

WISDOM BUILDS A POEM THE ARCHITECTURE OF PROVERBS 1:20-33

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WISDOM is a woman of many talents. In the Book of Proverbs she appears first as a poet who preaches, counsels, teaches, and prophesies (1:20-33). Her podium is the public arena; there she speaks to all sorts and conditions of people.

Since homiletic, advisory, didactic, and prophetic dimensions of the figure have their being in a poetic mode,¹ the poem itself is primary for understanding. Thus we propose to study its literary and rhetorical features in order to make explicit its pattern and posture.²

I

Our study contrasts with historical criticism,³ which focuses on detecting

¹ With variations and overlappings of views, scholars examine these dimensions. One group stresses the homiletic character of wisdom as a preacher of repentance: e.g., B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos* (HAT 16; Tübingen: Mohr, 1937) 16-17; H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom in the Old Testament* (Lund: H. Ohlsson, 1947) 95-96; W. Frankenberg, *Die Sprüche* (HKAT, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898) 22-23. A second group emphasizes the didactic dimension of wisdom as a teacher: e.g., W. McKane, *Proverbs* (London: SCM, 1970) 273-77; cf. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1904) 20-29. A third position focuses on wisdom as a prophet: e.g., A. Robert, "Les attaches littéraires bibliques de Prov. I-IX," *RB* 43 (1934) 172-81; C. Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9* (WMANT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966) 119-29; cf. J. L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," *Old Testament Form Criticism* (ed. J. H. Hayes; San Antonio: Trinity University, 1974) 248. The fourth view of wisdom as a counsellor is studied by P. A. H. de Boer, "The Counsellor," *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East: Presented to Professor Harold Henry Rowley* (eds. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas; VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955) 42-71, esp. p. 52. These views assume human models for the figure of wisdom in Prov 1:20-33. For suggestions that the figure has a mythological background, see R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB No. 18; New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965) 39; R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (SBT 45; London: SCM, 1965) 76-104; B. L. Mack, "Wisdom Myth and Mythology," *Int* 24 (1970) 46-60. Cf. R. E. Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems in Old Testament Wisdom Research," *CBQ* 24 (1967) 109-12.

² For this approach, see J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1-18; R. E. Murphy, "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature," *CBQ* 31 (1969) 476; D. Greenwood, "Rhetorical Criticism and Formgeschichte: Some Methodological Considerations," *JBL* 89 (1970) 418-26; J. L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," 262-64. Cf. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1957) 82-94; E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) 68-69; R. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974) 143-47.

³ The phrase "historical criticism" is not altogether adequate or accurate. Other phrases

and correcting irregularities in meter, rhythm, and content.⁴ That approach does guard against interpretation on a flat surface. The pericope has a history, even though lack of adequate data prevents recovery of that past. In addition, historical criticism provides a negative value: the recognition that this work of art does not necessarily conform to our sensitivities about structure and content. Thereby we learn to let the poem reveal inner integrity. If we cannot recover past character, we may discover present mode.

Form criticism aids this discovery. Christa Kayatz has identified the genre of Prov 1:20-33 as a wisdom-sermon (*Weisheitspredigt*).⁵ She stresses its impressive affinities with prophetic speech-forms and concludes that, unlike Proverbs 8, this poem rests in distinctive Israelite presuppositions without Egyptian influence.⁶ Its formal components are words of reproach (*Scheltrede; Anklage*) and of threat (*Drohrede; Mahnung*), interspersed with promise (*Verheissung*).⁷ Kayatz outlines the structure as follows:⁸

- vss. 20-21: Introduction of wisdom as a public preacher
- vs. 22: Address to the simple, to scoffers, and to fools in the form of a question which reprimands; introduced by *ʿad-māṭay*
- vs. 23: A warning strengthened by a promise
- vs. 24:⁹ Reproach-speech, introduced by *yaʿan*
- vss. 26-28: Threatening speech, introduced by *gam-ʾānī* and by *ʾāz*
- vss. 29-30: Reproach-speech, introduced by *taḥat kī*
- vs. 31: Threatening speech, introduced by *wʿ*
- vs. 32: Motivation, introduced by *kī*
- vs. 33: Closing appeal in the form of a promise

include literary-historical criticism, source criticism, and literary criticism. Though they all have problems, I resist specifically the description "literary criticism" for this approach. That phrase, along with "rhetorical criticism," as Muilenburg uses it, describes best the contrasting study which we present here. On this issue of terminology, see the relevant comments in the review by E. M. Good (*JBL* 92 [1973] 287-89) of *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* by N. Habel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). Cf. H. Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (London: Oxford, 1959) 86-87, 97-98.

