BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES


Sneed designed this book to serve as a textbook for undergraduate courses on the wisdom books of the HB. The book is accessible, even if at times Sneed uses technical terminology that he does not define well. Sneed is very thorough, but his work is not laborious to read.

The first two chapters provide some background for understanding the sages. Sneed lays out a crucial piece of his understanding of the sages in chapter 1. He argues that there was never a definable group of people known as sages since they came from all different professions. Such a theory presents a problem for understanding the production of the books of wisdom from the ancient Near East, but Sneed argues that scribal schools produced the literary works of wisdom. Chapter 2 is a broad look at ancient Near Eastern ideology and understandings, which helps students understand the wisdom texts, but the information is applicable to the entirety of the HB, not just the wisdom books.

The structure of the book relies heavily on Sneed’s argument that the sages responsible for the wisdom books were scribes. Sneed often speculates about how scribal educators employed the books in their curriculum. Because of this strong conviction, Sneed devotes chapters 3–5 (67–182) to scribalism in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel. This section is a great introduction to scribal practices for undergraduate students, but does not elucidate the wisdom literature as opposed to other works produced by scribes.

After concluding his section on scribalism, Sneed spends chapter 6 looking at the legitimacy of “wisdom” as a useful genre label. Sneed brings the present conversation about genre in the wisdom literature to the student. While assigning a genre to a given text is useful, it is a descriptive exercise that frequently oversimplifies. Chapter 7 provides the student with an overview of the rhetorical and poetic devices that wisdom literature employs. These two chapters help the student understand the function of wisdom texts more clearly.

The final five chapters (297–396) briefly cover specific books or categories within the wisdom corpus. Sneed devotes a chapter to each of the three books within the HB frequently classified as wisdom (Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes) and then addresses deuterocanonical wisdom books. The final chapter addresses wisdom psalms and the wisdom books in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sneed has no concluding chapter or epilogue that ties the book together. Thus the book ends abruptly. Despite not including a formal conclusion, the final five chapters are perhaps the most useful material in the book. Sneed summarizes the major themes and questions in each work in a well-informed manner. His basic introductions to these books are both accessible for undergraduate students and well informed as to the current scholarly consensus regarding these books. These final five chapters make the book what its tagline indicates: “An Introduction to Israelite and Jewish Wisdom Literature.” However, the latest material considered is the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Sneed occasionally makes overly strong claims that he does not substantiate well. He claims, referring to the arrangement of Prov 1–9 (304), “But that the sages are deliberately alluding to Deuteronomy cannot be denied!” While Prov 1–9 probably alludes to Deuteronomy, some serious scholars believe Deuteronomy draws from the wisdom tradition. Thus it is possible that Deuteronomy and Prov 1–9 both descend from a common wisdom tradition rather than having direct literary dependence.

A number of editorial mistakes appear in the book. For example, Sneed refers to lawyers engaging in oral “dispositions” (191) rather than “depositions.” Page 379 claims, “We are not entering disputed territory when considering certain psalms that have been classified as ‘wisdom psalms.’” Yet the following material is about the uncertainty of the category of wisdom psalms.

Sneed’s book accomplishes its task of being a thoughtful and accessible introduction to wisdom literature of the HB. While Sneed’s perception of the wisdom literature does not always agree with the general scholarly consensus, his work productively engages in scholarly conversation. A few shortcomings in the book leave open the possibility for a second edition, which would be a welcome addition to the pedagogical resources available for teaching wisdom literature to undergraduate students.

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The book of Isaiah has been graced of late with major commentaries by Childs, Goldingay, Williamson, Beukel, Koole, Blenkinsopp, and others. Few of those works manage, however, to be at once as succinct, historically and philologically careful, and theologically fruitful as Roberts’s new volume on chapters 1–39 in the Hermeneia series. The work exhibits numerous strengths. For example, by attending to the text-critical evidence (Qumran manuscripts, MT, LXX, and later versions) and drawing on cognates in related languages, Roberts recovers a convincing text that leads to a clear and sometimes poetically sensitive translation of the work. Though he frequently disagrees with standard English translations, Roberts states his case with clear arguments and meticulous attention to all available data.

Moreover, the same care also enters into his detailed analysis of each pericope, which almost unfailingly finds the key points while avoiding distractions in the innumerable viewpoints on side issues in the commentary.