

## Foreword

Proverbial wisdom continues to be a sorely neglected topic in contemporary moral discourse, at least in North America. The growing field of narrative ethics, for example, has captivated the moral imagination of many an ethicist, theologian, and literary critic. It is widely felt that the proverb, in terms of its moral import, cannot hold a candle to the power of narrative. As scholars, educators, and even political leaders continue their worthy quest to identify those genres that provide the most effective vehicles for shaping moral character, the little proverb is all too often left in the dust. And there it lies to be picked up only by erudite paremiologists, the modern scribes and collators of proverbial lore.

Biblical scholars, too, have been known to exile the proverb to the godforsaken land of the superficial. Relegated to the periphery of biblical theology, the book of Proverbs is often considered a catalogue of simplistic sayings. Whereas the other books of biblical wisdom—Job and Ecclesiastes—are often deemed worthy of theological reflection, ancient Israel's proverbial lore, it is said, largely “tends toward the banal,” hardly worthy of “careful study by serious students.”<sup>1</sup> A more subtle bias is reflected by those who find proverbs rhetorically significant insofar as they “perform” in narrative contexts. But once captured and placed in a collection, forced out of its narrative habitat, the proverb loses its value. Death by collection, thus, becomes the coroner's report.<sup>2</sup>

Dave Bland thinks that an autopsy is highly premature, and I would heartily agree. Whether featured in a collection or embedded in a narrative, the proverb remains a potent didactic force in contemporary culture.

1. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel*, 232.

2. See, e.g., Mieder, “The Essence of Literary Proverb Study”; Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings*, 54.

Within a collection, the proverb invites lively interaction with the reader in order for its range of meaning to be disclosed. While a particular proverb's significance is prescribed to some degree in a narrative setting, it becomes more fully reader responsive in a collection. As a compact, portable distillation of wisdom, the proverb makes no claim to universal truth or even authoritative guidance, yet it has the uncanny ability to tease the mind and heart, provoking new levels of discernment. As Bland ably demonstrates, both the form and the content of the biblical proverb invite critical engagement and, in turn, foster moral responsibility. Proverbs are as much contextual as they are flexible in application. Perhaps more than any other genre of didactic discourse, the proverb embodies the scandal of particularity within its claim to truth.

That the book of Proverbs features an array of frequently contradictory sayings indicates how the sages dealt with the challenges of day-to-day living. Life, the ancients affirmed, is filled with competing allegiances and bewilderingly diverse situations that demand careful reflection and hard decisions. Small wonder that the book conveys its own *Sachkritik*: it compels the reader to think, discriminate, and act in responsible and realistic ways. Yet the power of the proverb for moral (trans)formation remains untapped in contemporary discourse.

As Bland points out, the first nine chapters of Proverbs have received the lion's share of scholarly attention. Indeed, as I have tried to show in an early programmatic study to which he refers, these chapters (as well as the concluding poem found in Prov 31:10–31) provide a metanarrative for the sayings that constitute the book's center (chapters 10–30).<sup>3</sup> But, in truth, they are only prefatory in relation to the whole of Proverbs; they serve merely to whet the appetite and provide orientation for the myriad of sayings that follow chapter 9. And so it is only appropriate that Bland gives these proverbial snippets of wisdom their literary and theological due, as did the ancient compilers.

The editors behind Proverbs were quite explicit in the way they showcased these sayings. Their introduction to the book concludes with a profile of wisdom's domicile, in which a lavish banquet is prepared for her would-be disciples (9:1–6). What does wisdom require but to leave immaturity at the front door and partake of her feast? "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed," she beckons (v. 5). Her guests include both the neophyte and the wise. And what does wisdom offer her guests at the table but a banquet of insight and a feast of fellowship? As hostess, wisdom serves a multi-course meal, a curricular cuisine of sayings and instructions. It is

3. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 22–49.

precisely her rich fare that is featured in the following chapters. To be savored, enjoyed, and digested, these proverbs are the edifying morsels that sustain moral living. More than simply food for thought, they provide the sustenance for righteousness. And what a smorgasbord it is! As food is to be tasted and consumed, so wisdom's discourse is to be heard and appropriated. And it all begins with a diet of discipline taken in small, discrete doses.

Bland's work begins with that diet of discipline. His engagement with ancient wisdom is both wide ranging and urgently relevant. Enlisting the help of many a modern sage, from the philosophical to the down to earth (Hans-Georg Gadamer and Tex Sample, for example!), Bland sheds new light upon these ancient sayings and makes them eminently accessible for any interested reader. Eschewing technical jargon, Bland is able to bring these laconic snippets to bear on some of our most systemic moral challenges, including the lack of community and the narcissistic desire to retreat into uniformity and individualism. He puts to rest all doubts that Israel's proverbial lore is lightweight and pedantic and shows that the tiny proverb is laden with the profound, timely wisdom of the ancients. What is even more remarkable, Bland does all this in a way that is fun and engaging to read, something the sages themselves would have admired.

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