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Autor(en): **Oleneva, Julia**

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Rabbinic Response to Qohelet's Contradictions: Concepts of Wisdom

By Julia Oleneva*

Abstract

The worldview of the author of the book of Qohelet raised doubts and discussion among rabbinic sages about its inspiration and canonicity. However, the Rabbis overall recognized Qohelet as a sacred book – largely because according to their opinion it was authored by King Solomon. While reading the book of Qohelet, the Rabbis, like modern exegetes, faced numerous contradictions, sceptical, pessimistic and sometimes freethinking views and were interested in them. Qohelet frequently casts doubt on the value of human life including labours, wealth, justice, and wisdom. This article pays attention to those passages where Qohelet discusses various aspects of the imperfection of human wisdom. Qohelet praises wisdom, considers it as superior to foolishness like light is superior to darkness. However, he also realizes that human wisdom has its limits, cannot achieve the goal of investigation, and facing death, it is helpless. The main goal of the article is to analyse rabbinical approaches to Qohelet's tragic view of human wisdom and to scrutinize the Rabbis' negation of Qohelet's views and their reinterpretation, rewriting of Qohelet's text in accordance with the accepted rabbinic exegetical tradition.

1. Introduction

1.1. Concept of Wisdom in Qohelet

In Qohelet's world, wisdom (חכמה) is a central concept. Qohelet presents his main task as an effort to explore “with wisdom” all that occurs under the sun. Thus, his book examines life and experience, as well as the laws of the world, by means of wisdom. The author successfully resorts to the image of King Solomon as the wisest man in the world. Qohelet praises wisdom, considers it superior to folly like light is superior to darkness. However, he also realizes that human wisdom is limited; it cannot perceive all secrets of the universe and when facing death, it is as helpless as foolish. Therefore, human wisdom has some aspects of futility.

Most commentators regard Qohelet's wisdom as part of the traditional wisdom literature of the ancient Near East rather than that of Greek philosophy. However, according to some scholars it is also plausible that the

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

author of Qohelet had a general idea of Greek tradition and literature.¹ Qohelet's wisdom like other Old Testament wisdom literature focuses on the individual and his or her fate, whereas the Torah and the Prophets focus primarily on the community or group.² Most scholars agree that Qohelet's thoughts represent a type of wisdom in crisis. Obviously, Qohelet is in conflict with traditional wisdom. His concern about the limitation and imperfection of human wisdom, contrary to other texts of wisdom literature, led commentators to interpret Qohelet's message as a critique of traditional wisdom.³ Nevertheless, in spite of his rather pessimistic, and sometimes, even nihilistic views, the book should not be considered a radical opposition to other biblical wisdom texts.⁴ The assumption that the purpose of Qohelet's message is polemic against traditional biblical wisdom seems to be all but convincing. In-depth studies of Qohelet's philosophy reveal that Qohelet's comprehension of wisdom is multivalued and complex. He does

1 CHOON-LEONG SEOW, *The Anchor Bible. Ecclesiastes. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York 1997, p. 34.

2 ROBERT GORDIS, *Koheleth – the Man and His World: A Study on Ecclesiastes*, New York 1968, pp. 14-21. – Michael V. Fox specifies that the term חכמה have two fundamental aspects: 1) Reason, the faculty and mode of thought by which one may rationally seek and comprehend truth. This is an instrumental aspect of wisdom, the ability to discern knowledge and to act successfully. It is partly inborn and partly acquired. 2) Knowledge that is what is known: This is the wisdom that is transmitted from father to son and is often parallel to “words”, “doctrine” (MICHAEL V. FOX, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, Sheffield 1989, pp. 80-81). Martin A. Shields also, for example, concisely and precisely defines the idea of wisdom and its place in the Hebrew Bible. The concept of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible can be divided into two categories: (1) divine wisdom, originating with God, revealed through prophetic speech or encoded in the Law, and manifest through obedience to the word of God. This wisdom is consistently given a positive presentation and is achieved more through obedience than through philosophical contemplation; (2) human wisdom that rests solely in the application of human intellect to the problems of life in the world. This wisdom, although represented as being based on theistic presupposition, is almost universally presented negatively. The consistent message of the Hebrew Bible is that inquiry of this kind is bound to fail, for God alone has access to this information (MARTIN A. SHIELDS, *The End of Wisdom. Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes*, Winonna Lake, Ind. 2006, p. 20).

3 So, for example, WALTHER ZIMMERLI, “The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology”, in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964), pp. 148-156, and GERHARD VON RAD, *Wisdom in Israel*, London 1972, p. 226.

4 ROLAND E. MURPHY, *Ecclesiastes* (Word Biblical Commentary; vol. 23A), Dallas 1992, pp. LVI-LXIX.

not just present a critique of traditional wisdom, but observes at the same time the limits and the advantages of human wisdom. In Qohelet's experience, these negative and positive aspects of human wisdom go always hand in hand. He perfectly realizes that wisdom as knowledge has its limits; man cannot know and understand all aspects of life, let alone be able to foresee what will happen in the future. That lack of knowledge, however, displeases Qohelet. If man cannot know the future or understand why certain injustice happens, then he possibly cannot know either what is good for him, and what not. This, in turn, is the most vital and important question in Qohelet's philosophy of life. Because of this limitation of human wisdom, Qohelet as a great individualist – in contrast to other biblical sages – feels discomfort and uncertainty. Usually, a biblical wise man does not feel grief because of the limited scope of his knowledge and wisdom, but leaves his present and future to the hand of God.

In the context of Old Testament wisdom literature, the bulk of Qohelet's wisdom appears to appreciate practical and intellectual wisdom that is rooted in the faith in, and fear of, God. In biblical wisdom literature, the term חכמה has an ethically positive connotation.⁵ As commentators point out, Qohelet's wisdom possesses experimental aspects. The author of the book set out to test the wisdom tradition by experience. He is a seeker after truth about man and his fate in the world.⁶ Qohelet adopted an empirical methodology, seeking to derive knowledge from experience and to validate his ideas experientially. He never invokes the knowledge of previous generations, anything that he "heard". Driven by his experiences and observations, he repeatedly ponders his possibilities to come to conclusions and judgements.⁷

In spite of Qohelet's chagrin at shortcomings of wisdom, he frequently praises wisdom and stresses its practical aspects, above all, the obvious advantage of a wise man over an ignorant, which is like the superiority of light over darkness. Wisdom, for example, can teach man piety, diligence, and correct and moral behaviour. Thanks to wisdom, man is able to study nature and life (all that happens under the sun) and explore their laws. However, all his intensive investigation lead Qohelet to conclude that the world in general and human life in particular alike are affected by vanity. In view of this vanity, i.e. the inevitability of death and injustice, Qohelet does not see any absolute value in wisdom. Therefore, his deplorable findings cause him to draw a second conclusion: wisdom and knowledge increase misery.

