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**Reflection on Wise Living:
Analysis of Proverbs 3**

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**A full dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree**

Magister Artium

In the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies at the

**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR D J HUMAN

November 2006



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Most people live in the turmoil of demands upon them, to feed the family, to pay the bills, and to faithfully meet the requirements of work and of love.

People all over the world today contend for their daily bread and struggle to make ends meet. This represents the arena where humans battle to cope with the perplexities of daily life. At the same time they try to find meaning in life and guidelines to live life well. It is here, in ordinary real life, where Wisdom and Folly compete for human loyalties and where the divine and the human meet (O'Connor 1993:14).

1.2 Actuality and relevance

Wisdom teaches that the sphere where God and humanity meets is ordinary human life. It guides humanity how to live in the world and understands that the arena where God comes to meet people is daily life. Wisdom literature, having a specific perspective on life that sees God as



the Creator of order and the world, focuses on *life* and the *world*¹ and not on revelation or the history of salvation. For this reason, all wisdom is intrinsically religious, though human experience is the place where it is learnt. Throughout the biblical texts the Hebrew and Greek nouns for wisdom *hokmah* and *sophia* refer to a way of thinking, to a way of living, to a body of literature, to various technical skills, to a search for meaning and order, to common sense about life and human relations, to reverent ‘fear of the Lord’ and to a woman, personified wisdom herself (O’Connor 1993:23). People still search for meaning of life and guidelines to live life well. Therefore this research undertakes an analysis of Proverbs 3 with specific reference to the life perspective and guidelines towards living wisely as in Proverbs 3.

Traditionally, the Book of Proverbs is seen as the book of wisdom *par excellence*, covering a vast diversity of subjects transcending time. Being part of the wisdom literature it is widely accepted that the admonitions in Proverbs 3, which we will be looking at, were embedded in the everyday life of the Yahweh assembly (Perdue 2000:100). These admonitions seldom separated from their religion, according to the Semitic understanding of the cosmos.

Hebrew wisdom can be described as a set of conclusions providing guidance and training for happy living (Murphy1990:16). It must be noted though, that there are two sides to Hebrew wisdom. On the one hand we have the Book of Proverbs assuming an absolute order of reward and retribution which provides a reliable structure for life. On the other side we find the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes differing extensively from this viewpoint. Job gives us a passionate protest

¹ “World” in this context means nature and humanity.



against a simplistic theology that equates blessing with virtue and suffering with evil. Although he contradicts the viewpoint that everything works out in life according to a set order, he affirms God's sovereignty and righteousness after a personal encounter with God (Johnson 1975:69). The Book of Ecclesiastes also protests against the confident formula-for-living by Proverbs. Qoheleth² does not doubt God's existence but experienced pessimism and therefore claims perspective of a God that exists but is distanced from human everyday living (Johnson 1975:115).

1.3 Problem statement

'Life is difficult' (Peck 1978:13).

These are the introductory words of a practicing psychiatrist and writer who claims that once people truly see this truth, it can be transcended. Life problems call for our courage and our wisdom and for this reason, wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome the challenges of real life. In doing so, the wise choose to believe that problems and challenges are the cutting edge that distinguishes between living life as a wise man or as a fool.

Through my experience of working closely with people of different age groups, different social status and different backgrounds for the past twenty seven years, I have found that people can be very well educated, successful in their different careers, financially successful and also academically successful. Yet they are still seeking for something more

² The preacher and author of Ecclesiastes.



in life which I call 'a search for meaning'.

In South Africa we face corruption, rape (150,4 per day) and murder (50,8 per day)³ in a high degree (The Star, p5). Violence, assaults and residential robberies are not strange and according to Safety and Security Minister Charles Nqakula, 'a large chunk of South African crime is happening between people who know each other' (The Star, p3)⁴.

Dr. S Nxumalo, then acting Prime Minister of Swaziland, challenged the church in Africa "to strive for peace, stability and unity in the troubled continent of Africa" (Kretzchmar 1998:1). Dr. Nxumalo explained that by 'troubled continent' he saw disrespect and disobedience, low morals, crime, corruption, family disintegration and fallen and shaky governments as part of the problems that the church will have to do something about.

Looking at these problems, it is clear that conditions such as crime, abuse, poverty, corruption and murder are primarily the result of a very deeply rooted, more serious problem and surely does not speak of 'wholeness' of life. It is my concern that these problems together with the search for the 'meaning of life' call for people's courage and their wisdom to live life happily.

Le Roux (2006:2) stated that according to the ancient Israelite sages, living life wisely and having happy relationships, are direct results of a specific pattern of behaviour (www.otnet.net). Wisdom theology seems to capture the fact that there is a link between happiness and behaviour.

³ The Star 30 September 2006. Our children are the ones who suffer, p5.

⁴ The Star 28 September 2006. Good and bad news as crime figures are finally released, p3.

Follow the principles of truths learnt by life experienced, bound to a perspective of 'fear of God', and you will be happy (Johnson 1975:10).

The wisdom philosophy that is been held onto, emphasizes that humankind has the ability to work out his or her own happiness and find meaning in life, if and when, the 'fear of God' is the beginning of all their actions (Pr 1:7; 3:7).

In the light of this I will endeavor to discover these patterns of behaviour in Proverbs 3 and in doing so, reflect on wise living today.

Conflicting to the perspective of Old Testament wisdom that 'fearing God is the beginning of all wisdom', is a modern life perspective of a one-dimensional, 'man on an island' being that keeps a 'mental distance' from others (Peck 1993:30). God does not play a role in any decision making. Supporting this statement is the statistics produced by Barna (2006:25), in which more than two thirds of all American Christian adults do not agree that success is determined by their measure of obedience to God.

Wisdom as seen in the book of Proverbs, gives an optimistic view on mankind and a confidence that the human intellect and rationale can achieve something meaningful (Cox 1982:92). Wisdom shows us humanity wrestling with challenges still faced today. It teaches people how to live and work in the world yet at the same time acknowledging God as creator and trusting in his guidance and ordering of the world (Whybray 1972:13). Because wisdom claims that the arena where God comes to meet us is daily life, wisdom presents an opportunity to discover the answer to this search for meaning.



The approach to life that brings about wise living is twofold. On the one hand God is to be recognized as the beginning of all wise living. On the other hand specific patterns of behavior are to be followed in order to live a happy life. This implies that wisdom has a religious and an intellectual aspect and that human knowledge and divine control are not mutually exclusive according to Loader (Deist:1986:109).

These guidelines needed to be taught to young future leaders of the nation which gave wisdom an assumed educational role. Therefore it is supposed that wisdom schools existed in ancient Israel. There young men were trained in life skills and specifically in the perspective and philosophy of the Old Testament wisdom. Whether these schools were formal schools or rather folk schools are still debated (Fox 1996:228). What is clear, though, is that the process of teaching was important and values, guidelines and laws were taught from one generation to another through parental teaching (Fox 1996:232).

Biblical faith and Old Testament wisdom start with 'the fear of God' (Pr 1:7) as the cornerstone of an approach to life. This life of fearing God is about repentance, new life and wholeness. In Proverbs 3:7 the father teaches his son to turn away from evil, that is, to repent of his wrong ways and to fear God. In doing so it will bring new life (healing) and refreshment (wholeness) to his bones and this wholeness implies his entire life (Garrett 1993:79).

Most people are searching for a life filled with good relationships: happy families and contented communities, a life where the environment is safe, peaceful and happy. God the Creator created humankind to live life as

the one that will subdue, be fruitful in all they do and have dominion over life in all aspects as stated in Genesis 1:28-29.

According to Genesis 1:31 the environment, the light, the night and day, the animals, birds, fishes and humankind was *very good* and was meant to be good to live in. The creation narrative implies God's purpose for humanity is to be 'very good' (Gen 1:31). This means for people to have good relationships, peace and happiness and live from the perspective and within the guidelines of wisdom, she exhorts them to search for the meaning of real life that is to be found when God meets people in daily life.

In this reflection on wise living it has been found that the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, with specific reference to Proverbs 3, supplies ample guidelines for living well. It holds up a concise picture of people wrestling with challenges that still face us today, but also gives us guidance for every aspect of wise and sound living.

1.4 Aims and objectives

Proverbs 3, chosen as the object of research for this dissertation, forms part of the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs which is said to be the First Collection of eight in this book (Whybray 1972:12).

Because it is a compilation of a diversity of admonitions, prohibitions and qualities of life, it lends itself to reflecting on wise living.

The perspective and philosophy of the wisdom literature in Israel reflected intensely on ordinary life (Le Roux www.otnet.net/sermon) and

with this as a starting point, an attempt will be made to show that wisdom as a perspective and philosophy is still to be an essential part of ordinary and real life today.

The objectives of this research are to:

- i. do a textual analysis of Proverbs 3;
- ii. reflect on wise living in the current South African context;
- iii. identify guidelines for living wisely in a complex world such as the modern South African context.

The purpose of this discourse is not to provide simplistic answers but rather to suggest guidelines and the means to choose between Wisdom⁵ and Folly⁶.

1.5 Methodology

Since the research is primarily exegetical in nature, three translations of the Bible will be used for the discussion and analysis of Proverbs 3: The Revised Standard Version (RSV); The King James Version (KJV) and The New International Version (NIV).

To appreciate the relation of the Book of Proverbs to the wisdom literature of ancient Israel, it will be contextually analyzed. A consideration of the historical, social and cultural context will be done. The relation of Proverbs to wisdom literature in the ancient East,

⁵ Wisdom has several dimensions such as moral discernment, skill, cleverness, intellectual knowledge and when this moral quality of wisdom is combined with the concept of reverence for the Lord, wisdom has fully flowered (Johnson 1975:9).

⁶ Folly is the total opposite of Wisdom.

specifically that of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the origin and date of the book will be included.

In the formal analysis of the text, the literary form will be considered followed by a structural analysis which will consist of divisions and subdivisions. Proverbs 3, being the focus of this study, will be dealt with in the same way. Because the wisdom literature possesses distinctive literary features, the literary genre will be considered.

Literary forms include a variety of sayings such as: the proverb, question and riddle, numerical saying, beatitude, admonition and prohibition as well as instructions, dialogues, didactic narratives and poems and these will be considered in the analysis (Perdue 2000:5). Structural patterns such as repetition, parallelism, contrast and inclusion will be taken note of.

Finally a detailed analysis of Proverbs 3:1-35 will be done considering the various parts of the text followed by a synthesis in chapter 4. This will be done by a philological discussion of the text in view of comparative material.

For the purpose of the study a review of different literature will be done. The literature includes the work of specialist biblical scholars such as Crenshaw (1981), Loader (1986) and Whybray (1995) who explored the background, origin and meaning of the Old Testament wisdom over many years. The study further included scholars commenting on Proverbs 3 such as McKane (1970), Garret (1993), Harris (1995) and Perdue (2000).

1.6 Hypothesis

The wisdom philosophy calls for a deep reverence for God in conforming one's life to the Creator's design and order in the midst of a life full of challenges and therefore 'the end of all wisdom is to know God' (Peck 1985:118).

At the same time humankind yearns for guidance in living and for a life where belief, attitude, affections and action form an interrelated unity which gives meaning to their lives (O'Connor 1993:9).

With these challenges of humanity in mind, the following hypothesis for wise living is suggested from the analysis of Proverbs 3.

- * *In a broken community like South Africa as depicted in the problem statement and especially in a believing community, biblical wisdom pose an ingredient for harmonious relationship between God and humankind, and between humans.*
- * *For religious believers God is the source of wisdom and order in life.*
- * *Biblical wisdom needs to be decided upon by the individual or community and therefore requires a conscious decision to firstly remember what has been taught in biblical wisdom and secondly to exercise the art of wise living thereof.*
- * *Biblical wisdom requires responsibility to live wisely amongst fellow humans in order to display harmonious living.*



1.7. Chapter division

In chapter 1, we will be dealing with the introduction, background and actuality of this research. The problem of people searching for a meaning in life and challenged by different problems in everyday life will be researched. The method to be followed for finding probable solutions to the problem is also described.

A contextual analysis of the wisdom literature in the ancient East as well as ancient Israel will be done in chapter two. Specific reference to the international context of wisdom in relation to the wisdom of Israel is made.

With the background of the wisdom literature in mind, chapter three will be focusing on the literary form and structural analysis of the Book of Proverbs followed by the same for Proverbs 1-9. A detailed analysis of Proverbs 3 is then done concluded by a synthesis.

Chapter four is an attempt to distinguish the possibilities of different guidelines found in Proverbs 3. Wise living will be reflected upon while discussing these guidelines.

1.8 Definition of terms

Wisdom - Wisdom has several dimensions such as moral discernment, skill, cleverness, intellectual knowledge and when this moral quality of wisdom is combined with the



concept of reverence for the Lord, wisdom has fully flowered (Johnson 1975:9).

- Folly - It is the total opposite of wisdom and depicts a way that leads to death (Murphy 1990:18). It lacks the mastery of human environment and disregards any form of teaching.
- Wise living - The ability to order one's life according to the order and authority of God and to live according to the guidelines of wisdom.
- Ma'at - It is a divine cosmic order as acknowledged by the Egyptians (Cox 1982:26).
- New covenant - Theology of individual responsibility and personal commitment to life and wisdom (Cox 1982:116).
- Father and son - Probably an idealized reference to all young men and women addressed by the sages (Perdue 2000:99).
- Sages - A person who 'taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinized and arranged many proverbs' (Murphy 1990:3).
- KJV - The King James Version.
- RSV - The Revised Standard Version.
- NIV - The New International Version.



CHAPTER 2

WISDOM IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction

Wisdom in the first place refers to the reflective outlook on life by means of which ancient Orientals sought to find their bearings in and their way through the world. On the one hand the sages⁷ 'reflected on the nature and meaning of life and the world, and on the other hand they laid down guidelines on how to harmonize one's life accordingly' (Loader 1986:108).

Secondly wisdom literature refers to a body of literature found in the Hebrew canon, especially the books of Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth and in the Apocrypha, the Sirach⁸ and the Wisdom of Solomon (Perdue 2000:4). The term has been borrowed from biblical scholarship and later applied to similar literary works discovered in the twentieth century (Murphy 1990:1). These books are different from other biblical books in the sense that they have a specific approach to reality and have specific literature forms while standing out as most excellent examples of biblical wisdom.

⁷ Someone who "taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinized and arranged many proverbs" (Murphy 1990:3).

⁸ Ecclesiasticus

Wisdom books in the Bible are closely associated with one of Israel's great kings, Solomon who in the tradition became a wisdom figure. His wisdom is celebrated in 1 Kings 3-10, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as well as the Wisdom of Solomon (Murphy 1990:2).

2.2 Ancient International spheres of wisdom

2.2.1 Introduction

To understand the wisdom literature of Israel this phenomenon needs to be viewed against a wider background of the major literatures and cultures of the ancient Near East. These include the literature of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Canaan, and together, form an important part of the international and intercultural tradition (Cox 1982:24). The biblical wisdom literature was eventually incorporated into five main canonical and deuterocanonical writings: Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon (Perdue 2000:4).

This research concerns the Book of Proverbs which forms a vital part of the wisdom literature of Israel. This book should not be seen as an isolated literary work but forms part of the international world of wisdom literature. The culture of ancient Israel also belonged to a much wider cultural tradition which included the Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions. Wisdom is assumed not to have first originated in Israel, but is very present in the traditions of the ancient Near East (Clements 1990:16).

Similarities between the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East and that of the Bible have often been found and it is widely assumed that

the wisdom literature of the Bible may have been influenced by it (Garret 1993:23). For this reason it is essential to understand the related Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts. 'Only by this means will the distinctive features of Israelite wisdom come to prominence' (Crenshaw 1981:213).

With one of the types of Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature being 'wisdom literature' and these being far older than any part of the Old Testament (Whybray 1972:3), it is necessary to explore these literatures in order to understand more fully the vast world of Wisdom of which the Book of Proverbs is a part.

Subject matter, literary form and world view in Israelite wisdom and that of Egypt and Mesopotamia is a commonality according to Crenshaw (1981:212). At the same time a high value for learning and for academics together with a belief in an established order to which one had to conform (Cox 1982:24) is found in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature. One of the major parts of wisdom in Egypt was the pursuit of *ma'at*⁹ (Clements 1990:16). *Ma'at* may be translated as justice, order and truth of which God is the source (Crenshaw 1981:214). This principle represented the quest for understanding the world and for achieving success in life.

It could be said then that the subject matter, the literary form, the world view and the search for meaning of life are all shared characteristics in both Israelite wisdom and the wisdom of the ancient Near East. Because of these similarities between Israelite wisdom and her direct neighbours, a brief overview of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian

⁹ Divine cosmic order (Cox 1982:26)

wisdom literature will be done.

2.2.2 Egyptian wisdom literature

Wisdom is richly present in Egypt where the pursuit of *ma'at* is a major part of the search for understanding the world, coping with its many mysteries and difficulties, and for achieving success in its diverse opportunities.

According to Clements (1990:17), records of Egyptian wisdom literature date back to the age of the Great Pyramids and these were 'standing beneath the Egyptian sun at least six hundred years before Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees'.

Crenshaw (1981:213) divides Egyptian literature into two categories:

- i. Texts with traditional moral and practical lessons gained from experience and with a teaching nature of which the *Papyrus Anastasi* and the Instruction for *Merikare* are examples.
- ii. Texts that challenge society's givens because of unfavorable social changes that have made life unsafe and risky. These consist of pessimistic literature where difficult questions concerning the meaning of life and the conflict between truth and falsehood ask for a rethinking of recognized intellectual positions (Crenshaw 1981:213).

An important literary form called the 'Instruction' formed a central part of Egyptian literature of which the *Instruction of Amenemope* is a good example. For the biblical scholar this literary form has had an

especially prominent role. These Instructions usually take the form of teachings from the father to the son, a feature which is often reflected in the Book of Proverbs by the phrase 'my son'. No distinction between secular and religious truth exists for this literature and the fundamental concept which underlies these Instructions is *ma'at*. Instructions such as these have certain prominent themes such as: the art of correct speech, proper relations with women, correct dealing with one's inferiors and superiors, rules of etiquette and truthfulness (Crenshaw 1981:214).

2.2.2.1 Ancient Egyptian history

The ancient Egyptian history is divided into three periods in which the wisdom literature never stopped developing. Garret (1993:21-22) gives us a clearer view on the Instructions found from these periods:

The Old Kingdom: ca. 2650-2135 –

From this period comes the important *Instruction of Ptahhotep* as well as the texts of *Hardjedef* and *Kagemni*. In the instruction of Ptahhotep we find the emphasizing of the teaching of good manners, and eloquence for succeeding in public life.

The First Intermediate period: ca. 2135-2040 –

The *Instruction to Merikare* given by his father the king, where instruction in politics, statecraft and piety for the heir of the king is found.

The Middle Kingdom: ca. 2040-1650 –

Important works survived from this period of which The *Instruction of Amenemhet I*, most relevant to Proverbs, is one.

The *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, the *Dispute between a Man and His Soul* and the *Eloquent Peasant* relate to Ecclesiastes and Job.

The New Kingdom: ca.1550-1080 -

In Egypt we find the *Instruction of Amenemope* which seemed to be a work of major importance in the study of the Old Testament wisdom, especially in the book of Proverbs (Crenshaw 1981:223-224).

From the period of the New Kingdom approximately 1350 BCE in Egypt, a different religious ethos took shape. 'Earlier sages thought God was experienced indirectly in the political state, laws, and daily life, scribes now sought to make contact with God more directly through prayer and worship in general' (Crenshaw 1981:218).

The *Instruction of Amenemope* also came into being during this time. With the publication of E.W. Budge (1923) of this Egyptian 'wisdom' text, known as *The Teaching of Amenemope* (Papyrus 10474 in the British Museum), a new possibility was brought into focus. This likelihood was that Israel's wisdom literature might have come from a much older Egyptian literary tradition (Whybray 1995:6). With this discovery scholars began to reassess the historical context of Proverbs and acknowledged the correspondences between *Amenemope* and Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and 25-29, changing the study of Proverbs to a



great extent and agreeing on the influence of *Amenemope* on the Book of Proverbs (Harris 1995:3).

Besides these Instructions many school texts were found that gave students model letters for aspiring writers: greetings to teachers and superiors and pedagogical exhortations to pupils. This includes an Instruction coming from the *Papyrus Anastasi* but could just as well have been from the Book of Proverbs (20:1), dealing with the fatal combination of beer and leisure:

*I am told you forsake study and apply yourself to
pleasure instead. You wander from street to street,
where it smells of beer ... a dangerous companion*
(Cox 1982:27).

Observing the Egyptian wisdom literature, it becomes clear that the fundamental perception of all Instructions namely *ma'at*, is as important today as it was when these Instructions were written for the youth of Egypt. Living with the right perspective on how to behave towards others, having good manners, piety towards superiors and knowledge about politics and public life, made life more pleasurable and ensured that good relationships were formed.

2.2.3 Mesopotamian wisdom literature

In Mesopotamia, the 'land between the rivers', the term 'wisdom' is not used as much as in Egypt or Israel (Cox 1982:28). With an unstable and constantly changing political and human scene there is a continuous questioning of the relationship between the divine and the



human. A cosmic order¹⁰ was the focal point of thought although the will of the gods is perceived as random and unreasonable (Cox 1982:28).

Unlike the wisdom literature of Egypt where the Instruction form predominates, the Mesopotamian literature takes the form of collections of short proverbs and sayings. In these the teaching is expressed in statements which simply describe the facts of life (Whybray 1972:5-6) and the proverbs were arranged in separate collections by the Sumerian scribes (Crenshaw 1981:228).

It is assumed that at least twenty-four collections survived of which one important text is, *The Instructions of Šuruppak*. It resembles Egyptian teachings especially in the formal feature of father and son as teacher and instructed one. Another similarity between Egyptian and Sumerian wisdom is found in the description of the ageing process.

'(I was) a youth (but now)... my black mountain has produced white gypsum ... my teeth which used to chew strong things can no more chew strong things... (Alster, SSP, 93)' (Crenshaw 1981:229).

A significant departure from Egyptian wisdom occurs in the Sumerian variation to the biblical Job (Crenshaw 1981:229). For two significant reasons the problem of theodicy did not occupy the Egyptian sage's thought. In the first place the belief in life after death softened any experience of innocent suffering, for everything would be set right in the

¹⁰ A divine order in created things (Cox 1982:28).

next life. Secondly, the absence of legal codes in Egypt meant that humans were less likely to try to subject their gods to rules that applied among men and women. 'In ancient Sumer the problem of unjust suffering elicited an early protest, in this case an objection that the gods made human beings with a basic flaw' (Crenshaw 1981:229).

This can clearly be seen in the following text:

They say – the sages – a word righteous and straightforward:

'Never has a sinless child been born to its mother, a sinless workman has not existed from of old' (ANET, 590) (Crenshaw 1981:229).

In the large number of Sumerian proverbs that have been collected we find a few that are moralistic in the same way as many biblical proverbs are, but mostly they are reproachful, humorous, or of practical character (Garrett 1993:22). Pessimistic literature as found in Job or Ecclesiastes also came from Mesopotamia although the system of belief of retribution broke down more noticeably as a result of an over-extended application of the divine cosmic order (Cox 1982:28).

2.2.4 Conclusion

The teachings of both the Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature seems to be focusing on a course of behavior that will set humankind on a long, happy and successful life. A life of well-being and success was to be achieved by recognizing that the world is governed by a universal divine order and that man should conform to this Order in every department of life (Whybray 1972:8).



It seems that it corresponds quite well with the teachings of Israel's wisdom literature, yet we find a unique character of wisdom and religion in Israel. In contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia, who had a polytheistic system of multiple gods, Israel believed that everything in heaven and earth was under the control of only one God, their God Yahweh. The Book of Proverbs is clear in its teaching that wisdom is firstly the characteristic and possession of God himself, the creator of the world and all order. Therefore the beginning of wisdom is to fear God (Pr 1:7). This perspective gave Israel the ability to 'see more clearly than his neighbours the true relationship between wisdom and religious faith' (Whybray. 1972:8).

Viewing the Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature it becomes clear that living life successfully was as important to the ancient Near East as it is to modern man today.

2.3 Wisdom literature of Ancient Israel

2.3.1 Introduction

Wisdom literature 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). It also includes the Apocryphal books of Sirach (The Wisdom of Jesus, Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. Elements of wisdom also appear in other biblical books like Hosea 14:10 and Psalms. These books all share characteristics and points of view that are somewhat different than other biblical books. They distinguish themselves as most excellent examples of biblical wisdom. The differences should be kept in mind

when reading and studying wisdom books. *Wisdom perspectives* are also evident in other places in Scripture, such as the Psalms, Pentateuch (Gn 37-50), prophetic books (Hs 14:10), the teachings of Jesus, and the Epistle of James.

While wisdom's roots go back to the early days of Israelite history, it began to flower in the latter part of the Old Testament period, and flourished in the intertestamental period and the era of the New Testament (400 BC to AD 100).

2.3.2 The origin of wisdom literature in ancient Israel.

Much research has been done concerning the original social setting (*Sitz im Leben*) for wisdom instruction and yet, despite the many attempts no scholarly consensus has yet emerged on the subject of the exact origin and social setting for ancient Israel wisdom literature.

Garrett (1993:25) distinguishes three distinct groups that have been proposed as the originators and transmitters of wisdom in ancient Israel:

- i. The family: usually the first place where teachings are passed down and, rather than the school, were seen as the primary place of training.
- ii. The royal scribes and counsellors - court officials presented their wisdom in literary works to young men to be trained in the royal courts.
- iii. The religious scribes who studied and meditated on the Torah.



It is reasonably clear that the Israelite monarchies had many counsellors, scribes and priests but they had no separate or elite group identified as 'the wise'. Despite many offices that were held around the royal court, no mention is made of the title of a 'wise man' like in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Gn 37-50, David) (Garrett 1993:25).

Until recently there has been a commonly received academic agreement about the origins of wisdom and its arrival and indigenization in Israel (Martin 1995:18). It is assumed that 'wisdom' was taken mainly from Egypt where young men were trained for office in the state and the royal court. The Egyptian literature in its educational context was adopted. At the beginning of the monarchical period it was adapted for use in Israel where young men were trained in schools much in the same manner as those found in Egypt. The teachers in these schools were known as 'the wise men' and it was from them that came the collectors and editors of the material now contained in the Book of Proverbs, as well as the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes (Martin 1995:19). To strengthen this view there are several arguments by different scholars that a group of professional sages did exist in ancient Israel. This verdict is based on the mention of the 'men of Hezekiah' that suggests a distinctive class of sages to be present in the eighth century BCE (Crenshaw 1981:29). If such schools existed, it is understood that Proverbs or at least certain collections of the book, were written for use in these schools.

This view has lately been challenged by scholars such as Fox (1996:228). According to him there has been a dichotomy in scholarly approaches to the social location of the proverbs between what may be called the 'folk school' and the 'school school'. The 'school school' locates the origin of the sayings in the book of Proverbs to the royal

court. In this more formal school, children of the upper class were taught and the collections were essentially literary texts (Fox 1996:228).

The folk school on the other hand is presented for the most part by Whybray, Westermann and Golka and was concerned with folk sayings that originated in the daily life of 'simple folk': farmers, craftsmen, labourers, slaves and housewives in pre-exilic times (Fox 1996:228).

Fox (1996:229) argues by saying that 'for purposes of locating Wisdom's *Sitz im Leben*, the question of the existence of schools may be set aside, for there is no sign that Proverbs was composed *for* them. Education, which obviously is the goal of wisdom, is not identical with schooling'. In support of the view that Fox holds, Washington (1994:148) argues that 'there are good reasons to doubt that schools as such existed in ancient Israel. The Hebrew Bible contains no mention of schools – the first reference to such an institution is in Ben Sira 51:23' (Washington 1994:148).

While wisdom surely has education as a goal with its didactic nature (Cox 1982:3), it is clearly not identical with schooling. More often than not, the Instructions speak of passing this wisdom on from father or mother to child. This indicates a definite relation between teacher and student which implies that it was never meant to be mere education but rather an interrelational teaching condition. 'The self-presentation of wisdom literature is as paternal teaching' (Fox 1996:232).

It could be argued that, 'given the silence of biblical records on the existence of institutional schools in ancient Israel, it seems most likely that training in writing occurred, as in the Egyptian New Kingdom

through a system of apprenticeship where members of each professional group trained their successors' (Washington 1994:149).

We can then assume that the most probable way in which the wisdom of Israel originated was through the teachings that were passed on from one generation to another by means of the members of different professional groups or ordinary men and women, mentoring their students in the art of life. These teachers were most often the father or the mother as with King Lemuel in Proverbs, teaching their child (Pr 31).

Although much research has been done concerning the origin of wisdom literature, there is still much speculation between scholars as to exactly how and where the wisdom literature of Israel came into existence. It does seem that proverbs as a genre appear mainly among non-literate people (Martin 1995:30) with the purpose of passing on life skills from one generation to another. This primarily happened within the relation between father and son or teacher and student. With a strong example from neighbouring nations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia it is possible that written material at a later stage existed.

For this study it will be adequate to be aware of the fact that the origins of wisdom literature existed in a very wide range of perspective, philosophy and knowledge gained by sages through reflecting on nature, humanity and the world over many generations. It could be said that man would be a fool not to heed the treasures displayed in the wisdom literature of ancient Israel as found in the Bible.

2.4 Book of Proverbs

‘The book of Proverbs is a mirror held up to life. It is timeless, in the sense that it is not addressed to any one age or people, but to all ages and every sort of person’ (Cox 1982: 83). It consists of thirty-one chapters filled with different collections of proverbs, analogies and sayings that are united into a powerful whole to give guidelines towards the art of living wise.

2.4.1 Title and author

The Hebrew title for the Book of Proverbs is *mišlê šēlōmōh* and this title is formed in Proverbs 1:1 and Proverbs 25:1 (Freedman 1992:513). It is mainly translated as, ‘the proverbs of Solomon’. The title we find in the Septuagint (LXX) is *paroimiae* and the Vulgate has *proverbiae*, from where we get the English title ‘Proverbs’.

The Hebrew word for ‘proverb’ (*māshāl*) can be associated with a root meaning ‘rule’ and also with the idea of ‘comparison’ (Murphy 1990:7). The Book of Proverbs takes the facts and experiences of life and puts them in the form of proverbs (*mashal* v.6) (Dumbrell 1989:265). It most probably has the meaning of putting things together, noting a likeness in things unlike by comparing it to other facts and experiences. This means that we could expect more than only proverbs such as aphorisms, models or paradigms which have a discerning effect (Dumbrell 1989:265).

Traditionally Solomon has been regarded as the author of the Book of Proverbs although this view has long since been given up in critical



scholarship. A satisfactory explanation has not yet surfaced for the prominence of Solomon's name in the Book of Proverbs. Major collections are assigned either directly or indirectly to him and remaining collections to other authors (Freedman 1992:513). The book itself proclaims multiplicity of authorship. The authorship of at least six parts is mentioned according to Young (1973:311) while Fox (2000:6) also recognizes the collection headers as identifying different authors and therefore we find:

- i. 'the proverbs of Solomon' (10:1)
- ii. 'the words of the wise-men' (22:17)
- iii. 'also these belong to the wise-men' (24:23)
- iv. 'also these are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied out' (25:1)
- v. 'the words of Agur, the son of Jakeh, the burden saith the man to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukal' (30:1)
- vi. 'the words of Lemuel the king, the burden which his mother taught him' (31:1)

It is widely accepted that more than one person have been responsible for the writing or compiling of the Book of Proverbs.

2.4.2 Date and composition

Biblical wisdom is extremely difficult to date, largely because of the timeless quality of its teachings. Sages¹¹, the wise men of the ancient

¹¹ A person who 'taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinized and arranged many proverbs' (Murphy 1990:3).



