

Introduction

The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. —Prov 4:7

The Book of Proverbs is often regarded as one of the least theological in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB). Its practical advice, its form as, in the main, a series of maxims, and its relative lack of mention of God compared with other biblical books are all factors in this assessment. It is a call to the young and those who are interested to learn to “get wisdom” (a repeated phrase), as the first step in the journey of life.¹ Proverbs has been seen as a more “secular” book than most biblical books (if such nomenclature is even appropriate in a series of religious texts), perhaps more in a comparative way than in an absolute one.² So why attempt

¹ The repetition (Prov 3:13; 4:5, 7; 16:16; 19:8) and significance of this phrase and its slight variants led me to name my own introduction to the wisdom literature with the same phrase: Katharine J. Dell, “*Get Wisdom, Get Insight*”: *An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

² Famously, Johannes Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit in ihrer israelitisch-jüdischen Ausprägung: Eine Studie zur Nationalisierung der Weisheit in Israel* (BZAW 62; Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1933) characterized biblical wisdom as “eudaemonistic” and utilitarian, motivated predominantly

to write a book on the “theology” of such an unpromising work? I will argue that there are in fact important theological themes underpinning and characterizing the Book of Proverbs and that they merit further exploration.

A theological approach will be at the forefront of this volume, an approach that has gained momentum in recent decades and yet, in other ways, has also been on the scholarly agenda for a very long time.³ My basic definition of *theology* is “the word of God,” including “God-talk” from the human side – that is, whenever matters concerning God, his action in the world, his relationships, his intentions, and so forth are foregrounded in the material. However, I will not confine myself to passages that specifically mention God because the whole world-view of Proverbs has, I will argue, a set of presuppositions about divine agency in the world that underpins it.

I will trace interest in theological themes in the scholarship back to the rise of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century, right through until today. However, I anticipate two aspects that will emerge from this survey. The first is that evaluation of any one biblical book cannot be done in isolation, only in conjunction with other groupings of books, for example, “the wisdom literature” or “the Writings” with which the Book of Proverbs has been,

by human self-interest. This view of secularity prevailed well into the late twentieth century. Zoltán Schwáb gives the discussion an interesting new twist. See Zoltán S. Schwáb, *Toward an Interpretation of the Book of Proverbs: Selfishness and Secularity Reconsidered* (JTISup 7; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

³ Recent scholarly work on Proverbs has stressed its theological value, building on the work of Roland Murphy, notably his seminal article, “Wisdom and Yahwism,” in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in Honor of John L. McKenzie* (eds. James W. Flanagan and Anita Weisbrod Robinson; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 117–26.

and goes on being, variously aligned and considered.⁴ The second is that wider scholarly trends within the discipline of biblical studies, including archaeological finds, have had a significant impact on the study of Proverbs as it has unfurled. A changing scholarly landscape opens up fresh issues for each generation and significant archaeological finds – such as the discovery of the *Instruction of Amenemope* (Papyrus 10474) in 1923⁵ or the Qumran wisdom scrolls (not fully published until the 1990s) – influence interpretation too.⁶ Looking at scholarly debates, as I shall do, one can see that many of the concerns of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have a resonance today, and yet the ways in which debates are couched are very different. It is clear that much of what we think of as “new” has already been anticipated by much past scholarship, although it finds a place within a fresh debate, one influenced by new, wider concerns such as hermeneutics or linguistics, metaphor theory or intertextuality.

As soon as one starts to look at scholarship on Proverbs, one starts to see that it is hard to separate a theological approach from other matters – historical, authorial, source-critical, contextual and so on. This is partly because the history of interpretation of Proverbs has very much been dominated by these broader

⁴ The most common context in which one finds a chapter on Proverbs is in any introduction to the wisdom literature, e.g., James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox), which has appeared in three editions in 1981, 1998, and 2010. Each subsequent edition was expanded and updated with fresh overviews and bibliography.

