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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 23

Proverbs

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A Michael Glazier Book

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*To the Howard University School of Divinity,
faculty, administrators, staff, alumni/ae, and most of all, students,
who together have provided this immigrant from the segregated South
a new home, where I have been gradually transformed by a new
appreciation for gratitude and a glimpse of the wisdom of contemporary
sages. From the day I entered your hallowed halls in 1971 as an MDiv
student, to the day when—to my utter amazement and delight—you
invited me to be on your faculty, to the present day when I continue
to learn from you and thus to thrive in your midst almost fifty years
later, you have welcomed me with a hospitality that, though
completely unmerited, has not gone unnoticed. So, I offer this volume in
your honor, hoping that it may reflect your penetrating insight into
the human condition of which I have been a witness.*

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> .
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994-1999.

HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JRT	<i>Journal of Religious Thought</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codices
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
PL	Patrologia Latina
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SOTSMS	Society for Old Testament Studies Monograph Series
SymS	Symposium Series
TWOT	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, 2 vols. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.
USQR	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WCS	Wisdom Commentary

Contributors

(Rev.) Charles Redden Butler, Neto,¹ MDiv, HUSD, 2017, is a writer, scholar, and Pagan minister with Rising Sun Outreach Ministry. He resides in Hyattsville, Maryland, near Washington, DC. He received his baccalaureate from the University of Michigan in Latin American studies in 1975 and studied Hebrew at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, in 1981. His scholarly articles include “Psalm 51—A Study in Understanding,” for *Early Ethiopian Christianity* (November 2015), comparing Psalm 51 royal theology customs with Egyptian temple custom; “A Great Debate—Or Is It?” (2016) for *Systematic Theology*, giving voice to Eve and Gaia in a theological discussion; “Strangers at the Gate” (2010), a dramatic work of twenty midrash presented at the Women’s Expo in Baltimore in 2013; and *According to Us*, an opera created with Rosanna Tufts in 1997. He worked in prison ministry with Wiccan and Santeria women and men at the Federal Correctional Prison at Hazelton, West Virginia.

Sindile Dlamini, a former resident of Johannesburg, South Africa, is an ordained minister currently based in Washington, DC. She is presently an international psychology doctoral student at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, with research interest in maternal mental health

1. Neto is a suffix used in Portuguese-speaking countries to distinguish a grandson from his grandfather when they have the same given name.

in low-income communities, and is a certified Grief to Gratitude Coach. She is also a chaplain at Howard University Hospital and serves as an associate minister at Michigan Park Christian Church. She holds board membership with Life Restoration Ministry, the Caribbean and African Faith-Based Leadership Conference, and Daughters of the African Atlantic Fund. Additionally, she is passionate about service learning and community youth engagement.

Rev. Desiré P. Grogan is a member of the ordained clergy at the historic Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, DC. In 1992, Rev. Grogan became the first woman to be ordained by the Shiloh congregation, through the American Baptist Churches USA, since the church's inception in 1863. Rev. Grogan holds a bachelor of music degree from the Boston University School of Fine Arts, a master of library science degree from the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Library and Information Science, a master of divinity degree from the Howard University School of Divinity, and a master of arts degree in Semitics from The Catholic University of America. In addition to a prolific teaching and preaching ministry, Rev. Grogan has served as the fourth editor of *The WORKER Missionary and Educational Quarterly*, first published by the late Dr. Nannie Helen Burroughs in 1934 and continuously published by the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Rev. Grogan's ministerial and scholarly approach to the biblical text, both in the original languages and in the English translations, involves the discipline of plenary inspiration, that is, comparing Scripture with Scripture (1 Cor 2:13). Rev. Grogan affirms, both personally and experientially, that revelation knowledge is the result of this approach when applied to any biblical text under the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Glenda F. Hodges, PhD, JD, MDiv, is the founder and CEO of Still I Rise, Inc., a community-based empowerment organization for survivors of domestic violence. She lectures extensively in this area, serves as chairperson of the Domestic Violence Task Force for Prince George's County, and is the county's director for domestic violence services for District 9. She is also the county executive's appointee to the Prince George's County Redevelopment Authority Board. She has done numerous workshops on domestic violence for local and state organizations, and she continues to champion the cause of survivors whose voices have been silenced because of domestic violence. Dr. Hodges is an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), Second Episcopal District, Washington Annual Conference, where she serves as a member

of the board of examiners, teaching Christian theology and the legal system to second-year students. She also serves as a member of the judicial council for the AME Church and is an associate minister at Reid Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church, Glen Dale, Maryland, where her pastor is Rev. Dr. Lee P. Washington. Dr. Hodges attended Virginia State University, Howard University, Bowling Green State University, Harvard University, the University of the District of Columbia, and the University of Texas at Austin (School of Law) and holds the following degrees: BA, MA, PhD, JD, and MDiv. Additionally, she has completed several short courses in spirituality and medicine at the Harvard Medical School's Mind Body Medical Institute.

Kristy Hunt is currently an MDiv candidate at Howard University School of Divinity. As a person living with hidden disabilities, managing multiple complex health conditions, Kristy's personal experience as a caregiver and care recipient inform her interest in pastoral care in healthcare settings. Ms. Hunt is a native Philadelphian and longtime, naturalized resident of Washington, DC.

Sehee Kim is a PhD candidate at Boston University School of Theology and earned her MDiv at Harvard Divinity School. Her interests are in the Hebrew Bible and relating it to ancient Near Eastern texts, feminist studies, wisdom literature, archaeology, and classical languages.

NaShieka Knight is an ordained minister from Upper Marlboro, Maryland, who is passionate about women's empowerment and faith-based community outreach. In 2007, she founded Zelophehad's Daughters Inc., a mentoring organization for teen girls in the Washington Metropolitan area. She serves on the board of directors for the Daughters of the African Atlantic Fund and the Prince George's County Human Trafficking Task Force. Ms. Knight is a student member of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion and is a contributing author to *Unraveling and Reweaving Sacred Canon in Africana Womanhood* (Lexington Books, 2015). She holds an MDiv from Howard University School of Divinity and an MA in Jewish studies with a concentration in biblical and ancient Near Eastern civilizations from Towson University. She is currently a PhD student in Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School.

Eunyoung Lim is Assistant Professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She holds her PhD from Harvard Divinity

School and her doctoral work investigates the cultural valences and rhetorical functions of childlikeness in early Christian literature. Her main areas of research are the New Testament, the Nag Hammadi Library, and ancient Mediterranean cultures, focusing on how the categories of age, gender, and sexuality operate in ancient religious discourse. She served as an editorial assistant for *Harvard Theological Review* and was a visiting lecturer at the College of the Holy Cross.

Sam Perryman is a songwriter, church organist, and music librarian who uses his gifts to inspire others. He studied theology at Howard University, where his interests included comparative religions as well as the intersection of theology with race, gender, and sexuality. Musically, he has served the church for over forty years, and while he continues in that role, he also assists churches in finding creative ways of revitalizing their congregations. Currently, he is studying religion at Lancaster Bible College.

Niciah Petrovic received a master of arts in religious studies from the Howard University School of Divinity. Her focus was on Islamic social ethics and African American religiosity. In 2015, she received a triple major bachelor of arts in political science, Africana studies, and Middle Eastern studies from the University of Notre Dame. Since then, she has worked on local and national political campaigns against mass incarceration, poverty, and institutional racism. Niciah is a community organizer and public speaker, and she most recently sat on a panel for the Juvenile Justice Advocates at Howard University. Niciah has served on the DC Mayor's Commission on Fathers, Men, and Boys, where she applied her knowledge of social ethics to practical community problems stemming from racial disparity.

