



Learning to Love Wisdom

Don Priest

Learning to Love Wisdom

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‘Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight’ (Proverbs 4:6, 7).

‘I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me’ (Proverbs 8:17).

Introduction

My earliest memories of the book of Proverbs include hearing that my paternal grandfather's favourite passage was chapter three, verses five and six:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Given my Christian lineage from both of my parents, there appears to be a good case for valuing these and similar verses. Since life is complex, and includes difficulties and dilemmas not readily, if ever, resolved, these texts call for interpretation as well as acceptance. Are we, for example, to understand that the ancient sages simply want us to try harder at being godly, or are they sharing richer meanings and deeper insights? Are their messages aimed at providing directional encouragement and affirmation, rather than declaring deterministic legislative instruction? In what ways does their advice and exhortation connect with other Hebrew literature, including the Law and the Prophets as well as other Writings? What are the implications of the awareness that is evident regarding the boundary conditions they saw as beneficial in family, social and cultural, and temple contexts? What did it mean to them to be called an insider or a foreigner, wise or foolish, acceptable or strange?¹

I was asked to preach from the book of Proverbs while also contemplating topics for a brief theological dissertation.² *Learning to Love Wisdom* begins with *Significant Themes in Proverbs 1 to 9*, a modified version of the main part of the resulting dissertation.³ Edited appendices are included in *Further Considerations*, along with some insights from Longman's *The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* and several reflections.⁴ I conclude with a poem I wrote while completing my original dissertation.

Learning to Love Wisdom, like other books in this series, is a lay-person's journal, written and shared in the hope that it will encourage growth in community and understanding as we care for one other in this beautiful but troubled world. It is published as a thanksgiving for the communities in which we lived and for the opportunities I was given to share in their gatherings for worship. I hope that reading this book helps motivate further exploration of biblical themes and

¹ Boundary conditions are not merely locations or positions. People may be moving quickly or slowly towards or away from significant family, social, cultural and religious communities, and so may be viewed as accepting or resisting 'forces' and 'pressures' from within these groups.

² Don Priest, *Living in Love and Freedom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2017), 155–160.

³ *Educational, Social and Theological Themes in Proverbs 1–9* (2014).

⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*, *The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017).

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passages in their historical and theological settings, and that, in so doing, readers find peace, joy and hope. I hope that reading it deepens worship, encourages relationships and enriches application to everyday life. I also hope that it will help others who, like me, find challenges and concerns when seeking understanding and application of this collection of Hebrew wisdom literature.⁵

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June 2019

⁵ Proverbs 26:4 and 5 provides a rather terse summary of the existential double-bind dilemma we all too often seem to face: 'You will lack wisdom if you answer those who lack wisdom according to their lack of wisdom. You should answer those who lack wisdom according to their lack of wisdom, or else they will declare themselves wise, possibly at your expense' (my paraphrase).

Significant Themes in Proverbs 1 to 9

Frameworks

Issues relating to the mentoring and maturing of young men and women are central to the priorities of educational, political, sporting, cultural and religious groups in all societies. In Australian society, these concerns are impacted by changing social patterns resulting from immigration, technology and globalisation. The declining profile of Christian churches and the parallel development and increased presence of Christian schools provide a context for considering the biblical testimony concerning the preparation of children for adult life.

A significant focus in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible is the counsel of a father to his son and the descriptions of wisdom in Proverbs 1 to 9. This book considers the educational, social and spiritual significance of the advice given by the father and the related wisdom narratives in these chapters of Proverbs. It examines this goal in the context of the self-described priority of Proverbs in chapter 1:2–6.⁶

Context and background

Current context and background

Aspects of present-day social and theological environments that connect with my own history feature in and help focus this current context and background.

Much can be said about the influence of the enlightenment, modernity and post-modernity on present-day Western culture,⁷ with these conversations providing reminders of Kant's description of nonage,⁸ and the need for society to move

⁶ Proverbs 1:2–6 (ESV): To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, / to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; / to give prudence (NRSV: shrewdness) to the simple, knowledge and discretion (NRSV: prudence) to the youth— / Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance (NRSV: the discerning acquire skill), / to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.'

⁷ E.g. Charles Taylor, 'A Philosopher's Postscript: Engaging the Secular Citadel of Secular Reason' in *Reason and The Reasons of Faith*, ed. P.J. Griffiths and R. Hutter (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2005), 339–353.

'A Secular Age: Buffered and Porous Selves,' <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/> (accessed 14 Oct. 2013).

'Challenging Issues About The Secular Age,' *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010).

Varieties of Religion Today (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

'Future of the Religious Past, The' in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2011).

John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*, Horizons in Theology (Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press, 2006).

⁸ Immanuel Kant, 'What Is Enlightenment?,' <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html> (accessed Feb. 16, 2014) 1784.

towards maturity.⁹ There may be parallels and contrasts between Proverbs and Kant's suggested movement from nonage.

Current community concerns relating to social violence and substance abuse impact on religious groups and educational organisations. Schools and religious institutions are invariably asked to be positive influences through safe and supportive social practices. The book of Proverbs and our present-day contexts consider educational, social and parental priorities. While Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV) wisely urges parents to

Train up a child in the way he should go,
And when he is old he will not depart from it,

life does not run according to any one formula. Ezekiel and Jeremiah testify to a more complex picture (Ezekiel 18:1–3; Jeremiah 31:29).¹⁰

The family issues already raised and the decline of Western Christianity during the last century cannot be simply consigned to poor parenting by any single generation. Each person has responsibilities, whether as a parent or as a daughter or son, and healthy relationships require honest and accountable communication within an agreed belief framework. God's goal for humanity involves personal, family, community, national and global reconciliation, including between parents and children (Malachi 4:4–6).

Biblical context and background

Following observations about the authorship and date of Proverbs 1 to 9, suggestions regarding the main themes are considered. Finally, the structure and content of this section of Proverbs are discussed.

- *Authorship and date of Proverbs 1 to 9*

The book of Proverbs was written during the Davidic dynasties 2.5 to 3 millennia ago, with Perdue suggesting a post-exilic composition date for the first nine chapters.¹¹ Yoder also assigns a late date while noting that Israelite wisdom is often

'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance.'

⁹ Ibid.: 'If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on – then I have no need to exert myself. ... Now I hear the cry from all sides: 'Do not argue!' The officer says: 'Do not argue – drill!' The tax collector: 'Do not argue – pay!' The pastor: 'Do not argue—believe!' Only one ruler in the world says: 'Argue as much as you please, but obey!'

¹⁰ Cf. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Anchor Bible, 2000), 11.

¹¹ Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 1, 2 and 60, 61.

linked with Solomon in ways similar to those connecting psalms with David and laws with Moses.¹² Weeks thinks a late dating of Proverbs 1 to 9 is unlikely and dates these chapters 'as early as the tenth or as late as about the fourth century BC'.¹³

Goldberg has an alternative view, and insists on it being mainly Solomon's work,¹⁴ while Miller believes the book of Proverbs was first compiled as an initial Solomon Edition and was later added to during Hezekiah's reign.¹⁵ Waltke states that 'labelling Proverbs as a pseudepigraphon is the real fiction', but comments that the 'final editor, the real author of the book, not of its sayings' most likely lived during the Persian or Hellenistic eras.¹⁶ He sees Solomon as author of the first nine chapters on the basis of Proverbs 1:1.

Distinguishing between authorship and editorial functions is helpful, but further complicates any assignment of date or authorship. Fox asserts that the literary structure gives little assistance in dating and that the 'collection headers themselves recognise that the work is a sampling of the collective wisdom of ancient Israel'.¹⁷ He sees various claims for Solomon's authorship of Proverbs as inconsistent with the diverse social contexts evident in the proverbs and questions the validity of aspects of the wisdom phenomenon attributed to Solomon by other biblical texts.¹⁸ He distinguishes between authorship and ascription, and questions any 'typological interpretation'.¹⁹

It seems the first nine chapters are a reflective overview of the book of Proverbs, designed to add value to the rest of the collection. The implications for authorship, editorial refinement and date are clearly complex and somewhat unresolved. If it is unlikely that these chapters are an early document, it is probable that their major development came after or during later compilations of the other collections in

G. T. M. Prinsloo, 'Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context,' *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 58, no. 4 (2004): 1375-400. 1381, 1382 summarises Perdue's assessment.

¹² Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), xxiii, xxiv, 2.

¹³ Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 4, 5.

¹⁴ Louis Goldberg, *Practical Wisdom of Proverbs, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1990), 13, 14, 22-24.

¹⁵ John W. Miller, *Proverbs*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2004), 13-14, 17-26, 311-314. Miller identified two themes in the final version of Proverbs: 'acquiring wisdom and trusting God' and aligns the former with the Solomon edition and the latter with the final, Hezekiah edition.

¹⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 2004), 31.

¹⁷ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 6, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

Proverbs. Irrespective of conclusions about the date and authorship of Proverbs, especially chapters 1 to 9, there appears to be substantial agreement that most of the proverbs originated as ‘oral folk sayings’, even though small, rural settings are not prominent.²⁰

• *Structure and content of Proverbs 1 to 9*

Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and selected Psalms comprise the major wisdom literature in the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible. Proverbs is in three main parts: a father’s advice and profiles of wisdom (Proverbs 1:1–9:18), collections of sayings (Proverbs 10:1–31:9) and an acrostic poem about a good wife (Proverbs 31:10–31).²¹ Each of the collections of proverbs in Proverbs 10:1–31:9 has a different structure and emphasis.²²

This first section of Proverbs alternates between descriptions of a father speaking to his son and descriptions of Wisdom, sometimes personified, along with thoughts about learning from ants (Proverbs 6:6–8). The father’s speeches compare wise and foolish people. Divine wisdom is represented as feminine (Proverbs 1:20, 3:14–18, 4:6, 8, 13, 8:1–3, 11, 9:1–4) and contrasts with the ‘forbidden woman’ (Proverbs 2:16, 5:3, 20, 7:5 ESV, cf. 9:13). Sons are depicted as either listening, learning and living, or ignoring, rejecting and dying. The son’s mother is included with his father on several occasions (Proverbs 1:8, 4:3, 6:20), but, in contrast to the book of Job, there is no explicit mention of daughters (cf. Job 1, 42).

The ways the father-son conversation involves the father in mentoring his son, and the initiatives that the father takes in speaking with his son, may identify the father-figure as a representative persona rather than as a particular individual.²³ If

²⁰ E.g. Ibid., 9.

²¹ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 61.

Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1997), 15, argues that Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 frame these chapters, with Proverbs 10:1 clearly starting a new section.

²² John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2004), 481; Proverbs 10:1–22:16, 22:17–24:22, 24:23–34, 25:1–29:27, 30:1–14 and 31:1–9 have ‘distinct headings or superscriptions’, with 30:15–33 and 31:10–31 appearing ‘to be distinct units’.

Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 5, lists 30:1–31:31 as four appendices. Also, Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 1, 2; Perdue, *Proverbs*, 31, and Yoder, *Proverbs*, 278.

Miller, *Proverbs*, 21–26, 34–35, identifies Proverbs 1:1–9:18, 10:1–22:16 and 22:17–30:33 as three Parts, with 31:1–31 as a later addition. He divides Part 2 into 37+1+37=75 groups of 5 verses, with Part 1 (256 verses) and Part 3 (253 verses) of nearly identical size and believes the sizes of each section relates to the sizes of the scrolls in use at the time.

²³ Longman III, *Proverbs*, 54.

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the narrative is written by an actual father to his own son, the inclusion of his advice as biblical text may suggest that the account also reflects the aspirations of a whole community. The educational aspects of this vision may also be seen in its inter-generational essence (Proverbs 4:1–3). True hearing is referred to as a matter of the heart 14 times, mind once, soul twice, and strength once, indicating a focus on receiving advice heart to heart.²⁴ The way readers receive this father's instruction is likely to be affected by each person's experiences of their own parents.

The terms 'My son' or 'O sons' are used 18 times in Proverbs chapters 1 to 9.²⁵ The father is with his son. He is speaking to his son about his son's present and future life. He is urging his son to believe and act in a certain way, and then indicates the benefits that can be expected to come from this behaviour. He also warns his son about the dangers involved in other options. Proverbs 5:18 may imply that the conversation in that speech is between two adults with the son already married.²⁶

After the exhortation and advice about learning and valuing wisdom in Proverbs 2, the first twelve verses of chapter 3 contain two mentions of the address 'My son', with the father requesting that his son accepts his advice. The blessings indicated by the father should his son follow his recommendations are clearly identified.

The familial setting is repeated and further emphasised in chapter 4. Specific mention is made of the father's own parents (cf. Proverbs 1:8, 6:20 where he includes his wife), with a focus on the benefits of obtaining wisdom and insight (Proverbs 4:1–9). If 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10, cf. 1:7, 2:5, 15:33), the goal, purpose, result or end of wisdom is likely to be the benefits outlined by the sages. These blessings are described as a full and fruitful life (Proverbs 3:2, 16, 18, 22, 4:10, 13, 22, 23, 8:35, 9:11). Proverbs 5 to 7 is dominated by the father warning his son against ignoring his advice, with chapters 8 and 9 describing the blessings that can come from learning true wisdom.

²⁴ NRSV: Heart (Proverbs 2:2, 10; 3:1, 3, 5; 4:4, 21, 23; 5:12; 6:18, 21, 25; 7:3, 10), mind (Proverbs 6:14), soul (Proverbs 2:10, 3:22), and strength (Proverbs 8:14). Cf. Deuteronomy 4:1–9, 6:4–9. The entire book of Proverbs (NRSV) refers to true hearing as a matter of heart 48 times, mind 22 times, soul 9 times, and strength 9 times.

²⁵ Proverbs 1:8, 10, 15, 2:1, 3:1, 11, 21, 4:1, 10, 20, 5:1, 7, 20, 6:1, 3, 20, 7:1, 24 ESV. Proverbs 4:1, 5:7, 7:24 ESV are plural. The NRSV mainly uses 'child', but the text is primarily directed to his son.

Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, USA.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), 12, argues that 'It should be emphasized that 'my son' is not to be taken in a gender exclusive sense. This book is for all Israel, and the observations deal with universal human experience, except in very few cases.'

²⁶ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 206.

- *Major themes in Proverbs 1 to 9*

The book of Proverbs contains little, if any, prophetic history and makes few references to worship, law, ritual or sacrifice.²⁷ It speaks about life issues, where sickness, calamity and persecution were inevitably present, and includes the people's wisdom and understanding, gleaned as they struggled with neighbouring empires.²⁸ They interacted with the faith communities of other nations which eventually conquered them and took them into exile.²⁹

The proverbs³⁰ recorded can be seen to provide a compass, an orientation and a map,³¹ rather than primarily giving formulae, prescriptions, legislation, laws of nature,³² or recipes for a trouble-free life.³³ The sayings need not be heard as 'divine fiats',³⁴ 'moral absolutes',³⁵ or judgements, in the manner of Job's comforters, imposed on vulnerable believers trapped in guilt, legalism, hopelessness and fear of failure. Readers are repeatedly urged to gain the wisdom that enables faithful interpretation of the proverbs in their own context.³⁶ While the proverbs may 'seem detached from earth's harsh realities',³⁷ they need not be understood as some may interpret the parts of Ecclesiastes that appear to be dismissive of, and cynical about, life and God.³⁸

²⁷ For example, Proverbs 28:4, 7, 9 and 29, 9, 18 refer to law; Proverbs 2:17 to covenant; and Proverbs 7:14, 15:8, 21:3 and 21:27 to sacrifice.

James D. Martin, *Proverbs* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 16, 91. Proverbs, argues Martin, has no specific personal reference.

²⁸ For example, Babylonian (Jer. 50:35, 51:57); Egyptian (1 Kings 4:30; Genesis 41:8; Exodus 7:11); Canaanite (Ezekiel 28:3, 17), Edomite (Jeremiah 49:7; Obadiah 8; Job 2:11).

²⁹ Jesper Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects of Old Testament Theology* (JSOT Press, 1988), 98, presents Schmid's view that Israelite religion was largely congruent with neighbouring nations until 'the national catastrophe which befell Israel in the eighth to sixth centuries'.

³⁰ Miller, *Proverbs*, 15, 16 introduces Proverbs by indicating it to be 'a book of poems—not proverbs in the traditional sense'. He states that the poems in Proverbs, regardless of length, 'have a single theme and purpose: *for attaining wisdom* (1:2)'.

³¹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 3.

³² Michael B. Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 281.

³³ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Inter-Varsity Press, 1964), 13: 'it is not a portrait-album or a book of manners: it offers a key to life.'

Also, Longman III, *Proverbs*, 61: '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.'

³⁴ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 6, 7.

³⁶ Christine Roy Yoder, 'Proverbs' in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Ringe, Sharon H., and Lapsley, Jacqueline E. (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 233.

³⁷ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 107.

³⁸ Martin, *Proverbs*, 14, 15.

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The book of Proverbs is written from a male viewpoint.³⁹ References implying that the mother is included with the father are evident in the first nine chapters (Proverbs 1:8, 4:3, 6:20).⁴⁰ The focus on preparing a son for adult life in this first section leads to questions about whether these chapters can also be a valuable resource for a woman wanting to learn wisdom, and to whether there are insights that can serve as a source of advice for parents to share with their daughters.⁴¹

Any link between the father's advice and the poem about a good wife needs to consider the social and economic status of the parents as influential community leaders.⁴² As the issues at stake for fathers raising their sons include spiritual and material inheritance, the cultural ethos makes his instructions particularly relevant for his eldest son, with his comments having relevance for all his children.

In examining the male-dominated discourse, it may be helpful to consider the extent to which the author is implying a helpful movement in thinking and consequent behaviour away from paternalistic and exploitative patriarchy. Perverse patriarchy operated in and alongside the Hebrew community and is criticised both in Proverbs⁴³ and by the Hebrew prophets. While divine Wisdom in Proverbs is assigned honour and respect, questions about the implications of the portrayal of women are relevant in all cultural settings, including contemporary Western communities.⁴⁴ Along with these issues are the implications that result from only the son being addressed, and the silence regarding unmarried women.

³⁹ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 233.

⁴⁰ Proverbs 1:8 'Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching'; Proverbs 4:3 'When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother's favourite'; Proverbs 6:20 'My child, keep your father's commandment, and do not forsake your mother's teaching'. Cf. Proverbs 10:1, 15:20, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, 23:25, 28:24, 29:15, 30:11, 30:17, 31:1.

⁴¹ Proverbs 31:1–9 records the oracle King Lemuel's mother taught him. Cf. Martin, *Proverbs*, 80.

⁴² Yoder, *Proverbs*, 14.

⁴³ The approach of a wise son to parenthood is not explicitly mentioned but can be inferred from the context of Proverbs 1:8; 4:1, 3; 6:20, where the son is instructed to obey his parents. Cf. Proverbs 10:1; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 20:20; 23:22–25; 27:10; 28:24; 29:3; 30:17.

⁴⁴ Martin, *Proverbs*, 82–89 and 98 where he cites Roland E. Murphy, 'Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology,' *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 24 (1994): 4–7.

Research statement and questions

The book of Proverbs, and especially the first nine chapters, can be thought of as a resource for considering the needs and opportunities faced by families and society. As such, possible research issues include the social and religious context in which the book emerged; the nature of the literature itself, including ways in which the father-son discourse and the depiction of wisdom involve personas, metaphors and symbols; the relevance and significance of the gender constructs used; the relationship of these chapters to the rest of the Hebrew Bible; and the extent to which they are background for New Testament revelations concerning God as Father, Son and Spirit, and his reign as Creator-Redeemer.

Attempts at understanding the educational, social and theological context related to Proverbs 1 to 9 raise the need to consider the nature of the relationship of the wisdom teaching in these chapters to the other sections of Proverbs, to the whole of the biblical wisdom literature, and to other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Whether this wisdom teaching is of minor significance, or whether its thinking is foundational to the Hebrew worldview and theology matters greatly not only to Old Testament studies, but also to the understanding and interpretation of the New Testament and Christianity in its various forms.

The factors raised above suggest that examining the educational, social and theological themes in Proverbs 1 to 9 may be beneficial. Consequently, two research questions provide the focus for this study:

To what extent, and in what ways, do the father-son discourse and the related wisdom passages provide frameworks for encouraging and enabling growth towards maturity?

What educational, social and theological perspectives do these passages indicate are significant for this development into adult life?

Assumptions and approach

The theme of my research connected with my experiences in various educational and theological environments. The understandings I developed from these experiences affected the shape, structure and substance of this document. This research does not aim to be a detached, objective analysis of its theme, not simply because such analysis may be impossible, but as an acknowledgement that life's lessons seem to me to be best learnt in the context of everyday experience. This inquiry is not a personal narrative, however appropriate that might be in another situation. Rather, it is an attempt to discern something of God's self-revelation in and through the witness of the ancient sages who wrote these chapters of Proverbs, and to be thankful for their efforts to share these aspects of their thinking and experience. This study attempts to learn from the ancient sages' educational understandings and their awareness of the inter-relationship between teaching and learning processes, and theology.

This exploration connects with my perspectives and priorities through my belief that quality learning involves creativity and innovation, and so is more diverse than didactic, prescriptive and behavioural instruction.⁴⁵ Relationships that treat people with respect, decency and dignity, irrespective of race, gender and status, and which look to the sustainability and fruitfulness of the created world, are also personal core beliefs. This investigation endeavours to express insights into these nine chapters of Proverbs in ways that relate to shared human experiences and understandings.

Another factor influencing my assumptions is the perception communicated to me, whether expressly or by implication, from sections of the Christian community that work as an educator in the public education system was 'secular' and not 'spiritual ministry'. A reciprocal view from parts of the school context in which I worked regarded Christian activity as 'religious' and largely irrelevant. For me, by contrast, different perspectives can intersect and interact in mutually rich and positive ways, and can provide insights that positively enhance educational and theological perspectives, including where they appear to be contradictory. I also believe that these insights help towards enabling redemptive, restorative outcomes to occur that are learner-centred, relational and narrative oriented.

This research seeks to engage a conceptual and meta-cognitive interaction with Proverbs 1 to 9 to discern and explore key ideas, mindful of present-day Western perspectives. Issues relating to how the research questions connect with New Testament scriptures and regarding the insights and difficulties this framework presents for present-day readers are not addressed. Little attempt is made to examine the remainder of the book of Proverbs, or to survey wisdom literature

⁴⁵ Christian education is more than bible memorisation, creedal recitation, and catechetical instruction.

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from the same era in neighbouring societies. No attention is given to Ecclesiasticus (The Wisdom of Ben Sira), and limited discussion is provided to the ways in which Job and Ecclesiastes relate to Proverbs. A detailed definition and critique of educational theory in relation to the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs is also not attempted.

Educational, Social and Theological Themes

An understanding of the social and educational themes in Proverbs 1 to 9 is approached by discussing ways in which learning wisdom was understood in ancient Israel. This conversation raises a range of theological and educational questions, including the extent to which these chapters present a worldview that is unrelated and different to that expressed in the Law and the Prophets. These discussions follow an examination of the structure and content of these chapters, with attention to the account of a father's instruction and the portrayal of wisdom.

The structure and content of Proverbs 1 to 9

The text in this section of Proverbs is carefully written to enable the aims of the authors and editors to be best realised.⁴⁶ Just as each of the proverbs in the subsequent chapters has significance as 'a statement of an apparent truth that is based on experience and that endures in the life of a community over time', so these first nine chapters provide learning opportunities for those who will listen.⁴⁷ Indeed, 'It certainly looks as if education is the broad purpose of chs. 1–9'.⁴⁸ This first section, as one bookend to Proverbs, provides a vivid and dramatic prelude to the lists of proverbs (Proverbs 10–30), before Lemuel's mother's advice to her son (Proverbs 31:1–9) and the acrostic poem to the worthy woman (Proverbs 31:10–31) conclude the book.

