

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS WISDOM

A Theological Introduction
to Wisdom in Israel

Tremper
Longman III



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To our new granddaughters:

Ava Rae Longman (born July 8, 2016)
Emerson Foster Longman (born July 10, 2016)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in wisdom in the Old Testament began during my studies at Yale University in the late 1970s. As I was defining and exploring the genre of Akkadian fictional autobiographies for my dissertation under Professor W. W. Hallo, I found some autobiographies that ended with wisdom admonitions. As I will explain in chapter 9, these Akkadian compositions were similar in form to Ecclesiastes. I soon had an offer to write a commentary on Ecclesiastes, and then over the next couple decades, I also wrote commentaries on Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, and Psalms, all of which in one way or another helped me to gain a better understanding of the concept of wisdom in the Old Testament.

Being an advocate for and practitioner of christological or christotelic interpretation, my interest in wisdom in its discrete setting within the Old Testament led me to study wisdom in the New Testament as well. Furthermore, since I try to write in a way that will be helpful for clergy, I have also pondered the relationship between ancient biblical wisdom as it informs wisdom today (thus appendix 1).

I want to thank Baker Academic and in particular Jim Kinney for the opportunity and encouragement to write this book, which is a synthesis of years of studying biblical wisdom. I have worked with Jim for a number of years now and consider him not just my editor but a close friend. He not only encouraged me to write this volume but has also guided me through the entire process. I also want to thank Wells Turner and his team for an excellent job of editing the volume.

I appreciate and give credit to the countless students to whom I have taught wisdom literature at the undergraduate as well as the graduate level. The very

first course that I taught in 1981 was on Psalms and wisdom and indeed in the coming spring 2017 semester I will again teach that course. Naturally, the version of the course I will teach next semester is significantly different, and hopefully much better informed, than the one I taught in 1981.

I always want to thank my wife, Alice, for her great support over the years. She epitomizes wisdom in her life. We are also so thankful for our three sons, their wives, and also our four granddaughters. I have already dedicated previous books to our older granddaughters Gabrielle (now 11) and Mia (now 7), daughters of our son Tremper IV, so it is my pleasure to dedicate this book to our two newest granddaughters: Emerson Foster Longman (daughter of Timothy and Kari) and Ava Rae Longman (daughter of Andrew and Tiffany). Love to all you girls. May you grow up in the fear and wisdom of the Lord.

ABBREVIATIONS

General and Bibliographic

AB	Anchor Bible
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BIBD	<i>Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013)
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ca.	<i>circa</i> , about
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEB	Common English Bible
chap(s).	chapter(s)
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> , ed. William W. Hallo, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002)
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially
ESV	English Standard Version
ET	English translation
<i>EuroJTh</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
Heb.	Hebrew
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is

JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JHNES	Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JTISup	Journal for Theological Interpretation, Supplements
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> , ed. Leander E. Keck, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004)
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OT	Old Testament
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
RevQ	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TLB	The Living Bible
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
v(v).	verse(s)
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis	Josh.	Joshua	1 Kings	1 Kings
Exod.	Exodus	Judg.	Judges	2 Kings	2 Kings
Lev.	Leviticus	Ruth	Ruth	1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
Num.	Numbers	1 Sam.	1 Samuel	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Deut.	Deuteronomy	2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Ezra	Ezra

Neh.	Nehemiah	Jer.	Jeremiah	Jon.	Jonah
Esther	Esther	Lam.	Lamentations	Mic.	Micah
Job	Job	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Nah.	Nahum
Ps(s).	Psalms(s)	Dan.	Daniel	Hab.	Habakkuk
Prov.	Proverbs	Hosea	Hosea	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Joel	Joel	Hag.	Haggai
Song	Song of Songs	Amos	Amos	Zech.	Zechariah
Isa.	Isaiah	Obad.	Obadiah	Mal.	Malachi

New/Greek Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

Old Testament Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books

Add. Dan.	Additions to Daniel (= Pr. Azar., Sg. Three, Sus., and Bel)
Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther
Bar.	Baruch
Bel	Bel and the Dragon
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras
Jdt.	Judith
Let. Jer.	Letter of Jeremiah (= Baruch chap. 6)
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees
Pr. Azar.	Prayer of Azariah (often cited as part of the Song of the Three Jews)
Pr. Man.	Prayer of Manasseh
Ps. 151	Psalms 151
Sg. Three	Song of the Three Jews
Sir.	Sirach
Sus.	Susanna
Tob.	Tobit
Wis.	Wisdom (of Solomon)

Other Ancient Sources

<i>T. Job</i>	<i>Testament of Job</i>
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PROLOGUE

What is wisdom in the OT? The redemptive history claims that God works in a special way through Israel to reach the world (Gen. 12:1–3).¹ That special relationship comes to focus in Israel’s covenant relationship as well as the law expressed within the framework of the covenant. The prophets insist on exclusive worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and they condemn any who might worship another God. The priests protect God’s holiness by “guarding” that covenant (Deut. 33:9).

Upon initial reading, books that speak about wisdom—particularly Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—feel significantly different than books based on redemptive-historical, covenantal, legal, prophetic, and priestly traditions. Or that is certainly the impression one gets from the writings of those who have studied wisdom over the past number of decades. Scholars have talked about a distinctive wisdom tradition that is markedly different than the rest of the OT.² Wisdom, so the argument goes, is practical not theological, universal (consonant with ancient Near Eastern wisdom) not particular to Israel, tied to creation theology not redemptive history or covenant.

This book intends to explore wisdom in the Bible. We will focus on the OT, Israel’s wisdom. Ultimately, however, our study is a work of Christian biblical theology; thus, we will continue by examining how the NT appropriates the wisdom of the OT.

1. For how the promises to Abraham reverberate throughout the redemptive history of the OT and into the NT, see Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*.

2. Examples include the classic study of wisdom by von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, and the recent book by Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*.

At the heart of our study is the question of the nature of wisdom in the OT. Is the contemporary assessment of wisdom accurate, which views it as universal rather than particular, practical rather than theological, and based in creation theology rather than redemptive history? Very recently scholarly voices have been heard questioning what we might call the overarching consensus of the past decades. In particular, the work of Will Kynes and Mark Sneed, though differing in significant respects, have challenged the idea of a distinctive wisdom tradition, school, or genre as commonly perceived by scholars working in the field.³ This book owes much to their stimulating insights, though I do not find myself persuaded completely by their perspectives and will interact with them, as well as the ideas that they challenge, throughout this book. However, at this beginning stage I will simply state that even if they are correct that there is no specific wisdom tradition, school, or genre, there is a concept of wisdom in the Bible that is worth exploring and that will be the subject of this book.

