The ‘Wisdom Literature’ Category

An Obituary

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Abstract

The consensus that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job are the primary members of a ‘Wisdom’ collection is nearly universal, though the category’s origin is unknown and its definition debated. This article identifies that origin and argues that it has caused that continuing debate. Wisdom was not born in early Jewish and Christian interpretation, as some suggest, but in nineteenth-century Germany to make the Old Testament palatable to its ‘cultured despisers’.

The uncritical acceptance of the category perpetuates the presuppositions that inspired it, which continue to plague its interpretation. Now, as the category’s vital weaknesses are increasingly recognized, the time has come to declare Wisdom Literature dead and replace it with a new approach to genre that reads texts, not in exclusive categories, but in multiple overlapping groupings. This will offer a more nuanced understanding of the so-called Wisdom texts’ place in the intricate intertextual network of the canon and beyond. It will free Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, as well as the Israelite concept of wisdom to be interpreted more independently, beyond their connections with one another, and thus more fully and accurately.
The ‘Wisdom Literature’ category, a collection of biblical books centred on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, has died.\(^1\) After 167 years, it has succumbed to the obsolescence which constantly threatens generic classifications.\(^2\) The category’s recent rocketing rise in popularity coupled with the nearly universal agreement on its value for biblical interpretation makes its death more shocking, however, since they had given the impression that Wisdom was in excellent health.

**Wisdom’s Ancestry**

Wisdom’s relatively young age at death was also surprising, since its pervasive presence in biblical studies made it difficult to imagine a time when it was not around. Many assumed that Wisdom was much older. Perhaps they were influenced by the existence of ancient Near Eastern ‘Wisdom Literature’, forgetting to distinguish between the date texts currently associated with a category were composed and the origin of the category itself. Though texts that resembled Proverbs, such as the Egyptian *Instruction of Ptahhotep* or the Mesopotamian *Instructions of Shuruppak*, and others that resembled Ecclesiastes or Job, such as the Egyptian *Dialogue between a Man and His Ba* or the Mesopotamian *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, predated even those biblical texts, grouping them together as ‘Wisdom’ resulted from the scholarly consensus on the biblical Wisdom corpus,\(^3\) so it would be illegitimate to look there

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\(^1\) Following an increasingly widespread convention (see below), to communicate its status as a scholarly construct, I refer to ‘Wisdom Literature’ in quotation marks. However, for ease of reading, I will henceforth dispense with them. I will also refer to the category by the shorter title, Wisdom, using capitalization to distinguish the literary category from wisdom as a concept. My focus here is primarily on Wisdom as a category of biblical books. According to the nominalist approach to genre I will develop below, literary categories, such as Wisdom Literature, should be treated as genres, since they name a corpus of texts grouped according to some perceived affinity between them, but genres should not be treated as exclusive categories for texts.


\(^3\) This point has been made by those studying both Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts. See W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 1; Ronald
for its origin.

Even so, it was commonly assumed that ‘vestiges’ of the category were already evident in early Jewish and Christian interpretation. The closest approximation of a Wisdom category in antiquity is the collection associated with Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs), which is indeed clearly represented in both Jewish and Christian traditions. The rabbis connect the three Solomonic books to phases of the king’s life (Canticles Rabbah 1:1), while Christian interpreters attempt in various ways to make theological sense of the collection, either associating the message of each book with a separate person of the Trinity (Hippolytus of Rome, In. Cant. 1.3–5), a stage in the progression of philosophical reflection (Origen, Comm. Cant. prologue), or different aspects of earthly life to be renounced in favour of spiritual contemplation (John Cassian, ‘Third Conference: On Renunciations’, IV.4). These attempts to explain the progression between the books in the Solomonic corpus, however, are clearly efforts to make sense of its diverse contents. This suggests the Solomonic attribution inspired the grouping of the texts and not that the references to Solomon might have served to ‘classify the material within its genre’. Also, in this collection

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Job is excluded and the Song of Songs is included. To exchange this corpus for the modern one, the primary basis for the old category, Solomonic attribution, had to be discarded, and new historical, comparative, and form-critical criteria had to be developed. These changes suggest the ancient category is different from the modern one both quantitatively, in regard to its content, and qualitatively, in terms of its defining essence.

The same could be said for the other ‘vestiges’ of the category to which scholars sometimes appeal. Markus Witte, for example, argues the arrangement of the individual books in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and corresponding early descriptions of the canon, such as Josephus’s, all reflect a classification of the texts into historical, prophetic and sapiential, or didactic, categories. However, though Josephus does mention four unnamed books that ‘contain hymns to God and instructions for people on life’ (AgAp. 1.8) in the Hebrew canon, he is most likely referring to the Psalms and the three Solomonic books, leaving Job to be included among the prophets.

