

A Meal fit for a Sage:

Proverbs 9:1-6 and Christian Formation

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To Dr. Richard P. Belcher

Introduction

Parents, pastors, and pop stars alike know this simple truth: the children are our future. There must be a reason why the United States government spent over \$1 trillion on public education in recent years. There must be a reason U.S. parents spent over \$100 billion of their own dollars in the last few years to get their kids out of those public schools and into private institutions.¹ Christians take this charge to raise their children seriously as well but, for God's people, the duty entails education *together with* discipleship. Theirs is a formation in both the truth of the world and the Word. The Book of Proverbs is almost entirely framed as the teachings from Godly parents to their children and should account for a notable contribution to the field of Christian formation.² Instead, critical scholars dispute its authority in the life of Israel and many churches and curricula eschew its importance for all but the youngest Sunday school classes.

The church and its members are charged with submitting to all of Scripture as the ultimate rule for faith and life (WCF 1.3, 6). Further, Biblical testimony and historical considerations suggest the book of Proverbs was authoritative for God's people under the old covenant dispensation and remains so for God's people today. If the reader appreciates the religious tradition of Israelite wisdom literature, the literary features of Proverbs, and the contents of wisdom contained therein, several key elements emerge. The end of the beginning and the apex of Solomon's exhortation to get wisdom, Proverbs 9:1-6 presents a beautiful image of (1) the covenant setting, (2) the epistemological foundation, (3) the dialogical method, and (4) the excellent standard of wisdom in the life of God's people, which prove fundamental concepts for their spiritual formation.

¹ "U.S. Department of Education Budget History," Budget Materials (US Department of Education (ED), March 29, 2024), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/history/index.html>.

² Willem A. VanGemeren, "Proverbs," in *BTIOT*, ed. Miles Van Pelt (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 375.

The Problem with Wisdom

An investigation into the text of Proverbs should observe the challenges raised by popular readers and critical scholars alike. Proverbs, and indeed the entire biblical genre of wisdom literature, is the frequent subject of canonical and interpretive critiques.³ Broadly speaking, Proverbs and the wisdom corpus do not seem to fit with the law, history, and prophecy that make up the rest of the Hebrew Bible. These wisdom authors, often referred to as the “sages,” do not evidently make the same claims about God or share the same concerns about piety as the rest of the OT.⁴ The writings lack many elements which are typical of the Israelite Scripture. Proverbs specifically does not make explicit mention of any covenant, law, or temple practice.⁵ There are no references to the promises made to the patriarchs, no reviews of the Exodus, and no renewals of the Sinaitic Covenant.⁶ Wisdom literature is “strangely silent” about God’s redemptive intervention in the history of his people.⁷ Some scholars go as far as to claim that the worldview of the sages presents a “viable alternative” to exclusive service in YHWH’s name and may even reflect deliberate redactions of covenantal literature in favor of a secular structure.⁸

The text of Proverbs and its interpretation poses some difficulty as well. The book posits multiple authors including King Solomon (1:1), King Hezekiah (25:1), Agur son of

³ For a survey of the canonical issues beyond the topics relevant to this paper, see Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), 5-11 and Jamie A Grant, “Wisdom and Covenant: Revisiting Zimmerli” *European Journal of Theology* 12, no. 2 (2003): 103 for an updated list. For a summary of the interpretive challenges, see Ernest C. Lucas, “The Book of Proverbs: Some Current Issues,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017), 37-59.

⁴ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 9. Note, the “sages” may refer to the actual authors of the wisdom books or the more abstract historical proponents of the wisdom tradition in Israel.

⁵ Richard P. Belcher, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 42.

⁶ R.E. Murphy, “Wisdom in the OT,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. IV (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 297.

⁷ R.E. Murphy, “Wisdom-Theses and Hypotheses,” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1978), 36.

⁸ See J.L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: WJKP, 1998), 184 and J. Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 21-22. Rylaarsdam maintains, given its absence from Job, that the הָנָן name found in Proverbs (e.g. 9:10) simply means “deity”, instead of its usual, covenantal interpretation.

Jakeh (30:1), and King Lemuel (31:1). This group spans centuries of ANE history and reaches beyond the borders of Israel. Many scholars discuss the potential work of unnamed editors in the post-exilic period who are responsible for the headings and even the entire introduction (1-9).⁹ The more nefarious of these late redactors could have appropriated Solomon's name in order to promote this wisdom system.¹⁰ The authors of the book deploy a variety of distinct but nonetheless overlapping terms in various efforts to describe the wisdom and instruction that is essential to life in Israel.¹¹ Arriving at a translation that respects word choice and a comprehensive understanding is not always simple. Context offers little help in this endeavor; the work is largely a collection of individual and seemingly unrelated aphorisms, not grounded in any specific historical circumstance. These textual details raise interpretive questions. Most pressing: given the scope of their origins and content, are the Proverbs applicable to God's people? Do they suggest an alternate route to blessing outside of exclusive worship and service to YHWH?

