

Reading Proverbs 3:1-12 in its social and ideological context¹

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Abstract

Proverbs 3:1-12 is a masterful example of Hebrew poetry. It is quite permissible to analyse and enjoy the poem for its own sake. However, it should be taken into account that the text was written from a wisdom perspective, implying that it had a didactic function in the social context in which it originated. In this article the text is investigated on three levels. It commences with an analysis of the text as a poem, then moves towards an analysis of the type of society where such a text might have originated in order to determine the ideology that served as motivating principle for that society. In the process the role of Israelite wisdom literature in the context of the Ancient Near Eastern wisdom corpus and the influence of wisdom teachers upon society will also be touched upon. This will lead to some conclusions about the relevance of studying this literature for our own society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 3:1-12 is a masterful example of Hebrew poetry. This has clearly been illustrated in the previous article (Potgieter 2002)². It is thus quite permissible to analyse and enjoy the poem for its own sake. On the contrary, failure to do this might lead to an interpretation that is at least incomplete and most likely incorrect. On the other hand it is

¹ I dedicate this study to three former colleagues in the Department of Semitic Languages (presently Ancient Languages) at the University of Pretoria. Wouter van Wyk is my academic father and I owe him much gratitude for the faith he had in me. Louis Bezuidenhout was an appreciated colleague and friend with whom I shared a love for ancient Semitic poetry. Wally da Silva's passion for his students and for the Hebrew language made an indelible impression upon me as a younger colleague. His untimely death caused a lacuna in our department, but his memory lives on in his students, his publications and the many wonderful moments we shared.

² The present study is deliberately intended to be read together with Henk Potgieter's article in this same collection. Accordingly no attention will be paid to the text and translation. References to stanzas, strophes, verses and cola are based upon Potgieter's (2002) analysis.

equally important to take into consideration that Proverbs 3:1-12 is written from a wisdom perspective. Moreover, it belongs to a specific genre in that tradition, namely admonitions by the teacher to the learner, metaphorically expressed as instructions given by a father (teacher) to a son (pupil). Both observations lead to a basic presupposition: The poem had a didactic function in the actual socio-historical circumstances where it originated. Failure to recognise it will also lead to an incomplete and possibly an incorrect interpretation.

The broad problem to be investigated in this paper is the quest for the complete interpretation of the wisdom texts in Proverbs 1-9, with Proverbs 3:1-12 as a representative example of the corpus³. The hypothesis is that an analysis of both the poetic features of the text *and* the socio-historical context where such a text could have originated is necessary in order to interpret the text. Or to put it differently – an analysis of the intratextual, intertextual *and* extratextual relations of a text is necessary in order to arrive at a comprehensive interpretation. It is the dynamic interaction between text and society, words and values, poetry and ideology, rhetoric and wisdom, that constitutes meaningful dialogue and instigates change. These observations might be helpful in the current debate in South Africa on the ineffectiveness of our traditional “religious language”⁴. Can we learn from the ancient sage when he attempts to provoke his student(s) to life-changing decisions and value-based conducts? Will the dynamic interaction between rhetoric and wisdom be helpful in our attempts to discover the wisdom of rhetoric in the ever-changing landscape of our post-modern society?

This article will focus upon Proverbs 3:1-12 within the broader context of Proverbs 1-9 and the function of the compilation within its broad socio-historical context. Insights from the field of social scientific criticism (cf Elliott 1993:7) will be used to

³ The emphasis will fall upon the interpretation of the ten “instructions” in the corpus and not upon the wisdom poems inserted between the instructions.

⁴ There seems to be general consensus about two phenomena in our society:

- Society is perceived to be “valueless”, as can clearly be seen in the increase in crime rates, materialism, egocentrism, disloyalty, and many more negative trends.
- Religious communities are perceived to be “ineffective”, as can clearly be seen in decreasing membership of established churches, the silence of religious leaders about contentious issues such as abortion and pornography and growing interest in “new” religious movements such as paganism.

The furore caused in (Afrikaans) church communities by articles in the press on the Jesus Seminar and the call by prominent academics for a “New Reformation” is a symptom of the growing feeling of powerlessness and ineffectiveness in the churches of the establishment.

create a possible real life setting for the message of Proverbs 3:1-12 as explicated via the poetic analysis in the Potgieter's article.

It is impossible to deal with all the problems presented by these chapters⁵, although many of the issues will be touched upon. In order to arrive at this broad socio-historical context, two things will be done: firstly the text will be read against the background of its Ancient Near Eastern and biblical context (intertextuality); secondly the text will be read against the background of the social values predominant in ancient Mediterranean societies (extratextuality).

2. READING PROVERBS 3:1-12 IN ITS INTERTEXTUAL CONTEXT

2.1 Wisdom literature

Any discussion of Proverbs 3:1-12 in context must take into consideration that it is a text written from a "wisdom perspective" (Loader 1986:103-122). It has been said that wisdom is "an alien concept introduced from outside Israel" (Whybray 1994b) and that it has little to do with the religion of Israel. This, however, has been refuted by better insight into both the nature of Israelite religion⁶ and the nature of wisdom literature itself. Egyptologists have proven beyond doubt that the Egyptian Instructions are built upon the concept of *ma`at*, and it is a thoroughly religious concept, *ma`at* being a goddess herself, the daughter of *Ra*, the principle of "order", "truth" and "judgement" (Whybray 1994b:9)⁷, in fact the central concept of Egyptian thought (Assmann 2001:17). Therefore wisdom in Israel is not a-religious or a-Yahwistic.

⁵ Apart from the introductions to the commentaries, several excellent studies cover the subject in detail (cf Harris 1995; Müller 2000).

⁶ For a long time Von Rad's ([1962] 1975:106) definition of Yahwism, namely "that in principle Israel's faith is grounded in a theology of history" has been accepted as fundamentally true. Consequently he relegated wisdom literature to the periphery of Israel's religious experience (Von Rad 1975:435). However, lately more and more insight has been gained into the religious experience of the individual Israelite. The religion of Ancient Israel was more than the official cult and the annual festivals. Whybray (1994b:10) puts it quite clearly: "It was in the down-to-earth everyday life of which Proverbs speaks that the ordinary Israelite felt the presence of God".

⁷ Assmann (2001:17) indicates that it is impossible to translate the concept *ma`at* into any other language, mainly because no modern culture and language even remotely resembles Ancient Egyptian culture.