Similarly, the arrangement of the books in the Hebrew Bible provides little evidence of a potential ancient Wisdom category. The third, Writings section, in which all of the so-called Wisdom books are found, appears to be a miscellany, as its name suggests, composed of books that are unified only in their idiosyncrasy: their defining feature being their lack of fit among either the Law or the Prophets. The traditional Jewish subgroupings Sifrei Emet and Megilloth within that section separate Wisdom’s content, with Proverbs and Job in the former and Ecclesiastes in the latter. On the other hand, modern efforts to identify a Wisdom

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grouping within the Writings, either in the order found in Baba Batra 14b\textsuperscript{11} or as one of several exemplary genre groupings in an anthology that follows Greek precedents,\textsuperscript{12} reflect the modern understanding of Wisdom too well. Without explicit ancient evidence, they must circularly rely on the very thesis they are setting out to prove, which preserves the possibility that they have anachronistically projected the modern category onto the ancient list.\textsuperscript{13}

The Greek canon lists do appear to recognize genre distinctions, but they include both Job and Psalms with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (and often Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon). The few general references to this category from the early church reflect the criterion that would justify such a broad collection, classifying these texts merely as ‘the books written in verse’.\textsuperscript{14} Though this collection would eventually be known as \textit{libri didactici} in the Latin tradition, given its content and that criterion, it does not equate with ‘Wisdom Literature’, as some would suggest.\textsuperscript{15} The texts in this section are too diverse, with didacticism only characteristic of some of them.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{13} Steinberg’s schema is not reflected in the MT, the other major witness to the order of the canonical books, and it relates only superficially to the content of the books, leaving it ‘too general to be meaningful’ (Stone, \textit{Compilational History of the Megilloth}, p. 185). Lang, however, simply assumes the early existence of a Wisdom category consisting of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, even as he implicitly acknowledges a ‘sapiential’ Solomonic corpus of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs would have been more likely at the time (Lang, ‘The “Writings”’, pp. 51, 54).


The title ‘Wisdom’ applied to certain books might also appear to reflect a ‘specialized meaning’ for the term that reflects ‘an early recognition that certain Old Testament books are especially concerned to teach something called “wisdom.”’\textsuperscript{17} The books to which this title is applied, Ben Sira\textsuperscript{18} and Wisdom of Solomon, however, push the boundaries of the Wisdom category as it is currently conceived by, for example, incorporating the history of Israel (Ben Sira 44–49; Wisdom 11–19) or merging Wisdom with Torah (e.g., Sir. 19:20; 24:1–34) or apocalyptic (e.g., Wisdom 5). If these titles indicate the ‘specialized meaning’ of wisdom, then the definition of Wisdom applied to books in the Hebrew Bible poorly approximates it. Accordingly, none of those texts receives a similar title.\textsuperscript{19}

Even Jer. 18:18, commonly considered biblical testimony for a Wisdom category in ancient Israel, falls short of proving its existence. Though it mentions ‘the counsel’ (הצע) of ‘the wise’ (םכח) alongside ‘the instruction’ (רות) of ‘the priest’ (כהן) and ‘the word’ (רבד) of ‘the prophet’ (נביא), the most this text would provide is evidence for a specialized meaning for ‘the wise’ as a class in Israel, not for a group of texts. However, the parallel construction in Ezek. 7:26, where ‘the elders’ (קינים) replace ‘the wise’ as the third group in addition to prophets and priests, suggests that ‘the wise’ in Jer. 18:18 characterizes anyone who has attained wisdom, as could be assumed of the elders, and is not a specialized term for a


\textsuperscript{19} Matthew Goff, ‘Qumran Wisdom Literature and the Problem of Genre’, \textit{DSD} 17 (2010), pp. 332–33. Early Christian interpreters did occasionally refer to Proverbs, as well as the other books associated with the king, as Solomon’s ‘Wisdom’ (Edwin Cone Bissell, \textit{The Apocrypha of the Old Testament} [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880], p. 231). Like the Solomonic collection discussed above, this does not necessarily indicate a genre designation, and certainly does not indicate a collection that equates with the modern Wisdom category.
specific class in Israel. This is how the word is generally used in the Hebrew Bible, often in contrast with the ‘fool’, which is certainly not intended to indicate a particular social group.\(^{20}\)

The collocation of ‘the words of the wise’ (דברי הימים) with ‘collections’ (负责同志) and ‘books’ (ספרים) in Eccl. 12:11-12 suggests to some evidence of a Wisdom genre, however the contents of this purported genre are unclear. The following possibilities have been proposed: the Solomonic books, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in close association with Deuteronomy, or even ‘the words of the wise whatever they may be.’\(^{21}\) Choon-Leong Seow denies that ‘the words of the wise’ has a technical meaning here and argues that the passage refers to wisdom teachings generally rather than to a specific corpus.\(^{22}\) Either way, significantly, the passage provides little evidence for Job’s inclusion.

