



1997

## Review of William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*

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### Recommended Citation

Carasik, Michael, "Review of William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*" (1997). *Departmental Papers (Jewish Studies)*. 13.  
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## Review of William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*

### Abstract

"In American society renewed interest in the value of character has recently galvanized public and political discussion" (p. vii). Now William P. Brown, associate professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, has written a volume which looks at Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, the three pillars of biblical wisdom literature, through the lens of character. The aim of his study is "to demonstrate that the idea of character constitutes the unifying theme or center of the wisdom literature, whose *raison d'être* is to profile ethical character" (p. 21). The book is divided into six chapters. An introduction and a brief conclusion surround chapters on each of the biblical books; Job is treated in two separate chapters.

### Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Jewish Studies

Books of the Ancient Near East," *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 [1972] 75), and a date in the tenth century B.C.E. admirably fits on comparative grounds. He showed that there was no basis for believing that Proverbs 1–24 went through a secular-to-sacred evolution.

Shupak's main comparative argument for believing that Hebrew wisdom literature so evolved is that such an evolution occurred in Egypt. "The instruction of Amenemope," according to the author, marks the place where "faith assumes a major importance" (p. 42). Even if this development is the case in Egypt, "Amenemope" was written two to three centuries before the era of Solomon (cf. "The Alleged Semitic Original of the Wisdom of Amenemope," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 47 [1961] 100–106). Shupak accepts Assmann's analysis of Eighteenth Dynasty piety influencing wisdom literature, meaning that Egypt's evolution began in the fifteenth century and was complete by the twelfth. Hence by the time Egyptian influence would have impacted the Solomonic court, as Shupak believes, Egypt's evolution was already complete. The time gap between the evolution in Egypt and the alleged development in Israel seriously undermines the argument for a similar evolution in both literary traditions.

The volume is very thorough, well-researched, and makes an important contribution to the study of Hebrew wisdom literature. But, as with any important work, it raises questions for others to answer. If wisdom literature in Egypt is a guide to life in accordance with *m33t*, is Hebrew wisdom a practical paradigm for living under *tôrâ*? Shupak and others tend to see a connection between the goddess Maat and the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20f. While this connection is intriguing, the possible correlation between *tôrâ* and *m33t* also needs to be explored.

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**CHARACTER IN CRISIS: A FRESH APPROACH TO THE WISDOM LITERATURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.** By William P. Brown. Pp. xi + 179. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996. Paper, \$17.00.

"In American society renewed interest in the value of character has recently galvanized public and political discussion" (p. vii). Now William P. Brown, associate professor of Old Testament at Union Theological

Seminary in Virginia, has written a volume which looks at Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, the three pillars of biblical wisdom literature, through the lens of character. The aim of his study is "to demonstrate that the idea of character constitutes the unifying theme or center of the wisdom literature, whose *raison d'être* is to profile ethical character" (p. 21). The book is divided into six chapters. An introduction and a brief conclusion surround chapters on each of the biblical books; Job is treated in two separate chapters.

The introduction, "The Ethics And Ethos Of Biblical Wisdom," sets up a problem which calls for a solution: the three wisdom books, literarily identifiable because they do not readily fit into the categories of narrative or law, nonetheless appear "to lack a readily identifiable theological center" (p. 1). Brown notes a tension between the focus on humanity (which he sees as clearly primary) and the focus on God, observing that the dialectic which Perdue finds in wisdom literature is not a solution, but merely a description of the problem. The solution is provided by the lens of character. "The appeal of suggesting character formation as the central framework and goal of biblical wisdom lies in the literature's focus on the developing self in relation to the perceived world, thus bridging the gulf between the anthropocentric and theocentric frames of reference that run throughout the wisdom corpus" (p. 4). Brown argues that insights gained from studies of character within narrative have value for other genres as well. Thus he will use "character" both descriptively and prescriptively. His analysis of each biblical book will address three issues: (1) the way in which the literary characters (the parent figures, Elihu, God, etc.) are profiled, (2) the community's role in the formation of character, and (3) the character prescribed by each book.