Clifford (1999:19) recognises three dimensions in Proverbs' account of wisdom. According to him wisdom is:

- “Sapiential (a way of knowing reality);
- Ethical (a way of conducting oneself);
- Religious (a way of relating to the divinely assigned order or to God)”.

All three aspects are present in the Book of Proverbs, but it is especially the last two dimensions that are emphasised in Proverbs 1-9⁸.

2.2 Setting of wisdom

There are three main theories⁹ on the setting of wisdom literature (Lang 1972:36-46; Whybray 1994b:5; Perdue 2000:13). Some see the origins of the movement in popular, native Israelite proverbs and aphorisms, mainly handed down in the family from father and mother to children or in the clan from elders to younger generations. It was the special task of the senior male in the family to act as instructor who taught the younger members of the household the family traditions (Perdue 2000:16). Others look for the roots of wisdom in the literary activities of a group of “highly educated officials or scribes” (Whybray 1994b:5), the so-called “school wisdom” taught in the temple and palace to budding young officials and princes from the upper class (Snijders 1984:8)¹⁰. Related to this are the scholars who regard wisdom as a truly “international” exercise

⁸ Perdue (2000:3-13) pleads for an all-inclusive definition of wisdom including the aspects of knowledge, imagination, discipline, piety, order and moral instruction.

⁹ Cf Boström (1990:11-15) for an overview of the relevant theories and the main proponents of each theory. Boström (1990:10) adds a fourth possibility, namely that the sages did not belong to a specific social group “but were an intellectual class of relatively well-to-do citizens”.

¹⁰ In spite of the popularity of the theory that wisdom originated in “schools”, there is no archaeological evidence for the existence of such institutions in ancient Israel (Murphy 1998:xx). Schools definitely existed in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but it can not be assumed that wisdom in Israel developed *as a result* of the existence of schools under the influence of the monarchy. On the contrary, Proverbs distinctly lacks any royal flavour. Therefore others maintain that the origins of wisdom lie in the oral tradition of the family. Moreover, the schools in Egypt and Mesopotamia were not *wisdom schools* per se but *scribal schools* where all kinds of literature were studied and transmitted (Murphy 1998:xxi). It can no longer simply be assumed that Egyptian wisdom literature was intimately associated with school and court. From the time of the New Kingdom onwards wisdom texts “were composed by fathers for their sons” (Whybray 1994b:8). In some Instructions both father and son are known historical figures. There is no reason to doubt the literal interpretation of “father” and “son” in such cases.

(McKane 1970:5) and look for the roots of Israelite wisdom in the learned activities of Ancient Near Eastern scholars, mainly in Egypt¹¹, but also in Mesopotamia, who were primarily associated with the royal court. The three points of view are not mutually exclusive (Perdue 2000:13). Examples of all three kinds of wisdom material can be found in the Book of Proverbs (Murphy 1998:xix). In the case of Proverbs 3:1-12 with its emphasis on the youth's relationship with Yahweh, the setting should probably be sought in the family and not in the school (Fuhs 2001:35)¹².

Clifford (1999:2) points to the importance of the new context the ten instructions in Proverbs 1-9 received when the wisdom poems were interwoven to form a literary complex. The ten instructions have much in common with Mesopotamian and Egyptian instructions addressed to youths at the beginning of their public careers. The juxtaposition to a personified Woman Wisdom as a teacher seeking disciples elevates "Proverb's instructions to a metaphorical level" and broadens the perspective of the audience to more than the education of young men. Seeking wisdom becomes the main objective in all walks of life.

Clifford (1999:18) also indicates that Proverbs 1-9 differs from its Ancient Near Eastern counterparts in at least two respects. Firstly it is more general than the Egyptian and Mesopotamian instructions. The main consideration is to seek wisdom, not to execute specific actions. Secondly the personification of wisdom creates a metaphorical context absent in the Ancient Near Eastern parallels. The purpose of Proverbs 1-9 becomes the pursuit of wisdom and virtue and the rejection of wickedness, not merely the preparation for young manhood. The main purpose of the Instruction genre in Proverbs is "socialization and the refashioning of the character of the unlearned" (Perdue 2000:13).

¹¹ Adherents of this hypothesis especially refer to the literary dependence between the Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17-24:22 (cf Farmer 1991:7). There are, however, many parallels between Proverbs and other Egyptian wisdom sources, ranging from the Instruction of Ptahhotep dating from the Old Kingdom (2655-2155) to the Insinger Papyrus dating from 300 BC (cf Fuhs 2001:9-10). McKane (1970:51-208), Snijders (1984:12-14); Clifford (1999:8-19) and Fox (2000:19-27) give extensive overviews of the wisdom traditions in the Ancient Near East.

¹² Perdue (2000:96) opts for the school hypothesis "where the sage is instructing students in proper behaviour in Judahite society of the early part of the Persian period, a society where the hierocratic party had dominance."

2.3 Proverbs 3:1-12 in the context of Proverbs 1-9

It is important to take note of the literary context of Proverbs 3:1-12, especially as far as similarities and differences between the pericope and the context are concerned¹³. There seems to be general consensus that Proverbs 1-9 consists of two basic kinds of material, namely a series of ten lessons or instructions¹⁴ by a father/teacher to a child/pupil (Whybray 1994a:11) interspersed by two long poems where Wisdom is personified as a woman (1:20-33 and 8:1-36) and a shorter poem praising Wisdom in the third person (3:13-20; cf Whybray 1994a:12). All the poems have a common purpose: the education of “boys or young men to face the problems and dangers of the adult world so that they may become wise and responsible members of it” (Whybray 1994a:11). In this context 3:1-12 is unique because its subject matter is the relationship between Yahweh and the youth, and not general ethical conduct as in the other nine instructions (Tuinstra 1996:89). The whole series of Instructions and Wisdom poems is framed by a prologue (1:2-7) and epilogue (9:1-18). Proverbs 1:1 is the superscript of the collection in chapters 1-9 but also for the book as a whole¹⁵.

2.4 The date of Proverbs 1-9

Proverbs 1-9 is normally regarded as the latest stratum of the book (Lang 1972:35; Fox 2000:48¹⁶). Its earliest possible date is regarded as in the later Achaemenid period (Nel

¹³ The subject is discussed in all the major commentaries. At least one important detailed study of the composition of the Book of Proverbs has been published recently (Whybray 1994a).

¹⁴ The ten Instructions are not demarcated exactly the same by all exegetes. Fuhs (2001:13) identifies the following as the ten instructions: 1:8-19; 2:1-22; 3:1-12; 3:21-35; 4:1-9; 4:10-19; 4:20-27; 5:1-7 and 21-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27. He regards 5:8-20 as a later addition and 6:1-19 as an intermezzo. Clifford (1999:1) regards 5:1-23 as a single unit. Both 3:13-20 and 6:1-19 are interludes. He demarcates 9:1-6 + 11; 13-18 as the third wisdom poem and 9:7-10 + 12 as assorted sayings added later (cf also Whybray 1994b:19-20). Perdue (2000:62-63) regards 1:8-19; 2:1-22; 3:1-12; 3:21-35; 4:1-9; 4:10-27; 5:1-23; 6:1-19; 6:20-35 and 7:1-27 as the ten instructions. He identifies four poems on Wisdom: 1:20-33; 3:13-20; 8:1-36 and 9:1-18 (cf also Fox 2000:44-45).

¹⁵ The discussion is based on the presupposition that Proverbs 1-9, though containing diverse material, can be regarded as a literary unit. It is not accepted by all exegetes. Lang (1972:27), for instance, regards the order of the chapters as pure coincidence. Fox (2000:44-47) on the other hand see signs of deliberate structuring in the interlacing of “instructions” and “interludes”.

¹⁶ There is no consensus regarding the date. Whybray (1994b:29-30) gives an overview of various proposals ranging from the early monarchic period to late in the post-exilic time. Lang (1972:35) indicates that the “traditional” reason for the late dating of Proverbs 1-9 was the formcritical presupposition that the longer wisdom poems of Proverbs 1-9 were a later development of the original short wisdom saying. Egyptian and Mesopotamian parallels have proven this presupposition to be false. “Instruction” and “wisdom saying” are simply two different genres (cf also Perdue 2000:2).

1982:2), probably during the last half of the fifth century BC. Many exegetes argue that the work is much younger. It reflects none of the particularistic tendencies present in Ezra-Nehemiah (Fox 2000:49). Rather, the more intellectually cosmopolitan atmosphere “fits a time when Jewish traditions were in competition with foreign currents of thought” (Fox 2000:49). According to Fox Proverbs 1-9 shows some familiarity with Greek styles of thought, therefore he concludes that a Hellenistic dating is not out of the question.

This traditional dating has recently been questioned. Departing from the premise that the instructions in Proverbs 1-9 are the reflection of a truly international genre with parallels especially in Egyptian literature, it is argued that nothing in the corpus makes a post-exilic date imperative (Whybray 1994a:56; cf Steiert 1990:213). Whybray (1994a:14-56) allows for the possibility of a redactional expansion of all the instructions except 1:8-19 and 4:20-27, implying that some of the material at least could be pre-exilic. In the end (1994a:60) he is hesitant to propose a definitive date for the original composition or the redactional expansions.¹⁷

Fuhs (2001:10-11) also refers to the difficulties in dating the separate collections of the book. He indicates that in its final form the book probably was intended for the Jewish community in Palestine during the Hellenistic conflicts of the third and second centuries BC. Proverbs reflects some of the tensions in the Jewish community, especially the social tension between the rich and the poor and the pro-Hellenistic and particularistic parties. The final redactor “versucht die Kultur-synthese zwischen hellenistischer Weltweisheit und JHWH-Glauben” (Fuhs 2001:11).

Perdue (2000:56-62) regards a dating of Proverbs 1-9 in the Persian period (late sixth and fifth centuries BC) as the most plausible possibility. He indicates that the collection should be read against the background of growing tension between different social classes in the province of Judah. The indigenous population who remained in the homeland during the Babylonian Exile intermingled with deportees from other regions and had a more lenient understanding of Yahwism. On the other hand, the captives’ only source of identity was their religion. When they returned to the homeland, they brought

¹⁷ Clifford (1999:3-6) points out how relative many of the arguments (linguistics, editing devices and themes) for an early or late dating can be. The best that can be done is to trace the general development of wisdom, assuming that the rise of the monarchy also inspired the rise of literary traditions in Ancient Israel. This tradition culminated in the literary and redactional activities of the Second Temple period, roughly between the sixth and fourth centuries BC.

with them a much stricter version of Yahwism. On the other hand they maintained good relationships with the Persian authorities and soon became the group with the political and economic power.

This tension led to the formation of two opposing groups. On the one hand the Zadokite priesthood became the elite in Judean society and had the support of the Persians. On the other hand a group of visionaries from the disgruntled masses founded the apocalyptic movement, seeking a totally new dispensation under the guidance of a new Davidic ruler and a purified temple cult. Accordingly, two groups of sages also developed. The first aligned themselves with the “hierocratic party of the Zadokite priests’ (Perdue 2000:60). The second became more and more pessimistic about “the current cosmic and social order” (Perdue 2000:60). Proverbs 1-9 can be ascribed to the first group. They tried “to promote the interests of the prevailing social and religious order” (Perdue 2000:61).

Within this general framework the following can be said about the society where Proverbs 1-9 originated (Whybray 1994a:56; 1994b:24; Fox 2000:9):

- The purpose of the Instructions is the education of young men.
- Two themes are predominant: the avoidance of evil company and the avoidance of immoral women.
- The pupils belonged to the upper class of urban society.
- The Instructions presuppose the ability to read and write.
- Wealth is taken for granted, in contrast to the more mundane content of 10:1-22:16 and 25-29.

2.5 Deuteronomy and the Prophets as intertexts for Proverbs 3:1-12

Many exegetes have pointed out the similarities between Proverbs 3:1-12 and passages in Deuteronomy (cf Whybray 1994b:59). Stanza I (Strophes A and B; 3:1-4) shows a clear resemblance to Deuteronomy 6:1-15. As in 3:1ab the people are called upon to keep the מצוה of Yahweh (Deut 6:1-2), and promised a long life as a result of obedience (Prov 3:2ab and Deut 6:2). Like the son/pupil (Prov 1:1b), Israel should keep the commandments in their heart (Deut 6:6). In Deuteronomy 6:7 the Israelites are called

upon to teach the commandments to their sons (לְבַנָּיִךְ, cf Prov 3:1a, 11a and 12b), to bind them (קָשַׁר in Deut 6:8 and Prov 3:3b) on their hands and forehead and to write them (כָּתַב in Deut 6:9 and Prov 3:3c) on the doorposts of their houses. Yahweh should never be forgotten (שָׁכַח in Deut 6:12 and Prov 3:1a). But in contrast to Deuteronomy which speaks about the תּוֹרָה of Moses being written on לוחות “tablets” of stone (Deut 9:9, 11), the son is called upon to write the תּוֹרָה of the father on the לוח “tablet” of his heart (Prov 3:3c).

