
An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7

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In his address to the Society of Biblical Literature about 20 years ago, John McKenzie reflected what he believed to be a common sentiment toward wisdom literature. Concluding that Proverbs has never been the most thrilling area of biblical study, he declared, "The wisdom books attract readers from the general public which reads the Bible, whoever they may be, no more than they attract scholars."¹

Since that time, however, the church has come to a greater appreciation of the Old Testament, and wisdom literature in particular. Articles and books have devoted much space to the sufferings of Job, the observations of the sages in Proverbs, and the despair of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. Scobie recently observed, "In few areas of biblical scholarship is there more lively interest at the present time than in the study of 'Wisdom.'"²

Yet the material of such books as Proverbs continues to inspire few sermons. A recent writer suggests this is because of the failure

¹ John L. McKenzie, "Reflections on Wisdom," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (March 1967): 1. See Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14 (April 1984): 43, for interesting statistical information. Ludwig Köhler (*Old Testament Theology* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957]) and Th. C. Vriezen (*An Outline of Old Testament Theology* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1970]) devoted less than 1 percent of their theological studies to wisdom, and Walter Eichrodt gave only 2.5 percent to it.

² Scobie, "The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology," p. 43.

to see the present-day relevance of the book. "The crisis of relevance, which confronts any preacher who tries to bring to life a two-thousand year old scripture, is especially acute in books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes."³ True, the study of wisdom literature has increased. And yet theological works still give scant attention to the contribution of wisdom literature to theology proper, bibliology, and anthropology.

The secular world, for all its intellectual pursuits, also maintains a lack of fondness for wisdom. Carl Henry has summarized its present condition: "Despite its pursuit of knowledge, our generation, snared in relativities, is a stranger to wisdom. Wisdom—which Augustine viewed as 'the unum necessarium'—is no longer considered as the mind's indispensable acquisition, even by most intellectuals."⁴

The consequence of such priorities is a modern society of intellectual giants who are pygmies in the art of living. Robinson, in the foreword of Alden's commentary on Proverbs, makes this sad observation: "Alumni from noted universities have mastered information about a narrow slice of life but couldn't make it out of the first grade when it comes to living successfully with family and friends."⁵

If Proverbs is to make a greater impact, if it is to be the source of more sermons, and if it is to be considered more deeply for its theological contributions, more attention needs to be given to the proper interpretation of its truths. Too often, bits and pieces of this wisdom book are grabbed, taken out of context, and abusively applied.⁶ The consequence of such actions is the tendency to treat the book with trivial respect.

Approaches to the Introduction

Proper interpretation, however, must begin with the introduction of the book in Proverbs 1:1-7. Unfortunately Proverbs

³ John J. Collins, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 1.

⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 3:306.

⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, foreword to *Proverbs*, by Robert L. Alden (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 7.

⁶ Gordon Fee and Douglas D. Stuart note a number of abuses common to wisdom literature (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981], p. 188).

suffers the same treatment given to most books. The preface is approached like a highway in the summer desert: one journeys over it as expediently as possible to arrive at his destination.

The superficial treatment often given to Proverbs 1:1-7 can be traced in part to its unusual construction. In addition most commentaries do little to encourage the student to slow down. They are anxious to move on to the greener pastures of the book.

Many interpreters find Proverbs 1:1-7 lacking in harmony and inner consistency.⁷ If attention is given to this prelude, the focus is generally on the variety of terms used for wisdom. Alden expresses his appreciation for the "grand array of terms."⁸ Crenshaw refers to the introduction as a collection of words "heaped" together into a stereometry.⁹

Crenshaw's assessment may have been influenced by von Rad, who characterizes the introduction as a cumulation of known terms presenting the comprehensive nature of wisdom. The "hypnotic piling up of nouns" is an attempt to fix the limits, to define a specific area of sense by the use of words that are full of meaning. A single word would have been inadequate to say what the author wanted (cf. Bildad's need of four verses to convey the judgment of a fool, Job 18:7-10). However, rather than "heaped" together, von Rad concludes that they have been poetically expressed with a care that "falls little short of that of the modern scientist."¹⁰

If any attention is given to the unique syntax of Proverbs 1:1-7, it is often brief and inadequate. Cox finds a unity that is underscored by the grammatical structure, but gives an imprecise description of the unifying element as the "infinite construct" that dominates the passage.¹¹ A full discussion is given by Delitzsch, who says the infinitives in verses 2-6 are the "statement of its object," annexed to verse 1.¹² In his scheme verse 2 serves as the main object of Proverbs. Verses 3-5 expand verse 2a, while verse 6 gives

⁷ William McKane, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 263.