Without making the claim that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job constitute a distinct genre (though see appendix 2 for my discussion of genre theory as it relates to the question of wisdom literature), there are still obvious reasons to begin such a study by a close look at wisdom in these books. The preface to Proverbs (1:1–7) states that the purpose of the book is “to know wisdom and discipline” (1:2a) and “to give to the simple prudence, to the young knowledge and discretion” (1:4) as well as to make the wise even wiser (1:5). In our chapter on Job, we will demonstrate that the book is best understood as a wisdom debate between Job and his friends, as well as Elihu, with all of them the losers and God the winner. Wisdom also plays a central role in the book of Ecclesiastes. As we will see, an unnamed speaker addressing his son (12:12) points out that the main speaker in the book, Qohelet, “was a wise man” (12:9). The book will evaluate the nature of his “under the sun” wisdom. While all three of these books differ from each other and each will nuance our understanding of wisdom in different ways, they strikingly all agree, as we will point out in the chapters that follow, that the heart of wisdom is the “fear of the Lord.” Thus, our first three chapters (part 1, “The Heart of Wisdom: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job”) will be:

1. Proverbs: The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom
2. Ecclesiastes: Fear God, Obey the Commandments, and Live in Light of the Coming Judgment
3. The Book of Job: “Behold, the Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom” (Job 28:28)

3. See their contributions in Sneed, *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?*

While these three books have the most pervasive and intense presentation of wisdom in the OT, there are a number of other books or parts of books that also speak of or illustrate wisdom. We will have to tread carefully here, though, because, as in particular Kynes has stated, there is a tendency in scholars to treat everything as wisdom. Indeed, as we will later point out, an argument can be made that there is a pervasive wisdom dimension to most if not all of the OT, since the transmission and final form of texts were the product of scribes who themselves, like Qohelet, were considered “wise” (*hākām*). Thus, after treating Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, we will go on to look at wisdom in select psalms, Deuteronomy, Song of Songs, and certain historical narratives, in particular the stories of Joseph and Daniel as well as Adam and Solomon.⁴ We will cover these books (part 2, “Wisdom Elsewhere in the Old Testament”) in the following chapters:

4. Other Sources of Wisdom: Deuteronomy, Psalms, Song of Songs, and Prophecy
5. Joseph and Daniel: Paragons of Wisdom
6. Adam and Solomon: From the Heights of Wisdom to the Depths of Folly

Once we have gathered the textual materials that are most relevant to the study of wisdom, we will then examine a series of issues that will question the contemporary understanding of how wisdom fits into the rest of the canon. There is no question that wisdom has distinctive emphases that make it different from the other traditions of the OT, but we contend that these differences have been overemphasized to the point of distortion. The sages are not an alien presence within the Bible but rather another voice bearing witness to Yahweh along with the prophets, priests, and those who write of God’s mighty acts.

Our initial foray into wisdom (chaps. 1–3) will already have shown that wisdom is not just a practical (and ethical) category but is deeply theological (“the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,” Prov. 1:7). Afterward, we will continue questioning the depiction of wisdom as universal, rather than particular, by exploring the following issues (part 3, “Israel’s Wisdom: Cosmopolitan or Unique?”):

4. The subject of wisdom in historical narrative is not limited to the topics we will cover, but we believe that the stories of Joseph, Daniel, Adam, and Solomon are high points. For an interesting recent study, see Firth, “Worrying about the Wise.”

7. Sources of Wisdom: Experience, Observation, Tradition, Correction, and Ultimately Revelation
8. Wisdom, Creation, and (Dis)order
9. Israelite Wisdom in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting
10. Wisdom, Covenant, and Law

The study of these topics will reinforce our understanding that wisdom strikes a distinctive but not discordant note with the rest of the OT. With this background we will turn our attention to a series of issues that will deepen our understanding of wisdom in the Bible. First, we will examine the relationship between wisdom and reward: the question of retribution. On a surface reading of Proverbs, one might (and many do) claim that the way of wisdom leads to prosperity while the way of folly leads to failure and punishment. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes undermine the supposed connection between wisdom and reward, but are Proverbs and Job/Ecclesiastes at odds with each other? We will follow this with a look at two debated topics: (1) the social setting of wisdom and (2) wisdom and gender. Was there a specific social setting for wisdom, and can we identify it? The fact that a book like Proverbs depicts a father instructing his son about life and personifies divine wisdom as a woman raises questions about wisdom and gender (part 4, “Further Refining Our Understanding of Wisdom”).

11. The Consequences of Wise and Foolish Behavior: The Issue of Retribution Theology
12. The Social Setting of Wisdom
13. Wisdom and Gender

After this thorough look at wisdom in the OT, we will then look at its afterlife in two parts. We begin with intertestamental wisdom with a focus on Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. We will follow that with a chapter dedicated to the NT’s appropriation and development of OT wisdom. That chapter will include both the presentation of Jesus as the ultimate sage and an examination of the nature of Christian wisdom (part 5, “The Afterlife of Israel’s Wisdom”).

14. Intertestamental Wisdom from the Apocrypha to the Dead Sea Scrolls
15. New Testament Wisdom

We will end with two appendixes, the first of which will draw together our main conclusions and present our understanding of the nature of OT

wisdom in its broader (Christian) canonical context as well as its continuing significance for life today. The second appendix will turn to the question of genre. As mentioned above, in the light of new challenges to the idea that there is a genre of wisdom literature, we have decided to explore the concept of wisdom instead. However, in the appendix I will make a case for retaining the category wisdom literature, based on a more fluid understanding of genre.

Before moving on, we need to make clear our approach to Scripture, which will bear on the focus and shape of this present study. Our exploration of wisdom in the Bible will be synchronic and not diachronic, or in other words, canonical rather than historical-critical. We will be talking about these books in their final form and in the terms in which they present themselves. In my mind there is no doubt that all OT books (with the possible exception of Nahum) have a compositional history and that most, if not all, books found their final form very late in the postexilic period. While a diachronic study is possible, it is also extremely speculative. And in any case, as Childs and others have pointed out, the final forms of the books are the Scriptures of the church.⁵

5. Representative of Childs's canonical criticism is his *Biblical Theology*.

PART 1

THE HEART OF WISDOM

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job

The title of this book, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*, announces that it is a study of wisdom. But what exactly is wisdom in the OT? Since at least the mid-nineteenth century and the work of Johann Bruch, scholars have spoken of “wisdom literature”; wisdom as a genre of literature distinct from, say, the Historical Books and the Prophets and Law.¹ Granted, the health of wisdom as a genre has waxed and waned from its nineteenth-century origins until the present moment, but even today most scholars would affirm that Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes form the core of wisdom literature. Some scholars of the genre would add other texts, including a number of wisdom psalms and the Song of Songs. Others would go further and place the Joseph narrative,

1. Bruch, *Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer*.

Esther, Daniel, and certain other historical narratives and even prophets in this literary category.

In recent days, however, the idea of a wisdom genre has come under serious question. Will Kynes presents the most persuasive case that wisdom should not be considered a genre. He rightly indicates that there is no evidence that the so-called wisdom books were considered a genre in antiquity or even really until the mid-nineteenth century and Bruch's work. That said, he also recognizes that this is not a sufficient argument against the idea of a genre of wisdom literature, since as a single argument it commits the so-called genetic fallacy, which argues that "an idea's origin can either confirm or contradict its truth."² In other words, emic (native) categories are not the only valid ones. Etic (outsider) categories, those formulated by modern scholars, have their utility, as in the use of modern grammatical categories in the description and teaching of ancient languages.³

Kynes furthers his argument by pointing out that even the core books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes) are not easily distinguished generically from the other books of the OT. For instance, he questions the very existence of ideas commonly associated with wisdom as modern constructs imposed on the literature, or at least their distinctive use within a supposed wisdom literature (he names, for instance, creation theology, universalism, empiricism, retribution, and secularism).