None of the ancient literary collections often associated with the modern Wisdom category contain the same group of texts, which reflects the differing criteria used to form them. The combination of quantitative and qualitative differences between the contents and definitions of these early collections and the modern Wisdom category indicate that it was not an ancient tradition. In fact, the category’s origins were hitherto uncertain. It emerged beyond the borders of current knowledge, in a ‘grey area’ of biblical scholarship.\(^{23}\) Wisdom was an ‘orphan’, then, both because it appeared to resemble foreign forebears from the

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ancient Near East more than its canonical kin, and because its parentage was unknown.

Wisdom’s Birth

A few scholars have attempted to identify the category’s origins is biblical scholarship, suggesting dates such as 1908 or as early as 1891. However, references to the category appear in both English and German scholarship throughout the latter half of nineteenth century. The footnotes in those references all lead back to one book published in 1851, Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer written by Johann Bruch.

Bruch credits several works with influencing his view of Israelite Wisdom. However, none of these works demonstrate a clear conception of Wisdom as a separate

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29 Bruch, Weisheits-Lehre, pp. 4–5. He mentions, in particular, Johann Georg Dahler, Denk- und Stitensprüche Salomo’s: Nebst den Abweichungen der Alexandrinischen Übersetzung ins Teutsche übersetzt (Strasbourg: Amand König, 1810); W. M. L. de Wette, Lehrbuch der hebräisch-jüdischen Archäologie nebst einem Grundriss der herbräisch-jüdischen Geschichte (2nd edn.; Leipzig: Vogel, 1830); Friedrich Umbreit, Commentar über die Sprüche Salomo’s (Heidelberg: Mohr, 1826); and Heinrich A. Ewald, Geschichte des Volkes Israel bis Christus, 5 vols. (Göttingen: Dietrich, 1843–55); id., ‘Über die Volks- und Geistesfreiheit Israel’s [sic]’. He also shows an awareness of Wilhelm Vatke, Die biblische
category of biblical books consisting of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, and, in the apocrypha, Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon, as Bruch, and the vast majority of those who mention the category after him do. After Bruch, these texts would also consistently be connected to a separate movement in Israel, though its character and professional status would continue to be debated. Bruch appears, therefore, to be the father of Wisdom Literature. Though Bruch is the earliest to present the Wisdom category systemically and comprehensively, he does so by drawing heavily on a group of earlier scholars. Those earlier scholars are themselves each strongly influenced by prominent philosophical ideas of the early nineteenth century. They draw on philosophers such as Kant, Fries, Herder, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, and Hegel, many of whom they reference explicitly. If biblical scholarship, in the form of Johann Bruch, was Wisdom’s father, then post-Enlightenment continental philosophy was her mother.

Bruch’s work makes this lineage clear. *Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer*, with its subtitle, *Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, is a fitting sequel for his previous book, *Études philosophiques sur le christianisme*, which had been translated, with his help, into German a few years earlier. Explicitly addressing an audience of both theologians and philosophers (xiv), *Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer* begins by defending the study of the Old Testament to

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30 See below.


the latter group of readers, justifying the Hebrews’ inclusion in the history of philosophy. He writes,

Es schien mir, als ob schon der in mehreren Schriften des Alten Testaments wehende untheokratische Geist darauf aufmerksam hätte Machen sollen, daß es auch unter den Hebräern nicht an Männern fehlte, deren Geist in den religiösen Instituten ihrer Nation keine Befriedigung fand, und die daher auf anderin Wege, dem Wege nämlich des freien Denkens, sich Auffschluß über die sie bewegenden Fragen und Ruhe des Gemüthes zu verschaffen suchten. (ix–x)

The untheocratic and free-thinking spirit Bruch attributes to the wise combines many of the philosophical ideas that the biblical scholars who influenced Bruch had themselves imbibed as they served as a collective womb for Wisdom’s gestation. It also bears a remarkable similarity to the principles of Alsatian liberalism at the time, of which Bruch was a prominent proponent.34

The circumstances of Wisdom Literature’s birth, then, explain a great deal about the life of this controversial category. In themselves they do not doom it, but the convenient appearance of Wisdom Literature to meet the demands of the time requires more careful scrutiny than it has previously received. In nineteenth-century Germany, Christians continued what Kant had identified as their long struggle to present Christianity as ‘a purely moral religion’ while also in continuity with the Jewish faith, which he claimed was characterized by dogmatic faith, theocratic institutions, legal coercion, and particularistic exclusion.35

