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NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS PROVERBS: ON THE BENCH OR IN THE STARTING LINE-UP?

Where does Proverbs fit into your Bible? It is obviously wisdom literature, but why is it there in the first place? It is a book you tend to ignore as a theologian, and even as a practising Christian. If, like many of us, you read the Bible regularly a book at a time, then Proverbs is hard going. It is nice to dip into from time to time, but reading it systematically is difficult because of the apparently random collection of short sayings of which it is composed. Even to read it a chapter at a time is difficult. Furthermore, it contains many, apparently, secular sayings and does not seem to offer much about God. Worse still, if you adhere to some kind of “Salvation History” which binds the Old Testament together you would be hard pressed to find Proverbs a place in your team. You would be tempted to relegate it to an almost permanent place on the substitute’s bench, ready to come on for a token display at the end of the match. So where does it fit into a Christian Theology of the Old Testament? Why is it in the Bible? If you were God would you have included it? (go on, I know that sometimes you’ve imagined being God.) R. E. Clements, talking of Wisdom literature in general, sums it up nicely: “The overall impression concerning wisdom has therefore been of a profoundly interesting, and at times challenging, feature of ancient Israelite culture, but one which was in most respects marginal to the growth and development of Israel’s religion.”ⁱ

Yet I have fallen in love with this book. It might well include many sayings of popular wisdom which we might be tempted to describe as “secular”, but here they are in “God book” and that endows them with a new depth and relevance, inviting us to work out how they prescribe the life “the righteous” should live. So let me argue my case for not relegating Proverbs to the bench, but rather for putting it right up there in the game of the Christian life, to guide us and inspire us daily.

1. Proverbs as a Slightly Embarrassing Member of the Team

There are those who argue that there is no overall Theology of the Old Testament, but, rather, a diverse collection of books which offer a spectrum of teachings concerning the character and work of God. For them, Proverbs does not present a huge problem. However, the difficulty begins when you try to find an underlying theme running through the Old Testament, because Proverbs does not fit easily into such schemes. The following are a summary of the main approaches to Old Testament Theology.ⁱⁱ

i. The Dogmatic Approach.

If you decide to approach Old Testament theology in the style of the great systematic books of the past, you will be dividing it up into chapters on “God”, “Man”, “Salvation” etc. This is all very well, and, to some extent, helpful, although there is a danger of separating the Old Testament from the New, but the book of Proverbs is well nigh consigned to a footnote. It has little new to offer as to the character of God, and the jumbled collection of advice it offers is very hard to fit into any such scheme.

ii. A Thematic Approach

I am very sympathetic to such a methodology and have been greatly blessed by two of them in particular. Firstly, is Eichrodt’s use of the major covenants with Noah, Abraham, Mosesⁱⁱⁱ, but you do end up leaving Proverbs out in the cold because there is no obvious connection with the covenants. Whereas the successive covenants demonstrate a chronological progress, the timeless wisdom of Proverbs does not neatly fit into any of them. The second approach to capture my imagination was Walter Kaiser’s use of “*promise*” as a hermeneutic key to the Old Testament^{iv}. It is a genuinely exciting approach as it leads on so naturally to the Messiah. However, there is no obvious connection between Proverbs and the promise, and Kaiser’s method stalls here.

iii. A Topical Approach.

Some theologians down the years have given up trying to find a theme which holds the Old Testament together, and have resorted to using topics as the only meaningful way to study it. This approach typically rejects the Old Testament as a “Christian” book altogether and sees it as a description of how Israel experienced God in its religious cultic practice, its history, its future hope. Topics could be: election, land, laws, prophecy etc. At least in this approach Proverbs can rest comfortably in a topic we might call “how Wisdom reflects Israel’s experience of God in society”. The problem is that in abandoning any attempt to find a theme running through the OT the evangelical would baulk at the loss of what we would see as the principal element, namely the salvation story which finds its culmination in Christ.

iv. The Diachronic Method

Although G. Von Rad is quite old hat now, his works still make interesting and challenging reading.^v His research into how Israel rewrote its history for new circumstances, and his hope of uncovering the different layers and schools of thought which are represented in the OT is always challenging. In such an approach Proverbs is definitely a “suitable case for the treatment” and offers wide scope for careful analysis. At least, you would think so. In practise Von Rad was rather dismissive of our book. He stated that “in principle Israel’s faith is grounded upon historical acts,” thus excluding Proverbs from serious study.^{vi} Since the “wisdom teaching” of the older parts of Proverbs is based entirely on unaided empirical human experience, “it ought not to be at all considered in relation to the central content of Israel’s faith and cult”.^{vii} Although he did go on to argue that Wisdom theology is primarily a theology of creation and, therefore, part of the latter development of Israel’s theology, he has effectively marginalised the book for us. He ignores that it is about the individual Israelite and his relationship with God and is not restricted to festivals and the regular cult. Not everything needs to be linked to the public face of religion.