Beverly A. Reddy holds a BS in business management and an MDiv from the Howard University School of Divinity. Bivocational, she is employed as the director of patient financial services at the Kennedy Krieger Institute, where for twenty-nine years she has dedicated her service to helping children with special needs. She is an ordained Baptist minister. In 2012 she launched the Healing Hurts Domestic Violence Ministry, where she provides support to victims and education to church and community members about the effects of domestic violence. Furthermore, she is a member of the HIV/AIDS ministry and currently serves as director of Christian education at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in Baltimore,

Maryland. As founder and visionary of Ishshah's Place her goal is to provide a refuge for survivors of intimate partner violence designed to promote holistic lifestyle transformations. Ms. Reddy is mother to Tiffany and Brian and grandmother to eight-year-old Alayna; she enjoys spending quality time with her family.

Alexandrea Rich is a fifth-year doctoral student in sociology at Howard University. With licenses in social work and ministry, she is interested in alternative mental health practices for black women with a focus on the testimony and womanist practices of belonging.

Lawrence W. Rodgers is currently the pastor of the Westside Church of Christ in Baltimore, Maryland. Lawrence graduated with distinction from both Harding University, with a bachelor of Bible and ministry, and Howard University School of Divinity, with a master of divinity. While a student, Lawrence represented the student body in Howard University School of Divinity's envoy to Ethiopia to return manuscript Tweed MS150 to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Lawrence is a published author and speaker, focusing on the intersection between theology and prophetic social engagement, particularly concerned with the plight of the marginalized from both a national and global perspective. Furthermore, Lawrence has engaged in religious and cultural studies through teaching in the classroom or participating in field work in Ethiopia, Swaziland, South Africa, and Ghana. Lawrence's work in Africa is occupied with religious imperialism and its remedies on both the continent of Africa, in America, and throughout the diaspora. Lawrence's work in Baltimore includes advocacy and ministry toward homeless individuals, human trafficking victims, and re-entry citizens. In his free time, Lawrence enjoys spending time with his family, cycling, traveling, studying, and enjoying nature.

Teresa L. Smallwood earned a BA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she majored in speech communications and Afro-American studies, a JD from North Carolina Central University School of Law, an MDiv at Howard University School of Divinity, and a PhD from Chicago Theological Seminary in theology, ethics, and human sciences. She is the postdoctoral fellow and associate director of the Public Theology and Racial Justice Collaborative at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Dr. Smallwood was licensed and ordained to public ministry in the Baptist tradition and is presently an active member at New Covenant

Christian Church in Nashville under the pastoral leadership of Rev. Dr. Judy Cummings.

Rev. Anne Troy is a retired United Church of Christ minister who also worked as a government lawyer. Born and raised in New York, she graduated from Case Western Reserve University for her law degree and worked for the US government in Washington, DC, before her retirement. She is also a US Army veteran. Her last ministry before retiring and making Maui her retirement community was at the Shaw Community Center in Washington, DC, a UCC-founded social and racial justice project in the African American community. During her tenure there, she assisted with the acquisition of grant funds in excess of \$5 million for that organization. Currently, Anne is writing grants for local churches throughout Hawaii. She continues with Shaw Community Center as their development director.

March M. Wood is a Tibetan Buddhist who focuses on black women's healing and liberation from intersecting oppressions. She is a spiritual activist-organizer with seventeen years of communications and fundraising experience with leading mission-driven organizations. Ms. Wood earned her master of arts in religious studies from the Howard University School of Divinity and her undergraduate degree from Brown University. She has lived in Washington, DC, since 2000 and has been practicing mindfulness meditation for seven years.

Foreword

“Tell It on the Mountain”—or, “And You Shall Tell Your Daughter [as Well]”

Athalya Brenner-Idan

Universiteit van Amsterdam/Tel Aviv University

What can Wisdom Commentary do to help, and for whom?

The commentary genre has always been privileged in biblical studies. Traditionally acclaimed commentary series, such as the International Critical Commentary, Old Testament and New Testament Library, Hermeneia, Anchor Bible, Eerdmans, and Word—to name but several—enjoy nearly automatic prestige, and the number of women authors who participate in those is relatively small by comparison to their growing number in the scholarly guild. There certainly are some volumes written by women in them, especially in recent decades. At this time, however, this does not reflect the situation on the ground. Further, size matters. In that sense, the sheer size of the Wisdom Commentary is essential. This also represents a considerable investment and the possibility of reaching a wider audience than those already “converted.”

Author's Introduction

As I begin this commentary on Proverbs in the Wisdom Commentary, a series devoted to a feminist approach to interpretation of Scripture, it is useful to define my approach to the task at hand. For reasons that I will explain below, the term “feminist” has become freighted. Thus, I would prefer to say that this commentary represents a gender-sensitive reading of Proverbs. What that means is that I try to be alert to the codes that affected women (but also men) in the text, as in life. Some of these are explicit, as in the fact that the Proverbs are addressed to young men, even though the NRSV translates the singular בן as “[my] child” when its literal translation is “[my] son.”¹ In some biblical texts, this may be a correct translation, but in Proverbs, the literary environment makes it clear that the addressees are usually, if not exclusively, young men, as will be discussed in the commentary. Some of the gender codes are less obvious and must be teased out of the text. For example, wisdom is depicted and personified as a woman, especially in chapters 8–9, but often the human teachers who are depicted in literary texts are male, though not always. Proverbs 31:1-9 is devoted to the teaching of Lemuel’s mother to her son! In this volume I am primarily focusing on aspects of the text that affected ancient Israelite women and the implications of this for today.

1. See Translation Matters on Son (Child), בן , at 1:8.

The word “feminism” is obviously related to “feminine,” but one can be feminine, i.e., a female gendered person in body and/or mind, without considering oneself a feminist. In general, feminists read texts, as I do, with a lens focused on the experiences of women, the codes—both written and unwritten—that govern their conduct, their roles, and for what they are valued or devalued in the society in which they live. Ideally, if we are reading texts (or life) in this fashion, we should not limit our field of vision to women of one ethnicity, class, or religion, or, if we do, we should have a good reason for so doing. In practice, those who are part of a dominant culture have tended to focus on women in that dominant culture and their issues, thus creating a situation where feminism and feminists were correctly perceived as mostly limited in the United States to white middle-class women.

As a result, women of color developed womanism and called themselves womanists in response to the limitations of the feminist movement. The term “womanism” was coined by Alice Walker in her 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.² It is a term that comes from African American folk tradition, in which to act “womanish” means for a girl to act older than her age, to the dismay of her elders.³

The emergence of womanism has created a bit of a semantic conundrum, and for me a personal dilemma, because although a few African Americans describe themselves as black feminists, the term “feminist” is tinged with whiteness (why else would those who call themselves black feminists need to preface the term “feminist” with “black”?), so that I am somewhat uncomfortable with the term “feminist.” After all, it would seem odd to call myself a white feminist.⁴ It is akin to the problem of the word “man” used generically to refer to all humanity and the masculine

2. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

3. “Womanish” in Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=womanish>.

4. I became especially aware of this in the early 1990s when I wrote an article on the Queen of Sheba, which I had originally planned to call a feminist reading. When I decided to publish it in our journal at Howard University School of Divinity, the *Journal of Religious Thought*, I realized that I was not comfortable calling myself a feminist in the context of my professional setting in a historically black school. So instead of calling my reading of the Queen of Sheba a feminist reading, I called it a gender-sensitive reading: “(The Queen of) Sheba: A Gender-Sensitive Reading,” in *JRT* 51 (1994–1995): 17–28. Although I have not been consistent in my use of language on this issue, at this relatively late stage in my career I would prefer not to use a label, as none quite fits my social context.

pronoun “he” used generically to refer to either a male or a female. Thus, my preference is for the term “gender-sensitive reading” and no label at all for myself other than biblical scholar or the like.

Hebrew Poetry

By training, I am a Semitic philologist, which means that my area of expertise is in ancient Semitic languages, primarily northwest Semitic languages, of which the most well-known one is biblical Hebrew, though I learned other sister languages for comparative purposes. Through many years of study, I became aware of the prose and poetic styles of the ancient Hebrew authors, their typical rhetorical devices, as well as the culture that informed the literature they wrote. All of this is important for the book of Proverbs, which is ancient Hebrew poetry.