Kant’s solution was to argue that Judaism prepared the way for Christianity to arise only after

its patriarchal, political, and priestly character was diminished, allowing ‘this otherwise ignorant people...to receive much foreign (Greek) wisdom’, which had the effect of ‘enlightening Judaism with concepts of virtue’. The solution Bruch proposed was to present Wisdom as, in Delitzsch’s succinct formulation at the time, ‘eine Geistesrichtung universalistischer, humanistischer, philosophischer Art,’ within the Old Testament, independent of Israel’s particularistic theocracy, cult, and law. Delitzsch adopted the category from Bruch, whom he acknowledged ‘zuerst auf die Chokma oder den Humanismus als eine eigentümliche Geistesrichtung in Israel aufmerksam gemacht zu haben’. However, Delitzsch had concerns with Bruch’s placement of Wisdom ‘in ein indifferentistisches und sogar feindliches Verhältnis zum Nationalgesetz und zum Nationalcultus setzt, welches er dem Verhältnis christlicher Philosophen zur orthodoxen Theologie vergleicht.’ Others shared this concern with the opposition Bruch had introduced between the revealed popular religion and the free-thinking, philosophically minded ‘wise men’ who sought to transcend it in their writings. Yet even these scholars accepted his basic premise of a separate class and distinct corpus of texts, not recognizing how closely Bruch’s modern philosophical characterization of Wisdom was intertwined with the category’s very existence.

Wisdom’s Growth and Development

The interpretation of Wisdom in the last century and a half has demonstrated how the category and its philosophical origins are not easily separated. Despite its later success, the

36 Franz Delitzsch, Das Buch Job (Leipzig, Dörffling und Franke, 1864), vol. 1, p. 5.
37 Delitzsch, Salomonisches Spruchbuch, p. 38.
category was never able to escape the effects of its troubled upbringing and became ‘a rather errant child’ in the Hebrew Bible. As its popularity grew, so did its struggles with identity. Bruch had brought this group of texts together on the basis of their purported philosophical interests and independence from the rest of the canon and Israelite religion. Naturally, these themes continually reemerged as scholarly reflection on Israelite Wisdom developed.

In the category’s early years, though, Wisdom’s impact was minimal enough that, as mentioned earlier, its origin is frequently only recognized a half century into its existence. In 1924, however, Wisdom came to prominence when close parallels between Prov 22:17–24:22 and the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope were discovered. Since then, the debates between Bruch and his early opponents have been writ large in biblical scholarship. In the flood of research that followed this discovery over the next decade, further ancient Near Eastern parallels were explored, contributing to universalistic conceptions of Wisdom thought flowing out of a common social setting of educated scribes. After the Second World War, though, these ancient Near Eastern connections were employed to discredit Wisdom as ‘pagan’ and a ‘foreign body’ in the Old Testament. Those attributes that had set

her apart now kept her from having a part in a unified Old Testament theology, which was at
the time oriented around the theological significance of Israelite history. Over the course of
the 1960s, however, Israelite history lost its stronghold in biblical scholarship, and Wisdom
was marginalized no more. From the primeval history (Gen 1–11) to Esther, from law to
history and prophecy, few texts escaped Wisdom’s ‘influence’.\textsuperscript{45} This ‘special orphan’, as
Crenshaw puts it, became ‘queen for a day, perhaps even Queen Mother’.\textsuperscript{46}

Crenshaw was concerned about the rapid and extensive spread of Wisdom’s influence
across the canon, but his attempts to stop her by restricting the definition of Wisdom
Literature to the traditional Wisdom corpus have ultimately failed.\textsuperscript{47} One can attempt simply
to recount the variegated features of the diverse Wisdom corpus, as Crenshaw’s influential
definition of Wisdom Literature as a marriage between accepted Wisdom forms and Wisdom
content does.\textsuperscript{48} Or one can arbitrarily exclude some of those features, by, for example,
declaring Wisdom ‘non-revelatory speech’ despite the crucial role revelation plays in Job.\textsuperscript{49}
However, any definition broad enough to encompass the Wisdom texts in their entirety must
be so vague and abstract that hardly a biblical text may be excluded. Does any biblical
writing not intend to instruct? Is any not interested in guiding its reader toward wellbeing?

\\textsuperscript{45} For relevant bibliography and discussion, see James L. Crenshaw, ‘Method in Determining
‘Prolegomenon’, pp. 9–13; Donn F. Morgan, \textit{Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions}
(Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Stuart Weeks, \textit{An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom
\textsuperscript{46} Crenshaw, ‘Prolegomenon’, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{47} See Crenshaw, ‘Method in Determining Wisdom Influence’, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{48} James L. Crenshaw, \textit{Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction} (3rd edn.; Louisville, KY:
‘only really a way of encapsulating the problem of definition, rather than of solving it’
\textsuperscript{49} James L. Crenshaw, ‘Wisdom’, in J. Hayes (ed.), \textit{Old Testament Form Criticism} (San
Once again ‘wearing her party dress’, Wisdom defied definitional strictures. Interpreters were forced to choose between letting the category dance across the canon again or making a circular appeal to the ‘universal’ consensus on Wisdom’s contents. This recourse to scholarly consensus is further proof that Wisdom Literature is a modern scholarly tradition rather than an ancient one.51

