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Koosed, Jennifer L.

(Per)Mutations of Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book

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Finally, an unabashedly postmodernist reading of Qohelet, bringing a breath of fresh air to Qohelet studies. (Be advised, this is not your father's Ecclesiastes commentary.) The first chapter, "Introducing Qohelet," sets out the methodological and thematic parameters of the work. Koosed departs from conventional critical attempts to secure the meaning of the text and to explain its contradictions. Her aim is to make the most of the tensions and instabilities of the book, working from a postmodern, feminist, deconstructionist perspective, informed by theorists such as Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Judith Butler.

Koosed's focus on the body is in tune with recent developments in poststructuralist critical theory, where the materiality of bodies and the webs of discourse they inhabit are inseparable—there is no access to one apart from the other. She is impressed with the capacity of Qohelet's language to create for readers, critical and naïve alike, the experience of a vividly realized persona, "Qohelet," an embodied character who speaks of physical pleasure and pain, who occupies a gendered and mortal body. For Koosed, the book of Qohelet, as it evokes and represents the body, *is* a body with a life of its own. Like the human body, Qohelet is a mutable, unstable corpus, a site of fractured, contingent constructions of identity and meaning.

Chapter 2, "Calling Qohelet Names," examines the effect of the fictional autobiographical genre in the book. The Solomonic guise, persistent first-person speech, and distinctive voice are key to creation of the character "Qohelet." Readers are drawn into a sense of "knowing Qohelet," forgetting that the autobiographical form is fictional, the speaking "I" is elusive, the "author" of the book is obscure and cannot be identified with the persona evoked in the text. The name "Qohelet" itself, defying explanation, typifies the tenuous

identity of the character. The variously identified layers of frame narrator, editor(s), author(s), speaking persona(e), and epilogist(s) begin to look like a hall of mirrors. Koosed wryly observes, “with Qohelet we are reading the ‘autobiography’ of an author who is writing using a persona who is writing under a pseudonym whose meaning we do not understand” (33). Daunting as it sounds, this is not for Koosed a hindrance to interpretation; it simply underscores her claim that the “author” sought by some types of critical scholarship is a mirage, an effect of text and reader. “The reader,” she says, “does not know who Qohelet is beyond the words on the page” (33)

Chapter 3, “Fragments of Qohelet’s Body,” traces how Qohelet’s corporeal language constructs a body in the book, with reference especially to the terms “heart” and “eye.” The former term, which occurs more frequently than *hebel* in Qohelet, represents more than a physical organ. It is key to the Hebrew notion of a thinking, feeling person. The eye is not only an organ of perception but also an instrument of judgment, knowledge, power, and desire.

Desire becomes the focus of Chapter 4, “Qohelet in Pleasure and Pain,” touching on the question of whether Qohelet is an optimistic or pessimistic book: Does it counsel joy or despair? Koosed demurs from taking sides in this debate. Instead, she emphasizes the oscillation between pleasure and pain in Qohelet, an unresolved tension that stirs desire in the reader. Qohelet’s reflections on pleasure, she argues, are ambiguous, and in their very ambiguity they create a space for the play of desire.

Koosed weaves through this discussion of pleasure in chapter 4 a series of first-person narrative fragments detailing a young woman’s experience in posing for a life drawing class. This mildly erotic intrusion—maybe not so mild—puts the reader in a quandary. Must I go back and forth between these intriguing interludes and the prosaic exposition? How do I identify with this narrative, with the viewer or the viewed? Might I not enjoy simply skipping the argument of the chapter for a moment and reading the narrative altogether? Or does the narrative really make the argument of the chapter? In its fractured form, this chapter takes the reader through the very sort of vacillations Koosed sees at work in Qohelet’s reflections on pleasure. One cannot say, moreover, whether these segments are really autobiographical or Koosed’s inscribing of a fictive persona. I take this as a play on the ambiguities of the autobiographical mode in Qohelet itself.