Near East, endeavoured to communicate and provide insights that transcend space and time. Because of this, the dating of Proverbs has continually been debated by many scholars. When judging the authorship, date and historical context of the Book of Proverbs, the actual material itself should be considered, as well as the editorial project which is, the putting together of all the different collections (Cox 1982:89).

‘The book by its own testimony is a collection of sayings from an indefinite number of sages (see 24:23) over a number of generations, at a minimum from Solomon’s time (mid-tenth century BCE) to Hezekiah’s (eighth to seventh centuries; (see 25:1)’ (Fox 2000:6). It appears to have been in the post-exilic period that the wise men started functioning as teachers while the collections took on a different purpose and function. ‘From being a rather elitist and highly distinctive pursuit of a minority, with a central focus in the royal court, it became a vital teaching medium for every Jew’ (Clements1990:18-19). It should also be remembered that each of these different collections has its roots in a different historical context and could belong to different time periods.

Near consensus has been reached amongst researchers that chapters 1-9 and 31:10-31 are the latest parts of the book but, ‘outside the superscriptions of collections that mention Solomon, Hezekiah, Agur and the mother of Lemuel, there is very little other concrete historical data on which to formulate dates’ (Perdue 2000:2). The study of the present order shows that the formation of different collections was a gradual process that extended over a considerable period of time.



In conclusion it can be said that, from the bits of data still in existence, it is perceptible that the Book of Proverbs developed from the period of the early monarchy (tenth century BCE) into post-exilic times, fifth-fourth centuries BCE (Perdue 2000:3).

The Book of Proverbs then is a compilation of different collections that has been put together long after they have been separately compiled. Up until today this book is an inspiring and resourceful book and suggests many guidelines concerning the art of life. Highly relevant and modern themes for everyday living such as the search for life, the quality of life and the fullness of life are found in the Book of Proverbs (Farmer 1998:860-86). It is therefore important to have an understanding of the structure of the Book of Proverbs which will be discussed in chapter three.



CHAPTER 3

PROVERBS 3: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

The Book of Proverbs is the basic source of the study of biblical wisdom (Bergant 1997:78). There is a call to take to heart what is taught, to choose wisdom and avoid folly and to 'fear the Lord' because that is the beginning of all wisdom and knowledge.

This is an attempt to journey with the sages into a world of infinite wisdom and discover the perspective, the philosophy and the guidelines for living wisely.

3.2 Literary context of the book of Proverbs

3.2.1 Introduction

A number of titles are contained in the Book of Proverbs which appears to reflect different sections into which the book may be divided (Whybray 1972:12). This viewpoint is also supported by other scholars such as Martin (1995:33).



They are as follows:

- | | | |
|--------------------|---|---|
| 1:1-9:18 | - | The Proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel. |
| 10-15 and 16-22:16 | - | The Proverbs of Solomon. |
| 22:17-24:22 | - | The sayings of the wise. |
| 24:23-34 | - | More sayings of wise men. |
| 25-29 | - | More Proverbs of Solomon transcribed by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah |
| 30:1-33 | - | Sayings of Agur son of Jakeh from Massa. |
| Proverbs 31 | - | Words of Lemuel king of Massa and a poem about the capable wife. |

Using these titles as basis, it is possible to divide the book into the following sections:

3.2.1.1 First Collection (1:1-9:18)

This collection is labeled 'The Proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel' and is acknowledged as Instruction genre. It is most likely the work of the final editors who placed it at the beginning of their compilation as a statement of intent, and therefore probably dates to the fifth century BCE.

3.2.1.2 Second Collection (10:1-22:16)

Second collection, The Proverbs of Solomon, is found in two parts: chapters 10-15 and 16-22:16 and these two parts are bound together by deuteronomistic teachings (Farmer 1998:868). This collection has been dated from the end of the monarchy, after the death of Josiah, while the neo-Babylonian army has surrounded the people with violence and threats to their lives (Hab1:1-4). It is a collection of single-line proverbs which do not appear to be arranged in any logical or coherent order (Martin 1995:33).

‘These chapters consist almost entirely of short two-line, single-verse proverbs (henceforward referred to as the ‘sentence literature’ (Whybray 1994a:62). The ‘sentence literature’ is good examples of the traditional teachings or ‘wisdom’ of ordinary people, mainly small farmers who lived in towns and villages of ancient Israel. They were originally independent of one another.

3.2.1.3 Third Collection (22:17-24:22)

This collection has the title of ‘The sayings of the wise’.

Some scholars (Young 1973:314) claim this collection to have been based upon the Egyptian wisdom writing known as the *Teaching of Amenemope*. The format here is different from either of the two preceding sections. Individual verses are shaped into two to four-line proverbs but there is subject development without the use of the instruction-speech format. The major section, 25–29, returns to the style of 10:1–22:16. In chapters 25-27 special emphasis on creation and the animal world is found while in chapters 28-29 prominence is



given to social and legal problems. The main subjects in this part are the correct behaviour for a king and also the poor.

3.2.1.4 Fourth Collection (24:23-34)

'More sayings of wise men' is an addition to the previous section is represented in this collection. It contains the Words of Agur who uses numerical sayings and riddles as in chapter 30. The words of King Lemuel are a series of commands and prohibitions taught to him by his mother. These are dealing with women, drinking and justice.

3.2.1.5 Fifth Collection (25-29)

The fifth collection, 'More proverbs of Solomon transcribed by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah' is admitted that it may be as old as the title indicates. Agur (30:1) is identified as a member of the Arabian tribe Massa (Gn 25:14) to which Lemuel (31:1) also is said to belong although it cannot be told how old these two sections are (Young 1973:315).

3.2.1.6 Sixth Collection (30:1-33)

This collection called the 'Sayings of Agur son of Jakeh from Massa' is an explicit example of non-Israelite wisdom in the Book of Proverbs (Martin 1995:34).

3.2.1.7 Proverbs 31

This is the final chapter and has no heading. It contains the words of Lemuel that reaches no further than verse 9 and is followed by an anonymous acrostic poem on the virtuous woman.

Scholars are not unanimous about the total of collections it is to be divided into. Therefore three different interpretations will be highlighted.

- a. Freedman (1992:515) identifies only four collections being:
- An ancient collection of family teaching (10:1-22:16) which was enhanced by a greater knowledge with quite a broader application (25:1-29:27).
 - Secondly a supplement is found, followed by first a professional Instruction (22:17-24:22) and then by a body of instructions in which Egyptian imagery is completely integrated (1:1-9:18).
 - The third collection is a compilation of miscellaneous collections in 24:23-34 and 30:15-33, that may have preceded the last mentioned unit. It consists of the sayings of Agur (30:1-14) and Instruction of Lemuel's mother (31:1-9). These smaller units most probably followed the larger collections.
 - The latest section in the book of Proverbs, 31:10-31, seems to 'draw its power from the personification of wisdom but extols wives of flesh and blood' (Freedman 1992:515).



- b. Metzger (1993:624-625) defines five main collections followed by four appendices which are divided as follows:

First collection	-	1:1-9:18
Second collection	-	10:1-22:16
Third collection	-	22:17-24:22
Fourth collection	-	24:23-34
Fifth collection	-	25:1-29:27

Four appendices (30:1-31:31) close the book and they are identified as:

- i. an essay on scepticism (30:1-9)
- ii. the mysterious dimensions of life (30:10-33)
- iii. a “manual for rulers” (31:1-9)
- iv. portrait of the ideal woman (31:10-31)

- c. Whybray (1972:12) identifies eight collections.

Instructions and speeches	1:1 – 9:18
Proverbs of Solomon	10:1 – 22:16
Sayings of wise men	22:17– 24:22
More sayings of wise men	24:23 – 34
More Proverbs of Solomon collected by Hezekiah’s Men	25 – 29
Sayings of Agur	30:1-33
Sayings of Lemuel	31:1-9
Acrostic poem on the ideal wife	31:10-31



Although one does not find agreement amongst scholars concerning the exact way in which this book has to be divided, it is clear that the majority of scholars agree on the fact that the book has different collections. Each of these collections, whether five, seven or eight, was most probably originally a separate work that stood on its own.

3.3. Proverbs 1-9

Proverb 1-9 is the First collection and also forms an introduction to the whole of the Book of Proverbs (Farmer 1998:864). It has wisdom as its centre and introduces the reader to all the themes that will be found in the other collections. These chapters consist of longer, structured poems of a clearly literary character. The material is quite varied in content, and is widely assumed not to be the work of one writer only (Metzger 1993:624). There is a definite common purpose to be found in these chapters, which is clearly an educational one (Garrett 1993:57). This can be seen in the vocabulary found in chapter 1:1-6: learning, understanding, righteousness, discernment and knowledge. All combine to tell of the riches of wisdom and it is the wish of the father or teacher that the student will learn from him (Murphy 1990:16).

As stated before it is difficult to date Old Testament wisdom literature¹². The title of the book comes from Proverbs 1:1, 'The Proverbs of Solomon the son of David the king of Israel'. Goldsworthy (1987:208) states that: 'this is an intentional link with the narratives in I Kings 3–10 concerning Solomon as the exemplary 'wise man' and it can be

¹² See Chapter Two: Date and Composition

assumed that the traditional origins of Israelite wisdom lie with Solomon' (Goldsworthy 1987:209).

It is widely accepted though, that not only is Proverbs 1-9 the latest unit of tradition in the Book of Proverbs (Freedman 1992:514) but also that it derives from the period around the end of the exile and the period when the exiles were returning to Judah and Jerusalem, that is, the post-exilic period. According to Harris (1995:23) the evidence for this dating lies in the content of the parent's discourse and it is therefore, for the most part exilic or post-exilic.

Ten 'lessons' or more are found in chapters 1-9 and they are often called instructions that go from the father to his son ('my son') (Whybray 1995:64). These instructions account for more than half of these chapters and they reflected their specifically Israelite character. They were also, in form as well as in content, based upon the tradition of the Egyptian Instructions.

Whybray (1995:65) compares the following features:

- Prologue of Proverbs (1:1-6) and prologue of some Egyptian Instructions.
- Proverbs 8:22-31 strongly resembles the "I"-speeches by Egyptian divinities.
- The emphasis on:
 - * the importance of 'hearing' or obeying the teaching,
 - * significance of the 'heart' as the centre of human will,
 - * the parallel between Wisdom and *ma'at*¹³ as the

¹³ Divine cosmic order (Cox 1982:24)



source of 'life' and as governing the minds of kings and rulers.

Two additional poems 1:20-33 and 8:1-36 are then found in the collection, in which wisdom is personified as a woman who appeals to a public audience to recognize her qualities and allow her to guide their lives.

These chapters are framed by an introduction (1:1-7) and an addendum in chapter 9, which presents two contrasting images picturing two female figures, Wisdom and Folly. Between these two women the young student must choose. The one is offering life (wisdom) and the other illegitimate pleasure (foolishness) which will in the end lead to death (Whybray 1994a:12).

The first and second collections of this book are assumed to be the first edition of the book of Proverbs as attributed to Solomon. The canonical order of the book is as it appears, also the historical order (Snell 1993:114).

The aim of this collection is to:

- 'receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgement, and equity; to give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion' (Pr 1:4-5).
- know that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge' (Pr 1:7).



For the purpose of this research my focus is on Proverbs 3 with the endeavor of suggesting guidelines for wise living.

3.4 Proverbs 3

3.4.1 Introduction

In the Book of Proverbs chapter 3 an engagement in a kind of evangelism¹⁴ is found. It is though, an evangelism of a most profound nature. The message of total trust, obedience and submitting to Yahweh is proclaimed. This underlines the message of the new covenant where Yahweh will personally engrave his law and principles on man's heart. Once this guideline is accepted, man will receive guidance (wisdom) to live life effectively and this wisdom will surpass all human knowledge (Garrett 1993:79).

Proverbs 3 is the longest and most complex of the exhortation discourses (Garrett 1993:79) with the theme being that devotion to God and devotion to wisdom is inseparable. It is widely agreed upon that chapter 3 is a composite and not a primary unit and that originally independent units were joined together to create a 'theological summa' (Fox 2000:170).

3.5 Analysis of Proverbs 3

3.5.1 Introduction

Scholarly consensus exists that verses 1-12 form a literary unit although considerable disagreement exists concerning the literary units in the rest of the chapter (Clifford 1999:49).

¹⁴ Announcing the message of a relationship with God.



Hubbard (1989:68) divides as follows:

Admonitions to piety – A	3:1-12
Keep the commandments	3:1-4
Trust the Lord’s guidance	3:5-8
Honour the Lord’s provisions	3:9-10
Accept the Lord’s correction	3:11-12
Arguments for sagacity	3:13-20
Practical: a beatitude	3:13-18
Theological: an affirmation	3:19-20
Admonitions to piety – B	3:21-26
Guard wisdom	3:21-24
Don’t fear disaster	3:25-26
Admonitions to generosity	3:27-32
Don’t turn away from a needy neighbour	3:28
Don’t plot against a neighbour	3:29
Don’t be contentious	3:30
Don’t emulate violence	3:31-32
Antithetic conclusion	33:-35

Other scholars such as Whybray (1994b:58-74) use the following division;

Third Instruction	3:1-12
Interlude (poem)	3:13-20
Fourth Instruction	3:21-35



It seems that the division of Whybray (1994b:58-74) finds more than enough support by other scholars such as Fox (2000:142-171) and Perdue (2000:95-105) and for this reason I follow his division in the study and analysis of Proverbs 3.

3.5.2 Translation

<p>^{NIV} Proverbs 3:1 My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, ² for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. ³ Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;</p>	<p>^{KJV} Proverbs 3:1 My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: ² For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. ³ Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: ⁴ So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.</p>	<p>^{RSV} Proverbs 3:1 My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ² for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you. ³ Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them about your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.</p>
<p>^{NIV} ⁶ in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. ⁸ This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. ⁹ Honor the LORD with</p>	<p>^{KJV} ⁶ In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. ⁷ Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. ⁸ It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. ⁹ Honour the LORD</p>	<p>^{RSV} ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. ⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.</p>



<p>your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. ¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, ¹² because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.</p>	<p>with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: ¹⁰ So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine. ¹¹ My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: ¹² For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son <i>in whom</i> he delighteth.</p>	<p>⁹ Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. ¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, ¹² for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.</p>
<p>¹³ Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, ¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.</p>	<p>¹³ Happy <i>is</i> the man <i>that</i> findeth wisdom, and the man <i>that</i> getteth understanding. ¹⁴ For the merchandise of it <i>is</i> better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. ¹⁵ She <i>is</i> more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.</p>	<p>¹³ Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding, ¹⁴ for the gain from it is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.</p>
<p>NIV ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed. ¹⁹ By wisdom the</p>	<p>KJV ¹⁶ Length of days <i>is</i> in her right hand; <i>and</i> in her left hand riches and honour. ¹⁷ Her ways <i>are</i> ways of pleasantness, and all her paths <i>are</i> peace. ¹⁸ She <i>is</i> a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy <i>is</i> every <i>one</i> that retaineth her.</p>	<p>RSV ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called</p>



<p>LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; ²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.</p> <p>²¹ My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; ²² they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. ²³ Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble; ²⁴ when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. ²⁵ Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.</p>	<p>¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. ²⁰ By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.</p> <p>²¹ My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: ²² So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. ²³ Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. ²⁴ When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet. ²⁵ Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. ²⁶ For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.</p>	<p>happy. ¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; ²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew.</p> <p>²¹ My son, keep sound wisdom and discretion; let them not escape from your sight, ²² and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. ²³ Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble. ²⁴ If you sit down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. ²⁵ Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes; ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.</p>
<p>NIV ²⁷ Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. ²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"-- when you now have it with you. ²⁹ Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near</p>	<p>KJV ²⁷ Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do <i>it</i>. ²⁸ Say not unto thy neighbour, Go, and come again, and to morrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee. ²⁹ Devise not evil</p>	<p>RSV ²⁷ Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. ²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it" -- when you have it with you. ²⁹ Do not plan evil against your neighbor</p>



<p>you. ³⁰ Do not accuse a man for no reason-- when he has done you no harm. ³¹ Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways, ³² for the LORD detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence. ³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous. ³⁴ He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble. ³⁵ The wise inherit honor, but fools he holds up to shame</p>	<p>against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee. ³⁰ Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm. ³¹ Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways. ³² For the froward <i>is</i> abomination to the LORD: but his secret <i>is</i> with the righteous. ³³ The curse of the LORD <i>is</i> in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just. ³⁴ Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly. ³⁵ The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools.</p>	<p>who dwells trustingly beside you. ³⁰ Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. ³¹ Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways; ³² for the perverse man is an abomination to the LORD, but the upright are in his confidence. ³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the abode of the righteous. ³⁴ Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor. ³⁵ The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.</p>
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3.5.3 Third Instruction - Blessing of wisdom (1-12)

3.5.3.1 Translation (1-12)

<p>^{NIV} My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, ² for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. ³ Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.</p>	<p>^{KJV} My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: ² For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. ³ Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: ⁴ So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. ⁶ In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.</p>	<p>^{RSV} My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ² for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you. ³ Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them about your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.</p>
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NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.</p> <p>⁸ This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.</p> <p>⁹ Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;</p> <p>¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.</p> <p>¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke,</p> <p>¹² because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.</p>	<p>⁷ Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.</p> <p>⁸ It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones.</p> <p>⁹ Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase:</p> <p>¹⁰ So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.</p> <p>¹¹ My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction:</p> <p>¹² For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son <i>in whom</i> he delighteth.</p>	<p>⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.</p> <p>⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.</p> <p>⁹ Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce;</p> <p>¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.</p> <p>¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof,</p> <p>¹² for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.</p>

The widely recognized Third Instruction in Proverbs 1-9 is found in the first twelve verses of this chapter. It seems to be a moral discourse, or rather, 'a speech of exhortation that issues to students both



admonitions and prohibitions concerning a variety of virtues to embody in life and vices to avoid' (Perdue 2000:96).

This Instruction (vv.1-12) has been noted by commentators to have some similarities to the book of Deuteronomy with specific reference to Proverbs 3:1-4 and certain passages such as Deuteronomy 4:6 and 6:5-7 (Farmer 1998:866). In Deuteronomy, a book which is educational in intention, Yahweh is seen – through the medium of Moses – as the teacher and the nation of Israel as the pupil. In Deuteronomy 6:1-15 it is promised that if Israel keeps Yahweh's commandments¹⁵ it will be rewarded with a long life and with prosperity (Whybray 1994b:59). The teacher in Proverbs 3:1-4 uses much the same language as in Deuteronomy. He speaks of his teaching (*tôrāh*) and commandments that must not be forgotten but which, if they are remembered and done, will give his son a long life and well-being. To have the advantage of this long life and well-being, the words of Yahweh are to be bound round the neck and written on the tablet of the heart according to verses 3-4.

It needs to be noted that the assumptions that have been made concerning chapters 1-9 to have been largely dependent on the book of Deuteronomy, is found to be overstated by Whybray (1994b:60). He argues that the influence, if any, operated in the opposite direction. His support for this argument is found in Deuteronomy 8:5: 'Know in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, Yahweh your God disciplines you'. This suggests that the author of the introductory chapters of Deuteronomy may have used the language of family instruction that was already present. This was done in order to

¹⁵ *miswōt* - commandments

emphasize the binding nature of the law of Yahweh, the rewards of obedience to this law and the terrible cost of disobedience (Whybray 1994b:60).

3.5.3.2 Literary structure and interpretation

In verses 1-12 the father as the teacher, emphasizes the importance of paying attention to his teaching (vv. 1-4, cf. 1:8-9; 2:1) and according to Clifford (1999:50), it consists of a series of six four-line exhortations, in which the second bicolon of each mentions a reward or benefit.

This teaching is set out in the form of four admonitions of which the first three admonitions are positive with a promise of reward and similar in form:

- i. Verses 5-6: do not rely on your own insight.
- ii. Verses 7-8: be not wise in your own eyes.
- iii. Verses 9-10: be careful to pay your sacrificial duties to Yahweh.

The fourth admonition was most probably prompted by the awareness of the problem raised by cases where expected reward was absent.

- iv. Verses 11-12: Yahweh's discipline and reproof (Whybray 1994b:58).

Proverbs 3 is seen by Farmer (1998:86) as a new covenant¹⁶ and a synthesis of wisdom spirituality and therefore he divides verses 1-12 as follows:

a. New covenant (1-4)

The new covenant develops in hearts touched by the word of God. It gives birth to harmony and loyalty which are characteristics of the living and merciful God (Ex 34:6).

b. Fullness of life (5-6)

God's gift illuminates and strengthens the weakness of the human heart and makes straight the path that leads to the fullness of life (v.6).

c. Fearing God (7-8)

A life of wisdom consists in renouncing independence and evil and in fearing and honouring God with all our being.

d. Praise to Yahweh (9-12)

Yahweh gives us every blessing, especially that of life. Wisdom is thus an act of praise to the God of life. The Lord chastises the beloved to help them grow in wisdom (Farmer 1998:86).

¹⁶ Theology of individual responsibility and personal commitment to life and wisdom (Cox 1982:116)



3.5.3.3 Detail analysis - Quality of life (1-4)

<p>^{NIV} My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, ² for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. ³ Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.</p>	<p>^{KJV} My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: ² For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. ³ Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: ⁴ So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man.</p>	<p>^{RSV} My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ² for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you. ³ Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them about your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.</p>
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a. Father and son relationship.

A process is being followed here in verse 1 where the father invites his son into a relationship with him through asking him not to forget his teaching. The son is also invited to enter into a relationship of trust in the father or teacher and finally also to trust in God 'who takes up the



parental task of education (v.5)' (Clifford 1999:51). Trust in Yahweh means giving up confidence in oneself (v.7), honouring God with one's wealth (v.9), and allowing Yahweh to become one's teacher and father (vv. 11-12).

The son is promised a long life, a good name, divine protection, health and abundant crops as a reward for righteous conduct. This process of education was taken from the way teaching was done in an ancient Israelite household and was drawn from real life. The metaphor can also be applied to any teacher-learner relationship where one human being helps another to seek wisdom in the face of difficulties and brings the person into a relationship with God (Clifford 1999:51).

The first strophe (vv.1b-2) starts with the typical exhortation to the student to remember the teacher's instruction¹⁷ and to observe the commandments. As was the traditional custom in ancient Israel, learning happened by memorizing. Therefore the father or teacher urges his son not to forget but to remember the basic teachings concerning wisdom to be searched for, trusting God in all his ways (v. 5) and remembering the words of the teacher.

To *forget* usually refers to the willful neglect and diversion of attention as in Proverbs 2:17 (Fox 2000:142). It is clear that the teacher or father stresses the urgency of the instruction given to the son because it will determine real and meaningful life. On the other hand to retain or guard is a deliberate act. It is a definite decision to protect, nurture and maintain that which has been taught. The father demands continued attention to the teachings and we therefore can say that to 'keep' and

¹⁷ *NRSV* 'teaching'

to 'remember' is an active decision and action by the student.

The two words teaching (*tôrāh*) and commandments (*miswōt*) reappear in the introductions of other Instructions and mainly in parallel pairs. Together with others they are in different combinations that show they are all interchangeable (cf. 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 4:20; 5:1; 6:20) as also the verbs used with them: hear, receive, keep, be attentive, incline the ear and the negatives 'do not reject', 'do not forsake', 'do not forget' (Whybray 1994b:60). The content of these commands or teachings is not specified but 'we may suppose they are the basic teachings of chapters 1-9: to seek wisdom first, to revere the teacher's words, to trust God's action' (Clifford 1999:51). It is only in relationship where wisdom can be both taught and learnt. Wisdom teaches that the way to stand in the world, the stance to adopt before reality, is the way to relationship. For this reason the son is urged not to forsake or forget this relationship but to treasure it.

b. Teaching adds quality (long life and well-being) to life.

Two of the chief values of the wisdom tradition are found in the motive clauses: the father's teachings bring firstly long life (3:16; 4:10) and secondly well-being (3:17). In the same sense does wisdom itself (3:16, 18) as well as the fear of God (10:27) result in quality of life.

'Length of days and years of life and well-being' that will be added can be taken literally. A distinction is suggested between 'length of days' and 'years of life' which then implies that 'length of days' merely refers to a physical long life, while in 'years of life' life is widely referred to as the quality of life.

While the promise of life is central here it should be taken in a qualitative sense as the good life of well-being, indicated by 'peace' or 'shalom' also mentioned in verse 16 (Murphy 1998:20). The ideal was to live to a ripe old age, to see one's children's children, and to die in peace and contentment while surrounded by the extended family (see Gn 48 – 49).

Well-being (shalom) according to Perdue (2000:97) refers to the 'state of contentment, pleasantness, health, welfare, and security in which good things are had and experienced without the stress of anxiety and fear'.

Another approach is taken by Cox (1982:116) as well as Farmer (1998:86) in that they assume verse 2 to be covenantal terminology. This implies that there could be a reference here to the 'New Covenant theology of individual responsibility, and the need for a personal commitment to life and wisdom' (Cox 1982:116). He also sees this as a development of the basic theme in Proverbs 1:7 which is the 'fear of the Lord'.

This implies that the state of wholesome peace or well-being, primarily realized in relations among people (Fox 2000:143), is brought about by a personal responsibility and a choice to remember and do what has been taught.

In its broadest sense wisdom is an approach to reality and philosophy which shares a set of ideas, assumptions and expectations about life (O'Connor 1993:15). It is the responsibility of man to choose and

follow the path of wisdom which is realized primarily in relations between God and humankind and between humans.

c. Character of the heart.

There is a distinct difference between verse 3 and the verses in the rest of the passage in that it consists of three lines rather than the usual two. Whybray (1994b:61) suggests that the first line, 'let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you', is to be the added line although other commentators regarded the third line – 'write them on the tablet of your heart' – which is identical to 7:3b, to be the added line.

Whybray's assumption is based on the fact that elsewhere in the Instructions (6:21; 7:3; cf 1:9; 3:22), it is the father's (or parents') teachings which are to be bound or written on the heart. It is therefore probable that the 'them' of lines two and three here originally referred not to loyalty and faithfulness but to the father's teachings of verse 1 (Whybray 1994b:61). Again the father asks him to enter a relationship of trust (v.3) and finally to 'trust in God who takes up the parental task of education (v.5)' (Clifford 1999:51).

In verse 3 it is clear that Proverbs is not only an ethic of external obedience and reward. The command given here shows that the internal character of the heart is the main objective. The general nature of this command looks for inner integrity that manifests itself in all relations with God and people. In this respect, Proverbs is different from earlier non-Israelite wisdom. Garret (1993:80) explains that Egyptian wisdom for the most part exhorts the pupil to behaviour that is likely to give success in a career. Although high moral concepts are



not at all absent in the Egyptian wisdom literature, the emphasis is on politically sensitive behaviour rather than on the character of the inner person. In Proverbs the internal character takes the emphasis.

The double phrase, loyalty (NIV – love) and faithfulness (KJV – truth), is paralleled with the fear of Yahweh in 16:6 and was a standard expression used to describe the relationship between Yahweh and his people. However, loyalty and faithfulness become the focal point of this teaching.

Loyalty here refers to the ‘virtue of commitment and dedication that binds one’s life usually to an individual or group’ (Perdue 2000:97). In Proverbs 2:8 and 16:6, loyalty refers to devotion and unwavering commitment to God. The same unwavering commitment also goes to the teacher and the wisdom tradition (3:3), as well as husband or wife and larger family (5:15-23), to the king (20:28) and to the larger community (14:22) (Perdue 2000:97).

In this context, faithfulness is being used as a synonym for loyalty as in Proverbs 16:6. ‘The act of faithfulness is based on the belief in or assurance of divine trustworthiness’ (Perdue 2000:100). Entrenched deeply in the wisdom tradition and continually confirmed by new experiences, faith in Yahweh and faithfulness to God formed a major cornerstone of the teachings of the sages of Proverbs. It seems that the emphasis placed on loyalty and faithfulness in this context, is concerned with the teachings of the wisdom tradition as taught by the sage.

Lastly, this image also echoes Deuteronomic language as found in Deuteronomy 6:8-9; ‘Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an



emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates’.

The metaphor of engraving on a tablet signifies permanency. Jeremiah 31:33b. And I shall write it [God’s law] on their heart, and I shall be a god for them, and they shall be my people’. This implies that being inscribed on the heart does not merely involve retention in memory but rather; ‘the indelible definition of character’ (Fox 2000:146). Jeremiah stresses that the Jews will not only remember God’s law but will internalize and incorporate it in order to be instinctively aware of its demands. This same metaphor is also found in *Amenemope*¹⁸ where the reader is told that to ‘put them in your heart is beneficial’ (Whybray 1994b:61).

The father, anxious for the son to be wise, is using the same metaphor that was used in Jeremiah to urge his son to engrave on his heart and to internalize the teachings of his father. The reason being for the teaching to be indelible, internalized and weaved into the son’s character with the purpose that it should never be forgotten.

This father-son relationship can also be seen as a teacher-learner relationship where the ‘teacher’ brings the ‘learner’ into a relationship with God, motivating the student to learn and to seek wisdom. A person facing difficulties and needing help is subsequently concerned to seek help from another person that can be trusted and then this virtue comes into practice. ‘The context – motivating an inexperienced student – forbids us to interpret these verses as a naïve and mechanical doctrine of divine reward. Proverbs is realistic about the

¹⁸ Egyptian Teaching published in 1923 by E.W. Budge. (cf. chapter two)

dangers and difficulties faced by those who seek after wisdom' (Clifford 1999:51). This passage underlines the benefits of the search for wisdom and the help one can expect from God.

In verse 4 'favour' is an additional reward for incorporating the precepts. This is the good opinion others have toward its possessor. For example, in the case of Joseph¹⁹, his 'favour' consisted of the warder's favourable feelings toward him (Gn 39:21). The 'favour' mentioned in 1:9 is an "attractive garland" in the sense that it attracts favour to its possessor (Fox 2000:147).

The Hebrew here, according to Whybray (1994b:61) has the imperative, *šēkel* and the usual meaning is 'insight, understanding' but

it hardly seems appropriate here. Insight or competence and the success which normally followed it, were closely linked in the Hebrew mind and 'favour' should probably be rendered by 'success', or in view of the context, by 'approval' in the sight of God and man (Whybray 1994b:61).

Fox (2000:147) argues two-fold:

Firstly that 'favour' almost always refers to 'perception from the standpoint of the perceiver'. The possessor of 'favour' sees a situation clearly and is consequently discerning and circumspect.

Favour and good reputation will then have the meaning of having the approval and favourable feelings of others, including God, towards

¹⁹ Joseph narrative - part of wisdom literature (Le Roux 1993:309)



himself. If then man remembers and internalizes wisdom with loyalty and faithfulness, his days would be filled with quality of life. He will experience favour in the sight of God and man and receive length of days and peace in his life.

d. Conclusion

It is suggested that quality of life is in the first place a relationship of father (teacher) and son (student) and this is realized through trust and honour. The son decides to wilfully remember and guard the teachings and in doing so ensure a treasured relationship that will bring about wise living.

Secondly, when the son remembers the father's instructions and acts accordingly, it is rewarded by a long life, a good name, health and abundant crops. Man has a responsibility to choose and then follow the paths of wisdom.

Thirdly, the art of wise livings asks for character of heart. Loyalty and faithfulness or love and truth are to be a fundamental part of the wise man's character both towards God and man. Faithfulness to God forms a major cornerstone of the teachings of the Book of Proverbs.



3.5.3.4 Admonitions (5-12)

a. First admonition (5-6) – Do not rely on your own insight.

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.</p>	<p>⁵ Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. ⁶ In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.</p>	<p>⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.</p>

A teaching is now found that is set out in the form of four admonitions of which the first three admonitions are positive with a promise of reward and similar in form while the fourth admonition gives us a glance on Yahweh’s discipline and reproof.