The Blessings of Wisdom

Context and Coherence

There is good reason to trust the book of Proverbs, along with the other wisdom books, constitutes a unified literary work that coheres with the rest of the Hebrew Bible and contains authoritative instruction for God's people. Solomon is most likely the author of the texts attributed to him and serves on some level as the prototype for the wise Israelite. The

⁹ K.A. Kitchens, "PROVERBS AND WISDOM BOOKS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST: THE FACTUAL HISTORY OF A LITERARY FORM," *Tyndale Bulletin* 28, no. 1 (1977): 69–114.

¹⁰ The argument implied by critics here is one which situates the YHWH cult against the Sapiential tradition. See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 32-25.

¹¹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 13. For example, in the "purpose statement" (1:1-5) alone, we read מִשְׁלָל ("proverb"), בִּנְהָה ("wisdom"), חֲכָמָה ("instruction" or sometimes "discipline"), מִזְרָח ("understanding" but in Proverbs usually taken as "insight"), שְׁעָרָה ("prudence"), תַּعֲשָׂה ("knowledge"), מִזְפָּה ("discretion"), חַקְּה ("learning"), and תְּחִבָּלָה ("guidance").

genre of wisdom literature is well attested in the ANE both before and during Solomon's reign as the king of Israel.¹² These different wisdom traditions are common products of royal court settings.¹³ The language of Proverbs is consistent with the other Hebrew literature of Solomon's historical setting.¹⁴ Although the sections attributed to the singular wise king are made up largely of dialogues from two different teachers: the instructive father and Lady Wisdom, the father is the authority in the home and Wisdom is the authority in public. Their lessons are complementary; it is not necessary to assume that the different teachers are the products of different authors.¹⁵ In fact, the wisdom belonging to each figure shares its origin with the wisdom of Solomon. Lady Wisdom is the personification of the wisdom passed from father to son, the same wisdom Solomon received in abundance (1 Kgs. 3:3-14).¹⁶ Most importantly, the rest of the Bible bears witness to Solomonic authorship and the fruit of his wise character (1Kgs. 4:29-34; 5:9-14).¹⁷ In addition, it seems counterproductive for a pseudonymous author to claim Solomon's name for only parts of the work while still crediting other authors like Agur or even a foreign source like King Lemuel.¹⁸ The historical context together with the strong Israelite tradition of associating Solomon with production of wisdom literature supports the book's claim that the third king of Israel was entirely or primarily responsible for writing Proverbs 1-29.¹⁹

¹² Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 13.

¹³ Understandably, virtues like insight and discernment were highly valued among court officials. See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 34.

¹⁴ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 33.

¹⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 11.

¹⁶ David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 377. Also Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 87.

¹⁷ Richard L Schultz, "Unity or Diversity in Wisdom Theology? A Canonical and Covenantal Perspective," *Tyndale Bulletin* 48, no. 2 (November 1997): 279.

¹⁸ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 35.

¹⁹ Grant, "Wisdom and Covenant," 103. Note, arguing for the influence of Holy-Spirit-inspired editors does not necessarily compromise claims to Solomonic authorship and such a work would be well within God's authority and power. Faithful christians can certainly affirm that God worked by his Holy Spirit through human editors to compile and edit the biblical text, it is another thing altogether to argue that a single book or section of a book (which claims an author) is the amalgam of multiple, unnamed redactors. Trusting that God can and does inspire

The structure, lexicon, and delivery may be unique but the themes of Proverbs are consistent with biblical teaching and indeed, the metanarrative of God's Word. The book is universally counted among the body of wisdom literature, if not as the literary form's prototype.²⁰ The wisdom of the Hebrew Bible stood apart from the work of the sages in surrounding nations by framing their communal, experiential knowledge within a distinctly spiritual and religious realm.²¹ Proverbs refers to God almost exclusively as יהוה, Israel's covenant Lord.²² The practice of pursuing wisdom is intended to shape the life of the covenant community of Israel, to conform their personal and corporate character to God's standard. The entire OT shares this concern. The Torah delivers God's law to his people in principle; it lists in clear expression the requirements for the covenant body.²³ The Prophets warn Israel about their failure to understand and honor those covenant requirements.²⁴ The narrative books record the sometimes hopeful, sometimes disastrous efforts of God's people

individual authors to speak to multiple times and truths shapes the way the church reads every book of the Bible. This is especially relevant for the texts which span multiple stages of redemptive history. See O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Philipsburg: P&R, 2008), 188. It is an injustice to God's character and grace to claim that the Holy Spirit could not or would not reveal the glorious wisdom of God uniquely to a single author. See Richard L. Schultz, "Isaiah, Isaiahs, and Current Scholarship," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 160-161. The church must contend that one author could speak, albeit through a variety of images, to many people in many ages.