He has also noticed that there has been a gradual but persistent expansion of wisdom literature in scholarship. As noted in the second paragraph of this section above, some scholars would include broad swaths of the OT under the rubric wisdom. He sees here an analogy to how scholarship saw the influence of Deuteronomistic theology where Samuel-Kings, if not Joshua through Kings, Jeremiah, and other prophets were labeled Deuteronomistic. He then asserts, in the case of wisdom, that if everything is wisdom (a bit of an overstatement), then nothing is wisdom.

Kynes and others thus present questions that a book like mine purporting to describe wisdom cannot ignore. Is wisdom really dead? Is there no wisdom literature? Is there no distinctive wisdom movement? Are there no wisdom teachers or sages to be distinguished from priests or prophets or kings? These are questions we will take up in the following chapters.

But where to begin? Though wisdom as a distinct literary category, movement, or professional status can be challenged, perhaps successfully (as we

2. Kynes, *Obituary*.

3. A point I made as early as 1987 (Longman, *Literary Approaches*) in a book that was reprinted in 1996 with other books from the series in a combined volume titled *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (see esp. 127–28).

will see), there is no denying that the concept of wisdom makes its presence known in the OT. Wisdom is the English translation of *ḥokmâ*, and a person who is characterized by wisdom is called a *ḥākām*.⁴

Accordingly, perhaps it is best to understand this book not primarily as a description of a literary genre but rather as an exploration of the concept of wisdom. Kynes himself will agree with us on this level since he states that his approach “would treat wisdom (now with a lower case w) as a concept similar to holiness or righteousness instead of a genre.”⁵

So we will leave open the question of whether wisdom is a genre and embark on a study of the concept of wisdom (for more on wisdom as a genre, see appendix 2). But how should we organize our exploration? Where do we start and how do we progress?

One approach could be diachronic, starting with the earliest texts that speak of *ḥokmâ* and moving on from there until the latest texts. That would be a legitimate, but also a highly speculative, approach, speculative because the dating of texts is both highly complex and extremely controversial.

I have thus decided to approach the question synchronically. This does not mean that I will avoid all questions of when texts were likely or probably composed, but my description of wisdom will not depend on their dating, at least in major points.

I will start then with those texts that speak of *ḥokmâ* most pervasively. While this does not presume that they compose a genre, this does lead us to start with the three books that are, as we have noted above, considered the core of a supposed wisdom genre.

The first question we are going to ask is, what is the nature of wisdom? We start with Proverbs, which announces in its preamble (1:1–7) that it intends to make its readers wise.

4. The question of whether *ḥākām* is used as a professional category will be addressed in chap. 12.

5. Kynes, *Obituary*.

1

PROVERBS

The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom

The book of Proverbs is a book of instruction and, like its ancient Egyptian counterparts (see chap. 9 below), begins with a preface, which states the purpose of the following chapters in terms of their intended effect upon readers:

The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel—
to know wisdom and discipline;
to understand insightful sayings;
to receive the teaching of insight,
righteousness, justice, and virtue;
to give to the simple prudence,
to the young knowledge and discretion.
Let the wise hear and increase teaching;
let those with understanding acquire guidance,
so they may understand a proverb and a difficult saying,
the words of the wise and their enigmas.
The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (1:1–7)¹

1. All translations of the book of Proverbs are from Longman, *Proverbs*.

The lengthy purpose statement of the preface begins “to know wisdom.” The Hebrew word commonly translated “wisdom” is *ḥokmâ*. *Ḥokmâ* is the word used most frequently in Proverbs to denote the hoped-for consequence of reading the book of Proverbs, though there are many other closely related words found in the preface as well as throughout the book, words like “discipline” (*mûsār*), “understanding” (*bînâ*), “insight” (*ḥaśkēl*), “prudence” (*’ormâ*), “discretion” (*məzimmâ*), and others. Truth be told, we struggle to find the exact nuance of these words (thus the variation among translations),² but they all seem to be aspects of the broader concept of wisdom, and thus our focus will be an overarching understanding of wisdom in the book of Proverbs.

What Is Wisdom according to the Book of Proverbs?

We have to look not only at the preface but also the contents of the teaching of Proverbs in order to discover the meaning of wisdom. As we do so, we will see that wisdom is not a simple concept. Our description of wisdom in Proverbs will unfold on three levels: practical, ethical, and theological. While we will present wisdom separately as practical, then ethical, and finally theological, we should state right at the beginning that in Proverbs the three are deeply intertwined. No one can be truly wise unless one is wise practically, ethically, and theologically.

The Skill of Living: The Practical Level

When people think of the book of Proverbs today, they often think of it as a repository of advice about how to navigate life. Proverbs is a book that gives nitty-gritty instructions about how to avoid pitfalls and maximize success understood as having and maintaining robust relationships with others, maintaining personal health, and working in a way that will ensure a life-sustaining income (if not riches).

While we will see that certain excessive expectations of wisdom along these lines are wrong-minded (see chap. 11), it would be an error to deny that the teaching of Proverbs intends to impart advice that indeed has such purposes. Consider the following examples:

A slack palm makes poverty;
a determined hand makes rich. (10:4)

2. For the best effort so far to refine our understanding of the nuances of the various words used for wisdom (and folly), see Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 28–44.

Here the wisdom instructor commends industriousness as the route to material success, while warning against laziness, which will lead to disaster.

A winking eye brings trouble,
but those who reprimand with boldness bring peace.³ (10:10)

Here we have advice about how to maintain peace in a relationship when someone has done something wrong. In the second colon the wise teacher advises a straightforward reprimand of the person. The first colon is a bit obscure since we cannot be absolutely certain of the significance of a winking eye. It seems to be in contrast, though, to a bold reprimand, so it likely signifies a tacit acceptance of the wrongdoing on the part of another. The teacher insists that it is actually the reprimand rather than the avoidance of the problem that leads to healthy relationship.

In an abundance of words, wickedness does not cease;
those who restrain their lips are insightful. (10:19)

In this final example, we encounter counsel in the area of speech communication. Good speech is necessary for good relationships. This proverb fits in with others (13:3; 17:28) that advise the wise person to avoid excessive talking. The fewer words the better. Those who talk immoderately only make a situation worse.

These are just three of many examples of proverbs whose purpose is to impart a practical kind of wisdom that helps a person live life well.

Indeed, on this level wisdom is similar to what today we often call emotional intelligence.⁴ Emotional intelligence is similar to what used to be called social skills or even street smarts. Emotional intelligence is different from what we often mean when we say that a person is intelligent. The latter concerns a knowledge of facts (“knowing that”), while wisdom entails living life skillfully (“knowing how”). Raw intelligence can be measured by devices such as an IQ test, while emotional intelligence can be measured by tests that indicate a person’s EQ.

Emotionally intelligent people, like the wise in the book of Proverbs, know how to say the right thing at the right time. They do the right thing at the right time. They also express emotions that are appropriate for a situation at

3. The second colon follows the Septuagint translation, since the Masoretic text simply and almost certainly erroneously repeats 10:9b.

4. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*. More recently, see the excellent book by Brooks, *Social Animal*. See more in appendix 2.

the right intensity. Timing is everything in wisdom. Consider the following proverbs that emphasize proper timing:

It is a joy to a person to give an answer!
How good a word at the right time! (15:23)

A response is effective only if it is appropriate for the situation. Our next example illustrates this insight.

Those who bless their neighbors with a loud voice in the early
morning—
it will be considered a curse. (27:14)

On the surface of it, one might think a “blessing” or positive word would be well received, whether in a loud or a soft voice. However, the wise teacher informs his hearer that if it comes at the wrong time—early in the morning when a person is just waking up—that positive word will not be appreciated.

Note also the following proverbs that show how wisdom and folly are expressed through one’s emotions:

Patience brings much competence,
but impatience promotes stupidity. (14:29)

A patient person is better than a warrior,
and those who control their emotions than those who can capture a
city. (16:32)

These two proverbs support reticence in the expression of emotions. Losing control of one’s emotions leads to ineffective thought and action.

Those who hold back their speech know wisdom,
and those who are coolheaded are people of understanding. (17:27)

This proverb urges self-control in both speech and emotions. Those who are able to exercise self-control are called wise.

Intriguingly, research has discovered that there is a high correlation between emotional intelligence and success in life, with a corresponding low connection between a high IQ and human flourishing. In short, people who have good social skills as described above thrive in relationships and have an easier time getting a job and keeping it. The same research has shown that a high

IQ does not correlate well with these desired results.⁵ After all, says Goleman, “academic intelligence offers virtually no preparation for the turmoil—or opportunity—life’s vicissitudes bring.”⁶

Of course, IQ and EQ are not mutually exclusive characteristics. One can be highly intelligent both academically and emotionally, but it appears that, while the latter alone can bring a measure of life success, the former typically does not.

We turned our attention to the subject of emotional intelligence because of its similarity to biblical wisdom. Proverbs is a book that on the practical level offers to make its attentive reader wise (emotionally intelligent). The research that indicates that emotional intelligence/wisdom results in great benefits makes sense of the biblical sages’ connection between wisdom and reward, on the one hand, and folly and negative consequences, on the other, as illustrated by the following examples:

Wise women build their houses,
but dupes demolish theirs with their own hands. (14:1)

The sages frequently use this type of “antithetic parallelism,” which is constructed with the use of antonyms rather than near synonyms and addresses the same situation but from opposite perspectives. Here the contrast is between wise and foolish women. The actions of the former lead to constructive results and the latter to negative. Of course, wise women do not literally build, nor foolish women literally demolish, their houses, but rather their respective actions lead to the flourishing or diminishing of their households.

Those who ridicule the poor insult their Maker;
those who rejoice in disaster will not go unpunished. (17:5)

This proverb points the finger at those who mock poor people. The disaster in the second colon refers to the situation that led to their unfortunate circumstances. To rejoice in someone’s difficulties is not only unseemly but an insult to the God who made all people, including the poor and those who suffer tragedy. The wisdom instructor warns that such behavior will result

5. The data is presented in an accessible way by Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, including a study of Harvard students from the 1940s of varied academic levels who “were followed into middle age.” The study discovered “the men with the highest test scores in college were not particularly successful compared to their lower-scoring peers in terms of salary, productivity, or status in their field. Nor did they have the greatest life satisfaction, nor the most happiness with friendships, family, and romantic relationships” (35).

6. Ibid., 36.

in negative consequences for those who so treat the poor. The nature of the punishment is intentionally not specified because it might come in a variety of forms.

The wisdom teachers thus make the same point as those today who describe emotional intelligence. Wise, emotionally intelligent attitudes and behaviors lead to success in life.⁷

The Wise Person as a Good Person: The Ethical Level

In the previous section, we explored the practical dimension of proverbial wisdom. Many people recognize the beneficial value of proverbs for guidance in how to live life. Indeed, for many that is the sum total of the nature of wisdom. Such a limited understanding of wisdom, however, perverts the biblical idea of wisdom.

The purpose of Proverbs is not simply to make someone emotionally intelligent and able to live life skillfully. Proverbs wants to make a person good as well as successful.⁸

We get the first hint of the ethical dimension of wisdom from the preface. In 1:3b we read that the purpose of the book includes the impartation of “righteousness, justice, and virtue.” What constitutes these qualities is not specified here, which raises the question of the relationship between wisdom and the law found in the Torah. Both wisdom and law demand certain types of behaviors. God calls for obedience to the law, and the father and Woman Wisdom urge the son to follow the dictates of their advice in Proverbs.

The relationship between wisdom and law has been much debated, with some scholars seeing a close connection between the two and others denying any substantial relationship.⁹ Certainly there are differences between commandment and advice. As our study progresses, we observe with even more clarity that the proverb is not universally true but true only when applied to the right situation, while the commandment is always true. However, when the proverb is rightly applied, it has the force of commandment. Perhaps this explains why the vocabulary connected to law is used in the book of Proverbs for the teaching of the father and Woman Wisdom.¹⁰

7. See chap. 11 for further discussion of the relationship between wise behavior with reward and foolish behavior with punishment.

8. Lyu, *Righteousness*.

9. See the classic statement of the two sides in Gemser, “Spiritual Structure”; and Zimmerli, “Concerning the Structure.”

10. *Tôrâ* (“instruction/law”) is used in 1:8; 3:1; 6:20, 23; 7:2; 13:14; 28:4, 7, 9; 29:18; 31:26; and *mišvâ* (“command”) is used in 2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 6:20, 23; 7:1, 2; 13:13; 19:16.

Indeed, the teaching of many proverbs echoes the requirements of the Ten Commandments, particularly those that regulate the behavior among human beings:

Commandment	Proverbs
Honor father and mother (5th):	1:8; 4:1, 10; 10:1; 13:1
Do not murder (6th):	1:10–12; 6:17
Do not commit adultery (7th):	2:16–19; chap. 5; 6:20–35; chap. 7
Do not steal (8th):	1:13–14; 11:1
Do not bear false witness (9th):	3:30; 6:18, 19; 10:18; 12:17, 19
Do not covet (10th):	6:18

Proverbs is not as explicit on the connection between wisdom and law as the later Wisdom of Solomon or Ben Sira (see chap. 14). In those books Woman Wisdom speaks the law of Moses. However, the roots of this connection are to be found in the book of Proverbs itself.

David Bland has made a major contribution recently in describing the ethical nature of wisdom in his book *Proverbs and the Formation of Character*. He argues persuasively that the proverbs don’t simply lead to a change of behavior but encourage attitudes and behaviors that over time become habits that contribute to the transformation of character. As Lyu puts it, “Proverbs instructs that the reader should learn and become wise and righteous. To reach that goal, the learner is expected to go through the reshaping of his inner person. His desires, hopes, and disposition must be reconditioned to reflect the ideal.”¹¹ The son who obeys the advice of his father will become a righteous person, and the one who does not becomes wicked. Second, Bland emphasizes that wisdom is not just for individual betterment but for the benefit of the community.¹²

Throughout the book of Proverbs, righteousness and wisdom are interchangeable terms. One cannot be wise without being righteous. In the same way, folly and wickedness are inextricably intertwined. Foolish behavior is evil. If we understand this, we recognize the ethical dimension of wisdom. But even so, we have not yet arrived at an adequate understanding of wisdom according to the book of Proverbs.

11. Lyu, *Righteousness*, 64.

12. See also Brown (*Character in Crisis*, 47), who puts it this way: “Productive and responsible citizenship within the life of the community is of central concern to the editors who produced the book of Proverbs.”

Fearing God: The Theological Level

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Our continuing exploration of the nature of biblical wisdom takes us back once again to the preface of Proverbs. In its climactic concluding verse, we read:

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (1:7)

This statement is well known; but even so, Proverbs and wisdom have been described by some, scholars as well as laypeople, as nontheological or even secular. We will say more about this below, but first we will unpack Prov. 1:7.

The first six verses indicate the practical and ethical nature of wisdom, but this verse reveals its theological character: “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge.” This principle is repeated a number of times (sometimes with the variant “the beginning of wisdom”) in Proverbs (esp. 9:10, which forms an *inclusio* in the discourses of the book found in chaps. 1–9, but see also 1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 10:27; 14:2, 26, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30) and also in other wisdom passages (for instance Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Eccles. 12:13).

“Beginning” can either refer to the foundation on which an edifice is built or can mean the first of a succession of moments. In either case (and both might be meant), the phrase insists that where there is no fear of the Lord, there is no wisdom. One cannot even begin in the enterprise of wisdom without having fear of God.

But why fear? Why not “the love of God is the beginning of wisdom”?

To answer this question, we first explore what exactly is meant by “fear” in this context. The Hebrew word (*yir’at*) can be used of everything from anxiety to horror.¹³ There does not seem to be an exact English parallel to the sense in which it is meant here, but “fear” here certainly does not point to the type of fear that makes someone run away and hide like Adam in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8). Some suggest that the word should be understood as “respect” (TLB), but that word seems inappropriately weak. Perhaps the closest English word is “awe,” but even that word does not quite get it. The “fear” of the “fear of the Lord” is the sense of standing before the God who created everything, including humans whose very continued existence depends on him. The emotion is appropriate for wisdom because it demonstrates acknowledgment that God is so much greater than we are. He takes our breath

13. For a helpful and full study of the Hebrew word, see *NIDOTTE* 2:527–33.

away and makes our knees knock together. Such fear breeds humility and signals a willingness to receive instruction from God.

This fear is not the fear that makes us run, but it is the fear that makes us pay attention and listen. Fear of the Lord makes us humble, a wisdom trait, rather than proud and “wise in our own eyes” (3:5, 7; 6:17; 11:2; 15:25, 33; 16:5, 18, 19; 18:12; 21:4, 24; 22:4; 25:6–7, 27; 26:12; 30:1–4, 13). This is why fear rather than love is the appropriate emotion for the wise.

The fear of the Lord inevitably leads to obedience. The one who fears God will follow the advice that God imparts through the sages in the chapters of instruction in the form of lectures and proverbs that follow the preface.

The connection between fear of the Lord and obedience is well illustrated in the life of Abraham. For much of the NT, the Abraham story is read to drive home the important point that our relationship with God is based on faith not obedience. On a number of occasions Paul cites Gen. 15:6 (“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness”; see Rom. 4:3, 9; Gal. 3:6) to establish what later theologians would call the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

In their zeal to avoid works righteousness, many Protestant theologians don’t know what to do with James’s appropriation of the conclusion to the Abraham story found in Gen. 22, the binding of Isaac.¹⁴ Abraham passes this ultimate test of his faith and then hears the angel of the Lord proclaim: “Now I know that you *fear God*, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son. . . . I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, *because you have obeyed me*” (Gen. 22:12, 16–18, emphasis added). James uses this story to make his readers understand that faith without works is dead (James 2:14–26).

Thus, from Prov. 1:7a we learn that wisdom requires the right attitude toward God. Step one (“the beginning”) of wisdom involves a robust relationship with God. The second part of the verse talks about those who reject wisdom as fools. The rejection of wisdom begins with a rejection of God, as Ps. 14:1 points out:

The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”

14. Longman, *Genesis*, 286–302.

And then the psalmist goes on to comment on the fool's character:

They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
there is no one who does good.

We learn in Prov. 1:7 that at its foundation wisdom is a theological category through and through.

We are, however, led to the conclusion of the theological nature of wisdom by more than a single phrase, no matter how repeated and strategically placed. The sages who produced Proverbs further indicated that wisdom requires a relationship with Yahweh through the figure of Woman Wisdom. We thus turn our attention to the role she plays in the book.

WOMAN WISDOM

Proverbs 1:7 is not the only way that the book communicates the deeply theological foundation of wisdom. Throughout the discourses of the first part of the book (chaps. 1–9), we encounter the intriguing figure of Woman Wisdom. Indeed, she makes her initial appearance the second lecture:

Wisdom shouts in the street;
in the public square she yells out.
At the top of the noisy throng she calls out an invitation
at the entrances to the gates in the city she says her piece:
“How long, O simple, will you love simplemindedness,
and mockers hold their mocking dear,
and fools hate knowledge?
You should respond to my correction.
I will pour forth my spirit to you;
I will make known to you my words
Because I invited you, but you rejected me;
I extended my hand, but you paid no attention
You ignored all my advice,
and my correction you did not want.
I will also laugh at your disaster;
I will ridicule you when your fear comes.
When your fear comes like a tempest,¹⁵
and your disaster arrives like a storm,
when distress and oppression come on you,

15. Reading Qere (*šo'ā*) rather than the Ketib (*ša'āwā*).

then they will call me, and I will not answer;
 they will seek me, but they will not find me
 because they hated knowledge,
 and did not chose the fear of Yahweh.
 They did not want my advice,
 and they rejected all my reproof.
 They will eat from the fruit of their way,
 and they will be sated from their own counsels,
 For the turning away of the simple will kill them,
 and the complacency of fools will destroy them.
 Those who obey me will dwell securely;
 they will be untroubled from the horror of evil.” (1:20–33)

Here Wisdom speaks from the most public of places. She is out in the open, in the public square, on top of the wall, at the city gate. Her teaching is not hidden, mystical, secret, or elitist, but rather open and accessible to all. However, not everyone cares. The simpleminded (naive or immature) person, the fool, and, worst of all, the mocker ignore or resist her message.

