

RBL 03/2003



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***Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy
from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective***

Beihefte zue Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche
Wissenschaft 312

Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002. Pp. xvi + 308, Cloth.
\$97.00. ISBN 3110172429.

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The thesis of this Union Theological Seminary dissertation (directed by William Brown) is emphatically stated on page 25: “*Despite its unresolvable contradictions and complex use of language, Ecclesiastes exhibits a distinctly pedagogical thrust. In particular, the cosmologies depicted in 1:4–11 and 3:1–8, in combination with the form of question and answer and Qoheleth’s first-person speeches, are meant to be instructive*” (italics in the original). Kamano develops his thesis by examining the content (the “what”) of the book of Qoheleth in order to determine its pedagogical method (the “how). Kamano’s own methodology is rooted in rhetorical criticism, combining the modern application of that method to biblical texts with the theoretical discussions found in classical handbooks. Of particular importance for Kamano is the classical notion of “ethos,” which “is associated with the credibility of the speaker’s character as seen in the speech—whether the orator is good, trustworthy, or moral. Moreover, if the speaker is an expert on the subject or a well-known person of good reputation, this person’s ethos can strengthen the argument” (24). Thus Qoheleth’s “personal ethos” plays a major role in his pedagogy, as does the “cosmological ethos” of the worldview he presents in Qoh 1:4–11 and 3:1–8.

This volume is not a commentary per se, but it does discuss, in varying detail, the entire book of Qoheleth, which Kamano divides into five sections. These divisions, and

especially the titles Kamano gives them, is illustrative of his understanding of the book: “Qoheleth: The Wisest, Wealthiest King” (1:3–3:9); “Cosmology Theologically Reflected” (3:10–22); “Humanity Trapped in Cosmology and Ways to Cope with it” (4:1–6:9); “Qoheleth and the Search for Wisdom” (6:10–9:10); “Character Coping with Cosmology” (9:11–12:7[8]). The greatest amount of attention is given to the first section, in as much as it sets the foundation for the rest of the book (both Qoheleth’s and Kamano’s). Qoheleth 1:3–3:9 begins and ends with a poem that expresses the author’s view of his world. In Qoh 1:4–11 nature is described as repetitive: the same things occur over and over again without any noticeable effect. On the other hand, the alternation of thematic opposites in 3:1–8, combined with changing rhythms, shifting grammatical structures, and the like, leads to the conclusion that time “wobbles,” with the result that human beings cannot determine the right time for anything “under the sun.” In between those two poems we find Qoheleth’s reflection on his own (literary) situation as the wealthiest king ever to reign in Israel. This status gives him the freedom to investigate human affairs thoroughly, but he also learns that because of the repetitious nature of the world his accomplishments are not unique and thus do not have any lasting value. The only thing that stands out for him is the enjoyment he gets from his possessions.

The second section of the book of Qoheleth consists of a theological reflection on the preceding realization. Since the underlying cosmology has been ordained by God, it cannot be altered, but at the same time God does not enable us to understand the timing of events. This is followed by brief reflections on the universality of death, which lead into the rest of the book. Section three considers the human situation as being trapped within the cosmology that was presented in the first section but also envisions cultic activity as consistent with the immutability of God. Thus, the exhortation to fear God emerges as a parallel to Qoheleth’s commands to enjoyment. In section four, Qoheleth discusses our inability to know anything, especially the time of our own death. As a result, human wisdom is unable to master existence, and the call to enjoyment emerges as even more relevant. Finally, section five develops a lifestyle that “acknowledges and copes with the human limitation which the cosmological ethos imposes upon humanity” (26).

As noted earlier, the goal of Kamano’s analysis is to identify and illustrate Qoheleth’s pedagogical method. The latter is illustrated by attention to literary and rhetorical devices used throughout the book of Qoheleth. The preponderance of first-person speeches, combined with questions and answers evinces the author’s “personal ethos,” that is, the way in which he himself serves as the basis for his own observations. In the first section, his persona as king validates the all-encompassing nature of both his observations on wealth and wisdom as well as his realization that neither provides ultimate meaning. In the rest of the book, Qoheleth presents himself as a true sage, namely, one who possesses

the wisdom both to examine life and to recognize its shortcomings. He is the person best qualified to answer the questions that he asks. Underlying his personal ethos is the cosmological ethos he establishes in the first section. The fact that his observations on human affairs are consistent with that worldview reinforces their validity.

One may quibble with individual points in Kamano's analysis (e.g., his elaboration of chiasms as a structural feature for most sections of Qoheleth's book is not always convincing), but the end result is certainly plausible. On one level his emphasis on the rhetoric of the book does seem to illuminate Qoheleth's pedagogical method. However, the validity of the pedagogy itself is problematic for Kamano's conclusions. First, Qoheleth proposes a cosmology wherein the world is both repetitious and ultimately beyond our understanding. But what if the world is otherwise? Certainly other contemporary authors, biblical and otherwise, held other views. Qoheleth's reflections are consistent with that cosmology, but it is not the only one, merely the one that Qoheleth presents in the book. This limits the value of the book's "cosmological ethos." At the same time, the author does not even employ this determinative worldview consistently. If his kingly success is relativized by this repetitious cosmology, then why not the pleasure he repeatedly commends? If the accomplishments of "Solomon" are not unique, how much less so the joy experienced by a lesser sage?

Second, Qoheleth's self-presentation as king in the first section, a persona that is abandoned afterwards, actually creates problems for his "personal ethos" as a credible, truthful, and therefore reliable writer. The reality is that he begins his book with what at best would be called a fiction, at worst a lie. Despite its value for the point he is trying to make in the first section, Qoheleth's royal persona is simply not true. This fact undermines his credibility in the rest of the book, where he seeks to put himself forward as a trusted sage. Moreover, in the later parts of the book he acknowledges that his knowledge is limited and that he does not know all the answers. Exactly how does this qualify him as the one with the answers to his own questions? The fact that he is consistent with the book's cosmology is not sufficient in this regard, since he is the one who has chosen to present that cosmology as definitive.

In sum, if we judge Kamano's venture successful, that is, that he has correctly identified the pedagogical method present in the book of Qoheleth, we must judge the pedagogy itself a failure. Setting himself up to succeed Qoheleth in fact undermines his own claims to credibility. Was Qoheleth so oblivious to the inconsistencies of his method, or is there more to the book than Kamano has discerned?