

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS AND ECCLESIASTES

The purpose of a biblical commentary is to help readers interpret a biblical text more meaningfully. While different commentaries have different audiences and make various assumptions about what a meaningful reading of the Bible might be, all readers would agree that meaning is the goal.

One Hellenistic Jewish sage provides readers with a fairly accurate idea of what might be involved in reading ancient Israel's wisdom literature. He states that devoting oneself to the study of the law means one has to seek out the "hidden meanings of proverbs" and be "at home with the obscurities of parables" (Sir 39:3). Indeed, reading Proverbs and Ecclesiastes will leave readers with a new appreciation for hiddenness. Yet, the uncovering of what is hidden within these books will provide not only a fulfilling challenge in reading ancient Scripture, but will also require that readers begin by actually reflecting upon how to go about it.

This introduction is concerned with some of the questions that help readers understand the processes involved in interpreting these books. To begin, a good rule of thumb is that most questions about reading the Bible can be categorized under one of three categories. Most questions modern readers bring to the Bible are literary, historical, or theological in nature.

Literary questions concern the conventions of writing, collecting, and transmitting the books that now make up the Bible; our concern, first, is with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and their literary dimensions. Historical questions concern the ancient contexts—historical, cultural, sociological, ideological, and theological—that shaped the performance, writing, collecting, and transmission of the materials contained within our biblical books. Theological questions, a special category of historical questions, concern the sense in which these documents and their contents give expression and guidance to the faith and practice of various communities that worshiped and continue to worship the God of the Bible.

Readers should not think of these three categories as unrelated, however. It is not possible to investigate literary questions, as readers shall see, without also noting historical contexts and theological influences behind the literature. One may not, therefore, simply ask

theological questions—under the influence of modern theological interests—without also investigating the ancient theological motivations. Rather, readers should think of these three categories, and the many related subcategories of questions, as forming an interpretive matrix—a kind of three-dimensional grid. Every theological question has a corresponding historical and literary point of contact that informs the theological question. And, to the extent that the relevant historical and literary information is available, readers should use them in formulating meanings of a passage.

Literary Dimensions of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

The most logical place to begin describing our interpretive matrix seems to be with literary questions. Those who read Proverbs and Ecclesiastes for the first time begin with the text itself and thus begin to make distinctions of various types of materials contained within both books.

Literary Forms

Readers will encounter a diversity of rhetorical forms before completing chapter 1 of Proverbs. The *parental instruction* (Prov 1:8-19) is characterized by a parent's exhortation (1:8-10, 15) and contains a short *saying* (*māšāl*) (1:17), which makes an observation for reflection. A *wisdom poem* (Prov 1:20-33) reflects upon the nature of wisdom. Likewise, the first chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes confronts readers with a *didactic poem* (1:4-11), which opens with a *rhetorical question* (1:3) and leads into a *confession* or *testament* (1:12–2:26). Other forms readers will encounter include *example stories* (Prov 7:6-20; Eccl 4:13-16; 9:13-15), where a short narrative is offered by the instructor to illustrate a point or a conclusion; *better-than* sayings (Prov 17:1; 19:1; Eccl 4:6; 7:2), sayings that make explicit claims about the comparative value of various things by introducing the comparison with the word “better”; and *numerical sayings* (Prov 6:16-19; 30:18-19), where numbers provide an ordinal basis for comparing various phenomena.¹

This is not an exhaustive list of rhetorical forms readers will encounter. We will address refinements as they arise in the commentary. But there are enough listed in the opening chapters of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes alone to illustrate the kind of attention readers must invest in reading. To read these books meaningfully readers must take note of the subtle distinctions in rhetorical forms within the various collections. It will not suffice to read material that is deliberately shaped as parental instruction, with its explicit

imperatives and authoritative reasons, in the same way one would read a saying that makes no explicit attempt to be instructional, or didactic.

Literary Art

In a number of respects, the various forms indicate a level of artistry of which readers may not be aware. Beneath the various *genres* or rhetorical forms is the impulse to express convictions, beliefs, even worldviews in an artistic form. Readers encounter this immediately in the most important and basic poetic convention that defines this literature: parallelism. In Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (and other places in the Hebrew Bible) a single poetic line (or verse) consists of at least two statements placed in relationship to each other. The initial statement makes an observation or a description; its partner(s) qualifies or develops that opening statement in some way. The key to understanding the saying or particular line of poetry is in recognizing the logical relationship(s) between the constituent statements.²

For instance, Proverbs 20:5 reads: “The purposes in the human mind are like deep water, but the intelligent will draw them out.” The initial statement juxtaposes the “purposes within the human mind” and “deep water.” In Hebrew the simile (i.e., use of “like”) is *not* there. So the second phrase defines only one possible implication of the first statement with the statement that the “intelligent [i.e., the person of understanding] draws [meaning] out.” The word for “draw” is used in reference to the drawing of water elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Exod 2:19). With the implications of the simile defining the inner “purposes” as water in this saying, it suggests that the intelligent person penetrates beneath the various human facades to understand what cannot be seen on the surface. The sage would be quick to add, were it a lecture format, that only an understanding person has the ability to do this. The double statements therefore stand in a close relationship. The first half-line, or *stichos*, as we will call them in this commentary, creates the metaphor; the second *stichos* makes a statement that both assumes the preceding metaphor and advances to at least one possible implication of the statement. While there are several different types of proverbs and sayings—*similes*, *numerical sayings*, *imperatives*, *instructions*—they all have in common this phenomenon of doubling or parallelism. It remains for readers of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to ponder how the artifice of doubling conveys meaning in each case.

A deeper appreciation of the technique of doubling requires attention to yet other kinds of rhetorical devices. In addition to defining reality through observations that make explicit comparisons and contrasts, techniques of alliteration, paronomasia, and rhyme function to create irony, parody, and humor. Alliteration, for instance, is the repetition of initial identical consonantal sounds in succession, as in “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.” Readers with knowledge of biblical Hebrew will recognize this in Proverbs 26:1, which accomplishes a similar effect through the repetition of hard gutturals, transliterated as “k” and “q.” Paronomasia, or punning, is a play on words based on the similarity of their sounds, even though they have different meanings, as in “They went and told the Sexton and the Sexton tolled the bell.”³ Again, readers of biblical Hebrew see the same effect in Proverbs 6:27. The examples are extensive, and we will consider the remainder as they arise in the text.

Such conventions of creating artistic expression are further accompanied by the proverbs’ refined application of metaphor. For instance, some of the proverbs are mere observations that do not purport to have meaning at any level other than the literal. In 18:16-17, for instance, the statements “A gift opens doors; it gives access to the great” or “The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines” have meaning at only the literal level. Usually scholars refer to these as aphorisms or sayings. Other proverbs have significance beyond the literal level (see [Sayings and Proverbs]). In 18:4 there are two contrasting metaphors: “The words of the mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a gushing stream.” Metaphor is effective when it implies that two dissimilar things or notions are similar. In 18:4a, words are deep waters; in v. 4b wisdom is a gushing stream. Obviously, the intention is to communicate figuratively, to attribute the qualities of natural phenomena to words and wisdom. The statements invite readers to think at a new level beyond the literal.

Literary Collections

It is clear that within the book of Proverbs there are a variety of different forms of speech. At another level readers quickly discover there are a variety of collections that make up the book. These collections of individual sayings, proverbs, instructions, and poems may exist within larger collections themselves. For instance, a cluster of sayings in 10:1-5 seems to open the larger collection of sayings called “Proverbs of Solomon” in 10:1–22:16. It is not clear

that this smaller cluster ever existed independently, but readers have a deeper appreciation of the art that exists at the level of various collections if they are able to recognize it. This larger collection, 10:1–22:16, is itself composed of at least three different collections or sub-collections: 10:1–15:33; 16:1–33; and 17:1–22:16. Even at this level it is not clear that such collections ever existed independently. Readers soon discover that there are at least eight different collections of sayings, instructions, and proverbs that comprise the book of Proverbs, each designated with its own heading: “Sayings of Solomon, Son of David” (*mišlê šēlōmōh ben Dāwid*), 1:1–9:18; “Sayings of Solomon” (*mišlê šēlōmōh*), 10:1–22:16; “Words of the Wise” (*dibrê ḥākāmîm*), 22:17–24:22; “These also are of the Wise” (*gam-ʿelleh laḥākāmîm*), 24:23–34; “These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied” (*gam-ʿelleh mišlê šēlōmōh ʾāšer heʿtîqû ʾansê ḥizqiyā melek yēhūdā*), 25–29; “The Words of Agur” (*dibrê ʾagûr*), 30:1–33; “The Words of King Lemuel” (*dibrê lēmûʿel melek maśśāʾ*), 31:1–9; and 31:10–31. Readers of Proverbs are not merely reading a book, but rather a collection of collections of sayings.

The same cannot be said of Ecclesiastes, however. While some would argue that the editorial process reflects the gradual accretion of materials,⁴ a broader consensus exists that there was a single author who created a framework, a persona, and explored contradictory ideas throughout the book.⁵ Nevertheless, the author still demands that readers be attentive to the various rhetorical forms of speech used throughout.

Literary Transmission

Readers are acquainted with the challenges posed by multiple English translations available in modern settings of worship and study. Investigation gets more challenging when readers seek explanations for why the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), the translation used in this commentary, translates Proverbs 22:17a as “Incline your ear and hear my words,” while the REB (Revised English Bible) translates the same half-line as “Pay heed and listen to the sayings of the wise.” Setting aside the idiomatic renderings, one stichos speaks of “my words” while the other speaks of the “sayings [or words] of the wise.” Whose words are they? The answer has to do with the various ancient translations of Proverbs that are now in existence and therefore available for translation. In the preceding example, the NRSV bases its translation upon the Septuagint (LXX in this commentary), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, and the REB bases its translation of that verse upon

the Masoretic Text (MT in this commentary). While accounting for the difference, the divergence between Greek and Hebrew traditions makes readers aware of yet another aspect of the matrix of interpretation. Not only were Proverbs and Ecclesiastes written and/or collected, but they were transmitted in ways that included translation into other languages.

