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0521633052 - The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context

Katharine J. Dell

Excerpt

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Some parts of the Old Testament are far less clearly expressive of Israel's distinctive understanding of reality than others, some parts (and one thinks of such a book as Proverbs) seem to be only peripherally related to it, while others (for example Ecclesiastes) even question its essential features.

(Bright, 1967: 136)

Wisdom, both as a phenomenon and as a distinct literature, has often been treated by scholars as separate from the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Its context has been seen to have more in common with its ancient Near Eastern neighbours than with its mainstream Israelite institutions, and its theology has been seen to offer little contribution to the overall picture of Old Testament theology that is positive. This marginalization of the place of wisdom by scholars is, however, slowly changing in the light of recent interest in wisdom and attempts to understand its place in Israelite thought.<sup>2</sup> The last forty years have seen a great revival of interest in the wisdom literature in its own right.<sup>3</sup> Recent decades have also seen an interest in wisdom as a unifying feature of texts as employed by later redactors.<sup>4</sup> However, despite such attempts to define and understand

<sup>1</sup> Clements (1992) discusses this in the opening chapter of his book entitled *Wisdom in Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> Few Old Testament theologies written today would not at least contain a chapter on wisdom. However, in that by Preuss (1995–6), wisdom's relative absence is striking.

<sup>3</sup> A trend begun by von Rad's magisterial work *Wisdom in Israel* (1972).

<sup>4</sup> For example, in relation to the Psalter, the question of overall redactional intention was raised by Wilson (1985), who saw wisdom as having an important role, especially as it appears in Psalm 1. While wisdom influence can be found in the Psalter, evidence of systematic wisdom editorial activity throughout the Psalter is, as Whybray (1996) demonstrates, almost impossible to prove.

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wisdom, there is much work that still needs to be done in the area of its integration with the rest of the Old Testament. I maintain that, with a few exceptions in recent scholarly work, the separateness of wisdom that characterized older Old Testament scholarship is still maintained by many today in their attempts to understand the thought-world that gave rise to the wisdom phenomenon and in their overall characterization of its theology and of its affinities with other Old Testament material.

I am intending in this book to focus my concerns on three areas that continue to be at the centre of scholarly discussion, notably wisdom's social context, its theological identity and its relationship to other parts of the Old Testament. The question of social context has been raised as a result of a number of recent scholarly works that have challenged seemingly established conclusions.<sup>5</sup> The question of how to characterize wisdom's theology has been raised almost afresh in recent scholarship,<sup>6</sup> in that the theology of the wisdom literature was not taken seriously enough, particularly in relation to other parts of the Old Testament, which forms my third area of concern. Proverbs has rightly been seen as containing little that could be regarded as substantial influence from other thought-worlds of the Old Testament, but this observation has led to a tendency to treat wisdom completely separately.<sup>7</sup> In the third area of concern I will look at the echoes of other texts in Proverbs and ask whether this separation of both social context and theology on such grounds can really be maintained. Related to this, in my second area of theological concern, is the issue of whether God is extensively represented in Proverbs and whether he is to be identified with the same Yahweh who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt.

I shall be limiting my discussion to the book of Proverbs when looking at these key areas of social context, theology and links with other Old Testament material. This is because it is within Proverbs that most of the oldest and more traditional wisdom of Israel is preserved, both in its maxims and sayings and in its sections of more

<sup>5</sup> Weeks, in *Early Israelite Wisdom* (1994), contested many established conclusions about Egyptian influence and the Solomonic enlightenment. More radically, P. R. Davies (1998) views wisdom as almost entirely a scribal function from the later Old Testament period.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps most excitingly by Perdue, (1994; Perdue et al., 1994).

<sup>7</sup> This is particularly true in discussions of wisdom's theology; see the next section.

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theological reflection. The question of how different sections of the book came together, both in relation to oral origin and literary formulation, will be seen to raise the major issues of social context with which scholars are concerned. An examination of the theology of the book of Proverbs gives us an insight into the way a distinctive wisdom worldview developed. The links of Proverbs with other Old Testament genres, although generally seen to be limited, will give us an indication of its relationship to other thought-worlds existing alongside its distinctive worldview and will give us further clues to what kinds of social and theological connections were made by the sages of Israel.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

Any attempt to provide some social and historical background to Proverbs is fraught with peril. (Perdue, 1997: 79)

We have in front of us a biblical book that purports simply to consist of ‘The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel’ (Prov. 1:1). At face value, then, it is no more than a collection of the wise proverbs of a king, known from elsewhere in the Bible to have the gift of wisdom (1 Kings 3:16–28; 4:29–34) as well as being famous for building the temple in Jerusalem. One might assume that this king spoke some or all of the sayings and that they were perhaps recorded by scribes at his court. The Rabbis tell us that Solomon composed the Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in middle age and Ecclesiastes in old age (*Baba Bathra* 15a).

This simple picture of the social context of Proverbs has been challenged from every side and I am not about to promote it! In the critical period, the Solomonic attribution has been questioned. There is no doubt that Solomon was famed for his wisdom<sup>8</sup> and that he may have had an interest in collecting proverbs and even promoting the exercise. He may have even coined one or two proverbs himself. But the consensus of opinion is that the attribution is both

<sup>8</sup> Alt (1976) stresses the role of Solomon as portrayed in the Deuteronomistic history as collector of wisdom traditions, regarding the influence from the ancient Near East and also the distinctiveness of the Israelite version of wisdom as promoted by him.

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honorific and a matter of authority. Brueggemann<sup>9</sup> has recently stressed afresh the importance of Solomon as a figure of legitimization for wisdom. The name of a great king renowned for wisdom gives authority to a mass of material that may well have had a much more diverse origin. Solomon is also attributed with Ecclesiastes<sup>10</sup> and the Wisdom of Solomon, both books that he is unlikely to have written and that represent different periods of thought and of the development of ideas.<sup>11</sup> Proverbs is the most likely book to which Solomon might have had a historical link, but this link was probably of a limited character. The attribution to Solomon is not the only one in the book of Proverbs; there are attributions to Hezekiah in Proverbs 25:1 (whose ‘men’ are said to have ‘copied’ proverbs of Solomon) and to Agur and Lemuel in Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1 respectively. This suggests that different portions of the material were gathered under different authoritative names, and that the superscription in Proverbs 1:1 may be a later attempt to place the whole book under the name of the greatest wise king, Solomon. However, the important aspect of the Solomonic attribution is that it places Proverbs at the heart of Israelite wisdom literature and gives voice to Solomon’s renowned ‘three thousand proverbs’ (1 Kings 4:32).

Once scholars in the critical period, which effectively began at the end of the nineteenth century, started to look at the literary, historical and theological features of the text, the conclusion was drawn that Proverbs was unlikely to be the work of one author – Solomon or otherwise – and that it is in fact a collection of collections, in that different parts of the book of Proverbs were probably composed separately.<sup>12</sup> When the forms and content of the material were examined more closely, the characterization of the contents of this book as ‘sayings’ was quickly seen as oversimplified; in fact, there are within its pages longer pieces of instruction, poems about wisdom

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann (1990) is concerned to maintain that the tradition is remembering a connection between Solomon and wisdom rather than inventing one.

<sup>10</sup> The genre of ‘royal autobiography’, which takes its inspiration from Solomon, is a key aspect of this work, but it is likely to be a retrospective technique by the author of the book.

<sup>11</sup> The Song of Songs is also attributed to Solomon (see discussion in Dell, 2005). I would argue, however, that the nature of this attribution is rather different, connected as it is with other references to Solomon in the body of the work.

<sup>12</sup> Consistently maintained by Whybray in his work, e.g. 1994a; 1994c.