5 FOX, *Qohelet* (note 2), p. 82.

6 ROGER N. WHYBRAY, "Qohelet, Preacher and Joy," in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1992), pp. 87-98.

7 FOX, *Qohelet* (note 2), p. 86.

Below I would like to pay attention to those passages where Qohelet discusses various aspects of the imperfection of wisdom and further examine how the rabbinic sages interpreted these verses.⁸ The main objective of this article is to analyse rabbinical approaches to Qohelet's tragic view of human wisdom. In order to do that, it is necessary to scrutinize the sages' reaction, rejection, and negation of Qohelet's views and their attempt to reinterpret and eventually rewrite Qohelet's text in accordance with the accepted rabbinic exegetical tradition. Special attention will be paid to the following passages: 1:13-18, 2:12-15, 7:23, and 8:16-17.

1.2. *Qob. 1:13-18*

13 וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי, לְדָרוֹשׁ וְלִתּוֹר בַּחֲכָמָה, עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם; הוּא עֲנֵן רַע, נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבִנֵי הָאָדָם לְעֲנוֹת בּוֹ: 14 רָאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים, שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם; וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וְרֵעוּת רוּחַ: 15 מַעֲשֵׂת לֹא־יִוָּכַל לְתַקֵּן; וְחֶסְרוֹן לֹא־יִוָּכַל לְהַמְנוֹת: 16 דִּבַּרְתִּי אֲנִי עִם־לְבִי לֵאמֹר, אֲנִי הִנֵּה הִגַּדְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי חֲכָמָה, עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הִיָּה לְפָנַי עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם; וְלְבִי רָאָה הַרְבֵּה חֲכָמָה וְדַעַת: 17 וְאִתְּנָה לְבִי לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה, וְדַעַת הוֹלְלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת; יַדְעֵתִי שֶׁגַּם־זֶה הוּא רַעֲיוֹן רוּחַ: 18 כִּי בָרַב חֲכָמָה רַב־כֶּעֶס; וְיוֹסִיף דַּעַת יוֹסִיף מִכְאוֹב:

As can be learned from these verses, Qohelet expresses doubts as to the power of wisdom right at the beginning of his book. He suggests that efforts to study (investigate) and explore the world⁹ and its laws by using wisdom as problematic as useless (*hevel* הֶבֶל), as he affirms even twice (1:14, 17). To pursue wisdom is not only a bootless and futile effort, but also an unhappy business,¹⁰ given by God (v. 13). However, this does not mean that aspiration to gain wisdom is wrong and evil; to the contrary, it is a divine gift, even though it remains inscrutable. Referring to God's gift (v. 13), Qohelet most likely wants to emphasize what his personal theological conviction is, that everything is under God's control. Speaking about wisdom and his experience, the author of the book introduces himself as a sage like King Solomon. For that reason, some scholars maintain that there must

8 I used the following rabbinical sources: Midrash Qohelet Rabbah (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) and Targum Qohelet (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.)

9 The phrase *all that is done under the heavens (sun)* occurs in the text of the book many times (1:9, 14; 2:17; 4:3; 8:9, 17; 9:3, 6). It most likely means "all that happens in human life".

10 The word עֲנֵן (occupation, task) is probably an Aramaism, it occurs 10 times in Qohelet and has a mainly negative connotation.

have been a long history of wisdom tradition, which Qohelet picks up and continues. Nevertheless, when reviewing this history and evaluating its achievements, Qohelet cannot but to state in his concluding remark of the quoted passage that all that wisdom ended up with is the discovery of vanity. His knowledge and study led only to trouble and pain: the more he discovered the world under the sun, the less knowledge he actually acquired. Understanding of things eluded Qohelet, while wisdom turned out to be limited.¹¹

1.3. *Qob. 2:12-15*

12 וּפְנִינִי אֲנִי לְרֵאוֹת חֲכָמָה, וְהוֹלְלוֹת וְסִכְלוֹת; כִּי מָה הָאָדָם, שְׂיָבוֹא אַחֲרֵי הַמָּלָךְ, אֵת אֲשֶׁר-כָּבַר עֲשׂוּהוּ: 13 וְרֵאִיתִי אֲנִי, שְׂיֵשׁ יִתְרוֹן לְחֲכָמָה מִן-הַסִּכְלוֹת; כִּי יִתְרוֹן הָאוֹר מִן-הַחֹשֶׁךְ 14 הַחֲכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֵאשׁוֹ, וְהַכְּסִיל בְּחֹשֶׁךְ הוֹלֵךְ; וְיָדַעְתִּי גַם-אֲנִי, שְׂמַקְרָה אֶחָד יִקְרָה אֶת-כָּלָם: 15 וְאִמְרָתִי אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי, כְּמַקְרָה הַכְּסִיל גַם-אֲנִי יִקְרָנִי, וְלָמָּה חֲכַמְתִּי אֲנִי אִזּוֹ יוֹתֵר; וְדַבְּרָתִי בְּלִבִּי, שְׂגַמְזָה הַבָּל:

In this passage, Qohelet likewise examines the nature of wisdom comparing, contrasting it to foolishness.¹² In order to illustrate the contrast between the wise and the fool, he compares wisdom to light and folly to darkness.¹³ While pondering what the advantage (יתרון) of wisdom over foolishness is, he concludes that both the wise and the fool have a similar fate (מקרה), i.e. death.¹⁴ The term מקרה – as a synonym of the unavoidability of death – appears only in Qohelet.¹⁵ Qohelet does not see great benefit in wisdom,

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- 11 Some scholars suggest that the original setting of this passage is a saying in the school. The teacher instructed the students that wisdom is not to be gotten without efforts and pain, but one has to obtain it. The failures and trial can entail the pursuit of wisdom (see MURPHY, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 14). Seow, e.g., notes, “it was a common pedagogical assumption in the wisdom literature of the Near East that pain and trouble lead to wisdom” (SEOW, *Ecclesiastes* [note 1], p. 149). However, in contrast to this traditional suggestion, Qohelet says that it is not suffering that leads to wisdom, but it is wisdom, that causes troubles.
- 12 The text of the verse 12c is ambiguous, because it is not clear to whom this phrase refers. In the context of its “historical reading”, it would refer to Rehoboam, Solomon’s successor.
- 13 As widely done in wisdom literature, e.g., light: Ps. 119:105, Prov. 6:23; darkness: Job 12:26.
- 14 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, *Kobelet – the Man and His World: A Study on Ecclesiastes*, New York 1968, pp. 221-222).
- 15 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 Old Testament worldview and is available only in Qohelet. Other scholars (e.g. Seow) deny the presence of the Hellenistic influence and argue that Qohelet’s concept of fate is

because the unfairness of death overtakes both the wise and fool, and there will be no remembrance of the wise after his death. In his opinion, the pursuit for wisdom is vain and absurd because the advantage of wisdom ends with the end of human life. With this view, Qohelet opposes to conventional wisdom, which assures that the wise has an enduring legacy.¹⁶

