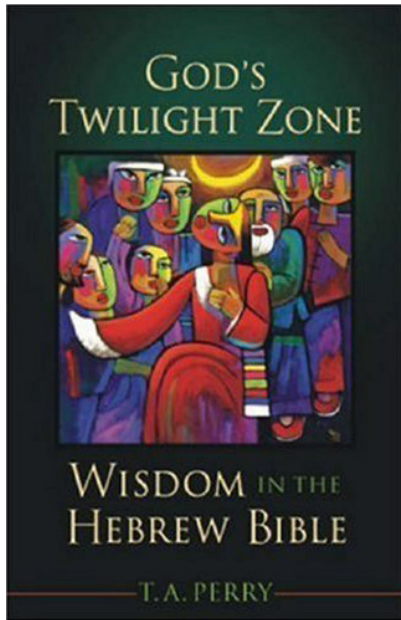


RBL 04/2009



Perry, T. A.

God's Twilight Zone: Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2008. Pp. xxi + 208. Paper.
\$19.95. ISBN 1598562274.

Thomas M. Bolin
St. Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin

Ordinarily, a book subtitled “Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible” follows a predictable pattern: a chapter or two on wisdom traditions in the ancient Near East followed by chapters dedicated to each of the wisdom books in the Tanak (and perhaps a chapter each for Sirach and Wisdom). The book is arranged according to a paradigm in which those sections of Proverbs believed to be the earliest of the wisdom corpus are deemed “traditional,” that is, supportive of the religious, social, or ethical status quo. Later texts, that is, Job and Qoheleth, offer a “challenge” to this established worldview. From here, such overviews can go in different directions: exploring the impact of Hellenism on a text such as Wisdom, reading Sirach as a reaffirmation of the traditional position, or exploring how wisdom morphs into apocalypticism.

T.A. Perry’s book does not follow these well-worn tracks, and this is at once the great strength and shortcoming of *God’s Twilight Zone*. But first a word about the book’s title: for Perry, “Twilight Zone” describes a historically identifiable theological position, namely, the death of prophecy in ancient Israel and the subsequent need to revert (for Perry sees this as a return to earlier religious practices) to “ambiguous oracles and signs, dreams, riddles” (xi). The smudged boundary between knowledge and ignorance of the

divine implied by these means of divination constitute for Perry a “twilight zone,” analogous to the equally ambiguous dividing line between night and day. But Perry goes further, for human existence itself exists in the twilight zone between life and death, the divine and the human, and how one ought to live with this ambiguity is exactly what wisdom in the Tanak addresses. Specifically, it was the sages of ancient Israel who addressed this, and their influence can be seen throughout the biblical text.

Perry arranges his chapters based on the canonical order of biblical books; consequently, the first three chapters deal with Genesis and Exodus. In chapter 1 Perry deftly argues for the integrity of the Tamar story in Gen 38 within the larger Joseph narrative (itself long identified as a story with wisdom overtones) because both Tamar and Joseph, through their own intellectual wherewithal, act for the preservation of life and the perpetuation of Israel. Moreover, the actions of Tamar allow Judah to choose life when faced with his pregnant daughter-in-law, in contrast to his actions when he and his brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Chapter 2 more fully explores the ambiguity of human existence through a close reading Gen 1–3 that interprets the juxtaposition of creation stories as demonstration of the fact that human beings are understood to be co-creators with God. Consequently, Genesis understands a righteous person—whether Noah, Abraham, Tamar, or Joseph—as one who, in helping to further life, imitates God the creator. In chapter 3, Pharaoh’s remark in Exod 1:10 about the danger of the Israelites’ increase is read—in the light of intertextual echoes with creation narratives and prophetic texts—as an unintended prophecy, not of Israel’s dominance over Egypt, but of their own growth as a people.

Chapters 4–7 are set apart as the middle section of the book. Chapter 4 examines Samson’s exchange of riddles with the Philistines and their overall function in the Samson narrative. The riddles foreshadow Samson’s conflict with the Philistines, specifically in the fact that, while the Philistines have correctly guessed the answer to the riddle (a honeycomb in a lion), they have misinterpreted the solution in viewing the lion as a symbol of power, that is, as themselves and not as something that was vanquished by Samson, something that he will also do to the Philistines. Chapter 5 reverses the standard view of proverb formation and sees it rather as something that begins with a particular sage only to be taken over by the collective anonymity of *das Volk*. Here the threefold repetition of the gnomic saying “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Sam 10:11–12; 19:24) is shaped and altered depending on who speaks it and in what context. Consequently, “proverbs are not timeless wisdom, but rather express opinions, evaluations, and values contextually understood and defined” (90). In chapter 6 Solomon’s adjudication of the dispute between the two mothers in 1 Kgs 3:16–28 is read as a meditation on the demands of parenthood, along the lines of the Aqedah, in which the cost of having a child is the power willingly to choose to give it up. Solomon is not a detective searching for the “truth” but rather seeks to find out which of the two women