Stanza III (especially Strophe F [3:11-12]) has many similarities with Deuteronomy 8:1-6. Both passages have as theme the subject of divine education (Fuhs 2001:37). Deuteronomy 8 describes the hardships of the wilderness journey as an educating experience (Clifford 1999:53). In both passages the image of fatherly discipline is used as an explanation for hardship (Prov 3:12ab and Deut 8:5). But as the son is called upon not to forget (לֹא תִשְׁכַּח in 3:1a) the teachings of the father, Israel is called upon in Deuteronomy 8 not to forget that it is Yahweh who gave them their land and all its blessings (cf Deut 8:11, 14, 19).

Stanza II (Strophes C and D [3:5-8]) on the other hand has parallels in the prophetic literature, especially in Isaiah and Jeremiah. The notion of making straight a path (3:6b) is well known in Deutero-Isaiah (cf Isa 40:3; 45:13), where the metaphor also refers to a prosperous life (Fox 2000:150). The warning against reliance upon own understanding (3:5b) and wisdom (3:7a) is also echoed in the prophets. Isaiah promises destruction to those who are wise in their own eyes (Isa 5:21). And Jeremiah warns that wisdom and might and wealth should never be a source of pride. Rather, pride should be sought in a relationship with Yahweh (Jer 9:23-24). An important question is how these similarities should be accounted for. According to Whybray (1994b:59-60) some instances might be pure chance, others due to common vocabulary and education, still others to parallels in other Ancient Near Eastern texts. Some, however, cannot be ignored. According to him the parallel between Deuteronomy 8:5 and Proverbs 3:11-12 implies that Deuteronomy was influenced by the vocabulary and concepts of family education. Perdue (2000:98) maintains that the sages of Israel and Judah were involved in the writing and redaction of Deuteronomy. For Clifford (1999:51) the similarities indicate, “that the exhortatory rhetoric of Deuteronomy and Proverbs had a common

origin in the scribal class of Jerusalem responsible for their writing". The parallels at least point towards a common social and religious background for these texts. The wisdom instructions in Proverbs 1-9 are not alien to the traditions of Yahwism expressed in Deuteronomy and the prophets.

2.6 Divine retribution

It has been suggested that the underlying principle in all wisdom texts is the notion of divine retribution¹⁸. Therefore the picture of God portrayed in Proverbs is different from that in the rest of the Old Testament. God is "perceived only as the One who presides over a system of rewards and punishments which is self-operative and grounded in the very nature of things, simply setting his seal, as it were, on it" (Whybray 1994b:11). It became customary to call this portrayal of God¹⁹ the "doctrine of retribution"²⁰ or (in a more refined form, especially by German scholars) the "Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang"²¹. While it is true that the principle of divine retribution, in which people are rewarded or punished according to what they deserve, is operative in many of the proverbs in 10:1-22:6 and 25-29, the matter is not as simple as that.

For a start, the terminology used is not quite appropriate. "Retribution" carries the undertone of *punishment* and *immediacy* that is absent in Proverbs (Clifford 1999:19). In many proverbs Yahweh is perceived as unknowable and human knowledge as limited (cf Prov 16:1, 9, 33; 17:3; 19:21; 20:24). Yahweh can intervene to frustrate human expectations. Yahweh is a "God who rewards and punishes in accordance with the principles of justice, but who nevertheless remains free and inscrutable in his decisions"

¹⁸ Boström (1990:90-140) gives an overview of scholarly opinions on the subject. In this paper only a few critical remarks with specific reference to Proverbs 3:1-12 can be made.

¹⁹ It should be noted that this is a portrayal of God created by exegetes, not necessarily the intended picture of the redactors of Proverbs. In the following discussion it will become clear that an uncritical acceptance of this picture of God can be refuted simply by critical exegesis of passages in Proverbs itself. The intentional juxtaposition of Proverbs 3:9-10 and 11-12 already suggests a paradox in the perceived "system" of retribution.

²⁰ In an absolute form the doctrine would imply that God is a judge "der in seiner »gerechten Vergeltung« die gute Tat »belohnt« und die böse Tat »bestraft« (*iustitia distributiva*"; Janowski 1994:250).

²¹ A proponent of the more refined definition is Koch (1955:1-42). He is critical of the absolute form of the doctrine and would rather not speak of a dogma of retribution but rather of a "Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang" whereby an act mechanically generates an effect. It is not Yahweh who necessarily rewards or repays, but there is a relationship between deeds and their consequences.

(Whybray 1994b:11). In many instances the Book of Proverbs is critical towards a mechanical dogma of retribution (Fuhs 2001:6). What is emphasised in the book is not the concept of retribution, but the reality that deeds have consequences (Fuhs 2001:6). Proverbs focuses on the *reward(s)* of a just life and its “*gradual consequences*” (Clifford 1999:19).

While a “dogma” of divine retribution might be detected in 3:9-10, it is immediately balanced by the reference to divine discipline and reproof in 3:11-12. There are cases where the expected reward as result of positive behaviour remains absent. Theologically the poet explains it as the Lord’s reproof for those whom he loves. Suffering too, then, has an educational purpose (Whybray 1994b:58). This “somewhat paradoxical” (Murphy 1998:xxv) instruction indicates the awareness that action and reward do not always correspond and “seems to be a way of incorporating adversity into life in a “constructive” way” (Murphy 1998:xxv).

3. READING PROVERBS 3:1-12 IN ITS EXTRATEXTUAL CONTEXT

3.1 Introductory remarks

The question now to be answered is in what kind of society a text such as Proverbs 3:1-12 could have originated. If the intertextual observations are taken seriously, Proverbs 1-9 can be described as a post-exilic document. While it is possible that some of the Instructions grew over a long period of time (cf Whybray 1994a:56-57), at least in their present form and setting in the Book of Proverbs they were intended to educate young people of the postexilic province of Judah to become responsible members of society (Fox 2000:11).

That society differed dramatically from modern (Western) society. Anthropologists have shown beyond doubt that the value systems²² and social institutions²³ of

²² A “value” is defined by Pilch and Malina (1998:xv) as “some general quality and direction of life that human beings are expected to embody in their behavior ... It is an emotionally anchored commitment to pursue and support certain directions or types of actions”.

²³ Pilch and Malina (1998:xvii) define “social institutions” as follows: “In order to realize values, human beings create and utilize social institutions... Institutions mark the general boundaries within which certain qualities and directions of living must take place.”

ancient Mediterranean societies were in many respects exactly the opposite from the society we live in. Pilch and Malina (1998:xxx) identified at least five areas of difference between the two societies. It can be schematised as follows:

ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN SOCIETY	(POST)MODERN WESTERN SOCIETY
Being and/or becoming (states) are important	Doing (activity) is important
Collateral (group) and lineal (hierarchical) relationships	Individualism
Present and past time orientation	Future time orientation
Uncontrollable factor of nature (subordination)	Manipulation or mastery of nature
Human nature is a mixture of good and bad	Human nature is neutral and correctable

One of the core values²⁴ of ancient Mediterranean societies was the concept of *honour and shame* (cf Olyan 1996:202-204; Plevnik 1998:106-115). The importance of this concept for the interpretation of the Book of Proverbs has not been appreciated yet. Olyan's (1996:204) definition of honour/shame will already illustrate the applicability of the concept for Proverbs 1-9 in general and Proverbs 3:1-12 in particular: "Honor, generally speaking, is owed by an inferior to a superior: by the young to the elderly...; by the worshiper to his or her deity...; by a child to a parent...; by the living to the dead...; by a dishonored or diminished person to an honored person... It is a commodity of value, actively sought by deities and by human beings. It is often conferred or inscribed in the public sphere, through ritual action such as sacrifice ..."

In a community such as the postexilic community in the province of Judah, these concepts became highly valued. The people of Judah have lost most of their political and financial power (symbols of honour). Honourable conduct in public, fitting into society, living according to divine order – these became motivating principles for people experiencing circumstances beyond their understanding and control. It is in this social context that Proverbs 3:1-12 should be read. Different aspects of this concept will be discussed in the rest of the paper.

3.2 Developing a dyadic personality

Snijders (1984:14) has observed that wisdom texts are not directed towards the people as a whole, but to the individual. But this observation should be seen in the context of

²⁴ Pilch and Malina (1998:xix) differentiate between core and peripheral values. "Values that are expected in all human interactions are core values ... Values that are specific to given interactions are peripheral values."

ancient Mediterranean societies where individualism was frowned upon and “individual people are not known or valued because of their uniqueness, but in terms of their dyad, that is, some other person or thing” (Neyrey 1998:54). In this system individual honour is ascribed according to someone’s attachment to a higher authority. In this context great value is placed on obedience, faithfulness and loyalty (Neyrey 1998:55).

These aspects are clearly present in Proverbs 3:1-12. There is a remarkable concentration of words for parts of body in the poem. לב “heart” occurs three times (3:1b, 3c, 5a) and as such plays a central role in the interpretation of the poem. According to Old Testament thinking the heart is far more than an organ pumping blood. It is also more than the seat of emotions (Snijders 1984:16). The heart is the “Personmitte” (Steiert 1990:254), the seat of intelligence (Clifford 1999:15), reason, and will (Malina 1998b:68) – in short the origin of life itself (Prov 4:23; cf Snijders 1984:37). In 3:1b and 3c the reference to “heart” should be understood metaphorically as the internalisation of the father’s teaching, making it part of the self. It is especially clear in the command “write them upon the tablet of your heart” in 3:3c. It refers to the Ancient Near Eastern custom of wearing an amulet with an inscription (mostly an incantation) on a cord around the neck. The amulet rests against the breast. Its function is to protect the wearer against evil spirits. Here the expression is used metaphorically as an indication of internalising love and faithfulness, making it part of the person’s being, allowing it to become the motivating principle in all relationships (Fuhs 2001:35). Only someone who has done this, can comply with the command in 5a – to trust the Lord with all your heart, that is with the whole being (McKane 1970:292).

גרגרות “neck” occurs in 3b. The neck is the place where breath and words originate (Snijders 1984:37). To bind something around the neck refers to the Ancient Near Eastern custom of engraving a word on a metal plate and wearing it around the neck, not only as decoration (McKane 1970:291), but also as good luck charm (Snijders 1984:37). In 3:3b it is used metaphorically as an indication of the visible practice of love and faithfulness (Farmer 1991:36).

עין “eye” occurs twice (3:4b and 7a). According to ancient Mediterranean thinking there was a direct link between heart and eye (Malina 1998b:68-69). When it is stated in 3:4ab that internalisation of the father’s teaching will lead to the son finding

“favour and high regard in the eyes of God and man” it refers to an honourable reputation in the estimation of all (Malina 1998b:71). Exactly the opposite happens in 7a. To be wise in one’s “own eyes” is to dishonour Yahweh and thus to be shamed.

שר “body” and עצמות “bones” occur in parallelism in 3:8ab. Together they refer to the outward and inward dimensions of the physical body. The result of fearing the Lord (3:7b) is health, wholeness, and vitality of the whole body.

All these terms emphasise the internalisation of teaching, the forming of character, the developing of personality. But the personality that emerges is a dyadic personality. The son exists, receives honour, and enjoys blessing *only in relation to* figures of authority (his father and Yahweh). Therefore great emphasis is placed upon the son’s obedience to his father and to Yahweh. He is called upon not to forget his father’s teaching (3:1a), but to keep his commands (3:1b). Equally important is the practising of “love and faithfulness” (3:3a). The son must “trust in the Lord” (3:5a), “fear the Lord” (3:7b) and “shun evil” (3:7b). Conversely, he must not lean upon his “own understanding” (3:5b) or be wise in his “own eyes” (3:7a). He must “honour” the Lord with his wealth (3:9a) and should not “despise” (3:11a) or “resent” (3:11b) the Lord’s “discipline” (3:11a) or “rebuke” (3:11b). It is only by honouring his father and Yahweh in this manner that honour will be bestowed upon him (cf 3:2, 4, 6, 8, 10).

3.3 Fitting into an authoritarian society

Ancient Mediterranean societies were by and large authoritarian (Malina 1998a: 13). It implies that authority figures can demand total submissiveness from people with lower status.

It is now generally accepted that the references to “my son” and “your father” in Proverbs 1-9 can be taken quite literally (Whybray 1994a:56). Parallels from Egypt from the New Kingdom onwards sometimes name a specific father and a specific son by name. Proverbs 1-9 seem to have originated as private communications and “reflect instruction actually carried on within the family” (Whybray 1994b:8). What should be looked for, is a “father/mother to son channel – a family, not a ‘school’ location” (Murphy 1998:xxi).

Within this channel, the authority figure expects nothing less than total submissiveness. That is the implication of all the positive and negative commands in

Proverbs 3:1-12. In the end, the purpose of the poem is to demand total submissiveness to Yahweh (cf 3:5a, 7b, 9ab), the highest authority. It should be done even in adverse circumstances. The son should be able to endure Yahweh's discipline (3:11a) and rebuke (3:11b) as a necessary part of his education and as a sign of Yahweh's love (3:12ab). It should be done precisely because Yahweh is "a father" (3:12b). Malina (1998a:15) states: "...the ability to wield force, to inflict pain, and to endure it are part of the value cluster called authoritarianism". The comparison of Yahweh to a father is an example of "the paternal discipline inflicted by the Lord" (Murphy 1998:xxv) and indicative of the authoritarian society where 3:1-12 originated.

Authoritarianism also implies a male dominated society. Pilch (1998:145) states it clearly: "The cornerstone of the patriarchal and patrilineal social edifice is the father". The father demands absolute submissiveness and would not refrain from "severe physical punishment" as "the means of instilling such obedience and subordination" (Pilch 1998:146). This is often propagated in Proverbs (cf 13:24; 23:13). It was especially adolescent boys who received this harsh treatment. These concepts can clearly be seen in the father of Proverbs 3:1-12's insistence on obedience, but especially in the command not to resent Yahweh's discipline and rebuke in 3:11-12.

However, the presence of the male dominated authoritarian society should not blind the interpreter for the important role played by female figures in Proverbs 1-9. Especially the portrayal of wisdom as a woman in these chapters points towards the important role of women in the household and in the larger society (Perdue 2000:51). Women played a crucial role in the education of young boys (Pilch 1998:147). While the father symbolised authority, the mother was viewed as "loving and compassionate" (Pilch 1998:147). It is a challenge to sexism in modern culture. In four didactic poems (1:20-33; 3:13-20; 8:1-36 and 9:1-18) as well as one instruction (4:1-9) "divine insight and artistic design are personified and metaphorically depicted as Woman Wisdom" (Perdue 2000:63). Personified Wisdom played a crucial role at creation, is actively involved in guiding the community, and remains the divine creative force that permeates the cosmos.

Diametrically opposed to Woman Wisdom is her evil counterpart, Woman Folly, "who represents not only the evil and frivolity of foolish life that strays toward destruction but also both the allure of the "foreign woman" and her culture and the threat

of the prostitute to the extended family” (Perdue 2000:63). But evil also has a male representative. Together with Woman Folly, Proverbs 1-9 stresses the danger of wicked men leading people astray. Submitting to the authority of the father and Yahweh, allowing one to be instructed by Woman Wisdom — that is the road to honour! However, allowing one to be lead astray by wicked men and Woman Folly — that is a certain recipe for shame.

3.4 Living honourably

In the end Proverbs 3:1-12 is permeated by the ancient Mediterranean values of honour and shame. On the one hand the son is encouraged to seek his own honour by honouring Yahweh. On the other hand he is warned against the danger of falling into shame by neglecting to honour Yahweh and relying upon his own insight. This is clear when the positive and negative commands and their respective outcomes are compared.

The *positive commands* especially emphasise the value cluster of authoritarianism already referred to and are intended to enhance the honour of both the father and Yahweh. The father calls upon his son to keep (1b) his commands, bind them (3b) around his neck and write them (3c) on the table of his heart. He must בטח “trust” in Yahweh (5a). To “trust” Yahweh implies to give oneself wholeheartedly to him and to leave behind every hint of one’s own abilities and ambitions (Hubbard 1989:71). As such it is indicative of Yahweh’s honour. The same is true of the command to ידע “acknowledge” the Lord (6a). To “acknowledge” Yahweh is indicative of a sound relationship between man and God, allowing God to guide and change one’s behaviour (Hubbard 1989:71). To acknowledge Yahweh “in all your ways” is to live a whole life long under his guidance and according to his principles (Hubbard 1989:71). In short – 6a refers to obedience to Yahweh’s precepts (Tuinstra 1996:94). Furthermore, to ירא “fear” (7b) Yahweh means to revere Him as supreme God (Clifford 1999:52) and to submit yourself willingly to his teaching and discipline (Snijders 1984:15). To “shun evil” (7b) implies ethically correct behaviour (Tuinstra 1996:94) and in the context is meant as the other side of the same coin as revering Yahweh (Clifford 1999:52). In the end the son is urged to כבד “honour” the Lord (9a). It is mostly interpreted as a cultic phrase (McKane 1970:293). Exegetes point out the relationship between 9ab and passages in

Deuteronomy (cf Deut 18:4; 26:2, 10, 15). To honour Yahweh is to recognise his authority (Tuinstra 1996:95). The proper attitude towards material blessing is gratitude and charity, indicating that it ultimately comes from Yahweh (Hubbard 1989:72).

The combination of positive commands creates a sense of “awe, intimacy, and obligation which mark sound relationships” (Hubbard 1989:71).

The *negative commands* state the same notion of honour in exactly the opposite way. To avoid shame the son should “not forget” (1a) the father’s teaching. Love and faithfulness “must not leave” him (3a). “On your own understanding do not lean” (5b) and “do not be wise in your own eyes” (7a) are both a sign of folly (Snijders 1984:18) and as such can bring only shame. Therefore the son should not “despise” (11a) or “resent” (11b) the discipline of Yahweh, but endure it as a sign of his love and a necessary step in his education. All of these terms refer to willful neglect of the son’s duties towards authority figures (Fox 2000:142). It implies unwillingness to honour them, and by implication leads to shame.

Honourable behaviour will not be without *results*. The son will receive “length of days” and “years of life” (2a) in return. Long life is a sign of divine blessing (Tuinstra 1996:91) and as such of honour. The direct relationship between a long life and wealth and honour is also mentioned in 3:16 (Snijders 1984:15). “Peace” (2b) emphasises quality of life (Fuhs 2001:35), the “state of contentment, pleasantness, health, welfare, and security in which good things are had and experienced without the stress of anxiety and fear” (Perdue 2000:97). חן (4a) refers to the ability to “get on well with other people, the possession of an attractive personality and the enjoyment of reputation and success” (McKane 1970:292). שכל-טוב (4a) in the sense of “regard” (Fox 2000:36) or “good reputation” in the eyes of others belongs to the sphere of honour. Clifford (1999:51) states it clearly: “One’s reputation in the community is an important social good. Public shame, on the other hand, destroys one’s place within the community”. Yahweh will also “make straight” the son’s “paths” (6b). This metaphor implies that it is Yahweh who makes the son’s life righteous and safe (Clifford 1999:52). He will also grant the son “health” (8a) and “refreshment” (8b). Together they indicate well-being of the whole person, tangible and intangible (Hubbard 1989:71), the “total personal prosperity that is God’s gift to those who walk in wisdom’s way” (Hubbard 1989:72). Everything

culminates in the promise of verse 10, that “your barns will be filled to overflowing” (10a) and “the wine of your vats will brim over” (10b).

Behind the commands and their related promises lies the notion of *patronage* (Malina 1998d:151) or the ancient Mediterranean value of patron-client relationships. “Clients” of a god reckoned their status with their god through their prosperity (Clifford 1999:53). Malina (1998d:151) describes it as “a form of “justice” rooted in generalised reciprocity”. If Yahweh is called a “father” (3:12b) it refers to his role as patron. The patron is expected to relate with his clients in the same way a father would relate to grateful and loving children (Malina 1998d:152). The patron will be honoured, the clients will have their needs met. This is exactly what is stated in Proverbs 3:1-12 (Steiert 1990:255)!

The juxtaposition of Strophes E (3:9-10) and F (3:11-12) shows that “ease and security are not automatic results of divine favor” (Clifford 1999:53). By entering into a father-son or patron-client relationship with Yahweh, suffering also enters the equation. It is, however, a sign of Yahweh’s love (12a). He disciplines his child like a father the son he delights in (12b). The suffering is “purposeful education” (Clifford 1999:53). The patron is of higher status than the client and accordingly under no obligation to provide assurances or guarantees (Malina 1998d:153).

3.5 Convergence of semantic fields

In Proverbs 3:1-12 a very interesting convergence of semantic fields takes place. Predominantly, the words used in the poem come from the semantic fields of “instruction”, “wisdom” and “covenant”. It is exactly in the convergence of these semantic fields that the honour of both the father and Yahweh is emphasised.

(a) The words for “*instruction*” all focus on the education of the son. The following words occur:

- תורה (1a): In Proverbs the term does not refer to “law or legally enforceable ordinances” (Fox 2000:142), but rather to the authoritative advice given by a superior to an inferior.

- מצוה (1b): In Proverbs it can be regarded as the content of תורה, the individual “directives” (McKane 1970:290) of the general term “instruction” (Perdue 2000:97). Both terms are never used for instructions given to superiors or equals (cf Fox 2000:143). It enhances the notion of authority.
- (b) The words for “*wisdom*” emphasise the son’s insight and reputation. The following words occur:
- שכל (4a): The word normally refers to “insight”, the ability to grasp the meanings or implications of a situation or message (Fox 2000:36). However, in Proverbs 3:4a it has the special meaning of “regard”, that is to say, the way others see one” (Fox 2000:36).
 - בינה (5b): It indicates “the faculty of intellectual discernment and interpretation” (Fox 2000:30), the ability to exercise that faculty and to illustrate it in words and deeds. As such it includes reason and intellect. In Proverbs 3:5b it is used in a negative sense. The son/pupil is called upon not to lean on his own insight. That would amount to *hubris* “which is incompatible with trust in Yahweh” (McKane 1970:292) and as such has the potential to shame the son.
 - חכם (7a): It refers to a “high degree of knowledge and skill in any domain” (Fox 2000:32) and can best be rendered by the English word “expertise”. In Proverbs 3:7a it is again used in a negative sense. The son/pupil is reminded not to be wise in his own eyes. That also amounts to *hubris* and in the end will bring shame upon the young man. Its use here is reminiscent of Isaiah’s critique upon old wisdom (cf Isa 5:21; McKane 1970:292).
 - מוסר (11a): It refers to a “lesson intended to correct a moral fault” (Fox 2000:34) conveyed by a superior to an inferior. The מוסר יהוה carries the undertone of “respect for Yahweh and his authoritative teaching” (McKane 1970:290).

- תוכחה (11b): It is used parallel to מוסר, with the additional connotation of “chastisement” (Fox 2000:34), there is a failing that calls for correction, an atrocity that calls for repentance.

(c) “*Covenant terminology*” is present in the following words:

- חסד (3a): It refers to solidarity between two parties, whether it is in the sphere of family life, between friends, in marriage or in the relationship with Yahweh (Snijders 1984:37). Malina (1998d:92) indicates that the term is central to covenant relations and refers to “the debt of interpersonal obligation for unrepayable favors received”. The idea of “ongoing reciprocity” functions strongly in this relationship.
- אמת (3a): It refers to trustworthiness and truth (Snijders 1984:37). According to Malina (1998c:72) the basic idea behind the term is “reliability”. Where persons are concerned, it especially refers to “reliability in interpersonal relations” or “enduring personal loyalty”. The two terms often occur together as a word pair. As such it is used in different contexts:
 - For the relationship between members of a family or clan (Gen 24:49).
 - For the basic conduct towards Yahweh and other members of the people of Yahweh (Hos 4:1; 6:4,6).
 - For Yahweh’s covenant relationship with his people (Ex 34:6; cf Steiert 1990:254).

Opinions diverge as far as the interpretation of חסד ואמת in 3:3a is concerned. Some interpret it in the context of familial relationships, others in the context of the school and still others in the context of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people (cf Ringgren 1980:21). It should be remembered that Proverbs 3:1-12 is the only instruction that explicitly has the relationship with Yahweh as its subject. The immediate context suggests that the covenant relationship is at stake (McKane 1970:291; Ringgren 1980:21; Farmer 1991:35). Moreover, חסד ואמת always function on two planes when covenant relationships are concerned, namely the vertical and the horizontal (McKane 1970:291).

The experience of Yahweh's love and faithfulness prompts the receiver not only to reciprocal behaviour, but also to showing a similar attitude towards other members of the covenant (Steiert 1990:255). A relationship with Yahweh only becomes real once it finds expression in a relationship of love and faithfulness towards other people (cf Ps 25:10; 86:15; 115:1; 117:2; Farmer 1991:35; Fuhs 2001:35).

Olyan (1996:204-204) indicated that the concept of honour and shame plays a significant role in covenant relationships. He states: "... treaty partners must honor one another, just as they must love one another, even in situations where they are unequal. To honor a loyal treaty partner confirms publicly the strength of existing covenant bonds". The "public actions" (Olyan 1996:208) confirming the state of the covenant relationship is of utmost importance. Frequently it takes place through rituals. Significantly the $\text{וְאָמַרְתָּ לְיְהוָה}$ (3:3a) at the beginning of Strophe B is followed by the public honouring of Yahweh by means of sacrifices at the beginning of Strophe E (3:9ab). Here the convergence of semantic fields is particularly clear. The benefits for the client in the patron-client relationship are also stated clearly (3:10ab). Honouring Yahweh with material goods will lead to a reciprocal blessing by Yahweh.

4. THE IDEOLOGY OF WISDOM

The underlying motivating principle for the Instruction literature in general and for Proverbs 3:1-12 in particular, is the core value of honour and shame. It is a persuasive text directed by an authority figure (father) to a person of lesser status (son), encouraging him to build his life upon the foundation of honourability in relation with fellow human beings, but especially with God. Proverbs 3:1-12 is the only Instruction with a clearly religious content. The son is encouraged to enter into a covenantal relationship with Yahweh (patron-client relationship). It implies giving all honour to Yahweh privately and publicly. In the process the son will gain much – the protection, good-will and blessing of the patron. By honouring Yahweh, he will also receive honour.

Proverbs 1-9 belongs to the genre of *didactic wisdom* (Murphy 1998:xx), "almost always cast in the words of a father to his son" (Fox 2000:18). Characteristic of the genre is the fact that it makes no reference to Israel, the history of Israel or the acts of God in history (Whybray 1994b:4). Moreover, wisdom is concerned with life-skill. In the

pursuit of wisdom in that sense, no distinction is made “between the pursuit of happiness and prosperity on the one hand and attachment to moral virtues and religious faith and practice on the other” (Whybray 1994b:4). The Book of Proverbs does not make the modern distinction between “religious” and “secular” modes of life. The one does not exclude the other. On the contrary – the one *is* the other! The main purpose of the Instructions is the education of young people (Whybray 1994b:24), especially to teach them to display correct behaviour in relationships.

It is equally important to note that wisdom literature focuses on Yahweh as Creator. In practical terms it implies that all people are equal before him. The rich should not treat the poor with contempt (14:31; 17:5) because “rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is the Maker of them all” (22:2). Wisdom does not distinguish between race, it knows only people (Snijders 1984:14). The expressly male-oriented perspective of Proverbs can be offensive to post-modern interpreters (cf Farmer 1991:8-11). It should be remembered that “most of the social, economic, and political power was wielded by men” (Farmer 1991:10). Then it is rather surprising that a positive attitude towards women is often prevalent in Proverbs 1-9, especially in the poems where wisdom is personified as a woman (Farmer 1991:11). It implies that all authority figures should be honoured.

Proverbs 3:1-12 covers a subject not particularly popular in modern society. The basic premises of the text are the following:

- Authority is a reality which can not be ignored except at great risk for a person’s own well-being.
- Submission to authority is a necessary prerequisite for character building.
- Personal piety is important. The lecture “preaches humility, faith in God, fulfilment of cultic duties, and loving submission to divine chastisement” (Fox 2000:154).
- The focus of the poem falls upon “shaping attitudes” (Fox 2000:154) and not on actions. The positive and negative imperatives call for mental dispositions, not

actions. This is in line with ancient Mediterranean thinking where states are more important than activity (Pilch & Malina (1998:xxx). But the message is clear: correct attitudes will also lead to the right actions.

- Morality is built upon the willingness to let your character be shaped by submission to teachings, commands, and discipline which will invariably force you to give up your own insight and will for the sake of a sound relationship with God and man.
- A covenantal relationship with Yahweh has practical implications and imposes public duties upon the receiver of covenant blessings.

In a society perceived to be increasingly valueless, a church perceived to be increasingly powerless has much to learn from Proverbs 3:1-12. The text did not originate in a society with significant political or economical power. But the text did originate in a society that valued relationships, relationships with God and with fellow human beings. The text is clear – blessing can only be expected where these relationships are upheld, where the participants in the relationships display the appropriate attitude and are willing to let themselves be corrected and disciplined. Honourable existence is only possible where God is honoured. The rhetoric of wisdom in Proverbs 3:1-12 is more than mere rhetoric. Submission to it is intended as a life-changing and life-enriching experience. A shift towards these values might just free a church used to power and influence to fulfill its prophetic role in our society.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigated the problem of the complete interpretation of the wisdom texts in Proverbs 1-9, with Proverbs 3:1-12 as a representative example of the corpus. The hypothesis was that an analysis of both the poetic features of the text and the socio-historical context where such a text could have originated is necessary in order to interpret the text. It is the dynamic interaction between text and society, words and values, poetry and ideology, rhetoric and wisdom, that constitutes meaningful dialogue and instigates change. An analysis of the intertextual and extratextual dimensions of

Proverbs 3:1-12 reveals that the text originated in the post-exilic period with a specific religious and educational purpose in mind. The central theme of the poem is the honour of Yahweh, due to him in view of the covenant relationship between him and the members of the post-exilic community. Honouring him implies submission to his authority, obedience to his teaching, complete faith in his guidance, public recognition of his blessings and acceptance of his discipline. These values will prompt Yahweh as covenant partner to show reciprocal acts of blessing, kindness and loyalty. The relationship opens the channel for the reciprocal flow of loyalty and faithfulness. If these values can be realised in any society, the result will be personal character building and healthy relationships.

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