

**A PROVERB IN THE HAND IS WORTH TWO IN THE BUSH:
A HERMENEUTICAL PROPOSAL FOR HANDLING BIBLICAL PROVERBS**

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A PROVERB IN THE HAND IS WORTH TWO IN THE BUSH: A HERMENEUTICAL PROPOSAL FOR HANDLING BIBLICAL PROVERBS

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It is a truism to say that the theme of the book of Proverbs is wisdom. After all, the word appears in the collection 118 times in all its forms; that's approximately once every 8 verses on average. The universally recognized contrast in Proverbs is between the *wise* (חָכָם, 41x) and the *fool* (כְּסִיל, 49x).¹ But another, less noticed emphasis also runs through the book. A major theme pervading the book of Psalms—the running contrast between the two kinds of people that populate the earth, the *righteous* (צַדִּיק, 46x)² and the *wicked* (רָשָׁע, 81x)—continues to dominate Proverbs as well. In fact, the contrast in Proverbs between the *righteous* (צַדִּיק, 64x) and the *wicked* (רָשָׁע, 77x) is essentially *tripled* over what one finds in Psalms, since Psalms (2641 verses) is nearly three times the size of Proverbs (915 verses).³ The assumption that Psalms juxtaposes the *righteous* and the *wicked* whereas Proverbs primarily juxtaposes the *wise* and the *foolish* is inaccurate; the sages of Proverbs value wisdom over foolishness, but the contrast between the *righteous* and the *wicked* predominates in Proverbs even *more* than in the Psalms.

A proverb, however, is a very different kind of literary animal than a psalm, or a command, or a letter, or a historical narrative pericope. And laws of literature govern the behavior of literary animals just as laws of nature govern the behavior of natural animals. A proverb is a species of wisdom literature, so our exploration of this topic needs to begin there, however generally and briefly.

1. BIBLICAL WISDOM

The English word “wisdom” has a fairly narrow range of customary usage focusing primarily on *intellectual aptitude*.⁴ Usage of the Hebrew terms (חָכְמָה, חָכָם) demonstrates that biblical wisdom has less to do with intellectual aptitude and more to do with practical aptitude. It involves the application of theory to practice to describe *adeptness, proficiency, skill* in whatever area is under consideration in the context.⁵ As such, biblical wisdom is not a matter of genetic material or innate IQ; it is learned, and increases with practice and experience—and that is good news for all of us. Put simply, proverbial wisdom is *skill at living life in the presence of God*. That's why Waltke can say, “A person could memorize the book of Proverbs and still lack wisdom, if it did not affect his heart, which informs behavior.”⁶

2. WISDOM LITERATURE

Wisdom literature is a unique, ancient, diverse, and culturally ubiquitous literary genre with its own rules of interpretation—“a family of literary genres common in the Ancient Near East in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated.”⁷ Two characteristics set biblical wisdom

¹ Other words, of course, descriptively designate both of these categories; but these are the primary terms for the two kinds of people set in opposition to one another.

² Again, other words also describe both of these categories, but these are the major terms. Also, the frequencies noted include only references to people, not God.

³ I.e., on average, צַדִּיק occurs once per every 57 verses in Psalms vs. once per every 14 verses in Proverbs (4x as frequently); רָשָׁע occurs once every 33 verses in Psalms vs. once every 12 verses in Proverbs (2.75x as frequently).

⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two primary senses: (1) sound judgment or discernment, and (2) knowledge or enlightenment. “Skillful” is listed as an obsolete sense of “wise” from the 16th century on.

⁵ Those areas can be quite diverse: textile craftsmanship (Exod 35:30–33), social craftiness (2 Sam 13:3), play-acting talent (2 Sam 14:2), diplomacy (2 Sam 20:16, 22), tactical warfare (Isa 10:13), sailing and ship-caulking (Ezek 27:8–9), and even such unlikely activities as snake-charming (Ps 58:4–5), professional funerary mourning (Jer 9:17–18), and doing evil (Jer 4:22). This flexibility explains how Solomon can depict “wisdom” in such contrasting terms. On the one hand he counsels, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom” (Prov 4:7); on the other he bemoans that “in much wisdom is much grief” (Eccl 1:18). The common denominator is a certain kind of skill, but what explains the apparent contradiction is context. The former is primarily theological/sociological/practical skill in its contextual coloring; the latter is predominantly philosophical and investigative skill in its orientation.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, NICOT 2 vols., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 2005), 1:77.

⁷ D. A. Hubbard, “Wisdom Literature,” *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 1245.

literature apart from its contemporary ANE expressions: (1) the biblical worldview that informed and shaped the thinking of its authors, and (2) concursive inspiration, which set down God's thoughts through their pens. "God used the sage's keen observations of creation and humanity and his cogent reflections upon them, informed by faith in Israel's covenant-keeping God, to produce the wisdom literature" of the Bible.⁸

"The wisdom literature in Scripture is similar to extrabiblical wisdom literature in many ways, but unlike" the wisdom literature of other cultures, biblical wisdom is rooted in "the conviction that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 9:10; Eccl 12:13)."⁹ Biblical wisdom literature, in other words, is not grounded in human intelligence or ingenuity or observation; it is grounded in and bounded by a specific worldview context, particularly the theology of the Pentateuch. "Pagan wisdom, though it, too, may be religious, has no anchor in the covenant God."¹⁰

Proverbs' similarity to pagan literature is part and parcel of Scripture's incarnation within its historical milieu. Its theological significance does not depend on the originality of its individual sentences or sayings . . . The theological significance of the OT rests rather on the connection of all its literature with the LORD, the God of Israel. The theological significance of Proverbs lies in its affirmation that the LORD brought "wisdom" into existence, revealed it to humanity, and, as Guarantor, upholds its revealed moral order.¹¹

It is that scriptural worldview lens on life that lends biblical wisdom its theological significance and distinctive authority. The similarities—in both form and even occasionally sentiment—between biblical wisdom literature and contemporary pagan wisdom literature¹² do not undermine its value or authority. Since the fall, pagan philosophy has had to poach many of its ideas from the King's forest.¹³ That more accurately explains similarities between biblical and other ANE laws, stories, or wisdom tropes, rather than biblical writers borrowing ideas from their pagan neighbors. Being as wise as he is reputed to have been, Solomon most certainly would have displayed a keen interest in the wisdom literature of others; wise men do not isolate themselves from the wisdom of others. But we are also informed that Solomon's wisdom tutored the sages of the surrounding nations (1 Kgs 4:34), who surely learned and borrowed from him.

2.1. Types of Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature is innately poetic (in a broad sense), with all the challenges of the typically terse language that characterizes most poetry. The exegetical rules of the game are shaped not only by the poetic form but also by how proverbs are designed to work and what they are meant to do. Not all wisdom literature is proverbial in form.¹⁴ Some is **reflective** in character—discourses that explore the enigmas of life and faith, ponder the meaning of existence, or probe the nature of the relationship between God and man. This reflective wisdom may take the form of extended **monologues** (e.g., Proverbs 1–9 and 30–31, or Ecclesiastes) or even **dialogues** (e.g., Job 4–27). The other major kind of wisdom literature is **aphoristic** in nature—brief, terse, pithy sayings that articulate principles for welfare and success (e.g., Proverbs 10–29).¹⁵ And it is precisely their self-contained terseness, usually expressed without the benefit of explanation, qualification, or context, that can often make them so challenging to decipher.

⁸ Waltke, 1:54–55. In the specific case of Solomon, of course, an additional dynamic was the unique endowment of divine wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29–34).

⁹ John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2015), 51, 1.

¹⁰ D. A. Hubbard, "Wisdom," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 1244.

