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THE  
WISDOM  
LITERATURE

Richard J. Clifford

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THE WISDOM LITERATURE

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To  
Frederick L. Moriarty, S.J.

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My First Teacher of the Bible  
and of Hebrew

## ABBREVIATIONS

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
TUAT	<i>Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments.</i> (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1990). Band III. Lieferung 1. Weisheitstexte I
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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## CHAPTER 1

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# OUR QUEST AND THE BIBLE'S WISDOM

The term “wisdom literature” refers to the books of Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, and sometimes the Song of Songs. Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon are among the Apocrypha, the Protestant term for honored but noncanonical books. They are accepted as canonical by Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. Some authors want to include some psalms, such as 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, and 128, under the same umbrella because “wisdom themes” appear in them. The wisdom books are traditionally grouped together because of their association with Solomon (Prov 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Qoh 1:1; Cant 1:1) and because of their common themes and style. It is in fact useful to read them together, for one can more clearly see their common themes and subtle differences.

### INITIAL REACTIONS TO BIBLICAL WISDOM

A first-time serious reading of the wisdom books brings many reactions. You will probably experience a mix of interest, confusion, boredom, and aversion. Your interest will be piqued by the occa-

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sional familiar or witty proverb, "One's folly subverts one's way, but one's anger rages against the Lord." Some of Job's eloquent tirades and his touching surrender may have the same effect.

I have heard of you by the hearing of the ears,  
but now my eye sees you.  
Therefore, I retract  
and give up my dust and ashes. (42:5-6 my translation)

Qoheleth's meditation on "times" in a person's life is equally memorable.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh. (3:1-4a)

Not everything is so immediately gripping. The reader will likely be confused by Wisdom's speeches in Proverbs (why are they so vague?), the precise point of Yahweh's thunderous speeches to Job (Job 38-41), and the philosophical critique of pagan worship in Wisdom of Solomon 15-15. Many readers are put off by the seeming banality of many of Proverbs' sayings, the portrait of a testing God in Job, and the misogyny of Ben Sira.

Not only the content but the style of much of wisdom literature attracts and repels. The opening and closing lines of Qoheleth, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" seem timeless and right; God's speeches in Job are grand even in translation; the description of wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon 7:22b-8:1 is magnificent. On the other hand, the endless sayings in Proverbs and the seemingly heavy moral essays in Sirach can be very unappealing.

Though the wisdom literature can seem strange to us, it is important to realize that its concerns are modern; in fact they are our concerns. The best route to that realization is reading each book on its own terms. The rest of this chapter will be taken up with the first task—recognizing that the concerns of wisdom literature are modern, in fact our own. The second task—learning to see each book on its own terms—will be the task of subsequent chapters.

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### MODERN WISDOM LITERATURE

Is there such a thing as modern wisdom literature? The answer is yes, and a broad spectrum of its topics corresponds to biblical concerns. Hundreds of books and magazine articles deal with the topics of succeeding in business, handling relationships (friendships, colleagues at work), managing a family and household, learning to bear with equanimity life's pains and uncertainties, becoming a better person, making wise decisions, and reflections on such questions as God's presence in suffering, determinism and free will. Characteristic of the books and articles is their highly personal perspective. Missing from them are politics, economics, and history as well as national and international affairs, for these are not (for the most part) subject to *personal* decision and reflection. Wisdom literature is personal and familial.

The literature of the modern quest for wisdom has a variety of genres. One of the most common is biography and autobiography, which tell how one man or woman has been successful in surmounting life's difficulties or attaining a new level of insight. Another genre is advice, whether it be advice for succeeding in business, managing the home, or simply being a better person. Yet another genre is the collection or anthology, whether it be proverbs, quotations, or anecdotes.

These genres are only some of those found in today's "wisdom literature." Corresponding to each is an ancient genre, a reminder of how close the ancient and modern quests can be. For example, autobiography has similarities to Qoheleth, who the reader is supposed to assume is the great king Solomon reflecting on his life. Ben Sira in 51:13-22 ends his teaching with an autobiographical poem, a reminder that the book is not just any collection but one that has been tested by Ben Sira himself. He is, he tells us, "a canal from a river [wisdom]"; and "I have not labored for myself alone, / but for all who seek wisdom" (24:30, 34).

Other genres have ancient precedents. Our modern moral tales, lists of do's and don'ts, and inventories of the habits of successful people can all be found in various guises in the Bible and beyond. And that most pervasive wisdom genre, the proverb or aphorism, is found in virtually all cultures in every age. Even in third-millennium Sumer twenty-four books of proverbs are attested.

A river of wisdom has flowed from the earliest records of the human race to the present. People have always sought to under-

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stand, to go beyond their first and often mistaken impressions to a more profound level of truth. They have sought to learn how to respond to reality, to act in a wise way, to do what brings them and others happiness and success. The Bible is the inspired attempt to become wise at the deepest level.

### BIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE

The book of Proverbs is an anthology of older collections of instructions and aphorisms and a number of short additions and poems. The instructions of chapters 1–9 inculcate trust in one's teachers and parents and recommend the energetic search for wisdom itself. In Proverbs, the search for and orientation toward wisdom is more important than learning specific things or doing a wise thing. From chapter 10 forward, the book consists largely of two-line aphorisms—exhortations, observations, paradoxes—designed, it seems, to aid the quest for wisdom. That search brings prosperity and happiness, because it puts one in touch with God and reveals the real structure of the world.

Job is the story of a legendary righteous man whose life suddenly goes awry when God (unbeknownst to Job) makes him a pawn in a wager with a mysterious heavenly figure. Job is systematically stripped of possessions and of family, after which we (and God) watch this paragon of virtue reacting to the counsel that his friends propose to him. He angrily refutes their wisdom and demands to meet God. God's thunderous response stops Job in his tracks, but, to everybody's surprise, God declares Job righteous, restoring his lost goods and providing him a new family.

Job in one sense is a biography—how one man faced disintegration with dignity and came back from the brink. The book resembles today's stories of struggle and triumph that inspire us, yet it is obviously far more than a biography. More than anything it is an inquiry into the nature of God, human beings, and the created world.

Qoheleth contains the reflections of a great king in his maturity, reflecting on what he has learned about life. His sense of the uncertainties of life (especially in commerce) and the inevitability of death have taught him flexibility toward tradition and the advisability of enjoying the present moment. He is a skeptic ("vanity" is a favorite word) but not a nihilist. For him, traditional wisdom is insufficient unless its application to the ever-shifting and unknowable present can be identified.

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The book of Sirach is a great collection of essays in poetic form. Ben Sira in the early second century is self-consciously a sage and heir to what had become in his lifetime a considerable body of wisdom teaching. His teaching ranges from proper household management in the face of newfangled ideas to discussing controversial issues such as the ultimate origin of evil (from God or human beings?) and how wisdom has appeared in the history of Israel. He has a mastery of the entire tradition and attempts to synthesize it in a persuasive manner.

Ben Sira, avoiding the dissenting voices of Job and Qoheleth, weaves the old aphorisms into moral essays, leaving behind the old elliptical and paradoxical style to create a more logical and discursive literature. His book is a library in which one can wander and discover the old tradition in new dress.

The book of Wisdom was not written on Palestinian soil and uses Greek rather than Hebrew modes of expression. The Jewish community in Egypt was in trouble, pressed by its Egyptian neighbors. The book attempts to give the community the confidence it had lost. Our Jewish wisdom, says the author, is a manifestation of the hidden power that rules the world. Wisdom picks agents or witnesses in every age (Solomon being the great exemplar), enters such people, and enables them to understand that the real, abiding world is hidden, yet will be triumphant. This world appears especially when the innocent righteous are killed and exalted. The old story of Israel in Egypt offers a way of understanding how the holy community is to live now.

These are the wisdom books, collected or written by human beings like ourselves. In one sense, the authors are highly conservative, for they revere the tradition, which they have studied carefully. In another sense, however, they are highly innovative and even on occasion rebellious, for they also revere their own experience and honestly record their impressions. The books look alike in many respects, but each is unique. And the genius of each becomes clearer the more each book is studied.

### RECOMMENDED READING

#### *General Introductions*

Bergant, Dianne. *Israel's Wisdom Literature*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997. A study of all the wisdom books using "the integrity of creation" as the basic perspective.

## THE WISDOM LITERATURE

Clifford, Richard J. "Introduction to Wisdom Literature," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, pp. 1-16.

Crenshaw, James L. *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1981. A standard introduction.

Murphy, Roland E. *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996. Excellent introduction to wisdom literature and up-to-date survey of the chief scholarly issues, and bibliography.

———. "Wisdom in the OT," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6. New York: Doubleday, 1992. Pp. 920-31. A balanced presentation. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* is a fine resource, with articles on all the biblical wisdom books and principal topics.

Perdue, Leo G. *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. A fine survey of recent work on theology and an integration of theological and literary approaches.

von Rad, Gerhard. *Wisdom in Israel*. Nashville/New York: Abingdon Press, 1972. A groundbreaking work, full of theological insights and extremely influential on theological discussion of wisdom literature.

### Studies

Barré, Michael L. "'Fear of God' and the World View of Wisdom," *BTB* 11 (1981): 41-43. Effectively argues that ancient wisdom was always religious, against some recent scholarship.

Crenshaw, James L., ed. *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. New York: KTAV, 1976. Influential scholarly essays.

———. *Theodicy in the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983. Essays, some not previously in English, on the problem of God's wisdom and justice in the world.

Murphy, Roland E. *The Forms of Old Testament Literature*. Forms of Old Testament Literature 15. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981. Form-critical analysis of all the wisdom books.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# WISDOM LITERATURE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Israel, on the evidence of the Bible itself, was a small nation in the Levant of the late-second and first millennia B.C.E. It was surrounded by small nations and peoples, some of them closely related in culture and language. To the north during the tenth to the eighth centuries were Aramaean city states. And there were the great empires that loomed over Israel: Egypt during almost its entire history, Neo-Assyria (eighth and seventh centuries), Neo-Babylon (late-seventh and early sixth centuries), Persia (539-333 B.C.E.), the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires (333-164 B.C.E.). These nations had their own literatures and customs. They also had a relationship to Israel through trade, diplomacy, or military occupation. It is not surprising, therefore, that biblical writings show the influence of other literatures.

The Bible is not a collection of private writings but an anthology of literary works that served a role in the political and liturgical life of the Israelite people. It was as much marked by the peculiar history and culture of the people as it was by the individual genius of its authors. Biblical literature was therefore inevitably interna-

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## CHAPTER 3

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# THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

**T**he book of Proverbs is an anthology of collections and appendixes, which were composed and collected from the earliest days of the monarchy (ca. 1000 B.C.E.) to the end of the sixth century B.C.E. Exile and, in the opinion of many scholars, for several centuries thereafter. The book contains several types, or genres, of literature, but the most common are the aphorism and instruction. Aphorisms are still current; we use proverbs every day (though perhaps less than our grandparents did) to help us come to decisions and to add wit to our speech. Instructions are another matter. In today's world, instructions are the booklets that come with appliances and cars. They show us how to operate computers and tell us how to launder different fabrics, and we throw them aside after we read them. We do not like advice, *especially* when it comes from people who claim to be wiser than we are.

The book of Proverbs means something a bit different by proverb and instruction than we do. Our preferences and biases need not stand in the way of enjoying the book and profiting from its shrewd and often surprising point of view. Why? Essentially, because Prov-

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erbs does not provide information. It is not a book of facts. Its "wisdom" is a skill, an art—the art of living well. Its concern is not *what* but *how*.

It is not surprising that many people think of Proverbs as didactic and having a doctrine. Some commentators focus on *what* the sages believed and taught, and reduce their teaching to a system. This approach is relatively modern and Western, a result of the "doctrinalization" of Christianity over the last few centuries that has transposed a way of life expressed in music, ritual, art, and literature, into formulas and statements. Proverbs, however, is concerned not with systems of thought but with living well and enjoying the world as a divine gift.

This chapter is less concerned with Proverbs' doctrines than with helping readers listen to its instructions and ponder its witty sayings. For Proverbs to speak we must allow its rhetoric free play. Rhetoric, needless to say, is positive in this usage: how a piece of literature engages and persuades its audience, how it is eloquent.

The following pages will give essential material on (1) the literary structure and purpose of the book, (2) the genres, (3) the social location, (4) the main assumptions and concepts of Proverbs, and (5) analyses of representative texts in all parts of Proverbs, which are intended as models.

### LITERARY STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

How does the book arrange its parts? Does it organize them in an artistic way or is it merely an archive? How does the book begin and end? Are its parts connected and if so, how? Is there a literary unity and hence one aim for the book?

The size and scope of the book of Proverbs is impressive by ancient Near Eastern standards. Compared with ancient Near Eastern literature, the incorporation into one book of so many different genres (instructions, sayings, riddles, poems) on so large a scale is extraordinarily impressive. By comparison Egyptian instructions seem simple; they have an introduction, exhortations and admonitions with supporting axioms. Proverbs, in contrast, anthologizes instructions, speeches, and collections of sayings into a volume of about 930 lines, about the size of one book of Samuel or the Gospel of Matthew.

Most scholars would agree on the following schematic outline.

## THE WISDOM LITERATURE

I.	Title and Introduction	1:1-7
II.	Instructions on wisdom and speeches of wisdom	1:8-9:18
III.	First Solomonic Collection of Sayings sometimes divided into chapters 10-15 (mostly antithetic parallelism) and 16:1-22:16 (much synonymous and synthetic parallelism)	10:1-22:16
IV.	"Sayings of the Wise" instructions partly modeled on the Egyptian Wisdom of Amenemope	22:17-24:22
V.	Appendix to "Sayings of the Wise"	24:23-34
VI.	Second Solomonic Collection	25-29
VII.	Sayings of Agur and other sayings, mostly in the form of numerical sayings ("three . . . four . . .")	30:1-33
VIII.	Sayings of King Lemuel, which he got from his mother	31:1-9
IX.	The capable wife	31:10-31

Is there a principle of unity behind such diversity? The answer lies in the introduction (1:1-7), which makes three important points: the author (and the book's "authority"), its purpose, and the audience it assumes.

The proverbs of Solomon son of David,  
king of Israel:  
For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,  
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—  
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,  
and the discerning acquire skill,  
to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.  
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Like Egyptian instructions, the book opens with an elaborate title and statement of author, purpose, and benefits to the reader. The first word names the genre, Hebrew *mishlê*, conventionally trans-

## THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

lated "proverbs," but actually designating more types than just proverbs. It includes, for example, instructions, sayings, poems, and riddles. The second word names the author, Solomon, king of Israel (961-922 B.C.E.), to whom the whole book is attributed. Biblical books (like Egyptian books) do not generally name an author; one kind of book, wisdom literature, is the exception. All the biblical wisdom literature except Job is attributed to King Solomon (Proverbs, Qoheleth, Song of Songs) or makes Solomon a hero and model (Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon). Egyptian instructions were also attributed to kings or highly placed figures. The authority of a wisdom book differed from the authority of a historical chronicle or a liturgical poem in that it came from association with a king whom the gods endowed with skill to govern, or from the maturity and experience of a "senior." Attribution to King Solomon should be interpreted not as a historical statement in a modern sense (though Solomon could have written and collected proverbs) but as a statement of the work's authority (the king endowed with divine wisdom) and literary classification, like the laws of Moses and the psalms of David.

The purpose of the book is stated through the accumulation of synonyms of wisdom rather than differentiating them. The book is concerned with learning (vv. 2-3), with understanding wisdom literature (vv. 2, 6), with teaching (v. 4), and, climactic by position and by reprise of the phrase "wisdom and instruction" from verse 2, with fear of the Lord. An alternative structure is discernible: verse 2*a* introduces wisdom as a general virtue, which is developed in verses 3-5; verse 2*b* introduces wisdom as the capacity to interpret learned writings, which is developed in verse 6. Verse 7 is the climax of the introduction, though some translations set the verse apart typographically. The purpose of the book is thus to make its hearers wise, that is, to live successfully, without undue trouble, which means living in "fear of the Lord," revering Yahweh. Another aspect of becoming wise, represented in the alternative structure, is knowing how to read the learned writings (vv. 2*a*, 6).

Proverbs, like wisdom literature generally in the ancient East, is thoroughly religious. The gods are the creators of the order in the world with which the literature is concerned. Scholarly attempts to argue for an early "secular" stratum of wisdom literature that was supplemented by a later Yahwistic stratum, have not won general acceptance.

The third point in the introduction is the audience. Verse 4 states



that the audience is “the simple” and “the young man, boy” (*na'ar*). The first term is the conventional, all-purpose, English translation of *pēti* (fourteen times in Proverbs); it has a range of meaning in the book—inexperienced, untaught, needing instruction, easily seduced, the opposite of wise. Because Proverbs often blends sapiential and ethical categories, “simple” can have a negative connotation and appear in parallel to “fools” (1:32; 8:5) and with “lacking intelligence” (9:4; 16). The second term, “youth, young man,” seems to restrict the intended audience to one segment of society, young males. One of the audiences of Proverbs is undoubtedly young men; some instructions compare the quest for wisdom with the quest for a wife or “founding” a household, which in that society seems to have been the task of the young male. He is not, however, the only audience the book envisions. Verse 5 explicitly mentions another—the wise person and the skilled or understanding person. This group is not young, for they have reached a certain level of experience. Proverbs was actually read or heard by people of all kinds; it has in view every Israelite, young and old, skilled and unskilled, male and female. True, some scenes portray young men as actors, but readers of both sexes and all ages may apply the scene to themselves.

## GENRES

Another important way the book communicates is through its genres, or types, of literature. Authors speak not in a vacuum but within recognized frameworks of discourse such as novels, plays, short stories, newspaper editorials, sports columns. Readers must know to some extent what to expect, for they need a framework within which to interpret what is said or written. Writers write within conventions; otherwise their readers would have no idea what they say. Writers can follow the conventions, alter them, or even subvert them, but between writer and reader there is a pact or a set of expectations called genre.<sup>1</sup>

The two main categories that will occupy our attention are the instruction and the saying. The instruction is very well represented in Egypt; Helmut Brunner has collected seventeen compositions that range in date from the Old Kingdom in the mid-third millennium to the late-first millennium.<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 22:17–24:22 draws on the *Instruction of Amenemope*, which was originally composed

about 1100 B.C.E. In Mesopotamia, the most widely known instruction is the *Instruction of Shuruppak*, composed in Sumerian about the middle of the third millennium, and translated and augmented in subsequent editions. The Kassite scribes of the sixteenth to the twelfth centuries did not copy much Sumerian wisdom literature, so it may be that *Shuruppak* never reached Canaan.

a) *The instructions*. Some of the material in Proverbs 1–9, 22:17–24:22, and 30–31 is instructions like those known in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and it will be useful to briefly characterize this genre of ancient literature, drawing primarily on the more plentiful and relevant Egyptian instances. Other types of literature such as the speeches of Woman Wisdom (1:20–33; chap. 8), numerical poems (6:6–19; 30:11–31), and the encomium on the good wife (31:10–31), will not be dealt with here. First, the chief aim of the instructions is to enable its hearers to live without unnecessary difficulties for themselves.<sup>3</sup> Before everyone there is a path, but there is only one right way, the way of life. The instruction does not hold up to its readers an abstract ideal to live up to but rather mentions many specific cases. Following the behavior depicted in these cases rather than an inner light is what brings success. Order is a societal as well as a natural reality. In Egyptian instructions the order is called *maat*. She is a goddess and can be opposed, but whoever does so can expect punishment sooner or later. The instructions are not about changing society but about a young person adapting to it. In Egypt, the young man advanced himself typically within a *famulus* (“private secretary”) system, entering a household as a private secretary. In this milieu, the requirements were discretion, loyalty, and restraint, especially with regard to the women of the household. We will return to these comments on the genre when we examine sample proverbs and instructions.