Hebrew poetry is very different from most Western poetry. It does not rhyme or have regular rhythm. The primary distinction from prose is parallelism. A typical line of poetry has two cola (half-lines); the first colon (a single half-line) briefly states an idea and the second colon usually restates it using different language. For example, we find in Proverbs 1:2:

For learning about wisdom and instruction	A
For understanding words of insight . . .	B

I have labeled the first half-line, or colon, A and the second one B. In the first colon, “for learning about” translates a Hebrew infinitive לדעת, “to learn,” and “wisdom and instruction,” חכמה ומוסר, are the two objects of the preposition “about” but only in English; the nouns are a compound direct object in Hebrew where there is no preposition needed. In the second colon, “for understanding” again translates a Hebrew infinitive להבין, and the phrase “words of insight” renders the object of the infinitive אמרי בינה, which is in turn a prepositional phrase (in Hebrew an equivalent structure). So, the first colon may be diagrammed grammatically as follows:

I (infinitive) O (object) + O (object) or I OO, or, more conventionally, ABB.

The second one may be diagrammed as IO, or, again more conventionally, A'B'.

In terms of what the two cola say, the semantic parallelism, we can also see that the two cola are parallel, because the verbs “learning” and “understanding” are synonyms, and the objects “wisdom,” “instruction,” and “words of insight” are all in the same semantic domain. Thus,

although the first colon has two objects and the second one has only one, a prepositional phrase, this is typical of the kinds of variation that we find in Hebrew poetry.

In addition to parallelism, Hebrew poetry also exhibits rhythm and euphonic sound patterns. In terms of rhythm, most cola present either a two-stress or three-stress pattern, with most Hebrew words being short enough that they have only one stress. This is subjective, but those familiar with the language can feel the rhythmic patterns. This rhythm is somewhat similar to what is called free verse in modern English poetry, which, it can be argued, is partly derived from the King James Version of the Psalms, which goes back to John Wycliffe's fourteenth-century translation.⁵ In Proverbs 1:2, the first colon has three beats and most people would probably hear the second one as having two. It is possible to sense this even in the English translation.

Hebrew poetry also exhibits euphony (alliteration and assonance). An example of both in an English poem can be found in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," of which the first three lines are presented below (consonants occurring at least three times are in boldface; repeated vowels are italicized; note that *v* and *f* are considered one sound):

Once upon a *midnight dreary*, while I pondered, **w**eak and **w**eary,
Over **m**any a quaint and curious **v**olume of forgotten lore—
While I **n**odded, **n**early **n**apping, **s**uddenly there came a **t**apping . . .

To give a sense of the euphonic sound pattern of Proverbs 1:2, it will be helpful to provide an informal transliteration of each colon (the letters in bold are consonants that are repeated; the italicized vowels are the ones that are repeated, so that the reader can easily see which sounds are emphasized):

לדעת חכמה ומוסר
leda'at **ch**ochmah *ou*mousar
להבין אמרי בינה
lehaveen *'ee*mray *vee*nah

The consonants *m* (3x), *l* (2x), *n* (2x), *r* (2x), and *v* (2x) are each repeated at least once in the two cola. The *ch* sound (as in Bach, not church) is created by two different consonants (ך and ח), but it is the same sound, so it counts. The vowels *a* (6x), *ee* (3x), and *ou* (2x) are repeated multiple times. The alliteration (repetition of consonants) and assonance (repeti-

5. Charles Allen, "Cadenced Free Verse," *College English* 9 (January 1948), 195–99.

tion of vowels), added to the rhythm (3-2 stresses) and the parallelism (ABB/A'B'), give the line its poetic character.

Hebrew poets love to play with the language, as poets are wont to do, sometimes creating complex wordplays that are usually not easily translatable into another language. There will not be time to go into much of this in a commentary of this length and focus, but the poetic structure of Proverbs needs to be kept in mind as we consider the nature of the material before us. As Marshal McLuhan famously said in in the 1960s, "The medium is the message."

Wisdom Literature

The book of Proverbs is Wisdom literature, a genre that also includes the books of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), Job, and three deuterocanonical works: Baruch, Wisdom of Ben Sira (aka Sirach or Ecclesiasticus), and Wisdom of Solomon.⁶ Proverbs, Qohelet, and Job are part of the third division of the Jewish canon, the *Ketubim* or Writings, which were canonized after the Torah and Prophets. Wisdom literature includes both oral folk sayings and the literature of the elite, reflecting on the nature of life and offering didactic advice. The word "proverb" (משל) may refer to a pithy saying written in terse poetic parallelism (like "You can have it all; you just can't have it all at once" [Oprah Winfrey]) or to an extended poem. Both types of משל are found in Proverbs. They are almost impossible to translate well into English, because of the interplay in the Hebrew between the sounds, rhythm, and meaning of the few words in each line. Additionally, double meanings and complex wordplays add to the translation problems. For example, the double meaning of the name of the pet supply store PetSmart would be impossible to render into another language.

Author and Date

The book of Proverbs is traditionally attributed to Solomon (Prov 1:1; 10:1; 25:1), but other authors are also named (22:17; 24:23; 30:1; 31:1). The authors of the sayings in chapters 10–29 are diverse in social location: urban and rural, elite and ordinary. Others are apparently foreign (Agur [30:1]; Lemuel's mother [31:1]). It is for this reason that scholars

6. "Apocryphal" in Protestant parlance.

do not believe that Solomon is responsible for all, or even most, of the proverbs. Although the individual proverbs cannot be dated, the date of the collection can be narrowed to within a few centuries. The earliest possible date would be the time of Hezekiah (late eighth to early seventh century BCE), since he is mentioned in 25:1. The collection is likely to have been complete before the time of Ben Sira (author of *Sirach*), who was writing in the early second century BCE, since he shows the influence of Proverbs in his book. Most commentators, however, date the latest segments of the book, chapters 1–9 and 31, which seem to form a kind of envelope around the middle section, to either the Persian Period or the Hellenistic Period (see the next section), i.e., between the last half of the sixth century and the first half of the fourth century BCE.

Social Setting

One question that has been discussed at length is the social setting of the teaching of wisdom. Were boys or young men (the original intended audience) taught in a school or at home? There is no definitive evidence for schools in ancient Israel until quite late, and the fact that mothers as well as fathers are depicted as authoritative teachers suggests that the home was the more likely setting.

Most scholars believe that the father was the one who did the vast majority of the teaching, but there are thirteen references to the word “mother” and seventeen to the word “father” in Proverbs, suggesting that the teaching roles were somewhat balanced. Focusing on the six texts that deal specifically with instruction, three verses mention both mother and father (1:8; 6:20; 30:17); two, only the father (3:12; 4:1); and one, solely the mother (31:1; Lemuel’s mother’s teaching her son, which goes on for the next eight verses!). Based on the information available, it is impossible to determine the degree to which mothers may have been involved in ancient Israelite instruction, but the possibility that mothers were deeply involved should not be dismissed. Gerlinde Baumann notes that Egyptian wisdom texts do not include mothers as teachers. She suggests that the depiction of mothers as teachers in Proverbs is not just for reasons of parallelism. Unless mothers actually functioned as teachers, they would not have been included in this literature.⁷

7. Gerlinde Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets: The Literary and Theological Functions of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” in *Wisdom and Psalms*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, FCB 2, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 49–52.

**Wisdom as the Feminine
Principle**

The Buddhist concept of wisdom, or *prajna*, is related to the supreme thought of achieving buddhahood to liberate all beings from suffering. When we manifest *prajna* we directly see the nature of reality and are free from the delusion that we are separate, unchanging, independent selves. With this understanding of the independent self as an illusion, we clearly see the nature of the relationship between self and other. This clarity leaves no need for an enemy. *Prajna* is the awareness that all phenomena are connected, which naturally brings about vast compassion.

