

THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Introduction

From the very inception of Israel's history, she was summoned to pass on her faith to the next generation. The instruction of youth was a religious responsibility, the very reason for the choosing of Abraham: "...for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Gen 18: 19). While there was no set form that Israelite households followed in carrying out their responsibility to instruct, it seems probable that different social strata implemented the educational task differently. Concerning Israel's instructional responsibility, R. A. Culpepper concludes: "Education in ancient Israel...was largely informal and related to the family unit."¹ Over a period of time the training process underwent changes, taking on new forms to meet the challenges of new circumstances.

Israel took her responsibility to heart. The book of Proverbs offers a valuable perspective on the efforts of a community to educate its youth in the formation of moral character. While Proverbs does not describe a systematic way in which this responsibility was carried out, one can identify, various parts of the process throughout the course of the book.

The development of moral character in Proverbs, and Wisdom Literature in general, has been of little interest among scholars. This should not come as a surprise since Proverbs itself is treated as a resident alien of Scripture.²

¹ R. A. Culpepper, "Education," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 revised (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 21.

² Proverbs has been marginalized for several reasons. 1) Canonically, it appears in the third and least authoritative section of the Hebrew Scriptures. 2) Theologically, wisdom does not seem to fit into the frame of the test of the QT. Gerhard von Rad's emphasis on *Heilsgeschichte* and Walter Eichrodt's use of covenant marginalized the Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature is deemed anthropocentric. It is

Contrary to popular opinion, however, Proverbs and Wisdom Literature are a vital part of the theology of the First Testament. What I wish to do in this article is to highlight the contribution Proverbs makes to the task of moral development in youth. I begin by demonstrating that the literary or formal context of Proverbs is the family. Once this is established, I investigate how character is developed within this familial context

The Familial Context

The setting for the final form of Proverbs is the post-exilic period during the time of the Persian empire.³ Before reaching the apex of its contribution to Israelite culture during the post-exilic period, Israelite wisdom went through several stages of growth and development. The earliest stage was the pre-exilic period of folk wisdom. Stage two was the monarchic period in which wisdom was developed, nurtured, and incorporated into the court setting. The third phase of development occurred after the exile. During this time the final form of the book of Proverbs took shape. This final phase was the most productive time for Wisdom Literature in Israel.

The post-exilic period was a time when Israel faced significant change. It was a time of transition. Israel no longer had the temple, the monarchy, or the land to depend on for her identity. She had to struggle with how she could maintain her identity in this context. Wisdom helped reshape Israel's former nationalistic focus by placing her religious beliefs in a different literary form (the proverb) and extracting the exclusive language of covenant. As a result, unlike many nations taken into exile, Israel was able not only to survive but also to thrive. Religious and personal identities were not lost, but were instead redefined. As Ronald Clements concludes, "In some respects wisdom became a 'transitional philosophy,' maintaining identifiable

centered on human achievement and ability. In the biblical canon, Proverbs is too secular or the rest of the neighborhood. 3) Formally, wisdom is not narrative as is the majority of the Hebrew Scriptures. How one deals with what appears to be random collections of Proverbs is an enigma. The self-contained Proverbs have no literary context. They thus give the appearance of moralistic platitudes.

³ See Hartmut Gese, "Wisdom Literature in the Persian Period," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Introduction; The Persian Period*, eds. W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 189-218. See also Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). Patrick Skehan posits a post-exilic editing based on linguistic and structural evidence. See "A Single Editor for the Whole Book of Proverbs," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom, The Library of Biblical Studies*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: KTAV, 1976) 329-40.

links with the past, but adapting them to new ways and conditions.”⁴ Thus wisdom flourished in its use for a couple of reasons. First, the original educational function that wisdom fulfilled was heightened during the post-exilic period by the need to instruct Jews living in a predominantly Gentile world in the religious and cultural ways of Jewish communities. Second, the lack of covenantal language enabled wisdom to ground moral instruction in something higher than Jewish nationalism.⁵

Within this environment the family takes on new significance. Having been removed from the land, Israel also is severed from the clan structure that had for centuries shaped her lifestyle. From the time the Israelites left Egypt, their social structure was organized around clans, extended family units known as the **בֵּית אָב** the “father’s house”). Such a social system gave them security, identity, and economic stability. But now with Israel dispersed across the Persian Empire, the clan system is dissolved. Clements’ words are apropos in this regard:

Taken in a larger context, some useful observations may be made which have a bearing upon the role of wisdom in a biblical theology. The most obvious is that, in the post-exilic period, wisdom appears to have flourished as part of a program of education carried out with the approval of, and probably within the location of, the individual household. Begin early, be persistent and, if necessary, do not shun physical punishment, in order to achieve results. These are seriously repeated maxims for instruction, aimed at parents, instructors and pupils. The very roots of religion and virtue are seen to rest within the relatively small household context of family life. The rewards of adherence to the dictates of wisdom are claimed to include security, prosperity and ultimately happiness. All of this indicates that religion is taken out of its cultic setting and is markedly domesticated. Parents, rather than priests, hold the key to its seriousness and success! Yet it is never secular in the formal sense, since it recognizes that, deprived of its religious foundations, it cannot succeed and will lack its indispensable starting-point.⁶

The post-exilic period is a time of transition and change. The household becomes the focal point in enabling Israel to maintain her identity as God’s people. It is the central sphere for the development of moral character.⁷

⁴ Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 125.

⁵ Ronald Clements, “Wisdom and Old Testament Theology,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, eds. John Day, Robert Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 273.

⁶ Clements, “Wisdom and Old Testament Theology,” 281.

⁷ See Ronald Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 125ff.; James Crenshaw, “Education

It is this historical context that lies behind the literary form of the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs is framed in a familial setting. After the introductory paragraph (1:1-7), the exhortation of the first wisdom poem sets forth the context: "Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck" (1:8-9). The book concludes with the picture of the well-ordered house and the capable woman offering counsel (31:10-31). She is the one who "opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (31:26). In addition, it is noteworthy that the sentence sayings of 10:1-22:16 begin with this affirmation: "A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother's grief" (10:1).⁸ Such a declaration at the beginning sets the tone for hearing the sayings in a familial context. As Ronald Clements concludes: "For wisdom the household had become both a school and a spiritual training ground."⁹ In spite of clues which may point to the existence of schools in Israel,¹⁰ the primary responsibility for instruction in the book of Proverbs falls on the family.¹¹

in Israel," *JBL* 104 (1985) 614. Claus Westermann observes: "Only in the sphere of instruction does the family play a significant role," in *The Roots of Wisdom: Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*, trans. J. Daryl Charles (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 24.

⁸ .The NRSV is used whenever Scripture is quoted in this article.

⁹ Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 143.

¹⁰ In brief, there are three major arguments for the existence of schools in ancient Israel: 1) Israel followed the practices of Egypt and Mesopotamia, who had schools; 2) the high literary quality of much of the OT is difficult to explain without the existence of schools; 3) archaeological evidence points to the existence of schools. Fragmentary inscriptions found and dated around the twelfth century BCE seem to be the school exercises of young students.

Bernard Lang is of the opinion there were schools in Israel based on the image described in Prov 1:20-33 of Dame Wisdom in the city gate rebuking the young men who were assembled to learn but were not listening. See Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986). However, it is difficult to offer a definitive argument for schools in Israel based on a text that is poetic! Both James Crenshaw and Stuart Weeks maintain that no definitive answer can be known from the current evidence. See Crenshaw in "Education in Israel," *JBL*; Weeks in *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). G. I. Davies in his article "Were There Schools in Ancient Israel?" sees the evidence as strongly in favor of schools. See *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, eds. John Day, Robert Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 199-211.

¹¹ Carole R. Fontaine draws the following conclusion: "Within the private sphere of the family, the most important sage roles are those that emphasize

Responsibility for instruction is placed on the shoulders of both father and mother. Sometimes the reference to the father-son relationship in Proverbs is understood as actually referring to the relationship between a teacher and his student. However, throughout Proverbs the mother, as well as the father, is assumed to have the responsibility to teach.¹² King Lemuel gives credit to his mother for the instruction he received as a youth: “The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, which his mother taught him” (31:1). What follows are examples of the kind of advice his mother offered him.¹³ It is also possible that the advice given to the son in Proverbs 7 comes from a woman. The image in 7:6 of the person looking out the window of the house may imply a female figure.¹⁴ Whether it actually is or not, in ancient Israel the maternal role plays an important part in the education of children. This is why the *children* (sons) of the capable woman in Prov 31:28 rise up and call her blessed.

