

THE  
CHRIST  
OF

*Wisdom*

A REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL  
EXPLORATION OF THE  
WISDOM BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

O. PALMER  
ROBERTSON

“I have often complained that modern Christians, even when diligent about ethics and worship, often fail to think deeply about epistemology, about knowing, about wisdom. They seek to grow in Christ, but they commit their education to secular teachers without any attempt to critique. That leads to spiritual shipwreck. The Bible speaks not only of trusting Christ and serving him in ethics and worship, but also about trusting him as the standard for thought. This is what biblical *wisdom* is about. It is a pattern of thinking that keeps the rest of life in proper order. Robertson’s book is the best I know of on this subject. It focuses on what the Bible itself says about wisdom, particularly in the wisdom literature. I have learned much from it, and I hope that many others will as well.”

—**John M. Frame**, J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

“Once again, O. Palmer Robertson has provided us with a mature fruit of his patient, wise, and meticulous biblical research. From a conservative-evangelical perspective, he explores the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, opening up new vistas of study and understanding of this part of Scripture, which until recently was undervalued and sometimes even neglected in Old Testament research. In his new book, Robertson convincingly argues that the so-called wisdom books do form an integral part of God’s Word, with their message and theology deeply embedded in redemptive history. Perhaps surprisingly, Lamentations is also included in this section. To call the books of wisdom ‘the how-to [puzzle, lament, love, etc.] books’ in the Old Testament canon is an eye-opener, just one of the many that the reader comes across in this rich and insightful work. Robertson’s joy in biblical research is contagious, as is his love for God’s Word that inspires him. The reading of this book is a joyful experience, and does not disappoint even if the reader disagrees with the author on some minor point.”

—**Eric Peels**, Professor of Old Testament Studies, Theological University, Apeldoorn, The Netherlands

“*The Christ of Wisdom* is a major contribution to Christian understanding of wisdom in the Old Testament. As always, Palmer Robertson’s work is firmly rooted in the full authority of Scripture and in

the supremacy of Christ over all creation. Thus, he helps us explore many portions of Scripture that evangelicals often overlook. He not only addresses academic issues, but also provides enormously helpful insights into the practical application of biblical wisdom to modern life. Every believer will find that this volume expands his or her vision of what it means to follow ‘Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:2–3).”

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

“The work of wisdom is the purview of the good king. Jesus is a sage greater than Solomon (Matt. 12:42) because he is the true and final son of David, yet many pastors and teachers still find it difficult to preach Christ from the Old Testament wisdom books. This is why Robertson’s work is so greatly needed. As with his other writing, he carefully maps out the many ways in which the teaching of the Old Testament speaks to the broader story of redemption and the person of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Throughout this book, he reminds us that wisdom literature will not merely make us wise, but also acquaint us with the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

—**John Scott Redd Jr.**, President and Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, DC

“How do the Old Testament wisdom books testify to the person and work of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27, 44)? In what way is Christ the incarnate wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24)? Let O. Palmer Robertson answer these questions for you in this book! I can think of no better treatment of this challenging topic from an orthodox, biblical-theological, redemptive-historical, covenantal perspective. As a master teacher, he leads his readers through the ancient world of wisdom literature, demonstrates how this material is vitally relevant for the church today, and magnifies the Christ of wisdom in each successive chapter. Robertson has helped us to heed the call of Scripture to ‘get wisdom’ (Prov. 4:5; 23:23) and so come to know the One ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom’ (Col. 2:3).”

—**Miles V. Van Pelt**, Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages; Director, Summer Institute for Biblical Languages; Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

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OF THE WISDOM BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

O. PALMER ROBERTSON

  
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This book is dedicated to my *grandchildren* and *great-grandchildren*, with the prayer that they and their coming generations may discover the fullness of Jesus the Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of God's wisdom that enlightens the whole of human life.

Grandchildren

Frances, Julia, Laurel, Owen, Sylvia, Nicholas, Jamal

Great-grandchildren

Wade, Willow, Ayla, Adeline



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## FOREWORD

Few persons will disagree that today's social structures are under enormous attack leading to radical reorganization, especially but not exclusively in Western culture. Concepts of human sexuality, the institution of marriage, the meaning of pain, and reflections on a philosophy of life are just plain "up for grabs" and rootless at the present time. The questions are all too familiar: "How then shall we live?" "How shall we respond to the great questions of life?" Even "How shall we weep in the midst of the tragedies that regularly confront us?" The questioning goes on and on. Society exists in the grip of a huge dilemma to which no one has the answers! Who knows the solution to our quandaries? Where do we go for insight and direction?

Clearly, secular Western society has forgotten its biblical roots. But what now is the excuse that the Christian church might offer for its deficiencies in dealing with today's confused world? Most evangelical believers firmly announce that they believe that "all Scripture is God-breathed" and is profitable and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training" (2 Tim. 3:15). If that affirmation is truly intended, where then is the evidence that Christians and their pastors are following through on what they acknowledge by their profession? Why have the biblical books that address the practical issues of the day been so greatly neglected in our generation?

Is it not amazing that despite all of society's lack of clear direction, a section of the Old Testament known as the wisdom books speaks with the specific purpose of relieving our confusion and restless searching? In the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Song of Songs, God has purposely provided solutions to all the puzzlements over how humans should act and live in times such as these.

As society and even God's own people continue to neglect the directions given in these wisdom books of the Old Testament,



a distraught generation stumbles on. What a shame! What a loss because of a famine of the Word of God in the land.

This book by O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, is exactly what should be prescribed for today's Christians, young and old. For people who have lost their way in a confused and upside-down world, for pastors and teachers who have pledged by their ordination vows to teach and preach the whole counsel of God, this stimulating book points to the truth so desperately sought in the convoluted world of today. Pastors have no need for a series of polls to discover where they can find the wisest counsel for congregations trying desperately to cope with life in this topsy-turvy world. The survey is already in. We need the preaching and teaching of the clear Word of God that comes from these books. For they contain enough truth to reshape a whole nation, and even the nations of the world!

Robertson rightly begins with the Bible's teaching on "the fear of the LORD" as the beginning of knowledge (and wisdom) (Prov. 1:7). Simultaneously with that discovery of the fear of the Lord, fathers and mothers must teach their children: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (3:5-6).

This distinctive treatment of Proverbs not only deals with the message of the book, but also enriches the appreciation of its message by unveiling the book's varied structures. Discovering the larger arrangements of the materials as well as its poetic diversities deepens the reader's appreciation of this practical instruction from the Lord on "how to walk in wisdom's way."

According to Robertson, the wisdom book of Job never fully answers the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" But it tells how to go about puzzling over the perplexing question of God's dealings with a fallen humanity. Three distinctive aspects of Job emerge: (1) the extensive use of figures of speech as a major contribution to the literary excellence of the book; (2) the progression across the three rounds of Job's dialogue with his friends as their accusations become more and more vitriolic while Job's responses become fuller and more confident; and (3) the process by which the various participants in the dialogue are systematically silenced until only God speaks.

Complementing Proverbs and Job, the book of Ecclesiastes shows how to deal with life's frustrations. This book of wisdom affirms that God "has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end"—until they find God himself (Eccl. 3:11).

Add to the balanced admonitions of fearing and trusting God the wisdom-based encouragement to saints who sorrow in their suffering: "The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him" (Lam. 3:25 NIV). What perfectly balanced wisdom words for people who simply want to live well despite a seemingly disordered world!

Indeed, a theology of weeping pervades the book of Lamentations, for what will we do when calamity comes? Where and to whom should we go? What shall we do? Are mourning and weeping acceptable to God? Must I accept the inevitability of pain, hurt, and suffering even as a believer? God's wisdom in Lamentations teaches us how to weep in view of these inevitable prospects.

Sex and marriage represent another of our modern neuroses. But should believers be found speaking in church about physical attraction between the sexes, about the intimacies of marital love? Despite all our timid hesitations, Solomon's Song celebrates marital love that is "as strong as death, . . . a mighty flame" from the LORD (Song 8:6 NIV). God in the wisdom of his Word does not avoid the topic of sex. He made it in the first place. He cares about how we handle it. He meant it for our pleasure and joy.

Robertson is not afraid to address the topic of sex from the straightforward perspective of the best Song ever written—the Song of Songs. For too long, parents, pastors, and teachers have danced around the natural meaning of the biblical text and left the waiting church without sober teaching on sex and marital love. The clear teaching of this book of the Bible has been abandoned by the church even while it is affirmed as the Word of God!

When I read Robertson's teaching on this section of the Bible, I shouted for joy! I laughed aloud at the comments of those who have tried their best to avoid affirming what the text was saying. Finally, a teacher, writer, theologian who has found the courage to say what the

Bible says! Yes, many naysayers will gloss over what is plainly taught. But let them show how they arrived at the allegorical, the typological, or the so-called spiritual understanding of the text. In the meantime, our young people are being sadly neglected because of our shyness and false embarrassments. The youth of the church should have heard the real Word of God a long time ago.

Enjoy this feast prepared for you based on the teaching of these wisdom books (sometimes described as the “orphan books”) of the Bible. May our Lord use the recovery of these books in our modern era to effect a renewal of our understanding of God’s all-embracing truth. Then we may be enabled to get a heart of wisdom and live all of life to the glory of his awesome name.

Walter C. Kaiser Jr.  
President Emeritus  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary



## EDITOR'S PREFACE

In a number of places throughout this work, the divine name *Yahweh*—יהוה—whose distinctly covenantal meaning was revealed to Moses in Exodus 3, is rendered *COVENANT LORD* or *LORD OF THE COVENANT*. This representation of *Yahweh* communicates the principal distinctiveness of this name for God.

The term *Yahweh* sounds awkward in English and communicates little to the reader. Substitutions such as the hybrid *Jehovah* and the capitalized *LORD* or *LORD* do little to communicate the uniqueness of this term. *Yahweh* is *distinctly* the LORD OF THE COVENANT, the COVENANT LORD.

P&R Publishing



## PREFACE

Several decades ago, at the encouragement of colleagues, students, and friends, I laid out a long-term plan for a ministry of writing. The whole endeavor was to focus on the theme “Christ in all the Scriptures.” It was to be a programmatic representation of all the various portions of the Bible—God’s infallible and inerrant Word—as they variously focused on the anticipation and the realization of the promised Christ.

First on the list came *The Christ of the Covenants* (1980). This work viewed the progress of redemptive history in terms of its movement from creation to consummation. As the successive covenants provide the architectonic structure of Scripture, so these divinely initiated bonds inevitably shape God’s working in this world. From Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to the new covenant in prophecy and fulfillment, the Sovereign LORD OF THE COVENANT determines the course of his grace as it came pouring out across human history.

Next came *The Christ of the Prophets* (2004, with a reorganized edition in 2008). This work asks: What was the focal moment of the entire prophetic movement? What redemptive event was this grand band of spokesmen for God commissioned to interpret? If the exodus was the encapsulating event of the Mosaic period, and the coming of king and kingdom defined the days of David, what event with comparable significance characterized the era of “my servants the prophets”? From Hosea to Malachi the answer is clear. Exile and restoration, death and resurrection, expulsion from God’s presence and rejuvenation in his presence describe the days of the prophets. The cataclysmic events of exile and restoration emerge as the key that unlocks the significance of the varied ministries of Israel’s prophets. Some prophets anticipate exile, other prophets experience exile, the final prophets return from exile. It’s all about the Christ, the Israel of

God, the Suffering Servant of the LORD, who experiences abandonment in sin-bearing and restoration as he sees the travail of his soul and finds satisfaction.

Third in this grand scheme of things was to be “The Christ of the Psalmists and Sages,” dealing with the poetical books of the Old Testament. But it was not to be. An initial effort at composing a brief twenty-page introduction to the theology of the Psalms proved to be a rewarding endeavor of personal enlightenment. The three-hundred-page result was *The Flow of the Psalms* (2015), in which the magnificent structure of the Psalter unfolded before my wondering eyes as a life-changing reality leading to God-centered, Christ-focused worship.

So now comes the other half of that originally conceived unity of “Psalmists and Sages.” *The Christ of Wisdom* (2017) deals biblically-theologically with five poetic volumes of the Old Testament that plumb the depths of divine wisdom. Internationally respected scholars find no natural resting place for the wisdom books of the Old Testament in a redemptive-historical approach to biblical theology. The books of wisdom resist pressure to take their proper place in the straightaway developmental timeline that stretches from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to Christ. In fact, except for Lamentations, you will be hard-pressed to uncover a single reference to the flood, the patriarchs, the exodus, Sinaitic lawgiving, or Davidic king-making in these books of wisdom. So how do you fit these wisdom books into the flow of redemptive history that consummates in the Christ?

By letting them be what they are in their own distinctiveness. They are, it should be remembered, canonical, divinely revealed, and authoritative writings that tell the world how and what to think about the deeper mysteries of human life. Rather than submitting to the moldings and bendings of modernity, these books broaden our understanding of the nature of redemptive history. Divine progress in the complete restoration of reality does not merely move in a purely linear fashion like the flight of an arrow moving across time and space without deviation until it reaches its target. This “third dimension” of redemptive history moves in a cyclical pattern. For certain aspects of God’s salvation perform according to a pattern of regulated repetition.

To ignore this dimension of redemptive history is to exclude a major portion of the old covenant canon—and that you do not want to do.

Just as creation has its cycles, so also does redemption. Each year has its seasons, each day its hours. Each life has its birth, its budding, its decline, its death. So the life of faith and repentance in one patriarch somehow repeats itself in each subsequent patriarch. God's people sin; the LORD inflicts judgment; they cry out in repentance; a singular saving hero appears; and the cycle begins again. Six times over, this identical pattern recurs in the age of Israel's judges.

So the wisdom books of the Old Testament conform to this repetitive pattern. A regal father instructs his son how to walk in wisdom's way, and expects him to pass on his enlightened understanding to the next generation (Proverbs). Dialoguing friends young and old come to a climax when they dialogue with the Divine. Joining in the discussion, the Almighty encourages humility whenever a person is forced to puzzle over the deepest challenges of life (Job). Male and female, bride and groom explore the wonders, the beauties of passionate love in vivid detail even as they pass along their perspectives on propriety in sexual relations to maidens of the next generation (Song of Songs). A wealthy king employs his vast resources to learn how to cope with life's frustrations, and shares his insights as the singular Shepherd with other instructors (Ecclesiastes). How to weep rightly in the midst of life's calamities represents an aspect of human wisdom eventually needed by one and all (Lamentations).

How can humanity live life to the fullest without the God-inspired wisdom of the wise? Everyone—young and old, male and female, rich and poor—sooner or later will need every bit of practical advice found in these “how-to” books of the Bible. Indeed, you may bungle along by the impulses of your own brain if you choose. But would it not be far better to “get wisdom,” to “get understanding”? With all the powers of your “getting,” “get wise!”

If you find yourself tantalized by these wisdom books to seek consummate wisdom, then turn your expectant eyes toward Jesus the Christ. For all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge consummate in him. He is the incarnate Word of wisdom who will willingly teach you his way.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I first began teaching, I expressed concern to a seasoned colleague about the many things I did not know. “Don’t worry,” he replied. “Your students will teach you all you need to know.”

Having experienced that truth firsthand many times over, I would like to acknowledge my students across the decades for the numerous insights and contributions they have made to my understanding of Scripture:

My students from Reformed Theological Seminary (1967–71)  
Jackson, Mississippi

My students from Westminster Theological Seminary (1971–80)  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

My students from Covenant Theological Seminary (1980–85)  
St. Louis, Missouri

My students from African Bible College (1992–2004)  
Lilongwe, Malawi

My students from Knox Theological Seminary (1994–2002)  
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

My students from African Bible University (2005–)  
Kampala, Uganda





## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	The Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
BCOT	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NASU	New American Standard Updated
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary



# INTRODUCTION TO WISDOM LITERATURE

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Introduction: Job 28

- I. The Regal Role of Wisdom
  - II. The Basic Biblical Terminology for *Wisdom*
    - A. *Chokmah*, “Wisdom”
    - B. *Mashal*, “Proverb”
    - C. *Yirat Yahweh*, “Fear of Yahweh”
  - III. The Broader Context of Wisdom in the Ancient Near East
  - IV. The Identification of the Books of Wisdom
  - V. The Poetic Form of Wisdom Literature
  - VI. The Place of Wisdom in Old Testament Theology
  - VII. An Initial Admonition: Get Wisdom!
- Selected Bibliography for Introduction to Wisdom Literature

What is *wisdom*? Where is it to be found? Several entire books of the Old Testament summon wisdom to address the critical elements of human existence, such as purpose for life, pain, and romance. But what is wisdom? The patriarch Job wrestled with this question. His poem vivifies the search for wisdom:<sup>1</sup>

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 146, says that this poem about the search for wisdom in Job “almost luxuriates in words.” He notes that the poet underscores the difficulty of discovering wisdom by comparing this search to “the most extreme task ever tackled by the human mind, mining in the heart of a mountain.”