Wisdom anticipates the time in the future when those who do not listen to her now will turn to her. When crisis hits, they will seek her, but because they ignored her in the present, she will ignore them in their future crisis. The message is clear. Turn to Wisdom now before you need her, before trouble comes.

Fear of the Lord leads people to form a relationship with Woman Wisdom, but fools and mockers do not fear God. Those who reject her will suffer, while those who turn to her will be safe (vv. 32–33).

Woman Wisdom herself speaks in this discourse, and she will speak again (see discussion of Prov. 8:1–9:6), but before looking at these pivotal passages, we will first take note of the way the father speaks of this Woman to his son.

Blessed are those who find Wisdom,
 and those who gain competence.
 For her profit is better than that of silver,¹⁶
 and her yield, better than gold.
 Her value is more than pearls,
 and all that you want is not the equal of her.
 Length of days is in her right hand;
 in her left are wealth and honor.
 Her paths are pleasant paths,
 and all her trails are peace.

16. Literally, “For its profit is better than the profit of silver.”

She is a tree of life to those who embrace her,
 and those who hold her tight are blessed.
 Yahweh laid the foundations of the earth with Wisdom,
 establishing the heavens with competence.
 With his knowledge the deeps burst open,
 and the skies drop dew. (Prov. 3:13–20)

In this discourse the father talks to his son about Woman Wisdom. He urges his son to seek a relationship with her by pronouncing those who do so “blessed” and telling him of the great reward that results. She is more precious than even the most expensive jewels and rare metals. She bestows long life and also the ability to navigate life. After all, Yahweh created the world with her (a point that will be expressed again in 8:22–31). Who would better know how the world worked?

Hear, sons, fatherly discipline,
 and pay attention to the knowledge of understanding.
 For I will give you good teaching;
 don’t forsake my instruction.
 For I was a son to my father,
 tender and the only one of my mother.
 He taught me and said to me:
 “Let your heart hold on to my words;
 guard my commands and live.
 Acquire Wisdom;
 acquire Understanding.
 Don’t forget,
 and don’t divert from the speeches of my mouth.
 Don’t abandon her, and she will guard you.
 Love her, and she will protect you.
 The beginning of wisdom: Acquire Wisdom!
 And above all your acquisitions, acquire Wisdom!¹⁷
 Esteem her highly and she will exalt you.
 She will honor you, if you embrace her.
 She will place on your head a garland of favor,
 she will bestow on you a crown of glory.” (4:1–9)

17. Many commentators (see Clifford, *Proverbs*, 60) argue that v. 7 is a later addition based on the fact that it is missing from the Greek and that it is awkward to the context and made up of phrases found elsewhere. However, it is not so awkward as to be without possible meaning in the text, and its absence from the Greek could have a number of different explanations, including that the Greek translator did not understand it and then dropped it, as Clifford does. Fox (*Proverbs 1–9*, 175) is not convinced v. 7 is original but does point out in its favor that it is part of a chiasmic structure in the passage.

The father again exhorts his son to establish a relationship with Woman Wisdom. Here he uses marital language. He is to love her and esteem her. In return, she will honor, guard, and reward him.

We now turn our attention to the most sustained presentation by Woman Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. In the eighth chapter the narrator, understood to be the father, introduces Woman Wisdom by identifying her location and calling our attention to her speech:

Does not Wisdom cry out;
and Understanding give forth her voice?
At the top of the high places on the path,
at the crossroads she takes her stand.
By the gate before the city,
at the entrances she shouts. (vv. 1–3)

Similar to her first speech, her location is public (1:20–21). Here we have for the first time an emphasis on the elevation of her location (“at the top of the high places”), which, as we move into chapter 9, will prove deeply significant.

The rest of the chapter presents her words as she reveals her character and her actions to them:

I cry out to you, O men;
my voice goes out to the sons of humanity.
Understand prudence, you who are simpleminded;
you fools, take this to heart.
Listen, for I speak noble things,
opening virtuous lips.¹⁸
For my mouth¹⁹ utters the truth,
and my lips despise wickedness.²⁰
All the speeches of my mouth are righteous.²¹
Nothing in them is twisted or perverse.
All of them are straightforward to understanding,
and virtuous for those who seek knowledge.
Take discipline and not silver,
and knowledge more than choice gold.
For wisdom is better than pearls,
and nothing is more delightful than it. (vv. 4–11)

18. Literally, “the opening of my lips is virtuous.”

19. The Hebrew has the more specific “palette” (*hēk*), though that seems a bit too precise a translation for this context.

20. Literally, “the abomination of my lips is wickedness.”

21. Literally, “In righteousness: all the speeches of my mouth.”

She opens her speech to all the men who hear her by admonishing them to pay attention to what she has to say. In particular, she appeals to the simple-minded (or immature) as well as fools. Presumably the wise are already listening to her. Her appeal is based on the ethical rightness of what she has to say. She speaks of noble, virtuous, righteous matters, and she eschews wickedness and perversity. Her words will lead to understanding and knowledge. She also encourages them to listen to her because what she has to say is more valuable than even the most precious metals.

I, Wisdom, dwell with prudence.
 I have found knowledge and discretion.
 Those who fear Yahweh hate evil,
 pride and arrogance, and the path of evil.
 I hate a perverse mouth.
 Advice and resourcefulness belong to me,
 as do understanding and strength.
 By me kings reign,
 and nobles issue just decrees.
 By me rulers rule,
 and princes, all righteous judgments.
 I love those who love me,
 and those who seek me will find me.
 Wealth and honor are with me,
 enduring riches²² and righteousness.
 My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold;
 my yield than choice silver.
 I walk on the way of righteousness,
 in the midst of the trails of justice,
 to cause those who love me to inherit substance,²³
 and I will fill their treasuries. (vv. 12–22)

Woman Wisdom now describes herself by associating herself with prudence, knowledge, discretion (v. 12), and righteousness (v. 20), while distancing herself from pride and perverse speech (v. 13). She has good advice, and therefore people—and in particular, rulers who are in charge of others' lives—are most

22. Or perhaps “negotiable wealth,” according to Hurowitz, “Two Terms,” 252–54. If so, it refers to wealth that can be transported during a trip, perhaps for business purposes. In either case, Woman Wisdom claims to be able to make a person rich.

23. This word *yēš* is unique as a noun in Hebrew. It typically has the sense of a copula “there is” or “there was.” Hurowitz, “Two Terms,” rather argues that it is related to the Akkadian *busu*, which also developed from a verb “there is,” and means “valuables, goods, moveable property.”

effective if they are related to Woman Wisdom (vv. 14–16). She aligns herself with those who fear Yahweh (see above).

This stanza also declares that those who enter into a relationship with Woman Wisdom will benefit not only in skill of living but also in material goods (vv. 18–19, 21). By emphasizing this connection, Woman Wisdom tries to encourage people to enter into a relationship with her.

