

# The (poetic) rhetoric of wisdom in Proverbs 3:1-12<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Proverbs 3:1-12 is a masterful example of Hebrew poetry. Failure to consider its poetic structure, is likely to result in incomplete and even incorrect interpretation. Many recent commentaries on Proverbs recognize the poetic character of the book, and even include a section on the poetic techniques present in the book, but ignore the relevance of these techniques as far as the interpretation of the individual poems and the book in general are concerned. This article argues that a comprehensive analysis of poetic features enhances the exegete's ability to appreciate the rhetoric of wisdom. An intratextual approach towards Proverbs 3:1-12 provides a framework for the complete interpretation of the text.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 3:1-12 is a masterful example of Hebrew poetry. Far too little attention has been paid in scholarly discussion to its “highly poetic structure” (Nel 1982:59). Without recognition of this phenomenon “any attempted interpretation is in jeopardy” (Nel 1982:59). It is thus quite permissible to analyse and enjoy the poem for its own sake. Failure to do this will probably result in incomplete and even incorrect interpretation.

It is quite remarkable that many recent commentaries on Proverbs recognise the poetic character of the book, even include a section on the poetic techniques present in the book, but then blatantly ignore the relevance of these techniques for the interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Wouter van Wyk, Wally da Silva and Louis Bezuidenhout shared a common interest in and love of biblical poetry. Therefore, I want to dedicate this article to our friendship and shared dedication of something truly beautiful.

of the individual poems and the book in general. The most recent commentary on the book (Fuhs 2001) is an excellent example of this general lack of interest in the (poetic) rhetoric of wisdom. Fuhs includes a section on *Redeformen und Stilfiguren* (Fuhs 2001:15) in the introduction to his commentary. But when he discusses Proverbs 3:1-12 he only mentions a (rather vague!) chiasmic relationship between 3:1 and 11 (2001:35), the antithetic parallelism between 3:5a and b and the chiasmic relationship between 5ab and 7ab (2001:36).

Failure to analyse *and appreciate the significance*<sup>2</sup> of the “highly poetic structure” of Proverbs 3:1-12 invariably leads to misinterpretation. The deliberate juxtaposition of Proverbs 3:8-9 and 11-12 and the *paradox* created by this technique (cf the discussion in Section C of the paper) is not often recognised in commentaries. Thus Fox (2000:141-142) demarcates the poem into three sections, namely 3:1-4 (Keeping my teachings in mind); 3:5-10 (Piety) and 3:11-12 (Suffering as discipline). Whybray (1994:64) goes even further and regards 3:11-12 as a later addition.

The hypothesis in this paper is that a comprehensive analysis of poetic features will enhance the exegete’s ability to appreciate the rhetoric of wisdom. An intratextual approach towards Proverbs 3:1-12 will provide a framework for the complete interpretation of the text.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this article is to provide such a framework. No attention will be paid to the interpretational problems of the book of Proverbs, particularly the problems involved in analysing Proverbs 1-9. These issues will be dealt with in the next article (cf Prinsloo 2002).

## 2. TEXT AND TRANSLATION

1	A	1	בְּנֵי תוֹרָתִי אַל־תִּשְׁכַּח וּמִצְוֹתַי יִצַר לִבְךָ:	1a My son, <i>do not forget</i> my <b>teaching</b> , b but my <b>commands</b> <i>your heart</i> <i>must keep</i> ,
		2	כִּי אֶרְךָ יָמִים וְשָׁנֹת חַיִּים וְשָׁלוֹם יוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ:	2a for <b>length of days</b> and <b>years of life</b> b and <b>peace</b> they will add for you.

<sup>2</sup> Watson (1986:2) points out the importance of analysing all the various levels of a poetic text. He states: “Only when a complete examination of each poetic device with respect to occurrence, types, functions, relationship to other devices and to the various literary forms is available will a full description of classical Hebrew poetry be possible”. What is said here about classical Hebrew poetry in general is also applicable to each individual poem.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between this article and Gert Prinsloo’s article (in this collection) is intentional. The two studies should be read together. This article covers the intratextual analysis of Proverbs 3:1-12, and Prinsloo’s article analyses the intertextual and extratextual perspectives.

