

Samuel E. Balentine. *Wisdom Literature*.

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In this volume of the Core Biblical Studies series, Samuel Balentine weaves together the wisdom tradition of Ancient Israel through five key texts: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon. For Balentine, these books express the core truth that the fear of God is the foundation of wisdom while also pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in the search for wisdom. Specifically, Proverbs offers a traditional view of wisdom that Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon build upon, while Job and Ecclesiastes challenge tradition to explore alternative understandings.

According to Balentine, Proverbs was compiled over at least 500 years and was influenced by wisdom traditions of surrounding nations. It exhibits several literary forms such as proverbs, maxims, “better than” sayings, numerical sayings, and metaphors and similes, to name a few. Balentine posits two distinct settings for the collections of proverbs. Behind the speeches in chs. 1–9 is a “family setting” of “Israel’s pre-state period” (p. 17), where the home was the primary source of character development for a child. Behind chs. 10–29, however, is a “court setting for instruction and wisdom” (p. 19). For Balentine, the lack of thematic coherence in Proverbs reflects the character of the Israelite wisdom tradition. Wisdom was developed in stages (as Proverbs was), and the journey to find wisdom has a beginning (the fear of the Lord) but no end.

In his chapter on Job, Balentine begins with the form, structure, and genre of the book. In his opinion, the oldest section of the book was a traditional story about a pious man. From there, the dialogues were added during the Babylonian exile, the wisdom poem (ch. 28) during the Persian period, and speeches of Elihu (chs. 32–37) during the Hellenistic period (pp. 35–36). Balentine goes on to compare the biblical Job to that of similar Egyptian, Sumerian, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Indian texts. In the remainder of the chapter, Balentine explores the interconnection of the various dialogues. He sees this dialogue as a rhetorical device that provides contrasting opinions that encourage readers to explore different perspectives. This lens encourages the reader to ask, “where can wisdom be found?”

Ecclesiastes’s two poems and two dialogues outline the rhetorical strategy of the book, which includes the repetition of five key words: *pointless*, *fate/chance*, *death*, *enjoyment/pleasure*, and *God*. Balentine dates Ecclesiastes to the intellectual culture of the mid-third century under the rule of Ptolemies and therefore compares and contrasts the thoughts of the author with

those of other great thinkers and literature of the time including Socrates, Cynic writings, and Epicurean philosophy. All these analyses must be read, however, through the lens of Ecclesiastes's epilogist (12:8–12), who challenges readers to reconsider the key terms in an attempt to bring an end to the search for divine wisdom.

The first apocryphal book Balentine reviews, Sirach, was composed between 195 and 175 BC. It encourages readers to fear God, wisdom, and law, which represents a shift in thinking among the sages. They no longer elevate the skepticism and critique of voices like Job and Ecclesiastes, but rather desire an authoritative, pious obedience to divine wisdom. As such, Sirach frequently draws on the wisdom of more traditional sources such as the Pentateuch and prophets, while elevating the status of ancient characters such as Abraham, Moses, and David. In the end, for the author, true wisdom is a devotion to Scripture.

The Wisdom of Solomon was probably written in Alexandria in the first century AD by a Jewish sage who employs a Solomonic persona. The influence of Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish thought is evident in the book and matches the cultural milieu of Alexandria in the first century. Balentine reviews each of these influences and their possible contribution to the book and greater Israelite wisdom tradition. Additionally, Wisdom's claim to encompass all cosmology illuminates certain theological claims that Balentine also reviews. These include the righteous and the wicked, life and death, and the ethics of immortality.

Balentine concludes his analysis of wisdom literature with a word for moderns. Although scientific inquiry and skepticism create doubt about the benefit of religion in promoting wisdom today, "the sages who give us Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon advocate Wisdom (with a capital W) that is hospitable to skepticism but not swayed by its doubt. Qohelet and Job speak of a wisdom (with a small w) that remains open to divine revelation without being closed to autonomous thinking and discovery (p. 161)." This dichotomy, for Balentine, is the beginning and the end of the pursuit of wisdom, and it allows for biblical wisdom's continued relevance for modern thinkers.

The Core Biblical Studies series seeks to "bring together our most respected scholars/teachers with students in the early stages of their learning" (p. ix). Therefore, it is not written simply to be an introductory book for undergraduate students, but to highlight the specific contributions and insights of Samuel Balentine in the field of wisdom literature. This is evident in the layout of each chapter. Rather than analyzing each book according to predetermined criteria (typically topics such as setting, date, compositional history, etc.), Balentine explores each book's contribution to the Israelite

wisdom tradition, while still highlighting current scholarship. As such, the book reads somewhat like a series of undergraduate lectures that encourages critical engagement with the text and deeper reflection. In the introduction, the editor states the desire for the series to be accessible to students new to the field and laity interested in furthering their biblical knowledge. I believe this is an accessible book for both groups.

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Donn F. Morgan, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Writings of the Hebrew Bible*.

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Morgan's collation of contributions on the Writings of the Hebrew Bible (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ezra–Nehemiah, Chronicles, Daniel) is a welcome addition to the Oxford Handbooks series for a canonical division that will feel less familiar to many readers from a non-Jewish background. Morgan's own essays (chs. 1, 30) serve not only as a helpful introduction to the Writings as a corpus, but his mature perspective on the opportunities, challenges, and implications of studying the biblical text are a credit to his many years of teaching experience.

As an editor, however, I was left wishing that Morgan had cracked the whip more firmly with some of his contributors. The volume claims to be "a comprehensive resource for the study of the literature of the Writings," in a series that aims to provide "an authoritative and state-of-the-art survey of current thinking and research." It has mixed success in achieving these goals. On a basic level, a surprising number of errors in spelling and grammar somehow survived into the published text. While most of the contributions are superb, some did not meet their brief, and not every essay met the expected level of quality. There were also some discussions beyond the scope of a handbook of this kind, and some gaps in the core subject matter.

Part 1 (chs. 2–4) discusses history and is entirely concerned with the postexilic period, despite the fact that previous historical epochs within Canaan are of relevance to the Writings in various ways: individual psalms and proverbs were composed in various periods of Israelite history; the narrative setting of Ruth and Chronicles is in the preexilic period; the events in the