The fact that both parents are frequently referred to as fulfilling this teaching role strongly points to the recognition that it was the pupil's natural parents who were involved. The father's reminiscence of his father's teachings in 4:3 further depicts parental, not school, education. Thus whether or not Proverbs was composed for use in schools, its literary context is the instruction

teaching, and these fall equally to father and mother.” Fontaine, “The Sage in Family and Tribe,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 164. Raymond Van Leeuwen remarks, “The social setting of the instructions in Proverbs 1-9 is portrayed as parental address to adolescent 'sons' about to undertake the journey to full adulthood with its responsibilities and rewards....Hence, the primary purpose of these chapters is protreptic: to entice the 'untutored' (׳נִבֵּן) to a wisely ordered (8:5-21) and godly life (1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:5-12; 8:13; 9:10)” (113). Later he comments, “But our interest lies rather in the explicit, self-conscious function of these texts as instruction to youth in a situation of passage into adulthood” (115). See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1-9,” *Semeia* 50 (1990) 111-44.

¹²4:1-4; 6:20-21; 10:1; 15:20; 17:25; 20:20; 23:22-25; 29:15; 30:11; 30:17; 31:26, 28. There are some 14 references to the ׀נ in Proverbs as it relates to an instructional context: 1:8; 4:1-4; 6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 19:26; 23:22; 23:25; 29:15; 30:17; 31:1.

¹³Note that the advice given about sexual temptation and drinking alcohol is the kind of advice one would give to a young adult.

¹⁴The "woman at the window" was a popular motif on Phoenician ivories. The LXX translates this verse using the third person feminine. For further argument see Athalya Brenner, “Proverbs 1-9: An F Voice?” in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Athalya Brenner and Fokkeliën Dijk-Hemmes (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993) 113-30.

of the (actual) father to his (actual) son. "Father" means father, just as the parallel "mother" (1:8; 4:3; 6:20) must mean the actual mother, not a "schoolmarm." A home, not a school, is the *literary* milieu of Proverbs.¹⁵

The Function of Family

The purpose of the household in Proverbs is for the instruction of youth. But how does this purpose fit into the theology of Proverbs? Or is it simply marginal to the book's concerns? Theologically speaking, Proverbs has been deemed anthropocentric.¹⁶ It is centered on human accomplishment and has been accused of being the first cousin to secularism. Recently, however scholarship has argued that wisdom is more theocentric.¹⁷ Creation theology, according to proponents, is at the core of the wisdom corpus. This theological focus aligns wisdom material more with the mainstream of OT thought. It is creation that reveals the nature and character of God in Wisdom Literature. I would argue, however, that creation theology is not an all-inclusive motif. In Proverbs the creation motif is, for the most part, confined to the promotion of social ethics and the treatment of the poor and oppressed. While creation constitutes an essential aspect of the theology of the sages, it is not the only aspect of their theology, nor even the most important. The anthropocentric still looms large.

Thus how the anthropocentric and theocentric dimensions relate to one another is the issue.¹⁸ While it should not be denied that the theocentric view is foundational, it is not in the foreground in Proverbs. The anthropocentric pole is front and center. The concern for the success and well-being of the individual and the community has precedence. Proverbs begins and ends with a focus on humans, specifically the family. What ties these two theological

¹⁵ Michael V. Fox maintains, "There is no justification for the common assumption that the speaker is a schoolteacher." See Fox, "Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," *JBL* 116 (1997) 620. See his further comments in nn. 10 and 11.

¹⁶ See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1972); Sibley Towner, "The Renewed Authority of Old Testament Wisdom for Contemporary Faith," in *Canon and Authority*, eds. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 132-47.

¹⁷ See Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). See also Lennart Boström, *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990).

¹⁸ Lennart Boström observes: "The remarkable thing about the book of Proverbs is that the anthropocentric approach never collides with the theocentric. The probable explanation is that the sages regarded the two as complementary and not, mutually exclusive." See Boström, *The God of the Sages*, 139.

perspectives together is that they serve a common goal. Their goal is the formation of moral character.¹⁹ Both Yahweh and parents are involved in the task of training youth in the way in which their moral character should develop.²⁰ The result is that the theocentric and anthropocentric views are no longer perceived as conflicting poles. The synthesizing force which engages the human and divine wills is the formation of moral character.²¹ This fact also explains why the anthropocentric captures center stage in the book. The sages were deeply concerned with the moral formation of individuals for the sake of maintaining order in society and the larger community.

At this point, however, a qualification is in order. Proverbs is not concerned with the family's psychological or emotional well-being. Nor does Proverbs engage in introspection, scrutinizing family dysfunctions and idiosyncrasies. The focus is on the family as an environment of instruction. It is on the call to youth to respond openly to sagacious instruction (1:20-33).

