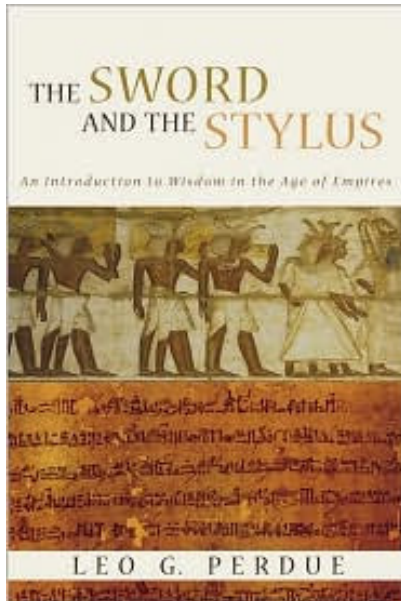


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Perdue, Leo G.

The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires

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In this ambitious volume, Leo Perdue challenges a common view that ancient wisdom is somehow timeless in a way that other forms of ancient literature are not, that what the ancient sages produced can be understood as “disconnected ideas that are seen as eternal thoughts the savants understood to be true” (1). At the very outset Perdue writes, “In this introduction, I begin and end with the general view that the wisdom tradition cannot be understood apart from the larger social history of the cultures in which it took root and flourished and the more particular position that the understandings of the roles of sages assumed their shape and changed within different social locations over the centuries” (1). Beginning with Egyptian wisdom and moving through to “rabbinic wisdom,” Perdue charts a course through the wisdom traditions of the ancient Near East and situates the major texts of Israelite and Jewish wisdom within this larger context.

In the first chapter, which he calls a “Prolegomenon,” Perdue discusses a wide array of topics that situate the Israelite and Jewish texts that he will discuss in detail: What is wisdom? How do we define wisdom? Who were the sages? How does wisdom appear in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece? In what social locations and institutions do we find wisdom? What is the rhetoric of wisdom? Perdue sets the stage by describing wisdom as both transcending national boundaries and developing in specific social and cultural

situations. Thus, ancient Israelite sages knew international wisdom, sometimes explicitly acknowledging their sources, but they also gave wisdom in Israel its own particular stamp. The sages who produced Israelite and Jewish wisdom texts, or the constituent parts of them, were embedded in specific social and cultural worlds, and the products of their reflection reveal both the nature of those social worlds and their responses to it. Perdue discusses a variety of features of these texts—rhetoric, theology, ethics, myth, and so on—that in the aggregate constitute the body of evidence from which he reconstructs their social context.

Perdue deals with his texts roughly in chronological order and thus begins with the book of Proverbs (ch. 2). As he does with all the works he treats in this volume, he begins with getting a fix on its date and historical context. Since Proverbs (like other wisdom texts) is a composite collection, Perdue faces the difficulty of trying to disentangle the various collections that make up the book in its final, redacted form. He identifies seven different collections, which include three non-Israelite ones, ranging from the First Temple period down to almost the Ptolemaic period. He concludes that the sages who composed and later brought together the separate collections saw themselves “as servants to the king and his representatives” (113). As such, they worked to uphold the central institution that they served, at first the monarchy and later the colonial apparatus and temple. They articulated a theology that was both socially and politically conservative, a world in which God maintained the divine order and selected kings and rulers. As a result, these sages pursued an ethic of the status quo, one in which God’s retributive justice serves ultimately “to justify wealth, status, and power” (115).

In chapter 3, Perdue argues that the book of Job developed over two centuries, primarily in the Babylonian exile into the Persian period, within the exiled community in Babylon. Based on the representation of the wise in the book and particularly the dialogue between Job and his friends, Perdue suggests that the book was composed by a sage living in the exile who tried to understand a crisis of faith prompted by the “horrors” of the destruction of Judah and the consequences on the community of the sages and other intelligentsia who constituted the majority of those living in Babylon. Job’s three friends represent traditional sages who oppose pious sages like Job who have added mantic wisdom to their sapiential repertoire. Several pieces of evidence convince Perdue that Job originated in a school setting.

Chapter 4 treats the wisdom psalms, which he numbers at eleven in five different categories: Torah psalms (1; 19B; 119); instruction psalms (32; 34; 37); proverb psalms (112; 127); reflective psalms (49; 73); and a psalm of creation (111). Most of these cannot be dated, although Perdue thinks that most probably originated in the Persian period, where he identifies several developments that changed the nature of the scribal enterprise

and hence of wisdom. Two are especially important. First was the development of the Torah as an authoritative set of texts that are identified with wisdom (see, e.g., Deuteronomy) and the increasing importance of scribes as interpreters of these texts, whose interpretations come to be seen as both revealed and inspired. For these scribes Torah “is now identified with the order of creation that sustains the cosmos and with wisdom that instructs its followers in proper ways to live in harmony with God and society” (191). The promulgation of Torah takes place within an increasingly diverse Judaism, and the Torah psalms reflect a motivation to create “a common expression of Judaism and brand as illegitimate all other forms” (193). Of course, this also concurrently raised the status of those scribes who worked within this orbit, since they became responsible for the codification of the text, its interpretation, and its implementation in Jewish life.

