

Proverbs

Tremper Longman III



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To Gabrielle Gagnon Longman,
born to Tremper and Jill Longman
on March 17, 2005

*Grandchildren are the crown of the elderly,
and the glory of children is their parents.*
Proverbs 17:6

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Series Preface

At the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, a wise father warns his son concerning the multiplication of books: “Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned. There is no end to the making of many books!” (12:12). The Targum to this biblical book characteristically expands the thought and takes it in a different, even contradictory, direction: “My son, take care to make many books of wisdom without end.”

When applied to commentaries, both statements are true. The past twenty years have seen a significant increase in the number of commentaries available on each book of the Bible. On the other hand, for those interested in grappling seriously with the meaning of the text, such proliferation should be seen as a blessing rather than a curse. No single commentary can do it all. In the first place, commentaries reflect different theological and methodological perspectives. We can learn from others who have a different understanding of the origin and nature of the Bible, but we also want commentaries that share our fundamental beliefs about the biblical text. Second, commentaries are written with different audiences in mind. Some are addressed primarily to laypeople, others to clergy, and still others to fellow scholars. A third consideration, related to the previous two, is the subdisciplines the commentator chooses to draw from to shed light on the biblical text. The possibilities are numerous, including philology, textual criticism, genre/form criticism, redaction criticism, ancient Near Eastern background, literary conventions, and more. Finally, commentaries differ in how extensively they interact with secondary literature, that is, with what others have said about a given passage.

The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms has a definite audience in mind. We believe the primary users of com-

mentaries are scholars, ministers, seminary students, and Bible study leaders. Of these groups, we have most in mind clergy and future clergy, namely, seminary students. We have tried to make the commentary accessible to nonscholars by putting most of the technical discussion and interaction with secondary literature in the footnotes. We do not mean to suggest that such information is unimportant. We simply concede that, given the present state of the church, it is the rare layperson who will read such technical material with interest and profit. We hope we are wrong in this assessment, and if we are not, that the future will see a reverse in this trend. A healthy church is a church that nourishes itself with constant attention to God's words in Scripture, in all their glorious detail.

Since not all commentaries are alike, what are the features that characterize this series? The message of the biblical book is the primary focus of each commentary, and the commentators have labored to expose God's message for his people in the book they discuss. This series also distinguishes itself by restricting its coverage to one major portion of the Hebrew Scriptures, namely, the Psalms and Wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs). These biblical books provide a distinctive contribution to the canon. Although we can no longer claim that they are neglected, their unique content makes them harder to fit into the development of redemptive history and requires more effort to hear their distinctive message.

The book of Psalms is the literary sanctuary. Like the physical sanctuary structures of the OT, it offers a textual holy place where humans share their joys and struggles with brutal honesty in God's presence. The book of Proverbs describes wisdom, which on one level is skill for living, the ability to navigate life's actual and potential pitfalls; but on another level, this wisdom presents a pervasive and deeply theological message: "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). Proverbs also raises a disturbing issue: The sages often motivate wise behavior by linking it to reward, but in reality, bad things happen to good people; the wise are not always rewarded as they expect. This raises the question of the justice of God. Both Job and Ecclesiastes struggle with the apparent disconnect between God's justice and our actual life experiences. Finally, the Song of Songs is a passionate, sensuous love poem that reminds us that God is interested in more than just our brains and our spirits; he wants us to enjoy our bodies. It reminds us that we are not merely souls encased in bodies but whole persons made in God's image.

Limiting the series to the Psalms and Wisdom books has allowed us to tailor our work to the distinctive nature of this portion of the canon. With some few exceptions in Job and Ecclesiastes, for instance, the material in these biblical books is poetic and highly literary, and so

the commentators have highlighted the significant poetic conventions employed in each book. After an introduction discussing important issues that affect the interpretation of the book (title, authorship, date, language, style, text, ancient Near Eastern background, genre, canonicity, theological message, connection to the New Testament, and structure), each commentary proceeds section-by-section through the biblical text. The authors provide their own translations, with explanatory notes when necessary, followed by a substantial interpretive section (titled “Interpretation”) and concluding with a section titled “Theological Implications.” In the interpretation section, the emphasis is on the meaning of the text in its original historical setting. In the theological implications section, connections with other parts of the canon, both OT and NT, are sketched out along with the continuing relevance of each passage for us today. The latter section is motivated by the recognition that, while it is important to understand the individual contribution and emphasis of each book, these books now find their places in a larger collection of writings, the canon as a whole, and it is within this broader context that the books must ultimately be interpreted.

No two commentators in this series see things in exactly the same way, though we all share similar convictions about the Bible as God’s Word and the belief that it must be appreciated not only as ancient literature but also as God’s Word for today. It is our hope and prayer that these volumes will inform readers and, more importantly, stimulate reflection on and passion for these valuable books.

One of the benefits of editing a commentary series is the opportunity to assign myself a particular book. Having already written commentaries on Ecclesiastes (NICOT; Eerdmans, 1998) and Song of Songs (NICOT; Eerdmans, 2001), I decided to tackle the book of Proverbs. It has been a joy to work and teach on Proverbs for the past five years. It is my hope and prayer that people, particularly those who teach and preach the book, will find this commentary helpful.

Tremper Longman III
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Author's Preface

The academy and the church (I can't speak for the synagogue) have discovered new significance and interest in the book of Proverbs. Long pushed to the side for being nontheological and even superficial, the book has found renewed use as a source for navigating life and for imparting advice about how to live life wisely. There is even a grudging acknowledgment of Proverbs' theological contribution.

My own appreciation for the book has grown immensely over the five years that I have worked on this volume. I have come to realize, for instance, that wisdom is more than a skill for living; it has profound theological significance. After all, it begins with the fear of God (1:7). Or to put it another way, wisdom involves making Woman Wisdom an integral, intimate part of our life (9:1–6). Indeed, the New Testament proclaims that Jesus is the epitome of God's wisdom and communicates this truth in many ways, including associating him with Woman Wisdom.

Even so, it continues to be true that the wisdom of Proverbs informs the reader about how to live, how to navigate the pitfalls of life, of which there are many. In this area, we will see that the contemporary discussion of emotional intelligence is relevant. Indeed, as we read the now vast literature about emotional intelligence, we note that the ancient book of Proverbs "got it" many centuries earlier.

I have also come to see that wisdom is both something one strives for through hard study and a gift from God. Wisdom comes from God, but also from the ancient Near East, and somehow these two truths do not undermine each other.

The study of the book of Proverbs is full of challenges. Perhaps the most interesting new challenge pertains to the structure of the book. As discussed in the introduction, the field is abuzz with talk of a newly discovered deep structure of the book, particularly the proverbs in chapters 10 and following. After much thought and reflection, however, I have concluded that the various schemes for describing the previously undetected groups of proverbs are misguided. Thus, one of the traits that differentiates this commentary from some of the other excellent

recent contributions on Proverbs is the belief that the traditional view, that the proverbs are relatively randomly organized, is the correct one. This conclusion has led me to write a series of topical essays at the conclusion of the commentary proper. In these essays, I synthesize the teaching on some of the major topics of the book: wealth and poverty, speech, neighbors and friends, and business ethics, to name a few.

I have written this commentary for all readers: lay, professional, and scholarly audiences. But the group I had most in mind as I wrote was the second category. By “professional,” I mean ministers and future ministers (seminarians). It is my hope that this commentary can help them as they prepare sermons and Bible studies on the book of Proverbs.

I wish to thank a number of colleagues and friends for their help in writing this commentary. I want to acknowledge their contribution while also freeing them from responsibility for my interpretive conclusions. Indeed, I know that at least some of them strongly disagree with some of the more controversial conclusions I have reached (such as the relationship between wisdom and law [and covenant], views of the afterlife in Proverbs, the christological reading of the book, and conclusions about structure). Even so, they each contributed greatly to the final form of the book. First, I wish to express my deep appreciation to John Goldingay, who served as conceptual editor of this volume. He challenged me on a number of points and helped me greatly improve the commentary. I would also like to thank Jim Kinney of Baker Academic, who recruited me to edit the series and (indirectly, since I chose it myself) to write this volume. As many will testify, Jim has done a wonderful job at Baker Academic in shaping its publication agenda and encouraging a number of very helpful projects. I also wish to thank Wells Turner and his staff for their excellent work in bringing this book to press.

Over the course of the past few years, I have also benefited from teaching the book of Proverbs in intensive seminary classes at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Fuller Theological Seminary, Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle, Canadian Theological Seminary in Calgary, and Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. While I cannot name all of my students, I thank them all.

Finally, I dedicate this book to the newest member of our family, Gabrielle Gagnon Longman. She is the first grandchild of my wife, Alice, and me, and the daughter of our son Tremper and his wife, Jill. Welcome to the family, Elle.

Tremper Longman III
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies
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Abbreviations

Bibliographic and General

- ANET* *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)
- b.* Babylonian Talmud
- BHS* *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967–77)
- ca.* circa (about)
- chap(s). chapter(s)
- COS* *The Context of Scripture*, ed. W. W. Hallo, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002)
- CTA* *Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques découvertes à Ras Shamra–Ugarit de 1929 à 1939*, ed. A. Herdner, 2 vols., Mission de Ras Shamra 10 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, Geuthner, 1963)
- Eng./ET English/English translation
- ESV English Standard Version
- GKC *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and enl. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910)
- Heb. Hebrew
- Kethib the word as written in the Hebrew text
- lit. literally
- LXX Septuagint
- MT Masoretic (Hebrew) Text
- n(n). note(s)
- NAB New American Bible
- NASB New American Standard Bible
- NEB New English Bible
- NCV New Century Version

<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. W. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Qere	the word to be read in the Hebrew text
REB	Revised English Bible
Sir.	Sirach
TNIV	Today's New International Version
v(v).	verse(s)
Waltke-O'Connor	Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990)

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps(s).	Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1-2 Thess.	1-2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1-2 Tim.	1-2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1-2 Cor.	1-2 Corinthians	1-2 Pet.	1-2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1-3 John	1-3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

Introduction

Title

English readers are familiar with the title “Proverbs” or “book of Proverbs.” The title thus associates the book with its most pervasive genre, the proverb—short, pithy observations, admonitions, warnings, and prohibitions (particularly in chaps. 10–31; see “Genre” below). This name derives from the Latin Vulgate title, *Liber Proverbiorum*.

The Hebrew name of the book is *mišlê*, the first word, which is the construct plural form of *māšāl* and means “proverbs.” In the Septuagint, the book is called *paroimiai*, the Greek word used to translate *māšāl* in the first verse. *Paroimiai* is close in meaning to *parabolē*, “parable,” since both can stand for the Hebrew *māšāl*, both can be translated “proverb” or “parable,” and both can refer to a wide variety of figurative language.¹ In sum, the title in Hebrew, Greek, and English tradition all point to the most distinctive genre of the book, the proverb.²

1. The word *paroimiai* is used in this sense in the Gospel of John, whereas the Synoptics use *parabolē*. See R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70), 1:385–86.

2. G. Wilson states: “The *māšāl* seems to represent a more general category of wisdom saying than two other terms found in Proverbs 1:6: *ḥidā*, riddle; and *meḷiṣā*, parable, figure, warning. In this most general sense, *māšāl* serves as an appropriate title for the book of Proverbs . . . although some think the title was shifted to its present position from the beginning of the proverbial collections in chapters 10–31” (*NIDOTTE* 2:1134–35).

Canonicity

In his definitive work on the canon of the OT, Roger Beckwith (*Old Testament Canon*) remarks that some rabbis stumbled over the apparent contradiction of Prov. 26:4–5:

Don't answer fools according to their stupidity;
 otherwise you will become like them yourself.
 Answer fools according to their stupidity;
 otherwise they will become wise in their own eyes.

On the surface of it, these two verses seem to offer a blatant contradiction, and some rabbinical authorities³ therefore concluded that, since God does not contradict himself, this book could not be the Word of God. As we will point out under “Genre,” such a viewpoint represents a misunderstanding of the genre of proverb. In any case, these rabbis were in a minority. As Beckwith also points out, there is abundant attestation from Jewish (Pharisee and Essene) and Christian sources going back to the second century BC that the book was accepted as authoritative.⁴

Place in Canon

Those who use English versions of the Bible find the book of Proverbs after Psalms and before Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. This follows the order in the Greek OT, which contains a more chronological order than the Hebrew Bible. It is likely that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are listed together because of their common connection with Solomon.

In the Hebrew canon, Proverbs is contained in the third part of the Tanak: the Ketubim, or Writings. Proverbs is thus found in a different order of books. The Ketubim begin with Psalms, then continue with Job and then Proverbs.⁵ Ruth and then the Song of Songs follow Proverbs. It is likely that Psalms precedes Job in the Ketubim so that massive and important book can introduce the third and final part of the Tanak. Job may then follow because of its ancient setting, to be followed by Proverbs.

3. Beckwith, *Old Testament Canon*, 284, cites the Talmud in *b. Šabbat* 30b.

4. As Beckwith says (*ibid.*, 319), “The Book of Proverbs is certainly or probably treated as Scripture by Ecclesiasticus, 4 Maccabees, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, the Epistle to the Romans, the Epistle of James, 1 Clement and Josephus.” See also *ibid.*, 72–76, 79–80, 98–99 (nn65, 67).

5. Though in some early manuscripts and Hebrew editions the order of Job and Proverbs is reversed. See Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 4.

After Proverbs come the Megillot, or Festival Scrolls, books that were important in connection with specific major Jewish celebrations: Ruth (Weeks), Song of Songs (Passover), Ecclesiastes (Tabernacles), Lamentations (the 9th of Ab), and Esther (Purim).⁶ Even though the Megillot are a separate section within the Ketubim, we do well to note the sequence of Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs. Proverbs ends with a powerful poem on the virtuous woman (*ʿēšet-ḥayîl*), to be followed by Ruth, who is called a virtuous woman (Ruth 3:11). Song of Songs, which contains poems, most of which are sung by a woman, ends the sequence.

Finally, Proverbs, along with Psalms and Job, is distinct from the other books in the canon for having an accentual system that indicates the Masoretes regarded this book as poetical.⁷

Authorship and Date

As is typical with wisdom and prophetic books, Proverbs opens with a superscription, which functions something like a title page in a modern book:

The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel—

Standing at the head of the entire book, the superscription appears to lead to the conclusion that the book at least claims to have been produced if not authored by Solomon, the third king of Israel (ca. 970–930 BC).

Indeed, a strong tradition connects Solomon with wisdom and specifically with the proverb form. After all, the book of Kings credits Solomon with pursuing and receiving the gift of wisdom from God (1 Kings 3:1–15). Solomon's fame is associated with his great wisdom in 1 Kings 4:29–34, a wisdom that is described in an international context and includes the fact that “he composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs number a thousand and five” (4:32 NRSV). The verb that NRSV translates “composed” is actually simply “uttered” or “spoke” (from *dbr*). Further, the Kings tradition illustrates how Solomon used his wisdom in judging cases (3:16–28). It further shows how people from all over the world, like the Queen of Sheba (10:1–13), marveled at his wisdom.⁸

6. Webb, *Five Festal Garments*.

7. Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 114–15.

8. On the basis of this tradition, Brueggemann (“Social Significance of Solomon,” 129) suggests that the reference to Solomon in the superscription of Proverbs “is not interested in historical concreteness, but in the memory that it was Solomon, for better or for worse, who opened Israel's way for such an intellectual enterprise.”

Furthermore, Solomon's connection with wisdom is demonstrated by his mention in the superscriptions of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Indeed, one rabbinic tradition offers a sequence for the writing of these three books during the life of Solomon. The *Midrash Rabbah* talks of Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as belonging to three phases of his life, with the explanation that "when a man is young he composes songs; when he grows older he makes sententious remarks; and when he becomes an old man he speaks of the vanity of things."

Though one's first impression might be to conclude that Solomon was the author of Proverbs, the situation is actually significantly more complex. In the first place, as we read on in Proverbs, we see that other sections of the book are marked by captions that seem to attribute authorship to people other than Solomon. For instance, 22:17 and 24:23 mention a group called simply "the wise"; 30:1 and 31:1 mention two unknown men named Agur and Lemuel respectively; 10:1 and 25:1 mention Solomon again, but the latter also ascribes some type of role to the "advisers of King Hezekiah of Judah."

As a second complicating factor in authorship, authors do not typically sit down and compose proverbs. Instead, proverbs often emerge in an oral context and eventually may find their way into a written collection like the book we know as Proverbs. What would it mean to say that Solomon composed proverbs?

A third item to keep in mind is the relationship between these biblical proverbs and those of the broader ancient Near East. As we will discuss (see "Ancient Near Eastern Background" below), a number of proverbs bear similarity to proverbs that we find in Egyptian and Aramaic collections, some of which clearly predate the Israelite book. Thus again, thinking of Solomon as original composer of the book is hard to sustain.

A fourth consideration weakens an argument based on the supposed Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Close studies of those books suggest that Solomon's name there has a different purpose than establishing that Solomon authored these books as a whole.⁹

All of this leads us to ask what picture emerges from the data. Certainly, it seems reasonable and defensible to recognize Solomon's hand in the book, but it is also important to honor the other clear compositional indications. When we do so, we realize that the book of Proverbs is actually a collection or anthology that has the following form:

Preamble (1:1–7)

Extended Discourses on Wisdom (1:8–9:18)

9. See the position taken in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, and idem, *Song of Songs*.

Solomonic Proverbs (10:1–22:16; 25:1–29:27)

Sayings of the Wise (22:17–24:34)

Sayings of Agur (30:1–33)

Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1–9)

Poem to the Virtuous Woman (31:10–31)

What does the text actually say about Solomon's contribution? Again, he is mentioned in superscriptions in 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1. The mention in 1:1 may simply serve the function of noting Solomon's foundational importance to the collection. It does not mean he wrote the whole book, nor does it necessitate the view that he was responsible for 1:2–9:18. If he were, then why would there be a Solomonic superscription at 10:1? Thus, the text explicitly connects Solomon to 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27. For the latter collection, the book also ascribes a scribal and perhaps an editorial role to King Hezekiah's men.¹⁰

The other named composers/collectors are either not given personal names ("the words of the wise" (22:17; 24:23) or have names that are otherwise unknown and are perhaps to be understood as non-Israelite (Agur [30:1] and Lemuel [31:1], the latter citing advice of his mother).

In conclusion, it seems likely that the composition of Proverbs, like the composition of the book of Psalms, took place over a long period of time before it finally came to a close and no more proverbs were added. Indeed, the considerably different structure of Septuagint Proverbs as well as a number of additions may indicate that this process continued even beyond the time that the Hebrew text tradition adopted by the Masoretes came to a close (see "Text" below).

Before concluding this discussion of authorship, we should introduce the fact of repeated proverbs throughout the book. Daniel Snell has catalogued the evidence for repeated verses according to the following categories (of which only represented examples will be placed in the brackets):¹¹

1. Whole verses repeated with spelling variations (14:12/16:25; 18:8/26:22)
2. Whole verses repeated with one dissimilar word (6:10–11/24:33–34)

10. Indeed, early Jewish tradition may have ascribed authorship of the entire book to them on the basis of this verse: "Hezekiah and his company wrote the Proverbs" (*b. Baba Batra* 15a).

11. Snell, *Twice-Told Proverbs*, 34–59. Not all his categories are repeated here, but simply the four types where the verses are the most similar.

3. Whole verses repeated with two dissimilar words (10:1/15:20; 11:1/20:23)
4. Whole verses repeated with three dissimilar words (10:2/11:4)

This evidence is best understood to indicate that proverbs were added over time. As in the Psalms (compare psalms like 14 and 53), similar and near similar psalms were perhaps added because different groups of psalms came into the collection at different times. While there would be a majority of new psalms in a new group, it may contain one or more that already existed in the collection. Even so, their presence may indicate something to us: the importance of such a theme. Repetition, resulting from whatever reason, leads to emphasis.

In any case, it does not seem possible to use this information to date when individual proverbs came into the collection. As a matter of fact, with the exception of saying that Solomon's role preceded Hezekiah's men's role (provided one takes the superscriptions seriously and also the historicity of the monarchy seriously), we cannot say anything with great confidence. However, in my view that is of no major importance; what is of interest is the final product and how the proverbs function in their present context.

In summary, we cannot say much about the identities and dates of the individual composers and editors of the book.¹² However, can we say anything about the social location of the proverbs? Are they from the upper levels of society or the lower? Are the proverbs derived from the court, the farm, the school, the temple, or some other place within ancient Israelite society?

Social Setting

The issue of the social setting of the composition and reading of Proverbs became particularly interesting after scholarship concluded that Solomon was not the sole author. However, even if Solomon is the foundational figure associated with the composition of the book, this does not settle the issue of the origin of proverbs. By their nature, proverbs are not only authored; they are also collected. Another way to approach the question of authorship is to ask whether the book of Proverbs betrays a connection with a specific sector of Israelite society.

There have been a number of different answers to this question. In his seminal *Wisdom in Israel*, von Rad argues that the proverbs in the

12. According to Snell, "Scholars generally agree that there are few indications of the absolute dates when the composers and editors worked" (*Twice-Told Proverbs*, 74).

book of Proverbs were produced by scribes employed in the service of the court. A number of lines of evidence may be used to support his idea. In the first place, the text's tradition of association with both Solomon and the "men of Hezekiah" presumes a relationship with the court. Second, it has often been argued that the analogy between the biblical books and ancient Near Eastern texts like Amenemope show a connection between the genre and the court, though Amenemope himself was a lower-level bureaucrat.

In recent days, the question of the court origin of the wisdom of Proverbs has been tied up with the issue of the existence of scribal schools that might have fed its graduates into the royal bureaucracy. It is true that the first mention of a school in Israelite literature is found in Sir. 51:23 (the *bêt hammidrāsh*) in the early intertestamental period. Of course, the first extant reference to a school does not decide the issue, but it does mean that arguments in favor of formal education in Israel become purely inferential.

One of the leading advocates for the position of the schools' existence, A. Lemaire,¹³ focuses on archaeological evidence in favor of schools. He notes the discovery of a handful of extrabiblical inscriptions that look as though they come from a school setting. Tablets that contain lists of the alphabet provide a good example. However, as other scholars have pointed out,¹⁴ while this supports the idea of literacy, it does not support the existence of schools in the biblical period. In the final analysis we need to remain agnostic about the question. While the idea may be strongly supported by the fact that Egypt, Mesopotamia, and even Canaan provide evidence of such schools, we have nothing like a smoking gun that will prove their existence. After all, the explicit comments about education in the OT (Deut. 4:10; 5:31; 11:19) as well as the dynamics of Prov. 1–9 suggest that learning came about when a father instructed his son in a family setting.

One interesting new approach to the question has been provided by Westermann and Golka,¹⁵ who look at modern societies that are arguably close to that of ancient Israel. In particular, they examine the use of proverbs in tribal Africa. The similarities lead them to support the idea that the biblical proverbs, at least those in chaps. 10–31, are the product of a society of small Israelite farmers.

However, close analysis of the proverbs themselves makes one wonder whether it is best to imagine multiple backgrounds to the proverbs, even those that may have been collected rather than composed by Solomon.

13. Lemaire, "Sage in School and Temple," 165–83. For an excellent survey of different opinions and a reasoned conclusion, see Crenshaw, "Sage in Proverbs," 205–16.

14. Golka, "Israelitische Weisheitsschule."

15. Westermann, *Wurzeln der Weisheit*; Golka, *Leopard's Spots*.

The content of some proverbs clearly makes one think that they come from a court setting. While it is true that many proverbs mentioning a king may still be relevant for those who stand some distance from the court, others, like 23:1–3, have direct relevance for someone who serves in the presence of the king:

When you sit down to dine with a ruler,
carefully consider what is in front of you.
Place a knife at your gullet
to control your appetite.
Don't long for his delicacies,
for they are false food.

This proverb would only be directly relevant to someone who served in the court, even though one might think of applications of the principle to other situations where there is a power imbalance.

On the other hand, there are individual proverbs that are a world apart from the court and seem more at home in the type of social context that Whybray envisions. An example would be 10:5:

An insightful son harvests in the summer;
a disgraceful son sleeps during harvest.

In conclusion, it seems unlikely that we can dogmatically assert a single social setting for the proverbs. The book seems to collect wise sayings from many different settings.

Text

The main issue surrounding the text of Proverbs becomes clear when the Hebrew Masoretic tradition is compared with the Greek Septuagint. The latter has been dated to 200 BC.¹⁶ For the former we use the Leningrad Codex found in *BHS*, which has been dated to around AD 1000. Relative dating is not determinative of the quality of these texts as representations of the original.

The most noticeable indication of a problem may be seen in the structure of these two versions of Proverbs. The order of the Septuagint matches that of the Masoretic Hebrew text up through 24:22. After that the arrangement diverges in the following way:

16. Cook, "Dating of Septuagint Proverbs."

Masoretic Hebrew text	Septuagint
24:23–34 (Further Sayings of the Wise)	30:1–14 (Agur)
25:1–29:27 (Hezekiah's Men)	24:23–34 (Further Sayings of the Wise)
30:1–14 (Agur)	30:15–33 (Numerical Parallelisms)
30:15–33 (Numerical Parallelisms)	31:1–9 (Lemuel's Mother)
31:1–9 (Lemuel's Mother)	25:1–29:27 (Hezekiah's Men)
31:10–31 (Poem to the Noble Wife)	31:10–31 (Poem to the Noble Wife)

Besides a difference in order of passages in the last part of Proverbs, there are also a number of texts that we find in the Masoretic Text that are not found in the Greek (4:7; 8:33; 16:1, 3; 20:14–22) as well as many additions in the Greek text that are not in the Masoretic Text.¹⁷

Thus, there is a difference between the two, and the questions are, Why? What is the significance of the difference? The issue has been debated at least since the important work of P. A. de Lagarde in 1863.¹⁸ Even today, a century and a half later, no consensus has emerged among the experts.¹⁹ Tov, for instance, has argued that the Septuagint and Leningradensis represent two different editions of the book. However, after review, the most persuasive hypothesis based on the textual evidence is articulated by Waltke, who suggests, following Barr, that the differences between the MT and the Greek may be explained in large part by the fact that the latter is a very free translation that is heavily influenced by Stoic philosophy and Jewish midrashic thinking.²⁰ Such a conclusion reduces the value of the Greek as a textual witness to the original text. Even so, as the commentary will argue, there are individual verses in which the Septuagint does offer help to recover the original.

The other versions (Syriac, Vulgate, Targum) are of no additional help since they reflect either the MT or the Septuagint. The Dead Sea materials only included a minimal witness to the book of Proverbs.

Genre

Proverbs is one of a number of books known in the English tradition by a genre label (Chronicles, Psalms, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Acts,

17. See E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1992), 337; and idem, "Recensional Differences."

18. For an outline of the debate, see Whybray, *Book of Proverbs: A Survey*, 161–64.

19. Compare the work and conclusions of Tov (*Textual Criticism*; "Recensional Differences") with Cook, *Septuagint of Proverbs*; McKane, *Proverbs*, 33–47; and Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:6–9.

20. Waltke, "How We Got the Hebrew Bible," 34–35. Barr, "B'RS-MOLIS"; Gerleman, "Septuagint Proverbs."

Revelation). The name comes from the superscription that begins “the proverbs of Solomon” (1:1). In Hebrew, the word “proverbs” comes from the singular *māšāl* and is in the construct plural (*mišlê*).

Unfortunately, one does not get very far trying to define the genre through etymology or even through a study of the word itself since its semantic field seems rather broad. In 1:6, the term is parallel with “words of the wise,” so perhaps the word *māšāl* simply refers to the fact that this literary vehicle is part of the wisdom teacher’s pedagogical repertoire. The Greek equivalents are *paroimiai* and *parabolē*, which support this idea and also point to the fact that the underlying verb may be *māšal I* (“to be like”), implying a comparison or teaching by metaphor, rather than *māšal II*, a verb translated “to rule” or “to dominate.” It is possible but not likely that the noun “proverb” plays on both words. If so, it would point to the fact that the proverb intends to draw comparisons so the recipient can stay in control of a situation.

But again, we are not interested in defining the genre by the etymology of its label. That would be like trying to understand the nature of an apocalyptic book, say Revelation, by the meaning of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which broadly means “revelation.”

As we look at the contents of Proverbs, we see more than one type of genre in the book. For instance, we immediately sense a difference between chaps. 1–9 and 10–31. The former is made up of discourses or speeches, while the latter are closer to what we call proverbs in English. The discourses are extended speeches from the father or Woman Wisdom to the son or sons, or perhaps in the case of Woman Wisdom to all the young men who are going by.

Fox has correctly described the components of the discourse as consisting of an exordium, a lesson, and a conclusion, though there is considerable variety in the amount of space devoted to these three elements. The exordium includes a call for the recipient to pay attention, which is accompanied by motivation to do so. The lesson is the object of teaching, and the conclusion brings the teaching to a close, sometimes by describing the consequences of listening or not listening to the lesson.²¹

Proverbs 2 is an example of a discourse that has a major emphasis on the exordium, which essentially takes up the first half of the chapter. It invokes the son (“my son,” v. 1), calling on the son to pay attention. Motivations are given, notably the fact that if the son seeks wisdom, God will grant it to him. The lesson includes avoiding evil women and men (vv. 12–19), and the conclusion is stated in the last three verses (20–22).

21. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 45–46.

In English, we typically reserve the word “proverb” to refer to the type of literature that we find in chaps. 10–31. We will describe the proverb in the light of a specific example, namely, 10:4:

A slack hand makes poverty; *roʾš ʿōšeh kap-remîyâ*
a determined hand makes rich. *wěyad ḥārûšîm taʿăšîr*

This proverb is chosen not because it is a particularly impressive proverb, but because it is fairly typical. In the first place, note that a proverb is a brief, pointed statement. Proverbs express ideas commonly accepted as true. They do not argue for the truth of the statement or nuance it. Proverbs can state an insight, make an observation, or offer advice in the form of an admonition or prohibition. This particular proverb is an observation. Even an observation, however, can imply advice. The fact that it is hard work and not laziness that makes a person rich intends to motivate a person to get to work.

Another feature of a proverb is that it does not teach a universally valid truth. On the contrary, proverbs are true only if stated at the right time and in the right circumstance. A number of proverbs make this explicit. For one thing, a number of proverbs urge that a person must say the right thing at the right time.

It is a joy to a person to give an answer!
How good a word at the right time! (15:23)

This implies that the same word spoken at a different time is not good. For instance, take a cheerful greeting, which one might expect to be a good thing at all times. According to the sages, however,

Those who bless their neighbors with a loud voice in the early
morning—
it will be considered a curse to them. (27:14)

Proverbs 26:4–5 is indicative of the circumstantial nature of the proverb:

Don't answer fools according to their stupidity;
otherwise you will become like them yourself.
Answer fools according to their stupidity;
otherwise they will become wise in their own eyes.

Which is it? It depends on the circumstance. One must not only know the proverbs but also be able to read the people and the circumstance to know which applies. Proverbs otherwise are useless or even dangerous:

The legs of a lame person dangle,
and a proverb in the mouth of fools. (26:7)

A thornbush in the hand of a drunk,
and a proverb in the mouth of fools. (26:9)

The ability to read the circumstances and people around them is crucial for the wisdom task. After all, God made everything “appropriate for its time” (see Eccles. 3:1–15).²²

Turning our attention again to 10:4, we can easily name exceptions to the “truth” of this proverb if it is taken as a universally valid proposition. What about someone who inherits a fortune? We could name some contemporary sluggards who are fantastically wealthy. Does this disprove the proverb? Of course not. Generally speaking, for most people it is true.

The time-sensitive nature of proverbs is not unique to Hebrew wisdom; it is inherent in the proverb form. “Haste makes waste” and “the early bird catches the worm” are both true, if applied at the right time. “Too many cooks spoil the broth” is right when a person wants to cook a meal without interference, but “many hands make light work” is appropriate when it is time to do the dishes. If spoken at the right time, the proverb is unarguable. One just has to accept or reject it. Otherwise, it falls flat and can easily be ignored.

Another aspect of the time-sensitive nature of the proverb is often missed but can be illustrated by 10:1:

A wise son makes a father glad,
and a foolish son is the sorrow of his mother.

This seems like a simple observation, but is it? Is it always true that a happy father indicates a wise son? What if the father is a godless abuser who takes pleasure in physically harming his children? Is this proverb a mandate not to resist his blows? Surely not. The proverb presupposes a godly parent. The reason the father is happy is that this father is godly and his joy is evoked by the godly behavior of his son.

The point is clear. The conditions for the truth of the proverb must be explored before or as it is being applied.

While all this is true and very important in the proper understanding of proverbs, we must admit that certain proverbs are always true. For instance, 11:1 states:

22. It was one of the great frustrations of Qoheleth that though he knew God made everything appropriate for its time, he could not read the time. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*.

Fraudulent scales are an abomination to Yahweh,
but an accurate weight brings his favor.

If there are exceptions to this proverb, they are so rare as to be unimportant.

Another common misconception about proverbs has to do with the connection between wise behavior and reward and foolish behavior and punishment. For this aspect of the proverb, please consult the discussion under “Retribution,” below. There we argue that proverbs are not promises or guarantees, but rather the rewards and punishments are (dis)incentives of certain types of behavior. The proverbs direct one toward that behavior most likely to produce beneficial results—all things being equal. Thus, it is true that a man is much less likely to get into trouble with a jealous husband if he doesn’t sleep with the man’s wife. However, the fact that Joseph got in trouble with Potiphar (Gen. 39) does not disprove the teaching of the book of Proverbs on the matter.²³

Literary Style

The book of Proverbs is made up of both discourses and proverbs proper. While the former is a longer type of speech, they are both forms of poetry. Thus, to read Proverbs well, one must understand how to read poetry.

Poetry is compressed language, saying a lot with just a few words. The obvious implication of this characteristic is that poetry is to be read reflectively and not quickly. Also, poetry is inherently more ambiguous than prose, though what it lacks in precision of communication it makes up for by its vividness and its appeal to the whole person—emotions, imagination, will, and intellect. Of course, this distinction between prose and poetry is not one of kind as much as degree, especially in the Bible, where the prose is highly literary.

