

A Proverb in the Hand Is Worth Two in the Bush: A Hermeneutical Proposal for Handling Biblical Proverbs

by Layton Talbert¹

It is a truism to say that a cardinal 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 eight verses on average. The contrast in Proverbs between the *wise* (חָכָם, 41x) and the *fool* (כֹּסֵל, 49x) echoes throughout the collection.² But another, less noticed emphasis also runs through the book. A major theme pervading the Book of Psalms—the running contrast between the *righteous* (צַדִּיק, 46x)³ and the *wicked* (רָשָׁע, 81x)—dominates 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 (2,641 verses) is nearly three times the size of Proverbs (915 verses).⁴ 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 just as laws of nature govern the behavior of natural animals, laws of literature govern the behavior of literary animals. A proverb is a distinctive species of literature, so our exploration of this topic needs to begin there, however generally and briefly.

Biblical Wisdom

The English word *wisdom* has a fairly narrow range of customary usage focusing primarily on intellectual aptitude.⁵ 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.⁶ As such, biblical

¹ Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary and the author of several books including *The Trustworthiness of God's Words: Why Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2022) and *Soteriology for Beginners: What Does the Bible Say About Salvation?* (n.p.: Equip Discipleship, 2023). The author wishes to acknowledge helpful feedback from Ken Casillas, Andrew Goodwill, Brian Collins, and Phil Brown.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ I.e., on average, צַדִּיק occurs once every fifty-seven verses in Psalms versus once every fourteen verses in Proverbs (4x as frequently); רָשָׁע occurs once every thirty-three verses in Psalms versus once every twelve verses in Proverbs (2.75x as frequently).

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two primary senses: (1) soundness of judgment, and (2) knowledge or enlightenment. "Wisdom"; accessed October 24, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wisdom_n?tab=meaning_and_use#14118620.

⁶ 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

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.”⁷

*Wisdom Literature*⁸

Wisdom literature is a unique, ancient, diverse, and culturally ubiquitous literary genre with its own rules of interpretation. It constitutes “a family of literary genres common in the Ancient Near East (ANE) in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated.”⁹ Two characteristics set biblical wisdom literature apart from its contemporary ANE expressions: (1) the biblical worldview that informed the thinking of its authors was shaped by a unique divine revelation—particularly the Pentateuch, along with other early historical writings—that made them who they were; 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.¹⁰

“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).¹¹ Biblical wisdom literature, in

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.

⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1:77.

⁸ The label “wisdom literature” as denoting a definitive literary genre in the Bible has been recently reweighed in the scales and found wanting by some. See Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Kynes identifies German theologian Johann Bruch (1758–1828) as the first to use this label to denote Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes as a discrete literary genre. Kynes’s historical investigation is eye-opening and his proposal revolutionary—that the genre label “wisdom literature” should be abandoned and that we learn to view these books as a mixture of multiple genres with intertextual connections that reach far beyond each other to many other biblical sections and genres. I am, however, not entirely convinced of his proposal in all its ramifications. As long as one maintains an awareness of the broad intertextual connections of these books across the entire span of Scripture and avoids viewing them in isolation from the rest of the canon, one can avoid the major pitfalls that Kynes critiques and yet still see major formal and thematic affinities between these three books in distinction from most others.

⁹ D. A. Hubbard, “Wisdom Literature,” *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 1245.

¹⁰ Waltke, 1:55. In the specific case of Solomon, of course, an additional dynamic was the unique endowment of divine wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29–34).

¹¹ John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015), 1; cf. 51. The language of *fearing Yahweh* occurs at least seventeen times in Proverbs, far more than any other biblical book. John A. Kitchen notes that “while the words of Proverbs may, at times, sound very much like those of other ancient wisdom writings, the underlying essence of them is fundamentally different. The ‘fear of the Lord’ is the beginning—the first principle—of all wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). The writings of the nations establish no such moral, spiritual, and ethical foundation to their wisdom.” *Proverbs* (Ross-shire, Great Britain:

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.”¹² This rooting of biblical wisdom in the relational language of fearing Yahweh actually establishes “wisdom as a relationship”¹³ with this covenant God; therein lies both its uniqueness and the necessary context for interpreting and applying it.

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.¹⁴

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 literature¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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 recorded to have been, Solomon most certainly would have displayed a keen interest in ANE wisdom literature; wise men do not isolate themselves from the wisdom of others.¹⁷ But we are also informed that Solomon’s wisdom schooled the sages of the surrounding nations (1 Kgs 4:34), who surely learned and borrowed from him.

Mentor, 2006), 14. Cf. also Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 92–93.

¹² Hubbard, 1244.

