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Introduction

[The advantages of virtue] are easy to observe from the contests of Heracles and the works of Theseus, whose manner of virtue has impressed upon their works so great a stamp of glory that not even all time is able to cast oblivion upon their deeds.[1]

The notion of virtue occupied the minds of many in ancient Greece and was pursued with similar enthusiasm by Christian figures in the centuries that followed. As Isocrates admired, virtuous character could leave a glorious imprint upon one's deeds, and yet it also left an impression upon the intellect of ancient writers, who developed what is now called "virtue ethics." Certain biblical scholars have set their hopes on writing a "chapter in the history of ethics" based on the literature of ancient Israel and have particularly gestured toward the book of Proverbs as the voice of virtue within that history.[2] Some have even attempted to square Proverbs with virtue ethics, arguing that the book is best understood as a form of Socratic moral philosophy,[3] with others seeing Aristotle as a more suitable model, and still others contending that Thomistic virtues "fit the book's moral teaching."[4] But attempts to align Proverbs with a particular theory of virtue remain incomplete, and the question of if and how the

[1] Isocrates, *To Demonicus* 8 (my translation).
[2] John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–2.
[3] Michael V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2009): 75–88.
[4] See, respectively, Christopher Ansberry, "What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Athens? The Moral Vision of the Book of Proverbs and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Hebrew Studies* 51 (2010): 157–173; Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 66–102. I use the terms "moral" and "ethical" interchangeably.

book might impress its own glorious or less-than-glorious stamp upon the backstory of virtue ethics remains to be seen. Most of all, the task requires an engagement with moral philosophy not yet exploited.

In this monograph, I establish the book of Proverbs as a tradition of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is, most simply, a subset of moral philosophy that determines what is good and what humans should do based upon the personal character of a virtuous exemplar. Rather than law or consequence, it is character that governs ethical questions. For some, it was the "wise," for others, "the silent man" and for many who took religious Scripture as in some way authoritative for morality, it was God himself who exemplified what was right and good. If we were virtue ethicists determining what ought to be done in a particular situation, we would not necessarily do what the law says or what will result in the most good for the most people; we would do what the virtuous person would do, even be as the virtuous person would be, which in turn contributes to a larger notion of the good. In other words, virtues of character govern moral inquiry – courage, patience, honesty, and so on – and inform what humans ought to do and who they ought to become.

Notions of character have become quite popular among interpreters of Proverbs as a way of explaining the book's moral landscape. According to many, the holistic possession of "virtues" and the self's trajectory toward moral maturation form essential pieces of a character-driven ethic for the book.[5] This movement of character is found by some in the reader's ambition to be like the "wise man" or the "excellent wife," in the pupil's journey from tutee (Proverbs 1–9) to ruling king (31:1–9), or in the simple hope that by mulling over certain proverbs we might become better people. Though commendable, it is within these efforts that a problematic assumption has been made: that the virtues as defined by many philosophers over the course of many years align with certain concepts in the book of Proverbs; that "justice" in Proverbs is comparable to "justice" in the *NE* or that Proverbial "faith" resembles what Thomas Aquinas called an "assent" to divinely revealed truth.[6] The assumption is not surprising given the depictions of fear, truth-telling, and other such traits in Proverbs

[5] See, e.g., William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 30–38.

[6] See the literature referenced in Chapters 3 and 6. I use "Proverbial" to refer to "of Proverbs," in contrast to "proverbial" as something well known and perhaps stereotypical.

that seem to correspond, for instance, with Aristotelian courage and honesty. Even more enticing are the characters that norm Proverbial ethics, the "wise" or "diligent" person, who seem to dovetail quite well with Aristotle's "prudent man" and his standard-setting way of life. And to this we could add the theological attire that covers all of Proverbs, which may look very much like the ethics of Thomism. However, the assumption that the "virtues" of Proverbs resemble the virtues of moral philosophy, as spelled out by Aristotle or Aquinas or any other philosopher, does justice to none of these sources and actually oversimplifies a nuanced and historically contextualized conception of their respective moral visions.

Instead of assuming that the concepts in Proverbs reflect the virtues laid down by moral philosophers, I consult with Aristotle and Aquinas in order to determine what exactly they had in mind when speaking of "virtue." It is their definitions and their criteria for what is and is not a virtue that, when used to interpret the book of Proverbs, consequently reveal how Proverbs conceives of virtue and what virtues it may promote, and it is by articulating these discoveries that Proverbs is expressed as a moral tradition. So instead of asserting that "justice" in Proverbs refers to a moral virtue in the way that "justice" did for Aristotle, I begin with Aristotle's notion of justice and its many contextual trappings to see if and how justice in Proverbs constitutes a virtue. This book, then, is about Proverbs, about the possibility of its moral concepts being virtues, and about how these virtues do and do not resemble those of Aristotle and Aquinas. In it I argue that Proverbs contains its own list of Aristotelian moral virtues and vices, and also portrays faith, hope, and love like Thomistic theological virtues. By interpreting Proverbs with the definitions and language of moral philosophers, the distinctive features, shortcomings, and advantages of its ethical vision can be brought to bear on the history of moral philosophy in a way previously unattainable. By way of further introduction, the meaning of "moral tradition" needs to be explained and a method for reckoning biblical studies with moral philosophy detailed.

MORAL TRADITIONS

Alasdair MacIntyre has pioneered the idea of "tradition" within moral philosophy. Each ethical theory constitutes a tradition of moral inquiry best understood as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute

that tradition."[7] In other words, traditions dispute about goods within particular historical and social contexts. For example, Homer offered a set of virtues within a particular social context that Aristotle modified into his own set of virtues, placing them, whether consciously or subconsciously, within new social and historical contexts. In this way, both brands of virtue – Homeric and Aristotelian – are distinct moral traditions. But these distinctions occur at different levels, so that virtue ethics as a whole is one tradition within moral philosophy, being distinct from utilitarianism and deontology, whilst within virtue ethics itself various traditions also exist, such as Homeric and Aristotelian.

With multiple moral traditions identified, the question then becomes one of how to settle disagreements between them.[8] How exactly did Aristotle "develop" the Homeric conception of virtue? How did competing theories of morality resolve their rivalry? And how do we validly defend our own choice of tradition and responsibly interact with the alternatives? Answering these questions entails a discussion of how traditions arise, interact, develop, and disintegrate, along with a detailed description of their components, which have been said to include no less than the following: a set of first principles, historical embodiment, authoritative texts, institutions, standards of rational justification, shared problems and disputes, social expression through hierarchy, conceptions of the self, virtues, and metaphysical cosmologies.[9] Taken together, these form a moral tradition.

To establish Proverbs as a moral tradition, I draw attention to four elements in MacIntyre's definition. First, since traditions are historically and socially embodied, the original cultural and intellectual contexts of Proverbs must be accounted for. These contexts are not only necessary for describing Proverbs but also for explaining why it differs from or resembles other traditions, even if these other traditions never came into contact with it. Second, traditions have authoritative texts, which form the primary sources of evidence for my study. The book of Proverbs represents one text within the Hebrew tradition of moral inquiry; Aristotle's works will determine Aristotelian virtue ethics; Aquinas' writings will represent his moral thought; and so on. Third, each tradition determines a set of

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (repr. 1981; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 257.
[8] So Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).
[9] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, esp. 7, 12, 326, 349, 390–391. For further discussion of and possible objections to this idea, see the end of Chapter 2.

virtues and standard for them. It is these virtues and their defining criteria that produce the primary comparative data for my inquiry, as they are exhumed from moral philosophers and then applied to the book of Proverbs. Finally, the first principles and the conceptions of final good(s) within each tradition are examined, notions that provide explanatory power when comparing traditions as well as comparative categories in their own right. In short, based on authoritative texts, I determine the criteria and catalogue of virtues from selected moral philosophies that are then used to examine Proverbs in order to produce its own set of virtues.