The teacher now assures the student that the search for wisdom is not a lonely venture. Yahweh is there to aid in the acquisition of wisdom but it must be remembered however, that trust in Yahweh is not easy. ‘It means giving up trust in one’s own understanding exclusively. The perspective is dramatic: Place your full trust in Yahweh rather than in your own understanding’ (Clifford 1999:52).

The vital dynamic of human life is ‘trust in the Lord’ (v.5), in the



context of daily life and the search for truth. This dynamic regulates life, its ideals, and its inspiration (Cox 1982:118). Trusting in the Lord suggests an inner commitment to God as wisdom becomes a personal and religious illumination rather than human education.

Understanding must be based on grace, as well as the divine enlightenment that comes from knowledge of God argues Cox (1982:17). It is this grace that guarantees to keep the pupil on the right path. True godliness manifests itself as intellectual humility (vv.5-8), submission of material wealth to God’s rule (vv.9-10) and patient acceptance of divine discipline (vv.11-12).

b. Second admonition (7-8) – Be not wise in your own eyes.

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.</p>	<p>⁷ Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.</p>	<p>⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.</p>
<p>⁸ This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.</p>	<p>⁸ It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones.</p>	<p>⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.</p>

To become a wise man or a woman that lives life skillfully, implies that you are not to become overly confident in your own intelligence (v.5) or arrogant about your wisdom (v.7). Trusting God means that one’s total



character²⁰ is to be committed to God's care. 'The prohibitions against depending on one's own understanding and against intellectual pride (vv.5b, 7a) implicitly reject a 'secular' search for wisdom and look back to the thesis of the book (1:7)' (Garrett 1993:81).

Devotion to God and devotion to Wisdom are inseparable. When the student is tempted to seek knowledge without first submitting to God in faith, humility and obedience, the search will be fruitless and the wisdom gained will be distorted (Garrett 1993:79).

In these verses each admonition is accompanied by a warning against adopting a contrary attitude: trust in one's own competence (v.5b) and confidence in one's own wisdom (v.7b). It is a serious warning not to develop an attitude of mind concerning one's own competence or wisdom, but rather trust God in all your ways (Whybray 1994b:62). The commitment to God means that all beliefs and decisions of life, including practical decisions, are to be submitted to God. In the previous two Instructions of Proverbs 1:8-19 and 2:1-22, we find similar warnings against criminal or immoral conduct of a concrete kind.

"When does wisdom cease to be wisdom?

When you think you are wise"

(Murphy 1998:21).

Such trust in God leads to well-being in the very depths of our persons (v.8). "*Bones*' and '*flesh*' are descriptors not just of the structure and

²⁰ The will, intellect and emotions of a person.



tissue of our bodies but of our whole selves, body-spirit, tangible-intangible’ (Hubbard 1989:71). The benefit of true wisdom and the reward of following the father’s advice is physical ‘health’ – a holistic and not just a physical expression.

‘Most probably it is the well-being of the whole person which is meant and not only physical health’ (Whybray 1994b:63). The message from the teacher is clear though that health, physical and otherwise, proceeds from a well-ordered life submitted to God.

Trusting God implies an attitude of mind that puts God first in all decision making, realizing that devotion to God and devotion to wisdom is inseparable. Once the student makes a responsible decision of submitting to God in faith, humility and obedience, ‘healing for his flesh and refreshment for his bones’ will be experienced.

c. Third admonition (9-10) – Pay your sacrificial duties to Yahweh.

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>⁹ Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine</p>	<p>⁹ Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: ¹⁰ So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.</p>	<p>⁹ Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.</p>



This is the only passage in the Book of Proverbs where sacrifice is prescribed and alludes to ceremonial worship. It is clear though that: 'Proverbs is not so much concerning itself with ceremonial religion here as it is exhorting the reader to demonstrate gratitude toward and confidence in God (rather than in wealth)' (Garrett 1993: 81).

It is assumed by Cox (1982:118) that Deuteronomy 26 and 28 are most probably the source for verses 9-10. This interaction between Deuteronomy and Proverbs shows up not only in the offering to God but also in the promise of '*barns ...filled with plenty*' and '*vats [overflowing] with new wine*' (v.10). He further states that although there is a direct interplay the formulation has changed in that the offering is becoming a spiritual offering.

This admonition is seen by Whybray (1994b:63) as an unconcealed expression in the Old Testament of the principle of *do ut des*, that is, the offering of gifts to God only in order to obtain material rewards from him. This passage confirms the view that in verses 5-8 the motive for the admonition to acknowledge Yahweh and submit to his demands, was to obtain success and happiness in life rather than a dutiful desire to serve him.

The suggestion is that this admonition offers a 'combination of traditional 'legal' religion, and a newer, sapiential, tradition of personal and very human love between mankind and God' (Cox 1982:118).



d. Fourth admonition (11-12) – Discipline and reproof.

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, ¹² because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.</p>	<p>¹¹ My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: ¹² For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son <i>in whom</i> he delighteth.</p>	<p>¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, ¹² for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.</p>

In this admonition there is no mention of rewards and these verses seem to recognize the possibility of misfortune despite serving and honoring God (Whybray 1972:25). It seems that it wants to let the student know there is a side to Yahweh that consists of discipline and reproof because a problem arises in cases where expected reward was absent. The solution, according to the writer, is that 'the Lord reproves²¹ him whom he loves'. This implies that 'suffering or misfortune may be educative in intention' (Whybray 1994b:58).

Another reason for this could be that the teacher wanted to let the student know that being a 'son' of God (Yahweh), does not 'by that fact alone bring unalloyed bliss' (Clifford 1999:51). It is still possible that God could use the same methods of a father to reprove when necessary.

²¹ NIV-disciplines; KJV-corrects



Justice, as seen in this passage, is not necessarily associated with 'prosperity' in a material sense, nor can it be easily measured. Although the traditional optimistic view as found in verses 6 and 8 that rewards can be taken for granted, is expressed quite often in this book, verses 11 and 12 express a different awareness. Based on the analogy of the discipline, or punishment given by human fathers, 'discipline' in that context, possibly implies physical punishment, as in 19:18 and 23:13 (Whybray 1994b:64).

Here there is no indication that the child has deserved certain punishment. It is rather exercised as a necessary feature of the educational process which helps to form the child's character and in doing so the father expresses his ultimate love for the child. For that reason the 'Lord's discipline and reproof are not seen as punishment for disobedience, but as meted out simply for the good of the recipient' (Whybray 1994b:64).

This picture of divine parenting, both strict and loving, captures the nature of God so well that centuries later the author of the Book of Hebrews in chapter 12:5-6 could find no better text than this with which to bring divine comfort to a nation in pain (Hubbard 1989:73).

Finally, at the end of this Instruction (3:12), the image of a father's love is noted. This image is used to speak of Yahweh and his divine love toward those who are searching and following wisdom's path. Everyday language is often used in the Old Testament to speak of God as the parent, God as redeemer of family members in distress, and God as husband (Perdue 2000:101). At the same time Israel is portrayed as the child, the resident alien, the day laborer, the slave, the

wife, and the concubine. The image of God the father is well-known to the nation of Israel and the father of the house, usually the senior male, was responsible for:

- giving economic roles to household members;
- determining the heir (usually male) of the major portion of the family patrimony;
- adjudicating family disputes;
- arranging marriages and
- determining punishment.

With this image of a responsible, loving but also strict father in Proverbs 3:12, the sage teaches that divine reproof is like that of a father who reproves those he loves. Even the son of his delight, presumably the son who would be the major heir of the household, will be disciplined when required (Perdue 2000:101). God loves as a father loves, but at the same time, God will discipline just as the father will discipline.

The purpose being that the son will accept discipline and in doing so, learn to live life as a wise man and not as a fool. The son will live in the knowledge that Yahweh is as 'a present dynamic that leavens human life' (Cox 1982:119).

e. Conclusion.

With these admonitions the father tries to guide the son to a steadfast relationship with Yahweh. Trust in God and honour towards God



balances with the blessings of Yahweh that is found in physical and material well-being (Venter 1978:9).

A true and steadfast relationship with Yahweh is displayed when:

- one’s own insight or knowledge is not relied upon because God is seen as the source of true and sustainable wisdom,
- gratitude towards God is expressed by the giving of material goods and by doing so demonstrating one’s confidence in God as provider of all,
- divine discipline is accepted as a result of the father loving his child and an implication that suffering or misfortune could be educative in intention.

Wise living in this sense is an enduring relationship between Yahweh and man which will ultimately lead to a life of many years of happiness.

3.5.4 Interlude - Praise of wisdom and role in creation (13-20)

NIV	KJV	RSV
¹³ Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, ¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.	¹³ Happy <i>is</i> the man <i>that</i> findeth wisdom, and the man <i>that</i> getteth understanding. ¹⁴ For the merchandise of it <i>is</i> better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. ¹⁵ She <i>is</i> more precious than rubies: and all the things	¹³ Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding, ¹⁴ for the gain from it is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with



<p>¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed. ¹⁹ By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; ²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.</p>	<p>thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. ¹⁶ Length of days <i>is</i> in her right hand; <i>and</i> in her left hand riches and honour. ¹⁷ Her ways <i>are</i> ways of pleasantness, and all her paths <i>are</i> peace. ¹⁸ She <i>is</i> a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy <i>is every one</i> that retaineth her. ¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. ²⁰ By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.</p>	<p>her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. ¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; ²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew.</p>
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This poem is complete in itself and it would seem that it formerly existed as a separate composition of a single eight-line poem (Clifford 1999:53). It is generally accepted that this poem has been added to the end of the First Instruction, verses 1-12 (Hubbard 1989:73). This is largely due to the fact that no specific mention has been made that wisdom ought to be acquired. It also interrupts the stream of admonitions by manner of inserting a double argument in favour of proclaiming wisdom's excellence: a practical argument in the form beatitude and a theological argument expressed as an affirmation (Hubbard 1989:73).



The poem provides motives for listeners to pursue wisdom with all their heart and has been divided into four couplets with two poetic lines each (Perdue 2000:101).

- a. First couplet (13-14): The joy of discovering wisdom and its value.
- b. Second couplet (15-16): Wisdom's incomparable precious nature and its representation as a goddess of life.
- c. Third couplet (17-18): Continues the image of wisdom as a goddess of life.
- d. Fourth couplet (19-20): Wisdom's role in creation.

a. Joy of wisdom - First couplet (13-14)

NIV	KJV	RSV
¹³ Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, ¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.	¹³ Happy <i>is</i> the man <i>that</i> findeth wisdom, and the man <i>that</i> getteth understanding. ¹⁴ For the merchandise of it <i>is</i> better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold.	¹³ Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding, ¹⁴ for the gain from it is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold.



These two verses begin with an inclusion 'happy' (NIV 'blessed'), which often marks the beginning of a religious poem (Murphy 1998:17) and it is then repeated in verse 18 and is also the final word. This inclusion gives us the outer boundaries of the poem and focuses attention on the key theme namely: the one who discovers wisdom is 'happy' or 'blessed'. This suggests that he or she has the means by which to enter the sphere of well-being (Perdue 2000:102). The emphasis is typical of a beatitude which concerns the relationship between wise conduct and its happy outcome (Hubbard 1989:74). The teacher once again affirms that wisdom may be found and emphasizes that it is within the reach of every human being.

In verse 14 the result of discovering wisdom is given. It points to the incomparable value of the obtaining and possessing of wisdom. The wealth produced is far better than silver and gold. The theme of wisdom as infinitely precious in verses 14-15 is also found in Job 28:15-19. Since there is no reason to suppose a direct connection between Job 28 and Proverbs 1-9, this theme at least was probably conventional amplification – compare 31:10, where the 'good wife' is likewise described as 'far more precious than jewels' (Whybray 1994b:66).

Following wisdom's optimistic outlook that life is orderly or that it can be made orderly, even if requiring immense effort (O'Connor 1993:59) will have great and long-lasting material rewards. Silver, perhaps mentioned first because of its rarity in Israel's antiquity, and fine gold, is painted as the ultimate in material wealth yet does not compare with the wealth to be found when wisdom is found.



b. Lady Wisdom - Second couplet (15-16)

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.</p> <p>¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.</p>	<p>¹⁵ She <i>is</i> more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.</p> <p>¹⁶ Length of days <i>is</i> in her right hand; <i>and</i> in her left hand riches and honour.</p>	<p>¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.</p> <p>¹⁶ Length of days <i>is</i> in her right hand; <i>and</i> in her left hand riches and honour.</p>

At the center of the wisdom literature stands a beautiful alluring woman, Lady Wisdom. The primary mode of being of the wisdom woman is relational. ‘In all the texts that she appears, the most important aspect of her existence is her relationships’ (O’Connor 1993:59).

This couplet makes use of more metaphorical language. Lady Wisdom is now positively compared with jewels, ‘red corals’ regarded as extremely valuable (Whybray 1994b:67), but her worth overshadows the value of these jewels by far. Wisdom is, considering all else, of greater worth than anything the human heart can desire and is superior to any material gains those precious objects could achieve.

Her ‘income’ is not her value or even her trading activity. Rather it is what she profits in terms of meaningful life because of holiness and consecration to the Lord: see Isaiah 23:18²². In Proverbs 3:14, ‘the comparison is not between the values of wisdom and that of precious

²² “And her merchandise (profit) and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord”



metals, but between the profits that each can produce' (Fox 2000:156).

These profits are once again emphasized as being life that is more than the material or physical, it is about an internal relationship between God and man. It is about finding wisdom to live a life of significance and it is about enjoying the profits²³ that wisdom will bring about.

Nothing you could desire will ever measure up to or be equal or likened to the value of wisdom in life. Life in its fullness is offered by wisdom. This means a qualitative life of self-fulfillment and honour; a quantitative life of longevity. Material goods are promised, but it is secondary to the possession of wisdom herself (Cox 1982:119).

Here, in chapter 1:20-33, wisdom is again personified as a woman. It has been suggested according to Whybray (1972:26), that the descriptions in this verse may have been resulting from the way in which the Egyptian goddess *Ma'at*, the goddess of Truth and Order, is represented pictorially. In the images, she holds objects in her hands which symbolize *long life* and *riches and honour*. Other divinities besides the Egyptian goddess have also been found as holding the sign for life, the *ankh*, in one hand and a scepter which is a symbol of riches and honour, in the other (Murphy 1998:22).

Compared to the Egyptian parallels, Israelite wisdom has an abstract value to be searched for while Egyptian wisdom remains a solely human attribute. Lady Wisdom is found preaching in the streets (Cox 1982:72) urging the young to follow her ways and therefore find true and real life. Proverbs 1:20 proclaims that wisdom 'cries aloud in the

²³ Meaningful life; relationships.



street; in the markets she raises her voice’ and in chapters 8:1-3 and 9:3 it is repeated. Cox (1982:72) assumes that the proper place for Lady Wisdom to make her dwelling is in the arena of everyday living. In doing so it proposes to change the quality of man’s life.

Wisdom’s benefits in verse 16 according to Clifford (1999:54) are what people most want: long life, which implies health and vitality, wealth and reputation. Reputation of the individual was especially important in ancient Mediterranean societies and great value was put on honour, reputation and on the avoidance of public shame. Therefore in these verses the sage declares wisdom’s value and power in terms of longevity, riches and reputation.

c. The tree of life - Third couplet (17-18)

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.</p>	<p>¹⁷ Her ways <i>are</i> ways of pleasantness, and all her paths <i>are</i> peace. ¹⁸ She <i>is</i> a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy <i>is every one</i> that retaineth her.</p>	<p>¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.</p>

‘Her ways’; the paths that Lady Wisdom travels, the way she treats her adherents, says Fox (2000:157) are peaceful. Perdue (2000:103) explains that in ancient Near Eastern literature a tree often serves as a



symbol for fertility goddesses. Asherah, the Canaanite earth-mother goddess, is portrayed as a living tree in Deuteronomy 16:21. The pathways of Lady Wisdom are thus characterized by pleasantness and peace and points to a state of well-being.

The 'tree of life' occurs in the Hebrew Bible outside of the Book of Proverbs only in the Genesis story. In Genesis 3:22 we find the tree of life that gives immortality to those who eat the fruit and is guarded by angelic figures (Gn 3:24). 'Proverbs reverses Genesis and ends the sequestering of the tree of life. One who finds wisdom finds life' (Clifford 1999:55). In the comparison of wisdom and the tree of life it is possible that this statement is trying to return to the ideal of perfect man before the fall in Genesis 3 (Cox 1982:120). The fruit of wisdom is twofold: longevity and material well-being as well as an interior quality in life itself (Cox 1982:120).

The image in verse 18 is to be symbolically 'grasped' rather than to be 'eaten'. Wisdom is to be made an internal, essential and eternal part of man. Once again the student is urged to choose relationship with Lady Wisdom and to integrate and internalize wisdom into his or her everyday life.

d. Wisdom in creation - Fourth couplet (19-20)

NIV	KJV	RSV
¹⁹ By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; ²⁰ by his	¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. ²⁰ By his knowledge	¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; ²⁰ by his knowledge



knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.	the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.	the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew.
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The interlude (poem) is concluded by these two verses and human wisdom is given cosmological significance with the subject being changed completely and very suddenly. Wisdom is now being linked to God's creative work in the beginning and is being pictured as a tool that was used by Him to do what only He could do (Hubbard 1989:75). It seems that the role of wisdom is purely instrumental here but it is also being described in Proverbs 8:22-31 in greater length.

This totally new theme can only be accounted for if it is seen as intended to define the status of this wisdom (Perdue 2000:103). Lady Wisdom has been portrayed as more valued than silver and from her, man will profit more than of any fine gold. She also has long life, riches and honour in her hands and like a goddess of life she hands out the valued gifts of human existence. It is this same wisdom that God applies when creating and ordering the world. Wisdom personified was both the power and the design that God used to bring the world into being and it is precisely this wisdom the father is teaching his son about (Perdue 2000:103). A person that throws away and denies this wisdom is running against the very structure by which the world was made (Garrett 1993:83).

Verses 19-20 imply that this status of wisdom has a negative as well as positive side: On the one hand wisdom is from the very beginning inferior to and dependent on Yahweh. Wisdom is a tool in Yahweh's hands so that, by implication, her gifts are not hers but God's. She is



an intermediary between God and mankind. On the other hand she is superior to mankind, having existed before the world was created and Yahweh guarantees the authority she derives from him (Whybray 1994b:68).

Two verbs are used to describe the activity during the act of creation: 'founded' and 'established'. Both the creativity of design and the strength of immovability are suggested by these two verbs. It is language that suggests that the world is an aesthetically pleasing, sturdy structure (Perdue 2000:103). The ultimate confirmation of wisdom is that God himself uses it (Fox 2000:159) and more so in the context of designing and creating the universe.

In Jeremiah 10:12 God is praised: 'He made the earth by his might, established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding he stretched out the heavens'. Proverbs is associating the act of creation with wisdom for the purpose of establishing certain knowledge in this poem. The same wisdom by which Yahweh created the world is available to all who is searching for it (Clifford 1999:55).

God sinks channels down to the unfathomable waters (v.20a 'the deeps were divided'), by having clouds, He gives rain (v.20b 'the clouds drop down the dew') and He provides sufficient water for this earth. This image drawn by the author displays God's wisdom in a special way. 'Wisdom is after all the capacity to *act wisely*, which God has done by mastering the primordial waters and delicately tapping them to make the earth fertile' (Clifford 1999:55). The conclusion then is that the world is not maintained on its own but its existence is blessed and sustained through the continuous wisdom of the Creator.



Recognizing the fact that the world was created by wisdom, it is most logic to assume that anyone who lives in agreement with wisdom will also be living in agreement with the structure and purpose of the universe. 'The text sets out to clarify the learner's relationship to Yahweh in the act of creation' (Cox 1982:121). According to the Proverbs it is assumed that if man finds and lives in relationship with wisdom, he will also find every human good: long life, health, good reputation and smooth paths.

These verses then suggest that God is the source of all wisdom and order on earth and as Creator He is blessing and sustaining the earth and its order through His continuous wisdom. If man then is searching for meaning in life, wisdom as creative power is the way to follow.

e. Conclusion

Relationship with wisdom, portrayed as a beautiful woman, brings about joy together with great and long-lasting material rewards. Nothing materially desired, could measure up to or be likened to the value of wisdom. Longevity, riches and good reputation are profited by the man who relates to Lady Wisdom for she is as a tree of life to everyone who embraces her. Her paths are characterized by pleasantness and peace and bring about a state of well-being. Man is urged to choose relationship with Lady Wisdom and to make wisdom an integral part of his or her life. Cosmological significance is given to wisdom while being linked to God's creative work.



3.5.5 Fourth Instruction (21-35) – Behaviour towards neighbours

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>²¹ My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; ²² they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. ²³ Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble; ²⁴ when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. ²⁵ Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared. ²⁷ Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. ²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"-- when you now have it with you. ²⁹ Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you.</p>	<p>²¹ My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: ²² So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. ²³ Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. ²⁴ When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet. ²⁵ Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. ²⁶ For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken. ²⁷ Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do <i>it</i>. ²⁸ Say not unto thy neighbour, Go, and come again, and to morrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee. ²⁹ Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee.</p>	<p>²¹ My son, keep sound wisdom and discretion; let them not escape from your sight, ²² and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. ²³ Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble. ²⁴ If you sit down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. ²⁵ Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes; ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught. ²⁷ Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. ²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it" -- when you have it with you. ²⁹ Do not plan evil against your neighbor who dwells trustfully beside you.</p>



NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>³⁰ Do not accuse a man for no reason-- when he has done you no harm.</p> <p>³¹ Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways,</p> <p>³² for the LORD detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence.</p> <p>³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.</p> <p>³⁴ He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.</p> <p>³⁵ The wise inherit honor, but fools he holds up to shame</p>	<p>³⁰ Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm.</p> <p>³¹ Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways.</p> <p>³² For the forward <i>is</i> abomination to the LORD: but his secret <i>is</i> with the righteous.</p> <p>³³ The curse of the LORD <i>is</i> in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just.</p> <p>³⁴ Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly.</p> <p>³⁵ The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools.</p>	<p>³⁰ Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.</p> <p>³¹ Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways;</p> <p>³² for the perverse man is an abomination to the LORD, but the upright are in his confidence.</p> <p>³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the abode of the righteous.</p> <p>³⁴ Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor.</p> <p>³⁵ The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.</p>

Once again there are differences among commentators concerning the division of this Instruction. Whybray (1994b:69) focuses our attention on different commentators that divide the Instruction into two separate parts: verses 21-26 and 27-35 with a possible division between verses 30 and 31. He argues that form and content suggest a quite different analysis and concludes that the 'original form of the Instruction thus probably consisted of introduction (vv.21-24) followed by five admonitions (vv.27-31)' (Whybray 1994b:70).



The setting or primary social context for this Instruction according to Perdue (2000:106) is once again the family household. The literary structure consists of an introduction followed by six admonitions of which the first and the last is in the form of a couplet (vv.25-26, 31-32) with motive clauses. The remaining admonitions consist of four one-line sayings. The three proverbs that follow form the conclusion and they contrast the fate of the wise and the foolish in verses 33-35 (Perdue 2000:106). It can thus be assumed, despite differences in dividing this Instruction amongst scholars, that the main content of the Instruction is to be found in the admonitions and deals with two groups who are antithetical to the wise: the wicked (v.25) and the violent and perverse, verses 31-32 (Perdue 2000:107).

This Instruction is different from all the others in that the father does not refer specifically to his own teaching although it seems to be implied (Whybray 1994b:70). The student is exhorted to attain 'sound wisdom' and 'discretion'.²⁴

These virtues are to be sought for two reasons:

Firstly the comfort and protection that they offer individuals and secondly the guidance they offer to the wise and their households on how to live in society with their neighbours (Perdue 2000:106).

²⁴ NIV 'discernment'



3.5.5.1 Wisdom gives life and security (21-24)

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>²¹ My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; ²² they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. ²³ Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble; ²⁴ when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.</p>	<p>²¹ My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: ²² So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. ²³ Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. ²⁴ When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.</p>	<p>²¹ My son, keep sound wisdom and discretion; let them not escape from your sight, ²² and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. ²³ Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble. ²⁴ If you sit down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.</p>

The opening of this passage and the introduction (vv.21-24) once again addresses the ‘son’ and assures him about the primary benefit of safety and security that is to be his part, if wisdom is followed. ‘As in the second and third Instructions, the pursuit of wisdom soon brings the student to Yahweh; the opening duo of father and son becomes a trio of father, son and God’ (Clifford 1999:58).

The student is exhorted to guard the possession of sound wisdom and prudence with the utmost care to ensure that they do not escape. The verb ‘escape’, could suggest that the teachings have an inclination to slip away and could be retained only by making a definite choice and taking a firm stand (Fox 2000:163). This implies that wisdom obtained was not



guaranteed to be a permanent possession. The normal expectation was that it was necessary to continue studying and constantly applying wisdom throughout a lifetime (Perdue 2000:106).

‘Wisdom’ is an inner resource that can help one in dealing with a crisis while ‘discretion’ (discernment) is private unrevealed thought and could also be translated as ‘circumspection’. These two virtues indicate clear thinking about acting in situations, which gives us a more concrete meaning of wisdom than in other instructions, such as chapter 2 (Clifford 1999:57).

The twin virtues used by the father, can be identified with everyday life and should then be practiced continuously to keep them alive in the student’s sight with the purpose of never to be forgotten. ‘Through the obtaining of these virtues, the student will make wise, prudent, and successful decisions that will lead to the enjoyment of security and stability along life’s journey’ (Perdue 2000:106).

Guard wisdom with your life because it is your life – ‘life to your soul and adornment for your neck’ (v.22). It will be: ‘Vitality to your throat’ or ‘life to your soul’. ‘Neck’ refers to (1) the physical throat or, more specifically, to the windpipe and the breath within it; (2) the ‘spirit’ of man, in the sense of personality and emotions and (3) the individual life itself (Fox 2000:163). The character of the student will be enhanced by the blessing of well-founded wisdom and judgement and therefore will lead to the ability of making sound decisions in life. Such a life will even be aesthetically pleasing to look at for wisdom will be as an adornment for his ‘neck’ or rather ‘the individual life’.



‘You will walk securely and your foot will not stumble’ is a general promise but it is not an absolute guarantee that the wise will never have occasion to stumble. Compared to the foolish however, the wise will experience harmony (Garrett 1993:83). Metaphors for life’s journey are applied in that you will be walking, sitting down and sleeping without pain or having to fear. In Psalm 91 we find a very similar promise of divine protection for those who put their total trust in God.

Wisdom requires a choice and needs to be sought after. The student is exhorted to choose wisdom which is sound judgement and discernment and in doing so secure well-being, security and stability along life’s path.

3.5.5.2 Admonitions (25-32)

a. The Lord is your confidence (25-26)

NIV	KJV	RSV
²⁵ Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.	²⁵ Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. ²⁶ For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.	²⁵ Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes; ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.



While continuing the picture of safety and security, verses 25 and 26 form a couplet and is also the first admonition (Perdue 2000:107). The assurance takes the form of a prohibition: Do not fear! Terror is for the wicked and not for the wise. ‘Do not be afraid of sudden panic’. Suddenness implies unexpected timing but even so the ‘Lord will be your confidence’ and security lies with the Lord. The threat here is not natural catastrophe but stems from the ‘trouble’ - literally ruin or storm - of the wicked (v.25). This is the only suggestion to danger from outsiders and makes one think of the ambush prepared by the wicked in chapter 1:11-12. Even in this situation, it is important to remember that God is present and that He will ‘keep your foot from being caught’ (v.26). To follow true wisdom is to be sure that one has the protection of the Lord near to you.

b. Love your neighbour and treat others fairly (27-30)

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>²⁷ Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.</p> <p>²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"-- when you now have it with you.</p> <p>²⁹ Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you.</p> <p>³⁰ Do not accuse a man for no reason-- when he has done you no harm.</p>	<p>²⁷ Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do <i>it</i>.</p> <p>²⁸ Say not unto thy neighbour, Go, and come again, and to morrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee.</p> <p>²⁹ Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee.</p> <p>³⁰ Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm.</p>	<p>²⁷ Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.</p> <p>²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it" -- when you have it with you.</p> <p>²⁹ Do not plan evil against your neighbor who dwells trustfully beside you.</p> <p>³⁰ Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.</p>

The two more lengthy prohibitions (vv.25-26 and vv.31-32) provide this central section of the teaching with a form-critical but also a thematic enclosure (Perdue 2000:107).

As is often true in Proverbs and other wisdom literature, the text offers only general exhortations and does not always specify the situation. These verses are concerned with the practical task of living in society and imports the virtues needed to live with others. Several prohibitions are found in this passage (vv.27-30):

- i. do not fail to do good to those who need it when in the position to be generous.
- ii. do not take part in wrong activity or act dishonest in withholding something from others.
- iii. do not take part in conspiracy against others and devise evil against a trusting neighbour.
- iv. do not take part in frivolous legal action and avoid debatable behaviour against a person who has done one no harm.

'To whom it is due'²⁵ in verse 27, is widely accepted as the correct translation (Whybray 1994b:72) although two arguments are relevant concerning verses 27-28:

Argument one: Based on the Septuagint's 'the poor', the verse has a simple recommendation to beneficence (Whybray 1994b:72).

Argument two: The verse may refer to a practice of procrastinating payment for goods or repayment of loans (Fox 2000:165).

²⁵ NIV-'those who deserve it'



The word 'good' (v.27) used in this verse is the most comprehensive word for generosity in a whole range of activities but particularly in the sharing of material goods. It is clearly expected of a wise person to do good to others. The question here is: Who are the persons specifically referred to in this verse?

It is claimed by Murphy (1990:23) that verses 27-28 has to do with relationship to neighbours. The presupposition seems to be that a neighbour has some right to consideration and, according to the Septuagint translation specifically a poor person, has a right to be helped by those who have the means to help.

Using the phrase 'to whom it is due', literally 'its owners', is more likely a graphic way of describing 'the needy' who, under the principle of neighbour love, have a claim on any goods that we can spare to help meet their needs. It is highly probable that this is what seems to be intended by 'in the power of your hand' (Hubbard 1989:77). This implies that when you have, you are under obligation to give to those in need.

Fox (2000:165) on the other hand argues that the meaning for giving here does not necessarily mean to give to the poor. It could be different things such as money or something of value that was lent or valuables deposited in pledge for a loan, goods held in safekeeping or the wages owed him. He further argues that the admonition has nothing to do with giving alms to the poor because of the more inclusive phrase 'your neighbour' which has the broad meaning of any person in one's interaction with people. Also the words used 'when



you have it all along'²⁶ emphasizes this viewpoint, for this implies a specific object in your holding that really belongs to the other person (Fox 2000:165).

A further argument by Whybray (1994b:72) is that the Septuagint's rendering of 'the poor' may be based on a different text and that this would in any case be a strange mode of speech.

'The solution may lie in the word 'good', which may mean material wealth or 'goods', as in 12:14; 13:2 and elsewhere. If that is so, the verse may refer to a practice of delaying payment for goods or repayment of loans, which is here condemned' (Whybray 1994b:72).

Clearly a principle underlined by Fox (2000:165) is stressed here as not to postpone if it is in your power to pay or give as and when you ought to. A warning to the student is also emphasized in verse 28 against; 'temporizing when someone comes to you to claim something rightfully his' (Fox 2000:165).

The significance is clear: do not procrastinate in doing that which is right especially concerning material belongings and money. It is vital to know that, according to the wisdom tradition, by giving to those in need the compassion and goodness of Yahweh is emulated by the giver who then at the same time displays a generosity of spirit that displays the kind heart of Yahweh.

In verses 29 and 30 the commands are given to live at peace with one's neighbor but in particular to avoid unjustified legal disputes.