## INTRODUCTION: JOB 28

- 1 “There is a mine  
for silver  
and a place  
where gold is refined.
- 2 Iron is taken  
from the earth,  
and copper  
is smelted from ore.
- 3 Man puts an end  
to the darkness;  
he searches the farthest recesses for ore  
in the blackest darkness.
- 4 Far from where people dwell  
he cuts a shaft,  
in places forgotten by the foot of man;  
far from men he dangles and sways.
- 5 The earth, from which food comes,  
is transformed below as by fire;
- 6 sapphires come  
from its rocks,  
and its dust contains  
nuggets of gold.
- 7 No bird of prey knows  
that hidden path,  
no falcon’s eye  
has seen it.
- 8 Proud beasts  
do not set foot on it,  
and no lion  
prowls there.
- 9 Man’s hand assaults  
the flinty rock  
and lays bare  
the roots of the mountains.
- 10 He tunnels  
through the rock;

- his eyes see  
 all its treasures.
- <sup>11</sup> He searches  
 the sources of the rivers  
 and brings hidden things  
 to light.
- <sup>12</sup> “But where can wisdom  
 be found?  
 Where does understanding  
 dwell?
- <sup>13</sup> Man does not comprehend  
 its worth;  
 it cannot be found  
 in the land of the living.
- <sup>14</sup> The deep says,  
 ‘It is not in me’;  
 the sea says,  
 ‘It is not with me.’
- <sup>15</sup> It cannot be bought  
 with the finest gold,  
 nor can its price  
 be weighed in silver.
- <sup>16</sup> It cannot be bought  
 with the gold of Ophir,  
 with precious onyx or sapphires.
- <sup>17</sup> Neither gold nor crystal  
 can compare with it,  
 nor can it be had  
 for jewels of gold.
- <sup>18</sup> Coral and jasper  
 are not worthy of mention;  
 the price of wisdom  
 is beyond rubies.
- <sup>19</sup> The topaz of Cush  
 cannot compare with it;  
 it cannot be bought  
 with pure gold.

- <sup>20</sup> “Where then does wisdom come from?  
Where does understanding dwell?  
<sup>21</sup> It is hidden  
from the eyes of every living thing,  
concealed  
even from the birds of the air.  
<sup>22</sup> Destruction and Death say,  
‘Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.’  
<sup>23</sup> God understands  
the way to it  
and he alone  
knows where it dwells,  
<sup>24</sup> for he views  
the ends of the earth  
and sees everything  
under the heavens.  
<sup>25</sup> When he established  
the force of the wind  
and measured out  
the waters,  
<sup>26</sup> when he made a decree  
for the rain  
and a path  
for the thunderstorm,  
<sup>27</sup> then he looked at wisdom  
and appraised it;  
he confirmed it  
and tested it.  
<sup>28</sup> And he said to man,  
‘The fear of the Lord—  
that is wisdom,  
and to shun evil  
is understanding.’” (Job 28:2–28 NIV)

This introduction to the subject of wisdom will consider several topics:

- The Regal Role of Wisdom
- The Basic Biblical Terminology for *Wisdom*
- The Broader Context of Wisdom in the Ancient Near East
- The Identification of the Books of Wisdom
- The Poetic Form of Wisdom Literature
- The Place of Wisdom in Old Testament Theology
- An Initial Admonition: Get Wisdom!

## THE REGAL ROLE OF WISDOM

In Scripture, wisdom manifests itself most fully in connection with kingship, with humanity's capacity to rule. The regal role of wisdom goes back to the time of humanity's creation. God showed his confidence in man's understanding of the essential nature of things by entrusting him with the responsibility of giving appropriate names for all the animals of creation. God brought the subordinate creatures to the man "to see what he would name them" or, as the phrase might be translated, "to see how he would designate them" (Gen. 2:19 NIV). Adam's kingly comprehension of the nature of all creatures enabled him by God's appointment to name the creatures in accord with their essential natures. This naming was not a mindless, random placing of a vocalized label. Instead, it anticipated a zoologist's classification of creatures, displaying a careful analysis of the nature of each and every living being.

From this original beginning, a long line of regal figures connects wisdom with royalty:

All the "wise men" of Egypt fail to interpret Pharaoh's dreams (Gen. 41:8 NIV). But Joseph satisfies the king with his understanding. He then advises him to "look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt" (41:33 NIV). The king can only conclude, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you" (41:39 NIV). Because of his extraordinary wisdom, Joseph must be the one to exercise rule over his nation.

Moses as the designated leader of God’s people manifests his superiority over the wise men, sorcerers, and magicians of Egypt during the contest of the plagues (Ex. 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18). He later rested his hands on Joshua as a symbolic way of transmitting his ruling authority to his successor. As a consequence, Joshua “was filled with the spirit of wisdom . . . . So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses” (Deut. 34:9 NIV). Only because of this bestowal of wisdom could Joshua succeed in governing the nation.

Samson the judge of Israel appears as a wisdom figure in view of his ability to construct a “riddle,” despite all his foibles. He displays his superiority over the Philistines by baffling them with his puzzling sayings (Judg. 14:1–18; 15:15–17).<sup>2</sup>

David the king is declared by the wise woman of Tekoa to possess “wisdom like that of an angel of God.” Because of his God-given wisdom, he has no trouble seeing right through the fabricated tale of Joab (2 Sam. 14:19–20).

King Solomon as the paragon of wise sovereigns throughout the world of his day climaxes these manifestations of wisdom among the rulers of God’s people. All the fourteen passages in Kings and the ten passages in Chronicles that speak of “wisdom” refer exclusively to King Solomon, with a single exception. Solomon’s prayer as he begins his reign underscores this regal role of wisdom as a focal factor in the life of the king:

Give your servant a discerning heart [lit., “a hearing heart”] to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours? (1 Kings 3:9 NIV)

2. The term used to describe Samson’s “riddle,” his *chidah* (חִידָה), appears among the various designations for wisdom in the opening verses of Proverbs (Prov. 1:6). It also describes the wise instruction imparted by the psalmist (Pss. 49:4; 78:2). The LXX translates this same word with παραβολή, “parable,” which in the New Testament describes the prevailing mode of teaching used by Jesus (Matt. 13:34–35, quoting and applying Ps. 78:2 to the teaching mode of Jesus).

The LORD heard this prayer of the king. As a consequence,

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish (1 Kings 4:29–33 NIV [2011]).

Trees, plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish embrace essentially every category of living thing on the face of the earth. The breadth of Solomon's wisdom represents a restoration of mankind to his pristine condition as the wise sovereign over all creation.

The regal role of Solomon's wisdom is underscored by the record of international responses to his wisdom: "From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings 4:34 NIV [2011]). The Chronicler is even more explicit: "All the kings of the earth sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart" (2 Chron. 9:23 NIV).

Solomon's role in the production of the Old Testament wisdom books underscores once more the regal role of wisdom. "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel" are the words introducing this king as the producer of the bulk of wisdom statements in Proverbs (Prov. 1:1; cf. 10:1; 25:1). The Song of Songs is identified in its opening verse as Solomon's (Song 1:1). The author of Ecclesiastes is described as "son of David," "king in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1). Though not specifically named, Solomon is traditionally regarded as author of this wisdom book as well. The fact that Solomon is associated with these three wisdom books in the Old Testament underscores once more the close association of wisdom with kingship. The king rules effectively over all the various aspects of human life because of his regal wisdom.



In light of this extended treatment of wisdom figures across Israel’s history, it is not surprising to find messianic expectation in Israel focusing on a future wisdom figure that would arise at God’s appointed time:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. (Isa. 11:1–3a NIV [2011])

So the first aspect regarding wisdom to be noted in Scripture is its regal role in the life of God’s people. As Wisdom personified declares:

By me kings reign,  
and rulers decree what is just;  
by me princes rule,  
and nobles, all who govern justly. (Prov. 8:15–16 ESV)

From a new covenant perspective, all believers united to the Christ by faith may share in this regal dimension of wisdom. For in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:2–3).

## THE BASIC BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY FOR *WISDOM*

The Old Testament has no lack of wisdom terminology, as the initial verses of Proverbs indicate. No fewer than seventeen different words or phrases for the concept of wisdom occur in the opening seven verses of the book.<sup>3</sup> This plethora of expressions suggests that wisdom had a significant role to play in the life of God’s people under the old covenant. Three of these terms deserve special consideration:

3. The terms listed in Proverbs 1 are: (1) “wisdom” (חָכְמָה); (2) “proverb” (מִשְׁל); (3) “instruction, discipline” (מוֹסֵר); (4) “sayings of understanding” (אִמְרֵי בִינָה); (5) “instruction of the wise” (מוֹסֵר הַשְּׂבִיל); (6) “righteousness” (צְדָקָה); (7) “justice” (מִשְׁפָּט); (8) “uprightness” (מִישָׁרִים); (9) “prudence, shrewdness” (עֵרְמוּהָ); (10) “knowledge” (דַּעַת); (11) “discretion” (מְזֻמָּה); (12) “learning” (לִקְחָהּ); (13) “guidance, counsel” (תְּהִיָּה); (14) “enigma, figure” (מְלִיצָה); (15) “riddle” (חֵידָה); (16) “fear of Yahweh” (יְרֵאָה יְהוָה); (17) “torah” (תּוֹרָה).

*chokmah* (“wisdom”), *maschal* (“proverb”), and *yirat Yahweh* (“fear of Yahweh”).

### *Chokmah*, “Wisdom”

This basic term for *wisdom* occurs approximately 150 times in the Old Testament. The related term *chakam*, “wise” (חָכָם), occurs an additional 166 times. The word describes the skill of the artisans who constructed the tabernacle, the expertise of Hiram king of Tyre in working with bronze, and the proficiency of sailors in piloting a ship (Ex. 28:3; 31:3; 35:31; 1 Kings 7:14; Ps. 107:27).<sup>4</sup> The term also describes the capacity of rulers to govern well (Deut. 34:9; 1 Kings 3:28; Prov. 8:15–16). A king who exercises wisdom in his rule creates happy officials and happy people (1 Kings 10:8). But only God can impart true wisdom. It must come as a gift from him (Ps. 90:12; Prov. 2:6; Eccl. 2:26; Dan. 1:17).

Several passages employing this term for *wisdom* underscore the fact that the only way to properly understand this world is to perceive it as a creation arising out of God’s wisdom and governed by divine understanding (Job 38:37–38; Ps. 104:24; Prov. 3:19; Jer. 10:12).<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of righteousness, justice, and uprightness as defining factors of wisdom clearly indicates that wisdom is a moral issue, not simply a matter of exercising shrewdness in coping with life (Prov. 1:3).<sup>6</sup>

4. In describing the frustration of the sailors in managing their ship in the sea storm, the phrase literally says, “And all their wisdom was swallowed up.”

5. Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), regards creation as the major defining factor of wisdom in the Old Testament. Cf. Gerhard von Rad: “Since for the Hebrews the world was a created order, held and governed by God, it could never be regarded as self-existent, nor could it for one moment be understood apart from God” (“Some Aspects of the Old Testament World-View,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* [Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966], 152). The radicalness of the concept of the One God Yahweh, the COVENANT LORD of Israel, as the alone Creator of all things contrasts drastically with the permeating polytheism of all other wisdom literature of the ancient Near East as well as the modern-day mythology of evolution. For a thorough discussion of the significance for wisdom of a single Creator God over all things, see Craig G. Bartholomew, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 262–70.

6. James L. Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 498, understands “righteous living” according to the wisdom literature to be living in accord with the order of

*Mashal*, “Proverb”

This term appears in the heading of Proverbs, but identifies principally a particular form of wisdom sayings. *Mashal* generally refers to a brief, pithy, memorable statement that encapsulates truth about God and his created world. It cannot be clearly established that the term *mashal* derives etymologically from the same root that means “to rule” (*mashal*).<sup>7</sup> Yet to formulate a “proverb” is indeed to demonstrate control by capturing the essence of a matter in its relation to God’s creation by a succinct, memorable statement. Solomon’s proverb about the ant accurately describes the true mode of the creature’s way of life in a manner that challenges the human reader to manifest the same wisdom (Prov. 6:6–8). Proverbs that depict a sluggard hinged to his bed and calling for “just a little more sleep” expose the folly of this tragicomical figure (26:14; 6:9–11).

When Jesus as messianic King taught about the kingdom of God, he spoke “many things in parables [παραβολαῖς]” (Matt. 13:3 NIV). By adopting this form of teaching, he was bringing to fullest realization the words of the Old Testament poet:

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the universe. This “righteous” living will bring blessing because by it a person places himself in harmony with creation. Says Crenshaw: “Life’s ambiguities make it highly desirable, if not absolutely essential, to secure God’s presence. By living in accord with the rules of the universe established at creation, one obtains God’s presence” (498). Crenshaw takes little or no notice of sin, of wrongdoing, and of the necessity of reconciliation with God because of violating his moral law, not merely creation’s rules. Yet folly in contrast with wisdom is inseparably connected with wickedness in the book of Proverbs. Job begins by offering sacrifice for each of his children, since they may have sinned (Job 1:5). God ultimately requires Job’s friends to offer sacrifice, since they have wrongly accused him (42:7–8). Job humbles himself and repents in dust and ashes (42:6). Ecclesiastes repeatedly acknowledges humanity’s sinfulness, a sinfulness firmly rooted in humans’ basic nature despite their being created upright (Eccl. 7:29); and every chapter in Lamentations includes explicit confession of sin. This permeating testimony of the wisdom books regarding human sinfulness establishes the fact that righteousness is not simply living in harmony with the rules of creation. True righteousness involves conformity with God’s moral law as revealed to Israel.

7. “The sense of *mashal* is difficult to precisely define, although the concept of ‘similitude’ and ‘ruling word’ appear to cover the broad spectrum of usage. Both meanings are possible. The former focuses on the sense of likeness, while the latter takes its departure from the root meaning ‘to rule, have dominion, reign,’ thus a ‘word spoken by a ruler or a word bearing special power’ (Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice*, 57). Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 30, notes that it is “possible but not likely” that *mashal* draws on both meanings. “If so, it would point to the fact that the proverb intends to draw comparisons so the recipient can stay in control of a situation.”

I will open my mouth in parables [παραβολαῖς], I will utter hidden things, things from of old. (Ps. 78:2 NIV; Matt. 13:34–35; cf. Ps. 49:3–4)

The Gospel writer indicates by this quotation that Jesus' kingdom parables correspond to the regal "proverbs" of the Old Testament. The Greek Old Testament (the LXX) lays the foundation for this connection by translating the Hebrew term *proverb* (לְמִשְׁלֵי) by the Greek term *parable* (παραβολή), so that the New Testament "parable" corresponds to the Old Testament "proverb." The king's "proverbs" find their counterpart in the kingdom parables of Jesus. In a deceptively simple, succinct, and memorable form, Jesus uncovers the true nature of the kingdom of God and defines the relation of various peoples to that kingdom. The parables of the mustard seed, the good Samaritan, and the wicked vinedressers display his genius as a wisdom figure propounding kingdom truth in parabolic form (Matt. 13:31–32; Luke 10:25–37; Matt. 21:33–45). Any individual attempting to duplicate Jesus' method of parabolic teaching will soon discover the superior nature and the profundity of his parables.

### *Yirat Yahweh, "Fear of Yahweh"*

This descriptive phrase occurs eighteen times in Proverbs, with representations of the phrase in all major sections of the book.<sup>8</sup> A classic passage defines the basic nature of wisdom:

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

Several passages underscore the single most significant effect of this "fear of Yahweh." It is, simply and profoundly, "life"!

The fear of Yahweh will prolong life. (Prov. 10:27)

The fear of Yahweh is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death. (Prov. 14:27)

8. The references are as follows: Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 26–27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 31:30.

The fear of Yahweh leads to life; any person following this principle will live in contentment, without being plagued by trouble. (Prov. 19:23)

The consequences of humility and the fear of Yahweh are riches, honor, and life. (Prov. 22:4)

But exactly what is this “fear of Yahweh”? If it has such far-reaching consequences concerning the essence of life itself, every person should greatly desire this wisdom that fears Yahweh.

Though regularly overlooked, this fear first focuses on none other than the one true God who has revealed himself as “Yahweh.” It is not a fear of God in general, not an indefinable terror of an “unknown god” that has no capacity to bring life and blessing. Superstitious fear of a false god invariably brings curse rather than blessing. Only as a person knows, fears, and trusts the one true living Yahweh, LORD OF THE COVENANT, can he expect the blessings described in these verses.

Second, this “fear” should not be reduced to a simple “reverence” of Yahweh, though this aspect of the fear of Yahweh must be recognized. The fear of Yahweh must include an acknowledgment that he is the Judge, that he will execute his just judgments both in this life and in the world to come. “Fear of Yahweh” means fully appreciating the fact that he will call to account every person who has ever lived on this earth. He will punish or reward all people on the basis of their deeds, whether good or bad.

Third, this fear should never be set over against a continuing trust in Yahweh, his goodness, and his grace. The “fear of Yahweh” serves as one of the root definitions for *torah*, the law of the LORD; and the essence of *torah* is to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Ps. 19:9; cf. Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:36–38; Luke 10:25–28). Fear of Yahweh means loving him with all that you are and trusting him with all that you possess.

So these three major terms capture the essence of wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to understand the basic principles inherent in God’s created order, and to live by those principles. Wisdom enables a person to summarize these basic principles in a succinct and memorable

fashion. Wisdom is living out the whole of life with a constant awareness of accountability before a loving, gracious, and just Creator and Redeemer.

## THE BROADER CONTEXT OF WISDOM IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The letters of the apostle Paul took on the form of the common epistolary pattern of the first century, beginning with an identification of the author, followed by a salutation and then the body of the correspondence. The book of Deuteronomy gives strong evidence of following the pattern of the ancient Hittite suzerainty treaties, including an opening statement concerning the glories of the conquering lord, a review of the past favors that he has shown his vassal, a summary of the stipulations required by the suzerain, a rehearsal of potential curses and blessings for the vassal, and a formula for the renewal of the treaty.

So it should not be surprising that the wisdom materials of the old covenant Scriptures parallel similar materials discovered by archaeologists in countries neighboring Israel. Even the contents of some of Scripture's proverbial statements, as well as the themes found in other wisdom books of the Bible, find their parallels in the wisdom traditions of other lands.