When comparing the virtues of Proverbs with philosophical virtues, I appeal to historical, social, and cultural contexts, first principles, basic beliefs, and conceptions of the good in order to explain the similarities and especially the differences between traditions. For example, if Aristotle's specific criteria for "justice" cohere with conceptions of justice in Proverbs, then this concept in Proverbs is a virtue in the Aristotelian sense. Any differences in how Aristotle and Proverbs treat justice are then outlined and, by appealing to their respective contexts and first principles, explained. This will begin to put a stop to suggestions like those of Joseph Blenkinsopp's, who has criticized the editors and authors of Proverbs, because "Their teaching is, at best, sclerotic and pedestrian and, at worst, complaisant and ethically insensitive on a whole range of issues. Their vision is limited and their language constrained by the social class to which they belong, the ethos of which they are committed to uphold and perpetuate."[10] Once understood as a tradition, Proverbs' ethical vision is anything but limited; it is wider, looser, and even more accommodating than some interpreters have let it be. Its social context is tantamount for appreciating its ethical sensitivity, and when compared with the *NE*, Proverbs takes on a dynamic all its own. This monograph, then, not only describes the "virtues" of Proverbs but reveals how and why Proverbs thinks about ethics, in view of its cultural context and alternative moral traditions, and in this way establishes the book as a moral tradition.

From this discussion, it is evident that by establishing Proverbs as a moral tradition I do more than place it into conversation with other philosophical texts and compare them. Comparative work may fall on a spectrum, one end simply placing the respective material side by side and assuming that the reader infers the significance of any overlap or variance,

[10] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 36.

with the other end explaining each commonality with a complex theory of literary and intellectual dependence.[11] These two extremes are avoided by using the criteria and concepts of moral philosophers to dictate the representation of Proverbs as a moral tradition. In other words, philosophical definitions of virtue will operate as the authoritative lens for interpreting Proverbs, which will in turn render its own, objective moral tradition, albeit in the language and categories of philosophical moral thought. Proverbs does stand on its own, and its language and structure will at times resist those of moral philosophers, but such distinctions cannot be determined without using particular philosophical notions of virtue as the control for interpreting the book. Otherwise we run the risk of assuming that Aristotelian virtues – e.g., courage, liberality, and gentleness – are the same as similar concepts in Proverbs, overlooking the fact that Aristotle had very particular notions in mind that may differ substantially from what Proverbs envisioned. Therefore, conceptions of virtue form the common ground upon which Proverbs and moral philosophy are examined. But before delineating the Aristotelian and Thomistic views of virtue, two issues need to be addressed: the precise nature of how moral philosophy and biblical studies have interacted, and potential objections to the proposed method of interaction.

"PHILOSOPHICAL" INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The OT, in part or in whole, is not widely recognized as a moral tradition. When a history of ethics begins, it often starts with Socrates and a selection of Greek figures who predated him, the "pre-Socratics," without mention of ancient Jewish thinkers or texts.[12] Similar comments could be made about the NT, especially the writings of the apostle Paul, which, although it forms the foundation of a Christian moral tradition, itself receives little attention in the discussion of moral theory. Although the Jewish backdrop of Paul's ethics might turn a few heads when it obviously influences the interpretation of his theological remarks, in its own right the OT does not have a place at the table of moral philosophy. The silence

[11] These extremes appear, respectively, in the works of Seizō Sekine (*A Comparative Study of the Origins of Ethical Thought: Hellenism and Hebraism*, trans. J. Wakabayashi [New York: Sheed & Ward, 2005]) and Russell Gmirkin (*Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible* [New York; London: Routledge, 2017]).

[12] For a list of overviews of philosophy, see Yoram Hazony (*The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 17–18, 279 n. 45).

between the Hebrew tradition and the discipline of moral philosophy is due at least to the fact that the biblical material has rarely been used to inform recent theories of virtue ethics, a problem that manifests itself within both philosophical and biblical disciplines.

Moral philosophers seem loath to incorporate the Bible into their theories of virtue. MacIntyre, for instance, has promoted Thomistic thought as the best account of rational inquiry, and while that warrants a reflection on biblical or at least theological material, these sources seem to play no substantial part in the endeavor.[13] Instead, Aquinas is suited with his Aristotelian past and little is offered by way of theological reflection on virtue. So rather than rivaling the Greek moral tradition with biblical viewpoints, Christian moral thought, or what by all means seems to be Christian moral thought, remains in the line of the Greeks. This is a convenient scheme if one is writing a philosophical history, but it may very well leave out Jewish and Christian Scripture, not to mention Aquinas' grounding in it.[14]

The problem within the field of moral philosophy correlates to one type of problem within the field of OT studies. The OT has been described as a "work of philosophy" and insightful interpretations of its ethical views have been pursued to show that the biblical material makes claims of a general nature for a universal audience.[15] It has broad appeal and

[13] So Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 184–192. See also his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1990).

