Abstract

This chapter introduces the volume by arguing that the study of biblical wisdom is in the midst of a potential paradigm shift, as interpreters are beginning to reconsider the relationship between the concept of wisdom in the Bible and the category Wisdom Literature. This offers an opportunity to explore how the two have been related in the past, in the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation, how they are connected in the present, as three competing primary approaches to Wisdom study have developed, and how they could be treated in the future, as new possibilities for understanding wisdom with insight from before and beyond the development of the Wisdom Literature category are emerging.

Keywords: wisdom, Wisdom Literature, history of interpretation, paradigm, genre

“History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed.” Thus begins Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970, 1). The study of biblical wisdom now appears to be in the midst of one of these “decisive transformations,”
otherwise known as a “paradigm shift.”¹ The title this chapter shares with the volume it introduces, “Wisdom and Wisdom Literature,” reflects one of the semantic shifts that Kuhn argues often accompany these transformations. That “and” has long been considered conjunctive, with the interpretation of the biblical conception of wisdom inseparable from that of the genre category, Wisdom Literature. Using genre taxonomically, Wisdom Literature reifies the affinities between a set of texts and then collectively associates them with a distinct tradition, theology, social class, and so forth. For example, when Ben Sira asks God to grant his audience “wisdom of heart to judge his people in righteousness” (45:26), Menahem Kister (2004, 14 n. 6) asks, “Would we have identified ‘wisdom’ in this verse as identical with that of ‘wisdom literature’ if we had not known that its author was Ben Sira?”

The interchangeable use of wisdom as concept and Wisdom as category suggests the Wisdom tradition encompasses the meaning of biblical wisdom. However, interpreters are increasingly exploring the possibility of treating that “and” as disjunctive, such that the concept, biblical wisdom, and the category, Wisdom Literature, are recognized to be distinct; related to one another, certainly, but retaining non-coextensive referents.²

¹ Though, as a discipline within the humanities, biblical studies can withstand inter-paradigm debate in a way in which the sciences in Kuhn’s understanding cannot (see Shedinger 2000), the dynamics he identifies surrounding changes in dominant paradigms may still apply, as Shedinger admits in regard to particularly influential paradigms in biblical studies, such as the Documentary Hypothesis (469).

² To reflect this semantic shift, throughout this volume Wisdom Literature and Wisdom are capitalized whenever they refer to the category or anything derived from it (“Wisdom thought,” “Wisdom tradition,” and so forth) to distinguish them from wisdom as a concept. Some would complain that this convention reifies wisdom. I would argue, however, that it
Interest in biblical wisdom is high, as recent publishing trends indicate. However, confidence in Wisdom Literature as a scholarly category is low. Questions have begun to be raised with increasing frequency and urgency about issues fundamental to the category’s definition and interpretation, including its delimitation, the tradition associated with it, and even its usefulness (see Sneed 2011; Dell 2015; Weeks 2016). One scholar has even attempted to write its obituary (Kynes 2019a). And along with these questions, scare quotes have begun to appear around the term, gripping it in uncertainty. Others have jumped to the category’s defense (e.g., Schellenberg 2015), but arguments that ideas are alive and well hardly make a strong case for their vitality. Indeed, the most concerning feature of recent Wisdom scholarship has been the increasing reliance on appeals to an ethereal “general consensus” to support its existence (see Kynes 2019a, 34-59).

This all makes the present a particularly exciting time to study biblical wisdom. The field is in what Kuhn would call a “revolutionary phase,” in which old paradigms and long-held assumptions may be questioned and new methods and theories proposed and debated. At the heart of these debates is the relationship between Wisdom Literature and the concept of wisdom itself. How have they been related in the past, how are they approached now, and how should they be related in the future?3

3 For example, the previous decade has seen the publication of numerous introductions to Wisdom Literature, including Crenshaw 2010; Weeks 2010; Bartholomew and O’Dowd 2011; Penchansky 2012; Saur 2012; Brown 2014; Sneed 2015a; Curtis 2017; Longman 2017; Phillips 2017; Balentine 2018; McLaughlin 2018.

