CHAPTER 1

Poetry, Pedagogy, and Ethos

> The subject is also demanding of the clarity only the Muses' grace can give – which doesn't seem, after all, out of place. Think of how doctors will give young patients bitter concoctions but first touching the rim of the cup with a drop of honey to try to beguile the lips and the tongue so that the child may drink down the nasty juice of the wormwood or whatever, deluded but not betrayed, for the motive is to do him good and restore him to health. Just so, it is my intention to set forth my argument in sweet Pierian song, touching it with the drops of the Muses' sweetest honey the better to engage your mind with hexameter verses so that you may discover the world and how it is made, and come to a better understanding of the true nature of things.[1]

> Form and content are not just incidentally linked, as they are so frequently in philosophical writing today. Form is a crucial element in the work's philosophical content. Sometimes, indeed … the content of the form proves so powerful that it calls into question the allegedly simpler teaching contained within it.[2]

Using the metaphor of a honeyed cup, Lucretius describes the function of didactic poetry to instruct by pleasing. As articulated in *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius's project relies on the vehicle of poetry to bring lucidity and delight to his exposition of Epicurean philosophy. Like medicine disguised with honey, so the sublimities of poetry will delight the mind and the senses, aiding the student to ingest its teaching. Martha C. Nussbaum observes that for Lucretius and several of his contemporaries, form is crucial to the philosophical content that they deliver. "Literary and rhetorical

[1] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura: The Nature of Things, A Poetic Translation* (trans. David R. Slavitt; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), I.853–65 [40].
[2] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Martin Classical Lectures 2; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 487.

strategies," she insists, "enter into the methods at a very deep level, not just decorating the arguments," but shaping the very conception of philosophical argument in order to engage the student.[3]

While not a work of philosophy, Epicurean or otherwise, the book of Proverbs is a similar testament to the close relationship between form and function. Although its poetic form has often been treated by scholars as incidental to its content, mere icing on the proverbial cake, in fact that form is central to the book's content and its didactic purpose. Many studies have pursued the "medicine" that Proverbs prescribes, but this monograph seeks to study the "honey" with which it is dispensed, in the process finding that the honey is indeed part of the prescription. As Patrick D. Miller writes about the psalms, "Meaning and beauty, the semantic and the aesthetic, are woven together into a whole, and both should be received and responded to by the interpreter. To ignore the beauty in pursuit of the meaning is, at a minimum, to close out the possibility that the beauty in a significant fashion contributes to and enhances the meaning."[4]

Within Proverbs, the meaning to which this form contributes is nothing less than the subject and the function of the book as a whole: the cultivation of wisdom and the formation of wise character in its student. While other studies have commented on Proverbs' conception of character, this work gives attention to the relationship between the formation of character and the form of poetry. As I will argue, the didactic poetry of Proverbs is intimately connected to its pedagogical function, a feature that is illumined by comparison with other examples of didactic poetry, such as *De Rerum Natura.*

The Poetry of Character and the Character of Poetry

From its opening words, the book of Proverbs presents itself as a manual of instruction for the student to acquire the necessary discipline and virtues to follow the wise course (1:2–7). Proverbs speaks in the language of character. It offers various models to the student, some to be emulated, such as the wise (חכם) and the discerning (מבין), and some to be avoided, such as the fool (אויל) and the dunce (כסיל). As these characters are presented throughout the book, they embody certain virtues or vices of character.[5]

[3] Ibid., 486.
[4] Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 30.
[5] Virtues of character include wisdom (חכמה), righteousness (צדקה), and savvy (ערמה), all of which are attributes of those characters that are marked positively in the book. On the other hand, vices of character include foolishness (אולת), evil (רע), and deceit (מרמה), features of negative characters.

While the concept of character is pervasive throughout the book, there has been a robust discussion in wisdom scholarship concerning the nature of character formation and the degree to which Proverbs even grants the possibility. John Barton, on the one hand, argues that Israelite wisdom views character "as fixed and unchanging, almost at times as predetermined."[6] Consequently, in his view while Proverbs describes various dispositions of character, its binary oppositions of wise versus foolish and righteous versus wicked indicate that humans are either one type or the other but cannot become either type in greater degrees.[7] On the other hand, William P. Brown insists that Proverbs not only describes various characters, but also functions to shape character within the student.[8] In conversation with character ethics, Brown draws attention to the ethical language of the book and the way in which its profile of certain literary characters (e.g., woman Wisdom and the strange woman) both illumines and cultivates a normative sense of character within the social community. Brown's approach accounts for the indication that virtues of character must be cultivated continually. The explicit addressee of the book is a simpleton (פתי), whose character must be shaped in accord with wisdom, and thus the book promises to help its student acquire the virtues of shrewdness, knowledge, and prudence (1:4–5). Even the wise person must seek more wisdom (1:5), for formation is a process that does not end. Conversely, vices of character must be ardently avoided, because sinners and fools also promise to shape a person's character, although the end result will of course be negative (see 1:10–19).

