

Collins, John J 1997 – Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. 275 Pages. Price: unknown,

Reviewer: Prof P M Venter (University of Pretoria)

Wisdom and apocalypics have become important subjects in New Testament research. This book pays attention to Jewish wisdom in the time before and during the New Testament in Palestine and Alexandria.

Commencing with a chapter in which he defines wisdom as first and foremost a tradition situated in an educational setting, presenting an “ethic of caution”, Collins continues to discuss wisdom against the background of two Hellenistic eras.

In the first part of his work he deals with the literature of Ben Sirach and some wisdom texts from the Dead Sea scrolls. He depicts them as examples of Hebrew wisdom which should be read against the background of the late third Ptolemaic and the early second Seleucid centuries. As with the description of the socio-historic setting in Alexandria in the second part, Collins gives a thorough sketch here of the history, social structures as well as ideological framework of Palestine thought during the late third and early second centuries BCE. He uses the text of Ben Sirach in both its Hebrew form, as far as it is possible to reconstruct it from the Geniza fragments, and in its Greek translated form. Collins sees in Sirach a person who wanted to bring together the wisdom tradition inherited from Proverbs with the Torah-based wisdom of the Levitical teachers. This enabled him to give advice on all kinds of everyday relationships between people. As eclectic thinker, he could draw upon Hellenistic thought and give his own opinion on matters like theodicy, creation et cetera. According to Collins, Sirach works with a duality inherent in creation that serves the purpose of God. Ben Sirach also brought a shift in wisdom tradition when he used the history of Israel as a source for sapiential instruction. In the fragments of the Dead Sea scrolls traditional wisdom is used in service of apocalyptic revelation.

In the second part of the book Collins discusses the didactic poem of Pseudo-Phocylides and the Wisdom of Solomon as the principal formulations of practical wisdom in the Hellenistic diaspora. Against the background of first century CE Alexandria, the Wisdom of Solomon represents an intermediate place between gnomic and philosophical wisdom as found in Philo. Both Pseudo-Phocylides and Wisdom have affinities with the practical wisdom of Ben Sirach. Pseudo-Solomon, however, provides no instructions on social relations and rather deals with subjects like immortality, death, the unrighteous, the cosmos and the creator, the knowledge of God and idolatry.

Collins succeeds in his work in showing how wisdom as a tradition was influenced by its socio-historic setting. He puts the wisdom literature within a broad framework as a hermeneutical key. He not only brings an enormous amount of contemporary literature into the discussion, but also presents the debate going on in scholarly circles in an up-to-date manner. This book is heartily recommended for both scholars of Old and New Testament and for anybody interested to know more about Hebrew wisdom as it occurred in intertestamental Hellenistic circles.

