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KSIĘGI KOHELETA 1,1–11 Z BUDDYJSKIEJ PERSPEKTYWY. PRZYSZYNEK DO PRZEKŁADU I KOMENTARZA MIĘDZYRELIGIJNEGO

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–11 FROM A BUDDHIST'S PERSPECTIVE. A CONTRIBUTION TO INTERRELIGIOUS TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule zaproponowaliśmy alternatywny, międzyreligijny przekład oraz komentarz Koh 1,1–11 dokonany z perspektywy filozofii buddyjskiej. Przekładając i komentując Koh 1,1–11, nie bazowaliśmy na filozofii jednego określonego nurtu buddyzmu. Odwołano się do idei, które są obecne zarówno w buddyzmie therawada, jak i w mahajanie, pamiętając, że w poszczególnych odłamach tej religii akcentują specyficzne aspekty i czasami pełnią nieco inną rolę.

Zaproponowany przekład skłania do dwóch istotnych wniosków związanych z procesem międzyreligijnego dialogu. Po pierwsze, w utworach literackich reprezentujących odmienne systemy religijne i kulturowe można odnaleźć idee, które są podobne do siebie. Z jednej strony ułatwia to proces przekładu, ponieważ niejako wprowadzamy jedne podobne koncepcje w miejsce innych. Musimy jednak pamiętać, że nawet te na pierwszy rzut oka podobne idee funkcjonują w zupełnie odmiennych kontekstach społecznych, historycznych, kulturowych i religijnych. W przypadku Koh 1,1–11 takim pojęciem, które od razu nasuwa pewne skojarzenia z filozofią buddyjską, jest koheletowe *hābel/hebel* („ulotność”, „marność”), które postanowiliśmy oddać przez dwa podobne pojęcia, czyli sanskrycki termin *sūnyatā* („pustka”) oraz palijski *dukkha* („coś niesatysfakcjonującego”, „cierpienie”). Po drugie, wyzwaniem dla tego rodzaju przekładu i komentarza stanowi znalezienie adekwatnych idei, które pełnią analogiczną funkcję w dwóch zestawianych ze sobą systemach religijnych, ale jednocześnie radykalnie mogą różnić się między sobą. W takim przypadku tłumacz musi odnaleźć i uchwycić specyfikę różnych koncepcji religijnych wraz z ich miejscem w danym systemie, a następnie znaleźć strukturalne ekwiwalenty w tekście źródłowym i doktrynie, z perspektywy której interpretuje ten tekst. W Koh 1,1–11 przykładem tego typu zjawiska były te fragmenty, w których pojawiają się wątki eschatologiczne. Kohelet jest reprezentantem tradycyjnej semickiej idei, która ogranicza autentycznie ludzkie życie jedynie do świata doczesnego. Po śmierci cień człowieka znajduje się w otchłani, zwanej Szeolem, w której jedynie wegetuje. Z kolei

buddyzm naucza o niekończącym się cyklu kolejnych żywotów. Oczywiście buddyzm, w oparciu o doktrynę braku samo-bytu (skr. *anātman*; pali *anattā*), odrzuca koncepcję nieśmiertelnej, wędrującej duszy czy jaźni.

Słowa kluczowe: Księga Koheleta, buddyzm, dialog międzyreligijny, przekład alternatywny, dialog chrześcijańsko-buddyjskim

Abstract

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–11 FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE. CONTRIBUTION TO TRANSLATION AND INTERRELIGIOUS COMMENTARY

In this article, we have proposed an alternative, interreligious translation and commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. When translating and commenting on Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, we did not base ourselves on the philosophy of one particular branch of Buddhism. Reference was made to ideas that are present in both Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana, bearing in mind that in individual branches of this religion they have specific accents and sometimes play a slightly different role.

The proposed translation leads to two important conclusions related to the process of interreligious dialogue. First, in literary works representing different religious and cultural systems, one can find ideas that are similar to each other. On the one hand, it facilitates the translation process, because we introduce some similar concepts in place of others. However, we must remember that even these seemingly similar ideas function in completely different social, historical, cultural and religious contexts. In the case of Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, such a concept that immediately evokes certain associations with Buddhist philosophy is the Kohelet *hābel/hebel* (“evanescence”, vanity), which we decided to render by two similar concepts, i.e. the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* (“emptiness”) and the Pali *dukkha* (“something unsatisfactory”, “suffering”). Secondly, the challenge for this kind of translation and commentary is to find adequate ideas that perform an analogous function in the two juxtaposed religious systems, but at the same time radicals can differ from each other. In this case, the translator must find and grasp the specificity of various religious concepts and their place in a given system, and then find structural equivalents in the source text and doctrine from the perspective of which he interprets this text. In Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, an example of this type of phenomenon were those fragments in which eschatological threads appear. Ecclesiastes is a representative of the traditional Semitic idea, which limits authentic human life to the temporal world only. After death, the shadow of man is in the abyss called Sheol, where he only vegetates. Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches about the endless cycle of successive lives. Of course, Buddhism, based on the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*, Pali *anattā*), rejects the concept of an immortal, wandering soul or self.

Keywords: Ecclesiastes, Buddhism, interreligious dialogue, alternative translation, Christian-Buddhist dialogue

Introduction

The Book of Ecclesiastes (hereinafter Koh) is probably the most original and controversial of the biblical books. Its pessimistic tone and theses, which very often stand in opposition to the views commonly held in ancient Israel, surprised already in antiquity and also surprise modern readers and commentators. The book is a pseudo-epigraphic work, the alleged author of which is King Solomon, considered in the biblical and Jewish tradition to be a symbol of a sage and philosopher. However, linguistic, literary and theological studies show that the text

of the book was written around the third century after Christ. This is evidenced, among others, by late biblical Hebrew with many Aramaic influences. In addition, references to the socio-historical context characterizing the Judaism of the Persian and Hellenistic periods can be noticed in the text. On the one hand, Ecclesiastes, like the Book of Job, engages in a discussion with many traditional wisdom and religious views. On the other hand, it seems that some influences of Hellenistic thought can also be seen in his work¹. The book's originality has been conducive to various forms of its reception in world culture over the centuries². There were also references to philosophies originating from distant Asia, such as Taoism or Buddhism³.

In this article, we want to propose an alternative, interreligious translation and Ecclesiastes' commentary made from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. The designation of this translation as alternative⁴ underlines the intended departure from the traditional Polish translation practice, which we observe in major editions of the Holy Bible, such as the *Millennium Bible*, the *Paulist Bible* or the *Poznań Bible*⁵. The proposed translation does not seek literal fidelity to the Hebrew original, nor does it strive for the best communicativeness in contemporary Polish. Its specificity concerns its intended interreligious character. In other words, our goal is to render Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 using concepts derived from Buddhist doctrine, to show the openness and flexibility of the biblical text to new levels and ranges of understanding and its cross-cultural adaptability. From this perspective, this type of translation can become a platform for interreligious dialogue between Christians and Buddhists⁶. Commentaries accompanying the translation try to show the meaning of Koh's Hebrew text and explain the author's specific translation choices.

¹ For detailed introductory issues in Eccl. see: Gianfranco Ravasi, *Kohelet. Najbardziej oryginalna i „skandaliczna” księga Starego Testamentu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Salwator, 2003), pp. 13–54; Ronald Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), XIX–LXIX.

² A rich presentation of various cultural readings of the book is presented in: Ravasi, *Kohelet*, pp. 320–400.

³ Mirosław Patalon, *Kohelet Taoista. Przyczynek do dialogu międzykulturowego* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2017).

⁴ An example of an alternative approach to the translation of the Gospel of Matthew is contained in the articles: Krzysztof Bardski, „Mateuszowa Ewangelia cudów (Mt 8–9) – przekład alternatywny”, *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne*, 31, 1 (2018): pp. 60–76; Krzysztof Bardski, „Być uczniem Jezusa – alternatywna parafraza Matthew 10–12” *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne* 31, 4 (2018): pp. 106–130.

⁵ On traditional biblical translation, see: Stanisław Koziara, *Tradycyjne biblizmy a nowe polskie przekłady Pisma Świętego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2009); Marek Piel, *Grzech dosłowności we współczesnych polskich przekładach Starego Testamentu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2003).

⁶ For more on the Christian-Buddhist dialogue, see e.g.: John B. Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue. Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, (Philadelphia: Wipf & Stock Pub., 1982); Whalen Lai, Michael von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001); Aelred Graham, *Conversations. Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968); Buddhadasa, *Christianity and Buddhism* (Bangkok: Thammasapha & Bunlentham Institution, 2009) Deisetz T. Suzuki, *Mysticism. Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Paul O. Ingram, *The Modern*

Translating and commenting on Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 from a Buddhist perspective, the author does not base himself on the philosophy of one particular stream of Buddhism. It refers to ideas that are present in both Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana, although in individual branches of this religion they emphasize specific aspects and sometimes play a slightly different role.

This article is a contribution to a more detailed reflection on Koh from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. The works of such researchers as J.P. Keenan, who made, among others, interpretation of the Gospel according to St. Marek from the point of view of Mahayana philosophy, show the value of this type of research projects and experiments⁷.

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2

*1 The words of Ecclesiastes, son of David, king in Jerusalem,
2 Unsatisfying (Pali dukkha), how unsatisfactory, said Ecclesiastes,
unsatisfying, how unsatisfying, everything is unsatisfying*

*1 The words of Ecclesiastes, son of David king in Jerusalem,
2 Empty (San. śūnyatā), absolutely empty, said Ecclesiastes,
Empty, absolutely empty, everything is empty*

The first two verses are the editorial prologue of the entire Koh. In verse 1, the alleged author of the book is presented, which is King Solomon, patron of the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel (1 Kings 5:9–14) and the alleged author of other biblical books, i.e. Proverbs (Proverbs 1:1), Song of Songs (Song 1) and the deuterocanonical Book of Solomon's Wisdom. Of course, this is an intentional literary device and in the case of Koh it appears with a pseudo-epigraphic work. In turn, verse 2 can be considered a kind of summary of the message of the entire book. The key to verse 2 is the noun *hābel*, a variant of *hebel*, which appears 38 times in Koh, compared to 70 times in the entire Hebrew Bible. This statistical fact is already illustrated by translating the Hebrew *hebel* into the Polish word "marność", English "vanity". This method of translation already appears in the Gdańsk Bible and the Jakub Wujek Bible, as well as in many modern translations such as the Millennium Bible, the Warsaw Bible, the Poznań Bible, the Warsaw-Praga Bible, the Paulist Bible. Its source is the Latin

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue. Two Universalistic Religions in Transformation (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1988); Paul O. Ingram, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in an Age of Science* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Żywy Budda, żywy Chrystus* (Warszawa: Zysk i S-ska, 1998).

⁷ John. P. Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark. A Mahayana Reading* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub., 1995).