⁴ Among others, C. H. Toy represents this approach. To turn the entire poem into couplets, Toy drops vss. 22b, 23a, and 27c. In vs. 21 he deletes as glosses "in the city" and "her words" (*Proverbs*, 20-22, 25). B. Gemser deletes "in the city" also, and he thinks that vss. 22c and 23c are perhaps additions, although comparable to vs. 27c (*Sprüche*, 16). J. A. Emerton regards vs. 22bc as a separate proverb displaced from its original position. *Contra* Toy, Emerton retains vs. 23a but "corrects" its short meter by adding a word ("A Note on the Hebrew Text of Proverbs 1:22-23," *JTS* ns 19 [1968] 609-14). For Whybray, the entire poem is a theological addition to the first discourse of Prov 1:8-19. Further, vs. 29 is a later insertion to link wisdom with the fear of Yahweh (*Wisdom in Proverbs*, 72-75).

⁵ *Proverbien*, 119. Cf. J. L. Crenshaw, who classifies it as an "imagined speech," a variant of the dialogue or *Streitgespräch* ("Wisdom," 255-56).

⁶ Kayatz, *Proverbien*, 122-29, 133-34.

⁷ Standard terminology for form-critical study is needed; see J. L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," 262-263.

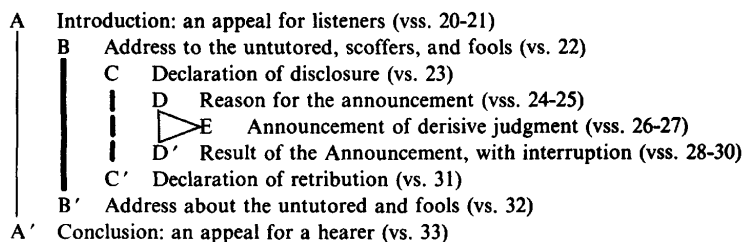
⁸ *Proverbien*, 120.

⁹ Kayatz does not mention vs. 25.

On the whole, these divisions correspond to shifts in content, and they utilize clues to form which introductory words provide. But the divisions neglect repetitions of words, phrases, and motifs for the shaping of structure.¹⁰ When these iterative features interact with content and with other rhetorical devices, a pattern emerges which the analysis of Kayatz does not demonstrate. That pattern is a chiasmus of four concentric circles converging on the center of the poem.

II

This diagram shows the overall architecture:



A (vss. 20-21): The poem introduces wisdom crying out for listeners. Four different verbs signify her appeal, and four different prepositional phrases designate her locale:¹¹

Wisdom cries aloud in the street;
 in the markets she raises her voice;
 on the top of the walls she calls;
 at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.

Double parallelism makes bold the point: the call of wisdom is inclusive. All people, wherever they are, may listen to her words.¹²

B (vs. 22): Having presented wisdom, the poem becomes her voice. Her first word is interrogative: "How long" (*ʿad-māṭay*)? By it wisdom implores and pleads; by it she implies judgment.¹³ She addresses her question to the untutored (*pʿīṭāyīm*), to scoffers (*lēšīm*), and to fools (*kʿsilīm*).¹⁴ These terms

¹⁰ See J. Muilenburg, "A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," *Congress Volume* (VTSup 1; Leiden: Brill, 1953) 97-111.

¹¹ The translation is the *RSV*, with changes made when necessary or desirable. Here in vss. 20-21, e.g., the *RSV* obscures the variety of vocabulary by translating two different verbs (*rnh* and *qrʿ*) as "cry."

¹² G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972) 157-66.

¹³ This interrogative functions similarly in the oracles of Jeremiah: 4:14, 21; 12:4; 31:22; 47:5; cf. also Exod 10:3; 1 Sam 1:14; 2 Sam 2:26.