The poetry of Proverbs makes an important contribution to the way in which the book seeks to shape character. Indeed, through its poetic form, Proverbs appeals to the whole human person, attending to his emotions, motivations, desires, and imagination, not simply his rational capacities. In so doing, the book indicates that character formation

Some attributes could be categorized as virtues *or* vices of character, depending on how they are exercised. Shrewdness (מזמה), for example, is a positive feature to which the student should aspire (3:21; 5:2); it is a capacity of discretion that woman Wisdom herself possesses (8:12), and in this sense, it is presented as a virtue of character. However, it is also an ability to devise secret schemes (24:8), prompting suspicion from others (14:17) and condemnation from God (12:2). In this sense, it is a character vice.

[6] John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explanations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 67. See the discussion of Barton's argument in Chapter 2.

[7] He states: "there are no Laodicean moralists in the Wisdom literature. Everyone is either good or bad, wise or foolish" (ibid.).

[8] See William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); revised as *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

is more than an intellectual project and, consequently, demands more than appeal to logical reasoning. Robert Lowth suggested that the sublime nature of the poetic form is integral to its pedagogical function, for unlike history or philosophy, "poetry addresses her precepts not to the reason alone; she calls the passions to her aid: she not only exhibits examples, but infixes them in the mind. She softens the wax with her peculiar ardour, and renders it more plastic to the artist's hand."[9] Indeed, the poetry of Proverbs uses a variety of poetic tools in fashioning in the student certain "habits of virtue."[10] Vivid metaphors, perplexing sayings, and arresting images characterize the book, and attention to these literary features will be an essential component of a study of character formation in Proverbs.

The attention to how the poetics of Proverbs function to shape character will also make contributions to the study of biblical Hebrew poetry, at large, and the genre of didactic poetry, in particular. Robert Alter insists that "one of the many gaps in the understanding of biblical poetry is a failure of those who generalize about it to make sufficient distinctions among genres."[11] While the study of Hebrew poetry has blossomed in recent years, much work remains to be done concerning the features of particular genres of biblical poetry, and this study seeks to address part of that gap. In fact, Proverbs is a particularly rich book to study in this respect because it contains several genres of poetry and makes use of a diverse set of poetic features.

Overview of Chapters

Part I provides a methodological foundation for the work that follows. In Chapter 2, I consider the character ethics approach as it has been practiced in biblical studies and how it has informed recent scholarship on the book of Proverbs. I argue that while the character ethics approach is a very helpful lens through which to study Proverbs, the form of Proverbs also challenges certain central assumptions of character ethics, especially the primacy of narrative in literary form and in the understanding of the human person.

[9] Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (trans. G. Gregory; 2 vols.; London: Ogles, Duncan, and Cochran, 1816), 1:12.

[10] Lowth adds that the poet teaches "by the beauty of imagery, by the ingenuity of the fable, by the exactness of imitation, he allures and interests the mind of the reader, he fashions it to habits of virtue, and in a matter informs it with the spirit of integrity itself" (ibid., 1:13).

[11] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), ix.

A central assumption of this work is that the poetic form of Proverbs makes a critical difference to interpretation of the book and to its pedagogical orientation, and the poetic form of Proverbs is the subject of Chapter 3. This chapter surveys the poetic features of Proverbs and considers the genre of its poetry in relation to the nature of biblical Hebrew poetry more broadly. I examine the poems in chapters 1–9 as didactic poetry, which can be profitably studied alongside didactic poems of other cultures. Recent critical work on the genre of didactic poetry in the classical tradition proves to be an especially helpful conversation partner for illumining some of the central features of the didactic poem in Proverbs. At the same time, however, I argue that Prov 1–9 shares many features in common with the genre of the Hebrew love lyric, and the Song of Songs is a fitting comparison.