⁸ Alden, *Proverbs*, p. 21.

⁹ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 32.

¹⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 25.

¹¹ Dermot Cox, *Proverbs* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), p. 98.

¹² Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, trans. M. G. Easton, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 1:2.

a fuller explanation of verse 2b. Likewise both McKane and Toy connect the infinitives to verse 1, finding the paragraph syntactically a continuation of verse 1.¹³

Unfortunately the change of construction in verse 5 is often overlooked. Delitzsch explains it away as a change for stylistic reasons. Others see the sentence as a parenthesis or editorial insertion. McKane appears to side with Gemser, who suspects that it is an intrusion, and Toy comments that "it seems, indeed, not to belong here."¹⁴ Others lump verse 5 with verses 2-4, and take verse 6 as a consecutive series of purpose clauses, ignoring that there has been a significant grammatical change.¹⁵

These examples reveal a variety of approaches to the introduction. Some are enamored by the multitude of terms for wisdom, others give brief attention to the grammar, and some attempt to find contextual design.¹⁶ However, none give a satisfying explanation for the changes in verbal forms, nor do they adequately relate the content to the grammatical construction. All this promotes the attitude that 1:1-7 does not play a significant role in understanding Proverbs.

This article seeks to demonstrate the importance of the first seven verses of Proverbs. As the book climaxes with careful acrostic design, so one finds a work of art in the opening. Synthetic poetry is skillfully enlisted to state a series of objectives that give the would-be sage his bearings for the rest of the trip.

An Analysis of the Introduction

- 1 The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel:
- 2 To know wisdom and discipline;
To discern the words of understanding;

¹³ See also R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1965), p. 35. He notes, "The series of clauses is syntactically dependent on the title and with it forms a single unbroken sentence."

¹⁴ Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), p. 14.

¹⁵ See Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 64.

¹⁶ Wilson finds careful design in the introduction, corresponding to the theme, structure, and function of the epilogue of Ecclesiastes (Gerald H. Wilson, "The Words of the Wise: The Intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9-14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (June 1984): 180.

- 3 To receive discipline of insight,
 Righteousness and judgment and uprightness;
 4 To give to the simple prudence,
 To the youth knowledge and purpose—
 5 Let a wise man hear and add instruction,
 And let the understanding acquire wise counsel—
 6 To understand a proverb and a satire,
 Words of the wise and their riddles.
 7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
 But fools despise wisdom and discipline (author's
 translation).¹⁷

THE INTRODUCTION IDENTIFIES THE BOOK'S LITERARY GENRE

The first verse introduces the entire Book of Proverbs. In these opening words, the basic authorship, the character of the material, and the kind of literature are established. Similar verses identify individual collections within the book, as well as designate the book's structure (10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1).

The opening verse assigns the authorship of the Book of Proverbs to Solomon much like the authorship of the Book of Psalms is popularly assigned to David. The title reveals that the book is set apart as royal literature, written in the context of the court, to be enjoyed by its patrons and practiced by those close to the king.¹⁸

This verse informs the reader about the kind of literature encountered in the book. It is material set in proverbial form to encourage the mind to slow down and compare, each couplet serving as a kind of thesis for discussion among the sages.¹⁹ To read Proverbs rapidly leads to frustration. As Collins put it, "To read straight through a few chapters of Proverbs is like trying to have a conversation with someone who always replies with a one-liner."²⁰ Hence from the very beginning the readers are made aware of the manner in which they must read the book.

¹⁷ Three types of parallelism are present in this passage. Verses 1-4 and 6 are synthetic, that is, the second line in each verse takes up and develops a thought begun in the first line of the verse. In verse 5, there is a close similarity between both lines, signifying synonymous parallelism. Verse 7 is antithetical; the second line contrasts with the first.

¹⁸ McKane, *Proverbs*, p. 262.

¹⁹ Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 24.

²⁰ Collins, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, p. 13.

Within the book numerous comparisons are being made—the wise woman with the adulteress, one road with another road, and others. Most statements are placed in poetic parallelism in which one line compares with and explains the other. These lines are placed antithetically, synthetically, and synonymously.

Antithetical parallelism in particular lends itself to the sage's philosophy, for he finds no middle ground between wisdom and folly. This kind of parallelism dominates chapters 10 through 15. Mankind is divided into two diametrically opposed groups in which, as Gammie puts it, "a mutual antipathy obtains between the members of the respective groups."²¹ In an age of relativism, in which societies pride themselves on their pluralism, this clear measuring device is needed.

THE INTRODUCTION DECLARES THE BOOK'S OBJECTIVES

Just as the conclusion is set apart by an acrostic, so the introduction is set apart by its own unique grammatical construction. A verbal pattern is utilized, one line building on another, to explain why the book was written.

Beyond the opening verses, much of the first nine chapters contains exhortation or instruction. In much of the rest of the book, imperfect verbs appear to make neutral assertions, "definitive observations on a particular topic"²² without any direct appeal to the listener. Describing them as retrospective with only an empirical value, von Rad writes, "The experiences are cited, the conclusions are drawn, and the result is produced."²³ However, these experiences, cited from lengthy observations, do take on a tone of responsibility. What appears as a descriptive ethic has prescriptive value. "The fact that these are included with overtly didactic sayings suggests that they can be used for didactic purposes on a particular level—for reasons other than that of merely registering an experiential fact."²⁴

Whereas the rest of the book uses imperative or imperfect verbs to make hortatory or observational statements, much of the

²¹ John J. Gammie, "Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (Summer 1974): 372.

²² McKane, *Proverbs*, p. 413.

²³ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p. 31.

²⁴ Roland E. Murphy, "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (October 1969): 479

introduction uses infinitive constructs to set forth a series of purpose statements.²⁵ This alerts the observant reader that something is different, that there is instruction to be gained before moving on.

This form of introduction is found in other wisdom literature, most notably the Egyptian wisdom of Ptahhotep and Amen-em-opet. Those writings also begin with a title followed by a series of purpose statements. In the "other book" in Proverbs (22:17-24:34) infinitive constructs are again employed in the opening verses (22:19, 21) to declare the objectives.

The origin behind this sort of introduction may be found in the oral tradition of teaching wisdom, in which a teacher began by defining his purpose. The unusual length is explained by Murphy: "Here the prolixity suggests a certain reflection and literary concern on the part of a writer (editor) who wishes to emphasize the value and importance of what follows."²⁶ However, as the four objectives of Proverbs are examined, one finds no redundancy here. Each one stands on its own and is complete apart from the others.

Objective one: to impart an intimate acquaintance with wisdom and discipline (v. 2a). The first and preeminent purpose of Proverbs is to state the object with which a wise man must become intimately acquainted—he must know wisdom and discipline (v. 2a).

The all-embracing term for wisdom is חָכְמָה. It conveys the idea of skill. Proverbs aims to show a person how to become adroit at the greatest skill of all, the skill of living. Proverbs pictures a world designed with order, from the tiniest speck to the largest ocean (Prov. 8:26-29). Man in his foolishness has blurred this design, and so the first principle of wisdom is to discover the skill to lead a life of moral order in an ordered universe. The importance of such an endeavor is summarized by Scott, who says that Proverbs shows man that a life lived in the fear of God can have "order" and "meaning."²⁷

The intimate sister of wisdom is discipline (מוֹסֵר). While חָכְמָה refers to prudent, skillful, experienced living, מוֹסֵר suggests

²⁵ Five of the six verbal nouns are construct in form. The one absolute infinitive, from חָכַל (v. 3), serves as a substantive.

²⁶ Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), p. 54.

²⁷ R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1971), p. 228.

correction or chastening. It refers to the correcting of one's wrong conduct, the chastening of one's life by God to bring him into conformity to His will. Those who beseech God for wisdom need to realize that it does not come apart from discipline or correction.

Objective two: to impart understanding of wisdom sayings (v. 2b, 6). The second objective is to help the reader recognize and understand "the sayings of understanding," sayings that reflect discernment about life.

The wise men did not produce simplified "folk sayings" but a consciously and laboriously developed piece of art. Crenshaw observes:

If we are correct in assuming that the wise constituted a distinct class within Israel, we may make another assumption: that these sages used a characteristic mode of discourse. It follows that the literary forms within Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon comprise a special world of communication which can only be understood in terms of its own categories.²⁸

Because God chose to reveal His wisdom in a language von Rad describes as "highly daring," the serious sage must be competent to handle its poetic form, the rhythm found not in vowel but in thought.

The term "understanding" (בִּינָה) more accurately refers to discernment. The person who is truly wise is able to separate, to discriminate, to read between the lines. On the surface some lines of poetry seem to have no relationship to each other (e.g., the two lines in 25:27). Some verses appear to be independent (cf. 25:16-17), while others are connected (26:4-5).

The repetition of the second objective in verse 6 underscores the difficulties to be encountered. This verse also specifies what a person desiring wisdom must come to understand. To be wise, he must pierce the meaning of proverbs, satire, and riddles—thoughts that deal with the mysteries of life experiences (cf. 16:1-3, 9; 25:2-3).

Objective three: to impart moral insight (v. 3). The proverbs of Solomon have been collected so that a person might receive moral insight. Like חָכְמָה ("wisdom"), שֵׂכֶל ("insight") refers to skill, especially the ability to understand history and foresee future

²⁸ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, pp. 36-37. See also John E. Johnson, "The Contribution of Proverbs to Ethics," ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984, pp. 100-106.

consequences. The second line of verse 3 distinguishes this third objective—the ability to have insight into what is upright, moral, and just. True wisdom is never exhibited apart from a moral framework of right standards.

The Book of Proverbs is a storehouse of moral instruction. Von Rad writes, "The Book of Proverbs has always been regarded as containing the concentrated deposit of ancient Israelite morality."²⁹ The Old Testament prophets often emphasized the need for personal and national righteousness. Yet along with the Torah the "deposit" of Israelite wisdom literature may have had a strong moral impact on the prophets (cf. Isa. 5; Jeremiah's frequent use of the word מִיָּסָר; and Ezekiel's use of the proverbial form). Side by side, the prophets and the wise men called Israel to high moral standards. Waltke finds a common cause in both kinds of leaders, describing them as "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."³⁰

Proverbs was not written to sharpen an individual's ability to be crafty or cunning. There must be a moral component which transforms a person of evil devices into a person of discretion, from craftiness into prudence.

Again the introduction establishes the criteria by which one may understand the book. The basic moral issues of justice and uprightness should be behind all one's endeavors. From doing acts of charity to disciplining one's children, the motivation is justice.

Objective four: to identify the intended recipients of wisdom (v. 4). This objective defines the intended readership of wisdom literature: "To give prudence to the naive, to the youth knowledge and discretion." Wisdom offers her advice to a wide range of interests: "Its precepts follow man into all the details of his daily occupation, and into all the relations of his common life. Wisdom is the friend and counsellor alike of the monarch on the throne, of the artisan in the workshop, and of the husbandman in the field."³¹

Verse 4 declares, however, that there are parameters as to the recipients of wisdom. Stated in another way, for certain kinds

²⁹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p. 74.

³⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (October–December 1979): 304 (italics his).

³¹ T. T. Perowne, *The Proverbs* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1899), p. 13.

of people, wisdom is off limits. The fool is not invited into the sage's classroom because he will only despise the wisdom of the sage's words (14:9; 18:2; 23:9).

The "naive" and "youth" are listed as the particular recipients of wisdom. The affectionate address, "my son," is present throughout the opening chapters. Fathers were responsible for conveying wisdom to their sons, so that their boys would not enter society raw and naive. Scott writes, "Specially is the young man directed to this book. His undisciplined ardor runs to waste. His mind fluctuates at the mercy of the winds of opinion in the world around him; and greatly does he need some settled master-principles to fix his purpose, choice, and conduct."³²

It is challenging to impart wisdom to the young, but it is especially difficult to give prudence to the naive (כֹּחַל, "simple, open, gullible"). The word for "naive" suggests an openness to influence and instruction, whether good or bad, an attitude common among the immature. For both the young and naive, the book is given not simply to impart knowledge but to give them greater skill as they grow in that knowledge.