¹³ Tremper Longman III, “Proverbs, Book of” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 549.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1964), 16–21; cf. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 125–41.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ “That Solomon knew of, and appreciated, such writings appears quite likely (1 Kings 4:29–31). Israel’s physical location placed her at the crossroads of trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt, a fact that heightens the likelihood of not only shared commerce but intellectual and cultural pursuits as well. . . . Solomon’s court had an international flair to it. . . . Therefore, given Solomon’s appetite for wisdom and the comparisons that exalt him above neighboring wise men (1 Kings 4:30), it seems certain that he knew of, studied, and was influenced by these foreign wisdom writings.” Kitchen, 12.

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, however.¹⁸ Some is *reflective* or investigative 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., Eccl 1–6, 7b–9, 11b–12)¹⁹ or even *dialogues* (e.g., Job 4–27). The other major kind of wisdom literature is *proverbial* or aphoristic in nature—brief, terse, pithy sayings that articulate principles for welfare and success (e.g., Eccl 7a, 10a, and 11a; Prov 10–29).²⁰ It is their self-contained terseness—usually expressed without the benefit of explanation, qualification, or context—that can often make them challenging to decipher.

Within the book of Proverbs, however, interpreters further differentiate between two forms of expression. *Admonition* is “characterized by the imperative and second-person form of direct address (Prov 1–9; 22:17–24:22; 31:1–9)” and may be stated either positively (command) or negatively (prohibition).²¹ *Wisdom sayings*

¹⁸ The categories described in this paragraph are drawn from Hubbard, 1245. I have, however, substituted Hubbard’s term *speculative* with the word *reflective*, which carries less conceptual baggage than *speculative*. Hubbard clarifies that “this speculative wisdom is practical and empirical, not theoretical”—which, oddly, is precisely what *speculative* implies.

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes is a heterogenous mixture of reflective and proverbial wisdom literature, only more so. Qoheleth frequently inserts isolated or grouped proverbial observations into larger sections of more contemplative, first-person, reflective wisdom.

²⁰ For the sake of simplicity, I use Prov 10–29 as shorthand to refer to the “proverbial” segment of Proverbs. More precisely, however, 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; 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 chapters 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, the most concentrated segment by far of negative admonitions (prohibitions) in the book appear in Proverbs 1–9 (29x) and 22b–24 (24x), compared to only 8x in Proverbs 10–22a. See below under the section entitled “Proverbs Express a General Life Observation.”

²¹ This is entirely peripheral to the focus of this paper, but it is curious that Solomon would begin with such an earnest appeal and warning about something so painfully obvious as committing highway robbery and homicide (1:10–16). One might have expected an opening topic more subtle, more devotional, more political even. But warning the young prince, right out of the gate, to avoid companions who would entice him to murder and pillage innocent subjects hardly seems the most intuitive tone to set. Waltke suggests that “the young man is most vulnerable to easy sex and easy money, for his sexual passions are now strongest and his tendency to be wise in his own eyes—and paradoxically to have group approval—has not yet been tempered by reality”—hence the warnings regarding “the invitations of the gang and of the temptress” (1:182). Similarly but more pointedly, Garrett notes, “Apparently in ancient Israel, no less than in the modern world, the comradeship, easy money, and feeling of empowerment offered by gangs was a strong temptation to the young man who felt overwhelmed by the difficulties of the life he confronted every day.” Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 2003), 69. When one thinks in terms of not merely the modern world, but the modern Middle Eastern world, the point is well taken. Still, one might expect that a prince living in the royal palace would be insulated from such companions. In Act 1 of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*, however, “Prince Hal—Henry IV’s son and heir—carouses in a tavern” with “the roguish Sir John Falstaff and his henchmen, who are planning a highway robbery.” In that context, “Prince Hal and Sir John Falstaff taunt each other, Hal warning Falstaff that he will one day be hanged as a thief and Falstaff insisting that, when Hal becomes king, thieves will have a friend in court” (“Henry IV, Part 1”; accessed October 23, 2025, <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-iv-part-1/read/>). However fictional the scene may be, it illustrates the sort of temptation that could confront someone in the position of Solomon’s son, with all manner of shady characters

are “generally in the third person and nonimperative (Prov 10:1–22:16; 24:23–34; 25–29).”²² The wisdom sayings would be equivalent to the category of proverbial wisdom literature described above.

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 duties to perform and of doctrinal truths to be believed. Instead, he revealed his mind in words communicated through a wide variety of humanly invented literary genres.²³ 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 lowcountry hoppin’ john.

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 (with the exception of prophecy). Different genres work in different ways, because we designed them to do so. Otherwise, there is no point of different genres at all—in either human or biblical literature. “Genre does not determine whether the Scriptures are true; it merely shapes how that truth is formulated into text.”²⁴

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 a prophecy, or an unconditional covenant promise; that is not how the proverbial genre functions in any culture. Again, literary genres function according to their design and need to be interpreted according to their own rules. Not only do the rules change when you step into wisdom literature; they can vary even within wisdom literature itself. That brings us to the primary focus of this article.