Though Buddhism is not a theistic tradition, the Hebrew concept of wisdom, *hokmah*, aligns with *prajna* because both point toward correct relationships. *Prajna* enables us to see ourselves in all beings, and *hokmah* demands that we live in right relation to God and God's people. Neither forms of wisdom are conceptual but are, rather, active states of engagement that can be

cultivated only through direct experience. *Prajna* and *hokmah* reflect the truth that actions have consequences, and when we choose wisely we can expect to lessen our suffering and the suffering of those around us.

Interestingly, wisdom is characterized as female in the Hebrew and Buddhist traditions. Tibetan Buddhists venerate *Yeshe Tsogyal* as a female Buddha, or "Awakened One." *Yeshe Tsogyal* was a real woman who lived in Tibet during the eighth century and is considered to be the human manifestation of the feminine principle of "experiential nondual wisdom."⁸ In Proverbs, *Hokmah* is repeatedly portrayed as a woman whose wrath and compassion offer warnings and blessings.

In both spiritual traditions, wisdom is the ground of right action. Without her counsel we are incapable of acting skillfully and more likely to cause harm. Listening to wisdom means dropping our grasping egos and returning to proper relations with ourselves and others.⁹

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8. Judith Simmer-Brown, "Yeshe Tsogyal: Woman and Feminine Principle," *Shambhala Times* (August 19, 2009); <http://shambhalatimes.org/2009/08/19/yeshe-tsogyal-woman-and-feminine-principle/>.

9. See Katherine Murphey Hayes, *Proverbs*, ed. Daniel Durken, New Collegeville Bible Commentary 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013); Trinley Dradül Jampal, the Kongma Sakyong II, *The Supreme Thought: Bodhichitta and the Enlightened Society Vow* (Halifax and Cologne: Dragon, 2013), esp. 32.

Contemporary biblical scholarship tends to view Proverbs as the work of conservative elite scribes whose comfortable position in society facilitated their view that God recompenses humans according to their deeds. Those who see Proverbs as reflecting easy, simple, complacent, or naive optimism often prefer the books of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) and Job, which are thought to question this traditional view.¹⁰ Feminist scholars often join in the negative judgment of Proverbs, adding concerns about the implied reader being a son, which requires women to read as if they were men.¹¹ This concern will be addressed below.

Intended Audience

Since the original intended audience comprised boys/young men (especially evident in chaps. 1–9 and 31:10–31 with their sexual imagery), it is sometimes considered difficult for readers who are not male to identify with the intended audience. Not only women but gay men and heterosexual men who are not looking for love may not find the sexual imagery relevant. Most contemporary readers must edit the material or adapt ourselves to make this aspect of it meaningful for our experience.

There are two responses to this concern. First, every time we read a novel or watch a movie in which the protagonist is a man, we read from the point of view of a male. In addition, we identify temporarily with the main character each time the protagonist is of a different ethnicity than we are or a different age or from a different social or economic class. There is nothing inherently evil in this unless there is something inherently evil about men or groups who are different from ourselves and we should thus never put ourselves in their shoes.

Most of us, men and women alike, have been socialized into certain attitudes toward women (and men) that are not ideal. That does not make men evil or make it a violation of one's womanhood to temporarily step into male shoes any more than it violates one's selfhood to step into the fictional shoes of a person of a different ethnicity, class, religion, or whatever. It is one way we learn about others. If we are threatened by

10. Peter T. H. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel*, SOTSMS (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 18–38.

11. Judith E. McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink*, Gender, Culture, Theory 4, JSOTSup 216 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 99.

temporarily identifying with a young male student, then one's identity as a woman is weak indeed.

We may well lament that there is not a version of Proverbs in the Bible directed toward young women. The reality is that a small elite group of male royal and priestly figures held much of the limited power that there was in a rural agrarian society beyond the power that everyone had within the group-oriented household.¹² Women occasionally wielded power, as various biblical stories make evident, but often their power was covert rather than overt, and/or limited to the domestic sphere.¹³ In any event, we must deal with the literature that we have and the society that it reflects, trying to understand it and critique it, as well as to understand and critique our own culture, in part by looking at our reflection in ancient texts such as Proverbs.

There is a second response to the concern about the implied audience. If we are women, gay men, or beyond the age of seeking mates, it is not necessary to identify with teenage males to usefully read the book of Proverbs; rather, we can acknowledge the antiquated imagery in Proverbs and recast it in more congenial terms. Today the strange woman (to be

12. Carol Meyers in *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 122–97, makes it clear that in the period before the monarchy there was greater equality and complementarity between the sexes than afterward. In the typical household everyone had to work hard in order for the extended family to survive. The rigid gender roles that developed later were much more fluid in the earlier periods. During the monarchic period, women lost power, but in the pioneer time after the exile, they regained it and then some.

13. Eve had agency but in Christian tradition is depicted negatively (Gen 3); Sarah had agency with regard to her handmaid Hagar, a domestic matter (Gen 16, 21); Rebekah had agency, using it for her favorite son, in a domestic setting (Gen 27:5-13); Rachel too had agency, stealing her father's gods, again in a largely family quarrel (Gen 31:34); she and Leah are depicted as not getting along but do cooperate, again in the domestic sphere (Gen 29:1–30:34); they also have agency with regard to their handmaids (30:3-13); Miriam had agency, but her song of the sea is mostly attributed to Moses (Exod 15:1-18, 20-21), and she is depicted as a complaining, jealous sibling to Moses (Num 12:1). Deborah acted overtly as a judge, but Jael, acting covertly, sealed the victory (Judg 4–5); the wise woman of Abel (2 Sam 20) is largely a puppet for the prophet Nathan; Bathsheba acted behind the scenes to ensure that her son Solomon would be king (1 Kgs 11–17); Jezebel acted through her husband but did not last for long (1 Kgs 16:31; 18:4-19; 19:1, 2; 21:5-25; 2 Kgs 9). Athaliah was monarch in her own right but also did not endure long (2 Kgs 11:1, 14-16; 2 Chr 23:12-15). Huldah had her own agency, but we know little of her (2 Kgs 22 and 2 Chr 34). Ruth, Naomi, Esther, and Judith all have agency, but they are probably fictional characters whose stories make various important moral points about Judah.

discussed below) may be seen as a sexual predator or pedophile, and these come in more than one gender, though they tend to be male. The ultimate point of Proverbs is not about finding the right mate, though for some demographics this is a significant quest, but about bonding with wisdom, which is a gender-neutral activity, even if in Hebrew the word for wisdom is grammatically and culturally feminine. Finding the right partner is an important element of happiness if we are inclined to mate, but it is only one element of life. Marriage with wisdom is universally necessary.

In spite of some very negative feminine imagery, discussed below, Proverbs includes perhaps the most positive female imagery of the divine in the entire Jewish and Christian canons, reflecting high social status for at least some women at the time it was being brought into final form, also discussed below.¹⁴

The book of Proverbs does reflect the world in which it was produced. How could it do otherwise? The question is whether it is a reactionary, conservative, or subversive text. In the last case, it would be challenging readers to reconsider their perspective on the world. If it is a product of the postexilic period, a time when the trauma of exile had called into question much traditional thinking, it is possible that Proverbs is reactionary, or just conservative. There is enough contradictory material in the book, however, to suggest that the authors intended it to cause its readers to ponder and question, not simply to learn old saws by heart. If this is the case, Proverbs is a profoundly more subversive and interesting book than is generally believed.¹⁵ That is the position argued in this commentary.

The editors of the book of Proverbs engage their audience, enticing them to think deeply about important questions such as wealth and poverty, diligence and laziness, reward and punishment, and their relationship. Is poverty always a result of laziness? What is the responsibility of the person of integrity toward the poor? Where does God fit in? The perspective of the sages is more subtle than they are sometimes given credit for. Wealth is good, but seeking after it too vigorously is not, and it is not as important as integrity. Poverty is often caused by laziness and diligence certainly tends to lead to wealth, but other factors also lead to poverty. In the last analysis, a poor integrity is better and more

14. Claudia Camp, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature," in *The Sage in Ancient Israel and the Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 127.