The genre appears in Proverbs but the biblical authors have added their own emphases such as sharp antitheses between types; they have reduced the amount of exhortation and are less specific. To put it another way, Proverbs emphasizes character rather than acts.

b) *The Saying*. The other main genre represented in Proverbs is the saying or proverb. Examples of sayings in Mesopotamian collections have been given in chapter 2. A good point of departure for the discussion is a widely accepted definition of the proverb: a concise statement of an apparent truth that has currency. “Concise” suggests saturation of thought and artful expression, in sound,

wordplay, ellipsis, the employment of irony and paradox. "Apparent" reminds us that a proverb must be "performed," that is, applied to a situation; a proverb is true when it is applied to this case. The last element, "currency," or popular usage, is the one that was probably not true of the bulk of the sayings of Proverbs. Though the point is disputed, it is likely that most were composed by scribes rather than collected from sayings of the people. Unlike those, for example, of the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, the extensive proverb collections are not archives of folk sayings. They are rather scribal compositions and constituent parts of the literary whole called the "Proverbs of Solomon."

### SOCIAL LOCATION

Who wrote Proverbs? Did professional scribes collect the sayings from the common people and arrange and embellish them? Was Proverbs used in the curriculum of schools in Israel? Who were the original readers?

Unfortunately, there is surprisingly little data about the Palestinian society that created and read the book. We do know that the royal court was the dominant institution for writing and for literature. The king employed scribes to handle correspondence with other nations, to oversee archives and keep records, and to compose literature such as liturgical poetry for the Temple, chronicles, and "wisdom literature" such as Proverbs. The data are few and we are forced to conjecture for some of the answers.

The theories of scholars on the origin of the book can be reduced to two: (1) the instructions and proverbs originated in the tribal society of villages and enshrined family and tribal wisdom; (2) they originated in schools for the upper class or in the royal court. In a word, are the proverbs of tribal or scribal origin?<sup>4</sup> According to the tribal theory, the material in Proverbs, in particular its maxims, arose as oral sayings of simple folk, farmers, artisans, slaves, housewives (though they may have been collected by scribes). Proponents of this view point to the dominance of the family in ancient Israel and the authority of family heads in the society, the everyday topics of the maxims, and the absence of evidence for the alternative postulated source—scribal schools in ancient Israel. The alternative theory is that the material arose among scribes and was perhaps used as school texts.

Unfortunately, there is an absence of compelling evidence for either view. The scribal school is derived by analogy from Egypt, but in Egypt schools were places where young students learned to write by *copying* (not *composing*) wisdom instructions. It was not a school in the sense of an academy or intellectual group. The authors of Egyptian instructions were royal officials writing, it seems, for their own sons (not their pupils) and, through them, for a larger public. As to the evidence for the alternative, a rural and (extended) familial origin, the evidence is likewise not powerful. One cannot argue from Proverbs' topics such as harvesting or the importance of a good name in favor of a village milieu. The topics are sufficiently general to apply to many groups, and can be metaphorical. One can speak "of cabbages and kings" without being a cook or a courtier.

The view taken here is that the Israelite school or family explanation is unlikely as the origin of the material in Proverbs. A scribal origin of some sort cannot be denied. The only solid evidence from Proverbs itself (25:1) tells us that the "men of Hezekiah" (715-687 B.C.E.) collected proverbs of Solomon. Taking this action as typical of the formation of the book, Fox attributes the diversity and unity of the book to the collectors' judgment: "Learned clerks, at least some of them the king's men, were the membrane through which principles, sayings and coinages, folk and otherwise, were filtered. The central collections of Proverbs are their filtrate, an essentially homogeneous one: In the end, it is *their* work and *their* idea of wisdom that we are reading, and it is, not surprisingly, quite coherent."<sup>5</sup> Further evidence of scribal composition is the exceptional artistry of the sayings. The instructions are too indebted to Egyptian models to be attributed to tribal heads. We can conclude, therefore, that the book of Proverbs is an anthology of collections of sayings (some of which were folk in origin) and of instructions. The collectors were most likely scribes employed by the royal court, who were already charged with the creation of literature for temple and court.

### MAIN ASSUMPTIONS AND CONCEPTS

Proverbs operates with several assumptions and concepts, not all of which are familiar or fashionable in contemporary Western thinking. It is better not to call them "teachings" or "doctrines," for Proverbs, in my view, did not primarily aim at communicating

content. One of its main assumptions can be summed up by Samuel Johnson's dictum in the *Rambler*: "Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed."<sup>6</sup> Proverbs more often invites its readers to look again at what they missed the first time, to view an old reality in a new way. To quote Johnson again, this time his remark on the great eighteenth-century aphorist Alexander Pope: "New things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new."<sup>7</sup> Proverbs invites people into a process, training them to perceive a hitherto hidden dimension to reality. The process is best seen in the sayings. Below we will look at examples, to see how they work to aid the reader to discern and to view afresh.