The original manuscripts of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes do not survive. The oldest manuscript of Proverbs comes from Qumran, a village in the Judean desert from around 150 BC to AD 70. That village was home to Zadokite priests who had fled what they felt was a perverted and impure temple cult in Jerusalem. They sought to live a life of purity in the desert. The two Hebrew fragments of Proverbs, 4QProv^a and 4QProv^b, date from around 30–31 BC and AD 50 respectively.

Long before the writing of the scrolls at Qumran, however, a project to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek had been initiated in Alexandria, Egypt. The translation is called the Septuagint, or “Seventy,” due largely to the legend that there were seventy-two scholars who translated the entire Hebrew Bible into Greek. More likely the Pentateuch alone was actually translated during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–246 BC) in Alexandria. This began a trend in translation that eventually saw all of the Jewish Scripture translated. This commentary will refer frequently to the Septuagint (LXX) for comparative analysis of sayings.

As noted above, we do not have the manuscripts that the LXX scholars had when they were translating Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Translators base modern-day translations upon the so-called “Masoretic Text” (see [\[The Masoretes\]](#)) a text established, not created, by Jewish scholars after the destruction of the temple in 70 BC. The work of these people involved vocalizing a traditional consonantal text, and thus moving in the direction of standardizing the many and divergent Hebrew manuscripts. By the second century AD the divergencies between texts evident among the manuscripts at Qumran no longer existed as extensively. Yet even this movement to standardize the text had to overcome divergencies between Jewish scribal schools in Babylon and Palestine. By the tenth century AD, a family of texts—the ben Asher text—began to take priority over all others. So, while we compare our English translations with the Masoretic Text (MT) and the LXX, we must be aware that these are not themselves original texts, but stand in a process of transmission that involved translation.⁶

This commentary will only refer to other versions of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as secondary resources do. Those other versions

might include the Targums, which is a literal translation of the MT into Aramaic; the Peshitta (S), which is a translation into Syriac, produced mainly for Syriac-speaking Christians in the second century AD; and the Vulgate (V), a Fourth-century AD translation from Hebrew into Latin.

It is important to discuss the literary transmission of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes because it is relevant to the origins of the texts and translations, and also because the process of transmission and translation leads readers into another relevant aspect of the interpretive matrix. Clearly, readers can see that the book of Proverbs, indeed the Bible, is a product of human processes. This does not necessarily detract from notions of inspiration; but it does require that readers, who take seriously the literary processes set out above, now take seriously the role that historical context plays in our reading.

Historical Dimensions of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

The questions readers may ask take them beyond the mere consideration of the text. Nothing makes this more clear than the array of ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible that now exist and are available for our reading. Each translation invites readers to consider the events, particular circumstances, the audience, and the people who caused them to happen. The question “why translate” is ultimately one that is contextual, not textual. And if context is relevant in matters of transmission of text, it might also be relevant in reference to the collection of the text or the very production of the text. One might also ask whether the context also contributes to the various rhetorical distinctions represented by the text itself. Ultimately, modern readers are able to apply to biblical texts the same kinds of commonsense principles they apply to other kinds of written texts; social and historical context influence the shape and meaning of the text.

Authorship

The book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon (e.g., 1:1; 10:1), and the book of Ecclesiastes implies the same (1:1, 12). We shall focus here on Proverbs and treat Ecclesiastes in the introduction to that book. That Solomon alone is the author of the entirety of Proverbs seems impossible given the ascriptions to others, such as one named “Agur” (30:1) and “Lemuel” (31:1). Further, in order to maintain Solomonic authorship in a literal sense as we know it today, readers would have to include Solomon in the guild of “the wise,” sages to whom other collections of the proverbs are

attributed (e.g., 22:17; 24:23). Of course, it is not impossible that the very large collections of materials might preserve sayings coined by Solomon. It seems unlikely however, even if Solomon were involved somewhat in the authorship of the Proverbs, that he alone put the book together. Given the work of kings as administrators, it seems equally unlikely that Solomon, or any king, might have been a member of a group of sages. The reference to “Hezekiah’s officials,” who collected and perhaps arranged the materials in Proverbs 25–29 (25:1), suggests that kings patronized the arts and education in antiquity. It was not the kings themselves, however, but their officials at court who actually did the work.

Several aspects of the sayings within the book of Proverbs suggest that there may be multiple sources of origins. That some of the collections were attributed to non-Israelite kings, for instance (e.g., 30:1; 31:1), implies that there may have been a non-Israelite influence on the sayings. The extensive parallels between the collection in Proverbs 22:17–23:24 and the Egyptian collection attributed to Amenemopet reinforces the relevance of comparing the biblical wisdom with non-Israelite wisdom collections as a means of determining origins. Further, since there is a strong tradition that Israelite kings were involved in passing on the wisdom tradition (e.g., 1 Kgs 4:29–34; Prov 25:1), it is reasonable to examine the royal courts of ancient Judah and Israel as contexts in which wisdom might have been preserved. Yet, since the sayings themselves concern matters of family and community, readers are not off track by supposing a family setting for the preservation of wisdom. In fact, the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs give the impression that these sayings were remembered as having been passed on by parents to their children.⁷ In none of these cases, though, is there hard and fast evidence of any particular setting. At most, readers can only draw inferences from parallels with other non-biblical literatures and the claims of the biblical literature itself.

Date

Finding a historical date for the materials within the book is even more complicated than the question of authorship. As noted above, there are fragments of the book at Qumran, allowing one terminus for dating the book sometime in the first century BC. Most scholars would agree that the final editing of the book is no later than Qumran. The ascriptions that head various collections in the book, however, would place some of the materials in the ninth century BC (Solomon) and the late eighth century BC (Hezekiah). Given the

**Qumran**

The desolate cliffs lining the western edge of the Dead Sea contain many caves, including these near Qumran. In these caves were hidden several clay jars containing what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

need of the court for scribes, and the preservation of materials important to the state, it is not unreasonable to assume that by the time of Hezekiah (715–687 BC) there was a thoroughgoing literary tradition in existence as might be inferred from the superscription in Proverbs 25:1.⁸ It is further probable that this tradition preserved wisdom materials that originated in rural, family settings from periods long before the late 8th century. So the materials being collected by Hezekiah's men had been around for some time, perhaps collected in early royal scribal settings. The difficulty is determining how long they had been around.⁹

Linguistic analysis does not yield definitive results, either. The assumption is that materials may be dated according to hypothetical linguistic characteristics of ancient Hebrew. But the process of transmission means that copyists who are passing materials on to subsequent generations are constantly updating, making very

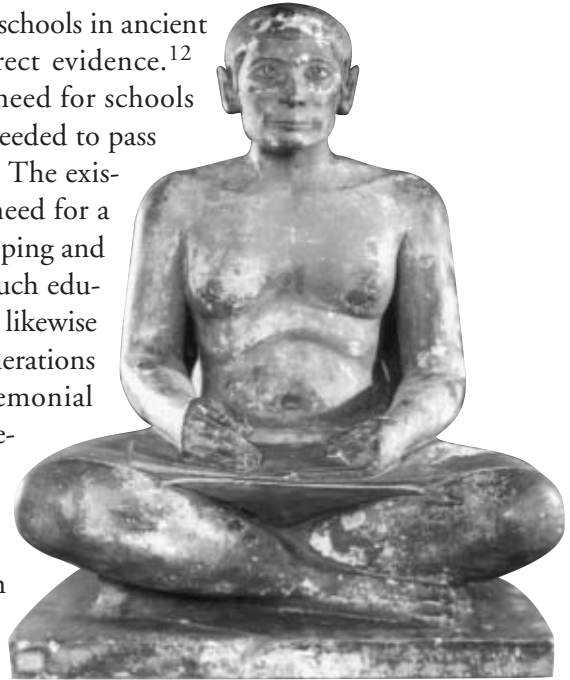
ancient writing conventions more accessible to contemporary readers. Such a process, though, wipes out the evidence of antiquity, making linguistics an unreliable way of dating. As it stands, most scholars think the materials in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and 25–29 are pre-exilic (older than the sixth century BC) and the instructions in Proverbs 1–9 are post-exilic (after sixth century BC).¹⁰

Social Context

By social context we refer to a phenomenon different from, although related to, the historical context. The guiding assumption is that there had to be socially legitimate institutions within ancient Israel that preserved such materials as proverbs and sayings or we would never have them today. For example, one might think of the way the modern church preserves Scripture; analogously, judicial institutions preserve law and priestly institutions preserve the rituals and liturgies of worship. Since we do not really know what kinds of ancient institutions might have been available to preserve the materials in wisdom, we must draw inferences and form hypotheses. The question is, what social institution stands behind modes of speech that are contained in sayings, aphorisms, proverbs, and instructions?

While the literary stage of the biblical text surely reflects a setting that valued knowledge, certain normative behaviors, and the written transmission of these, it is perfectly plausible that the preservation of such existed long before they were written. The universal character of proverbial traditions¹¹ makes Israelite wisdom's setting within family contexts entirely plausible. Many of these short sayings and observations about ways of life that saved time, that took advantage of technology, that sought out a better way, reflect the ethos of the home environment with its emphasis upon survival, prosperity, and common sense. The instructions opening with “my child” in Proverbs 1–9 certainly betray that familial ethos. Likewise, sayings that suggest the importance of the authority of parents, and heeding their instruction, also suggest the concerns of the family and tribe (e.g., Prov 10:1; 15:20; 20:20; 23:22; 30:11, 17). Sayings that are concerned with disciplining children (e.g., 19:18; 22:6) and caring for family and land (e.g., 5:10; 6:31; 24:27; 28:19) indicate the concern with continuity and security. The recurring theme of proper marriage partners recognizes that concern for community matters begins at home (e.g., 12:4; 14:1; 18:22).