15. Hatton, *Contradiction*.

satisfying than a rich corruption. There are tensions within the book of Proverbs, which the compilers who brought it into final form present to the audience/reader to ponder, but they have structured the material in such a way that they provide guidance as to what answers they hope we will find. These are lessons we need to hear today in our culture, as much as the ancient Hebrews needed to hear them in their day, for our society is far more consumerist, materialistic, and coarse than the ancient Israelite one was.

Gender Roles

One of the major issues at play in Proverbs is gender roles. At the time the book came into final form (most likely the postexilic period), women's roles seem to have changed. By the evidence in Proverbs itself (31:16) as well as other sources, women could own property and engage in business activities. One imagines that some parts of ancient Israelite culture were not pleased with these advances for women. Indeed, one can see some of the negative attitudes toward women in Proverbs, such as the strange woman passages in 2:16-19; 5:1-11, 15-23; and 7:14-20, as well as proverbs such as 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15, which complain about unpleasant wives. Proverbs 19:13 is a good example:

A stupid child is ruin to a father,
and a wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain.

The sages include these negative sentiments, perhaps because they were so much a part of traditional wisdom that they could not be omitted, but they are undercut by the strong and positive image of the strong woman (אשת־חיל [“capable wife” in NRSV]) in 31:10-31 (see also 12:4), as well as the personified feminine figure of Wisdom in 8:4–9:6. Christl Maier suggests that the old traditions were not erased but passed on in creative new ways.¹⁶ In addition, they are balanced by many more statements about quarrelsome men. (See discussion and note at 21:9, 19.) Using old traditions, Proverbs makes bold, new statements within the well-known format of a collection of bromides and stereotyped complaints. Think of it as a way of providing a kind of corrective lens through which the reader can see the old proverbs anew.

16. Christl Maier, “Proverbs,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 255–72.

An example of a negative version of this process is the way American slave owners embedded the story of the so-called curse of Ham in their interpretive traditions. The biblical story clearly says that it was not Ham but Canaan who was cursed (Gen 9:18-27), yet without changing a word of the text, the slave owners were able to interpret the story in such a way as to make it say that it was Ham who was cursed, and therefore slavery of Africans was justified.¹⁷ In a similar but constructive, progressive manner, the sages who brought the book of Proverbs into its final form were providing corrective lenses for some of the out-of-date proverbs, which could not be discarded, because they were too much a part of the community tradition, but needed to be understood fresh in a new era.

Structure

One other matter is worth considering at the outset. Most scholars hold that the sayings in chapters 10–29 are mostly a hodge-podge, thrown together without any ordering principle. Although the ordering principles are not always easy to discern, at times the proverbs do seem to have been gathered in a fashion intended to help the wisdom seeker contemplate the issues created by the juxtaposition of various proverbs, as mentioned above. I will make an attempt at grouping the proverbs to show their interrelatedness and subversive potential, following Knut Heim’s divisions of 10:1–22:16, though not rigidly.¹⁸

The book of Proverbs divides into the following sections (Hebrew titles in parentheses):

Section	Chapters	Heading(s)
1	1–9	Advice to Young Men about Women and Wisdom, Concluding with Wisdom’s and Folly’s Banquets (The Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel)
2a	10:1–15:33	A Collection Marked by Antithetic Parallelism (The Proverbs of Solomon)
2b	16:1–22:16	A Courtly/Royal Collection

17. See Gene Rice, “The Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18-27),” *JRT* 29 (1972): 5–27.

18. Knut M. Heim, *Like Grapes of Gold Set in Silver: An Interpretation of Proverbial Clusters in Proverbs 10:1–22:16* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001).

3a	22:17–24:22	A Free Adaptation of the Egyptian Wisdom Text, <i>The Instruction of Amenemope</i> (The Words of the Wise)
3b	24:23–34	A Small Collection of Miscellaneous Proverbs (These Also Are the Sayings of the Wise)
3c	25:1–29:27	A Collection with Courtly/Royal Focus (These Are Other Proverbs of Solomon That the Officials of King Hezekiah of Judah Copied)
4a	30:1–14	Sayings of an Unknown Individual, Possibly a Non-Judahite (The Words of Agur Son of Jakeh. An Oracle)
4b	30:15–33	Numerical and Other Sayings
4c	31:1–9	The Words of King Lemuel. An Oracle That His Mother Taught Him
5	31:10–31	Poem on the אשה-חיל, Strong Woman/Wife (Capable Wife) (A Strong Woman/Wife Who Can Find?)

The Significance of the Structure of Proverbs

The structure of Proverbs suggests that the editors were making a point about women and wisdom, especially since the first nine chapters and the last chapter were probably added late (see below). Part 1 is advice mainly of fathers to sons about women but concludes with the banquets of Wisdom and Folly, where the feminine divine Wisdom clearly has the upper hand (A). This is balanced by part 5, which is the Ode to the Strong Woman/Wife (“Capable Wife” in NRSV), divine Wisdom’s human counterpart (A’). Parts 2, 3, 4a, and 4b are again advice mainly of *fathers* to sons (B), which is balanced by part 4c, which is advice of a *mother* to her son. This may be represented diagrammatically as follows:

1	Fathers to sons about women/ Wisdom over Folly	A
2–4b	Fathers to sons about everything including women	B
4c	Lemuel’s mother’s advice to Lemuel about women among other things	B’
5	Ode to the Strong Woman/Wife, who on a human level represents Wisdom	A’

TRANSLATION MATTERS

A few words are in order about the NRSV translation. To make Proverbs relevant to a contemporary audience, the NRSV translates some words generically that originally were undoubtedly understood in their masculine sense, for example, Hebrew בן, “son,” is translated as “child,” as discussed above, though NRSV does not follow this principle consistently. The NRSV also translates some words in a way that constitutes an interpretation rather than a translation, for example, אשה זרה, literally, the “strange woman,” is translated as “loose woman” (5:3; 7:5; 22:14), interpreting her strangeness as sexual rather than ethnic or a combination of these aspects of her character.

Although I am an advocate of inclusive language in contemporary speech and writing, I do not think it is helpful to impose it on ancient texts where it is clearly not the intention of the authors; nor do I think it is helpful to translate terms such as אשה זרה, which are multivalent in meaning, with a single meaning other than a literal one. It is better to translate them literally, in this case “strange woman,” so that the ambiguity of the original can be heard in the translation. If the ancient text was sexist by our standards, we cannot change that through translation sleight of hand, and it is better not to be dishonest with the public.

In addition, some common words, like צדק, translated as “righteous,” are perhaps better translated differently, as noted in Translation Matters below.¹⁹ Finally, some Hebrew words used regularly in Proverbs need explanation. Where I disagree with NRSV, which is fairly frequently, since some of the words are key ones in Proverbs, I use my preferred translation in the commentary, putting NRSV’s translation in parentheses the first time I use the word in that section. The NRSV is no worse than other translations done by committees; it is better than many, but most such translations cater to an ecclesiastical market that wants to hear what it is used to hearing rather than a newer, more accurate understanding and/or to hear religiously unoffensive renderings. Translations sold to the public are inherently the result of religio-political and economic factors that sadly do not result in more excellent products. In other words, translation by compromise muddies the waters instead of sifting the wheat from the tares, to mix metaphors horribly.

