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Les biens pour rien en Qohéleth 5,9–6,6 ou La traversée d'un contraste

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Scholarly investigation of the book of Ecclesiastes continues apace, as if defying Qohéleth's claim that there was nothing new under the sun but all the while confirming his observation about an endless process of literary productivity. The monograph under review, submitted in 2000 as a doctoral thesis to la Faculté de Théologie Catholique de l'Université Marc Bloch de Strasbourg, resembles in some ways the literary analysis of Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), and Gary Dean Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric, Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 327; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). Laurent ably combines an interest in discourse strategy with traditional exegesis and hermeneutical theory. The result is a provocative analysis of the human condition as articulated in what is taken to be an important subsection of the biblical book.

Like Ecclesiastes, this book consists of twelve chapters. The first three chapters take up such preliminary matters as context, the nature of discourse, and textual particularities (translation, textual variants, and cultural givens). Four chapters, part 1, are devoted to a close reading of smaller divisions of the entire unit, 5:9–6:6, except for 5:17–19, which Laurent considers important enough to constitute the second part of the analysis. This study makes up chapters 8 and 9. The third part, chapters 10–12, focuses on theological

and anthropological perspectives about the human drama, examines the affinities between Job 1:21 and 5:14, and assesses the role of the narrator's personal observation about having seen certain things. A conclusion to each section, plus a final general conclusion, rounds off the investigation. A limited bibliography, biblical index, lexical index, and list of cited authors enhances the book's utility.

Part 1 introduces the notion of goods that fail to bring full satisfaction. The lover of money discovers an inability to enjoy it (5:9–11), for with increased wealth comes more devourers of that largesse, together with less sleep. Moreover, the narrator has observed an egregious instance of one who acquired substantial wealth but lost it in a risky venture, hence has nothing to leave to his son. Neither father nor son, after all, can take anything with them to the grave (5:12–16). In fact, sometimes God gives good things to persons but withholds from them the capacity to enjoy wealth, possessions, and honor. Consequently, a stranger reaps the benefits of another's dubious fortune (6:1–2). Even though one were to live a staggering lifetime but lack enjoyment, an aborted fetus would be better off (6:3–6).

The second part moves from anthropological observations to theological assertions. In 5:17 one finds a positive vision, according to Laurent, and in 5:18–19 the emphasis falls on the divine gift that makes possible joyous consummation, even given an element of creative ambivalence. Part 3, between birth and death, the unfulfilled gift, attempts to resolve the inner tensions of the text by seeing a movement from contrast to contradiction and back again to contrast. The logical movement of the biblical text entails exclusion by difference and negation so that a superior rationality emerges. In brief, Qoheleth employs negation and its opposite to move to a high level of cognition, a joyous appreciation of the good in the face of limits.

The clue to this particular reading is found in Qoheleth's interjection, "I have seen," which occurs three times in 5:9–6:6. Four criteria play decisive roles: theme, form, semantics, and logic. To these, Laurent adds a fifth, the necessity of integrating all four into a view of the text in its particularity. Among many insights, one stands out as especially noteworthy. In the section being examined wisdom and folly play no role, not even to explain why riches come to one individual and misfortune to another. Indeed, 6:2 functions as a critique of a theological justification of evil.

Laurent's valuable contribution raises once again the vexing question: How does one negotiate a literary unit that has internal inconsistencies? Martin Rose, often Laurent's sparring partner, has re-energized the old theory of multiple redactions (*Rien de nouveau: Nouvelles approches du livre de Qohéleth* [OBO 168; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

Ruprecht, 1999]). Without ruling out the possibility of a gloss in 5:17–19, Laurent defends the unity of 5:9–6:6.

Why this particular unit? Of the thirteen commentaries that Laurent cites on this matter, only one (Delitzsch) concurs that 5:9–6:6 comprises the larger unit. Eight of them, including that of the reviewer, extend it to 6:9, three to 6:12, and one begins it with 5:7 and ends it with 6:10. A case can be made for beginning the unit with 5:8, for agricultural language links this verse with the following one (*sādeh/tebû'āh*), and *ne'ebād* is echoed in *ha'ōbēd* of verse 11. The end of the unit is even less certain than its beginning, for a common refrain links 5:9 and 6:9 (*gam zeh hebel*; cf. *zeh hebel* in 6:2). Furthermore, thematic continuity in 6:7 is undeniable, even if the language for unfulfilled desire changes from *lō' yisba'* to *lō' timmālē*. Arguably, the expression *mēhalāk-nāpeš* means an individual's departure (in death), a use of the verb *hālak* found also in 5:14 (*lāleket*; cf. 30, 6:6; 9:10; 12). Granted, new terminology occurs in 6:9 for seeing (*mar'ēh enayīm*), and in 6:7 the mouth is called the object of toil, whereas 5:10–11, 16–18 have forms of the verb *'ākal*. More telling, 6:8 singles out sage and fool, which occurs nowhere else in 5:9–6:6.

Identifying citations of a biblical text within another one is just as difficult as isolating literary units. Does Qoheleth 5:14 quote Job 1:21, or does it simply appeal to common knowledge formulated as an axiom? Laurent's treatment of this issue openly acknowledges the complexity of answering this question. Noting the missing theological reference in Qoheleth's formulation ("The Lord has given and the Lord has taken; blessed be the name of the Lord," Job 1:21b), Laurent calls Qoheleth's version a veritable subversion of the Joban text. Similarly, Qoheleth's use of imagery for an aborted fetus is labeled cool hypothesis rather than Job's aggressive mode of discourse. Less violent and more figurative, Qoheleth's language is said to indicate a theological crisis, an unwillingness to mention God in the context of human coming and going into darkness. Incidentally, one wonders why Qoheleth never resorts to an equally powerful metaphor for life's ebb and flow, that of spilled water employed with such poignancy by the woman of Tekoa whom Joab instructed to persuade King David to pardon Absalom (2 Sam 14:14). Laurent's discussion of subtle changes in possible citations would have benefited from reading Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).

Perhaps Qoheleth's assessment of reality in 5:17–19 tilts toward pessimism, like the rest of the larger unit. Five features point in this direction: (1) the restrictive concept of portion, *heleq*; (2) the emphasis on toil; (3) the explicit reference to God's control (gift) over good things, along with the partitive "some"; (4) the divine affliction (?) that limits remembrance; and (5) the fourteen adverbs of negation. This understanding of *ma'aneh*

makes just as much sense in context as the later rabbinic nuance of “keeping occupied.” Why do so many interpreters refuse to let Qoheleth’s sober view of the human situation stand? Is 5:17–19 really the theological center of the book celebrating the joy of life, as Franz Josef Backhaus thinks (“*Denn Zeit und Zufall trifft sie alle*”: *Studien zur Komposition und zum Gottesbild im Buch Qohelet* [BBB 83; Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Anton Hain, 1993])? Although tempted by this positive view, Laurent acknowledges the text’s ambivalence.

The subtlety in Laurent’s argument and its irenic nature commend themselves to readers willing to penetrate the somewhat unusual realm of discourse. Although the book, like life, leaves desire unfulfilled, one certainly finds much in it that evokes joy.