Scripture itself recognizes the existence of wisdom materials among the traditions of surrounding nations. Disturbed over his dream concerning cows emerging from the Nile, the pharaoh calls for the diviners of Egypt "and all her wise ones" (וְאֵת כָּל־חֲכָמֶיהָ) (Gen. 41:8). The narrative of Exodus further confirms the presence of "wise men" in Egypt during the time of Moses by its reference to the "wise ones" (לְחֲכָמִים) that Pharaoh summons (Ex. 7:11). According to the testimony of the new covenant Scriptures, Moses was educated "in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (πάση σοφία Αἰγυπτίων) (Acts 7:22). Later in Israelite history the prophet Isaiah explicitly refers to the ancient wisdom tradition of Egypt that had been transmitted in his own day:

The officials of Zoan are nothing but fools; the wise counselors of Pharaoh give senseless advice. How can you say to Pharaoh, "I am one of the wise men, a disciple of the ancient kings"? Where are your wise men now? Let them show you and make known what the LORD Almighty has planned against Egypt. (Isa. 19:11–12 NIV)

When setting the cultural context for the special wisdom granted to Solomon, Scripture makes a specific comparison with other lands where wisdom played a major role in the culture of the people. The wisdom of the king of Israel is said to surpass "the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30 NIV [2011]). These two locales represent major sources of wisdom tradition in ancient times that were immediately in contact with the people of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

So it is quite evident from these several references that the producers of the old covenant Scriptures were fully aware of the presence of wisdom traditions in lands neighboring Israel. Still further, it seems clear that Israel had significant interaction with these other wisdom traditions.

In addition to the Bible's own testimony to the presence of wisdom traditions among other nations, a great deal of evidence outside Scripture itself confirms the existence of a body of material that could properly be classified as wisdom literature. Proverbial sayings have a very ancient history. The teaching of Imhotep of Egypt dates to the period between 2700 and 2400 B.C.<sup>10</sup> Some manuscripts of this material date as early as 2000 B.C., a thousand years before the time of Solomon. Sumerian proverbs from Mesopotamia exist in copies dating to 1800 B.C. Canaanite princes of the fourteenth century B.C. quote old proverbs from the Amarna letters addressed to the pharaohs of Egypt.

9. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 18 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), xli, and others identify the "people of the East" not with the people of Mesopotamia but with people along the desert fringes of Israel, tribes east or northeast of Canaan. For biblical references that may support this perspective, cf. Gen. 29:1; Judg. 6:3, 33; 7:12; 8:10; Job 1:3; Isa. 11:14; Jer. 49:28; Ezek. 25:4, 10. But the "East" could just as well refer to the civilizations of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Cf. Ps. 107:3; Isa. 41:2; 43:5; 46:11; Zech. 8:7; Matt. 2:1.

10. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Proverbs," in *The Biblical Expositor*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1960), 2:72, for the dating of this material.

Ugaritic materials of the fourteenth century B.C. contain proverbs comparable to the literature in Israel. So it may be said that Israelite culture of the tenth century B.C. was literally surrounded with the wisdom of the ancients. In addition to materials that compare closely with the form and content of the biblical proverb, a number of parallels have been found to the narrative concerning Job and other biblical wisdom materials.<sup>11</sup> In Mesopotamia a document dating a thousand years before Solomon discusses the perplexity that arises over a righteous sufferer. Babylonian documents dating between 1300 and 1000 B.C. have been designated the “Babylonian Job” and the “Babylonian Ecclesiastes.”<sup>12</sup> From Nippur near Babylon have been found two large collections of aphorisms dating into the second millennium B.C. A sample reads as follows:

“Build like a [Lord],  
go about like a slave.”  
“Build like a [sla]ve,  
go about like a lord.”<sup>13</sup>

So what is the precise relation of these various bodies of wisdom literature to the biblical material? Is a direct relationship of these extrabiblical documents to the wisdom books of Scripture possible?

In view of the verified awareness by Israel of various wisdom traditions, it may be appropriately proposed that the parallels of expression could be explained by access to a common tradition of wisdom known in Israel, Egypt, Canaan, and the East. Their interrelationship may be best explained through presuming studied interaction among the schooling experiences of the wisdom scribes of the various nations,

11. The principal ancient Near Eastern texts related to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament may be found in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), with a listing of the various texts on pages xiii–iv. For a brief overview of the available documents, see Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, *Forms of the Old Testament Literature* 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 9–12. William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 51–208, offers an extensive discussion of the documents.

12. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1969), 18.

13. *Ibid.*



which “undoubtedly provided opportunity for the study of a wide range of Wisdom writings.”<sup>14</sup> It is quite possible to imagine Solomon and the “wise men” of his kingdom as scrutinizing the wisdom materials of Egypt, and transforming them so that they would conform to the larger truths arising from their unique knowledge of Yahweh, the one and only God of creation and covenant who revealed himself to Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses, the people of Israel, and David the organizer of Israel’s worship practices.

At the same time, foundational theological differences inevitably exclude direct dependence, whether speaking of pithy aphorisms or extended discourses.<sup>15</sup> If in any way Israel derived some of its expressions from the wisdom of other cultures, the comments of one biblical scholar are well worth noting:

Egyptian jewels, as at the Exodus, have been re-set to their advantage by Israelite workmen and put to finer use.<sup>16</sup>

Revelation transfigures what it touches.<sup>17</sup>

To purge heathen thought-forms and fill them with truth is what Scripture regularly does in the realm of human words and expressions. In this sphere, as in others, former enemies can make good apostles.<sup>18</sup>

## THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE BOOKS OF WISDOM

Various sayings and narratives focusing on wisdom appear throughout the Old Testament historical and prophetic books. Particular psalms also underscore the role of wisdom in the life of God’s

14. Scott, *Proverbs*, 20–21.

15. Kitchen, “Proverbs,” 73. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 18, observes that “even in the case of Amenemope, the contact was probably mediated.”

16. Kidner, *Proverbs*, 24.

17. Derek Kidner, “Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament,” in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne (London: Word Books, 1970), 122.

18. *Ibid.*, 121.

people, though the idea of so-called wisdom psalms has been brought under serious scrutiny.<sup>19</sup>

But the most distinctive manifestation of wisdom material in the Old Testament finds its focus in several entire works properly characterized as “wisdom books.” All these books are found in the “Writings,” the third category of the Jewish canon alongside the “Law” and the “Prophets.”

The materials included in the Writings of the Jewish canon fall into three types: the historical books (Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther); a prophetic work (Daniel, though not strictly speaking a “prophetic book”); and the poetical books (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations). Some question may be raised regarding the poetic nature of Ecclesiastes. As has been observed, however, Ecclesiastes “uses strongly cadenced, evocative prose, perhaps qualifying as prose-poetry,” which “in two extended passages moves into formal verse.”<sup>20</sup>

The preponderance of usage of *chokmah* as the most basic term for *wisdom* in the Old Testament is divided among three of these books of poetry: Proverbs (38 uses), Ecclesiastes (28 uses), and Job (18 uses). These three literary works have been traditionally identified as belonging to the category of *wisdom books*.<sup>21</sup>

19. Cf. the discussion in R. N. Whybray, “The Wisdom Psalms,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 152–60. Whybray concludes that it would be justifiable to designate a particular psalm as a “wisdom” psalm “only if its resemblance to some part of the Old Testament wisdom books . . . were so close as to be undeniable” (158). Despite the virtual impossibility of meeting this criterion, he concludes that Psalms 34, 37, and 73 qualify as wisdom psalms (158).

20. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), xvi. An informal count indicates that over half the verses of Ecclesiastes are poetic in form (136 out of 222).

21. The phrase *wisdom literature*, as has been observed, “is not a form-critical term; it is merely a term of convenience, derived apparently from ecclesiastical usage, to designate the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, and among the Apocrypha, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon” (Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 3). Neither the Jewish nor the Protestant canon of inspired Scripture includes the apocryphal books of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus—second century B.C.) and the Wisdom of Solomon (c. 50 B.C.), though they are often included in studies of wisdom literature.

Several aspects of these three works underscore their commonality: (1) as just indicated, they are all located in the third section of the Hebrew canon; (2) as also noted, they are poetic in form; and (3) they all seek to provide answers to the way in which people can make the best of human life in a manner acceptable to God, to oneself, to one's neighbor, and to a world created by God but fallen as a consequence of man's sin.

As a further point of their identity as *wisdom books*, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes stand outside the categories that define other types of literature in the canon of Scripture. None of these three books contains narrations of God's redemptive work in the world as recorded in the historical books of the Old Testament. Patriarchs, exodus, covenant, Sinai, wilderness, conquest, and kingship find no place in these three books. Neither do they contain apodictic or casuistic law, characterized elsewhere in Scripture by the traditional introductory phrases "Thou shalt not . . ." and "If a person [does such and such] . . ." These three books do not take the form of prophetic declarations introduced by an authoritative "Thus says the LORD . . ." They do not take a shape appropriate for liturgy in worship as found in the book of Psalms. In contrast with all these other categories of literature in the Old Testament canon, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes focus on practical issues faced by all humans through the medium of a variety of poetic forms. Thus, they may be appropriately designated as *wisdom books* of the Old Testament.

Although not traditionally regarded as works of wisdom, two additional books will be treated among Old Testament wisdom literature in this material because of their substance in providing wise counsel regarding critical issues in people's lives: Song of Songs and Lamentations. Indeed, the basic words for *wisdom* and *the wise* do not appear in these two books. Wisdom is never urged on the reader, as in the case of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Yet several factors make it appropriate to treat Song of Songs and Lamentations in the context of wisdom literature.

As in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, both these books are a part of the third section of the Hebrew canon. According to one scholar, Song of Songs and Lamentations are grouped together with Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes in the Talmudic arrangement of this third section

of the canon.<sup>22</sup> These circumstances do not in themselves establish Song of Songs and Lamentations as “wisdom books.” But their placement in the Hebrew canon does put them in the same canonical grouping with Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, which has some significance.

This canonical placement has particular significance with respect to the Song of Songs, identified specifically with Solomon, who has been described as “the source of Israel’s wisdom literature.”<sup>23</sup> According to one author:

The ascription of the Song of Songs to Solomon by the Hebrew canon sets these writings within the context of wisdom literature. Indeed this song is the “pearl” of the collection. . . . The Song is to be understood as wisdom literature.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond their locale in the third category of the Hebrew canon, both the Song of Songs and Lamentations are poetic in form. The Song of Songs is structured as an extended poem of interactive dialogue, similar to the book of Job. Lamentations is distinctive in its poetic form as the most extensive example of acrostic poetry in Scripture. Obviously, poetic form does not in itself qualify these two books as belonging to the category of wisdom literature. But it does indicate one further link with Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

Still further, as in the case of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, these two books do not conform to any of the other categories of canonical literature as previously discussed. They do not take the shape of history, law, prophecy, or liturgy.

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22. Cf. S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 9th ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), ii (in Introduction proper). The collection of books in the Writings has taken on various arrangements in terms of their order, which makes it difficult to affirm a specific order for the wisdom books. Driver’s representation of differing orders indicates that the Talmudic arrangement groups together the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Lamentations. Cf. Tremper Longman III, *Job* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 23.

23. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 574.

24. Ibid. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, xiii, states: “As a whole, the Song emphasizes values which are primary in wisdom thought.” Murphy notes that recent scholarship has been open to “ascribing the preservation and transmission” of the Song of Songs “to the sages of Israel” (xiii).

A question may be raised in conjunction with the historical setting of Lamentations in the context of the fall of Jerusalem. In one sense, this circumstance sets Lamentations outside the pale of wisdom books because of its clear connection with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians as a specific moment in redemptive history. But it may be noted that other works generally regarded as wisdom books also include references to the history of redemption. The first verse of Proverbs identifies the book as “the proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (Prov. 1:1).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the opening verse of Ecclesiastes deliberately sets this book in the redemptive-historical context of the “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1). In addition, the two apocryphal works generally regarded as wisdom books (Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon) both contain extensive records of redemptive history, stretching from Adam to Nehemiah—far more extensive in recording history than the setting of Lamentations in the time of Jerusalem’s collapse before the Babylonians.<sup>26</sup>

Lamentations may not formally fit into the category of a wisdom book as traditionally viewed. But most significantly, in terms of its substance, the book addresses a very practical dimension of human life. Lamentations, though specifically recording the grief of Israel associated with the historical moment of the fall of Jerusalem, at the same time presents a godly pattern for the LORD’s covenant people to express their grief in all the various tragedies of life. As has been observed:

One of the results of incorporating the events of the city’s destruction into Israel’s traditional terminology of worship was to estab-

25. Cf. the comment of Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 52, in noting Proverbs as a product of Solomon as king in Israel: “Solomon as king of Israel looked at humanity and his world through the lens of Israel’s covenants and drew the conclusion that one could enter the world of wisdom only through the fear of the LORD.” At least to this degree, Proverbs is set in the context of the progress of redemptive history. This relationship would not be far off from the connection of Lamentations to Israel’s exile.

26. Ben Sira chapters 44–47 trace the biblical history from Enoch through Nehemiah. The Wisdom of Solomon includes specific references to individuals from Adam through the conquest (chaps. 10–19). Note the qualification regarding Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon by R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 4n6, that in these two books “the streams of wisdom and prophecy have mingled.” The stream of redemptive history might also be included.

lish a semantic bridge between the historical situation of the early sixth century and the language of faith which struggles with divine judgment. For this reason the book of Lamentations serves every successive generation of the suffering faithful for whom history has become unbearable.<sup>27</sup>

More than any other consideration, the treatment of two very practical issues of human life by these two books encourages considering their message in the context of the wisdom books of the Old Testament. Song of Songs deals with the very human issue of “how to love” in a marital situation.<sup>28</sup> “How to weep” in response to tragic events, both corporately and individually, is the element of wisdom provided by the book of Lamentations. At the most basic level, Song of Songs and Lamentations offer wisdom’s rich insights into these practical dimensions of human life.

In view of these observations, and despite the traditional restriction of wisdom books to Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, the current work will include a treatment of the Song of Songs and Lamentations. It is hoped that the generous reader will manifest a tolerance that will allow him to derive some benefit from the practical wisdom provided by these two books, even though he may not find himself prepared to embrace the Song of Songs and Lamentations as, strictly speaking, wisdom books.

So the poetical books of the Old Testament, with the exception of the book of Psalms, may be treated in the context of Old Testament wisdom literature. This observation naturally leads to these questions: Why does the wisdom literature take on the form of poetry? What various poetic forms are found in these Old Testament wisdom books?

## THE POETIC FORM OF WISDOM LITERATURE

The poetry of Old Testament wisdom literature takes on a vast variety of forms. This extensive poetic material displays the basic ele-

27. Childs, *Introduction*, 596.

28. The framework for interpretation of the Song of Songs will be dealt with in chapter 5 of this book.

ment of Hebrew parallelism throughout, including representations of all its diversity. The book of Proverbs contains two-line couplets, four-line quatrains, the measured *middah* (the “measurement” of typically “three or four” things), and the extended poem, parable, or discourse. Job represents an epic poem sandwiched between two narrative sections. Its larger poetic middle appears in the form of an interactive dialogue, with each subsequent speaker identified by name. In similar form but with distinctive differences, the Song of Songs represents a poetic interchange between a man and a woman designed to provide instructions regarding love and marriage. In contrast with the form of Job, no explicit identification of speakers is provided, which quite possibly indicates that the book was designed for dramatic reading or chanting by featured individuals, though without dramatic enactment. The book of Ecclesiastes opens and closes with narrative observations regarding wisdom, while the central poetic bulk of material is cast mostly in the first person. The book of Lamentations in its total substance is the longest acrostic poem in the Old Testament, even longer than the familiar acrostic of Psalm 119 with its 176 verses. Despite a basic uniformity of the five chapters of Lamentations with their verses arranged in acrostic form, significant diversity appears throughout. The fifth poem may be called a *quasi-acrostic*, containing the standard twenty-two verses, but without any semblance of alphabetic order.

So a wide range of distinctive poetic material characterizes the various wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In each of these instances, it is not simply a matter of poetic materials that have been integrated into the various books. The entirety of each of these books, perhaps with the exception of Ecclesiastes, is deliberately structured in poetic form. In two cases a prose section at the beginning and end is set in contrast with the poetic body of the book. No other portion of Scripture except the Psalms and some portions of the Prophets presents poetic material comparable to these masterpieces of literary composition.

But why? What in the subject of wisdom inspires such extensive poetic expression? As one commentator queries, “is there something about the poetic form that makes it particularly useful for evoking

wisdom?”<sup>29</sup> The author answers his own question with an example: “To say that God is ‘transcendent’ or ‘omniscient’ . . . is qualitatively different than declaring that God ‘rules the raging sea.’”<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the larger impact made by poetic literature, the practical purpose of these discourses may be a primary factor that brought about this all-embracing poetic mode of expression. These inspired works do not focus on history or theology. Scattered admonitions address the people, but these poems contain nothing resembling the “Thus says the LORD” of the Prophets.

These books of wisdom may be called the *how-to books* of the Old Testament. God’s people desperately need to know the how-tos that make life possible in the midst of a world that challenges every aspect of human life. Furthermore, they need this practical advice to be preserved in memorable fashion, which partly explains the books’ poetic rather than prosaic form.<sup>31</sup> God’s people need to carry these God-inspired words of wisdom along with them as they walk along the road, barter in the market, and return each evening to the privacy of home and family.<sup>32</sup>

From this perspective, these five books of the Old Testament may be characterized as follows:

29. Bartholomew, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 68.

30. *Ibid.*, 69.

31. Cf. the comments on memorization as a critical factor in the use of poetry in ancient oral societies in Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (London: W. W. Norton, 2011), 55–56.

32. Some significant recognition has been given to the role of the family as a formative element in communicating Israel’s wisdom tradition, in accord with the manifold times that Solomon addresses his “son” or “sons” in Proverbs. R. E. Clements, “Wisdom and Old Testament Theology,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), notes that wisdom in the Old Testament underscored the importance of a right attitude to life in general based on a religious commitment. Regarding the critical role of the family, he notes regarding wisdom in a biblical theology: “The most obvious is that, in the post-exilic period, wisdom appears to have flourished as a part of a programme of education carried out with the approval of, and probably within the location of, the individual household” (281). Again, he states: “The very roots of religion and virtue are seen to rest within the relatively small household context of family life” (281). Though uncertain about the sociological setting of Old Testament wisdom, Crenshaw notes: “In all probability, the central place of instruction was the family” (*Urgent Advice*, 595).



- Proverbs: How to Walk in Wisdom's Way
- Job: How to Puzzle
- Ecclesiastes: How to Cope with Life's Frustrations
- Lamentations: How to Weep
- The Song of Songs: How to Love

Following the conclusion of this brief introduction to Old Testament wisdom literature, the present work will explore each of these books individually. The goal will be to capture the essence of wisdom in each book from a biblical-theological perspective, so that it speaks with practical effectiveness into the current context of the lives of God's people. Special attention will be paid to the varied poetic dimensions of the various books.<sup>33</sup>

## THE PLACE OF WISDOM IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

For decades, the biblical-theology movement has focused altogether on the history of redemption. The record of the "mighty acts of God" across Israel's historical experience has dominated the study of Old Testament theology. Though producing numerous insights into the biblical message, a sad side effect has been the neglect of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.<sup>34</sup> In the wisdom literature almost no mention is made of the promise to the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, the lawgiving at Sinai, the wilderness wandering, the conquest, Davidic kingship, exile, and restoration.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, the wisdom materials have been essentially treated as an appendix to the drama of redemption. Some have even gone so far as to dub

33. One Old Testament scholar who has given his life to research in the wisdom literature notes that the top of the list for future studies in the field must be "literary artistry." Underscoring this observation, he continues: "There is no more appropriate endeavor, since such analysis takes its cue from ancient sages who labored to master the art of speaking and writing" (Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice*, 32).

34. Says Clements: "It is a significant feature of the influential work of Gerhard von Rad that his attention to the role of wisdom in the growth of the biblical tradition emerges after the completion of his *magnum opus* on Old Testament theology" ("Wisdom and Old Testament Theology," 269).

35. As an exception, as previously noted, Lamentations represents a faith reaction to Israel's redemptive-historical experience of exile.

the wisdom literature of the Old Testament an “alien corpus.”<sup>36</sup> This significant aspect of Israel’s life of faith has had no opportunity to make its positive contribution to the understanding of God’s revelation to Israel. God’s people as a consequence have been significantly impoverished.

This neglect of wisdom’s contribution to the faith and life of God’s people has occurred in part as a consequence of viewing redemptive history from a purely linear perspective. Abraham’s faith points to Moses’ exodus followed by David’s kingdom consummating in Messiah’s coming. A straight line across history has provided the pattern for understanding the life and faith of God’s people.

A critical modification of the manner in which redemption progresses across history may bring into fuller focus the true nature of God’s ongoing work among a fallen humanity. Not only is there the straight line of continuum from the age of the old covenant to the new, but a spiral of repetition must be taken into account—repetition with increased intensity. The cycle of sun and moon that orders the seasons has its vital role to play in redemptive history. The spiral of the Sabbath must be noted—the weekly Sabbaths anticipating sabbatical years accumulating up to the fifty-year Jubilee, which defines the progress of redemptive history (Lev. 25:1–12; 2 Chron. 36:21; Dan. 9:25). Beyond these basic cycles of creation is the significant cycle of birth, life, and death defining the life span of particular men and women who “served God’s purpose in [their] own generation” (Acts 13:36). The cycle of the generations functions as an aspect of God’s redemptive work in the world that must never be overlooked. Beyond the cycle of generations is the cycle of epochs, of elongated periods of time. Integral to the cycle of epochs is the cycle of national experiences, as dramatized in the days of Israel’s judges. Six times over, national sin provokes divine chastening; divine chastening leads to a cry for deliverance; a cry for deliverance receives divine answer by God’s sending a judge as savior. But the salvation brought by the

36. Cf. the allusion to this perspective in Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice*, 1. Note also the references in Waltke (*Proverbs 1–15*, 64) to the acknowledgments of several Old Testament theologians regarding the failure to integrate wisdom literature into Old Testament biblical theology.

judge is soon forgotten, and the nation enters the descending spiral into sin once more (Judg. 2:10–19).

Without this larger picture of the repetitive cycles inherent in humanity's experience as ordered by the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the world, the understanding of basic reality by God's people will remain deficient. This larger picture of God's working in the world provides the framework for a wise understanding of marriage in youth, labor throughout life, tragedy in crisis, weeping in death, and worship in hope. From this perspective, the Old Testament books of wisdom contribute significantly in every age to the understanding of redemption's progress toward its ultimate goal, which finds its personified climax in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, the wisdom of God.

### AN INITIAL ADMONITION: GET WISDOM!

The final word in this introduction to biblical wisdom must speak as wisdom speaks: Get wisdom! "The beginning of wisdom is—Get Wisdom! And with all your getting, get understanding" (Prov. 4:7). The proverb drills this admonition into the head and heart of the reader by multiple repetitions:

Get wisdom! Get understanding!  
Do not forget!  
Do not turn away from the words of my mouth!  
Do not abandon her,  
and she will protect you.  
Love her,  
and she will watch over you.  
The principal thing is wisdom.  
Get wisdom!  
and with all your getting,  
get understanding. (Prov. 4:5–7)

Five times in three verses the admonition is underlined: Get, get, get, get, get! Make the getting of wisdom your chief goal in life. All these years, all these decades, God's people have suffered from relative neglect of these five books of wisdom. So now the admonition must be heeded. It is imperative. Get wisdom.

But just as was asked at the beginning of this introduction to Old Testament wisdom, the question must be asked again, “Where is wisdom to be found?”

The wisest way to wisdom is to follow the route of the wise men from the East: “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Matt. 2:2 NIV). They found the young child born of a virgin, conceived of the Holy Spirit, designated the Son of God. As a youth he grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). Of himself he said, “[Wisdom] greater than Solomon is here” (Matt. 12:42 NIV). The wisdom of men has been made foolishness by the revelation of God’s wisdom in Christ (1 Cor. 1:20–25). As the Creator of all things, he has all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in himself (Col. 2:3).

So this study of the wisdom of the Old Testament must eventually rest on Jesus the Messiah as the fullness and the fulfillment of all the wisdom of God. While appearing as foolishness in the eyes of men, all the wisdom of the ages focuses on him.

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# PROVERBS

## HOW TO WALK IN WISDOM'S WAY

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- I. The Origin and Development of the Book of Proverbs
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Conclusion

Selected Bibliography for Proverbs

## INTRODUCTION

If any book of the Bible is given over to the practicalities of life, it is the book of Proverbs. “How to walk in wisdom’s way” summarizes the message of this book that provides “down-to-earth” advice. But this advice is like no other available in this world. It is advice inspired by God, sent from heaven. This book contains the divinely inspired wisdom by which a father may prepare his son for the many different challenges that he must face in life. How to respond to wealth, to work, to words. What to expect from the constant scheming of wicked people. How to understand calamities. But most of all, how to keep God, the LORD of Creation and Covenant, central throughout your entire life.

This wisdom for the walk of a lifetime does not come in the form of a theological treatise or a collection of lessons from history. It comes instead in the form of poetic proverbs—short, practical summaries of truth that anticipate just about every situation that a person will face. Indeed, longer, more elaborate warnings and counsels also appear in the book. But typically these proverbs may be characterized as “God’s existentialism.” You may plan out the details of your schedule before you step out into today’s world. But how can you anticipate the variety of circumstances that will confront you throughout the day? You bump into an old friend, you receive an unexpected message, you miss your appointment. You stumble on a slippery walkway, you have a serious disagreement with your boss, your child’s school principal calls for an appointment to discuss a problem that has arisen.



What can possibly prepare you for all these different situations? They arise unannounced without a moment's notice. Where can you turn for the practical advice that will tell you what to do? You need instant insight so that you can know how to react.

That's what the book of Proverbs is all about. It's the LORD's wisdom condensed into short, pithy, memorable sayings that address the concrete challenges his people face every day.

Every human culture creates its own storage bank of wise words. So it should not be surprising that proverbial sayings had a long history among the people of God under the old covenant. Anonymous sayings embodying wisdom are scattered throughout the Old Testament books of history and prophecy:

That is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD." (Gen. 10:9 NIV)

As the proverb of the ancients says, "Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness." (1 Sam. 24:13 NASB)

Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off. (1 Kings 20:11)

Does the ax raise itself  
above him who swings it,  
or the saw boast  
against him who uses it? (Isa. 10:15 NIV)

The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. (Jer. 31:29; cf. Ezek. 18:2)

Everyone who quotes proverbs will quote this proverb about you: "Like mother, like daughter." (Ezek. 16:44 NIV)

Not only in the Old Testament literature of history and prophecy. The psalmist also indicates his intent to preserve the treasures of wisdom with a proverb:

My mouth  
will speak words of wisdom;  
The utterance from my heart  
will give understanding.

I will turn my ear  
 to a proverb:  
 With the harp  
 I will expound my riddle. (Ps. 49:3-4 NIV)

Becoming the object of a proverbial saying could indicate a blessing or a curse. For a wise saying is capable of cutting both ways. The LORD warns King Solomon that if the people of Israel violate his commands, they will become “a byword [proverb—מִשְׁלַּל] and an object of ridicule among all peoples” (1 Kings 9:7 NIV; cf. Deut. 28:37). Having witnessed the devastations of God’s judgments on his nation, the psalmist declares: “You have made us a byword [proverb—מִשְׁלַּל] among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us” (Ps. 44:14 NIV; cf. 69:12). In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, to be a reproach and a proverb, an object of ridicule and cursing, are essentially the same thing (Jer. 24:9).

These biblical aphorisms should not be regarded merely as “timeless truths” that manifest no sensitivity to the progress of redemptive history. Though rooted in concrete circumstances of a specific time and place, these Old Testament proverbs contain an element that anticipates the pattern of a spiral moving across history toward its climax. In ever-increasing intensity, through every age, “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). This central theme of life is manifest across the various periods of redemptive history. So the search for wisdom by the patriarch Job underscores the significance of the “fear of the Lord” (Job 28:28). In facing the prospect of the dark days of the exile, the prophet Isaiah declares that those who live by “fear of the LORD” are set over against those who “light fires” in honor of false gods and who will eventually lie down in torment (Isa. 50:10–11; cf. 59:19). As the era of the old covenant moves toward its conclusion, the prophet Malachi anticipates the climactic day in which God will act in judgment to distinguish the righteous from the wicked. At that critical moment, the prophet promises that those who “fear the LORD” will be his treasured possession and will be spared (Mal. 3:16–17). From 2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C. to 700 B.C. to 500 B.C., the proverbial truth that the “fear of the LORD” is the beginning of wisdom manifests its reality across the ages.

Even in the context of the new covenant, the ever-increasing significance of this proverbial word about the “fear of the LORD” finds its place. When the climactic hour of the Son of God’s incarnation draws near, Mary declares that the Lord’s mercy extends to all those who “fear him” from generation to generation (Luke 1:50). Subsequently, as the apostle Peter acknowledges God’s gift of salvation to the Roman centurion, he affirms that God accepts from every nation those who “fear him,” anticipating the worldwide spread of the Christian gospel across nations (Acts 10:35). Other instances of this enlargement of a proverbial principle across redemptive history may be traced in the application of particular proverbs to new situations brought about by the progress of redemption.<sup>1</sup> True in every age, these proverbial sayings increase in their significance as redemptive history progresses toward its climax.

In considering the role of Proverbs throughout the life of God’s people, the present study will consider the following topics:

- The Origin and Development of the Book of Proverbs
- The Relation of Proverbs to Other Ancient Wisdom Materials
- The Form, Substance, and Structure of the Book of Proverbs
- Theological Perspectives on the Book of Proverbs

## THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The opening verse of Proverbs traces the book’s origin to King Solomon, the quintessence of wisdom in Israel’s history:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.  
(Prov. 1:1 NIV)

1. Three additional examples of the ongoing significance of a proverbial saying may underscore this expanding role of the biblical proverb throughout the Old Testament and into the New: (1) “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Prov. 3:11–12 NIV; cf. Deut. 8:5; Job 7:17; Ps. 94:12; Heb. 12:5; Rev. 3:19). (2) “The LORD resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Prov. 3:34 LXX; cf. Ps. 138:6; Isa. 57:15; Matt. 23:12; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). (3) “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (Prov. 25:21 NIV; cf. Ex. 23:4; Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:20).

The indication that Solomon composed three thousand proverbs (1 Kings 4:32) more than adequately covers the approximately eight hundred verses found in the book of Proverbs. As in the case of the preservation of the words of Jesus, this collection of wise sayings represents a high level of selectivity even if all these proverbs should be attributed to Solomon (cf. John 20:30–31).

Further notations within the book itself indicate that not all the material in Proverbs claims to have originated with Solomon. Certain statements give evidence of a variety of authors and editors. More explicitly, authorship is attributed to:

- Solomon (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1)
- “Wise men” (Prov. 22:17; 24:23)
- Agur (Prov. 30:1)
- Lemuel the king (Prov. 31:1)

It is not possible to precisely identify the “wise men” responsible for different portions of the book. Traditionally, *Agur* and *King Lemuel* have been regarded as names substituting for *Solomon*, although this conclusion is difficult to confirm.

Critics of an earlier day concluded that despite the claim of Solomonic origin, the biblical proverbs must have originated in approximately the third century B.C. because of their Persian or Greek flavor.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Egyptian and Babylonian parallels have made it clear that the content of the book of Proverbs may be appropriately located in the early days of Israelite kingdom history. In addition, the numerous proverbs referring to kings “presuppose the existence of the Israelite monarchy,”<sup>3</sup> which would not suit a third-century B.C. date for the book’s origin. The personification of wisdom in chapters 8 and 9 was once regarded as the latest material in Proverbs. But more recently these chapters have been seen as the closest thing in Proverbs to ancient Canaanite materials.<sup>4</sup>

2. W. F. Albright calls Hermann Gunkel’s late-date theory a “curious myth.” Cf. W. F. Albright, “Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 4.

3. Cf. R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 152, referring to the opinion of W. O. E. Oesterley.

4. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1969), 26.

Despite contrary opinions, both external and internal evidence provides significant support for the Solomonic origin of the bulk of materials in Proverbs.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, as previously noted, Scripture itself attributes portions of the book to authors other than Solomon.

A statement within the book itself provides significant internal testimony to editing after the time of Solomon. The statement indicates a conscious editorial rearrangement of proverbs attributed to Solomon that was carried out by a group of wise men in the days of Hezekiah, working 250 to 300 years after their Solomonic composition.

These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men  
of Hezekiah king of Judah. (Prov. 25:1 NIV)

The term translated “copied” (הִעֲתִיקוּ) comes from a root that means “to move,” as in Genesis 12:8: “[Abraham] moved from there to a mountain on the east” (cf. also Gen. 26:22). In the context of the formation of the book of Proverbs, the term suggests a transposing of certain proverbs from one location in a collection of manuscripts to another. As one commentator explains, the word means “‘to remove from their place,’ and denotes that the men of Hezekiah removed from the place where they found the following proverbs, and placed them together in a separate collection.”<sup>6</sup> The arrangement (or rearrangement) of the book by the men of Hezekiah indicates that the final form of the book could not have taken shape any earlier than 250 to 300 years after Solomon.

5. Recent biblical scholarship has tended to give more credence to the possibility that Solomon composed at least some of the book of Proverbs. Says R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9*, Studies in Biblical Theology 45 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1965), 20: “it is difficult to set aside entirely the persistent tradition which connects Solomon with wisdom.” He comments further that the ascription of wisdom to Solomon “may have a historical basis.” He notes that the ascription of certain collections in Proverbs to Solomon “may not be entirely unfounded,” since the cultural circumstances favor it (21). To the contrary, Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 56, says: “Historically, it is improbable that many—if any—of the proverbs were written by Solomon.”

6. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 1:5.

## THE RELATION OF PROVERBS TO OTHER ANCIENT WISDOM MATERIALS

Already the place of biblical wisdom writings has been considered in the larger context of ancient Near Eastern wisdom material.<sup>7</sup> Exploration of this question as it specifically relates to the book of Proverbs has focused on an Egyptian document, the “Wisdom of Amen-em-Opet.”<sup>8</sup> When this document was made public, it was immediately hailed as having a direct relationship to the collection of sayings of the “wise ones” in Proverbs 22:17–24:22. Before its publication, it was assumed that Proverbs was different from other Old Testament books simply in that it elaborated on the ethical teaching of the Law and the Prophets. But once attention turned to a comparison with Egyptian and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, Proverbs suddenly came to be viewed as “what might be called the Hebrew version of an intercultural phenomenon shared with Egypt and Mesopotamia.”<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, viewing Proverbs as an authentic expression of Israelite faith was brought into question. Now Proverbs was perceived as providing a secularistic view of life, instructing people how to achieve material success.

The dating of this Egyptian document varies between the twelfth and sixth centuries B.C., which means that its chronological relation to the book of Proverbs cannot be determined with certainty.<sup>10</sup> More recent studies have promoted a twelfth-century B.C. dating.<sup>11</sup> But apart from questions of dating, the “points of contact between the two are too many and too close to be a matter of coincidence.”<sup>12</sup>

7. Note the introductory chapter of this book in the section titled “The Broader Context of Wisdom in the Ancient Near East.”

8. E. W. Budge presented the document to the British Museum in London, England, in 1888. But it was thirty-five years later, in 1923, that the material was finally published.

9. R. B. Y. Scott, “The Study of Wisdom Literature,” *Interpretation* 24, 1 (1970): 24.

10. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 421–25, dates this Egyptian document somewhere between the tenth and the sixth centuries B.C., noting that some weight of evidence favors the seventh to the sixth centuries B.C. Assuming the role of Solomon in the production of the materials found in Proverbs, this dating would place the Egyptian document centuries later than the biblical proverbs.