Chapter 5, “In Love and Gender Trouble,” addresses the notorious passage in Qoh 7:26–29 concerning the woman “more bitter than death.” Koosed surveys various ways in which commentators (usually male), have denied, minimized, or theologically co-opted the misogyny of this text. Yet looking again at Qoh 7 she finds the maleness embodied there to be not so simple and stable after all. The unemended text of Qoh 7:22a presents a

second-person addressee whose gender wavers between feminine (Ketib) and masculine (Qere). “Through this pronoun dysphoria,” Koosed says, “the coherent male audience slips” (83). The MT of Qoh 7:27 reads the impossible, “See, this I found [masculine], said [feminine] Qohelet.” Then there is the odd feature of Qohelet’s grammatically feminine name. “Qohelet,” Koosed says, “is a figure with an untranslatable and femininely formed name, and there are places in the text where feminine forms unexpectedly emerge, like slips of the tongue. Qohelet is more invested and entangled in the feminine than the condemnation of women in 7.26–29 first suggests” (83–84). Of course, there are satisfying text-critical and philological explanations for the oddities noted above. Koosed simply points out (playfully and transgressively) incongruities in the representation of gender in the text. “What,” she says, “is Qohelet trying to hide?” (83). Given the negative views of women in Qohelet, this gentle ridicule of nervousness about gender ambiguity (in the reader, not the author!) makes a serious point.

Chapter 6, “Decomposing Qohelet,” treats the theme of death. For Qohelet, Koosed says, death means the nullifying of memory and the leveling of difference. Noting that some recent commentators have despaired of identifying a coherent literary structure in Qohelet, she suggests that death itself is enacted in the shape of the book, decaying and disintegrating on its way to the ineluctable concluding depiction of death in Qoh 12:1–8. The chapter ends with an absorbing meditation on the status of mortality in Qohelet read alongside Derrida’s work *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Chapter 7, “Reading the Epilogue through this Body,” begins by surveying arguments about authorship and editorial activity related to the epilogue in Qoh 12:9–14. Koosed sees no reason to read the book as if the epilogue came from another hand, but her main point is that these debates are governed by untenable assumptions about unified meaning and coherent identity in texts. She observes also that the concluding emphasis on keeping the commandments (Qoh 12:13) entails, in addition to belief and ethical conduct, the observation of ritual, that is, bodily practice. The epilogue, therefore, does not contradict the rest of the book; it shows that radically skeptical religious questioning and ritual observance can coexist.

Once again in this final chapter Koosed interleaves autobiography with exposition. I imagine that this time the autobiography is authentic. The chapter includes a comparison of Qohelet’s epilogue with Elie Wiesel’s essay “The Death of My Father,” where Wiesel, reeling at the prospect of religious meaning in the wake of the Holocaust, nonetheless goes to the synagogue to say Kaddish for his father. Like Qohelet, Koosed says, Wiesel answers death’s ultimate negation of meaning with participation in ritual. Running through this discussion are the first-person reflections, sometimes anguished, sometimes joyful, of a woman, Jewish, observant, if ambivalently so, and uncertain of God. The last

lines of the autobiographical material leave unanswered the question, “Do I believe in G-d?”—except for a bodily gesture, a fleeting touch of the mezuzah at her door.

The book could be improved. There are traces of dissertationese, and at points Koosed seems uncertain how to achieve definitively the methodological departure she announces, writing as if she has one foot in Wellhausen’s study and the other in Derrida’s. Increasingly interpreters are taking up Eric Christianson’s proposal that the book of Qohelet contains elements of event and plot, that is, the makings of narrative, along with vivid portrayal of the sage’s character (*A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). Further exploration of narrative possibilities for reading Qohelet would greatly enhance her work on characterization. But none of this detracts from Koosed’s achievement in this theoretically sophisticated, provocative reading of Qohelet. For this she is to be thanked and congratulated.