¹⁴ On the nuances of these words, see C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, 23-24; also W. McKane, who argues persuasively that *pʿīṭāyīm* ought to be translated "the untutored" (*Proverbs*, 273). As for *lēšīm*, H. Neil Richardson suggests "babblers" ("Some Notes on לִשְׁיָ and Its Derivatives," *VT* 5 [1955] 163-79, esp. p. 172), a translation accepted in W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (3d ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1967—) 507a.

derive meaning from the inclusive call of the introduction. Hence, they describe all people, not just individuals or groups. All are unwise when wisdom begins to speak. Moreover, wisdom fluctuates in her relationship to people. First, she speaks to them directly: "How long, untutored ones, will you love immaturity?"¹⁵ Then she switches to the third person: "How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?" Ambivalent about the public, wisdom exchanges proximity for distance.¹⁶

C (vs. 23): Proximity returns in the direct address of the imperative: "Give heed (*tāšūbū*) to my reproof." Here wisdom uses language and style reminiscent of prophetic speech.¹⁷ The imperative summons listeners to conversion, even as it specifies reproach for the unenlightened. To fools who hate knowledge (*da^cat*, vs. 22), wisdom offers knowledge: "I will make known (*ʿōdī^cāh*)," she says. With this promise of disclosure, she threatens and warns:

Now (*hinnēh*)¹⁸ I will pour out to you my thoughts;¹⁹
I will make known my words to you.²⁰

D-E-D' (vss. 24-30): The disclosure itself forms the core of the poem. It begins with Reason; it centers on Announcement; it ends with Result. Signal words mark each of the three sections.²¹ Reason and Result are inverse parallels of vocabulary and motifs.

Functioning to signify motive, the particle *ya^can* introduces the Reason for the Announcement (vss. 24-25).²² The Reason covers two lines. In the first wisdom alternates between her acts and the response of the people, between direct address and indirect speech:

²⁴Because (*ya^can*) I have called
and you refused to listen.²³

¹⁵ Cf. the translation by W. McKane (*Proverbs*, 212).

¹⁶ Thus I treat these shifts in person as a literary phenomenon within the poem and not as a compositional problem (*contra*, e.g., J. A. Emerton, "A Note," 610-11).

¹⁷ C. Kayatz, *Proverbien*, 120-21; H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom*, 96.

¹⁸ On proper translations of *hinnēh*, see T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribner, 1971) 168-70; on its rhetorical usages, see L. Alonso-Schökel, "Nota estilística sobre la partícula ׀ִנְנֵה," *Bib* 37 (1956) 74-80.

¹⁹ *Rū^h* is translated "thought," possibly as parallel to "word" (*dābār*); cf. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, 24; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs*, 40.

²⁰ For "make known" as language of disclosure in prophetic speech, cf. Isa 5:5; Jer 16:21; Ezek 20:5.

²¹ On the importance of signal-words, see J. Muilenburg, "The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle ׀ in the Old Testament," *HUCA* 32 (1961) 135-60.

²² The use of this particle to designate motive is extensive, especially in prophetic literature. In addition to the parallels which C. Kayatz lists (*Proverbien*, 120), see Amos 5:11; Hos 8:1; Isa 3:16; 7:5; 8:6; 29:13; 30:12; 37:29; Jer 5:14; Ezek 5:7, 9, 11; 16:36, 43. See J. Pedersen, *Israel* (London: Oxford, 1926) 117; H. W. Wolff, "Die Begründungen der prophetischen Heils- und Unheilssprüche," *ZAW* 52 (1934) 5-6, 8.

²³ Although W. McKane allows for a prophetic model behind these words, he plays down this possibility by claiming that the vocabulary and stance of vss. 24-25 are those of a wisdom-teacher

I have stretched out my hand
and no one has heeded,

they will seek me diligently
but will not find me —

²⁹Inasmuch as (*tahat ki*)

they hated knowledge
and the fear of the LORD
they did not choose —

²⁵and you have ignored

all my counsel
and my reproof
:~::~:~::~:
you would not have.

³⁰they would not have

my counsel;
they despised
all my reproof.
≡ :~::~:~::~:

Just as *ya^can* signals motive, so the particle ²*āz* marks consequences.²⁹ Whereas in vs. 24a wisdom called (*qārā²*) and the people refused to listen, in vs. 28a the people call (*qārā²*) wisdom and she refuses to answer (cf. Zech 7:13). Once wisdom stretched out her hand in a gesture of seeking the people (vs. 24b). No one responded. Now the people seek wisdom, and they do not find her (vs. 28b). She does not respond.

