Dell, Katharine

The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context


Magne Sæbø
MF Norwegian School of Theology
Oslo, Norway

Dr. Katharine J. Dell, who is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, has a thorough knowledge of the problems of Old Testament wisdom literature and its wider framework, which is the ancient Near Eastern, in particular the Egyptian, context. She is notably familiar with the extensive modern research in the field of wisdom tradition and literature that has turned out to be most popular in recent years; to the ever-growing number of specialized studies in the field she has contributed both articles and monographs, among which her books ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’: An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature (2000) and Seeking a Life That Matters: Wisdom for Today from the Book of Proverbs (2002) may be mentioned. In her latest book, to be reviewed here, she presents to some degree a synthesis of her earlier studies. In her analyses and discussions she continually makes references to the vast and variegated modern debate on wisdom issues without going into too great detail, and she also makes her own position in actual questions distinct; thus, some markings for the way ahead for further wisdom studies have been signaled as well—and they will be met with interest and attention.
As the title of her book indicates, Dell has chosen to focus on the social and theological context of the phenomenon and literature of wisdom in the Old Testament, limited to the book of Proverbs. This is an appropriate choice, for by that she is at the heart of central matters of the current debate. Methodically, she has an open and critical modus procedendi that is visible from the beginning of her study.

In the introduction (1–17) Dell both starts and ends with the problem of the separation and marginalization of wisdom, especially of the book of Proverbs, which she seems to regard as a key problem of the whole. She starts with the usual treatment of the Old Testament wisdom, stating that “the separateness of wisdom that characterized older Old Testament scholarship is still maintained by many today.” In this scholarly tradition, wisdom’s “context has been seen to have more in common with its ancient Near Eastern neighbours than with its mainstream Israelite institutions, and its theology has been seen to offer little contribution to the overall picture of Old Testament theology that is positive” (1). Against a “backdrop” of this kind, it easily becomes obvious why the concept of “context” is so important in her analyses and why the introduction also ends by focusing on wisdom’s “relationship with other parts of the Old Testament” (12–17). In between the introduction presents a brief general discussion of the problems of “social context” (3–7) as well as of wisdom’s theology (8–11). First, as for the question of the social context, Dell emphasizes that, since the book of Proverbs is to be regarded as “a collection of collections,” this question must be judged differently for each part of the book. Instead of the usual separation of Proverbs from the rest of the Old Testament, Dell “prefers separation of the genre—its forms and contents—and hence of the social context” (6). Then it is important to make a distinction “between oral stages of transmission and the writing down of material” as well. In this respect and for the question of the function of the Proverbs, largely related to “education and moral formation,” one must also take into consideration the existence and significance of both “family wisdom” and “schools for education,” and here a possible relation to the royal court may be discussed as well. Second, with regard to the wisdom’s theology, various reasons have been given for its separation from the biblical “theological scene.” This separation was not least grounded in the strong revival of biblical and Old Testament theology around the middle of the last century, concentrated as it was on a theological “centre” of Yahweh’s self-revelation in saving actions in history and in his covenant with Israel. Since the wisdom tradition and literature seemed to lack all of this, its theology was regarded as being of lesser interest. However, in recent years a substantial change has occurred: “A fresh approach to Old Testament theology is beginning to emerge in certain scholarly quarters, which gives a more central place to creation theology whereby historical and ahistorical elements of Israelite faith are being recognized” (11).
After this introductory discussion of the book’s three main concerns, Dell goes more into details of the text of the main parts of the book. She starts in chapter 1 with the first main concern, the question of social context, with regard to Prov 1–9 (also with some reference to the similar unit Prov 22:17–24:22), to Prov 10:1–22:16 in chapter 2, and then to the rest of the book, Prov 22:17–31:31 in chapter 3 (65–89)—which really is somewhat surprising, since these texts are of a very diversified character. Proverbs 1–9 is clearly given the broadest treatment (18-50), but the next main part, Prov 10:1–22:16, is also discussed relatively extensively (51–64). In examining Prov 1–9, with consequences also for the other parts, four criteria are first presented and discussed (18–21): (1) “a literary analysis” that exhibits “predominantly two genres,” first the “instructions,” similar to the Egyptian “instructions,” and “then a group of poetic discourses … speeches largely concerned with the description of a female figure of Wisdom and her relationship with God”; (2) the texts’ relation “to a historical and theological development,” including “questions of dating and of relationship to other texts from both within and outside the Old Testament”; (3) the “comparison with the ancient Near East as a whole,” with special reference to Prov 22:17–24:22, which has been extensively debated; and, (4) a “comparison with other parts of the Old Testament,” which generally has been shown little attention in the discussion of wisdom. Finally, Dell deals with the much-debated questions of “The School” and “Education within the Family,” in which she takes a decidedly flexible stand, avoiding sharp and contrasting alternatives—which not seldom has been the case.

The book’s second concern, the issue of wisdom’s theology, is treated in a double way: first the special question of the “Mention of Yahweh in Proverbs” is discussed (ch. 4; 90–124), then, the “Theological Context” (ch. 5; 125–54). The analysis of the mention of Yahweh also follows the three main parts of the book of Proverbs: chapters 1–9 (90–105); 10:1–22:16 (105–17); and 22:17–31:31 (117–23). The main result is that “Yahweh appears in a large majority of chapters of the book of Proverbs. The mention of him forms an integral part of structure of many of the genres and of chapters as we now have them.” Whereas “the references are more numerous and hence more integral” in the first nine chapters and “may well belong to the earliest stage of the development of both instructions and poems,” in Prov 10:1–22:16 and 25–29, on the other hand, “there is perhaps more significance in the placement of the smaller number of Yahweh proverbs.” Further, it is emphasized that Prov 30:1–14 “is the most religious part of the final chapters.” Dell adds: “The religious and the less religious existed side by side, in my view, in the earliest wisdom traditions” (123–24). This significant result of her first analysis is thereupon complemented by the next chapter’s discussion of the “Theological Context” (125–54), where—with reference to scholars such as von Rad, Gese, Zimmerli, Schmid, and, more recently, Perdue—the main focus in characterizing wisdom’s theology is laid on creation theology, on wisdom’s “interest in order and creation.” In this and other
ways, Dell has argued well for wisdom’s theological integration, which is more extensive than generally maintained.

Finally, prepared by the preceding chapters, Dell’s third concern is treated in the last chapter, which discusses “Echoes of Other Old Testament Texts and Contexts in Proverbs” (ch. 6; 155–87). Her analysis proves both “prophetic echoes” and “Deuteronomistic links,” as well as “cultic influence and echoes of psalmic texts,” although differently in the different parts of the book. Her conclusion, anticipating the book’s main “Conclusion” (188–200), is “that Proverbs is more unified with other parts of Old Testament … than scholars have generally allowed” (187).

This book, which most usefully ends with an extensive bibliography (201–20) and an index of names and topics (221–25), is clearly and well written and will be heard in future studies of the book of Proverbs.