In Part II, I examine four different ways in which Proverbs talks about and seeks to shape its students' character, which I term the models of *mûsār* ("discipline"): rebuke, motivation, desire, and imagination. In my analysis, "model" refers simply to patterns of language and thinking in Proverbs that are clustered around these four themes. These models are not mutually exclusive, nor are their bounds rigid. In fact, there is often a great deal of overlap between them. However, they are useful heuristic categories to illumine distinct ways that Proverbs talks about character and implicitly conveys certain assumptions about the nature of the human person.

In Chapter 4, I consider the model of rebuke, which includes references to both physical and verbal correction. The book is filled with both sayings about such correction and the content of that correction. In this respect, it uses the resources of its poetic form to function as verbal rebuke that provokes the student to follow a particular course. I use this model and its emphasis on discipline as a lens through which to view Proverbs' understanding of the moral self, arguing that it advances a perspective that I term "educated moral selfhood," which assumes both internal and external agency in the formation of a moral self. Chapter 5 treats the extensive language of motivation in the book and the ways in which this functions to highlight central values of the sapiential worldview. This model indicates that Proverbs views its students as self-interested creatures who stand to be influenced by a variety of motivational forces.

The prominence of motivation as a means of character formation points to a related, although distinct, model of desire. In Chapter 6, I explore the pervasiveness of this theme in the book, extending from food to wine to wealth to women, and I consider the relation between desire

and the moral self. One of the primary claims of Proverbs, I argue, is that the things that humans desire shape their character and, consequently, a significant facet of the book's pedagogy is built on not only describing helpful and harmful desires but in shaping the student's desires in accord with wisdom. Chapter 7 considers the profoundly imaginative nature of moral reasoning in the book. In conversation with recent work on the imagination in cognitive science and ethics, I survey several of the imaginative structures in the book, including moral prototypes and metaphor, and suggest that Proverbs' manner of thinking is not nearly as simplistic as many scholars have presumed. Throughout these chapters, I intentionally linger over the poetic features of selected poems because it is in and through the poetic form that Proverbs' pedagogy unfolds. Consequently, by way of conclusion, in Chapter 8 I return to the question of character ethics and consider the way in which the poetic form of Proverbs offers an important critique of the narrative orientation of character ethics.

Character, Knowledge, and the Moral Self

The relationship between character, knowledge, and virtue within Proverbs reveals some of the primary underlying moral and intellectual assumptions of the book, although their precise relationship is the subject of dispute. Michael V. Fox, for example, finds the ethics of Proverbs to be akin to the claim of Socratic ethics that all virtue is one.[12] Socratic ethics holds as a central premise that virtue is knowledge, that is, "knowledge of the good is both a necessary and sufficient condition to being good and doing the good."[13] Furthermore, knowledge of the good – moral knowledge – is the knowledge of what constitutes well-being, and to know this good is to desire the good and to do the good. Conversely, while knowledge is virtue, ignorance is vice. Fox contends that this notion is shared by Proverbs, for the fundamental problem, according to the sages, is ignorance, and, consequently, the solution is knowledge, that is, wisdom. Wisdom is moral knowledge, and the one who has wisdom knows the good, desires the good, and does the good.[14] Christopher B. Ansberry, on the other

[12] See Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 935–45.

[13] Ibid., 937.

[14] Here Fox is reading the book as a whole. He argues that there were different conceptions of wisdom in the three different redactional stages he identifies (stage 1 represented by the sayings in Prov 10–29; stage 2 by the "lectures" of Prov 1–9; and stage 3 by the "interludes" in chapters 1–9). In the first stage, he suggests that wisdom was not associated with moral virtue but was instead a purely

hand, argues that Aristotelian ethics, as articulated in *Nicomachean Ethics*, is a more useful heuristic model. In particular, he suggests that Aristotle's notion that knowledge must be accompanied by a virtuous disposition – character – is a more adequate model for Proverbs because, within the book as a whole, "a virtuous disposition is the fundamental prerequisite for the acquisition of wisdom."[15] Ansberry's most noteworthy critique is of the Socratic principle that no one does wrong willingly and that, accordingly, lack of knowledge is the fundamental cause of vice. Ansberry argues that within Proverbs a corrupt moral disposition – a fault of character – is often the cause of vice, which coheres with Aristotle's contention that "unethical behavior is not simply the product of ignorance."[16] He cites the fool (אויל), the wicked (רשע), and the scoffer (לץ) as examples of characters for whom "ignorance is simply the by-product of their moral disposition."[17] Fox, on the other hand, would argue that their activity is the result of their lack of knowledge, which consequently perverts their character. To some extent, this dispute of the relationship between knowledge and character is a question of "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Character and wisdom are inseparably intertwined in Proverbs, and it is difficult to discern the priority of one over the other. Just as wise and righteous character leads to knowledge, so it evidences the prior acquisition of knowledge. Fox's view, however, is more compelling because he accounts for wisdom as the fundamental category in the book,[18] although Ansberry

