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# The Theology and Ethics of the Book of Proverbs

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Proverbs is often described as a book of merely prudential wisdom, based solely on human experience and reason, and, as such, a purely humanistic work, at best independent of, and at worst hostile to, revealed truth. This extreme view condemns the Book of Proverbs for what is in reality its greatest strength. The premise of this paper is that no theology which claims relevance to the daily life of human beings can confine itself to the stratosphere of revealed truth. It must come down to earth in a central concern for mundane, secular experiences and for the human logic and reason necessary to cope with them. The paper argues that Proverbs provides a model of the way in which theology and secular life may be brought into constructive contact without undermining the theological foundation or playing down the significance of rational thought or secular experience.

Scholars such as H.D. Preuss emphasize the international nature of proverbial wisdom, the extent of its borrowing from non-Israelite sources, and the absence from it of motifs which are dominant in the rest of the Old Testament. Preuss affirms: "Wisdom does not speak of the Patriarchs, Covenant, Promise and Fulfilment, Moses, Exodus, The Law of God, Israel as the Covenant People, nor of David and the Davidic Covenant, nor of history and eschatology. It, therefore, stands apart from what is specific to the Old Testament."<sup>1</sup> He refers to wisdom as an "alien substance" (*Fremdkörper*) in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Statements of this kind raise the question whether adherence to a religious position must isolate one from the wisdom and experience of those who do not share it, so that one merely reiterates one's own creed, and does not empathize with or ap-

appropriate to oneself the insights of others. Proverbs has permanent value as an example of the ability to recognize the wisdom of other communities and to incorporate it into the framework of one's own theological thought.

It should be stated at the outset at what point in the long history of the Book of Proverbs I propose to take up the proverbial material. This paper will not be primarily concerned with the early folk wisdom of Israel. Nor will it deal at length with the monarchical period when wisdom was largely secular and its practitioners, heavily influenced by foreign wisdom, were proteges of the court and of the nobility. Rather, the study will focus on the period immediately after the Exile, when, bereft of their national and courtly base, the wise men<sup>3</sup> set themselves to give a theological accounting of the wisdom for which they were the spokesmen and custodians. From a literary point of view, this means that our centre of attention will be Proverbs 1-9, where the enterprise of theologizing wisdom is one of the principal motivations of the writers.

However, this does not imply that the collections of proverbs which follow chapters 1-9 are irrelevant to the study. These collections, although earlier in date than Proverbs 1-9, underwent editorial revision whose aim was to ensure that the earlier material in the collections was compatible with and contributed to the theological understanding of wisdom. One conspicuous example of this editorial process may be cited. Proverbs 22:17-24:22 is closely related to an Egyptian wisdom document, the *Instruction of Amen-em-Opet*. However, it is precisely in this section that the personal name of Israel's God, Yahweh, occurs with greater relative frequency than in any other section of Proverbs. The editors seem to have chosen the device of inserting the divine name into these proverbs of foreign origin in order to emphasize their consistency with Israelite wisdom.

## The Orders of Existence

The fundamental premise of the proverbial literature is the concept of orderliness in the world. The spheres of nature, society, and human conduct each possess an order intrinsic to itself. However, these are not discrete and separate orders. They interlock and interplay with one another, so that they may be regarded as aspects of one universal order. The task of

the wise men was to understand the nature and functioning of these orders, and the implication of that understanding for the proper and efficient conduct of human life. The instrument by which this understanding could be achieved was human reason, applied to the data provided by observation and experience. The wise men's task included the discovery of the various facets of the universal order. It also involved the maintenance of that order in the face of the immense variety of fools and their folly, which threatened to plunge the social order into chaos.

The presupposition of a universal order implies that that order will be marked by recognizable cause-and-effect sequences. Many commentators represent this view as necessarily implying a rigidly deterministic outlook on life. However, it is not at all obvious that a concept of order necessitates a strictly deterministic relationship between act and consequence. Unless the world of human experience is completely chaotic acts must have more-or-less predictable results. Human reason and experience must have value in foretelling the probable outcome of a given line of action.