Rather than allow Wisdom to be excluded from the rest of the Hebrew Bible and its theology, scholars had begun increasingly to invite it right into its ‘main stream’,52 its broad ‘background’,53 its ‘beginning’,54 its ‘heart’,55 and the ‘preservation, composition, utilization, and instruction’ of its entirety.56 Some were even actively advocating for Wisdom’s conquest of the entire canon, ‘look[ing] forward to a time when most of the Hebrew Bible, if not all of it, will be recognized as “wisdom literature.”’57

Wisdom had been born with two vocations, to shed new light on a collection of opaque biblical books and the ancient Israelite world from which they came and to carve out some part of the Hebrew Bible that would be palatable in a post-Enlightenment age. As it developed, however, these callings came into conflict. Wisdom became more distinctive from

the rest of the Hebrew Bible, and then it began to shape the rest of the canon into its image as more and more texts and finally the basic Israelite worldview as a whole were associated with Wisdom. Interpreters found ‘something attractive’ about Wisdom, even if they could not quite identify it.\(^{58}\) Thus, Crenshaw observes, since its identification as a separate category, Wisdom ‘has stood largely as a mirror image of the scholar painting her portrait’.\(^{59}\) And, John Collins adds, biblical interpreters have demonstrated a tendency to apply the ‘Wisdom’ label to ‘[a]ny form of knowledge that is recognized as good’,\(^{60}\) which often has a striking similarity to the knowledge those scholars themselves most value.

Starting with the ‘presumption’\(^{61}\) or ‘assumption’ of a ‘subjective nature’\(^{62}\) that a category primarily composed of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job exists, interpreters find it difficult to identify that ‘mysterious ingredient’ that holds it together.\(^{63}\) But perhaps that is not because the category is so foreign and obscure but because it is so familiar and clear. Views of what is ‘good’ have not changed that much since the category originated in the nineteenth century. It is little surprise that these vague, abstract features of Wisdom, such as ‘didactic emphasis’, ‘humanistic interest’, or ‘focus on creation’—knowledge that is recognized as good—may be found in so many other texts, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the ancient Near East. With little concrete evidence, either literarily or historically, to hinder its spread, the Wisdom category has had the power increasingly to transform the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern texts into its reflective image.


\(^{59}\) Crenshaw, ‘Prolegomenon’, p. 3.


\(^{62}\) Crenshaw, ‘Prolegomenon’, p. 5.

Wisdom’s Death

Even as Wisdom was expanding in the 1960s, however, Gerhard von Rad recognized the category’s inherent weakness as a scholarly invention and therefore something that could disguise its contents despite potentially never having existed.64 Though von Rad went on to preserve the category, recently the ‘uncritical use of this collective term’ and its potential for ‘dangerously prejudicing the interpretation of varied material’, of which he warned, have caught up with Wisdom. Fundamental questions about the category have begun to be raised with a new urgency: Was there a ‘wisdom tradition’?65 What are the boundaries of ‘Wisdom’?66 Is the ‘Wisdom Literature’ category ‘useful’?67 The scare quotes in the titles of these articles demonstrate the waning scholarly confidence in the category as much as the recent attempts to come to its defence.68 As the questions mount, von Rad’s worry that the category may be ‘more of a hindrance than a help’ is being increasingly validated.69 The time, it appears, has come to declare Wisdom dead.

65 Sneed, ‘Is the “Wisdom Tradition” a Tradition?’
69 Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, p. 8.
Wisdom’s Legacy

Despite its weaknesses, Wisdom will be survived by the benefits it has generated: an increased interest in the concept of wisdom in the Bible and across the ancient Near East, and a widespread appreciation for the value of the three so-called Wisdom books. Wisdom’s legacy, then, will depend on the place given these heirs by future biblical interpreters. Its life depended on closely uniting the one, the concept of wisdom and a growing throng of associated ideas, such as creation theology, universalism, empiricism, and individualism, with the other, a specific group of texts. The Wisdom category was dependent on the unity of the two, and they were dependent on each other. The category’s death frees the concept of wisdom and the so-called Wisdom texts to be understood more independently from one another. Without the category setting common boundaries for both, wisdom can be understood with resources beyond these texts (as it often is in the requisite definition of הָכֵח at the beginnings of introductions to Wisdom Literature), and the message of these texts can transcend wisdom. This will demonstrate the interdependence of the ‘Wisdom’ texts and other biblical texts across the canon and beyond. All are interwoven in a vast, intricate web of meaning.