Scholars disagree about the existence of schools in ancient Israel largely because of the lack of direct evidence.¹² However, it is not difficult to infer the need for schools due to the existence of institutions that needed to pass knowledge on to succeeding generations. The existence of the ancient monarchy, with its need for a scribal community to maintain record-keeping and to teach writing, allows the inference of such educational endeavors. The temple institution likewise would have had to educate succeeding generations of priests in matters of ritual and ceremonial cleanliness, not to mention proper interpretations of cultic inquiry. The importance of institutional self-perpetuation makes education, especially in the context of the royal court, almost unavoidable.¹³ Such headings as that in Proverbs 25:1, “These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied,” make clear that by the eighth century at least some process of collecting and copying these sayings was sponsored by the royal court. The concluding epilogue of the book of Ecclesiastes suggests that the sage whose wisdom is contained in the book was one who “taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs.” What is more, the verbal, formal, and conceptual correspondences between biblical wisdom texts and ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts allow one to assume the connection between court and schools.



Scribe

This sculpture of an Egyptian scribe attests to the institution of education and the preservation of knowledge in ancient Egypt. It is uncertain whether such institutions existed in pre-exilic Israel.

Egyptian Scribe from Saqqara, Egypt. Old Kingdom. 5th Dynasty. c. 2400 BC. Limestone, alabaster, and rock crystal. Musée du Louvre. Paris.

Ancient Near Eastern Context

The past two centuries of biblical studies have increasingly been influenced by the ability to reconstruct the ancient world of Egypt and the civilizations of Mesopotamia. Greater awareness of the vast influence of these cultures makes biblical readers realize that ancient Israel, as significant as it has come to be for Western religion, was but a small part of the ancient world.¹⁴ Ancient Israel was naturally influenced by the worldview, the cultural heritage, and the events it shared with neighbors to the south and east.

Readers wishing to understand the historical matrix behind Proverbs and Ecclesiastes must reckon the influence of these more

ancient and widely influential wisdom traditions. The discovery in Egypt of “The Instructions of Amenemopet” (see Prov 22:17–23:24) has provided new illumination, not only for biblical proverbs, but for such references to non-Israelite wisdom as contained, for example, in 1 Kings 4:30: “Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all wisdom of Egypt.” The Aramean wise man Ahiqar is remembered as one of the influential sages of the ancient Near East. The collection of proverbs in his name, dating from the fifth century BC but perhaps as old as the seventh, further illuminate the biblical practice of collecting sayings and instructions.¹⁵ The similarity of theological content between the biblical book of Job and Mesopotamian works such as *Ludlul bel nemeqi*, “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,” makes clear that long before the composition of the Israelite poem about an Edomite righteous man, the Mesopotamian poets were reflecting upon the problem of the suffering of innocent people.¹⁶ Most striking are the affinities between the Babylonian *Gilgamesh Epic* and the book of Ecclesiastes. Both works grapple with the problems of mortality and humanity’s response to its limitations.¹⁷

One need not argue for any kind of direct literary dependence upon these more ancient works in the production of the biblical materials. However, it is clear that such works helped to define the larger intellectual context in which the biblical materials were produced. The literary forms and theological themes were common to the intelligentsia from the fertile crescent to the first cataract of the Nile. Granting such an assumption, understanding the biblical wisdom literature requires a close comparison with the very similar literature from across the Near East. Such comparative study further provides a wealth of evidence that helps scholars reconstruct both the theological and sociological contexts out of which various wisdom traditions emerged.

Theological Dimensions of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

When we speak of theology we refer to the way that we comprehend God. So in asking about wisdom theology, or the theology behind Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, we are seeking to understand how the collections of sayings and instructions comprehend God. Of course, the sayings do not necessarily aim to offer explicit theological statements as we wish they did, so the reader’s task is to draw inferences about the theology of the sages based upon what statements are made about matters that might betray theological assumptions.

Theology functioned in the ancient world, as for many people today, as a frame of reference providing a basis for interpreting and understanding the events of life. It explains who God is, how one knows the deity, the nature of humanity and its dilemmas. As the Deuteronomist insists that God is revealed through Israel's escape from Egypt, the sages thought God to be revealed in a still more immediate way. Wisdom itself is one of the ways of knowing God.

Absence of the Story of Yahweh's Revelation

Readers soon recognize a profound silence in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (Job, too) regarding the story of Yahweh's self-revelation through specific historical events and through individuals. The idea of God's entering into covenant with a specific nation of people, a covenant defined by stipulations of social and moral behavior, is likewise absent. The readers and performers of ancient wisdom traditions, the guild of scribes and court teachers, clearly found an alternative system of thinking about the way of knowing God.

Some scholars have defined this absence as a deliberate abandonment of the nationalistic, or particularistic, features of Yahwism for more universalistic features.¹⁸ Wisdom accommodated a need for more universalistic (less particularistic) theology because of the international relations promoted at court in the pre-exilic setting,¹⁹ or perhaps more significantly, because of the absence of the political support structure to make it meaningful in the post-exilic period of transition.²⁰ The point is that readers familiar with the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and David will not hear references to them as they do in the Pentateuch. The sages offer alternative ways of asserting the nature of God's relationship with God's people.

Wisdom's Anthropocentrism

The sayings and instructions in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, while assuming a God who has created an orderly and reliable cosmos, are distinctive in their consciousness of the signal importance of the human perspective. Although the sages ultimately attribute wisdom's origins to the deity, wisdom is described and fleshed out as human skills of intellection, reflection, speech, and timely action (e.g., Prov 1:1-3). The human experiences gained through such skills are passed on authoritatively to succeeding generations.

Behind such skills there seems to exist a "self-righting" universe that is bound to principles of equity, justice, and piety.²¹ Of course, the sayings and instructions name Yahweh as the one who has

established that universe, but, again, the perspective is that of humanity (e.g., 16:4). Individuals perceive this order that, according to the sages, makes sense only if one figures it out by bringing oneself into harmony with its order. For human society and its individuals the universe fragments itself into the need for discovery, understanding, and cooperation. Individuals have ever before them the choice between “two ways:” one that accords with this ordered universe, the other that does not (e.g., 2:20; 4:18; 12:26; 13:15; 25:26); one that accords with righteousness, for instance, and one that does not (e.g., 11:10, 23; 12:21); one that accords with the traditions as passed on through parents and teachers (e.g., 15:31, 32, 33), and one that does not (e.g., 13:1, 13; 16:5).

Revelation through Creation

The link between human observation of an ordered universe and the affirmation that the deity stands behind it rests in the frequent affirmations of creation. This order has been established in creation and is evident in the natural world all around. Thus several poems in the Proverbs assert the interrelationship between Yahweh’s creation and the order of human civilization (e.g., Prov 3:19-20; 8:22-31; Eccl 1:4-10; 11:5–12:7). Readers are not surprised that the cycles of nature and agriculture stand behind many observations (Eccl 1:4-11; Prov 6:6-11; 11:22; 12:10; 14:4; 18:4) or humanity’s interaction with natural aspects of its own being (Prov 12:25; 14:13; 16:31; 17:14; 20:13).

The link between the creator, nature, and the human realm is wisdom, both in the forms of instructions passed on by parents and teachers, and in the human form of a woman who stands with Yahweh as creation and world-maintenance take place (e.g., Prov 1:20-33; 4:1-12). Woman Wisdom is a mediator, and by embracing her and her teaching, the uneducated may come to understand the deity’s creation.

Over against this confident assertion of Yahweh’s revelation through the created order are various assertions that order is not as readily evident as the confident sayings of the sages would imply. Thus, the sages are quick to point out human limitations and finitude that establish humanity’s role over against the natural order, which Yahweh alone understands (e.g., Prov 16:1-2, 33; 19:21, 23). This does not preclude the human expression of bewilderment when life does not coincide with faith. Ample testimony of the refrain-like reminder of human inferiority permeates Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (e.g., Prov 30:1-4).

Human inferiority leads to a new level of reflection in the book of Ecclesiastes, though. Qoheleth, the sage behind the book of Ecclesiastes, seems to reverse values through his observations. Unlike Proverbs, whose reflections on nature are introduced with the confident affirmation of the “fear of Yahweh” in chapters 1–9, Ecclesiastes begins with observations of nature and its cycles (Eccl 1:4-11). There can be no question of order in these verses. But, is this order something ultimately that assures humans of the deity’s concern, or of the deity’s absence (e.g., Eccl 3:1-11)? If one did not already affirm and celebrate a beneficent deity, would Qoheleth’s observations from nature be convincing that there was one at all?

Does Qoheleth’s emphasis upon nature represent an ancient “natural theology”? Natural theology is simply defined as those insights that humanity can have about God without God’s special revelation (e.g., through individuals such as prophets and through events such as the exodus and Sinai). Such conclusions are certainly implied by an emphasis upon humanity’s perspective and the created, natural order. If the biblical wisdom literature does not put forward a true natural theology,²² it is at least an expression of a theological perspective that takes seriously the natural world.

Humanity still must submit, recognizing its limitations over against God’s created order. Humans still seek to understand the workings of the created order, and to bring their lives into a harmonic relationship with it. But the language and imagery of direct relationship between human and deity, of a particular history that defines who the people of God are, is not present in the same sense as it is in other biblical books.

NOTES

¹ For fuller treatments of rhetorical forms in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 36-41; idem, “Wisdom,” in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. J. H. Hayes (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 225-64; G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1972).

² Several helpful works are available on this point. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3-26; James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1983); Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988).

³ Quoted in C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (3rd ed.; Indianapolis and New York: The Odyssey Press, 1972), 425.

⁴ See James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 34-49 for a discussion of many possibilities.

