CHAPTER TWELVE

ENOC H AND WISDOM: REFLECTIONS ON THE CHARACTER
OF THE BOOK OF PARABLES

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I

The writings incorporated in the *Ethiopic Book of Enoch*, although traditionally classified as apocalypses, possess a number of features that raise the question of their relationship to the wisdom literature and the wisdom tradition. Over the last few years there have been repeated attempts to answer this question, but the Enochic writings have of course also formed part of the evidence in the discussion of the much wider issue of the relationship of “apocalyptic” to “wisdom”—both highly ambiguous concepts—ever since the publication fifty years ago of the second volume of Gerhard von Rad’s *Theologie des Alten Testaments* in which he argued that wisdom was the real matrix from which apocalyptic literature originates.¹ Of the work of that intervening period, reference should be made here, in view of what follows, to the influential study by Michael Stone published in 1976 of the lists of astronomical and meteorological phenomena that occur in some of the apocalypses including 1 Enoch. He argued that the lists provided summaries of the information revealed to the seers and occurred at the high point of the visionary experience or as a later summary of what was revealed, and that the contents of the lists often had their origins in wisdom sources.²

In more recent years a number of scholars have attempted to answer the question of the relationship of the early Enochic writings to the

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wisdom literature by comparing the Enochic writings to Sirach. The most detailed study of this kind was undertaken by Randal Argall who compared the themes of revelation, creation and judgement in 1 Enoch and Sirach and argued that they made use of common literary forms to express views that could be seen to be similar. Thus he argued that in both traditions wisdom has a heavenly origin, is brought from heaven by a revealer figure (Enoch, Wisdom), is embodied in a book (Enoch’s writings, the Torah), and has a life-giving function; that in both traditions the obedience of creation to the creator is seen to provide a lesson for humans, and the created order is viewed as constituted for judgement; finally that both traditions envisage an eschatological judgement, although they have different views about the nature of this judgement. Throughout Argall is concerned to note the differences as well as the similarities in the understanding of the concepts that he studied. He suggests that Ben Sira and the authors of the early Enochic writings may have been aware of one another’s views and may have formulated their views in part in opposition to one another, and he contrasts, for example, the condemnation in the Epistle of false interpretation of the Torah by those regarded as rival sages (98:9–99:2; 99:14) with the condemnation in Sirach of those who abandon the Torah—that is, as it was interpreted by Ben Sira (41:8).

Other scholars have taken further the idea of opposition between the authors of Sirach and of the early Enochic writings. Ben Wright, for example, has discussed this issue in a number of articles, and he thinks that “one can reasonably conclude that Ben Sira and the Book of Watchers and possibly the Astronomical Book (in its present form) represent groups of Jews who, at the least, know each other’s argu-

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3 See also Nickelsburg 1998. Nickelsburg argues that central to the Enochic writings is the belief that wisdom originated with God and can only be obtained through revelation. This wisdom was revealed to Enoch when he ascended to heaven, and he wrote it down in books that he gave to Methuselah and his children to hand on to future generations (1998, 127). For Nickelsburg, within the Enochic writings “revealed wisdom is a comprehensive category that includes revelations about God’s will expressed in commandments and laws, about the blessings and curses that will come to those who obey or disobey, and about the world in which these are enacted” (1998, 128). The revelation of wisdom through the Enochic writings can be contrasted with the identification of wisdom with the Torah in Sir 24; Bar 3:9–4:4. Cf. Wright 2007, 162–63.

4 Argall 1995.


6 Argall 1995, 203–8, 238, 245–47; cf. 78.