Vulgate, which renders *hābel/hebel* by the noun *vanitas*, meaning "vanity"⁸. However, the semantic scope of the Hebrew original is much wider. G. Ravasi, in his commentary on Koh, presents a list of meanings of Hebrew and its Semitic counterparts: “– late Hebrew and late Aramaic: warm breeze, steam, smoke, breath, nothingness; – Syriac: gunpowder; – Arabic: steam, smoke, wind; – late Egyptian and Ethiopian: wind; – Mandy: breath, breeze, steam, smoke”⁹.

Thus, this noun indicates something impermanent, not entirely tangible and passing. Verse 2 emphasizes that being *hābel/hebel* characterizes all reality. Every being in the universe is marked by impermanence and transience. No being can be finally grasped and seized by man. Nothing in the cosmos can be a support or foundation for human existence, because it is as fragile and delicate as rising steam or mist. Kohelet reinforces this fundamental characterization of reality by using the construction *hābel hābālīm*, which expresses the superlative degree. In other words, the transience, the impermanence of all things is total, absolute.

The words in verse 2 seem to sound very Buddhist at first glance. However, upon closer consideration, it turns out that the Hebrew term *hābel/hebel* can be translated in two ways in interreligious translation, thus emphasizing slightly different aspects of Buddhist philosophy and referring to various branches of Buddhism¹⁰.

Some commentators, such as N. Frye¹¹, have suggested an analogy between Kohelet's *hābel/hebel* and the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* (Pali *suññatā*; Chinese *kōng*; Japanese *kū*), which is most often translated as "emptiness"¹². As pointed out by J.P. Keenan, also in Japanese translations of the Koh, the Chinese ideogram read in Japanese as *kū*, which is the equivalent of the Sanskrit *śūnyatā*, was sometimes used, rendering the Hebrew *hābel/hebel*¹³. The concept of emptiness is already present in Theravada Buddhism (Pali *suññatā*), but it was only in Mahayana that it began to play the role of one of the central elements of Buddhist

⁸ In this article, we use the following Hebrew dictionaries: Piotr Briks, *Podręczny słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski Starego Testamentu* (Warszawa: Vocatio, 2000); Markus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* (London–New York: Luzac G.P. Putnam's Son, 1903); Ernst Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for readers of English* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1987); Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, Johann J. Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski Starego Testamentu* (Warszawa: Vacatio, 2008).

⁹ Ravasi, *Kohelet*, 21.

¹⁰ Egzegeza, vv. 1–2 in: Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 1–4; Ravasi, *Kohelet*, pp. 57–64 (Ravasi discusses together, vv. 1–3).

¹¹ Northrop Frey, *Il grande codice*, (Turyn: Einaudi, 1986), 168.

¹² With regard to the Buddhist understanding of terms in Sanskrit and Pali, we use: Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary. Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980).

¹³ Keenan, *Gospel of Mark*, 25.

philosophy¹⁴. It occupies a special place in the tradition of the prajnaparamita sutras (San. *prajñāpāramitā*)¹⁵ and in the philosophical current of Madhyamika, the most important representative of which is Nagarjuna (150–250 after Christ), and his fundamental work entitled *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*¹⁶. The concept of emptiness has been misinterpreted by Western commentators and interpreters of Mahayana Buddhism. Very often it is understood in the spirit of nihilism that emptiness means nothingness. However, from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, the emptiness of all beings indicates that they are not characterized by self-being (*svabhāva*; Chinese *zìxìng*), or unconditioned and independent existence. From the perspective of conventional truth, every being in the universe is subject to the law of cause and effect and is part of the chain of dependent origination (San. *pratītyasamutpāda*; Pali *paticcasamuppāda*)¹⁷. In other words, the idea of emptiness is a logical extension of the fundamental Buddhism doctrine of no-self (*anātman*; Pali. *anattā*)¹⁸. Not only does the knowing subject possess no enduring essence or substance, but this characterization extends to all beings. If entities were not characterized by emptiness, they would in fact be independent quasi-absolute static monads. The fact that all elements in the universe do not have a constant nature, this self-being, enables their creation, development and passing away. Emptiness is therefore a kind of potentiality of all beings.

An interreligious translation of the term *hābel/hebel* into *sūnyatā* would thus emphasize the aspect of impermanence of all beings understood as the lack of a permanent being, the lack of self-existence. Moreover, the emptiness of all things implies that nothing in the universe can be a final foothold for man. Since things are empty, and therefore conditioned, they cannot provide a solid foundation upon which a human being can rely. The construction expressing the superlative degree (*hābel hābālīm*) was translated using the phrase “absolute emptiness” to emphasize that we are dealing with a fundamental and universal feature of all beings. It is worth noting, however, that the use of the term *sūnyatā*

¹⁴ A detailed analysis of the doctrine of emptiness is included in the monograph: Artur Przybysławski, *Buddyjska filozofia pustki* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2009).

¹⁵ On this current in Mahayana philosophy: Wiesław Krupiewski, *Filozofia pradźniaparamita. Droga bodhisattwy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo A, 2010).

¹⁶ Nagarjuna's philosophy is presented in monographs: Volker Zotz, *Historia filozofii buddyjskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2007), 119–132; Krzysztof Jakubczak, *Madhjamaka Nagardżuny. Filozofia czy terapia* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2010).

¹⁷ A very detailed discussion of the doctrine of dependent origination is contained in the Polish translation of the sutras of the Pali canon by Piotr Jagodziński: *Majjhima Nikaya. Zbiór mów średniej długości* (Warszawa: Fundacja „Theravada”, 2021), pp. 84–268. So-called a modernist exposition of this concept is included in the works: Buddhadasa, *Under the Bodhi Tree: Buddha's Original Vision of Dependent Co-Arising* (Somerville: Wisdom Pub., 2017); Nanavira Thera, *Seeking The Path 1960–1965* (Path Press., 2012), pp. 11–32.

