

The Sword and the Stylus is a broad and rich survey of the history of Wisdom Literature by a scholar who has written extensively and thoughtfully in that field. He has often approached Wisdom texts with a theological orientation, but here he undertakes a social-historical investigation, examining the “realistic dimensions of history and social construction” rather than “philosophical idealism” (3). Wisdom grew out of specific historical events and social circumstances. “The disregard of historical and social contexts,” Perdue warns, “leads to the distortion of the literature and deposits it into an impenetrable isolation” (3). For the most part, Wisdom was cultivated and taught in the schools and largely served the needs of the royal courts, and its authors and tradents were learned sages mostly in its employ.

An extensive prolegomenon takes in an extraordinary sweep of some 3,000 years, extending over the entire Near East: Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Aram, Israel, Egypt and even Greece. Wisdom is vividly described as an “act of the imagination” that refers to “the ability of the sage to construe through his/her inventiveness the existence and character of God, the nature of reality, and the moral character of sapiential life that lead to well-being and the constitution of the larger orders of reality in both society and the cosmos” (4). The sages set forth a worldview based on cosmic and societal order and believed in retributive justice, but not as an absolute (6).

After the prolegomenon, Perdue turns to a series of chapters on different Wisdom texts. Each book (or corpus) is associated, rather schematically, with a particular time period: Proverbs with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah; Job (very problematically) with the Neo-Babylonian empire; Wisdom Psalms with the Persian Empire; Qoheleth with the Ptolemaic Empire; Ben Sira with the Seleucid Empire; and the Wisdom of Solomon with the Roman Empire. He then turns to the “continuing streams” of Pseudepigrapha, Qumran and rabbinic texts. The extension of Wisdom into late Hellenistic times is justified and welcome, and the Qumran sapiential texts and Pirke Avot certainly are affiliated with the earlier genre. However, the coherence of Wisdom as a literary genre breaks down with the inclusion the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the Midrashim and (in spite of some mixing) apocalyptic. Though Perdue discusses the social features of the Dead Sea scrolls as a whole, he does not probe the strange recognition in 4QInstruction that
the reader may be poor ("if you are poor"). This concession is, I think, unique in Wisdom Literature.

The weakness of the book is its lack of clear definitions of key concepts. Wisdom is defined as “a discipline that fashions human character, ranging from thinking critically to disciplined study, to spiritual meditation, to ethical behavior” (9). This is reasonable as a definition of the faculty of wisdom but is too broad to define Wisdom Literature. Perdue’s survey of Wisdom includes not only the specifically didactic texts but also laments of a sufferer, such as the Ugaritic text RS 25.460 (37), Greek philosophical and rhetorical works, the mantic arts, and rabbinic haggadic and halakic compositions, including the Mishnah. It is true that the ancients would have called all this and more “wisdom,” but does it cohere in any way into a genre worth discussing as a literary or intellectual category?

The concept of “sage” is not so much defined as described with great sweep. The sages were “professional officials, administrators, counselors, and teachers in the royal, temple and gubernatorial administrations and schools,” including the entire range of counselors, officers, military officials and “principals who directed schools,” as well as fathers, mothers, teachers and intelligent, clever women (105). Moreover, sages are sometimes conflated with scribes, who have no closer connection to Wisdom than to any other genre. To be sure, members of the above-mentioned groups could be called wise, as could anyone who applied intelligence, skills, or knowledge in professional and personal life, but that does not place them among the authors or even the audiences of Wisdom Literature.

The strengths of this book are the solidity and breadth of its learning, its temperate and middle-of-the-road interpretations of the books studied, and the clarity of its writing. Perdue successfully establishes his main conclusion that “[i]ndications from these texts point to the changing social locations, roles, and functions of the scribes and sages, the literary forms and structures of their texts, and the specificity of their diverse theologies” (412). The book is to be recommended as a survey of Wisdom Literature that joins attention to the thought of the Wisdom texts to consideration of the social conditions underlying and motivating their production.

Turning to Scribes, Sages, and Seers, though its essays are all valuable in themselves, they are too diverse in subject and goal to cohere into a book that addresses the editor’s leading question: “Who were the sages, scribes, and seers who composed this literature?” (vii). By “this literature,” Perdue means Wisdom Literature, but the studies in this volume give attention to a great variety of genres. In fact, there is no reason to associate the scribes with Wisdom more than any other genre.

While “scribe” is a fairly stable concept, the authors of these essays understand “wise” and “sage” in different, not entirely compatible, ways. Although Perdue apparently uses the word “sage” to render חכם (3), the חכמים did not form a group and were not in a single “professional social class” with the scribes, nor is