What is the basic content of the instruction that parents give? The fundamental thrust is revealed in the prologue in Prov 1:1-7. This is the purpose statement of the book.²² The recipients of these proverbs are taught "righteousness, justice and equity" (v. 3)²³ This instruction is fleshed out in the wisdom poems of chapters 1-9, which are a series of parental admonitions to the young adult.²⁴ In like fashion, the purpose of the dense thicket of sayings in chapters 10-29 is to instruct in the way of righteousness. Clustered at the beginning of this section is a series of proverbs on the

¹⁹ I am indebted to William Brown for calling attention, to the central role that character development plays in the Wisdom Literature. Unlike Brown, however, I do not see the theology of character as the template through which *all* of Wisdom Literature is interpreted. See William Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

²⁰ Note the collaborative effort of parent, youth, and Yahweh as described in Prov 2:1-8. Parents initiate the instruction responsibility (2:1-2), but Yahweh is the one who provides the resources for accomplishing the task (2:6-8).

²¹ See William Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 1-4.

²² The five statements in verses 2-6 begin with the preposition, "ל", which is connected with the infinitive construct.

²³ See 2:9 and 8:20. See also William Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 26, 43-49.

²⁴ Claudia Camp has observed: Wisdom personified as feminine offers an interpretive framework for the collection of proverbs. The feminine image enables the book of Proverbs to be a unified whole and function as part of a canon of religious literature. It enables the sentence sayings to be cradled in a narrative context. However, Camp does not clarify how the narrative context informs our understanding of the individual proverbs. See Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1985).

righteous and the wicked which serves to set the agenda for the rest of the sayings.²⁵ What the way of righteousness involves is fleshed out in the myriad of sayings that follows. Among other things, it encompasses the appropriate use of speech, respect for others, a proper sense of timing in dealing with people, integrity in relationships, the ability to resolve disputes, the proper use of wealth, and reverence for Yahweh. In Proverbs the righteous person is one who knows how to live responsibly before God. In many respects, the term is synonymous with “wise.” Righteous persons live wisely because they are obedient both to God and to the teachings of the sages.²⁶

Thus in Proverbs, the anthropocentric focus and the theocentric foundation unite to accomplish a common goal: instruction in the formation of moral character. Through the gift of wisdom, the human dimension yields to the divine will to enable the divine to do its work in the lives of individuals who have nurtured a “listening ear.” The parent provides the initial instruction to youth. Yahweh empowers those who incline their heart to understanding (2:1-22).²⁷ Proverbs is a collection of sayings, experiences, and insights written primarily to equip youth to contribute to the well-being of the community.

The Process of Moral Instruction

In the book of Proverbs, the means by which moral instruction is passed on to youth is multifaceted. Again, Proverbs does not layout this process in an organized fashion. Elements of the process are implicitly referred to throughout the book. I want to identify and describe a few: the employment of the rod, the use of wise reproof, the implementation of oral repetition, the art of discernment, and the skill of observing life.

²⁵ The largest number of sayings in Prov 10-29 on any single topic deals with the righteous and the wicked. John Goldingay has discovered that the righteous/wicked sayings cluster at the beginning of chapters 10-22. In 10:1-11:13 forms of the root for righteous (קָדַשׁ) appear nineteen times and for wicked (רָעָה) eighteen. He concludes that the concentration of righteous/wicked sayings at the beginning of the unit establishes an ethical context for chapters 10-22. See John Goldingay, “The Arrangement of Sayings in Proverbs 10-15,” *JSOT* 61 (1994) 75-83.

²⁶ Boström, 213.

²⁷ For further reflection on the educational process described in Proverbs 2, see Michael V. Fox, “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2,” *JBL* 113 (1994) 233-43. Fox summarizes the text with the following remark: “Father, mother, and God collaborate with the youngster in the shaping of moral character which will remain a reliable source of protection” (243).

Two means by which youth are instructed are referred to in Proverbs 29:15: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by a neglected child.” Two forms of discipline are described here: physical and verbal. The first form has to do with the use of the rod in the process of instruction. Sages appear to promote the use of corporal punishment as the following proverb graphically depicts:

Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die. If you beat them with the rod, you will save their lives from Sheol (23:13-14).²⁸

The common stereotype of pedagogy in Israel is that it is a harsh and mindless affair that includes a healthy dose of zealous thrashings. John Collins remarks, “It is typical of all ancient wisdom that learning and education was thought to involve suffering.”²⁹ However, strictness is not viewed as incompatible with love (13:24).³⁰

While there is little doubt that ancient cultures resorted to physical punishment in the educational process, there is some sign of at least the limitations of corporal punishment as the following proverb suggests:

A rebuke (גְּעֵרָה) strikes deeper into a discerning person than a hundred blows into a fool (17:10).

