This short book is offered as a “spirited, accessible introduction to wisdom literature in the Bible.” The books so classified in the Jewish/Protestant canon (Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth) and the deuterocanonical Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon are covered. Each of the seven chapters ends with a set of questions for review, a short list of key words, and suggestions for further readings. The style is accessible, and footnotes are kept to a minimum.

The introduction affirms the continuity of a distinct wisdom tradition whose authors, the sages, were “thoroughly Yahwist” but who thought that “wisdom comes to those who carefully observe the ways of nature and the complexities of human behavior” (2). The early sages, it is argued, held to a belief that humans get what they deserve, while a second generation noticed that this was not the case; Sira and Pseudo-Solomon continue the tradition’s discussion in the context of Hellenism (the theory that Qoheleth also belongs in this context is not entertained) while introducing some new elements but in a way that shows their essential continuity with their forbears. Short summaries of each of the subsequent chapters follow. The introduction concludes with an explanation of the reference in the book’s subtitle to “Conflict and Dissonance.” This refers both to the way that opinions expressed in different wisdom books (and in Qoheleth within one book)
clash with one another and the way that “many aspects of wisdom conflict with fundamental ideas found in the rest of the Hebrew Bible” (8). It is in the clashes, ambiguities, and dissonances of these texts, especially the early Hebrew language books, that their meaning and their value reside.

Chapter 1 argues that the sages responsible for the wisdom books are to be identified as a distinct class, “the wise,” advisors to rulers. Penchansky follows Crenshaw in arguing that, although traces of wisdom influence can be found in many biblical narratives, this class were regarded with profound suspicion by other groupings, such as the prophets, in preexilic Israel. They were apparently mistrusted because they were so open to the teachings of other cultures that they were prepared to incorporate them in their own writings—thus (17) “Proverbs 22:17–24:22 are copied and adapted from the Egyptian Instructions of Amenhotep [sic; an error for Amenemope]”—and because they were open to knowledge derived from experience.

Although the book of Proverbs is covered in the second chapter, Penchansky tells us that he wrote it after the rest of the book, as he found the task of writing anything about a book “that has no real structure, with no distinctive style or perspective” (22) so difficult. This difficulty arises from what he sees as the attempt by two different groups of sages to base their enterprises on irreconcilable methodologies. One school, “Get Wisdom,” proceeds on the basis that we can know enough about God to assure success in life; the other, “Fear Yahweh,” believes that the deity is so unpredictable that such a positive epistemology is impossible to maintain. Even the thought that (pace the introduction) the clash between these two attempts to explain the existence of evil might be of some interest was not apparently productive. Indeed, consideration of such a clash would, it seems, avoid proper consideration of Proverb’s striking portrayal of Wisdom personified as a woman, Chochmah. The key thing about her, Penchansky argues, is that she was an Israelite goddess.

In chapter 3 we read Job through the lens of Yahweh’s statement in Job 42:7 that Job’s friends “have not spoken rightly” of the book’s suffering protagonist. Accordingly, this reading stresses the unfairness of the divine attack, through the agency of Satan, on him and his family as well as the error and crass insensitivity of the friends’ accusations against him. Job’s protests remain a valid outcry against any notion of divine benevolence; the final restoration is a further insult against which his silence can only be a “mute and ineffective protest against Yahweh’s benevolence” (49).

Chapter 4 turns to Qoheleth, seen (like Job) as a multivocal text. Three voices are detected in the text: one pessimistic, another pious, and a third that urges the enjoyment of life’s simple, guiltless pleasures. A diachronic enquiry into the book’s formation is considered.
irrelevant. A reading based on the final form is offered that argues that the pessimistic voice is “the authentic voice of Qoheleth … the best voice, the wisest voice, the voice I most want people to listen to” (63). The circularity of this argument is noted.