19. See Translation Matters on Just/Integrity/Honesty (Righteous[ness]), צדיק/צדק/צדקה, at 1:2.

Part 1

Proverbs 1:1–9:18

Advice to Young Men about Women and Wisdom, Concluding with Wisdom's and Folly's Banquets

Introduction

Chapters 1–9 differ from 10–29 in that they mainly consist of long poems rather than short, pithy sayings. This does not require a single author, but it makes it more likely than for parts 2–4b (chaps. 10–29) and part 5 (chap. 31). These introductory chapters use the imagery of Wisdom¹ and its antithesis, Folly, personified poetically as female figures.² Wisdom is a personification rather than a divine hypostasis in that divine Wisdom is depicted as if it were a person, like giving fictional consciousness and personality to an aspect of a person like one's eyes or mind (as if one's eyes and one's mind had separate existence

1. For recent overviews of the biblical wisdom figure, see Gerlinde Baumann, "Personified Wisdom: Contexts, Meanings, Theology," in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Caldich-Benages, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History; Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, vol. 1.3 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 57 n. 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 58; Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies in the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

and each had individual agency; “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”). In hypostasis, the entity is viewed as an actual being separate from its source, as in Pinocchio becoming a real boy. (For a detailed discussion of personified Wisdom, see the commentary on 8:22.) The personified figure of Wisdom in 1–9 was probably drawn in part from images of the God of Israel and in part from goddess mythology.³ It is also likely that personified Wisdom emerged in the theological and political crisis brought about by the loss of kingship and temple during the postexilic period. In that destabilized environment, this figure took over functions that the king and perhaps even the priests had formerly performed. Even after a new temple was built, its functionaries may not have had the same status as previously.⁴ In transitional periods, women often gain authority, both practically and in the abstract realm.

The personified figures of Wisdom and Folly are also tied to their human counterparts: the respectable wife a young man should marry and stay with exclusively, and her opposite, אשה זרה, the “strange” woman, also known as נכרייה, the “foreign” woman (2:16; 5:20; 7:5). In this context these terms do not necessarily denote ethnic foreignness but might only indicate otherness or deviation from the norm.⁵ It is possible, however,

3. Bernhard Lang, “Lady Wisdom: A Polytheistic and Psychological Interpretation of a Biblical Goddess,” in *Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 400–423; Judith M. Hadley, “Wisdom and the Goddess,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*, ed. John Day et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 234–43; Michael D. Coogan, “The Goddess Wisdom—Where Can She Be Found? In Literary Reflexes of Popular Religion,” in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 203–9; Gerlinde Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets: The Literary and Theological Functions of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” in *Wisdom and Psalms*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole A. Fontaine, FCB 2, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 62–66; and Baumann, “Personified Wisdom,” 57–63.

4. Alice M. Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom*, SOTSMS (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 9.

5. Athalya Brenner, “Proverbs 1–9: An F Voice?,” in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, BibInt 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 113–30; Christl Maier, “Conflicting Attractions: Parental Wisdom and the ‘Strange Woman’ in Proverbs 1–9,” in Brenner and Fontaine, *Wisdom and Psalms*, 92–108; Carol A. Newsom, “Women and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 142–60; Harold C. Washington, “The Strange Woman אשה זרה/נכרייה of Proverbs 1–9,” in *Temple and Community in the Persian Period 2*, ed. Tamara Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards, JSOTSup 175 (Sheffield: JSOT Press,

that, in the context of a xenophobic Persian Period, ethnic otherness was part of the intended meaning.⁶ Other phrases used to describe this woman are אִשָּׁת רָע, “evil woman” (6:24), and אִשָּׁת כְּסִילוֹ, “a woman of foolishness.” Her speech is described as smooth, deceptive, and false (2:16; 5:3; 6:24; 7:5), and her ways lead to Sheol and death (2:18; 5:5; 6:26; 7:26–27). It is possible to read the references to the Strong Woman/Wife (31:10–31)⁷ as applying on one level to Wisdom and the contrasting verses on the foreign or evil woman as being tied to Folly.

It is likely that for the most part the same strange woman is being depicted in all of these chapters, because personified Wisdom is the same character throughout and the strange woman is her human antithesis.⁸ The structure of chapters 1–9 also suggests that even if the individual pieces were originally written separately, they have been brought together into an editorial whole in which the strange woman units are identified with each other. The structure is a double chiasm, a chiasm being a symmetrical pattern, e.g., ABBA.

Prov 1:11–14 Speech of the gang A

Prov 1:22–33 Speech of Wisdom B

Warning against the strange woman—2:16–19

Prov 4:4–9 Speech of the father’s father B'

Warning against the strange woman—5:1–11, 15–23

Prov 5:12–14 Speech of the son A'

Warning against the evil woman—6:23–35

Prov 7:14–20 Speech of the strange woman A

Prov 8:4–36 Speech of Wisdom B

Prov 9:5–6 Speech of Wisdom B'

Prov 9:16–17 Speech of the foolish woman/Folly⁹ A'

1994), 217–42; Jane S. Webster, “Sophia: Engendering Wisdom in Proverbs, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon,” *JOT* 78 (1998): 63–79.

6. Christl M. Maier, “Good and Evil Women in Proverbs and Job,” in Maier and Calduch-Benages, *The Writings and Late Wisdom Books*, 86.

7. See Translation Matters on Strong Woman/Wife (Capable Wife), אִשָּׁת־חַיִל, at 12:4.

8. Gale A. Yee, “‘I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh’: The Foreign Woman (*iššā zārā*) in Proverbs 1–9,” in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 53–68.

9. *Ibid.*, 113.

Because the theme of advice to sons to avoid women appears at the beginning of chapter 31, mirroring chapters 1–7, and 31:10–31 is a poem in praise of the ideal wife, the human counterpart to divine Wisdom (mirroring 8:1–9:6), chapters 1–9 and 31 form a literary frame around the book of Proverbs.¹⁰ These two sections were written down after the rest of the book as a kind of envelope for the older material, recontextualizing it and giving it a new focus. It is not just a compendium of proverbs; it is a book about Wisdom and Folly. The date of chapters 1–9 is generally believed to be postexilic, during either the Persian Period (538–333 BCE)¹¹ or the first half of the fourth century BCE.¹² Whatever the date of chapters 1–9, the social setting is urban and the audience is upper-class boys/young men.

It is possible that the creator(s) of Proverbs 1–9 and 31 developed the personified figures of Wisdom and Folly from the reference to them in Proverbs 14:1:

Wisdom builds her house,
but Folly tears it down with her own hands.¹³

In a similar fashion, each of the two words in the strange/foreign woman pair is present once in chapters 10–29:

The mouth of a loose [Hebrew זרית, strange, (plural)] woman is a deep pit;
he with whom the LORD is angry falls into it. (22:14)

For a prostitute is a deep pit;
an adulteress [Hebrew נכרייה, foreign woman] is a narrow well. (23:27)

Again, these occurrences provide the material from which the author(s) of chapters 1–9 may have developed the strange/foreign woman figure. (See the commentary for a detailed discussion.)

10. Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, BLS 11 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), 207–8.

11. Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31*, BZAW 304 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001); Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 136; Washington, “The Strange Woman.”

12. Maier, “Conflicting Attractions,” 100–104.

13. Author’s translation. The NRSV renders it: “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.” See Translation Matters at 14:1. See also the contrast between wisdom and prostitutes in 29:3.

Many interpretations of the strange woman in chapters 1–9 have been offered: a foreigner,¹⁴ a figure combining ethnic otherness and foreign worship,¹⁵ a social outsider, a prostitute (foreign or not), and someone else's wife. Gale Yee interprets the prohibitions against sex with the strange woman on two levels, literal and figurative. On the figurative level, sex—usually adultery—with the strange woman represents marriage with a woman outside the *golah* community, those who had returned to Judah from Babylonian exile. These marriages are the ones prohibited by Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23–30).¹⁶

My view is like that of Gale Yee. The strange woman may have represented the lower-class women who did not go into Babylonian captivity but remained in the land. When the exiles returned, the men may have married the local women to get access to the land they had once owned but had lost when they went to Babylon. These non-elite women may have been viewed as strange, even ethnically other, given that the Judahites were endogamous (married within their own tribes). Perhaps their worship customs had become somewhat different as well, which would have added to their being viewed as social outsiders from the perspective of the upper-crust group who had been in Babylonian exile.

