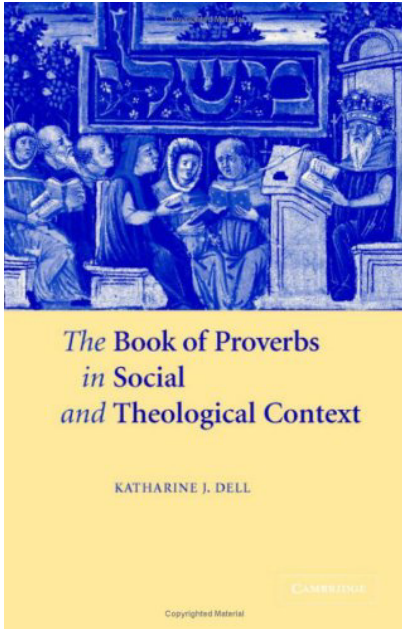


RBL 09/2008



**Dell, Katharine J.**

***The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context***

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. x + 225. Hardcover. \$85.00. ISBN 0521633052.

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In this book Katherine Dell attempts to establish the social and theological context of the book of Proverbs. Dell asserts that, since the book of Proverbs does not deal with Israel's history, election, and covenant (8), scholars have over the years considered it peripheral to the rest of the Old Testament testimony to Israel as the elect of God. Proverbs has, therefore, not occupied any place of prominence in Old Testament theologies. Furthermore, since most of the wisdom that characterizes Proverbs has been found among Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors, including Egyptians and Mesopotamians, it has been seen as the work of a class of sages who had no interest in Israel's mainstream institutions and whose theology differed from that of other parts of the Old Testament. She, however, acknowledges that this view of Proverbs is gradually changing, and the last forty or so years have seen a revived interest in wisdom literature in its own right (1). Yet for Dell the tendency to think of wisdom as a "foreign" corpus in the Bible, which characterizes older Old Testament scholarship, continues in attempts to understand the context and theology of Proverbs as well as the relationship of wisdom to the larger witness of the Old Testament (6).

Dell uses the history of the study of the book of Proverbs as a point of departure to both endorse and diverge from the ideas of earlier scholarship because she understands it as the text in which most of the oldest and traditional wisdom of Israel is preserved (2). She focuses her attention on three major areas of concern, which she claims continue to be at the “center of scholarly discussion”: the social context of Proverbs; its theological identity; and the relationship of Proverbs to other parts of the Old Testament (2). Dell questions whether the views of older scholarship regarding the distinctiveness of wisdom’s social context and theology in relation to the rest of the Old Testament can be maintained. Dell thus presents the views of a myriad of scholars who have engaged these topics over the years and subsequently adopts a synchronic approach to examine texts from other parts of the Old Testament (including prophetic literature, Psalms, and Deuteronomy) to debunk the arguments that Proverbs and wisdom are indeed a kind of foreign body in the Old Testament. One of her major concerns is to examine “whether God is extensively represented in Proverbs and whether he is to be identified with the same Yahweh who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt” (2).

In her examination of the social context of Proverbs, Dell addresses how the different sections of Proverbs (including 1–9; 10:1–22:16; 22:17–24:22; 24:23–34; 25–29; 30; 31) came together from their oral origins to their current literary formulation. Dell argues that the various attributions to royal and other authorship found in the superscriptions of Proverbs (Solomon, 1:1; 10:1; Hezekiah’s men, 25:1; Agur, 30:1; and Lemuel’s mother, 31:1), the variety of themes espoused in Proverbs, and the connection between specific sections of Proverbs and Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature, do not allow for assigning the book to a single context. For Dell, it is thus better to analyze the book’s various genres in order to determine its social context (6). Furthermore, the idea that Proverbs functions as a manual for education and moral formation does not preclude the fact that other forms of formation take place in schools as well as in family contexts, which constitute the earliest roots of wisdom. Proverbial materials thus point to “a wider ethical concern for all beyond simply being for the education of young men” (7). In her examination of the theology of Proverbs, Dell sees the pervasiveness of Yahweh’s role in it and posits that this role is more integrative than has been hitherto asserted (148–49). She therefore comes to the conclusion that the theological context of the book provides “insight into the way a distinctive wisdom worldview developed” (3). Wisdom is related to other thought-worlds that existed alongside the distinctive worldview of Proverbs, and this relationship provides clues to the social and theological connections made by the sages of Israel (4).

