# PROVERBS & ECCLESIASTES

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BrazosPress
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Paperback edition published 2015
ISBN 978-1-58743-388-7

Printed in the United States of America



The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:
Treier, Daniel J., 1972–
Proverbs & Ecclesiastes / Daniel J. Treier.
p. cm. — (Brazos theological commentary on the Bible)
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
ISBN 978-1-58743-148-7 (cloth)
1. Bible. O.T. Proverbs—Commentaries. 2. Bible. O.T. Ecclesiastes—Commentaries. I. Title.
II. Title: Proverbs and Eclesiastes.
BS1465.53.T75 2011
223′.707—dc22 2010051565

To Amy

Walking through life with you,
I encounter the truth of Proverbs 31:10–31 and
Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 with profound joy

# CONTENTS

# SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

> The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.[1]

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. "Anyone," he says, "who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures."[2] Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay "On the Interpretation of scripture," he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. "The simple words of that book," writes Jowett of the modern reader, "he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times." The modern interpreter wishes to "clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon" the words of Scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis "would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day."[3] The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called "the original spirit and intention of the authors."[4] We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks

2. *Against the Heretics* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. Ibid., 340.

interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a "strawy letter," for, as he said, "it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it."[5] In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.[6] To this end, "the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation."[7] The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine's view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapide, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian

5. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.
6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.
7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. "War is too important," it has been said, "to leave to the generals."

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, "The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart."[8] This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of

8. *Sermon* 212.2.

historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest

fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Since Proverbs and Ecclesiastes call us into concrete communal relationships, it is especially important to acknowledge others who contributed to this project. Rusty Reno, Rodney Clapp, and the editorial board of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible took great risk in having me write for this series and then graciously pushed me to take worthwhile risks beyond my native inclinations. Whatever complaints I would like to nurse, "faithful are the wounds of a friend": Rusty's editorial crucible made this a far better book, and I will never be the same as a writer. David Aiken was very helpful in the editorial process, and John Muether generated the indexes. For several years, student assistants—Barry Jones, Carrie Littauer, Lissy Verseput, and especially Uche Anizor, Emily Bergen, and Steve Pardue—handled numerous research details, including heroic attempts to uncover resources on liturgical usage and Jewish exegesis.

Colleagues in Old Testament studies, particularly Michael Graves, Richard Schultz, and Andrew Hill, gave not only encouragement during this endeavor but also concrete help. Michael commented on the entire manuscript and stoked my courage. Richard offered comments on key portions and deserves undying gratitude for welcoming me to "Advanced Hebrew Exegesis: Ecclesiastes" without humiliation for my impoverished language skills. His helpful perspectives also appear from draft forms of forthcoming commentaries. Craig Bartholomew and Amy Plantinga Pauw likewise graciously gave previews of their commentary efforts, with Craig providing his valuable manuscript ahead of publication. All the folks thanked here should of course be exonerated for occasions on which this book reflects my stubborn and/or theologically adventuresome spirit.

Wheaton College granted a course release through the G. W. Aldeen Memorial Fund and then a sabbatical during which the project finally neared completion. I am very grateful to administrators Jeff Greenman, Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, and Stan Jones for their generous support. Others connected to the college who either read portions of the manuscript, enhanced my cultural resources, and/

or sustained me in this weariness of the flesh include Alan Jacobs, Jon Laansma, Tim Larsen, Kevin Vanhoozer, doctoral students at the systematic theology colloquium, and others from the Café Padre gang. Michael Allen commented on the entire manuscript—at multiple draft stages, no less—offering inestimable resources and encouragement. Without these folks, particularly Michael, I could never have finished.

It remains to thank the family members who are so integral to pursuing the path of wisdom, for which especially my parents and grandparents never stop praying. Thanks to the birth of daughter Anna, I have encountered anew the human delights and limitations of which Proverbs and Ecclesiastes speak. Through my wife, Amy, to whom this book is dedicated, God further confronts my misguided scholarly ambitions while making the joys of Prov. 18:22 concrete: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, / and obtains favor from the LORD." This proverb is true in myriad ways, far beyond Amy teaching me to embrace finitude joyfully. But I am all the more grateful that she and Anna love me through the stresses of learning about human toil.

# ABBREVIATIONS

## Bibliographic

| | |
|---|---|
| → | indicates a cross-reference to commentary on a passage in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes |
| ANF | The Ante-Nicene Fathers. 10 vols. Reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957. |
| FC | Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947–. |
| NPNF[1] | A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, first series. 14 vols. Reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956. |
| NPNF[2] | A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series. 14 vols. Reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956. |
| PTA | Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen. Edited by D. Hagedorn et al. Bonn: Habelt, 1968–. |
| WSA | Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-First Century. Edited by J. E. Rotelle. Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1995. |

## Bible Versions

| | |
|---|---|
| ESV | English Standard Version |
| KJV | King James Version |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| TNIV | Today's New International Version |

## Biblical Books

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts | Acts |
| Amos | Amos |
| 1 Chr. | 1 Chronicles |
| 2 Chr. | 2 Chronicles |
| Col. | Colossians |
| 1 Cor. | 1 Corinthians |
| 2 Cor. | 2 Corinthians |
| Dan. | Daniel |
| Deut. | Deuteronomy |
| Eccl. | Ecclesiastes |
| Eph. | Ephesians |
| Esth. | Esther |
| Exod. | Exodus |
| Ezek. | Ezekiel |
| Ezra | Ezra |
| Gal. | Galatians |
| Gen. | Genesis |
| Hab. | Habakkuk |
| Hag. | Haggai |
| Heb. | Hebrews |
| Hos. | Hosea |
| Isa. | Isaiah |
| Jas. | James |
| Jer. | Jeremiah |
| Job | Job |
| Joel | Joel |
| John | John |
| 1 John | 1 John |
| 2 John | 2 John |
| 3 John | 3 John |
| Jonah | Jonah |
| Josh. | Joshua |
| Jude | Jude |
| Judg. | Judges |
| 1 Kgs. | 1 Kings |
| 2 Kgs. | 2 Kings |
| Lam. | Lamentations |
| Lev. | Leviticus |
| Luke | Luke |
| Mal. | Malachi |
| Mark | Mark |
| Matt. | Matthew |
| Mic. | Micah |
| Nah. | Nahum |
| Neh. | Nehemiah |
| Num. | Numbers |
| Obad. | Obadiah |
| 1 Pet. | 1 Peter |
| 2 Pet. | 2 Peter |
| Phil. | Philippians |
| Phlm. | Philemon |
| Prov. | Proverbs |
| Ps. | Psalms |
| Rev. | Revelation |
| Rom. | Romans |
| Ruth | Ruth |
| 1 Sam. | 1 Samuel |
| 2 Sam. | 2 Samuel |
| Song | Song of Songs |
| 1 Thess. | 1 Thessalonians |
| 2 Thess. | 2 Thessalonians |
| 1 Tim. | 1 Timothy |
| 2 Tim. | 2 Timothy |
| Titus | Titus |
| Zech. | Zechariah |
| Zeph. | Zephaniah |

# INTRODUCTION

## *Sage Theological Commentary*

The temptation is overwhelming for commentaries on Ecclesiastes to begin brazenly, by citing Eccl. 12:12b: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." The commentators acknowledge the obvious irony of writing still another book on Ecclesiastes, yet, after appearing to be appropriately sheepish, they proceed anyway. Lately there is no end to the making of methodological prefaces either. Accordingly, it was this author's original intention to avoid such weariness. Hermeneutics, which theologians engage both too much and too little, must not substitute for exegesis.

However, two rather different commentaries appear within this volume, which calls for explanation. Moreover, Eccl. 12:9–14 presents a paradigm for the act of commentary itself. In this passage we have third-person commentary on the character and work of Qoheleth, the book's main voice, describing the Sage's approach to preceding wisdom tradition(s): "Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly" (12:9–10). The ensuing reflections in the epilogue to Ecclesiastes interpret the rest of the book positively as wisdom. Via emphasis on fearing God and keeping the commandments, Ecclesiastes relates not only to Proverbs but also to the Torah—divine instruction for living—in the rest of scripture. Therefore the epilogue's portrayal of Qoheleth as a wise collector and purveyor of divine truth can guide contemporary commentary on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

## Character

The portrayal begins by ascribing wisdom to Qoheleth. For this reason the term "Sage" is preferable to "Teacher" or "Preacher," since these usual translations have modern professional connotations that could mislead English readers. Ecclesiastes certainly evinces skepticism regarding elements of wisdom, as that tradition is typically depicted in critical Old Testament scholarship. Nevertheless, Eccl. 12:9 is not ironic in predicating wisdom to the Sage, since the argument of this passage needs to bolster the book's canonical propriety. The text is counteracting potential skepticism, not winking at it. Therefore we have before us ideals toward which a theological commentator should aspire. The textual ethos—its tone, subtexts, judgment, and so forth—should manifest and encourage the fear of God.

Wisdom denotes not just the subject matter of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but also the proper pursuit of interpretation. Sage commentary therefore attends not only to the biblical text and its author(s), but also to its readers' contexts and responses. Hence, in a particular sense the adjective "devotional" would be a compliment for the present work. Sage commentary ought to reflect reverence for scripture, not as an end in itself but as the means by which we hear God speaking in order to live.

Wisdom literature seeks to align the character of its readers with the divine design in creation. The Torah, as embodied in the Pentateuch, orders the life of the people of Israel around their covenant with God. Therefore its literary forms are primarily laws and narratives. The narratives provide the history of salvation. The laws provide the civic framework and cultus for the community, along with the moral boundaries for life in covenant with God. But if laws are to be more than guardrails, they require prudence for particular people to implement, especially across time and place. Hypotheses about the development of wisdom via schools, possibly associated with royal courts—and how this might relate to the development of Torah—are only speculative. In terms of canonical significance, though, wisdom literature addresses the need for prudence to help the divine teaching of Torah result in communities of character. Though rooted in God's created world, wisdom material does not depart from the covenant. Beyond setting up the cultic practices and specific identity of Israel, wisdom literature relates God's people to all of creation and to the learning of outsiders; beyond setting out Israel's civic order, wisdom fosters communal life; beyond setting forth basic moral order, it builds personal character and judgment. The affinities between Deuteronomy and Proverbs, for instance, suggest complementary harmony, rather than competition, between wisdom and Torah. Rightly read, wisdom presumes the salvation-historical narratives as the framework within which Torah can be simultaneously personalized and situated within community and cosmos. In this way wisdom literature orders the particular narratives of ordinary lives around salvation history, guiding members of the covenant community toward the fear of the Lord.

## Clarity and Conciseness

Not unrelated to the textual ethos is the clarity of its logos. According to Eccl. 12:9 once again, the Sage focused on teaching "the people." This is a reminder that the theological commentator should not address academic colleagues as an exclusive—or, in the present case, even primary—audience. The Sage "arrang[ed] . . . proverbs" (12:9) and "sought . . . pleasing words" (12:10). Thus it is appropriate to strive for delightful rather than boring writing. The goal is to convey "truth plainly" (12:10) in a way that people can remember for the sake of prodding and guidance (12:11). Moreover, we should expect interpretative judgments to coincide with the promotion of virtue. Moral exhortation is appropriate in a commentary that engages the text as scripture, although such exhortation should not be so blunt as to detract from proper esthetic sensibilities (12:10–11). The sharpness ought to lie in memorable divine address, not authorial moralizing.

Moving from 12:11 to 12:12, we encounter a somewhat abrupt change in tone. The editor warns against moving beyond the sayings of the wise, kept in mind for the sake of living well. Study eventually degenerates into tedium. And not just tedium—proliferation of various voices and complex ideas can put us in moral danger. Concrete implications follow for the present commentary, both in its writing and in the reading of others.

The discussion of Proverbs is not expository in detail like the treatment of Ecclesiastes. This decision stems partly from assigned word counts, but also from the nature of the material. Ecclesiastes begs for close engagement, as themes subtly build on their various appearances and on each other. Though not a linear argument, neither is the text a slapdash hodgepodge in which one occurrence of "vanity" is the same as another. Literary context matters greatly for how we understand the oft-bold declarations. Ecclesiastes elicits careful reflection and different points of identification with the Sage's quest. Hence occasionally meandering commentary matches substance with style: Ecclesiastes itself meanders, and effort should be made to convey this. In a haunting essay, R. R. Reno cautions against "drawing out" theology from the text, since focusing on doctrinal inference can produce conceptual abstraction from scriptural language.[1] By extension, the present commentary tries to avoid abstraction from the dialectical style of Ecclesiastes as well, thus rejecting an overly simplistic rhetorical line that leaves no conundrums intact.[2]

Meanwhile, Proverbs has significant stretches in which the literary connections are either tenuous or nonexistent. Scholarly inventions to the contrary are usually

1. R. R. Reno, "Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Theological Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 385–408.

2. Many readers, of course, use a commentary sporadically for preaching and teaching, not reading the volume straight through. Cross-references to other relevant passages in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are thus indicated with an arrow (→) to reduce repetition.

too clever by half. As a collection of various wisdom materials, Proverbs itself invites multiple thematic intersections between them. As proverbs are encountered, they resonate with other lessons one has already learned. While Ecclesiastes contains numerous proverbs as well, these are usually ordered in small sections contributing to a larger movement of thought. By contrast, Proverbs overall creates much less demand for linear engagement or exposition.

The commentary on Prov. 1–9 treats these chapters sequentially, although more briefly and less thoroughly than Ecclesiastes. The overarching theme of "two ways" becomes the theological framework within which the exposition fits. A lengthy subsection addresses the passage fraught with significance for later christological debates (8:22–36). In Prov. 10–29, where we largely encounter strings of proverbs, moral frameworks from the Christian tradition structure the presentation of material, before Prov. 30–31 closes the book. On the one hand, we seek to become people of virtue—four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues. On the other hand, we must learn to avoid seven "deadly sins" or capital vices. This mode of organization allows for illustrative and thematic, instead of comprehensive, engagement with the panoply of individual proverbs. The book of Proverbs by nature invites the use of external paradigms to appropriate its teaching. As the exposition will show, the classic virtues and vices do justice to that teaching. Not only do their contents cover the array of proverbial ethics; the classification of virtues as cardinal or theological enables the reader to engage how Proverbs relates to nature and grace. And the various classifications of interrelationships between capital vices hold true to the moral complexity of Proverbs.

## Criticism

Conciseness also entails that no commentary can do everything, so here discussions of historical-critical scholarship are limited to forms of philology that serve theological proclamation. Readers seeking thorough exegetical treatment of each proverb or passage in Proverbs have other fine commentaries from which to choose. This has not always been the case. Now, however, we have not only an increasing number of commentaries treating Proverbs carefully, but also commentators exuding a measure of theological interest. Thus I gratefully see no need to reinvent such wheels.

Still, theological interest in a critical commentary is not the same as a theological commentary. Quite often, learned biblical scholars carefully engage textual particulars in pursuit of theological answers. Yet, when it comes to allowing theology to shape the questions or to suggest possible answers while precluding certain alternatives, there is wariness or downright refusal. The movement proceeds in one linear direction, from biblical text to theology. A modest contribution of the present commentary as theological, then, is to sift through the exegetical cornucopia for essential bounty without methodologically holding off theology until dessert or

even an after-dinner snack. Furthermore, the reflective movement proceeds back and forth within *scripture*—not just an isolated biblical text—and thus between scripture and theology. The canon is not merely a source of possible historical parallels, but primarily a treasure chest of complementary teaching to proclaim.

Ecclesiastes has frequently garnered more theological attention than Proverbs. Its existential and cultural resonances elicit more open-ended forms of engagement, and so numerous books have been my teachers, whether or not they come to prominent citation. Just as I do not reinvent the wheels of exegetical detail regarding Proverbs, so also I try not to regurgitate the theological history of others' engagement with Ecclesiastes, in particular Ellul's 1990 unique achievement.[3] Ellul states early on that he studied Ecclesiastes for decades, yet resolved not to read secondary literature in the years immediately before he actually wrote his commentary. While youth and time constraints prevented following this model entirely, I sought to do so in my own way. Many faithful, gifted authors will therefore look in vain for direct engagement with their work.

Nevertheless, for both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes I refer frequently to a limited number of so-called historical-critical commentaries—for Proverbs, Longman 2006 and Waltke 2004–2005; for Ecclesiastes, Bartholomew 2009, Krüger 2004, and Longman 1998—providing in-text citations only when reasonably sure that a distinctively creative insight was in play. Otherwise I depended on them to mediate the most important elements from additional scholars. The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Wright 2005) played an analogous role with respect to much of the patristic material cited, proving to be an invaluable pointer to primary texts. These reading choices were intentionally representative of different regions and approaches—such as finding more or less structure in the Proverbs collections and having more or less positive approaches to Ecclesiastes. Doubtless many alternatives were possible, but I sought to serve busy pastors and laypeople by imitating them in accepting limitations: one can read only so much. According to the Sage, one *should* read only so much. The Sage's pursuit of wisdom served, ultimately, his presentation of wisdom. The theological commentator today undertakes a task that must eventually result in proclamation of what he or she hears as the word of God. We cannot go on listening forever to secondary voices before venturing our own, however tentative, speech.[4]

3. In addition, for a masterful survey of the history of effects of Ecclesiastes, see Christianson 2007; for its hermeneutical treatment, see Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, Analecta Biblica 139 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1998); for resonances with film, see Robert K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); and for its postmodern relevance, see Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

4. David H. Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) reflects important interaction with wisdom literature but came into my hands after submission of this manuscript to the publisher—thus, unfortunately, too late to engage in detail.

Commentary stands in an odd position between what we might call first and second iterations of a text. Bound up with ascertaining what the text even is and how to render it in translation—whether literally in a language or metaphorically in mind—commentary is a practice of direct encounter with the material. However, commentators are inevitably aware of mediation—prior translations and commentaries on the one hand, a reading audience on the other. The commentary's audience encounters the text even more indirectly, reading for someone else's understanding that mediates the text itself to them. In this way we can discern an analogy with practices of the church: there is scripture reading on the one hand, preaching on the other. Even scripture reading involves translation, but certainly preaching involves a stronger dimension of mediation. The preacher stands at this awkward bridge—encountering scripture and mediating its message to others, all the while encountering a tradition of interpretation (more and less consciously). So it is, likewise, with the theological commentator, who pursues this task as an act of participation in tradition(s) that mediate the text.

I belabor this point to emphasize the commentator's goal that the text should remain primary, with his or her creativity modestly in the background. Tradition is inescapable and fruitful because the text is in one sense inexhaustible, so the commentator's goal must be that the prominence of the latter might become greater, and the former less (Eccl. 12:12). That is, faithful tradition ministers the message of the text more than drawing attention to itself. A commentary points toward the founding text and away from itself all the more, since no commentator's work claims normative influence within a tradition until it has stood a test of time. My goal is therefore to imitate the Sage in sifting through the wealth of words connected to Ecclesiastes for what is particularly pleasing and theologically edifying. It is no shame if the present work reflects little of me, much of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and many good words said about them.

Why, then, does this theologically ordered commentary engage the historical-critical tradition at all? A first response concerns the difficulty of definitions: both "historical criticism" and "theological interpretation of scripture" are notoriously tricky to pinpoint. So-called precritical exegetes appropriated the scholarly resources of their day and surprisingly often challenged what many would expect to be churchly assumptions. The point is not to speculate that patristic commentators would be historical critics if they were alive now, but rather to recognize that historical and literary methods are not intrinsically antagonistic to theological reading. The root question concerns what is servant and what is master—which conception reigns regarding the nature of the Bible and the aims of its reading.

A second response stems specifically from Ecclesiastes once again. It is difficult to ignore "the way the words go," given the positive portrayal of the Sage's attention to words. From early on, the history of interpretation has involved both focusing on the Sage's persona(s) even more than his words and confronting some basic hermeneutical dilemmas over and over (Christianson 2007: 18). Thus it would be arbitrary either to ignore classic interpreters *or* to stop this ongoing conversation

prior to the modern critical tradition. Though the rest of the scriptural canon provides a fertile field of meaning for Ecclesiastes, its unique words, uses of words, grammatical features, and so forth call for philological expertise. Some experts provide resources friendlier to theological interpretation than others; it is arguable that such believing criticism even stands within a tributary of the contemporary stream called theological exegesis. Selective engagement with critical, philological scholarship can supplement large deficits in my own expertise without being co-opted by the speculative elements of many historical hypotheses. Avoiding conjectures about date, setting, and the like is especially important regarding Ecclesiastes, for which these hypotheses have consistently tenuous connections with the text itself.

## Canon and Christ

To sum up, this commentary counts as theological by hearing Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as words from God and about God, within the one word of God. The assumed audience therefore embraces any readers—scholarly, pastoral, lay—who wish to explore what it means to apply theological commitments operationally, not just notionally or methodologically, to the reading of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The goal is not just to derive theological commitments from these texts at the end of the reading process, as important as that is. More boldly, with prayerful vigilance, appealing to Christian doctrine can foster, rather than hinder, the scriptures having their say. Though I write as an evangelical Protestant—which influences questions asked, illustrations used, even books regarded as canonical, in ways beyond my full awareness—Catholic and Orthodox readers likewise share the commitments of Nicene Christianity prominent here. Others outside such Christian orthodoxy are also welcome to join this exploratory journey of theological reading. All are welcome to criticize, not just celebrate: "Iron sharpens iron, / and one person sharpens the wits of another" (Prov. 27:17).

As scriptural, these texts present words *from* God, but not in an easy manner—so this commentary notes particularly at the beginning of Ecclesiastes. As scriptural, these books also present words *about* God, although again not always directly. For, as wisdom texts, they concern themselves primarily with the lives of particular human beings set within the contexts of the created cosmos and the covenant community. The explicit subject matter is frequently anthropological. Yet, if knowledge of God and true knowledge of self coinhere, then Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are no less theological than other scriptural texts, even if this is less explicit.

No theory of spiritual interpretation fully determines how this theological knowledge arises, in advance of engaging the textual details. Commitment to character formation, mentioned above, elicits the extension of the literal sense to apply to faith, hope, and charity—what ancient interpreters pursued as allegorical,

anagogical, and tropological senses. The chief complication involves properly finding belief about Christ in these Old Testament books and then allowing such belief to shape their interpretation further. Proverbs 8 and other wisdom texts, along with the persona of "Solomon" in Ecclesiastes, clearly raise questions of possible convergence with New Testament Christology. Beyond these particulars, two rules of thumb seem prudent.

First, any Old Testament pointers must remain partial and indirect, in order to fit the structure of biblical salvation history. Therefore, we should look not only for persons, institutions, and events that positively correspond to ultimate fulfillment in Christ and his church—what often goes today under the rubric of typology—but also for ways in which human realities are inversely related to Christ. What, in other words, are the human callings and hopes that have not yet become reality? In Proverbs and Ecclesiastes we learn about Christ not only from what Solomon was but also from what he was supposed to be; Christology accords with wisdom yet addresses folly.

Second, because we have wisdom material that *is* christologically relevant, prudence demands restraint in the rest of the texts. There is no need to force christological connections into particular words or items—via the sort of external, symbolic logic that moderns often label allegory—since the message of the literal sense can be drawn coherently into the larger canonical narrative. Complex and controversial terms like "typology" and "allegory" aside, the point is that figural reading usually recognizes the figure of Jesus by implication from extending the text's literal sense into the future, only rarely by reading Christ into isolated details. When the latter occurs (e.g., Eccl. 4:9–12), there should be an element of mystery in the Old Testament text that seems unaddressed without the unfolding of further revelation it anticipates.

Ultimately, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are read in fullness only as part of the *one* word of God we must hear. This means reading them as scripture, comprising together—with the rest of the biblical canon—one book. Its complex unity requires acknowledging tensions, so that in the present case neither Proverbs nor Ecclesiastes, taken to extremes, may stand on its own. Together, however, these books provide checks and balances whereby the truth may be properly heard as their distinctive voices operate both antiphonally and polyphonically (→Eccl. 12:9). More broadly, this affirmation of the oneness of the word of God means reading scripture as witnessing to God's final speech-act in Jesus Christ. Here again Proverbs and Ecclesiastes confront us with unique challenges, since only some of their subject matter directly refers to Israel's hope for the blessing of the nations. Yet these wisdom books' discernment of and struggle over the nature of God's creation can, by grace, depict both the shape of what Jesus Christ came to redeem and a sketch of why that redemption is so necessary.

# PROVERBS

# TWO WAYS

## PROVERBS 1–9

Roland Murphy suggests that the history of interpretation of Proverbs involves "benign neglect," with the book serving "as little more than an 'enforcer' for moral guidance."[1] After all, there is a relative dearth of surviving classical commentaries—with the intriguing exception of Philip Melanchthon producing various volumes on the book in the sixteenth century—and modern, critical scholars prioritize the Torah over Proverbs for Israelite ethics. Even modern commentaries on Proverbs were relatively few until the last couple of decades. Yet the present commentary begins with another side of the story: Proverbs influenced the Christian pattern of thought right from the church's beginning.

### The Basic Framework

As evidence for this claim, consider the *Didache*, the so-called Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, which provides Christian instruction from as early as the second century, possibly even the first. The manual begins as follows: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways" (*Didache* 1.1).[2] The twofold commandment to love God and neighbor starts the explication of the way of life, leading into elements of the

1. Roland E. Murphy, "Proverbs and Theological Exegesis," in *The Hermeneutical Quest: Essays in Honor of James Luther Mays on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Donald G. Miller (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), 87–88.

2. Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 251.

Sermon on the Mount about loving one's enemies and giving to others. The next chapter appeals to several of the Ten Commandments. It might be tempting to dismiss the *Didache* as a law-oriented rather than wisdom-oriented source, given some of these legal elements. Yet, although the text soon unfolds God's law in many respects, the commands are not simply "do not" prohibitions but instead character-driven exhortations: "Be not [such-and-such a person]." Ensuing themes such as judging righteously and teaching youths the fear of God clearly resonate with Proverbs. Rather than treating the *Didache* as merely Torah-like, it would be better to acknowledge the degree to which its harmony of legal and sapiential elements parallels the scriptures.

Aaron Milavec proposes that the *Didache* be called "The Training of the Twelve Apostles," since it apparently presumes a one-on-one, apprentice-to-master relationship of discipleship, probably for Gentile converts in particular.[3] This training privileged orality,[4] as do proverbs. The decision to structure the material around the two ways reflects Jewish traditions that persisted into early Christianity. Famously, Ps. 1 contrasts "the way of the righteous" with "the way of the wicked." Jeremiah 21:8 juxtaposes "the way of life and the way of death." The blessings-and-curses structure in Deuteronomy (e.g., 11:26–28) is similarly binary. Jesus contrasts the broad path to destruction with the narrow path to life (Matt. 7:13–14), so that his followers dubbed their movement "the Way," according to a number of passages in the book of Acts.[5]

The *Didache* appropriates the two-ways framework to prepare catechumens for Christian baptism. This is the means by which children and adult converts publicly enter into covenant with the triune God of Israel, being joined with the Son of God in his death and resurrection while the Holy Spirit thereby connects them to the church. Christian faith kills the old self walking the way of death and makes alive the new self, created in Christ Jesus to pursue the true way of life. As the two-ways tradition developed after Proverbs, focus increased on the in-breaking of divine judgment and salvation. With the end of the ages dawning in Christ, who poured out the Spirit for making us wise unto salvation, Gal. 5:17–25 provides an instructive New Testament bridge to the *Didache*: a duality of Spirit versus flesh (in the sense of weak, earth-bound, sinful existence, not simply the body); a catalog of virtues and vices; and an eschatological incentive, within which God's in-breaking future of judgment and salvation shapes moral and spiritual life.[6]

After the *Didache* begins by setting forth the way of life, warnings appear against the way of death and false teachers who promote it. It would be easy to

3. Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 47.

4. Ibid., 41.

5. Ibid., 45.

6. Especially Gal. 5:21b but also 5:24; so M. Jack Suggs, "The Christian Two Ways Tradition: Its Antiquity, Form, and Function," in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen P. Wikgren*, ed. David E. Aune (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 69.

think that succeeding chapters change the subject, since they address a variety of churchly and pastoral practices with very concrete instructions and prohibitions. However, some of this material offers wisdom regarding how to discern true teachers from false ones, for which money is a chief concern. Hence we never stray so far from Proverbs-type material as one might think. Without entering into historical debates over the two-ways tradition, the larger point is that the mindset of Proverbs does not lie far off the beaten path of early Christian teaching. Possibly we should say this the other way: early Christian teaching continues in the canonical trajectory that Proverbs helps to set. Its demand for us to become wise as an outgrowth of fearing the Lord finds parallels throughout the New Testament. Early Christian texts do not separate law from wisdom, or individual from community formation, in the ways that modern form critics might prefer.

Beyond the explicit framing of the *Didache* around the two ways, there is the added consideration that much patristic exegesis never resulted in a commentary as such. Instead, early Christian interpretation of scripture poured forth in sermons, catechesis, and the like. In this way much patristic material remains connected to Proverbs, appealing regularly to its wisdom in ways that are appropriate to its genre. Despite the absence of formal commentary, Proverbs is not as foreign to Christian theology as are modern scholarly assumptions about what constitutes theology and whether the book meets that standard. Not only may theology transcend the systematic genre so familiar in the modern West; it may also broaden beyond theology proper (regarding the divine attributes) to include the economy of divine action (and thus the privileges and responsibilities of creatures). Insofar as Proverbs treats ethics in the context of the fear of the Lord, the book is theological whether or not it labors to develop a systematic doctrine of God, for Proverbs instead presupposes a body of teaching about God's character and will.

A few centuries after the *Didache*, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Born around AD 480, Boethius rose to prominence in the Roman Empire, though he eventually fell into disfavor and was falsely accused of conspiracy. While in prison he authored his paean to wisdom before death in 524. The *Consolation* unfolds in five books. Early in book 1, Philosophy appears as a woman to the despairing Boethius. Since Philosophy etymologically points to love of wisdom, we recognize a striking parallel to Proverbs, wherein Lady Wisdom appears to woo us away from Dame Folly. Boethius's *Consolation* therefore extends the sapiential two-ways trajectory of the *Didache*, offering an additional form of early Christian literary parallels to Proverbs.

Initially Philosophy calls Boethius out of self-pity, noting the consistent persecution that seekers of wisdom have undergone over the centuries. Boethius responds with a harbinger of issues to come: his complaint is not about the persecution, which should be expected; instead he is frustrated over the evil of its success

(*Consolation* 1.4 [153]).[7] Ironically, common opinion assumed Boethius's guilt precisely because of an ingrained retribution principle: if he suffers, there must be a reason (1.4 [157]). At this point the book signals that it will address not merely the subject matter of Proverbs, but also the tensions with wisdom that are evoked by Ecclesiastes: Why do bad things happen to good people?

Philosophy announces its goal: "I seek not so much a library with its walls ornamented with ivory and glass, as the storeroom of your mind, in which I have laid up not books, but what makes them of any value, the opinions set down in my books in times past" (1.5 [163]). The goal is reorientation of Boethius's inward compass, to be tugged into line with the truth handed down by faithful tradition. Proverbs likewise pursues fidelity of heart—"the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7)—to the best of tradition (its primary address is to "the young"; 1:4). "Men's minds are obviously such that when they lose true opinions they have to take up false ones, and then a fog arises from these false ideas, which obscures that true vision" (Boethius 1.7 [171]). There is no neutrality: there are only two ways of thinking and living. Ecclesiastes comes circuitously to the same conclusion: "Remember your creator in the days of your youth. . . . Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. . . . Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (Eccl. 12:1, 12, 13).

Book 2 takes up Boethius's concern over his loss of good fortune: "You have given yourself over to fortune's rule: you must accommodate yourself to your mistress's ways. Will you really try to stop the whirl of her turning wheel? Why, you are the biggest fool alive—if it once stop, it ceases to be the wheel of fortune" (2.1 [179]). Sounding like Ecclesiastes in confronting human insatiability, Philosophy provides a counterweight to many readings of Proverbs on retribution. According to such extreme scholarly portrayals, Proverbs simplistically suggests that good people or actions result almost automatically in good consequences, and so too bad people or actions get just what they deserve. Later on, Proverbs itself will counteract this portrayal at a number of points. But for now, one piece of the puzzle is strikingly clear in the *Consolation* (2.2 [185]) right along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—namely, money cannot buy happiness:

> Should Plenty pour from cornucopia full
> As much in riches as the sand
> Stirred up by wind-whipped seas, or as the countless stars
> That shine in a clear night sky,
> And never stay her hand,
> Still would mankind not cease
> Complaining of their wretchedness.
> Even were God with much gold prodigal,

7. Square brackets contain page numbers from Boethius, *The Theological Tractates; The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester; Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

> Answering men's prayers,
> And heaped bright honours on those wanting them,
> Their gains would seem to them
> Nothing: ever their cruel gain-devouring greed
> Opens new maws. What curbs
> Could check within firm bounds this headlong lust,
> When even in those whose wealth is overflowing
> The thirst for gain still burns?
> He is never rich
> Who trembles and sighs, thinking himself in need.

The wise person does not conclude that riches constitute good fortune. Not only does the sand provide an inadequate foundation, but so also does the mountaintop, by subjecting a house to high winds. The wise person builds a house on the low rock (Boethius 2.4 [199]), as Jesus teaches (Matt. 7:24–27).

So Boethius needs to learn contentment, seeking the measure of goods appropriate to his identity. As a human being, he reduces himself below God's esteem for him if he clings to earthly goods (2.5 [205]). Similar considerations pertain, beyond riches, to power and prominent offices. After concluding book 2 with a song suggesting that love is what makes the world go round (2.8 [227]), the *Consolation* therefore treats true happiness in book 3: "The most sacred kind of good is that of friendship, a good reckoned not a matter of fortune but of virtue" (3.2 [235]). Rival possibilities by which we seek happiness, such as fame, fortune, and bodily satisfactions, undergo deconstruction. They fail to last and deny true freedom by making us wrongly depend on factors outside God and ourselves. Happiness comes from the supreme good; our recognition that these other goods are deficient requires that a perfect good exists by which to measure the rest (3.10 [275]). All other goods—to the extent that they are good—must not be separate rivals but instead aspects of participation in the one good, God, whose simplicity brings unity to all the rest (3.10 [281, 289]).

More controversially, Boethius's Philosophy concludes that everything must be seeking this good, at least by nature and in principle, even when defectively seeking this or that worldly good. "There is therefore nothing . . . which while remaining true to its nature would try to go against God" (3.12 [303]). Standing behind this conclusion is a concept of order such as we have in Proverbs. It is not that the world lacks fools, but such folly is out of step with our God-given nature—inconsistent with what we see happening when the world around us works according to divine design.

Yet evil people and fools often seem to get on quite well; we can hear echoes of the Sage musing in Ecclesiastes. Why does God not make the way of the world more straightforwardly conducive to virtue alone? This is the preoccupation of books 4–5 in the *Consolation*. Lengthy exposition of Philosophy's answer to Boethius lies beyond our present purpose, which is simply to affirm that the moral life, for which Proverbs exhorts and equips us, readily raises theological questions.