- B 3 חֶסֶד וְאֵמֶת אֶל-יַעֲזֹבֶךָ<sup>3</sup> 3a **Love** and **faithfulness** *must not leave* you:<sup>4</sup>  
 קָשְׂרָם עַל-גַּרְוֹתֶיךָ b *bind* them around your neck,  
 כְּתָבָם עַל-לִיבְךָ: c *write* them upon the tablet of your heart,
- 4 וּמִצָּאֶיִךָ וְשִׂכְל־טוֹב<sup>4</sup> 4a and you will find<sup>5</sup> **favour** and **high regard**  
 בְּעֵינֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאָדָם: פ b in the eyes of God and man.
- II C 5 בְּטַח אֶל-יְהוָה בְּכָל-לִבְךָ<sup>5</sup> 5a *Trust* in the Lord with all your heart,  
 וְאַל-בִּינְתֶךָ אֶל-הַשָּׁעֵן b and on your **own understanding** *do not lean*,  
 6 בְּכָל-דְּרָכֶיךָ דַּעְהוּ<sup>6</sup> 6a in all **your ways** *acknowledge* him,  
 וְהוּא יִשֶׁר אֲרָחֹתֶיךָ: b and he will **make straight your paths**.
- D 7 אַל-תְּהִי חָכָם בְּעֵינֶיךָ<sup>7</sup> 7a *Do not be wise* in your **own eyes**,  
 יִרָא אֶת-יְהוָה וְסוּר מִרָע: b *fear* the Lord and *shun* evil,  
 8 רַפְאוּת תְּהִי לְשַׁרְךָ<sup>8</sup> 8a **health** it will bring to **your body**<sup>6</sup>,  
 וְשִׁקּוֹי לְעַצְמוֹתֶיךָ: b and **refreshment**<sup>7</sup> to **your bones**.

<sup>4</sup> Many exegetes regard 3a as a gloss. According to them the 3 masculine plural suffixes in 3bc refer back to תורה in 1a and מצוה in 1b. 3abc is the only tricolon in the poem and is consequently regarded with skepticism (Whybray 1994:61). It is noteworthy that the LXX manuscripts Vaticanus and Sinaiticus omit 3c (Alexandrinus retains it; cf Plöger 1984:32). Some retains 3a but omits 3c (Clifford 1999:50). There are, however, no sound *textcritical* reasons for the omission of 3a or any necessity to follow Vaticanus and Sinaiticus in omitting 3c (cf Plöger 1984:32).

<sup>5</sup> The imperative מִצָּא is used here in logical dependence upon the two preceding imperatives and indicates “the distinct assurance or promise that an action or state will ensue as the certain consequence of a previous action” (Cowley [1910] 1976:325 = GesK § 110f; cf also Tuinstra 1996:93).

<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of שַׁרְךָ is problematic. The Hebrew word שַׁר occurs only here and in Song of Songs 7:3 with the meaning “navel” and Ezekiel 16:4 with the meaning “navel-string”. Following the LXX’s τῶ σῶματί σου (cf also the Peshitta) many exegetes propose that the text should be emended to לְבָשָׁרְךָ or לְשַׁרְךָ “to your flesh/body”. McKane (1970:293) relates the Hebrew word to the Aramaic *šrrt* “strength, good health, prosperity” and proposes that the 8a should be translated “It is a tonic for your health”. Fuhs (2001:36) indicates the metaphorical value of the Masoretic text. The navel recalls the “Grundversorgung des Embryos im Mutterlieb” (cf also Plöger 1984:32; Tuinstra 1996:95).

<sup>7</sup> McKane (1970:293) proposes the translation “medicine” for שִׁקּוֹי and “bodily frame” for עַצְמוֹתֶיךָ. Hence he translates 8b with “and a medicine for your frame”.

III	E	9	כִּבֵּד אֶת־יְהוָה מִהוֹנֵךְ וּמִרְאשֵׁי כָּל־תְּבוּאֹתָיִךְ:	9a Honour the <b>Lord</b> with <b>your wealth</b> , b with the firstfruits of all <b>your crops</b> ,
		10	וְיִמְלְאוּ אֶסְמִיךְ שֶׁבַע וְתִירוֹשׁ יִקְבֵּיךְ יִפְרֹצוּ: פ	10a then <b>your barns</b> will be <b>filled</b> to overflowing <sup>8</sup> , b and the <b>wine of your vats</b> will <b>brim over</b> .
	F	11	מוֹסֵר יְהוָה בְּנֵי אֶל־תִּמְאַס׃ וְאֶל־תִּקְחֵן בְּתוֹכָהֶן:	11a The <b>Lord's discipline</b> , my son, <i>don't despise</i> it, b and <i>do not resent</i> his <b>rebuke</b> ,
		12	כִּי אֵת אֲשֶׁר יֶאֱהָב יְהוָה יוֹכֵחַ וְיִכָּאֵב אֶת־בֶּן יִרְצֶה:	12a for the <b>Lord rebukes</b> those he loves, b just as a father (does) to the son he delights in.

### 3. DEMARCATION

The demarcation of the poem is problematic (cf Tuinstra 1996:89; Clifford 1999:49). According to the Masoretic paragraph markers (Petuchot) as represented in *BHS* 3:1-4, 5-10, 11-18 and 19-35 were regarded as paragraphs (Fox 2000:47). It is (at least partly) followed by some modern commentators. Cox (1982:115-124) divides Proverbs 3 into the following paragraphs: 3:1-10 (The ways of human morality), 3:11-18 (A hymn to wisdom), 3:19-20 (Wisdom's creative function), 3:21-35 (Maturity is the fruit of wisdom). Hubbard (1989:68-69) regards the entire chapter as a single poem and divides it into the following sections: 3:1-12 (Admonitions to piety – A), 3:13-20 (Arguments for sagacity), 3:21-26 (Admonitions to piety – B), 3:27-32 (Admonitions to generosity), 3:33-35 (Antithetic conclusion). Plöger (1984:30-31) argues that 3:1-12, 3:13-20 and 3:21-26 are independent units, but that 3:27-35 is a later addition.

McKane (1970:289-290) has argued that verses 13-20 has a distinctive character. It contains no imperatives and has a hymnic flavour. Verses 1-12 and 21-35 on the other hand contain numerous imperatives. It is characteristic of the genre of “Instruction” as McKane labels the admonitions in Proverbs 1-9. He thus demarcates three paragraphs in Proverbs 3: 3:1-12 (Trust in Yahweh and submit to his discipline), 3:13-20 (In praise of wisdom), 3:21-26 (Yahweh will guide and keep in safety). The same demarcation is proposed by Fox (2000:44), who labels the three paragraphs 3:1-12 (The wisdom of piety), 3:13-20 (In praise of Wisdom) and 3:21-35 (The wisdom of honesty).

<sup>8</sup> Some exegetes presuppose that שֶׁבַע “plenty” here means “grain” as in a Phoenician inscription from the eighth century BC and that it is parallel to תִּירוֹשׁ in 10b (Clifford 1999:50). The Masoretic text is clear and the normal interpretation of שֶׁבַע can be retained.

#### 4. STRUCTURE AND POETIC FEATURES

The general demarcation of the individual sections of the poem can easily be determined. Each strophe follows the same general pattern of instruction followed by either the result of obedience or the reason for giving that particular command(s). Six strophes can be demarcated by applying this general pattern of *command (imperative)* followed by *result* or *reason* (A [1-2]; B [3-4]; C [5-6]; D [7-8]; E [9-10]; F [11-12]). Each strophe consists of two lines each. Only at the beginning of Strophe B (verse 3abc) a tricolon can be demarcated. All the other lines are bicola.

Within this general pattern there are quite interesting variations when the six strophes are studied in more detail. The instruction or imperative can be either negative or positive. Two or three imperatives occur in each strophe. The result or reason contains one, two or three terms. In the table below the emphasis falls upon the verbal forms:

		A (1-2)	B (3-4)	C (5-6)	D (7-8)	E (9-10)	F (11-12)
<b>Impe- rative</b>	-	1a אל־תִּשְׁכַּח	3a אל־יַעֲזֹבֶדְךָ	5b אל־תִּשְׁעֶנְךָ	7a אל־תִּהְיֶה		11a אל־תִּמְאָס 11b וְאַל־תִּקְיָץ
	+	1b יִצַר	3b קִשְׂרָם 3c כִּתְבָם	5a בִּטַח 6a דַּעְהוּ	7b יָרָא וְסוּר	9a כִּבֵּד	
<b>Result</b>			4a וּמִצָּא חַן וְשִׂכַל־טוֹב	6b וְהוּא יִישָׁר	8a רַפְאוֹת תִּהְיֶה 8b וְשִׁקְוֵי	10a וְיִמְלֵאוּ 10b יִפְרְצוּ	
<b>Reason</b>		2a אַרְבֵּי יָמִים וְשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים 2b וְשָׁלוֹם יוֹסִיפוּ					12a יוֹכִיחַ

From the table the following can be deduced:

- Strophes E and F fall outside the pattern created in Strophes A-D by the juxtaposition of one negative and one/two positive commands. Strophe E has only one positive command<sup>9</sup>. Strophe F has two negative commands. This suggests that while in the first four strophes an antithesis exists within the strophe, Strophes E and F should be antithetically related to each other, with special emphasis on the *two* negative commands in Strophe F.

<sup>9</sup> The imperative כִּבֵּד is presupposed in 9b as well. It is an example of the poetic stratagem of deletion.

- On the other hand the suggestion of an *inclusio* is created by the fact that Strophes A and F are the only strophes where the introductory commands are followed by a motivation introduced by ׀ (cf 2a and 12a). In Strophes B-E the commands are followed by result clauses indicative of promises (Nel 1982:46-48).
- In Strophes A-B the two negative commands suggest “distance” (“do not forget” in 1a and “they must not leave you” in 3a), while the positive commands suggest “closeness” (“your heart must keep” in 1b; “bind them around your neck” in 3b and “write them upon the tablet of your heart” in 3c). The two strophes are semantically parallel.
- In Strophes C-D the negative commands suggest “reliance upon own power” (“on your own understanding do not lean” in 5b and “do not be wise in your own eyes” in 7a). Two of the three positive commands suggest “reliance upon Yahweh” (“trust the the Lord” in 5a and “fear the Lord” in 7b). These two strophes are semantically parallel. The third command (“shun evil” in 7b) falls in the semantic category of “distance” mentioned in Strophes A-B, linking the four strophes on this level.
- The positive command in Strophe E (“honour” in 9a) and the two negative commands in Strophe F (“don”t despise” in 11a and “do not resent” in 11b) emphasise the positive and negative side of the same semantic field, namely “honouring someone or something”. It links the two strophes.
- These observations already indicate that Strophes A-B, C-D and E-F can be grouped together as three stanzas. The close links between A and F on the other hand should not be ignored. It provides a sense of closure to the poem.

It is a worthwhile exercise to also tabulate the qualifications added to the imperatives, motivations and result clauses by means of explicit subjects, objects and prepositional phrases:

		A	B	C	D	E	F
I M P E R A T	Vocative	1a בני					11a בני
	Subject(s)	1b לבך	3a חסד ואמת				
	Object(s)	1a תורתִי 1b ומצותִי			7a חכם 7b את־הנה	9a את־הנה	11a מוסר יהנה 11b בתוכחתו
	Prep phrase(s)		3b על־גרותיך 3c על־לוח לבך	5a אל־הנה בכל־לבך 5b ואל־ביתך בכל־דרכיך	7a בעיניך 7b מרע	9a מהונך 9b ומראשית כל־תבואתך	
R E S U L T	Subject(s)			6b והוא		10a אסמך שבע 10b ותירוש יקביך	
	Object(s)		4a חן ושכל־טוב	6b ארח־תיך	8a רפאות 8b ושקוי		
	Prep phrase(s)		4b בעיני אלהים ואדם		8a לשׁיך 8b לעצמותיך		
R E A S O N	Subject(s)						12a יהנה
	Object(s)	2a ארך ימים ושנות חיים 2b ושלום					12a את אשר יאהב
	Prep phrase(s)	2b לך					12b וכאב את־בן ירצה

On this level links are created between the various strophes by means of the following:

- The vocative בני in 1a and 11a again creates a link between Strophes A and F and suggests an *inclusio*. There is also a suggestion of a chiasmic relationship between תורתִי (1a) and בתוכחתו (11b) on the one hand and ומצותִי (1b) and מוסר יהנה (11a) on the other hand (Fuhs 2001:35).
- Parts of the body are mentioned in Strophes A-D, linking the four strophes together. Especially noteworthy is the occurrence of לבך in Strophes A-C (1b, 3c, 5a).
- On the other hand יהנה is explicitly mentioned in Strophes C-F, suggesting that the more general commands in Strophes A-B are applied to the child/pupil's relationship with Yahweh in Strophes C-F.
- These observations also indicate close links between Strophes A-B, C-D and E-F on the one hand and the interrelatedness between all six strophes on the other hand. It confirms that the poet is a master of his art!

These general observations are enhanced by an analysis of poetic stratagems on the level of sounds, patterns and semantics.

- As far as *sounds* are concerned, alliteration and assonance can be detected in virtually every colon. What is significant, however, is the repetition of *i* and *ay* (1 singular suffixes) in 1ab and 11a as well as the repetition of *ch/cha* (2 masculine singular suffixes) in 2b-10b. This strengthens the suggestion of *inclusio* already referred to.
- As far as *patterns* are concerned, reference has already been made to various forms of *repetition* in the poem. The following should also be noted:
  - *Parallelisms* occur in the following cases. It is given in tabular form with notes on specific techniques within each parallelism:

1a 1b	בני הורתי אל־תשֶׁכַח ומצותי יִזַר לִבְךָ: External synonymous parallelism. Note the contrast between the negative command in 1a and the positive command in 1b as well as the <b>delesion</b> of בני (1a) in 1b and the addition of לִבְךָ (1b) as a <b>ballast variant</b> .
3b 3c	קִשְׂרָם עַל־גְּרוֹתֶיךָ כְּחֶבֶם עַל־לִיחַ לִבְךָ: External synonymous parallelism.
7b	יִרָא אֶת־יְהוָה וְסוּר מִרָע: Internal antithetical parallelism. To fear Yahweh implies to turn away from evil.
8a 8b	רַפְאוֹת תְּהִי לְשִׁבְךָ וְשִׁקְיִי לְעֲצֻמוֹתֶיךָ: External synonymous parallelism. Note the <b>delesion</b> of the verb in 8b.
9a 9b	כִּבֵּד אֶת־יְהוָה מִהוֹנֵךְ וּמִרְאשֵׁית כָּל־תְּבוּאָתֶךָ: External synonymous parallelism. Note the <b>delesion</b> of the phrase אֶת־יְהוָה (9a) in 9b and the addition of כָּל־תְּבוּאָתֶךָ (9b) as a <b>ballast variant</b> .

The main purpose of the parallelisms is to bind the cola together and enhance the theme of the relevant strophes.

- *A broader parallelistic structure* exists between Strophes A (1-2) and B (3-4). It can be schematised as follows:



This structure binds the two strophes closely together.

- *Chiasms* occur in the following cases:

2a 2a		כִּי אֶרְחַם יָמִים וְשָׁנֹת חַיִּים	
3a 3b 3c	חֶסֶד	אֶל־יְעוּבָה קִשָּׁה ׀ עַל־גִּרְוֹתֶיךָ כְּתָב ׀ עַל־לִוּי לִבְךָ	אֱמֶת
5a 5b	בַּטַּח	בְּכָל־לִבְךָ אֶל־תִּשְׁעַן	אֱלֹהִים
10a 10b	וַיִּמְלֵאן וַתִּירֹשׁ	שָׁבַע פָּרְצוּ נִמְכְּרוּ	אֲסִמְיָה
11a 11b	מוֹסֵר אֶל־תִּקַּן	בְּתוֹכָתוֹ אֶל־תִּמְאַס׃	בְּנֵי יְהוָה

These chiasms bind the relevant cola closely together, enhance the antitheses in the poem and emphasise the themes of the strophes.

- A broader chiastic pattern exists between Strophes C (5-6) and D (7-8) in terms of the syntactic order of positive and negative commands. It can be schematised as follows:

	STROPHE C (5-6)	STROPHE D (7-8)	
Positive a	5a בַּטַּח אֶל־יְהוָה בְּכָל־לִבְךָ	7a אֶל־תְּהִי חֶכֶם בְּעֵינֶיךָ	b <sup>1</sup> Negative
Negative b	5b וְאֶל־בֵּיתְךָ אֶל־תִּשְׁעַן	7b יִרְא אֶת־יְהוָה	a <sup>1</sup> Positive
Positive c	6a בְּכָל־דְּרָכֶיךָ דַּעְהוּ	: וְסוּר מִרָע	c Positive

This is indicative of a very close relationship between Strophes C and D.

- A very interesting *chiastic relationship* exists between 1a and 11a. It can be schematised as follows:

	STROPHE A (1a)	STROPHE F (11a)	
Vocative a	בְּנִי	מוֹסֵר יְהוָה	b' Object
Object b	תּוֹרָתִי	בְּנִי	a' Vocative
Command c	אַל תִּשְׁכַּח	אַל תִּמְאֵס	c Command

It enhances the suggestion of an *inclusio* between Strophes A and F, thus equalising the teaching of the father and the discipline of Yahweh. The position of the vocative implies that the *emphasis* in Strophe A falls on “my son” and in Strophe F on “the Lord’s discipline”.

- *Enjambment* occurs in 2ab and 4ab, linking the cola closely together.
- On *semantic level* the following should be noted:
  - *Metaphorical* language is present in 3bc and 6b. In 3bc the internalisation of the father’s teaching (1ab) that should find expression in a relationship of “love and faithfulness” towards God and man (3a) is metaphorically expressed as a “binding around the neck” (3b) and a “writing upon the tablet of the heart” (3c). 3b metaphorically refers to the external realisation of אֱמֶת וְחֶסֶד in relationships and 3c to its internalisation, making it a way of living, a part of the son’s being. In 6b Yahweh’s constant guidance of those who live in a relationship with him, is described as making straight “your paths”. It implies companionship, guidance and assistance in difficult situations.
  - *Comparison* is present in 12b. Yahweh’s discipline is likened to a father’s discipline of the son he delights in. In this manner a very subtle equitation takes place between the teaching of the father (1ab) and the teaching of Yahweh (11ab). It again emphasises the suggestion of *inclusio* already referred to.
  - *Pars pro toto* is present in all the references to parts of the body (1b, 3b, 3c, 4b, 5a, 8a and 8b). In all instances the part of the body represents the whole person.
  - *Antithesis* is present at the beginning of Strophes A-D. It is presented by means of the interplay between positive and negative commands in each strophe. However, an antithesis exists between Strophes E and F in the sense that Strophe E

contains a positive and Strophe F two negative commands. It suggests a *paradoxical* relationship between the two strophes. It suggests that Strophes E-F should be regarded as the culminating point of the poem. This observation will be confirmed when the two strophes are analysed on semantic level.

- *Merism* is present in the expression **בְּעֵינֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאָדָם** “in the eyes of God and man” in 4b. It implies that an obedient son’s good reputation (4a) will be recognised everywhere (Whybray 1994:61).

The exquisite links created by the poet’s masterful application of poetic techniques only become apparent via a careful analysis of all language levels. When all evidence is taken into account, the poem can be divided into three interrelated stanzas of two strophes each. The structure of the poem can be schematised as follows<sup>10</sup>:

STANZA	STROPHE	VERS E	THEME
<b>I</b>	<b>A+B</b>	<b>1-4</b>	<b><i>INTRODUCTION: A way of life</i></b>
	<b>A</b>	1-2	Keep my commands and live peacefully
	<b>B</b>	3-4	Love and faithfulness will provide you with a good reputation
<b>II</b>	<b>C+D</b>	<b>5-8</b>	<b><i>APPLICATION: A relationship with God</i></b>
	<b>C</b>	5-6	Trust in the Lord and experience his companionship
	<b>D</b>	7-8	Fear the Lord and experience lifelong blessing
<b>III</b>	<b>E+F</b>	<b>9-12</b>	<b><i>REALISATION: Accept blessing AND discipline as a gift</i></b>
	<b>E</b>	9-10	Acknowledge the Lord’s blessing and be blessed even more!
	<b>F</b>	11-12	Hardship is a blessing too!

## 5. CONTENT AND MESSAGE

Proverbs 3:1-12 is a unique piece of literature in the context of Proverbs 1-9. It is the only poem in the corpus that has an explicit religious content. The subject matter of the poem is a relationship with Yahweh. In a certain sense the poem makes explicit what is implied in Proverbs 1:7 – that real “wisdom” can never be achieved without an actual

<sup>10</sup> This analysis differs from that of Perdue (2000:96) who demarcates 1a as the introduction, 1b-10 as the teaching proper and 11-12 as the conclusion. He fails to appreciate the links between the various strophes demarcated above.

(covenantal!) relationship with Yahweh. A life worth living, an honourable and fruitful life, is only possible when Yahweh receives due recognition as the ultimate source of all blessings. This message is transmitted subtly and skillfully by the poet of Proverbs 3:1-12.

### **STANZA I – INTRODUCTION: A way of life (3:1-4)**

The poem is introduced by a general exhortation put in the mouth of a wise father to an eager to be educated son. The content of the exhortation is to follow in the footsteps of the wise father, to enter into a specific mode of existence, a way of life that has been proven to provide success and prosperity. The father is portrayed as a Moses-like figure giving teaching and commands that should be taken to heart, memorised and applied (Snijders 1984:36). This general exhortation is explicated in two ways:

In *Strophe A* (3:1-2) the son is called upon not to forget (a willful, deliberate act of neglect, cf Fox 2000:142) the father's teaching (תורה in 1a) but to make the father's commands (מצוות) part of his being, his thoughts, his will, his life (לבך in 1b)<sup>11</sup>. Such a way of living will have positive results. There is a good reason for living in this manner – it provides life in the true sense of the word (2ab) – “length of days and years of life ... they will add for you”. The chiasmic relationship between the expressions ארך ימים and שנות חיים emphasises the positive result of obedience and should not be interpreted as qualitatively different from each other (Whybray 1994:60). A long life (2a) *per se* is no real blessing (Perdue 2000:97), but a long life coupled with שלום “peace, well-being” (2b) – that is real living (cf also 4:10)!

In *Strophe B* (3:3-4) the content of the father's teaching is given (Perdue 2000:97): It is the well-known concepts of חסד ואמת (3a cf also Prov 14:22; 16:6; 20:28). This covenant term emphasises that teaching should also become doing, commands should become practise. חסד refers to the solidarity between members of a family, between friends or the partners in a covenant. אמת refers to trustworthiness and truth (Snijders 1984:37). Love and faithfulness should be the son's characteristic attitude in his relationship with God and fellow human beings (Whybray 1994:61; Perdue 2000:96).

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<sup>11</sup> Cf the use of תורה and מצוה together with related terms like מוסר, דברים, אמרים in the other Instructions in Proverbs (1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 4:20; 5:1; 6:20; 7:1-2), implying that all of these words belong to the same semantic field and are interchangeable (Whybray 1994:60).

The metaphors of bounding them around the neck (3b) and writing them on the tablet of the heart (3c) is well known in Jewish tradition (cf Deut 6:6-7 and Jer 31:33) and emphasise the outward and inward aspects of love and faithfulness (Snijders 1984:37; Fox 2000:147). It becomes apparent like an ornament around the neck in the son's attitude towards others. But the real motivating principle is the internalisation of love and faithfulness, allowing it to become part of his personality, his innermost being. Such a way of life also brings benefits – a positive reputation in the eyes of God and man (4ab). This merism implies “everybody” (Whybray 1994:61).

### **STANZA II – APPLICATION: A relationship with God (3:5-8)**

The general introduction of Stanza I finds specific application in Stanza II. The focus now shifts towards the son's relationship with Yahweh. What comes into the spotlight is the son's proper attitude towards Yahweh (Whybray 1994:62).

In *Strophe C* (3:5-6) the son is called upon to trust only in the Lord (5a) and acknowledge him in all his ways (6a). The verb עָרַב here implies complete obedience to Yahweh's will (Whybray 1994:62). In direct contrast to this attitude is the exhortation not to put any trust in his own understanding (5b). The way of life mentioned in Stanza I now gets a new perspective. A fruitful way of living is to refrain from *hubris*, from relying upon one's own abilities (cf 26:5, 12, 16; 28:11). Then you can also rely upon Yahweh's guidance (6b). The metaphor of making straight the paths implies Yahweh's constant presence and protection (Snijders 1984:37; Whybray 1994:63). Trust in Yahweh brings with it the promise of his companionship and support (cf Isa 40:3; 45:13). But even more is promised.

*Strophe D* (3:7-8) points out that a relationship with Yahweh brings lifelong blessing. The strophe commences with the negative exhortation not to be wise in one's own eyes (7a). A really wise man knows the boundaries of his own abilities and insights. Only someone who fears the Lord (7b) can be wise. To יָרָא “fear” the Lord implies a close relationship with him, obedience to him, respect for him. Such a person naturally shuns evil (7b) as he moves closer and closer to Yahweh. This way of living also bears fruit – it brings health and refreshment to the whole person (8ab; cf Whybray 1994:63). This promise refers to the lifelong blessing inherent in a relationship with Yahweh. It

picks up the theme of שלום in Strophe A (2b). A long life means nothing if you are sick and weak, detrimentally influenced by negative spiritual powers (cf Prov 15:30; 16:24; 17:22; 25:15; cf Snijders 1984:38). In order to experience real שלום you also need health and vitality.

### **STANZA III – REALISATION: Accept blessing AND discipline as a gift**

The poem reaches a climax in Stanza III. The term “realisation” has been chosen as an intentional pun, indicating both “materialisation” and “awareness”.

On the one hand the realisation of the promise of Stanza II is quite real and materialistic. It is emphasised in *Strophe E* (3:9-10). A life in relationship with Yahweh implies the abandonment of self-reliance and *hubris*. It in turn implies that all material blessings come from Yahweh (Plöger 1984:35). His graciousness should be acknowledged publically and openly. This is demonstrated in the public act of worship (Whybray 1994:63). 9a clearly states that Yahweh should be “honoured” with material blessings. The מראשית of 9b underlines the cultic setting (Perdue 2000:98-99). It refers to the giving of tithes as a symbolic gesture, acknowledging the fact that the real giver of wealth and prosperity is Yahweh and Yahweh alone (cf Ex 23:10; 14:28; Deut 18:4; 26:2; Snijders 1984:38; Perdue 2000:99). Such an attitude carries the inherent blessing of the deity (10ab). By acknowledging him as the giver of wealth, he will reward his faithful servant with even more wealth (Whybray 1994:63).

On the other hand the promise of 10ab leads to a paradoxical (cf Fox 2000:152) realisation in *Strophe F* (3:11-12)<sup>12</sup>. A relationship with Yahweh does not imply instant and unconditional blessing. This is the only passage in Proverbs which attempts to explain the apparent failure of Yahweh’s promises in so many instances (Whybray 1994:64). Yahweh is likened to a father (12b) taking the valuable but sometimes unpleasant task of disciplining the son (cf Prov 19:18; 23:13; 29:17) quite seriously. Here the problem of suffering (Snijders 1984:38; Murphy 1998:21) is discussed within

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<sup>12</sup> Many exegetes fail to appreciate the paradoxical relationship between Strophes E and F. F is then regarded as a later addition and as a reaction against the principle of divine retribution in Strophe E (Whybray 1994:58 and 64).

the context of the promises of rewards in the previous strophes.<sup>13</sup> When suffering occurs, it should not be resented (11ab), but accepted as the logical result of Yahweh's discipline. Discipline is "a necessary feature of the educational process which helps to form the child's character" (Whybray 1994:64). The source of that discipline is love (12a). Illogical as it may seem, suffering is good for the sufferer (Murphy 1998:21)! It strengthens his relationship with Yahweh! Fox (2000:153) remarks: "The author of Prov 3:11-12 ... is not rationalizing suffering; he is inculcating the right attitude toward it".

In the end the poem displays a very logical semantic structure. In Strophe A the father invites the son into a relationship with him by taking the father's instruction to heart. That relationship implies mutual trust and integrity (Strophe B) that originates in a relationship of trust with Yahweh (Strophe C). Trusting in Yahweh in turn implies giving up any form of self-confidence (Strophe D). Then the son will realise that all blessings come from Yahweh alone and he will honour Yahweh with his wealth (Strophe E). He will allow Yahweh to become his teacher and father, and will accept Yahweh's discipline as necessary for his own personal growth (Strophe F). The poem thus concludes a full circle – the process beginning with the human father reaches its true purpose and zenith when Yahweh becomes the real teacher and father (Clifford 1999:51; Perdue 2000:101).

## **6. GENRE**

Nel (1982:7) indicates that genre classification in wisdom literature is often a difficult enterprise. On the one hand, one can follow the route of McKane (1970:3) in formulating genre so widely that in the end he recognises only two genres in the Book of Proverbs, namely the "wisdom sentence" characterised by the indicative and the "Instruction" characterised by the imperative. On the other hand, one can go into so much detail that a bewildering number of genres can be identified. Nel (1982:7) warns that not every variation within a genre can be classified as a new category. It is important to specify the

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<sup>13</sup> Delkurt (1993:38-41) denies the connotation with suffering. He would rather interpret *יָדָוּ* in Proverbs 3:11-12 as a pedagogical term. He defines it as "Erziehen zu einer Lebensführung, die die Regeln des Miteinanders nicht verletzt" (Delkurt 1993:41). Müller (2000:165), however, refers to the parallel expressions in Psalm 118:18 and Job 5:17-18 where *יָדָוּ* definitely carries undertones of discipline. It will be argued in Section C that the word should be understood against the background of an ancient Mediterranean "authoritarian" society. Then the element of suffering as necessary prerequisite for character building definitely comes into play.

essentials of a genre in such a way “as to allow for the greatest possible amount of structural variations” (1982:7).

Departing from these general remarks, Proverbs 3:1-12 is labelled differently by exegetes. Some call it “instruction” (McKane 1970:3). Fox (2000:45) prefers the term “lectures” and regards it as “a father lecturing his son or sons in moral behaviour”. Nel (1982:13) calls the longer didactic poems in Proverbs 1-9 “wisdom teaching (Lehrrede)” and looks for the social setting in the “educational situation (school)”. They, in turn, are made up of a number of “wisdom admonitions” (Nel 1982:18) which consist of an admonition with a “connected motivative” clause.

Though exegetes differ in terminology, they point to the joint characteristics of the ten “instructions” in Proverbs 1-9. All begin with an introductory exhortation by the father to the son to pay attention to his instruction (cf 3:1-4). Then follows the instruction proper (Perdue 2000:29), characterised by positive and negative commands (cf 3:5-12). Most of the instructions conclude with a passage referring to the positive results of obedience and/or the negative results of disobedience (cf 3:32-35; Lang 1972:31-34; Perdue 2000:30).

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The poetic analysis leads to the conclusion that Nel (1982:59) was correct in emphasising the “highly poetic structure” of Proverbs 3:1-12. Even though stating the obvious, he also has not appreciated the value of his remark to its fullest extent. Proverbs 3:1-12 is a work of art. Perdue (2000:32) puts it eloquently: “...the sages uses the art of well-crafted and polished language to render meaning. Artistry and content are inseparable in the sapiental genres”. It is the poetic quality of the poem that captured the imagination, moved the audience to reflection on the content, to understand the truth and value of the instruction. That, in the end, motivated the younger generation to change, to grow, to develop insight, to live (Perdue 2000:33)!

The purpose of the (poetic) rhetoric of wisdom in Proverbs 3:1-12 is to promote growth in relationships: in the relationship of the father with the son and with Yahweh which, in the end, amounts to the same thing! But equally important – also in the relationship of the son with fellow human beings. The son’s appropriate attitude towards



the authority figures above him, the equals next to him and the inferiors below him should all be characterised by love and faithfulness (3:3a). If he lives according to these principles, he will be reciprocally and richly rewarded by Yahweh.

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