

A Sociological Interpretation of Proverbs: The Wisdom of Care and Social Responsibility. A Challenge to the Evangelical Church

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Abstract

*Using the sociological method of interpretation this article seeks to investigate the socio-economic issues of Israel during its political splendour¹ and how it dealt with the weak and the vulnerable. Over the years the efforts of the evangelical church was focused on spiritual reality with no due consideration for the socio-economic condition in which people lived. The function of scripture is not only to lead unbelievers to repentance and faith in Christ but also to instruct and nurture believers with truth that transforms our understanding about life **here and now**. This paper seeks to challenge the evangelical church to apply “wisdom” in addressing certain socio-economic issues and to become a voice for the voiceless in the context that we find ourselves*

1. Introduction

Wisdom Literature (WL) is a term applied to the Old Testament canonical books of Job Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and sometimes to the Song of Songs (Song of Solomon). These books all share characteristics and points of view that are somewhat different than other biblical books, and those differences should be kept in mind when reading and studying them. Wisdom is really an approach to life, a way of looking at the world and, for Israelites, a way of living out in very deliberate, rational ways their commitment to God. Bartholomew (2001:8) states “WL in the Old Testament is about how to negotiate life successfully in God’s good but fallen world.” WL is written in order to find the way of wisdom amidst the challenges of life in the world. The summation of WL is about learning to live life well and to improve one’s life and the authors seek to help the readers reach that aim. This paper seeks to investigate how poverty and injustices and the vulnerable are addressed within WL with a special focus on selected readings in Proverbs.

In doing so, I will use the sociological method of interpretation. Elliott (1982:7-8) defines sociological analysis as the critical study of Scripture “through the combined exercise of the exegetical and sociological disciplines, their principles, theories, and techniques. He (*ibid*) further elaborates by stating that the method is sociological because it incorporates the perspectives, presuppositions, practices, models, theories, and research of the discipline of sociology, but it is also exegetical because it focuses on biblical documents while utilizing all of the sub disciplines of exegesis to determine the meaning of the text. Thus sociological analysis not only asks what a text historically said, but also how and why the text was created, how it was to function, and what its social impact was intended to have. Most interpretative models presuppose that the Bible is a product of historical, social, and cultural conditioning, with the result that interpreters of scripture must recognize the social and cultural factors that played a part in the lives of the authors and readers of the Biblical text. In other words, since the text of within WL dealing with the weak and vulnerable was written, delivered, and understood by humans in a particular social setting, it must be interpreted in light of its original contexts. With sociological

analysis defined, I will outline how the selected text in Proverbs will be interpreted using the sociological approach.

Kee (1989:65-69) using five interactive levels describes how of sociological analysis can be used in studying the biblical text. First, sociological analysis studies the social setting of the book of Proverbs. Second, it describes the sociological dynamics of the biblical/political world, including the interactions between the various social structures that maintain the status quo or disrupt society and engender change. Third, it uses sociological models to help define and analyse the ways in which groups and individuals exist and function within the multifaceted sociological matrix of their world. Fourth, sociological analysis studies the text within the sociological context of the original audience communities in Israel. Finally, it attempts to maintain a careful distinction between the sociological horizon of the interpreter and that of the text

Thus sociological approach in general will contribute to the study of Proverbs by focusing perspectives to help correct the natural tendency to only seek out the theological propositions of the text, and also this approach will help the reader to read and understand the text in light of their own social and cultural setting. Padilla (2009:198) sees this method as important because it addresses the question arising from the socioeconomic and political context in light of the moral vision of Scripture.

2. Wisdom in Context of Israel

It should be noted that Israelite wisdom literature is distinctive but not unique in form and subject matter. Garret (1993:21) states that throughout the Near East, many analogies to Israelite wisdom can be found. While none of the wisdom literature of the other nations is exactly like those of Israel, similarities are so conspicuous that the influences from Egyptⁱⁱ and Mesopotamia cannot be ignored. Lohfink (1987:12-13) on the other hand point out that major aspects of the wisdom understanding of poverty has its foundation in the exodus, thus is unparalleled framework for all social and economic thought, Israel was unique in the ancient Near East in setting its response to poverty within the narrative of God's long term purpose for humanity.

3. Origin of Proverbs

While there is no scholarly agreement regarding the original social setting (*SitzimLeben*) for wisdom instruction. Three distinct groups have been proposed *originators* or transmitters of wisdom: The family, the royal scribes and counsellors and the religious scribes who studied and mediated on the Torah (Garett, 1993:21).

I would however propose that the literary life setting (*SitzimLeben*) of Proverbs was a small aristocratic circle of the royal courts. For unlike the countries that surround

Israel, the Israel monarchies did not have soothsaying counsellors as the pagan nations but scribes and priest and other aristocratic groups that gave counsel to the king. But Israel did not have a group of people there were called the “wise men” In the book of Proverbs the title “wise men” is not a profession but refers to the “moral estimate of a man’s character (Garrett,1993:25). I would conclude that the book of Proverbs (1:1; 10:1; 25:1) was a product that had its origin in royal courts of Solomonⁱⁱⁱ and continued to function in the divided monarchy and thus will concern itself with the socio-economic and socio-political aspects of public and family life.

Proverbs thus is an application of the law particularly summarised in the book of Deuteronomy and the impact it would have had on the Israelite family (compare Duet. 19:14;27:17 to Prov22:28;23:10). While the book of Proverbs is practical as well as conversant with the most advanced courtly wisdom of the ancient world, its teachings are ultimately divine in origin and are entirely consistent with the orthodox faith of Israel. Jackson (2008:734) states that the wisdom associated with Solomon in the Old Testament originates in the fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7), divinely revealed (Prov 2:6) and maintained by the discipline of the Lord (Prov 3:11-12).

4. Human Action – Divine Responsibility

The WL clearly calls on the people of Jehovah to reflect in their daily living a social responsibility and care for those who are in need as an important trait if the life well lived. In Proverbs 31:8-9 we read of a woman that inspires us towards a lifestyle of care. This Proverbs encourages us to speak up on behalf of the poor because they are unable to speak up for themselves. Thus the Proverbs roots our responsibility towards others in the attitude that says “all humanity is one family” and that the family of God the church, shares a responsibility to those who are marginalized by society. The other side to our humanitarian efforts of care and social responsibility is our divine responsibility. Proverbs 22:22-23 encourages us to realize that one day we will all give an account for the way we treated the voiceless, who are also created in the image of God.

***Do not exploit the poor because they are poor
and do not crush the needy in court,
for the LORD will take up their case
and will exact life for life.***

As stated earlier that the WL on care and social responsibility is rooted in the Old Testament welfare laws. These laws acknowledge that there will always be poor people in Israel (Duet 15:4) and thus these laws were divinely appointed to protect the marginalized in society. I will just highlight these laws to give the reader a glimpse of these laws.

A. Generous lending (Duet 15:7-11)

This passage reminds us that lending to the poor is a positive thing. This text acknowledges that going into debt is often the means by which the poor can climb out of a hole with their dignity intact. The key is the proportion and terms of any loan. Lending to the poor was to be high risk and to be with no interest to be charged and also the possibility of losing the money lent. This was done so that the poor can be given a chance to re-establish themselves with dignity as contributors to the economy of Israel.

B. Gleaning (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Duet 24:17-22)

This law stipulates that farmers should deliberately leave some of the harvest behind for the poor. Thus this law granted the poor the right to glean from the harvest even though they themselves had no land to call their own. Thus in God's sight everyone in Israel had a right to food.

C. The triennial tithe (Duet 14:28-29; 26:12-15)

God instructed the Israelites to tithe all of the produce of the land and herd as an offering to the Lord (Lev 27:30-33). The primary purpose was to support the Levites who were dispersed in many cities. Priests were not given a land inheritance. They were to take care of the spiritual aspects of Israel. This text that deal with tithes is not exclusively for the use of the priest but also for the poor.

Wrights (1996: 260-261) states care for the poor was structured into the regular economic life of the nation. It was not left to private duty. Rather it was public duty that the weakest and the poorest should also be enabled 'to eat and be satisfied' (Duet 14:29) from the blessing of Yahweh on the whole nation.

5. "Wisdom" on Care and Social Responsibility

Thus based on the law we come across several expressions of this idea in Proverbs that calls for advocating of the poor and weak that speaks to the issue of care and social responsibility. Thus there is a strong base for the concern for the poor based on creation and the law. Thus, for Proverbs, the poor should be treated with dignity and respect for they too are created in the image of God (Prov 14:31, 17:5; 22:2, 22-23; 29:13). Based on careful examination, these sayings advocate compassion, generosity and justice for the poor. Such an attitude is in fact characteristic of true righteousness.