Since cause-and-effect language is so often used to express rigid determinism, it is less prejudicial to use a more neutral expression, such as "happening-outcome." Without accepting the strictly deterministic rule of cause-and-effect one may maintain, as the wisdom writers did, that certain happenings—natural, social and personal—have outcomes which are, in a general sense, predictable.

Ill-gotten wealth gains no profit,  
but uprightness is a safeguard against death (10:2).

A perverse man reaps the fruit of his conduct,  
but a good man the fruit of his own achievement (14:14).

The interrelated nature of the orders of existence means that happenings and their outcomes in one sphere may parallel and illuminate happenings and outcomes in another. If a particular event in the natural order produces a specific outcome, an analogous event within the social order may be expected to have a similar and parallel result. Hence, part of the stock-in-trade of composers of proverbs was the comparison of happening-outcome sequences in the natural order with parallel happenings and outcomes in the human order.

Pressing milk produces curds,  
 pressing the nose produces blood,  
 pressing anger produces strife (30:33).

The industry of the ants keeps them secure from famine and want. This is a happening-outcome sequence which applies also to the human realm. Therefore, the sluggard is advised to open his eyes and take a lesson from the lowly ant (6:6-11).

Belief in the existence of order in reality and confidence that reason and experience are valid tools for exploring that order and discovering happening-outcome sequences within it is not distinctively Hebrew. It is in fact the basic assumption which makes ethical conduct a possibility for human beings. In a chaotic universe ethics would have neither meaning nor content.

The Egyptian sages possessed a concept of order embraced in the word *ma'at*. *Ma'at*, the hieroglyphic symbol of which is a feather, stood for the cosmic and human order established by the gods at the creation of the world. Ethical conduct was conduct in accordance with *ma'at*. To live according to *ma'at* was to enjoy a creative, dynamic and successful life. Divergence from *ma'at* plunged the perpetrators into chaos, and eventually led to the destruction of individual lives and the disintegration of society.

The principle of order is not as clearly present in the thought of Mesopotamia as it is in that of Egypt. However, the idea is implied in the concept of the Tablets of Destiny, which are fixed by the Council of the Gods and which define the order of the universe for a given period, probably one year. It appears also in the *mes*, which Jacobsen describes as "cosmic offices" or institutions. The *mes* were established by Enki, god of ingenuity and cunning, at the time of creation. As Jacobsen indicates, the concept of the *mes* implies the belief that "everybody and everything in existence is under the law and may be brought to justice."<sup>4</sup>

The concept of universal order provided a point of contact between the wise men of Israel and the wisdom of Israel's neighbor nations. On the basis of their shared assumptions the later compilers and editors of Proverbs could retain wisdom sayings borrowed from non-Israelite sources without regarding them as "foreign substances," provided the borrowed proverb did not state or imply a violation of Israel's monotheistic faith.



## Wisdom and Creation

The important question of the origin of the orders of reality and of the happening-outcome sequences within it was answered in Egypt and Mesopotamia by associating it with creation thought. The orders of reality were established at the beginning of things by divine activity and divine fiat. The wise men of Israel followed a similar model and associated wisdom with creation. This association enabled the wise men to assert that the orders observable in reality were not the result of chance, but were orders ordained by Yahweh, the God of Israel. Therefore, they represent Yahweh's will, intention or plan, and in attempting to discover the elements of order, in reality the sage glimpses some small part of the design of God for the world.

The first, tentative connection between wisdom and creation is made in the introductory section of Proverbs (chapters 1-9).

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens;  
by his knowledge the deeps broke forth,  
and the clouds drop down the dew (3:19-20).

In this passage wisdom is seen as a quality of the divine mind. It is not yet separated from, but remains within, God's nature. Divine wisdom is God's ability, unmatched by human beings, to form plans and to carry them out. This wisdom was the quality at work in creation and resulted in the order observable within the world.

Proverbs 8:22-36 takes a long step beyond the simple view of Proverbs 3:19-20. Here wisdom is personified as a woman. She was called into existence before the earth or its inhabitants as the first of God's creative acts. She knew God's plan from its inception, and, functioning as a master artisan, assisted in bringing it to reality. Lady Wisdom rejoices in the whole creation, but her chief delight is in human beings. She makes her home among them, and is eager to entertain them in her house, and out of her intimate knowledge of the divine plan to instruct them in God's ways.