Feminist evaluations of the feminine imagery in these chapters range from somewhat positive to mostly negative. On the positive side, divine Wisdom is personified as a female figure. On the negative side, she has two antitheses: on an abstract level, Folly; and on a human level, the strange woman. Moreover, the critics assert that Wisdom is at best God's diminutive sidekick, almost a plaything. Although it is true that Wisdom has a playful side in chapter 8, for the most part she is a powerful, serious figure who essentially speaks for God. One may even go so far as to speculate that she represents the absent prophetic voice. Wisdom calls from the streets and rebukes those who do not answer her call. Even pre-scending from the later Christian interpretations of Wisdom as the Logos, she is no mere sidekick. Some feminist scholars, such as Silvia Schroer and Christl Maier, view her as the basis of a new feminist spirituality.¹⁷

14. Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The "Foreignness" of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9: A Study of the Origin and the Development of a Biblical Motif*, BZAW 381 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

15. Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange, and Holy: The Making of the Bible*, JSOTSup 320 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

16. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve*, 135–58, 220–31.

17. Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 39–41; and Maier, "Proverbs," 264.

Perhaps most troubling is the polarization of the human counterparts of Wisdom and Folly, the strong woman/wife and the strange woman. At least the poles are wife and strange woman rather than the virgin-and-whore dichotomy of Christian polemics. Nevertheless, in real life, individuals (male and female) are usually mixtures of good and bad. Two of the most highly thought of “saints” in contemporary America are Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy. Yet, it is well known that both of these men were far from pure in matters of sexuality. That does not seem to matter. It is understood that men have weaknesses.

Yet, women are not allowed the same freedom. When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, her action was used by the NAACP rather than a similar action by a fifteen-year-old who was pregnant as a result of statutory rape, because they understood that Rosa Parks would “sell” better than the fifteen-year-old pregnant woman; she would be seen as a woman of virtue; no sexual scandal could be attached to her. And for years she was seen by the public as a tired old woman rather than the trained civil rights worker that she was.¹⁸

Even in the twenty-first century, though mores have changed, a sexual double standard persists. On the one hand, in 2017 the president of the United States could boast of certain sexually aggressive actions toward women;¹⁹ on the other hand, men in high places were beginning to be called on their sexually predatory practices, and men of goodwill were beginning to join in the chorus to say “no more.”²⁰

Women are freer than ever before but often are still expected to uphold traditional sexual values more than men, especially in ecclesiastical circles. How much of this can be attributed to the influence of an ancient text like Proverbs and its twin figures of Wisdom and Folly and human

18. Josh Moon, “Bus Boycott Took Planning, Smarts,” *USA Today*, November 29, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/local/blogs/moonblog/2015/11/29/bus-boycott-took-planning-smarts/76456904/>.

19. “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Taped Comments about Women,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>.

20. It is not just women who are calling men to task; it is also men, who in the past were bystanders but now, emboldened by the change in climate, are beginning to see the power in numbers. See Robert Lypsyte, “Sexual Harassment: How We Men Can—and Must—Help Bring Down Sexual Predators,” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/19/sexual-harassment-assault-men-jock-culture>.

counterparts of the strange woman and the strong woman/wife is hard to say, especially given how biblically illiterate the American population is.²¹ Nevertheless, influences of ancient texts do tend to linger, even after the active consciousness of such texts has all but disappeared. Whether the contemporary double standard can be blamed in part on Proverbs, it must be acknowledged that at least in this regard the book is, unfortunately, not out of date.

Prologue (1:1-7)

Proverbs 1:1-7 forms a prologue to the whole book, emphasizing that the proverbs are intended for learning wisdom, knowledge, justice, and related virtues. Proverbs 1:2 begins a series of Hebrew infinitives (translated as “learning,” “understanding,” etc.) with direct objects (“wisdom,” “instruction,” etc.) in 1:2-4 and 1:6 that describe the purpose of the book. This series begins in 1:2 with the expression “to know” or “learn to know” wisdom and instruction.

TRANSLATION MATTERS

The Hebrew root ידע and the derived infinitive דעת in Proverbs 1:2 can be translated as both “learning” and “knowledge” and means (1) know and learn but also (2) to know a person—both socially and carnally (sexually)—and (3) to know how to do things on a practical level.

The second colon of 1:2 uses the verb להבין, meaning “understand” but also “perceive” and “discern.” The object of this verb, בינה, “words of insight,” includes the same root. In 1:3, the idea is that one is to take the discipline (the word is מוסר) in wise dealing (השכל) to heart. The verb השכל, “understand, make wise,” is sometimes used as a synonym for דעת, knowledge, and other nouns from the root ידע. The second colon adds three more objects: righteousness, justice, and equity.

The verb in 1:3, translated as “gaining,” literally “taking,” is parallel to the infinitive “learning” in 1:2. The meanings of the objects of the infinitive are discussed in Translation Matters.

21. Albert Mohler, “The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It’s Our Problem,” January 20, 2016, <https://albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/m>.

Prov 1:1-7

- ¹The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
²For learning about wisdom and instruction,
 for understanding words of insight,
³for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity;
⁴to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—
- ⁵let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
 and the discerning acquire skill,
⁶to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.
⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
 fools despise wisdom and instruction.

TRANSLATION MATTERS

Just/Integrity/Honesty (Righteous[ness]), צדקה, צדק, and צדיק; the root behind these words means conformity to an ethical standard, what is just, lawful, or right.²² The NRSV translation, “righteous[ness]” is too narrow and misleading, suggesting superficial piety, especially given the fact that the word is most often used today in the combination self-righteous. The terms צדקה and צדק (righteousness) are roughly synonymous.²³ Although no single translation will always work, “integrity” (or “honesty”) is a better translation than “righteousness” for these terms. Similarly, (the) “just” (or in some contexts innocent) is a better rendering for צדיק than “righteous.”

Justice/Right/Rectitude, משפט, are among the range of meanings.

Uprightness/Equity, מישרים, means what is upright, equitable. So, all three—צדק, משפט, and מישרים—are nuances of wisdom.

Proverbs 1:4 indicates that the audience includes the simple, naive individuals (פתאים) and the young (נער), but 1:5 broadens the audience to the mature persons, designated as wise (חכם), who already have a measure of understanding. The objects of the verb להח, “to teach,” in 1:4 are prudence (ערמה, “shrewdness”), knowledge (דעה), and discretion (מומה, “prudence”). In Wisdom literature, דעה means discernment, understanding, and wisdom.

22. Harold G. Stigers, “1879 צדק,” in *TWOT*, 752–55.

23. Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, “צדק,” in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 808.

TRANSLATION MATTERS

Prudence/Prudent (Shrewdness/Clever), ערום/ערמה; the related words ערמה and ערום have a consistently positive meaning in Proverbs.²⁴ The rendering of the noun ערמה as “shrewdness” and the adjective ערום as “clever” by NRSV is ambiguous, as these words can have pejorative connotations, as in “too clever for her own good.” It would be better to translate as “prudence/prudent.”

Foresight/Discretion/Purposes/Plans, מזומה; the noun מזומה connotes hidden plans or purposes, which because of their hiddenness require discretion and suggest a person of foresight.

Proverbs 1:6 promises that the addressees will be able to understand proverbs and figures of speech, the words of the wise and their enigmatic sayings. The verb להבין, “to understand,” is the same one used in 1:2b. The term משל, translated as “proverb” in 1:6, is used of brief, popular, wise sayings, prophetic figurative discourse, parables, poems, and the sayings collected in the book of Proverbs. The word מליצה, translated as “figure” in 1:6, is used only here and in Habakkuk 2:6, where it refers to a mocking poem. Here, in parallelism with משל, it must refer to some poetic figure. The wise (חכמים) in Proverbs refers to those who are learned in ethical and religious matters. The final word in the verse, חידתם, means “riddles” in the sense of allegorical and figurative sayings that need interpretation.

TRANSLATION MATTERS

Know, the verb ידע, from which the infinitive דעת, translated as both “learning” in 1:2 and “knowledge” in 1:7, has a broad range of meanings, including to know a person—both socially and carnally (sexually). Since one of the objects of the verb is wisdom, which is later personified as a female figure who invites young men to a banquet, the sexual meaning of the verb is relevant and serves to emphasize the intimate relationship required with wisdom. Here wisdom is paralleled with מוסר, discipline, chastening, or correction (instruction).