¹¹ Waltke, 1:66. Likewise, House: "This insistence on the one God who reveals wisdom distinguishes Israelite thinking from that of its ancient counterparts. . . . The forms of the literature are similar to those of other nations, but the most important detail, Yahweh as its only stated source, is not." Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 449.

¹² See, e.g., Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVPO, 1964), 16–21; cf. Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985), 125–41.

¹³ The only way for the unbeliever to make sense of life and function in a reality created by a God whom he knows but suppresses (Romans 1) is by adopting principles and procedures that may not logically coalesce with the rest of his unbelieving worldview.

¹⁴ The distinctions in kinds of wisdom literature are drawn from Hubbard, "Wisdom Literature," 1245.

¹⁵ The "proverbs" proper appear in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and chapters 25–29. The material in 22:17–24:34 is immediately distinguished by the multiplicity of 1MS pronouns of direct address to the reader (22:17–21; 23:15–19; 23:26ff; 24:13ff; 24:21ff;

2.2. Interpreting Wisdom Literature

In giving to us an inspired revelation, God could have provided a textbook of theology in purely propositional form—a list of doctrinal truths to be believed and of duties to perform. Instead, he revealed his mind in words communicated through a vast variety of humanly invented literary genres.

We understand intuitively and experientially that not all forms of written communication are the same, or handled the same. No one reads and interprets poetry in the same way they read and interpret a car repair manual, or Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* vs. a history of the Third Reich, or a book of philosophy vs. a recipe for chocolate chip cookies.

Consequently, how we interpretively handle any given passage of Scripture depends very much on what sort of literature it is, and what rules govern the interpretation of that sort of literature. When we handle any genre of Scripture, we need to handle it in keeping with the “rules” that naturally govern that particular genre. We invented genres and their rules (though as J. R. R. Tolkien famously observed, our ‘inventions’ are merely sub-creations, echoes of the creative capacity built into the image of God that we bear). Different genres work in different ways, because we invented them to do so. Otherwise, there is no point of different genres at all—either in human literature or biblical literature.

Proverbial wisdom literature is a distinctive literary subgenre. When we read a collection of proverbs (aphoristic wisdom), we should not expect to find an account of historical events, or prophecy, or an unconditional covenant promise; that is not how the proverbial genre functions in any culture. Again, literary genres function according to their nature and need to be interpreted according to their own rules. Not only do those rules change when you step into the wisdom literature; they can vary even within wisdom literature itself. That brings us to the primary focus of this paper.

3. NATURE OF PROVERBS

We use the word “Proverbs” to refer to both a specific literary form and to a book of the Bible (which, as it happens, is not limited to that specific literary form). We tend to think of the whole book of Proverbs as a collection of independent topical wisdom sayings. But that misconception will skew our understanding, interpretation, and application of certain parts of the book.

Proverbs is comprised of divisions distinguished by the two distinctive subgenres already mentioned, each governed by distinct hermeneutical rules. Proverbs 1–9 comprises *reflective* wisdom consisting of discursive, extended monologues. The verses in this section of Proverbs are not proverbs in the technical or formal sense; they have as much continuity and contextual development as Ecclesiastes. Proverbs 10–29,¹⁶ by contrast, is a compilation of mostly epigrammatic aphorisms, observations, and maxims. The verses in this section of the book are the *proverbs* of Proverbs, and they need to be understood according to the rules that govern that specific sub-genre. These chapters, and the verses in them, generally have only limited continuity and localized contextual flow, if any. Finally, Proverbs 30–31 revert to *reflective* wisdom; “the words of Agur” (Prov 30) are an autobiographical collection (the first person

24:30–34), which occur dozens of times in chapters 1–9, but disappear until 22:17ff (with the sole exception of 19:27; cf. 27:11). Similarly, the expression of direct address (“my son”) that peppers chs 1–9 (15x) likewise disappears until 22:17–24:34 (6x), again, with the sole exception of 19:27 (cf. 27:11). If Proverbs 1–9 functions as a prologue to the collection of Solomon’s proverbs, Proverbs 22b–24 might almost serve as an epilogue to that collection. Proverbs 25:1 introduces yet another collection of “the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied.” Not coincidentally, Proverbs 1–9 (29x) and 22b–24 (24x) also comprise the most concentrated segment by far of negative admonitions (prohibitions) in the book (only 8x in Proverbs 10–22a). See below under 3.1.3.

¹⁶ Technically, 24:23–34 are editorially sectioned off as “also for the wise” before a final section of Solomonic proverbs recorded by Hezekiah’s scribes (25:1–29:27). But for all practical purposes these may be considered as proverbs proper as well. Even the extended story/instruction of 24:30–34 is not unknown in the main proverbial collection (e.g., 23:29–35).

singular pronoun is conspicuous) of several categories of mostly numerical sayings,¹⁷ while “the words of Lemuel” (Prov 31) comprise a discursive monologue on a single subject.

3.1. Defining Proverbs

The primary focus of this paper is the *proverbs* of Proverbs.¹⁸ A proverb may be defined in terms of four constituent characteristics: (1) *a portable saying*, (2) *in poetic form*, (3) *expressing a general life observation*, which is (4) *conditioned by a cultural worldview*.¹⁹ By extension, a *biblical proverb* is (1) *a portable saying*, (2) *in poetic form*, (3) *expressing a general life observation*, which is (4) *conditioned by a biblical worldview*. In other words, in definition and function, a biblical proverb is exactly like any other proverb. If either the definition or function of proverbs in the Bible differs from those outside the Bible, then biblical proverbs *cease to be proverbs at all*. The key point of distinction is the fourth component—the informing worldview. The cultural worldview that shapes biblical proverbs is not *merely* racial (Hebrew) or geographical (Middle Eastern), but religious, ethical, and theological; the worldview that shapes biblical proverbs is a culture informed by scriptural revelation.

3.1.1. Proverbs are portable.

Portable means *short*. A proverb is usually one sentence, sometimes two; a paragraph is not a proverb.²⁰ Portable also connotes a saying that is *concise, compact*. “Their aim is to make an insight permanent . . . by stripping it down to its essence and cutting away all that is irrelevant” or distracting—such as qualifications or exceptions—and relying on “imagery, metaphor, tighter-than-normal syntax.”²¹ *Brevity is the soul of wit. Character is what you are in the dark. Open rebuke is better than secret love* (Prov 27:5). Portable also implies *memorability*. A clever or arresting expression makes a lasting impression. *Eagles may soar, but turtles don’t get sucked into jet engines. A beautiful woman without discernment is like a gold ring in a pig’s nose* (11:22, my rendering).

3.1.2. Proverbs are poetic.

In many contexts and cultures, poetic may mean rhymed and/or metered syntax.²² *Truth that is told with bad intent can beat any lie that you can invent; or, early to bed, early to rise . . .* (the fact that I don’t need to finish it testifies to its poetic memorability). Poetic may mean balanced structure: *to be humble to superiors is duty; to equals, courtesy; to inferiors, nobleness*.

¹⁷ These include two requests (30:7–9), four generations (30:11–14), four things never satisfied (30:15–16), four wonders (30:18–19), four disturbing inversions (30:21–23), four things small but wise (30:24–28), and four things of stately stride (30:29–31).

¹⁸ Discussing Jesus’ use of proverbs in the Gospels, T. D. Bernard vividly captures the form and function of proverbs as “sayings which glance by us, as condensed and momentary parables, suggesting much that it would take long to tell . . . complete in themselves, terse and pointed, fashioned for common memory and common use, meaning more than they say, and, by strong antithesis or seeming paradox, fitted to arouse reflection, and to fix on the mind some principle of thought or conduct. . . . It is of the essence of proverbial speech that it detaches itself from particular occasions, that it has a capacity for various applications, and a fitness for permanent use, and embraces large meaning within narrow limits.” (*Progress of Doctrine in the NT*, 82).