In the light of this passage wisdom is the order of reality established at creation, a concept closely parallel to the Egyptian idea of *ma'at*. Wisdom is also the guide of human

beings. Those who live in her house and hear her instructions are participants in the divine order. Those who reject her give allegiance to a quite different woman, the seductive prostitute, Folly, who is the personification of chaos and disorder. The contrast between Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly places the thought of the wise men squarely in the context of the chaos *vs* order theme which dominates creation thought throughout the Old Testament.

The intimate connection between folly and chaos is dramatically expressed in Proverbs 7:6–20. The harlot, Folly, accosts a gullible youth at the street corner. Promising him all the delights of love within the safety provided by the absence of her husband, she entices him to her house, where he finds, not the anticipated pleasures, but a speedy and shameful death. The writer drives home the point of his parable with the judgment

Her house is the way to Sheol,  
going down to the chambers of death (7:27).

Sheol and death are universal synonyms in the Old Testament for chaos, the negation of meaningful existence.

## Fools and Their Folly

The wise men's vigorous, sometimes violent, denunciation of the fool should be understood in the context of the chaos/order confrontation. The fool is not primarily a stupid person, much less a wrong-headed opponent who can be met and dealt with in debate. The fool is a more dangerous character than these innocuous definitions would suggest. Representing and producing chaos in human life and society, the fool's existence threatens the order decreed by God. If folly is allowed to persist, disorder and the eventual destruction of meaning and regularity in human experience results.

Not all fools are equally dangerous to the equilibrium of society. The least offensive of fools is the *pethi*, the vacant-minded, empty-headed person. As the servant of chaos almost involuntarily, the *pethi's* problem is not wickedness, but naive vulnerability. "The *pethi* believes everything" (14:15). Lacking the wisdom which would have stabilized his life, he is easy prey for the harlot Folly. However, if the wise man gets to him first and if he accepts the instruction offered to him, he may be redeemed from his folly and set on the right road. If not, "he

goes on his own way, and suffers for it" (22:3). Consequently, one of the aims of the wise man in his teaching is "that the *pethi* may be given prudence" (1:4).

Sliding further down the scale of folly brings us to the *lutz*. The root meaning of the word, "to make mouths at," indicates the character of this type of fool. The *lutz* is a mocker, a scorner, a consistent and dedicated cynic to whom every aspect of human life is a subject for ridicule. "*Lutz* is the name of the proud, haughty man" (21:24). There is little hope for a *lutz* because he delights in his scoffing (1:22), mocks the teaching of wisdom, and will heed neither correction nor rebuke (9:7, 13:1). His scornful cynicism prevents him from ever acquiring wisdom (14:6). The *lutz* is a radically destructive presence in society: "Scoffers will set a city aflame" (29:8). Since such a person is unteachable, society can protect itself from the *lutz* only by condemning his ways and punishing his actions. "A rod toughened in brine is ready for the *lutz*" (19:29). The punishment of the scoffer will not make him wise, but it may be a salutary lesson for the *pethi*.

At the bottom of the scale of folly is the *nabal*, who is tyrannical, vicious and brutal, given to gluttony, violence and uncontrolled anger. It is the *nabal* who "says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). On the lips of the *nabal* these words are not the declaration of an intellectually convinced atheist. They are the words of one who cannot accept the idea of a moral order created by God because the existence of such an order would expose his depravity and destructiveness. The *nabal's* existence can be justified only if chaos rules in the universe.

## The Authority of Reason

The authority of the teachers of wisdom is not bestowed on them by divinely-revealed law; nor by a sacred institution, such as the temple or the priesthood; nor by a direct and personal revelation of God, as was the case with the prophets. Their authority resides in the inherent reasonableness of what they teach. Their teaching strikes a responsive chord in all sensible people, and their observations are verifiable by those who accept their premises. Their words also recommend themselves because they have a valuable explanatory quality. They make



sense out of an otherwise confused existence. By the way in which they connect act and consequence, they offer not only a way to understand life as coherent and reasonable but also a promise that the secret of successful living can be found in the happening-outcome sequences which they discovered and taught.