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and short pieces of narrative as well as the staple genre of the proverb.<sup>13</sup> As well as the quest for genres, much scholarship has focused on the process of accumulation, that is, of the gathering together of ideas and their collection into ‘books’.<sup>14</sup> There is also a distinction to be made between oral stages of transmission and the writing down of material, so that this may be a book that has come together as a written text as a result of a long process of collection, adaptation and emendation.<sup>15</sup> And then there is the question of the book’s relationship to other books in the Old Testament, notably to the other wisdom books within the canon (Job, Ecclesiastes) and outside it (Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon),<sup>16</sup> and its place within the broader framework of historical and theological developments that took place throughout the period in which the Old Testament came together.<sup>17</sup> There is also recent concern with the book both as material gathered together from oral and written origins and as a written text within a canon of scripture.<sup>18</sup> A further area of scholarly interest is the book’s relationship with the ‘wisdom’ of other nations, particularly that of Egypt. The close relationship of part of the book with an Egyptian ‘Instruction’ (*Amenemope*) has made this particularly fertile ground when addressing the question of the origins of ideas and literary genres.<sup>19</sup>

One effect of the scholarly enterprise in relation to Proverbs and the wisdom literature in general has been the ease with which Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes have been hived off into a category of their own, that of ‘wisdom literature’. This has been partly on the basis of form, in that the predominant forms of wisdom appear in these books sufficiently for them to be so categorized. Even if a few wisdom forms are found in other literature, that is explained as wisdom ‘influence’ spilling over from one genre to another. The separation of the

<sup>13</sup> For a useful overview of the different genres used in Proverbs (and other wisdom books) see Murphy, 1981b.

<sup>14</sup> This accompanies a stress on the canonization process and is seen, for example, in P. R. Davies, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> See Niditch, 1996, for an interesting recent discussion of this issue.

<sup>16</sup> An issue aired in any good introduction to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, e.g. Crenshaw, 1981b; Murphy, 1990; Dell, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> See Dell, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Childs (1979; 1985; 1992) has pioneered such concerns in reference to all biblical books.

<sup>19</sup> Many scholars have pursued this line. See discussion in Chapters 1–3.

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wisdom genre has also been on the grounds of content in that there seem to be particular concerns in this literature, notably in retributive justice, moral behaviour, training of the young and the relationship between human beings and their creator God, who is known through the medium of Wisdom (a personified, feminine concept), that are distinctive to this literature. Again, aspects of these ideas found elsewhere in the Old Testament have been seen as wisdom ‘influence’ from an essentially self-contained theological agenda. Perhaps most strikingly in the area of social context, wisdom has been seen as the preserve of a small group of ‘the wise’ (חכמים) (mentioned in Jer. 18:18) who produced the book of Proverbs and members of which, be they all protesting voices on the edge of the mainstream, produced Job and Ecclesiastes. The question whether there was a separate ‘class’ of sages in Israel has been much debated (Whybray 1974;<sup>20</sup> Weeks, 1994). The separation of wisdom has also been achieved by the close relationship perceived between this material and that of the ancient Near East, which has led many to wonder whether it is home-grown Israelite material, and, even if it is a kind of Israelite version of both Egyptian and Mesopotamian models, whether it fits in with the rest of the Old Testament and with the theological worldview of the Israelites.<sup>21</sup>

I am concerned in this book, then, with the wider issue of wisdom’s separation and integration. Especially when discussing questions of social context, there has been a tendency to separate Proverbs (and indeed wisdom as a whole) off into a side-path when speaking of its place in the rest of the Old Testament. The model I have just outlined above prefers separation of the genre – its forms and contents – and hence of the social context. The function of the Proverbs is largely seen as education and moral formation; and wisdom is seen as an area clearly distinct from other concerns of Israelite life such as law, worship, prophecy and story-telling. The

<sup>20</sup> Whybray (1974) argues against ‘the wise’ as a separate class and shows how wisdom thought becomes integrated with other parts of the Old Testament as time goes on.

