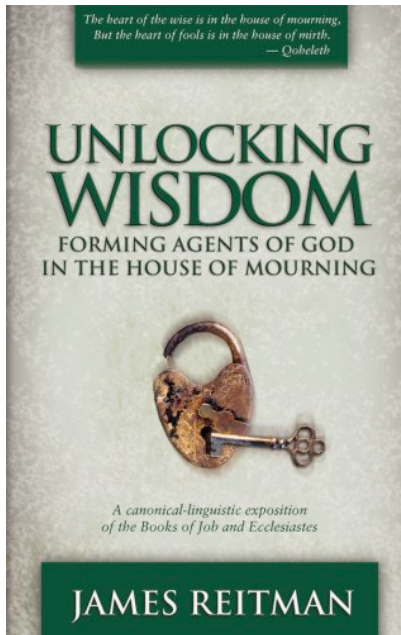


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Reitman, James

Unlocking Wisdom: Forming Agents of God in the House of Mourning

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Reitman brings his experience in the medical world, his own suffering, and some twenty years of reflection on Job and Ecclesiastes together in this volume. The book is evenly divided between an exposition of Job and Ecclesiastes. *Exposition* is the right word to describe this book; it is not a verse-by-verse commentary but rather moves through Job and Ecclesiastes section by section, always aiming at the overarching message of the books.

Reitman, as his subtitle signifies, is up front about his hermeneutic. Drawing on Kevin Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine*, in the preface Reitman outlines his understanding of a canonical-linguistic hermeneutic. For him this means that each book must be studied in its own coherence before being correlated with the rest of Scripture. He identifies key principles according to which biblical books should be studied and then applies these to Job and Ecclesiastes. The principles are: literal composition (one must aim at uncovering the overarching meaning intended by the author); grammatical composition; historical context; literary shape; theology of the book; and validation (although a text may be "layered," only one interpretive solution is valid for a text).

Reitman reads both Job and Ecclesiastes as literary unities. Each exposition begins with a diagrammatic outline of the literary structure/argument of the book. Reitman's focus is on Job and Ecclesiastes as canonical wholes, and little time is devoted to the typical historical-critical introductory issues. Both Job and Ecclesiastes are read as grappling with profound disillusionment; in their very different situations, both are diagnosed as struggling with the problem of a *self-sufficient* attitude toward life: "The two protagonists are quintessential models of human self-sufficiency that argue forcefully for seeing the critical role of adversity in dislodging this entrenched disposition from fallen mankind" (43).

For Reitman, Job's message is that, even when God's purposes remain inscrutable, he rules with wisdom and power over his creation; the aim is to encourage readers in adversity to "replace self-sufficient presumption with calm confidence in God's redemptive character" (49). While most commentators think that Satan disappears after the opening chapters, Reitman discerns Satan at work throughout the book, *inter alia*, using Job's three friends to discourage him from getting back on track. Reitman, contra many commentators, interprets the role of Elihu very positively and argues that Elihu is the mediator Job so needs and who prepares the way for Job's transforming encounter with God. Through his encounter with God, Job is restored and enabled to become an agent of God's grace in creation.

The "structure" of Ecclesiastes is notoriously difficult to discern. Reitman buttresses his quest for a logical structure and unified, coherent message in the book with an appeal to the perspicuity of Scripture. He argues for a basic division in the book between 1:1–6:12 and 7:15–12:14, with 7:1–14 as the turning point around which the symmetrical book swivels. The first section deals with wisdom's frustration, the second with wisdom's advantage. Reitman takes the theme of mourning in 7:1–14 as indicative of a better approach to disillusionment in life compared with the frustration of the first major section of the book. This turning point evolves in the second section to a growing recognition of the advantages of wisdom and culminates in the epilogue.

Unlocking Wisdom is well-written, the style is lucid and engaging, and every aid is given to the reader in following the argument as Reitman expounds Job and Ecclesiastes. Summaries at the top of each section are very useful in enabling the reader to follow the argument. A considerable amount of information and pointers to academic literature is contained in the footnotes, but it never clutters or obscures the movement of the argument. Reitman's work arises out of his lived experience of suffering, which he is open about, and the result is a book that is rich in pastoral application. In terms of its shape and pastoral concerns, this is a model that theological interpretation would do well to follow, especially insofar as it seeks to make academic interpretation available to a

broader audience. I think that Reitman is quite right to pinpoint *self-sufficiency* as a key motif in both Job and Ecclesiastes, as well as opening up just how hard it is to dislodge this very human but sinful tendency.

Students, pastors, and academics will find the book of interest and help. Job and Ecclesiastes are difficult at best, and, not surprisingly, I find myself at points in disagreement with Reitman, although I like his overall approach. Declaring one's hermeneutic up front is helpful, but I suspect a canonical hermeneutic is more complex than *Unlocking Wisdom* may suggest. An example: I do not think that either Job or Ecclesiastes can be understood canonically apart from being read against the background of Proverbs. One never simply starts with a biblical book in terms of its own coherence.

Theologically, I think that, especially with God's affirmation of Job at the end, Job is more of a positive model for suffering than Reitman allows. "Calm confidence" may be the goal, but with profound suffering it is normal for it to be found at the end of a long journey of hell, rage, and protest. Structurally, I do not think that Ecclesiastes manifests the bipartite logical structure that Reitman discerns, nor do I think that an appeal to the clarity of Scripture necessarily supports such an approach. Ecclesiastes, in my view, manifests a literary, organic—rather than logical—unity and structure that mirrors the back and forth movement of Qohelet's devastating search for meaning.

My hope is that Reitman's book, the result of years of living with and through the message of Job and Ecclesiastes, will receive a wide reading. It has much to offer.