1.4. *Qob. 7:23*

כִּלְזֶה נִסִּיתִי בַחֲכָמָה; אָמַרְתִּי אַחֲכָמָה, וְהִיא רַחֲוִקָה מִמִּנִּי:

In this verse Qohelet concludes that his attempt (1:13) to examine and understand the world and nature of human existence by wisdom is not crowned with success.¹⁷ In spite of the fact that Qohelet attained much wisdom and applied it very diligently, he realized the limits of his wisdom. For this reason, he does not speak of different degrees of wisdom, but recognizes that there is a considerable distance between divine and human wisdom, man's practical wisdom is unable to comprehend fully the work of God.¹⁸

1.5. *Qob. 8:16-17*

16 כַּאֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה, וְלִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעֲנָנוֹ, אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה עַל־הָאָרֶץ; כִּי גַם בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה, שָׁנָה בְּעֵינָיו אֵינְנוֹ רֹאֶה: 17 וְרֵאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים, כִּי לֹא יוּכַל הָאָדָם, לְמַצּוֹא אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַחַת־הַשָּׁמַיִם, בְּשׂוֹל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמַל הָאָדָם לְבַקֵּשׁ וְלֹא יִמָּצֵא; וְגַם אִם־יֹאמֶר הַחֲכָם לְדַעַת, לֹא־יִוָּכַל לְמַצּוֹ:

These verses reflect the consequences of Qohelet's words examined above and, at the same time, present an explanation. Qohelet returns to his troublesome task (ענין) (cf. 1:13, 3:10) to examine by wisdom "all what happens under the sun". According to him, human action on earth primarily seems to be connected with the action of God under the sun. Therefore, Qohelet

Semitic. Moreover, in LXX the word is translated by συνάντημα "accident, meeting", and not by τύχη "chance", "fate" (see MARTIN HENGEL, *Period Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic*, Philadelphia 1981, p. 119; SEOW, *Ecclesiastes* [note 1], p. 135).

16 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 (Deut. 25:5-6; Prov 10:7; Sir 38:9-11), Qohelet, however, expresses doubts about this traditional thought.

17 Fox points out that there is a certain contradiction in Qohelet's wisdom statements: In 1:13, Ecclesiastes uses wisdom in order to investigate reality, while in 7:23, he finds that wisdom ended in failure. Therefore, Qohelet is facing a paradox: a sage in the traditional sense, he discovers that he is not a truly wise man and does not possess the wisdom (FOX, *Qohelet* [note 2], p. 239).

18 Similar to this: Job 28 and the words of Agur (Prov 30:1-4).

considers understanding of the divine action a higher achievement of human wisdom. However, as he had to learn, in spite of all his efforts, even a wise man cannot understand the deeds of God and the laws of world and nature. Therefore, the search for wisdom remains fruitless and futile.¹⁹

2. Rabbinic Interpretation

2.1. Rabbinic response to *Qoh. 1:13*

2.1.1. *Qohelet Rabbah*

The Midrash *Qohelet Rabbah* (= *QohR*) offers several interpretations of the verse 1:13. In its first interpretation, the Midrash tries to explain what means *to search out* (לְתוֹר) *by wisdom*: “It means that Solomon becomes an explorer of wisdom; he sits in the presence of one who teaches Scripture well, or expounds Mishnah well.”²⁰

As a second interpretation, *QohR* presents various interpretations of the words *it is sore task* (עֲוִיָּה). The Midrash first assumes that *sore task* is the nature of wealth. The more man has, the more he wants. However if man uses his wealth for pious purposes, when he prays – he is answered (e.g. Gen. 30:33). Should he not use his wealth in this way, it will testify against him and accuse him (Deut. 29:16).²¹ The Midrash takes the verse out of its context, speaking about the futility of wealth. One can assume that this rabbinic reflection is to serve as a literal explanation of *Qoh. 5:9*²² whose interpretation is absent in the Midrash.

The third interpretation, which the Midrash offers, understands *sore task* as a metaphor of robbery. “R. Simeon b. Abba said in the name of R. Yohanan: When the measure of iniquities is full, which accuses first of all before the judgment-throne of God? The robbery... because Twenty-four sins did Ezekiel enumerate, and out of all of them he concluded only with robbery; as it is written, *Behold, therefore, I have smitten My hand at thy dishonest gain which thou hast made* (Ezek 22:13).”²³ Therefore, robbery is great vanity and evil.

19 One can see here obvious parallel to Prov. 21:30: “There is no wisdom, no understanding, and no counsel, against the Lord.”

20 *QohR* 1:13. Similarly, in *ShirR* we read: “And I applied my heart to seek and to explore (וּלְתוֹר) by wisdom (Eccl. I, 13). What does וּלְתוֹר mean? To become an explorer of wisdom, as it is written, *And they explored (וּיְתוֹרוּ) the land* (Num 13:21). If a man taught the Scripture well, he went to him; if one taught the Mishnah well, he went to him, as it says, *And to explore (וּלְתוֹר) wisdom* (Eccl. 1:13).”

21 *QohR* 1:13.

22 *He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.*

23 *QohR* 1:13.

The next two interpretations correlate Qohelet's verse with the TaNaKh. R. Hunia related this verse to the Prophets and Hagiographa, for if the Israelites had been worthy, they would have read the Pentateuch alone. The Prophets and Hagiographa were given to them only to labour in these as well as in the Pentateuch, and perform the precepts and righteous acts to receive a good reward.²⁴ Continuing this theme, the Midrash refers Qohelet's words in the name of R. Abbahu to the peculiar character of study of the Torah. A man learns the Torah, but forgets it. It seems that pursuit of the Torah knowledge is sore and futile task since a man cannot remember what he learns because of his imperfect memory. This rabbinic thought to some extent rebukes God creation. However, the Midrash decides to moderate this statement and offers a positive interpretation: "The Babylonian rabbis said; it is for man's good that he learns Torah and forgets it. Because if a man studied Torah and never forgot it, he would occupy himself with learning it for two or three years, resume his ordinary work and never pay further attention to it. But since a man studies Torah and forgets it, he will not entirely abandon its study."²⁵ Thus, God's decision is right and a man can earn the reward by his permanent study of the Torah. This idea of the forgetfulness of the Torah is consonant with the previous interpretation of Qoh. 2:1 where the Midrash offers full explanation of differences between the study of the Torah in this world and the world to come. Compared to the way of learning in this life, the study of the Torah in the world to come is considered perfect. Thus, one can conclude that at this point, the Midrash is rather far from the literal meaning of the text and prefers to interpret Qohelet by using symbols and vital rabbinic questions.