Proverbs assumes the existence of a world created by God with a certain order or inherent dynamism. People perforce live in God's world, but they do not by that fact know *how to live* in that world. There is much they do not know, much that is hidden. That necessary but hidden knowledge is not data and information, but an order, the way in which the divinely made world operates. To live well, to be "successful," one must know this hidden dimension. The nonapparent world is not easy to attain. One is constantly tempted to miss it and be seduced by "look-alikes." Hence knowledge in Proverbs is not information but a way of seeing reality, a way of conducting oneself, and a way of relating to the order or wisdom that placed one in the world. Note that Proverbs sometimes names God as an agent and at other times simply uses a passive verb to express the way things work, for example, "Plans are foiled for want of counsel, / but succeed with many advisors" (15:22).

Wisdom in Proverbs has a threefold dimension, the sapiential ("a way of seeing reality"), the ethical ("a way of conducting oneself"), and the religious ("a way of relation to the 'order' of God"). The first three sayings in the great collection of 10:1–22:16 illustrate the blend of the three dimensions.

A wise child makes a glad father,  
but a foolish child is a mother's grief.  
Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit,  
but righteousness delivers from death.  
The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry,  
but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

Verse 1 is "sapiential," having to do with knowing; it parallels in antithetic lines or cola two sapiential types, the wise and the foolish

person. Verse 2 is ethical in its concern that wealth has been unjustly acquired; unjust and just or righteous behavior are contrasted. Verse 3 picks up the righteous and unrighteous contrast from verse 2 but explicitly names Yahweh, the God of Israel, as the guarantor of the divinely implanted system of the world. As Alonso-Schökel has noted,<sup>8</sup> the sayings collection at its very beginning consciously relates the three spheres of knowing, acting, and piety. Proverbs expressly keeps together what elsewhere are separated—knowing, acting, and relating to God or the "ultimate structure of the universe."

These remarks are important for understanding the instructions of Proverbs. The instructions, despite the name, do *not* primarily impart information. Rather, as we shall see in dealing with chapter 2, they generally invite the reader to get in touch with wisdom (1:20–35; chaps. 2, 3, 4, 8 and 9) or unmask seductive alternatives (1:8–19; chaps. 5, 6, 7, 9). The instructions inculcate receptivity to wisdom and vigilance against deception. A central metaphor is trustful relationship, variously, to Wisdom herself, to a teacher, to a father, to both parents, to a wife.

In addition to the assumptions shared with ancient Near Eastern literature, there are several operative concepts in the book. Four can be singled out for comment: (1) its psychology of the human person as a knower and a doer; (2) its use of types, usually antithetically paired, to describe behavior and its consequences; (3) its personification of wisdom as a woman; (4) its dominant metaphor of finding a wife, founding a household.

1) *The psychology of the human person as a knower and doer.* Proverbs makes an extraordinary assumption about the psychological freedom of the human person, but this freedom is balanced by concern with the social implications (on family, community, and God) of human acts. Life is action, and the person is defined through the organs of action—the organs of perception, decision, expression, and motion. Proverbs uses sensory images—eye, ear, mouth (tongue, lips), heart, hands, feet. The book has such confidence in a person's capacity to direct his or her life that it virtually equates knowing the good with doing the good. The ignorance of the fool is not a simple lack of knowledge but an active aversion to it, an aversion arising from cowardice, pride, or laziness. Ignorance has an ethical dimension, and knowing is a moral obligation for human beings. The wise person is morally good; the fool is wicked.

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This blending of ethical and sapiential language seems to be an original contribution of the book.

Proverbs 4:20-27 is a good example of a human being as a free and energetic moral agent. The italicized words in my translation designate the organs of perception, decision, or action. By metonymy (cause for effect) the organ stands for the act, for example, eye for sight, foot for walking (= activity).<sup>9</sup>

My son,<sup>10</sup> pay attention to my words,  
give your *ear* to my utterances.  
Do not let (them) out of your *eyesight*,  
hold them in your *heart*,  
for they are life for those who find them,  
healing for his whole body.  
More than anything you guard, guard your *heart*,  
for from it comes the source of life.  
Rid yourself of a lying *mouth*;  
deceitful *lips* keep far from you.  
Keep your *eyes* gazing straight ahead,  
direct your *eyelids* unswervingly before you.  
Attend to the path of your *feet*  
so that all your ways turn out well.  
Turn neither to the right nor the left;  
hold back your *foot* from evil.

The process of learning, deciding, and acting in Proverbs involves perceiving through seeing or hearing, storing the perceptions in the heart, making decisions, and expressing one's heart in words (mouth, lips) and acts (eyes, feet). As in Egyptian instructions, the heart stores and processes data and is best translated by English "mind." The human person is conceived here to be energetic, straining every sense to its limit: one is to "extend" one's ear like an antenna, let nothing escape the eyes, preserve words in the heart, keep false speech away from mouth and lips, hold eyes and eyelids undeviatingly on the goal, keep one's feet from stumbling or taking detours. It is assumed that the disciple is extraordinarily free and available, *disponible* in the French sense. A corollary of Proverbs' presumption of psychological freedom is its contempt toward lazy people, whom it condemns for refusing to act. An example is 26:14: "A door turns on its hinges, / so does a lazy person in bed."