The emphasis evident in the first seven verses of the first chapter is maintained in the following nine chapters. Priority is given to listening, hearing and keeping, as well as to gaining, finding, receiving, doing and going. The learner, in being attentive, is to bind, treasure and write what he learns not only in his mind, but in his heart and soul, and by his actions.⁴⁹ The setting where the father speaks is most likely a family dwelling, and, given Wisdom's declarations, the family lives in a village, town or larger community where culture is substantial and diverse.⁵⁰ The family is prosperous, and the involvement of religious, cultural or government institutions in education appears minimal.

⁴⁶ Katharine J. Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context, The* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18–22 nominates criteria for understanding Proverbs 1–9: literary analysis, historical and theological development, comparisons with other ancient near-eastern cultures, and comparisons with other parts of the Old Testament. Dell indicates there is wide agreement 'that the primary context of Proverbs 1–9 is an educational one'.

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 2.

⁴⁸ Katharine J. Dell, 'Proverbs 1–9: Issues of Social and Theological Context,' *Interpretation Union Presbyterian Seminary* 63 (2009): 229–40., 230.

⁴⁹ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 11, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

Prologue: Proverbs 1:2–7

This prologue sets out the qualities and characteristics that are expanded upon in the first nine chapters. There are three main aspects to this prologue: wisdom is richly described in definite categories, receiving instruction is active and not merely passive, and fearing Yahweh is the context in which all learning is to occur.⁵¹

The language of learning in Proverbs 1:2–7 (NRSV) is practical and insightful:⁵² ‘learning about wisdom and instruction’ (Proverbs 1:2),⁵³ ‘understanding words of insight’ (Proverbs 1:2), ‘gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity’ (Proverbs 1:3), teaching ‘shrewdness [prudence] to the simple, knowledge and prudence [discretion] to the young’ (Proverbs 1:4). These verses set out the hope that ‘the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill [guidance]’ (Proverbs 1:5) by understanding ‘a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles’ (Proverbs 1:6).

The prologue sets the context for the father’s instructions and Wisdom’s advice for the son to reach maturity. It exhorts those who have already gained a level of wisdom, discernment and insight to ‘hear and increase in learning’ (Proverbs 1:5 ESV).⁵⁴ Receiving instruction includes more than listening. It involves submission to the discipline not only of hearing but accepting and obeying.⁵⁵ As Proverbs 1 to 9 reveals, neither teaching these qualities nor learning them is easy. They ‘are difficult to teach—knowledge is one thing, but shrewdness and prudence are others. They are perceptive rather than solely intellectual qualities. They are difficult to learn and can only be acquired gradually with experience and maturity’.⁵⁶ The emphasis on the imparting of wisdom to youth and on increasing the learning of the wise suggests that the authors wanted Proverbs to help preserve their knowledge and insight, and for those who received this learning to prosper in life and to be protected by wisdom from foolish mistakes (Proverbs 1:4, 5).⁵⁷

Fearing Yahweh (Proverbs 1:7) is ‘the ‘motto’ of Proverbs’.⁵⁸ It is ‘the beginning of knowledge’ (Proverbs 1:7) as well as its goal (Proverbs 2:5). In Proverbs 1 to 9 it

⁵¹ John W. Kleinig, *Getting of Wisdom, The: A Study in the Theology of Proverbs* (Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, , 1981), 68.

⁵² Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 70–75.

⁵³ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 3: Yoder translates instruction in Proverbs 1:2 and 7 as discipline.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1: ‘The prologue (1:2–7) promotes the book of Proverbs as instruction for a lifetime, as a primer for the young and advanced textbook for the more experienced’.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3–6. The Septuagint translates discipline or instruction using παιδείαν.

⁵⁶ Dell, ‘Proverbs 1–9: Issues of Social and Theological Context.’, 233.

⁵⁷ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

becomes clear that the wise person fears God, avoids unnecessary distress and benefits from God's generosity and goodness.⁵⁹ God is identified as a creator who is relationally involved with his world, but is not described as one who dramatically and unexpectedly interrupts it.⁶⁰ Humanity may not be depicted as being like or as imaging God in Proverbs 1 to 9, but, for the authors of Proverbs, the fear of Yahweh permeates the relational context in which humanity lives.

With the powerful invitation in these seven verses, readers are encouraged to develop deeper and denser knowledge and insight. Joining the participants' 'conversation itself is formative. Proverbs, like other texts, evokes our sensibilities, exposes our prejudices, and engages us in a process by which our understandings are clarified, complicated, and disciplined'.⁶¹

The father's lectures and the wisdom interludes

Proverbs 1:8–9:18 contains speeches given by a father and addressed to his son, along with four wisdom interludes (Proverbs 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 8:1–36, 9:1–18) and one passage (Proverbs 6:1–19) consisting of 'four epigrams on folly and evil'.⁶² The fifteen references to 'My son' (Proverbs 1:8, 10, 15, 2:1, 3:1, 11, 21, 4:10, 20, 5:1, 20, 6:1, 3, 20, 7:24) and the three references to 'sons' (Proverbs 4:1, 5:7, 7:24) set a father-son/s context for the lectures, as well as highlighting relational connections between the father and his son/s (or the teacher and the student/s, if a school or royal court context is understood).⁶³

Whybray identifies ten speeches, all starting by addressing the son (Proverbs 1:8–19, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:21–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–19, 4:20–27, 5:1–23, 6:20–35, 7:1–27).⁶⁴ These ten speeches instruct the son to listen to and remember the advice given, and affirm the father's authority and the value of his advice. All authority in the introductions to the ten speeches identified by Whybray is attributed to the father. Wisdom is referred to twice (Proverbs 4:11, 5:1), and then only as 'ordinary human wisdom'.⁶⁵ The other eight references to the son (Proverbs 1:10, 15, 3:11, 5:7, 20, 6:1, 3, 7:24) either lack the structure of the ten speeches (Proverbs 5:7, 7:24), function as 'an independent collection of proverbs' (Proverbs 6:1 as part of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁰ Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, 278.

⁶¹ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 8, 9.

⁶² Michael V. Fox, 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 4 (1997): 613-33., 614, 616, and *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 44, 45.

⁶³ Martin, *Proverbs*, 35

⁶⁴ R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, Studies in Biblical Theology Volume 45 (SCM Press, 1965), 33, 73, initially called them discourses. Also, 'Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. Supplement Series 168 (1994)., 12ff.

⁶⁵ *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 34, 35. Also, 'Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The,' 13.

6:1–19), or are ‘merely parenthetical’ (Proverbs 1:10, 15, 3:11, 5:20, 6:3).⁶⁶ *Further Considerations: Lectures and interludes in Proverbs 1 to 9* summarises ways some commentators group these chapters.

Whybray classifies Proverbs 1:8–9:18 as being either original, largely redundant, or additional theological material. These theological additions form two groups. The first group of additions concerns ‘something called ‘wisdom’ and were made to the original discourse.⁶⁷ The second group of additions identify this wisdom with Yahweh and were added later. Whybray indicates that removing the second group from Proverbs 1:8–9:18 does not affect the coherence of the remaining text. These alignments were seen by the authors and editors as necessary, because without them Proverbs 1:8–9:18 was silent about God.⁶⁸ *Further Considerations: Whybray’s analysis of Proverbs 1 to 9* details Whybray’s classification of the text and analyses some of the benefits that were expected to come from accepting the father’s advice.

For Whybray, the characteristics of wisdom⁶⁹ remove ideas that life was experienced devoid of ‘the positive command of the living God who actively participated in the events of history’.⁷⁰ In this way, the possibility where a father as a wisdom-teacher, or another mentor-teacher, established a context that eliminated any active role for Yahweh was reduced. The wise person was not a prophet, and hence in the first group wisdom was not equated with God’s word. It is this equation that the second group solves: true wisdom belongs to Yahweh, it is his wisdom, and knowledge of it begins with the ‘fear of the LORD’ (Proverbs 1:7, c.f. 3:5ff.). Whybray concluded that the personification of wisdom was introduced to help bridge the gap between ‘the wisdom tradition and the main Israelite religious tradition’.⁷¹

Some commentators pay little attention to the overall structure of the first nine chapters, and work solely within the chapter divisions,⁷² while others agree with Whybray or propose their own views on the structure of the text.⁷³ Perdue, for example, acknowledges Whybray’s ten instructions, but treats Proverbs 4:10–27

⁶⁶ *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 33.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 74, 75.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 37–52. Also, Whybray, ‘Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.’, 12–28.

⁶⁹ *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 76.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷² See Yoder, *Proverbs*, xxv and Murphy, *Proverbs*, 8, 9.

⁷³ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 33ff.

Cf. Martin, *Proverbs*, 46, 47. Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 11, lists 3:13–35 and places 6:1–19 as an appendix to 5:1–23.

as one instruction rather than two, and includes Proverbs 6:1–19 as another instruction.⁷⁴ Camp rejects Whybray's precision in dissecting the text, and believes his assumption that 'Israel's wisdom tradition began as a secular phenomenon and only later (and under pressure) underwent a progressively theological development' is arbitrary.⁷⁵ While insisting on 'a certain circularity' in Whybray and McKane's logic, Camp nonetheless accepts Whybray's identification 'of a more explicitly Israelite theological expression' in parts of the text.⁷⁶ Miller adopts a different approach and splits the first nine chapters into two editions attributed to Solomon and Hezekiah.⁷⁷

Fox modifies Whybray's categorisation to identify ten lectures and five interludes, with each lecture having an introduction followed by a lesson and a conclusion. The introduction to each lecture consists of an address to the son/s, an exhortation to listen and remember, and a motivational support. He regards the interlude in 6:1–19 as 'rather extraneous'. Fox suggests that the various authors of the other four interludes were probably aware of and responding to what had already been written.⁷⁸ Additional details about the ways he and Dell understand the formation of these chapters is in *Further Considerations: Fox and Dell on Proverbs 1 to 9*.

The assumption that there is a sequential movement from purely educational considerations to a more religious setting is fundamental to Whybray's logic, and, in Dell's judgement, is not correct. Dell states that 'an ethical content must be found in any text that claims to be educational, and this is the case when one turns to the instruction texts. This would suggest that the educational context is integral'.⁷⁹ After discussing Camp's and Fox's views on the structure of Proverbs 1 to 9, Dell writes that:

If one takes a more integrated view of these chapters, YHWH and Wisdom appear as essential and often interchangeable concepts woven into the fabric of both instructions and poems. The religious elements seem to stand alongside the more general ethical concerns and provide a further dimension to the educational emphasis of the instructions in particular. ...

⁷⁴ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 62, 63.

⁷⁵ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), 43, 44.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 45. Dell, 'Proverbs 1–9: Issues of Social and Theological Context.', 236, states that Whybray's method 'has fallen from favor somewhat in recent years'.

⁷⁷ Miller, *Proverbs*, 34–36, 43–44, 62–63, 75–76, 91–92: Original Prologue (Solomon Edition), 1:1–7; Supplemental Poems (Hezekiah Edition), 1:8–3:35; Original Poems (Solomon Edition), 4:1–5:14; Supplemental Poems (Hezekiah Edition), 5:15–7:23; and Original Poems (Solomon Edition), 7:24–9:18.

⁷⁸ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 45–47. Also, *ibid.*, 322–330, and Fox, 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9.', 613–619.

⁷⁹ Dell, 'Proverbs 1–9: Issues of Social and Theological Context.', 232.

To see this as a two-stage development from more secular educational concerns to a pious, theological approach is a mistake in my view.⁸⁰

Waltke groups the first nine chapters of Proverbs in three parts: a 'main title' and 'preamble' (1:1–7), a 'prologue' (1:8–8:36) and an 'epilogue' (9:1–18). He indicates that this first collection establishes the context for the rest of the book,⁸¹ and that it comprises twelve poems: ten lectures by a father to his son and two extended interludes by Woman Wisdom (who personifies Solomon's wisdom) to 'gullible youths'.⁸²

Verses 20 to 35 of chapter 6 are thought by Waltke to be 'an appendix to the preceding lecture'.⁸³ He sees the text after the preamble being arranged into a 'concentric pattern' with 3:1–4:27 and 5:1–6:35 at the centre surrounded by 2:1–22 and 7:1–27 which are in turn enfolded by 1:20–33 and 8:1–36, and then finally by 1:8–19 and 9:1–18.⁸⁴

According to Waltke, the father's instructions have a domestic setting and complement Wisdom's public pronouncements. He notes that while Wisdom appears to address 'the masses, including the gullible, her encomiums to herself are in fact ensconced within addresses to the son'.⁸⁵

By examining the literary form of the ten lectures, Pemberton identifies that they contain '(1) an initial address to my 'son' or 'sons', (2) use of the imperative to exhort, (3) reasons for obeying the commands, (4) assertion of the personal authority of the speaker, and (5) claims for the value of the teacher's words'.⁸⁶ He believes that the rhetorical structure of the lectures shows that each one is 'a complete speech containing a proposition, proof, and epilogue'.⁸⁷ Pemberton notes that 'four of the ten father-son lectures cite speeches by other persons or groups', and observes that 'speech dominates Proverbs 1–9'.⁸⁸ Pemberton also

⁸⁰ Ibid., 240.

⁸¹ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 10. See *Further Considerations: Lectures and interludes in Proverbs 1 to 9*, 54.

⁸² Ibid., 10, 11.

⁸³ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 12. Also, Perdue, *Proverbs*, 62, 63.

⁸⁵ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 11.

⁸⁶ Glenn D. Pemberton, 'Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1-9, The,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30.1 (2005): 63-82. 63. 64 fn 2, adds that 'Whybray's delineation of the ten lectures has stood without serious challenge'. Also, *Rhetoric of the Father, The: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Father/Son (Lectures in Proverbs 1-9)* (Faculties of The Iliff School of Theology and The University of Denver (Colorado Seminary), 1999).

⁸⁷ 'Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1-9, The.', 64.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 64, fn 5: The four speeches are 'The speech of the sinners (1.10–14), the speech of the father's father (4.3–9), the speech of the foolish son (5.12–14), and the speech of the alien woman (7.10–21)'.

groups the father's lectures into three 'subsets on the basis of their rhetoric: (1) calls to attention (1.8–19; 2.1–22; 4.1–9; 4.10–19), (2) calls to remember and obey (3.1–12; 3.21–35; 4.20–27), and (3) warnings against the alien/strange woman (5.1–23; 6.20–35; 7.1–27)'.⁸⁹ By contrast, there are five wisdom interludes that lack the same structure as the father's speeches, although three interludes include speeches.⁹⁰ The wisdom passages not only have their own collective and individual 'careful and cohesive crafting', they interweave with the ten lectures to 'function as [three] framing pillars in the house of Wisdom', so providing 'poetic structure' for Proverbs 1 to 9.⁹¹

Personified Wisdom: Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31

Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31 can be seen as bookends to the complete book of Proverbs.⁹² The profiles of personified Wisdom and the Woman of Substance inform an understanding of the whole book.⁹³ The silent son is urged to reach maturity by learning from personified Wisdom not only how to live, but also how to learn to live according to her wisdom.⁹⁴ The son's learning is not uncontested, since an alternative personification is also present: a 'forbidden' woman (ESV: cf. Gen. 2:17).

Personified Wisdom speaks after the first lecture, calling out in the streets and marketplaces for people to listen, and promising to 'pour out my spirit to you' and to 'make my words known to you' (Proverbs 1:23). After the last lecture, two further Wisdom speeches are recorded. In the first of these speeches, Wisdom indicates that she has substantial abundance to share with those who learn from her: 'My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver' (Proverbs 8:19). The last Wisdom speech includes an invitation to a banquet she has prepared at the house she has built and reminds her listeners that 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight' (Proverbs 9:10). The first nine chapters conclude with a final invitation from Woman Folly, and a reminder of the consequences of accepting her seductive words: 'But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 63: 'Further, although the lectures of each subset possess common features that distinguish them as a group, each lecture also possesses unique features that distinguish it from other group members.'

⁹⁰ Ibid., 64, fn 3: The five interludes are Proverbs 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 6:1–19, 8:1–36 and 9:1–18.

⁹¹ Bálint Károly Zabán, *Pillar Function of the Speeches of Wisdom, The* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 3, 4. Cf. 344–346:

⁹² Whybray, 'Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.', 162, 163 argues that there is 'meager' evidence for Camp's assertions about the 'close affinities between chs. 1–9 and 31.10–31 and that these two sections of the book form a framework to the rest, but also that they were deliberately composed in order to develop and reinterpret the themes and images of chs. 10–29.'

⁹³ Dell, 'Proverbs 1–9: Issues of Social and Theological Context.', 229.

⁹⁴ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 233.

depths of Sheol' (Proverbs 9:13–18).⁹⁵ *Further Considerations: The fear of the LORD is wisdom* outlines more of Longman's views on Israel's wisdom literature.

The Woman of Substance in the last chapter of Proverbs complements Woman Wisdom. She is engaged with more than domestic duties, and, despite evident societal male dominance, had considerable economic and social opportunities.⁹⁶ The poem, according to Fox, is an 'encomium' based on an actual woman, and has sentiments consistent with the whole of Proverbs, especially chapters 3, 8 and 9.⁹⁷ Whether this woman is simply a valuable possession whose whole life is obligated to others, with little effective voice or relational power, is open to debate. One point noted by Fox is that she is lauded for gathering wealth for others, while men succeeded by enriching themselves, with the benefits others might gain being more implicit.⁹⁸

Understanding the literary function of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Substance is critical to appreciating the nature of wisdom in Proverbs, and its educational emphasis. *Further Considerations: Personified Wisdom and the forbidden woman* discusses aspects of the inter-relationships of these two sections of the book of Proverbs and the women mentioned in these chapters.

⁹⁵ Longman III, *Proverbs*, 61.

⁹⁶ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Anchor Yale Bible, 2009), 900, 901.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 908.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 912–914.

Social and educational themes in Proverbs 1 to 9

A discussion of learning wisdom in this section follows an examination of the social and ideological context.

Social and ideological context

The social and ideological context of Proverbs 1 to 9 links to the practical and religious priorities of the sages who wrote and compiled Proverbs.

- *Social settings*

The contents of Proverbs 1 to 9 may have been imported from Egyptian or Mesopotamian sources for royal court use or could have emerged from clan or family contexts.⁹⁹ Whybray initially thought that the ‘unity of the chapters lies more in its function as a ‘lesson-book designed for use in scribal schools and [that it was] closely modelled on Egyptian prototypes’,¹⁰⁰ but later concluded that it is unlikely that these chapters comprise a single textbook to which additions have been made, or even a final resource to be used for formal lessons.¹⁰¹ Martin argues that while ‘quite striking similarities exist between the Israelite wisdom literature and the corresponding literatures of Egypt and Mesopotamia’, that, apart from Proverbs 22:17–24:22, ‘it is unlikely that there was direct borrowing as such’.¹⁰² For Martin, the concept of a court connection relating to Proverbs 1 to 9 is weakened by an examination of the content of the advice provided. He argues that none of this counsel was ‘relevant exclusively to life at court or in the state bureaucracy’ but was primarily connected to ways of living successfully – especially in terms of morality, ‘wealth and happiness’.¹⁰³

In addition to a weak link relating Proverbs 1 to 9 to foreign court-based literature, Martin believes that Israel, even by Solomon’s time, was still developing from a clan-based structure to a royal regime, and so was essentially a ‘chiefdom’.¹⁰⁴ Biblical and archaeological evidence lacks support for a regional state system or a schooling structure beyond the family.¹⁰⁵ Although there is mention of schools for ‘king’s sons (e.g. 1 Kgs 12.8; 2 Kgs 10.1–6), priests (1 Sam. 1–3), prophets (2 Kgs 6.1ff; Isa. 8.16; 50.4–6) ... None of them indicates how such literacy was acquired,

⁹⁹ Martin, *Proverbs*, 18–20. Also, 78.

¹⁰⁰ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 7.

¹⁰¹ ‘Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.’, 11, 27, 28.

¹⁰² Martin, *Proverbs*, 19, 20.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 21, 22. *Ibid.*, 36, cites McKane as opposing this view for Proverbs 1–9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 23. Also, Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 480.

¹⁰⁵ Martin, *Proverbs*, 24, 25.

and none presupposes the existence of schools of any kind. ... Proverbs 25.1 may be the only reliable hint of ... scribal training'.¹⁰⁶

Wisdom was primarily developed indigenously with limited external influence.¹⁰⁷ According to Martin, those involved in the compilation of the text were not from a separate group of writers, but had a 'specific area of expertise: priests and *torah* (guidance), wise men and *esah* (counsel), prophets and *dabar* (word)'.¹⁰⁸ The development and teaching of wisdom was deeply integrated into community life, and largely occurred in domestic settings:

Proverbs 1.8 and 6.20 both refer to the mother's 'teaching' (*tordh*) in parallel to the father's 'instruction' (*musdr* in 1.8) or 'commands' (*misvah* in 6.20), and these references provide one of the arguments for suggesting that the educational process in ancient Israel was conducted not in schools but in family contexts.¹⁰⁹

Education was not exclusively confined to either local or court environments. Collins believes that while evidence is lacking about the existence of schools in Jerusalem before the exile, court influence on developing wisdom literature was likely.¹¹⁰ Perdue argues that folk wisdom needed refinement by court and religious schools to reach the level of sophistication evident in the book of Proverbs.¹¹¹ He supports his perspective by noting the upper social stratum implied in both the father's mentoring of his son and in the acrostic poem in Proverbs 31.¹¹² Nonetheless, he acknowledges that the evidence for these schools is 'largely inferential', but indicates that 'priestly or temple schools' developed alongside 'royal schools' from late in the pre-exilic era.¹¹³

In understanding the context in which the broader Hebrew wisdom literature developed and was documented, the type of literature and its purpose are

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 29, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 27: cf. 'There will still be priests to guide us, still wise men to give counsel, still prophets to proclaim the word' (Jeremiah 18:18). Also, Goldberg, *Practical Wisdom of Proverbs*, The, 15. The prophetic writings detail disagreements between prophets and priests. In this reference, Goldberg is silent about the contrasting emphases between the book of Proverbs and the Law and the Prophets.

¹⁰⁹ Martin, *Proverbs*, 82.

¹¹⁰ Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 482: 'These two kinds of settings, of course, are not mutually exclusive'.

¹¹¹ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 17.

¹¹² Ibid., 17, 18.

¹¹³ Ibid., 21, 22. Also, Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 132–156, esp. 153, 156.

Learning to Love Wisdom

significant. Dick summarises the ‘Social Setting and Literary Form’ evident in this literature as follows:¹¹⁴

Social Setting	Literary Format	Purpose
Family and Clan	Hortatory and Proverbs	Mastery of Life
Royal Court	Didactic	Educate Selected Court Officials
Scribal School	Dialogue and Admonition	Reflection and Speculation

The consensus among scholars, according to Dell, is that the social context of Proverbs 1 to 9 is educational, with the Wisdom discourses ‘providing a wider and more theological context for the [father’s] instructions’.¹¹⁵ While the extent to which formal schooling occurred, as possibly suggested by Proverbs 5:13, is not clear, education, according to Dell, is certainly a main goal of Proverbs 1 to 9. The need for documentation in more formal educational settings indicates that a significant connection was likely between oral and written communication.