Commenting the verse 1:14 the Midrash uses three parables (משלים *mešalim*). In place of full introductory formulation of משל *mašal* (Heb. משל למה - *mašal le-mah ba-davar domeh le-*; translation: "A parable. To what the matter likens? To ..."), all three parables use the brief form *le-* (to ...).²⁶ The words of Qohelet are understood here as a warning. The first parable speaks about an old man sitting at the crossroads and warning the passers-by

24 While commenting on this fragment, Cohen points out to the fact that most of the prophets and Hagiographa contain rebukes to Israel for their wrongdoing. Therefore, this part of the Bible owes its existence to Israel's sinning (*Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes*, trans. by ARTHUR COHEN, London 1957, p. 40).

25 QohR 1:13.

26 For further information on *mašal* in QohR, see JOHANNES WACHTEN, *Midrasch-Analyse. Strukturen im Midrasch Qohelet Rabba* (Judaistische Texte und Studien, vol. 8), Hildesheim 1978, p. 264-272.

about two paths before them. The Midrash asks: “Ought not people to be thankful to him for warning them?”²⁷ Then QohR examines the next parable that offers a direct commentary on the text, and asserts that the author of Qohelet is King Solomon. Therefore, the words of the verse 1:14 are to be understood as a warning of Solomon who sits at the gates of wisdom and warns Israel. All that is done under the sun is vanity and striving after wind, except for repentance and good deeds.²⁸ In this interpretation, the Midrash makes it clear that not all human activity and works are *hevel*. Pious life that includes good deeds and repentance is not depraved by vanity and futility. Here one can see that QohR denies the general nature of *hevel* and attest its features as belonging only to direct events. After the second parable the Midrash smoothly goes on to the third parable and tells about an astrologer who was sitting at the entrance to the harbour and advised all passers-by by telling them that such-and-such wares could be sold in such-and-such place. Completing this parable the Midrash again asks whether people should be thankful to him.²⁹ Most probably, in the opinion of the Rabbis, this parable is an allusion to the warning of Solomon as the interpretation of this verse concludes with a brief version of previous Solomon’s parable. Reading the fragment one may conclude that the parables only superficially expose the theme of Qohelet’s words – because the persons mentioned in the parables are not connected with the sense of the text. However, it is no coincidence that QohR mentions the name of Solomon in the text and puts in his mouth more concrete interpretation. Thus, the Midrash wants the reader to understand that the author of the book as well as the text can comment the biblical words. This midrashic commentary is a good example of how the form of a parable can serve as an acceptable method of interpretation.

27 QohR 1:14.

28 In Biblical and post-Biblical literature, repentance (*teshuvah*) is generally regarded as *the* condition on which salvation and redemption not only of the people of Israel, but also of every individual man, depend (Gen. 4:7; Lev. 4; 5; Deut. 4:30, 30:2; I Kings 8:33, 48; Hosea 24:2; Jer. 3:12, 31:18, 36:3; Ezek. 28:30-32; Isa. 54:22, 55:6-10; Joel 2:12; Jonah 2: 10). The Rabbis argued that God created repentance before the Creation (bPes 54a). According to bShab 32a repentance and works of charity are man’s intercessors before God’s throne. For more information, see BERNARD J. BAMBERGER, “Repentance,” in: *The Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IX, New York 1943, pp. 134-135; JACOB MILGROM, “Repentance,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. XVII, Detroit / New York etc. 2007, p. 221.

29 QohR 1:14.

The Midrash explains the verse 1:15 contrasting this world to the world to come: “In this world he who is crooked can be made straight and he who is wanting can be numbered; but in the Hereafter he that is crooked cannot be made straight and he that is wanting cannot be numbered.”³⁰ In order to prove this the Rabbis offered the following parable: There were two wicked men, who were companions, one to the other in this world. One of them repented right in time during his life before he died, while the other did not repent before his death. The one who repented in his lifetime was rewarded to stay with the righteous, while the other found himself within the band of the wicked.³¹

In sum, QohR offers four interpretations in the commentaries on verse 1:18. The first interpretation can be defined as a literal interpretation because the Midrash agrees with Qohelet’s words and, in addition to that, attributes them to King Solomon: “All the time that a man increases wisdom he increases vexation, and all the time that he increases knowledge he increases suffering.”³² It is highly unusual for rabbinic tradition to connect wisdom with suffering because the pursuit of wisdom was one of the highest goals. However, the Midrash suggests that attaining wisdom is the cause of pain. Ruth Sandberg supposes that here the Midrash reflects the period of the Roman domination, possibly during Hadrian’s reign, when those teaching the Torah were sentenced to death. Death penalty certainly could be seen as the ultimate suffering that accompanies wisdom.³³

The second interpretation is presented in the form of the *mašal* telling the story about two men: “One of them ate coarse bread and vegetables; the other ate fine bread and fat meat, drank old wine, partook of an oily sauce and came out feeling ill. The man who had fine food suffered harm, while he who had coarse food escaped it.”³⁴ Here, the parable clearly confirms Qohelet’s words. A man who feeds his mind with much learning and

30 QohR 1:15.

31 Ibid.

32 The same interpretation can be found in BerR 19:1 in connection with the story of the serpent that persuades Eve to eat the fruits from the tree of knowledge of good and evil: At the same time, when our progenitors acquired knowledge, further suffering on earth punished them.

33 RUTH N. SANDBERG, *Rabbinic Views of Qohelet*, Lewiston, NY 1999, pp. 101-102.

34 QohR 1:18; cf. BerR 3:1: “For in much wisdom is much anger and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow (Eccl. 1:18): Because man increases his wisdom, he increases anger against himself, and because he increases his knowledge, he adds to his sorrow. Solomon said, “Because I have multiplied wisdom to myself I multiplied anger against myself, and because I increased my

knowledge does not only suffer more than the ignorant, but has also a greater responsibility.

The next interpretation is connected with the commentary on Gen. 3 provided in BerR. As the Midrash explains: Because the wisdom of the serpent was so great (Gen. 3:1), the penalty inflicted upon it was proportionate to its wisdom.³⁵ Here, by interpretation of another biblical verse, the Midrash again emphasizes the responsibility of a wise man for the use of his wisdom.

In the following interpretation, QohR resorts to the method of typology. By using biblical characters it affirms that there are some who increased wisdom to their advantage (Moses, Solomon), and others who increased it to their disadvantage (e.g. Doeg: I Sam. 22:18 ff; Ahitophel: II Sam. 17:23). Strength also can be increased to advantage (David, Judah) and to disadvantage (Samson, Goliath). The same *caveat* applies to wealth. The Midrash refers to the “types” of David and Solomon, Korah and Haman. The next example of typology supposes that many children can be an advantage (Jacob, David), but also a disadvantage (Ahab, Eli).³⁶

Thus, QohR agrees with Qohelet that wisdom can entail suffering; pain largely may be dependent on high standard of knowledge.