[14] So Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 190 n. 11. Many of those who call for biblical integration, whilst attempting to develop virtue theories from a "biblical" standpoint, remain within the theological realm, making limited use of biblical texts and rarely, if ever, the OT. Hauerwas mentions the OT story and includes brief comments on particular NT verses and books (*A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981], 46–52, 67–68, 70; *Christians*, 14–16, 43–48, 144–148). See also Michael Lawler and Todd Salzman, "Virtue Ethics: Natural and Christian," *TS* 74 (2013): 442–473; William Spohn, "The Return of Virtue Ethics," *TS* 53 (1992): 60–75; Joseph Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics, Moral Traditions & Moral Arguments* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996); Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed., ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 87–102. For a thoughtful but not unproblematic response to Christian theories of virtue, see Harry Bunting, "Ethics and the Perfect Moral Law," *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000): 235–260.

[15] See Hazony, *Philosophy* (quotation from 273). See also Shira Weiss (*Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* [Cambridge: Cambridge

makes somewhat timeless moral offerings rather than confined and revelatory prescriptions targeted toward a single religious community. This approach, taken by scholars like Yoram Hazony, guards against readers who impose "philosophical" ideas upon the Bible and aims to let the text speak on its own terms, revealing that it already makes claims of a philosophical nature. That may remain sensitive to the literary and historical contexts of the OT, but the approach is limited because it fails to adequately interact in detail with other philosophical works, so that identifying concepts like "natural law" within the narratives of Genesis and spotting various descriptions of epistemological activities within Isaiah, which harbor great potential for philosophical-biblical reflection, facilitate limited interaction between traditional philosophical disciplines and the OT.[16]

Those who do interact with the details of philosophical theory unfortunately overlook the literary and social contexts of OT texts.[17] In other words, the pendulum swings too far. Bold theories have been presented by scholars such as Jaco Gericke for how the Bible might be understood through the lens of what has traditionally been considered philosophy. Examples include the nature of religious language, the concept of revelation, the nature and properties of Yahweh, and implicit arguments for and against the realism of ancient Near Eastern gods. And yet no method for interpreting the Bible on its own terms is established. The text is treated from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, certain

University Press, 2018]), who begins to engage with deeper philosophical analysis but still inclines towards Hazony's approach and limits her study to OT narrative. Blenkinsopp (*Sage*, esp. 9–48) has also identified portions of the OT as "traditions" and does so from a diachronic perspective that traces the emergence of various "intellectual" traditions, such as the scribal, legal, and prophetic. For discussions in the eighteenth century, particularly among German scholars, which engaged philosophy and the concept of OT wisdom, see Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 82–104.

[16] See, e.g., Hazony, *Philosophy*, 87, 104.

[17] Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion*, SBL Resources for Biblical Study (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 201. He (232) names the following philosophical "loci": nature of religion in a Book; nature of religious language; concept of revelation; nature and properties of Yahweh; implicit arguments for and against realism regarding gods; relation between religion and morality; nature of religious experiences; relation between religion and history; relation of religion and culture; religion and science; religious epistemology; religious pluralism. Gericke provides a thorough account of the literature that addresses the integration of OT and philosophy, broadly understood (see also his "Is There Philosophy in the Hebrew Bible? Some Recent Affirmative Perspectives," *Journal for Semitics* 23 [2014]: 583–598).

historical-critical conclusions are assumed, and the rhetorical functions of certain biblical genres are overlooked. Although any one of these interpretive decisions is warranted, one consequence is not: when methods that overlook the literary and historical textures of the Bible too easily cater to the interpreter's preferences rather than the text's.