<sup>21</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1. This kind of view sounds dated nowadays in a context in which Old Testament studies fully recognizes the much greater influence that ancient Near Eastern myths and ideas had on the Israelite corpus. In fact, this broader recognition of ‘foreign influence’ ironically makes the wisdom literature less out of place within the Old Testament as a whole.

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educational, administrative suggestions that owe much to the ancient Near Eastern parallels have also had this effect. While this separation provides a helpful way of categorizing material, one wonders how far it was a reality in people's lives. Personal experience tells us that we interact with all the different 'genres' of life almost without thinking about it. While there might be establishments that deal with certain areas, such as schools for education, even there, other aspects of the formation of the young are taking place at the same time. The other side of the coin is integration. Some of the suggestions regarding context have had a more integrative effect, notably ideas about family wisdom as a broader context for wisdom's earliest roots, arguments that the proverbial material indicates a wider ethical concern for all beyond simply the education of young men, and the changing evaluation of the role of Yahweh in the material in a more integrative direction.

This links up with a wider debate about the 'distinctiveness' of wisdom. Was there a separate group of sages with concerns separate from the rest of Israelite life? Or are there hints of more integration with wider Israelite life? This question of wisdom influence comes in here. Some scholars have stressed this aspect more than others,<sup>22</sup> but it may be that because of scholarly attempts to separate, the majority have been too ready to sideline evidence of integration and to try to make sense of a more complex social world in which different genres were constantly being used and reused in ever new and changing contexts. As I say, I shall be focusing here on the book of Proverbs, but one might equally well extend the argument to all the wisdom books. In fact, the later wisdom books of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon have long been acknowledged to show much more integration with more traditional aspects of Israelite life, and scholars have spoken of a striking development of wisdom into this new, more unified direction. This is no doubt the case, but are scholars in fact failing to notice the seeds of integration at an earlier stage?

<sup>22</sup> Crenshaw (in a useful collection of all his wisdom articles, 1995a) has consistently shown unease with finding too much 'wisdom influence' in texts outside 'the wisdom literature' proper and is concerned about a dilution of the definition of wisdom itself.

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## WISDOM'S THEOLOGY

It is the wisdom literature which offers the chief difficulty because it does not fit into the type of faith exhibited in the historical and prophetic literature. In it there is no explicit reference to or development of the doctrines of history, election or covenant. (Wright, 1952: 103)

One of the oldest reasons cited for keeping wisdom separate on a theological level is that there is in wisdom no reference to the saving history. There is no mention of Yahweh's self-revelation in the exodus, in the promise to David or in the election of Israel as the covenant people. Wright's comment (above) characterized the mood of the 1950s in which scholars largely dismissed the inclusion of wisdom in a wider estimate of Old Testament theology because 'in it there is no explicit reference to or development of the doctrines of history, election or covenant' (1952: 103). The title of his book, *God who Acts*, indicates that it is in the saving actions of history that Wright believes that God is revealed, not in the everyday, pithy saying. Wisdom seems to some scholars to be a misfit even within the cultic context of Israel's worshipping life, despite the presence of some wisdom psalms. Dentan, for example, sees wisdom as lacking the corporate concern of other material, notably of cultic material. Rather, it satisfied a need for concern for the individual and showed closest links with ancient Near Eastern ideas. Dentan also notes the lack of concern with the covenant, and writes, 'The complete absence of covenantal terminology from the Wisdom Literature is notorious' (Dentan, 1968: 8).

In fact, while it is true of the earlier canonical wisdom material that there is no historical reference (although attributions seek to historicize), it is not true of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon, in which history is the arena in which wisdom is revealed through the Torah. It also becomes problematic when looking for wisdom ideas outside the strictly wisdom books, since historical and wisdom elements are often very mixed – in psalms on the borders of being included in the definition of wisdom literature, for example, such as Psalm 22, which contains material very similar to Job, but which also recalls God's action on behalf of Israel. If the influence of wisdom can be found elsewhere to be more than just a literary



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influence and to have been formative in the growth of material outside the wisdom literature as well as within it, then wisdom's separate mooring comes adrift and the evidence points towards integration, even if within the wisdom books themselves the more historical concerns were mainly left aside.

