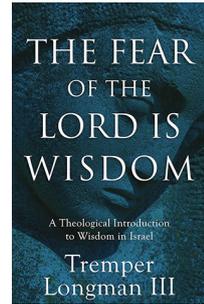


Book Review

Tremper Longman III.
*The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom:
A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*
Baker Academic, Grand Rapids (2017).
pp. 336 £24.50 ISBN: 080102711X .

Reviewed by Dan Martin, Pastor at Grace Church, Gateshead.



Tremper Longman III, a renowned wisdom literature scholar, aims to provide a comprehensive introduction to 'wisdom' in the Bible within a relatively short number of pages. Since one of Longman's goals is to provide, in a single volume, a broad vista of 'wisdom', only part 1 – which he titles *The Heart of Wisdom* – deals directly with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. In his chapter on Proverbs, he focuses almost entirely on the first nine chapters, a skew which hinders the rest of Longman's book. For Longman, the 'Woman Wisdom' motif is clearly dominant in his understanding of the Proverbs. He makes a distinction between three categories of wisdom; the practical, ethical, and theological. Some readers may wish Longman had shown more extensive textual warrant for making these distinctions. Little is said about Proverbs and pedagogy. The ensuing chapter on Ecclesiastes assumes a 'two speakers' perspective, arguing that its goal is to bring the reader to an 'above the sun' perspective. In his chapter on Job, Longman emphasises that 'only God is wise...the fear of the Lord is the proper response to God's wisdom... that wisdom is fundamentally the result of a relationships with God...true wisdom has a theological foundation' (p. 61-62).

Part 2, *Wisdom Elsewhere in the Old Testament*, considers OT wisdom outside of

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. There is much that will interest students and scholars alike in this section, though much of it might have functioned better as an appendix. Longman's methodology as to what he has and hasn't chosen to include is somewhat opaque. For instance, why Daniel is included but not, say, the book of Ruth, given the lexical links between Proverbs 31.10 and Ruth 3.11. If, as Longman argues, the 'fear of the LORD' is a key theological shorthand for marking out wisdom texts – and indeed, the very title of his book – we might have expected a more comprehensive survey based on that phrase. Isaiah, for example, is fleetingly referenced, despite the significant use of 'fear of the LORD' in its text, while Song of Songs – a book which Longman acknowledges does not explore the nature of wisdom - receives its own sub-section.

Part 3 is titled *Israel's wisdom: Cosmopolitan or Unique?* This section will be of great resource to those beginning studies in this area. Longman engages with Zimmerli's position, questioning the 'supposed absence of redemptive history, law, covenant and cult' within OT wisdom (p. 127). Longman recognises that wisdom, even gained through observation and experience, remains fundamentally a 'gift from God'. His position is that Proverbs 'as proverbs, make no universal truth claim; they are only true if applied to the right situation' (p. 137). However, he holds back from outlining *how* one might know the correct application of a Proverb to a

situation. Returning to Job, he argues that it is the wise who recognise that the fundamental order of the world has been disturbed, and so it is naïve to assume wisdom will always work. Nevertheless, he writes that there is 'still great benefit to the way of wisdom' (p. 145). What Longman does not address, however, is the inherent (rather than merely pragmatic) value ascribed to wisdom by to Biblical texts. The survey of ANE 'wisdom' sources is succinct and well-organised. He notes a number of strong connections between Biblical wisdom and ANE wisdom sources, especially between Proverbs and *The Instruction of Amenemope*, an Egyptian 'wisdom' text believed to originate in the thirteenth century BC and compiled by Amenemope, 'a functionary in the Egyptian court' (p. 156), intended for his son. It is also within this section that Longman gives a succinct but careful articulation of the fear of the LORD as the *beginning* of wisdom, and the implications for how other sources of wisdom can be thoughtfully accommodated within 'knowledge on its proper foundation, a proper relationship with YHWH.' (p. 161-162).

Similarly, Longman's defence of the covenantal context of wisdom, including its 'close cousin' relationship with law, is precise and cogent, and is commended to all wisdom scholars. Longman asserts that this context is subtle but clear, multi-faceted, and centred upon the very name of YHWH: 'after all, "the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom". Nothing could be more particular than this conception of wisdom.' (p. 178).

Part 4, *Further Refining our Understanding of Wisdom*, considers three topics which have been 'controversial in recent years in the academy and the church', namely retribution theology; the social setting of wisdom, and gender in wisdom. Each respective chapter

will interest the reader. However, one wonders again at this point how these three topics were decided upon. For instance, one might have expected the content of the second appendix, *Is Wisdom Literature a Genre?* to have merited a chapter of its own in this section, given the marked interest in this question in recent years. Furthermore, at points Longman seems to overlook texts directly relevant to the question at hand; it was notable that in his consideration of gender and wisdom that there is only a very brief consideration of the woman of Proverbs 31.

Part 5, *The Afterlife of Israel's Wisdom*, is an outstandingly succinct introduction to the Apocrypha and Dead Sea Scrolls in relation to Old Testament wisdom. Within this section is chapter 15, an extended consideration of the New Testament and wisdom. On the one hand, Longman is laudable in his goal of a comprehensive survey of wisdom, and many significant connections to the New Testament are highlighted in this chapter, in particular Jesus of Nazareth as consummate wise man. On the other hand, certain features seem inexplicably absent. Longman again focuses on Proverbs 1-9, and in particular Woman Wisdom, to the extent that other material is overlooked. For instance, the New Testament's explicit quotations of Proverbs 3 are not considered, whereas Longman devotes not insignificant space to attempting to articulate precisely how the NT writers conceived of Jesus in relation to Woman Wisdom. Pauline texts on wisdom and the cross in relation to OT wisdom receive only a passing mention.

In summary, both depth and breadth are challenges in a book of this nature. With regards to breadth, Longman has inevitably had to make careful decisions about what aspects of wisdom study *not* to attend to or reference.

My opinion is that the book overwhelmingly succeeds in its breadth of scope. Depth is a challenge since Longman inevitably has had to limit his survey of (let alone full engagement in) key questions and debates within wisdom studies. Most readers with a prior interest in wisdom literature will identify sections that seem too brief, or topics overlooked altogether; many questions necessarily remain unaddressed in a book of this nature, namely a consideration of the book of Proverbs in full; precise handling of the NT's quotations of Proverbs; and rigorous organization around the 'fear of the LORD' phrase within texts. Even making allowance for the constraints of a one-volume survey, Longman's book lacks a degree of methodological clarity and consistency. Ironically, had the 'fear of the LORD' rigorously been his chief organising principle, this would likely not have been the case. Nevertheless, this is an excellent volume worthy of a place on the shelf of students, scholars, and pastors both as a reference resource and an introduction to Biblical wisdom studies.