Gericke and Hazony incline toward opposite ends of a spectrum: one end imposes philosophical categories on the Bible; the other end insufficiently accounts for philosophical works. Where Gericke embraces philosophical categories to the neglect of literarily and historically sensitive biblical interpretation, Hazony is highly sensitive to literary aspects of the Bible and yet interacts very little with philosophical disciplines. I propose an alternative, middle way for facilitating interaction between the Bible and philosophical texts, which, in practice, several scholars have started to sound out.[18] Rather than appealing to general concepts of philosophy, such as "epistemology" or "the good," ideas must be extracted from particular philosophical works in detail and used as instruments for interpreting the Bible. At the same time, the genre of OT texts and the cultural contexts that inform them must be judiciously accounted for when approaching the Bible from a philosophical angle.[19] To these ends, ahistorical readings and literarily insensitive interpretation are guarded against, and a method for utilizing philosophical texts established. This study advances the philosophical interpretation of the OT by focusing on Proverbs, a book palpable in moral concepts, and by giving unabridged attention to moral philosophy and contextually sensitive biblical interpretation.

[18] In his comparison of Greek and Hebrew ethics, Sekine (*A Comparative Study*) has approached a possible middle way between Hazony and Gericke. His book ambitiously incorporates material from the Pentateuch and Writings, and features the *NE*, and yet with about 25 pages dedicated to Proverbs his definitions of Aristotle's terminology remain imprecise and his comparison of Greek and Hebrew material lacks historical-contextual explanation. More positively, see Dru Johnson, *Epistemology and Biblical Theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark's Gospel*, Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Biblical Criticism 4 (New York: Routledge, 2018), esp. 1–10; his work is perhaps the nearest attempt to articulate something like what I am proposing here. See also Patricia Vesely, *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Alan L. Mittleman, *A Short History of Jewish Ethics: Conduct and Character in the Context of Covenant* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 16–45.

[19] The book of Proverbs will be considered in its final form, since this best serves the objectives of the project, though some attention is given to text-critical issues within the footnotes.

OBJECTIONS

My hopes to attend to the details of moral philosophy and to use them as the authoritative lens for interpreting Proverbs immediately confront the question of why this sequence has been chosen. Why interpret the OT through the lens of philosophy rather than interpreting philosophy through the lens of the OT? Instead of delineating criteria for Aristotelian virtue and determining whether these appear in Proverbs, criteria could be found for a biblical concept of humility and then used to interpret Aristotle, for instance. A more severe version of this objection says, "Why not interpret the Old Testament 'philosophically' without the help of philosophers?" I start with philosophy for four reasons. (1) As mentioned, certain biblical interpreters assume that Proverbs contains virtues as defined by moral philosophers. To evaluate the conclusions of these interpreters, the philosophical sources themselves must be closely examined rather than ignored or treated as secondary. (2) The objection stems from the assumption that the OT can be interpreted "philosophically" or "as philosophy" without the aid of recognized philosophical works. If we rid ourselves of philosophy altogether, leaving only the OT, how do we justify that it addresses "philosophical questions"? When pressed to answer what "philosophically" means, interpreters might validly defend definitions that are broad, divergent, and perhaps incompatible with each other, and thus I propose to anchor a "philosophical" approach by selecting specific philosophical works.[20] Although selection limits my study, it nevertheless makes it controlled and incisive. (3) The OT will be used to interpret philosophical works, but only as its characteristic elements arise through comparison with those works. After using philosophical texts to illuminate certain features of the OT, those biblical features can then challenge such philosophies, which leads to the final point: (4) I am not concerned to show that the OT is a "philosophical" work but rather to establish its views of morality with the help of key philosophers and then to show that it contends, in many cases

[20] This is not to devalue the plurality of approaches to OT-philosophy research. Consider the miscellany of definitions for "philosophy" within this field: "the exercise of those operations of the human mind by which general causes are derived from experience, elaborated as laws and principles that are likewise general in character, and applied to particular cases" (Hazony, *Philosophy*, 272; he refrains from distinguishing "philosophy" from "reason"); "second-order thinking," that is, "thinking about our thinking" (see the 2017 conference at Aarhus University: "Second Order Thinking in the Ancient Fertile Crescent"); definitions derived from the disciplines of analytic, phenomenological, or comparative philosophy (Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 116).