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,

hoping to get in good with a wealthy young prince, for the prestige and protection of the association and in hopes of riding his coattails into the court when he becomes king (cf. 1 Kgs 12:8–11ff.).

²² Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs*, THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 8–13. T. Hildebrandt, “Proverbs, Genre of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, & Writings*, 534. Greg W. Parsons, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs,” in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 154–55. Lucas and Hildebrandt label the categories as *instruction* and *sentence* or *saying*; Parsons identifies the two categories as *admonition* and *wisdom sentence*.

²³ Genres represented in Scripture include allegory, apocalypse, autobiography, biography, chronicle, creed, discourse, drama, fiction (parable), genealogy, historical narrative, hymn, law, letter, love song, philosophical treatise, poetry, prophetic oracle, proverb, riddle, sermon, suspense, testimony, theological treatise—not to mention multiple subgenres under some of these headings.

²⁴ Hildebrandt, 531.

interpretation, and application of certain parts of the book. The Book of Proverbs is comprised of divisions distinguished by the two distinctive subgenres already mentioned, each governed by distinct hermeneutical rules.

Proverbs 1–9 comprises a series of discursive, extended, admonitory monologues expressed in the first-person singular and aimed directly at the second-person singular (1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1) or occasionally plural (4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:32)—a feature that reappears only in 22:17–24:34 (with the sole intervening exception of 19:27) and 30:1–31:31 (with the sole intervening exception of 27:11). The verses in these sections of Proverbs are extended discourses of a predominantly admonitory nature, not proverbs in the technical or formal sense; consequently, they are not framed in a way that admits exceptions (as discussed below).²⁵ Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27, by contrast, are compilations of aphorisms, observations, and maxims in the form of epigrammatic sayings. 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 of wisdom literature. These chapters, and the verses in them, generally have only limited continuity and localized contextual connections. “The words of Agur” (Prov 30) comprise an autobiographical collection (as noted above, the first-person singular pronouns are again conspicuous) of several categories of mostly numerical sayings,²⁶ while “the words of Lemuel” (Prov 31) mostly comprise an acrostic monologue on a single subject—finding a wife who bears some intriguing resemblances to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9.²⁷

Defining Proverbs

The primary focus of this paper is the *proverbs* of Proverbs. 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*.²⁸ By extension, a *biblical proverb* is (1) *a portable saying*, (2) *in poetic*

²⁵ Isolated examples in these non-proverbial sections that seem to admit exceptions are, in my opinion, better resolved contextually. For example, 3:16 may seem to promise wealth to the wise, but since the preceding verses exalt wisdom as *better* than material wealth (3:14–15), it seems unlikely that the subsequent verses are trying to link wisdom as the source of wealth; a preferable explanation would be to view 3:16 as non-material wealth, a euphemism for life success in God’s economy (cf. 8:18). Again, 6:9–11 is not a guarantee that every lazy person becomes poor; it is not promissory, but admonitory in the same sense that a father might warn his teenage son, “If you keep driving like that, you’re going to end up in a ditch!” On the other end of the book, Proverbs 31 does not promise that every virtuous woman’s husband will be wealthy (31:11) or famous (31:23), nor that her children will properly appreciate her (31:28), any more than it necessitates that she engage in real estate or gardening (31:16) or stay up all night (31:18) or sew clothes for her household (31:19, 22) and for selling on Etsy (31:24). The passage is an acrostic poem (apparently from a woman, 31:1) in praise of an idealized woman of virtue. See also fn 27.

²⁶ 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).

²⁷ Note 31:10 (cf. 3:15; 8:11) and 31:26. It is intriguing that the collection as a whole would conclude with an epilogue in praise of a woman who echoes the female personification of wisdom that dominates the book’s prologue. Cf. Thomas P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31,” in *Learning from the Sages*, 391–410.

²⁸ Garrett defines a proverb as “a short, artistically constructed ethical observation or teaching” that is “easily remembered and readily popularized” (29, 38). These features are reflected in the first three components of my definition. Though my fourth component is rarely 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 (“proverb”; accessed October 24, 2025, <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

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, as we will see, is the fourth component—the informing worldview.

Proverbs Are Portable

Portable means short. A proverb is usually one sentence, sometimes two; a paragraph is not a proverb.²⁹ Portable also connotes a saying that is concise, compact—“a saying which opts for the power of brevity over the clarity of verbosity.”³⁰ A proverb’s “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.”³¹ “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 “pithy sentence packed with thought-provoking punch.” 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” (Prov 11:22, my rendering).

Proverbs Are Poetic

In many contexts and cultures, *poetic* may mean rhymed and/or metered syntax.³² “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 do not need to finish it testifies to its poetic memorability). *Poetic* may also refer to balanced structure: “To be humble to superiors is duty; to equals, courtesy; to inferiors, nobleness.” In English, *poetic* often means utilizing “sound techniques”: “All’s well that ends well,” or “His bark is worse than his bite.”³³ Most commonly in biblical proverbs, however, poetic form usually manifests some variety of parallelism.³⁴ Moreover, poetry is known for its verbal economy.

experience not shared by nor expressed in the proverbs of desert-dwelling Bedouins (“Top 26 Eskimo Proverbs About Life (WISDOM)”; accessed October 24, 2025, <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).

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Kitchen, 17.

³¹ “Proverbs as Literary Form,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 679.

³² Rhyming is not unheard of in Hebrew (cf. Prov 25:27, אָכַל דְּבַשׁ הָרְפוֹת לֹא-טוֹב וְחִקְר כְּבֹד כְּבֹדָם כָּבוֹד).

³³ “It is clear that the sages who originally crafted proverbs were keenly sensitive to the sounds of their sayings.” Hildebrandt, 531. As a biblical example he cites the Hebrew reading of Prov 10:9a: הוֹלֵךְ בָּתֵּם יֵלֵךְ בְּטָח.

³⁴ 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.

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).³⁵

Finally, a poetic form also tends to mingle simplicity with profundity.³⁶ “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).

Proverbs Express a General Life Observation

This is, perhaps, the most commonly misunderstood characteristic of biblical proverbs. “General truths are the stock in trade in Proverbs.”³⁷ 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).³⁸ Directive proverbs—whether negative (prohibitions) or positive (commands)—are conspicuously uncommon among proverbs proper.³⁹

Read the first nine chapters of Proverbs, and directives leap out like rabbits from a brushpile (e.g., 3:1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, etc.); twenty-five percent of the 266 verses in Proverbs 1–9 include commands. The same maxim that applies to real estate (location, location, location) also applies to hermeneutics. Proverbs 1–9 is not a collection of isolated proverbs in the specialized sense, but cautionary 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 two percent of the 375 proverbs in

³⁵ Waltke, 1:38.

³⁶ 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, and Longman III, 679.

³⁷ Garrett, 57.

³⁸ Ibid., 29–30. The latter category would include what Garrett labels “better sayings”—comparative statements that make a moral evaluation (e.g., 12:9).

³⁹ Garrett’s term for this category is “admonitions,” but I have chosen to reserve that label for one of the specific categories of wisdom literature in Proverbs discussed above. The details of the next paragraph bear out the legitimacy of admonition as a major category with Proverbs.

Proverbs 10:1–22:16.⁴⁰ Like the Solomonic Prologue (Prov 1–9), the Solomonic Epilogue (22:17–24:34)⁴¹ is also peppered with admonitions (mostly negative); thirty-three out of eighty-two verses contain admonitions (forty percent). Finally, the Hezekian supplemental collection of Solomonic proverbs includes a deposit of fourteen admonition proverbs (ten percent of the 138 verses in Proverbs 25–29),⁴² 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), directives are extremely rare, constituting only four percent of all the aphoristic proverbs in Proverbs; ninety-six percent of the proverbs are either descriptive or didactic observations. This confirms the above discussion regarding the major categories within Proverbs as *admonition* and *wisdom saying*.

One of the ramifications of the foregoing discussion is that, as general observations, biblical proverbs may admit exceptions.⁴³ We understand, intuitively and experientially, that non-biblical proverbs have exceptions. Not every son is like his father, sometimes an apple can fall pretty far downhill from the tree, and most cats die not from curiosity but from old age. Biblical proverbs, too, are susceptible to exceptions, not because they are fallible but because they are *proverbs*.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

“Except after *c*” prevents “*i* before *e*” 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.

⁴⁰ For the significance of this division, see note 20 above, which addresses the implications of the admonitions that suddenly dominate 22:17–24:34.

⁴¹ See note 20 above.

⁴² Proverbs 25:4, 5, 6, 8, 9; 26:4, 5, 25; 27:1, 2, 10, 11, 23; 29:17.

⁴³ “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. Such clarifications are ubiquitous in the literature on Proverbs.

⁴⁴ “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.

⁴⁵ Andreas Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 293.

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.⁴⁶

To be sure, “Proverbs speaks with divine authority in every verse”⁴⁷—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.”⁴⁸ The intersection of this quality of proverbs and the one that follows creates the conundrum that this article aims to address.

Proverbs Are Culture-Conditioned and Worldview-Reflective

Proverbs are culturally universal and historically ubiquitous, reflecting “the human urge to classify, generalize, and codify experience, filtered through a culture’s ideals and values.”⁴⁹ That is why they may vary widely from culture to culture. Some proverbs transcend cultural boundaries because they reflect universal human characteristics or experiences. Other proverbs may be immediately sensible and understandable in one culture but seem nonsensical in other cultures; so, an understanding of the culture of origin can help clarify the meaning.⁵⁰ The same is true of biblical proverbs. But the cultural worldview that shapes biblical proverbs is not *merely* ethnic (Hebrew) or geographical (Middle Eastern), but religious, ethical, theological, and above all, covenantal.⁵¹

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 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

⁴⁶ Willem Van Gemen, “Proverbs,” *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 380. Though Van Gemen 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” or dogmatizing them *beyond* the category of general principle.