v. A Dialectic Approach

It is enlightening to focus on the tensions that exist in the Old Testament text: “Ethics and Aesthetics, Liberation and Blessing, Theology and Cosmos, Providence and Election but I for one would rather something more positive. Tensions in Theology exist in the Old Testament, and they are present in the book of Proverbs, but they should not take precedence over clear unambiguous teaching. Although some tension does exist between individual proverbs, the majority are clear and straightforward, even if there is not always an obvious reason why different couplets and subjects follow each other in the order we find them in.

vi. A Canonical approach

By stating that the Old Testament is the inspired Word of God as we find it, and emphasizing that it deliberately uses and remoulds older material in order to self-consciously create a normative literary medium to serve for our instruction, we are rejecting the dichotomy between “it meant for them x it means for us”. It becomes the Word of God for our use today, and invites us to interpret it and use it. Clearly, the sub-text of this approach is the christocentric nature of the both Old and New Testaments. We are asked, then, to find in Proverbs a connection with the New Testament and see how the book works as Scripture. It does not exist in isolation, but purposefully engages with the whole of the inspired text of the Bible. This is the approach of Brevard Childs and his followers, and the approach that I will follow here. However, even he struggles with Proverbs, and the chapter in his seminal work, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* is probably the least convincing in the book.^{viii}

vii. A Multiple Approach

This is the approach preferred by Hasel, which recognises that there is merit in most of the above approaches to the Old Testament. I am comfortable with this providing we do not lose sight of the connection between Proverbs and the rest of scripture.

R. E. Clements is correct to assert that “the question of the place that should be assigned to the wisdom writing of the Old Testament in a work of Old Testament theology has not so far been accorded any widely recognized consensus.”^{ix} There was a tendency in the past to place it on the margins of the Jewish and Christian traditions, although there may be evidence that these days it is given rather more prominence.

This, then, is our challenge. If we are going to argue for a fully inspired canon of scripture, we must establish Proverbs as a fully integral part of the Bible, with a place and purpose which coincides with our christocentric evangelical viewpoint. This, frankly, is what makes doing theology fun.

2. Proverbs as a Full Member of the Inspired Canonical Team

Mercifully, we do not need to get bogged down in critical concerns. The consensus is that Proverbs is made of various collections, many of which carry their own sub-titles (chs. 1-9; 10:1-22:16; 25-29; 30:11-33; 31:1-9; 31:10-31). Although the opening verse attributes the book to Solomon, the appearance of Agur, Lemuel and others tells us that we should not take the first verse too literally. We cannot know how many authors made contributions. There is no consensus on the reason for the order of material in the book, and although many commentators date much of it in the pre-exilic period, no one is sure when the collection was finally closed. This rather timeless quality of the book is reinforced by the lack of historical context and the absence of obvious ties to the Torah and to the Prophets in the text itself. However, we should not play down the connection with Solomon. He was famous

for his wisdom and he did, after all, speak three thousand proverbs and write a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:29ff). We will look again at the implications of this connection for a modern preacher in the last section.

Although “wisdom” is clearly the main emphasis of the book (the noun is used 39 times and its adjective 47 times), this emphasis is refined and emphasised by the opening nine chapters which provide us with **the hermeneutical key**. There are collections of old sayings to be studied in this book, but before we get to them we must understand where they come from. And even if the sayings were oral sayings originally, they have now been made into a book. Clements points out that “the particular theological appeal of wisdom lies in the fact that, of all the features of Israelite intellectual life, wisdom had most to gain from the adoption of a written form. Writing is a skill of the wise. Wise man and scribe are often the same person.”^x Equally, the sayings may well have been secular originally, but now chapters 1-9 make them sacred.

It is clear from the opening chapters that wisdom is available as a gift of God to all people. Only the most rebellious will refuse to hear the call of Wisdom as she calls to them. “Out in the open she calls aloud, she raises her voice in the public square; on top of the wall she cries out, at the city gate she makes her speech. (1:20f). This is not secret knowledge, it is offered to all. Whereas the Torah traces out legal requirements, cultic demands, and national exigencies Wisdom tells the just how faith in Yahweh should work out in their day to day struggles with serving a perfect God in an imperfect and unpredictable world. The law traces out boundaries which must be obeyed, but real life is a series of small decisions which the Torah with its wide brush strokes can do little to illuminate. It is not a collection of abstract principles, but advice on concrete situations: “its intention is to train a person, to form a character, to show what life is really like and how best to cope with it.”^{xi}

So who organized the final collection? Whybray poses a series of, by and large, unanswerable questions:^{xii}
What was the position of the authors in Israelite society?
What was the reason for their concern to make the observations and to give the advice of which the book consists?
To whom was the book addressed?
What was the basis of the authority which the authors implicitly or explicitly claim to possess?
At what stage or stages in Israel's history were they active?

Whether they were court officials of the early monarchy or a later school of scribes does not altogether matter. The book is given a timeless context in its introduction by the person of Wisdom, an enigmatic, omnipresent narrator who speaks to every generation. The authors have deliberately hidden themselves behind the main persona of the opening nine chapters. The lack of reference to the Mosaic Law, which is a major characteristic of Ecclesiasticus, confirms its origins within the earlier period common to other Old Testament books.

The magnificent figure of Wisdom (chapters 1-9) in all her splendour derives her glory from her close relationship with Yahweh. This is how the canonical shape of the book shifts our attention away from the secular nature of many of the proverbs, towards the God who is behind all wisdom. This is not “Chicken Soup For Your Soul.” It is not a compilation for the sake of it. This is scripture which is inspired by and ordained by Yahweh himself as the “first of his works (8:22ff)” and rejoices in His presence (8:30). This is good news for the “just”, those who live under the promise and covenant of God, because, quite frankly, they find life confusing. “Wisdom affirms that a planned and coherent order determines the relationship between all things.”^{xiii} You will know as well as I do that this is not always apparent to the casual observer.

This canonical shape of the book, making Lady Wisdom the dominant force of the book with its motley collections of proverbs answers Whybray's objection that the “God of Proverbs lacks most of the characteristics of the God of Israel.”^{xiv} We are reminded that all wisdom derives its authority from the Creator, and this wisdom takes its place alongside the Torah, the Prophets and the great historical deeds of Yahweh in its direction of human destiny. Proverbs was written specifically to fulfill this role. It is, therefore, neither anomaly nor irrelevance in Old Testament Theology.

3. Proverbs as Christian Canonical Literature

Some time ago while clearing out the loft space, I moved a long piece of two by four back into a corner, and straight into a wasps' nest that, unbeknown to me, had been built that summer. The reaction was immediate and aggressive. Equally, some theologians buzz with anger at the assertion that the Old Testament is part of the Christian canon. They accuse us of just reading the Christ event back into a text that originally was oblivious to the possibility, and at first glance Proverbs does little to help our case. There is no messianic hope in this work, just

the struggle of the believer to make sense of an awkward and at times contradictory world. But it is not “out of synch” with the rest of scripture. Childs comments that both Pentateuch and Proverbs “converge on a basically unified expression of the good and obedient life”^{xv}

How does it link to Jesus? His sayings do not obviously cite the book of Proverbs, although his teaching is not dissimilar to it. Westermann, however, points out that “Jesus is not presented as a teacher of abstract, didactic wisdom (as, for example, in Proverbs 1-9) rather he is one who has received the proverbial wisdom of the fathers . . . This heritage links the New Testament with the Old Testament.”^{xvi}

However, does the hypostasis (the quasi-personification of divine attributes), in Proverbs not offer another approach? It is very tempting to find a link here. Wisdom in both Proverbs 1-8, and in the books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon, gets this treatment, as does the Logos in the works of Philo (ca. 20 BC - AD 50). Philo’s works were well circulated in first century Palestine and it is reasonable to assume that they influenced to some extent John’s choice of the Logos motif in John 1:1-14. It is interesting to compare the Book of Proverb’s Wisdom and John’s Logos:

Both The Word and Wisdom were in the beginning (all quotes from NIV):

“In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1)

“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began (Proverbs 8:22f. See also Sir. 1:4, Wis. 9:9)

Both Word and Wisdom were with God:

“The Word was with God and the Word was with God” (John 1:1)

“Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence.” (Prov. 8:30, see also Sir. 1:1, Wis. 9:4)

Both Word and Wisdom were co-creators:

“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:3)

“By wisdom the Lord laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place” (Prov. 3:19)

Other parallels are possible when we include the apocryphal books: Wisdom provides light, is rejected, is the substance of life, and is the gateway to life.

In Paul’s Wisdom-Christology, “Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:24). “We speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.(1 Corinthians 2:7). However, Paul’s Christ as Wisdom of God goes way beyond Proverbs 1-8 to be, as N. T. Wright describes it “the Divine Wisdom, God’s Second Self, doing at last what Temple, Torah and ‘Wisdom’ might have been supposed to do but what they had not succeeded in doing.”^{xvii}

Let us keep our feet on the ground. Clements is correct to warn us that “no matter how affirmatively wisdom is presented as belonging to the divine side of reality, so that God works in, by and through wisdom, wisdom is in no sense another deity alongside the Lord . . . Rather she appears as the inalienable bond that unites the creative intention of God with the experienced working of the world.”^{xviii} While that is true, Von Rad reminds us that “the most important thing is that wisdom does not turn towards man in the shape of an “it” , teaching, guidance, salvation or the like, but of a person. . . So wisdom is truly the form in which Yahweh can speak in this way.”^{xix} I agree that none of the Old Testament or inter-testamental writers would have strayed into the realm of Trinitarian theology, but the parallels are very clear and as Christian commentators on the Book of Proverbs we should not hesitate in making the connection between Lady Wisdom and Christ the Wisdom of God. Christ fulfils the aspirations of the ancient writers and, provided we are careful, we should find the parallels inspiring and instructive.

Sometimes, of course, Wisdom is seen as an attribute of the Holy Spirit rather than God, and this is picked up in the current best-seller “The Shack” by Wm. Paul Young.^{xx} When he attempts his hypostasis of Wisdom she turns into “Sophia” – part of the mystery surrounding *Sarayu* (his name for the Holy Spirit).^{xxi} Clearly, for Young, Wisdom is closer to the mysterious oriental Spirit than his chuckling carpenter, Jesus. Probably this is a warning to all of us preachers not to follow the parallel between Jesus and the Wisdom of God too closely, but to enjoy its suggestiveness.

4. Proverbs as a Gift to the Preacher

The canonical shape of the book encourages us to apply it to our own lives. If the first nine chapters serve as our key to understanding the timeless quality of wisdom, so the lack of grouping or order in the rest of the book encourages their use in the day to day. We are obliged to make sense of them by seeking applications in our own life.^{xxii}

The early connection to Solomon helps us in that regard. Such collections were by no means confined to Israel. “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt,” we are told (1 Kings 4:30), and as late as Jeremiah, the wisdom of Teman in Edom was still legendary (Jer 49:7). The book of Job is not even set within Israel but within the land of Uz (Job 1:1). By linking the book of Proverbs to Solomon and his international context the book indicates that the Wisdom of God transcends the sacred and historical traditions of Israel and offers His gift of insight to the entire human race. In the time of exile, it was a reminder to the Jews that in a strange and foreign land, there was still a principle at work which had power to lead them in the path of God’s blessing. There are no boundaries to this book. We are invited to savour it and encouraged to expound it. A perfect gift of God for a preacher in the 21st century global village.

Peter James Cousins, Bangor, January, 2010.

ⁱ R. E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1992), p. 21.

ⁱⁱ Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology. Basic Issues in the current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids; William B Eerdmans, 1991).

ⁱⁱⁱ W. Eichrodt, *Old Testament Theology*. 2 vols., trans. J. Baker (London: SCM 1967).

^{iv} W.C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1978).

^v Von Rad, G., *Old Testament Theology*. 2 vols. (London: Harper and Row, 1962-65).

^{vi} Von Rad, G., *O T Theology*, vol 1 (1962), p.106.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 435. Quoted in R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs, The New Century Bible Commentary* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), p. 10.

^{viii} Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

^{ix} Clements, p. 13.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 45.

^{xi} Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life. An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), p.15.

^{xii} Whybray, p. 4f.

^{xiii} Clements, p. 45.

^{xiv} Whybray, p .11. Although he does admit that “a number of proverbs make it clear that Yahweh, far from being a mere rubber stamp, is perceived as fundamentally unknowable and as frequently intervening to frustrate human expectations; that human knowledge is limited,” I feel that he has overlooked the way the compilers have shaped the book so as to emphasize the overarching providence of Yahweh in His provision of Wisdom to guide human lives.

^{xv} Childs, p.558.

^{xvi} Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 115f.

^{xvii} Tom Wright, *Justification, God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), p.133.

^{xviii} Clements, p.157.

^{xix} G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*. Vol 1 (NY: Harper and Row 1962), p. 444. See also Murphy pp. 231 -281, the Millennium Supplement.

^{xx} Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 171.

^{xxii} Childs, p. 556.