Chapter 5 asks why the older wisdom books fail to mention the covenantal theology so prominent in the rest of the Bible. Penchansky offers some explanations for this silence. Were the covenants so important to the sages that they did not need to be explicitly mentioned, or does their silence represent a deliberate protest against a trend they considered pernicious? Or did they fear persecution from the protagonists of covenant theologies? These explanations are rejected in favor of an understanding based on the idea that Israelite society was more complex than generally accepted and belief in covenant was less dominant than scholars assume. In fact, the sages represent a viewpoint in which covenant theology was not thought to be central.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, texts continuing the tradition in the context of Hellenism. Penchansky sees both books as essentially conservative, seeking to bolster a nationalistic reaction to the dominant cultures and close down any of the profound questioning that the earlier books allowed. Pseudo-Solomon may seem to be more open to such Greek ideas as the immortality of the soul, but, in fact, it co-opts this new teaching to serve its attempt to defend the conservative notion of divine retribution. As such, both books represent a profound retreat from the questioning, subversive wisdom of the older sages, above all the authors of Job and Qoheleth.

The conclusion identifies two narratives about wisdom: one a tragedy, the other a triumph. The tragic narrative concerns a progressive movement, a “flash of light and fearless intellectual discourse that subsequently flamed out” (112), a wisdom that, in Job and Qoheleth, dared to question the certainties of a rigid, conservative Israelite society but whose impetus was lost in a subsequent reactionary generation of sages. The triumphant narrative is one about a group of writers who were prepared to confront foundational questions in the light of the reality of human suffering and the absurdity of much of life, to consider “the implications of a universe where one cannot depend upon God” (112). Which of these two narratives about the wisdom tradition are we to choose? Apparently we do not need to; rather, the sages’s characteristic ambiguity is also to be applied to any consideration of whether their enterprise succeeded or not.

Penchansky is to be commended for his sensitivity to the conflicts and dissonances, not to say the contradictions, that characterize these books, especially Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth. Moreover, it is refreshing and congenial when a scholar is prepared to admit that a text has defeated his best interpretative efforts, as Penchansky confesses he has been
defeated by Proverbs (33). On the other hand, his determination to focus on conflict and dissonance results in a curious silence about the many beauties of this enigmatic but engaging book, its wit and humor, the way its sometimes brutal realism is balanced by a sensitivity to the plight of the poor and the oppressed, the passionate cries of Chochmah, who is so much more than just a proof of Israelite polytheism (a thesis against which much could be said). Consequently, the reader seeking to be introduced to the rich feast that Wisdom sets in Proverbs receives little in the way of a compact but comprehensive guide.

Indeed, as an introduction to biblical wisdom literature, the book as a whole has some deficiencies. For instance, we are told that the glory of the sages was their readiness, supposedly distinctive in ancient Israel, to encounter the rich wisdom of other cultures. However, the student encountering their work for the first time is given almost no information about what is known of those riches. Apart from a brief (and misleading) mention, we hear nothing of the Egyptian instructions; Mesopotamian texts often held to be illuminating parallels (e.g., Shuruppak for Proverbs, Babylonian Theodicy for Job, Gilgamesh for Qoheleth) are conspicuous by their absence, as is the Syrian Ahiqar. Indeed, Penchansky’s confidence that the sages were a distinct group in Israel is not confronted with the evidence that some biblical writings, generally not considered to be from the wisdom school (e.g., Gen 1; 6–9), are aware of, indeed in polemical interaction with, such non-Israelite texts as Enuma Elish and Atrahasis. More advanced students will have, it is to be hoped, some awareness of the powerful counterarguments to the positions adopted here and to some others elsewhere in the book, but beginners, who might assume that they represent a scholarly consensus, could be misled.

Penchansky confesses himself torn between two conflicting readings of the wisdom tradition. The first he offers is, as it were, a tragedy in which this “more progressive” movement failed to maintain its witness in the midst of a “patriarchal, rigid Israeliite society” (111). On the other hand, he is himself suspicious of such a “pat narrative” (112) and is also drawn to a more generous understanding of the tradition as triumphantly able to accommodate old insights to new conditions. Perhaps his inability to decide between these two narratives flags up the inappropriateness of the criteria he seeks to apply. Can any ancient texts be properly evaluated on the basis of whether they conform to our notions of what is “progressive”? Indeed, if we insist on seeking for ancient parallels to those modern exegetes for whom doubt and suspicion are the main beams of enlightenment, we shall be disappointed. Often enough, this book’s tendency so to do obscures as much as it reveals about the heuristic passions of these rich, complex, questioning, yet deeply devout texts.