Poetry has three major characteristics: terseness, parallelism, and intense use of imagery. There are also a number of what might be called secondary poetical devices.²⁴

Terseness

Terseness refers to the economic use of words characteristic of poetry. One notices this even in English translations of Proverbs—there is a lot

23. See Waltke, “Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?”

24. For the best presentation of biblical poetry available, consult Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*.

more white space on the page than in a prose book like Genesis. Economy of words is brought about by the use of ellipsis (allowing a verb or noun in the first line to do double duty by being implied but unexpressed in the second line) and a sparing use of conjunctions. The second colon (a poetic phrase, typically in parallel with another phrase) of a poetic line is almost always shorter than the first.

Proverbs is well described as terse when compared with prose. It is composed of cola in parallel lines, not sentences in paragraphs. However, compared with other poetry, it is wordy. Proverbs 31:11 will be our example:

Her husband entrusts his heart to her, and he does not lack plunder.	<i>bāṭaḥ bāh lēb ba'lāh wəšālāl lō' yeḥsār</i>
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We can see how the Hebrew is terser than its English translation. Typically, English translations of Hebrew poetry will have more words than the original. The second colon is shorter than the first, even though in this case there is a conjunction, a simple *wāw* that connects the two cola. The brevity of the second colon is achieved by the subject “her husband” (*ba'lāh*) being understood and not stated in the second colon.

Parallelism

Parallelism refers to the correspondence that occurs between the phrases of a poetic line. We can hear the echo in a proverb like 16:13:

Righteous lips draw the favor of kings;
they love those who speak with virtue.

“Draw the favor” parallels “love”; “righteous lips” echoes “speak with virtue.” The relationship is not strictly synonymous (A = B); rather, the second colon always intensifies or seconds the first.²⁵ Righteous lips are more specifically defined in the second colon as virtuous speech.

If we refer back to 31:11, the relationship of the two parallel cola is not highly synonymous, but we can observe that that relationship should be described as “A, and what’s more, B” rather than “A = B.” In other words, the second colon flows from the truth of the first colon. Because her husband trusts her, she can go out into the world and gain a profit for the benefit of her family.

25. The language comes from the groundbreaking work of Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*.

We should point out three special features of parallelism in Proverbs. There is a high frequency of antithetic parallelisms, better-than parallelisms, and number parallelisms.

Antithetical parallelisms use antonyms rather than synonyms in conjoint cola and look at the same truth from opposite perspectives.

A wise son makes a father glad,
and a foolish son is the sorrow of his mother. (10:1)

Antithetical proverbs are frequent in Proverbs because the book delineates two major categories, that of wisdom and that of folly.

One qualification of this idea is exposed by the presence of better-than proverbs like 19:1:

Better to be poor and walking in innocence
than have crooked lips and be a fool.

Better-than proverbs state relative values. Other proverbs indicate that there is nothing wrong with wealth, and it may indeed be a sign of Yahweh's blessing (10:22), but a better-than proverb recognizes that some people will have to make a choice between wealth and moral rectitude.

Third, Proverbs contains numerical proverbs. This follows an X + 1 pattern, as seen in 30:18–19:

Three things are too wonderful for me,
and four things I cannot figure out.
The way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship in the heart of the sea,
and the way of a man with a young woman.

Such a device is a way of saying that there are a number of different examples of a given phenomenon, only a few of which are mentioned. (The phenomenon here is the mysterious movement that leaves no trace, the fourth example being an allusion to sexual intercourse.) In Proverbs, the list that follows the introduction usually has the same number of elements as the second, larger number.

Imagery

Poetry is rich in images, and Proverbs is no exception to this rule. As we will see in the description of the theology of Proverbs, "the path," which stands for one's life journey, is central particularly but not exclusively to

the first nine chapters. Furthermore, the figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly loom large in the critical chap. 9 of the book.

There are also more local images used, such as is found in 16:24:

Pleasant words are liquid honey,
sweet to the taste and healing to the bones.

The proper interpretation of these images is to unpack them. How are pleasant words like liquid honey? This type of question will occupy us in the commentary proper.

Secondary Poetical Devices

Terseness, parallelism, and imagery are pervasive through the book of Proverbs, but we also will observe the use of other occasional poetic devices. Two examples will suffice here; others will be pointed out in the commentary.

Proverbs 31:10–31 is a poem to the noble woman. Its twenty-two verses each begin with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The sense of the whole, accordingly, is that we have the A to Z of the noble woman.

We will also encounter sound plays such as that found in 30:20:

<p>This is the way of the adulterous woman: she eats and wipes her mouth, and she says, “I have done nothing wrong!”</p>	<p><i>kēn derek ʾiššâ mēnāʾāpet</i> <i>ʾokēlâ ûmāḥātâ pihâ</i> <i>wēʾāmērâ lōʾ-pāʿaltî ʾowen</i></p>
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The content of this verse focuses on the woman’s mouth, and this message is underlined by the fact that a high proportion of the letters are labials, signifying sounds formed by the lips (particularly *m*’s and *p*’s).

The Structure of Proverbs

In one sense, the book of Proverbs provides its own outline by virtue of various rubrics that typically indicate authorship. The issues surrounding authorship have already been discussed above. There we observed that the following passages have superscriptions associating a section of the book with some figure:

1:1 Solomon, for the whole book
10:1 Solomon, for 10:1–22:16

- 22:17 the wise (see also 24:23), for 22:17–24:34
- 30:1 Agur, for 30:1–33
- 31:1 King Lemuel, for 31:1–9

Recognizing that 1:1 is a superscription for the entire book and that 1:2–7 is a preamble certainly added late in the process of collection to describe the purpose of the whole book, we find the following structure.

1:1	Superscription
1:2–7	Preamble (stating the purpose)
1:8–9:18	Extended discourses on wisdom
10:1–22:16; 25:1–29:27	Solomonic proverbs
22:17–24:34	Sayings of the wise
30:1–33	Sayings of Agur
31:1–9	Sayings of Lemuel
31:10–31	Poem to the virtuous woman

However, this is not the only way to view the structure of the book. In terms of literary form, we can clearly recognize a break between Prov. 9 and 10. In chaps. 1–9, the book contains extended discourses of two types. One type is when a father speaks to his son, and the other has Woman Wisdom publicly addressing the crowds of naive young men who are walking by her. Proverbs 10–31, for the most part, is composed of the short, pithy proverbs that give the book its name. Thus, we propose the following as a second way of understanding the structure. This structure will be relevant for our theological analysis of the book as given below.

I. Extended discourses (1:1–9:18)

1. The purpose of the book (1:1–7)
2. Avoid evil associations (1:8–19)
3. Don't resist Woman Wisdom (1:20–33)
4. The benefits of the way of wisdom (2:1–22)
5. Trust in Yahweh (3:1–12)
6. Praising wisdom (3:13–20)
7. The integrity of wisdom (3:21–35)
8. Embrace wisdom! (4:1–9)
9. Stay on the right path (4:10–19)
10. Guard your heart (4:20–27)
11. Avoid promiscuous women: Part I; love your wife (5:1–23)
12. Wisdom admonitions: Loans, laziness, lying, and other topics (6:1–19)
13. The danger of adultery (6:20–35)

14. Avoid promiscuous women: Part II (7:1–27)
15. Wisdom's autobiography (8:1–36)
16. The ultimate encounter: Wisdom or folly (9:1–6, 13–18)
17. Miscellaneous wisdom sayings (9:7–12)

II. Assorted Advice, Observations, and Warnings (10:1–31:31)

Recent work on Proverbs raises the issue of whether there is some order to the proverbs found in the latter part of the book. When one reads Prov. 10–31 for the first time, the impression is of a rather random collection of proverbs. Like the Psalms, the reader occasionally notices unannounced groupings. For instance, Prov. 15:33–16:9 contains a number of sayings that feature Yahweh, followed by sayings in 16:10–15 that feature the king; but on closer inspection even these appear unsystematic. Such occasional groupings appear indisputable.²⁶

Nonetheless, the latter part of the twentieth century up to today has seen a growing consensus among interpreters that there is more here than meets the eye. The argument has been made that an intentional and subtle structure permeates large parts of 10–31. An early precursor to such a view is G. Boström's (1928),²⁷ but most of the studies that try to uncover deeper structures have appeared since 1980.

As illustrative of this trend, we review the recent book by K. M. Heim (2001).²⁸ Heim incorporates a number of other studies in his own understanding of the arrangement of proverbs. This includes earlier studies by Hermisson, Perry, Krispenz, Whybray, Meinhold, Murphy, Hildebrandt, Scoralik, and others.²⁹

But we should not get the impression from this long list of names that there is much consensus here beyond the basic premise that there is some arrangement of proverbs hidden from casual reading. There are as many different nuances in the schemes suggested to unravel the

26. Whybray, "Yahweh-Sayings." See also the article by Goldingay ("Arrangement of Sayings in Proverbs 10–15"), which builds on Whybray by pointing out a clustering of ethical vocabulary in 10:1–11:3 that, he believes, establishes an ethical context for 10:1–22:16.

27. *Paronomasi i den äldre hebreiska maschallitteraturen*. He saw "paronomasia in aural links, such as alliteration, assonances, rhymes, etc. He was not interested in the arrangement of sayings, but nevertheless provided a list of catchword links from one saying to the next." So Heim, *Like Grapes of Gold*, 30.

28. *Ibid.* This critique of Heim stems from a paper I delivered as the Brownlee lecture at Claremont Graduate School in April 2002. Since that time, M. Fox has written an important review in *Hebrew Studies* 44 (2003): 267–72. My understanding and critique has been greatly enriched by his insights.

29. Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit*; Perry, *Structural Patterns in Proverbs 10:1–22:16*; Krispenz, *Spruchkompositionen im Buch Proverbia*; Whybray, *Composition of the Book of Proverbs*; Meinhold, *Sprüche*; Murphy, *Proverbs*; Hildebrandt, "Proverbial Pairs"; Scoralick, *Einzelspruch und Sammlung*.

mystery as there are scholars. Heim is aware of this but is not rattled or dissuaded from his search. Rather, he approvingly quotes Whybray's response to McKane's conclusion that individual proverbs have no broader context as follows: "McKane's assumption that individual proverbs have no context but occur in random order amounts to no more than an admission that modern scholars have so far not been able satisfactorily to discover what such a context, whether literary or theological, might be."³⁰ Heim gains further encouragement from the fact that his survey of recent commentaries discovering some form of arrangement shows that seven out of nine believe there is some form of structure relevant to interpretation.

Surveying these previous attempts, he sees that there are multiple strategies employed together to find editorial groupings: "chapter divisions, 'educational' sayings, paronomasia and catchwords, theological reinterpretations, proverbial pairs, and variant repetitions."³¹ Heim says that none of these will quite do, at least individually. For instance, he shows how educational sayings appear only sporadically at the beginning of sections.³² The use of repeated words as catchwords to form a unit is done, in his opinion, without controls. There is, after all, a rather basic wisdom vocabulary in Proverbs.

Heim ultimately argues for coherence between sayings through phonological, semantic, syntactic, and thematic repetition.³³ He believes that scholars looking for thematic or logical development within these short units have made a huge mistake. Once a unit is determined, he says, it is equally possible to read it from the beginning to the end, the end to the beginning, or from the middle outward. Nonetheless, the units do provide a context in which the proverbs should be read. The analogy that Heim invokes, associating proverbs within a unit, is from the title of his book, taken from Prov. 25:11: "The right word at the right time is [like] grapes of gold set in silver." In his own words, "The cluster forms an organic whole linked by means of small 'twiglets,' yet each grape can be consumed individually. Although the grapes contain juice from the same vine, each tastes slightly different. It doesn't matter in which sequence the grapes are consumed, but eating them together undoubtedly enhances the flavour and enriches the culinary experience."³⁴

However, let me immediately register my concern about the criteria that he uses to divide these units. Unlike some before him, he gives up on the possibility of finding "boundary markers" that delineate clear

30. Whybray, *Composition*, 65.

31. Heim, *Like Grapes of Gold*, 63.

32. *Ibid.*, 64.

33. *Ibid.*, 106.

34. *Ibid.*, 107.

units. Instead, he looks for repetitions of a variety of sorts, both sound and meaning, to associate a group of proverbs, and then he reads them in the light of each other. My problem is that the criteria of association are so broad and varied that different scholars will continue to come up with different units. Also, by his own admission there is no correlation between the various criteria of association or even any coherence of criteria within a proverbial unit. And once the unit is determined in this rather ad hoc way, there is of course no problem with doing a contextual reading. Creative minds can create subtle associations between proverbs in a cluster. The human mind, after all, can associate the most disparate facts.

What then are we to make of the organization and arrangement of the proverbs in chaps. 10–31? The best conclusion is that the proverbs are indeed arranged in a more or less random fashion, especially with regard to contents.³⁵ For example, proverbs on laziness and determination are scattered throughout the book (see “Appendix: Topical Studies”); there is no attempt to bring them all together.

A partial explanation for such randomness may be the result of the history of composition. Since, as Snell has pointed out, there are many near and completely identical proverbs in the book (see the discussion of his work under “Authorship and Date” above), it seems logical to think that proverbs were added over time either individually or in groups. In this way, the collection of proverbs is similar to that of psalms. The arrangement probably changed innumerable times before settling in its final form as we have it in the MT.

Further, the randomness of proverbial collection is also the case in most ancient Near Eastern wisdom collections. In Egyptian tradition, for instance, we get a clear arrangement along thematic lines only with the Papyrus Insinger, the copy we have being dated to the first century AD, though its composition may go back to Ptolemaic times (fourth to first centuries BC), still very late in comparison to biblical proverbs.

In fact, a systematic collection of proverbs may give the wrong impression. It would give the sense that life is systematic and that Proverbs was a “how-to” fix-it book. In other words, the random collection of Proverbs reflects the messiness of life. As McCreesh puts it, the lack of structure is “based on a refusal to see life as a neat system.”³⁶ Of course, even this comment is pure speculation as to the conscious strategy of the redactors of the book.

35. In other words, I believe von Rad (*Wisdom in Israel*, 6) got it right when he said, “Basically each sentence, each didactic poem, stands on its own.”

36. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” 45.

Though I do not see a systematic structure to Proverbs, there is no doubt that proverbs of similar topic are occasionally grouped together. Proverbs 10:4–5 is a good illustration:

A slack hand makes poverty;
a determined hand makes rich.
An insightful son harvests in the summer;
a disgraceful son sleeps during harvest.

There is no question but that there is a relationship between the two verses. The first states a general principle, and the second is a specific illustration of laziness versus diligence. But the question is, What brought these together? Was it a conscious structuring device that permeates the book, as Heim and others have argued? In actuality, though, this type of clear connection between neighboring proverbs is relatively rare. The explanation may be nothing more complex than that one of the redactors at some point along the way saw a connection and placed them next to each other. In other words, one proverb acted like a magnet for the placement of the next. And this was done only occasionally, or so it appears from the end result of the process.

Even more importantly, and contra Heim, reading the proverb in context does not change our understanding of either proverb. It doesn't even enrich our understanding. And in the final analysis it appears that Heim is very concerned about the need for a context. According to W. Mieder, a proverb in a collection is dead.³⁷ After all, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett³⁸ has pointed out, a proverb needs a context to make sense, and its original context is oral. Once placed in a literary context, if understood as isolated, then how would anyone know what it really means? Heim's view is that his "twiglet" model provides the answer:

In response, I would say that for the proverb to come alive again, it needs to be spoken orally in the right context.³⁹ What is the right context? That is for the wise person to sort out. In reference to the so-called contradictory 26:4–5, for instance, the wise need to determine what kind of fool they are speaking to. To make these proverbs live, one must read the fool. Understanding proverbs is not just a matter of memorization or a simple academic exercise; they must flow from a character formed by wisdom.

37. Mieder, "Essence of Literature Proverbs Study."

38. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning."

39. As Murphy states, "Although it has been said that a proverb in a collection is dead, presumably because the original proverb performance cannot be captured, this is not necessarily so. One can use imagination and be open to multiple applications of a saying. This is not difficult for a reader who is sensitive to the imagery and the succinctness employed in proverb-making" ("Can the Book of Proverbs Be a Player in 'Biblical Theology?'" 5).

The implication of my view of organization is that we should be suspicious of complex schemes to find under-the-surface arrangements. Instead, we should go back to interpreting the proverbs as randomly structured. Thus, for the most part, the commentary in Prov. 10–31 will proceed in a verse-by-verse manner. The theological and practical implications of the proverbs will be discussed in the appendix. There the proverbs will be grouped into their proper contexts and examined as clusters. In this I depart from other recent commentaries that I feel have imposed, rather than discovered, structuring devices on these chapters.⁴⁰

Ancient Near Eastern Background

The Bible presents a view of faithful Israel at war with pagan religions. The worship of Baal, Asherah, and the other deities from Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Egypt exerted an unholy pull on the hearts of Israel's people and leaders alike. The question of the origins and development of Israel's monotheism has been raised with vigor in recent days,⁴¹ but if there was henotheism (the belief that only one among many gods matter) or polytheism in Israel's past, it is only subtly detected in the present text. Most of the Bible is couched in the language of Yahweh versus the pagan gods. When most people think of the relationship between Israel's religion and the religions of the ancient Near East, one thinks of prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, or Isaiah. For these men there was no room for compromise, no appreciation for the opponent.

How surprising, then, when we come to wisdom literature and examine the thought of the sages. When Solomon's wisdom is praised, it is evaluated not in contrast to but in comparison to the wisdom of Egypt and other Near Eastern traditions:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. (1 Kings 4:29–30 NRSV)

Such a statement acknowledges the wisdom of the east and of Egypt. Solomon's wisdom is not of a completely different order. To praise something by saying it is better than something else is to appreciate the latter.

40. It is my understanding (through personal communication), however, that Michael Fox will dispute these recent attempts to find pervasive structure in his forthcoming commentary on Prov. 10–31 in the Anchor Bible commentary series.

41. Smith, *Early History of God*.

Indeed, as the following survey will hint at and the commentary proper will indicate, there clearly are connections between specific proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern proverb connections. In this section, we survey the texts from the broader Near East that provide a generic background to the book of Proverbs, and in the commentary we point to specific proverbs that may have been adapted from a non-Israelite background and brought into the collection.

Egyptian Instructions

As mentioned, even the Bible recognizes the wisdom of Egypt, and outside the Bible, no other ancient wisdom tradition has been so carefully studied. The primary genre of wisdom in Egypt had the native term *sbyʾt* attached to it.⁴² This word is often translated “instruction” or “teaching,” though J. D. Ray suggests that “enlightenment” may be closer to its true meaning.⁴³ These texts appear as early as the Old Kingdom (2715–2170 BC) and down to the demotic period (seventh century BC and after). Indeed, it is one of the most popular genres in all Egyptian literature. Space will only allow us to mention the high points.

These instructions come from the upper echelons of Egyptian society (but see below for some exceptions) and in large part are composed of advice about how to get along in that society and perhaps even move upward. The form of the genre is a father who is instructing his son. In some examples the father is the king. The father is old and experienced, about to step down from his high position in society, and his son is just starting. These compositions begin with a prologue that introduces the speaker in particular as well as the addressee.

Instructions from the Old through the Middle Kingdoms: Hardjedef, Kagemni, Ptahhotep, and Merikare

Egyptologists judge that the writings of instructions began during the Old Kingdom period. Even though the earliest papyri come from

42. We should note that M. Lichtheim (*Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies*) has questioned the existence of wisdom literature in Egypt, based primarily on the lack of a word that can clearly be translated “wise/wisdom” before the Late Period. In our opinion, she bases too much on the linguistic argument. Even if she is right that there is not a word that can be translated “wise/wisdom,” the concept is present. Also, she curiously divides wisdom ideas from morality and piety.

43. Ray, “Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 18. R. Williams (“Sages of Ancient Egypt,” 7) reminds us that this Egyptian term is not identical with “wisdom tradition,” since in Egyptian literature it is applied to a broader group of texts.

the Middle Kingdom period and the texts are often, but not always, judged as pseudonymous, the Instructions of Hardjedef, Kagemni, and Ptahhotep are thought to come from the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties of the Old Kingdom.⁴⁴

Hardjedef is thought to be the oldest composition and has the simplest prologue. We cite it here because, in spite of its brevity, it has the basic elements of such an introduction:

Beginning of the Instruction made by the Hereditary Prince, Count, King's Son, Hardjedef, for his son, his nursling, whose name is Au-ib-re. [He] says:⁴⁵

This Hardjedef is known as the son of Cheops, the builder of the Great Pyramid. We have this text on nine ostraca from the New Kingdom and on an even later wooden tablet, but again, it is judged to be a product of the late Old Kingdom, though a pseudonymous work. The instructions that we have are fragmentary and brief and concern the establishment of a household and preparation for death.

We know Kagemni from the first two pages of the Papyrus Prisse, located in Paris at the Bibliotheque Nationale. In the text, an unspecified person, but presumably his father, addresses Kagemni. The composition dates itself to the reign of King Sneferu and adds that Kagemni was promoted to vizier based on the wisdom demonstrated in the text. In the text, Kagemni is instructed in proper behavior, even table manners, before the king.

The most important text for our purpose during this early period is Ptahhotep, also known to us from the Papyrus Prisse. Ptahhotep is said to be vizier under King Izezi of the Fifth Dynasty, but this text is often understood to be pseudonymous and from the Sixth Dynasty. Ptahhotep is much longer than the previous two instructions and begins with a lengthy prologue. Egyptologists inform us that this composition is composed in very difficult Egyptian, and so there is some variation between translations. The instructions themselves are divided into thirty-seven maxims and are followed by an epilogue. The maxims promote the ideal of a quiet, contented man of humility over against a heated, anxious, and striving man.

We possess an instruction from the time of transition between the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, specifically from the Ninth or Tenth Dynasty, named after Merikare, the addressee of the instructions. One innovation here is that the speaker is a king, and thus

44. See the argument by Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 5–8.

45. Translations are from *ibid.*, 58–59.

we have a royal testament. What is interesting about this text is that it is a royal instruction where the previous king lays out a political agenda for the next king.

New Kingdom and Later: Ani, Amenemope, Ankhsheshonqy, and Papyrus Insinger

Ani was a middle-level scribe in the court of Queen Nefertari, the wife of Ahmose, who along with his brother Kamose expelled the Hyksos from Egypt (Eighteenth Dynasty).⁴⁶ J. D. Ray summarizes the contents as “a collection of conventional themes: respect for motherhood and religion, avoidance of alien or unfaithful women, honesty in transactions (greatly emphasized), restraint in the face of aggression, and reticence before strangers.”⁴⁷

The Instruction of Amenemope requires special treatment because of the role it has played in the interpretation of the biblical book of Proverbs (for more, see below). E. W. Budge, the eminent Egyptologist, first discovered the main papyrus from which we know this composition in 1888, but it was not presented in translation until the same scholar did so in 1923.⁴⁸ The papyrus, now in the British Museum, has been most consistently dated to the tenth–sixth centuries BC.

The text is typical of Egyptian instructions in that it is the advice of a senior Egyptian bureaucrat, Amen-em-ope, described as the “Overseer of Grains,”⁴⁹ to his son, Hor-em-maa-kheru.⁵⁰ Similar to other instructions, the text has an introduction that gives not only lengthy descriptions of the speaker and a shorter one of his addressee but also a statement of purpose that includes “the teaching of life, the testimony for prosperity, all precepts for intercourse with elders, the rules for courtiers, to know how to return an answer to him who said it, and to direct a report to one who has sent him . . . , to rescue him from the mouth of the rabble, revered in the mouth of the people.” Unique to Amenemope among the Egyptian instructions is its division of the advice section into thirty chapters.

46. The most recent edition of Ani is found in Quack, *Lehren des Ani* (1994). He dates the composition to the early Nineteenth Dynasty.

47. Ray, “Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 23.

48. Plates I–XIV in E. W. Budge, *Second Series of Facsimilies of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum* (London, 1923).

49. All translations of this text are from J. A. Wilson in *ANET* 421–25.

50. Nonetheless, H. C. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), has recently argued that the advice given in this text is not only for the elite of society but for all of society. He persuasively argues that scribes were not as well off or elitist at this time as we might be led to believe.

The explicit setting and the advice all point to a court setting. Egyptologists have observed how this text signals a shift from previous instructions in that Amen-em-ope values more inward virtues and rewards than materialistic ones. It contrasts the “heated man” and his strivings with the humbler and more modest “silent man.” We will later cite some of the more striking instructions when we compare this text with Proverbs.

Two instructions will serve as examples of the genre from late in Egyptian history. We begin with the Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy.⁵¹ The text was first known from a very damaged papyrus discovered in 1896 and placed in the British Museum. It is written in Demotic, the late cursive form of Egyptian, and was originally dated to the first century BC. References that seem to come from this text, though, have been discovered in two papyri dated to the second century BC, and so the composition is now usually thought to be from the Ptolomaic period.

The text begins with a narrative frame that explains why Ankhsheshonqy is writing a wisdom text to his son. In a word, he is imprisoned in connection with an attempt on the pharaoh’s life and so does not have the opportunity to teach his son personally. The story that led to his imprisonment is given in the prologue and goes as follows. Ankhsheshonqy, priest of the sun god, had traveled to visit an old friend, Harsiese, who had been appointed chief physician to the pharaoh. He wanted to ask his friend some advice, but when he arrived, he found him embroiled in a plot to do away with the king. The priest never joined the conspiracy, so he was spared a death sentence when the word got out, but he also knew about the plot and did not report it, thus the prison sentence.⁵²

After the lengthy prologue comes a large number of proverbs and maxims. Indeed, the form of these maxims is something of an innovation in that they are brief prose sentences, making an observation or giving advice. While they are often grouped roughly by topic or form, they still have a random feel to them. However, some themes are emphasized more than others. Perhaps, given the prison setting of the advice, it is not surprising to find that one of the major themes is “the ubiquity of change and the vicissitudes that go with it, and the fact that actions have consequences.”⁵³ The following is illustrative:⁵⁴

When a youth who has been taught thinks, thinking of wrong is what he does.

51. Sometimes spelled Onkhsheshonqy. The text may be found in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3:159–84. Translations are from this source.

52. Lichtheim (*Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature*) believes she recognizes some parallels with the Aramaic Ahiqar (see below).

53. Ray, “Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 26.

54. From Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3:171.

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When a man smells of myrrh his wife is a cat before him.
When a man is suffering his wife is a lioness before him.
Do not be afraid to do that in which you are right.
Do not commit theft; you will be found out.
Do not let your son marry a woman from another town, lest he be taken
from you. (15.9, 11–15)

We will look at one last Egyptian instruction, found on the lengthy Papyrus Insinger. This text is named after the man who bought it for the collection at the Rijksmuseum in Leiden in 1895. It is written in Demotic and comes from the first century AD. The original composition probably comes from an earlier time, but no earlier than the Ptolemaic period. There are other fragments in Copenhagen and also other collections, some of which have not yet been published. The first part of this text is damaged, and what we have begins with proverbs and maxims. Like Ankhsheshonqy, these texts are single-line prose sentences, but unlike the earlier text, there is a definite thematic arrangement complete with headings. An example is the beginning of the ninth instruction:

The Ninth Instruction: The teaching not to be a fool, so that one does
not fail to receive you in the house.
Wrongdoing [occurs] to the heart of the fool through his love of women.
He does not think of the morrow for the sake of wronging the wife of
another.
The fool who looks at a woman is like a fly on blood.

Furthermore, there is a close connection drawn between religion and ethics. We can see this in the admonition, also found in the ninth instruction, to avoid an evil woman:

There is she whom I hold in contempt as an evil woman.
Fear her on account of the fear of Hathor.

Before leaving this survey of Egyptian instructions, we need to look at a concept central to many of them, the idea of *Ma'at*. As a concept *Ma'at* is important not only to the instructions but also to Egyptian thought generally. *Ma'at* refers to the order and harmony of creation; its associated ideas are truth and justice. A rupture in the harmony, truth, and justice of the creation is an assault against *Ma'at*. *Ma'at* often is presented and seems to be seen as an impersonal concept, but it also is at times represented as a goddess. The following are excerpts from the instructions that mention *Ma'at*.⁵⁵

55. For more, see Lichtheim, *Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies*, as well as Assmann, *Ma'at*.

If thou art a leader commanding the affairs of the multitude, seek out for thyself every beneficial deed, until it may be that thy (own) affairs are without wrong. Justice (*Ma'at*) is great, and its appropriateness is lasting; it has not been disturbed since the time of him who made it, (whereas) there is punishment for him who passes over its laws. It is the (right) path before him who knows nothing. Wrongdoing has never brought its undertaking into port. (It may be that) it is fraud that gains riches, (but) the strength of justice (*Ma'at*) is that it lasts, and a man may say: "It is the property of my father." (Ptahhotep 85–95 [ANET 412])

Do justice (*Ma'at*) whilst thou endurest upon earth. (Merikare 64 [ANET 415])

Ma'at determines what is right and wrong. The instruction genre as well as didactic literature generally seeks to inform a person how to live in conformity with *Ma'at*.

Sumerian Wisdom

Proverb Collections

Sumerian proverbs have been discussed for decades, but a real turning point came in 1959 with the publication of E. I. Gordon's translation of the proverb collections known at that time.⁵⁶ Just recently, this monumental work has been replaced by another written by B. Alster that brings the study up to date and publishes the twenty-eight extant proverb collections.⁵⁷ Alster shows how we now have examples of collections that extend as far back as the Early Dynastic III period (2600–2550 BC), and how they continued in use, being cited in the Sumerian language in Akkadian literature, even after Sumerian was no longer spoken. Most of the texts come from the Old Babylonian period. He also points out that some of these texts were translated into Akkadian, being found in Ashurbanipal's library in the seventh century (see mention of bilingual proverbs under "Akkadian Wisdom" below). These texts come from such Sumerian cities as Nippur and Ur (yielding by far the largest number) as well as Sippar, Susa, and Kish. Alster further provides evidence that these proverb collections were used as exercises in the scribal schools, and some bear marks of their school setting:

A scribe who does not know Sumerian,
what kind of scribe is he? (2.47)

56. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*.

57. We cite the following proverbs from Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer*.

Alster summarizes the major topics of concern of the proverbs as “a woman’s daily routine, family relationships, the good man, the liar, legal proceedings, Fate, the palace, the temple and their gods, a well as historical and ethnic allusions.”

He also argues for a strong division between religion and a “secular” attitude toward life. He suggests that “these proverbs clearly testify to the contemporary existence of a completely secular attitude toward social behavior.”⁵⁸ When we read some of the proverbs in an isolated fashion, we might develop the same idea:

Something which has never occurred since time immemorial: Didn’t the young girl fart in her husband’s lap? (1.12)

He who eats too much cannot sleep. (1.103)

He didn’t plow the field in the cold season.
At the time of the harvest he applied his hand to carding. (2.20)

A fox urinated into the sea.
“All the sea is my urine,” it said. (2.67)

Those who live near the water look into the mountains.
They don’t look in their own direction. (2.149)

Nonetheless, it is hard to believe that the Sumerians would have kept their religion separate from their worldview and behavior standards as expressed by the proverbs. It is more likely that it was presupposed. It is true that these proverbs were almost certainly not thought to be revealed by the gods, but rather that through long observation they were getting in touch with the creation as their gods had ordered it. Occasionally, the gods are explicitly mentioned in a proverb, as in the following:

A disorderly son, his mother should not have given birth to him. His god should not have created him. (1.157)

Instruction of Shuruppak

Besides lists of proverbs, Sumerian wisdom also attests an instruction similar to the Egyptian *sbyꜣt* described above, as well as to Prov. 1–9. This is the Instruction of Shuruppak, named after the father of the famous sage Ziusudra, who survived the flood. We know this text primarily through what Alster calls the “standard version,” dated to 1900–1800

58. *Ibid.*, xviii.

BC, but it is known from a version dated to the Early Dynastic period (specifically twenty-sixth century BC).⁵⁹ There are some later Akkadian translations of this Sumerian work.

The text contains the instructions of Shuruppak to Ziusudra his son, and it speaks to many of the subjects of wisdom instruction from other Near Eastern cultures, including Proverbs. Notably, there is material relating to sexual relationships:

Do not laugh with a girl who is married; the slander is strong.
My son, do not sit (alone) in a chamber with a woman who is married.
(lines 33–34)

Do not have sexual intercourse with your slave girl; she will name you
with disrespect. (line 49)

Do not buy a prostitute; she is the sharp edge of a sickle. (line 154)

Akkadian Wisdom

W. G. Lambert holds pride of place in the presentation and analysis of Akkadian wisdom texts.⁶⁰ While there are Akkadian proverbs, they are not as numerous as those in Sumerian. Indeed, it may be that the Sumerian proverbs served Akkadian speakers. Nonetheless, there are bilingual proverbs that are extant as well as a Babylonian/Akkadian composition entitled the *Counsels of Wisdom*, which has the form of a father giving advice to a son.⁶¹ In addition, an Akkadian version of the *Instructions of Shuruppak* is also available. Lambert speculates that Akkadian literature did not preserve proverbs in abundance because the Kassites, who transmitted Akkadian literature in the mid-second millennium BC, did not respect literature with oral/popular roots.

Northwest Semitic Wisdom: Ahiqar

One of the most striking examples of a wisdom text written in Northwest Semitic is the Ahiqar text. The story was first known through the apocryphal book of Tobit as well as in Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and other languages.⁶² However, in the early part of the twentieth century,

59. See B. Alster, "Instructions of Shuruppak," in *COS* 1:569–70. Translations are from Alster.

60. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*.

61. See *ANET* 425–27. A more recent translation of the *Counsels of Wisdom* may be found in B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:328–31.

62. Lindenberger, *Aramaic Proverbs*, 3–6.

an Aramaic version was recovered from Elephantine, Egypt.⁶³ The papyrus is from the fifth century BC but may well reflect a composition that was written soon after the text's setting, a hundred years earlier. The story is set in the sixth century during the reigns of the Assyrian kings Sennacherib (704–681 BC) and his son and successor Esarhaddon (680–669), both of whom Ahiqar is said to have served as a high-level counselor. However, there is no solid independent evidence of a historical Ahiqar, though there is a text from the Seleucid period (ca. 165 BC) that mentions a man whom the Aramaeans called Ahuqar, who was the *ummanu* (a scholar or sage), but we have no reason to accept this text as preserving an authentic historical memory.⁶⁴

The state of the text is extremely fragmentary, and the best edition of the proverbs of the Aramaic version in English is that of Lindenberger.⁶⁵

The following synopsis is in part based on the fragmentary Aramaic text, supplemented by the later versions.⁶⁶ Indeed, the Aramaic text preserves neither the beginning nor the end of the narrative, but only the middle. However, it does preserve a number of the proverbs and maxims that follow the narrative.