Yahweh begot me at the beginning of his paths,
 before his works of antiquity.
 From of old I was formed,
 from the beginning, from before the earth.
 When there were no deeps I was brought forth,
 when there were no springs, heavy with water.
 Before the mountains were settled,
 before the hills, I was brought forth.
 At that time the earth and the open country were not made,
 and the beginning of the clods of the world,
 when he established the heavens, I was there,
 when he decreed the horizon on the face of the deep,
 when he strengthened the clouds above;
 when he intensified the fountains of the deep,
 when he set for the sea its decree,
 wherein the water could not pass where he said.²⁴
 I was beside him as a craftsman.²⁵

24. “Where he said” is literally “his mouth.”

25. The translation of this difficult yet important word is much discussed, and relevant bibliography will be cited herein. The consonantal text of the Hebrew is *ʾm-w-n*, and the Masoretes vocalized the word as *ʾāmôn*, which means “craftsman” or “master craftsman.” (For Dahood’s defense of the translation “Master Architect,” see “Proverbs 8,22–31,” 518–19.) However, many readers find this difficult for two reasons. In the first place, Wisdom is never said to actually participate in the acts of creation in this chapter. Second, many people, including myself, would find it troubling if the text presented the picture of a second, separate creator who, along with Yahweh, brought the cosmos into existence. It appears that for these reasons, particularly the second, some scholars, going back at least to Aquila and his Greek translation, repoint the word with a u-vowel, thus *ʾāmūn*, and understand the word as “nursling” or “child.” I will briefly mention yet another approach—namely, that of Scott (“Wisdom in Creation”), where he revocalizes the text as *ʾōmēn* (“binding together”) and translates the phrase “I was at his side a living link.”

Most scholars agree that the meaning of the word could produce either meaning, provided one is open to vocalic emendation. However, it appears the only real reasons for moving away from the MT “craftsman” are theologically motivated. This is usually not satisfactory, but it is true that we should try to understand this text in the context of orthodox Yahwism. Rogers (“Meaning and Significance”) tries to solve the problem by appealing to grammar. He says that we should take the word as appositional to the pronominal suffix, thus “I (Wisdom) was beside him (Yahweh), who is a craftsman.”

My own view may be explained as follows. I agree with Rogers that the word *ʾāmôn* refers to Yahweh, but contra Rogers, I also believe it refers to Woman Wisdom. How so? The answer

I was playing daily,
 laughing before him all the time.
 Laughing with the inhabitants of his earth,
 and playing with the human race. (vv. 22–31)

Verses 22–31 are the most difficult in terms of both translation and content. The footnotes indicate and try to navigate the former. What is clear is that Woman Wisdom here declares her involvement in the creation of the world. No matter the details, the implicit message is that humans should want to know this woman because she, better than anyone, knows how the world works, and thus she is capable of helping us navigate life.

One reason this stanza is so difficult is that the NT uses this chapter to describe Jesus. Thus, through the ages interpreters have felt uncomfortable with the idea that Woman Wisdom appears here to have been created or born herself. We will deal with this issue later (see chap. 15).

No doubt, though, attends the idea that Woman Wisdom was present during the period of the creation of the cosmos. She was present before there were the watery deeps or the mountains. She was there and observed the creation of the heavens themselves. Interestingly, the poet speaks of creation utilizing ancient Near Eastern mythological ideas. This is seen most clearly when God sets a limit to the sea, restricting its location. Here (v. 29) the sea is personified as a force that needs control, very similar to the depiction of Marduk pushing back the sea and instructing “not to let her [Tiamat’s] water escape.”²⁶

It is clear that Woman Wisdom observed creation, but the poet likely goes further and indicates that she also participated in it. The question hinges on the meaning of the Hebrew word *’āmôn* in v. 30. The philology is discussed above in the footnote attached to this verse, and there it can be seen that I think the predominance of evidence lies on the side of a translation like “craftsman” rather than “nursling,” “child,” or some other alternative.

And now, sons, listen to me;
 happy are those who guard my path!
 Listen to discipline, and be wise,
 and don’t avoid it.

to that question rests on the exegesis of Prov. 9:1–6, but anticipating that discussion, I believe that Woman Wisdom is a poetic personification of Yahweh’s wisdom; indeed, as indicated by her house’s location on the high point of the city, Wisdom ultimately represents Yahweh himself.

Fox (“*Amon Again*”) suggests reading *’āmôn* as an infinitive with the meaning “being raised” or “growing up.” The colon would thereby refer to Wisdom’s growing up in the presence of God.

26. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 95, citing *Enuma Elish*, tablet 4, line 140.

Happy are those who listen to me,
 watching daily at my doors,
 guarding my doorposts.
 For those who find me find life,
 and they gain favor from Yahweh.
 Those who offend me do violence to their life;
 all those who hate me love death. (8:32–36)

This magnificent poem of Woman Wisdom ends with what is by now a familiar exhortation to pay attention and have a relationship with her. Those who do so will be happy and will live, whereas those who reject her will suffer and die. The decision whether to embrace Woman Wisdom is truly one of life or death. This choice comes to a head in the final chapter of the first part of the book:

Wisdom built her house;
 she erected her seven pillars.
 She slaughtered her slaughter, mixed her wine.
 She also arranged her tables.
 She sends her maidens; she issues²⁷ an invitation
 from the pinnacle of the heights of the city:
 “Whoever is simpleminded—turn aside here,”
 she says to those who lack heart.
 “Come, eat my food,
 and drink the wine I mixed.
 Abandon simplemindedness and live.
 March on the path of understanding.” (9:1–6)

The narrator introduces the speech of Woman Wisdom by describing her house, her feast, and her invitation. Wisdom constructed her house, and it is a magnificent house, which seems to be the meaning of the seven pillars, a number of completeness and totality. Claims that the seven pillars are a reference to the seven known planets of the day²⁸ or to the seven discourses in the previous chapters²⁹ are possible but speculative. That she has built her house reminds us of the later proverb that describes the wise woman as one who builds her own house instead of tearing it down as the foolish woman does

27. The breakup of the poetic line differs from the MT, since the *athnach* occurs under the verb “issues.” Combined with the question of the significance of the *athnach* is the question of who is the subject of the verb “issues.” We understand the subject to be Woman Wisdom and not the young maidens who are sent out. See McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom*, 46.

28. In Poythress, *Shadow of Christ*, 18.

29. Skehan, “Seven Columns.”

(14:1). She has also prepared a feast by slaughtering animals, thus providing meat, and mixing her wine. A meal of meat and wine was a special meal, a true banquet. Having prepared herself for guests, she then sends out her female servants to invite all the men who are going by. Indeed, considering the pervasiveness of the metaphor of the path and that all men—the addressees of the book of Proverbs—are on a path, we are to consider this an invitation to all who read the book of Proverbs.

At this point we note the location of her house, though we will discuss the implications later. Her house is described as occupying “the pinnacle of the heights of the city,” again emphasizing her location at a high place (see also 8:2).

The invitation is addressed to the simpleminded (immature or naive, Heb. *petî*), who are also referred to as those who “lack heart.” Unlike in modern English, in the OT “heart” refers primarily to the mind and not to the emotions or to courage. The term simpleminded could also be understood and even translated “immature.” Thus, the invitees are neither clearly wise nor foolish. They could go either way. Woman Wisdom wants them to come to her feast.

Even today when we invite someone over for a meal, we do so in order to create a deeper relationship with that person. If anything, in ancient Israel to eat with someone is to create closer bonds with that person. And here, where a woman invites men to dine, there is even a stronger emphasis on relationship building. As McKinlay points out, eating and drinking are sexual metaphors.³⁰ Woman Wisdom wants these men to enter into an intimate relationship with her.

However, before the men, who represent the book’s readers, can respond, they receive a second invitation, this one from Woman Folly.

Woman Folly is boisterous;
 she is simpleminded but does not even know it.
 She sits at the doorway of her house,
 on a seat at the heights of the city.
 She invites those who pass by on the path,
 those going straight on their way.
 “Whoever is simpleminded—turn aside here,”
 she says to those who lack heart.
 “Stolen water is sweet;
 food eaten in secret is pleasant.”
 But they do not know that the departed are there;
 that those invited by her are in the depths of Sheol. (9:13–18)

30. McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom*, 57.

The narrator begins by introducing this second woman, whose name is Folly. She herself is simpleminded but so simpleminded that she is unaware of it. Someone who is simpleminded or immature and knows it can take steps to move toward wisdom, but she lacks any self-awareness. While Woman Wisdom worked to prepare the meal she offered to those who pass by, Woman Folly simply sits at her door. While Woman Wisdom is industrious, Woman Folly is lazy. Indeed, this description of her raises the question whether there actually is a meal at all or whether she is lying. We must also note here—to be explained later—that Woman Folly’s house is also at an elevated location, “at the heights of the city.”

She appeals to the same group as Woman Wisdom: those who pass by on the way. They are here, as earlier, described as “simpleminded” and “those who lack heart”—that is, people who have come to a point of decision. Will they dine with Woman Wisdom, or will they dine with Woman Folly? Woman Folly offers a meal that is stolen and to be eaten in secret, while Woman Wisdom offers her meal in public. The language connected with Woman Folly suggests a kind of secret knowledge gained illegitimately. After Folly’s speech, the narrator notes the dire consequences for those who accept her invitation. They will die and become one of the departed (Heb. *rapā’im*), a shade or departed ancestor. They will find themselves in the depths of Sheol, the shadowy place where all the dead go.³¹

THE CRUCIAL CHOICE

Now that we have considered the main texts that inform us about Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, we should feel the burden of choice. With whom will we dine? Whom will we make an integral part of our life? This is the most fundamental decision we can make. But who are these women? What or whom do they represent?

Their names make it obvious that they are personifications of wisdom and folly, respectively. Indeed, Woman Wisdom, who is the more fully developed figure, embodies all the virtues associated with wisdom. She speaks truth and avoids lies. She hates arrogance. She is industrious, not lazy. The brief description of Woman Folly correlates with the vices associated with foolishness. She is secretive, a thief, and a liar.

So certainly Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly represent wisdom and folly. However, the location of their houses allows us to go further. Their houses

31. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*.

are on the heights, and Woman Wisdom often speaks from the heights. When one asks whose house occupies the highest place in an ancient Israelite, or for that matter ancient Near Eastern, city, the answer is the deity.

Thus, we may go further and say that Woman Wisdom is not simply a personification of God's wisdom but actually represents Yahweh himself. But if that is true, what about Woman Folly? Her house is also on the heights. Woman Folly also represents deity. In her case, she stands for the false gods and goddesses that rival Yahweh for the affection of the Israelites.

The choice is clear. Do we, the readers, choose to dine with Woman Wisdom, who represents Yahweh? Or do we choose to dine with Woman Folly and thus worship a false deity? In this way the book of Proverbs shows that it understands that wisdom and folly are theological categories.

Conclusion: The Nature of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs

Much recent thinking about this subject has suggested that wisdom, as opposed to other biblical traditions, has a secular, or at least cosmopolitan, perspective. Zoltán Schwáb has recently collected and analyzed the comments of a number of scholars who apply the category "secular" to wisdom.³² Here are just three examples he provides:

Wisdom teaching is profoundly secular in that it presents life and history as human enterprise. . . . [Wisdom] consistently places stress on human freedom, accountability, the importance of making decisions. . . . [Wisdom] is concerned with the freedom, power, and responsibility of man to manage his world.³³

The proverbs as such have a universal character. Proverbs can surface anywhere among humankind, just like accounts of creation or the flood. . . . [Proverbs mentioning God] have no specifically theological foundation in an explicitly theological context. Rather, they speak of God in such a manner as would any person without stepping outside of everyday, secular discourse.³⁴

Unfortunately, some preachers also hold this perspective, as represented by this quotation from Willimon:

32. Z. Schwáb, *Toward an Interpretation*, 164–74. McKane (*Prophets and Wise Men; Proverbs*) is often cited as the scholar who first promoted the understanding that early Israelite wisdom was secular. More recently, Fiddes (*Seeing the World*) sees Proverbs as fundamentally and originally secular in approach.

33. Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 81–83.

34. Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom*, 130.

Generally, I dislike the book of Proverbs with its lack of theological content, its long lists of platitudinous advice, its “do this” and “don’t do that.” Pick up your socks. Be nice to salesclerks. It doesn’t hurt to be nice. Proverbs is something like being trapped on a long road trip with your mother, or at least with William Bennett.³⁵

Our understanding of the nature of wisdom in the book of Proverbs is that it is more than practical advice for how to live in the world. Wisdom is ethical and foundationally theological. One cannot be called wise unless one has a proper relationship with Yahweh (Prov. 1:7 and the figure of Woman Wisdom).³⁶

This theological understanding of wisdom means that even those proverbs that don’t mention God in the second part of the book (chaps. 10–31) are theological. We end with two examples:

A wise son makes a father glad,
and a foolish son is the sorrow of his mother. (Prov. 10:1)

A slack palm makes poverty;
a determined hand makes rich. (Prov. 10:4)

On the surface, these two proverbs seem to be observations with no theological substance. However, they must be read in context that includes the first nine chapters and in particular the decision offered in Prov. 9 whether to dine with Woman Wisdom or Woman Folly, both of whom represent deities. Once the reader recognizes this context, then we must consider Prov. 10:1 to make a theological statement along the following lines. Those who bring joy to their parents are wise, meaning that they are acting like a proper worshiper of the true God. However, those who bring grief to their parents are acting like idolaters. In the case of Prov. 10:4, hard workers are wise and thus in relationship with Woman Wisdom, who represents God, while lazy persons are acting like they are in relationship with an idol.

Thus, Proverbs makes it clear that wisdom is neither secular nor universal, but rather theological and particular to Israel. We now turn to Ecclesiastes to see if our understanding of wisdom rings true for this perplexing book.

35. Willimon, *Pastor*, 255–56, quoted in Bland, *Proverbs and the Formation of Character*, 8.

36. In this we agree with Weeks (*Early Israelite Wisdom*, 73): “The theory that early Israelite wisdom was a secular tradition has been examined in some depth and found to be wanting in almost every respect.”