4 See Markus Witte’s discussion in this volume (“Literary Genres of Old Testament Wisdom”) of the fundamental engagement of the process of classification with past, present,
Wisdom as Concept and Category

המכח (hokhmah), the main Hebrew word for wisdom, refers broadly to “a high-degree of knowledge and skill in any domain,” and it appears across the Hebrew Bible in contexts that range from women spinning goats’ hair into linen (Exod 35:25–26; cf. Prov 31:24) to God creating the world (Jer 10:12; Prov 3:19) (Fox 2000, 32). Ultimately, “wisdom aims at a successful life and proves itself to be a life skill,” as Markus Witte puts it in this volume. However, when biblical scholars speak about the purported “Wisdom movement,” are they referring to a movement in Israel particularly concerned with this concept of wisdom in all its breadth? If so, its appearance in such a broad range of contexts would indicate a similarly and future perspectives on the text, and the problems which arise when people attempt to classify texts that originated in a different cultural milieu.

5 Referencing texts from the Torah, Former and Latter Prophets, and Writings, Michael Fox (2000, 33) lays out the word’s semantic breadth, which includes (a) “skill”; (b) “learning”; (c) “perceptiveness”; (d) “cleverness”; (e) “prudence”; and (f) “sagacity.” In this volume, Jonathan Schofer (“Wisdom in Jewish Theology”) summarizes Maimonides’s similar four-fold understanding of המכח in the Bible: (1) “the apprehension of true realities,” (2) “acquiring arts,” (3) “acquiring moral virtues,” and (4) “the aptitude for stratagems and ruses.” See also Isra Yazicioglu’s chapter in this volume on “Wisdom in the Qur’an and the Islamic Tradition,” in which she presents the five aspects of “wisdom” (hikma) that the early qur’anic exegete Muqatil b. Sulayman sees in the Qur’an, which are more closely associated with divine revelation.

6 For more on the association between wisdom, skill, and success, particularly as mediated through sapiential instruction, see Jacqueline Vayntrub’s chapter in this volume, “Advice: Wisdom, Skill, and Success.”
broad movement; one which would encompass devotion to the law, as in Deut 4:6 and Ps 19:7, and practical skill, from yarn spinning (Exod 35:25) to bronze working (1 Kgs 7:14) (see Van Leeuwen 2010). Similarly, if Wisdom Literature simply referred to literature interested in the concept wisdom, then why would any text that mentions the word be excluded, particularly 1 Kings 1-11, which uses the word “wisdom” (חכמה and its derivatives) twenty-one times, a higher rate than Job (see Whybray 1974, 91; Lemaire 1995, 106-107)? As it is, however, the movement associated with Wisdom Literature has a narrower focus. Norman Whybray’s (1974) attempt to “investigate afresh” the meaning of this term across the Hebrew Bible, for example, only ends up reinforcing its restriction by sapiential assumptions, since he considers all non-intellectual usage of the term as “non-significant” (5, 83; see Van Leeuwen 2010, 418). Even aspects of the so-called Wisdom books, such as Proverbs’ connections with the law or Job’s revelatory climax are disassociated from it.7

Thus, with a semantic sleight of hand, the broader biblical conception of wisdom is swallowed up in a narrower scholarly conception of Wisdom Literature imposed upon it, and the wisdom concept is primarily defined by the traits associated with that collection of texts. For instance, despite the concerns James Crenshaw (1969, 130 n. 4) had earlier raised with precisely this terminological confusion, the closest he comes to defining wisdom as a concept in his influential introduction to Old Testament Wisdom (now in its third edition) is clearly

7 In this volume, for example, Witte claims, “Where cosmological knowledge is traced back to a specific divine revelation, that is to say, where vertical communication exists, such as in Enoch’s heavenly journeys (1 En. 17–36), it is not a Wisdom genre that is being dealt with, but a prophetic one, or more precisely, an apocalyptic one.” He refers to Job as an “inspired wise man.”
shaped by the Wisdom category’s intellectual emphasis. Crenshaw (2010, 4) writes,

The reasoned search for specific ways to ensure personal well-being in everyday life, to make sense of extreme adversity and vexing anomalies, and to transmit this hard-earned knowledge so that successive generations will embody it—wisdom—is universal. Until the second century BCE, biblical wisdom was silent about Abraham or any of the patriarchs, Moses, David, prophets, and priests, indeed anything specific to Israel (emphasis mine).

Thus, as Raymond Van Leeuwen observes in this volume, “The concomitant tendency to equate wisdom with select genres, and to restrict wisdom (mostly) to the Wisdom Literature, meant that the broader biblical presence of wisdom was largely overlooked” (“Theology: Creation, Wisdom, and Covenant”; emphasis original).