²⁰ The argument here assumes that the wisdom books (traditionally: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes) are themselves a unified genre. The case for unity includes (1) a shared concern with the Law, as in Eccl. 12:13-14, (2) shared conformity to standards of Mosaic piety, (3) agreement on the origin and limitations of wisdom (Prov. 26:12, 5:16; 3:5, 7; 28:11, 2; Eccl. 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 9:1, 12; 10:14; 7:23-24; Job 36:26, 29; 37:15-16; 38:18, 20-21, 36-37), and (4) mutual affirmation of divine sovereignty and inscrutability. See Schultz, "Unity or Diversity?" 279-280.

²¹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 5.

²² The authors and editors are "consistent in avoiding the suggestion that the God of the sages is any other than Israel's covenant God, Yahweh (see Exod 3:15; 33:18-20; 34:6-7; John 1:14-18). Proverbs has [other] profound similarities to [ANE] wisdom. Perhaps the consistent use of 'Yahweh' was meant to forestall the idea that the God of Proverbs was not Israel's covenant God." See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 33.

²³ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 375.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle, vol. VIII, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 263-264.

to keep his covenant.²⁵ All biblical literature is covenant literature because it is the conversation of a covenant people, the record of a covenant making and keeping God purifying a people for himself.²⁶ The wisdom books share this emphasis: carefully situating man in his proper relation to God.²⁷ Proverbs brings the practical outworking and living experience of that covenantal position and its ethic into the foreground.²⁸

Proverbs shares many similarities with the OT canon beyond the overarching covenant priority. Fathers are exhorted to pass the tradition YHWH-fearing down to the next generation and bind the teaching on their heart with the expectation of blessings, just as in the Torah (Prov. 2:21; 10:30; Deut. 4:21; 15:4; 19:10).²⁹ The sayings recognize God's immanence; he is concerned with his people choosing holiness in every circumstance, another legal priority.³⁰ As noted, the use of "wisdom" is a chief function of royal offices, a practice on full display in the life of Solomon of course, but also figures like Joseph, Ezra, and Nehemiah.³¹ Part of the monarchy's role was to bring every aspect of life into submission under the final covenant headship of YHWH, a role which the sages served by examining seemingly mundane scenes and duties.³² The prophetic books are replete with appeals to the individual responsibility of God's people within the broader covenant community, appeals

²⁵ For the Deuteronomistic history, see J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden, 4th ed. (Louisville: WJK, 1987), 140. For the Chronicler's history, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 213-214.

²⁶ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology Vol. 3: The Works of God and the Fall of Man*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2021), 127, 139, 161. In the context of wisdom literature specifically, see David Allan Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith" *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966): 16.

²⁷ Grant, "Wisdom and Covenant," 107.

²⁸ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 109.

²⁹ Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement," 12.

³⁰ Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement," 21.

³¹ Von Rad even notes that Joseph's wise leadership in Egypt would set the stage for the Exodus, the definitive act of covenant redemption in the OT. cf. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement," 12.

³² Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement," 7. This expectation of YHWH's involvement with the "ordinary" ingredients of daily life may explain the despair of the other figures in wisdom literature, Job and Qohelet. The two assumed that God would preserve the meaning and order that ideally characterized covenant life and experienced crises of faith when these assumptions were challenged. See Grant, "Wisdom and Covenant," 109.

that resemble the apparent focus in Proverbs.³³ Prophets and Sages employ many of the same rhetorical devices: parables, rhetorical questions, allegories, and the “n...n+1” numerical pattern (Prov 6:16-19; Amos 1:3-13).³⁴ Both genres explain the opposing paths of blessing and punishment for both men and the nation.³⁵ Ultimately, the use of the wisdom prescribed in Proverbs requires a trust in the promises of God to order and, if needed, redeem the world.³⁶ Taken together, the historical and literary context of life in Israel with the Proverbial priority of life in the covenant with YHWH indicate that there is no other God and no other ethic in view. Proverbs is best understood in light of God’s progressive revelation of himself and his will (WCF 1.1-3) as the work of inspired authors, observing and reflecting on the practical realities of life informed by faith in the covenant keeping God of Israel.³⁷

Interpretation

The questions of authorship and unity addressed, the interpretation of Proverbs and its sayings should be attended to briefly.³⁸ No doubt the book seems in places to promote a logic of universal, cause-and-effect, retributive morality. Since, as argued, the book must cohere with the covenantal system of ethics which pervades the OT, there is no reason to assume that Proverbs “promises too much” by way of its apparently independent and sweeping adages. First, King Solomon’s intended audience includes the young (Prov. 1:8) and the simple (1:22). His priority is to communicate principles and generalities regarding practical living.³⁹ More mature students may be prepared for the nuance and complexity that characterizes the

³³ Hubbard, “The Wisdom Movement,” 21.

³⁴ Hubbard, “The Wisdom Movement,” 8-10.

³⁵ Jeremiah, for example, even uses the **לְקַח מִזְפָּר** (“take correction”) formula frequently, a phrase which occurs dozens of times in Proverbs. See Hubbard, “The Wisdom Movement,” 10.

³⁶ Bogdan Poniży, “Sapiencjalne Przejście Od ‘Przymierza’ Do ‘Przyjaźni Z Bogiem’,” *Verbum Vitae* 4 (2003), 114.

³⁷ VanGemeren, “Proverbs,” 373 and Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 55.

³⁸ See Belcher, *Finding Favour*; 39-51, for a more thorough survey of the hermeneutical issue treated here.

³⁹ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 108.

books of Job and Ecclesiastes but they are not the target here. Second, Proverbs regularly puts the choice between two ways before its hearers: the way of wisdom, which leads to life (1:33), and the way of folly, which leads to death (1:12). This choice orients the student toward the future (in and after this life); it expresses the sage's concern with the long-term character of a people and their community over and above discrete acts.⁴⁰ Third, the book includes several categories of sayings which suggest the authors did not have a blanket secular moralism in mind.⁴¹ Select verses are “contradictory,” presenting competing ideas (e.g. 24:4 & 5), and many describe not an “act-result” paradigm but a “better-than” structure (16:8, 18).⁴² The authors assume that life requires different interpretations for circumstances. Plenty of statements emphasize righteous character over base consequences of behavior (17:7; 19:10; 30:21-23).⁴³ The sages are comfortable conceding the wicked may enjoy prosperity in this life (11:16; 13:23; 18:23).⁴⁴ Finally, Proverbs admits the limits of human wisdom both in practice and relative to the Wisdom of God (19:21; 21:30) and the ultimate hope of blessing in victory over death.⁴⁵

Structure

As noted above, the Solomonic sections of Proverbs contain two sections: the opening lessons from the father and Lady Wisdom (1-9) followed by the collections of short sayings (10-29).⁴⁶ The first 9 chapters set the stage for the book in a few aspects. The long-form dialogues and consistent themes set them apart from the bulk of the text. Most

⁴⁰ Lucas, “Current Issues,” 43.

⁴¹ Against J.L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: WJKP, 1998), 11, 68-72, 148.

⁴² Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 46-47.

⁴³ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 108.

⁴⁴ Lucas, “Current Issues,” 43.

⁴⁵ Lucas, “Current Issues,” 44 and Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 109. There is debate whether Proverbs conceives of life after death; this is beyond the scope of the argument here. Consider Proverbs 10:25; 14:32; 24:16. King Solomon almost certainly understood that there was a life after bodily death whether or not he made such belief clear in his work. See his father David’s poetry in Psalm 36:9; 63:3; 68:20; 118:18.

⁴⁶ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 23, 39.

scholars consider this division the substantial introduction to the book.⁴⁷ This prologue details the purpose of the book (1:1-5)⁴⁸, the facets of the wisdom in view⁴⁹, the method of transmission⁵⁰, and most importantly the basis of all wisdom (1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17). These constituent parts in harmony pose the question which undergirds the entire work: will the student (young or simple) choose the way of wisdom (therefore, YHWH) to life or the way of folly to death?⁵¹ Proverbs 9:1-6 forms the capstone of the introduction; the opening scene is a colorful picture of that essential question.⁵² The choice between the two ways is imagined as opposing invitations to conflicting meals. The imagery highlights the covenant setting, epistemological foundation, dialogical method, and high standard of wisdom set before God's people.

Christian Formation in Proverbs

Setting

The ideal setting for pursuing and partaking in wisdom depicted in 9:1-6 is the home, the principle covenant institution. Lady Wisdom opens the verse with a tour of her house: a grand mansion of extraordinary scale and beauty.⁵³ Most likely, the seven pillars are features of a home.⁵⁴ In this case, her lodgings are spacious, speaking to the comprehensive nature of

⁴⁷ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 5 and Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 11, for example. 10:1 also reorients the reader: מִשְׁלֵי שָׁלְמָה, suggesting the start of a new section.

⁴⁸ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 5.

⁴⁹ Including “cognition, reasoning, and emotional intelligence.” VanGemeren, “Proverbs,” 386.

⁵⁰ VanGemeren, “Proverbs,” 375.

⁵¹ Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 123. Also Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 37.

⁵² See appendix below for the full text in view.

⁵³ The subject “wisdom” must be Lady Wisdom, a regular appearance in 1-9, given the *qal* 3fs ending בָּנָתָה.

