BOOK REVIEWS


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If one had to choose a book of the Bible for its theological merits, Proverbs would probably not be high on the list. Nevertheless, interpreters are finding in this modest corpus a wealth of theological resources. Moreover, Proverbs has prompted in recent scholarship a divergent array of interpretations. The commentaries of Fox and Perdue are no exceptions.

Some words of caution are in order before comparing these two commentaries. Like apples and oranges, the commentaries exhibit deep differences in style and format that make a fair comparison well nigh impossible. Perdue’s volume in the Interpretation series targets an ecclesial audience, including pastors who would make use of such a commentary for preaching and teaching. Fox’s volume in the Anchor Bible series is more technical in its approach (It must be said, however, that Fox’s writing is refreshingly lucid). Much attention, for example, is devoted to rehearsing past arguments. Fox provides his own translation, replete with textual notes (His forte is particularly evident in discussing the Greek and Syriac witnesses). Consonant with the Interpretation series, Perdue works primarily with the NRSV. Most decisively, Perdue’s commentary covers all of Proverbs in little more than half the space that Fox uses to concentrate on the first nine chapters.

With those caveats in mind, fruitful comparison is to be had. I will focus exclusively on how each commentator frames and identifies the theological significance of Proverbs.

Perdue takes pains to highlight the theological implications of Proverbs in its original context and for the church. He observes that the sages, contrary to other biblical traditions, eschewed the national traditions of salvation history (p. 48). Israel’s sages were more ecumenical than its prophets and historians. Wisdom provides a “universal framework” for moral and theological
reflection that highlights God's creative and sustaining activity, as well as mystery and ambiguity in the world. The sages revealed in the exercise of the imagination to discern patterns of cosmic and social order. "Sapiental theology" exemplifies a manner of moral and theological reflection that steers away from ethical absolutes and divine fiat (pp. 6, 43). Yet for all its open-ended nature, Perdue contends, the moral instruction of Proverbs promulgates a generally "static view of world order" (p. 12).

Regarding the character of God, Perdue finds much theological merit in the "feminization of wisdom," for it highlights the "feminine character and activity of God," thereby providing a "more rounded, inclusive representation of God in faith" (p. 51). The metaphor of Woman Wisdom, in turn, offers a "concrete, albeit literary, form of divine immanence in the world" (p. 85). In the image of the "tree of life" (Prov 3:18), Wisdom serves as a "symbol for fertility goddesses" such as Asherah. Incomparably valuable, Wisdom is "like a goddess of life" (p. 103). Woman Wisdom and her nemesis, Woman Folly, are portrayed in Proverbs 9 as "divine rivals who seek to rule the human heart and the larger creation" (p. 155). Perdue's reading of Wisdom, in short, is charged with mythos.

Both Fox and Perdue agree that Proverbs has all to do with character formation and that the perennial crux in Prov 8:30 bears the image of a growing child (contra NRSV). Beyond that, however, all similarities vanish. Fox offers a thoroughly demythologized portrayal of proverbial wisdom in order to accentuate the ethos of the sages' wisdom. What Fox's commentary may lack in theological extrapolation is more than compensated for his engaging style and keen literary insights, which stem in part from his dialogue with rabbinic literature. Fox finds in Proverbs an entirely innovative profile of wisdom as an ethical virtue (p. 29). (But see Deut 4:5-8.) Whereas knowledge (or "fear") of God constitutes the goal of learning and God is considered the source of wisdom, nowhere in Proverbs is wisdom considered a medium of revelation and personified wisdom is no goddess. "Woman Wisdom" is a trope for the moral instructions of the sages, while the "Strange Woman" or "Lady Folly" simply denotes another man's wife, not a fertility cult or the kind of exogamy forbidden in Ezra and Nehemiah. The "Strange Woman" embodies the "menace of sexual trespass," while the Wisdom's "godlike" attributes are only a literary guise (p. 354). Fox finds feminist readings of personified wisdom and folly to be woefully overstated. The "Strange Woman" profiled in Proverbs 7 is no monstrously mythic figure, but a "sad and shabby" seductress (p. 254). Wisdom is not an active agent of creation (she "plays" rather than works in Proverbs 8), yet represents no static body of knowledge. Amid her