From the later versions, we learn that Ahiqar, who began his career as a counselor to Sennacherib, has no son, so he raises his nephew Nadin to be his successor. When Esarhaddon is on the throne, Nadin betrays his uncle, with the result that the king orders his officer Nabushumishkun to execute the older man. Fortunately for Ahiqar, he had earlier saved this officer's life, so he appeals to him for his life. Nabushumishkun kills a eunuch who is in his service and passes the body off as that of Ahiqar. Later, the Egyptians approach Esarhaddon to request an adviser for a large building project, and the king bemoans the fact that the brilliant Ahiqar is not available. Nabushumishkun chooses this moment as the right one to bring Ahiqar back to public attention. The king greets him warmly, and then Ahiqar beats Nadin for his traitorous activities.

This narrative is followed by a large number of wisdom sayings.⁶⁷ They are short and rather randomly organized. Examples similar to teachings found in Proverbs include these:

63. Parker ("Literatures of Canaan," 2400) suggests that the reason Ahiqar survived in Egypt was that Aramaic-speaking readers of the text took it with them when they migrated to Egypt. Papyrus can only survive in a very few areas, like Egypt.

64. Note the discussion of this text in Greenfield, "Wisdom of Ahiqar," 44.

65. *Aramaic Proverbs*.

66. This synopsis may be justified on the basis of general similarity between versions of the story; nevertheless, "it is now quite clear that there were different bodies of gnomic sayings attached to the figure of Ahiqar" (Greenfield, "Wisdom of Ahiqar," 50).

67. Indeed, Lindenberger lists over one hundred sayings. A translation of the extant Aramaic text by H. L. Ginsberg is in *ANET* 427–30. A more recent translation, but less

The son who is instructed and restrained, and on whose foot the bar is placed, [will prosper in life]. (saying 2)

Spare not your son from the rod; otherwise, can you save him [from wickedness]? (saying 3)

There are two things which are good,
and a third which is pleasing to Šamaš:
one who drinks wine and shares it,
one who masters wisdom [and observes it];
and one who hears a word but tells it not.
Now that is precious to Šamaš. (saying 12)

Proverbs in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom

In the light of the above survey, we conclude that the book of Proverbs exists in the context of a widely attested genre of literature. In many ways, wisdom literature may be the most widely shared genre in the ancient Near East, as our opening quotation from 1 Kings 4 anticipated. Space does not permit a detailed comparison between the different literatures, but we conclude with some observations on relationships between the texts. As expected, we see similarities as well as differences, but studying Hebrew wisdom in the light of the broader ancient Near East gives us a much deeper understanding of Proverbs. In all traditions, wisdom is not abstract and philosophical, but rather practical, with the hope of getting on and getting ahead in life.⁶⁸

Amenemope and Proverbs

We begin with a look at a comparison between a specific Egyptian instruction text and the book of Proverbs. We do this because it was really the publication of Amenemope that raised the issue of the relationship between biblical and ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. In particular, it was noted that the Egyptian text had a special relationship with Prov. 22:17–24:22, the so-called sayings of the wise, as well as similarities with other parts of the biblical book.

Clear similarities include the following examples:⁶⁹

accessible, is by Lindenberger, *Aramaic Proverbs*. The cited translations are from the latter's work.

68. Clifford, *Proverbs*, 8.

69. These examples (including the translation of Amenemope) are taken from the article by Ruffle, "Teaching of Amenemope."

Proverbs	Amenemope
Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate. (22:22 NRSV)	Guard yourself from robbing the poor, from being violent to the weak. (4.4–5)
Do you see those who are skillful in their work? They will serve kings; they will not serve common people. (22:29 NRSV)	As for the scribe who is experienced in his office, He will find himself worthy to be a courtier. (17.16–17)
Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist. When your eyes light upon it, it is gone; for suddenly it takes wings to itself, flying like an eagle toward heaven. (23:4–5 NRSV)	Do not strain to seek excess when your possessions are secure. If riches are brought to you by robbery, they will not stay the night in your possession. When the day dawns they are no longer in your house. Their place can be seen but they are no longer there. The earth opened its mouth to crush and swallow them and plunged them in dust. They make themselves a great hole, as large as they are. And sink themselves in the underworld. They make themselves wings like geese, And fly to heaven. (9.14–10.5)
Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of an orphan, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you. (23:10–11 NRSV)	Do not remove the boundary stone on the boundaries of the cultivated land, nor throw down the boundary of the widow. (7.12)

These and other parallels have led to an intense debate over the origin of the wisdom reflected in both texts. Advocates of Egyptian priority,⁷⁰ Israelite priority,⁷¹ and a third common source may be cited. One of the problems that make this a difficult question is the lack of certainty about when the various parts of Proverbs, or for that matter Amenemope, were written. The fact that Amenemope has thirty sayings and that a word with obvious textual problems in Prov. 22:20 can be relatively easily emended to mean “thirty” has led most modern translations (NRSV, NIV) to make that emendation with confidence.

However, as Ruffle and others have argued, the similarities between Amenemope and Proverbs, while real, are not unique.⁷² In other words,

70. Early on by Erman, *Eine ägyptische Quelle* (1924).

71. R. O. Kevin, *The Wisdom of Amen-em-ope and Its Possible Dependence on the Book of Proverbs* (Austria: Adolf Mozhausen’s Successors, 1931).

72. Ruffle, “Teaching of Amenemope”; Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books.”

the more we learn about Egyptian instruction, the more parallels we see not only with this one text but with many Egyptian instructions. Not only that, but we also see similarities of both with other cultures' wisdom, most notably the Aramaic Ahiqar. Perhaps the best conclusion is that there is not a specific relationship between Proverbs and Amenemope; rather, both texts are part of an international tradition of wisdom that shares many similarities. In the light of the similarities, the differences—particularly the role of Yahweh in the wisdom of Proverbs—stands out even more.⁷³

Father-Son

Egyptian instructions are most often addressed as the advice of a father to a son. The book of Proverbs, particularly the first nine chapters, also presents admonitions of the father to the son. However, as Day points out,⁷⁴ though Egyptian instructions mention the father-son dynamic in the prologue, it does not work itself into the advice section of the text as it does in Proverbs (1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 10, 20). In addition, he demonstrates that other Semitic practical wisdom is similar to the book of Proverbs, not to Egyptian wisdom. He cites Aramaic Ahiqar (lines 82, 96, 127, 129, 149) as well as Akkadian and Sumerian (admittedly non-Semitic) wisdom.

Even so, all the Near Eastern traditions clearly place their practical wisdom in the setting of father and son. This leads to the debate as to the exact nature of the relationship. Is it biological, or is the language a metaphor for a professional relationship, as with a teacher and an apprentice? Often the two probably coincided, with the biological son succeeding the father in his profession. Egyptian instruction seems to be the profession most consistently focused on, but even there its teaching often articulates principles that are useful for getting along in life generally. As we comment elsewhere (see "Social Setting" above), the wisdom of proverbs is a mixture of family, professional, and scribal advice. But there is no doubt that the father-son dynamic is often biological. Adding support to this viewpoint is the appearance of the mother, rare to be sure, along with the father in the instruction of their son (see Prov. 1:8; 6:20; 31:1).

Wisdom Forms

The proverb, understood broadly, is a short, pithy saying that offers advice or an observation on the world. E. I. Gordon defines it more spe-

73. This view is shared by Whybray, *Book of Proverbs: A Survey*, 6–17. See the counter-view of Emerton, "Teaching of Amenemope," 431–52.

74. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. J. Day et al., 65–66.

cifically as a “short familiar saying, expressing some well-known truth or common fact of experience,” and he cites Cervantes’ memorable definition that a proverb is a “short sentence founded on long experience.”⁷⁵ It packs a lot of meaning into a very short statement. In Proverbs, these are usually two-part parallel lines, most often in antithetic relationship. Proverbs 15:1 is typical:

A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (NRSV)

Egyptian wisdom does not know this form until the late instructions of Ankhsheshonqy and Papyrus Insinger, but other Semitic poetry as well as Sumerian proverbs attest similar forms. This is true of even subcategories of the proverb genre. For instance, the numerical proverb (such as Prov. 6:16–19) is not known in Egyptian wisdom but is found in Ahiqar and in nonproverbial contexts in Ugaritic. Proverbs 6:6–8 is an example of an animal proverb, again rare if existent in early Egyptian wisdom, but found in other Semitic texts.⁷⁶

While there are many parallels between non-Egyptian wisdom forms and Prov. 10–31, the case is different with the first nine chapters of Proverbs. These more extended discourses find their closest formal parallels with Egyptian texts. We have also already noted that the so-called “sayings of the wise” in 22:17–24:12, which contain longer proverbs, also have some similarity to Egyptian forms of wisdom.

Wisdom Themes

One cannot help but be struck by similar interests and themes that appear between Proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom traditions. To illustrate them, we mention two themes here and leave more specific connections to be discussed in the commentary proper.

The Dangerous Woman

A quick survey of the above descriptions of the texts from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine shows a number of quotations from texts that concern the dangerous woman, a woman who can distract and seduce a man into doing crazy things and abandoning his commitments to his profession and family. Again, there is no need to suggest any kind of intentional and specific borrowing; the literature deals with a frequent temptation that the addressees, being young men, face in every culture

75. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, 1.

76. Day, “Foreign Semitic Influence,” 64–65.

up to the present day. Since we have quoted a number of examples above, we will, for convenience' sake, add just one more, the first from the Babylonian Counsels of Wisdom, and this may be compared to what we see in Prov. 5–7:

Don't marry a prostitute, whose husbands are legion,
 Nor a temple harlot, who is dedicated to a goddess,
 Nor a courtesan, whose intimates are numerous.
 She will not sustain you in your time of trouble,
 She will snigger at you when you are embroiled in controversy.
 She has neither respect nor obedience in her nature.
 Even if she has the run of your house, get rid of her.
 She has ears attuned for another's footfall. (2.23–30)⁷⁷

The Wise and the Foolish

Wisdom literature, through observation and advice, seeks to guide the student to navigate life. If there is a right way to live life, then there is also a wrong way. The biblical book of Proverbs speaks of this as the way of wisdom and the way of folly. Those who take the right road are themselves wise; those who take the wrong road are fools. In Proverbs, there is a strong ethical content to wisdom and folly. Wisdom is connected to justice and righteousness. Wisdom is constructive and leads to life, while folly is destructive and ends up in death.

Theology of the Book

The theology of the book of Proverbs has often been approached more as a problem than anything else. The book's teaching majors in practical advice and observations and seems distant from the theological concerns of the bulk of the OT. We look in vain, for instance, for any connection with the events of redemptive history. Nothing is said of the patriarchs, the exodus, the establishment of the monarchy, and so on. In addition, while the term "covenant" (*bērit*) is not absent from the book (2:17) and associated words like "covenant love" (*hesed*) occur even more often (3:3; 14:22; 16:6; 19:22; 20:6, 28), the concept of covenant cannot be said to be a major theme of the book. Finally, references to God, though frequently made by using God's covenant name "Yahweh," occur sporadically in the text. In particular, many of the proverbs in chaps. 10–31 have no reference to God and at first glance appear relatively isolated from a broader context. No wonder the book has been described as containing

77. Quoted in Clifford, *Proverbs*, 12.

secular advice.⁷⁸ Some scholars have even gone so far as to say that when Yahweh's name is found in a proverb, it is a sign of a late addition to a consistently secular book.⁷⁹

As we have stated, it is true that Proverbs has an ancient Near Eastern context unlike that of a historical book or a prophetic book. The wisdom of the broader environment receives a respect accorded no pagan prophet, for instance. Individual proverbs are arguably collected from or inspired by earlier non-Israelite sources. In the minds of some, this also minimizes the theological distinctiveness of the book of Proverbs and wisdom in general.

While all the above observations about the book are correct, the conclusion that the book is not theological is wrong. Proverbs is not rightly understood if it is taken as a book of practical advice with an occasional nod of the head to Yahweh. The book is thoroughly and pervasively theological. We intend to establish this by first looking at the expression "the fear of Yahweh," followed by an analysis of the role of Woman Wisdom.

The Fear of Yahweh

The conclusion of the preamble to the book states:

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (1:7)

The position of this verse signals that the complier intends to color our view of the teaching of the book as a whole. A more detailed exposition of the meaning of the verse may be found in the commentary proper, but the important thing to point out at this stage is that this statement claims that there is no "knowledge" (a near synonym of "wisdom," which is actually used in the formula elsewhere)⁸⁰ apart from a relationship with Yahweh that is characterized by fear.

Wisdom is not simply a matter of learning certain principles of life and applying them mechanistically. Wisdom begins with a relationship with God. That this relationship is described as characterized by fear

78. O. Eissfeldt says, "The basis for the commendation of wisdom and piety is . . . purely secular and rational" (*The Old Testament: An Introduction* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], 47).

79. The view that earlier secular wisdom has been Yahwehized by later theologically minded redactors may be associated with Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 72; McKane, *Proverbs*, 1–22. It is properly disputed by L. Boström, *God of the Sages*, 36–39.

80. For other uses, see especially 9:10, but also 1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 26, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:7; 24:21; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30.

means that the sages understand their place in the universe. While fear is not to be equated with terror, it is probably more than mere respect (see 1:7).⁸¹ After all, people are totally dependent on Yahweh, who created and sustains them. The sages understood this and therefore trembled in the presence of God.

Pagans may well stumble on some interesting and helpful truth that provides insight on how to avoid a problem or achieve a desired goal. They may even be able to formulate that bit of advice in a way that is memorable. The Israelite sages may even adapt the advice for inclusion in the book of Proverbs. However, based on 1:7, they still would not judge pagan wisdom teachers as truly and authentically wise, because they lack fear of Yahweh.

The bottom line is that there is no wisdom apart from a relationship with Yahweh. The very concept of wisdom is a theological concept, and it runs throughout the book. The pervasiveness of the theological perspective of the book is underlined by the role of Woman Wisdom, and to that subject we now turn.

Embracing Woman Wisdom

A second important entrée into the discussion of the theological richness that pervades the book of Proverbs has to do with the metaphor of Woman Wisdom.

We begin by remembering the fundamental division of the book into two major parts: the discourses (chaps. 1–9) and the proverbial sayings (chaps. 10–31). It is our contention that the latter was meant to be read in the context of the former. The discourses are mostly the address of a father to his son, but in some cases the speaker is a Woman whose name is Wisdom (1:20–33; 8:1–9:6). The following discussion presents conclusions that are argued in the commentary proper. Relevant alternative proposals are also presented there. Here we adopt the position related to our exegetical conclusions.

In the first place, Woman Wisdom represents God's wisdom. While there are debates concerning the source of the inspiration of this personification (for instance, a foreign goddess like Ma'at or Isis), most people agree that in its present context the figure represents Yahweh's wisdom. The key to the relationship between a divine figure and Woman Wisdom is the location of her house on the highest point of the city. In Israel, as throughout the ancient Near East, the only building allowed on

81. M. V. Van Pelt and W. C. Kaiser (*NIDOTTE* 2:527–33) argue that *yrʔ* can mean “respect” or “fear.” However, it means “respect” only in a very few contexts, and according to them, it means “worship” with God as the object of the *yrʔ*.

the high place was the temple. On this basis, however, I would take the image further than most and suggest that Woman Wisdom represents not only Yahweh's wisdom but Yahweh himself.

One possible objection to this idea is the fact that some of the details of the self-description of Wisdom in chap. 8 ill fit Yahweh. What would it mean to say that Yahweh was the firstborn of creation and specifically that Woman Wisdom was formed by Yahweh (see 8:22–29)? Or that Wisdom witnessed or at best was the agency through whom Yahweh created creation rather than the Creator himself?⁸² But for that matter, with regard to God's attribute of wisdom, what would it mean to press the language in detail as a literal description? Like all poetic metaphors (and personification is a type of metaphor), the language is not meant to be understood in that way. Part of the art of interpretation is the uncertain process of coming to grips with how far the comparison may be taken. The major point of these verses seems to be that creation and W(w)isdom are inextricably bound. Thus, if one wants to know how the world works and thus to successfully navigate life, one had better know this woman, which is Yahweh's wisdom and Yahweh himself.

Whether we take Woman Wisdom simply as Yahweh's wisdom or Yahweh himself, we recognize just how theological the very notion of wisdom becomes in this book. But what, then, about Folly? After all, she too has a place on the highest point of the city (9:14). Does this mean she too represents a deity? By the logic of the preceding argument, the answer must be yes. However, by virtue of her description as ignorant, she is best understood as a metaphor for all the false gods and goddesses that provided such a tremendous illicit attraction to Israelites. In a word, she represents the idols, perhaps no one specific idol, but any false god that lured the hearts of the Israelites. Among the ones that we know pulled the hearts of the Israelites are Marduk, Asherah, Anat, Ishtar, and perhaps most notoriously Baal. Thus, in the same way that personification gives wisdom a theological dimension, so also folly is more than simply a mistaken way to act or speak. They represent diametrically opposed relationships with the divine and alternative worldviews.