11. Whybray, *Survey*, 10. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 18, dates the document sometime in the twelfth to the eleventh centuries B.C.

12. Kidner, *Proverbs*, 23.

A comparison of some expressions in these two documents may demonstrate their similarities:<sup>13</sup>

Amen-em-Opet	Proverbs
"To know how to return an answer to him who said it, and to direct a report to one who has sent him." (Introduction)	"To make you know the certainty of words of truth, that you may correctly answer to him who sent you." (Prov. 22:21)
"Give thy ears, hear what is said, give thy heart to understand them. To put them in thy heart is worthwhile." (i, 1-3)	"Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge. For it will be pleasant if you keep them within you." (Prov. 22:17-18a)
". . . nor encroach upon the boundaries of a widow." (6th chap., viii, 18)	"Do not move the ancient boundary which your fathers have set." (Prov. 22:28)
"Better is a measure that the god gives thee than 5000 [taken] illegally." (6th chap., viii, 18)	"Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and turmoil with it." (Prov. 15:16)
"Better is bread, when the heart is happy, than riches with sorrow." (6th chap., ix, 8-9)	"Better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it." (Prov. 15:17)
"Cast not thy heart in pursuit of riches. . . . They have made themselves wings like geese and are flown away to the heavens." (7th chap., ix, 10; x, 4-5)	"Do not weary yourself to gain riches . . . for wealth certainly makes itself wings, like an eagle that flies toward the heavens." (Prov. 23:4-5)
"Do not associate to thyself the heated man, nor visit him for conversation." (9th chap., xi, 13)	"Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man." (Prov. 22:24)
"Do not lean on the scales nor falsify the weights, nor damage the fractions of the measure." (16th chap., xvii, 18)	"Differing weights are an abomination to the LORD, and a false scale is not good." (Prov. 20:23)
"Man knows not what the morrow is like." (18th chap., xix, 13)	"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." (Prov. 27:1 NIV)
"Do not eat bread before a noble. . . . Look at the cup which is before thee, and let it serve thy needs." (23rd chap., xxiii, 13, 16)	"When you sit down to dine with a ruler . . . put a knife to your throat." (Prov. 23:1 NIV)

13. The quotations from Amen-em-Opet are taken from Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 421-24. Pritchard omits thirteen of the thirty chapters, describing their content only briefly in a footnote. The omitted chapters are 3, 5, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 22, 24, 26, 27, and 29.

So how is the relationship of these two documents to be understood? Basically three approaches have been proposed.

The first approach discovers a specific allusion to the “thirty chapters” mentioned in Amen-em-Opet in Proverbs 22:17–24:22. This section of Proverbs is regarded as containing a direct reference to the “thirty sayings” found in the Egyptian document. A recent translation of the critical verse reads as follows:

Have I not written thirty sayings for you,  
Sayings of counsel and knowledge[?] (Prov. 22:20 NIV)<sup>14</sup>

Based on this analysis of the relationship between the two documents, this first collection of the proverbs of the “wise ones” (Prov. 22:17–24:22) is then divided into thirty “sayings.”<sup>15</sup>

The second approach uncovers various expressions scattered throughout Amen-em-Opet that correspond to a number of the “sayings” of the wise ones as recorded in this same section of Proverbs (Prov. 22:17–24:22). Random aphorisms of Amen-em-Opet are compared with similar statements coming from Proverbs.<sup>16</sup>

14. NIV (1984, 2011). The earlier NIV footnotes the following optional readings: (Have I not) “formerly written” (to you)? and (Have I not) “written excellent” (things to you)? The later NIV (2011) does not include these optional readings. Though not in the NIV of 1984, the NIV of 2011 identifies thirty consecutive “sayings” by inserting headings across this section of Proverbs. The *ESV Study Bible* (2008) also renders Proverbs 22:20 as “thirty sayings.” The enumerations of the two versions differ in that the NIV (2011) counts the introductory verses of the section (Prov. 22:17–21) as “Saying 1” and then merges Proverbs 24:10–12 into a single “saying” to achieve the number “thirty.” The *ESV Study Bible* study note begins its enumeration with Proverbs 22:22–23 and separates Proverbs 24:10–12 into two “sayings,” also concluding with the number “thirty.”

15. This arrangement is extensively developed in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 225–88. Cf. also Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), 21–24. In support of the “thirty sayings” reading of the text, see also Kidner, *Proverbs*, 23, 249–50; Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 415; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 291–94.

16. An illustration of this approach may be found in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 424n46, citing D. C. Simpson, “The Hebrew Book of Proverbs and the Teaching of Amenophis,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 12, 3/4 (1926): 232–39. Pritchard cites no parallels with forty-seven of the seventy verses from this section of Proverbs.



The first proposal explaining the connection is based on the assumption that Proverbs 22:20 actually refers to “thirty” (sayings).<sup>17</sup> But the written Masoretic Hebrew text (*Ketib*) reads “[on] the third [day]” (*shilshom*, שְׁלֹשֹׁם), which means “[on] the day before yesterday,” and is found elsewhere only as an idiomatic expression meaning “in the past” or “formerly.” With this understanding, the verse gives expression to a rhetorical question: “Have I not written formerly to you . . . ?”<sup>18</sup> Following this reading of the written Masoretic text, no mention is found in this section of Proverbs to a supposed “thirty” (sayings).

Indeed, the Masoretic verbalization of the text (the *Qere*) has the meaning “thirty” (*shalishim*, שְׁלִישִׁים). Yet the “widespread agreement that the close resemblance to Amenemope ends at 23:11” with only ten comparable units rather than thirty argues against any preciseness of connection between the Egyptian document and Proverbs on the basis of a reference to “thirty sayings.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the fact that this section of Proverbs (Prov. 22:17–24:22) can be convincingly divided into precisely thirty sayings supports its connection with Amen-em-Opet.

With respect to the second approach and its concentration on specific parallels of expression shared between Amen-em-Opet and Proverbs 22:17–24:22, the larger framework of these sayings must be taken into account. A polytheistic perspective on life permeates Amen-em-Opet, which is wholly foreign to the biblical document. Repeated reference is made to its various gods. The introduction speaks of the scribe who “sets up the divine offerings for all the gods.” He refers to the one who “installs Horus upon the throne of his father,” to “God’s Mother,” and to the one who “protects Min in his shrine.” The body of the text appeals to the moon god to establish justice in the land (second chapter), speaks of satisfying god with the will of the Lord [?] (sixth chapter), refers to Fate and Fortune, which are identified as the god Sahy and the goddess Renaenut (seventh chapter), urges making prayer

17. The word *sayings* is not in the biblical text.

18. R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 328.

19. Cf. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 292. Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 228, also acknowledges the limitation of the connection at the outset of his comparison: “Recall that it is precisely at 23:11 that material dependent on *Amenemope* disappears.”

to Aton when he rises, for he will give prosperity and health (seventh chapter), speaks of safety in the hand of the god, which should enable a person to be sincere (tenth chapter), describes “the ape” that “sits beside the balance” whose god is Thoth (sixteenth chapter), declares that “God is [always] in his success, whereas man is in his failure” (eighteenth chapter), states that “as for wrongdoing, it belongs to the god; it is sealed with his finger. There is no success in the hand of the god, but there is no failure before him” (eighteenth chapter). In addition, the text identifies the “All-Lord” as the pilot of the tongue (eighteenth chapter) and urges its reader not to discover the will of god for his own self without reference to Fate and Fortune (twentieth chapter). In the conclusion, the scribe of Amen-em-Opet identifies himself as Senu, son of the God’s Father Pa-miu (thirtieth chapter).

To an Israelite who regularly recited the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one,” Deut. 6:4 NIV), this plethora of gods must have appeared as utter abomination. Not knowing how the various gods would react to the different circumstances of life according to their diverse whims must have appeared as totally confusing—which as a matter of fact it is. Given this wholly different context of the aphorisms of Egypt, it may be appropriately observed that far more words of Amen-em-Opet stand in opposition to the teaching of Proverbs than the scattered words that appear to have some formal agreement. Making comparison of phrases or parts of phrases taken out of their total context cannot be a proper way of understanding either the sayings of Amen-em-Opet or the proverbs of Solomon.

How, then, is the connection and sometimes similarity of phraseology between Amen-em-Opet and Proverbs to be understood? The third analysis of the relationship acknowledges the similarities, but at the same time insists that the two different world-and-life views must always be taken into account.<sup>20</sup> Because of the verified awareness by Israel of the wisdom traditions in Egypt, it may be appropriately proposed that the parallels of expression could be explained by appeal to a common tradition of wisdom known in both Israel and Egypt.

20. Whybray, *Survey*, 16, notes that “the more recent studies of Proverbs show a growing tendency, while not denying Egyptian influence altogether, to understand the book as more closely related to Israelite traditions than to outside influences.”

Their interrelationship may be best explained through presuming studied interaction among the schooling experiences of the wisdom scribes of the various nations, which “undoubtedly provided opportunity for the study of a wide range of Wisdom writings.”<sup>21</sup> It is quite possible to imagine Solomon and the “wise men” of his kingdom scrutinizing the wisdom materials of Egypt, noting the saneness of some of their proverbial sayings, and adjusting them so that they would conform to the larger truths arising from the uniqueness of Yahweh, the one and only true God of Creation and Covenant who revealed himself with consistency to Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses, the people of Israel, David the organizer of Israel’s worship practices, and Solomon.

At the same time, foundational theological differences inevitably exclude direct dependence, whether speaking of pithy aphorisms or extended discourses.<sup>22</sup> If in any way Israel derived some of its expressions from the wisdom of Egypt, they must be understood as being wholly transformed by their context in the Old Testament faith of Israel.

## THE FORM, SUBSTANCE, AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

*Form*, *substance*, and *structure* are rather elastic terms that can be stretched or shrunk to cover diverse elements of a literary piece. In this instance, the terms anticipate a basic outline of the structure of the book of Proverbs, along with observations regarding larger and smaller elements of form and substance.

### Basic Outline

An outline of the basic contents of Proverbs may be helpful in visualizing the flow of the book across its several sections. Both the

21. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 18 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 20f.

22. Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Proverbs,” in *The Biblical Expositor*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1960), 2:73. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 18, observes that “even in the case of Amenemope, the contact was probably mediated.”

content and the form of the material, along with specific introductory statements, combine to mark out the various materials of the book. The basic sections may be summarized in the following manner:<sup>23</sup>

- Introductory Section: The Worth of Wisdom's Way (Proverbs 1–9)
- The Proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 10:1–22:16)
  - Proverbs with a Contrast (Proverbs 10–15)
  - Proverbs without a Contrast (Proverbs 16:1–22:16)
- The Words of the Wise Ones (Proverbs 22:17–24:34)
  - First Collection from the Wise Ones (Proverbs 22:17–24:22)
  - Second Collection from the Wise Ones (Proverbs 24:23–34)
- The Hezekian Arrangement of Solomonic Proverbs (Proverbs 25–29)
- The Words of Certain Wise Men (Proverbs 30:1–31:9)
  - Agur (Proverbs 30:1–33)
  - King Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1–9)
- An Acrostic Poem Celebrating the Godly Woman (Proverbs 31:10–31)

### Elements of Form and Substance

According to the introductory statements of the book of Proverbs, these words of wisdom arise in the form of communications from the king to his son. As son of the king, he is heir to the throne. He himself will soon be ruling over God's people. In this way the necessity of transmitting wisdom across the generations receives special recognition in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs concentrates on the theme "How to walk in wisdom's way." It is first and foremost a practical book from cover to cover. The father explains to his son "the way" in which he must walk throughout life.<sup>24</sup>

23. See "Chapter Outline" above for a more detailed outline of the book of Proverbs.

24. This concept of "walking in wisdom's way" as the overarching theme of Proverbs is reflected in the title of the book by R. B. Y. Scott: *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament*

Specific references to this theme of walking in wisdom's way occur no fewer than twenty-three times throughout the book, without even attempting to calculate the number of times allusion is made to the practical wisdom required for every aspect of human life. Both from a negative and a positive perspective, the author underscores the necessity and the blessing of walking in wisdom. With his son's life stretching before him, the father urges his offspring never to set his foot in the paths of people who search for stolen wealth (Prov. 1:15, 19). His son must not leave the straight paths to walk in ways of darkness (2:13). He must not walk with a perverse mouth, or as a slanderer maliciously revealing secrets that need never be known (6:12; 11:13; 20:19). He must take great caution that he does not suddenly turn and walk after the trail of the adulteress (7:22). He must take care that he not walk as a bully who causes his neighbor to walk in a path that will lead to nothing good (16:29).

From a positive perspective, many blessings and benefits in life come as a person walks in wisdom's way:

- Yahweh will shield you from evil. (Prov. 2:7)
- You will be kept safe, walking securely. (Prov. 10:9; 28:18, 26)
- Your foot will not stumble; your step will not be hindered. (Prov. 3:23; 4:12)
- Your children will be blessed. (Prov. 20:7)
- Your father's directions will guide you when you walk, watch over you when you sleep, and speak to you when you wake. (Prov. 6:22)
- You will grow wise as you walk with the wise. (Prov. 13:20)

Even wisdom personified walks in the path of righteousness (Prov. 8:20). A vivid imagery compares the walk through life to the progressive enlightening of the day:

The path of the righteous  
is like the first gleam of dawn,

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(New York: Macmillan, 1971). But the author does little to develop the theme. A brief but insightful treatment of wisdom as the "way" in Proverbs may be found in Cornelius Vanderwaal, *Job-Song of Songs*, vol. 4 of *Search the Scriptures* (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1978), 72.

shining ever brighter  
till the full light of day. (Prov. 4:18 NIV)

A phrase that occurs only once in Proverbs but several times elsewhere in the Old Testament deserves some notice: “the way of Yahweh”:

A fortress for the person with integrity  
is the way of Yahweh;  
but ruination for those who practice evil. (Prov. 10:29)

This “way of Yahweh” could be understood as the “way” that Yahweh himself directs the universe by his thoughts and actions. Or it could refer to the “way” commended by Yahweh for a person to follow. In either understanding, the thought is essentially the same, and has the effect of distancing the God-blessed way of life from any secular perspective of the “way.” This “way” cannot be generalized to describe the way of any “god” that might arise in people’s imaginations. It is instead the way of *Yahweh*, the one and only LORD of Creation and Covenant.

This phrase, “the way of *Yahweh*,” appears in several significant contexts in the Old Testament outside Proverbs. The LORD indicates that he will not keep secret his plans from Abraham. For he has chosen him “so that he will command both his son and his daughter who succeed him to keep *the way of Yahweh* by continually practicing righteousness and justice, so that Yahweh will make everything come to pass for Abraham exactly as he has promised” (Gen. 18:19; cf. also Judg. 2:22; 2 Kings 21:22). As in the case of Proverbs, the revelation to father Abraham comes to him specifically for the sake of his children.

This whole concept of “the way” and “walking in wisdom’s way” naturally anticipates the distinctive designation of the life pattern of early Christian believers as recorded in the book of Acts. The life of the Christian is categorized as “the Way.” Six times in Acts this term captures the essence of the Christian’s existence in this world. Believers in Jesus as the Christ belong to “the Way” (Acts 9:2). Opponents in Ephesus malign “the Way,” and as a consequence a great disturbance develops about “the Way” (Acts 19:9, 23). Paul explains that he first

persecuted the followers of this “Way,” but then himself became a devoted follower of “the Way” (Acts 22:4; 24:14).

What is this Way of the disciple of Christ? Paul defines it very succinctly before Felix the Roman governor. Walking in the Way is equivalent to worshipping “the God of our fathers” in conformity with “everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14 NIV). Rather than developing outside the realm of redemptive history as something unique to the substance of biblical theology, “walking in the wisdom of the Way” defines the lifestyle of the redeemed in every age. From the consummative perspective of the new covenant, nothing less than living in unity with Jesus Christ qualifies as walking in the Way. For he embodies in himself “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” the only way of coming to the Father (John 14:6). In him are stored all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge needed for this life (Col. 2:3).

“Walking in wisdom’s way” may provide a proper perspective for considering the form and substance of the book of Proverbs. The first portion of Proverbs (chaps. 1–9) comes primarily in the form of extended discourses that introduce a limited number of major topics. The second portion of the book consists mainly of independent two-line or four-line proverbs (chaps. 10–29). The third portion of the book (chaps. 30–31) presents distinctive advice from two wise men, and concludes with an acrostic poem celebrating the godly woman.

### **Introductory Section: The Worth of Wisdom’s Way (Proverbs 1–9)**

This introductory material concentrates on commending wisdom as the way to fullness of life. It is distinctively hortatory in style, repeatedly exhorting the reader to seek wisdom. The preface (Prov. 1:1–6) defines the purpose of the whole book, which is to encourage the covenant people of God to seek his wisdom. The spiritual bedrock of all wisdom is identified as “the fear of the COVENANT LORD” (1:7).

Three topics receive extensive development in these first nine chapters of the book. The author repeatedly returns to these focal themes, which are the commendation of wisdom; the personification of wisdom; and a special warning to a son.

*The Commendation of Wisdom (Ten Passages)*

As an appropriate beginning of his treatment of the subject of wisdom, the author urges his young readers to set a priority on gaining wisdom. These ten passages do not always appear as completely separate entities, but often flow naturally into one another. The extent of this material in the opening portion of Proverbs underscores the significance of wisdom to the writer. But it also suggests the difficulty of convincing the next generation of the importance of placing wisdom as the great priority of life. These passages are:

*(1) Proverbs 1:1–7*

These verses present the reason for the book and underscore wisdom's moral quality. Over a dozen different terms introduce the subject of wisdom. Godly wisdom is not merely shrewdness in dealing with the various challenges of life. It involves doing what is right, just, and fair. Wisdom's essence is laid out as the heart of the book: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

*(2) Proverbs 1:8–9*

These verses provide an initial exhortation to the "son" to listen to his father's instruction and his mother's teaching. Godly wisdom can be acquired only when a person pays attention to his father and mother, those who have been established by God to instruct him in the school of wisdom.

