

[MJTM 21 (2019–2020)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Richard P. Belcher Jr. *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 46. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018. xvi + 246 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-2647-6. \$26.00.

Richard P. Belcher Jr. is John D. and Frances M. Gwin Professor of Old Testament and Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC. His recent publications include a commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Mentor Commentary Series and a commentary on Job in the Focus on the Bible series. His work in these two books makes him well qualified to author a biblical theology of wisdom literature. *Finding Favour* fills a void in modern publications by providing a theology of wisdom literature that is accessible to pastors and lay people alike. This fits well within the aim of the New Studies in Biblical Theology series to “help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better” (xi). The author’s goal is for modern readers to engage in wisdom literature as a source of wisdom because of the relative absence of these texts in the modern world. In an effort to achieve this goal, the author provides an overview of the traditional wisdom corpus (Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes), highlighting the unique ways in which each book provides instruction for living in a fallen world and points forward to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Finding Favour* begins with an overview of scholarship on wisdom literature, tracing its development from a peripheral concern in Old Testament theology to its present place of prominence. Biblical scholarship has traditionally not treated wisdom literature consistently in relation to the other elements of the Old Testament, such as salvation history, covenant, and the prophetic tradition. However, Belcher argues that without denying the differences between wisdom and salvation history, the two concepts

have enough similarities and overlap to form a “unified approach to creation, wisdom and salvation history” (12). His unified approach avoids the pitfalls of an overly strict view of genre that interprets the wisdom genre in isolation from the rest of the Hebrew canon, and implements intertextuality to better understand the theology of wisdom literature (This methodology is demonstrated most notably and recently in Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.) This unified approach to wisdom is employed throughout *Finding Favour*, where each wisdom book (Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes) is given three chapters that survey critical questions regarding its interpretation and background, the book’s content and message, and the book’s theology.

In an effort to establish a working definition of wisdom, Belcher interacts primarily with Crenshaw, whose humanistic view of wisdom is “the reasoned search for specific ways to assure well-being and the implementation of those discoveries in daily existence” (9). Belcher contends that “Wisdom is concerned with the order in creation to help human beings acquire knowledge of their environment to achieve mastery over life” (5). Additionally, the use of wisdom forms, the occurrence of certain themes or subject matter, and emphasis on creation are three aspects that are typically associated with wisdom. These three characteristics enable the author to limit his theological survey to Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, before including a basic overview of how Christ relates to wisdom.

In the chapters on Proverbs, the author views the book as the outcome of Israel’s attempts to understand their world and how to live in it according to wisdom from God. Wisdom’s purpose is to help young individuals plan and achieve the right goals in life. The author helpfully explains that proverbs are not universal promises for all situations. He argues, however, that they are “dependently true now” and will be “ultimately true then” (50) in the future kingdom of God.

In the chapters on Job, Belcher argues that the book is concerned with how one should suffer instead of why someone suffers. He establishes the origin of Job as being between Abraham and the character's mention by Ezekiel, and quickly concludes that *śāṭān* with the definite article in Job 1–2 must be Satan. Ultimately, Job is not told why he suffers, and the book shows that because of God's sovereignty, fear of the Lord should not be lost in times of suffering.

The chapters on Ecclesiastes are based on the idea that Qohelet is a sage who is struggling with Proverbs and its message. Belcher correctly notes that the author of the book is listed as Qohelet without trying to establish the figure's identity. The genre of the book is also uncertain, yet he argues that the structure of the book is an autobiography framed within narrative. His interpretation of the text focuses primarily on the "under the sun" (142) perspective, in which theological truths about God do not influence Qohelet's conclusions. Instead, solutions to the sage's questions are limited to what can be known within the observable human realm.

The book concludes with a chapter on the relationship of Jesus and wisdom. Jesus is portrayed as a wisdom teacher because of the style of his teachings, such as his use of proverbs. Belcher argues that Jesus is not personified wisdom, or Lady Wisdom, even if general similarities can be drawn between him and Prov 8. This conclusion is driven by his desire to avoid portraying wisdom as a divine hypostasis.