The sage has declared four objectives. If a reader of Proverbs dares to proceed, he must be willing to submit to the rigors of wisdom, he must become proficient at interpreting the vehicle through which wisdom is conveyed, he must subscribe to the moral code of righteousness, and he must qualify by being interested in moving from immaturity to maturity. Having stated the four objectives, the sage moves on to the means for becoming wise.

THE INTRODUCTION EXHORTS READERS TO BE RECEPTIVE

In verse 5 the teacher gives his initial exhortation to his students: "Hear, increase in, and acquire understanding." Unlike the verses surrounding it, verse 5 does not join the chorus of statements that declare the purpose of the book. A significant grammatical shift has taken place.

From infinitives of purpose, verse 5 shifts to imperfects (which may in fact be jussives). This change leaves the interpreter with a dilemma. If there is careful design in the introduction, one must wrestle with the rationale for the change of structure. Neither style nor parenthesis serves as an adequate explanation.

³² Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 2.

While it is apparent that the writer was stating his purposes in verses 2-4, there is a certain awkwardness in the construction. The governing verb, that normally precedes infinitives, seems to be absent. There is a sense of incompleteness that may encourage the careless reader to hurry over the verses.

If one opts for a governing verb, he has two choices. First, the infinitives may find their completeness in verse 1. This assumes a "to be" verb, which is often omitted in Hebrew. Hence verse 1 might read, "The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel *are* for the purpose of—"

On the other hand the infinitives may connect with a verb that follows. Gesenius gives examples of this grammatical construction, noting that this form occurs when emphasis is placed on the infinitive³³ (also see 22:19). In this case the most likely candidate is found in verse 5. It is here that all the infinitives connect, where all the appendages find their attachment to the body.

This construction is substantiated by the normal role of title verses, which are not linked grammatically to what follows. Assuming that Ecclesiastes is written by the same author, one finds that Solomon similarly did not join his inscription with the following words.

Thus Proverbs 1:5 gives the key to reaching the stated objectives. To be intimately acquainted with wisdom (v. 2), to discern wisdom's language (v. 2b), to develop moral insight (v. 3), and to move from immaturity to maturity (v. 4), one must be willing to "hear," to be receptive. This is the key to wisdom. Though it sounds simple, it is difficult to achieve. The ability to hear is not acquired easily. Yet no student can be wise who has not first mastered the art of listening, an attitude of receptivity.

This truth is reinforced at strategic points throughout the book. In 2:1-4, a number of conditions are established if one is to be wise, and central to all is a trained ear, a heart inclined toward instruction (2:2). These two motions are unnatural, evidenced by a parent's continual need to instruct a child to listen (cf. Deut. 6:4-9). In the "other introduction" in this book (Prov. 22:17-21), the admonition to "incline your ear" is given in the opening verse.

The second line (1:5b) is stereophonic, urging a young person seeking wisdom to procure wise counsel. The wise willingly ac-

³³ Cf. Gen. 42:9; Num. 22:20; Josh. 2:3 (*Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, p. 348).

quire counsel from others, counsel that will help navigate them through life. Similar ideas are repeated elsewhere in the book (4:5; 23:23).

Verse 6 is positioned to reinforce the beneficial result of being receptive. The one who listens to instruction and acquires good counsel will then be able to have insight into the various literary forms of wisdom and their meanings (cf. v. 2b). The sage was sensitive to embrace both form and content. Only the receptive person will have the skill to master both.

THE INTRODUCTION GIVES THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE OF PURSUIT OF WISDOM

Verse 7, which concludes the introduction of Proverbs, gives the guiding principle for the pursuit of wisdom. Once a person understands the truth of this principle, he is ready for the instruction in the remainder of the book.