⁴⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 623.

⁴⁸ 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,” cf. Paul’s differentiation between inspired divine revelation and inspired apostolic opinion in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul is Spirit-directed to pen 7:25 and 40 in the form of a *gnōmē*, an *opinion*. As such, it is intended to function as *counsel, advice, opinion* to be weighed and seriously considered as apostolic opinion by individuals in similar circumstances, but not as a command to be compelled in all cases without exception. God could easily have revealed these directives to Paul as commands and had him pen them as commands if that was his intent; he did not.

⁴⁹ Hildebrandt, 529.

⁵⁰ “Culture impacts how proverbs are interpreted, and one must make an effort to understand both the culture of origin and the current culture of usage.” *Ibid.*, 531.

⁵¹ 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.

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.⁵²

The worldview that shapes biblical proverbs is a culture informed by scriptural revelation and specifically contextualized by a covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh—a covenant that establishes certain conditions and expectations for blessing and success in a theocratic society. Proverbs took shape within that religiously specific context and was addressed to a religiously specific audience. Its mores, counsels, and observations emerge from a particular and unique covenantal arrangement with very specific covenantal promises, warnings, and expectations. “To listen to a proverb without at the same time hearing its covenantal background is to pry a gem from its setting.”⁵³ Failure to keep that setting in mind may lead one to mistake a legitimate covenantal expectation for a generic and universal principle that is demonstrably false. See, for instance, the first example in Table 1 below. The linkage between being a faithful tither and experiencing material blessing from God is a clear echo of a solemn covenantal promise from God to the individual Israelite (both verses are addressed to the second person singular). In other words, this is a Jew under the Mosaic Covenant counseling Jews how to live successfully under the Mosaic Covenant, and confirming a promise of the Mosaic Covenant to those who fulfill their obligations under the Mosaic Covenant. Is it an absolute? I am compelled to say yes, *in that covenantal context*, since it is reiterating God's own covenantal oath that is part of the biblical worldview in which Solomon's wisdom is grounded. In any case, however you interpret Proverbs 3:9–10 must be equally applicable to the blessing pronounced on Israelites by God himself in Deuteronomy 28:1, 8.⁵⁴

The most foundational theological truths of a Judeo-biblical worldview echo throughout the book of Proverbs. God is the Creator of the cosmos (3:19–20) and the Maker of all people (22:2) who observes and assesses all human actions and judges human sins (5:21–22).⁵⁵ Even beyond such theological fundamentals, however, the wisdom of Proverbs is steeped in a decidedly Pentateuchal, and often particularly Deuteronomic, worldview.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

⁵² Waltke, 1:82.

⁵³ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 59.

⁵⁴ To wax hypothetical for a moment, however, suppose a man is a blaspheming, adulterous, covetous Jew who nevertheless tithes meticulously and faithfully (cf. Matt 23:23); is God nevertheless obligated to materially bless such an individual? Both Proverbs and Deuteronomy have plenty to say about hypocrisy and presumption, as well as the consequences of those other sins as well. To assume a mechanical correspondence between certain acts of righteousness and certain rewards is not only unrealistic but also covenantally uninformed. Likewise, to dismiss the possibility that God reserves the right to suspend material blessings even on the faithful for his own good and sovereign purposes is equally unrealistic and covenantally uninformed.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ 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).

⁵⁷ For more detailed study of Proverbs-Deuteronomy intertextuality, see William P. Brown, “The Law and the Sages: A Reexamination of Tôrâ in Proverbs,” in *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride Jr.*, ed. John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 251–80. Though positioned within less than conservative parameters, Brown nevertheless disputes the alleged absence of any intersection between these two books, concluding that “Levinson's claim that Deuteronomy comprehensively includes ‘matters of cultus, justice, political administration,

Table 1. Deuteronomic Foundations for Proverbs

Proverbs	Deuteronomy
3:10—So your barns [בִּצְבָצָה] will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine.	28:8—The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns [בִּצְבָצָה] and in all that you put your hand to, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you.
3:11–12—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.	8:5—Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.
3:33—The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.	11:26–28—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.
7:1–3—My son, keep my words and treasure my commandments within you. . . . Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.	6:6–9—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.
11:1—A false balance is an abomination to the LORD. 20:10, 23—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.	25:13, 15—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
18:5—To show partiality to the wicked is not good, nor to thrust aside the righteous in judgment. Cf. 24:23	1:17—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
19:5—A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will not escape.	19:16–19—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.
19:17—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	15:7–8, 10—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 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.
20:20—He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness.	27:16—Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother. Cf. Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9

family life, sexuality, warfare, social and economic justice, and theology' applies also to Proverbs!" (280). Cf. also Bernd U. Schipper, "Teach Them Diligently to Your Son!": The Book of Proverbs and Deuteronomy," in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, LHB/OTS 629, ed. Katharine Julia Dell and Will Kynes (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 21–34; and Bernd U. Schipper, "When Wisdom Is Not Enough! The Discourse on Wisdom and Torah and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs," in *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of 'Torah' in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period*, *SuppJSJ* 163, ed. Bernd U. Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 55–79. While Proverbs-Deuteronomy intertextuality lies more on the periphery of this study, I am indebted to colleague and friend Phil Brown (professor at God's Bible School & College) for drawing my attention to these resources.