ought to be the child's mother. The story is not about the wise king's knowledge regarding a particular instance of maternity but rather his insight into the nature of maternity itself. In chapter 7 Perry argues that, if Ps 1 is truly a wisdom psalm, then it cannot function as an introduction to the Psalter, since wisdom psalms do not figure prominently in the entire collection. Instead, Ps 1 speaks of God actively seeking out humanity just as people are called to seek out God. Perry bases this interpretation on the claim that God, not the wise person, is the subject of the verb *יהגה* in Ps 1:2b. This also requires that the *תורה* mentioned in Ps 1:2b refer to a *human torah* that God delights in contemplating, thus forming a mirrored parallelism with 1:2a, which describes the wise person's joy in meditating on the Torah of God.

Chapters 8–9 form the third and final part of the book. Chapter 8 revisits the much-studied allegory in Qoh 12. Perry proposes to read the text “literally,” by which he means not as a figurative description for decrepit old age or as a coded eschatological vision. Doing so shows that Qoheleth is not describing old age as an end to enjoyment but rather as a transition from one kind of enjoyment, appropriate to youth and the bloom of life, to another: “both youth and old age are good and must be experienced as such and at their proper time or season” (142). Wisdom is thus connected with old age in that both occupy the position of twilight, between God and the world, life and death. Chapter 9 looks at another riddle, this time the fourfold poser about the mystery of movement in Prov 30:18–20. Here the constant use of nature as an example in biblical proverbs in general, and this one in particular, allows Perry to explore the continuum between the wondrous and the natural in ancient wisdom's reflection on the world around. Our ambiguous connection with the remainder of the physical world constitutes another kind of twilight zone, as we react with awe both to the truly unexpected, that is, rare occurrences that violate our understanding of “nature,” and to the regular workings of nature itself. Regarding specifically the wondrous way of a young man with a woman in Prov 30:19, Perry here emphasizes the ambiguity of the young woman's power to cause wonder—either through licit love or seduction—thus echoing with the portrayals of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly elsewhere in Proverbs. What is important for wisdom teaching, however, is to elicit in the reader a heightened awareness for what things might mean, their polyvalence being the *sine qua non* of the twilight zone's impact on human beings.

After a brief concluding chapter, an appendix makes intertextual connections between a saying from Pirke Avot and Ps 1.

Perry's work is a *tour de force*. He moves deftly, at one point in dialogue with modern scholars, at another with medieval Jewish commentators, here making subtle (perhaps too subtle) intertextual connections between texts, there picking up equally subtle allusions. The whole is often more redolent of Hillel's *middoth* than the work of Crenshaw,

Murphy, Perdue, von Rad, and the rest. Many readers will be put off by Perry's constant readings against the grain. At times he seems to be too clever by half, making the obvious sound novel. For example, he makes a great deal out of the agonistic nature of the riddle exchange between Samson and the Philistines, but competition—and even antagonism—are ubiquitous in riddle-telling throughout folk and fairy tales. Those who are convinced of the “assured results” of the majority scholarship on the wisdom literature will not be swayed by Perry's idiosyncratic readings (witness the decidedly lukewarm comments of J. Crenshaw on the book's back cover). However, by no means should Perry's work be dismissed on these accounts. He is an astute reader sensitive to the multiple meanings of biblical texts without falling into the easy position that the texts may mean, or can be made to mean, anything. His articulation of wisdom as dealing with the ambiguity of the divine-human relation is important and need not be locked into a rigid chronological schema that places it after or during the so-called death of prophecy in ancient Israel. In this case, it is analogous to the question of individual versus collective punishment, an equally intractable theological problem in ancient Israel that waxed and waned throughout its history (see the discussion on this in T. Bolin, “The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Its Implications for Reading Genesis 18–19,” *JSOT* 29 [2004]: 37–56). Anybody working in the texts Perry has discussed will want to take his insights into account, regardless of their approach to the question of wisdom in the Tanak.