In this final verse another structural change and a shift in parallelism reveal the author's desire to capture the reader's attention. If the introduction may be compared to the foundation of a building, this verse is its cornerstone. The introduction ends with a strong declarative statement, serving as the motto in which the distinctive feature of Hebrew wisdom is declared—the fear of the Lord. The sage now turned to the authority which underlies this book. "The point is simple, yet vital; many profound moral systems collapse, not from lack of substance, but from lack of foundation or authority. Hebrew moral wisdom presupposes the existence of God, which in turn gives the whole system coherence, authority and integrity."³⁴ Though "the fear of the Lord" is often interpreted as meaning "reverence," Murray gives a more probing definition: "The fear of God is the soul of godliness." "The first thought of the godly man in every circumstance is God's relation to him and it, and his and its relation to God."³⁵

The importance that wisdom and Scripture as a whole attach to fearing God can hardly be overstated. The fear of God is the "beginning" of knowledge. This word יָרֵא is used in two ways: to refer to something that has priority in time or origin (e.g., Gen.

³⁴ Peter C. Craigie, "Biblical Wisdom in the Modern World: I Proverbs," *Crux* 15 (Summer 1977): 8.

³⁵ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 229.

1:1), or to a principal part. Both meanings seem to be combined in Proverbs 1:7, in view of what is said in Proverbs about fearing God. The sage wants the reader to know that this fear is the initial point to real knowledge. In 9:10, a parallel verse, the word translated "beginning" (תְּחִלָּה) is always used to refer to something done at a prior time (Gen. 13:3; 41:21; 43:18, 20; Isa. 1:26; Hos. 1:2). Von Rad, after comparing 9:10 with 1:7, concludes: "The sentence means, therefore, that the fear of God leads to wisdom. It enables a man to acquire wisdom; it trains him for wisdom."³⁶ The second line of 1:7, which antithetically states that fools despise wisdom and instruction, also fits with the sense of priority, as Blocher observes: "It could be an ironic dart flung at the ungodly: those who lack the fear of God are ignorant of the very ABC of wisdom; they lie below beginning level!"³⁷ Also the fact that the author of Ecclesiastes makes the fear of God the grand finale to his book (12:13) supports the idea of priority in Proverbs 1:7. Having tried every road that life has to offer, the writer concluded that all eventually end in deadend streets. Only as man fears God does his life have meaning.

On the other hand the sage is also declaring that the fear of the Lord is the very essence of wisdom. It is wisdom's discipline (מִסֵּר; 15:33). In underscoring this usage Kidner and McKane use such phrases as "controlling principle of knowledge" and "the queen of all the rules of steering through life."³⁸ The fear of God "places in capsule form the main truth taught by the writer."³⁹

Thus fearing God is the very heart, the germ, the choice ingredient of wisdom. One cannot be wise and fail to fear God. It is the filter through which true wisdom flows, sifting out all that is ungodly. Waltke describes its all-encompassing nature this way: "It is at one and the same time both the source and the substance, the cause and the effect."⁴⁰ The writer of Proverbs therefore was declaring that unless a person fears and reverences God,

³⁶ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p. 66.

³⁷ Henri Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom," *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977): 15.

³⁸ Derek F. Kidner, *The Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), p. 59; and McKane, *Proverbs*, p. 20.

³⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, "Wisdom Theology and the Centre of Old Testament Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 50 (July-September 1978): 138.

⁴⁰ Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology," p. 313.

he is wasting his time if he proceeds to read the rest of the book. Perowne captures it best:

I am offering, the writer would seem to say, to give you the right of entering into the House of Knowledge, to conduct you through some of its goodly chambers, to display to you a portion of the rich and varied treasures within which it is stored. But as you approach the portal, note well the inscription which is traced above it. The House is not a Palace only, but a Temple.⁴¹

Conclusion

In the first seven verses of Proverbs, the author first identified the material; second, he declared the objectives; third, he called the hopeful to receptivity; and fourth, he pointed up the motto of wisdom that aspiring "sages" must never forget.

Like a pilot going over a flight plan, the reader of Proverbs is told the kind of terrain he will find below, the objectives for his flight, and the guiding compass by which he must ever navigate. By following this flight plan, it is hoped there will be a greater appreciation of the book.

⁴¹ Perowne, *The Proverbs*, p. 41.



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