Learning wisdom was not theoretical philosophical contemplation but was intended to assist families in practical everyday situations, and to enable achievement of their aspirations for sons to mature.¹¹⁶ This maturation process involved rites of passage where the son left adolescence behind and went through a liminal phase before realising his new identity. Perdue asserts that

the social setting ... may best be described in terms of liminality which is a phase within the »rites of passage« that accompany status elevation. In these cases, then, the »son« is leaving his former status and is to be reincorporated into society at an elevated status, usually filling the position of the »father«. It is in this context that the instructions are given by the »father« to the »son«, and embody the important social values of the respective society. In addition the teachings bear the authoritative impress of the societal structure, the »father«, and even a claimed divine approval. The teachings’ function is not only to transmit societal knowledge, but also to bring about an ontological change in the character of the »son«.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, 283.

¹¹⁵ Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, *The*, 22, 24–32. Dell (ibid., 15) states that ‘a prophet like Isaiah was probably trained in a wisdom school’.

¹¹⁶ Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1378, 1379.

¹¹⁷ Leo G. Perdue, ‘Liminality as a Social Setting for Wisdom Instructions,’ *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1981): 114-26., 116, 125.

This emphasis on the liminal highlights the importance of understanding educational processes in the light of the social and theological priorities of the Hebrew society. Education was intended to help ensure the community's inter-generational survival and prosperity.

- *Practical, religious and ideological considerations*

Wisdom in Israel was 'experiential knowledge', the ability 'to adapt' and 'deal with difficult situations'.¹¹⁸ Their literature in the Hebrew Bible expresses this knowledge in different ways: 'Proverbs ('proverbial sentence or instruction'), Job ('debate') and Ecclesiastes ('intellectual reflection')'.¹¹⁹ Wisdom in Proverbs can be understood as a three-fold phenomenon. In addition to the literature itself, there are the ways one internalises it, and the social and educational means that exist to share it. The authors of Proverbs were aware of the processes of internalisation, of 'memory, sense perception, reason, experience, and imagination', and the crucial nature of these processes in developing educational practices.¹²⁰ The wisdom tradition 'possesses distinctive literary, social, theological, and ethical features', with these characteristics seen as eventually developing in the context of government and temple schools as well as in domestic settings.¹²¹ Perdue believes that the son's education would have included areas of knowledge beyond the categories contained in the wisdom literature.¹²²

The elements of 'knowledge, imagination, discipline, piety, order, and moral instruction' can be used to describe this view of wisdom and how it is learnt.¹²³ While direct revelation through the prophets and Israel's past history was vital, the wisdom tradition offered an 'indirect way of receiving divine revelation and insight [and] meant that the sages had both the freedom and the responsibility to subject the teachings of their ancestors to critical assessment based on their own experiences of life and insights into the nature of reality'.¹²⁴

Ancient wisdom was understood as 'practical rather than theoretical', covering 'culture as well as craft'.¹²⁵ It was learned from religious and political hierarchies and institutions, as well as parents. The book of Proverbs, according to Clifford,

¹¹⁸ Martin, *Proverbs*, 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 17, 18.

¹²⁰ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 4, 8.

¹²¹ Ibid., 5.

¹²² Ibid., 5.

¹²³ Ibid., 4, 8–13.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁵ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 8, 9.

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adds two extra dimensions to other ‘ancient wisdom literature’.¹²⁶ It identifies personal qualities through actions and creates ‘a metaphorical level of discourse that was unknown in earlier wisdom literature’.¹²⁷ The personification of Wisdom, with her male and female opposition, provides the context for the contrasting narratives addressed to the son, and to other readers (Proverbs 1:5).

The worldview of the writers of Proverbs included beliefs that the world was ‘self-righting’, and that justice and piety, as against folly, were elements of wisdom.¹²⁸ Wisdom comprised ways in which reality could be comprehended (sapiential), appropriate ways of behaving (ethical), and ways in which people could relate ‘to the divinely designed order (religious)’.¹²⁹ This view of wisdom, especially regarding ways in which behaving and relating lead to knowing, is ‘emphasised in Proverbs 1–9’.¹³⁰ All three components combine to shape the ‘psychology of the human person as knower and doer’ and each person’s life ‘as a free and energetic moral agent’.¹³¹ This freedom is explored through the concept of the path or way, which leads either to life or death.¹³² People operating with this freedom and responsibility choose their path from ‘antithetical pairs’ with opposite consequences, and so need to be educated well if they are to act wisely.¹³³

Those wanting to benefit from this wisdom by ‘meaningful dialogue [which] instigates change’ are engaged in a ‘dynamic interaction between text and society, words and values, poetry and ideology, rhetoric and wisdom’.¹³⁴ These perspectives contrast with current social thinking in a range of ways:¹³⁵

Ancient Mediterranean Society	(Post) Modern Western Society
Being and/or becoming (states) are important	Doing (activity) is important
Collateral (group) and lineal (hierarchical) relationships	Individualism

¹²⁶ *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, Père Marquette Lecture in Theology (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1995), 19.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²⁸ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³⁰ Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1378.

¹³¹ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 20, 21.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁴ Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1376.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1386.

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Present and past time orientation	Future time orientation
Uncontrollable factor of nature (subordination)	Manipulation or mastery of nature
Human nature is a mixture of good and bad	Human nature is neutral and correctable

Prinsloo nominates ‘honour and shame’ as a ‘core value’ that is very different in today’s society from how it was understood in ancient societies, and which affected the way education occurred.¹³⁶ People lived in a relationally dependent, authoritarian and patriarchal society which continually demanded ‘total submissiveness from people with lower status’.¹³⁷ In addition to the factors nominated by Prinsloo, other contrasts with current societies include ‘an agricultural versus an industrial economy, a predominantly oral versus a literate society, a religious versus a secular culture, a family-centred view of the human person versus a more individualistic viewpoint’.¹³⁸

A discussion of the practical, religious and ideological considerations relevant to Proverbs 1 to 9 is never ‘ideologically neutral’ because the father-son relationship is part of and identifies a social discourse.¹³⁹ Any discussion of the similarities and differences between ancient and contemporary settings should acknowledge the patriarchal family context and the dominant status and privilege of sons. As Newsom points out, families appear to be ‘ideologically innocent places’ as ‘everyone has one’.¹⁴⁰ The issues of concern to the father relate not only to sexual immorality, but, as indicated in Proverbs 1:10–19, to ‘the generational chasm’ evident in the hierarchies involved in patriarchal society. It is in this context that personified Wisdom speaks in Proverbs 1:20–33 with ‘the same cultural voice’ as the father, urging the son to reject false allurements and remain true to his patriarchal heritage.¹⁴¹

Much of the social context of these nine chapters is defined by the patriarchal nature of Hebrew society. The voices of the father and Wisdom communicate the messages of the forbidden woman and the disruptive men. No record is made of anything said by the son or his mother, with all communication voiced by the father and personified Wisdom. The father and personified Wisdom are

¹³⁶ Ibid., 1386.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 1388.

¹³⁸ Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 2.

¹³⁹ Carol A. Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9’ in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1989), 143.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 144.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 146.

completely aligned, with the forbidden woman and rebellious males opposing their message. This polarisation of female voices is seen by Newsom as essential to how women are represented and acts as a reason for controlling and limiting their voice.¹⁴² From this perspective, female speech is an indication of the social and ideological character of male authority and domination. Male identity is seen to disintegrate if women do not fulfil the demarcation function of either supporting or rejecting patriarchal authority. One result of this logic is that men may interpret any defiance, however legitimate, in gender terms, and then might apply this pattern of thinking to perceived defiance by other vulnerable social groups, leading to possible further exploitation. *Further Considerations: Perspectives on patriarchy and gender* briefly summarises Waltke's discussion and Newsom's interpretation of gender roles in Proverbs 1 to 9.

Teaching and learning wisdom – 1

Any discussion of teaching and learning involves beliefs regarding the learner, the teacher and the teaching and learning processes. Fox identifies four common beliefs in Proverbs 1 to 9 and comparable Egyptian literature.¹⁴³ Firstly, he argues that some people will not or cannot learn (Proverbs 9:7), but nonetheless teaching should be available to all, even the foolish who may then choose to learn wisdom. Secondly, he states that teaching can succeed where it is appropriately implemented. Next, he suggests that instruction processes are not easy, since the way to wisdom is similarly not easy, but will prosper where what is taught is treasured (Proverbs 2:1, 2). Lastly, he indicates that where the learner searches (Proverbs 2:2–4), God gives understanding and knowledge, and, in Proverbs, even gives himself (Proverbs 2:6–15).

Just as there are theological differences between Proverbs 1 to 9 and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, there also are different educational approaches. Murphy comments that: 'If the prophets threaten, the sages cajole, entice, sometimes with a kind of subliminal invitation'.¹⁴⁴ In Proverbs, the sages' approach aims to shape character by the authoritative voices of the father and Wisdom transmitting 'an accumulated wisdom of action' which energises and motivates the learner. Learning is described in tactile terms.¹⁴⁵ It impacts on the complexities of life with practical immediacy, reinforcing basic ethical values and anticipating positive outcomes.

According to Fox's assessment of modern scholarship, 'Education in ancient Israel ... was a harsh and mindless affair: demands for obedience to rules learned by rote

¹⁴² Ibid., 148.

¹⁴³ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 315ff.

¹⁴⁴ Roland E. Murphy, 'Can the Book of Proverbs Be a Player in 'Biblical Theology'?', *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 31 (2001): 4-9., 5.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 5, 6.

and drummed in by incessant rebukes, simplistic promises, and, above all, zealous thrashings'.¹⁴⁶ Fox argues that Proverbs 1 to 9 adopts a different view, describing 'far more subtle, nuanced, and thoughtful ideas about pedagogy than the common picture would have it'.¹⁴⁷

The use of language in Proverbs significantly affects how wisdom was taught. According to Pemberton, the ten lectures align successfully with Aristotle's 'artistic proofs' of logic, pathos and ethos,¹⁴⁸ and the way the speeches aim to persuade the listener is an intentional part of the instruction process.¹⁴⁹

In discussing the second lecture (Proverbs 2:1–22), Fox notes that its primary purpose is 'to encourage the pupil in the search for wisdom',¹⁵⁰ a pursuit beginning and ending with piety,¹⁵¹ and proceeding with linear logic:

If you do what I say, you will learn wisdom, which will bring you to the fear of God and righteousness, which will protect you and keep you away from wicked men and women and thereby ensure you a long life.¹⁵²

Education in this setting involves parental instruction, learning by the son, followed by the divine gift of wisdom. Thus, education is a tripartite, collaborative effort of the son, his parents, and God. Learning is a faith adventure as the son is striving towards goals not yet experienced, and so he needs 'encouragement and assurance in this task'.¹⁵³ This second lecture describes the way the sages intended character development to occur.¹⁵⁴ Learning wisdom is the educational goal from which practical details emerge, and so such specifics are mainly implied and minimally described in this discourse. Lecture two, for Fox, summarises the instructional intention of the first nine chapters:

Wisdom, Collection I [Proverbs 1 to 9] teaches, does not consist simply in knowing what is good to do, such as maintaining sexual virtue and avoiding loan guarantees. Wisdom is a configuration of character, a compound of knowledge, fears, expectations, and desires that enables one to identify the right path and keep to it. Wisdom means not only knowing but also

¹⁴⁶ Michael V. Fox, 'Pedagogy of Proverbs 2, The,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113, no. 2 (1994): 233–43., 233.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁴⁸ Pemberton, 'Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9, The.', 67, 79.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 64. Also, 80, 81.

¹⁵⁰ Fox, 'Pedagogy of Proverbs 2, The.', 234.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 235, 236.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 242. Hence, teaching has a prophetic dimension.

¹⁵⁴ Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 7. *Ibid.*, 20

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wanting to do what is right and to avoid sin. This desire will protect you from the tragic consequences of immorality.¹⁵⁵

The third lecture (Proverbs 3:1–12) has similarities with other passages with educational themes, including Deuteronomy 6, 8 and 9, and sections of Isaiah and Jeremiah.¹⁵⁶ The similarities include the father urging his son to write his commandments ‘on the tablet of [his] heart’ (Proverbs 3:3), just as Israel was to keep the commandments written on stone tablets (Deuteronomy 9:9–11). Similarly, the parallel between Yahweh and the father in Proverbs 3:11–12 correlates with Deuteronomy 8, while Proverbs 3:7–8 and Jeremiah 9:23–24 warn against false pride.¹⁵⁷ Prinsloo points out that in this passage ‘The words for ‘*instruction*’ all focus on the education of the son’ while the ‘words for ‘*wisdom*’ emphasise the son’s insight and reputation’.¹⁵⁸

The fourth lecture (Proverbs 3:21–35), according to Yoder, articulates the community’s understanding of the way the world functions – its ‘iconic narrative’.¹⁵⁹ When events inevitably challenge this worldview, the father, and the whole community want the son to know that these occurrences do not negate the underlying truth they have taught about creation and Yahweh. The passage is an invitation to be clear about the alternatives that face the next generation. Yoder explains these options by saying that legalism ‘too readily identifies human conventions with God’s will’ while atomism considers everyone as ‘a sovereign, self-made individual, a ‘free unfettered agent’ not bound to any authority’.¹⁶⁰ Yoder believes that the parents in Proverbs 1 to 9 regard both of these options as ‘cautionary tales of hubris and folly’.¹⁶¹

The fifth lecture (Proverbs 4:1–9) reminds the son that wisdom is more than cognitive. Learning wisdom is also affective and volitional, and involves appropriate actions, making it always ‘the greatest goal of education’.¹⁶² As Fox asks: ‘how can we teach desire?’¹⁶³

¹⁵⁵ Fox, ‘Pedagogy of Proverbs 2, The.’, 243. *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 131–134. Cf. Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1384. Also, Clifford, *Proverbs*, 51.

¹⁵⁷ Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1383.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1392, 1393.

¹⁵⁹ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 49.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 49, 50.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁶² Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 348.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 348.

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The sixth lecture (Proverbs 4:10–19) is the ‘most extensive treatment of the two ways [of wisdom versus folly] in Proverbs’.¹⁶⁴ The two ways are not ‘permanent states’, but paths which ‘one can get on and off by one’s conduct’.¹⁶⁵ Learning about the benefits and dangers of these alternative ways is essential if responsibility is to accompany freedom. While these lessons in life involve learning from experience, listening to the wisdom shared by the father will help prevent unnecessary difficulties. The father’s instructions, like wisdom in the previous lecture, are personified in Proverbs 4:13, with the son urged to ‘guard her, for she is your life’.¹⁶⁶ Understanding these two ways is further emphasised by the ‘language of movement—walk, run, stumble, enter, avoid, go, turn away, and pass by’ used in this lecture.¹⁶⁷

The seventh lecture (Proverbs 4:20–27) describes a person engaged in learning with freedom and energy. According to Clifford, this learning was not merely passive cognitive reception since the

poem views the human person in action, straining every sense to its limit: extending the ear like an antenna, letting nothing escape the eyes, preserving words in the heart, keeping false speech away from the mouth and lips, holding the eyes and eyelids undeviatingly on the goal, keeping the feet from stumbling or taking detours.¹⁶⁸

The first lecture and the last three lectures contain warnings to the son about dangers he is to avoid. The message is difficult to learn, hard to implement, but simple to state: ‘My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent’ (Proverbs 1:10).

When the Wisdom speeches are considered with the ten lectures, it is apparent that, for the writers and editors of the first nine chapters, learning wisdom is a life-long, family enterprise. Having compared the language of Woman Wisdom in appealing to the young man with that of the Song of Songs, Clifford declares that:

We are now in a position to appreciate the great analogy of Proverbs 1 to 9 between finding a wife and finding wisdom. The original historical and social context was that of a young man leaving his parental house (1:8–19) to establish his own house. Building a household implies finding a wife, establishing a basic relationship for one’s life. One must be faithful to one’s wife (5:15–19) lest one lose one’s property (5:10; 6:30–31), one’s vigour (5:9; 6:32–33), one’s reputation (5:14), one’s very life (2:18–19; 5:22–23; 7:23; 9:17–18). And so with Woman Wisdom. You must choose her, trust

¹⁶⁴ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 22; *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom*, *The*, 17, 18.

¹⁶⁵ *Proverbs*, 22.

¹⁶⁶ The Basic English Translation has ‘Take learning in your hands’.

¹⁶⁷ Yoder, *Proverbs*, 55.

¹⁶⁸ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 20, 21, cf. 13, 14.

her, and be ever-faithful. As fidelity to one's spouse is achieved by rejecting others' allurements, so Wisdom is acquired by rejecting foolish and wicked behaviour. The other woman is 'foreign' or 'strange,' i.e., out of place, the wrong one, out of bounds for marriage.¹⁶⁹

Teaching and learning in ancient Israel occurred in the context of the everyday urgencies of life. Learning was intended to be life-long, to have unfolding goals, to occur by intelligent, free, personal commitment to learning processes, and to fear Yahweh as the source of wisdom.

The portrayal of teaching and learning in Proverbs 1 to 9, according to Yoder, 'reflects Israel's wisdom as interpreted and arranged by privileged men—often at significant moments when the community was claiming or reclaiming its values'.¹⁷⁰ These lessons were being taught in a world which, as described by Newsom, has 'competing and conflicting discourses: the words of the father, the words of the crooked man, the words of the strange woman'.¹⁷¹ Both the father and personified Wisdom view the teaching and learning of wisdom as an urgent imperative, making the educative means they choose in teaching the son all the more significant.

Teaching and learning wisdom – 2

Based on the above assessment, and the theological and educational considerations outlined in the next section, Proverbs 1 to 9 provides some helpful guidance relating to teaching and learning processes. These educational activities will ultimately be effective when the learner responds to the wisdom she or he receives by valuing and assimilating it. Proverbs 1 to 9 presents the father and personified Wisdom in several teaching roles. Sometimes they act as expert, stating facts, with or without descriptions, or by providing the learner with alternatives. On other occasions they endeavour to facilitate learning by using 'incentive and invitation', but most frequently they support their advice or instruction with a combination of explanations, illustrations, predictions and questions.¹⁷² This last group of teaching strategies is described by Estes in terms of guidance as they require active participation by both the teacher and the learner.

Examples of these instruction processes are provided in the following table:

¹⁶⁹ *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 24.

¹⁷⁰ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 233.

¹⁷¹ Newsom, 'Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9', 146.

¹⁷² Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 124.

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Instruction Process	Teacher's Role	Examples
Address ¹⁷³	Expert ¹⁷⁴	Proverbs 1:20–33 Proverbs 8:1–11
Description ¹⁷⁵	Expert	Proverbs 6:12–19 Proverbs 8:22–31
Condition with command ¹⁷⁶	Expert	Proverbs 6:1–5
Command with reasons ¹⁷⁷	Guide ¹⁷⁸	Proverbs 3:1–12 Proverbs 4:10–19
Command with reasons and illustrations ¹⁷⁹	Guide	Proverbs 1:10–19 Proverbs 7:1–27
Command with consequences ¹⁸⁰	Guide	Proverbs 1:8, 9
Command with rhetorical questions ¹⁸¹	Guide	Proverbs 6:20–35
Incentive ¹⁸²	Facilitator ¹⁸³	Proverbs 3:13–18 Proverbs 8:12–21
Invitation ¹⁸⁴	Facilitator	Proverbs 9:1–3, 13–15

Effective teaching and learning is deeply personal, relational and interactive – especially given the three-fold emphases of Proverbs 1 to 9 on parents, Wisdom and Yahweh. The parents and community leaders are engaged in their own life-long learning. Wisdom gives herself to the learners who embrace her, becoming their ongoing companion, while Yahweh is the source, subject and goal for all who will learn his wisdom and live life as his gift and delight.¹⁸⁵ Given the immediate and personal nature of the discourse in Proverbs 1 to 9, care needs to be taken about over-identifying the text with a school or palace court context to the exclusion of the home environment.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 104–106.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 126, 127.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 106–109.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 109, 110.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 111–116.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 130–133.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 116–118.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 118, 119.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 119–121.

¹⁸² Ibid., 121, 122.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 127–130.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 122, 123.

¹⁸⁵ Kleinig, *Getting of Wisdom, The: A Study in the Theology of Proverbs*, 68, 71, 77.

Theological and educational themes in Proverbs 1 to 9

This section discusses the relationship between Proverbs 1 to 9 and other parts of the Hebrew Bible and considers alternative approaches to theology and education.

Disconnection and integration

A significant factor regarding learning wisdom in ancient Israel relates to the degree of silence in the wisdom literature about Israel's history and worship. The view of Yahweh as Creator-God in Proverbs 1 to 9 excluded the deities and cultic practices of neighbouring nations. Elsewhere in Proverbs, learning from other nations about living wisely in Yahweh's world was evident.¹⁸⁶ Wisdom was primarily understood in terms of Yahweh's provision of opportunities to gain insight and to discern wisely regarding the practical realities of life.¹⁸⁷ Ways in which this understanding of wisdom differs from the teaching of the Law and Prophets warrants consideration.¹⁸⁸ *Further Considerations: Theological and educational considerations* discusses this disconnection and suggests possibilities for integration.

Approaches to theology and education

The themes that characterise wisdom in Proverbs 1 to 9 relate to both the theological and educational priorities of the authors and editors. These key ideas include Yahweh's world being a place of substantial order, with discernible patterns; that ambiguity is evident in it; that rewards and penalties result from human choices; that a well-lived life is the 'supreme good'; and that searching for wisdom is the first priority for those who seek a well-lived life, with such wisdom being freely available to all.¹⁸⁹ At the centre of this 'wisdom exercise' is personified Wisdom, who, according to Dell is a 'poetic personification' depicted as a creation of Yahweh prior to creation itself.¹⁹⁰ She continually enjoys him, and he delights in her, with her purpose being 'to teach and instruct humanity to find life'.¹⁹¹ God, through wisdom, reveals himself to humanity, who can choose to live fruitful lives.

One approach to discussing these themes is adopted by Waltke, who considers pedagogy while commenting on the text.¹⁹² Another method identifies educational categories before analysing theological themes. This second approach,

¹⁸⁶ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 14, 15.

¹⁸⁷ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 57–73. Psalms 14 and 53, for example, indicate a belief by some that there is no God who acts against evil, not a belief in atheism as denying the existence of God, *per se*.

¹⁸⁸ Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 479.

¹⁸⁹ Katharine J. Dell, 'Get Wisdom, Get Insight'. *An Introduction to Israel's Wisdom Literature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2000), 18–20.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹² Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 126.

adopted by Estes, involves examining various passages in the context of ‘categories typical of pedagogical discussion’.¹⁹³ Education, for Estes, involves ‘the development of the learner towards intellectual and ethical maturity’ by using the insights into teacher and learner roles evident in Proverbs 1 to 9. In this way, the society’s worldview and values are learnt, and nominated goals are achieved.¹⁹⁴ In discussing these topics, Estes also considers the educational curriculum and the processes used in ancient Israel for instruction. Moss questions whether the categories Estes uses are valid in terms of the social realities of ancient Israel but accepts that they serve as a useful ‘hermeneutical device’.¹⁹⁵

Because this first section of Proverbs affirms that Yahweh is creator, the instructions in these chapters are not only compatible with, and complement, the Law and the Prophets, but are relevant for all humanity. There is, according to Estes, no valid religious and secular separation. Education is relevant because the ordered universe is observable and knowable, and under Yahweh’s good governance. Wisdom, though, is needed, as life is not purely mechanical or probabilistic, and has its own inherent mystery under Yahweh’s care. Wisdom begins with this perspective in mind, as the sages remind us, and is the ‘prime value in life’ and education.¹⁹⁶ Just as Yahweh has exhibited and continues to show incredible skill and loving, faithful generosity in creating and sustaining his universe, so humanity is to be wise, teachable and righteous if it wants to live fully and meaningfully in Yahweh’s world.¹⁹⁷

Waltke, on the other hand, outlines theological and anthropological perspectives. God is described by his covenant name and is creator of the world and humanity. He is both transcendent and immanent, and expresses his sovereignty in a process where a person’s character determines their conduct, and where their conduct leads to predictable consequences.¹⁹⁸ These outcomes are outlined in the ‘theophanies [given] to Moses’, and by the prophetic interpretations through ‘visions and auditions’.¹⁹⁹ The sages ‘supplement [this] through keen observations, cogent reflections and faith’,²⁰⁰ though Waltke sees a danger in replacing inspiration with observation.²⁰¹ Human beings are described in Proverbs in terms of soul, heart and spirit, and fall into groups such as wise and fools. Wise people act righteously and

¹⁹³ Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 13.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹⁵ Alan Moss, ‘Book Review: Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9,’ *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 12 (1999): 87-88., 88.

