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WISDOM RECONSIDERED, IN LIGHT OF THE SCROLLS

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“Where is wisdom to be found?” asks the book of Job (28:12). The conventions of biblical scholarship provide a ready answer to this question: in the books of Proverbs, Qoheleth, Job (with some reservations), Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon. Other material is identified as sapiential by analogy with these books. But even when the corpus is so defined, scholars have great difficulty in specifying just what these books have in common. It is much easier to say what wisdom is not. It is not narrative, although it may include brief narrative elements. It is not prophecy, since it does not claim to be the word of the Lord. It does not have the binding force of law. While it may contain hymnic passages, hymnody is not one of its dominant forms. In the Hebrew Bible, it is also distinguished by its lack of reference to the specific traditions of Israel, such as the Exodus or the Sinai covenant, but this distinction is eroded in the later books of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon. When we try to speak positively of the coherence of the wisdom material, however, the task becomes more difficult. In fact, the category seems to have arisen from ecclesiastical usage, based on the fact that the word “wisdom” occurs with exceptional frequency in these books.¹ Nonetheless, the fact that this kind of material can be readily distinguished from other genres supports the widespread intuition that the books in question have something in common.

There would seem to be three possible ways to approach this question, focusing on literary form, worldview, or function and setting.

There is universal agreement that wisdom does not constitute a literary genre, and that it can find expression in various literary forms.²

¹ R.E. Murphy, “Wisdom in the OT,” *ABD* (1992) 6.920.

² R.E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (POTL XIII; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) 3.



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