After all, as John Frow observes, ‘All texts are relevantly similar to some texts and relevantly dissimilar to others’. Further, according to Karl Popper, ‘things may be similar in different respects, and any two things which are from one point of view similar may be dissimilar from another point of view’. Different approaches to genre handle both this tension between the general and the particular and the potential surplus of meaning these relationships create in different ways. Biblical studies, encouraged by form criticism’s linking

70 For these and other distinctive Wisdom traits, see, recently, Miller, ‘Wisdom in the Canon’ and Schellenberg, ‘Don’t Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater’.
of literary genre to historical setting, has long perpetuated a realist approach to genre, which carves this complex textual network into exclusive, non-overlapping genre classifications. This traditional taxonomic approach over-emphasizes both the similarity with some texts and the difference with others, placing groups of texts in distorting echo chambers.

Recognizing the marginalizing effect this approach has had on Wisdom Literature, the recent pan-sapiential response has emphasized similarity to the detriment of difference and flattened out textual diversity. Acknowledging that Wisdom cannot be justified according to a taxonomic understanding of genre, scholars have proposed more pliant and permeable approaches that maintain a distinct biblical Wisdom category while giving it more ‘fuzzy boundaries’. These approaches include the general dismissal of ‘generic realism’ in favour of ‘generic nominalism’, and more specific approaches such as prototype, family resemblance, or speech-act theories. Though a step in the right direction, these approaches still cling to old taxonomic assumptions so the vague definitions they provide only contribute to the scholarly tendency to associate more and more texts with Wisdom.

An individualistic approach, though, which attempts to dismiss genre groupings altogether and interpret each text independently, would make the opposite mistake, emphasizing difference over similarity. More than that, it attempts a practical impossibility, since textual comparison is both necessary and inevitable in interpretation. Responding to this view, David Fishelov argues that ‘no matter how fervently an author claims that his text is

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74 Wright, for example, betrays his underlying taxonomic impulse by comparing genres to clubs with texts participating ‘fully’ in one genre club and potentially as an affiliate in others (‘Joining the Club’, p. 303). In Sneed’s nominalist approach, he argues that texts may be associated with numerous different genres, but still attributes not merely the Wisdom books, but ‘the other literary genres of our Hebrew Bible’ as well to ‘these same Israelite wisdom writers or scribal scholars’ (‘Is the “Wisdom Tradition” a Tradition?’, pp. 62–64).
unique, it still has intimate links with existing types of literature, i.e., with literary genres. However, this is a false disjunction: a text’s unique character need not be set against its links with other types of literature, since every text will relate differently with other texts and involve a unique set of ‘intimate links with existing types of literature’. Therefore, I favour a definition of genre such as the one proposed by Eric Drott. Rather than taxonomic categories, he argues, genres should be understood as dynamic groupings, which ‘result from acts of assemblage…performed by specific agents in specific social and institutional settings.’

Biblical scholars have begun to recognize the ways genres overlap in texts, but they have yet to integrate this insight with the contribution of historical and cultural perspectives like the nineteenth-century German context in which Wisdom was conceived. To conceptualize this, a metaphor may help, as they often do in genre theory. Genres can be envisioned as constellations of texts, ‘an imaginary way of representing real relationships’, that trace out ‘zones of reading’ in the sky. Friedrich Schlegel claims the traditional taxonomic approach, then, is ‘pre-Copernican’, since it assumes ‘whatever somebody is capable of producing, whatever happens to be in fashion, is the stationary earth at the center of all things.’ Genres in this understanding are drawn on the two-dimensional firmament viewed from this single perspective. The stars, however, are actually spread across three dimensions of space, not two. This means that stars that appear relatively close together from

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an earthly vantage point may in fact be much farther apart. For example, the anthropomorphic relationship between the stars that forms the Orion constellation would disappear if those stars were viewed from elsewhere in the universe; then, new relationships between Orion’s stars and others in the sky would emerge.\(^8\)

As the ancestry, birth, life, and death of Wisdom Literature demonstrate, ‘the way we constellate texts changes as a function of history through the perspective of individual critics’\(^8\). Therefore, instead of being limited to the stationary view from a single, nineteenth-century perspective, in which a ‘universalistic, humanistic, philosophical’ conception of Wisdom is ‘at the center of all things’, the relevant affinities revealed by other perspectives should also be considered. To maintain its hermeneutical value, the conception of Wisdom that united Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job for scholars such as Bruch should not be taken as the only, or even necessarily the main, topic with which the three books are concerned. I would propose, then, imagining the intertextual network surrounding those texts in three dimensions rather than two as in figure 1 below, where relationships between the texts are depicted in the shape of a pyramid. This would encourage the texts to be interpreted from varied ‘points of view’, each which considers different affinities ‘relevant’ as they inspire different textual groupings. This would appreciate how each text demonstrates its particularity by ‘participating’ in multiple genres without ‘belonging’ to any one of them.\(^8\)

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Intertextual network in three dimensions (fig. 1)

For example, before the Wisdom category was developed, de Wette, inspired by the philosophy of Jakob Friedrich Fries to seek out deeply felt religious experience in the Hebrew Bible, combined the lament Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes to describe Hebrew religion as characterized by *Unglück* or ‘misfortune’.

