Wilson, Lindsay

*Joseph Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis 37-50*

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This book is a revised version of a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Melbourne in 1999. According to the author, his study has two major goals: “To explore the question of whether wisdom ideas and emphasis can legitimately be found in Genesis 37–50” (5); and to explore “the intersection of the wisdom and covenant ideas that may emerge from the Joseph story” (6).

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 (“Preliminary Matters”) includes three chapters. After an introductory chapter, “Wisdom and the Joseph Narrative” (ch. 2) opens with a survey relating to the question of wisdom influence on Gen 37–50. Gerhard von Rad was the first scholar in modern research who claimed that the Joseph story was a wisdom literature, and he was responsible for the interest in the Joseph story as a wisdom novella. In an article first published in 1953 von Rad laid the foundations for any further research of the wisdom elements in the narrative. In his survey Wilson differentiates between von Rad’s critics (Crenshaw, Redford) and supporters (Loader, Wessels), with Coats in a mediating position claiming that the story as whole is not a wisdom tale, although there are wisdom elements in the story. Wilson explains that none of these scholars denies the presence of wisdom elements in the story and that the disagreement
revolves about the question of whether or not the Joseph narrative is *solely* a piece of wisdom literature.

The survey leads Wilson to the preliminary conclusion that the Joseph story “is not a pure example of wisdom literature” (27) and that there is a need to explore the interaction between different aspects of the story, especially between the wisdom elements and the covenant parts of Gen 37–50. In the end of chapter 2 Wilson turns to speak about the need for terminological clarity, proposing his own term: ‘Wisdom Literary Influence.” “By this is meant how the ‘wisdom-like elements’ in the text relate to other elements in the text’s final form” (29). Wilson finishes chapter 2 with a proposed methodology for assessing wisdom influence on nonwisdom literature.

Chapter 3 (“The Integrity of Genesis 37–50 as a Literary Unit”) deals with the boundaries of the Joseph story and the integrity of the text, in light of the dissatisfaction with source criticism. By the end of this chapter Wilson comes to the conclusion that Gen 37–50 should be regarded as a literary unit, and he chooses to look at the text in its final form. As opposed to other scholars, Wilson does not omit any chapters from the story (such as Gen 38; 49:1–27), and he devotes a rich and interesting discussion to justify this choice, mainly in part 2 of his book.

Part 2 (“A Literary Reading of the Joseph Story”) is composed of four chapters that divide the Joseph story into subunits: Gen 38 (ch. 5); 39–41 (ch. 6); 42–45 (ch. 7); and 46–50 (ch. 8). In these chapters Wilson presents a detailed literary analysis of the Joseph narrative, with a special interest in the “wisdom-like elements.” The analysis leads Wilson to several observations about the importance of wisdom in the narrative and to the conclusion “that the text as a whole is not a ‘wisdom narrative’ but that many ‘wisdom-like elements’ have been woven into it” (300).

Part 3 (“Wisdom and Covenant in the Joseph Story”) is divided into three chapters, after which Wilson presents his conclusions. In chapter 9 (“The Abrahamic Promises and Genesis 37–50”) Wilson attempts to combine the literary reading of the Joseph story (part 2 of the book) with the broader context of Genesis and the Pentateuch as a whole. This leads the author to conclude that one cannot understand the Joseph story as a pure wisdom tale in narrative form, because the story in its present form is embedded in a wider context dealing with the fulfillment of the covenant promises (the patriarchal accounts, on the one side, and the stories of Moses, on the other). Thus, a part of the narrative’s meaning derives from this link.

Chapter 10 (“Wisdom and Genesis 37–50”) deals with the different aspects of wisdom in the Joseph narrative. Here one can find an analysis of Joseph’s public wisdom (Gen 39–
41, in the Egyptian court) as well as his private wisdom (Gen 42–45, family affairs). One can also find in this chapter an analysis of Joseph’s character and a rich discussion about God’s role in the story (in relation to wisdom teaching). In chapter 11 (“Covenant and Wisdom in Genesis 37–50”) Wilson discusses how the two themes of the Joseph story, “wisdom-like elements” and the Abrahamic covenant promise, are combined, what is the relation between the two and how they coexist.

The book is of interest not only to the scholars interested in the Joseph story but also to scholars interested in Old Testament wisdom. The book offers important insights to questions such as the importance of wisdom vocabulary in assessing wisdom influence, the relation between wisdom and nonwisdom elements in the narrative, wisdom elements in a narrative text (prose) compared to elements in proverbial text (poetic text), the interaction between wisdom elements and other traditions, and so on.

The importance of Wilson’s work culminates in part 3 of the book. Wilson does not stop with the question whether or not the Joseph story includes wisdom elements but takes the reader one step further. After he points out the wisdom elements of the narrative, Wilson examines the whole picture and looks at wisdom elements in the light of another dominant aspect of the narrative: the covenant. Many scholars overlook the fact that the Joseph narrative does not stand alone but rather it is a part of the patriarchal stories and therefore includes common motifs. One of these motifs is the promise to the fathers of the nation. Wilson shows how these seemingly opposing elements of the story cannot only coexist but enrich one another and produce one of the best stories of the Bible: the Joseph narrative.