A second reason for wisdom's separateness is that in the attempt to construct an Old Testament theology, with finding a centre at the forefront of scholarly concern, wisdom sits uneasily alongside the main historical development of concepts such as covenant, election and salvation history. Brueggemann, in speaking of the place of wisdom in relation to the salvation-history scheme, writes, 'The unspoken counterpart to that commitment has been the notion that wisdom didn't count, that it really was an unwanted child, if not a bastard in the family of faith, that is unchristian, unbiblical, and not worth our time' (1970b: 5–6). He argues that it is in the broadening out of the quest for wisdom theology into other parts of the Old Testament, such as the Joseph narrative (Gen. 37–50) and the Yahwist's (J) creation account (Gen. 2–3), that a fuller appreciation of wisdom's place can be found.

Childs (1985) has argued that one of the more exciting aspects of Old Testament studies in recent years has been the theological discovery of the wisdom literature. Despite its not containing the revelatory deeds of history, he says that increasingly wisdom has its own theological integrity and cannot be associated with a secularization of religion or restricted to a late influence. It has influenced all parts of the canon in various ways. He writes, however, on its previous marginalization: 'The rebirth of interest in Old Testament theology which began in the 1920s and reached its first high-point with the theologies of Köhler and Eichrodt in the 1930s also had very little interest in wisdom. The reason for this lack of attention is also clear. Theology was thought to be grounded in the great acts of God in Israel's history and therefore it focused on the development of the traditions of election, covenant, people of God and Davidic covenant' (Childs, 1985: 210–12).

Before the 1920s the existence of wisdom literature alongside other parts of the Old Testament was accepted on the assumption that it was a late group of texts that presupposed other Old Testament Literature. So Driver wrote in 1891 that 'the wise men took for

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granted the main postulates of Israel's creed, and applied themselves rather to the observation of human character as such' (1891: 393). However, once the patently false idea that the wise simply presupposed the rest of Israelite religion is taken away, the problem starts to emerge.

Interest in writing Old Testament theologies began in the 1920s and peaked in the 1930s with the publication of the theologies of Köhler (1936) and Eichrodt (1961–7 [Ger. 1933–9]). Eichrodt was engaged in the quest for a 'centre' of the Old Testament, which Eichrodt himself found in the covenant idea, and so it is hardly surprising that wisdom literature was marginalized as a result of this focus. According to Eichrodt, 'For a long time the wisdom of God made virtually no contribution to Israel's religious understanding. Clearly God was the possessor of the highest wisdom . . . for Israel's central concerns, however, the fullness of divine life and the divine self-communication in spirit and word were far more important than wisdom' (Eichrodt, 1961–7: II: 80–1). He saw wisdom as a predominantly post-exilic phenomenon, as did many earlier scholars. He viewed wisdom writings as having been brought under the shadow of the covenant as their 'cosmopolitan and religiously neutral worldly wisdom . . . changes into a means of obedience to the unquestionable divine command, teaching that true wisdom lies in the fear of God' (Eichrodt, 1961–7: II: 23). Wheeler Robinson saw wisdom as subordinate to prophecy and went as far as to define the wisdom movement as 'the discipline whereby was taught the application of prophetic truth to the individual life in the light of experience' (1946: 241). As Day, Gordon and Williamson write in the introduction to *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 'For too long wisdom had been a casualty of the long-running quest for a theological centre in the Old Testament which had seen a variety of potential unifying themes proposed and wisdom almost invariably marginalized in the accompanying discussion. Since the wisdom texts paid little attention to cult and even less to covenant it was virtually inevitable that, as long as the quest persisted in this form, wisdom would be on the sidelines' (Day, Gordon and Williamson, 1995: 1).

Therefore the characterization of Israelite theology that has long held the field in Old Testament study is that what distinguished Israel from its neighbours was the belief in a God who worked in