Vs. 29 interrupts the Result. Interruption does not mean insertion; it means attention. This verse belongs to the poem, and the poem assigns a special status to it.³⁰ While proclaiming the dire consequences of her disastrous Announcement, wisdom breaks off to recall that there is, indeed, motivation for the Announcement and its Result. Having given the Reason once, in proper sequence and with particular words (vss. 24-25), now she underscores it in an improper sequence and with a conventional formula of sapiential thought.³¹ By employing this formula wisdom ties her motivation directly to divine authority. The people's rejection of wisdom (vss. 24-25) is their rejection of Yahweh (vs. 29).³² Moreover, the phrase "hate knowledge" here in vs. 29 reflects wisdom's use of that same phrase in vs. 22. Fools who hate knowledge do not choose the fear of Yahweh — even when wisdom offers

²⁹ As a signal-word for a result, cf. its use in constructions of protasis and apodosis: e.g., Isa 58:13-14; Prov 2:4; Job 9:30-31. See also Isa 35:5-6; 58:8-9; Jer 22:15-16; 31:13. Cf. Muilenburg, "The Particle '2,'" 135 n. 1.

³⁰ Here I follow the general principle of letting the present poem disclose its inner integrity. This principle neither affirms nor denies a history behind the text. R. N. Whybray holds that vs. 29 is an insertion; it can be removed without "any loss of grammatical coherence or metrical balance." Then he avers that its removal tends to improve both the form and meaning of the poem (*Wisdom in Proverbs*, 73-75). That judgment is subject to the judgment of the poem itself as an organic unit with "an ambiguous structure of interlocking motifs" (cf. N. Frye, *Anatomy*, 82, 315-16).

³¹ *Mutatis mutandis*, the formula appears in Prov 1:7; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16, 33; 19:23; 22:4.

³² McKane does see wisdom emerge "almost as a prophet" with the use of this formula (*Proverbs*, 275).

them her special knowledge (vs. 23). So vs. 29 belongs to one compelling motif in the poem.

In addition, this theological statement elicits attention by its double particle *tahat ki*, which is a forceful way of presenting the basis for punishment.³³ The sentence itself is chiasmic. As elsewhere in the Result, the third-person form identifies the people:

Inasmuch as (*tahat ki*)
 a b
 they hated knowledge
 b' a'
 and the fear of the LORD they did not choose.

Like its content and meaning, the structure of this interruption conforms to the general design of the poem. Specifically, chiasm occurs in each of the three sections which constitute the core (vss. 25, 26-27, 29).

Vs. 30 functions in overlapping ways. It provides a transition from interruption back to Result. While continuing the style of indictment (vs. 29), it resumes the thought of consequences (vs. 28). Wisdom has declared withdrawal from the people: they will seek but not find her. In vs. 30 she describes her withdrawal as their activity: they would not have her counsel and they despised her reproof. What they have rejected she offers no longer. Their negative response is her negative reply. Lastly, vs. 30 answers vs. 25 with parallels of vocabulary and themes. Juxtaposed, these two verses demonstrate the coalescence of Reason and Result. Having ignored the counsel of wisdom (vs. 25), the people would not have it (vs. 30). Rejecting her reproof (vs. 25), they have despised it (vs. 30). This motif of reproof began as an imperative to pay attention (vs. 23). It became a motivation for judgment (vs. 25) and now it concludes as a declaration of consequences (vs. 30).

There are still other links between Reason and Result. First offering herself to the people, wisdom receives four negative responses (vss. 24-25). Three of these carry a negative meaning in the verbal forms themselves: you refused; no one heeded;³⁴ you have ignored. The fourth employs the adverb not (*lōʿ*) before the verb: you would not have. In the Result this pattern is reversed. The people seek wisdom, and she gives four negative replies (vss. 28, 30). The adverb *lōʿ* shapes three of them: I will not answer; they will not find me; they would not have my counsel. For the fourth, the negative meaning comes in the verb itself: they despised.

Wisdom's ambivalence about the people surfaces again in these verbs. The change from the second to the third person in the Reason is a waver between proximity and distance. Full involvement returns with the Announcement,

³³ The combination *tahat ki* is virtually a *hapax legomenon* in the OT; Deut 4:37 has a textual problem. Cf. *tahat ʿašer* in 2 Kgs 22:17 and Deut 28:47.