⁵⁴ There are almost as many interpretations of the seven pillars as there are commentators. Murphy surveys several options: the seven heavens, seven planets, seven days of creation, seven books of the law, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, seven eras of church history, seven sacraments, or seven sages of Mesopotamian myth. He (rather reluctantly) takes them as reference to the preceding 8 chapters of Proverbs. *Proverbs*, 59. See a selection of Patristic interpretations in J. Robert Wright, ed., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, vol. IX, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005) 71-75. Chrysostom, for example, connects the pillars to the seven spirits of God in Isaiah 11:2-3. McKane is heavily dependent on cultic and mythological ANE precedent and takes the pillars as evidence that Wisdom's house is a temple. William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 363. Seven is commonly related to

the wisdom found with her. She plays the familial role of gracious host, like a faithful wife and loving mother.⁵⁵ Wisdom opens her house to serve a family meal, another marker of a vibrant and nourishing home.⁵⁶ The welcoming hostess sends messengers out to extend her invitation from the highest places, another indication that her base is a home and not the temple. This nationwide reach reflects the boundaries of the covenant. The setting of the home is certainly special but not exactly exclusive; Wisdom invites all who will hear. Similarly, the covenant is a home for those who have none or those who have wandered from theirs. The call of the servants echo the exhortations from the father and mother in the preceding chapters of the book.⁵⁷ One final picture emphasizes the importance of placing oneself consciously within God's people: Lady Wisdom's foil in the subsequent context (9:13-18). Folly is personified as well, her home and table are tempting. Yet, where Wisdom is the very picture of faithfulness and provision, Folly is adulterous and murderous.⁵⁸ Her character is the seductive woman, by definition someone who has abandoned and violated

perfection or completion therefore it is probably best to view the pillars as the totality of God's wisdom, all the insight which the audience of Proverbs is seeking. In addition, having several support pillars may have been a luxury among Israelite houses but not uncommon in the largest homes. See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 433.

⁵⁵ There is no shortage of views of Lady Wisdom's character here, including that of a priestess, a queen, even goddess. However, her actions most closely resemble that of a homemaker: she prepares a meal that is lavish but not necessarily ceremonial, there is insufficient evidence in the text to take בִּתְהַלָּה as a palace rather than the typical house, Israelite literature has no place for "goddesses" or any deity besides YHWH and wisdom is his servant (8:30), and last, another "epilogue" in the book (31:10-31) characterizes wisdom as the faithful and productive wife and mother. See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 432.

⁵⁶ Some authors see the meal as having sacrificial significance, but the killing and preparing of animals here has no explicit cultic implication. Ceremonial killings are typically from the root בָּנָה (cf. 7:14) where 9:2 reads בָּנָה טְבַח, describing the ordinary slaughter of animals for eating. See V. Hamp, "בָּנָה טְבַח," in TDOT, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 283-87. The בָּנָה root is never used to describe cult sacrifices. However, several of these occurrences correspond explicitly to descriptions of either the blessings or cursings of God's covenant with Israel (Gen. 43:16; Deut. 28:31; Eek. 21:15 [21:10]).

⁵⁷ Servants and Parents each take the role of sages who deliver wisdom and implore the simple to take what they offer. Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 435.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 59.

covenant promises.⁵⁹ The contrast is clear: the pursuit of wisdom has life and death implications; the way of wisdom is the way of the covenant.⁶⁰

The home assumes the forefront because it is the central building block in the life of God's people. God ordained the home to be where all children first and frequently learn about his work in their life and his will for their life (Deut. 4:9-14; 6:4-7). Practically, children first learn the responsibilities and privileges of life with their parents and siblings. Theologically, the family model typifies God's relationship to his people.⁶¹ He, as a loving father, imparts provision and wisdom, and therefore life. The home is the first place where all his children practice translating the covenant stipulations they learned from birth into the covenant experience of practical life.⁶² The home and the family may not enjoy the same focus and weight as institutions like the temple, yet they are the primary means God elected to bless his people and teach them to live in his family. Further, Proverbs attests that submitting to the social structure ordered by wisdom has cosmic implications (30:21-23).⁶³

Foundation

The covenant setting is essential to instruction in righteousness and growth in insight but the definitive element in view throughout all of Proverbs is יְהֻנָּה יִרְאָת. The “Fear of the Lord” is the foundation of Israel’s epistemology; only by way of exclusive worship and a heart that seeks YHWH can they hope to gain wisdom and thus any true understanding of themselves and the world.⁶⁴ 9:1-6 sets up Solomon’s final attempt to lay this foundation for

⁵⁹ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 25, 35.

⁶⁰ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 64. Also Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 26.

⁶¹ Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 67.

⁶² Kline, *Structure of Biblical Authority*, 65.

⁶³ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 280. God’s created order is intimately tied with, even perhaps the standard for, his covenant promises (Jer. 31:35-37). See Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 33.

