

## Preface

This book has simmered in the crockpot for a long time. I hope that as a result it is not over cooked but rather the time spent on slow cook has enabled it to absorb the best flavors and ingredients of the research, reflection, and wisdom of others. Hopefully the whole process will yield positive results from following the proverbial advice of “make haste slowly.” That, however, remains for the reader to decide.

I have always been fascinated with the pithy proverb, even as a youth. I frequently heard my parents and grandparents utter proverbial sayings as a means of imparting wisdom. I took my fascination more seriously during my graduate work, focusing my dissertation on the sentence literature in Proverbs chapters 10 through 29. That was over twenty years ago. Around 1999 College Press in Joplin Missouri invited me to contribute a volume to their NIV Old Testament Commentary Series on *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, which I gladly accepted. That commentary was published in 2002 and serves as a foundation for this volume. Even before I published the College Press Commentary, however, I had already been working for several years on this kind of book. It has morphed into different shapes and sizes over the years until settling into its current form.

My goal with this volume is to bring together the best scholarship has to offer from both fields of biblical wisdom and character formation. So this is an interdisciplinary work. The very nature of wisdom calls for an openness to seek insight from all disciplines, experiences, and cultures. That is why the sage in Proverbs seeks wisdom from all corners of the world. The sage, for example, incorporates the best of wisdom material from Egyptian culture (Prov 22:17—24:22) and from foreigners like Agur (30:1) and King Lemuel (31:1). The sage also learns from creation (6:6–8), from observing others (24:32–34), and from listening to others (25:12)—even boring

conversations, according to Cornelius Plantinga!<sup>4</sup> The wise learn from every experience, culture, creature, community, and resource life offers.

In keeping with the nature of wisdom, this volume brings many different disciplines to bear on the subject of character formation. I of course begin with the book of Proverbs and specifically the sentence literature. This material serves as the source and theological foundation out of which I operate, organize, and develop the volume. Building on that foundation I engage other disciplines that help illuminate, provide fresh perspective, and bring out the contemporary relevance of the sentence literature. These disciplines include the field of homiletics, which I hope will generate ideas along the way for those who preach. The other disciplines I rely on include biblical studies, theology, rhetoric, ethics, philosophy, paremiology, psychology, cultural studies, and education theory. I want to capitalize on the best these disciplines have to offer to the task of shaping individual and corporate character.

In our materialistic culture, success is determined almost exclusively by one's wealth. Not so for the sage. For the wise in Proverbs it is one's character that governs the success or failure of a person. That is why the proverb that makes the observation "a good name is better than great wealth" seems so odd to us (Prov 22:1). It is countercultural. My aspiration is that this book will contribute to this countercultural worldview and enable readers to help put the task of character formation in working clothes.

I want to thank in particular two of my former graduate assistants for their invaluable help in enabling this project to come to completion. Sean Webb, as a critical thinker and a gifted writer, provided fresh insights, identified inconsistencies along the way, and made helpful suggestions for clarifying my thoughts. Steven Gaines, as a careful researcher and thoughtful processor, provided expertise in formatting matters, corrected a number of my inaccurate entries, and made many helpful suggestions to improve the quality of this work. I am indebted to them.

4. Plantinga, *Reading for Preaching*, 26.