Bernd U. Schipper

*The Hermeneutics of Torah*

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It has long been recognized that there is some kind of literary relationship between the books of Proverbs and Deuteronomy. This is unlikely to be a simple matter of one of these books being written under the influence of the other. Given that they are both tradition-historically complex products of the scribal culture of postexilic Yehud, the relationship between them is likely to be correspondingly complex. Bernd Schipper’s study is a sophisticated attempt to address this issue. This revised and expanded English version of his *Hermeneutik der Tora: Studien zur Traditionsgeschichte von Prov 2 und zur Komposition von Prov 1–9* (BZAW 432 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012]), is framed as a key to understanding his extensive commentary on Prov 1–15, originally published in German (2018) and subsequently in English in the Hermeneia series (2019). It is a major contribution to our understanding of how a more-or-less normative corpus of authoritative literature developed in Second Temple Judaism prior to the existence of a fixed “canon,” and it helps to demonstrate the extent to which generations of scribes in the Persian and Hellenistic eras were responsible not simply for the copying and transmission of the biblical texts but for their composition.

The introductory chapter provides an overview of previous scholarship on Prov 2 and on the relationship between the books of Proverbs and Deuteronomy, before turning to the phenomenon of “textual consistency” or “textual coherence” (*Textuelle Kohärenz*) in Egyptian “wisdom” literature as a model for understanding the reuse and adaptation of older texts. Chapter 2 then
gives a translation of Prov 2:1–22 accompanied by textual notes, weighing the MT against the evidence of the versions. Proverbs 2 is presented as a carefully constructed nonalphabetic acrostic that reflects both an educational setting and a highly literate audience. Proposals that divide the text up on literary-critical grounds are to be resisted, and explicitly theological language is to be understood as part of the warp and woof of the text.

Chapter 3 demonstrates a plausible literary connection between Prov 2 and three other complexes of tradition: the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic Literature, the so-called wisdom psalms, and postexilic scribal prophecy. Within and between these texts can be traced a dialogue concerning the relationship between wisdom and torah, especially as it pertains to the theology of the land. Also at issue in these texts is the question of whether humans are capable of obedience if they attend faithfully to the summons of wisdom (Prov 2) or whether obedience requires divine intervention, either through transformation of the human heart (e.g., Jer 31:31–34) or through its wholesale replacement (e.g., Ezek 11). Schipper traces a development within the book of Proverbs itself, from a conception of wisdom that recognized an innate human capacity for perceiving the wise course of action to a kind of “critical wisdom” that recognized the limits of human perception and the need for some form of divine intervention.

Proverbs 2 is then situated in the wider context of the book of Proverbs as a whole (ch. 4). Schipper identifies a single hand responsible for the compilation of the eight instructions in Prov 3–7 and argues that Prov 2 presupposes these instructions as a preexisting collection. It serves not so much as a table of contents as an aide-mémoire and a guide for reading. Schipper identifies three literary stages in the tradition-historical development of Prov 1–9: (1) a corpus of eight instructions in Prov 3:1–7:27 (3:1–12, 21–35; 4:1–9, 10–19, 20–27; 5:1–23; 6:20–35; 7:1–27); (2) Prov 2 was composed as an introduction to these instructions, along with the previously independent wisdom poem in Prov 8; (3) this corpus was expanded at the beginning (1:1–7, 8–19, 20–33) and at the end (9:1–18), with 6:1–19 then being placed in the middle. These final touches derive from different redactional hands, with 1:1–7, 6:1–19, and 9:7–12 belonging to the final redaction of the book as a whole. Distinct patterns of citation and allusion are distinguishable between the various redactional layers, reflecting distinct perspectives on wisdom and torah, from the “nomistic wisdom” of Prov 13, in which torah refers to the instructions of the wise with no reference to Deuteronomic law, to the personified wisdom of Prov 8, which in effect takes the place of law, to the “sapientialized torah” of Prov 6, in which the law is presented in sapiential terms.

Reading between the lines of the redactional history of Deuteronomy and late prophetic texts, Schipper discerns (ch. 5) traces of a theological discourse concerning the interpretation of divine revelation. On one side we find a subordination of wisdom to the written torah, which assumes the era of revelation to have ended with Moses (e.g., Deut 4:5–6; 31:9). On the other side we find a prophetic critique of this sapiential exegesis of torah, in favor of a belief in ongoing revelation
from YHWH (e.g., Jer 8:8–9). Associated with the former are a sapiential group for whom wisdom is derived from God and identified with the torah, with the wisdom teacher effectively taking the place of Moses in an ongoing transmission of the law (Deut 4:5–6), and a priestly group, for whom the exegesis of the sealed book of the law is restricted to a process of learned priestly interpretation (Deut 30:11–14; 31:9). This dialogue can also be traced through the various layers of the book of Proverbs. Schipper posits a group of literati in postexilic Jerusalem, plausibly identified with the “scribes” of Jer 8:8–9, probably associated with the temple or a school located there, and dedicated to the transmission and interpretation of older texts, especially Deuteronomy. The redactional development of the book of Proverbs thus reflects a complex intertextual dialogue concerning the status of wisdom in relation to torah, not only with textual traditions external to Proverbs but also between the different redactional layers of the book of Proverbs itself.

Chapter 5 concludes with a “prospectus” tracing the development of the dialogue around wisdom and law through Sirach and Baruch. In Sirach, torah is defined in terms of wisdom (Sir 24); in Baruch, wisdom is subordinated to torah (Bar 3:9–4:4). Given that the nature of wisdom, its relation to law, and the possibility of ongoing divine revelation continued to be points of tension through and beyond the Second Temple period, it would be good to see the implications of Schipper’s argument developed further in relation to other texts—the book of Daniel, for example, in which the scribal interpretation of Jeremiah is framed in terms of apocalyptic (i.e., “revelatory”) insight; or the Qumran scrolls, in which the interpretation of law (e.g., 4QHalakhic Letter frags. 14–17 II, 4) and prophecy (e.g., 1QpHab VII, 1–5) is associated with particular kinds of insight, as is the transmission of sapiential instruction (e.g., 4QInstruction frag. 81 line 17); or the Enochic tradition, which seems to critique the idea that wisdom is in some way incarnated in the Mosaic torah (see, e.g., 1 En. 42.1–3, against Sir 24).

This thorough and tightly argued work is essential reading for all serious students and scholars of Proverbs and Deuteronomy. It is, to be sure, a dense and challenging work, and it can be difficult at times to keep track of all the details of the argument. It is helpful to have clear summaries of the various chapters and of the book as a whole. The textual analyses are patient and precise, and the overall argument is a model of methodological rigor that shows beyond any doubt the abiding value of tradition-historical research, without which the development of the Hebrew Bible cannot be accurately understood. Schipper is working with “a broadened notion of tradition history in which the focus lies on the relations to different traditions, that is, to texts” (81), so that one cannot simply say that Proverbs is dependent on Deuteronomy or vice versa. They are dependent on each other at different stages in their redactional development. Tradition history here is not simply the process by which individual texts developed but the process by which these texts developed in dialogue with one another. If one group of texts has chronological and ideological priority over the others, it is Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature.
One could even say that this is a study of the *Wirkungsgechichte* of the various redactional layers of Deuteronomy, in the context of the scribal culture(s) of the Persian and Hellenistic eras.

What remains somewhat unclear is how we are to understand the literary genres of the texts. Schipper refers unambiguously to “wisdom literature” (e.g., 44, 70, 158, 169, 175), “wisdom texts” (86, 99, 158), “wisdom themes” (100, ref. to Ps 37), and “wisdom thought” (274). Proverbs 2 is a “wisdom instruction” (99) that “oscillates between wisdom language and legal themes” (88), as if to suggest that “wisdom” and “law” are discrete entities, perhaps deriving from distinct scribal groups. Yet some important recent scholarship has called the category wisdom literature into question as a means of characterizing works such as Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, and Ben Sira. As Judean scribes edited their corpus of authoritative literature, then, how exactly did they understand the literary character of the various works they were adapting and transmitting? And if we are dealing here with a scribal process that is traceable at the level of the written texts, without recourse to any hypothetical oral tradition (306), is there nonetheless room for investigating the oral and aural dimensions of this process of scribal transmission? There is plenty of scope here for future research, which can only further illuminate the scribal cultures of the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman periods.