

## Reviews

**CONTRADICTION IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS: THE DEEP WATERS OF COUNSEL** by Peter T.H. Hatton (*Ashgate/Society for Old Testament Study Series Aldershot, 2008*) Pp. 210, £50 hbk.

Reading this book has left me feeling somewhat chastened. Hatton's purpose is to point the way to a reading of the Book of Proverbs that acknowledges its creative purpose, its unity, and its profundity, and in doing so he decries, forcefully though without hyperbole, the still-prevailing tendency to dismiss the book as 'articulat[ing] a platitudinous and banal wisdom, consisting chiefly of the counterfactual doctrine that both the good and bad would always be appropriately requited for their deeds' (p. 3). Having so dismissed Proverbs, even those Old Testament scholars who have an interest in the wisdom literature – a larger minority now, at least, than a decade or two ago – are by-and-large inclined to move directly to the more glamorous 'sceptical wisdom' of Job and Ecclesiastes, often seen as cleverly subverting the mainstream pieties and/or clerical-establishment ideologies of Proverbs.

I cannot deny being somewhat guilty of this myself. I have never imagined that the authors or collators of the great tide of short aphorisms, apparently arranged almost randomly, which makes up the bulk of the book could possibly have believed, or expected their readers to believe, that it is a rule of the cosmos that bad things happen to bad people and good to good; but apart from the occasional citation plucked out as often as not for its amusement value, I too have directed much more attention to the other wisdom books, and within Proverbs principally to the first nine chapters, wherein one finds material with more obvious structure and seemingly richer theological content.

Yet perhaps we should all have realised that the wave of re-readings of the OT books, a wave that has eroded so many scholarly sandcastles – the documentary hypothesis being only the most obvious example – should eventually have reached this most neglected of books. The longer and more consistently held the assured results of biblical criticism have been, the more certain it is that the time will come when we will look back and laugh at our own naivety and ignorance; and nowhere is this phenomenon more pronounced than in Proverbs, when as radical a scholar as Philip Davies, writing in 2002, can work from basically the same set of assumptions as those held more than a century previously.

Hatton launches his campaign, then, with a rehearsal of the history of the question (one can tell that this is based on a doctoral thesis), and the reader coming new to the study of Proverbs would do very well indeed to begin with these chapters, marked as they are by clarity, wit without sarcasm, and the ability time and again to highlight the unreasonableness, inconsistency and just plain mistakenness of so much of the secondary literature. An excellent example is the detailed excurses (pp. 98–109) examining the key proof texts for Koch's 1955 argument that the ideological centre of Proverbs is the *Tat-Ergehen Zusammenhang* or 'Act-Consequence Relationship'. Hatton is able to show that even Koch's slanted selections fail to say consistently what Koch claims is *the* message of the book.

This lack of consistency is a key element of the positive argument that Hatton goes on to develop. Undoubtedly, his implied debating-partners admit, there are

inconsistencies in Proverbs, indeed sometimes flat contradictions, but this is a typical feature of this kind of work, a cobbled-together miscellany of materials from a variety of sources, smaller and larger chunks of already-redacted tradition stitched together with little, if any, thematic or poetic coherence. In other words, the incompetent redactor so dear to the hearts of historical-critical scholarship. No, says Hatton: it is deliberate. In using self-referential verbal echoes and allusion to deny what it has previously stated, the Book of Proverbs intentionally causes its reader to blink, to stumble, to acknowledge the limits of humanly produced literature to capture the mysteries of the cosmos and man's place within it. Hatton appeals to Bakhtin's concept of a 'heteroglossalic text', a text that is dialogical not monological, so that 'the reader is goaded into a more mature and reflective wisdom... Proverbs, it transpires, is far from the settled, self-satisfied text that many scholars have taken it to be. In its own way, it is as challenging and provocative as Qohelet' (p. 116).

The idea that Qohelet is such a dialogical text is a fairly standard one, and of course in the case of Job it is explicit. To apply it to Proverbs is a new and exciting proposal. Moreover, Hatton goes further, and in two ways. In the first place, he goes on to argue that the pattern of self-contradiction occurs on more than one scale: sometimes two mutually contradictory verses are right next to one another, or one might find a single saying dropped into what seems an otherwise smooth-flowing and coherent passage. He gives the example of 10:15 within the chapter as a whole – the beginning of the 'proverbs of Solomon'. A second disturbing saying then occurs at 10:22, and Hatton suggests that such sayings 'are like stones dropped into a smoothly flowing stream; the ripples spread in several directions' (p. 93). But these ripples are also part of much larger patterns: he identifies another in which 'Proverbs 6:20–34 and 21:14 constitute a framework around a dialogue about the subject [of bribery]' (p. 137).

Just as importantly, Hatton insists that the dialogical or heteroglossalic nature of Proverbs is not something he has identified as part of a 'reader-response' hermeneutic, but is the deliberate creation of a highly-skilled author. Here he stands over against the many biblical scholars who, despairing of making coherent sense of a work as the unitary creation of an author, but unwilling to take upon themselves the task of unpicking supposed redactional seams in order to interpret some quite different text, prescind from the question of authorial intention entirely. Hatton suggests that this is indeed a counsel of despair, and an unnecessary one, and although one might have welcomed a more substantial statement of his hermeneutical presuppositions, he is nonetheless to be lauded for the attempt to ground his reading of Proverbs in historical reality.

Whether his particular historical reconstruction of the author and his intentions is wholly convincing is debatable; it is proposed almost as an afterthought, and much can be gained from this fascinating, lucid and cleverly argued book without accepting every last conclusion. It is long past time that the 'assured results' of historical-critical interpretation of the Book of Proverbs were seriously reconsidered, and I hope that this book will mark the turning of the tide.

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**SACRED TIME IN EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND: THE MONKS OF THE NAUGATIO AND THE CÉLI DÉ IN DIALOGUE TO EXPLORE THE THEOLOGIES OF TIME AND LITURGY IN PRE-VIKING IRELAND** by Patricia M. Rumsey  
(*T. & T. Clark London, 2007*) Pp. xi + 258, £75 hbk

One of the most neglected sources for the study of the early medieval history of these islands is the material relating to the church's liturgy. There must have