Perdue situates Qoheleth (ch. 5) in Jerusalem in the late third century B.C.E., and he characterizes it as testamentary literature “similar to the autobiography of the deceased found in some Egyptian tombs ... and to Jewish testament literature” (205). The author would have had acquaintance with Hellenistic literature, and Perdue pictures him as a teacher in a school who was critical of traditional forms of religion, particularly temple priests and scribes. He was “cosmopolitan in outlook” and wealthy, influenced by Greek skepticism and opposed to “worldly Zadokite priests, the cosmopolitan Hasidim, and the sectarian apocalypticists” (232). For Qoheleth, God is hidden from human view and ken, and in contrast to previous views of retributive justice in wisdom literature, Qoheleth finds God’s decisions to be capricious. Death is every person’s end, from which there is no escape or possibility of return. What remain in life are moments of joy provided by work, food and drink, a lover, and youth. But even joy “serves only as an anesthetic that allows one to escape the despair of meaningless existence for a brief moment and that makes one temporarily forget the past” (255). Qoheleth’s consuming skepticism is a direct result of the Jewish encounter with Hellenistic culture, from which he learned these views. A later, more traditionally pious scribe edited the book and added the passages that encourage following Torah and the sages in order to avoid divine judgment.

Ben Sira (ch. 6) wrote in the early part of the second century B.C.E. during a period shortly after political hegemony over Judea had shifted from the Ptolemies to the Seleucids. Perdue argues that Ben Sira, who taught in a school and was perhaps a temple scribe, adapted “his understanding of traditional Judaism to that of Hellenism” (257). As a member of the elite of society, Ben Sira was a strong supporter of the temple and high priesthood. He represents a development in sapiential tradition that both recognizes the international scope of wisdom and focuses on a particularist theology of the election of Israel, including a notion of salvation history (in his Praise of Pious Men, chs. 44–50). In this period, the sage became, among other things, “an interpreter of Scripture.” In Ben

Sira's case, Perdue contends that Ben Sira also saw his own work as inspired in the manner of the prophets and that he "fully expected to gain entrance to the Hebrew canon" (273). Due to his social position, Ben Sira might be called conservative; that is, although he was amenable to the new insights of Greek culture and thought, he was not "reactionary"; he did not want "to participate too dramatically in the new social and cultural metamorphosis of Judaism in the province" (266). This kind of conservatism contrasts with the teachings of someone like Qoheleth, whose disciples Perdue suggests Ben Sira might have opposed.

From Ben Sira's friendly but arms-length approach to Hellenic thought, Perdue turns to the *Wisdom of Solomon* (ch. 7), whose author he thinks was a wisdom teacher who was trained by a sophist or in a Hellenistic school of rhetoric—he was a Jewish rhetor. The book was likely composed in the latter half of the first century B.C.E., "perhaps during the pogrom of Flaccus in 38 BCE" (308). The author employs Greek rhetorical and literary techniques along with philosophical ideas with the aim of decrying Jewish acculturation to Alexandrian Hellenistic culture. The language of the book suggests conflict between the Jewish community and the Egyptians and Roman authorities. Perdue argues that the *Wisdom of Solomon* charts a middle path between complete rejection of things Hellenistic and immersed acculturation—thus "a form of Hellenistic Judaism developed that blended the two cultures in different ways" (320). Theologically, the author has inherited the Jewish sapiential tradition's emphasis on creation, wisdom, and its recent inclusion of salvation history, but he has rearticulated these ideas in Hellenistic terms. So, for example, *Sophia* (Wisdom) is understood similarly to the Stoic *Logos*, and thus she is pictured as a kind of world soul.

Chapters 8 and 9 break with the document-based, chronologically oriented chapters that precede them. In these two chapters Perdue discusses the relation between apocalyptic and wisdom, first as a general matter in works such as *Daniel* and *1 Enoch* and then at Qumran in particular. Perdue locates the origins of Jewish apocalypticism largely in marginalized groups of scribes who rejected an accommodationism of the Zadokite priesthood in the Hellenistic period and who "longed for a hopeful future in which liberation from foreign opponents and their Jewish allies would occur" (370). Their heroes were seers such as *Daniel* and *Enoch*. The Second Temple apocalypses produced by these scribes incorporate elements of prophecy, mantic wisdom, and traditional wisdom. In the Qumran sectarians, Perdue finds a "social organization of an apocalyptic sect that has elements of wisdom and observance and interpretation of Torah" (380). The group had an abiding interest in the Jewish wisdom tradition, as evidenced by the healthy number of wisdom texts found among the scrolls. However, some of these texts, and particularly *4QInstruction*, display the developments Perdue has pointed to earlier,

namely, the combination of wisdom instruction and knowledge of the created order, history, and the future gained by revelation.