⁵ Ernest W. Budge, “The Admonitions of Amenemapt, the Son of Kanekht,” in *Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, Second Series (London: British Museum, 1923), plates 1–14. Also, Ernest W. Budge, *The Teaching of Amen-Em-Apt, Son of Kanekht* (London: British Museum, 1924).

⁶ See Daniel J. Harrington, *Wisdom Texts from Qumran* (London: Routledge, 1996).

concerns, with different phases of the scholarship being caught up in specific debates that have eventually run their course, but had an excessive amount of influence at the time.⁷ Because of the heritage of scholarship, it is necessary that the remit of the present volume goes beyond a strictly theological analysis so as to look at what concerns have been dominant and how debates have outplayed. This will bring in some historical issues regarding context, place and date. It will also bring in comparison with the ancient Near Eastern world in relation to genre and parallels. It will also, fundamentally, bring in literary and source-critical issues.

I will also take a literary-critical approach to Proverbs that involves questions of genre – that is, form, content, and context as defined by form-criticism. This leads to a highlighting of the diversity of literary styles leading to an essential subdivision of the book into parts. It becomes clear then that doing a theological analysis of this very varied book can only be done properly and be fully appreciated by building on the findings of literary criticism. As literary-critical study has moved towards a fuller appreciation of final form, so this volume will both subdivide the Book of Proverbs (Chapters 3–5), but also seek to unite in its theological analysis at a later point (Chapter 6).

While the Book of Proverbs as we read it today has a fixed final form, the question of how it came together as a text, what the social location of different forms and content might have originally

⁷ This is made clear in Knut Martin Heim, “The Phenomenon and Literature of Wisdom,” in *Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, Volume III Part 2: *The Twentieth Century* (ed. Magne Saebø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 559–93, esp. 571–85. He notes that two approaches dominated during the twentieth century, the one literary, the other comparative, and that only a minority of scholars pursued both.

been, and how the different sections relate to one another is still crucial.⁸ Another key literary issue – but also a theological one in that these issues inevitably overlap – is how the book relates to other books in canonical relationship (Chapter 7).⁹ Its closest partners are often regarded as other “wisdom” books, but exactly how to define such links and where the most convincing parallels lie needs fresh investigation, especially in the light of the newer technique of intertextuality.¹⁰

Proverbs 1–9 is a key section that has to feature strongly in any evaluation of the theology of the book as that is where key theological discussions of the “fear of the LORD,” the “act-consequence nexus,” the doctrine of reward and retribution, the quest for “order” and the emphasis on “creation” have taken place, and these all warrant attention within an overview of scholarly evaluation of the book. Within Proverbs 1–9 we meet the figure of Wisdom who stands at the center of a profound theological relationship between God and humankind in three

⁸ There is also the consideration of versions of Proverbs that vary from the Masoretic Text, such as the Septuagint and Vulgate and versions from Qumran. I will not be treating these issues in this volume, but I refer the reader to any good commentary on Proverbs. One of the best is Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB Vol. 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000); idem, *Proverbs 10–31* (AB Vol. 18B; New York: Doubleday, 2009).

⁹ See Julius Steinberg, “The Place of Wisdom Literature in an Old Testament Theology: A Thematic and Structural-Canonical Approach,” in *The Shape of the Writings* (eds. Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone; Siphut 16; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 147–74. Steinberg’s approach is a mixture of canonical and theological, drawing theological significance from the canonical placement of the wisdom books.

¹⁰ An intertextual approach has been explored recently in relation to Proverbs and has opened up a fruitful new field of study. See Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, eds., *Reading Proverbs Intertextually* (LHBOTS 634; London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

poems (Prov 1:20–33; 3:13–20; 8:1–9:18). If we read Proverbs in its final form, these theological emphases, established at the start of the book, imbue our reading of the rest.¹¹ I will explore the difference between evaluating sections separately and reading the book as an integrated whole by starting with separate chapters (3–5) and then bringing the theology of the whole together in Chapter 6.