These women appeal to the men who are walking by their homes to join them for a meal (9:1–6, 13–18). Apparently, the path that these men are walking on goes by the high hills where the women live.

Throughout the first part of Proverbs, the path is a pervasive metaphor culminating in chap. 9. Everyone is walking on a path, or perhaps, better said, on one of two types of path, a straight path or a crooked path. "Path" (*derek* is the main Hebrew term, but there are a host of near

82. Whether Wisdom is a witness or the agent of creation depends at least in part on how we understand the *ʿāmôn* of 8:30 (see commentary).

synonyms) refers to one's life. Even today, it is common to refer to life as a journey. Path implies a current point of origin (where one is in life now), a destination, and key transitional moments (forks in the road or an encounter, as we are now discussing). In fact, two paths are open. One is "crooked" (2:15) and "dark" (2:13). Danger lurks on this path (1:10–15; 2:12–15). These dangers include traps and snares that can foul up one's walk on the proper path of life. The dark path represents one's behavior in this life, and it culminates not in life but in death.

On the other hand, there is the right path, the path that leads to life. This path is straight and well lit. One who stays on this path will not stumble.

The reader of Proverbs, as we have seen, is represented by the son, or in the case of 1:20–33 and 8:1–9:18 by all young men. These are the implied readers of this part of the book. However, as we have argued, the preamble broadens the audience of the book to include everyone, male and female, naive and wise (1:1–7). Thus, all actual readers must identify with young men, who are the implied readers of the book. Whether old or young, male or female, for the purpose of understanding the book, we all must use our readerly imagination to place ourselves in the position of the son.

This interpretive move is particularly important for understanding the encounter of the young men with Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. They both issue invitations for dinner. The invitations suggest intimate, perhaps even sexual relationships. The call then is to become intimately involved with Wisdom or Folly, to make one of them an integral part of our lives.

Thus, chap. 9 at the end of the first part of Proverbs calls for a decision. With whom will we dine? Will we dine with Woman Wisdom, who represents Yahweh's wisdom, even Yahweh himself? Or will we dine with Woman Folly, who represents the false gods of the surrounding nations?

This is the background through which we should read the individual proverbs that follow. As an example, we cite 10:19:

In an abundance of words, wickedness does not cease;
those who restrain their lips are insightful.

Here we have a typical antithetical proverb, which contrasts the "wicked" with the "insightful." These two words are closely connected with folly and wisdom respectively. The proverb associates those who speak all the time with wicked folly, and those who watch carefully what they say with the insightful wise.

But in the light of chaps. 8 and 9, wisdom is more than good sense or proper behavior and speech. Those who speak a lot and thus commit abundant evil deeds are associated with Woman Folly: they are connected to or at least are acting like idolaters.

On the other hand, those who act with appropriate verbal restraint are insightful, thus showing they are related to Woman Wisdom; they are acting like good followers of Yahweh.

In summary, I have argued that chaps. 1–9 serve as an introduction, even a kind of hermeneutical prism, through which we should read the rest of the book. This first part of the book requires a decision of the young men, who represent the reader. With whom will one dine, with Wisdom or with Folly? This is a call for a religious decision, a decision between the true God and false gods.

Reading within the Context of Ecclesiastes and Job

Now that we have described what we believe to be the pervasive theological significance of the book of Proverbs itself, we now look at the book's connection to the rest of the canon, beginning with the OT and focusing on two other wisdom books, Ecclesiastes and Job.

Proverbs makes a very important argument in favor of the connection between certain behaviors and their outcomes. Wise actions and speech result in positive consequences, and foolish ones have negative consequences. We have discussed this (above) in connection with the issue of retribution. It is not the intention of a proverb to yield guarantees or promises but rather to point toward behaviors that, all things being equal, will normally lead to desired ends. Thus, laziness normally leads to poverty. However, all things aren't always equal, and a lazy person might be the recipient of a significant inheritance or stumble across a lost treasure. Such exceptions do not disprove the rule, however. But it does remind us that, to use a modern proverb, one "can't tell a book by its cover." One cannot immediately judge that a certain rich person is hardworking, or that a certain poor person is lazy. Indeed, we have already acknowledged that Proverbs itself shows an awareness that a person may have to decide to be wise and not wealthy. In other words, the consequence does not always follow. The biblical story of Joseph is an excellent example of this, since he does just as the proverbs urge—rejecting the advances of a promiscuous woman—but, rather than being rewarded, ends up in jail (Gen. 39). To judge by immediate consequences, the way of wisdom led to trouble rather than blessing.

However, in spite of the built-in safeguards of thinking there is an invariable connection between godly behavior and rewards, it appears

that many people fell into the trap of presuming on the results of their behavior. In a word, they thought that good things should happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. When such a connection did not exist, it threw them, at least temporarily, into a conundrum (Ps. 73).

In the books of Ecclesiastes and Job, we have a recognition and assessment of the issue. These wisdom books of the OT beg to be read in conjunction with Proverbs. Indeed, in my opinion, Ecclesiastes and Job function in part as a canonical corrective to an overreading of the book of Proverbs. They quash any presumption that one invariably and immediately receives rewards for good behavior and punishments for bad behavior.

The issue of the proper interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes is vexed, and my reading follows the interpretive strategy presented and argued for in my earlier commentary on the book.⁸³ At the center of this interpretation is a recognition of two voices in the book. On the one hand, we hear Qoheleth, commonly rendered “the Teacher,” speak in the first person in the body of the book (1:12–12:7). The frame (1:1–11 and 12:8–14) contains the words of a second wisdom teacher who is quoting Qoheleth and speaking of him in the third person. He is exposing his son (12:12) to the thought of Qoheleth and critically evaluating it.

The basic point Qoheleth is making in his long speech is that life is difficult and ultimately meaningless because one dies. As a wisdom teacher himself, he is particularly upset because he does not see or experience a proper connection between good deeds and good consequences. A selection of passages illustrates the point:

In my vain life I have seen everything: there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evil-doing. Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both. (7:15–18 NRSV)

In 8:10–13, Qoheleth seems to go back and forth between what he sees and what he knows, and then finally back to what he sees. He knows that the godly should live long and do well, but what he sees is the opposite.

And Eccles. 9 is filled with the expression of frustration at the unfair way that life works out. Illustrative of this are vv. 11–12:

83. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*.

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (NRSV)

Thus, Qoheleth expresses exasperation at the fact that retribution does not work out “under the sun.” When the second wise man comes to evaluate the words of Qoheleth, he acknowledges that he speaks the truth (“and he wrote words of truth plainly,” 12:10 NRSV). In spite of this, however, he points his son not to the same tone of resignation as Qoheleth’s *carpe diem* passages suggest (2:24–26, etc.), but to what we might call an above-the-sun perspective (12:13–14).

Ecclesiastes thus serves as a check against an overly optimistic view of rewards promised to the wise. It does this by showing that the principle of retribution does not always work out in under-the-sun experience. Ecclesiastes does not solve the issue as much as it urges the son to stay in relationship with God and expect the coming judgment. It belies the view that rewards always follow wise behavior.

The same may be said of the book of Job. In the person of Job himself, this book definitively does away with the idea that godliness always leads to blessing and wickedness always leads to punishment. The reader knows, beyond any doubt, that Job is “blameless and upright.” Not only does the narrator inform the reader of this (1:1), but God himself also boasts of him to “Satan.” In other words, we clearly have a divine affirmation of his godliness, and we know that his suffering has nothing to do with his ethical state.

The three friends, Elihu, and perhaps even Job himself operate with the contrary idea. The three friends look at Job’s suffering and conclude that he is a sinner in need of repentance. Elihu essentially argues the same point, and Job himself wonders what has happened. God must have made a mistake.

The book does not offer a solution to the problem of suffering but rather again illustrates the recognition that rewards may not come in this life and that one must simply submit oneself to the power and wisdom of God.⁸⁴

84. The fact that Job is blessed at the end is not a compromise of this argument. It is not asserting a belief that everyone who is godly will ultimately be rewarded in this life. The restoration is an affirmation that Job has done the right thing in the light of his inexplicable suffering; he simply submits. Read in the light of the entire canon, however, the thought may be developing toward the idea of an afterlife, a time when retribution will finally be worked out.

Reading Proverbs in the Light of the New Testament

Having discussed the place of Proverbs in the OT canon, we take a broader view that includes the NT. The hermeneutical issue of the relationship between the OT and the NT is a much-discussed and disputed question. Even among Christian scholars we can find great hesitation to recognize that the NT presents itself as a continuation and fulfillment of the OT. Part of this hesitation is out of respect for the concern of Jewish friends and colleagues that we are wresting the Hebrew Bible away from them, to whom it was most directly addressed. However, Christian scholars should listen to Jon Levenson when he encourages them to be Christian in their theology.⁸⁵ Other scholars are reluctant to read the OT from a NT perspective because it warps the distinctive contribution of the OT to the canon.⁸⁶

I firmly believe in the importance of studying the OT/Hebrew Bible on its own terms first. I also have considerable doubt that the original authors of OT books had a conscious understanding of the future significance of their words. Perhaps they had a sense that what they were saying had eschatological implications, but certainly not to the extent that the NT authors took it. It seems that the appearance of Jesus led to a deeper understanding of the message of the OT. In the light of Jesus's death and resurrection, his followers read the OT in a new way.

While the nature of Jesus's messiahship was surprising to everyone,⁸⁷ Jesus himself was angry that they did not in essence understand what the OT was talking about. He expressed his frustration on two occasions in the days after his resurrection.

In the first, Jesus walked with two of his disciples who were utterly confused and dismayed at his recent crucifixion. They did not recognize him,⁸⁸ and as they expressed their consternation, they revealed their previous expectation when they said, "We had hoped that he was the

85. J. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

86. Three of the most articulate spokespersons for this view are W. C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); idem, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); J. E. Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel* (Old Testament Theology; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); and J. Walton, whose otherwise masterful treatment of Old Testament topics is marred by his refusal to consider New Testament connections. For an example, see most recently Walton's *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

87. As I argue in "The Messiah: Explorations in the Law and Writings," a paper I delivered at the Bingham Colloquium at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, June 2004.

88. "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (Luke 24:16 NRSV).

one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21 NRSV). Jesus replied: “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” These words are backed by his appeal to Scripture, when the narrator reports that “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (24:25–26 NRSV). Soon thereafter, he appeared to a broader group of disciples, and Luke reports the event as follows:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:44–49 NRSV)

There is much about this passage that can be debated; however, certain things are clearly delineated here. First, the disciples had an expectation, though it was apparently not clearly formed or accurate. The imperfection of their expectation is implied by their confusion at the time of the crucifixion and their reaction to reports of the empty tomb. Second, Jesus was angry or at least disappointed that they did not know what to expect. After all, he taught them during his earthly ministry. Third, he gave them another lesson, a lesson in hermeneutics, which we are to assume convinced them this time in the light of the resurrection. From this point on, the disciples could not read the OT except in the light of the resurrected Jesus.

The Bible is one continuous and organic story, though told in a variety of genres and by a variety of authors, who provide different perspectives on the same truth. The Bible is composed of many books but in the end is a single book. It has many authors but ultimately is the product of a single Author. It is important to study the books of the Bible from the perspective of their distinctive contribution as well as their connection to the whole.

In terms of the latter, the Bible is like any narrative. On a first reading the story of the OT unfolds in ways not expected. However, on second and further readings of the canon, one cannot, except as an intellectual exercise, read the beginning without knowledge of the end. In terms of the study of the OT, Christian scholars should initially do their best to bracket their understanding of how the story ends in the NT. However,

such a reading is an intellectual exercise. In reality, one cannot and ultimately should not read the beginning of a story the same way twice. Indeed, a second reading of the beginning of any story and in particular the story of the Christian Bible will be accompanied by recognition of how that story ends.

Of course, Proverbs is not a story as such. However, as we have observed above, the book presents a striking metaphor of God's wisdom and arguably God himself in the form of Woman Wisdom. Readers of the NT cannot help but notice the description of Jesus as, in the first place, the very epitome of God's wisdom and, second, in association with Woman Wisdom herself.

We begin by an exploration of NT passages that characterize Jesus as the apex of God's wisdom. The infancy narratives are brief, but they pay special attention to the growth in Jesus's extraordinary wisdom. Of the two Gospels that report his birth and youth, Luke shows a special interest in Jesus's wisdom. For instance, after Jesus is born, we learn twice that this young man grew physically but also "with wisdom beyond his years" (Luke 2:40 NLT; cf. also 2:52). These two notices surround a story that gives us Christ's wisdom, and it too comments on one of the few events related to us from Jesus's youth.

Like good Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph took their son every year to Jerusalem for Passover. When Jesus was twelve, they made the trip as usual, but this time as they returned to Nazareth, they panicked when they realized that Jesus was not with them. With fear in their hearts, they rushed back to Jerusalem and spent three days frantically searching for him. They finally discovered him in the temple "sitting among the religious teachers, discussing deep questions with them" (Luke 2:46 NLT). People were watching with amazement "at his understanding and his answers" (2:47 NLT). After all, he wasn't speaking with just anyone; he was in a discussion with the leading theologians of his day, and they were paying attention to what he was saying. Here was a child who reflected God's wisdom.

When Jesus began his ministry, people recognized him as a wise teacher. In Mark's first report of his teaching, we hear the people's reaction: "Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum. When the Sabbath day came, he went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law" (Mark 1:21–22, cf. NIV, NLT). Later, in Nazareth, those who knew him while he was growing up also acknowledged his gifts: "Where did he get all his wisdom and the power to perform such miracles?" (Mark 6:2 NLT).

The most characteristic form of Jesus's teaching, the parable, was part of the repertoire of the wisdom teacher. Indeed, the Hebrew word (*māšāl*)

was translated into the Greek word “parable” (*parabolē*). Accordingly, it is not a stretch to say that Jesus was a first-century wisdom teacher.

Jesus recognized himself as wise and condemned those who rejected his wisdom. In Luke 11:31, he tells the crowd: “The queen of Sheba will rise up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, because she came from a distant land to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And now someone greater than Solomon is here—and you refuse to listen to him” (NLT).

While the Gospels demonstrate that Jesus was wise—indeed, wiser than Solomon—Paul asserts that Jesus is not simply wise; he is also the very incarnation of God’s wisdom. Twice Paul identifies Christ with God’s wisdom. First in 1 Corinthians, a passage that will occupy our attention later, he says, “God made Christ to be wisdom itself” (1 Cor. 1:30 NLT). Second, in Col. 2:3 Paul proclaims that in Christ “lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (NLT). With this as background, it is not surprising that the NT subtly associates Jesus with Woman Wisdom, particularly as presented in Prov. 8.

Gospels and Epistles both attest to Jesus’s wisdom being the most profound expression of God’s wisdom. Moreover, the link with Woman Wisdom is explicit in several other passages that we now explore.

We begin with Matt. 11. In this passage, Jesus addresses opponents who argue that John the Baptist was an ascetic in his lifestyle, while Jesus was too celebratory. Notice the final assertion in his reply:

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” But wisdom is proved right by her actions. (Matt. 11:18–19 NIV)

In that last sentence, Jesus claims that his behavior represents the behavior of Woman Wisdom herself.

Elsewhere in the NT Jesus is described in language that is reminiscent of Prov. 8. We turn first to Col. 1:15–17:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,

for through him God created everything in heaven and on earth.

He made the things we can see
and the things we can’t see—

Such as thrones, kingdoms,
rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him.

He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together. (cf. NLT)

Though this text is clearly not a quotation from Proverbs, someone as well versed in the OT as Paul was would recognize it as saying that Jesus occupies the place of Wisdom. Indeed, the literal rendition of the Greek of the sentence that ends “is supreme over all creation” is “He is . . . the firstborn of all creation” (NRSV). Paul is inviting a comparison: Wisdom was firstborn in Prov. 8; Jesus is firstborn in Colossians. Wisdom is the agent of divine creation in Proverbs; Christ is the agent in Colossians. In Prov. 8 we read:

By me kings reign,
and nobles issue just decrees.
By me rulers rule,
and princes, all righteous judgments. (Prov. 8:15–16)

And in Col. 1:16, Christ made “kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities” (NLT). The message is clear: Jesus is Wisdom herself.

The author of Revelation is a further witness to the connection between Wisdom and Jesus. In the introduction to the letter to the church at Laodicea, we read, “This is the message from the one who is the Amen—the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s [new] creation” (Rev. 3:14b NLT). The last phrase (*hē archē tēs ktiseōs tou theou*) resonates with the ideas behind Prov. 8:22–30. In particular, the phrase may represent the meaning of that difficult word in Prov. 8:30, the “architect” (*ʿamôn*) of creation. The allusion is subtle but clear: Jesus stands in the place of Woman Wisdom.

Even more subtly, we might note that the great preface to the Gospel of John echoes with language reminiscent of the poem about Woman Wisdom in Prov. 8. The Word of God (the Logos), who is God himself (John 1:1), was “in the beginning with God. He created everything there is” (NLT). Indeed, the “world was made through him” (1:10 NLT). Jesus, of course, is the Word, and the association is with language reminiscent of Woman Wisdom.⁸⁹

Seeing the connection between Jesus and Woman Wisdom has important implications for how Christians read the book of Proverbs. We have already established the fact that the ancient Israelite would read the metaphors of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly as a choice between Yahweh and the false gods of the nations. This decision would have little relevance to modern readers who are not trying to make a choice between God and Baal; the latter is not a live option, and the NT claims to reveal the nature of the Godhead more carefully. Thus, the NT presents Jesus as the mediator of our relationship with God. The gospel choice

89. As we observe in the commentary proper, there is a debate over whether Wisdom is the agent through whom God created creation or simply a witness to it. Of course, if the latter is the correct view, then the connection is weaker with John 1.

is a decision whether to follow Jesus. Thus, to understand the invitation of Woman Wisdom as the invitation of Christ to relationship with God makes the book contemporary to Christian readers.