The most important organ in Proverbs is the mouth (or "tongue")

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and "lips"). Speech is the most important capacity; words are the subject of a large number of proverbs. By speech one defines oneself more completely than in any other act. Through speech, teachers communicate instruction (teaching or discipline), knowledge, and wisdom.<sup>11</sup> Speech must be truthful and reliable; lying is vehemently denounced (17:4; 19:22; 30:6), particularly lying in the law court (6:19; 12:17; 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9, 28; 21:28). A key difference between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in chapters 1-9 is the reliability of their words. In a metaphor that holds good in Hebrew as well as English, Wisdom's words are straight, on the level (8:6-11), whereas Folly's are crooked (5:3; 9:17) or smooth and slippery (2:16; 6:24; 7:5).

The emphasis on personal freedom, and the equating of wisdom with virtue and ignorance with malice, are not the whole story, however. Proverbs is keenly aware of the givenness of human life, and expresses that givenness with the metaphor of the way. One's free choice places one on a path or way that has its own dynamic, independent of the agent.<sup>12</sup> By one's choices one ends up walking in "the way of the righteous" (e.g., 2:20; 4:18) or "the way of the wicked" (e.g., 4:14, 19; 12:26; 15:9). Two ways lie before you. Your actions put you on one or the other. Each has its inherent dynamic, toward death or toward life, for God (or the cosmic order) would see to the "completion" of human acts. The concept of the two ways is not static; one can get on and off by one's conduct. One's free choices put one on route, but the route has its own destination. Thus does Proverbs balance personal freedom with its social consequences. In Proverbs' use of the two ways, one joins a community of people on the path and shares their fate, as in the opening scene of 1:8-19.

The most extended treatment of the two ways in Proverbs is 4:10-19.

Hear, my child, and accept my words,  
that the years of your life may be many.  
I have taught you the way of wisdom;  
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.  
When you walk, your step will not be hampered;  
and if you run, you will not stumble.  
Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;  
guard her, for she is your life.  
Do not enter the path of the wicked,

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and do not walk in the way of evildoers.  
Avoid it; do not go on it;  
turn away from it and pass on.  
For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;  
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.  
For they eat the bread of wickedness  
and drink the wine of violence.  
But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,  
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.  
The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;  
they do not know what they stumble over.

Verses 18-19 add to the metaphor of the way the images of light and darkness. The light-dark contrast is a harbinger of later usage, such as the children of darkness and the children of light at Qumran and in the Gospel of John.

2) *The use of types, usually antithetically paired, to describe behavior and its consequences.* Another idea central to Proverbs is its use of character types. The main antithetical characters are the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked, the lazy and the diligent, the rich and the poor. Each set of polarities has its own characteristics; treatments of the wise and the foolish show little interest in retribution with Yahweh as agent, whereas divine retribution is a strong interest with the righteous and wicked. Rich and poor, as noted by a number of recent publications, are related uniquely: "Riches are traced back particularly to the commitment of the rich person, but the wise are well aware that diligence by itself is not responsible; on the other hand, poverty is not solely to be laid at the door of laziness."<sup>15</sup> It is good to remind ourselves that the aphorisms were written not in order to motivate the foolish, wicked, and lazy to change their ways but to motivate the virtuous. The character types are concerned with action, as is shown by the predominance of verbs. The concept of "the way" plays an important role in the full working out of the types.

In addition to these types, persons or groups recur in the book—father-mother-slave-son, friend-neighbor, the king, and the role of the woman. Father-mother-slave-son constitute the household, an institution that is important in Proverbs not only because of the metaphor of founding and maintaining a house established in chapters 1-9, but also because the household is so important in life. The household is viewed from the experience of the male.

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3) *The strong personification of wisdom as a woman.* It is not surprising that Proverbs personifies wisdom, for personification is common in the Bible, for example, "O send out your light and your truth; / let them lead me" (Ps 43:3); "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; / righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (Ps 85:10). The surprising thing is that the book so persistently focuses on wisdom itself, which differs from the concern of nonbiblical wisdom literature with wise *acts*; the personification is strong and persistent.<sup>14</sup> Wisdom gives long speeches and she has an equally vivid counterpart, Folly. Wisdom's speeches inculcate no particular teaching but urge obedience to her as one who represents Yahweh. Her message is herself.