⁵ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 147-53; Choon L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), 38-43.

⁶ For a fuller discussion, see Richard Clifford, "Observations on the Texts and Versions of Proverbs," in *Wisdom, You are My Sister*, FS Roland E. Murphy, ed. M. L. Barré (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1997), 47-61.

⁷ See the discussions of R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study*, History of Biblical Interpretation Series 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1-33; and Michael V. Fox, "The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions*, FS M. Haran, ed. M. V. Fox et al. (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 227-39.

⁸ See Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 3-6, for an excellent and brief discussion of dating and various criteria for dating.

⁹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 32-41.

¹⁰ Clifford, "Observation on the Texts and Versions of Proverbs," 4.

¹¹ Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom*, trans. J. Daryl Charles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

¹² See the opening remarks of G. I. Davies's "Were there schools in ancient Israel?" in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, FS J. A. Emerton, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 199.

¹³ Numerous scholars share this view in varying degrees from G. Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970), 17-18, to Carole R. Fontaine, "Wisdom in Proverbs," in *In Search of Wisdom*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Bernard B. Scott, William J. Wiseman (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 104-108.

¹⁴ H. W. F. Saggs, *Civilization Before Greece and Rome* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Jonas Greenfield, "The Wisdom of Ahiqar," in Day, Gordon, and Williamson, 43-54.

¹⁶ John Gray, "The Book of Job in the Context of Near Eastern Literature," *ZAW* 82 (1970): 251-69.

¹⁷ B. W. Jones, "From Gilgamesh to Qoheleth," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature*, ed. W. W. Hallo, B. W. Jones, and G. L. Mattingley (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 349-79.

¹⁸ E.g., James L. Crenshaw, "The Concept of God in Old Testament Wisdom," in *In Search of Wisdom*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Bernard B. Scott, and William J. Wiseman (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 1-18; R. E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 13-39.

¹⁹ Thus William McKane, *Proverbs* (London: SCM Press, 1970).

²⁰ Thus Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 13-39.

²¹ This brief section owes much to Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, 19-23.

²² James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 91.

PROVERBS

PROVERBS WITH PURPOSE

Proverbs 1:1-7

A Testament of Instruction, Proverbs 1–9

The book of Proverbs opens in chapters 1–9 with materials scholars identify as “instruction.” Unlike the short sayings that follow in Proverbs 10:1–22:16, the instructions are explicitly didactic. [Structure at a Glance: Proverbs 1–9] They are formulated to imply a setting in which knowledge is deliberately imparted by an authority figure, either a parent or some kind of teacher. The frequent imperatives to “hear” (1:8), “listen” (4:1), “be attentive” (5:1), “keep my words” (7:1), etc., along with language implying that the audience is a child or student, are unambiguously intended to inculcate the values of wisdom.

Instructions are not the only features of this introductory collection. Interspersed throughout are four wisdom poems and one miscellaneous collection (1:20–33; 3:13–20; 6:12–19; 8:1–36; 9:1–18). These poetic compositions aim to elevate and celebrate wisdom. A most striking feature is their personification of wisdom as a successful woman, a device that functions elsewhere in Israel’s Scripture (e.g., Gen 3:1–7). The fact that such a wisdom poem occurs at the beginning and end of the collection is no accident. The sages sought to package their instructions in ways that ensured the reader’s (or listener’s) careful attention. [Inclusio with Two Women] This woman who calls

Structure at a Glance: Proverbs 1–9



In general readers will recognize the recurring formula of introduction, instruction, and observation throughout chs. 1–9. These formula help to delineate the sections within the collection as well as to distinguish the collection from those that follow in chs. 10–31 (see [Inclusio with Two Women]). The instructions and reflections established throughout Prov 1–9 are isolated as follows:

- I. 1:8–19 Prosperity from Greed
1:20–33 Wisdom’s Security
- II. 2:1–22 The Teacher’s Syllabus
- III. 3:1–12 Wisdom’s Absolute Surrender
3:13–20 Wisdom’s Incomparability
- IV. 3:12–35 Wisdom for Community Life
- V. 4:1–9 The Wisdom of Experience
- VI. 4:10–19 The Wisdom Way of Life
- VII. 4:20–27 The Heart of Wisdom
- VIII. 5:1–23 The Seduction of An “Other”
6:12–19 Thoughts on Foolishness
- IX. 6:20–35 The Foolishness of Adultery
- X. 7:1–27 The Parent’s Final Admonition on
Adultery
8:1–36 Woman Wisdom Comes Calling
9:1–18 Feasting at Wisdom’s Table

For further reading, see R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (SBT 41; London: SCM Press, 1965); idem, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (JSOTSup 68; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); and Michael V. Fox, “Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” *JBL* 116/4 (Winter, 1997): 601–12.

Inclusio with Two Women

ΑΩ Readers will notice throughout the book of Proverbs several devices for organizing information that are different from modern conventions of chapter headings, verse markers, and page numbers. Much more common is the use of repetition of words, phrases, themes, etc., to provide framing structures that function like bookends to mark the boundaries of units of material. Such a boundary convention is referred to as an *inclusio*. When readers recognize such a device, they immediately begin to ask how the unit of material functions together to make a particular kind of meaning. Some examples of various kinds of *inclusios* might include Ps 8:1 and 9; Job 1–2 and 42; Eccl 1:1-11 and 11:1-9. An important *inclusio* framing Prov 1–9 is thus formed by the location of references to two women: Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, the one a personification of wisdom, the other a personification of folly.

Readers encounter Woman Wisdom in 1:20-33 and again in 8:1-36 and 9:1-6. Woman Folly is also met along the way in 9:13-18.

- I. 1:8-19 Prosperity from Greed
 1:20-33 (Woman) Wisdom's Security
- II. 2:1-22 The Teacher's Syllabus
- III. 3:1-12 Wisdom's Absolute Surrender
 3:13-20 Wisdom's Incomparability
- IV. 3:12-35 Wisdom for Community Life
- V. 4:1-9 The Wisdom of Experience
- VI. 4:10-19 The Wisdom Way of Life
- VII. 4:20-27 The Heart of Wisdom
- VIII. 5:1-23 The Seduction of An "Other"
 6:1-19 Thoughts on Foolishness
- IX. 6:20-35 The Foolishness of Adultery
- X. 7:1-27 The Parent's Final Admonition on Adultery
 8:1-36 Woman Wisdom Comes Calling
 9:1-18 Feasting at (Woman) Wisdom's Table

These two women, both personifying opposing values of wisdom instruction, provide a framework for the instructions that are within Prov 2–7. By arranging these two poems in this way, the sages could use the images of these two women to exemplify the competing values of wisdom instruction. That they used such images in this fashion suggests their remarkable ambivalence toward women's roles in their own society. On the one hand, Woman Folly is antithetical to wisdom values, associated as she is with activities that threaten a patriarchal society. On the other hand, Woman Wisdom stands as an opponent to the foolish and validates a feminine attribute to wisdom.

For further reading, see Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT/Almond Press, 1985); Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom's Song: Proverbs 1:20-33," *CBQ* 48 (1986): 456-60; and Carol Newsom, "Women and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 142-60.

implicitly presents herself as an opponent of other women who also call to young men.

While there is a general consensus that Proverbs 1–9 are written later than the materials contained in Proverbs 10–30 (probably

post-exilic times), there is no definitive proof of the dating of any of the materials.¹ It is highly unlikely that there is any historical validity to the claim of Solomonic authorship (e.g., Prov 1:1). It is helpful to remember that as proverbs became “popular,” authorship ceased to matter.² The purpose of the instruction poems is manifested in their theological content. The pragmatic aims of wisdom simultaneously maintain a high theology that is illustrated in their view of creation.³ The cosmos is like a well-planned city wherein Woman Wisdom walks about and teaches young men who would become citizens. Wisdom speaks for God. Her words and images convey an ongoing process to maintain creation order.⁴ The implications for young men include surrendering to the Lord as well as to the instructions of Woman Wisdom. Thus, Proverbs 1–9 provide a theological introduction to the remainder of the sayings contained in the present form of the book. These opening nine chapters inspire readers that wisdom comes from Yahweh alone, and that it is therefore grounded in the framework of the very creation. Thus, wisdom’s worldview and value system may be asserted authoritatively as the only valid alternative for the young.

Proverbs with Purpose, 1:1-7

The opening verse of the book of Proverbs catapults readers immediately into the story world of ancient Israel. The traditional view was that Solomon, son of David, was himself among the wise ones. If Solomon himself was therefore known for his great wisdom and understanding (1 Kgs 4:29-34), the king’s reputation carried great weight with readers. Whatever humble folk origins wisdom may have had (see Introduction), wisdom was important in the court of one of the most important kings in Israel. By reminding readers of this, the opening statement offers implicit legitimization and authentication for the collection of instructions and sayings that follow. They become the legacy, or testament, of Solomon, Israel’s great king.

These first seven verses of the book set out the overall aims of the accompanying collections of admonitions and sayings. Several questions should guide readers as they begin to reflect upon these verses. First, how does the phrase “proverbs of Solomon” inform the reading of this biblical book? Second, how is the purpose of this book elaborated and clarified by the many terms that are compounded in vv. 2-6? Third, what is “the fear of the LORD,” and how does it connect with the concerns of wisdom as set out in vv. 2-6 and the following collections of materials?

COMMENTARY

The Superscription, “The Proverbs of Solomon,” 1:1

Superscriptions similar to this are also attached to other collections within the book (e.g., 10:1; 25:1; 22:17; 24:23; 30:1; 31:1), and two of these also attribute origins to Solomon (10:1; 25:1). The figure of Solomon is offered in part to gain the weight of authority. That authority comes both because he is a character out of Israel’s distinguished past and because his story provides readers a point of origin for thinking about wisdom. Wisdom in these collections is therefore the testimony of that ancient king, Solomon.