Especially as one examines Proverbs 1-9, corporal punishment is not among the tools used to educate youth; and though Dame Wisdom reproves, she never uses the rod. The description of the education process in chapter two, for example, is a collaborative effort among parents, youth, and Yahweh.³¹ Yahweh and Wisdom offer reproof; parents give instruction. None resort to the rod.³²

²⁸ Eight times **טֹבֵט** (rod) is used to describe corporal punishment in Proverbs (10:13; 13:24; 22:8; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 26:3; 29:15). One time the term **חֹטֵר** (rod) is used (14:3). From Proverbs 13:24 we have coined the contemporary gnomic saying “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

²⁹ John Collins, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980) 40.

³⁰ See 2 Sam 7:14-16. Also, Paul's advice to fathers is in keeping with the spirit of the sage: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4).

³¹ See Fox, “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2.”

³² The social context of Proverbs is the world of the young adult. Notice the kind of advice given. Youth are to stay away from gang-related activities (1:8-19); they are to avoid the temptress (2:16-19; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:6-27); they are to avoid the overuse of wine (23:29-35); they are to live a disciplined life and not yield

The second form of discipline described in Prov 29:15 is verbal: reproof.³³ The noun reproof (תּוֹכַחַת) appears in Proverbs more than in any other book in the Hebrew Scriptures.³⁴ Reproof in Proverbs has to do with training in moral instruction (see 19:25 and 21:11). Reproof in the mind of the sage is not something that is practiced by the contentious man (26:17-28) or the contentious woman (27:15-16). That is, reproof is not verbal abuse or persistent nagging. Neither is reproof a verbal response that comes only in the context of an angry moment. When appropriately used, reproof is a skill that is learned through experience and through applying wisdom. The sages describe it as a work of art: “Like gold or an ornament of gold is a wise reprove to a listening ear” (25:12).³⁵ Elsewhere reproof is described as wholesome admonition:

The ear that heeds wholesome admonition³⁶ will lodge among the wise. Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who heed admonition gain understanding. The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor: (15:31-33).

This text envisions the instruction the sage gives to the youth. It uses the familiar sapiential language of “admonition” or “reproof” (תּוֹכַחַת vv. 31, 32). This is not just any kind of reproof; this is wholesome, life-giving (חַיִּים; v. 31) instruction. Youth are exhorted to heed admonition and discipline.

Reproof has as its goal the instruction of youth in the ways of righteousness, justice, and equity. In its best sense, the whole of Proverbs is a collection of

to the temptation slothfulness (6:6-11; 24:30-34). This advice is blunt and graphic-the kind given to young adults, not grade school children!

³³ The term is often used with מוֹסֵר (discipline, instruction) in Proverbs (3:11; 5:12; 6:23; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:5; 15:10; 15:32). The Hebrew word for “reproof” is also the word for reasoned argument such as would be put forward by a lawyer in the courtroom (cf. Job 13:6; 23:4; Ps 38:14).

³⁴ It occurs twenty-four times in the OT; sixteen of those are in Proverbs. The verb יָכַח occurs 59 times in the OT. Its most frequent occurrence is in Job (17 times) and Proverbs (10 times).

³⁵ In the context of this proverb, the gold referred to in the first line is more than likely gold that is fashioned into an earring. Such attractive jewelry is compared to the process of offering reproof that is in good taste to one who has a receptive ear. Both the ring and reproof are viewed as works of art.

³⁶ The phrase for “wholesome admonition” is תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים; literally “admonition of life.”

advice that could be classified as reproof. In the opening paragraph of 1:8-19, a wise father offers reproof to the listening ear of the son. The father warns the youth about the dangers of living by the rules of a gang-type lifestyle. The sage in 7:6-27 describes in graphic details the enticing and destructive ways of the temptress. This is wise reproof to the attentive ear. King Lemuel recalls with appreciation the constructive reproof his mother gave him as a youth (31:1-9). She warned him about the baleful temptations of the seductress and the ruinous effects of wine and strong drink, and she admonishes him as king to practice justice and righteousness toward the poor and afflicted (31:5, 8-9).

In Proverbs, offering reproof is a way of holding up experiences of life before young adults in order for them to have an image of how they are to live morally responsible lives. To offer constructive reproof is one form in which moral instruction is taught. Good discipline aims at education; it is concerned with how much a youth learns, not how much it hurts. Though rebuke can turn into nagging and even verbal abuse (26:17-28), its constructive function is to develop character. In fact, reproof which is forthright but wise is more productive than a superficial demonstration of love.³⁷ Reproof finds its theological moorings in the way in which Yahweh instructs his children:

My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
for the Lord reproves the one he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights (Prov 3:11-12).

