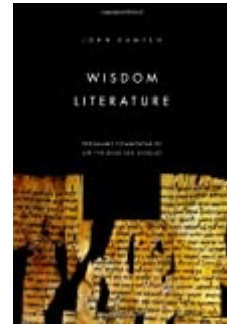




John Kampen. *Wisdom Literature.* Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010. xiii + 390 pp. \$36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4384-5.



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A Sage Study

John Kampen, a senior scholar who teaches at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, has written the first commentary on the wisdom literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls. As such, this is an important book that will prove very useful to scholars and students who work on the subject.

Wisdom literature is a traditional genre classification of three books of the Hebrew Bible—Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)—and, in the Apocrypha, Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. While these books attest a wide range of literary forms and thematic diversity, their grouping under the designation wisdom expresses that they are didactic compositions that presuppose some sort of pedagogical setting, in which teachers give instruction on practical topics, such as marriage and family, and also on more speculative topics, including theodicy and God's creation of the world.

Ben Sira was composed around 180 BCE and the Wisdom of Solomon ca. 40 CE, or perhaps somewhat earlier. These dates are clearly later than the composition of the

wisdom texts of the Hebrew Bible, allowing for speculation about how the wisdom tradition developed in the late Second Temple period. Such pursuits were traditionally hindered by the fact that there was only one Jewish wisdom text in Hebrew written between the Bible and the Mishnah—Ben Sira (the Wisdom of Solomon being in Greek). The Qumran corpus has substantially increased the number of Hebrew wisdom texts from the period, with many of the key compositions only published in the last ten years or so. This has produced a renewal of scholarly interest in the topic.

Kampen's book clearly and judiciously takes the reader through the main wisdom texts from Qumran. He covers the following texts (along with the classification numbers of their manuscripts): Instruction (1Q26, 4Q415-418, 423), the book of Mysteries (1Q27, 4Q299-300, 301?), The Evil Seductress (4Q184), Wisdom Composition (4Q185), Cryptic Words of the Maskil to All Sons of Dawn (4Q298), Sapiential-Didactic Work A (4Q412), Ways of Righteousness (4Q420-421), Instruction-like Composition B (4Q424), Beatitudes (4Q525), and Ben Sira (cov-

ering only the ancient Judean manuscripts of this work, not those from the Cairo Geniza–2Q18 and the Masada manuscript, which corresponds to Sir 39:27-44:17). True to the commentary format, the author provides not only summary overviews of the material but also translations and insightful line-by-line expositions of the texts.

While anyone working on the sapiential texts from Qumran will find this book useful, I do think its value is hampered to some extent by the format mandated by the series in which this book is included. The goal of the Eerdmans Commentaries is to provide accessible translations and commentary on the entire corpus of the Dead Sea Scrolls. A laudable aspiration to be sure, but many of the scrolls are highly fragmentary, preserving a few words or less. With such texts there is just not much to translate or comment upon. This is particularly the case with Instruction, the largest wisdom text from Qumran. It is a large composition that comprises over four hundred fragments, many of them quite small. Because of this format, substantial portions of the coverage of this text are devoted to tiny fragments that are relatively insignificant (e.g., pp. 172-82). This eats up space that could have been used to examine substantive fragments of the composition in more detail. This, and the goal of covering all the major wisdom texts, forces treatment of material to be, while consistently insightful, rather brief. The passage of Instruction that has perhaps engendered the most attention is the so-called Vision of Hagu passage (4Q417 1 i 13-18). The pericope bristles with terms and issues that need to be unpacked. Voluminous secondary literature has been written on the passage. The present book, however, includes under four pages of commentary on 4Q417 1 i 13-18 (pp. 98-101). I applaud the editorial decision to commission a commentary on the main Qumran sapiential texts in their entirety, but it often forces the author, even though the book is quite lengthy, to sacrifice breadth at the expense of depth.

Kampen shows awareness of not only the opportunities, but also the problems raised by Qumran writings conventionally labeled as wisdom literature. While most scholars would agree on what are the major wisdom texts from Qumran, there is no agreement on how many Dead Sea Scrolls should be so labeled. In principle people can

argue that this or that text is a wisdom composition. Kampen astutely (displaying wisdom, one might say) defines the Qumran wisdom literature by stating that *âit* is instructional material that can be identified with the biblical tradition of wisdom, while not limited by it in form or content^â (p. 14). He grants that this definition is *âvagueâ* and I agree that it is best to admit that the wisdom label is loose and somewhat subjective. Kampen is aware that this material forces scholars not simply to incorporate the *ânewâ* information the scrolls provide into our understanding of the wisdom tradition but, more importantly, to reexamine the categories of genre we use to make sense of the material (e.g., p. 13). However, more attention could have been devoted to the larger questions of their genre identification. He asserts, for example (as do many scholars), that the combination of traditional wisdom and apocalypticism is a hallmark feature of the Qumran wisdom literature (p. 13). But when one goes beyond Instruction and the book of Mysteries, apocalyptic themes such as heavenly revelation or eschatological judgment are relatively rare in these texts (see, for example, 4Q412, 4Q420-21, 4Q424). He argues that the book of Mysteries is *âan integral part of a wisdom corpus at Qumran that is characterized by the integration of wisdom with eschatologyâ* (p. 193). This assessment may be correct, but it depends on how one understands *âwisdom.â* It has been argued that Mysteries is not a wisdom text and, if one disagrees with this assessment (as I do, with Kampen), the work nevertheless illustrates a problem facing the study of Qumran wisdom literature in general—given that the texts in question are used to show how the wisdom tradition changed over time, it is possible that a Qumran text can be labeled a sapiential work even though it has relatively little in common with the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. This is the case with the book of Mysteries, which includes a dynamic scene of eschatological judgment but scant practical advice. While Kampen^âs book provides an excellent exposition of the material, there could have been more engagement with the problems that face anyone interested in the fascinating material from Qumran that is conventionally labeled as wisdom literature—how one decides which texts comprise the category and what it means to classify a composition as such.

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