"The Formation Of Character In Proverbs; Or, Virtue And The Art Of Community Maintenance" plausibly takes Proverbs 1–9 and 31 as a framework intended to invest the sentence literature contained between them with a particular significance. In the introductory section of the book, Prov 1:2–7, Brown finds a chiasmic structure deliberately centered around righteousness (*sedeq*), justice (*mišpāt*), and equity (*mēšārīm*), inherently community-oriented virtues. In wisdom's own discourse, too (Proverbs 8), "the communal virtues stand at the apex of wisdom's discourse and character" (p. 37, citing the mention of righteousness and justice in Prov 8:20). Descriptively, he finds the book to present a journey in the development of character: "The book of Proverbs began with a silent son, instructed in the

responsibilities of communal life and family fidelity, and ends with an adult male who has successfully fulfilled them" (p. 48).

Brown's study of Job is divided into two parts, separating the dialogue with the original "friends" from the encounters with Elihu and God. In "The Deformation Of Character: Job 1–31," he reframes the book not as an attempt to grapple with the problem of evil, but as "the journey of one person's character in response to an instance of seemingly inexplicable suffering" (p. 51). He observes that Job's story begins where that of Proverbs left off, with the "successful patriarch" of Prov 31:23. The dialogues are "a debate first and foremost over his character" (p. 63). Even Job's dilemma is framed this way; his suffering calls either his own character (the friends' view) or God's into question. "The Reformation Of Character: Job 32–42" builds on this theme. "God essentially enters into the debate [because] it is equally God's character that is at stake" (p. 90). God's speeches "recharacterize" creation so that in the epilogue, "Job is now thrown back into the community with a new sense of purpose and moral vision.... Like the son-turned-family man at the conclusion of Proverbs, Job, the patriarch-turned-citizen of the cosmos, returns to his domicile and community with renewed vision" (pp. 114 and 118).

In "Character Reconstructed: Ecclesiastes," Brown faces a radically different approach to the question of character. Acknowledging that Qoheleth sees no role for the community in the formation of character, he adopts Michael Fox's understanding of *hebel* as existential absurdity. When Qoheleth "steps back" from the world, he "nullifies the notion of traditional character and undermines the business of character formation" (p. 133). Yet the book ends "by approximating the same social setting as that envisioned in Prov 1–9" (p. 134). "The profound recognition of the absurdity of human life" (p. 148) required Qoheleth to reconstruct for himself a "minimalist" list of cardinal virtues: quietude, simplicity, and enjoyment of the moment. In his conclusion, "The Journey Of Character," Brown finds a unity among the three books in that each "chart[s] the self starting from a central, familiar locale that provides expected security and identity" (p. 152), stepping back, and then re-entering into the world of community. Admittedly, this is a unity in diversity: "To pose the question of a standard, exhaustive profile of right character for all seasons is to some extent analogous to asking a chess master for the best move" (p. 158). The book ends with a brief discussion of "The Letter of James: Wisdom for the Church," which Brown feels is the New Testament book that "best reflects the ethos of the Hebrew wisdom traditions" (p. 160).

Indeed, Brown explicitly introduces his study as an attempt to find biblical wisdom's place "in ethical discourse among Christians" (p. ix), and those who are interested in this question will find themselves the most rewarded here. (The explicit Christian orientation is restricted to the conclusion and to the observation that "the next and final move" after what happened to Job was the crucifixion.) Brown demonstrates command of the scholarly literature on his subject, but this and comments directed at scholars are confined almost entirely to the footnotes. This reader found Brown's insistence on the organizing principle of character, and more so on the word itself, ultimately unconvincing as an overall explanation of wisdom literature; but the view through this lens is, indeed, thought-provoking.

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**PROVERBS.** By R. N. Whybray. The New Century Bible Commentary. Pp. xxxii + 446. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Marshall Pickering, 1994. Paper.

Professor Whybray has spent much of his long and distinguished career studying the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. To the task of writing this commentary he brings a vast knowledge of the biblical text of Proverbs and of the scholarship which debates its meaning. As with his other publications, Whybray has produced a clear, comprehensive, and well-reasoned study of a difficult and complex book.

After a select but representative and balanced bibliography, Professor Whybray provides a succinct introduction to Proverbs which deals with the character of wisdom and its place in ancient Israel, the literary forms found within the book, and its overall structure. Before each major section of the text, Whybray discusses its content and character, pertinent scholarship, and his rationale for its structural cohesion and integrity. The *New Century Bible Commentary* is based on the *Revised Standard Version*, but Whybray is not timid about suggesting other readings and pointing out problems with the translation when he feels it is justified. The strength of this commentary is Whybray's ability to do detailed and careful exegesis of difficult texts in a way which is both academically responsible and lucid.