## Wisdom and the Fear of the Lord

However, the fundamental theological question has not yet been posed. Is the wisdom of the Israelite wise men derived from secular sources and human reason alone, or does it in some way involve revelation and require a religious commitment on the part of the wise man? The answer to this question is bound up with the meaning of the fundamental Proverb which the wise men put forward as the basis of their teaching. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning (*reshit*) of wisdom" (1:7), or "the first step" (*tehillah*) toward wisdom (9:10), or "instruction (*musar*) in wisdom" (15:33).

The wording of these sentences does not imply that the fear of the Lord is a constituent part of wisdom, or an ingredient within it, nor do they suggest that the fear of the Lord is the sum total of wisdom. Rather they indicate that the fear of the Lord is the presupposition of wisdom, its *sine qua non*, its essential condition.

Proverbs 2:1-15 graphically describes this relationship between wisdom and the fear of the Lord. The passage begins with the standard exhortation of the wise man to his pupil to seek wisdom. As the poem progresses, the description of the quest becomes increasingly intense and increasingly demanding. The whole personality of the seeker must be strained to hear the instruction of wisdom, ear and heart tense to catch her words (2:2). The searcher becomes so involved in the quest that he cries aloud for wisdom (2:3). The pursuit of wisdom takes on the single-minded concentration of a prospector's search for precious metal, and the searcher values wisdom above all treasure (2:4).

One would think that the outcome of a search of such intensity would be the discovery of wisdom. The wise man might be expected to say in effect, "If you search for wisdom with all your power, you will find her." However, the wise man's thought moves in quite a different direction.

If you seek wisdom like silver,  
and search for her like hidden treasure,  
then you will understand the fear of the Lord,  
and find the knowledge of God (2:5-6).

At the end of the quest, after putting forward an extreme effort, the searcher finds, not wisdom, but the fear of the Lord. From this somewhat unexpected conclusion the writer intends the reader to understand that wisdom cannot be acquired by human effort alone. The effort is indispensable, but its outcome is paradoxical. It convinces the searcher that wisdom as a human attainment is an impossible dream.

The conviction that wisdom is beyond the reach of human achievement is not confined to the passage which we have been examining. It is even more powerfully stated in the wisdom poem found in Job 28. The poem begins with a series of reflections on the ability of human beings to conquer their environment. No matter how deeply precious metals are hidden in the earth, human ingenuity will find a way to get at them, exploring in the process subterranean places which no bird or animal has ever seen. Human beings grow their food on the surface of the earth, mine for treasure below ground and dam up rivers if they prove inconvenient. No attainment seems to be beyond human capability (Job 28:1-11). One thing only defies the all-embracing power of humanity. Wisdom is beyond human ken. It is to be found nowhere in our world. The earth's greatest treasures cannot buy it. Even the underworld and death are not privy to the secrets of wisdom (28:12-22). Only God understands it because he established wisdom when he created the ordered universe (28:23-27). As far as human beings are concerned, the fear of the Lord is their wisdom (28:28).

Human wisdom and that of God belong to two different orders. God's wisdom is the complete knowledge which the Creator has of the creation. Human wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

In the context of Proverbs 2:1-15 and Job 28 the fear of the Lord is much more than wisdom's precondition. It is an attitude of the total person, a stance toward reality, marked by profound reverence for God and awe in the presence of the orders of nature and society which God has ordained. The

ones who fear God accept the limitations of their own nature and recognize their dependence on God for the gift of wisdom. They do not expect to receive complete knowledge of their nature, their destiny, or their world. Such total knowledge belongs to God alone. What they receive is wisdom sufficient to guide their footsteps through the labyrinth of life. The fear of the Lord does not negate human effort or disqualify reason and logic as tools for dealing with life's complexities. Rather, it provides the context or atmosphere in which the intellect can cope most efficiently and most honestly with them.

In the light of this discussion wisdom may be understood as the response of one who reveres God to the orders which God has established in nature and society. Consequently, the Proverbs, the literary deposit of this wisdom, are not to be taken as fixed and unchangeable laws. They are better understood as descriptions of a character responsive to and responsible to God's intention. Such a character is creative of the kind of society in which God's intention may be realized.