¹⁹ Garrett defines a proverb as “a short, artistically constructed ethical observation or teaching” that is “easily remembered and readily popularized.” Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 2003), 29, 38. These features are reflected in the first three components of my definition. Though my fourth component is rarely if ever included in a formal definition of *proverb*, it is self-evident and demonstrable from the fact that (a) proverbs are frequently connected with folk literature, which implies distinctive cultural worldviews (<https://www.britannica.com/art/proverb>); and (b) though many proverbs translate internationally, some are expressed in unique cultural terms that would not translate universally. E.g., Eskimo proverbs that turn on references to ice reflect a cultural life experience not shared by nor expressed in the proverbs of desert-dwelling Bedouins (<https://graciousquotes.com/eskimo-proverbs/>). Likewise, proverbs about the gods from a polytheistic culture would not mesh with those from a monotheistic culture, either in terms of the nature of God’s being or his character (cf. Kidner, *Wisdom*, 127).

²⁰ For a discussion of the technical literary structure of proverbs, see Garrett, 33–38. Occasionally folded into the collection of proverbs proper you will find a technically distinct wisdom literary form—e.g., an *example story*, a poetic paragraph that functions as an extended reflection (e.g., Prov 24:30–34—at the tail end of the first collection of Solomonic proverbs). But these are exceptions in an otherwise simpler, standard proverbial format.

²¹ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, & Tremper Longman III, eds., “Proverbs as Literary Form” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 679.

²² Rhyming is not unheard of in Hebrew (cf. Prov 25:27).

In biblical proverbs, however, poetic form usually manifests some variety of parallelism.²³ Moreover, poetry is known for its verbal economy.

Hebrew poetry, like all poetry whatever the culture, tends to be more terse . . . than prose, and the relationships and transitions between the lines tend to be unexpressed. . . . In Proverbs terseness becomes even more acute; it is the hallmark of its lines. . . . They [proverbs] concentrate or distill truth and so by their nature cannot express the whole truth about a topic. . . . A lack of recognition of the genre characteristic of terseness and its function to assert truth baldly has led to many errors in interpreting Proverbs. . . . To avoid overstating truth or teaching half-truths through isolated proverbs, sages call on their disciples to learn all of them (22:18).²⁴

Poetic also tends to mingle simplicity with profundity.²⁵ *Necessity is a hard nurse, but she raises strong children. Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give* (25:14 ESV). And poetic combines specificity with universality. *Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint. Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather . . . is one who sings songs to a heavy heart* (25:19–20).

3.1.3. Proverbs express a general life observation or directive.

This is, perhaps, the most commonly misunderstood characteristic of biblical proverbs. “General truths are the stock in trade in Proverbs.”²⁶ Those general truths may take different forms. *Observational* proverbs are the “most common form of Old Testament wisdom” and depict “human behavior without an *explicit* moral evaluation” (e.g., 18:16). *Didactic* proverbs include “an explicit moral evaluation” in which (for example) one action is identified as wise or righteous and another as foolish or wicked (e.g., 14:1).²⁷ *Admonitions*—conspicuously less common among proverbs proper—are directives, whether negative (prohibitions) or positive (commands).

Read the first nine chapters of Proverbs and admonitions leap out like rabbits from a briar patch (e.g., 3:1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, etc.); 25% of the 266 verses in Proverbs 1–9 include commands. The same maxim that applies to real estate (location, location, location), however, also applies to hermeneutics. Proverbs 1–9, is not a collection of isolated proverbs in the specialized sense, but reflective discourses on wise living. Read the next thirteen and a half chapters, however, and you will discover *only seven admonitions* (14:7, 16:3; 19:18, 20; 20:13, 22; 22:6); that’s less than 2% of the 375 proverbs in Proverbs 10:1–22:16.²⁸ Like the Solomonic Prologue (Prov 1–9), the Solomonic Epilogue (22:17–24:34)²⁹ is also peppered with admonitions (mostly negative); 33 out of 82 verses contain admonitions (40%). Finally, the Hezekian supplemental collection of Solomonic proverbs includes a deposit of 14 admonition proverbs (10% of the 138 verses in Proverbs 25–29),³⁰ followed by two admonitions in the words of Agur (30:6, 10) and five admonitions in the words of Lemuel (31:3, 6, 8, 9, 31). The point remains that within the technical category of aphoristic proverbs (Proverbs 10–22a and 25–29), admonitions are rare, constituting only 4% of all the aphoristic proverbs in Proverbs; 96% of proverbs are either descriptive or didactic observations.

²³ Major forms of parallelism include synonymity, progression (synthetic), and proverbial merismus (antithetical). For a discussion of these and others, see Garrett, 33–38; Waltke, 1:41–45.

²⁴ Waltke, 1:38.

²⁵ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* highlights some of the same characteristics of the proverbial form: “memorable,” “simultaneously simple and profound,” “both specific and general, both particular and universal,” and having “poetic form.” Qoheleth’s proverb about leaky roofs (Eccl 10:18), for example, “speaks to a universal principle of life, not simply a fact of negligent building maintenance,” and as such, “covers a whole category of similar events and speaks to a general tendency of life.” Ryken, Wilhoit, & Longman III, 679.

²⁶ Garrett, 57.

²⁷ Garrett, 29–30. The later category would include what Garrett labels “better sayings”—comparative statements that make a moral evaluation (e.g., 12:9).

²⁸ For the significance of this division, see fn 15, which addresses the implications of the admonitions that suddenly dominate 22:17–24:34.

²⁹ See fn 15.

³⁰ Proverbs 25:4, 5, 6, 8, 9; 26:4, 5, 25; 27:1, 2, 10, 11, 23; 29:17.

One of the ramifications of the foregoing discussion is that, as general observations, biblical proverbs may *admit exceptions*.³¹ We understand, intuitively and experientially, that non-biblical proverbs have exceptions; not every son is like his father, some apples can fall pretty far downhill from the tree, and most cats die of old age not curiosity. Biblical proverbs, too, are susceptible to exceptions, not because they are fallible but because they are *proverbs*.³²

Correctly understood, the individual proverb presents a *typical* relationship between events, and any such proverb admits exceptions and is situation-dependent. The classic example is what at first looks like the contradictory instructions in 26:4–5. The proverbs are to be viewed as paradigms rather than precepts, and the book does not claim to be a manual on how to do this or that and always succeed in what one attempts. . . . [T]he book is more subtle than often thought and does not provide simplistic or formulaic answers to the complex issues of life.³³

“Except after *ℓ*” prevents “*i* before *ℓ*” from being an absolute rule in all cases; but it does not negate the broad validity of the rule. Likewise, exceptions prevent a proverb from being an absolute, but exceptions do not negate the validity of the general observation.

Promises and threats [in the form of proverbs] appear to be categorical, but in reality they are situational at the human level and subject to divine sovereignty. . . . Instead of absolutizing the sayings into principles, we must recognize the complexity of life and the situations in which a saying applies or does not apply.³⁴

To be sure, “Proverbs speaks with divine authority in every verse”³⁵—the proverbs of Proverbs are divinely directed observations of the way things typically work within the context of a divinely revealed worldview. “By their very nature they are generalized statements, intended to give advice rather than to establish rigid codes by which God works.”³⁶ The intersection of this quality of proverbs and the one that follows creates the conundrum that this paper aims to address.

3.1.4. Proverbs are culture-conditioned and worldview-reflective.

Proverbs may vary widely from culture to culture, and some that are immediately sensible and understandable in one culture may seem nonsensical in other cultures. Sometimes an understanding of the culture of origin helps clarify the meaning. The same is true of biblical proverbs.