¹⁹⁶ Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 43.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹⁸ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 67-76, 75.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 80, 81.

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are prudent, shrewd and discreet. Their insight is reliable, they act strategically with understanding or 'know-how'.²⁰² As a result, their behaviour is just and fair, and they are seen to be blameless, good and trustworthy people. Unlike the fool, they fear Yahweh (the LORD) and act according to the wisdom they receive from him.²⁰³

Whether Waltke's embedded approach or Estes' pedagogical method is used to analyse educational and theological themes, educational goals in Proverbs have strong personal emphases: they involve 'cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes) and psycho-motor (skills) objectives',²⁰⁴ are character forming and require the devotion and commitment of the learner. These, and other qualities, are congruent with Waltke's theological and anthropological reflections, and can be expected to lead towards competent, viable and prosperous lives in which Yahweh is personally known and not merely conceptually imagined.²⁰⁵ The learning program for the student – the curriculum – will involve active engagement with the created world and human society, and will be enriched by learning from those who are equipped to share understandings discerned and revelations received from earlier generations.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Ibid., 96.

²⁰³ Ibid., 100, 101. Also, 109–116.

²⁰⁴ Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 63.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 84.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 88, 98, 99.

Discussion and Interpretation

This chapter discusses and reflects on the above overview of educational, social and theological themes in Proverbs 1 to 9 by analysing the nominated research questions.²⁰⁷

Father-son and wisdom passages as frameworks

To what extent, and in what ways, do the father-son discourse and the related wisdom passages provide frameworks for encouraging and enabling growth towards maturity?

Meta-frameworks

Three meta-frameworks are evident from the father-son discourse and the related wisdom passages. They relate to the internal structure of Proverbs, to the historical development of the book, and to the way Proverbs connects with the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

By its internal structure, and its place in Proverbs, the text of chapters 1 to 9 provides a framework for encouraging and enabling growth towards maturity. The detailed proverbs of chapters 10 to 30 contrast with the more motivational nature of the first nine chapters and the apparent reprise of chapter 31. The messages of the two main voices within this first section profile different ways of encouraging and enabling the son's maturation. The father's instruction and personified Wisdom's advice perform different roles with the former more immediately immanent and the latter adding greater cosmic and divine context.

Their speeches are invitations to join 'an ancient and ongoing conversation about what is good and wise and true in life' in 'the ordinary of days',²⁰⁸ and to 'increase in learning ... and ... obtain guidance' (Proverbs 1:6). The first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs are intentionally designed but not linearly systematic. They are structured to enable a range of rhetorical techniques to present significant themes.

The way in which the writers and editors developed the text provides a rich pedagogical meta-narrative. The iterations of successive generations not only used the improved technologies and facilities available to document verbal memories, they reflected, refined, revised and reinvigorated their understandings of life in Yahweh's world. Whether documentary precipitation occurred on limited occasions by Solomon, Hezekiah and others named, or in a longer process using these authorities for context, the final document in our possession at least involved ongoing editorial preparation and replication. The commentaries say little

²⁰⁷ Fox, 'Pedagogy of Proverbs 2, The.', 233. Also, Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 153, 154.

²⁰⁸ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 232.

explicitly of the technologies used,²⁰⁹ mainly focusing on the availability of resources from neighbouring nations. The difficulties relating to assigning authorship may be the reason scholars do not comment in detail on the impact of the political and national conflicts described in the historical, prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. According to these biblical texts, Hebrew society existed in increasingly vulnerable circumstances until it was overrun, and then faced significant challenges in seeking to re-establish itself. These concerns must have increased pressures on parents and teachers to preserve the wisdom they had received from their ancestors, and so are likely to have helped shape their chosen pedagogies.

As a learning community, Hebrew society explored the tension between the voices of the Law and the Prophets on one hand, with their claims of Yahweh's direct authority, and the wisdom developed by living in the order and uncertainty of his world on the other hand. The way this tension would be resolved in Israel's history, including in New Testament days, and within Christianity in the ensuing centuries, is not prescribed. Community choices determine whether a reactive, defensive and protective approach with a strong patriarchal bias is adopted, or whether, by contrast, confidence in Yahweh's wisdom leads to an inclusive movement towards the welfare of the stranger, the widow and the orphan (as in Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 24:17, 24:19, 26:13; 27:19; Jeremiah 7:6; Malachi 3:5).

A further framework

Another framework within these meta-frameworks incorporates the overviews identified by the commentators discussed in the previous chapter. It recognises the focus of Proverbs 1 to 9 on the son and emphasises a learner-centred perspective. This learner-centred focus identifies necessary learner attitudes and learning activities, and their related personal and social outcomes. Teacher-student relationships and teaching strategies are then identified, along with the physical and relational context in which the learning occurs.

The next table outlines some indicators evident from the above survey of educational, social and theological themes in Proverbs 1 to 9. These indicators involve identifying appropriate qualities for *who* is learning, indicating *how* learning processes happened, identifying *what* were the aims of the learning processes, identifying *what* were the aims of the learning processes, indicating appropriate *ways* for teaching processes to happen and identifying *where* the learning occurred:

²⁰⁹ Note, though, Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, The, 25.

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Aspects	Descriptions
Learner attitudes	Identifying appropriate qualities for <i>who</i> is learning
Learning activities	Indicating <i>how</i> learning processes happened
Personal learning outcomes	Identifying <i>what</i> were the aims of the learning processes
Social learning outcomes	Identifying <i>what</i> were the aims of the learning processes
Teacher-student relationships and teaching strategies	Indicating appropriate <i>ways</i> for teaching processes to happen
Physical and relational learning context	Identifying <i>where</i> the learning occurred

The following tables provide sample outcome information for the above aspects. The outcomes and details included below suggest ways in which these aspects can be explored and are not intended to be complete. Some details associated with these outcomes have already been identified in this exploration of educational, social and theological themes from Proverbs 1 to 9.

- ***Learner attitudes***

Identifying appropriate qualities for *who* is learning:²¹⁰ The main outcomes that relate to these qualities include a willingness to engage in learning and to be instructed, an openness to benefit from both familial and universal wisdom and a readiness to seek and receive Yahweh's blessings.

²¹⁰ Fox, 'Pedagogy of Proverbs 2, The.', 233–243; Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 135–149.

- *Learning activities*

Indicating *how* learning processes happened:²¹¹

Outcomes	Details
Receiving instructions ‘in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity’ (Proverbs 1:3) ²¹²	Listening, hearing and keeping
	Gaining, finding, receiving, doing and going
	Binding, treasuring and writing in mind, heart and soul, and with actions
Living ethically	Learning to discern right from wrong [wisdom from folly]
Identifying fiction and other language constructs used in the characters involved	Determining significance from the ‘linguistic blanks’ created. ²¹³
Engaging in ‘dynamic interaction(s) between text and society, words and values, poetry and ideology, rhetoric and wisdom’ ²¹⁴	
Using ‘memory, sense perception, reason, experience, and imagination’ to internalise the learning ²¹⁵	

²¹¹ Proverbs 1:2–7; Yoder, ‘Proverbs’, 232.

²¹² *Proverbs*, 10–12.

²¹³ Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9’, 142, 143.

²¹⁴ Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1376.

²¹⁵ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 4.

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- *Personal learning outcomes*

Identifying *what* were the aims of the learning processes:²¹⁶

Outcomes	Details
Understanding ‘a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles’ (Proverbs 1:1–7)	Learning ‘about wisdom and instruction’ (Proverbs 1:2)
	Understanding ‘words of insight’ (Proverbs 1:2)
	Appreciating the social dimensions of language ²¹⁷
Acquiring guidance and skill	
Receiving Wisdom’s benefits and Yahweh’s blessings	Avoiding Folly’s ensnarement and the forbidden woman’s seduction
Identifying ‘good neighbour[s], loving partner[s], [and] trusted friend[s]’ ²¹⁸	
Identifying core values	
Living with integrity and communicating appropriately	Using human freedom mindful of the consequences of the choices made
Living a ‘reverent life’ ²¹⁹	

²¹⁶ Proverbs 1:2–7.

²¹⁷ Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9’, 142, 143.

²¹⁸ Yoder, ‘Proverbs’, 232.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 232.

- *Social learning outcomes*

Identifying *what* were the aims of the learning processes:

Outcomes	Details
Achieving familial and community sustainability	Enabling ‘strong families and just communities’ ²²⁰
	Understanding ‘resources’ ²²¹
	Establishing a home
Enabling family and community learning	Enabling the wise to ‘hear and gain in learning’ (Proverbs 1:5)
	Enabling the discerning to acquire skill and guidance
	Enabling the simple to learn shrewdness, prudence and discretion
Educating children	Understand that being wise is more than acting wisely
	Learning a curriculum defined by sapiential, ethical and religious wisdom ²²²
	Appreciating that families and communities are not ideologically neutral, and that Yahweh provides the chosen faith context ²²³
	Appreciating the social dimensions of language ²²⁴
Assisting the community in worshipping Yahweh	

²²⁰ Ibid., 232.

²²¹ Ibid., 234.

²²² Clifford, *Proverbs*, 19.

²²³ Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9’, 143.

²²⁴ Ibid., 142, 143.

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- *Teacher-student relationships and teaching strategies*

Indicating appropriate *ways* for teaching processes to happen:²²⁵

Outcomes	Details
Providing practical and insightful activities to enable wisdom to be learnt	
Identifying that fearing Yahweh is the appropriate context for all learning	
Recognising that the wisdom literature and tradition has developed in a cyclic spiral by an iterative and constructive processes as the community – with the help of its sages – has continued to refine, refresh and renew its covenant life under Yahweh	Understanding that this process involves reflection, declaration and documentation ²²⁶
Using didactic teaching methods in ways that are appropriate to the learning context and the disposition of the learner	

²²⁵ Dell, 'Proverbs 1–9: Issues of Social and Theological Context.', 229, 232; Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 101–134.

²²⁶ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 7.

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- *Physical and relational learning context*

Identifying *where* the learning occurs:²²⁷

Contexts	Details
Physical environment	Home
	Town or city
	Temple or religious centre
	Court or administrative facility
Relational culture ²²⁸	Worldview
	Values
	Beliefs
Relational environment	Parents, siblings and extended family
	Local and national community
	Other communities and nations

²²⁷ Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 9, 10. Also, Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, 19–40; Martin, *Proverbs*, 18–31.

²²⁸ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 7.

Educational, social and theological perspectives

What educational, social and theological perspectives do these passages indicate are significant for this development into adult life?

This section considers educational, social and theological perspectives arising from Proverbs 1 to 9, including comments about educational and epistemological issues, theories and ideologies. All the frameworks in the previous section are essentially relational, as is evident from the parents and Wisdom speaking of the fear of Yahweh and providing advice for the son. These voices spoke in their homes and in the community's streets, marketplaces and worship sites. Their messages relate to their educational priorities and are embedded in and imbued with theology and wisdom regarding Yahweh and everyday experience. Relationships, education, society and theology are lenses through which these perspectives can be understood and on which attention can be focused.

Relational lenses include all the various personas, present and absent, including those with voice and those who are silent.

Educational lenses involve teacher-initiated (involving parents and Wisdom) and learner-centred perspectives. Educational lenses can consider the ways rhetoric and language are used, links concerning a life of faith in Yahweh or aims towards the maintenance and development of culture and skills. Other educational lenses can involve the wisdom-education necessary for young people and young adults in the context of their life-long learning journeys.

Social lenses operate in all settings, including family, house, village, marriage, commerce and sanctuary/temple.

Theological lenses can consider the use of polarities and analogies, identify and explore any connections with Hebrew covenant, law and prophets, and examine any evidences of an awareness of other ancient societies.

These **relational, educational, social and theological lenses** link with the community's strategic priorities and connect with the strategies used to help ensure the community's long-term survival. Appropriate collective and personal behaviours flow from the father's instructions and Wisdom's advice, and, with these lenses, form a two-dimensional matrix:

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Attributes Lenses	Strategic priorities	Community and personal disciplines	Survival strategies
Relationships			
Education			
Society			
Theology			

Strategic priorities aim to achieve community sustainability and growth, including identifying important intra- and inter-generational issues. Community and personal disciplines involve becoming wise and acting wisely, trusting Yahweh, not breaking covenant and keeping thanksgiving rituals. Survival strategies assist in managing situations identified as personal and communal risks.

The concerns identified in Proverbs 1 to 9 about rejecting parental advice, engaging in predatory behaviour, mistreating women, committing sexual immorality, mismanaging financial resources, listening to and mixing with the wrong group, and speaking inappropriately were not intended to dominate educational discourse so that they became a basis for false moralisation. The positive educational, social and theological perspectives identified in these chapters were considered vital in enabling a rich and fruitful adult life.

If Proverbs 1 to 9, along with the rest of the wisdom literature, is not intended to be explicitly legislative or restrictive, then it is arguable that its development would have been iterative, with its conclusions subject to ongoing review and revision. Interpreting wise advice in each fresh circumstance would have emphasised this ongoing dynamic by highlighting the educative processes and learner experiences that were involved. The instructions were not to be imparted only using catechetical decrees which demanded unquestioning responses and compliance. The dynamics of family and community life-cycles, and the expected practical implementations, suggest substantial conversations between father and son. Likewise, the repetitive and somewhat contradictory nature of the experiential advice that was given also suggests discussions amplifying the wisdom contained in the lectures. This underlying constructivist paradigm provides room for vigorous and rigorous dialogue. The confidence of parents and Wisdom in this process was not accidental. Creation was God's gift with an inherent moral and spiritual order, and, included in this divine endowment is the capacity for human perception, reasoning, creativity, participation and communication. The silence of the son may result more from the rhetorical techniques that were used in writing the text rather than being the only form of actual educational practice. Learning was understood as a life-long journey. Even older, wiser people, like the father,

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sought to learn, and could be expected to engage in conversation with their parents and other mentor teachers (as in Proverbs 1:6).

Understanding the education of the son involves understanding the relational hierarchy of Yahweh, personified Wisdom, the father (and mother, and other community leaders), and his son. It includes comprehending the dynamics of wisdom and folly, with their impact on the whole person. It means dissolving perceived dissonance between religious and secular (or non-religious) contexts, and recognising the awareness of a universal, integrated environment that is portrayed in the words of the father and personified Wisdom. An appropriate analysis of the son's education also involves understanding the social settings in which the community lived and appreciating the difference between experiential and revelatory wisdom. These factors provide a rich, inclusive and integrated worldview that presents challenges to individualistic, fragmented and fractured thinking. Concerns about paternalism and gender portrayals call for considerable sensitivity and diligence when interacting across time with this dynamic ancient learning context.

Conclusions

The first section of the book of Proverbs focuses on father-son instructions and Wisdom's invitation to her home. The father-son relationship was an essential inter-generational bond, while the portrayal of Wisdom's home transcended the domestic context and Israel's covenant nation identity. Being home was understood as living joyfully in Yahweh's world and so had divine significance. Home was where Yahweh's presence was known as families feasted together in the immediacy of community, in the relational richness of marriage and children, and in the skilful, practical work of sustaining their life together.

Implicit in the father's instruction to his son is the cycle of birth, life and death, without the focus on futility and weariness found in Ecclesiastes, or the suffering described in the book of Job. While ongoing dangers from gangs are mentioned, systemic national persecutions are missing. Readers of Proverbs 1 to 9 may find themselves in a narrative that appears stylised, culturally remote and discordant, and which uses personified polarities some of which are significantly sexualised and stereotypical. Nonetheless, through the lens of these wisdom writings, Proverbs 1 to 9 offers a unique window into ancient Hebrew society, its faith and work contexts, and how education was attempted and experienced. These chapters provide rich opportunities for reflecting creatively on modern society and the challenges Christianity and Western society face today.

Implications for further research

This study has identified frameworks and related perspectives for educational, social and theological themes in Proverbs 1 to 9. These frameworks and perspectives require elaboration and research not possible in this paper, including further consideration of the scholars referenced. The insights of the authors mentioned herein have only been very briefly considered and are worthy of more detailed discussion in the context of this paper's themes. Further research would benefit from reflecting on the outcomes described in the suggested frameworks in relation to various educational theories. Such analysis could be structured to examine selected church, school and theological educational settings to identify possible areas for improving current theory and practice. This process should not assume that Proverbs 1 to 9 represents preferred or optimum practice, but that, as inspired Scripture, it provides an historical and theological context which can stimulate contemporary learning. In considering the social themes presented, the influence of the technology used in the development of the book of Proverbs could also be discussed, including when and how the Hebrew community was increasingly able to record and subsequently share their history, law and wisdom. Additional analysis of the decline of the Hebrew nation, and its restoration, may help enrich pedagogical understandings derived from Proverbs 1 to 9.

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Questions for further research arising from this survey of and discussion about educational, social and theological themes in Proverbs 1 to 9 can include:

Social themes

Is 'wise' an adjective for prophets, priests and kings and/or a separate category?

How extensive is the evidence of pre-exile institutional places of learning?

How did ancient Israel understand morality and ethics?

What social dynamics emerge from Proverbs 1 to 9 that can help identify how ancient Israelite society provided opportunities for women, for disadvantaged groups and for people from other cultures and with different religious beliefs?

What technologies did the sages use to record their wisdom, and in which time spans did they use them?

How did the decline and restoration of the Hebrew nation impact on their educational practices?

Educational

What evidence is there of educational instruction in ancient Israel beyond teaching the appropriate social behaviours discussed in Proverbs 1 to 9?

What is the social and theological significance of the educational frameworks and perspectives outlined?

What are the educational implications of the teaching and learning focus on the whole person in Proverbs 1 to 9?

What education is indicated or implied in Israel's wisdom literature – and the rest of the Hebrew Bible – for young or mature women?

Theological

To what extent is the wisdom language of Proverbs 1 to 9 embedded in or connected with the Hebrew Torah and Prophets?

Does Proverbs 1 to 9 suggest anything beyond creational wisdom? What redemptional wisdom is there in these chapters for those who repent from folly?

What comparisons are there between Wisdom and the father, and how do they affect the narrative in Proverbs 1 to 9?

What theological insights does Proverbs 1 to 9 bring to a Christian theology of trinity and incarnation, and creation, atonement, reconciliation, restoration and divinisation?

What relevance does Proverbs 1 to 9 have for contemporary evangelism and connecting or interacting with Western multi-faith societies and other cultures?

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What common features and what differences are there between post-exilic Israel and modern Western society, especially relating to theological views of social stability and the physical universe?

What theological issues arise from the gender constructs used in Proverbs 1 to 9? In what ways do these issues align with the understanding of God in the rest of the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament?

Recommendations for Christian communities and families

Understanding that these chapters of Proverbs are more than moral advice or command is vital if Christian communities are to access and benefit from the wisdom shared by the authors and editors involved. Proverbs 1 to 9 is an invitation to gain wisdom and to engage in life-long learning. It invites readers to understand and practise the learning paradigms that were embraced by authors and editors in writing, revising and adding to the literature that became the final book. This iterative process was not simply a radical alternative to a passive acceptance of formal political and religious decrees but was a way of living meaningful and thoughtful lives of faith in an ever-changing world.

Christian communities and families could use the insights of the father and Woman Wisdom to reflect on the underlying social constructs evident in Proverbs 1 to 9 and to consider the theological issues that arise from them. Christians who find the level and nature of patriarchy in Proverbs unwelcome and inappropriate may use this text to explore ways of constructing a fairer and more inclusive social environment in the church and in society. Christians committed to complementarian and subordinationist approaches to gender may use the social constructs evident in these chapters to discuss relevant questions relating to pastoral practice and social engagement. Either way, it seems preferable to understand Proverbs 1 to 9 not so much as a paradigm for current practice, but as an inspired narrative that can help inform and enrich contemporary Christian belief and education.

Further Considerations

Lectures and interludes in Proverbs 1 to 9

This summary lists the way several commentators group the father's lectures and Wisdom interludes. Whybray's analysis is discussed in the next section.

Fox:²²⁹

Proverbs 1 to 9 comprises a prologue (Proverbs 1:1–7) followed by ten lectures with five interludes. The ten lectures are Proverbs 1:8–19, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:21–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–19, 4:20–27, 5:1–23, 6:20–35 and 7:1–27. The interludes are Proverbs 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 6:1–19, 8:1–36 and 9:1–18.

McKane:²³⁰

Proverbs 1 to 9 is largely made up of groups of instructions (Proverbs 1:8–19; 3:1–12, 21–35; 4; 5; 6:1–5, 20–35; 7:1–5, 24–27) and sections where the formal instruction structure is modified (Proverbs 2; 3:13–20; 6:6–11; 7:6–23).

Pemberton:²³¹

Proverbs 1 to 9 has ten lectures and five interludes after an introduction (Proverbs 1:1–7). Each of the first seven lectures are framed as a call with the last three lectures being warnings. The ten lectures are Proverbs 1:8–19, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:21–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–19, 4:20–27, 5:1–23, 6:20–35 and 7:1–27. The five interludes are Proverbs 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 6:1–19, 8:1–36 and 9:1–18.

Clifford:²³²

After the introduction in Proverbs 1:1–7, Proverbs 1 to 9 contains ten lectures, three wisdom poems and two interludes. The ten lectures are Proverbs 1:8–19, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:21–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–19, 4:20–27, 5:1–23, 6:20–35 and 7:1–27. The wisdom poems are Proverbs 1:20–33, 8:1–36 and 9:1–6, 11, 13–18 with verses 7–10 and 12 assorted sayings. The two interludes are Proverbs 3:13–20 and 6:1–19.

²²⁹ Fox, 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 614, 616, and *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 44, 45.

²³⁰ W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1970).

²³¹ Pemberton, 'Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1-9, The.', 63, 64. Also, *Rhetoric of the Father, The: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Father/Son (Lectures in Proverbs 1-9)*

²³² Clifford, *Proverbs*, 1, 2.

Perdue:²³³

The introduction is followed by ten lectures and four wisdom poems. The ten lectures are Proverbs 1:8–19, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:20–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–27, 5:1–23, 6:1–19, 6:20–35 and 7:1–27. The four wisdom poems are Proverbs 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 8:1–36 and 9:1–18.

Waltke:²³⁴

The preamble (Proverbs 1:1–7) is followed by 10 lectures (with the ninth lecture including an addendum), two interludes and an epilogue. The ten lectures are Proverbs 1:8–19, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:13–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–19, 4:20–27, 5:1–23, 6:1–19 (and 6:20–35) and 7:1–27. The interludes are Proverbs 1:20–33 and 8:1–36 with Proverbs 9:1–18 as an epilogue.

Longman:²³⁵

Longman uses descriptive titles for the sections: Proverbs 1:1–7, 1:8–19, 1:20–33, 2:1–22, 3:1–12, 3:13–20, 3:21–35, 4:1–9, 4:10–19, 4:20–27, 5:1–23, 6:1–19, 6:20–35, 7:1–27, 8:1–36, 9:1–6 with 9:13–18, and 9:7–12.

The emphasis in these headings is on the son accepting Wisdom Woman, receiving her benefits and trusting Yahweh. Since Wisdom Woman has integrity and is to be praised and embraced, the son is to remain on the correct path and guard his heart. He is to avoid evil and immoral women and love his wife, as well as work hard and manage his business transactions well. Since life's choice are between wisdom and foolishness, Wisdom Woman's narrative is important.

²³³ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 62, 63.

²³⁴ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 10, 11.

²³⁵ Longman III, *Proverbs*, 37, 38.

Whybray's analysis of Proverbs 1 to 9

This summary of Whybray's analysis of the structure of Proverbs 1 to 9 discusses his views of the structure of the text, the original instructions, and the Wisdom and Yahweh additions. It includes overviews of the benefits of accepting the advice given in Proverbs 1 to 9.

The structure of the text

An outline of Whybray's analysis of the structure of Proverbs 1 to 9 is:²³⁶

Section	Relevant issues
Introduction	The book introduces the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:1–7). Verses 6, 7 are later additions with specific reference to Yahweh.
Instruction 1	The first instruction is on avoiding being enticed by 'sinners' (Proverbs 1:8–19).
Call from Wisdom	A call from Wisdom follows the first instruction (Proverbs 1:20–33).
Instruction 2	The second instruction is on the value of wisdom (Proverbs 2:1–22). It includes additions with a wisdom theme (Proverbs 2:2–8, 10–15, 20–22).
Instruction 3	The third instruction includes advice to trust in Yahweh (Proverbs 3:1–12) with the last two verses 'probably added to meet objections (similar to those of Job) that right conduct does not, in fact, always lead to prosperity'.
Wisdom poem	Proverbs 3:13–20 is a poem on wisdom.
Instruction 4	The fourth instruction focuses on responsible citizenship (Proverbs 3:21–35), has no clear ending after verse 31, and includes secondary advice in verses 25 and 26.
Instruction 5	The fifth instruction (Proverbs 4:1–9) has textual complexities and contains reflections by the father regarding the teaching he received as a youth from his own parents.

²³⁶ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 33–52, 73. Also, 'Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.', 12–28.

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Section	Relevant issues
Instruction 6	The sixth instruction (Proverbs 4:10–19) has verse 13 as secondary and encourages the son to avoid wicked people.
Instruction 7	The seventh instruction (Proverbs 4:20–27) encourages the son to protect himself so that ‘the springs of life’ flow with purity and truth.
Instruction 8	The eighth instruction is a warning against adultery (Proverbs 5:1–23). Verse 7 includes a redundant ‘O sons’ exhortation, and the instruction has an unclear ending. The main thoughts are in verses 1–6 and 8.
Interlude	Proverbs 6:1–19 is inserted from a separate collection and contains practical warnings.
Instruction 9	The ninth instruction (Proverbs 6:20–35) includes more warnings against adultery and contains extra content in verses 26 to 31 with some repetition in verses 33 to 35. Verses 22 to 24 have textual complexities.
Instruction 10	The final instruction is a last warning against the adulteress (Proverbs 7:1–27) with verses 6 to 23 enlarging the original advice, while verse 24 is an extra reference to the son. The last two instructions are similar.
Wisdom poems	Proverbs 8:1–36 and 9:1–18 are wisdom poems.

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The following table summarises Whybray's analysis of the text of Proverbs 1 to 9 into original, other, group 1 and group 2 categories:

Section	Original	Other	Group 1	Group 2
Introduction	1:1–5	1:6		1:7
Instruction 1	1:8–19			
Wisdom 1			1:20–28, 30–33	1:29
Instruction 2	2:1, 9, 16–19	2:20–22	2:2–4, 10–15	2:5–8
Instruction 3	3:1–10, not 3a	3:3a, 11, 12	3:13–18	3:19–20
Instruction 4	3:21–24, 27–31	3:25, 26, 32–35		
Instruction 5	4:1–4, 5b		4:5a, 6–9	
Instruction 6	4:10, 12, 14–19	4:11	4:13	
Instruction 7	4:20–27			
Instruction 8	5:1–6, 8	5:7, 9–23		
Interlude		6:1–19		
Instruction 9	6:20–22, 24, 25, 32	6:23, 26–31, 33–35		
Instruction 10	7:1–3, 5, 25–27	7:6–24	7:4	
Wisdom 2		8:33–35a	8:1–21, 32, 36	8:13a, 22–31, 35b
Wisdom 3		9:7–12	9:1–6, 13–18	

Whybray draws the following conclusions:²³⁷

- a. Proverbs 2:1ff includes additions of both kinds.
- b. Proverbs 4:1ff, 4:10ff and 7:1ff have references to personified Wisdom, without any to Yahweh.
- c. Proverbs 3:1ff 3:21ff and 5:1ff have references to Yahweh, without any to personified Wisdom.
- d. Proverbs 1:8ff, 4:20ff and 6:20ff have no references to personified Wisdom or Yahweh.
- e. Proverbs 1:8–19, Proverbs 3:1–12 and Proverbs 7:1–27 are immediately followed by poems mentioning both personified Wisdom and Yahweh (Proverbs 1:20ff, 3:13–20 and 8:1ff).
- f. Proverbs 1:8–19 and 4:20–27 include no additions and are templates to which the other instructions initially corresponded.
- g. The original instructions appear to range from five to twelve couplets, with their final form ranging from eight to twenty-three couplets.

Original instructions

The original instructions identified by Whybray contain encouragements and warnings.²³⁸ Each of these ten instructions commences with a positive exhortation, with only the second one being explicitly conditional. The first and ninth instructions use parallelism to urge the son not to forsake his mother's teaching, while the second instruction contrasts a heart that keeps the advice given with a mind that forgets it. All ten instructions indicate benefits from following the advice given, although the benefits are presented in different proportions in the respective instructions. The benefits can be summarised under two main headings as nominated in the table below. Where there is overlap, a major theme is used:

²³⁷ 'Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.', 27.

²³⁸ *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 72–104 and 'Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.', 29–48 give textual and thematic information. Also, Martin, *Proverbs*, 35–41.

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Benefits	Instruction	Passage
A life of abundance, safety and integrity.	1	1:9
	3	3:2, 3, 5–10
	4	3:22–24
	6	4:12, 18
	7	4:21, 22, 27
	9	6:21, 22
An understanding and practice of righteousness, justice, equity, goodness and wisdom, leading to the keeping of discretion and the guarding of knowledge.	2	2:9
	3	3:4
	5	4:1–4
	6	4:11
	7	4:23
	8	5:2
	10	7:2, 3

The first list of passages contains evocative descriptions regarding the value of the instructions. These descriptions identify adornments that bring peace, longevity, health, refreshment, wealth, security, rest, and establish straight and smooth paths (instructions 1, 3, 4 and 6). Instruction 6 develops the path theme from Instructions 2 to 4 (Proverbs 4:18). Instruction 7 reinforces the themes of fruitfulness and walking securely, while instruction 9 repeats the exhortation that treasuring this parental advice results in good guidance, protection and insight. In the second list, there are strong familial injunctions in Instructions 5 and 10, and a social orientation towards a discerning and appropriate exercise of justice, righteousness and goodness with Instructions 2, 3, 6 to 8. Only Instruction 3 refers to Yahweh.

The passages that Whybray believes add no new theological information reinforce the above two themes (Proverbs 2: 20–22, 3:3a). Several verses mentioning discipline (Proverbs 3:11, 12, 5:21 and 6:23) and other verses relate to valuing and respecting his wife (Proverbs 5:15, 18, 19, 21).

Wisdom additions

The Wisdom additions can be grouped in two lists. One collection indicates that Wisdom brings life, safety, and the understanding that leads to protection. Her gain is beyond riches and treasure, and ‘all her paths are peace’. She brings blessings and ‘is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her’. Honour and praise come to those who love her ‘for she is your life’ (Proverbs 1:32, 33, 2:11, 12, 3:13–18, 4:5–9, 13, 7:4, 8:10–12). A second set of Wisdom additions speaks of an outpouring of Wisdom’s spirit and a revelation of her knowledge. In this context, searching for wisdom means seeking insight and understanding for one’s heart and soul. Those who respond to her invitation receive prudence and truth, they learn righteousness,

understanding, knowledge and discretion, and receive counsel and strength. Good government and justice depend on her, and she leaves a rich inheritance (Proverbs 1:20–23, 2:2–4, 10, 4:5–9, 13, 8:1–12, 14, 15–21, 9:1–6). The Wisdom additions in Proverbs 9:7–12 contain a series of short proverbs which are like those in the series that follow chapter 9, while the Wisdom additions in Proverbs 8:33–35 repeat thoughts already described.

Yahweh additions

Searching for wisdom brings understanding of the fear of Yahweh and revulsion towards evil. God provides protection and watches ‘over the way of his saints’ (Proverbs 2:5–8, 8:13). Proverbs 3:19, 20 and 8:22–31 indicate Yahweh established personified Wisdom prior to creation, with the personification of wisdom further developed in Proverbs 8:22–31.

Conclusion

The benefits of learning wisdom described in these lectures can be summarised as a life of abundance, safety and integrity, and as an understanding and practice of righteousness, justice, equity, goodness and wisdom, leading to the keeping of discretion and the guarding of knowledge. The benefits indicated in the Wisdom additions can be grouped in two similar lists. One list indicates that Wisdom brings life and safety, and that understanding leads to provision and protection. The second set speaks of an outpouring of Wisdom’s spirit and a revelation of her knowledge. The Yahweh additions state that searching for this wisdom brings understanding of the fear of Yahweh and revulsion towards evil, knowledge of Yahweh and his wisdom and understanding. The call from Wisdom and the Wisdom poems develop the idea that Yahweh established personified Wisdom prior to creation and explore her role in relationship to the advice being given to the son.

Fox and Dell on Proverbs 1 to 9

This outline looks at Fox's understanding of the formation of Proverbs 1 to 9 and discusses Dell's analysis of these chapters.

Fox on the structure of Proverbs 1 to 9

Fox believes these chapters represent the work of numerous sages and scribes over many years with each generation building on the achievements of their predecessors: 'The strata did not disappear, nor did one bury the other. The contributions of the different authors were cumulative and continue to be heard'.²³⁹ Fox believes Whybray's approach is 'procrustean' as Whybray reduces the ten instructions until they fit a predetermined structure.²⁴⁰ Fox, however, agrees with Whybray that Proverbs 1 to 9 has more than one author.

The prologue and the sequence of ten 'poems' form an introduction to chapters 10 to 29 and were probably composed by a single author.²⁴¹ The five interlude poems were most likely written by different authors and added later, as were further amendments. The lectures form a cycle rather than a series and have consistent structure and language style. Each one uses sequential logic and consists of '(1) an exordium (itself tripartite, comprising (a) address to the son, (b) exhortation, and (c) motivation); (2) a lesson; and (3) a conclusion'.²⁴² This form was either the result of redaction or single authorship. Given that the Prologue does not personify wisdom, it was probably written by the author of the ten lectures. The interludes have more diversity. Proverbs 6:1–19 is unrelated to the other interludes. The other four interludes differ from the lectures. Wisdom is internalised in the lectures but externalised in the interludes. Secondly, the lectures address only the son, while the interludes lack a clear structure. Thirdly, the interludes appear to have different authors, and lack a logical sequence. Fourthly, the interludes respond to themes found in the lectures and in each other, and, lastly, they do not seem to be separately written poems.²⁴³

Fox concludes that a series of scribes added to and reorganised an original collection of lectures. He notes that the first interlude complements the first lecture, the second interlude complements the third lecture, while the fourth interlude is antithetical to the last lecture. The last interlude develops some of the themes included in the earlier interludes.

²³⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 330.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 324.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 324–330. Also, Fox, 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 613–619 and Pemberton, 'Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1-9, The.', 81, fn 34.

Dell on theological integration in Proverbs 1 to 9

Dell considers the instructions in Proverbs 1 to 9 individually, rather than identifying evidence common to all instructions. She indicates that the instructions have substantial variation in theme, style and context, and that they 'were composed for a range of situations'.²⁴⁴ Their diversity, however, does not negate their individual 'unity of theme and purpose', but suggests that they were useful in either school or family situations.²⁴⁵ She concludes that Proverbs 6:1–19 is an interlude rather than an instruction or a wisdom poem.

Focusing on the nature and level of theological integration in Proverbs 1 to 9, Dell rejects the 'kind of cutting and pasting of which some [commentators] have been so fond'.²⁴⁶ She also rejects the idea that Proverbs 1 to 9 is substantially disconnected from other scriptures. In exploring her concerns, she notes that 'Proverbs 22:16–24:22 [and Proverbs 31] seem to be closely related to the concerns and images of Proverbs 1 to 9, and that 25–9 are quite repetitive of 10:1–22:16'.²⁴⁷ Having divided the book in this way, Dell concludes that the former passages are probably more closely linked to formal educational settings, while the second group of passages most likely have stronger alignment with 'more homegrown Israelite maxim-making from family/folk/tribal settings'.²⁴⁸

In discussing how integral theological context is to Proverbs 1 to 9, Dell states that Whybray assumed religious and educational developments occurred separately. She notes that Fox criticised Whybray for being "procrustean" in assuming the instructions were originally uniform.²⁴⁹ Her view is that all of the instructions were stamped with a unique Israelite emphasis on Yahweh, even though they developed gradually, and not necessarily together. This understanding of Yahweh is distorted if educational priorities and theological themes are separated, especially as it then detracts from the way Wisdom is linked with Yahweh.²⁵⁰

This level of integration indicates that more than a strictly educational focus was in mind and suggests that the Yahweh described in Proverbs is identical to the God depicted in other Hebrew scriptures. It seems evident from this logic that Yahwistic themes were significant prior to the development of any written documents that now form Proverbs 1 to 9.

²⁴⁴ Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, The, 47.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49, 50.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 105. Dell argues that Wisdom and Yahweh are at times almost interchangeable and that parental teaching roles often seem 'to take the Wisdom role, and their teaching is backed up by Yahweh'.

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Working, then, from the perspective that Yahwistic themes were closely integrated with educational goals, a richer understanding of their world-view emerges from the instructions and wisdom poems. Rather than being a later addition, the Yahweh passages were an essential part of the development of the nine chapters from their original 'oral context' and perform a 'framing and relativizing function'.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Ibid., 117.

Personified Wisdom and the forbidden woman

This discussion considers comparisons between Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Substance and reflects on the identity and purpose of the forbidden or strange woman. It concludes with some additional thoughts on Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31.

The women of Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31

The acrostic poem in Proverbs 31 may be intended to ‘convey the notion of totality or completeness’ as a final touch defining not only the nature of the poem itself but the conclusion of the book.²⁵² If this is the case, it is most likely that it is also an end-note to the introduction provided by the first nine chapters. Given the imbalance in length between the first nine chapters and the last poem, Proverbs 1:20–33 may provide a matching bookend to chapter 31:10–31.²⁵³

Any linkage between Proverbs 1 to 9 and Proverbs 31 is strengthened by similarities between the active female personification of Wisdom and the initiatives and successes of the faithful wife: ‘Wisdom builds her house; in 31.10–31 the house is already happily and successfully established: the promise of chs. 1–9 has been fulfilled and completed’.²⁵⁴ Other textual connections between the women include the role of both women in teaching, the emphasis on finding, the discerning oversight the women provide, and the great value of these women.²⁵⁵ Dick, while suggesting that female Wisdom is also evident in the stories of Esther and Ruth, states that ‘The postexilic redaction of the book of Proverbs ... transferred the focus of the wisdom tradition away from the defunct royal court and into the home administered by the Israelite woman’.²⁵⁶ Yet this realignment to the home may still interpret the text from within male-centred role models.²⁵⁷ Consequently, it does not adequately represent the educative and counselling emphasis that pervades and dominates the representation of women in Proverbs.²⁵⁸ Murphy’s summary of Clifford’s assessment highlights the significant role women play in these chapters:

the instructions of chapters 1–9 [act] as advice for a youth who leaves home to find a wife and establish a household. The advice is raised to a

²⁵² Whybray, ‘Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.’, 160.

²⁵³ Pete F. Wilbanks, *Non-Proverb Proverbial Bookends: A Possible Lens for Viewing the Book of Proverbs* (http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/20-Proverbs/Text/Articles/Wilbanks-Prov1And31.pdf, 1999).

²⁵⁴ Whybray, ‘Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.’, 161.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 161, 162.

²⁵⁶ Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, 287.

²⁵⁷ Goldberg, *Practical Wisdom of Proverbs, The*, 16. Cf. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 92.

²⁵⁸ *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 90.

‘metaphorical level,’ and thus made available to everyone, by the speeches of personified Wisdom.²⁵⁹

The impact of this elevation makes the last passage of this section in chapter 9 where Wisdom and Folly give their final speeches all the more significant.²⁶⁰ The contrast between these two women is not the only polarisation in Proverbs 1 to 9. Wisdom’s enemies include deceitful men, who oppose the father giving his advice to his son.²⁶¹ Clifford notes that all the characters in the drama are introduced in chapter 1, leaving readers ‘sufficiently familiar with the relationships to draw their own conclusions’.²⁶² Proverbs 1 to 9 differs, according to Clifford, from

its Ancient Near Eastern counterparts in at least two respects. Firstly it is more general than the Egyptian and Mesopotamian instructions. The main consideration is to seek wisdom, not to execute specific actions. Secondly the personification of wisdom creates a metaphorical context absent in the Ancient Near Eastern parallels.²⁶³

Just as the father-son narrative invokes discussion about characteristics of the broader society from which it arose, ‘Woman wisdom is an elusive figure’²⁶⁴ who provides a way of examining how women are represented in Proverbs.²⁶⁵ Indeed, there is some validity in Yoder’s view that, along with references to the fear of Yahweh, ‘Portraits of women ... ‘frame’ Proverbs’.²⁶⁶ Given ‘the sheer quantity of human female imagery appearing in these chapters’,²⁶⁷ and a traditional failure to consider the ‘human focus’ regarding Woman Wisdom,²⁶⁸ this discussion of Wisdom can also help inform the way the father mentors his son. Camp’s list of thematic connections about women in these passages includes a mother’s teaching, women being precious, prosperous and excellent, embracing Wisdom, the city gates and discernment.²⁶⁹

²⁵⁹ Murphy, ‘Can the Book of Proverbs Be a Player in ‘Biblical Theology’?’, 6.

²⁶⁰ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 2 fn1. See Fox, ‘Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9’, 618.

²⁶¹ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 3.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18. Also, Prinsloo, ‘Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.’, 1379, and Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 19.

²⁶⁴ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 9.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁶⁶ Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2001), 2.

²⁶⁷ Whybray, ‘Composition of the Book of Proverbs, The.’, 161.

²⁶⁸ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 69.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 188, 189. Wilbanks, *Non-Proverb Proverbial Bookends: A Possible Lens for Viewing the Book of Proverbs*, 1, 2. ‘The sheer preponderance of feminine imagery at the beginning and end of the Book of Proverbs seems to demonstrate an editorial shaping or redacting that results in an inclusio for the Book

Fox provides a similar list, and notes that the 'Woman of Strength' and 'Lady Wisdom' are not identical, as can be seen from the former being hard to find, while the latter is readily accessible (Proverbs 31:10 and 8:17, 35):²⁷⁰

Whether these attributes are construed as literary concepts drawn from the Hebrew Bible,²⁷¹ applications of mythologies from related cultures, or characteristics of a composite contemporary female representation,²⁷² affects the way the father's advice to his son is understood.²⁷³ If a composite contemporary female representation is understood, then such a perspective reinforces the father's concern that his son ensures the continuity of the family's economic and social prosperity.²⁷⁴ It may also be the case that the woman to be avoided is from a non-Israelite community, so possibly emphasising perceived concerns about religious purity.²⁷⁵ Whether ethnic and religious coherence was involved or not, central to understanding personified Wisdom remains the fact that 'she is a pedagogical figure for teaching more than economical survival She is about fidelity to Yahweh.'²⁷⁶ For Clifford, Proverbs 31:10–31 'is a portrait of an ideal wife (of a great house) and, on a metaphorical level, a portrait of Woman Wisdom and what she accomplishes for those who come to her house as disciples and friends.'²⁷⁷

Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Substance have much in common: their reverence for Yahweh, their abundance and fruitfulness in life and their generosity are exemplary. They demonstrate living in their social context in fullness and diversity.²⁷⁸ The other substantial woman of Proverbs 31:1–9 should not be neglected. King Lemuel's mother's advice to her son 'is the only instruction attributed to a king's mother known from the ancient Near East ... whereas a father's instruction opens the book, a mother speaks near its conclusion.'²⁷⁹

While the identification of wisdom as a feminine personification does not exhaust the theological function of biblical wisdom, it does, in Murphy's view, serve 'to

of Proverbs. While the pericope of instruction of Lemuel's mother to her son ... does contribute to the feminine framework, the closing acrostic poem ... provides seven out of eight of Camp's connections'.

²⁷⁰ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 908.

²⁷¹ Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 9.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 12, 90, 91.

²⁷³ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 23, 24 discusses four alternatives.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 83, 95–101.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 73–75. Also, Claudia V. Camp, 'Review: Nam Hoon Tan, Nancy, the 'Foreignness' of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif,' *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10 (2010).

²⁷⁶ Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 106–110.

²⁷⁷ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 274.

²⁷⁸ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 241.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

crack open the culturally conditioned language that refers to the Lord in a totally masculine manner'.²⁸⁰

The forbidden or strange woman

The 'strange' woman is mentioned in Proverbs 2:16–22, 5:1–23, 6:20–35 and 7:1–27. The contrast between the son entering the house of the 'forbidden', 'strange' or 'foreign' woman, and delighting in his own wife is clearly indicated in Proverbs 5:1–23.²⁸¹ While the comparison is complex, as it relates not only to personified Wisdom, but to the young son's wife, the strong polarisation of female stereotypes reflects a view of women as being 'male projections' rather than persons with their own freedom and identity. Yoder, referring to Newsom, states that

The parent's pedagogy thus offers no immediate respite to women. Rather, it serves as a reminder and caution—such gender assumptions and mythic conceptions of women are woven deeply into Western culture and persist today.²⁸²

Yet this 'reminder and caution' also acts to provoke further consideration of feminine roles in biblical, Judaic and Christian contexts. While the forbidden woman fades from consideration as the book of Proverbs progresses, the unacceptable role she represents remains present in later biblical passages (e.g. John 4:4–42, 8:1–11; Revelation 18).²⁸³

Fox rejects this woman being '(1) a foreign, secular harlot, (2) a foreign devotee of a foreign god, (3) a foreign goddess, (4) a social outsider, (5) a native prostitute', and insists that she is not an outsider, but simply another man's wife.²⁸⁴ For Fox, the father is concerned in lecture eight about marital fidelity, where he 'encourages him to take his fill of legitimate erotic pleasures, depicting their delights in lush, provocative terms'.²⁸⁵ His appeal is to the son's emotions rather than to his 'legal obligations' and ignores the consequences to the son's wife should she be betrayed.²⁸⁶ In the last lecture, the forbidden woman is given a carefully crafted personality, and the father has no evident concern for her welfare. The father's intention is clearly oriented towards his son understanding the consequences faced by those whom she seduces: 'he does not know that it will cost him his life' (Proverbs 7:23).

²⁸⁰ Murphy, 'Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology.', 7.

²⁸¹ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 234.

²⁸² Ibid., 235.

²⁸³ Ibid., 235: 'The poetry dances between such diverse images of her that they blur'.

²⁸⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 134, 140, 141.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 207–209.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 208.

The unmistakable significance of the forbidden woman in Proverbs 1 to 9 has been interpreted in many ways. Fox nominates five of them: she represents any foolish and godless advice, she symbolises heresy including Christianity from a Judaic perspective, she is used to warn against the dogmas and beliefs of other nations, she indicates the dangers of physical, material or sensual desires, and she depicts the 'Other'.²⁸⁷ Fox expands this last interpretation, noting that 'the very richness and pliancy of the allegorical hermeneutic is also its weak point. The Strange Woman can easily be expanded into a symbol of any evil one may wish.'²⁸⁸ For Fox, representing the father as having 'deep anxiety towards female sexuality', as seeing women as strangers, or as wanting 'social control of women's sexual behavior' is not valid.²⁸⁹ While acknowledging the patriarchal context, he believes the author's aversion to 'fornication' is not 'specifically masculine'.²⁹⁰ He rejects women as an 'other', since the son's wife is his companion, and male evildoers are outsiders. Similarly, the lack of expressed opposition to either female sexuality or its control may in fact be thought of as a weakness, given the father's concerns for his son.

It is helpful to remember that the forbidden woman is the 'negative counterpart' to the son's wife, and that personified folly is the parallel opposite to personified Wisdom.²⁹¹ The practical concern of these passages is adultery and sexual immorality, not femininity, per se. Yet, as Fox points out: 'Still, the allegorical hermeneutic is legitimate as a homiletic strategy. It reuses biblical material in creating a new and distinct text with its own values'.²⁹²

Personified Wisdom

When Wisdom is considered in the context of Proverbs 1 to 9, Yoder's summary encapsulates who she is, what she does, and how she acts:

Wisdom personified as a woman is breathtakingly complex. She speaks as God or a prophet, taking her stand in the busiest places of the city in the thick of everyday bustle and calling out to the naive, scoffers, and fools to heed her instruction, lest disaster befall them (1:20–33). She is a teacher who promises to reveal all that she knows, all that she is, and provide generously for those who seek her (e.g. 1:23, 33). She is a 'tree of life,' a mythological image in the ancient Near East (3:18). ... Wisdom is a most desirable bride who bestows a garland and crown, signs of nobility and

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 254, 255.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 255.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 257.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 259.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 262.

²⁹² Ibid., 262.

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marriage, on her beloved (4:5–9; 7:4–5). She speaks what is right and true. She empowers all who govern rightly (e.g., 8:15–16). And she prepares for everyone ('all who live,' 8:4) a luxurious feast and builds a seven-pillared house, a number that signifies wholeness (9:1–6).²⁹³

Yoder identifies that Wisdom's authority derives from her 'existence prior to God's creation of the cosmos' and that she was always God's companion.²⁹⁴ Her pre-existence is an unresolved mystery that evokes 'inexpressible' ideas about 'birthing, acquiring, anointing, [and] creating'.²⁹⁵

Murphy emphasises her metaphorical divine profile:

An astonishing feature of Wisdom's speeches in chaps. 1–9 is that she speaks like the Lord, no less. The references to the prophetic language ... are an indication of this. What was referred to God is now referred to her. It is she who feels rebuffed, and who threatens those who refuse to listen. She has divine authority, and she hands out reward and punishment. She does not mention the Lord; she does not urge conversion to God, but to herself!²⁹⁶

The authors of Proverbs 1 to 9, according to Fox, opted to use 'personae' rather than identify their own 'authorial voice'.²⁹⁷ The father and Wisdom instruct the son, not a separate school teacher, even though the speeches may have eventually been used in schools.²⁹⁸ The father dramatically describes the realities his son will face with reminders that 'we can control our actions but not their consequences'.²⁹⁹ In this context, Lady Wisdom, as Fox calls her, 'is not simply a cipher for ordinary human wisdom, yet she is in some way identified with it'.³⁰⁰ Just as her literary persona may have been developed from a variety of mythological or actual sources,³⁰¹ so she has been interpreted in different ways: as the Law, as a 'hypostasis of God's wisdom', or as a representation of 'the primeval order'.³⁰² Wisdom, however, is none of these:

²⁹³ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 235, 236.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 236.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 236.

²⁹⁶ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 12.

²⁹⁷ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 346.

²⁹⁸ 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 620.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 623; Also, Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 348–351.

³⁰⁰ 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 624.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 625. Also, Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 352–354.

³⁰² 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 627.

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All that Wisdom does is to summon people, praise her own excellence, and react to people with emotions corresponding to the way they respond to her. She says nothing about the world apart from the fact that she saw it being formed, and she reveals no 'mystery of order'.³⁰³

Her power lies in the way she reinforces the wisdom messages of the sages, voiced through the father in Proverbs 1 to 9. She achieves this outcome by using the fact she was made prior to creation, while acknowledging that she was not active in making it. Wisdom informs, but does not rely on, human intelligence for her identity. Her potency also comes from her 'intellectual and aesthetic' relationship with God. She is independent of time or space, and reveals herself by what she says, by her own wisdom, rather than by her actions.³⁰⁴

This representation of Wisdom as a 'universal' provides rich and independent harmonic voice to the father's instruction, establishing a cosmic context greater than his domestic circumstances: 'What the father says about wisdom in the lectures, Wisdom says about herself in the interludes'.³⁰⁵ She is more than intellectual and conceptual, or emotional: she is personal, alive and active. She remains readily accessible although with her own mystery and is not esoteric or unavailable. Her transcendent identity, according to Fox, does not lead to the kind of universalism that uncritically embraces 'foreign wisdom', but acts to assure 'Jews that they need not look elsewhere to find the sort of wisdom that is so admired by the peoples. Israel has its own *philosophia*'.³⁰⁶

Israel's wisdom is more than subjective or internal imagination and is richer than an integrating framework. Wisdom is not only a dynamic, powerful creation of God,³⁰⁷ she is an expression of his pure delight and joy – and brings If 'God is the supreme and quintessential artist ..., and he feels the joy of the creative act' then Wisdom's purpose is in reinforcing this divine delight. Fox goes on to describe this joy in terms of God being an intelligent artisan, counsellor, author and scholar, and then wonders whether the writer's primary goal was the 'joy of learning' as his words were 'in the first instance [written] to young men who need encouragement in their pursuit of learning'.³⁰⁸

³⁰³ Ibid., 627.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 628; Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 354–357.

³⁰⁵ 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 630; *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 357.

³⁰⁶ 'Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.', 633. *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 359.

³⁰⁷ *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 294.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 294, 295.

Waltke rejects Fox's assessment of Wisdom as a universal, seeing it as 'drawn from the platonic idea', rather than defined by the text. For Waltke, who accepts Solomon's authorship of these chapters,

A holistic exegesis of the prologue shows that Wisdom in all her various guises, especially as a heavenly mediatrix, personifies Solomon's inspired wisdom, the communication of which is the book's aim and rationale (1:1–2). There is every reason to think that 'Wisdom' has the same meaning, intention, and source as in his opening statement, and none to think otherwise.³⁰⁹

Woman Wisdom, for Waltke, is more than a guide, sister/bride or hostess. Because of her 'prophetic, teaching and divine roles', definitions of her as a wise wife, lover or provider are inadequate.³¹⁰ Indeed, these roles 'so interpenetrate one another that she emerges as a unique personality whose only peer is Jesus Christ' with her 'identification as an incarnate heavenly being who in humiliation accepts the rejection of the masses to offer them eternal life functions within the canon as a foreshadowing of him who is greater than Solomon'.³¹¹ Waltke also believes that the 'valiant wife' of Proverbs 31 'incarnates wisdom's ideals, without removing her from the historical realm'.³¹² Having discussed the acrostic poem in Proverbs 31, he concludes that Proverbs provides 'exemplars' which readers are to apply to the social contexts in which they live.³¹³

Woman Folly mimics Woman Wisdom by also issuing her invitations from 'the highest places in the town', which is where sanctuaries were usually located (Proverbs 9:3, 14).³¹⁴ Longman thinks this means 'Woman Wisdom represents not only Yahweh's wisdom but Yahweh himself'.³¹⁵ Yahweh, Wisdom and creation are so 'inextricably bound' together that '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'.³¹⁶ Woman Folly, by contrast, represents all of the counterfeit deities who successfully seduced Israel: 'In a word, she represents the idols, perhaps no one specific idol, but any false god that lured

³⁰⁹ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 87.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

³¹¹ Ibid., 85.

³¹² Bruce K. Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 15-31*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 2005), 517, 518.

³¹³ Ibid., 519, 520

³¹⁴ Longman III, *Proverbs*, 58, 59.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

the hearts of the Israelites'. The alternative to seeking Wisdom is stark. Each person finds themselves standing with the son, with the same decision to make.³¹⁷

Woman Wisdom, for Perdue, is the 'voice of God' who 'embodies the sapiential tradition that finds its authentication in the insights of the savants of Israel's past and present'. The rich and significant way she is presented highlights two problems associated with Israel's 'making the national God Yahweh into a deity of creation and providence who ruled over all nations'. If Yahweh was sovereign, how is the problem of evil to be resolved? And, if Yahweh is primarily represented as masculine, what does this mean for the feminine? Perdue's answer is that Israel chose not to use 'divine pairs, male and female', but

chose to address the dilemma in various ways, including the personification of Israel and Jerusalem as a woman (wife, daughter) and, for the sages, the metaphor of divine wisdom as a woman, as both the daughter and the consort of God.³¹⁸

It is evident from the above discussion that the personification of Wisdom is more than a significant part of the discourse in Proverbs 1 to 9. The Woman Wisdom figure provides a lens through which insights can be gained into the social and theological concerns of the original authors and editors.

Searching for wise women and men

Connections between Woman Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman invite study into how they are described. Longman argues Woman Wisdom's

appeal is based on the ethical rightness of what she has to say. She speaks of noble, virtuous, righteous matters, and she eschews wickedness and perversity. Her words will lead to understanding and knowledge.³¹⁹

He adds that

we may ... say that Woman Wisdom is not simply a personification of God's wisdom but actually represents Yahweh himself.³²⁰

As we have seen, the woman of Proverbs 31 is described by different authors as a faithful woman, a woman of strength and a woman of substance, while translations use terms for her such as capable, excellent, noble and virtuous. Whatever description is favoured, King Lemuel's mother's voice is in the first person while the woman whose location and identity are the subject of the author's invitation remains silent, just as the father's wife was in the first nine chapters. The

³¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

³¹⁸ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 50.

³¹⁹ Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*, The, 18.

³²⁰ Ibid., 23, 24.

contrast between the silence of the Proverbs 31 woman and the evocative voice of Woman Wisdom may suggest that the Proverbs 31 woman's voice might be at least partially understood from that of Woman Wisdom.

Discovering the Proverbs 31 woman's voice and understanding her identity is a significant invitation provided by the Hebrew sages who wrote and shaped the book of Proverbs. This importance is focused by Enns' argument that

originally the intention of this book was for young men entering life in the court and leadership and having to rule. And having to have wisdom in order to rule well or supervise well other people.³²¹

The decision of the sages to include Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31 raises a range of other interpretative questions: In what ways did the sages hope that a broader audience would engage with these perspectives on Woman Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman? Were they hoping that the Proverbs 31 woman would be understood as an 'embodiment' of Woman Wisdom just as the 'loose adulterous woman' is 'almost like an incarnation of Lady Folly'?³²² Were they wanting the description of the Proverbs 31 woman as being 'more precious than jewels' to serve as an invitation for readers and hearers to revisit Proverbs 1 to 9 and engage in inter-generational narratives about wisdom which would be actualised in their own lives?

Enns suggests that because this book was canonised and so would be for all people and not just for rulers, male readers were not to think so much about finding a Proverbs 31 wife as to learn from her and be a Proverbs 31 man. Young men reading Proverbs 31 were not primarily to plan to be her ideal husband, but to align with her by being as wise as she was wise. By further implication, female readers were not simply to imagine themselves as ideal wives, but also to be as wise as she was wise.³²³

Enns adds that 'The book of Proverbs is actually painting a portrait for us of a reality that we are invited into' and into which we participate. Just as Proverbs 10ff is not a rule book and has ambiguity 'baked into the pages', readers of Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31 are to be trained in wisdom and not in memorising rules. The whole book of Proverbs according to Enns is about equipping people to 'read situations and not simply to read books'.³²⁴

³²¹ Peter Enns, '7 Things You Need to Know About How the Book of Proverbs Works,' <https://peteenns.com/how-proverbs-works/>.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid. Enns argues that the sages' answer to questions as to which option from Proverbs 26:4 and 5 one should choose would be either 4 or 5.

Learning to Love Wisdom

It is helpful when the hidden biases about gender, culture and theology, and the hermeneutical assumptions that inevitably exist, are identified and reconsidered when examining and interpreting biblical passages. Doing so may best honour the sages and their hopes in sharing these wisdom narratives with us. The sages may have believed that families and communities which do this enable rich tapestries of understanding to emerge. They may have hoped that this way of life would involve rightly fearing Yahweh and so encourage diversity, enhance dignity and enable the flourishing that Woman Wisdom proclaimed and taught. If this is true, then portrayals of wise women and men in chapters 1 to 9 and 31 are not locked into predetermined patriarchal regimes but open for new insights and wisdom. The qualities assigned to the Proverbs 31 woman and Woman Wisdom may then be more clearly understood both in their original context and in contemporary settings.

Perspectives on patriarchy and gender

This note briefly summarises Waltke's discussion and Newsom's interpretation of gender roles in Proverbs 1 to 9. Waltke focuses on the actions and character of the women in Proverbs 1 to 9, while Newsom discusses issues of privilege and status by considering the ways in which speech is used by the father and the Wisdom Woman.

Waltke's assessment of male and female in Proverbs 1 to 9

Male bias in Proverbs, according to Waltke, is clear: Proverbs sees women through men's eyes.³²⁵ Daughters are not addressed, only sons; unfaithful wives are mentioned, but not unfaithful men; no description is given of men seducing women, only the reverse; and no direct profile of an ideal husband accompanies that of the ideal wife.

Waltke does not appear to question the appropriateness of only sons being 'expected to assume' family leadership and define their family's 'identity and values'. Sons, according to Waltke, are 'more adventuresome' than daughters in pressing 'existing boundaries' and are more likely to deviate from inherited traditions. Daughters, Waltke claims, are naturally more oriented towards nurturing domestic and community environments.³²⁶

In Proverbs, men and women are assumed to be married, and teach their children not so much to separate wise and foolish speech as wise and foolish people. The primary example of folly is the 'Unchaste ('Strange') Wife' who has deviated from acceptable life in the covenant community.³²⁷ She was most likely to be a 'lustful apostate', an 'unrestrained wife', or someone who had married 'outside the covenant community' rather than a foreigner.³²⁸

Her role in the text, according to Waltke, 'functions as a paradigm for spiritual infidelity against the LORD'. He argues that this understanding is emphasised by her 'personification as Woman Folly'.³²⁹ Waltke concludes by noting the negative impact on Israel's life as God's people that resulted from Solomon's sexual immorality.

Newsom's assessment of rival discourse in Proverbs 1 to 9

The father's speeches and the Wisdom discourses in Proverbs 1 to 9 describe the economic, social and gender-based threats of the voices opposing the existing

³²⁵ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 116.

³²⁶ Ibid., 117.

³²⁷ Ibid., 119, 120.

³²⁸ Ibid., 124: Waltke cites Proverbs 2:16-17, 5:9, 20, 6:24, 29, 34, 35, 7:5, 19 as evidence.

³²⁹ Ibid., 125.

patriarchal culture as opportunistic. For Newsom, the father's instructions and Wisdom's exhortations in Proverbs 1 to 9 can be considered as responses to a 'rival discourse ... based not on patriarchal family affiliation but on common enterprise', and so on a peer-based alternative to the father's generational authority.³³⁰ The three Wisdom speeches 'belong to the same cultural voice that speaks through the father'. Personified Wisdom contrasts the father's authority within his family by being a 'public voice' symbolising 'collective authority and power'.³³¹ The father and Wisdom both seek to constrain and correct the son's behaviour by ensuring he remains subordinate to their authority and does not become a free agent. Their ultimate fear is the destruction of their own authority system.³³²

Several voices speak in Proverbs 2, but only through the father's mouth. Consequently, only his view is ultimately presented. Not only is the son silent, there is no evidence that the father values 'the plurality of discourses that intersect a culture'.³³³ Given the interactions evident in Proverbs between different ancient wisdom cultures, the father's beliefs might seem contradictory. The son is to learn from these interactions that both wisdom itself, and the way it is taught, involve pragmatic elements.³³⁴

The father warns against those who oppose him, and this primarily means the forbidden or strange woman. She is 'the quintessential other' who challenges the patriarchal culture, and, according to Newsom, it matters little why she is seen as a strange or foreign.³³⁵ By her competing and alluring message, she threatens the father and son's 'solidarity', the basis on which the patriarchal culture will survive.³³⁶ As such, she represents various 'marginal discourses. She is the contradiction, the dissonance that forces a dominant discourse to articulate itself and at the same time threatens to subvert it'.³³⁷

In discussing Proverbs 3, Newsom comments that by 'giving discourse a privileged position' and seeing the world as involving 'conflicting discourses', Proverbs 1 to 9 'appears to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of reality and the problematic status of truth'.³³⁸ Yet the father is presenting a view of life that has transcendental foundations and is not socially constructed. The emphasis on

³³⁰ Newsom, 'Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9', 145.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

³³² *Ibid.*, 146.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 147.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

Yahweh builds on the initial Wisdom discourse and is further developed in Proverbs 8 and 9. Newsom writes that the 'authority of the transcendent Father of fathers', reinforced by personified Wisdom, is needed to establish and supplement the authority structure of the patriarchal father that has been already profiled.³³⁹ Wisdom is incomparably rich, promises and gives long life, and declares herself 'as the tree of life' (Proverbs 3:18). In doing so she offers the knowledge that gives life.³⁴⁰

Newsom points out that, in Proverbs 4:1–9, while the son's subordination to his father is permanent, his own status as a father will eventually emerge.³⁴¹ She notes that, 'One is always a subordinate son to the collective authority of the symbolic order. But its transcending father-status is what underwrites the father-status of those who occupy positions of authority within it'.³⁴² Newsom identifies several 'cultural codes' used in Proverbs 4 to develop this notion of emerging maturity.³⁴³ Proverbs 4:5 and 7 urge the sons with 'economic code' to 'Get wisdom; get insight', while Proverbs 4:6 and 8 use 'erotic code' by urging the sons to 'love her' and 'embrace her', rather than 'forsake her'.³⁴⁴ Proverbs 4:10–19 uses the 'code of movement: way, lead, walk, paths, steps, run, stumble, go, come, road, go straight, avoid, cross over', while Proverbs 4:20–27 uses parts of the body.³⁴⁵

Newsom indicates that the strange woman threatens the father's 'patriarchal thinking' by her 'lack of the phallus and the privilege that the male associates with its possession'.³⁴⁶ The conflict between the strange woman and the father is linked with her use of speech to achieve a position of symbolic authority. Women were to be silent as evidence of their feminine inferiority, even though 'sexuality is by its nature dialogical, as the term 'intercourse' well suggests'.³⁴⁷ The son's place in the 'social and symbolic order' would be determined by his choice of sexual partners. These choices would either replicate or threaten the patriarchal family.³⁴⁸ Women speaking publicly as the strange woman did were seen by the father to undermine the structure and function of patriarchal society itself. Wisdom speaks, and speaks publicly, but only to reinforce and not challenge the father's dynasty.

³³⁹ Ibid., 150.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 151.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 151.

³⁴² Ibid., 151.

³⁴³ Ibid., 151.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 151, 152.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 152. Newsom links body parts with personal dispositions. She notes that 'the phallus is never referred to explicitly' but that problems associated with it are mentioned in Proverbs 5 and 6.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 153.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 153.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 153.

These different speeches in Proverbs 7 and 8, together with the contrasting speeches in chapter 9, demonstrate that women act as boundary markers for patriarchal society.³⁴⁹

The pedagogical point, for Newsom, is that inherent within the discourses in Proverbs 1 to 9 is a reason for querying the text's 'own claims' to authority and so for resisting the 'patriarchal interpellation of the father as well.'³⁵⁰ Proverbs 1 to 9 is therefore not simply an 'initiation' document but one that challenges the 'problematic nature' of this type of patriarchal discourse.³⁵¹

If Newsom is correct, then the strange or forbidden woman represents any dissenting voice in a patriarchal society that speaks, legitimately or otherwise, against the hegemony and oligarchy of the senior patriarchal authorities. Newsom's assessment assists in discussing prejudice involving the characters described in Proverbs 1 to 9. Dixon et al. believe that prejudice primarily relates to perceptions about belonging to certain groups, rather than ownership of specific beliefs.³⁵² Gender issues are readily discernible because group membership is explicitly identified. Consideration of prejudice in a patriarchal society may focus either on presumed male dominance or perceived female weaknesses. For Dixon et al., sexism involves the reinforcement of views of women that diminish female 'agency and independence' either through male hostility or male benevolence.³⁵³ Women who fit the expected stereotypes are praised, while those who do not are marginalised. The portrayals of women in Proverbs provides opportunity for attitudes of hostile or benevolent sexism to be discussed, and for the welfare of all people in a community to be investigated and improved.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 156, 157.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 159.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 159.

³⁵² John; Levine Dixon, Mark; Reicher, Steve; Durrheim, Kevin, 'Beyond Prejudice: Are Negative Evaluations the Problem and Is Getting Us to Like One Another More the Solution?', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 35 (2012): 411-66., 412.

³⁵³ Ibid., 414.

Theological and educational considerations

This supplement discusses factors relating to the perceived disconnection of Proverbs 1 to 9 from the rest of the Hebrew Bible. It also considers ways in which chapters 1 to 9 are seen to be integrated with it.

Disconnection

The significant silence in these first nine chapters, and in the wisdom literature generally, regarding Israel's worship practices and doctrines, may suggest that Proverbs 1 to 9 and other wisdom literature have little theological relevance.³⁵⁴ Martin asserts that 'if we turn to the standard works on Old Testament theology we find either an almost total disregard of the wisdom literature or an embarrassment on the part of the author as to know how to deal with it'.³⁵⁵ Murphy argues that 'many scholars [think] that wisdom literature has no place in theology'.³⁵⁶ He identifies several reasons for this conclusion: the wisdom books lack consistency and finality, biblical theology has focused on salvation history, there are only three 'unquestionable wisdom books', and some authors simply oppose biblical wisdom literature.³⁵⁷ There is certainly a need to explain both the lack of sacred specifics in the text and the central relevance to daily life of faith in God described in these chapters.

An understanding of the distinction between the representation of God in the Law and the Prophets, and his depiction in Proverbs 1 to 9, can consider the validity of Whybray's assertion that in these nine chapters we do not find 'the dynamic God of the Old Testament tradition, but a remote sovereign who judges but does not interfere with human conduct'.³⁵⁸ According to this reasoning, Proverbs 1 to 9 focuses on human motivation and achievement, realised in harmony with the character of God, and understood by attaining wisdom and insight from a faithful heart and a diligent mind. Proverbs 1 to 9 may be thought of as community wisdom as it was understood in the faith context provided by the Law and the Prophets.³⁵⁹

Waltke argues that McKane, Wurthwein, and Zimmerli regarded earlier Israelite wisdom as 'utilitarian and eudaemonistic rather than religious' rather than being

³⁵⁴ Martin, *Proverbs*, 91. In the same vein, Prinsloo, 'Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.', 1377, fn 6.

³⁵⁵ 'Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.', 92. Also, Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 64.

³⁵⁶ Murphy, 'Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology.', 4. Also, 'Can the Book of Proverbs Be a Player in 'Biblical Theology'?', 4.

³⁵⁷ 'Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology.', 4.

³⁵⁸ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 26.

³⁵⁹ Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 9.

connected with Israel's religious life. His understanding is that 'ancient Near East literature' lacks any 'secular/profane' or 'religious/pious' distinctions.³⁶⁰ Fox, by contrast, argues that Proverbs 1 to 9 is best understood as 'a secular work', in which 'God is never quoted or addressed', and which simply gives direct, pragmatic advice for everyday issues.³⁶¹

Another perspective on the book of Proverbs, especially given its origins in family and social settings, explores the contrast between experiential and revealed wisdom. Martin sees 'a kind of polarity' between experiential knowledge and wisdom, and the concept that there are limits beyond which 'theological or revelatory wisdom' is required.³⁶²

Understanding the limits of experience as boundaries beyond which revelation is needed is not the only possible interpretation of this polarity. One alternative approach might consider theological wisdom as a framework, as a conceptual structure or language through which experiential wisdom is understood. Another option is the reverse approach, where experiential wisdom provides a framework for theological wisdom.

Explanations of the disconnection of 'one of the most important intellectual and literary movements represented in the books of the Hebrew Bible',³⁶³ according to Dick, result from a range of issues. These issues include a theological focus on the Mosaic Covenant, a perception that the wisdom literature is overly oriented to a cosmology of order which excludes divine intervention, the similarity of Hebrew wisdom literature 'both in *content* and *form*' to similar literature among neighbouring nations, the rejection of several Hebrew wisdom books from their Bible, and uncertainty about the concept of wisdom in its Hebrew context.³⁶⁴ For Dick, 'A wise Israelite assumes that harmony (Hebrew, *tsedaqa*) reigns in and among the spheres of (1) nature, (2) human society, and (3) the religious relationship between believers and their deity'.³⁶⁵

One further source of this disconnection may relate to the use of personified Wisdom, and to the role of the father, in Proverbs 1 to 9. Personified Wisdom, according to Yoder, 'is a remarkable female figure who has been neglected or downplayed far too long in the religious life of Jews and Christians—despite such

³⁶⁰ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 53. Also, Clifford, *Proverbs*, 9 and Prinsloo, 'Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in Its Social and Ideological Context.', 1396.

³⁶¹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 7. Also, Murphy, 'Can the Book of Proverbs Be a Player in 'Biblical Theology'?', 5.

³⁶² Martin, *Proverbs*, 93.

³⁶³ Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, 2008, 277.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 278–279.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

persistent and compelling testimony to her significance'.³⁶⁶ Proverbs 1 to 9, for Newsom, involves privileged father-son communication, and so is ultimately 'men, preoccupied with speech, talking about women and women's speech'.³⁶⁷ And, it might also be observed that Proverbs 1 to 9 contains significant personifications of women who provide strategic instruction, leadership and support, and whose practical activities are productive, fruitful and functional.

Integration

Several efforts at integrating 'the wisdom literature more into the centre of a theological appraisal of the Old Testament' are described by Martin.³⁶⁸ According to Martin, one perspective is Towner's discussion of how understanding the wisdom literature helps explain secularism, and its freedom and limitations. From this viewpoint, experience is 'desacralized', with humanity able to make its own choices in a structured, divinely created world.

Zimmerli, according to Martin, adopts another strategy. He describes obedience to the law, sacrificial worship and practical wisdom as three strands of the one rope (cf. Eccles. 4:11, 12), rather than treating wisdom as something of little relevance.³⁶⁹ A third approach, described by Martin, is outlined by Høgenhaven who explores the primary thrust of Hebrew faith as experiential wisdom understood in the context of a freely given and fundamentally good creation made by their covenant God, Yahweh. Salvation history makes sense for Høgenhaven in this context, as he, according to Martin, 'argues that for pre-exilic Yahwism what was of primary importance was not history ... but 'cosmic and social order and stability''. Consequently, for Martin, Israel's wisdom tradition goes 'back to the very earliest periods of Israel's history'.³⁷⁰ Høgenhaven adds that 'wisdom involves the conception of a comprehensive world-view, in which cosmological and ethical laws and regularities are ascertained'.³⁷¹

The final perspective cited by Martin seeks to integrate wisdom into theology by identifying significant theological elements in the wisdom literature. He considers this perspective as being aligned with Murphy's approach. Murphy focuses on the fear of Yahweh, the link between creation and wisdom theologies, the substance of the Proverbial morality, issues relating to theodicy, and the implications of the feminine personification of wisdom.³⁷² The last point is seen as relevant by

³⁶⁶ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 232.

³⁶⁷ Newsom, 'Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9', 142.

³⁶⁸ Martin, *Proverbs*, 94.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 95, 96.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96. Also, Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, 15.

³⁷¹ Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects of Old Testament Theology*, 99.

³⁷² Martin, *Proverbs*, 97. Also, Murphy, 'Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology', 5-6.

Learning to Love Wisdom

Murphy because Wisdom, as woman, reflects something unique about the nature of God; her invitations evoke fresh insights into human responses to God; and she disrupts both extreme patriarchalism and purely masculine views of God.³⁷³

In seeking to avoid the book of Proverbs being read as ‘the ‘small print’ to the Sinai law’, Goldsworthy explores a model where ‘grace (redemption), law and human wisdom [are thought of] as three concentric circles’, from outside to inside.³⁷⁴ In his framework, ‘the wisdom of Proverbs may operate at any of [these] three levels’, since God

made us to be responsible, thinking, reasoning people who consider matters before us and make choices. Responsible freedom within the bounds set by God’s word is very close to the heart of the human wisdom of Proverbs.³⁷⁵

From this perspective, there is minimal ‘God-talk’ in Proverbs 1 to 9 because Proverbs 1:7 clearly sets the context, and in this setting ‘godly thought and action do not have to be continually pinned down’ by ‘artificial piety’.³⁷⁶

Another viewpoint is provided by Collins, for whom the difference between observable, experiential wisdom, and that based on revelatory claims, is also significant. The former wisdom develops tenuous conclusions, based on the observer’s outlook. Its logic is often supported by comparisons and analogies and emphasises perceived results from certain behaviours. Building values and ethics in this manner constructs belief systems which require the ongoing adaptation and refinement that are evident in the wisdom literature. Just as Proverbs 1 to 9 provides an overview of the lists of proverbs that follow (along with the final acrostic poem), so Job and Ecclesiastes enrich understandings of biblical wisdom itself.³⁷⁷

The perspective that Hebrew proverbs were not secular, despite being common sense, is emphasised by Dell.³⁷⁸ Her judgement is that the tension between ‘human-sided’ and ‘God-given’ dimensions of wisdom is ‘the key that unlocks an understanding of the nature of the wisdom quest’.³⁷⁹ From this position, life makes

³⁷³ Martin, *Proverbs*, 97. Also, Murphy, ‘Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology,’ 5. Cf. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 11.

³⁷⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Tree of Life, The: Reading Proverbs Today* (Sydney, N.S.W.: Anglican Information Office, 1993), 31.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷⁷ Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 483–484; also, Martin, *Proverbs*, 14, 15; Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, 14.

³⁷⁸ Dell, ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’. *An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature*, 29.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

sense in a divinely ordered world, with God revealing himself through these life experiences.

Waltke states that the emphasis on the fear of the LORD indicates that Proverbs is well integrated with the rest of the Old Testament.³⁸⁰ He affirms Goldingay's assessment that wisdom literature is more concerned with daily life than past history, more interested in repeated patterns than unique events, more oriented to social relationships than national concerns, and more focused on people's experiences than religious traditions.³⁸¹ Common themes to both Proverbs and the rest of the Old Testament include that Yahweh is creator of all things, that the living God avenges wrongdoing, comforts his people, and actively directs history, and that God is merciful and righteous, and acts with 'aesthetic-ethical sensibilities'.³⁸²

The theology of creation, as Dick notes, has implications for understanding 'cosmic order, political legitimacy and social justice, and divine grace',³⁸³ as well as defining the arena in which redemption occurs. Reciprocally, redemptive theologies have implications regarding the nature of creation theologies. If the advice the father has for his son and Wisdom's call in the streets provide frameworks for action rather than enacting legislation, then their wisdom informs authentic listeners how to navigate through the inevitable crises, challenges and opportunities that life presents.³⁸⁴ Their wisdom enriches listeners' understanding of God's deliverance from times and places of difficulty in this way.

Wisdom involves elements of pragmatism and idealism. It wrestles with the need for 'practical results' with a 'down-to-earth, realistic character', while hoping to be altruistic and ethical.³⁸⁵ Proverbs, according to Collins, describes God's actions as guaranteeing 'the cosmic order' and that he 'is encountered in human affairs as the power that limits human capability'.³⁸⁶ In this context, Proverbs 1 to 9 links 'the fear of the LORD' with 'the beginning of wisdom', and translates that maxim into parental respect and rejection of false allurements. These chapters exalt wisdom and reject folly, encourage discipline and despise laziness and waywardness.³⁸⁷ Collins believes that Proverbs, where references to God are infrequent compared to elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and where Israel's history of 'miraculous

³⁸⁰ Waltke, *Book of Proverbs, The: Chapters 1-15*, 64, 67.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁸³ Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, 280.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

³⁸⁵ Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 485, 486.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 486.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 488.

interventions' is not mentioned,³⁸⁸ reflects a tradition distinct from that requiring obedience to the Law and the Prophets.³⁸⁹

Hebrew history, in Zimmerli's thinking, identifies the 'wise man' with being either a skilled artisan, a political counsellor or a scribe.³⁹⁰ He concludes that 'in the Old Testament the 'wise man' is not the 'philosopher' or theoretician speculating on people and the world'.³⁹¹ With all its mastery of artistically expressed proverbs and songs, this wisdom remains eminently practical and devoted to successful living.³⁹² Focusing on successful living is particularly pertinent where everyday decision-making is not explicitly connected to religious decrees.³⁹³ In this context, recognising 'hidden regularities' in creation is not 'an intellectual game' but a means of living a fruitful life.³⁹⁴ This life, according to Zimmerli, 'stands under the confession of Yahweh' just as much as that described in Israel's salvation history and law. He also argues that a fruitful life clearly emphasises the differences between wisdom and folly.³⁹⁵

Given that Hebrew wisdom literature expresses their understanding of everyday life, as well as their perceptions of Yahweh, some dialogue between these 'anthropocentric and theocentric' perspectives is unavoidable.³⁹⁶ This conversation inevitably explores views of creation,³⁹⁷ and, in Proverbs 1 to 9, this is mainly expressed through the personification of wisdom.³⁹⁸ Dell believes that Zimmerli 'put creation back on the agenda'³⁹⁹ and that Murphy

rejects making wisdom or creation faith into outsiders for Israelite faith ... He speaks of two types of creation tradition in wisdom: first, creation as 'beginnings', as expressed in the poems on Wisdom that make the wisdom tradition the means of understanding the nature of reality, as revealed in the

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 486.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 494.

³⁹⁰ Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 107–108.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 108.

³⁹² Dick, *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, 284, 285.

³⁹³ Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 155.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 157.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 158–160.

³⁹⁶ Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, The, 129.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 127, 128.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 129.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 134.

created world, and secondly, creation as the arena of human existence, an arena which, in its emphasis on experience, included experience of God.⁴⁰⁰

By establishing a world-view where life was fundamentally meaningful and consistent, and where worship practices could be more readily aligned with a theology of creation, wisdom provides an integrating factor between these creational and ritual viewpoints.⁴⁰¹ Dell believes that salvation history, while essential to their world-view, described their longitudinal experience of Yahweh in his world. Proverbs 3:19–20 and 8:22–31, as part of the wider Wisdom narrative, highlight the ‘divine element of the wisdom enterprise and introduce the revelation of the divine through wisdom and through the acts of creation’.⁴⁰²

Dell believes the same God is spoken of in Proverbs as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Readers, she asserts, are presented with ‘a portrait gallery of understandings of God and of encounters with truth, and in that sense, no one understanding of God was identical to any other’.⁴⁰³ One consequence of this awareness of God is that the social context of Proverbs 1 to 9 is essentially religious, and that the focus in the passages on wisdom and creation is intended to inform an understanding of God already connected with other scriptures. Dell suggests scholars too readily identify social settings with literary genres without adequately considering the ethical, educational and prophetic dimensions of the ‘wisdom maxims’. Identifying these ‘interconnections’ helps free the proverbs from the ‘contextual straitjacket[s] in which they have been traditionally confined’.⁴⁰⁴

These considerations regarding the prophets, the law and the cultic practices suggest that Proverbs is better integrated with other parts of the Hebrew Bible than is commonly believed. Rather than being a peripheral issue, Hebrew wisdom literature provided a sense of unity and purpose. Proverbs 1 to 9 summarises this perspective at a distinct stage of Israel’s history, and is a significant landmark in their intellectual and faith development. In these chapters, where the father-son discourse is collected, and where Wisdom is personified, the sages have left evidence of their understanding of faith and trust in Yahweh.⁴⁰⁵ Their writings are a compatible, but different, perspective on living a fruitful life, enhancing the revelation of Yahweh provided through the Law and the Prophets. As Perdue comments, the absence of cultic and historical data in Proverbs does not imply inflexibility about the sages’ teaching: ‘The sages were well aware that the

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 135. Also, Perdue, *Proverbs*, 47–48.

⁴⁰¹ Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, The, 136.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 139, 140.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 185.

⁴⁰⁵ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, 11; also, Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, 13.

Learning to Love Wisdom

authenticity of a saying or teaching was intrinsically connected to the concrete specificity of time, place, and conditions in which a teaching was considered for guidance in a sage's decision making and behaviour'.⁴⁰⁶

Another way in which personified Wisdom can be seen as an integrating factor can be through a reconsideration of the 'captivating and complex portrait of wisdom as a woman—one that would be reclaimed, repainted, and renamed by sages for generations to come', especially in seeking to understand biblical and contemporary patriarchal societies.⁴⁰⁷ After all, the book of Proverbs is 'about living wisely in the everyday'.⁴⁰⁸

Despite the disconnections discussed already, it seems appropriate to conclude, with the words of Clifford, that 'the Book of Proverbs is a genuinely religious work lying at the centre of the Bible rather than, as is sometimes alleged, a pragmatic and mechanical book at the Bible's fringe. It can speak to us today'.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 3.

⁴⁰⁷ Yoder, 'Proverbs', 242.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁰⁹ Clifford, *Book of Proverbs and Our Search for Wisdom, The*, 1, 2, 5.

Longman: The fear of the LORD is wisdom

This outline shares several insights from Longman's *The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*.⁴¹⁰

Old Testament Wisdom Writings

Longman indicates that Old Testament wisdom is usually seen as practical, common to other nations than Israel, and linked with doctrines about creation. Israel's theological and redemptive covenants are often not thought to be connected closely with this wisdom literature.⁴¹¹ If wisdom does however have theological foundations, then studying its themes and concerns can generate harmonies and resonances with 'redemptive-historical, covenantal, legal, prophetic, and priestly traditions' in the Scriptures.⁴¹²

Longman distinguishes between describing a genre of Old Testament wisdom books and appreciating the extent to which wisdom thinking permeates the whole Hebrew Bible.⁴¹³ Identifying common themes in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job helps establish an appreciation of Old Testament wisdom thinking.⁴¹⁴

Proverbs

Wisdom in Proverbs, according to Longman, focuses on practical, ethical and theological levels, each of which interacts with the others. Practical wisdom is about well-being and emotional intelligence.⁴¹⁵ A person is practically wise when they know what to say and do at any given time. Ethical wisdom is morally transformative and helps people grow in goodness and righteousness. Ethical wisdom, like practical wisdom, is situational and involves following suitable advice. While this advice impacts in similar ways to the law-commandments, it does not have the same level of permanence as the Old Testament legal system was seen to possess.⁴¹⁶ Practical and ethical wisdom connect with theological wisdom. Fearing the LORD is both the foundation and the entry point for wisdom.⁴¹⁷

As theocentric wisdom involves relating to the LORD and links with Woman Wisdom, her identity and activity are critical factors in understanding wisdom in

⁴¹⁰ Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*, The.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., xiv.

⁴¹² Ibid., xiv, xvi.

⁴¹³ Ibid., xvi.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 1–3.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 6, 7.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

the book of Proverbs.⁴¹⁸ Woman wisdom is about more than ethical truth as she witnessed and took part in creation, activities which are understandably not assigned to Woman Folly.⁴¹⁹ Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, according to Longman, cannot therefore be regarded as simply secular or universal.

Ecclesiastes

Like Job, Ecclesiastes has a different ethos to Proverbs. Longman believes that Qohelet is a pseudonym for Assembler or Gatherer and that Qohelet's voice occupies Ecclesiastes 1:12 to 12:7. The frame narrator is a wise father who interprets Qohelet for his son.⁴²⁰

Qohelet declared that meaning cannot be found in work, pleasure, wealth, relationships or wisdom because death ends our stories, and injustice occurs when wicked people prosper and righteous ones suffer. Timing is impossible, causing frustration and making wisdom difficult (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:9–11). We are left to make the best of whatever temporary circumstances we experience.

The frame narrator's perspective is shared in a two-part epilogue. The first part in verses 8 to 12 assesses Qohelet's narrative while the next two verses inform his son about the most appropriate way to live.⁴²¹ By rejecting the adequacy of Qohelet's 'under the sun' thinking, the frame narrator also rejects any idea that Qohelet was suggesting a meta-narrative of joy.⁴²² In the second section of the narrator's epilogue, he insists that he has reasoned enough about Qohelet's concerns and wants to emphasise an 'above the sun' point of view. Humanity's duty, he claims, is to fear God because God has the final say.⁴²³

Longman assumes a late date for Ecclesiastes and believes that the tri-part structure of the Hebrew Bible (Law, Prophets and Writings) has affected the essence of the book of Ecclesiastes. Fearing God links with Law, being aware of judgement is a reminder of the prophets and not thinking under the sun emphasises the messages in the whole Hebrew Scriptures.⁴²⁴

Job

If Woman folly and her cohort in the book of Proverbs and Qohelet's presentation of death, injustice and untimeliness are not distressing enough, the narrative about

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 14, 18.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 20, 23, 24.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 26, 28.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 30, 34, 35.

⁴²² Ibid., 39, 40. Cf. Priest, *Living in Love and Freedom*, 196–199.

⁴²³ Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*, The, 38–40.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 41. There are twenty-nine direct references to 'under the sun' in Ecclesiastes (NRSV).

suffering in the third book in this trilogy focuses attention on misery and emptiness. Yet, Longman insists, the book of Job is initially concerned with wisdom and not primarily about suffering.

Despite Job's innocence and virtue, God's response to a report from his 'spy service' involves Job experiencing great and inexplicable loss, pain and grief. Job's response to his situation is understood as lament while those in the Exodus wilderness journey grumbled. The persistent response of Job's friends is simply that people only suffer because they are sinners. Retribution theology is the unchanging narrative of Job's critics.⁴²⁵

Job's response includes sarcasm, showing that the debate between them is about wisdom and not suffering (Job 12:2–3). Job, nonetheless, had a similar retribution theology to his friends. Accepting this doctrine and believing he was not the cause of his suffering led Job to 'accuse God of injustice'.⁴²⁶

On this basis, Job explores the possibility that someone, although he doesn't know who, might intervene in his complaint with God. His most positive declaration about God is in the familiar redeemer passage (Job 19:23–27). Longman sees 'immense irony' in Job's assessment. The celestial council included an accuser but made no mention of a redeemer!⁴²⁷

Job's 'soliloquy' in chapters 28 to 31 opens with a strong and rich declaration that God is the source of all wisdom, acknowledges that only God knows where to find wisdom and that 'Truly, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding' (Job 28:28). This testimony of Job interrupting his laments is a little like Jeremiah's well-known affirmation of the LORD's steadfast love (Lamentations 3:22ff).⁴²⁸

God refused to explain to Job why Job was suffering: 'Rather, God has put Job in his place, reminding him that Job is not God'.⁴²⁹ Job repented of his claim that God was unjust, but not of his belief that he was not the cause of his own suffering. Longman indicates that Job was correct in rejecting his friend's arguments and in wanting to continue to communicate with God even though there appeared to be no benefits for Job in doing so. The result was that Job emerged with a stronger relationship with God, one in which he could 'suffer deeply and not demand answers'.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 44, 46.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 48–51.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 58, 59.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 60, 61.

Longman concludes that each of these wisdom books affirms that God is the source of wisdom and that the appropriate human response is reverence and awe. Fearing the LORD is the beginning, purpose and goal of true wisdom.⁴³¹

Other Old Testament wisdom writings

Longman briefly explores wisdom in Deuteronomy, Psalms, Song of Songs and several of the prophets before turning to character studies of Joseph and Daniel, and Adam and Solomon. In this process, links readily emerge between redemptive history and wisdom narratives, affirming his view that biblical wisdom is more than practical insight and moral virtue. The stories of Joseph and Daniel, and Adam and Solomon, highlight the emphasis in Proverbs on wisdom as a life-long learning journey in different ways.

Israel's wisdom

Sources

If biblical wisdom has more in common with wisdom beyond Israel's borders than with Israel's own 'redemptive-historical, prophetic, and legal traditions', then Israel's wisdom was mainly based on 'experience, observation, tradition, and learning from one's mistakes'. It may therefore be argued that its only theological connections were in terms of creational understandings.⁴³² If wisdom does involve divine disclosure and hence excluding revelation from 'tradition, experience and observation' is folly, then further examinations of the links between revelation and wisdom are beneficial.⁴³³

While tradition in each of the three main biblical wisdom books is contextual and inter-generational, tradition is also evident in the ten commandments. Longman emphasises the correlations between both strands before highlighting that these patterns of transmission were not unique to Israel. He believes that 1 Kings 4:30 is an example of the high regard Israel's sages had for their neighbour's wisdom and that the sages saw value in adapting their neighbour's teaching to their own Israelite settings. The sages affirmed that some modification was needed to their neighbour's wisdom because of their own theological foundations, processes and goals, all of which were expressed in terms of the links between fearing the LORD and learning wisdom.⁴³⁴

Tradition is based on experience and observation, even though people have different levels of insight and self-reflection in learning about viable and successful living. Wise people learn from their mistakes and can be corrected while foolish

⁴³¹ Ibid., 62.

⁴³² Ibid., 109.

⁴³³ Ibid., 112.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 116.

people are prone to repeat their faults and ridicule those who provide helpful advice. Humility therefore characterises wise people and pride those who are foolish. This process of learning calls for the wisdom of older people to be carefully considered and not casually ignored.⁴³⁵

The wisdom narratives emphasise that children are to learn that gaining wisdom requires careful study and ongoing commitment. Wisdom requires effort and involves more than passively waiting for prayers to be answered.⁴³⁶ Yet this learning process requires learners to remember that their brilliance and perception are not the original source of true wisdom. The beneficial attributes that any person or community possesses are all ultimately divine gifts requiring God's self-revelation.⁴³⁷

Longman states that Woman Wisdom personifies Yahweh's wisdom and is a 'metonymy representing God'. This wisdom and Israelite law, according to Longman, have more links than contemporary scholars usually appreciate.⁴³⁸ He cites Deuteronomy 4:5–6 as evidence that while gaining wisdom and acting wisely are not easy, God is wisdom's true source and so wisdom cannot be rightly separated from God. Wisdom therefore involves fearing God and relating intimately with Woman Wisdom as God's representative.⁴³⁹

Wisdom and creation

Longman suggests that the link scholars make between creation and wisdom may have more to do with the silence that exists in the wisdom books about Israel's covenant, law and worship history as a redeemed community than about connections between creation and wisdom in these wisdom writings. Without explicitly referencing Israel's past historical narrative or speaking of future judgements, the wisdom writers differ from the prophets, whom he calls covenant lawyers.⁴⁴⁰

Proverbs 3:19–20 indicates that the universe was created by divine wisdom rather than chance, and so has intrinsic order. Knowing the way creation functions and living successfully therefore involves relating to and fearing Yahweh (cf. Proverbs 1:7 and other passages). Comparing Proverbs 3:19–20 with Proverbs 24:3–4, Longman muses that we may be meant to understand Yahweh's creating the world as God building a home, and comments that it is common for scholars to identify

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 117, 118.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 120, 121.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 122, 126.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 128, 130.

links between God creating the universe and Israel constructing the tabernacle and temple.⁴⁴¹

Linking creation and wisdom, with creation only being secular or universal, can avoid questions about whether Israel's understanding of creation in the wisdom books was revelatory, particularly given the strong links between Yahweh and Woman Wisdom including that 'as crafter of creation, [she] plays and laughs before God as well as with humanity'.⁴⁴² The accounts in Job of God creating the world focus on God establishing order from chaos rather than on God's word creating the material universe (cf. Gen. 1:1–2:4a). Ecclesiastes 3:11, 20 and 12:1, 7 suggest that Qoholeth's mind had creation as its focus even given that Ecclesiastes lacks the kind of creation narratives that are in Proverbs and Job.⁴⁴³

After briefly looking at the wisdom Psalms and the Song of Songs, Longman concludes that since creation has order and is not merely random, the sages were teaching about wise living in terms of being in an ordered creation. This conclusion leads Longman to ask about the levels of confidence the sages had that their explanations matched what best achieves a 'flourishing life'.⁴⁴⁴

Longman concludes that while Proverbs urges people to live wisely, it does not claim that wise living leads to guaranteed outcomes. While wise strategies are most likely to work, other circumstances may intervene.⁴⁴⁵ Longman holds the view that Job and Ecclesiastes do not contradict Proverbs but provide 'a canonical corrective to an overreading of the book'. Linking biblical wisdom with creation theology does not take humanity back to pre-fall Eden 'but recognizes that we live in a troubled, disordered world'.⁴⁴⁶

If, in contrast to other ancient near-eastern creation stories, Genesis 1 and 2 reject a conflict narrative, by for example, referring to God's Spirit hovering over the waters but not fighting them, then this revelatory understanding must inform the way the sages understood their own wisdom and the wisdom of their neighbours. In the book of Job, God does not primarily profile himself as creating the waters but as controlling them 'like a parent controls a rambunctious child'. This control does not eliminate 'chaos and evil' but indicates that God handles them in ways that are beyond human ability or comprehension.⁴⁴⁷ Hence wisdom believes there is benefit in being wise and acting wisely without being so simplistic as to claim

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 130, 131.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 132, 133.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 140–142.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 143.

infallibility.⁴⁴⁸ Practical and ethical wisdom is possible while ‘theological wisdom’ involves trusting and fearing the LORD.⁴⁴⁹

Longman also asks whether biblical wisdom was unique to Israel or if it was universal, and whether it differs from other Old Testament writings. He concludes that the Israelite sages seem to be more open to learn from other nations than the prophets. He qualifies his comment by insisting that the wisdom motif about the fear of the LORD being the *beginning* of wisdom means that outside of fearing God there is no true wisdom, and that it is ‘Israel’s deity, not the ‘common God,’ who is to be feared’.⁴⁵⁰ As biblical wisdom is based on fearing Israel’s God, its openness to other insights was not seeking ‘the common good along with the common God’.⁴⁵¹

Wisdom, covenant and law

If Genesis describes a lack of hostility between the waters and God, the story of Noah and the flood reflects a world no longer operating according to God’s original mandate. Discussions about covenant therefore need to begin with the two creation accounts. Longman argues that God’s covenant with Noah should be considered as a ‘re-creation covenant after the Adamic covenant, the original creation covenant’.⁴⁵²

He sees the Abrahamic covenant established in Genesis 12, with Genesis 15 and 17 as renewals. The Mosaic covenant links law to reward and punishment, while the Davidic covenant inaugurates a dynasty which David’s descendants are to lead by obeying God’s will.⁴⁵³ In summarising Old Testament covenants, he does not limit thoughts about them to these events, or to promises in Jeremiah regarding a new covenant.⁴⁵⁴ The new covenant anticipated by Jeremiah was expected to fulfil the former covenants and be ‘more intense, more intimate, more internal, and more immediate’ than them.⁴⁵⁵

Covenant terminology is linked with treaties which are, in turn, connected with understandings about conquest. Longman points out that other ancient near-eastern treaties are either between parties of equal or nearly equal power, or

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 145, 146.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 160–162.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 164. Cf. William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Honiton, Devon, UK: Paternoster Press, 1997).

⁴⁵³ Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel, The*, 165, 166.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

between a dominant power and a weaker one. He sees biblical covenants as vassal treaties rather than parity ones.⁴⁵⁶

He notes that Deuteronomy has a similar structure to these treaties.⁴⁵⁷ While law and wisdom have ‘overlapping interests and purposes’, biblical law comes from God, while wisdom in Proverbs was imparted by fathers. Yet fathers are ‘God’s proxy’, and Woman Wisdom, who personifies ‘God’s wisdom if not God himself’ also instructs young people.⁴⁵⁸

Divine revelation and human fingerprints are on both law and wisdom, with the emphasis in covenant law being on the former and in proverbial wisdom on the latter. Wisdom’s life is in experience and observation, interpreted in the context of transmitted traditions. This interpretive factor is significant when considering that proverbs do not always apply, while the ten commandments are expected to be accepted as always valid – even if the books of Exodus and Leviticus interpret them in various ways.⁴⁵⁹

Longman mentions Meredith Kline’s view that all Scripture involves God’s covenants, and that since wisdom commences with fearing the LORD, ‘the way of wisdom is the way of the covenant’.⁴⁶⁰ He also cites Jamie Grant’s argument that the book of Job relies on a type of ‘covenant consciousness’.⁴⁶¹ It is this awareness, according to Longman, that Job cannot reconcile with his suffering. Job’s lament is that God’s friendship has evaporated, and his presence evokes distress and grief (Job 29:4–5; cf. Job 7:11–21).

Although the Old Testament might not major on interactions between law, covenant and wisdom, the underlying emphasis on fearing the LORD always directs readers to Israel’s covenant God.

Refining an understanding of wisdom

Wise and foolish behaviour

It is easy to conclude that the book of Proverbs links wisdom with success and folly with failure, and that both Job and Qohelet question this conclusion, concluding that it is ‘cruel’.⁴⁶² Since retribution theology permeates the Old

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 169. Introduction (1:1–5), Historical Review (1:9–3:27), Law (4–26), Rewards and Punishments (27–28) and Witnesses (30:19–20).

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 170, 171

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 174. Cf. James A. Grant and Wilson Alistair J., eds., *God of Covenant, The* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2005).

⁴⁶² Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel, The*, 184.

Testament, Longman bases his response on 'canonical interpretation'.⁴⁶³ Rather than seeing Job and Ecclesiastes opposing Proverbs, Proverbs needs careful reading. He suggests that if the genre of the book is understood then this issue diminishes. Some proverbs require choices and, quoting Waltke, Longman points out that proverbs are not to be read as promises but as indicators to help people make wise choices.⁴⁶⁴

The social setting of wisdom

While schools are not mentioned in the Old Testament, Longman refers to evidence for schools in other nations and to the simpler Hebrew alphabet. Some form of Israelite education occurred, as is evident from the existence of the biblical writings, but we do not know when it first happened in schools.⁴⁶⁵

There is also doubt as to whether and when there were professional sages in ancient Israel. Longman concludes that many current scholars see the Hebrew Bible as being composed mainly during the postexilic period, and that textual evidence and the existence of professional sages in neighbouring nations both support the existence of professional sages in Israel.⁴⁶⁶ If wisdom writings are not a distinct genre, then it is less likely that these documents were produced by separate communities of sages.⁴⁶⁷

Wisdom and gender

Longman indicates that the father-son, patriarchal narratives in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job primarily present women as a problem even though Proverbs mentions Wisdom Woman. Woman Wisdom may however simply be there to attract the attention of male readers.⁴⁶⁸

Given that in Proverbs, the father never addresses his daughters, that his wife never speaks to any of her children, and that there is so much attention on the perils of 'predatory women' without any mention of 'predatory men', the book of Proverbs presents significant issues.⁴⁶⁹ Proverbs does, however, include positive descriptions of women.⁴⁷⁰

Longman, in asking what contemporary readers are to make of this narrative, emphasises that we were not the initial audience for these Scriptures even though

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 185, 186.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 192–194.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 195, 196.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 202.

they may be relevant to us. He indicates that he was assisted by considering a 'redemptive-movement hermeneutic'.⁴⁷¹

Rather than seeing Scripture in terms of a 'static 'utopian' ethic', he believes it moves people towards an 'Edenic ideal'.⁴⁷² Longman illustrates his point by discussing biblical views about slavery and the Genesis narrative regarding women. In the latter case, he asserts that the creation accounts see men and women as equals, and that *ezer* is best understood in terms of being an 'ally' and that it does not imply subordination or inferiority.⁴⁷³

Longman sees gender issues as significant, and believes this approach encourages women to take Proverbs and shape it to their situation.⁴⁷⁴ Proverbs can be helpful for all God's people using this and similar approaches.⁴⁷⁵

Intertestamental wisdom

Longman makes four conclusions about second temple wisdom. He identifies stronger connections between these writings and the book of Proverbs, than with Job or Ecclesiastes. He indicates that links between wisdom and law in Proverbs become more explicit in some of the later nonbiblical texts.⁴⁷⁶ He understands the relationship between wisdom and revelation in these nonbiblical writings as a development rather than as something new, and emphasises that Proverb's focus is based on a view of revelation (cf. Proverbs 20:12). Wise people fear God. They relate to Woman Wisdom as God's representative and see the father in Proverbs 1 to 9 as God's proxy.⁴⁷⁷

Longman believes that the growth in these post-biblical wisdom writings of apocalyptic language, mystery terminology and a belief in a final judgement of the wicked suggests an interactive hermeneutic exists between the way they understood wisdom, apocalypse, mystery and judgement.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 204.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 205.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 242.

Three themes for ongoing reflection

In reflecting on my dissertation and on Longman's book, I highlight three themes, one relating to power and leadership, another on understanding wisdom and interpreting revelation, and a final one on faith-centred education.

Vulnerability and viability, resilience and sustainability

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this (Deuteronomy 24:17–22).

The fragility and frailty of human community and personal life is evident in the biblical wisdom writings and throughout the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. The context for this emphasis on wisdom is mostly on homes and families in local villages or communities. This immediate setting is, however, rarely isolated from other factors. The royal persona used in Proverbs and the frame narrator in Ecclesiastes both point to the sages' having a court or temple setting as an educated community or as connected individuals.

The power-authority structures operating from palace and temple may tacitly inform the family and community narratives in the wisdom writings. These power systems provided national identity and are most likely evident in the 'fear of the LORD' motif. It is intriguing, therefore, that the profiles used in the wisdom literature are usually silent about this temple-palace framework, and describe boundaries in terms of local factors, even when other people-groups might be in mind. These community and personal boundaries are not only about *position and place* in family and society, but relate to *movement and direction*, and to *attractions*. The sages may have had in mind Egyptian pyramids and Babylonian ziggurats, and that the Hebrew narrative included liberation from both empires. They may have believed that encouraging and assisting families and communities was the best way of securing the nation's future.

The perception of social vulnerability and viability, and the need for resilience and sustainability, may be systemic and not just connected to individual piety and

practice. Prophets, priests and royalty are more likely to provide diligent leadership when they have wise discernment and mediate well-being. Qualities like empathy and compassion that link with emotional intelligence, when also connected with cognitive intelligence, physical ability and spiritual maturity, correlate biblical wisdom with the love commandments in the law narratives.⁴⁷⁹

These discussions of social and family structures use patriarchal identities and frameworks familiar to the authors. Genesis 1 and 2, and the Wisdom Woman narratives in Proverbs 1 to 9, have some common themes. The feminine and masculine words of Genesis 1:2, the male-female creation in Genesis 1:26–30 that images God, and the mutual helper narrative in Genesis 2 provide a powerful hermeneutical reference point when studying the wisdom writings. The use of the story of the fall to define compliant and submissive wisdom women in contrast to defiant and rebellious foolish woman distorts the Genesis accounts and misrepresents the gender profiles in the wisdom writings.

The self-reflective, re-defining, meta-narrative structure evident in the wisdom literature suggests that the kind of reading of Scripture used by Jesus, Paul and various New Testament authors should encourage us to think wisely about our own cultural context and the most appropriate way of participating in it.

The sages indicated that care is needed to distinguish Wisdom Woman and wisdom folly. We can similarly be alert not to create Christian silos, ghettos and echo chambers where group-think and role-lock deafen us to those who are neighbours and strangers, and not innately foolish and defiant, as well as those who may be out-siders and down-siders in our own communities. Jesus, as the ultimate wisdom-teacher, shared many parables along these lines.

The law-love commands of love towards God and neighbours, with their emphasis on those near, on, and beyond the margins, are also fundamental to the wisdom narratives. The resilience and sustainability of the families and communities – and the nation itself – depended on nothing less.⁴⁸⁰

Revelation and wisdom: being, knowing and doing

See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we

⁴⁷⁹ E.g. Exodus 34:6; Leviticus 19:18, 34; Deuteronomy 6:5, 7:9, 10:12, 11:1, 13:3, 30:6.

⁴⁸⁰ Cf. Exodus 13:3, 14, 20:2, Deuteronomy 7:7–11, 8:11–20.

call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today (Deuteronomy 4:5–8)?

Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

‘With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?’ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:6–8)?

One crucial theme in considering biblical revelation and wisdom relates to the retribution-prosperity dynamic, especially as being understood in mechanical and impersonal ways. Prophets, priests and royalty all would have known that God’s reign involved more than a behavioural and legalistic obedience-disobedience motif. Life presented too many complications to be so simply resolved by that form of social and theological arithmetic!

The sages were free to pursue discussions about the complexities of life, and to fulfil a broader role than the uniquely prophetic focus on calling the nation away from ungodliness. If understanding the functioning of God’s creation required more than a retribution-prosperity narrative, then community and family well-being also needed more than proverbs that were only understood as rules and instructions. The social microcosm, in this sense, according to the sages, reflected the creational macrocosm. The creational emphasis in the wisdom literature was not therefore a secularising influence, but a reminder that fearing and honouring God meant more than could be described and practised in a retribution-prosperity type of cultic worship and sacrifice.

The gap between revelation-law-cultus and creation-wisdom-community may not therefore be as great as it might appear on first sight. Worded, non-imaged revelation may be more personal and relational than a once-only decreed and dictated disclosure. Experiential, inherited wisdom, with its joint fear the LORD and Wisdom Woman theme, may also be more revelational than secular. An example of this view of law is in the progressive development of law described in the middle sections of the book of Exodus. The movement from Jethro’s advice to the revelation on Mt Sinai, to the applications that follow has much in common with the progressive spiral suggested by the wisdom narratives in Proverbs 1 to 9. The unfolding covenants given throughout the Hebrew Bible also develop a rich tapestry not limited to any single covenant. The non-unique outcomes of wisdom advice, with their dilemmas and delights have inevitable parallels when revealed law is applied.

For both wisdom and revelation, beginnings, origins and foundations come from Israel's covenant God, align with his creation, and are known and understood by trusting and fearing him. As the context moves from temple to marketplace to home, the implicit and explicit emphases also alter. Alert to the dangers of reductionism,⁴⁸¹ we can hear a symphony of revelation and wisdom, of worship and wonder paralleled in the daily enterprises of human sociality and vocation. A mutuality between temple and street enriches both.

Contemporary western churches can do better at not creating sanctified silos for religious life that are separate from everyday life. Workers can re-create 'revelation' based spaces that are more connected with 'wisdom' spaces. Facilities can be modified and used for more than a few sacred hours each week, and so reflect a richer relationship between revelation and wisdom.

Education and worship: truth and honour

At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'.

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:25–30).

Wisdom literature consistently emphasises parent-child relationships. Experience, observation, tradition, and learning from failure are nominated as crucial avenues for gaining the wisdom and insights needed for social stability and prosperity. These factors suggest an inter-generational hermeneutical and interpretive spiral was active in the minds of the sages as they wrote and/or edited the wisdom books – and may have helped with other biblical writings.

All roads led them to the crucial role of education, whether more formally in schools or more contextually in families and communities, or both. Academically solving life's crises inside a retribution-prosperity narrative was not the sages' primary goal. They were more concerned about social, economic, political and religious leadership, and about providing advice regarding the complex practical, ethical and revelatory dilemmas that were always present.

To be sustainable, the inter-twined creation-community-home and temple-revelation narratives needed viable transmission processes. *Learning* as education,

⁴⁸¹ Cf. Victor E. Frankl, *Will to Meaning, The* (New York, USA: Penguin Books, 1988), 21ff.

and worshipping as *service*, could only be effective partners if they were open to interpretation and interaction, and oriented to loving, fearing and trusting Israel's covenant God. In this way, worship was better *learnt*, and education more profitably *served* the community's goals. Wisdom was more than secular, and revelation was not indifferent to or detached from everyday life. The sages' silence about the cultus may have been intentional, aiming to provoke a focus on creation as *God's* domain through and by which *God* speaks and acts and is present. They may not have been implying distance or remoteness but presence and proximity. Creation, in this context, is a God-given learning environment, a God-created cosmic classroom, and a God-provided research arena, where successive generations can explore and re-explore the wisdom and traditions shared by and learnt from their parents and elders. Chaos and order may not always be as disconnected and unrelated as they seem, including when considered using mathematical frameworks!⁴⁸²

All cultures need taxonomies to understand and practise higher levels of wisdom and insight. They need frameworks that enable their sages and leaders to move to higher-order thinking and action, transitioning from facts, data, opinions and skills, to knowledge, understanding and technique, to a wisdom narrative and technological praxis that continues to grow and evolve amid life's difficulties and delights and its failures and successes. In other words, just as social, political, religious and economic systems develop, so educational practices and processes will also recreate and regenerate. ⁴⁸³

Each of these developments requires effective leaders who act with integrity. They need leaders who *rule* without being predatory, dominating, denigrating, or demeaning, who *curate* learning and wisdom without falsifying or fabricating, and who *mediate* without manipulating or marginalising. In each of these domains, the wisdom and insights of educators are vital.

Just as chaplains may add value in schools, churches at all system-levels may benefit from employing and interacting with educationally qualified teachers to lead life-long learning programs. A properly resourced, inter-generational, educational focus facilitates sustainable institutions and fruitful communities.

The hierarchical nature of many revelation-based churches with top-down, invisible, or very low-level accountability and transparency management systems, and with expectations and demands of high levels of compliance and conformity,

⁴⁸² Cf. Gregory Chaitin, *Metamaths: The Quest for Omega* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2007); Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London, UK: Souvenir Press, 2000); Russell W. Howell and W. James Bradley, *Mathematics in a Postmodern Age: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

⁴⁸³ Cf. Don Priest, *Effective and Innovative Educational Leadership Relating to Implementing Digital Technologies in Schools* (2013).

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might suggest a lack of confidence in their mission, and poor inter-connections with the communities they aim to serve. There is a considerable difference between *teaching ministries* and *learning communities*, between *franchises* and *fellowships*, and between *catechetical instruction* and *collaborative engagement*.

The writers of the Hebrew Bible believed there is wisdom *in* revelation and revelation *in* wisdom. One reason first century churches thrived may have been because they believed in a Christ who was revelation and wisdom, and so saw themselves as imaging their redeeming and recreating Lord and Sage.

I am the strange woman

Proverbs 1 to 9, Maundy Thursday 2014

I am the strange woman
I am the foreigner
The one outside
Beyond the boundaries
Disowned, disenfranchised, disfigured
Beyond hope, redemption, and restoration.
I am the vagabond
I am the disrupter
The street man
Outside the inner clique
Deceived, dismayed, despairing
Away from recovery, repair, and renewal.
Their narrative is wrong.
Their twisted tale paints hostility
When the cry was for covering,
For care, kindness, and compassion.
When the call was consistent
With the very values and beliefs
Of the self-proclaimed faithful.
Somehow the story is upended
And the privileged hierarchy
Hastens to its demise
As it deludes, deceives, and demeans
Not the strange woman or the vagabond man
But itself, its power, its prestige, and its prominence.
Calculus seemed causal, algebra looked fatalistic
Until Wisdom Woman called
And reminded them that their place in the cosmos
Was not inevitable but contingent
That Wisdom was there before Creation's dawn
And understood true beauty and joy
In Wisdom's shared and glorious promises
That reach beyond mechanics into spirit and soul
And proclaim refreshment and healing to all –
To the vagabond, to the stranger and the alien,
Regardless of status, gender, and race –
To ensure the final banquet house
Is not just for the elite but for the ennobled
The recovered, the restored, the redeemed and the renewed –

Learning to Love Wisdom

The realists for whom ecclesiastical, economic, and political patronage
Is so often irrelevant and irreverent.
The Wisdom Woman speaks the final word –
The last lesson of life –
She sets the feast and builds the home
To which mothers and daughters and fathers and sons arrive
In worship of holy YHWH
Whose steadfast love and mercy
Writes the true story:
The first and last narrative,
The primal and final drama
That alone makes sense of the discord and despair
Known by those who belong and those beyond.

Conversations along the way

Conversations along the way records ideas and perspectives exploring biblical themes written over many years as rough drafts or more revised documents. I hope my thoughts may be enriching and encouraging. Where my writing suggests ideas and frameworks that vary from those held by other Christians, our common faith can keep us in community and help us explore and reconcile our differences. I hope readers with non-theistic and/or secular understandings can find some helpful common values, even though I have used what might seem to be merely a discussion of literary narratives, symbols and imaginations. Those with other religious belief systems may find fresh insights by sharing in my journey of faith-seeking-understanding, including where collisions of thought and practice emerge. To all readers, please forgive my short-comings and my inevitable and unhelpful biases, and may your reading bring you peace, joy and hope.

In this series

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Redefining

On Earth as in Heaven

Joys and Sorrows

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⁴⁸⁴ *Educational, Social and Theological Themes in Proverbs 1–9.*

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Providing wise guidance and counsel, especially to young people, about life's opportunities and challenges is central to community sustainability and growth. The first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs describe a father's discourse with his son and personify wisdom in the context of fearing Yahweh and living wisely.

Learning to Love Wisdom considers the educational, social and theological themes evident in these initial chapters, mindful of the place of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, and with a view to the implications for our present-day lives.

“Don draws out conclusions in an original way that is greater than the sum of the parts. ... I feel like I have learned to see these lectures and speeches in a new way.”

Dr Elizabeth Boase, Academic Dean (Learning & Teaching), Adelaide College of Divinity; Head of Theology, Flinders University; Lecturer in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.

