

# THE VERBS מִצָּא 'TO FIND' AND בִּקֵּשׁ 'TO SEARCH' IN THE LANGUAGE OF QOHELET.

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

“I searched, but I did not find”. That is how Qohelet expresses himself in the intriguing text in Qoh 7,23-29 where nonetheless he adds: “you see, only this I have found!” The vocabulary of ‘searching’ and of ‘finding’ is well known in biblical texts and returns even in the New Testament (cf. Matt 7,7 par.). In his article ‘Words typical of Qohelet’, which is the first in the volume *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, Prof. Schoors looks forward to further work of a semantic nature being done on other words that could help to bring to light, as he writes, ‘the highly reflective and even philosophical character of the Book of Qohelet’.<sup>1</sup> Among the words which Schoors would want to see in an in-depth study I have chosen the verb מִצָּא, without forgetting בִּקֵּשׁ.<sup>2</sup>

Even at a first reading of the text of Qoh 7,23-29, where the verb מִצָּא constitutes an evident key-word, two facts emerge on which we should reflect: first of all, Qohelet actually prefers מִצָּא to בִּקֵּשׁ (and בִּקֵּשׁ to דָּרַשׁ, which appears only in Qoh 1,13) and it is immediately clear that for Qohelet the accent falls not so much on the fact of ‘searching’, than on the *result* of the search itself, or rather the ‘finding’.<sup>3</sup> What is it that Qohelet says he did *not* find, and what, on the other hand, does he affirm that he *did* find?

<sup>1</sup> A. SCHOORS, *Words Typical of Qohelet*, in: A. SCHOORS (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium, 136)*, Leuven, 1998, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> The verb מִצָּא occurs in Qohelet 17 times: 3,11; 7,14. 24. 26. 27(bis). 28(ter). 29; 8,17(ter); 9,10. 15; 11,1; 12,10. The verb בִּקֵּשׁ (Pi.) occurs only 7 times: 3,6; 3,15 (with God as subject); 7,25. 28. 29; 8,17; 12,10.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, cf. the problem as presented by A. SCHELLENBERG, *Erkenntnis als Problem. Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 188)*, Göttingen, 2002, p. 17.

The second aspect that emerges from the text of Qohelet is that he uses the verb **מצא** (and **בקש** to a lesser extent) in a clearly epistemological perspective. In relation to the epistemology of Qohelet, the book by Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem*,<sup>4</sup> constitutes today a good starting point in which the most important studies are brought together on a subject that has never really been at the centre of the attention of students of Qohelet; Schellenberg fixes her attention in particular on the contributions by Fox, Crenshaw and the Italian Patrizia Sciumbata.<sup>5</sup> Schellenberg's study, however, centres on the exegesis of the texts of Qohelet more than being a work of semantic character concentrating on single terms used in the book.<sup>6</sup>

Luis Alonso Schökel warned about the necessity of being very careful that biblical exegesis should not transform itself into studying what the biblical scholars write!<sup>7</sup> For this reason, taking into account the results of these and other works, I will try to centre the discussion on the biblical texts, to discover how, above all, the verb **מצא** is used in Qohelet in relation to the epistemological problem (we will also thus have to deal four times with **בקש**), in the light of biblical texts that are earlier than Qohelet.<sup>8</sup> With regard to the chronology, I date the book of Qohelet to

<sup>4</sup> Cf. note 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. V. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up. A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, Grand Rapids – Cambridge, 1999, p. 71-96, and ID., *The Inner Structure of Qohelet's Thought*, in: SCHOORS (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, p. 225-238. J. L. CRENSHAW, *Qohelet's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry*, in: SCHOORS (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, p. 205-224. M. P. SCIUMBATA, *Peculiarità e motivazioni della struttura lessicale dei verbi della 'conoscenza' in Qohelet*, in: *Henoch* 18 (1996), p. 235-249 and also the synthesis of her not yet published doctoral thesis: *The Lexical Field of Substantives of 'Knowledge' in Ancient Hebrew. Il campo lessicale dei sostantivi della 'conoscenza' in ebraico antico*, in: *Revue européenne des études hébraïques* 5 (2001), p. 140-144. Schellenberg presents the positions of all these scholars in her book, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, p. 50-66. Cf. also C. BARTHOLOMEW, *Reading Ecclesiastes. Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory (Analecta Biblica, 139)*, Rome, 1998, especially p. 230-237 and R. E. MURPHY, *The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qohelet the Sage*, in: J. G. GAMMIE and L. G. PERDUE (eds.), *The Sage in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, Winona Lake, 1990, p. 263-271. With particular reference to the theme of 'searching' and 'finding' in the book of Qohelet I also recall the study by H. SPIECKERMANN, *Suchen und Finden. Kohelets kritische Reflexionen*, in: *Biblica* 79 (1998), p. 304-331.

<sup>6</sup> Schellenberg dedicates only pages 180-187 of her book *Erkenntnis als Problem* to the analysis of vocabulary relative to knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL and J. M. BRAVO ARAGÓN, *Appunti di ermeneutica*, Bologna, 1994, p. 183: "La scienza biblica ormai non è più la conoscenza della Bibbia, ma dei biblisti".

<sup>8</sup> In a first approach to the study of these verbs one should refer to the study by S. WAGNER, **מצא** in: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, IV, Stuttgart, 1984, p. 1043-1063 (= *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, III, Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 464-483); and again S. WAGNER, **בקש**, in: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testa-*

about the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., according to what is by now an *opinio communis*.

## II. THE EXPERIENTIAL VALUE OF THE VERB מִצָּא

1. Among the different meanings of this verb, we are particularly interested in 'finding' seen as the result of an intentional search, expressed usually by the verb בִּקֵּשׁ, less often by דִּרֵּשׁ, a search that can concern both concrete and abstract objects; the texts in this respect are well known and it is sufficient to consult the exhaustive study by Wagner in the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> The verb מִצָּא, nevertheless, also expresses 'finding' understood as the result of a subjective assessment or of a personal experience (sometimes expressed by the verbs רָאָה or יָדַע; see below) and, in this sense, מִצָּא frequently appears totally detached from בִּקֵּשׁ. Wagner's study arrives at the important conclusion that "the Old Testament contains a series of passages in which מִצָּא is used to designate the results of an investigation or evaluation".<sup>10</sup>

We have some good examples in the narrative texts of the Pentateuch,<sup>11</sup> the repeated use of מִצָּא in Gen 18,26.28.29.30.31.32, with regard to the fact that God can 'find' or 'not find' some just men inside the city of Sodom. This is a 'finding' that arises from a precise investigation and therefore from a direct experience, in this case made by God himself; see, in Gen 18,21, the use of the verbs רָאָה and יָדַע that underline the experiential aspect of the research. Significant also in Gen 38,22 is the use of the formula 'I have not found' with which Judah's servant expresses the negative result of his search for the prostitute, who was in reality Tamar in disguise (38,21); the servant affirms precisely (38,22): 'I have not found her' (לֹא מִצָּאתִי); the verb had already appeared with the same meaning in v.20). Finally, in the juridical language of Deuter-

*ment*, I, p. 754-769 (= *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, II, p. 229-242); also N. SHUPAK, *Where can Wisdom be Found? The Sage's Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 130)*, Göttingen, 1993, especially p. 70. On the verb מִצָּא cf. also the important study by A. R. CERESKO, *The Function of Antanaclasis (מִצָּא "to find" // מִצָּא "to reach, overtake, grasp") in Hebrew Poetry. Especially in the Book of Qohelet*, in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982), p. 551-569; cf. B. ISAKSSON, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth, with Special Emphasis on the Verbal System (Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, 10)*, Uppsala, 1987, p. 117-118.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. S. WAGNER, מִצָּא, in: *Theological Dictionary*, p. 467-469.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>11</sup> I prefer not to enter here into the extremely complex problem of the precise dating of these texts, on which currently there is an ongoing open debate.

onomy, the ‘not finding’ is relative to the charge against the adulteress (cf. Deut 22,14.17), and it refers to the result of the investigation carried out on her behalf.<sup>12</sup>

The verb **מצא** is particularly used for expressing the result of an evaluation relative to the behaviour or to the qualities of a person of whom we have been able to have a direct experience. In regard to this, there emerges the use of the negative form **לא מצאתי**. In 1 Sam 29,3.6 the object of the ‘not finding’ is, in the first case (v. 3), expressed with **מאומה** ‘nothing’, in the second case (v. 6) with **רעה** ‘evil’: “David’s loyalty to the Philistine king Achish of Gat is confirmed by the latter in the face of suspicions involving David’s participation in a campaign against Saul”.<sup>13</sup> A careful investigation about David, leads both the characters and the hearers of his story to consider David innocent of the accusations brought against him. We can find similar uses of the form **לא מצאתי** in Hos 12,9 and, in the positive form, in the texts of 1Kings 21,20; Jer 23,11, with God as subject.

2. This strong experiential dimension of **מצא** appears also in the poetical language of the early wisdom literature, that is, in what are perhaps the oldest parts of the book of Proverbs (Prov 10,1–31,9). We must admit that dating the book of Proverbs is notoriously still an open question. There has been, however, a near-consensus that chapters 1–9, in their present form, are the latest section of the book, even if some scholars still consider the content of Prov 1–9 as pre-exilic. The single proverbs contained in Prov 10,1–31,9, and some of the seven collections, are very probably older than the collection in Prov 1–9 and could have their roots in the monarchic period, while Prov 1–9 (and perhaps also Prov 31,10–31) should be dated between the fifth and fourth century B.C., and even as late as the beginning of the third century.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In Deut 22,13.29 the verb **מצא** is used as a ‘catchword’ in a series of laws relative to sex and it assumes different nuances; cf. the vv. 14.17.20.22.23.24.27.28; on this point cf. A. R. CERESKO, *The Function of Antanaclasses*, p. 557-558.

<sup>13</sup> S. WAGNER, **מצא**, in: *Theological Dictionary*, p. 474-475.

<sup>14</sup> For a full discussion of this issue, see R. N. WHYBRAY, *The Book of Proverbs. A Survey of Modern Study*, Leiden *e.a.*, 1995, p. 150-158; see also M. V. FOX, *Proverbs 1-9 (Anchor Bible, 18A)*, New York, 2000, especially p. 6.48-50. On the author of Prov 1–9 as a possible editor of the whole book, cf. P. W. SKEHAN, *A Single Editor for the Whole Book of Proverbs*, in: J. L. CRENSHAW (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, New York, 1976, p. 329-340. For an early date for Prov 1–9, see C. KAYATZ, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9. Eine form- und motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament, 22)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1966 and B. LANG, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs. An Israelite Goddess Redefined*, New York, 1986. For a late date for Prov 10,1–31,9

In Prov 10–30 the verb מִצָּא is present 11 times, always detached from בִּקֵּשׁ, which instead appears 13 times.<sup>15</sup> The formula מִצָּא טוֹב, in particular, appears four times: ‘finding good’ is for the sage the fruit of a wise and therefore an *experiential* search, even though not disjoined from trust in God; this is so, for example, in the text of Prov 16,20: “Those who are attentive to a matter will find good, and happy are those who trust in the Lord”. See also Prov 19,8 and 18,22, in relation to the wife; cf. Prov 21,21 and, to the contrary, Prov 17,20. In Prov 10,13, the verb appears in the Ni. form in relation to the wisdom that ‘one finds’ on the lips of the נֹבֵךְ; a similar use is in Prov 16,31. In all these texts the verb מִצָּא has an experiential value, but it is not explicitly used in an epistemological context.

A significant passage is, without a doubt, Prov 24,13-14, where the verb מִצָּא acquires an epistemological value:

Eat, my son, honey because it is good,  
a sweet honeycomb for your palate;  
know that wisdom is such to your soul;  
if you *find* it, you will *find* a future,  
and your hope will not be cut off.

Beyond the exegetical difficulties of the text,<sup>16</sup> מִצָּא is placed here in parallel with יָדַע and has for its object, both the חִכְמָה (‘wisdom’) and hope in the future. But what does it mean, in the context of Prov 10–30, ‘to find wisdom’, ‘to search (בִּקֵּשׁ) for wisdom’ (Prov 14,6; cf. 15,14; 18,15) or ‘to find good’? We need to remember how in Prov 10,1-31,9, wisdom appears closely tied to experience, which is the primary source of knowledge for the sage; the relation with the verb יָדַע helps us to understand that ‘to find wisdom’ means first of all to put one’s own experience to good use.

3. Here we enter upon a most delicate point that goes well beyond semantical problems. M. Fox states very firmly that ‘wisdom epistemol-

see H. W. JÜNGLING, *Proverbi e l'origine della tradizione sapienziale in Israele*, in: G. BELLIA and A. PASSARO (eds.), *Libro dei Proverbi. Tradizione, Redazione, Teologia*, Casale Monferrato, 1999, p. 35-54.

<sup>15</sup> The verb מִצָּא occurs in Prov 10,13; 16,20.31; 17,20; 18,22; 19,8; 20,6; 24,14; 25,16; 28,23. The verb בִּקֵּשׁ in Prov 11,27; 14,6 (to search for wisdom); 15,14 (to search for scientific knowledge); 17,9.11.19; 18,1.15 (to search for knowledge); 21,6; 23,35; 28,5 (to search for the Lord); 29,10.26.

<sup>16</sup> W. MCKANE, *Proverbs. A Commentary (Old Testament Library)*, London, 1970, p. 402-403 reads, with Ringgren, דָּעָה, that is to say: “so is *knowledge* and wisdom for your life”; it is also possible to read, with the MT, דָּעָה, and so we can translate: “*know* that wisdom...”.

ogy is not empirical' and that in the wisdom texts 'experience was simply an occasion for thought'.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, according to Fox, Qohelet would be a revolutionary, the first to suggest experience as the principal source of knowledge. Fox's thesis in my opinion is debatable, both in regard to Qohelet, as J. L. Crenshaw has already demonstrated in a different way, and in regard to older wisdom literature<sup>18</sup> that is probably to be found in Prov 10,1–31,9.

I am convinced that von Rad is still right when he affirms that wisdom in Israel implies "a practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world based upon experience".<sup>19</sup> Knowledge results from human inquiry and observation of nature and human behaviour; we can speak about a real 'intellectual tradition' in ancient Israel, whose primary source is experience.<sup>20</sup> The wise authors of the oldest parts of the book of Proverbs, in particular, are characterised by what we may define as an 'epistemological optimism'; their trust in the possibility of human knowledge is such that "the experiences of the world were for her [i.e. wisdom] always divine experiences as well and the experiences of God were experiences for her of the world", according to another well known remark by von Rad.<sup>21</sup>

J. L. Crenshaw adds two other sources of knowledge for the early Israel wisdom: the tradition and the encounter with God: "for Israel's sages, revelation occurred at creation, and the goal of men and women was to discover hidden truth".<sup>22</sup> So, the primary value of experience as a source of knowledge for the sages is confirmed; at the same time, the trust of the sages goes hand in hand with consciousness of the limits of wisdom, the first of which is God himself, precisely because the sages know that every human experience cannot be other than limited.

With this epistemological background we can reach a better understanding of the experiential value of the verb מִצָּח. As a first conclusion:

<sup>17</sup> M. V. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down*, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> J. L. CRENSHAW, *Qohelet's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry*, p. 212-213. Crenshaw recalls that Qohelet often proceeds in an apodictic way, appealing to ideas which totally escape experience and that therefore Qohelet is less revolutionary than is usually thought; cf. hereafter my conclusion.

<sup>19</sup> G. VON RAD, *Old Testament Theology. Vol I. The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, Edinburgh, 1962, p. 418.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. R. N. WHYBRAY, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament*, Berlin – New York, 1974, especially p. 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> G. VON RAD, *Wisdom in Israel*, London, 1972, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> J. L. CRENSHAW, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence (Anchor Bible Reference Library)*, New York, 1998, p. 130; see the discussion in SCHELLENBERG, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, p. 19-21.

in the language of the older narrative, as well as in the poetical language of the early prophets and sages,<sup>23</sup> it seems that a use of מִצָּא relative to a 'finding' which can be understood not only as a result of a research, but also more in general as the result of an experience, is well attested. From this point of view, within this experiential value, emerges also a use of מִצָּא in the epistemological field.

### III. THE THEOLOGICAL VALUE OF מִצָּא AND בִּקֵּשׁ IN DEUTERONOMIC, PROPHETIC AND LATE WISDOM TEXTS

1. In the Qohelet texts, the verb מִצָּא is used also, as we will see, in relation to 'to find the work of God' (cf. Qoh 3,1; 8,17); and so one of the most significant spheres for us is the use of מִצָּא and of בִּקֵּשׁ in relation to, 'to search and to find' God. In two pre-exilic texts, Amos 8,11-12 and Hos 5,6, the object of the search is, in Amos, the word of the Lord, in the text of Hosea it is the Lord himself. The situation of sin, in which humankind or the people of Israel find themselves, is such that the result of this search is absolutely negative: humankind will not find either the Lord or his word.

Spieckermann's study offers us a good analysis of the texts, which, during or immediately after the exile, deal with this question, 'to search and not to find (God)', presented by the first prophets: this is dealt with in Deut 4,29-31; Jer 29,13-14; Ezek 34,15-16 and Isa 65,1; to these passages we must add the text, of just a bit later, in 2Chron 15,4.15. As Spieckermann has demonstrated well, we can note a clear progression in the use of the verbs מִצָּא and בִּקֵּשׁ within these texts: one goes from the Deuteronomic text, in which the possibility of 'finding' the Lord is affirmed for anyone who searches for him, on to the text of Ezekiel, in which it is God himself that goes in search of man. In these texts, the 'searching' and 'finding' of God are founded on the belief that the Lord allows himself to be found by his dispersed people, and therefore, on the trust that it is possible for man to know him; so, 'to find' God, is at the same time a gift and a task for man.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Here I draw upon the criteria of the 'functional languages' proposed by the students of the University of Florence: cf. I. ZATELLI, *Functional Languages and their Importance to the Semantics of Ancient Hebrew*, in: *Abr Nahrain Supplements* 4 (1995), p. 55-64.

<sup>24</sup> SPIECKERMANN, *Suchen und Finden*, p. 311: "Suchen und Finden als Gottes heilsame Bewegung zu seinem verstreuten Volk und Suchen und Finden als Gotteserkenntnis zwischen Bemühen und Geschenk – das ist das theologische Erbe das aus Prophetie und Weisheit auf Kohelet gekommen ist."

Deuteronomic and prophetic theology does not, however, represent the only attempts to respond to the epistemological crisis provoked by the exile, when the optimism of the sages seems not to be able any more to give an answer to the tragedy that had struck Israel. The language of the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs, which as we said lead us probably to the fifth or fourth century B.C., if not even to the beginning of the third century, opens interesting prospects in relation to the use of the verb **מצא**. A simple statistical investigation shows us that **מצא** appears 14 times in Prov 1–9,<sup>25</sup> whilst with the exception of Prov 2,4, the verb **בקש** never appears. Moreover, with the exception of Prov 1,13 and 6,31.33, **מצא** is always used in contexts relative to knowledge. If in deuteronomic and prophetic language **מצא** appears very often coupled with **בקש**, in relation to ‘searching’ and ‘finding’ God, in the first nine chapters of Proverbs it means mainly ‘to find’ wisdom.

2. The text of Prov 1,28-29, containing the first speech of personified wisdom, explicitly takes up the prophetic language and, along the lines of the already mentioned texts of Hos 5,6 and Amos 8,11-12, underlines the danger of ‘not finding’ what one searches for.<sup>26</sup> The difference from the prophetic texts lies, in the first place, in the object of the search, which is no longer the Lord (Hosea) or his word (Amos), but wisdom itself. In the second place, the verb **בקש** disappears, substituted, as also happens in Prov 7,15 and 8,17, by the verb **שחר**, which, put alongside **מצא**, occurs in the Hebrew Bible only in these texts. We must remember that the verb **שחר** is used in relation to the ‘search’ for God in the texts of Hos 5,15; Ps 63,2; 78,34; Job 8,5; the meaning of ‘to search’ is evident in the text in Prov 11,27, where **שחר** is placed in direct relation to **בקש** and **דרש** (cf. also **שחר** in Prov 13,24). Neither should one neglect the fact that in Prov 1,28-29, the vocabulary of ‘searching’ and ‘finding’ can here probably acquire also an erotic nuance, if read in the light of the text in Prov 7,15 where the ‘foreign woman’ perverts the motif of ‘searching’ (here again expressed with **שחר**) and ‘finding/not finding’ the beloved which appears in the renowned texts in Cant 3,1-4; 5,6-8 and 8,1.

With regard to the use of the verb **מצא** of particular importance for us is the text in Prov 2,4-6, which follows the invitation to give ear to the

<sup>25</sup> Prov 1,13; 1,28; 2,5; 3,4; 3,13; 4,22; 6,31.33; 7,15; 8,9.12.17.35(x2).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. M. GILBERT, *Le discours menaçant de sagesse en Proverbes 1,20-33*, in: D. GARRONE and F. ISRAEL (eds.), *Storia e tradizioni di Israele. FS J. A. Soggin*, Brescia, 1991, p. 100-119.



words of the teacher (2,1-3) and to listen to wisdom (חִכְמָה), intelligence (בִּינָה) and understanding (תְּבוּנָה):

<sup>4</sup>If you seek (בִּקֵּשׁ) it [wisdom] like silver,  
and search (חִפֵּשׂ) for it as for hidden treasures –  
<sup>5</sup>then you will understand (בִּין) the fear of the Lord  
and you will find (מִצָּא) the knowledge (דַּעַת) of the Lord.  
<sup>6</sup>For the Lord will give wisdom;  
from his mouth knowledge (דַּעַת) and understanding (תְּבוּנָה).

This text is probably the indication of a compromise between an older wisdom tradition, which insists on the value of experience and of the human search for wisdom (so vv. 4-5), and the new vision of wisdom presented in Prov 1–9, which considers, on the contrary, the same wisdom as a *corpus* of established teaching, acquired from a teacher and tied to an established knowledge that only God can give to humankind. So v. 6, attributing the source of wisdom directly to God, corrects the idea that wisdom is only the result of human effort (as in Prov 2,1-5), even though it leads to the ‘fear of the Lord’ (cf. v. 5).<sup>27</sup>

At v. 5 the verb מִצָּא is placed in parallel with בִּין (‘to understand’); at v. 4, on the contrary, the idea of ‘searching for hidden treasures’ appears. In this way the verb מִצָּא acquires the double meaning of ‘to grasp’, ‘to understand’ (v. 5) together with ‘to find’, ‘to acquire’ (v. 4).<sup>28</sup> In this way, the verb מִצָּא, explicitly used in relation to epistemological themes, does not, in any case, lose its connection with its experiential dimension. The real difference from the use of מִצָּא in Prov 10,1–31,10 is that the object of the search (the knowledge of God and wisdom as in our text in Prov 2,4-5) is something which is very easily acquired; a similar theme appears in the texts in Prov 3,13 and 4,20-22; he who searches for wisdom cannot but find it!

In the second address by ‘Lady Wisdom’ (Prov 8), the verb מִצָּא assumes particular importance; מִצָּא appears four times: towards the end of the first strophe (Prov 8,9), as a sign of the division of the second strophe into two parts (vv. 12 and 17) and at the end of the poem

<sup>27</sup> Here one can surmise that v. 6 was purposely added to neutralise the tension between the two different currents, creating a more unified text; on this practical question within the wisdom texts cf. M. P. SCIUMBATA, *Tendenze censorie nella redazione finale dei libri sapienziali: il caso di Giobbe 1,22*, in: *Materia giudaica* 6 (2000), p. 26-31 and A. ROFÉ, *The Valiant Woman, γυνή συνετή, and the Redaction of the Book of Proverbs*, in: C. BULTMANN *e.a.* (eds.), *Vergegenwärtigung des Alten Testaments. Beiträge zur biblischen Hermeneutik. FS R. Smend*, Göttingen, 2002, p. 145-155.

<sup>28</sup> As according to A. R. CERESKO, *The Function of Antanaclasses*, p. 563.

(8,35).<sup>29</sup> In all four cases **מצא** has a clear epistemological value; at v.9, it is employed in relation to those who have ‘found’ knowledge (**דעת**) listening to the proposed words of wisdom. At v.12, the same wisdom appears as the subject of the verb **מצא**; Lady Wisdom ‘has found’, or rather has understood, ‘prudence’ and the ‘knowledge of shrewdness’.<sup>30</sup> Verse 17 particularly reminds us that the search for wisdom, here expressed with the verb **שחר**, as in Prov 1,28-29 (see above), has a completely positive result: “I love those who love me<sup>31</sup> and those who search for me find me”. Verse 35, in conclusion to the whole poem, insists on the ease with which wisdom is found; here **מצא** assumes the nuance of ‘to acquire’:

Happy the man who listens to me,  
 watching daily at my gates,  
 waiting beside my door.  
 For he who acquires me (**מצאני**) finds (**מצא**) life,<sup>32</sup>  
 and obtains favour from the Lord.

The use of **מצא** in Prov 1–9 confirms first of all that the verb has not totally lost its experiential connotation (as in the text of Prov 2,4-6); on the other hand, ‘to find’ has by this time an evident epistemological value and is tied to personified wisdom, a ‘theological’ wisdom, closely united to God, mediator between God and man, who lets herself be found by those who search for her. More than on the search (with the exception of the text Prov 2,4, in which, as previously mentioned, the verb **בקש** is missing, replaced by **שחר**) the authors of Prov 1–9 insist with much optimism on the result of the search itself: ‘to find’, that is, *to acquire* and, at the same time, *to understand* wisdom.

The question that opens the concluding passage of the book of Proverbs, the eulogy of the ‘valiant woman’, in this way receives a positive response: “a valiant woman, who can find her?”. This kind of question, as we find in Prov 20,6b and Job 28,12, gives the idea of being beyond comparison and, at the same time, constitutes an enigma, the solution to which, in the case of Prov 31,10, is ‘the sage’. The ‘valiant woman’ is in

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the analysis of the literary structure proposed by M. GILBERT, *Le discours de la sagesse en Prov 8. Structure et cohérence*, in: Id. (ed.), *La sagesse de l’Ancien Testament (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium, 51)*, Leuven, 1990,<sup>2</sup> p. 202-218.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. M. V. FOX, *Proverbs 1-9*, p. 272.

<sup>31</sup> Reading **אהבי** with the *Qere*.

<sup>32</sup> Following the *Qere*; the MT **מצאני** is read by Ceresko, following Dahood, as a suffix in the third person singular that expresses the *dativus commodi*: “For he who acquires me attain(s) life for himself”; cf. A. R. CERESKO, *The Function of Antanaclasis*, p. 564 n.55.

fact the image not so much of wisdom, but of the sage who is capable of receiving it.<sup>33</sup> In this case also מִצָּא expresses a positive result: the ‘valiant woman’ is the image of the sage who finds the wisdom which comes from God and puts it into practice. The optimism of the sages emerges to a greater extent with respect to the older wisdom; ‘finding’ in fact, is no longer guaranteed only by the intrinsic value of experience but by the very existence of that wisdom which reveals herself as ‘daughter’ of God<sup>34</sup> and by Him given to men. Lady Wisdom is the proof of the existence of a harmony between God, the world and men; to search and to find this wisdom means to seek and to find God himself.

This vocabulary for ‘to find’ wisdom will return, after Qohelet, in Ben Sirach’s Hebrew; cf. in particular the texts in Sir 51,16.20.26 (B), with regard to ‘finding’ (מִצָּא) the doctrine or wisdom; cf. also Sir 6,27-28 (A) and 40,19 (A). In Ben Sirach’s book we can see again the vocabulary of Prov 1–9: mankind must search for wisdom (“if you will not seek, you will not find”; cf. Sir 11,10A in another context), but wisdom is easily found by anybody who searches for her. Chapter 24 of Ben Sira, while stressing the ‘heavenly’ provenience of wisdom, emphasizes that the same wisdom is accessible to mankind.<sup>35</sup>

3. In the poetical language of the book of Job, the verb מִצָּא presents a relatively high number of occurrences (18x), which contrasts with the only one occurrence of בִּקֵּשׁ.<sup>36</sup> The verb מִצָּא appears in all its wide range of meanings, in poetic contexts often difficult to interpret. In relation to our study, the texts of Job 11,7; 23,3; 28,12.13 stand out particularly; in them מִצָּא relates to the problem of knowledge, even if the epistemological problem is not as central in Job as it is in Qohelet.<sup>37</sup> By means of

<sup>33</sup> T. P. MC CREESH, *Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31,10-31*, in: *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985), p. 36-46, also suggests a possible relationship between Prov 31,10 and Qoh 7,24. For the woman of Prov 31,10-31 as the image of the sage cf. M. GILBERT, *La donna forte di Proverbi 31,10-31: ritratto o simbolo?*, in: G. BELLIA and A. PASSARO (eds.), *Libro dei Proverbi*, p. 147-167. For a different interpretation, see also the article by A. Rofé quoted in n. 27: “the Valiant Woman is an earthly human being, and the praises upon her do not contain the minimal hint of her functioning as a metaphor” (p. 146).

<sup>34</sup> For this interpretation, cf. M. GILBERT, *Le discours de la Sagesse*, p. 209-214.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Sirach, like the book of Qohelet, opposes any kind of apocalyptic epistemology; see R. A. ARGALL, *I Henoah and Sirach. A Comparative Literary and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation and Judgement*, Atlanta, 1995. But, contrary to Qohelet, Ben Sirach makes a clear use of the canons of ‘theological’ wisdom of Prov 1–9.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Job 3,22; 11,7; 17,10; 19,28; 20,8; 23,3; 28,12.13; 31,25.29; 32,3.13; 33,10.24; 34,11; 37,13.23; 42,15; בִּקֵּשׁ only in Job 10,6.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. A. SCHELLENBERG, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, p. 204-218.

these texts we are able to study a kind of ideal itinerary of our verb within the book of Job.<sup>38</sup>

The text of Job 11,7 is placed in the mouth of Zophar; here the author of Job probably plays on the double sense of the root מִצָּא: 'finding' as 'understanding' and 'finding' as 'reaching'.<sup>39</sup>

Can you *understand* (מִצָּא) the profundity of God  
or *reach* (מִצָּא) the summit of the Almighty?.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of the speech by Zophar there appears, at v. 6, the theme of the wisdom that only God is capable of revealing. The object of מִצָּא is poetically represented by the 'profundity' and the 'summit' of God, something which with his own strength man is not able to find, or to understand (see the verb יָדַע at v.8). Zophar's conclusion is along the lines of the theological wisdom of Prov 1–9: the impossibility of 'finding' God or his wisdom involves a radicalisation of the idea of retribution, combined with an invitation to man to receive with humility the doctrine already established.

On the other hand, the point of view of Job himself emerges in Job 23,3:

Who will help me to know how to *find* him?  
If I could only reach up to his throne!

Within a rhetorical question, the object of מִצָּא is God himself. Quite unlike Zophar, Job's desire is rather that of 'finding' God, that is 'to know him', so as to be able to discuss with him. This passage testifies to the clash of two different types of epistemology: again, unlike Zophar, Job founded his argumentation on experience, as is evident from chapter 24. Also Job, like Zophar, knows well that man cannot find God; even so, Job insists in searching for him.

<sup>38</sup> To the passages just mentioned, we must add two passages taken from the speeches of Elihu, Job 32,13 and 37,23. In Job 32,13 the friends of Job say they have met a wisdom which they are incapable of confuting, that of Job: "we have run into a wisdom that only God can confute, and not man" (cf. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL and J. L. SICRE DÍAZ, *Job. Comentario teológico y literario [Nueva Biblia Española]*, Madrid, 1983, p. 459). The text in Job 37,23 is more problematic: the use of מִצָּא could be here a response by Elihu to what Job affirms in 23,3; according to Elihu, God cannot 'be found', or still better, man can never fully understand the Almighty.

<sup>39</sup> Or, according to A. R. CERESKO (*The Function of Antanaclasis*, p. 554.560-561) due to the fact that two separate roots lie behind מִצָּא.

<sup>40</sup> For this translation, cf. G. BORGONOVO, *La notte e il suo sole. Luce e tenebre nel libro di Giobbe: analisi simbolica (Analecta Biblica, 135)*, Roma 1995, p. 218-219; the term תְּכִלִּית 'profundity' (cf. Job 26,10; 28,3), can be read in the sense of 'perfection'. For the double meaning of מִצָּא, cf. A. R. CERESKO, *The Function of Antanaclasis*, p. 560.

The third text in Job is the famous chapter 28, in which מָצָא occurs in the first refrain, at v. 12, and a second time at v. 13, at the beginning of the second strophe:

But wisdom, *where can it be found?*  
 And the place of knowledge, where is it?  
 The mortal does not know the place  
 and it is *not found* in the land of the living.

In v.12 the syntagma מָצָא תְּמָנָה is a matter of discussion:<sup>41</sup> some scholars vocalise this verb as מָצָא with the meaning of ‘to come’, hence the translation: ‘but wisdom, from where does it come?’ But the Ni. form of מָצָא with its usual value of ‘to find’ (see Hos 14,9), here constructed with מָצָא, is not impossible.

Here the object of מָצָא is ‘wisdom’; she cannot be found by mankind. But this ‘not finding’ must not be read along the lines of Zophar’s speech, as if the hymn in Job 28 were a confirmation of Job’s errors. Job 28, in fact, expresses the point of view of the author of the book; if there is polemic in this chapter, it is primarily aimed at Job’s three friends who, just when they talk of the impossibility of finding God and his wisdom, set themselves up as judges both of Job and of God himself and they consider themselves sages.

In the light of chapter 28 Job’s friends cannot claim anymore that they have found wisdom; she exists with God and only God can understand wisdom. Mankind cannot fully understand her or pretend to possess her, but nevertheless they can indirectly receive wisdom, *if* they fear God and act well. Wisdom is not a matter of understanding, but of ethical living; this is the meaning of Job 28,28, which in my opinion is not to be considered an addition to the original poem. ‘Finding’ has at last, in the book of Job, as in Prov 1–9, a positive outcome.

At the same time, it is important to observe that v. 28 has another purpose; it also introduces the protestation of Job which immediately follows (Job 29–31); so the poet intends to emphasize once again that traditional orthodox wisdom (strictly tied in v. 28 to the fear of God, as in Proverbs 1–9) is not acceptable to his hero; as in Job 23,3, the suffering Job is again demanding direct and personal access to God; chapter 28 is not *the* final answer in the book. From this point of view, ‘finding’ God or his wisdom still stands in the book of Job as an open question.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. G. BORGONOVO, *La notte e il suo sole*, p. 260 n. 31.

## IV. 'FINDING' (AND 'SEARCHING') IN THE BOOK OF QOHELET

1. The use of the verb מצא in Prov 1–9 and in Job's language takes us directly to the book of Qohelet. The texts in which מצא and בקש are present with a clear epistemological value are all particularly important: cf. Qoh 3,11 (and Qoh 3,6.15); 7,14; 7,23-29; 8,16-17; 12,10. Three times (Qoh 3,11; 7,23-29; 8,16-17), in particular, the language of 'seeking' and 'finding' is related to the intent of Qohelet's investigation: Qohelet is trying to understand both the human business – which mankind is doing under the sun – and the work of God. Three times the language of 'seeking' and 'finding' seems to express an impassable boundary for human knowledge.

We shall simply omit the texts in Qoh 9,10.15,<sup>42</sup> where the verb מצא does not have a direct epistemological value. However, the use of verb מצא in these texts can easily confirm its experiential value.

2. The first occurrence of the verb מצא is in Qoh 3,11, in what is certainly the most 'theological' passage of the whole book: Qoh 3,10-15.

"I have considered the occupation that God has given to mankind so that they may strive in it: He made everything appropriate at the right time; he placed in their hearts the mysteriousness of time, but<sup>43</sup> man is unable to find [that is to say: to understand] the work that God has done, from the beginning to the end".

The verb מצא appears in *yiqtol* in the negative form (לא ימצא); it has as its subject mankind (האדם) and as its object 'the work that God has done'. 'The work of God' is recalled three more times in Qohelet (7,13; 8,17 and 11,5); with the exception of 11,5, where we find the verb ידע in the negative form, 'the work of God' is always placed as the object of the verb מצא, that is, as something that man is unable to find, or rather, to understand, to grasp.<sup>44</sup> The work of God, that is the work of creation,

<sup>42</sup> For the problem of מצא in Qoh 9,15 see A. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words. A Study of the Language of Qoheleth. Part 1: Grammar (Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta, 41)*, Leuven, 1992, p. 77-78.

<sup>43</sup> I take the conjunction לא מבלי אשר as having an exceptive or a restrictive force ('except that', 'only that'); L. MAZZINGHI, *Ho cercato e ho esplorato. Studi sul Qohelet*, Bologna, 2001, p. 222-223. Cf. A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 147-148; the conjunction can also have a final or a consecutive force; it depends mainly on the interpretation of the word עלם.

<sup>44</sup> On this theme, see the careful analysis by J. Y. S. PAKH, *Il canto della gioia in Dio. L'itinerario sapienziale espresso dall'unità letteraria in Qohelet 8,16-9,10 e il parallelo di Gilgameš Me. III*, Napoli, 1996, p. 102-108.

but also the whole range of God's divine activity in the world, is never negatively evaluated by Qohelet; it simply lies beyond the human powers of comprehension. God's action thus constitutes a precise epistemological limit. God placed 'in their hearts the mysteriousness of time',<sup>45</sup> or rather he gave to mankind the possibility of having an intuition of the existence of a logic of time that nevertheless escapes his full understanding.

In v. 10, Qohelet introduces his reflection with a verb which is particularly dear to him: רָאִיתִי, 'I saw', that is 'I considered'. As well noted by Schoors, this verb refers to Qohelet's experience.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the epistemological value of the verb מִצָּא, at v. 11, gets tied to experience as the primary source of knowledge for Qohelet. In this sense, Qohelet is more in line with the older wisdom tradition than was thought in the past, far from proposing a distant and impersonal God as too many commentators persistently maintain.<sup>47</sup> I would like recall that in vv. 12-14 man's epistemological limit opens up to the possibility of the divine gift of joy and to the attitude of 'fearing God'.

'Not finding' has to be seen as the result of a personal experience, of the search described in the programmatic text in Qoh 1,13-18; God's activity constitutes its most evident limit; and yet man must not give up his task 'to search and to explore', which, even though 'an unhappy business (עֲנִין רַע)', is a task that God himself gave to man.

In the list of antithetic actions contained in Qoh 3,2-8, one reads at v. 6 that there is 'a time for searching' (בִּקֵּשׁ), but there is not, as one would perhaps have expected, a 'time for finding' (עֵת לִמְצֹא); on the contrary there is only a 'time for losing' (עֵת לֵאבֹד)! This language of 'searching and losing' here recalls similar language in the texts in 1 Sam 9,3-4; Ezek 34,4.16; Ps 119,176, but within different contexts. On the other hand, in the very difficult v. 15, God appears for the only time in Qohelet as the subject of the verb בִּקֵּשׁ; he alone is able 'to search for

<sup>45</sup> With 'mysteriousness of time' I am trying to offer an interpretation of the difficult term עֵלֶם, where I see both a temporal meaning (עֵלֶם) and an epistemological value (a play on words with עֵלֶם 'hidden'). About this proposal, cf. L. MAZZINGHI, *Il mistero del tempo: sul termine 'olam in Qoh 3,11*, in: R. FABRIS (ed.), *Initium Sapientiae. Scritti in onore di Franco Festorazzi nel suo 70° compleanno*, Bologna, 2000, p. 147-161. Here I prefer to speak about 'the mysteriousness of time' rather than of 'the mystery of time', because 'mystery' has too strong a theological value.

<sup>46</sup> A. SCHOORS, *Words Typical of Qohelet*, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Not the last among these is Spieckermann, who insists on affirming that the God of Qohelet "ist jedenfalls fremd geworden, fast unpersönlich, mehr Fatum als Vater. Nicht einmal als ferner Schöpfer gewinnt er positive Konturen" (H. SPIECKERMANN, *Suchen und Finden*, p. 329).

[the time] that has fled past’;<sup>48</sup> once again ‘the mysteriousness of time’ is in God’s hands, and not in man’s. Man seeks to understand time and creation, but is not able to find (3,11); eventually only man is able to lose (cf. 3,6), whereas only God is capable of ‘searching’ with success (3,15).

A last observation: against whom is Qohelet’s polemic directed? We will return later to this point; but the mention of the ‘the mysteriousness of time’ already leads us to put forward a hypothesis: Qohelet is here arguing against the concept of a revealed wisdom typical of the rising apocalyptic tradition.

3. We find the verb מצא again in Qoh 7,14, as a prelude to the important texts in 7,23-29 and 8,16-17. In Qoh 7,1-14, our sage takes up many themes belonging to traditional wisdom literature, in direct opposition to the theological optimism in Prov 1–9.<sup>49</sup> In vv. 13-14 Qohelet underlines again the empirical dimension of wisdom: ‘I saw (ראיתי) all God’s work’. Going back to what was already affirmed in 1,15, Qohelet recalls that no one is capable of ‘straightening’ what God has made ‘crooked’; this is the motive for which he calls not for passive resignation, but in the ‘sad day’ for reflection and ‘in the happy day’ for joyfulness; that is, to acknowledge that man can only accept the actions of a God that he is not able to understand. Verse 14 in fact concludes: “God made this equal to that, so that...<sup>50</sup> לא ימצא האדם אחריו מאומה”. This is in fact a difficult text.

In Prof. Schoors’s interpretation, following a suggestion of L. G. Sargent, v. 14 would show how “man cannot go beyond or behind God’s ways and find any basis for criticism of his actions”.<sup>51</sup> But why should mankind *not* criticise God for the *bad* days? If God acts in the way described in Qoh 7,13-14, it is difficult for Him to escape man’s reproof.

Schoors insists that in 7,14 אחריו the third person suffix most probably refers to God, otherwise the order of words (אחריו מאומה) should be

<sup>48</sup> On this interpretation of 3,15, cf. L. MAZZINGHI, *Ho cercato e ho esplorato*, p. 233-236. On a different interpretation, which anyway connects 3,15 with 3,6, see H. SPIECKERMANN, *Suchen und Finden*, p. 318-320.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. F. BIANCHI, ‘Un fantasma al banchetto della Sapienza?’. *Qohelet e il libro dei Proverbi a confronto*, in: G. BELLIA and A. PASSARO (eds.), *Libro dei Proverbi*, p. 40-68.

<sup>50</sup> Here I give to the conjunction על-דברת ש a final sense, rather than a consecutive one; cf. A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 118-119; cf. also L. G. SARGENT, *Ecclesiastes and Other Studies*, Birmingham, 1965, p. 59.



reversed. But in 1 Sam 12,5 and especially in 1 Sam 29,3 we find a similar word order: וְלֹא מִצָּאתִי בּוֹ מֵאוֹמָה; another similar construction is to be found in the book of Qohelet (Qoh 5,13).

The reading proposed by Schoors is not too far from the reading in the Vulgate (*ut non inveniatur homo contra eum iustas quaerimonias*) and Symmachus: τοῦ μὴ εὑρεῖν ἄνθρωπον κατ' αὐτοῦ μέμψιν; see also the Syriac: 'that man will not find any fault with Him'. But the reading in all these ancient versions can easily be explained as a mistranslation of מֵאוֹמָה, wrongly interpreted by the translators as מֵאוֹם, 'blame' (see Job 31,7). The MT מֵאוֹמָה can be explained as it stands, as is clear from the Septuagint and Jerome. So the expression לֹא יִמְצָא הָאָדָם אַחֲרָיו מֵאוֹמָה can be better translated by referring to אַחֲרָיו to man, as: "because man can find nothing of what comes after him", that is, man cannot understand anything about his future.

Here Qohelet returns to the theme of man's ignorance concerning the future, as he also does in 3,22; 6,12; 10,14. If the subject of the verb מִצָּא, still in the negative form, remains mankind, the object is no longer just the work of God, but also the future which lies ahead of man and which man is unable 'to find'. The problem is, once again, an epistemological one.

Now if, as would appear in the more recent parts of the book of Proverbs, like the wise woman of Prov 31,25, the sage laughs at the future (לֵיּוֹם אַחֲרָיו) precisely because he has found wisdom, the sage who has founded his wisdom on experience never boasts of today, because he knows nothing of tomorrow; so it is, for example, in Prov 27,1. This is also Qohelet's position; man 'cannot find', that is, man cannot understand either the work of God or his own future, not because God is an incomprehensible despot, but because divine action simply escapes man's full understanding and precisely for this reason man is incapable of judging it. From this point of view, Qohelet is acting like a frontier guard who forbids human wisdom to cross the border established between God and mankind.

4. For us the text in Qoh 7,23-29 is the most interesting passage, but unfortunately also the most problematical.<sup>52</sup> Here, the verb מִצָּא with its eight recurrences, three of which are in relation to בִּקֵּשׁ, clearly consti-

<sup>52</sup> Cf. for an updated and complete bibliography the study by J. Y. S. PAHK, *Woman as Snares. A Metaphor of Warning in Qoh 7,26 and Sir 9,3* in: N. CALDUCH BENAGES and J. VERMEYLEN (eds.), *Treasures of Wisdom. Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom. FS M. Gilbert (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 143)*, Leuven, 1999, p.

tutes a key word. The problems concern above all the meaning of what Qohelet says about women. Must we agree with Fox when he says that ‘this passage remains irreparably misogynistic’,<sup>53</sup> or listen to Lohfink’s defence?<sup>54</sup> I can but limit myself to some considerations on the use of the verbs מצא and בקש, that may help us not to fix our attention only on the real or apparent misogyny of Qohelet. Regarding the verb מצא, we can start from the good analysis given in the study by Ceresko mentioned above, which carefully distinguishes, in 7,23-29, between four different nuances of this verb: ‘grasp’, ‘find’, ‘learn’, ‘reach’.<sup>55</sup>

a. The first occurrence of מצא is in 7,23-24, a passage that immediately highlights an evident epistemological problem: “all this I have experienced by means of wisdom. I said: I want to become wise! But she [i.e. wisdom] is a long way away from me. Far away is what happens [or: ‘what exists’], and profound, profound: who will be able to grasp [to find] it?”.

The object of מצא is constituted by the expression מה־שהיה where a textual problem arises. In the very new critical apparatus in the Biblia Hebraica Quinta Y. A. P. Goldman suggests a somewhat eclectic reading of vv. 23b-24a, mixing Greek and Masoretic text: “I decided to get wisdom, but it fled away from me farther than any reality; and the deepest who can find it?”. So he prefers to read מה־שהיה as מִי־שהיה, following the Greek (ὄπερ ὁ ἤν) and the Latin (*multo magis quam erat*).<sup>56</sup>

If we read the Masoretic text (as we have done in our translation) the problem is the interpretation of מה־שהיה. According to A. Schoors, who follows the proposal of R. Gordis and R. Barton, מה־שהיה should be understood as ‘all that exists’ owing to the highly philosophical character

397-404. Cf. also, by the same author, a good analysis of the literary structure proposed in J. Y. S. פאח, *The Significance of אשר in Qoh 7,26: “More Bitter than Death is the Woman, if she is a Snare”*, in: A. SCHOORS (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, p. 375-376. According to J. VÍLCHEZ LÍNDEZ it is virtually impossible to give a secure interpretation of vv. 26-29! (cf. *Ecclesiastes o Qohelet [Nueva Biblia Española]*, Estella, 1994, p. 324-325). Even for the problem of the inner literary structure of vv. 23-29 ‘there is simply no certain solution’ (R. E. MURPHY, *Ecclesiastes*, Dallas 1992, p. 75). The main problem is 8,1a: does it belong to 7,23-29 or to the following section?

<sup>53</sup> Cf. M. V. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, p. 266.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. N. LOHFINK, *War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind? Ein Versuch, die Logik und der Gegenstand von Koh. 7,23-8,1a herauszufinden*, in: M. GILBERT (ed.), *La sagesse de l’Ancien Testament (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 51)*, Leuven, 1990<sup>2</sup>, p. 259-287.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. A. R. CERESKO, *The Function of Antanaclasses*, p. 566-567.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. A. SCHENKER e.a. (eds.), *Biblia Hebraica quinta editio cum apparato critico novis curis elaborato. General Introduction and Megillot*, Stuttgart, 2004, p. 94\*-95\*.

of this verse; the perfect would refer 'to a timeless present'.<sup>57</sup> But in Qoh 1,9; 3,15; 6,10 the same formula, מִה־שֶׁהֵיָה, has the quite clear meaning of 'all that happens' in this world, under the sun, and there is no reason to reject a similar value in 7,24, so avoiding the temptation to load this formula with too strong a philosophical nuance, as Schoors does. Qohelet always starts from an experiential point of view; certainly he is speaking about reality, but only that reality which mankind can experience *under the sun*.

In this text, the use of מִצָּא in the interrogative form closes a reflection in which Qohelet plays on two different meanings of the term חִכְמָה. Wisdom, for Qohelet, is on the one hand a sum of all knowledge, a well-defined corpus, as conceived in the Prov 1–9 teaching. On the other hand, wisdom also clearly becomes the *means* which Qohelet uses to arrive at knowledge; this is obvious right from the programmatic text of Qoh 1,13–18. In this way, it is precisely the use of wisdom as an epistemological *instrument* that leads Qohelet to understand the limit of wisdom itself; in all this Qohelet is not far from Agur's position (see Prov 30,1–5) or from the description of wisdom in Job 28. But what characterises Qohelet's peculiar position is here a strong *ironical* nuance,<sup>58</sup> due to the different meanings of the word 'wisdom' that he employs: precisely because Qohelet *possesses* wisdom, understood as experience of reality and as an epistemological instrument, he can ask himself rhetorically 'who will be able to find it?', that is, who is capable of grasping the meaning of all that happens under the sun?

b. Verse 25 once again presents Qohelet's intention, with an accumulation of terms relative to knowledge: "again I have reflected to understand, to explore and to search<sup>59</sup> for wisdom and a practical conclusion,<sup>60</sup>

Goldman underlines his choice with a short comment: "This means that one never finds the foundation of reality, one never finds the ultimate wisdom and the world remains hermetically sealed to human understanding".

<sup>57</sup> A. SCHOORS, *The Verb hayā in Qohelet*, in: D. PENCHANSKY and P. L. REDDIT (eds.), *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? FS. J. L. Crenshaw*, Winona Lake, 2000, p. 235–236. Schoors cites Isaksson in this regard: "True wisdom, which would involve insight into the real nature of the things going on under the sun, is beyond the reach of human intellect, and this is exactly what is expressed in 7,24" (B. ISAKSSON, *Studies in the language of Qoheleth*, p. 90–91).

<sup>58</sup> On the irony of Qohelet see F. J. BACKHAUS, *Kohelet und die Ironie*, in: *Biblische Notizen* 101 (2000), p. 29–55 and especially R. VIGNOLO, *La poetica ironica di Qohelet. Contributo allo sviluppo di un orientamento critico*, in: *Teologia* 25 (2000), 217–240.

<sup>59</sup> The third infinitive, וּבִקֵּשׁ, lacks the preposition *lamed*; but such an ellipsis is not impossible; cf. A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 203; all these three infinitives serve to strengthen the idea of an intense study in seeking wisdom.

to understand wickedness, foolishness, stupidity and folly”.<sup>61</sup> It should be noted immediately how, contrary to the typical vocabulary in Prov 1–9, Qohelet says he wants *to search* for wisdom, but he does not say he has found it!

Suddenly, in a totally unexpected way, Qohelet informs us that something, nevertheless, he has found: v. 26 opens with a single participial form, **מוצא אני**. Normally Qohelet uses participial forms in a frequentative sense or to express a present tense.<sup>62</sup> According to Fox, this participle “can only introduce Qohelet’s own conclusion, not an opinion he repudiates”.<sup>63</sup> Many authors, however, are convinced that here Qohelet is introducing the citation of a wise saying or, in any case, of a traditional opinion; Michel, in particular, believes that this is actually confirmed by the participle, which Qohelet would use to express, and then criticise, what he would have found in tradition as an apparently stable and secure opinion.<sup>64</sup> I think Michel is close to the mark: using the participle, Qohelet express what he ‘is finding’, that is to say what he has discovered when exploring the sayings of the wisdom tradition.

c. The conclusions of Qohelet’s reflection are actually in v. 27: “You see, this I have found, says Qohelet” and, then in v. 29, “see what is the only thing I have found”; in both cases **מוצא** acquires the nuance of ‘to learn’ or ‘to understand’ something from personal experience. In v. 27b Qohelet uses again the verb **מוצא** in the positive form to express both a finality, that is to say the end purpose of his research, and his method: ‘to find’, that is to say ‘to reach’ a **חשבון**, a solution, a practical conclusion. This practical conclusion which in reality, with a pinch of irony, Qohelet says he is still searching for without finding, as the parenthetical incision in v. 28a tells us, is expressed in v. 29, this time by a truly sin-

<sup>60</sup> The term **חשבון** has been variously understood; Schoors prefers to read it together with **חכמה** as an hendiadys; cf. A. SCHOORS, “Bitterder dan de Dood is de Vrouw” (*Qoh* 7,26), in: *Bijdragen* 54 (1993), p. 121-140; but **חשבון** can perhaps have a ‘mathematical’ and a ‘commercial’ value: the total, the result, a practical conclusion which is capable of reassuring all Qohelet’s reflections.

<sup>61</sup> Another possibility: “to understand that wickedness is foolishness and stupidity is folly”. See the discussion in the *Biblia Hebraica quinta editione*, p. 95\*-96\*.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. A. SCHOORS; *Preacher I*, p. 184-186.

<sup>63</sup> M. V. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, p. 266-267.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. D. MICHEL, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 183)*, Berlin, 1989, p. 235-237: in v. 26 the participle expresses “was er in der Tradition ‘dauernd findet’”, whilst v. 27 “gibt er jetzt zu bedenken, was er bei seiner Überprüfung der Tradition ‘herausgefunden, als wahr gefunden’ hat”. For a list of those that consider v. 2 as a citation cf. J. VILCHEZ LÍNDEZ, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 327 n. 17; cf. also A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 188-191.

gular use of the verbs **מצא** and **בקש**. In Qoh 3,11; 7,14 and 7,23-24, Qohelet told us what man is incapable of finding, that is, he is incapable of understanding either the work of God or his wisdom. Here instead, he tells us that by means of his research he has found something: “see what is the only thing *I have found*: God created human beings upright, והמה בקשו חשבונות רבים”. I translate the difficult term חשבונות, which gives rise to a play on words with חשבון, in reference to the meaning that it has in 2 Chron 26,15, ‘war engines’, and consider it, at the same time, a term with a theoretical value, as understood by the old translations: “but they search for many deadly inventions”.<sup>65</sup> Qohelet knows very well that the action of God in relation to man is positive and the problem is not so much with God, but with the human claim to penetrate his mystery, as, for instance, humanity in the story of Gen 3,1-7.

In the light of these observations, maybe it is possible to understand better what Qohelet says of woman in v. 26 and then affirms in the problematic **מצאתי** of v. 28b: “*I have found* one man among a thousand, but a woman, among them all, *I have not found*”. Qohelet’s polemic could be directed more against the pretension of the traditional wisdom which is expressed in Prov 1–9; mentioning alternatively Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly Qohelet uses the ‘searching and finding’ language to reject the claim the pretension of the sages to have found Lady Wisdom;<sup>66</sup> this would also explain the undeniable proximity of this vocabulary to the erotic language typical of the Song of Songs.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, vv. 26 and 27 could be understood as a fierce criticism of the traditional wisdom, which Qohelet would attack when discussing matters of common concern, such as misogyny.

5. In Qoh 8,16-17, where the verb **מצא** appears three times, one of which is again in relation to **בקש**, we find a further development in the use of

<sup>65</sup> The LXX translates חשבונות as λογισμοὺς πολλοῦς; the Vulgate has *infinite quaestionibus*. For a play of words in 2 Chron 26,15, cf. L. DI FONZO, *Ecclesiaste*, Roma – Torino, 1967, p. 248 (‘ordigni bellici’); cf. also A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 64 n.117 (חשבונות from the root of חשבן, ‘device’, ‘invention’).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. F. J. BACKHAUS, “*Es gibt nichts Besseres für den Menschen*” (Koh 3,22). *Studien zur Komposition und zur Weisheitskritik im Buch Kohelet (Bonner Biblische Beiträge*, 121), Bodenheim, 1998, p. 261-289. For Backhaus, Qohelet would not be so much a ‘Weiterentwicklung’ of the traditional wisdom as a ‘Neuinterpretation’.

<sup>67</sup> On the relation between Qohelet 7,27 and the Song of Songs see L. SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, “*Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück*” (Koh 2,24). *Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie (Herders biblische Studien*, 2), Freiburg *e.a.*, 1994, p. 177-178; but see the criticism by J. Y. S. PAHK, *The Significance of אשר*, p. 379 n. 40.

these verbs within Qohelet. I will stop at v. 17: “And I saw all the work of God: that man cannot *grasp* the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he cannot *grasp* (it), even if the sage claims to understand (it), he cannot *grasp* (it)”.<sup>68</sup>

This passage constitutes the synthesis of a movement of thought relative to ‘finding’ introduced in Qoh 3,10-11 and developed starting from 7,13-14. In all these texts מצא acquires again the meaning of ‘to understand’, ‘to grasp’ (see especially the relation with the verb ידע stressed here) and it is expressed, once again, in the negative form (twice tied up with the expression ‘cannot’). The subject of the verb in 8,17 is twice the human being (האדם); in the third occurrence of מצא the subject specifically becomes the sage. The object of ‘not finding’ is not, however, only ‘the work of God’, but also ‘the work that is done under the sun’, or rather the whole field of human activity, in particular that which is expressed in v. 16, man’s effort to know wisdom and the laborious occupations (עוני) that mark man’s life. Here Qohelet does not want to affirm that God must be considered directly responsible for the epistemological limit that afflicts man. The impossibility of understanding the action of God leads directly to the failure of knowledge and human activity. The problem is on man’s side, not on God’s.

Twice, i.e. in v. 16 and v. 17, Qohelet underlines the experiential dimension of his search, particularly through the use of the verb ‘to see’ (ראה). It is on the grounds of this experience that he can polemically conclude that there does not exist a sage who is able ‘to find’ or ‘to understand’ (ידע) the work of God. In this way, Qohelet exposes a radical epistemological impossibility: God’s action in this world is for human wisdom an impassable boundary; such a boundary is not the result of some kind of misdeed for which man can feel himself responsible, as in the prophetic texts on ‘searching’ and ‘finding’ God. On the other hand Qohelet does not follow the path of Prov 1–9: wisdom cannot be found, and this means that the sage, paradoxically using his own wisdom (see above, regarding the irony of this position) has to become conscious of the futility of his own claims to wisdom itself.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. A. SCHOORS, in his review of A. Schellenberg’s book, in: *Biblica* 85 (2004), p. 278-281. Schoors makes use of Schellenberg’s translation (cf. *Erkenntnis als Problem*, p. 131-135), but criticises her interpretation, according to which in 8,16-17 Qohelet would attribute directly to the action of God the impossibility, for man, to arrive at knowing him. For an excellent study of Qoh 8,16-17 cf. J. Y. S. פאנק, *Il canto della gioia in Dio*, p. 75-128. For the translation of בשל אשר with ‘however’, cf. A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 145-146.

6. The last occurrence of the verb **מִצָּא** in the Book of Qohelet (except for the text of the epilogue which we shall come to shortly) is in 11,1b: “cast your bread on the surface of the waters because after many days *you will find it*”. Here the verb does not have an obvious epistemological reference but is inserted in a context that is not always recognized as such. In fact, Qohelet 11,1-6 is characterized by the presence of the phrase ‘not to know’, repeated four times (twice, in vv. 1 and 5, we find **לֹא תִדְעַ**; twice again in vv. 5 and 6 **אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ**);<sup>69</sup> the presence of the verb **מִצָּא** in verse 1 reminds us vividly of the kind of terminology already encountered in Qoh 7,23-29.

As is well known, the interpretation of vv. 1-6 is debated and difficult. The action of casting bread upon the surface of the waters to find it again after many days (Qoh 11,1) may be understood as an apparently absurd action but with unforeseeably positive consequences; v. 2 would thus express the exact opposite: an apparently wise action, but with negative results. Perhaps, however, we should not underrate the possible reading of vv. 1-2 in the sense, which is more traditional, of a call to generosity.<sup>70</sup> In any case, the verb **מִצָּא** here refers to something man can find without looking for it first.

Yet the context of vv. 1-6 is epistemological and at the same time theological, which is a point not always recognized by commentators.<sup>71</sup> In v. 2 the result of human actions is connected with an ‘unknowing’ to do with ignorance of the future; in particular, resuming subjects and terminology already to be found in Qoh 8,7; 9,12; 10,14, man does not know, nor can he foresee the evil that may befall him when he least expects it. Nevertheless, in v. 5 the phrase ‘you do not know’, repeated twice, takes on an obviously theological significance: man’s ‘unknowing’ is about the activity of God ‘who makes everything’; divine activity which, over and above the textual difficulties that beset v. 5,<sup>72</sup> is com-

<sup>69</sup> For a literary analysis of this unit see G. S. OGDEN, *Qohelet 11,1-6*, in: *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983), p. 222-230.

<sup>70</sup> I exclude the interpretation of Qoh 11,1-2 in connection with the idea of maritime commerce; a *status quaestionis* of the problem is to be found in J. VILCHEZ LÍNDEZ, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 388. For a possible recovery of the traditional interpretation cf. M. V. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down*, p. 311-314 and C. L. SEOW, *Ecclesiastes (Anchor Bible, 18C)*, New York, 1997, p. 334-335.342-343.

<sup>71</sup> For an analysis of 11,1-6 along these lines, see, with opposite views, the works by H. SPIECKERMANN, *Suchen und Finden*, p. 326-328, and A. SCHELLENBERG, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, p. 135-141.

<sup>72</sup> Verse 5a can be read in various ways; a first possibility is: “as you do not know by what way the vital spirit enters, how the bones [or better, by correcting **בַּעֲצָמִים** to **כַּעֲצָמִים**, following the *Targum*, ‘in the bones’], in the womb of the pregnant woman ...”; cf. the careful discussion by DI FONZO, *Ecclesiaste*, p. 306. Assuming there to be an ellipsis of

pared in every case with the growth of life in woman's body. Qohelet never protests against divine action (cf. 7,13-14), or considers it in itself something detrimental to man (cf. also 3,10-11); the real problem is, as already stated, the fact that man cannot manage to understand it; he can only accept it and recognize, as in this case, its positive nature.

Such a position, as can be seen in v. 6, does not make Qohelet either a pessimist or a determinist, as many commentators would have it and of whom some are embarrassed at having to explain the unexpected positive ending to this verse.<sup>73</sup> The fourth occurrence of the phrase 'you do not know' is in fact linked to a possible outcome to human action. Man must therefore act in this world, even though he knows practically nothing: the results of his activity, his future (too often unpleasant), the meaning of God's actions, which are nonetheless real. The paradox is that there is no need to 'seek', but that is possible to 'find' a positive outcome without even looking for it (cf. 11,1); this is because God's dealings with man (cf. 11,5) can lead to unexpected results for whoever has the courage to face, notwithstanding *hebel* and death, the combat for life in this world.

7. Our investigation cannot be complete without referring to the epilogue to Qohelet; in Qoh 12,10, we find both of the verbs that we are interested in: "Qohelet searched to find pleasant words (בקש למצא) (דבריי חפץ) and here are written his authentic words".

The combination בקש למצא is quite unusual and as such is not to be found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. When Qohelet uses בקש, except for 3,6 and 3,15, he does so to underline the negative result of the research: 'searching', but without 'finding' (7,25.28.29; 8,17). Here the epilogist tells us that Qohelet 'searched to find': but to find what, when we see that, apart from 7,26.27, Qohelet tells us only what he has *not*

the expression איןך ידע it is possible to read, with Barton, "as thou knowest not what the path of the wind is, nor the bones in the womb of a woman..."; cf. A. SCHOORS, *Preacher I*, p. 204 and, more recently, R. ALTHANN, *Ellipsis in Psalm 9,19; Qohelet 11,5 and Esther 2,1*, in: A. VONACH and G. FISCHER (eds.), *Horizonte biblischer Texte, FS J. M. Oesch*, Göttingen, 2003, p. 93-94. The editor of the *Biblia Hebraica quinta* (p. 100\*), however, suggests following the Greek text, reading v. 5 as follows: "just as the path of the spirit in the bones inside the womb of the pregnant woman, so you cannot know the deeds of God who creates all things".

<sup>73</sup> Cf. the remarks by G. RAVASI, *Qohelet*, Cinisello Balsamo, 1978, p. 326-327 and M. V. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down*, p. 315, who completely ignores the positive ending of v. 6. For the interpretation of 11,1-6 as a statement of determinism, cf. in particular A. LAUHA, *Kohelet (Biblischer Kommentar. Altes Testament, 19)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978, p. 201-202.



found? What is therefore the object of **מצא**? The expression **דברי־חפץ** is normally translated as ‘pleasant words’, or following the Septuagint, as ‘useful words’. I recall here a very recent proposal by J. Y. S. Pahlk who suggests translating it as ‘the matter of matters’, or ‘the meaning of reality’, thus giving to **חפץ** the meaning of ‘matter’, ‘business’, that this word has in the rest of the book.<sup>74</sup>

However one resolves this difficulty, it is certain that by using such an unusual combination, **בקש למצא**, the epilogist intends to propose again Qohelet’s entire reflection which still states that he had found neither wisdom nor the meaning of the work which takes place in the world. Nevertheless, as the epilogist again affirms in v. 9, he “has listened to, investigated and straightened many proverbs”.<sup>75</sup> The epilogist in this way wants to underline appropriately the value of such an epistemological research that has produced at least one result: the ‘pleasing words’ (if that is how we want to still translate **בקש למצא**) written by Qohelet are in any event something that he ‘has found’. Qohelet’s words, emerging from the critical experience of reality, can be considered among those ‘words of the sages’ which v.11 links, in any case, to the action of that one ‘shepherd’, who could be king Solomon, but could also be God himself. Therefore, according to the epilogist, Qohelet is certainly not a sceptic.

#### V. QOHELET’S ‘ADVERSARIES’: APOCALYPTIC AND TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Up to this point our analysis has tried to show the way in which Qohelet uses the verbs **מצא** and **בקש** within this text and in relation to other texts in the Hebrew Bible, texts which are mainly earlier than Qohelet, with the exception of Ben Sirach. If Ben Sirach denotes a return to the lexicon of Prov 1–9, a glance at the Qumran vocabulary reveals that the verb **מצא** is no longer used in relation to knowledge, except sporadically; the use of **בקש** in the epistemological sense is even more rare (cf. e.g. 1QH<sup>a</sup> VI,3: to search for wisdom).<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> On v.10 and its problems, cf. L. MAZZINGHI, *Ho cercato e ho esplorato*, p. 330-331. On the suggestion by J. Y. S. PAHLK cf. *The Role and Significance of דברי־חפץ (Qoh 12,10a) for Understanding Qohelet*, in: *XVIIIth IOSOT Congress, Leiden 1-6 August 2004* (not yet published).

<sup>75</sup> Cf. L. MAZZINGHI, *Ho cercato e ho esplorato*, p. 327-330 and, for the exegesis of the whole epilogue (Qoh 12,9-14), p. 313-358.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. M. G. ABEGG (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance, Vol. I. The Non-biblical Texts from Qumran*, Leiden – Boston, 2003.

In the *Rule of the Community*, מִצְאָ is used three times (cf. 1QS VIII,11; IX,13.20) to express ‘finding’ the exact knowledge which characterises the community, something which does not become known through experience, but only by divine revelation and which is deepened by means of the study strictly reserved to members of the community. In the so-called *Sapiential Works*, to which the 51st *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense* dedicated itself, the idea of ‘wisdom’ appears forcefully as a divine gift that permits a knowledge of the רִז נְהִיָה, an expression which, no matter how we care to translate it, is relative to a ‘body of teaching’ which concerns at the same time the meaning of creation, human activity and eschatology.<sup>77</sup> This concept of understanding the רִז נְהִיָה as a gift from God is surely the most important contribution made by the Qumran Wisdom texts.