*(3) Proverbs 1:10–19*

Now the author directly addresses his son a second time, offering an initial warning. Don't give in to the suggestions of sinners. Peer pressure as an alternative to the instruction of wisdom must be resisted. Wisdom is clearly a moral question, a matter of life and death. Sinners who tempt others to join them in their wicked ways only lay a trap for themselves, lying in wait for their own blood.

*(4) Proverbs 2:1–22*

The young man who devotes himself to seeking wisdom like hidden treasure will understand the fear of the LORD. God will guard



the course of the just, and he will protect the way of his faithful ones. For wisdom has the power to protect from evil. As a consequence, the upright will live in the land, while the wicked will be exiled from its borders.

(5) *Proverbs 3:1–12*

This section makes use of a distinctive style in which admonition precedes promise:

- *Admonition:* Don't forget my teaching and my commands.
- *Promise:* You will have prosperity and long life. (Prov. 3:1–2)
  
- *Admonition:* Maintain love and faithfulness.
- *Promise:* You will gain favor in the eyes of God and man. (Prov. 3:3–4)
  
- *Admonition:* Trust the LORD with all your heart.
- *Promise:* He will make your paths straight. (Prov. 3:5–6)
  
- *Admonition:* Fear the LORD and shun evil.
- *Promise:* You will have health in your body and nourishment in your bones. (Prov. 3:7–8)
  
- *Admonition:* Honor the LORD with your wealth.
- *Promise:* Your barns will be full. (Prov. 3:9–10)
  
- *Admonition:* Do not despise the LORD's discipline.
- *Promise:* You will be assured of God's love. (Prov. 3:11–12)

The many positive consequences of wisdom should encourage a person to seek it with all his heart.

(6) *Proverbs 3:21–35*

The encouragement to seek wisdom in these verses comes in the form of six *Do not*s, followed by a summary of promises for those who will walk in wisdom's way:

- *Do not* let sound judgment out of your sight. (Prov. 3:21)
- *Do not* withhold good from those who deserve it. (Prov. 3:27)
- *Do not* tell your neighbor to come back tomorrow when you can help today. (Prov. 3:28)
- *Do not* plot harm against your trusting neighbor. (Prov. 3:29)
- *Do not* accuse a man for no good reason. (Prov. 3:30)
- *Do not* envy a violent man. (Prov. 3:31)

The consequences of heeding or not heeding these encouragements to live in wisdom are either curse or blessing. The blessings include life, safety, sweet sleep, and absence of fear. The curses are mockery and shame inflicted by God himself.

(7) *Proverbs 4:1–4*

Once more Solomon admonishes a young man to listen to the wisdom of his father. Only in this case, his word addresses “sons” in the plural rather than a “son” in the singular (cf. Prov. 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21). In this unique cameo, Solomon shares his own personal experience: “When I was a boy in my father’s house, still tender and an only child of my mother [presumably Bathsheba], he [presumably King David] taught me” (4:3–4). As Solomon the wise king learned from his father David, so he encourages every young man to learn from the wisdom found in previous generations.

(8) *Proverbs 4:10–19*

These verses develop a contrast between the pathway of the wise and the wicked. The way, the path, the walk, the steps, the running of the wise will always lead them to life (Prov. 4:10–13). But the path, the walk, the traveling, the way of the wicked must be avoided at all costs (4:14–17). The section closes with a classic contrast between the path of the righteous and the way of the wicked:

The path of the righteous  
 is like the first gleam of dawn,  
 shining ever brighter  
 till the full light of day.

But the way of the wicked  
is like deep darkness;  
they do not know  
what makes them stumble. (Prov. 4:18–19 NIV)

(9) *Proverbs 4:20–27*

This section opens with a general admonition to “pay attention” to the words of a wise father. In this regard, it belongs with the many other direct admonitions regarding the way of wisdom in these opening nine chapters of the book. Then the “son” receives one specific admonition after another: “Listen”; “Do not forsake”; “Do not forget”; “Keep my commands”; “Do not despise”; “Do not resent”; “Pay attention”; “Accept what I say”; “Hold on to instruction”; “Listen closely.” It is as though the instructor in wisdom is doing everything within his power to get through the natural resistance of youth to the teaching of wisdom. As a concluding promise, the son who accepts the instruction of wisdom will experience health for his entire body, including the heart (Prov. 4:23), the mouth (4:24), the eyes (4:25), and the feet (4:26).

(10) *Proverbs 6:1–19*

This last section commending wisdom indicates specific follies that wisdom will enable a person to avoid:

- The folly of being security to a neighbor. (Prov. 6:1–5)
- The folly of living like a sluggard. (Prov. 6:6–11)
- The folly of being morally corrupt. (Prov. 6:12–15)
- The folly of becoming any one of the seven things that God hates. (Prov. 6:16–19)

By these ten passages that commend wisdom in the introductory nine chapters of the book, the author lays a strong foundation for all the various wise sayings found in the remaining twenty-two chapters. This concentration on the commendation of wisdom underscores two things: the need for young people (and older people as well) to set a priority on acquiring wisdom; and the innate resistance to wisdom’s instruction on the part of people, especially young people, even God’s own people.

*The Personification of Wisdom (Five Passages)*

A reinforcing of the importance of wisdom for life is strongly supported by no fewer than five passages that personify wisdom in this same introductory section of the book. Encountering wisdom is not dealing merely with an abstract idea. Encountering wisdom means interacting with a person, who is none other than God himself. These five passages are:

*(1) Proverbs 1:20–33*

Madam Wisdom makes her first appearance as she “calls aloud in the street” and “raises her voice in the public squares.” She cries out at the intersection of the busy streets, and makes her speech at the gateways of the city (Prov. 1:20–21). By this imagery, personified wisdom enforces the truth that God’s wisdom is not like the secrets of a “mystery religion” available only to the initiated. Instead, God openly declares the treasures of his divine wisdom for all who will hear.

In her first speech, Madam Wisdom laments the stubbornness of the simpleminded. Note well! She would have poured out her spirit on every true learner and made her deepest thoughts fully known to every listener (Prov. 1:23).<sup>25</sup> In an earnest effort to recapture the attention of those who have foolishly rejected her, she declares their imminent fate. Disaster, calamity, distress, trouble, abandonment, death, and destruction await all those who stubbornly refuse to accept her advice and foolishly spurn her rebuke. But whoever listens to wisdom will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm.

*(2) Proverbs 3:13–20*

In this second personification, Solomon underscores the blessedness of the person who finds wisdom. For Madam Wisdom is much more profitable than silver, yields better returns than gold, and is more precious than rubies. Nothing that a person might desire can compare

25. Proverbs 1:23 in the NIV reads, “I would have poured out my heart to you” (1984) or “I will pour out my thoughts to you” (2011). These renderings eliminate possible reference to the outpouring of “my Spirit” on those who heed the call of Madam Wisdom, which is an altogether appropriate rendering of the word רִיחֵי. Note the ESV, which reads, “I will pour out my spirit to you.”

with her. She brings the blessings of long life, riches and honor, pleasant and peaceful pathways. She is a tree of life to all who will embrace her, bringing unending blessings.

So how is it that wisdom possesses the capacity to bestow all these blessings? It is because wisdom lies at the foundation of the whole of the COVENANT LORD's creation. For by wisdom the LORD OF THE COVENANT laid the earth's foundations and set the heavens in place (Prov. 3:19). The ocean's depths as well as the morning's dewdrops are all dispensed by divine wisdom (3:20). So to personally encounter wisdom is to experience intimacy with the Source and Sustainer of all created reality.

*(3) Proverbs 4:5–9*

This third section personifying Madam Wisdom concentrates on admonitions to the king's sons to "get wisdom," to "get understanding," to love her, esteem her, embrace her. Her rewards will be great if a young man will only seek her. She will protect you, exalt you, honor you. In addition, Madam Wisdom will

set a garland of grace  
on your head  
and present you  
with a crown of splendor. (Prov. 4:9 NIV)

Youthful passions may lead a young person to seek after personal pleasures. But the steady pursuit of Madam Wisdom will provide much more satisfying benefits. For:

Wisdom is the principal thing;  
therefore get wisdom.  
Though it cost all you have,  
get understanding. (Prov. 4:7)

*(4) Proverbs 8:1–36*

This chapter contains the most extensive passage dealing with the personal nature of wisdom. Yet throughout the ages it has been the most controverted section of the entire book. The Arians of the fourth century A.D. based their heretical teaching on this passage when

they declared: "There was a time when the Son was not." But what exactly does this passage affirm about divine wisdom?

First, this personification of wisdom presents itself as freely available to all mankind (Prov. 8:1–5). In accord with the first of wisdom's appearances, it openly manifests itself in the public square, at the gates of the city (cf. 1:20–23). In this passage, wisdom "cries aloud," "raises her voice," and takes her stand on the heights and at the gates leading into the city (8:1–3). Wisdom calls out to all mankind, even to the simpleminded, the most foolish of humanity (8:4–5).

Next, the worth of wisdom's words is affirmed (Prov. 8:6–9). She speaks only worthy things, things that are upright, true, just, and faultless. Far from the mouth of wisdom are words of wickedness, all perverse and crooked words. This introductory statement regarding the inherent value of wisdom's words prepares the way for all the admonitions about words that will follow throughout the remainder of the book.

Then the value of wisdom itself is once more extolled (Prov. 8:10–11). Better than silver or choice gold, more precious than rubies is wisdom. Nothing that a human being might desire can compare with her.

The fruit of wisdom (Prov. 8:12–21) may be seen in its moral productions, including the fear of the COVENANT LORD, the hatred of pride and arrogance, and the rejection of all evil behavior and perverse speech. On the positive side, wisdom serves as the source of power, sound judgment, and the ability of kings to rule by declaring just laws. Wisdom always walks in the way of righteousness and justice, "bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full" (8:21 NIV).

Climactically, wisdom displays her all-embracing significance by affirming her presence and place at the creation of the heavens and the earth (Prov. 8:22–31). "The LORD OF THE COVENANT possessed me at the beginning of his works" best represents the opening phrase of this celebrated hymn to the role of wisdom in creation (8:22). The term *qanah* (קָנָה) describes the presence of wisdom within the essence of the Godhead even *before* his deeds of old, *before* the world began, *before* the mountains, *before* he made the earth or any of the world's

dust (8:22–26). Five times wisdom is declared to exist “before” the work of creation had begun. Wisdom appears as the personification of a “craftsman” at God’s side, filled with delight day after day, rejoicing in his presence, rejoicing in the whole world, and delighting in mankind (8:30–31).

Not as a separated entity existing apart from the Godhead, but as an integral part of the essence of the Creator, this personified wisdom suitably represents in old covenant form the Word that was face to face with God in the beginning. This wisdom-Word was God, and all things were made by him (John 1:1–3). He has the position of priority over all creation, since by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created by him and for him (Col. 1:15–16). As one commentator has explained the significance of this figure of personified wisdom, it

paves the way for the New Testament’s proclamation of the personal Word and Wisdom of God. . . . The use of such a word [as Wisdom], rather than an impersonal term, such as “order” or “law,” . . . carries the implication that God’s active thought sustains the world. The further step of portraying Wisdom personified, though only a poetic device, strengthens this emphasis, and provides the New Testament with part of the language it will need for its Christology.<sup>26</sup>

Ancient and modern efforts to read “the LORD *created* me” instead of “the LORD *possessed* me” as an alternative translation for the Hebrew verb *qanah* (קָנָה) have been persistent despite the questionable nature of this understanding of the word in terms of linguistic and lexical usage.<sup>27</sup> The word appears eighty-four times in the Old

26. Derek Kidner, “Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament,” in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne (London: Word Books, 1970), 128.

27. The LXX translated the Hebrew word *qanah* as “created” (ἔκτισέν), which played right into the hands of the Arians. For a discussion of the interpretation of Proverbs 8:22 by Athanasius as the “champion” of the opponents of Arianism, see the “Additional Note” at the end of this section. This ancient tradition of seeing wisdom as “created” has recently taken a new turn. Katharine Dell, *Get Wisdom, Get Insight: An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature* (London: Darton, Longman, and Ford, 2000), 20, sees wisdom as “a poetic personification of the female aspect of God.” She resists the idea of a female consort of God as in neighboring religions, citing “majority scholarly opinion” (20). Instead,

Testament, and only six or seven of these instances might allow the understanding “create.”<sup>28</sup> As noted by one commentator, “The meaning ‘possess’ for *qanah* is entirely suitable and is in keeping with the author’s usage in 1:5; 4:5, 7. *Yahweh* ‘possessed’ wisdom as an attribute or faculty integral to his being from the very first, and ‘in [with, or by] his wisdom founded the earth.’ (3:19)”<sup>29</sup>

One commentator begins his discussion of the term *qanah* by stating that the word means “to acquire”: “The word’s *lexical* meaning, the semantic content it brings to context, is ‘acquire,’ no more than that.” But from this affirmation he moves from “acquire” to “create”: “But one way something can be acquired is by creation.” Having deduced that wisdom was “created,” he makes a far-reaching conclusion: Wisdom “did not exist from eternity. Wisdom is therefore an accidental attribute of godhead, not an essential or inherent one.”<sup>30</sup>

So according to this logic, God first existed without wisdom. Then he created wisdom. From that point on, wisdom helped God

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wisdom is “Yahweh’s creature and therefore created by God” (20). In response to recent feminist interpretations, Karen H. Jobs concludes that “the feminine personification of *Sophia* was completely governed by the grammatical gender of first the Hebrew and then the Greek noun for *wisdom*. Modern feminists have latched onto the language of *sophia* and then have reconstructed it to address gender concerns when it had no such purpose in late-Jewish/early Christian usage” (“Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 243).

28. Kidner, *Proverbs*, 79. The passages where *qanah* might mean “to create” are Genesis 14:19, 22; Exodus 15:16; Deuteronomy 32:6; Psalms 74:2; 139:13; Proverbs 8:22. Yet in virtually all these passages, the word may just as well be translated as “possessed” or “acquired” rather than “created.”

29. Scott, *Proverbs*, 72. Bruce Vawter, “Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation,” *JBL* 99, 2 (1980): 213, affirms that Scott is “entirely correct” in rejecting wisdom as God’s creation in Proverbs 8:22. But he then resists Scott’s assertion of the meaning “possessed” by affirming that *qanah* “is not a stative but a very transitive verb” (214). Yet the idea of “to possess” can be very “active,” depending on the thing possessed. “Possessing” wisdom inherently suggests making good use of wisdom’s full potential. To possess wisdom is not to hold it as though it were an inanimate stone. As Vawter himself explains, *qanah* means that “Yahweh took possession of a wisdom that he then proceeded to utilize in his work of creation” (215). In other words, the concept of *transitive* or *intransitive* as applied to the possession of wisdom is not a very useful distinction. One can hardly “be in possession of” wisdom without making good use of it.

30. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 279.



create everything else, which he presumably could not have created without wisdom's help.

But where according to this theory did God get the wisdom to create wisdom? If he began with a lack of wisdom (which is unthinkable), needing wisdom to help him create everything else, where did he get the help he needed to create wisdom? More basically from a linguistic perspective, what in the context of these verses suggests the movement from "acquired" to "created"?<sup>31</sup>

Another commentator affirms that in most instances, the verb *qanah* means to "acquire" or "purchase." In order to then arrive at the meaning "created" for *qanah*, he appeals to the Ugaritic usage of a related root, and four verses in the Old Testament (Gen. 14:19, 22; Deut. 32:6; Ps. 139:13).<sup>32</sup> In at least two of these four passages, however, a better case may be made for translating with "possessed" rather than "created." When Abram meets Melchizedek together with the King of Sodom, the main concern in their interchange has to do with the spoils of war. Abram responds to Melchizedek's blessing by presenting him with the tithe. This blessing is pronounced in the name of "God Most High," who is appropriately acknowledged as "'Possessor' [*qanah*] of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19–20). In the same context, the King of Sodom proposes that Abram keep the spoils of war for himself. Abram responds by stressing that he has sworn to the COVENANT LORD, God Most High, "Possessor" (*qanah*) of heaven and earth, that he will accept nothing from him (14:21–23). In each case, the context focuses on "possessions," the spoils of war, making it more appropriate to recognize God as "Possessor" of all these things, though he is obviously also their "Creator."

In addition, it is quite clear that "to create" is not the meaning of the term *qanah* in the other ten passages where the term occurs in Proverbs. The person being instructed by Proverbs certainly is not expected to "create" wisdom, knowledge, or truth (Prov. 4:5, 7; 18:15; 23:23). He may be encouraged to "get," "obtain," or "possess" these

31. Vawter, "Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation," offers an extensive analysis of all the critical texts in which the term *qanah* appears. In summarizing, he states: "I conclude that, as there is not compelling evidence from other OT texts to indicate a Hebrew *qanah* = "created," neither should the verb in Prov 8:22 be translated in this fashion" (213).

32. Longman, *Proverbs*, 204.

most valuable things. But he clearly is not instructed to “create” them. The term may be used even to refer to a person who is identified as a “buyer” (הַקַּוֵּנֶה) of goods (20:14). Clearly, this person is not a “creator” of the goods that he is attempting to acquire or possess. In this regard, the term “acquire” stands in the closest possible relationship to “possess.” For the “acquiring” of an object has as its end the “being in possession of” the same object. The possession of wisdom and its acquisition represent two aspects of the same concept.