⁶⁴ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology Vol. 4: Redemption in Christ* (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2023) 383; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 203. After all, many pagan philosophers have sought in vain for a justification of

seeking wisdom.⁶⁵ Lady Wisdom here is inseparably tied to God, the personification of his order imbued in creation.⁶⁶ He created wisdom and then created by it.⁶⁷ This attribute of God speaks to men from and through the world. Construction of a great house with seven pillars solidifies this connection. God built his cosmic “house” in seven days; Wisdom built her house with seven pillars.⁶⁸ Her project resembles God’s forming and filling (Gen. 1), everything within is good and ordered according to God’s goodness.⁶⁹ Thus, seeking wisdom entails complete submission to YHWH’s designs for man and the world, or living in holy fear of him.⁷⁰ The table that wisdom sets is a picture of bountiful provision, another characteristic gift from God. Only through him can the hungry truly be satisfied.⁷¹

Lady Wisdom’s call here is a picture of the voice of God; YHWH himself beckons to all men through his handiwork.⁷² She sends it from the highest places in the city, a position typically reserved for the temple and sites of religious significance.⁷³ Responding to this divine call demands a turn, leaving the way of the simple. Like seeking God, seeking wisdom

moral knowledge outside of God. Some of these theories even posit the home and family as the center of moral instruction, for example David Hume, “A Treatise of Human Nature Bk. III, Pt. II,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Stuart D. Warner and David W. Livingston (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 8-11.

⁶⁵ R.N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*, JSOT Supplement Series 168 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 61. The preceding context initiates the analogy and teases the blessings still behind closed doors (8:34). God promises to bless those who eagerly await the invitation to partake of his wisdom. See Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology Vol. 1: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2018), 189.

⁶⁶ Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology Vol. 2: Faith in the Triune God*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2021), 262-263.

⁶⁷ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 147.

⁶⁸ Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 264. The immediate context in 8:27-31 makes this connection as well.

⁶⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 87.

⁷⁰ “...faith and obedience to YHWH preconditions our access to God’s cosmic designs.” Bartholomew and O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 91.

⁷¹ The life-giving table may represent a polemic against foreign idols. Ishtar and Anat were goddesses of Mesopotamian myth known to invite men to banquets for the sake of seducing, deceiving, and killing them. See Richard J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998), 55.

⁷² Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 34.

⁷³ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 36. Against von Rad, who does not think wisdom is “controlled by covenant ideas” and thus claims she speaks not from the religious sanctuary but public forum. *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 158, 165. Public and Religious life for the Israelites were not so distinct. To use wisdom was a religious act, testifying to YHWH, its source and standard. See VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 377.

demands the displacing of worldly affections.⁷⁴ Comparison in context again is revealing; the opposite choice is one of choosing adultery, a common image of idolatry.⁷⁵ Wisdom's meat, bread, and wine contrast illicit food and water on Folly's table (9:17). Attending her meal entails infidelity.⁷⁶ Only by exclusive service to YHWH, fear forsaking all others, can the young and simple gain insight and access the blessings therein.

Method

Although technically speaking, there is only a singular speaker in 9:1-6, the invitation to Wisdom's feast is typical of the dialogue between sage and student that makes up the book. The virtue of the lady, the size of the home, and the beauty of the banquet comprise an invitation that demands a response. The reader can imagine being drawn to a neighbor's yard by the smoke wafting from a mouthwatering barbecue. Indeed, the very personification of Wisdom as a woman is meant to entice the simple.⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that her intent, however, is to assist, to offer guidance, security, and rest.⁷⁸ This aim highlights an essential component of Solomon's method of receiving instruction in righteousness. Wisdom has in mind not soldiers who follow her every order without question but children who love her for her own sake.⁷⁹ The simple will not always have the security afforded by strict rules; they must choose wisdom for themselves. Thus, her role is to make herself attractive. The project is thankfully not dependent on the download of distinct data points; instead, the sights, smells,

⁷⁴ Charles Bridges, *Proverbs*, Geneva (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1846), 86.

⁷⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 434.

⁷⁶ McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, 365.

⁷⁷ Lucas, "Current Issues," 48. Murphy notes an erotic connotation to her invitation (as in Songs 5:1) see *Proverbs*, 59. This is not necessary, the language is flexible, broad, and intended to point more to a concept than a physical woman. See Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985), 23.

⁷⁸ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 173.

⁷⁹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, 169.

and scale of the scene bear witness to an experience which affects the mind, heart, and will.⁸⁰

Wisdom and her blessings are bountiful and the teacher's role is to equip his student with the skills to perceive that reality. Proverbs is realistic; Solomon and his sages understand that people naturally need "prodding and cajoling" if they will turn from simplicity to wise practical living.⁸¹ Bring men to the point where they are capable of recognizing and choosing the best of two options.⁸² This is the task of Lady Wisdom's servants; of the righteous father, of the productive mother, and even the Kings of Israel and beyond.

The sages are not alone in this endeavor. Wisdom dispatches teams of servants.⁸³ The task of training the young and instructing the simple is a dialogue not just between a pair but involving the whole covenant community. Wisdom's house can accommodate all who seek her. In addition, a strength of the Sapiential tradition is its history. Experience and skill in practical living is not limited to the living. The dialogue envisioned here is a conversation with a historic people. The observations of each generation constitute a rich inheritance passed down to the next (4:1-9).⁸⁴

Standard

The final aspect of the pursuit of wisdom espoused by the picture in 9:1-6 is its exceptionally high standard. The pursuit of wisdom is nothing less than the pursuit of excellence. Lady Wisdom herself is involved in the quality craftsmanship of every stage of the event. She builds the house, prepares the food, and leads her servants in the summons of

⁸⁰ Wisdom entails the "perception and appreciation of practical truths as part of a beautiful whole." VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 391.

⁸¹ VanDrunen, "Wisdom and the Natural Moral Order: The Contribution of Proverbs to a Christian Theology of Natural Law," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 1 (2013): 159.

⁸² Estes, *Hear My Son*, 123, 128, 149.

⁸³ The feminine plural construct noun with the 3fs pronominal suffix can refer either to young girls or young female servants such as maids (Ruth 2:8), court ladies-in-waiting (Ex. 2:5), or simply hard-workers (1 Sam. 25:42; Est. 2:9). See H.F. Fuhs, "תְּבָתִים," in *TDOT*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 474-485.

⁸⁴ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 390.

countless guests.⁸⁵ The home is exemplary; large enough to sustain a widespread summons but warm enough to host a beautiful dinner party. The feast is sumptuous; large enough to accommodate a hungry host but rich enough to supply sustenance. Her effort reflects the responsibility of the most powerful and privileged to dispense ample and frequent hospitality. Just the presence of a table suggests her status belongs to the highest in society.⁸⁶ The expectation is not that only the wealthy can be wise; rather, all are expected to dedicate their whole strength and heart to seeking wisdom. Again, a contrast is made between the hard-working host and the inhospitable Folly. She cannot be bothered to seek the simple, instead sitting and calling to those who pass by (9:14). She did not prepare the food she serves and is even ignorant of her own ends (9:13, 17).

The seven pillars supporting the house of Wisdom signify the perfection of her project, as noted above. Like God's creation, Wisdom's work is complete and good.⁸⁷ The wise will not be satisfied with anything less than this same sense of completion. However, the allusion to God's creating in seven days and his cosmic house evoke another image. The pursuit of excellence in wisdom is a function of the image of God imprinted on man. To build and fill a house echoes God's own wise work in creation.⁸⁸ To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, and to give prudence entails the skillful ordering of the world after God.⁸⁹ As God through his Wisdom imposed order on the void, so his people are invited and charged to do the same to the chaos of life. In sharing her luxurious, almost regal home and meal, Wisdom delegates the rite of kings to all

⁸⁵ The parallel *qal* pf. 3fs verbs (9:1-2) highlight her creativity, activity, and diligence. See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 431.

⁸⁶ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 431, 435.

⁸⁷ Koptak, *Proverbs*, 265.

⁸⁸ Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 54-55.

⁸⁹ VanDrunen, "Wisdom and the Natural Moral Order," 157.

her children (Deut. 34:9; Ezra 7:25).⁹⁰ Proverbial ethics are garden ethics. Wisdom's banquet is a victory feast celebrating a bout of dragon-slaying and dominion-taking.

Canonical Conclusions

Proverbs 9:1-6 contains the climactic image of Solomon's foundational prologue detailing the covenant setting, epistemological foundation, dialogical method, and excellent standard for pursuing wisdom in the life of God's people. The Book of Proverbs as a whole along with this scene marks an instrumental development in the moral life of God's people. Under the Israelite monarchy, the kings were charged with bringing the whole life of God's covenant people, including themselves, into submission to God's will. Each member of the royal line was held to that standard of faithfulness and assumed the responsibility to seek YHWH on behalf of the nation (Deut. 17:18-20; 2 Sam. 7; Isaiah 9:6). The Wisdom Tradition emerged in part as Solomon and other kings attempted to honor these stipulations of covenant headship. With Proverbs, they looked to disseminate the wisdom required to honor God in every circumstance of practical life. Wisdom's invitation is available to all who will listen. The potential post-exilic and extra-Israelite contributions to the genre make this progression dramatically clear. God reveals more and more of his wisdom to more and more who will be his people.⁹¹ The gift of discernment from above and the application of God's covenant requirements to all dimensions of covenant life would extend beyond the borders of Israel.⁹² After the exile, Wisdom Literature exemplified by Proverbs helped God's people transition from the theocracy of the Mosaic Covenant and the Monarchy of the Davidic Kingdom toward a New Covenant epoch where they would live as exiles.⁹³ The Epistle of

⁹⁰ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 383-384.

⁹¹ VanGemeren, "Proverbs," 373.

⁹² Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement," 21.

⁹³ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 412.

James is no doubt the most striking example, although other passages that champion kingdom ethics, Like the Sermon on the Mount, continue the tradition in their own way.⁹⁴

Writers like James maintained (with the sages) that the Fear of the Lord and consequent wisdom must grasp the whole mind, body, heart, soul, and tongue! Yet in God's grace, James understood this submission clearly; all judgment was given to Christ the Lord (James 1:1; 5:5). Wisdom demands submitting to the good of the Creator King (Heb. 1).⁹⁵ It is not a leap to see Wisdom's feast fulfilled in Jesus's invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Matt. 24; Luke 14) or even at the Lord's table, set with bread and wine.⁹⁶ In him, God's people are invited to taste and see the goodness of God, take hold of comfort and life.⁹⁷

Lady Wisdom still encourages believers to prioritize education and discipleship within the comfort of the home with the help of covenant community. No one is better equipped to impart the fear of God and the beauty of submission to his lordship than parents, no institution is better equipped to help them than the church. Formation must begin with this fear, only through the source of Truth can we know any truth or worship in spirit and truth.⁹⁸ God's children should be led and invited to his beauty, raised up to maturity and solid food that they might, by God's grace, seek him of their own profession. In God's presence alone there is life, joy, and eternal pleasure (Psalm 16:11). Finally, Christians should not be ashamed to pursue the highest standard of excellence in their application of God's law to every circumstance.

⁹⁴ Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement," 23

⁹⁵ Note, the Author of Hebrews seems to see Proverbs as addressed to the church (Heb. 12:5-6). See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 127.

⁹⁶ Bridges, *Proverbs*, 85.

⁹⁷ An admittedly apocryphal but still edifying work, Ben Sira says of wisdom: "... put thy feet into her fetters, and thy neck into her chain. Bow down thy shoulder, and bear her, and be not grieved with her bonds. Come unto her with thy whole heart, and keep her ways with all thy power. Search, and seek, and she shall be made known unto thee: and when thou hast got hold of her, let her not go. For at the last thou shalt find her rest, and that shall be turned to thy joy." Sir. 6:24-28.

⁹⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Philipsburg: P&R, 1971), 14.

Appendix: BHS, LXX, and English Text

1 (LXX) Ἡ σοφία ὡκοδόμησεν ἐαυτῇ οἶκον
καὶ ὑπήρεισεν στύλους ἐπτά·

Wisdom has built her house;
she has cut her seven pillars.

2 ἔσφαξεν τὰ ἐαυτῆς θύματα, ἐκέρασεν εἰς
κρατῆρα τὸν ἐαυτῆς οἶνον καὶ ἡτοιμάσατο τὴν
ἐαυτῆς τράπεζαν·

She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed
her wine;
she has also set her table.

3 ἀπέστειλεν τοὺς ἐαυτῆς δούλους
συγκαλούσα μετὰ ὑψηλοῦ κηρύγματος ἐπὶ¹
κρατῆρα λέγουσα

She has sent out her young women to call
from the highest places in the town,

4 Ὅς ἐστιν ἄφρων, ἐκκλινάτω πρός με· καὶ
τοῖς ἐνδεέσι φρενῶν εἴπεν

“Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!”
To him who lacks sense she says,

5 Ἔλθατε φάγετε τῶν ἐμῶν ἄρτων καὶ πίετε
οἶνον, ὃν ἐκέρασα θύμιν·

“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.

6 ἀπολείπετε ἀφροσύνην, καὶ ζήσεσθε, καὶ
ζητήσατε φρόνησιν, ἵνα βιώσητε, καὶ
κατορθώσατε ἐν γνώσει σύνεσιν.

Leave your simple ways, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

חִכְמָה בְּנָתָה בַּיְתָה
חִצְבָּה עַמּוֹדִיקָה שְׁבָעָה:

טְבַחָה טְבַחָה מִסְכָה יִיְהָ
אֲרָכָה שְׁלִתָה:

שְׁלִחָה נְעָרָתִיה
תְּקָרָא עַל-גַּפִי מַרְמִימִיקָרָת:

מִידְפְּתִי יִסְרָה הָנָה
חַסְרִילָב אַמְרָה לוֹ:

לְכוּ לְחָמוֹ בְּלָחָמי
וּשְׁתָו בֵּין מִסְכָתִי:

עִזּוּבָו פְּתָאִים וְחַיָּו
וְאַשְׁרוֹ בְּדָרָךְ בִּינָה:

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