



The Moral Vision of Proverbs

*A VIRTUE-ORIENTED
APPROACH TO WISDOM*

Timothy J.
Sandoval

“Sandoval presents Proverbs as a profoundly theological statement about the cultivation of moral character through the practice of the complex moral and intellectual activity that the sages call ‘wisdom.’ Eschewing conventional moralistic and utilitarian treatments, he brings to his reading a philosophical, cultural, and literary sophistication that encourages critical and self-critical engagement. This study will be essential for serious students of biblical wisdom traditions, in the academy and also in the church.”

—Ellen F. Davis, Duke Divinity School

“The book of Proverbs finally receives its full ethical due from the able hands of Sandoval, who offers the most robust and nuanced moral treatment to date of this often-overlooked book. Sandoval’s study is both sophisticated and engaging, philosophical and dialogical, offering its share of exegetical surprises, all to highlight Proverbs’ overarching goal to impart the ‘craft of living well.’”

—William P. Brown, Columbia Theological Seminary

“In a rich and incisive contribution to a burgeoning debate on Proverbs as a book of virtue ethics, Sandoval claims, by engaging with Aristotle and other classical writers on virtue ethics, that it is indeed an ancient, virtue-oriented moral discourse. Picking up on Proverbs’ concern with character ethics, Sandoval discovers more profound aspects of its moral rhetoric and wider moral vision, including natural law, social virtues, and practical wisdom that together embody a coherent model for promoting human flourishing.”

—Katharine J. Dell, University of Cambridge

“In this substantial and engaging study, Sandoval sheds light on why biblical scholarship has largely relegated Proverbs to second-tier status as a source of theological and ethical insight. Delivering his scholarly erudition in clear prose, Sandoval redresses this balance and reveals Proverbs’ merits as such an intellectual resource by examining its moral perspective in light of ancient virtue ethics. As I have with Sandoval’s other books on Proverbs, I have learned much from this book and recommend it to others.”

—Gilberto A. Ruiz, Saint Anselm College

“In *The Moral Vision of Proverbs*, Sandoval helps dispel the all-too-common biases that Proverbs lacks moral complexity, displays simplistic act-consequence behavioral schemas, and promotes restrictive natural theologies. With precision, care, and wisdom, Sandoval demonstrates how Proverbs’ engagement with premodern, virtue-oriented moral discourse yields instruction that is ethically and theologically relevant for the contemporary world. This is a must-have for any serious reader of Proverbs.”

—Patricia Vesely, Memphis Theological Seminary

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For Tony

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Preface

In my classes at Brite Divinity School, when we talk about the wisdom literature I always begin with this question: What is biblical wisdom literature? Or, what are the biblical wisdom books? Inevitably students respond by naming texts such as Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Others, often a bit more tentatively, will add the Psalms and Song of Songs to the list and perhaps even the deuterocanonical, or for Protestants “Apocryphal,” books of Sirach (Wisdom of Ben Sira) and the Wisdom of Solomon. I then usually note both that the biblical wisdom tradition extends to a host of other texts, including some found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and that “wisdom” works were quite common throughout the scribal cultures of ancient West Asia and Egypt, from which emerges a work like Instruction of Amenemope, which seems clearly at points to have impacted the composition of Proverbs 22:17–23:11.

I then ask students another question: How do you *know* that these texts are “wisdom” books? After someone boldly or sheepishly states what many others surely are thinking—“Because the textbook says so,” which really isn’t a bad answer (it shows, at least, they’ve done the day’s reading!)—we slowly are able to uncover a series of criteria or family resemblances for identifying what “counts” as biblical wisdom literature. We also try to account for the arguments of those who call into question the category of “wisdom” itself.¹ But having identified a cluster of features that suggest the traditional wisdom texts stand in an important discursive relationship with one another, I also try to convince students that biblical wisdom literature offers us a kind of

1. See, e.g., Kynes, *Obituary for “Wisdom Literature.”*

ancient theological ethics—though it is a theological ethic that is often not fully appreciated today.

Persuading students of the moral worth of Proverbs is sometimes a tough sell. The book's rhetoric and moral vision must compete with the compelling narratives and divine precepts of the Pentateuch, the soaring rhetoric of the prophetic books and the Psalter, and the engaging tales of Ruth and Esther. It also must compete with the other wisdom books: Job, which wrestles with the perennial issues of theodicy and the suffering of the just, and Qohelet, which rings uniquely modern in its pessimistic outlook and bold embrace of pleasure.

There have, however, long been scholars who have tried to appreciate Proverbs' theological and ethical orientation and to suggest that the constructive payoff for close study of this book might rival that of other "more central" biblical texts. In an effort to contribute to this endeavor, this study first strives hermeneutically to read Proverbs through the lens of virtue ethics. At the same time, it also suggests that, historically speaking, the text may best be understood as a species of ancient virtue-oriented discourse. Offered by a Christian scholar, this work is concerned both with (re)describing the historical-literary aspects of Proverbs' moral rhetoric and with constructively interpreting the book.

This project's origins trace most broadly to my initial scholarly work, in which I studied how wealth and poverty function in the book of Proverbs.² What follows is an extension of that work, or at least part of it. In earlier studies I emphasized how Proverbs' rhetoric of material reward and punishment for right and wrong conduct can and ought to be understood figuratively. It promises not merely or simply real, material goods to the book's hearers and readers who find wisdom; more fundamentally, it promises the incomparably valuable life of virtue itself. As I see now, this was an incomplete description of how Proverbs understands the relation between real material and social goods—for example, honor and wealth—and the attainment of wisdom. The key is recognizing Proverbs more fully as a virtue-oriented moral discourse. Like other such discourses (e.g., in the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions), it has a clear and legitimate place for the human pursuit of happiness (*eudaemonia*) that involves, indeed must include, a desire and need for the sorts of real material and social goods that I understood more figuratively in my earlier work. This figurative dimension of wealth and poverty rhetoric in particular *is* at play in Proverbs, but it is only one aspect of what ought to be a fuller description of Proverbs' moral discourse.

2. Sandoval, *Discourse of Wealth and Poverty*.

The more immediate origins of this project, however, lie elsewhere. Having thought I had said all I wanted to say about Proverbs and happily having moved on to more focused study on books like Tobit, I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the “Human Distinctiveness Summer Seminar: A Program to Engage Theologians with the Dynamism of Anthropological and Evolutionary Approaches to the Human” at the University of Notre Dame. Participating in this project, led by Professors Celia Deane-Drummond and Agustín Fuentes, reinvigorated my interest in understanding biblical wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, in terms of premodern virtue-oriented moral discourses—for in striving to understand how humans might attain well-being, such moral discourses pay significant attention to the sorts of beings humans naturally are. To Dr. Deane-Drummond and Dr. Fuentes, as well as to all the contributors and participants in the seminar, I am grateful. Besides Dr. Deane-Drummond and Dr. Fuentes, several members of this group deserve special mention. Dr. Adam M. Willows, Dr. John Berkman, Dr. Joel Hodge, and Dr. Philip A. Rolnick on different occasions generously and patiently helped me grasp better the ins and outs of Aristotle, Thomas, and virtue ethics. Dr. Arthur Walker-Jones has continued to encourage me to think more fully about how a text like Proverbs understands the relation between humans and their wisdom and the lives and wisdom of nonhuman animals with whom we share our world. Others have prodded my thinking through their writings, in conversation on conference panels and in other contexts. These are too many to name and so I mention only William P. Brown, Michael V. Fox, and Bernd U. Schipper. I am continually surprised by how many times I have started out contesting one or another point that these scholars have made about Proverbs, only to find my own views, in the end, lining up very closely to theirs.

A brief but serendipitous meeting with Jim Kinney of Baker Academic at a gathering of the Catholic Biblical Association, which revealed a mutual interest in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, led me to consider Baker as a publication venue for this book. I am grateful to the various editors at Baker for their work on the manuscript, especially to Brandy Scritchfield, who showed keen interest in my work early on, and to Eric Salo, who made many suggestions to improve my prose. The suggestions, and at points the words of both, have only improved the manuscript.

Although the following pages would not have come to see the light if not for my engagement with all these colleagues, any shortcomings belong to me alone.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my son Antonio James Sandoval Yax, the deepest joy of my life. My hope for him is only that, with God’s help, he will grow to become a good, wise, and just person.

Abbreviations

[]	Alternative versification used by some English translations is included in brackets
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999
HS	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LQ	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NE	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> . In <i>The Complete Works of Aristotle</i> . Edited by Jonathan Barnes. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984
NETS	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> . Edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by Leander E. Keck et al. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004

NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 17 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2021
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Introduction

An interest in biblical ethics—whether the ethics *of* the Bible or the role and function of the Bible *in* ethics—is hardly a new concern of biblical scholars or of ethicists.¹ Yet the last decade or two has seen increased attention to the study of character ethics and the Bible, including a keen interest in how aspects of the Hebrew Bible might reflect a virtue-oriented moral discourse, or at least how the witness of the Scriptures might be appropriated into a normative “character ethics” framework. The ongoing interest in virtue ethics and the Bible among biblical scholars is evident from books with titles such as *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*; *The Good Life in the Old Testament*; *God and the Art of Happiness*; and *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*:

1. See, e.g., the exhaustive Green et al., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. Two standard Christian handbooks on biblical ethics in English are Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics*; and Spohn, *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics?* See further the work of ethicists in Curran and McCormick, *Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*; and Ogletree, *Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*. Each of these texts distinguishes between the ethics of the Bible and the use of the Bible in ethics, and is primarily concerned with the latter. A number of other studies more concerned with the former aspect of “biblical ethics” include Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, and Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, both of which treat a range of issues in biblical ethics. See also Levinson, Otto, and Dietrich, *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament*; Rogerson, *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*; and Brown, *Character and Scripture*. Mills considers the ethics of biblical narratives in *Biblical Morality*. On the wisdom literature and Proverbs in particular, see the works noted in the discussion below, as well as Delkurt, *Ethische Einsichten*. Newsom maps the contours of the moral self as this emerges in texts of the biblical tradition in “Models of the Moral Self.” Cf. the responses to Newsom’s work in *JSOT* 40, no.1 (2015), especially Camp, “Proverbs and the Problems of the Moral Self,” 25–42; and Stewart, “Wisdom’s Imagination,” 351–72.

*What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life.*² As the “Old Testament” terminology intimates, this development in biblical studies is largely a Christian one, but not only so. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson argues that a range of biblical literature and subsequent Jewish texts can well be understood in light of an Aristotelian-oriented conception of virtue ethics.³ In any case, the interest in considering the Bible’s moral discourse in light of character ethics is a welcome development since, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, it “works against a caricature of the . . . Old Testament . . . as a set of commandments that are too familiarly labeled as ‘legalism.’”⁴ It is welcome, too, because it provides a hermeneutic through which to analyze biblical texts that is structured differently than those critical approaches most familiar to many biblical scholars.

Proverbs and Character Ethics

The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, and especially the book of Proverbs with its educational ethos, presents ideal texts to analyze in terms of the concerns and questions of virtue ethics.⁵ In 1996 William Brown did just that in a book-length study called *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*.⁶ Brown’s “fresh approach” was precisely to scrutinize wisdom texts in terms of character ethics. *Character in Crisis* thus fired what for some biblical scholars was the starting gun that precipitated a concern for thinking about the Bible, especially wisdom literature, in light of character ethics. Brown himself has reprised this earlier work under the title *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature*.⁷ Far from a simple “revised edition” of *Character in Crisis*, *Wisdom’s Wonder* is a substantive rethinking and expansion of the earlier work. Most distinctively, Brown supplements his earlier study by

2. Carroll R. and Lapsley, *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*; Whybray, *Good Life in the Old Testament*; Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*; and Strawn, *Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*.

3. Tirosh-Samuelson, “Virtue and Happiness.” Compare Tirosh-Samuelson, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism*.

4. Brueggemann, foreword to *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, viii.

5. The category of biblical “wisdom literature,” which regularly includes the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and certain psalms, is one that scholars have long been somewhat uneasy about. See, e.g., Kynes, *Obituary for “Wisdom Literature.”* Works such as Sirach (Ben Sira) and Wisdom of Solomon in the Old Testament canons of certain Christian traditions are also regularly regarded as wisdom books, and the category usually extends to other early Jewish texts, such as 4QInstruction from Qumran and certain ancient West Asian and Egyptian works.

6. Brown, *Character in Crisis*.

7. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*.

recasting it through a hermeneutic of wonder or “fear seeking understanding.”⁸ This hermeneutic, says Brown, permits him to integrate better what he, like Katharine Dell, regards as the two primary thematic axes of wisdom literature: its concern with ethics or right living and a robust theological interest in creation.⁹

As with Brown’s earlier work, *Wisdom’s Wonder* begins with a helpful sketch of the main elements of character that inform his study. He explains that moral character is “the tendency to act, feel, and think in certain describable ways” and “refers to the sum and range of specifically ethical qualities or traits the individual or community possesses.”¹⁰ Following Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen’s handbook on biblical ethics, he underscores the importance of perception, intention, and virtue for understanding a person’s character.¹¹ Importantly, Brown also acknowledges that narrative (as that which gives shape to a life over time so that long-term dispositions and excellencies of character can be discerned) is an important category for virtue ethics. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, for virtue-oriented moral systems, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”¹² Of course, Proverbs consists primarily of instructional poems and short sayings. It has no clear “story” that it tells—an issue Brown resolves by identifying a metanarrative shape to Proverbs, whereby the silent youth that the book initially addresses “moves out from the household to the Grand Central Stations of urban life” and ends up in Proverbs 31 as “an adult male who has successfully fulfilled these responsibilities by marrying well and finding his place among the elders.”¹³

Yet if Brown’s *Character in Crisis* fired the starting shot for considering the Bible and especially wisdom literature in light of character or virtue ethics, the field of runners considering the book of Proverbs in this light was for some time rather small. Despite Brown’s seminal work and the ongoing interest in character ethics in/and the Bible generally, Proverbs did not initially receive as much sustained attention as one might have expected given

8. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 24.

9. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 4. Brown cites Dell, *Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*, 11, 91, 178–79.

10. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 8.

11. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 9–14; cf. Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics*, esp. 35–65.

12. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

13. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 64–65. Brown is not sanguine about all this, however. He recognizes the patriarchal nature of the text and its vision of the developing male and so subsequently the need for critical feminist and cultural critique of the book. On the adequacy of the “story” Brown finds in Proverbs for a virtue-ethics reading of the book, see chap. 9 below. For a more direct, critical engagement with the hierarchical and exclusionary facets of Proverbs’ moral discourse, see the conclusion below.

the book's clear moral rhetoric and instructional goals. Most scholars of Proverbs, both before and after Brown's *Character in Crisis*, have instead been primarily concerned with other important issues: understanding the book's act-consequence rhetoric or the sages' supposed empirical methodology; exploring Proverbs' relation to "international" wisdom works from Egypt and Mesopotamia; attempting to discern the social location of the book's authors or editors; or considering the relationship of Proverbs' short sayings to the folk proverbs of different peoples throughout history—to name just a few lines of investigation.¹⁴ Even the collection of essays published by the Society of Biblical Literature's "Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation Group"—*Character Ethics and the Old Testament*—contains only two essays that treat wisdom texts in any significant way; one of these essays is also by Brown, and neither treats Proverbs directly.¹⁵

Despite such limited efforts to understand Proverbs in terms of character ethics after Brown's *Character in Crisis*, some studies of the book have begun to talk about virtues and vices, the formation of character, the role of moral exemplars in character formation, the ethics of being over the ethics of duty, and so forth—all concerns that belong to the discourse of character ethics. The present study builds on many of these efforts.

Michael Fox in his magisterial two-volume commentary on Proverbs, for instance, contends that the proverbial ethical program is most akin to the character ethics of Socrates. In particular, Fox finds in Proverbs an affinity with the Socratic dictums that "virtue is knowledge," "no one does wrong willingly," and "all virtues are one," as well as with the premium Socrates puts on the power of the intellect in controlling character.¹⁶ Fox is no doubt correct that aspects of the Socratic vision resonate with Proverbs. However, other scholars look to Aristotle—and the ethical tradition that stems from him—as a better analogue for understanding Proverbs' moral discourse. In response to Fox's work, Christopher Ansberry, for instance, argues that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, with its understanding of matters such as knowledge, virtue, and flourishing, "serves as a more useful heuristic model for understanding the moral vision of the book of Proverbs than Socrates' ethical theory."¹⁷ As noted, Tirosh-Samuelson studies a range of Jewish lit-

14. As we shall see at different points in the following chapters, all these concerns bear on a reading of Proverbs as a virtue-oriented text.

15. See Brown, "Moral Cosmologies of Creation"; and Smith-Christopher, "Quiet Words of the Wise." If Song of Songs is considered a wisdom text, then one could also add Pleins, "Wine, Women, and Song (of Songs)."

16. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 934–45.