More specifically, some thought must be given to the precise sense in which the self-contained God who created all things would “acquire” something outside himself, particularly something as vital as “wisdom.” This “wisdom” is said to have served as the “master craftsman” (אֲמִןּוֹן) at his side, delighting day by day, rejoicing before him always (Prov. 8:30). Is it then to be supposed that God at first existed without this wisdom that was so vital to all creation? Was God then to first “acquire” this wisdom from somewhere outside himself before he began his work of creation?<sup>33</sup>

To the contrary, the natural meaning of the word *qanah* in this context is that Yahweh “possessed” this wisdom “at the beginning.” *Before* his deeds of old he possessed this wisdom. This wisdom was established “from eternity,” “from the beginning,” “before the world began” (Prov. 8:23). Repeatedly the existence of wisdom before all of God’s creative activities is stressed in these two verses (8:22–23).

“I was there!” (אֲנִי שָׁם—Prov. 8:27 NIV) declares personified wisdom, “when he set the heavens in place.” The passage clearly reflects the processes of creation as depicted in the first chapter of Genesis. When there were no oceans, no springs of water, no mountains or hills, before the earth or any of the dust of the world existed, wisdom was brought forth to do its great work (8:24–26).<sup>34</sup> When God set the heavens in place,

33. Vawter speaks of “pre-existent wisdom” that Yahweh “discovers” (“Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation,” 206). He further notes: “In sum, we are here presented with the concept of a pre-existent wisdom or at least of a wisdom not of the ordinary created order, . . . a wisdom which is not a native attribute of God but a reality accessible to him alone and acquired by him” (215). Not surprisingly, Vawter agrees that this wisdom is “un-Israelite” (215). For from a biblical perspective, wisdom cannot be an entity in itself separated from Yahweh and needed by him to aid him in the creation of the world.

34. The phrase rendered “was brought forth” (חֹרֵף לְיָדָי) could be translated “was given birth,” which functions as a figure of speech. This “giving birth” of wisdom might be

marked out the horizon, established the clouds, gave the sea its boundary, and marked out the foundations of the earth, she was there (8:27–29). As the days of creation progressed, wisdom was rejoicing in the whole world and delighting in mankind, the crown of creation (8:30–31).

So how is this picture of wisdom to be understood? The imagery may be perceived as an elaborate personification of wisdom. Or the description may be judged to be so specific that it posits an actual being, a “hypostatis,” that existed alongside but not separated from God.<sup>35</sup> In either case, this image of wisdom anticipates all that would later be described from a new covenant perspective as the “Word” that “in the beginning” was “face to face with God” and “was God” (John 1:1). It was “through him” that all things were made that have been made (1:3). Nothing and no one else can adequately or completely fulfill all aspects of this imagery of personified wisdom as depicted in the description of “wisdom” found in Proverbs 8. This passage is remarkable in its anticipation of a person alongside but separated from the LORD who serves as the Creator of all things.

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compared to the phrasing of Psalm 2:7: “You are my Son; today I have ‘given birth’ to you.” This phrase is understood in the New Testament as a figure of speech for the Son’s resurrection (cf. Acts 13:33–34). In Acts 13, as in Proverbs 8, the figure of “giving birth” does not mean “come into existence.” In the context of Proverbs 8, the “birth” of wisdom represents her “coming forth” to be intimately involved in all of God’s creative activity, not her coming into existence.

35. Scott, “Study of Wisdom Literature,” 42, asks whether wisdom in Proverbs 8 is simply a “poetic personification,” or whether it is something more, a *hypostatis*—that is, “an attribute or activity of Yahweh thought of as having an independent personal identity.” He cites a number of scholars who have held that in Proverbs 8 “the description of wisdom passes from that of symbolism and personification to that of an independent being, God’s master builder and assistant in creating the world.” Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 153, sees the passage as having “a stylistic dependence . . . on Egyptian texts” that “cannot be denied.” He asserts that “there can be no doubt that Israelite teachers have been dependent on the idea of the Egyptian goddess of order and have even borrowed characteristic, individual expressions.” He affirms that we can therefore say that in verses 22–29 the style of a specific Egyptian divine proclamation “has clearly been borrowed.” An amassing of categorical statements such as “cannot be denied,” “there can be no doubt,” and “has clearly been borrowed” without supporting evidence inevitably fosters questions about the convincing character of the argument. Von Rad himself proceeds to state that in the process of this transference of Egyptian ideas to the Hebrew thought world, many of the Egyptian concepts have become “completely different.” In fact, he affirms that the “wisdom” of Proverbs 8 can be compared “only with difficulty” to the Egyptian concept (153).

Finally, the admonition by personified wisdom directed to his “sons” underscores the blessing that comes to a person from this wisdom of God (Prov. 8:32–36). Twice the word “blessed” is pronounced over those who keep the ways of wisdom (8:32, 34). To enjoy this blessedness, a young man must “watch daily,” “wait expectantly” at wisdom’s doors. The consummate blessing of eagerly seeking wisdom’s blessing is *life*: “For everyone who finds me finds life and receives favor from the COVENANT LORD” (8:35). But whoever sins against this personification of divine wisdom “does violence to himself.” For as wisdom itself pronounces, “All who hate me love death” (8:36 NIV). Let every person, young or old, take heed.

EXCURSUS: *THE INTERPRETATION OF PROVERBS 8:22 BY  
ATHANASIUS AS THE CHAMPION OF THE OPPONENTS OF  
ARIANISM*

Athanasius (c. A.D. 298–373) served as the key figure in the church’s determination of the nature of the Trinity and the person of Christ as formulated by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. As a young deacon trained by martyr teachers in Alexandria, Egypt, he accompanied his bishop to the council “as an indispensable companion.”<sup>36</sup>

The fullest refutation of the errors of Arianism by Athanasius may be found in his four “Discourses against the Arians,” consisting of almost 150 double-columned pages.<sup>37</sup> This material was composed during his third exile as a consequence of his uncompromising stand against the Arians (A.D. 356–62). During these years he hid himself from the imperial troops of Emperor Constantius, primarily in the deserts, caves, monasteries, and tombs of the Upper Nile region of Egypt.

These four discourses were originally intended as a “decisive blow” against Arianism. One author observes that the “serious reader” will appreciate “the richness, fulness, and versatility” of his use of Scripture, “the steady grasp of certain primary truths, especially of

36. Archibald Robertson, ed., *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, in *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 4, 2nd ser. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), xviii.

37. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 4, 2nd ser. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 303–447.

the Divine Unity and of Christ's real or genuine natural and Divine Sonship." Above all, in all these discourses may be seen "his firm hold of the Soteriological aspect of the question at issue, of its vital importance to the reality of Redemption and Grace."<sup>38</sup> In other words, Athanasius thought deeply about these matters—in many regards more deeply than modern exegetical treatments of the same topics and passages of Scripture.

His second "Discourse against the Arians" contains an extensive treatment of Proverbs 8:22, with fifteen double-columned pages of introduction to the passage<sup>39</sup> and twenty-one double-columned pages of exposition.<sup>40</sup>

In understanding his treatment of Proverbs 8:22, several factors should be kept in mind. First, as an introduction to Proverbs 8:22, Athanasius offers extensive treatment of a number of passages dealing with the person of Christ that he regards as essential to properly understanding the wording of Proverbs 8:22. He analyzes in great detail Philippians 2:9–10, Psalm 45:7–8, Hebrews 1:4; 3:2, and Acts 2:36, as well as treating numerous additional passages. By this method, Athanasius is displaying his commitment to the basic principles of the "analogy of faith." In other words, a single passage of Scripture must not be interpreted in isolation from the total teaching of Scripture on a particular subject.

As a sample of the depths of his thoughts, his treatment of one element of teaching from John's Gospel may be considered. The brackets have been added by the current writer, in the hopes of aiding the understanding of the passage.

But if [God] calls into existence things which existed not by his proper [that is, God's own] Word, then the [creating] Word is not in the number of things non-existing and [subsequently] called [into existence]; or we have to seek another Word, through whom He too [the Word] was called [into existence]; for by the Word the things

38. As quoted by Robertson in Schaff and Wace, *Athanasius*, 303–4.

39. Athanasius in *ibid.*, 357–72.

40. *Ibid.*, 372–93. Archibald Robertson as editor of this material supports a dating between 356 and 360 for these four discourses (303), which would be a full generation after the Council of Nicea (325).

which were not have come to be. And if through Him [the Word] He [God] creates and makes, He [the Word] is not Himself of things created and made; but rather He is the Word of the Creator God, and is known from the Father's works which He Himself [the Word] worketh, to be "in the Father and the Father in Him," and "He that hath seen him [the Word] hath seen the Father," because the Son's Essence is proper to the Father, and He [the Word] in all points like Him [the Father].<sup>41</sup>

This form of intense analysis may prove to be rather challenging for the modern mind, conditioned as it is to merely "byte-sized" thinking. But Athanasius regarded this type of analysis of related passages from the Old and New Testaments as essential to a proper framework for interpreting the reference to wisdom in Proverbs 8:22.

Second, Athanasius explicitly notes that "what is said in Proverbs, is not said plainly, but is put forth latently."<sup>42</sup> As a consequence, "it is necessary to unfold the sense of what is said, and to seek it as something hidden, and not nakedly to expound as if the meaning were spoken 'plainly.'"<sup>43</sup> Athanasius clearly understood the significance of literary genre such as a "proverb" or a "parable" in analyzing Scripture, even though he would have been altogether unfamiliar with modern linguistic jargon. In this case, Athanasius concludes that the indication that wisdom was "created" in Proverbs 8:22 must be considered in its figurative sense, as the immediately following point regarding his treatment of Proverbs 8:22 will indicate.

Third, Athanasius works altogether with the LXX translation of this passage, which reads:

κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ. (Prov. 8:22 LXX)

A literal translation of the passage may read as follows:

The LORD created me a beginning of his ways, for his works.  
(Prov. 8:22)

41. Ibid., 360.

42. Ibid., 372.

43. Ibid.

Nowhere in his discussion does Athanasius refer to the Hebrew text of Proverbs 8:22. As has been observed, he was altogether “ignorant of Hebrew.”<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, he makes no comment on the various possibilities for translating *qanah* as describing God’s “acquiring” or “possessing” rather than “creating” wisdom. All his discussion hinges on wisdom’s being “created” (ἐκτισέν), as represented in the LXX. But in view of the weight of evidence that he himself had previously cited regarding the eternity of the Son and his equality with the Father, Athanasius concludes that wisdom was “created” in the sense that Christ’s human body was the thing created, not his eternal essence. As he explains: “If the text refers to an Angel, or any other created being, let the passage be understood as saying, He ‘created me;’ but if it be the Wisdom of God, in whom all things originate have been framed, . . . what ought we to understand but that ‘he created’ means nothing contrary to ‘He begat?’”<sup>45</sup>

So having been misdirected by the translation “he created” in the LXX, Athanasius chose to wrestle with this text as a witness to the person and work of Christ in the larger context of the primary teaching of Scripture on this critical topic. As a consequence, it would be unjust to fault Athanasius for treating “created” as a figurative term because of its form as a literary “proverb.” At the same time, it would be improper to make a serious appeal to Athanasius’s interpretation of Proverbs 8:22 in referring to wisdom as “created,” since he had no other textual options before him, and yet interpreted the term “created” as figurative for “begat.”

44. Robertson in *ibid.*, xiv.

45. Athanasius in *ibid.*, 372. Waltke observes that “a grammatico-historical exegesis of Proverbs 8 does not support patristic exegesis” in its identity of the preexistent Christ with personified wisdom in Proverbs 8 (*Proverbs 1–15*, 127). Yet with regard to Athanasius, full appreciation must be expressed for the carefulness of his exegetical work. Even at the point of his conclusion, he states with great care that *if* Proverbs 8:22 is applied to an angel, the text can be understood as “created”; but if the text refers to the wisdom of God, it must mean “begat.” As a point of interest, Athanasius working from the Greek text and Waltke working from the Hebrew text reach the identical conclusion regarding the force of the verb in Proverbs 8:22. According to Athanasius, “he created” means nothing more than “he begat” if applied to Christ. After exploring various options, Waltke concludes that the verb *qanah* “probably means ‘to beget,’ ‘to bring forth’ in Prov. 8:22” (409). While the limitation of Athanasius to the Greek text means that a fuller comprehension of the passage was denied him, his work must be appreciated for its thoroughness and care within the whole of the biblical context.

In the end, the consistency of this ancient saint of Christ as well as his cogency in argumentation for the truth must be fully appreciated. For a period of more than forty years, beginning with his critical role as a youth at Nicea to his final days of exile and return in his septuagenarian years, Athanasius held fast to his scripturally based convictions regarding the nature of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ. By no means a “slouch” in his exegetical processes and his comprehensive knowledge of Scripture, this one man stood against the tides of time and set the course of future centuries for Christianity along the right path.<sup>46</sup>

46. The history of Athanasius's life is altogether fascinating in itself. A brief review of certain highlights may disclose something of the cost this man paid for his unwavering stand for the truth about the person of Christ, as well as the intrigues of his Arian rivals. From about age twenty-eight to seventy-five, he stood as the champion of truth against Arianism, never succumbing to weariness in well-doing. Based on the rehearsal of his life as presented by Archibald Robertson in Schaff and Wace, *Athanasius*, the life and career of Athanasius may be traced as follows:

He was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in about A.D. 296–98, and was trained under the tutelage of early Egyptian martyrs. His education in Bible and theology followed the tradition of Origen, including his emphasis on the ascetic life. With respect to his intense participation in the formula of Nicea, Robertson comments: “It was not as a theologian, but as a believing soul in need of a Saviour, that Athanasius approached the mystery of Christ” (Robertson in *ibid.*, xiv). This faith was the one thing that sustained him throughout this controversy, even until his decease at the age of seventy-five.

Athanasius played a focal role in the ultimate decision of the Nicean Council, prevailing even over the renowned and respected Eusebius. The small group set against Arius owed much “to the energy and eloquence of the deacon Athanasius, who had accompanied his bishop to the council as an indispensable companion” (*ibid.*, xviii).

Shortly after the conclusion of the Council of Nicea, he was elected bishop over all Egypt and Libya in A.D. 328. He experienced a period of quiet during the beginning years of his role as bishop (328–35). But Eusebius the champion of Arianism was quickly restored from his banishment after Nicea to full favor with Emperor Constantine. By about 330, Eusebius had even obtained the recall of Arius to Egypt. The emperor demanded that Athanasius receive him, but Athanasius refused. The emperor threatened deposition, but Athanasius refused again. Because of a plot against him by Eusebius, Athanasius was summoned by the emperor. A full year was taken up with answering trumped-up charges. In one case, Athanasius was accused of killing a follower of Arius named Arsenius and cutting off his hand. Arsenius had been whisked off to a secret locale in a monastery in Upper Egypt, while a severed hand was circulated as exhibit A in the case against Athanasius. While Athanasius was on trial at Tyre, the hand was introduced as evidence of his brutality. But Arsenius had been found by Athanasius's men and presented at the site of the trial. Arsenius was brought forward wrapped in a cloak, and identified by the exposure of his face. One hand was brought forward, followed by the second. Then it was asked where the arm was for the third hand that had been cut off (*ibid.*, xxxviii–ix).



Though apparently not properly attributed to Athanasius, the Athanasian Creed summarizes well the biblical truth regarding the Trinity as formulated by Athanasius. The first portion of the creed, dealing with the nature of the Trinity, reads as follows:

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith.

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Despite this public embarrassment, the Arian prosecutors persisted, now saying that Athanasius had tried to murder Arsenius, who had been forced into hiding for his life. After further charges, Athanasius was eventually exiled by the emperor during the years A.D. 336–37 because of further false charges (*ibid.*, xxxix–xl).

After a brief reprieve, a second exile was forced on Athanasius during the years A.D. 339–46 as a result of the Arians' plots. The first half of these years was spent in Rome (*ibid.*, xliii).

To support his case against the Arians, Athanasius cites a number of atrocities committed by their adherents. In one instance, Lucius, Bishop of Adrianople, who had spoken boldly against the Arians, was bound with iron chains around his neck and hands and driven into banishment, where he died (Athanasius, "History of the Arians," in Schaff and Wace, *Athanasius*, 276).

His second exile was followed by the longest "quiet period" for Athanasius in Alexandria during the years A.D. 346–56 (Robertson in Schaff and Wace, *Athanasius*, xlvi). He was forty-eight years old at the beginning of this era, called his "golden decade."

But this golden age could not endure. Emperor Constans, ruling in the West, was murdered, which gave the opportunity for his brother, Emperor Constantius, to take charge of the entire empire. Troops were sent to Alexandria by Constantius, who assaulted the church where Athanasius was conducting a service in a crowded sanctuary in preparation for a communion service the next day. Athanasius was sitting in his chair in the recess of the apse. As the emperor's troops were breaking into the church, he ordered the deacon in charge of the service to begin Psalm 136, with the people responding at each verse, "For his mercy endures forever." Athanasius refused to escape until all his people were safe. The soldiers crowded up to the chancel. But at the last minute, a crowd of monks and clergy seized Athanasius and in the confusion managed to convey him out of the church "in a half-fainting state" (*ibid.*, l). For the next six years, Athanasius was hidden away in this his third exile (A.D. 356–62). Ironically, but as happens so often among God's people, this exile "marks the summit of his achievement. Its commencement is the triumph, its conclusion the collapse of Arianism" (*ibid.*, li; cf. Paul's letters from prison, Martin Luther's and William Tyndale's translations of the Bible, and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*). Robertson continues: "This period then of forced abstention from affairs was the most stirring in spiritual and literary activity in the whole life of Athanasius" (*ibid.*). More than half of Athanasius's extant works were composed during this period. The soldiers of the emperor searched for him in vain. "Towns and villages, deserts and monasteries, the very tombs were scoured by the Imperial inquisitors in the search for Athanasius; but all in vain; not once do we hear of any suspicion of betrayal" (*ibid.*).