2.1.2. *Targum Qohelet*

In contrast to the Midrash QohR, the Targum offers a “historical” reading of verse 1:13 that associates Qohelet with Solomon: “And I set my mind to seek instruction *from the time when he revealed himself to me at Gibeon* to test me and to *ask me what I wanted from Him. And I asked of Him only* wisdom to *know the difference between good and evil* understanding of everything that happened under the sun *in this world. I saw all the deeds of sinful people* were an evil matter *which* the Lord gave to the people so that they should be afflicted by it.”³⁷ Targum interprets Qohelet’s verse in the light of I Kings 3:5–9. Solomon asked of God an understanding heart to judge God’s people and to discern between good and evil. According to the Targum, sore task given by God is not pursuit for wisdom, but all deeds of sinful people.

The Midrash (QohR) and the Targum (TQoh) often overlap. Probably, they drew on similar sources and were redacted about the same time. In the case of the verse 1:14, however, TQoh does not offer an interpretation that is similar to the Midrash. TQoh renders the biblical text almost literally adding

knowledge I increased my sorrows.”

35 QohR 1:18.

36 QohR 1:18.

37 TQoh 1:13. See also *The Targum of Qohelet* (note 8), p. 22.

some phrases only, which make the text more precise: “I saw all deeds *of people* which are done *in this world* under the sun, and behold all is vanity and breaking of the spirit”.³⁸ Apparently, the Targum assumes that the words of Qohelet are clear and, therefore, does not see the necessity to comment on the text in detail. Whereas the interpretation of 1:15 in TQoh is very similar to the midrashic reading – TQoh too speaks about repentance and the fate of a wicked person after his or her death: “*A man whose ways are rebellious in this world and who dies in them without repenting is not permitted to be straightened out after his death. And a man who is lacking in Torah and commandments during his life is not permitted to be counted among the righteous in the Garden of Eden.*”³⁹ –, the Targum’s interpretation of verses 1:16-17 clearly differs from QohR: “I said *in the imaginings* of my mind saying, ‘I am the one who multiplied and increased wisdom more than all *the sages* who preceded me in Jerusalem, and my mind has seen the multitude of wisdom and knowledge.’ I set my mind to know wisdom, the intrigues *of government*, knowledge and understanding, *and I investigated so that I know that this too is breaking of spirit for a man who tries to find them out.*”⁴⁰ Without digressing from the meaning of the Masoretic text, TQoh specifies that Qohelet’s (or according to the Targum: Solomon’s) wisdom should be compared to the wisdom of other sages. However, unlike the biblical text, the Targum applies Qohelet’s abstract nouns “madness” and “folly” (חוללות וסכלות *holelot we-sikblut*) to intrigues of government,⁴¹ thus providing a “historical reading” of the text affirming that suffering and vexation increase because of sin: “Surely, *a man who multiplies wisdom, when he sins and does not repent, increase anger before the Lord. And he who increases knowledge and dies in his youth increases heartache.*”⁴² Wisdom and sin are incompatible, and this incompatibility gives rise to anger and vexation.⁴³

2.2. Rabbinic response to Qoh. 2:12-15

2.2.1. Qohelet Rabbah

Though it seems that the passage 2:12-15 has one meaning only, QohR offers several interpretations explaining the individual phrases separately. When interpreting the phrase *and I turned myself to behold wisdom*, QohR resorts to a play on words reading פניתי (I emptied myself) instead of פניתי (I turned myself).

38 TQoh 1:14. Cf. *The Targum of Qohelet* (note 8), p. 22.

39 TQoh 1:15.

40 TQoh 1:16f.

41 Cf. QohR 2:12.

42 TQoh 1:18. Cf. *The Targum of Qohelet* (note 8), p. 22.

43 Cf. GenR. 3:1.

The Midrash compares Solomon to a bowl; as a bowl is filled sometimes and at other times emptied, so Solomon at one time learns the Torah and forgets it another time.⁴⁴ This interpretation is similar to the previous midrashic reflection on studying the Torah in this world (Qoh. 2:1; 1:13).

The next interpretation explains the phrase *to behold wisdom and madness and folly*. QohR understands the words *madness* and *folly* metaphorically. Thus, *madness* refers to the intrigues of rulership⁴⁵ or to the *madness* of heresy; *folly*, however, means trouble⁴⁶ or inanity.

The phrase *for what can the man do who succeeds the king* the Midrash explains advising: “if a man tells you, ‘I can stand upon the foundation of the world’⁴⁷, answer him. ‘You are unable to understand a human king; how then can you comprehend the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He!’”⁴⁸ God and His works are unfathomable, as the Midrash agrees with Qohelet’s conclusion that man, human wisdom, is unable to comprehend God’s actions and the secrets of the nature.

It is rather problematic to translate Qohelet’s following sentences when taking into account the context of the verse. The English translation does not coincide with the Hebrew text grammatically. The phrase אֲשֶׁר־כָּבַר עָשׂוּהוּ means *that they already have made*. In line with what we have said in the previous paragraph, QohR tries to explain that the word *they* in *they have made* may refer to God and His *Beit Din* (i.e. “court of justice”).⁴⁹ The Midrash further

44 QohR 2:12. ShemR on 6:2 contents following interpretation of Solomon’s studying of the Torah: “Solomon said: “Because I tried to be wiser than the Torah and persuaded myself that I knew the intention of the Torah, did this understanding and knowledge turn out to be madness and folly.” Why so? “For what can the man do that cometh after the King? Even that which hath been already done?” Who is permitted to entertain doubts about the ways and decrees of the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, whose words issue from before Him like solid blocks?”

45 According to Cohen, it can mean also the intrigues of Court life (COHEN, *Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes* [note 24], p. 61, n. 5).

46 As Cohen explains, the cause of trouble is lack of wisdom, but trouble may also refer to heavy cares of government (COHEN, *Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes* [note 24], p. 61, n. 6).

47 It means that he can fathom nature to its depths (COHEN, *Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes* [note 24], p. 61, ft. 7).

48 QohR 2:12. Cf. BerR 2:4. “For what is the man that cometh after the king?” i.e. after the King of the Universe, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He!”

49 In Sab. 10 one can read that the judge who performs his duties conscientiously and delivers דִּין אֱמֶת (Heb. “true judgment”) is as great as if he had taken part in the creation of the world.

explains that, when man was created, “they” took a vote concerning every single one of our limbs and made us perfect. Everything was created only after due consultation among “them” and “their” mutual agreement.

That way, QohR puts forward its idea about two main creative powers. According to rabbinic tradition, the prototype of the *Beit Din* already existed at the time of the creation. The Midrash continues to develop this subject further in connection with its interpretation of Gen. 2:7. According to rabbinic views, the phrase *Then the Lord God formed (יצר) man* indicates that the Creator (הצור) is a skilful artist (צייר). God boasts of His creation, which He had created, and of the form, which He had given to it.⁵⁰ The Midrash also considers it necessary to add an explanation of the verse Gen. 2:4: *These are the generations of heavens and earth when they were created*. It understands the letter ה in the word בהבראם as an abbreviated form of הוא “He” meaning God, because it is He, Who created them, and it is He, Who praised them, so who would presume to decry them.⁵¹ Continuing to explain the meaning of the letter ה, QohR assumes that God created them by means of this very letter.⁵² Understanding Qohelet’s words metaphorically and, thus, associating the king with God, the Creator of the universe, the author of QohR comes to discuss important theological aspects of the creation process.