As for Woman Folly, she may be taken as anything or anyone who seeks to divert our primary attention away from our relationship with Jesus. Idols today are typically more subtle than in ancient times. Rather than deities and their images, we are lured by more abstract and conceptual idols: power, wealth, relationships, status, and so forth.⁹⁰

Other Developments of the Metaphor of Woman Wisdom

The NT was not the only or the earliest post-Hebrew Bible writing to further develop the metaphor of Woman Wisdom. The first⁹¹ that we know of is found in the two intertestamental wisdom books, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon.

Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, is known from a Greek translation (ca. 130 BC), which is based on an earlier Hebrew composition (ca. 180 BC). It is a prominent member of the OT Apocrypha. Sirach 1 introduces the figure of Woman Wisdom:

Wisdom was created before all other things,
and prudent understanding from eternity. . . .
It is he who created her;
he saw her and took her measure;
he poured her out upon all his works,
upon all the living according to his gift;
he lavished her upon those who love him. (1:4, 9–10 NRSV)

Chapter 24 in particular develops the description of Woman Wisdom. The most notable innovation has to do with associating Wisdom with Israel and specifically with the law of Moses.⁹²

Then the Creator of all things gave me [Wisdom] a command,
and my Creator chose the place for my tent.

90. For an examination of modern idols in the light of the book of Ecclesiastes, see D. Allender and T. Longman, *Bold Purpose* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1997).

91. Unless one counts the Greek translation of the LXX that arguably was done around 200 BC. According to Cook (“*Ishâ zārâ*”), Prov. 8 was rendered into Greek in a way that purposefully protected against assimilation with Hellenistic ideas of wisdom. In particular, it makes clear, clearer than in the Hebrew, that God was the sole Creator.

92. The present commentary argues (see “Wisdom and Law” below) that the connection between wisdom and law is implicit in the book of Proverbs. Sirach is making the connection explicit.

He said, “Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance.” (24:8 NRSV)

Whoever obeys me [Wisdom] will not be put to shame,
and those who work with me will not sin.
All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,
the law that Moses commanded us
as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob. (24:22–23 NRSV;
see also 15:1; 19:20; 33:2)

While Sirach represents one further development of the metaphor of Woman Wisdom in the direction of a Jewish particularism,⁹³ the Wisdom of Solomon (sometime between 50 BC and AD 100),⁹⁴ also a deuterocanonical book, uses the figure to try to assimilate Jewish with Hellenistic wisdom, in particular a Stoic and Neoplatonic mind-set:

She [Wisdom] is an exhalation from the power of God,
a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing tainted insinuates itself into her.
She is an effulgence of everlasting light,
an unblemished mirror of the active power of God,
and an image of his goodness. (7:25–26)⁹⁵

In the early church, Prov. 8 with its personification of wisdom provided a source of controversy regarding the arguments of a popular preacher and theologian, Arius (260–336 BC). Arius and his followers noted the connection between Jesus and Wisdom and then applied all the characteristics of Wisdom to Jesus. They pressed literally the language in the Greek version of Prov. 8 that Wisdom (Jesus) was created or brought forth as the first of creation. On that basis, they reasoned that since God is “Creator” and Wisdom, who stands for Jesus, is “created,” then Jesus cannot be God.

In response, we simply point out that Prov. 8 is not a prophecy of Jesus or any kind of literal description of him. We must remember that the text is poetry and is using metaphor to make important points about the

93. As J. G. Snaith (“Ecclesiasticus: A Tract for Our Time,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. J. Day et al., 181) puts it, “With Hellenistic reform seemingly just around the corner in Jerusalem, Sirach wrote his book, ignoring the Jews still in Babylon, to provide a Zionist-like declaration of the values of traditional Judaism, a book treasured at Qumran and Masada, and found in the Cairo Geniza, and indeed well known to Jews and Christians throughout the world thanks to the Greek translation of a loyal grandson.”

94. For a particularly helpful look at the Wisdom of Solomon, see Enns, *Exodus Retold*.

95. Translation and commentary may be found in D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 184–87.

nature of God's wisdom. Indeed, even in its OT setting, where Wisdom stands for Yahweh's wisdom, we would be wrong to press the language of creation literally, as though at some point God was not wise and only later became wise just in time to create the world.

We must remember all this when we see that Jesus associates himself with Wisdom in the NT. Woman Wisdom is not a preincarnate form of the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is not to be identified with Wisdom. The language about Jesus being the "firstborn of creation" is not to be pressed literally, as though Jesus were a created being. But—and this is crucial—the association between Jesus and Woman Wisdom in the NT is a powerful way of saying that Jesus is the embodiment of God's Wisdom.

Athanasius (ca. 296–373) led the charge against Arius. The controversy allowed the church's leaders to further reflect and define their understanding of the nature of Christ and the Trinity. The culmination of their work issued in the development of the Nicene Creed, which asserts the following about Jesus, making it clear that Arius's implications from Prov. 8 were wrongminded:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, and born of the Father before all ages, (God of God,) Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Though the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches followed Athanasius in this regard, the teaching of Arius is not dead. Rather, it is found in groups like the Mormon Church or among Jehovah's Witnesses, who deny that Jesus is fully God as well as fully man. In their understanding Jesus is a created being, and Prov. 8 again is a proof text for them.

Proverbs 8 is the origin of another form of modern theological speculation as well. In recent decades a group of feminist scholars⁹⁶ have protested what they see as the patriarchal nature of NT religion, with

96. Not all feminist scholars identify with the viewpoint described here. There are a host of different feminist perspectives on the book of Proverbs. Those that proceed in the direction of treating Woman Wisdom/Sophia as a feminine alternate to the male Christ include E. A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 61 (1985): 274–89; E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); J. M. Robinson, "Very Goddess and Very Man," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. K. L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 113–27. A "Re-imagining 1993" conference was held in Minneapolis and attended by church leaders, theologians, and laypeople. This conference was attempting to make the faith more palatable to modern women by presenting Sophia as an alternative mediator between God and humanity.

its masculine Savior, by worshipping God through Sophia, a female picture of God. “Sophia,” of course, is the Greek word for wisdom, and not surprisingly Prov. 8 has been a place where they have sought some textual support. However, as we have already tried to establish, such a view of Prov. 8 is out of keeping with the nature of the text. It treats the description of Woman Wisdom as a literal description rather than as a poetic metaphor. In a word, it takes the metaphor too far and in a way that it contradicts other parts of Scripture.⁹⁷ Even so, the church should not simply react against this view but should examine what has driven these scholars, pastors, and laypeople to such a viewpoint. Perhaps the church has been guilty of overpatriarchalizing the gospel—but that is a subject for another study.

Selected Theological Topics

What follows includes a study of certain topics that are of special interest for the book of Proverbs. Presented in no certain order, they are a miscellany of topics that allow us to explore issues of interest in the book.

Gender and the Theology

Proverbs is composed of discourses and proverbs. The discourses of 1:8–9:18 are clearly addressed to men. Most are speeches of a father, speaking on behalf of himself and his wife and addressing his son or sons. The exceptions are 1:20–33 and 8:1–9:6, where Woman Wisdom speaks to all the young men; and 9:13–18, where Woman Folly speaks to the same group. The addressees of the proverbs that follow in chaps. 10–31 are only rarely made explicit, but when they are, the text again refers to the “son” (as in 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13; etc.). Also, the observations are geared toward the son and not the daughter or children in general (as in 10:1, 5; 13:1; 15:20; 17:2, 25; 19:13). Furthermore, the subjects are directed toward men more than toward women, as the extensive teaching on choosing the right woman (31:10–31) and avoiding the wrong woman (chaps. 5–7) would indicate. There is no comparable teaching about avoiding the wrong man or husband or choosing the right one. In essence, 1:8–31:31 is addressed to young men.

97. For a full and devastating critique of modern feminist Sophia theology, see K. Jobes, “Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and S. K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 226–50.

Indeed, to feel the full force of what is arguably the most important metaphor of the book, one must put oneself in the position of a male. The relational and erotic overtones of *Woman Wisdom's* and of *Woman Folly's* appeals to the young men to dine at their respective houses (9:1–6, 13–18) may only be fully realized if one is or imagines oneself to be a male. J. Miller (*Proverbs*) makes an important point when he says that modern gender-inclusive translations like the NLT lose something when they typically translate “son” as “child.”⁹⁸

However, there is more to the issue. Proverbs 1:1–7 functions as a kind of preamble or title page to the book as a whole. The collection of materials that follow the preamble needs to be read in its light. Among other introductory matters, the preamble names those to whom the book is addressed. We are not surprised that the “simple” and the “young” are numbered among those to whom the book is directed (1:4), but we might be surprised to see that 1:5 specifically names “the wise” as among the book’s audience. Since the gender of the addressees is not specified in the preamble, it is appropriate to believe that males and females are both intended.

A further argument in support of the idea that the final form of Proverbs is meant to be read and appropriated by both genders and all ages is the mere presence of the book in the canon. The canon provides a new context for the book, and it is one that broadens the audience to include all of God’s people.

When we think about it, Proverbs is no different from most other biblical books. After all, few if any books of the Bible were addressed to the whole of the people of God. The original settings had specific audiences in mind. Samuel–Kings was written for the exilic community, and Chronicles for the postexilic community. Romans was written to the Roman church, and Galatians to the church of Galatia. The mere presence of these books in the canon indicates to us that they have some continuing relevance for us today. We first of all must study the book of Galatians in its original context, struggling to know, for instance, the nature of the false teaching it resists. After doing this, we do our best to understand the significance of the book for us today. Proverbs is no different, especially if we are not young men. However, once the process of understanding is initiated, we can see that it really is not that difficult. Women may not be directly addressed by a proverb like 21:9:

It is better to live in the corner of a roof
than with a contentious woman in a shared house.

98. However, it is also true that the NLT is generally careful to preserve the awareness of the male addressee when *Woman Wisdom* makes her appeal to those who pass by.

But it is appropriate and not difficult for the woman to apply the proverb to her own situation:

It is better to live in the corner of a roof
than with a contentious *man* in a shared house.

Nor is it difficult to think of a male sexual predator rather than a female one as a woman appropriates chaps. 5–7 to her situation.

Before we leave this situation, we make a comment concerning the value and appropriateness of gender-inclusive translations of Proverbs. The fact that the book was addressed to young males in its original setting might argue for preserving the gender-specific language of “son” in our translations. Indeed, it is difficult to see how one can avoid doing so in chapters such as 5–7, where the son is warned against the wiles of the promiscuous woman. However, the preamble plus the presence of the book in the canon does seem to allow for the translation “child” for “son.”

The bottom line is that there is not a right or wrong answer to this question. All translations must make compromises with the original meaning since no two languages have a one-to-one correspondence. The best solution is to have both types of translations available to the serious student. For Bible readers a gender-inclusive translation may be best so they understand that the discourses and proverbs apply to them, whether male or female. Among the most popular translations, some are gender specific (ESV, NIV, NASB) and some are gender inclusive (NLT, NCV, TNIV). Serious students will have both available as they study, particularly if they lack a knowledge of Hebrew.

The Sources of Wisdom

Where does the wisdom of the discourses and proverbs of the book of Proverbs come from? The book of Proverbs recognizes a number of ways in which a person grows wise. They include observation, instruction, learning from mistakes, and, finally and most important, revelation, recognized by those who fear the Lord.⁹⁹

Observation and Experience. A wise person has been observant of life. While many people live unreflectively, the wise person tries to understand why certain behaviors work and others do not. Provided a person has been self-aware and self-critical, the more experience one has, the wiser one is apt to be. Since experience is important for growth in wisdom, societies have generally thought that older people tend to be wiser than

99. Estes, *Hear, My Son*, 87–100.

the young. While the three friends of Job show that this is not a universally valid principle, it is generally true. In Proverbs, it is always the father instructing the son, never the son instructing the father.

Occasionally, the teacher in Proverbs appeals explicitly to the process of observation in order to back up his teaching. One of the best examples comes from 6:6–8:

Go to the ant, you lazy people!
See its paths and grow wise.
That one has no military commander,
officer or ruler;
it gets its food in summer,
gathers its provisions at harvest.

The teacher instructs his pupils about laziness by inviting them to go out and observe the diligent ant. From this experience, the teacher feels confident that the hearer will draw the lesson that follows in the text:

How long, you lazy person, will you lie down;
when will you rise up from your sleep?
“A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the arms to lie down”—
and your poverty will come on you like a prowler
and your deprivation like a person with a shield. (6:9–11)

Later, the sage warns his son about the dangers of an immoral woman by sharing the following observation:

When from the window of my house,
from behind my lattice I looked down,
I looked for a moment,
and I perceived among the sons a youth who lacked heart.
He was crossing the street at the corner,
and he marched on the path to her house
at beginning of the evening of the day,
in the middle of night and darkness. (7:6–9)

The story continues as it tells of the woman’s seduction of the young man and the horrible consequences:

He impetuously goes after her.
He goes like an ox to the slaughter
and like a stupid person to the stocks for discipline,
until an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird hurrying to the snare,
not aware that it will cost him his life. (7:22–23)

From this observation the sage advises the son to avoid this woman (7:24–25).

Though this type of conscious reflection on the process of experience and observation is infrequent in the book, it does appear in more places than those just cited (see also 22:10, 26–27; 26:15).

Instruction Based on Tradition. Observation and experience allow the sensitive person to know how to navigate life. Strategies that succeed are repeated and taught; those that fail become the subject of warnings. The observation or experience need not be personal. We also rely on the learned analysis of others. Here, of course, we speak of the role of the father/teacher. In Prov. 4, the father instructs his son based on the tradition handed down by his father:

Hear, sons, fatherly discipline,
and pay attention to the knowledge of understanding.
For I will give you good teaching;
don't forsake my instruction.
For I was a son to my father,
tender and the only one of my mother.
He taught me and said to me:
"Let your heart hold on to my words;
guard my commands and live." (4:1–4)

Indeed, in this context we can also reflect back on Prov. 7. The lesson about the seductive, immoral woman was based on wisdom gleaned through the observation of the father, but it was passed on to the son by instruction. The son did not have to directly observe or experience the situation to learn from it. In other words, we may learn wisdom from the traditions of others who have gone before us.

A new section of the book of Proverbs begins in 22:17 and is introduced by the following verses:

Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise;
set your heart toward my knowledge,
for they are pleasant if you guard them in your innermost being
and have all of them ready on your lips.
So your trust will be in Yahweh,
I will inform you, even you, today.
Have I not written for you thirty sayings
with advice and knowledge?
Their purpose is to inform you of true, reliable speeches,
so you can return reliable speeches to those who sent you. (22:17–21)

The thirty sayings represent a tradition passed on from father to son, down to the present time. From this instruction the son will grow wise. Indeed, this is the admonition of the following two proverbs:

The wise of heart grasps commands,
but a dupe's lips are ruined. (10:8)

Listen to advice and receive discipline,
so you might grow wise in your future days. (19:20)

We have seen that Israel's wisdom teachers depended not only on native Israelite tradition but also on the wisdom of the broader ancient Near East (see "Proverbs in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom" above).

Learning from Mistakes. Part of gaining wisdom by experience and observation is learning from one's mistakes. Proverbs supposes that everyone makes bad choices along the way. The difference between the wise person and the fool is that the former learns from mistakes, but the latter simply refuses to change behavior. In this regard, the book of Proverbs uses two key words: *mûsār* and *tôkaḥat*. The first is often translated by "discipline" and the second by "correction." The two words are in the same semantic field (a group of words with related meaning) and often occur parallel to one another in the same verse.

Discipline and correction are directed toward those who wander off the right path, encouraging them to get back on. As 12:1 says:

Those who love discipline love knowledge;
and those who hate correction are dullards.

And 10:17 states why it is good to love discipline and not ignore those who try to correct our mistakes:

Those who guard discipline are on the way to life,
and those who abandon correction wander aimlessly.

Discipline is hard to accept; it means admitting that one made a mistake. This is a humbling experience, but a wise person is humble, not proud. Indeed, Proverbs has a lot to say about the dangers of pride. In 8:13, Woman Wisdom herself, speaking in the first person, says

Those who fear Yahweh hate evil,
pride and arrogance, and the path of evil.
I hate a perverse mouth.

On the other hand, God loves those who are humble:

He mocks mockers,
but he shows favor to the humble. (3:34)

After all, pride has very negative side effects and outcomes, while humility takes us back to the good path that leads to life.

When insolence comes, then shame will come,
but wisdom with modesty. (11:2)

The fear of Yahweh is wise discipline,
and humility comes before glory. (15:33)

Pride comes before a disaster,
and before stumbling comes an arrogant attitude. (16:18)

So, learning from one's mistakes as well as observing the mistakes of others is an avenue to wisdom, which puts one on the road to life. Only humility, acknowledging one's weaknesses and failings, will allow this kind of instruction to work its benefits in one's life.

