

Perdue, Leo G. *The Sword and the Stylus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. x + 502 pp. Paper, \$38.00.

Leo Perdue introduces his reconstruction of the historical contexts of Hebrew wisdom with a prolegomenon ample in both its definition of wisdom and its review of wisdom literature and practice across the ANE and beyond (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Aram, Greece). Still establishing the general background for his study of the ancient Hebrew material, he follows his discussion of texts, terms, and themes—in those territories—with a discussion on wisdom's social character and the sages' roles. Unlike his opening remarks on ancient wisdom texts, this phase of his introduction does cover the Israelite and Judean situations. A concluding section on the rhetoric of the biblical material elaborates, with examples, on the variety of literary forms featured in seven different genres Perdue has earlier mentioned in his definition of "wisdom" (7). The seven genres are: wisdom sayings (proverbs, comparisons, beatitudes, "better than" sayings, abominations, and numerical sayings); teaching/instruction, aimed at inculcating moral behavior; aesthetic works (wisdom psalms, poetically crafted didactic poems); dialogues (Job being the best known); collections ("sayings of" such as Prov 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Qoh 12:11); narratives of model sages (Joseph, Gen 37-50; Baruch, Jer 36, 45, 1 Baruch); and, finally, lists (e.g., cosmological elements, Job 38-39; animals, Job 40-41; wisdom's characteristics, Wis 7:21-23). The author also touches on key terms of Hebrew wisdom equivalent to those discussed earlier in connection with Greco-Roman culture and Greek wisdom and philosophy.

Entering on his main thesis, Perdue's correlations of Hebrew wisdom and historicopolitical context begin with the book of Proverbs, which he dates to the time of the Israelite and Judahite monarchy; he dates Job to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, except for its wisdom hymn (chap. 28) and Elihu speeches, both of which he considers reflections of postexilic period. The hymn shows Second Temple piety in its identification of wisdom with the fear of God. Elihu's sentiments, from the same historical period, are those of a dissatisfied sage representing "a marginalized community on the periphery of political and religious power" (139). Perdue finds the Wisdom Psalms to be a Persian product, while Qoheleth is consigned to Ptolemaic times. He locates Apocryphal Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon to the Seleucid era and Roman Empire respectively, finding their special contribution to Hebrew wisdom to be the notion of a divinely directed national history and the concept of immortality. Three chapters on "Continuing Streams" separately consider rabbinic wisdom, the general influence of apocalyptic on wisdom, and its particular impact at Qumran. The final eighty-one pages of Perdue's thesis consist of copious indices on modern authors consulted, ancient literature referenced, and biblical texts cited.

Perdue has written this book on wisdom and empire out of conviction that wisdom's proper understanding requires a mental move "out of the realm of philosophical idealism and into the realistic dimensions of history and social construction" (3). By conceding that wisdom literature, like historical reconstruction, is an act of the imagination (4), Perdue makes room for

individual idiosyncrasy. More substantively, he thus locates today's wisdom scholarship within the tradition of the ancient sages, who called on their own sapiential imagination to shape a cosmology and social world that were theologically coherent, ethically attractive, and morally compelling (5). The discipline they practiced, articulated, and documented in written literature signifies multiple elements inclusive of much more than data—the knowledge acquired through empirical experience, rational thought, and comparative analysis. Beyond mere data, wisdom comprehended the ability to acquire both theoretical and practical information and belief in a cosmic system of morality and order. Wisdom involved an investigative approach that sought to discover, expose, and rationalize the inherent order in creation, society, human thought, and human behavior. Finally, ancient wisdom was the province of privilege and the servant of empire, particularly through its schools, royal, prophetic, or otherwise, functioning as they did as one of wisdom's primary social locations (70). This servitude involved both the ideological articulation of poet-scribes, who justified the status quo, and the shaping of future generations of rulers—through scribal instruction to maturing royalty.

There is much to acknowledge in Purdue's sociological analysis. There is also sufficient room for disagreement, including, for example, and by his own acknowledgement, the precise dates and settings of the very texts he has dated and set (412). Beyond this, many of the themes he defines as wisdom's focus—providence, divinely led history, beauty, and practical morality—seem readily recognizable as foci of the prophetic genres. Moreover, his identification of YHWH as the center of the wisdom writers' imaginations (6) emphasizes in compelling terms wisdom's affinity with other allegedly more spiritual biblical genres, even as Purdue develops his thesis on secular politics and power struggle as textual nexus. Purdue may or may not believe that Yahweh was a product of the sages' imagination. But his work on wisdom hews much more closely to the traditional categories than does that of T. A. Perry (*God's Twilight Zone: Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008]), who finds that Noah, Tamar, Pharaoh, Judah, Saul, Esther, and more are either positive or negative models of biblical wisdom. And yet both Purdue and Perry run the risk of defining away the biblical wisdom genre in the brilliance of their individual idiosyncracies, and their willingness to break new ground.

Finally, Purdue contends that to accomplish their intellectual objectives, the ancient sages had to move beyond “hidebound Aristotelian logic and empirical testing” to “esthetic description and expression” that produced language combining logic with beauty (5). This affirming tone on the sages' liberating move from Aristotelian categories raises its own wonder as to when the Hebrew sages and biblical writers in particular, might have experienced the need for such liberation, or whether, in fact, it may be the practitioners of current scholarship who need to be delivered from the categories of our own intellectual history in order to properly access the mindset of the ancient composers of the Hebrew Bible.