Then with the death of Constantius, Athanasius returned as bishop to Alexandria. He called a church council in 362. At this point, he was as a victor surveying the field. The documents produced at the council obviously were from his hand. This council represents the crown of his career (*ibid.*, lviii).

Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless  
perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,  
neither blending their persons  
nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person,  
the person of the Son is another,  
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.

But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,  
their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has.

The Father is uncreated,  
the Son is uncreated,  
the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable,  
the Son is immeasurable,  
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

The Father is eternal,  
the Son is eternal,  
the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings;  
there is but one eternal being.

---

Julian the new emperor had recalled the bishops. But soon thereafter he revealed his heart for paganism. He then ordered Athanasius to leave not only Alexandria but Egypt. The new emperor regarded him as “the enemy of the gods,” “a contemptible little fellow” (*ibid.*, lix). Athanasius was secure in the support of the populace. He had the power of the people supporting him. But in peace he started up the Nile for a final exile. As he was sailing up the river, he learned that government officials were trailing him. He reversed his direction, passing right by his pursuers. Suspecting nothing, they asked for news of Athanasius. “He is not far off” was the answer, according to Athanasius (*ibid.*).

After Julian’s death, Jovian (a Christian) replaced him (*ibid.*). But short-lived Jovian died from inhaling fumes from a charcoal fire in his bedroom (*ibid.*, lxi). Valentinian, a convinced but tolerant Catholic, was then elected emperor by the army. Under his reign, Arianism practically died away in the West (*ibid.*). So in the end, Athanasius’s persistence in the faith prevailed.

Under Valentinian’s reign, Athanasius enjoyed a deserved period of peace as bishop in Alexandria, though not without facing many challenges (A.D. 366–73). Active to the last, he died at age seventy-five in A.D. 373. Throughout his lifetime, he had “wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground” (Heb. 11:38b). Of him it may be appropriately said that “the world was not worthy” (11:38a).

So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings;  
there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty,  
the Son is almighty,  
the Holy Spirit is almighty.

Yet there are not three almighty beings;  
there is but one almighty being.  
Thus the Father is God,  
the Son is God,  
the Holy Spirit is God.

Yet there are not three gods;  
there is but one God.  
Thus the Father is Lord,  
the Son is Lord,  
the Holy Spirit is Lord.

Yet there are not three lords;  
there is but one Lord.  
Just as Christian truth compels us  
to confess each person individually  
as both God and Lord,  
so catholic religion forbids us  
to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from  
anyone.

The Son was neither made nor created;  
he was begotten from the Father alone.

The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;  
he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers;  
there is one Son, not three sons;  
there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after,  
nothing is greater or smaller;  
in their entirety the three persons  
are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier,  
we must worship their trinity in their unity  
and their unity in their trinity.

Anyone then who desires to be saved  
should think thus about the trinity.<sup>47</sup>

(5) *Proverbs 9:1–18*

This final personification of wisdom underscores the open invitation extended by Madam Wisdom to even the simplest, the uninitiated of humanity. The passage also underscores the reward offered by wisdom. This representation of wisdom is set in dramatic contrast over against Madam Folly (Prov. 9:13–18).

First, Madam Wisdom offers her generous invitation to all who will listen to her (Prov. 9:1–6). She dwells in a glorious mansion with seven pillars, representing the perfection of ornamentation joined to firmest stability. Inside this magnificent dwelling she has prepared a luxurious banquet table laden with the finest meats and the sweetest wines. In view of these extravagant preparations, it might be assumed that the people invited to this feast with Madam Wisdom would be necessarily limited in number. But no! Just the opposite is true. Prior qualifications have no place in the issue of invitations to this feast of all feasts. Without exception, all those who are “simple” and “lack judgment” are urged to eat the nourishing food of wisdom and drink her mixed wine.

Sad to say, not everyone responds eagerly to this generous summons (Prov. 9:7–9). Contrariwise, the person making these offers may even expect insult and abuse from wicked mockers.

In all these regards, the wisdom parables of Jesus anticipate these same negative reactions to wisdom's offer of fullness of life. The parable of the banquet with guests who foolishly refuse the gracious invitation to the great banquet and the parable of the wicked vinedressers who eventually slay the son solemnly bring to climax the rejected invitation of personified wisdom, and the consequent death of the foolish and wicked servants (Luke 14:15–24; 20:9–19).

To encourage a proper response to this gracious invitation, Madam Wisdom describes the reward that comes to those who will receive her. A life of many days and extended years will be their reward (Prov.

47. This version of the Athanasian Creed was adopted by the Christian Reformed Church Synod in 1988.

9:10–12). The fear of the LORD and knowledge of the Holy One will open the door to a life of ever-increasing wisdom and understanding.

In starkest contrast with this imagery of wisdom is the picture of Madam Folly (Prov. 9:13–18). Rather than maintaining a tasteful decor in the public square, Madam Folly is loud, boisterous, undisciplined. She squats at the door of her house, choosing the most prominent point of the city. As people pass by, she hawks her wares. She makes her appeals to the “simple ones” who pass by. Rather than openly declaring the truth about what she actually offers, Madam Folly proposes “stolen waters,” “secret delicacies.” But the unsuspecting simpleton, the featherhead who listens to her appeals, has no idea that her guests step down into the depths of the grave, invariably joining the dead.

So the book of Proverbs introduces the reader to this strong contrast between Madam Wisdom and Madam Folly. Each has her own appeal. Accepting the one or the other of their invitations settles the matter of life and death. Young men especially should be duly instructed and warned.

Not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New, wisdom undergoes personification. The Pharisees slander Jesus, trashing him as a glutton and a drunkard because of his association with people who are obviously sinful in their outward behavior. Jesus responds by linking his ministry with John the Baptist's, even as he simultaneously sets up a dramatic contrast between their two modes of ministry. The Baptist came as a strict Stoic, fasting as he denounced sinners, while Jesus came as a friend of tax collectors and harlots, openly welcoming the wicked. “But,” says Jesus, “Wisdom is justified by her works” (Matt. 11:19c). By his acceptance of sinners, Jesus embodies personified wisdom as the entity being justified. Though Jesus may not directly link himself with personified wisdom as depicted specifically in Proverbs, the essence of divine wisdom is found in Jesus. For this reason, the lifestyle of Jesus will be ultimately vindicated (“justified”). Wisdom is justified “by its works,” and so is Jesus as wisdom personified by his lifestyle despite the carping criticism of his adversaries. “For Jesus, like Sophia, ‘Wisdom,’ can do no wrong.”<sup>48</sup>

48. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC 33A (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 311.

Still further, Jesus is regularly described in language reminiscent of Proverbs 8. He existed before anything was created, and is supreme over all creation. Through him God created everything (John 1:1–3). He is the “firstborn” of all creation, not as first to come into existence, but firstborn in terms of priority of position. Christ controls all kings, kingdoms, rulers and authorities (Col. 1:15–17), echoing the statement in Proverbs regarding wisdom that “by me kings reign” (Prov. 8:15).

*A Special Warning to a Son: Avoid Adultery (Five Passages)*

As an extension of the conflicting imagery of Madam Wisdom and Madam Folly, Solomon as a wise father counsels his son quite pointedly concerning the adulterous woman. No fewer than five passages in these introductory chapters reiterate this warning, two of them embracing entire chapters (Prov. 5, 7). Climaxing this series of extended proverbial warnings is a distinctive literary form that may be designated a “fable of exposure.”<sup>49</sup> In this literary form, a fictitious narrative exposes the listener’s deficiency. Instances of this literary form may be found in both the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament. Jotham son of Gideon constructs a parable regarding the trees of the forest who decline kingship. Eventually the bramble accepts the post, and institutes a reign of terror (Judg. 9:6–20). By this fable, Jotham exposes the folly of the people’s desire for a monarch. Nathan’s tale about the man who confiscates his neighbor’s pet lamb to serve as a supper dish for a passerby vivifies the king’s guilt in absconding with his neighbor’s wife (2 Sam. 12:1–7). David’s General Joab concocts a tale that surreptitiously compares Absalom’s banishment to “water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered,” dramatized before David by the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:14; cf. 14:1–17). The fictitious parables of Ezekiel depicting the apostasy of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah as two adulterous women fit into the same category (Ezek. 16:1–63; 17:1–24; 23:1–49). In each of these cases, the fictitious narrative results in the exposure of the listener’s deficiency.

This literary form represents the closest anticipation of some of Jesus’ best-known parables, as in the case of the good Samaritan

49. This literary form deserves further research, in both the Old and the New Testaments.

(Luke 10:25–37), the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14), the four soils (Matt. 13:1–23), the rejection of invitations to the great banquet (Luke 14:15–24), and the wicked vinedressers (Luke 20:9–19). In each case, the parable exposes some deficiency in the listeners' actions or attitudes.

This particular literary form serves well to paint in vivid colors a foolish youth's encounter with an adulteress (Prov. 7). This wise father portrays to his son the step-by-step entrapment of the unsuspecting youth by the adulteress.

The five passages in Proverbs dealing with this subject are as follows:

*(1) Proverbs 2:16–22*

The adulteress leaves the partner of her youth and ignores the covenant she has made not merely with her husband, but with her God. Marriage as ordained by the Creator is a solemn three-way bond among the man, the woman, and their Creator God, the God of the covenant. As in all of God's covenants, the marriage bond includes curses as well as blessings. By violating this faithful-unto-death relationship between her God, her husband, and herself, the adulteress denigrates her house so that it becomes a direct pathway to death. None who goes in to her will ever return to normalcy on the pathways of life.

In sharpest contrast, those who heed the warnings of the wise will "walk in the ways of good men" (Prov. 2:20). They will "live in the land," experiencing the blessing of God's people, settled in a land flowing with milk and honey (2:21). This blessing of "inheriting the land" finds reiteration in a psalm hymning a righteous life. The psalmist reiterates this blessing six times (Ps. 37:9, 11, 22, 27, 29, 34). But the foolish son who succumbs to the folly of the adulteress will be disinherited from any possession of the promised land (Prov. 2:22).

*(2) Proverbs 5:1–23*

This entire chapter develops a contrast between the son who succumbs to the temptations of the adulteress and the son who finds full satisfaction in the wife of his youth. A clear statement of the folly of embracing another man's wife vivifies this contrast (Prov. 5:20–23).

The lips of the adulteress drip honey. Her speech is smoother than oil, which makes it all the more dangerous. For in the end she will make a man's life as bitter as gall. She will cut to the quick as sharply as a double-edged sword. Even though she may not acknowledge it, her steps lead directly to the grave (5:1–14). How much wiser is the son who remains captivated by his love for the wife of his youth, viewing her as a loving doe, a graceful deer who totally satisfies him with her breasts (5:15–19). So why? Why would a young man be captured by an adulteress, another man's wife? The LORD OF THE COVENANT watches every step along this pathway of sin. The erring youth will die for lack of self-discipline, led astray by his own folly (5:20–23).

(3) *Proverbs 6:20–35*

Both father and mother offer warnings to their son about the snares of an adulteress in this third passage. Walking, sleeping, and waking, their counsel will provide guidance, protection, and warning to their son about this life-threatening issue. The wayward wife may be beautiful, even captivating. But can a man scoop fire into his lap without burning his clothes? Can he walk on hot coals without scorching his feet? So the man who sleeps with another man's wife will not go unpunished. The offended husband will relentlessly pour out his wrathful vengeance on the man who has committed adultery with his wife. A thief who is caught may be required to pay all the wealth of his house as a recompense for his crime. But the man who commits adultery will never have his shame removed. The husband whose jealousy has been aroused will show no mercy as he takes his revenge. No compensation, no bribe will satisfy him, however large it might be.

So the son is urged by his father and his mother to avoid this trap at all costs. He will never escape the consequences of his act of folly.

(4) *Proverbs 7:1–27*

For the second time a full chapter is devoted to this warning regarding the adulterous woman (cf. Prov. 5). It might seem that the topic is experiencing a literary “overkill.” But the very fact of the steady, intensive warning properly recognizes the seriousness of the danger faced by the young man—and by the old man as well. Only



the repeated words, the commands, the teachings, the wisdom of the concerned father can keep his son from the adulteress, the wayward woman with her seductive words (7:1–5).

This time the wise father dramatizes the seductive process by which the fool, the simpleton, the featherhead succumbs to the allurements of the adulteress. First, he's in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's near her corner, walking in the direction of her house. It's twilight. Daylight fades, and the dark of night is setting in. This woman—she never stays at home where she belongs. She's loud and defiant, brazenly parading in the public squares, lurking in the corners. She greets him with flattery: “You are the one I came to meet. I've been looking for you, and have finally found you.” Then she flaunts her religiosity. She has made fellowship offerings, fulfilling her religious vows this very day. With less-than-subtle suggestiveness, she tells him that she has covered her bed with colored linens from Egypt. She has perfumed her bed with myrrh, and invites him to come and drink deeply of love until the morning. Then she anticipates his cautious objections by informing him that “the man” has gone on a long journey and will not be home for several weeks.<sup>50</sup>

“All at once” he follows her! He's like a dumb ox going to the slaughter. He's like a deer stepping into a noose. Then in an instant a shivering arrow pierces his liver and his life is forever lost.

In a final word, the wise man offers a warning to his sons: Do not let your heart turn toward her ways. Do not stray into her paths. For many are the victims she has brought down. Her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is a highway to the grave leading down to the chambers of death.

This fuller description of the adulterous woman in Proverbs 7 is intentionally placed back to back with the personification of Madam Wisdom as described in the very next chapter (Prov. 8). By this arrangement, the choice between two optional ways of life is effectively dramatized. Either a young man chooses life or he chooses death. Either

50. Her reference to “the man” (*ba-ish*) in distinction from “my husband” (*ba'aly*) could be understood as a deliberate downgrading of her relationship to her marriage partner, even though *ish* can mean “husband,” particularly since the term *baal* is specifically used three times for “husband” in Proverbs 31:11, 23, 28.

he embraces the wisdom that comes from God or he succumbs to the allurements of the adulteress. While many other significant choices face the young man, this particular choice determines life or death.

(5) *Proverbs 9:13–18*

This final warning regarding the adulterous woman completes the first major section of the book of Proverbs. Quite fittingly, the description of the adulterous woman corresponds to the imagery of Madam Folly in this final section. Just as the brazen adulteress sits at the highest point of the city, calling to all who pass by, so Madam Folly parades her wares before the public eye. Their joint invitation is extended to all who are simple and lack good judgment. Both the adulteress and Madam Folly appeal to the special sweetness of stolen waters, of food eaten in secret. But the simpleton who is lured into accepting her invitation doesn't understand that the dead are in her house, that her guests end up in the depths of the grave.

A simple children's poem ("The Spider and the Fly," by Mary Howitt,<sup>51</sup> somewhat modified) might vivify the subtle entrapment of a young man by an adulteress:

"Will you come into my parlor?" said the Spider to the Fly;  
 "It's the prettiest little parlor that ever you will spy.  
  
 "The way into my parlor is up a winding stair,  
 "I have many things to show you if you'll only come up there."  
  
 "O no," said the Fly, "to ask me is in vain;  
 "The one who goes up your stair will ne'er come down again."  
 .....  
 "Sweet creature," said the Spider, "you're witty and you're wise,  
 "How handsome are your lovely wings, how beautiful your eyes.  
  
 "I have a little mirror up on my parlor shelf;  
 "Step in for just one moment, sir, and you can see yourself."  
  
 "Thank you, gracious ma'm," he said, "for the pleasing things you say.  
 "But bidding you good-morning now, I'll come another day."

51. Roy J. Cook, ed., *One Hundred and One Famous Poems with a Prose Supplement*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1958), 155–56.

The Spider slowly turned about, and went into her den,  
For well she knew the silly Fly would soon be back again.

So she subtly wove her little web, making everything look fine,  
And got her table ready for the time when she would dine.

Then out her door she came again, and cheerfully did sing,  
“Come in, come in, my pretty Fly, with pearl and silver wing.

“Your robes are green and purple, there’s a crest upon your head;  
“Your eyes are bright as diamonds, but mine are dull as lead.”

So very sad it was! How soon this silly Fly,  
Listening to these flattering words, came slowly drifting by.

With buzzing wings he hung aloft, then near and nearer drew,—  
Thinking only of his brilliant eyes, his green and purple hue;

Thinking only of his crested head—*poor foolish thing!* At last,  
Up jumped the cunning Spider, and fiercely held him fast.

She dragged him up her winding stair, into her dismal den.  
He went into her little parlor, but ne’er came out again!

And now to every one of you who may this story read,  
To idle, silly, flattering words, be sure you ne’er give heed;

To an evil temptress close your heart, your ear, your eye,  
And learn a lesson from this tale of the Spider and the Fly.

### The Proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 10:1–22:16)

This second major section of Proverbs quite possibly preserves the original core of the book. All these proverbs are in couplet form containing two poetic lines, with the single exception of Proverbs 19:7, which contains four lines.<sup>52</sup> By observing that the proverbs of this section are

52. William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 2, offers an explanation of the way in which the wisdom literature of proverbial sayings developed. He says that it is “clear” that the “primitive element of form is the one-limbed, single-verse saying,” and that the development “proceeds from the unit of one verse to the unit which contains a plurality of verses.” In this “natural” process, two or more clauses related in context were next attached for emphasis. Then reasons or consequences were added. Finally, “it was not a great step from this to the larger literary units of the wisdom

O. Palmer Robertson provides a redemptive-historical analysis of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Lamentations, showing how this often neglected wisdom literature offers the contemporary reader inspired insight (and a solid dose of godly realism) into every major realm of human existence: from grief and calamity to love and intimacy.

“Robertson’s book is the best I know of on this subject. It focuses on what the Bible itself says about wisdom, particularly in the wisdom literature. I have learned much from it, and I hope that many others will as well.”

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