The authors of Proverbs viewed the creation through the lens of faith consistent with Israel’s world-and-life views. The book’s title identifies its author specifically as “king of Israel.” Israel’s covenant-keeping God

³¹ “Put simply, proverbs teach probable truth, not absolute truth. By nature, proverbs are not absolute promises from God that guarantee the promised outcome if one follows them. . . . [Rather,] they offer general principles for successful living” In other words, “a proverb expresses a truth observed to work in most cases. . . . It does not deny that exceptions occur; it merely omits them from consideration.” William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 496–97.

³² “It is important to realize that [proverbs] are not universal truths that apply equally to all situations. . . . Instead, the proverb intends to cover most cases without claiming that it fits every conceivable instance of things that appear alike. To claim that it does fit everything everywhere is to overextend the genre [i.e., it’s no longer a proverb] and to treat it as if it were a form of expository prose!” Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 86–87.

³³ Andreas Köstenberger & Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 293.

³⁴ Willem Van Gemeren, “Proverbs,” *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 380. Though Van Gemeren is making the same point as the other writers cited in this section, his language is susceptible of improvement. What appear to be “promises” may, in fact, not be *promises* at all; and the problem is not viewing proverbs as “principles” (they are), but “absolutizing” them *beyond* the category of principle.

³⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 623.

³⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 247. On the issue of inspired biblical “advice” see the appendix on 1 Cor. 7.

commanded him as Israel’s king, on his assuming the throne, “to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites” (Deut 17:18). . . . The authors of Proverbs drew inspiration through keen observation and cogent reflections on creation, but they brought to their task Israel’s world-and-life view and used the creation to confirm it.³⁷

The most foundational theological truths of a biblical worldview are echoed in the book of Proverbs. God is the Creator of the cosmos (3:19–20) and the Maker of all people (22:2), and he observes and assesses human actions and judges human sins (5:21–22).³⁸ Even beyond such theological fundamentals, however, the wisdom of Proverbs is steeped in a decidedly Pentateuchal, and often particularly Deuteronomistic, worldview.³⁹ The following chart offers only a partial but adequate demonstration of the biblical worldview that informs and shapes the sages’ observations throughout the entire book of Proverbs.

Table 1: Deuteronomistic Foundations for Proverbs

| Proverbs | Deuteronomy |
|---|--|
| 3:10 — <i>So your barns [בִּצְרִים] will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine.</i> | 28:8 — <i>The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns [בִּצְרִים] and in all that you put your hand to, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you.</i> |
| 3:11–12 — <i>My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or loathe His reproof, for whom the LORD loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.</i> | 8:5 — <i>Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.</i> |
| 3:33 — <i>The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.</i> | 11:26–28 — <i>See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commands of the LORD your God . . . and the curse, if you do not listen to the commands of the LORD your God</i> |
| 7:1–3 — <i>My son, keep my words and treasure my commandments within you. . . . Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.</i> | 6:6–9 — <i>These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. . . . You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and . . . you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.</i> |
| 11:1 — <i>A false balance is an abomination to the LORD</i> 20:10, 23 — <i>Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD. . . . differing weights are an abomination to the LORD, and a false scale is not good.</i> | 25:13, 15 — <i>You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small. . . . You shall have a full and just weight; you shall have a full and just measure, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. Cf. Lev 19:35, 36</i> |
| 18:5 — <i>To show partiality to the wicked is not good, nor to thrust aside the righteous in judgment. Cf. 24:23</i> | 1:17 — <i>You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God’s. Cf. 16:19; Lev 19:15</i> |
| 19:5 — <i>A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will not escape.</i> | 19:16–19 — <i>If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother.</i> |
| 19:17 — <i>One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed. Cf. 22:9; 28:27</i> | 15:7–8, 10 — <i>If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall</i> |

³⁷ Waltke, 1:82.

³⁸ For a more thorough theology proper of Proverbs, see Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2010), 249–55. See also Waltke, 1:67–76.

³⁹ The primary Hebrew word for *law* (תּוֹרָה) occurs in Proverbs 1–9 almost exclusively with reference to parental instruction (1:8; 3:1; 4:2; 6:20; 7:2), but in the later collection with unarguable reference to the Sinaitic Covenant law (28:4, 7, 9; 29:18).

| | |
|---|--|
| | <i>freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. . . . You shall generously give to him . . . because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.</i> |
| 20:20 — <i>He who curses his father or his mother, His lamp will go out in time of darkness.</i> | 27:16 — <i>Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.</i> Cf. Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9 |
| 20:22 — <i>Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and He will save you.</i> | 32:35 — <i>Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them.</i> |
| 22:28 — <i>Do not move the ancient boundary which your fathers have set.</i> | 19:14 — <i>You shall not move your neighbor's boundary mark, which the ancestors have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess. Cf. 27:17</i> |
| 25:2 — <i>It is the glory of God to conceal [סֵתֵר] a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.</i> | 29:29 — <i>The secret [סֵתֵר] things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.</i> |
| 28:13 — <i>He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.</i> | 4:31 — <i>For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.</i> |
| 30:6 — <i>Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.</i> | 4:2 — <i>You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Cf. 12:12</i> |
| 30:9 — <i>Lest I be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?" . . .</i> | 8:10–19 — <i>. . . lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, . . . then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God . . .</i> |

3.2. The Proverbial Challenge

Compact, poetic, general, and culturally conditioned—a proverb is insight in capsule form, perception combined with potency and portability. Compactness is what defines a proverb and makes it memorable. As previously suggested, however, compactness also defines a proverb's limitations. That's by design. Again, we understand instinctively that proverbs are universals but not absolutes.

Naturally they generalize, as a proverb must, and may therefore be charged with making life too tidy to be true. But nobody objects to this in secular sayings, for the very form demands a sweeping statement and looks for a hearer with his wits about him. We need no telling that a maxim like "Many hands make light work" is not the final word on the subject, since "Too many cooks spoil the broth."⁴⁰

Some might object that *secular* proverbs may conflict or admit exceptions, but *biblical* proverbs cannot because they are inspired and inerrant and, therefore, they must always state universal and absolute truths. They are, however, inspired and inerrant *proverbs*; once we insist they must all be universal absolutes without exceptions, they cease to be proverbs at all. It is precisely because they *are* proverbs that they are *not* necessarily absolutes; their applicability ebbs and flows with the changing circumstances of life (e.g., 26:4, 5), the mysteries of divine providence (e.g., 11:31; 12:21), and other considerations.⁴¹

4. INTERPRETING PROVERBS

Proverbs has often been cast as presenting the world in terms of a predictable, unvarying, black-and-white moral order, while Job and Ecclesiastes allegedly overthrow the simplistic, sanitized view of Proverbs via a rebellion of

⁴⁰ Kidner, *Wisdom*, 26.

⁴¹ For example, another biblical principle to factor into proverbial equations is that often "the righteous remnant suffers along with [and because of] the wicked, a fact Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others discover firsthand. Their righteousness does not shield them from adversity." House, 449.

realism.⁴² This, however, is a misreading of all three books, which are “canonical partners, not canonical and theological opposites.”⁴³ “Job and Ecclesiastes are not battling a rigid retribution doctrine propounded by Proverbs.”⁴⁴ In reality, a threefold theological worldview cord runs through all three of these core wisdom books: (1) Yahweh is the Sovereign who governs the fallen world in keeping with his character;⁴⁵ (2) because of human fallenness and finiteness, God’s ways and purposes are sometimes inscrutable to us;⁴⁶ and, (3) a fear of Yahweh that takes him seriously, trusts him implicitly, and submits to his words and ways is, therefore, the path of wisdom in this life “under the sun.”⁴⁷

4.1. Interpretational Challenges in Proverbs

The first hermeneutical principle for interpreting Proverbs is to recognize and remember the literary difference between Proverbs 1–9, 30–31 and the rest of the book. The focus of this section is specifically on interpreting the proverbs within the book of Proverbs. Because of their distinctive characteristics as a genre, interpreting and applying proverbs in the larger context of a reliable and authoritative divine revelation poses some challenges that need to be navigated with care.

4.1.1. Proverbs & Inspiration

Proverbs 1:1 introduces “the proverbs of Solomon,” but chapters 1–9 form an extended prefatory discourse to Solomon’s collection of proverbs themselves. In it Solomon repeatedly counsels the posture of the reader not only towards the values urged in these chapters but also towards the proverbial wisdom that will follow. The preface is a railed boardwalk designed to orient the reader before depositing him or her onto what Kidner aptly describes in coastal terms.

To be faced abruptly with the hundreds of individual sayings . . . like a great stretch of pebble beach to make one’s way along, would be more than daunting: it could be disorienting. What kind of wisdom, at bottom, and what kind of folly, are pictured in those terse . . . remarks? . . . So we can be grateful to encounter this readable stretch of nine chapters before arriving at the “beach”—glad not only of their smooth going as miniature essays, but also of their clear notices and signposts. Here at the outset, in 1:1–7, we are alerted to the kind of approach that awaits us in the main collection, and the kind of wisdom that will be offered us. The approach is neatly summarized in the four terms of 1:6, which the New English Bible translates as “proverbs . . . parables . . . sayings . . . riddles”—all of them designed not to spoon-feed the reader but to prick him into thought, whether by their vivid pictures and analogies or by the sharpness of their brevity and their teasing refusal to explain themselves. It will be very different than the preaching and appeals that launch the book on its way in these preliminary chapters.⁴⁸

The contextualized and extended counsel contained in Proverbs 1–9 does not function as *proverb* and is, consequently, not subject to the same hermeneutic that governs individual, isolated aphorisms (like the fact that they may admit exceptions).⁴⁹ The *proverbs* of Proverbs are divinely inspired guidelines given to govern our thinking and acting—broad principles and general observations that affirm the presence of a scripturally informed value system. The exceptions

⁴² “Reading proverbs as a literary whole has shown this interpretation to be too simplistic. Wisdom *does* teach that wise acts generally lead to success and blessing. . . . However, this general truth is not worked out in every individual case, and in the later chapters the exceptions come more clearly into focus (cf. Prov 15:16; 16:8).” C. Bartholomew, “Wisdom Books,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 121.

⁴³ House, 450.

⁴⁴ Köstenberger & Goswell, 292. “Job and Ecclesiastes are not to be viewed as ‘wisdom in revolt,’ nor as ‘protest wisdom.’ Their authors are not seeking to correct or counter Proverbs, for the placing of the books side by side more likely assumes or asserts their compatibility.” Ibid.

⁴⁵ Prov 3:18; 5:21; 15:3; 16:4, 33; 19:21; 21:1–2, 30–31; 25:2; Eccl. 3:14; 6:10; 7:13; 9:1; Job 38–42.

⁴⁶ Prov 20:24; 25:2; Eccl 3:11; 8:17; 11:5; Job 5:9; 9:10; 11:7.

⁴⁷ Prov 1:7; 3:5; 9:10; Eccl 5:7; 7:18; 12:13; Job 1:1, 8; 28:28; 42:6.

⁴⁸ Kidner, *Wisdom*, 18–19.

⁴⁹ The interpretation of this or any other contextualized genre, of course, takes that context into account—including issues of genre, setting, purpose, audience, etc.

we may experience living in a fallen world do not cancel the validity of the generality; it is those anomalies with which Job and Ecclesiastes grapple.

4.1.2. *Proverbs & Exceptions*

No one thinks the “early to bed, early to rise” trope is a foolproof path to health, wealth, and wisdom—but it’s still a smart, industrious, responsible way to live. Proverbs, by definition and function, do not convey infallible promises. “A proverb is an instructional statement about what is generally true—not an ironclad promise of what is universally true.”⁵⁰ That means even biblical proverbs are not necessarily guarantees. Does that mean that there are *no* biblical proverbs that can be said to express an “ironclad promise of what is universally true”? What about this one: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path.* Is that universally true and timelessly reliable? Absolutely, *because it’s not a proverb*. Note the location (3:5–6). This is not hermeneutical sleight of hand; it is attention to context and genre.

What about this one: *The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be shortened* (10:27). Is that true? Generally yes—a fear of God often prevents one from engaging in risky behaviors—but infallibly and without any exception in human history and experience? If it is an absolute guarantee, how does one square it with the remarkably “shortened” life of a David Brainerd or a Robert Murray M’Cheyne—two godly ministers who died at age 29 almost exactly one century apart.⁵¹ And as for the wicked, Job grappled with the incongruity of their prosperity and longevity (Job 21:7–15), and Manasseh was Judah’s wickedest yet also longest-reigning king. The exceptions don’t mean the proverb is wrong; it simply means the proverb is a *proverb*.⁵²

There shall no evil happen to the just: but the wicked shall be filled with trouble (12:21). Joseph, Job, and Jesus spring to mind as exceptions. One cannot deflect the difficulty by arguing that what befell Job wasn’t “evil,” merely calamity or adversity. For one thing, he was the victim of the moral evil of theft; for another, the same Hebrew word is used to describe what happened to him (Job 42:11; cf. 2:10). To absolutize such a principle as a health-and-wealth guarantee for the righteous (as Job’s friends did⁵³) would undermine the clear teaching of the book of Job as a whole, not to mention the real-life experiences of uncounted numbers of God’s righteous people.⁵⁴ That doesn’t mean the proverb is wrong; it is simply reflecting an observable *norm* in God’s world.⁵⁵

Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner (11:31). Some interpret this “recompense” in the positive sense of reward for the righteous in contrast to the certainty of negative recompense (punishment) for the wicked (Garrett). Others see the recompense as negative retribution for *both* the righteous and the wicked (Kidner): if God chastises even the righteous, how much more the wicked.⁵⁶ Taking this view, Waltke

⁵⁰ Randy Jaeggli, “Interpreting Proverbs 22:6,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 32:2 (November 1999), 41. House makes a similar statement but over-qualifies it: “It must be remembered that *proverb* does not mean ‘absolute promise’ in every specific context.” For confirmation he cites his own previously established definitions of the Hebrew terminology, which in no case ever define *proverb* as *promise*, let alone an *absolute promise*. “A proverb,” he continues more accurately, “is a comparison that teaches *principles and expected outcomes* in life.” House, 448 emphasis added.

⁵¹ The seemingly pious assumption—in order to defend the infallibility of the proverb—that such people “obviously” must have had some secret sin for which God judged them is neither charitable nor realistic, and places one in the uneasy company of Job’s erroneous friends.

⁵² Waltke (1:477–78) places the fulfillment in the future, contrasting eternal life (cf. v. 30, “*the righteous will never [not for eternity] be toppled*”) with a reference to eternal death (cf. v. 25, “*is no more*”); but the antithetical parallel between long life and short years seems clearly to be commenting on the earthly sphere, not eternity.

⁵³ “The rigid application of this law was the mainstay of Job’s comforters.” Kidner, *Proverbs*, 98.

⁵⁴ Even the exceptions, however, do not negate a corollary truth—affirmed by both Joseph (Gn 50:20) and Paul (Rom 8:28)—that even the evil inflicted by man may be turned by God to good; but that does not negate the evil of evil.

⁵⁵ Waltke understands the “evil” in the proverb as *ultimate* evil, and interprets the proverb in the light of eternity; this is possible, but seems to read too much into the simplicity of the proverb’s statement.

⁵⁶ The negative view is bolstered by Peter’s allusion to this verse from the LXX (1 Pt 4:18, *if the righteous scarcely be saved . . .*). That does not alter the fact that the Hebrew verb is שָׁלַם; sin and evil may indeed be recompensed (20:22), but it is an odd verb to use negatively of the righteous with no reference to their sin in the context.

argues that the verse “probably implies a distinction between the present remedial punishment of the righteous ‘in the earth’ and the future penal punishment of the wicked” in eternity.⁵⁷ But this seems to sidestep the proverb’s apparently intentional parallelism in terms of sphere—just as the righteous will be recompensed *in the earth* so the wicked (will receive their just deserts *in the earth*)—which clearly has exceptions.⁵⁸ The exceptions, however, don’t negate the general principle: there are earthly consequences for both righteousness and wickedness, but that does not mean that those earthly consequences are either full or final.

The appetite of the sluggard craves but gets nothing, but the desire of the diligent will be abundantly satisfied (13:4 NET)—a pre-Aesopian proverbial version of the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. But we are all too aware of exceptions: non-producers who have learned how to game the welfare system, while many a hard-working farmer in a subsistence culture barely survives. Nevertheless, few would contest the normally expected outcomes of both slothfulness and industry. *The righteous eat to their hearts’ content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry* (13:25 NIV) is similarly subject to exceptions.

Of course, so rosy a view of things is asking for trouble. To say that the more honestly you live and the harder you work, the better you will far, is to state a very salutary general truth. But it may blind the dogmatically minded to the glaring exceptions to that rule, as it blinded Job’s three comforters.⁵⁹

Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old he will not depart from it (22:6 KJV). This proverb has fortified many a young parent, and confused (if not unduly guilted) many an old one. Even on the most basic exegetical and translational level, much of the proverb’s interpretation and application is debated.⁶⁰ For the purpose of this paper, the point is simply to note that even though the principle admits exceptions virtually regardless of how it is explained, that does not negate the fundamental importance and long-term value of pedagogy.

4.1.3. *Proverbs & Observations*

The foregoing discussion requires an important clarification. The fact that proverbs, by definition, may admit exceptions does not mean that most of the proverbs in Proverbs are vague generalities that must be constantly qualified. First, the proverbial subgenre that admits exceptions does not apply to significant sectors of the book (chapters 1–9 and 30–31).

Second, even among proverbs proper, *only a small minority of proverbs are in a form where exceptions are even a feasible consideration*. Most biblical proverbs—like most secular proverbs—take a form in which exceptions simply do not compute. For example, nearly half of the 56 verses in Proverbs 25–26 are proverbial similes, while the intervening ones typically offer advice either explicit or implied. Note this sampling from Proverbs 25:

13 **Like** the cold of snow in the time of harvest Is a faithful messenger to those who send him, For he refreshes the soul of his masters.

14 **Like** clouds and wind without rain Is a man who boasts of his gifts falsely.

15 By forbearance a ruler may be persuaded, And a soft tongue breaks the bone.

16 Have you found honey? Eat only what you need, That you not have it in excess and vomit it.

17 Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor’s house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you.

18 **Like** a club and a sword and a sharp arrow Is a man who bears false witness against his neighbor.

19 **Like** a bad tooth and an unsteady foot Is confidence in a faithless man in time of trouble.

⁵⁷ Waltke, 1:514. Waltke’s assertion that the “preceding proverbs leave no doubt that their eternal death is in view” is not entirely convincing either.

⁵⁸ On the view of recompense as reward, if a premillennialist wishes to argue (not without merit) that the righteous will, indeed, find their recompense “in the earth” during the millennium, then the same interpretation would have to be applied to a this-earthly recompense to the wicked—which is theologically much harder to defend, whether in the millennium or the new earth.

⁵⁹ Kidner, *Wisdom*, 27.

⁶⁰ Jaeggli identifies five different ways this verse is interpreted: a moral upbringing view, an “ironic” view, an “individual aptitude” view, a “chronological development” view, and as an induction into adulthood. See Jaeggli, 41–48.

How does one find an exception to the observation of 25:13 or 14, or the commonsense advice of 25:16? While it is important to qualify that the proverbial genre is not designed to provide absolute guarantees, it is equally important to clarify that many proverbs are simply not framed in such a way as to invite exceptions.

4.1.4. Proverbs & Deity Affirmations

Here is the nub of the problem: what about a proverb that affirms something about the character of God?

*The eyes of the **LORD** are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. (15:3)*

*The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable to the **LORD**, but the prayer of the upright is **his** delight. (15:8)*

*The **LORD** detests the way of the wicked, but **he** loves the one who pursues righteousness. (15:9)*

If these are proverbs proper—and they are—and proverbs by nature and definition are susceptible to exceptions, then does that imply that God is aware of what's going on only most of the time? Or that God only sometimes delights in the prayer of the upright? Or that God may at times be ambivalent about the righteous and the wicked? Can we affirm that *these* proverbs are timelessly and universally true? If so, how does that square with the general and non-absolute nature of the proverbial genre that scholars keep emphasizing?

I have cited numerous works on Proverbs and hermeneutics that assert that proverbs admit exceptions. Ironically, however, those same works seem to pass over this rather glaring problem. None of them would argue that deity proverbs are arbitrary; but neither do they provide any kind of paradigm for explaining this significant exception to the hermeneutical rule—namely, that *some proverbs are absolutes*. How, then, do we explain this apparent hermeneutical inconsistency? The solution is not particularly profound; it's just rarely if ever explained.

Remember the fourth component of a proverb: *proverbs are culture-conditioned and worldview reflective*. And a central component of the covenantal worldview that shapes the culture from which biblical proverbs emerge is the immutability of the character of their covenant God, Yahweh. In fact, Proverbs uses the distinctive personal name of Israel's unique covenant God—Yahweh—almost exclusively.⁶¹ Even though they are among other proverbs and in proverbial form, these proverbs affirm *moral absolutes about the character of Israel's covenant God, which never changes*. A proverb that affirms a truth about Yahweh's person or character is an *exception* to the rule about proverbs admitting exceptions.⁶²

Nestled in among the hundreds of general observations and proverbial principles for navigating life wisely in a fallen world that is nonetheless ruled by a righteous and sovereign God are dozens of reminders of the character of the unchanging God to whom we can tether our total trust.

*A false balance is an abomination to the **LORD**, But a just weight is **His** delight. (11:1)*

*A good man will obtain favor from the **LORD**, But **He** will condemn a man who devises evil. (12:2)*

*Lying lips are an abomination to the **LORD**, But those who deal faithfully are **His** delight. (12:22)*

*The **LORD** is far from the wicked, But **He** hears the prayer of the righteous. (15:29)*

*All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the **LORD** weighs the motives. (16:2)*

*Commit your works to the **LORD** And your plans will be established. (16:3)*

*The **LORD** has made everything for its own purpose, Even the wicked for the day of evil. (16:4)*

*The name of the **LORD** is a strong tower; The righteous runs into it and is safe. (18:10)*

⁶¹ Yahweh is referenced 87x in the book as a whole, 66x in chs 10–29; the more generic title אֱלֹהִים appears only 5x in the book (along with אֱלֹהִים 1x). By contrast, Job references Yahweh 33x and various forms of אֱלֹהִים 118x. Ecclesiastes, for what I would argue are rhetorical reasons, never refers to Yahweh, but references אֱלֹהִים 39x.

⁶² At the risk of lapsing into banality, it is the proverbial hermeneutical equivalent to “*i* before *e* except after *c*, or when sounding like *a* as in *neighbor* or *weigh*”: *proverbs admit exceptions except when about God, or when structured in forms to which you would just nod*. The final phrase is an admittedly lame attempt to find a rhyming way to match the spelling trope after which it is modeled, by incorporating the clarification in point 4.1.3. Proverbs & Observations.

*The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the **LORD**; **He** turns it wherever **He** wishes. (21:1)*
*To do righteousness and justice Is desired by the **LORD** more than sacrifice. (21:3)*
*There is no wisdom and no understanding And no counsel against the **LORD**. (21:30)*
*The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But victory belongs to the **LORD**. (21:31)*

Some 55 proverbs in chapters 10–29 describe facets of the immutable person and character of Yahweh;

The 55 or so proverbs in chapters 10–29 that say something about the person or character of God do not admit exceptions—not merely because we believe that God never changes, nor because the rest of the Bible teaches that he never changes, *but because that conviction was an inherent part of the worldview of the biblical wisdom writers themselves, based on the Pentateuchal revelation that shaped and defined their worldview.*⁶³ As such, these proverbs express absolute realities grounded in the covenantal worldview from which they emerge. Amid all that is devious or merely unpredictable in this world, the person and character of God are unchanging (Num 23:19).

Table 2: Theology Proper in Proverbs 10–29⁶⁴

| Theology | Proverbs | Pentateuch |
|--|---|----------------------------------|
| God is the Maker of all men | 14:31; 17:5; 20:12; 22:2; 29:13 | Gen 1; Deut 28:8 |
| God is glorified in the selectivity of his revelation | 25:2 | Deut 29:29 |
| God judges the proud but cares for the needy and the righteous | 10:3; 15:25; 22:14 | Deut 11:26–28 |
| God is the source of blessing | 10:22 | Gen 24:35; Deut 8:18 |
| God abominates deception | 11:1; 12:22; 20:10, 23 | Lev 19:35, 36; Deut 25:13, 15 |
| God abominates arrogance | 16:5 | Lev 26:19 |
| God abominates justifying evil and condemning the righteous | 17:15 | Deut 19:16–19 |
| God repays generosity to the needy | 19:17; 25:22 | Deut 15:7–8, 10 |
| God protects the righteous | 18:10 | Exod 34:5–7 |
| God intervenes for those who wait for him | 20:22 | Deut 32:35 |
| God delights in the good and the upright, and condemns the perverse and the wicked | 11:20; 12:2; 15:9, 26 | Deut 28 |
| God is omniscient regarding the thoughts and actions of all men | 15:3, 11; 21:2 | Exod 3:19; Deut 31:21 |
| God detests false/hypocritical worship and accepts only genuine worship | 15:8, 29; 21:3 | Exod 34:14; Deut 6:13 |
| God is sovereign over all | 16:4, 33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1, 30; 21:31 | Exod 4–15 |
| God evaluates the motives of all people | 16:2; 17:3 | Deut 8:2 |

4.2. A Paradigm for Interpreting Proverbs

The issues explored in this paper confront the kinds of questions Proverbs is likely to raise. Observant and thoughtful readers wonder about the discrepancies between certain proverbial statements and the realities they see around them—whether in their own experience, or in historical record, or in the Bible itself. We set up ourselves (and others)

⁶³ E.g., an Egyptian proverb reads: “Make monuments for the god; this is what preserves the name of him who does it.” A Babylonian proverb says: “Reverence begets favor, sacrifice improves life, and prayer dispels guilt.” Kidner, *Wisdom*, 127. Neither of those could have emerged from a people shaped by a Pentateuchal worldview with a very different view of God.

⁶⁴ The chart is by no means exhaustive, only suggestive; the point is merely to demonstrate that God’s Pentateuchal self-revelation—via both propositional statements and historical example—informs Israelite wisdom literature in general, and technical proverbial wisdom literature in particular.

for disappointment and confusion when we nourish assumptions that God does not offer in Scripture. This happens when we fail to read our Bibles (as Kidner put it) “with our wits about us.”

That is not to say that God is tricky with the fine print; but he does expect us to read intelligently, thoughtfully, and thoroughly, not simplistically or selectively. When misread, Proverbs can be a breeding ground for bewilderment. It is our fault if we forget that we are reading *proverbs*. Sometimes God graciously overlooks our innocent ignorance and condescends to honest but ignorant faith. But that does not justify simplistic reading and careless interpretation.

Considerations for determining how to view a statement in Proverbs include the following:⁶⁵

- Is it located in the reflective wisdom section (1–9, 30–31) or the proverbial wisdom section (10–29)?
- Is it a theological statement regarding the character of the unchanging God?
- Is it a generally operable principle within a biblical worldview that may be subject to the providences of God?
- Is it a saying that circumvents exceptions—a sagacious observation, a pedagogical principle, a word of advice, a qualitative analysis, or an illustrative comparison?
- Is it a direct command or prohibition that circumvents exceptions?

Table 3 attempts to lay out a hermeneutical paradigm that recognizes the variety of proverbial statements in Proverbs 10–29.

⁶⁵ Do we parse the contents of any other book of the Bible in this way? A legitimate question to raise is whether any other book in the Bible is comprised of more than one genre that requires such different hermeneutical handling within the same book. The answer is yes. For example, historical narrative frequently weaves in bits of poetry, prophecy, parable, and even proverb—all of which require hermeneutical handling in keeping with the rules of that genre and in distinction from the rules that govern historical narrative itself.

Table 3: Hermeneutical Paradigm for Proverbs 10–29⁶⁶

| CATEGORY | EXAMPLES | EXCEPTIONS? |
|---|---|--|
| DEITY AFFIRMATIONS | | |
| Yahweh's Character | 12:22— <i>Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, But those who deal truthfully are His delight.</i> 21:3— <i>To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice.</i> | No <i>They are grounded in the self-revelation of the unchanging God which undergirds and informs the Israelite culture.</i> |
| Yahweh's Works | 20:22— <i>Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the LORD and he will save you.</i> 21:1— <i>The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever he wishes.</i> 21:2— <i>The eyes of the LORD are in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good.</i> | |
| SAYINGS | | |
| General principles of operation within God's moral universe | 10:27— <i>The fear of the LORD prolongs days: But the years of the wicked shall be shortened.</i> 11:31— <i>Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: Much more the wicked and the sinner.</i> 12:21— <i>There shall no evil happen to the just: But the wicked shall be filled with mischief.</i> | Sometimes <i>They are subject to other considerations in the providence of God.</i> |
| Observational Saying | 14:5— <i>A trustworthy witness will not lie, But a false witness utters lies.</i> 29:20— <i>Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.</i> | Not Applicable <i>They are framed in a form that circumvents exceptions.</i> |
| Didactic Saying | 13:20— <i>He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will suffer harm.</i> 25:27— <i>It is not good to eat much honey, Nor is it glory to search out one's own glory.</i> | |
| Advice Saying | 19:2— <i>Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, And he who hurries his footsteps errs.</i> 25:17— <i>Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you.</i> | |
| Qualitative Saying | 19:1— <i>Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity Than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.</i> 25:24— <i>It is better to live in a corner of the roof Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.</i> | |
| Comparative Sayings | 26:1— <i>As snow in summer and rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool.</i> 26:11— <i>Like a dog that returns to its vomit Is a fool who repeats his folly.</i> | |
| ADMONITIONS | | |
| Command | 23:12— <i>Apply your heart to instruction, and your ears to words of knowledge.</i> 23:22-23— <i>Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding.</i> | Not Applicable <i>They are framed in a form that circumvents exceptions.</i> |
| Prohibition | 22:24-25— <i>Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul.</i> 22:28— <i>Do not remove the ancient landmark which your fathers have set.</i> | |

⁶⁶ Garrett "builds on" the work of von Rad, Gottwald, and Murphy to identify the various species of proverb (Garrett, 29–32), though the only relevant major categories for Proverbs 10–29 are Sayings and Admonitions. I am, in turn, building on the work of Garrett in identifying a few more species.

Conclusion

In raising the question “Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?” Bruce Waltke recognizes the same hermeneutical conundrum this paper seeks to address.⁶⁷ Because his is one of the more thorough works on Proverbs, it merits evaluation and interaction.