Past

If we are to comprehend the present or anticipate the future, we must, as Kuhn suggests, understand the past. The current revolutionary phase of Wisdom study offers an opportunity to reconsider where the narrower conception of wisdom that defines Wisdom Literature came from and whether it should be retained. It cannot have come from the purported ancient Near Eastern “Wisdom Literature,” since grouping these diverse texts, some of which are similar to Proverbs, others to Ecclesiastes or Job, all together as “Wisdom” resulted from the preexisting scholarly consensus on the biblical Wisdom corpus, which was already employed in biblical scholarship before those texts had been discovered in the late nineteenth century.8

8 This point has been made by those studying both Egyptian (Williams 1981, 1; Lichtheim 1996, 261) and Mesopotamian (Lambert 1960, 1; Beaulieu 2007, 3) texts. In this volume, Joachim Quack raises similar concerns (“Wisdom in Egypt”), while Yoram Cohen and
This narrower conception is not evidenced amongst early Jewish and Christian interpreters either, since they never exclusively group Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes together or associate them with a distinct conception of wisdom. Instead, they group different texts together for different reasons. This makes these earlier groupings not merely quantitatively but also qualitatively different than the modern Wisdom category.

For example, the Solomonic collection, particularly when Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon are included, may have “emerged as a way to rationalize the affinities readers could discern throughout this ‘Solomonic’ corpus,” as Matthew Goff claims in this volume (“The Pursuit of Wisdom at Qumran”), but that only makes it more significant that the modern Wisdom category excludes one member of that original corpus, Song of Songs, and includes another, Job, not attributed to Solomon. Clearly, Wisdom Literature is an attempt to rationalize different affinities.

When ancient readers employ a narrower conception of wisdom, it also differs from the one used within modern biblical scholarship. Origen, for example, envisions the three Solomonic books as a precursor to Greek philosophy. But he claims this curriculum in

Nathan Wasserman acknowledge that Wisdom is not an emic genre in Mesopotamian literature, but argue for its interpretive value nonetheless (“Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature”).

9 For further documentation of these differences, see Kynes 2019a, 60-81.

10 For the interpretive implications of the Solomonic corpus, see Katharine Dell’s chapter in this volume, “Solomon and the Solomonic Collection.”

11 The same can be said for Ephraim Chambers’ Cyclopedia (1728), which includes Song of Songs and Psalms along with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job in its “sapiential” category, while acknowledging that Job is at the time also placed in the category of Historical Books.
“divine philosophy” culminates in the Song of Songs, which “instils into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly,” leading “the seeker after wisdom” to “reach out for the things unseen and eternal” (trans. Lawson 1957, 41). The wisdom Origen has in mind is not the practical, humanistic wisdom of the contemporary category.

Similarly, in Berakhot 57b the rabbis associate various texts with a repeated series of different concepts. In the Sifre Emet, Psalms is connected with piety, Proverbs with wisdom, and Job with calamity, while, in the Megilloth, Song of Songs is linked with piety, Ecclesiastes with wisdom, and Lamentations with calamity. The association of both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes with wisdom might suggest a Wisdom category that cuts across these sub-collections, though it would again exclude Job, which, by that logic, would join Lamentations in a Calamity collection. Further, this text also associates Ezekiel with wisdom, which again implies a different understanding of wisdom from that which pervades modern scholarship.

In fact, in many cases, the use of wisdom as a concept in early Jewish and Christian interpretation is even broader than the meaning of חכמה in the Hebrew Bible. As Van Leeuwen observes in this volume, by referring to the Hebrew scriptures’ collective ability to “make one wise” (σοφίσκει), 2 Tim 3:15-17 “implies that the entire Old Testament is wise,” a view which Augustine and the Western Church would extend to the entire Bible (de doc. Chr., 4.5.7). The prologue of Sirach also implicitly refers to the entire canon as “pertaining to

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12 See Michael Legaspi’s chapter in this volume, “Wisdom in Dialogue with Greek Civilization.”

13 Earlier in the text, the rabbis also associate Solomon with wisdom, but, since they connect Song of Songs with piety (with which David is also associated) and not wisdom, they do not appear to be using Solomonic authorship as an incipient Wisdom classification as some have suggested.
instruction and wisdom,” since, after reading “the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors,” the prologue says Ben Sira “was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom.” Further, the rabbinic sages’ designation as “the wise” would suggest, as Amran Tropper writes in this volume (“Wisdom in Rabbinic Interpretation”), that their entire output, “including law, midrash, mysticism, theology, magic, medicine, literary narrative and dream-interpretation” could be considered “Wisdom Literature.” He argues that “this sweeping range of rabbinic interests implies an understanding of wisdom far broader than the range of conceptions of wisdom found in pre-rabbinic sources,”\(^{14}\) though one might also conclude that the range of conceptions of wisdom in those earlier sources is broader than we tend to recognize.\(^{15}\)

However, Ben Sira also provides a narrower view of wisdom by associating it with the Torah (Sir 24:23). Rabbinic sources, such as Leviticus Rabbah, repeatedly treat wisdom

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\(^{14}\) Consistent with the conception of wisdom they apply to their own work, the rabbis at times employ a broader definition of wisdom for classifying texts that incorporates far more books, potentially the Writings as a whole (see y. Mak. 2:4-8; Yalqut Shimeoni Tehillim 702) and perhaps even the entire canon (see, e.g., the Hekhalot literature discussed in Stemberger 2008, 318-319).

\(^{15}\) Günter Stemberger (2008, 319 similarly claims, “Wisdom literature in the rabbinic world is no longer what it used to be in biblical and Second Temple times. It is no longer a clearly distinguished separate literary genre with a well defined agenda.” However, as the Wisdom genre is increasingly considered less clearly distinguished and separate and its agenda less well-defined even within biblical and Second Temple times, the rabbinic view appears to be in closer keeping with its more ancient precedents.
as identical with Torah, as well (Fischel 1975, 70). Christian interpreters likewise offer a narrower understanding of wisdom that similarly identifies it with the focal point of their piety, Christ, who is spoken of as the wisdom of God in 1 Cor 1:24, 30, and in whom Col 2:3 claims “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden. In this volume, Susannah Ticciati discusses the continued association of wisdom with Christ in Patristic interpretation.

These early Jewish and Christian interpretations may appear to be hopelessly anachronistic impositions of the traits these interpreters most prized onto biblical wisdom. And yet, the scholarly characterization of biblical wisdom that arises in the mid-nineteenth century is hardly immune from the same charge. Franz Delitzsch (1866 [1864], 1:5) characterized Wisdom Literature at the time as the “universalistic, humanistic, philosophical” collection within the Old Testament, independent of Israel’s particularistic theocracy, cult, and law. He adopted the category from Johann Bruch, whom he acknowledged was “the first to call special attention to the Chokma or humanism as a peculiar intellectual tendency in Israel” in his book Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie (Wisdom Teaching of the Hebrews: A Contribution to the History of Philosophy) published in 1851. However, Delitzsch (1874–75 [1873], 1:46) had concerns with Bruch’s placement of Wisdom “in an indifferent and even hostile relation to the national law and the national cultus [of Israel], which he compares to the relation of Christian philosophy to orthodox theology.” As Bruch (1851, ix-x), whose previous work (1839) had focused on Christian philosophy, himself put it, the “wise” in Israel “found no satisfaction in the religious institutions of their nation” and “therefore sought other ways—

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16 See Tropper’s chapter, “Wisdom in Rabbinic Interpretation,” in this volume.

namely, the way of free thinking—to gain answers about the questions that moved them and to seek their spirit’s rest.”

This characterization of Wisdom Literature has endured since. Mark Sneed, in this volume (“The Social Setting of Wisdom Literature”), recognizes an enduring “myopic” tendency to view the “wise” as “some idiosyncratic group that was not interested in prophetic literature or the Torah and its commandments or the priestly material.” Wisdom Literature continues to be associated with modern values, such as humanism, individualism, universalism, secularism, and empiricism rather than concepts central to Israelite religion (see Miller 2015, 91-93). As Roland Murphy (2002, 1) has observed, the “most striking characteristic” uniting the Wisdom Literature still remains “the absence of what one normally considers as typically Israelite and Jewish.”

Michael Fox (2000, 29-30) quotes Eugene Rice’s (1958, 2) observation that the concept of wisdom has been “transformed by the changing needs and aspirations of successive epochs, centuries, and even generations,” consistently conformed to “the highest knowledge men were capable of and the most desirable patterns of human behavior” and, therefore, “mirrored man’s conception of himself, of the world, and of God.” Thus, for Jews, wisdom is Torah, while for Christians, it is Christ; “Each community tended to ‘decode’ canonical wisdom according to their respective commitments” (Berry 1995, 63), what they believed would produce a “successful life,” as Witte put it above. Even biblical interpreters, as John Collins (1994, 2) notes, have demonstrated a tendency to apply the “Wisdom” label to “[a]ny form of knowledge that is recognized as good.” Unsurprisingly, then, Wisdom

18 In this volume (“Theology of Wisdom”), Tremper Longman challenges the universalistic and cosmopolitan characterizations of the theology of Wisdom Literature that descend from Bruch’s work.
Literature, as James Crenshaw (1976, 3) writes, “has stood largely as a mirror image of the scholar painting her portrait.”

Present

As the history of interpretation demonstrates, interpreters’ cultural locations inevitably affect how they understand the concept of wisdom and therefore which texts they associate with it. As Witte observes in this volume, “Classifications, even those that are fundamentally timeless, are contingent upon culture and period.” Or, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1988, 5) writes, “What we see depends on where we stand.” The question now facing interpreters is how to proceed once the subjective nature of their interpretation of wisdom, both as concept and genre category, is acknowledged. In the fragmented and uncertain present state of Wisdom study, three primary approaches are emerging.19

The Traditional View

The first, traditional view maintains the understanding of wisdom and Wisdom Literature that reached “general consensus” status during the twentieth century. As Crenshaw (1969, 132) argues, this view orients the definition of biblical wisdom to the accepted Wisdom books. In this volume, Goff makes a more nuanced (and less circular) defense of the traditional category that draws on more recent genre theory that sees genres as “multivocal, fluid, and relational.” He argues that, though the Wisdom category is etic and constructed, and therefore

19 In his chapter, “The Pervasiveness of Wisdom in (Con)texts,” in this volume, John Ahn also sees three approaches emerging, though he characterizes them as the traditional view, the elimination of the category, and an intermediary view that draws on newer approaches while maintaining the traditional view.
“fragile,” it provides pragmatic benefit for highlighting significant affinities between texts. He writes, “If one analyzes Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes without classifying them as Wisdom texts, it would still be clear that these three texts have more similarities, despite their extensive differences, with each other than with other books of the Hebrew Bible.”

Pan-Sapientialism

Crenshaw feels the need to restrict wisdom to the Wisdom books because a second tendency to expand the category across the canon has long accompanied Wisdom interpretation. This approach began with a proliferation of studies of Wisdom “influence” in various texts ranging from Genesis to Esther in the mid-twentieth century and has now progressed to a pan-sapiential extreme, in which the whole canon and the heart of the Israelite worldview are associated with the Wisdom movement. This is not mere hyperbole. In The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture (2012, 284–285 n. 26), Yoram Hazony “look[s] forward to a time when most of the Hebrew Bible, if not all of it, will be recognized as ‘wisdom literature.’”

This

20 In this volume (“Wisdom Influence”), John McLaughlin worries that the many proposals for Wisdom influence put both the distinctive character of Wisdom Literature and the broader analysis of biblical literature in jeopardy, since “if everything is ‘Wisdom,’ then not only does Wisdom no longer constitute an identifiable body of biblical literature, neither does history, prophecy, etc.” See also Crenshaw 2010, 34.

21 Similarly, J. de Waal Dryden (2018, 261) argues, “The whole of the Hebrew Bible can fit under the umbrella of wisdom,” with “all biblical genres as sub-genres of wisdom,” and defends a pan-sapiential approach as hermeneutically fruitful for opening up new intertextual readings. Unlike Hazony, Dryden appears to be advocating a return to something closer to the early Christian view of the entire Bible as wisdom, though he defends the modern Wisdom
recent pan-sapientialism differs in a subtle yet significant way from earlier Jewish and
Christian views that the entire canon communicates divinely inspired wisdom, since the
wisdom associated with Wisdom Literature is instead rationalistic, humanistic, secular, and
philosophical. This is precisely the attraction of pan-sapientialism for Hazony (2012, 284-285
n. 26), who claims texts across the canon “were composed largely in an effort to attain and
inculcate worldly wisdom.” The language of “Wisdom influence” is particularly telling in
this regard. It is the “Wisdom” movement that is said to “influence” texts across the canon
while the influence of texts across the canon on the Wisdom Literature is a priori excluded by
the defining features of the category as independent of Israel’s law, history, and cult.

Sapiential Minimalism

On the opposite extreme, a third approach, which Goff christens “sapiential minimalism” in
this volume, questions fundamental features of current Wisdom study and even rejects the
category entirely. Concerns about Wisdom Literature have long remained an undercurrent,
consistently raised by those, like Delitzsch or Gerhard von Rad, who nevertheless continued
to work with the traditional category. However, Stuart Weeks has led the charge in asking
more uncomfortable questions, beginning with his book, Early Israelite Wisdom (1994),
which challenges many of the assumptions surrounding a purported class of “wise men”
participating in an international “Wisdom movement.” Sneed’s article “Is The ‘Wisdom
Tradition’ a Tradition?” (2011) struck a nerve a few years ago, inspiring a session devoted to

22 Von Rad (1972 [1970], 7–8) questioned whether, as an invention of the scholarly world,
the Wisdom category could be “dangerously prejudicing the interpretation of varied material”
and has, therefore, “been more of a hindrance than a help.”
considering Wisdom’s future in the Wisdom in Israel and Cognate Traditions section of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2012 and then the collected volume *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies* (Sneed 2015b).

Goff’s nuanced traditional view and the “minimalist” approach I have developed by building on the work of Weeks and Sneed are not actually that far apart, however (see Kynes 2019a). I agree with Goff that “classification is a core and basic act of the human mind” that “should be acknowledged rather than dismissed,” but, precisely for that reason, I would prefer to multiply the genres in which we read each so-called Wisdom text rather than restrict them to this single, fixed, and modernly imposed classification. The Wisdom category may indeed highlight the affinities between texts that Goff identifies, but given the pragmatic value Goff sees in this genre for highlighting those affinities, why not pursue other genres that illuminate other affinities those texts may have with other texts, such as those between Job and Psalms or Proverbs and 1 Kings?23 The problem, in my view, is not grouping certain texts around a particular interest in wisdom or instruction; it is not even interpreting texts according to modern understandings of wisdom. The problem is projecting a post-Enlightenment conception of wisdom onto a group of biblical texts or even the entire canon without acknowledging it—concealing anachronism in circularly supported historical conjectures about a purported Wisdom movement—and thereby restricting interpretation of biblical wisdom to modern views of what is good.24

23 See Kynes 2012, 2019b. For more examples of connections between the three books associated with Wisdom and other texts across the canon and beyond, see Dell and Kynes 2013, 2014, 2019.

24 It should be acknowledged that restricting the study of wisdom to “biblical” wisdom also imposes an anachronistic category on the texts, since the canon developed after the texts that
Future

Proceeding from this revolutionary phase, Wisdom study would profit in the future from incorporating more readings, first, from before “Wisdom Literature” was developed and, second, from beyond the category’s Western cultural context. Rather than restricting the interpretation of these ancient texts to a nineteenth-century conception of wisdom, the approaches of readers before the Wisdom category developed could provide new, ancient insight into the meaning of both the wisdom concept and the texts associated with it. Perhaps their perspectives on the texts—though self-interested like those of modern readers—enabled them to see things that those ostensibly objective interpreters missed or attempted to explain away. Thus, in this volume, after setting aside “the post-Enlightenment presuppositions projected onto the category of ‘Wisdom Literature,’” Jonathan Burnside (“Law and Wisdom Literature”) comes to a similar conclusion as many early interpreters: Law and Wisdom are complementary, not dichotomous. This is a conclusion with which early interpreters would agree, such as those who interpreted Ecclesiastes in relation to the law during the canonization process (e.g., Targum of Ecclesiastes 1:3; cf. Dell 2013, 23), or attributed Job, it includes (see Bowley and Reeves 2003). Some restriction is inevitable to focus the object of study. As a contribution to biblical scholarship, this volume is designed to elucidate the meaning of the concept of wisdom primarily in the texts that came to be known as the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, with special attention to those texts that have been most closely associated with that concept in that discipline. However, its design also resists restricting the understanding of wisdom exclusively to that corpus by including chapters on wisdom in related ancient and modern cultures and their texts (which is in keeping with Bowley and Reeves’s understanding of a more heuristically valuable use of “biblical” in the field [14]).
with its connections to texts across the Torah, to Moses (b. Baba Batra 15a). In fact, Maimonides follows the Talmudic sages in seeing wisdom as a “verification” of the Torah.²⁵

The interpretation of Wisdom should also go beyond Western perspectives. Biblical scholarship has recently begun to appreciate the contributions of various contextual approaches to the text. As Brian Blount (2019, 14) recently argued, differing contextual perspectives allow readers to perceive different aspects of the text’s “meaning potential.” For this reason, this volume includes essays that consider the concept of wisdom from a variety of contexts, both historical and ideological. For instance, in his chapter on “The Pervasiveness of Wisdom in (Con)texts” in this volume, John Ahn interprets the Wisdom books from an Asian context, which highlights, among other things, how Job, like the Buddha, is tempted by an adversary. This feature is absent from all extant comparable so-called ancient Near Eastern Wisdom texts and minimized in Wisdom interpretation.²⁶

Conclusion

This reception-oriented approach is not a flight from the text’s original historical meaning or the investigation of the world behind it. Instead, after acknowledging the subjectivity of even critical attempts at objectivity, it multiplies subjective perspectives in order to pursue a more objective perception of that historical meaning between them.²⁷ For example, research into

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²⁶ For similar contextual approaches, see also Hancock 2019; Masenya and Olojede 2019.

²⁷ Blount (2019, 12 n. 24) quotes Paul Ricoeur’s (1976, 77) comparison of a text to a three-dimensional object “which may be viewed from several sides, but never from all sides at once” and therefore concludes that “the reconstruction of the whole has a perspectival aspect similar to that of a perceived object.” For a similar multiperspectival approach, see Kynes
how ancient Near Eastern scribal practices may illuminate the so-called Wisdom texts will be distorted if it perceives scribal practice exclusively through a modern lens, which reflexively disassociates wisdom from ritual and revelation. In fact, as Sneed argues in this volume, the evidence points not to Wisdom specialists but to scribal curricula in which “Wisdom Literature was integrated with other genres, like erotica, hymns, model letters, etc.” Yoram Cohen and Nathan Wasserman similarly acknowledge in this volume (“Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature”) that the Mesopotamian concept of wisdom is often associated with divinely revealed knowledge and religious ritual (see, e.g., The Scholars of Uruk, Hear the Advice). This, they say, “broadens for us the significance of the concept of wisdom in Mesopotamian thought.”

This broader understanding of wisdom will also provide greater relevance for wisdom in the world in front of the text. As von Rad (2001 [1957–60], 1:428) argues, “Any sound discussion of Israel’s wisdom means taking the concept as broadly as it was indeed taken.” He laments that wisdom, which “has to do with the whole of life and had to be occupied with all its departments,” has been “thought of more or less as the product of an exclusive theological school.” Looking before and beyond the Wisdom Literature category underscores that each text it includes is more than a Wisdom book, and that biblical wisdom “has to do with the whole of life,” not merely the life of the mind.

This volume, therefore, is designed both to reflect on the contested nature of the Wisdom Literature category and to take advantage of the opportunities this presents for reconsidering the concept of wisdom more independently from it. The first half of the volume is devoted to wisdom as a concept, with essays on its relationship to advice, epistemology, virtue, theology, and order in the Hebrew Bible, its meaning in related cultures, from Egypt 2019a, 107–145, esp. 139-141.
and Mesopotamia to Patristic and Rabbinic interpretation, and, finally, in the modern world, including in Islamic, Jewish, and Christian thought, and from feminist, environmental, and other contextual perspectives. The latter half of the Handbook then considers “Wisdom Literature” as a category. Scholars address its relation to the Solomonic Collection, its social setting, literary genres, chronological development, and theology. The category’s relation to other biblical literature (law, history, prophecy, apocalyptic, and the broad question of “Wisdom influence”) is then discussed before a series of essays address the texts commonly associated with Wisdom Literature. Though the volume’s structure gives contributors in the first half devoted to wisdom as a concept the freedom to explore its meaning unfettered by the category’s constraints, they embrace this freedom to varying degrees. Some remain within the traditional textual confines of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job (along with Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon), while others pursue the concept more broadly across the canon. On the other hand, in the latter half of the volume devoted to the category, some emphasize the category’s limitations and even question its validity, while others staunchly defend its heuristic value. This reflects well the Kuhnian “revolutionary phase” in which the field now finds itself. The current paradigm can no longer simply be assumed, but a new one has not emerged to claim widespread approval. Though the organization of the volume highlights the independence of wisdom as concept from “Wisdom Literature” as category, seeking to reverse the lack of attention given to this question in the traditional approach, their inclusion together in the same volume reflects their continued interconnection. Time will tell what the future holds for this relationship.


meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Chicago, IL. 21 November.


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