## Righteousness Its Own Reward

"Righteousness" is the principal descriptive adjective applied in Proverbs to the pattern of the wise person's life. In the context of the book righteousness is not adherence to written laws. It is the quality of life approved by God because it conforms to the structure of reality. "The conduct of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but he loves one who pursues righteousness" (15:9).

The apparently crass and self-serving side of the wise person's righteousness has often been pointed out. Righteousness pays! It confers wealth, honour and social status.

In the house of the righteous there is much treasure,  
but income of the wicked brings trouble (15:6).

He who pursues righteousness and kindness  
will find life and honour (21:21).

A righteous man eats his fill,  
but the belly of the wicked goes empty (13:25).

Taken by themselves, passages such as these encourage the belief that righteousness and prosperity go hand in hand, and

only sinners suffer and are in want. This view, although it is commonly held, does less than justice to the thought of the wise men as expressed in Proverbs. As we have seen, the concept of a moral order in the world implies a correlation between righteousness and successful living. It is a *correlation* and not a simple *equation* between the two that Proverbs maintains.

The equation of prosperity with righteousness is ruled out by the fact that the moral order is God's and not humankind's. Even the wisest is not privy to the full counsels of God or in possession of complete knowledge of God's purposes.

A man's mind plans what he will do,  
but the Lord directs his steps (16:9).

The Lord directs a man's steps.  
How then can he understand where he is going? (20:24).

Everything a man does seems right to him,  
but the Lord weighs the heart (16:2).

The God who created the moral order is sovereign in its operation, and cannot be bound by strict laws of cause and effect.

The morally destructive error that arises from the equation of wisdom and prosperity is that one may be led to seek wisdom in order to get the benefits that may accrue to the wise. To make wealth, honour and social status the motives for fearing the Lord and seeking wisdom is to corrupt wisdom at its crucial point, and to make unethical the quest for an ethical existence. Recognizing this the wise men insisted that, even though it brings no tangible rewards, a life guided by wisdom is better than one trapped in folly.

To get wisdom is better than gold,  
and understanding is preferable to silver (16:16).

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity  
than a double-talker who is a fool (19:1).

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord  
than great treasure and trouble with it (15:16).

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,  
but righteousness delivers from death (11:4).



The truly wise person follows wisdom for its own sake. Any benefits that may follow are pure bonus.

## Social Ethics

In the collections of proverbs little is said directly about society, and the casual reader may be misled into thinking that the wise men were exclusively teachers of personal ethics to the virtual exclusion of the broader concerns of the community. However, closer examination reveals the fundamentally social orientation of the proverbial literature.

Broadly speaking, the relationship between the individual and society can be looked at in two distinct ways. The first lays primary emphasis on the individual and sees the well-being of society as the cumulative result of the ethical performance of its individual members. If most members of the community observe a sound personal ethic, a good society will result. The second begins with a concept of what society should be, and derives a personal ethic designed to produce individuals who will contribute to, foster and maintain, such a society.

The social ethics of the Book of Proverbs is of the second type. To be sure the writers do not draft a blueprint of an idealized society. Utopias are not their stock-in-trade. They build upon a single basic principle. Society exists and operates constructively by the cooperation and harmonious interrelationships of its constituent parts. It is in health and vigour only when concord and unity are maintained. Wise conduct is activity which binds society together. Folly is behaviour which breaks apart the cohesiveness of the community.

The principle is, of course, never stated in Proverbs in the abstract form just given. Nevertheless, it may be inferred from the repeated use of the word "strife" (*madon*). Almost half the occurrences of this word in the Old Testament are in Proverbs. Its primary reference seems to be to legal contentions, but it can mean any kind of quarrel or contention. "The beginning of strife is like leaking water" (17:14). If the leak is allowed to develop, it will destroy the whole structure.

## The Character of the Fool

Certain qualities of human personality and kinds of human activity are strife producers. They disrupt the harmony of

interpersonal relationship and, with it, the orderly functioning of society. The wise men recognized these as characteristic of the gross and vicious fool (*nabal*). All of them represent a breakdown of self-control, which, if allowed to persist, tears society apart. The wise men's view of drunkenness illustrates this idea. In ancient Israel wine accompanied almost every meal, but its universal use did not blind the wise men to its potential danger. In excess, wine becomes the master of the drinkers and takes away that rational control of the faculties which is essential if one is to follow the course of wisdom.

Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler.  
Whoever is led astray by it is not wise (20:1).

Do not look on the wine when it is red...  
Your eyes will see strange things;  
your mind and speech will be confused...  
(You will say), "As soon as I come to  
I will have another drink" (23:21, 33, 35).

Anger is an obvious example of a radically anti-social emotion. The angry person has lost control. Anger calls up angry responses in others, and creates an atmosphere in which constructive relationships wither and die. "The angry man stirs up strife, but one who is slow to anger heals discords" (15:18).

Hatred is anger hardened into a permanent condition, and is, consequently, even more dangerous to the structure of society than anger. "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offences" (10:12).

Greed, the breeding ground for a whole battery of crimes against individuals and society, stems (like anger and hatred) from a breakdown of self-control, and is part and parcel of the character of a fool (28:25).

Socially disruptive conduct is not always uncontrolled. It may be subtle and deliberately planned. A case in point is maliciousness, which frequently expresses itself in spitefulness and the spirit of revenge.

A malicious person spreads strife (16:28).

Do not say, "I will give him tit for tat;  
I'll pay him back for what he has done" (24:29).

Gossiping and tale-bearing are particularly vicious and underhanded forms of maliciousness.

A gossip separates close friends (16:28).

For lack of wood a fire goes out;  
where there is no tale-bearer strife ceases (26:20).

The wise men condemned the character and activity of the fool, not merely because it was anti-social, but because it was incompatible with the fear of the Lord, and because, by disrupting the order of human society approved by God, it was indeed an offence against God.

## The Character of the Wise

*Self-control.* As a minimum response to the strife produced by fools in the world, the wise person stays out of other people's quarrels. "He who meddles in someone else's quarrel is like one who grabs a passing dog by the ears" (26:17). However, such merely negative action is not enough. The sages cultivated in themselves and in their disciples a character which reduces strife and helps to establish God's order in society.

Self-control is again the key. It is the leash which restrains destructive emotions and the actions to which they give rise.

He who keeps a cool head is a man of understanding (17:27).

To master oneself is better than to capture a city (16:32).

For the wise men speech was the agency by which human beings make their most significant impact on society and, hence, an area of human activity which demanded rigorous self-control. "Death and life are in the tongue" (18:21). Truthful speech makes for stability in human relationships (12:19). Therefore, "a poor man is better than a liar" (19:22). Controlled speech is sparing and carefully considered.

He who guards his mouth preserves his life,  
but he who talks too much courts disaster (13:3).

The mind of the righteous man ponders how to answer,  
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things (15:28).

It has no place for pride or boasting (12:23), and for the sake of harmony in society it avoids harsh or provocative words.

A gentle tongue is a tree of life (15:4).

A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but harsh words stir up strife (15:1).

An important, but often neglected, aspect of wise speech is to know when to be silent and listen (18:15b). Maintaining silence is at its most difficult when one is being criticised. The mark of the wise man is not to resent criticism, but to listen to and evaluate it. "He who hates reproof is a fool" (12:1).

*Responsibility in the Family.* One of the wise men's fundamental convictions was that society can be maintained in health only when its members were willing to accept responsibility for the communities of which they were a part.

Families are the building blocks of society. Hence, a wise man will act responsibly in his various roles in family life, as son, father and husband (the world of the wise men was a man's world).

As son he will bend every effort to learn the ways of wisdom from his father and mother (1:8; 4:3-4; 6:20) and from his teachers, who often stand in the place of his parents (1:10 and numerous similar statements). By his wisdom or folly the son has it in his power to make the family a happy and harmonious unit, or to bring shame and disgrace upon it (10:1; 15:20; 17:21).

As father the wise man accepts responsibility for the education and discipline of his children.

Train up a child in the way he should go,  
and when he is old he will not depart from it (22:6).

The discipline recommended is harsher and more physical than modern society will tolerate (13:24), but the principle of the responsibility of parents in the formation of their children's character remains valid.