Wisdom, חכמה, which can also be rendered as “skill” or “prudence,” is primarily a religious and ethical concept, though it includes practical aspects as well. It is, first of all, an attribute of God (2:6; 3:19); its fundamental principle is fear of YHWH²⁵ (9:10; 15:33). In 8:22-31 it is personified as a female figure.

24. A. Luc, “ערם,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Exegesis and Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 539–40.

25. See discussion of this phrase at 1:7.

Discipline/Chastening/Correction, מוסר; the NRSV rendering as “instruction” in 1:2 and 1:7 is a mild translation of the word. The concept of מוסר involves the student undergoing a difficult, life-changing process and includes notions of discipline, chastening, and correction. Today we hear a lot about transformative leadership and the training required for it, but most of it is shallow. We are drawn to the stories of the Olympic athletes because we can tell the years of dedication it took for them to mold their bodies into the perfection required to win at the Olympic level. But there is another kind of transformation that the book of Proverbs is talking about and that liberal education was originally intended to convey, one that deeply impacts the student’s moral core. Heroes of this sort include people like Mary McLeod Bethune,²⁶ Nannie Helen Burroughs,²⁷ Mary Lyon,²⁸ Pauli Murray,²⁹ Mary Church Terrell,³⁰ and Ida B. Wells-Barnett³¹—each in her own way fought for women’s rights and the rights of the underprivileged and marginalized. These were women of deep character and determination.

26. Mary McLeod Bethune, born in the late nineteenth century, an educator and activist, served as president of the National Association of Colored Women, founded the National Council of Negro Women, and founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute in 1904, which later became Bethune-Cookman College. (See <https://www.biography.com/people/mary-mcleod-bethune-9211266>.) A statue of her erected in the 1970s is in Lincoln Park in Washington, DC.

27. Nannie Helen Burroughs, born in the late nineteenth century, opened the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls in Washington, DC, in 1909, when she was twenty-six. Her motto for the school was “We specialize in the wholly impossible.” She trained her faculty to teach students through a curriculum that emphasized both vocational and professional skills. Her students were to become self-sufficient wage earners and “expert homemakers.” Nannie Helen Burroughs never married. She devoted her life to the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls and remained its principal until her death in 1961. Three years later the institution she founded was renamed the Nannie Burroughs School.

28. Mary Lyon, women’s rights activist and educator, was born in the late eighteenth century. She founded the first women’s college in the United States, now known as Mount Holyoke College, in South Hadley, Massachusetts. See <https://www.biography.com/people/mary-lyon-9389865>.

29. Pauli Murray was a twentieth-century civil rights activist, an original member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the first African American woman ordained by the Episcopal Church, a lawyer, and a gay rights activist. Her autobiography was rereleased in 1987 as *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest and Poet*. See <https://paulimurrayproject.org/pauli-murray/biography/>.

30. Mary Church Terrell’s life spanned the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. She was a suffragette, a civil rights advocate, a charter member of the NAACP, and its first president.

31. Ida B. Wells, born in Mississippi, in the last third of the nineteenth century, was a journalist and became an antilynching advocate as a result of a triple lynching that

Proverbs 1:7 declares the central tenet of the book of Proverbs. Since knowledge and wisdom are virtually synonymous, the saying that the fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge means likewise that it is the beginning of wisdom. Fear of YHWH is not much in fashion today. The pendulum swung from fear to praise to apathy some time ago for many people. Fear, in the proper sense of the word, however, is magisterial. C. S. Lewis describes it in an especially affecting way:

Those who have not met this term may be introduced to it by the following device. Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told “There is a ghost in the next room,” and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is “uncanny” rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. Now suppose that you were told simply “There is a mighty spirit in the room” and believed it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it—an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare’s words “Under it my genius is rebuked.” This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the Numinous.

A modern example may be found (if we are not too proud to seek it there) in *The Wind in the Willows* where Rat and Mole approach Pan on the island:

“Rat,” he found breath to whisper, shaking, “Are you afraid?”
 “Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love.
 “Afraid? of Him? O, never, never. And yet—and yet—O Mole, I am afraid.”³²

Here for the first time the opposite of the wise are mentioned: אִוִּילִים, fools.

occurred in her hometown while she was out of town, in which a friend was one of the victims. See <https://www.biography.com/people/ida-b-wells-9527635>.

32. C. S. Lewis, introduction to *The Problem of Pain*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, rev ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2007; original, 1940), 554.

TRANSLATION MATTERS

Jerk/Schmuck/Folly (Fool/Folly), אױל/אױלױת, is the worst sort of fool and folly that is encountered in Proverbs. The word for the person occurs seventeen times in Proverbs. The אױלױת despise wisdom and instruction (see also 17:28). They are not just dumb, mindless idiots. From the point of view of the sages, they are morally corrupt creatures. They talk too much (10:14; 14:3; 17:28) and are arrogant (12:15) and contentious (e.g., 12:16; 20:3; 28:3). We might in our less charitable moments call them jerks or even schmucks. Today we may suspect that they are covering up insecurity, but whatever the reason for their behavior we view it as obnoxious. This root occurs forty times in Proverbs.

This type of fool should be distinguished from the כסיל, a word that is also translated as “fool” by NRSV but is a different sort of person. He is inept, bumbling, and stupid, but not evil. When the sages speak of Folly, they are talking about moral corruption, אױלױת, not just bumbling stupidity. Because there is no good substitute for the English translation of Folly, and since it is still used in contemporary speech, I have retained the traditional translation. It only translates אױלױת and thus if we were looking for a synonym in English it would be recklessness or irresponsibility rather than mere madness or idiocy, and certainly not silliness, though “recklessness” does not feel like a strong enough word. Strangely, it is usually associated with the ignorant types of fools or the naive rather than the type being described here. The two exceptions are 16:22 and 27:22. We do not seem to have a perfect synonym for the Hebrew concept of Folly in English with its connotations of serious moral corruption.

There is one other type of fool mentioned in Proverbs called a נבל, a nickname given to the character in the story of Abigail’s first husband, Nabal, who acts foolishly in his dealings with David (1 Sam 25). This sort of fool is presumptuous, ignoble, and churlish. Variations on this word occur three times in Proverbs, in 17:7, 17:21, and 30:22.

Proverbs 1:7, with its repetition of the key words from 1:2, forms an *inclusio* around the prologue.

²For **learning** [דעת] about *wisdom* [חכמה] and **instruction** [מוסר],
for understanding words of insight,

⁷The fear of the Lord is the beginning of **knowledge** [דעת];
fools despise *wisdom* [חכמה] and **instruction** [מוסר].

In addition, words from the same root as wisdom occur in 1:5-6, strongly binding the prologue together:

⁵let the *wise* [חכמים] also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,

⁶to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the *wise* [חכמים] and their riddles.

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General Editor

Barbara E. Reid, OP, is a Dominican Sister of Grand Rapids, Michigan. She holds a PhD in biblical studies from The Catholic University of America and is professor of New Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Her most recent publications are *Wisdom's Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures* (2016) and *Abiding Word: Sunday Reflections on Year A, B, C* (3 vols.; 2011, 2012, 2013). She served as vice president and academic dean at CTU from 2009 to 2018 and as president of the Catholic Biblical Association in 2014–2015.

Volume Editor

Sarah J. Tanzer serves as professor of New Testament and Early Judaism at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. She has written several essays on feminist interpretation of ancient texts including “Wisdom of Solomon” in *Women's Bible Commentary* (3rd edition; 2012) and “Ephesians” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary* (1994). Her other research interests have included the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gospel of John, the historically Jewish Jesus, and most recently, how difference develops in biblical interpretation between Judaism and early Christianity.

Author

Alice Ogden Bellis is an ordained minister and professor of Hebrew Bible at Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, DC. Her books include *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994 and 2007); *Science, Scripture, and Homosexuality*, with Dr. Terry Hufford (Pilgrim Press, 2002; Wipf and Stock, 2011); and *Jews and Christians and the Theology of Hebrew Scriptures*, coedited with Joel Kaminsky (SBL Symposium Series; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, November 2000).