Proverbs	Deuteronomy
20:22—Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and He will save you.	32:35—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.
22:28—Do not move the ancient boundary which your fathers have set.	19:14—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
25:2—It is the glory of God to conceal [סֵתֵר] a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.	29:29—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.
28:13— He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.	4:31—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.
30:6—Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.	4:2—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
30:9—Lest I be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?"	8:10–19— . . . lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, . . . then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God.

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. We understand instinctively that proverbs are universals but not absolutes. "In short, proverbs are true but are encapsulated and focused on just one aspect of a diverse reality."⁵⁸

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."⁵⁹

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*. Again, once we insist that all biblical proverbs must 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.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Hildebrandt, 531.

⁵⁹ Kidner, *Wisdom*, 26.

⁶⁰ 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.

Interpreting Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs has often been mischaracterized as presenting the world in predictable terms of an unvarying, black-and-white moral order, while Job and Ecclesiastes allegedly overthrow the simplistic, sanitized view of Proverbs via a rebellion of realism.⁶¹ This, however, is a misreading of all three books, which are “canonical partners, not canonical and theological opposites.”⁶² “Job and Ecclesiastes are not battling a rigid retribution doctrine propounded by Proverbs.”⁶³ 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;⁶⁴ (2) because of human fallenness and finiteness, God’s ways and purposes are sometimes inscrutable to us;⁶⁵ 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.”⁶⁶ This theological core is important not only for a correct reading of the book itself, but for placing it solidly within the larger, overarching metanarrative of a holistic biblical theology.

Interpretational Challenges in Proverbs

The first hermeneutical principle for interpreting Proverbs is to recognize and remember the literary difference between Proverbs 1–9, 22:17–24:34, 30–31 as discursive admonition, and the rest of the book as a collection of isolated wisdom sayings (proverbs). 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.

Proverbs and 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.

⁶¹ “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,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 121.

⁶² House, 450.

⁶³ Köstenberger and 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.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ Prov 20:24; 25:2; Eccl 3:11; 8:17; 11:5; Job 5:9; 9:10; 11:7.

⁶⁶ Prov 1:7; 3:5; 9:10; Eccl 5:7; 7:18; 12:13; Job 1:1, 8; 28:28; 42:6.

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.⁶⁷

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 aphorisms (like the fact that they may admit exceptions).⁶⁸ 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 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.

Proverbs and 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. "A proverb does not give guarantees; rather, it indicates the best route to a desired end."⁶⁹ 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."⁷⁰ Even biblical proverbs do not necessarily guarantee infallible outcomes. What about the following? "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, in part 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 distinctions. The statement in 3:5–6 is one in a sequence of direct admonitions that are grounded in a covenant relationship with the Lord.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Kidner, *Wisdom*, 18–19.

⁶⁸ The interpretation of this or any other contextualized genre, of course, takes that context into account—including issues of genre, setting, purpose, audience, etc.

⁶⁹ Longman III, 545.

⁷⁰ Randy Jaeggli, "Interpreting Proverbs 22:6," *Biblical Viewpoint* 32, no. 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).

⁷¹ Embedded in each admonition in the sequence is a relational imperative (3:5, trust the Lord; 3:7, fear the Lord; 3:9, honor the Lord; 3:11, do not reject the discipline of the Lord). It's also not obscurantist to point out what the statement affirms when we

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. More than that, it echoes a covenantal principle for Israelites living in the land under the law (Deut 4:40). But is it an infallible rule for all believers anywhere without any exception in human history and experience? If this 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 twenty-nine almost exactly one century apart.⁷² And as for “the years of the wicked,” one must explain why Manasseh was Judah’s wickedest yet longest-reigning king, and why Job grappled with the incongruity of the prosperity and longevity of the wicked (Job 21:7–15). The exceptions don’t mean the proverb is erroneous; it simply means the proverb is a *proverb*.⁷³

“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 of the first statement. 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 “all the evil that 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 did,⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ That doesn’t mean the proverb is wrong; it is simply reflecting an observable norm in God’s world.⁷⁶

“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. Others see the recompense as negative retribution for *both* the righteous and the wicked: if God chastises even the righteous, how much more the wicked.⁷⁷ Taking this view, Waltke 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.⁷⁸ But

commit our way to him; it does not say such a person will have sudden clarity or flawless judgment in a decision, nor that nothing “bad” will happen. What it assures is God’s sovereign, gracious, and providential supervision of one’s path.

⁷² 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.

⁷³ 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.

⁷⁴ “The rigid application of this law was the mainstay of Job’s comforters.” Kidner, *Proverbs*, 98.

⁷⁵ Even the exceptions, however, do not negate a corollary truth—affirmed by both Joseph (Gen 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.

⁷⁶ DeRouchie notes, “Many proverbs address ultimate and not immediate truths” (DeRouchie, 86). 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.

⁷⁷ The negative view is bolstered by Peter’s allusion to this verse from the LXX (1 Pet 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.

⁷⁸ 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.

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.⁷⁹ 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 fare, 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.⁸⁰

"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 young parents and confused (if not unduly guilty) many old ones. Even on the most basic exegetical and translational level, much of the proverb's interpretation and application is debated.⁸¹ For the purpose of this article, 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.

Proverbs and Observations

The foregoing discussion requires 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, 22:17–24:34, and 30–31).

Second, even among proverbs proper, only a small minority of proverbs are the kinds of statements that even invite exceptions. For most biblical proverbs—like most secular proverbs—exceptions simply do not compute. For example, nearly half of the fifty-six 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.

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ Kidner, *Wisdom*, 27.

⁸¹ 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 an "induction into adulthood" view. See Jaeggli, 41–48.

- 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.

How does one find an exception to the observation of 25:13 or 14, or the common-sense 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 entertain exceptions. Indeed, it is not irreverent to suggest that some observational proverbs intentionally evoke a humorous image.⁸²

Proverbs and 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.⁸³

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

⁸² “Perhaps the proverb is cited simply for pointed humor, such as the sluggard who is too lazy to raise his hand up to his mouth (Prov 19:24; 22:13).” Hildebrandt, 531.

⁸³ E.g., Hildebrandt identifies “Yahweh Sayings” as one of nine different proverbial forms (535) but does not address whether they succumb to the non-promissory qualification of the proverbial genre. Similarly, one of the five categories of proverbial authority is the “universal mandate (Prov 3:5)” (531); again, however, he never discusses why or on what basis such a statement may be considered a universal mandate as opposed to a general observation that admits exceptions. Likewise, Longman asserts (without explanation), “we must admit that that certain proverbs are always true,” citing Proverbs 11:1 as an example along with the ambiguous qualification, “If there are exceptions to this proverb, they are so rare as to be unimportant.” Longman, 543.

emerge is the immutability of the character of their covenant God, Yahweh. Proverbs uses the distinctive personal name of Israel's unique covenant God—Yahweh—almost exclusively.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵

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)

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)

The approximately fifty-five proverbs in chapters 10–29 that say something about the immutable being or attributes of God do not admit exceptions—not because we impose on Proverbs a systematic-theological construct based on what the rest of the Bible teaches about God, *but because the conviction of an immutable God was an inherent component of the worldview of the biblical wisdom writers themselves, based on God's self-revelation in the Pentateuch that shaped and defined their worldview*. As such, these proverbs express absolute theological 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).

This assertion, however, necessitates a clarifying caveat. Greg Parsons discusses two interpretational guidelines back-to-back: “Beware of the Erroneous Assumption That Proverbs Are Unconditional Promises” (a principle already covered under “Proverbs and Exceptions” above) and “Realize That Some Proverbs Are Unconditionally True”—which is where we are now. In explaining the latter guideline, Parsons notes that

⁸⁴ Yahweh is referenced by name 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.

⁸⁵ 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 “Proverbs and Observations” above.

some proverbs may always be true. Frequently these are connected to an attribute or action of God (11:1; 12:22; 15:3; 16:2, 33; 22:2). However, this does not mean that because the name of the Lord is used in the proverb there is a “blank check” to use in an unconditional fashion. For instance, 15:25 and 16:7 must not be forced to apply to all situations.⁸⁶

I have tried to choose my words carefully, however, in specifying that proverbs are absolutes if grounded in the *person or character* of God. Contrary to Parsons’s combination of God’s “attribute or action” as the distinguishing factor, I would suggest that deity proverbs that isolate a divine *attribute* are absolutes, but deity proverbs that describe God’s *actions* may *not* necessarily be absolutes. To be sure, God’s actions are always consistent with God’s character; but that does not mean that God’s character always expresses itself in the same actions in every circumstance. I observed earlier (under “The Proverbial Challenge”) that the applicability of proverbs may be conditioned on the changing circumstances of life or the mysteries of divine providence. Likewise, God’s *actions* may vary depending on circumstances and his secret providential purposes.⁸⁷ In short, *God’s being and character never vary; his actions may often vary, though they are never inconsistent with his being and character.*⁸⁸ Consequently, I would suggest that the deity proverbs Parsons cites above (15:25; 16:7) are conditional and non-absolute precisely because they describe *not* God’s unchanging and absolute *character* (like the nearby 15:26; 16:5) but God’s conditional and non-absolute *actions*, which may vary even in similar circumstances depending on his own sovereign will and wisdom.⁸⁹