Since the world of the wisdom teachers was a man's world, the proverbs were written for and about men. The wise men describe the husband-wife relationship almost exclusively from the husband's point of view. A good wife is a gift from God (19:14), and can bring her husband honour and respect in the community (12:4). A bad choice of a life partner brings nothing but worry and strife (21:9). Finding a suitable wife is one of the most important tasks of a young man. She ought to be prudent and discrete, sensible and industrious, and, if she is beautiful, so much the better (11:22). The writers of Proverbs specify only one duty of the husband toward his wife, to be sexually faithful to her, and to rejoice in her love to the exclusion of all extra-marital relationships (5:15-20).



The wife's sphere of influence was entirely within the household, but in that narrow context she had almost unlimited power to create strife or harmony. The poem in praise of the good wife in Proverbs 31:10–31 indicates that in well-to-do Israelite families the wife had the sole responsibility for managing domestic affairs. She provided the family with food and clothing (31:14, 21), and directed the servants in their tasks (31:15). She made the family donations to the poor (31:20). She was no recluse, but went into the public markets to purchase food (31:14), to sell the products of her home industry (31:24), and even to buy property on behalf of the family (31:16). The wife shared with her husband in the education and upbringing of the children (31:26, cf. 1:8; 6:30; 31:1). To be equal to such heavy responsibilities the wife, like her husband, needed wisdom and the fear of the Lord (31:26, 30).

In spite of the wife's high standing and power within the family circle the wise men did not regard her as her husband's equal. Her efforts are all directed toward his welfare. She brought him gain and prestige (31:11, 23). She might be his crown (12:4) and more precious to him than the jewels in his treasury (31:10), but she was not his equal.

*Responsibility in Society.* A person's major contribution to the well-being of the wider society beyond the family comes through his work. The lazy man, who will not pull his own weight, injures both himself and his community (20:4).

Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,  
is the sluggard to the person who entrusted him with a task (10:26).

Industry leads to profit and standing in the community, but it must be honest industry without taint of crookedness or deceit.

A false balance is an abomination to the Lord (11:1).

Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man,  
but afterwards his mouth is full of gravel (20:17).

Sluggards and shysters threaten the community at its fringes, but injustice strikes at the very heart of society. Therefore, the wise men opposed oppression in all its forms, particularly the exploitation of the weaker members of society.

He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker (14:31).

Do not rob the poor man, because he is poor,  
or deny the needy justice in the court,  
for the Lord will support their case,  
and rob of life those who rob them (22:22-23).

Because of their status in the community, the wise men were deeply involved in the administration of justice. They heard cases in the courts, and had direct opportunity to observe both the operation and the abuse of the legal system. They hated any activity which would corrupt the public administration of justice, but especially partiality (18:5), bribery (17:23) and perjury (17:15).

But the wise men knew that strict justice does not produce a truly humanized community. That can only come about when there is regard for the well-being of all, even the domestic animals (12:10), respect for one's neighbor (14:21), willingness to overlook offenses (17:9), generosity broad enough to include one's enemies (25:21), and compassion and help for the underprivileged (21:13). The inclusive word for these characteristics is "love" (10:12).

The Book of Proverbs offers no pat answers to modern ethical and social problems. Rather it presents the theologian and practicing minister with the challenge to make a generous place in the theological system for the practical reason and common sense by which human beings attempt to cope with the problems which beset them in their "secular" existence.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hans Dieter Preuss, "Erwagungen zum theologische Ort alttestamentlicher Weisheitliteratur," *Evangelische Theologie*, 1970, 30, 414.
- <sup>2</sup> Hans Dieter Preuss, "Alttestamentliche Weisheit in christlicher Theologie?" in *Questions Disputées d'Ancient Testament*, C. Brekelmans, ed. (Louvaine Leuven University Press, 1974) 173.
- <sup>3</sup> As I indicate elsewhere in the paper, the world of Wisdom was a man's world; the teachers of wisdom were men who addressed themselves to men. I have elected, therefore, to retain the designations "wise men" and occasionally "wise man" for the teachers of wisdom, while otherwise striving for inclusive language.
- <sup>4</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976) 85.

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