One of the strengths of *Finding Favour* is its clear explanations of the content and theology of each of the wisdom books. Scholarship on wisdom literature often centers around discussions of form and tradition criticisms, history of interpretation, and other aspects that can make a given resource inaccessible to many readers. *Finding Favour* avoids these pitfalls by providing a concise discussion of critical concerns and focusing on an explanation of the biblical text and its theological message. A prime example of this strength is the limited discussion on Qohelet, in which he does not get sidetracked in peripheral issues,

particularly the question of whether or not Solomon is the book's author. Although he presents various arguments regarding the book's authorship, he notes that the book does not identify Solomon as its author and that Solomonic authorship is not central to understanding the book's message. This format of discussion keeps the emphasis on key issues of the book and its interpretation, rather than on issues that do not have a large impact on interpretation.

Additional insights are scattered throughout *Finding Favour* for those looking to draw application from the text. Most notable is the author's advice on how to preach and teach Ecclesiastes. Belcher argues that "Once the negative work of deconstruction is presented, an 'above the sun' view that provides answers should be given" (182). This approach turns to Christ as the answer to many of Qohelet's concerns in life. Although this approach can neglect the intended tensions within the biblical text, it is practical and helps pastors and teachers relate to the text as Christians. Insights such as these uphold the stated goal for his readers. This is an important aspect of the book, as many treatments of the wisdom books raise challenging questions for the modern believer, particularly in the area of epistemology.

Although *Finding Favour* is a valuable book, it comes with many weaknesses. One shortcoming is that Belcher provides no specific methodology or procedures on how he plans to evaluate wisdom literature and its theology. He mentions the significance of Will Kynes' approach to wisdom through intertextuality (Will Kynes, "The Modern Scholarly Wisdom Tradition and the Threat of Pan-Sapientialism: A Case Report." In *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?: New Perspectives in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, edited by Mark R. Sneed, 11–38. Ancient Israel and Its Literature 23. Atlanta: SBL, 2015), and Tremper Longman III's genre-based approach (Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), yet does not specify how he plans to interact with those approaches in his study beyond the shared concern for connecting wisdom back to the rest

of the Old Testament. He implements some intertextual connections in his analyses, yet does not provide a reason for reading the two intertexts together. These issues prohibit his readers from retracing his steps to advance their own studies for teaching or personal growth. This is further complicated by the lack of a conclusion to the book. A confirmation of his argument or thesis is also lacking, although his only goal is to focus on the message and theology of each book. It would benefit the reader to have a concluding discussion that articulates a synthesis of wisdom as it appears in the Old Testament, or potential implications or applications for the the modern reader, which would strengthen his earlier argument that biblical wisdom is needed in modern times.

When controversial topics are in view, the author typically provides only the briefest representation of opposing perspectives on the issue before introducing his own platform. In the discussion of the identity of the accuser in Job 1–2, Belcher simply acknowledges that other views exist before asserting that the accuser must be the devil because the devil is known to cause trouble for God’s people (Zech 3; Rev 12:15–17). No further explanation is provided. This brevity is beneficial when the issue at hand is peripheral, such as identifying Qohelet, but greater explanation would benefit his readers when discussing interpretive arguments and issues.

Although *Finding Favour* is in no way intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive, it overlooks a few key concepts. In his discussion of the identity of Lady Wisdom, the author neglects to mention that some believe she is a metaphor of God’s wisdom. Including this prominent view would greatly benefit his analysis, as it avoids hypostasis yet allows for comparisons to be made between Lady Wisdom and Jesus (cf. Matt 11:18–19). The book also lacks substantial discussion of the definition of the fear of the Lord, one of the most prominent issues within wisdom literature. Although the phrase appears throughout the book, with only a brief explanation, one is left wondering if it is actual fear, or if it is simply reverence or awe—although each of those terms is used throughout the book.

*Finding Favour* demonstrates the relevance of wisdom literature in the modern era. Belcher provides a concise overview of wisdom literature and eloquently articulates theological insights from each of the wisdom books. His style is clear and engaging, and his insights motivate his readers to seek and value biblical wisdom. Although readers will need additional sources for further explanations of many topics, this book is recommended for pastors, students, and lay people beginning a study on a wisdom book. It will undoubtedly make its readers better interpreters of wisdom literature.

Matthew Bovard  
McMaster Divinity College  
Hamilton, ON