Hindy Najman, Jean-Sébastian Rey, and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar (eds.)


Several recent publications have begun to criticize the category of “wisdom” or “sapiential literature” (see the collection of essays edited by Mark Sneed, Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies [SBL Press, 2015], as well as Stuart Weeks, An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature [T&T Clark, 2010]). For many of these scholars, the category artificially and arbitrarily draws boundaries delineating “wisdom” from “non-wisdom,” and as such ignores the diversity and complexity of these traditions in favor of a (deceptively) clear heuristic dichotomy. The editors of this monograph, a collection of twelve essays presented in Metz in October 2014, carefully echo this growing unease in a work which claims to “problematize and challenge current conceptions of the category of wisdom” while reconsidering “the scope and breadth of ancient Jewish wisdom” (1).

A majority of the contributions in this volume follow this general trajectory, comparatively assessing cases where wisdom interacts with, appropriates, or is appropriated by other literary techniques, themes, and traditions. The essay by James Kugel is emblematic in this regard. Kugel evaluates how the concept of “divine long-range planning” (i.e., God’s perfect, all-inclusive arrangement of creation; see p. 31) is exposited in Jewish wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs, Job) but becomes a prevailing theme in later Jewish literature as well (e.g., Daniel, Jubilees). Kugel concludes by showing how these later authors broadly adapted this feature of “wisdom theology” (42) for new purposes outside its original sapiential context.

Several other contributions concerning texts composed during the Second Temple period follow the same methodological course. The work of Samuel Adams examines the relationship between prophecy and wisdom in Ben Sira. For Adams, although Ben Sira incorporates several literary motifs and concepts from the prophets, and even exhorts readers to study the prophets, at no point does Ben Sira assume the guise of a mantic prophet. Taking a much different approach to Ben Sira, Benjamin Wright assesses the relationship of the work to Hellenism with a particular concern for the author’s acquaintance with the Greek language and paideia. Turning to the Serek ha-Yahad and the Musar le-Mevin, Arjen Bakker makes the interesting argument that both texts fuse the concepts of wisdom and holiness together, a feature which Bakker links to their shared emphasis upon continuous study of revealed wisdom as modeled by angels. Along these lines, Bakker suggests that both the Serek and the Musar view their respective recipients of heavenly wisdom as beings transformed by...
their access to holy knowledge. The essay by Patrick Pouchelle examines how Pss. Sol. 5 integrates literary features of the Psalms, argumentative strategies like those found in popular proverbs, and Prov 30:8. According to Pouchelle, such features suggest that the author of Pss. Sol. 5 was “educated in a sapiential way” (154).

Moving beyond the Second Temple period, two chapters analyze the relationship between tractate Avot and older Jewish sapiential literature. In the first, Maurice Gilbert examines how Pirqe Avot shows the influence of these sapiential traditions in its successive recording of the sayings of the masters and its use of tripartite literary structures. The second, by Ishay Rosen-Zvi, analyzes Mishnah Avot and its relationship to wisdom. After exploring rabbinic understandings of wisdom, most notably its stressed identification with torah, Rosen-Zvi proposes that Avot represents a mishnaic explanation of torah through the appropriation of sapiential literary forms and themes.

Taking a different methodological approach, two other chapters focus on somewhat underexplored features of Jewish wisdom. Elisa Uusimäki investigates how Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Qumran scrolls exert “formative” influence upon the “spiritual formation and exercises” of their readers (58). According to Uusimäki, while these texts certainly express deep pedagogical concerns, religious practices such as contemplation, prayer, and self-control must also be recognized as integral components of the educational process. The last chapter, authored by Gideon Bohak, surveys an assortment of divinatory manuals (e.g., astrological, brontological, meteorological) from several caches (e.g., the Qumran scrolls, the Cairo Genizah). In doing so, Bohak advocates that these texts should be viewed as testimonies to the pervasive role of mantic wisdom among Jews of the Second Temple period and late antiquity alike.

Finally, three of the essays in this volume, in some shape or form, readdress the category of “wisdom literature.” This problem is most expressly engaged in the chapter by Stuart Weeks, which critically analyzes the historical background of the category. Weeks goes on to propose a more “nominalist” terminological approach which emphasizes distinct similarities to specific texts, literary techniques, and motifs, as opposed to an ill-defined and amorphous concept of wisdom (23). In his contribution, Matthew Goff offers a fresh assessment of 4QInstruction as wisdom literature. After exploring its pedagogical features, the elevated role of the mevin, and the rather modest social setting of the text, Goff presents a nuanced assessment of the value of the genre of wisdom en route to his pragmatic use of the category as a literary marker reflecting the recognizable instructional and pedagogical nature of 4QInstruction. Lastly, Stephanié Anthonioz’s chapter aims to explore how the