I am convinced that among the principal objectives of Qohelet’s polemic there is the idea of an already widespread apocalyptic tradition, which in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC is well attested in the already existing Enoch tradition. According to the typical apocalyptic vision, as well as Qumran’s *Sapiential Works*, in which both apocalyptic and wisdom outlook clearly meet, wisdom exists, understood as a comprehension of the meaning of creation, of man’s life and of the eschatological future, and it is a gift that can only be received from God. As Leo Perdue has af-

<sup>77</sup> Two main problems arise: the translation and the meaning of the רִז נְהִיָה. For a recent survey of opinions see A. SCHOORS, *The Language of the Qumran Sapiential Works*, in: C. HEMPEL e.a. (eds.), *The Wisdom Texts from Qumran and the Development of Sapiential Thought (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 159)*, Leuven, 2002, p. 86-87. T. ELGYVIN, *The Mystery to Come: Early Essene Theology of Revelation*, in: F. H. CRYER and T. L. THOMPSON (eds.), *Qumran between the Old and New Testaments (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series, 290)*, Sheffield, 1998, p. 113-150 observes that the verbal form נְהִיָה refers, on the one hand (if understood as a participle) to the work of God in the past; on the other hand, (if understood as a participle) to the eschatological mystery that is unfolding; in any case, the presence of the verb הִיָה seems to exclude the translation proposed by A. LANGE, ‘Das Geheimnis des Werdens’, that is to say the order of creation; cf. his *Weisheit und Prädestination. Weisheitliche Ordnung und Prädestination in den Textfunden von Qumran (Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, 18)*, Leiden, 1995, p. 57-56. According to D. J. HARRINGTON, the רִז נְהִיָה, ‘the mystery that is to be/to come’, is ‘a body of teaching’, that is a revealed teaching that can be both written or oral; he likewise acknowledges how such a teaching regards both ethics and eschatology; cf. *The raz nihyeh in a Qumran Wisdom Text (1Q26, 4Q415-418, 4Q423)*, in: *Revue de Qumran* 17 (1996), p. 549-553. For L. SCHIFFMAN the רִז נְהִיָה ‘the mystery of that which was coming into being’, is connected to divine wisdom from which it comes and by means of which it is revealed; the “raz refers to the mysteries of creation, that is the natural order of things, and to the mysteries of the divine rule in the historical processes. The source of these mysteries is divine wisdom”; cf. *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: the History of Judaism, The Background of Christianity, The Lost Library of Qumran*, Jerusalem – Philadelphia, 1994, p. 206-207.

firmed, “Qohelet strongly opposed much of the teachings of the traditional sages, and he was strongly against the major themes of the apocalyptic, including especially knowledge of divine character and activity, eschatological judgement of the righteous and the wicked and life after death”.<sup>78</sup>

In the text of 1 Hen 42 we read something interesting with regard to ‘finding’ wisdom: “Wisdom could not find a place in which she could dwell; but a place was found [for her] in the heaven. Then Wisdom went out to dwell with the children of the people, but she found no dwelling place. [So] Wisdom returned to her place and she settled permanently among the angels”.<sup>79</sup> In this passage, that is dated probably towards the middle of the first century BC, it is not mankind that finds wisdom; it is wisdom itself who does not find a place in which to dwell and who retreats to heaven, because of the iniquity of the men who rejected it. So in the Enochic tradition wisdom, because of human wickedness is not to be found, but contrary to the theological perspective which emerges from Job 28, and especially from Prov 1–9 and again from the book of Ben Sirach (cf. Sir 1; 24), wisdom cannot be found except through a divine revelation totally detached from worldly experience and reserved only for the elect.

I am well aware that all these remarks take us well beyond the purpose of this article, but they can explain better the use that Qohelet makes of the verbs מִצָּא and בִקֵּשׁ. I am convinced that Qohelet’s polemic is directed against both the typical conceptions of the emerging apocalyptic (especially the Enochic tradition) and against the traditional wisdom which is present in Prov 1–9. Qohelet agrees with the apocalyptic view that wisdom is inaccessible, but not because it has escaped to heaven due to men’s iniquity; the epistemological limit typical of man is not tied, for Qohelet, to ethical factors, even if Qohelet is well aware of man’s wickedness (Qoh 9,3). Moreover, exactly because of this limit, Qohelet does not conceive any possibilities of a direct divine revelation

<sup>78</sup> L. G. PERDUE, *Wisdom and Apocalyptic: the Case of Qohelet*, in: F. GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ (ed.), *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 168)*, Leuven, 2003, p. 251. Cf. also L. MAZZINGHI, *Qohelet and Enochism: a Critical Relationship*, in: G. BOCCACCINI (ed.), *The Origins of Enochic Judaism. Proceeding of the First Enoch Seminar, University of Michigan, Sesto Fiorentino (Italy) June 19-23, 2001 (= Henoch 24/1-2 [2002])*, p. 157-168.

<sup>79</sup> Translation by E. ISAAC, in: J. H. CHARLESWORTH (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Volume 1*, Garden City, 1983, p. 23.

of the apocalyptic type: “from many dreams and many absurdities, many words: but you, fear God!” (cf. Qoh 5,6).

VI. CONCLUSIONS: ‘IF YOU DO NOT SEARCH, YOU DO NOT FIND’  
(CF. SIR 11,10B)

1. At the end of this investigation we can *search to find* some conclusions or better our חשבון. First of all we must note again that our sage chooses to give prominence to the verb מצא, eliminating דרש almost entirely (cf. only in Qoh 1,13), probably because it refers too much to the theme of the ‘searching of God’, and then making frequent use of the couple מצא / בקש so as to create a type of antithetical language to that of Prov 1–9 (see especially the negative use of בקש in Qoh 7,25.28.29 and 8,17).

The search which Qohelet undertake has an experiential character; in this way it does not surprise us to discover that the meaning of מצא oscillates between ‘to find’, ‘to discover’ understood as the result of experience, and the more intellectual meaning ‘to understand’, ‘to grasp’, more often in relation to the verb ידע, ‘to know’; in this way Qohelet takes up again and widely develops a use, sometimes already present in the older wisdom texts.

The verb מצא in the epistemological sense appears in the negative form, with the exception of Qoh 7,26.27 (cf. however 9,10; 11,1) and has for its subject man in general (3,11; 7,14; 8,17; cf. also 7,24), or rather the sage (7,26.27.28.29), or Qohelet himself (12,10). As to the object of the ‘not finding’ we have the work of God (3,11; 7,13-14; 8,16-17), man’s future (7,14), human activity (8,17), wisdom, all that happens in the world and the possibility of arriving at a conclusion (cf. 7,24.25). Moreover, the problematical passage in 7,23-29 underlines how misguided it is to expect to have found wisdom, very probably again in opposition to the theological wisdom in Prov 1–9. In short, with the verb מצא Qohelet underlines the fact that God constitutes the insurmountable epistemological obstacle which all human wisdom encounters.

In his use of the verb מצא, more than in his use of בקש, Qohelet first of all restores the experiential meaning it already had in the language of earlier wisdom. At the same time he forcefully stresses the epistemological meaning which it has both in Job and in Prov 1–9. In this way he

gives a new semantic nuance to the verb and thus **מצא** makes the lexicon the main instrument in his polemic against the 'theological' epistemology of the sages. Here I reach the same conclusions as those to be found in the work of Patrizia Sciumbata, even though she does not deal directly with **מצא** and **בקש**.<sup>80</sup>

2. What are the consequences that emerge from this analysis in view of a reconsideration of Qohelet's epistemology? It is necessary to acknowledge that our sage is much less a revolutionary than is often believed (Crenshaw against Fox). The criticism which Qohelet makes of the 'theological' wisdom of Prov 1–9, but also and above all of the new vision of the world proposed by the rising apocalyptic, is first of all a convinced reaffirmation of the old canons, in the name of a wisdom that finds itself on experience; in this Qohelet is still more radical than the author of Job.

Qohelet writes at a time when the teaching of the ancients is no longer considered an infallible element with regard to which one could talk of an epistemological crisis caused by the exile experience. Prov 1–9 is proof of this: it tries to demonstrate how the 'seven columns of the house of wisdom' (Prov 9,1) are nothing else than the traditional teaching of the sages reread in the light of the figure of Lady Wisdom, daughter of God. If the Enochic-apocalyptic tradition searches for a solution in dreams, visions and heavenly revelations, Qohelet reaffirms the canons of old wisdom that comes from experience, both against any such apocalyptic solution, and against the theological solution to be found in the first part of Proverbs.

Qohelet is convinced that in the light of experience man discovers in God the limit to all human wisdom; and yet he never renounces 'searching', even if 'finding' is limited to discovering the groundlessness of the optimism of the sages, based on trust in a divine 'Wisdom', that enables man to understand the meaning of the reality and activity of God in the world. In all this, Qohelet is by no means a sceptic, but a sage, and therefore a realist before being a philosopher; moreover one could question whether one could still define him as a representative of that

<sup>80</sup> Cf. M. P. SCIUMBATA, *I verbi della 'conoscenza' in Qohelet*, p. 248. In comparison with Prov 10–30 Qohelet gives **מצא** a more cognitive and less material sense (only three cases in this sense). In conflict with Prov 1–9 he denies the optimism of the sages and gives a new twist to a verb not used in connection with knowledge in traditional circles. He rejects the gnoseological mechanism of the sages and replaces it with a caution that verges upon scepticism.

‘erkenntnistheoretischer Skeptizismus’ of which Lohfink speaks.<sup>81</sup> To accept this epistemological limit, or rather to agree that “man cannot argue with one who is stronger than him” (Qoh 6,12) does not mean plunging into resigned and dreary scepticism or pessimism, but understanding that “to be still searching, even without finding” can really lead to the possibility that man – as is clear from Qoh 3,12-14 – may experience joy as a limited but still a real gift of God and learn to fear him.

<sup>81</sup> On the ‘scepticism’ of Qohelet see A. SCHELLENBERG, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, p. 45-61.