Solomon is not the author, however. External literary evidence from ancient Egyptian and Babylonian wisdom collections gives us some indication as to why. In those settings royalty certainly patronized the work of wise men, but did not themselves participate in composition and collection. Further evidence from within the Bible itself attests to the phenomenon of attributing writings to great figures long after such figures lived. One should consider, for instance, the first century BC date for “The Wisdom of Solomon,” an apocryphal book that also attributes its authorship to this same king. The superscription to another pre-exilic collection of proverbs contained within biblical Proverbs (25:1) admits both a process of

Pre-exilic

AQ This is a term readers will encounter throughout the commentary. The term, along with its counterpart “post-exilic,” is a historical reference that is also a watershed in understanding the development of ancient Israelite religion and theology. Pre-exilic refers to the period before the Babylonian exile, conventionally dated to 587 BC. This moment in history witnessed the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, the deportation of its citizens, and, most importantly, the destruction of the Solomonic temple. The destruction of Jerusalem marks the end of the old order, as it were.

When Babylon fell to Persia, the Persian court embarked upon a new policy toward captive nations by allowing them to return to and resettle their homelands under the aegis of the Persian court. With the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem after 538 BC (see Ezra and Nehemiah), the absence of real political independence, as well as the institutional loss of the Davidic monarchy, nevertheless required radical rethinking of ancient Israelite traditions. Many scholars believe that wisdom takes on a greater significance in this post-exilic period than in the pre-exilic period as Jewish refugees sought to redefine their lives under Persian domination.

For further reading, see Robert P. Carroll, “Israel, History of (Post-Monarchic Period),” *ABD* 3:567-76; and M. A. Knibb, “The Exile in the Literature of the Intertestamental Period,” *HeyJ* 17 (1976): 253-72.

Pre-exilic Timeline

- 1486 BC: Canaanite army defeated at Megiddo by Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose, consolidating Egyptian rule over Canaan
- 1300 BC: Moses leads the Jews out of Egypt
- c. 1200 BC: Philistines arrive by ship and give the name "Palestine" to the area; Jews start to arrive in Land of Israel
- 990 BC: Jerusalem captured by King David and Israel unified as one nation
- 950 BC: First Temple built by King Solomon
- 928 BC: After a fight over taxation, Israel splits into two nations: "Judah" in the south and "Israel" in the north
- 597 BC: Babylonians send army to put down a rebellion and take prominent Jews into exile
- 586 BC: Babylonians arrive to put down another rebellion, destroy the First Temple, and remove more Jews into exile

transmission and more than one person involved. [Pre-exilic] One should not necessarily conclude that the final collectors of these materials aimed to exploit readers' credulity with fraudulent statements. Rather, the attribution of literary works to great characters of the past was a widely practiced convention in antiquity. Finally, the sages also appeal to "the LORD" as the giver of wisdom (1:7; 2:5; 3:5-6; 9:10) or to wisdom personified as a female teacher of wisdom (1:20-33; 8:22-36; 9:1-6).

Perhaps more important for readers of this superscription is the meaning of the term the NRSV translates as "proverbs." The word is a plural form of the Hebrew word *māšāl* (also v. 6). A linguistic definition offers not one but two relevant insights on the meaning of the term. It may mean (1) "to rule" or "to reign" (e.g., Gen 37:8; Judg 8:22; Isa 63:19), thus reinforcing a proverb's authority; and (2) "to represent, or be like," (e.g., Ps 49:12, 20; Isa 46:5; Job 30:19), thus wisdom's way of describing and defining the world. More precision in meaning is certainly necessary for an understanding and appreciation of the entire collection. Yet this may only be derived as one gains experience in reading. For instance, the intuitive understanding of proverbs as short, catchy sayings that convey multiple levels of meaning and truth must either be modified or abandoned in the opening section of the book.

Proverbs 1–9 (also compare Prov 22:17–24:22; 24:23–34; 31:1–9). In these chapters readers encounter much lengthier forms, characterized by motivated instruction and admonition rather than by short, catchy sayings. And yet, both broad literary types are included in a book of *mēšālîm*. If readers look beyond this book to the entire Hebrew Bible, they find yet more extensive poetic and contextual variation in the use of the term *māšāl*. Form criticism allows readers to recognize so-called sayings (1 Sam 24:13; 1 Kgs 20:11), taunts (Mic 2:4; Hab 2:6–8), similes (Gen 10:9; 1 Sam 10:11), and other such short aphoristic sayings that are not at all like the much more stylized poetic proverbs we encounter in the book of Proverbs. [Form Criticism]

Form Criticism



Form criticism is a mode of reading the Bible that attends closely to linguistic patterns within a text for the purpose of classifying them according to type or *genre*. The implicit assumption is that the structure of language or patterns of speech reflect the social contexts in which those patterns functioned. For instance, in much the same way as one hypothesizes the background of a hymn of praise to be congregational worship on a high holy day, one might similarly place a proverb within a certain instructional setting.

The form critic further hypothesizes that as the social setting changes and develops, the speech patterns reflect this change as well. This hypothesis theoretically allows a later reader to trace the development over time of certain patterns of speech associated with the developments of certain social settings. While there is not enough evidence to trace definitively the history of wisdom genres, it is possible to delineate several different wisdom genres and sub-genres within the biblical corpus. These would include the proverb, the riddle, the numerical saying, the instruction, the allegory, the fable, the autobiographical discourse, the dialogue, and lists.

For further reading, see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1985); James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); and Gene M. Tucker, "Form Criticism, O.T.," *IDBSup*, 342–45.

The Purpose in the Prologue, 1:2-7

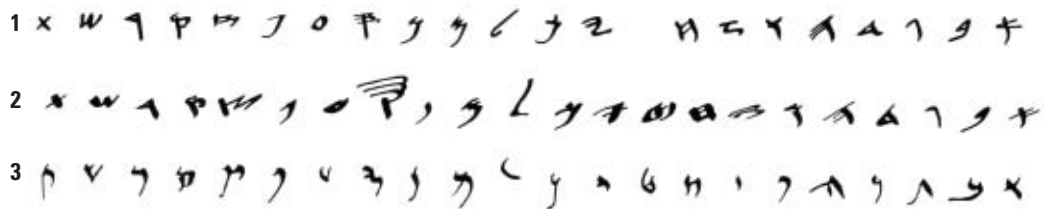
The first six verses after the superscription set out the several purposes of these collections of proverbs and instructions in a series of “purpose” clauses. They conclude with a thematic statement locating the “fear of the LORD” at the center of the pursuit of wisdom (v. 7). For Hebrew readers, orthographic features, word repetition, and syntax combine to indicate both the unity and the poetic nature of this series of verses. [Hebrew Orthography and Transliteration] Our English translations of the Bible are not nearly so elegant, but nevertheless convey the purposive function of these verses in the translations, “for learning” (v. 2a), “for understanding” (v. 2b), “for gaining instruction” (v. 3a), “to teach” (v. 4a), and “to understand” (v. 6a). The repetition of the Hebrew words for “wisdom” and “instruction” (*ḥokmâ* and *mûsār*) in vv. 2a and 7c create a poetic “inclusio,” or boundary, thematically marking off the beginning and ending of this particular unit. Within this inclusio (see [Inclusio with Two Women]) readers encounter similar repetition in vv. 2b and 6a and b with the Hebrew words *lēhābîn ḥimrê bînâ*, “for understanding words of insight” (v. 2b) and *lēhābîn dibrê ḥakāmîm*, “to understand the words of the wise” (vv. 6a and b).

Hebrew Orthography and Transliteration

AΩ Orthography generally concerns the spelling of words in ancient Hebrew. Transliteration concerns the representation of those ancient Hebrew spellings in English script. Paleographers, scholars who study the development of ancient language, attend to matters of orthography as indications of how ancient languages may have changed over time.

The spelling of Hebrew words offers poets the potential of using words and letters to create meaningful structure. Like most poetry, concision of expression is one of the underlying aims of the poet. In the opening unit, Prov 1:1-7, the repetition of the Hebrew letter *lamed* creates a distinctive orthographic pattern evident in vv. 2, 3, 4, and 6. What is more, since the *lamed* functions as a preposition and is followed by the respective infinitival purpose clauses, 1:1-7 has the introductory function of specifying the purpose of the instructions that follow. Therefore readers must be alert to how the ancient poets might be communicating through orthography, or spelling.

For further reading, see Frank M. Cross, “The Development of the Jewish Scripts,” in *The Bible in the Ancient Near East*, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Garden City NY: Doubleday; reprint, Winona Lake IN, 1979); and Mark L. McLean, “Hebrew Scripts,” *ABD* 3:96-97.



Samples of Semitic alphabets: (1) Samaria Ostraca, (2) Lachish Ostraca, (3) Elephantine Papyri.

Recognizing such deliberate organization of the text invites a deeper appreciation of the poetic aspects of this kind of instruction.

The opening passage indicates the purpose of the wisdom instruction that follows. The compounding of terminology indicates the defining intellectual, moral, and aesthetic characteristics of the wisdom tradition in general. Furthermore, in these wisdom terms readers encounter some of the most frequently recurring vocabulary of the book of Proverbs as a whole. While the list of wisdom terminology is not exhaustive, it is worthwhile to define the terms for them briefly.⁵

Words denoting intellectual processes: For the following discussion readers should consult the table below.

The Language of Wisdom

<i>Intellectual Processes</i>	<i>Aesthetic Processes</i>	<i>Moral Processes</i>
v. 2 wisdom (<i>ḥokmâ</i>)	v.1 saying (<i>māsāl</i>)	v.3 righteousness (<i>ṣedeq</i>)
instruction (<i>mūsār</i>)		justice (<i>mišpāt</i>)
understanding (<i>bînâ</i>)	v.6 figure (<i>mēlišâ</i>)	equity (<i>mēšārîm</i>)
	riddle (<i>ḥîdâ</i>)	
v. 4 shrewdness (<i>ʿormâ</i>)		
knowledge (<i>daʿat</i>)		
skill (<i>taḥbūlôt</i>)		
prudence (<i>mēzimmâ</i>)		
v. 5 learning (<i>leqah</i>)		
v.7 fear of LORD (<i>yirʾat yhwḥ</i>)		

Words concerning various processes of intellection and cognition include “wisdom” (*ḥokmâ*), “instruction” (*mūsār*), and “understanding” (*bînâ*), all occurring in v. 2; “shrewdness” (*ʿormâ*), “knowledge” (*daʿat*), and “prudence” (*mēzimmâ*) in v. 4; “learning” (*leqah*) and “skill” (*taḥbulôt*) in v. 5. The first of these—*ḥokmâ*—is always translated as “wisdom” and occurs more frequently in the Proverbs than any of the others, forty-one times. *Ḥokmâ* is one of the central concepts of the wisdom literature generally, and is coupled with the term “knowledge” (*daʿat*), which occurs thirty-seven times in Proverbs. This latter term, *daʿat*, is always translated as “knowledge” (v. 4b) and forms along with “wisdom” the broad conceptual parameters within which the remaining terms fall. The two terms in v. 2 that further qualify wisdom, “instruction” (*mūsār*) and “understanding” (*bînâ*), aim much more precisely at activities that contribute to one’s gaining of wisdom. The former, “instruction,” occurs thirty times in Proverbs and clearly implies an educational context. It carries with it the idea of discipline. The latter term in v. 2, “understanding” or “insight,” occurs only fourteen times in Proverbs

and denotes an activity or faculty of intellectual discernment. Thus, becoming wise is a process of receiving instruction that leads one to understand the sayings of intellectuals.

Verse 4 continues with two words in addition to “knowledge:” these are “shrewdness” (*ʿormâ*) and “prudence” (*mēzimmâ*). In v. 4 these two faculties are offered to the naive (*liptaʿyim*) and the inexperienced youth (*lēnaʿar*). Both terms may convey activities that are morally questionable. Thus the serpent of Genesis 3:1 is said to have this characteristic of shrewdness or cleverness. The Gibeonites of Joshua 9:4 are likewise shrewd. But shrewdness, occurring three times in Proverbs, also has a legitimate meaning as a practical faculty that facilitates the accomplishment of one’s tasks. The term occurs eight times in Proverbs and is translated in these verses (v. 4) as “prudence” but is probably better captured by the terms “scheming” or “devising.” It is another potentially morally questionable term that is co-opted by the sages. Readers have but to recall the scheming of Job’s friends (e.g., 21:27-28) to recognize the scope of the term’s possible application. But in the writings of the sages such intellectual machinations are legitimate and fall under the governance of an accompanying morality. In a word, v. 4 suggests that wisdom offers to the uninitiated some practical intellectual skills for survival in the world.

Verse 5 concludes the list of wisdom terms with two very infrequent words, “learning” (*leqah*) and “skill” (*taḥbulôt*). The former term, occurring only five times in Proverbs, is a derivative of the verb “to take,” *lāqah*, and thus denotes the activity of learning. The second term, also occurring only five times in Proverbs, is probably better rendered “guidance” or “steering” and has affinities with the idea of “counsel” or “advise” (e.g., Prov 11:14; 12:5; 20:18; 24:6). What is perhaps more significant in v. 5 is that even those already wise may benefit from these proverbs.

Aesthetic Features. Linguistic and literary sensitivity are also required for appreciating wisdom’s process of intellection and cognition. Put briefly, *how* the sages communicate is at least as important as *what* they communicate. We have already spoken of the “proverb” (*māšāl*) in v. 1, and made reference to the “words of the wise” (*dibrê ḥākāmîm*), but v. 6 mentions two other concepts that students must master through the study of this collection. These are the “figure of speech” (*mēlišâ*) and the “riddle” (*ḥîdâ*). Both riddles and figures of speech call to mind Jesus Ben Sirach’s (second century BC) conviction that reckoning with “hidden meanings,” *apokrypha paroimion* (Sir 39:3), was part of the sage’s task.

Fear of the Lord

ΑΩ The concept “fear of the LORD,” translating the Hebrew phrase *yir’at yhwh*, frames the introductory collection of instructions (1:7 and 9:10), the entire book of Proverbs (1:7 and 31:30), and the combined books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (1:7 and Eccl 12:13). The repetition of the phrase throughout the Proverbs indicates its centrality to the sages’ thinking about the relationship between wisdom and piety (e.g., 2:5; 8:13; 10:27; 14:27; 15:33; 19:23; 22:4; Job 28:28).

The idea of fear in the sense of terror is part of the larger background for its function in Proverbs. Readers of the Scripture will recall the people’s response to the Lord at Sinai (Exod 20:18), Joshua’s obeisance before the Lord’s commander of hosts (Josh 5:14), and Isaiah’s sense of woe in the presence of the Lord (Isa 6:5) as examples of the emotional and behavioral responses to the terror of the deity. The Deuteronomist admonished that fear of the Lord was required of the covenant people, only in this case there was more than mere terror. The Deuteronomist’s admonition parallels “fear of Yahweh” with “walk[ing] in all his ways,” “lov[ing] him,” and “serv[ing] the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 10:12). The implication in Deuteronomy is that fear of the Lord is realized in a lifestyle, thus functioning as a term for morality. The concept moves beyond mere terror of the presence of the deity to a concern for one’s society. This is probably the understanding most widely applicable in Proverbs.

That lifestyle begins by recognizing the Lord as creator, and therefore also as the one who enforces the cosmic connections between human deeds and their consequences. The universe is designed to reflect a moral order that must be obeyed by every individual. Not to recognize this moral order, or worse, not to obey it, is foolishness—the opposite of wisdom. Thus in Prov 10:27 it is the Lord who distinguishes between the rewards for the righteous and the wicked: “The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.” Because the creator of the moral order is righteous, prosperity gained by wickedness could not endure; therefore, the value of poverty with the Lord’s blessing could be affirmed as in Prov 15:16: “Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it.” Fearing Yahweh, with its many implications for lifestyle, simply becomes a way of avoiding evil, Prov 16:6. Interestingly, in the later wisdom materials that comprise Prov 1–9, the fear of the Lord becomes knowledge itself (1:29; 2:5; 9:10).

For further reading, see B. Bamburgher, “Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament,” *HUCA* 7 (1929): 39-54; H. Bloche, “The Fear of the Lord as the ‘principle’ of Wisdom,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 3-28; Dermit Cox, “Fear or Conscience? *Yir’at YHWH* in Proverbs 1–9,” *Studia Hierosolymitana* 3 (1982): 83-90; H. Fuhs, “*yare*,” *TDOT* 6:290-315; and Roland E. Murphy, “Excursus on the Fear of the Lord,” in *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 254-58.

The riddle clearly has to do with language’s capacity for the artful concealment of knowledge. Knowledge, the sages believed, is only available for those who are willing to search it out. If one may take the *mēlîṣâ* as “figure of speech,”⁶ one wishing to be wise must master a mode of symbolic and metaphorical reflection upon reality. This skill will furthermore be critical for reading this collection of sayings and instructions. So modern readers must themselves learn the sages’ manner of wisdom in addition to its matter.

Moral Values. Wisdom is further characterized by its concern with a moral consistency to all of reality. Students should also embrace the concepts denoted by the terms “righteousness” (*ṣedeq*), “justice” (*mišpāṭ*), and “equity” (*mēšārîm*; v. 3). These concepts betray the sages’ assumption of the principles on which all meaningful human activity hinges. The close connection between a moral order and wisdom’s processes of understanding is further indication that those who fail to live by moral principles are not only immoral, but are fools as well. The concluding verse of the passage (v. 7), a thematic

statement on the “fear of the LORD,” emphasizes the origins of this moral order. [Fear of the Lord] By associating wisdom with the Lord, the moral order obtains cosmic significance: the Lord, the sages believe, is the one who created and maintains a universe that turns on righteousness, justice, and equity. The fear of the Lord as the “beginning” of wisdom, then, is not simply a first step beyond which one eventually moves. Rather, the fear of the Lord is the “beginning” in the sense of the foundational, most important, principle that permeates the entire scope of one’s search for wisdom. From this grounding assumption readers may search for connections between wisdom and other features of ancient Israel’s confession of faith (e.g., Exod 3:6; Deut 5:5; Ps 111:10).

CONNECTIONS

The Beginning of Wisdom

The instructions open by echoing another great “beginning” in Genesis 1:1. Readers are left to wonder what exactly the beginning of wisdom might be. Should readers interpret this in some subjective sense where they are themselves subjectively related to wisdom’s beginning? In that case readers would ask of these verses where wisdom begins for them, personally. How do they obtain it? What must they do to get on the path? Alternatively, readers might interpret this beginning in some objective sense, quite apart from wisdom’s possible relevance to their desires or needs. In that case, readers must ponder on that beginning point for wisdom. What are its origins? From whence does it come? How does it relate to the traditions that have been handed down as revealed of the Lord? Such questions are not unique to contemporary readers.

Inquiring about the beginning of wisdom has another significance that may derive from thinking about the subjective and the objective, the personal and the public significance of wisdom’s beginnings. This significance is illustrated, perhaps, in readers’ recollection that wisdom comes from the Lord as well as from that ancient king of such great fame. The affirmation of Solomonic beginnings, and thus of very particular and even personal origins, was of such import in antiquity it is invoked again in the book of Ecclesiastes. So wisdom comes both from the Lord and from Solomon. It comes from the Lord and is remembered through sages stemming back to Solomon.