There is such a close relationship in this text between the discipline of the Lord and the discipline of a father to a youth that the discipline of a loving father who offers wise reproof is really an extension of Yahweh's discipline.

Woven into the process of reproof is a heavy dose of oral repetition. Through memorization the sages infuse their instructions into young, pliable minds. This is apparently what the sages are referring to when they exhort youth to keep the father's instructions "on your fingers and write them on the tablet of your heart" (7:3; cf. also 3:3; 1:9; 22:17-21).³⁸ These instructions

³⁷ Compare the following proverbs: "Better is open reproof than hidden love" (27:5). "Whoever reproves a person will afterward find more favor than one who flatters with the tongue" (28:23). See also Eccl 7:5: "It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise, than to hear the song of fools."

³⁸ See André Lemaire, "Education: Ancient Israel," in *ABD*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 309.

are packaged in the memorable form of the proverb. Parallelism³⁹ enable the proverb to be tucked away easily into the corners of the mind ready for active duty when the occasion arises. Proverbs make instructions portable.⁴⁰

In terms of its socio-historical context, the proverb was of primary importance during the transitional years of the post-exilic period. When Israel lost its major institutions, was exiled and dispersed abroad, the sages reframed their beliefs, packaging them not in narratives but in proverbial form to pass on to their children. In fact, Gerhard von Rad holds that throughout Israel's life proverbs may have been more important for making daily decisions than were the ten commandments.⁴¹ While Israel was in exile, proverbs served as survival tools.⁴² Even though the sages taught youth to develop reasoning skills, to plan for the future, to think critically, there were times when youth had to make immediate decisions in the heat of temptations and moral dilemmas. To have a mental storehouse of proverbs provided the resources for youth to meet the demands of such occasions.⁴³

The sages, however, are not interested just in having youth memorize oral instruction. They are quite concerned that youth learn to engage the mind. The sages want students to learn the art of discernment (1:2, 6). The discerning student is the one who develops a "listening ear" (25:12). The sages want to equip students with the ability to think critically.⁴⁴ In their

³⁹ Parallelism is a dynamic quality of Hebrew poetry in which the second line in some way emphasizes, or seconds, the first line.

⁴⁰ James Crenshaw refers to this portable quality when he defines the proverb as "a winged word outliving a fleeting moment." James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 67.

⁴¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 26.

⁴² This is Ronald Clements's thesis in *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁴³ Walter Harrelson's remarks are apropos (though he oversimplifies the thought process of wisdom): "Wisdom operates without the necessity of synthesis. This is perhaps its most characteristic feature. Humans need both disciplines of philosophy/logic and phronesis/wisdom thinking....They need the carefully articulated picture of the world and its parts which comes from systematic thought that aims at synthesis. They need equally-and this is my point-the mode of thinking that can stop short of synthesis. That is what the ancient world called wisdom....A society needs to have a large number of observations that can be applied to given situations unthinkingly, immediately, without necessary reference to some coherent scheme of thought within which they fit..." (10-11). See Harrelson, "Wisdom and Pastoral Theology," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 7 (1966) 6-14.

⁴⁴ See John Eaton, "Memory and Encounter: An Educational Ideal," in *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages*, eds. Heather A. McKay and David

instruction, the sages give no pat answers.⁴⁵ For example, while the proverbs in chapters 10-15 emphasize the simple, conventional theology of wisdom (wise people prosper, foolish people suffer), Prov 16:1-9 quickly dispels any mechanical or mindless approach to that theology. Prov 16:1-9 throws a wrench in the conventional cogs of wisdom claiming that humans may make their plans, but Yahweh has the final say. This cluster of proverbs in verses 1-9 describes the complexity of a world that lives with the tension between human freedom and divine sovereignty. No simple answers exist.

It appears, however, that some students were attracted to the simple route of receiving wisdom. Prov 17:16 reveals the concern of the sages in regard to a lack of interest in learning discernment: “What is this price in the hand of a fool to acquire wisdom, when there is no mind?” Some students believed they could gain understanding apart from using the mind. All they needed to do was to pay the tuition cost and wisdom was theirs for the taking. Wisdom was a commodity, a matter of learning some techniques, accepting certain beliefs, and memorizing a few proverbs. But not so in the eyes of the sage. The answers were not cut and dried (cf. 26:4, 5). Students had to learn to think. They had to interact with others. Students who accepted the challenge came to realize that understanding is a process in which “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (27:17).