Table 2. Theology Proper in Proverbs 10–29

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

⁸⁶ Parsons, 157–160. Parsons’s helpful hermeneutical directives remind the interpreter to take into account (1) “the overall structure, purpose, and ‘motto’ of the book of Proverbs”; (2) “various literary forms and devices”; (3) “the erroneous assumption that proverbs are unconditional promises”; (4) “that some proverbs are unconditionally true”; and (5) “the historical-cultural context of extrabiblical wisdom literature.” 153–61.

⁸⁷ This fact should hardly require corroboration, but one obvious example is God’s divergent providence in not delivering James from execution (Acts 12:1–2) and yet orchestrating Peter’s miraculous deliverance from the same fate (Acts 12:3ff.).

⁸⁸ So, for example, per Table 2, God is the Maker of all men without exception, is always sovereign, and always abominates deception and arrogance; those qualities and values reflect God’s unchanging being and attributes. As we have seen, however, God does not always choose to intervene on behalf of the godly nor judge every act of ungodliness in this life.

⁸⁹ Other deity proverbs that could fall into this category of divine actions that may vary with the circumstances include 10:3, 22; 20:22; 21:12; 28:25. Note that Table 2 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.

Theology	Proverbs	Pentateuch
God is the security of 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 motive of all people.	16:2; 17:3	Deut 8:2

A Paradigm for Interpreting Proverbs

The issues explored in this paper confront the kinds of questions Proverbs is likely to raise. Many readers wonder about the discrepancies between certain proverbial statements and the realities they see around them—whether in their own experience, in historical record, or in the Bible itself. We set up ourselves (and others) 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:⁹⁰

- Is it located in the admonition section (1–9, 22b–24, 30–31) or the aphoristic wisdom sayings section (10–22a, 25–29)?
- Is it a theological statement regarding the being or character of the unchanging God?
- Is it a theological statement regarding the actions of God, which may vary depending on God’s wisdom or will?
- 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?

⁹⁰ 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 attempts to lay out a hermeneutical paradigm that recognizes the variety of proverbial statements in Proverbs 10–29.⁹¹

Table 3. Hermeneutical Paradigm for Proverbs 10–22a, 25–29

Category	Examples	Exceptions?
Deity Affirmations		
Yahweh's Person, Attributes, Character	12:22—Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight. 15:26—The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD, but the words of the pure are pleasant. 16:5—Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces, none will go unpunished. 21:2—The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. 21:3—To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice.	No <i>They are grounded in the self-revelation of the unchanging God which undergirds and informs the Israelite culture.</i>
Yahweh's Actions	10:22—The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it. 15:25—The LORD will destroy the house of the proud, but He will establish the boundary of the widow. 16:7—When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. 20:22—Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD and he will save you. 21:1—The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever he wishes.	Sometimes <i>They are subject to other considerations in the providence of God.</i>
Sayings		
General Principles of Operation within God's Moral Universe	10:27—The fear of the LORD prolongs days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened. 11:31—Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner. 12:21—There shall no evil happen to the just: but the wicked shall be filled with mischief.	Sometimes <i>They are subject to other considerations in the providence of God.</i>
Observational Sayings	14:5—A trustworthy witness will not lie, but a false witness utters lies. 29:20—Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.	Not Applicable <i>Framed in a way that circumvents exceptions.</i>
Didactic Sayings	13:20—He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. 25:27—It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one's own glory.	
Advice Sayings	19:2—Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, and he who hurries his footsteps errs. 25:17—Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, or he will become weary of you and hate you.	

⁹¹ Garrett "builds on" the work of von Rad, Gottwald, and Murphy to identify the various species of proverb (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.

Category	Examples	Exceptions?
Qualitative Sayings	19:1—Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool. 25:24—It is better to live in a corner of the roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman.	
Comparative Sayings	26:1—As snow in summer and rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool. 26:11—Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.	
Admonitions		
Commands	23:12—Apply your heart to instruction, and your ears to words of knowledge. 23:22–23—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.	Not Applicable <i>Framed in a way that circumvents exceptions.</i>
Prohibitions	22:24–25—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. 22:28—Do not remove the ancient landmark which your fathers have set.	

Conclusion

In raising the question “Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?” Bruce Waltke recognizes the same hermeneutical conundrum this paper seeks to address. 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.⁹²

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 *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

⁹² Waltke, 1:107–8.

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.⁹³

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.⁹⁴

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.

⁹³ Ibid., 108.

⁹⁴ Ibid.