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Cazeaux, Jacques

Le partage de minuit: Essai sur la Genèse

Lectio divina

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In *Le partage de minuit*, Jacques Cazeaux takes us on a voyage through the book of Genesis that he himself compares to taking a raft across the Pacific, which allows one to take note of each wave as it passes. The implied analogy with the Kontiki expedition is intriguing, as the book has many of the strengths and weaknesses of Thor Heyerdahl's exploit in crossing from Peru to Polynesia on a balsawood raft in the attempt to demonstrate his anthropological theory of the links between the civilizations of South America and of the Pacific Islands. Cazeaux also offers a perilous but exciting voyage driven by a controversial thesis that disdains the obvious means of navigation and communication. Although the overall thesis may not be sustainable, he undoubtedly offers a wealth of incidental insights.

The thesis that underlies the book is one that Cazeaux has set out in a series of works that have appeared in the same series as the present one, namely *Lectio divina* from Les Edition du Cerf in Paris. That series title should alert us that this is not an academic monograph in the usual sense but a book designed for intelligent lay readers who have a Christian commitment to the revelatory power of the text. This is one reason for the, at first surprising, absence of a bibliography and the lack of reference to the scholarly or any

other literature on Genesis, which is confined to one mention of von Rad in a footnote. Other than that, as with Heyerdahl, there is a renunciation of the conventional aids and the accumulated experience of modern scholarship.

This is both annoying and refreshing. It is clear from Cazeaux's work and from general mentions of the scholarly literature that he is well read and fully competent in the skills of exegesis and that he is more than capable of mounting an interesting scholarly defense of some of his more original readings. He does engage in discussion of Hebrew roots, but for a non-Hebrew reading audience and unsurprisingly spends no time on textual variants. For a scholarly readership, the lack of explicit engagement with other scholars is frustrating and, more importantly, tends to obscure where his real originality lies. For those who are not biblical scholars, this may make things easier, but it also conceals the range of interpretations that are already available and reinforces the sense that biblical scholarship as such is irrelevant. Much of it is, of course, but not all. It may be one thing to lay aside the historical critics, but there is little indication of the range and sophistication of narratological and literary studies on Genesis. This may partly be due to the distinctive development of narrative criticism in francophone biblical scholarship which, to Anglo-Saxon readers, may seem to be rather narrowly defined and formalist, but even that tradition is not acknowledged.

What is refreshing, however, is that Cazeaux is able to shape his reading without being sidetracked by having to summarize the opinions of others and give an opinion on well-worn but often inconclusive arguments. As far as I can judge, his writing manages to be both lucid and evocative, which is an unusual and enviable combination. Somewhat in his defense, the lack of references does reflect his working assumptions about the text. He is defiantly a reader of the final form of the biblical text who regards the Bible as a whole, by which he means the Christian canon, as a single work of literature, although with a complex history of compilation behind it. That said, he is also clear that the Hebrew Scriptures have to be read in their own right, without an explicit Christian context. He acknowledges and draws on the results of critical scholarship, but it principally serves to confirm for him that questions of historicity and origins are not the point of biblical reading.

His model of the reading situation is the Jewish father recounting the text to his son. The text is read in the context of a community that presupposes its contents. In that sense, every reading is a rereading. As he points out more than once, the story of creation as told in Gen 1 is not a new story to its readers and never has been. This allows the author and the reader to concentrate on details of the text but also to bring the memory of future events, so to speak, to bear on any narrative. Indeed, he sees the whole of the Hebrew

Bible as the result of reflection in postexilic times on the lessons to be gleaned for the next generation from the errors of Israel's history.

The great mistake was the monarchy, in his view. This was what the compilers of Genesis and of the whole canon were concerned to drive home. His reading is thus driven by a conviction that their message to the future sons of Israel is that power is something to be relinquished voluntarily, not grasped. Indeed, his reading encompasses the whole Christian canon, which shows that to be truly in the image of God, as Gen 1 claims, human beings should imitate the renunciation of power shown by Christ. This is what David and his dynasty failed to do. In a memorable phrase, Cazeaux describes Genesis as "the cure presented before the disease" of the monarchy (25). He also describes it as "slow prophecy," inculcating through its leisurely narratives the same warning that in the prophets becomes a stark rebuke.

The two pillars of the monarchy, as he sees it, are inheritance through the firstborn and the claim to possession of the land. These are seen at their most stark in the genealogies and censuses that punctuate the text. Throughout Genesis, Cazeaux maintains, these two pillars are systematically undermined by the sidelining of the firstborn and the opposition of the "soil" to the "land." Much of the originality of his readings comes from the working out of these hypotheses, controversial as they are, rather as Heyerdahl's now generally discredited theories of the origin of Polynesian civilization nevertheless give the impetus for his epic voyage. Cazeaux is not the first to argue that Genesis is an oblique commentary on the monarchy, of course, although that would not be clear to a casual reader. Whether, however, problems over primogeniture and land tenure are to be linked so firmly to the monarchy is another question. Inheritance and survival are universal problems for the patriarchal male, monarch or not, and the model of father reading to son Cazeaux proposes raises them on the plane of the text, again a dimension that he does not explore. The danger always lurks of shaping the text to fit the hypothesis rather than the other way around, and alternative explanations are not generally considered and weighed against his proposals. In his defense, the reader is certainly at liberty to make those comparisons, although the lack of references does mean that only those already competent in the scholarly arguments will be able to do this.

To draw together all the incidental insights of the book would be beyond the scope of this review. Fortunately, however, Cazeaux himself acknowledges that his readers are unlikely to read the book straight through but are more likely to seek out particular passages and incidents. This means that he is unashamed in repeating his main points as necessary and that he provides summaries at strategic points throughout. This is not only convenient for his French-speaking readers but is also a boon for those readers whose less than perfect French may make the prospect of tackling a book of this length rather daunting.

In what follows I propose just to indicate the structure that Cazeaux uncovers in the book in order to give some idea of its flavor. Cazeaux sees Genesis as setting up a series of enigmas to which it then provides a key. The creation of Adam is an enigma that he sees answered in the last words of Joseph. One of the stronger points of his reading, in my opinion, is that it does give some account for why the Joseph story is so prominent and how it can be read as a suitable culmination of Genesis when, we know, Joseph is not the bearer of the promise or ancestor of the royal line. For Cazeaux, that is the point. Joseph actually provides a better model for Israel “in the image of God” than the monarchy ever does. Joseph who pardons his brothers is a foil for both Cain and for David and Solomon, whose revenge on their enemies leads to destruction. Joseph’s reuniting of his brothers, especially Judah, gives a model for the union of northern and southern kingdoms that is never truly achieved in the land. It is Joseph who provides the condition for Israel to be tillers of the soil in Egypt, as they were first called to be in Eden. The relationship to the soil, not the land, is the mark of Israel. As for the land itself, Joseph only reenters Canaan after his death, and this relates to the centrality of the Sabbath in Cazeaux’s account. The two versions of the Ten Commandments give two different theologies of the Sabbath, but this only serves to reinforce its centrality. On the seventh day, God relinquishes power, thus giving the model that Joseph follows, but the kings do not. Joseph’s sons never inherit his power. For Joseph, Canaan is the land of rest, of the Sabbath of death. Joseph’s story is thus a consolation to the exiles, which Cazeaux links to Jer 29. Israel can be Israel and allow each Israelite to be “in the image of God” while in Egypt.

There are many points of detail one might want to argue over with Cazeaux here, but this kind of reading in terms of the broad themes of the whole canon is what he does well. It also allows him to make some very illuminating suggestions along the way on matters of detail in the text. The strengths and weaknesses of the work are of a piece. Anyone working on the literary analysis of Genesis could do worse than to turn to the *Table des matières* of the book (there is no index) and seek out Cazeaux’s views. As with Heyerdahl’s adventure, the destination is reached and much is seen from a unique perspective on the voyage. It may not be necessary to undertake the whole voyage along with the gallant captain, and the success of the venture proves little about the truth of the initial hypothesis. There we have to look into the wider scholarly literature, just as anthropologists use DNA testing to show the Asian rather than American links of the Polynesians despite Heyerdahl’s feat. However, there is still much to learn from and enjoy in the account of the attempt.