



INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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The Book of Proverbs is an intriguing mixture of materials. It has an overall organising structure with opening exhortations to follow the path of wisdom and avoid the path of folly, and a post-script. But the bulk of the book consists of a variety of anthologies of proverbs, or, as they are sometimes characterised, miniature parables. They cover many different aspects of life, seemingly arranged at random. There are attempts to find some patterns underlying them. However, perhaps this randomness is meant to model the accidental nature of life itself, whereby the chance bits of advice or wisdom that we accumulate may prove helpful at certain times.

The Book is customarily grouped with Ecclesiastes and Job as examples of ‘wisdom literature’. All three are located in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, *Ketuvim*, ‘Writings’. This would classify them, in rabbinic thought, as human compositions, inspired by the *‘ruach ha-kodesh’*, the ‘holy spirit’, but not examples of direct divine revelation.

The Book is credited to King Solomon, which must go some way to explaining why it was included in the Hebrew Bible. But can we learn something more from within the Book itself to explain why it was thought to be necessary to include it in the Biblical library?

According to the Biblical record Solomon was the composer, collector and editor of wisdom sayings (1 Kings 5:12; Ecclesiastes 12:9). His own wisdom was said to exceed that of ‘all the people of the East’ and the wisdom of Egypt (1 Kings 5:10). So, the Bible acknowledges the existence of international wisdom traditions, and the Book of Proverbs may actually quote an example with the words of the otherwise unknown King Lemuel in chapter 31:1. Historical studies attest to multiple borrowings within the Book of Proverbs itself from collections of similar materials from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Whether the studying or collecting of proverbs was confined to scribal schools or reflects domestic or village contexts, clearly these materials were a significant part of Biblical Israel’s culture. Yet, perhaps this, in itself, presented problems.

Firstly, to what extent might there have been concerns about the influence of these foreign cultural imports amongst those who wanted to defend the uniqueness of Israelite nationality and identity?

Secondly, how far did such materials represent an autonomous, human source of knowledge and values? How might they relate to the beliefs and teachings enshrined in the Sinai covenant with its laws governing daily life? Were the Israelites faced with questions about the respective authority of two different sources of ‘truth’, ‘empirical’ and ‘revealed’, like the drama played out today between ‘science’ and ‘religion’?

In terms of the first question, I am struck by the repeated use of the words 'zarah', 'strange', or 'nochriah', 'foreign', 'alien', to describe 'dame folly', the female opponent to 'dame wisdom', whether she is represented literally or metaphorically as a prostitute or adulterous woman. The negativity surrounding the two terms occurs also in warnings against giving loans to foreigners (Proverbs 20:16; 27:13). Notoriously, the term 'nochriah' occurs frequently in Ezra 9 and 10 with the demand to divorce the foreign wives that the local Israelite community had married during the period of the Babylonian exile. In the Book of Ruth, Ruth uses the term about herself, deliberately emphasising her foreignness to Boaz, and so forcing him to contradict such a negative value judgment and instead commend her for her loyalty to Naomi. Thus 'folly', as opposed to 'wisdom', is charged with a range of negative connotations, both misogynist and xenophobic. The Biblical record is clearly opposed to the import of foreign deities. Did such concerns extend to the import of foreign teachings and values?

With regards the second question, Michael V Fox notes the critiques of wisdom teachers by prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Thus says the Eternal: 'Let not the wise man glorify in his wisdom nor a mighty man glorify in his might, nor a rich man in his wealth; but let him who glorifies glory in this: understanding and knowing Me. (Jeremiah 9:22-23; c.f. 18:18)

Fox suggests that there was a felt need to assimilate the wisdom material to the covenantal system and points to the repeated linking of wisdom with the 'fear of the Lord'. He writes:

The Yahwistic reworking took four approaches. First of all, it made Yahweh, rather than only tradition and the teacher, the source of wisdom. Second, it identified 'fear of Yahweh' with wisdom, emphasizing the religiosity of wisdom. Third, it sought to make Yahweh independent of the world order and in control of man's fate. Finally, following on the assertion of Yahweh's independence and omnipotence, it called for trust in God.¹

The tetragrammaton, appears 87 times in the Book of Proverbs, compared to 32 times in the Book of Job, (all but two cases in the Book's narrative prologue and epilogue), and not at all in Ecclesiastes. The phrase, 'fear of the Lord', appears fourteen times in Proverbs and in some cases is strategically located. In 1:7 it comes as the climax to the introduction and as a kind of motto for the Book: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but the foolish despise wisdom and discipline.' In 9:10 it comes as the centre of the concentric structure which differentiates the wares on offer by wisdom and folly. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and knowledge of the All-holy is understanding.'

But there are other features that indicate how wisdom is being deliberately incorporated into a divinely ordained programme. Most obvious is the role ascribed to wisdom as the blueprint consulted by God in the creation of the world (Proverbs 8:22-31).

Another phrase, 'the tree of life', appears four times in the Book (Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:40). It is used to refer not only to the quality of true wisdom, but to the value of other worthwhile characteristics of the good life.

However, it is difficult to hear the phrase 'tree of life' and not think immediately about the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden lest they eat from the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:22). But the 'tree of life', is now understood to mean the quality of life that is available to people, if they follow the wisdom on offer to them through the fear of the Lord.

While we are in the Garden of Eden, and in a speculative mode, why not go a step further? Why is the imagery of food so prominent in the public offerings of both dame wisdom and dame folly (Proverbs 9)? With what act did human history as we actually experience it, begin? When Eve looked at the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil', she saw: 'that the tree was good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom' (Genesis 3:6). So, she ate from it, and

¹ Michael V Fox, 'Aspects of the Religion of the Book of Proverbs' *HUCA* 39 1968, 55-69, 65.

her eyes were opened, but opened to the reality of our human vulnerability. Could the Book of Proverbs be intended not just as an apologia for Eve's behaviour, but the ultimate vindication of her act? After all, the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs is a celebration of the ideal woman – 'Her mouth is open in wisdom, and on her tongue is the teaching of faithful love' (31:26).²

Perhaps one reason for including the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible was to justify the inclusion of foreign wisdom material within Israelite culture. But also it might serve to reconcile two sources of human knowledge and truth, the empirical and the revealed, by consciously and deliberately subsuming the former under the latter. Certainly, this would set us free to embrace all knowledge, from whatever its source, as ultimately a gift of God.

The early rabbinic sages may have felt the need to set the seal on this synthesis in the one context where theology is acted out in the public arena. With great ceremony, we take the scroll of the Torah out of the ark during the Shabbat morning service, parade it before the congregation and read from it. Among the texts that we chant is the verse from Proverbs 3:18:

It is a tree of life to those who grasp it and those who hold it are happy.

But the 'tree of life' mentioned in verse 18 refers back to verse 13 in the same chapter, where the subject is *hochmah* (wisdom). So, as we display the Torah scroll before the congregation, we affirm publicly that wisdom has been assimilated to and subsumed under Torah. It is Torah that is our true 'tree of life'.

Gefördert durch:



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

² A similar 're-writing' of a negative Genesis image is found in Song of Songs. Eve's desire will be towards her husband and he will rule over her (Genesis 3:16). But in Song of Songs 7:11 the independent heroine says: 'I am my beloved's and his desire is towards me.'