The Jewish *Sifrei Emet* grouping, however, unites Job and Psalms with Proverbs. Though the reasoning behind this grouping is unclear, it does focus attention on the way Job stands between Psalms and Proverbs, incorporating significant features from each, and the importance of the dichotomy of righteousness and wickedness in all three books. Other early groupings, such as the Solomonic collection or the poetic division of the canon, provide more perspectives still, each

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85 The books may simply be grouped together based on their larger relative size or the distinctive cantillation marks they share, which may distinguish their poetic style. However, Rabbinic reflection on the grouping describes the books’ differences rather than their affinities, associating Psalms with piety, Proverbs with wisdom, and Job with punishment (*Ber. 57b*).


87 Claus Westermann, for example, notes their disproportionate use of the word רעש (“wicked”) compared to the rest of the Hebrew Bible, which indicates “a relationship of these three complexes to one another” (*Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*, trans. J. Daryl Charles [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995], p. 81).
which considers different similarities between the texts relevant, and such examples could be multiplied. By viewing the texts within these overlapping groupings, this ‘polycentric’ approach to genre would provide a fuller appreciation of their meaning by triangulating their location in relation to other texts more accurately ‘in the more-than-three-dimensional universe of verbal art.’

Ecclesiastes, for example, appears in several of the textual constellations just mentioned, Wisdom, Misfortune, Solomonic, and Poetic, each which reveals different salient features of the text, whether that is the book’s interest in wisdom according to Bruch’s reading, the agonized search for meaning de Wette sees in it, the royal garb of its reflections, or its formal characteristics. These genre constellations do not exist without the recognition of the particular relationship Ecclesiastes has to separate patterns of different textual stars in the literary sky, but interpreting the book fully requires these four patterns of textual meaning to be blended together. The book’s meaning is more than any one genre grouping can comprehend, but that meaning cannot be comprehended without genre groupings.

Job, which was not closely associated with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes before Wisdom Literature was developed in the nineteenth century, shares the category with them particularly uncomfortably. In pre-modern interpretation, the book is grouped in various ways with a wide range of texts, not merely the Sifrei Emet and Poetry, but also History, Torah, Prophecy,

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and dramatic and epic texts both in the canon and beyond. Modern interpretation has resurrected a number of those genre proposals as well as suggesting that the book’s author has adapted other genres, dramatizing lament or lawsuit, or transforming prophecy into ‘metaprophecy’. For some, the author’s manipulation of genre is considered so pervasive that it becomes a genre itself, a meta-genre, such as parody or polyphonic dialogue. The old, taxonomic approach to genre would require readers to choose one of these genres in which to classify the book. Some of the remaining genre proposals might then, at most, be maintained as subservient genres serving the purposes of that ‘predominant’ genre. However, debate continues over which genre that might be. Even Wisdom Literature is increasingly questioned. As a result, many opt to categorize the book as sui generis. If Job is sui generis, however, this is not due to the book’s isolation from other texts, but its connections with so many of them. As Crenshaw writes of Job, ‘Like all great literary works, this one

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rewards readers who come to it from vastly different starting points.\textsuperscript{99} To this end, mapping the dense intertextual network surrounding the book, to which these various genre proposals testify, incorporates the book’s defiance of genre into its interpretation rather than limiting the book’s meaning to a single genre or denying it any genre at all.

The emphasis on wisdom in Proverbs guarantees that this topic will play a prominent role in any interpretation of the book. However, the other texts included in that grouping will affect how that wisdom is understood, and the Wisdom classification directs readers’ attention away from, rather than toward the nuance and complexity of both the text and the wisdom it describes.\textsuperscript{100} In addition to the \textit{Sifrei Emet} collection, which highlights the book’s emphasis on righteousness,\textsuperscript{101} and Poetry collection, which underscores the contribution of its poetic form to its message,\textsuperscript{102} the Solomonic collection is an ‘equally valid’ lens through which to view the book, which ties it with Song of Songs.\textsuperscript{103} Further, the strong association between Proverbs and Solomon invites the text to be read along with the variegated description of the king’s wisdom in 1 Kings 1–11, which intertwines wisdom with political, legal, and even cultic acumen.\textsuperscript{104} This creates a much more intricate intertextual network for

the book.\textsuperscript{105} Scholars have begun to explore this network by grouping Proverbs with political narratives,\textsuperscript{106} legal texts that convey ethical paraenesis,\textsuperscript{107} or texts depicting the construction of cultic spaces and their psalmic liturgy.\textsuperscript{108} Rather than serving as evidence for historically unsubstantiated Wisdom ‘influence’,\textsuperscript{109} these groupings each reveal different facets of the book’s literary shape.