These heavenly promises of life, health, prosperity, and honor seem detached from earth’s harsh realities. The promises seem false to human experiences under the sun, as Job and Qoheleth complained, and contrary to sound doctrine. . . . The popular evangelical solution that these are not promises but probabilities, though containing an element of truth, raises theological, practical, and psychological problems by stating the matter badly. According to this wording, the human partner is expected to keep his obligations perfectly (3:1, 3, 5, 7, 9), but God may keep his obligations imperfectly (3:2, 4, 6, 8, 10). . . . Moreover, a sober person would like to know the probabilities, and a psychologically well person could scarcely trust God with all his heart (3:5) knowing that he usually, but not always, keeps his obligations.

Waltke raises a valid concern. If this is the practical interpretational/applicational outcome of one’s treatment of Proverbs 3, then there is a serious problem. But I have already suggested two observations that mitigate this apparent problem. (1) His example is drawn from the reflective, *non-proverbial* segment of Proverbs; chapters 1–9 do not feature proverbs proper but, rather, extended, contextualized wisdom discourses which deal in absolutes. (2) Deity affirmations *even in technical proverbial literature* are exceptions to the normal rules governing aphoristic proverbs, because they echo truths about the unchanging God at the center of the covenantal culture that informs all Israelite wisdom literature. Consequently, proverbial deity affirmations are not merely probable, because they are part of the absolute theological worldview that underwrites all of Proverbs.

Other steps, however, can be taken toward a resolution. First, the promises are partially validated by experience. The sober not the drunkard (23:29–35), the cool-tempered not the hothead (15:18; 19:19; 22:24; 29:22), and the diligent not the sluggard usually experience health and wealth.

Waltke’s own resolution, however, is still forced to fall back on *probabilities* (note his use of “partially” and “usually”), which inherently assumes exceptions—the very problem he is attempting to resolve. Also, none of the sample passages he describes as “promises” here even use promissory language; they are merely observations about the tendencies of certain human characteristics or behaviors. In other words, Waltke has “solved” passages that need no solution, while leaving the problem passages untouched.

Second, the epigrammatic nature of the proverbs [i.e., their terseness in dealing with only a single thought or side of an issue] often causes the audience to overlook the counter-proverbs that qualify these promises. . . . Without these qualifying sayings, one could legitimately accuse Solomon of being guilty of half-truths.

To identify proverbs as “promises” that need to be “qualified” by “counter-proverbs” is precisely what perpetuates the confusion. This paper has attempted to offer a more consistent, thorough, theologically objective, and biblical-theologically robust solution to the problem of proverbs, exceptions, and absolutes. Once one simply understands the inherently non-promissory nature of a *proverb*, however, one cannot in any case accuse Solomon of being guilty of half-truths. By definition, a *proverb* is not a “promise” nor a “truth” so much as a “truism”—a generally valid observation of how life tends to work in God’s world. The exception to that is when a proverb ventures onto the holy ground of the unchanging person and character of Yahweh.

⁶⁷ Waltke, 1:107–09.

Appendix: 1 Corinthians 7—Authoritative Revelation or Apostolic Advice?

Paul is writing under directive inspiration. The question about some of Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7 is whether Paul is writing inspired divine *revelation*, or inspired apostolic *opinion*? And does what we do with it depend on the answer to that question?

- 7:6—“*I speak this by permission, and not by commandment*”
 - There is some debate whether he is referring back to 7:5, or all the way back to 7:2, or whether the “this” refers instead to what he is about to say in 7:6ff.
- 7:10—“*And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord*”
 - It is not merely Paul doing the “commanding” here; he is summarizing what the Lord (Jesus) himself commanded in this regard (Mt. 5, 19).
- 7:12—“*But to the rest speak I, not the Lord*”
 - At this point, Paul moves beyond the commands of Christ to an issue the Lord himself did not specifically address during His earthly ministry (viz., the issue of mixed marriages).
- 7:25—“*I have no commandment from the Lord, yet I give my judgment (gnōmē: opinion, viewpoint, counsel)*”
 - Again, the Lord himself gave no specific command (either in his earthly ministry, or in his personal revelation to Paul) addressing the kinds of specific issues raised by the Corinthians involving virgins.
 - Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, loc. cit.: “That is, neither Christ himself, nor the Spirit of Christ, had commissioned him to do anything more than to counsel these persons. He was inspired, or led by the Spirit, in this matter, not to command but to advise. His advice, however, was worthy of great deference.”
- 7:40—“*according to my judgment (gnōmē: opinion, viewpoint, counsel), and I think I also have the Spirit of God*”
 - Paul is clearly expressing his personal opinion and, once more, his general counsel based on that opinion—but it is the opinion and counsel of a man filled and led by the Spirit of God. He is not commanding a course of action based on that opinion, merely making the observation of an experienced and Spirit-filled man. Consequently, we have no authority to press his opinion on others (“You really shouldn’t remarry because Paul says ...”) any more than he pressed his opinion on the Corinthians.
 - Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, loc. cit.: “*After my judgment*; it was an opinion, as he says, on the peculiar circumstances of the time [*the present distress*], and not intended to bind the conscience or to interfere with the liberty of others, v. 35. Nevertheless, it was the opinion of a holy and inspired [*better, Spirit-led*] man, and therefore entitled to the greatest deference.”

Taken in context, Paul's statements are clearly not admissions that he is speaking outside the sphere of divine inspiration or authority. The closest he comes to that is 7:25, 40. In every case, what he penned—whether a reference to something Jesus did or did not teach, or an expression of his own counsel—was spoken through him by the Spirit of God and was precisely what God wanted written and preserved *in the form of general advice* in which it was written and preserved. Consequently, it all carries divine authority, but *it carries the authority of sound godly advice* which, while weighty and worthy of serious and prayerful consideration, is not the same as unequivocal proposition or unqualified command; such counsel may vary individually from situation to situation.

Objection: *Does this not open the door to treating any or all of Paul's writings as non-authoritative advice?* In no way. Under the Spirit's direction, Paul *expressly* presents what he writes in this passage as counsel and not command in a way he does not in other passages, clearly implying that this is an exception not the rule for Paul's writings.

What Paul pens (in the case of 7:25 and 40) is an opinion, as he is directed by the Spirit of God through the thought and experience. In the end, however, it is still an opinion—an apostolic opinion, to be sure, to be weighed as an apostolic opinion—but not to be regarded as an absolute command. That's why Paul is so careful to present his counsel to virgins, to their fathers, and to widows *as counsel* and *not as command*.

- He takes equal pains in certain cases to speak absolutely and unequivocally:

- the mutual responsibilities of spouses to one another (3-4)
- the issues of divorce and desertion (10-16)
- the qualification that a widow may remarry *only* in the Lord (39c)
- He takes equal pains in other cases to *qualify* his counsel:
 - **If** widows cannot remain single, let them marry (8-9; remember link to 7:39-40)
 - **If** virgins marry, they have not sinned (28)
 - **If** fathers give in marriage, they have not sinned (36-38)

Genres and forms of expression are inextricably part of the fabric of revelation, of **what** is inspired and in what **form** it is inspired. Paul's expression of "my judgment" (7:25, 40)—penned by a Spirit-filled, Spirit-borne apostle—is spoken in the **form** of a *gnōmē*, an *opinion*. That is, it is presented, intended to be received, and intended to function as *counsel, advice, opinion* (to be weighed and seriously considered by individuals in similar circumstances), *not command* (to be compelled in all cases without exception). God could very easily have revealed these directives to Paul as commands and had him pen them as commands if that was His intent. He did not. Circumstances vary, God's gifts vary, God's callings vary, so God's will varies.

So, is it authoritative revelation? Or apostolic advice? The answer is yes: it is inspired authoritative revelation of apostolic advice.