Arthur Miller's autobiography begins with a provocative image of geologic formation that might help readers to reflect upon the role memory plays in such activities of composition.⁷ [Timebends] Geological formation of the earth's crust is not simply a matter of sedimentation, where layers and layers of dust, mud, detrital material, etc., neatly settle on top of old layers. Forces over time such as erosion, heat, pressure, stress, and emanations from the earth all combine to cause folding, faulting, shifting, and landsliding. The result is a stratification that does not provide a convenient depiction of the origins of those strata. Faulting and shifting displace parts of some strata alongside other strata. Older layers of sediment now appear on top of much younger layers of sediment, making it difficult to know where anything really begins or ends.

Such is memory, for Miller, in his reconstruction of his own story. One's point of view at any given moment is always providing a different way of reconstructing the past. Similarly, the origins of wisdom succumb to the same effects of many different forces of use and reinterpretation, editing and reediting over the passage of time.

The sages of ancient Israel surely knew that time bends and refracts one's point of view. Framing these ever-changing points of view by appealing both to the wisdom of a great king and their confession that the Lord was the ultimate beginning point, the sages in effect abandon any search for a historical beginning. They choose confession instead of historicity. Such a confession confronts readers with the challenge to let wisdom begin with the sages' understanding that the Lord has no real beginning or end. The book of wisdom in Proverbs only begins for the reader. Wisdom itself has no beginning since it ultimately was with the Lord before the beginning (Prov 8:22-31).

Timebends



Memory keeps folding in upon itself like geological layers of rock, the deeper strata sometimes appearing on top before they slope downward into the depths again.

Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 586.

NOTES

¹ Roland Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xix-xx; Carol Fontaine, "Wisdom in Proverbs," in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John Gammie*, ed. Leo Perdue, Bernard B. Scott, and William Wiseman (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 99-114. For an older source consulted frequently in this commentary, see William McKane, *Proverbs* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970), 1-9.

² *Ibid.*, 170.

³ Leo Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 70-80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁵ The discussion that follows relies heavily upon Michael V. Fox, "Words for Wisdom," *ZAH* 6/2 (1993): 149-69; other useful sources would include, R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 131-49; and William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, 1965, 1983).

⁶ With only two occurrences in the Hebrew Bible (Hab 2:6 and Prov 1:6), comparative evidence is simply unavailable for discernment of its meaning. Note that LXX translates as "dark word," *skoteinon logon*.

⁷ Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 586.

ECCLESIASTES

INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES: THE LEGACY OF SKEPTICISM

Turning from Proverbs 31:31, readers encounter a second wisdom book, named in the Greek tradition Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew name of the book is Qoheleth,¹ a name worthy of further comment below. In beginning to read the book of Ecclesiastes after completing the Proverbs, readers move from the instruction of a king's mother recounted by her son the king (Prov 31) to the words of another king. These have been passed on in tradition as the words of "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (v.1). Readers may make a connection between these two royal perspectives. That connection between the two books gives us pause at the outset of this commentary to reflect upon the possible purposes of the canonical sequence of the two books.

Ecclesiastes in the Canon

In the present Jewish canon the book is included among the Writings, the third section of books that follows in date and authority the Law and the Prophets. Within the present Jewish sequence of holy books, Ecclesiastes does *not* actually follow Proverbs. Rather, it has been grouped with four other books known as the "Scrolls," or *mēgillôt*, which are to be used as a liturgical reading within the context of the Feast of Booths (*sūkkôt*). Thus the book follows Song of Songs within the larger arrangement of Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Readers in that canonical tradition therefore do not simply "turn a page" in their Bibles, as suggested above, from Proverbs 31 and begin reading the words of yet another king.

Only in the most ancient canonical lists did the book of Ecclesiastes follow Proverbs, having attained canonical status as one of the books of Solomon—along with Proverbs and Songs. The Greek canonical tradition has preserved that sequence.² Since Christian Bibles are more or less based upon the Greek tradition of the church, modern Christian readers encounter Ecclesiastes as immediately following the book of Proverbs. Thus, the traditionally held Solomonic authorship of both books functions as an additional

stance from which readers might reflect upon the way both books are in conversation with each other.

Authorship

From another point of view, the book of Ecclesiastes questions the tradition of Solomonic authorship. For one thing, the book itself does not consistently maintain its implication that Solomon was the author. For instance, the reader's deductions of Solomonic authorship from 1:1 and 1:12 are overturned in 12:9-11, which describe Qoheleth as a teacher and professional sage, not a king. What is more, after the introduction to the book, 1:12–2:26, the persona of a royal teacher altogether disappears and does not occur again. Rather than autobiographical testimony, readers easily recognize that the opening royal imagery is artificial. While it is not impossible for people of power, with extensive administrative responsibilities, to have a moral sense, it strains readers' credulity to think that a king as powerful as Solomon really wrestled with the moral and religious dilemmas described in various places of the book.

Once readers can begin to consider the difficulty of holding to the notion of a literal Solomonic authorship, the differing voices within the book leads them to hypothesize alternative ways of thinking about authorship. The book consists of a central core of first person accounts (1:3–12:8) surrounded by third person reflection upon the content and/or the person offering those accounts (1:1, 2; 12:8; 12:9-14). In addition to these changes in perspective, the internal inconsistencies seem to imply more than one point of view, thus possibly more than one author. For instance, in some places wisdom is denigrated (e.g., 1:18-19), in others it is affirmed (e.g., 2:13; 7:11); in 2:17 the speaker says he hates life, but elsewhere he affirms life (e.g., 9:4-6; 11:7).

The hypothesis of multiple sources or multiple editors, however, has not been persuasive.³ It is far more likely that a sage, someone steeped in ancient Israel's intellectual tradition, wrote the book. This would be someone who utilized the ancient conventions of pseudonymity in order to construct an authoritative reflection upon the very claims of the traditional wisdom school. It is possible that this person constructed a narrator (1:1) and a character named Qoheleth (1:3) whose reflections and observations are the basis of dialogue between narrator and reader.⁴ The contradictions are reflections of the real world the sage is seeking to explain, and the truth sought out stands only as such contradictory claims about

reality are considered at face value and not merely glossed over.⁵ In this commentary we will assume that there was a real sage who taught about life's contradictions. An anonymous writer passed on his teachings in the form of this book, in which he has collected and framed those teachings. This person is sympathetic with Israel's wisdom tradition, both its interest in order and its openness to reflect upon disorder.⁶

Ancient Near Eastern Context

Readers will recognize the Jewish influences upon the book within the first few lines. The appeal to the Solomonic tradition (1:1,12), for instance, assumes readers to have a basic grasp of that Davidic/Solomonic history. Further, the book's themes also make contact with biblical traditions. The themes of wisdom vs. folly (e.g., 2:12-13), of creation (3:11), of unjust suffering (e.g., 4:1), of faithfulness in one's religious obligations (e.g., 5:4) are all common within the Bible, not to mention the wisdom tradition contained in the Proverbs, Job, and some Psalms.

Like many other biblical works, however, Ecclesiastes bears remarkable evidence of influence from outside those traditions that make up the Bible. Thus readers find warrant to seek further information on this background as a means of understanding the arguments and artistic forms the sage is using within this book. It is unclear whether the Hebrew writer actually depended upon these other documents as he wrote. Suffice it to say that there are parallels, both in genre and in content, with a breadth of materials that stem from non-Jewish traditions.

In terms of content, readers find striking similarities between Ecclesiastes and Mesopotamian texts. The so-called "Dialogue of Pessimism," which recognizes the fundamental problem of retribution, says: "Go up to the ancient ruin heaps and walk around; look at the skulls of the lowly and the great. Which of the skulls belongs to someone who did evil and which to people who did good?" (see Eccl 2:14).⁷ Likewise, the Gilgamesh Epic, an ancient Akkadian myth, offers advice very similar to Qoheleth's advice. Siduri, the "ale-wife," says to Gilgamesh as he is about to undertake his adventure to seek his deceased partner, Enkidu: "Let thy garments be sparkling fresh, Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water. Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand, Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom! For this is the task of [mankind]" (see Eccl 9:7-9).⁸

Similarly, Egyptian texts offer helpful comparisons, especially in terms of genre. The instructional features of Ecclesiastes parallel the

instructional genre of ancient Egypt, especially that of royal instructions. “The Instruction of Hor-dedef” and “The Instruction for King Merika-re” are two examples that are similar in form to the opening of the book (Eccl 1:11–2:26), where readers hear a royal voice.⁹ Of course, the royal voice does not offer instruction in these opening verses of Ecclesiastes, neither does it continue throughout the entire book. One of the “Harper Songs” of the first “Intermediate Period” is similar in its skepticism as well as its advice:

I have heard the words of Ii-em-hotep and Hor-dedef,
 With whose discourses men speak so much.
 What are their places (now)?
 Their walls are broken apart, and their places are not—
 As though they had never been!

The advice (see Eccl 2:24; 3:13, 22; 5:18) that grows from such skepticism is:

Make holiday, and weary not therein!
 Behold, it is not given to a man to take his property with him.
 Behold, there is not one who departs who comes back again!¹⁰

Date of Origin

Scholars conclude that linguistically, socioculturally, and theologically the book reflects a much later time period than the age of the Solomonic empire. Such conclusions are based upon comparisons with other extra-biblical documents, but also upon a growing awareness of the cultural and historical characteristics of the late post-exilic period. The linguistic characteristics of the book point to a time when Aramaic was a dominant language. This would be a time after the Persian empire came to dominate the Palestinian world, sometime after the sixth century BC, establishing the earliest possible date for the book’s origin.¹¹ Greater accuracy in dating is sought by many scholars by hypothesizing a Ptolemaic setting for the origins of the book (301–200 BC). The book was apparently known by the writer of Jesus ben Sirach, written around 185 BC, thus providing a point no later than which it could have been written. To most scholars the book betrays the economic and social circumstances of a period within that framework as early as 300 BC, as late as 150 BC.¹² A less widely held view, though recently well

argued, is that the imaginative thought of Qoheleth reflects the earlier Persian period.¹³

Although questions remain about the date of origin, it is clear that the writer is deeply engaged in the world of Jewish ideas that flourished in the post-exilic period. His use of proverbs and sayings, rhetorical questions, and other didactic forms of speech focus for readers the wisdom background from which he originates. While most readers find Qoheleth to be offering a mighty challenge to his wisdom traditions, his theological assumptions clearly locate him within the mainstream of post-exilic Judaism. He assumes a single God who is creator of the world, who has the power to correct the injustices of the world. He assumes humankind to be weak, having come from dust and returning to dust. He knows the traditional contrast between the fates of the righteous and the wicked, only he takes this as a starting point for raising questions about his tradition rather than offering the usual affirmations. He is in the midst of a crisis of meaning; things in his world do not measure up to his traditional beliefs. He therefore comes across as one who, like Job, subverts the views of his community of faith. For this reason, Qoheleth's theological assumptions are of central interest to anyone who reads the book of Ecclesiastes.