17. Ansberry, "What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Athens?," 161.

erature, including Proverbs, in light of Aristotelian perspectives on ethics. As she says, the Bible, especially the wisdom tradition, “shared the assumption of Greek philosophy that to act rightly the moral agent must acquire virtues through training that conditions the moral agent to live wisely.”¹⁸

Ellen Davis, too, largely understands Proverbs in terms of a character ethics that seems ultimately to derive from Aristotle. She points to the importance of the virtues in Proverbs and highlights especially the central place of “prudence” in the book, while also noting ways Proverbs’ creation theology is related to virtue—all matters with which the following pages are also concerned.¹⁹ In a wide-ranging study, Zoltán Schwáb sees Proverbs’ moral discourse in terms of a virtue-oriented tradition—that of Thomistic moral theology, itself profoundly indebted to Aristotle. He does so, in part, to demonstrate that Proverbs’ concern with “interested piety” (my term)—people’s quest for certain external goods such as wealth in the context of moral action—can be regarded as an important aspect of a *legitimate* ethical perspective that is of a piece with the social interdependence and just communal relations the book also values, something that has been difficult for Proverbs scholars in the modern epoch to understand.²⁰ Christine Roy Yoder’s commentary on Proverbs is also broadly concerned with relating categories of character ethics to the text, while her work on the formation of “fearers of Yahweh” studies one “profile of virtue” in the book.²¹ Yoder also considers the role that “natural” human emotions play in Proverbs, drawing on the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics that Martha Nussbaum elaborates.²² Elsewhere Yoder attempts to sketch Proverbs’ vision of the “good life.”²³ L. Juliana Claassens also draws on Nussbaum to consider whether the Woman of Valor in Proverbs 31:10–31 might be reckoned as one who is fully flourishing or not.²⁴

Anne Whitaker Stewart’s study of the poetic ethics of Proverbs is another work that considers how Proverbs might be regarded as a text of virtue ethics, as her keen engagement with the likes of MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and Stanley Hauerwas suggests. Stewart recognizes the important role the training of

18. Tirosh-Samuelson, “Virtue and Happiness,” 711. On the foundational role of Aristotle, cf. 701–11.

19. Davis, “Preserving Virtues.” The “prudence” she speaks of appears to be closely related to the notion of *phronēsis* in the Greek tradition and what in Proverbs I will call “Practical Wisdom” (cf. chap. 8 below).

20. Schwáb, *Toward an Interpretation of the Book of Proverbs*.

21. See C. Yoder, *Proverbs* and “Forming ‘Fearers of Yahweh.’” Cf. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 934–45.

22. C. Yoder, “Objects of Our Affections.” Cf. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 129–37.

23. C. Yoder, “Path and Possession in Proverbs 1–9.”

24. Claassens, “Woman of Substance.”

desire and emotion plays in virtue ethics and contends that Proverbs' poetic literary forms are indispensable for the virtue-oriented moral work that the text seeks to carry out.²⁵ Like Brown, Stewart also recognizes the fundamental place of narrative in much contemporary discourse of character ethics. However, she is not convinced Proverbs reveals the sort of narrative arc Brown discovers in the text. Rather, following the likes of Galen Strawson and Dan Zahavi, she proposes that character formation need not depend on narrative as strongly as the writings of MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and others suggest.²⁶ For her and her theoretical-ethical interlocutors, character and virtue can be recognized, even formed, episodically without "story." Indeed, for Stewart it almost seems that the mere existence of the nonnarrative book of Proverbs, with its concern for virtue and character, is proof of this.

Arthur Jan Keefer also studies Proverbs thoroughly in light of premodern virtue-oriented moral traditions—especially those of Aristotle and Thomas. To demonstrate that Proverbs itself constitutes a distinct moral tradition, Keefer identifies the central virtues and vices the book articulates and closely compares them with the range and conception of virtues and vices in Aristotle and Thomas. He "definitively" concludes "that many of the moral concepts in Proverbs constitute virtues in the Aristotelian and Thomistic senses, with the book itself emerging as a moral tradition in its own right."²⁷

Others, though less explicitly turning to Aristotle and his interpreters, also broadly consider aspects of Proverbs' moral discourse in terms of character ethics. Sun Myung Lyu studies the book's notion of righteousness in this light, and I explore how the book's discourse of wealth and poverty relates to particular virtues that the book values.²⁸ Carol Newsom proposes an important way to map constructions of the moral self throughout the Hebrew Bible and in early Judaism, including Proverbs; the moral terms and categories she deploys resonate with a turn toward analyzing biblical texts in terms of character ethics. Newsom contends that "three elements form the fundamental grammar of the moral self in the Hebrew Bible: desire, knowledge, and the discipline of submission to external authority"—elements that are also common to ancient virtue-oriented traditions, though she does not invoke that tradition explicitly.²⁹

25. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*.

26. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 203–7; cf. Strawson, "Against Narrativity"; Zahavi, "Self and Other."

27. Keefer, *Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics*, 203.

28. Lyu, *Righteousness in the Book of Proverbs*; Sandoval, *Discourse of Wealth and Poverty*.

29. Newsom, "Models of the Moral Self," 12. In a direct response to Newsom's contention that Proverbs presumes a coherent moral self, Camp ("Proverbs and the Problems of the Moral Self") questions the coherency of the moral subject in Proverbs. Focusing on minority

Beyond the relatively recent works just mentioned, other studies of Proverbs—including some older works published well before the last two decades—also implicitly analyze Proverbs, *at least in part*, via the idiom and categories of character ethics. A consideration of this phenomenon is instructive since it points to an important feature of many Proverbs studies in especially the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: namely, a significant ambiguity in descriptions of the nature of Proverbs' moral discourse. The ambiguity is one that seems to arise from efforts to interpret the book, consciously or unconsciously, primarily through modern moral orientations—especially utilitarian and deontological schemes—without fully recognizing how aspects of the text itself may represent a premodern moral discourse like the virtue-ethics traditions of ancient Greece. This ambiguity has at times meant that aspects of Proverbs' moral perspectives have not been clearly understood, and subsequently the book's moral worth has sometimes been only ambivalently appreciated.

The work here differs from other valuable studies in several ways. First, in part 1, I focus on several matters somewhat more than they do: the question of why Proverbs has not often been read, until recently, as a species of virtue ethics; the nature of human beings and how it relates to their quest for happiness or eudaemonia; the necessity of training a person's natural desires for goods that contribute to happiness; and the centrality of two particular virtues in traditions of character ethics—sociability and Practical Wisdom. In part 2, I explore several topics or questions that relate to and build on an understanding of Proverbs as a book of character ethics, which others—because of the focus and scope of their own work—do not much consider or approach from a somewhat different angle than I do. These concern how Proverbs' conception of wisdom and virtue might relate to similar notions elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, how Proverbs' cosmogony might “fit” in a virtue-ethics reading of the book, and how Proverbs' moral tradition might be understood as a “practice” to be constructively engaged today (see “The Plan of This Book” below).

The primary task of this book is thus to describe and account for some of the ambiguity in portrayals of Proverbs' theological ethics, while also, more fundamentally, advancing descriptions of Proverbs as an ancient virtue-oriented moral discourse—an undertaking others have already ably begun.³⁰

perspectives and contradictions in the text, Camp suggests that the moral self in the book ought to be regarded as more fragmented than Newsom's model and analysis suggest.

30. Throughout the volume I use expressions such as “theological ethics,” “theological-ethical,” or “moral-theological,” which collapse two sorts of discourses that sometimes are analytically best kept separate—the theological and the ethical. These expressions, which signal the close link between the theological and ethical, are appropriate *vis-à-vis* Proverbs because the book's ethical concerns are inextricably bound up with its theology, most obviously evident through claims that associate creation and the fear of the divine (Adonai) with knowledge and

I hope the efforts here will also point to ways Proverbs offers a coherent and legitimate moral vision that may still, or again, prove valuable for the constructive moral-theological work of individuals and communities for whom the Bible remains an important ethical-theological resource.

Proverbs and Character Ethics?

Given the relatively recent turn to character ethics as a heuristic lens through which to understand Proverbs, it is not surprising that some question whether virtue ethics is the most useful conversation partner when studying the “Old Testament ethics” of Proverbs. John Barton, for example, once contended that although aspects of Proverbs’ moral discourse might appear akin to that of character ethics, “on closer inspection” this proves to be only a superficial resemblance. As he suggested, “the gulf between” Proverbs and “a modern virtue ethic may be wider than first appears.”³¹ Barton has revised his views on Proverbs and now concedes that the book has more in common with character ethics than he once thought.³² Nonetheless, it is worth rehearsing some of the earlier views of this leading interpreter of scriptural ethics, since many of these claims will surely still resonate with other students of Proverbs.

In his earlier work, Barton understood the human characters of Proverbs as static figures. “Everyone is either good or bad, wise or foolish,” so that “living the good life appears to be an absolute, with no gradations or variations.” For Barton this meant that “Proverbs eschews most ideas of moral progress,” while the possibility for training and advancement in virtue is a key element of virtue ethics. Barton averred that a book like Proverbs seems “to inhabit a cruder world of thought, where character is indeed all important but is seen as fixed and unchanging, almost at times as predetermined.”³³

wisdom (e.g., 1:7; 3:19–20; 8:22–31; 15:33). As Quinn explains, “Any ethical doctrine that makes theistic assumption is theological. The ethical theories characteristic of the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and ISLAM are thus theological.” See “Theological Ethics” (capitalization original).

31. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 67.

32. For Barton’s recent perspectives, see “Ethics and Character Formation.”

33. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 67. Cf. Stewart’s response to Barton in *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 13–15. The two places Barton has room for character ethics in understanding biblical ethics are (1) in the analysis of (some) biblical narratives where distinct characters might serve as moral exemplars; and (2) as a normative conversation partner for those concerned with bringing biblical interpretation to bear on contemporary theological and ethical concerns (*Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 65–74).

It is clear, however, from Proverbs itself that at least the book's simpletons and young addressees (and probably the בָּסִיל ["dolt"]³⁴ and other moral types) can progress in wisdom and righteousness, though other figures, such as the אָוִיל ("fool"), do seem incapable of moral progress (cf. 1:7; 15:5; 24:7; 27:22).³⁵ Indeed, the book's concern with instruction, discipline, and reproof assumes that at least some people who are not wise or just can become both, while others through discipline or punishment can at least be made not to act foolishly or wickedly. What is more, the prologue's (1:2–7) identification of the book's audience as not only simple youth (1:4) but also advanced sages (1:5) implies that study of the text can continue to shape the character of even those excelling in wisdom.³⁶ Proverbs, however, does not presume that a person's moral development is always in a positive direction. Bad human character is not necessarily static. As Newsom succinctly puts it, even the "inveterate fool in Proverbs is 'made' rather than 'born.'"³⁷ Finally, as we shall see further below, the entailments of the fundamental moral metaphor of the two ways, upon one of which a person must travel through life, also suggests that one can advance in wisdom. The path of a wise or just person heads somewhere;³⁸ it has a goal or end of flourishing or well-being (not mere success) toward which one moves via the continued cultivation and right exercise of wisdom's virtues.³⁹ As Stewart aptly summarizes matters (also in response to Barton), character for the ancient sages "can and must be cultivated, and this is why the character ethics approach is such a helpful resource for reading the book of Proverbs."⁴⁰

Barton's earlier work, however, was largely concerned to characterize the ethics of the Old Testament as a whole. Subsequently, one might surmise he may have unduly assimilated the distinct moral discourse of Proverbs to

34. Whenever the NRSV renders בָּסִיל as "fool," I change this to "dolt" to distinguish it from אָוִיל, which the NRSV also renders as "fool."

35. Cf. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 38–43.

36. Most contemporary scholars recognize in the prologue a double addressee—the simple youth and the advanced sage. Cf. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 23–30; Sandoval, "Revisiting the Prologue." For a somewhat distinct perspective, see Keefer, "Shift in Perspective."

37. Newsom, "Models of the Moral Self," 13.

38. Because no two lives are the same, moreover, how any particular wise or just person, or any wicked or foolish person, travels or progresses on their life's path will be distinct; the precise range of virtues (or vices) different people will more or less cultivate and how they will exhibit them may thus also be somewhat different.

39. This formulation of the relation between the possibility of human flourishing and the metaphor of the way in Proverbs is slightly distinct from the perspective C. Yoder offers in "Path and Possession in Proverbs 1–9." For her, it appears, following the way of wisdom is flourishing. As will be explained further, I understand following the way of wisdom in Proverbs more precisely as an indispensable prerequisite for flourishing.

40. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 15.

the broader understanding of Old Testament ethics he seeks to promote. In this normative Christian endeavor he draws liberally on the New Testament and Protestant theological tradition to claim that the Old Testament's moral perspective in general is "far from the idea of moral good as the distillation of the way good people actually live"—a succinct articulation (and rejection) of a central dictum of virtue ethics that goes back to Aristotle.⁴¹ Indeed, for Barton, not just in Proverbs but in the broader Old Testament, "the characteristic features of a virtue ethic are lacking" since "the emphasis" in that collection of texts "lies on the divine lawgiver rather than on human moral character."⁴²

Yet if for the earlier Barton Proverbs was no virtue-oriented work, neither was it plainly a command-oriented, or deontological, moral discourse. Instead, Barton concluded that Proverbs is concerned to help readers attain "success." Its discourse is "more of a eudaemonism that we should have to call, in our terms, teleological, or consequentialist."⁴³ Such a view is redolent of the conclusions that scholars like C. H. Toy (and others) articulated a century earlier.⁴⁴ It is also one (as we shall shortly see) that in some shape or fashion has not been uncommon among Proverbs scholars up through the early twenty-first century.

Barton's earlier work is thus important, not only because it illustrates how few scholars have understood Proverbs as an ancient virtue-ethics discourse until recently. It is also significant because Barton explicitly names the two primary modern ethical discourses by which Proverbs has typically been (mis)understood (i.e., consequentialism and, particularly, utilitarian thought) and by which it has typically been evaluated or judged (i.e., deontological thought)—or so I will suggest.

41. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 69. Among others, Barton invokes St. Paul and Luther, as well as the concept of "justification by faith" (67–68). Although it may be that Barton was at points led astray in his earlier analysis of Proverbs by what appear to be strong normative Protestant views, I do not wish to suggest that such normative interpretive projects and appeals to particular traditions, whether Christian, Jewish, or otherwise, are somehow illegitimate merely because they are normative projects. My own analysis of Proverbs' moral discourse has normative concerns and makes appeals to a largely Christian—both Protestant and Catholic—moral tradition. On some of these issues, see Levenson, *Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*.

42. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 69.

43. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 70. Although virtue-oriented traditions are regularly concerned with the telos of human life and so can be described as teleological, the term "teleological" as Barton uses it here (with "consequentialist") regularly refers to those modern ethical systems that judge the worth of a moral action in terms of the end or consequence the action produces (e.g., utilitarianism, for which an act is valued if it is of use for attaining some subjectively, if also rationally, determined good end—e.g., a person's pleasure, the most happiness for the most people). For more on how this is distinct from virtue-oriented moral systems, see chap. 1 below.

44. Toy, *Proverbs*, xiv.

Barton may be correct that much of the Old Testament canon is best viewed as “deontological rather than a virtue-based ethic.”⁴⁵ However, this hardly means that all parts of the Bible are. What is more, the sort of virtue-oriented moral vision Proverbs offers may have significantly more in common with other biblical texts, such as the pronouncements of the great prophet of social justice Amos, than is usually thought. In any case, Tirosh-Samuelson’s words about how the Bible’s ethics are regularly reckoned is an apt characterization of Barton’s earlier position: “The Bible . . . is usually adduced as an example of deontological ethics, whose major modern exponent was Immanuel Kant.”⁴⁶ This is so even if one adds that the sort of theistic but still command-oriented perspective Barton presents can be distinguished from Kant’s project (see below).

Funlola Olojede, writing out of an African context and critical hermeneutic, also questions the appropriateness of a virtue- or character-ethics approach to the study of Proverbs, but on grounds quite distinct from those of Barton.⁴⁷ She rightly notes that it is Western scholars who have regularly investigated Proverbs’ ethics and they have done so with Western ethical and philosophical presuppositions. Hermeneutically, then, biblical scholarship has largely presented only one possible kind of reading of Proverbs’ morality, and it is one that is skewed toward the normative ethical programs of Europe. For Olojede, the results of such scholarship are suspect because of their complicity with the modern European–North American projects of colonialism and imperialism.⁴⁸ Olojede’s indictment of unhelpful approaches to Proverbs, however, includes more than modern, post-Enlightenment scholarship; it also includes work that draws on premodern virtue-oriented reflection as well, specifically that associated with Socrates and Aristotle. Olojede contends that an African lens applied to Proverbs better demonstrates the nature and extent of the book’s emphasis on matters such as communal well-being. Such matters resonate deeply with the ethical orientations of traditional African social-moral visions.

Olojede is quite correct about the mostly unarticulated (European) modernist moral presuppositions brought to bear on Proverbs by many biblical scholars, as will be discussed in chapter 1. However, although Socrates and Aristotle do stand at the beginning of what becomes the European philosophical

45. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 70.

46. Tirosh-Samuelson, “Virtue and Happiness,” 711.

47. Olojede, “Woman Wisdom.”

48. For a robust account of aspects of the complicity of biblical studies with European and North American colonial and imperial projects, see Cuéllar, *Empire, the British Museum, and the Making of the Biblical Scholar*.

tradition, her critique of the appropriateness of bringing these ancient discourses to bear on Proverbs may not be as apt. As premodern works, the classical tradition of virtue ethics emerged in a broader ancient Mediterranean context that included parts of the African continent and long before the emergence of a “Europe” or of European colonial-imperial hegemony. It is thus not surprising that some of the moral emphases of ancient virtue ethics—for instance, the high value placed on virtues that promote human sociality—resonate deeply with features of the traditional communitarian moralities of the African world that Olojede sketches.

Kwame Gyekye in fact offers a sketch of “African Ethics” that in many respects corresponds with aspects of the classical traditions of virtue ethics. He highlights the central place of “character” and character formation in the establishment of moral personhood in many African cultures.⁴⁹ In traditional African ethics, humans are not born virtuous but have the capacity to progress in virtue, to choose “to pursue good” but also to “pursue evil.”⁵⁰ What is more, the sociality of human beings and a concern for their flourishing are taken for granted: “The ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being” are central.⁵¹ Social or communitarian virtues are highly prized in order to establish a “common good” reckoned as a “good for human beings” that embraces “the needs that are *basic* to the enjoyment and fulfillment of the life of each individual.”⁵² All these features of African moral perspectives, as we shall see more fully in the following pages, resonate with key aspects of traditions of virtue ethics.

In light of Gyekye’s work, one might think that differences between the classical tradition of ethics and African moral orientations may not be as sharp as Olojede intimates. Whatever the case, Olojede herself is ultimately not concerned to “pitch a Socratic-Aristotelian approach” to studying Proverbs against an African-centric approach; nor does she simply reject the insights of Western scholars who look to Aristotle or Socrates as heuristic guides to understanding Proverbs. Instead, she is most concerned “to show the need for an African approach to biblical ethics in the African context.”⁵³ In her efforts to do so, Olojede clearly senses how the moral vision of Proverbs resonates deeply with traditional African morality. To the extent that this book strives to revise interpretations of Proverbs predicated on modernist European

49. Gyekye, “African Ethics.”

50. Gyekye, “African Ethics,” 14.

51. Gyekye, “African Ethics,” 35.

52. Gyekye, “African Ethics,” 27 (emphasis original).

53. Olojede, “Woman Wisdom,” 3.

thought—by suggesting that an ethical perspective emerging from the ancient Mediterranean world is a more apt dialogue partner for studying the text—it is allied with Olojede’s work.

Olojede’s work and Barton’s earlier studies suggest Proverbs might *not* best be read in light of character ethics. Though perhaps not fully compelling, they nonetheless serve as important cautions for any attempt to do so. As I noted, descriptions of the nature of Proverbs’ moral discourse are often ambiguous, and despite some significant efforts to study Proverbs in light of character ethics, certainly not all is settled when it comes to describing the book’s moral vision. Not all scholars have considered the possibility that Proverbs may in part be a book of virtue ethics; among those who have, not all are equally or fully persuaded of the ways in which it is. One can continue to ask: How and to what extent can or ought Proverbs be understood as a book of character ethics? What features of the text indicate that its moral discourse—its vision of wisdom—ought to be understood as a kind of virtue-oriented moral discourse? And one can still query about the interpretive implications of understanding Proverbs as a book of character ethics.

Reading the Book of Proverbs: Preliminary Matters

Israel’s legendary wise king, Solomon, is traditionally considered the author of Proverbs. The text, however, is rather obviously an anthology of wisdom poems and collections of sayings. Several sections are ascribed to other individuals—sometimes anonymous, sometimes named. Some are derivative of other ancient and non-Israelite “wisdom” works. Proverbs 22:17–24:22 (or at least 22:17–23:11), for instance, is regularly regarded as dependent in some way on the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope and perhaps began with the phrase “words of the wise.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Proverbs 24:23 introduces the instruction that follows with the words, “These also are sayings of the wise” (וְגַם־אֵלֶּה לְחֻכְמִים). Proverbs 30:1 speaks of “the words of Agur,” and Proverbs 31:1 presents the short instruction that follows as “the words of King Lemuel . . . that his mother taught him.”⁵⁵ Other sections of the book (Prov. 1–9; 10:1–22:16; 25–29), however, are directly

54. The reading of the superscription “words of the wise” in 22:17 is based on a well-known emendation of the line first proposed by Gressman, “Die neugefundene Lehre des Amenemope,” 274. Instead of MT’s *ḥaṭʾ oznākā ūšāmaʾ dibrē ḥākāmīm*, read *dibrē ḥākāmīm ḥaṭʾ oznākā ūšāmaʾ dēbārāy*; cf. LXX Prov. 22:17; Fox, *Proverbs* 10–31, 707.

55. For difficulties and questions surrounding both Prov. 30:1 and 31:1, see Fox, *Proverbs* 10–31, 852–54, 884.

associated with Solomon via superscriptions; Proverbs 25:1 also mentions the eighth-century-BCE Judahite king Hezekiah. However, allusions to Solomon are typically understood as traditional ascriptions and not claims of authorship. Critical scholarship thus rejects Solomonic authorship of the “book” of Proverbs.⁵⁶

If it is clear that Solomon did not write Proverbs, how and when the different sections of the book were composed and brought together into a literary whole remains a complicated question. Most assume that the collections of proverbial sayings in 10:1–22:16 and 25–29 constitute the earliest, preexilic sections of Proverbs. To them were added the poems of Proverbs 1–9 sometime after the monarchy ended. Still later, chapters 30 and 31, and finally the book’s prologue (1:2–7), were appended to a Proverbs scroll. When exactly the final form of the Hebrew (MT) version of Proverbs took shape may be as late as the Hellenistic era. Indeed, the placement and ordering of certain sections of Proverbs appear not to have been fixed across textual traditions even as late as the writing of the Greek version (LXX Proverbs), which differs not insignificantly from the Hebrew (MT), most notably in its moralizing rhetoric and especially its ordering of certain sections of the text.⁵⁷

As interesting as arguments concerning the literary and textual development of Proverbs may be, for my purposes here it is not necessary to take a strong position on any of it. In the following pages, I strive to discern and analyze the nature of the ethical discourse and moral vision of Proverbs as they emerge in the final form of the book; my study is what biblical scholars call a synchronous one. But I hope my synchronous analysis is undertaken with a strong diachronic sensibility that recognizes that sections of the Proverbs anthology emerged from teachers and scribes in different historical periods and probably in distinct social-economic contexts. This is especially true of Proverbs 30 and 31, which likely date later than much of the book. But it can also be true for the relationship between the instructional poems of Proverbs 1–9 and the

56. Besides the obvious collections of material in Proverbs signaled by superscriptions, scholars have long suggested that Prov. 10–15, characterized by antithetically parallel sayings, constitutes a separate section within the broader block of material that makes up 10:1–22:16. Likewise, Prov. 30, though initially associated with Agur, seems to be a composite text, with the proverbs of “ascending numerical parallelism” in the second half of that chapter presenting a quite different literary feel than the chapter’s initial eleven or fourteen verses. So too the acrostic poem praising the Woman of Valor at the end of Proverbs (31:10–31; cf. conclusion below) was likely an independent literary work adapted or composed to be juxtaposed to Lemuel’s mother’s words and to bring the book to a fitting close. Finally, Proverbs’ opening verses (1:1–7) are thought to constitute a separate literary introduction or “prologue” to the book once it reached something near its final form.

57. E.g., in the LXX, the material of MT chaps. 24–31 is arranged as follows: 24:1–22; 30:1–14; 24:23–34; 30:15–33; 31:1–9; 25:1–29:27; 31:10–31. Fox alludes to the “moralizing additions” to LXX Proverbs in *Proverbs 1–9*, 361.

short sayings of Proverbs 10–29, the latter surely related in some complex way to the folk wisdom of the broader populations of ancient Israel and Judah.⁵⁸

There is thus no specific historical reason to insist that the moral rhetoric and impulses of Proverbs' diverse sections will *precisely* correspond. Still, my own sense is that most of the book ultimately emerges from scribal and educational contexts, which may have been temporally distant from one another but are sufficiently analogous in sociological terms for them to have a high degree of consistency of moral vision and emphasis. In this regard, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin and his close collaborator Pavel Medvedev offer helpful insights about how the distinct generic parts of a composite work might function. The distinguishable parts of such composite works, they contend, may well be "separate and finished [whole] utterances independently oriented in reality."⁵⁹ Yet such utterances also have become constitutive parts of some larger utterance. As parts of the larger utterance, they can mean more than they would as independent utterances because they "contribute to the whole utterance's meaning."⁶⁰ Just so, the different sections of Proverbs with their distinct literary genres can be regarded as independent utterances that entail somewhat unique ways of comprehending the world. Yet this diverse material now belongs to a single utterance that is the book of Proverbs and so informs the meaning of that larger work.⁶¹ It is with the meaning(s) of the "whole utterance" of the book of Proverbs that I am most concerned.

The Plan of This Book

The task of part 1 of this book is to suggest how and to what extent Proverbs is an ancient, virtue-oriented, moral discourse. Part 2 considers several key texts and interpretive questions in light of part 1's claims. A central feature of the exegetical and constructive interpretive task of this book is thus to draw out

58. On this question see chap. 8 below and the literature cited there.

59. Medvedev, *Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, 132, cited in Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 274. The short sayings of Prov. 10–29 (and certainly the oral folk sayings they evoke), when read in isolation, can thus be said to "see the world" somewhat differently than the instructional poems of Prov. 1–9.

60. Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 274. For Bakhtin, an utterance is a unit of "speech communication" that involves extralinguistic or pragmatic elements. It may be "as short as a grunt and long as War and Peace." What is key is that it must be addressed to someone, "respond to something and anticipate a response," and it "must be accomplishing something by the saying of it" (Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 125–26).

61. For a lucid explanation of Bakhtin's understanding of genre, see Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, esp. 271–309.

and describe the moral-philosophical presuppositions and logic of Proverbs' moral rhetoric against which the book's explicit teachings might best make sense and be analyzed. For this task, premodern moral and philosophical thought and terminology—especially those of Aristotle and his contemporary interpreters—will be an apt guide, providing useful concepts and vocabulary for understanding Proverbs' teachings. This is so even though one might legitimately be suspicious of understanding a discourse from one time and place (the book of Proverbs) in light of another discourse from another time and place (classical traditions of virtue ethics). One must always remember that the conceptual links between Proverbs and other moral discourses are heuristic and not exact. The Hebrew book is no *Nicomachean Ethics*, presenting philosophical arguments or logical proofs for the presuppositions of its moral instruction and rhetoric.⁶² Yet as Tirosh-Samuelson claims, although the Bible “was not a philosophical text and it did not propose a systematic account of any topic, including virtue and happiness,” the “theologico-ethical outlook” of much of Scripture, “especially as expressed in the Wisdom stratum,” shares similarities with virtue traditions and can be theorized or “expressed in propositional terms.”⁶³

My primary guides in this book's task include Aristotle himself and some of the most prominent contemporary interpreters of the Aristotelian moral tradition—Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum—as well as the eminent scholar of ancient Greek ethics, Julia Annas. My intention is not to explicate fully the work of these prominent thinkers. It is rather to argue that if Proverbs shows concerns sufficiently analogous to those highlighted by virtue-oriented moral traditions and thinkers, we can be more confident *that* Proverbs is a book of character ethics and *how* it is so. My ultimate thesis is simple: because Proverbs reveals genuine concern with matters of character ethics, one is warranted in studying the book's wisdom—its moral vision—and analyzing its discourse features in light of and in terms of virtue-oriented moral discourse.

In chapter 1, I suggest that biblical scholarship has not understood Proverbs clearly or sufficiently as an ancient virtue-ethics text. Instead, it has often ambiguously described the nature of the book's moral discourse. Consequently, Proverbs' moral worth has often been only ambivalently appreciated. I begin to account for this situation by considering certain trends within biblical studies, and wisdom studies in particular. On the one hand, such tendencies marginalize the theology and ethics of Proverbs within and in relation to the

62. Cf. Keefer, *Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics*.

63. Tirosh-Samuelson, “Virtue and Happiness,” 711.

theology and ethics of the rest of the Bible. On the other hand, Proverbs scholarship has also tended to interpret and evaluate the book's moral discourse—whether consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly—through the lenses of modern ethical theory above all utilitarian schemes and deontological sensibilities. (Scholarship has also often applied to Proverbs literal-minded historical reading strategies likewise largely developed in modernity.) Much in this situation, I suggest, is due to what MacIntyre has identified as a kind of historical amnesia—an incomplete remembering—in the modern epoch of premodern modes of moral reflection.

Chapter 2 considers Proverbs' prologue (1:2–7) to underscore two key points about the book's moral discourse. First, Proverbs' opening lines reveal that—like character ethics—the book is concerned with virtue, whether intellectual and practical dispositions or moral-social virtue. Second, the prologue also makes clear that its readers should attend to the text's literal or plain-sense teachings, as well as to its figurative and symbolic dimensions. The final section of chapter 2 analyzes how these dual emphases inform our understanding of Proverbs' cause-and-effect rhetoric. Both features of the prologue are important for understanding the logic of the book's act-consequence rhetoric in light of premodern notions of causality or means-end relations, which MacIntyre also describes. The analysis points to subtle and symbolic ways the sages have imagined the exercise of the virtues to result not so much in various external goods but in a different internal relation to a broader conception of a flourishing life, which itself entails some enjoyment of external goods. This last section of chapter 2 also alludes to aspects of Proverbs' virtue-oriented discourse that subsequent chapters will elaborate and build on.

Chapter 3 explains the necessity of character-ethics traditions, of knowing what sort of being humans are and what constitutes their happiness or flourishing. The anthropology of Proverbs reveals that the ancient sages—not unlike traditions of character ethics—reckoned people as material, spiritual, intellectual, and social creatures with a range of needs and desires. Humans for Proverbs are also typically corrigible, able to learn virtue and advance in wisdom—at least up until adulthood—in ways that enable the proper understanding of how various goods contribute to human thriving and how such goods are appropriately pursued. For the sages, humans are quite like MacIntyre's description of the species as dependent rational animals.⁶⁴

Chapter 4 considers how character-ethics traditions prioritize “moral agents” over “right acts.” These traditions focus on the virtues and vices

64. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.

that make up people's character rather than on other ethical matters, such as deontological rule following or utilitarian pleasure/happiness seeking. The chapter highlights the emphasis in virtue-oriented traditions on people's "way of life"—whether it be a good and virtuous path or a vicious and wicked path—and how this emphasis is abundantly evident in Proverbs too.

Chapter 5 takes up the importance of virtue ethics to rightly train a person's emotions and desires for goods that humans naturally pursue. Drawing on chapter 2's insistence that Proverbs itself signals the reader to attend to the figurative or symbolic dimensions of its moral discourse, chapter 5 describes how the book seeks to train the natural longings of its presumed young male audience—especially longings for things such as material wealth and sexual satisfaction. The sages reckon wisdom, or the acquisition of virtue, as more valuable and desirable than anything else because wisdom enables an understanding of both the place goods like sex and riches have in the quest for happiness and the appropriate ways to pursue such goods.

Chapter 6 briefly explores the relationship between ethical and intellectual virtue in Proverbs and how both relate to the desires of the individuals discussed in chapter 5. Here the focus is on a few moral types in the book who are not described as wise and just or foolish and wicked. These moral agents can helpfully be analyzed in terms of Aristotle's distinctions between virtuous or vicious people whose characters are fully settled and those he describes as *enkratic* or *akratic*—those whose desires are not fully trained, yet whose moral knowledge and rational wills make them able to do good (*enkratic*) or not (*akratic*).

The next three chapters (7–9) highlight the central place of two key virtues in traditions of character ethics and in Proverbs: sociability and Practical Wisdom. Proverbs considers the exercise of these to be essential for human flourishing (cf. chap. 3). Chapter 7 recalls dimensions of virtue-oriented ethical discourses—first mentioned in chapter 1—that are sometimes not well recognized or acknowledged. The chapter then describes the central place social virtue (e.g., justice or being just) holds in Proverbs' moral rhetoric. Chapters 8 and 9 turn to the more complex and implicit ways Proverbs construes a full understanding of "wisdom" as Practical Wisdom, analogous to the notion of *phronēsis* in classical traditions. Chapter 8 highlights especially the distinction Proverbs implicitly makes between *practical virtue* and *Practical Wisdom*. Chapter 9 considers the limits of both practical virtue and Practical Wisdom for Proverbs. It also considers the important role that narrative and moral exemplars—stories and lives in which a full Practical Wisdom is glimpsed—play in virtue ethics, describing how Proverbs both does and does not point its readers to moral agents who can serve as moral models.

After establishing in part 1 the manner in which Proverbs can be said to constitute an ancient virtue-ethics discourse, I consider in part 2 how Proverbs' rhetoric and long-standing interpretive questions might be analyzed afresh. In chapter 10, I revisit the question of the influence Proverbs' "wisdom" discourse might have had on the book of Amos. After discussing the history of this topic, I use a Bakhtinian conception of intertextuality to suggest not that Proverbs overtly drew on Amos or vice versa, but that the two texts reveal a significant relationship to one another in terms of their moral rhetoric. This fact might be explained by the place an early Proverbs scroll held in Israelite and Judahite education.

Chapters 11 and 12 are complementary chapters. Together they consider how Proverbs 8:22–31—the famous description of Woman Wisdom's activities at or before the creation of the cosmos—might be understood as consonant with a virtue-ethics reading of the book. I reconsider whether and how Proverbs' teaching might constitute or promote a kind of natural law. Chapter 11 sketches the way such a question has typically been formulated in Proverbs studies and contends that the matter might be better recast in terms of ancient conceptions of virtue ethics. Instead of suggesting that in Proverbs Wisdom's relation to the cosmos means that humans can discover objective moral orders of creation and thereby discern divinely ordained rules or "natural law" for individuals and society, I suggest that Wisdom's infusion of the primordial "stuff" out of which Adonai creates the cosmos means that humans (and other creatures) are created with a wisdom appropriate to the kind of being we are. Full and genuine wisdom is not discovered "out there" in the laws of the created world, but it can and should be developed from our own human nature—as material, intellectual, spiritual, and social beings whose happiness and well-being typically depend on the attainment of certain natural goods (cf. chap. 3). Because these sorts of conclusions about Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8 are not common, chapter 12 offers a detailed exegetical discussion of Proverbs 8:22–31 in light of especially ancient Egyptian comparative material. In the end, I suggest it is warranted to consider Proverbs' moral discourse as related to conceptions of natural law, but only in a limited sense and not in ways that such a connection is usually construed.

Chapter 13 takes up the question of how different conceptions of wisdom in the Bible might be considered a "practice" in MacIntyre's sense of the term—that is, as a complex form of human activity that results in human excellencies and by which "conceptions of the ends of goods" are extended.⁶⁵ I contend that the notion of wisdom in some biblical texts, and certainly the (Practical)

65. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

Wisdom of Proverbs, can be well regarded as a kind of moral practice. Chapter 14 points further to how MacIntyre's conception of a practice can inform an understanding of Proverbs as promoting the practice of wisdom. As with MacIntyre's "practice," the ancient sages believed that to be fully wise, one had to submit to a tradition of wisdom and its expert practitioners, while also coming to value the internal goods of that practice over any external goods that might be associated with it. What is more, advancing sufficiently in the practice of wisdom puts a person in the position to critically engage, modify, and advance that practice.

The conclusion of this book concerns itself with the possibility of adequately revising and extending a moral tradition like that of Proverbs. The chapter forthrightly faces the ethical limits and problems of ancient virtue-oriented ethical thought in general, and the contingent and provisional aspects of Proverbs' moral discourse in particular. I suggest that those who wish to stand in the tradition of the book's ancient wisdom must become the sort of expert practitioners of its wisdom who can and should modify and extend the book's insights and concerns to enable more well-being for more people. All of this must be done in light of changing social circumstances, new knowledge of the nature of humans, and the insights of diverse communities of wisdom. I offer an analysis of the final pericope of Proverbs—the poem to the Eshet Chayil—to point to ways the book itself starts to deconstruct the limits of its own moral vision and hence how this portion of Scripture warrants the ongoing work of critically engaging, revising, and extending Proverbs' moral perspectives and traditions.

PART 1

The Case
for Proverbs
as
Virtue-Oriented
Moral Discourse



1

The Undervaluing of Proverbs' Moral Worth

The Role of Biblical Studies and Modern Ethics

If the predominately Christian students I have taught over the years are a reliable barometer, many readers of Scripture are fascinated with aspects of the Bible's wisdom literature—especially Job's wrestling with questions of theodicy or “unjust suffering” and the skepticism and/or bold embrace of pleasure in Qohelet.¹ However, although some readers of Proverbs may be enamored with the wit and wisdom the book offers, most do not relish the long lists of everyday advice they encounter in the book. Others may come to appreciate the book, even if only as a text one needs to be familiar with to understand Job's and Ecclesiastes's more profound and engaging theological and ethical views. Whatever the case, few think the theological and moral weight of Proverbs matches that of these other two wisdom books. For many Bible readers, Proverbs is not the go-to text for understanding ancient Israelite or biblical religion and theology, or for theological meditation and ethical reflection on key moral issues facing the world today.

In this chapter I explain why the theological ethics of Proverbs has sometimes been underappreciated. On the one hand, tendencies in twentieth-century

1. Christianity is the religious tradition I know best and out of which my engagement with Proverbs' ethics emerges.

biblical studies led to a minimizing of Proverbs' theological-ethical value within the biblical canon. On the other hand, the generally unacknowledged modern moral contexts and presuppositions of the book's interpreters sometimes resulted in negative or, more often, ambiguous accounts of the nature of the book's moral discourse; and this likely also contributed to an ambivalent appreciation of its ethics, especially compared to the value ascribed to the theological-moral visions of other parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Getting No Proverbial Respect

One reason interest in Proverbs has not always been robust may have to do with the limited place it enjoys in the liturgy and life of faith communities. Various Christian denominations appear to share my students' evaluation of the theological-ethical worth of the wisdom literature, and Proverbs in particular. For example, the Revised Common Lectionary, used by a range of Protestant denominations, has only two readings in Ecclesiastes. The significantly longer "literary classic," the book of Job, supplies only seven readings to the lectionary. Readings from Proverbs also number only seven, and four or five of these focus on the image of personified Woman Wisdom (especially in Prov. 8), a historically significant figure in christological discussions and, more recently, a powerful resource for constructive feminist theological work—for example, in imagining nonmale images of the divine.²

The relative lack of appreciation for the theological-ethical value of Proverbs is also evident in the history of modern scholarly interpretation of wisdom literature, at least until a few decades ago.³ Much of the twentieth century's lack of interest in wisdom literature was due to the approach of the so-called biblical theology movement. Especially prevalent in the mid-1900s, biblical theology sought and defined the theological center of the Hebrew Scriptures in terms of key events and notions—such as the exodus, covenant, and historical credos, none of which is particularly evident in Proverbs.⁴ The fact that the biblical theology movement was largely carried out in Protestant

2. See, e.g., the few readings from Proverbs noted in <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>. The liturgical reading of Proverbs likewise appears sparse in Roman Catholic and Jewish liturgical practice. See "Roman Catholic Lectionary," Word to Worship, <https://wordtoworship.com/lectionary/catholic?year=2023>; and "Calendar of Torah and Haftarah Readings," Movement for Reform Judaism, 2015, <http://www.wimshul.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Version-2-Calendar-of-Torah-and-Haftarah-Readings-5776-5778-.pdf>.

3. For a similar but more extensive look at how Proverbs was marginalized, see Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, 17–45.

4. Cf. the influential (and at points controversially critical) account of the biblical theology movement and its practitioners offered by Barr in *The Concept of Biblical Theology*.

circles, as opposed to Roman Catholic theological contexts where emphasis on human virtue is more prominent, may also have contributed to earlier failures to recognize the virtue-oriented character of Proverbs' rhetoric.⁵

Yet wisdom studies were never completely marginalized. Various monographs continued to make claims about the nature of Proverbs' instruction, and major commentaries continued to be written. Much of this work touched on the book's theology and ethics.⁶ Nonetheless, it was only after Gerhard von Rad devoted significant attention to wisdom texts, both in his *Old Testament Theology* and especially in a 1970 study of the Bible's wisdom texts,⁷ that critical academic study of the wisdom literature started to gain steam. Von Rad's creative and robust effort in *Wisdom in Israel* to come to terms hermeneutically and theologically with biblical wisdom literature, including Proverbs, has rarely been matched by other studies.⁸

Despite the waning of the biblical theology movement and the influence of von Rad's book, critical studies of Proverbs after *Weisheit in Israel* (1970)—though increasingly abundant—still only sought in part to robustly appreciate the theological ethics of the book.⁹

The reasons for this are again complex. First, it remained clear that Proverbs does not speak much of significant religious and theological themes central to other parts of the canon—whether the exodus liberation, God's faithfulness (*chesed*) to the ancestors and Israel, the divine giving of Torah and establishment of covenants, or the grand prophetic demands for justice.¹⁰ Additionally, the fact that Proverbs was deemed both universal in its

5. Roman Catholics who did participate in the biblical theology movement did so on the terms laid out in the contributions of the major Protestant biblical theologians. Jewish interest in the entire project of biblical theology has been ambivalent, as Levenson explains; see the chapter "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology" (33–61) in *Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*. More recently, however, some Jewish scholars have demonstrated a keen interest in revised conceptions of biblical theology. See, e.g., Kamili, *Jewish Bible Theology*.

6. See, e.g., Zimmerli's influential work: "Ort und Grenze der Weisheit," reprinted and translated as "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom." Cf. further the mostly German works mentioned in Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos*, xxx–xxxi.

7. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, esp. 1:383–459; von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (1972 English translation *Wisdom in Israel*).

8. See, e.g., the critical judgments of various authors in Sandoval and Schipper, *Gerhard von Rad and the Study of Wisdom Literature*.

9. Studies that have treated seriously the ethics and theology of Proverbs after von Rad's *Wisdom in Israel* and prior to Brown's *Character in Crisis* include, but are not limited to, Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*; and Delkurt, *Ethische Einsichten*.

10. Though, of course, a virtue like loyalty or *chesed* in the wisdom literature is an important trait that wise humans ought to cultivate and practice with others. See, e.g., Prov. 3:3; 11:17; 16:6; 19:22; 20:6, 28; 21:21; 31:26. Proverbs also deeply values justice and social virtue (cf. chap.

moral-theological perspectives and not centrally focused on Israel's particular deity—Adonai (YHWH)—likely also contributed to a limited appreciation of the book's theological ethics. In an influential commentary published the same year that von Rad's *Weisheit in Israel* appeared, William McKane contended that much of Proverbs is originally and fundamentally secular wisdom. Only subsequent redaction of the text resulted in this teaching being overlaid with Yahwistic material that brought it closer to the center of Israelite religion and theology.¹¹ Proverbs was even at times reckoned as a “foreign” body of literature in the Bible.¹² And the book is clearly related to the instructional material of non-Israelite texts from other ancient West Asian cultures and especially Egypt. A version of the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope, for example, almost certainly affected the composition of Proverbs 22:17–23:11,¹³ while the short sayings of the rest of the second half of Proverbs also resonate deeply with ancient West Asian and Egyptian proverb collections and instructions.¹⁴ The instructional poems of Proverbs 1–9 are likewise influenced by Egyptian prototypes.¹⁵ Proverbs also associates parts of its instruction with named, wise, non-Israelite teachers. Both Agur in Proverbs 30 and the mother of King Lemuel in Proverbs 31 are perhaps “of Massa.”¹⁶

Finally, besides its lack of focus on key Israelite traditions and its supposed universalizing, secular, or foreign character, a further reason Proverbs' moral

7 below), though it articulates this concern with a rhetoric that is both similar to and somewhat distinct from that of the great prophets of social justice, such as Amos (cf. chap. 10 below).

11. McKane, *Proverbs*. McKane classified the sayings in Proverbs as “A” material (sayings directed toward individuals designed to help them achieve success); “B” material (proverbs concerned with the community and that censure antisocial behavior); and “C” material (sayings addressed to individuals but that have undergone a Yahwistic redaction).

12. Regularly cited in this regard is Preuss, “Erwägungen zum theologischen Ort alttestamentlicher Weisheitsliteratur”; cf. Steiert, *Die Weisheit Israels—Ein fremdkörper im Alten Testament?*, who argues against the view that wisdom is a foreign body in Israel's Scripture. Cf. the brief discussion in Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 948.

13. Cf. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 705–33. Important early studies of Amenemope include Budge, *Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri*; Erman, “Eine ägyptische Quelle der ‘Sprüche Salomos’”; Gressman, “Die neugefundene Lehre des Amen-em-ope”; more recently, cf. Bryce, *Legacy of Wisdom*; Römheld, *Wege der Weisheit*; and Washington, *Wealth and Poverty*.

14. Cf. the overview of Proverbs' relationship to “die altorientalischen Weisheit” in Schipper, *Proverbs 1–15*, 11–24. For translations of the ancient West Asian texts that have been compared to Proverbs, see Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. For the Egyptian instructions (and related literature), see Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*.

15. See Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*; cf. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 45–47.

16. The appropriate understanding of נִשְׁמָה in Prov. 30:1 and 31:1 is debated. Is it a proper noun referring to “a northern Arabian tribe (Gen 25:14; 1 Chr 1:30; also mentioned in Assyrian sources)?” Or does it refer to an oracle or “pronouncement” (Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 852)? Cf. Sandoval, “Texts and Intertexts.”

worth has been undervalued over the years surely has to do with the book's perceived naive ethics—what Anne Stewart calls the “simplicity thesis.”¹⁷ In particular, Proverbs' cause-and-effect rhetoric has proven a stumbling block to many readers who have understood this language quite literally as a reflection of the ancient writers' underlying view of reality, their straightforward moral-theological recipe for “success.” That is, the sages of Proverbs, it has sometimes been thought, understood there to be an “act-consequence nexus” (or *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*) at work in the cosmos whereby good or evil consequences follow almost mechanistically from good or evil deeds.¹⁸ For many interpreters of the book—whether scholars or others—this *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang* becomes particularly problematic morally speaking when Proverbs' offers teaching on things like economic matters. For example, it sometimes appears that the book “blames the poor” for their poverty, understanding in reductionistic fashion a poor person's destitute condition to be caused by that person's failure to follow wisdom; at the same time, it appears to congratulate the rich for their virtue.¹⁹ Proverbs 10:4, for instance, states,

A slack hand causes poverty,
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.²⁰

And 13:22 says,

The good leave an inheritance to their children's children,
but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.

By contrast to those who see a problematic simplicity in Proverbs' ethics, other interpreters seem to presume that those who compiled Proverbs were not necessarily, or merely, morally naive—unaware of the structural, political, and social “causes” of poverty and wealth. Instead, these interpreters suggest that the sages—who likely formed a part of ancient Israel's political

17. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 71 and passim.

18. The classic statement of the act-consequence nexus in the Bible (including Proverbs) is Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution,” 57–87. This is a somewhat abridged translation of Koch's “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma,” 1–42. Koch distinguishes between consequences that inhered in certain acts and the retribution for good or wicked deeds that an agent, such as the deity, might enact, suggesting the former is prevalent in the Hebrew Bible. For criticism of Koch's position and articulations of other views that nuance Koch's claims, see, e.g., Adams, *Wisdom in Transition*; Freuling, “*Wer eine Grube gräbt . . .*”; Janowski, “Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück”; and Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit*.

19. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty*, 1; cf. R. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 261; and Van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty.”

20. Cf. Prov. 8:18; 12:3, 14, 24; 13:4, 25; 14:14, 19, 23; 18:9; 19:15; 28:25.

and economic elite (or were ideologically beholden to them)—peddled an act-consequence view of reality to their own (and their overlords’) benefit. For instance, Dianne Bergant, although she also finds liberative elements in the book, recognizes that “the instruction of Proverbs is a powerful political tool in the hands of the established institutions, whether these institutions are based on kinship, such as the family, clan, or tribe, or on political organization, such as court or scribal schools.”²¹ J. David Pleins similarly and more forthrightly relates “the values and practices advocated in the wisdom tradition” with “the political and economic leanings of the ruling classes.”²² In other words, some of Proverbs’ rhetoric might be heard to suggest that if the wise and just receive real, good rewards, those who enjoy wealth and status must be wise! Once the book’s moral discourse is characterized in this way, it is easy to understand why someone would not want to grapple seriously with such (self-serving) moral and theological perspectives.

All these ways of characterizing the “wisdom” of Proverbs—its distance from Scripture’s central theological themes, its universalist or secular orientation and close relation to non-Israelite literature, and its simplistic or even ideologically suspect ethics—are somewhat understandable. It is not the case that “all” of this is “all wrong”; aspects are certainly defensible. Erudite and insightful scholars have adopted and promoted some of these typical characterizations of Proverbs, and compelling arguments have been made to support this picture of Proverbs’ rhetoric and theological ethics. Indeed, a simple, straightforward, plain-sense reading of the book (in a post-Enlightenment world) will almost “naturally” result in such conventional views and evaluations of Proverbs’ wisdom. Such portrayals of Proverbs may sound “kind of right.” This view of Proverbs, however, is not so much wrong as it is not exactly right. It is like a portrait hanging crookedly on a wall. One can appreciate the art in its skewed position, but it would be better to straighten it and take another look. Our picture of Proverbs—especially its moral discourse—needs to be adjusted a bit.

Some understandings of Proverbs’ moral vision that have left the portrait of the book askew have already been remedied to a significant extent. For example, the idea that wisdom literature was marginal to ancient Israel’s particular religious and moral-theological imagination is now often regarded as incorrect. Such a formulation does not fully appreciate the centrality of creation theology in Proverbs or the manner in which the book’s moral rhetoric relates

21. Bergant, *Israel’s Wisdom Literature*, 93.

22. Pleins, *Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible*, 457, cf. 452–83; see also Pleins, “Poverty and the Social World of the Wise,” 69; and Pleins, “Poor, Poverty.”