The personification of wisdom in Proverbs is so distinctive that it has stimulated scholars to search for its origins in other cultures. One scholarly suggestion is that she was originally a Canaanite goddess of wisdom who represents the institution of the school. Another is that she is derived from the Egyptian goddess of wisdom, *Maat*. A third suggestion is that she is a "contrast phenomenon" that was created literarily as an antithesis to Woman Folly. Evidence for the first suggestion is lacking; the second proposal is not compelling, for *Maat* is not strongly personified; she gives no speeches in her own name, for example. The third possibility, that Wisdom was created by Proverbs to be a foil to the "wrong woman," is the most likely theory, in the view taken here. The reason is that Woman Folly has antecedents in earlier literature. There existed stories of seductive women offering a young hero life but ultimately dealing him death: the goddess Ishtar in Gilgamesh, Anat in the Ugaritic Aqhat story, and, in a very transposed form, in the *Odyssey* characters Calypso and Circe. If these seductresses (along with traditional warnings against "foreign women") were models for the seductive woman in Proverbs, then perhaps Woman Wisdom has been created by the author as a contrast. It is important to remember, however, that the origin of Woman Wisdom or Folly is not of primary importance. What is important is the way the women function in the book.<sup>15</sup>

How do the women function in chapters 1-9? Woman Wisdom has two speeches (1:20-33 and chap. 8) and in 9:1-6, 11 she invites passersby to her banquet. The other woman does not have an independent speaking role, appearing only as an object of warning in the teacher's instructions in chapters 2:16-19; 5, 6, and 7. In the matching portraits of two women in chapter 9, they appear together

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for the only time in the book. There are other speakers besides Wisdom in chapters 1-9: the parents in 1:8-19 and 6:20-35; the father alone in 4:1-9; a teacher in chapter 2; 4:10-19, 20-27; chapter 5; 6:1-19; chapter 7. Who do the women address? According to the introduction (1:1-7), the audience consists both of "the simple and youths" (1:4-5) and "the wise" (1:5). Woman Wisdom similarly addresses all human beings (8:4) but singles out the simple and youths (8:5). The duality of the audience adds richness. One audience is an inexperienced young man about to leave his parents' household, find a wife, and found his home (1:8-19), or newly married and learning to maintain his household. Most readers are not in that category but can easily apply that liminal situation to themselves. Our encounter as readers with Woman Wisdom therefore has a context: she addresses all of us at a critical moment in our lives, when we are, so to speak, in the process of building our lives, founding a household, seeking a relationship. The book takes a particular moment in a youth's coming of age and uses it as an analogy.

4) *The dominant metaphor of finding a wife, founding a household.* The figures of the two women (especially Woman Wisdom) and the persistent metaphor of finding a wife, or relating properly to her, and founding a household or maintaining it, provide a lens for reading chapters 1-9. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 at one level warn a married man not to commit adultery, because of its high personal and social costs and because of one's delightful wife. Metaphorically, the warnings are now against allowing seductions of any kind to disturb the relationship one is invited to have with wisdom. Wisdom is an attractive woman who invites people into a long-term, marriagelike relationship with her, which is founded on her truthfulness, bounty, and relationship with Yahweh. Her appeal is to anyone who wishes to be a companion of wisdom and enjoy the bounty of those favored by God. The personification of wisdom makes her active role vis à vis the reader much more vivid.

## ANALYSES OF REPRESENTATIVE TEXTS

Having looked at the genres, structure, and ideas of the book, let's now let the book speak for itself. The rest of the chapter provides examples of instructions and sayings, which are interesting in themselves and can also serve as models for understanding

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similar pieces in Proverbs. I begin with representative instructions of chapters 1-9, then sayings in chapters 10-22 and 25-29, excerpts from the instruction in 22:17-24:22, and I conclude with the poem on the virtuous wife in chapter 31.

### *Instructions*

Three passages are taken from chapters 1-9: (1) the opening instruction of the parents in 1:8-19; (2) the speeches of Woman Wisdom in 1:20-35 and chapter 8; (3) the speech of the teacher in chapter 2; and (4) the warnings against Woman Folly.

1) *The Opening Scene: Leaving Parents and Home.* The opening scene establishes the context of the wisdom instructions or lectures: a young person leaving parents and home to found a house of his own. It establishes the systematic metaphor<sup>16</sup> of an inexperienced ("simple") person making fundamental choices and tempted to depart from traditional values. Metaphor is introduced in this scene and maintained in the rest of the book. There are thus two levels in chapters 1-9. On one level, a young man is warned by parents, father, and teacher against bad companions and against the promiscuity and adultery that will ruin his marriage and household. He is exhorted to seek the right wife or, if he is married, to be faithful to the wife he has. This level is portrayed with typical ancient Eastern features. On the second level, the scene is shifted from its specific setting to a broader context. Any person can apply to himself or herself the situation of achieving maturity, finding a wisdom that is self-constructed but truly "out there," learning to discern the true from the deceptive, learning to establish a household or life. The two levels coexist throughout the book.

The scene-setting opening begins with the parents' voice. In my translation here, repeated Hebrew words are italicized. Verse 16 is secondary and has been omitted; it is not in the best Greek manuscripts and was probably copied from Isaiah 59:7.

<sup>8</sup>Hear, my son, the instruction of your father,  
do not disdain the teaching of your mother,

<sup>9</sup>for they are a handsome diadem for your head  
and a pendant for your neck.

<sup>10</sup>My son, if sinners entice you,  
do not consent, if they say:

<sup>11</sup>"Walk with us,  
we will set an ambush for blood,