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#### BOOK REVIEW

Stuart Weeks. *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 541. New York: T. & T. Clark, 2012. xiv + 219 pp. Hdbk.

Stuart Weeks, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, is quickly becoming known as one of the world's leading authorities on Israelite wisdom literature. The present volume follows closely on the heels of his *Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (T. & T. Clark, 2010) and precedes a full commentary on Ecclesiastes. Weeks states that he wrote *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* "as a way to escape the *minutiae* of the text," and readers will be thankful that he did—the product is a highly readable, carefully researched, and thought-provoking monograph on the highly contested relationship between Ecclesiastes and scepticism. However, much like Ecclesiastes itself, the path Weeks takes to get to his final destination (Qohelet's "scepticism," pp. 132–69) is long and winding, full of delightful surprises and many stops along the way to ponder Qohelet (pp. 12–43), his world (pp. 44–76), living in that world (pp. 77–103), and observation and illusion in Qohelet (pp. 104–31).

In discussing the person(a) "Qohelet" (pp. 12–43) Weeks outlines the issues involved in the relationship between Qohelet and Ecclesiastes, ultimately arguing that "rather than thinking in terms of pseudonymity or authorial attribution at all, we might do much better to compare [the relationship between Qohelet and Ecclesiastes to] the modern first-person novel" (p. 18 n. 11). This is an altogether novel way to solve the problem regarding the relationship between the book and its main character, but it is not without difficulties itself, such as the fact that ancient texts were not written as modern-day novels, which leaves this

comparison open to the criticism that it is anachronistic. Nevertheless, Weeks argues forcefully that, whatever the relationship between Qohelet and the author of Ecclesiastes, it is *certain* that Solomon is not the author. In fact, Weeks goes a step further by arguing that Qohelet does not even *intend* to relate himself to Solomon—save for Eccl 1:1 and 1:12—*contra* most modern interpretations, even those that oppose Solomonic authorship. While this claim is somewhat extraordinary, Weeks defends it well, pointing out that Qohelet “notably does not boast about great public works or achievements—the meat and drink of royal inscriptions: the things which he creates are repeatedly and specifically ‘for me’ . . . and they include nothing which serves any obvious public function” (p. 26). Furthermore, Weeks points out that Solomon’s luxury, described in 1 Kings, “finds little echo in Qohelet’s story, and the sources of Solomon’s wealth are quite different from Qohelet’s” (p. 28). This is important for Weeks’s argument because he rightly points out that the reader must be aware of who Qohelet is in order to interpret the book appropriately.

Just as important as knowing who Qohelet is is understanding “Qohelet’s World” (pp. 44–76). In this chapter Weeks characterizes Qohelet’s world as something altogether brief, stating that for Qohelet “the limits of our perception cause us to proclaim the commonplace unique, and the infinitely old as new” (p. 56). Weeks’s unique contribution in this regard is that he sees Qohelet *not* as saying everything is finite, but that human perspective is significantly limited by an all too brief life. Weeks goes on to explore the business aspect of Qohelet’s world, which, he argues, leaves its mark on the entire book—the disconnect between actions and rewards in business weighs heavily on Qohelet, causing him to question whether there is any real benefit in this life. What is significant in this chapter for understanding how Weeks reads Ecclesiastes is his insistence that the basic human problem for Qohelet is the inability of humans to control anything, along with the significant possibility that humans will misunderstand what they experience.

“Living in Qohelet’s World” (pp. 77–103) examines the way that Qohelet encourages his readers to go about life in this world

in which humans know too little and understand even less. Weeks explores Qohelet's view of pleasure with refreshing nuance, pointing out that it is a gift of God for which humans should always strive. Weeks also points out that material wealth and pleasure are entirely distinct for Qohelet, so that one can "have all the outward trappings of divine blessing—prosperity, children and long life—but lack the inward gift of enjoyment" (p. 81). Nevertheless, in the uncertain world that Qohelet paints for his readers, enjoyment is the "only sort of gain which Qohelet can identify" (p. 102). Interestingly, Weeks argues that Qohelet is supremely self-centered, having "little interest in how humans can help each other through this complicated life . . . . Notions of duty and altruism have little place in a discourse which seems rarely to escape Qohelet's concern with the maximization of personal benefit" (p. 103). Because of this aspect of Qohelet, Weeks warns readers to take Qohelet's advice with a grain of salt—there may in fact be another way to cope with this unjust life that does not rely so heavily on personal enjoyment.

Next, Weeks examines a crucial part of his argument: "Observation and Illusion" (pp. 104–31). Here he outlines his view of Qohelet's observations of life, namely that human observation is largely illusory. In order to argue his case, Weeks spends the majority of the chapter examining the meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, ultimately arguing that "illusion" is the best English gloss for the term, though he is careful to note that even this is not sufficiently able to capture all of *hebel*'s nuance. Building off of this thesis, Weeks goes on to argue that the basic problem for Qohelet is poor perception: if humans had antennas like television sets from the 1980s, then one would always be having to adjust them, adding aluminum foil and the like in a vain attempt to pick up some sort of signal. Similarly, humans simply are unable to perceive the world as it really is, resulting in an unclear picture of reality.

After a captivating 130 pages, Weeks finally brings the reader to the main event: "Qohelet as a Sceptic" (pp. 132–69). Given the title of the book, one would expect this chapter to come earlier, if not to form the nexus around which the book is written. And while it may not be so obvious that this chapter is the

book's climax, the careful reader will note that Weeks's thesis requires significant build-up to bolster his argument. Therefore, while one would likely ask while reading the first four chapters, "What about scepticism?" it would be beneficial to remember that Weeks is getting there. It just takes a bit of time. Weeks's answer to the question of Qohelet's relationship to scepticism comes as no surprise: "It is not scepticism or even pessimism that characterizes Qohelet's ideas, then, so much as a sense that humans are missing the point, and he presents himself as a man seeking to steer others away from the false expectations and disappointment which he experienced himself, by opening their eyes to the reality of their situation" (p. 169).

Stuart Weeks is an excellent writer. *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* is worth a read if for nothing else than the pleasure of reading, something hardly ever to be said about academic monographs. His translation of the text of Ecclesiastes keeps the book fresh and interesting for those intimately familiar with the biblical text, even if his translations seem at times to be a bit of a stretch. Furthermore, the argument of the book is quite compelling, as Weeks offers a fresh take on such an ancient work, even sneaking in an interesting section on the meaning of *hebel* in which he manages to propose a new rendering for the word—all under the auspices of a discussion of the relationship between Ecclesiastes and scepticism.

This brings me to the first of my complaints. The book is short—only 196 pages plus the bibliography and indexes—and yet it takes Weeks nearly all of those pages to finally get around to discussing scepticism. Granted, much of the work is spent building his argument and offering support for what is to come in the final chapter, but perhaps the title of the book should reflect the relatively minor role that Qohelet's relationship with scepticism actually plays. My only other lament is that this excellent monograph, due to its price of US \$130.00, is likely to remain unread by a large segment of the population.

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