"The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern." (Prov 29:7)

Proverbs 22:22-23

The text emphasis is on fair treatment of the poor. This verse admonished us not to exploit the poor in ^{iv}court^v because they are powerless. This Proverb warns those

who try to use this system to do wrong against the poor will find out that they are called to a higher court. Koptak (2003:535) states that Prov 22:23 echoes the voice of the prophet who portrays Yahweh as a judge, prosecutor and executor.

Proverbs 22 :28 and 23:10-11^{vi}

Ancient boundaries were marked with stones that acted as a safeguard of a person's land from incursions by others. Moving these stones would imply theft of the persons property as this would impact on the persons livelihood as most of the society was agrarian, thus their survival depended on the harvest of the land. In ancient Israel not even the King was allowed to simply take land that belonged to another (1 Kgs 21). Thus to remove a boundary stone was an act of exploitation of the weak in society. This illegal appropriation of land was not only an attack on societal order, but also an attack on God's divinely ordered system. Van Leeuwen(1997:205) states "the historically established social order-though human and flawed- was also seen as a work of God inasmuch as it protected the weak and powerless and fostered justice and righteousness. For the sake of the vulnerable, boundary markers came under God's protection (Prov 15:25)

This text envisages a court battle in which one party has wrongfully sieged the property of the weak and voiceless. God himself takes on the role of advocate for the wronged weaker party. The party that defrauded the weak and the voiceless cannot possibly win.

Thus these Wisdom sayings are directed towards the protecting and caring for the powerless in society because of our common humanity but also we are divinely commanded to do so. Walkte (2004:448) in discussing Proverbs 14:31 write:

The poor and needy have an exalted status together with all humanity by reason of their creator, whose honour is inseparably connected with his workmanship. The one who humiliates God will not go unpunished, and the one who give him honour will not go unrewarded. These Proverbs that command generosity to the poor are addressed to everyone who is able to help the destitute and save them from starvation.

Thus exploitation of the weak vulnerable is an offense against the goodness of God and the church must defend the poor against injustices and call on government to fulfil their God- appointed role. In doing so the church of God expresses the lordship of Christ in our political, social, and economic commitment to the poor and the voiceless by taking part in the political process of our country.

Conclusion

Upon reflection on the study above, the question then arises what the Evangelical faith says about the poor and socio-economic, and political conditions that determine their relationship. Evangelicalism seems to espouse a concern for spiritual reality but not with the material condition of people. Therefore, one of the most vexing problems awaiting address from the evangelical church in a climate that sees a growing gap between the rich and poor, is how can the Evangelical become the voice of the

poor? The concern for the weak and vulnerable was first and foremost in the mind that produced the words of the wise in Proverbs. Washington (1994: 142) argues that Proverbs reflects a heightened awareness of the poor in society. In South Africa in the past (Group areas act) as it is today we have today there are those who will use the legal system to exploit the poor and the weak. The “wise one” rejects all such temptation, but also remembers that Yahweh takes up the case of those who have been crushed and plundered. Therefore to respond as God does is to become an advocate for the poor using whatever resources and authority are available to offer mercy and work for justice. Thus the evangelical church can test their “wisdom quotient” by asking how much time and resources go towards improving the situation of the vulnerable, weak and marginalized in society.

Cone writes (1986:36) when the meaning of Christianity is derived from bottom and not the top of the socio-economic ladder, from people who are engaged in fight for justice and not from those who seek to maintain the status quo, then something radical and revolutionary happens to the function of the “holy” in the context of the secular.

End Notes

ⁱ Jackson DR quoting G. Van Rod speaks of the Solomon’s reign as a high point in Israelite culture as well as commerce(See Dictionary of the Old Testament pg. 734)

ⁱⁱ Derek Kinder states (1985: 31-32) that many scholars see the similarities between Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and the Ancient Egyptian collection called the *Instruction of Amenemope*. Amenemope is also a collection of thirty sayings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Walkte also supports the view that Solomon was the author of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs NICOT (see pgs. 31-37).

^v“Court” literally translated “ at the gate” where legal matters were decided. Ruffle writes (1995:320) *at the gate* could perhaps refer to some form of legal oppression through the city court which met traditionally at the gate of the city.

^{vi}Like the Law and the Prophets and Psalms the Wisdom traditions puts its finger on the spot in pointing to the key roles of Political authorities in taking responsibility for the needs of the poor. In Prov 31:8-9 King Solomon’s mother focuses on the Dueteronomic Law in giving her son advice to seek justice for the oppressed.

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