It is the comparative approach with the ancient Near East that led some scholars of the past to downgrade Proverbs as having more in common with “foreign” material than Israelite.¹² The lack of mention of the great historical events of Israel’s past and lack of nationalistic emphasis bolstered this idea.¹³ However, it is nowadays recognized that throughout the OT/HB there are important ancient Near Eastern (ANE) influences to be found both in literary and theological areas and so no part of the canon can be fully understood without reference to the wider thought-world beyond

¹¹ See Arthur Keefer, *Proverbs 1–9 as an Introduction to the Book of Proverbs* (LHBOTS 701; London and New York: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2020) who argues not only that we, as readers, can appreciate the influence of Proverbs 1–9 on an understanding of the whole book, but that, when this section was added, it gave a fresh lens for the book’s editors to both assist and clarify interpretation of key verses in the body of the proverbial sayings.

¹² Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit*, proposed that biblical wisdom was essentially foreign in origin and adapted to Israelite concerns later for inclusion in the Book of Proverbs. This viewpoint held sway for a long period of time and affected the place that Proverbs held in evaluations of Old Testament theology.

¹³ This is often said of the wisdom literature as a whole, e.g., James D. Martin, *Proverbs* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). Martin summarizes the point well when he writes, “Because of their lack of interest in Israel’s salvation history or the cult of the temple, they [the wisdom books] have been felt to have little or nothing to contribute to the general theological perspectives of the Old Testament” (91).

the Israelite nation.¹⁴ The “wisdom literature” is simply one of the more fruitful avenues for understanding these influences.¹⁵ The universalistic approach of Proverbs is a refreshing antidote to some of the more directly nationalistic books in the canon.

Although mention of God is not excessive in the Book of Proverbs, I will argue that when his name or role is brought out this emphasis is significant, and that even when God is not explicitly named, a world-view that assumes God’s place in the working out of human and societal affairs is implicitly present. Whilst some have found clusters of Proverbs shaped by a later Yahwistic redaction, and have hence downplayed God’s role,¹⁶ I will argue that there never was a time when God was absent from proverbial wisdom and that mention of him (both as Yahweh and as Elohim) gives the whole Book of Proverbs a more theological feel than has often been claimed for it.¹⁷

The first chapter will look at the issue of the place of Proverbs within the genre of literature that we call “wisdom.” This is to link

¹⁴ For a recent compendium of relevant works from the ancient Near East for the OT/ HB, see Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

¹⁵ See Richard J. Clifford, ed., *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2007) for a series of essays showing the range of wisdom literature in many ancient cultures, including Israel.

¹⁶ Given definitive expression by the work of R. Norman Whybray, “Yahweh Sayings and Their Contexts in Proverbs 10:1–22:16,” in *La Sagesse de l’Ancien Testament* (ed. Maurice Gilbert; BETL 51; Gembloux: Leuven University Press, 1979), 153–65 where he argues for a Yahwistic redaction in the main body of sayings in Proverbs.

¹⁷ Much has been made recently of the fact that God is not simply Elohim in Proverbs, the use of the divine name Yahweh being deliberately used to ground Proverbs in the national history of Israel. See in particular Lennart Boström, *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs* (CB 29; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990).

up to a very recent discussion about the definition of the genre and also to connect up in significant ways with the Solomonic attribution that opens the book (1:1) and with the other attributions that open different sections of the book (10:1; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1). An outline and overview of the key sections of Proverbs will also be explored as will questions of orality and literacy. Chapter 2 will look at scholarly assessment of traditional issues in relation to Proverbs such as provenance, historical and cultural context and literary-critical history across the debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries leading into the twenty-first.