For the next verse (2:13), QohR offers just a brief literal interpretation: “It has been taught in the name of R. Meir: as there is superiority of light over the darkness, so there is superiority of words of Torah over words of vanity.”⁵³ Therefore, the words of the Torah are light and wisdom for man; a wise man will avoid vanity, verbosity, and heresy.

The verse 2:14, however, is given two brief interpretations in the Midrash. According to the first one, “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. A wise has the end of business in his thought before he began it.”⁵⁴ Here again, the Midrash plays on the double meaning of a Hebrew word, in this case, it is the word ראש, which means “head”, but can also mean “beginning” and, thus, provide a different meaning of the text.

50 QohR 2:12.

51 QohR 2:12.

52 ה is often used to represent the name of God, as ה stands for *Ha-Shem*. Cohen offers commentary that God created them with absolute ease, like the utterance of the letter ה, which requires a mere breath (COHEN, *Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes* [note 24], p. 63, n. 4).

53 QohR 2:13.

54 QohR 2:14.

The second interpretation, in turn, is based on a typological reading of the text. Whereas in the wise man of the text, the Midrash sees the patriarch Abraham, it identifies the fool as Nimrod, Abraham's antagonist, who – unsuccessfully – tried to force Abraham to commit idolatry. However, the Midrash concludes, both of them met the same fate, both of them died, because as Qohelet said the same fate happens to them all.⁵⁵

With regard to the last verse 2:15, QohR offers five possible interpretations; almost all of them see in Qohelet's words an allusion to biblical types.

The first interpretation looks like a sequel to the previous commentary. Qohelet's reflections are put in the mouth of Abraham and supplemented with rabbinic arguments. "Abraham reasons: 'I have been called 'king' and the wicked Nimrod is called 'king'. Both alike died; in that case, *why was I then wiser? Why did I jeopardize my life for sanctification of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He?*' Further Abraham answers with Qohelet's words *for there is no remembrance of the wise man together with the fool forever.*"⁵⁶ However, the author of QohR apparently disagrees with Qohelet and the negative outlook of the biblical text. Therefore, he decided to alter Qohelet's conclusion: "When adversity befalls Israel they cry, *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants* (Ex. 32:13); but do the heathen nations cry, 'Remember the deeds of Nimrod!'"⁵⁷ Thus, the Midrash suggests that the wise and pious man continues to live in the memory of others, while the fool and the sinner do not.

The second interpretation follows the same line and logic but with reference to (the types of) Moses and Balaam. The eyes of the first are in his head, while the latter walks in darkness. Each of them was called "prophet", and Moses is asked about the reasons that prompted him to devote his life to the Torah. The Midrash answers: "In the future Israel will suffer adversity and cry, *Then His people remembered the days of old, the days of Moses* (Isa. 63:11), but do the heathen nations cry 'Then he remembered the days of old, the days of Balaam!'"⁵⁸

The next biblical "types" referred to are David, king of Israel, and the wicked Nebuchadnezzar. The former built the Temple⁵⁹ and reigned forty years, while the latter destroyed it and reigned forty years, too, and David is

55 QohR 2:14.

56 QohR 2:15.

57 QohR 2:15.

58 QohR 2:15.

59 Cohen assumes that the erection of the Temple is attributed to David because he planned to build it (COHEN, *Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes* [note 24], p. 65, ft.1).

rhetorically asking why he devoted himself to the building of the Temple. QohR puts the answer in the mouth of Solomon who built the Temple and said, *Remember the good deeds of David Thy servant* (II Chron. 6:42). David, king of Israel, and King Solomon, i.e. “Qohelet”, are juxtaposed here against Evil-Merodach who could not stand up and say, *Remember the good deeds of Nebuchadnezzar Thy servant*.⁶⁰ Therefore, by offering the three aforementioned interpretations, the Midrash most probably wishes to place Qohelet in the biblical historical context and, thus, again confirms the unity of the biblical tradition.

The fourth interpretation draws on an example from practical life. According to it, the wise is he who purchases wheat for three years, while the fool is he who purchases wheat for one year, only; but the wise asks himself why he pawned the furniture of his room to provide food for himself. The Midrash has the 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.”⁶¹ Wisdom here is related to a very pragmatic approach to life and denotes the ability to reasonably keep the house.

The last interpretation discusses the study of the Torah among the Rabbin. It contrasts a disciple who is diligent in his study to one who neglects his study. Each of them is called “Rabbi,” each is like a “Sage.” However, if there is no remembrance of the wise and the fool – why the former devoted himself to the study of the Torah? QohR puts the answer in the mouth of R. Hiyya b. Nehemiah: “If a disciple thinks there is no necessity to quote a teaching in the name of his master, his knowledge of Torah will be forgotten in the future.”⁶² Therefore, the name of a Rabbi will live after his death because his disciples remember him and quote his teachings. That way, the Midrash applies Qohelet’s text to the explanation of the contemporary situation of rabbinic teaching and learning.

2.2.2. *Targum Qohelet*

The Targumic version of this passage differs from the biblical text significantly and gives new meaning to each verse. Thus, in 2:12, the Targum speaks about a vain prayer instead of Qohelet’s reflection that nobody, who follows in his steps, will ever have greater opportunities than he had to combine wisdom and wealth. “And I looked to see wisdom, the *intrigues of government* and understanding. *For what profit does man have to pray after the decree*

60 QohR 2:15.

61 QohR 2:15.

62 QohR 2:15.

of the king *and after the punishment? For by then it is already decreed against him and done to him.*"⁶³ The Targum agrees with QohR concerning the intrigues of rulership. According to it, there is no benefit from the prayer about past events. The next verse, in turn, renders the Hebrew text almost literally: "I saw *through the Holy Spirit* that wisdom has an advantage over foolishness *as the advantage of the light of the day over the darkness of the night.*"⁶⁴ Commenting on the verse 2:14, TQoh partly coincides with the Midrash, but adds that the wise must also pray for the world: "The sage *sees at 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.*"⁶⁵ Therefore, wisdom surely goes together with piety and virtue; otherwise, there is no benefit from it. When interpreting this verse, the Targum again resorts to a "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 is? And I told myself that this too is vanity *and there is only the decree of the Memra of the Lord.*"⁶⁶ The Targum here refers to the events described in I Sam.15. Saul was commanded to kill all Amalekites. However, he did not obey and fulfil God's commandment and therefore later lost his kingdom. The Targum parallels Saul and Solomon and concludes that, in contrast to Saul, Solomon was wiser because he had realized that fulfilling God's commandments is all man is to do. Again, the Targum asserts that wisdom coexists only with virtue and obedience of God.

2.3. Rabbinic response to Qoh. 7:23

2.3.1. Qohelet Rabbah

The interpretation of the verse 7:23 in QohR discusses King Solomon's wisdom. The main goal of the midrashic interpretation is to prove that Solomon was wiser than other people were. In order to develop the idea QohR decides to comment simultaneously the fragment from I Kings 4:29-34. At the beginning, there is a discussion between the Rabbis and R. Levi. Solomon's wisdom is compared to the sand on the seashore (I Kings 4:29). The Rabbis maintain that Solomon was given wisdom equal to that of all Israel.

63 TQoh 2:12. Cf. KNOBEL, in: *The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 15 [note 8], p. 26.

64 TQoh 2:13.

65 TQoh 2:14.

66 TQoh 2:15.

R. Levi, nevertheless, said: “As the sand is a fence to the sea, so wisdom was a fence to Solomon.”⁶⁷ Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the sons of the east, and all the wisdom in Egypt (I Kings 4:30).⁶⁸ According to the Midrash, the sons of the East were skilled in astrology, divination, and augury. The wisdom of Egypt was astrology, too. While praising Solomon’s wisdom, QohR argues that he was wiser than all men were (I Kings 4:31), wiser than Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph. The Midrash provides commentary practically on all these comparisons. Solomon composed three thousand proverbs (4:32). Nevertheless, according to R. Samuel b. Nahmani Solomon prophesied not more than eight hundred verses.⁶⁹ That means that every verse composed by Solomon contains two or three meanings. Furthermore, the verse I Kings 4:33 (*He spoke of trees [...], he spoke also of animals, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish*) induces the Midrash to speak about the instructions of the Torah regarding kosher food and forbidden animals, birds, creeping things, and fish. Thus, QohR affirms that Solomon was able to explain all ordinances of the Torah. However, Qohelet reminds that Solomon’s wisdom was limited as well. Subsequently, the Midrash asserts that there is one chapter in the Torah that even Solomon had difficulties to explain: “Solomon said: Concerning all these ordinance of the Torah, I have stood and investigated their meaning, but the chapter of the red heifer (Num. 19) I have been unable to fathom. When I laboured therein and searched deeply into it, *I said: I will get wisdom, but it was far from me.*”⁷⁰ According to Num. 19, anyone who touches a corpse becomes ritually impure and must be purified by a specific ritual (i.e. must be sprinkled with the ashes of an unblemished red heifer). For the Rabbis, this commandment has no logical basis; Solomon could not understand it by his wisdom either. It is also possible that the Midrash does not agree with Qohelet’s statement that wisdom is ultimately vain.⁷¹ Therefore, lack of understanding of some

67 Israel is also compared to the sand which is upon the seashore (Gen 22:17).

68 QohR 7:23. In BemR on Num. 29:2, one can find similar interpretation of Solomon’s wisdom. „It is written, he said, „*And God gave Solomon wisdom... even as the sand that is on the sea-shore*” (I Kings 5:9). What is the implication of the expression *as the sand*? Our Rabbis say it implies that He gave him as much wisdom as all Israel; as may be inferred from the text, „*Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea*”, etc. (Hos. 2:1). As the sand, said R. Levi, is a wall to the sea, so was wisdom a wall to Solomon”.

69 QohR 7:23.

70 QohR 7:23; cf. BemR 29:2.

71 Ruth Sandberg also points to this rabbinic conclusion (SANDBERG, *Rabbinic Views of Qohelet* [note 33], pp. 103-104).

commandments does not provide evidence for the futility of wisdom. Thus, in this fragment QohR combines the interpretation of Qohelet's verse with the story about King Solomon as related in the Book of Kings, and several commandments of the Torah. This exegetical approach, basing the argument on paragraphs taken from all three parts of the TaNaKh, proves once again the rabbinic conviction of the unity of the biblical text.

2.3.2. *Targum Qohelet*

Similar to QohR, TQoh too associates wisdom with respect for understanding the Torah: "All that, *I said*, I have tested with wisdom. I said *to myself*, I will be wise *also in all the wisdom of the Torah*, but it eluded me."⁷² Even the wise is not capable of fully understanding the Torah and all its commandments. Man's knowledge is limited; he is not able to comprehend all of God's secrets.

2.4. *Rabbinic response to Qoh. 8:16-17*

2.4.1. *Qohelet Rabbah*

QohR comments on the two verses 8:16-17 separately. While commenting on verse 8:16, the Midrash pays attention to the words *for neither day nor night do men see sleep with their eyes* and understands this phrase as an allusion to repentance:⁷³ "A man neither sees repentance nor performs it."⁷⁴ Continuing its allegorical interpretation, QohR mentions two good things that are near to man and at the same time far from him, i.e. repentance and death.⁷⁵ Abraham Cohen offers the following explanation of this rabbinic logic. Repentance is near to him, because God is always ready to receive the penitent; it is far from him, because the sinner hesitates to abandon his evil ways. Death is near to him, when God decrees it, but good deeds can avert the decree; and when it is to take place in the distant future, wickedness can bring it near.⁷⁶ Thus, the Midrash wants to say that if repentance is near, death is far away, and *vice versa*. If a man is pious and performs good deeds – then death and evil are far from him.

The interpretation of the next verse (8:17) in QohR is not connected with the previous one. The Midrash focusses on the words *then I beheld all the works of God* as a reference to the understanding of the Torah: "Many have begged

72 TQoh 7:23. Cf. KNOBEL, in: *The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 15 (note 8), p. 40.

73 Cohen explains that Midrash identifies the word שנה *šenah* ("sleep") with שינוי *šinu'i* ("change" from evil to good by means of penitence) (COHEN [note 24], p. 223, n. 4).

74 QohR 8:16.

75 QohR 8:16.

76 COHEN (note 24), p. 224, n. 1.

for the ability to perform and to fathom the words of the Torah, but have been unable to do so. Why?”⁷⁷ The Midrash finds the answer in Qohelet’s words: *For though a man labours to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.*⁷⁸ According to the Midrash, this phrase also alludes to King Solomon when he said that he could multiply the number of his wives without becoming an idol worshipper (I Kings 11:1-8). Indeed, Solomon ignored the warning of Deut. 17:17 and married many wives and therefore was punished: His kingdom was taken away from his descendants (I Kings 11:9-13). Even a sage like Solomon can turn away from God, become a sinner and commit idolatry – and consequently lose his wisdom. Thus, QohR admits that wisdom is closely connected to sincere faith and devotion to God and His commandments.

2.4.2. Targum Qohelet

According to the Targum, in these verses (8:16-17) Qohelet refers to the study of the Torah: “Just as I set my mind to learn the wisdom of *the Torah* and to see the business which is done on the earth, so *the sage who desires to occupy himself with the Torah and to find wisdom; it is labour, for he has no rest* in the day time and at night he sees no sleep with his eyes.”⁷⁹ Such is the study of the wisdom of the Torah; it is as main as hard work of the sage. In the next verse, TQoh parallels acquiring wisdom and knowledge of the Torah to the knowledge of the future: “I saw every *mighty* work of the Lord, *for it is awesome, and a man is not permitted to find out the mighty work* of the Lord, which is done *in this world* under the sun. *When a man labours to seek what will be, he shall not find out and also if a wise man says to himself that he will know what will be at the end of days, he is not permitted to find out.*”⁸⁰ Man’s wisdom does by no means suffice to understand all works of God; thus, he is unable to predict the future, what – by the way – is also forbidden for him. However, futile is man’s wisdom only with regard to the comprehension of secrets of divine world.

3. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Qohelet’s view of wisdom is very ambiguous. The reader of the book of Qohelet encounters thoughts that at the same time express praise and disappointment of wisdom. Speaking

77 QohR 8:17.

78 QohR 8:17.

79 TQoh 8:16. Cf. KNOBEL, in: *The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 15 (note 8), p. 43.

80 TQoh 8:17.

about limitedness and imperfection of man's wisdom, Qohelet appears to be in conflict with traditional perception of wisdom. However, his frequent advice to observe God's commandments proves that the main message of his book is far from deserving to be regarded as heretical. The following paragraphs sum up what rabbinic and patristic sources understand by "wisdom" and how they approach Qohelet's individualistic concept of it and his contradictory views.

It is important to mention that both the Midrash QohR and TQoh agree that the author of the book of Qohelet is the King Solomon. Therefore, they often interpret the verses quoted above in the light of biblical passages regarding Solomon's wisdom. Thus, TQoh interprets Qoh 1:13 in light of I Kings 3:5-9. Solomon asked God for "giving him an understanding mind to govern God's people that he may discern between good and evil". Subsequently, QohR understands Qoh 1:14 as a warning of Solomon who sits at the gates of wisdom and warns Israel. Applying the method of typology to the interpretation of Qoh 1:18, QohR asserts that Moses and Solomon increased wisdom to their advantage, while Doeg and Ahitophel increased it to their disadvantage. The Targumic reading of Qoh. 2:15 juxtaposes Saul and Solomon and claims that the latter is wiser than the former, because he realized that observing God's commandments is all man is to do. Discussing King Solomon's wisdom in the explanation of Qoh 7:23, QohR proves that Solomon was wiser than all other people were, including even people like Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph. Comments in QohR on Qoh 8:17 (referring to the story in I Kings 11:1-13) convey a warning to those disobeying God. However, even a sage like King Solomon turned away from God, became a sinner and committed idolatry – and consequently lost his wisdom.

In rabbinic tradition, "wise man" or "sage" (חכם) became the title of the master of the Law (mAvot 1:4, 2:15), likewise called "rabbi". For the Rabbis, the study of the Torah is the main task of the sages, masters and faithful men. Therefore, it is not surprising that the QohR and TQoh frequently associate wisdom with the study of the Torah.⁸¹ Seeing in Qohelet's pursuit of wisdom the process of the study of the Torah, the Rabbis completely rewrote Qohelet's message and presented it as if the spirit of the Torah inspired it. This is also the reason why the Rabbis positively evaluated Qohelet's "sore task" (ענין) as the effort to investigate and explore the world and its laws with wisdom. The Midrash resolves the problem of imperfection of human understanding and wisdom by referring to the imperfection of

81 In some rabbinic texts, *wisdom* is contrasted to Torah (bQidd 49b; bNiddah 69b; bSanh 104b; yMak 2,31d).

human memory. A man, for example, immerses himself into the study of the Torah, but forgets it. Taking into account this shortcoming, the study of the Torah seems to be a “sore and futile task”, since man is unable to remember and memorize all what he learned. Nevertheless, the Midrash explains this contradiction and denies the alleged futility of wisdom. In addition to that, the Rabbis understand the imperfectness of human memory as a great good for a man. While forgetting some words of the Torah, man always is bound to pay attention to it and to remember that the study of it is the first and foremost work of his life.

Qohelet’s suggestion that wisdom increases troubles is also explained by the Rabbis in light of the abovementioned treatment of wisdom as study of the Law. Rabbinical interpretation puts forward the question of responsibility of the wise for his knowledge. A man who devotes himself to learning and acquiring of knowledge suffers more than an ignorant man. He is also responsible for his right use of the knowledge acquired. God gives wisdom but man must understand the significance of this gift. It is important not only to study, but also to apply knowledge to life in accordance with the requirements of the Law of God. That is why wisdom as well as sin are inconsistent, but their possible combination can give a rise to anger and vexation. At the same time, according to rabbinic teaching, studying the Torah and performing good deeds in this world opens up the possibility that a man will be counted among the righteous in the world to come.

When interpreting the biblical text, the Rabbis agreed with Qohelet in his conclusion that a man cannot comprehend God’s acts and the secrets of nature by means of his wisdom. Yet, they do not regard that as a major existential problem. The task set to the teacher and the student alike is the permanent process of studying the Torah – and not the acquirement of an absolute knowledge of the universe.

In the context of Torah study, the Rabbis were also able to appreciate Qohelet’s appraisal of wisdom. The words of the Torah are superior to other teachings, let alone heresy, as light is superior to darkness. This perception also enabled the Rabbis to rewrite Qohelet’s pessimistic view regarding the same fate of the wise and the fool, i.e. death. Thus, the Rabbis suggest that the wise and pious man lives in the memory of others, while the fool and the sinner do not. Therefore, according to rabbinic logic, a good name and memory of the wise can counterbalance the fear of the inevitability of the death. In order to prove their confidence, the Rabbis put Qohelet’s words in rabbinic context. Thus, the wise becomes the “Rabbi” whose name and knowledge of the Torah will not be forgotten after his death because his disciples remember his teaching and quote them.

Rabbinic sources do not speak openly about futile aspect of the wisdom referred to by Qohelet. They merely asserted Qohelet's conclusion that a man cannot comprehend God's acts and all the secrets of nature by means of his wisdom. Nevertheless, the Rabbis do not affirm that this inability is a tragedy of human life. The Midrash and the Targum again try to explain such human imperfection in light of Torah study. According to them, lack of understanding of some of the commandments of the Torah is not an evidence for the vanity of human wisdom or intelligence either. To the contrary, lack of knowledge and comprehension offers man an incentive to develop himself. That a student does not understand all the words of the Torah may be excusable, because even the wisest man on earth, i.e. King Solomon, did not understand one of the commandments either. At the same time, referring to some mistakes Solomon made in his life, the Rabbis again express a warning to the readers that any incorrectness of both teacher and student can lead to loss of wisdom and understanding the Torah.

Finally, in terms of methodology, the rabbinic approach to the Book of Qohelet can be described as an attempt: (1) to read its text "historically" by attributing it to King Solomon and explaining it in light of the biblical story of Solomon; (2) to confirm the unity of the TaNaKh by way of using typology and allusion to different biblical characters and basing their argument on texts taken from all three parts of the TaNaKh, and (3) to understand Qohelet's search for wisdom as a metaphor for the process of Torah study – without overlooking or negating Qohelet's perception of the imperfection of human wisdom.