Among other things, lack of discernment manifests itself in those who develop the habit of speaking before thinking. The consequences result in significant harm inflicted on others (25:20; 27:14). In the same vein, the person who does not know how and when to use a proverb lacks discernment. Such a person is described as foolish (27:7,9). The ability to discover that which is appropriate for a particular situation is an essential ingredient of wisdom (25:11). Thus for the sages, the development of moral character comes as a result of a genuine engagement of the mind in discerning what is appropriate or not appropriate for the occasion at hand.

The art of discernment is also used to engage students in another process of instruction: the skill of learning to observe life. The strategy of the sage is to provide youth with opportunities to observe experiences at a distance

J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 179-91.

⁴⁵ The individual proverbs are not timeless truths. Neither are they, contrary to popular opinion, general truths. Rather, they are sayings that are appropriated to specific contexts. It takes wisdom to know how and when to use a proverb. Wisdom is not so much in the proverb as it is in the proverb user. Alyce McKenzie describes proverbs as more like spotlights than floodlights. See McKenzie, *Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom for the Pulpit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) xvii.

without having to pay the consequences of irresponsible behavior. The sages are not interested in sheltering youth from the harsh realities of life. They want youth to know and experience vicariously the dangers of certain lifestyles. Thus youth are exposed to the crooked speech of wicked men (2:12-15) and the smooth deceptive speech of wicked women (2:16-19). Youth are introduced to the violent behavior of gangs (1:8-19). They are escorted to the red light district of town (7:6-27). They are shown the havoc alcohol wreaks on its victims (23:29-35). They even get a taste of the devastating consequences of a life of indolence (24:30-34). Exposing youth to experiences they can observe in others is a form of inoculation, a powerful means of “receiving instruction” (24:32).

The sage, however, exposes youth not only to negative experiences but to positive ones as well. Youth are given a glimpse of the well-ordered family (31:10-31). They are shown the ways of the prudent so. They are exposed to the seven-pillared house of Dame Wisdom and the ordered life she offers (9:1-12). Youth observe the ways of the ant and see the results of hard work and self-discipline (6:6-8). They observe creation around them and learn wisdom (30:24-28). For the sage, then, instruction occurs in observing life. In the process of observing life, one learns to reflect on those experiences with discernment.

Wisdom devotes much effort to the instruction of youth. While there is no complete picture of the process, the gravity of the task for both parents and youth is clearly portrayed. The process is rigorous. It calls on parents to initiate the process, to offer reproof, to seek out opportunities to instruct. It calls on youth to respond receptively: to receive reproof openly, to engage the mind for the task of memorizing, for thinking, for observing. But this demanding assignment seems always to appear in the context of a deep respect for the value of the individual as that individual seeks to contribute to the well-being of the whole community.

The Goal of Moral Instruction

What is the goal of these instructional tools and of the whole educational process of wisdom? To respond to that, it is first helpful to look at the absence of such training. One of the consequences of an undisciplined youth is that such a one wreaks havoc on the larger community. Prov 29:18 takes the principle of instruction beyond the home to the neighborhood and city: “Where there is no prophecy the people cast off restraint; but happy are those who keep the law.” The King James Version translates the first line in the most familiar way: “Where there is no vision the people perish.” The proverb is frequently understood to mean that where people have no dreams

for the future they will not survive.⁴⁶ This translation, however, makes the proverb impotent. In 29:18 “vision”⁴⁷ is a term that refers to moral instruction or revelation, not to the imagination or foresight of the people. In fact, the word “vision” or “prophecy” in the first line is parallel with “law”⁴⁸ in the second. Thus verse 18a affirms that where people have no respect or consideration for the instruction of the wise, there is chaos: “the people cast off restraint.” That is, there is no discipline.⁴⁹

With the second line of the proverb, there is an important shift that occurs, a shift from the plural to the singular. This shift is lost in the NRSV because of its use of inclusive language. A somewhat more literal reading is “...but blessed is he who keeps the law.” There is a contrast between an immoral community in the first line and a morally responsible individual in the second. One implication may be that even though a society may lose its moral bearings and cast off restraint, an individual who follows sagacious advice can choose otherwise. Such a person maintains strong ethical character even in the midst of a corrupt society.

This advice is precisely what the parents seek to give their son in 1:8-19. Here the youth is tempted to become a part of a gang that has no regard for others or for the community. Such a group rejects the instruction that is given them by their parents (v. 8). They cast off all restraint. They steal, abuse, and mistreat others in order to gain selfishly for themselves. They are schemers, mischief-makers, a gang without scruples. However, their lifestyle is attractive, and they seem to have quite a following. They share equally in the spoils of their conquests. They practice the philosophy “all for one and one for all” (v. 14). Yet the youth who is being lured can make a choice to reject that enticing way of life and follow in the way of sound instruction. He can maintain strong moral character even in the midst of unscrupulous people. If he does, according to Prov 29:18, he is blessed.