¹⁸ On the concept of not-self (*anātman/anattā*), see: Dalajlama, Tubten Cziedryn, *Buddyzm. Jeden nauczyciel, wiele tradycji* (Poznań: Rebis, 2015), pp. 189–219; Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 12–14.

deprives Ecclesiastes of its pessimistic tone. The Hebrew noun *hābel/hebel* and its multiplication in verse 2 brings with it a note of pessimism and melancholy over the impermanence and fleeting nature of all things, which corresponds to the further content of the entire book. Contrary to some Western interpretations, the Buddhist idea of emptiness is not so pessimistic. Essentially *śūnyatā* is simply a common feature of all reality, independent of the subject's emotional attitude.

It seems, therefore, that the second proposal of translating *hābel/hebel* using the Pali term *dukkha* may be closer to the message of the Hebrew Ecclesiastes. The Pali noun *dukkha* (*duḥkha*) is very often translated into Polish by the word “cierpienie”, English “suffering”. However, the term *dukkha* has a much broader meaning, encompassing not only physical suffering, but also mental suffering, disappointment or dissatisfaction¹⁹. Thus, it can be seen that *dukkha* describes very strong experiences, strongly affecting the subject, but also more subtle and trivial ones. A perfect definition of how Buddhism understands the concept of *dukkha* is given by the Buddha in his first post-awakening sermon in the Pali Canon²⁰, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11): “And this, O monks, is the noble truth of suffering [*dukkha* – P.G.]: birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, associating with the one we do not love is suffering, separation from the one we love is suffering, failure to achieve one's wishes is suffering; in a word, suffering is the five categories of elements that feed the lust for existence”²¹.

This passage contains the Buddha's teaching on the first of the Four Noble Truths (*catvāri āryasatyāni*; Pali *cattāri ariyasaccāni*)²². It can be seen that *dukkha* characterizes the entire existence of man. In fact, not only those events and experiences that we classify as negative, but also those that we evaluate as positive are marked by *dukkha*. Due to the fact that it is very difficult to translate this Pali term into Polish or English, it is impossible to fully convey its rhetorical power in the original linguistic and cultural context. What is perceived and experienced by man as negative is associated with various shades of suffering. At this point, such a translation of the Pali *dukkha* is able to reflect the meaning of the original.

¹⁹ Discussion of this key term for Buddhism: William Hart, *Sztuka życia. Medytacja vipassana według nauki S.N. Goenki* (Warszawa: Anicca, 2019), pp. 49–51; Nayantiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 54–55; Marek Mejer, *Buddyzm. Zarys historii buddyzmu w Indiach* (Warszawa: Pruszyński i S-ka, 2001), pp. 86–87; Dalajlama, Cziedryn, *Buddyzm. A selection of texts in the Pali Canon dedicated to the human condition: Bhikkhu Bodhi, In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Rooksley: Ingram Publisher Services, 2005), pp. 26–40.

²⁰ Introduction to the Pali Canon: Mejer, *Buddyzm*, pp. 131–141; Oscar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000); *An Analysis of the Pali Canon*, red. Russel Webb (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008).

²¹ Polish translation after: Mejer, *Buddyzm*, p. 240.

²² Mejer, *Buddyzm*, pp. 80–81.

However, when it is said that what is positive for a person is also *dukkha*, then in this case the Polish word “cierpienie”, English "suffering" is not fully adequate. The noun *dukkha*, however, can be translated as "dissatisfaction." In this sense, no thing or event, even a positive one, can satisfy human desires and desires (*tṛṣṇā*; Pali *taṇhā*)²³, which are the subject of the second noble truth. In other words, man is constantly looking for new sensations in the hope that he will finally achieve a state of complete satisfaction and happiness, for this purpose he desires more things and sensations, and avoids unpleasant experiences. However, everything that a person sets his expectations for turns out to be disappointing and unsatisfying in the end. This is Buddhist *dukkha*.

The Pali term *dukkha* thus conveys much more of the meaning of the Hebrew noun *hābel/hebel* than the term *śūnyatā*. The transience of everything in the universe, as indicated by *hābel/hebel*, is associated not only with the transience of beings, but also with the fact that they are unable to satisfy human desires. The subsequent chapters of Ecclesiastes show how the hero of the book undertakes various human activities, allowing himself to experience the most sophisticated pleasures (Eccl. 2:1–11), but ultimately none of them gives him happiness and fulfillment, leaving only disappointment (see Eccl. 11). The Buddhist term *dukkha* describes the world experienced by the subject in a very similar way. Moreover, in Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice, the experience of insight into the *dukkha* of the universe entails the view that everything is also impermanent (*Anityya*; Pali *anicca*)²⁴ and has no self-existence (*Anatman*; Pali *anattā*)²⁵. So *dukkha* is also related to the impermanence of things, as does the Hebrew *hābel/hebel*. In the interreligious translation, the construction *hābel hābālīm* was rendered as "how unsatisfactory", treating the superlative as a means of emphatically emphasizing that everything in the cosmos is marked by *dukkha*.

Ecclesiastes 1.3–11

3 What fruit (San. and Pali vipāka) for man in all his actions (San. karma; Pali kamma) that he performs in samsara (San. and Pali saṃsāra)?

²³ Nayantiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 177–178.

²⁴ On the concept of impermanence see: Nanavira Thera, *Seeking The Path*, pp. 47–48 Nayantiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 14–15.

²⁵ Three features of reality are explained i.a. Hart, *Sztuka życia*, pp. 95–96.

Verse 3 begins a new literary unit that includes verses 3–11²⁶. The Polish term “owoc”, English “fruit” corresponds in the Hebrew text to the word *yitrôn*. It is a noun that appears 10 times in the Hebrew Bible and only in Ecclesiastes. It means “benefit”, “benefit”, “profit”, “result of action”, “something that exceeds”. In the interreligious translation, *yitrôn* is rendered using the Pali term *vipāka*, which in Theravada Buddhism indicates the karmic consequences of human conduct, regardless of whether one speaks of beneficial (Pali *kusala*) or unfavorable (Pali *akusala*) actions. On the other hand, the word “action”, which in the Hebrew Koh corresponds to the noun *’āmāl*, is translated by the Pali term *kamma*, or “deed,” “action”. The Hebrew term *’āmāl* means “what is gained with difficulty”, “toil”, “anguish” and has a much more negative connotation than the proposed Buddhist equivalent. In the interreligious translation, however, the author wanted to read the statement from verse 3 in the light of the Buddhist doctrine of the law of karma, hence the proposed translation. A detailed discussion of the law of karma, also known as the law of cause and effect (*kamma-vipakā*)²⁷, is beyond the scope of this article, especially when the meticulous analysis of the *Theravada abhidhamma*²⁸ is taken into account. At this point it is enough to be aware that the consequence (Pali *vipakā*) of a human act, referred to in the Pali term *kamma*, is of fundamental importance to the intention of the acting subject (Pali *cetanā*)²⁹. If the will is guided by bad intentions, of course it will lead to negative, adverse results. Similarly, actions conditioned by good intentions lead to beneficial effects. *Vipakā* can be experienced by the subject both in this life and in subsequent lives. Since Buddhism presupposes a succession of lives, our present life is in turn the fruit of the deeds of previous lives. Of course, in Buddhism, unlike in Hinduism, there is no subject that is subject to the process of transmigration. The doctrine of no-self (Pali *anattā*) precludes the existence of such a permanent subject, but speaks of a succession of existences.

The choice of the noun *vipakā* as the equivalent of the Hebrew term *yitrôn* captures the essential message of Ecclesiastes verse 3. The Hebrew sage wishes to emphasize that any human actions are not able to provide a person with lasting happiness. Similarly, in Buddhism, clinging to pleasure and avoiding unpleasantness cannot tear a person out of a series of existences. Many beneficial deeds may result in the next existence being lived as a divine being (San. and Pali *deva*), but even in this case, someday, after many eons, there will

²⁶ Detailed exegesis vv. 3–13 in: Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 5–10; Ravasi, *Kohelet*, 65–82 (Ravasi begins this pericope with v. 4).

²⁷ The law of karma in Theravada terms is discussed in Nanavira Thera, *Seeking The Path*, pp. 49–50.

²⁸ A very good introduction to Theravada Abhidhamma is provided in the monograph: Yakupitiyage Karunadasa, *The Theravada Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality* (Somerville: Wisdom Pub., 2019).

²⁹ See more: Nanavira Thera, *Seeking The Path*, pp. 53–56; Nayantiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 39.

be an end to this form of existence. The only way out, in Theravada Buddhism, is to achieve awakening (*nirvāṇa*, Pali *nibbāna*), which can be prepared by practicing a certain group of beneficial actions, especially the noble eight-fold path (Pali *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*). So here the Buddhist perspective is a bit more optimistic, because the author of Koh seems to be a bit more skeptical and pessimistic. Perhaps wisdom gives some advantage over stupidity, but in the end everything is *hābel/hebel* (Ecclesiastes 2:11–17), and for man, like animals, only death awaits (Ecclesiastes 3:18–21).

The Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes defines the arena of man's earthly struggles with the phrase *taḥat hašāmmēš*, meaning “under the sun”. In our interreligious translation, the phrase “*in samsara*” was found to be an adequate equivalent. The concept of samsara (San. and Pali *saṃsāra*) refers to the entire universe in which the process of successive existences continues. In Buddhist philosophy, especially in the traditional Theravada interpretation, this process is explained by the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*; Pali *paṭiccasamuppada*). Most religious systems originating from the Indian subcontinent, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, seek a way to liberate themselves from samsara. Irrespective of philosophical differences regarding the subject's status, in most cases ordinary Hindus and Buddhists seek to gain merit through good deeds that will enable them to be favorably reborn in subsequent lives. In this view, samsara is the arena of struggle in which man toils and works for his future, in this life and the next. From the Buddhist perspective, however, merit alone cannot free a human being from samsara. This is possible only by attaining awakening and attaining the state of nirvana (*nirvāṇa*; Pali *nibbāna*; Chinese *nièpán*; Japanese *nehan*)³⁰.

*4 Sentient beings come and sentient beings go,
and the process of samsara (San. and Pali saṃsāra) continues in countless kalpas (San. kalpa;
Pali kappa)*

In verse 4, Ecclesiastes speaks of succession of generations. The term for a generation is *dôr*, a singular Hebrew noun with a collective meaning. The continuity of this process is emphasized by the author of the book by applying the participle to the stems *hlc* (“come”,

³⁰ Theravada understanding of this idea see: Nanavira Thera, *Seeking The Path*, pp. 66-69; Nayantiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 105–107. The compilation of Theravada and Mahayana concepts is presented by: Dalai Lama, Cziedryn, *Buddyzm*, pp. 341–354. In the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, a doctrine is postulated that recognizes that samsara is identical with nirvana. The state of ignorance, however, does not allow one to experience this insight. On the background of this idea in Mahayana philosophy: Zolt, *Historia filozofii buddyjskiej*, pp. 77–100, pp. 119–147; Krzysztof Jakubczak, *Filozoficzne szkoły buddyzmu mahajany – madhjamaka i jogaczara*, in: *Filozofia wschodu*, red. Barbara Szymańska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2001), pp. 207–244.

“go”) and *bw*’ (“come”, “arrive”). The first part of this verse shows the collective way of looking at the history of mankind, characteristic of the ancient Israelite culture. A man as an individual is always part of a larger community, first a home, then a clan, ending with a nation. Moreover, Koh's eschatology does not include any more developed concepts regarding the afterlife. It seems that Ecclesiastes is faithful in this matter to the traditional Hebrew idea of limiting the real life of man to the temporal. What awaits a human being after death is only a quasi-existence in Sheol (Ecclesiastes 3:18–21). Ecclesiastes thus describes a continuous process of successive generations, in which the individual stories of individual people are lost.

As the Buddhist equivalent of the Hebrew *dôr*, we chose the phrase “sentient beings”. According to the law of karma and the concept of *samsara*, every being can be born in six spheres of existence (San. *ṣaḍgati*): as a divine being (San. and Pali *deva*), as a *manussa*, as animals (Pali *tira-acchanā*), as hungry ghosts (San. *preta*; Pali *peta*) and as hellish beings (San. *naraka*). In Buddhism, birth as a divine being is considered beneficial. However, it is human existence that is valued most because it enables one to attain awakening and thus liberate oneself from *samsara*³¹.

The last part of verse 4 in the Hebrew text speaks of the eternal enduring of the earth (hbr. *'ereṣ*). The term for eternity is *'ôlām*, meaning “long duration”, “ancient times”. The aspect of eternal duration is also emphasized by the participle based on the root *'md*, meaning “stand”, “stand still”, “establish”. In the author's interreligious translation, the noun *'ereṣ* (“earth”) is rendered as “the process of *samsara*”. The entirety of verse 4 describes the continuous process of successive generations that takes place in this temporal world. The idea of *samsara*, in which there is a process of continuous rebirth, outlined above, adequately expresses the intent of the Hebrew text in terms of the Buddhist worldview. The noun *'ôlām*, on the other hand, is translated by the Sanskrit term *kalpa* (Pali *kappa*). *Kalpa* in Indian religions and philosophies means a huge span of time, and in the plural it becomes almost synonymous with eternity³². Verse 4 illustrates the concept of time, very characteristic of Ecclesiastes, which, on the one hand, assumes the transience, fleetingness and impermanence of everything in the universe, and on the other shows a kind of cyclicity (Ecclesiastes 3:1–17). We also find an analogous idea in the religions of the Indian subcontinent, especially in Buddhism. Buddhism emphasizes the impermanence of everything (*anitya*; Pali *anicca*), but

³¹ A presentation of Buddhist cosmology is included in the monograph: Akira Sadakata, *Góra Sumeru i kraina Sukhawati. Zarys kosmologii buddyjskiej* (Warszawa: Moderski i S-ka, 2000).

³² A detailed presentation of the *kalpa* concept: Sadakata, *Góra sumeru i kraina Sukhawati*, pp. 97–104.

at the same time it borrows from Indian mythology and philosophy the concept of the cyclical nature of the world, which expresses the concept of *kalpa*.

5 *The sun rises and the sun sets,
and wants its place (Pali. tanhā), rising again,
6 He goes south and circles north,
it goes around following the wind, and the wind returns to its path of circulation
7 All the streams flow into the sea, and the sea is not filled,
to the place where the streams go, there they return by going.*

We have translated verses 5-8, remaining faithful to the original Hebrew Ecclesiastes. The overall message of these verses points to the Koh-specific concept of time already discussed above, combining the transience of all things with cyclicity, which is very similar to the Buddhist understanding of temporality. Some commentators point out that in verses 4 to 8 the author of the book uses the motif of the four elements of which the universe is made. For verse 4 speaks of the earth, verse 5 of the sun, which would indicate the element of fire, verse 6 of wind, which may be an allusion to air, and verse 7 describes rivers and seas, i.e. the element of water. The motif of the four elements from which the entire universe is built is present in Greek philosophy, from where, under the influence of the expansion of Hellenism, starting from the second half of the 4th century BC, it could have reached the land of Israel³³.

The motif of the four elements – the foundations of the cosmos is also present in the culture of the Indian subcontinent, including Buddhism. These are the so-called great elements (San. and Pali *mahābhūta*), which consists of: earth (San. *pruṭhavī-dhātu*), water (San. *āpa-dhātu*), fire (San. *taja-dhātu*) and air (San. *vāyu-dhātu*). It is very difficult to say whether the concept of the four elements developed in Greek and Indian culture, regardless of whether there was any exchange of ideas between them³⁴.

The only interreligious modification in the translation occurs in verse 5, where the participle based on the root *š'p* (“sigh”, “pant”, “struggle”, “strive”) is rendered by the verb “to desire”, alluding to the Pali term *tanhā* (“desire”, “lust”). The noun *tanhā* is the content of the second noble truth showing the cause of *dukkha*, or “suffering”, “lack of satisfaction”. As the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) says: "And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the origin of suffering is craving [tanha – P.G.], which creates new

³³ Ravasi, *Kohelet*, pp. 66–67.

³⁴ Nayantiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 48–49.

incarnations, accompanied by pleasure and passion, which is satisfied here there - the desire for pleasure, the desire for existence and the desire for non-existence³⁵.

Taṇha is the driving force behind *dukkha* because one is still clinging to things, persons, or situations in the hope of finding final, lasting fulfillment in them³⁶. However, the universe is characterized by impermanence (*anitya*; Pali *anicca*), it is empty (*śūnyatā*; Pali *suññatā*), i.e. devoid of self-existence (*anātman*; Pali *anattā*), and this leads to the experience of *dukkha*. *Taṇhā* characterizes primarily the actions of sentient beings, but due to the fact that in the Hebrew text Koh appears with the personification of the sun, it was allowed to introduce such an interreligious equivalent in the author's translation.

*8 All things (San. dharma; Pali dhamma) are unsatisfactory (Pali dukkha),
no man can say them,
will not quench its thirst (Pali taṇhā) the eye looking,
the ear will not be filled with hearing*

The beginning of verse 8 in the Hebrew text Koh allows us to interpret and translate the noun *debārîm* in two ways. *Debārîm* can mean “words” and then verse 8 reads as follows: “all words are wearisome, man cannot utter (them)”. This Hebrew noun can also be translated as “things”, “things” and then we have “all things / matters are tiring, man (them) cannot say”. Some commentators prefer the first way of understanding, emphasizing that then the parallel juxtaposition of the three functions of the senses, i.e. speaking, looking and listening, is much more emphasized. However, the semantic scope of the term *debārîm* also allows for a second way of understanding, and in the interreligious translation the author went in this direction by introducing the Sanskrit noun *dharma* (Pali *dhamma*). It is a very capacious noun and can be used to convey such concepts as: “science”, “law”, “the teaching and path of the Buddha”, “order”, “nature”, “things”, “matter”, “smallest elements structure of matter”. The author’s translation of the beginning of verse 8 renders *dharma* as “thing” and “affair”, “event”, approaching the second meaning of the noun *debārîm*.

These “words” or “things/things” are characterized in the Hebrew text as *yeḡe’im*, or “tiring”, “disturbing”. Here the Buddhist term *dukkha* was reintroduced as an interreligious equivalent for *yeḡe’im*. Both the Hebrew text and its Buddhist reading emphasize that all things and affairs in the cosmos are ultimately unsatisfactory, leaving a person feeling unfulfilled, disappointed and tired of the effort put into them. Not being able to say all of them

³⁵ Mejer, *Buddyzm*, pp. 80–81.

³⁶ A detailed discussion of the Buddhist understanding of desire is presented by Piotr Jagodziński in the edition of the translations of the texts of the Pali canon: *Majjhima Nikaya*, pp. 130–143.

means not being able to fully understand, grasp and thus master them. In the text of Ecclesiastes, this results from the general characterization of everything as *hābel/hebel*, i.e. “ephemeral”, not giving lasting happiness and support. Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana tradition and the Madhyamika trend, emphasizes that human words and the doctrines and concepts based on them create only conventional truth (short for *paramārtha staya*) and are unable to describe reality in a final and definitive way. Ultimate/absolute truth (San. *samvrtti satya*) cannot be understood as a simple antithesis of conventional truth³⁷. In other words, since conventional truth cannot describe the essence of reality, grasping this essence is possible thanks to absolute truth, captured in the experience of insight. For the experience of the ultimate truth is the experience of the emptiness of all things. Sometimes concepts such as the doctrine of the ultimate truth or the doctrine of Buddha/*tathāgatagarbha* natures (San. *tathāgatagarbha*; Chin. *fóxìng*; Japanese *bushhō*) are understood in an essentialist way, both by the Buddhists themselves and by Western interpreters³⁸. However, this is not entirely consistent and coherent with such doctrines of Buddhism as the doctrine of no self-being or emptiness. Paradoxically, the very formulation and attempt to define absolute truth is an expression of conventional truth.

Describing the inability to satisfy the desire for visual sensations, the Hebrew text uses the negative particle (Hebrew *lōʾ*) with a verb based on the root *śbʾ*, which means “to be satisfied”, ‘to drink/eat to the full’, “to be satisfied”. In the author's interreligious translation, the phrase “the eye is not satisfied with looking” is rendered by “the eye will not satisfy its thirst by looking”. Thus, the concept of *taṇhā*, desire as the source of man’s existential *dukkha*, was introduced in order to emphasize and somehow strengthen the message of the original text. The root *śbʾ* suggests a state of saturation, i.e. full satisfaction of human desires, in this case those related to the sense of sight. It is the craving that the Buddhist tradition calls attention to by the term *tanha* that is the cause of this unsatisfied and unsatisfied search for various sensory impressions.

9 *What was will be, what has been done (karma; Pali kamma) will be done (karma; Pali kamma),*

there is nothing new in samsara (San. and Pali saṃsāra)

10 *This is the thing (dharma, Pali dhamma) of which he says "Look, this is something new!", it was already in the kalpas (San. kalpa; Pali kappa) that were before us*

³⁷ A very accurate discussion of the concept of two truths, emphasizing in particular the capture of the correct distinction between the absolute truth, is contained in the monograph: Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 30-38.

³⁸ The presentation of the tathagatagarbha idea is in the work: Jarosław Zapart, *Tathagatagarbha. U źródeł koncepcji natury Buddy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2017).

Verses 9–10 again evoke Ecclesiastes’ concept of time, in which there is a cyclical passing and arising of everything in the cosmos. The first part of verse 9 uses two roots: *hyh* (“be”, “become”, “happen”) and *’śh* (“make”, “make”, “create”, “prepare”), which appear in verbs in two grammatical forms, with suffixes (former perfect) and prefixes (former imperfect). Forms with prefixes refer to the future, while forms with suffixes can describe the past or the present. Using the specificity of the Hebrew verb, the author of Koh shows the cyclical dynamics that characterize the temporal world. We have rendered the root *’śh* with the Sanskrit verb *karoti*, which is related to the very important noun *karma* (“deed”) in Buddhist and Hindu doctrine, discussed above. As in verse 3, the phrase *taḥat hašāmmēš* (“under the Sun”) is translated by the constructions “*in samsara*”.

In verse 10, the noun *dābār* (“thing”, “event”, “word”, “speech”), which has already appeared in the plural in verse 8, here simply means a specific thing or event. As in verse 8, it is translated with the Sanskrit noun *dharma*. On the other hand, the term *’ōlāmîm* (“long duration”, “olden times”), as in verse 4, is rendered by the concept of *kalp*.

*11 There is no memory of past lives,
and also after the future lives that will come, there will be no remembrance of those that come
after*

The last verse of the analyzed pericope talks about the process of the ongoing loss of memory about successive generations of human beings. Kohelet in a very shocking and controversial way uses the noun *zīkrôn* (“memory”), based on the root *zkr*, which in the biblical tradition very often indicated memory related to the history of patriarchs and ancestors (see, for example, Exodus 13:3; Dt 7, 18n)³⁹. Throughout his work Ecclesiastes emphasizes that it is also a concept of individual eschatology, in which truly human existence ends with death, and only an unspecified shadow of a man vegetates in Sheol.

In the author's interreligious translation, the eschatological issues of Ecclesiastes are the subject of quite significant reinterpretation. As in verse 4, the author seeks not so much to find an idea in Buddhist doctrine with some degree of similarity to the Hebrew one, but to find an analogous concept from a structural perspective. In other words, the Semitic individual eschatology, which limits human life to the temporal, is replaced by Buddhist ideas

³⁹ Piotr Goniszewski, „Pamiętaj, że byłeś niewolnikiem w ziemi egipskiej... (Deut. 5:15). Judaizm i filozofia pamięci”, in: *Adlojada. Pamięć i kultura*, ed. Jaromir Brejda, Dariusz Kacprzak, Beata Małgorzata Wolska (Szczecin: Muzeum Narodowe w Szczecinie, 2017), pp. 15–24.

about the succession of lives. In Buddhism, as in Hinduism, the possibility of knowing past lives is possible, but it is the fruit of significant progress in meditation practice. In Sanskrit, these supernatural abilities are called *siddhis* and include the ability to reduce one's body to the size of an atom, the ability to expand one's body indefinitely, the ability to levitate, the ability to bilocate, the ability to read the minds of others, and the ability to remembering past lives. At the same time, Buddhism warns not to become attached to such abilities, as they can become an obstacle on the way to achieving the experience of insight. Most people are therefore deprived of the possibility of accessing memories related to previous lives, as indicated by the author's proposal for an interreligious translation. However, it should be remembered that in folk forms of Buddhism or Hinduism there are stories about people who, not being advanced yogis, remembered their previous existences.

Conclusion

This article proposes an alternative, interreligious translation and commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:1–11. The original message of this text, viewed from the perspective of the entire Hebrew Bible, suggests some common or similar themes with Buddhism or Daoism on first reading. Therefore, this book turned out to be a very good source for an attempt to make a translation and commentary of an interreligious nature, looking at the biblical text through the eyes of Buddhist philosophy. Our translation and commentary works indicate two important aspects of this type of interreligious reading of the biblical text.

First, in literary works representing different religious and cultural systems, one can find ideas that are similar to each other. On the one hand, this facilitates the translation process, because some similar concepts are introduced in place of others. However, it should be remembered that even these seemingly similar ideas function in completely different social, historical, cultural and religious contexts. Interreligious translation must be sensitive to such situations in order to best capture the dynamics of the relationship between the original source text and its alternative version. In the case of Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, such a notion that immediately evokes certain associations with Buddhist philosophy is the Ecclesiastes *hābel/hebel* (“evanescence”, “vanity”), which the author decided to convey by means of two similar concepts, i.e. the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* (“emptiness”) and the Pali *dukkha* (“something unsatisfactory”, “suffering”).

Secondly, the challenge for this kind of translation and commentary is to find adequate ideas that perform an analogous function in the two juxtaposed religious systems, but at the

same time can be radically different from each other. In this case, the translator must find and grasp the specificity of various religious concepts and their place in a given system, and then find structural equivalents in the source text and doctrine from the perspective of which he interprets this text. In Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, an example of this type of phenomenon were those fragments in which eschatological threads appear. Ecclesiastes is a representative of the traditional Semitic idea, which limits authentic human life to the temporal world only. After death, the shadow of man is in the abyss called Sheol, where he only vegetates. Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches about the endless cycle of successive lives. Of course, Buddhism, based on the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*, Pali *anattā*), rejects the concept of an immortal, wandering soul or self. However, it recognizes that a person can shape subsequent existences through good or bad deeds, according to the law of karma. Liberation from this cycle of rebirths and lives brings only the final awakening called nirvana (*nirvāṇa*, Pali *nibbāna*). Thus, it can be seen that in terms of content, Ecclesiastes' eschatology differs radically from Buddhist eschatology. However, both doctrines have a similar place in the whole religious construction, be it the Judaism of the time of Ecclesiastes or Buddhism.

To sum up, interreligious translation, as an alternative translation, does not try to replace classic biblical translations, but its task is to create a common ground for discussion and reflection for representatives of different religions. This type of translation also shows a great deal of flexibility and openness in interpreting religious texts, such as the Bible.

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