

Jennifer Barbour. *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xv + 225 pp. \$135.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-965782-7.

Reviewed by Jennifer L. Koosed (Albright College)

Published on H-Judaic (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



The History-Haunted Meditations of Qohelet

Jennie Barbour's *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet* provides a new perspective on the issue of history in Qohelet. The scholarly consensus has been that historical reference is completely absent from Qohelet, a book that does not seem to be interested in either the figures or the events of ancient Israel. Barbour challenges this consensus. She argues that "history haunts Ecclesiastes" (p. 3). Barbour is not, however, trying to revive some Jewish and Christian traditional exegesis which assumes Solomonic authorship and imposes an allegorical and historicizing interpretation on the book. Rather, Barbour proposes that the author of Qohelet (highly educated and literate) is drawing on a wealth of textual traditions and a deep cultural memory that has been shaped by the experience of the Babylonian destruction and exile. This experience, then, leaves its mark on Qohelet's meditations as well.

Barbour's thesis is explained in her introduction, which also discusses her methodology. Her argument depends upon intertextuality and allusion rather than any conscious and intentional appropriation of past texts and traditions. In this way, as Barbour herself notes, her method is beholden to the theories of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Mikhail Bakhtin, although as her notes and bibliography indicate, Barbour never reads or engages these philosophers directly. Instead, she applies a method of biblical allusion as outlined primarily by Richard Hayes and Benjamin Sommer. Barbour also employs the ideas of collective memory as described by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Although there are

problems with her methodology, I found Barbour's proposal about the presence and influence of history in Qohelet original and provocative.

One of her strongest arguments is her reading of the royal persona that the author creates to speak the words of Qohelet (chapter 1). Noting some of the features of the narrative voice that have long puzzled commentators—the name "Qohelet" is strange, the speaker seems to be referencing Solomon yet Solomon's name is not explicit, and the narrative voice both embraces and distances itself from the royal persona—Barbour argues that all can be explained by understanding "Qohelet" to be a composite of Israel's kings cast in the mold of Solomon. The speaker is a "royal archetype: not Everyman so much as *Everyking*" (p. 26). Barbour argues that the book is primarily drawing on Israelite literary traditions (instead of ancient Near Eastern genres), especially descriptions of royal activity found in Chronicles. She demonstrates this idea through a meticulous mapping of the rich intertextual web that stretches between Chronicles and Ecclesiastes 2:4-10. It is this composite king, drawn from Israel's memory and its literary traditions, whose consciousness shapes the whole narrative; it is this history of Israel's kings that echoes through all of Qohelet's meditations. Thus Barbour builds her own argument about the presence of historical reflection in the book of Ecclesiastes, while also presenting alternative answers to the perennial questions about Qohelet's genre, use of the royal persona, and unusual name.

The second chapter reads two of the book's opening poems (1:4-11 and 3:1-15) as musings on Israel's historical experience. Qohelet's overarching concern is "all" that has been done "under heaven" and "under the sun" (1:13-14). These human deeds are not just private and individual but also public and, thus, in the realm of history. In particular, these opening poems are full of allusion to both the prophetic understanding of the failure of Israel's kings (especially as recorded in Isaiah) and also to Chronicles's narrative of the same. These points culminate in the primary argument of chapter 3: ultimately, Qohelet is a critique of kingship. Qohelet is part of a tradition that can be seen throughout Second Temple Judaism (4QMMT, Daniel 9, Baruch 1-3, etc.) of understanding Israel's national tragedies as a result of the failure of its kings. In this way, Qohelet's anguish is not just existential, but is also "an exercise in historical despair" (p. 104).

Chapter 4 examines two of the vignettes in Qohelet (5:12-16 and 6:1-6) to focus more specifically on what Barbour argues are allusions to the Babylonian exile. Qohelet is not "cut off" from the historical reflection evident in most other Second Temple texts but is invariably caught up in the language of the exile as he also examines other moments of human misery. It is here that Barbour more explicitly uses the language of "haunting," building on Halbwachs's ideas of social memory and drawing on Jan Assmann's work on Moses. Chapter 5 regards the closing poem in Ecclesiastes (11:9-12:7) as a city-lament, describing the fall of Jerusalem. As throughout, Barbour is not reviving traditional exegesis (both Jerome and Qohelet Rabbah understood the final poem in this way), but is arguing that this destruction became a template through which all other tragedies were considered and understood.

Not all of Barbour's arguments are equally convincing. Her ghost of history is sometimes just a shadow that not everyone will see. In many ways, weaknesses

in interpretation are due to faults in methodology. Barbour claims to be more influenced by a poststructuralist understanding of intertextuality; yet, ultimately, she is making a historical argument about Qohelet. Even though Barbour manages to avoid the more egregious misuses of the term "intertextuality" frequently found in biblical scholarship (where "intertextuality" relies on the dating of texts and the intentions of authors), she is still trying to locate the site of intertextuality in a particular historical moment, rather than in the experiences of the reader. By attempting to straddle historically oriented and reader-oriented approaches, sometimes Barbour is not sufficiently either.

In order to capitalize on some of the real strengths of her analysis, Barbour's work needs to be more conversant in psychoanalytical and poststructuralist theories that also explore trauma, memory, and language through the framework of haunting. Instead of a term coined by Assmann (p. 110), "haunting" is an idea that emerges in several places, especially in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994; original French 1993). Although not referenced directly, it is widely believed that Derrida is influenced by the psychoanalytical work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who propose in *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994; original French 1987) that trauma can be transmitted as a "phantom" across generations via cultural memory. Abraham and Torok, in turn, were drawing on Freud's work on trauma and memory (albeit with significant differences). Barbour is well read in terms of biblical scholarship; her book, however, is lacking direct engagement with, even knowledge of, psychoanalytical and poststructuralist theories.

Whereas the theoretical underpinnings of the book could be stronger, Barbour does provide an example of the importance of textual allusion and its relevance to reading. The idea that the traumas of Israel's history leave their traces in Qohelet's text adds another aspect to this multifaceted and endlessly complex book.

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Citation: Jennifer L. Koosed. Review of Barbour, Jennifer, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

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