

## REVIEWS

**William P. Brown.** *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. (235 pp.) [ISBN 9780802867933]

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Anyone looking for a straightforward introduction to the provenance, structure and contents of the three major wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job – should not look to Bill Brown's book, *Wisdom's Wonder*. Brown approaches his task rather like a biblical sage, a probing and prodding exploration of the wisdom corpus, and does so with the sage's rhetorical flourish. Observing that "If the wisdom corpus were a choir, a melodious harmony would not be its forte" (2), he asks what holds this diverse literature together. Some scholars have seen the defining feature of wisdom literature as anthropocentric, focused on human prosperity. Other scholars see wisdom literature as theocentric, with God's creation its central theme. Brown proposes that the diversity of wisdom literature is held together by creation providing the "generative *context*" for wisdom and character formation the "rhetorical *aim*" (5, *italics original*). Yet the search for biblical wisdom is no detached academic pursuit but rather is animated by wonder, with its two sides of awe and inquiry (23), and wonder is often precipitated by crisis. And there's the title of the book.

The introduction to the book is dense and perhaps overly ambitious in terms of squeezing a lot into a small space. Brown explores moral character (ethics) and literary character (characterisation) to lay the ground for how literary characters in the wisdom literature are deployed to form character in the readers. The concept of wonder is also explored, drawing upon both ancient and contemporary philosophers. Brown returns to these themes throughout the book, although in a discursive rather than systematic way. His discussion of how in biblical wisdom the "cosmic order depends upon the proper ordering of the social realm" and "the sages' perception that the natural and social realms are an interconnected whole" (18) rings true in our age of global warming, Covid-19 and an invasion in Eastern Europe which has created food shortages around the world.

The main body of the book explores Proverbs (one chapter), Job and Ecclesiastes (two chapters each). The order of the books moves from most straightforward, Proverbs, to most enigmatic, Ecclesiastes, with Job sitting squarely in the middle. Brown approaches each book differently. The chapter on Proverbs is a thematic treatment mainly of the first nine chapters of the book, exploring the how the different characters function to cajole, threaten and invite the readers to pursue wisdom and thus develop good character themselves. Brown draws upon his discussion of virtue from the introductory chapter to consider the role of moral and instrumental virtues in building healthy community. The proverbs themselves, the sentence sayings which constitute 70% of the book of Proverbs, receive a brief and none too insightful treatment compared with the detailed discussion in the rest of Brown's book. The reader will need to look elsewhere for help in understanding the magic of the proverbial sayings themselves.

The book of Job is treated in a macro-commentary fashion, working through the book from beginning to end. The book of Job is well known as an “open” text and has been interpreted negatively, understood as God and Satan carrying out a sadistic experiment on Job and his family, and culminating in God the cosmic bully pummelling Job into submission. Brown reads the book of Job positively, concentrating on the changes in Job throughout the book. After his life implodes Job first pleads to God to take his life. But his attitude changes through the dialogue with his friends, and Job rejects his death wish and becomes impassioned by the desire to confront God with the injustice of his life. Job gets his wish, but instead of arguing his case with God he is silent, overcome by wonder of God and of God’s awesome creation. Although the book of Job is almost finished at this point, Brown makes much of the ten-verse epilogue, explaining how the Fromm Job of the prologue has been transformed into a joyous Job through his travails and encounter with God. Job is an open text and this a suggestive reading.

The final two chapters, “Wandering Among the Ruins: Ecclesiastes I” and “Wondering Among the Ruins: Ecclesiastes II,” see Brown himself wandering and wondering through Ecclesiastes in a thematic study. It is a masterful treatment, filled with thought provoking insights and help in understanding this most left-of-field book in the Bible. Yet at the end of nearly 50 pages discussion, Brown writes, “[Ecclesiastes’] perplexing nature both beckons and bewilders readers (at least this one), and for all that has been said by way of commentary and reflection, I am not at all sure if any of it (or any other interpretation) is on target” (181). Welcome to Ecclesiastes!

I have given a barebones outline of Bill Brown’s *Wisdom’s Wonder*. It is a deep and rich reflection on the three main O’T wisdom books, and I can see myself returning to it many times to mine its insights.