Revelation. According to Proverbs, observation and experience, tradition, and learning from one's mistakes—all are important sources of human wisdom. However, at the heart of wisdom is God himself. Apart from God there is no true insight into the world. God is the only source of true wisdom. Even the ability to observe and experience comes from the Lord:

An ear to hear and an eye to see—
Yahweh made both of them. (20:12)

We have already seen that Proverbs establishes this from the very beginning, when it concludes its opening purpose statement with:

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (1:7)

The theme of the fear of the Lord reverberates through the whole book. After all, if wisdom depends on understanding the world correctly, how can that be achieved if one does not acknowledge that God is the center of the cosmos? Everything must be understood in relationship to Yahweh himself. This is what leads to humility, which comes, after all, from knowing that there is a greater power in the universe:

Many plans are in people's hearts,
but the advice of Yahweh, that is what will succeed. (19:21)

And so we look to the One greater than us to provide the instruction we need to navigate life:

To humans belong the plans of the heart,
but from Yahweh comes a responding tongue. (16:1)

We have also looked closely at the figure of Woman Wisdom and have discovered that she ultimately stands for Yahweh. As we listen to her, we listen to God himself. Indeed, all true wisdom, knowledge, and insight—even that gained by tradition, instruction, experience, observation, and correction—comes from God himself:

For Yahweh bestows wisdom,
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He stores up resourcefulness for those with integrity—
a shield for those who walk in innocence,
to protect the paths of justice
guarding the way of his covenant partners. (2:6–8)

Wisdom and Creation

Though the theme is not extensively developed in Proverbs (however, see the divine speeches in Job 38:1–40:2 and 40:6–41:34), two of the most interesting texts in Proverbs show the close connection between wisdom and creation. Proverbs 3:19–20 states the matter more directly than 8:22–31, but both present the same fundamental truth: God created the cosmos through his wisdom. While chap. 3 makes this point in so many words, in chap. 8 we have the development of the complex metaphor of Woman Wisdom.¹⁰⁰ Through this Woman and in her presence, God created the earth and the heavens. Woman Wisdom is a personification of Yahweh's wisdom and ultimately stands for Yahweh himself. The implicit teaching of the connection is to tell the reader that the best way to know how to get on in the world is to become acquainted with the One so intimately involved in its creation. The key to successful living is wisdom.

As we saw earlier, the NT associates Woman Wisdom with Jesus in John 1 and specifically does so by using the language of creation. Just

100. For the many different perspectives on the origin and function of this metaphor, see the commentary. Here we make a summary statement of our own conclusions.

as God created the cosmos through Woman Wisdom according to Prov. 8, so God created the cosmos through Jesus Christ, the Word.

Wisdom and Law

It is not hard to see a connection between wisdom and law. Both make demands upon a person's life and behavior.

Honor your father and mother. (Exod. 20:12 NRSV)

Answer fools according to their stupidity. (Prov. 26:5)

Even the observations of Proverbs imply a mode of behavior:

A wise son makes a father glad,
and a foolish son is the sorrow of his mother. (Prov. 10:1)

It is also true that words associated with the law (in particular "command" [*mišwâ*] and "instruction/law" [*tôrâ*]) are used in connection with demands of the book of Proverbs.¹⁰¹ These observations lead one to see a close connection or even identification between wisdom and law.

However, as noted by various scholars,¹⁰² one must acknowledge a difference as well. The law comes with no stated or unstated exceptions. One must always honor one's parents. One may never worship other gods, make an image, take God's name in vain, commit adultery, steal, murder, bear false witness, or covet. Wisdom is another matter. Though Prov. 26:5 demands that a person answer a fool, the previous verse demands that a person not answer a fool. While this might be considered a contradiction if judged as though these verses were law, it is in the nature of the proverb to consider the circumstance (see "Genre" above). What kind of fool is one speaking to? Will answering help or just mire one in a hopeless controversy? Perhaps, then, it is best to consider the wisdom of Proverbs as good advice rather than as required stipulation. However, such a conclusion might be premature.

While not related like brothers, law and wisdom are like close cousins. Both intend to shape the behavior of the covenant community (see comments below on "Covenant and Wisdom"). In the first place, we must acknowledge the wisdom of Proverbs as a matter of take it or leave it. Some of its requirements are nonnegotiable and do not depend on the

101. For *mišwâ*, see 2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 6:20, 23; 7:1, 2; 13:13; 19:16. For *tôrâ*, see 1:8; 3:1; 6:20, 23; 7:2; 13:14; 28:4, 7, 9; 29:18; 31:26.

102. Note the debate between Zimmerli and Gemser described in connection with the occurrence of the word "command" in Prov. 2:1.

circumstance. This is true, for instance, concerning its extensive teaching on how to react to a promiscuous woman. Indeed, we should observe the connection between this teaching and the seventh commandment, not to commit adultery (Exod. 20:14). Indeed, a number of proverbs may be related to specific provisions of the Ten Commandments—not all of them, but certainly a majority, especially those concerning human-to-human relationships. The following chart is not exhaustive but does demonstrate the connection I am talking about:

Commandments (Exod. 20:12–17)	Proverbs
Fifth: Honor father and mother	1:8; 4:1, 10; ¹⁰³ 10:1; 13:1
Sixth: Do not murder	1:10–12; 6:17
Seventh: Do not commit adultery	2:16–19; chap. 5; 6:20–35; chap. 7
Eighth: Do not steal	1:13–14; 11:1
Ninth: Do not bear false witness	3:30; 6:18, 19; 10:18; 12:17, 19
Tenth: Do not covet	6:18

Here again, law and wisdom are not identical. They are different genres, and it is important to bear this in mind. In a recent book on OT narrative, Gordon Wenham made an important distinction that appears relevant to our understanding of the ethical quality of Proverbs.¹⁰⁴ That distinction is between what he calls ethical ideals and legal requirements. The latter is connected to law and should be considered rock-bottom acceptable behavior for the covenant community. Wenham recognizes that “obedience to the rules is not a sufficient definition of OT ethics, but that much more is looked for by members of the covenant people than this.”¹⁰⁵ That much more may be described as, among other terms, character and virtue. Though, as we have just seen, many proverbs intersect with legal requirements, wise behavior certainly extends beyond that bottom-line requirement. A good example is the extensive teaching concerning diligence and avoiding laziness. This teaching is not directly connected to the law, though some might argue that it is an extension of the Sabbath commandment and in certain situations of the law not to steal. However, the wisdom teaching is calling for something above and beyond the call of duty as defined by the law.

103. Proverbs 4:10 even connects obeying one’s father to a reward of a long life, reminiscent of the commandment.

104. G. J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

105. *Ibid.*, 79.

Covenant and Wisdom

Having discussed the relationship between law and wisdom, we are in a position to address the connection between wisdom and covenant. It is a well-known fact that wisdom has always been a difficult part of the canon to assimilate into a biblical theology that insists on a “center,” and this is particularly the case when that center has been defined as redemptive history or covenant.¹⁰⁶ Now it is true that the word “covenant” does appear in Proverbs and words associated with covenant like *hesed* are also found; but even so, it has been difficult for scholars to deeply integrate Proverbs or wisdom in general with the covenant idea.

On the other hand, law fits in easily since covenant is a legal metaphor. Comparisons between the biblical idea of covenant and ancient Near Eastern treaties have made this connection even clearer since law is part and parcel of a treaty document. The law expresses the will of the sovereign king, and the king’s subjects show their thanks for his gracious actions, as delineated by the historical prologue (in the case of the Bible, as narrated in the historical books). Meredith Kline has put forward the most forceful arguments in seeing Proverbs related to covenant by virtue of its association with legal requirements.¹⁰⁷ The covenant community listens to law and wisdom in order to live life in obedience to their covenant king.

Our above analysis of the relationship between law and wisdom would support Kline’s idea in the main, but also inject a note of caution. The note of caution is connected to the fact that law and wisdom, though similar, are not identical. It is probably impossible to insist on a single center of biblical theology, whether covenant or any other topic, and do full justice to the distinctive nature and quality of a varied canon. While it is possible to relate covenant and wisdom, it is also important to reflect on a theology of wisdom, thereby treating that subject as the center of a biblical theology. In a later work I hope to return to this subject.

Retribution

In the discourses, the father and Woman Wisdom urge men/sons to wise behavior and to avoid foolish behavior. Part of their strategy involves pointing to the good things that follow from the former and the bad consequences that flow from the latter. According to the teaching of

106. See comments in D. G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies* (London: SCM, 1974), 40–41, 105, with other references.

107. M. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

the book, the ultimate outcome of wisdom is life, and the final outcome of foolish behavior is death. Proverbs 3:2 refers to the wise:

For length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.

In regard to the fool, 24:20 states:

For there will be no future for evil;
the lamp of the wicked will be extinguished.

But life and death are not the only rewards (and for the significance of “life” in the book, see “Afterlife” below). Other more temporal rewards are associated with wise actions and attitudes, and punishments with foolish ones. A selection of proverbs will illustrate:

Honor Yahweh with your wealth
and from the first of your produce.
And your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will burst with wine. (3:9–10)

All the haughty are an abomination to Yahweh;
they will surely not go unpunished. (16:5)

The lips of a fool lead to accusation;
his mouth invites blows. (18:6)

The violence of the wicked will sweep them away,
for they refuse to act with justice. (21:7)

For the righteous may fall seven times, but get up,
but the wicked will stumble in evil. (24:16)

This is just a sample of proverbs that connect godly action with blessings and ungodly action with curses, but they are illustrative of the approach to retribution found in the book.

A number of questions are raised by the rewards and punishments of the proverbs. The first is the agency of the punishment, while a second important one is whether they are true to life.

With regard to the first question, while in Proverbs good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, rarely is the agent of the blessing and punishment named. Sometimes the connection between act and consequence is just stated, with no mention of how it will happen. In the case of a text like 21:7, it seems as if the evil acts themselves will boomerang back on evildoers. They reap the consequences

of their actions. In 18:6, the very words of fools will result in their pain. Interestingly, a text like 24:16 reveals that the sages understand that bad things will happen to good people; the righteous are said to stumble and more than once. However, they, as opposed to the evil, will get up again. In other words, the bad things that happen to good people are simply temporary setbacks. They are, after all, on a road that ends in life.¹⁰⁸

On the other hand, a text like 16:5, though it doesn't make a direct connection, certainly leaves the impression that Yahweh has something to do with the punishment. The fact that the act is an abomination to Yahweh leads to the punishment. Finally, there are passages that do make a connection between Yahweh and reward and punishment:

For the one whom Yahweh loves he will correct,
even like a father who treats a son favorably. (3:12)

The curse of Yahweh is in the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the home of the righteous. (3:33)

Yahweh will not let the righteous starve,
but he will push away the desire of the wicked. (10:3)

So there are texts that lead us to think that the act of the wicked will come back to haunt them and those that imply or directly connect Yahweh to the rewards and punishments that come on people. However, the two are not really different. The former may imply that Yahweh will see that people get what they deserve. Perhaps the best way to think of it is that Yahweh built the world in such a way that punishments are inherent in bad actions and rewards in good actions. Yahweh is ultimately behind all consequences. As Boström puts it, "Our investigation . . . has led us to the conclusion that the world view of the sages was neither built upon a concept of an impersonal order nor of actions with 'automatic,' built-in consequences, but on the active participation of the Lord in the affairs of men in conjunction with man's own responsibility."¹⁰⁹

However, this raises an even more troubling question: Is Proverbs' teaching on retribution true? Is it really the case that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people? The question may be most pointedly stated with reference to 10:3. If Yahweh does

108. K. Koch ("Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52 [1955]: 1–42) famously described this as "the act-consequence relationship": an act leads inexorably to a certain consequence. Others (Boström, *God of the Sages*, 90–91) have qualified this to "the character-consequence relationship," recognizing that acts arise out of character and are more like a symptom than the reason for the consequence.

109. Boström, *God of the Sages*, 139; also argued by Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:73–76.

not let the righteous starve and pushes away the desire of the wicked, why does it appear as if some godly people go hungry and even die of starvation while some wicked people are fat and happy?

This raises the question of whether it is correct to consider the threats of punishments and the anticipation of rewards as promises or guarantees. Is Proverbs saying that whoever acts in a wise way will definitely and without fail be wealthy, healthy, and happy? And will the one who acts foolishly always be poor, sickly, and sad?

The answer to this important question is no. It is in the nature of the proverb not to give promises but rather to indicate the best route toward reward—all things being equal. We illustrate what we mean here by an examination of a commonly abused proverb, 22:6:

Train up youths in his [God's] path;
then when they age, they will not depart from it.

The commentary proper may be consulted for a full examination of the proper interpretation of this difficult question. Here we look at the connection between the admonition for action (“train up youths”) and the consequence that they will not depart from it. But is this true? Are parents who train their children in God’s way promised that they will be godly when they are older? And if so, may the behavior of adult children be used as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the efforts of their parents?

Due to the nature of the proverb as explained above, the answer is no. Parents are here encouraged to train their children in God’s way since that will lead to their godliness—all other things being equal. It is much more likely that children will go the right way if so trained than if their spiritual education is ignored. But all things might not be equal. Perhaps the children fall in with a bad crowd who persuade them to go a different direction. Or there may be a host of other reasons for why a child rejects God’s way. A single proverb does not intend to address all the nuances of a situation; it just gives a snapshot of life to motivate proper behavior.¹¹⁰

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes guard against the misunderstanding that wisdom and righteous behavior inexorably lead to good things. But even within the book of Proverbs itself, there is awareness that the wise do not always receive all the blessings immediately. As Van Leeuwen has shown, this is indicated by the better-than proverbs. We illustrate with 22:1:

A reputation is preferable to much wealth,
and graciousness is better than silver and gold.

110. Waltke, “Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?”

A better-than proverb states relative values. It implies that one may need to make a choice between two things and points the reader toward the one that is preferable. Here we see that reputation and graciousness are better than material wealth. So, even though some proverbs may suggest that righteous people become wealthy, we see here that sometimes people may have to sacrifice wealth in order to gain virtues associated with wisdom.¹¹¹

Afterlife

Christians who read Proverbs and the rest of the OT in the light of the NT cannot help but wonder how its understanding of the afterlife might relate to the issue of retribution in the OT generally and to Proverbs in particular. The issue of the OT teaching on the afterlife is difficult, and the struggle on the issue among Jewish interpreters in the first century may be seen in the divide between the Sadducees and the Pharisees.¹¹²

The problem of proper retribution is not limited in the OT to Proverbs. Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic thought made a strong connection between obedience to the law and blessings and between disobedience and curse. For the most part, the prophets warned the people of God of great punishments because they had disobeyed the law. Of course, such threats were not necessarily immediate. In the case of Samuel-Kings, for instance, the argument is based on what might be called delayed retribution. Finally redacted during the period of the exile, it may be making the case for why God had allowed for the destruction of Jerusalem by showing how the sins of the past generations had “come to roost.”

The perspective provided by the NT is that retribution does work out in the long run. In its vision of the afterlife, it suggests that people ultimately get what they deserve. However, an important component of this is that the final assessment is based not exclusively on obedience but on relationship with God.

But does Proverbs itself demonstrate an awareness of an afterlife where people meet their final reward? Most scholars say no. They suggest that the reason earthly rewards—wealth, long life, happiness—are put forward is that there was no sense of anything beyond this life. And certainly there is no definitive argument to prove otherwise.

111. A point well made by Van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty.”

112. Part of the divide may also be explained by the fact that the Sadducees, who denied the afterlife, considered only the Torah as “canonical,” while the Pharisees affirmed the Prophets and Writings as well. However, according to many contemporary scholars, the latter (with the possible exception of Dan. 12:1–3) did not teach a concept of the afterlife either. As will become clear, I do not share this skepticism.

Even though the word “life” does not clearly point to knowledge of the afterlife, in some contexts such a minimalist reading makes the sages seem incredibly naive. What does it mean to promise life to those who are wise and death to those who are foolish when everyone knows that all die? Of course, this is the question that Qoheleth raises, concluding that in the final analysis the wisdom enterprise is not worth it (Eccles. 2:12–17).

Even so, we cannot determine the intention of the ancient sages with certainty. When they said “life,” did they simply mean to suggest that God would reward good people with a few more years, or did they have a sense of something beyond?¹¹³ This may be the case particularly with regard to passages like the following in Proverbs:

In the way of the righteous is life,
and the path of abomination leads to death. (12:28)

For one with insight, the way of life is upward,
to turn aside from Sheol below. (15:24)

Don't withhold discipline from young people.
If you strike them with the rod, they will not die.
Strike them with a rod,
and you will extricate their lives from Sheol. (23:13–14)

However, the textual and philological difficulties of these verses make certainty impossible.¹¹⁴

Though we cannot answer this question with regard to the intention of the human composers and ancient speakers of these proverbs, those who read the same texts in the light of the fuller revelation of the NT do so with more confident teaching on the nature of the afterlife.

113. This is not to take the side of M. J. Dahood, who argued on the basis of Ugaritic comparisons that the Hebrew word “life” (*ḥay*) frequently meant “eternal life.” See his *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology*, 25–26. This approach has been roundly rejected. See N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 43.

114. See discussion in Johnston, 207–9.