Theology

In no way can readers think of Qoheleth, the sage behind the book of Ecclesiastes, as a systematic theologian. He is not systematic nor is his concern only theological. Nevertheless, he makes certain theological assumptions that help readers identify him with a tradition of thought given expression within the Bible. Readers have already seen in Proverbs that the sages' worldview placed great emphasis upon the matrix of human contingency and created order. The essence of the good life lay embedded within the ability of a wise man to deduce the good from the harmonious workings of the creation order. The collected sayings and instructions within Proverbs provide an image of a meaningful and discernible universe (see Prov 3:19-20; 8:22-31).¹⁴

The importance of creation as a theological foundation for the book of Ecclesiastes is expressed in the form of a framework for the instructions within the book. Readers might equate the role of creation in Ecclesiastes with what is today called "natural theology." It assumes that the natural world is a component in understanding God's nature, first and foremost as the end result of God's act of

creating and ordering it. The order of human relationship as well as God's purpose of human society may be derived through careful analysis of the natural order.¹⁵ As this view is worked out in other places in the Bible, nature is an avenue for knowing God. As natural theology comes to an expression in more contemporary contexts, nature stands over against God, making the idea of God's direct revelation less necessary and less discernible. The opening and concluding poems of Ecclesiastes offer reflections upon creation (1:4-11) as well as the human dilemma and its implications within that creation (11:9-12:7). This kind of framing technique recalls the similar convention in Proverbs 1-9, which personifies wisdom as a woman in both the beginning of the collection, 1:20-33, and at the conclusion, 9:1-12. However, there is no persona of wisdom in Ecclesiastes that stands next to the deity.

In Ecclesiastes the sage finds that the once reliable order of the universe, which guaranteed goodness and assured justice, is not in fact reliable in an unqualified sense. The sage's purpose is to turn up the power of magnification, so to speak, and have a closer look to see how traditional views may be held and where they need to be qualified. The moral fabric of his world is rather in shreds (4:1-2), from the height of political power (5:8-9) to the ordinary citizen (8:10-11). While the sage holds out the hope that God will indeed judge the deeds of all people (3:17; 5:6-7), the cosmic basis upon which to admonish moral behavior seems remote (3:16; 7:15-17; 9:2). The confidence that creation reveals some predictable and reliable moral order has vanished for this teacher. God cannot be known (3:14; 7:14). Moreover, what the creator of the universe has done cannot be undone (7:13); indeed, God is responsible, as creator, for that which is twisted and perverted in human existence. There is an order to creation, but it is an endless and impenetrable cycle beyond the ken of humankind (1:4-11; 3:1-9). The endless cycles of seasons, circuits of the wind, and well-timed activities of human society only serve to remind the sage that order has itself become burdensome and meaningless. It is against such theological and cosmic assumptions that the sage fashions his instruction, through a message that nevertheless argues the possibility of some happiness in a terribly meaningless world.

The Message of the Book

The crisis of traditional theological and cosmological assumptions is troublesome indeed. This alone would be an important touchstone in accounting for the frequent judgment throughout the

book that all is “vanity” (*hebel*). However, the sage seems to be offering a confession that moves beyond the mere recognition of ambiguity and inconsistency in the universe. The thrust of the message concerns *how* the search for meaning continues rather than *what* that meaning is to be. The book portrays a teacher whose aim is to model for his students the importance of making relative judgments. He calls attention to the dangers of absolutes and the vulnerability of unquestioned assumptions. The benefits of his instruction are not in their seminal grasp of new sweeping reforms. Rather, they provide ways of coping with meaningless circumstances that never seem to change. Readers may think of this teacher’s insights as minor adjustments, nuances of color and sound, perceptible only to those who are asking the questions the way Qoheleth is asking them. Or, they may agree with his premise that in the face of unyielding madness and folly, it is still possible to find enjoyment. It is a gift of God, to be sure, and is as unpredictable and undeserved as any other reality. Nevertheless, enjoyment is still commended. In contrast to the sage advice of Proverbs 10:1, the wise are counseled to abandon the search for profit (Eccl 2:10-21) for it never satisfies (5:13-17; 6:7-9). Death is inevitable (3:19-22), life is full of pain and suffering (2:23), God is unknowable, and yet it is entirely possible to enjoy one’s lot in life (5:18-20).

So, without any delusion of getting ahead, of pleasing God, or of actually changing the inexorable facts of existence, it is still better to be wise than a fool (7:11-12), better to draw near to worship in an attitude of respect than in one of disrespect (5:1-5), better to live in the moment than in the past (7:10). One should make the most of one’s time—whatever it is (9:10)—should seek God while youth allows (12:1-2), and should take advantage of every opportunity to enjoy what has been made available for one’s enjoyment (9:7; 11:7-8). In other words, the meaning of life is not found in the macro-assumptions one holds, but in the way one manages life’s micro-significances. The little things count the most to make life full and meaningful.

Literary Genre and Structure

The subtlety of this message is conveyed through the genre of the book as well as the structure. There are a number of ancient forms that resemble Ecclesiastes’ dialogical format, its call for enjoyment, and its instructional rhetoric.¹⁶ The fiction of Solomonic instruction invites readers to hear these words as the teachings of a king

whose voice calls authoritatively from beyond the grave. The irony of an authoritative call from the grave, however, serves to reinforce the subversion of traditional assumptions and approaches.

The structure of the book, while disputed among scholars, further illuminates the subtleties of the instruction. Most scholars recognize two main sections: 1:1–6:9 and 6:10–12:14. The challenge for readers is in understanding the relationship between the two sections. Guidance for reading might be sought in Qoheleth's own dialectical mode of reasoning, which is represented in the following phrase: "on the one hand, . . . but on the other." It is better to live than die, he says (9:4-6), but those who have died are better off (4:2). Another example is his view that wisdom does not profit (1:17-18; 2:13-16), but it does give one an advantage when there is also an inheritance (7:11). It has been noted above that the opening poem, 1:4-11, reflects a concern with creation, and the closing poem, 11:9–12:7, reflects the anthropological response to the inevitable implications of God's creation.

The strategy for readers is therefore not so much one of finding a logical argument as much as listening to a sage debate with himself. The point-counterpoint movement reinforces the sage's attention to subtleties. For everything that moves forward, there is a force tugging in the opposite direction. He raises questions based upon his experiences and readers must listen to the different perspectives; some traditional, others quite untraditional. As we understand Qoheleth's point of view, we also enter into his arguments, rejecting some and retaining others. But even more than detecting some resolution in Qoheleth's thinking, readers themselves learn by experience a process of deliberating on life's and faith's riddles.

The internal structure reflects further subdivision. The two halves may be divided into two further halves. For one recent scholar each half of the book contains a series of reflections (1:2–4:16; 6:10–8:17) followed by ethical implications (5:1–6:9; 9:1–12:8).¹⁷ While 5:1–6:9 does not follow 1:2–4:16 in any direct sense by addressing similar topics, it is clear that there is some rhetorical change that warrants subdivision. For that purpose, these categories of subdivision are followed in this commentary. However, for others, no such symmetrical overall structure is available. The book consists mainly of a string of reflections punctuated by affirmations to "enjoy life" while one is able. Four such affirmations appear in the first half of the book (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19), while three follow in the second half (8:14-15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10), subdividing the book into its various instructions.¹⁸ Readers are cautioned not to make too much of modern literary

conventions that risk imposing upon the ancient text an appearance that could never have been intended.

NOTES

¹ Throughout this commentary I shall refer to the book as “Ecclesiastes,” utilizing the name most readers are familiar with. I will use the name “Qoheleth” to refer to the implied author and sage whose wisdom the book contains.

² See Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

³ See James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) for a discussion of these options.

⁴ See Michael V. Fox, “Frame narrative and composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106. More recently, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 363-77.

⁵ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 38-39.

⁶ Regarding pseudonymity, readers should note that the Apocryphal book “Wisdom of Solomon,” while attributed to Solomon, makes no pretense that it was not written in the late 1st century BC. Likewise, readers of the Proverbs cannot forget that this book is a collection of several collections. The final form of the book bears the mark of the collector or editor.

⁷ *ANET*, 601 (IX).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 90 (iii).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 414, 419.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 467 (both quotations).

¹¹ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 14-15.

¹² Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Waco: Word, 1992), xxii-xxiii; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 4-5; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 49-50.

¹³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21: “the second half of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries BC.”

¹⁴ For the terminology of a theological framework consisting of anthropology, cosmology, and theodicy, see Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 34-48.

¹⁵ See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 194-202, notes the “Righteous Sufferer poems,” the “Dialogue of Pessimism,” “The Songs of the Harper,” the “Grave Biographies,” and the “Royal Instruction.”

¹⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 46-7.

¹⁸ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 204-205, quoting François Rousseau, “Structure de Qohelet I 4-11 et plan du livre,” *VT* 31 (1981): 200-17; see James L. Crenshaw’s extensive summary of several approaches to the structure of the book, *Ecclesiastes*, 34-50.