²⁶ literally "and it is with you"



Trust is a central ingredient of community. 'Where it is betrayed by devising (or plotting) evil (harm) against a neighbour, no community is possible' (Hubbard 1989:77). It then becomes a place where every person or family is for itself, trying to protect in different ways themselves from each other. 'Betraying the trust of a neighbour (28-29) is more than a social crime, it is the betrayal of the relationship of trust that allows one to stand before God' (Cox 1982:123). These verses forbid any form of plotting and meaningless schemes against a neighbour. This is very well illustrated in the Bible by Jezebel's conspiracy against Naboth in I Kings 21 and Haman's designs on Mordecai in Esther. Verse 30 explicitly prohibits any form of frivolous litigation. 'It does not absolutely forbid bringing a suit in court, but abuse of the legal system by habitual or malicious use is condemned' (Garrett 1993:85).

Hubbard (1989:78) argues that where frivolous litigation, devising evil or betraying the trust of a neighbour is present it is the height of selfishness and is resulting from a lack of generosity. The hard to please, difficult person does not know the grace of give and take, and refuses to grant the neighbour the benefit of the doubt. 'Part of neighbourliness is the willingness to be wrong and the ability to bite one's tongue when we think we are right. Few issues in life are worth breaking relationships to prove our correctness' (Hubbard 1989:78).

The hypothesis seems to be that a neighbour has some right to consideration if and when one has the means to help and there is no reason why such help should be postponed. It does not necessarily mean only a poor person but rather any person that is in need of neighbourly support. A man experiencing the security and protection as offered by the Lord of wisdom is under the obligation to be



generous and kind to others and should not in any way delay in doing good to others.

c. Do not envy the violent (31-32)

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>³¹ Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways, ³² for the LORD detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence.</p>	<p>³¹ Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways. ³² For the forward <i>is</i> abomination to the LORD: but his secret <i>is</i> with the righteous.</p>	<p>³¹ Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways; ³² for the perverse man is an abomination to the LORD, but the upright are in his confidence.</p>

Verses 31-32 are in the form of a couplet and also that of an independent antithetical proverb. This could quite probably be the climax reached after all the previous prohibitions given to the student.

Upright and honourable people are often tempted to envy the wicked who prosper (cf. Ps 37:1; 73:3) (Murphy 1998:23). ‘The term ‘violent’ refers to destructive actions directed against other human beings, in particular assault and murder’ (Perdue 2000:10). This verse emphatically emphasizes the fact not to be jealous of the wicked because it is only to play the fool and suffer the consequences (Hubbard 1989:78). Murphy (1998:23) explains that the violent will not belong to the inner circle of God which is the place where divine intimacy and confidence is shared.



‘When the person given to physical or emotional attack on others (*oppressor*) becomes a hero, we personally and our community generally have hit bottom’ (Hubbard 1989: 78).

It has been perceived through the history of mankind that there is no person or community in such a bad state as the one that uplifts the wicked and puts the violent on pedestals of admiration. This argument is taken further by Hubbard (1989:78) who says that the admonition has lost none of its clear thought given the level of violence that prevails in our communities whether local or international.

In verse 32 the motivation for all five negative commands in verses 27-31 is found. The perverse²⁷ man is an ‘abomination to the Lord’. The root-meaning of ‘abomination’ (NIV-‘detests’) is; ‘disgusting’ and ‘loathsome’ without necessarily having any ethical or religious grounds.

Sometimes ‘abomination’ just represents plain disgust²⁸, with no ethical suggestion (Fox 2000:166). It is especially used in condemning moral offenses such as dishonesty in speech and also in writing, arrogance, shedding of innocent blood, falsity in thought or words and any form of antisocial attitudes and deeds (Perdue 2000:108).

Abomination is God’s loathing of the perverse man and puts a distance between God and man. Verse 32 gives us the direct opposite of this image which is the ‘in the confidence of God’. To be in the

²⁷ ‘perverse’: to go wrong; go crooked; be devious in all other forms of not being ‘straight’.

²⁸ Shepherds are *repulsive* to Egyptians; sick people find food *repulsive* which means that any behavior linked to the above, is repulsive, disgusting and loathsome in the eyes of God.



‘confidence’²⁹ of God is no small thing. The angelic council itself is called God’s ‘confidence’ in Job 15:8 (Fox 2000:167).

“Confidence’ denotes an intimate and confidential relationship, sometimes involving secret discussion of policy (15:22) and thus a position of trust’ (Whybray 1994b:73).

‘The metaphor of straight and crooked is a familiar one in Proverbs. One who destroys human relationships will experience the loss of the relationship with God’ (Clifford1999:58).

This verse then implies an intimate, personal and close communication between God and the upright which is the exact opposite of an impersonal and loathsome distance experienced between the wicked and God.

d. God’s favour and disgust (33-35)

NIV	KJV	RSV
<p>³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.</p> <p>³⁴ He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.</p> <p>³⁵ The wise inherit honor, but fools he holds up to shame.</p>	<p>³³ The curse of the LORD <i>is</i> in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just.</p> <p>³⁴ Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly.</p> <p>³⁵ The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools.</p>	<p>³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the abode of the righteous.</p> <p>³⁴ Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor.</p> <p>³⁵ The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.</p>

³¹ Confidence : KJV ‘secret’ - secret counsel or familiar converse and intimacy with God.

Verses 33–35 are further antithetical proverbs of the same type as verse 3 and contrast the inheritance and fate of the wicked with that of the wise. According to Whybray (1994b:73), it is most unlikely that this long epilogue forms part of the original instruction and it is possible that verses 33-34 were originally separate proverbs. Clifford (1999:59) though, sees these verses as a very fitting way in which to end this lecture. He argues that ‘judgment is exercised in a biblical way; it is not an impartial pronouncement but a rising up of the righteous and a putting down of the wicked’.

Another view taken by Hubbard (1989:79) is that the text seems to say: Thinking that one can gain power, wealth and status from a neighbour by means of greed, deceit, quarrel or violence is proven wrong and are attainable only as gifts from God. Furthermore it is only attainable on God’s terms of uprightness and humble dependence. This Instruction is concluded by three antithetical proverbs that contrast the legacy and destiny of the wicked to those of the wise.

e. Antithetical proverbs

First antithetical proverb - Curse versus blessing

What is perfectly clear here is that the curse of Yahweh is directed not only to the wicked in person but also to their households (v.33), while the household of the upright is blessed by God. The fact that the wise strongly believed in the communal effect of human behaviour and speech on the households of both the wicked and the righteous, as well as on the larger community, is greatly emphasized by this proverb (Perdue 2000:109).



Second antithetical proverb - Arrogance versus humbleness

This proverb contrasts Yahweh's disdain of the 'scorners' with his grace toward the 'humble'³⁰ (v.34). 'Scorners' as used in this phrase; '*toward the scorners he is scornful*', can be explained as people that are arrogant, boasting or mocking. The meaning of the verb 'scornful' is being used in the sense of; 'exact retribution or repayment in kind' (Whybray 1994b:74), whereas to the 'humble' he shows kindness and grace. The punishment of the 'scorners' is an unusual act where the Lord pays them in kind. 'The sense is that he 'outscoffs' the scoffers (cf. Ps 18:27)' (Murphy 1998:23) and grace and curse are handed out according to the behaviour of individuals.

Third antithetical proverb - Honor versus disgrace

This last antithetical proverb seems to contrast the inheritance of the wise, which is 'honour' with the 'disgrace' of the fools. 'Honour was one of the sages' most desired and cherished virtues (Pr 15:33; 18:12; 21:12), whereas disgrace was shameful, degrading, and much to be avoided (Pr 6:33; 9:7; 11:2; 12:16; 13:18; 18:3; 22:10)' (Perdue 2000:110).

Verse 35 was according to Whybray (1994b:74) not originally attached to verses 33-34. He supports his view with the fact that there is a sudden change of theme from the wicked and righteous, the scorners and humble to 'wise' and 'fools' and further argues that the meaning of the phrase 'get disgrace' is altogether unclear.

A summary of verses 33-35 given by Hubbard (1989:84) captures

³⁰ KJV – 'lowly'



the consequence of obedience or disobedience very clearly:

<i>Humanly chosen conduct</i>	<i>Divinely assigned result</i>
Verse 33 wicked/just	curse/blessing
Verse 34 scornful/humble	scorns/gives grace
Verse 35 wise/fools	glory/shame

Garrett (1993:84) argues that the wise do not merely earn the respect of other people³¹ but in a much more profound sense they take part in God's 'glory'. Wisdom, right behaviour, and devotion to God are permanently set in Proverbs and it is as a refrain through Proverbs 3 that Yahweh wants to give and share His glory with the upright.

3.6 Conclusion

In Proverbs 3 it is found that the teaching is tied together by the theme of the fear of God and honouring God at all times. This theme proclaims: with thanksgiving and in humbleness we honour the Lord with our material means (v.9); in acts of obedience we are connected to wisdom who holds riches and honor in her hand (v.16). God makes this honour³² available to all who live in loving and peaceful community with their neighbours, who are also His creatures and beloved ones (v.35) (Hubbard 1989:79).

The purpose of this teaching is to exhort learners to instill the intrinsic worth of wisdom and discretion into their lives.

³¹ Such is implied by NIV "honour".

³² Lit. "glory"



In doing so they will enjoy the comfort and security of God and make wise and successful decisions. At the same time they will receive the protective oversight of God (Perdue 2000:110). These virtues will enable them to live in harmony with their neighbours and not to envy the 'violent'. Once wisdom is internalized in man's life the behaviour of the individual will affect the well-being of the community.



CHAPTER 4

SYNTHESIS

4.1 Introduction

The problem discussed in this research was that every human being on this earth faces a continuous problem: how to live wise in a difficult context. The art of living seems to be the most difficult of all the arts and there is no simple solution. Fortunately, experience and observations can be shared. Insights can be learned. Wisdom can be taught.

In the present troubled historical and cultural context at the end of the millennium people are asking, as perhaps never before, what is wisdom and where is it to be found? (Barton 1999: xvii).

In South Africa corruption, violence, assaults and residential robberies are part of everyday life and the question is constantly asked: how do I live a happy life? Rauch (2005:1) made the statement: 'Politicians, religious leaders and social commentators have all spoken about a breakdown in morality in South Africa, with crime as the most commonly cited evidence' (www.iss.co.za).

With many political and economical changes in South Africa in the past decade, it is understandable that Bishop Desmond Tutu (2006:1) asked the question: 'What has happened to us? It seems as if we have perverted our freedom, our rights into license, into being irresponsible.

Rights go hand in hand with responsibility, with dignity, with respect for oneself and the other' (www.mg.co.za). It is in everyday real life where respect, integrity and care for others are absent, where Wisdom and Folly compete for human loyalties and where the divine and the human meet (O'Connor 1993:14).

People search for a life filled with good relationships: happy families and contented communities, a life where the environment is safe, peaceful and happy. Yet, in South Africa we face insecurity, disrupted families and an unsafe environment.

Despite good education, success in different careers and financial success, people are still seeking for something more in life which can be called 'a search for meaning' and they yearn for guidance in the art of life.

Humanity is seeking for an integrated life of faith in which belief; attitude, affections, prayer and action form a cohesive unity which will give meaning to their lives (O'Connor 1993:9). In Proverbs 3 a practical picture of people wrestling with challenges that still face us today is found as well as guidance for every aspect of wise and sound living.

The analysis of Proverbs 3 has not provided us with simplistic answers but suggested guidelines for living wisely in a complex world such as the modern South African context has been found. At the same time wise living has been reflected upon while the ways to choose between Wisdom and Folly have been identified.

The method used in this research has been a contextual analysis of the Book of Proverbs in relation to the wisdom literature of ancient Israel. A consideration of the historical, social and cultural

context has also been done. Included in this study is the relation of Proverbs to wisdom literature in the ancient East, specifically that of Egypt and Mesopotamia and the origin and date of the book.

In the formal analysis of the text, the literary form has been considered followed by a structural analysis. Finally a detailed analysis of Proverbs 3:1-35 has been done considering the various parts of the text.

The hypothesis stated wisdom as the ingredient for harmonious relationships between God and humankind and between humans. This has been confirmed in the research on Proverbs 3.

The perspective that God is the source of all wisdom and order in life forms the cornerstone of wisdom and therefore wisdom needs to be chosen by the individual and consciously remembered. It has been concluded that wisdom requires responsibility to live wisely amongst others in order to display a harmonious life.

In chapter 1 the introduction, background and actuality of this research has been dealt with. The picture of people searching for meaning in life and people challenged by different problems in everyday life has been looked into as well as the method to be followed for finding probable solutions to the problem.

A contextual analysis of the wisdom literature in the ancient East as well as ancient Israel has been done in chapter 2 with specific reference to the international context of wisdom in relation to the wisdom of Israel. With the background of the wisdom literature in mind, chapter 3 focused on the literary form and structural analysis of the



Book of Proverbs followed by the same for Proverbs 1-9. A detailed analysis of Proverbs 3 has been done concluded by a synthesis.

Chapter 4 is an attempt to distinguish the possibilities of different guidelines found in Proverbs 3. Wise living has been reflected upon while guidelines for living wisely have been suggested.

4.2 Relevant wisdom

4.2.1 Wisdom's legacy

Wisdom literature in the ancient Near East, including Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia, embodies knowledge and is an international phenomenon which was also followed in ancient Israel. The biblical wisdom literature was eventually incorporated into five main canonical and deuterocanonical writings: Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon. These were influential in shaping the language and content of other collections of wisdom literature namely Psalms, certain prophets, the Joseph story and the succession narrative in 2 Samuel 9-20 (Perdue 2000:4).

Wisdom literature can be divided into two genres namely didactic wisdom and critical wisdom. In the biblical wisdom literature, the Book of Proverbs forms part of the didactic wisdom and concerns teaching and guiding the young. Critical wisdom, of which Job and Qoheleth forms a part, is not necessarily pessimistic or sceptical, but rather has a common feature of reflecting and commenting on doctrines and values found in the didactic wisdom literature. Qoheleth has much reflective material, but as a whole presents itself as a teaching about how to live one's life



(Fox 2000:17). Job challenges the doctrine of reward and retribution and questions accepted teachings of Israelite theology in the crucible of human experience (Habel 1975:4).

To learn from experience implies that experience must be passed on by generations. In ancient Israel the sages left a valuable legacy to the world in the form of wisdom literature. This legacy started off with the belief that the world was essentially ordered and good (Cox 1982:12). Inherent to the nature of things was a divine order that could be comprehended by human effort. It is therefore possible for man to become wise and then take responsibility for, and achieve proficiency over creation, while ultimately remembering that God is the controller of creation (Cox 1982:13).

From a religious perspective, the person who has found his or her place in the created world³³ and has a relationship with God as creator, will in all probability live a fulfilled life. Such a person will be wise³⁴ and will be distinguished by a specific attitude of kindness, graciousness and pleasantness. This is contrasted to the fool who, according to Qoheleth 10:12-15 gossips, has no discipline of mind or tongue and uses wicked words. Wisdom and Folly continuously stand directly opposite each other for the 'fool' is the negative of the 'wise'. A person who is foolish lacks the mastery of human environment and disregards any form of teaching.

³³ Living according to a divine order, *ma'at*.

³⁴ Co-ordinated and in control of life to the extent that it is possible to be (Cox 1982:15).

4.2.2 Wisdom – a philosophy of living

The world view or philosophy of life in Israelite wisdom is that God is Creator, both of his people and the physical world; all knowledge and wisdom come from God. The sages observed an order of justice and blessing that provided for the continuation of the existence of both human and non-human creatures. The goal is to live in harmonious relationship with God, others and the world, while understanding that creation was not a 'once-for-all event locked in the primordial past, but rather a continuous action' (Perdue 1994:79).

Because wisdom has a concept of 'goodness', it has a social dimension which is ultimately observed in relationships. The reality of relationship with wisdom determines how one should act in any given situation (Cox 1982:61). It is not a code of laws or commandments but a relationship to the society and the world in which God has placed a person.

Wisdom is therefore concerned with the issues facing humanity in general. In its broadest sense, wisdom is an approach to reality. It is a philosophy which shares a set of ideas, assumptions and expectations about life. In the ancient Near East this way of thinking was international in origin and influence.

The wisdom philosophy calls for a deep reverence for God in conforming one's life to the Creator's design and order in the midst of a life full of challenges.



