

Melville's Wisdom: Religion, Skepticism, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century America. By Damien B. Schlarb. American Academy of Religion Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xiv + 252. \$74.00 cloth.

For more than a generation, literary historians have struggled to pin down Herman Melville's theological identity. How exactly did his pessimistic tone differentiate him from the sunnier transcendentalists? Was it evidence of a corrosive skepticism one step further removed from traditional Christianity, or of a lingering allegiance to Calvinist notions of depravity? How should one square the idiosyncratic religiosity of Melville's novels with his personal participation in a thoroughly mainstream Unitarian congregation in New York City? Amid all the confusion, one thing seems clear: one cannot make full sense of Melville's literary vision without coming to terms with his lifelong preoccupation with biblical texts. This insight has inspired a small library of books on Melville and the Bible, among them *Melville's Bibles* (2008) by Ilana Pardes, *Satirical Apocalypse* (1996) by Jonathan Cook, and *Sacred Uncertainty* (2015) by Brian Yothers.

Damien Schlarb's entry into this crowded field seeks to resolve the confusion by anchoring Melville preeminently to one part of the Bible: the so-called "Wisdom Books" of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These books, Schlarb suggests, offered Melville a religious way of being in the world that was equally distant from orthodox Christianity and from skeptical deism. Wisdom literature affirmed Melville's own skeptical tendencies, but it also led "him out of the valley of despair toward an integrative, modern vision of truth-seeking" that "assemble[d] under one tent empirical, phenomenological, as well as metaphysical approaches" (178). Following wisdom literature's guidance, Melville was able to forge a relationship to the Bible that was equally suited to his age and to ours. He could treat it as "a storehouse of cultural and moral guidance for a new age while divesting it of institutional authoritarianism" (180). This was possible because the wisdom books themselves "assemble religious and profane or experiential language" (19). This insight leads Schlarb to dissent from Pardes's contention that Melville crafted a "grand new, inverted Bible" (22). Melville did not need to do so, or to engage in "merely subversive skepticism" (180), because "much of his alleged irreverence operates within the lines of skeptical thinking included in Old Testament wisdom" (181–182). Schlarb suggests that this insight has the potential to place Melville at the center of a revised story of religious transformation in the nineteenth century, one "in which religion is not seen as a fortress besieged by marauding hordes of skeptics but as a constantly evolving organism that spawns, shapes, and is subsequently shaped by adverse projects of modern meaning-making" (21).

To demonstrate that wisdom is indeed the key to Melville's entire literary output, Schlarb organizes his book into three large chapters, each linking a distinct Biblical book to close readings of several of Melville's texts. The chapter on Job shows that Melville used wisdom to wrestle with the mystery of suffering without lapsing into simplistic solutions; it contains readings of *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, "Bartleby the Scrivener," and *The Encantadas*. Schlarb treats Proverbs as an epistemological guide that is more reliable than either religious orthodoxy or secular science, and he shows how Melville engaged Proverbs in *Mardi*, "The Lightning-Rod Man," *The Confidence Man*, and *Billy Budd*. Finally, Ecclesiastes taught Melville to meet the ultimate inscrutability of the universe with moderation, recognizing the limits of wisdom itself. Schlarb suggests

that *Moby Dick*'s Ishmael learned this lesson well, while the protagonists of *Redburn* and *Pierre* struggled to do so. The Ecclesiastes chapter also engages Melville's Civil War poem, *Battle-Pieces*.

Schlarb's argument braids together two distinct claims, one of which I found much more convincing than the other. The convincing claim treats "wisdom" as a current of biblical thinking that cuts across multiple texts in the New Testament as well as the Old. From this perspective, whenever Melville reads *any* biblical text, he reads it for the wisdom it contains, rather than for its literal truth or its place within a system of dogma. This claim is well-supported by the evidence Schlarb amasses. The texts he reads engage a dizzying array of biblical passages, often compressed within a single paragraph or sentence. Elements of wisdom appear even when Melville is talking about Genesis or the Prophets or Gospels. Yet as far as I could tell, Schlarb never states this claim explicitly.

Instead, Schlarb too often lapses into a tendentious argument that the three books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes were more important to Melville than other parts of the Bible—that they functioned as "a stylistic and thematic touchstone on which he built the moral cosmos of his texts" (13). This claim is problematic in several ways. It forces Schlarb to paper over the real theological and stylistic differences among these three books. It leads him to imply, without evidence, that Melville experienced them as a cohesive subset of the Bible. Yet Schlarb also acknowledges that the concept of wisdom as a distinct biblical genre was first proposed in 1851 by a German scholar who may have been unknown to Melville (5–6). And it leads him into some unnecessarily strained readings. In one egregious case, Schlarb suggests that when Melville referred to "the prophets" he was really talking about Solomon—despite the fact that Melville characterized them as "mostly recluses" (117), which Solomon certainly was not! Schlarb downplays the obvious Christological dimension of *Billy Budd* and the even more obvious connection between *Moby Dick* and the book of Jonah. It is sad that he does not say more about Jonah, because it is an especially fertile example of how the wisdom ethos can be found even in biblical texts not classified as "wisdom."

Schlarb's overemphasis on Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes made the reading experience frustrating for me. I was repeatedly tempted to quibble with his cherry-picking rather than to sit, alongside Melville and his characters, at the feet of Lady Wisdom. Yet Schlarb's larger point stands: Biblical wisdom still has much to teach the world, and Melville is an apt tutor for those who wish to learn.

Dan McKanan

Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

doi:10.1017/S0009640723001269

Good for the Souls: A History of Confession in the Russian Empire.
By Nadieszda Kizenko. Oxford Studies in Modern European History.
Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021. xiv + 327 pp. \$100 cloth.

Among the few facts about the Russian Orthodox Church in Imperial Russia familiar to nonspecialists is that Peter the Great's 1722 *Supplement to the Spiritual Regulation* required priests to report sedition learned through confession. This requirement to break the confessional seal was and remains key evidence for the longstanding