Much work remains to be done, but, significantly, when mapping the intertextual networks surrounding these texts in this way, wisdom as a concept is used to identify certain affiliations between texts, not defined on the basis of the texts chosen. Further, wisdom is only one feature that contributes to the understanding of each text; each is more than merely a ‘Wisdom’ text. The word wisdom has returned to the orbit of other concepts in the Israelite worldview, such as righteousness or holiness. This classification, long considered absolute and exclusive, has become relative and partial.

Genres may be emic, as authors intentionally compose their texts according to certain genre conventions, or they may be etic, and applied to a text later as a heuristic construct.\textsuperscript{110} Biblical scholarship treats Wisdom Literature as an emic genre, but the available evidence

\begin{footnotes}
\item[107] John Gammie argues ‘the entirety of the books of Deuteronomy, Proverbs and Sirach may be assigned without any hesitation’ to the genre ‘Paraenetic Literature’ (‘Paraenetic Literature: Toward a Morphology of a Secondary Genre’, \textit{Semeia} 50 [1990], p. 66; emphasis original).
\item[109] See Weeks, \textit{Wisdom Literature}, 135–42.
\end{footnotes}
does not indicate that the authors of those texts were knowingly writing in this genre. Instead
the evidence suggests the genre first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century and was then
projected back onto those texts. The collection of texts into etic genres is not in itself
problematic. As Michael Fox observes, scholars have devised numerous categories after the
fact to classify phenomena, such as ‘detective story’ or ‘phoneme’.\textsuperscript{111} He argues the influence
of contemporary intellectual and religious ideas need not invalidate these concepts, and they
can be applied today with any erroneous historically situated ‘extraneous assumptions’ set
aside. Fox does acknowledge, though, that biblical scholarship may be ‘crippled’ by
ideological influences ‘when the ideology predetermines the conclusion’. Wisdom, I have
argued, has been crippled in this way since its birth; the philosophical presuppositions that
inspired it are not ‘extraneous’ but intrinsic to its character, which they continue to define.

More than that, though an imposed category is not necessarily problematic, it
becomes so when it creates an alternative centre of gravity for a group of texts, drawing them
away from the rich variety of their original context into a new orbit around modern concerns.
This danger is magnified when the constructed nature of the etic genre is forgotten. Then, it
may not only be confused with an emic genre, but also reified as a taxonomic category and
connected with a particular ancient ‘tradition’ or ‘movement’ complete with its own social
setting and group of authors and tradents, as has been the case with Wisdom. This obscures
the genre’s contingent status as merely one way of grouping texts together according to
particular affinities readers have recognized when viewing them from a certain cultural
perspective. The word ‘wisdom’ (חכמה) is indeed used disproportionately frequently in
Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job (along with 1 Kings 1–11). Those three books (along with
Deuteronomy and a number of psalms) may indeed have a more explicitly didactic tone (as

modern readers understand didacticism). The Wisdom Literature category, however, transforms the undeniable heuristic value of such comparisons into a restrictive hermeneutical hegemony as it defines each book as a ‘Wisdom text’, discouraging comparisons outside the category, unless those other texts conform to the characteristics of Wisdom, demonstrating their ‘Wisdom influence’. This echo-chamber effect undermines the interpretive help Wisdom could provide, making it a hindrance.

Wisdom takes to its grave an extensive conceptual and paratextual apparatus—a purported ancient Israelite movement and current scholarly and publishing conventions that cordon off from the rest of the canon the so-called Wisdom books and those who wrote them and continue to write about them. Wisdom is just one of many genre groupings responding to shared affinities between these texts and others. It may be a genre but it is not the genre of these texts. They are not ‘Wisdom Literature’ in any definitive, categorical sense that would justify the assumption that they were composed in a separate school with a distinctive theology that requires its own introductions, specialists, courses, or conference sections—at least not any more than grouping texts based on their interest in other concepts, such as righteousness or holiness, would. Even as constructs, genres can have these types of real effects in the world as they shape readers’ expectations,112 which makes their uncritical use hermeneutically dangerous. As the Wisdom corpus is laid to rest in the dust, the network of canonical constitutive elements from which it came, it will reintegrate, as bodies do, into those same elements. From canon it was and to canon it will return. After the death of the Wisdom Literature category, it is through this intertextual reintegration that both the concept of wisdom and the texts associated with it may be reborn.

112 Fox, ‘Three Theses on Wisdom’, p. 78.