⁴⁶ George Barna uses this proverb as a biblical basis for stressing that churches need goals and visions. See Barna, *The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and Apply God's Vision for Your Ministry* (Ventura: Barna Research Group, 1992).

⁴⁷ The Hebrew term is רְאוּיָה . See Amos 1:1; Isa 1:1; Nah 1:1.

⁴⁸ תּוֹרָה (torah or instruction) here may refer to God's law as revealed through the prophets, but more likely it refers to the instruction given by the wise, including father and mother.

⁴⁹ William McKane translates this line as follows: “Where there is no vision people are undisciplined.” See McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 257.

Those who are given solid moral training in the home become responsible citizens in the community even when many in that community are corrupt. But the development of moral character is not for the sake of having skills for one's personal success. Moral instruction is about preparing youth to serve the larger community. The end result is imaged in Prov 31:10-31. Here the youth has come of age and is now living responsibly within the family and society. The capable woman is not depicting the ideal wife that every youth is supposed to desire; instead, she herself represents wisdom incarnate. She is what wisdom looks like when it is nurtured and developed. The capable woman provides for the welfare of her family as well as the community. Here the mature youth, the one who has come of age, who is now established in the community, is actively involved in the lives of those around (vv. 13-19). She encourages others; she is a wise counselor (v. 26); she engages in instruction (v. 26); she ministers to the poor and the needy (v. 20); she has the respect of her friends and family (v. 28-29). In a word, she practices righteousness, justice, and equity. The book of Proverbs is about youth who journey beyond the protected walls of home into the mainstream of society to fulfill their roles responsibly so that righteousness exalts the nation (14:34). Such is a description of one who truly fears the Lord. This is the goal of wisdom's instruction.

Conclusion

In Proverbs the primary function of the family is to prepare youth for living morally responsible lives. Responsibility lies with both parents and youth in the educational process. Parents initiate the process (2:1-2; 4:1-4). They provide the loving caring environment where instruction can most effectively occur. They offer wise reproof; words that instruct, encourage, caution, and guide. They give youth a mental repertoire of proverbial sayings that enable them to face daily moral decisions responsibly. They actively engage the mind of the youth in the art of critical thinking. They provide opportunities for youth to observe some of the harsh realities of life. These parents are invested in the well-being of their children.

The stereotypical view of adolescence in our culture today describes it as a period of rebellion; it is a time to "sow one's wild oats." Youth, it is believed, have little interest in moral or spiritual matters.⁵⁰ Thus conventional wisdom advises, "leave them alone, be patient, lay low; eventually they will come around." "If they do not have solid instruction given to them prior to the teen years, it's too late anyway." William

⁵⁰ Thomas G. Long, "Beavis and Butt-Head Get Saved," *Theology Today* 51 (1994) 199-203.

Willimon refers to the present generation of young people as the “abandoned Generation”⁵¹ because parents have, by and large, been absent from their lives. In contrast, Proverbs depicts fathers and mothers deeply engaged in the instruction of youth.

However, youth have responsibility as well. They can choose to reject a parent's discipline. There is the youth who scoffs at instruction (13:1); there is the foolish son (10:1), the one who brings shame to his family (29:15). But the responsible youth has cultivated an attentive ear (2:1-2). Such a youth is open to receiving instruction (22:17-19). No, the task is not easy. In the initial stages, seeking wisdom and developing moral character is wearisome (2:3-4). It demands critical engagement of the mind. But the one who perseveres receives satisfaction. Such a youth delights in doing right (2:9-10).

However, neither parents nor young people striving to live uprightly are left to their own devices. Underlying the whole instruction process is Yahweh, who supplies the strength and grace for both parties to fulfill their responsibilities. Yahweh gives wisdom. He offers protection from the destructive lifestyles of the wicked (2:7-8). He preserves the way of those who walk in integrity (2:7-11).

In submission to Yahweh's will, parents strive to train up responsible youth in the way in which they should morally live out their lives. Youth, in response, endeavor to comply by cultivating the listening ear. They learn to fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

51 William Willimon, “Hunger in This Abandoned Generation,” in *Sharing Heaven's Music: The Heart of Christian Preaching*, ed. Barry L. Callen (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 21-32.

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