

Wisdom Literature by Alastair Hunter.
scm press 2006.

The biblical genre of Wisdom Literature is one of the richest in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and Apocrypha, and the source of many epithets that have entered the English language and become embedded in Judaeo-Christian civilisation. In this study in the SCM Core Text series, Dr Alastair Hunter, Senior Lecturer in Hebrew and Old Testament studies at Glasgow University presents a thorough survey of Wisdom literature as a genre and then considers the primary exemplars – Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira.

The book is divided into three parts; the first considers Wisdom as a literary genre, both in terms of the context of Ancient Israel and the contemporary Near East. The latter demonstrates that as a type, Wisdom Literature was a key form in the Fertile Crescent, especially in Egypt but also in Babylonia and the Hittite Empire. Hunter also illustrates the closeness of some biblical and non-biblical Wisdom texts, notably Proverbs 22.17-23.10 and the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope, while pointing out the pitfalls in attempting to prove close cross-cultural connections definitively.

The second part is devoted to the principal Wisdom texts in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, to which he adds the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus. What marks this study out is that at the end of each chapter Hunter provides a series of provocative questions for the reader, encouraging him/her to challenge some of the theories that he has proffered.

The final section, folk tales and fairy tales, considers the anthropological setting of the Wisdom genre, with particular regard to the theories of the 19th/20th century scholar Axel Olrik, which Hunter applies to a number of stories in Genesis, including Genesis 22 and 37, the tale of the Binding of Isaac and Joseph and His Brothers.

This is an extremely fine study of Israelite Wisdom Literature that ducks none of the complexities and challenges of the genre, but admirably clarifies many issues. It will be a source of great interest to devotees of the biblical text who wish to learn more about its inner structures and meaning, to students of the text at university or theological college, and to discussion groups in churches and synagogues.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh