

The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology

Bruce K. Waltke

Hartmut Gese wrote, "It is well known that the wisdom literature constitutes an alien body in the world of the Old Testament."¹ This implied consensus is founded on two superficial observations: the striking similarities between the Book of Proverbs and the ancient, panoriental wisdom literature,² and the lack of reference in Israel's wisdom circles to national Israel's election and covenants.

In an earlier article this writer surveyed the affinities of the Book of Proverbs with the international sapiential literature in its literary forms, arrangement, and contents.³ On account of these striking parallels Preuss went so far as to suggest that Israel's wise men attempted to shape Israel into the image of their pagan environment.⁴

In contrast to the scholarly success in showing the comparative similarity of Israel's wisdom with its pagan environment, Old Testament theologians proved unable to integrate the Book of Proverbs into the rest of the Old Testament which builds around Israel's covenants and its history of salvation. In the heyday of the biblical theology movement Wright commented that in any outline of biblical theology, the proper place to treat the Wisdom literature is something of a problem.⁵ Rylaarsdam put the problem this way: "This striking neglect of Jewish history and religion by the canonical wisdom writers clearly indicates that the Hebrew Wisdom movement had not yet been integrated into the national movement."⁶ The attempts of Eichrodt to integrate wisdom into "covenant" and of von Rad into

1 Hartmut Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1958), p. 2, cited by James L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1976), p. 2.

2 See Bruce K. Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (July-September, 1979): 226-38.

3 Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," pp. 226-38.

4 Horst D. Preuss, "Erwägungen zum theologischen Ort alttestamentlicher Weisheitsliteratur," *..Evangelische Theologie* 30 (1970): 393-417, cited by Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," p.2.

5 G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 115.

6 J. Coert Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 20

The author is delighted to express his indebtedness to students in an Old Testament seminar on Proverbs (spring 1979) who contributed to his thinking for this article. Papers deserving recognition include Nigel Biggar, "Wisdom in Weakness"; Kathy Brown, "Wisdom's Veil" and Judy Krzesowski, "The Power of Words."

salvation history have proved notable failures.⁷ Kaiser's recent proposal to relate wisdom to the rest of the Old Testament by the common concept of "the fear of God/Lord" also fails because he relates this theme to "promise" which he seems to define in terms of Israel's organic covenantal history.⁸ Wisdom writers do not mention Israel's covenants or national promises culminating in the Messianic age.

Moreover, according to others there is a strain of wisdom in the Old Testament whose posture is summed up as "humanism," meaning here the ability to attain one's goal through proper education and mental discipline.⁹ This alleged strain belonging to the age of the so-called "Solomonic Enlightenment" differs from the prophets not only in its universalism over against their national particularism, but in its very soul and spirit. McKane, who accepts this view, says that it is "this-worldly and has no commitment to ethical values."¹⁰ Fichtner stated the view thus:

In the spiritual history of Israel, there are so few completely antithetical phenomena as prophecy and hokmah (wisdom). Two worlds stand in total opposition: the proclaimer and the admonisher who is seized by God and laid completely under claim and who carries out his lofty and dangerous mission to his people without any personal considerations, and the clever and prudently worldly-wise sage who goes his peaceable way cautiously looking right and left and who instructs his protégés in the same wise style of mastering life. To appreciate this vast difference one has only to read a few sentences from the Book of Amos and then a few from Prov 10 or 27!¹¹

If one assumes that these morally neutral wise men contributed to the Book of Proverbs, it follows that the prophetic attack against the wise who made themselves independent of Yahweh included these men (cf. Isa. 5:19-24). According to many liberal critics the prophets made war against the priest with his magic; McKane now adds that they made war against the shrewd sage with his strength of mind.

But others have made a start in challenging this distorted picture. They have noted that a distinction cannot be established in the Book of Proverbs between an older, profane, and secular wisdom and a younger so-called distinctively Israelite strain of wisdom which transformed and supplemented the former. Accordingly, the Proverbs are *not* alien to the concepts and spirit of the rest of the Old Testament. Priest argued that the prophetic age and the

7 cf. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," p. 1, and notes from criticisms from many sides.

8 Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), pp. 168-71.

9 For-example, H. Gressman, "Die neugefundene Lehre des Amenemope und die vor-exilische Spruchdichtung Israels," *Zeitschrift für Altes Testament* 41 (1924): 289-91.

10 William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 1.

11 Johannes Fichtner, "Isaiah among the Wise," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, p. 429. Most recently D. Kent Clark sides with those who pit prophet against sage ("Between Prophet and Philosopher," *New Blackfriars* 58 [1977]: 267-72).

age of wisdom occurred simultaneously and that there existed "a common religious tradition in early Israel from which prophets, priests and wise men selected specific emphases without necessarily rejecting those emphases chosen by other groups."¹² According to this view prophet and sage together expressed the totality of Israel's faith which neither could do alone. But Priest did not attempt to demonstrate their common inspiration, and until that is done his thesis lacks conviction. Weinfeld showed a clear connection between wisdom and Deuteronomy both in specific legislation and even in identical wordings (cf. Deut. 4:2; 13:1 and Prov. 30:5-6; Deut. 19:14 and Prov 22:10; Deut. 25:13-16 and Prov 20:23).¹³ But he gave pride of place to wisdom and proposed that the Deuteronomists were schooled in wisdom circles. Moreover, he restricted his attention to specific verbal and ethical parallels some of which are also met in non-Israelite wisdom. But in spite of these limitations it is a start in the reverse direction.

The vein of this article is to demonstrate that the sages and the prophets were true spiritual yokefellows sharing the same Lord, cultus, faith, hope, anthropology, and epistemology, speaking with the same authority, and making similar religious and ethical demands on their hearers. In short, they drank from the same spiritual well. Noth¹⁴ and von Rad¹⁵ have shown the close connection between the Book of Deuteronomy and the works of the so-called "former prophets," and Westermann¹⁶ has demonstrated that the accusations, threats, sentences, and promises round in the "classical" prophets correspond with similar literary forms in Deuteronomy. Thus this writer here uses the term *prophetic* more broadly to include the Book of Deuteronomy along with the literature traditionally attributed to the prophets.

THE SAME LORD

According to Manley, God's personal name, Yahweh, occurs in the Book of Deuteronomy either alone or in various compound expressions 593 times, and His generic title, Elohim, twenty-four times.¹⁷ In the Book of Proverbs, the tetragramaton occurs alone forty-six times and thirty-eight times in various combinations for a total of eighty-four times, and the

12 John F. Priest, "Where Is Wisdom to Be Placed?" in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, p.281.

13 Moshe Weinfeld, "The Wisdom Substrata in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic Literature," *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 244-74.

14 Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernard W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

15 Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (London: SCM Press, 1953), pp. 74-91.

16 Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

17 G. T. Manley, *The Book of the Law* (London: Tyndale Press, 1957), p. 37.

appellative Elohim appears five times. Thus the distribution of the two common epithets for Israel's deity occur in about the same proportion in Deuteronomy and Proverbs. The distinct meaning of these two names is widely recognized: whereas the title Elohim contrasts God with man in their natures, the name Yahweh presents God as entering into a personal relationship with man and revealing Himself to him. More specifically Yahweh is God's covenantal name, and by using this name the sages present themselves as teachers within Yahweh's covenant community even though they never mention Israel or the covenant. In short, the sages present themselves as spokesmen for the same God who encountered Israel through Moses and the prophets that succeeded him.

Also the wise men ascribe the same attributes and actions to Yahweh as those ascribed to him by the prophets. According to both circles He is the Creator of the cosmos (Deut. 10:14; Isa. 40:21-22; Prov. 3:19-20) and of all mankind (Deut. 4:32; Isa. 42:5; Prov. 14:31; 29:13). He is the same living God who will avenge wrong (Deut. 32:35, 40-41; Nahum 1:2; Prov. 25:21-22) and the same spiritual Being who comforts men and knows man's ways (Deut. 23:14; Jer. 16:17; Provo 5:21; 15:3). According to both, He is the sovereign Lord directing history (Deut. 4:19; 29:4, 26; Isa. 45:1-13; Prov. 16:1-9, 33; 19:21; 20:24 et passim) and is yet present in it, withholding and giving rain (Deut. 11:13-17; Hag. 1:10-11; Prov 3:9-10), disciplining His children (Deut. 8:5; Isa. 1:4-6; Prov. 3:11-12), and in His mercy answering their prayers (Deut. 4:29-31; Isa. 56:7; Prov. 15:8,29). According to both sources He is merciful (Deut. 4:31; 30:8; Isa. 63:7; Prov 28:13), wise (Deut. 4:26; Isa. 11:2-3; 31:2; Prov. 8:22-31), delights in justice and hates iniquity (Deut. 10:17; Isa. 1:16-17; Prov 11:1; 17:15), and has aesthetic-ethical sensibilities (Deut. 22:4-11; 23:10-14; Jer. 32:35; Prov. 3:32; 6:16-19; 11:20; 15:9 et passim).

To put the matter the other way around, there is no difference between the way God is described in the prophetic literature and the way He is described in the Book of Proverbs.

THE SAME RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

Scholars frequently allege that Israel's preexilic prophets and wise men both took a critical stance toward Israel's religious systems with its sacred site, personnel, sacrifices, and institutions (cf. Amos 5:25-27; Hos. 6:7; 12:9; Isa. 1:10-15; Jer. 7:22; and Prov. 15:8, 29; 20:25; 21:3, 27; 28:9; 31:2).¹⁸ But in fact neither is critical of the cultus per se; instead they are critical of religious ritual devoid of ethical behavior. In fact, the prophets

¹⁸ Space does not permit entering the debate here regarding this relationship. For the purposes of this article it is simply noted that since the turn of the century scholars have recognized many affinities in the language, style, and thought of these two sources.

were zealous for a worship established in righteousness (Isa. 43:22-24; 44:28; 56:4-7; Ezek. 45:13-46:24; Zeph. 3:18 et passim), and the sages assumed its existence. Perdue has argued persuasively that Proverbs 15:8 does not say the Lord accepts prayer as a valid practice and rejects sacrifice, but rather that the verse condemns both prayer and sacrifice offered by the wicked.¹⁹ He also argued that Proverbs 21:3 and 27 are not lambasts of the wise against religious sacrifices -though they could be regarded in this light -but aphorisms affirming with their spiritual peers (the priests and the prophets) that ethical behavior is more important than religious ritual.²⁰ In addition to prayers and sacrifices the sages referred to the sacred vow (20:25; 31:2), the sacred lots (16:33), and the firstfruits (3:9). In short, although the wise men did not initiate the cultus, they assumed it, and with the prophets and priests they attempted to correct it by an emphasis on the priority of ethical behavior. There is no reason to assume that the sages had in view a religious system differing from the one referred to in the Law and prophets.

THE SAME INSPIRATION

As stated above, according to the prevailing consensus, preexilic prophetic proclamation is grounded in a claim to revelation, whereas preexilic sapiential counsel is founded in human experience and reflection. Fichtner stated this view bluntly: "The prophet speaks in large measure on the basis of the authority conferred with his commission and tells his hearers 'God's Word'; while the wise man -especially in the earlier period! - gives advice and instruction from tradition and his own insight without explicit or implicitly assumed divine authorization."²¹ Zimmerli in his pioneering study exploring the structure of Israelite wisdom also underscored the anthropocentric character of wisdom thought.²² According to him, instead of speaking with a categorical, prophetic word (דְּבַר), the wise men offered deliberative, debatable counsel (עֵצָה), instead of appealing to the Creator's authority, they appealed to what is in man's best interest as the justification for their validity; instead of issuing commands, they sought to compel assent. Cazelles presented the same view. "Wisdom is the art of succeeding in human life, both private and collective. It is grounded in humanism, in reflexion,[sic] on and observation of the course of things and the conduct of man."²³ For Couturier the wisdom tradition began as "the totality of life experiences transmitted by a father to his son, as a spiritual

19 Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult* (Missoula, MT: Scholar's Press, 1977), p. 156.

20 Ibid., pp. 161-62.

21 Fichtner, "Isaiah among the Wise," p. 430.

22 Walther Zimmerli, "Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, pp. 179-99.

23 Henri Cazelles, "Bible, sagesse, science," *Revue d'Histoire des Religions* 48 (1960): 42-43, cited by Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," p. 4.

testament."²⁴ And Rylaarsdam claimed, "the wisdom seeker must rely entirely on his natural human equipment."²⁵

But to defend this view one must divide up the sayings in the Proverbs into earlier secular and humanistic sources and its later religious context, which was added to validate the strictly utilitarian approach, or into categories of wisdom, as Crenshaw does. For him there is "court wisdom" which has a "secular stance," and "scribal wisdom," which has a "dogmatico-religious" stance along with still other sources.

But in the author's discussion of the history of the wisdom tradition in the preceding article, it was argued that there is no compelling evidence for this construction in either Israelite or non-Israelite wisdom texts.²⁶ Rankin likewise concluded, "We have no reason to assume, in the absence of actual evidence, that at any time there was in Israel a purely secular proverb literature. From the very outset in Israel's wisdom writings the religious sanction of right conduct, the motive supplied by the idea of God's blessing and cursing was present."²⁷ Priest noted: "Even if, and this is by no means beyond dispute, there was a movement from the secular to the divine in the wisdom of those countries (around Israel), such a shift had already taken place by the 15th century at the latest, well before the inception of Israel's wisdom."²⁸ Priest also noted that even in Ben Sira, unquestionably later than Proverbs, maxims appear, which, if they had been found in Proverbs would have been assigned by many scholars to the earliest strata since they are obviously "secular" in content and orientation. He concluded, "It is simply impossible to demonstrate that the earliest strata are secular and the latest religious."²⁹

As the above discussion implies, critics concur that the canonical form of the Book of Proverbs has a religious stance and that its teachings are grounded not in humanism but in revelation. Thus in the sayings constituting the hermeneutical context for interpreting the book it is stated that the Lord brought forth wisdom before the creation (8:22) and that "from his mouth came knowledge and understanding" (2:6). Agur assumed canonical limits to revealed wisdom: "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar" (30:5-6). Without this revelation man casts off restraint and perishes (29:18).³⁰

24 Guy P. Couturier, "Sagesse babylonienne et sagesse israelite," *Sciences Ecclesiastiques* 14 (1962): 309.

25 Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, p. 667.

26 Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," pp. 226-38.

27 Oliver S. Rankin, *Israel's Wisdom Literature* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), p. 69.

28 Priest, "Where Is Wisdom to Be Placed?" p. 278.

29 Ibid.

30 The mention of revelation (חִזְיוֹן) and law (חֻרְתָּה) probably refer to the sayings of the wise which are otherwise attributed to Yahweh and called torah (Prov. 2:6 and 1:8 et passim).

But how was this revelation mediated to the sages? God spoke audibly to Israel at Sinai out of the fire (Deut. 4:32), to Moses face to face (Exod. 3:2-4; 5:23-30; 34:10), to the prophets in visions (Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1; Ezek. 1), and to Job out of a whirlwind (Job 38: 1-42:6). But to Solomon, apart from the vision granted him at Gibeon (1 Kings 4), God did not speak audibly. Instead of having the revelation mediated to him, Solomon spoke with the authority of an anointed king, as the son of God (2 Sam. 7:14). An indirect parallel in Egypt may be instructive here. In Egypt no legal code existed, and this absence is attributed by various Egyptologists -though without consensus to the fact that the word or command (*mdw, wd*) of the reigning king was regarded as actual law and no written law could have existed beside it.³¹ So likewise in Israel, it was probably sufficient that God's courtier spoke as His anointed representative. The royal sage won truth by reflection on what he saw (Prov. 24:30-34) and what he perceived by faith (cf. 15:3). It was the glory of God to conceal the matter; it was Solomon's glory as an anointed king to find it out (25:2). Moreover, the Spirit of God rested on him (cf. 1 Sam. 16:13), the Spirit of wisdom and understanding (cf. Isa. 11:1-2; Prov. 1:23). In short, the same Spirit that inspired Moses and the prophets worked effectually in Solomon and Israel's other courtiers (1 Kings 4:26; 2 Tim. 3:16), and the circumcised of heart have heard His voice in those writings.

THE SAME AUTHORITY

Crenshaw on firm grounds censured Zimmerli for eroding the ground of wisdom's authority.³² According to Crenshaw, the wise man's counsel carried the same authoritative weight as the prophet's word. His study of the meaning of the root חָכָם and the sociological setting in which the wise men gave their teachings verify his position. Moreover, the biblical aphoristic literature claimed authority. If indeed "wisdom" denotes a fixed order informing the creation,³³ then, as Hermission has argued, man is not the measure of all things but is measured against the creation in which he is placed,³⁴ and cosmology not anthropology is more central to the book's thought structure, as Schmid contended.³⁵ More central to wisdom's thought than anthropology is the reckoning with a Creator who through wisdom

31 John A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 49.

32 James A. Crenshaw, "Prophetic Conflict," *Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125 (1976): 116-23.

33 Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," pp. 226-38.

34 H. J. Hermission, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament* 28 (1968).

35. H. H. Schmid, "Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit," *Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 101 (1966).

established the cosmos (3:19-20; 8:22-31; 16:11) and upholds with power the moral order in it (10:3; 16:4; 22:12 et passim). The book calls on the faithful not to trust the order but the God who stands behind it (3:5; 16:3; 22:19).

But it took an inspired sage "to search out" this fixed order (25:2) and give it expression. By giving it expression it can almost be said that he created it. Cassirer wrote: "In a realistic sense, what happens in language is that the world is given material expression. Objects are only given form and differentiation in the word that names them."³⁶ He moved a step even closer to hypostatization when he reasoned: "Language's power is released when a word is actually spoken. The act of speaking the word frees the concept's potentials as it reveals the world to man. Each spoken word has unlimited and sovereign power over the scope of its thought."³⁷ Even as Adam joined the Creator in naming and thereby defining the animals, so the Israelite king took part with Him in coining proverbs revealing His truth. Moreover, it is important to note the arresting comment added to Genesis 2:19: "And whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name." In a similar way Israel's king, needing no specially mediated audible revelation, coined the rules of moral and social behavior with authority. Thus the wise man both discovered, created, and maintained order in the personal and social spheres of life. Obviously their words, by transforming ontological reality into epistemological categories, carried inherent weight.

This idea of wisdom as a revealed fixed order does not correspond badly with the sages' references to their teachings as "law" (תּוֹרָה) and "commandments" (מִצְוֹת) and their demand that the hearer give them his ear. Zimmerli called attention to this terminology so similar to the Mosaic law.

Not only is the entirety of wisdom admonition repeatedly referred to as torah (1:8; 3:1; 13:14; 28:4, 7 et passim) -with the same designation as the Law which is authoritative admonition *kat 'exochein* -the correspondence also appears in the designation of individual admonitions of the wise, then they often occur as commands *m_{swt}* (2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 6:23 et passim).³⁸

Fichtner also recognized that this wisdom spoke with a word no less authoritative than that of Law.³⁹

Moreover, like Moses and the prophets the sages demanded to be heard. Zimmerli noted this fact along with other additional features that lead to the conclusion that the wisdom teacher spoke with authority.

36 E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), pp. 80-81.

37 E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953-1957), pp. 107-8.

38 Zimmerli, "Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom," p. 179.

39 J. Fichtner, "Die altorientalische Weisheit in ihrer israelitisch jüdischen Ausprägung, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 62 (1933): 82ff.

Again and again, it is stressed that everything depends on "hearing" -the high value of the 'zn sm^ct ("ears that hear") is underscored a number of times (15:13; 25:12) since 'zn ("ear") above all is the principal entrance for wisdom. Wisdom's precepts can be simply termed leqah (that which is to be accepted 1:5; 4:2; 9:9; 16:21,23 ...); obedience to the wise commandment can be designated lqh "learning/doctrine" (cf. iqh mswt ["authoritative doctrine"] 10:8 etc.). Moreover, when the picture of education in the Egyptian scribal schools is considered and certain aphorisms of Proverbs concerning the education of the young man to wisdom are compared with it (13:24; 22:15; 29:15; 23:13f.; and to the last see Ahikar 81f.), then they seem to round out the picture of how wisdom-precept is authoritative-command in the strictest sense.⁴⁰

It is amazing in the light of this clear evidence that Zimmerli later reversed himself in the same article.

In short, the attempt to construct a model contrasting a prophetic authoritative word from God against tentative, human counsel is false. The wise man spoke with the same authority as the prophet.

THE SAME ANTHROPOLOGY

Moses complained about the sinful depravity of the elect and privileged nation: "For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the LORD while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die" (Deut. 31:27). Jeremiah castigated man with his famous words: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). The sage observed that man was both foolish and wayward: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him" (Prov. 22:15). "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge" (Prov. 19:27). Solomon's life tragically bore out his own proverb.

THE SAME EPISTEMOLOGY

When this writer spoke of the wise men as searching out the fixed order, and even in a sense creating it, he did not mean to imply that they thought with the Greek philosophers that this order could be known as some objective reality apart from man. Prophet and sage concur that their doctrines could not be "understood" simply by the hearing of the ear; they had to be understood in the heart. Thus, for example, Moses commented on his own generation: "But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear" (Deut. 29:4). Thus, though not without ambiguity, he exhorted the people, "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (10:16). The Lord judged Isaiah's generation by hardening their hearts beyond understanding: "He

40 Zimmerli, "Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom," p. 179.

said, 'Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. " Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.' " (Isa. 6:9-10).

The sages shared the same skepticism about man's ability to understand without "wisdom" already resident in the heart: "The way of a fool seems right to him but a wise man listens to advice" (Prov. 12:15). "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (14:12).

Thus only the weak, the humble, the teachable -in contrast to the arrogant, the proud, and mockers are capable of "understanding." "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions" (18:2). The mocker "does not listen to rebuke" (13:1b) and "resents correction; he will not consult the wise" (15:12).

By contrast, "with humility comes wisdom" (11:2). Thus the sages' epistemology resolves itself to trust in the Lord and to love Him. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil" (3:5-7). "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid" (12:1).

Probably it was for this reason that they referred to their proverbs as enigmas, riddles, and dark sayings (1:6). Knowledge, for them, was not a matter of intellectual control, but of openness of heart. Like the parables of Jesus they obfuscate reality to the unbelieving heart but reveal it to the faithful.

Pascal's debunking of Descartes' human pretensions to autonomy in epistemology and Pascal's demand for a submissive spirit in order to comprehend divine mysteries harmonizes with the demands of the prophets and the sages. Pascal wrote, "What amazes me most is to see that everyone is not amazed at his own weakness. Man is quite capable of the most extravagant opinions, since he is capable of believing that he is not naturally and inevitably weak, but is, on the contrary, naturally wise."⁴¹

According to saint, prophet, and sage, one must first make himself open and available to understand the divine Word.

THE SAME SPIRITUAL DEMAND

Both prophet and sage, therefore, concentrated their address to the human heart. Its spiritual condition in the final analysis determined the success or failure of their teaching. Moses knew that the Lord had sealed the fate of Pharaoh and Sihon when He had made their hearts obstinate. The sage

41 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 374.

admonished, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Prov. 4:23). Deuteronomy mentions the heart forty-five times and, Proverbs refers to it fifty-three times.

Moreover, both prophet and sage made a similar claim on the heart. Moses said, "And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 10:12). This command "to fear God" is found many times in Deuteronomy (4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6, 10; 10:12, 20; 13:5; 14:23; 17:19; 28:59; 31:12-13) and in the prophetic literature based on it. Indeed, the prophet historian evaluates Israel's king on the basis of his heart (cf. 1 Kings 11:4). It is well known that the motto of Proverbs is in 1:7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

Becker concluded from his study of this term in the Law that the fear of the Lord denotes "reverence of Yahweh and the special aspect of loyalty to Him as the covenant God."⁴² Without question it denotes along with other terms a commitment to Yahweh and his covenant, and thus it is correctly, designated a "covenant formula."⁴³ Stähli noted that it is used in conjunction with the commands to "love" (Deut. 10:17), "hold fast" (10:20), "walk in His ways" (8:6), "follow after" (13:5), and "serve" (6:13).⁴⁴ In contrast to love which denotes a spontaneous commitment out of appreciation, fear denotes a commitment out of awe and respect. This fear is not the numinous dread of a moment, but a lifetime stance of submission in reverent awe. Such an attitude is an essential spiritual condition of the heart if a man hopes to have a personal relationship with a God whose name and deeds are "terrible" (Exod. 34:10; Deut. 4:34; 28:58; Mal. 1:15; 3:23) and who is "great" and "holy" (2 Sam. 7:27; 1 Chron. 16:25; Ps. 99:3; 145:6).

In Proverbs the expression occurs in parallel with humility before God (15:33; 22:40) and unfailing love and fidelity to Him (16:6) in contrast to pride and arrogance (8:13; 18:12) and rebellion (1:7). This appropriate submissive attitude of commitment issues in life (10:23; 19:23), security (14:26), and spiritual enrichment (15:16), and enables one to avoid calamity (16:6; 24:21).

Since the religious issue resolves itself to the heart, both prophet and sage divide all men into only two categories: the righteous/wise and the wicked/foolish. Until one understands that the heart is central to man's spiritual condition, the biblical distinction into rascals and saints will appear overly simplistic. Rengstorff cogently observed: "But the basis of the distinc-

42 J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (1965), p. 85, cited by H. P. Stähli, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 1: 774.

43 cf. K. Baltzer, *Das Bundesformular* (1964), pp. 22-23, 46-47.

44 Stähli, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch*, p. 774.

tion in both the prophetic and wisdom circles is not to be found in the immoral or ungodly mode of life, but much deeper....The basis of the distinction is the fundamentally different religious attitudes."⁴⁵ The pious are committed in their hearts to God; the ungodly are not. As the Lord Jesus Christ expressed it, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30).

Sages, prophets, and saints know that there is but one religious command: "Serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:24).

THE SAME ETHICAL DEMANDS

The phrase "the fear of the Lord" presents a paradox in both the prophetic and the sapiential literature: It is at one and the same time both the source and the substance, the cause and the effect. On the one hand, the term denotes the spiritual prerequisite for all ethical behavior, namely, a commitment to God out of awesome reverence for Him. On the other hand, it denotes the objective content of that which He demands through His spokesman whether it be the priest with the law, or the prophet with the word, or the wise man with his counsel (cf. Jer. 18:18). Thus the sage promised, "My son, if you accept my words...then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Prov. 2:1-5). Stähli noted that in Proverbs "the fear of the Lord" is a close parallel to terms for wisdom and can almost be used as a synonym for knowledge (1:29; 2:5; cf. Isa. 11 :2; 33:6; Job 28:28).⁴⁶ In Deuteronomy and the prophetic literature the fear of the Lord is both taught and learned (Deut. 31:12; 2 Kings 17:7, 25, 28, 32-39, 41).

The content of the fear of the Lord overlaps in the prophetic and aphoristic literature. This point is conceded even by Fichtner.

Without question, there are various points at which the views of the pre-exilic prophets seem to be directly compatible with those of the wise men of the Book of Proverbs. Further areas of ethical admonition were cultivated by both groups. I need only mention here their active championship of righteousness and charity toward the *personae miserabiles* (Amos 5:7; Hos. 5:11; Isa. 1:21ff.; Mic. 2:2; Jer. 22:17 et passim, and Prov. 3:27; 14:21, 31; 22:9; 28:27; 29:14 etc.)⁴⁷

In addition Fichtner noted that both circles condemned the use of false weights and measures, partisanship and corruption, disrespect for elders, etc. Weinfeld cataloged parallels regarding ethical behavior in Proverbs and Deuteronomy.⁴⁸

But these commonalities do not prove that the sages were drinking from

45 Theological Dictionary of the New Testament s.v. "ἁμαρτωλός" by Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, I:321.

46 Stähli, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch*, p. 776.

47 Fichtner, "Die altorientalische Weisheit," p. 430.

48 Weinfeld, "The Wisdom Substrata in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomical Literature," pp. 244-74.

an Israelite heritage. Weinfeld tried to trace the flow of thought from non-Israelite to Israelite wisdom and from there to Deuteronomy. More particularly, Fensham notes, "the protection of wisdom, orphan and poor was the common policy of the ancient Near East."⁴⁹ But Fensham also cogently observed that in Mesopotamia the same ethical values find expression in the legal and the wisdom literature and that both forms of texts present their similar ethical demands in the religious context in which Shamash (the sun-god) upholds the course of justice. For example, in the prologue to the Code of Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C.) the statement is made that "the strong are not allowed to oppress the weak, so that the sun (Utu-Shamash, god of justice) may rise over the people."⁵⁰ The same statement occurs in the epilogue. Moreover, Shamash is called on to maintain justice in the land. Thus, as in the Bible, religion and social ethics are closely connected.

Fensham then turns his attention to the Babylonian wisdom literature and finds the same religio-ethical context: "The idea that the poor man is protected by Shamash and that his is expected as a way of life amongst his people, occurs frequently in Babylonian wisdom literature."⁵¹ Thus Old Babylonian law and wisdom share the same religio-ethical system. Moreover, it is arresting to observe that though the ancient Mesopotamian law-giver and sage share the same spiritual convictions they do not quote each other.

From this Mesopotamian analogy it seems plausible to suppose against Weinfeld that the Israelite sage derived his ethical convictions not by borrowing from his pagan neighbors but rather by his common belief with the other authors of the Old Testament that Yahweh as the Judge of all men will reward the righteous and punish transgressors. Murphy remarked, "In the concrete, the sage was a Yahwist, and the worshiper of Yahweh found, that the wisdom of the sages fitted in with his tradition."⁵²

In any case, the Book of Proverbs is in the biblical canon not because it contains ethical values similar to those demanded by pagan sages but because Yahweh encounters the faithful in it with His commandments to fear Him and to love man made in His image.

THE SAME HOPE

Murphy tersely concluded, "The kerygma of wisdom can be summed up in one word: *life*."⁵³ He proceeded by stating that "life and death...are

49 F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21 (1962): 129-39.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

52 Roland E. Murphy, "The Kerygma of the Book of Proverbs," *Interpretation* 20 (1966): 12.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

central in the doctrine of the Old Testament sages."⁵⁴ Kaiser underscores the connection between the fear of the Lord and life (10:27; 14:27. 19:23. 22:4).⁵⁵

Life may refer to sheer existence in many days (3:16; 28:12), or the quality of realizing the highest possible good in this existence,⁵⁶ or even existence beyond the shadow of death (12:28).⁵⁷

The Law and the prophets set forth this same hope (Deut. 8:1; Isa. 55:1-3; Ezek. 33:19 cf. John 17:3). Moreover, in Proverbs as in the rest of Scripture this hope does not function as a mere "profit motive" within a eudaemonistic philosophy of life. Instead it denotes the enjoyment of life's potentials in the will of God, and thus all material gain possesses sacramental value as a benefit given from Him.

THE SAME FAITH

In Romans 12:19-20 the Apostle Paul strings together Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22 to support his exhortation to the saints at Rome that they show kindness to their persecutors rather than seeking revenge. This Pharasaic practice was dubbed by Longenecker as "pearl stringing": "bringing to bear on one point of an argument passages from various parts of the Bible in support of the argument and to demonstrate the unity of Scripture."⁵⁸ Without question both Proverbs and Deuteronomy teach the common norm that a man not avenge himself.⁵⁹

But it may escape the casual reader's attention that this ethical behavior is based on the common faith verbalized in Proverbs 20:22 that Yahweh will avenge wrong. Commenting on Proverbs 20:22 and 24:29 von Rad observed, "Behind the very serious exhortation not to requite evil done to one ..., not to take matters into one's hand when found with evil men...there does not lie...a lofty ethical principle, but something else, namely faith in the order controlled by Yahweh."⁶⁰ Robinson put this common faith behind the aphoristic sayings in this way: "There is almost always present a

54 Ibid., p. 10.

55 Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 171.

56 "It refers to all the assets -emotional, physical, psychological, social, spiritual- which permit joy and security and wholeness" (Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1972], p. 15).

57 Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," pp. 226-38.

58 Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 115.

59 The reference to "burning coals of fire on the head" should be interpreted on the basis of an Egyptian expiation ritual, according to which a guilty person, as a sign of his amendment of life, carried a basin of glowing coals on his head (S. Morenz, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 78 [1953]: 187-92).

60 Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 95.

confidence that Yahweh is active in man's life."⁶¹

Out of this common belief to trust God rather than to seek one's personal revenge, both prophet and sage call the righteous to prayer (Deut. 4:32; Isa. 12:4; Prov. 15:29; 15:8). Both prophet and sage call on their hearers to trust the living, righteous, powerful Creator.

CONCLUSION

Several points may be noted in concluding this study.

1. The commonality observed between the prophet and the sage is not intended to minimize the obvious differences in their lifestyles, fate, purpose, literary forms and manner of receiving and delivering revelation. One cannot imagine the sages who speak in the Book of Proverbs going about in a loin cloth like Isaiah or eating dung like Ezekiel or thundering out invectives like the shepherd of Tekoa. The wise men did not arraign the nation before the Lord's bar of justice and accuse them of breaking His covenant. But in spite of these differences, it is maintained that they shared the same theology.

2. This notion of unity with diversity fits well with the belief that the Creator is also the Lord of the canon. Kaiser stated this point well: "To introduce the topic of the integration of truth, fact, and understanding is to appeal to the unity of truth made possible by the one Who created a UNI-verse. Thus the doctrinal base for any norms of truth and character are grounded ultimately in a doctrine of Creation and the person of the Creator."⁶²

3. This article has not attempted to inquire into the common source from which both the classical prophets and the royal sages drank, but it seems plausible to suggest that it originated with Moses and even more particularly in the covenant he mediated between Yahweh and Israel "in the desert east of the Jordan" (Deut. 1:1). As noted, Weinfeld reversed the field by arguing for the priority of the wisdom literature and the dependence of Deuteronomy on it. The priority of one over the other cannot be proved as yet by empirical data, but no hard evidence exists to turn upside down the prima facie witness of the Bible that the addresses attributed to Moses preceded the Book of Proverbs. This primary witness finds support in the assumption that both Yahweh and His cultus were well known by the sages. Moreover, the borrowing of individual non-Israelite sayings by wise men does not support the notion that these pagan sources shaped the Israelite sage's philosophy. Those he borrowed were probably consonant with his faith in Yahweh which he already possessed.

61 H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 252.

62 Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 175.

If recent scholarship is correct in its view -and there is no reason to think otherwise -that the prophets were not innovators but reformers harking back to Israel's covenantal heritage, then why should one not suppose the same for their spiritual peers, the sages? The close affinity between Proverbs and Deuteronomy finds a plausible explanation in the Law's injunction that the king "write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law" (Deut. 17:18). Kaiser commented that the similarities noted by Weinfeld "do illustrate the point that wisdom was not cut off conceptually or theologically from materials which we have judged to be earlier than sapiential times."⁶³

4. Old Testament theologians must find another center than covenant, salvation, history, cultus, or even promise -if this be understood in terms of promises to the patriarchs and Israel -to accommodate wisdom. As Toombs has commented, "As long as Old Testament theology is represented exclusively in terms of history, institutions and cultus of the Hebrew people, it will exclude the wisdom literature by definition."⁶⁴ Kaiser's suggestion of looking to "the fear of the Lord" as an expression common to both is helpful, but it is more apropos to define it in terms of its own use, that is, not as a reference to promise but to a commitment to serve Yahweh as Lord.

5. Although prophet and wise man occasionally express identical ethical norms, such as not removing a neighbor's landmarks (Deut. 19:14; Prov. 22:28) and showing concern for the disenfranchised, for the most part their areas of ethical concern remain distinct. Kidner introduced his superb commentary by calling attention to these differences: "There are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings. Proverbs moves in this realm, asking what a person is like to live with, or employ; how he manages his affairs, his time and himself."⁶⁵

For wisdom, man needs both the priest with his **תּוֹרָה** the prophet with his **דְּבָר** and the sage with his **עֵצָה** (cf. Jer. 18:18). But above all he needs to enter into a personal relationship with Him of whom Isaiah predicted, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him -the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD " (11:2).

63 Ibid., p. 166.

64 Lawrence E. Toombs, "Old Testament Theology and the Wisdom Literature," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 23 (1955):195.

65 Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), p. 5.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204 www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu

The book of Proverbs also warns those who neglect to grow in wisdom. Wisdom, personified throughout the book as a woman,[3] speaks. "Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death" (Prov. 8:1-3). Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), entry 907. For an explanation of the feminine personification, see Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 83. About the Book of Proverbs. Back to Table of Contents Back to Table of Contents. Book of Proverbs. The KJV Old Testament was translated from the Masoretic Hebrew text. 5 A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: 6 To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings. 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. 8 My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 9 For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck. 10 My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology. Bruce K Waltke. Hartmut Gese wrote, "It is well known that the wisdom literature constitutes an alien body in the world of the Old Testament." [Show full abstract] In an earlier article this writer surveyed the affinities of the Book of Proverbs with the international sapiential literature in its literary forms, arrangement, and contents. 3 On account of these striking parallels Preuss went so far as to suggest that Israel's wise men attempted to shape Israel into the image of their pagan environment.