practical faculty that enabled a person to live successfully. It is not until the lectures of Prov 1–9 that wisdom and righteousness are conflated such that wisdom encompasses moral virtue.

[15] Christopher B. Ansberry, "What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Athens? The Moral Vision of the Book of Proverbs and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," *HS* 51 (2010): 161. Ansberry argues that this dynamic is especially evident in the sentence literature. He argues that the polarities of righteous/wise and wicked/fool are co-referential; each pair of terms has the same referent, but not the same meaning. The combination of these moral and intellectual traits in a person "suggests that the moral vision of Proverbs is comparable to the ethical theory of Aristotle, for both identify the necessity of moral character and practical wisdom for virtuous behavior" (ibid., 162).

[16] Ibid., 164.

[17] Ibid. He explains: "the ignorance of these personages is not attributed to their intellectual aptitude; rather it is associated with their moral character, which perverts their reason" (ibid.). Ansberry argues that the אויל delights in evil (10:23), hates discipline and correction (15:5), and lacks self-control (12:16). The רשע is greedy (10:3), violent (10:6), deceitful (12:5), and cruel (12:10), and the לץ is arrogant and resists correction (14:6). These characters thus evidence perverse dispositions, not simply a lack of knowledge, he claims. But Ansberry does not prove that their disposition is anything other than the consequence of lack of knowledge. Ansberry notes that the arrogance of the לץ "prevents him from acquiring wisdom, even if he chooses to seek it" (ibid., 165), yet one could say that lack of knowledge is both the symptom and the cause of the scoffer's disease.

[18] It is hard to find an example in Proverbs in which a person clearly has knowledge yet does not act in accord with it, which would be the situation to discredit Fox's point. Fox could counter all of Ansberry's examples with the claim that the character's moral perversion arises from his lack of knowledge.

has a legitimate critique about aligning wisdom solely with knowledge and "intellectual aptitude."[19]

My analysis will not adjudicate Proverbs' precise relationship to classical models of virtue, but it may shed certain light on this debate in examining the diverse ways in which Proverbs conceptualizes character and the grounds of knowledge. This inquiry will also raise the significance of the diverse means of knowing in the book, including desiring, loving, hating, tasting, hearing, and even smelling. The emotions and the senses are important elements of knowledge in Proverbs; intellectual knowledge alone is not enough to make one wise; it must be accompanied by and displayed in one's right desires and emotions.

Finally, through its multifaceted means of formation, Proverbs indicates a more complex view of the human person than has often been acknowledged. One of the primary aims of this study is to consider the moral and intellectual assumptions of the book, particularly with reference to its view of the moral self. What does the way in which Proverbs conceptualizes character formation reveal about its understanding of human beings, including their nature, aptitude, and capacity for wisdom? Does it presume that the moral self – that is, the individual's capacity to think and to choose and to act in accord with moral reasoning or wisdom – is innate and develops by an internal aptitude or is amenable to external influence?[20] I will argue that Proverbs indicates that the moral self requires both the external influence of discipline and an innate receptivity to appropriate that discipline. Within Proverbs, the formation of the moral self is a function of the whole human person, a task of mind and heart.[21]

[19] Ansberry, "What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Athens?" 165.

[20] For approaches to these kinds of questions, see Michael V. Fox "Who Can Learn? A Dispute in Ancient Pedagogy," in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (ed. Michael L. Barré; CBQMS 29; Washington, DC.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), 62–77; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel* (BZAW 301; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000); Carol A. Newsom, "Models of the Moral Self: Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism," *JBL* 131 (2012): 5–25.

[21] On this point, see Christine Roy Yoder, "The Shaping of Erotic Desire in Proverbs 1–9," in *Saving Desire: The Seduction of Christian Theology* (ed. J. Henriksen and L. Shults; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 148–62; see also Chapter 6 for further discussion and bibliography.

PART I

Character and Poetry