Finally, Perdue considers what he calls “rabbinic wisdom” (ch. 10), produced by teachers who have important continuities with other Jewish wisdom teachers and whose instruction was brought together in the major rabbinic collections compiled from the late second century C.E. onward. He looks at the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods for the origins of rabbinic tradition, and the rabbinic texts and interpretations of the Tannaitic period “point to a developing rabbinic tradition emerging at the same time that other texts and wisdom teachers appeared, including the scribes of Qumran, Philo, Josephus, the Wisdom of Solomon, Q in the New Testament, and the Sayings of the Gospel of Thomas” (411).

This rather extended summary of some of Perdue’s main points does not do justice to the depth and detail of his exposition in this book. Few scholars would be able (or perhaps willing) to write about wisdom literature from ancient Egypt to the rabbis, let alone with the erudition that Perdue brings to the task. I would not feel at all competent to comment on Perdue’s discussion of ancient Near Eastern wisdom in Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example.

Yet, as is the case with any book as ambitious as this one, there are potential points of debate. Certainly scholars whose special expertise is in one or more of the works covered here will find things with which they disagree. So, for example, in the chapter on Ben Sira, I think that Perdue has overestimated the influence of Greek literature and culture on Ben Sira, primarily due to the way he frames his discussion by using Theophil Middendorp’s study of Ben Sira, which argues that the work was meant to be a Hellenistic school book. Issues like this one, however, pertain to individual books, and Perdue has of necessity to set his feet down at some point in the scholarship where he is most convinced. Some might take issue as well with other subjects of scholarly dispute that extend beyond a single chapter, such as the origins, nature, and function of the synagogue as an institution or the existence and scope of a biblical canon in the Second Temple period.

Some larger issues also attend the discussions. Perdue’s main goal is to show that the producers of these wisdom texts are conditioned by their social and cultural worlds, which are reflected in them. For each text, Perdue looks at date and historical context, the critical problems that attend each one, the nature and context of the scribal enterprise that is reflected therein, and theology, which usually comes last in his discussions, because it is the outcome or product of the scribes and their embeddedness in particular social contexts. The description of the historical or ideological context of a work (or a constituent part of one), which usually inaugurates a chapter, has the potential to shape

the discussion of scribes, their tasks and their contexts in problematic ways. So, for example, in discussions of Second Temple texts Perdue argues that a central issue was to what degree accommodation or acculturation to Hellenistic culture was acceptable. Although he notes the complications of discussing “Hellenism” or “Hellenization” and the range of Jewish responses to and negotiations with Greek cultural forms, one gets the impression that there are opposing or somewhat mutually exclusive viewpoints—Jewish ones and Hellenistic ones. So he says about Ben Sira that he “adapts his understanding of Judaism to that of Hellenism” (257). About the Wisdom of Solomon, Perdue writes, “Thus while accommodation was his approach, he rejected full-scale acculturation in Hellenistic culture” (309). In this case, I am not entirely certain of the distinction between accommodation and acculturation. Perdue notes that the author of Wisdom approved of Greek philosophical rejection of idols. So, does acculturating refer to Jews “who were apostates and renounced their heritage and identity” (309), that is, someone like Tiberius Julianus Alexander, whom he singles out in the context? I agree with Perdue that Jewish identity is at stake in these works, but as I read Ben Sira or even the Wisdom of Solomon, I think that Perdue’s presentation seems to rely on an inherent dualism that implicitly views Judaism and Hellenism as somehow opposed to or at least set against one another. I find a similar sort of implicit dualism of categories evident in the discussions of apocalyptic and wisdom in chapter 8.

A second more general issue is how we think about the relationship between texts and the social groups that might lie behind them. Trying to reconstruct a social context or location for these texts is one thing (and Perdue spends a good deal of time locating texts). Identifying social groups behind those texts that have survived is another, and the effort is fraught with difficulties and uncertainties. I am not sure, for instance, how effectively we can talk about sapiential or apocalyptic groups or some hybrid of them. Concerning the development of the book of Daniel, Perdue concludes that it “emerged in a *sapiential community* located in Egypt in the early second century and made its way to Judea, probably Jerusalem, no later than the reign of Antiochus IV. In Judea the collected narratives were taken up by an *apocalyptic community* in which wisdom continued to play an important role in shaping their worldview” (361, emphasis added). About 1 Enoch he writes, “First Enoch points to an *apocalyptic-sapiential group* of sages and seers” (361, emphasis added). Do the ideas expressed in these works point to actual *groups* or *communities* of scribes to which these adjectives might apply? What do these adjectives communicate about the nature of these groups, and what would such groups have looked like? Perdue has more confidence than I do that we are able to answer these and other similar questions with a high degree of certainty.

However, as I see it, Perdue’s main point, with which I began this review, is without doubt correct, that the wisdom texts of ancient Israel and Judaism *must* be studied in

their contexts, as much as we can reconstruct them. Wisdom cannot be viewed as somehow standing outside of particular and localized historical, social, and cultural processes. This book constitutes a major contribution to the study of Israelite and Jewish wisdom literature in the light of those processes. The extent to which one agrees or disagrees with one or another of Perdue's arguments does not mitigate that contribution. I applaud and admire Perdue for what he has accomplished in this book. It will no doubt become a standard work on ancient wisdom traditions and their social worlds, and I know that I will return to it often as I continue my own thinking and pursue my research.