The following three chapters (3–5) will offer an opportunity to look in more depth at key sections of Proverbs, sometimes aligned together since their relationship to each other is close. It will also be an opportunity to explore scholarly arguments in relation specifically to these sections. Chapter 3 treats Proverbs 1–9, which demands a whole chapter because of its theological significance and maturity. Both the educational context of the instructions and the figure of Wisdom in the poetry are essential parts of this discussion. Then Chapter 4 will range together what is widely believed to be the oldest proverbial material – that is, the previously oral maxims that form the bedrock of the “proverb” genre. These are to be found in the main sayings collection in 10:1–22:16, traditionally attributed to Solomon, but also in the smaller section of Prov 24:23–34. Another fairly extensive collection is in Proverbs 25–29, demonstrating some overlap with 10:1–22:16 but also some interesting variation in individual proverbial statements and a rather different attribution to the “men of Hezekiah” (Prov 25:1). Finally, in this chapter, the miscellany of animal sayings and lists in Prov 30:7–33 will be examined as part of the older material that makes up the book. The role of all these sections in ethical guidance, itself not monochrome but characterized by difference and contradiction,

will be explored and there will be a focus on the placement of the proverbs that mention God. Chapter 5 then looks at the remaining sections of Proverbs largely in the light of the Egyptian influence that is particularly found there – Prov 22:17–24:22 is a case in point. Proverbs 30:1–6; 31:1–9; and 31:10–31 are shorter and self-contained whilst being collectively disparate. However, the “sayings of Agur” in Prov 30:1–6 forms a bridge towards the scepticism of Ecclesiastes that, in my view, provides a key “wisdom” partner to Proverbs within the tradition. Proverbs 31:1–9 in its attribution to a foreign king has interesting implications for social context and the final section in Prov 31:10–31 with its poem about a worthy woman containing key framing links to Proverbs 1–9 and the female figures within that section.¹⁸ This final poem gives Proverbs an important theological framework in relation to the women that frame the book with their differing characters, qualities and advice.

Chapter 6 takes us back to the whole Book of Proverbs and focuses on a theological evaluation of the whole book. In many ways it is the central chapter of this volume and it brings us up to date in more depth on the scholarly discussions of the twenty-first century that have strongly impacted theological issues, such as a relatively recent interest, for example, in the “fear of the LORD” as a guiding theological principle of the book¹⁹ and in the place of “creation” in Proverbs.²⁰ I will also look at the key intersection of theological themes with a fresh emphasis in scholarship on

¹⁸ See Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socio-Economic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31* (BZAW 304; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001) amongst a number of other feminist interpreters.

¹⁹ Notably, Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

²⁰ See Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005).

character formation,²¹ on the moral and educational goals of the book,²² and at ideas about life as a journey.²³

Chapter 7 then looks at the interaction of Proverbs with other books in the canon, notably Ecclesiastes, Genesis 1–11, Deuteronomy and “wisdom psalms.” Questions of the place of Proverbs within a broader intellectual tradition will also be explored. I will argue here that there is a particularly strong link in both literary and theological aspects with the book of Ecclesiastes, with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes forming together the mainspring of the “Solomonic” wisdom quest. Job is, in my view, slightly more obliquely related to the Proverbs text in that, although it shares an interest in retribution and views God as creator, its range of genres is quite different, much of Job’s protesting in the dialogue resembling psalms of lament. Genesis 1–11 with its emphasis on creation and its goodness is another obvious intertext. Within the canon, there is also an important relationship of Proverbs 1–9 with Deuteronomy and the wider issue of the relationship between wisdom and law. The psalms that relate most closely to Proverbs should also come in for a mention.

And finally, Chapter 8 looks, necessarily in brief, at the afterlife of Proverbs, first outside the canon, notably in Ben Sira and in the other key text from the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon and

²¹ William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

²² Christine Roy Yoder, “Objects of Our Affections: Emotions and the Moral Life in Proverbs 1–9,” in *Shaking Heaven and Earth: Essays in Honor of Walter Brueggemann and Charles Cousar* (eds. Christine Roy Yoder et al.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Anne W. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs: Wisdom Literature and the Shaping of the Moral Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²³ Kai-Wen Karen Yuan, *An Analysis of the Motions and Emotions in the Drama of the Pursuit of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2016).