

THE
EXPOSITOR'S
BIBLE
COMMENTARY
REVISED EDITION

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

Allen P. Ross, Jerry E. Shepherd
& George M. Schwab

Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland
General Editors

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Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

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PREFACE

Frank Gaebelin wrote the following in the preface to the original Expositor's Bible Commentary (which first appeared in 1979): "The title of this work defines its purpose. Written primarily by expositors for expositors, it aims to provide preachers, teachers, and students of the Bible with a new and comprehensive commentary on the books of the Old and New Testaments." Those volumes achieved that purpose admirably. The original EBC was exceptionally well received and had an enormous impact on the life of the church. It has served as the mainstay of countless pastors and students who could not afford an extensive library on each book of the Bible but who wanted solid guidance from scholars committed to the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Gaebelin also wrote, "A commentary that will continue to be useful through the years should handle contemporary trends in biblical studies in such a way as to avoid becoming outdated when critical fashions change." This revision continues the EBC's exalted purpose and stands on the shoulders of the expositors of the first edition, but it seeks to maintain the usefulness of the commentary by interacting with new discoveries and academic discussions. While the primary goal of this commentary is to elucidate the text and not to provide a guide to the scholarly literature about the text, the commentators critically engage recent academic discussion and provide updated bibliographies so that pastors, teachers, and students can keep abreast of modern scholarship.

Some of the commentaries in the EBC have been revised by the original author or in conjunction with a younger colleague. In other cases, scholars have been commissioned to offer fresh commentaries because the original author had passed on or wanted to pass on the baton to the next generation of evangelical scholars. Today, with commentaries on a single book of the Old and New Testaments often extending into multiple volumes, the need for a comprehensive yet succinct commentary that guides one to the gist of the text's meaning is even more pressing. The new EBC seeks to fill this need.

The theological stance of this commentary series remains unchanged: the authors are committed to the divine inspiration, complete trustworthiness, and full authority of the Bible. The commentators have demonstrated proficiency in the biblical book that is their specialty, as well as commitment to the church and the pastoral dimension of biblical interpretation. They also represent the geographical and confessional diversity that characterized the first contributors.

The commentaries adhere to the same chief principle of grammatico-historical interpretation that drove the first edition. In the foreword to the inaugural issue of the journal *New Testament Studies* in 1954, Matthew Black warned that “the danger in the present is that theology, with its head too high in the clouds, may end by falling into the pit of an unhistorical and uncritical dogmatism. Into any new theological undertaking must be brought all that was best in the old ideal of sound learning, scrupulous attention to philology, text and history.” The dangers that Black warned against over fifty years ago have not vanished. Indeed, new dangers arise in a secular, consumerist culture that finds it more acceptable to use God’s name in exclamations than in prayer and that encourages insipid theologies that hang in the wind and shift to tickle the ears and to meet the latest fancy. Only a solid biblical foundation can fend off these fads.

The Bible was not written for our information but for our transformation. It is not a quarry to find stones with which to batter others but to find the rock on which to build the church. It does not invite us simply to speak of God but to hear God and to confess that his Son, Jesus Christ, is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Php 2:10). It also calls us to obey his commandments (Mt 28:20). It is not a self-interpreting text, however. Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures requires sound learning and regard for history, language, and text. Exegetes must interpret not only the primary documents but all that has a bearing, direct or indirect, on the grammar and syntax, historical context, transmission, and translation of these writings.

The translation used in this commentary remains the New International Version (North American edition), but all of the commentators work from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and draw on other translations when deemed useful. The format is also very similar to the original EBC, while the design is extensively updated with a view to enhanced ease of use for the reader. Each commentary section begins with an introduction

(printed in a single-column format) that provides the reader with the background necessary to understand the Bible book. Almost all introductions include a short bibliography and an outline. The Bible text is divided into primary units that are often explained in an “Overview” section that precedes commentary on specific verses. The complete text of the New International Version is provided for quick reference, and an extensive “Commentary” section (printed in a double-column format) follows the reproducing of the text. When the Hebrew or Greek text is cited in the commentary section, a phonetic system of transliteration and translation is used. The “Notes” section (printed in a single-column format) provides a specialized discussion of key words or concepts, as well as helpful resource information. The original languages and their transliterations will appear in this section. Finally, on occasion, expanded thoughts can be found in a “Reflections” section (printed in a double-column format) that follows the Notes section.

One additional feature is worth mentioning. Throughout this volume, wherever specific biblical words are discussed, the Goodrick-Kohlenberger (GK) numbers have been added. These numbers, which appear in the *Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* and other reference tools, are based on the numbering system developed by Edward Goodrick and John Kohlenberger III and provide a system similar but superior to the Strong’s numbering system.

The editors wish to thank all of the contributors for their hard work and commitment to this project. We also deeply appreciate the labor and skill of the staff at Zondervan. It is a joy to work with them—in particular Jack Kuhatschek, Stan Gundry, Katya Covrett, Dirk Buursma, and Verlyn Verbrugge. In addition, we acknowledge with thanks the work of Connie Gundry Tappy as copy editor.

We all fervently desire that these commentaries will result not only in a deeper intellectual grasp of the Word of God but also in hearts that more profoundly love and obey the God who reveals himself to us in its pages.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Bible Texts, Versions, Etc.

ASV	American Standard Version
AT	<i>The Complete Bible: An American Translation</i> (NT: E. J. Goodspeed)
Barclay	<i>The New Testament, A New Translation</i>
Beck	<i>New Testament in Language of Today</i>
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
CEV	Contemporary English Version
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
GNB	Good News Bible (see also TEV)
GWT	God's Word Translation
JB	Jerusalem Bible
KJV	King James Version
Knox	<i>Holy Bible: A Translation from the Latin Vulgate</i>
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek OT)
MLB	Modern Language Bible
Moffatt	<i>A New Translation of the Bible</i> , James Moffatt
Montgomery	<i>Centenary Translation of the New Testament in Modern English</i>
MT	Masoretic Text of the OT

NA ²⁷	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , Nestle-Aland, 27th ed.
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NEB	New English Bible
NET	New English Translation (www.netbible.com)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
Norlie	<i>New Testament in Modern English</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Phillips	<i>New Testament in Modern English</i> , J. B. Phillips
REB	Revised English Bible
Rieu	<i>Penguin Bible</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RV	Revised Version
Samar.	Samaritan Pentateuch
Syr.	Syriac
Targ.	Targum
TCNT	Twentieth Century New Testament
TEV	Today's English Version

TNIV	Today's New International Version
UBS ⁴	<i>The Greek New Testament</i> , United Bible Societies, 4th ed.
Vul.	Vulgate
Weymouth	<i>New Testament in Modern Speech</i> , R. F. Weymouth
Williams	<i>The New Testament in the Language of the People</i> , C. B. Williams

Old Testament, New Testament, Apocrypha

Ge	Genesis
Ex	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Nu	Numbers
Dt	Deuteronomy
Jos	Joshua
Jdg	Judges
Ru	Ruth
1-2Sa	1-2 Samuel
1-2 Kgdms	1–2 Kingdoms (LXX)
1-2Ki	1-2 Kings
3-4 Kgdms	3–4 Kingdoms (LXX)
1-2Ch	1-2 Chronicles
Ezr	Ezra
Ne	Nehemiah
Est	Esther

Job	Job
Ps/Pss	Psalms/Psalms
Pr	Proverbs
Ecc	Ecclesiastes
SS	Song of Songs
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
La	Lamentations
Eze	Ezekiel
Da	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Am	Amos
Ob	Obadiah
Jnh	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Na	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zep	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zec	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi
Mt	Matthew
Mk	Mark

Lk	Luke
Jn	John
Ac	Acts
Ro	Romans
1-2Co	1-2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Php	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1-2Th	1-2 Thessalonians
1-2Ti	1-2 Timothy
Tit	Titus
Phm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1-2Pe	1-2 Peter
1-2-3Jn	1-2-3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation
Add Esth	Additions to Esther
Add Dan	Additions to Daniel
Bar	Baruch
Bel	Bel and the Dragon
Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah

1-2 Esd	1-2 Esdras
1-2 Macc	1-2 Maccabees
3-4 Macc	3-4 Maccabees
Jdt	Judith
Pr Azar	Prayer of Azariah
Pr Man	Prayer of Manasseh
Ps 151	Psalm 151
Sir	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Sus	Susanna
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon

Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts

CD	Cairo Genizah copy of the <i>Damascus Document</i>
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
1QapGen	<i>Genesis Apocryphon</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QH	<i>Hôd āyôt</i> or <i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QIsa	Isaiah (texts from Qumran)
1QM	<i>Milḥāmāh</i> or <i>War Scroll</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QpHab	<i>Pesher Habakkuk</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QpMic	<i>Pesher Micah</i> (text from Qumran)
1QS	<i>Serek hayyahad</i> or <i>Rule of the Community</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QSa	<i>Rule of the Congregation</i> (texts from Qumran)
4QpNa	<i>Pesher Nahum</i> (texts from Qumran)

4QpPs	<i>Pesher Psalms</i> (texts from Qumran)
4QQoh ^{a,b}	Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)
4Q44 (4QDt ^q)	Deuteronomy (texts from Qumran)
4Q174	<i>Florilegium</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q252	<i>Commentary on Genesis A</i> , formerly <i>Patriarchal Blessings</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q394	<i>Miqṣat Ma‘aśê ha-Torah^a</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q400	<i>Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q502	<i>Ritual of Marriage</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q521	<i>Messianic Apocalypse</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q525	<i>Beatitudes</i> (texts from Qumran)
11Q13	<i>Melchizedek</i> (texts from Qumran)

Other Ancient Texts

<i>Abraham</i>	<i>On the Life of Abraham</i> (Philo)
<i>Ad.</i>	<i>Adelphi</i> (Terence)
<i>Aeth.</i>	<i>Aethiopica</i> (Heliodorus)
<i>Ag.</i>	<i>Agamemnon</i> (Aeschylus)
<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	<i>Against Apion</i> (Josephus)
<i>Agr.</i>	<i>De Lege agraria</i> (Cicero)
<i>Alc.</i>	<i>Alcibiades</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Alex.</i>	<i>Alexander the False Prophet</i> (Lucian)
<i>Amic.</i>	<i>De amicitia</i> (Cicero)
<i>An.</i>	<i>De anima</i> (Tertullian)

<i>Anab.</i>	<i>Anabasis</i> (Xenophon)
<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annales</i> (Tacitus)
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antigone</i> (Sophocles)
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> (Josephus)
<i>Ant. rom.</i>	<i>Antiquitates romanae</i> (Dionysius of Halicarnassus)
<i>1 Apol.</i>	<i>First Apology</i> (Justin Martyr)
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologia</i> (Plato, Tertullian)
<i>Apos. Con.</i>	<i>Apostolic Constitutions</i>
<i>Ascen. Isa.</i>	<i>Ascension of Isaiah</i>
<i>As. Mos.</i>	<i>Assumption of Moses</i>
<i>Att.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Atticum</i> (Cicero)
<i>b. 'Abod. Zar.</i>	<i>'Abodah Zarah</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>2-4 Bar.</i>	<i>2-4 Baruch</i>
<i>b. B. Bat.</i>	<i>Bava Batra</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Ber.</i>	<i>Berakhot</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Ketub.</i>	<i>Ketubbot</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Meg.</i>	<i>Megillah</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Ned.</i>	<i>Nedarim</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Pesah.</i>	<i>Pesahim</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Roš Haš.</i>	<i>Ros Haššanah</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Šabb.</i>	<i>Šabbat</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Šebu.</i>	<i>Šebu'ot</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Soṭah</i>	<i>Soṭah</i> (Babylonian Talmud)

<i>b. Ta'an.</i>	<i>Ta'anit</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Yebam.</i>	<i>Yebamot</i> (Babylonian Talmud)
<i>Bapt.</i>	<i>De baptismo</i> (Tertullian)
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Barnabas</i>
<i>Ben.</i>	<i>De beneficiis</i> (Seneca)
<i>Bibl.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca</i> (Photius)
<i>Bibl. hist.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca historica</i> (Diodorus Siculus)
<i>Bride</i>	<i>Advice to the Bride and Groom</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Cels.</i>	<i>Contra Celsum</i> (Origen)
<i>Cic.</i>	<i>Cicero</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Claud.</i>	<i>Divus Claudius</i> (Suetonius)
<i>1–2 Clem.</i>	<i>1–2 Clement</i>
<i>Comm. Dan.</i>	<i>Commentarium in Daniele</i> (Hippolytus)
<i>Comm. Jo.</i>	<i>Commentarii in evangelium Joannis</i> (Origen)
<i>Comm. Matt.</i>	<i>Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei</i> (Origen)
<i>Corrept.</i>	<i>De correptione et gratia</i> (Augustine)
<i>Cyr.</i>	<i>Cyropaedia</i> (Xenophon)
<i>Decal.</i>	<i>De decalogo</i> (Philo)
<i>Decl.</i>	<i>Declamationes</i> (Quintilian)
<i>Def. orac.</i>	<i>De defectu oraculorum</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Deipn.</i>	<i>Deipnosophistae</i> (Athenaeus)
<i>Deut. Rab.</i>	<i>Deuteronomy Rabbah</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i> (Justin Martyr)
<i>Diatr.</i>	<i>Diatribai</i> (Epictetus)

<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Disc.</i>	<i>Discourses</i> (Epictetus)
<i>Doctr. chr.</i>	<i>De doctrina christiana</i> (Augustine)
<i>Dom.</i>	<i>Domitianus</i> (Suetonius)
<i>Ebr.</i>	<i>De ebrietate</i> (Philo)
<i>E Delph.</i>	<i>De E apud Delphos</i> (Plutarch)
<i>1–2 En.</i>	<i>1–2 Enoch</i>
<i>Ench.</i>	<i>Enchiridion</i> (Epictetus)
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae morales</i> (Seneca)
<i>Eph.</i>	<i>To the Ephesians</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i> (Jerome, Pliny, Hippocrates)
<i>Ep. Tra.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Trajanum</i> (Pliny)
<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Ethica nichomachea</i> (Aristotle)
<i>Exod. Rab.</i>	<i>Exodus Rabbah</i>
<i>Fam.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad familiares</i> (Cicero)
<i>Fid. Grat.</i>	<i>De fide ad Gratianum</i> (Ambrose)
<i>Flacc.</i>	<i>In Flaccum</i> (Philo)
<i>Flight</i>	<i>On Flight and Finding</i> (Philo)
<i>Fr. Prov.</i>	<i>Fragmenta in Proverbia</i> (Hippolytus)
<i>Gen. Rab.</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
<i>Geogr.</i>	<i>Geographica</i> (Strabo)
<i>Gorg.</i>	<i>Gorgias</i> (Plato)
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus Haereses</i> (Irenaeus)
<i>Heir</i>	<i>Who Is the Heir?</i> (Philo)

<i>Hell.</i>	<i>Hellenica</i> (Xenophon)
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historicus</i> (Polybius, Cassius Dio, Thucydides)
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historiae</i> (Herodotus, Tacitus)
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>History of the Church</i> (Eusebius)
<i>Hist. Rome</i>	<i>The History of Rome</i> (Livy)
<i>Hom. Acts</i>	<i>Homilies on Acts</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Col.</i>	<i>Homilies on Colossians</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Jo.</i>	<i>Homilies on John</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Josh.</i>	<i>Homilies on Joshua</i> (Origen)
<i>Hom. Phil.</i>	<i>Homilies on Philippians</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Rom.</i>	<i>Homilies on Romans</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. 1 Tim.</i>	<i>Homilies on 1 Timothy</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. 2 Tim.</i>	<i>Homilies on 2 Timothy</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Tit.</i>	<i>Homilies on Titus</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hypoth.</i>	<i>Hypothetica</i> (Philo)
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Institutio oratoria</i> (Quintilian)
<i>Jos. Asen.</i>	<i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>
<i>Joseph</i>	<i>On the Life of Joseph</i> (Philo)
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i> (Josephus)
<i>L.A.E.</i>	<i>Life of Adam and Eve</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Legum allegoriae</i> (Philo)
<i>Legat.</i>	<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> (Philo)
<i>Let. Aris.</i>	<i>Letter of Aristeas</i>

<i>Lev. Rab.</i>	<i>Leviticus Rabbah</i>
<i>Liv. Pro.</i>	<i>Lives of the Prophets</i>
<i>m. 'Abot</i>	<i>'Abot (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Bek.</i>	<i>Bekhorot (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Ber.</i>	<i>Berakot (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Bik.</i>	<i>Bikkurim (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Giṭ.</i>	<i>Giṭṭin (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Mak.</i>	<i>Makkot (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Mid.</i>	<i>Middot (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Naz.</i>	<i>Nazir (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Ned.</i>	<i>Nedarim (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Nid.</i>	<i>Niddah (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Pesah</i>	<i>Pesahim (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Šabb.</i>	<i>Šabbat (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Tamid</i>	<i>Tamid (Mishnah)</i>
<i>m. Ṭehar.</i>	<i>Ṭeharot (Mishnah)</i>
<i>Magn.</i>	<i>To the Magnesians (Ignatius)</i>
<i>Mand.</i>	<i>Mandate (Shepherd of Hermas)</i>
<i>Marc.</i>	<i>Adversus Marcionem (Tertullian)</i>
<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memorabilia (Xenophon)</i>
<i>Midr. Ps.</i>	<i>Midrash on Psalms</i>
<i>Migr.</i>	<i>De migratione Abrahami (Philo)</i>
<i>Mor.</i>	<i>Moralia (Plutarch)</i>

<i>Moses</i>	<i>On the Life of Moses</i> (Philo)
<i>Nat.</i>	<i>Naturalis historia</i> (Pliny)
<i>Num. Rab.</i>	<i>Numbers Rabbah</i>
<i>Onir.</i>	<i>Onirocritica</i> (Artemidorus)
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i> (Demosthenes)
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i> (Dio Chrysostom)
<i>Paed.</i>	<i>Paedagogus</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
<i>Peregr.</i>	<i>The Passing of Peregrinus</i> (Lucian)
<i>Pesiq. Rab.</i>	<i>Pesiqta Rabbati</i>
<i>Pesiq. Rab Kah.</i>	<i>Pesiqta of Rab Kahana</i>
<i>Phaed.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i> (Plato)
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>To the Philippians</i> (Polycarp)
<i>Phld.</i>	<i>To the Philadelphians</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Phorm.</i>	<i>Phormio</i> (Terence)
<i>Planc.</i>	<i>Pro Plancio</i> (Cicero)
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>De plantatione</i> (Philo)
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politica</i> (Aristotle)
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>To Polycarp</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Posterity</i>	<i>On the Posterity of Cain</i> (Origen)
<i>Praescr.</i>	<i>De praescriptione haereticorum</i> (Tertullian)
<i>Princ.</i>	<i>De principiis</i> (Origen)
<i>Prom.</i>	<i>Prometheus vinctus</i> (Aeschylus)
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>
<i>Pud.</i>	<i>De pudicitia</i> (Tertullian)

<i>Pyth.</i>	<i>Pythionikai</i> (Pindar)
<i>Pyth. orac.</i>	<i>De Pythiae oraculis</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Quaest. conv.</i>	<i>Quaestionum convivialum libri IX</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Quint. fratr.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem</i> (Cicero)
<i>Rab. Perd.</i>	<i>Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo</i> (Cicero)
<i>Resp.</i>	<i>Respublica</i> (Plato)
<i>Rewards</i>	<i>On Rewards and Punishments</i> (Philo)
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Volumina rhetorica</i> (Philodemus)
<i>Rom.</i>	<i>To the Romans</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Rosc. com.</i>	<i>Pro Roscio comoedo</i> (Cicero)
<i>Sacrifices</i>	<i>On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel</i> (Philo)
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satirae</i> (Horace, Juvenal)
<i>Sera</i>	<i>De sera numinis vindicta</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Serm.</i>	<i>Sermones</i> (Augustine)
<i>Sib. Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>
<i>Sim.</i>	<i>Similitudes</i> (Shepherd of Hermas)
<i>Smyrn.</i>	<i>To the Smyrnaeans</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>De somniis</i> (Philo)
<i>Spec.</i>	<i>De specialibus legibus</i> (Philo)
<i>Stat.</i>	<i>Ad populum Antiochenum de statu</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
<i>T. Ash.</i>	<i>Testament of Asher</i>
<i>T. Dan</i>	<i>Testament of Dan</i>
<i>T. Gad</i>	<i>Testament of Gad</i>

<i>Tg. Neof.</i>	<i>Targum Neofiti</i>
<i>Tg. Onq.</i>	<i>Targum Onqelos</i>
<i>Tg. Ps.-J.</i>	<i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i>
<i>Theaet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus (Plato)</i>
<i>t. Hul.</i>	<i>Hullin (Tosefta)</i>
<i>t. Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin (Tosefta)</i>
<i>T. Jos.</i>	<i>Testament of Joseph</i>
<i>T. Jud.</i>	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>T. Mos.</i>	<i>Testament of Moses</i>
<i>T. Naph.</i>	<i>Testament of Naphtali</i>
<i>Trall.</i>	<i>To the Trallians (Ignatius)</i>
<i>T. Reu.</i>	<i>Testament of Reuben</i>
<i>Tusc.</i>	<i>Tusculanae disputationes (Cicero)</i>
<i>Verr.</i>	<i>In Verrem (Cicero)</i>
<i>Virt.</i>	<i>De virtutibus (Philo)</i>
<i>Vis.</i>	<i>Visions (Shepherd of Hermas)</i>
<i>Vit. Apoll.</i>	<i>Vita Apollonii (Philostratus)</i>
<i>Vit. beat.</i>	<i>De vita beata (Seneca)</i>
<i>Vit. soph.</i>	<i>Vitae sophistarum (Philostratus)</i>
<i>y. 'Abod. Zar.</i>	<i>'Abodah Zarah (Jerusalem Talmud)</i>
<i>y. Hag.</i>	<i>Hagigah (Jerusalem Talmud)</i>
<i>y. Šabb.</i>	<i>Šabbat (Jerusalem Talmud)</i>

Journals, Periodicals, Reference Works, Series

AASOR	Annual of the American Academy of Oriental Research
AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>ABR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>ABW</i>	<i>Archaeology in the Biblical World</i>
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACNT	Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament
<i>AEL</i>	<i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i>
<i>AJBI</i>	<i>Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute</i>
<i>AJSL</i>	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature</i>
AnBib	Analecta biblica
<i>ANEP</i>	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i>
<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
AnOr	Analecta orientalia
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
ASORMS	American Schools of Oriental Research Monograph Series
<i>ASTI</i>	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
<i>AThR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
AUSDDS	Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>

<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BAGD</i>	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker (2d ed.). <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BDAG</i>	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (3d ed.). <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
<i>BDB</i>	Brown, Driver, and Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>BDF</i>	Blass, Debrunner, and Funk. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
<i>BEB</i>	<i>Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible</i>
<i>BECNT</i>	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Ber</i>	<i>Berytus</i>
<i>BETL</i>	<i>Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium</i>
<i>BGU</i>	<i>Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden</i>
<i>BI</i>	<i>Biblical Illustrator</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>BibOr</i>	<i>Biblica et orientalia</i>
<i>BibS(N)</i>	<i>Biblische Studien (Neukirchen)</i>
<i>Bijdr</i>	<i>Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie</i>

<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
<i>BLW</i>	<i>Babylonian Wisdom Literature</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BRev</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BWL</i>	<i>Babylonian Wisdom Literature</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CAD</i>	<i>Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i>
CAH	Cambridge Ancient History
CahRB	Cahiers de la Revue biblique
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CGTC	Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary

<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>ChrT</i>	<i>Christianity Today</i>
<i>CIG</i>	<i>Corpus inscriptionum graecarum</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus inscriptionum latinarum</i>
<i>CJT</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
ConBNT	Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CTM</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>DDD</i>	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i>
<i>DJD</i>	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
<i>DRev</i>	<i>Downside Review</i>
<i>DukeDivR</i>	<i>Duke Divinity Review</i>
<i>EA</i>	El-Amarna tablets
<i>EBC</i>	<i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
<i>ECC</i>	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
<i>EcR</i>	<i>Ecumenical Review</i>
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>EgT</i>	<i>Eglise et théologie</i>
<i>EGT</i>	Expositor's Greek Testament
<i>ErIsr</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
<i>ESCJ</i>	Etudes sur le christianisme et le judaïsme (Studies in

Christianity and Judaism)

<i>EstBib</i>	<i>Estudios biblicos</i>
ETS	Evangelical Theological Society
<i>EuroJTh</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex auditu</i>
<i>Exeg</i>	<i>Exegetica</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FF	Foundations and Facets
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
GKC	<i>Genesius' Hebrew Grammar</i>
GNS	<i>Good News Studies</i>
GR	<i>Greece and Rome</i>
<i>Grammar</i>	<i>A Grammar of the Greek New Testament; in the Light of Historical Research</i> (A. T. Robertson)
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
HALOT	Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HBD	<i>HarperCollins Bible Dictionary</i>
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
Herm	Hermeneia commentary series
<i>HeyJ</i>	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>

HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
<i>Hor</i>	<i>Horizons</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IB</i>	<i>Interpreter's Bible</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>IBS</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>IDBSup</i>	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplement</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>IJT</i>	<i>Indian Journal of Theology</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Interpretation	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>ISBE</i>	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> , 2d ed.
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>

JAARSup	JAAR Supplement Series
JANESCU	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society at Columbia University</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBMW	<i>Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood</i>
Jeev	<i>Jeevadhara</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JPOS	<i>Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JRT	<i>Journal of Religious Thought</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
JSP	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTC	<i>Journal for Theology and the Church</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
K&D	Keil and Delitzsch, <i>Biblical Commentary on the Old</i>

Testament

KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
KTU	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i>
L&N	Louw and Nida. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains</i>
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LS	<i>Louvain Studies</i>
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, and Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i>
MM	Moulton and Milligan. <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NBD	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i> , 2d ed.
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
Neot	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
NewDocs	<i>New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity</i>
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary

NIVSB	Zondervan NIV Study Bible
<i>Notes</i>	<i>Notes on Translation</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
NTC	New Testament Commentary (Baker)
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTG	New Testament Guides
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTT	New Testament Theology
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
<i>OJRS</i>	<i>Ohio Journal of Religious Studies</i>
OLA	Orientalia lovaniensia analecta
<i>Or</i>	<i>Orientalia</i> (NS)
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies
<i>OtSt</i>	<i>Oudtestamentische Studien</i>
<i>Parab</i>	<i>Parabola</i>
<i>PEGLMBS</i>	<i>Proceedings, Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Bible Societies</i>
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PG	Patrologia graeca
PL	Patrologia latina

PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>Presb</i>	<i>Presbyterion</i>
<i>PresR</i>	<i>Presbyterian Review</i>
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
PTMS	Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series
<i>PTR</i>	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RBibLit</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>RefJ</i>	<i>Reformed Journal</i>
<i>RelSRev</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBK	Strack and Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
<i>SBT</i>	<i>Studies in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>ScEccl</i>	<i>Sciences ecclésiastiques</i>
<i>ScEs</i>	<i>Science et esprit</i>

ScrHier	Scripta hierosolymitana
SE	<i>Studia evangelica</i>
SEÅ	<i>Svensk exegetisk årsbok</i>
SEG	Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
Sem	<i>Semitica</i>
SJLA	Studies in Judaism of Late Antiquity
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTSU	Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt
SP	Sacra Pagina
SR	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
ST	<i>Studia theologica</i>
Str-B	Strack, H. L., and P. Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i>
StudBT	<i>Studia biblica et theologica</i>
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
SVF	<i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta</i>
SwJT	<i>Southwestern Journal of Theology</i>
TA	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
TBT	<i>The Bible Today</i>
TDNT	Kittel and Friedrich. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TDOT	Botterweck and Ringgren. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>

<i>Text</i>	<i>Textus</i>
<i>TF</i>	<i>Theologische Forschung</i>
<i>THAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>ThEv</i>	<i>Theologia Evangelica</i>
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TLNT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TWOT</i>	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>UBD</i>	<i>Unger's Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
<i>VE</i>	<i>Vox evangelica</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
WW	<i>Word and World</i>
YCS	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
ZPEB	<i>Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible</i>
ZWT	<i>Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie</i>

General

AD	<i>anno Domini</i> (in the year of [our] Lord)
Akkad.	Akkadian
Arab.	Arabic
Aram.	Aramaic
BC	before Christ
ca.	<i>circa</i> (around, about, approximately)
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
d.	died
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially

et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
EV	English versions of the Bible
f(f).	and the following one(s)
fig.	figuratively
frg.	fragment
Gk.	Greek
GK	Goodrick & Kohlenberger numbering system
Heb.	Hebrew
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
Lat.	Latin
lit.	literally
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
n(n).	note(s)
n.d.	no date
NS	New Series
p(p).	page(s)
par.	parallel (indicates textual parallels)
para.	paragraph
repr.	reprinted
rev.	revised
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word
Syr.	Syriac
TR	Textus Receptus (Greek text of the KJV translation)

trans. translator, translated by

v(v). verse(s)

vs. versus

PROVERBS

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Introduction

1. Background
2. Authorship and Date
3. Literary Forms
4. Theological Value
5. Canon and Text
6. Bibliography
7. Outline
8. Topical Index

1. BACKGROUND

The book of Proverbs is a marvelous collection of wise sayings and instructions for living a useful and effective life. The collection forms part of the larger group of biblical writings known as Wisdom Literature. This literature gives instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life. Proverbial wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements; but speculative wisdom, such as Ecclesiastes or Job, uses lengthy monologues and dialogues to probe the meaning of life, the problem of good and evil, and the relationship between God and people.¹

The genre of wisdom literature was common in the ancient world, and a copious amount of material comes from ancient Egypt.² From the Old Kingdom (2686–2160 BC) we find pieces of wisdom in the “Instruction of Kagemni” and the “Instruction of Ptah-hotep” (2450 BC), which advise the proper decorum for a court official. As in Proverbs, Ptah-hotep counsels on persuasive speech: “Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones.”³ He further warns against going after a woman like a fool, for “one attains death through knowing her.”⁴ The “Instruction of Merikare” (2160–2040 BC) records a monarch’s advice for his son on the wise qualities needed by a king,

including this saying: “The tongue is a sword . . . and speech is more valorous than any fighting.”⁵

In the New Kingdom period (1580–1100 BC), the “Instruction of Amenemope” stands out. Amenemope instructs his son regarding proper conduct. This work, arranged in thirty sections, contains many instructions that are similar in form and content to various laws of the Pentateuch and teachings of Proverbs. These instructions are generally seen as forming the background of Proverbs 22:17–24:22. Although the two collections are not identical, they are similar enough to attest direct influence. General knowledge of wisdom sayings across the ancient Near East as well as specific interchange between Egypt and Solomon’s court make a literary connection likely. Because of the dates involved, it is unlikely that Amenemope borrowed from Solomon.

Similar teachings in the Pentateuch might suggest a greater antiquity for biblical wisdom sayings, but there is insufficient material to draw a firm conclusion. Many ancient laws, sayings, songs, poetic couplets, and proverbs found their way into inspired Scripture. Inspiration does not exclude the divine use of existing material; but in Scripture it takes on a new force, a higher meaning, and becomes authoritative.

In the “Instruction of Amenemope” morality is defined as what is pleasing to the god, and it forms the basis for life and prosperity. For example, the instructions include the following:

Do not associate to thyself the heated man,
Nor visit him for conversation (cf. Pr 22:24).⁶
Do not strain to seek an excess,
When thy needs are safe for thee.
If riches are brought to thee by robbery. . . .
(Or) they have made themselves wings like geese
And are flown away to the heavens (cf. Pr 23:4–5).⁷

After “Amenemope,” wisdom literature again surfaces with the “Instruction of Ani” (ca. 1100 BC). Here a father instructs his son about personal piety, ritual purity, and appropriate speech. He enjoins fulfillment of religious and filial obligations, good manners, generosity, and reserve in

speech; and he warns against adultery, clamor, and presumption before the god. He says, “Be on your guard against a woman from abroad . . . a woman who is far away from her husband. . . . She has no witnesses when she waits to ensnare thee.”⁸ Much later there is the “Instruction of ‘Oncheheshongy” (ca. 400–300 BC), a large collection of about five hundred sayings and proverbs like those in Proverbs that reflect the practical and religious concerns of the community. But they do not have the poetic parallelism characteristic of Hebrew proverbs. For example, their instructions include: “Do not go to your brother if you are in trouble, go to your friend” (cf. Pr 27:10); and “Better [to have] a statue for a son than a fool” (cf. 17:21).⁹

Mesopotamia also had collections of proverbial material.¹⁰ The “Instruction of Shuruppak” (ca. 2000 BC) records the advice of a king to his son Ziusudra, the hero of the flood in the Sumerian version. For example, it says, “My son, let me give you instructions, may you pay attention to them,” and “[My] son, do not sit [alone] in a [chamber] with someone’s wife.”¹¹

The “Counsels of Wisdom” (ca. 1500–1000 BC) are a collection of moral exhortations about avoiding bad company and careless speech, being kind to the needy, and living in harmony with one’s neighbor and in loyalty to the king. For example, it says,

Do not return evil to your adversary;
Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you,
Maintain justice for your enemy.¹²

The “Words of Ahiqar” (700–670 BC) is a collection of proverbs, riddles, short fables, and religious observations by a court official for the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon; the work gives advice on disciplining children, guarding the tongue, respecting secrets, and being circumspect in dealing with the king. For example, it says, “Withhold not thy son from the rod” (cf. Pr 13:24); and, “I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than [grief]” (cf. 27:3).¹³

Thus Proverbs has affinities with literature from other countries, and the Bible itself alludes to the wisdom of Egypt and Mesopotamia (1Ki 4:30; Da

1:4, 17, 20). This literary background is helpful in understanding the biblical book. First, these other works provide help in understanding the forms of wisdom literature—proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions. Second, it indicates the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, especially Proverbs 1–9, which was once considered to be the latest form. But it now can be demonstrated that the literary proverb of two lines may be as old as the Sumerian proverbs and that collected instructions may be as old as the Old Kingdom of Egypt.

In making these comparisons, commentators find help in dating the various collections within the book of Proverbs. Kitchen, for example, has argued for the plausibility of the Solomonic date of Proverbs 1:1–24:34 on the basis of its similarities with the genre of instruction demonstrated in the first part of the second millennium. This form includes a title (cf. 1:1); statement of purpose (cf. 1:2–7); lengthy prologue exhorting and encouraging compliance to instruction (cf. 1:8–9:18); and collection of maxims, proverbs, precepts, and admonitions (10:1–22:16). Kitchen also argues for the early inclusion of 22:17–24:34 based on the dating of the “Instruction of Amenemope.”¹⁴

In addition to this comparison with the great collections of wise instructions, there is also value to be gained from tracing similar concepts. For example, paralleling the Hebrew concept of wisdom is the Egyptian presentation of *maʿat*— a fixed, eternal religious order, manifested in the stability of nature, justice in society, and the integrity of the individual’s life.¹⁵ Another concept found in both Hebrew and Egyptian literature is the rhetorical use of personification to convey abstract concepts such as intelligence, understanding, justice, and skill. The biblical figure of personified wisdom (Pr 8) corresponds to the personification of *maʿat* in Egyptian art and literature.

Finally, many specific emphases in Proverbs find parallels in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. But even though the collections share some of the same interests, the biblical material is unique in its prerequisite of a personal faith in a personal God. To the Hebrews the success of wisdom did not simply require compliance with wise instructions but also trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord (Pr 1:7; 3:5–6; 9:10), who created everything and governs both the world of nature and human history (3:19–20; 16:4; 21:1). Any ancient wisdom used by the Hebrews

had to harmonize with this religious worldview, and any ancient wisdom used in this collection took on greater significance when subordinated to the true faith.

The biblical writers occasionally used literary forms and expressions that were common to their culture. While the fullness of the Yahwistic faith in all its distinctions came by direct revelation, God did include Semitic customs, standard laws, treaty forms, poetic expressions, and wise sayings that were compatible with the truth and useful in the communications of the divine will. One may speculate how and when concepts such as wisdom, justice, and holiness, or sacrifice, sanctuary, and priesthood—to name but a few—found their place in primitive societies. But apart from that speculation, to recognize the biblical texts as divine revelation does not necessarily mean that all of their contents had to be comprised of previously unknown information. On the contrary, before many of these facts and concepts were written down, they were passed on verbally from generation to generation and consequently could have circulated over vast distances and found their way into many diverse cultures; therefore, whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the word of the Lord. Such inclusions then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will.

Likely the writers deliberately used well-known concepts and expressions from the pagan world to subordinate them to the true religion. For example, while Ma'at was a deity of justice and order in Egypt, no such deity existed in Israel. Rather, *ḥokmâ* (“wisdom”; GK 2683) was personified and spoke its message in the first person—something *ma'at* did not do. By incorporating wise sayings and motifs (in addition to producing new and unparalleled sayings) and investing them with higher religious value, the Hebrew sages were in a sense putting new wine into old wineskins. They could forcefully teach, then, that true wisdom was from above and not from below.

2. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The traditional view that Solomon wrote the entire book of Proverbs is supported by the titles in 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1. Moreover, Solomon was a

wise man, writing proverbs and collecting sayings from other wise men (see 22:17–24:34). Proponents of this view have also frequently assumed that Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1) were pseudonyms of Solomon.

This general view, however, stands in need of some revision. It is now recognized that Agur and Lemuel were probably not pseudonyms for Solomon and that 22:17–24:34 forms a separate collection of proverbs, for it has a distinct form, bears a separate title and purpose, and seems to be directly related to the “Instruction of Amenemope.” It is impossible to determine who added this material to the collection of Proverbs. Furthermore, on closer examination the title of 1:1, which has generally been taken to head up 1:8–9:18, may not actually refer to these chapters; it may simply be the heading for the whole book in its final form and may not necessarily indicate that the first nine chapters are from Solomon.

It is unreasonable, however, to deny that the largest portions of the proverbs are Solomon’s, as older critical scholars often did. Otto Eissfeldt is only willing to say that “one or another of the sayings” is Solomon’s and that “one or another of the quite small collections” goes back to Solomon.¹⁶ More and more scholars, however, acknowledge that the earlier period is an appropriate setting for the composition and collection of such wisdom sayings. The age of Solomon was characterized by national consolidation, the organization and development of the temple staff, and the collection of traditional literary works, including wisdom sayings. It was also a period of broad international exchange; for through his many alliances and trade contracts, Solomon would have had scribes of foreign lands in his courts. It is easy to see how similarities between Proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern literature could have developed.

Yet it is not possible to date the book of Proverbs only on the basis of literary style or content. All the literary forms and perhaps the overall structure can be demonstrated in early parallels as well as late parallels.¹⁷ In addition, the same sociological, theological, and educational background can be demonstrated for much of the wisdom literature in the ancient Near East. The instruction frequently came from a royal father concerned with preparing his son to replace him in court and teaching self-control in temperament, speech, and action so that his son might be successful. Also, the theology of Proverbs is consistent with the theology of the Law and the Prophets, thus making parallel references as a basis for dating rather

difficult.¹⁸ Moreover, even the earlier attempts to parallel motifs, such as the personification of wisdom with later Greek philosophical thought, are no longer definite, for examples of such personification have been discovered all over the ancient world.¹⁹

An examination of the titles of the book is important to the study of its authorship. The heading in 10:1 clearly credits Solomon for the subsequent material. In 10:1–22:16 there may be two collections (chs. 10–15; 16:1–22:16)—a determination based on differences in style (the second collection has greater variety of parallelism). The heading in 25:1 also affirms that Solomon was the author (or editor) of a larger collection from which the scribes of Hezekiah’s court excerpted the proverbs in chs. 25–29. There are also differences of style between chs. 25–27 and chs. 28–29, the former having more illustrative parallelism and more grouping of topics.

The title in 1:1 has been taken variously as the heading (1) to the book as a whole, (2) to 1:1–9:18, and (3) to other delimited sections, such as 1:1–24:34.²⁰ The title probably cannot be limited to 1:1–9:18, for then we might have expected the heading in 10:1 to be like that in 25:1—“these *also* are the proverbs of Solomon.”²¹ In addition, the term *mišlê* (“proverbs”; GK 5442) does not describe any of the sayings in 1:8–9:18; so the title is inappropriate if specifically introducing just that section. Finally, 1:2–7, which belongs with the heading of 1:1 by its grammatical construction, best expresses the general purpose of the whole collection; as an introduction it forms part of the prologue (1:1–9:18) to the major collection of 10:1–24:34.

This introductory section (1:1–7), however, may have functioned as the introduction to an earlier collection as well. Since the expression “the proverbs of Solomon” fits the dominant form found in the collections of 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27, the [introduction of 1:1–7](#) may have formerly introduced a collection now found in 10:1–31:31. Yet, since there seems to be no reason for dating 1:8–9:18 any later than the first Solomonic collection, this prologue may have been written for the core collection.

There are also titles in the book that are non-Solomonic. Any borrowing that took place may have been based on firsthand knowledge of the Egyptian material.²² This dependence, confined to similarity of concepts and similarity of figures and not to precise wording, seems to be limited to 22:17–23:11. Since “Instruction of Amenemope” dates from at least as early as 1100 BC, the time could fit the Solomonic era. Scott thinks this

Egyptian document was still being copied centuries later and “may well have been studied during his training by an Israelite scribe of the prophetic period.”²³

The title in 31:1 credits Lemuel with the sayings that follow. Although the NIV translates *maśśā* as “an oracle,” it may be that it refers to a kingdom named “Massa” that is attested in the annals of the Assyrian kings from the time of Hezekiah (roughly 715–687 BC). The poem in 31:10–31 has no heading and cannot be readily connected with Lemuel. The heading of 30:1, “the sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an oracle [‘of Massa’; NIV margin],” is also obscure. These issues will be discussed in the commentary.

In conclusion, then, Solomon is responsible for 10:1–22:16 and perhaps all or part of chs. 25–29. Most scholars, including many conservatives, see some dependence of 22:17–24:34 on the “Instruction of Amenemope.” The nature of this dependence is debatable, but it may be that Israel knew these sayings by the time of Solomon. Most scholars also see chs. 30–31 as non-Solomonic and from a later date, perhaps from a time contemporary with Hezekiah.²⁴ The prologue to the book (1:8–9:18) may have been added to form an introduction, certainly by the time of Hezekiah, and possibly in Solomon’s time. But a final editor may have put it all together during the Persian period (540–322 BC) or later, carefully safeguarding the traditional collections. The old title and introductory purpose (1:1–7) then headed up the final collection.

3. LITERARY FORMS

A casual reading of Proverbs reveals the general form of a proverb. A proverb, as Scott says, is a short, pregnant sentence or phrase whose meaning is applicable in many situations.²⁵ A thorough analysis of the proverbs reveals that these short sayings follow many patterns and constructions that bear on the meanings.

As with all Hebrew poetic discourse, the proverbs use the different types of parallelism.

- *Synonymous* parallelism expresses one idea in parallel but slightly different expressions: “A fool’s mouth is his undoing, / and his lips are a snare to his soul” (18:7).

- In *antithetical* parallelism the second line contrasts with the first: “The plans of the righteous are just, / but the advice of the wicked is deceitful” (12:5). This type of parallelism is the most common in the book; in 12:5 it sets before the reader the wise and profitable way and the foolish and disastrous way.
- *Emblematic* parallelism uses a figurative illustration as one of the parallel units: “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, / so is a sluggard to those who send him” (10:26).
- Another category used in earlier commentaries is the general one of *synthetic* parallelism, applied to passages in which the second line amplifies the first in some way: “The LORD works out everything for his own ends—/ even the wicked for a day of disaster” (16:4). Because this category always required the interpreter to explain the specific way the parallelism worked, more recent scholarship prefers to use more precise categories. There is *progressive* or *consequential* parallelism, in which the second line describes an action that chronologically or logically follows what precedes; there is *specifying* parallelism, in which the second line specifies how a preceding general statement is realized; and there is *complementary* parallelism, in which the second line can provide a perspective that is complementary to the preceding statement.²⁶ Whatever label is given to this category, the expositor still must explain clearly how the parallelism works.
- The final category is proverbs whose second line simply completes the idea begun in the first, exhibiting *formal* parallelism. One part may contain the subject and the second the predicate (15:31); the first line may state a condition and the second the consequences (16:7), its cause (16:12), or its purpose (15:24); and one part may state a preferred value or course over another: “Better a little with the fear of the LORD / than great wealth with turmoil” (15:16).

Proverbs are essentially didactic, whether they follow the pattern of a formal instruction using imperatives or prohibitions (16:3; 23:9), are expressed in didactic sayings that observe traits and acts to be followed or avoided (14:31), tell an example story (7:6–23), make a wisdom speech (8:1–36), or develop numerical sayings (6:16–19).

Instructions, whether commands or admonitions, use motivations—reasons for complying. The most common form of motivation is a subordinate clause stating the purpose, result, or reason for the instruction: “Listen to advice and accept instruction, / and in the end you will be wise” (19:20). Sometimes the motivation is implied in the general observation: “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline / and do not resent his rebuke, / because the LORD disciplines those he loves, / as a father the son he delights in” (3:11–12).

In general proverbs draw lessons by reflecting on the way things are in relation to right values and right conduct. Scott lists seven ways the book draws these lessons: proverbs may present (1) things that appear distinct but are similar (14:4a); (2) things that seem the same but are different (27:7b); (3) things that are similar (using similes, as in 25:25); (4) things that are absurd or futile (17:16); (5) sayings that classify types of people (14:15); (6) sayings that indicate relative values (27:3); and (7) sayings that set forth consequences (27:18).²⁷

Finally, it should be noted that the structure of the entire book uses different forms. Proverbs 1:8–9:18 appears to be an organized introduction to the book with many admonitions and prohibitions as well as example stories and personified wisdom speech. This section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1–7), but folly may interrupt this purpose (1:8–33); there are advantages to seeking wisdom (2:1–4:27), but folly may prevent one from seeking it (5:1–6:19); there are advantages to finding wisdom (6:20–9:12), but folly may prevent one’s finding it (9:13–18).

Proverbs 10:1–22:16 is a collection of some 375 seemingly unrelated proverbs. Then, following the sayings patterned after the “Instruction of Amenemope” (22:17–24:22), another collection of proverbs is included (chs. 25–29). The last two chapters include among other things the numerical sayings of the wise (30:10–33) and the acrostic poem on wisdom (31:10–31). Although these collections appear to be randomly gathered, recent studies into the technical elements of the poetry indicate that there is a more skillful composition involved. Some have sought to understand the material by numerical considerations, as in wisdom’s seven pillars, or in the numerical value of the Hebrew name “Solomon” (the numerical value of the letters adds up to 375, the number of proverbs in the Solomonic

collections). But these explanations are not entirely convincing and do not explain the actual construction of the verses.

More helpful approaches use the vocabulary and the forms in rhetorical criticism to understand the arrangement. For example, following the pattern of the first collection (the title and preamble [1:1–7], the prologue [1:8–8:36], and the epilogue [9:1–18]), many have seen parallels in the second collection (10:1–22:16). This section also has a title, followed by a lengthy section contrasting wisdom and folly, including a section on the unfaithful wife. The units within this collection may further be marked off by specific vocabulary, types of sayings, and themes; thus it can be divided into two units, chs. 10–15 and 16:1–22:16. The heart of this collection (chs. 15 and 16) contains an emphasis on the sayings of the Lord.

The analysis of the other collections of proverbs may also be analyzed by the types of proverbs and their distinct emphases. All such studies do show that at work was a carefully planned structure. However, the various proposals for the analysis of the structure are not always convincing and not always readily observable to the reader of Proverbs. A dedication to the technical aspects of the language and poetics of the book is required to uncover how the material has been put together. But this detailed analysis should enhance the understanding of the meanings of the proverbs and not become an end in itself.²⁸

4. THEOLOGICAL VALUE

This collection of wise sayings is not exclusively religious; its teachings apply to human problems in general, not primarily to the problems of the religious community or to major theological themes such as election, redemption, and covenant. Rather, the teacher of wisdom “concerns himself with people as plain, ordinary individuals who live in the world, and with the wisdom and folly of their attitudes and actions in the common things of life.”²⁹

Accordingly, the sayings exhibit several distinctive characteristics. First, they focus attention on individuals rather than on the nation by setting forth the qualities needed and the dangers to be avoided by people seeking to find access with God. Second, they are applicable to all people, at any period in history, who face the same types of perils and have the same characteristics

and abilities (1:20; 8:1–5). Third, they are based on respect for authority, traditional values and teachings, and the wisdom of mature teachers (24:21). Fourth, they are immensely practical, (1) giving sound advice for developing personal qualities necessary to achieve success in this life and avoid failure or shame, and (2) warning that though virtue is rewarded by prosperity and well-being, vice leads to poverty and disaster.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Proverbs is a secular book; its teachings are solidly based on “the fear of the LORD” (1:7), thus making compliance with them in reality a moral and spiritual matter. In fact, the book teaches that this fear of the Lord is the evidence of faith, for the wise teacher enjoins people to trust in the Lord, whose counsel stands (19:21), and not their own understanding (3:5–7). The purpose of proverbial teaching, then, is to inspire faith in the Lord (22:19).

Such reverential fear requires a personal knowledge of the Lord (“fear” and “knowledge” are parallel in 9:10); to find this fear is to find knowledge (2:5)—a knowledge that comes by revelation (3:6). Ultimately, however, the fear of the Lord is manifested in a life of obedience, confessing and forsaking sin (28:18) and doing what is right (21:3), which is the believer’s task before God (17:3). Since the motivation for faith and obedience comes from Scripture, Proverbs relates the way of wisdom to the law (28:4; 29:18). In the final analysis we must conclude with Plaut, “There are no ‘secular’ proverbs which can be contrasted with ‘religious’ ones; everything on earth serves the purposes of God and is potentially holy.”³⁰

According to Jeremiah 18:18, prophets, priests, and sages molded the cultural life of Israel, the sages being an ancient and influential group (Isa 29:14). In the early days their wisdom was probably declared in the gates for all to hear (Job 29:7–25). Their teachings were preeminently concerned with truth that had stood the test of experience—it had to ring true.³¹ They classified people into two groups—those who were wise, who possessed moral qualities to which wisdom makes her moral appeal, and those who were deficient in the same.³² Accordingly, the teachings of Proverbs are of the highest ethical quality, for they relate virtue to the will of God. The disaster that comes as a result of folly and vice is part of divine retribution—a more immediate concern than the question of immortality.

Finally, the religious value of the book is endorsed by its being in the canon. Jesus himself recognized the wisdom of Solomon recorded in

Scripture as evidence of its place in the developing plan of redemption. But that revealed plan ultimately led to Christ himself, who in all points is greater than Solomon (Mt 12:42). Christians may certainly draw inspiration and instruction from the book of Proverbs, but they have the wisdom of Christ as God's final word.

5. CANON AND TEXT

The book of Proverbs appears in the Jewish lists of the books of the canon (e.g., in Josephus's lists and in the talmudic tractate *Baba Bathra*) and is commonly cited as authoritative scripture in the *Mishnah*. The NT quotes Proverbs various times (Mt 16:27 [Pr 24:12]; Ro 3:15 [Pr 1:16]; 12:16 [Pr 3:7], 20 [Pr 25:21–22]; Heb 12:5–6 [Pr 3:11–12]; Jas 4:6 [Pr 3:34], 13 [Pr 27:1]; 1Pe 2:17 [Pr 24:21]; 4:8 [Pr 10:12], 18 [Pr 11:31]; 5:5 [Pr 3:34]; 2Pe 2:22 [Pr 26:11]). So the book is unquestionably an integral part of the Holy Scriptures. It was placed in the last section of the Hebrew canon, the *Kethubim* ("Writings"), but it occupies different positions in different lists. According to the rabbinic literature, Proverbs follows Psalms and Job (*b. B. Bat.* 14b, 15a); but the LXX grouped Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon on the basis of their authorship.

The Hebrew text is arguably in fair condition. Where the LXX differs in a number of places, the MT is usually far more satisfying. Harrison estimates about twenty-five difficult readings in the Hebrew, along with some obscure words.³³ But the LXX has greater problems. It is close to the Hebrew in chs. 1–9, but in chs. 10–31 the differences are great. The LXX retains the title in 1:1, omits the title in 10:1, and changes the titles in 30:1 and 31:1. Throughout the book the LXX adds certain proverbs (which may be from a different Hebrew Vorlage [underlying text]) but deletes others. Moreover, the position of 30:1–31:9 differs in the Greek (30:1–14 is placed after 24:22, and 30:15–33 and 31:1–9 are placed after ch. 24). Possibly, separate traditions of these chapters were in existence with different orders; but it is also possible that the arrangement was the resolution of the LXX to show Solomonic authorship.³⁴

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7. OUTLINE

I. Introduction to the Book of Proverbs (1:1–7)

- A. Title: The Proverbs of Solomon (1:1)
- B. Purposes: To Develop Moral Skill and Mental Acumen (1:2–6)
- C. Motto: The Fear of the Lord (1:7)

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- A. Introductory Exhortation (1:8–9)
- B. Admonition to Avoid Easy but Unjust Riches (1:10–19)
- C. Warning against Disregarding or Despising Wisdom (1:20–33)
- D. The Benefits of Seeking Wisdom (2:1–22)
 - 1. The Admonition to Receive Wisdom (2:1–4)
 - 2. Consequences of Receiving Wisdom (2:5–22)
 - a. Knowledge of God and His Protection (2:5–8)
 - b. Moral Discernment (2:9–22)
 - i. Discernment for Living (2:9–11)
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- E. Admonition to Follow the Way of Wisdom in Relationships with God and People (3:1–35)
 - 1. Introductory Exhortation (3:1–4)
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 - 3. Commendation of the Way of Wisdom (3:13–26)
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 - b. Motivation: With Wisdom Seduction May Be Avoided (5:3–6)
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 - a. Exhortation for Prevention (5:7–8)
 - b. Motivation: Obedience Will Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:9–14)
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 - b. Finding Satisfaction with One’s Wife (5:18–19)
 - c. Motivation: Adultery is Sinful Folly (5:20–23)
- H. Admonition to Seek Release from a Foolish Indebtedness (6:1–5)
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8. TOPICAL INDEX

This index covers the short sayings of the book as well as the longer discourses. Since the passages are most frequently complex—that is, showing a contrast, a “better than” statement, a consequence, or a development of ideas—it is clear that they could each be listed under several topics. However, the headings chosen here for the verses attempt to focus on the main teaching of each passage, even though it may be elucidated by contrasts and causes. A more thorough topical study in the Proverbs would use several different types of listings. A good index can be found in Plaut, 333–36; an excellent series of subject studies is included in Kidner, 31–56.

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2. See Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979).
3. *ANET*, 412.
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9. See Robert B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), xlv.
10. Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), 92–117.
11. See B. Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer* (2 vols.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1997), 15, 37.
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15. James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 214.
16. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. P. R. Ackroyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 476.
17. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 2005), 223–26.
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21. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 22.

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25. Robert B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 59.
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29. Kenneth T. Aitken, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 4.
30. W. Gunther Plaut, *Book of Proverbs* (Jewish Commentary for Bible Readers; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961), 7.
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32. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1019.
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Text and Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF PROVERBS (1:1–7)

A. Title: The Proverbs of Solomon (1:1)

¹The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

COMMENTARY

1 This verse provides the general heading for the entire book, even though the proverbs of Solomon probably do not begin until ch. 10. But the title most naturally uses a genitive of authorship to indicate that most of the collection following was either written by Solomon or collected by him. Interestingly, this book lacks an addressee and in that respect is unlike all the other wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. Those collections were primarily addressed to the crown prince, but here the material is written for the whole nation of Israel.

But what is a proverb? The use of *māšāl* (GK 5442; here *mišlê š'lōmōh*, “proverbs of Solomon”) suggests the idea of likeness. Toy, 3, referring to the Niphal, suggests the meaning “to become like, be comparable with.” For example, Psalm 49:12[13] says that the one who lives only for this life is “like [*nimšal*] the beasts that perish”; and verse 4[5] of the psalm identifies the poem as a wisdom psalm (*l'māšāl*, “to a proverb”). The word appears also in 1 Samuel 10:12 to report how a proverb (*māšāl*, “a saying”) came into being: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” His prophesying invited comparison to the prophets. This idea for *māšāl* is also supported by the Akkadian *mišlu* (“of like portions”) and the Arabic *mitlu* (“likeness”).

A proverb may then be described as an object lesson based on or using some comparison or analogy. It may be a short saying that communicates a general truth (Eze 16:44), a lesson drawn from experience (Ps 78:2–6), a common example (Dt 28:37), or a pattern of future blessing or cursing (Eze 21:1–5). The purpose of a proverb is to help one choose the best course of action among those available—the foolish way is to be avoided and the wise way followed (A. R. Johnson, “*Māšāl*,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955], 162–69).

B. Purposes: To Develop Moral Skill and Mental Acumen (1:2–6)

OVERVIEW

This book has two purposes: to nurture moral skillfulness and mental discernment. The first purpose is developed in vv.3–4; then, after a parenthetical exhortation in v.5, the second purpose is developed in v.6.

²for attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight;
³for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair;
⁴for giving prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
⁵let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
⁶for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.

COMMENTARY

2 The first purpose is that the disciple will develop skillfulness and discipline in holy living (v.2a). “Attaining,” from the infinitive *da‘at* (lit., “to know”; from GK 3359), encompasses an intellectual and experiential acquisition of wisdom and discipline, for the expression “to know” wisdom not only means to become conscious of it but also to observe it, to realize it, and to experience it.

“Wisdom” (*hokmâ*; GK 2683) basically means “skill.” This word describes the “skill” of the craftsmen who worked in the tabernacle (Ex 31:6), the “wits” of seasoned mariners (Ps 107:27), administrative abilities (1Ki 3:28), and the “wise advice” of a counselor (2Sa 20:22). In Proverbs

“wisdom” signifies skillful living—the ability to make wise choices and live successfully according to the moral standards of the covenantal community. The one who lives skillfully produces things of lasting value to God and to the community.

The other object to be acquired is “discipline” (*mûsār*; GK 4592; cf. 4:5), the necessary companion of wisdom. *Mûsār* denotes the training of the moral nature, involving the correcting of waywardness toward folly and the development of reverence for the Lord and personal integrity. Waltke, 1:175, asserts that wisdom cannot be possessed without this instruction to correct moral faults.

The second major purpose of Proverbs is to help the disciple acquire discernment (v.2b). The meaning of the Hiphil infinitive *hābîn* (“to understand, discern”; GK 1067) can be illustrated by the cognate preposition *bên* (“between”). “To discern” means to distinguish *between* things, to compare concepts, form evaluations, or make analogies. One cannot gain wisdom and instruction without understanding.

The object of this infinitive is cognate to it: “words of insight” (*ʿimrê bînâ*, with “words” referring to complete statements, of course). Proverbs will train people to discern lessons about life, such as distinguishing permanent values from immediate gratifications. Both writing and speaking these words were used in the instruction.

3 The first purpose statement is now developed. Once again an infinitive is used—the disciple will receive (*lāqah*, “acquire”) something worth having. In 2:1 this verb (“to accept”) is parallel with *šāpan* (“to treasure, store up”). What the student receives is discipline (*mûsār*) and prudence (*haśkēl*; GK 8505). The Hiphil infinitive *haśkēl* indicates the (genitive of) result: discipline produces prudent living, i.e., wise behavior or good sense. To act prudently means “to act circumspectly.” The concept may be illustrated by the actions of Abigail, the wife of the foolish Nabal (1Sa 25).

The three terms that follow—*šedeq* (GK 7406), *mišpāṭ* (GK 5477), and *mêšārîm* (GK 4797)—are adverbial accusatives of manner, expressing how the prudent acts manifest themselves. These three tests prevent wisdom and understanding from being misused. *Šedeq* (“righteous” or “righteousness”) denotes conformity to a standard, as in Deuteronomy 25:15, where weights and measures were required to be right. The religious use of the term signifies what is right according to the standard of God’s law (see Dt 16:18–

20), viz., conduct that conforms to the moral standards of the covenantal community (see Jer 22:13; Hos 10:12). Knowledge and understanding that does not lead to righteousness is not wisdom at all.

Prudent acts will also exhibit “justice.” *Mišpāṭ* (“just,” NIV) essentially signifies a “decision” like that of an arbiter (see Dt 16:18). It is applied to litigation (2Sa 15:2) and the precedent established by such (Ex 21:9; used of a custom in 1Ki 18:18). The term also connotes that which is fitting or proper (Jdg 13:12). Proverbs will develop a life that has a sense of propriety in making decisions.

The third quality is “equity” (“fair,” NIV). *Mêšārîm*, related to *yāšār* (“upright, straight”) can describe that which is pleasing (Jdg 14:3 [“right one”], 7 [“liked”; lit. “she was right”]). The book will instruct a lifestyle that is equitable, one that incorporates the most pleasing aspects (see Ps 9:8[9]).

So the disciple of Proverbs will acquire discipline that will produce a prudent life, and that prudent life will be demonstrated by “doing what is right and just and fair.”

4 The first purpose statement is now developed from the teacher’s point of view—he will give shrewdness to the naive or “simple,” what Waltke, 1:177, calls the morally brainless *petî* (GK 7343). (For a discussion of the simple person, see Kidner, 39.) This naive person (*petî*) is one who is gullible (14:15) and easily enticed (9:4, 16), and falls into traps (22:3). Although this person may be a youth, the characteristics are by no means limited to young people. The term describes anyone on the verge of becoming mature—some never get there. The instructor wants to give such a one a sense of shrewdness (*‘ormâ*; “prudence,” NIV; GK 6893), the ability to foresee evil and prepare for it (13:16; 22:3). With *‘ormâ* the naive will be able to avoid the traps in life (see Mt 10:16).

The second half of this verse parallels “simple” or “naive” with “[immature] youth” (*na‘ar*) and “shrewdness” or “prudence” with “knowledge” (*da‘at*; GK 1981) and “discretion” (*mʿzimmâ*, from *zāmam*, “to devise”; GK 4659). This latter expression refers to devising plans or perceiving the best course of action for gaining a goal (Toy, 7). *Da‘at* and *mʿzimmâ* may form a hendiadys to be translated “purposive knowledge,” viz., the perceptive ability to make workable plans. Such ability is crucial for the immature youth in this world.

5 Before elaborating the second purpose statement of the book, the writer digresses to exhort those on the other end of the spectrum. The first verb advises the wise to hear, and the second gives the purpose—“[to] add to [w^eyôsep] their learning.” By using the verb “add” the writer is emphasizing that each new hearing of wisdom should increase their wisdom and understanding and not merely confirm them in the wisdom already achieved.

Parallel to this advice is the counsel for the “discerning” (*nābôn*, participle of *bîn*; cf. [comment on v.2](#)) to get guidance. This person has the capacity of *bînâ*—one who is discerning. The “guidance” to be obtained is the term *taḥbulôt* (GK 9374; from *ḥābal*, meaning “to bind”; cf. *hebel*, “rope, cord”). The term may be illustrated with the cognate *ḥōbēl*, the rope pulling done by sailors to steer or guide a ship. Cohen, 2, says *taḥbulôt* is the discernment to steer a right course through life. Proverbs is not simply for the naive and the gullible; everyone can grow by learning from its teachings. Discerning people can obtain guidance from this book so that they might continue in the right way.

6 The second major purpose of the book is to give mental acumen to the student (see [comment on v.2](#)). The repetition of *l^ehābîn* from verse 2b shows that this line expands that one and stresses the importance of understanding truth. The point here is that one needs to develop the ability to understand the language of the sages.

The teachings will develop one’s ability in discerning “proverbs” (*māšāl*) and “parables” (*m^elîṣâ*; GK 4886). This latter term can refer to a satire, a mocking poem, or an alluding saying. The verb *lîṣ*, related to the Arabic *lāṣa* (“to turn aside”), may have the idea of speaking indirectly. It may have included the idea of a spokesman, for a *melîṣ* is an interpreter (Ge 42:23). *M^elîṣâ* may then refer to a saying that has another sense to it that needs uncovering (see H. Neil Richardson, “Some Notes on מְלִיץ and Its Derivatives,” VT 5 [1955]: 163–79).

The disciple must understand also the “sayings” of the wise. *Dîbrê* is a general term, but with the genitive *ḥ^ekāmîm* (“the wise”) it becomes specific—the words come from the sages. Their teachings at times take the form of “riddles” (*ḥîdôt*). This word, if related to the Arabic *hâda* (“to turn aside, avoid”), may refer to what is obscure or indirect, such as the riddles of Samson (Jdg 14:13–14) or the queen of Sheba (1Ki 10:1).

C. Motto: The Fear of the Lord (1:7)

⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

COMMENTARY

7 Here we have the theological foundation of the book—the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (cf. Ps 111:10). This statement is different from the purpose statements given so far. It tells us what is basic to the understanding of the book: Reverential “fear” (*yir ’â*, GK 3711) of the Lord is the prerequisite of knowledge. This term can describe dread (Dt 1:29), being terrified (Jnh 1:10), standing in awe (1Ki 3:28), or having reverence (Lev 19:3). With the Lord as the object, *yir ’â* captures both aspects of shrinking back in fear and drawing close in awe. (The expression “the fear of the LORD” occurs fourteen times in the book.)

Such fear is not a trembling dread that paralyzes action, but neither is it a polite reverence (Plaut, 32). “The fear of the LORD” ultimately expresses reverential submission to the Lord’s will and thus characterizes a true worshiper. In this context it is the first and controlling principle of knowledge (“beginning” can refer to the first thing, the chief thing, or the principal thing). Elsewhere in Proverbs the fear of the Lord is the foundation for wisdom (9:10) or the discipline leading to wisdom (15:33); it is expressed in hatred of evil (8:13), and it results in a prolonged life (10:27).

By contrast, fools disdain wisdom and discipline. They are not able to grasp this prerequisite, for in their pride they have chosen to reject the teachings of wisdom. Verse 7b is the antithesis of verse 7a. The term ^ʿ*wîlîm* (“fools”; GK 211) describes those who are thick-brained, conceited, and stubborn (Greenstone, 6). They lack understanding (10:21), do not store up knowledge (10:14), fail to attain wisdom (24:7), talk loosely (14:3), are filled with pride (26:5), and are contentious (20:3). They are morally unskilled and refuse any correction (15:15; 27:22).

Fools are people who “despise” wisdom and discipline; they treat these virtues as worthless and contemptible. This attitude is illustrated in Genesis 25:34, where Esau despised the birthright, and in Nehemiah 4:4, where Sanballat and Tobiah belittled the Jews.

II. A FATHER'S ADMONITION TO ACQUIRE WISDOM (1:8–9:18)

A. Introductory Exhortation (1:8–9)

⁸Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
⁹They will be a garland to grace your head
and a chain to adorn your neck.

COMMENTARY

8 The disciple is exhorted to heed parental guidance. Youths are in the greatest need of admonition—the passions are strong, self-confidence is growing, and group acceptance is important—but the experience of real life has not yet tempered them. “My son,” the customary form of address for a disciple, derives from the idea that parents are responsible for moral instruction (4:3–4; cf. Dt 6:7). Here the disciple is to respond (*šma*; “Listen” [NIV], with the attitude of “taking heed to”) to “discipline” (*mûsār*; “instruction,” NIV), which is normally the father’s responsibility (except in Pr 31:1, where it is the warning of the mother).

The son is also to follow his “mother’s teaching.” *Tôrâ* (“teaching”) may be cognate to a verb meaning “to point, direct” (cf. BDB, 434–35), so that the idea of teaching can be illustrated as pointing in the right direction (see Ge 46:28). At any rate, in Proverbs this instruction is for ordering the life (see also 6:20; 31:26).

9 As a result of heeding instruction in the law, the disciple receives a special promise. “Grace,” the charm that teaching brings to the disciple, refers to those qualities that make him agreeable. The metaphor compares these qualities to an attractive wreath worn around the head.

Obedience will also improve the disciple, as the metaphor of the neck pendant speaks of adorning the life. The one who loses the rough edges through disciplined training will present a pleasing presence to the world (McKane, 268).

B. Admonition to Avoid Easy but Unjust Riches (1:10–19)

- ¹⁰My son, if sinners entice you,
do not give in to them.
- ¹¹If they say, “Come along with us;
let’s lie in wait for someone’s blood,
let’s waylay some harmless soul;
¹²let’s swallow them alive, like the grave,
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;
¹³we will get all sorts of valuable things
and fill our houses with plunder;
¹⁴throw in your lot with us,
and we will share a common purse”—
¹⁵my son, do not go along with them,
do not set foot on their paths;
¹⁶for their feet rush into sin,
they are swift to shed blood.
- ¹⁷How useless to spread a net
in full view of all the birds!
- ¹⁸These men lie in wait for their own blood;
they waylay only themselves!
- ¹⁹Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain;
it takes away the lives of those who get it.

COMMENTARY

10 The summary statement warns the son not to consent to the enticement of moral misfits. The term for “entice,” related to the root of “simple” or “naive” (*petî*, from *pâtâ*; GK 7331) mentioned in verse 4, means “to allure, persuade, entice, seduce.” Here the enticement is to do evil since it comes from “sinners” (*ḥaṭṭā’îm* in this context describes professional criminals, a gang of robbers).

11 The young man is being enticed with the offer of joining professional criminals in a life of crime. The words of the temptation are provided by the wise teacher—the unruly gang would never use expressions that condemn their acts; rather, they would try to cover them up or give them a different spin. The text explains how they waylay the unwary (vv.11–12). The ambush the young man is asked to join is vicious; the verb *’ārab* (“to lie in wait”) occurs elsewhere of hostile purposes such as murder (Dt 19:11), kidnapping (Jdg 21:20), and seduction (Pr 23:28). Here the aim is bloodshed.

The attack is also evil. The wicked lie in wait for the innocent (*nāqî*; “harmless soul,” NIV), and their attack is without a cause (*ḥinnām* [untranslated in NIV] is often used this way; see 1Sa 25:31; Ps 35:7).

12–14 The criminals assure the novice of swift success; they will swallow up victims who are in the vitality of life (*tāmîm*, “full of health, whole,” GK 9459) as surely and swiftly as death opens and swallows its victims (v.12; cf. Nu 16:32–33); they determine to remove them from the living. They are confident that by sharing the wealth (v.13), they will fill their houses with “plunder” (*šālāl*). The use of *šālāl* elsewhere for spoils from war suggests that theirs is a life of crime (Cohen, 4). So the offer made to the youth is to pursue with the roustabouts a life of easy but ill-gotten gain (v.4).

15–16 The young man’s parents strongly advise him to avoid such evil companies because their lifestyle, though it may appear prosperous, leads to destruction. The advice “do not go” (v.15) counters the allurements of the wicked—“come along with us” (v.11). The primary reason for not going is that the sinners’ purpose is bloodthirsty (v.16); therefore, their retribution is sure (cf. v.18). In the final analysis, the trap the wicked lay for others will catch them.

17–19 There are two ways to interpret v.17 within the context. One way is to see a comparison with the folly of birds that fall into a snare even though forewarned; likewise the wicked, because they are driven by lust, fall into the snare God lays. The other is to see a contrast between the natural behavior of birds when forewarned and the irrational greed of robbers. In other words, it is futile to spread out a net for birds that are watching, but these men are so blinded by evil that they fail to recognize the trap (v.18).

The blind folly of greed leads to their doom—retribution is the law that will take away their lives (v.19; see also Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 173–74). But they do not even see it coming, for they do not connect the consequences with their acts. At least birds have the good sense of seeing the danger, and so the fowler has to sneak up on them to trap them.

NOTES

10 For the conditional clause in the MT (“if sinners entice you”), the LXX has rendered a volitive: “Let not impious men lead you astray.”

12 The LXX has an editorial variation for v.12b patterned after Pss 34:16[17] and 109:15: “Let us take away the remembrance of him from the earth.”

16 The verse is not in the LXX. It may have been dropped by dittography. Some argue that the verse interrupts the flow of the argument by describing the sinners instead of giving a reason to heed the warning. But the verse probably does both.

C. Warning against Disregarding or Despising Wisdom (1:20–33)

²⁰Wisdom calls aloud in the street,
she raises her voice in the public squares;
²¹at the head of the noisy streets she cries out,
in the gateways of the city she makes her speech:

²²“How long will you simple ones love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery
and fools hate knowledge?

²³If you had responded to my rebuke,
I would have poured out my heart to you
and made my thoughts known to you.

²⁴But since you rejected me when I called
and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand,
²⁵since you ignored all my advice
and would not accept my rebuke,
²⁶I in turn will laugh at your disaster;
I will mock when calamity overtakes you—
²⁷when calamity overtakes you like a storm,
when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind,
when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

²⁸“Then they will call to me but I will not answer;
they will look for me but will not find me.

²⁹Since they hated knowledge
and did not choose to fear the LORD,
³⁰since they would not accept my advice
and spurned my rebuke,
³¹they will eat the fruit of their ways
and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

³²For the waywardness of the simple will kill them,
and the complacency of fools will destroy them;
³³but whoever listens to me will live in safety
and be at ease, without fear of harm.”

COMMENTARY

20–21 The first two verses introduce a lengthy appeal from wisdom (Phyllis Tribble, “Wisdom Builds a Poem: The Architecture of Proverbs 1:20–33,” *JBL* 94 [1975]: 509–18). In public places stands personified Wisdom, exhorting the ignorant and the scornful to listen and warning of destruction if they refuse (Toy, 20). The book includes three such personifications—in 1:20–33; 8:1–36; and 9:1–6. Here “wisdom” is in the plural (*ḥokmôt*; v.20) to signify the intensity and comprehensiveness of it all—the “all-embracing, eloquent, veracious, and elevated wisdom” (McKane, 272). In addition, the verb for “crying out” (*rānan*, “to give a ringing cry”; “calls aloud,” NIV) expresses an excited exhortation.

The location of this exhortation is in the public places—“in the street . . . the public squares . . . the gateways”—suggesting that wisdom is readily available for the business of living; it is for the common person, not the scholar exclusively. These places were the centers for all activities: daily affairs (2Ki 7:1), justice (Ru 4:1), employment (Mt 20:3), and even playing (Zec 8:5 et al.). Since wisdom touches all aspects of life, the setting is appropriate. Here Wisdom, like a prophet, calls out (McKane, 273).

22 Wisdom offers a complaint—“How long. . . ?”—that addresses three types of people: the “simple” (*p̄tāyim*), the scoffers or “mockers” (*lēšîm*), and the dullards or “fools” (*k̄sîlîm*). The first is the naive person or the simpleton, the second the defiant and cynical freethinker, and the third the morally insensitive fool (Kidner, 40). Each is satisfied with his ways and does not listen to reason (see J. A. Emerton, “A Note on the Hebrew Text of Proverbs 1:22–23,” *JTS* 19 [1966]: 609–14).

23 The invitation takes the form of a conditional clause—“If only you’d respond” (NEB). Wisdom is firmly resolved to pour out her words (lit., “my breath,” a metonymy for words spoken, and not in the sense of “my spirit”) on those who respond. Like a copious spring she will gush forth to them.

24–28 There is grave danger, however, in disregarding the invitation. If the call has been extended for some time—“How long?” (v.22; see also Isa 65:2)—then the warning is given for a prolonged refusal. Because Wisdom has been continually rejected, she will laugh at the calamity of those who have rejected it. Wisdom will not laugh at the disaster, but at the confirmation of what is right over what is wrong at the time of disaster (Waltke, 1:207). This retributive justice is expressed figuratively in vv.25–28 as Wisdom’s mocking at their distress.

But then v.28 explains the meaning of the mocking: Wisdom will not be there to help when the fools cry out from their distress. The figure of laughing reveals the absurdity of choosing a foolish way of life and being totally unprepared for disaster.

29–33 This section closes with a denunciation for despising Wisdom. Not only had these foolish ones preferred their folly, but they had also despised the knowledge of ethical and religious principles for life (v.29; cf. Cohen, 7). Moreover, they continually spurned Wisdom’s reproofs (v.30).

The punishment for such indifference and antagonism takes the form of retribution (vv.31–33). The term “fruit” (v.31) is used metaphorically for the consequence of actions, likened to growth that culminates in produce (McKane, 275–76). Their way—their life and what it produces—stands in contrast to the way of Wisdom they have spurned.

The teaching of retribution is confirmed in v.32. The “turning away” (“waywardness,” NIV) and the “complacency” will be the ruin of these people. But those who heed the teachings of Wisdom will live in safety and security (v.33). The expressions used suggest a permanent, settled condition free from the sense of danger or dread. Such is the contrast between the false security of the wicked and the true and lasting peace of the righteous.

NOTES

21 Instead of “at the head of the noisy streets she cries out” (MT), the LXX reads, “She proclaims on the summits of the walls.” It then expands the verse to read, “sits at the gates of the princes, at the gates of the city she boldly says.” The word **הַמְיֹוֹת** (*hōmîyyôt*, “noisy”) is the feminine plural active participle from **הָמָה** (*hāmâ*, “to murmur, roar”). **רֹאשׁ הַמְיֹוֹת** (*rōš hōmîyyôt*) then describes the head of bustling streets or, as Perowne, 45, says, “the place where the street branches off or has its beginning.” The LXX reads “wall” as though from the word **חֹמָה** (*hōmâ*). Waltke, 1:197, notes that the parallel in 8:2 better matches “wall” than does “noisy.”

21–23 The LXX turns the questions into declarative sentences: “So long as the guileless hold fast to righteousness, they shall not be shamed; but the foolish, being lovers of insolences, have become impious, have hated knowledge.”

D. The Benefits of Seeking Wisdom (2:1–22)

OVERVIEW

This chapter appears to be a long poem in six parts: the appeal for wisdom followed by a fivefold blessing. Because there is no instruction about specific matters, McKane, 281, argues that the formal structure is more complicated and follows the instruction pattern of “The Instructions of Amenemope”; the language of the chapter is set in the frame of religious commitment and its derivative, morality.

Waltke, 1:216–17, provides a survey of the structure of the chapter, an alphabetic poem of twenty-two verses designed to present completeness; he divides it into two halves (vv.1–11 and 12–22), with each half having two stanzas of four verses each and a concluding three-verse section. (He draws on M. Fox, “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2,” *JBL* 113 [1994]: 233–43; for analysis of the parallelism he refers to D. Pardee, *Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetic Parallelism: A Trial Cut* [‘nt I and Proverbs 2] [VTSup 39; Leiden: Brill, 1988].)

1. The Admonition to Receive Wisdom (2:1–4)

¹My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
²turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding,
³and if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
⁴and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,

COMMENTARY

1–4 The teacher again makes the appeal: To attain wisdom requires constant meditation and rigid discipline. Charles T. Fritsch (*IB*, 4:793) refers to it as a receptive spirit and an ardent search.

The requirement of meditation begins with receiving the teaching. “Accept” is paralleled with “store up” (v.1), and “words” is paralleled with “commands,” thus showing intensification from the first colon to the second. The figure “store up” implies that most teaching cannot be used immediately but that some time will pass before education’s effects are felt (Plaut, 43). In the meantime the teachings will develop in their pupils attitudes that will influence their actions at some time in the future.

Such a perspective calls for patience by the students—patience that makes both heart and mind attentive. The ear is the instrument of hearing obediently, and the heart the focus of the mental process of learning and understanding. The figures (metonymies) describe a responsive and obedient person, with “ear” and “heart” (v.2) representing the mental faculties.

The other requirement is the use of the voice in a diligent search for wisdom (v.3). On his own initiative the disciple is to summon or “call out . . . for” (*qārā’ + l’*) understanding. The elevation in the lines from “call out” to “cry aloud” suggests that if understanding does not come immediately, one should raise the voice to a higher pitch and put forth greater efforts (Greenstone, 17). Thus, the ear hears the teaching, the mind understands what is said, and the voice is used to inquire after true knowledge.

This search for wisdom and understanding should be as diligent as the search for precious metal (“silver”; v.4), the simile suggesting both the value of the treasure and the diligence of the demanding search. Looking for such a treasure as silver is illustrated beautifully by the account in Job 28:9–11, and the intensity of the word “search” may be illustrated by the searching of the brothers’ sacks in Genesis 44:12. The starting point in the search for understanding is revelation—specific words and commandments—and the method is not one of free speculation but of exploring and treasuring the teachings (Kidner, 61).

2. Consequences of Receiving Wisdom (2:5–22)

a. Knowledge of God and His Protection (2:5–8)

⁵then you will understand the fear of the LORD

and find the knowledge of God.

⁶For the LORD gives wisdom,

and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

⁷He holds victory in store for the upright,

he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,

⁸for he guards the course of the just

and protects the way of his faithful ones.

COMMENTARY

5 The point of this first consequence is direct: When you seek wisdom, you find God. The search will enable one to understand the fear of the Lord. So the fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom (1:7), it is also the goal. The wise will gain deeper insight into it.

The “knowledge of God” is knowledge about God. Referring to more than intellectual opinion, it also includes obedience (“in all your ways acknowledge him,” 3:6), for to know God is to react ethically and spiritually to his will. The expression is found in Hosea 4:1 and 6:6 parallel to *ḥesed*, “faithful covenant love” (GK 2876), meaning devotion or loyalty to God. Coupled with the fear of the Lord, this knowledge means that the disciple will follow God’s moral code; to know God is to react ethically to his will, to follow his principles (Greenstone, 18).

6–8 The reason the one who seeks knowledge will find God is that God is the source of wisdom and knowledge (v.6)—it comes from “his mouth.” Moreover, God has stored up wisdom as a protection for his saints (vv.7–8). The word translated “victory” (*tûšiyyâ*) means “sound efficient wisdom” (GK 9370), or the power or capacity or competence of wisdom (McKane, 80). The LXX translated it “salvation.” The term includes the ideas of both sound wisdom and its effect, namely, abiding success—achievement and

deliverance. God holds in store sound wisdom that is powerful for his saints.

Moreover, God protects the whole enterprise since he is a “shield” (a metaphor for protection) for those who walk blamelessly before him. Verse 8 expands this idea of protection with the verbs “to guard” and “to protect” (lit., “keep”). But what God guards is the life of the upright, those who walk blamelessly, the just, and his pious ones. Divine provision and protection are prepared for the righteous.

b. Moral Discernment (2:9–22)

i. Discernment for Living (2:9–11)

⁹Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair—every good path.

¹⁰For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

¹¹Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.

COMMENTARY

9 The thought of this second consequence is introduced with *tābîn*—“you will understand” (also used in 1:2; 2:5). The disciple will develop the intellectual capacity and moral insight to discern what is “right” (*ṣedeq*), “just” (*mišpāṭ*), and “fair” (*mêšārîm*)—viz., every good path (cf. 1:3). *Ma‘gāl* (“path”) is used metaphorically for the course of a person’s actions. The word is related to the verb *gālal* (“to roll”) and the noun *gālâ* (“cart”); so *ma‘gāl* literally means “the track of a wagon wheel” and, therefore, is parallel to the idiomatic “way.” Thus “every good path” is a lifestyle that regularly leads in the direction of what is morally good (Toy, 30).

10–11 Verses 10 and 11 explain the basis for this understanding. Wisdom will take up its abode in the heart (inner life), and knowledge will be

pleased to dwell in the soul. These words speak of the inner life, the mind, the emotions, the will, and the conscience. *Nā'ām* (“pleasant”; v.10) describes a quality that attracts one to an object (as in SS 7:7)—so knowledge is attractive and attracting. When a person assimilates wisdom, doing right becomes attractive and delightful, for that person sees the advantage of it (Toy, 41).

In addition, this assimilated wisdom will manifest itself in discretion (knowledge and understanding with a purpose) and discernment that protect from evil, or it will save a good man from the consequences of naivete (McKane, 283).

ii. Protection from Evil Men (2:12–15)

¹²Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men,
from men whose words are perverse,
¹³who leave the straight paths
to walk in dark ways,
¹⁴who delight in doing wrong
and rejoice in the perverseness of evil,
¹⁵whose paths are crooked
and who are devious in their ways.

COMMENTARY

12–15 These verses present the first of two specific examples of protection from evil—from the “way of the wicked men” (v.12). The adjective “wicked” (*ra'*) describes what is unpleasant, bringing pain and misery. Evil ways bring harm to others. The parallel colon clarifies how they harm others—they speak perverse things, things contrary to what is right and proper (Cohen, 10). The word “perverse” is related to the verb *hāpak*, “to overthrow, overturn” (as in the destruction of a city); perverse

things are things that turn sensible and right things upside down. Perverse speech is the inevitable expression of the evil within.

Verses 13–15 describe the purpose, pleasure, and perverted paths of those who are wicked. Their purpose is to walk in the ways of darkness (v.13); they abandon the straight way to follow an evil way that can only be described as “dark.” Darkness is often metaphorical for sinfulness, ignorance, or oppression. Their way is uncertain, devoid of ethical illumination (see 4:18; Ecc 2:13).

Their “delight” (v.14), in fact, their joy, is in doing what is morally evil. This activity may not be due to an abnormal or sadistic delight but rather to dullness of conscience (Greenstone, 21). Verse 15, using a variation of the expressions of the preceding verses, describes their perverted ways—evil men, constantly turning aside to the wrong ways, are twisted (as in deformed bodies) and devious (meaning crafty and cunning) in the path they follow. The disciple needs wisdom for protection from those who turn the Lord’s ways upside down and try to draw others in by creating ethical chaos.

iii. Protection from the Evil Woman (2:16–19)

- ¹⁶It will save you also from the adulteress,
from the wayward wife with her seductive words,
¹⁷who has left the partner of her youth
and ignored the covenant she made before God.
¹⁸For her house leads down to death
and her paths to the spirits of the dead.
¹⁹None who go to her return
or attain the paths of life.

COMMENTARY

16–19 The second class of evil persons from whom wisdom delivers is the licentious woman. Her seductive voice joins the appeal from the disloyal men but with a different result; whereas the evil man brings pain and perversion, the evil woman brings moral ruin through a more subtle temptation. Prostitutes and adulteresses existed in Israel from the earliest times (Jdg 11:1; 1Ki 3:16; Hos 3:1; notice also laws against adultery in Ex 20:14; Lev 20:10). In this passage the licentious woman is first described (vv.16–17); then her ruin and that of those who submit to her are presented as a warning (vv.18–19).

The descriptive term “strange” (*zārâ*; “adulteress,” NIV) describes this woman as outside the framework of the covenantal community (see Snijders, 85–86). The term does not necessarily mean that she is a foreigner; rather, she is estranged from the corporate life of the community, with its social and religious conventions (McKane, 285).

An Israelite woman is probably in view, for her marriage is called a “covenant” (v.17), and she offers communion sacrifices (cf. 7:5, 14). Such a woman is acting outside the legal bounds of marriage within the covenant. The parallel term “wayward wife” (lit., “foreign woman”) would have the same sense; she may be an Israelite, but she is wayward, loose, a nonconformist to standard morality.

The subtlety of the appeal comes from flattering speech—the adulteress talks smoothly (see 5:3; an example of such talk occurs in 7:14–20). Acquiring discernment will protect the disciple from the smooth, seductive speech of a temptress. Seductive talk is evil not only because it reveals a brazen character, but also because the adulteress is guilty of marital infidelity; she leaves the “companion of her youth” (used here and in Jer 3:4 for the husband; the word means one who is well known, a familiar partner) and is unmindful of the covenant.

“Covenant” probably refers to the temptress’s marriage vows (Mal 2:14) but could mean the covenantal law that prohibited adultery (Ex 20:14). If the marriage vows are meant, such a covenant was entered into at betrothal, when the dowry was established. The adulteress violates her pledge of fidelity.

The effective warning against this type of evil derives from understanding the result of such infidelity—it leads to destruction, the very opposite of the happy and prosperous life. The syntax of v.18 is difficult.

“Her house” could be taken in the construction as “she *with her house* sinks down to death,” but “she sinks down to death, *which is her house*,” may have better support; for 9:18 states that the dead are in her house and that her guests are in the netherworld (see Notes).

Not only does she sink down to death, but also her paths lead to the “shades” (“the spirits of the dead,” NIV). The “shades” are the inhabitants of Sheol; the term describes the shadowy continuation of those who have lost their vitality and strength (see R. F. Schnell, *IDB*, 4:35, s.v. “Rephaim”). So the inevitable fate of her course of life is to be among the departed in the realm of the dead. The expression may carry a figurative meaning rather than a literal one: Get entangled with her, and you may find only estrangement from the living community, a life among outcast moral lepers who have taken a journey into the land of no return (McKane, 288).

NOTES

17 The MT reads “covenant of her God,” בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיהָ (*b'rît 'ēlōheyhā*). The LXX simply has “covenant of God,” διαθήκην θεῖαν (*diathēkēn theian*). The editors, recognizing the reference is to marriage, suggest “covenant of her tent,” אֹהֶלָּהּ (*oh'lēh*, “her tent, hut”) = חֻפְּתָהּ (*huppātāh*, “her covering, tent”).

18 The difficulty in this passage concerns the relationship of בֵּיתָהּ (*bêtāh*, “her house”) to the rest of the sentence. The MT literally reads, “she sinks down to death her house.” The verb שָׁחָה (*šāḥâ*) is the third feminine singular perfect tense of שָׁחַ (*šûaḥ*, “to sink, bow down”). בֵּית (*bayit*, “house”) is not normally a feminine noun; so it is probably not the subject of the verb. The editors suggest an emendation of נִתְּבַתָּהּ (*n'tîbātāh*, “her path”) in comparison with 7:27. But all the versions support the consonantal text of the MT.

The LXX seems to have read a verb שָׂתָה (*šātâ*, third feminine singular perfect of שָׂתַת *[šît*, “to set, place”]) and made *bêtāh* the object: “she has established her house near death.” But we are left with the explanation of the more difficult verbal form in the MT. Toy, 48, suggests taking the verb from שָׁחָה (*šāḥâ*, “to sink”), but that verb normally means “bow down.” Delitzsch, 1:83, suggests that *bêtāh* is a permutative noun that qualifies the

subject—“she together with all that belongs to her.” The solution of Kidner, 62, is to take *bêtāh* in apposition to מוֹת (*māwet*), meaning that “death” is her house. Some versions (NEB, NRSV) have emended the word *byt*, “her house,” to *ntybt*, “her path,” in comparison with 5:9; 7:8; and 9:14.

iv. Enablement for Righteous Living (2:20–22)

²⁰Thus you will walk in the ways of good men
and keep to the paths of the righteous.

²¹For the upright will live in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;

²²but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the unfaithful will be torn from it.

COMMENTARY

20–22 The passage ends on the more positive note that wisdom will enable people to do what is right and to enjoy God’s blessing. Once again the promise of blessing is for good people, the righteous, the upright, and the blameless—the same terms used earlier for those who follow the path of wisdom. Here the text brings in the Deuteronomic emphasis on the land, God’s supreme gift being the fulfillment of the promises. The reference to the land could refer to the land of Israel or the whole earth—perhaps even the world to come. The upright will enjoy security and prosperity in it, but the wicked will be rooted out in divine judgment.

Those judged are called the “wicked” (“ungodly” in older translations), a term that refers to those who remain guilty before God, evil in their thoughts, words, and deeds, and therefore not members of the covenantal community of the righteous. They are also called “the unfaithful,” a word that has more of an emphasis on treachery in a relationship than simple unfaithfulness. The wicked will be “cut off.” The expression, frequent in Leviticus (e.g., Lev 17:10; 19:19), refers to judgment on the person—

excommunication at least, but probably death as well. They will not inherit life in the earth; they will be rooted out of future blessing. This excision also will preserve the faithful community in their righteousness before their holy God.

NOTE

20 The LXX reads v.20 as a conditional sentence and connects it with v.19: “for if they had gone in good paths, they would have found the paths of righteousness easy.” Toy, 38–40, thinks that v.20 interrupts the flow of v.19 and v.20, so he joins vv.9 and 20 and then follows with vv.10–19.

E. Admonition to Follow the Way of Wisdom in Relationships with God and People (3:1–35)

OVERVIEW

The instruction in this chapter advances the themes of the last one and may be divided into two speeches: vv.1–12 and vv.13–35. The first speech may be charted as follows (see Waltke, 1:239, for more detail): an introduction that calls for the disciple to keep the commands (v.1) and hold fast to love (v.3), with the corresponding motivations of life and peace (v.2) and favor (v.4). The body of the speech calls for trust, favor, and honor (vv.5, 7, 9) with the corresponding motivations of following the straight path, healing, and prosperity (vv.6, 8, and 10). The conclusion admonishes the disciple not to reject discipline, which is the proof of the father’s love (vv.11–12).

1. Introductory Exhortation (3:1–4)

¹My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
²for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you prosperity.

³Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
⁴Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

COMMENTARY

1–2 The first exhortation is to follow the father’s “teaching” (*tôrâ*; GK 9368) because it will bring a long and peaceful life. Kidner, 63, observes that where *tôrâ* occurs in the book unqualified, it refers to divine law; but when qualified, as here, it refers to home teachings. Here the verbs “do not forget” and “keep” remind the disciple of general educational discipline. The result is a life worth living, free from danger and trouble (so *ḥayyîm* and *šālôm*; “life” and “prosperity,” NIV).

3 The second exhortation is to be faithful and trustworthy because doing so brings honor with God and people (v.4). “Love” (*ḥesed*; GK 2876) and “faithfulness” (*ʾemet*; GK 622) are the two basic covenantal terms in Israel. *Ḥesed* is essentially fidelity to obligations arising from a relationship (see Nelson Glueck, *Ḥesed in the Bible* [trans. Alfred Gottschalk; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967], 55); *ʾemet* is essentially that which can be relied on, that which is stable (Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* [Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1852], 167). The two words together form a hendiadys: “faithful love.”

These words, coupled with the allusion to Deuteronomy 6:8 and even Jeremiah 31:3, show that the content of this disciplined life is the Yahwistic faith. By “binding” and “writing,” the teacher is stressing that the teachings become a part of the disciple’s nature (Toy, 58). The ramifications of this terminology are that the disciple is actually subject to the Lord, not the teacher, and that the requisite “discipline” (*mûsār*; v.11) is respect and obedience for the Lord and his teaching and not merely for a human instructor. (See McKane, 290–91, though he argues that Deuteronomy was influenced by Proverbs.)

4 This verse provides the final motivation: favor and a good name. Parallel to 13:15, this difficult line probably signifies that the disciple will have a reputation for good understanding, meaning that he will be respected by God and people.

NOTE

4 The MT reads literally, “You will find favor and good understanding in the sight of God and men.” The word “understanding,” שֵׂכֶל (*śēkel*), seems not to form a good parallel with “favor.” The LXX attaches the first two words of v.4, וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ (ûṃṣāḥēn, “Then you will win favor”), to v.3 and then reads v.4 as “and devise excellent things in the sight of the Lord and of men” (cf. Ro 12:17; 2Co 8:21). The Targum and the Peshitta list the words separately—“favor and good and understanding.” Toy, 58, suggests changing the word שֵׂכֶל (*śēkel*) to שֵׁם (*šēm*, “name”), an emendation followed by the NIV. There is no manuscript evidence for such a change, however. It is possible that *śēkel* has a derived meaning from “understanding” that would be akin to “success,” i.e., a reputation for good understanding.

2. Admonition to Be Faithful to the Lord (3:5–12)

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;

⁶in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.

⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.

⁸This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.

⁹Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;

¹⁰then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.

¹¹My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
and do not resent his rebuke,

¹²because the LORD disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.

COMMENTARY

5–6 Several specific instructions comprise this general admonition to be faithful. The first is to trust in the Lord and not in oneself, because he grants success. In other words, the teaching is valid because God will bless it. *Bāṭah* (“trust”; GK 1053) carries the force of relying on someone for security; the confidence is to be in the Lord and not in human understanding. Here the object of faith is what the Lord has said through the wise teaching of the father. The call is for a trust characterized by total commitment—“with *all* your heart,” “in *all* your ways.” *Bînâ* (“understanding”) is now cast in a sinful mode (cf. 1:2, 6), so there is to be a difference between the *bînâ* that wisdom brings and the natural *bînâ* that undermines faith.

The traditional rendering “acknowledge him” (v.6) needs to be refined, for the expression suggests “confess him.” But the verb is “know him,” and it reflects the intimate experience of a personal relationship. The sequence of the lines may also suggest their communication of a promise: by trusting him fully you will know him. What these beautiful expressions call for is “absolute obedience and surrender in every realm of life” (Fritsch, *IB*, 4:799). When obedient faith is present, the Lord will guide the believer along life’s paths in spite of difficulties and hindrances. The idea of “straight” contrasts to the crooked and perverse ways of the wicked.

7–8 The second instruction is to revere the Lord and avoid evil. Here, too, there is a difference between human wisdom and the new wisdom from above (cf. Isa 5:21). There must be a higher source, and v.7b clarifies it: “Fear the LORD and shun evil.” Compliance with this instruction is

therapeutic; it will be health to the body and nourishment for the frame (v.8). The healing that the fear of the Lord and avoidance of evil brings is first and foremost spiritual. Scripture often uses the physical body to describe inner spiritual or psychical feelings (see A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* [Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1949], 67–68).

9–10 The third piece of advice is to give back to God some of one's wealth as a sacrifice in recognition that God gave it. Here we find a cultic verse in the admonition (see Ex 23:19; Nu 28:26–27; Dt 18:4; 26:1–2). The admonition reminds the faithful of their religious duties to God. Kidner, 64, poignantly puts it, "To 'know' God in our financial 'ways' is to see that these honour Him." Then follows the promise of blessing in the "barns" and the "vats."

11–12 The final instruction warns the disciple not to rebel against the Lord's discipline, for it is an evidence of his love. God takes great pains with his people because he cares so much for them, and that care can be painful at times. Wisdom literature knows that the righteous do not enjoy uninterrupted blessing; suffering remains a problem to the sages, and this text records one of their solutions (see Scott, 47).

The friends of Job, and countless others after them, reduce suffering to just punishment; but this passage reminds us that there is far more to it. This motivation recalls the language of the Davidic covenant (2Sa 7:14; Ps 89:32–33), which mentions discipline in love. Indeed it is the father-son relationship that provides insight into the nature of that discipline (see [comment on v.22](#)). These verses are quoted in Hebrews 12:5–6 to show that suffering is a sign of sonship.

NOTES

8 The MT has **לְשֶׁרֶךְ** (*l'sārrekā*), "to your navel," not the NIV's "to your body." The difficulty is that **שֶׁר** (*šār*, "navel") is never used for "body" in the OT. The *BHS* editors suggest a slight change either to **לְבִשְׂרֶךְ** (*libšārekā*, "to your flesh") or **לְשֶׁרֶכְךָ** (*liš'ērekā*, "to your body"). Such changes run contrary to the canons of textual criticism by preferring a common reading to the rare and difficult one. Since *šār* only occurs twice in the Bible, it would be hard to conclude how it was or was not used. And since the words

here must be synecdoches anyway (i.e., the part representing the whole, here the navel representing the firm center of the body, paralleled by the bony framework), *šār* works as well as בָּשָׂר (*bāśār*, “flesh”).

11 The LXX has “faint not” (see Heb 12:5). This expression appears to be either an interpretation (for “despise not”//“resent not”) or a translation of another reading.

12 וַיִּכָּאֵב (*ûk^oāb*, “as a father”) is slightly difficult in that it is the only place in Proverbs that identifies God as Father. Here the LXX reads a hiphil verb, וַיַּכּ וַיִּבּ (*w^yak ’ib*, “and scourges”), thus yielding, “Whom the Lord loves, he reproves, and scourges every son whom he receives.” The reading “scourges” (= afflicts) fits the parallelism; however, there is not sufficient difficulty with אָב (*’ab*, “father”) to reject it in favor of a reading with better parallelism.

3. Commendation of the Way of Wisdom (3:13–26)

OVERVIEW

The second half of the chapter may be made up of independent poems, the first three providing the motivation (vv.13–18, 19–20, 21–26), and the fourth the climactic lesson (vv.27–35).

a. Wisdom the Most Valuable Possession (3:13–18)

- ¹³Blessed is the man who finds wisdom,
the man who gains understanding,
¹⁴for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
¹⁵She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.
¹⁶Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
¹⁷Her ways are pleasant ways,

and all her paths are peace.

¹⁸She is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

COMMENTARY

13 Verses 13–18 appear to be following a hymnic style, for “blessed” (*ʿašrê*) replaces the imperative (McKane, 289). The statement “Blessed is the man” is followed by a series of motive clauses giving the reason for this happy estate. “Blessed” describes heavenly bliss stemming from being right with God; it depicts the human condition of well-being that comes with God’s blessing or as a divine reward for righteousness (see S. H. Blank, s.v., “Happiness,” *IDB*, 2523).

14–18 The statement concerning the blessedness of finding wisdom is now validated. Wisdom (personified) is better than wealth and riches (vv.14–15), for her yield is power, influence, and respect—the gifts of life (McKane, 295). She is also compared to “a tree of life” (v.18), the symbol of vitality and fullness of life (v.16).

This figure, drawing on Genesis 2–3 (cf. Ge 3:22), signifies at least that wisdom is the source of a long and beneficial life (v.16; see Ralph Marcus, “The Tree of Life in Proverbs,” *JBL* 62 [1943]: 117–20). Consequently, those who obtain wisdom will be “blessed” (v.18, forming an inclusion with v.13). Waltke, 1:260, argues that in the light of the use of this motif in literature, its significance here includes healing and immortality; he further explains that Proverbs then functions symbolically (and provisionally) as the tree of life that was lost in Genesis 2:22–24. Until we reach the tree of life, meaning paradise (Rev 2:7), we hold fast to this life-giving book, and now also to Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.

NOTE

16 The LXX adds an ethical element that is out of place in the passage: “Out of her mouth proceeds righteousness, and law and mercy she bears on her tongue.”

b. Wisdom Essential to Creation (3:19–20)

¹⁹By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
²⁰by his knowledge the deeps were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew.

COMMENTARY

19–20 Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are also valuable to God, for by them he created the universe. How wisdom was used in creation and how it pictures Christ, the Wisdom of God, is discussed in the [comments on 8:22–23](#) (see also J. Emerton, “Spring and Torrent in Ps. 74:15,” *VTSup* 15 [1965]: 125). This section shows that the wisdom that directs life is the same wisdom that created the universe; to surrender to God's wisdom is to put oneself in harmony with creation, the world around one (Fritsch, *IB*, 4:804). The two verses concentrate first on the foundation of heaven and earth.

c. Wisdom and a Long and Safe Life (3:21–26)

²¹My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment,
do not let them out of your sight;
²²they will be life for you,
an ornament to grace your neck.
²³Then you will go on your way in safety,
and your foot will not stumble;
²⁴when you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

²⁵Have no fear of sudden disaster
or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,
²⁶for the LORD will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being snared.

COMMENTARY

21–26 The speech now concerns the value of wisdom to the son or disciple. This section forms an admonition to keep on the way of wisdom (v.21) along with promises for such compliance (vv.22–26). If the disciple diligently preserves sound judgment and discernment, he can be confident that the Lord will guide and protect him. But he cannot let them out of his sight for a moment, as *yāluzû* (lit., “depart”) indicates (v.21).

Whoever trusts and follows sound judgment in a life of righteousness will find not only strength and beauty in wisdom (v.22) but also preservation in action and repose (vv.23–24)—in normal life and in times of disaster (vv.25–26). In other words, one’s life will be enriched (v.22), safe and secure (vv.23–24), and without fear (v.25). True spiritual discernment that places its confidence in the Lord will not be disappointed (v.26).

NOTE

21 In the MT the clauses are in reverse order, making the first line difficult since no subject is expressed: “My son, let them not depart from your eyes, keep sound judgment and discernment.” The simplest solution is to reverse the clauses (so NIV), instead of inserting a subject (cf. 4:20).

4. Warning to Avoid Unneighborliness (3:27–30)

²⁷Do not withhold good from those who deserve it,
when it is in your power to act.
²⁸Do not say to your neighbor,

“Come back later; I’ll give it tomorrow”—
when you now have it with you.

²⁹Do not plot harm against your neighbor,
who lives trustfully near you.

³⁰Do not accuse a man for no reason—
when he has done you no harm.

COMMENTARY

27–30 Here is the lesson for the speech. It contains a succession of instructions with regard to neighborliness. These ideas, expressed in the negative, follow naturally from the emphasis on love and faithfulness in v.3. Verses 27–28 exhort doing acts of kindness to those in need, for it is wrong to withhold help from a needy neighbor—people ought to be good neighbors. The father also prohibits plotting maliciously against an unsuspecting neighbor (v.29). Malice is a crime; it ruins community. Neither should anyone bring groundless litigation against an innocent neighbor (v.30). The reference may have in mind people who take others to court on the flimsiest accusations (see McKane, 300).

NOTE

27 The MT has “from its possessors” after “do not withhold good”; the LXX has “from the poor” (as though the poor possessed the “good”). The Peshitta and Targum leave it out. Toy, 77, suggests reading “neighbor” instead, as in Hebrew רֵעִי (r ‘yk) displays some visual similarity to בעליו (b’lyw). The change seems gratuitous.

5. Warning against Emulating the Wicked (3:31–35)

³¹Do not envy a violent man
or choose any of his ways,

³²for the LORD detests a perverse man
but takes the upright into his confidence.

³³The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the home of the righteous.

³⁴He mocks proud mockers
but gives grace to the humble.

³⁵The wise inherit honor,
but fools he holds up to shame.

COMMENTARY

31–35 In dealing with neighbors, one should avoid both envying and emulating (LXX) a violent person (cf. Ps 73:3–5). This warning in v.31 is followed by the reasons, expressed in a series of contrasts but essentially arguing that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. The Lord detests the perverse (v.32), curses the house of the wicked (v.33), mocks proud mockers (v.34), and holds fools up to shame (v.25). But he is pleased with the upright (v.32); he blesses their home (v.33), gives grace to the humble (v.34), and bequeaths honor to the wise (v.35). So wise and upright behavior pleases God and results in his blessing.

NOTE

34 The verse uses a strong anthropomorphic idea: “He mocks the proud mockers.” The LXX has a softened interpretation: “The Lord resists the proud” (cf. Jas 4:6; 1Pe 5:5).

F. Admonition to Follow Righteousness and Avoid Wickedness (4:1–27)

OVERVIEW

This chapter is comprised of three discourses on the value of wisdom, each including the motifs of instruction, exhortation, command, and

motivation. After two introductory verses, the first lecture is on the family heritage (vv.3–9).

1. Traditional Teaching and Its Benefits (4:1–9)

a. Exhortation to Acquire Traditional Wisdom (4:1–4a)

¹Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction;
pay attention and gain understanding.
²I give you sound learning,
so do not forsake my teaching.
³When I was a boy in my father's house,
still tender, and an only child of my mother,
⁴he taught me and said,

COMMENTARY

1 The first discourse begins with a double call, stressing the importance of receiving the teaching. The “instruction” (*mûsar*) is the moral instruction introduced previously (cf. 1:2); it adds self-control and guidance to wisdom.

The significant feature of this discourse is that the teaching is traditional. The plural “sons” suggests that disciples (pupils) are in view and that the father is a teacher (Toy, 84). But the use of “mother” in v.3 and the fact that the teacher-pupil relationship was modeled on the parent-child relationship suggest that a father-children relationship is indicated. Alden, 45, perhaps goes too far in identifying David and Bathsheba as the parents.

2 The tradition being passed on is “sound”—it is the voice of experience. But it must be received; the term *leqah* (“learning”) implies that it requires taking (Plaut, 66). Accordingly, this teaching is designated as tradition.

3–4a The concern that these traditional teachings be received is reinforced by personal experience—they were lovingly handed down by his parents. They were ingrained in the author's soul; he has seen them shape

his life and prove reliable. So the home continues to be the prominent arena of learning as parents in turn pass on the traditions (see Dt 6:6–9). In this section, then, the one teaching strengthens his credibility by informing his sons that it is a shared experience.

NOTE

3 The LXX introduces the idea of “obedient” and “beloved” for **רַךְ וְיָחִיד** (*rak w’yāhîd*, “still tender, and an only child”), viz., “I also was a son, obedient to a father, beloved in the presence of a mother.” This seems to be a free interpretation, if not a translation of a different Hebrew reading. The MT has “tender” and “only one,” though *rak* could be “alone” or “only.” The Hebrew makes good sense and requires no emendation. The idea is that the body and the character are weak and sensitive because they are inexperienced (Waltke, 1:278).

b. Benefits of Acquired Wisdom (4:4b–9)

“Lay hold of my words with all your heart;
keep my commands and you will live.

⁵Get wisdom, get understanding;
do not forget my words or swerve from them.

⁶Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you.

⁷Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom.
Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

⁸Esteem her, and she will exalt you;
embrace her, and she will honor you.

⁹She will set a garland of grace on your head
and present you with a crown of splendor.”

COMMENTARY

4b Receiving this traditional wisdom wholeheartedly will bring life. “You will live” must mean to experience life with all of its blessings—life as opposed to the whole realm of death, with which it is in conflict (Kidner, 55). Deuteronomy 30 captures the contrast forcefully: people are in a life-and-death struggle, and choosing life means obeying the commandments in order to enjoy God’s bounty. This theme of true life appears in each of the discourses (4:4, 10, 22–23). Of course, the sage uses this motivation in the general sense, for there are always exceptions, such as Job (Scott, 52).

5–6 A second benefit of traditional wisdom is security. After reiterating the exhortation to acquire wisdom and understanding (i.e., perhaps through purchase, for there is a cost for such acquisition), the teacher uses feminine verbs to promise protection and safety. Here we find Wisdom personified as a woman, at first reading like a bride that is to be loved and embraced (cf. v.8), but also having the qualities of an influential patron who can protect (v.6; cf. McKane, 306). Wisdom personified as a virtuous woman contrasts to the strange woman. If the novice gives wholehearted devotion to wisdom, she will watch over him. Proverbs elaborate how wisdom protects one from the evil man (2:12–15), the evil woman (2:16–19; 5:1–20; ch. 7), and catastrophe (5:22–23).

7–9 A third benefit is “honor” (*kbd* in v.8). Using an implied comparison here with a valuable object (cf. 3:14–15), the teacher implores the disciple to obtain this wisdom at all costs (including the cost of one’s heart), for it is of supreme value. The personification continues in these verses, showing that embracing wisdom will bring honor like a wreath on the head. The imagery is that wisdom is a patroness rewarding her lover; wisdom is to be caressed or held dear (see Fox, 179). The honor acquired essentially has to do with the character that wisdom produces; such virtue will be readily recognized in the community (11:10–11).

So there are several benefits to be gained from embracing this teaching. The first step is the earnest determination to have it (Greenstone, 39).

NOTE

7 Toy, 88, on the basis of its omission from the LXX, deletes v.7 as an impossible gloss that interrupts vv.6 and 8.

2. Admonition to Live Righteously (4:10–19)

a. Pursuit of a Righteous Lifestyle (4:10–13)

- ¹⁰Listen, my son, accept what I say,
and the years of your life will be many.
- ¹¹I guide you in the way of wisdom
and lead you along straight paths.
- ¹²When you walk, your steps will not be hampered;
when you run, you will not stumble.
- ¹³Hold on to instruction, do not let it go;
guard it well, for it is your life.

COMMENTARY

10 The second lecture begins with the repeated admonition to listen carefully to the instruction to stay off the wrong path so that life might be extended. The parallelism explains that the disciple must appropriate (*qah*; “accept,” NIV) the life principles of wisdom. Doing so prepares him to discern what is the right way and what is the wrong way in the later collections of sayings.

11–12 That this teaching must be appropriated is underscored by the use of *hōrētîkā* (“I guide you”), a verb related to the noun *tôrâ* (see further Driver, “Hebrew Notes,” VT 1 [1951]: 241–50). More specifically, the idea is that of instructing and leading the disciple along. James L. Crenshaw notes how wisdom taught that laws governed the universe and ensured prosperity and harmony (“The Acquisition of Knowledge in Israelite Wisdom Literature,” WW 7 [1986]: 9).

The figure of a road is now used to make a comparison. Living according to wisdom is like walking or running on a safe road, a course that will be free of obstacles, so that progress will lead to abundant life (see [comment on 3:5–6](#)). Verse 12 uses two synonymous temporal clauses to fill out the

image: when one lives by this teaching (walking and running), nothing will impede progress.

13 Not only is wisdom the means of making progress in life, it is life itself. (The father's instruction and wisdom are equated here with life.) Anything so essential must be enthusiastically guarded.

b. Avoidance of a Wicked Lifestyle (4:14–19)

¹⁴Do not set foot on the path of the wicked
or walk in the way of evil men.

¹⁵Avoid it, do not travel on it;
turn from it and go on your way.

¹⁶For they cannot sleep till they do evil;
they are robbed of slumber till they make someone
fall.

¹⁷They eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.

¹⁸The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

¹⁹But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble.

14–15 The author gives a warning to avoid evil ways and evil men by not even starting on the wicked path of life. Plaut, 69, rightly paraphrases: “Don’t take the first step, for you may not be the master of your destiny thereafter.”

The rapid sequence of six intensifying imperatives in these verses stresses the urgency of the matter. And the expressions used continue the comparison of lifestyle with a path that can be traveled—only now the lifestyle is evil, masquerading as what is true and right.

16–17 The first reason one should avoid such a lifestyle is that it is enslaving—evil becomes the true nature. By using hyperboles the teacher portrays the character of the wicked as those who are addicted to evil (v.16; cf. Ps 36:4). They are so completely devoted to evil conduct that they cannot sleep until they find expression for it. Alden, 47, comments: “How sick to find peace only at the price of another man’s misfortune!”

Moreover, evil is the diet of the wicked (v.17), the figure “bread of wickedness” meaning that wickedness is what the wicked regularly consume. This hyperbole stresses how powerful the influence of evil is in the life of the wicked; to them it is like food and wine (contrast Php 4:8). Verse 17 has been taken also to mean that violence is the way the wicked sustain themselves.

18–19 In addition to being enslaved by evil, one should realize that becoming involved with evil is dangerous. Similes make the contrast vivid. The path of the righteous is like the morning sun; it is secure and clear like the bright light of the daytime that shines brighter and brighter (“dawn” and “day” may form a merism to express that this light is constant; v.18). By contrast, the way of the wicked is insecure and dangerous, like darkness in which people stumble (v.19). The right path is like the morning sun, which grows brighter, not like the evening sun, which grows dim.

NOTE

18 For the noun “dawn” or “morning sun,” the LXX has a verbal translation: “The ways of the righteous shine like light.” But the contrast in v.19 is with a nominal form: “darkness.” The editors of the *BHS* propose transposing vv.18 and 19 or deleting the ¹ (w^e) at the beginning of v.18.

3. Admonition to Concentrate on Righteous Living (4:20–27)

a. Exhortation to the Father’s Teaching (4:20–22)

²⁰My son, pay attention to what I say;
listen closely to my words.

²¹Do not let them out of your sight,

keep them within your heart;
²²for they are life to those who find them
and health to a man's whole body.

COMMENTARY

20–21 The exhortation in this third discourse uses several terms for parts of the body. The disciple must use the ears to listen closely to the teacher's words, the eyes to watch them closely, and the heart to determine to do them. By using the ears, eyes, and heart, the teacher exhorts the whole person to receive the traditions, that is, to walk straight ahead and not swerve to the right or the left (cf. v.27).

22 The reason for giving heed to instruction once again is that the words of wisdom provide life and health, the implication being a restoration to full life. The health that is promised here is physical, emotional, and spiritual—the whole person. It is made possible because of God's words, which bring deliverance from the harmful evils that hinder life.

b. Concentration on Righteousness (4:23–27)

²³Above all else, guard your heart,
for it is the wellspring of life.
²⁴Put away perversity from your mouth;
keep corrupt talk far from your lips.
²⁵Let your eyes look straight ahead,
fix your gaze directly before you.
²⁶Make level paths for your feet
and take only ways that are firm.
²⁷Do not swerve to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil.

COMMENTARY

23 In this instruction for righteousness, the parts of the body that are used are those involved with expression or action. First, the “heart” (i.e., the mind or will, the source of choices) must be guarded diligently. Verse 21 instructed the disciple to guard wisdom in the heart. Now the heart must be watched over and restrained from evil, for the heart is the “wellspring of life,” the starting point of the activities of life (16:9; 23:19); the heart determines the course of life (see R. J. Bouffier, “The Heart in the Proverbs of Solomon,” *TBT* 52 [1971]: 249–51).

24 Righteousness will control the tongue by averting it from twisted and crooked speech. This step is the next logical one to take; it is not enough to guard the heart without watching what the heart produces, for words flow out of the heart. Wisdom produces truthful speech (8:13; 10:32; et al.). Scott, 52, reminds us that “falsehood and dissimulation are repeatedly condemned by wisdom teachers”; he refers to “Amenemope” and “Ahiqar” (cf. *ANET*, 423, 429).

25 Next, the eyes must be focused on proper goals so that the wise person does not swerve from the path (the image of the road being resumed here). The wise person will have unwavering directness, but the fool is easily distracted (17:24). To look straight in front means that one has a fixed goal.

26–27 Here the focus is on the foot. The imagery of the level, firm, and straight path is used again in these final verses to advise the disciple to avoid evil actions. There is no middle way: one must reject the wrong way and follow the right way every step on the road of life.

NOTE

27 The LXX adds a bit of a homily: “For the way of the right hand God knows, but those of the left are distorted; and he himself will make straight your paths and guide your goings in peace.” This addition is unnecessary, for the text is clear as it stands. For a brief discussion on the question of whether this addition is Jewish or early Christian, see Toy, 99.

G. Admonition to Avoid Seduction (5:1–23)

OVERVIEW

1–2 Chapters 5 and 6 now elaborate earlier warnings against pursuing easy money and sex from evil men and women. In chapter 5 we have a man-to-man warning to avoid liaisons with loose women, a fairly common theme in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East (McKane, 312; for an analysis of the arrangement of the chapter, see John E. Goldingay, “Proverbs V and IX,” *RB* 84 [1977]: 80–93). The structure of the passage includes an introductory address and call to attentiveness (vv.1–2), reasons for following the advice (vv.3–6), warning of the great folly (vv.7–14), a reminder of the wisdom of marriage (vv.15–20), and finally some conclusions and consequences (vv.21–23; see further Waltke, 1:305).

1. A Father’s Warning about Deadly Seduction (5:1–6)

a. Exhortation for Discretion (5:1–2)

¹My son, pay attention to my wisdom,
listen well to my words of insight,
²that you may maintain discretion
and your lips may preserve knowledge.

COMMENTARY

1–2 This initial exhortation is for the son to listen carefully to this warning that he may keep discretion and knowledge. This knowledge and “discretion” (*m^ezimmôt*, GK 4659, is used elsewhere in a bad sense but here signifying wise, prudent consideration) will be basic for avoiding temptation to such disastrous folly.

b. Motivation: With Wisdom Seduction May Be Avoided (5:3–6)

³For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
⁴but in the end she is bitter as gall,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
⁵Her feet go down to death;
her steps lead straight to the grave.
⁶She gives no thought to the way of life;
her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.

COMMENTARY

3 The reason the disciple should guard discretion is that the adulteress is seductive. *Zārâ* (“strange woman,” elsewhere “harlot”) is taken here, as in ch. 7, to be a married woman, an unchaste wife. The father’s warning assumes that the son is married or soon will be married. But the main point the text makes is that her words are flattering—they draw him to excitement, delight, and mystery (McKane, 314). The images of dripping honey and smooth oil refer to her words, not her kisses (cf. SS 4:11; see also M. Dahood, “Honey That Drips: Notes on Proverbs 5:2–3,” *Bib* 54 [1973]: 65–66).

4 The teacher uncovers corruption under the adulteress’s charm; Proverbs does not allow us to forget that there is an afterward, when she is “bitter” (*mārâ*) as “wormwood” (*la‘nâ*) (see Kidner, 65). The reference in the MT is to the aromatic plant in contrast to the sweetness of honey. Some, however, follow the LXX with “gall” (so NIV). Plaut, 74, keenly observes that there is sweetness insofar as the tryst has alluring glamour, but afterward it has an ugly ring. The image of the two-edged sword (lit., a sword with more than one mouth) signifies that a liaison with this woman brings pain and destruction. The flattery conceals for a time the harmful side of this sin.

5–6 In fact, the wayward woman’s lifestyle is the pathway to death. In this passage *šē’ôl* (“grave,” NIV; GK 8619) is not just the realm of the unblessed, for it is paralleled with “death” (*māwet*). Although these terms

could be hyperbolic for a ruined life, they probably convey a note of the real consequences that exist for a life of debauchery. Those who abandon God walk aimlessly and ignorantly in darkness, which is death. The sadder part of this description is that the *zārâ* does not know how unstable her life is (v.6; but see D. W. Thomas for the interpretation “she is not tranquil” in “A Note on *lō’ tēdā’* in Proverbs 5:6,” *JTS* 37 [1936]: 59).

2. A Father’s Warning to Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:7–14)

a. Exhortation for Prevention (5:7–8)

⁷Now then, my sons, listen to me;
do not turn aside from what I say.
⁸Keep to a path far from her,
do not go near the door of her house,

COMMENTARY

7–8 This next part concerns the folly of adultery. It begins with a warning not to turn aside from the father’s teaching. One mistake can ruin the family. Going to the adulteress would be such a turning aside, and so the writer strongly warns, “Keep clear” (as Moffat has it); do not even go near her door. (Note the wordplay between *rāḥaq* [“Keep . . . far”] and *qārab* [“go near”] in these verses.) The disciple should avoid her house completely—it is a place of death.

b. Motivation: Obedience Will Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:9–14)

⁹lest you give your best strength to others
and your years to one who is cruel,
¹⁰lest strangers feast on your wealth

and your toil enrich another man's house.

¹¹At the end of your life you will groan,
when your flesh and body are spent.

¹²You will say, "How I hated discipline!
How my heart spurned correction!

¹³I would not obey my teachers
or listen to my instructors.

¹⁴I have come to the brink of utter ruin
in the midst of the whole assembly."

COMMENTARY

9–10 The first part of the writer's motivation is the warning that consorting with an adulteress will rob a person of health and prosperity (v.9). These verses begin with "lest" (*pen*), introducing negative consequences. The theme here is that the hard-earned substance can pass over to "strangers" (*zārîm*, v.10). The "strength" (*hôd*, v.9) may refer to health and vigor that might be relinquished to a cruel enemy, perhaps an offended husband as in ch. 7 (although a husband is not mentioned here).

The "years," the best years in the prime of life, signify what those years have produced, what a person has worked for. Likewise the "wealth" (*kōah*) in v.10 refers to the produce that laborious toiling has gained, the family's hard-earned fortune. The point of these verses is clear: The price of infidelity may be high, for everything one has worked for—position, power, prosperity—can be lost either through the avaricious demands of the woman or the outcry for restitution by the community.

11–14 When the foolish participant is ruined in such a way, there will be regret for not heeding the warnings. This theme is introduced with "you will groan" (*nāhamtā*), a term used elsewhere for the loud groaning of the poor and distressed (Eze 24:23). Here the verb conveys an elemental, animal cry of anguish when the guilty finds himself destitute (McKane, 317). The use of both "flesh" and "body" underscores the fact that the whole body is exhausted.

Next begins what Alden, 51, calls a long litany of “if onlys.” The condemned conscience realizes too late that instruction and reproof have been ignored. If the disciple listens to his teacher and heeds his warnings, he will be spared of “utter ruin” (*kol-rāʿ*, v.14) and the remorse of wrong choices.

NOTE

11 The LXX interprets נְהַמְתָּה (*nāhamtâ*, “groan, mourn”) as נִחַמְתָּ (*niḥamtâ*, “repent”), viz., “And you repent at the last when the flesh of your body is consumed.” Without vocalization they apparently thought of the common word נָחַם (*nḥm*) as having an ethical emphasis.

3. Advice to Find Satisfaction at Home (5:15–23)

a. Avoid Sharing Love with Strangers (5:15–17)

¹⁵Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.

¹⁶Should your springs overflow in the streets,
your streams of water in the public squares?

¹⁷Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.

COMMENTARY

15–17 The theme here is that the enjoyment of sex in marriage enables people to avoid temptations. By using high figures the wise teacher instructs the son to find sexual satisfaction with his own wife and not strange women. The figures used here have troubled commentators because they are not common in instruction material (see McKane, 317).

But Kruger develops the section as an allegory consisting of a series of metaphors, and this approach seems satisfactory. He contends that what is at

issue is a private versus a common claim. The images of a cistern, well, or fountain are used of a wife (see v.18b; SS 4:15) because she, like water, satisfies desires. Channels of water in the street then signify sexual contact with lewd women. According to Proverbs 7:12, the lewd woman never stays at home but instead is in the streets and the property of many (Paul A. Kruger, “Promiscuity or Marriage Fidelity? A Note on Prov. 5:15–18,” *JNSL* 13 [1987]: 61–68). So the young man is advised to spend his sexual energy at home, producing children (see Sir 26:19–21) rather than giving himself to “strangers” (*zārîm*; v.17).

NOTE

15 For “cistern” the LXX has “vessel.” While the change may be only slight and retain the basic idea of the passage, the Hebrew imagery means that the wife is to be a source of true pleasure, not an everyday instrument for mere physical satisfaction.

b. Finding Satisfaction with One’s Wife (5:18–19)

¹⁸May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

¹⁹A loving doe, a graceful deer—
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.

COMMENTARY

18 The advice is now plainly given—the proper course of action is to find pleasure in a fulfilling marriage. Proverbs clearly indicates that marriage is to be monogamous, contracted early, and then maintained throughout life. The first line, calling for the “fountain” to be blessed, indicates that sexual delight is God-given; therefore, one should rejoice in the wife who has from the vigor of youth shared the excitement and

satisfaction, the joy and the contentment of a divinely blessed, monogamous relationship (see Mal 2:15).

19 The imagery for intimate love in marriage is now drawn from the animal world. The “doe” and “deer” illustrate the exquisite gracefulness of a loving wife. The translation “gazelle” also is used (see *ZPEB*, 2:665). (Women frequently were named after pretty and graceful animals [e.g., Tabitha/Dorcas in Acts 9:36].) The husband should be “captivated” (*tišgeh*) by the love of his wife. The word *šāgâ* signifies a staggering gait and so here expresses the ecstatic joy of a “captivated” lover. It may even suggest “be intoxicated always with her love.”

NOTE

18 For the Hebrew “let your fountain be blessed,” the LXX reads, “Let your fountain be your own,” possibly reading לְבַדְּךָ (*l'baddekā*) for בְּרוּךְ (*bārûk*).

c. Motivation: Adultery is Sinful Folly (5:20–23)

²⁰Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?

Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?

²¹For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD,
and he examines all his paths.

²²The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him;
the cords of his sin hold him fast.

²³He will die for lack of discipline,
led astray by his own great folly.

COMMENTARY

20 In view of the divine plan for marital love, sexual involvement outside marriage is folly. So now the teacher shows the folly of adultery by raising

rhetoical questions. Here he repeats the *šāgâ* of v.19 (“captivated”) but with the connotation of foolish delirium: “Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress [*zārâ*]?” Common sense says that such brief liaisons with strangers give no time for intimacy; that requires a lifelong bonding with the wife of one’s youth.

21 The conclusion is based on theology: God’s knowledge and justice. The practical point is that a person’s ways are in clear view of the Lord, who examines them. No matter how careful someone might be to conceal sin, nothing can be concealed from God. Anyone who does not factor in God’s omniscience will get entangled in sin.

22–23 In sum, the lack of discipline and control in the area of sexual gratification is destructive. This principle harmonizes with the theology of the justice of God; wicked acts bring death in God’s administration. Accordingly, the one who plays with this kind of sin will become ensnared by it and led off to ruin. Verse 23 uses *šāgâ* again (“led astray,” NIV), only this time to underscore that the crime spawns the punishment: “in the greatness of his folly he will *reel*” (my trans.). In other words, if the young man is not *captivated* by his wife but becomes *captivated* with a stranger in sinful acts, then his own iniquities will *captivate* him; and he will be led to ruin. Judgment, in one form or another, is inevitable.

NOTE

22 The Hebrew line is difficult; it reads literally, “his iniquities shall catch him, the wicked.” Since אֶת-הָרָשָׁע (*et-hārāšā*, “the wicked”) is not represented in the LXX, it could be an old scribal error; or the LXX may have simply smoothed out the sentence. Toy, 117, suggests turning the sentence into a passive idea: “The wicked shall be caught in his iniquities.” The NIV rearranges it to read, “The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him.”

H. Admonition to Seek Release from a Foolish Indebtedness (6:1–5)

1. Conditions of Indebtedness (6:1–2)

¹My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
if you have struck hands in pledge for another,
²if you have been trapped by what you said,
ensnared by the words of your mouth,

COMMENTARY

1–2 In the biblical world it was common for someone to put up security for someone else, that is, to underwrite another person’s debts. Here the guarantee of surety is graphically represented by the image of striking hands (v.1; cf. 11:15; 17:18; 22:26); but the pledge is a foolish one, for the debtor is a neighbor who is a misfit (*rēa’ . . . zār*, lit., “neighbor . . . stranger”). The guarantor was under no obligation to put up the security—it was merely an impulsive act of generosity. A gullible young man might lack judgment and be easily swept in, only to realize too late that he was “trapped” (*yāqaš*; v.2) and “ensnared” (*lākad*). Some rash act of generosity might take a lifetime to repay.

2. Exhortation to Obtain Release (6:3–5)

³then do this, my son, to free yourself,
since you have fallen into your neighbor’s hands:
Go and humble yourself;
press your plea with your neighbor!
⁴Allow no sleep to your eyes,
no slumber to your eyelids.
⁵Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,
like a bird from the snare of the fowler.

COMMENTARY

3–4 The advice for the indebted person is to try to get released from the pledge as soon as possible (‘ēpô’, signifying “here and now”; “then,” NIV). The full array of imperatives used in this section stresses the need for immediate attention to the situation. Freeing oneself (*hinnāṣēl* having the force of rescuing or delivering oneself from a situation) may be a humiliating process, but it is far better than the indebtedness.

The verb “humble yourself” (*hitrappēs*; GK 8346) may have behind it the literal idea of allowing oneself to be trampled on (which Gesenius interpreted to mean “prostrate yourself” [*Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (London: Samuel Bagster and Son, 1847), 777]). G. R. Driver related it to the Akkadian *rapāsu* (“trample”) and interpreted it in the sense of trampling oneself or swallowing pride, with the implication of being unremitting in the effort (“Some Hebrew Verbs, Nouns, and Pronouns,” *JTS* 30 [1929]: 374). This purpose for the humbling is “to press [the] plea” (*rēhab*, from *rāhab*, “to act stormily, boisterously”—here “to importune”). The pledge can be released if one begs the creditor, but one should lose no time in pressing the appeal.

5 The exhortation is then enhanced by two similes that retrieve the motif of the person’s being entrapped by the pledge. A gazelle that has been caught in a corral and a bird that has been caught in a trap give their full attention to escaping the difficulty.

I. Admonition to Avoid Laziness (6:6–11)

1. Lesson in Diligence (6:6–8)

⁶Go to the ant, you sluggard;
 consider its ways and be wise!
⁷It has no commander,
 no overseer or ruler,
⁸yet it stores its provisions in summer
 and gathers its food at harvest.

COMMENTARY

6 The teacher next directs a lesson to the sluggard (*‘āṣēl*, “to be sluggish, lazy”) by using the activities of the ant to make the point (cf. a parallel section in 24:30–34, where the emphasis is on the neglected field of the sluggard). By even giving such instruction the teacher indicates that there is still hope for the sluggard. The teacher instructs him to learn from the ant. Since the ant is a lowly creature, this comparison is somewhat degrading; but the sluggard can learn diligence from its ways.

7–8 The description of the ant’s activities shows that although it appears to have no leader (even though it actually does have organization and cooperation), it provides for the future with great industry. The word *tākîn* (“it stores,” from *kûn*) means to put things in their proper order or preparedness—especially food for bad times that might come. The classic example of such foresight and industry is Joseph in Genesis 41. (For a treatment of wisdom motifs in the story of Joseph, see Gerhard von Rad, *God at Work in Israel* [trans. John H. Marks; Nashville: Abingdon, 1980], 19–35.)

NOTE

8 The LXX adds a lengthy section at the end of this verse on the lesson from the bee: “Or, go to the bee and learn how diligent she is and how seriously she does her work, her products kings and private persons use for health; she is desired and respected by all, though feeble in body, by honoring wisdom she obtains distinction.” Toy, 124, surmises that the LXX translator thought the other insect ought to be mentioned and so elaborated the point.

2. *Danger of Poverty (6:9–11)*

⁹How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?

¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
¹¹and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

COMMENTARY

9–11 These verses provide the motivation for the admonition, for the danger of poverty exists. The rhetorical question (“How long [*‘ad-māṭay*] will you lie there, you sluggard?” v.9) is designed to rebuke laziness in a forceful manner. The wording assumes that the harvest is now in progress and the sluggard should be at work. But the sluggard does not respond; his preference is to sleep, to escape either pain or responsibilities. Thus, using effective irony the instructor mimics the lazy person’s speech (v.10). His point is that too much sleep will lead to poverty; it will rob the lazy person of potential increase.

Two similes in v.11 illustrate the onslaught of poverty personified. (1) Poverty will come “like a bandit” (*m^hallēk*). This difficult term has been interpreted as a “dangerous assailant” or a “highwayman,” i.e., a bandit that robs. McKane, 324, however, takes the view that it means a “vagrant.” (2) “Armed man” (*ʾiṣ māgēn*) is probably connected to the military ideas of “shield” and “deliver” (*gānan*, “to cover, surround, defend”). G. R. Driver connects it with the Arabic word for “bold, insolent” and interprets its use here as “beggar” or “insolent man” (“Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament, IV,” *JTS* 33 [1932]: 38–47).

NOTE

11 The MT has “your poverty will come like a wayfarer”; the LXX has “swiftness of a traveler.” The parallelism suggests that one traveling swiftly would be a robber or an assailant. The imagery, then, is of a swift attack that brings poverty.

J. Warning against Deviousness (6:12–15)

1. Description (6:12–14)

¹²A scoundrel and villain,
 who goes about with a corrupt mouth,
¹³who winks with his eye,
 signals with his feet and motions with his fingers,
¹⁴who plots evil with deceit in his heart—
 he always stirs up dissension.

COMMENTARY

12–14 The subject matter is now the “evil scoundrel” or “troublemaker” (*ʿādām b^līyyaʿal*) and the “malevolent person” or “villain” (*ʾîš ʾāwen*). These terms describe one who is both wicked and worthless. Gesenius (cf. also BDB) analyzes *b^līyyaʿal* (GK 1175) as a compound of the negative *b^lī* and a noun *yaʿal* (“worth, profit”). But there are other proposals for its etymology, such as a compound with *baʿal* (“lord of goats,” related to *ʾazazel*), a derivative of *bālaʿ* with reduplication (“confusion” or “engulfing ruin”), and a proper name from Babylonian “Bililu” (see Benedikt Otzen, “*בְּלִיַּעַל* [*b^līyaʿal*],” *TDOT*, 2:131–36; D. Winton Thomas, “*בְּלִיַּעַל* in the Old Testament,” in *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey* [ed. J. N. Birdsall and R. W. Thomson; New York: Herder, 1963], 11–19).

Whatever the word’s etymology, a survey of its use shows that it describes troublemakers of all kinds who violate the law (Dt 15:9; Jdg 19:22; 1Ki 21:10, 13; Pr 16:27) or who act in a contemptuous or foolish manner against cultic observance or social institutions (1Sa 10:27; 25:17; 30:22). The instruction will focus on the devious activities of this type of person.

The description moves from the scoundrel’s corrupt or perverse sayings (v.12) to his sinister sign language (v.13) to his disruptive plots developed through deceit. The expressions in v.13 seem to refer to any look or gesture

that is put on and therefore a form of deception, if not a way of making insinuations. A wink may seem like a playful thing, but with these troublemakers it is malicious. McKane, 325, thinks there is even a reference here to magic, as “plots” (*ḥōrēš*, v.14) is used elsewhere to devise magic. The evil plans of their hearts are a vivid reminder of the description of the wicked in Genesis 6:5.

2. Destruction (6:15)

¹⁵Therefore disaster will overtake him in an instant;
he will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.

COMMENTARY

15 Disaster will befall the troublemaker suddenly. It is uncertain whether or not *yiššābēr* (“he will be destroyed”) refers to death. Probably the line means that a character like this will be ruined when exposed. Still, the disaster must be seen as evidence of God’s wrath; the ultimate disaster will be eternal death.

K. Conduct the Lord Hates (6:16–19)

1. Introductory Statement (6:16)

¹⁶There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

COMMENTARY

16 The verses that follow this one condemn certain characteristics and activities; the terms “hate” and “detestable” show that these are taboo. By saying that the Lord hates them, the writer means that God is opposed to them, separate from them, and will punish those who do them. Since he hates these practices, those who do them cannot remain in his presence.

The text lists several of the things as misused body parts and then describes two evil actions. These seven traits are probably still describing the troublemaker of the last section. Plaut, 89, perceives that these vices deny the divine element in humanity. Verse 16 uses what is known as a numerical ladder by paralleling “six things” with “seven things” (see also 30:15, 18, 21, 24, 29; Job 5:19; Ecc 11:2; Am 1:6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; Mic 5:5). The point of such a poetic arrangement is that the present enumeration does not exhaust the list (cf. Toy, 127; Roth, “The Numerical Sequence $x / x + 1$ in the Old Testament,” 300–11; idem, “Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament,” 86).

2. Delineation (6:17–19)

¹⁷haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
¹⁸a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
¹⁹a false witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

COMMENTARY

17–19 The seven things that the Lord hates are specific, personal attitudes and actions. There is something of a contrasting parallel arrangement with the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, where seven blessed things answer these seven hated things. Moreover, the first beatitude (“Blessed are

the poor in spirit,” Mt 5:5) contrasts with the first hated thing (“haughty eyes,” i.e., “a proud look,” Pr 6:17) and the seventh (“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Mt 5:7) with the seventh abomination (“stirs up dissension,” Pr 6:19).

The first on the list, “haughty eyes” (*ênayim rāmôt*; v.17a), refers to a proud look suggesting arrogant ambition. The writer is starting at the top, and so the eyes are listed first; but they are also listed first because the pride seen in them is the opposite of the humility of wisdom. The term “haughty/high” is similarly used in Numbers 15:30 for the sin of the high hand, i.e., willful rebellion or defiant sin. Usage of “haughty eyes” in the OT is telling: it describes the pompous Assyrian invader in Isaiah 10:12–14 as well as the proud king in Daniel 11:12 (“pride,” NIV). God will not tolerate anyone who thinks so highly of himself (see Pr 21:4; Isa 2:11–17).

The second description is “a lying tongue” (*l’sôn šāqer*, lit., “tongue of deception”). The term is used in Jeremiah 14:14 to portray false prophets who deceive people and in Psalm 109:2 to describe the deceiver who betrays—a passage that the disciples apply to Judas in Acts 1:20. Deception in speech is harmful (Pr 26:28), but in the end truth will overcome it (12:19).

The third description focuses on the hands as the instruments of murder (v.17c). Genesis 9:6 prohibited shedding human blood because people have been made in the image of God—no matter what one might think of them. But shedding “innocent blood” (*dām-nāqî*) is an even greater crime. King Manasseh had filled the streets with innocent blood (2Ki 21:16; 24:4). Princes did it for gain according to Ezekiel 22:27. Even King David was prohibited from building the temple because he had shed much blood (1Ch 22:8).

Appropriately, at the center of the list, the fourth phrase (v.18a) concerns the heart that “devises [*ḥōrēš*] wicked schemes [*maḥšbôt ’āwen*].” The heart most often represents the will, which here plots evil. God early on declared that the human heart was capable of doing this sort of thing (Ge 6:5); Proverbs elaborates the theme by showing that the heart that schemes wickedness is also deceitful (Pr 12:20; 14:22).

The fifth description uses the figure of “feet that are quick to rush into evil.” This captures the enthusiastic and complete involvement in activities that bring pain to all concerned.

The sixth abomination (v.19a) returns to the theme of deception, but now the text uses participial expressions. In this line the focus is on perjury (*‘ēd šāqer*, “a false witness,” NIV), a direct violation of the Decalogue. This character pours out “lies” (*kʿzābîm*, also found in Ps 40:4; Am 2:4; Mic 1:14 [where the wordplay on the city of Achzib also carries the idea of a false expectation; cf. Jer 15:18, where the adjective *ʾakzāb* describes a mirage]).

The final description is general: God hates one “who stirs up dissension.” “Dissension” is attributed in proverbs to contentious, quarreling people (21:9; 26:21; 25:24), who have a short fuse (15:18). Paul, by contrast, warns against envy, malice, and strife (1Ti 6:4). These things, then, God will not tolerate. If he hates these things, conversely he must love and desire (1) humility, (2) truthful speech, (3) preservation of life, (4) pure thoughts, (5) eagerness to do good things, (6) honest witnesses, and (7) peaceful harmony.

NOTE

18b The MT has (lit.) “make haste to run,” the idea’s being to make haste to begin to run, i.e., to be eager to seize the opportunity. The LXX omits “run,” yielding the idea of feet hastening to do evil. The word “run” is unnecessary in the line, if the analogy of 1:16 (which has only one verb in each clause) holds.

L. Warning about Immorality (6:20–35)

OVERVIEW

This closing section, like the beginning of ch. 5, expands the warning of 2:16–19. Here the introduction and conclusion are written in the second person; the rest of the address is in the third person.

1. Reminder to Heed Instruction (6:20–24)

²⁰My son, keep your father’s commands
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.

²¹Bind them upon your heart forever;
fasten them around your neck.
²²When you walk, they will guide you;
when you sleep, they will watch over you;
when you awake, they will speak to you.
²³For these commands are a lamp,
this teaching is a light,
and the corrections of discipline
are the way to life,
²⁴keeping you from the immoral woman,
from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife.

COMMENTARY

20–21 The youth is exhorted to cling fast to the teachings of his parents (see P. W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom: Proverbs 5:15–19 and 6:20–24* [Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971], 1–8). Implicit in these verses is the basic understanding that a good home life (i.e., father and mother sharing the rearing of the children together) will go a long way to prevent youth from falling into immorality. But the teachings must become a permanent part of the youth’s thinking; they must be memorized and practiced.

22–24 The motivation for keeping these commands is that they will bring protection from the adulteress. Verse 22 strengthens the instruction by using language similar to Deuteronomy 6:7; and v.23 uses metaphors that are also used of the law (see Ps 119:105). But beside the general ideas of protection and direction, the specific benefit of the teaching will be in keeping the youth from the loose woman. She is described in v.24 as an “immoral woman” (*’ēšet rā’*) and a “wayward wife” (*nokrîyâ*; some commentators follow the variant reading *’ēšet rēa’*, “the wife of another man,” as in the LXX). The context shows that this immoral woman is another man’s wife.

NOTE

24 The parallelism supports the reading “wife of another,” i.e., a married woman, as in the LXX. The difference in readings is but one vowel change.

2. Warning to Avoid Seduction (6:25–35)

- ²⁵Do not lust in your heart after her beauty
or let her captivate you with her eyes,
²⁶for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread,
and the adulteress preys upon your very life.
- ²⁷Can a man scoop fire into his lap
without his clothes being burned?
- ²⁸Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
- ²⁹So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.
- ³⁰Men do not despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.
- ³¹Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.
- ³²But a man who commits adultery lacks judgment;
whoever does so destroys himself.
- ³³Blows and disgrace are his lot,
and his shame will never be wiped away;
³⁴for jealousy arouses a husband’s fury,
and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.
- ³⁵He will not accept any compensation;
he will refuse the bribe, however great it is.

COMMENTARY

25 The admonition warns against lusting in one's heart for the immoral woman's beauty or charm. The verb *ḥāmad* ("to lust," GK 2773) is used in the Decalogue to warn against coveting, so here the verse warns against coveting the immoral woman. Lust, according to Jesus, is a sin of the same kind as the act, not just the first step toward the sin (Mt 5:28). Playing with temptation is only the heart reaching out after the sin. So one's heart should not dwell on the woman's seductive charms. "Eyes" are singled out here because the painted eyes and the luring glances are devices of seduction (see 2Ki 9:30).

26 The summary motivation for the admonition is that such sin has a high price—it may even ruin one's life. The parallelism in this verse is difficult. It is not meant to say that whoring is better than adultery because it only impoverishes, whereas adultery preys on the very life. But it does make the contrast that the prostitute will be satisfied with a small amount of pay, whereas the adulteress demands more. Both are costly sins to be avoided, but one is much more costly.

27–35 The motivation now elaborates the motif that punishment is inevitable. (For the use of questions here, see James L. Crenshaw, "Impossible Questions, Sayings, and Tasks," *Semeia* 17 [1980]: 19–34.) Playing on the word *ʾiš* ("man") and *ʾiššâ* ("woman," v.26), the instructor introduces the figure of "fire" (*ʿēš*, v.27). Scooping coals into one's lap represents holding the adulteress, and walking on coals (v.28) signifies further sexual contact with her. The self-evident answer to the questions is that the adulterer will "get burned"; he will not go "unpunished" (v.29; "touches her" is probably a euphemism for sexual contact as in Ge 20:6).

The rest of the passage reasons that there is no restitution acceptable for adultery as there might be with thievery. The thief, when caught, has to pay dearly (v.31). But the adulterer will be humiliated and ruined. Nothing will satisfy the husband but revenge. He will accept no payoff; he cannot be bought off in this situation.

The expression "destroys himself" (*mašḥîṭ napšô*) in v.32 stresses that the guilty one destroys his own life. He could be given the death penalty (Dt 22:22); but, destroyed spiritually and socially, he apparently continues to

live in ignominy (see Pr 2:18; 1Ti 5:6). Kidner, 75, observes that in a morally healthy society the adulterer would be a social outcast.

NOTE

26 In the first clause of this verse, בְּעַד (*b^ead*) may be taken either as “on account of” (= by means of) a harlot or “for the price of” a harlot. Fox, 232, suggests “in exchange for.” Most expositors take the first reading (though that use of the preposition *b^e* is unattested) and supply “one is brought down.” The verse then says that a harlot brings a man to poverty, but the man joined to an adulterer seeks death. If the second reading is taken (with the support of the ancient versions), then it is saying that there is a small price for the one and a greater price for the other.

M. Admonition to Avoid the Wiles of the Adulteress (7:1–27)

OVERVIEW

Once again the theme of seduction surfaces in the instructions of the father (cf. 2:16–18; 5:1–23; 6:20–35). Here the instruction takes the form of a narrative about an individual woman’s seductive tactics that draw a youth into adultery. It is a didactic narrative that serves to make an earnest warning. The adulteress is probably not a personification of evil in this chapter; that is fully developed in ch. 9. But reference to wisdom as a sister prepares for the personifications of chs. 8 and 9. Wisdom will obviate temptations, the greatest being the sexual urge.

1. Important Teaching of the Father (7:1–5)

- ¹My son, keep my words
and store up my commands within you.
²Keep my commands and you will live;
guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.
³Bind them on your fingers;

write them on the tablet of your heart.
⁴Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,”
and call understanding your kinsman;
⁵they will keep you from the adulteress,
from the wayward wife with her seductive words.

COMMENTARY

1–4 The section begins by repeating the instruction for the son to preserve and practice the authoritative teachings in order to “live” (*wehyēh*; v.2). The expression “the apple of your eye” (*’išôn ’ēneykā*, v.2) is literally “the little man in your eye,” having reference to the pupil, where the object focused on is reflected. The point is that this teaching is so precious it must be guarded that closely. Verse 3 strengthens the admonition by alluding to the instruction for heeding the law given in Deuteronomy 6:8. The images used stress the memorization and retention of the teachings. Additionally, spiritual success will take a marriage-like commitment to following the teachings of wisdom.

5 The reason for following these teachings carefully is to give protection from the wiles of the loose woman. She is called an “adulteress” (*’iššâ zārâ*) and a “wayward wife” (*nokrîyâ*; cf. 6:24). There is some debate over her status. McKane, 334, contends that she is a foreigner and devotee of a false god. Snijders, 85–86, however, argues that she is an outsider because of her loose morals. The distinction makes little practical difference, for she is a wayward wife with “seductive words” (*’māreyhā heḥ’lîqâ*, lit., “smooth words”). Helmer Ringgren and Walther Zimmerli suggest that she is a promoter of a pagan cult (*Sprüche/Prediger* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980], 19).

NOTE

1 Before v.2 the LXX inserts, “My son, fear the Lord and you shall be strong, and besides him fear no other.” Although this addition has the precedent of 3:7, 9 and harmonizes with 14:26, it does not fit here. The advice is to listen to the teacher.

2. Description of Seduction (7:6–23)

a. The Victim (7:6–9)

⁶At the window of my house
I looked out through the lattice.
⁷I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who lacked judgment.
⁸He was going down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house
⁹at twilight, as the day was fading,
as the dark of night set in.

COMMENTARY

6–9 The narrative unfolds with the observation of an unwary youth strolling along the streets at night. He is described as one of the “simple” (*p̄tā’yim*; v.7; cf. 1:4) ones, i.e., “a youth who lacked judgment” (*na‘ar ḥ̄sar-lēb*, lit., “a youth lacking of heart,” i.e., one devoid of common sense or understanding). He is young, inexperienced, featherbrained (as Kidner, 75, puts it). His refusal to commit to following the teachings of wisdom makes him easy prey for the experienced seductress. His evening stroll takes him intentionally (as suggested by *ṣā‘ad*, “to step, march”; “walking along,” NIV) down the street to her house (v.8). And if all this activity of the naive young man takes place under cover of night, only trouble can follow (v.9).

b. The Temptress (7:10–12)

¹⁰Then out came a woman to meet him,
 dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
¹¹(She is loud and defiant,
 her feet never stay at home;
¹²now in the street, now in the squares,
 at every corner she lurks.)

COMMENTARY

10 The narrative next introduces the seductress who comes out to meet the innocent youth. She has the attire of a prostitute and has crafty intent (*n̄ṣurat lēb*). This latter expression is difficult; the ancient versions took it with the meaning of causing the youth’s heart to flutter or of bewildering or capturing his heart. The expression literally means “guarded in heart,” but Driver has shown the word’s semantic development from “guarded” to “crafty, sly.” She has locked up her plans and gives nothing away. But her bold attire gives her away—she knows her victim and comes boldly to trap the gullible youth. She will be more successful than Potiphar’s wife was with Joseph, because this youth lacks strong convictions.

11–12 The text further describes this wayward woman as “loud and defiant” (v.11a), with a roving desire (vv.11b–12). “She lurks” (*teʿrōb*, from *ʿārab*, “to lie in wait, ambush, with a hostile purpose”; GK 741) at every street corner, waiting for the gullible young man to pass her way. She has all the noise and activity of a street woman; her feet are all over town (Fox, 245). Plaut, 102, astutely warns, “Woe to the marriage whose partners cannot find values in their home and must constantly seek outside stimulation!”

NOTE

10 The translation “crafty” or “wily” (RV) for נְצִרָת (*n̄ṣurāt*) is uncertain. Toy, 149, lists the commentators’ suggestions: false, malicious,

secret, subtle, excited, hypocritical. If the root נָצַר (*nāṣar*) is the same as that found in Isaiah 48:6, נִצְרוֹת (*n'ṣurôt*, “hidden, secret”), then a sense such as “wily” fits. The LXX (adding νέων [*neōn*, “young men”] for explanation) has “causes the hearts of the young men to fly away.”

c. The Seduction (7:13–20)

- ¹³She took hold of him and kissed him
and with a brazen face she said:
- ¹⁴“I have fellowship offerings at home;
today I fulfilled my vows.
- ¹⁵So I came out to meet you;
I looked for you and have found you!
- ¹⁶I have covered my bed
with colored linens from Egypt.
- ¹⁷I have perfumed my bed
with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
- ¹⁸Come, let’s drink deep of love till morning;
let’s enjoy ourselves with love!
- ¹⁹My husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey.
- ²⁰He took his purse filled with money
and will not be home till full moon.”

COMMENTARY

13–15 The steps in the seduction are carefully calculated to ensnare the inexperienced youth. First, the woman boldly grabs him and kisses him (v.13). She follows this move with a second step—her flattering invitation (vv.14–15), in which she explains that she has “fellowship” offerings at

home and came out especially looking for him. (Only a fool would believe the woman was interested in him.)

Here she presents herself as part of an orderly society by covering her evil intentions with religious motivations (Waltke, 1:376). These fellowship offerings refer to the meat left over from the votive offerings made in the sanctuary (see Lev 7:11–21). Apparently the sacrificial worship meant as little to her spiritually as Christmas does to modern materialists who use the religious holiday as an excuse for secular pursuits. By expressing that she has fellowship offerings, she could be saying nothing more than that she has fresh meat for a meal or that she has become ceremonially clean, perhaps after her menstrual period. It is also possible that she is a participant in a fertility cult, and having made the appropriate offering she now needs a male partner. At any rate, her claim is probably a ruse for winning a customer; after all, nothing this woman says can be believed.

16–17 The third step is the report of her careful preparations. She is not poor, for she has a bed, and it has been made ready with fine, colored, imported linens from Egypt and perfumed with the best spices—aphrodisiac scents fit for a wedding bed (cf. Ps 45:8). Such lavish planning and preparation would overwhelm the gullible youth.

18 The fourth step is the direct proposition: “Come, let’s drink deep of love.” Her invitation speaks of complete satiety (*nirweh*, “let’s drink deep”) and sheer enjoyment (*nit ‘all’sâ*, “let’s enjoy ourselves”) in physical love (*dōdîm*, from *dôd*, found frequently in the Song of Songs for “loved one” or “beloved”).

19–20 The final step is the adulteress’s disarming reassurance. She does not try to convince the youth that their encounter is right, only that they can get away with it. She explains that “the man” (i.e., “my husband,” as the LXX has) is not at home. Conveniently, he is gone on a journey; and judging from his taking a moneybag and staying till the next full moon, they will be perfectly safe in their escapade. (He may even be gone for two weeks, if a comparison of vv.9 and 20 can give clues to the chronology.) At any rate, her appeal is bold, exciting, and apparently safe. It would take someone with the wisdom and integrity of a Joseph to resist such an appeal (cf. the important motifs in Ge 39, especially v.8).

d. The Capitulation (7:21–23)

²¹With persuasive words she led him astray;
she seduced him with her smooth talk.
²²All at once he followed her
like an ox going to the slaughter,
like a deer stepping into a noose
²³till an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird darting into a snare,
little knowing it will cost him his life.

COMMENTARY

21–23 The fall of the simpleton (see comment on *p̄tā'yim* in v.7), after a brief pondering, is sudden (*pit ʾōm*, “at once”; v.22) because she seduces him with her enticing speech. There is irony in the fact that *leqah* (used earlier for wise instruction [“sound learning”; 4:2]) is now used for “enticement” (*liqhâ*; “persuasive words,” NIV; v.21), which D. Winton Thomas (“Textual and Philological Notes,” 280–92) interprets as the adulteress’s method of speech.

Using the similes of an ox for the slaughter and a deer for the noose, the teacher warns of the complete ruin that can come to one who allows himself to be trapped by seduction (v.22). The sin could “cost him his life” (v.23; lit., “that is his life,” as in Nu 16:38)—a fact he needs to know. This verse may well refer to moral corruption rather than literal death.

The arrow piercing the liver may refer to the pangs of a guilty conscience that the guilty must suffer along with spiritual and physical ruin. But an arrow to the liver—symbolizing the seat of life in the OT—would certainly mean sure and sudden death. The point is that just as stupid animals see no connection between the trap and death, so morally stupid people do not make the connection between sin and death (Waltke, 1:384).

NOTE

22 The third clause in this verse is difficult. It has been translated traditionally as “fetters to the chastening of a fool.” But there is no support that the word עֶכֶס (*‘ekes*) means “fetters.” It appears in Isaiah 3:16 as “anklets.” The parallelism here suggests that animal imagery is required. Thus the versions have “as a dog to bonds.” Scott, 64, argues for the emendation of the MT’s וְעֶכֶס אֶל-מוֹסֵר אַיִל (*ûk^eekes ‘el-mûsar ‘^ewîl*) to כְּעֶכֶס אֶל-מוֹסֵר אַיִל (*k^eākkēs ‘el-mōsēr ‘ayyāl*), yielding “like a stag prancing into captivity.”

3. *Deadly Results of Consorting (7:24–27)*

- ²⁴Now then, my sons, listen to me;
pay attention to what I say.
- ²⁵Do not let your heart turn to her ways
or stray into her paths.
- ²⁶Many are the victims she has brought down;
her slain are a mighty throng.
- ²⁷Her house is a highway to the grave,
leading down to the chambers of death.

COMMENTARY

24–27 With a final flurry of explanations, the teacher warns his son to stay away from the seductress’s paths (vv.24–25) because consorting with her leads to death (vv.26–27). The language is startling in its force; but the ruin that such evil brings is as devastating as death and may, of course, end in actual punishment. He stresses that she has been the death of many and that her house is the way that leads to the “chambers of death” (*ḥadrê-māwet*; v.27).

Her house is not the grave. It is, however, surely the way to it, and the one who takes that way is pathetic indeed. One’s life is not destroyed in a

single instant; it is taken from people gradually as they chart a course of life that will leave them as victims of the wages of sin. But once again, the understanding is that God is the one who sentences sinners to death.

N. The Appeal of Wisdom (8:1–36)

OVERVIEW

In this chapter wisdom continues to be represented as a person (cf. ch. 7). The material combines 1:20–33, in which Wisdom proclaims her value, and 3:19–26, in which Wisdom is the agent of creation. The personification of wisdom has affinities with other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and, in fact, may have drawn on various mythological ideas. (For a good survey on the subject, see Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985], 23–70.)

Wisdom in Proverbs 8, however, is not a deity like Egypt's *ma'at* or the Assyrian-Babylonian *Ishtar*. Rather, Wisdom is presented as though it were a self-conscious, divine being distinct from but subordinate to Yahweh; in fact, however, here it is a personification of the attribute of wisdom displayed by God. (See further Scott, 69–72; Ralph Marcus, "On Biblical Hypostasis of Wisdom," *HUCA* 23 [1950–51]: 157–71.)

Many interpreters have equated Wisdom in this chapter with Jesus Christ. The connection works only insofar as Jesus reveals the nature of God the Father, including his wisdom, just as Proverbs presents the personification of this attribute. Jesus' claims included having wisdom (Mt 12:42) and a unique knowledge of God (11:25–27). He even personified wisdom in a way that was similar to Proverbs (11:19; Lk 11:49). Paul saw the fulfillment of wisdom in Christ (Col 1:15–20; 2:3) and affirmed that Christ became our wisdom in the crucifixion (1Co 1:24, 30). So the bold personification of wisdom in Proverbs certainly provides a solid foundation for the revelation of divine wisdom in Christ. But because Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22–31 appears to be a creation of God, it is unlikely that Wisdom can be identified as the preincarnate Jesus Christ.

1. Introduction (8:1–3)



¹Does not wisdom call out?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

²On the heights along the way,

where the paths meet, she takes her stand;

³beside the gates leading into the city,

at the entrances, she cries aloud:

COMMENTARY

1–3 Plaut, 107, introduces this chapter by observing that it is now Wisdom’s turn to exhibit her attractions—in the open, not lurking in secret. Wisdom continuously attests to her value; the rhetorical questions of v.1 show that she is ready to call out. But this crying out is in the high roads and at the doors of the city, where people gather to buy and sell their goods, settle legal disputes, and determine proper decisions for the community—all requiring wisdom (v.2). Kidner, 76, comments, “A chapter which is to soar beyond time and space, opens at street level . . . relevant here as heaven.”

2. First Cycle (8:4–9)

a. Invitation: Listen and Gain Understanding (8:4–5)

⁴“To you, O men, I call out;

I raise my voice to all mankind.

⁵You who are simple, gain prudence;

you who are foolish, gain understanding.

COMMENTARY

4–5 The invitation from wisdom embraces all classes of people: v.4 includes “men” (*îšîm*) and “humankind” (*b^{nê} ’ādām*, lit., “sons of mankind”); v.5 uses *p^{tā}yim* (“simple”) and *k^{sîl}îm* (“foolish”). The invitation for the “simple” and the “foolish” is to gain “prudence” (*ormâ*) and “understanding” (*lēb*, lit., “heart”).

b. Motivation: Wisdom Is Noble, Just, and True (8:6–9)

⁶Listen, for I have worthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right.
⁷My mouth speaks what is true,
for my lips detest wickedness.
⁸All the words of my mouth are just;
none of them is crooked or perverse.
⁹To the discerning all of them are right;
they are faultless to those who have knowledge.

COMMENTARY

6 Wisdom begins her motivation by declaring that she has noble things to say. The term *n^{gîd}îm* is “noble, princely” (lit., “excellent things”). Moreover, when Wisdom opens her mouth, she speaks what is upright (*mēšārîm*). So what she has to say is excellent and right.

7 The things Wisdom says are also reliable (*met*, “true”). The sense of truth here refers to what is firm and dependable; it is the reflection within the heart before the speech. This speaking of truth is derived from detesting wickedness. (Thus to Wisdom wickedness is taboo.)

8 The motivation now includes *šedeq* (with a *b^e* of essence, indicating Wisdom’s appeal is right and “just”). *Šedeq* is contrasted with *nīptāl* (“crooked”) and *’iqqēš* (“perverse”). There is no hidden agenda and no deception in Wisdom’s teachings.

9 Wisdom's words are "right" (*n'kōhîm*) and "faultless" (*y'sārîm*). The teachings are in plain view, intelligible to all who have some discernment or who find knowledge. (Here the theme of "to find" [*māṣā*; "have," NIV] is introduced.)

3. Second Cycle (8:10–21)

a. Invitation: Receive Instruction and Knowledge (8:10)

¹⁰Choose my instruction instead of silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold,

COMMENTARY

10 The second cycle begins with the invitation to receive (*q'hû*, lit., "take"; "choose," NIV) "instruction" (*mûsār*) and "knowledge" (*da'at*) over silver and gold. True wealth derives from the former, not the latter.

b. Motivation: Wisdom Is Valuable (8:11–21)

¹¹for wisdom is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.

¹²"I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion.

¹³To fear the LORD is to hate evil;
I hate pride and arrogance,
evil behavior and perverse speech.

¹⁴Counsel and sound judgment are mine;
I have understanding and power.

¹⁵By me kings reign

and rulers make laws that are just;
¹⁶by me princes govern,
and all nobles who rule on earth.
¹⁷I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.
¹⁸With me are riches and honor,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
¹⁹My fruit is better than fine gold;
what I yield surpasses choice silver.
²⁰I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
²¹bestowing wealth on those who love me
and making their treasuries full.

COMMENTARY

11 The reason one should choose wisdom over wealth is because wisdom is more “precious” (*ṭôbâ*), more desirable than anything else. The goodness of wisdom is based on its incomparable value in life. Besides, wealth without wisdom will be used foolishly.

12–16 Wisdom’s lesson is now developed in two parts of ten verses each, the first pertaining to historic time (vv.12–21) and the second to primordial time (vv.22–31). The first emphasizes Wisdom’s counsel, understanding, and strength, and the second her nobility and authority (Waltke, 1:399–400).

The first part then establishes that the value of Wisdom may be found in its practical use, especially by those in power. Wisdom now claims to dwell with “prudence” (*ʿormâ*; v.12), that is, right knowledge in special cases. She also has (*ʿemṣā*; “possess,” NIV) knowledge and discretion. Parallel to this quality is the fear of the Lord, which leads to rejection (*śānē*; “hate,” NIV; v.13) of evil, pride, and perverse speech.

In vv.14–17, then, the pronouns are pronounced, though the English does not fully reflect this emphasis. Counsel, judgment, and understanding belong to Wisdom, and together they spell power (v.14). Power naturally forms the transition to the practical side of these qualities—people in power use Wisdom to govern the earth. (See Isa 11:1–4, which prophesies how the Messiah will use Wisdom in governing the world.) The point is made forcefully with the use of paronomasia: *m'lakîm yimlōkû* (“kings reign”; v.15) and *śārîm yāsōrû* (“princes govern”; v.16). Their government must be “just” (*ṣedeq*; v.15) if it derives from godly Wisdom.

17–21 Wisdom rewards those who love her. The emphasis here is that Wisdom not only possesses all these attributes but also makes them accessible to those who seek her. Loving (*āhab*) and seeking (*šāḥar*) point up the means of finding (*māṣā*) Wisdom (v.17). Those who find it obtain honor and wealth (vv.18, 21). This honor and wealth come along the way of righteousness (v.20), for divine blessing is always connected to obedience, i.e., ethical behavior. Earlier the teacher had instructed the disciple to walk in the way of righteousness; now we see that Wisdom walks in this way.

NOTES

16 Many of the MT MSS have נְדִיבִים כָּל־שֹׁפְטֵי אֶרֶץ (*n'dîbîm kol-šōp'êṭe 'āreṣ*, “sovereigns, all the judges of [the] earth”); the LXX reads, τύραννοι . . . κρατοῦσι γῆς (*tyrannoi kratousi gēs*, “sovereigns . . . rule the earth”). Toy, 167, suggests that the Hebrew here has assimilated to Psalm 148:11 in its construction.

21 The purpose of Wisdom’s walking in righteousness and justice is to bequeath property to those who love her, for only they have a proper claim on Wisdom’s wealth. At the end of this verse, the LXX adds a transition: “If I declare to you the things of daily occurrence, I will remember to account the things of old.”

4. Third Cycle (8:22–36)

a. Motivation: Wisdom Preceded and Delights in Creation (8:22–31)

²²“The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
²³I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.
²⁴When there were no oceans, I was given birth,
when there were no springs abounding with water;
²⁵before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
²⁶before he made the earth or its fields
or any of the dust of the world.
²⁷I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the
deep,
²⁸when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

COMMENTARY

22–23 In this next part Wisdom focuses on her place in primordial time; here the motivation for receiving Wisdom precedes the invitation. The first two verses provide a summary: Yahweh possessed Wisdom before the

creation of the world (v.23). With the verb *qānâ* (GK 7865) we must choose between homonyms and translate either “possess” or “create.” The older versions have “possess”; otherwise it might sound as though God lacked Wisdom and so created it before the world began. Their translators wanted to avoid saying that Wisdom was not eternal. Arius liked the idea of Christ as the meaning of Wisdom and chose “create” as the verb. Athanasius read “constituted me as the head of creation.”

The verb *qānâ* occurs twelve times in Proverbs with the idea of acquire; but the LXX and Syriac have the idea of “create.” Although the idea is that Wisdom existed before creation, the parallel ideas in these verses (*qānānî*, “brought me forth,” v.22; *nissaktî*, “I was appointed,” v.23; and *hōlālî*, “I was given birth,” v.24) argue for the idea of “create/establish” (see R. N. Whybray, “Proverbs 8:22–31 and Its Supposed Prototypes,” *VT* 15 [1965]: 504–14; W. A. Irwin, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found,” *JBL* 80 [1961]: 133–42). The point of the metaphor of Wisdom’s being begotten is that this inspired Wisdom comes from God’s essential being unlike the rest of creation, which came into existence outside of him. And because this Wisdom existed before creation, it is not accessible to humanity and cannot be controlled by humans but must be revealed (Waltke, 1:409).

24–31 The summary statement is now developed in a lengthy treatment of Wisdom as the agent of creation. Verses 24–26 reiterate that Wisdom was established before creation (*t’hōmôt*, “oceans” [v.24] or “deeps,” recalling creation); vv.27–29 declare that Wisdom was present when God created (notice the same progress of preexistence to world-creating acts for the Logos in Jn 1:1–3; Col 1:15–16); and vv.30–31 tell how Wisdom rejoiced in God’s creation (“delight day after day” [v.30] recalls that “God saw that it was good” [Ge 1:4, 9, 12, etc.]).

Critical to the interpretation of this section is the meaning of *’āmôn* (“craftsman”) in v.30. R. B. Y. Scott (“Wisdom in Creation: The *’āmôn* of Proverbs 8:30,” *VT* 10 [1960]: 213–23) surveys the possible interpretations; he rejects “master craftsman,” “nursing child,” “foster father,” etc., and chooses rather the idea of “faithful”—a binding or living link. The image of “child” does fit the metaphor of birth. Although “workman/craftsman” has the most support and is chosen by most commentators (LXX; Vul.; Syr.; Targ.; SS 7:1[2]; Jer 52:15; see also Patrick W. Skehan, “Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24,” *CBQ* 41 [1979]: 365–70), it

is not without problems in the meaning of the passage, the primary one being that the emphasis is on God the creator and not a separate agent. The translation “continually, faithfully” does harmonize with the contextual emphasis on wisdom’s faithful presence and daily delight.

b. Invitation: Listen to Wisdom and Be Blessed (8:32–36)

³²“Now then, my sons, listen to me;
blessed are those who keep my ways.
³³Listen to my instruction and be wise;
do not ignore it.
³⁴Blessed is the man who listens to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway.
³⁵For whoever finds me finds life
and receives favor from the LORD.
³⁶But whoever fails to find me harms himself;
all who hate me love death.”

COMMENTARY

32–36 Verses 32–33 offer the explanation to the sons to listen, for a blessing is in store for all who live by Wisdom’s teachings. The explanation of this follows in vv.34–36. The alternatives could not be more striking—it is a choice between life and favor (vv.34–35) and harm and danger (v.36). The contrast is further marked out by the verb “finds me” (*māṣā*; v.35) and “fails to find me” (*ḥāṭā*, lit., “misses me”; v.36).

O. Consequences of Accepting the Invitations of Wisdom or Folly (9:1–18)

OVERVIEW

With a two-strophe poem of two banquets, ch. 9 forms the conclusion of the lengthy nine-chapter introduction to the book of Proverbs. Now Wisdom is portrayed as a noble patroness and Folly as a wicked hostess. Both Wisdom and Folly will make their final appeals; and both appeal to the simpletons, those who need to live by wisdom but who are most easily influenced by folly. Wisdom out of love offers life with no mention of pleasure; Folly out of sensual lust offers pleasure with no mention of death.

1. Accepting Wisdom (9:1–12)

a. Invitation to Wisdom (9:1–6)

i. Preparations for the Invitation (9:1–3)

¹Wisdom has built her house;
 she has hewn out its seven pillars.
²She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
 she has also set her table.
³She has sent out her maids,
 and she calls from the highest point of the city.

COMMENTARY

1 The first three verses provide an exposition that is essential for understanding the invitation to follow. The text now makes a transition from the previous passage; Wisdom was last seen as the director of work on the cosmic level (8:30–31), but now she is portrayed among humans. She has prepared a house and established it on seven pillars. This may refer to the habitable world (8:31), which is spacious and enduring. For the equation of a house with the world, see 8:29; Job 38:6; Psalm 104:5 (see Gustav Boström, *Proverbia Studien: Die Weisheit und des fremde Weib in Spr. 1–9*

[Lund: Lunds Universitets Arsskrift, n.F., Aud. I, Bd. 30, Nr. 3: 1935], 1–14).

A number of feminist commentators take this passage and others in Proverbs as referring to a goddess named Wisdom who builds a palace, gives a feast, and inaugurates worship (see, e.g., Susan Cady, Marion Ronan, and Hal Taussig, eds., *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989]; B. Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined* [Vandalia, MI: Pilgrim, 1986]; but see also Aida Besancon Spencer et al., *The Goddess Revival* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995]). There is no support for such a view, especially within the strict monotheism of Israel.

The image is of a grand house with a noble hostess. The seven “pillars” (*ammûdeyhā*, GK 6647) have been variously interpreted, often with fanciful suggestions (Boström, e.g., suggests the seven planets). They seem to be part of the imagery of the house but may have cosmic references. The phrase has given rise to expressions such as “the seven pillars of wisdom” or “the house that wisdom builds.” Since seven is a sacred or ominous concept, usually indicating completeness or expansiveness, the point seems to be that wisdom produces and is at home in a perfect world.

2–3 Wisdom has prepared a sumptuous banquet in the house and sends out her maids to call the simple to come and eat (M. Lichtenstein, “The Banquet Motif in Keret and in Proverbs 9,” *JANESCU* 1 [1968/69]: 19–31). The figures of meat and wine represent the good teaching of Wisdom that will be palatable and profitable.

Wine in the Bible is at times used in a bad sense and at times a good sense; in the bad sense Proverbs is primarily concerned with drunkenness (cf. Isa 55:1–2; Jn 6:51, 55 for similar uses of the figures). It is uncertain whether the mixing of wine here refers to the practice of mixing wine with spices or mixing it with water, as the Greeks did (see the LXX of v.2, which introduces the Greek custom with the word *kratēr* [“bowl”]; cf. Pr 23:30; Isa 5:22). Thus, just as one would prepare a banquet and invite guests, Wisdom prepares to press her appeal—to come not for just a meal, but for life! All this imagery lets the simpleton know that what Wisdom has to offer is costly, but marvelous.

ii. Wisdom's Invitation (9:4–6)

⁴“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgment.
⁵“Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed.
⁶Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of understanding.

COMMENTARY

4–6 The call goes out to the simple (*mî-petî*; “who are simple,” NIV), to those “who lack judgment” (*ḥ^asar-lēb*), to turn aside to Wisdom (v.4). A close analysis of the lines indicates two aspects of the appeal: she calls to the gullible to turn, and she calls to the brainless to come (Waltke, 1:427, n. 9). Carrying the figure of eating forward, the writer invites people to eat the food and drink the wine, i.e., to appropriate the teaching of wisdom (v.5). This acceptance would necessarily prompt the simpleton to abandon the “simple ways” (*p^etā’yim*) and live (v.6).

The understanding of this last term is difficult. Some translations have interpreted the plural as simpletons—do not keep company with simpletons (meaning the peer group). Waltke, 2:427, has “leave your ways, you gullible ones.” The proper direction is on the way of understanding, but to follow that way requires repentance and turning away from folly.

b. Description of Responses (9:7–11)

OVERVIEW

The connection of these verses to the context is not immediately apparent, and so various commentators attempt different reconstructions. For example, Scott, 76, suggests that vv.10–12 continue the invitation and form the original end of vv.1–9. Others regard vv.7–12 entirely as a later insertion to provide a caution, but this view is not helpful. As the text stands, one can see the descriptions of the scoffer (vv.7–8a) and the wise

man (vv.8b–11) as examples of the two responses to the invitation of Wisdom.

i. The Scoffer (9:7–8a)

⁷“Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult;
whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.
⁸Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you;

COMMENTARY

7–8a We have met the scoffer before in the book (1:22; 3:34); he is the immoral or frivolous person who will not live by wise and moral teachings (13:1; 15:22; 21:24; 22:10). Moreover, he is not content to let others do so without his cynical mocking. The warning is that anyone who tries to correct a mocker is asking for trouble. “Strife” or “insult” (*qālôn*) and “abuse” (*mûm*) are second nature to this cynical heckler (v.7). The only response such rebuke will receive is hatred, so the warning is put in the form of a negative jussive: “Do not rebuke” (*‘al-tôkah*, v.8a). The idea of hatred is a spontaneous rejection as well as a dislike for the one trying to correct the mocker. One may perceive the potential to learn in such a person, but if met with such scorn the effort should be abandoned.

ii. The Wise Man (9:8b–11)

rebuke a wise man and he will love you.
⁹Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;
teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.
¹⁰“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

¹¹For through me your days will be many,
and years will be added to your life.

COMMENTARY

8b–11 The antithetically parallel idea forms the contrast—the wise person will love the one trying to correct him (v.8b). “Love” (ʿāhab), conversely, has the idea of choosing and embracing; so this is the profitable response to corrective teaching. The parallelism of “wise” (ḥākām) and “righteous” (ṣaddîq) in v.9 underscores the interrelationship between these qualities and shows the predisposition of those who are teachable.

Moreover, the theme of the fear of the Lord (v.10) is brought forward here from 1:7 (perhaps forming an inclusion for chs. 1–9), because this is the foundation of all wisdom and all righteousness (see B. Waltke, “Fear of the Lord,” in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality Presented to James Houston* [ed. J. I. Packer and L. Wilkinson; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 17–33). The “fear of the LORD” forms the pious affirmation that the Lord is the Creator and Sustainer of life and the Giver of wisdom. The epithet “Holy One” is the plural *q̄dōšîm*; although translated “holy men” by the Targum, the plural probably is meant to signify the majestic nature of the Lord—he is “All-holy” (Greenstone, 94). In the final analysis those who fear the Lord, add to their learning, and receive discipline will look forward to a long and productive life.

c. Consequence: Reward (9:12)

¹²If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you;
if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.”

COMMENTARY

12 The conclusion of the matter is expressed by the antithetically parallel ideas: Wisdom rewards the wise, but mockery suffers alone. “Your wisdom will reward you” (*ḥākamtā lāk*) is literally “you are wise to yourself,” meaning that wisdom brings its own reward; it is sufficiently satisfying to be worth pursuing. This does not mean that “you” are the sole beneficiary of wisdom, only a primary one. Conversely, “if you are a mocker, you alone must bear it [‘you alone will suffer,’ NIV].” These words anticipate the teachings of James (cf. Jas 3:1–12) that our ill-spoken words will haunt us throughout life.

2. Accepting the Invitation of Folly (9:13–18)

a. Invitation (9:13–17)

i. Situation of the Invitation (9:13–15)

- ¹³The woman Folly is loud;
she is undisciplined and without knowledge.
¹⁴She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the city,
¹⁵calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way.

COMMENTARY

13 Now the rival “woman Folly” presses her appeal for the naive to come and eat from her provision. The translation “the woman Folly” for *’ēšet k’sîlût* is better than “foolish woman” or “stupid woman”; she is the counterpart of the personification of wisdom. Her character is described as “loud . . . undisciplined and without knowledge.” “Loud” (*hômîyâ*) comes close to the idea of riotous; McKane (366) defines her as restless and rootless. “Undisciplined” (*p’tayyût*) portrays her as foolish and simplistic. To these troubling qualities is added the idea of ignorance, which in Proverbs must be moral ignorance. (D. Winton Thomas, on the other hand,

suggests the idea of *yād^êâ* as meaning “become still, be at rest,” yielding here “restless” [“A Note on *bal yad^êâ* in Prov. 10:13,” *JTS* 4 (1953): 23–25]).

14–15 Folly’s position (v.14) is prominent in the city streets. Here we must notice how she often imitates wisdom (cf. v.3), so only the cautious and discerning will make the right choice. In ch. 7 the adulteress woman was lurking in the night, but now Folly is openly bold and apparently accepted by the community. Her deportment is one of a prostitute; she has put no effort into preparing the feast but only sits and calls. Her invitation, likewise, is to passersby (v.15), here described as those “who go straight” (*hamyašš^êrîm*) on their ways, thus identifying them as quiet and unwary.

NOTE

13 The text of v.13 is uncertain. The MT has, “The foolish woman is boisterous, simplicity, and knows not what.” The LXX reads, “A foolish and impudent woman comes to lack a morsel, she who knows not shame.” The Syriac has “a woman lacking in discretion, seductive.” The Targum translates it, “a foolish woman and a gadabout, ignorant, and she knows not good.” The Vulgate has, “a woman foolish and noisy, and full of wiles, and knowing nothing at all.” The point of the passage seems to be a description of this woman as seductive and without knowledge of moral integrity (see Toy, 189).

ii. Invitation (9:16–17)

¹⁶“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgment.

¹⁷“Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!”

COMMENTARY

16–17 Folly’s invitation parrots that of wisdom to *mî-petî*, “all who are simple” (see v.4). This competing voice, albeit louder and more appealing to those who “lack judgment,” likewise invites people to eat. “Stolen water” (*mayim-gⁿûbîm*; v.17) is now offered to passersby instead of mixed wine from wisdom. The “water” is only sweeter than “wine” because it is stolen, much as food seems more delicious because it is unjustly gained—the idea of getting away with something is appealing to the baser instincts.

Of course, the figures here are similar to those in the section of Wisdom: the words and ways of Folly are compared to food and drink. Compare 5:15–16 (water) and 30:20 (bread) to see the specification as sexual folly. If the water is “stolen,” it is taken from the legitimate spouse. So the invitation would be to the folly of sexual misconduct, with a hint that such would be common to alien religions and cultures that would destroy Israel’s distinctiveness. If the invitation alludes to the surrounding fertility cults, then it is presented as a way to gain life, when in fact it will only bring death (see Perdue, 148).

b. Consequence: Death (9:18)

¹⁸But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of the grave.

COMMENTARY

18 The contrast with Wisdom’s banquet continues, but now the consequence for Folly’s “guests” is startling. The naive who enter her banquet hall do not know that the dead are there. These “dead” are the *r^pâîm*, often translated “shades.” It refers to the dead who lead a shadowy existence in *šē’ôl* (see [comment on 2:18–19](#); cf. Job 3:13–19; Ps 88:5; Isa 14:9–11). The verse approximates the “as-though” motif of wisdom literature—those ensnared by folly are as good as in hell, for that house is a throat to hell. Many “eat” on earth what they “digest” in hell. For a similar motif of death, see the sayings of Ptah-hotep (*ANET*, 412–14).

The point is that the life of folly—a life of undisciplined, immoral, riotous living—runs counter to God’s plan of life and inevitably leads to death. Once again a section of the book ends with the death of a fool (see 7:26–27, 36). Jesus will warn people to avoid this broad way that leads to destruction and to follow the straight and narrow path of righteous, wise living.

NOTE

18 The LXX adds to the end of v.18: “But turn away, linger not in the place, neither set your eye on her: for thus will you go through alien water; but abstain from alien water, drink not from an alien fountain, that you may live long, that years of life may be added to you.”

III. THE FIRST COLLECTION OF SOLOMONIC PROVERBS, PART I (10:1–15:29)

OVERVIEW

Beginning with ch. 10 we see a notable change in the form of Proverbs. No longer do we find the forceful admonitions to seek wisdom, the lengthy poems, or the developed pictures and personifications. Instead we find what more closely corresponds to the title “Proverbs”—a collection of independent, miscellaneous aphorisms, dealing mostly with the consequences of right or wrong actions on various topics. McKane, 415, classifies these topics generally into old wisdom sayings that are concerned with the education of the individual, community-life topics that address harmful effects of antisocial behavior, and statements of religious piety that express moralism from the Yahwistic faith.

Each saying falls into one of a number of parallel patterns. Whybray, 57–59, lists and explains the most common of these: *antithetical parallelism*, pointing to a contrast between the wise and the foolish (“A wise son brings joy to his father / a foolish son is his mother’s bane”; cf. 10:1); *synonymous parallelism*, giving the statement greater comprehensiveness and authority (“Pride comes before disaster / and arrogance before a fall”; cf. 16:18); the *continuous sentence*, preserving the twofold shape of the saying but simply running the thought on to the second line (“A strong man who trusts in the fear of the LORD / will be a refuge for his sons”; cf. 14:26); *comparisons*, in which comparative value judgments are offered instead of black and white decisions (“If the righteous in the land get their deserts / how much more the wicked and the sinner!” cf. 11:31); and the *statement and explanation* (“A king’s threat is like a lion’s roar / one who ignores it is his own worst enemy”; cf. 20:2).

Please note that in the discussion of these various proverbs, since many of them are written in the singular, this commentary will often use the generic word “man” or the pronouns “he, his, him.” The intent here, however, is not to exclude the feminine gender.

NOTE

The proverbs in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 seem to defy an orderly arrangement or outline. With this fact in mind, yet still endeavoring to make this section as accessible and useable as possible to the reader, I have given a topical heading to each of the proverbs (in italics between the verse number and its explanation) and supplied a topical index (see the [Introduction](#)).

There have been a number of proposals regarding the arrangement of these proverbs according to the sounds of the Hebrew words and the sense of the proverbs. Even though there is always the chance that the repetition of sounds might be simply a coincidence or that the connections of sayings with similar meanings may have been due to other factors, there does seem to be enough evidence to identify overarching themes in the sections.

We know that there are 375 proverbs in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 (375 being the numerical value of the Hebrew name “Solomon”) that form the second major section of the book; and this section may be divided into two parts as well. The first part (10:1–15:29) includes mostly antithetical parallels of the righteous sage and the wicked fool. In the 185 proverbs of this section language seems to be the dominant theme (Perdue, 159). Proverbs 10:1a provides the title; then 10:1b–16 focuses on wealth and speech; 10:17–11:31 deals with deeds and destinies; 12:1–28 is about speech and deeds; 13:1–25 is on good teaching, ethics, and learning; 14:1–32 focuses on living in wisdom; 14:33–15:4 emphasizes gentle speech; 15:5–19 stresses the importance of instruction; and 15:20–29 records the consequences of righteousness and wickedness. (These categories represent the general section headings used by Waltke.)

Proverbs 15:30–33 marks the end of the section and the beginning of the next. The second part of this collection (16:1–22:16) has 190 sayings, with Yahweh-sayings and proverbs about the king and the court as the prominent themes (Perdue, 159).

A. Proverbs 10:1–32

¹The proverbs of Solomon:

A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son grief to his mother.

²Ill-gotten treasures are of no value,
but righteousness delivers from death.

³The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry
but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

⁴Lazy hands make a man poor,
but diligent hands bring wealth.

⁵He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son,
but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.

⁶Blessings crown the head of the righteous,
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

⁷The memory of the righteous will be a blessing,
but the name of the wicked will rot.

⁸The wise in heart accept commands,
but a chattering fool comes to ruin.

⁹The man of integrity walks securely,
but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

¹⁰He who winks maliciously causes grief,
and a chattering fool comes to ruin.

¹¹The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

¹²Hatred stirs up dissension,
but love covers over all wrongs.

¹³Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning,
but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment.

¹⁴Wise men store up knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.

¹⁵The wealth of the rich is their fortified city,
but poverty is the ruin of the poor.

¹⁶The wages of the righteous bring them life,
but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.

¹⁷He who heeds discipline shows the way to life,
but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.

¹⁸He who conceals his hatred has lying lips,
and whoever spreads slander is a fool.

¹⁹When words are many, sin is not absent,
but he who holds his tongue is wise.

²⁰The tongue of the righteous is choice silver,
but the heart of the wicked is of little value.

²¹The lips of the righteous nourish many,
but fools die for lack of judgment.

²²The blessing of the LORD brings wealth,
and he adds no trouble to it.

²³A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct,
but a man of understanding delights in wisdom.

²⁴What the wicked dreads will overtake him;
what the righteous desire will be granted.

²⁵When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone,
but the righteous stand firm forever.

²⁶As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is a sluggard to those who send him.

²⁷The fear of the LORD adds length to life,
but the years of the wicked are cut short.

²⁸The prospect of the righteous is joy,
but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.

²⁹The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous,
but it is the ruin of those who do evil.

³⁰The righteous will never be uprooted,

but the wicked will not remain in the land.

³¹The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom,
but a perverse tongue will be cut out.

³²The lips of the righteous know what is fitting,
but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.

COMMENTARY

1 *Wisdom, its affect on others.* This antithetical saying declares that the consequences of wisdom or folly in the child (“son” is idiomatic) affect the parents accordingly (cf. 17:21, 25; 23:24–25; 28:7; 29:3; also “Ptah-hotep” in *ANET*, 413).

2 *Righteousness, its value.* The sage asserts that “righteousness” (*ṣḏāqâ*) has far greater value than ill-gotten wealth. This word takes on the meaning of honesty in this contrast. Wealth in general can only be enjoyed for a while, but righteousness delivers from mortal danger (*māwet*, “death”).

3 *Rewards, satisfaction of needs.* In another antithetical saying, the general observation is that the Lord rewards the righteous with the satisfaction of their needs. The text literally says that he will not leave unsatisfied “the appetite [*nepeš*, lit., ‘soul’] of the righteous,” which here includes the inner urge toward success. Conversely, “the wicked are condemned to live forever with their unfulfilled, and so sterile, desires, which cannot be transformed into practical attainment” (McKane, 426).

4 *Wealth, through diligence.* This saying attributes wealth to diligence. “Lazy hands” (*kap-rēmîyâ*, lit., “slack hand”) refers to the careless work that such hands produce. See further Norman C. Habel, “Wisdom, Wealth, and Poverty Paradigms in the Book of Proverbs,” *Bible Bhashyam* 14 (1988): 28–49.

5 *Diligence, opposite of idleness.* Once again idleness, which leads to ruin, is contrasted with diligence. The wise son seizes the opportunities with keen insight into the importance of the season.

6 *Rewards, words of blessing.* The focus of this contrast is on rewards. We would expect a curse to be the antithesis of “blessings.” But the point is

rather that behind the speech of the wicked is aggressive “violence” (*ḥāmās*), so they cannot be trusted (McKane, 422).

7 Reputation, good. Likewise, a reputation is determined by righteousness or wickedness. “Name” (*šēm*) and “memorial” (*zēker*) are often paired as synonyms. “Name” refers to fame; the name of the wicked will eventually disappear, and it will leave a bad memory that excites abhorrence (see also “Meri-ka-re,” *ANET*, 415).

8–10 Conduct, wise and foolish. Next are three sayings contrasting the wise person with the fool. The first saying exhorts compliance with “commands” (*mišwōt* possibly referring to scriptural commands) from superiors—a fool talks too much to be attentive to them. The second holds out the promise that security goes with those who have “integrity” (*tōm*), but the insecurity of retribution awaits the perverse. Verse 10 departs from the normal antithetical pattern to form a comparison: shifty signs, although grievous, are not as ruinous as foolish talk. (Note that v.10b is identical to verse 8b.) Both are to be avoided.

11–12 Conduct, good and evil. Two pairs of sayings (vv.11–12, 13–14) contrast good and evil and wisdom and folly (see R. B. Y. Scott, “Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked,” *VT* 29 [1972]: 146–65). What the righteous say is beneficial to life, unlike the aggressive violence of the fool (cf. v.8b). The idea of the “fountain of life” (v.11) may come from Psalm 36:9 (see also Pr 13:14; 14:27; 16:22; Eze 47:1–12; Jn 7:38).

The second proverb (v.12) of the first pair compares the attitudes behind the two types: the wicked are motivated by hatred that brings dissension but the righteous by love that is harmonious. Love’s covering wrongs is harmonious with forgiveness (see 1Pe 4:8).

13–14 Speech, wise or foolish. In the second pair of sayings, attention turns to wisdom and folly. In v.13 the critically perceptive person (*nābôn*; “discerning,” NIV) speaks wisdom, unlike the fool, who constantly needs correction (cf. Ps 32:8–9). The other proverb extols the wisdom of silently storing knowledge rather than foolishly talking prematurely (see Jas 3:13–18; “Ptah-hotep” and “Amenemope” in *ANET*, 414 and 423).

15 Wealth, security. A contrast is provided here between rich and poor. Security comes with wealth. The image used is of a “fortified city” (*qiryat ‘uzzô*), which protects its inhabitants against all adversity.

16 Rewards, life or ruin. Rewards are determined by moral choices—righteousness brings life, but wickedness punishment (see Ro 6:23). The point seems to be that what one receives in life depends on a wise use of gifts and a righteous character. Kidner, 87–88, admonishes not to blame poverty for the quality of life. The point again is to live righteously (see also D. W. Thomas, “The Meaning of *ḥaṭṭā’t* in Proverbs 10:16,” *JTS* 15 [1964]: 295–96).

17 Discipline, its benefit. Learning to “accept” discipline is wise because it will benefit others. The participle *šômēr* (“heeds,” NIV) means holding fast to discipline as a path of life. Abandoning (*‘ōzēb*; “ignores,” NIV) correction also influences others, unfortunately.

18 Speech, lies and slander. In this comparison two errors are given, the second being climactic: hypocrisy is bad enough, slander is worse. At least in the first one—the “lying lips”—one keeps hatred to himself. In the ancient world there is much in wisdom literature that condemns lying and slander (see “Amenemope” and “Ahiqar,” *ANET*, 423 and 429).

19 Speech, controlled. Controlling the tongue helps avoid sin. (See Jas 3:1–12 for a discussion of the loose tongue.)

20 Speech, valuable. What the righteous say is infinitely more valuable than what the wicked intend. The contrast is between the tongue (i.e., what is said) and the mind (“heart,” i.e., what is determined). Righteous speech, like silver, is valuable and treasured.

21 Speech, edifying. Moreover, what the righteous say is edifying—it enhances (*yir* ‘û; “nourishes,” NIV) common life. “Fools” (*‘wîlîm*), characterized by a lack of discipline and little wit, ruin their lives and others as well.

22 Wealth, a blessing. God brings wealth to those whom he blesses—and without anxiety (*‘eṣeb*; “trouble,” NIV). Psalm 127:1–3, too, stresses how the Lord gives to his beloved prosperity and safety as well as peace of mind. The proverb is also a warning against self-sufficiency.

23 Pleasure, good and evil. One’s character is revealed in what one enjoys. Evil conduct to the fool is “like sport” (*kišḥôq*; “pleasure,” NIV), literally, like a laugh; like child’s play, it is so easy (Plaut, 132). This evil conduct is contrasted with wisdom, the delight of those who have understanding.

24 Prospects for life, hopes and fears. This little contrast declares the working out of the fear of the wicked and the desire of the righteous. The “terror of the wicked” (*m’gôrat rāšā’*; “wicked dread,” NIV) will come on them, so that there is no security for them; the “desire” (*ta’wâ*) of the righteous, which they long for in their righteous lifestyle, will be given to them.

25 Confidence, in calamity. Survival in catastrophes of life is reserved for the righteous, for they are properly prepared to meet the real tests of life (Plaut, 132). Matthew 7:24–27 addresses the same point: If people base their lives on temporal values, they must know that they can be quickly swept away.

26 Servants, lazy. Vinegar to the teeth is an irritant that is unpleasant to experience, and smoke to the eyes is a hindrance to progress. This little proverb portrays the aggravation in sending a lazy servant on a mission—it could be a confusing, unpleasant ordeal.

27 Fear of the Lord, life-giving. The fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (1:7), contributes to a long and prosperous life. This saying is a general one. Why the righteous suffer and even die young is a problem that perplexed Israel’s sages (cf. Job; Pss 49; 73).

28 Prospects for life, joy and ruin. This proverb contrasts expectations, based on God’s justice. The righteous will experience the joyful fulfillment of their hopes, but what the wicked hope for will be dashed.

29 Security, the way of the Lord. The “way of the LORD” refers to God’s providential administration of life. Thus divine justice will be security for the righteous and disaster for the wicked.

30 Security, of the righteous. This proverb concerns the enjoyment of covenantal promises—dwelling in the land of Israel. It is promised to the righteous (see Lev 26; Ps 92). If the people live in righteousness, they will enjoy the land; if not, they will be exiled.

31 Speech, wise or perverse. Righteous speech can be beneficial to others and pleasing to God; if it is perverse, it is a complete waste of words—no one wants to listen to the latter. The bold image of cutting out the tongue is hyperbolic.

32 Speech, pleasing or perverse. The righteous speak words that produce pleasure or delight (*rāṣôn*; “what is fitting,” NIV). Proverbs teaches that

good people use few words and choose them well. The wicked say things that are worthless or perverse, generally without prior consideration and beyond prudent limits.

NOTE

9 The verb translated “will be found out” (*yiwwādēa*⁶) is frequently emended to “will be harmed” (*yērôa*⁶) to make a better parallelism with “walks securely.” It simply involves a change from a *dalet* to a *resh*, two letters that are easily confused. There is no reason to change the text, though, for the word “be known, found out” may be interpreted as a metonymy for the effect, “come to ruin.”

B. Proverbs 11:1–31

- ¹The LORD abhors dishonest scales,
but accurate weights are his delight.
- ²When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom.
- ³The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.
- ⁴Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.
- ⁵The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way
for them,
but the wicked are brought down by their own
wickedness.
- ⁶The righteousness of the upright delivers them,
but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.
- ⁷When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes;
all he expected from his power comes to nothing.
- ⁸The righteous man is rescued from trouble,

and it comes on the wicked instead.

⁹With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor,
but through knowledge the righteous escape.

¹⁰When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices;
when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.

¹¹Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,
but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.

¹²A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor,
but a man of understanding holds his tongue.

¹³A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.

¹⁴For lack of guidance a nation falls,
but many advisers make victory sure.

¹⁵He who puts up security for another will surely suffer,
but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe.

¹⁶A kindhearted woman gains respect,
but ruthless men gain only wealth.

¹⁷A kind man benefits himself,
but a cruel man brings trouble on himself.

¹⁸The wicked man earns deceptive wages,
but he who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward.

¹⁹The truly righteous man attains life,
but he who pursues evil goes to his death.

²⁰The LORD detests men of perverse heart
but he delights in those whose ways are blameless.

²¹Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished,
but those who are righteous will go free.

²²Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.

²³The desire of the righteous ends only in good,
but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.

- ²⁴One man gives freely, yet gains even more;
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
- ²⁵A generous man will prosper;
he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.
- ²⁶People curse the man who hoards grain,
but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell.
- ²⁷He who seeks good finds goodwill,
but evil comes to him who searches for it.
- ²⁸Whoever trusts in his riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.
- ²⁹He who brings trouble on his family will inherit only
wind,
and the fool will be servant to the wise.
- ³⁰The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
and he who wins souls is wise.
- ³¹If the righteous receive their due on earth,
how much more the ungodly and the sinner!

COMMENTARY

1 Honesty, in business. Honesty pleases the Lord. This contrast between what the Lord abhors and delights in elaborates the point. The Scriptures throughout condemn dishonesty in business (see Lev 19:35–36; Dt 25:13–16; Am 8:5; et al.). Likewise, the law codes of the ancient world ruled against it (see *ANET*, 388, 423). Whatever the Lord “abhors” must be avoided. Thus to be accepted by God in one’s transactions, one must deal honestly (see Pr 16:11; 20:10, 23).

2 Humility, wise and honorable. Humility avoids disgrace and leads to wisdom (notice the sounds of the first colon: *bā’-zādôn wayyābō’ qālôn*, “when pride comes, then comes disgrace”). “Pride” (*zādôn*; GK 2295) is literally a boiling up; and so hubris, an overstepping of the boundaries and insubordination, is meant. Humility describes those who know their place;

but those who are proud, says Plaut, 136, are inflated to the level of self-bestowed divinity. The proud will have their egos deflated (*qālôn*, “made light of, disgrace”).

3 Integrity, a preservation. Here is another proverb affirming the value of integrity. The contrast is between the upright and the unfaithful; those who use treachery (*selep bôḡdîm*, lit., “the crookedness of the unfaithful”) are destroyed rather than guided by it.

4 Righteousness, better than wealth. The focus of this saying is on what is most useful when disaster strikes: righteousness or wealth. Whybray, 67, is correct in taking the “day of wrath” as divine punishment in this life (see Job 21:30; Eze 7:19; Zep 1:18). Righteousness, which pleases God, is therefore more valuable than riches when anticipating divine justice.

5–6 Conduct, righteous and wicked. Here are two proverbs contrasting the righteous with the wicked. The first teaches that the righteous enjoy security and serenity through life (*ṭyaššēr darkô*; “makes a straight way,” NIV; v.5). The second one states that the wicked are caught by their own evil desires; their sins catch up with them (v.6).

7 Prospect for life, of the wicked. The subject of the “hope” (*tiqwâ*) of the wicked is developed in this proverb, thus showing its consequences—his expectations perish with him (see Ps 49). Any hope for long life or success borne of wickedness will be disappointed. The LXX adds an antithesis: “When the righteous dies, hope does not perish.” The LXX’s translators apparently wanted to see the fulfillment of the hope of the righteous as the world to come. But this proverb is not antithetical.

8 Retribution, just. Here is an expression of confidence in God’s justice in bringing recompense into the world. The antithesis shows the consequences of actions with an unusual twist—the “trouble” (*ṣārâ*) that the righteous escape falls on the wicked.

9 Speech, safety from slander. This antithetical verse stresses that a righteous person can escape devastating slander through knowledge. The “godless” (*ḥānēp*, i.e., the hypocrite or flatterer) is the one who “destroys” a neighbor. The righteous will have sufficient knowledge and experience to identify and end the slander.

10 Emotions, joy when righteousness prevails. The common theme of this line is joy; it comes from either the success of the righteous or the ruin of the wicked (so an antithetical idea is present). Examples are found in 2

Kings 11:20 and Esther 8:15. Kidner, 91, notes: “However drab the world makes out virtue to be, it appreciates the boon of it in public life.”

11 Speech, helpful or harmful. This contrast expressing the social effects of words is similar to that in v.10 (see also “Meri-ka-re,” *ANET*, 415). The “blessing of the upright” (*birkat y’sārîm*) consists in the beneficent words and deeds that bring enrichment to a community. But the words of the wicked have a disastrous effect on society, endangering, weakening, and ruining it with demoralizing, slanderous, and malicious criticism.

12 Speech, silence rather than derision. The next four proverbs (vv.12–15) follow the theme of talking. The first advises that it is proper to hold one’s tongue rather than to deride a neighbor—in modern parental parlance, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” The wise man is a “man of discernment” (*’îš t’bûnôt*; “man of understanding,” NIV); the other person lacks “judgment” (*lêb*). How one treats a neighbor is significant in Proverbs; you are expected to be a good neighbor. To despise (*bāz*; “derides,” NIV) a neighbor is contemptible.

13 Speech, keeping confidence. Verse 13 contrasts the gossip and the “trustworthy man” (*ne’man-rûah*; lit., “trustworthy spirit”). The talebearer goes from one to another and speaks disparagingly about someone in a malicious manner; he cannot wait to share secrets that should be kept (see Lev 19:16; Jer 9:3). The talebearer is despised because he cannot be trusted.

14 Speech, good advice. Verse 14 is framed in a contrast as well, showing that advice is essential for the stability of a nation. The term *taḥbulôt* (“guidance”) is comparable to steering a ship, here a ship of state (see Whybray, 67; Pr 1:5); without it the nation is in danger. Of course since “victory” (*t’sû ‘â*) is “sure,” the saying assumes that the counselors are wise and intelligent.

15 Speech, avoid pledges. The fourth saying in this group instructs people to avoid pledges with strangers if they want to remain financially solid. The point of this proverb is to focus on the consequences of an action. The “stranger” (*zār*; “another,” NIV) could refer to an individual from a different nation or merely to an unknown person; but here it may refer to someone from another clan or family (see Toy, 228).

16 Kindness, brings respect. Two contrasts are here juxtaposed: “a kindhearted woman” (*’ēšet-ḥēn*) and “ruthless men,” and “honor” (*kābôd*; “respect,” NIV) and “wealth” (*’ōšer*). The idea seems to be that one can

seize wealth by any means, but “honor” is the natural reward for the gracious person. Two additional lines are found in the LXX (see Note), but they do not seem to provide the full sense.

17 *Kindness, better than cruelty.* This saying contrasts the consequences of dispositions: “kindness” (*ḥesed*) is healthy, but anger brings trouble. One’s health and well-being are at risk if the personality is volatile. We may say that such raging works against a person as a part of divine justice. The word “trouble” may recall Joshua 7:25–26, where Achan troubled Israel.

18 *Rewards, justly earned.* Ultimately, rewards are appropriate for different character traits. The line extols the benefits for one “who sows righteousness,” i.e., one who inspires righteousness in others while practicing it himself. What is sown will yield fruit (1Co 9:11; 2Co 9:6; Jas 3:18). According to Scott, 88, this verse teaches that one answer to the prosperity of the wicked is that it does not last. Notice the paronomasia in the line: “deceptive” is *šāqer* and “reward” is *śeker*.

19 *Conduct, brings life or death.* Since life and death result from moral choices, righteousness must be pursued. Some versions have “son of righteousness,” an idiom meaning “having the quality of righteousness.” The MT has *kēn*, which HALOT identifies as a participle from *kûn* and interprets to mean “steadfast in righteousness,” while Toy, 231–32, and McKane, 435, read it as *kān* and interpret it to mean “strive after, pursue.” “Life” and “death” describe the vicissitudes of this life but can also refer to what is beyond the grave.

20 *Conduct, pleasing to God.* This contrast records other things that the Lord either detests or delights in. The “perverse heart” is a twisted mind, i.e., the whole spiritual being is influenced toward evil. This inclination is an abomination to the Lord. Conversely, to please God one should follow a blameless course of life (see 2:21; 17:20).

21 *Retribution, its certainty.* God’s just retribution is certain. The initial expression, “Be sure of this” (lit., “hand to hand”), means that it is settled; one can depend on it (see M. Anbar, “Proverbs 11:21; 16:15: *yd lyd* sur le champ,” *Bib* 53 [1972]: 537–38). Those who escape are called (lit.) the “seed of the righteous,” a phrase that describes a class of people—the righteous and their kind (cf. Isa 1:4; 65:23; Whybray, 69).

22 *Character traits, beauty without discretion.* This proverb uses emblematic parallelism to describe a beautiful woman without “discretion.”

The word is literally “taste” (*ṭā‘am*; GK 3248); it can mean physical taste (Ex 16:31), intellectual discretion (1Sa 25:33—Abigail had it), or ethical judgment (Ps 119:66). The description is of a woman with no moral sensibility or propriety; she is compared to a pig with an ornament. Why join a beautiful ornament and an unworthy body? The pig will not know its value, nor will a woman who has no discretion.

23 *Prospect for life, good or bad.* The consequences of hope are determined by moral character. God rewards the righteous with prosperity; wrath eventually comes on the wicked.

24–25 *Prosperity, for generosity.* The paradox presented here does not refer to financial investments. Rather, in God’s economy generosity often determines prosperity: one must give in order to gain (see Ps 112:9; 2Co 9:6–9).

There are rewards for being generous. The person who is generous toward others will be provided for himself. The two lines in v.25 are in synonymous parallelism. The first description, “a generous man,” is literally “the soul of blessing” (*nepeš-bṛākâ*). “Blessing” in the Bible describes a “present” (Ge 33:11) or “special favor” (Jos 15:19). The verb “made rich” (*ʿduššān*; “prosper,” NIV) is literally “to be made fat,” drawing on the standard comparison between fatness and abundance or prosperity (Dt 32:15). The second line makes a comparison between providing water for the thirsty with generously providing for those in need (see Jer 31:25; cf. La 3:15). The kind act will be reciprocated.

26 *Business, socially responsible.* This proverb reveals how a merchant’s response to supply-and-demand will influence the customer’s opinion of him. Some merchants hoard up the produce to raise the prices when there is a great need for the produce. Merchants must have a social conscience, too.

27 *Prospect for life, realized desires.* One generally receives the consequences of the kind of life one pursues, whether good or evil. The line stresses that there is a divine justice. The expression “seeks [‘finds,’ NIV] good will” (*yʿbaqqēš rāṣôn*) could refer to seeking God’s favor (see Ps 5:12; Isa 49:8); that is, whoever diligently seeks good is seeking divine favor.

28 *Security, object of faith.* Security and prosperity are determined by the object of faith. The righteous trust in the Lord and flourish. The image of the “green leaf” is a figure of prosperity and fertility throughout the ancient

Near East. The image of falling uses the analogy of the physical act to portray coming to ruin in life.

29 *Laziness, trouble and poverty.* This proverb describes an avaricious man who deprives his family of livelihood and brings them to nothing but distress. He gains nothing for his efforts, “wind” signifying that which cannot be grasped (27:16; Ecc 1:14, 17). The second line suggests that one who foolishly mismanages his accounts may have to sell himself into slavery to the wise. So the ideas in the verse are complementary.

30 *Righteousness, brings life.* Righteousness brings life. Both “fruit” and “tree of life” are metaphorical, the first image signifying what the righteous produce and the second identifying that as a healthy, long life. The second half of the verse refers to “winning souls.” If this reading is correct, it refers to capturing (*lōqēah*, “to lay hold of, seize, conquer”) people with ideas or influence (2Sa 15:6). This is the wise course of action. (See further Daniel C. Snell, “‘Taking Souls’ in Proverbs 11:30,” *VT* 33 [1983]: 362–65; he interprets this expression as “comprehends souls.”)

31 *Retribution, its certainty.* Retribution for sin is certain, for the righteous and especially for the sinner. The proverb uses a “how much more” argument—if that be true, how much more so this (argument from the lesser to the greater). The point is that divine justice deals with all sin; and if the righteous suffer for their sins, certainly the wicked will. The LXX introduces a new idea to the verse: “if the righteous be scarcely saved”—an idea recorded in 1 Peter 4:18 (see J. Barr, “בְּאֵרֵי—μόλις: Proverbs 11:31 and 1 Peter 4:18,” *JSS* 20 [1975]: 149–64).

NOTES

7 “A wicked man” is the standard translation of *’ādām rāšā’*. Waltke, 2:481, however, goes against most manuscripts and versions in favor of two manuscripts that omit *rāšā’*, thus leaving *’ādām* and the translation “human being.” He bases this choice on internal evidence in the line.

16 The LXX inserts between the two lines, “She who hates virtue makes a throne for dishonor / the idle will be destitute of means.” The LXX apparently did not think that the contrasts in the lines were sufficient. The NEB, NAB, and NRSV follow this view and insert the readings. Toy, 229,

thinks that the MT records remnants of the idea but that the LXX does not provide its full meaning.

19 The form כֵּן (*kēn*, “truly”) is in one MS, the LXX, and the Syriac as בֵּן (*bēn*, “son”), giving the reading “son of righteousness.” The use of the idiom, however, usually introduces evil qualities (“son of Belial, son of death”). The word *kēn*, meaning “steadfast, established,” here serves to modify the word following. The NIV and NRSV take it with reference to character, “the truly righteous man.” It may be best to take it as a confirming answer, “truly, it is right.”

30 The alternative reading is “he who takes away lives is violent”; חָמָס (*ḥāmās*, “violent”) instead of חָכָם (*ḥākām*, “wise”) is reflected in the LXX and Syriac. If לָקַח נַפְשׁוֹת (*lōqēah nēpāšôt*) were intended positively (“winning souls”), “wise” could have easily been read through orthographic confusion. If the phrase were read negatively (“captures souls”), then “violent” fits well as the predicate. The line would then form an antithetical idea to the first line. The expression “taking lives away” is nowhere else used in a good sense; it is usually a negative expression for killing. But if in this context the activity of that expression is considered “wise,” then it has to have the sense of capturing lives with ideas, which is why it was earlier translated “winning souls.”

31 The MT has בְּאַרְץ (*bā’āreṣ*, “in the land”). The LXX’s “scarcely” could have come from a Vorlage of בַּצָּרָה (*baṣṣārâ*, “deficiency, want”) or בַּצֹּר (*baṣṣōr*, “to cut off, shorten”), perhaps arising from confusion over letters. The verb יִשְׁלַם (*yēšullām*, “receive due”) means “be recompensed” and could be only indirectly interpreted “be saved.”

C. Proverbs 12:1–28

¹Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but he who hates correction is stupid.

²A good man obtains favor from the LORD,
but the LORD condemns a crafty man.

- ³A man cannot be established through wickedness,
but the righteous cannot be uprooted.
- ⁴A wife of noble character is her husband's crown,
but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.
- ⁵The plans of the righteous are just,
but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.
- ⁶The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,
but the speech of the upright rescues them.
- ⁷Wicked men are overthrown and are no more,
but the house of the righteous stands firm.
- ⁸A man is praised according to his wisdom,
but men with warped minds are despised.
- ⁹Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant
than pretend to be somebody and have no food.
- ¹⁰A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal,
but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.
- ¹¹He who works his land will have abundant food,
but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.
- ¹²The wicked desire the plunder of evil men,
but the root of the righteous flourishes.
- ¹³An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk,
but a righteous man escapes trouble.
- ¹⁴From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things
as surely as the work of his hands rewards him.
- ¹⁵The way of a fool seems right to him,
but a wise man listens to advice.
- ¹⁶A fool shows his annoyance at once,
but a prudent man overlooks an insult.
- ¹⁷A truthful witness gives honest testimony,
but a false witness tells lies.
- ¹⁸Reckless words pierce like a sword,

but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

¹⁹Truthful lips endure forever,
but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

²⁰There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil,
but joy for those who promote peace.

²¹No harm befalls the righteous,
but the wicked have their fill of trouble.

²²The LORD detests lying lips,
but he delights in men who are truthful.

²³A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself,
but the heart of fools blurts out folly.

²⁴Diligent hands will rule,
but laziness ends in slave labor.

²⁵An anxious heart weighs a man down,
but a kind word cheers him up.

²⁶A righteous man is cautious in friendship,
but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

²⁷The lazy man does not roast his game,
but the diligent man prizes his possessions.

²⁸In the way of righteousness there is life;
along that path is immortality.

COMMENTARY

1 Discipline, its acceptance. Those who wish to improve themselves must learn to accept correction and learn from it. This proverb adds the contrast that to refuse correction is brutish (“stupid” is *bā‘ar*, descriptive of a dumb animal). It is almost as though one distinction between the human and the brute is this rational feature of being able to receive discipline.

2 Conduct, pleasing to God. Obtaining the Lord’s favor is the result of virtue. Here the “good man” is contrasted with the “crafty man” (’îš

mʿzimmôt). The term *mʿzimmâ* is used of “plans” in a good sense in chs. 1–9 but in a bad sense in chs. 10–24.

3 Righteousness, brings stability. Only righteousness brings stability in life—in society as well as in individuals. Society cannot long endure if established on evil principles (see 10:25).

4 Character traits, noble wife. The moral character of a woman affects her husband’s enjoyment of life. The contrast is between a wife of noble character (*ʿēšet-ḥayil*, as in 31:10) and a “disgraceful wife” (*mʿbîšâ*, lit., “one who puts to shame,” i.e., lowers her husband’s standing in the community). A “crown” is a symbol of honor and renown; but the negative side, using the figure of “decay in his bones,” is that the disgrace will eat away her husband’s strength and destroy his happiness.

5 Plans, just and unjust. Righteous people are fair and honest. This verse shows that the thoughts (i.e., intentions) of good people are directed toward what is right, toward simple justice. The adverse describes the wicked, whose advice is deceitful and can lead only to evil.

6 Speech, skillful defense. The righteous are able to make a skillful defense against false accusations. The vivid picture of “lying in wait for blood” conveys that the wicked make a trap by their false accusations (Whybray, 73). The righteous, who through discipline and instruction have gained knowledge and perception, are able to avoid this danger.

7 Security, of the righteous. Here is another saying on the stability of the righteous in times of trouble (cf. Mt 7:24–27). The image of the fate of the wicked as being “overthrown” (*hāpôk*) is forceful and may allude to Genesis 19:21—they will be destroyed completely.

8 Wisdom, its appreciation. This saying makes a point about the appreciation of clear thinking. Praise for a person is in proportion to or “according to” (*lʿpî*, from *peh*; lit., “mouth”) one’s wisdom. The term for “wisdom” (*śekel*, lit., “intelligent,” as in 1Sa 25:3) refers to the capacity to think straight. The “warped mind” is *naʿwēh-lēb*—i.e., a crooked heart that lacks the ability to see things as they really are and so makes wrong choices. No praise exists here.

9 Humility, better than pretension. One should be satisfied with comfort at the expense of pretension. The point seems to be that some people live beyond their means in a vain show (*mitkabbēd*, “pretend to be somebody,” a Hithpael participle from *kābēd*, “to be weighty, honored”), whereas if they

lived modestly they could have some of the conveniences of life, e.g., a servant. Another way to read v.9a is, “Better is the lowly that serves himself” (see Note).

10 *Character traits, compassion for animals.* Compassion for animals indicates one’s character. The righteous are kind to all God’s creation (see Dt 25:4) because they have received his bounty. Toy, 248, suggests the analogy that if one is kind to animals, one will surely be kind to humans. Greenstone, 129, adds that even when the wicked are moved to compassion, they often manifest it in a cruel way.

11 *Diligence, prospers.* One ensures income through diligent work and not through unfounded speculation. *Rêqîm* means “vain things” or “empty things”; here it refers to “fantasies” (so NIV). Plaut, 145, advises that on the basis of this truth people should do their work and not run after some dream of a quick profit.

12 *Prosperity, for righteous pursuits.* The proverb is difficult to interpret, as the many variant readings for it show. The text of v.12a says, “the wicked desire the net of evil men.” Toy, 249–50, surveys all the readings and proposals (see Note); and while he finds the LXX’s reading clear, he prefers the emendation, “wickedness is the net of bad men.” The verse seems to be saying that there are good rewards for the righteous, but the wicked are dangerous and perhaps get caught in their own devices.

13 *Speech, dangerous.* Righteous people avoid evil talk because it is dangerous. The point of the parallel expression is that the evil man catches himself in his words (lit., “the rebellion / transgression of his lips”). People who are righteous will not get themselves into a bind (*ṣārâ*; “trouble,” NIV) by what they say.

14 *Prosperity, through words and work.* Proper speech and diligent work result in good things. If one’s conversation is wise, intelligent, and honoring to God, it will result in blessing, i.e., good things will come of it.

15 *Wisdom, takes advice.* People demonstrate their maturity by how well they respond to sound advice. Reasonable people (i.e., “wise”) will recognize and accept good advice, even if they themselves often give advice to others. “Advice” (*‘ēṣâ*) is an application of wisdom and knowledge to a specific situation, either by astute observation or well-thought-out opinion. The fool, however, is set in his own ways and will not

listen to advice. “The way of a fool” (*derek* ‘wîl) describes the headlong course of actions not abandoned even when good advice is offered.

16 *Wisdom, overlooks insults.* Those who are mature are able to handle criticism without responding instinctively and irrationally. McKane, 442, says that the fool’s reaction is “like an injured animal and so his opponent knows that he has been wounded.” The wise man does not give the enemy that satisfaction. It is not so much that the wise man represses anger and feelings but that he is more shrewd in dealing with them.

17 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* The true witness (‘mûnâ; “truthful witness,” NIV) is reliable because he tells the truth; he always utters what is right. The contrast is made with the false witness and his lies.

18 *Speech, wounding and healing.* Those who are wise do not cause harm by their reckless talk. “Reckless words” (*bôṭeh*) has the idea of speaking hastily and unadvisably (see Lev 5:4; Nu 30:7). Such talk is like a piercing sword—it wounds. Conversely, the tongue of the wise (a metonymy for what the wise say) is “healing” (*marpē* ’, which is a metonymy of the effect, showing the opposite of the cutting, irresponsible words). The words are healing because they are faithful and true, gentle and kind, uplifting and encouraging.

19 *Speech, truth outlasts lies.* Truthfulness will outlive lies—forever. Or, conversely, as Plaut, 147, says, “Lies have generally limited staying power.” The LXX saw the setting for this proverb in the courts of law: “True lips establish testimony, but a hasty witness has an unjust tongue.” The little expression “only a moment” is literally “till I wink again” (‘argî ‘â, a denominative verb from *rega*’); it forms a circumlocution for the idea.

20 *Plans, for evil or peace.* The contrast here is between plotting evil and promoting peace with a view to the consequences. The effect of plotting evil can only be sorrow and trouble, because “evil” (*rā’*, GK 8273) has the idea of pain in it. “Peace” (*šālôm*, GK 8934), by contrast, refers to social wholeness and well-being (see Pss 34:14; 37:37). The “counselors of peace,” as the text literally reads, will reap the inner contentment from doing what is right as well as the pleasure of seeing positive results.

21 *Security, of the righteous.* Here is a relative truth about the contrast between the righteous and the wicked with respect to calamity. “No harm befalls the righteous” means that decent people do not have frequent trouble of their own making, although Rashi took it to mean that the righteous do

no evil even unintentionally (Greenstone, 134). *ʾĀwen* is “evil, harm, misfortune” and is probably not sin in this instance (see also Ge 50:20; Ro 8:28, 35–39).

22 *Speech, truth pleases God.* Truthfulness rather than falsehood pleases the Lord. The contrast in consequences is strong: “pleasure, delight” (*rāṣôn*) versus “abomination” (*tô ʿēbâ*; “detests,” NIV). To speak falsehood is a misuse of a God-given faculty. The point the verse teaches is to act in good faith; in the OT *ʿāśâ* + *ʾmûnâ* carries this meaning (i.e., “the ones doing truth”; “men who are truthful,” NIV).

23 *Speech, discretion.* Wisdom is distinguishable from folly in speech. The “prudent” (*ʿādām ʿārûm*, lit., “a shrewd man”) restrain themselves from displaying knowledge. The verb “conceals” (*kōseh*; “keeps,” NIV) does not mean that he never speaks; rather, it means that he uses discretion. Conversely, the intent of “fools” (*kʿsîlîm*) is to call out “folly” (*ʿiwwelet*). McKane, 422, notes that the more a fool speaks, the less likely he is able to speak effectively.

24 *Diligence, rules.* Diligence at work determines success and advancement. To put it bluntly, the diligent rise to the top and the lazy sink to the bottom. At the bottom they may be forced to work as though they owed it. For other proverbs extolling the virtue of industry, see 6:6–11; 10:4; 12:27; 13:4; 19:15; 21:5.

25 *Speech, encouraging.* Words of encouragement lift the spirits of someone who is depressed through anxious fear. “Anxious” (*dʿāgâ*) denotes “anxiety, fear” (see Jer 49:23; Eze 4:16; for the verb *dāʿaq*, see Ps 38:18[19]; Jer 17:8 [“worries,” NIV]). Anxiety in the heart bows the person down—bowing in the sense of physical mourning (Pss 35:14; 38:6). The “kind word” (*dābār ṭôb*) includes encouragement, kindness, and insight—saying what the discouraged person needs in order to gain a proper perspective and renew hope and confidence. There is an effective wordplay in the verse: “weighs down” (*yašḥennâ*) and “cheers up” (*yʿšammḥennâ*). One should seek to turn another person’s depression into rejoicing by saying the right things.

26 *Associations, dangerous.* The righteous cautiously avoid dangerous friendships. There is a great variety of ways this verse has been translated and interpreted. The verb *yātēr* (“is cautious”) can be taken to mean “spy out, examine,” which makes a fine contrast to the “leading astray” (from

nā'â) of the “way of the wicked.” Emerton takes *ytr* from *ntr* in the Hiphil, “to set free”; *yuttar* in the Hophal would yield the meaning “the righteous is delivered from harm [reading *mērā'â*]” (J. A. Emerton, “A Note in Proverbs 12:26,” *ZAW* 76 [1964]: 191–93). Another possibility is to interpret the line thus: “The righteous guides his friend aright.” The proverb, at least, is advising correct action in friendships.

27 Diligence, successful. Diligence leads to success. The negative image in this antithetical line is of the lazy person who cannot bring a project to completion. The verb *yah^arōk* is rare; in Aramaic it means “to roast” (i.e., “to scorch or singe by burning”). Its use here is metaphorical: just as one who might hunt but never cook what he finds, so the lazy person never completes a project. The *Midrash* (*Gen. Rab.* 67:2) sees here an allusion to the Jacob and Esau story in Genesis 25. (But see Mitchell Dahood, “The Hapax *harak* in Proverbs 12:27,” *Bib* 63 [1982]: 60–62; he translates, “The languid man will roast no game for himself, but the diligent will come upon the wealth of the steppe.”)

28 Righteousness, leads to immortality. A righteous lifestyle leads to immortality. The verse probably means that those who enter righteousness by faith and seek to live righteously are on the way to eternal life. “No death” (*ʿal-māwet*) may be taken to mean “immortality” (so NIV); but it can also mean permanence and stability in this life (see M. Dahood, “Immortality in Proverbs 12:28,” *Bib* 41 [1960]: 176–81).

Some manuscripts and ancient versions take the second colon of this verse as, “there is a path that leads to death.” McKane, 451–52, opts for this reading and notes that the MT was probably prejudiced toward the doctrine of immortality. In Proverbs and in the early OT, the teachings on immortality are not clear; specifically, unless this is an exception, *ḥayyîm* (“there is life,” NIV) is not used in Proverbs of eternal life. So many prefer the antithetical parallelism to the synonymous.

NOTES

9 The LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate, as well as many modern versions, repoint the noun (“a servant”) as a participle for the reading “who serves [himself].” But the MT is reliable and does not need to be changed.

12 The MT in the first colon reads, “The wicked desires the net of evil men”; the LXX has “the desires of the wicked are evil”; the Syriac has “the wicked desire to do evil”; and the Latin has “the desire of the wicked is a defense of the worst [things or persons]” (see Toy, 249–50). The word *mêšôd* in the MT is a “net” or “snare” (with the meaning by metonymy of “plunder”), or a “stronghold.” It could be a corruption for *mêšôr*, a “fortification” (Waltke, 2:529). Whatever the word was, the LXX and the Syriac did not translate it. The point is that the wicked do not have their own strong defense and so covet a defense against other wicked plans.

D. Proverbs 13:1–25

- ¹A wise son heeds his father’s instruction,
but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.
- ²From the fruit of his lips a man enjoys good things,
but the unfaithful have a craving for violence.
- ³He who guards his lips guards his life,
but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.
- ⁴The sluggard craves and gets nothing,
but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.
- ⁵The righteous hate what is false,
but the wicked bring shame and disgrace.
- ⁶Righteousness guards the man of integrity,
but wickedness overthrows the sinner.
- ⁷One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing;
another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.
- ⁸A man’s riches may ransom his life,
but a poor man hears no threat.
- ⁹The light of the righteous shines brightly,
but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out.
- ¹⁰Pride only breeds quarrels,

but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

¹¹Dishonest money dwindles away,
but he who gathers money little by little makes it
grow.

¹²Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

¹³He who scorns instruction will pay for it,
but he who respects a command is rewarded.

¹⁴The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,
turning a man from the snares of death.

¹⁵Good understanding wins favor,
but the way of the unfaithful is hard.

¹⁶Every prudent man acts out of knowledge,
but a fool exposes his folly.

¹⁷A wicked messenger falls into trouble,
but a trustworthy envoy brings healing.

¹⁸He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame,
but whoever heeds correction is honored.

¹⁹A longing fulfilled is sweet to the soul,
but fools detest turning from evil.

²⁰He who walks with the wise grows wise,
but a companion of fools suffers harm.

²¹Misfortune pursues the sinner,
but prosperity is the reward of the righteous.

²²A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's
children,
but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous.

²³A poor man's field may produce abundant food,
but injustice sweeps it away.

²⁴He who spares the rod hates his son,
but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

²⁵The righteous eat to their hearts' content,
but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry.

COMMENTARY

1 Discipline, its acceptance. Those who are wise listen to instruction and respond properly to discipline. Driver ("Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs," 174) suggests the reading *m'yussār*, "allows himself to be disciplined." The point of this antithetical saying is teachability. The "scorner" (*lēš*; "mockers," NIV; GK 4370) is the highest level of a fool. He has no respect for authority, reviles religion, and because he thinks that he knows what is best, is not teachable (Whybray, 77). The use of *g'ārâ* ("rebuke") shows that the mocker does not respond to any level of discipline.

2 Speech, helpful or harmful. Words and wishes find their just rewards. This saying concerns the outcome of conduct; as Alden, 104–5, says, a common theme in Proverbs is that you get what you deserve. The clauses in this verse do not fit very well; the LXX, therefore, has for the second line "the souls of the wicked perish untimely." More likely the second line is saying that the desire of the "unfaithful" (*bōg'dîm*, or "treacherous") is to obtain what does not belong to them. The "violence" that is their appetite refers to the violence that is done to others.

3 Speech, wisdom of discretion. It is safest to hold one's tongue. The lesson is that tight control over what one says prevents trouble. Here is a perfect antithesis on the subject of speech (for similar ideas see 10:10; 17:28; Jas 3:1–12; Sir 28:25; see also "Amenemope," ch. 3; 5:15, who advises to "sleep a night before speaking"). The old Arab proverb is appropriate: "Take heed that your tongue does not cut your throat" (O. Zockler, *Proverbs*, in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, ed. Charles Aiken [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.], 134).

4 Diligence, better than daydreaming. The fulfillment of dreams demands diligence. The contrast is between the "soul of the slothful" (*napšô 'āšēl*; "the sluggard," NIV) and the "soul of the diligent" (*nepeš ḥāruṣîm*; "the desires of the diligent," NIV). Rather than spend all day hoping for things they do not have, the diligent work toward realizing their

dreams. McKane, 458, writes, “Laziness is barren and encourages escapism; the illusory world of desire unrelated to attainment is a prison.”

5 *Conduct, hating falsehood or acting shamefully.* Here is another contrast between the moral conduct of the righteous and the wicked: the righteous hate what is “false” (*šeqer*), but the wicked act vilely and shamefully. The verbs *yab’îš* (“shame”) and *yahpîr* (“disgrace”) can be taken as a hendiadys: “spread the smell of scandal” (McKane, 460). For *bā’aš* with the nuance of “stink,” see Exodus 5:21 and Ecclesiastes 10:1 (see Note). Plaut, 152, comments: “Unhappily, the bad odor adheres not only to the liar but also to the one about whom he lies—especially when the lie is a big one.”

6 *Righteousness, brings security.* Security in life resides with righteousness. This little contrast shows that righteousness, like a fortress, protects the man of integrity (see 2:11; 4:6). This may work through divine intervention or natural causes. “Righteousness” (*ṣēdāqâ*) refers to that which conforms to God’s law and to order; so it would be natural to expect that the perfect walk (*tām-dārek*, lit., “the way of integrity”; “the man of integrity,” NIV) would be safe. By contrast, perverse and malicious activity (*riš’â*, “wickedness”) plunges one into sinful activity.

7 *Honesty, better than pretension.* People may not be what they seem to be. Some who are poor pretend to be rich, perhaps to save face; some who are rich pretend to be poor, perhaps to conceal wealth and avoid responsibilities. Although there are times when such pretending may not be wrong, the proverb suggests that people should be honest and unpretentious. An empty display or a concealing of means can come to no good. “Pretending to be rich” is like “pretending to be somebody” (cf. 12:9).

8 *Wealth, its disadvantages.* There are disadvantages to having possessions. On the surface the verse appears to be saying that only the rich are susceptible to kidnapping and robbery. The second line, however, says that the poor person does not heed rebuke—he does not have money to buy off oppressors (see McKane, 458). The rich person is exposed to legal and powerful assaults and uses his wealth as ransom. The poor person is free from blackmail and so ignores the attack and endures the consequences of difficulties.

9 *Prospect for life, endurance of the righteous.* The righteous can anticipate a long and prosperous life. The images of light and dark are used effectively; “light” represents life, joy, and prosperity, while “dark” signifies adversity and death. The verb *yîsmāḥ* carries the meaning “shines” rather than “rejoices” (KJV, NASB; see Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 180, who shows the relationship between “bright” and “joy” in Ugaritic). The figure of light may well be drawn from the enduring flame of the temple light.

10 *Wisdom, takes advice.* Those who are wise listen to advice rather than argue out of stubborn pride. The idea of “pride” (*zādôn*) here describes contempt for other opinions, a clash of competing and unyielding personalities (Kidner, 102). This kind of conceited person creates strife, enflames passions, and wounds feelings (McKane, 454). Only strife can come from him. But the wise are “those who take advice” (*nô ‘āṣîm*).

11 *Prosperity, honest investment.* Steady and wise investment produces prosperity. This is a warning against wild speculation. The image of “hand by hand” (“little by little,” NIV) stresses the diligent activity and the gradual growth of one’s investment. But if the riches come quickly through some unfounded means, one could lose them just as easily. There is some question whether the text should read “in haste” (quick scheme) or “in vanity” (meaning either “dishonest” [so NIV] or transitory; see Note). The MT reads the latter; it could simply mean that the gain comes from something transitory or nonexistent, which may imply dishonesty.

12 *Prospect for life, discouraging and encouraging.* It is invigorating to realize one’s hopes; to fail to do so can be discouraging or depressing (*maḥ^alâlēb*, “makes the heart sick”). This is a general saying applicable to believers and unbelievers alike. Plaut, 153, elaborates that people can bear frustration only so long; they must have encouragement to continue. Perhaps believers should make it part of their task to help others realize their hopes whenever possible.

13 *Instruction, reward for heeding.* Safety lies in obedience to proper “instruction.” The word *dābār* (lit., “word, thing”) signifies teaching in general, and the word *miṣwâ* the more forceful instruction, viz., “a command.” The use of these two terms carries religious significance, since they most often refer to Scripture. Kidner, 103, says that their use is a “reminder that revealed religion is presupposed in Proverbs.” The vivid

point made in *yēḥābel* (“will pay”; *BHS* suggests *yḥubbāl*, “will be broken by”) is that whoever despises the teaching will be treated as a debtor; he will pay for it if he offends against the law.

14 *Instruction, benefits for life.* The teaching of wisdom is life giving. The second line is the consequence of the first: not only does wisdom give life, it also turns one from the snares of death. “Snares of death” suggests that death is like a hunter; McKane, 455, compares the idea to the Ugaritic god of death, Mot, in his carrying people off to the realm of the departed. The image of the “fountain of life” is used of “the mouth of the righteous” in 10:11 and “the fear of the LORD” in 14:27.

15 *Discernment, brings favor.* Wisdom and intelligence add to one’s social esteem. *Šēkel-ṭôb* (“good understanding”) describes the capacity for good sense, sound judgment, and wise opinions. The second line is a bit problematic; it says that the way of treachery passes away. Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 181) supports the idea with the reading “is not lasting” (see Note).

16 *Knowledge, basis of prudent acts.* Actions either display wisdom or expose folly. The wise will study the facts and then make decisions. The “prudent” here is *‘ārûm*—one who knows the circumstances, dangers, and pitfalls. Such knowledge makes him cautious. Not so the fool! He will eventually make a fool of himself because it is his nature. McKane, 456, sees in *yiprōś* (“exposes”) the figure of a peddler displaying his wares: “he spreads out folly.”

17 *Servants, wicked or faithful.* The faithfulness of the messenger determines the success of the mission. Wisdom literature in the ancient world was frequently concerned with instructing ambassadors. Here the faithful envoy (*ṣîr mûnâ*; “trustworthy envoy” [NIV], an expression suggesting governmental service—see Isa 18:2; Jer 49:14) ensures success (*marpē*’, lit., “brings healing”). The “wicked messenger” falls into trouble, perhaps as a punishment. The RSV reads a causative *yappîl*, yielding “plunges men into trouble,” perhaps by betraying trusts.

18 *Discipline, its benefit.* Responding correctly to discipline can bring honor and success; this stands in contrast with poverty and shame. The key is “discipline” (*mûsār*) and “correction” (*tôkaḥat*). The point seems to refer to commercial success; control and caution bring results. The verse has a powerful little wordplay: “shame” is *qālôn* (lit., “lightness”) and “honor” is

y'kubbād (lit., “made heavy”). McKane, 456, observes that the difference is between the man of weight (power and wealth) and the man of straw (lowly esteemed and impoverished).

19 *Prospect for life, fulfilled.* The lines here are difficult. Toy, 274, suggests that each line has lost its parallel line. Perowne, 103, may offer the best summary for the difficult verse: “In spite of the sweetness of good desires accomplished, fools will not forsake evil to attain it” (cf. 13:12; 29:27). One can surely say that Proverbs teaches people to make their desires good so that fulfilling them is cause for joy.

20 *Associations, with wise or fools.* Proper company contributes to safety and growth. This verse advises association with the wise and not with fools. The wordplay in the second line stresses the power of association: “a companion [*rō ‘eh*] of fools suffers harm [*yērôa’*].” Several scholars have attempted to parallel the wordplay. A. Guillaume has, “he who associates with fools will be left a fool” (“A Note on the Roots ריע, ירע, and רעע in Hebrew,” *JTS* 15 [1964]: 294). Kidner, 104, cites Knox’s translation of the Vulgate: “Fool he ends that fool befriends” (for further teachings on associations, see 1:10; 2:12; 4:14; 16:29; 23:20; et al.). The point cannot be missed: Examine who is influencing you.

21 *Prosperity, reward of righteous.* Here is teaching on recompense in absolute terms. It is this idea that Job’s friends applied (incorrectly) to his situation. “Good” (*tôb*) is the general idea of “good fortune” or “prosperity” (so NIV); “evil” (*rā’â*) is likewise “misfortune” (so NIV) or “calamity.”

22 *Restitution, by divine intervention.* Divine justice determines the final disposition of one’s inheritance. In Israel the idea of bequeathing an inheritance was a sign of God’s blessing; blessings extended to the righteous and not to the sinners (see Ps 49:10, 17 for the idea of the wicked’s leaving their estates for others).

23 *Poor, susceptible to injustice.* Injustice can take away what hard labor produces. Plaut, 155, makes this application: There is no need for poverty; the earth yields enough if justice and decency prevail. The verse may also be saying that anything produced through unjust means will not endure. The lesson concerns the proper way to deal with produce, not the amount of one’s resources.

24 *Discipline, evidence of love.* Parental love is displayed in disciplining children responsibly. The powerful verbs “hates” and “loves” stress the

point—hating a son probably means, in effect, abandoning or rejecting him. Whybray, 80, cites an Egyptian text that says that “boys have their ears on their backsides; they listen when they are beaten” (for general biblical teaching on this issue, see Eph 6:4; Heb 12:5–11; see Pr 4:3–4, 10–11 for balanced tenderness). Too much lenience and too much harsh discipline are equally problematic. Balance comes when the child has room to grow while learning limits. The word *šihʾrô* has two possibilities here; it may be translated “is careful in disciplining” (so NIV) but may be better rendered “treats him early with discipline” (see Driver, “Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs,” 170).

25 *Contentment, reward for righteous.* Righteousness is rewarded by the satisfaction of one’s physical needs. This saying is another general one based on the law’s teachings about God’s blessings (Lev 26). It could also be implying that what the righteous acquire will prove satisfying to them because they are righteous.

NOTES

5 There is variety in the translations: The LXX has “is ashamed and without confidence”; the Targum has “is ashamed and put to the blush”; the Latin has “confounds and shall be confounded” (see further Toy, 263). The variations are due to the relation of *בָּאֵשׁ* (*bāʾaš*, “offensive to smell”) to *בוֹשׁ* (*bôš*, “shame”) and how these are interpreted. Some have assumed that *bāʾaš* is a byword of *bôš* and so render it “cause shame.” But the use of *bāʾaš* always carries the meaning either “cause to smell” or “cause oneself to smell (become a stench).” The translation should retain the sense “cause himself to be a stench” instead of “bring shame.”

9 The LXX adds, “Deceitful souls go astray in sins, but the righteousness are pitiful and merciful.”

11 The LXX, Vulgate, and RSV prefer “in haste” (changing *מְהֵבֵל*, *mēhebel*, “in vanity” to *מְבֹהָל*, *mʾbōhāl*). The idea of “vanity” does not make a very good parallel antithetical with the idea of gradual labor, thus no doubt leading to the reading “in haste,” which is easier.

13 The LXX adds, “A crafty son will have no good thing, but the affairs of a wise servant will be prosperous; and his path will be directed rightly.”

15 The word עֲתָנָה (*êṭān*) means either “enduring” or “filled with running water.” The idea of a stony valley that could not be cultivated is behind the translation “hard” (see Delitzsch, 280). The sense of “enduring” would give the idea that the unfaithful persist in treachery, even though this sense is otherwise positive. Driver suggests that אֵין (*ê*, “not”) was dropped before עֲתָנָה (*êṭān*; “hard,” NIV) by haplography and so the reading should be “is not lasting.” The LXX, Syriac, and Targum have “destruction, destroyed,” presumably reading *’êdām*.

23 The versions give evidence that the verse is difficult to understand. The LXX has “the righteous enjoy wealth many years, but the unjust will perish suddenly.” The Peshitta has “those who have no habitation waste wealth many years, and some waste it completely.” The Targum has “the great man devours the land of the poor, and some men are taken away unjustly.” The Latin reads “there is much food in the fresh land of the fathers, and for others it is collected without judgment.” Toy, 277–78, concludes that the Hebrew text is corrupt beyond emendation.

E. Proverbs 14:1–35

¹The wise woman builds her house,
but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers
down.

²He whose walk is upright fears the LORD,
but he whose ways are devious despises him.

³A fool’s talk brings a rod to his back,
but the lips of the wise protect them.

⁴Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty,
but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant
harvest.

⁵A truthful witness does not deceive,
but a false witness pours out lies.

⁶The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none,

but knowledge comes easily to the discerning.

⁷Stay away from a foolish man,
for you will not find knowledge on his lips.

⁸The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their
ways,
but the folly of fools is deception.

⁹Fools mock at making amends for sin,
but goodwill is found among the upright.

¹⁰Each heart knows its own bitterness,
and no one else can share its joy.

¹¹The house of the wicked will be destroyed,
but the tent of the upright will flourish.

¹²There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.

¹³Even in laughter the heart may ache,
and joy may end in grief.

¹⁴The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways,
and the good man rewarded for his.

¹⁵A simple man believes anything,
but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.

¹⁶A wise man fears the LORD and shuns evil,
but a fool is hotheaded and reckless.

¹⁷A quick-tempered man does foolish things,
and a crafty man is hated.

¹⁸The simple inherit folly,
but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.

¹⁹Evil men will bow down in the presence of the good,
and the wicked at the gates of the righteous.

²⁰The poor are shunned even by their neighbors,
but the rich have many friends.

²¹He who despises his neighbor sins,

but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.

²²Do not those who plot evil go astray?

But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness.

²³All hard work brings a profit,
but mere talk leads only to poverty.

²⁴The wealth of the wise is their crown,
but the folly of fools yields folly.

²⁵A truthful witness saves lives,
but a false witness is deceitful.

²⁶He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress,
and for his children it will be a refuge.

²⁷The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
turning a man from the snares of death.

²⁸A large population is a king's glory,
but without subjects a prince is ruined.

²⁹A patient man has great understanding,
but a quick-tempered man displays folly.

³⁰A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.

³¹He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

³²When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down,
but even in death the righteous have a refuge.

³³Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning
and even among fools she lets herself be known.

³⁴Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any people.

³⁵A king delights in a wise servant,
but a shameful servant incurs his wrath.

COMMENTARY

1 Prosperity, in the household. A woman's wisdom enables the household to thrive. The contrast is between wisdom and folly; wisdom builds the house, but folly tears it down (cf. 9:1a). The text has *ḥakmôt nāšîm*, which could mean "wise ones among women" or "wisdom of women." To see these ideas worked out, contrast the wise woman (31:10–31) with the foolish one (7:10–23). The *Midrash* uses Jochebed, the mother of Moses, as an example of wisdom, and Zeresh, Haman's wife, of foolishness (Plaut, 158). But of course it is wisdom, not the woman herself, that brings the prosperity.

2 Fear of the Lord, uprightness. Here is a contrast between those who fear the Lord and those who despise him—the distinction is in the conduct produced: uprightness versus perversion (see 2:15; 3:32; 10:19).

3 Speech, its effects. What people say bears greatly on how they are received as persons. The fool's conversation brings punishment. The text literally says that it is a "rod of pride" (*ḥōṭer ga'wâ*), with the genitive being objective (i.e., "a rod for pride"). This line may seem only to be saying that his language is proud; but the contrast of the second line clarifies that his talk harms him, that he brings trouble on himself, for the speech of the righteous brings safety. Many commentators have emended the text from *ga'wâ* to *gēwōh* (cf. *BHS*) to read "a rod for his back" (cf. NIV). This reading makes the punishment seem stronger.

4 Prosperity, in business. To be productive one must use the appropriate means. For the farmer, oxen are indispensable; so the wise farmer will see to it that his oxen are numerous and in good condition. Whybray, 83, connects the two lines by observing that the farmer has to balance the oxen's consumption of grain with the work they do.

5 Speech, true and false witnesses. This short saying explicates true and false testimony. A faithful witness does not lie (*y^ekazzēb*), but a false witness pours out lies (*k^ezābîm*). The saying addresses the age-old problem of false witnesses in court who hinder the quest for the truth (see 12:17; 16:10).

6 *Wisdom, those who acquire it.* Those who are serious and discerning acquire wisdom. The contrast is between the scorner (*lēṣ*) and the “discerning man” (*nābôn*). The scorner is intellectually arrogant; he lacks any serious interest in knowledge or religion. One can only guess that he pursues wisdom in a superficial way so that he might have the appearance of being wise. Plaut, 159, offers one application: those who want to read and learn will not be heard saying, “I have no time to read”; that statement is made only by those wishing to inflate their egos.

7 *Associations, unprofitable.* One cannot increase in knowledge by associating with a fool; nothing comes from nothing, as many can affirm. The first clause advises to go out from the presence of a fool. The second clause is problematic; it reads literally, “You did not know the lips of knowledge” (see Note). The verse teaches people to get away from fools, for no knowledge is gained from their speech. If you want to learn, seek out the wise.

8 *Conduct, careful consideration.* Biblical wisdom is practical theology. While the wise give careful consideration to their conduct, the way of the fool is “deception.” The word *mirmâ* (GK 5327) certainly means “deception,” but some question whether it can mean “self-deception” (see McKane, 466; D. Winton Thomas, “Textual and Philological Notes,” 286). The parallelism of this line favors that interpretation, but there is little support elsewhere for it, as the word usually means craft practiced on others (see Toy, 285). If the line is saying that the fool is deceitful, then there is only a loose antithesis.

9 *Reparation.* Folly offends, but wisdom makes amends. This verse is difficult, but it concerns offending others. The first line has “fools mock reparation [*ʾāšām*]”; but the verb “mock” (*yālîṣ*) is singular and the subject “fools” (*ʿwilîm*) is plural. This had led to the suggested reading, “guilty/guilt offering mocks fools” (Toy, 287, offers Isa 1:14 and Am 5:22 as examples). The ancient versions are not much help here; the LXX has something like “houses of transgressors will owe purification.” The parallelism suggests the idea that fools ridicule reparation, whereas the upright show goodwill.

10 *Emotions, personal.* There are joys and sorrows that cannot be shared. People in their deepest emotional feelings of “bitterness” (*mārâ*) or “joy”

(*śimḥâ*) alone can understand those feelings. The proverb forewarns against any unnatural or forced attempts to express empathy.

11 Prosperity, ensured. Personal integrity ensures domestic stability and prosperity. The contrast is a simple one and the sentiment general. For comparison see 12:7 and Job 18:15.

12 Worldliness, its destruction. Vice is a course of action that leads to ruin. One should be careful that any evil activity that seems successful and safe could take any number of turns to destruction (the expression is in the plural—“roads of death”). This proverb recalls the ways of the adulterous woman in chs. 1–9. The first half of the verse does not state that the way that seems right is a vice, but the second half clarifies that meaning. The image used is of a traveler on a straight road; it seems safe, but it is fatal, for the destination is wrong. “Death” signifies mortal ruin (see 7:27; 16:25; also Mt 7:13–14). The LXX adds “Hades,” but the verse seems to be concerned with this life’s events. The issue, then, is how deceptive evil is. It may promise and deliver happiness, power, and the good life, but it cannot sustain what it gives.

13 Emotions, mixed. Life is filled with bittersweet things; no joy is completely free of grief. At first reading this proverb sounds pessimistic. The point must be the alternating emotions of life. This verse may also be hinting that in some superficial joyfulness there is underlying pain (*yik ’ab*; “ache,” NIV) and that once the joyfulness leaves, the “grief” (*tûgâ*) is still present.

14 Retribution, present in deeds. This saying reminds the reader that retribution is at work: one’s deeds determine the rewards. The faithless (*sûg lēb*) are those whose heart turns aside; they will partake of their own evil ways (*yiśba’*, “be satisfied”; “be fully repaid,” NIV). The good person will find satisfaction from his ways; his deeds are rewarding.

15 Discernment, opposite of gullibility. Wisdom prevents gullibility. This verse contrasts the simpleton (*petî*) with the prudent (*‘ārûm*), i.e., the youth who is untrained intellectually and morally contrasted with the wise person who has the ability to make critical discriminations. The saying shows that the *petî* is gullible; he believes every word, probably because he hears what he wants to hear. The prudent person, however, discerns every step.

16 Evil, cautious avoidance. Wise people are cautious and not reckless. The first line of the verse simply says that “a wise man fears and turns from

evil.” Since the holy name is not used, the verse probably does not mean that he fears the Lord but fears the consequences of his actions; the wise person is thus cautious (Greenstone, 153). By contrast, the fool is reckless, self-assured, and overconfident (as McKane, 465, defines the words); he is arrogantly confident, when he of all types of people should be cautious.

17 Character traits, distasteful. Two character traits that are distasteful to others are a quick temper and craftiness (*mʿzimmâ*). The “crafty man” may be the counterpart of the quick-tempered person, although Toy, 292, thinks the expression is antithetical and translates it “but a wise man endures” (cf. Note). The quick-tempered person acts foolishly and loses people’s respect, but the malicious plotter is hated.

18 Knowledge, evidence of prudence. The kind of honor one receives in life is based on the amount of wisdom used. The contrast is between the simple who “inherit” (*nāḥʾlû*) folly and the prudent who are crowned with knowledge. The meaning of *kātar* (“crowned”) is a little difficult; it may not mean “are crowned” or “crown themselves” but “encircle” or “embrace.” For the verb “inherit,” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 181) proposes “are adorned” (from *ḥālâ*).

19 Rewards, victory over the wicked. Ultimately the wicked will acknowledge and serve the righteous. The figure used here is of a conquered people kneeling before their victors awaiting their commands. Greenstone, 154, suggests the expression “at the gates” may also imply that they are begging for favors. While this proverb has its primary focus on triumphs in this life, one cannot help but think of the ultimate fulfillment of the thought in Philippians 2:10.

20 Wealth, its popularity. Possessions determine popularity. This is just a statement of the reality of life. The poor are avoided and shunned (*yiśśānē*’, lit., “hated”) as useless by their neighbors, but “the lovers of the rich are many” (lit. trans.).

21 Neighbors, proper treatment of. One cannot sin against a neighbor and hope to enjoy God’s blessings. The line contrasts the sin of despising (*bāz*) a neighbor with showing favor to the needy. In this line the neighbor is assumed to be poor or at least in need. Despising (*bāzâ*) means treating with contempt, discarding one as worthless. To ignore a neighbor in this coldhearted fashion is just as much a sin as showing favor to the poor is an act of righteousness.

22 *Conduct, good and evil.* One's moral behavior is usually the result of planning. The image bound up in *ḥāraš* is that of an artisan's skill. The contrast is between "those who plot evil" (*ḥōršê rā'*) and "those who plan good" (*ḥōršê ṭōb*). The result of the first is going astray and of the second showing faithful love ("show love and faithfulness," NIV margin; "mercy and truth" [lit. trans.] usually describe the Lord's intervention, but here they refer to the faithful and kind dealings of the righteous).

23 *Diligence, profitable.* Profits come from hard work and not idle talk. The "hard work" here is *ʿešeb* (lit., "painful toil"), a term introduced in Genesis 3:19. The empty talk (lit., "words of lips") leads to poverty (see Job 11:2; 15:3; Isa 36:5). People should be more afraid of idle talk than of hard work. Or, to put it another way, don't just talk about it—do it!

24 *Wealth, a benefit for the wise.* Wisdom has its own rewards. This verse is difficult. The first line reads (lit.) "the crown of the wise is their riches." Toy, 296, suggests it means that wealth is an ornament to those who use it well. The second line seems to be saying that fools only have their folly. Consequently many follow the *BHS*'s proposal to read *w^liwyyat* instead of *ʿiwwelet* to form a better parallel with the first half: "the wealth of fools is their folly" (McKane, 466). The point would be that the fool can only expect greater exposure of his folly, rather than merely saying that his folly is his folly.

25 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* Telling the truth in court effects swift justice in the outcome of a trial. The person who tells the truth "saves lives"; he is a true witness (*ʿēd ʾemet*). This person will deliver someone else from death based on a false charge by coming forward with the truth. A false testimony, however, deceives the court and brings ruin. To make this point clearer, several commentators have changed *mirmâ* ("deceit") to *m^orammeh* ("destroys"), though this change is not necessary. The point stands that nothing good is gained by perjury. Moreover, as Kidner, 110, says, anyone who will trim the facts for you is just as likely to do it against you.

26 *Fear of the Lord, security.* The reverential fear of the Lord leads to security. The image is of a "secure fortress" (*mibṭaḥ-ʿōz*) for the God-fearer and his children. The "fear" finds expression in obedience to the law, with all of its rewards and punishments, and this obedience ensures safety. The children mentioned here are the God-fearer's children, not worshipers in

general. Exodus 20:5–6 declares that children will reap the benefits of righteous parents if they also love the Lord; parents who fear the Lord will be a refuge for their children.

27 *Fear of the Lord, life.* Reverential fear of the Lord brings life. This line is similar to 13:14, except that “fear of the LORD” replaces “the teaching of the wise.”

28 *Power, political.* A prince’s power varies with the size of his empire. This statement is generally true of empires; from a human viewpoint political power is based on the number of people in the party.

29 *Patience, opposite of quick temper.* Patience is the evidence of understanding. The one who is patient has “great understanding”; the one who has a quick temper (*q̣̣̣sar-rûah*; lit., “hasty of spirit”) exalts folly, i.e., he brings it to a full measure. So one should cultivate understanding.

30 *Contentment, its healthy benefit.* It is healthy to find contentment, for envy brings constant turmoil. Literally the verse says, “the life of the flesh [*ḥayyê ḅ̣̣sārîm*] is a heart of healing [*lēb marpē*].” The point is that a healthy spirit is the life of the body; it soothes. But envy brings pain and problems. The word *qin’â* (“envy”; GK 7863) describes passionate zeal, a violent excitement that is never satisfied. One who is “consumed with envy” has no tranquility.

31 *Poor, treatment of.* How people treat the poor displays their faith in the Creator. Here is the doctrine of the creation in its practical outworking. Anyone who oppresses (*’ōšēq*) the poor shows contempt for his Maker, for that poor person also is the image of God. Showing favor (*ḥōnēn*) to the poor honors God because God has commanded this action (see Mt 25:31–46; cf. Pr 14:21; 17:5; 19:17; see also Emerton, 202–22, for a meaning of *’šq* as “slander”).

32 *Confidence, in the midst of calamity.* Those who trust and obey the Lord have a sense of security in catastrophe. The contrast is with the wicked, who are cast down in the time of calamity; the righteous have a “refuge” (*ḥōseh*; GK 2879) even in death. So the idea is that the righteous have hope for just retribution. A problem often raised is that nowhere in Proverbs is hope for immortality found; rather, death is seen as a misfortune. Nevertheless, this verse may be a shadowy forerunner of that truth.

33 *Wisdom, its possessor.* The greatest amount of wisdom resides with those who have discernment. The second colon is a little difficult. It is normally translated as in the NIV: “even among fools she lets herself be known.” This may be ironic or sarcastic: the fool, anxious to appear wise, blurts out what he thinks is wisdom but in the process turns it to folly. The LXX negates the clause: “not known in fools.” Thomas connects the verb to the Arabic root *wd* ‘ and translates it “in fools it is suppressed” (“The Root *yd* ‘ in Hebrew,” *JTS* 35 [1934]: 302–3).

34 *Righteousness, national.* The prosperity and the power of a nation depend on its righteousness. The verb “exalt” (*rûm*) means that the people’s condition in that nation is elevated. Widespread sin, however, is a disgrace.

35 *Servants, clever and incompetent.* A servant’s competence affects a king’s attitude toward him. The wise servant is a delight, for he is the skillful, clever one (*maškil*); but the incompetent one (*mēbîš*; “shameful,” NIV) is the bungler who botches the king’s business and whose indiscretions and incapacity expose his master to scandal and criticism (McKane, 470).

NOTES

7 The MT has “you did not know lips of knowledge.” The Targum freely interprets this as “for there is no knowledge on his lips.” The LXX has several variations of the line, including “wise lips are weapons of discretion.” Toy, 285, wants to emend to “for his lips do not utter knowledge,” as in 15:7. But the Hebrew line makes sense as it is, even though the construction (“know lips”) is not found elsewhere.

17 The LXX reads “endures” (סָבַר, *yîśśā*) rather than “is hated” (סָנֵא, *yîśśānē*). This change seems to have arisen on the assumption that a contrast was needed; in fact, the LXX often changes the text to achieve a desired antithesis (see further Waltke, 2:580). The LXX took *’îš m’zimmâ* in a positive sense and then changed the verb to match: “a thoughtful person endures.” The word has a positive sense, but not when it is an attributive genitive (see 12:2). The Greek can be explained away in favor of the MT’s “a crafty man is hated.”

24 Commentators find both parts of the verse improbable, even though they make good sense as they appear in the Hebrew. Toy, 296, wishes to

change the first colon to read, “The crown of the wise is their wisdom,” because he finds the idea in the MT farfetched. The second line, following the LXX, makes the change from folly to “wreath.” For additional material on the Hebrew word, see M. Rotenberg, “The Meaning of *’iwwelet* in Proverbs,” *Leshônênu* 25 (1960/61): 201.

32 The LXX has “in his piety” or “integrity,” as though from *בְּתוֹמוֹ* (*b’tûmmô*), in place of “in his death,” which is from *בְּמוֹתוֹ* (*b’môtô*). This variant reading involves a metathesis: *bmtw* > *btmw*. The LXX then says that the one who relies on his own piety is a righteous man. McKane, 475, prefers this reading because it avoids having any reference to the afterlife or immortality. But as Waltke, 2:583, points out, Proverbs teaches faith in the Lord, not in one’s own piety.

F. Proverbs 15:1–29

- ¹A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.
- ²The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.
- ³The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.
- ⁴The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life,
but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
- ⁵A fool spurns his father’s discipline,
but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
- ⁶The house of the righteous contains great treasure,
but the income of the wicked brings them trouble.
- ⁷The lips of the wise spread knowledge;
not so the hearts of fools.
- ⁸The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked,
but the prayer of the upright pleases him.

- ⁹The LORD detests the way of the wicked
but he loves those who pursue righteousness.
- ¹⁰Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path;
he who hates correction will die.
- ¹¹Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD—
how much more the hearts of men!
- ¹²A mocker resents correction;
he will not consult the wise.
- ¹³A happy heart makes the face cheerful,
but heartache crushes the spirit.
- ¹⁴The discerning heart seeks knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.
- ¹⁵All the days of the oppressed are wretched,
but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.
- ¹⁶Better a little with the fear of the LORD
than great wealth with turmoil.
- ¹⁷Better a meal of vegetables where there is love
than a fattened calf with hatred.
- ¹⁸A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension,
but a patient man calms a quarrel.
- ¹⁹The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns,
but the path of the upright is a highway.
- ²⁰A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish man despises his mother.
- ²¹Folly delights a man who lacks judgment,
but a man of understanding keeps a straight course.
- ²²Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed.
- ²³A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—
and how good is a timely word!
- ²⁴The path of life leads upward for the wise

to keep him from going down to the grave.
²⁵The LORD tears down the proud man's house
 but he keeps the widow's boundaries intact.
²⁶The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked,
 but those of the pure are pleasing to him.
²⁷A greedy man brings trouble to his family,
 but he who hates bribes will live.
²⁸The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,
 but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.
²⁹The LORD is far from the wicked
 but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

COMMENTARY

1 *Speech, conciliatory.* The way one answers another person will have an effect on the response. This antithetical proverb stresses that it is wise to use a gentle answer to turn away wrath. More than merely gentle or soft, the idea seems to be conciliatory, i.e., an answer that restores good temper and reasonableness (McKane, 477). To use a “harsh” (*eṣeb*) word is to cause pain (same Hebrew word) and bring an angry response. The exchange between David and Nabal in 1 Samuel 25 illustrates this result; Gideon in Judges 8:1–3 gives a classic example of the soft answer that brings peace, whereas Jephthah illustrates the harsh answer that leads to war (Jdg 12:1–6; see *b. Ber.* 17a.)

2 *Speech, wise or foolish.* How wise people are can often be determined by what they say; knowledge comes from the wise and folly from fools, according to this contrast. The verb *têṭîb* (GK 3512) of the first colon is a little difficult. Although translated “commends,” the Hebrew word is literally “makes good” or “treats in a good or excellent way” (Toy, 303). M. Dahood (*Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* [Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 133; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963], 32ff.), however, suggests a change to *yṭp*, a cognate of *nṭp* (“drip”), and offers the reading, “tongues of the sages drip with knowledge.”

3 Divine omniscience. The Lord knows everyone completely. The thought is continuous in the two lines of this verse; it uses anthropomorphic language to stress God's exacting knowledge. But as Plaut, 169, says, this verse is not intended as a statement of theology but an incentive for conduct. Of course, for the righteous divine omniscience is a great comfort (see also 2Ch 16:9; Ps 11:4; Heb 4:13, which show that God's purpose in this activity is salvific).

4 Speech, helpful or harmful. What a person says can bring either healing or harm. The teaching here affirms that healing words bring life to the spirit but perverse words crush the spirit. The Greek has *iasis* for *marpē*, thus giving the idea of therapy. This thought fits well with the image of the tree of life, which signifies a source of vitality to others (see McKane, 483). The contrast is the perverse, twisted, or "deceitful" (*selep*) words that crush the spirit (cf. Isa 65:14).

5 Discipline, wisely heeded. How well one responds to discipline reveals character. The contrast here is between the fool who spurns it and the prudent individual who heeds it. The latter shows good sense (see also v.20; 13:1, 18).

6 Reward, for righteousness. Prosperity is one reward for righteousness. This verse contrasts great treasure with the prospects of the wicked. The Hebrew of the second line says that the income of the wicked is "a thing troubled" (*ne'kāret*). The word "trouble" (*ākar*) is usually calamity that one man brings on another (as illustrated by Achan, whose name [*ākān*] seems to reflect the word in 1Ch 2:7 [see NIV margin]). The LXX for this verse, however, has no reference to wealth but talks about amassing righteousness.

7 Speech, spreading knowledge. Wise people will spread knowledge when they speak; their words are profitable. This verse is concerned with teaching, but the verb of the first clause ("spread") does not fit the idea of the parallel clause, for a mind does not scatter. So the idea of the second colon simply should be interpreted to mean that the fool has no comprehension of knowledge (see Note).

8 Worship, acceptable and unacceptable. The spiritual condition of the worshiper will determine the acceptability of the worship. Here, as well as throughout the Bible, sacrifices from wicked people are unacceptable because they are insincere and blasphemous (cf. v.29; 21:3, 27; 28:9; et al.; see also 1Sa 15:22; Ps 40:6–8; Isa 1:10–17). But prayer from the righteous

pleases God. Greenstone, 162, observes that if God accepts the prayers of the righteous, he will accept their sacrifices. Sacrifice is an outward ritual and easily performed by the wicked, but prayer is a private and inward act and not usually fabricated by unbelievers.

9 *Conduct, acceptable to God.* God is pleased with the righteous. Parallel to the preceding verse, this verse uses *tô* ^ʿ*bat* (“detests, abominates”) to describe the life of the wicked, in contrast to *ye*^ʿ*hāb* (“loves”), which describes God’s approval of the righteous. The refinements of this verse should be carefully noted: God hates *the way* of the wicked, i.e., the sin but not the sinner; and God loves those *who follow after* righteousness (the Piel signifying persistent pursuit). Plaut, 170, says, “He who loves God will be moved to an active, persistent, and even dangerous search for justice.”

10 *Discipline, its necessity.* Discipline must be used for those who go astray, but in this discipline they may die prematurely. The “way” (*ʿōrah*; “path,” NIV) here is the life of righteousness stressed throughout the book. The relationship of the two lines is probably synonymous; the “stern discipline” (*mûsār rā*^ʿ) of the first line is parallel to the death (*yāmût*) in the second. The point of the verse is that it is one thing to sin and find forgiveness but another altogether to refuse correction and receive such stern discipline (see also Ro 8:13).

11 *Divine omniscience.* The Lord knows every intent of every individual. The development of thought in these two lines is an argument from the lesser to the greater (“how much more”). Sheol (*š*^ʿ*ôl*) and Abaddon (*ʿ*^a*baddôn*) represent the remote underworld and all the mighty powers that reside there (see 27:20; Job 26:6; Ps 139:8; Am 9:2; Rev 9:11). If that remote region with its inhabitants is open before the Lord (*neged yhwh*, which signifies irresistible omniscience), how much more the hearts of people! The word “hearts” in this verse is a metonymy for motives and thoughts (see Ps 44:21).

12 *Discipline, rejected.* The scoffer resists all efforts to reform him. This individual is fixed in his ways and will not change to live according to the wise (lit., he will not “walk with” the wise). The MT has “to the wise” (*el-ḥ*^a*kāmîm*), but the LXX has “with.” If “to” is correct, it means that he does not seek their advice. For an illustration see the account of Ahab and Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:8.

13 *Emotions, joy and sorrow.* The emotional condition of a person has an obvious effect on body and soul. This verse uses an antithesis. Joy is inspiring and is expressed by a cheerful face, but “heartache” is depressing, i.e., “crushes the spirit.” The words used here stress the pain and the depression with a note of despair. Toy, 308, observes that the implication is also that a broken spirit is expressed by a sad face and that a cheerful face shows a courageous spirit (see also 17:22; 18:14; Isa 66:2). See Genesis 40:6 for a good illustration.

14 *Knowledge, sought by the discerning.* Those who are wise and discerning desire knowledge. This verse is similar to v.7; throughout the book knowledge is linked with righteousness, and ignorance goes with sinfulness. The idea of the second colon, “feeds on folly” (*yir ‘eh ’iwwelet*), does not make a strong parallel to the verb “seeks” of the first half (see Note). But the poetic image of feeding signifies the acquisition of folly.

15 *Emotions, joy and sorrow.* Life can be delightful or difficult, depending on one’s circumstances and disposition. The contrast is between the “oppressed” (*‘ānî*) and the “cheerful heart” (*ṭôb-lēb*). The parallelism of the second line suggests that the *‘ānî* are those who are inwardly oppressed. Obviously the proverb recommends the cheerful frame of mind, for the image of the feast signifies enjoyment of life’s offerings. This is far better than the evil (*rā’îm*; “wretched,” NIV) days (see Ru 1:20–21; Hab 3:17–18).

16–17 *Wealth, spiritual better than physical.* These two verses stress that spiritual things are far better than material wealth. In v.16 the fear of the Lord brings more satisfaction than wealth with discontentment or, as Moffat has it, wealth with worry (Kidner, 115). “Turmoil” (*mehûmâ*) is anxiety; the reverential fear of the Lord alleviates such anxiety, for it causes contentment and tranquility, the opposite of “turmoil.” Not all wealth has this disadvantage, but when it does, it is undesirable. The tone of the proverb is caught in *m. ’Abot* 2:7: “The more possessions, the more anxiety.”

Verse 17 contrasts *’ahbâ* (“love”) with *śin’â* (“hatred”) and affirms that happy, loving relationships are more desirable than a great meal where there is hatred. Again the teaching concerns the negative side of wealth; all too often wealth replaces love in a family. The ideal is to have a loving family, friends, and great food; short of that, a humble meal with love is preferable.

18 *Patience, its affect on strife.* It takes great patience and calmness to maintain peaceful relationships. The contrast is with the “hot-tempered man” (*ʿîš ḥēmâ*) who stirs up dissension and the person who is “long or slow of anger” (*ʿerek ʿappayim*; i.e., “patient”). McKane, 482, seeing here a reference to litigiousness, writes: “There is the kind of person who thrives on acrimony and who seeks a pretext to transform every difference or disagreement into a bitter legal contest, and there is his opposite who will do everything in his power to minimize contention and to obviate the acerbities of litigation” (see also 14:29; 15:1).

19 *Diligence, its progress.* Diligence normally determines progress in life. This proverb says that the slothful person seems to find obstacles along the way—his way is like a hedge of thorns (*kimśukat ḥādeq*; “blocked with thorns,” NIV; the LXX has “strewn with thorns”; see Hos 2:6). The way of the upright is like a well-made road, a “highway” (*s^lulâ*); they have no reason to detour or swerve. For parallelism of the slothful and upright, see Proverbs 28:19 (cf. 6:10; 10:26).

20 *Wisdom, its affect on others.* Wise children affect their parents’ joy (see 10:1, which is almost the same, except that “despises” replaces “is a source of anxiety”). According to Kidner, 116, the contribution of this verse is that it describes the callousness of the one who inflicts grief on his mother.

21 *Conduct, straight course.* A valuable lifestyle must be maintained by wise decisions. The proverb shows the importance of good judgment and “understanding” (*ʿbûnâ*, GK 9312). The fool follows any whim of fancy, and it is a delight to him because he lacks “judgment” to see the folly in it. The one who has insight follows in a “straight course.” So once again, as Toy, 312, reminds us, knowledge is the foundation of character.

22 *Speech, value of advice.* The success of plans requires using good advice (see 11:14). This general observation is of value on the personal and national level.

23 *Speech, appropriate.* It is most satisfying to be able to give timely and fitting advice. The parallelism is synonymous. The topic concerns the well thought-out and appropriate reply. To say the right thing at the right time is satisfying; it requires knowledge and wisdom.

24 *Conduct, beneficial for life.* A life of wisdom preserves life. The first colon reads, “The way of life is upward to the wise man.” This idea is

clarified by the second clause, that wise ways prevent him from going down to š'ôl (cf. NIV margin). There is some disagreement over the meaning of “upward” (*l'ma'lâ*). The verse is generally taken to mean that “upward” is a reference to this physical life and “going down to the Sheol” is a reference to physical death, viz., “the grave,” because the idea of immortality is not clearly revealed in Proverbs. The point here then is that the righteous expect to live long and healthy lives (2:20–22; 3:18; 5:6; 10:17; 13:14). McKane argues that “upward” does not fit this worldly pattern of conduct and that it is only intelligible if taken as a reference to immortality (see Note). We may at least say that the language anticipates what later Scriptures teach about the ultimate destination of the way of life.

25 *Justice, divine.* The Lord administers his justice through righteousness. He brings down the proud but protects the needy. Scripture amply confirms that the Lord champions the cause of the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the needy. These people were often the prey of the proud, who took their lands and houses (cf. 1Ki 21 about Naboth; cf. also Pr 16:19; Isa 5:8–10).

26 *Plans, pleasing to God.* The Lord is pleased with plans that have righteous intentions. The intentions or “thoughts of the wicked” are thoughts that will harm other people; these are an abomination to the Lord. The contrasting clause is difficult, the MT having *ṭ'hōrîm 'imrê-nō 'am* (“pleasant words are pure”). Usually “to him” is inserted to make the connection (see Note). The NIV phrases the clause “but those of the pure are pleasing to him.”

27 *Contentment, opposite of greed.* Those who are secure in their circumstances will not succumb to the evil devices of greed. The “greedy man” is the *bôṣēa' bāṣa'*, the one who wants a big cut, who is in a hurry to get rich, and who is not particular how it happens (McKane, 485). This verse is actually a warning against taking bribes. *Mattānōt* (lit., “gifts”) could be innocent enough, but they may alter one’s values (Kidner, 117). So hating bribes is the safest path to follow. For an example of avoiding this danger, see Genesis 14:22–24, where Abram refused to take anything for himself. See also the story of Elisha’s refusal of Naaman’s gift and Gehazi’s ruinous greed for it (2Ki 5:16, 20, 27).

28 *Speech, carefully planned.* Those who are wise are cautious in how they answer, in contrast to the wicked who blurt out vicious things. The text

says literally that the mind of the righteous “weighs” (*yehgeh*, “considers, muses, meditates, studies”) how to answer. The advice is to say fewer but better things. The LXX in the first colon has “the hearts of the righteous meditate faithfulness.” What the wicked say is painfully “wicked” (*rā’ôt*; “evil,” NIV).

29 *Prayer, God’s response to.* God’s response to prayer is determined by the righteousness of the one who prays. The wicked keep distance from him, so he is “far” (*rāḥôq*) from them—an idea that signifies he is inaccessible or deaf to their appeal (cf. Ps 22). Of course, a prayer of repentance by the wicked is the exception, for by it they become the righteous (Toy, 316).

NOTES

7 Because the idea of *יָרִי* (*ȳzārû*, “spread, scatter”) does not work with both lines of the verse, Toy, 305, suggests, with the support of the LXX, the verb *יִצְרֵ* (*yiṣṣrû*, “preserve,” from *נָצַר*, *nāṣar*). The Greek evidence (Symm.) for this, however, is not strong. For the second line the LXX has “hearts of fools are not safe,” apparently from taking *לֹא־כֵן* (*lō-kēn*, “not so”) as “unstable.” McKane, 478, prefers the interpretation of “warped” or “perverse.”

14 D. Winton Thomas (“Textual and Philological Notes,” 285), following the reading in the LXX, suggests that instead of *יִרְעֶה* (*yir ‘eh*, “feeds”) we read *יִדְעֶה* (*id ‘eh*), with the one slight change from *resh* to *dalet* (not unusual). This word would then be connected to the Arabic *da‘a* (“sought, demanded”) to form a better parallel. McKane, 478, explains that it would mean that the fool seeks out the companionship of folly.

24 The translations “upward” and “downward” are not found in the LXX (but they are in the Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate). McKane, 479–80, favors following the LXX and deleting them to avoid the ideas of blessed immortality and afterlife punishment. He argues that these words were added afterward when the idea of immortality became prominent. But the LXX itself includes in this verse the idea of being saved from Hades (see further Waltke, 1:630).

26 The LXX has “the sayings of the pure are held in honor.” The Vulgate has “pure speech will be confirmed by him as very beautiful.”

IV. THE FIRST COLLECTION OF SOLOMONIC PROVERBS, PART II (15:30–22:16)

OVERVIEW

Those who make a careful study of the Hebrew words and the meanings of the lines propose a second collection of Solomonic proverbs in chs. 16 through 22, with the last few verses of ch. 15 serving as an introduction. While the average Bible reader may not be able to see clear distinctions in the sections of this part, some commentators lay them out as follows: 15:30–16:15 include the relationships between people, the king, and the Lord; 16:16–30 contrasts wise and foolish speech; 16:31–17:6 focuses on age; 17:1–28 is about fools; 18:1–21 contrasts the speech of fools versus the speech of the wise; 18:22–19:23 concerns wealth and wisdom in the court and the home; 19:24–20:11 is about fools and punishment; 20:12–19 concerns speech and business; 20:20–28 speaks of justice through the king; 20:29–21:31 is predominantly about righteousness and justice; and 22:1–16 concerns wealth and moral instruction.

A. Relationships between People, the King, and the Lord (15:30–16:15)

³⁰A cheerful look brings joy to the heart,
and good news gives health to the bones.

³¹He who listens to a life-giving rebuke
will be at home among the wise.

³²He who ignores discipline despises himself,
but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.

³³The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom,
and humility comes before honor.

^{16:1}To man belong the plans of the heart,
but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.

- ²All a man's ways seem innocent to him,
but motives are weighed by the LORD.
- ³Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and your plans will succeed.
- ⁴The LORD works out everything for his own ends—
even the wicked for a day of disaster.
- ⁵The LORD detests all the proud of heart.
Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.
- ⁶Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.
- ⁷When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD,
he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.
- ⁸Better a little with righteousness
than much gain with injustice.
- ⁹In his heart a man plans his course,
but the LORD determines his steps.
- ¹⁰The lips of a king speak as an oracle,
and his mouth should not betray justice.
- ¹¹Honest scales and balances are from the LORD;
all the weights in the bag are of his making.
- ¹²Kings detest wrongdoing,
for a throne is established through righteousness.
- ¹³Kings take pleasure in honest lips;
they value a man who speaks the truth.
- ¹⁴A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
but a wise man will appease it.
- ¹⁵When a king's face brightens, it means life;
his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.

COMMENTARY

30 *Speech, good news.* It is uplifting to hear good news. These two lines form a synonymous parallel with slight variation. The *m^eôr-ênayim* (lit., “light of the eyes”; “cheerful look,” NIV) may indicate the gleam in the eyes of one who tells good news, as the parallel second clause suggests (see Note). The idea of “health to the bones” comes from a Hebrew expression that is literally “makes the bones fat,” a symbol of health and prosperity (see also 17:22; 25:25; Ge 45:27–28; Isa 52:7–8).

31 *Character traits, teachable.* A teachable person will become wise. This proverb forms a single sentence; it shows how the one who listens to reproof that is beneficial to life will be at home with the wise.

32 *Discipline, its benefit.* Accepting discipline is important to personal development. The person who despises discipline slights or “despises himself” (*mô ’ēs napšô* means that he rejects himself as though he were of little value and so fails to grow). One must acquire understanding, especially about oneself, to grow spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

33 *Fear of the Lord, wisdom and honor.* Humble submission in faith to the Lord brings wisdom and honor. The exact connection between the clauses is difficult. The idea of the first clause is similar to 1:7 and 9:10. Here it may mean that “the discipline of wisdom [teaches] the fear of the LORD,” just as easily as the reverse, since the sentence is without a finite verb. The second clause has its contrast in 18:12, where pride leads to destruction; here humility brings honor. See also 22:4, where fear and humility are connected.

16:1 *Speech, divine enablement.* God sovereignly enables people to put their thoughts into words. The verse is in the form of a contrast: “the plans of the heart” (*ma’arkê-lēb*) and the “reply of the tongue” (*ma^anēh lāšôn*) are contrasted by the prepositions “belong” and “from.” The verse can be taken in one of two ways: (1) the thoughts and the speech are the same, or (2) the speech differs from what the person had intended to say. The second view fits the contrast better. This proverb, then, is actually giving the reader a glimpse of how God confounds even the wise. The word “reply” (*ma^anēh*; GK 5101) in the book seems to refer to a verbal answer to another person (15:1, 23; Job 32:3, 5); so when someone is trying to speak in front of others, the Lord directs the words according to his sovereign will.

2 Divine omniscience. The Lord alone can evaluate our behavior because he knows our motives. The proverb is arranged in antithetical parallelism to express the only true evaluation of moral behavior. People may seem “innocent” (*zak*) in their own estimation, but self-deception and rationalization make this estimation unreliable. The word *zak* (GK 2341) is used for pure oils, undiluted liquids; here it signifies unmixed actions. The proverb suggests that such a premature opinion of oneself is naive at best and smug at the worst.

The person may be far from pure when the Lord weighs the motives (*tōkēn rūḥôt*). The figure of “weighing” signifies evaluation (see Ex 5:8 [“require”]; 1Sa 2:3; Pr 21:2; 24:12; cf. 1Sa 16:7). There may be a faint allusion to the Egyptian belief of weighing the heart after death to determine righteousness. The word *rūḥôt* is a metonymy for the motives, as in Proverbs 21:2 and 24:12 (where it is parallel to “heart”). The conclusion of the matter is that we deceive ourselves so easily and therefore cannot fully evaluate ourselves. God, by his Spirit and through his Word, provides the penetrating evaluation.

3 Plans, committed to God. For our plans to succeed, we must depend on the Lord. This proverb of instruction includes the result for compliance. The verb “commit” is literally “roll” (*gōl*, from *gālal*, though the LXX and Targum assume *gal*, “reveal”). The figure of rolling, as in rolling one’s burdens onto the Lord, is found also in Psalms 22:8[9]; 37:5; 55:22. It portrays complete dependence on God. This is accomplished with a spirit of humility and by means of a diligent season of prayer, but the plan also must have God’s approval.

The syntax of the second clause shows that there is subordination: the *waw* on *yikkōnû*, coming after the imperative of the first clause, expresses that this clause states the purpose or result of the first. People should commit their plans to the Lord so that he may establish them. Not every plan we have is pleasing to him; but for those that are, this verse is a great comfort. Greenstone, 172, says, “True faith relieves much anxiety and smoothens many perplexities.”

4 Retribution, divine. God in his sovereignty ensures that everything in life receives its appropriate retribution. On the surface the verse strikes an immediate impression for God’s sovereignty, in that all God’s acts are part of his plan. Kidner, 118, says that ultimately there are no loose ends in

God's world. Since the wicked are punished in the end, this proverb adds that that punishment is his plan for them. Whybray, 93–94, suggests this saying could have sprung up in answer to the question, “Why did God create the wicked?”

The line of poetry is arranged with synthetic parallelism; it affirms the truth and then expands it with the specific application about the wicked. The verb *pā'al* means “to work out, bring about, accomplish”; it is naturally used of God's sovereign control of life (see Nu 23:23; Isa 26:12; et al.). The interpretive difficulty concerns *lamma^anēhû*; it has been taken to mean “for his purpose” or “for its answer.” The word is *ma^aneh* (“answer, response”; see [comment on v.1](#)) and is not from *l^ema'an* (“purpose”). So the suffix likely refers to *kol* (“everything”). The point is that God ensures that everyone's actions and their consequences correspond—certainly the wicked for the day of calamity. In God's order there is just retribution for every act, for every act includes its answer or consequence.

5 *Pride, its fall.* The Lord will surely bring down those who are arrogantly proud. The idea continues from the first colon to the second, but the second explains what it means by the Lord's hating the proud. “Proud of heart” (*g^ebah-lēb*) describes the arrogance of the one who sets himself presumptuously against God (see 2Ch 26:16; Ps 131:1; Pr 18:12). One can be absolutely sure (lit., “hand to hand,” again used to signify something that is guaranteed, as in a confirming handshake; see [comment on 11:21](#)) that these arrogant people will not go free. “Will not go unpunished” is probably a tapeinosis here, an understatement to stress, first, that they will be punished and, second, to imply that those who humble themselves before God in faith will go free (see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* [repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], 159). The LXX adds several lines to this verse (see Note).

6 *Sin, freedom from.* Faithfulness to the Lord brings freedom from sin. This verse uses synonymous parallelism with a variant. One half speaks of atonement for sin and the other of avoidance of sin, so from both sides the stress is on complete freedom from sin. In the first colon we have *ḥesed* (GK 2876) and *ʾemet* (GK 622) joined together; these words form a hendiadys expressing “faithful covenant love” (“love and faithfulness,” NIV). The couplet often characterizes the Lord, but here in parallel to the fear of the Lord (as in 3:3–7) it refers to the faithfulness of the believer.

Such faith and faithfulness bring atonement for sin (*y^kkuppar* ‘*āwōn*, the technical term for expiation of sin). Toy, 322, explains the idea by saying it affirms that the divine anger against sin is turned away and man’s relation to God is as though he had not sinned.

In the second colon we read that the person who fears the Lord “avoids evil” (*sûr mērā’*). The word *rā’* (GK 8273) can mean calamity or disaster, but it probably means sin or evildoing because it is parallel to ‘*āwōn* (GK 6411; see also v.17; 3:7; 4:27; 13:19). Thus, reverential fear of the Lord prompts the believer to turn from evildoing.

7 Conduct, peaceful. A lifestyle pleasing to God disarms social hostility. This verse uses formal parallelism with a protasis and an apodasis. The subject matter of the verse is “a man’s ways” (*darkê-’îš*) that are “pleasing” (*biršôt*) to the Lord. The question is who is the subject of the second clause, “he makes even his enemies live at peace [*yašlim*] with him”? The appropriate choice is the “man” and his “ways”; it is his lifestyle that disarms the enemies. McKane, 491, comments that the righteous have the power to mend relationships (see also 10:13; 14:9; 15:1, 4, 18; 25:21–22). The life that is pleasing to God is above reproach and finds favor with others. This is part of God’s plan for rewards. But we must remember that this proverb, as well as 2 Timothy 3:12, must not be pressed to universal application.

8 Righteousness, better than unjust wealth. Few possessions with righteousness are better than much gain with dishonesty. The form follows the “better” sayings and so presents a contrast. There are, of course, other options (such as wealth with justice), but this line does not consider them. The “little” (*m^cat*) is not necessarily abject poverty; it could refer to modest income. To have little with righteousness is better than unjust wealth, but the contrast is between righteousness and “injustice.” *Mišpāt* (used here with “not”) is used for both legal justice and ethical conduct. In 12:5 and 21:7 it is contrasted with righteousness; in 21:3 it describes ethical behavior. Here unethical conduct tarnishes the great gain and will be judged by God. See a similar saying in “Amenemope” ch. 6 and 8:19–20 (*ANET*, 422).

9 Sovereignty of God. The Lord sovereignly determines the outworking of our plans. The Bible in general teaches that only those plans that are approved by him will succeed. The verse is antithetical; the human heart

“plans his course,” but the Lord fulfills or “determines his steps” (*yākîn ša^adô*). The verb *kûn* with *ša^adô* (and similar expressions) means “to direct” (see Ps 119:133; Jer 10:23). The point is the contrast between what we plan and what actually happens—God determines that. As Paul later said, God is able to do abundantly more than we ask or think (Eph 3:20; see Pr 16:1; 19:21; 20:24; see also “Amenemope” ch. 18 and 19:16–17 [*ANET*, 423]).

10 *Speech, responsible.* Here begins a series of proverbs about kings. This first one teaches that kings must speak righteously in their official capacities. The parallelism is loosely synonymous, perhaps forming a cause-effect arrangement. When the king speaks officially, it is as though it were “an oracle.” The word *qesem* (Gk 7877) is used throughout the Bible in the negative sense of “divination”; here it seems merely to mean words from an oracular sentence, as though the king speaks for God (see Nu 22:7; 23:23; for a popular opinion of such, see 2Sa 14:20). The effect of this is that his mouth “should not betray justice.” For a portrayal of the ideal king, see Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11:1–5. (For a comparison with Eze 21:23–26, see E. W. Davies, “The Meaning of *qesem* in Prv 16:10,” *Bib* 61 [1980]: 554–56.)

11 *Honesty, in business.* The Lord is the source of honesty and justice in all human enterprises. This proverb concerns weights and balances; the OT law prescribed that they be just (see Lev 19:36; Dt 25:13; Am 8:5; Mic 6:11). But shrewd people in OT times kept light and heavy weights to make dishonest transactions (as a modern individual might keep two sets of books). But the verse, using synonymous parallelism to stress the point, affirms that righteous and just measures are from the Lord. Toy, 324, noting that the affirmation is unique in the OT, wants to change “LORD” to “king” within this context; he thinks some scribe may have thought it was a reference to the divine King.

12 *Righteousness, stability in government.* A righteous administration determines the stability of a government. This verse displays formal parallelism, with an explanation coming in the second colon: kings detest criminal acts (*reša'*; “wrongdoing,” NIV) because their thrones are “established” (*yikkôn*) in righteousness. This saying stresses the ideal that righteousness characterizes the administration in God’s theocracy (see Dt 17:19–20; 2Sa 7:13–16; Isa 32:1).

McKane, 492, includes a lengthy discussion probing the parallel in Egyptian practices, where a pedestal is portrayed under the throne that resembles the hieroglyph for *Ma'at* (“justice” or “the divine order”), indicating that the throne was founded on justice. Solomon likewise used pedestals (1Ki 10:18–20). McKane is not convinced that the parallel is helpful, since the idea of a righteous basis for government was common. Interestingly, if this proverb had been written after the monarchy had disintegrated, there would have been greater variance between the ideal and the real. But coming from the golden age of Solomon, the ideal was still credible.

13 *Honesty, approved by leaders.* People who are honest and candid are valuable to governments. Political leaders know that without such their domains would become anarchic. This little saying uses synonymous parallelism to make the point. Those who speak uprightly please (*r̥ṣôn*; “take pleasure in,” NIV) kings; they love (*ye^ehāb*; “value,” NIV) those who speak uprightly. Ideal rulers love righteousness and not flattery (Plaut, 179).

14 *Wisdom, in appeasing wrath.* The wise person knows how to pacify the unexpected or irrational anger of leaders. This proverb introduces the danger of becoming a victim of such caprice. By using formal parallelism, it presents a dictum and then a consequence. The first colon describes the “wrath” (*ḥ^amat*) of the king as “messengers of death” (*mal ʾ^akê-māwet*). An example of this is Solomon’s assassinations of Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei in 1 Kings 2:25, 29–34, 46. When the wrath of the king so threatens, a wise man will try to pacify or “appease it.”

15 *Encouragement, from rulers.* Favor from a king is encouraging to his people. This proverb is the antithesis of v.14. By using two metaphors the saying describes the benefits of having a king who is pleased with his subjects. The king’s brightened face signifies his delight and thus means life for those around him (as opposed to his wrath). The favor this symbolizes is like the “rain cloud”—the latter rain or harvest rain, which is necessary for a successful harvest. Some of these ideas are similar to Psalm 72:15–17, which portrays the prosperity of the land as a blessing on account of the ideal king, whose righteous reign seems to ensure prosperity.

NOTES

15:30 For “a cheerful look” the LXX has “the eye that sees beautiful things” or “that sees well.” But the parallelism requires something that is seen and not the pleasure of seeing. For מֵאֵר (m^eôr, “light [of the eyes]”), D. Winton Thomas (“Textual and Philological Notes,” 285) suggests pointing a Hophal participle *môr ’ê* and reading, “a fine sight cheers the mind.”

16:5 The LXX has inserted two couplets: “The beginning of a good way is to do justly, and it is more acceptable with God than to offer sacrifices; he who seeks the Lord will find knowledge with righteousness, and they who rightly seek him will find peace.” Toy, 321–22, notes that there were many proverbs and sayings that sound like those in the canonical book of Proverbs; these similar-sounding sayings are in the LXX’s version of Proverbs and in Sirach.

B. Wise and Foolish Speech (16:16–30)

- ¹⁶How much better to get wisdom than gold,
to choose understanding rather than silver!
- ¹⁷The highway of the upright avoids evil;
he who guards his way guards his life.
- ¹⁸Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.
- ¹⁹Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed
than to share plunder with the proud.
- ²⁰Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers,
and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.
- ²¹The wise in heart are called discerning,
and pleasant words promote instruction.
- ²²Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it,
but folly brings punishment to fools.
- ²³A wise man’s heart guides his mouth,

and his lips promote instruction.
²⁴Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
²⁵There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.
²⁶The laborer's appetite works for him;
his hunger drives him on.
²⁷A scoundrel plots evil,
and his speech is like a scorching fire.
²⁸A perverse man stirs up dissension,
and a gossip separates close friends.
²⁹A violent man entices his neighbor
and leads him down a path that is not good.
³⁰He who winks with his eye is plotting perversity;
he who purses his lips is bent on evil.
³¹Gray hair is a crown of splendor;
it is attained by a righteous life.
³²Better a patient man than a warrior,
a man who controls his temper than one who takes a
city.
³³The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD.

COMMENTARY

16 *Wisdom, better than wealth.* Wisdom is more valuable than money. This didactic saying follows the pattern of the “better” sayings. Wisdom and wealth are not incompatible, but this comparison is between wealth without wisdom and wisdom without wealth. McKane, 489, says, “Wealth without wisdom may be vulgarity or greed or ruthless individualism.” The

point of the verse is to encourage people to acquire wisdom and understanding (cf. 3:14).

17 Righteousness, prevention of evil. Righteous living is a safeguard against calamity. The parallelism of these lines is probably synthetic: the first asserts that integrity avoids evil, and the second explains further that the person who guards his way protects his life. In the first colon the point of righteous living is made with the image of a “highway” (*m^esillâ*), a raised and well-graded road. This well-cared-for life, this integrity, turns from or “avoids evil” (*sûr mērāʿ*, with *rāʿ* in the sense of “sinful living”). The metaphor of the “way” (*m^esillâ* // *darkô*) is carried into the second colon: he “guards” his way and thereby safeguards his life. The LXX adds several lines here as well (see Note).

18 Pride, its consequences. Pride leads inevitably to a downfall. In fact, pride is the first step down. The lines are synonymous. “Pride” (*gāʾôn*) and the “haughty spirit” (*gōbah rūah*) are paired; and “destruction” (*šeber*) and “fall” (*kiššālôn*, lit., “a tottering, falling”) are matched. Many similar sayings have warned against pride and arrogance. An Arabic proverb says, “The nose is in the heavens, the seat is in the mire.” McKane, 490, sees another implication in the words of this proverb: “‘Disintegration’ suggests a contrast with the man who has achieved wholeness [*šālôm*] by submitting to *mûsār* and learning wisdom; and ‘stumbling’ a contrast with the safe road along which the teacher directs his attentive and receptive pupils.”

19 Humility, better than plunder. Better to be oppressed than to oppress. This, another “better” saying, presents a contrast of relative values. It is better to have a low spirit (*šepal-rūah*) and be among the poor than to share the “plunder” (*šālāl*; “loot” as Whybray, 95, translates it) with the “proud” (*gē ʾim*). The “proud” and the “lowly” here are ethical and religious descriptions for the proud rebel, who is overbearing and oppressive, and for the humble person, who submits to God and is unassuming and inoffensive (cf. Toy, 328). One should cultivate a humble spirit regardless of economic status, but one should never share the loot of those antagonistic to God.

20 Faithfulness, its blessing. Faithfulness to the Lord brings his blessing. This simple proverb uses synonymous parallelism to make the basic point about the reward for the righteous. The person who trusts in the Lord and “gives heed to instruction” will be blessed by him; he will find earthly prosperity and heavenly bliss from living a life that is right with God.

21 Speech, competent. Wise speech builds a reputation for competence and enhances influence. It leads to the reputation of being “discerning,” and its influence coming from sweet or “pleasant words” (*meteq š’pātayim*, i.e., gracious and friendly words) is to “promote instruction” (or “increase appropriation”); i.e., the teaching will be well received because it is persuasive.

22 Prospect for life, good or bad. An individual’s prospects in life are determined by his wisdom. Here is another antithetical saying. “Understanding” (*šēkel*) is a “fountain of life” (see 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 18:4), but “folly” (*’iwwelet*) brings “punishment” to fools. This “punishment” (*mûsar*) is essentially requital for sin. Once again Proverbs affirms that there is little that can be done for or with the fool. Alden, 129, astutely notes, “It is highly unlikely that Solomon would accept the idea that all men are created equal and thus deserve education at government expense.”

23 Speech, wise. Those who are wise ensure that they say wise things. The parallelism is synthetic, the first asserting that the wise heart “guides” the mouth, and the second line adding that he increases the reception of what he says (see v.21).

24 Speech, beneficial. Pleasant words are comforting and encouraging. The subject matter here is *’imrê-nō ‘am* (“pleasant words”). They are first described as “a honeycomb” (see Ps 19:10[11]). Then the added predicates are “sweet” (*mātôq*) and “healing” (*marpē*). One may recall, in line with the use of this imagery, how Jonathan’s eyes brightened when he ate the honeycomb (1Sa 14:27); such is the uplifting effect of pleasant words.

25 Conduct, its consequence. Conduct that seems to be right may end in disaster. This proverb is identical to 14:12 (see [comments](#)). The formal parallelism develops a continuous idea; but the contrast is with the “way” that seems right and the “ways of death” (*darkê-māwet*; “leads to death,” NIV), which in the end provide the reality for the shortsighted evaluation.

26 Diligence, its motivation. Hunger drives people to work diligently. Here is a classification of labor and its primary incentive—need. “Labor” (*‘āmēl*) is boring drudgery; motivations are necessary to its continuance, and hunger is the most frequent motivation. The word “appetite” is literally “soul” (*nepeš*), that part of human nature that craves food; for the “life” (*nepeš*) is a bundle of appetites. The second clause adds an explanatory

idea: his “mouth” (*pîhû*; “his hunger,” NIV) presses him on. The sense of the passage seems clear enough (though there are variant readings; see Note; cf. also Eph. 4:28; 6:7; 2Th 3:10–12; Ecc 6:7).

27 *Conduct, malicious.* Scoundrels plan ways to slander people. This verse is in formal parallelism, the thought continuing from one colon to the next. The “scoundrel” is literally a “man of belial” (*ʾîš bʿlîyyaʿal*). The meaning of “worthless” has been frequently given to *bʿlîyyaʿal*, but that is too weak. The term describes deep depravity and wickedness (see Toy, 125–26, where he first discusses the term). This is a wicked person, for “he digs up evil.” The meaning of *kōreh* (“plots,” NIV) is that of bringing evil to the surface (cf. 26:27; Jer 18:20). What he finds he spreads. His speech is like scorching fire; the simile speaks of the devastating effect of his words. McKane, 494, says that he “digs for scandal and . . . propagates it with words which are ablaze with misanthropy.”

28 *Speech, divisive.* Slanderers and gossips cause divisions. The wicked is described as “a perverse man” (*ʾîš tahpukôt*, lit., “a man of falsehoods, a liar”) and a “gossip” (*nirgān*), viz., one who whispers and murmurs (18:8; 26:20, 22). This kind of person destroys close friendships (*ʿallûp*) by what he says. Rashi took *ʿallûp* in the sense of “a prince” and said that such speech alienates the Prince, namely, God. But that interpretation is unnecessary.

29 *Associations, evil.* Violent people influence others toward violence (note the synthetic parallelism, the second part adding to the first). The man of violence (*ḥāmās*; GK 2805) will influence his acquaintances toward violence. *Ḥāmās* often refers to sins against society, social injustices, and crimes. The “path that is not good” must refer to habits of crime. The point is to warn people to keep away from such villains.

30 *Character traits, wicked expressions.* Often people who plan wicked things betray themselves with malicious expressions. Two expressions are depicted here: winking the eye and pursing the lips. Facial expressions often reveal whether someone is plotting something evil (see 6:13–14). Mannerisms and character are closely linked. Plaut, 182, suggests that there may be another way to understand this verse, namely, that a person who sees no evil and hears no evil is a social detriment and by his passivity brings evil to pass. But most likely the verse is associating the expressions with malicious intent.

31 Rewards, long life. Righteousness is rewarded with longevity. This proverb presents the ideal, of course, for the saying does not include evil old men or good people who die young. The equity envisioned in Proverbs is that the wicked come to an early end but the righteous endure. Toy, 333, suggests that the NT clarifies this teaching by explaining how immortality guarantees the long-lasting reward. Proverbs is concerned with longevity in this life, however. “Gray hair” (*šêbâ*) is the “crown of splendor”; it can only be attained through righteousness. While the proverb presents a simplified observation, there is something commendable about old age that can remember a long walk with God through life and can anticipate unbroken fellowship with him in glory.

32 Patience, more effective than power. Patience is preferable to physical power. A “patient” (*ʿerek ʾappayim*, lit., “long of anger”) man rules or “controls” (*mōšēl*) his “spirit” (*rûaḥ*; “temper,” NIV). Normally *ʿerek ʾappayim* is an attribute of God (see Ex 34:6); here it describes a patient person. “Controls his spirit” means that such a person has his emotions under control. This saying would have significant meaning in a time when military prowess was held in high regard. *M. ʾAbot* 4:1 uses this proverb to answer the question, Who is a true hero? Greenstone, 180, records the account from Nachmias about the pious man who said to the king, “You are the servant of my servant.” He meant by this, “You are the slave of your evil inclinations, while I am their master.”

33 Sovereignty of God. The Lord controls the decisions that are submitted to him. The passage concerns the practice of seeking divine leading through casting lots. “Every decision” (*kol-mišpāṭô*) is from the Lord (see also “Amenemope,” ch. 18; 19:16–17 [*ANET*, 423]). So Proverbs 16 ends as it began, with a word about God’s sovereignty.

NOTES

17 The LXX adds three lines after v.17a and one after v.17b: “The paths of life turn aside from evils, and the ways of righteousness are length of life; he who receives instruction will be prosperous, and he who regards reproofs will be made wise; he who guards his ways preserves his own soul, and he who loves his life will spare his mouth.”

26 The LXX may have misread פִּיהוּ (*pîhû*, “his hunger” [lit., “his mouth,” meaning “his hunger”]) as *pîdô* to get the idea of “ruin” for the laborer—he drives away ruin. This reading influenced the Syriac to some degree; however, its first clause understands suffering instead of labor; the person who causes suffering suffers.

C. About Fools (17:1–28)

- ¹Better a dry crust with peace and quiet
than a house full of feasting, with strife.
- ²A wise servant will rule over a disgraceful son,
and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.
- ³The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but the LORD tests the heart.
- ⁴A wicked man listens to evil lips;
a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue.
- ⁵He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker;
whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.
- ⁶Children’s children are a crown to the aged,
and parents are the pride of their children.
- ⁷Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool—
how much worse lying lips to a ruler!
- ⁸A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it;
wherever he turns, he succeeds.
- ⁹He who covers over an offense promotes love,
but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.
- ¹⁰A rebuke impresses a man of discernment
more than a hundred lashes a fool.
- ¹¹An evil man is bent only on rebellion;
a merciless official will be sent against him.

- ¹²Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs
than a fool in his folly.
- ¹³If a man pays back evil for good,
evil will never leave his house.
- ¹⁴Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam;
so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
- ¹⁵Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—
the LORD detests them both.
- ¹⁶Of what use is money in the hand of a fool,
since he has no desire to get wisdom?
- ¹⁷A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for adversity.
- ¹⁸A man lacking in judgment strikes hands in pledge
and puts up security for his neighbor.
- ¹⁹He who loves a quarrel loves sin;
he who builds a high gate invites destruction.
- ²⁰A man of perverse heart does not prosper;
he whose tongue is deceitful falls into trouble.
- ²¹To have a fool for a son brings grief;
there is no joy for the father of a fool.
- ²²A cheerful heart is good medicine,
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.
- ²³A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret
to pervert the course of justice.
- ²⁴A discerning man keeps wisdom in view,
but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth.
- ²⁵A foolish son brings grief to his father
and bitterness to the one who bore him.
- ²⁶It is not good to punish an innocent man,
or to flog officials for their integrity.
- ²⁷A man of knowledge uses words with restraint,

and a man of understanding is even-tempered.

²⁸Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,
and discerning if he holds his tongue.

COMMENTARY

1 *Peace, its value.* Poverty with peace is better than prosperity with strife. This contrast makes a preference for the better of two circumstances. On one side is the “dry crust” with quietness. *Pat ḥ^arēbâ* is like bread without butter, a morsel of bread not dipped in vinegar or some such mix (cf. Ru 2:14). In this humble setting there is “quiet” (*šalwâ*; the LXX reads *šālôm* “peace”), which is better than a house of feasting with “sacrifices of strife” (*zibḥê-rîb*; cf. NIV margin).

The use of *zibḥê* suggests a connection with the temple (see [comments on 7:14](#)) in which the people may have made their sacrifices and had abundant meat to eat. It is also possible that the reference is simply to a sumptuous feast, for the term can also refer to this (see Dt 12:15; Isa 34:6; Eze 39:17). Rarely did the Israelites have meat apart from sacrificial occasions. The contrast formed is not between the morsel and the meat but between peace and strife. Abundance often brings a deterioration of moral and ethical standards and an increase in envy and strife.

2 *Ability, better than privilege.* Faithful and prudent servants are more highly honored than disgraceful sons. The verse expresses one continuous thought, although the two lines do reflect parallel ideas with “ruling” and “inheriting.” The setting is the ancient world, in which servants rarely advanced beyond their station in life. Notable exceptions are the servant of Abram (who would have been Abram’s heir if there had been no son, Ge 15:3), the slave who married into the line of Judah and became an heir (1Ch 2:35), and Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth (2Sa 16:1–4; 19:24–30). This proverb focuses on the prudent or “wise servant,” who uses all his abilities effectively. This one rules over the “disgraceful son” by becoming a joint heir with the brothers. This means that the worthless son will be disinherited.

3 Divine omniscience. The Lord examines every thought and every motive. The imagery is of silver and gold being purified, parallel to the Lord's "testing" (*bōḥēn*) human hearts. Such examinations are always constructive; they are designed to improve the value of what is purified.

4 Speech, malicious. The wicked find destructive speech appealing. The synonymous parallelism stresses that those who listen to malicious talk are in fact malicious themselves—birds of a feather. The "wicked man" (*mēra'*) listens to wicked or "evil" (*'āwen*) lips, the "liar" (*šeqer*) pays attention to the "malicious tongue" (*l'šôn ḥawwōt*). The metonymies "lips" and "tongue" signify speech, and the qualifications show this speech to be destructive. Leviticus 19:17 warns people to rebuke those with malicious words and not to bear evil with them. Plaut, 186, explains that people who listen to gossip are just as guilty of it as those who spread it.

5 Speech, mocking the poor. Anyone who mocks the misfortune of the poor holds the Creator in contempt and will be punished. The parallel clauses identify the subject matter: "mocking the poor" (*lō 'ēg lārāš*) and "gloating over disaster" (*šāmēaḥ l'êd*, though *BHS* proposes *l'ōbēd*, "to the one perishing"). The "disaster" is meant to explain the poverty.

The second part of each colon diverges: the first one explains that whoever mocks the poor reproaches or "shows contempt for" his Maker; the second line affirms that the mocker will be punished. The idea of reproaching the Creator may be mistaking and blaming God's providential control of the world (Toy, 337). Plaut, 187, explains that whoever mocks the poor holds up their poverty to them as a personal failure and so offends their dignity and divine nature (as in 14:31). He adds that it is easier to rejoice over calamity than over good fortune.

6 Honor, in family relationships. People treasure their family heritage. The synonymous parallelism here focuses on this point from two sides—grandchildren are a crown to the aged, and parents are an honor to children. This idea comes from a culture that places great importance on the family in society; the older folks have preeminence in the family and receive the appropriate respect. On the clause that affirms that parents are an honor to children, Plaut, 187, wryly comments, "Except, perhaps, in adolescence. Indeed, a family without full self-acceptance is in a state of perpetual immaturity."

7 Speech, dishonest. A dishonest leader is worse than an arrogant fool. The first thesis lays the point for comparison: “Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool.” The word *yeter* (“arrogant”) could also be rendered “excellent” (see Note). It describes lofty speech, and this does not suit the fool. *Nābāl* (“fool”; GK 5572) occurs only here, in v.21, and in 30:22 in Proverbs. It describes someone who is godless and immoral in an overbearing way (see 1Sa 25:25; Ps 14:1). Lofty speech, whether great claims or arrogant opinions, is simply out of character for the fool.

The second line makes the point: “How much worse lying lips to a ruler!” This *nādīb* (“ruler”) is a gentleman with a code of honor, to whom truthfulness is almost second nature (McKane, 507). Lies simply are not suited to him. So the lesson is that if fools should not speak lofty things, then certainly honorable people should not lie.

8 Bribery, its success. Those who use bribery meet with widespread success. This line is a little troubling; but as Toy, 341, clarifies, the sage is merely affirming a point of reality without making a comment. The first colon says that a bribe is a “stone of grace” (*’eben-ḥēn*; “charm,” NIV); the second line adds that everywhere the briber turns with it, “he succeeds” (*yaśkîl*; “deals wisely”).

The word for “bribe” (*šōḥad*; GK 8816) could simply refer to “a gift” that opens doors, insofar as it was the custom to offer a gift for most occasions. This would not be as problematic as a bribe and fits well in this positive statement (Whybray, 100). The law clearly prohibited taking bribes (Ex 23:8); true bribery is described in v.23. But *šōḥad* is never used of a disinterested gift, so there is always something of the bribe to it (see Ps 15:5; Isa 1:23). The proverb is expressing this reality from the viewpoint of the one giving the bribe—it works. *’Eben-ḥēn* indicates that it is a stone that brings “favor”; McKane, 502, says that it has magical properties and works like a charm. It is a “lucky” stone.

9 Love, shown by discretion. How people respond to the faults of others reveals whether or not they have compassion. This proverb is an antithetical statement, showing the contrast between “he who covers over an offense” of a friend and the one who “repeats” the news about it; the former promotes love and the latter separates friends. There can be no friendship without such understanding and discretion. Plaut, 188, says such friendship requires the ability to forget; harping on the past has destroyed many

friendships and marriages. The point is that for the sake of love, the true friend buries the wrong done; Mckane, 508–9, describes the antithesis this way:

On the one hand the person who believes that love is better served by a charitable silence than by a campaign of exposure and, on the other, the person who breaks up friendships—other men’s friendships, not his own—by scandalous gossip. Even if this is done with a kind of zeal for the welfare of the community, the means are not justified by the end, for it is an activity which will destroy love and trust and so destroy what it sets out to preserve. And those who begin as crusaders will be degraded by what they supposed to be their mission in life and will become common informers and persecutors.

10 *Discipline, of value to the discerning.* Discipline will benefit the wise but not the foolish. This verse contrasts the wise and the fool over the matter of “rebuke” (*g^eārâ*). Those who are wise will be humbled by a rebuke and learn from it, but not even a hundred lashes will make such an impression on the “fool” (*k^esîl*; GK 4067). The proverb may also be saying that in general physical punishment is less effective than criticism.

11 *Retribution, its certainty.* Those bent on rebellion will surely meet with severe retribution. The formal parallelism lines up a cause-and-effect relationship. The cause is that evil people seek rebellion, and its effect is that retribution will be sent in the form of a “merciless official” (*mal ’āk ’akzārî*). This expression could refer to a pitiless messenger the king would send; but it also could refer to storms, pestilence, or any misfortune that served as God’s messenger of retribution.

12 *Associations, dangerous.* It is dangerous to encounter a fool engaged in folly. A contrast stresses this point. The first clause literally says, “Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man” (see 2Sa 17:8; Hos 13:8). The contrast explains that this would be less dangerous than meeting a “fool” (*k^esîl*) engaged in “his [wicked] folly” (*’iwwaltô*). The human, who is supposed to be intelligent and rational, in such folly becomes more dangerous than the beast that in this case acts with good reason. As Alden,

134, comments, “Consider meeting a fool with a knife, or gun, or even behind the wheel of a car” (cf. Samuel E. Loewenstamm, “Remarks on Proverbs 17:12 and 20:27,” VT 37 [1987]: 221–24).

13 *Justice, for ingratitude.* Acts of ingratitude will be punished accordingly. This saying presents a condition and its consequences: The condition is when someone repays “evil” (*rā‘â*) for “good” (*ṭôbâ*), and the consequences are that the punishment fits the crime—“evil” (*rā‘â*) will never leave his house. The verse does not explain whether God will turn evil back on that person directly or whether people will begin to treat him as he treated others. Moreover, the verse does not justify rewarding evil for evil.

14 *Strife, controlled.* Conflicts must be stopped before they get out of control. The proverb presents a cause and its effect. The first line says that starting a “quarrel” (*mādôn*) is like “letting out water” (*pôṭēr mayim*; “breaching a dam,” NIV). The image is of a small leak, perhaps in a dam, that starts slowly to spurt water; the problem will only get worse. The second line gives the advice: stop it before “strife” (*rîb*; “a dispute,” NIV) breaks out. McKane, 505, notes that this probably refers to litigation (see 15:18, where both *mādôn* and *rîb* are used). The lesson is to stop a quarrel before it gets to court, for a legal victory makes a disagreement permanent.

15 *Justice, corrupted.* The Lord hates any miscarriage of justice. This proverb uses effective wordplays to express the two things the Lord hates—declaring “righteous” (*mašdîq*; “acquitting,” NIV) the person who is a “guilty [criminal]” (*rāšā‘*), and “declaring guilty” (*maršî‘*; “condemning,” NIV) the person who is “righteous” (*šaddîq*; “innocent,” NIV). Such reversals are an abomination for the righteous Judge of the whole earth.

16 *Wisdom, inaccessible to fools.* The fool has no interest in obtaining wisdom in the way that it must be obtained. This continuous sentence asks a rhetorical question—in effect, What good is money, since what is needed cannot be bought? The person under consideration here is the “fool” (*k’sîl*), the one who lacks the intellect to gain wisdom in the first place (Toy, 346). He may desire the reputation of the wise, but he will not live up to its demands. McKane, 505, envisions a situation in which a *k’sîl* comes to a sage with a fee in hand and supposing that he can assure a career as a sage, thus giving rise to the biting comment presented here: Why does the fool have money in his hands? To buy wisdom when he has no brains?

17 Friends, loyal in adversity. The love of a true friend is constant. The verse is set in synonymous parallelism; i.e., the “friend” and the “brother” are equated. Faithful “love” (*’ōhēb*) is present at all times, even in times of “adversity” (*šārâ*), when it might be severely tested.

Some take the two lines as antithetical. Plaut, 189, for example, argues that friendship is a spiritual relationship, but a brother’s ties are based on a blood relationship. He adds, “No wonder that adversity is frequently the only unifying force in many families.” But the line is not implying that the brother confines his kindness to times of adversity; moreover, the brother does not always come forward at such times (see 18:19, 24; 19:7; 27:10). Here the true friend is the same as a brotherly relation. *L’šārâ* may be translated “of adversity”—it is in such times of adversity that this strong friendship is displayed.

18 Wisdom, in business. It is foolish to pledge security for someone else’s loans. The parallelism is synthetic. The lack of judgment is introduced with the idea of striking hands and then clarified by “puts up security” (see also 6:1–5).

19 Speech, arrogant and contentious. Arrogant and contentious speech ends in destruction. The double focus is on the one who “loves a quarrel [*maššâ*]” in v.19a and the one who “builds a high gate” in v.19b. Some have taken the latter expression literally and interpreted it to mean pretentious house building, but that would be an unusual expression in the OT. Probably it is figurative; the gate is the mouth, and so to make it high is to say lofty things—he brags too much (see 1Sa 2:3; Pr 18:12; 29:23). The figure is comparable to the use of “trap” for mouth in American English. Toy, 348, wishes to emend the text to *pîw* (“his mouth”) for clarity, but there is no need to do so; the figure can be properly interpreted that way.

Thus, the proverb is about a quarrelsome and arrogant individual who loves “sin” (*peša’*) and invites “destruction” (*šāber*). The destruction could be what he inflicts on others but may also mean what he brings on himself. The latter fits the parallel *peša’* a little better (though Toy also wishes to emend *peša’* to “wounds” for the sake of parallelism).

20 Conduct, wicked. Wicked ways and words lead to trouble. The synonymous parallelism makes this verse fairly easy to understand. The wicked person has a “perverse” heart (i.e., he is morally crooked) and a “deceitful tongue” (i.e., he has turned away from the truth). All who are

wicked in their plans and speech can expect only trouble ahead. The idea of “trouble” (*rā’â*) refers to calamity or adversity in this life; such people face a life without good (meaning prosperity in this life).

21 *Folly, a grief to others.* It is a grief to parents to have children become fools. It is not always a completely joyous experience to have children, not with the world and human nature as they are. Here *k’sîl* (GK 4067) and *nābāl* (GK 5572) are put in synonymous parallelism—they are almost the same. However, *k’sîl* (which occurs about fifty times in the book) portrays a slow-witted dullard, whether it be in spiritual, intellectual, or moral matters; *nābāl* (a rare term in Proverbs) primarily focuses on religious folly and refers to one who is morally and religiously indifferent (Toy, 348). In this situation a father who hoped for a son who would be a credit to the family and the faith may find only disappointment.

22 *Emotions, affect on health.* One’s psychological condition affects one’s physical condition: a healthy attitude fosters good health, but a depressed spirit ruins health. The antithetical idea, describing the two effects, stresses the importance of a cheerful heart. The first line presents the ideal: a “cheerful heart” (*lēb sāmēah*) causes “good healing” (*yêṭîb gēhâ*; “is good medicine,” NIV). The heart, as with the spirit in v.22b, refers to the mind, the psyche. A positive and healthy outlook on life brings healing. On the other hand, a “crushed spirit” (*rûah n’kē ’â*), i.e., one that is depressed or dejected, has an adverse effect on the health of the body. “Bones” figuratively represents the body (encased in the bony frame); fat bones means a healthy body (3:8; 15:30; 16:24), but dry bones signify unhealthiness and lifelessness (cf. Eze 37:1–14).

23 *Justice, perverted by bribes.* Bribery perverts justice. This single sentence uses a purpose clause to explain the intent of a bribe. The “wicked” who accepts the “gift” is a corrupt judge or some other official with similar power (see [comment on v.8](#)). The fact that he accepts it in secret (lit., “from the bosom,” *mēḥêq*) indicates it is not proper. The purpose clause clarifies that the bribe is “to pervert the course of justice.”

24 *Discipline, concentration on plans.* The wise persist in following a course of wisdom. They comprehend the true issues of life and concentrate on the path of wisdom. The “fool” (*k’sîl*), however, lacks any serious concentration and is unable to fix his attention on anything, so he drifts in

the limitless sea of uncertainty (Toy, 351). McKane, 504, vividly depicts these distinctions when he says:

The eyes of the *mēbîn* [“discerning man”] are riveted on the teacher, for he is fascinated by her instruction and is a picture of unbroken concentration. The *k’sîl* [“fool”] has the wandering eye and the vacant distracted mind, and his condition is expressed by a hyperbole. As a student who is hearing nothing of what his teacher says might let his eyes rove to every corner of the classroom, so the fool who is inattentive to the instruction of Wisdom is said to have his eyes on the ends of the earth.

25 *Folly, its effect on parents.* It is a bitter grief to have a child turn out to be a fool (see v.21; 10:1; 15:20).

26 *Punishment, unjust.* It is a mistake to punish people who are innocent. The two halves of this verse appear to be in synonymous parallelism, but the exact relation between them is a little more complicated. Rather than simply citing two examples of injustice, the second scenario is perhaps being used to show how wrong the first one is, viz., punishing the righteous makes about as much sense as flogging an official for his integrity. But if the two lines are simply synonymous, then the “officials” (*n’dîbîm*) are the good people. *Nādîb* (“noble”) is used elsewhere in contrast to the fool (see [comment on v.7](#); cf. Isa 32:5–8). The verse clearly affirms that punishing (lit., “fining”) the righteous is “improper” (*‘al-yōšer*, lit., “contrary to what is right”; “for integrity,” NIV).

27 *Character traits, self-control.* The wise restrain their speaking and control their actions. The text literally says that he is “sparing” (*hōśēk*) of words and “cool of spirit” (*qar-rûah*; “even-tempered,” NIV). The one who restrains his speech is the truly knowledgeable person, and the one who has cool composure has understanding. So the instruction is that to gain composure and restraint one must develop knowledge and understanding.

28 *Speech, wisdom of silence.* Silence is one evidence of wisdom. Even a fool appears wise in silence—at least he conceals his folly by keeping silent. Kidner, 127, says that a fool who takes this advice is no longer a complete fool. He does not, of course, become wise; he just hides his folly.

An old saying explains that no one knows that he nothing knows, unless he talks too much (Plaut, 192).

NOTES

4 The verb מֵזִין (*mēzîn*) is from זִן (*zîn*, “to feed”). The suggested emendation is to take it as a denominative verb from אוֹזֵן (*ōzen*, “ear”), “pay attention to.”

6 The LXX has inserted, “To the faithful belongs the whole world of wealth, but to the unfaithful not an obolus [a very small coin].” This was apparently a popular sentiment.

7 There is some question over the best translation of יָתֵר (*yeter*; NIV “arrogance”). The basic idea of “remainder” or “excess” has yielded derived meanings of “excellence,” “heightened,” and “arrogance.” The LXX, using πιστά (*pista*), seems to reflect the idea of excellence and makes a contrast: “Words that are excellent do not fit a fool.” The concept of “arrogance” works if it is taken in the sense of lofty, heightened, or excessive language.

14 The lines are difficult. The LXX misread the words in the text and gave it a legal sense; accordingly it developed a different proverb: “The beginning of righteousness gives authority to words, but quarrelsomeness and fighting lead to poverty” (see James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968], 257). But Toy, 349, says that the Greek reading of “words” instead of “water” gives the better sense; it is a warning against thoughtless talk (cf. 10:19; 17:27).

22 The word גְּחָה (*gēhâ*, “healing, health”; NIV “medicine”) is found in the MT. Some suggest emending it to “face,” after the Arabic *jihatu*, or to גְּוִיָּה (*gʿwîyâ*, “body”), as in the Syriac and Targum. The Hebrew, although a *hapax legomenon*, makes good sense in the verse.

D. The Speech of Fools versus the Speech of the Wise (18:1–21)

¹An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends;

he defies all sound judgment.

²A fool finds no pleasure in understanding
but delights in airing his own opinions.

³When wickedness comes, so does contempt,
and with shame comes disgrace.

⁴The words of a man's mouth are deep waters,
but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.

⁵It is not good to be partial to the wicked
or to deprive the innocent of justice.

⁶A fool's lips bring him strife,
and his mouth invites a beating.

⁷A fool's mouth is his undoing,
and his lips are a snare to his soul.

⁸The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man's inmost parts.

⁹One who is slack in his work
is brother to one who destroys.

¹⁰The name of the LORD is a strong tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.

¹¹The wealth of the rich is their fortified city;
they imagine it an unscalable wall.

¹²Before his downfall a man's heart is proud,
but humility comes before honor.

¹³He who answers before listening—
that is his folly and his shame.

¹⁴A man's spirit sustains him in sickness,
but a crushed spirit who can bear?

¹⁵The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge;
the ears of the wise seek it out.

¹⁶A gift opens the way for the giver
and ushers him into the presence of the great.

- ¹⁷The first to present his case seems right,
till another comes forward and questions him.
- ¹⁸Casting the lot settles disputes
and keeps strong opponents apart.
- ¹⁹An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified
city,
and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.
- ²⁰From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled;
with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied.
- ²¹The tongue has the power of life and death,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.

COMMENTARY

1 *Character traits, antisocial.* An antisocial person is self-centered and unreasonable. This verse does not describe someone who is merely unfriendly or unsociable but one who is an enemy of society; its message is a warning against being a schismatic (Toy, 354). The Mishnah uses this passage to teach the necessity of not separating from the community because people have responsibilities as social beings (*m. 'Abot* 2:4).

The first line of the verse is difficult and complicated by a textual problem. Instead of reading “the one who separates himself seeks his own desires [*ta'wâ*; ‘selfish ends,’ NIV],” Frankenberg follows the LXX and reads, “seeks his own occasion” (*tō'ânâ*), viz., “his own pretext” (cited by Toy, 354). The change seems unnecessary to the point of the proverb, differing only in the reason behind the separation. Lot, for example, chose the best land out of his desires (Ge 13:11). The proverb also describes the antisocial person as one who contends against all sound judgment. The verb *yitgallā'* (“defies,” from *gāla'*) means “burst out in contention” (lit., “snarl, show the teeth”). He is indeed opposed to society and its decisions (see also Pr 17:14; 20:3).

2 *Instruction, rejected for opinion.* A fool prefers to give his opinion rather than acquire wisdom. Kidner, 127, says, “Closed mind, open mouth.”

By means of antithetical parallelism, we learn what the “fool” (*k^csîl*) does and does not do. He “finds no pleasure in understanding” (a tapeinosis; the opposite is the point—he detests understanding). Instead of gaining “understanding” (*t^cbûnâ*), he loves telling what is on his mind (*b^chitgallôt libbô*; “delights in airing his own opinions,” NIV; the verb *gālâ* means “to uncover, reveal, betray”; see 20:19; Ps 98:2). McKane, 515–16, observes that this kind of person is in love with his own ideas and enjoys spewing them out. This kind of person asks questions to show how clever he is, not to learn.

3 Sin, its effect. Contempt and disgrace come with wickedness. This verse displays step parallelism: wickedness (see Note) leads to “contempt” (*bûz*), and “shame” (*qālôn*, parallel to contempt) leads to “reproach” or “disgrace” (*herpâ*). The point is that punishment for wickedness comes naturally from the community. The disgrace, for example, would be the critical rebukes of the community against the wicked person. Of course, communities may not do this. Plaut, 195, notes, “Many a country club welcomes members whose contempt for the community and its needs should make them social outcasts.” See Malachi 2:9, where the Lord made the wicked priests base and contemptible before the people.

4 Speech, profound. The words of the wise are an inexhaustible supply of blessing and counsel. The question in this verse is whether v.4b is an antithesis to v.4a or a continuation. Normally a *waw* would begin an antithetical clause; the structure and the ideas suggest that the second part continues the idea of the first half. The metaphors in the verse normally describe the wise (see 10:11; 13:14; 16:22), and so that is its meaning (though v.4a only says “man”). The figure of “deep waters” suggests either the idea of an inexhaustible supply of words or deep, profound words. The figures of “fountain of wisdom” (see Note) and “bubbling brook” describe the speech of the wise as a continuous source of refreshing and beneficial ideas. Consequently the idea of profound fits better.

5 Injustice, denounced. It is reprehensible to pervert justice. The second line complements the thesis presented in the first line. The image in the first part, “lifting up the face,” means showing partiality in judgments (cf. Dt 10:17; Mal 2:9). The predicate “not good” is an understatement (tapeinosis); it is reprehensible, vile, and wrong. The second clause may

illustrate this crime: *l'haṭṭôt* signifies “to turn aside,” i.e., to turn people from their rights (“deprive,” NIV; cf. 17:26; 28:21).

6 *Speech that invites trouble.* Foolish people get themselves into trouble by what they say. The second line, almost identical in thought to the first, parallels the result (“beating”) with the cause (“strife”). The speech of the fool (*k'sîl*) brings him into (legal?—the term is *rîb*) controversies; and since he is wrong, he is punished. The “beating” is probably physical, given either by a father or by society (for *mah'lumôt* see 19:25; Ps 141:5).

7 *Speech, consequences of.* What a fool says can ruin him. This proverb continues the point of v.6. What a fool says is a “snare” (*môqēš*) to his life. Calamity and misfortune can come to the person whose speech makes known his lack of wisdom.

8 *Speech, gossip.* People delight in listening to gossip. This sad observation, developed in synthetic parallelism, simply affirms the common trait of human nature. The words of the “gossip” (*nirgān*) are like “choice morsels” (the word is related to a verb meaning “to swallow greedily”). When such tasty bits are taken into the innermost being, they stimulate the desire for more. Whybray, 105, summarizes, “There is a flaw in human nature that assures slander will be listened to.”

9 *Laziness, its effect.* Laziness is destructive. The lines form a comparison to express that the lazy person and the destructive person are equally detrimental to society. The first is “slack” (*mitrappeh*) in his work; the other is called *ba'al mašhîṭ* (“possessor [= dealer] in/of destruction”; “one who destroys,” NIV). The link between these two is the term “brother”; they belong to the same classification; they are of similar nature. For example, the one who is slack may look for shortcuts and may make things that fall apart. His destruction may be indirect and slow in coming, but it is just as problematic.

10 *Security, the name of the Lord.* The Lord is fully able to protect those who trust in him. The first line establishes this truth, and the second focuses on the trust of the righteous. This is the only place in Proverbs where “the name of the LORD” occurs; it signifies the attributes of God, here the power to protect (cf. Ex 34:5–7). The metaphor of “strong tower” (*migdal-ōz*) sets up the imagery of the second clause: “running” metaphorically describes a wholehearted trust in God’s protection (see Isa 40:31), and “safely on high” (*nišgāb*; “safe,” NIV), a military term, stresses the effect.

Other Scriptures delineate how God protects his people in different circumstances.

11 *Security, wealth.* Wealthy people often assume that their wealth brings security. The imagery of safety (*nišgābâ*; “unscalable,” NIV) links this proverb to the preceding. Since security comes from God, this proverb simply reports an assumption without commenting on it. Any protection wealth may bring is limited; for, as Psalm 49 teaches, money cannot bring ultimate security. The first metaphor, the “fortified city,” suggests protection from outsiders and outside elements; the second, “unscalable wall,” expresses their thoughts about being invincible.

12 *Humility, its reward.* The way to honor is through humility (see also 11:2; 15:33; 16:18). The humility and exaltation of Jesus provides the classic example of this truth (see Isa 52:13–53:12; Php 2:1–10). An antithesis makes the point: pride (*yigbah*) in the heart is the way to downfall, but “humility” (*‘nāwâ*) is the prelude to “honor” (*kābôd*).

13 *Speech, premature.* Speaking too hastily leads to shame. The formal parallelism completes the thought that premature answering is “folly” (*‘iwwet*) and “shame” (*k’limmâ*). Poor listening reveals that the person has a low regard for what the other is saying or is too absorbed in self-importance. The Mishnah lists this as the second characteristic of the uncultured person (*m. ‘Abot* 5:7). McKane, 515, adds, “It is impossible to speak to the point if the point has not been taken, and effective speaking is inseparable from high relevance and a sensitive regard for all views which are being expressed.”

14 *Spirit, healthy.* A healthy spirit brings healing to the body. This is affirmed by contrasting a healthy spirit with a “crushed spirit” (*rûaḥ nēkē ‘â*); the healthy attitude sustains a person, but depression is unbearable. In physical sickness one can fall back on the will to live; but in depression the will to live may be gone, and there is no reserve for physical strength. The figure of a “crushed” spirit suggests a broken will, loss of vitality, despair, and emotional pain. Few things in the human experience are as difficult to cope with as a crushed spirit.

15 *Knowledge, sought.* Those who are wise eagerly search for knowledge. By paralleling “heart” and “ears,” the verse stresses the full acquisition of knowledge: the ear of the wise listens to instruction, and the heart of the wise discerns what is heard to acquire knowledge. Note that it is

the wise in Proverbs who continually seek knowledge. Kidner, 129, says, “Those who know most know best how little they know.”

16 Gifts, their influence. One may gain influence through gifts. The poetry is synthetic: the gift opens the way and gives “entrance” (*yanḥennû*; “ushers,” NIV) to nobles. *Mattān* (“gift”) is more general than “bribe” (*šōḥad*, as in 17:8, 23). But it, too, has dangers (see 15:27; 21:14), for by offering such gifts one may learn how influential they are and start to make bribes. Here the proverb simply says that a gift can expedite matters but says nothing about bribing judges. See Genesis 43:11 and the appeasing gift for Joseph.

17 Justice, cross-examination. There must be cross-examination to settle legal disputes. The proverb is a continuous sentence. The first half affirms that the one side in a dispute may seem right, but it must be challenged by the other (*ḥ^aqārô*, meaning “investigate”; “questions him,” NIV). The proverb reminds us that there are two sides in any dispute (legal, domestic, or religious) and that all sides in a dispute must be given a hearing.

18 Disputes, divinely arbitrated. Serious disputes may be resolved through divinely inspired arbitration. The assumption behind this saying is that providence played the determining role in the casting of lots (cf. 16:33). If both parties recognized this, the matter can be resolved, no matter how strong the “opponents” (*‘šûmîm*). Today God’s Word and spiritual leaders figure prominently in divine arbitration (1Co 6:1–8).

19 Disputes, their effect. Serious disputes create insurmountable barriers among friends. The Hebrew is difficult; it seems to say that “an offended brother is [more isolated] than a strong city, and disputes are like the barred gates of the city”; but see the textual variations (see Note). The proverb is talking about changing a friend into an enemy by abuse (McKane, 520). Kidner, 130, notes that these walls are easy to erect and hard to demolish.

20 Speech, productive. Productive speech is satisfying. The lines are synonymous; the “fruit of his mouth” and “the harvest from his lips” both express the idea of productive speech. Such speech is satisfying (*tišba’* [“is filled”] and *yišbā’* [“is satisfied”] are used in the two lines). In Proverbs words can bring good or evil; “fruit” and “harvest” have good connotations, and so constructive and beneficial speech is in view here.

21 Speech, consequences of. What people say can lead to life or death; “those who love it will eat its fruit.” The referent of “it” must be “the

tongue,” i.e., what the tongue says. So those who enjoy talking, i.e., indulging in it, must bear its fruit, whether good or bad. The lesson is to be warned, especially if you love to talk. The *Midrash* mentions this point, showing one way it can cause death: “The evil tongue slays three, the slanderer, the slandered, and the listener” (*Midr. Tehillim* 52:2; see further James G. Williams, “The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs,” *Semeia* 17 [1980]: 35–38).

NOTES

3 Many commentators (McKane, 521; Scott, 112; Toy, 355) change the text from רָשָׁע (*rāšāʿ*, “wicked”) to רְשָׁע (*rešāʿ*, “wickedness”) to form a better parallel in the line: with wickedness comes contempt. But this emendation is not necessary. The MT’s “wicked person” lines up better with the misanthrope in v.1 and the fool in v.2.

4 For “the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook” the LXX has “a river and fountain of life spring forth,” reading “life” instead of “wisdom.” This may have come about because of the rare word for the “brook” or “rushing stream” and the influence of 10:11, but there is no good reason for the change. Furthermore, Waltke, 2:72, notes that because there is no “but” in the line, the verse does not form a contrast but a synthetic description of wisdom’s speech.

19 The translation “more unyielding than a fortified city” takes the preposition *min* as a comparative *min* and assumes an ellipsis of something like *qāšeh*. The LXX may have confused the *mem* with a *kaph* and then developed a clear antithetical proverb here: “A brother helped [not offended] is like a stronghold, but disputes are like bars of a citadel.” Accordingly the editors of *BHS* propose מוֹשִׁיעַ (*môšîaʿ*) or שׂוֹעַ (*šôaʿ*) instead of נִפְשָׁע (*nipšāʿ*, “offended”). This reading is followed by the Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate as well as the RSV. But since both lines use the comparison with a citadel (fortified/barred city), the antithesis seems problematic.

E. Concerning Wealth and Wisdom in Court and Home (18:22–19:23)



²²He who finds a wife finds what is good
and receives favor from the LORD.

²³A poor man pleads for mercy,
but a rich man answers harshly.

²⁴A man of many companions may come to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

^{19:1}Better a poor man whose walk is blameless
than a fool whose lips are perverse.

²It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,
nor to be hasty and miss the way.

³A man's own folly ruins his life,
yet his heart rages against the LORD.

⁴Wealth brings many friends,
but a poor man's friend deserts him.

⁵A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who pours out lies will not go free.

⁶Many curry favor with a ruler,
and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts.

⁷A poor man is shunned by all his relatives—
how much more do his friends avoid him!
Though he pursues them with pleading,
they are nowhere to be found.

⁸He who gets wisdom loves his own soul;
he who cherishes understanding prospers.

⁹A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who pours out lies will perish.

¹⁰It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury—
how much worse for a slave to rule over princes!

¹¹A man's wisdom gives him patience;
it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

¹²A king's rage is like the roar of a lion,

but his favor is like dew on the grass.
¹³A foolish son is his father's ruin,
and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping.
¹⁴Houses and wealth are inherited from parents,
but a prudent wife is from the LORD.
¹⁵Laziness brings on deep sleep,
and the shiftless man goes hungry.
¹⁶He who obeys instructions guards his life,
but he who is contemptuous of his ways will die.
¹⁷He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward him for what he has done.
¹⁸Discipline your son, for in that there is hope;
do not be a willing party to his death.
¹⁹A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty;
if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.
²⁰Listen to advice and accept instruction,
and in the end you will be wise.
²¹Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.
²²What a man desires is unfailing love;
better to be poor than a liar.
²³The fear of the LORD leads to life:
Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

COMMENTARY

18:22 *Wife, a blessing.* A good marriage is a good gift from God. The parallelism is formal, the second line explaining the first: finding a mate is the sign of favor from God (see Note). Although it does not specify so, the verse clearly means a “good” wife. Proverbs 31:10–31 develops this idea more fully, whereas other passages lament a bad wife (e.g., 12:4; Ecc 7:26).

Whoever finds a good wife—or, as it can be broadened, a good marriage—finds “good” (*ṭôb*, meaning “fortune, favor,” not a “good thing”). The background of the saying may be Genesis 2:18, which affirms that it was “not good for the man to be alone.” The word “good” describes that which is pleasing to God, beneficial to life, and abundantly enjoyable.

23 *Speech, humble or harsh.* One’s social status determines the tone of one’s voice. The contrast is between the poor man and the rich man. The poor man “pleads for mercy” because he has no choice—he has to ask. The rich man, however, often speaks “harshly”; he has hardened himself against such appeals because of relentless demands. It is generally the way of the world.

24 *Friendship, loyal.* It is better to have one good, faithful friend than numerous unreliable ones. The first line of the contrast says, “A man of many friends [‘companions,’ NIV] comes to ruin.” The Hebrew *l’hitrô ‘ēa’* is difficult. It means “for being crushed” or “to be shattered,” not “to show oneself friendly” (cf. KJV). The idea may be that there are friends to one’s undoing (if we read *yēš*, “there is,” instead of *’îš*, “a man,” with Toy, 366). If a person has friends who are unreliable, he may still come to ruin, especially if these nominal friends use him. The second line is clearer: “there is a friend [*’ôhēb*] who sticks closer than a brother.” This indeed is a rare treasure!

19:1 *Poverty, better than folly.* Personal integrity, even with poverty, is far better than foolish perversion. This proverb provides a contrast between two selected situations. One is poverty with integrity (*b’tummô*; “blameless,” NIV), and the other is “perverse [speech]” (*’iqqēš*, “twisted”) of a “fool” (*k’sîl*). Some change “fool” to “rich” to make a better parallel and to match 28:6, but the change is unnecessary. The verse teaches people to follow honesty, even if it leads to poverty (see also 18:23; 19:22).

2 *Zeal, without knowledge.* Ill-advised and thoughtless zeal leads to failure. The lines are loosely synonymous. In the first the word *nepeš* means “vitality, drive,” so it describes the eager “zeal” of a person. Without knowledge this will be unsuccessful (“not good”). Neither is there success for those who are “hasty” (*’āš b’raglayim*, lit., “hasty with the feet”) and “miss the way” (*hōṭē*; see Jdg 20:16; Job 5:24). Kidner, 132, underscores “how negative is the achievement of the man who wants tangible and quick rewards”—he will miss the way. The passage reminds us that we must

know the time and the direction for action, or zealous effort will be a futile activity.

3 Character traits, blaming God. Fools will try to blame God when they ruin their lives. The first line establishes the fact that it is a person's "folly" (*ʿiwwelet*) that ruins his life; the second adds that he "rages" (*yizʿap*) against God. The fool is not willing to accept failure as his own. Of course, to blame God is also folly. Sirach 27:25 says, "He who throws a stone into the air is throwing it on his own head."

4 Wealth, its effect. People run after the wealthy. Like 18:23–24, this proverb simply makes the observation on the reality of life. It does so with a contrast between the rich and the poor; wealth adds many friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friends. People will run after the rich in the hope of gaining something, but they will avoid the poor out of fear that the poor might be trying to gain something from them.

5 Speech, false witnesses. The lines of this proverb are in synonymous parallelism; "false witness" is parallel to "pours out lies." Such people will be punished. The saying is general, because sometimes a perjurer gets away with the crime. The Talmud affirms, "False witnesses are contemptible even to those who hire them" (*b. Sanh.* 29b; see also v.9; 6:19; 14:5, 25).

6 Friendship, influential. People seek the friendship of influential people. The two ideas in this verse are loosely synonymous. The first uses the image of "stroking the face" (*yʰallû pʰnê*); this means "to mollify, to make the face soft, to curry favor" (NIV; cf. Ps 45:12). The second line introduces "gifts" again (*mattān*). As with Proverbs 18:23–24, this proverb acknowledges the value of gifts in life, especially in business and politics.

7 Poverty, its effect. People avoid those who are poor. This verse is difficult; it has three parallel units, but the third is unclear. As the text stands in the MT, the first two lines are loosely synonymous: "A poor man is hated [*šʿnē ʿuhû*; 'shunned,' NIV] by all his relatives—/ how much more do his friends avoid him!" But the third line adds, "He pursues them [*mʿraddēp*] with pleading [*ʿmārîm*], / but they are nowhere to be found." The last line is open to various translations, none of which is completely satisfactory. Toy, 370, argues that it is probably the remnant of a lost couplet and thus hardly possible to restore the full meaning. The basic meaning of the passage is clear, however; the idea of "hate," in the sense of

“reject,” tells how superficial friends and relatives will abandon the poor man. The plight of Job captures such abandonment.

8 *Wisdom, profitable.* Those who choose wisdom will prosper. The lines are loosely synonymous: “gets wisdom [lit., ‘a heart’]” parallels “cherishes understanding,” and “loves his own soul” (i.e., has regard for his own interests) parallels “prosper” (lit., “finds good”). Loving life states the cause, and finding good adds its effect. Toy, 371, notes that “intellectual insight (= clearness of thought, good sense) is profitable in this life, the moral as well as the physical life being probably included.”

9 *Speech, perjury.* Those who bear false witness will be punished. This proverb is the same as v.5, except that the last line changes to the verb *yōbēd* (“will perish”).

10 *Character traits, inappropriate positions.* A servant who gains power is worse than a fool who obtains wealth. Two thoughts here present unbearable conditions, one being slightly worse than the other. The operative word is *nā'weh*—“It is *not fitting* [italics mine] for a fool to live in luxury.” Of course, if the fool changed and earned it, that is one thing. But this verse is about a misfit. The second thought is a slave who takes command over princes (see 12:24; 17:2). In these reversals the fool will only make worse his bad qualities—boorishness, insensitivity, and lack of discipline—and the slave will become arrogant and cruel. Toy, 371, says, “Wealth and power befit only the wise and the free.” For other unbearable things, see 11:22; 17:7; 26:1; 30:21–23.

11 *Patience, its nature.* Patience is prudent and honorable. The first line declares that “prudence” or “wisdom” causes patience. This *śēkel* (GK 8507) is good sense; it makes the man even tempered. McKane, 530, says:

The virtue which is indicated here is more than a forgiving temper; it includes also the ability to shrug off insults and the absence of a brooding hypersensitivity. It is the ability to deny to an adversary the pleasure of hearing a yelp of pain even when his words have inflicted a wound, of making large allowances for human frailties and keeping the lines of communication open. It contains elements of toughness and self-discipline; it is the capacity to stifle a hot, emotional rejoinder and to sleep on an insult.

This kind of person prudently delays expressing anger (*he'rik 'appô*; “gives him patience,” NIV) and passes over an offense. Patience like this is “his glory” (lit., “his honor,” signifying more the idea of beauty or adornment). Kidner, 133, explains that such patience “brings out here the glowing colours of a virtue which in practice may look drably unassertive.”

12 *Emotions, of a king.* A king has the power to terrify or to refresh. Through the use of two similes, the verse contrasts the king’s “rage” (*za'ap*) with his “pleasure” or “favor” (*r'sônô*). The first simile, the roar of a lion, presents him at his most dangerous attitude (see 20:2; Am 3:4). But the second portrays him as benevolent. For similar teachings see Proverbs 16:14–15; 20:2; 28:15. For a picture of the ideal king, see 2 Samuel 23:3–4. This proverb advises the king’s subjects to use tact and the king to cultivate kindness.

13 *Family, its ruin.* Folly and strife destroy a home. There are two problems that bring chaos to a family. The first is a foolish son (lit., “son of a fool,” meaning a son who is a fool), and the second is a “quarrelsome wife” (*midynê 'iššâ*). The foolish son brings “ruin” (*hawwôt*) to the father (cf. 10:1; 17:21, 25); the quarrelsome wife is merely annoying (cf. 27:15–16).

14 *Family, prudent wife.* A prudent wife, unlike property, is God’s special gift. The verse contrasts wealth that can be inherited from a father with a “prudent” (*maškālet*) wife who is from the Lord. The verse does not answer questions about unhappy marriages or bad wives; rather, it simply affirms that when a marriage turns out well, one should credit God (cf. 18:22; 31:10–31).

15 *Laziness, its consequences.* Those who are lazy waste time and lose money. These loosely synonymous clauses stress one basic point. “Laziness” (*ašlâ*) brings on a “deep sleep.” *Tardēmâ* is used to describe complete inactivity (see Ge 2:21; Jn 1:5); here it probably signifies lethargy (Whybray, 110). This individual wastes time that is needed to provide for himself and his family. Parallel is the “shiftless man” (*r'mîyâ*) who goes hungry. Once again the first line presents the cause (“deep sleep”) and the second the effect (“goes hungry”).

16 *Instruction, obedience to.* Obedience to instruction is a safeguard of life. Another antithetical parallelism stresses this point: obedience contrasts with contempt and life with death. The first line affirms that obedience to

instruction safeguards life. This “instruction” (*miṣwâ*; GK 5184) may refer to the teaching of the sages or to God’s law. If it refers to God’s commandments, there is a stronger guarantee of safety for life.

The second line announces that the one who holds God’s ways in contempt will die (see Note). “His ways” could refer to the conduct of the individual or to the divine instruction (parallel to *miṣwâ*). If the latter is the case, then the punishment is more certain (even if through the courts). Toy, 374, offers the emendation from “his ways” to “his word” (as in 13:13), but unnecessarily so.

17 Rewards for charity. This proverb teaches that the Lord will reward those who give to the poor. The one who is gracious or “kind” (*hônēn*) to the poor is actually lending to the Lord, and the Lord will repay or “reward” (*y’sallem*) him for his deed. This promise of reward does not necessarily signify that he will get his money back; the rewards in Proverbs involve life and prosperity in general. In the NT such kindness is viewed as kindness to the Lord (Mt 25:40); see also the reward for following Jesus (19:27–28).

18 Discipline, its benefit. It is necessary to discipline (*ysr*) children to prevent their premature death. Proverbs here and elsewhere teaches that to refrain from discipline allows a child to grow up stupid or wicked and thereby possibly incur death as a result of bad behavior (Whybray, 110). The motivation for such discipline is that “there is hope” (*tiqwâ*), an excellent reason to keep at it. The clause in the second half literally reads, “Do not lift up your life to kill him”; that is, do not make the kind of decisions that will lead to his death (i.e., to allow him to go astray through neglect). The idea in *ysr* includes both chastisement and instruction.

19 Character traits, hot temper. The second line of this proverb presents the consequence of the action of the first. Although the text is difficult (see Note), the point is that a hot-tempered person will be constantly in trouble. “Pay the penalty” suggests paying a fine, so the trouble could be legal. The second line warns that if you save this person from his legal troubles, you will have to do it again and again. Unless he changes, he will always need bailing out.

20 Instruction, acceptance of. By accepting advice and discipline, one becomes wise. This proverb is one continuous thought, the second half providing the purpose of the advice. The vocabulary reminds the reader of chs. 1–9: “Listen to advice [*’ēṣâ*] and accept instruction [*mûsār*; lit.,

‘discipline’].” This advice is in all probability the teachings of the sages that will make one wise. “In the end” there will be maturity from all the discipline, and there will be steadfast perseverance in the path of life.

21 *Sovereignty of God.* The success of our plans depends on God’s will. In the form of a contrast, the proverb teaches that only those plans that God approves will succeed (see 16:1, 9). People have many “plans,” but the Lord’s counsel or “purpose” will stand. Humans are diverse and uncertain; God is absolutely wise and sure, as Toy, 378, reminds us. *Midrash Mishlê* applies this passage to the accounts of Pharaoh, Absalom, and Haman.

22 *Character traits, loyalty.* Loyal love is better than wealth. According to the MT (see Note), what is desired is “unfailing love, loyalty” (*ḥasdô*). *Ḥesed* (GK 2876) refers to the bond of loyal love between members of the covenant. It was expected that covenanters would be faithful in their words and deeds of kindness. The second line may present the logical inference from this; “a liar” is without *ḥesed* entirely, and so poverty is better than that character trait. *Kāzāb* (“liar”) can be used in the sense of a mirage, so perhaps there is a closer antithesis between faithful love and false friend.

23 *Fear of the Lord, safety and contentment.* Piety brings a life of contentment and safety. The saying uses synthetic parallelism, the second part carrying the idea of life further. “Life” is probably a metonymy for all the blessings and prosperity in life. Its essential feature is “contentment” (*śābēaʿ*; “content,” NIV) that lodges without being visited by calamity or “trouble” (*rāʿ*). The vocabulary is vivid: “rests” is metaphorical for abide, and “untouched” means without any intervention to alter one’s destiny. When one lives a life of piety, the Lord provides a quality of life that cannot be disrupted by such evil.

NOTES

18:22 The LXX saw fit to embellish the line for the complete thought: “Whoever puts away a good wife puts away good, and whoever keeps an adulteress is foolish and ungodly.”

19:13 The LXX substitutes in v.13b the moralistic observation, “vows paid out of hire of a harlot are not pure.”

16 “Will die” represents the Qere reading יָמוּת (*yāmût*), which harmonizes best with Proverbs. The Kethiv, יֻמָּת (*yûmāt*), a Hophal, is

“will be put to death.” The Hophal is common in legal literature, but it never occurs in wisdom literature. A death sentence is not expected in a proverb (Waltke, 2:91).

19 There are many renderings of this verse that make its true meaning elusive (see Toy, 376–77). For example, the second clause could be: “If you save (your enemy), you will add (good to yourself)”; “If you save (your son by chastisement), you may continue (chastisement and so educate him)”; etc. However, as Toy says, all such translational attempts must supply a good deal of interpretation.

22 The MT has תַּאֲוָה (*taʾwat*, “desire, lust”) and yields, “What is desired in a man is loyalty.” The LXX has καρπός (*karpos*, “fruit,” probably from תְּבוּאָה [*tʾbû ʿat*], “produce”). It reads, “The fruit of man is mercy.” “Desire” is the preferable reading in this couplet, which is an attempt to inspire loyal love.

F. Fools and Punishment (19:24–20:11)

- ²⁴The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he will not even bring it back to his mouth!
- ²⁵Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence;
rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge.
- ²⁶He who robs his father and drives out his mother
is a son who brings shame and disgrace.
- ²⁷Stop listening to instruction, my son,
and you will stray from the words of knowledge.
- ²⁸A corrupt witness mocks at justice,
and the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil.
- ²⁹Penalties are prepared for mockers,
and beatings for the backs of fools.
- ^{20:1}Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler;
whoever is led astray by them is not wise.

²A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion;
he who angers him forfeits his life.
³It is to a man's honor to avoid strife,
but every fool is quick to quarrel.
⁴A sluggard does not plow in season;
so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.
⁵The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters,
but a man of understanding draws them out.
⁶Many a man claims to have unfailing love,
but a faithful man who can find?
⁷The righteous man leads a blameless life;
blessed are his children after him.
⁸When a king sits on his throne to judge,
he winnows out all evil with his eyes.
⁹Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure;
I am clean and without sin"?
¹⁰Differing weights and differing measures—
the LORD detests them both.
¹¹Even a child is known by his actions,
by whether his conduct is pure and right.

COMMENTARY

24 *Laziness, its nature.* Some people are too lazy to eat. This humorous portrayal is certainly an exaggeration. It probably was meant more widely for anyone who starts a project but lacks the energy or desire to complete it (Whybray, 111). The sluggard "buries" (*tāman*, perhaps a cleverly chosen metaphor) his hand in the dish and is too lazy to pull it out—even to feed himself! (See also 26:15.)

25 *Discipline, its effect.* Discipline affects people differently. The antithetical proverb shows the different ways discipline works. Three types

of people are noted here: the “mockers” (*lēš*) with a closed mind, the “simple” or simpleton (*petî*) with an empty mind, and the “discerning” (*nābôn*) with an open mind (Kidner, 135). The simpleton learns by observing punishment given to the scoffer. Although the punishment will have no effect on the scoffer, it should still be given, for the *petî* will learn what the *lēš* does not (McKane, 525–26). The discerning person, however, will learn from verbal rebuke, even if it is painful truth. This is the more rational way. The contrast is caught in a wordplay in the *Midrash*: “For the wise a hint [*remez*], for the fool a fist [*kûrmêzā*]” (*Midr. Mishlê* 22:6).

26 *Family, mistreatment of parents.* Anyone who abuses one’s parents is a disgrace. The saying portrays this ingrate as one who “robs” his father and “drives out” his mother. Father/mother may be taken as a poetic stereotypical word pair rather than as two ideas separating what is done to the father and then to the mother (see 10:1; 17:21; 23:24). The proverb may have in mind the son who wishes to take over his father’s lands prematurely.

27 *Discipline, its rejection.* Rejecting discipline leads to disobedience. The verse includes an admonition and its motivation (a result). The admonition uses irony (it is not a conditional clause): “Stop listening to instruction, my son.” Of course it means, “Do not cease” to do so. The result of ceasing to listen is that the son will stray from the words of knowledge.

28 *Justice, corrupt witnesses.* Corrupt witnesses are a mockery to justice. The portrayal of the wicked witnesses in this proverb is arranged in loose synonymous parallelism. The wicked are first described as *‘ēd b’lîyya‘al*. *B’lîyya‘al* (GK 1175) does not mean “worthless” but wicked; they are witnesses who wilfully distort the facts (“corrupt,” NIV). Such activity certainly “mocks” (*yālîš*, from *lîš*, “to scorn”) justice.

The second line says that the mouth of the wicked “gulps down evil” (*y‘balla‘-’āwen*). The verb “gulps down, swallows” does not seem to fit the line very well. Some have emended it to *yabbîa‘* (“gushes”; cf. *BHS* margin). Driver (cited by McKane, 529), on the basis of the Arabic *balāga*, reads “enunciates,” which makes a fine parallel for the idea of false witnesses. However the last verb is translated, the proverb clearly decries wilfully corrupting justice through false witnessing.

29 Retribution, its certainty. Fools will be punished. The lines are almost identical. *Špāṭîm* (lit., “judgments”) is a metonymy and may be rendered “penalties.” This parallels “beatings” closely and makes the emendation to *šbāṭîm* (“rods”) unnecessary (cf. *BHS* margin).

20:1 Drink, its effects. The use of alcohol can lead to foolish behavior. The formal parallelism shows first the effects of intoxication and then makes an evaluation. The drinks are wine and beer, made from grapes and grains (see Lev 10:9; Dt 14:26; Isa 28:7). The terms “wine” and “beer” may be metonymies for those who drink them, or they may be personifications. In either case the point is the conduct of the inebriated person—mocking (*lêṣ*) and brawling (*hōmeh*). The excessive use of intoxicants excites the drinker to boisterous behavior and aggressive and belligerent attitudes; it confuses the senses so that he is out of control. Whoever overimbibes is unwise; it just is not sensible to drink to excess (Toy, 382).

Moreover, given the ease with which one may make a habit of drinking too much, it is wise to avoid alcohol entirely. In the OT the use of alcohol was not prohibited; in fact, it was regularly used at festivals and celebrations. But intoxication was considered out of bounds for a member of the covenantal community (see 23:20–21, 29–35; 31:4–7).

2 Emotions, of a king. It is unsafe to provoke the anger of a king. The verse begins with a comparison and then offers an explanation. The “wrath” (*êmat*) of a king is compared to a lion’s roar, indicating imminent judgment. Anyone who angers a king will “forfeit” (*hôtē*; lit., “miss” or “sin against”) his life. The verb *mit ‘abbêrô* is problematic. The Hebrew form suggests “is angry with,” but the LXX more appropriately has “angers”; the word has also been taken to mean “vent anger against” (see Note). The simple idea is that one would do well to stay away from any angry person, especially a king who cannot be treated like other men (Whybray, 113; see also 16:14; 19:12).

3 Conduct, avoiding strife. Honorable people find ways to avoid strife. A contrast is presented here between avoiding “strife” (*rîb*) and jumping at a chance for a “quarrel” (*yitgallā*, which includes the idea of snarling like a dog). The former is the way of honor and dignity; the latter, the manner of a “fool” (*‘wîl* here). One cannot avoid strife entirely but should avoid every unnecessary confrontation. As McKane, 537, says, the honorable person stops short of undignified and unedifying wrangling; it is this person who

has the capacity of preserving a working relationship with even the most difficult people (see also 17:14, 28; 18:2).

4 Laziness, its results. A farmer who is too lazy to plant at the right time will find no harvest. The parallel lines present the cause and the effect. The first line describes the lazy man or “sluggard” (*‘āṣēl*) who does not plant in the autumn (see Note). The right time for planting was the rainy season (see Ge 8:22). It was cold, wet, and unpleasant. Perhaps such discomfort was his excuse. The effect is that at harvest time, when the sluggard “looks” (*yšā‘al*; lit., “asks”), there is “nothing.” The verse suggests that he did plant but perhaps at the wrong time or half-heartedly (contrast Ps 126:5–6), since he actually looks for some harvest. It is also possible to take the verb *yšā‘al* to mean that he begs others for a share of their income. This character is typical of all who want excellence without putting forth the effort.

5 Discernment, motives. Those who are wise can discern the motives of the heart. This saying is one continuous sentence, though it exhibits a bit of an antithesis. The counsel or purpose (*‘eṣā*) in the heart is first compared to “deep waters.” This figure probably means that one’s motives are difficult to “fathom”—it takes a counselor with “understanding” (*tʿbûnâ*) to “draw them out.” The line shows how important good counseling is.

Plaut, 209, notes that if we are not aware of our motivations, others who are wise may enable us to discover them. Of course, there is always the need for discernment as to how much should be dredged from within the heart. McKane, 536, takes a slightly different approach, interpreting the “deep waters” to mean profound ideas (as in 18:4). Accordingly, it would take the wise to use their skills of clarification and interpretation.

6 It is rare to find a truly faithful friend. A contrast is offered here between many who claim to have faithful love and the rarity of one who actually has it. Many people profess “love” (*ḥesed*), but such professions are often hollow. The shift to *ʿmûnîm* (“faithful”) in the second clause makes this clear and captures the truth—it is rare to find one on whom you can depend.

7 Integrity, its heritage. The integrity of parents will extend to the lives of their children. Two terms portray this integrity—*ṣaddîq* and *tōm*. *Ṣaddîq* (GK 7404) introduces the “righteous” man as a member of the believing community who strives to live according to God’s standards, and *tōm* (GK 9448) shows his lifestyle to be “blameless.” The line describes a parent who

believes in the Lord and lives out the claims of his faith. Based on this description the second clause anticipates a blessing on the children. In God's economy the nature and actions of parents have an effect on children (Ex 20:4–6); here the parents' legacy is righteousness, and so the children reap the benefits (see 14:26).

8 *Justice, a king's discernment.* The righteous king discerns right from wrong. The first clause lays the foundation and the second explains its outworking. The king in the ancient world was a judge, one whose counsel stood (see 2Sa 15:2–4; 1Ki 3:28; Ps 72:4; Isa 11:3–4). This proverb names justice (*dîn*; “to judge,” NIV) as the basis of his administration and then uses the image of winnowing to show that he removes evil from his realm (see Ps 101). The verse could apply to any person in authority, but certainly the principle stands that a just government roots out the evils of society (Plaut, 210). Unfortunately, no government has ever lived up to this ideal.

9 *Conduct, sinlessness.* No one can say that he or she is pure in thought and deed. There is a development in thought with the second part of the proverb. Using a rhetorical question, the sage affirms that no one is sinless. To claim to have kept the heart “pure” (*zikkîti*) is to say that all decisions and motives have been faultless; and to claim “I am clean” (*ṭāhartî*) is to say that moral perfection has been attained and one is therefore acceptable to God (*ṭāhar*, “clean,” in the Levitical laws of purification meaning “purged of all sin”).

Many passages affirm the inevitability of our sinfulness (Ge 6:5; 1Ki 8:46; Ps 143:2), and Psalm 51:7 teaches that one can claim to be pure only if made pure by divine forgiveness. The sages here reflect the weakness of humanity. McKane, 548, says that one “can never be certain that his mind is pure and that he is without alloy of sin. Even when he has no good reason to believe otherwise and might draw such a conclusion in good faith, he cannot be certain that he is not self-deceived and has failed to plumb unsuspected depths of duplicity and perversion which Yahweh will take into account.” So this proverb should bring us to personal humility and engender in us an understanding of the failures of others.

10 *Honesty, in business.* The Lord detests dishonesty in business. See v.23; 11:1, which are based on Deuteronomy 25:13–16.

11 *Righteousness, displayed in actions.* Righteous conduct reveals righteous character. The verse develops through synthetic parallelism the

idea that a young child's character can be recognized by his actions. The *na'ar* in the first nine chapters referred to a young man, one whose character is formed in his early life; but here it refers to a younger boy. Parents can recognize certain traits in a child's conduct. If it is pure and upright, they can cultivate this; if it is not, they must try to develop it through teaching, disciplining, and personal example.

NOTES

19:27 Waltke, 2:92, observes that numerous alterations of the text have been proposed because of a failure to reckon with the proverb's sarcasm. The LXX rewords the line to read a participial form with the subject: "A son who ceases to attend to discipline of his father is likely to stray from words of knowledge." Others have weakened the translation by making it a conditional clause. But in the MT "my son" is a vocative followed by an imperative. McKane, 525, also argues for the MT, but on form-critical considerations.

29 Toy, 382, adopted the LXX reading of "scourges" instead of "penalties." The variant may have misread *šebet* as *šôṭîm*.

20:2 McKane, 543–44, surveys several suggestions for *מִתְעַבֵּר* (*mit 'abb'rô*, "he who angers him"); the LXX has "he who irritates [the king]"; HALOT has "he who loses his temper." Driver, connecting to the Arabic *gābara*, suggests "he that is negligent." The literal translation of the MT is "the one who makes him to show himself angry." There is no reason to resort to a cognate for the meaning when the Hebrew usage is clear enough.

4 The line says, "A sluggard does not plow from winter on." Toy, 384, rejects the translations of "winter" (RV) or the "cold" (Latin) because the point is laziness. The LXX reads "reproach," and this reading led to other changes in the line: "A sluggard when reproached is not ashamed; so also he who borrows grain in harvest."

6 The first line of this proverb is difficult. The line in the Hebrew begins with an emphatic nominal absolute, *rāb-'ādām*, "As for many human beings . . ." (Waltke, 2:119). But then the Targum, Syriac, and Vulgate make the verb passive: "many men are called merciful." This would require a

different pointing of the verb. Greenstone, 213, paraphrases the sense of the verse as, “Most men meet people who will do them occasional kindnesses.”

G. Speech and Business (20:12–19)

- ¹²Ears that hear and eyes that see—
the LORD has made them both.
- ¹³Do not love sleep or you will grow poor;
stay awake and you will have food to spare.
- ¹⁴“It’s no good, it’s no good!” says the buyer;
then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.
- ¹⁵Gold there is, and rubies in abundance,
but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.
- ¹⁶Take the garment of one who puts up security for a
stranger;
hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman.
- ¹⁷Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man,
but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel.
- ¹⁸Make plans by seeking advice;
if you wage war, obtain guidance.
- ¹⁹A gossip betrays a confidence;
so avoid a man who talks too much.

COMMENTARY

12 *Human nature, God’s creation.* The Lord has prepared people with the capacity to see and hear. The statement “ears that hear and eyes that see” refers to the two basic senses, though Toy, 386, thinks they represent all the God-given faculties. Certainly Scripture affirms their God-givenness (see Ex 4:11). By usage “hear” also means “obey” (see 1Sa 15:22; Pr 15:31;

25:12) and “see” also means “perceive, understand” (Isa 6:9–10). The verse not only credits the Lord with creating these senses but also reminds all people of their spiritual use in God’s service.

13 *Diligence, rewarded.* Diligence leads to prosperity. The verse is set in antithetical parallelism, the ideas of loving sleep and staying awake being contrasted, as well as their results of growing poor and being satisfied. Just as sleep can be used for slothfulness, so opening the eyes and staying awake can represent vigorous, active conduct. The second line uses two imperatives to stress the point: “stay awake . . . and [in order that you may] be satisfied” (“you will have food to spare,” NIV; see also 6:9–11; 19:15).

14 *Honesty, in business.* Some people falsely appraise a deal to gain a bargain. This humorous but realistic point may be looked at in several ways. It presents a buyer who complains about how bad the deal is for him: “It’s no good, it’s no good” (*raʿ raʿ*; lit., “bad, bad”) and then goes away bragging about it. This may simply reflect normal procedure in a world where haggling for prices was common, but it may also be a warning to the inexperienced on how things are done and perhaps evaluates it as a questionable business practice. Shrewdness is one thing, but deceitful misrepresentation in the deal in order to buy under value becomes unethical.

15 *Speech, wise words.* It is rare to find someone who speaks knowledgeably. The verse is normally taken as antithetical parallelism, “gold” and “rubies” being contrasted with “lips that speak knowledge.” Toy, 388, however, arranges it as follows: “store of gold and wealth of corals and precious vessels—all are wise lips.” “Lips that speak knowledge” should be taken to mean “lips that impart knowledge,” viz., wise speech.

16 *Obligations, fulfilled.* People should be held to their obligations. Two synonymous lines teach that a person who foolishly becomes responsible for another person’s debts should be made to keep his word. Taking the garment was the way of holding someone responsible to pay debts. The person for whom this “one” took responsibility is called “a stranger” (*zār/nokrîyâ*; see Note). The reference may be to other members of society in general. Dahood, 359–66, tries to argue that the cloak was given in pledge for a harlot, so here two crimes are in view: taking a cloak and going to a wayward woman (*nokrîyâ*; see also Snijders, 85–86).

17 Dishonesty, its effects. Good things acquired dishonestly will not bring satisfaction. The before and after scenes are presented in the two lines. “Food gained by fraud” means anything that is obtained through dishonest means; the image of “food” harmonizes with “sweet” (*‘ārēb*) in the initial response. The imagery is advanced in the second line: “he ends up with a mouth full of gravel” (a mass of small particles; see Job 20:14–15; La 3:16). One thinks immediately of the bitterness after Adam’s and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit (Ge 3), but this verse applies to anything wrongfully acquired.

18 Plans, sound advice. Effective plans incorporate sound advice. This verse is written as an injunction; it presents a continuous idea of first making plans and then waging a war. Sound “advice” (*‘ēṣâ*) and “guidance” (*taḥbulôt*) are indispensable to the success of the mission. There have been many attempts to offer figurative interpretations of “war,” such as life’s struggles, litigation, or even evil inclinations (Rashi); but there is no reason or justification for this—it likely describes preparation for going to war, and in that there is wisdom in the consensus of leaders (see 24:6).

19 Speech, gossip. It is dangerous to associate with a gossip. The first line pictures the gossip as one who goes about revealing secrets, and the second line warns against associating with the person who talks too much. If a person is willing to talk to you about others, he will be willing to talk to others about you. McKane, 537, observes that these people are not necessarily malicious; they just lack discernment and are too garrulous. The less contact one has with a gossip, the better off one will be.

NOTE

16 The text involves a Kethiv-Qere reading. The Kethiv and the Vulgate have *nokrîm*, “foreigners” or “other men,” but the Qere and the Targum have *nokrîyâ*, “foreign woman” or “other man’s wife” (as in 27:13). The parallelism suggests that “stranger” is the correct reading, though theories have been presented with regard to the Masoretic correction to the idea of the wayward woman (NIV). Plaut, 211, moderately says that willful foolishness must be paid for, especially when it involves another man’s wife. In support of the Kethiv, however, Waltke, 2:139, suggests that the original form was *nokrî-m* with enclitic *mem*, a form that was not understood by the Masoretes.

H. Justice through the King (20:20–28)

- ²⁰If a man curses his father or mother,
his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.
- ²¹An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning
will not be blessed at the end.
- ²²Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!”
Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.
- ²³The LORD detests differing weights,
and dishonest scales do not please him.
- ²⁴A man’s steps are directed by the LORD.
How then can anyone understand his own way?
- ²⁵It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly
and only later to consider his vows.
- ²⁶A wise king winnows out the wicked;
he drives the threshing wheel over them.
- ²⁷The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man;
it searches out his inmost being.
- ²⁸Love and faithfulness keep a king safe;
through love his throne is made secure.

COMMENTARY

20 *Conduct, cursing parents.* Whoever curses his parents will be destroyed. Under the law (Ex 21:17; Lev 20:9; Dt 27:16), whoever cursed his parents was cursed with death. That judgment seems to be caught poetically in this single-sentence proverb. The topic is cursing (*qālal*, “to treat lightly, contemptuously”; GK 7838) parents, which, as Plaut, 212, reminds us, can be done in a number of ways, including denying and disparaging one’s origin and background. The punishment is that “his lamp

will be snuffed out,” and he will be left in pitch darkness. The lamp is metaphorical for the life; for the lamp to go out means death (see 13:9) and possibly also removal of posterity (see Whybray, 115). In practice this curse may have been a social punishment only, i.e., the curser of parents being considered by others as dead (see Toy, 390).

21 Prosperity, sudden but unsatisfying. Sudden prosperity may not prove satisfying. The statement that prosperity gained suddenly will not be blessed in the end seems general. The implication is that what is “quickly gained” is either unlawful or unrighteous. The verb describes a hurried or hastened activity; perhaps a wayward son seizes the inheritance quickly (cf. Lk 15:12) or even drives out his parents (cf. Pr 19:26). In either case divine justice is at work—this enterprise “will not be blessed” (*lō’ t̄bōrāk*); rather than prosper, it will probably be wasted.

22 Retribution, God’s work. Leave retribution to the Lord; let him bring about a just deliverance. The verse uses two imperatives to make the point; there is a slight antithesis between the two since one is negative (“Do not say”) and the other positive (“Wait”). The righteous should not take vengeance on evil, for only God can repay evil justly (cf. Ro 12:19–20). The response of the righteous must be to “wait” (*qawwēh*) on the Lord; this waiting involves belief in and reliance on God. The work of the Lord here focuses on the positive side—he is a deliverer (*yōšā’*) rather than an avenger, although to deliver the righteous involves judgment on the wicked. The spirit of the verse is caught in the Talmud in *b. Gittin 7a*: “Do not even ask him to inflict punishment on them.”

23 Honesty, in business. The Lord detests dishonesty in business (see v.10; 11:1).

24 Providence, divine. God’s control of our lives is beyond human comprehension. This proverb contains an affirmation and then a rhetorical question based on it: the “steps of a mighty man [*miṣ‘dê-gāber*; ‘a man’s steps,’ NIV] are from the LORD”; how, then, can anyone discern or “understand” (*yābîn*) his way? How can anyone delude himself into thinking that he does not need the Lord when even a strong man’s activities are divinely prepared (see, e.g., Ge 50:20; see also Pr 3:6 for the proper advice in view of this truth). McKane, 546–47, says: “No man can walk with enlightened assurance along the path of life by reason of a well-cultivated nicety of judgment and power of intellectual penetration. He is

dependent at every step of the way on Yahweh, and without his light on his path his journey is deprived of safe guidance and enlightened purposiveness.”

25 *Speech, rash vows.* Do not get caught in a rash vow. This single-sentence warning about making a rash vow addresses a common problem. Dedicating rashly (lit., declaring something sacred, as in Mk 7:11) is considered a “trap” (*môqēš*) because it can lead the person into financial difficulties. (Leviticus 27 explains that Israelites could buy themselves out of rash vows, but doing so was expensive.) Whybray, 116, broadens the warning to the avoidance of all unconsidered action. After making a vow, one must consider how to fulfill it. Too many people will make promises under the inspiration of the hour only later to realize that they have strapped themselves; they then try to go back on their word.

26 *Justice, removing wickedness.* A wise king purges his kingdom of the wicked. Using loosely synonymous parallelism, the sage draws on the image of winnowing to explain how the king removes evil from his empire. The metaphor implies that the king can identify and rightly judge evildoers. The figure of driving the wheel over them represents a threshing process; the sharp iron wheels of the threshing cart easily served the purpose (cf. Isa 28:27–28). So this image also expresses the king’s discrimination and ability to destroy evil from his domain (see also D. Winton Thomas, “Proverbs 20:26,” *JTS* 15 [1964]: 155–56).

27 *Conscience, searching motives.* God provides everyone with a spirit that can evaluate actions and motives. The Hebrew literally says that the “breath” (*nišmat*; “spirit,” NIV) is the lamp of the Lord, though the NIV interprets it differently and supplies “searches” to v.27a from v.27b (though cf. NIV margin). The *n’šāmâ* (GK 5972) is that inner spiritual part of human life that was inbreathed at creation (Ge 2:7) and that constitutes humans as spiritual beings with moral, intellectual, and spiritual capacities. This spiritual nature includes the capacity to know and please God—it serves as the functioning conscience (the metaphor of “lamp”).

This point is further developed in the second part; the searching makes it possible for people to know themselves. If one’s spiritual life is functioning properly (i.e., yielded to God through salvation and controlled by his Word [Heb 4:12]), then there should be increasingly less self-deception or indifference to righteousness.

28 *Stability, in government.* Faithful covenant-love brings stability in society. The parallel ideas stress the security of the king's administration. The first line uses "love and faithfulness [lit., 'truth']" (*ḥesed we'emet*), two terms that often form a hendiadys to express reliable love. *Ḥesed* (GK 2876) is singled out of this couplet to form the parallel idea that the throne is secure.

These are covenantal terms. In the Davidic covenant (cf. 2Sa 7:11–16) God promised not to take his covenant-love (*ḥesed*) from the king (cf. v.15) but to make his house stable (v.16). The two ideas are reiterated in Psalm 89:19–37, which expresses the covenant in poetry. It is the Lord and his faithfulness to his covenant that ultimately makes the empire secure; but the enjoyment of divine protection requires the king to rule with loyalty to the covenant.

I. Righteousness and Justice (20:29–21:31)

- ²⁹The glory of young men is their strength,
gray hair the splendor of the old.
- ³⁰Blows and wounds cleanse away evil,
and beatings purge the inmost being.
- ^{21:1}The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD;
he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.
- ²All a man's ways seem right to him,
but the LORD weighs the heart.
- ³To do what is right and just
is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.
- ⁴Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
the lamp of the wicked, are sin!
- ⁵The plans of the diligent lead to profit
as surely as haste leads to poverty.
- ⁶A fortune made by a lying tongue

is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.

⁷The violence of the wicked will drag them away,
for they refuse to do what is right.

⁸The way of the guilty is devious,
but the conduct of the innocent is upright.

⁹Better to live on a corner of the roof
than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

¹⁰The wicked man craves evil;
his neighbor gets no mercy from him.

¹¹When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom;
when a wise man is instructed, he gets knowledge.

¹²The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked
and brings the wicked to ruin.

¹³If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor,
he too will cry out and not be answered.

¹⁴A gift given in secret soothes anger,
and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great
wrath.

¹⁵When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous
but terror to evildoers.

¹⁶A man who strays from the path of understanding
comes to rest in the company of the dead.

¹⁷He who loves pleasure will become poor;
whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

¹⁸The wicked become a ransom for the righteous,
and the unfaithful for the upright.

¹⁹Better to live in a desert
than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.

²⁰In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil,
but a foolish man devours all he has.

²¹He who pursues righteousness and love

finds life, prosperity and honor.

²²A wise man attacks the city of the mighty
and pulls down the stronghold in which they trust.

²³He who guards his mouth and his tongue
keeps himself from calamity.

²⁴The proud and arrogant man—"Mocker" is his name;
he behaves with overweening pride.

²⁵The sluggard's craving will be the death of him,
because his hands refuse to work.

²⁶All day long he craves for more,
but the righteous give without sparing.

²⁷The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable—
how much more so when brought with evil intent!

²⁸A false witness will perish,
and whoever listens to him will be destroyed forever.

²⁹A wicked man puts up a bold front,
but an upright man gives thought to his ways.

³⁰There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the LORD.

³¹The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but victory rests with the LORD.

COMMENTARY

29 *Character traits, strength and honor.* Both youth and old people have their glory. This observation reminds us that there are different commendations in life. For young men it is strength; for old men it is gray hair. This verse must be taken in the context of ancient Israel and not modern civilization, which often has little respect for the elderly. "Gray hair" symbolizes everything valuable about age: dignity, wisdom, honor, experience. At the very least one can say that since the elderly have

survived, they must know something. At the most, they were the sages and wise elders of the people.

30 Discipline, spiritual value. Physical punishment may prove spiritually valuable. Loosely synonymous, the clauses focus on corporeal punishment: “blows and wounds”//“beatings,” which “cleanse” (*tamrîq*, “rub away”) the soul of evil. Other proverbs have explained that certain people will never learn from such discipline, but in general this saying is true. Kidner, 141, says that where the conscience is slow to work (see v.27), this intervention may be necessary. He then reminds us of the bruising and stripes of the Suffering Servant, through which we are healed—an interesting turn of the sentiment here (Isa 53:5).

21:1 Sovereignty of God. A king’s decisions are controlled by God. The verse uses synthetic parallelism to develop the point. The first line affirms that the decisions (“heart”) of the king are under the Lord’s control (“in the hand”), and the second explains that God directs the king as he pleases. What clarifies the second line is the simile that the heart is “like a watercourse.” As a farmer channels the water where he wants and regulates its flow, so does the Lord with the king. No human ruler is supreme; to put it another way, the Lord is truly the King of kings. Scripture offers many examples of the truth of this proverb (Ezr 7:21; Isa 10:6–7; 41:2–4; Da 2:21; Jn 19:11).

2 Knowledge, divine. The Lord evaluates our motives and not merely our actions. The verse, in antithetical parallelism, reiterates the point that we think we know ourselves; but the Lord knows our hearts, and his knowledge is evaluative (see also 16:2).

3 Righteousness, its priority. The Lord requires righteousness before religious service. This single sentence affirms that to do what is “right” (*ṣ̣dāqâ*) and “just” (*mišpāṭ*) is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. The theme appears elsewhere (15:8; 21:29; 1Sa 15:22; Ps 40:6–8; Isa 1:11–17; et al.). It does not teach that ritual acts of worship are to be avoided; rather, it stresses that religious acts are valueless without righteous living.

4 Character traits, pride. Arrogant pride is sin. The verse is one continuous sentence, but the Hebrew is difficult. The MT reads, “Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the tillage of the wicked [*nir r̥šā’îm*] is sin [*ḥaṭṭā’t*].” The meaning of the line seems clear enough, but the relationship of the clauses needs explanation. The problem is *nir* (“tillage”), which

indicates that the product of the wicked is sin. McKane, 559, explains that the wicked cannot be cultivated; they are not amenable to educational discipline. But the difficulty remains: Are pride and arrogance the products of the wicked? Even if one accepts the reading *nēr* (“lamp”), based on the LXX and the Aramaic and forming a nice contrast with 20:27—though here the lamp is that of the wicked—there is still no clear connection in the verse. Toy, 399, suggests that the recovery of the text or its meaning seems impossible. In general we may say that the verse portrays pride as sin.

5 Prosperity, patient planning. Patience and planning lead to prosperity. By antithetical parallelism the verse exhorts industriousness. On the one hand, the “plans of the diligent” lead to profit; but on the other, “haste” leads to poverty. Toy, 399, thinks that the contrast between the diligent and hasty is not precise and suggests changing hasty to “slothful.” To make such a change, however, levels out the line to what McKane, 550, calls a pedestrian antithesis: the text contrasts calculated expeditiousness and unproductive haste. The text here warns about the danger of hasty shortcuts (see also 10:4; 28:20).

6 Prosperity, by fraud. A fortune gained by fraudulent means will be a fleeting treasure. Here again the Hebrew lines are difficult. The subject, expressed in the first part, is clear—it concerns a “fortune” made by a “lying” tongue. Two ideas comprise the predicate: “fleeting vapor” and “deadly snare.” The *hebel niddāp* is more properly a “driven vapor” or “driven vanity”; it is as though the treasure disappears into thin air (Greenstone, 223). The “deadly snare” (lit., “snares of death”) is derived from a change based on the LXX, for whose translators the Hebrew’s “seekers of death” seemed meaningless (see Note; see also Ps 18:5). The point, then, is that ill-gotten gain is a fleeting pleasure and a crime for which punishment is prepared.

7 Retribution, just. The wicked will be destroyed in their own devices. The sentence affirms this truth and then explains it. It is the “violence” (*šōd*) of the wicked that destroys them—it “drags them away,” probably to more sin, but ultimately to their punishment. But they are not passive victims of their crimes or circumstances, for “they refuse” to do justice. In the final analysis they can blame only themselves, for they choose to persist in evil rather than do what is right.

8 Righteousness, revealed in works. Righteous behavior reveals righteous character. The antithetical clause asserts that it is also true that sinful acts betray the wicked. The first line is difficult: “The way of the guilty [ʾîš wāzār] is devious.” Since *wāzār* occurs only here, it has received much attention. The idea of “guilty” is drawn from an Arabic cognate meaning “bear a burden” and so “sin laden” or “guilty.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 185) prefers the idea that “a man crooked of way is false [*zār*].” Toy, 400, adopts the idea of “proud.” Whether they are here described as guilty, false, or proud, the point is that the men described are devious.

Another way to analyze the line is to take *zār* to mean “strange” or “stranger,” yielding, “The way of a man and a stranger is perverse.” But this reading forms no satisfactory contrast to v.8b. Another suggestion is “the way of (usual) man is changeable and strange, but the pure fellow leads a straight and even course” (Greenstone, 244). The second line is clear: “The conduct of the innocent is upright.” This is the antithesis of the deviousness of the wicked.

9 Family, peaceful relationships. Simplicity with peace is better than prosperity with strife. The line displays formal parallelism framed as one of the “better” sayings. The situation presented is sharing a house with a quarrelsome wife. The *bêt ḥāber* (lit., “house of company”) has received numerous interpretations (see the discussion in McKane, 554). According to this verse it would be better to live on the corner of the roof. The reference is probably to a little guest room built on the roof (see 1Ki 17:19; 2Ki 4:10). It would be cramped and lonely—but peaceful in avoiding strife. The LXX removes all reference to a quarrelsome wife in favor of the idea of injustice in a common house.

10 Character traits, wicked. The wicked pursue evil and not mercy (see also 4:16; 10:23; 12:10; Isa 1:16–17). The person who lives to satisfy his craving for evil thinks only of himself. McKane, 556, observes that since humanity consists of reaching out to help others, “the man who cannot transcend his own self-assertiveness is in a prison and is dehumanized.” It is the propensity for evil that constitutes him as “wicked.”

11 Discipline, its effect. How mature one is determines how easily one will learn. The contrast is between the wise and the simple; the former learns by instruction, the latter by example. The wise person gains

knowledge through “instruction,” which not only causes him to know but also gives insight into the issues of life. The wise person never stops learning. By contrast the “mockers” (*lēṣ*) is unteachable. Nevertheless he should be punished, because the “simple” (*petî*) will “gain wisdom” through seeing his punishment (see also 19:25).

12 Judgment, its certainty. Righteousness will be satisfied when the wicked are punished. There are two different ways that this proverb can be taken. The easiest interpretation is to take *ṣaddîq* to refer to God, “the Righteous One.” God observes the house of the wicked and then hurls them to ruin (see 22:12; Toy, 402; Plaut, 220; Kidner, 143). But Proverbs does not refer to God in this way. The other interpretation takes *ṣaddîq* to refer to a “righteous man” (see NIV margin), presumably a judge or ruler, who, although he may be kindly disposed to the family of the wicked, is obliged to condemn him (Greenstone, 225).

13 Character traits, unmerciful. Those who show no mercy will not obtain mercy. Measure for measure justice is expressed by this cause-and-effect statement. The one who shuts his ears from the cry of the poor (i.e., refuses to help) will not be listened to when he cries out for help. So talionic justice is meted out for the omission of a commandment as well as for evil acts. See Luke 16:19–31 for an example.

14 Injustice, bribery. Bribes can effectively pacify an angry person. The two clauses are synonymous; the first uses the more neutral word *mattān* (“gift”) and the second the word *šōḥad* (“bribe”). Kidner, 143, notes that their parallelism in the proverb underscores how hard it often is to discern the difference. The verse does not condemn or condone; it merely observes the effectiveness of the practice. Although the verb “soothes” (*yikpeh*) is satisfactory, various commentators attempt to emend it to forms such as *y’kappēr* (“covers”) or *y’kabbeh* (“extinguishes”; see *BHS*). The point of the verse is clear without the change. The idea of the gift given in secret influenced the interpretation of the verse in the Talmud as a righteous act of charity (see *b. B. Bat. 9b*: “Whoever does this in secret is greater than Moses our teacher”).

15 Justice, its effects. How people respond to justice reveals their character. The occasion—“When justice is done”—can refer to a legal decision or to doing right in general. The point is that people who are law-abiding citizens are pleased with justice; those who are not are terrified by

it, tend to ridicule it, and try to get around it in some way. *M^hittâ* means “terror,” although some commentators prefer to change it to “dismay” to make a better parallel with *śimḥâ* (“joy”). But the idea of “terror” heightens the contrast (Toy, 404); the wicked may be shaken into reality when justice is carried out.

16 *Wisdom, its importance.* Those who abandon the way of wisdom inevitably ruin their lives. The verse is a single sentence with the second part providing the predicate. The subject matter is one who wanders away from the “path of understanding” or prudence (*haśkēl*), i.e., one who does not live according to the knowledge, discipline, and insight of wisdom. Such a person “comes to rest” in the “company of the shades” (*q^hal r^epāⁱm*; “dead,” NIV). The verb “rest” (*nûaḥ*, GK 5663) does not carry with it the comforting idea of repose but merely that of “dwell,” for to rest among the “shades” is to be numbered among the dead. Physical death is again presented as the punishment for folly, which is sin. Plaut, 221, remarks, “Errant man will destroy himself before his time”; he will follow the broad way that leads to destruction and find himself among the dead (Mt 7:13–14).

17 *Pleasure, its cost.* Living a life of self-indulgent pleasure leads to poverty. By two synonymous lines the sage makes his point that the unbridled love of the finest things of life is very costly. “Joy” (*śimḥâ*; “pleasure,” NIV; GK 8525) represents the effect of the good life; “wine and oil” represent the cause for joy (so the metonymies work together). “Oil” signifies the anointing that goes with the luxurious life (see Pss 23:5; 104:15; Am 6:6). There is nothing wrong with joy or with enjoying the finest things in life. The “love” that is here portrayed must be excessive or uncontrolled, because it brings one to poverty. Perhaps other responsibilities are being neglected or the people are trying to live above their means.

18 *Judgment, just.* Divine justice will be administered righteously. In what way are the wicked a “ransom” (*kōper*; GK 4111) for the righteous? “Ransom” normally refers to the price paid to free a prisoner. Whybray, 121, puts the verse in perspective: If it means that the wicked obtain good things that should go to the righteous, it is then a despairing plea for justice (which would be unusual in Proverbs); but if it is taken to mean that the wicked suffers the evil he has prepared for the righteous, then it harmonizes with Proverbs (e.g., 11:8). The saying is either a general statement or an

ideal that in calamity the righteous escape but the wicked perish in their stead (e.g., Haman in the book of Esther). We must think, as Toy, 406, puts it, that when God punishes a community it is the bad, not the good, he is directing his anger against. Believers can have wholehearted trust in the justice of God (see Ge 18:23–25).

19 Family, peaceful relations. Being alone is preferable to enduring domestic strife. This verse reiterates the theme of v.9 (see also 25:24), with one change—“a desert,” which would be sparsely settled and quiet. These verses surely advise one to be careful in choosing a marriage partner and then to be diligent in cultivating the proper graces to make the marriage enjoyable.

20 Wisdom, its frugality. With keen foresight and appropriate frugality, the wise prepare for the future. The verse makes the point by contrasting the wise and the fool (*kʿsîl*). In the wise person’s house are “precious treasure and oil” (*ʾôṣār neḥmād wāṣemen*; “choice food and oil,” NIV), but the foolish man “devours it.” The verse basically means that the wise gain wealth but the foolish squander it.

The mention of “oil” (*ṣemen*) is problematic. How can a fool devour oil? Toy, 406, suggests dropping “oil” from the verse on the basis of the LXX; but the LXX seems too free for any support: “precious treasure will rest on the mouth of the sage.” McKane, 552, adopts the view that *ṣemen* should be repointed *šāmîm* after an Arabic word *tamîn* (“expensive”) and the line rendered “desirable and rare wealth.” But this idea does not match the metaphor any better. McKane says further that the fool lets money run through his fingers and does not use it to create a material environment for gracious living.

21 Righteousness, its rewards. Virtue will be rewarded. In fact, the idea may be that virtue has its own rewards. “Righteousness” (*ṣʿdāqâ*; GK 7407) and “love” (*ḥesed*; GK 2876) depict the lifestyle of the faithful covenant believer who is pleasing to God and a blessing to others. Whoever pursues righteousness will be filled with “life, prosperity and honor.” “Prosperity” is again *ṣʿdāqâ*; so there is a wordplay on the term, the first use giving the basic meaning of conduct that conforms to God’s standard and the second the effect of such righteousness. The idea of the proverb is renewed in the words of Jesus: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt 5:6; see also 6:33).

22 *Wisdom, greater than strength.* It is more effective to use wisdom than to rely on strength. This proverb uses a military scene to describe the superiority of wisdom; the lines are loosely synonymous. It tells how the wise can scale the walls of the city of the “mighty” (*gibbôrîm*) and pull down their trusted stronghold. In a war the victory is credited not so much to the infantry as to the tactician, the general who plans the attack. Brilliant strategy wins wars, even over apparently insuperable odds (see also 24:5–6; Ecc 9:13–16; 2Co 10:4, which explains that wisdom from above is necessary for spiritual victory).

23 *Speech, controlled.* People who control what they say are more likely to avoid trouble than those who speak freely. The verse is a continuous sentence offering the consequences of an action—guarding the mouth and the tongue. The “calamity” (*ṣārôt*) may refer to social and legal difficulties into which careless talk might bring someone (see 13:3; 18:21); therefore, one should say only what is true, helpful, pleasant, and kind and avoid what is false, destructive, painful, and damaging to others.

24 *Character traits, pride.* The two lines of v.24, loosely synonymous, portray the godless attitude and the scornful arrogance of the “mockers” (*lēṣ*, GK 4370). He is “proud” (*zēd*, GK 2294) and “arrogant” (*yāhîr*, 3400), acting with “overweening pride.” Pride may refer to the refusal to submit to the Lord or describe the refusal to learn from wisdom (McKane, 551). While the latter may be in view here, the two are not unrelated. This verse describes the nature (“name”) of the irreligious mocker as insolent and proud. He is a most unpleasant fellow, disliked even by his own family, as the Talmud observes (*b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 18b; *b. Soṭah* 47b).

25 *Laziness, its outcome.* The lazy come to ruin because they desire the easy way out. The “slothead’s desire [*ta’wat*; ‘craving,’ NIV]” must be coupled with “his hands refuse to work” to understand the point. Living in a world of wishful thinking and not working will bring ruin (*tēmîtennû*, “will be the death of him,” is probably used hyperbolically here). Plaut, 223, suggests that there may be more to this idea; the slothead might set his goals too high, far out of reach, thus paralyzing himself and producing nothing. At any rate, the verse teaches that doing rather than desiring brings success.

26 *Generosity, evidence of righteousness.* Generosity reveals righteousness. This verse has been placed with the preceding because of the

literary connection with “desire”—“he craves for more,” but it provides an independent thought. The verse contrasts the one who craves with the one who gives generously, here called “the righteous” person. Consider the contrast between Abram and Lot in Genesis 13; Lot chooses the most desirable land for himself, and Abram gives Lot his preference. To be generous in that way requires walking by faith and not by sight.

27 *Worship, unacceptable.* God abhors worship without righteousness. The verse affirms that the “sacrifice” (*zebah*) of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord and then intensifies the idea (“how much more”) by referring to “evil intent” (*zimmâ*) with the sacrifice. Hypocritical worship is bad enough; worship with evil intent is deplorable. God does not want acts of worship without repentance; but he certainly detests them from someone still bent on wickedness, who thinks a sacrifice will buy continued acceptance with God. In popular religion people soon came to think that sacrifices could be given for any offense and without genuine submission to God. This happens with all religious acts. But God first requires of the worshiper true repentance and resolution to live righteously.

28 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* False witnesses will be discredited and destroyed. The verse in Hebrew is obscure, though it does apparently contrast true and false witnesses. The first line affirms that the “false witness will perish”; that is, either his testimony will be destroyed or he will be punished.

The second line literally says, “A man who listens shall speak forever.” “The man who listens” contrasts to the false witness of the preceding line and probably describes a witness who knows and understands what the truth is (Kidner, 146). The NIV, following cognates, sees a homonym meaning “perish”—thus the translation “will be destroyed forever” instead of “speak forever.” Toy, 411, expected an idea such as “will be established” to contrast with “will perish.” McKane’s suggestion, 556, probably fits the best: The truthful witness “will speak to the end” without being put down or refuted (in cross-examination).

29 *Righteousness, its genuineness.* Those who are truly righteous cultivate a consistent lifestyle that pleases God. Kidner, 149, summarizes the verse to say that a bold front is no substitute for sound principles. The verse contrasts the wicked person who puts up a “bold front” with the upright person who solidifies (*yākîn*, “gives thought”) righteous conduct.

The image of the hardened face reflects a hardened heart (Plaut, 224); it portrays one who holds in contempt the opinions and views of others (see Isa 48:4; Jer 5:3; Eze 3:7).

30 Sovereignty of God. Human “wisdom” (*ḥokmâ*), “insight” (*tʿbûnâ*), and “counsel” (*ʿēṣâ*; “plan,” NIV) must be in conformity to God’s will to be successful. The verse uses a single sentence to declare that if these qualities are in defiance of God, they cannot succeed; for human wisdom is nothing in comparison to the wisdom of God (Greenstone, 232; see Job 5:12–13; Isa 40:13–14). McKane, 558, reminds us that these qualities are the claims of the sages, who present themselves as the intellectual elite. Yet he adds: “But the sages do not in fact possess the prescience and control which are indicated by these high-sounding words; their vocabulary and claims make shipwreck on Yahweh, to whom alone the vocabulary which the wise men use of themselves and their intellectual powers really applies.”

31 Sovereignty of God. Ultimate success comes from God and not from human efforts. The contrast here is between the plans and efforts for the battle (“the horse is made ready for the day of battle”) and the true acknowledgment of the source of victory (“the LORD”; see Pss 20:7; 33:17).

NOTES

20:30 This verse is difficult. The LXX has “blows and contusions fall on evil men, and stripes penetrate their inner beings”; the Latin has “the bruise of a wound cleanses away evil things.” Toy, 397, suggests adopting the LXX or emending the line to read, “Stripes cleanse the body, and blows the inward parts” or “cosmetics purify the body, and blows the soul.”

21:6 The MT’s מְבַקְשֵׁי-מוֹת (*mʿbaqšê-māwet*, “seekers of death”) yields the translation, “a fleeting vapor for those who seek death.” The variant reading מוֹקְשֵׁי (*môqšê*, “snares of”) is supported by the LXX and the Latin. This reading does not make a more credible metaphor, and to adopt it one has to explain the loss of the letter *beth*. It is easier to interpret within the verse that the fortune is a deadly snare. But this reading argues against the variant. As Waltke, 2:160, says, one can more readily explain away the LXX’s “traps” as a facilitating reading because of the rare syntax of

m^ebaqšê than explain away the more difficult text supported by the majority of manuscripts, as well as the Targum, Syriac, and Symmachus.

14 The LXX offers a moralizing interpretation not too closely tied to the MT: “He who withholds a gift stirs up violent wrath.”

J. Wealth and Moral Instruction (22:1–16)

¹A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

²Rich and poor have this in common:
The LORD is the Maker of them all.

³A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge,
but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

⁴Humility and the fear of the LORD
bring wealth and honor and life.

⁵In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares,
but he who guards his soul stays far from them.

⁶Train a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not turn from it.

⁷The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is servant to the lender.

⁸He who sows wickedness reaps trouble,
and the rod of his fury will be destroyed.

⁹A generous man will himself be blessed,
for he shares his food with the poor.

¹⁰Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife;
quarrels and insults are ended.

¹¹He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious
will have the king for his friend.

¹²The eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge,

but he frustrates the words of the unfaithful.
¹³The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!”
or, “I will be murdered in the streets!”
¹⁴The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit;
he who is under the LORD’s wrath will fall into it.
¹⁵Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.
¹⁶He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth
and he who gives gifts to the rich—both come to
poverty.

COMMENTARY

1 Reputation, good. A good reputation is more valuable than wealth. This verse is not disparaging wealth; it merely notes that a good name is worth more than silver or gold. The lines are synonymously parallel, “name” being matched by “to be esteemed.” In the first line the word “good” is understood. Only a good name would be desired, for it brings praise, influence, and prosperity. *Hēn tōb* in the second line means “good favor,” i.e., one well thought of, one who has engaging qualities. The point is that a good reputation excels other blessings in life (see *m. ’Abot* 4:17). Kidner, 146, says that our proper joy is “not in the power we wield, but in the love in which we are held.”

2 Sovereignty of God. Regardless of status in life, all are equally God’s creation; the verse uses synthetic parallelism to make this point. Both the rich and the poor live side by side in this life (expressed by *nipgāšû*; “have this in common,” NIV), but they both are part of the order of God’s creation (McKane, 570). People often forget this truth and make value judgments; we do well to treat all people with respect, for God can as easily reduce the rich as raise the poor.

3 Wisdom, avoiding trouble. Those who are shrewd avoid the dangers of life. The contrast is between the “prudent” (*’ārûm*) and the naive or “simple” (*p^etayîm*). The prudent know where the dangers and pitfalls are in

life; they are wary. They are the product of training in wisdom and discipline, for one of the purposes of Proverbs is to make the naive (*p^{tî}*) wary (*‘ārûm*; see 1:4). The simple person is unwary, uncritical, and credulous; he is not equipped to survive in this world and so blunders into trouble (McKane, 563).

This verse develops the contrast: the prudent avoid danger, but the naive do not see it and so they “suffer” for their blindness (*‘ānaš*, GK 6740; this word describes a fine in 17:26 and 19:19; here it is more general; see 27:12). The unspoken implication is, Get wisdom!

4 *Piety, its reward.* God will reward reverential piety. This verse simply lists two spiritual qualifications (humility and fear) and three rewards (wealth, honor, and life). The relationship between the clauses is expressed by *‘ēqeb* (“consequence, reward”; “bring,” NIV). “Humility” (*‘nāwâ*) is used here in the religious sense for piety and so fits well with “the fear of the LORD” (*yir ‘at yhwh*). For the idea of life as the product of piety, see 21:21; for the reward, see 3:2, 16.

5 *Security, through wisdom.* Those who have the discipline of wisdom avoid life’s dangers. The two parts of this verse are loosely antithetical. The first clause informs us that the “wicked” are on a path to death; the way is covered with “thorns and snares.” “Thorns” (*šinnîm*) seems out of place; therefore, many emend the text to *šammîm* (“traps”), making a better match—“traps and snares” (see Note). In contrast to the wicked is the one who guards his life and thus avoids the snares. This person is obviously the prudent one.

6 *Family, child training.* Proper training of a child will endure throughout his life. The parallelism is formal; the second clause provides the consequence of the first. The imperative is “train” (*h^anōk*, GK 2852); this verb includes the idea of “dedicate,” and so the training should be with purpose. The “child” (*na‘ar*) presumably is in the youngest years, although the Talmud places him between sixteen and twenty-four. The NEB captures the point of early instruction: “Start a boy on the right road.”

The right road is expressed by “in the way he should go” (*‘al-pî darkô*). The way the verse has been translated shows that there is a standard of life to which one should go. Of course, a person must be young enough when change for the better is still possible. The consequence is that when he is

old (*yazqîn*), he will not depart from it. Whybray, 125, notes that the sages were confident of the character-forming quality of their teaching.

In recent years it has become popular to interpret this verse to mean that the training should be according to the child's way. The view is not new; over a thousand years ago Saadia suggested that one should train the child in accordance with his ability and potential. The wise parent will discern the natural bent of the individual child and train it accordingly. Kidner, 147, acknowledges that the wording implies respect for the child's individuality but not his self-will; he reminds us that the emphasis is still on the parental duty of training. Training in accordance with a child's natural bent may be a practical and useful idea, but it is not likely what this proverb has in mind.

In the book of Proverbs there are only two "ways" a child can go: the way of the wise and the righteous, or the way of the fool and the wicked. Moreover, it is difficult to explain why a natural bent needs training. Ralbag, in fact, offered a satirical interpretation: "Train the child according to his evil inclinations (let him have his will) and he will continue in his evil way throughout life" (cited in Greenstone, 234). Toy, 415, summarizes the ways that one might take "according to his way":

not exactly "in the path of industry and piety" (which would require *in the right way*), nor "according to the bodily and mental development of the child" (which does not agree with the second cl.), but "in accordance with the manner of life to which he is destined," the implication being that the manner of life will not be morally bad.

McKane, 564, agrees that "according to his way" must mean the way he ought to go: "There is only one right way—the way of life—and the educational discipline which directs young men along this way is uniform."

7 Poverty, its effect. Poverty makes people dependent on others. The parallel is synonymous. The verse simply states a fact that the poor or the borrowers become subservient to the rich. The verse may be referring to the apparently common practice of Israelites selling themselves into slavery to pay off debts (see Ex 21:2–7). It is not appreciably different from the modern debtor who is working to pay off bills.

8 Punishment, certain. God will surely destroy the power of the wicked. The first clause declares the truth that the one who sows “wickedness” (*awlâ*) reaps “trouble” (*’āwen*). The second clause appears to carry this idea further to reveal how it works: “The rod of his fury [*šēbeṭ ’ebrātô*] will be destroyed” (see Note). The symbol of the rod here represents his power for doing evil. One would conclude that in reaping trouble this fellow will no longer be able to unleash his fury. The LXX adds, “A man who is cheerful and a giver God blesses”—an idea expressed in 2 Corinthians 9:7.

9 Generosity, its nature. There is a reward for being generous to the poor. The generous person is here *ṭôb-‘ayin* (“a good eye”), in contrast to the “evil eye,” which is stingy and covetous. This person has a benevolent disposition, keen social conscience, and concern for the poor. The irony is that because he is not the prisoner of his selfish desires, he achieves the highest degree of self-fulfillment (McKane, 569).

10 Strife, its source. The mocker causes quarrels and strife. Written in loosely synonymous parallelism, this verse advises us to expel the “mocker” (*lēṣ*). One can think of a heckler who is present only to disrupt a meeting; before serious discussions can begin, he will have to be removed. The LXX freely expresses that “when he sits in a council [*synedriō*], he insults everyone.” The MT does not suggest that the setting is in a court of law, so there is probably no reference to the Sanhedrin.

11 Speech, honest and graceful. Honest and gracious speech will be highly respected. The syntax of this verse is not easy to understand. The text seems to say, “He who loves purity of heart, the grace of his lips the king is his friend.” The simplest interpretation is that someone who is honest and gracious will be welcomed in the courts of the palace (see also 16:13).

12 Sovereignty of God. The Lord ensures that truth, not deception, succeeds. The lines are in antithetical parallelism, contrasting how God deals with truth and error: He “frustrates” the words of the “traitor” (*bōgēd*; “unfaithful,” NIV), but he keeps “watch over knowledge.” The point is clear enough—the Lord acts to vindicate the truth. D. Winton Thomas suggests a change of meaning from “knowledge” to “lawsuit” based on an Arabic cognate (“A Note on *יָעַר* in Proverbs 22:12,” *JTS* NS 14 [1963]: 93–94). This suggestion is one possible solution to the difficulty that the abstract idea of “knowledge” is not used with the verb “watch” (*nāṣar*).

Toy, 418, has, “The eyes of Yahweh are on the righteous,” but this change is too radical for the text.

13 Laziness, its excuses. The lazy person makes absurd excuses for not working. The verse humorously portrays the sluggard as not going out because he might be eaten by a lion in the streets (cf. 26:13). The LXX changes it to “murderers in the street” to form a better parallel, possibly because *rāṣah* (“to murder,” GK 8357) is used only of humans in the Bible.

14 Judgment, divine. Divine judgment brings ruin on the adulterer. The topic is the “mouth of an adulteress,” perhaps a reference to her seductive speech (see 2:16–22; chs. 5; 7). It is described as a “deep pit” where the guilty fall under God’s judgment. The pit is like the hunter’s snare; it is difficult to escape. So to succumb to the adulteress—or to any such folly—is both a sin and its punishment.

15 Discipline, parental. Discipline will remove a child’s bent to folly. A general contrast first explains that “folly” (*iwwelet*) is in the child and then instructs how to get rid of it—by “the rod of discipline.” Whybray, 125, suggests that this idea might be described as a doctrine of “original folly.” The child is morally immature; the training must suppress folly and develop potential (see also 13:24; 23:13, 16; 29:15).

16 Injustice, extortion, and bribery. The punishment for extortion and bribery is poverty. The Hebrew is a little cryptic: “Oppressing the lowly, it is gain for him; he who gives to the rich, it is loss.” Perhaps both are to be seen as folly and resulting in poverty, the first being an immoral act (*ōšēq*, “oppresses”) that God will punish and the second being a waste of money. McKane, 572, says that “giving money to a person who is already rich is an example of squandermania.” Perhaps the verse is simply observing that it is easy to oppress the poor for gain, but it is a waste of money to try to buy a patron (Kidner, 149).

NOTES

5 The word צַנִּיִּם (*šinnîm*, “thorns”) is obscure. There is an apparent cognate צַנִּיִּם (*š’nînîm*, “thorns”) in Numbers 33:55 and Joshua 23:13. The idea of thorns in the way is also found in Proverbs 15:19. The LXX translated the word τριβόλοι (*triboloi*, “prickly plants”) based on the verses in Joshua and Numbers. But that translation requires adding an “and.”

Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 186) traced the word from an Arabic cognate *ṣinnu*, meaning “basket traps.” McKane, 565, also traces this possible development to support the change to “traps.” Waltke, 2:194, concludes that “trap/snares” is a safe guess that does not require emending the text. The construction involves an asyndetic apposition: “snares, bird traps.”

8 The LXX adds another verse here: “God blesses a cheerful and liberal man, but a man shall prove the vanity of his works.” The expression שֶׁבֶט עֲבָרָתוֹ (*šēbet ‘ebrātô*, “the rod of his fury”) has a variant in the LXX: “the punishment of his deeds.” Thus, Toy, 416, emends to *šeber* so that it reads, “the produce of his work.” But the Hebrew text is not obscure, and *šeber* does not actually mean “produce.” Although “rod of his fury” may not follow closely the imagery of v.8a, it is understandable in the verse.

11 The LXX missed the nominative absolute and then inserted “the Lord” from v.12 as the subject, thus yielding the translation, “The Lord loves the pure in heart, all who are blameless in their ways are acceptable to him.” The LXX’s reading does not fit v.11b. In fact, the LXX has little correspondence with the MT; nevertheless commentators use the LXX to attempt to reconstruct the verse.

V. THE SAYINGS OF THE WISE (22:17–24:34)

OVERVIEW

Here begins a new collection of sayings forming the fourth section of the book. This collection is not like that of 1:1–9:18; here the introductory material is more personal than 1:1–7 and differs in style, showing great similarity to the Egyptian “Instruction of Amenemope” (see McKane, 369–74).

A. Thirty Precepts of the Sages (22:17–24:22)

1. Introductory Call to Attention (22:17–21)

¹⁷Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise;
 apply your heart to what I teach,
¹⁸for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart
 and have all of them ready on your lips.
¹⁹So that your trust may be in the LORD,
 I teach you today, even you.
²⁰Have I not written thirty sayings for you,
 sayings of counsel and knowledge,
²¹teaching you true and reliable words,
 so that you can give sound answers
 to him who sent you?

17–21 In the introductory call to attention, the sage urges greater trust in the Lord and promises solid teachings that will prove reliable. This extended introduction reminds us that the wise sayings are not curiosity pieces; they are revelation, and revelation demands a response. The call is

laid out with the exhortation to learn and pass on the teaching (v.17), followed by three motivations: (1) there will be a pleasing store of wisdom (v.18); (2) there will be deeper trust in the Lord—a distinctively Israelite aspect of wisdom literature (v.19); and (3) it will build reliability—he will grasp the truth (v.20) and see himself as a special envoy to keep wisdom in his heart and on his lips (v.21; Kidner, 149).

This introductory section has two striking connections with the “Instruction of Amenemope.” First, the purpose of “Amenemope” was to teach “how to return an answer to him who said it, and to direct a report to one who has sent him, in order to direct him to the ways of life” (introduction; 1:5–7). Likewise, our “Sayings of the Wise” are words of truth that will provide reliable answers to the sender. Whybray, 133, explains that court officials are entrusted with conveying messages and obtaining answers; the ability to discharge this important function in a reliable manner is a test of character.

Second, the reference to “thirty” (*šālîšîm*; v.20) is significant, for “Amenemope” also had thirty chapters (*ANET*, 421–24). So this section of Proverbs is close in contents with the Egyptian work; but the proverbs here are not direct borrowings or mere imitations. Nonetheless the influence of the Egyptian work on this section is certainly there (see Simpson; Whybray, 132; Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* [Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979]; J. Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBul* 28 [1977], 29–68; John A. Wilson, “Egyptian Instructions,” in *ANET*, 412–25; see also A. Cody, “Notes on Proverbs 22:21 and 22:23b,” *Bib* 61 [1980]: 418–26).

According to this introductory paragraph, as Toy, 424–25, says, “the pupil is to devote himself to study, in order that his religious life may be firmly established, and that he may be able to give wise counsel to those who seek advice.”

2. The Thirty Sayings (22:22–24:22)

²²Do not exploit the poor because they are poor

and do not crush the needy in court,
²³for the LORD will take up their case
and will plunder those who plunder them.
²⁴Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man,
do not associate with one easily angered,
²⁵or you may learn his ways
and get yourself ensnared.
²⁶Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge
or puts up security for debts;
²⁷if you lack the means to pay,
your very bed will be snatched from under you.
²⁸Do not move an ancient boundary stone
set up by your forefathers.
²⁹Do you see a man skilled in his work?
He will serve before kings;
he will not serve before obscure men.
^{23:1}When you sit to dine with a ruler,
note well what is before you,
²and put a knife to your throat
if you are given to gluttony.
³Do not crave his delicacies,
for that food is deceptive.
⁴Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
have the wisdom to show restraint.
⁵Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle.
⁶Do not eat the food of a stingy man,
do not crave his delicacies;
⁷for he is the kind of man
who is always thinking about the cost.

“Eat and drink,” he says to you,
but his heart is not with you.

⁸You will vomit up the little you have eaten
and will have wasted your compliments.

⁹Do not speak to a fool,
for he will scorn the wisdom of your words.

¹⁰Do not move an ancient boundary stone
or encroach on the fields of the fatherless,
¹¹for their Defender is strong;
he will take up their case against you.

¹²Apply your heart to instruction
and your ears to words of knowledge.

¹³Do not withhold discipline from a child;
if you punish him with the rod, he will not die.

¹⁴Punish him with the rod
and save his soul from death.

¹⁵My son, if your heart is wise,
then my heart will be glad;

¹⁶my inmost being will rejoice
when your lips speak what is right.

¹⁷Do not let your heart envy sinners,
but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.

¹⁸There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.

¹⁹Listen, my son, and be wise,
and keep your heart on the right path.

²⁰Do not join those who drink too much wine
or gorge themselves on meat,
²¹for drunkards and gluttons become poor,
and drowsiness clothes them in rags.

²²Listen to your father, who gave you life,

and do not despise your mother when she is old.

²³Buy the truth and do not sell it;
get wisdom, discipline and understanding.

²⁴The father of a righteous man has great joy;
he who has a wise son delights in him.

²⁵May your father and mother be glad;
may she who gave you birth rejoice!

²⁶My son, give me your heart
and let your eyes keep to my ways,

²⁷for a prostitute is a deep pit
and a wayward wife is a narrow well.

²⁸Like a bandit she lies in wait,
and multiplies the unfaithful among men.

²⁹Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has strife? Who has complaints?
Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?

³⁰Those who linger over wine,
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.

³¹Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup,
when it goes down smoothly!

³²In the end it bites like a snake
and poisons like a viper.

³³Your eyes will see strange sights
and your mind imagine confusing things.

³⁴You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,
lying on top of the rigging.

³⁵“They hit me,” you will say, “but I’m not hurt!
They beat me, but I don’t feel it!

When will I wake up
so I can find another drink?”

^{24:1}Do not envy wicked men,
do not desire their company;
²for their hearts plot violence,
and their lips talk about making trouble.
³By wisdom a house is built,
and through understanding it is established;
⁴through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures.
⁵A wise man has great power,
and a man of knowledge increases strength;
⁶for waging war you need guidance,
and for victory many advisers.
⁷Wisdom is too high for a fool;
in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say.
⁸He who plots evil
will be known as a schemer.
⁹The schemes of folly are sin,
and men detest a mocker.
¹⁰If you falter in times of trouble,
how small is your strength!
¹¹Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
¹²If you say, "But we knew nothing about this,"
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay each person according to what he
has done?
¹³Eat honey, my son, for it is good;
honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.
¹⁴Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul;
if you find it, there is a future hope for you,

and your hope will not be cut off.
¹⁵Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous
man's house,
do not raid his dwelling place;
¹⁶for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises
again,
but the wicked are brought down by calamity.
¹⁷Do not gloat when your enemy falls;
when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice,
¹⁸or the LORD will see and disapprove
and turn his wrath away from him.
¹⁹Do not fret because of evil men
or be envious of the wicked,
²⁰for the evil man has no future hope,
and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.
²¹Fear the LORD and the king, my son,
and do not join with the rebellious,
²²for those two will send sudden destruction upon them,
and who knows what calamities they can bring?

COMMENTARY

22–23 *Saying 1: treatment of the poor.* This passage warns people not to oppress the poor, because the Lord avenges them (cf. “Amenemope,” ch. 2; 4:4–5). The jussives *’al-tigzol* and *’al-ṯdakkē* prohibit exploiting or crushing the poor. McKane, 377, observes that because the poor are defenseless, they can be robbed easily; this situation makes the crime contemptible but tempting as well. The oppression pictured here may be in bounds legally, but it is out of bounds morally (e.g., similar to modern business ethics). The motivation is that the Lord will plead or “take up their case” and will turn the plundering back on the guilty. Here again the Lord is revealed as champion of the defenseless.

24–25 *Saying 2: dangerous associations.* The warning is to avoid associating with a hothead because his influence could prove fatal (cf. 1:10–19; 14:17, 29; 15:1; see “Amenemope,” ch. 9; 11:13–14). The “one easily angered” (*îš ḥēmôt*, lit., “a man of heat” // *baʿal ʾāp*, “a hot-tempered man”) is denounced here primarily because such conduct is injurious, although the implication is that it is also morally wrong (Toy, 426).

26–27 *Saying 3: rash vows.* If people foolishly pledge what they have, they could lose it all (see 6:1–5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; there is no parallel in the Egyptian material). The risk is that if someone lacks the means to pay, his creditors may take his bed, i.e., his last possession (cf. our expressions “the shirt off his back” or “the kitchen sink”). “Bed” may be a metonymy for the garment that covers the bed (cf. Ex 22:26).

28 *Saying 4: respect for property.* The sage warns against appropriating someone else’s property (see also “Amenemope,” ch. 6; 7:12–13). Removing an “ancient boundary” (*gʾbûl ʾôlām*) was always an issue; the general teaching is that ancient traditions, if right, were to be preserved. But violations were frequent. Kidner, 150, says, “No law will protect people when integrity is absent” (see Dt 19:14; 27:17; 1Ki 21:16–19; Isa 5:8; Hos 5:10). The boundaries were sacred because God owned the land and had given it to the ancestors as their inheritance; to extend one’s land at another’s expense was a major violation of covenant and oath. Of course, property disputes and wars ancient and modern arise because both sides can point to times when their ancestors owned the land.

29 *Saying 5: benefits of skill.* Skill earns recognition and reward of advancement (see also “Amenemope,” ch. 30; 27:16–17). The saying anticipates that a person “skilled” (*māhîr*) in his work will serve kings. The person might be a scribe or an official (Whybray, 134), like the keen-witted statesman in the “Words of Ahiqar” (see McKane, 380); but the description applies to all craftsmen. Kidner, 150, notes: “Anyone who puts his workmanship before his prospects towers above the thrusters and climbers of the adjacent paragraphs.” Such will find the proper setting where his skill will be appreciated and not have to waste it on an ignoramus (Plaut, 235).

23:1–3 *Saying 6: caution before rulers.* “Amenemope” (chapter 23; 23:13–18) also warns about getting too close and too familiar with a ruler—he probably has ulterior motives. Plaut, 237, reminds the reader that these sayings are set in the history and culture of ancient times; courtiers had to

learn how to deal with all-powerful tyranny, how to survive while not losing their self esteem.

This passage warns against overindulging in the ruler's food, because that could ruin one's chances for advancement. The expression "put a knife to your throat" (v.2) means "to curb your appetite, control yourself" (like "bite your tongue"; see Delitzsch, 2:104). The reason is that the ruler's food may be "deceptive" (*kʿzābîm*)—it is not what it seems. So the warning is not to indulge in his impressive feast; the ruler wants something from you or is observing you (Delitzsch, 2:105). The Mishnah (*m. 'Abot* 2:3) quotes Gamaliel as warning that a ruler only draws you into court for his purpose, but in your day of trouble he will not be there.

4–5 *Saying 7: fleeting wealth.* People should not wear themselves out trying to get rich, because riches disappear quickly. "Amenemope" (ch. 7; 9:10–11) says, "They have made themselves wings like geese and are flown away to the heavens" (cf. *ANET*, 9.10–10.5). In the ancient world the figure of a bird flying off symbolized fleeting wealth. It is therefore folly to be a slave to it (see also Lk 12:20; 1Ti 6:7–10). Besides, as *m. 'Abot* 2:8 warns, this behavior will only add to the anxiety.

6–8 *Saying 8: unpleasant hospitality.* It is a mistake to accept hospitality from a stingy person, for his lack of sincerity will make the evening unpleasant. The person considered here has an "evil eye" (*raʿ ʿāyin*; "a stingy man," NIV; v.6). This miser (v.7; see 28:22) is ill-mannered and inhospitable; he is up to no good (contrast the "bountiful eye" in 22:9 ["generous man," NIV]). Eating and drinking with him will be irritating and disgusting (see Note). Any unpleasant conversation attempted will be lost (though Toy, 430–31, connects "lose sweet words" ["wasted your compliments," NIV] with v.9).

9 *Saying 9: wisdom wasted on a fool.* A "fool" (*kʿsîl*) despises wisdom, so it is a waste of time to try to teach him. There is no specific connection to Egyptian literature, but the general concept is there that a fool rejects discipline and instruction, often scorning the teacher who tries to change him. Plaut, 239, suspects that "some hate the critic in direct proportion to the justification of the criticism."

10–11 *Saying 10: respect property.* Once again the instruction warns against removing a boundary stone and encroaching on the property of the defenseless (v.10; see 22:22–23, 28). The motivation is that their

“Defender” (*gō^alām*) is strong and will plead their cause. The redeemer/avenger (*gō[’]ēl*; GK 1457) was usually a powerful relative who would champion the rights of the defenseless; but if there was no human *gō[’]ēl*, God would take up their cause (see Ge 48:16; Ex 6:6; Job 19:25; Isa 41–63).

12 *Saying 11: renewed call to attention.* The disciple is to apply his heart to discipline and listen carefully to knowledge. This introductory verse may have been added later, based on 22:17.

13–14 *Saying 11: necessity of discipline.* The sage instructs the continued use of “discipline” (*mûsār*, GK 4592), for the one punished will not die. “Ahiqar” 6:82 also says, “If I strike you my son, you will not die.” The idea is that discipline helps the child to live a full life; if he were to die (prematurely), it would be a consequence of not being trained. In Proverbs such a death might be moral and social as well as physical.

15–16 *Saying 12: wise and joyful speech.* Children bring joy to their parents by showing that they make wise choices. The quatrain is arranged in a chiasmic pattern, using “if your heart is wise” and “when your lips speak what is right” to bracket the verses. A wise heart is one that makes wise choices; the “right” (*mêšārîm*) speech refers to direct and honest speech, in which there is no discrepancy between the speech and the intentions. McKane, 387, summarizes: “[The] function of speech is then always to clarify and never to deceive”; to speak *mêšārîm* is to speak in contrast to deception that uses ambiguity to darken counsel.

17–18 *Saying 13: fear the Lord.* These lines advise us always to be zealous for the fear of the Lord rather than be envious of sinners. The contrast is between right and wrong envy; the one is spiritual exercise and the other a disease. The difficulty, of course, is that the sinful world seems more attractive. Thus the motivation provided is that the future belongs to the righteous. Kidner, 152, remarks that the remedy for envying sinners is to look up (“fear the LORD” in v.17) and look ahead (there is a “future hope,” v.18).

19 *Renewed call to attention.* The disciple must listen, be wise, and keep his decisions right. For a fuller treatment, see [comment on 4:25–27](#).

20–21 *Saying 14: poor associations.* If one associates with drunkards and gluttons, he will become poor. The “drunkard” and the “glutton” represent the epitome of the lack of discipline. Drunkenness and gluttony are used to

measure a stubborn and rebellious son in the Mishnah (*m. Sanh.* 8). Plaut, 241–42, observes that excessive eating and drinking are usually symptoms of deeper problems; we usually focus more on the drinking because it is a dangerous social problem with far-reaching consequences.

22 *Saying 15: honoring parents.* Because of parents' position and experience, their wise counsel should be heeded. The idea of honoring here takes on the precise nuance of listening to instructions (Toy, 436).

23–25 *Saying 16: wisdom's estimation.* The instruction is to acquire truth and gain wisdom, discipline, and understanding—this is the life that pleases God and brings joy to parents. Getting truth means acquiring training in the truth, and gaining understanding means developing the perception and practical knowledge of the truth (Toy, 436).

26–28 *Saying 17: following advice.* It is imperative to follow the teacher's warnings about temptation because Dame Folly is lurking. The teacher calls for the pupil to imitate him, to follow his ways (v.26), i.e., to shun the temptress. The passage portrays two types of harlots: unmarried (*zônâ*, "prostitute") and married (*nokrîyâ*, "wayward wife"; v.27). In either case there is danger, for their way is a "pit," the gateway to Sheol; those who enter are as good as dead.

But the danger is active; "like a bandit she lies in wait" (v.28; see 7:12) and multiplies the unfaithful among men. Dahood, 359–66, reinterprets *bôg'dîm* ("a bandit," NIV) to mean "garments," saying that she collects garments in pledge for her service. The change is unnecessary; the line makes good sense meaning that her victims prove "unfaithful" to the law of God or that she is unfaithful to her husband repeatedly.

29–35 *Saying 18: excessive drinking.* One should avoid the temptation to excessive drinking, for it leads to trouble when the senses are dulled. The change of style shows that the sage could break into a vivid use of his imagination (Whybray, 138). M. E. Andrews ("Variety of Expression in Proverbs 23:29–35," *VT* 28 [1978]: 102–3) charts the developing ideas here: v.29 is a riddle and v.30 its answer; instruction follows in v.31, with consequences described in v.32; the direct address continues in vv.33–34; and the conclusion is in the drunk's own words (v.35).

The sage gives a vivid picture of the one who drinks too much: he raves on and on, picks quarrels and fights, poisons his system with alcohol, gets bloodshot eyes, loses control, is confused, is unable to speak clearly,

imagines things, and is insensitive to pain. While alcoholism is a medical problem, it is also a moral problem because it involves choices and endangers other people.

24:1–2 *Saying 19: evil associations.* One should not envy or desire the company of evil people, for they are obsessed with violence (see also 1:10–19; 3:31; 23:17). Kidner, 153, observes that a close view of sinners is a good antidote to envying them.

3–4 *Saying 20: practicality of wisdom.* The use of wisdom is essential for domestic enterprises. In 9:1 wisdom is personified as a woman who builds a house, but here the emphasis is primarily on the building—it is a sign of security and prosperity (Toy, 442). One could make a secondary application to building a family (cf. Ps 127). Plaut, 247, observes: “The replacement of book shelves by television sets and of the study by the ‘den’ in modern homes (regressing from human to bestial habitats!) is a sad commentary on our times.” It certainly is true that if it takes wisdom to build a house, it also takes wisdom to build a household.

5–6 *Saying 21: wisdom greater than strength.* Wise counsel is necessary for war. The point is that for victory strategy is more important than strength—but that strategy must be wise. See also 11:14; 20:18; 21:22.

7 *Saying 22: fools.* Fools cannot obtain wisdom. The text is difficult here (see Note). The verse portrays a fool out of his element. In a serious moment in the gathering of the community, he does not even open his mouth. Wisdom is beyond the ability of the “fool” (ʿwîl).

8–9 *Saying 23: disapproval of evil men.* The general public disapproves of a wicked person who plots evil things. The picture of the wicked person is graphic: he devises evil and is a schemer, a sinner, and a scorner (*lêš*). *Zimmâ* is “scheme”; elsewhere it describes outrageous and lewd schemes (see Lev 18:17; Jdg 20:6). Here the description “schemer” (*baʿal-mʿzimmôt*) portrays him as a cold, calculating, active person: “the fool is capable of intense mental activity (*mʿzimmâ*) but it adds up to sin” (McKane, 399). This type of person flouts all morality, and sooner or later the public will have had enough of him. The only way out for such wickedness is repentance and forgiveness.

10 *Saying 24: test of adversity.* How well one does under adverse conditions reveals how strong that person is. The verse uses a paronomasia to stress the connection: “If you falter in the times of trouble [*šārâ*], / how

small [*ṣar*] is your strength!” You never know your strength until you are put into situations that demand much from you. Of course, a weak person will plead adverse situations or conditions in order to quit (Kidner, 154).

11–12 *Saying 25: preservation of life.* God holds people responsible for rescuing those who are in mortal danger. The use of “death” and “slaughter” seems strong in this passage; one might expect the verse to stress the need to rescue through teaching those who by their vice or imprudence are hastening toward destruction (see Toy, 445). The idea of “staggering” to the slaughter may need emendation to “at the point of” (G. R. Driver, “Problems in ‘Proverbs,’” *ZAW* 50 [1932]: 146).

The references here may be general (i.e., to any who are in mortal danger) or specific (i.e., those convicted). If the latter is meant, the sage is saying not to abandon the convicted to prison, for they need all the help they can get (McKane, 401). The general application would include any who are in mortal danger, through disease, hunger, war; we cannot dodge responsibility, even by ignorance.

13–14 *Saying 26: future of wisdom.* One should develop wisdom because it has a profitable future. The proverb draws on the image of honey; its health-giving properties make a good analogy to wisdom. While the literal instruction is to eat and enjoy honey, the point is to know wisdom. (D. W. Thomas argues for “seek” instead of “know”; see “Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,” *JTS* 38 [1937]: 401.) The motivation is that wisdom will have a long future to it (“hope”—*’ahîrît* and *tiqwâ*).

15–16 *Saying 27: treatment of the righteous.* It is futile and self-defeating to mistreat God’s people, for they survive, whereas the wicked do not! The warning is against attacking the righteous; to attack them is to attack God and his program, and that will fail (see Mt 16:18). The consequence, and thus the motivation, is that if the righteous suffer misfortune any number of times (= “seven times,” v.16), they will rise again; for virtue triumphs in the end (Whybray, 140). Conversely, the wicked will not survive; without God they have no power to rise from misfortune. The point, then, is that ultimately the righteous will triumph and those who oppose them will stumble over their evil.

17–18 *Saying 28: misfortune of the enemy.* It is dishonoring to God for us to rejoice over the misfortune of our enemies. The prohibitions “Do not gloat” and “do not . . . rejoice” extend even to the inner satisfaction (the

“heart”) at their calamity; such people are still the image of God. The motivation for this instruction is the fear of the Lord’s displeasure—God may even take pity on your enemy!

The point is a little complicated. It is the property of God to judge, and it is not to be taken lightly or personalized. God’s judgment should strike a note of fear in the hearts of everyone (see Lev 19:17–18; Mt 5:44). So if we want God to continue his anger on our enemies (by implication, the wicked), we should not gloat at their punishment. The proverb refers to personal enemies; the imprecatory psalms, directed against the enemies of God and his program, address a different set of circumstances.

19–20 *Saying 29: envying the wicked.* It is foolish to envy the wicked, for they are doomed (see 3:31; 23:17–18; 24:1–2). Two jussives—“Do not fret” (*ʿal-tithar*) and “do not be envious” (*ʿal-tʿqannē*)—form the warning. The motivation is that the wicked have no “future hope” (*ʿahʿrît*), or as Toy, 449, explains, there will be no good outcome for their lives. Their lives (“lamp”) will be suddenly “snuffed out.”

21–22 *Saying 30: fearing God and the king.* People should fear both God and the government, for both punish rebels. The positive instruction is followed by the warning “do not join” (*ʿal-tit ʿārāb*; lit., “do not get mixed-up”) with “the rebellious” (*šônîm*; lit., “people who change,” i.e., political agitators; see Note). Verse 21a is used in 1 Peter 2:17 and v.22 in Romans 13:4. The reward for living in peace under God in the world is that those who do so will escape the calamities that will fall on the rebellious.

NOTES

23:7 The LXX and Targum misunderstood the rare word *šāʿar*; the LXX rendered it as “hair” (as though *šē ʿār*) and the Targum as “gate.” The LXX has “eating and drinking (with him) is as if one should swallow a hair; do not introduce him to your company nor eat bread with him.” The Hebrew *šāʿar* has been taken in the sense of “calculated,” literally “as he calculated in his soul.” The slight change from *šāʿar* to *šē ʿār* would give this picture of an irritating and sickening experience. “Amenemope” uses “blocking the throat” in the same saying (ch. 11; 14:7). But evidence from cognates indicates the verb means “to arrange” balances or thoughts. The description of one’s arranging his thoughts harmonizes with the idea that he is a calculating person, or as the NIV has, is always thinking about the cost.

24:7 רָאֲמוֹת (*rāmôt*, “too high”) would normally be “corals”—“Wisdom to the fool is corals,” i.e., an unattainable treasure. With the slight change in the word to *rāmôt*, “high” is formed (so NIV).

21 D. W. Thomas (“The Root *šnh* = *šny* in Hebrew, II,” ZAW 55 [1937]: 174–76) connects *šônîm* to Arabic *saniya*, “high, exalted in rank.” The proverb would then be a warning against joining those who exalt themselves, perhaps against the king. The word שׁוֹנִים (*šônîm*, “rebellious”) may simply refer to the nobility. But it has been given various translations. The idea of change is preserved in the RV, which Toy, 450, says may include the idea of political agitators. The Syriac and Targum have “fools”; the Latin has “distractors”; the LXX has “do not disobey either of them,” referring to God and the king in the first line. Accordingly, the ruin predicted in the next line is the ruin that God and the king can inflict (see a full discussion in Toy, 450).

B. Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23–34)

²³These also are sayings of the wise:

To show partiality in judging is not good:

²⁴Whoever says to the guilty, “You are innocent”—
peoples will curse him and nations denounce him.

²⁵But it will go well with those who convict the guilty,
and rich blessing will come upon them.

²⁶An honest answer
is like a kiss on the lips.

²⁷Finish your outdoor work
and get your fields ready;
after that, build your house.

²⁸Do not testify against your neighbor without cause,
or use your lips to deceive.

²⁹Do not say, “I’ll do to him as he has done to me;

I'll pay that man back for what he did.”
³⁰I went past the field of the sluggard,
 past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
³¹thorns had come up everywhere,
 the ground was covered with weeds,
 and the stone wall was in ruins.
³²I applied my heart to what I observed
 and learned a lesson from what I saw:
³³A little sleep, a little slumber,
 a little folding of the hands to rest—
³⁴and poverty will come on you like a bandit
 and scarcity like an armed man.

COMMENTARY

23–25 *Partiality in judgment.* These verses contain several ethical teachings for judges: “To show partiality” is not good (v.23), calling the “guilty” (*rāšāʿ*, lit., “the wicked”) “innocent” (*ṣaddîq*, lit., “righteous”) will bring strong denunciation (v.24); but “those who convict the guilty” will be richly blessed (v.25). All these sayings set the standard that righteousness and evil be clearly distinguished by the courts (see 18:5; Lev 19:15; Dt 16:19).

26 *Truthfulness.* A truthful answer is the mark of friendship. The symbol of specifically kissing on the lips is mentioned only here in the Bible. Herodotus (*History* 1.134) shows that among the Persians this act was a sign of true friendship. The metaphor signifies that friendship is characterized by truth (cf. the NT practice of greeting with a “holy kiss”; Ro 16:16; 1Co 16:20; et al.).

27 *Financial stability.* A man should be financially secure before starting a family. Before entering marriage one should have a well-ordered life. Whybray, 153, thinks that the meaning is not restricted to marriage but in general teaches us to keep first things first.

28 *False witness.* This saying may be directed to the false accuser, for a friend says the right thing. There should be solid reasons before one ever goes to testify against a friend.

29 *Vengeance.* Rather than give in to the old spirit of vengeance, one should avoid retaliation (the same teaching is used in 20:22; Mt 5:43–45; Ro 12:9). Hillel said, “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you” (*b. Šabb.* 31a).

30–34 *Laziness.* The teacher makes several observations about the state of the sluggard that reveal that his continued laziness will result in poverty. The reminiscence used here may be a literary device to draw a fictional but characteristically true picture of the lazy person (see also 6:6–11).

VI. PROVERBS OF SOLOMON COLLECTED BY HEZEKIAH (25:1–29:27)

A. Introduction (25:1)

¹These are more proverbs of Solomon,
copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah:

1 This section of the book contains additional proverbs attributed to Solomon that were collected by the men of King Hezekiah (715–687 BC). These scribes or scholars “copied out” the sayings, i.e., transcribed them from one book to another. Critical scholars such as Toy, 457, assert that this superscription has no historical value other than to report the later disposition that people attributed many proverbs to Solomon.

The proverbs in these chapters differ in that there are more multiple-line sayings and more similes; chs. 28–29 are similar to chs. 10–16, but chs. 25–27 differ in having few references to God. For general material on 25:2–27, see Bryce, 145–57.

B. Proverbs 25:2–28

²It is the glory of God to conceal a matter;
to search out a matter is the glory of kings.

³As the heavens are high and the earth is deep,
so the hearts of kings are unsearchable.

⁴Remove the dross from the silver,
and out comes material for the silversmith;

⁵remove the wicked from the king’s presence,

and his throne will be established through
righteousness.

⁶Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence,
and do not claim a place among great men;

⁷it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here,"
than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.

What you have seen with your eyes

⁸do not bring hastily to court,
for what will you do in the end
if your neighbor puts you to shame?

⁹If you argue your case with a neighbor,
do not betray another man's confidence,

¹⁰or he who hears it may shame you
and you will never lose your bad reputation.

¹¹A word aptly spoken
is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

¹²Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold
is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.

¹³Like the coolness of snow at harvest time
is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him;
he refreshes the spirit of his masters.

¹⁴Like clouds and wind without rain
is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give.

¹⁵Through patience a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

¹⁶If you find honey, eat just enough—
too much of it, and you will vomit.

¹⁷Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house—
too much of you, and he will hate you.

¹⁸Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow

is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor.

¹⁹Like a bad tooth or a lame foot

is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble.

²⁰Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,

or like vinegar poured on soda,

is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

²¹If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;

if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

²²In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,

and the LORD will reward you.

²³As a north wind brings rain,

so a sly tongue brings angry looks.

²⁴Better to live on a corner of the roof

than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

²⁵Like cold water to a weary soul

is good news from a distant land.

²⁶Like a muddied spring or a polluted well

is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.

²⁷It is not good to eat too much honey,

nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.

²⁸Like a city whose walls are broken down

is a man who lacks self-control.

COMMENTARY

2 *Providence, searched out.* Kings must make things understandable to people, but God's providence is beyond knowing. This first saying expresses a contrast between God and kings. On the one hand, it is the glorious nature of God to "conceal" things. God's government of the universe is beyond human understanding—humans cannot fathom the

divine intentions and operations. McKane, 579, rightly observes that this is appropriate to God: “When it is supposed that everything is known about God, it is no longer possible to worship him.” He explains further that religion becomes ordinary and flat if there is no boundary to our understanding of him.

On the other hand, it is the glory of kings to “uncover” or “search out” things. Plaut, 257, says that human government cannot claim divine secrecy. Kings have to investigate everything; then they must make things open and intelligible to their subjects, especially judicial matters (Greenstone, 263). The juxtaposition of these two lines basically forms a contrast; but kings who rule as God’s representatives must also try to represent his will in human affairs; they must inquire after God to reveal his will.

3 *Counsel, of kings.* The king’s decisions are beyond the knowledge of the people. Using formal—almost emblematic—parallelism, the sage records a simple political fact. While a king ought to make judicial matters clear to the people (v.2), many things are not made known, perhaps because of his superior wisdom, his caprice, or the necessity of maintaining confidentiality. But the comparison with the heavens as high and the earth as deep capture the nature of the king—he must be resourceful, inscrutable, always one step ahead, to keep a firm grip on power and to enhance his perception by the people.

4–5 *Stability, through righteousness.* These two verses offer first an illustration and then its application (so emblematic parallelism). The lines are written with imperatives, forming instructive lessons. The first verse is problematic; removing “dross” (*sîgîm*) from silver does not produce “a vessel” (*kelî*; cf. NIV margin) for the silversmith. Thus, some versions render it “material” (so the NIV) for the silversmith. The LXX states that it will be entirely pure. Following this approach, D. Winton Thomas reads *kālîl* and renders it “purified completely” (“Notes on Some Passages,” 271–79). McKane, 580, simply rearranges the line to say that the smith can produce a work of art.

Whatever the exact reading for *kelî* is, the point is clear: Remove the wicked, and the throne will be established in righteousness. Greenstone, 264, says, “The king may have perfect ideals and his conduct may be impeccable, but he may be misled by unscrupulous courtiers.” When

these are purged, then the government will be left with righteous counselors and therefore “established through righteousness.”

6–7 Humility, its wisdom. It is wiser to wait to be promoted than to risk demotion by self-promotion. Promoting oneself in court may risk a public humiliation, but it would be an honor to have everyone in court hear the promotion from the king himself (see also Lk 14:8–11). The last line —“What you have seen with your eyes”—is attached to v.8 by the LXX, Syriac, Vulgate, and most modern translations.

8 Speech, cautious testimony. One must not be too eager to testify, lest one be put to shame publicly. “What you have seen with your eyes” (v.7c) fits well here, referring to a neighbor’s affairs (so the reference may be to a private matter). When this information is known, it would be risky to go “hastily” to court; for if the case had no valid claim, then one ends up in public disgrace. This is a warning to be cautious in divulging information. McKane, 581, urges that the verse speaks more of broken confidence than of hasty legal action and that it also applies to an administration that sees and hears things it must not divulge.

9–10 Quarrels, private. It is best to keep personal quarrels private to avoid public shame. These verses also are in the form of an instruction with a motivation. The thought runs that if in an argument with your neighbor you reveal another man’s confidence, he who hears you will shame you and you will always have a bad reputation.

To put it more directly, do not divulge secrets in order to clear yourself in an argument. The point involves damaging a friendship by involving others in a private quarrel. Plaut, 258, warns to stay in bounds if one must fight, for no success is achieved at the price of one’s integrity or someone’s hurt. Kidner, 157, brings the application forward: “To run to the law or to the neighbours is usually to run away from the duty of personal relationship—see Christ’s clinching comment in Matthew 18:15b.”

11 Speech, profound. The emblematic parallelism uses the simile of “apples of gold in settings of silver.” The meaning is not entirely certain; but it does speak of beauty, value, and artistry. The “apples of gold” (possibly apricots, citrons, quinces, or oranges) may refer to carvings of fruit in gold on columns. The point is obviously the immense value and memorable beauty of words used skillfully (Whybray, 148).

The expression translated “aptly” is *‘al-’opnāyw* (lit., “on its wheels”). Noting the meaning of the term and the dual form of the word, McKane, 584, explains that the expression is metaphorical for the balancing halves of a parallel Hebrew wisdom saying: “The *stichos* is a wheel, and the sentence consisting of two wheels is a ‘well-turned’ expression.” The line then is describing a balanced, “well-turned” saying, a proverb (see 8:19; 15:23); it is skillfully constructed, beautifully written, and of lasting value.

12 *Speech, rebuke.* A wise rebuke that is properly received is of lasting value. Another emblematic parallelism compares the rebuke to ornamental jewelry—it is pleasing and complimentary. The verse presents the ideal combination of a wise teacher and a willing student. (“Listening ear” means that the disciple is obedient in response to the rebuke.)

13 *Faithfulness, its appreciation.* A faithful messenger lifts up the spirits of those who sent him on the mission. The emblem in this verse is the “coolness of snow at harvest.” Various attempts have been made to explain this idea: snow at harvest would be rare, so it may refer to snow brought down from the mountains and kept in an ice hole (Whybray, 148); it may be the cool air with the snow, i.e., a “refreshing breeze that comes from the snow-capped mountains” (Greenstone, 266); it could be a snow-cooled drink (Toy, 464) or an application of ice water to foreheads (McKane, 585); or perhaps it is an imagined pleasure—snow at harvest (Plaut, 260). These suggestions, along with others, attempt to clarify the simile; but the lesson itself is clear enough—a faithful messenger is refreshing.

To “refresh the spirit” is *w^enepeš . . . yāšîb*, the idea being that someone who sends the messenger entrusts his life (i.e., his soul) to him; and a mission faithfully accomplished “restores” it to him. Faithfulness is always refreshing.

14 *Speech, bragging.* The promises of a boaster are empty. The illustration here is clouds and wind that lead one to expect rain but do not produce it; they gain attention but prove to be disappointing and hence deceitful. Similar is the windbag who brags of gifts to be bestowed, but the promise is deceitful (*šāqer*, “he does not give”)—there are none. The lesson, of course, is not to make false promises.

15 *Speech, patient and mild.* Calm and patient speech can break down insurmountable opposition. The lines are loosely synonymous. By patience one can persuade a ruler. McKane, 585, suggests that the verb *y^eputteh* (“be

persuaded”) suggests the idea of “made to act like a *petî* [‘simple one’],” but the parallelism with “break a bone” argues for *pâtâ* II (“to persuade”). By soft speech a bone can be broken; that is, stiff opposition can be broken down. The verse recommends “conciliatory and persuasive advocacy which succeeds in the end over against the most determined and studied recalcitrance” (ibid.; see also 14:29; 15:1, 18). Toy, 464, suggests changing “ruler” to “anger,” arguing that princes are not shown forbearance; he then changes the verb as well to match. But these changes seem gratuitous.

16 *Conduct, moderation.* Anything in which one overindulges can become distasteful; indeed, one *can* get “too much of a good thing”! The verse displays formal parallelism, giving the condition and then its consequences. It teaches that moderation (“just enough”) is necessary in the pleasures of life (see 16:24). Kidner, 159, says, “Since Eden, man has wanted the last ounce out of life, as though beyond God’s ‘enough’ lay ecstasy, not nausea.”

17 *Conduct, moderation.* Do not wear out your welcome with frequent visits. Verses 16 and 17 are similar in their words and ideas, with both advising moderate actions. The instruction to “seldom set foot” is literally “make your foot rare” (*hōqar ragl’kā*, from *yāqar*, “rare, precious”). D. W. Thomas suggests that *hōqar* is related to the Arabic *waqara* (“to overload, weigh heavily”), thus meaning here “make your foot heavy” (by staying away; cf. our expression, “make yourself scarce”; “Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,” *JTS* 38 [1937]: 402). The motivation for the warning is that familiarity breeds contempt.

18 *Speech, false witnesses.* False witnesses are deadly in society. The emblem line compares false witnesses to a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow—all deadly weapons. False witnesses can cause the death of innocent people (cf. Ex 20:16; Dt 5:20; also Pr 14:5).

19 *Character traits, unfaithfulness.* An unfaithful person is useless and painful. The verse also uses emblematic parallelism, starting with the similes of a bad tooth and a lame foot. Both are incapable of performing; they are painful and ineffective.

The second line makes the point: “is reliance [*mibṭāḥ*] on the unfaithful [*bôgēd*] in times of trouble.” The verse has been taken two ways, with “reliance” (*mibṭāḥ*) referring either to reliance on an unfaithful person or to what the unfaithful person relies on. Toy, 466, argues that what the faithless

relies on will fail him in the time of trouble. Thus *mibṭāḥ* refers to the ground of hope, e.g., wealth or power (as in 14:26: “has a secure fortress”). This view requires a slight change in pointing. The other view, which fits the Hebrew without changes, is that trusting a faithless person is like a decaying tooth or lame foot.

20 *Conduct, inappropriate.* Irresponsible attempts to cheer people up only make matters worse. This verse has some serious textual difficulty; the first line may be a dittogram—it is not in the LXX (see Note). As the MT stands, the verse is written in emblematic parallelism offering two similes for the point to be made. The first line refers to one who takes away a garment on a cold day. The verb usually means “adorn,” but here it must mean “lay off.” Removing a garment is inappropriate.

The second simile mentions pouring vinegar on soda (*ḥōmeṣ* on *nāter*). The reference is to sodium carbonate (occurring naturally in Egypt; see also Jer 2:22), which is neutralized with vinegar. But neutralizing sodium carbonate is doing something counterproductive. It would be inappropriate and counterproductive to “sing songs” to a “heavy heart” (*leb-rāʿ*). One needs to develop sensitivity to others; songs may only irritate grief. For an exceptional case, see the example of David’s serenading Saul (1Sa 19:9), though Saul’s response was unpredictable.

21–22 *Conduct, kindness to enemies.* People who treat their enemies with kindness will bring remorse to them and blessing from God. The saying includes an instruction and consequences. The imagery of the “burning coals” represents pangs of conscience, more readily affected by kindness than by violence. These burning coals produce the sharp pain of contrition through regret (see 18:19; 20:22; 24:17; Ge 42–45; 1Sa 24:18–20; cf. Paul’s use in Ro 12:20).

The other consequence is that the Lord “will reward you” (*yʿšallem-lāk*), though the rabbis took this in the causative sense: “will cause him to make peace with you” (Greenstone, 270). A reward coming from the Lord shows that this instruction belongs to the religious traditions of Israel. Plaut, 262, records a Chinese proverb on the same theme: “Meet good with good that good can be maintained; meet evil with good that good may be created” (see also G. R. Driver, “Problems and Solutions,” VT 4 [1954]: 225–45).

23 *Speech, sly words.* Sly words will infuriate people. The north wind that brings the rain is compared with the “sly tongue” that brings angry

looks. One problem in the verse concerns the north wind, for it is the west wind that brings rain to Palestine (1Ki 18:41–44). Toy, 468, suggests that the expression is general and means a northwest wind (possibly even in error). McKane, 583, summarizes and refutes the view of J. P. M. van der Ploeg (“Prov. 25:23,” VT 3 [1953]: 189–92) that the saying may have originated outside the land, perhaps in Egypt; if so, the saying is being used in a geographical area in which it doesn’t apply.

Whybray, 149, suggests the solution lies with the verb *tʰôlêl*; rather than meaning “brings forth,” perhaps it means more literally “distresses” (i.e., “repels, holds back”). His interpretation then is that as the north wind holds back the rain, so an angry glance prevents slander. In this case “sly tongue” denotes a “quiet tongue” that drives anger away. I prefer the basic meaning that as northerly winds bring rain, the sly tongue brings angry looks. The verse stresses inevitable results.

24 *Family, peaceful relationship.* Better to have peaceful solitude than companionship with strife. The verse is the same as 21:9.

25 *Speech, good news.* Good news refreshes the weary soul. The point of the verse is transparent (see also 15:30). It is true of love; it is true of spiritual realms. Toy, 469, notes that the difficulty of getting news from a distant place at that time heightened the refreshment of it. See for an illustration Genesis 45:27.

26 *Character traits, integrity.* A righteous man who loses his position is useless. The images of the “muddied spring” (fouled perhaps by crossing animals) and the “polluted well” suggest an action that is unforgivable. The comparison is with the righteous person who “gives way” (*māṭ*, lit., “moved”) before the wicked.

This verse has often been interpreted to refer to the loss of integrity by the righteous. Perowne, 161, says, “To see a righteous man moved from his steadfastness through fear or favour in the presence of the wicked is as disheartening as to find the stream turbid and defiled, at which you were longing to quench your thirst.” But the line may refer to the loss of social standing and position by plots of the wicked (Toy, 470). For the righteous so to fall indicates that the world is out of joint (see also McKane, 593).

27 *Character traits, self-glory.* To seek one’s own glory is dishonorable. The second line of this verse is problematic; it should make an analogy to honey—glory is good, like honey, but not to excess; thus, McKane, 587–88,

translates, “Be sparing in your encouraging words.” The Hebrew literally says, “The investigation of their glory is glory.” This sentence was rendered in the LXX as, “It is proper to honor notable sayings.” A. A. MacIntosh suggested, “He who searches for glory will be distressed” (“A Note on Prov. 25:27,” *VT* 20 [1970]: 112–14); Bryce, 145–57, has “to search out difficult things is glorious”; Raymond C. Van Leeuwen suggests “to seek difficult things is as glory” (“Proverbs 25:27 Once Again,” *VT* 36 [1986]: 105–14); but Toy, 470, argues that the text is doubtful, each line having lost its original companion.

28 *Character traits, self-control.* Without self-control a person is vulnerable. The point of the comparison to a broken-down city is that one who lacks self-control has no defenses.

NOTES

8 The word פֶּן (*pen*, “lest”) seems out of place in this proverb (NIV translates “for”). But Waltke, 2:303, notes that “lest” is an anacolouthon, “lest—what will you do?” The full thought would be something like “lest you lose the case, what will you do?” Toy, 461, suggests changing the word to כִּי (*kî*, “for”; cf. *BHS* margin) to make a better connection and avoid supplying an ellipsis.

20 The translation of *nāter* as “soda” does not harmonize well with the parallel lines. G. R. Driver (“Problems and Solutions,” *VT* 4 [1954]: 240–41) links the word to the Arabic *natru(n)*, which has the idea of plunging a weapon into someone, and *natratu*, “deep wound.” This was the sense of the word according to the LXX. The Hebrew consonants מַעְדָּה בִּגְד בְּיוֹם קָרָה (*m’dh bgd bywm qrh*) of this verse are similar to the consonants מוֹעֵדֶת מִבְּטָח בִּגְד בְּיוֹם צָרָה (*mw ‘dt mbṭḥ bwgd bywm ṣrh*) in v.19. The LXX has a much longer reading: “Like vinegar is bad for a wound, so a pain that afflicts the body afflicts the heart. Like a moth in a garment and a worm in wood, so the pain of a man wounds the heart.” The idea that verse 20 is a dittogram is not that convincing; and the LXX is too far removed to be of help in the matter.

C. Proverbs 26:1–28



- ¹Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
honor is not fitting for a fool.
- ²Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow,
an undeserved curse does not come to rest.
- ³A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey,
and a rod for the backs of fools!
- ⁴Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him yourself.
- ⁵Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.
- ⁶Like cutting off one's feet or drinking violence
is the sending of a message by the hand of a fool.
- ⁷Like a lame man's legs that hang limp
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
- ⁸Like tying a stone in a sling
is the giving of honor to a fool.
- ⁹Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
- ¹⁰Like an archer who wounds at random
is he who hires a fool or any passer-by.
- ¹¹As a dog returns to its vomit,
so a fool repeats his folly.
- ¹²Do you see a man wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.
- ¹³The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road,
a fierce lion roaming the streets!"
- ¹⁴As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.
- ¹⁵The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;

he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.

¹⁶The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
than seven men who answer discreetly.

¹⁷Like one who seizes a dog by the ears
is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own.

¹⁸Like a madman shooting
firebrands or deadly arrows

¹⁹is a man who deceives his neighbor
and says, "I was only joking!"

²⁰Without wood a fire goes out;
without gossip a quarrel dies down.

²¹As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.

²²The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man's inmost parts.

²³Like a coating of glaze over earthenware
are fervent lips with an evil heart.

²⁴A malicious man disguises himself with his lips,
but in his heart he harbors deceit.

²⁵Though his speech is charming, do not believe him,
for seven abominations fill his heart.

²⁶His malice may be concealed by deception,
but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.

²⁷If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it;
if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.

²⁸A lying tongue hates those it hurts,
and a flattering mouth works ruin.

COMMENTARY

1 Honor, inappropriate to fools. Toy, 472, calls vv.1–12 the Book of Fools. Verse 1 indicates that honor is out of place with a fool. It draws a comparison with snow in summer and rain in harvest to show that honor does not “belong” (*nāweh*) to the fool. The “fool” (*k’sîl*) is the stupid person who is worthless and vain (just the kind of person popular culture seems to honor). *Kābôd* (“honor,” GK 3883) probably refers to the external recognition of worth, i.e., respect, advancement to high position, and accolades, but it can also include intrinsic worth. All the incongruities mentioned would mean that life is topsy-turvy (McKane, 595). The sage warns against elevating and acclaiming those who are worthless (see also J. A. Emerton, “Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,” VT 15 [1965]: 271–79).

2 Speech, undeserved curse. An “undeserved curse” is ineffective. Like a fluttering sparrow or darting swallow, it does not settle down, nor does it reach its destination (see 1Ki 4:33 for Solomon’s interest in animals). It was commonly believed that blessings and curses had objective existence—that once uttered, the word was effectual. Scriptures make it clear that the power of a blessing or a curse depends on the power of the one behind it (e.g., Balaam could not curse what God had blessed; cf. Nu 22:38; 23:8). This proverb corrects superstition. The Word of the Lord is powerful because it is the Word of the Lord—he will fulfill it.

3 Discipline, physical. A fool must be controlled by physical force. The point of here is that the “fool” (*k’sîl*) is as difficult to manage as a donkey or horse. Neither the fool nor these animals respond to reason but must be driven by whip, halter, or rod.

4 Fools, responding to. The one who responds to a fool appears like a fool. The instruction is that one should not answer a “fool” (*k’sîl*) according to “his folly” (*k’iwwaltô*; see Rotenberg, “The Meaning of *’iwwelet* in the Proverbs,” *Leshônênu* 25 [1960/61]: 201). One should not stoop to a fool’s level of thought. To get into an argument with a fool in that way will only make one look like a fool as well.

5 Fools, responding to. The one who rebukes a fool will discourage him from thinking too highly of himself. The inclusion of both vv.4 and 5 posed a major problem for the rabbis; they solved it by saying that v.4 refers to secular things but v.5 to religious controversies. While this does not resolve the issue, it does present a sound application of the point being made—in

negligible issues one should just ignore the stupid person, but in issues that matter, he must be dealt with lest credence be given to what he says (Plaut, 266).

The text presents together two sayings, each of which contains an aspect of the whole truth. The meaning of the two together is that one should not lower oneself to the level of a fool but that there are times when the lesser evil is to speak out than be silent. Whybray, 152, says these two verses are put together to show that human problems are often complicated and cannot always be solved by appealing to a single rule. A good example of answering a fool according to his folly is Paul's so-called "fool speech" to correct the foolish thoughts of the Corinthians (2Co 11:16–17; 12:11).

6 *Fools, useless as messengers.* To use a fool as a messenger is to invite trouble. The similes of "cutting off one's feet" and "drinking violence" are difficult to comprehend. Sending a messenger is like having another pair of feet; but sending a fool on the mission is not only no help, it is like cutting off the pair of feet one has—it is a setback! "Violence" (*ḥāmās*) is injustice or violent social wrongs and "drinking violence" is metaphorical for suffering violence; that is, sending a fool on a mission will only have injurious consequences. The verse gives the consequences in line one and the condition that causes them in line two. It is better not to send a message in the first place than to use a fool to deliver it.

7 *Fools, dense.* Proverbs are useless to fools. In this verse the emblem is a little unclear, but the point is not. The first line gives the simile: "Like a lame man's legs that hang limp" (*dalyû šōqayim mippissēḥ*). There have been various attempts to interpret *dalyû*, but the idea must include that the lame man's legs are useless to him; they hang down, thus preventing him from going too far. Likewise, the fool is a "proverb-monger" (as put by Toy, 474); he handles an aphorism about as well as a lame man walks. Plaut, 267, says that learning wisdom from a fool is like learning to dance from a lame man (though, of course, a lame man could have intelligence and explain things). The fool does not understand the "proverb" (*māšāl*), has not implemented it, and cannot use it or teach it correctly or profitably.

8 *Honor, inappropriate to fools.* Honoring a fool is not only counterproductive, it is absurd. It is like "tying a stone" in a sling. Various attempts to explain this picture have been made. One, based on the Latin, sees it as referring to casting a stone into the heap of stones of (the god)

Mercury (see Plaut, 267). Another explains it as hiding a precious stone among a heap of stones, i.e., a waste (Perowne, 163). But *margēmâ* is a “sling” (LXX, *sphendonē*) and not Mercury or a heap; and “bind” fits the idea the best. Whybray, 152, explains that only someone who does not know how a sling works would do such a stupid thing. So to honor a fool is absurd, because what is intended cannot be accomplished—he will remain a fool.

9 *Fools, use of proverbs.* It is painful to hear fools use proverbs. The illustration is that of a “thornbush in a drunkard’s hand.” Toy, 475, interprets this image as more than a thorn; he pictures a half-crazy, drunken man brandishing a stick. But if in taking a thornbush the thorn pierces the hand (lit., “comes into the hand”), then the picture is of a drunk who does not know how to handle the thornbush because he cannot control his movements and so gets hurt (see McKane, 599). A fool can read or speak a proverb but will be intellectually and spiritually unfit to handle it; he will misuse it and misapply it. It is at just such a time as this that he should be answered (see v.5).

10 *Fools, dangerous.* Hiring a fool or a stranger is a dangerous thing to do. The one who hires such is compared to “an archer who wounds at random” (*rab mʰôlêl-kôl*). The line is difficult because it can be translated in different ways: *rab* can mean “archer,” “master,” or “much”; and *mʰôlêl* can mean “wound” or “bring forth.” The possibilities include the following: “A master performs all”; “a master injures all”; “an archer wounds all”; or simply “much produces (wounds) all” (see Toy, 476, for the variety of interpretations). The line must express something that is negative—an archer/master who injures/wounds everything. Anyone who hires a fool or a stranger gives him ample opportunity to do great damage. The undisciplined hireling will have the same effect as an archer’s shooting at random.

11 *Fools, persist in folly.* Fools repeat their disgusting mistakes. No matter how many times a fool is warned, he never learns, not even from experience, but “repeats his folly.” The simile of a dog’s returning to his vomit is graphic and debasing; it is used in 2 Peter 2:22 to forestall returning to sin.

12 *Character traits, self-conceit.* Those who think they are wise are almost impossible to help. The saying uses a comparison to stress how

difficult it is to curb self-conceit—a fool has more hope. Kidner, 163, observes that there is more for an able man’s vanity to feed on and thus more damage that he can do. Self-conceit is actually a part of the folly the book decries, because for someone to think he is wise when he is not makes him a “conceited ignoramus” (Plaut, 268).

13 Laziness, its excuses. The sluggard uses absurd excuses to get out of work (see 22:13). This verse begins the Book of Sluggards (vv.13–16). Kidner, 163, provides a helpful overview of the section by explaining that the sluggard does not think he is lazy and so is self-deceived. A sluggard would say that he is a realist and not a shirker (v.13), that he is below his best in the morning and not self-indulgent (v.14), that his inertia is an objection to being hustled (v.15), and that he is sticking to his guns and not mentally indolent (v.16).

14 Character traits, laziness. The sluggard does not like to get out of his bed. The humor in this verse is based on the analogy with a door—it moves but goes nowhere. Likewise the sluggard is hinged to his bed. McKane, 601, says that the sluggard’s turning in his bed “is the greatest degree of movement to which he aspires” (see also 6:9–10; 24:33).

15 Character traits, laziness. The sluggard is too lazy even to eat (see 19:24).

16 Character traits, self-conceit. The sluggard is filled with self-conceit. This fellow is self-satisfied; in his own opinion he is wiser than any number of people who “answer good sense,” i.e., “discreetly.” He thinks he has life all figured out and has chosen the wise course of action—but he is basically lazy. Greenstone, 269, says, for example, “Much anti-intellectualism may be traced to such rationalization for laziness.”

17 Conduct, meddling. The subject matter concerns the one who “meddles” in someone else’s quarrel. Anyone who does so is asking for trouble. The Hebrew verb literally means “become excited” (*mit ‘abbēr*); the Vulgate and the Syriac have “meddle” (reading *mit ‘ārēb*). The Hebrew could fit the line—someone who gets angry over the fight of another. The comparison is grabbing a dog by the ears—a dangerous thing to do, for dogs in the ancient world were wild, like jackals. So the person who makes trouble for himself cannot complain when he gets hurt.

18–19 Speech, deceptive. It is dangerous to deceive someone out of jest. Anyone who “deceives” his neighbor and then protests that he is “joking” is

like a “madman” shooting deadly arrows. The practical joker is immature and thinks only of his own laughs. Plaut, 270, advises that “the only worthwhile humor is that which laughs with, not at others.” By comparing the joker to a madman, the sage describes him as irresponsible and dangerous—he may hurt people while thinking it is all good fun. McKane, 602, says, “Liberties cannot be taken with dangerous weapons, nor can they be taken with the confidence of a friend.”

20 *Conduct, gossip.* Gossip fuels strife. The instruction of the verse is to prevent a “quarrel” (*mādôn*) by restricting “gossip” (*nirgān*), just as one ends a fire by withholding the wood. For more on the talebearer, see 18:8.

21 *Character traits, quarrelsomeness.* Quarrelsome people start fights. The “quarrelsome man” (*’iš midwānîm*) in this instance is not unlike the *nirgān* (“gossip”) of v.20. His quarreling is like piling fuel on the fire—strife flairs up again and again.

22 *Speech, gossip.* Gossip is appealing. Here the words of a “gossip” (*nirgān*) are compared to choice morsels—they are eagerly and thoroughly “devoured” by those who hear them (see 18:8).

23 *Speech, deceptive.* Fervent speech may conceal evil plans. The sage compares hypocritical speech to the glazing over of an earthen pot. The Hebrew has *kesep sîgîm* (“silver dross”), which makes little sense, in spite of the attempts by commentators to explain it. Ugaritic has a word for “glaze” (*spsg*), paralleled in Hittite *zapzaga(y)a*. H. L. Ginsberg (“The North-Canaanite Myth of Anat and Aqhat,” *BASOR* 98 [1945]: 21; “Ugaritic Studies and the Bible,” *BA* 8 [1945]: 57–58) repointed the Hebrew text to *k’sapsaqîm* (“like glaze”), adopted by many modern interpretations (so NIV; see also W. F. Albright, “A New Hebrew Word for ‘Glaze’ in Proverbs 26:23,” *BASOR* 98 [1945]: 24–25; Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 173–97; Kenneth L. Barker, “The Value of Ugaritic for Old Testament Studies,” *BSac* 133 [1976]: 128–29).

Glaze covering a vessel makes it look dazzling and certainly different from the clay that it actually is. The analogy fits the second line very well: “fervent” (*dōl’qîm*, lit., “burning, glowing”) lips concealing an evil heart (the LXX reads “flattering lips,” as though from *ḥōl’qîm*). On the surface a person fervently says things that may be pleasing, perhaps protestations of affection; but they merely cover one’s true nature as one plotting evil.

24 *Speech, hypocritical.* Hypocritical words may hide a wicked heart. This verse repeats the sentiment of v.23 (and continues through v.27). Here the “malicious man” (*šônē*) “disguises” (*yinnākēr*) the “deceit” (*mirmâ*) in his heart by what he says.

25 *Speech, hypocritical.* Charming words might merely cover evil thoughts. The sage warns the disciple, “Do not believe” (*ʿal-taʾmen*) the one who has “charming” (*yḥannēn*) speech, because there are countless (= “seven”) abominations he has planned. It will take great shrewdness and wisdom to discern who can be believed. This verse may have in mind a person who has already proven untrustworthy but who now is using speech to conceal and to put into action his evil plans.

26 *Retribution, certain.* Concealed malice will inevitably be made known. The proverb is concerned with how evil will be exposed. The lines are in antithetical parallelism, the first stating that “malice” (*šinʾâ*) may be concealed “by deception” and the second affirming that his evil will be exposed publicly. That righteousness will ultimately be victorious informs this saying.

27 *Retribution, certain.* Whatever a man sows he will reap. The lines are set in synonymous parallelism, giving two illustrations of the point—digging a pit and rolling a stone. The digging refers to laying a trap for someone, and rolling a stone is probably on someone for greater force. Measure for measure justice is in view—he will fall into his own pit, or the stone will roll on him. For samples consider Haman (Est 7:10) and Daniel’s enemies (Da 6:24–28). Also see the saying in *m. ʾAbot* 2:7 (drowning for drowning).

28 *Speech, deceptive.* Deceptive speech brings ruin without regard for those it may hurt. The two lines, loosely synonymous, portray the evil person who deceives (“lying tongue”//“flattering mouth”) as one who ruthlessly ruins people. The “ruin” (*midḥeh*) that such a person works could be on himself (an idea that fits the context) or on others (which seems to be the point of the verse). The introduction of the motif of the tongue that “hates those it hurts” suggests that expressions of hatred help the deceiver justify what he is doing (Plaut, 271). In any case, only pain and ruin can come from deception. Kidner, 164, writes, “Truth is vital, and pride fatal, to right decisions.” (See Driver, “Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs,” 162–75.)

D. Proverbs 27:1–27

- ¹Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring forth.
- ²Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
someone else, and not your own lips.
- ³Stone is heavy and sand a burden,
but provocation by a fool is heavier than both.
- ⁴Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy?
- ⁵Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
- ⁶Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.
- ⁷He who is full loathes honey,
but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.
- ⁸Like a bird that strays from its nest
is a man who strays from his home.
- ⁹Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart,
and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his
earnest counsel.
- ¹⁰Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father,
and do not go to your brother's house when disaster
strikes you—
better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.
- ¹¹Be wise, my son, and bring joy to my heart;
then I can answer anyone who treats me with
contempt.
- ¹²The prudent see danger and take refuge,
but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

¹³Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger;

hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman.

¹⁴If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning,

it will be taken as a curse.

¹⁵A quarrelsome wife is like

a constant dripping on a rainy day;

¹⁶restraining her is like restraining the wind
or grasping oil with the hand.

¹⁷As iron sharpens iron,

so one man sharpens another.

¹⁸He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit,

and he who looks after his master will be honored.

¹⁹As water reflects a face,

so a man's heart reflects the man.

²⁰Death and Destruction are never satisfied,
and neither are the eyes of man.

²¹The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but man is tested by the praise he receives.

²²Though you grind a fool in a mortar,
grinding him like grain with a pestle,
you will not remove his folly from him.

²³Be sure you know the condition of your flocks,
give careful attention to your herds;

²⁴for riches do not endure forever,
and a crown is not secure for all generations.

²⁵When the hay is removed and new growth appears
and the grass from the hills is gathered in,

²⁶the lambs will provide you with clothing,
and the goats with the price of a field.

²⁷You will have plenty of goats' milk
to feed you and your family
and to nourish your servant girls.

COMMENTARY

1 *Plans, uncertain future.* Presumption about the future is dangerous because the future is uncertain. Line one is the instruction and line two the reason. The warning is, “Do not boast about tomorrow” (i.e., a metonymy for what you will do in the future). The verse is not ruling out wise planning for the future, only one’s overconfident sense of ability to control the future—and no one can presume on God’s future.

Rather, humility is required; one “must live from day to day, grateful for the life one has from God, with the awareness that it may be withdrawn at any time and that he must not speak or plan as if he himself had full disposal of his destiny and power over the future” (McKane, 607). See the development of the idea in James 4:13–16 and in Matthew 6:34 with the instruction not to worry (see also Lk 12:20). A second application of the verse is not to postpone to an uncertain future what is in one’s power to do at once (Greenstone, 282, citing *m. ’Abot* 2:8).

2 *Humility, praise from others.* It is best to let other people praise you. The verse is another instruction but now in synonymous parallelism. Self-praise is a form of pride, even if it begins with little things (such as whom you know, where you have been, etc.), and it does not establish a reputation. The reputation comes from what others think of you. “Someone else” in this proverb is literally “stranger” (*zār*)—a person who may speak more objectively about your accomplishments and abilities. On a practical level, the rabbis permitted one to make virtues and achievements known where one was not known (*b. Ned.* 62a).

3 *Fools, provocation of.* What a fool provokes is unbearable. Emblematic parallelism is used to make the comparison: stone and sand are heavy, and whoever carries them knows the work is exhausting and painful. But more tiring is the fool’s provocation, for the mental effort it takes to deal with it is more wearying than physical work; the fool brings a spiritual malaise for

others to endure (McKane, 609). Toy, 482, does not think that “provocation by a fool” would be given the epithet “heavy,” so he proposes “anger”: “the anger of a fool is heavier than them both.” This suggestion is not compelling.

4 Character traits, jealousy. Jealousy is more unbearable than anger. The parallelism is formal, the comparison being drawn with a rhetorical question. The sage focuses attention first on anger that is ruthless and destructive (lit., “a flood of anger”; see Job 38:25; Ps 32:6; Na 1:8 for the imagery used for destruction). In contrast “jealousy” (*qin’â*), here probably in the negative sense (as opposed to the positive sense of zeal to defend a threatened institution for the right reasons), is a raging emotion that defies reason at times and takes the form of destructive violence, like a consuming fire (McKane, 611; see Pr 6:32–35; SS 8:6–7).

5 Reproof, a part of love. Direct reproof is better than unexpressed love. The verse is a single sentence forming a “better” saying of relative values. “Open rebuke” is a frank, direct word of honest criticism or disapproval (from either a friend or foe). “Hidden love” is a love that is too timid, too afraid, or not trusting enough to admit that reproof is a part of genuine love (McKane, 610). A love that manifests no rebuke is morally useless (Toy, 483). In fact, one might question whether or not it is sincere (see also 28:23; 29:3).

6 Reproof, its value. Reproof given in love is superior to insincere expressions of affection. The lines are set in antithetical parallelism contrasting the faithful (*ne^emānîm*; “can be trusted,” NIV) wounds of a “friend” (*’ôhēb*) with the profuse (*na^ttārôt*; “multiplies,” NIV) kisses of an “enemy” (*šônē*). The wounds of a friend “can be trusted” because they are meant to correct (see 25:12; cf. Dt 7:9; Job 12:20). But an enemy’s kisses are deceptive (e.g., the deceitful kiss of Judas [Mk 14:43–45]), in spite of their profusion. (For the word *na^ttārôt* the versions have a variety of translations—“confused,” “fraudulent,” “bad,” etc.)

7 Character traits, need versus desire. Those who have great needs are more appreciative than those who are satisfied. The verse contrasts the one who is “full” (*nepeš š^ebē ‘â*) with the one who is “hungry” (*nepeš r^eēbâ*); the former loathes honey, and the latter finds even bitter things sweet. The word *nepeš* in each half refers to the whole person with all one’s appetites. Most agree that the proverb is capable of wider application than eating; it can

apply to possessions, experiences, education, etc. Toy, 483, suggests the idea of praise—it is nauseous to one who is much praised but greatly appreciated by one who seldom receives it. Greenstone, 284, suggests that one who thinks he is fully competent rejects rebuke.

8 *Security, abandoned.* To stray from home is to lose security. The parallelism compares a bird that “strays” (*nôdedet*) from a nest with the man who “strays” (*nôdēd*) from home. The reason for his straying is not given, but it could be because of exile, eviction, business, or irresponsible actions. Kidner, 165, thinks the sage condemns the one wandering because he has deserted his charge and forfeited his prospects; he is a rolling stone, but not a pilgrim or fugitive. The saying may be more general and simply asserts that those who wander lack the security of their home and can no longer contribute to their community life (e.g., refugees who must move en masse). The verse could be portraying the wandering as an unhappy plight without condemning the wanderer as irresponsible.

9 *Advice, of a friend.* Advice from a friend is pleasant. The emblem is the joy that perfume and incense bring to people, and the point is the value of the advice of a friend. Line two of the verse is difficult. Toy, 484, suggests it is unintelligible as it appears in the Hebrew, which reads: “The sweetness of his friend from the counsel of soul.” Many interpreters take line two to describe the advice or counsel of a friend as sweetening the soul (see Note).

10 *Friend, helpful.* A friend who is available is better than a relative who is not. This verse is difficult. Toy, 485–86, suggests that the three lines put together have no immediate connection: v.10a instructs people to maintain relationships; v.10b says not to go to their brother’s house (only?) when disaster strikes; and v.10c observes that a neighbor nearby is better than a brother far away. Toy thinks a connection may have been there once but has long since disappeared; he also wonders whether v.10b is a gloss (see 17:17) from someone opposed to brothers. (Removing v.10b, however, does not make the verse clearer.)

The conflict between 17:17 and 27:10b may be another example of presenting two sides of the issue to show that such a matter cannot be resolved with one simple teaching. If the verse is preserved as it appears in the MT, it teaches us to maintain relationships with family and friends but to realize that a neighbor who is near will be of more help than a relative far away (“nearby” and “far away” referring to spatial distance, not feelings).

11 Teaching, vindicated. A wise son (disciple) enables a father (teacher) to defend himself against his critics. The verse gives an instruction (“Be wise”) with its consequence (“then I can answer anyone who . . .”). The expression “treats me with contempt” refers to the taunting or criticizing of the instructor as a poor teacher. Teachers are usually held responsible for the faults and weaknesses of their pupils; but any teacher criticized that way takes pleasure in pointing to those who have learned as proof that he has not labored in vain. Along this concern, see 1 Thessalonians 2:19–20; 3:8.

12 Wisdom, wary of evil. Avoiding the pitfalls in life requires wisdom. The contrast is between the “prudent” (*ārûm*) and the “simple” (*ptāyīm*); the former is the mature person who has developed a wariness (1:4), and the latter is the inexperienced and untrained youth who stumbles into things. The verse is a motivation for the naive to be trained, for life will be far less painful for them if they know how to avoid its dangers (see 22:3).

13 Obligations, fulfilled. People must be held to their obligations no matter how foolishly they were made. The verse is essentially the same as 20:16.

14 Speech, inappropriate greeting. Loud and untimely greetings are not appreciated. At the least the verse tells us that how, when, and why we say what we say is important (see Kidner, 166). But there are a few ways to interpret this verse. On the surface it appears to be describing one who comes in early and loud with his blessing or greeting; he is considered a nuisance (“it will be taken as a curse”). But “blesses” and “curse” could mean more; they could refer to the loud adulation of a hypocrite, the person who goes to great length to create the impression of piety and friendship but is considered a curse by the one who hears him. Another possibility, though less likely, is that the blessing is given prematurely, before the fortune is known, and that God, offended by the premature assumption, will reckon it a curse.

15–16 Family, quarrelsome wife. A quarrelsome mate is an unbearable irritant (see 19:13). The LXX interprets: “Drops [of water] drive a man out of his house on a wintry day; so a railing woman also drives him out of his own house.”

Verse 16 would be obscure if it were not connected with v.15; it adds the idea that the quarrelsome wife is also uncontrollable. The first line says that “restraining her is like restraining the wind” (*šōpneyhā šāpan-rûah*). The

wind is elusive; it can gust at any moment; so too is the woman who may burst out at any moment. The second line is “grasping oil with the hand,” an expression Scott, 163, compares to our idiomatic “butterfingers.” The point is that the husband is dealing with a woman as unpredictable and uncontrollable as a gust of wind or a hand grasping oil. Greenstone, 288, suggests a view that may be too subtle: “oil” represents fatness, and that means power, i.e., she has to be restrained by force. The LXX also takes an etymologizing approach and arrives at “the north wind is a severe wind but by its name is termed auspicious.”

17 Criticism, helpful. Constructive criticism between friends develops character. The simile focuses on the use of iron to “sharpen” (*yāḥad*, from the root *ḥdd*, “to sharpen,” as in the versions) iron. Possibly *yāḥad* is to be translated “together,” yielding the idea that they go together. But the point of line two is that a man sharpens the face of his fellow (*’iš yāḥad p̄nê-rē ‘ēhû*; “one man sharpens another,” NIV). The word *p̄nê* (“face”) here means the personality or character of the person. McKane, 615, suggests the idea of wits, i.e., that the interaction makes them sharp as a razor. The Talmud applied it to study: two students sharpening each other in the study of Torah (*b. Ta’an. 7a*; see also A. Sperber, “Biblical Exegesis,” *JBL* 64 [1945]: 39–140).

18 Rewards, for service. Those who faithfully serve will be rewarded in kind. Another emblematic parallelism, this verse uses the illustration that one who takes care of a fig tree will eat its fruit. A fig tree needed closer attention than other plants; so the point includes the diligent tending of it. A. Cohen suggests that *nōṣēr* (“tends”) refers to planting figs (“He Who Tends a Fig Tree Will Eat Its Fruit [Prov 27:18],” *Beth Mikra* 25 [1979]: 81–82; see Jer 31:5–6). The second line says that the servant “looks after” (*šōmēr*) his master, i.e., serves him meticulously by anticipating the needs and watching over his charge. Such a servant need not worry about his efforts going unrecognized or unrewarded (see also Pr 22:29; 2Ti 2:6, 15).

19 Character traits, reflected in thoughts. Thoughts reflect one’s true character. This verse is cryptic, and thus there are several suggestions as to its meaning. It is set in emblematic parallelism, with the first line forming the similitude. The verse literally says, “As water face to face / so a man’s heart to a man.” The simplest way to take the verse is to say that as clear water gives a reflection of the face, so the heart reflects the true nature of

the man (NIV). The suggestion of Toy, 490, that through the observation of another a man can know himself is not convincing, for that interpretation requires another “(man’s) face” in line one. The point seems to be that through looking at our attitudes of heart we come to true self-awareness.

20 *Desires, insatiable.* The desires of human beings are as insatiable as “Death” and “Destruction.” Šôl and ʾbaddōh are expressions for the underworld (see 15:11). Generations of people have gone headlong into the world below, yet it is never satisfied. This observation forms the emblem of the point that the eyes of man “are never satisfied.” The *Midrash* (*Ecc. Rab.* 1:34) says, “No man dies and has one-half of what he wanted.” The LXX adds: “He who fixes his eye is an abomination to the Lord, and the uninstructed do not restrain their tongues.”

21 *Character traits, praiseworthy.* Public praise is usually a good measure of the qualities and contributions of a person. The comparison of the point is with the crucible for silver and the furnace for gold—they refine and reveal the pure metals. So the idea is that a person “is tested by the praise he receives [*lʿpî mahʿlālô*, lit., ‘by his praise’].” Public praise formed a test for Saul and David (1Sa 18:7), with David’s coming out the better for it. Public opinion, or the praise of others, is normally a good barometer; but there is the other side of the matter, namely, that righteousness will be denounced (Mt 5:11). Another way to interpret *mahʿlālô* is “the praise he gives”—we often stand revealed by what we praise (Kidner, 168). The LXX again adds a couplet: “The heart of the transgressor seeks evil; / but the upright heart seeks knowledge.”

22 *Folly, unalterable.* Folly cannot be removed by force. The verse is in formal parallelism but is metaphorical, using the imagery of grinding grain in a mortar with a pestle, i.e., pulverizing, to talk about physical punishment for the fool. Since folly is his nature, it will not be removed from him. The LXX paraphrases the line—“If you scourge a fool in the assembly, dishonoring him, you would not remove his folly”—and in so doing removes its imagery.

23–27 *Wealth, transitory.* People should preserve what income they have because it does not long endure. The last few verses of the chapter form a little poem about the preservation of income. Verse 23 provides the main instruction: take care of your livelihood. The motivation for this is that riches do not last long (v.24). The reasoning for wisely taking care of one’s

income continues in the second half of the poem—the protasis being in v.25 and the apodasis in vv.26–27: If the growth is removed, they can sell and use their livestock. The poem shows the proper interplay between human labor and divine provision.

NOTE

9 The Latin has “the soul is sweetened by the good counsels of a friend.” Thomas suggests “counsels of a friend make sweet the soul” (“Notes on Some Passages,” 275). G. R. Driver (“Hebrew Notes,” ZAW 52 [1934]: 54; “Suggestions and Objections,” ZAW 55 [1937]: 69–70) suggests “the counsel of a friend is sweeter than one’s own advice” (lit., “more than the counsel of the soul”). He also suggests “more than of fragrant wood.” The LXX reads, “and the soul is rent by misfortunes.”

E. Proverbs 28:1–28

¹The wicked man flees though no one pursues,
but the righteous are as bold as a lion.

²When a country is rebellious, it has many rulers,
but a man of understanding and knowledge maintains
order.

³A ruler who oppresses the poor
is like a driving rain that leaves no crops.

⁴Those who forsake the law praise the wicked,
but those who keep the law resist them.

⁵Evil men do not understand justice,
but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.

⁶Better a poor man whose walk is blameless
than a rich man whose ways are perverse.

⁷He who keeps the law is a discerning son,
but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father.

- ⁸He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest
amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.
- ⁹If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law,
even his prayers are detestable.
- ¹⁰He who leads the upright along an evil path
will fall into his own trap,
but the blameless will receive a good inheritance.
- ¹¹A rich man may be wise in his own eyes,
but a poor man who has discernment sees through
him.
- ¹²When the righteous triumph, there is great elation;
but when the wicked rise to power, men go into
hiding.
- ¹³He who conceals his sins does not prosper,
but whoever confesses and renounces them finds
mercy.
- ¹⁴Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD,
but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.
- ¹⁵Like a roaring lion or a charging bear
is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people.
- ¹⁶A tyrannical ruler lacks judgment,
but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life.
- ¹⁷A man tormented by the guilt of murder
will be a fugitive till death;
let no one support him.
- ¹⁸He whose walk is blameless is kept safe,
but he whose ways are perverse will suddenly fall.
- ¹⁹He who works his land will have abundant food,
but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of
poverty.
- ²⁰A faithful man will be richly blessed,

but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.

²¹To show partiality is not good—
yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread.

²²A stingy man is eager to get rich
and is unaware that poverty awaits him.

²³He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor
than he who has a flattering tongue.

²⁴He who robs his father or mother
and says, “It’s not wrong”—
he is partner to him who destroys.

²⁵A greedy man stirs up dissension,
but he who trusts in the LORD will prosper.

²⁶He who trusts in himself is a fool,
but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.

²⁷He who gives to the poor will lack nothing,
but he who closes his eyes to them receives many
curses.

²⁸When the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding;
but when the wicked perish, the righteous thrive.

COMMENTARY

1 *Confidence, of the righteous.* The faith of the righteous builds confidence. This observation is presented in contrast to the fear of the wicked, who flee when “no one pursues.” The proverb implies that the wicked, prompted by a guilty conscience or a fear of judgment, become fearful and suspicious of everyone. But the righteous, who seek favor with God and humankind, have a clear conscience and thus no need to look over their shoulders, as it were (Kidner, 168). The righteous can have the confidence (*yibṭāḥ*; “are bold,” NIV) to live righteously under God’s providence.

2 Stability, in government. A nation's stability comes with a discerning and knowledgeable ruler. The verse uses antithetical parallelism to contrast the chaos of a sinful nation with the stability brought by a righteous order. In the first line the reference to "many rulers" indicates that during rebellious times a nation has many changes of power or many people vying for power. Plaut, 281, adds that people generally get the governments they deserve. The period of the judges and the days of the northern kingdom of Israel, with its nine dynasties, are examples of political instability as a result of sin.

The second line of the verse is difficult: literally, "by a man who is discerning and knowledgeable right lasts long" ("but a man of understanding and knowledge maintains order," NIV). Toy, 495, suggests that this part of the verse may not belong with line one (for a detailed survey of proposed emendations, see Toy and McKane, 630). The LXX reads (probably from a different text): "It is the fault of a violent man that quarrels start, but they are settled by a man of discernment." For an analysis of what chs. 28 and 29 say about kings and governments, see Bruce V. Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarchs," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 238–45.

3 Ruler, oppressive. A ruler who oppresses the poor destroys his own dominion. The first line introduces the subject matter (one "who oppresses the poor"), and the second line, by a simile, tells of the effect—that like a driving rain he destroys and leaves nothing in the land (i.e., only the hardest survive). The Hebrew has "a poor man" (*geber rāš*) "oppresses the poor" (*wə'ōšēq dallîm*). The problem is that the poor in the book of Proverbs are not oppressors and do not have the power to be such. So commentators assume *rāš* is incorrect. By slight changes the reading "ruler" can be obtained, and it seems to fit the verse and the book better (see Note). If the reading "poor man" is retained, then the oppression includes betrayal—one would expect a poor man to have sympathy for others who are impoverished, but in fact that is not the case.

4 Law, respect for. Obedience to the law determines one's attitude toward law-breakers. The contrast is between "those who forsake the law" (*ōz'be tôrâ*) and "those who keep the law" (*šôm'rê tôrâ*). Toy, 495, does not think that *tôrâ* refers to the law but to "instruction, teaching," because "forsake" would be unexpected with "the law." However, "keeping the law" implies that *tôrâ* is binding—which would not be true of teaching in general (see

John Bright, “The Apodictic Prohibition: Some Observations,” *JBL* 92 [1973]: 185–204). Moreover, 28:9 and 29:18 refer to the law, and this chapter stresses the piety of God.

This verse gives the consequences of those who forsake the law as those who “praise the wicked” and of those who keep it as those who “resist them,” to which the Targum adds, “so as to induce them to repent.” Praising the wicked may mean calling them good, i.e., no longer able to discern good from evil. Kidner, 169, says, “Without revelation, all is soon relative; and with moral relativity, nothing quite merits attack”; he suggests a correlation with Romans 1:18–32.

5 *Justice, perceived.* Piety alone fully comprehends justice. This contrast between those who are evil and those who seek the Lord concerns the perception of justice. *Mišpāṭ* (GK 5477) refers to the legal rights of people; but there are always those who believe justice is that which benefits them—otherwise it is not justice (Plaut, 282). To “seek the LORD” originally meant trying to obtain an oracle from God (see 2Sa 21:1) but then came to refer to devotion to God (i.e., seeking to learn and do his will). Only people attuned to the divine will can fully perceive what justice is. Without that standard, legal activity easily becomes self-serving.

6 *Righteousness, better than unjust wealth.* Honest poverty is better than dishonest wealth (Toy, 497). The verse is set in formal parallelism presenting another “better” saying. The verse only contrasts a poor man with integrity and a perverse rich man (see 19:1)—there are, of course, rich people with integrity and poor people who are perverse.

The word for “ways” (*dʿrākayim*) is dual, suggesting that the person has double ways, i.e., he is hypocritical, a double dealer. Toy does not like the interpretation that *dʿrākayim* means good and bad ways (one way to interpret the dual), but his emendation to the plural is gratuitous. This chapter gives attention to the contrast between the rich man and the poor man, assuming an integrity to the poor that is not there in the rich (see also vv.6, 8, 11, 20, 22, 25, 27; Gordon A. Chutter, “Riches and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs,” *Crux* 18 [1982]: 23–28).

7 *Conduct, obedient versus profligate.* One who is obedient to the law will be discerning enough to lead an untarnished life. The antithesis is between the “discerning son” (one who has perception or moral illumination) and the “profligate” (“companion of gluttons,” NIV). Again,

“law” could mean instruction, perhaps originally from a father; but in a chapter stressing religious piety, “law” probably refers to God’s law. Besides, in Proverbs a father’s instruction harmonizes with God’s law anyway. Obviously the son who becomes a “companion of gluttons” has not kept the law. He shames his father because such profligacy is unruly and antisocial and thus brings disrespect on the family (Greenstone, 296).

8 *Wealth, unjustly gained.* Wealth amassed by unjust means will eventually go to the poor. The law prohibited making a commission or charging interest (see Ex 22:25; Lev 25:36–37; Dt 23:20; Ps 15:5). These laws were concerned with the necessities of life; if the poor needed help, the wealthy should give it to them as charity—they were not to take advantage of another Israelite’s plight. This proverb assumes that wealth gained unjustly will eventually find its way to the poor. Greenstone, 297, says that the divine punishment for this activity is the loss of wealth and its reversion to those who “will be kind to the poor” and distribute it among those from whom it was taken.

9 *Prayer, of the lawless unanswered.* God will not listen to the prayers of those who do not listen to him. Such prayers certainly will not be proper prayers; anyone who refuses to obey God cannot pray according to God’s will but will probably ask for physical things and perhaps even make demands on God. Plaut, 284, suggests that one implication of this observation is that adult education is a prerequisite for meaningful worship. Of course, a prayer of repentance would not be an abomination to the Lord. But in general, as McKane, 623, observes, “Yahweh’s *rāṣōn* [‘favor’] is enjoyed by the *ṣaddîq* [‘righteous’], and his *tō ‘ēbâ* [‘abomination’] is incurred by the *rāšā’* [‘wicked’]. Hence one who fails to attend to Yahweh’s *tōrâ* [‘law’] is a *rāšā’* even if he is a man of prayer.”

10 *Rewards, just.* Destruction awaits those who corrupt others; rewards await those who have integrity. Judgment is certain for those who lead the upright into evil; they will fall into their own trap. The line shows that the wicked will be caught in their own devices; but it also shows that the righteous are corruptible—they can be led into morally bad conduct (“an evil path”; see 26:27; Mt 23:15).

11 *Character traits, self-deceit.* Here is another contrast between the rich and the poor. In this one the rich man is filled with self-conceit, but the discerning poor man “sees through him” (*yahq’rennû*). With religious

insight, i.e., “discernment” (*mēbîn*), the poor man searches out the flaws of the rich man—he sees through the pretension. Some argue that the verb *yahq’rennû* is to be derived from the Arabic *ḥqr* (“despise”; see D. W. Thomas, “Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,” *JTS* 38 [1937]: 402–3); the resulting reading is predictable and flat.

12 Righteousness, in government. People flourish under righteous administrations. The contrast is between the situations of the wicked’s coming to power and the triumphing of the righteous. The Hebrew reads literally, “when the righteous rejoice, great is the glory; but when the wicked arise to power, men are sought out.” Toy, 500, thinks the translation derived from this Hebrew has to be strained: “rejoice” = triumph = arise, i.e., come to power; and “are sought” = must be sought = have gone into hiding. He then constructs his own translation: “When the righteous are exalted there is great confidence, but when the wicked come into power men hide themselves.” For *y’huppaś* Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 192–93) posits an Arabic cognate *ḥahaša* (“prostrated, trampled on”), which gives a more direct result of the rule of the wicked but is perhaps an unnecessary change (see also v.28; 29:2; Emerton, 202–20).

13 Repentance, effectual. Repentance and renunciation of sin bring God’s mercy and blessing. This verse is unique in Proverbs; it captures the theology of forgiveness found in passages such as Psalm 32:1–5 and 1 John 1:6–9. The contrast is between one who “conceals” his sins and one who “confesses and renounces them.” The former will not prosper; the latter will find God’s “mercy” (*y’ruḥām*). Each part of this verse is essential to the truth: “confession must be coupled with true return in order to assure God’s mercy” (Plaut, 285). Would that the people of God were half as faithful in showing mercy as God is!

14 Fear of the Lord, godly. One’s prospects in this life depend on reverential fear. This verse contrasts the one who “always fears” (*m’pahēd tamîd*) with the one who hardens his heart. The first is blessed, and the second falls into trouble. The verse gives no object for “fear”: various translations have assumed that the Lord is its object (so NIV), especially in Proverbs. But *yir ’â* (“fear”) is not used here. Perhaps the verse means fear of sin. In other words, the one who is always apprehensive about sin and its results will be more successful at avoiding it and finding God’s blessing. Or perhaps the blessing is the avoidance of sin, for *’ašrê ’ādām* (cf. Ps 1:1, *ašrê*

hā'îš, “Blessed is the man”) describes the heavenly bliss of the one who is right with God.

15 Rulers, wicked. Political tyrants are dangerous and destructive. The wicked man who rules over “helpless people” is compared to a “roaring lion” and a “charging bear”—subhuman, beastly, powerful, insensitive, in search of victims (prey). Because tyrants are like this, animal imagery (beast imagery?) is used in Daniel 7:1–8 for the series of ruthless world rulers. The poor crumple under such tyrants because they cannot meet their demands.

16 Rulers, good versus bad. The righteous ruler, not the tyrant, will remain in power. The first line reads literally, “The prince who lacks understanding is also a great tyrant” (*nāgîd ḥ^osar t^obûnôt w^orab ma^ošaqqôt*). The LXX has “lacks income” (reading *t^obû 'ôt* or *t^onûbôt* instead). Toy, 501, suggests deleting *nāgîd* (“prince”) altogether. Assuming *nāgîd* belongs in line one, however, this ruler will face the danger of rebellion and even assassination. The second line describes the one who rules with integrity; he “will enjoy a long life” (*ya^orîk yāmîm*, lit., “extends days”). A righteous administration pleases the people and God, who preserves it.

17 Guilt, its effects. The guilty fugitive will be isolated. This verse has some difficulties for the interpreter. The first line literally says, “A man tormented by the blood of a life” (*ādām 'āšūq b^odam-nāpeš*); Toy, 502, thinks the words make no sense but may have at one time been part of a law book and were inserted here by mistake.

Other commentators try to emend *'āšūq* (lit., “oppressed”). Greenstone, 300, draws from the cognate in Syriac the meaning “accused,” which may be reflected in the Targum as “suspected” or “charged with.” This meaning yields the reading, “A man charged with murder shall flee to the pit.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 192) suggests *ōsēq* (“busied himself”) in Aramaic or *'āšiga* (“clung to”) in Arabic as possible links: “a man given to bloodshed.” But it may be that if the motive for this saying is religious and not legal (as Toy, 502, says), the idea of “oppressed” is workable. At any rate, the second line of the verse is either saying that it is futile to try to support a murderer on the run or that one should not interfere.

18 Security, based on integrity. Integrity brings security; perversion brings insecurity. A life of integrity (*hōlēk tāmîm*; “walk is blameless,”

NIV) is contrasted with the one “whose ways [dual; see v.6] are perverse [ne‘qaš]”; the result of the righteous lifestyle is being “kept safe,” whereas the wicked will fall. The last word, *b^eehāt* (“at one [once]”), may indicate a sudden fall (cf. NIV). McKane, 622, wishes to emend *b^eehāt* to *šahat*, “into a pit,” based on v.10b, where he first emended the word.

19 Diligence, its results. Prosperity depends on diligent work. This verse is essentially the same as 12:11. There is a meaningful repetition here: the diligent person will have “plenty [yišba‘] of bread,” but the lazy person will have “plenty [yišba‘] of poverty” (RSV).

20 Character traits, faithfulness. Faithfulness determines success. The “faithful man” (‘îš ‘mûnôt) is contrasted with the one who is “eager to get rich” (‘āš l’ha‘šîr). The first is faithful to his obligations to God and to other people, whereas the one who hastens to make riches is doing it without an honest day’s work and perhaps even dishonestly. In a hurry to acquire wealth, he falls into dishonest schemes and bears the guilt for doing so; he will not go unpunished. The Targum adds the interpretation—probably a correct one—that he hastens through deceit and wrongdoing.

21 Injustice, bribery. Partiality in judgment is wrong, even though easily acquired. To show partiality (*hakkēr-pānîm*) destroys justice (see Lev 19:15; Dt 1:17; 16:19; Pr 18:5; 24:23). The second line of this verse has several possibilities. It could mean that a man can be bribed for a very small price (a piece of bread being the figure for it), or that some might steal for a piece of bread so the judgment should show a little more compassion on the crime of desperation, or that even in such a desperate act one should show no partiality. The first interpretation harmonizes best with the law. Kidner, 172, adds poignantly that the price can go even lower than a piece of bread and that what is true of judges is true of preachers, too (see also Mal 2:9).

22 Avarice, its effect. Avarice inevitably leads to poverty. Here we meet the man with the “evil eye” again (‘îš ra‘ ‘āyin; the expression was used in 23:6 for the selfish, “stingy man” [NIV] who looks at all the wrong things in life). Here he is eager for wealth; the presumption is that greed involves sin, for which he will be punished with poverty. In 22:9 we had the “good eye” (“generous man,” NIV). McKane, 627, terms the “bad eye” as the misanthropic person (greed being one expression of misanthropy) and the “good eye” as the philanthropic person.

23 Reproof, preferable to flattery. In the final analysis rebuke will be better received than flattery. The flattering tongue may be pleasing for the moment, but it will not offer constructive help like that of the “rebuke” (*môkîah*). There is a difficulty with the word rendered “in the end” (*ʾahray*). It literally means “after me” (e.g., “after my instructions”), but that phrase is awkward here. Toy, 504, suggests simply changing it to “after” or “afterward,” i.e., “in the end.” Driver suggested an Akkadian cognate *ahurru* (“common man”), reading, “As a rebuker an ordinary man” (Driver, “Hebrew Notes,” *ZAW* 52 [1934]: 147; see also 15:5, 12; 25:12; 27:5–6; 29:5).

24 Conduct, robbing parents. Whoever robs his parents, no matter how he seeks to justify the act, is a destroyer. The point of *gôzêl ʾābîw* (“he who robs his father”) seems to be that of prematurely trying to gain control of the family property through some form of pressure and in the process reduce the parents’ possessions and standing in the community. He can say, “It’s not wrong” (*ʾên-pāšaʿ*), because he can reason that it someday will be his anyway. The proverb classifies this type of greedy person as a companion to one “who destroys” (*mašhîl*).

25 Character traits, greed versus trust. One’s object of faith determines the direction of one’s life. The antithetical parallelism pits the “greedy man” (*rḥab-nepeš*, “large appetite”; lit., “wide of soul”) against the one “who trusts” (*bôṭēah*) the Lord. The first one is completely selfish and usually ruthless. His attitudes and actions stir up strife because people do not long tolerate him. He pushes so hard for the things he wants that his zeal becomes a hindrance to obtaining them. Conversely, the true believer, who is blessed by God, “will prosper” (lit., “will be made fat,” i.e., abundantly prosperous).

26 Conduct, righteous, versus self-sufficiency. Security comes from a life of wisdom and not from self-sufficiency. Some commentators think the lines of vv.25 and 26 got mixed up; they would arrange them as follows: 25a, 26b, 25b, 26a (see Toy, 505–6). As it stands, v.26 in the Hebrew is set in antithetical parallelism, contrasting the one who trusts in himself (*bôṭēah bʾlibbô*) with the one who “walks in wisdom.” Toy says that trusting in one’s own heart means following the untrained suggestions of the mind or relying on one’s own mental resources. If he is correct, the idea forms a fitting contrast to walking in wisdom, i.e., the wisdom from above that this

book has been teaching. McKane, 621, observes that the end of the process of education is none other than to make the person rely on his own intellect *once it has been informed and disciplined*; so v.26a presumes impiety.

27 Generosity versus indifference. Generosity is rewarded, but indifference is cursed (see also 22:9; 11:24–26). A generous person will not miss what he gives away (Greenstone, 303), but the one who is indifferent to the needs of the poor will be cursed often—by them no doubt.

28 Stability, righteous government. The righteous flourish when wickedness is removed from government. The verse is essentially the same as 28:12, only in reverse order (see also 11:10; 29:2, 16). For “go into hiding” (*yissātēr*), Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 192–93) suggests the Akkadian *satāru* (“demolish”), cognate to the Aramaic *s̱tar* (“destroyed”).

NOTE

3 The word שָׂרֵשׁ (*rāš*; “poor,” NIV margin) is often emended to *rōš*, “chief [ruler]” (NIV). McKane, 629, suggests for *rōš* a meaning of “principal.” The LXX understood the word as *rāšāʿ*, yielding the translation of *geber rāsāʿ* as “a wicked ruler.” But the MT can easily be translated “a destitute man and one who oppresses the poor.”

F. Proverbs 29:1–27

¹A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes
will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.

²When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice;
when the wicked rule, the people groan.

³A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father,
but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.

⁴By justice a king gives a country stability,
but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.

⁵Whoever flatters his neighbor

is spreading a net for his feet.

⁶An evil man is snared by his own sin,
but a righteous one can sing and be glad.

⁷The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern.

⁸Mockers stir up a city,
but wise men turn away anger.

⁹If a wise man goes to court with a fool,
the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace.

¹⁰Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity
and seek to kill the upright.

¹¹A fool gives full vent to his anger,
but a wise man keeps himself under control.

¹²If a ruler listens to lies,
all his officials become wicked.

¹³The poor man and the oppressor have this in common:
The LORD gives sight to the eyes of both.

¹⁴If a king judges the poor with fairness,
his throne will always be secure.

¹⁵The rod of correction imparts wisdom,
but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.

¹⁶When the wicked thrive, so does sin,
but the righteous will see their downfall.

¹⁷Discipline your son, and he will give you peace;
he will bring delight to your soul.

¹⁸Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint;
but blessed is he who keeps the law.

¹⁹A servant cannot be corrected by mere words;
though he understands, he will not respond.

²⁰Do you see a man who speaks in haste?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.

- ²¹If a man pampers his servant from youth,
he will bring grief in the end.
- ²²An angry man stirs up dissension,
and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.
- ²³A man's pride brings him low,
but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.
- ²⁴The accomplice of a thief is his own enemy;
he is put under oath and dare not testify.
- ²⁵Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.
- ²⁶Many seek an audience with a ruler,
but it is from the LORD that man gets justice.
- ²⁷The righteous detest the dishonest;
the wicked detest the upright.

COMMENTARY

1 Character traits, stubbornness. Destruction comes swiftly to those who stubbornly refuse to change. The verse is a warning about the peril of persisting in sin; it uses the image of the “stiff neck” (*maqšeh-‘ōrep*) to portray the obstinate person who disregards all rebukes (see Ex 32:9). The opposite of the stiff neck is a bending neck, i.e., submission.

The stubborn person does not foresee misfortune and so will suddenly “be destroyed” without any healing. Whybray, 167, illustrates this fate with the fable of the oak and the bulrush; the latter bends with the wind and survives, but the former is too rigid and breaks. For similar proverbs see 6:15; 13:18; and 15:10.

2 Righteousness, its affect on morale. Good people can enjoy life when righteousness predominates in government. The antithetical parallelism supports the interpretation of the righteous increasing to mean that they gain control (Greenstone, 305). When the righteous are in authority, there is

rejoicing; but people suffer under wicked regimes (see 11:10–11; 28:12, 28).

3 *Wisdom, its affect on the family.* Wisdom ensures joy and prosperity for the family. Here again the lines are antithetical: in contrast to the wise person, who brings “joy” to his father, is the son who brings grief by squandering his wealth on “prostitutes” (*zônôt*). Whybray, 168, notes that since wealth was a sign of God’s blessing, it was essential for an honorable standing in the community; to waste it was a shameful betrayal of the family. Moreover, it would break a father’s heart to see his son become a pauper through vice (McKane, 653). For the financial consequences of vice, see chs. 1–9 (esp. 5:10; 6:31).

4 *Security, through justice.* A nation is secure when justice prevails. This verse contrasts a king who makes the nation secure (lit., “stand,” *ya^amîd*) with one who “tears it down” (*yehersennâ*). The first brings prosperity by championing “justice” (*mišpāt*); the second is a “man of bribes” (*’îš t^rûmôt*; “one who is greedy for bribes,” NIV). The term *t^rûmâ* usually refers to “ritual offering”; here it refers to exactions or taxes. The idea of “bribes” is not the point; this king breaks the backs of the people with demands for monetary gifts (see 1Sa 8:11–18), thus causing divisions and strife.

5 *Speech, deceptive.* False flattery is self-destructive. The subject is one who “flatters his neighbor.” This flattering (*maḥ^llîq*) works by deception and guile, for the word literally means “deals smoothly.” McKane, 636, says, “The sycophant is not to be trusted, for words which are too smooth and too obviously designed to gratify are a form of premeditated malice and a cloak for evil conduct.” There is some uncertainty as to the referent in the second line: “he spreads a net for his steps.” The phrase could designate a net spread for the one flattered or for the flatterer himself. The latter would make the message of the verse more powerful (see also 2:16; 7:5; 26:28; 28:23).

6 *Security, of the righteous.* Only the righteous can enjoy a sense of security. By means of another antithetical saying, the sage observes that the evil man is caught in his own sin (similar to v.5), but the righteous sing and are glad—two expressions that signify their confidence. The first line literally says “in the transgression of a bad man is a snare”; the Syriac simplifies the expression and makes the verb passive (see also NIV; Toy,

508). The second line makes the contrast that the righteous have no fear of snares and so can sing.

The verbs *yārûn* (“sing”) and *śāmēah* (“be glad”) present problems. Because Proverbs does not usually duplicate such verbal ideas and because *yārûn* is irregular, some commentators change it to *yārûṣ* (“will rush,” *BHS*). Toy, 508, suggests “run,” but McKane, 638, emends to “exult” to form a hendiadys: “is deliriously happy.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 193–94), changing *môqēš* (“snare”) to *mûqāš* (“is snared”) after the Peshitta and Targum, changes *yārûn* to *yādôn* (“remains”) based on two manuscripts (Arabic *dāna*, “continue”). He then translates, “The evil man is snared, but the righteous remains and rejoices.”

7 Justice, for the poor. Only the righteous champion justice for the poor. This antithetical parallelism pits the righteous against the wicked. The righteous person cares (*yōdēaʿ*, “knows,” meaning “has sympathetic knowledge of” or “considers favorably” [Toy, 508]) about justice for the poor (i.e., their rights; see 20:8; 31:5, 8); but the wicked do not “discern knowledge” (*yābîn dāʿat*)—they have no such interest or insight into the problems of the people (see Job 29:12–17).

8 Wisdom, averting anger. The wise maintain peace and harmony in society. This contrast tells how the wise “turn away anger” rather than “stir up” strife. The “men of scoffing” or “mockers” are “men who laugh at moral obligations and stir up the baser passions of their fellow citizens (Isa. 28:14)” (Toy, 508–9). The idea of “stir up” is from the Hebrew *yāpîhû* (“blow,” as in “blow up a flame,” i.e., kindle a fire; see also its use in 6:19; 12:17, where it suggests to “puff out” words). Such scoffers make dangerous situations worse, whereas the wise calm things down and ensure peace in the community. See the account of the rebellion of Sheba the son of Bicri and how the wise woman averted disaster (2Sa 20).

9 Strife, exacerbated. It is a waste of time to try to settle a dispute calmly or rationally with a fool. The first line presents the condition and the second the effect. To go into court with a fool, you have to reckon “with unreasonable and objectionable behavior and a complete lack of proportion” (McKane, 636). Whether this “fool” (*ʿwîl*) is angry or laughing, there is no possible resolution to the matter (*ʿên nāḥat*; “no peace,” NIV). One can only cut the losses and have no further dealings with him (see Whybray, 168; see also 26:4 and its warning not to answer a fool).

10 Righteousness, hated by the wicked. Bloodthirsty men loathe the integrity of the upright. Because the wicked despise all sense of decency or “integrity” (*tām*), they seek to destroy it. The second line forms a contrast; literally it reads, “as for the upright, they seek his life [*napšô*].” “Seeking a life” was usually a hostile act, but here the contrast requires the idea of “seek to preserve a life” (interpreted differently by the NIV). McKane, 637, is satisfied that here “seek” means to seek the welfare of someone; thus it means that the upright “have regard for” men of integrity.

11 Character traits, self-control. It takes wisdom to restrain anger. The antithesis is between the “fool” (*k^csîl*), who lets out all his anger, and the wise, who “stills it back” (*’āḥôr*). The line is difficult but does make sense as it stands (see Note). The wise man holds his anger in check, but the fool is the “slave of impulse and is at the mercy of every moment when he chances to feel irritation” (McKane, 635; see also 16:32; 25:28).

12 Speech, lies. Once a ruler begins to listen to lies, his court will be corrupted. The point is that courtiers adjust themselves to the prince (see Toy, 510); when they see that deception and court flattery win the day, they learn how the game is played. Plaut, 292, reminds us of the Roman saying, *Qualis rex, talis grex* (“like king, like people”; see 16:10; 20:8; 25:2).

13 Life, from God. Regardless of status or circumstances, all people receive their life from God. These lines are set in synthetic parallelism. The first links the poor man and the oppressor (the LXX has “debtor” and “creditor”), and the second explains what they have in common: “The LORD gives sight to the eyes of both.” The imagery of giving sight means that God gives the light of life (see Job 33:30; Ps 13:3). God creates and controls them all (see Pr 22:2).

14 Poor, treatment of. The duration of an administration depends on its moral character. This verse shows the importance of guaranteeing that fair and just treatment is given to all (judging with “fairness” [*’emet*, lit., “truth”]), especially the poor. To fail to do so is immoral (see 16:12; 20:28; 25:5; 31:5).

15 Discipline, its effect. Discipline makes a child’s behavior enjoyable. The lines form a contrast: “a rod of correction” (“rod” and “correction” form a hendiadys, viz., “a correcting rod”) versus leaving a child alone (*m^cšullāḥ*). The focus on the mother in the last part is probably a rhetorical

variation for the parent (see 17:21; 23:24–25) and not meant to assume that she will do the training (see also 13:24; 23:13).

16 *Judgment, its certainty.* No matter how much wickedness spreads in the land, righteousness will live to see it destroyed. This verse teaches that righteousness will prevail, but it does not say when or how. The first part merely affirms the equation that when the “wicked thrive,” sin thrives. But one day the righteous will prevail over them (*yir ’û b^e*, signifying to “see their downfall” triumphantly).

17 *Discipline, its effect.* A disciplined child brings contentment to parents. The parallelism is synthetic, with the second line adding the thought of “delight” to that of “giving peace” (*wînîhekā*, “giving rest, relieving anxiety,” as in Dt 12:10; see Pr 19:18).

18 *Revelation, obedience to.* A nation’s well-being depends on obedience to divine revelation. This popular verse refers to two forms of divine revelation, vision and law. The first line is worded negatively—if there is “no revelation” or “vision” (*ḥāzôn*; GK 2606), the people “throw off restraint” (*yippāra^ʿ*). The word *ḥāzôn* refers to divine communication to prophets (as in 1Sa 3:1) and not to individual goals that are formed.

Toy, 512, sees a problem with this meaning, in that the most calamitous period of Israel’s history was when prophetic vision was at its height, whereas people were obedient at times when God hid his face. He also notes that in Proverbs there is no mention of prophetic teaching with wisdom as a guide. Thus, following the LXX, Toy emends *ḥāzôn* to read “guidance.” The TEV has “guidance”; the NIV has “revelation.” It should be stated, however, that the prophetic ministry usually came in response to periods of calamity to call the people back to God, so that *ḥāzôn* meaning revelatory vision should be retained. If there is no revelation from God, people can expect spiritual and political anarchy (Alden, 202). The meaning “cast off restraint” is assumed for *yippāra^ʿ* based on Exodus 32:25. In contrast to the first line, the second provides the positive wording: there is a blessing for those who keep the law.

19 *Discipline, its method.* It is not sufficient to train servants by words alone. The verse shows that slaves had to be treated like sons (i.e., they frequently had to be corrected), for they were naturally unresponsive (McKane, 634). The second line gives the explanation: (lit.) “though he understands, there is no answer.” That is, he does not obey when spoken to;

he has to be trained. The verse is probably a general observation on the times; doubtless there were slaves who did better (e.g., Joseph in Egypt; Daniel in Babylon).

20 *Speech, rash.* It is easier to train a fool than to correct rash speech. The focus in this verse is on the one who is hasty with words—to speak before thinking something through is foolishness. The prospects (*tiqwâ*, “hope”) of the fool are better, for rash speech cannot easily be remedied (see 26:12; Jas 3:8).

21 *Discipline, lack of.* An undisciplined servant causes nothing but grief. The proverb says that if someone pampers his servant from youth, in the end (of this process) he will have “grief” (*mānôn*; GK 4959). The word *mānôn*, a *hapax legomenon*, has been given a variety of translations; the idea of “grief” comes from the LXX. J. Reider (“Etymological Studies in Biblical Hebrew,” VT 4 [1954]: 276–95) takes the word to mean “weakling” from an Arabic root *na’na* (“to be weak”), with a noun/adjective *muna’ana* (“weak, feeble”).

22 *Character traits, anger.* Anger brings strife. The lines, in synonymous parallelism, focus on the “angry man” (*’îš-’ap*)—one who is given to anger and not merely temporarily angry. Not only does such a one stir up “dissent” (*mādôn*), but in so doing he also causes sin in himself and in others (see also 14:17, 29; 15:18; 16:32; 22:24).

23 *Character traits, pride and humility.* A humble spirit brings honor and respect. The verse contrasts consequences: pride leads to abasement, but humility brings exaltation. The lines are tied together with a paronomasia between “brings low” (*tašpîlennû*) and “lowly [*š’pal*] in spirit.” McKane, 633, explains that the lowly one can learn, but “pride is a way of descent to mediocrity or worse” (see Lk 14:11; 18:14).

24 *Sin, its entanglements.* An accomplice in crime will find no easy way out of his dilemma. This verse is a little confusing; it describes the accomplice of a thief as his own enemy (lit., “he hates [*šônē*] himself”)—he hears a curse (*’ālâ yišma’*) and will not speak up. According to Leviticus 5:1, if a witness does not speak up, he is held accountable for the crime. The case here might be one in which the guilty person is unknown; and when a curse is pronounced on that unknown culprit, the accomplice hears it but cannot speak up. So the curse attaches itself to him as well (see Toy, 514). Another way to explain the verse is that the accomplice, when called

as a witness (translating *’ālâ yišma’* as “he is put under oath”), perjures himself. The saying may have been aimed at some official who used crooks and then shielded them in legal inquiries.

25 *Security, faith in the Lord.* True security is the result of trusting God and not humans. The contrast is between “trusting” (*bôṭēah*) the Lord and “fearing man” (*ḥerdat ’ādām*). Such fear becomes a snare when it gets to the point of letting others control your life—their opinions and attitudes put subtle pressure on you, even hindering you from speaking the truth or doing what is right (Whybray, 169–70). Release from such bondage comes when people put their faith in the Lord alone (see 10:27; 12:2; and the example of the apostles in Ac 5:29).

26 *Justice, from God.* True justice ultimately comes from God. The contrast is between seeking the face (grace) of a ruler and finding justice from the Lord. The great miscalculation is to assume that true justice depends on some ruler and that supplication must be directed first to him. Toy, 515, writes, “Proverbs deplores immoral (cringing or corrupt) reliances on human (especially political) power.”

27 *Character traits, hatred.* The righteous and the wicked detest the lifestyles of each other. The righteous detest the dishonest, and the wicked detest those who try to live uprightly.

NOTE

11 The clause *וְחָכָם בְּאַחֹר יִשְׁבְּחֶנָּה* (*wḥākām b’āḥôr yšabbḥennâ*) reads literally, “but a wise man stills it back.” Because *’āḥôr* does not fit well with the verb, most commentators offer some change. Toy, 510, reads “anger” for “back” and translates the verb “restrain” after the LXX (which has “has self-control”). The idea of “keeps it back” (implied in the line; cf. NIV) and “stills it” is a possible interpretation.

VII. THE WORDS OF AGUR (30:1–33)

A. The Title (30:1)

¹The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an oracle:

This man declared to Ithiel,
to Ithiel and to Ucal:

COMMENTARY

1 The heading for this section identifies the words that follow as those of Agur, the son of Jakeh, for Ithiel and Ucal. Many have tried to interpret these names. They have been translated as appellatives (Vulg., assembler = teacher) or interpreted as sentences, such as, “I am weary, O God, I am weary, O God, and faint” (see NIV margin), or, “I am not a God, I am not a God that I should have power” (C. C. Torrey, “Proverbs Chapter 30,” *JBL* 73 [1954]: 93–96). Or they have been taken as names of unknown sages in Solomon’s time (as there were others; see 1Ki 4:30–31). A Jewish midrash attempts to credit the section to Solomon through a clever but contrived etymology: “Agur is really Solomon because the latter girt his loins (*ogar*) with wisdom; he is called Bin Jakeh because he was free (*noki*) from sin; and the words, the burden, are added because he bore the yoke of God” (Plaut, 299, summarizing *Midr. Mishle*).

Most likely someone other than Solomon wrote these sayings; they have a different, almost nonproverbial, tone to them. For the unity of the section, see Paul Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur in Proverbs 30: Piety or Scepticism,” *ZAW* 95 (1983): 239–52.

The section is also titled a “burden” or “oracle” (*hammaśśā*). It is possible that Massa is a place; the idea of a “burden” normally describes a prophetic oracle of some kind (see GK 5362–3564).

This heading may not represent all the contents of ch. 30: there is much diversity in the chapter, and the arrangement differs somewhat between the LXX and the MT. Nonetheless, the heading ascribes most, if not all, the passages to one Agur.

B. Agur's Confession and Petition (30:2–9)

1. Confession of Ignorance (30:2–4)

²“I am the most ignorant of men;
I do not have a man's understanding.
³I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
⁴Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his
hands?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and the name of his son?
Tell me if you know!

COMMENTARY

2–3 Agur confesses that he is ignorant of the ways of God. He begins by lamenting that he has not learned wisdom, i.e., that he is not one of those who profess to understand the Holy One. (Toy, 521, thinks this statement is a bit sarcastic.) “Ignorant” refers to intellectual dullness; this person feels like the lower animals (Pss 49:10–12; 73:22). The “Holy One” in this section is in the plural (*q̄dōšîm*), as in 9:10.

4 To make his point Agur includes five questions, which, like Job 38–41 and Proverbs 8:24–29, focus on divine acts to show that it is absurd for

mortals to think that they can explain God's works or to compare themselves with God. These questions display human's limitations; they may have a sarcastic tone, implying that some people think they understand the phenomena of the universe.

The first question, accordingly, could refer to a human ("Who has gone up to heaven?") but may simply refer to God, as the other questions do. The final question seeks to identify this sovereign God. To know a person's name is to exhibit power over and closeness to him. The parallel reference to "son" was identified as "Israel" in some Jewish writings, in other places as the demiurge, the Logos, or as a simple poetic parallel for "his name." Christian interpreters have seen here a reference to the Son of God (a subtle anticipation of the full revelation in the NT).

2. Affirmation of the Reliability of God's Word (30:5–6)

⁵"Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
⁶Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

COMMENTARY

5 Agur affirms that God's word is pure (š'rûpâ; "flawless," NIV). The point of the predicate, used elsewhere of purifying metal, is that God's word is trustworthy; there is nothing deceitful or false in it. The second half of the verse explains this meaning; it is safe to take refuge in the Lord (see Pss 12:6; 18:31).

6 This confidence is followed by a warning not to add to the Lord's words (see Dt 4:2), such adding being a tendency that is all too common. Humanity's danger lies in conceit and the self-ascription of divinity (Plaut, 300).

3. Prayer (30:7–9)

⁷“Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
⁸Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only
my daily bread.
⁹Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.

COMMENTARY

7–9 Agur prays that God will prevent him from becoming deceitful (v.8a) and self-sufficient (vv.8b–9). He wants to be honest in all his dealings, and he wants a life of balanced material blessings. He reasons that if he has too much, he may become independent of God (see Dt 8:11–14); and if he has too little, he may steal and thus profane God’s name.

Thus, acknowledging his own ignorance, relying on God’s word for security in life, and praying that God will keep him from falling into temptation, Agur is ready to offer his words.

C. The Admonition of Agur (30:10–33)

1. Noninterference in Domestic Situations (30:10)

¹⁰“Do not slander a servant to his master,
or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.

COMMENTARY

10 The advice here is literally “not to slander” (*ʿal-talšēn*) a servant to his master, “lest he curse you” (*pen-yʿqallelkā*) and “you pay for it” (*wʿāšāmtā*). The verse is not clear on first reading. The verb *lāšan* (lit., “wag the tongue”) means “defame,” i.e., “slander,” if the charge is untrue. Toy, 525, suggests that the warning is not limited to slaves. The warning could be taken literally: Do not slander a servant to his master; for if it is not true, then he will make you look small (for this sense of *qālal* see McKane, 650), and you will be found guilty (*ʿāšām*); if you are not guilty, then the curse will have no effect.

Another view is that the verse refers to the delivery of a fugitive slave to his master (Greenstone, 319). “Slander” in this case would refer to denouncing, i.e., accusing to authorities (see Dt 23:15–16). The advice then is not to meddle in the affairs of someone else.

2. Four Evil Things (30:11–14)

- ¹¹“There are those who curse their fathers
and do not bless their mothers;
¹²those who are pure in their own eyes
and yet are not cleansed of their filth;
¹³those whose eyes are ever so haughty,
whose glances are so disdainful;
¹⁴those whose teeth are swords
and whose jaws are set with knives
to devour the poor from the earth,
the needy from among mankind.

COMMENTARY

Possibly there was a heading for this section at one time (“Three things, yea four . . .”). All the things listed here begin with the word *dôr* (“generation,” GK 1887, meaning a class or group of people; see also Mt 11:16).

11 *Disrespect for parents.* The first observation is that there is a segment of society that lacks respect for parents, in spite of the law (cf. Ex 21:17; Pr 20:20). In the parallelism the negative (*lō' y'bārēk*, “do not bless”) follows the positive (*y'qallēl*, “who curse”); “cursing” a parent could refer to defaming, treating lightly, or showing disrespect in general.

12 *Self-righteousness.* These are they who are “pure” (*ṭāhōr*) but are “not cleansed” (*lō' ruḥāṣ*) from their “filth” (*ṣō'â*). “Filth” often refers to physical uncleanness, but here it is moral defilement (cf. Isa 36:12; Zec 3:3–4). There is a group of people who may observe all outer ritual but pay no attention to inner cleansing (see Isa 1:16; Mt 23:27). Such hypocrisy is harmful in every walk of life.

13 *Pride.* The eyes of the proud are “high” (*rāmû*; “haughty,” NIV) and their eyelids “disdainful.” These expressions refer to their arrogant attitude—the lofty view of themselves and the corresponding contempt for others (see also 6:17; Ps 131:1).

14 *Oppressing the poor.* The imagery of the first half of the verse captures the rapacity of the power of this group of people—their teeth and their jaws are swords and knives. The second part explains that they devour, like a ravenous and insensitive beast, the poor and the needy (see 31:8–9). Those who exploit and destroy other people are beasts.

3. Insatiable Things (30:15–16)

¹⁵“The leech has two daughters.

‘Give! Give!’ they cry.

“There are three things that are never satisfied,
four that never say, ‘Enough!’:

¹⁶the grave, the barren womb, land,
which is never satisfied with water,

and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’

15a Things that seem never to be satisfied are problematic for the normal enjoyment of life. The meaning of v.15a and its relationship to vv.15b–16 has been debated. The “leech” is the symbol of greed because it sucks blood through its two suckers (here called its “two daughters” who cry “Give! Give! [*hab hab*]”). Various attempts to identify the two daughters have been made, but none of them is satisfactory. The Zohar describes a dog in Gehenna that barks, “*Hab, hab.*” J. J. Gluck suggests that what is in view is erotic passion (and not the leech) with its two maidens of burning desire crying out for more (“Proverbs 30:15a,” VT 14 [1964]: 367–70). F. S. North rightly criticizes this view as gratuitous; he argues for the view that a leech with two suckers is what is intended (“The Four Insatiables,” VT 15 [1965]: 281–82).

15b–16 There probably is a relationship in the numbering between v.15a and vv.15b–16: two daughters, three insatiable things, and four things that never say enough (see Roth, “Numerical Sequence,” 300–11; “Numerical Sayings,” 86). McKane, 656, suggests that the series builds to the climax, that the focus of attention is on the barren woman, and that insatiable death, the thirsty land, and the greedy fire are all metaphors of her sexual desire. But this proposal is not convincing.

The four insatiable things are then listed: שְׁׁוֹל (“Sheol”; the “grave,” NIV), the abode of the dead (see also 27:20); the barren womb (‘*ōṣer rāḥam*, lit., “the closing of the womb”) of one whose desire for children is all-consuming (see Ge 16:2; 30:1); land that is not satisfied with water; and fire that continues until it burns itself out.

There is no clearly stated ethical lesson; the verses merely list basic observations of life. But one point that could be made is that greed, symbolized by the leech, is as insatiable as these other things.

4. Punishment for Parental Disrespect (30:17)

¹⁷“The eye that mocks a father,

that scorns obedience to a mother,
will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley,
will be eaten by the vultures.

COMMENTARY

17 Severe punishment awaits those who show disrespect for their parents. The sentence focuses on the “eye” that “mocks” (*til ‘ag*) a father and despises or “scorns” (*tābûz*) obedience to a mother (see Note). The point is that the eye manifests the inner heart attitude, so the contemptuous look runs deep. The punishment is talionic; the eye that mocks will be pecked out by the birds. By these images the sternest punishment is held out for one who holds one’s parents in such contempt.

NOTE

17 “Obedience” is לִיִּקְהַת (*lîqq^hat*), used only here and in Genesis 49:10. Toy, 530, makes a change to *l’ziqnat*, thus reading, “the old age of the mother.” The LXX’s *gēras* suggests that a root *lhq* had something to do with “white hair.” D. Winton Thomas (“A Note on לִיִּקְהַת in Proverbs 30:17,” *JTS* 42 [1941]: 154–55) suggests a form of *l’hāqâ* or *l’hîqâ*; so *lhyqt* was corrupted to *lyqht*. It would read, “The eye that mocks a father and despises an aged mother.”

5. *Amazing Things in Nature (30:18–19)*

¹⁸“There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:

¹⁹the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden.

COMMENTARY

18–19 Many things in nature are amazing but incomprehensible. This little observation also begins with the numerical formula, “There are three things that are too amazing [*nīpl^eû*] for me, four that I do not understand [*lō^ʾy^ʿda^ʿtîm*].” The verb “amazing” (*pālē* ʾ) basically describes what is wonderful, surpassing, incomprehensible (cf. Ge 18:14; Jdg 13:18; Ps 139:6; Isa 9:6[5]). The sage can only admire the wonders of nature; he is at a loss to explain it all.

It is not easy to discover what the four things have in common. They all are linked by the use of the word “way” (*derek*, “course of action”; GK 2006) and by a sense of mystery in each area. Suggestions for a common theme include the following: all four things are hidden from continued observation, for they are there in majestic form and then are gone, not leaving a trace; they all have a mysterious means of propulsion or motivation; they all describe the movement of one thing within the sphere or domain of another; or the first three serve as illustrations of the fourth and greatest wonder—it concerns human relations and is slightly different from the first three. Whybray, 177, observes that if the author intended to be mysterious and keep us guessing, he has certainly succeeded.

The first entry is the way of the eagle in the sky, a marvelous creature soaring with apparent ease but certain determination and purpose, all hidden from the observer. Next is the way of the serpent on a rock. Here is the mysterious but smooth and efficient movement of a reptile without feet. The way of a ship in the sea portrays the magnificent movement of a vessel through a trackless sea. All these phenomena are marvelous to observe; they focus our attention on the majestic and mysterious movements in the sky, on the land, and on the sea.

The fourth mystery is “the way of a man with a maiden.” The term *ʾalmâ* (“maiden”; GK 6625) does not in and of itself mean “virgin” but rather describes a young woman who is sexually ready for marriage. In view here is the wonder of human sexuality, for the preposition *b^e* suggests that the “way of a man” is either “with” or “in” the *ʾalmâ*. This mystery might begin with the manner of obtaining the love of the woman but focuses on the most

intimate part of human relationships. So the most intimate moments of love are at the heart of what the sage considers to be wonderful. All of it is part of God's marvelous plan for his creation and therefore can be fully enjoyed and appreciated without fully comprehending it.

NOTE

19 For an alternative view, see Gregorio Del Olmo Lete, “Nota Sobre Prov 30:19,” *Bib* 67 (1986): 68–74. He takes עֲלֵמָה (*almâ*) as “darkness” and reads, “the way of the courageous man in the dark.”

6. The Brazen Woman (30:20)

²⁰“This is the way of an adulteress:
She eats and wipes her mouth
and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’

COMMENTARY

20 Equally amazing is the insensitivity of the adulteress to sin. That this verse was placed here lends support to the idea that the previous verse is focusing on sexual intimacy in marriage; for just as that encounter is incomprehensible (filling one with wonder), so is the way that human nature has distorted and ruined it.

Carrying forward the use of *derek* (“way”), the verse describes “the way of an adulteress.” She is *’iššâ m’na’āpet*; she may be married but certainly is unchaste. The portrayal is one of an amoral woman more than an immoral one (McKane, 658). Kidner, 180, notes that the act of adultery is as unremarkable to her as a meal. The imagery of eating and wiping her mouth is euphemistic for sexual activity (see 9:17). It is incredible that human beings can engage in sin and then so easily dismiss any sense of guilt or responsibility, perhaps by rationalizing the deeds or perhaps through a calloused indifference to what the will of the Lord is for sexuality.

7. Abuse of Position (30:21–23)

²¹“Under three things the earth trembles,
under four it cannot bear up:
²²a servant who becomes king,
a fool who is full of food,
²³an unloved woman who is married,
and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.

COMMENTARY

21–23 Certain people who are suddenly elevated in their status in life can be unbearable. The sage says that under these things the earth trembles and cannot bear it (v.21)—obviously using humorous or satirical hyperbole to say that these changes shake up the order of life. This observation assumes that the elevated status was not accompanied by a change of nature.

For example, it was not uncommon for a servant to become a king in the ancient Near East (v.22). Possibly once he became king, he would develop the mentality and disposition of a king and perhaps be better than the preceding ruler. But the “earth trembles” when a servant is king; unaccustomed to such dignity, he might become a power-hungry tyrant and oppressive ruler (Greenstone, 324, suggests the example of Hitler).

The second, a fool who is full of food, describes a fool who becomes prosperous but continues to be boorish and irreligious. But now he is overbearing and, worse yet, finds time hanging heavy on his hands.

The third is the unloved woman who gets married (v.23). Perhaps she is unattractive or odious, but also perhaps she is married to someone incapable of showing love. Being unloved, not sought or wooed, she is actually hated (see Ge 29:31, 33).

The fourth is the maid who displaces her mistress. The tension from the threat of Hagar in Genesis 16:5 and 21:10 shows how unbearable this

situation could be. Such upheavals in the proper order of things make life intolerable.

8. Wisdom the Key to Success (30:24–28)

²⁴“Four things on earth are small,
yet they are extremely wise:
²⁵Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;
²⁶coney are creatures of little power,
yet they make their home in the crags;
²⁷locusts have no king,
yet they advance together in ranks;
²⁸a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings’ palaces.

COMMENTARY

24–28 These verses focus on four things that are small but “extremely wise” (*ḥ^akāmîm m^eḥukkāmîm*): ants, rock badgers, locusts, and lizards. The wisdom exhibited by the ants concerns their forethought and organization to make provision for food; the wisdom of the rock badgers (“coney,” NIV) is found in their ingenuity to find a place of security; the wisdom of the locust consists in its cooperation and order, which when massed in military division becomes a force for humans to reckon with (see Thomas, “Notes on Some Passages,” 271–79); and the wisdom of the lizard is in its elusiveness and boldness. (For a survey of lessons from nature, see S. P. Topperoff, “The Ant in the Bible and Midrash,” *Dor le Dor* 13 [1985]: 179–83.) In God’s creation wisdom manifests itself in a variety of ways, and humans can learn the value of wisdom over size and numerical strength.

9. Leadership Qualities (30:29–31)

²⁹“There are three things that are stately in their stride,
four that move with stately bearing:
³⁰a lion, mighty among beasts,
who retreats before nothing;
³¹a strutting rooster, a he-goat,
and a king with his army around him.

COMMENTARY

29–31 Leaders exhibit majestic qualities. There is a simple point to this observation: three things are “stately in their stride” (*mêṭîbê ṣā‘ad*), four that move with “stately being” (*mêṭîbê lāket*). Three examples come from the animal world, leading up to the fourth, the king, who has his army about him to defend against revolt (see Note).

NOTE

31 Waltke, 2:462, suggests that the simplest understanding of the expression is to take אַל (*‘āl*) as the negative “not” and קוּם (*qûm*) as “to rise up,” thus giving the idea of a king whom no one dares resist. The text has אֶל־קוּם עִמּוֹ (*‘alqûm ‘immô*, “with his army around him”), which has been emended to read *‘immô lô’ qām* (“against whom there is no rising up”) or *qām ‘el ‘ammô* (“standing over his people”; Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 194). The LXX has “a king haranguing his people.” While a slight change makes it a little easier to offer a translation, the exact meaning is far from certain. The point must focus on the stately appearance of the king.

10. A Final Admonition (30:32–33)

³²“If you have played the fool and exalted yourself,

or if you have planned evil,
clap your hand over your mouth!

³³For as churning the milk produces butter,
and as twisting the nose produces blood,
so stirring up anger produces strife.”

COMMENTARY

32–33 The sage advises those who have “exalted” themselves and “played the fool” and those who have “planned deception” to cease their efforts and control what they say, viz., “clap your hand over our mouth!” (*yād l’peh*; cf. Job 40:4–5). The explanation for this warning is that talking about these things only causes strife.

Two similes are used in the last verse—churning the milk and twisting the nose. Both involve a pressing, the first producing butter from milk and the second drawing blood from the nose. In the same way stirring up anger (through pride and evil planning) produces “strife” (*rîb*). There is also a subtle wordplay here, for “nose” (*’ap*) is related to “anger” (*’appayim*). So the intent of this concluding advice is to strive for peace and harmony through humility and righteousness.

VIII. THE WORDS OF LEMUEL (31:1–9)

A. Title: The Words Taught to Lemuel by His Mother (31:1)

¹The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him:

COMMENTARY

1 Nothing is known about King Lemuel. The same question of translation occurs here with *maśśā* that occurred in 30:1, whether it means “oracle” or refers to a place called “Massa” (see GK 5362–3564). Jewish legend identifies Lemuel as Solomon and the advice as from Bathsheba from a time when Solomon indulged in magic with his Egyptian wife and delayed the morning sacrifices (see Greenstone, 329). But there is no evidence for these assumptions.

This passage is the only direct address to a king in Proverbs, though such addressing was the norm in the wisdom literature of other ancient countries (see Leah Leila Brunner, “King and Commoner in Proverbs and Near Eastern Sources,” *Dor le Dor* 10 [1982]: 210–19, 259; Brunner shows that the advice is religious and not secular). The instruction includes two warnings and then sound advice.

B. First Warning (31:2–3)

²“O my son, O son of my womb,
O son of my vows,
³do not spend your strength on women,
your vigor on those who ruin kings.

COMMENTARY

2–3 The king is warned not to spend his strength on sensual lust. The repetition of “son” shows the seriousness of the warning; and the twofold motivation adds to this impact—he is her son, and she has vowed him (cf. 1Sa 1:11; see F. Deist, “Prov. 31:1, A Use of Constant Mistranslation,” *JNSL* 6 [1978]: 1–3; Deist argues that “son of my womb” should be “own son”). She advises him not to spend “your strength” (*hêlekā*) or “your ways” (*dʿrākeykā*) on women. The term *derek* (“vigor,” NIV; GK 2006) may allude to sexual intercourse (see 30:19) or in general refer to the heart’s affection or attention (Toy, 540).

“Women” in this passage are qualified as those who “ruin” (*lamḥôt*) kings. Commentators note that this difficult term is close to an Aramaic word for concubine (see Greenstone, 330) and an Arabic word that is an indelicate description of women. Whatever the precise meaning, the point of the verse is that while it would be easy for a king to spend his time and energy enjoying women, doing so would be unwise.

C. Second Warning (31:4–7)

⁴“It is not for kings, O Lemuel—
not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave
beer,
⁵lest they drink and forget what the law decrees,
and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.
⁶Give beer to those who are perishing,
wine to those who are in anguish;
⁷let them drink and forget their poverty
and remember their misery no more.

COMMENTARY

4–7 Drinking wine and craving beer is not for kings. If this literally prohibits any use of such drinks, it would be unheard of in the ancient courts. Either excessive use of alcohol or troubling need for it (reflecting deeper problems) is what is meant. The danger, of course, would be to cloud the mind and thus deprive the oppressed of true justice.

Verses 6–7 explain that a better use for strong drink is to relieve bodily suffering and mental distress. People in those conditions need to forget.

D. Instruction: Defend the Defenseless (31:8–9)

⁸“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.

⁹Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

COMMENTARY

8–9 The king is to open his mouth (*pʿtaḥ-pîkâ*, i.e., “speak up for”) those who are dumb (*ʿillēm*, probably signifying “those who cannot speak for themselves”). It is the responsibility of the king to champion the rights of the poor and the needy, those who are left desolate by the cruelties of life (see 2Sa 14:4–11; 1Ki 3:16–28; Pss 45:3–5; 72:4; Isa 9:6–7).

IX. THE WIFE OF NOBLE CHARACTER (31:10–31)

OVERVIEW

The book of Proverbs comes to a close with the addition of this poem about the woman of valor. A careful reading of the passage shows that her value is derived from her character of godly wisdom, which is beneficial to her family and to the community as a whole. Traditionally, this poem was recited by husbands and children at the Sabbath table on Friday night (see Y. Levin, “‘The Woman of Valor’ in Jewish Ritual [Prov. 31:10–31],” *Beth Mikra* 31 [1985/86]: 339–47). Christians, too, have seen it as a paradigm for godly women.

The theme of the poem, the wife of noble character, captures the ideals of wisdom that have filled the book (see T. P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31,” *RB* 92 [1985]: 25–46). It may well be that this passage sums up more the point of the composition than merely portraying the ideal wife. The woman here presented is a wealthy aristocrat who runs a household estate with servants and conducts business affairs—real estate, vineyards, and merchandise—domestic affairs, and charity. It would be quite a task for any woman to emulate this pattern.

Camp describes the woman as an idealized wife in an ideal home in an ideal society; she is not just some man’s dream woman but represents a universal type of woman (Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1985], 92–93; see also André Barucq, *Le Livre des Proverbs* [Paris: LeCoffre, 1964], 233). Others have also recognized that more is going on here than a description of the ideal wife or instructions for the bride-to-be (that parallel the instructions for the young man in the book). Kidner, 184, allows that “this lady’s standard is not implied to be in reach of all” but rather reveals the flowering of wisdom in domestic life. Kenneth Aitken (*Proverbs* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986], 158) likewise affirms that “as a whole it cannot be read as a kind of blueprint of the ideal Israelite housewife, either for men to measure their wives against or for their wives to try to live up to.” Moreover, the work says nothing about the woman’s personal relationship with her husband, her intellectual or emotional strengths, or her religious activities.

In general it appears that the woman of Proverbs 31 is a symbol of wisdom (see E. Jacob, “Sagesse et Alphabet: Pr. 31:10–31,” in *Hommages à A. Dupont-Sommer* [ed. A. Caquot and M. Philonenko; n.p.: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1971], 287–95). If this is so, then the poem plays an important part in the personification of wisdom in ancient Near Eastern literature. Indeed, many commentators correctly invite a contrast to the earlier portrayals of Dame Folly lurking dangerously in the streets—she was to be avoided—and Lady Wisdom, who is to be embraced. The Lady Wisdom in this chapter stands in the strongest contrast to the adulterous woman in the earlier chapters.

Several characteristics of this poem should be noted in order to appreciate its impact on the teaching of wisdom. (On this subject see Murray H. Lichtenstein, “Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31,” *CBQ* 44 [1982]: 202–11.) First, the entire poem is arranged alphabetically (a pattern known as “acrostic”). This arrangement means that the first word of each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. Most commentators recognize that such a pattern makes the work uneven and somewhat random in its organization. Nevertheless, this arrangement made memorization easier and perhaps also served to organize the thoughts. We may say, then, that the poem is an organized arrangement of the virtues of the wise wife—the ABCs of wisdom.

Second, the passage has striking similarities with hymns (see Al Wolters, “*Ṣôpiyyâ* [Prov. 31:27] as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia,” *JBL* 104 [1985]: 577–87). Usually a hymn is written to God, but here apparently it was written to the wife of noble character. A comparison with Psalm 111, a hymn to God, illustrates some of the similarities.

- The psalm begins with *hal'êlû yâ* (“Hallelu Yah” [NIV margin], or “Praise the LORD”; Ps 111:1); this phrase is reflected in Proverbs 31:31, which says, “Her works bring her praise [*wîhal'êlûhâ*].”
- Psalm 111:2 speaks of God’s works; Proverbs 31:13 speaks of the wise woman’s works.
- Psalm 111:2 says that the works of the Lord are searched or “pondered” (*d'rûšîm*); Proverbs 31:13 says that the woman “selects” (*dār'sâ*) wool and flax.
- Psalm 111:3 says that the Lord’s work is honorable (*hādār*; “majestic,” NIV); Proverbs 31:25 ascribes strength and “dignity”

(*hādār*) to the woman.

- Psalm 111:4 says that the Lord is gracious and full of compassion (*raḥûm*); Proverbs 31:26 ascribes the law of compassion or kindness (*ḥesed*) to the woman.
- Psalm 111:5 says that the Lord gives “food” (*ṭerep*); Proverbs 31:15 says that the woman provides “food” (*ṭerep*) for her house.
- Psalm 111:10 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom—the motto of Proverbs; Proverbs 31:30 describes the woman as fearing the Lord.
- Psalm 111:10 says that the Lord’s praise will endure; Proverbs 31:31 says that the woman will be praised for her works.

It is clear that Proverbs 31 is patterned after the hymn in order to extol the works of wisdom.

Third, the passage has similarities with heroic literature. The vocabulary and the expressions in general have the ring of an ode to a champion. For example, “woman of valor” (*ʿēšet-ḥayil* in v.10; “woman of noble character,” NIV) is the same expression one would find in Judges for the “mighty man of valor” (*gibbôr heḥayil* [Jdg 6:12]; “mighty warrior,” NIV)—the warrior aristocrat; “strength” (*ôz* in v.17 [“vigorously,” NIV], 25) is elsewhere used for powerful deeds and heroics (e.g., Ex 15:2, 13; 1Sa 2:10); “value” (v.11) in “lacks nothing of value” is actually the word for “plunder” (*šālāl*, as used in the name “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz” in Isa 8:1, 3; cf. NIV margin); “food” (v.15) is actually “prey” (*ṭerep*); “she holds” (*šillḥâ* in v.19) is an expression also used in military settings (cf. Jdg 5:26, “reached for,” for Jael’s smiting Sisera); “surpass them all” (v.29) is an expression that signifies victory.

Putting these observations together, one can conclude that Proverbs 31:10–31 is like a hymn to Lady Wisdom written in the heroic mode. Wisdom is personified as a woman because the word “wisdom” is a feminine noun and naturally suggests it, and because the woman is an excellent example of wisdom by virtue of the variety of applications it receives—at home, in the market, with charity, in business.

There are several reasons why the writer would use these literary features to present his description of wisdom: (1) a personification of wisdom allows the writer to make all the lessons concrete and not abstract (we can see them in action in everyday life); (2) it provides a polemic against the

literature of the ancient world that saw women as merely decorative—charm and beauty without substance; (3) and it depicts the greater heroism as moral and domestic rather than militaristic. But the personification in this chapter differs from earlier personifications in the book in exactly these practical details that describe the noble woman. There is no reason to doubt that the writer has a historical person in mind when constructing the poem. From the way the poem is written, one must conclude that even if it is symbolic, it is nonetheless real. The noble woman, then, becomes a role model of wisdom for all who read the poem.

The poem certainly presents a pattern for women who want to develop a life of wisdom; but since it is essentially about wisdom, its lessons are for both men and women to follow. The passage teaches that the fear of the Lord will inspire people to be faithful stewards of the time and talents God has given; that wisdom is productive and beneficial for others and requires great industry in life's endeavors; that wisdom is best taught and lived in the home—indeed, the success of the home demands wisdom; and that wisdom is balanced living that gives attention to domestic responsibilities as well as business enterprises and charitable service.

The poem can be arranged into eight stanzas; this arrangement generally follows Toy, 542–48, albeit without the rearrangement of some of the verses.

A. Praise in General (31:10–12)

¹⁰A wife of noble character who can find?

She is worth far more than rubies.

¹¹Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.

¹²She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.

COMMENTARY

10 The introductory rhetorical question establishes the point that the wife of noble character is not easily found; but when she is, she is a treasure. Her description as “a wife of noble character” (*’ēšet-ḥayil*) signifies that she possesses all the virtues, honor, and strength to do the things the poem will set forth. It is interesting to notice that this woman, like wisdom, is worth more than rubies (cf. 3:15; 8:11).

11–12 The noble woman’s husband lacks nothing of value. The term *šālāl* (“value”; v.11) usually means “plunder”; the point may be that the gain will be as rich and bountiful as the spoils of war. The capable woman inspires the confidence of her husband because in her business and domestic enterprises she proves able (v.12; cf. 1Sa 24:2). In any marriage, but especially when a large household is involved, such trust in the wife’s abilities is essential.

B. Industrial Pursuits of the Household (31:13–15)

- ¹³She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.
¹⁴She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.
¹⁵She gets up while it is still dark;
she provides food for her family
and portions for her servant girls.

COMMENTARY

13–15 Now the cataloging of activities begins. The picture presented is of a large household that requires supervision. All indicators suggest that it is a wealthy and honorable household. This noble woman takes the responsibility to see that food and clothing are provided; she makes the

choices, works with her hands, and ensures that the food for the day will be there. The simile with the merchant ships suggests that she brings a continual supply of abundance.

C. Financial Enterprise (31:16–18)

- ¹⁶She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
¹⁷She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.
¹⁸She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.

COMMENTARY

16–18 This part of the account portrays the noble wife as a shrewd businesswoman who makes wise investments from her earnings. There is no foolish purchasing or indebtedness here. Verse 17 literally says that she “girds her loins with strength”—she is a vigorous and tireless worker, for girding is an expression for preparation for serious work. Consequently she learns by experience that her efforts are profitable. The last line of v.18 may simply mean that she burns the midnight oil in following through a business opportunity (McKane, 668), though it may signify that her house flourishes without calamity (cf. Job 18:6; Jer 25:10).

D. Provision for the Family and the Poor (31:19–21)

- ¹⁹In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

²⁰She opens her arms to the poor

and extends her hands to the needy.

²¹When it snows, she has no fear for her household;

for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

COMMENTARY

19 Verse 19 focuses on the domestic activity of spinning: the “distaff” is the straight rod, and the “spindle” is the round or circular part. She “stretches out” (“holds,” NIV) her hand to the work to provide clothing.

20 The noble wife also provides for the poor. The text literally says that she “opens her palm” to the poor; i.e, she gives to the poor with liberality (Ps 112:9). This was the hand that was diligently at work in the previous verse with an acquired skill; it is not the hand of a lazy, wealthy woman. She uses her industry in charitable ways.

21 Moreover, the noble wife is well prepared for the future. When faced with cold, her family has warm clothes to wear. The word “scarlet” can be read also as “two cloaks,” suggesting double garments for warmth (see Note).

NOTE

21 For the MT’s שָׁנִים (*šānîm*, “scarlet”), the LXX and the Vulgate read שְׁנָיִם (*šēnāyim*, “two” or “double”) and hence render “a double garment,” having *šēnāyim* in pause with the word that follows, מַרְבְּדִים (*marbaddîm*, “cover”). The question asked is whether scarlet would keep one as warm as a “double garment.”

E. Distinction by Industry (31:22–24)

²²She makes coverings for her bed;

she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

²³Her husband is respected at the city gate,
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.

COMMENTARY

22 The word rendered “coverings” (*marbaddîm*) appears also in 7:16, where it is rendered “covered.” Delitzsch, 2:335, suggests “pillows” or “mattresses.” The LXX, bringing over the word *šānîm* (“scarlet,” NIV; but see note on v.21), renders “lined overcoats,” thus harmonizing with the second part of the verse, which clearly has attire in view.

The noble woman’s clothing is “fine linen and purple,” i.e., costly and luxurious. Garments dyed with purple indicated wealth and high rank (cf. Ex 25–37, *passim*; SS 3:10). One is reminded of the rich man in Luke 16:19, who was also clothed in purple and fine linen. The problem was not with the clothing he wore but his lack of charity.

23 The woman’s husband was important. The “gate” was the place of the assembly of the elders who had judicial responsibilities (Ru 4:1–12). The man was a prominent, well-known leader. Toy, 546, suggests that “it is assumed by the people that the head of so well-ordered a household must be a worthy man.”

24 The woman’s industry finds expression in business. The poet did not think it strange or unworthy for a woman to engage in honest trade. In fact, from antiquity the weaving of fine linens was a common trade for women in Palestine.

F. Wisdom and Prosperity (31:25–27)

²⁵She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.

²⁶She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

²⁷She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

COMMENTARY

25 The noble wife is diligent and prudent in her work; her strength and honor come from her solid financial and economic position, as v.25b shows (Toy, 547); so the result is that she is confident in facing the future.

26–27 She is wise and gracious in her speech. She uses good, practical common sense in her discussions; and her instruction is reliable. The last phrase of v.26 literally says “law of kindness” (*tôrat ḥesed*)—kind and faithful instruction comes from her. Finally, the wife’s supervision of the household is alert, as a watchman (v.27).

G. Merits Recognized (31:28–29)

²⁸Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:

²⁹“Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all.”

COMMENTARY

28 The wisdom of the noble woman inspires praise from her family—from those who know her the best. Unfortunately, praise often comes from outside the home, from those who do not know the person very well. This woman is of such worth that her children “rise up” (*qāmû*) to praise her, an

expression that describes an activity in preparation for such an utterance (see Ge 37:35 [“came,” NIV]).

29 This woman surpasses all other women. These words are probably the praise of the husband, who speaks for the rest of the family.

H. Laudatory Summation (31:30–31)

³⁰Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
³¹Give her the reward she has earned,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

COMMENTARY

30 These words could be the husband’s but may better form the poet’s summation of the matter. In any case, what is valued in the wife are her domestic efficiency and her piety rather than charm and beauty. Physical appearance is not necessarily dismissed—it simply does not endure as do those qualities produced by the fear of the Lord (see Note). Beauty is deceitful, and one who pursues beauty may well be disappointed by the character of the “beautiful” person.

31 Once again there is a reference to the city gate, where all manner of business was conducted. The woman’s works bring her praise in her own right and not merely as an appendage of her husband (Toy, 549).

With the emphasis on the “fear of the LORD” (cf. v.30) at the close of the book, Perowne, 193, observes, “Thus does Wisdom, true even to herself, return in her last utterance to her first (1:7), and place once again the crown on the head of the godly.” Plaut, 315–16, concludes:

Let all know about this kind of woman who, in piety, in devotion and with skill and diligence builds her home. Here is the foundation of society as Judaism sees it; for in

Hebrew, house and woman are often used synonymously. . . . Over both man and wife stands God in whose honor these proverbial collections were made and reverently placed into the Biblical canon, so that later generations might listen, learn, and live more richly.

NOTE

30 The LXX has συνετή (*synetē*, “intelligence”) in addition to “fears the LORD.”

ECCLESIASTES

JERRY E. SHEPHERD

Introduction

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1. A PUZZLING BOOK

“Anyone to whom the book of Ecclesiastes is not a puzzle has not yet read it.” Thus the late David Hubbard began his popularly oriented study of Ecclesiastes.¹ His judgment is correct. The attempt to understand this book, which declares the futility of all human activity, becomes itself a demonstration of the declaration. Not just in minute details, such as the meaning of individual words, but even with regard to more sweeping interpretive concerns, such as the very purpose of the book, there are numerous issues on which there is no scholarly consensus. While every biblical book has its problems of interpretation, in Ecclesiastes those become particularly acute.

The book declares a particular frustration in the search for truth and wisdom, but it never comes to the point of recommending abandonment of the search. Nor should we. Though our attempt to interpret the book will necessarily result in understandings that are provisional and may, perhaps in measure, appear to render the attempts futile, the alternative—to fold our hands and do nothing—comes under the more scathing condemnation of “foolish” (4:5). God speaks to us in this book, and though our apprehension of what is said may be faulty, the effort must be made. For as with all the books in the biblical canon, but perhaps even more acutely in Wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes included), the issues discussed are the issues of life and death.

2. TITLE

The English title, “Ecclesiastes,” is derived from the Latin Vulgate’s rendering of the Greek Septuagint’s title for the book, *ekklēsiastēs*. The Greek term refers to one who is a member or possibly convenor of a public assembly and thus reflects the translator’s understanding of the Hebrew title of the book, *qōhelet* (GK 7738). This Hebrew title is the same word as that rendered in 1:1 by the NIV as “Teacher” and by the NASB as “Preacher.”

Most commentators regard *qōhelet* as a feminine participle derived from the Hebrew verb *qāhal* (GK 7735), which means “to assemble, gather.” The use of the feminine participle carries no gender implications and appears to have been simply one way by which to form a noun referring to an occupation or office (i.e., “assembler, gatherer”; cf. Ezr 2:55, 57; Ne 7:57, 59, where the two names Hassophereth and Pokereth appear to be occupationally related). The term *qōhelet* occurs seven times in Ecclesiastes (1:1–2, 12; 7:27; 12:8–10). The Septuagint’s *ekklēsiastēs*, because of its closeness to *ekklēsia*, “church,” gave rise to the conception and subsequent popularity of the idea that the office suggested was that of teacher or preacher.

Though it is fairly certain that *qōhelet* derives from the verb *qāhal*, it is less clear just what this person gathers. The majority of commentators suppose that the reference is to a gathering of people, perhaps for instruction. Alternatively, some commentators suggest that it refers to the gathering of proverbs and sayings (cf. 12:9–10). In light of the close

connection of the noun *qōhelet* to the verb *qāhal* and the noun *qāhāl* (“assembly”), both of which are always used with reference to a gathering of people, the former alternative seems more likely.

Readers of commentaries and other literature on Ecclesiastes can become somewhat confused because of the tendency by some authors to refer to the book by its Hebrew title, Qohelet. Because this commentary supports the idea that there are actually two voices in the book (see below under [Authorship](#)), it will, except for places where other authors are being quoted, consistently use the term “Ecclesiastes” to refer to the book and the term “Qohelet” to refer to the primary voice or speaker in the book.

3. AUTHORSHIP

For the greater part of the last two thousand years it was generally assumed that Solomon was Qohelet and was thus to be identified as the author of the book. The equation was an easy one to make for several reasons:

- Qohelet’s denomination as king or ruler over Israel and Jerusalem (1:1, 12, 16)
- the reference to him as “son of David” (1:1)
- his declared resolve “to study and to explore by wisdom” (1:12), as well as the claim to have superior wisdom (1:16)
- references to his great wealth (2:4–10)
- the mention of his building projects (2:4–6)
- the reference to his harem (2:8)

All of these factors seemed to fit well with the narratives about Solomon in 1 Kings 1–11 and 2 Chronicles 1–9.

Over the course of the last two centuries, however, the Solomonic identification has been nearly completely abandoned. The primary reasons for this move are:

- the recognition that the Hebrew of the book is much later than that which would have come from the period of Solomon and the early monarchy

- Qohelet's claim in 1:16 to have increased in wisdom "more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me" (lit., "more than *all* who ruled," though David was the only king to have ruled in Jerusalem before Solomon; it is unlikely that this reference would be to the earlier Jebusite rulers of Jerusalem)
- the nonappearance of the name Solomon in the book, when his name had already been attached to Proverbs and the Song of Songs

Today few scholars still maintain Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes. Probably the majority position through much of the last century has been that an Israelite sage wrote the book as a skeptical, pessimistic, wisdom treatise and adopted a Solomonic persona to give it a measure of authority. Then a second person added an introductory title (1:1) and epilogue (12:9–11) to the book. A third person added a second epilogue (12:12–14) as an orthodox corrective to make the book more acceptable.

In a groundbreaking article in 1976 titled "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," Michael Fox argued that, as opposed to the idea that there was a second or third person who added an epilogue or epilogues to the book, Ecclesiastes is actually the work of one person. There are two voices in the book, but they both come from the same person. The epilogist is actually the creator of the character Qohelet and what that character says. To use Fox's own words, "it is not that the epilogue is by Qohelet, but that Qohelet is 'by' the epilogist."² For Fox, Qohelet is a persona created by the author of the book. Qohelet actually represents, in large part, the thought of the author, but in the epilogue (12:9–14) the author distances himself to a certain extent from the persona he has created.³

Tremper Longman has taken Fox's proposal and reworked it somewhat.⁴ His thesis is that there are two voices in the book: that of Qohelet in 1:12–12:7 and that of a second sage, who provides a prologue in 1:1–11, an epilogue in 12:8–14, and also briefly interrupts at 7:27, in all three places referring to Qohelet in the third person. This second voice is, in essence, the author of the book. Longman is undecided with regard to Fox's position that Qohelet is a fictional, literary creation of the author, and he leaves open the possibility that Qohelet may have been a real person, assuming for the sake of the commentary that he is.

Additionally, Longman argues that “Qohelet’s speech is a foil, a teaching device, used by the second wise man in order to instruct his son (12:12) concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel.”⁵ In 12:9–14 (see [exposition](#)), the epilogist distances himself from Qohelet and, though he praises him for his sagacity, criticizes him for incorporating into his teaching pessimistic, skeptical wisdom thought from the larger ancient Near Eastern environment.

In this commentary, I have adopted Longman’s main thesis, but I have elsewhere argued that Qohelet is indeed a literary creation of the author, a persona behind which stands not only the figure of Solomon but also that of Hezekiah.⁶ In chs. 1–2 Qohelet is painted with obvious Solomonic characteristics; but by not explicitly naming Qohelet as Solomon and by introducing conflicting data, such as the reference to “*all* those who ruled in Jerusalem before me” (1:16), the author wants the reader to look for another Israelite king who might also fit the portrait. Hezekiah, who in both biblical and rabbinical tradition has wisdom connections and who, in the accounts of his reign in 2 Kings 18–20, 2 Chronicles 29–32, and Isaiah 36–39, makes several statements that appear to parallel ones made by Qohelet in Ecclesiastes, is the likely candidate.⁷

Qohelet, then, is a composite character behind whom stand both Solomon and Hezekiah, the two bookends of the royal wisdom tradition in ancient Israel—two kings who, in spite of their connection to wisdom, made unwise decisions. Thus, in addition to Longman’s thesis that the book is a warning against “speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel,” I argue that the book also serves as a censure of the Davidic dynasty for allowing this pessimistic, skeptical teaching to stand alongside Torah and the instruction to “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13). See more on this approach under [Message and Purpose](#).

4. DATE

The majority of scholars today assume a date for the book at approximately the middle of the third century BC. The arguments for this dating fall along three basic lines. (1) The language of Ecclesiastes is late, even moving toward, some would argue, a more Mishnaic Hebrew. (2) The suggested sociological setting for the book accords well with a date around 250 BC. (3)

Much of the book's contents appears to show signs of Hellenistic philosophical influence.

Though analysis of a literary work's language may provide substantial clues for the dating of the work, studies on the language of Ecclesiastes done in the last twenty years have come to different conclusions.⁸ Fredericks, for example, arrives at an exilic or even preexilic dating, and Schoors, writing after Fredericks, argues for a later, postexilic though still pre-Hellenistic date. Conventional indicators of lateness, such as Aramaisms, loanwords, and so on, can also be explained in other ways. In some respects, the use of such indicators constitutes an argument from silence. One could always argue that a well-educated, and perhaps well-traveled, Israelite could pick up and utilize words from another language before there was a wholesale interchange between Israelite society and the nation of the current ruler on the block. There are a couple of Persian loanwords in Ecclesiastes, no certain Grecisms, and, according to Seow, no Mishnaic Hebrew features that could not be viewed as "literary deposits of popular speech" of which both Ecclesiastes and the later Mishnaic texts were common inheritors.⁹ But Seow, noting that the Aramaisms seem to have a high frequency of occurrence, dates the book in the late fifth century to early fourth century BC.

Though some defend a sociological setting during the Hellenistic period, claiming that Qohelet belonged to the upper crust of society in a time of relative economic prosperity,¹⁰ the evidence for this putative socioeconomic setting is meager. Seow, for example, has argued just as persuasively, if not more so, for a setting in the Persian period.¹¹ While there are, to be sure, some similarities between Greek philosophical thought and some of the content of Ecclesiastes, the connections are more extensive, better situated, and more easily explainable in terms of the rich heritage of the earlier Wisdom tradition in the ancient Near East.¹²

In sum, the only substantial evidence for dating appears to be the higher number of Aramaisms that occur in the book. Elsewhere, I have noted evidence in Ecclesiastes that the author was perhaps familiar with the Chronicler's account of the reign of Hezekiah.¹³ If this is so, then a date in the fifth century BC, after the writing of 1 and 2 Chronicles, would appear to be the most probable date for the writing of this book.

5. SETTING

Biblical studies have become more and more interdisciplinary in the past decades. One discipline with which biblical scholars have been increasingly interacting is sociology. Commentaries, theologies, and histories of Israelite religion are now being written from sociological, or more precisely, from sociopolitical and socioeconomic perspectives.

The problem with many of these works, however, is that because of the paucity of hard data with respect to the sociological, economic, and even political conditions of ancient Israelite society, they actually become exercises in sociological reconstruction. The commentator tries to take clues from the text and match it up with the putative sociological reconstruction put forth in the commentary. Thus, as mentioned above, Ecclesiastes has been thought by some to fit the reconstructed conditions of Israelite society in the Hellenistic period, by others to fit the conditions of the Persian period, and by some scholars even been forced to find its home in the Maccabean period.

As Roland Murphy notes, however, such putative sociological settings are largely arguments from silence.¹⁴ We simply do not know enough about the sociological conditions of the different periods to make anything like a definitive judgment. Perhaps, as mentioned above, Seow has argued the most cogently for the Persian period.¹⁵ But even there the connections made between the sociological setting and the text of Ecclesiastes are not so specific as to demand such a setting. Even if one argued that the text demands a socioeconomic setting in which there is a wealthier ruling class and an oppressed lower class, and that there is also political corruption, one could place the book anywhere from the time of Solomon forward. Qohelet himself reminds us that the times do not really change all that much (1:9–11). I take the position here that no definitive socioeconomic setting for the book has been demonstrated.

6. TEXT

The Masoretic text (MT) of Ecclesiastes has come down to us in relatively good shape. Among the ancient versions of the book are texts in Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin. Much later (well into the Middle Ages) are

Ethiopic and Arabic versions. From a text-critical perspective, the Greek text (the Septuagint, or LXX) is the most important by far.

There is some controversy with regard to the LXX. It has a number of features, among them an extreme literalness, that distinguishes it from most other books in the LXX. It has been argued by many scholars, therefore, that the LXX of Ecclesiastes is actually the work of Aquila, a second-century AD Gentile convert to Judaism whose Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was recorded in the third column of Origen's famous Hexapla (a kind of parallel Bible). Others have denied that it was done by Aquila and claim, rather, that it is simply Aquila-like. In any case, because it is so literalistic, divergences between the LXX and the MT become rather important. The most significant of these will be noted in the exposition below.¹⁶

From Qumran there are two fragments of manuscripts of the text of Ecclesiastes, 4QQoh^a and 4QQoh^b, the first of which may date as early 175 BC. Together the fragments cover Ecclesiastes 1:10–14; 5:14–18; 6:1, 3–8, 12; 7:1–10, 19–20. Most of the variants are orthographic (spelling). Any significant variations will be discussed in the exposition.¹⁷

It should also be mentioned here that at one point in the book there is a different verse enumeration, over a twenty-verse stretch, between the Hebrew and English versions. The first verse of ch. 5 in the English versions is the last verse of ch. 4 in the Hebrew text. Hence the Hebrew 4:17–5:19 = English 5:1–20. Beginning with ch. 6 the MT and the English versions are back in sync. Readers consulting commentaries that deal with the Hebrew text should note that many of them work with the Hebrew verse enumeration rather than the English one.

7. CANONICITY

Because of the book's apparently unorthodox positions and internal contradictions, its canonicity was a topic of debate in the ancient rabbinical literature, especially between the rabbinical schools of Hillel (in favor of inclusion) and Shammai (against inclusion). An account of these debates is beyond the space limitations of this commentary.

What is interesting to note, however, is that despite these extensive discussions, the book was accepted as canonical, though we are not sure

why. The two most popular suggestions are that the last two verses of the book, with their more orthodox sentiments, and the connection to Solomon are what decided the issue. Interestingly, however, the much more conservative book Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach) did not make it into the Jewish canon despite its explicit drawing of the connection between wisdom and Torah piety, and books such as the Wisdom of Solomon, with explicit attribution to Solomon, did not make it into the canon either. We are not really sure why the rabbis finally accepted Ecclesiastes as canonical.

There was apparently no problem in the ancient church with respect to the canonicity of the book. Nor again are we sure why this was the case. Was it because of the Solomonic attribution? If so, then perhaps Ecclesiastes may have been correctly recognized as canonical, though for the wrong reason, as in the case of the NT book of Hebrews, which probably was received as canonical because of a belief in its Pauline authorship. And perhaps the reasons are really not that important. The church does not constitute canon; rather, it recognizes a canon that it receives from God, who is himself Canon.¹⁸

8. COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Israel did not exist in a vacuum. Her neighbors were involved in the writing of Wisdom literature long before Israel was a nation. Indeed it was probably only in the days of Solomon that Israel began to join the wisdom enterprise per se, and to contribute to, and even draw upon, the larger body of Wisdom literature in the ancient Near East.¹⁹ What follows is a nonexhaustive list of some of the wisdom texts that preceded Ecclesiastes and that fall to a greater or lesser extent into the basic category of pessimistic or doubting wisdom.

From Egypt

Dispute Between a Man and His Ba [Soul]²⁰

Harper Song²¹

Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb²²

From Mesopotamia

Babylonian Theodicy²³
Dialogue of Pessimism²⁴
I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom²⁵
Counsels of a Pessimist²⁶

In addition to these texts, all of which display some attitude on a continuum from skepticism to pessimism to something approaching cynicism, there are other wisdom texts that cannot be categorized as pessimistic as such, but nevertheless may contain occasional expressions of attitudes, statements, and instructions that have some close parallels in Ecclesiastes. For both these texts and the texts listed above, where significant parallels exist they will be noted in the course of the exposition.

Though it does not come under the category of Wisdom literature, another text in which there are significant parallels to Ecclesiastes is the Epic of Gilgamesh.²⁷ Again, these correspondences will be noted in the exposition. Other texts with which Ecclesiastes has a more formal correspondence will be discussed in the next section.

9. GENRE

Genres can be identified at various levels of abstraction. Furthermore, a biblical work that can be categorized as belonging to one genre can, of course, be made up of passages that belong to numerous other genres. In what follows we will first of all discuss briefly some of the various genres contained within Ecclesiastes and then go on to consider the genre of the book as a whole.

On a broad scale, the book is comprised of a combination of prose and poetry. While biblical Hebrew poetry is notoriously difficult to define, it may at least be said that its most recognizable characteristic is parallelism, a device by which two lines (more rarely, three or four) have a particular semantic and/or grammatical or syntactical relationship to each other. Semantically, the two lines of the couplet may take the form of statement–restatement; statement–contrasting statement; cause–effect; effect–cause; if clause–then clause; and so on. Grammatically and syntactically, the lines may be parallel in terms of the parts of speech that are used and the actual order of the words.

More narrowly, among the most prominent genres in the book are: proverbs (short, pithy sayings; e.g., 4:6), instructions (which usually contain commands or prohibitions, with accompanying reasons; e.g., 5:1–7), and example stories (short vignettes to demonstrate the author’s point; e.g., 9:14–16). Perhaps the genre that characterizes Ecclesiastes more than any other is the reflection. As defined by Roland Murphy, the reflection “states a thesis or goal which the writer considers and evaluates in a very personal way” (e.g., 2:1–17).²⁸

Several proposals have been offered for the genre of the book as a whole, depending on how many points of similarity and what kinds of similarity one looks for to compare it to other works of literature in the same class. Other scholars deny that the book can be classified under a single genre designation. These various proposals, including the denial, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On a broad plane, the book can of course be categorized as Wisdom literature. More narrowly, other suggestions have been “reflection,” “proverb,” “diatribe,” and “royal testament.”

In this commentary I have adopted the position advocated by Tremper Longman that the work is best characterized as “framed wisdom autobiography,” with the material inside the constructed frame of the prologue and epilogue finding its closest formal parallels in the genre of royal Akkadian “fictional autobiography.” Longman, building on the work done for his published Yale dissertation, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, compares Ecclesiastes to fifteen Akkadian texts in which a king introduces himself in the first person and then goes on to talk about his exploits.²⁹ All of these texts were written long after the death of the kings to whom they were attributed, thus making them fictional, pseudonymous works.

For three of these texts—the Cuthaeen Legend of Naram-Sin, the Sin of Sargon text, and the Adad-guppi autobiography—there is a concluding section in which the king gives a series of wisdom admonitions and instructions. The book of Ecclesiastes is most closely parallel to these three texts. Like the kings in these texts, the king Qohelet introduces himself in the first person (1:12), goes on to tell of his exploits (his search, 1:12–6:9), and then proceeds to deliver wisdom sayings and instruction based on the earlier related narrative (6:10–12:7). Unlike the texts with which Ecclesiastes was compared, these Akkadian texts do not compare materially, inasmuch as they are not pessimistic works (though some of the

instructional material in the third section of these works comes out of mistakes the kings made during their exploits). Nevertheless, they do seem to provide the best formal comparisons.³⁰

10. STRUCTURE

Franz Delitzsch, in his nineteenth-century commentary on Ecclesiastes, declared that all attempts to uncover a comprehensive structure for the book “have hitherto failed, and must fail.”³¹ If this prediction holds up, it will not be for lack of scholarly effort, for many proposals to account for the structure of the book have been made. Suggestions include: tracing patterns of consideration, assessment, and reasoning;³² noticing alternating observation and instruction complexes;³³ finding polar oppositions;³⁴ and reading the book as a dialogical debate.³⁵

There have also been attempts to ascertain the structure by taking into account the various repeated phrases in the book, such as “meaningless,” “under the sun,” “chasing after the wind,” “I saw,” and the like. Though such an approach certainly has merit, it must also reckon with the possibility that an author has been inconsistent with the use of the phrases, sometimes inserting them without any structural intentions; this seems to be the case in Ecclesiastes.

Addison Wright has coupled this last approach with what he perceives to be a numerical pattern in the book.³⁶ Based on the numerical value of the word *hebel* (“meaningless”; GK 2039), using the Hebrew letters to represent numbers, and the word’s various formulations and distribution throughout the book, he arrives at a structure that seems to correspond with more broad, thematic divisions that had already been suggested by others. There is certainly merit to his initial observations in this regard, as noted particularly by Roland Murphy.³⁷ But Wright’s subsequent attempts to provide a very intricate structure based on these numerical patterns has not won much support.³⁸

This commentary, with its adoption of Longman’s suggested genre designation for Ecclesiastes as “framed wisdom autobiography” (see above under [Genre](#)), also takes the position that the broader structure for the book accords with that designation. The outline below is taken (with slight changes) from Longman:³⁹

- I. Prologue (1:1–11)
- II. Qohelet's Autobiography (1:12–12:7)
 - A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)
 - B. Narrative of Qohelet's Quest for Meaning (1:13–6:9)
 - C. Qohelet's Advice (6:10–12:7)
- III. Epilogue (12:8–14)

At the end of this introduction under Outline, this structure will be further fleshed out to provide a guide for the Text and Exposition to follow. But no claim is made here that this fuller outline provides the originally intended structure for the book. Delitzsch's prediction, I believe, has so far proved correct.

11. MESSAGE AND PURPOSE

As mentioned above under Authorship, I take the position that there are two voices in the book—that of Qohelet, who is the speaker in 1:12–12:7, and that of the frame-narrator, who is actually the author of the entire book, in 1:1–11 and 12:8–14 (briefly interrupting as well at 7:27). Qohelet, a literary creation of the frame-narrator, serves as a foil to provide a contrast for the author's message. That message is: Beware the dangers of pessimistic skeptical wisdom thought; rather, fear God and keep his commands, "for this is all there is to man" (a more literal rendering of 12:13). In other words, this is where the meaning of life resides.

Disputing that this or some other similar reading constitutes the message and purpose of the book are those who prefer to interpret Qohelet rather as a "preacher of joy."⁴⁰ They see the message of Ecclesiastes as an encouragement to live to the fullest, to enjoy life, to seize the day (*carpe diem*). Appeal is made to the so-called *carpe diem* passages (2:24–26; 3:12–14; 3:22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; and perhaps 11:7–10) as representing the book's true message and the sum of Qohelet's advice.

While Qohelet certainly does advocate the idea of the enjoyment of life in these passages, at least three factors (among more) provide strong arguments against this construal of Qohelet's purpose. First, the book's "motto" must be reckoned with. The word rendered by the NIV as

“meaningless” is the Hebrew word *hebel*. In its literal sense it denotes “air, vapor, breath.” But as it is used in Ecclesiastes, a better rendering of the metaphor is that suggested by Michael Fox, that of “absurd.”⁴¹ This captures the essence of Qohelet’s use of the word. Thus a better translation for Ecclesiastes 1:2 would be:

“Absurdity of absurdities!”

says Qohelet.

“Absurdity of absurdities”

Everything is absurd.”

The point is not simply that life is meaningless or that it is a zero; rather, the point is that life is anti-meaning—it is a minus. This can be demonstrated, for example, from 1:18:

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

The point is not simply that wisdom and knowledge fail to provide returns on the time invested to acquire them, but that they provide exactly the opposite. The so-called *carpe diem* passages must be read in this light. Qohelet’s best advice is to eat, drink, find satisfaction in your work, and enjoy life with your wife. But even these activities take place “under the sun” and come under the category of “absurd.” In the end they are meaningless—or worse.

Second, it is important to note that the attitude with which Qohelet introduces these *carpe diem* passages is hardly cause for elation. Qohelet’s recommendations to eat and drink and enjoy life are, for the most part, prefaced by the phrase, “there is nothing better than,” or in other words, “this is the best I can come up with.” Qohelet is not enthusiastic about these activities—he is merely resigned to them.

Third, as Longman so astutely comments, “Qohelet never lifts himself out of his pessimism.”⁴² By the time you get to the end of the book, Qohelet is just as steeped in despair as he was at the beginning. The frame-narrator

felt comfortable in bracketing the entire speech of Qohelet with the summary of his message, “Everything is absurd!” (1:2; 12:8).

As also noted under Authorship, I believe that in addition to being a warning against the danger of skeptical, pessimistic wisdom, the book is also in measure a censure of the Davidic dynasty for its excursion into the larger body of ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature. It was the king’s responsibility to teach Torah, the commandments of God, to the *qāhāl* (the “assembly”), the people (see Dt 17:18–20; 31:9–13; 2Ki 23:1–3; 2Ch 34:29–32). While both Solomon and Hezekiah may have done this, their teaching was, nevertheless, from the epilogist’s perspective, unfortunately mixed with the more speculative, pessimistic wisdom thought of the ancient Near East. In contrast to the teaching of Qohelet, the epilogist’s simple instruction is that one should fear God and keep his commands (Ecc 12:13–14). In some measure, he censures Qohelet for seeking wisdom and teaching the people knowledge from a source other than Torah. While Qohelet’s theology is not necessarily unorthodox (though in measure it certainly is), his mixture of orthodox theology with speculative, pessimistic wisdom is, for the epilogist, at best unnecessary and at worst destructive.

That being said, a qualification must also be made. This fictional character the author has created in large part reflects the author’s own thoughts. Both Qohelet and the author belong squarely in Israel’s wisdom tradition. In 12:9–11 the author characterizes Qohelet as a sage, one who sought to teach the people upright and true words. While the author is ultimately critical of Qohelet and feels the need to add at the end what Qohelet never quite seemed to get around to saying, he is also respectful toward him.

If Qohelet and others like him are constantly burdened with concerns over the meaning of life, it is in fact a God-given burden (1:12; 3:10–11). There may be those who can go through their lives being happy-go-lucky, as it were, seldom giving any thought to the meaning of life, its apparent randomness, and its unfairness. Qohelet is not one of them. And while it may be wrong to teach doubt and skeptical thought, it is not wrong to have or give voice to those doubts.⁴³ On this point, Addison Wright notes:

The presence of the book in the canon validates in every age the same kind of critical assessment of theology,

conventional wisdom, and piety as Qoheleth practiced, and validates it not as an optional activity but as one constantly necessary to keep religion honest and in touch with reality. . . .

Finally, in no way can Qoheleth be said to have had a close personal relationship with God. Not infrequently the rhetoric of the believing community creates the impression that all the faithful should be experiencing such a relationship and that they are in some way at fault if they do not. Clearly, countless thousands of devout people travel in the dark as did Qoheleth, and they can find dignity in the believing community because Qoheleth was deemed worthy to have a place in the biblical writings.⁴⁴

Wright may have overstated the case. Clearly, the “rhetoric” of the believing community certainly does suggest that the faithful should have a close relationship with God, that they should know Jesus Christ and be indwelt by his Spirit; and this rhetoric was passed down to it by the NT authors themselves. Nevertheless, there are many among us whose “dark night of the soul” is darker and lasts longer than it does for others. And perhaps for them Qoheleth may be in many ways a comforting word.

Ellen Davis makes reference to a Vietnam War chaplain who said that Ecclesiastes “was the only part of the Bible that his soldiers were willing to hear.”⁴⁵ She goes on to note that one of her students, “who suffers from recurrent bouts of depression, says that reading Ecclesiastes is ‘like slipping into a warm bath.’” This therapeutic function of the book certainly deserves to be recognized. But while the book can indeed, in cases like these, provide a certain solace (“misery loves company”), the ultimate solace, I would argue, must come from another source, from Christ himself, who knows firsthand about the absurdity of life (see [next section](#)).

12. BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

Attention here will be given briefly to four ways in which Ecclesiastes ties into the larger canon of Scripture (though there are many more). First, there are some obvious connections with the book of Genesis (especially Ge 1–

4). Several studies have called attention to these connections.⁴⁶ The preoccupation with the arduousness of toil and its lack of return connects with the curse on the man in the Garden of Eden after the fall (Ge 3:17–19). That human beings die and return to dust and that their spirit returns back to the Creator (Ecc 12:7) reflect Genesis 2:7 and 3:19.

I also believe that the choice of Qoheleth's theme word, *hebel* ("meaningless" or "absurd"; GK 2039), is meant to call to mind the narrative in Genesis 4 about the death of Abel (Abel's name and the term *hebel* are identical). In a book that bemoans life's arbitrariness and injustice, the use of *hebel* is intended to remind the reader of Abel, the only one of the four human characters mentioned so far in the book of Genesis of whom there is no recorded wrongdoing, and yet the first one to die.

Second, Martin Shields and Nicholas Perrin have called attention to the fact that the phrase "one shepherd" in 12:11 occurs only two other places in the OT, both of them in Ezekiel (Eze 34:32 and 37:24), in reference to the promised Davidic Messiah.⁴⁷ Perrin, in particular, suggests that its use in Ecclesiastes 12:11 is a direct reference to this king. I believe, rather, that the phrase as used in 12:11 refers more immediately to the king-sage Qohelet, who represents the Davidic dynasty, but that at the same time it holds out hope for a future king-sage whose teaching will be pure wisdom from God, unmixed with worldly wisdom. Ultimately, that King-Sage is Jesus, who has become for us the very "wisdom of God" (1Co 1:24, 30).⁴⁸

Furthermore, the wisdom dispensed to us by this Sage far outstrips and stands in direct contradiction to the wisdom of Qohelet. Qohelet failed in his search for the meaning of life. Jesus tells us why, in that such searches are doomed to failure from the very start: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39). Meaning in life is not found by searching for it, but by abandoning the search and losing one's self in Christ.

Third, in Romans 8:20 the apostle Paul says that the world has been subjected to "frustration," using the Greek word *mataiotēs*, the same word the LXX used to translate the Hebrew word *hebel* ("meaningless"). In other words, Paul freely admits that Qohelet was correct. We do live in a frustrated, meaningless, absurd world. But then Paul goes on to declare in 8:32 that God "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all." This

is an absurd world, but God has subjected his own Son to that very absurdity.

Indeed, this was the ultimate absurdity: the tortuous death of the only righteous man who ever lived, he “who had no sin” (2Co 5:21), that we might be rescued from the absurdity of this world and be “brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Ro 8:21). In this way the NT provides a hope for redemption and resurrection that answers Qohelet’s quest for meaning in a way he never considered.⁴⁹

Fourth, Qohelet’s complaint that there is no reward or gain for his labor (‘*āmāl*’; cf. 1:3) finds an echo in the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. In the second of the four Servant Songs, in Isaiah 49:4, the servant complains, “I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing [*hebel*].” Yet, the servant, unlike Qohelet, lifts himself up out of his despair and declares, “Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.” Then, in the fourth Servant Song, in Isaiah 53:11, the Lord declares about his servant that “after the suffering (‘*āmāl*’) of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. It is in the ‘*āmāl*’ of the Suffering Servant, whom Christians have traditionally identified as the very Son of God, that Qohelet’s question finds an answer. And for those who identify themselves with the crucified and risen Jesus, they too can be assured that their “labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1Co 15:58).

13. PREACHING AND TEACHING THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

If, as argued above, Qohelet serves as a foil for the frame-narrator to get across his message of the danger of pessimistic, skeptical wisdom, what are the implications for the preaching and teaching of the book? Does it mean that sermons should not be preached, for example, from 3:1–15; 4:1–9; 5:1–7; or 12:1–7? Does it mean that it is wrong to preach a series of sermons from Ecclesiastes, since the only real word from God comes in the last few verses? Doesn't this perspective on the book in essence destroy the possibility of preaching anything other than one message from the book?

In large measure, the answer to those last three questions is “yes.” But a similar situation presents itself to today's preacher in the book of Job. For the most part, preachers are comfortable preaching from the opening story in Job 1–2, from the closing story in ch. 42, from Job's speeches scattered through the book, and from God's speeches, which come near the end (chs. 38–41). I have never heard a sermon preached from the speeches of Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar, however—and rightly so. For their speeches are, in essence, a foil for the rest of the teaching in the book. These speeches are not the word of God per se, and yet they are contained in a book that is the Word of God in order to provide a contrast to the book's ultimate message. To some extent, even Job's speeches become a foil that God plays off in his speeches at the end.

In the same way, the long autobiographical speech of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes is not the word of God but is contained in a book that is God's Word. And sermons preached from these passages in Ecclesiastes should, as with all sermons, be biblical-theological; that is, they should be concerned with the larger message not only of the book of Ecclesiastes but also of the canon as a whole. Any single passage should be preached in an ever-expanding circle of contexts, beginning with the immediate context and extending to the entirety of Scripture.

Sermons along this line can draw on the full richness of God's Word by noting, for example, places where a text in Ecclesiastes has thematic or motific links to one of the four suggested biblical-theological lines

mentioned above: (1) the book of Genesis and the issues there of labor, the curse, life, death, dust, breath, Abel (*hebel*), and so on; (2) the hope for a wise king, ultimately to be fulfilled in Christ, who will speak a better word than Qohelet's *hebel* and who dispenses a wisdom that helps us deal with life's absurdity; (3) the hope of redemption and resurrection, secured for us by Christ's incarnation and his decision to subject himself to the ultimate absurdity; and (4) the satisfaction that Christ received from his labor and the assurance that neither will our labor be in vain. This always makes for a sermon that is more biblically informed, more theologically correct, and ultimately more beneficial for the hearers. But it is also hard work.

Nevertheless, perhaps the answer to the above questions can also be "no." Interestingly, in 1 Corinthians 3:19 Paul quotes from Job 5:13 ("he catches the wise in their craftiness") and introduces his quotation with the formula, "as it is written." Yet the person he is quoting is Eliphaz, of whom God said that he and his two friends "have not spoken of me what is right" (Job 42:8). Was Eliphaz correct in what he said in Job 5:13? Yes, he was. Yet the speech as a whole was headed in the wrong direction and was ultimately a correct assessment neither of Job's situation nor of the character of God.

Likewise, Qohelet says many good things, many correct things, and in fact, like Eliphaz, seems to have considered himself a guardian of God's honor (5:1–7). But ultimately, on the whole, he leads us in the wrong direction. So, can individual passages from Ecclesiastes be preached without always being qualified by the epilogue and the larger canon of Scripture? Perhaps, but I believe the warrant for such preaching is fairly thin. Qohelet was certainly correct about the twistedness and absurdity of this world, and he does occasionally give some good advice, but on the whole his words are best preached in the light of the rest of the canon, and particularly in the light of the NT authors, who found in his successor a King-Sage whose wisdom is, indeed, the very wisdom of God.

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15. OUTLINE

- I. Prologue: The Absurd Circle (1:1–11)
- II. Qohelet’s Autobiography: The Wisdom Quest (1:12–12:7)
 - A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)
 - B. Narrative of Qohelet’s Quest for Meaning (1:13–6:9)
 - 1. Qohelet Introduces His Quest (1:13–18)
 - 2. The Royal Pleasures (2:1–11)
 - 3. Wisdom and Folly (2:12–16)
 - 4. Hatred of Life (2:17–26)
 - 5. A Pretty Poem about Time (3:1–8)
 - 6. But Time Is Elusive (3:9–15)
 - 7. God’s Test (3:16–22)
 - 8. Oppression, or “In Praise of the Dead and the Unborn” (4:1–3)
 - 9. Laziness versus Over-industriousness (4:4–6)
 - 10. Aloneness versus Companionship (4:7–12)

11. Wisdom, Folly, and Succession (4:13–16)
12. Fools in God’s Presence (5:1–7 [4:17–5:6])
13. Oppression and Politics, Poverty and Wealth (5:8–20 [5:7–19])
14. Labor without Satisfaction (6:1–9)

C. Qohelet’s Advice (6:10–12:7)

1. Impotence and Ignorance (6:10–12)
2. When Things Are All Twisted (7:1–14)
3. A Balanced, Mediocre Life (7:15–22)
4. Of Schemes and Schemers: The Knowledge of Good and Evil (7:23–29)
5. Fools in the King’s Presence (8:1–9)
6. The Inversion of Justice and Injustice (8:10–17)
7. The Hand of Fate and the Serendipity of the Hand (9:1–10)
8. Time and Chance (9:11–12)
9. A Forgotten Sage (9:13–18)
10. Folly Gets More Press Than Wisdom (10:1–3)
11. Some Loosely Connected Words about Rulers (10:4–7)
12. Some Occupational Hazards and Difficulties (10:8–11)
13. Some Words about Words (10:12–15)
14. Some Loosely Connected Words about Royalty (10:16–20)
15. Risk Management? Or Ignorance Control? (11:1–6)
16. Some Questionable Advice for Youth (11:7–10)
17. An Apocalyptic Death (12:1–7)

III. Epilogue: Qohelet Was Wise—But (12:8–14)

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1. David Alan Hubbard, *Beyond Futility: Messages of Hope from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 7.
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 3. In his most recent commentary, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), Fox has changed his view somewhat and now sees Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 as being the work of an additional and more orthodox epilogist.

4. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2–9.
5. Ibid., 38.
6. Jerry E. Shepherd, “The Identity of Qohelet.” Paper read at the Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Portland, Oregon, May 1998.
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15. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21–36.
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20. See *AEL*, 1:163–69; *ANET*, 405–7.
21. See *AEL*, 1:196–97; *ANET*, 467.

22. See *AEL*, 1:145–49.
23. See *BWL*, 63–91; *ANET*, 438–40.
24. See *BWL*, 139–49; *ANET*, 437–38.
25. See *BWL*, 21–62; *ANET*, 434–37.
26. See *BWL*, 107–9.
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Text and Exposition

I. PROLOGUE: THE ABSURD CIRCLE (1:1–11)

¹The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

²“Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

³What does man gain from all his labor
at which he toils under the sun?

⁴Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

⁵The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

⁶The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

⁷All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

⁸All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

⁹What has been will be again,

what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
¹⁰Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.
¹¹There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow.

COMMENTARY

1 The frame-narrator, the author of the prologue and epilogue, introduces the main speaker in the book, “the Teacher” (*qōhelet*, GK 7738; henceforward I will refer to this person with the more simplified transliteration, Qohelet). By calling him David’s son and a king, the author wants the reader to think immediately of Solomon. But by not specifically naming him “Solomon,” he leaves the identification ambiguous. The position taken here is that Qohelet is a persona created by the book’s frame-narrator. He is painted with obvious Solomonic characteristics but, under closer consideration, can be seen to be a composite character representative of the entire Davidic dynasty (see more under [Title](#) and [Authorship](#) in the [introduction](#)).

The term Qohelet comes from the Hebrew root *qhl*, which means “to assemble.” Thus Qohelet would be “the Assembler.” Most likely, the author intends for the reader to view Qohelet as a person standing before an assembly to give some kind of instruction; hence the NIV’s “Teacher” is probably a fair representation of that idea, though we should not picture a situation analogous to a modern-day classroom. Taking into account this person’s royal status, perhaps we should envision a scene like that in 1 Kings 8, in which Solomon “assembled” (NIV, “summoned”) the people of Israel to Jerusalem for the dedication of the temple and addressed the

“assembly” (cf. also 2Ki 23:1–3, in which King Josiah assembled all the people to read to them the book of the covenant).

2 This verse serves as a motto-like summary of Qohelet’s teaching. The NIV’s “meaningless” (NASB, “vanity”) translates the Hebrew word *hebel* (GK 2039). Literally, the word denotes air, vapor, or breath; but here it is used metaphorically. The exact nuance of the metaphor is debated. Alternative translations include, in either nominal or adjectival forms, “futility,” “transience,” “impermanence,” “ephemerality,” and “incongruity.”

While perhaps no one translation can cover all the intended nuances in the word’s thirty-eight occurrences in the book, the position taken here is that Michael Fox’s translation in his commentary (*Time to Tear Down*), “absurd,” best captures Qohelet’s meaning on the whole. While “incongruity” comes close, it doesn’t adequately represent the oppressiveness of the situation as described by Qohelet. He is not simply perplexed intellectually by what appears to be an unsolvable puzzle, but he is emotionally and psychologically anguished as well.

“Absurdity” is also an advance over the idea of “meaningless.” It takes account of the idea often expressed in the book (see, e.g., 1:18) that not only is life a zero—it is oftentimes a minus. The fivefold repetition of *hebel* anticipates the emphasis on repetition and circularity in the verses to follow. (Both the NIV’s “Meaningless! Meaningless!” and “Utterly meaningless!” is literally “meaninglessness of meaninglessnesses”; this is simply a Hebrew idiom expressing the superlative.)

3 The frame-narrator begins to unpack what Qohelet means by calling everything meaningless or absurd. His initial observation has to do with labor (‘*āmāl*, GK 6662). Though this word does not always carry negative connotations in the OT, it quite often does, and does so consistently in Ecclesiastes. In the book, labor is an oppressive business, one for which there is not sufficient compensation. In Ecclesiastes the term refers not just to physical work but also to the arduousness of life as a whole. It can also refer to the results of one’s labors. “Profit” (*yitrôn*), though it is indeed a word borrowed from the economic terminology of the day, is not used in the technical sense of what is left over after all expenses; rather, it refers to compensation in general. Qohelet sees no return for one’s labor, whether looking at the gross or the net.

This absurdity of work for no profit takes place “under the sun.” As used in Ecclesiastes the phrase refers to whatever might be accessible by Qohelet’s or humankind’s senses—in other words, everything. While commentaries make much of the fact that certainly Qohelet is not concluding that everything in the entire universe is meaningless, and certainly neither God nor things in heaven, but only that which is technically “under the sun,” the observation does not, in fact, exempt much. Everything on which Qohelet can possibly lay his eyes is meaningless.

4–7 Qohelet laments the passing of successive generations against the backdrop of the unchanging world stage. That the “earth remains forever” is not the point; it only provides a cruel contrast to the passing of the generations. As the generations come and go, the earth remains, unmoved and uncaring, and each generation might as well not have even existed. These lines anticipate the conclusion in v.11—not only does the inanimate earth forget those who have lived, but people don’t remember them either.

Sun, wind, and rivers go through their meaningless cycles. The repetition of key words in this passage, with little recourse to the use of substitutionary pronouns, reinforces the concept of meaningless repetition. The language used with regard to the sun is particularly striking. The NIV’s “hurries” translates *šā’ap*, which more literally means “to pant” or “to gasp.” This may well reflect the ancient Near Eastern concept of the sun as making its circuit from horizon to horizon across the sky by day, and then traveling underneath the earth by night to get back to the first horizon in time to start the process all over again. The point here is that even the sun takes part in the absurd circle. While Qohelet says that all things “under the sun” are meaningless, here he extends the concept to the sun itself.

Interestingly, by way of contrast, Psalm 19:4–6 describes the sun in its travel in more glorious terms: “like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.” The psalmist uses the sun’s journey as one illustration of how the heavens “declare the glory of God” (19:1). Qohelet uses it as an illustration for his thesis that all is meaningless. Though Qohelet may on occasion play the poet, he never becomes a psalmist!

8 After taking time in vv.5–7 to use the natural elements to describe his thesis, he returns to the sphere of human activity. The word translated “things” (*d’bārîm*, GK 1821) is also the usual Hebrew term for “words.” In

which sense it is used here is difficult to decide. It is probably best to see *d̥bārîm* as providing a transition that describes both the “things” (the activities) of the previous verses and the words to be mentioned in the following verses. In any case, they are “wearisome” or “wearying.” This word derives from *yāga*‘, which, much like “labor” (*āmāl*) in v.3, can refer to work in general or more pejoratively to its wearying effects. The latter seems preferable here. Indeed, words cannot be found to express this wearisomeness.

Alternatively, taking *d̥bārîm* to mean “words,” one can read the verse as expressing the tiresomeness of making and listening to so much verbiage. At the same time, despite the overdose of words, there is still no satisfaction for the listening ear or the watching eye. Qohelet’s own words will be no different.

9–11 The summary goes on to note the same repetitiveness in human activity that characterized the natural phenomena described earlier. Nothing new ever really happens. Despite the multiplicity of words and actions that take place under the sun, nothing new ever really occurs. So why are people deceived into thinking that there are indeed new happenings? For Qohelet the answer is “a colossal ignorance of the past, a failed memory” (Crenshaw, 68).

But this answer given by Qohelet in v.11 is more than simply an explanation as to humankind’s self-deceit about newness. It constitutes the substance of the oppressive absurdity that hangs over Qohelet’s head throughout the entire book. Philosophers today ask the question, “If a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one to hear it, does it make a sound?” Qohelet asks a similar but much graver question: “If a man is born and lives and dies, and then after he dies, no one remembers him, did he ever really live?” Qohelet despairs because he knows that one day he too will join the thousands of nameless, faceless, forgotten people who once played parts on the earth’s stage.

The message for the readers is clear: “Nor will you escape such a fate. Any funerals or memorials conducted in your honor will only be temporary and brief delays before the world resumes its activity fullscale. The morning after you’ve gone, the stock exchange will open, the trains will run, and children will play in the streets. Did you suppose that it might have been otherwise? Fools, deceive yourselves no longer!”

NOTES

1 קהלת (*qōhelet*, GK 7738) is regarded by almost all commentators as derived from the root קהל (*qhl*), the verbal form of which means “to assemble”; the corresponding noun refers to an “assembly.” Though some have thought that it might be a proper name, the occurrence of the word with the article “the” in 12:8 and possibly in 7:27 (see [exposition](#)) suggests that it should rather be seen as denoting an office.

2 There have been numerous articles, even dissertations, devoted to understanding the meaning of הבל (*hebel*, GK 2039) in Ecclesiastes. In particular, see Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 409–27; Douglas Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Academica Biblica; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); J. E. McKenna, “The Concept of *Hebel* in the Book of Ecclesiastes,” *SJT* 45 (1992): 19–28. It should also be noted that some commentators suggest that the narrator here has gone too far in summarizing Qohelet’s views. But in 1:14, a verse definitely falling within the first-person narrative, Qohelet confirms the narrator’s summary: “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

4–7 Some (as far back as Ibn Ezra, twelfth century AD) have suggested that the mention of earth, sun, wind, and rivers in these verses is a conscious mirroring of the four elements thought by ancient Greek philosophers to comprise the world (earth, fire, air, water). Against this suggestion, however, is the different role the earth plays in this passage in contrast to the other three.

10 Krüger, 25–26, has made the intriguing suggestion that Qohelet’s denial that there is anything “new” could be a critique of prophetic or apocalyptic pronouncements that God either has or is about to do something new. This would be especially directed at passages like Isaiah 42:9; 43:19; 48:16; and 65:17–25. If correct, this would be one more piece of evidence for Qohelet’s nonorthodoxy.

II. QOHELET'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE WISDOM QUEST (1:12–12:7)

A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)

¹²I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

COMMENTARY

12 Qohelet now introduces himself to us in the first person. This introduction is similar to the introductory notice in the royal, “fictional Akkadian autobiographies,” to which I believe Ecclesiastes has the greatest formal generic similarity (see [Genre](#) and [Structure](#) in the [introduction](#)). In addition to what we learned about Qohelet earlier in v.1, we now find out (though we should have already surmised as much) that he is king over Israel.

Commentators note here that other than Solomon, no Davidic king was ever said to have ruled over Israel. Elsewhere I have argued that particularly for the book of Chronicles, after the demise of the northern kingdom Hezekiah effectively becomes the king for the northern Israelite peoples and, by default as it were, but also by his actions, king over all Israel (Shepherd, “The Identity of Qohelet”). If this is the case, then perhaps we see here one more clue that Qohelet is a composite character representing the entire Davidic dynasty.

NOTE

12 הָיִיתִי (*hayîti*; NIV, “I . . . was”) is a Qal perfect of הָיָא (*hāyâ*, “to be”) and would normally be translated as past tense, as the NIV has it. But the NASB’s “have been” is also certainly within the range of translational options for the perfect and may indeed be the best rendering here. Alternatively, it could simply be a literary subtlety whereby the author lets us know that Qohelet is representative of a king long dead or a dynasty with no currently reigning descendant.

B. Narrative of Qohelet's Quest for Meaning (1:13–6:9)

1. Qohelet Introduces His Quest (1:13–18)

OVERVIEW

These verses, as noted by Murphy (*Wisdom Literature*, 134), may be conveniently divided into two parallel sections best characterized as reflections:

First reflection (vv.13–15)

Statement about the meaninglessness of pursuing wisdom
(vv.13–14)

Proverb quoted in support (v.15)

Second reflection (vv.16–18)

Statement about the meaninglessness of pursuing wisdom
(vv.16–17)

Proverb quoted in support (v.18)

¹³I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ¹⁴I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁵What is twisted cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

¹⁸For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

COMMENTARY

13–15 Qohelet informs the reader that he gave himself over to the task of exploring by wisdom all that happens “under heaven” (simply a variant of “under the sun”). Then follows what may be taken either as a description of what he has learned about all that happens, or as a judgment about the burdensome character of his exploration; the latter is more likely. He characterizes it as a “heavy burden.” The NASB’s “grievous task” is more on the road toward a correctly nuanced translation of the adjective *rāʿ* (“evil”; GK 8273). While the word does not carry moral overtones in all of its occurrences, its use here does demonstrate how oppressive Qohelet regards this task (*ʿinyān*).

Untranslated in the NIV is the verb rendered by the NASB as “to be afflicted with” (*ʾānâ*). “Afflicted” may be too strong; perhaps it would be better rendered “kept occupied with.” In any case, what is especially important to note is that the one who has consigned people to this task is God. As Crenshaw, 73, remarks (and understatedly so), “Qohelet’s view of the deity lacks the warmth of the trusting relationship in some parts of the Hebrew Bible.”

In v.14, Qohelet confirms the narrator’s summary of his thought in v.2 and adds that activities done under the sun are a “chasing after the wind,” a futile activity that, according to 1:6, will keep one going around in circles. In proverbial fashion, Qohelet confirms his thesis by noting that one cannot straighten what has been twisted and cannot count items that are missing. Later (7:13) Qohelet will point out that God is the one who has done the twisting.

16–18 Again Qohelet resolves to go exploring and this time adds a little boast that his wisdom was greater than any who ruled Jerusalem before him. This seems strange in that David was the only Israelite king before Solomon who reigned in Jerusalem. That this time Qohelet leaves out his having ruled “over Israel” (as mentioned in v.13) has caused some commentators to speculate that he may be referring as well to the Jebusite

kings, who ruled the city before David's conquest and establishment of Jerusalem as his capitol. This seems unlikely. More likely is the possibility that here the author is giving a clue that leads away from a strict Solomonic identification, while intending that instead the reader see Qohelet as a composite portrait of the Davidic dynasty as a whole.

It may seem strange in v.17 that, in addition to wisdom, Qohelet also resolves to understand "madness and folly." While in the rest of the book Qohelet will by no means actually advocate that one pursue a course of folly, he will constantly bemoan the fact that the same fate is reserved for both the wise person and the fool. But did this observation, at least for a brief moment, lead Qohelet to investigate whether there were any advantages to being a fool?

One is reminded of that delusional (foolish?) character Elwood P. Dowd in Mary Chase's play *Harvey*, in which Elwood at one point reflects on what his mother told him: "She'd say to me, 'In this world, Elwood, you must be oh so clever or oh so pleasant.' Well for years I was clever. I recommend pleasant." Perhaps it was worth a try to look at folly, since wisdom hadn't achieved the desired results. In fact, as Qohelet says in v.18, not only had his wisdom and knowledge failed to bring satisfaction and gain; it actually brought exactly the opposite. The increase of wisdom and knowledge only correlatively increased his sorrow and grief. This was, indeed, an absurdity.

NOTES

13 It is possible that עֲנָן (*inyān*, "task"; GK 6721; NIV, "burden") may be related semantically to the verb עָנָה (*ānâ*). But even if this is not the case, there does at least seem to be a sound play involved, thus justifying a translation along the lines of, "an evil *task* with which to be *tasked*."

14 Several meanings have been suggested for רָעוּת (*rêût*, "chasing") after the wind, among them "desiring" and "shepherding." "Chasing" seems preferable.

2. The Royal Pleasures (2:1–11)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet now describes his “experiment” to find meaning and satisfaction in various pleasures that are, for the most part, royal prerogatives unavailable to the majority of people.

¹I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. ²“Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?” ³I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

⁴I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my work,

and this was the reward for all my labor.

¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done

and what I had toiled to achieve,

everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;

nothing was gained under the sun.

COMMENTARY

1–3 Qohelet proposes a pleasure test to find out what is good, but he declares the result to be *hebel* (“meaningless”) after discovering that laughter is foolish and pleasure accomplishes nothing. He adds wine as a variable to his experiment and even flirts again, as he had in 1:17, with the possibility of adopting folly—such is his desperation—to discern what might provide consolation for his all-too-painful awareness of the brevity of life. Nevertheless, his mind (*lēb*, “heart,” as in v.1), guiding him with wisdom, prevents him from adopting that course.

4–9 More specifically, now, Qohelet details the various items in which he has sought to find meaning in order to try to find something he can declare not to be *hebel* (“meaningless”). The list includes building projects, plants, animals, money, and people, all of which he either built or acquired, as he says, “for myself” (*lî*). This phrase occurs, ad nauseum, nine times in vv.4–9, of which for stylistic reasons the NIV translates only a few. This immediately eliminates the possibility of any altruistic motives—“for the good of my people”—being attributed to the king here. The list is also intended to remind the reader of Solomon, whose building projects, monetary possessions, and multiplication of wives are narrated in 1 Kings 1–11 and 1 Chronicles 1–9. It should also be noted, however, that other Davidic kings also multiplied and boasted of their great possessions, such as Hezekiah (2Ki 20:12–15).

Attention must be called here to Deuteronomy 17:14–20, a passage that, one can argue, forms for the frame-narrator a conscious backdrop for the crafting of his Qohelet character. The passage specifically forbids the king to amass silver and gold, marry many wives, or “consider himself better than his brothers.” There is also an implicit condemnation of the desire on the part of the Israelites to have a king “like all the nations around us.” Qohelet, in Ecclesiastes 2:4–9, *does* amass silver and gold, *does* acquire many women, *does* exalt himself over his brothers (his indulgences having been by no means the common lot of the grand majority of the people in his kingdom), and *does* end up being a king like those of the other nations.

Qohelet himself refers in 2:8 to his acquisition of the “treasure of kings,” that is, that to which he felt himself to be entitled, as would any king. Indeed, Qohelet’s boasts in these verses are comparable to many texts from the ancient Near East in which kings boasted of their great accomplishments, building projects, and possessions. Qohelet has become a

king like any other king: his accomplishments like their accomplishments, his possessions like their possessions. Perhaps worst of all, his wisdom, originally received as a gift of God (1Ki 3:1–15), has now become just like their wisdom: pessimistic, skeptical, and essentially godless.

Two items in the list call for specific comment. In v.7, in addition to buying slaves, Qohelet notes that there were also slaves “born in my house.” This no doubt refers to the children born to those who were already slaves, who automatically became the property of the slaveowner (see Ex 21:2–11). It is interesting that in the same verse these slaves are mentioned along with flocks and herds. The slaves are just as much property as are the cattle and sheep. One wonders whether Qohelet, who was so concerned about humankind’s arduous labor (*‘āmāl*) with which he considered himself to be afflicted, was at all concerned about the labor of his slaves and their dreary, meaningless existence.

The other item is the “harem” in v.8. The translation of the text is debated. What is one word in the NIV is actually a singular noun, followed by the conjunction “and,” in turn followed by the plural of the same noun (*šiddâ wšiddôt*). The meaning of *šiddâ* is unclear (see Notes), but many commentators believe it refers to the female breast and is thus a vulgar way of referring to a woman by a part of her body. The phrase then would be translated (less vulgarly) as “a woman and women.”

Judges 5:30, a passage that refers to the spoils of war, offers both a somewhat similar grammatical structure and idiomatic usage of an anatomical term. The NIV’s “a girl or two for each man” is more literally “a womb, two wombs for each man” (“womb” itself probably serving as a euphemistic reference to the vagina).

The phrase in Ecclesiastes 2:8, “delights of the heart of man,” seems to favor the harem interpretation. If correct, then it is to be noticed that all three elements of what has become a stock expression for a man’s “good life” in our culture—i.e., “wine, women, and song”—are present in the passage.

10–11 Qohelet summarizes this part of his quest by boasting that he had spared no expense in financing his experiment. Everything he saw and wanted he took. One is reminded of Eve, who in Genesis 3:7 saw the fruit and took it, and of the “sons of God,” who in 6:2 saw the “daughters of men” and “took” (NIV, “married”) them. Unbridled taking of whatever one

wants does not get good press in the OT; we should not expect differently here. Qohelet did not withhold from himself any “pleasure” (*śimḥâ*, GK 8525), and he declares that he did indeed take “delight” (*śāmēah*, a word closely related to *śimḥâ* and derived from the same root) in the fruit of his labor, and that he does receive a reward, a *ḥeleq* (usually translated “portion, lot”; GK 2750).

After surveying all of his works, however, he then passes judgment on all of them as meaningless and a chasing after wind. What is especially critical to note with regard to this judgment is that it hangs like a dark cloud over every so-called *carpe diem* passage that follows. Ever before getting to the first such passage at the end of the ch. 2, he declares everything to be *hebel* (“meaningless”). Two words that describe what he received from his toil —“pleasure” (*śimḥâ*) and “reward” (*ḥeleq*)—are also prominent in the *carpe diem* passages. For example, in 3:22 Qohelet says, “there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot.” “Enjoy his work” here is simply the verbal form (*śāmah*) of the noun “pleasure” (*śimḥâ*) in 2:10, and “lot” (*ḥeleq*) is the same as the word translated in 2:10 as “reward.”

In other words, even though several times later in the book Qohelet will recommend that the best thing a person can do is to derive pleasure from his labor (or the fruits of his labor) because that is his lot in life, he declares up front that he himself received pleasure from his labor as his lot in life but considered it all to be meaningless and a chasing after the wind. This shows us that the *carpe diem* passages are really falsely named. The advice to be given in these passages is not so much “seize the day” as it is “here is a palliative for you to take in the light of the painful absurdity of life.”

NOTES

1 Qohelet’s self-address here is similar to that which takes place in the Egyptian text *Dispute between a Man and His Ba [Soul]* (see [Genre](#) in the [introduction](#)).

3 Krüger, 65, makes a comparison between Qohelet’s search for good and the answer provided by Micah 6:8: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. . . .” Apparently Qohelet either ignored or rejected Micah’s answer.

8 There are numerous proposed translations for שִׁדָּה וְשִׂדּוֹת (*šiddâ w^cšiddôt*). Among the various suggestions for the meaning of שִׁדָּה (*šiddâ*, GK 8721) are “cupbearer” (so LXX), “cups,” “spoils,” and “concubines” (both with and without any reference to “breast”). More recently, C. L. Seow, 131–32, has taken up an older suggestion and argued that the word is actually a postbiblical Hebrew term that means “chest” and that it then in context refers to the containers in which the “delights of the heart of man” are kept; this would then remove the necessity of translating either phrase with a sexual connotation. This interpretation has also been adopted by the NJPS and NJB.

Additionally, the interpretation is influenced by how one understands תַּעֲנוּג (*ta^cnûg*, “delights”). The term occurs only five times in the Hebrew Bible, one of them being in Song of Songs 7:7, which refers to the sexual delight that the male character in this song takes in the female character. More generally, it seems in the other places to refer to the idea of luxurious surroundings. In none of its occurrences, however, does it appear to refer to items that would be kept in chests. This, along with the arguments given in the main exposition above, suggests that the idea of a harem best fits the context.

3. *Wisdom and Folly (2:12–16)*

OVERVIEW

Twice already (1:17; 2:2) Qohelet has mentioned investigating and embracing folly. This passage serves to flesh out the results of the investigation.

¹²Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.

What more can the king’s successor do
than what has already been done?

¹³I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize
that the same fate overtakes them both.

¹⁵Then I thought in my heart,

“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?”
I said in my heart,
“This too is meaningless.”

¹⁶For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long
remembered;
in days to come both will be forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise man too must die!

12 Almost as though it were an explanation of what it means to consider wisdom, madness, and folly, Qohelet expresses a concern here that has to do with his successor. Unfortunately, the grammatical constructions and syntax of the second half of the verse are extremely difficult, so that we are not quite sure what the concern is. Literally, the text reads something like: “What the man who will come after the king which already they have done it?” Either there is a Hebrew idiom in this verse with which we are unacquainted, or the text has undergone some corruption in transmission. Later in this chapter (v.19) Qohelet laments the absurd possibility of being succeeded by someone who is a fool. Perhaps that should be understood as the concern in v.12 as well.

Another possibility is that he is disturbed that despite his own just-recorded pleasure experiment, which ended in frustration, his successor will be doomed to repeat the experiment with the same results. This, however, is less likely. In the rest of the book, Qohelet’s concern is always *with* the successor, never *for* him.

13–14 Qohelet announces the results of his wisdom-versus-folly investigation. Wisdom has an advantage, just as light has an advantage over darkness. The wise actually have eyes that they use when they walk; the fool is “completely in the dark.” But—and this is the horror of it all for Qohelet—this advantage is only temporary, because the “fate” (*miqreh*, GK 5247) of the one is the fate of the other too. Death will come along as the great leveler and erase all distinctions.

The word *miqreh* just “happens” to occur seven times in Ecclesiastes, always with reference to death. For an excellent discussion on this word and its usage in the book, see Peter Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159–75.

15–16 Qohelet, having come to this realization about a common fate for the wise and the foolish, now rhetorically asks what advantage there is to being wise. He provides his own answer by calling it a *hebel* (“meaningless, absurdity”). He also adds to the mix the fact that neither the wise person nor the fool will be remembered for long. Indeed, the NIV’s “in days to come” can be rendered more literally, “already the days are coming”—the wise man and fool have already begun to be forgotten and they haven’t even died yet!

Qohelet holds out only the slimmest of hopes that there is life beyond the grave (see [comments on 3:21](#); [12:7](#)). The only consolation for death is posterity and the possibility of being remembered after one has died. This is little consolation for us today. One is reminded of the line that has been attributed to different people (I first heard it attributed to Woody Allen): “I don’t want to attain immortality through my works; I want to attain immortality by not dying.” For the ancient Israelites, however, the grand majority of whom probably had no concept of an afterlife, being remembered and having descendants was their only hope.

Qohelet, perhaps already in v.12 but certainly later in the book, is deeply concerned about his descendants, with no assurances that they will be wise and not foolish. Here, however, the despair that comes over him concerns the fact that neither the wise man nor the fool will be remembered after they have died. The commonality of their fate is depressing for Qohelet. We

could even raise the bar here by bringing up the further depressing fact that sometimes the fool is remembered when the wise person is not. Almost everyone today knows who Adolf Hitler was; very few of us could give the names of more than a handful of the six million Jews who died in his implementation of the “final solution.” Qohelet could live on through his children; but he has no assurance that they will not be fools. He could live on through those who will remember him; but though he’s not even dead yet, he has already begun to be forgotten. Absurdity!

NOTE

12 Perhaps the easiest text-critical suggestion is that a verb such as יַעֲשֶׂה (ya‘śeh, “he will do”) has somehow dropped out of the text between “what” and the “man.” Restoration of the verb would cause the first part of the sentence to read, “What will the man do who will come after the king?” The last part of the verse, however, is still troublesome, especially with the plural verb, “they have done it.” Several Hebrew manuscripts do have a singular here; alternatively, the verb could be read impersonally, which would have the practical effect of rendering it passively, “what has been done.” For some of the various proposals, see Seow (133–34), Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 182–83), Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 20), and Longman (96–97).

4. Hatred of Life (2:17–26)

OVERVIEW

Now, after his royal pleasure quest and weighing of wisdom, Qohelet passes perhaps his most harshly expressed judgment on the human situation that he observes.

¹⁷So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort

and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²²What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

17 Qohelet declares his hatred for life. Longman, 100, suggests that even though he must have meant his life in particular, by not using the personal pronoun “my,” the statement carries the “force of suggestion to his readers as well. That is, everybody’s life is worth hating.”

18–21 As well Qohelet declares his hatred for the things he had acquired, for they must be passed on to someone else after his death. The text does not specifically identify this person as a physical descendant, though that appears to be the implication. This hateful situation is exacerbated by the possibility that this heir might be a fool. Being that Solomon is probably the main figure behind the Qohelet character, this is perhaps intended to remind the reader of Solomon’s son Rehoboam, who was “foolishly” responsible for the breakup of the kingdom he had inherited from his father (1Ki 12). If indeed, as argued in the [introduction](#), Hezekiah also stands behind the Qohelet persona, then the reader can also remember that Hezekiah’s son Manasseh, because of his “foolish” deeds, was responsible for the eventual exile of Judah to Babylon (2Ki 21:1–18; 23:26; 24:3–4).

The situation causes Qohelet to despair. In v.20 the text reads literally, “I turned around to despair”; the first verb is *sābab* (GK 6015), the same word

used four times in 1:6 to describe the circular, meaningless movements of the wind. Qohelet has not only engaged in activities that are like chasing the wind; he has now become like the wind itself, randomly and absurdly going around in circles (see Perry, 82). He considers it a “great evil” (a more literal rendering of the NIV’s “great misfortune”) that a wise person can labor for something only to die and to have to turn it over to some fool who has not labored for it.

22–23 After his rhetorical question in v.22, where the expected answer seems to be “nothing,” Qohelet elaborates that implied answer in v.23. The elaboration is far more than a simple “nothing.” His toil not only does not bring the desired result, it brings the exact opposite—and then some! The “pain and grief” that accompany him during the day while he works go home with him at night and accompany him to bed as well. Even at night “his mind does not rest” (lit., “his heart does not lie down”). There is no escape from the absurd situation.

24–26 Here is the first of the so-called *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) passages. But as noted above in the [comments on 1:10–11](#) (see also [Message and Purpose](#) in the [introduction](#)), these are not really *carpe diem* texts; rather, their content is simply the best advice that Qohelet can come up with in the light of life’s absurdity. They are passages of resignation.

The advice is to eat and drink and find satisfaction in one’s work. But he has already told us in 2:10–11 that he tried this approach and found it wanting, meaningless. So here he is not by any means turning into a “preacher of joy”; rather, having already pronounced all human activity to be meaningless, he now simply suggests that this activity is perhaps less meaningless than others, whatever consolation that may bring, and acknowledges that any enjoyment that may result is a gift from God.

This acknowledgment raises the question as to whom God gives this gift. As translated in the NIV, God gives it to the one “who pleases him,” but to the “sinner” he gives only the task of gathering and storing, only to have to hand it over to the one who pleases God. (What is gathered the text does not actually say; the NIV supplies the word “wealth.”)

While this issue may seem fairly straightforward, a valid question is whether the contrast Qohelet sets up here is to be seen as ethically differentiated. The term “sinner” (*ḥôṭeʾ*, GK 2627), though in the OT primarily designating a person engaged in unethical conduct, often refers to

someone who has done something deemed offensive by another person but without a specifically ethical connotation. The majority of the most recent major commentaries on Ecclesiastes (e.g., those by Crenshaw, Murphy, Seow, Longman, Fox, and perhaps Krüger) take the position that in Ecclesiastes the term has indeed been emptied of any moral significance: the *hōṭe'* is simply someone who has become displeasing to God. Some of the suggested translations, then, are “one who is offensive,” “bungler,” “unlucky one,” “unfortunate one,” or simply “one who is displeasing to God.”

This is a hard issue to decide; certainly, in some other passages in Ecclesiastes where the term is used, it does seem to have moral connotations (e.g., 7:20); but there are others where it does not (e.g., 10:4). In this particular situation, the context would seem to warrant the nonmoral interpretation for two reasons. First, if indeed the meaning was that righteous people receive their just rewards and wicked people receive punishment as well, it seems strange that Qohelet then refers to it as a *hebel*, an absurdity, at the end of the verse. He always reserves that judgment for situations that do not make sense. But second, he has already mentioned this situation a few verses earlier (vv.18–21). Qohelet himself is one who by “wisdom, knowledge, and skill” has amassed things, only to have to hand them over to the one who “pleases God,” though he is not sure whether this person is actually wise or a fool.

In this particular context, then, it is probably best to understand these two classes—the “one who pleases God” and the “one who is offensive”—to be in Qohelet’s thinking somewhat like a revolving door. The person who has collected things, who was for a short while the one whom God favored, will soon be the one who falls out of favor. He will die and leave all the things for which he has labored to the one to whom God has now transferred his favor. That person may be wise or a fool, but he is also the lucky one whom, for some reason, God has made to be his new favorite. But his unfortunate time will come as well. This, too, is an absurdity.

NOTES

17 The Qal perfect of שָׂנֵא (*śānē* , “hate”) is translated by most versions as a simple past tense. But with the prefixed *waw* and in light of the context, it would seem preferable to translate it more along the lines of “So, I came

to hate life.” Fox, who translates similarly (*Time to Tear Down*, 181), suggests that this was only momentary and that as he goes along “he tempers his frustration with discoveries of good things” (ibid., 184). While this may be true, it must also be noted that Qohelet never explicitly disavows this hatred; it seems more likely that the sense is that he came to hate life and still does.

25 There are various proposals for the meaning of the verb חִשׁ (hûš, GK 2591; NIV, “find enjoyment”); a partial list of alternative proposals includes “hurry,” “worry,” “pity,” “consider,” “refrain,” “be full,” “glean,” and “drink.” Affecting the translation is whether one expects this to be a term complementary to “eat” and thus more closely tied to v.24, or a term providing a contrast to “eat” and thus more closely tied to v.26. See the discussions in Seow, 139–40; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 189; Longman, 108–9.

“Without him” is actually in the Hebrew text “without me.” But along with several Hebrew manuscripts and ancient versions, including the LXX, the third masculine singular suffix seems preferable. The difference has to do with whether the last letter is a ם (yod) or ם (waw), letters that in the older Hebrew scripts were easily confused.

5. A Pretty Poem about Time (3:1–8)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet has either borrowed or himself crafted a pretty poem about time, at least well enough that, perhaps aside from the motto-like statement in 1:2, it has become the most famous passage in the book. Yet its attractiveness only serves to seduce the reader into thinking that in some way time is actually manageable and under human control. That delusion will be deconstructed and shattered in the next section. But there are hints of it even in the poem itself. For example, the poem has what appears to be a neat structure of fourteen pairs of opposites, fourteen being twice the perfect number seven. But attempts to make further sense of the pattern have not yielded agreed-upon results, perhaps giving the lie to the poem’s perfection.

Perhaps J. A. Loader comes closest in attempting to figure out the pattern and suggesting a rationale for why some pairs start with the positive member and others with the negative. But his structure is dependent on being able to recognize clearly which members are indeed positive and negative (“Qohelet 3:2–8—A ‘Sonnet’ in the Old Testament,” *ZAW* 81 [1969]: 240–42; idem, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* [BZAW; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1979], 11–13, 29–33; idem, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary*, trans. John Vriend [Text and Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 33–38). But that is not always so easily recognizable; for example in v.5, is “scatter stones” or “gather them” the positive term? In v.7, is it “be silent” or “speak” that constitutes the negative member? Indeed, it may be questioned whether there are any true positives or negatives in the list. No value judgments are made in the poem. Everything is appropriate in its time.

Another way in which the poem seduces the reader is by listing various activities that may be thought to be under human control. For example, we would normally think that a person chooses to plant or to uproot, to tear down or to build, to be silent or to speak. Yet the very first pair in the list, “a time to be born and a time to die,” is normally thought to be outside human control and determined rather by God. By making this pair the first in the list, the author effectively puts a huge question mark over all the other pairs to follow, thus subtly suggesting that even these times aren’t really under our control. A farmer doesn’t really choose the time to plant; rather, it is forced on him by the alternating seasons and by the weather. A person doesn’t choose when to weep or laugh; that is determined by calamity or good fortune. The times are determined by God. They are outside human control or manipulation.

While a structure beyond the simple fourteen pairs of opposites is difficult to discern, this commentary takes the position that there are also pairs of pairs, that is, that there are seven pairings in the list of fourteen pairs, and that each of the seven pairings (which also constitute the seven verses) has some thematic element that connects its pairs to each other.

¹There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:

²a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
³a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
⁴a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
⁶a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
⁷a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

COMMENTARY

1 There are two different words for time in v.1, *z'mān* (NIV, “time”) and *‘ēt* (NIV, “season”). There is no significantly appreciable difference between them. It is the second of these two words that occurs repeatedly as “time” in vv.2–8.

2 The two pairs in this verse have to do with life and death. The NASB more accurately translates *lāledet* as “to give birth” rather than “to be born.” Though it isn’t the exact opposite of “to die,” it is certainly within the thematic range of life and death and also corresponds more closely to “plant” in the second pair (see Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 29). “To uproot” (*āqar*) should not be confused with “reap” or “harvest.” For various reasons, a farmer may decide to uproot a perfectly good plant. God may decide to recall a perfectly good life.

3 These verses relate thematically in terms of constructiveness versus destructiveness. Again, notice that “kill” and “heal” are not exact opposites. (The opposite of “kill” would have been “give life.”) Notice also that the

apparently positive/negative polarities have been reversed as compared to v.2. Perhaps the reversal is a subtle way of suggesting that positive versus negative is a matter of perspective.

4 These two pairs have to do with sadness versus gladness. While “weep” and “laugh” are opposites, “mourn” and “dance” are less perfectly so. Notice that these are outside human determination. Weeping and laughing are, for the most part, forced on us by what “happens” to us.

5 The first pair in this first verse presents substantial interpretive problems: What is meant by casting stones? What is meant by gathering them? And which one is positive and which negative? Numerous suggestions have been made; perhaps the most “suggestive” one is that the idiom refers to sexual intercourse, with “stones” referring to the male’s semen. This then makes the terms in the second pair, “embrace” and “refrain,” sexual references as well.

I take the position, however, that the first pair of opposites indicates two different ways of dealing with an enemy. The NASB’s more correctly translated “throw stones” refers to the throwing of stones at one’s enemy, and the second member refers to the more peaceful action of gathering stones; note how in Genesis 31:46, the two enemies, Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, gathered stones and piled them up to symbolize their covenant of peace (however uneasy that peace may have been). “Gathering stones” may have become an idiom for attempts at peacemaking.

The second pair in this verse then refers to the same kinds of situations. Sometimes you can settle your differences with an enemy; sometimes you can’t. But the real question is whether a person can reasonably ascertain when to settle and when not to.

6 The two pairs in this verse are related by their oppositions with regard to possessions. In the first pair the opposition has to do with pursuing something not currently in the pursuer’s grasp (without a clear indication as to whether it ever had been) versus giving up the search and considering the object lost (or unattainable). In the second pair the opposition is actual possession of the object versus a decision to throw it away. Crenshaw, 95, perceptively remarks: “This verse especially illustrates futility. If one could only know whether to invest time in a search, or whether the item is irrecoverable! As it is, one always thinks, ‘Perhaps if I had looked harder’ or ‘Why did I not just let it go?’”

7 Attempts to see these two pairs as correlating have focused on the idea of mourning. Thus, rending (tearing one's garments) and silence would accompany mourning; sewing and speaking would indicate the end of the mourning rites. Though this is certainly possible, the actions are not so specific as to demand this interpretation. But if this suggested context is in fact the case, we should again notice that these times are not so much chosen by us as for us.

8 The emotions contrasted in the first pair lead consequentially, though not necessarily inevitably, to the actions in the second pair. The last pair also forms, though not exactly, an *inclusio* with the first pair in the list. Thus a time of warfare is a time of great death, and certainly it is better to give birth in peacetime than during war. But again, those times are not ultimately under our control.

6. But Time Is Elusive (3:9–15)

OVERVIEW

After reciting this poem, Qohelet proceeds to deconstruct any illusions the poetry may have engendered in the reader's mind.

⁹What does the worker gain from his toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on men. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. ¹³That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.

¹⁵Whatever is has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account.

COMMENTARY

9–11 Not content to observe that everything has its appropriate time, Qohelet wants to know what the payout of this knowledge is for the worker in all of his toil. In words nearly identical to 1:13, Qohelet again notes that God has given human beings a “burden” (lit., “a burden with which to burden him”). It is interesting to note that in both places (1:13 and 3:10), the reference to this “burden” or “task” (*inyān*, GK 6721) comes on the heels of poems, both of which have been mistakenly read by various commentators as celebratory in nature.

In 1:13, the statement follows a poem whose so-called “nature” verses (1:4–7) have been regarded by some as a composition that “praises the cosmos as glorious and eternal” (Lohfink, 40; cf. Whybray, 39–43; idem, “Ecclesiastes 1.5–7 and the Wonders of Nature,” *JSOT* 41 [1988]: 105–12); but as was pointed out in the exposition, 1:4–7 really constitutes a declaration that nature also partakes in absurdity. In the same way, the lilting cadences of the poem in 3:2–8, which seem to celebrate the ordered regularity of events occurring at their appropriate times, actually serve only as a setup to explain the burden by which God keeps human beings occupied. In his song “Slip Slidin’ Away,” Paul Simon captures well the message of Ecclesiastes 3:11.

God only knows;
God makes his plan;
The information’s unavailable
To the mortal man.

God has made everything “appropriate in its time” (NASB; the NIV’s translation of “beautiful” for *yāpeh* is possible but less likely in this wisdom context). But only God knows what those times are. Human beings may be deluded into thinking that they know, because God “has set eternity” (*ōlām*) in their hearts, such that they dimly see that there must be some connection between the appropriate times for each activity and God’s eternal plan (i.e., between “time and eternity”); “yet they cannot fathom

what God has done”; that is, they cannot make the connections—“the information’s unavailable to the mortal man.” Each activity has its “fitting” time, but God has not seen fit to clue human beings in as to what those fitting times are.

Humans rarely discover the times; rather, the times discover them and come upon them when they least expect. What then is the answer to Qohelet’s question? What is the upshot for the worker in all of his toil? Again, Paul Simon catches in modern parlance and context the Qohelet’s answer to his own question:

We work our jobs,
Collect our pay,
Believe we’re gliding down the highway
When in fact we’re slip slidin’ away.

12–15 In the light of this absurdity, Qohelet gives for the second time in the book his judgment as to the best course of action—to try to enjoy life as much as is possible. But it must be remembered that he has already told us that this cannot really be done—it is like chasing the wind (2:10–11). The advice to “do good” in v.12 is not to be taken as an encouragement to engage in selfless, altruistic behavior; rather, the “good” (*tôb*) refers to the “good life,” enjoyment of the fruit of one’s labor. Qohelet acknowledges that the ability to do this is a gift from God. It is clear from the rest of the book, however, that he does not consider himself to be among the recipients. Nor does he hold out hope that there is any formula that guarantees membership among those so gifted.

God has made his plan; there will be no additions or subtractions. God doles out his gifts in this arbitrary manner “so that men will revere him.” If he cannot be “figured out,” then he cannot be controlled or manipulated. For Qohelet, God is the one who manipulates and who, by the arbitrariness of his giftings, keeps human beings busy guessing, which in turn causes them to fear him.

After repeating in v.15 what he had already said in 1:9—the repetition itself serving to illustrate the point—Qohelet goes on to say that God “will call the past to account.” This last clause is literally, “God seeks what is

pursued,” and there has been much discussion on the exact meaning. Generally, commentators take the position that the line reinforces the first part of the verse: the reason things happen over and over again is that God keeps recycling the past. Joseph Blenkinsopp has observed that the particular form of the verb “pursued” (see Notes) is only used in the Old Testament with reference to “the action of the wind driving something before it” (“Ecclesiastes 3.1–15: Another Interpretation,” *JSOT* 66 [1995]: 63). He then suggests that the word may stand in close connection to the phrase, “chasing after the wind.” If so, in addition to the general consensus, there may be the more specific idea that what God causes to happen over and over is the unsatisfying human pursuit of meaning—a “chasing after the wind.”

NOTES

11 Michael Fox (*A Time to Tear Down*, 210–11) has adopted and cogently defended an earlier suggestion that the Hebrew word for “eternity,” עֹלָם (*ōlām*), is a textual corruption resulting from a metathesis of the last two consonants and that the word was originally עָמַל (*āmāl*, “labor, toil”; GK 6662), which occurs over twenty times in Ecclesiastes. This *āmāl* would be basically the same as the עֲיָן (*inyān*, “burden”; GK 6721) mentioned in v.10. It would indicate the mental labor of the person trying to understand God’s works and make sense of life.

Fox notes other places in the OT where *āmāl* refers to mental or emotional anguish (Ps 73:16 [NIV, “oppressive”; note that this is also a wisdom context]; Isa 53:11 [NIV, “suffering”]). He also compares this passage to Ecclesiastes 8:17, which basically says the same thing as 3:11 and where several of the same terms used in 3:11 occur (“what God has done,” “find” [the NIV translates as “fathom” in 3:11 and as “comprehend” in 8:17], “man”) and where the verbal form of *āmāl* occurs (the NIV translates as a noun, “Despite all his *efforts*”). This is an attractive suggestion and may well be correct; but in the absence of any textual corroboration from other ancient versions or Hebrew manuscripts, I opt here for the traditional text.

15 נִרְדָּפָה (*nirdâp*, “past”) is the Niphal masculine singular participle of רָדַף (*rādap*). As noted above, Blenkinsopp observes that all occurrences of

this word in the Niphal refer to something being driven by the wind. Of the passages he lists in support, however (Lev 26:36; Job 13:25; 30:15; Ps 83:15[16]; Isa 17:13), in only two (Lev 26:36 and Job 13:25) does the verb actually occur in the Niphal. This notwithstanding, he is probably still correct to see a connection between *nirdāp* and that which humans pursue in their “chasing after the wind.”

7. God's Test (3:16–22)

OVERVIEW

Though these verses are tied to the previous passage by the mention of “a time for every activity” in v.17 and possibly by the opposition of time versus eternity in vv.21–22 (though this is not clear), a new set of concepts is introduced, particularly, injustice and the absurdity of a common destiny for humans and animals. Both are connected to the idea in v.18 of God as the divine test-giver.

¹⁶And I saw something else under the sun:

In the place of judgment—wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

¹⁷I thought in my heart,

“God will bring to judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity,
a time for every deed.”

¹⁸I also thought, “As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the

animal. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”

²²So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

COMMENTARY

16–17 Qohelet observes injustice. This observation in itself is not particularly striking. What makes it so, however, is that he observes this injustice in the very place where justice is supposed to be performed. Most likely, we are to think here of judgment contexts that would have been the ancient equivalent of our law courts. But in light of the surrounding context, we should probably also consider that in Qohelet’s thinking the law court constitutes a microcosm of what he thinks should be a much larger place of justice and righteousness, namely, the world itself, with God as the one who should enforce these concepts. Indeed, justice and righteousness are ultimately the responsibility of the deity (see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* [2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000], esp. 5, 20–23, 179–214).

Isaiah 5:7 tells how God himself had a complaint similar to that of Qohelet’s: “He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” But Qohelet’s complaint goes the other direction. He has looked at God’s place of justice, the world, and finds wickedness there. He thought (v.17) that God would prove himself to be the righteous judge, believing that in God’s ordered set of times there must be one for righteous judgment. But we are left with the impression that he is not so sure. The next verses confirm this impression.

18–22 This lack of justice causes Qohelet then to conceive of God as the divine test-giver; it is the examination part of the curriculum whereby God shows humans that they are really no different from animals (see Job 40:15, where God reminds Job that animals and humans were made on the same day; see also the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s becoming an animal in Da 4; cf. Pss 49:12; 73:22). Qohelet looks at the animal world and what happens

there and is drained of hope. To Jesus' assertion in Matthew 10:29–31 that God watches over the sparrows, Qohelet would have replied that the arbitrariness of what actually happens to sparrows—some live longer than others, many of them are killed by wild animals—provides little hope that God is concerned about justice and righteousness in the human sphere or that he actually cares about humanity.

The same is true in death as in life. Animals and humans have the exact same fate; there is no advantage whatsoever for humans when it comes to death. The precise understanding that ancient Israelites would have had about life beyond the grave is hard to discern (see most recently Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*). Probably their understanding was nebulous, and indeed, passages outside Ecclesiastes suggest that if any such existence was expected at all, it was one that was emotionless and speechless (Pss 6:5; 30:9; 88:10–12; Isa 38:18). In any case, Qohelet is highly skeptical of any suggestion that animals and humans might have different fates at their deaths. Thus he holds out little hope that the injustices of this life will be corrected in the next.

So Qohelet recommends in one short *carpe diem* verse (v.22) that, since there is no justice in this life and since no one can show him that there is any hope for justice afterward, the best course for a person is to try to “enjoy his work, because that is his lot.” But this advice does not give one great cause for optimism, for, as was pointed out earlier, Qohelet has tried this option already and it didn't work (see [comments on 2:10–11, 24–26](#)). It's not very good advice, but it's all he's got.

NOTE

18 The NIV's “tests them” for the MT's לָבָרָם (*l'ḇārām*) assumes, along with most modern translations, that the verb is a Qal infinitive construct of בָּרַר (*bārar*, GK 1405). Elsewhere, this verb usually means “to choose, separate, purify, prove, distinguish.” Interestingly, the LXX translates the word with διακρίνω (*diakrinō*, “to judge”), the same verb used earlier in v.17. If this is indeed the sense, then it provides an ironic statement (“God will judge all right, he'll judge us to be like animals!”). Fox, without endorsing it, calls attention to the earlier conjecture of Arnold Ehrlich that the word be divided and repointed as לֹא בָרָם (*lō' bārām*, “did not

distinguish”); that is, God did not distinguish humans as different from animals (*A Time to Tear Down*, 216). This suggestion has the advantage of providing a finite verb for the sentence. Whichever suggestion one adopts, the basic sense of the verse seems to be the same.

For the MT’s **וְלִירֹאֹת** (*w^llir ʾōt*, “to see”; Qal infinitive construct), it is probably best to read it as a Hiphil (along with several ancient versions, including the LXX), explained either by the possibility that the **ו** has accidentally dropped out in transmission or by the phenomenon known as syncope or apocopation, the loss of one or more letters at the beginning of a word (characteristic of later Mishnaic Hebrew; see Seow, 167). The NIV opts for understanding humans rather than God as subject (so also Whybray, 78), though that would be a grammatically awkward shift of subject.

8. Oppression, or “In Praise of the Dead and the Unborn” (4:1–3)

OVERVIEW

Chapter 4 contains several passages that are only loosely connected to each other. One motif that does connect them—however loose that connection may be—is the idea of the “better third” or “three is better.” In 4:1–3, a third category of persons (the unborn) is declared better off than the living or the dead. In 4:4–6, a third attitude toward labor is commended rather than over-industriousness or laziness. In 4:7–12, three strands are better than two. And in 4:13–16, if one adopts the “three-character” scenario (see below), the third person in the royal succession has the advantage, at least temporarily, over the two who preceded him. Graham Ogden (“The Mathematics of Wisdom: Qoheleth iv 1–12,” *VT* 34 [1984]: 446–53) has also called attention to this phenomenon but has not extended his observation to the last pericope.

¹Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—

and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.
²And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.
³But better than both
is he who has not yet been,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.

COMMENTARY

1 Having already introduced the idea of injustice, Qohelet goes on to the topic of oppression. He laments the tears of those who are oppressed, and especially their lack of solace. The twofold occurrence of the phrase “they have no comforter” ties this section closely to the previous one, where in 3:16 the phrase “and wickedness was there” also occurs twice. This literary connection also argues against those who advocate the deletion, in either text, of the repeated phrase.

2 In the light of the observed oppression, Qohelet “declares” that those who have died “are happier” than those who are alive. The verb the NIV translates “declares . . . are happier” is *šābah*, and in most of its other occurrences in the OT it carries the idea of praise (e.g., Ps 63:3, “glorify”; 117:1, “extol”; 145:4, “commend”; 147:12, “glory”). In context, perhaps the NASB’s “congratulated” better captures the nuance.

Additionally, however, in at least three occurrences the verb carries the idea of calming, soothing, or restraining. In Psalms 65:7 and 89:9 it refers to the stilling of the seas; in Proverbs 29:11 it describes the wise man, who “controls” or calms himself, in contrast to the fool, who “gives full vent to his anger.” The word in these instances is most likely a different word altogether but is comprised of the same root letters in Hebrew. This gives

rise to the intriguing possibility that a double entendre may be in play here. Qohelet laments the fact that those who are oppressed have no comforter. Now Qohelet plays the role of both congratulator *and* comforter. The irony, of course, is that now that the oppressed have died, they are in no position to accept the congratulations, and there is no longer need for consolation.

But that is exactly Qohelet's point: there is no consolation to be had in this life or the next. One is reminded of the first question in the Heidelberg Catechism: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" As opposed to the glorious answer provided by the catechism, "That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ," Qohelet's answer is, "There is no comfort in life, and in death the only comfort there is comes too late and cannot even be experienced or felt."

This leads him to suggest that the best congratulations are reserved for those who have not yet been born. Seow, 187, perceptively notes, "The alternative of not having lived is not an option that people can choose." The verse, then, "points to the irony of human existence: what is really 'better' in this regard is not within the grasp of mortals. People, by their very existence, have already been assigned their lot." Thus Qohelet constructs a hierarchy of happiness and contentment: the dead are in the middle, the living are at the bottom, and the unborn are at the top—and none of them gets to choose their position.

NOTE

וְשַׁבַּח 2 (wəšabbēah) is a Piel infinitive absolute of שָׁבַח (šābah), which normally means "to praise," as noted above. Here the word acts as a finite verb, and there is no need to emend it in form to a perfect. It occurs only eleven times in the Hebrew Bible, though there are five occurrences in the Aramaic portion of Daniel. Most lexicons assign the occurrences to two different roots, with eight assigned to one ("praise") and three to the other ("still"). Most definitely, the first meaning is the one intended by the author in 4:2, as well as in 8:15. But the idea of a double entendre, with שָׁבַח serving as a wordplay synonym of the participle of נָחַם (nāḥam, "comfort") in v.1, is a real possibility.

9. Laziness versus Over-industriousness (4:4–6)

⁴And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

⁵The fool folds his hands
and ruins himself.

⁶Better one handful with tranquility
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

4–6 In these verses Qohelet contrasts two attitudes toward labor and what it achieves, and then he suggests a third, mediating option. First he observes that all work and achievement is motivated by envy, a desire to keep up with—or rather surpass—one's neighbors in possessions and status. After declaring work so motivated as meaningless, he then provides a contrast in the case of the fool who “folds his hands” (cf. Pr 6:10; 24:33) and “ruins himself.”

As opposed to both of these attitudes, he suggests a middle way in v.6. Skillfully, he repeats from the first example in v.4 the term *‘āmāl* (translated by the NIV as “labor” in v.4 and “toil” in v.6) and the phrase “chasing after the wind.” For the second example in v.5, he substitutes two terms, *kap* and *hōpen* (both translated “handful”), for the word “hand” (*yad*). In this way he recalls both attitudes and suggests a third that is better, something in between: Strive, but don't strive too much. One handful is certainly better than none (in which case you die); but one is also better than two, if to get two you never have time to rest.

NOTES

4 There is some debate about the proper translation of כִּשְׂרוֹן (*kišrôn*) that is reflected in the translations of the NIV and NASB: “achievement” versus

“skill.” The term occurs only three times in Ecclesiastes (2:21; 4:4; 5:11[10]). The exact meaning is ambiguous in 2:21 and 4:4, but it definitely refers to success in 5:11 (NIV, “benefit”). Whichever translation one opts for, the meaning of the passage is not measurably affected.

5 Instead of the meaning adopted above for the idiom “consumes his own flesh,” a minority of commentators (e.g., Lohfink, 69–70) suggests that the verse actually commends the fool, so that the sense of the passage is that in spite of his laziness, the fool still has meat to eat. The fool is then further commended in v.6 as the one who has a “handful with tranquility.” Though Qohelet sometimes acknowledges that the wise and the industrious appear to have no advantage over the fool, he never recommends a fool’s behavior. Also, as Fox points out (*Time to Tear Down*, 220), the phrase “his flesh” (or “its flesh,” בִּשְׂרֹוֹ, *bēśārô*) never refers to one’s food but rather to one’s own body.

10. Aloneness versus Companionship (4:7–12)

⁷Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

⁸There was a man all alone;

he had neither son nor brother.

There was no end to his toil,

yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,

“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”

This too is meaningless—

a miserable business!

⁹Two are better than one,

because they have a good return for their work:

¹⁰If one falls down,

his friend can help him up.

But pity the man who falls

and has no one to help him up!

¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone?

¹²Though one may be overpowered,

two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

COMMENTARY

7–8 Qohelet now lists and contrasts three situations: singleness, companionship, and “threeness.” In v.8, “there was a man all alone” is literally, “there was one and there was not a second.” Exactly who this nonexistent second person was supposed to have been is not clear. Many commentators have argued that the concern is for a successor (i.e., a “son”), or at least some relative (i.e., a “brother”) who could inherit the estate. But Qohelet has already declared absurd the whole concept of amassing possessions only to pass them down to someone (2:17–21), so it seems strange if he would here lament the lack of an heir. More likely, the referent is a wife, a work partner, or just a friend, who could provide companionship.

There was no end to this person’s labor, however, nor was there an end in sight to his dissatisfaction. Qohelet then takes up this person’s lament in the first person (“he asked” is not in the text). Is Qohelet quoting this loner? Is he sympathetically describing this person’s situation? Or has Qohelet actually been describing his own situation? Whatever the case, he categorizes this unfortunate circumstance to be an absurdity, an “evil business.”

9–12 Qohelet now moves on to discuss the advantages of “two” over “one” and lists four of them: Two get a better return on their labor; if one of them falls the other can provide assistance; two can help each other stay warm; and two can more easily ward off attackers.

Possibly the last three advantages, and perhaps even the first one, are to be associated with travel. Journeys were more hazardous in the ancient Near East than is generally the case today. Those who journeyed by

themselves were at significantly greater risk than those who traveled in pairs or larger groups. A person might fall into a pit or over a cliff and would need someone to help him up. Travelers could provide greater warmth at night by huddling together. Bandits who would think nothing of attacking solitary persons might think it best not to attack those traveling in pairs.

This last observation then leads Qohelet to observe that three are even better. One version of the Gilgamesh Epic, with which Ecclesiastes has other similarities, has the line, “No man will cut the three-ply cord” (see discussion in Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 223–24; Longman, 143; Seow, 189). Ecclesiastes may have been influenced in some way by this text, or the lines in both texts may be indicative of the saying’s larger popularity.

Though Qohelet does not finish this section off with a *hebel*-judgment (“meaningless”), Seow, 189–90, correctly reminds us that the main thing to note here is that “because life’s journey is difficult and perilous, it is better that one not face it alone. It is not that there is absolute certainty in numbers. The benefit is rather, only relative. All advantages are only relative for Qohelet.” Qohelet gives good advice. But the world in which that advice is to be employed is still meaningless.

11. Wisdom, Folly, and Succession (4:13–16)

OVERVIEW

In a book that is already hard to understand, there are few passages more difficult than this one. Complicating the interpretation are grammatical difficulties, syntax problems, and especially the use of pronouns without clear antecedents or referents. Indeed, the NIV and NASB appear to reflect two different theories as to how many actual characters there are in the passage. The NIV appears to support what has been a traditional understanding that there are two characters: the old king and a youth who replaces him. The NASB, with the phrase in v.15 “the second lad,” seems to lean toward seeing three characters: the old king, a youth who replaces him, and a second youth who replaces the first youth.

In recent years, the tendency has been for commentators to opt for the three-character scenario, as represented by the commentaries of Crenshaw, Lohfink, Longman, Murphy, Ogden, Whybray, and Krüger. Among those

still advocating two characters are commentaries by Eaton, Garrett, Gordis, and Provan, as well as articles by Dominic Rudman (“A Contextual Reading of Ecclesiastes 4:13–16,” *JBL* 116 [1997]: 57–73) and Addison Wright (“The Poor But Wise Youth and the Old But Foolish King (Qoh 4:13–16),” in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Festschrift for Roland Murphy* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1997], 142–54). More recently, Fox in his commentary has even advocated a four-character scenario, with two different youths being mentioned in v.14 and a third youth in v.15.

Complicating the search for a solution is the question as to whether the main subject of v.14 is the old king, the youth, or, in Fox’s scenario, two youths. Another question is whether there are actual historical persons to whom Qohelet is making reference. Taking the two-character scenario as an example, only a few of the suggestions as to who these two characters may have been include: Pharaoh and Joseph, Saul and David, Solomon and either Rehoboam and Jeroboam, and either Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar and Daniel. There have been a number of extrabiblical historical persons who have been suggested as well.

Because of the lack of a consensus, the interpretation given below is provisional and tentative. Nevertheless, on account of the motif mentioned above that seems to tie together loosely the passages in this chapter—that of the “better third” or “three is better”—I opt for the three-character scenario. Also, in the light of my belief that Qohelet is a composite character representing the Davidic dynasty as a whole, but especially Solomon and Hezekiah, the suggestion is advanced here, without arguing that the characters in the passage can be directly identified with specific persons in the biblical narrative, that there are allusions to the succession narratives concerning those two kings, as well as issues with regard to wisdom and folly that arise in those two narratives.

¹³Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. ¹⁴The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. ¹⁵I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king’s successor. ¹⁶There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those

who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

13 The first verse seems to be fairly clear. Qohelet indicates that better than an old but foolish king is a youth who is wise but poor (or “a commoner”; so Seow, 183). To be noted here is how this seems to upset the traditional idea in Wisdom literature that wisdom comes with age.

14 The majority of commentators take the position that the youth is the one whose accession to the throne is being described. So the youth is the one who may have come to be king after being in prison or having come from an impoverished situation. Whether we are to understand that the old king was responsible for either the youth’s imprisonment or poverty is impossible to determine.

15 Qohelet observes that the subjects of the kingdom followed “the youth, the king’s successor” (so NIV; NASB, “the second lad who replaces him”). Literally, the Hebrew text reads, “the youth, the second.” This could be understood appositionally, namely, “the youth, that is, the second,” with the understood “first” being the old king. Thus one arrives at a two-character scenario. But grammatically it seems more natural to read the construction simply as a noun followed by an attributive adjective, that is, “the second youth,” with the understood “first” being the youth mentioned earlier. So the order thus far is (1) an old, foolish king, (2) succeeded by a wise youth, (3) who is in turn succeeded by a second youth, for whom there is no specific characterization given in the text.

16 The first part of this verse is difficult grammatically and syntactically. The NIV opts for a translation that understands the subject of the verb *hāyâ* (“were”) to be one set of people who are contrasted to another group of people who were temporally before them. An alternative for the grammar is to understand that the subject of the verb is not the people but the king, thus resulting in the following translation: “There was no end to all the people, to all before whom he was,” that is, the people over whom he reigned as king. In other words, he was immensely popular. The first, wise youth has been forgotten, and now this second youth (was he a wise man or a fool? maybe it doesn’t matter) had a huge following. But then the verse goes on

to say that this king, too, fell out of favor with the people. Then Qohelet brings in his *hebel*-judgment: this is an absurdity.

REFLECTION

In ch. 4 are four passages loosely tied together by the idea of “three.” As well, the last two passages (vv.7–12 and 13–16) are also connected by the use of the word “second” (*šēnî*) in vv.8, 10, and 15. Qohelet is on a search to find out what is good. Here he experiments with math. Two are better than one and three are better than two. “Two is good, three’s a charm.”

But in this last vignette Qohelet throws a cloud over the whole mathematical enterprise. “Second” was a good thing in vv.7–12, but the “second” in this last passage only ushers in an absurd situation. And indeed this “second,” who is also the third character in this story, falsifies Qohelet’s theory. At first it looks as though wisdom has triumphed. A wise youth has replaced a foolish old king. But then a second youth replaces him and gains immense popularity, and the first youth is forgotten. But then this second youth falls out of favor as well. As Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 41) remarks, “This is another defeat for wisdom (the youth ‘poor but wise’). In effect, the observation of v.13 has been controverted by the story in vv.14–16.” So Qohelet’s earlier observation in 1:11 still holds: “There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.” Absurdity!

12. Fools in God’s Presence (5:1–7 [4:17–5:6])

OVERVIEW

In these verses Qohelet gives advice regarding proper behavior in God’s presence. At first sight this passage seems to be fairly discrete, with no clear connections to the passages that precede and follow it. But in the introductory comments for the next section (5:8–20), I will suggest a connection between vv.1–7 and the rest of the chapter.

Please remember that the verse enumeration in the Hebrew is slightly different from the English. The Hebrew enumeration is noted in square brackets.

¹Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

²Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.

God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.

³As a dream comes when there are many cares,
so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

⁴When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. ⁶Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, “My vow was a mistake.” Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

1[4:17] Qohelet warns that one should be on guard when entering God’s house and should be sure to listen rather than to offer the kind of sacrifice a fool might offer. By designating listening as the more appropriate thing to do in God’s presence, the implication is that the “sacrifice of fools” is excessive talk; this implication becomes explicit in v.2.

Various interpretations have been given of the last part of the verse, of which a more literal translation would be, “for none of them knows to do evil.” Some commentators have suggested that this means that fools are so stupid that they do not know “how” to do evil. But more likely this refers to fools’ ignorance of their culpability and of the inappropriateness of verbosity in God’s presence. Seow, 195, cites an interesting parallel from an Akkadian-Hurrian fourteenth-century BC inscription (text in *BWL*, 116):

One who acknowledges no guilt rushes to his god,
Without thinking he quickly raises his hand (in prayer) to the god.
. . . his guilt. . .
A man in ignorance rushes to his god.

The idea is that to avoid looking like a fool, one should speak as little as possible in the deity's presence. We may also be reminded of Alexander Pope's famous line, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

2[5:1] Qohelet is now more explicit. While operating with speed and haste can sometimes be good, that principle never applies to speaking in the divine presence. Careful thought should always precede speech in any situation; how much more so when it comes to speech uttered before God. Interestingly, the reason given is that when you are in God's presence, you are really not in his presence—you are still on earth, but God is in heaven. In other words, do not by your excessive talk give the impression that somehow you think you "have arrived." The gap between you and God will always be an infinite one.

Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 231) suggests as well that the distinction calls attention to God's omniscience, his heavenly vantage point that allows him to see and foresee all things, "while man's horizon is constricted and does not permit him to know what eventualities may keep him from paying his vows." But the idea of vows is not specifically mentioned until v.3, and it seems more likely that at this point the warning concerns any speech before God, not just that which is vow-related.

3[2] While the dream to which Qohelet refers may not specifically be a nightmare, it is at least a restless one brought about by a *rōb 'inyān* (lit., "multiplicity of business"; NIV, "many cares"). "Cares" is the same word as that translated "burden" in 1:13 and "grief" in 2:23. Indeed, 2:23 may be directly relevant here: "All his days his work is pain and grief [*'inyān*]; even at night his mind does not rest." In the second line, though Fox is correct that there is no direct causation, inasmuch as a multiplicity of words is not the cause of the fool's speech, one can still speak of causation with regard to demonstration; that is, a multiplicity of words demonstrates that their producer is a fool. The comparison therefore is an apt one.

4–7[3–6] Now Qohelet moves on specifically to speech uttered while making a vow. The reader is warned not to be rash. The making of vows was a regular part of the worship of ancient Israel (see, e.g., Lev 7:16; 22:17–21; 23:38; 27:1–12; Nu 30:1–16; Dt 23:21–23; Pss 22:25; 50:14; 61:8; 66:13; 76:11; 116:14, 18). From the passages in Psalms it seems that vows were regularly made in prayers of lament and that the psalmist often vowed to do or pay (sacrifice) something if his prayer were answered. The warning here, which resembles closely Deuteronomy 23:21–23, is that one should either be prompt in fulfilling the vow or refrain from making the vow in the first place. While not making the vow may appear to make you look stingy, the vow and subsequent nonpayment make you look like a fool; God takes no delight in fools.

The NIV's addition of the word "temple" to describe the messenger, while possibly correct, masks a certain ambiguity in the text. The word for "messenger" is *mal 'āk* (GK 4855), which is also the Hebrew for "angel." One interpretation—that adopted by the NIV and probably the majority of commentators—is that the messenger is a temple representative whose job it may have been to collect on such vows.

Alternatively, *mal 'āk* can be understood as referring to an angel of God. The LXX actually translates this word as "God" (*theos*). While it can be argued that this was simply interpretive on the part of the LXX's translator, Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 232) argues for an extremely literal Greek translator working from a Hebrew text that had *ʾlōhîm* ("God") rather than *mal 'āk* and that this is the original reading. This interpretation finds support from the consequence for telling this messenger that his "vow was a mistake," namely, that God himself will rage against the vower's voice and destroy his property. In my opinion, it is not likely that the Hebrew text originally had "God," but rather that in this particular instance the LXX is being interpretive, and perhaps correctly so. It is possible that the ambiguity in the Hebrew may be intentional.

After again bringing "dreams" into the picture and declaring that a lot of dreaming and a lot of words are meaningless, Qohelet concludes in v.7 by advising the reader to fear God. The NIV's "stand in awe of God," while in some ways acceptable, sounds too much like our modern language of worship. Qohelet is not talking about worship, nor does he mean what the frame-narrator means in 12:13 when he says "fear God," though he uses the

identical words. Having just mentioned in 5:6 that God “may be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands,” Qohelet’s admonition here is not that one should have a “reverential” fear of God but that one should be truly afraid of God.

I have titled this section “Fools in God’s Presence.” I have titled another passage later in the book (8:1–9) “Fools in the King’s Presence.” My intention in giving these passages similar titles is to highlight that Qohelet’s advice to “fear” God is not much different from the advice he gives later as to how to relate to the king.

Moreover, passages such as 10:4, 20 should also be considered. The similarity between 5:6 and 10:20 is particularly striking. In 5:6 the messenger will hear what you say, and God will punish you; in 10:20 the advice is, “Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.” Qohelet advises the reader to fear God in the same way that one should fear the king. This includes being afraid of him, obeying his commands, and behaving circumspectly in his presence.

But in no way can Qohelet be said either to have himself had, or recommended that his reader have, any kind of emotional attachment to the deity. The behavior before God that he encourages is motivated by fear, not by depth of devotion. Qohelet may have considered himself to be God’s subject, servant, and maybe even his sycophant, but not his devotee.

NOTES

1[4:17] “Draw near” is a Qal infinitive absolute of קָרַב (*qārab*). Among the various options, it seems best to regard it as taking the place of an imperative, taking its aspect from the preceding imperative, “guard.”

6[5:5] “A mistake” is שְׁגָגָה (*šgāgā*), which in the Levitical legislation has reference to sins committed unintentionally (e.g., see Lev 4:2; 5:15, 18; Nu 15:24–29). Two possibilities in this verse are that either the person is saying that the vow was a mistake, or that the nonpayment was a mistake, an oversight. The latter seems more likely.

7[6] The syntax of the first half of this verse is difficult. Literally it reads, “For in a multiplicity of dreams and absurdities and many words,” with no explicit verb, nor is it easy to imply a verb of being. Several solutions have

been given, including rearranging the words and dropping one or more of the conjunctions; no consensus has emerged. I prefer the translation of Crenshaw, 114, which treats the first half of the verse as a setting for the command in the last half: “Yes, in a multitude of dreams and futility and many words—still fear God.”

13. Oppression and Politics, Poverty and Wealth (5:8–20 [5:7–19])

OVERVIEW

Here Qohelet touches on a number of topics, as suggested in the heading above. A possible connection between this passage and the previous one is the relationship between the role of God in vv.1–7 and the king in v.9. Both get their share of the profits, one way or another, and Qohelet may well consider God’s taking of his share to be as oppressive as the moneygrabbing of the officials and the king in vv.8–9. Again, we must emphasize that while Qohelet fears God, respects him, and in some measure even guards his honor, there is no evidence to suggest that he loves him; rather, he sees God as in some way being the source of the oppressive burdens under which he suffers.

It should also be noted that the larger section to which these verses belong (5:8–6:9) seems to be chiastic in form. Daniel Fredericks appears to have been the first to notice this structure (“Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” *JBL* 108 [1989]: 17–35). Seow, 216–17, has analyzed it as follows (in a slightly different format and with abbreviated wording):

- A 5:8–12 (poor, not satisfied, accomplishment, seeing of the eyes)
- B 5:13–17 (sired a son, going as he came, eats in darkness)
- C 5:18–19 (good, God has given, this is a gift)
- D 5:20 (does not remember [or reflect] much; occupied with gladness of heart)
- C’ 6:1–2 (evil, God gives, this is a sickness)
- B’ 6:3–6 (sires a hundred, came . . . went, goes in darkness)
- A’ 6:7–9 (afflicted, not satisfied, advantage, seeing of the eyes)

As one can see from the chiasm, its center (5:20) is perhaps the key verse of the passage. As such, it notes the desirability of being one of those who do not have to reflect so much on life because God keeps them “occupied with gladness of heart.” Qohelet himself, however, is not a member of that club.

⁸If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still.
⁹The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

¹⁰Whoever loves money never has money enough;
 whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his
 income.
This too is meaningless.

¹¹As goods increase,
 so do those who consume them.
And what benefit are they to the owner
 except to feast his eyes on them?

¹²The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
 whether he eats little or much,
but the abundance of a rich man
 permits him no sleep.

¹³I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:

wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,
¹⁴or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when he has a son
 there is nothing left for him.

¹⁵Naked a man comes from his mother's womb,
and as he comes, so he departs.
He takes nothing from his labor
that he can carry in his hand.

¹⁶This too is a grievous evil:

As a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain,
since he toils for the wind?

¹⁷All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.

¹⁸Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. ¹⁹Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. ²⁰He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

COMMENTARY

8–9[7–8] Qohelet says there is no reason to be shocked by oppression; for there is an established bureaucracy that sees that everyone gets his cut. The NIV's "surprised" is *tāmāh* which, in most of its other occurrences in the OT, refers not only to surprise but also to shock and dismay at a negative situation. Perhaps the admonition here is not just to expect these oppressive situations but also not to be dismayed at them. Numbness is the preferred reaction.

The word translated as "official" is *gābōah*, and though this translation has become customary, Seow, 203–4, correctly notes that elsewhere in the OT the word never carries this meaning but instead simply refers to people or things that are high, many times meaning "proud" or "arrogant." Perhaps

in this context a translation such as our term “higher-ups,” with its usually negative connotation, best catches the nuance. So while they may not necessarily be officials, they are at least in powerful enough positions that they are able to oppress the poor with impunity. They constitute a chain, with the king himself being at the top.

The NIV’s translation for v.9, while being somewhat interpretive, is nevertheless on the right track. All, including the king, get their share of the poor person’s profits, and to ensure that this system continues, they “guard” each other. It is not clear whether this means that they protect each other’s interests or that they keep watch to make sure their subordinates don’t attempt to take more of a cut than they should. Either way, the poor come out on the bottom.

10–12[9–11] Qohelet turns from the plight of the poor to the plight of the rich—possibly the ones who oppress the poor. Their greed, even if fed by oppression and exploitation of the poor, is insatiable, and that is indeed an absurdity—that which they stole from others fails to satisfy even them. Why? Because it is not only the goods that increase, but the consumers increase as well.

These “consumers” have been variously understood as those who levy taxes, those who provide services for the rich and then bill them, the increased staff of servants, the extended household (including those who somehow “worm” their way into the household), and even the rich lovers of money themselves (for this last one see Seow, 205, 219–20). Speaking perhaps somewhat overstatedly, Qohelet laments that these owners never really get to enjoy their possessions, only look at them—and, we may suppose, try to figure out how to keep them. The poor laborer has at least one advantage over the rich man: either because he doesn’t have the same cares or because he is too tired to do otherwise, his sleep is sweet.

13–17[12–16] A story is now used to illustrate a point. Qohelet refers to the story as a “sickening evil” (*rā‘â ḥôlâ*; perhaps better than “grievous”); the story turns his stomach. In v.13 it is unclear as to exactly how the “hoarded” wealth (though “hoarded” is perhaps too pejorative a translation; better simply “guarded” or “stored up” wealth) brings harm to the owner; several scenarios could be envisaged. Most likely what is meant is that the owner, by storing up his wealth to pass down to his son, sacrificed the comfort that his wealth could have provided for himself. More pertinent,

however, is what happens next. Through some misfortune—whether it is the owner’s fault is not indicated and is thus irrelevant—he loses his wealth, sires the son he wanted, but now has nothing to pass down to him.

There is some debate as to who is being described in v.15—the father or the son. Most likely, because of the mention of this person’s “labor,” it refers to the father. In any case, he comes into the world “naked” (*ārôm*). The word recalls both the original state of humankind in Genesis 2:25 as well as Job’s comparable statement in Job 1:21. Indeed, Qohelet may be parodying Job’s statement. He agrees with Job that humans come into the world naked and go out the same way. He agrees that it is God who gives and takes away (again, notice that no blame is assigned to the man in this passage). But he has nothing comparable to Job’s “blessed be the name of the LORD.” Qohelet fears God; he never praises him.

In vv.16–17, we probably have a more general extrapolation rather than a continuation of the example. Human beings come as they go. They toil and reap nothing but wind. They eat in darkness. Perhaps we should think again of the above-mentioned example, that the man, in storing up his wealth, ate his food in darkness in order to avoid unnecessary expenditures and pass down as much as possible to his son. More likely, however, along with Seow, 207–8, we should understand “eat” to be metaphorical for “earning a living” (cf. Am 7:12, where the NIV correctly translates “earn your bread” for the more literal Hebrew expression, “eat bread”).

If this is the interpretation, “darkness” becomes a metaphor for the context in which one spends all of one’s life. Those days are also spent in “frustration, affliction [or ‘sickness,’ the nominal form of the adjective ‘sick’ in v.13], and anger.” What does this example illustrate? You would think storing up wealth to pass down to your children would be a good thing. And perhaps it is—if God allows you to do so. But there are no guarantees. And as sorry as Qohelet was for the poor persons in vv.8–9, he is just as upset (to his stomach) for the rich person in this story. It is indeed a sickening evil.

18–20[17–19] In this, the fourth of the so-called *carpe diem* passages (see [Message and Purpose](#) in the [introduction](#)), Qohelet again declares what he has found to be good: that it is appropriate for humans to eat, drink, and take pleasure in the fruits of their labor. The days in which this can be done

will be few. And when a person is able to do so, he should recognize the opportunity as a gift from God.

But again, we must call attention to the fact that there is nothing humans can do to “seize” these days. If God favors you so as to grant this as your lot in life, that’s great. But it is just as likely that he will withhold these gifts from you, as illustrated in the cases of the oppressed poor people in vv.8–9 and the rich person in vv.10–17. And the decision to give or to withhold will be made without regard to any merit or fault on your part. But even for those who are so gifted, as Qohelet at one point considered himself to be (2:10–11), the verdict over the whole is still *hebel*—“meaningless.”

The central verse of this larger chiastic section (5:9–6:9) is v.20. The ones favored by God with wealth, possessions, and joy in the fruits of their labor do not have to reflect much on life, because God keeps them “occupied with gladness of heart.” But one gets the feeling that this declaration, which on the surface seems to congratulate these kinds of people, ultimately becomes a judgment on those whom Qohelet really considers to be shallow minded.

Qohelet himself knew what it was to be wealthy, and he too enjoyed the fruit of his labor, but he regarded it as ultimately meaningless and a chasing after the wind (2:10–11). And instead of “gladness of heart,” God kept him occupied with the “heavy burden” (1:13; 3:10) of reflecting endlessly on the days of his life (which is the very reason we have this book!). If these carefree, nonreflective people actually exist—and it is possible that Qohelet doesn’t believe they do—then he is confident that they will one day join his own ranks. For that, too, is a gift of God.

NOTES

9[8] The syntax and grammar of this verse is difficult. Literally it seems to read, “And the profit of a land is this—a king for a served field.” There are numerous suggestions for how this is to be understood, as well as various proposed textual emendations, some of which omit the word “king.” One crucial issue has to do with whether “served,” נִעְבַּד *ne^cbād*), refers to the “king” or the “field.” If “king,” then the last part of the verse would read, “a king by a field is served.” Perhaps the best way to understand the verse is as a sarcastic statement. Everybody gets a cut of the

profit. And the profit for the people who actually work the land? They get a king who is either over the field or is served by the field. The field, ultimately, is for him.

17[16] It is common on the part of translations and commentaries to go with the ancient versions against the MT and read the last line of this verse as containing three nouns. The MT literally reads, “and he is greatly frustrated, and his sickness, anger.” The changes are fairly simple ones: (1) the verb **וְכָעַס** (*w^hkā‘as*, “and he is frustrated”) is repointed to the nominal form **וְכָעַס** (*w^hka‘as*, “frustration”); and (2) the third masculine singular suffix in the word “his sickness” is deleted and the word repointed accordingly (the *waw* suffix probably being a dittography from the *waw* on the front of the next word). This is to be preferred over the MT.

18[17] I agree with several commentators (Longman, Seow, and Fox [at least in his earlier commentary, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, though he has changed his view somewhat in his more recent work, *Time to Tear Down*]) that the phrase **טוֹב אֲשֶׁר-יָפָה** (*tôb ‘šer-yāpeh*, “the good which is proper”) should be read with the relative **אֲשֶׁר** serving either as a kind of colon or a substitute for **כִּי** (*kî*, “that”). This results in the following reading: “Then I realized what is good: that it is appropriate. . . .”

20[19] Most translations and commentators take **מַעֲנֶה** (*ma‘neh*, “keeps occupied”) as a Hiphil participle of **עָנָה** (*‘ānâ*) III, “to occupy” (GK 6701). Lohfink, 84–85, however, prefers to take it as **עָנָה** I, “to answer” (GK 6699), and translates the last part of the verse as “God continuously answers through the joy in one’s heart.”

For several reasons, “occupy” or “keep occupied” appears to be more applicable in this context. First, the previous two occurrences of this verb in Ecclesiastes (1:13; 3:10), while possibly relating either to **עָנָה** III or **עָנָה** II (“to humble”), are definitely not instances of **עָנָה** I, as Lohfink acknowledges. Second, “answer” seems to be foreign to the context in 5:20. The person in this verse is asking no questions and is not reflecting on the days of his life. Third, in the light of the second reason, it seems that v.20 is intended to provide a contrast to the person described in 1:13 and 3:10; therefore, the idea of “keep occupied” fits the context better.

14. Labor without Satisfaction (6:1–9)

OVERVIEW

The basic theme of this section, as in much of the book, is the lack of satisfaction humans receive from their work. Moreover, if there was anything in the preceding *carpe diem* passage (5:18–20) that may have teasingly given a person hope, this passage cruelly snatches it away.

¹I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: ²God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

³A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. ⁵Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—⁶even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

⁷All man's efforts are for his mouth,
yet his appetite is never satisfied.

⁸What advantage has a wise man
over a fool?

What does a poor man gain
by knowing how to conduct himself before others?

⁹Better what the eye sees
than the roving of the appetite.

This too is meaningless,
a chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

1–2 Qohelet describes a burden that “weighs heavily” on humans and presumably on himself as well. God gives a person “wealth” (*‘ōšer*), “possessions” (*nēkāsîm*), and “honor” (*kābôd*). The second member of this triad occurs only four other places in the OT (one being in Ecc 5:19). But significantly, two of those occurrences are in 2 Chronicles 1:11–12, and in both verses it occurs with the other two members of the triad, and in exactly the same order. In that passage God promises to give Solomon this triad of gifts as a reward for not having requested them but instead having asked for wisdom.

Is this a purposeful allusion? And if so, does the frame-narrator intend for us to understand Qohelet here as being self-referential? There is no certain answer, but this much is certain: God has given an essentially useless gift. Wealth, possessions, and honor are worthless if God does not enable the recipient to enjoy them—God gives the cake but does not enable one to eat. To compound the absurdity, God gives these gifts to a stranger. It may be that the Solomonic allusion is intended to intensify the hopelessness. If these things brought Solomon no satisfaction, what hope is there for anyone else? It must be noticed as well that there is no characterization given for this stranger. He is neither wise nor foolish, neither good nor evil. What God does, at least in this passage according to Qohelet, he does arbitrarily.

3–6 An example is brought forward of a man who has a hundred children, long life, and prosperity, and yet for some reason is not able to enjoy them. Again, no ethical or other evaluative judgment is made. We could manufacture one, but it would lack support from the text.

One problem in v.3 is the reference to a proper burial. It seems a bit abrupt to introduce this idea, especially without giving the reason as to why, if it is to be understood with reference to the man. Literally the Hebrew reads, “there was no grave for him” (the word “proper” not appearing in the text). Along with Crenshaw, 126–27, and Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 48), it may be best to understand this clause as being anticipatory, referring to the stillborn, and to read *wəgam* as concessive (“and although”), resulting in the translation, “and though he had no burial, I say that the stillborn is better (off) than he” (for a similar sentiment see Job 3, esp. vv.11–19).

Another interpretive problem has to do with the referent for “it” in v.4. Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 243) has made an interesting case that the unfortunate man, not the stillborn child, is being described. He argues, for example, that the stillborn doesn’t really come and go, for it never actually comes. Also, its name is not covered in darkness, for it never had a name.

In addition to Fox’s arguments, if indeed the *w^egam* clause in v.3 is to be read as a concessive clause (Fox does not argue for this), then the same could be true for the *w^egam* clause in v.5. Thus the following reading of vv.4–5 would result: “He [the man] comes in absurdity and he goes in darkness, and in darkness his name is covered. Even though he [the stillborn] never saw the sun or knew anything, there is more rest for this one [the stillborn] than for that one [the man].” Regardless of how one decides on these two translation issues, the basic idea is clear. The stillborn is better off than the man to whom, for whatever reason, God has given gifts without also giving the ability to enjoy them.

The example is raised another notch by supposing a scenario where this unfortunate man has a life that spans two millennia. In essence Qohelet says: fill in the blank with whatever number of years you wish—it still results in absurdity, since all go to the same place. The “place” may simply be the grave or, more likely, Sheol, a nebulous place where the dead go, and yet at the same time a place where, to use Qohelet’s own language from 9:10 (where Qohelet actually uses the word), a place where “there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (for more, see Johnston, esp. 69–85).

7–9 In the previous verses, the complaint concerned the absurdity of a person’s not being able to enjoy the fruit of his labor because God turns it over to someone else. In these verses, the absurdity has to do with those who apparently get to hold on to their possessions but still gain no satisfaction. Verse 7 should not be understood only as a reference to eating, but to the desire for, and the consumption of, material goods. The word “appetite” is *nepeš*, which is translated a number of ways by the various translations in its nearly eight hundred occurrences. In older translations it was usually rendered “soul.” But because this gives rise to the misleading idea that the ancients thought the soul could be separated from the body, modern translations usually use the word “person” or “life.” In this verse,

however, it probably has a different meaning—“desire.” In essence, our cravings to have and enjoy more things are never satisfied.

A tantalizing suggestion has been made that the two “his” pronouns in v.7 do not refer to the man but rather to the “place” previously mentioned in v.6, that is, Sheol (see Peter R. Ackroyd, “Two Hebrew Notes,” *ASTI* 5 [1967]: 84–86; Mitchell J. Dahood, “Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography,” *Bib* 49 [1968]: 368). Thus the suggestion is made that all human efforts are for Sheol, pictured—as in other places in the OT—as a beast with its mouth wide open to receive new inhabitants (see Ps 141:7; Pr 1:12; 27:20; 30:16; Isa 5:14; Hab 2:5). As fascinating as this suggestion is, however, it doesn’t quite seem to work in this context, especially since the same thought occurs in v.9 with definite reference to human desires.

In addition, Longman, 173, points out that Proverbs 16:26 provides a close parallel to the thought of v.7: “The laborer’s appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on.” And, as Seow, 226–27, has argued, it may well be that this Sheol imagery has actually contributed to the portrait of the greedy rich (cf. Ps 73:9; Hab 2:5) in such a way that the “insatiability of the rich is not only self-destructive, it poses dangers to others who fall prey to their greed.”

While the first half of v.8 is clear, the meaning of the second half is not so easy to determine (though the Hebrew is not difficult), nor does either half at first sight seem particularly relevant to the immediate context. Most likely we are to understand that the “wise man” is the same as the person described in v.7. By his wisdom this person has amassed wealth, but since it brings him no satisfaction, he has no advantage over the fool. And as for the poor person, whether he is a fool or not, he might as well be one, for should he manage to gain enough wisdom to know how to get along in life, it really does him no good, for it “takes money” to put that knowledge into action.

The implications of this situation are then laid out in v.9. It is better to be content with what you have than to wear yourself out getting more. For the wise and wealthy this means: Be satisfied with your current possessions. For the poor, who may or may not be wise, it means: Be content with your possessions, don’t try to learn any more about how to get along in society than you already know, and be content to stay in the same social class to which you currently belong—to rise any higher it takes money, and you

don't have it. This may or may not be seen as good advice. But for Qohelet, the whole situation is oppressive—it is an absurdity.

C. Qohelet's Advice (6:10–12:7)

OVERVIEW

We turn now to the second major section of Qohelet's monologue. There is some overlap of content in that Qohelet still does some searching in this second half, while the first half has not been free of advice. But by and large this second part is more admonitory in character, more proverbial, and has more of a didactic tone than does the first part.

1. Impotence and Ignorance (6:10–12)

OVERVIEW

Scholars disagree over whether these three verses go more with what precedes or what follows, or whether it stands alone. Seow, 241, however, has demonstrated a close connection between these verses and the closing verses of the next section (7:1–14); what follows is adapted from Seow with slight changes:

6:10–12

7:10–14

“whatever happens” (6:10)

“how is it?” (7:10)

“they cannot” (6:10)

“who can” (7:13)

“advantage” (6:11)

“advantage” (7:12)

“like a shadow” (6:12)

“as a shadow” (7:12)

“after him” (6:12)

“after him” (7:14)

The correspondences support the idea that 6:10–7:14 should be seen as a coherently unified section, with 6:10–12 and 7:10–14 serving as an inclusio

to bracket the entire passage. This bracketing also has the effect of relativizing the material that comes in between the two “brackets.” The middle section of this larger passage makes a number of declarations as to what is “good” or “better.” The two bracketing passages, while not necessarily nullifying the declarations, cast a huge shadow of suspicion over them.

¹⁰Whatever exists has already been named,
and what man is has been known;
no man can contend
with one who is stronger than he.

¹¹The more the words,
the less the meaning,
and how does that profit anyone?

¹²For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few
and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can
tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?

COMMENTARY

10–12 There is a translational problem in v.10 concerning the clause the NIV renders, “what man is has been known.” The Hebrew here is awkward, and there have been several suggestions for translation, including some that emend the text at various levels. The preferable option is to leave the text as is and to read, more literally, as follows: “Whatever has been has already had its name called, and it is known that it [i.e., the name] is Adam, and he is not able to contend with the one who is stronger than he.”

The verse calls attention to the creation where God created the first human pair and named them “*ādām*” (Ge 1:26–27; 5:2). It also calls to mind the ancient Near Eastern notion that to name something or someone was to demonstrate and exercise authority over what or who was named. As Qohelet uses the concept here, the point is that humankind has been named

and its course has been determined, and there is no point in trying to change that course. It is futile for humans to argue with their creator, for he is stronger than they are, hence he is the one who will determine their course.

Verse 11, then, in contrast to being simply a general saying about the over-multiplication of words (though that extrapolation can still be made), is specifically about the attempt to argue with God about the course of one's life. There is no point in doing it. Indeed, the more you argue, the more you increase the absurdity (*hebel*) of the situation. There is no profit whatsoever for humans in the attempt.

Verse 12 reinforces how futile such an exercise would be. Not only is God stronger than humans; he also has an obvious advantage in the knowledge department. Humans have no comparable resources, and no one can—and God will not—tell them what their future will be. Instead of the understanding in the NIV, it is probably best to render *ʾah^arāyw* (“after him”) as “his future.” This would not be some future life after death; rather, it is specifically qualified as “under the sun.” In other words, no one can discern what the rest of one's life on earth will be like, other than the fact that it will be absurd and will pass away like a shadow. Consequently, there is little point in wasting those few, shadowy days debating about them with one who is stronger and omniscient and has obviously made up his mind about how those days will run their course. Cut your losses now and abandon the task.

NOTE

10 וְנֹדַע אִשֶּׁר-הוּא אָדָם (*w^enôdā^c ʾāšer-hû ʾādām*), literally, “and it is known what he man,” seems at first to be awkwardly unintelligible Hebrew. In the exposition above I have suggested a reading that takes the pronoun הוּא (*hû* ʾ) to refer to “name” rather than “man.” Additionally, Gordis, 263, notes that after verbs of perception אִשֶּׁר (*ʾāšer*) never means “what” but instead “that”; however, he rejects the possible translation, “it is known that he is man,” because there is “no logical and grammatical antecedent for הוּא.” But “name” would seem to work well as the antecedent. The use of “name” to label “what has happened” is a subtle shift away from “happenings” to “humans” and allows Qohelet to make a statement about אָדָם (*ādām*).

Another attractive suggestion has been put forward by Seow, 230–32, that revocalizes אֲשֶׁר־הוּא as אֲשֶׁר־הוּ (ʾāšurēhû, dropping the א as a dittography from the next word). This would be אֲשֹׁר (ʾāšûr), “course,” with a third person masculine singular suffix, resulting in the translation, “his course is known.” The suffixed pronoun in this case would be anticipatory for אָדָם (ʾādām), “man,” resulting in “his course is known, that is, humankind’s.” With either suggested translation, it is important to note that “known” in this verse does not refer to simple cognition but should rather be seen as in parallel with “named” or “called” to indicate divine determination.

2. *When Things Are All Twisted (7:1–14)*

OVERVIEW

After having just said that it is impossible to know what is good (6:12), Qohelet now proceeds, nevertheless, to pontificate what is good. Is he being sarcastic? Are his suggestions as to what is good, or what things are better than other things, intended primarily for shock value? Or do the following verses simply serve to illustrate his original point? Whatever the case may be, at the end of the passage (vv.13–14) he will again reanchor all his suggestions firmly in pessimism and ignorance.

¹A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.

²It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of every man;
the living should take this to heart.

³Sorrow is better than laughter,
because a sad face is good for the heart.

⁴The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

⁵It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke
than to listen to the song of fools.

⁶Like the crackling of thorns under the pot,
so is the laughter of fools.
This too is meaningless.

⁷Extortion turns a wise man into a fool,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.

⁸The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.

⁹Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,
for anger resides in the lap of fools.

¹⁰Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?"
For it is not wise to ask such questions.

¹¹Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing
and benefits those who see the sun.

¹²Wisdom is a shelter
as money is a shelter,
but the advantage of knowledge is this:
that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.

¹³Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?

¹⁴When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider:

God has made the one
as well as the other.

Therefore, a man cannot discover

anything about his future.

COMMENTARY

1 Qohelet creates or quotes a proverb with which all would agree, even though they might not necessarily reflect their agreement by their actions. The proverb is even nicely packaged with a chiasmic and alliterative flair, the first line in Hebrew being *ṭôb šēm miššemen ṭôb*, literally, “good name than oil good” (“oil” and “name” also being associated in SS 1:3). But this proverb leaves the reader unprepared for the comparative statement that the day of death is better than the day of birth, and now the reader has to figure out how the comparison works.

James Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1981], 10) suggests that the verse anticipates Qohelet’s later statement in 10:1 that perfume can become easily spoiled, so that the newborn has the potential of turning out to be good or bad, even as good oil can become spoiled. But if one has a good reputation, on the day of one’s death that reputation is secured. Kugel’s interpretation is most likely correct. But taking into account Qohelet’s assertion that no one is really ever remembered (1:11; cf. 9:15), we see how fragile the declaration as to what is better really is.

Later, in one of the so-called *carpe diem* passages (9:7–10), Qohelet will recommend the liberal use of perfume during one’s life in the light of the absurdity of death. He doesn’t seem to be concerned about a good name in that passage or elsewhere in the book. Also note that birth and death are the first two elements in the “pretty poem about time” in 3:2. Certainly, anyone reading the poem would have considered birth to be the positive element in that pair, with death being the negative one. Here positive and negative are reversed. Perhaps this is his sarcastically subtle way of reinforcing the implied answer, “no one,” to his question in 6:12, “Who knows what is good?”

2–4 In the next three verses, it only follows (as Lohfink, 93, aptly puts it, “the pretty saying is dragged on *ad absurdum*”) that the house of mourning is a better place to be than a house of feasting. The former probably refers to a home where a death has occurred, and the latter, the *bêt mišteh* (“house

of drinking”), to any place where there was a celebration. (The exact phrase occurs elsewhere only in Est 7:8; Jer 16:8.) The reason given is that at a funeral a person is reminded of a human being’s ultimate “end” (*sôp*; the NIV’s “destiny,” while acceptable, being perhaps a bit too nuanced). By attendance at the house of mourning, one gains a proper perspective on life and death. The sentiment here may be related to that expressed in Psalm 90:12, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Qohelet goes on to say that “anger” or “frustration” is better than laughter (“sorrow” is too weak a translation for *ka‘as*; see 1:18; 2:23; 7:9; 11:10) and that a “sad face” (lit., “evil of face”) makes the heart better (cf. here Pr 14:13). Finally, Qohelet remarks that wise people attend mournful activities, but fools go to the “house of pleasure” (*bêt šimḥâ*).

It should be noted again how the so-called *carpe diem* passages are relativized by this advice as to what is better. Elsewhere, Qohelet commends *šimḥâ* (“joy”; cf. 2:26; 5:20; 8:15; 9:17). Especially in 8:15 (“So I commended the *enjoyment* [*šimḥâ*] of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink . . .”) and 9:7 (“Go eat your food with *gladness* [*šimḥâ*], and drink your wine with a joyful heart”), Qohelet recommends behavior that here in ch. 7 he calls foolish. Neither here nor in the “eat, drink, and be merry” passages are we given reliable advice as to what is good; rather, we are given a demonstration that Qohelet is more on target when he says that neither he nor anyone else really knows what is good (6:12).

5–7 In these verses some traditional wisdom is dispensed but then subverted. The value of a rebuke coming from one who is wise versus anything that a fool might have to offer is commonplace in biblical wisdom (see, e.g., Pr 10:10; 13:20; 14:3, 7; 15:2, 7; 17:10; 27:5; 28:23). While the contrast between the wise and the foolish in v.5 is precise, that between “rebuke” and “song” is not. This has led some commentators (e.g., Seow, 236) to suggest that the song must be, in particular, an ode or song of praise (flattery?). Qohelet’s oppositions are not always that exact, however (see [comments on 3:1–8](#)), and the contrast here has more to do with seriousness and soberness than inanity and silliness.

This is depicted graphically in the illustration of the “crackling of thorns under the pot.” The words for “thorns” (*šîrîm*), “pot” (*šîr*), and “fool” (*kêšîl*)

all have the syllable *sî*, thus giving the verse a measure of alliteration and assonance. (As well, “laughter” [*śēḥōq*] begins with an “s” sound; in v.5 the word for “song” [*šîr*] may also be part of the scheme.) Crenshaw, 135, nicely summarizes the thought: “This wordplay gives an apt description of the spontaneous bursts of laughter among fools, where there is more noise than substance. Thistles provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise.” Qohelet considers this to be absurd.

The meaning of v.7, in the context, is debated. In contrast to the NIV, which ignores the *kî* at the beginning of v.7 and turns the verse into a stand-alone statement, the NASB at least correctly attempts to translate it with “for.” Other translations, such as the NRSV, render it as “surely” or “indeed.” There are two problems with understanding the sense of the verse. The first is that the *kî* (“for”) suggests some connection between it and what precedes it, but that connection is not so easily discernible. Second, in the Qumran fragment of this passage (4QQoh^a) there is an erasure before v.7 that covers, according to some estimates, about fifteen to twenty character spaces. This has led several commentators to suggest that there has been an omission from the text that would more clearly explain the connection between vv.5–6 and v.7.

Even before the Qumran discovery, commentators had suggested that something had been lost in the process of transmission. The erasure in the scroll, however, occurs at the very top of a column and may simply be an erasure of mistakenly duplicated text. There is no other textual evidence that supports the possibility of a deletion. Longman, 186, has suggested that the connection is that v.7 explains why the advice given in vv.5–6 is to be seen as *hebel* (“meaningless”), as it is called at the end of v.6. The reason is that you cannot be sure whether the rebuke of the wise man might be the result of extortion or bribery.

Interestingly, biblical Wisdom literature is ambivalent on the subject of bribery (see Pr 15:27; 17:8, 23; 18:16; 19:6; 21:14; 22:16; 29:4). Fools are always fools, but the wise can become fools, and a bit of extortion or a bribe may be all that is needed to effect the change. How then can you have confidence in their advice and in their rebukes? So Qohelet calls it an absurdity.

8–9 These two verses seem to be only loosely related to their immediate context, though there is a bit of connection to vv.1–2, which are concerned

with the end of life rather than its beginning. The advice is fairly traditional in Wisdom literature. The end is better than the beginning, and patience wins out over pride. A passage that also seems to connect these two ideas is 1 Kings 20:11, where to the proud taunts of the king of Aram the Israelite king Ahab responds, “One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.” Indeed, for Ahab the end of the battle turned out much better than the beginning.

The word for “anger” in v.9 is *ka’as*, the same word translated “sorrow,” “frustration,” or “vexation” in v.3. Most likely, the word does, in fact, have two different meanings or nuances in the respective contexts. But in the larger context of vv.1–14, which purports to pontificate what is good, the many twists and turns the passage takes, even with respect to the same word’s being used in different senses, betrays a certain confusion on Qohelet’s part. His pontifications, as a result, are measurably weakened; nevertheless, there is certainly truth in the sentiment. When anger looks for a lap in which to nestle, it usually seeks out a fool’s lap first.

10 This verse appears to stand alone. But it still ties in to the overall theme of the good or better thing to do. Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 65), in suggesting that this statement in some way constitutes a critique of traditional wisdom with its desire to preserve the traditions of the past, probably goes too far. At the same time, it could be argued that there is a latent danger that one could all too easily end up glorifying the past by selective memory. As Longman, 198, notes, “to believe that the present is worse than the past shows a complete ignorance of history.” Furthermore, Crenshaw, 137, calling attention to what Qohelet had said earlier in 1:10, remarks, “If there is nothing new under the sun, the past is not superior to the present.”

11–12 Now Qohelet introduces what probably a majority of scholars believe to be a comparison between wisdom and money. What is more likely, however, is that what is introduced is not a comparison but an association. The difference between the two ideas can be seen in the translations of the NIV and NASB: NIV, “like an inheritance”; NASB, “along with an inheritance.” Prepositions are perhaps the slipperiest things in any language, and in v.11 it is the preposition *‘im* over which the translations and commentaries differ. Advocates of using “as, like” to translate *‘im* point to 2:16, where the same preposition means “as.” But even there I believe

that “along with” provides a perfectly acceptable rendering (lit., “how dies the wise man along with the fool”); it even adds a nuance that is missing in the translation “as.”

In other words, in 7:11, the point is not that wisdom is as good as an inheritance, but that it is good when coupled with an inheritance. It takes money to put wisdom to use. The statement recalls 6:8, where Qohelet, in essence, considered it useless for a poor person to be wise (cf. 9:16). The thought here, then, is that you have to have money to use your wisdom. And how much better it is when that money is an inheritance; as Fox remarks (*Time to Tear Down*, 256), “This is an especially desirable form of wealth because one supposedly obtains it without strain and toil.” Indeed, as Longman, 190, also notes, this is “a rather jaundiced view of wisdom.”

There is also debate on the interpretation of v.12. Literally the Hebrew for the first half of the verse is, “for in the shadow of wisdom in the shadow of silver.” Several of the ancient versions read the prepositions on either just the last occurrence or on both occurrences of the word “shadow” as *k^c* (“as”) rather than the MT’s *b^c* (“in”). As to how to understand the verse, the plethora of suggestions ranges from reading the prepositions as the ancient versions understood them to a number of conjectural emendations, some of which take the phrase “in the shadow” and turn it into verbal form. (For a survey see James Kugel, “Qohelet and Money,” *CBQ* 51 [1989]: 40–44.) Probably the simplest solution is to leave the text as is and understand it, as commentators such as Crenshaw, Fox, Longman do but against both the NIV and NASB, to mean that to be in the shadow of wisdom is to also be in the shadow of money.

The verse then goes on to say that wisdom has an advantage over money in that the owner of wisdom has a better chance of living longer. There is, however, an intended irony in the verse: long life is supposed to be the result of one’s being in wisdom’s “shadow”; yet, the word “shadow” had just been used in 6:12 to denote the shortness of life. Wisdom may provide a longer life; it may not. And the “may not” is, for Qohelet, an absurdity.

13–14 This section comes to a close by calling attention to the works of God. But Qohelet, far from praising God, attributes to him the messiness of vv.1–12. Qohelet may be correct that the day of death is better than the day of birth. Perhaps it is better to go to a house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Perhaps vexation and sadness are better than laughter. Perhaps it

is true that wise men can turn into fools. Perhaps it is true that wisdom and money provide protection that are only shadow-like in substance. But these things can only be true in a world that is twisted and warped—and here Qohelet clearly charges God with the twisting.

Qohelet has gotten bolder as he has gone along. In 1:15 he declared, “what is twisted cannot be straightened.” He seems to hint that God arbitrarily plays favorites as to whom he decides to give his gifts (2:26). Plucking up courage, he begins to suggest that God has not done right by the world in allowing injustice to prevail, and that his purpose in doing so was to humble humans into the realization that they are like animals (3:16–21). In ch. 5 there is the subtle hint that God is in some way behind the oppression that goes on in the world. In ch. 6 God perpetrates an evil on humanity in his bestowal and withholding of gifts, and since God is the sole determiner, there is no point in arguing with him. Now, in his boldest move yet, the twisting that he complained about in 1:15 he charges directly to God. The world is twisted all right, and God is the one who has done the twisting!

Bildad, using the same word as Qohelet does in 1:15 and 7:13 (*‘āwat*), asks rhetorically in Job 8:3, “Does God *pervert* justice? Does the Almighty *pervert* what is right?” It is only later in the book that Job uses the same word to provide his answer: “then know that God has *wronged* me” (19:6). Later, Elihu takes it upon himself to declare outright that “it is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would *pervert* justice” (34:12). Here Qohelet takes Job’s side and says that it is entirely conceivable.

So what are humans to do while they live in this twisted, meaningless, absurd world? If God gives you a good day, consider yourself fortunate and enjoy it. If he gives you a bad one, then you will have to do some reflecting on these days, unlike the supposedly fortunate person in 5:20, who never has to reflect. You will have to consider that both days come from God and that there is no way you will be able to ascertain which one of those days you are going to have tomorrow or the next day or any day after that.

And there is little, if anything, you can do to affect God’s decisions in this regard. Righteousness on your part may get you a good day; wickedness may get you a bad day. There’s no way to tell for sure, because from our vantage point the decisions appear to be arbitrary. “Keeping fortunes fluctuating inexplicably is God’s way of keeping man uncertain

and anxious and crumbling his self-confidence. This is one way God causes fear” (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 255). “To the bewilderment of all, God’s sovereign will is behind good and evil, and thus human beings are kept off balance” (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 63). Qohelet’s advice never rises much higher.

NOTES

עֲשֶׂק 7 (‘ōšeq), “extortion,” is translated by the NASB as “oppression.” This is the more usual meaning of the word and is so understood in 5:8 and in its verbal form in 4:1. By metonymy, however, the word can stand for the result of such oppression, i.e., extorted goods (as in Lev 6:4; Ps 62:10; Eze 22:12, 29).

For more on what is either a lacuna or an erasure in 4QQoh^a, see James Muilenberg, “A Qohelet Scroll from Qumran,” *BASOR* 135 (1954): 26–27; Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 621.

14 Though the exact phrase does not occur elsewhere in biblical Hebrew, the translation “on account of which” for עַל־דִּבְרַת שֶׁ (‘al-dibrat š; NIV, “therefore”) is clear from the parallel construction in Aramaic in Daniel 2:30: עַל־דִּבְרַת דִּי (‘al-dibrat dī).

Charles Whitley (*Koheleth: His Language and Thought* [BZAW 148; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979], 66) has argued that the clause יִמְצָא . . . אֶת־רָאיוֹ (yimṣā . . . ‘aḥ^arāyw, “discover . . . his future”) has an equivalent in Aramaic that means “find fault with.” Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 60–61, 66) has also opted for this translation. It has little to commend it, however, and most translations and commentators keep to the traditional rendering. Also, in accordance with our explanation of 6:12, אֶת־רָאיוֹ most likely refers to one’s future on earth, not to an afterlife.

3. A Balanced, Mediocre Life (7:15–22)

¹⁵In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

a righteous man perishing in his righteousness,

and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.

¹⁶Do not be overrighteous,
neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?

¹⁷Do not be overwicked,
and do not be a fool—
why die before your time?

¹⁸It is good to grasp the one
and not let go of the other.
The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.

¹⁹Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful
than ten rulers in a city.

²⁰There is not a righteous man on earth
who does what is right and never sins.

²¹Do not pay attention to every word people say,
or you may hear your servant cursing you—

²²for you know in your heart
that many times you yourself have cursed others.

COMMENTARY

15 In vv.15–22 Qohelet gives some questionable, “lukewarm” advice with regard to righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly. He begins by reporting on what he has seen in his “meaningless life” (*bîmê heblî*, lit., “in my absurd days”). Some commentators claim that here *hebel* clearly refers to the “ephemerality” of life, the fewness of one’s fleeting days, not to their meaninglessness or absurdity. They probably do so because of the temporal reference; but here, as almost everywhere else in the book, the idea of absurdity best fits the context. How short Qohelet’s life has been is irrelevant in the context of what he is reporting. What he sees makes his life

absurd, and here he sees the wicked living long lives and the righteous dying, apparently, after a relatively short life. Though traditional wisdom certainly recognized these anomalies, for Qohelet they are oppressive.

16–18 These three verses constitute a conundrum of interpretation. In v.16 Qohelet counsels against excessive righteousness and wisdom; in v.17 the advice is to avoid excessive wickedness and folly. The result of the first pair is emotional and psychological devastation (the real meaning of *šāmam*, instead of “ruin, destroy”), a life not worth living. The result of the second pair is death before one’s time. (It seems that humans sometimes can help God with his ordering of the appointed times!)

The problem comes in trying to understand the exact meaning of the advice. On the one hand, Qohelet appears to recommend that one should not “strive for excellence” in the areas of ethics and wisdom; on the other hand, he seems to condone a measure of wickedness, in that one should not be “overly” wicked. Only “folly” is left unqualified, without an attendant intensifier.

Various suggestions have been made to account for the advice. One is to understand the particular form of the verb “to be wise” in v.16 (called a Hithpael) as meaning, “Don’t make a pretense of being wise.” While this is grammatically possible, it is unlikely. Qohelet never uses the Hithpael verbal form anywhere else in Ecclesiastes to indicate this nuance (as noted by M. Strange, “The Question of Moderation in Ecclesiastes 7:15–18” [D.Sac.Th. diss., Catholic Univ. of America, 1969], 80; cited in Longman, 195). The only other OT occurrence of the Hithpael for the verb “to be wise” (*ḥākam*; Ex 1:10) does not indicate pretense (as noted by Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 261). Furthermore, none of the other verbs in these two verses are in the Hithpael, nor is there any indication that pretense is meant for them.

The advice is not to avoid pretense in righteousness and wisdom, but to not overdo it. The reasoning seems to be, following on the heels of v.15, that since righteousness doesn’t necessarily guarantee long life, there’s no point in overdoing it and setting yourself up for a huge disappointment. The same thing goes for wisdom, which only makes you more acutely aware of life’s absurdities when they occur. In v.17, perhaps a little mischievousness can be a good thing, but don’t overdo it, for you might hasten your death. (But then again, you might live a long time, as do the wicked in v.15.)

In v.18, the advice is to hold on to the one and not let go of the other. The NASB's "come forth with both of them" is preferable to the NIV's over-interpretive "avoid all extremes." The one who fears God will exercise both. But to what does "both" refer? One possibility is that it refers to the two pairs of polar opposites: righteousness and wickedness, and wisdom and folly (though "folly," being the only one of the three without an intensifying qualifier, is not an option). Another is that it refers to the two pieces of advice given in the preceding verses. Probably the latter is meant, though it doesn't make too much difference which option is chosen.

My conclusion here is that Qohelet simply gives bad advice. Motivated by v.15 that the righteous die young and the wicked live long, Qohelet advises against committing oneself totally to either of the two options. The one who is afraid of what God can do, as evidenced by what he has already done in v.15, will go forth in life accompanied by Qohelet's two axioms. Sometimes he will employ the one, sometimes the other, and maybe both at the same time—whatever it takes to stay on God's good side. A balanced, mediocre, boring but safe life.

19 This verse seems clear enough, but its relationship to the context is less so. Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 249, 256–57) opts for relocating the verse to just after v.12. He also argues for an emendation that reads the last half of the verse as, "more than the wealth of the magnates who are in a city," by repointing the Hebrew word for "ten" and making a slight change in the division of the consonants (see Notes for details). Fox calls attention to the "widespread" dislocations that occur in Wisdom literature and also argues that the verse makes better sense coming after v.12 (with or without the emendation). In its present location it makes no sense and "interrupts the tight connection between vv.18 and 20." Fox's arguments are cogent and most likely correct. But with either translation and either location, wisdom's value still ends up being undermined by the larger context of the chapter.

20 Perhaps connecting more closely to vv.15–18 than v.19—or perhaps serving to relativize v.19—this present verse, while true in its acknowledgment that there is no one who never sins (see 1Ki 8:46; Ps 143:2; Pr 20:9), seems trite. Is Qohelet perhaps using this truism as an excuse for his less-than-commendable advice not to strive for righteousness?

21–22 Probably serving as a concrete illustration of Qohelet’s statement in v.20, these verses advise against taking too much to heart the negative things people say about you, for you yourself have said the same things about others. Verse 22 is slightly ambiguous. Literally it says, “for also many times, your heart knows that you have cursed others.” The ambiguity is as to whether the cursing of others has actually been done verbally. Perhaps it was only done internally, and that is why Qohelet says, “your heart knows.” In either case, the verses call appropriate attention to the all-too-hasty reaction of condemning others for things you have done yourself, or toward which you have a tendency but perhaps lack occasion. Good advice—but set in a context where the advice has not been so stellar.

NOTES

15 Here, as in 2:14, 16; 3:19–20; 7:18, the word “all” (כָּל, *kōl*) refers to only two things; hence the NIV’s translation “both” in some of these passages.

One expects something like “days” after מֵאֲרִיךְ (*maʾrîk*, “lengthen”), according to the usual Hebrew idiom for living a long time, “to lengthen one’s days.” While it is possible that the “days” has dropped out, it is just as likely that the idiom was so common that the verb could stand in for the whole phrase.

18 If the אִתְּ (*et*) is understood as the preposition “with” rather than the direct object marker, there is no real difficulty with the grammar; the resulting translation, as in the NASB, is “with both of them.”

19 As mentioned above, Fox favors in place of the MT’s מַעֲשֵׂרָה שְׁלִישִׁים (*mē ʿśārâ šallîṭîm*, “ten magistrates”), reading מַעֲשֵׂר הַשְּׁלִישִׁים (*mē ʿōšer haššallîṭîm*, “the wealth of the magistrates,” or “magnates”). This is a reasonable emendation and probably correct.

תָּעוּז (*tāʿōz*, “to be strong”) is probably to be read intransitively, i.e., “wisdom is more powerful for a wise man.” The LXX gives evidence of, and 4QQoh^a actually has a different verb, אָזַר (*āzar*, “to help”). Either one is possible; the meaning is not greatly affected.

4. Of Schemes and Schemers: The Knowledge of Good and Evil (7:23–29)

OVERVIEW

As he already had at the beginning of his biography (1:12–2:26), Qohelet declares his determination to use his wisdom to investigate different matters, wisdom among them. The results of the investigation turn out to be no more satisfactory than they were before.

²³All this I tested by wisdom and I said,

“I am determined to be wise”—

but this was beyond me.

²⁴Whatever wisdom may be,

it is far off and most profound—

who can discover it?

²⁵So I turned my mind to understand,

to investigate and to search out wisdom and the
scheme of things

and to understand the stupidity of wickedness

and the madness of folly.

²⁶I find more bitter than death

the woman who is a snare,

whose heart is a trap

and whose hands are chains.

The man who pleases God will escape her,

but the sinner she will ensnare.

²⁷“Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered:

“Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of
things—

²⁸while I was still searching

but not finding—
I found one upright man among a thousand,
but not one upright woman among them all.
²⁹This only have I found:
God made mankind upright,
but men have gone in search of many schemes.”

COMMENTARY

23–25 By wisdom Qohelet determines to be wise, yet he finds wisdom to be beyond him—it is “far off, most profound” (lit., “deeply deep”). There is no real contradiction here in Qohelet’s claim that by wisdom he sought wisdom, as some have supposed. Nor is there any need to try to postulate different definitions or fine nuances between the wisdom he possessed and the wisdom he sought. As Longman, 200, notes, to attempt to do so “presses Qohelet’s consistency too far, forgetting that at times Qohelet’s words are almost stream of consciousness. It is as if he states his wisdom program, catches himself, and then admits his failings.”

The real conclusion to be drawn from Qohelet’s resolve to find wisdom by wisdom, yet not finding it, is that wisdom—especially the form that tries to limit the finding of it to what can be concluded from observation—doesn’t work. It tries to make humanity’s investigatory endeavors the “measure of all things,” thus cutting wisdom off from its true source, indeed, the very beginning of wisdom—the proper reverential fear of God and trust in his revelation.

Introduced for the first time in the book in v.25 is the word *ḥešbôn* (GK 3113; NIV, “scheme of things”). It reappears in v.27 (also in 9:10), and a similar-sounding word with the same consonants but different vowels occurs in v.29. This sets up a wordplay here. In v.25 *ḥešbôn* seems to be either parallel to or, perhaps better, an explanatory term for wisdom. As a probable derivative of the verb *ḥāšab* (GK 3108), which means to “think, consider, reckon, design,” the word “encompasses the intricate plans, schemes, and inventions produced by human thought and ingenuity” (John Hartley, “חשב,” *NIDOTTE*, 2:308–9).

While it is a harmless enough word, in this verse it perhaps sets up the next line forebodingly—what Qohelet wants to know is “the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly” (the first phrase being, more literally, “the wickedness of stupidity”). He wants to investigate not only the good but also the bad, i.e., the dark side. The reader, aware of how the book has already alluded to the early chapters of Genesis, will perhaps be reminded of someone else who wanted the knowledge of good and evil in order to be wise (Ge 2:17; 3:5–6). The prospects are not promising.

26 The investigation of the dark side leads Qohelet to make a pronouncement either about a certain type of woman or about women in general. Given what follows in v.28, it would seem that even if he is not referring to women in general, he certainly thinks that a large majority of females are in fact described by the sinister terms he uses. Even though his description of the woman in v.26 is reminiscent of the description of the adulteress in Proverbs 2:16–18; 5:3–6; 6:24–29; 7:6–27, Qohelet, surprisingly, does not identify the woman here as an adulteress. This again lends force to the argument that he is describing women in general. His conclusion, then, is that women are the problem.

Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 268) captures well how surprising this conclusion is: “The result of his inquiries in the abstruse realms of intellect comes down to this: woman is dangerous [!].” As surprising as this may be (if indeed Ge 3 underlies the author’s thinking in this passage), the statement may reflect Adam’s answer in the garden of Eden when asked by God whether he had eaten from the forbidden tree: “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Ge 3:12). Adam blames the woman. The frame-narrator, the creator of the composite Qohelet character, has made his creation talk just like Adam!

27–29 The narrator intrudes just briefly here in v.27 to remind the reader that Qohelet is the one who is saying these things. It is almost as though he wants to distance himself from the character he has created (though the distance in his day would not be as great as in our own).

All translations add a verb to their renderings in order to make better sense of the last line in v.27. Taking their cue from the phrase “one to one” (*ʿaḥat lʿaḥat*), most have incorporated the verb “to add”; several have also translated this second occurrence of the word *ḥešbôn* (NIV, “scheme of things”) as “sum,” which is indeed a possible translation. It seems better,

however, to leave room for other possibilities. Gordis, 180, 284, for example, translates *ʾaḥat lʾaḥat* as “step by step.” It is also possible that a more accurate understanding is that Qohelet “compared” one thing to another. Or perhaps he examined “people” one by one, which would then provide an antecedent for “them all” in v.28.

Qohelet, conceding that he has not been able to find the ultimate explanation, says that he nevertheless found at least this much—one man in a thousand, but not one woman. We are not told in this verse, however, what criterion he has used. What would a man or woman have either to be or do in order for Qohelet to count him or her? The NIV supplies the term “upright,” incorporating it from v.29. In light of the moral implications that are present in the woman’s description in v.26, as well as the use of the term “upright” in v.29, it seems that this suggestion is correct. Righteous men are rare; righteous women do not exist.

Despite his portrayal of woman in v.26 and his failure to find one worth trusting in v.28, later (in 9:9) Qohelet will still recommend that it is apparently worth the risk to love one of them and to attempt to enjoy life with her. This suggests that his depictions of woman in these verses have been somewhat hyperbolic. Nevertheless, despite the valiant efforts of some commentators, it is impossible to clear Qohelet of all misogynist charges. His words, as much as any others in the Bible, show the results of the curse in Genesis 3:16 and the strife between men and women.

Fearing that perhaps he had gone too far with his charge in 7:13 that God has twisted and made the world the way it is, and having carried his blaming of women about as far as it can go, Qohelet returns to a more orthodox sentiment in v.29, which again shows the influence of the early chapters of Genesis. He affirms that God made humans “upright” (*yāšār*) but that they have searched instead for many “schemes.”

The word for “schemes” is *ḥiṣṣbōnôt* (GK 3115), which is related to the different word *ḥešbôn* in vv.25, 27 but which is also translated by the NIV as “schemes.” This word is used only twice in the OT—here and in Chronicles 26:15, where it apparently refers to military equipment. In the Ecclesiastes context, it must refer to something in contrast to “upright.” The similarity of this rare word to the rare one used to describe that for which Qohelet searched in vv.25, 27 practically demands that the reader see a wordplay here; thus the title that I gave to this section: “Schemes and Schemers.” If

humans, despite having been made upright, have gone off in search of schemes and have in fact become schemers, then Qohelet himself, having done this very thing by his search for a *ḥešbôn*—a search that even took him to the dark side in his search for wisdom—has become the premier example of a schemer. Qohelet has indicted himself.

NOTES

25 The last four words have caused some difficulty. The overall meaning is clear enough, but the syntax is a bit odd. The phrase רָשָׁע נָפֶסֶל (*reša' kesel*, “wickedness of stupidity”) appears to be a construct chain, but the nouns could also both be read as absolute. The latter phrase, וְהַסְכִּלֹת הוֹלִלֹת (*w^ehassiklût hôlelôt*) can also be seen as construct chain, but it is odd to have the article on the construct noun and the construct noun as the only one of the four with the article. Some commentators, such as Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 268), have opted simply to read the four nouns as independent of each other. Again, the meaning is not significantly affected.

27 The MT has אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת (*‘āmṛâ qōhelet*) with a third person feminine singular verb. But most commentators recognize an incorrect word division here. The ה (h) on the verb should be attached to the noun instead, resulting in a third person masculine singular verb.

28 Attempts either to downplay or relativize the apparently misogynistic character of this verse have included: understanding אֶלֶף (*‘elep*) to be “army” rather than “thousand,” thus resulting in a simple statement that Qohelet found no women in the army (Klaus Baltzer, “Women and War in Qohelet 7:23–8:1a,” *HTR* 80 [1987]: 127–32); suggesting that Qohelet is quoting a statement with which he does not actually agree (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 77; in a slightly different form Perry, 126); and understanding the statement to be a secondary addition to the text (Seow, 265). None of these proposals seem necessary or credible.

5. Fools in the King’s Presence (8:1–9)

OVERVIEW

The similarity of the title I have given this passage to the one for 5:1–7 (“Fools in God’s Presence”) calls attention to the close parallels between the two passages. In 5:1–7, Qohelet gives advice as to how to avoid behaving and looking like a fool in God’s presence. Here he does the same thing for those who have occasion to come before the king. That the author intends for the passages to be interpreted in relation to each other can be seen from the parallels between them. First there are parallels that are both conceptual and linguistic (to highlight the correspondences, I am using my own translation rather than the NIV):

“guard [š ^c mōr] your foot when you go to the house of God” (5:1)	“guard [š ^c môr] the mouth [the commandment] of the king” (8:2); “whoever guards [šô ^m mēr] the commandment [of the king]” (8:5)

“when you go [yēlēk] to the house of God” (5:1)	“go [tēlēk] from his [the king’s] presence” (8:3)

“do not be rash [or ‘hurry,’ t ^b bahēl]” (5:1)	“do not be rash [or ‘hurry,’ t ^b bāhēl]” (8:3)

“fools who do not acknowledge their evil [rā ^c]” (5:1)	“do not stand in an evil [rā ^c] thing” (8:3; the word also occurs in vv.5–6, 9)

Other conceptual parallels with 5:1–7 do not have precise verbal connections. In 5:4–6, Qohelet reminds the reader to be sure to keep vows made to God; in 8:2 he offers advice concerning an “oath of God” (though the exact nature of this oath is unclear; see below). In 5:3 God is sovereign in heaven, and in v.7 one must stand in awe of him; in 8:3–4 the king does whatever he pleases, his word is supreme, and no one can challenge him. In 5:6 God will be angry at those who fail to keep his command and will destroy their work. In 8:5 those who keep the king’s command come to no harm—implication: those who fail to keep his command will certainly come to harm. (The king may also be the one who causes harm in 8:9.)

These parallels, as much as they may be a commentary on how one should reverence the king (i.e., as they would God), serve perhaps more sharply as a commentary on the attitude one should adopt with reference to

God, i.e., the same attitude one would have toward an ancient Near Eastern despot. One gets the feeling in ch. 8 that there is no real heartfelt reverence, and certainly nothing approaching love, for the king. The obedience does not come out of reverence or devotion but instead out of fear. The same is true with regard to God in ch. 5.

This highlights again how wrong it is to suggest that Qohelet should be our guide in theological matters. While he is orthodox to a measure, ultimately his advice takes us down a dead-end street. He is not to be considered, as it were, a pre-NT apologist for the Christian faith, or for that matter the faith of the OT; rather, he represents in this book the very thing against which the prophets preached and against which Christ and the apostles warned—a syncretistic fusion of skeptical, pessimistic wisdom philosophy derived from empirical investigation, with a faith that is only minimally orthodox, lifeless, and colorless, without any real devotion. It is true that his description of life is in large measure accurate and that his questions are the correct ones. But we will have to look to someone other than him for the answers.

¹Who is like the wise man?

Who knows the explanation of things?

Wisdom brightens a man's face

and changes its hard appearance.

²Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. ³Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases.

⁴Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

⁵Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm,
and the wise heart will know the proper time and
procedure.

⁶For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter,

though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

⁷Since no man knows the future,
who can tell him what is to come?

⁸No man has power over the wind to contain it;
so no one has power over the day of his death.
As no one is discharged in time of war,
so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

⁹All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under
the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his
own hurt.

COMMENTARY

1 It is difficult to decide whether this verse should be seen as closing the previous passage or beginning the current one. Perhaps it is best seen, with Longman, 208, “as a sarcastic exclamation of frustration that stands between two larger units.” According to the suggestion of a number of commentators, based on a minor redivision of the consonants, the beginning of the first line should read, “Who is so wise?” This has much to commend it and, in the context, seems to be more likely (see Notes). On this reading, no one is really wise.

Nevertheless, in anticipation of the advice he will give in the next few verses, Qohelet suggests that someone who wants to be wise in the king's presence must learn the art of putting on a face that masks one's true inner feelings. The importance of wearing the proper face in the king's presence is illustrated in Nehemiah 2:1–2, where Nehemiah recounts how one day when he was sad in the Persian king's presence, and the king noticed, Nehemiah became “very much afraid.” As Gordis, 287, remarks, “Dissembling is important for the politician, then as now!”

2–4 There are significant grammatical and syntactical difficulties with regard to the relationship between vv.2 and 3 that call into question the usual translation of these verses. Also, it is difficult to understand contextually the command not to be in a hurry to leave the king's presence,

since the next line warns against standing in an evil matter, presumably still in the king's presence. Some recent commentators, in contrast to the usual understanding reflected in most translations (including the NIV), read the last phrase in v.2 as part of the same sentence as the beginning of v.3, thus resulting in the translation, "and in regards to the oath of God, do not be in a rush. Leave his presence" (so Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 273, 276–77; Longman, 209, 211). Other commentators have argued that the verb translated "be in a hurry" (*tibbāhēl*) should be understood instead as "be terrified" (so Crenshaw, 148, 150; Seow, 276, 279–80). Following this line, the NRSV translates, "Do not be terrified, go from his presence."

This matter is difficult to decide, but perhaps it is best to go with the first option. On this understanding, the person being addressed in this passage—possibly some courtier or one of the king's advisors—has made some suggestion or advised a course of action that the king has rejected. Qohelet's advice is to guard the king's mouth, i.e., don't argue with him, and certainly don't do so with an oath. As soon as is appropriately possible, leave his presence, and don't stubbornly maintain your position, for the only result will be evil for you. The king is going to do what the king is going to do.

We might compare this situation to that of Ahithophel, one of David's advisors, who betrayed him and became advisor to David's son Absalom, who was in the midst of an attempted coup against his father. Ahithophel gave Absalom some advice as to how to capture David, but Absalom followed another advisor's counsel instead. Seeing that his advice was rejected, Ahithophel left and hung himself (2Sa 17:1–23). Qohelet doesn't counsel suicide, but he does suggest leaving the king's presence as soon as possible.

5–6 The king must be obeyed, and for those who do so, harm from the king can usually be avoided. Of course, as suggested by the following verses, there is always the possibility of a certain arbitrariness or capriciousness to the king's actions, which, like God's capriciousness (see [comments on 3:15–22; 7:13–14](#)), keeps us guessing and thus instills greater fear of the king.

Nevertheless, Qohelet does suggest that the wise man should be able by his wisdom to figure out the proper times and procedures with regard to coming and going and behavior in the king's presence. He affirms that there

are indeed such times in v.6, but then he begins to qualify this affirmation by noting that “a man’s misery” (lit., “the evil of a man,” i.e., his misfortunes) weighs “heavily upon him.” Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes the idea of a burden that weighs heavily on people has to do with their not being able to figure things out (1:12; 3:10–11). It is no different here. There are proper times when the wise should be able to figure them out. But unfortunately, this confidence hangs under the cloud of the rhetorical question in v.1: “Who is so wise?” The answer is, “No one.”

7–8 The reason no one can be sure is that no one knows what will be, nor is there anyone who can tell him. No one can truly know the outcome of one’s actions—and in this context in particular, his actions before the king. To make matters worse, accompanying the ignorance is weakness (see [comments on 6:10–12](#)), or more precisely, lack of authority (*šallîṭ* [NIV, “power”] is better translated “authority” or “proprietorship”). There is probably an intentional ambiguity in the use of the word “wind” (*rûah*, GK 8120). While it may indeed mean “wind,” it is probably also to remind the reader of another meaning, “life-breath” (its meaning in 3:19, 21; 12:7).

What heightens this probability is the next line, which says that no one has authority over the day of death. (We should note here that only one person has ever truly had authority over the day of his death in such a way that he also had authority over life: “I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again” [Jn 10:17–18].)

The meaning of the third line in v.8 has been debated. Most modern commentaries and translations have proposed something like “discharge” for the noun *mišlahat* (GK 5449). But in the only other place the word occurs in the OT (Ps 78:49), it refers to a “band of destroying angels” (“company,” NRSV; “detachment,” NJB). Seow, 282–83, has proposed the translation “substitution,” referring to the practice of allowing a person, for a payment of money, to send someone to battle in their place. But it is difficult to see how either the idea of “discharge” or “substitution” connects well with the meaning of “detachment” in Psalm 78.

It seems best to understand this line to be in a close parallel relationship with the last line of the verse, which speaks of rescue; therefore, retaining the meaning “detachment” or “company,” I translate, “There will be no detachment on the day of battle.” (The LXX’s *en hēmera polemou* may be a

translation of a Hebrew text that had “in the day of battle” rather than the MT’s “in the battle.”) Seow, 283, has cogently argued for the intriguing suggestion that the battle here refers to an individual’s personal struggle with death. If that is the case, then the message of this line is that on the day of your appointed struggle with death, don’t expect a detachment (of angels or otherwise) to come to your aid. On the day of your death, the cavalry will not come to the rescue.

The last line in v.8 says that wickedness will not effectuate an escape either; literally it reads, “wickedness will not rescue its owners.” To talk about one as “owning” wickedness seems awkward, which has occasioned the NIV’s rendering “those who practice.” As well, it seems strange to introduce a moralizing concept in the last line when morality has not been at issue. Consequently, some commentators have suggested either that the word “wickedness” (*rešaʿ*) has been metathesized from the Hebrew word for “wealth” (*ʾōšer*), with the first and third consonants being switched, or that “wickedness” is a metonymy for the profit that might come from engaging in wicked practices, though this last option retains the moralizing concept. The metathesis possibility is attractive.

9 There is some ambiguity over whether “to his own hurt” refers to the man who “lords it over others” (lit., “over a man”) or to the man who is “lorded over.” The latter seems more in line with the context. Almost certainly, the man who “lords” here is the king, and those over whom he lords are the subjects—and more particularly the courtiers. It is another example of the oppression that Qohelet has had the privilege of witnessing in his absurd life (see 4:1–3; 7:15).

NOTES

1 The LXX gives evidence of having had a Hebrew text that read כֹּה חָכָם (kōh ḥākām, “so wise”) rather than כְּחֵחָכָם (kʰehḥākām, “like the wise man”). This reading probably makes better sense in the context.

2 In the MT the first word in the verse is אֲנִי (*ʾanî*, “I”) but is not attached syntactically to any other word in the verse; it is also untranslated by most ancient versions. The NIV leaves it untranslated; the NASB does translate it and provides the verb “say.” It is possible that some word like “say” has dropped out of the verse. Another possibility is that the word is a

dittography or corrupted suffix from the last word of v.1. Still another suggestion is that the word is from an otherwise biblically unattested **אֲנִי** (*ʾanpê*, “in the presence of”); but this causes problems because of the unassimilated *nun* (**נ**), as well as trying to account for the lack of the letter *peh* (**פ**).

6. *The Inversion of Justice and Injustice (8:10–17)*

OVERVIEW

Qohelet has described the problem of injustice before (3:16; 4:1–3; 5:8–11), and now he addresses it again for the last time (though it still lies in the background of all of his thought, especially with reference to what he himself perceives to be the injustice of God).

¹⁰Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.

¹¹When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong.

¹²Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. ¹³Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

¹⁴There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. ¹⁵So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

¹⁶When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—
¹⁷then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

COMMENTARY

10 This is an exceptionally difficult verse to translate. Space limitations preclude covering all the suggested translations and text-critical emendations that have been made for the verse. (Some of them are briefly mentioned in the notes.) The rendering adopted here is, “Then too, I have seen the wicked being buried. And they came and from the holy place they went. But forgotten were those who had done righteously.” This translation, while not adopting all the particulars, most closely follows the suggestions of Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 282–83) and Seow (276, 284–86).

The first sentence sets the stage with the observation of the funerals of wicked people. The second sentence is about those who came to the holy place (most likely a synagogue) to honor the dead and then exited the holy place to join in the funeral procession. The third sentence then completes the picture of what Qohelet calls absurd: those who had done righteously were forgotten. It is oppressive for him to think that the wicked are buried with pomp and great honor (cf. Job 21:32–33), while the righteous are forgotten.

11 Building on this example, Qohelet complains that the lack of swift retribution for wicked crimes only encourages further wickedness. In the case just mentioned in v.10—that of wicked people’s burial with full honors—there is no longer even the possibility of retribution for crimes committed. While initially one might think that Qohelet’s complaint is against those in the city who have honored the wicked and forgotten the righteous, the very fact that death has entered the picture means that, ultimately, his complaint is against God, who has allowed the wicked to go beyond the jurisdiction where justice can be meted out.

12–15 There is little, if any, justification for translating the initial word of v.12 (ʿašer) as the concessive “although”; rather, it should be translated “for.” In the Hebrew of this verse there is no noun to go with the adjective “hundred.” Some of the suggested translations are “a hundred times,” “a hundred years,” and “the evil of a hundred [or ‘hundreds’].” Whatever is the case, the first line of v.12 provides a further example of the complaint in v.12: “For a sinner does evil a hundred (times?) but lives long.”

In the rest of vv.12–13, Qohelet says that he knows that good will come to those who fear God, but good will not come to the wicked who do not fear God, and they will not live long. But this stands in direct contradiction not only to what he has just said, but also to what he will continue to say in

v.14. The introduction of this more traditional sentiment is so jarring that many commentators have argued that this is a secondary addition from a more orthodox editor. Others, who wish to understand Qohelet as more pious to begin with, grasp at any orthodox straw offered and suggest that here Qohelet's true heart shines through.

But in the light of the surrounding context, as well as the book as a whole, it is more realistic to see these comments as a parenthetical concession to traditional wisdom: "I know the teaching," says Qohelet, "and if push came to shove I would probably subscribe, but. . . ." Then he proceeds to give more examples of evidence to the contrary and pronounces the whole situation to be meaningless. Then he does what he usually does when backed into the absurd corner: he recommends, in another of his so-called *carpe diem* verses, that one simply try to enjoy life. He can't think of anything better.

16–17 Qohelet, in his search for wisdom, observes the "labor" (*'inyān*, better "burden" or "task"; see [comment on 1:13](#)) that is done on the earth. Part of what he "sees" is that one does not "see" sleep (both instances use the verb *rā'â*). It is unclear whether this sleeplessness describes the plight of people Qohelet has observed or whether it is self-referential (this search, as he said before in 1:13, being *his* task [*'inyān*]). Whatever the case, his conclusion is that what he has tried to discover, no one can discover. The works of God cannot be comprehended. A sage may claim that he knows, but he doesn't.

So the rhetorical question he has asked at the beginning of this chapter—"Who is so wise?"—has been answered anyway. No one is so wise that he knows, and no one understands the explanation of things. Or if we leave the question the way it is in most translations, "Who is like the wise man?" the answer is "No one, indeed, not even the wise man is like the wise man." There are no wise people, only those whom God has given for a few short years the task of trying to find wisdom, yet has not given along with the task the ability to find it. To Qohelet, this is absurd.

NOTES

10 A list of only the more important textual and semantic problems in the verse include the following questions. Note that my decisions on these questions can be seen in the translation offered in the exposition. (1) Should

the MT's רָשָׁעִים קָבְרִים וּבָאוּ (r^šā'im q^əburîm wābā'û, "the wicked buried and they came") be emended in accord with the LXX to רָשָׁעִים קָבַר מוֹבָאִים (r^šā'im qeber mōbā'im, "the wicked being brought to the grave")?

(2) Should וּמִמְקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ (ûmimm^eqôm qādôš, "and from the place of the holy [one]") be emended to וּמִמְמָּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ (ûmimmāqôm qādôš, "and from a holy place")?

(3) Should וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ (w^eyištakk^hû, "and they were forgotten") be alternatively translated, "and they were neglected," or should it be emended to וַיִּשְׁתַּבְּחוּ (w^eyištabb^hû, "and they were praised")?

(4) Should אֵשֶׁר (ʾ^ešer) be translated "where" (referring to "the city") or "who" (referring to the subject of the verb "had done")?

(5) Should the subject for כִּן-עָשׂוּ (kēn-ʿāsû) be understood as the previously mentioned wicked and translated "they had done thus," or should it be understood as a new subject for the verb "forgotten," and the whole last phrase, אֵשֶׁר כִּן-עָשׂוּ (ʾ^ešer kēn-ʿāsû) be translated "those who had done righteously" (with כִּן [kēn] being not the adverb "thus" but either the noun "right" or the adverb "righteously")?

13 כַּצֶּלַל (kaššēl, "like a shadow") has been understood in two different ways, depending on whether one sees the phrase as modifying the verb "lengthen" or the noun "days." With the first option, the lengthening of the shadow represents long life. But elsewhere, when the imagery of the shadow is used to describe length of life, it indicates fleetingness and brevity (see 6:12; also 1Ch 29:15; Job 8:9; 14:2; Pss 102:11; 109:23; 144:4). In the story of the sign given to Hezekiah (2Ki 20:9–11), the lengthening shadow is symbolic of shortness of life, not length. It may be best, therefore, to take "like a shadow" in this verse as modifying days, thus, "they will not lengthen their days, which are like a shadow."

7. The Hand of Fate and the Serendipity of the Hand (9:1–10)

OVERVIEW

There are many ways in which this section could be titled and summarized. The NIV's heading works well, "A Common Destiny for All." The title given here is based on the two occurrences of the word "hand" in

the first and last verses of the passage—in v.1 a reference to the hand of God, and in v.10 to a human hand. The difference between these two hands will become apparent in the exposition below.

¹So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him. ²All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good man,
so with the sinner;
as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.

³This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. ⁴Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

⁵For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even the memory of them is forgotten.

⁶Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.

⁷Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. ⁸Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. ⁹Enjoy

life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. ¹⁰Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

COMMENTARY

1 Qohelet, taking into consideration what he has already recounted and anticipating what he is about to relate, acknowledges that the righteous and the wise are in the hands of God. But there is little comfort to be derived from this assertion, as the next few verses confirm. C. S. Lewis, the great twentieth-century writer and Christian apologist, in his book *A Grief Observed* (the chronicle of his emotional anguish after the death of his wife from cancer) tells of his response to well-meaning, would-be comforters who tried to console him with the thought, “She’s in God’s hands now.” Lewis’s response was, “She was in God’s hands all the time, and I have seen what those hands did to her here. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body?”

Qohelet’s problem isn’t exactly of the same nature as Lewis’s, for Qohelet is unconvinced there is anything beyond the grave. His problem is that there is no way of knowing how those hands will treat one here in *this* life. Even love and hatred are somehow in God’s hands, and no one knows whether they will have in this life more of one than the other, or both, or neither. For Qohelet, “‘the hand of God’ is not a consoling thought or a sign of predilection; it merely designates divine power, from which there is no escape” (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 90).

2–3 After declaring that all have one fate (*miqreh*), Qohelet lists five pairs of human oppositions. (The NIV’s “the good and the bad” is textually problematic, and I have not included it in the list; see Notes.) Regarding the last of the five oppositions, it is not clear which of the two is positive or negative. In the first four pairs the positive member was listed first, so that would argue for seeing “those who take oaths” as being the positive member in the fifth pair. But Qohelet has already twice warned against entering into a vow too quickly (5:4–6; 8:2–3), so the ambiguity is not

totally removed. Perhaps there is a measure of intentional ambiguity in this last pair that reflects the ambiguity of life itself and the lack of any assured correlation between a deed and its consequences.

In v.3 Qohelet labels as an “evil” (*rāʿ*, GK 8274) that God makes no distinction between these moral opposites and rewards one as he does the other. He also complains that human hearts are full of “evil” (*rāʿ*) and madness. It is difficult to be certain whether Qohelet is using “evil” in its moral sense or in the sense of calamity. In support of the moral sense is 8:11, where he says that the hearts of men are filled to do evil (“filled” and “evil” being the same words as in 9:3). Against the moral sense is the use of “evil” in the first part of the verse, where it seems to be used in a nonmoral sense. Also against it is the fact that in the passage Qohelet has made no clear switch from talking about what happens to “all” to talking just about the wicked. It seems more likely that the nonmoral sense is meant here. The verse ends abruptly with the phrase (lit.), “and afterward, to the dead.” After a lifetime of ill fortune and madness—comes death.

4–6 Reversing himself from his previous pronouncements concerning the advantage of the dead over the living (4:2), Qohelet now argues that life, though it is full of calamity and madness, is preferable to the alternative, death. He now seems to think that pain and mental anguish are preferable to having no feelings at all. The exact level at which the proverb in v.4 works is unclear. Is he talking about dogs and lions? Or does he expect the reader to make the immediate analogical jump and realize that “‘dog’ (a scavenger) was a metaphor for a contemptible and worthless person, whereas ‘lion’ designated a prince or person of great worth” (Crenshaw, 161)?

Whatever the case, Qohelet says that even the dog has “hope” or “confidence” (*biṭṭāhôn*; there is some debate over the exact nuance). In what this “hope” or “confidence” consists is not communicated precisely, unless we are to understand that Qohelet is being ironic and that it consists in nothing more than what is related in v.5. In a statement that, had it been written two thousand years later, could have been seen as a cruel parody of Descartes’ famous line, “I think, therefore I am,” Qohelet says, “I know I’m going to die; therefore, I’m alive and have the advantage over those who are dead and know nothing.” If this is, in fact, the “hope” of which he speaks, it is ironic indeed. Or perhaps we are to understand that the hope refers to all

the things he says the dead do not have—reward, being remembered, love, hate, jealousy.

Notice, again, that by including “hate” and “jealousy” in the list, the idea of “better to have bad feelings than no feelings at all” is reinforced. Especially painful is the erasure of any memory that this person had ever lived. A graveyard I visited recently illustrates Qohelet’s point. The graveyard was unkempt, overgrown with thick brush and tall weeds, and several of the tombstones had weathered so badly that the inscriptions were no longer legible. For some graves there was no tombstone, only two crossed wooden sticks with writing that could barely be made out. Ironically, at the entrance to this graveyard was the sign, “Forever Remembered.” Qohelet is firmly convinced that the sign makes false claims. And it does not matter whether the deceased was wise or foolish, righteous or wicked—one fate fits all.

7–9 We come now to the last of the so-called *carpe diem* passages in the book (unless one also includes 11:7–10; see [Message and Purpose](#) in the [introduction](#) and the [exposition](#) at 2:24–26). All of these passages have come after Qohelet has painted his picture of life’s absurdity with the darkest colors on his palette. Having painted this last picture especially dark, he now correspondingly gives his most detailed advice as to how to live in the light of this absurdity. We have already seen the advice to eat, to drink, and to be joyful (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15), but now are added one new perspective and three new pieces of advice.

The new perspective is that God has “already” (*kēbār*) approved your deeds (so NASB, preferable to NIV’s “now”; the same word is translated by the NIV as “long since” in v.6). What the approved deeds are is not said specifically, though it is most likely the actions of joyfully eating and drinking. But this statement raises the question as to how Qohelet knows that these deeds have been approved. The answer is provided by the contrast with v.6. There, as we have just seen, the love, the hate, and the jealousy of the dead have “already” (*kēbār*) perished. How does Qohelet know this? Because they’re dead! In the same way, Qohelet knows that God has already approved your eating and drinking and feasting and making merry. How does he know this? Because you’re alive and doing these things.

Qohelet had already said that the ability to eat and drink and be joyful is the gift of God (3:13; 5:19). Automatically then, if you are doing these things, you must be among the gifted ones. Fox puts it well: “As always when praising pleasure, Qohelet observes that it is God’s gift. Now he goes farther: not only does God allow you enjoyment, he *wants* you to have it—if you are one of the fortunate” (*Time to Tear Down*, 294; similarly Crenshaw, 162). But remember, you will not always be so fortunate. And one day, the “already” that will be said about you is that you have “already” lost any participation in the course of human events (i.e., “under the sun”), and your love and hate and jealousy will have long since vanished.

Two of the three new pieces of advice are always to dress in white and to anoint your head with oil. The “always” character of this advice is striking. While many commentators regard these two pieces of advice as being somewhat “festive” in their orientation, it is also important to see that the advice is not, as it were, to be continually in attendance at parties and feasts; rather, the advice is to turn every day into a festive occasion. Delitzsch, 363, referencing 2 Samuel 14:2, notes that white clothes “are in contrast to the black robes of mourning” and that “sorrow and anointing exclude one another.” To dress in white and to anoint your head with oil is to hold your own small celebration of the fact that for at least one more day you have cheated death and the grave, where feasting no longer occurs.

The third piece of advice is to enjoy life with a woman that you love. Because the definite article “the” is not attached to the word “woman” in the Hebrew, there has been much discussion as to whether we are to understand this woman to be one’s wife. If at this point in the book the reader is still supposed to be making Solomonic connections, the recall of the narratives about that king’s seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines might suggest that Qohelet is saying flippantly, “Just pick one!” More likely, however, the text is meant to be ambiguous. The woman may be one’s wife, or she may not, though there is no justification for any interpretation that would include adultery or promiscuity (at least as understood by ancient Near Eastern conventions). We should probably also relate this advice to 4:8, where Qohelet complained about the man for whom there was “no second” with whom to share his joy (see [comments](#)).

It has become commonplace in commentaries to note the similarities between this passage and the Epic of Gilgamesh, a text that dates to around

the eighteenth century BC—over thirteen hundred years before Ecclesiastes. The protagonist, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is given some advice by Shiduri, a tavern keeper (*The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, trans. by Andrew George [London: Penguin, 1999], 124):

Said the tavern-keeper to him, to Gilgamesh:
“O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
The life that you seek you never will find:
when the gods created mankind,
death they dispensed to mankind,
life they kept for themselves.
But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
dance and play day and night!
Let your clothes be clean,
let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
For such is the destiny [of mortal men].”

As one can easily see, there is a striking similarity between this ancient text and Ecclesiastes 9:7–10, not just in the particulars but also in general tone. Karel van der Toorn, however, warns against too quick an assumption that the author of Ecclesiastes has simply borrowed wholesale from this text, or at least exclusively so; he notes other ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts that express similar sentiments (“Did Ecclesiastes Copy Gilgamesh?” *BRev* 16, no. 1 [2000]: 22–30, 50). But at the very least, we can say that Qohelet’s thinking was certainly not anomalous in the ancient Near East.

Twice in v.9 Qohelet refers to absurdity: “all the days of this meaningless life . . . all your meaningless days.” Many commentators argue that the

second occurrence should be deleted and note that several ancient versions, including one LXX text (Alexandrinus) and a few Hebrew manuscripts, do not have it. But in addition to the fact that all other LXX texts do have it, the retention makes better sense for at least two reasons. First, since the repetition is not an exact one—the first phrase uses the word “life” whereas the second one does not—accidental omission on the part of these manuscripts, rather than accidental duplication, seems to be the more easily made mistake. But more important, as Gordis, 306, notes, the repeated but shortened phrase “gives a haunting effect, like the Kinah [lament] rhythm.” In the midst of his encouragement to live life to the fullest, Qohelet still sings a dirge.

He goes on to encourage excellence in the art of making merry—if you are one of the fortunate ones whose hand has serendipitously found opportunity to do so. It is significant that among the four things he lists in v.10 as missing from the place to which all are going, he saves “wisdom” for last. All along he has been on a quest, by his wisdom, to find wisdom (7:23). But in the end, no one is wise. He had declared that “wisdom preserves the life of its possessor” (7:12). But now, in this sad verse, we find out that, at most, all it really ever does is delay the inevitable.

NOTES

1–2 Some commentators favor understanding that the end of v.1 and the beginning of v.2 constitute a clause and emend the first word in v.2 from **הַכֹּל** (*hakkōl*, “the all”) to **הַבֶּל** (*habel*, “absurdity”) thus resulting in the reading, “Everything before them is absurdity. Since all share a common destiny. . . .” There is also versional support for this reading. It is an attractive suggestion, but the MT as it stands is not unintelligible.

2 After the phrase “the righteous and the wicked,” the MT has **לְטוֹב** (*laṭṭōb*, “to the good”), to which the NIV adds, “and the bad” (see text note), in order to provide an opposing term in accordance with all the other pairs in the verse. But in accord with some versional evidence and the word’s recurrence in the same verse (“the good man . . . the sinner”), it is more likely that it should be deleted.

4 In place of the MT’s *Kethib* **יִבְחַר** (*yibḥar*, “he will choose”) or **יִבְחָר** (*yibbāḥēr*, “he will be chosen”) is the *Qere* **יִחְבַּר** (*yḥubbar*, “is joined”),

adopted by most translations and commentators.

9 Addison Wright prefers dropping the second *hebel* phrase, “meaningless days,” not only in accordance with evidence from some of the versions, but also because retaining it would result in thirty-eight occurrences of the word *hebel* in the book, whereas the word’s numerical value is thirty-seven. On his numerical analysis of how *hebel* is used in Ecclesiastes, it should occur only thirty-seven times (“The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 42 [1980]: 44). While Wright’s thesis about the craft with which the author may have structured the book numerically certainly has merit, even being adopted by Roland Murphy (*Wisdom Literature*, 127–29; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxviii–xli), a text-critical decision to delete a phrase for numerical reasons seems tenuous.

8. Time and Chance (9:11–12)

¹¹I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.

¹²Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

COMMENTARY

11–12 Like the wind, again Qohelet turns (*sābab*, GK 6015), going around in circles (see [comments on 1:6](#) and [2:20](#)), and finds another example of oppressive absurdity. In v.11 he lists five areas in which one should always be able to predict the outcome. The first two, a race and a battle, are physical activities that by their very nature should turn out in favor of the fastest and the strongest. The last three, the states of being wise, brilliant, and learned, should bring to their possessors wealth and favor (whether from God or people is not indicated). But Qohelet says that doesn't happen.

Some translations qualify each of these statements with the word “always,” but the qualification is unnecessary for two reasons. First, it is common for poetry in any language to be somewhat hyperbolic in expression, and adding the word “always” takes away this poetic character. Second, it is at least possible that Qohelet is not being hyperbolic but that he really means what he says. Even though we might think the fastest person won the race and the strongest person won the battle, in actuality all that we have really witnessed is one person's taking a temporary lead. In reality, every contest ends in a tie—the loser and the winner both die. The only real winners are “time and chance”—they conquer all.

Furthermore, we don't know when “time and chance” will claim their victory. For just like fish and birds who are caught in nets and snares as they are about to get their food, just when we think we are about to make it, we end up springing the traps that time and chance have laid out for us. Of course, the thoughtful reader should take the logical step and ask, “Who is it, then, that controls time and chance?” For Qohelet, the answer, as we have seen all along, is oppressive.

NOTES

11 פֶּגַע (*pegaʿ*, “chance”; GK 7004), only occurs elsewhere in 1 Kings 5:4, where it is qualified with the word “evil.” It is difficult to say with certainty whether the word by itself is a neutral term and needs a qualifier such as “evil” to communicate the idea of misfortune, or whether it actually means misfortune, with the adjective “evil” in 1 Kings 5:4 simply intensifying the inherent meaning.

12 The NIV's "when his hour will come" is literally "his time," but the translation certainly captures the idea in our more current idiom that this time is, in fact, the time of one's death.

9. A Forgotten Sage (9:13–18)

¹³I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: ¹⁴There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. ¹⁵Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. ¹⁶So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.

¹⁷The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one sinner destroys much good.

COMMENTARY

13–16 Qohelet now recounts an example of wisdom that greatly impressed him. Unfortunately, the great impression was also one that caused him great depression. He tells what appears to be a fairly straightforward story. A small, sparsely populated city was besieged with huge siegeworks by a great king. A poor but wise man (or "commoner"; so Seow, 310) was found, and he saved the city by his wisdom; but afterwards nobody remembered him.

There are, however, several subtleties in the story that can easily be missed. First, the fact that a great king (some believe this phrase indicates he was an emperor) would build huge siegeworks to capture a small, sparsely populated town seems odd. Second, in a city that had only a few

people, why did this wise man have to be “found” or “discovered”? Third, the wisdom of this man must have been truly remarkable for being able to save the city against overwhelming odds. Fourth, how was it possible that in such a small city this man could then be forgotten?

Perhaps it was these tremendous incongruities that caused Qohelet to say that this story “greatly” impressed him. “Impressed” may actually be too positively nuanced; the Hebrew simply says “it was great to me.” The translation could just as easily be “it appalled me.” Qohelet’s initial observation on recounting the story is how much more advantageous wisdom is than strength. But the rest of the story shows how powerless wisdom is when no one pays attention to it.

17–18 Rather than the NIV’s translation, which turns the Hebrew in v.17 into a prescription rather than a description, the verse should probably be read as follows: “The words of the wise in quiet are heard more than the cry of a ruler among fools” (with “in quiet” describing the “words of the wise,” not how they are heard). The previous example seems to provide contrary evidence, but the point being made here is that a wise man can make himself understood in a calm, quiet voice more than can a ruler directing loud rantings toward an audience of fools.

Of course, the problem is that when a wise man addresses a group of fools, who are more impressed by noise than substance, his words are wasted. But when the words are heeded, the weapons of war can be overcome. Yet even then, it only takes one sinner to nullify all the good that either was done or might have been done. Perhaps the implication is that in the previous example, “for one, brief, shining moment” wisdom prevailed and a city was saved. But then wisdom was forgotten and a single fool ended up reversing all the good that was done. Absurd.

NOTES

14 מְצֹדִים (*mēṣôḏîm*, “siegeworks”) occurs only about six times in the OT, but two of those are Ecclesiastes 7:26 and 9:12, where both times it means something like “snares.” This has caused some to suggest that the better reading here would be מְצֹרִים (*mēṣûrîm*), an otherwise unattested form apparently derived from the more prevalent term for siege or siegeworks, מְצֹר (*māṣôr*). This is possible, but it is also possible that,

given the few times that מְצֻדִים occurs, it may indeed have the meaning “siegeworks.”

15 There has been much discussion over the exact rendering of וּמִלֵּט (ûmillat, “and he saved”). Several commentators have opted to understand it as modal, “he might have saved,” rather than indicative (see Seow, 310–11). Supporting this translation is v.16, which says that the poor man’s wisdom is despised and his words not heeded; the NIV adds “no longer” to suggest, perhaps correctly, that the despising and failure to listen came after the rescue. Against this alternative understanding is that on this reading לֹא זָכַר (lō zākar, “did not remember”) has to be taken in the sense of “did not consider” or “did not give thought to.” As attractive as the suggestion is, it seems perhaps best to stay with the traditional understanding.

10. Folly Gets More Press than Wisdom (10:1–3)

OVERVIEW

This chapter contains probably the most loosely connected material in the book, and the divisions between individual passages can seem arbitrary. Nevertheless, throughout the chapter the absurdity and topsy-turviness of life continues to be demonstrated. In this first section, we find some thoughts about the garishness of fools and their folly.

¹As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

²The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left.

³Even as he walks along the road,
the fool lacks sense
and shows everyone how stupid he is.

COMMENTARY

1 Despite grammatical problems with the exact understanding of the first line (see Notes), the basic message is clear: as a dead fly (or flies) in perfume can actually reverse the effect so that the perfume becomes foul-smelling, so a little folly can reverse the effects of wisdom and honor. While this can be related to the previous passage—in particular 9:18, with its assertion that one sinner can destroy much good done by a wise person—it is also possible that this verse is making a quite different point, namely, that a wise person who turns to folly makes people forget that he was ever wise. The turning of the wise person into a fool is a distinct possibility (see 7:7), and all that people will remember is the folly.

2 In biblical Hebrew there are no clear instances where “left” refers to evil as there are in later, postbiblical Hebrew, though this verse could itself be evidence of the development. In any case, since most people are right-handed, or turn to the right, the fool’s turning aside to the left makes him more conspicuous. Thus folly draws more attention than wisdom.

3 Even in the simple act of walking on a path the fool demonstrates his lack of sense. As Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 302) notes, “One does not need much intelligence when treading along a well-beaten path, such as the highway to a city, whereas in other places, such as the market, the activity may require some application of thought.”

The last line in the verse is capable of at least three different interpretations. Literally it reads, “and he says to everyone he is a fool.” One possibility is that he is calling other people fools. Another is that he proclaims as he walks along, “I am a fool! I am a fool!” The third is that the subject of the verb “says” is the word “heart” (the previous line [NIV, “the fool lacks sense”] being literally, “his heart is lacking”). Fox (*ibid.*, 302–3) compares this to Proverbs 12:23, “The heart of fools cries out, ‘Folly!’” and argues that the idea in v.3 is that a fool’s heart “works against him” and produces behavior that, contrary to what the fool may say, announces to everyone that the person is a fool. It is not impossible that all three interpretations may be correct. The unfortunate thing, as Qohelet sees it, is that whereas fools, by what they say and do, get a lot of attention, wisdom receives comparatively little.

NOTE

זְבוּבֵי מָוֶת 1 (*zēbûbê māwet*, “flies of death”) is problematic for two reasons: (1) the phrase “flies of death” doesn’t actually mean dead flies, and (2) the verb that follows, “to cause to stink,” is in the singular. A reasonable emendation, suggested by several commentators, is to read instead זְבוּב יָמוּת (*zēbûb yāmût*, “a fly dies” or “a fly that dies”).

11. Some Loosely Connected Words about Rulers (10:4–7)

⁴If a ruler’s anger rises against you,
do not leave your post;
calmness can lay great errors to rest.

⁵There is an evil I have seen under the sun,
the sort of error that arises from a ruler:

⁶Fools are put in many high positions,
while the rich occupy the low ones.

⁷I have seen slaves on horseback,
while princes go on foot like slaves.

4 Qohelet now gives some advice about behavior *before* rulers and then makes some observations about the behavior *of* rulers. It is unclear whether the “ruler” (*môšēl*) in v.4 is to be understood as a king, with Qohelet having much to say about kings in other passages, or is a lesser, perhaps provincial, official. If he is not a king, that may explain the contradiction between the advice given here and that given in 8:3, where he encourages leaving a king’s presence should he become upset.

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for the biblical wisdom material to give apparently contradictory advice, on the expectation that the wise person will know which piece of advice to follow when (cf. Pr 26:4–5). In this case, Qohelet advises that one should not leave when the ruler gets upset but retain calmness and composure, thus being able to appease the ruler’s anger even with regard to great “offenses” (rather than “errors”).

5–7 Qohelet expresses indignation about a certain kind of error rulers make—that of putting fools in positions of authority but rich people in lower positions. He provides a concrete example with his observation of servants riding on horseback while princes walk on foot.

We must note two important things here. First, Qohelet is complaining about a world that seems to have been turned upside-down. Things are not the way they should be, and higher values have been exchanged for lower ones. But second, there seems to be a bit of class-snobbishness on Qohelet’s part in that his distinction is not between fools and the wise or righteous; rather, it is between fools and the wealthy and then between servants and princes. This should remind us that although Qohelet has some legitimate complaints about the absurdity of life, some of those absurdities are related more to his own vested interests rather than the common lot of humankind.

NOTE

4 There seems to be a wordplay using the same root word with two different meanings: **תָּנַחַ** (*tannah*, “leave”) and **יָנַחַ** (*yannîah*, “lay . . . to rest”), both from the root **נָוַחַ** (*nûah*, “rest, settle”).

There have been several suggested meanings for **מָרַפָּא** (*marpē* , “calmness”), such as “gentleness,” “composure,” “soothing,” and “pacifying.” It is evidently a derivative of the root **רָפָא** (*rāpā*, “to heal”).

12. Some Occupational Hazards and Difficulties (10:8–11)

OVERVIEW

These verses deal with various occupational hazards (vv.8–9) or with problems to be encountered in the performance of one’s task (vv.10–11). It is important to note from the outset that with regard to the hazards there is no indication of moral judgments being made, nor, for that matter, are there any evaluations of the skills or work ethic of the tradesmen to whom these accidents happen. Nor is there any indication that the “accidents” are due to carelessness; they just happen. It appears to be different, however, for v.10. In v.11, whether there is blame to be assigned is unclear.



⁸Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
 whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a
 snake.

⁹Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them;
 whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

¹⁰If the ax is dull
 and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed
 but skill will bring success.

¹¹If a snake bites before it is charmed,
 there is no profit for the charmer.

COMMENTARY

8 Though the first example in the verse is used elsewhere in the wisdom literature as a metaphor for how the wicked plot to destroy the righteous only to have the plot turn against them (Pss 7:15; 9:15; 35:7–8; 57:6; Pr 26:27; 28:10), there is no such connotation in this passage; the digging of a pit could simply be in order to make a well or to set a trap for wild animals. Likewise, in the second example there could be a number of reasons why a person might want to break through or tear down a wall that was no longer serving a purpose. Walls built of stone without mortar could easily become habitations for snakes.

9 There are several dangers involved in quarrying rock or splitting logs. Interestingly, in the second example, though we would normally think that the primary danger in splitting logs would be from the axe, the implication of the Hebrew is that the injury may be caused by the logs themselves. This parallels the first example, in which the injury is caused by the rocks.

10 Though the grammar and syntax of this verse are difficult (see Notes), the message seems clear: in the words of a more recent proverb, “more sweating at the stone—less sweating in the field.” The last line seems to

suggest that the wise person will take care to spend the proper amount of time sharpening the axe at the stone.

11 There is some ambiguity as to the meaning of v.11—and perhaps intentionally, to allow the verse to be read both ways. The common understanding is that the snake bites before the charmer is able to arrive and prevent it from doing so by his incantations. But the Hebrew of the verse, “if the snake bites without a charm,” also allows the interpretation that the snake bites without having been charmed to do so. (For this line of interpretation in the Talmud and other rabbinical sources, see Delitzsch, 382; Gordis, 323.) On this interpretation, the desired action occurs before the charmer can do his work, so that the charmer receives no fee—he wasn’t needed in the first place.

Whatever the case may be, it should be noted that unlike v.10, there is nothing in the verse that suggests the charmer was late or negligent. It just happened. Wisdom and skill are wonderful things to have, but opportunity is needed as well. You have to be diligent, but you also have to be fortunate.

NOTE

10 Though there are several unique lexical and grammatical features about this verse that present some problems, it is especially the last three words that are the main issue. The *Kethib* of the MT has וִיתְרוֹן הַכְשִׁיר הַחֲכָמָה (w^yitrôn haksîr hokmâ, “the advantage of to be successful [or ‘to succeed’] is wisdom”), the middle word being a Hiphil infinitive construct (the *Qere* reads it as an infinitive absolute). Several solutions have been presented. Anthony Frendo recommends recognizing the construction as a broken construct chain and reading, “the advantage to wisdom is success [or ‘to succeed’]” (“The ‘Broken Construct Chain’ in Qoh 10:10b,” *Bib* 62 [1981], 544–45). Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 306) favors repointing the infinitive construct to a nominal form and reading, “the advantage of the skilled man is wisdom.” Seow, 307, 318, favors understanding the verb to have the meaning “to appropriate” and translates, “It is an advantage to appropriate wisdom.” Whichever solution one opts for, the intent of the verse still seems clear.

13. Some Words about Words (10:12–15)

¹²Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious,
but a fool is consumed by his own lips.

¹³At the beginning his words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness—

¹⁴and the fool multiplies words.

No one knows what is coming—
who can tell him what will happen after him?

¹⁵A fool's work wearies him;
he does not know the way to town.

COMMENTARY

12 This passage is about fools, but in particular about their words, which turn their owners into self-destructive, raving mad ranters of meaningless verbiage. That the words of the wise are gracious is commonplace in Wisdom literature (see, e.g., Pr 10:11, 20; 15:4; 16:21, 24; 20:15). Qohelet calls attention to the observation, but primarily to set up his more extensive description of the fool and his words. The implication of the first line is that the graciousness of the wise person's speech has a pleasant effect on *others*. But the fool's speech results in *self*-destruction. Of course, gracious words are also good for their owner, and fools' words can also be destructive of others. But the critical point here is that the fool's speech hurts himself.

13 If a fool gives a speech, and at the beginning it sounds like nonsense, then wait till you hear the end of the speech! While this could almost be funny, unfortunately the madness at the end of the speech is characterized by "wickedness" or "evil" as well. "When words are many, sin is not absent" (Pr 10:19).

14 While some commentators suggest that the first line should be seen as concluding the thought of v.13 and has nothing to do with what follows (cf. NIV), it is more probable that the last two lines of v.14 are reinforcing the first line (cf. NASB). The fool multiplies words. Thinking that he knows a

lot about everything, including what's going to happen in the future, he prattles on ad nauseum. He thinks he knows a lot about the future, but the rest of the verse says no one really knows what's going to happen, nor is anyone able to tell anyone else.

But something subtler is going on here as well. The point is being demonstrated. Qohelet has already talked about ignorance of the future several times before (3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7, 16–17), and now he takes two more repetitive lines to say it again. If a fool multiplies words to pontificate the future, Qohelet has multiplied words to pontificate the fool's ignorance. Perhaps Qohelet is the fool.

15 There are two grammatical problems with the first line in this verse. The Hebrew reads literally, “the work of fools wearies him.” The first problem is that the noun “work” is masculine, but the verb “wearies” is feminine. The second is that “fools” is plural, but the pronominal suffix “him” on the verb is singular. As for the gender issue, I agree with Seow, 320 (cf. BDB, 765), that the best solution is simply to understand that the word for “work” is here being used as a feminine noun, possibly because it is being used as an abstract noun. With regard to the number problem, the best solution is to understand that the antecedent for the suffix “him” on the verb “wearies” is not “fools,” but the particular fool who has been the example in the previous verses.

In other words, the first line could be rendered, “The work that fools do wearies him,” i.e., “The work that fools have been assigned to do wearies him.” And the work that has been assigned to fools is to engage in endless talk out of the fullness of their ignorance, especially regarding the future. The irony is that they do not even know the directions to town, “the best-known place in the region” (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 308).

NOTES

14 Some of the versions as well as some Hebrew manuscripts read מַה־שֶּׁחָיָה (mah-šehāyâ, “what has happened”) rather than the MT’s מַה־שְּׁיִיחֶה (mah šeyyihyeh, “what will be”). The MT makes more sense in the context.

15 Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 308) has argued for an emendation to solve the grammatical difficulties in v.15, namely, that of changing

עֲמַל הַכְּסִילִים תִּיָּעַנּוּ (^a*mal hakk^esîlîm t^yagg^eennû*, “the toil of the fools wearies him”) to עֲמַל הַכְּסִיל מִיָּעַנּוּ (^a*mal hakk^esîl m^yagg^eennû*, “the toil of the fool wearies him”). The solution proposed above leaves the MT as is and correctly, I believe, catches the nuance of the verse.

14. Some Loosely Connected Words about Royalty (10:16–20)

OVERVIEW

In vv.5–7 the concern was about rulers who put fools and the lowborn into positions of authority, while they put the rich and princes in positions of lower authority. But what if the king himself is low born and princes act like fools?

¹⁶Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant
and whose princes feast in the morning.

¹⁷Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth
and whose princes eat at a proper time—
for strength and not for drunkenness.

¹⁸If a man is lazy, the rafters sag;
if his hands are idle, the house leaks.

¹⁹A feast is made for laughter,
and wine makes life merry,
but money is the answer for everything.

²⁰Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,
because a bird of the air may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

COMMENTARY

16–17 The NIV has opted for “servant” to translate *na‘ar* but in a footnote calls attention to another possibility, “child”; both meanings are well attested. In this verse, though the king’s youth may be part of the problem, the fact that the contrasting term in v.17 is *ben-ḥôrîm* (“son of nobility”) suggests that more than youth and immaturity are at issue. Given the previous instances where Qohelet has betrayed his class bias (6:8; 10:5–7), we should probably take this as another display of it. Somehow, a boor has become king. When that happens, the princes of the land also act like boors. They do not contain their times of feasting to the evening but also eat and feast during the daytime, when they should be accomplishing business (cf. Isa 5:11; also Pr 31:4–5). Woe to the land in which this happens.

But the land is blessed when the king is wellborn, for then its princes feast at the proper time. The NIV’s “for strength and not for drunkenness” implies, as do other translations, that the princes eat to build up their strength and not to become drunk. To achieve this meaning, however, the same word that was translated “feast” in v.16 (*yō’kēlû*) is here translated “eat.” It seems better to understand that “feast” is meant in both verses. And the purpose of feasting is not to build up one’s strength. Thus *bigbûrâ* would be better translated “in strength” or “with strength,” which, in contrast to “drunkenness,” would mean something like, “with manly self-control.” (For this interpretation see Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 308; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 104; Seow, 328, 330). Blessed is the land in which this happens.

18 Commentators are divided as to how, or even whether, vv.18–19 relate to the surrounding verses and to each other. The position taken here is that while these verses, which may have been popular proverbs of the day, were not necessarily coined in connection with the matters Qohelet mentions in this section, the frame-narrator places them here because he perceives them as in some way being a commentary on what has just been said in vv.16–17. Thus v.18 relates to v.16, and v.19 to v.17.

The surface meaning of v.18 is easily understood: Laziness and idleness let a house fall into disrepair. Though many commentators dismiss the possibility, it is likely that “house” is used here to refer to the kingdom or the “royal house.” Seow, 331, calls attention to various places where “house” means just that, both in biblical texts (e.g., 1Sa 20:16; 2Sa 7:11;

1Ki 12:26; 13:2; Isa 7:2, 13) and in Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Akkadian texts. The “house” of state will not last long when lowborn men rule it and when its princes feast endlessly and never attend to the administration of the kingdom.

19 This verse affirms that feasting is for laughter and drinking wine is for merriment. Nothing negative is implied here. Among those commentators that do see a relationship between vv.16–17 and vv.18–19, this verse is usually understood as a negative comment related to v.16, as is v.18. The positive tone of these lines, however, does not fit the negative situation in v.16. It is better to see here an affirmation that feasting done at the proper time, as is the case in v.17, is entirely appropriate.

The last line is enigmatic, inasmuch as the verb “answer” (*ānâ*) has a wide variety of meanings. Probably, “everything” (*hakkōl*) should be taken as the equivalent of “both,” referring to the activities of eating and drinking, and the verb should be taken to mean “provide” (see Gordis, 328; Whybray, 157; Longman, 252). To feast and make merry require money. This is not a critical comment, but it is perhaps a somewhat grudging or resentful one: You have to be one of God’s favorites to be gifted with the money that allows an extravagant lifestyle.

20 In the last few verses Qohelet has made a couple of negative comments about kings. (The frame-narrator allows his fictional royal character to do so.) But now he gives a warning that one should not be too vocal in expressing dissatisfaction with the current reigning monarch or the rich, who are most likely in positions of authority. There is even a bit of hyperbole in the first line: “Don’t even think about it!”

The last two lines were probably more sinister-sounding in the ancient Near Eastern context than in our ears today. We would probably equate the thoughts expressed there with something like, “a little birdie told me.” During the Persian period in particular, as the Greek historians Xenophon (*Cyropaedia*, 8.2.10) and Herodotus (*History* 1.114) relate, there was a network of government informants known as “the eyes and ears of the king.” (For these and other such references, see Seow, 341.) So be careful, Qohelet says, with whom you share negative thoughts about the king. Don’t even share them with your wife. Better yet, don’t even share them with yourself.

NOTE

20 Other translations have been offered for **בַּמַּדְעָא** (*b^emaddā^{ca}kā*, “in your thoughts”). The word **מַדָּע** (*maddā^c*) occurs only five other times in the OT, usually with the meaning “knowledge” (see, e.g., 2Ch 1:10–12 for three of the occurrences). By the changing of one or more consonants, various suggested emendations result in terms that are thought to be more in parallel with “bedroom” in the next line, such as “bedchamber” (so NASB), “couch,” “repose,” “acquaintance,” etc. All textual witnesses attest to the accuracy of the MT, however, and “thoughts” or “thinking” is a fair extrapolation from a term for “knowledge.”

15. Risk Management? Or Ignorance Control? (11:1–6)

OVERVIEW

If, as Qohelet has repeatedly said, the future is unknowable, what are the implications for business, investment, and labor?

¹Cast your bread upon the waters,
for after many days you will find it again.

²Give portions to seven, yes to eight,
for you do not know what disaster may come upon the
land.

³If clouds are full of water,
they pour rain upon the earth.

Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where it falls, there will it lie.

⁴Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

⁵As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb,

so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things.

⁶Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let not your hands be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.

COMMENTARY

1–2 From ancient times these verses were understood as an encouragement to charitable giving; this became the traditional interpretation. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a shift occurred to what became the dominant interpretation, namely, that the advice was to take risks with one's investments, perhaps even overseas, but also to diversify those investments. Of late more commentators have returned to the traditional interpretation.

The usual supports cited include one text from the same time period as Ecclesiastes, early Jewish and Christian interpretation of these verses, and similar-sounding proverbs from other cultures in the region. The Egyptian text Instruction of Ankhsheshonky, dated somewhere between the fifth and first centuries BC, has the lines, "Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it" (text in *AEL*, 3:174). Though the parallel is in some respects apparent, the "bread" metaphor is lacking; the text itself may date later than Ecclesiastes. The later proverbial similarities in other texts may have arisen from early Jewish and Christian interpretation. (Two reasoned arguments in favor of the traditional interpretation may be found in Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 311–14 [with some qualifications]; Seow, 334–36, 341–44.)

The position adopted here is that the investment scenario best fits the context of the passage and the thought of Qohelet as a whole. Qohelet has thus far demonstrated no real concern for the poor. The phrase, "Send . . . upon the waters" (a better translation for *šallah* than "cast"), has a parallel

in Isaiah 18:2, which speaks of sending (same verb) boats on the water. In Proverbs 31:14, the virtuous woman “is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar” (“food” being *leḥem*, the same word as “bread” in Ecc 11:1). The advice, then, is to take some risks, especially regarding foreign investments, but “don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” since you don’t know which of several disasters might occur.

The use of the numbers “seven . . . eight” is referred to as a “graded numerical saying,” a poetic device, both in Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern languages, in which the numbers are not to be taken literally or exclusively (see, e.g., Pr 6:16; 30:15–33; Am 1–2; Mic 5:4). Notice that Qohelet’s advice is, of course, directed to those who are fortunate enough to be in a position to invest.

3–4 It is possible that two of the disasters of which Qohelet speaks are given in v.3. Clouds may well bring rain at the most inopportune time. A tree may fall, perhaps because of a heavy wind or storm and, depending on where it falls, cause no, little, or significant damage. Here, if indeed the tree falls because of a windstorm, it is possible that vv.3–4 together form a chiasm, with the two mentions of clouds (vv.3a and 4b) going together, and the tree (v.3b) and the wind (v.4a) going together. Whether or not the chiasm is intentional, the message is clearly that the contingencies, the possibilities of disaster, should not force one into a state of paralysis. Even as, in the light of life’s absurdity, Qohelet has previously recommended laboring and taking pleasure in the fruits of one’s labor over the alternative of doing nothing, here he recommends action over inaction in the face of the unknown contingent.

5 There are two different readings for the first half of the verse. Staying with the MT but supplying the conjunction “and” before “how bones” (*kaʿṣāmîm*; NIV, “how the body”), many commentators and translations, including both the NIV and NASB, understand that there are two separate analogies: “the path of the wind” and “the body . . . in the womb.”

But, without supplying the conjunction and by reading a different preposition on the noun *baʿṣāmîm* (“in the bones”), one arrives at a different translation containing only one analogy: “as you do not know how the spirit comes into the bones in the mother’s womb.” The Hebrew letters *b* and *k* are similar (כ and כּ) and easily confused, especially in older scripts. This is supported by a number of Hebrew manuscripts and would

seem to be the better reading. Regardless, the point is clear: just as you cannot comprehend this analogy (or analogies), so you cannot possibly understand God's doings. The verse serves as a reinforcement of ignorance.

6 For the fourth time in this six-verse passage, Qohelet informs the reader, “you do not know.” The human being's position is basically one of ignorance. So he advises activity in the morning and at night, without by any means leaving us to infer that the hours in between are to be idle ones. Maybe one of our activities will succeed, maybe the other. If we are extremely fortunate, maybe both will succeed. Qohelet doesn't mention the possibility that “neither” will succeed; either that goes without saying, or he intimates that certainly something ought to work.

The title I gave to this section is “Risk Management? Or Ignorance Control?” In the face of the absurdity of life, with all of its contingencies, Qohelet recommends a certain amount of risk, offshore investing, a diversified portfolio, and doing something rather than nothing. While there is a measure of soundness to his counsel, we shouldn't be too eager to make Qohelet our primary financial advisor. The advice again betrays his class bias as well as his relative lack of concern for the poor and less fortunate (assuming the correctness of the interpretation above). All of his advice is born under a massive cloud of ignorance—it has no greater motivation.

But the Bible also speaks of another financial advisor, one who had no place to lay his head (Lk 9:58), who relied on a fish to supply him with tax money (Mt 17:27), and who advised his followers not to be too concerned about how they were going to survive financially, much less become “well-to-do.” Those who would follow his advice may be under just as much of a cloud of ignorance as those who would follow Qohelet. But somehow Jesus' advice seems better.

NOTES

3 The last words of this verse, שָׁם יְהוּ (šām y'hû , “there it is” [not “lies”]), are somewhat difficult. The יְהוּ (y'hû) could be analyzed as the third person masculine singular of הָוָה (hāwâ, “to become”), with an א (aleph) substituting for a ה (heh); such interchanges are more common in later biblical Hebrew. But the vocalization is not quite what one would expect. It seems better to understand that a י (yod) was accidentally

inserted in the course of transmission and that the original reading was שָׁם הוּא (šām hûʾ, “there it is”).

5 There is an interesting wordplay in v.5 in the use of the words רוּחַ (rûah, “spirit”) and הַמְלֵאָה (hammēlêʾâ, “the full one,” i.e., “the pregnant one”). In the previous verses the concern was with the “wind” (רוּחַ, rûah) and the clouds that were “full” (יְמֵלֵא, yimmālʾû) of rain. Two words previously used with reference to phenomena of weather are now used with reference to the mystery of human birth (Seow, 337, has most recently called attention to this use).

16. Some Questionable Advice for Youth (11:7–10)

OVERVIEW

These verses are part of a larger passage (11:7–12:7) dealing with youth, old age, and death. But it is convenient to look at the initial verses of the larger passage by themselves. While some commentators would separate out vv.7–8 as belonging to the previous section, for most commentators there seems to be a closer connection with what follows. Here Qohelet addresses a young man and gives advice that must be regarded as highly questionable.

⁷Light is sweet,
and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.
⁸However many years a man may live,
let him enjoy them all.
But let him remember the days of darkness,
for they will be many.
Everything to come is meaningless.
⁹Be happy, young man, while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your
youth.

Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you to judgment.

¹⁰So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigor are meaningless.

COMMENTARY

7 Despite his earlier declaration in 6:5 that the unborn child who has not seen the sun is better off than those who are alive and beset by many troubles (cf. also 4:1–3), Qohelet here says that it is indeed both sweet and pleasant to see the sun and to enjoy its light. He never suggests that one should commit suicide—what Jerry Leiber in his song “Is That All There Is?” referred to as the “final disappointment.” Despite the fact that the moment will not last, Qohelet recommends that one take pleasure, whenever possible, in life’s sweetness.

8 But the dark cloud that has hung over the entire book shows up again and cannot be ignored. Whether those days in the sun be short or long, they are ephemeral, and the days of darkness that follow will be even longer, rendering absurd the whole enterprise of living. The exact referent for “days of darkness” is not certain. In 5:17 Qohelet referred to darkness as the current vexatious state of one’s existence, but in 6:4 darkness represents death. It may be that by describing these days as “many,” Qohelet intends both nuances. The “days of darkness” refer primarily to death. But death, as it were, extends backwards and makes its evil felt even in the present, in the toil of life, and especially in the years of growing old, when it becomes much more difficult to see the light and to enjoy the sun.

9 Qohelet now addresses one young man in particular and advises him to enjoy life’s pleasures while he is still young. If this had been all, it would have been no different from what had already been said in v.7. But the advice takes a pernicious turn with the encouragement to “follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see.” Despite the unsupported (and

frankly, unsupportable) declaration of some commentators that the advice is nothing more than to get all the innocent enjoyment out of life as possible, both the immediate context and the larger theology of the OT suggest exactly the opposite.

In Numbers 15:39, the warning from Moses to the people is to “remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes” (NASB). The only bad advice the prophet Nathan ever gave David was this: “Whatever you have in mind [lit., ‘in your heart’], go ahead and do it” (2Sa 7:3); and that very night God appeared to Nathan and countermanded the advice. The consistent message of the OT is that one’s heart may lead one astray, and one’s eyes may yearn after the very thing that will bring about their owner’s destruction. The heart and the eyes are unreliable guides.

In the more immediate context, Qohelet admits how dangerous his advice really is when he adds that God will bring into judgment those who follow it. This is not simply a statement that God will judge matters, but in fact that precisely “for all these things” (i.e., following one’s own heart and eyes) God will bring the follower to court.

It is also important to note that the advice is directed toward one addressed as “young man.” Unlike the frame-narrator, who will come in at the end and in typical wisdom fashion speak to “my son” in urging him to “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:12–13), Qohelet addresses a young man (any young man) and gives him leave to do the exact opposite, should his heart and eyes tell him to. Interestingly, they both call attention to God’s judgment (11:9 and 12:14), but whereas the frame-narrator talks about God’s bringing “every *deed* into judgment,” Qohelet says that God will bring “*you* into judgment.” Qohelet’s warning is more ominous precisely because the foregoing advice has been so perverse.

10 Qohelet advises the young man to banish anxiety (*ka’as*, “vexation”) from his heart and to remove the troubles (*rā’â*, “evil”) from his body. Of course, no one really has control over the anxiety that may work its way into one’s mind or over the pain that may afflict one’s body. They cannot simply be banished or removed; but they can, in a measure, be palliated, and that must be Qohelet’s meaning here.

This palliation is accomplished by one’s eating, drinking, living “the good life,” and doing whatever the heart mandates and the eyes command.

Of course, this is most easily done when one is young, so that is the time to do it. But remember, youth and vigor are *hebel* (“absurd”; GK 2039). Perhaps *hebel* in this passage primarily takes on the idea of “ephemeral,” as even Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 319), the primary advocate of the meaning “absurd,” allows. But Fox also notes, “At the same time, it connotes illusoriness and thus absurdity, because the brevity that makes it [youth and pleasure-seeking] precious also makes it deceptive; and what deceives the mind is absurd.”

NOTE

10 הַשְּׁחָרוּת (haššah^ʿrûṭ, “vigor”) has been variously seen as either derived from or related to שָׁחַר (šahar, “dawn”), thus the dawn of youth or young adulthood, or from שֹׁחַר (šahôṛ, “black hair”), thus also the time of youth, when the hair has not yet begun to gray. Other suggested derivations have been made as well.

17. An Apocalyptic Death (12:1–7)

OVERVIEW

While it would be an exaggeration to say that there are as many different interpretations of this passage as there are commentators, it would at least be fair to say that there is no consensus on the interpretation. The disagreement among interpreters exists at three levels: (1) Should the passage be interpreted literally, symbolically, allegorically, or with a mixture of two of these approaches, or even all three? And whichever line of interpretation one chooses, is there any assurance that the author of the passage was himself consistent throughout; i.e., could the author have shifted from literal to symbolic, to allegorical, back to literal, etc.? (2) Once one adopts the literal, symbolic, or allegorical interpretation, exactly what is the overall meaning of the passage within any one of these three rubrics? (3) Finally, what is the meaning of the individual clauses, phrases, and words (some of which occur in the Hebrew Bible only here)?

For example, if one opts for the literal, what exactly is the passage describing literally? Among the suggested answers are: (1) old age and death, (2) an approaching storm, (3) the onset of winter, (4) apocalyptic

judgment, (5) a dirge, (6) a funeral, (7) war, (8) the deterioration of a house, or (9) the depopulation of a town. If one sees the passage as being primarily symbolic, exactly what is being symbolized, and how extensive is the symbolism? Does the rain stand in for tears? Does the darkening of the sun represent blindness? And if so, does the reference to how “those looking through the windows grow dim” represent the same thing? Do the grinders represent teeth? Are the almond tree blossoms representative of gray hair? Is the grasshopper a euphemism for the male sexual organ? Does the pitcher symbolically contain the water of life? For those who interpret the passage as an allegory, is it an allegory of the body growing old, or a corpse, or a town, or a kingdom?

In the end, one must make a choice. Though not opposed to allegorical interpretation, (indeed, I agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that, in some respects, allegorical interpretation “remains a splendid freedom of the church’s exegesis” [*No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 316]), I believe that, most likely, the author did not intend such here. It seems best to take the passage literally, while recognizing that some of the literal elements readily lend themselves to a symbolic meaning, but not so as to become a full-blown allegory. Though some elements may be understood symbolically, they all contribute primarily to the literal meaning.

On the literal plane, then, the passage is a depiction of death and its attendant circumstances. More precisely, a man who has grown old in v.1 dies in v.2. Verses 3–5 describe the state of mourning that attends his death. Verses 6–7 depict the interment. This scenario basically follows the interpretation set out by Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 319–49) and, in measure, by Seow (351–68, 372–82).

Three special aspects to this death must be noted. First, this is an apocalyptic death. It is accompanied by ominous clouds, the darkening of the light from the heavenly bodies, the dissolution of industry and commerce, and, depending on how v.5 is interpreted, the languishing of nature. The person who dies is important enough that business comes to a halt. Perhaps he is the owner of a large estate. Perhaps he is the king. Perhaps it is Qohelet himself. But the passage also lends itself to democratization. This is your death. As John Donne would remind you, the

bell tolls for thee. And everyone's death is a mini-apocalypse. Each death is the end of the world.

Second, this passage is both a reflection and, in some cases, a reversal of the first so-called nature poem in 1:4–11. The sun that never rested in 1:5 now rests darkened forever in 12:2. The wind (*rûah*, GK 8120) that went around endlessly (*sābab*, GK 6015) in circles in 1:6 finds its reflection in the spirit (*rûah*) of humankind, which no longer goes around but returns to God in 12:7, and also in the mourners who “go about” (*sābab*) the streets in 12:5. The earth, which remains forever in 1:4, is the same earth that is now ready to receive back the dust (12:7) that it temporarily loaned out so that the man could have a body in which to live. If this passage is to be seen as reflective of Qohelet's own death, then he is the “generation” (1:4) that came and now has gone. It is only seen this way from the perspective of the one who dies, however. The next day the sun will shine again, and business will resume as usual.

Third, this passage is also a reversal of Qohelet's autobiographical sketch in 1:12–2:11. For Qohelet, the one who built houses for himself (2:4), his house has now become a place of mourning (12:3). For the one who acquired slaves (2:7), now those slaves observe his death (12:3). For the one who amassed silver and gold (2:8), now the silver cord is severed and the golden bowl is broken (12:7). For the one who acquired female singers (2:8), now the “daughters of song” sing only faintly (12:4). For the one who made reservoirs of water (2:6), now the pitcher is shattered at the spring (12:6). And if we bring in 11:9–10 as part of this passage, then for the one who followed after his own heart and eyes in 2:1–11, God has indeed “for all these things” brought him to judgment (11:9). Qohelet has died—and you will too.

¹Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them”—
²before the sun and the light

and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
³when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;
⁴when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when men rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
⁵when men are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags himself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then man goes to his eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.
⁶Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
or the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
or the wheel broken at the well,
⁷and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

COMMENTARY

1 Qohelet's encouragement to remember one's Creator while still young is put into a time frame. This is to be done "before" the "evil" (*rā'â*) days come. What is not clear here is exactly how one is to remember the Creator, and for what reason. While it is possible that there may be a measure of

piety in the statement, it seems more likely that the remembering is for the purpose of reminding oneself that the Creator will also one day be the De-creator, that the One who made you from the dust of the earth and breathed into you the breath of life (Ge 2:7) is the same One who will recall that life, return your body to the dust, and take back his breath (Ecc 12:6). So if you are going to follow Qohelet's advice to "follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see" (11:9), you had better be sure to do so while you're young—before God sends upon you the evil days, when it will be too late to take any pleasure in life.

2 Old age, which replaced youth in v.1, is now in turn replaced by death. To "see the sun" in Ecclesiastes (6:5; 7:11; 11:7) is to be alive. For the sun and its light plus the moon and stars to grow dark means for one to die. The clouds that return after the rain serve as an ominous portent of evil, for after it has rained the clouds should disappear. That they return is symbolic of an evil day from which there will be no escape. The evil day has come, the sun is not going to reappear, and there will be no reprieve. Death, if it has not already occurred, is imminent.

3 Four groups are mentioned in v.4. The attempts to allegorize the four have usually resulted in the following: "keepers" = arms, "strong men" = legs, "grinders" = teeth, "those looking through the windows" = eyes, and of course the house is the body as whole. While these identifications are certainly possible, and perhaps even intentionally suggestive as a kind of double entendre, they are better understood on the more literal level.

The "keepers" are the household servants, who are witnessing the death. The "strong men" (*ʿanšê heḫāyil*) are noblemen, the most important men in the community, whose bodies "writhe" or "are bent" (*āwat* [NIV, "stoop"], the same word translated as "crooked" in 1:15 and 7:13) at the thought of another member of the nobility coming to the end of life. The "grinders" are either female household servants grinding meal for the estate, or women who are grinding at a community mill. They cease their work and gradually leave their positions to join those who are gathering together to mourn over the death that is about to occur or has already occurred. Those "looking through the windows" are noblewomen who, from a more respectable distance becoming of their societal position, see what they can see.

With regard to this last group, it is important to note the motif that occurs in the OT of the woman looking through the window (see Jdg 5:28; 2Sa

6:16; 2Ki 9:30; 1Ch 15:29; Pr 7:6). In all of these occurrences, the woman at the window is witness to a distressing scene. Here the scene is the death of a nobleman in the community. The women “grow dim” for sorrow (cf. La 5:17; same word). The whole community—menservants and noblemen, grinding maids and noblewomen—are affected by this death.

4 The doors to the street, most likely the street-market, are shut. Selling and buying have been put on hold. The mill has shut down operations. Jeremiah 25:10 refers to the cessation of sound from the millstones, along with the silencing of the voices of bride and bridegroom, as signs of ruin and destruction. Here an important member of the community has died or is rapidly nearing death. The business and industrial community stops to mourn. It has become so “deathly” quiet that the voices of birds arouse more attention than usual, perhaps as harbingers of evil. And the women in the community, who usually sing joyous songs, are now reduced to singing songs of mourning.

5 In what is probably the most difficult verse in this passage to interpret, there are also the most suggestive attempts at allegorization. In keeping with the belief that the passage is primarily about old age, the first two lines have generally been interpreted to say that old people are afraid of heights and of leaving their homes. The next three lines have been interpreted with the almond blossoms representing gray hair, the grasshopper symbolic of a failing male sex organ, and the “caperberry” (NASB, a more accurate rendering than the NIV) as an aphrodisiac that no longer has the desired effect. Rejecting this allegorical interpretation leaves a number of questions at the literal level. Who is the one who is afraid, and what is it above that is feared? What are the dangers on the road? Are the last three lines to be interpreted positively or negatively? And is the grasshopper a grasshopper, a locust, or a locust plant?

The position taken here is that the terrors both on high and on the road are terrors that accompany the death of the important person in this passage. And if indeed this important person is the king, then one may compare Lamentations 4:20: “The LORD’s anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations.” It is significant that in the surrounding context are found some of the same images as are in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7: “Moreover, our eyes failed” (La 4:17), just as “those looking through the windows grow dim” (Ecc

12:3); “men stalked us at every step, so we could not walk in our streets” (La 4:18), just as there are “terrors on the road” (Ecc 12:5 NASB); “our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky” (La 4:19), just as there are terrors on high (Ecc 12:5).

The last three lines, having to do with the almond tree, the grasshopper, and the caperberry, have usually been taken as either wholly positive, i.e., nature goes on, apparently oblivious to the death that has occurred; or it has been taken as a mixture of positive and negative (usually positive for the almond and negative for the other two). It is best to understand all three images as negative. Against the traditional translation “blossoms,” which requires reading a different verb from the one actually indicated in the consonantal text, it is best to read “becomes revolting” (so Seow, 347, 361). In Jeremiah 1:11—one of only three other occurrences of the word for “almond” (*šāqēd*) in the OT—a branch from an almond tree plays a figurative role in the forecast of divine judgment on Israel. It is possible, then, that the almond tree, as well as the two following images, are explicatory of the “terrors on the road.” In some way, the sight of the almond tree becomes a repulsive, foreboding sight as an accompaniment to the death of this man.

That the grasshopper, or perhaps better locust, is “laden” (better than “drags himself along”) is also portentous. In the light of other passages in which locusts are responsible for major devastation (e.g., Ex 10:4, 12–15; Dt 28:38, 42; 2Ch 7:13; Ps 78:46; Joel 1:4; 2:1–11, 25), the sight of an overstuffed locust constitutes another harbinger of evil. That the caperberry “fails” or “breaks covenant” may simply mean that it has failed to produce fruit, perhaps after promising to do so with its flowers; it thus becomes another sign of terror, an attendant circumstance to the death of the king.

While Michael Fox sees all of vv.3–5 as pertaining to the funeral, it would appear rather that the description of the things that have happened pertain to the day of death, and that only when we arrive at the end of v.5 does the funeral actually come into play. The corpse is now carried to its eternal home, a euphemism for the grave, and mourners join in the funeral procession.

6 The most likely understanding of v.6 is that we have here a series of actions that take place at the funeral or interment. Seow, 366–67, 381–82, calls attention to abundant archaeological evidence from sealed graves

yielding lamps and broken pottery, which could have only been broken before being put in the grave (see also his “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” *JBL* 118 [1999]: 230–33).

It is unclear whether the “silver cord” and “golden bowl” should be understood as connected. The usual understanding is that the bowl is suspended from the cord, which when severed causes the bowl to break. Seow, 364–66, has argued that in this particular instance “cord” is better translated as “tendril” or “branch,” as of a lampstand, the bowl’s purpose consisting in holding the oil for the lampstand. Though this is a reasonable understanding, it is impossible to be certain of its correctness.

While the translation for “pitcher” seems definite, there is uncertainty with regard to the “wheel”; several have argued that it refers to some other kind of pottery. The word for “well” or “cistern” (*bôr*, GK 1014) can also be translated as “pit,” a word used often in the OT to refer to the grave. It is reasonable to understand here a funerary ritual during which various items seen as symbolic of life were shattered to symbolize the end of life and then placed in the grave.

7 The body is returned to the earth, and the spirit, the “breath” of life, is returned to God, the Creator, who gave it. There is no hint here of any belief in a life beyond the grave. This is not simply the end; it is the absolute end. The earth has reclaimed its dust. God has reclaimed his spirit.

NOTES

1 “Your creator,” the MT’s בֹרֵאֵיךָ (*bôr ’eykā*), seems troublesome for many commentators because the noun is plural and because a reference to the Creator seems out of place. Instead they read the noun as בֹר (*bôr*, “pit”; GK 1014), translated “well” or “grave” in v.6; or they read it metaphorically as a reference to one’s wife, as the word is used in Proverbs 5:15. The plural is probably a plural of majesty, however, and the references to God in 11:9 and 12:7 do not really make the reference here seem all that out of place. The MT probably has the correct reading, but it is possible that the author may have wanted the reader also to pick up on the homonymic possibilities for a wordplay.

5 Though the Masoretic notes favor removing the aleph (א) from וַיִּנָּשׂ (wyn’s) to form the verb וַיִּנָּשׂ (wyānēš), from נָשַׂא (*nāšaš*, “to blossom”), I

favor, with Seow, keeping the consonantal text as it is and pointing it **וַיִּנְאֵשׁ** (*wʿyanʿēš*, Hiphil of **נָאֵשׁ** [*nāʿaš*, “to cause one to revile/be repulsed”]). Alternatively, it could be pointed as the Niphal **וַיִּנְאֵשׁ** (*wʿyinnāʿēš*, “to be disdained, reviled”). Seow suggests that a wordplay could also be involved. One looks expecting blossoms but instead finds something repulsive.

“Grasshopper” is **חֲגָב** (*ḥāgāb*), a variety of locust; this word occurs only four other times in the OT. Because it occurs here between the mention of two plants, some suggest that it should probably be seen as referring not to the insect but to the locust plant. If so, the passage could mean that, as Seow, 362, suggests, “the dead locust tree droops—from the weight of the pods.” While this is certainly possible, it seems that the interpretation given in the exposition above fits better with the idea that the images are reflective of terrors on or by the road.

תִּפְרָה (*tāpēr*, from the root **פָּרַר** [*pārār*], most often used in the OT for someone violating a covenant or other such pledge) may appear to be a strange word to use with regard to the caperberry’s failure to produce fruit. But there is a similar floral parallel in Isaiah 40:6, where a covenantal term is used with regard to how humans are like grass, and all of their **חֶסֶד** (*ḥesed*, “faithfulness, loyalty”; GK 2876; NRSV, “constancy”) is like the flowers of the field.

6 The Hebrew verb translated “severed” (NIV) is problematic. The MT’s *Kethib* has some form of the verb **רָחַק** (*rāḥaq*, “to be distant, to be removed”), while the *Qere* assumes the verb is from **רָתַק** (*rātaq*). The only other biblical occurrence of *rātaq* is Nahum 3:10, where in the Pual it means “to be bound” (though Seow, 365, argues that the verb in later Aramaic means “to knock, crush”); the *Qere* is actually the textual reading in some forty Hebrew manuscripts. Many scholars emend the text so that the verb comes from **נָתַק** (*nātaq*, “to tear, snap”). This verb’s subject, the “silver cord,” is ambiguous and eludes any certainty of identification.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what is the **גִּלְגָּל** (*galgal*, “wheel”). The usual assumption is that it is a wheel for the pulley at the “well” (*bôr*, GK 1014). But if *bôr* is translated rather as “pit” or “grave,” this necessity no longer obtains. It seems more likely, as Seow, 367, argues, that it appears in parallelism with the word for “pitcher” in the previous line and thus designates some other vessel of pottery. It also possibly has some

relationship with the word for “bowl,” גִּלָּת (*gullat*), two lines before. In fact, Seow suggests that the word be repointed as גִּלְגֹּל (*golgōl*), which puts it in close relationship not only to *gullat* but also, interestingly, to גִּלְגֹּלֶת (*gulgōlet*), “skull” = NT “Golgotha.”

III. EPILOGUE: QOHELET WAS WISE—BUT (12:8–14)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet's words are completed. The frame-narrator now reenters, summarizes Qohelet's thought, gives an evaluation, talks about the words of the wise, and brings the whole business to a conclusion. Though most commentators see these verses as coming from two or more different hands, it is best, along with Fox and Longman, to understand that the epilogue is the work of the frame-narrator, who is in fact the author of the book (see [Authorship](#) in the [introduction](#)).

⁸“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.

“Everything is meaningless!”

⁹Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. ¹⁰The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

¹¹The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. ¹²Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

¹³Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.

¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,

whether it is good or evil.

COMMENTARY

8 As the narrator began his summary of Qohelet's thought (1:2), so he now brackets Qohelet's speech with basically the same words, except that mercifully he writes *hebel* ("absurd") only three times instead of five. It is important to note here that the narrator does not choose one of the so-called *carpe diem* phrases to introduce and conclude Qohelet's thought, but rather aptly summarizes his created character's philosophy with the words for which the book of Ecclesiastes is best known.

If Qohelet truly were a "preacher of joy," it would seem that the narrator would have chosen one of his more "upbeat" statements to summarize the message. But that would have gone against Qohelet's own teaching; for Qohelet said that *everything* is *hebel*, and if *everything* truly is *hebel*, then there is nothing more to say (see Notes). But the narrator finds more to say, for in spite of what his created character asserts, the narrator cannot quite bring himself to believe that truly *everything* is *hebel*.

9 The first word, *yōtēr*, is not to be translated as the NIV ("not only") and NASB ("in addition to") have it, rather, as the conjunction "furthermore" or "moreover" (see Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 350–51; Longman, 277; Anton Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* [OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992], 115). So the first assertion is that Qohelet was a sage. It may seem strange that the narrator feels the need to communicate this information to us, but it must be remembered that the only official information we have as to Qohelet's occupational status is that he was a king.

The use of another intensifying conjunction, "also" (*ôd*), in the next clause suggests that teaching the "people" (apparently larger and more diverse groups than just those being trained as courtiers) was not necessarily the understood role of every sage, but certainly it was the role of a king-sage. While "pondered" or "weighed" is a possible translation for *'izzēn* (seen as a derivative of *mô 'znayim*, "scales"), it would be the only such occurrence of this word in the OT. It is just as likely, if not more so, that it should be seen as a form of the verb *'āzan*, "to hear," with hearing

(i.e., listening to what had been said before) being perhaps the first responsibility of every sage.

He also “searched out,” a term used in Proverbs 25:2 with reference to what kings do: “to search out a matter is the glory of kings.” While the “set[ting] in order” (*tiqqēn*, GK 9545) of proverbs may include, as Fox suggests, the composition of proverbs (*Time to Tear Down*, 349, 352), “set in order” more likely refers to the collecting and arranging of them—something that Solomon probably did and that Hezekiah and his men certainly did (Pr 25:1). Michael Fishbane argues that it is in fact a technical term for editorial activity (*Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1988], 32).

While Fishbane may be correct, Fox’s caution against taking the terms in this verse as necessarily technical is also valid. It is interesting that the verb *tiqqēn* has been used twice before in Ecclesiastes (in 1:15 and 7:13) to refer to the impossibility of “straightening out” what has been made (or what God has made) crooked. Does its use here suggest that Qohelet tried to “straighten” proverbs, i.e., correct idealistic sayings so that they better conform to reality (see Perry, 172)?

10 Qohelet sought to find words of “delight” (*hēpeš*, cf. NASB). His success in the quest may be gauged by his own statements to the effect that he never found what he was looking for (cf. 7:28; 8:17). The exact meaning of the second half of the verse is debated. Unlike many commentators and translations, it is preferable here to translate more along the lines of the NASB, that he sought “to write” rather than that “he wrote” (NRSV) or “what was written” (NIV). In other words, the last line should be seen as related to what Qohelet “sought” to do rather than as a statement of what he actually accomplished. The narrator remains noncommittal with regard to the success of Qohelet’s venture (see [Notes](#)).

11 The narrator uses examples of what were apparently herding tools to describe the teachings of the sages. They are like “goads” and “firmly embedded nails.” While the sharpness of these objects is certainly in view here, emphasis should also be given to the “firmly embedded” or “well-driven” aspect. In the only other occurrence in the OT of the word for “goad” (*dorbān*), in 1 Samuel 13:21, it is noted that the goad was “set.” In that verse the NIV has “repoint,” and other translations understand “sharpen,” but the verb is *nāṣab*, which always means to “station, set up,

establish, set firm.” Thus it would seem that here the point (pun intended) of the verse is that not only are these sayings sharp, but they are also firmly established, i.e., they are entrenched in the tradition.

But Qohelet’s activity, while certainly to be seen within the wisdom tradition, has nevertheless done something to loosen the firmness of the goads and nails. The frame-narrator is, in measure here, settling in between his created character Qohelet and the tradition for which he still has great regard.

There is considerable discussion as to the identity of the “one Shepherd.” Both the NIV and NASB, by their capitalization, clearly indicate that the shepherd is God; and this has been the traditional interpretation. More recently, most scholars seem to have adopted the position that the phrase is simply a continuation of the metaphor begun with “goads” and “nails” and that the “one” should be treated here, as is certainly many times the case, as an indefinite article, thus resulting in the simple translation, “a shepherd.” I believe, however, that the “one shepherd” refers rather to the (or “a”) king.

Martin Shields (“Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom,” *TynBul* 50 [1999]: 132–33) and Nicholas Perrin (“Messianism in the Narrative Frame of Ecclesiastes?” *RB* 108 (2001): 51–57) have pointed out that the only other places in the Hebrew Bible where the term “one shepherd” appears are Ezekiel 34:32 and 37:24, where in both cases it refers to the Davidic Messiah. I believe it is highly plausible that the “one king” of Ezekiel 34 and 37 also stands behind the use of the identical phrase in Ecclesiastes 12:11 and that the phrase may have even become a technical term in reference to the king (or perhaps, the “Davidic Messiah”).

The import, then, of 12:11 is to indicate that the previously mentioned activities (searching, teaching, writing), products (words, sayings, goads, nails), and offices (the “masters of collections”; cf. NASB) are in fact state-sponsored, royally sponsored activities, products, and offices. They are “given” by the king. The activity of the sages, their writings, and even their positions exist because of, and in the service of, the throne. Qohelet is the chief sage, i.e., the king, and the work of the sages who serve in his royal court should be seen as an extension of the king’s own sagacity. (For further support, see Shepherd, “Identity of Qohelet.”) This sets the stage for the more explicit criticism to follow.

12 As Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 356–57) and Longman (280–81) argue, the opening phrase should be translated, “Furthermore, of these things, my son, be warned,” not “in addition to them” (NIV). The warning does not mean to be cautious about words in addition to those of Qohelet and the other wisdom writers, but to be cautious of Qohelet’s *own* words and the wisdom writings as a whole. Because such words are, in fact, the product of royally sponsored activities and because power corrupts, they are capable of being used in the wrong way—even in the service of oppression. Qohelet himself warned that a wise man can turn into a fool (7:7). Solomon himself, though great in wisdom, yet had his heart turned toward foolishness. Hezekiah—the other bookend, as it were, of the royal wisdom tradition in Israel—though himself wise, also had his heart turned toward foolishness. Now the frame-narrator gives a caution as to the extent to which their writings, their collections, their accumulated wisdom, can actually be used.

It should also be noted here that the narrator addresses this caution to someone he calls “my son.” Whether this is actually a biological son, a student, or simply a literary way of addressing the implied reader of the book, note that this form of address, so common in Proverbs, never occurs in the words of Qohelet. The closest he comes to it is in 11:9, where he tells the “young man” to follow the ways of his heart and eyes—advice in direct contradiction to the way of the Torah.

It is interesting that Solomon’s and Hezekiah’s successor-sons, Rehoboam and Manasseh, are the two kings who, according to the books of Kings, are respectively responsible first for the division of Israel’s united monarchy into two separate kingdoms, and some three hundred years later for the ruin of the southern kingdom of Judah. Solomon’s and Hezekiah’s wisdom did them no good in teaching their own sons how to rule. Now the narrator is expressing a certain amount of caution with regard to adherence too closely to their accumulated wisdom. A more precise reason will be given in v.13.

The second line indicates that books can be multiplied endlessly and that excessive study (meditation? talking? see Notes) is wearying to the body. “Making many books” may refer to the student’s copying down of the wisdom books he is studying. “Study” would be the time spent trying to understand these writings. In light of the foregoing, the implication seems

to be that there is a better way in which “my son” can spend his time, or at least that, after a while, such study offers only diminishing returns.

13 Abruptly, the narrator brings the whole to a conclusion. Enough said! Here’s what’s important: “Fear God and keep his commandments.” Those who think that in some way the narrator is here summarizing Qohelet’s thought can do so only by glossing over what Qohelet has actually said. Qohelet has never told his readers to keep the commandments; if anything, he has done the opposite (see 7:16; 11:9). While he has encouraged the fear of God (3:14; 5:7; 8:12), the exposition above has shown that his fear is in fact only “terror” before the One who is stronger, and that whatever his piety may be, it is unmixed with anything like heartfelt devotion.

The narrator says that this fear of God and keeping of his commandments is *kol-hā’ādām*, “all of the man.” This is the entirety of humanity’s existence. Here is an “everything,” an “all,” that is not a *hebel*. Throughout the entire book, Qohelet has searched for something under the sun that is not meaningless, something that is not absurd. The narrator says that Qohelet never found it because he never looked in the right place. It cannot be found by empirical investigation, by observation of nature, or by studying the accumulated “wisdom of the ages and the sages.” It is found in God and in his revealed Torah.

It was the king’s responsibility to teach the people the law of God, or at least to make sure that it was taught (Dt 17:18–20; 31:9–13; cf. 2Ki 23:1–3; 2Ch 34:29–32). Solomon and Hezekiah both did this in measure (see 1Ki 8:54–61; 2Ch 29:3–11; 30:6–12). But for the narrator, the Davidic dynasty failed in this mission on account of its excessive excursion into, and use of, the larger body of wisdom material in the ancient Near East. The formula for the people to be truly wise had already been given in Deuteronomy 4:5–6:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your *wisdom* and *understanding* to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a *wise* and *understanding* people.” (italics added)

Qohelet, the composite character representative of the Davidic dynasty, only partially succeeded in this task and unfortunately mixed godly Torah with worldly wisdom. Perhaps the narrator would not have formulated it in this way, but the book cries out for another Qohelet, another King-Sage to come whose teaching will conform to revelation, who will speak only what he hears from God (Jn 8:28), who is greater than Solomon (Mt 12:42)—indeed, one who is the very personification of wisdom (1Co 1:24, 30).

14 The narrator concludes by forcefully stating something else about which Qohelet was ambivalent. There will be a judgment that will include everything that is now hidden and unknown. Surely the narrator is no less observant than Qohelet and certainly knows as well as Qohelet that wicked people live to be old and that righteous people die young. For him to make this statement so forcefully at the end of this book suggests a belief in an accounting that must take place beyond the grave and beyond this life.

But there is much for which he could not have hoped. Indeed, there will be a time when the only truly wise and righteous judge will come and right all wrongs, correct all injustices, and redeem us from the absurdity of this life (Ro 8:20–21), because he himself was not spared from suffering that very absurdity (8:32). He will bring us into the glorious freedom of the children of God (8:21), and when he comes, the absurdity of death will not be able to separate us from his love (8:38) or from the One who himself is “the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25).

As the writing of this commentary comes to a close, it is Christmastime, and I am listening to “O Come, O Come, Immanuel,” that song built on what the church of the Middle Ages referred to as the Great “O” Antiphons of Advent. One of the verses, built on the antiphon that begins “O Sapientia,” fittingly serves as a conclusion to this study:

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high
And order all things, far and nigh.
To us the path of knowledge show
And cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice, Rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

NOTES

8 John Jarick has recently pointed out that it is only the least stroke of a pen, a tittle, that separates the words **הכל** and **הבל** (*hakkol* and *hebel*), “the whole” and “absurd.” Jarick writes, “In the twinkling of an eye, with a deft sleight-of-hand, ‘everything’ has been changed into ‘nothing.’ And that is what Koheleth has done: **הכל** is **הבל**, he tells us, and in fact **הכל הבל** tells us everything we need to know about life and the universe from his perspective” (“The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on *hakkōl hebel* and *lakkōl zʾmān* in Ecclesiastes,” *JSOT* 90 [2000]: 79–80). Later he refers to this phrase as the “most compact form of parallelism to be found in the Bible” (81).

10 The problem in this verse is how to understand **כָּתוּב** (*kātûb*). As pointed by the Masoretes it is a Qal passive participle. But the passive participle is awkward here, and most modern commentators repoint as an infinitive absolute, **כָּתוּב** (*kātôb*). The question then becomes how this infinitive absolute should be understood. Some commentators regard it as parallel to “sought” and thus translate it in the indicative, “he wrote.” I prefer, however, along with Longman, 277–78, and Fox in his earlier article (“Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 [1977]: 96–97, though he has subsequently reversed his position in his two commentaries), to take the infinitive absolute as being in coordination with “to find” and in subordination to “sought.” That is, the infinitive absolute along with the infinitive construct “to find” constitute a compound direct object for “he sought.”

This construction makes sense grammatically and syntactically for two reasons. First, the infinitive absolute can assume the function of any other verbal form, including the infinitive construct (as in 1Sa 22:13; 25:26, 33; Jer 44:17; Eze 36:3; see Paul Joüon, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka [2 vols.; Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991], §123x, 2:431). In this verse it seems more likely that the infinitive absolute would take on the function of the form that precedes it (and is more immediate), in this case the infinitive construct. Second, that the infinitive absolute can serve as the object of another verb is attested elsewhere (Dt 28:56; Job 9:18; 13:3; Isa 1:17; 7:16; 42:24; 57:20; see Joüon-Muraoka,

Grammar, §123b, 2:420–21). It seems best, then, to understand the infinitive absolute here acting as the infinitive construct.

12 The exact derivation and nuance of לַהֲגָה (*lahag*, “study”) is not clear. It is variously explained as either a noun meaning “dedication” or “study,” or perhaps as a somewhat corrupted form of the infinitive construct for הָגָה (*hāgâ*, “to read, meditate, talk,” etc.). In either case the general meaning seems to be that, whatever it refers to, an excessive amount of it is not wise.

SONG OF SONGS

GEORGE M. SCHWAB

Introduction

1. First Impressions
2. History of Interpretation
3. Authorship and Date
4. Purpose and Canonicity
5. Bibliography
6. Outline

1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When a newcomer reads the Song of Songs, he or she is confronted with a jumble of images that seem to run together or suddenly shift with no rhyme or reason. One may ask, “When does one section end and another begin? Is there a story being told, and if so, who are the characters and what is the plot?” Without an answer to these questions, the book is confusing and enigmatic.

To many, the Song of Songs remains a closed book. They can discover little practical value in its eight chapters. The book does not speak of God, the law, or the history of Israel. Paul claims that all Scripture is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2Ti 3:16–17)—but how can this be true of the Song of Songs? To what does it call the church? If the subject matter is human love and sexuality, why is there no mention of procreation? Why is there no clear moral prohibition of extramarital relations? Where is the girl’s father?

We who are Christians believe that Jesus Christ fulfills the OT (Mt 5:17; Lk 24:27; 2Co 1:20); however, the Song does not seem to be interested in matters of salvation. How does this book point to Christ? It is commonly asserted that the Song is an allegory of the relationship between Christ and his church, but the Song does not read like an allegory. In it, the girl seems to be the more aggressive character—for example, running out in the streets to pursue the boy. In that episode, what (if anything) is being said about

Christ and the church? Are we ready to read 5:10–16 as a description of Jesus? Is this the best that we can do to find Christian meaning in this book of the Bible?

Students of the Song of Songs have wrestled with these questions for millennia. Various answers have been advanced, and many of these are still endorsed today. Contemporary approaches include allegorical, dramatic, liturgical, and lyrical interpretations. For this reason, it is necessary to review briefly how the Song of Songs has been read through the centuries and to define the distinctive approach of the present work.

2. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

A Song of Love

The earliest evidence for how the Song was understood can be found in the Old Greek translation. If the Old Greek translators were allegorists, they exhibited remarkable restraint in how they rendered this book. Almost every word is rather woodenly translated. The only possible exceptions to this rule involve the translation of a name (^א*mānâ*, 4:8) and a few other glosses of difficult words. Even in those cases, the translation is justifiable according to the “literal” sense.

As has often been noted, if the Song had been discovered outside of its canonical context, it would be categorized as an ancient love song. In fact, a number of love songs have been discovered that bear striking similarity to the Song of Songs but that predate Solomon by many centuries. These share generic characteristics with this biblical song and as such are evidence that it was read in antiquity as a love song. In *t. Sanh.* 101a, Rabbi ‘Aqiba (c. AD 100) is reported to denounce the practice of singing the Song in banquet halls! We may conclude that in the time of Christ the Song of Songs was read literally, as a celebration of human love.

Allegory of Spiritual Things

Early in the history of the church, however, we find the literal sense set aside in favor of allegory. The justification for this may be tied to the metaphor of God and Israel as husband and wife in the OT prophets. Psalm

45 is also a love song and shows many similarities to the Song of Songs—and the king of Psalm 45 is explicitly identified with Christ in Hebrews 1:8. The Old Greek consistently translates one word for sexual love in the Song as *agapē*, a word that takes on a significantly different meaning in the NT. Thus it was possible for an interpreter to find ways to derive fresh meanings.

It is a common misunderstanding that the Song was allegorized because of its sexual character. One may falsely imagine that the celibate Christians of antiquity reinvented the Song of Songs rather than heeded its celebration of sexuality. The truth of the matter is that all Scripture was subject to allegory.

In his *Peri Archōn*, Origen sets forth his belief that God has encoded Scripture with meaning, that every word of the Bible has hidden divine purpose (with God's purposes sometimes not being clearly revealed to the casual observer). If every text is true and meaningful, it follows that some enriching and significant truth can be found by a competent expositor. The more the text seems inaccurate, carnal, or unworthy of God, the more ingenuity is required to unlock its true meaning. For example, Leviticus describes six kinds of leprosy. What can an expositor do with this that would be of benefit to the Christian? Origen considered this interesting only insofar as it allegorically pointed to six sins that beset believers.

The early church expected rich and profound truth in every word of the Bible. It is out of the desire for the text to be relevant and doctrinally pure that allegory was born. Thus Origen found in an allegorical reading of the Song much that spoke of Christ. It is Christ, says Origen, standing behind the wall of the house of the OT before revealing himself to the church (2:9). "Your eyes are doves" (4:2) means that the girl can perceive hidden truths in Scripture. The cedar beams of their houses (1:17) are the bishops of the church. When the Song says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:2), it is really speaking of Christ pouring words of wisdom into the mouth of the believer. The entire Song of Songs was understood as a symbolic reflection on the rich, palatable, and ardent love between the resurrected Christ and his church and the love of the Christian soul for this Lord. But it was the invented allegory, not the text, that spoke so clearly of Jesus.

The use of the Song as a springboard to allegory characterized the ancient church's hermeneutics and carried through to the medieval world; it was read almost exclusively as an allegory up until the last century. This can be seen in the medieval era in the writings of Gregory of Narek (tenth century AD) and Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century AD). Martin Luther read the Song as a symbolic expression of Solomon's experiences as king of Israel. To Luther, "let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:2) depicts the love between God and the people under King Solomon. "The king has brought me into his chambers" (1:4) signifies how God comforted the king because of the evils he faced in government.

Luther's method of reading the Song as a code that points beyond itself to a completely different subject is almost indistinguishable from that of medieval interpreters. John Cotton's exposition of the Song (c. 1620) was "among his most millennial."¹ Though the Song makes no direct mention of the church, Christ, or (perhaps) even God, it became an important theological text in the Antinomian Crisis in New England (1636–37).² In the twentieth century, the allegorical approach to the Song is still alive and well.³

Though no two allegorists interpret the Song in the same way, they do share one perspective—their inspiration comes from the Scripture as a whole. The subject matter of their expositions is provided by the Song's canonical context itself (rather than the text of the Song). In contrast, the modern approaches are characterized by attempts to understand the Song of Songs in different contexts, not only that of the Bible.

The Song in Various Contexts

Drama. Franz Delitzsch called eighteen hundred years of allegory "numberless absurdities."⁴ By the close of the nineteenth century, the Song was read in the generic context of love drama: a romance with a beginning, middle, and end. Delitzsch presented the most popular two-character dramatic analysis of the Song, which he divided into six acts of two scenes each.

In a different interpretation, the three-character drama hypothesis, Solomon tries to woo the girl away from her true love, the simple shepherd. Three-character dramatists such as S. R. Driver criticized the two-character

drama hypothesis (in which the boy and girl declare their mutual love) as “nothing but mutual declarations of admiration”⁵ without ethical consequence. As no two allegorists interpreted the Song alike, so dramatists could not agree as to the plot, act and scene divisions, or number and identity of characters. If read as a secular love drama, the Song of Songs is a closed book. Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century many commentaries and translations of the Song have tried to impose a logical progression on it with more or less success. The rubric “Chorus” for some sections of the Song echoes the dramatic approach reflected in a number of Bible translations today.

Syrian wedding ceremony. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the Song of Songs was commonly read in the generic context of Syrian wedding songs. Delitzsch’s commentary recites a Syrian wedding song that bears notable likeness to the Song.⁶ In the light of this material, the Song seemed to be a traditional part of an ancient wedding ceremony.⁷

The Syrian wedding songs that have so much in common with the Song are still in use in the twentieth century. It is unclear whether this material existed in the ancient world and genuinely sheds light on the original setting of the Song of Songs. Since the early part of the twentieth century, the Song has been placed in other contexts that are much closer to its ancient Near Eastern heritage.

The fertility cult. Babylonian and Canaanite fertility ritual have provided two other contexts within which the Song has been understood. Pope advanced the fertility cult hypothesis by reading the Song in the light of the *marzēah* feast.⁸ In these contexts, the Song appears to echo a liturgical past. The religious character of this material was advanced as an answer to the question of the Song’s inclusion in the sacred text of the Bible. By placing the Song in a context other than the Bible, the liturgical theorists are able, paradoxically, to use its canonical context as evidence for their theory! Read in these patently religious contexts, the Song is thought to enshrine practices of Israel’s idolatrous past by speaking of divine love rather than human love.

But the Song is clearly not religious in character. No deity is named, and the theory requires that later scribes excised whatever significant liturgical components ever existed.⁹ Thus, despite similarities in genre, the evidence

for the Song's origin as rooted in the fertility cult seems forced in comparison to another context—Egyptian love lyrics.

Egyptian love lyrics. In the twentieth century, ancient Egyptian love songs (1300–1100 BC) have provided the most successful context for the Song.¹⁰ In the light of the Egyptian material, the Song can be read as an anthology of compositions that are secular and treat human (not divine) love—a collection of shorter songs, with no progression or plot in the dramatic sense, somewhat like the Psalter. It is unnecessary to assume (as the fertility-cult theorists must) an original usage obscured over time by Yahwistic scribes. In the generic context of the Egyptian material, the Song appears as a collection of loosely connected, individual love poems.

The following are selections from Egyptian love lyrics.

I am yours like the field
 planted with flowers
 and with all sorts of fragrant plants. . .
Pleasant is the canal within it
 which your hand scooped out,
 while we cooled ourselves in the north wind:
a lovely place for strolling about
 with your hand upon mine!
My body is satisfied
 and my heart rejoices
 in our walking about together.
To hear your voice is pomegranate wine (to me):
 I draw life from hearing it.
Could I see you with every glance,
 it would be better for me
 than to eat or drink.¹¹
“Come, spend time where the young people are:
 the meadow celebrates its day.
Under me are a festival booth and a hut,

and my rulers are happy and rejoice at seeing you.
Have your servants sent before you
fitted out with their vessels.
One grows intoxicated just hurrying to me
even before having taken a drink!
Your attendants have come
bearing their supplies.
They've brought beer of all sorts,
and bread of all types,
plants aplenty from yesterday and today,
and fruits of all kinds for delight.
Come spend the day in pleasure,
(one) morning, then another—two days,
sitting in (my) shade.”
“Her friend is at her right
as she gets him intoxicated
and does whatever he says.
The beer hut is disarrayed from drink,
But she has remained with her brother.”¹²

The poems quoted above contain many points of contact with the Song of Songs. The outdoor imagery, including fields, flowers, and fragrant plants, is reminiscent of 1:13–2:3. The girl sits in the boy's shade, his fruit is delightful, and the “beer-hut” where he is “at her right” bears remarkable likeness to 2:4–6. Like the Song, the Egyptian material has few references to the gods. In many ways, the love lyrics of Egypt seem to be cut from the same generic cloth as the Song of Songs: anthologies of love songs in various pastoral and urban settings. Each song presents the reader with a different perspective on its subject matter—love between a young man and woman.

The present work will approach the Song as a collection of individual love songs that treat human love and are not intended to add up to a story. Its overall design is not seen as one of plot and progression but of artistic

composition with a view to emphasizing certain aspects of love. It is most likely that this perspective has gone full circle to the way that the vignettes in the Song were regarded from the time of Solomon until Jesus' day.

3. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

Along with other Wisdom literature books in the Bible, the Song presents aspects that seem late and others that seem early. Aspects that appear early may include the Song's mention of choice spices from India, its use of *še-* in place of *šašer*,¹³ the Solomonic-era Jerusalem of the Song,¹⁴ its affinity with Bronze Age Canaanite texts, the lack of any Greek loanwords, and its similarity to Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts that date to well before Solomon's time. The mention of Solomon in the title will be discussed in some detail below.

Aspects that appear late include the absence of the Song's distinctive terminology in Solomonic texts,¹⁵ Hebrew that is either dialectical or late, and the presence of Persian loanwords. Dates have been proposed that range from Solomon's era to the third century BC. The Song embodies forms that predate Solomon and achieved its final recension some time before the translation of the Old Greek; it preserves ancient love songs while bearing the stamp of later scribal activity.

Solomon is credited in the Bible for composing 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1Ki 4:32). Many of these were collected in the book of Proverbs, but a number were not added to the book until the days of Hezekiah (Pr 25:1). Similarly, even if the title of the Song of songs ascribes authorship to Solomon, it is unnecessary to assume that Solomon is responsible for its final form. Linguistic considerations witness to continuing development through the Exile. The individual songs, however, share generic traits with Egyptian material extant in Solomon's lifetime. After Solomon, there was little intercourse between Israel and Egypt until the time of Josiah. Solomon is named seven times in the Song. It would seem that there is a good case for authorship in the Solomonic era of some or all of the individual songs in some early form.

Nevertheless, Solomon is not really a character in any part of the Song. He stands in the distance, aloof, seen from afar; perhaps he is also the unnamed king mentioned in some lyrics. Several times the harem is

negatively compared to the love relationship that the Song commends. It is as though the song was written with Solomon as a foil—sometimes about him, sometimes describing life in his kingdom. If this is the case, then the Song could have been written at any time when Solomon was regarded as a great king.

Unlike allegory (where much is made of Solomon's name, *šālôm* = [prince of] peace) and drama (where the lecherous historical Solomon tempts a girl with worldly splendor), reading the Song as an anthology of love lyrics requires no knowledge of either the author or the specific historical setting. Each vignette speaks to the human experience of love, and all who read may enter therein to taste and savor its sweet and bitter fruits.

4. PURPOSE AND CANONICITY

To those who argue that the Song is an allegory of spiritual truths—and was always intended to be read so—it belongs in the Bible because of its spiritual subject matter. George Noyes (1798–1868) is a typical example of those who rejected the allegorical approach and thus wondered whether “perhaps it might have been expedient to pass it by in significant and prudent silence.”¹⁶ Without a religious meaning, it was questioned whether it should have been included at all. But if the Song was once sung at weddings, then historically it may have been included in the Bible because of its close association with this aspect of the life of the community. This theory leaves unexplained how the Song, all but devoid of religious content, became more than a ditty sung at weddings.

The liturgical view also argues for an original religious content, albeit an idolatrous one that is censured in the Bible. Supposedly, beginning as liturgy in an important part of Israel's religious past, it was later shaped and adopted into a form harmless to the Yahwistic cult, all the while remaining in its religious context.

A more satisfactory way of explaining the process by which the Song was included in the Yahwistic and *marzēah*-condemning Bible as we have it (not some other imagined religious document) is that of reading the Song as a polemic against the fertility cult.¹⁷ The worship of various goddesses alongside Yahweh was pervasive in ancient Israel. King Solomon set up the

likeness of Asherah in the temple of Yahweh. One important facet of the struggle between the exclusive claims of Yahweh and the worship of Canaanite deities lay in the interpretation of sexuality. In ancient Near Eastern thinking, sex was ritually linked to the goddess and believed to possess magical properties. In antiquity, it was believed that

sexual intercourse releases divine power into the world to refresh the reproductive forces of nature, to renew the power of the king, and to stimulate fertility in domestic animals and in women. Even sex occurring privately and spontaneously between individuals recalls this primary religious archetype; as a result, where the goddess reigns, the personal aspect of sexual interplay does not fully emerge.¹⁸

The Song serves to undermine this view of sex. It is no longer mythical Inanna who embarks on a treacherous journey—but any ordinary girl who falls in love. “Who is this, bright as the sun, pure as the moon,” whose glance unsettles the boy (6:10)? Just “the only daughter of her mother,” one unique maiden among many (6:9).

The Song is unashamedly sexual, and not apparently religious at all. It is also quite free of any specific references to the fertility cults of Israel’s neighbors. Since no cultic-mythological significance is apparent, we should acknowledge the Song’s free and open attitude to human sexuality as opposed to the sexual religious practices of Canaanite fertility religion. Perhaps the Song was included in the canon because it was a non-mythological, non-cultic, non-idolatrous, outright, open celebration of God-given sexual love.¹⁹

The kind of material preserved in the Song of Songs may have played an important part in the history of Israel toward supplanting the fertility cult with a different vision of sexuality. Sexuality itself in the ancient world was intrinsically religious, but by exposing oneself to the picture of love painted in the Song, one’s own perspective is corrected, with one’s vision of God

the Creator necessarily following. It is the task of the expositor to present clearly the images and definitions of love found in the Song. In that way, the God of all passion will be known anew.

The Song presents many paradigms for the multifarious experience of love. Love as a power that controls human life is warned against; love as a potent and desirable experience is celebrated; love as an ordeal of yearning, unsatisfied physicality, and societal constraint is an object lesson. The Song defines love as exclusive, resembling a covenant, supervised by the family in youth and with a public aspect when mature. Lovers are never quite apart because the world takes on the semblance of the beloved.

The Wedding of the Great King is the paradigm for all loves, and ultimately this points to the love of Christ for his church. The love of Christ (which death cannot extinguish) stands behind all loves, and for this love all Christians hope and lovers foretaste. For this reason, temporal loves are not ultimately satisfying, and they always leave a residue of longing for eternal love. Thus the Song of Songs puts on display part of God's creation that points away from itself to the love that truly satisfies.

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6. OUTLINE

I. The Title (1:1)

II. The Anthology of Songs (1:2–8:12)

A. Daydreams and Perfume in the Presence of the King (1:2–12)

1. In the Presence of the King (1:2–4)
2. Reminiscences (1:5–8)
3. In the Presence of the King (1:9–12)

B. An Outdoor Fantasy (1:13–2:7)

1. Love in the Glade (1:13–2:3a)
2. Love in the Wine House (2:3b–6)
3. Adjuration to Beware of Love (2:7)

C. Turn, My Beloved, Be Like a Gazelle! (2:8–17)

1. My Lover Arrives (2:8–9)
2. My Lover Calls (2:10–15)

- 3. My Response (2:16–17)
- D. Upon My Bed I Sought Him, but I Did Not Find Him (3:1–5)
 - 1. My Disturbing Dream (3:1–4)
 - 2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (3:5)
- E. Who Is This Coming Up from the Desert? (3:6–11)
- F. You Are All Beautiful, There Is No Flaw in You (4:1–7)
- G. I Have Come into My Garden, My Sister, My Bride (4:8–5:1)
 - 1. Lebanon (4:8–11)
 - 2. Paradise (4:12–5:1a)
 - 3. Encouragement to Love (5:1b)
- H. I Opened to My Lover, but He Had Turned and Gone (5:2–8)
 - 1. My Disturbing Dream (5:2–7)
 - 2. Adjuration to Keep a Secret (5:8)
- I. Tell Us about This Lover! (5:9–6:3)
 - 1. What Kind of Lover Is He? (5:9–16)
 - 2. Where Has He Gone? (6:1–3)
- J. Who Is This, As Awesome as an Army with Banners? (6:4–10)
- K. Let Us See Whether the Vine Has Budded (There I Will Give You My Love) (6:11–7:12 [13])
 - 1. Looking for Signs of Spring (6:11–13 [7:1])
 - 2. How Fair You Are (7:1–6 [7:2–7])
 - 3. I Am My Lover's and His Desire Is for Me (7:7–10 [7:8–11])
 - 4. Let Us Look for Signs of Spring (7:11–12 [7:12–13])
- L. Oh, That You Were Like a Brother to Me! (7:13–8:4 [7:14–8:4])
 - 1. If Only You Were Mine (7:13–8:3 [7:14–8:3])
 - 2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (8:4)

M. Who Is This, Coming Up from the Desert? (8:5–7)

1. Love and Death (8:5–7a)
2. Love and Pauperization (8:7b)

N. Solomon, You Can Keep Your Silver (8:8–12)

1. Reminiscence (8:8–10)
2. Parable of Solomon's Vineyard (8:11–12)

III. Final Thought (8:13–14)

1. Jesper Rosenmeier, "'They Shall No Longer Grieve,' The Song of Songs and Edward Johnson's *Wonder Working Providence*," *Early American Literature* 26/1 (1991): 10.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. E.g., Jean Daniélou, "The Canticle: A Song of Sacraments," *Orate* 25 (1950–51): 97–103, 161–65; Thomas Fountain, "A Parabolic View of the Song of Solomon," *BETS* 9/2 (1966): 97–101; Bishoi Kamel, "Repentance in the Song of Solomon" (trans. L. Soliman) *Coptic Church Review* 6/1 (1985): 13–16; and Joseph R. Sizoo, "Winds of God [Song of Solomon 4:16]," *JRT* 10/2 (1953): 149–54.
4. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1877), 3.
5. S. R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 44.
6. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 174–76.
7. H. H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament*, ed. H. H. Rowley (London: Lutterworth, 1952), 211–12.
8. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977).
9. See Theophile J. Meek, "The Song of Songs: Introduction," *IB*, 5:95: "The transforming influence of later Yahwism has almost completely obliterated the elements of the dying and rising god, the sacred marriage, and the place of the king in the rites."
10. Michael Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Lyrics* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
11. *Ibid.*, 26 (taken from P. Harris 500, Group C, no. 18).
12. *Ibid.*, 46 (taken from the Turin Love Song no. 30).
13. Chaim Rabin, "Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry," *SR* 3/3 (1973–74): 206.
14. M. H. Segal, "Song of Songs," *VT* 12 (1962): 482–84.
15. Athalya Brenner, "Aromatics and Perfumes in the Song of Songs," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 75.
16. Linda Munk, "Giving Umbrage: The Song of Songs which is Whitman's," *Literature and Theology* 7 (1993): 53.
17. The Bible condemns Pope's hypothesized original setting of the Song, the *marzēah* feast, in Jeremiah 16:5–9 and Amos 6:3–7.
18. Connie Whitesell, "Behold, Thou Art Fair, My Beloved," *Parab* 20 (1995): 93–94.

19. John Snaith, *Song of Songs* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 5.

Text and Exposition

I. THE TITLE (1:1)

¹Solomon's Song of Songs.

COMMENTARY

1 The first line titles the book and associates it with Solomon and with the section of the Bible called “sapiential” or “wisdom” literature. In fact, the Song offers a perspective on love not unlike that of the book of Proverbs. It is unclear whether the title asserts Solomonic authorship (see [Introduction](#)).

The title “Song of Songs” has been read as though it identifies the genre as “an anthology of songs.” Though it is an anthology of songs, the syntax is that of the absolute superlative degree analogous to “King of kings,” “Holy of holies,” “vanity of vanities,” or “forever and ever.” It is the “Greatest song.”

One may read the Song expecting the finest sapiential song of love that the world has ever known. We may agree with Rabbi ‘Akiba that the whole world does not match in worth the day that God gave the Song of Songs to Israel.

NOTE

1 The *lamed* before Solomon's name, לְשִׁלֹמֹה (*lišlōmōh*), is usually read as a *lamed auctoris*, i.e., an attribution of authorship; however, it may also indicate the subject matter or an interest in the named personage. *Šîr haššîrîm* ^{”šer} *lišlōmōh* may then be read, “The Song of Songs, which pertains to Solomon.”

II. THE ANTHOLOGY OF SONGS (1:2–8:12)

OVERVIEW

The Song of Songs can be divided into fourteen vignettes, each composed of smaller units, called strophes. Each vignette offers a unique insight into the varieties of human love and can be interpreted more or less independently of the others. But the Song is greater than the sum of its parts and the vignettes together produce an overall effect. The Song must be read as a unity even as the vignettes are read individually.

A. Daydreams and Perfume in the Presence of the King (1:2–12)

OVERVIEW

This vignette begins and ends in the fragrant presence of the king. It is divided into three strophes: the present royal setting, reminiscences, and the present royal setting. The contrast between the middle strophe and the others is that between youth and maturity, between the time before love and the time when love is pleased to arise. Love in adolescence is hardly pleasant.

1. In the Presence of the King (1:2–4)

²Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.

³Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the maidens love you!

⁴Take me away with you—let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

We rejoice and delight in you;
we will praise your love more than wine.
How right they are to adore you!

COMMENTARY

2 The anthology immediately opens with the girl's impassioned plea for the king's sultry affections. The girl speaks far more than the boy in the Song, and she seems more active and even aggressive. One should not misread the rubrics "*Beloved*" and "*Lover*" in some Bibles (e.g., the NIV) as indications that the girl is more passive and the boy more active in matters of love. By this rule, the girl should be called "*Lover*" and the boy "*Beloved*"! The Song introduces the reader to love in the words of a girl who is expressing her desire to be touched.

She delights in the boy's lovemaking more than she delights in fermented wine. The similarity between love and alcohol is a theme that runs throughout the Song. Both yield pleasure and enjoyment; both are dangerous.

3 The girl delights in the boy's fragrant oils and compares their aroma to his "name." His reputation and character have made him desirable in the eyes of all who know him, so the maidens, who know nothing of his kisses, also love him from afar. This fact heightens her enjoyment of his lovemaking. Even in love, character counts. And so does cologne.

4a The girl's stimulated condition makes her impatient for privacy. The "king" brought her to his chambers. Is this a regal union and 1:5–8 an imagined pastoral fantasy? Or is the boy a shepherd whom the girl pretends a king? The reader cannot know for certain. Whether in fact or in fantasy, the girl is whisked away to the private royal suite.

4b The strophe concludes with other voices expressing their admiration for the king. In English the second personal pronoun has no gender, but in Hebrew it is clear that the praise is directed to the king. Terminology akin to worship occurs here in the Song: "Let us rejoice! Let us exalt! Let us remember!" The king, whoever he may be, inspires veneration by his peers.

NOTES

2 Abraham Mariaselvam (*The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems* [AnBib 118; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988], 64) suggests that *yiššāqēnî minn^ešîqôt*, “kiss me with kisses,” is onomatopoeic, “the sound effect of the action of kissing.” The change of person, “let *him* kiss me . . . for *your* love is more delightful than wine” is an example of enallage, a well-known rhetorical device in which one grammatical form is substituted for another. It should not be read (with the dramatists) as though the girl were telling her beloved to permit another to kiss her!

4a Here we have another example of enallage, “Take me away with *you*. . . . Let *the king* bring me. . . .”

4b Following 7:9, Fox, 200, reads *mêšārîm* as “smoothness” and repoints *mîyayin* to *mîyên*, “More than smooth wine do they love you.” Usually *mêšārîm* is read as “rightly” or “the righteous.” Those who are righteous worship and love the king.

2. *Reminiscences (1:5–8)*

⁵Dark am I, yet lovely,

O daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
like the tent curtains of Solomon.

⁶Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.

My mother’s sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I have neglected.

⁷Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock
and where you rest your sheep at midday.

Why should I be like a veiled woman
beside the flocks of your friends?

⁸If you do not know, most beautiful of women,
follow the tracks of the sheep
and graze your young goats
by the tents of the shepherds.

COMMENTARY

5–6a The girl's native beauty is not overcome by the rays of the sun, which have melanized her. Though she is yet beautiful, she feels somewhat sunburned and asks her peers not to look at her. In this strophe, we are no longer in the royal court but have moved to the provenance of those exposed to the heat of the sun, the tenant farmer and shepherd. The girl is immature and subject to adolescent self-conscious feelings about her appearance. For these reasons, the strophe is best read as a reminiscence of the time before love flowered.

6b Here we find the reason for the girl's exposure to the sun. She had angered her brothers and was being punished. The brothers appear again in the last vignette of the Song—thus closing the book as it opens—with the girl recalling her past subjection to her family.

There is no father in the Song of Songs, and the mother is merely mentioned. The brothers fill the role of parental presence in the Song of love and speak for the family. This is analogous to the disposition of Rebekah in Genesis 24. Laban, her brother, supervised the initial negotiations. Abraham's servant gave gifts to Laban and Rebekah's mother; her father, Bethuel, is not really a character in the story. In the same way, the brothers uphold the honor of the family in the Song of Songs.

What had the girl done to invoke the family's wrath? Reading the text in the light of the closing vignette and the theme of love, one may conclude that she was perceived to have behaved inappropriately in matters of love. If the vineyard may be read as a symbol of an affair, we see the girl chafing under the family's discipline and complaining that she is always a bridesmaid and never a bride, surrounded by love and yet having no relationship of her own. Will she ever know love? This question is answered in the closing vignette of the Song.

7–8 One may imagine the blushing girl approaching the object of her infatuation to inquire of his whereabouts later in the day. She wants to avoid the embarrassment of inquiring after him. The boy teases her in reply and tells her to use common sense and tend to her sheep with the shepherds. Thus the picture of adolescence is painted, complete with concern over appearance, embarrassment of having one's feelings known, shyness, being subject to the whims of authority, and feeling left out of love. Love does not always engender comfortable feelings.

NOTES

6a Cheryl J. Exum (“Asseverative *’l* in Canticles 1:6?” *Bib* 62 [1981]: 417) argues for the asseverative use of לֵאל (‘*al*) and reads, “Look on me that I am black!” It seems clear, however, that the cause of her blackness is the damaging heat of the sun, as is consonant with the remainder of the strophe in its presentation of young love as unsettling and awkward.

6b Thomas E. Fountain (“A Parabolic View of the Song of Solomon,” *BETS* 9 [1966]: 100) suggests that the vineyard is her personal appearance. In the OT, it is always the brothers who uphold family honor and manage the girl (Ge 34:1–31; 2Sa 13:20, 32).

7 The participial form of עָטָה (‘*th*) is employed to mean “one who covers oneself,” i.e., “is veiled.”

3. In the Presence of the King (1:9–12)

⁹I liken you, my darling, to a mare
harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.

¹⁰Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
your neck with strings of jewels.

¹¹We will make you earrings of gold,
studded with silver.

¹²While the king was at his table,
my perfume spread its fragrance.

COMMENTARY

9–12 In this strophe the vignette has returned to the present and is characterized by lavish ornamentation and the fragrance of the girl's perfume in the king's presence. Along with other observations, the fact that Pharaoh is mentioned suggests that if it is King Solomon in the vignette, the girl may be identified as the daughter of Pharaoh.

In these verses we hear the king speak for the first time. He compares the girl to a regal equine prized by Pharaoh and adorned with gold and silver. Others speak of their intention to beautify the young lady. In contrast to her days as a youth, she is indulged and encouraged in love. The vignette closes as it began with the girl in the aromatic environs of the king.

NOTES

9 The *yod* ending of לְסִסְתִּי (*l'susātî*) should not be read as a possessive suffix, “to my mare,” but as the old genitival case ending, “to the mare of.”

12 מִסָּב (mēsab) elsewhere always means “round about” (1Ki 6:29; Job 37:12). בִּמְסִבּוֹ (bimsibbô) is glossed in the NIV's “at his table.” A meaning akin to the חֶדֶר (*heder*) of 1:4 may be intended: “While the king was in his element.”

B. An Outdoor Fantasy (1:13–2:7)

OVERVIEW

The second vignette knows nothing of the royal court. Here the amorous couple strolls through a wooded glade, where they are not shy to evince pleasure in each other. Each is unique in the other's eyes. Passion awakens and lighthearted banter gives way to the interlocking of limbs and bodies. As the two approach sexual rapture, the vignette abruptly breaks away to instruct and warn the reader of the power of love.

1. Love in the Glade (1:13–2:3a)

¹³My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh
resting between my breasts.

¹⁴My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
from the vineyards of En Gedi.

¹⁵How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

¹⁶How handsome you are, my lover!
Oh, how charming!
And our bed is verdant.

¹⁷The beams of our house are cedars;
our rafters are firs.

^{2:1}I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.

²Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among the maidens.

³Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
is my lover among the young men.

COMMENTARY

13–14 While walking through the glade, the boy and girl express to one another feelings of affection inspired by the surrounding flora and fauna. Here the girl compares the boy to aromatic blossoms and perfumes. Perhaps intentionally, the Hebrew is ambiguous—is it the sachet of myrrh or the lover himself who rests between her breasts?

15 One should not read the Greatest of Songs hastily. The boy reiterates his lover's beauty and compares her eyes to doves. How does the dove resemble her eyes? Perhaps her eyes look like a dove's eyes, or the outline of a dove traces her eyes in the genre of Egyptian art. The image is difficult to acculturate and requires the modern reader to consider the image thoughtfully. Perhaps it refers to the dove's graceful or fluttering motion. Dillow, 29, suggests that the dove symbolizes purity and thus virginity.

16–17 The make-believe character of this vignette is seen in the girl's pretend mansion. She imagines the lush grass is their bed, the interlocking branches of the trees their walls and ceiling. "Imagine," she seems to say, "our house someday!"

2:1–3a The "rose" is probably an ordinary asphodel. The girl compares herself to common wildflowers. She is nothing special in her own eyes. The boy responds by comparing other damsels to thorns. To him she is a flower among them; all others are as unattractive as brambles. Here we find one aspect of love commended in the Song of Songs—true love is exclusive and fixates on a single object. He has eyes for no other. To her, he is the one sweet tree in a forest of ordinary trees.

NOTES

13 The verb לָוַן (*lwn*) often connotes "spend the night," as in its other use in 7:11. "Myrrh" is found seven times in the Song and eleven times in the OT as a whole.

14 En Gedi, "Fountain of the Kid," is a cliff-enclosed fertile oasis to the west of the Dead Sea.

16 רַעֲנָנָה (*ra^anānâ*), "lush, green," usually modifies "tree.

17 Reading *Qere*, there are two *hapax legomena*, רַחֲיִטְנוּ בְּרוֹתִים (*rahîṭēnû b'rôtîm*), glossed "our rafters are firs." רַחֲיִט (*rāhîṭ*) is perhaps related to רַחַט (*rahṭ*), "watering trough." בְּרוֹת (*b'rôt*) is a dialectical form of the usual Hebrew בְּרוֹשׁ (*b'rôš*). בְּתֵינוּ (*battēnû*) literally reads, "our houses."

2:1 "Sharon" refers to the coastal plain from Athlit to Jaffa. The Old Greek and Vulgate do not take the word as a proper name. See 1 Chronicles 5:16, which couples Gilead and Sharon.

2. Love in the Wine House (2:3b–6)

^{3b}I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.
⁴He has taken me to the banquet hall,
and his banner over me is love.
⁵Strengthen me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.
⁶His left arm is under my head,
and his right arm embraces me.

COMMENTARY

3b Love begins to propel the pair toward full engagement. In his shade she tastes his “fruit.” It is unnecessary to imagine priapic and seminal imagery in the tree and the fruit. The boy is the tree whose fruit and shade indulge the girl; she finds pleasing her total experience of his masculinity. In this strophe the girl is decidedly passive in love.

4 The movement towards consummation intensifies. He has brought her to the “house of wine,” another identification of love with alcohol (and the vineyard of the previous vignette). The “banner” is a military standard that signals the identity of an encampment. Pope, 2, glosses, “His intent toward me Love.” The unmistakable design of the boy when he brought her to the house of wine, she says, was concupiscence. A literal banquet hall is as unnecessary to postulate as the houses of 1:16–17; perhaps the “wine-house” is part of the fantasy.

5 The girl is overwhelmed by the power of love. She cries out for sustenance because love has enfeebled her. In Egyptian literature the girl becomes lovesick because of the absence of her lover; only his presence can cure her. Here, however, his amatory presence makes her weak. The Song

shows love to be a power that diminishes the vital powers of lovers. It is an intoxicating ordeal that is not for the timid.

6 The boy and girl finally are seen intertwined; his banner, indeed, was love. The reader would perhaps expect the next verse to celebrate the satisfying quality of sexual congress: “We had our fill of love” or “We were satisfied with love.” But the next verse hits like a slap of cold water.

NOTES

3b Literally, “I delighted and I sat in his shadow.”

4 Gordis, 204, translates from the Akkadian cognate *dgl*, “look upon”: “His glance upon me was loving.” This requires translating אֶהְבָּהּ (*ah^abâ*) as “loving” rather than “love,” which lacks context in the strophe.

5 Lovesickness is a powerful negative experience. Amnon (2Sa 13) was visibly haggard day after day because he loved (אֶהְבָּהּ, *’hb*) Tamar. His true illness (חֲלָהּ, *h^lh*) led him to feign illness (חֲלָהּ, *h^lh*) to rape her.

3. Adjuration to Beware of Love (2:7)

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

COMMENTARY

7 This is the first of four verses that conclude a vignette by urging the reader to respect the power of love. It is arguably the moral of the Song of Songs. A stroll in the glade inevitably led to lovesickness and the cry for sustenance. This verse cries out, “Do not miss the point! It is dangerous to awaken or arouse love!”

The verb “charge” is translated elsewhere “swear,” but one does not swear by wild animals. The beasts are used symbolically in the Song for the girl’s breasts (4:5) and the boy’s avid sex drive (2:9). “Swear to me,” the girl seems to say, “by the power of sexuality.” The word “gazelles” is in Hebrew *ṣ̣bā’ôt*, identical with “hosts” of the divine appellation “LORD of hosts.” Also, “does of the field” sounds remarkably similar to *’ēl šaddāy*, “God Almighty.” The beasts are circumlocutions for God.

The girl is then seen urging the maidens to swear, not merely by sexuality but also (using circumlocution) by the God of sexuality, not to arouse love prematurely. Swear by God, who has placed such potency in human love, to refrain from ardor until every element is in place. What are these elements? The Song explores these in vignette after vignette. One such element has been noted a few verses above—love should be individual-specific. If the heart of either is divided, then love is not yet pleased to arise.

NOTE

7 Other interpretations of this verse are possible. Falk, 19, offers, “Not to wake or rouse us / Till we fulfill our love.” This forces the meaning of the verb *הפץ* (*hps*) and is grammatically weak. Love, not the lovers, is the object of the verbs. The KJV reads, “Stir not up, nor awaken *my* love / till he please.” The NASB reads, “That you will not arouse or awaken *my* love / Until she pleases.” The KJV lacks gender concord between the masculine sense and the feminine verb “please.” The NASB maintains gender concord but implausibly shows the boy as speaking to the girl’s companions.

Elsewhere, endearing epithets possess a pronominal suffix, e.g., “my lover.” Though the definite article may substitute for a pronominal suffix, such usage is elsewhere unattested in the Song. Both the KJV and NASB put “*my*” in italics because the possessive pronoun is not in the Hebrew. “Love” is best understood as sexual emotion and desire, the same sense as the other occurrences in the vignette.

C. Turn, My Beloved, Be Like a Gazelle! (2:8–17)

OVERVIEW

This vignette begins and ends with verses comparing the lover to a gazelle and a young stag. This poetic device of bounding a unit with a repeated phrase is called “inclusio” and is commonly employed in the Song. Something like it was evident in the first vignette’s opening and closing with the description of fragrance in the king’s presence. This vignette’s repeated material (the girl’s wish that he come as a gazelle or a stag) is found in one more place—the conclusion to the Song as a whole.

The aspect of love discovered in this vignette is its seasonal character. Love has its natural time of awakening. The closing verse of the previous vignette implored the reader not to stir up love until it pleases. This vignette pictures the first stirrings of love—like the spring that follows moribund winter.

1. My Lover Arrives (2:8–9)

⁸Listen! My lover!

Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁹My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.

COMMENTARY

8 The vignette opens with the enlivened cry of the girl for her larger-than-life lover. A distinctive behavior of gazelles and deer is “pronking” or “stotting”—bounding straight up with all four limbs leaving the ground and landing together, often with the erection of the tail (Fritz R. Walther, *Communication and Expression in Hoofed Mammals* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984], 125). This is seen in times of excitement and

youthful play. The boy is pictured as a prancing male gazelle at home in his natural terrain. Though gazelles commonly stot in alarm, their energized behavior is here an image of the boy's wild vitality. As predators affect ungulates, so the girl affects her paramour.

9 Two verses earlier the girl implored her friends by the gazelle and doe; now she compares the boy to a similar pair. Some Mesopotamian magical spells consider gazelles the “epitome of sexual potency” (Snaith, 33). Great sexual energy drives the boy to draw near, to attempt to steal a glance, and to cry out to the girl. She is ensconced behind an impenetrable wall, so he cannot enter. He must persuade the young lady to come out to him (vv.10, 13). In this vignette, she takes a decidedly passive role in love.

NOTE

9 Usually צוץ (ṣwṣ) denotes “blossoming, flourishing,” which the ancient versions correctly glossed as “peeping, gazing,” because of its poetic context. Harold Fisch (*Poetry with a Purpose* [Indianapolis: Indiana Univ Press, 1988], 88) considers 2:9–14 to be one of three dreams in the Song.

2. My Lover Calls (2:10–15)

¹⁰My lover spoke and said to me,
“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,
and come with me.

¹¹See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.

¹²Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.

¹³The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me.”

¹⁴My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

¹⁵Catch for us the foxes,
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.

COMMENTARY

10 One moral of the Song is, “Leave your father and mother and cleave to me!” Here the boy calls the girl to leave her abode and come away with him. One feature of the lovers’ tête-à-tête throughout the Song is the many terms of endearment. Sweet nothings are ever on the lips of sweethearts.

11–13a The season motif is introduced as an analog to one facet of love. The word “time” (*ēt*; NIV, “season”) is found only here in the Song. As nature awakens, the flower blooms, and the figs ripen, so the time has come for love to burst forth. In love’s winter, before its time to ripen, the lovers were truly in love; now that spring has arrived, this love is able to blossom. Thus the Song understands a winter love, a season of waiting in anticipation while in love yet apart. When love finally awakens, it does so with boundless energy and enthusiasm.

13b–14 In place of the image of the wall and the lattice, what separates the lovers here is the inaccessible cleft of the rock, within which she is concealed. The boy cannot come to her but can only appeal to her heart. “Come away with me!” he cries, as though to say, “Leave your father and mother and cleave to me!” He longs for union. This longing is the longing

nurtured in the winter and expressed in the spring—it is the flowering of passion. It is in this mood of unfulfilled desire that the Song of Songs closes in 8:13–14.

15 It is unclear who is speaking in this verse. The vineyard—the relationship—is now in full bloom. Though spring has arrived, and with it, love, the growth of the vineyard is not secure. Even in the spring of love, nothing is certain. The vineyards in bloom must be definitively and firmly protected from injury. Little foxes are known in antiquity to effect great damage to cultivation and are here an image for deteriorating forces adverse to love.

NOTES

10 The strophe can be subdivided by the inclusio of “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,” here and in 2:13a.

11 The *Qere*, **הַסִּתְיָו** (*hassṭāyw*, “winter”) is a *hapax legomenon* with Near Eastern cognates meaning “rain.” This makes for a fitting description of winter in the Near East.

13 The fig tree “ripened” (root **חָנַט**, *ḥnt*), elsewhere always glossed “embalmed” (Ge 50:2).

15 Various interpretations have been offered for the image of the little foxes. In antiquity the damage as a result of foxes was most likely proverbial (Snaith, 41). Snaith and Murphy, 141, also argue that the foxes are young men whom the girl’s family must guard against. Michael Goulder (*The Song of Fourteen Songs* [JSOTSup 36; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986], 24) writes, “Fox-cubs, with their long, slim muzzles ending in rounded tips, make ideal male sex-symbols, suggested by the perfume-laden vines which are female sex-symbols, and which they do in fact despoil in later summer.” There is, however, no hint in the Song of competition to win the love of the girl. It is in the context of her excitement at her lover’s coming that the foxes are mentioned. The foxes are best left undesignated—to the imagination of the reader in love.

3. My Response (2:16–17)

¹⁶My lover is mine and I am his;
he browses among the lilies.

¹⁷Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the rugged hills.

COMMENTARY

16a “My lover is mine and I am his” is covenantal language, e.g., “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” The Song does not treat love merely as a tryst in the wood or a casual and youthful affair; the use of covenant formulae reveals love’s profundity. Biblical covenants involve lifelong commitment, progeny, and a code of behavior, and they are rooted in a historical association. While all of these elements may not be present in the simple phrase, it is patent that she feels comfortable describing her relationship as one of mutual ownership and fidelity. This is love when pleased to awaken.

16b The boy is seen in the image of the gazelle doing what gazelles do, grazing among “lilies.” She is the field of lilies, and it is amidst her person and her life that he ranges. Later in the Song the boy enters the “garden” of the girl.

17 Gazelles are diurnal and most species are active in the early morning and late afternoon. Either the verse means, “When the day begins it is time for love,” or “Let us love until the day ends.” In answer to his plea above, she now entreats the boy to romp with her as a rutting gazelle, frolicking on the “rugged hills” of her body.

NOTES

17a J. Coert Rylaarsdam (“Song of Songs and Biblical Faith,” *BR* 10 [1965]: 13) argues that the lovers must part at dawn; Falk, 93, suggests that

the girl employs caution by shooing away the boy in the morning lest their love affair be discovered. But she can hardly send him away to be “like a gazelle,” since he cannot leap on the “hills” when absent from her. Gazelles are diurnal, and a nocturnal intrigue cannot be explicated under the image of a rutting gazelle. Most species are active in the daylight but not in the heat of the day.

17b בֶּתֶר II (*beter*), a *hapax legomenon*, is glossed “rugged” and treated by the KJV as an otherwise unknown place name, “Bethel.” בֶּתֶר (*btr*) connotes “cut in pieces” in Genesis 15:10, and בֶּתֶר I (*beter*) expresses “part of, piece.” S. Craig Glickman (*A Song for Lovers* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976], 17) reads “mountains of separation” as a reference to the girl’s breasts. One may read “mountains of cleavage.”

D. Upon My Bed I Sought Him, but I Did Not Find Him (3:1–5)

OVERVIEW

This vignette is the first of two dreams that afford insight into the inner life of the girl. Her desire evinced here reveals that love is not all sweetness and light. The Song explores the aspect of love that impels the girl to dream of dangerous nocturnal jaunts, borne of her driving need to possess him. Sexual desire unsettles the girl’s mind, thus forcing her to secure the boy in her powerful grip. Love enervates lovers. The Song again warns the reader that love should be left alone until it is pleased to awaken.

1. My Disturbing Dream (3:1–4)

¹All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.
²I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.

So I looked for him but did not find him.
³The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”
⁴Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
till I had brought him to my mother’s house,
to the room of the one who conceived me.

COMMENTARY

1a The word “night” in Hebrew is plural and may mean “night after night.” She searches for her beloved (“the one my heart loves”) while on her bed. This vignette seems a companion to 5:2–7, which opens, “I slept but my heart was awake.” Her dream of searching is detailed in the next verses. (Alternatively, she may have awakened and arisen out of bed to actually search in the city streets.)

1b She looks for him while on her bed (asleep?) but does not find him. The motif of seeking and finding is part of the experience of love figured in the Song. Once in love, not all is right with the world unless the object of love is safely secured.

2–3 She arises to search for him. There are two possible outcomes of a search such as this—she may find him, or she may not. This vignette exhibits what transpires in the event that she finds him; 5:2–7 reveals the sorry alternative. In neither situation is she quite in her right mind. The silent guards find her, and she queries, “Have you seen the one I crave?” Love has driven her to behavior that is counter to her best interest.

Though in this vignette the danger is not evident, it is very real, and in 5:2–7 she suffers for her intrepid search. For the sake of love, people put themselves at risk. This time the guards do not assault her. Those who guard and protect the city walls do not encourage love.

4 She finally finds the object of her desire. She holds him and will not let him go. The verb used for “held” is *ʾh̄z* (GK 296), which occurs several verses earlier, “*Catch us the little foxes*” (2:15), and several verses later, “swords *grasped* by warriors” (3:8; NIV “wearing”). It is also used in 7:8 to describe seizing stalks to strip them of their fruit. This verb connotes violent clutching; here it indicates her fierce and unwavering grip to guarantee that she will reach her goal—to bring him to the chamber of her conception.

The word “room” (*heder*) is used elsewhere in the Song only in 1:4, “The king has brought me in to his chamber” (NASB). Love drives her on until she has bedded him. Love empowers the girl to seek out her beloved, brave the night, and compel him to her uterus. The Song shows that love pushes aside prudence and security. In this vignette the boy is quite passive.

NOTES

1 נֶפֶשׁ (*nepeš*, GK 5883) as a subject with בָּקַשׁ (*bqš*) as a verb is rare in the Hebrew Bible. In Ecclesiastes 7:28, Qohelet’s “soul” seeks an intrigue; in Ecclesiastes, נֶפֶשׁ always has the meaning “appetite.” In Lamentations 1:11, 19 the impoverished people seek food to fill their נֶפֶשׁ. In the Song, נֶפֶשׁ often indicates sexual desire. שְׁאֵהָבָה נֶפֶשִׁי (*še’āh’bâ napšî*) may be glossed “the one I long for,” “the one my voracity craves,” or “the one my appetite loves.” Her מִשְׁכָּב (*miškāb*, “bed”), used once in the Song, is found on the lips of the adulteress in Proverbs 7:17 (see also Eze 23:17, “the bed of love”; Pr 5:16).

2 Libidinous desire motivates the girl. She goes about the city streets and open places, the haunt of the adulteress in Proverbs 7:8, 12.

4 Graham S. Ogden (“Some Translational Issues in the Song of Songs,” *BT* 41 [1990]: 227) suggests the *yod* of הֹרָתִי (*hôrātî*) is a possessive ending and should be read “my becoming pregnant”; thus, “I will not let him go until I bring him home, to the room where I would conceive.” Horine persuasively argues that her conception chamber is her womb (Steve Horine, *Interpretive Images in the Song of Songs: From Wedding Chariots to Bridal Chambers* [New York: Lang, 2001], 108–9). “In other words, she is reenacting the intercourse of her parents” (Landy, 115). Her intention toward him is coition.

2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (3:5)

⁵Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

COMMENTARY

5 This refrain is repeated for the second time. It forces the reader to look for reasons in the vignette that might caution against love. Why not hastily and casually awaken desire? One will become dissatisfied alone in one's bed and will be driven to desperate measures to possess one's beloved. Passion, according to the Song of Songs, is not to be regarded lightly.

NOTE

5 See note on 2:7.

E. Who Is This Coming Up from the Desert? (3:6–11)

OVERVIEW

This vignette includes the only reference to a wedding in the Song, the wedding of Solomon. Solomon himself is passive and neither acts nor talks; he is not a character in the proper sense, only a royal figure in the distance. The perspective is that of a girl watching in excitement, calling on her friends to gaze at the trappings of ceremony on display.

It is not until the last line that the reader realizes that the spectacle has anything to do with matrimony. This emphasizes the importance of the event as a joyous wedding day. Many of the Song's—and especially this vignette's—motifs are echoed in Psalm 45. (Similarities include the girl's

virginal companions, warriors beside the king, the queen's golden attire, and the presence of aloes and myrrh.)

Like Psalm 45, this vignette celebrates regal nuptials and should be read as a delightful spectacle. There is no hint that circumstances should be different from those described. This is true despite the fact that the bride is presented as part of the royal treasury, Solomon's booty. The vignette begins, "Who is this?" This phrase is found two other places in the Song (6:10; 8:5), once closing a vignette that critiques the harem of Solomon.

Love is not only between lovers; there also includes a public dimension. The wedding of the king is the most public of all, the paradigm of all weddings.

⁶Who is this coming up from the desert
like a column of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and incense
made from all the spices of the merchant?

⁷Look! It is Solomon's carriage,
escorted by sixty warriors,
the noblest of Israel,

⁸all of them wearing the sword,
all experienced in battle,
each with his sword at his side,
prepared for the terrors of the night.

⁹King Solomon made for himself the carriage;
he made it of wood from Lebanon.

¹⁰Its posts he made of silver,
its base of gold.

Its seat was upholstered with purple,
its interior lovingly inlaid
by the daughters of Jerusalem.

¹¹Come out, you daughters of Zion,

and look at King Solomon wearing the crown,
the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
the day his heart rejoiced.

COMMENTARY

6 From a distance, the procession appears merely as a cloud or pillar of smoke rising up from the ground. An observer asks, “Who is this?” The smoke is not merely the stirred-up dust but also burning incense and fragrant spices. One may recall the first vignette, in which the presence of the king is characterized by scent. The question seems to be, “Whose bride is this?” with the answer in the next verse, “Solomon’s bride!”

7–8 Sixty mighty men (the same number as the queens of the harem in 6:8) carefully guard Solomon’s carriage, which presumably carries the bride. The sword girded on the thigh is a feature of Psalm 45 that celebrates the love of the king for his bride. The threats of war and nighttime terrors necessitate a military line of defense. The bride is part of the apparatus of Solomon’s court and as such is treated as a state treasure. She is so absorbed into functionary status that it is unnecessary to mention her at all in this vignette!

9–10 Gold, silver, and wives are trademarks of prosperous and victorious kings (Dt 17:17; 1Ki 20:5). The carriage itself is described in terms that parallel the description of its escort. As the fighting unit was taken from the mighty men of Israel and as the wood of the carriage was taken from the trees of Lebanon, so its “interior” is taken from the daughters of Jerusalem. The cohesive force that binds the girl to the carriage is love.

The ceremonial, political, fiscal, official, and statutory aspects of love are highlighted in the vignette. Love does not remain merely passionate and sexual; it controls human life as it did the girl’s by cementing her to her governmental office of queen. This is a facet of love that is cause for celebration, pomp, and circumstance, and the rejoicing of the daughters of Zion. When Esther was made queen, all Persia celebrated (Est 2:18).

11 A reveler calls her companions to come and see the king wearing the crown that he received on his wedding day. As the bride is bound to the carriage by love, so the king's jubilant heart is described by his symbol of office. In both cases, the public and official aspect of love is underscored. The wedding of the great king is cause for celebration by the entire populace. With the royal union comes the promise of blessing on the land and progeny: "Your sons will take the place of your fathers; you will make them princes throughout the land" (Ps 45:16).

There is a sense in which every marriage recapitulates the wedding of the great king. All may participate in Solomon's nuptials as either spectator or lover. Whenever any lovers copulate, they are reenacting the paradigmatic royal wedding. This is perhaps the meaning of 8:5, which also begins, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness," echoing 3:6, and continues to describe the very passionate lovemaking of the girl and boy under an apple tree. In the present vignette, the virginal daughters participate by rejoicing in the public display and wishing him well.

NOTES

6 Peter B. Dirksen ("Song of Songs 3:6–7," VT 39 [1989]: 220) argues that since **זֹאת** (*zō't*) and **עֲלָה** (*ōlâ*) are feminine, the approaching carriage must bear the bride.

7 M. Fox (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Lyrics* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985], 121) suggests that the **מִטָּה** (*miṭṭâ*) is Solomon's stationary nuptial bed; however, the term is used in 2 Samuel 3:31 in the sense of "bier," and it is described as possessing a "riding seat" in 3:10. It is best understood as a carriage.

10 Daniel Grossberg ("Canticles 3:10 in the Light of a Homeric Analogue and Biblical Poetics," BTB 11 [1981]: 74), based on the Homeric description of Odysseus' bed, suggests that **סִתְּבָה** (*āh°bâ*, GK 173) should be translated in line with the Arabic *'ihāb*, "hide": "they made it with leather." Jacques Winandy ("La Litière de Salomon [Ct 3:9–10]," VT 15 [1965]: 108), however, reads the preceding *hapax legomenon* **רָצוּף** (*rāsûp*) as "*disposé, agencé, aménagé*," thus rendering **סִתְּבָה** as an adverb. Love is the binding energy that holds it all together. The private interior, taken from the daughters of Jerusalem, is held in place by institutionalized love.

Literally, the phrase reads, “its-interior enjoined (by) love from-the-daughters-of Jerusalem.”

REFLECTION

This vignette particularly resembles Psalm 45, a psalm of love. There the great king is described in all his glory, and beside him is the bride as the culmination of God’s blessings. This psalm, which has more affinity to the Song of Songs than any other part of the Bible, is quoted in Hebrews 1:9 to refer to Christ. There is something about Christ’s passionate love for the church (he “craves” the bride in Ps 45:11) experienced in the nuptial embrace. Every Christian, single or married, also participates in the celestial wedding between Christ and the church, which is the paradigm of every Christian marriage and is the substantial love reflected in all terrestrial loves.

F. You Are All Beautiful, There Is No Flaw in You (4:1–7)

OVERVIEW

This vignette is bounded by an *inclusio* pattern. It begins, “You are fair, my darling, you are fair!” and ends, “You are all fair, my darling, there is no flaw in you!” It is the first of four examples in the Song of the *waṣf*, a genre that is part of traditional Syrian wedding ceremonies. Though there is no hint in it of anything alluding to matrimony, perhaps it is no accident that the first use of the genre follows the vignette of Solomon’s procession.

The *waṣf* is a description of the beloved by his or her lover that moves linearly from the head to the feet (or vice versa). The description entails comparing bodily features to various specimens of flora, fauna, and artifice in ways that highlight some characteristic of the beloved. It is not always easy for the modern reader to appreciate the comparison.

The reader is invited into the work of synthesizing comparisons for one’s own beloved. Lovers see the world through beloved-colored glasses, whereby anything and everything is transformed into images of the beloved.

¹How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Mount Gilead.
²Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin;
not one of them is alone.
³Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely.
Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
⁴Your neck is like the tower of David,
built with elegance;
on it hang a thousand shields,
all of them shields of warriors.
⁵Your two breasts are like two fawns,
like twin fawns of a gazelle
that browse among the lilies.
⁶Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of incense.
⁷All beautiful you are, my darling;
there is no flaw in you.

COMMENTARY

1a The vignette opens with a repetition of 1:15 but adds the phrase “behind your veil.” The reader must ask how her eyes behind her veil are like a dove. See [comments on 1:15](#).

1b Gilead is a Transjordanian hilly region south and east of the Sea of Galilee. Imagination is required to appreciate the image presented in this verse. Picture the rippling motion of a densely packed flock of black goats sauntering down a hillside. This sight reminds the boy of the girl’s hair.

2 This is much more than the banal compliment, “You have good teeth.” Imagine a flock of white ewes all in a row by a lake, seen from a nearby hillside. Each ewe has its “twin,” its reflection (Falk, 230), with the appearance of a row of teeth formed in a smile. This sight also reminds the boy of her smile whenever he sees the sheep by the water.

3a Her mouth is beautiful, highlighted by her red lips. The word used here for “mouth” is unique to the Bible and sounds like “wilderness” (see [Notes](#)); the word for “beautiful” sounds like “habitation.” Fox, 204, calls this a “double pun.” The girl has a “beautiful” “mouth,” which is an “oasis” in the “desert.” Her red lips outline her succulent and refreshing oral cavity, her beautiful mouth.

3b The image of the pomegranate most likely refers to the girl’s mouth and completes the wordplay of “oasis in the desert.” Her succulent mouth is experienced as juice from an opening in a pomegranate. Senses other than sight are engaged in the *waṣf*—in this case, taste.

4 The *waṣf* is moving in a line from her hair downward. When the boy sees the tower of David bedecked with shields, he thinks of her neck adorned with a necklace. Meyers, 213, takes special note of the military imagery and sees in it the notion of might, strength, and defense. In Ezekiel 27:10–11, shields and helmets hung about the walls depict splendor. Throughout the Song, the girl is associated with danger (e.g., the figurative danger of scaling an inaccessible cliff in 2:14) and martial images. The Song returns repeatedly to the paradigm of the female as an imposing fortress best approached with caution. The splendor and power of the tower remind the boy of the imposing glory of the girl, even as its appearance resembles her necklace.

5 Her breasts are compared to young fawns of a gazelle. This is perhaps the most perplexing image in the *waṣf*. Previously in the Song it was the boy who was a gazelle pronking upon the “mountains of cleavage.” Here

the girl's breasts are figured as twin browsing fawns. What is the point of comparison? Do her breasts look like gazelles? Smell like gazelles? Are they furry? The sensitive reader will not limit the possibilities to visible appearance but will allow the Song to engage all the senses. Perhaps her breasts are soft; perhaps the point of comparison is motion (gazelles travel with a graceful, bounding gait; see 2:8).

6 This verse echoes 2:17. The boy declares his intent to go to the hills of frankincense and the mountain of myrrh. The mounds are probably her breasts, as are the “rugged hills” of 2:17. The boy intends to romp with the twin female gazelles of her breasts.

7 In his eyes she has no “blemish” (NIV “flaw”). From head to toe Absalom had no “blemish” (2Sa 14:25). Deuteronomy 17:1 declares that an animal with no “blemish” is fit for sacrifice. The boy sees no imperfection in the girl. This vignette does not really describe what the girl looks like; rather, how the boy sees her. Neither physical nor inner beauty is at issue; rather, it is the beauty the boy imputes to her.

In the Song, love creates its own world. Within that world there are not merely herds and hills and towers and pomegranates; rather, in every moment the boy is surrounded by echoes and reminders of his beloved. He is never alone. This is one aspect of love explored in this vignette.

NOTES

1 *glš* (NIV “descending”) is found only here and in 6:5 in the Bible. Steven S. Tuell (“A Riddle Solved by an Enigma: Hebrew *glsh* and Ugaritic *glt*,” *JBL* 112 [1993]: 103) argues from the Ugaritic cognate *glt*, “wave of the sea,” to suggest *glš* connotes rippling motion.

3a Fox, 204, argues that מִדְבָּר (*midbār*, “mouth,” which elsewhere means “wilderness”)—uniquely the “speaker” (root דָּבַר, *dbr*)—is intentionally juxtaposed with נִאוֹה (*nāweh*, “beautiful”), which sounds like נֶוֶה (*nāweh*, “habitation”). These are found together in Isaiah 27:10.

3b Marc Rozelaar (“An Unrecognized Part of the Human Anatomy,” *Judaism* 37 [1988]: 101) argues that רִקָּה (*raqqâ*, which, though always singular is usually glossed “temples”) is best translated “mouth.” He suggests a derivation from רִק (*rōq*, “spittle”). To read “temples” deviates

from the linear progression from head to toe of the *waṣf*. “When [a pomegranate] ripens, it usually cracks, revealing the inside, which indeed resembles an open mouth.” Reading פֶּלֶחַ (pelah) as “fissure,” the phrase can be glossed, “Like a ripening pomegranate is your mouth behind your veil.”

6 Dillow, 77, suggests the singular mountain of myrrh represents the *mons veneris*.

G. I Have Come into My Garden, My Sister, My Bride (4:8–5:1)

OVERVIEW

This vignette is the center of the Song of Songs and is divided into two major strophes. The first identifies the bride with Lebanon. Though she is inaccessible, she ravishes him. He calls to her to come away with him. In the second strophe the boy takes full possession of the garden, his bride, with language designed to titillate all the senses. There is nothing of her that he does not fully taste and indulge. The experience of love climaxes with the boy’s ejaculation: “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride!” The closing remark encourages the two to be inebriated with love.

Love in this vignette is rapturous and sensual. It is compared to drinking wine, eating fruit, and smelling and tasting spices, honey, and milk. Love is for the carnal enjoyment of lovers. It is through love that one enters paradise.

The picture of man and woman in the midst of a garden recalls the garden of Eden. A subterranean spring waters both gardens. The two are naked and not ashamed. As in Eden, there is no curse and no sin. Adam’s cry at the sight of his mate, “Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” is heard in the cry of the boy who has savored every fruit; but unlike in Eden, there is no forbidden fruit in the garden of the Song. The only command here is to take, eat, and be drunk on the produce of the garden and the girl’s fountain. In this vignette, to lose oneself in sensual pleasure with one’s spouse, recaptures Eden and enjoys unqualified endorsement.

1. Lebanon (4:8–11)



⁸Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
come with me from Lebanon.
Descend from the crest of Amana,
from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon,
from the lions' dens
and the mountain haunts of the leopards.
⁹You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
you have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
¹⁰How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!
¹¹Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of
Lebanon.

COMMENTARY

8 Lebanon refers to two mountain chains north of Palestine. Amana probably refers to Jebel Zebedani of the eastern range, while Senir and Hermon to Jebel esh-Sheik of the western range. In the Song the term “bride” is unique to this vignette and helps bind it together as a unit. Elsewhere in the Bible the term refers to a woman who is related to the family by marriage: “sister-in-law,” “daughter-in-law,” “spouse.” Here, however, it is used as a term of endearment and may be no more literal than “sister” of 4:9. The epithet does indicate that the boy regards the girl, at least playfully, within the sphere of kinship.

He calls his “bride” to come to him from the highland lairs of lions and leopards. Again we see the female associated with danger and the boy unable to act except to exhort her to come away with him. Note the grand

hyperbole. The girl, his “bride,” situated in the rich, aromatic, source of living water (4:15), also dwells with predacious brutes and is dangerous to approach. Yet the girl seems to have it within her power to leave “Lebanon” and come to him. The Lebanese spell she casts on him is explored through this strophe.

9 “You have stolen [ravished] my heart [*libbabtini*], a paragram with ‘Lebanon’], my sister.” The term of endearment “sister” is common in Egyptian love lyrics. In the Song, it is found only in this vignette and in the first line of the next. With little effort on the part of the girl, the boy is mesmerized. With one “eye” and one “jewel” she has gained control over his heart and inflamed him with desire.

10 As in 1:2, where the girl exclaimed that the king’s love is better than wine, here the boy declares the same of her. Her love and her aroma charm him. Esther, in preparation for her night with the king, spent six months being treated with the same “balsam oils” (Est 2:12). This girl is ready for love.

11 This verse fills the mind with the image of a deep kiss. The girl, who a few verses before had been inaccessible, is now tasted; her lips savored, her mouth explored, her tongue relished. She carries with her the scent of Lebanon. As the boy breathes the Lebanese atmosphere, he prepares to penetrate her sealed well.

NOTES

8 “Amana” may relate to the river of 2 Kings 5:12. The word sounds like “Amen,” which is the Hebrew verb translated “faithfully, truly.” In characteristic fashion, the Old Greek mistranslates the proper name as *pisteōs*. See Deuteronomy 3:9 for Senir and Hermon.

9a Waldman suggests that *לִבְבַתִּי* (*libbabtini*) may not be derived from the root *לֵב* (*lēbāb*, GK 4222, “heart”), but from the late *לָבַב* (*labābu*, “be enraged”). He suggests a semantic evolution from “rage” to “be aroused” to “be aroused sexually.” This is analogous to the Greek *ὀργή* (*orgē*). The Hebrew would be then glossed, “You have roused me to passion.” See 1 Corinthians 9:5, ἀδελφὴν γυναῖκα (*adelphēn gynaiika*), “sister-bride/wife.”

9b “Eyes” in Hebrew is *mē ‘ênayik*, a paragram with *ma’yān*, “fountain,” of the next strophe (v.12). Gender discord between the masculine numeral and the feminine noun indicates a verb, “glance,” may have been lost.

10–11 The language of these verses is reflected in Proverbs 5:3: “For the lips of an adulteress drip honey / and her speech is smoother than oil.” This is the language of seduction; the girl has captivated the boy with her many charms.

2. Paradise (4:12–5:1a)

¹²You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

¹³Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
with choice fruits,
with henna and nard,

¹⁴nard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon,
with every kind of incense tree,
with myrrh and aloes
and all the finest spices.

¹⁵You are a garden fountain,
a well of flowing water
streaming down from Lebanon.

¹⁶Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread abroad.

Let my lover come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits.

^{5:1}I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;

I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

COMMENTARY

12 Closing the inclusio from v.8, v.11 ended with the word “Lebanon.” A new movement now begins in the vignette with the boy shut out of the garden-spring. She is virgin soil, locked and sealed. Three features dominate this strophe. First, the girl is a “garden” full of spices and delectable fruits. Second, she is a “fountain” or “well,” a fount of abundant refreshing waters. Third, his olfactory sense is dazzled and he is enraptured as he inhales her omnipresent bouquet. She is an unsullied virgin, inviolate, now prepared and ready to receive her lover.

13a “Your plants,” or “your shoots,” possibly refer to her limbs. The term is likely derived from *šlh* (“to send”) and related to the form in Isaiah 16:8, “branches,” and Joel 2:8, “sword, spear.” Having tasted her mouth, tongue, and lips, he now moves on to her arms and legs. Her “shoots” are an orchard of pomegranates. “Orchard” is the Hebrew *pardēs*, “paradise.” Her extremities are his paradise.

13b–14 No fewer than nine spices are listed here, along with pomegranates and “choice fruits.” The sense of smell and taste are used as synecdoche for all the senses. Cinnamon is found three times in the Bible—including Proverbs 7:17, where the seductress has perfumed her bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. The perfumes are intended to entice and stimulate the senses. Here the Song treats the reader to a crescendo of taste and smell, a fast-paced bombardment of sensuality in which the boy wholeheartedly revels.

15 The lovemaking has reached the fount of romance, the girl as a well or spring. A few verses before, this fountain was sealed—an image of her virginity. It is now gushing living waters, streaming from Lebanon, the very nucleus of love. The image of woman as fountainhead is the dominant motif of Proverbs 5:15–18. There the wife is a “cistern,” “flowing,” “well,” and a “fountain.” What is in view there is specifically sexual intercourse. She is

the “blessed” water from whom the man is instructed to drink. With the image of the girl as an unsealed “well” in Song 4:15, the love song has reached its apogee in emblematic coitus.

16 For the first and only time in this vignette the girl speaks, making clear her attitude toward sexual engagement with the boy. With six volitional verbs, she exclaims her desire for the experience to mount to climax. In ecstasy she calls on the winds to awaken and set the air astir with the scent of love, for fragrant oils to gush and flow, for her lover to enter his garden and eat all of its pleasant fruit! Her emphatic wish is to please, to be entered, to be enjoyed.

1a The girl’s six volitional verbs are followed by four perfectives of the boy. This multiple repetition consummates the superlative degree; there is nothing left to experience. He has savored it all. What he has tasted is described in rich sensuous language designed to titillate the senses. The olfactory and gustatory stimuli serve as synecdoche for all the senses; it is the girl that he has enjoyed, tasted, imbibed.

NOTES

12 The MT reads גַּל (gal, “spring”) in v.12b, but ancient versions read גַּן (gan, “garden”) twice: “A garden locked is my sister, my bride / A garden locked, a fountain sealed.”

13 שְׁלֵחַ (šēlah), “your plants” (NIV), alternatively may be related to שְׁלַח (šēlah) in Nehemiah 3:15, “water conduit.” In that case, “canal” may be a metaphor for the vagina.

14 לְבֹנָה (l’bônâ, “frankincense,” which ends the first line of the verse, is a paragram with the last word of 4:15, לְבָנוֹן (l’bānôn, “Lebanon.” The verb “locked” (n̄l) of 4:12 ordinarily signifies a door locked from the inside (Jdg 3:23–24; 2Sa 13:17–18).

15 “Fountain of gardens” (or “garden fountain”) refers to an irrigation system. Proverbs 23:27 reads, “the strange woman is a narrow well.” The well is a common image for the sexual woman.

16 The first verb the girl employs is the same as that used in 2:7 and 3:5, “Do not *awaken* love.”

3. Encouragement to Love (5:1b)

^{1b}Eat, O friends, and drink;
drink your fill, O lovers.

COMMENTARY

5:1b In the second vignette (1:13–2:7), when the couple approach coital contact, the vignette suddenly breaks off into a cold warning not to stir up love until it pleases (2:7). Here a different moral is offered. The final comment implores the twosome to eat, drink, and be intoxicated. In the final analysis, the perspective of love offered in this vignette is that it is like alcohol. Using the Hebrew verb *rwh* (GK 8115), Proverbs 5:19 reads, “Let her breasts *satisfy* you always,” and in Proverbs 7:18 the adulteress says, “Come, let us *satiate ourselves* with love.” “A barren womb is never satisfied [*śbʿ*, GK 8425]” (Pr 30:16), and the harlot of many lovers “was not *satisfied* [*śbʿ*]” (Eze 16:28–29).

Words such as *rwh*, *śbʿ*, and *mlʾ* (GK 4848) are used throughout the Bible to indicate “satisfaction.” This language is not used in the Song of Songs. Love is not idolized, and the Song does not claim that love ultimately satisfies. The closest the Song comes is to speak of “becoming drunk” with love. Unlike wisdom, which is compared to a well-prepared meal in Proverbs 9, love is compared to an intoxicant. The verb *škr* (GK 8910, “drunk”) in 5:1 is often a synonym for “confusion”: “You will be drunk, but not with wine” (Isa 29:9; 49:26; 51:21; Na 3:11). In Scripture, to drink is to become disoriented, lose one’s self-control, and have an enjoyable time doing it.

Love is encouraged, commended, and celebrated in this vignette for what it is—a whirlwind of pleasure, a powerful inebriant. In love, as with alcohol, caution and normal inhibition are cast aside. This is one facet of love celebrated in this vignette that stands in stark contrast to the picture of love in the next.

NOTE

1b Daniel Grossberg (“Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible,” *HS* 35 [1994]: 9) renders “drink to inebriation of love.” Outside the song, שָׁכַר (škr, GK 8910) occurs nineteen times, sixteen in a negative sense. In Genesis 43:34, Joseph intended his brothers to drink such that the next day they would believe that Benjamin took the golden cup. Thus within this positive use of שָׁכַר is the common sense of loss of control and vulnerability. The other positive use of שָׁכַר is in Haggai 1:6, “You drink, but not to drunkenness,” where it highlights the desirability of drink. Imbibers want to become drunk.

H. I Opened to My Lover, but He Had Turned and Gone (5:2–8)

OVERVIEW

In the dream of 3:1–4 the girl searched the streets and squares for her lover. She eventually found him. The present vignette repeats the seek-and-find motif but also chronicles what transpires when the girl *fails* to recover the object of her desire. The vignette lends insight into the inner life of the girl: her anxiety, erotic fantasy, confusion, and lovesickness. Love is not for the timid! In contrast to the preceding vignette, the picture of love presented here is not pleasant. Love will drive lovers to act counter to their own best interest, throw caution to the wind, dash into danger, and languish in misery. In a sense, the girl is not in her right mind.

This vignette is a masterpiece of double entendre and should be read on two levels. On one level, the boy arrives at the girl’s domicile, calls to her, attempts to open a door, and finally leaves. The other level is the most titillating material in the Song. Her disturbed mindset is interwoven with her erotic fantasies, thus in the end leaving her sick with love.

1. My Disturbing Dream (5:2–7)

²I slept but my heart was awake.

Listen! My lover is knocking:

“Open to me, my sister, my darling,

my dove, my flawless one.
My head is drenched with dew,
my hair with the dampness of the night.”
³I have taken off my robe—
must I put it on again?
I have washed my feet—
must I soil them again?
⁴My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening;
my heart began to pound for him.
⁵I arose to open for my lover,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with flowing myrrh,
on the handles of the lock.
⁶I opened for my lover,
but my lover had left; he was gone.
My heart sank at his departure.
I looked for him but did not find him.
I called him but he did not answer.
⁷The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
they took away my cloak,
those watchmen of the walls!

COMMENTARY

2a While the girl sleeps, her “heart” is “awake.” This idiom probably depicts a dream state of consciousness. The verb *‘wr* (“awake”) is used two verses earlier (“Awake, north wind!”) as well as in 2:7 and 3:5 (“Do not *arouse* or *awaken* love until it so desires”). The girl lies on her bed in a sexually stimulated state.

2b “The voice of my lover” (*qôl dôdî*) is a phrase found in 2:8, where the boy stands by the window and bids the girl to come away with him. A common motif in the Song is that of the boy imploring the distant girl but unable to approach her and waiting for her response. Here is the same motif, this time with the boy’s voice pummeling the girl as he entreats her to open to him. “Open” (*pth*) can refer to the womb (Ge 29:31; 30:22) and to undressing (Job 12:18; Ps 30:12). The vignette is replete with double entendre, and perhaps the call to “open” has a sexual overtone. In the previous vignette, the girl was a garden locked from the inside. Here again his entry is controlled by the inclination of the young lady.

The boy desires to escape the night, his body wet with condensate as he urgently enjoins her. Again we are privy to his tender terms of endearment. She is his “flawless one.” Outside the Song, the term usually refers to moral integrity (Job 1:1; Pr 29:10). Here, however, it seems to refer to physical perfection (Ge 25:27). She is his “sister,” a term that associates this vignette with its only other use in the previous vignette. There the lovers were drunk with passion, with the boy tasting every succulent fruit. Here the boy fails to gain entry, and love is lost.

3 The girl is naked and her feet are clean. She is faced with a choice—to open or not to open. Her hesitation is due to her concern with her nudity and her cleanliness. In the Hebrew Bible, “feet” is a euphemism for genitalia. To “cover the feet” is to urinate (Jdg 3:24); a newborn is “that which issues from between the feet” (Dt 28:57); pubic hair is the “hair of the feet” (Isa 7:20); to spread the feet is to present the vagina for intercourse (Eze 16:25). Because the girl is concerned about her nudity and unsullied “feet,” she does not open to her lover. Her self-interest obviates love.

4a “My lover thrust his hand through the [hole].” “Hole” has no modifier such as “*latch-hole*,” “*hole of the door*,” or “*key-hole*,” thereby augmenting the double entendre. Her lover “sent” or “thrust” his hand into the hole. The word “hand” is a euphemism for the erectile organ. The harlot “saw the hand” (Isa 58:8); the Manual of Discipline at Qumran (1QS 7:13) declares that the one who “puts out his hand” from beneath his clothing will be punished. On one level, the boy is probably trying to penetrate her dwelling, but in her mind his phallus penetrates her personal aperture.

4b The thrusting of his hand makes her “bowels roil” (lit.). Her *mē ‘eh* (“insides, intestines”) refer to internal organs. It is a synonym for “womb”

in Genesis 25:23. The verb “roil, surge” in Proverbs 20:1 is glossed “strong drink is raging.” In Jeremiah 31:20, Yahweh expresses his feelings for his son as, “My bowels yearn for him.” It stands for the roaring of the sea, the tumult of a crowd. The last word in the verse may also be translated “upon him,” yielding, “My insides roiled upon him.” The girl is stimulated to an orgiastic state.

5 Her first worry over her state of undress and her cleanness has been overcome. No longer concerned with these, in a sexually charged condition she finally rises to open to her lover. In language reminiscent of the previous vignette, her rising to open is extravagantly described. Her hands drip with myrrh, her fingers with liquid myrrh that run over the “palms” of the lock. The lock recalls 4:12, the “locked garden” of the girl. There the lock and seal represented her virginity. Here the lock of the girl possesses “palms” and flows with myrrh. “Palm” in Genesis 32:25, 32 is glossed “thigh”; in Deuteronomy 25:12 it may refer to female circumcision. In Jeremiah 4:31, a woman spreads her “palms,” i.e., thighs or legs, in labor. The girl’s “lock” with its “palms” is wet with odoriferous moisture. She is ready to open for him.

6a Too late she finally opens to her lover. Her initial concern with nudity and cleanliness made her hesitate. Because she has wavered, he leaves her alone in her affected state.

6b The sentence reads literally, “My soul departed at his leaving.” In Genesis 35:18, the departing of a *nepeš* denotes clinical death. She swoons and describes her experience as deathlike when she opens for him and he is gone. When under the power of love, one’s soul is not one’s own, and one feels as though dying when denied. She searches for him, calls for him, without result. He gives no answer. Love has been lost.

Notice how love has placed the girl in a double bind. She did not want to open, but not opening was ultimately worse. Against her own best interest and initial impulse, she finally was driven to open to her lover, only to grow faint and sick with love and feel wounded and assaulted.

7 In 3:1–4 the girl queried the watchmen; here the watchmen assault her. This is the darkest moment in the Song of Songs. The girl suffers because love has driven her to take inordinate risks. The guards “struck” her. Usually the verb *nkh* means “slay” (see Pr 23:13–14, “Smite him with the

rod”). “They bruised me” uses *pš*ʿ, found twice elsewhere, together with *nhk* in 1 Kings 20:37 and in Deuteronomy 23:1, to refer to sexual injury.

In a final indignity afflicted on the young woman, the night watchmen lift her finery from her. The guardians of the walls molest and strip the girl. This is what transpires in the event that she fails to find her lost love. The girl, in her dreams, imagines a dark and violent scenario. Love is not celebrated in the Song apart from the recognition of its danger. With this vignette, the Song of Songs again presents yet another aspect of love.

NOTES

2 דּוֹפֵק (*dôpēq*) in this verse is usually rendered “knocking”—the boy knocks at the door and begs for entry. In the Hithpael precisely this sense is found in Judges 19:22. This approach must read *qôl* as “sound” or “noise” rather than “voice,” though the verse continues with the lover’s appeal. In Genesis 33:13 the verb is glossed “drive hard.” The word “door” is nowhere in the vignette, and the Qal participle דּוֹפֵק is used as the predicate of the verbless clause. This construction is seen in Genesis 4:10, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying out [צָעֲקִים, *šō* “*qîm*] to me.” His voice pummels the girl.

3 Tamar tore her *ktōnet* (“robe”) after being raped by Amnon (2Sa 13:19). The harlot is to be “stripped” (פָּשַׁט, *pšt*) and left naked and bare (Eze 16:39). The girl here had stripped off her robe, i.e., she was *au naturel*. טָנַף (*tnp*) is a *hapax legomenon* with Aramaic and Akkadian cognates and should be read “soiled.”

4a M. Delcor (“Two Special Meanings of the Word יָד in Biblical Hebrew,” *JSS* 12 [1967]: 230–40) suggests a relationship between יָד (*yd*) and יָדִיד (*ydyd*, “beloved”), both used in this verse. In that event, יָד I, “hand,” should be distinguished from יָד II, “penis,” from the root יָד/וָד (*yd/wd*, “to love”).

5 See Lyle M. Eslinger (“The Case of an Immodest Lady Wrestler in Deuteronomy 25:11–12,” *VT* 31 [1981]: 269–81) for a more detailed account of the use of *kap* (translated “handles” in the NIV here) in the Bible. Quoting from Cunningham’s manual of practical anatomy, Eslinger, 276, writes, “Regarding the specific anatomical identity of the *kappôt*

hamman'ûl it is possible to suggest the vaginal vestibule and bulbs, along with the bulbospongiosus muscle as the locking or barring mechanism (*hamman'ûl*) and the labia minora and majora as the plural appendages which together form the walls of the vulvic cavity.” Though the poetic line will not bear this exacting description, the double entendre does suggest female anatomy.

6a The verb *ḥmq* (“left”) elsewhere occurs only in Jeremiah 31:22: “How long will you go *here and there*, O faithless daughter?”

6b דבר I (*dbr*) carries the meaning, “lead, push back,” and here describes the departing of the girl’s lover. Alternatively, one may read דבר II, “My soul departed at his speaking.” See NIV text note.

7 The girl’s garment, *r’dîd*, is found elsewhere only in Isaiah 3:23 in a list of finery. The guards “lifted” it as Ruth “lifted” her skirt (Ru 2:18).

2. Adjuration to Keep a Secret (5:8)

⁸O daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—
if you find my lover,
what will you tell him?
Tell him I am faint with love.

COMMENTARY

8 The same girl who had wavered because of her clean feet began hunting for her lover through the alleyways, only to return home assaulted and demeaned. Her “soul,” her “voracity,” forced her to choose between the lesser of two evils of forbidding and allowing entry. Neither choice was satisfactory. First she underestimated her own concupiscence and hesitated. This was an untenable situation, for her passion grew overpowering. Since she did pause, however, opening to her lover only caused her suffering. The choice to open was finally inescapable, since she had lost her self-control and her conduct was determined by libidinal fever.

In the end the girl languishes at home and informs her companions that she is lovesick. “Do not tell him,” she says weakly, “that I am ill from love” (see Note). If the episode is a dream that highlights the inner conflict between what she desires and the behavior that is expected of her, the reader may wonder at the confusion of her inner life. The “wall” is mentioned in the Song again only in 8:9–10, where it seems to be an image for the girl’s virtue. In her dream, the guardians of the walls punish her for her fervent pursuit (5:7). At the very least, the reader is left with a picture of what love can do to the psyche, the emotional contortions that are a necessary part of the experience of love.

The phrase “I charge you” is the same as that in 2:7 and 3:5, here recited without reference to the divine circumlocutions. At this point in the Song, the reader may assume that this is ellipsis and the objects of the oath are understood. She previously adjured her friends to refrain from arousing love; this adjuration highlights what can happen when love is stirred. It is as though the Song says, “Are you yet ready, O reader, for this love?”

NOTE

⁸ Fox, 205, persuasively argues that *mah-taggidû lô* should be translated, “Do not tell him,” rather than, “What will you tell him?” The other adjurations are negative, and *mah* is read as a negative particle. Thus the vignette ends with the girl embarrassed and pleading with her companions not to tell the boy what she did.

I. Tell Us about This Lover! (5:9–6:3)

OVERVIEW

This vignette continues the thought of the last. In response to the girl’s request, the maidens inquire of her, what makes this man so special? Her answer is the second *waṣf* of the Song (see [comments on 4:1–7](#)). Imagine an unmarried young woman talking with her girlfriends about the object of her ardor.

1. What Kind of Lover Is He? (5:9–16)

⁹How is your beloved better than others,
most beautiful of women?

How is your beloved better than others,
that you charge us so?

¹⁰My lover is radiant and ruddy,
outstanding among ten thousand.

¹¹His head is purest gold;
his hair is wavy
and black as a raven.

¹²His eyes are like doves
by the water streams,
washed in milk,
mounted like jewels.

¹³His cheeks are like beds of spice
yielding perfume.

His lips are like lilies
dripping with myrrh.

¹⁴His arms are rods of gold
set with chrysolite.

His body is like polished ivory
decorated with sapphires.

¹⁵His legs are pillars of marble
set on bases of pure gold.

His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as its cedars.

¹⁶His mouth is sweetness itself;
he is altogether lovely.

This is my lover, this my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

COMMENTARY

9 The companions of the girl ask her about this man. What about him has reduced her to a state of illness? The question directly asks her to compare her lover with other lovers. One aspect of love in the Song of Songs is that of exclusivity, a principle that underpins the vignette. Her lover is unique, and he uniquely affects her. She attempts to explain it to the daughters of Jerusalem.

10 Earlier in the Song, the boy described the girl as a lily among thorns. Here the girl declares that the boy stands out among ten thousand; all others are insignificant. He is “radiant” (*ṣaḥ*), a term used in Isaiah 18:4, “*dazzling* heat in the sunshine,” and in Jeremiah 4:11, “*scorching* wind.” This sizzling phenomenon is how the boy affects the girl; he bedazzles and overheats her. He appears “blood red,” an almost theophanic picture similar to Revelation 1:13–16 (see Note). The young man is larger than life.

Perhaps this is literary synaesthesia, the transfer of sensation from its usual-sense modality to another modality. In this case, nonvisual stimulation may be sensed as the color red (chromaesthesia). The boy sets all of her senses on fire. In the next vignette, with similar language the boy compares the girl with the sun and the moon.

11 The modern reader should not rush through this poetry. Why is the man’s head described as fine gold? The head of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 2 was golden, in that case representing beauty and grandeur. By what sense are his locks like date panicles? Sight? Smell? Perhaps the softness of the flower reminds her of his hair. The comparison to a raven is expressly that of color.

12–15a The *waṣf* derives images from artifice, i.e., here a statue seems to be described. His golden head, eyes mounted like jewels, arms of gold, and alabaster legs on a golden base seem to describe a sculpture or fabrication. The overall impression is one of strength, solidity, and immovability, with glory and magnificence. He shines like gold; his features bedazzle like jewels. He commands the girl’s attention.

Intertwined with the statuesque imagery are figures more organic and lively (see [comments on 1:15](#), where the girl’s eyes are doves). Here more

detail is given about the comparison. His eyes are doves by streams of water, washed in milk. Perhaps color is the point of comparison. His lips are as lilies. Again the reader must pause and consider. Do they look like lilies? Smell like lilies? Do they have petals? Perhaps they are soft to her touch. They flow with myrrh, as did the “fingers” of 4:5. When her face is close to his, she experiences his scent—“beds of balsam, towers of scented herbs.”

The *waṣf* begins with the man’s head and works its way down to his “foundation,” passing through face, hands, midriff, and legs. The midriff (glossed “body” in the NIV) is located between the upper body and the legs. Daniel 2:32 uses the Aramaic cognate, “Its *belly* and thighs were of bronze”; but the Hebrew word usually denotes “bowels” and is the same as in 5:4, “My *insides* surged upon him.” It is glossed “womb” in Ruth 1:11, and except for here and Daniel 2:32, it always signifies internal organs.

The particular “intestine” in view in the Song is visible to the girl and is compared to a “polished tusk encrusted with sapphires” (lit. trans.). The word “ivory” is in Hebrew “tooth” or “tusk” and connotes a tusklike appearance in 7:4, “a tower of ivory.” The most likely referent for the girl’s description here is the man’s penis, like a polished tusk. Later in the Song, another Hebrew word that usually signifies internal organs is used for the same visible region of the female body.

It is this kind of material in the Song of Songs that leads commentators to conclude that if the Song had been discovered outside of its canonical context, it would certainly have been read as a prurient love song. Imagine a clique of young single women listening to someone describe her infatuation detailing her boyfriend’s erection. The other girls are affected by this and desire to seek out this man also. Obviously, to read this section as an allegory of Christ and the church is to present to the reader’s imagination a disrespectful vision of Christ in the same sense that Ham disrespected his father (Ge 9:22–23). An allegorical reading of the Song of Songs is thus sacrilegious. The religious value of the Song is in its vision of sexuality that conceives God the Creator, who has put passion in the hearts of human beings—a passion that echoes the deeper passion for a love that satisfies and never ends (SS 8:6).

15b–16 The *waṣf* of 5:11–15a is bounded by an inclusio of the word *paz* (“fine gold,” only these two places in the Song). Before and after the *waṣf* are general descriptions of his overall appearance; he is like choice cedars

of Lebanon and able to cast his own Lebanese spell on the girl. She makes special mention of his “sweet palate.” In 2:3 his fruit was sweet to her palate. Here the note that his palate is “sweet” uses a word echoed in Proverb 9:17 in a sexual sense: “Stolen water is *sweet*.” She concludes, “He is entirely desirable.” This has its parallel in 4:7, where the boy claims that the girl has no flaw. In her mind, the lovesickness is certainly justifiable.

NOTES

9 The phrase reads literally, “What is your lover from a lover?” This is understood as a form of the superlative, “What distinguishes your lover from all other lovers (who are ordinary)?”

10 The NIV reads, “*Outstanding* among ten thousand,” from *dāgûl*. Arguing from the Akkadian root *daġālu*, “look with astonishment,” Gordis, 203, suggests, “distinguished among ten thousand.”

The NIV translates אָדוֹם (*ādôm*, “bright red”) as “ruddy.” First Samuel 16:12 uses אֲדָמוֹנִי (*admônî*, “reddish”) to describe David. To the author’s knowledge, the physiological phenomenon of synaesthesia was first associated with the Song in 1998 by Heidi Epstein at the Society of Biblical Literature’s annual meeting.

11–15a Though beds of balsam and various birds and flowers are part of the *waṣf*, its overall lineament seems to be of a graven image. Interpreters such as Meek (in his introduction to the Song of Songs in *IB*, 5:91–98) and Pope, who argue for the liturgical origin of the Song, note this fact. After all, the man is introduced with a blazing, semi-theophanic visage. But every *waṣf* presents images that tease the mind; a prototypical idol is hardly necessary to posit. In 7:2 the girl’s thighs are compared with a jeweler’s handiwork. Landy, 80, has called the description “coldly metallic and disjointed.” Yet the girl concludes her erotic *waṣf* with a positive evaluation: “He is all desirable,” and her companions are stirred to seek him out themselves.

14 *ešet* (“polished”), from *ʿšt*, is found elsewhere only in Jeremiah 5:28, “they have grown fat and *sleek*.” Perhaps it is a synonym for “fatness” and can be glossed “a thick tusk.”

2. Where Has He Gone? (6:1–3)

¹Where has your lover gone,
most beautiful of women?
Which way did your lover turn,
that we may look for him with you?

²My lover has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to browse in the gardens
and to gather lilies.

³I am my lover's and my lover is mine;
he browses among the lilies.

COMMENTARY

1 The girl has finished her *wasf*, and her companions have been moved to join her in her quest. They now desire to see this man for themselves!

2 After her nocturnal hunt, her molestation, her lovesickness, her charge to the companions, her titillating description of her lost love, and the friends' desire to look for him, some climactic reunion is expected as the climax to the vignette. Instead, the emotion is diffused; he is only gathering lilies. Elsewhere in the Song, to browse among lilies and to enter gardens is to enjoy lovemaking with one's beloved. There is no need to search; there is no tension. The Song seems to subvert itself. After creating such tension, the reader is left in the end with no satisfaction and the impression that all the ado has been about nothing. In this manner, the Song reveals that her inner life is full of fears and doubts even while her lover is entirely domesticated. Love is not an altogether positive experience in the Song.

3 For the second time in the Song the language of covenant appears: "I am my lover's and my lover is mine" (see [comments on 2:16](#)). It is precisely while in a covenantal relation to her lover that she imagines losing him, being punished by watchmen and being lovesick. Love creates an unsettled mind even when it pleases to be stirred.

NOTE

2–3 Landy, 202–3, claims that when her lover gathers lilies he is actually grazing among women: “. . . if he is hers,” *dôdî lî*, how can he promiscuously graze among women? This is in fact a point of extreme tension in the Song.” But 2:16 uses the same language with no such tension; the girl herself is the field of lilies in which he grazes. The verse should be read as synonymous parallelism, “I am my lover’s and my lover is mine” = “He browses among the lilies.”

J. Who Is This, as Awesome as an Army with Banners? (6:4–10)

OVERVIEW

The vignette opens and closes with the unique Hebrew phrase ^a*yummâ kannidgālôt* (lit., “terrible as an army with banners”; NIV, “majestic as troops with banners,” v.4; “majestic as stars in procession,” v.10). The boy’s description of the girl mirrors hers of him from the previous vignette; she is larger than life and unsettling to him. For the first time, the fabulous harem of Solomon is critiqued. The love celebrated and explored in the Song of Songs is set in contrast to that institution. This is another expression of the Song’s posture that love is exclusive.

The tiny *waṣf* associates this vignette with 4:1–7 and is in fact an abbreviated version of it. This vignette includes just enough of the first *waṣf* to invoke it all, then places it in an appropriate context. The setting for the *waṣf* is revealed as the opposite of the harem; the *waṣf* is a celebration of the other’s uniqueness.

The famous love of King Solomon for women that inspired the bloated harem is indirectly appraised and found lacking. It is unlikely that Solomon himself authored this critique, for that action would in effect be judging himself to have lost the essence of love.

⁴You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,

majestic as troops with banners.
⁵Turn your eyes from me;
they overwhelm me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Gilead.
⁶Your teeth are like a flock of sheep
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin,
not one of them is alone.
⁷Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
⁸Sixty queens there may be,
and eighty concubines,
and virgins beyond number;
⁹but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,
the only daughter of her mother,
the favorite of the one who bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her blessed;
the queens and concubines praised her.
¹⁰Who is this that appears like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
majestic as the stars in procession?

COMMENTARY

4a The girl is compared to the beauty of two cities: Tirzah, the capital of the northern kingdom from the schism until Omri, and Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom. Though the use of both cities may indicate authorship during the united kingdom, it is also possible that the dual status as centers of government indicates an authorship of this vignette sometime

between Jeroboam and Omri, or perhaps afterward when a southern poet would have eschewed the later capital, Samaria.

“Tirzah” (*tirṣâ*) is from the root *rṣh* (GK 8354), “pleasing.” Jerusalem is “the perfection of beauty” (La 2:15; cf. Ps 50:2). It is notable that the girl is compared to the beauty of these cities. A beautiful city implies fine architecture, pleasing landscape, an interesting layout, and cleanliness. As these cities are pleasing to many senses, so the girl pleases the boy; but a city is not graceful or feminine. It has no smile, is not soft to the touch, is not fair of face. It can be grand and awe-inspiring, especially if seen from ground level before its defensive walls. The girl is later compared to a defensive fortress (SS 7:4; 8:10), and perhaps it is the cities’ imposing quality in view here.

4b The word “dreadful, majestic,” or “awesome” (*dgl*), is found outside the Song only in Habakkuk 1:7, where it describes the fearsome and dreaded onslaught of the oncoming Chaldean military. A closely related word is found in Deuteronomy 32:25, glossed “terror.” The girl is an “army with banners” bearing down on the boy and inspiring trepidation.

5a This trepidation causes the boy to cry out for her to turn her alarming eyes from him. *Rhb* (“overwhelm”) is used in Proverbs 6:3 in the sense “harrass” or “importune” one’s creditor. Rahab is the aquatic monster that churns up the sea (Ps 87:4; Isa 51:9). In a moment of self-protection, the boy implores the girl to spare him. In the Song of Songs, this seems to be the male equivalent of lovesickness; he is helplessly in her power.

5b–7 These lines repeat the *waṣf* of 4:1–5 but are limited to her hair and face and omit her lips. The new aspect of the *waṣf* is its immediate context between the cry of the boy and women’s praise. Against the backdrop of many queens and concubines, she singularly overwhelms the boy. The genre of the *waṣf* is specifically placed in a literary context that precludes any reading other than one that celebrates the unparalleled love of the one for the other.

8 The vignette abruptly shifts from the *waṣf* genre to a delineation of the multiplicity of innamoratas of various sexual affiliations with the court. There are sixty queens, the same number as the warriors who defended the apparatus of the throne in 3:7. “Queens” refers to the regular wives of the king, who enjoyed higher status than concubines. There is an increasing numerical gradient as the sexual relationship becomes more peripheral:

sixty wives, eighty concubines, numberless maidens. The maidens are found elsewhere in the Song only in 1:3, in a royal context; they love the king for his name and oil. First Kings 11:3 ascribes three hundred concubines to Solomon. The harem is the foil against which the girl is measured.

9a In juxtaposition with the characterization of the three-tiered seraglio is the thrice-blessed peerless girl. She is neither royal wife nor concubine nor maiden; she belongs in no category with these paramours. In place of *sixty* wives is “my dove, my perfect *one*”; of *eighty* concubines is “*unique*, the only daughter of her mother”; of *countless* maidens is “*favorite* of the one who bore her.” In each iteration the numeral “one” (and its substitute in the third case, “favorite”) is in the emphatic position. In the sixty, eighty, numberless business of royal consorts, the girl whose eyes affect the boy is one, one, one.

9b–10 The vignette began with the boy’s exclamation that she is “terrible as an army with banners” and closes the inclusio with the female courtesans repeating the same phrase (see [Overview of 8:4–10](#)). The “daughters” (i.e., “maidens”) bless her (ʿšr) and the others praise her (*hll*). These terms describe the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31:28.

The opening compared the girl to metropolitan images, the ending to astronomical images. She “appears [looks forth]” like the dawn. The word signifies gazing from an elevated position, such as a window (2Ki 9:30) or heaven (Ps 14:2). As the dawn surveys the landscape, so the girl views the world. She is fair as the moon, “bright” as the sun. “Bright” uses the same word as “favorite” in the preceding verse. Her beauty shines on the world.

“Who is this?” the ladies ask (v.10). Previously the question was asked in the context of a royal procession that featured Solomon with his crown (3:6). Here the question is asked against the backdrop of Solomon’s many women. The aspect of love presented in this vignette is its quality. As love becomes more peripheral, the number of women in their respective categories increases to infinity. The opposite is also true. As love becomes more central, the number of women in the category decreases. When the number of women to love decreases to only one, the degree of love grows exponentially to cosmic proportions.

NOTES

4a The Old Greek translates Tirzah as εὐδοκία (*eudokia*, “delight, pleasing”), from its root *ršh* (GK 8354), “fair as pleasure, beautiful as Jerusalem.” Note the similar misunderstanding in 4:8.

4b From the Akkadian root *dagālu*, Gordis, 204, translates “these great sights.” The alternative is to read the Niphal participle, “ones with banners,” along with the use of the verb in Psalm 20:5, “we will lift up our banners.”

5a Pope, 564–65, translates *hirhîbunî* as “drive me wild,” denoting sexual excitement.

5b Compare *min-haggil ‘ād*, “from Gilead,” with 4:1, *mēhar gil ‘ād*, “Mount Gilead.”

9a *Bārâ* (GK 1338), “favorite,” is in the next verse a quality of the sun and is usually rendered “pure” or “clean” (in a moral sense, see Job 11:4; Ps 24:4); “where there are no oxen the stall is *clean*” (Pr 14:4). The verb is glossed “choice, elect” in Nehemiah 5:18. Here the word is a virtual synonym with the numeral. “My dove, my perfect one,” is a term of endearment used in 5:2.

10b The moon is literally “white one” and the sun is literally “hot one.” These are also paired in Isaiah 24:23; 30:26. In the context *dgl* could then be rendered “astronomical sights,” or as in the NIV, “stars in procession.”

K. Let Us See Whether the Vine Has Budded (There I Will Give You My Love) (6:11–7:12 [13])

OVERVIEW

At this point the macrostructure of the Song of Songs begins to become harder to discern. The twice-repeated reference to the vine and pomegranates budding and blossoming (6:11; 7:12) is the last major inclusio. Unlike the other major inclusios, however, the bounded material does not share a common motif or perspective. It is difficult to organize the remainder of the Song into vignettes. As love itself spins out of human control, so the Song of Songs defies rational explanation.

The fourth and final *waṣf* is found in this vignette, uniquely moving from the feet to the head. There also seems to be a deliberate reference to judgment on women in Genesis 3:16; in the context of love, the judgment is

turned upside down. When the boy simply delights in the charms of the girl, he does not mind being captivated by her.

1. Looking for Signs of Spring (6:11–13 [7:1])

¹¹I went down to the grove of nut trees
to look at the new growth in the valley,
to see if the vines had budded
or the pomegranates were in bloom.

¹²Before I realized it,
my desire set me among the royal chariots of my
people.

¹³Come back, come back, O Shulammite;
come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!

Why would you gaze on the Shulammite
as on the dance of Mahanaim?

COMMENTARY

11 The girl muses whether the signs of spring are apparent. The seasonal aspect of love again nuances her search. Has the time for love arrived? In the words of 2:11, is the winter past and the rain over and gone? Have the vines budded or the pomegranates bloomed? The significance of her search for efflorescence is not revealed until 7:12. The time of maturity is the season for love.

12 Literally this verse reads, “I did not know, my soul set me from/upon the chariots of my noble people.” The girl may be daydreaming. She certainly is the center of attention in the next verse. If she is daydreaming about being placed upon a royal chariot, then her musing may continue through the *waṣf* of the next section, since the only other use of *nādīb*

(“noble”) is found in the opening verse of 7:1, where she is called a “*prince’s daughter*.”

13a [7:1a] This is the only verse in the Song of Songs that uses the feminine form of the word Solomon to designate the girl: *šûlammît*. Perhaps the epithet signifies nobility or royalty and should be translated “princess.” The appellation belongs uniquely to this section of the Song. To identify the girl as the *šûlammît* throughout the whole Song is to flatten the Song’s multiform character. In 4:8–5:1 she is his “sister bride,” in 3:1–4 he is “the one for whom my soul longs,” and in this verse, and perhaps this vignette, she is the *šûlammît*.

The Hebrew is ambiguous as to whether she is being implored to return or to pirouette—“Turn around, turn around!” In either case, the girl has captured the crowd’s attention, even if only in her imagination.

13b [7:1b] The girl teases and asks the crowd why they gape as though she were performing *le pas des Mahanaim*. The etymology of “Mahanaim” is “Two Camps” (Ge 32:2; cf. 2Sa 17:24), which associates the girl’s dance with the prospect of war. She stupefies like an army with banners (cf. SS 6:4).

NOTES

12 Falk, 41, leaves the verse untranslated. Fox, 205–6, pronounces it “untranslatable” and emends to *šāmtanî mirkebet ‘im nādîb*, “You have put me on a chariot with a nobleman,” i.e., he makes her feel like nobility. In contrast, M. Deckers (“The Structure of the Song of Songs and the Centrality of *nepes*,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. A. Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 194) translates with the MT, “I don’t know / my being determines me / vehicle of my noble people,” and claims that this is the pivotal verse in the poem. Raymond J. Tournay (“Les Chariots d’Aminadab [Cant 6:12]: Israël, Peuple Théophile,” VT 9 [1959]: 267) argues that the phrase *‘ammî-nādîb* is a purposeful modification of the name Abinadab, just as *šûlammît* was changed from Shunamite. He sees these alterations as part of the allegorical intention of the poet to review the history of David and Solomon, who knew Abishag the Shunamite and transferred the ark to the house of Abinadab.

13a [7:1a] Leo W. Schwartz (“On Translating the Song of Songs,” *Judaism* 13 [Winter 1964]: 71) reads שׁוּב (šûb), “Turn, turn around.” The šûlammîṭ has the definite article and thus is not a proper name. Along with the name “Solomon,” the epithet is derived from šlm. The Song of Songs ends with the girl finding šālôm with her lover in 8:10. It is less likely that the term refers to Abishag of 1Kings 1:3, 15; 2:17–22.

2. How Fair You Are (7:1–6 [7:2–7])

¹How beautiful your sandaled feet,
O prince’s daughter!
Your graceful legs are like jewels,
the work of a craftsman’s hands.
²Your navel is a rounded goblet
that never lacks blended wine.
Your waist is a mound of wheat
encircled by lilies.
³Your breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.
⁴Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon
by the gate of Bath Rabbim.
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon
looking toward Damascus.
⁵Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel.
Your hair is like royal tapestry;
the king is held captive by its tresses.
⁶How beautiful you are and how pleasing,
O love, with your delights!

COMMENTARY

1 [2] The phrase “How beautiful” opens and closes this *waṣf* and bounds it as a unit. This is the last *waṣf* in the Song and uniquely proceeds from the feet to the head. That Ezekiel 16:10–12 also linearly traces the bride’s beauty from her sandaled feet to her crowned head suggests that the *waṣf* of the vignette may be intimate speech spoken by her lover rather than the continuing ribald cries of the gaping throng.

Here, her feet are beautiful in what may be dancing shoes. Perhaps as a synonym to *šûlammît*, she is identified as the “prince’s daughter.” Her thighs are finely worked jewels. This identification echoes 5:10–15, where her lover is described in statuesque terms. The highlighted feature is the curvature of her sculpted thighs.

2a [3a] The next item on the list, *šārrēk*, is traditionally glossed “your navel.” The word is a *hapax legomenon* and so has no context outside of this verse. Since the *waṣf* traces a linear path, it is to be expected that the body part in question is situated between the girl’s thighs and her “belly.” The navel is out of place. Her vulva is the logical candidate—a round goblet never lacking in delectable moisture. To sing the praises of her vulva again reminds the reader of 5:14, where the girl celebrated the boy’s loins in her *waṣf*.

2b [3b] In 5:14 a word that usually signifies the “intestines” or “womb” was used to designate the man’s penis. Here a word that elsewhere in the Bible always refers to internal organs, the “womb” or “stomach,” is used to stand for the pubic region, specifically the *mons veneris*, a “mound of wheat encircled by lilies.”

3 [4] In language identical with that of 4:5 (see [comments](#)), the girl’s breasts are again compared with twin gazelles. Since the image is not visual (her breasts presumably do not look like bovidae), other senses and perspectives must be employed to find the similarity. Perhaps her breasts are soft or gracefully in motion.

4 [5] Meyers, 213–15, finds martial imagery in the next comparisons. Her neck is likened to a military installation, a tower like a tusk of ivory. Her nose is an outpost that monitors Damascus, a military threat in Solomon’s time. Her eyes are the tactically advantageous pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath-Rabbim, part of the city’s defenses. These images

highlight the formidable presence of the lady. She is best approached with caution.

5a [6a] Carmel is the high mountain range running into the Mediterranean. Its equation with the girl's head may suggest grandeur, majesty, loftiness. Like any mountain range, Carmel can appear purple from a distance. The heaviness of the imagery here appropriately follows the formidability of the previous verse. Each image is weightier than the last. The picture of the lady is developed until it reaches its climax in the following statement concerning her effect on the king.

5b–6 [6b–7] 'sr is glossed “held captive” and indicates the confining of prisoners (Ge 39:20; 40:3, 5). Unlike Isaiah 49:9, which announced to the prisoners “Come out!” and “Be free,” the Song declares, “You will be bound!” “You will be enslaved!” Not even the king can be free from the captivity of love. The word “king” is rare in the Song, and its use here indicates that love transcends any power; before the charms of the formidable lady the otherwise sovereign ruler is held fast and helpless.

The *waṣf* closes with a general comment on the girl's desirability. It is because she is so delightful that she captivates the king. The *waṣf* crescendos with the subjugated sovereign pleased to be so.

NOTES

1 [2] The word translated “graceful” in the NIV is *ḥammûq*, “turnings, curves,” a *hapax legomenon* from חִמּוֹק (*ḥmq*), translated “left” in 5:6.

2a [3a] שִׁרְרֵךְ (*šar'rēk*, “your navel”) is a *hapax legomenon*. Possible cognates include שֹׁר (*šōr*) from Ezekiel 16:4, “umbilical cord,” and שָׁרִיר (*šārîr*) from Job 40:16, which can be glossed “loins.” (Proverbs 3:8 is ambiguous.) The Arabic *sirr* can mean “coitus.” As a vessel of juice, the vulva is a more likely candidate than the navel. Murphy, 182, translates, “your valley.”

4 [5] Athalya Brenner (“Come Back, Come Back, the Shulammite [Song of Songs 7:1–10]: A Parody of the Wasf Genre,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. A. Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 235) finds here an anti-*waṣf*, an unflattering picture of an obese dancer. She notes its departure from the head-to-toe convention, its immodesty, and its bizarre distortion of the nose and head. She also (“A

Note on *bat-rabbîm* [Song of Songs VII 5],” VT 42 [1992]: 115) argues that “the pools of Heshbon” were turbid and emends Bat-Rabbîm (an otherwise unknown locale) to Bat-Rabbah, the Ammonite capital.

But the only other full-bodied *waṣf* in the Song is just as immodest; Ezekiel 16:10–13 (which is certainly not ribald humor) also vectors from foot to head; and bizarre imagery is the genre’s stock in trade. No doubt, the pools convey adulatory qualities. Perhaps they sparkled; perhaps they are part of the *waṣf*’s military imagery.

5 [6] *bārḥāṭîm* (from *raḥaṭ*), “by [its] tresses,” is rare (only Ge 30:38, 41; Ex 2:16), elsewhere glossed “watering trough.” Oddly, both instances have sexual contexts. The Aramaic cognate means “run.” The girl’s hair seems to be compared to running water.

6 [7] Although the LXX, Vulgate, and Peshitta all translate as a vocative, אַהֲבָה (*ʾah^abâ*; NIV, “O love”) is not used elsewhere in the Song as an epithet for the boy or girl. It may be read, “How pleasing you are in the delights of love,” or “There is nothing so fair and pleasant as love.” Pope, 593, adds a second בַּתְּעֻנּוּגִים (*batta^anûgîm*) and reads “daughter of delights.”

3. I Am My Lover’s and His Desire Is for Me (7:7–10 [7:8–11])

⁷Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.

⁸I said, “I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit.”

May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,
⁹and your mouth like the best wine.

May the wine go straight to my lover,
flowing gently over lips and teeth.

¹⁰I belong to my lover,
and his desire is for me.

COMMENTARY

7–9a [8–10a] The boy compares the girl’s stature to a palm tree and her breasts to its fruit. The fruit is not easily reachable; to enjoy its clusters one must first climb the tree. The boy intends to climb the tree to take hold of its fruit. In other words, his intention is to climb the girl and take hold of her breasts. The word “take hold” is from the Hebrew *ʾh̄z*, elsewhere glossed “catch the little foxes,” and “I *held* him and would not let him go.” After mounting the palm tree, he will vigorously denude its fruit. He hopes her breasts and kisses will be intoxicating like the fruit of the vine, and that when he is close enough he will discover her scent to be pleasing.

9b [10a] The girl delights in his designs and expresses her desire to see that his foretastes are not disappointed.

10 [11] The Song uses *tšûqâ* (GK 9592), “desire,” elsewhere found only in Genesis 3:16, “To your man is your *tšûqâ*, and he will rule over you,” and in 4:7, “To you is its *tšûqâ*, and you should rule over it.” Sin’s desire is for the man as the woman’s desire is for her husband, and the man is to master it and rule her. In both verses the issue is mastery and desire. In the Song the girl says, “His *tšûqâ* is for me . . .” and to the reader acquainted with Genesis the thought begs to be completed, “. . . and I will master him.” This follows a *waṣf* that treats the girl with military imagery culminating with the king’s being in her power.

If the use of *tšûqâ* is an intentional commentary on the judgment of Genesis 3:16, the Song demonstrates that in love the judgment is mitigated and is not the last word on relationships. Throughout Genesis, women are seen using sex to get what they want from men (Lot and his daughters, Leah and Jacob, Tamar and Judah). In each case, the man’s desire was for the woman; they did not know what has happening to them, and the women consequently bested them. The judgment of Genesis 3:16 is not the last word on the subject of male–female relations in Genesis; women have power over men invested in their femininity.

What is in the sphere of power plays, manipulation, and deception in Genesis becomes in the Song of Songs a delightful aspect of love. The king

is happy to be captivated by her; his desire is for her, while she celebrates, “I belong to him.”

NOTES

7 [8] The initial *zō’t*, “*This*, your stature, is like a palm tree,” often indicates the beginning of a new section.

8a [9a] In the NIV, in 7:7 her breasts are “fruit” (*ʿeškôl*) and in 7:8 he will seize the “fruit” (*sansan*). Though in Hebrew they are different words, the sense is correct. *ʿeškôl* is later recapitulated in 7:8, “May your breasts be like the *clusters*.” The boy claims, “I will climb [*lh*] the palm tree!” In Genesis 31:10–12, *lh* signifies mating.

8b [9a] The girl’s “nose” or “breath” (*ʿap*, GK 678) is like apples. Mitchell Dahood (“Canticle 7:9 and UT 52:61: A Question of Method,” *Bib* 57 [1976]: 109) argues from the Ugaritic phrase *bʿap dd*, “the nipple of the breast,” that the *ʿap* continues the thought of the verse. Thus the boy puts a fine point on his wish. Pope, 636, identifies the *ʿap* with the Ugaritic entrance to the city gate in the Aqhat epic and translates, “The scent of your vulva like apples.”

9 [10] Literally, the girl’s speech reads, “Going to my lover smoothly, trickling over the lips of the sleepers.” *lʾmêšārîm*, “smoothly,” follows Proverbs 23:31, “wine . . . goes down *smoothly*” (see the note on 1:4b). *dôbēb* is a *hapax legomenon*, perhaps a derivation of the Aramaic *dwb* or the Hebrew cognate *zwb*, “flow.” The latter is the common designator for semen in Leviticus.

If the initial *yod* of יָשְׁנִים (*yʿšēnîm*) were changed to *waw* and the final *mem* were enclitic, the text would read “my lips and my teeth.” The Old Greek, Vulgate, and Peshitta support this reading. The other occurrence of a sleeper in the Song is in 5:2. There the girl is stirred in an emotional dream that is pregnant with double entendre and erotic imagery.

4. Let Us Look for Signs of Spring (7:11–12 [7:12–13])

¹¹Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside,

let us spend the night in the villages.
¹²Let us go early to the vineyards
to see if the vines have budded,
if their blossoms have opened,
and if the pomegranates are in bloom—
there I will give you my love.

COMMENTARY

11–12 [12–13] This small piece recalls the seasonal motif of the opening lines, thus closing the inclusio. The boy is invited to “spend the night,” with the phrase using a word found in the Song elsewhere only in 1:13, “my lover is to me a sachet of myrrh *resting* between my breasts.” The girl desires to inspect the vines to see if the spring has arrived. There she will give him her love.

The vignette closes with her promise, yet without allowing the reader to know whether the spring has come. Has it? Have the pomegranates blossomed? Has the time for love arrived? Only the couple knows.

NOTE

11–12 [12–13] There are two terms unique in the Song to these verses and in 6:11: *prh*, “bud,” and *nšš*, “bloom.” These serve as an inclusio to bind the vignette together.

L. Oh, That You Were Like a Brother to Me! (7:13–8:4 [7:14–8:4])

OVERVIEW

This is the fourth and last vignette ending in an adjuration; once more the girl implores her companions not to arouse love until it pleases (8:4). In 3:1–4, the girl sought her beloved in the city streets, only to find him and cling to him until she had secured him in her uterus. Only then would she relax her grip. That vignette is revisited in 5:2–8, where the girl failed to

find her beloved and was left languishing and lovesick. In the vignette below, again the girl muses of finding her beloved in the street—but this time it is entirely in the realm of daydream, with the seek-and-find formula in the optative mood.

The conception that love can bring derision is introduced. This vignette is similar to 1:5–8 in portraying the immature yearnings of a girl inexperienced in love. Love is not an entirely pleasant experience. The girl is infatuated; her daydream drifts into an erotic fantasy before the cautionary word is issued. Beware love, says the Song of Songs, for one smitten will ache with longing—a longing that cannot be fulfilled without the community's censure.

1. If Only You Were Mine (7:13–8:3 [7:14–8:3])

¹³The mandrakes send out their fragrance,
and at our door is every delicacy,
both new and old,
that I have stored up for you, my lover.

^{8:1}If only you were to me like a brother,
who was nursed at my mother's breasts!
Then, if I found you outside,
I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.

²I would lead you
and bring you to my mother's house—
she who has taught me.

I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the nectar of my pomegranates.

³His left arm is under my head
and his right arm embraces me.

COMMENTARY

13 [14] This verse either belongs to the previous vignette, opens the present vignette, or stands on its own as a fragment. It seems to invoke the domestic life of the girl and yield insight into her inner world, the things she stores as treasure for the day she can share them with her lover. Imagining her home, she “hid” for him pleasant things new and old. In the verses that follow, however, it is clear that he is not yet hers.

8:1 If the boy of her fancy were her brother, she could greet him in the street with a friendly kiss; but he is not, so such behavior would bring scorn on her. This dovetails with the family’s anger of 1:6 and the punishing watchmen of 5:7. The disdain of the family and the community for unbecoming conduct is part of the experience of love in the Song of Songs. One does not love in a vacuum; it is not merely a matter of the two alone. Love and scorn are sociologically linked. Of course, the variety of kiss she would render to a kinsman is not what she would to her lover. The language here echoes that in Proverbs 7:13, “She took hold of him and kissed him.”

2a Her reverie surrenders to concupiscence. She imagines taking charge of the boy, driving him to her uterus, recapitulating the act of her own conception (see comments and note on 3:4). The verbs “bring” and “drink” are in the causative stem in Hebrew, thus emphasizing her initiative. *tʾlammēdēnî* can be read as a third person feminine, “she will teach me,” or second person masculine, “you will teach me.” Either translation is defensible.

2b Throughout the Song of Songs, Bible translators err on the side of modesty. When the Hebrew seems to indicate genitalia, the English versions gloss with nonsexual language. The “loins” of 5:14 and “vulva” and “mons” of 7:2 (also “nipple” of 7:8) are the chief examples. In contrast to this, though the Hebrew is clearly singular, translators gloss “pomegranates,” thus casting the fruit as an image of her breasts. But the girl’s luscious mouth is the likely referent (see the note on 4:3b). She causes the boy to drink of her pomegranate. The scenario has moved from a peck in public to a deep kiss in her bedchamber.

3 Her wishful thinking hastens from the kiss to the copulatory embrace. At this point, the accelerating libidinal fantasy is suddenly interrupted.

Instead of reaching a climax, the text breaks off into a warning about love (see [comments on 2:6–7](#)).

NOTES

13 [14] *dûdā'îm*, “mandrakes,” is similar to “my lover,” *dôdî*, and *doddîm*, “breasts.” Mandrakes are associated with coitus in Genesis 30:14–16 and were regarded as an aphrodisiac.

8:1 The expression reads literally, “Who will give you as a brother to me?”—an expression of the optative mood, “If only you were my brother.”

2a “I would lead you” (from נָהַג, *nhg*) usually means “lead” or “drive” a people or an army (Ge 31:18; 1Ch 20:1; Isa 20:4). This vignette repeats in abbreviated form several previous lines in the Song. In 3:4, the “house of my mother” is described as the girl’s uterus (see note on 3:4). To read *t'lamme'dēnî* as “you would teach me” does not insert the mother into the action (as the NIV translation does) and is consistent with the syntactically identical word of 8:3, “you would embrace me.” It has the disadvantage of giving the boy an active role; it is difficult to imagine this young lady needing direction in the ways of love.

2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (8:4)

⁴Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

COMMENTARY

4 Like a literary *coitus interruptus*, the charge of the Song of Songs intrudes on the erotic vignette, thus preventing the interpreter from reading it as entirely positive. There is a price tag attached to love that involves much wishful thinking, discontentment with present circumstances, and ungratified physical attraction. To love is to yearn, to love is to fantasize, to

love is to be dissatisfied. The Song of Songs highlights this aspect of love and challenges the reader to consider it.

NOTE

4 This verse is an abbreviated form of the refrain in 2:7, and the phrase “by the gazelles and by the does of the field” is present in ellipsis. By this point in the Song, the object of the oath is understood.

M. Who is This, Coming Up from the Desert? (8:5–7)

OVERVIEW

This vignette compares love to the most voracious forces in human life: death and the grave. Its unique vocabulary and patterning bring the Song to its climactic perspective and unveil a new dimension to love. Love is conceptualized as an unquenchable fire greater and more powerful than the lovers themselves.

The vignette begins with a picture of love’s arousal, then moves to the ultimate desire in the human heart—the love for which lovers long. The previous vignette showed a girl yearning for a love that she did not have; this vignette explores the yearning that lovers have for a love that never ends, a love that satisfies. The last word on the subject is the brief recall of the theme introduced in 8:1, namely, the linkage between love and the derision of the community. Love is a raging inferno that could consume the lover’s house and leave him with nothing.

1. Love and Death (8:5–7a)

⁵Who is this coming up from the desert
 leaning on her lover?

Under the apple tree I roused you;
 there your mother conceived you,
 there she who was in labor gave you birth.

⁶Place me like a seal over your heart,
 like a seal on your arm;
 for love is as strong as death,
 its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
 It burns like blazing fire,
 like a mighty flame.
⁷Many waters cannot quench love;
 rivers cannot wash it away.

COMMENTARY

5a For the second time, a vignette opens with the line, “Who is this coming up from the desert?” In 3:6 the line continues to describe the procession of Solomon; here the royal promenade is transformed into the solitary stroll of the couple, with no ceremonial elegance or splendor. The wedding of the great king is reenacted in the passion of the twosome; the kingly celebration serves as exemplar for all lovemaking. The girl leans on her lover, then asks to be set as a seal on the boy. She wants to be his; she desires no autonomy.

5b The Hebrew is a triad of three words each:

Under	the-apple-tree	I-aroused-you
There	strained-for-you	your-mother
There	strained-for-you	she-bore-you

The three verbs seem to set parallel the girl’s sexual stimulation of the boy, the orgasmic writhing of his mother when he was conceived, and the writhing of her parturiency. Arousal and conception involve physical contortions equated with giving birth. Every aspect of how sexual intercourse physically wrenches the body is summarized. She rouses the boy immediately after she charges her friends not to rouse love. This

paradox leads to the Song's strongest reflections on love's consuming power.

This is another problematic verse from an allegorical standpoint. If it speaks of Yahweh and Israel, who is Yahweh's mother?

6a The signet ring or seal in Scripture signifies a public commitment to comply with a treaty or promise. After Judah impregnated Tamar, she exacted his signet to guarantee his pledge (Ge 38:18). The seal is also closely related to the idea of identity (Ex 28:11, 36; Jer 22:24); a person as a seal is a common metaphor in the Bible. To be imprinted as a seal on another is to be inseparable from that person. She wishes his life to be hers, to be derivative, since love is strong as death.

In the Song, jealousy is a synonym for love. Yahweh is a "consuming fire/a jealous God" (Dt 4:24). Jealousy is as fierce as Sheol in its pursuits. Love/jealousy is like death and the grave in sharing their strength and stubbornness. Sheol's appetite cannot be assuaged; its mouth has no limit; it consumes the world and is not filled (Pr 27:20; Isa 5:14; Hab 2:4). Sheol, like the barren womb, never says, "Enough!" (Pr 30:16). Love/jealousy is a sealed passion that allows no mollification. Lovers are defenseless when in its grasp.

6b The last word of the verse is *šalhebetyâ*, "mighty flame." The shortened form of the divine name is suffixed (as in "Hallelu-*jah*") and read as a superlative. Some English versions read "the flame of the LORD." In D. W. Thomas's study of superlatives (209–24), every case of the divine name so used retained a religious significance. The superlative degree does not exhaust the meaning of the word; something about Yahweh makes it the greatest flame. Love, like God, is a consuming fire.

Paul says that it is better to marry than to burn (1Co 7:9, 38). Proverbs 6:27–34 warns about love and jealousy in similar language:

Can a man scoop fire into his lap
without his clothes being burned?
Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
So is he who sleeps with another man's wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.

Men do not despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.
Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.
But a man who commits adultery lacks judgment;
whoever does so destroys himself.
Blows and disgrace are his lot,
and his shame will never be wiped away;
for jealousy arouses a husband's fury,
and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.

7a The property that equates fire with death and Sheol is here revealed to be its unstoppable character; love is a fire that cannot be doused. Ordinary fires are extinguishable and only extraordinary conflagrations can traverse rivers; but love-fire yields to no power and cannot be quenched. Thus love is not only as strong as death, but also it triumphs when death threatens to extinguish love.

NOTES

5 רִפָּק (rpq) is a *hapax legomenon* but is known in late Hebrew and cognates. חָבַל (ḥbl) and its derivatives can mean “be pregnant” (Ps 7:14), “fetus” (Job 39:3), “travail” (Isa 13:8), “engender” (Ps 2:7), or “conceive” (Ge 4:1). The gloss “strain” attempts to capture some similarity between the act of conception and parturition.

6 William W. Hallo (“For Love is Strong as Death,” *JNES* 22 [1993]: 45–50) argues that the girl wants the status of funeral objects, i.e., to rest with him in the grave. Dianne Bergant (“My Beloved Is Mine and I Am His (Song 2:16): The Song of Songs and Honor and Shame,” *Semeia* 68 [1994]: 32) sees their love as a force contending with death and Sheol. Some commentators read “jealousy” as “ardor” or “passion,” thus avoiding a negative nuance.

In Hebrew literature, מוֹת (môt, GK 4637) can express the superlative: Samson was vexed unto death. Thomas, 223, suggests “love is extremely

strong,” in place of “love is strong as death,” and “jealousy is hellishly cruel.” Numbers 5:11–31 describes the ordeal of jealousy in the case of a man who suspects his wife of infidelity.

7a In Scripture, מַיִם רַבִּים (*mayim rābbîm*, “many waters”) occurs twenty-nine times. Often the phrase refers to the life-threatening waters that menace the created order (Ps 77:19; Eze 26:19; Hab 3:15), or it symbolizes dangers (2Sa 22:15–17; Pss 18:17; 144:7; Isa 17:13). This phrase may draw on imagery from the Ugaritic mythological battles of Baal, Mot, Yam, and judge Nahar.

REFLECTION

The Song of Songs first compares love to death in its tenacity. Then, in a startling display of hyperbole, the Song argues in the image of the inferno that nothing at all can overflow love. This love, in this image that puts into words the lover’s yearning for a never-ending love, of necessity requires the invocation of Yahweh. The only love that truly transcends death and that is not smothered is the love of God in Christ. Jesus rose from the dead and will return for his people. Thus every Christian possesses the substance of the Love behind all loves celebrated in the Song of Songs, just as lovers image this love and enjoy a foretaste of it in their lovemaking (see [comments on 3:11](#)).

This is why the Song never uses the terminology of satisfaction (see [comments on 5:1b](#)). Satisfying love is the Love that never ends, that transcends death, that is sealed on one’s body and soul forever. Satisfying love is the Love that death and the grave will not conquer in the end. His tomb is empty, and Love guarantees that someday the reader’s will be also.

2. Love and Pauperization (8:7b)

^{7b}If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.

COMMENTARY

7b Three approaches are possible: the man would be scorned if he tried to buy love; the wealth itself would be scorned; or love would be the only valid reason for which a man may imperil his fortune (“If a man were to give all of the wealth of his house for love, would he be entirely despised?” Pope, 676). See Proverbs 6:30–31 (above).

The overriding value of love over the treasure of a house is the core interpretation with which all three readings agree. The specter of a man’s hazarding poverty for love is raised. Wisdom brings wealth (Pr 8:18), but love can bring anti-wealth. As the girl in 8:1 considered the scorn of the community, the same scorn is at issue when the claims of love conflict with normal behavior. Sacrificing one’s wealth for love is as outlandish as running through the dark city streets to find one’s lover.

The vignette began with the girl’s identity lost to the boy, and it ends with the boy’s being prepared to lose everything for love and perhaps gain only scorn. Love is like death and the grave, and no ransom can free a man from it.

NOTE

7b The only instance of the intensifying infinitive in the Song is “utterly scorned.” Raymond J. Tournay (“The Song of Songs and its Concluding Section [8:1–7],” trans. D. Meisels, *Immanuel* 10 [1980]: 12–13) argues for the unity of 8:1–7 from a number of common words, as *ntn*, *byt*, *tht*, and *hbbh*.

N. Solomon, You Can Keep Your Silver (8:8–12)

OVERVIEW

The Song of Songs climaxed in the previous vignette by unveiling the transcendent dimension of the Love that stands behind all loves. Even lovers yearn for a love that truly satisfies. Here the anthology closes by recapitulating the opening vignette, which remembered a time when the girl was under the discipline of her brothers. Here a picture of that time is revisited. In the beginning of the Song, the girl chafed under this

preparation and complained that she had no vineyard of her own. In the end, the girl finally possesses her vineyard.

Two aspects of love are presented here. First, the way to peace is through virtue, through being a fortress in one's youth. Second, the love between one virtuous girl and her singular lover is superior to that possessed by Solomon, with his bureaucratic love enterprise. Solomon's bloated harem is nothing to envy and is not representative of the love celebrated in the Song of Songs. It is on this note that the anthology of songs ends.

1. Reminiscence (8:8–10)

⁸We have a young sister,
and her breasts are not yet grown.
What shall we do for our sister
for the day she is spoken for?
⁹If she is a wall,
we will build towers of silver on her.
If she is a door,
we will enclose her with panels of cedar.
¹⁰I am a wall,
and my breasts are like towers.
Thus I have become in his eyes
like one bringing contentment.

COMMENTARY

8 As in 1:6, the girl remembers a time when she was subject to her family. Her brothers discuss the disposition of the immature girl. In 1:6 they were angry with her and restricted her. Here they discuss how they will handle her; they think ahead to the day when she is “spoken for,” i.e., when the time comes for suitors, for love, for marriage (1Sa 25:39b).

9 The family envisions two possibilities: she may become a “wall” or a “door” (see Note). The metaphor of the wall recalls the military imagery of 4:4 and 7:4 (see [comments](#) on these verses). She may be a fortress, a tower bedecked with shields, a military stronghold that a man dare not approach without fearing for his life. Alternatively, she may be a door, a structure designed for entry—the opposite function of a wall.

If the girl behaves as a wall, the family plans to adorn her accordingly, to add to her fortified glory “battlements of silver.” If she is a door, however—if she poses no threat to would-be suitors (why were they angry in 1:6?)—the family will board her up in a wooden compartment.

10 From the vantage point of history, the girl answers her brothers. She was in fact a wall, and her breasts were its towers. These images are synonymously parallel; she was impregnable. No man had entry to her. Because of her chastity, she has found *šālôm* (GK 8934), “peace, contentment” in the eyes of her lover. The way to peace is through being a wall.

It is noteworthy that the reward for her battlemented conduct is “peace.” Peace from what? In the [commentary on 5:1b](#), it was noted that the Song compares love to alcohol rather than to a satisfying meal. Here the best that love offers the girl is peace. Peace implies the absence of strife and has in its meaning an awareness of war. Perhaps the peace that she has found in her lover’s eyes is peace from the effects of love—peace rather than midnight searches, terrifying dreams, lovesickness, syncope.

NOTES

9 **נָצוּר** (*nāṣûr*, “enclose”) from **צוּר** (*ṣûr*) is a military term usually glossed “besiege.”

10 The verse reads literally, “I a-wall my-breasts as-towers then I-was/became in-his-eyes one-finding **שָׁלוֹם** [*šālôm*, GK 8934].” The past tense, “I was a wall” seems preferable to the present, “I am a wall.” If the girl is still a wall, then she could hardly have a lover. **שָׁלוֹם** can denote “wholeness” (Ge 37:14), “safety” (2Sa 17:3), and “prosperity” (Lev 26:6). It is an easily lost favorable circumstance not to be taken for granted. The girl’s **שָׁלוֹם**, found in his eyes, is causally connected with her description as

a fortification that fended off love until it was pleased—on the day she was spoken for.

2. Parable of Solomon's Vineyard (8:11–12)

¹¹Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;
he let out his vineyard to tenants.
Each was to bring for its fruit
a thousand shekels of silver.
¹²But my own vineyard is mine to give;
the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon,
and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.

COMMENTARY

11–12 Baal Hamon is an unknown locale. *ba'al* (GK 1251) means “lord,” and *hāmôn* means “multitude,” as in Genesis 17:4, “father of a multitude.” *ba'al* can also signify “husband” (Est 1:17; Pr 31:11). Thus the place name may signify “husband of a multitude,” a caustic remark at the expense of the libidinous king. Its collective organization is its only stated feature. To administrate his vineyard, Solomon must let it out to tenants, who keep twenty percent for themselves. The institution of the harem had converted love into a commercial enterprise and, in the process, sacrificed the essence of love.

In contrast to this perversion, the girl possesses her own vineyard, her own relationship, and lacks nothing. She keeps it all, in contrast to Solomon, who pays a price. Thus the anthology ends in a parable contrasting its own vision of love with Solomon's harem, highlighting the girl's advantage over the king.

NOTES

12 A literal reading renders, “My-vineyard which-is-to-me before-me.” If the vineyard is her relationship or her lover, this can be translated, “My own vineyard stands before me.” If the vineyard is an image for the girl, it is translated (NIV), “My own vineyard is mine to give.”

III. FINAL THOUGHT (8:13–14)

¹³You who dwell in the gardens
with friends in attendance,
let me hear your voice!

¹⁴Come away, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the spice-laden mountains.

13–14 The anthology of songs is complete, but the Song of Songs ends with motifs from 2:8–17 and perhaps 4:12. The boy cries out to the girl among her companions in the gardens to let him hear her voice, thus recalling 2:14:

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
Show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
For your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

The boy is distanced from the girl and desires to be near her. She responds with an echo of 2:9, 17 by inviting the boy to frolic as a rutting gazelle on her fragrant hills.

The perspective of 2:8–17 is the note that ends the Song of Songs. This perspective is one of anticipation and waiting, the seasonal aspect of love. The lovers are truly in love, yet are apart; love is not yet pleased to arise.

This abrupt anticlimax leaves the reader on a note of yearning. In this respect, it mirrors the adjurations that interrupt the erotic flow of events elsewhere in the Song (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The longing of unfulfilled desire highlights the lack of satisfaction that characterizes the Song. Whether one is a lover or not, an aching for true Love is always present. The Song of Songs concludes in this mood of the boy and girl, apart in time yet with the expectation of consummation.

NOTES

14 Lit., “Flee, my lover.” Falk, 93 argues that the girl sends him away in the morning light lest their clandestine romance be discovered. However, the girl can hardly dismiss him to the aromatic hills, since they signify the girl! See note on 2:17a.