Among the major tasks that Dell attempts to accomplish in this book is to “affirm the important place that the wisdom enterprise and its thought had in the early formation of Israelite belief, while not denying its essential role in the shaping of texts and post-exilic

thought” (17). She posits that the forms of instruction in Prov 1–9 might have originated in both the royal court school setting (with Egyptians parallels [22–25, 67]) and in the familial setting but that they are united by one key feature: both represent a “teaching and an educational context containing broader ethical concerns” (47). Here she argues that earlier scholarship focused on the instructional content of the material at the expense of the theological (48), but her own position is to steer away from the “cut and paste” (49) approach of some scholars in order to discover whether there is more integration of the theological within the structure of individual sections instead. Apart from Prov 1–9, Dell examines 10:1–22:16 and concludes that the emphasis is on family/folk/tribal contexts in these proverbs. This emphasis for her endorsed or “served to underline the earliest context of these proverbs and also opened up a fresh field of possibility” (54), which falls within an oral/literacy continuum (57). Dell asserts that, although the purpose and social context of this literature focuses on the educational, there are also “legal and cultic contexts and often no particular context at all beyond the general ethical one” (63). Furthermore, for her, though certain proverbs may have formed clusters along thematic lines, even at the oral stage, attempts at finding a common theme for the book have proved futile (64). She distinguishes between oral and written stages of the book and concludes that the history of the written text probably begins in Hezekiah’s time (64).

Dell also examines Prov 22:17–31:31 and affirms, in particular, possible links between 22:17–24:22 and the thirty instructions of the Egyptian Amenemope. She ascribes both the Proverbs passage and that of Amenemope to royal scribal schools. She also finds similarities between Prov 1–9; 10:1–22:16 and other parts of Proverbs, largely in the form of repetition of material (e.g., 25–29 restates aspects of 10:1–22:16). Following upon these findings, Dell posits that two strands of context were at play in this section. These include a possible link to the scribal school culture of the Egyptian type (see 22:20; p. 73), which makes reference to writing, and a more homegrown family/folk/tribal context (88–89).

Having determined the social context, theological identity, and relationships between Proverbs and other Old Testament texts (e.g., Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Prophets), Dell closes her book with the conclusion that “wisdom represents a mainstream tradition within OT life and thought” (200). As such, “both the social context(s) and theology of the book of Proverbs, can be successfully integrated, in relation to other known contexts of social functions and theological expression” (200), in the formulations of Old Testament theology.

Dell’s project is quite elaborate, and with any such project one will note some shortcomings. Dell, for example, helpfully highlights the problems with earlier scholarly discussions of key issues but often fails to do full justice to these issues when arguing her own points. Thus, Dell questions whether “a different Yahweh appears in Proverbs than

the God who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt” (2) and rejects the idea that it is a different Yahweh who appears in this material (129); one would expect her full engagement and arguing out of her case in response to her own query. Unfortunately, this happens only in passing, when she asserts simply that divine references are embedded in Prov 1–9 and 22:17–24:22. Dell begins her book by claiming that she will offer fresh ideas regarding the social context and theological identity of the book of Proverbs (2); however, her arguments are largely a rehearsal of various arguments and conclusions drawn by other scholars over the years. One is thus left wondering if the title of the book, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, is not somewhat misleading. Nonetheless, there is much to commend in Dell’s book. For example, her suggestion that wisdom be fully integrated into scholarly consideration of Old Testament theology and not be regarded as peripheral to this project (200) is apt. Likewise, her engagement of R. N. Whybray’s work (1965) on the development of sapiential ideas is helpful. Moreover, she is certainly correct to question whether there were “religious aspects to the instructional as well as the poetic material from its inception” (92). In the end, students, pastors, and scholars who are looking for a guide to the modern study of Proverbs will find here a helpful and thorough tool.