4.2.3 Book of Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs is a mirror held up to life. The admonitions and teachings are timeless, in the sense that it is not addressed to any one age or people, but to all ages and every sort of person (Cox 1982:83). The Book of Proverbs appeals to the most basic things in everyday life and helpful guidelines are given concerning the world we live in where religious, political or social background is not considered. These teachings are about living well on this earth as a parent, a child, a husband or wife, a citizen and a worker. It is about how to live in relationship with God and one's neighbour whether you are a teacher, an artist or a mother attending to her children.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil (Pr 3:5-7).

One of the main intentions of the Book of Proverbs is to lead people by ways of uprightness, intelligence and religious 'backbone' to fullness of life (Cox 1982:92). It is instruction in living wisely in everyday life. The instructions that are given, although they are for everyday circumstances, refer to humankind's honourableness before God.

Throughout the Book of Proverbs the thought pattern of reverence and respect for God (the 'fear of the Lord') in all situations is encouraged and emphasized. Once man submits himself to this guideline, true knowledge and successful living can be achieved.

The Book of Proverbs is assumed to be the basic source of the study of biblical wisdom and is a collection of collections. These collections originated at different times and from diverse circumstances and yet there appears to be a definite structural framework which speaks of editorial intentionality (Bergant 1997:78). Smaller units, larger collections and sapiential genres were designed to teach and persuade the one seeking wisdom through the creativity of words.

4.2.4 Proverbs 1-9

Proverbs 1-9 is acknowledged as the First Collection of the Book of Proverbs and this unit also forms an introduction to the whole of the Book of Proverbs.

It is widely accepted that Proverbs 1-9 is the latest unit of tradition in the Book of Proverbs and also that it derives from the post-exilic period. According to Harris (1995:23) the evidence for this dating lies in the content of the parent's discourse and it is therefore, for the most part exilic or post-exilic.

The teaching in Proverbs 1-9 seeks to provide the unschooled with prudence and youths with knowledge and planning. At the same time the sage will hear and increase in learning, and the person of insight will receive guidance (Perdue 1994:78-79).

This section is fundamentally instructional in character, presenting its message as the words of a father to his son. 'It exploits the narrative

aspect of instruction to include pairs of speeches by other characters' (Weeks 1999:24).

Prominent in this section are the two female figures. Lady Wisdom invites humans to enter into relationship with her and to follow her in all her ways. She was present at creation; she loves humanity and promises life and the protection of divine approval (Weeks 1999:24). On the other side we find Lady Folly who also invites humankind to follow her but following her will lead to death.

The quest for wisdom begins with 'the fear of the Lord' (Pr 1:7) and it is only in relationship with God that this quest will lead to the understanding of God. The embodiment of true morality is grounded in commitment to God and to a religious piety. 'Wisdom then, begins with a faith in God that seeks understanding' (Perdue 1997:79).

4.3 Suggested guidelines to wise living

The wisdom philosophy, which is seated in faith in God as Creator and beginning of all wisdom, emphasizes that man has the ability to work out his or her own happiness and then also find meaning in life. According to the ancient Israelite sages, living life wisely and having harmonious relationships, are direct results of a specific pattern of behaviour. It is this pattern of behaviour found in Proverbs 3 through this study that has led to become the suggested guidelines to wise living.

4.3.1 Wisdom as life ingredient for harmonious relationship between God and humankind and between humans

In a broken community like South Africa as depicted in chapter 1 and especially in a believing community, biblical wisdom pose an ingredient for harmonious relationship between God and humankind, and between humans. Wisdom is personified and illustrated by the representations of the Egyptian goddess, *Ma'at* (Murphy 1998:22) and cosmological significance is given to her when linked to God's creative work.

The search to find her is not simply a seeking of the intellect but also a longing of the human heart which brings about joy together with great and long-lasting material rewards. Like a beautiful woman, Lady Wisdom is the object of the heart's desire. She is as a tree of life and gives life, honour and wealth to those who embrace her. Upon entering into a relationship with Lady Wisdom, the wise man or woman live in a state of well-being and delight (Perdue 2000:103) and her paths are characterized by pleasantness.

Wisdom teaches that one of the major guidelines for living life successfully is that of relationship between God and humankind and between humans. Life on earth is about living with and among others. It is about knowing what to do, how to do it and when to do it. It is about living in harmony with others.

Learning to live life and standing in relationship with others starts between parent and child and therefore the Book of Proverbs has to do with the teaching of the young. It is in this area that Proverbs 3 starts with an admonition from father to son and gives man guidance for wise living

4.3.1.1 Relationship between father and son

In verses 1-4 the father invites the son³⁵ into a relationship with himself. He invites him to trust his experience and observations concerning true life. He urges him to bind them around his neck and write them on his heart so that he will never forget them. By doing this it can be said that it is highly probable that he will never forget but rather always remember the one who has taught him. The father does not specify any content of his commands but it may be supposed that they are the basic teaching of chapters 1-9 (Clifford 1999:51).

These teachings include seeking wisdom first, to hold in the highest regard the teacher's words and to trust God's action. Loyalty and faithfulness towards the father are described by a metaphor in such a way that the son needs to internalize these virtues. Adhering to the father's teaching and being loyal and faithful towards the father, creates a strong and enduring relationship between father and son.

Compliance with the rules of wisdom implies submission to authority (Loader 1986:110). 'My son, do not forget my teaching' (Pr 3:1). Here the father, in the light of their relationship, urges his son to:

- recognize and remember him as a symbol of experience of life;
- be humble and;
- participate in God's order for man.

The teachers of ancient Israel emphasized again and again the importance of the disciplinary teaching of figures of authority.

³⁵ Probably an idealized reference to all young men and women addressed by the sages (Perdue 2000:99).

To receive long happy years of living and to have good favour in the sight of God and man, the relationship between father and son or teacher and student needs to be treasured.

Today the relationship as found in Proverbs 3 between father and son can be between any young person and another person with life experience who are willing to teach and guide the young in the art of living. On the side of the young he or she has to be willing to be humble and remember and live the experience and teachings of the teacher.

4.3.1.2. Relationship between God and humankind

Relationship between God and humankind is a choice. The father encourages the son to choose God and His order, he is exhorted to choose to 'fear the Lord' and turn away from evil (v.7). In verses 5-12 the father gives his son guidelines on how to live in relationship with God. He explains that certain characteristics have to be present when walking in relationship with God. One needs to:

- a. Trust in the Lord (v.5).
- b. Fear and honour the Lord (v.7, 9).
- c. Adhere to the Lord's discipline (v.11).
- d. Remember God's love for his people (v.12).
- e. Conclusion.

a. Trust in the Lord (v.5)

Trust in God is a virtue that is central to the practice of religious faith. It means to rely on God's truthfulness and integrity and to know that God will protect the one who lives in a relationship of total trust with God (Perdue 2000:98).

In verse 5 a relationship with God is characterized by trust in God. Trust or faith³⁶ according to Perdue (2000:100) is used only in the Old Testament and then only in regard to Israel's God, not to any other deity. Rooted deeply in the wisdom tradition is faith in Yahweh and faithfulness to God which formed a major cornerstone of the relationship between God and man. Trusting in your own insight (v.5) implies that man feels himself wiser than God and is more foolish than the fool (Pr 26:12).

In verse 12 the simile of a father's love is found. Household language is often used in the Old Testament to speak of God as parent and in this verse it is clear that the teacher is confirming that God, as a father, loves man and this love will be the motivating aspect of discipline. Love between people implies relationship and thus the father is teaching his son that once man decides to enter into relationship with God and live by His principles there will be relationship between God and man.

A relationship with God is characterized by humility. To accept God's authority and discipline, humility is needed. This is one of the most conspicuous outward characteristics of a wise man (Loader 1986:110).

The father urges his son to trust in the Lord, to fear Him, to honour Him and to heed His discipline. In doing these, he will experience healing to

³⁶ "Faith is analogous to 'trust' (Perdue 2000:100).



his flesh and refreshment to his bones and will have plenty to eat and drink.

b. Fear and honour the Lord (v.7, 9)

Verse 7 warns the student not to be wise in his own eyes but, in his relationship with God, to avoid evil which is directly joined to the fear of God (Murphy 1998:21). In fearing God he acknowledges God as the creator and sustainer of this earth and also of his own life. When fearing God he will be practicing the moral life that will not deviate into shallowness and wickedness (Perdue 2000:98). The reward for following the father's advice is expressed in terms of bodily health which is most probably the well-being of the whole person (Whybray 1994b:62).

Fear and honour for the Lord goes hand in hand. Honouring God according to Perdue (2000:98) can in all probability be expressed in giving the best that one has and in doing so acknowledging God's lordship. When giving from one's wealth in the context of true worship, God as the giver and sustainer of life is acknowledged.

c. Adhere to the Lord's discipline (v.11)

In relationship with God, reprimand should not be seen as rebuke but rather as the guiding hand and caring word of a loving parent toward the child (Perdue 2000:99). Discipline from the Lord should be understood as a sign of divine paternal love (Murphy 1998:21) and will be an element of the loving relationship between God and man. The assurance is given that God loves man as a father loves his son and

divine discipline is accepted as a result of the father or teacher loving the student.

d. Remember God's love for his people (v.12)

Verse 12 states that just as a father reproveth his son in whom he delights, the Lord reproveth those he loves.

In this text, the 'son' in the simile would be God's instead of an indefinite father's. God loves man. Suffering as well as good fortune can flow from God's love. There is no mechanical balance sheet notion of retribution or a simple and immediate causal link between sin and retribution (Fox 2000:152). The most important fact to remember is that God loves man as a father loves his child and the principle of relying on God is once again emphasized.

e. Conclusion

Such a true relationship between God and man is only displayed when:

- man's own insight or knowledge is not relied upon, but God is recognized as the source of all wisdom and knowledge;
- gratitude towards God is expressed by the giving of material goods in acknowledging God as the source of all and;
- divine discipline is accepted as a result of a loving person teaching a student to live wisely.

In conclusion it can be assumed that in all probability the relationship between parent and child is the cornerstone of many relationships. This cornerstone relationship can today be seen as a portrayal of a loving relationship between two people where the one is older, has life experience and is living a harmonious life while the younger student acknowledges, accepts and adheres to the teacher's guidance and teaching.

Once the young enters into relationship with his father (teacher), the experience and loving guidance of the father will lead him into relationship with God who is the source of all true knowledge and real life. In man's relationship with God and his earthly father (teacher), he or she will learn to adhere to the order of creation and thus experience material blessings (Murphy 1998:21).

4.3.2 God is the source of all wisdom and order (vv.19-20).

'The creator is the divine architect who designs and constructs the cosmos in the form of an elegant and well-planned building or city (Pr 3:19-20; 8:26-29)' (Perdue 1994:79).

In this portrait, wisdom is the skill or the plan and knowledge that God uses to secure and order the universe. Consequently, divine wisdom continues in bringing stability to the ongoing cosmic order. All wisdom is grounded in the life-giving order of the cosmos created and sustained by God who is the beginning of all. Humankind receives wisdom as a divine gift from God when searching for this wisdom and submitting to God as Creator of the world and its order.

Yahweh, Creator of all, used wisdom as a tool when He created the world and founded the universe in Isaiah 48:13. Verses 19-20 is an assertion that 'the verses eulogized in verses 13-18 is *Yahweh's* wisdom' (Whybray 1994b:68).

God is the Creator who, by his knowledge, providentially provides for the moisture that sustains life in the world (Perdue 2000:105). People, when guided by God's wisdom attained as a gift from God, have the ability to direct their own lives and to transmit to others the life-sustaining teaching that enables people and communities to persevere.

4.3.3 Wisdom requires a wise decision (v.21)

Once again this verse addresses the son (NRSV 'My child') as if reminding the son of the relationship between father and son. The verse here does not refer to the teacher's words but to *your ability and prudence* (Whybray 1972:29). The father exhorts his son to keep what he has learnt and to continue searching and studying wisdom throughout his lifetime.

It seems that wisdom is, according to the wise men, not guaranteed to be a permanent possession (Perdue 2000:106). When wisdom is obtained, a decision is needed to remain wise and the student is exhorted to guard intentionally, and with diligence the possession of sound wisdom. One has to make a decision and then actively hang wisdom around your neck as a charm. This will then be 'your source of vitality' (Whybray 1972:29).

4.3.4 Wisdom requires responsibility (3:27-32)

4.3.4.1. Open your hand to your neighbour (vv.27-28)

In the same way that relationship with God is characterized by giving of the first fruits of your income, the father urges his son to act similarly towards his neighbours by giving when he is in the position to give.

The wisdom tradition never teaches the abandonment of possession in order to follow a life of poverty, but it does stress the importance of supporting those in need. In doing so, the sages were modeling the compassion and charity of Yahweh. Verses 27-28 teach fairness and honesty and not necessarily charity or kindness (Fox 2000:165). When following the paths of Lady Wisdom, you are obliged to take responsibility for others in the same manner as God supports and have compassion for humankind. If in any way you can help your neighbour, you are obliged to do so.

4.3.4.2 Do not plan evil (v.29)

A responsibility to live at peace with one's neighbour is expected of the man who is living wisely. There is a presupposition that a neighbour has some right to consideration (Murphy 1998:23) and therefore a person has to avoid unjustified legal disputes.³⁷

The responsibility goes even further in that the father emphasizes the fact that the neighbour is not only acquainted to you but also trusts you

³⁷“such is the meaning of ‘contend’” (Murphy 1998:23)

and therefore you need to assure him by your actions that you are trustworthy.

Perdue (2000:104) declares that 'The identical knowledge and power that reside in God's activity of creation and world maintenance are available to those who find wisdom'.

Once wisdom has been attained, specific virtues can be part of man's life which include a position of trust before God (v.32); deliverance from evil people (v.25); honour (V.35); long life and riches (v.2); God's blessings (v.33) and real life (v.22).

4.4 Conclusion

In a life full of challenges the wisdom philosophy calls for a deep respect for God in conforming one's life to the Creator's design and order.

Simultaneously humankind yearns for guidance in living and for a life where belief, attitude, affections and action form an interconnected unity that gives meaning to their lives.

With these challenges of humanity in mind and through the study of Proverbs 3 it is concluded that:

- * *In a broken community like South Africa as depicted in the problem statement and especially in a believing community, biblical wisdom pose an ingredient for harmonious relationship between God and humankind, and between humans.*



- * *For religious believers God is the source of wisdom and order in life.*
- * *Biblical wisdom needs to be decided upon by the individual or community and therefore requires a conscious decision to firstly remember what has been taught in biblical wisdom and secondly to exercise the art of biblical wise living.*
- * *Biblical wisdom requires responsibility to live wisely amongst fellow humans in order to display harmonious living.*

The principle of God as the source of all wisdom and order in life, forms the cornerstone of the wisdom perspective and therefore of harmonious living.

Furthermore biblical wisdom is not a natural component of humankind but has to be chosen. It therefore needs a conscious decision to firstly remember what has been taught and secondly to exercise the art of biblical wise living.

Lastly it has been found that wisdom requires responsibility to live wisely amongst one's fellowmen in order to display harmonious living.

The goal for the individual that seeks meaning in life, for South Africa as a community and the broader world will be to live in harmonious relationship with God, others and the world. In the suggested guidelines in Proverbs 3 answers to questions such as how to live life:

how to think, how to cope and how to succeed, is given to every person searching for a meaningful life.

Proverbs 3:6 summarizes the teaching found in Proverbs 3.

*‘In all thy ways acknowledge him,
and he shall direct thy paths.’*

The purpose of this teaching is to exhort the student to fill his or her life with the essential worth of wisdom and discretion. In doing so he or she will enjoy the comfort and security of God and make wise and meaningful decisions while at the same time receive the protective oversight of God. These virtues will enable man to live in harmony with his or her neighbour and not to envy the ‘violent’. Once wisdom is internalized in man’s life, the behaviour of the individual will affect the well-being of the community.

‘A healthy organization – whether a marriage, a family, or a business corporation – is not one with an absence of problems, but one that is actively and effectively addressing or healing its problems’ (Peck 1993:10).



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