³⁴ Although this construction (*ʿên maqšib*) is not parallel to the surrounding forms, my point is that the adverb *lōʿ* is not used in any of these three statements.

which is completely in the second person. Proclaiming calamity, wisdom speaks directly. After this climactic utterance, however, she uses only the third person in reporting the Result. Thereby she re-establishes distance from the people, and this distance she keeps.

These many interlocking relationships among Reason, Announcement, and Result secure internal structure as well as external design. The poem continues by completing the circles begun in vss. 20-23. Since completion is progress, however, wisdom returns to her beginnings with differences.³⁵

C' (vs. 31): A summary of natural retribution, this verse corresponds to vs. 23, which is a preface to the central section. Yet these two lines have no verbal similarities; they differ in length; and neither one commences with a signal word.³⁶ Together they are perhaps the rhetorical equivalent of synthetic parallelism, aiding the movement of thought.³⁷ Whereas the imperative (*C*) introduced the center, the declarative (*C'*) comments succinctly upon it:

They shall eat the fruit of their way
and with their own devices be satisfied.

This summary leads wisdom to elaborate.

B' (vs. 32): Parallels within circles resume as vs. 32 answers vs. 22. But no longer does direct address alternate with third person forms. Ambivalence ceases. Distance replaces intimacy; separation displaces involvement. Accordingly, the untutored who originally were addressed now join the fools to be spoken about. Further, vs. 32 compresses the address of vs. 22 by omitting reference to scoffers:

B

²²How long, untutored ones, will
you love immaturity?
How long will scoffers delight
in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
:~::~:

B'

³²For (*ki*) the untutored are
killed by their turning away
and the complacency of fools
:~::~:
destroys them.

Instead of turning (*šûb*, vs. 23a) to wisdom for life, the untutored and the fools have turned away (*šûb*, vs. 32a) for death. Since they have reversed the meaning of repentance, they themselves are responsible for their destruction.

³⁵ Cf. W. L. Holladay, "The Recovery of Poetic Passages," 433.

³⁶ I do not see *w* at the beginning of vs. 31 having the force of "therefore" (so *RSV*) or of any other introductory signal-word (cf. C. Kayatz, *Proverbien*, 121).

³⁷ The dotted line connecting *C* and *C'* in the diagram above indicates both parallelism of position and lack of additional parallels.

A' (vs. 33): With the compression of vs. 32, the poem begins to wind down. Its final line completes the diminishing process:³⁸ "The one who hears me will dwell secure and will be at ease from dread of evil." Beginning with wisdom crying out for listeners, the pericope concludes with wisdom speaking about the one who hears. The contrast is between expansion and retrenchment. The two full lines of the introduction and the one final line of the conclusion move from plural invitation to singular acceptance. In other words, wisdom's meaning is the number of her lines and the number in her verb-form. At first all listen; at last one hears. The poem ends much closer to a whimper than to a bang. Remnant is the manner, matter, and meaning of this ending.

III

In Prov 1:20-33 a chiastic architecture is the mode in which wisdom speaks. Her homiletic, advisory, didactic, and prophetic dimensions have their being in this poetic form. Thus, by exploring its literary and rhetorical features, we have perceived pattern and posture:

- A* Beginning with a public appeal (vss. 20-21)
- B* to all who are unwise (vs. 22)
- C* that they heed reproof as disclosure (vs. 23),
- D* wisdom supplies ample Reason in the negative responses of the people to her (vss. 24-25)
- E* for her climactic Announcement of derisive judgment when inevitable calamity strikes severely (vss. 26-27).
- D'* As the Result, wisdom refuses to respond to the people because they "hated knowledge and the fear of the LORD they did not choose" (vss. 28-30).
- C'* She declares continuing trouble (vs. 31)
- B'* for the unwise who cause their own destruction (vs. 32).
- A'* Alas, the remnant of her hearers is singular (vs. 33).

Yet that one who does hear "will dwell secure and will be at ease from dread of evil." To these words of faint hope the woman of wisdom leads all sorts and conditions of people. There she leaves us to make our choice.³⁹

³⁸ For another instance of "shortening given units of the poem as the poem progresses," see W. L. Holladay, "Form and Word-Play," 188.

³⁹ This study was completed during a year of research in Jerusalem, made possible by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities.