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# Richard J. Clifford, ed. *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*

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*Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*. Edited by RICHARD J. CLIFFORD. SBL Symposium Series, vol. 36. Atlanta: SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE, 2007. Pp. xiii + 116. \$19.95 (paper).

This volume originated in a symposium at the 2004 Society of Biblical Literature national meeting. After a brief editorial introduction to the various anthologies related to Mesopotamian and biblical wisdom literature, the book contains seven essays in four parts.

Part one, "The Context of Wisdom in Mesopotamia," contains thematically related essays by Paul-Alain Beaulieu and Karel van der Toorn. Beaulieu's essay concisely describes the social and intellectual setting of Mesopotamian wisdom literature as it developed historically. According to Beaulieu, the king was the focal point of wisdom and the closely related ante-

diluvian knowledge in pre-Kassite times; he was a culture bearer and responsible for ensuring harmony with the gods. By the end of the second millennium, however, kingship gave way to scholarship as the primary vehicle of wisdom. Royal advisers—diviners, lamenters, and exorcists—became the bearers of wisdom and antediluvian knowledge and the mediators between humans and gods. Beaulieu argues correctly that our notion of “wisdom literature” in this later period must be expanded to include textual corpora related to divination, lamentation, exorcism, and astrology. This essay is essential reading for understanding Mesopotamian wisdom literature.

Beaulieu's ideas mesh well with van der Toorn's main contention: in late-second-millennium texts “experience as the soil of wisdom gave way to revelation as its ultimate source” (p. 21). Wisdom became a secret of the gods. He demonstrates this first through a comparison of the OB and SB versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the latter of which shows an emphasis on antediluvian wisdom and its revelation as a secret of the gods. Brief appeals to the secret scholarly corpora as antediluvian wisdom (e.g., exorcism, astrology, and divination) and to the comparisons of kings with Adapa in historical inscriptions support this idea. In the last few pages van der Toorn rightly asserts that wisdom became a secret due to the prominence of writing, the standardization of important cuneiform works, and the exclusivism of the scribal profession. But the traditional divinatory notion that the gods wrote their secret will on the livers of animals must also have played a significant role in adapting secrecy to scribal activity and products.

Part two, “Studies in Babylonian Wisdom Texts,” presents two essays from Victor Avigdor Hurowitz. The first is brief, identifying two previously unnoticed allusions in the Dialogue of Pessimism (ll. 62–69 and 70–78) to the Hymn to Shamash (ll. 118–21 and 122–27, respectively). The second discusses The Instruction of Šūpê-Amēli, a relatively new wisdom text from the Akkadian periphery, and offers some biblical comparisons. The text contains a dialogue (like the Book of Job) between a dying father and his son. The father's words are “a sort of ethical will” (p. 40), containing about sixteen instructions about how to live a successful life (like the Book of Proverbs). But the son rejects the father's counsel, believing that “in the end there is no importance to the things that will befall a man, even if he heeds the pragmatic counsel promising success” (p. 43). The criticism of the father's wisdom by the son makes this text unique among Akkadian wisdom literature and most comparable to biblical Qohelet. Hurowitz concludes the essay with his own translation that both highlights the text's structure and adduces more biblical parallels.

Essays from Edward L. Greenstein and Raymond C. van Leeuwen comprise part three, “Comparisons of Mesopotamian and Biblical Texts and Motifs.” Informed by various explicit theoretical definitions, Greenstein

looks for humor—not just satirical but also comedic—in the biblical Book of Qohelet and the Mesopotamian Dialogue of Pessimism with interesting results. For example, a mechanical, predictable reaction to changing circumstances, according to one definition, is humorous. Thus, when the master and servant in the Dialogue both act exactly the same for each proposed activity, whether they are commending or denigrating it, Greenstein sees humor. For the same reason, the fool in Qohelet is a comical figure. According to another definition, the “sudden discovery of incongruence” (p. 60), expressed quickly and perceived immediately, also marks humor. Greenstein notes the servant's advice to train a god like a puppy as an example of this in the Dialogue (l. 60). The same definition identifies the rapid reversals or contradictions in the Book of Qohelet as humorous (see, e.g., Qoh. 2:3 and 4:6). Despite identifying a common element of humor in both the Dialogue and Qohelet, Greenstein does not use these similarities to flatten out their significant differences.

Van Leeuwen offers a very insightful study of Prov. 3:19–20 and 24:3–4 in light of the ancient Near Eastern metaphor of house building and house provisioning. The first third of the essay provides ancient Near Eastern background material, informed by an explicit theoretical understanding of myth and metaphor. Van Leeuwen persuasively demonstrates the interrelationship across various text genres of divine cosmic creation, mundane palace/temple/house building/provisioning, and the utility of wisdom in these endeavors. He uses this cluster of ideas as the key to understanding the divine activity of house building/provisioning in Prov. 3:19–20 and the human activity of the same in the related Prov. 24:3–4. Van Leeuwen also shows the close relationship these two texts have with the building of the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–3) and the temple (1 Kgs. 7:13–14). Scholars interested in metaphor, intertextuality, and the situatedness of biblical (wisdom) literature in its ancient cultural milieu will find much to think about in this essay.

Finally, an essay from James L. Crenshaw constitutes part four, “Biblical Wisdom Literature.” Crenshaw offers a catena of annotated biblical passages thematically related to human life: its beginnings (Job 10:8–12, Ps. 138:13–18, and Qoh. 11:5), its end (Job 14, Qoh. 12, Sirach 34:7, 41:1–4, *Wisdom* 3:3–4, and 8:19–20), and life's necessities (Sirach 29:21, 39:25–27, Qoh. 9:7–9, and Prov. 27:26–27).

Although the essays here are quite varied, especially in range—from bird's-eye overview to detailed treatment of particular texts—the volume offers several important studies for understanding biblical and Mesopotamian wisdom literature.

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