

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE "TWO WAYS" IN PROVERBS

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In reading the book of Proverbs it becomes apparent that people and actions are often presented in polar extremes. Some of the prominent polarities are the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked, and actions that lead to honor or shame.<sup>1</sup> This may leave modern readers with the impression that individual proverbs fail to present real situations because the situations in view seem too simplistic. Some, taking an extreme view, see Proverbs as "generally mediocre as literature, tedious as ethics, banal as religion."<sup>2</sup> This unmerited scorn may be due to a pervasive unpopularity of the proverb in modern culture, along with centuries of familiarity and repetition that have rendered them trite by modern standards, as well as the apparent lack of topical organization the book of Proverbs presents to the reader.<sup>3</sup>

A reading of Israel's wisdom literature from this kind of standpoint might see the book of Proverbs as a collection of quaint sayings and admonitions whose application and practicality are no longer in effect. But a key to understanding the wisdom of the book of Proverbs is to understand the "two ways," a concept used to teach the importance of choosing wisely which path or lifestyle would be followed: the path of the wise and righteous, or the way of the foolish and wicked.

A proper grasp of the purposes of Proverbs and a sensitivity to the literary and cultural background of the book will help the modern reader to appreciate the proverbial wisdom of Israel. The tendency to express the issues and concerns of society in extremes was due to at least four factors: (1) the constraints of Hebrew poetry, (2) the nature of a proverb, (3) the use of "way" or "path" as a metaphor for conduct or lifestyle, and (4) the didactic purposes of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> For the wise and foolish see Prov 10:1, 14; 14:3, 8, 16, 24; etc.; for the righteous and wicked see Prov 10:3, 6, 7, 25, 28; 11:5; 12:5; etc.; for shame and dishonor see Prov 3:35; 13:18; 18:13; 20:3; etc.

<sup>2</sup> N. K. Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations* (New York: Harper, 1959) 472. In all fairness a more recent publication of Gottwald's lacks this kind of criticism; see *The Hebrew Bible—A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Thompson, *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) 13-15. Thompson goes on to talk about the modern lack of appreciation for the form of Biblical proverbs, our failure to understand how proverbs functioned in ancient Israelite society, the book's high view of human reason, and the doctrine of reward and punishment, which fails to match up to our present experience, as other barriers to our understanding of Proverbs (pp. 15-16).

## I. THE CONSTRAINTS OF HEBREW POETRY

Ancient poetic conventions made it difficult for sages to formulate proverbs other than in short, pithy sayings and admonitions. When reading the sayings in Proverbs in English translations it is easy to forget that we are reading the shortest poems in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the RSV appeared in 1952 that the poetical sections of the OT outside the psalms were printed as poetry.<sup>5</sup> A failure to recognize the differences in the types of literature can cause misinterpretation, so a knowledge of Hebrew poetry is invaluable for interpreting these sections of the OT.

Since the study of Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century, it has been recognized that a main feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism.<sup>6</sup> Simply defined, parallelism is the restatement or development of a line of poetry using similar vocabulary in a following line. Reaching the correct interpretation of a poetic passage often depends on understanding the structure of the parallelism used in the poem or saying, since to some extent the message is controlled by the form.<sup>7</sup> The entire book of Proverbs is set in poetic format and must be understood accordingly. There are many good studies of Hebrew poetry and parallelism available so further comments here are unnecessary.<sup>8</sup>

Longman also suggests terseness as a prominent trait of Hebrew poetry.<sup>9</sup> The lines of poetry are compact, rarely containing more than four words. This brevity is due to (1) the use of few conjunctions, which must often be supplied by English translations; (2) the tendency toward a rough isosyllabism;<sup>10</sup> (3) the frequent occurrence of ellipsis;<sup>11</sup> and (4) the use of imagery. Imagery helps to compact the line of poetry because of the mental picture it suggests. Using an image allows an author to imply multiple levels of meaning since a metaphor, simile, hyperbole, symbol, personification or apostrophe all function not only at a literal level but also at a figurative level.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. L. Ryken and T. Longman III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 263.

<sup>5</sup> G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 174.

<sup>6</sup> N. H. Ridderbos, H. M. Wolf and W. S. La Sor, "Poetry, Hebrew," *ISBE* 3.892.

<sup>7</sup> W. S. La Sor, D. A. Hubbard and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 307.

<sup>8</sup> For brief, accessible studies on this subject see C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1988) 31–38; Ridderbos *et al.*, "Poetry" 3.891–898; La Sor *et al.*, *Survey* 307–318.

<sup>9</sup> T. Longman III, "Biblical Poetry," *Literary Guide* 82. Longman's discussion (pp. 80–91) covers more than just the various types of parallelism and helps a reader discern poetic features not always covered in treatments of Hebrew poetry.

<sup>10</sup> This term means that parallel lines of poetry will often have the same or nearly the same number of syllables, according to Longman, "Biblical Poetry" 83.

<sup>11</sup> Ellipsis is the dropping of a major element of a line of Hebrew poetry with the expectation that the reader will carry over that element from the first line. It is most common to see this with a verb. Some call this a "ballast variant" or compensation; see La Sor *et al.*, *Survey* 308.

<sup>12</sup> For brief explanations and examples of these terms see Longman, "Biblical Poetry" 84–85. This will be dealt with more below under the discussion of the use of "path" or "way" as a metaphor for conduct or lifestyle.

Though the traditional terms used to categorize the aspects of poetic parallelism (synthetic, synonymous and antithetic) have come under criticism in more recent studies, they will be retained here.<sup>13</sup> Patterns of parallelism can be quite intricate or simple, but the most common pattern of poetry in Proverbs is the bicolon or couplet.<sup>14</sup> Other patterns are the monocolon (24:26), the tricolon (22:29; 25:13), the quatrain (24:5–6; 24:19–20) and, more rarely, the pentad (30:15–16) and the hexad (30:29–30).<sup>15</sup>

One reason why the wisdom of Proverbs often seems limited in outlook is the tendency to use fixed pairs. If a sage was attempting to formulate a saying that would underscore the importance of making right choices there was no better poetic format to use than antithetic parallelism, since the emphasis is on the contrast between two types of character, or opposing actions, and so forth. Two of the more prominent fixed pairs in Proverbs are "righteous/wicked" and "wise/fool."<sup>16</sup> The purpose of a proverb stated antithetically is to emphasize the importance of making good choices, to show the results of living in obedience to Yahweh and according to the principles of wisdom as opposed to the negative consequences on the one who makes poor choices.<sup>17</sup> While synonymous parallelism functioned to reinforce or place a slightly different emphasis on an action or attitude, antithetic parallelism, more than any other pattern, lent itself toward the type of teaching format that drew out the differences rather than the similarities.<sup>18</sup> This laying out of choices between acting righteously or in behaving like the wicked, in the pursuit of wisdom or following the foolish, forms a basis for the doctrine of the "two ways." See for example Prov 10:28:

*tôhelet šaddiqîm šimhâ* The prospect of the righteous is joy,  
*wëtiqwat rëšâ'im tō'bed* But the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.

One of the first observations is the difference in the number of words used in the Hebrew of the proverb as compared to the NIV.<sup>19</sup> A count shows sixteen words used to translate six Hebrew words. The compacted language allows for very little discussion or elaboration. Each colon lacks a definite article, so English translations must supply "the" in both lines. Missing definite articles, along with the rare use of the direct object marker and the

<sup>13</sup> Note Bullock, *Introduction* 31; D. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993) 34–35; and the extensive study by J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs* 34.

<sup>15</sup> These patterns were not limited to Israelite literature; see K. A. Kitchen, "The Basic Literary Forms and Formulations of Ancient Instructional Writings in Egypt and Western Asia," *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (OBO 28; ed. E. Hornung and O. Keel; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1979) 253–259, 278–280.

<sup>16</sup> While the term "fixed pairs" is more accurately used of synonyms (note La Sor *et al.*, *Survey* 314–315) it is used here to include the association of opposite or contrasting ideas, as is very common, e.g., in Proverbs 10–15, where antithetic parallelism abounds. These fixed pairs of antonyms, while less prominent in other sections of Proverbs, are still present on occasion.

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Hubbard, *Proverbs* (Dallas: Word, 1989) 19.

<sup>18</sup> This will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>19</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical references are from the NIV.

relative pronoun, are common features of Hebrew poetry.<sup>20</sup> Thus the Hebrew text of a proverb may consist of only a few words, but the English translation(s) must supply certain words so the reader can get the meaning.

The antithetic structure of the saying contrasts the hope of those who are righteous (*ṣaddiqîm*) with those who are wicked (*rəšā'îm*) and to show the results of the contrasted lifestyles. For the righteous there is joy or rejoicing (*šimhâ*), but for the wicked there is only the hope of perishing, using the root <sup>ʾ</sup>*bd* as the contrasting word to joy or rejoicing in the first line.

The doctrine of the "two ways" is partly a product of Hebrew poetry. The binary nature of the poetry and the form of parallelism used limited what could be said and also how it could be stated.

## II. THE NATURE OF A PROVERB

The study of proverbs is called *pariemiology*.<sup>21</sup> Studies in this field have shown that with only a few exceptions, cultures from very earliest times have produced sayings or observations about life that are classified as proverbs.<sup>22</sup> It is not my purpose to come to an exact definition of a proverb since this form of communication is so broad and varied in its styles and uses that a single definition would be difficult to come by.<sup>23</sup> Russell's oft-quoted statement that a proverb is the "wisdom of many and the wit of one"<sup>24</sup> has much to commend it, although John M. Thompson claims this is a misquotation.<sup>25</sup> Thompson observes that this remark, while somewhat brief and slightly misquoted, points to three very common features of proverbial lore: (1) an arresting and individually inspired form ("wit of one"), (2) a wide appeal and endorsement ("of many"), and (3) content that commends itself to the hearer as true ("wisdom").<sup>26</sup>

Turning to OT proverbs, it might be said that a proverb was a self-evident truth or axiom generally accepted as true by society and crystallized into a memorable, often witty saying couched as poetry.<sup>27</sup> By nature a proverb is unable to address all possible angles of an issue at once, since a proverb is

<sup>20</sup> D. N. Freedman, "Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: An Essay on Biblical Poetry," *JBL* 96 (1977) 6. For statistical counts of prose particles and a comparison of their frequency in prose and poetry see F. I. Andersen and A. D. Forbes, "'Prose Particle' Counts of the Hebrew Bible," *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. C. Meyers and M. O'Connor; Philadelphia: ASOR, 1983) 165-183.

<sup>21</sup> C. R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982) 29.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, *Form* 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> "The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each their proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone" (A. Taylor, *The Proverb and an Index to the Proverb* [Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962] 3).

<sup>24</sup> A. K. Helmbold, "Proverbs, Book of," *ZPEB* 4.919.

<sup>25</sup> What Russell really said was "A proverb is one man's wit and all men's wisdom," according to Thompson, *Form* 18 n. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

<sup>27</sup> See also F. E. Gaebelien, "Proverb," *ZPEB* 4.913, who says, "A proverb is a terse expression of some generally acknowledged truth or experience."

characterized by "shortness, sense and salt,"<sup>28</sup> an attempt to pack as much meaning into as few words as possible. Our task is essentially unpacking the proverb to see all the possibilities that may lie behind the brief statement.<sup>29</sup> But the compacted language limits the conclusions that can be reached, resulting in overstatement or oversimplification, since individual proverbs carry no fine print, footnotes or lists of exceptions.<sup>30</sup>

This has many implications for the study of the book of Proverbs, one of which is that individual proverbs should not be read with the same expectations as, for example, the historical narratives in the OT or Paul's doctrinal discussions in his letters.<sup>31</sup> In other words, there must be a sensitivity on the part of modern readers to the type of literature that is before them at any given point. Most would recognize the hermeneutical distinctions between the narratives and poetic passages of the Bible, as well as the distinction between various genres in the literature.<sup>32</sup>

Because of their compact nature, proverbs may be found addressing a broad variety of social situations. Examining some of the characteristics of this type of literature will show that there are several good reasons why individual proverbs should not be taken as dogmatic statements. The five reasons suggested below may overlap as the individual sayings are discussed briefly, but under each point only one aspect will be emphasized.

1. *Generalizing proverbs.* The general nature of a saying is often shown by the paucity of specifics and lack of reference to a setting. This would emphasize the unspoken assumption that wisdom is more than knowing what to do. It also requires good judgment, timing and common sense. In 15:1 we are told:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
But a harsh word stirs up anger.

The book of Proverbs places great value on speech when the references to lips, tongue, mouth and other synonyms for verbal communication are noted.<sup>33</sup> This is not surprising in a society where writing materials were expensive and not as readily available as they are today. The large number

<sup>28</sup> Helmbold, "Proverbs" 4.919.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of general guidelines for interpreting or unpacking proverbs see Hubbard, *Proverbs* 17–30; G. W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *BSac* 150 (1993) 151–170.

<sup>30</sup> Hubbard, *Proverbs* 25.

<sup>31</sup> The point here is that different literary genres are read with different expectations. When reading historical narratives or doctrinal teaching it is not normally read with the same eye to the figurative and the metaphorical as poetry, although some type of figure of speech may be used. Modern readers do the same. A recipe is not often read with the same hermeneutic as, for example, a eulogy.

<sup>32</sup> See Osborne, *Spiral* 8–9, for a brief discussion of meaning-dependency based on genre distinction, as well as sections on interpreting various genres such as narrative (pp. 153–173), poetry (pp. 174–190), wisdom (pp. 191–204), prophecy (pp. 205–220), etc.

<sup>33</sup> See the "Subject Study: Words," in D. Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1964) 46–49.

of sayings that address the issue of speech shows that in the world of the sages words were the coin of the realm.<sup>34</sup> This proverb envisions a situation where a gentle answer might help diffuse someone's wrath, since the natural inclination is to respond in kind. But by the same token, a gentle answer may have no effect on the other person at all. This does not invalidate the proverb, since the practice of wisdom is not mechanistic or ritualized. The wisdom in this proverb is simply an encouragement to seek situations where this wisdom is applicable. Knowing when to speak is just as important as knowing how to speak.

Similar to this is the saying in 13:21, which is so general it could not apply at all times and in every situation. Job's friends used this, or a similar principle, as the basis of their advice that he needed to repent of a sin that had apparently led to his suffering.<sup>35</sup> The absolute terminology of this saying may lead to the misunderstanding that the principle of retribution is unbending or mechanical. It is obvious that the righteous do not always enjoy prosperity, nor do the wicked automatically suffer misfortune. The psalmists struggled with this same problem (Psalms 37, 49, 73) and concluded that these were temporary situations. But this proverb makes no reference to a time frame, and some may find it difficult to limit this saying to a general statement since it seems so assured in its pronouncement.

For a modern reader to see a proverb as a guarantee is a misreading of the genre. David A. Hubbard observes that proverbs are "not like subway tokens, guaranteed to open the turnstile every time. They are guidelines, not mechanical formulas. They are procedures to follow, not promises that we claim."<sup>36</sup>

The general nature of proverbs makes it necessary for the modern reader to exercise caution in their application. To see them as commandments or promises is to use them in a way they were not intended.

2. *Situation-specific proverbs.* In contrast to the previous point, there are proverbs set in specific situations so that removing them from their settings dilutes the wisdom they seek to impart. These types of proverbs are so specific they probably would not have been formulated except for these situations. In 14:25 it is stated:

A truthful witness saves lives,  
But a false witness is deceitful.

This shows a concern that was quite common in Proverbs, that of truth and falsehood in legal settings (e.g. 6:19a; 12:17; 14:5; 19:5, 9; 21:28; cf. Exod 20:16; Deut 19:18). A proverb like this one must have arisen from a situation where the testimony given before the court resulted in the removal of a harmful or potentially harmful person or circumstance from the commu-

<sup>34</sup> See R. E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 22, who lists a large number of aspects of both proper and improper speech.

<sup>35</sup> This will be elaborated on below.

<sup>36</sup> Hubbard, *Proverbs* 25.

nity. But a series of events might just as easily be envisioned whereby the truthful testimony of a witness leads to the loss of life—for example, a legally sanctioned execution.

Another example of a situation-specific proverb is 22:11. Suffice it to say that the monarchy often had those sitting on the throne who did not appreciate or care for the one who had a pure heart or gracious speech. The examples of Elijah, Jeremiah and David<sup>37</sup> can be cited, among others.

Proverbs addressing the monarchy are now anachronistic, and any attempt at application must take this into consideration, but this is not the main point here.<sup>38</sup> The observations here involve the fact of our different allocation of governmental power, especially in the United States, where executive power is separated from judicial power. But these two types of power were combined under the authority of the king in ancient Israel (cf. 16:10, 13; 20:8, 28).

While modern readers can make general application of these types of sayings in somewhat similar contexts, it is not possible to draw from the advice given in these proverbs directly since they are dealing with situations that are so specified and narrow that they do not apply at all times, or may not apply at all.

3. *Opposing proverbs.* Another issue to consider when interpreting individual proverbs is the element of opposing proverbs. In our own culture we might use "Haste makes waste" as a guideline, yet there are other times when the more appropriate course of action is summarized by "He who hesitates is lost."<sup>39</sup> Both are true in certain situations, but neither can be true in every situation since they encourage opposing actions. Because of the variety of situations one might encounter in everyday life the ancient Israelites also had proverbs that encouraged opposing actions. The most notable are those in 26:4–5 on answering a fool.<sup>40</sup> Other examples are the differing views of speech in 17:27–28, of bribes in 17:8, 23, of wealth in 15:6; 18:11, and of going to court in 25:8–9. It is significant that many opposing proverbs were placed near each other. This may be an indication that the scribes who collected and collated this material were aware of the limited nature of the proverb and placed them in close proximity in order to show the necessity of using good judgment when one sought to apply the various proverbs.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> David is a fascinating case to examine in this light, since he was involved at both levels: once as the one persecuted (by Saul), and later as the persecutor (of Uriah the Hittite).

<sup>38</sup> This will be addressed below.

<sup>39</sup> Note Hubbard, *Proverbs* 25. We might also observe that "Many hands make light work," but in other situations "Too many cooks spoil the broth"; see D. Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985) 26.

<sup>40</sup> K. G. Hoglund, "The Fool and the Wise in Dialogue," *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honour of Roland E. Murphy* (JSOTSup 58; ed. K. Hoglund et al.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 161–187, contends that these proverbs, though encouraging opposite actions, when taken in context are not contradictory at all.

<sup>41</sup> J. A. Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992) 210, says in reference to the placing of 26:4–5 next to each other, "This juxtaposition is not a coincidence but a way to stress that a proverb's application is limited to the particular and concrete."

4. *Anachronistic proverbs.* Other proverbs deal with situations, practices or social institutions in an era or a cultural setting in such a way that application of the proverb is no longer valid. In this light 20:20 is worth examining:

If a man curses his father or mother,  
His lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.

While modern society discourages the mistreatment of parents, the OT roundly condemns it. This proverb may be a comment on the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother" (Exod 20:12). The sages obviously believed the flip side of the coin was also true, that the one who cursed a parent would come to no good end (Exod 21:17; Deut 5:16). The "lamp . . . snuffed out" in this proverb is an image of death (Prov 13:9; Job 18:6; 21:17).<sup>42</sup> Though this saying does not refer to a legal situation where children were required to obey parents on penalty of death, the end result is the same (cf. 10:27; 30:17). Regarding 30:17, an eyeball being plucked out by birds would imply a dead body left unburied.<sup>43</sup> Leaving a corpse exposed was the climax of indignity or judgment because the body could then be ravaged by wild animals.<sup>44</sup> Few of the concrete elements of 20:20, 10:27 or 30:17 would have much correspondence to modern situations. Therefore a general principle must be seen at work here if we are to apply the truth of these proverbs. The social situation of this proverb in its original setting reflected a specific cultural idea of parental authority. When there were no social workers, probation officers or organized police force, parents were seen as one of society's highest authorities. So the appearance of sayings and admonitions regarding the positive results of honoring parents and the negative results of disobedience or disrespect should not be surprising.

Along these same lines 19:18 may also be applied:

Discipline your son, for in that there is hope;  
Do not be a willing party to his death.

It is possible that this admonition is set against the background of Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9; Deut 27:16. These passages all contain commands to parents that a child who strikes, curses or dishonors a parent should be put to death, although few scholars see this proverb in a legal setting.<sup>45</sup> The proverb in 19:18 is addressed to parents and encourages the use of proper training so that the extreme punishment designated in the Torah need not ever be carried out. Application of this proverb in its original context would be impossible today in the United States because the laws of the land, both

<sup>42</sup> Hubbard, *Proverbs* 258.

<sup>43</sup> C. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1899) 529.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 14:11; 2 Kgs 9:37; Ps 79:3; Jer 7:33; etc.; see J. Barton Payne, "Burial," *ISBE* 1.556; W. Harold Mare, "Burial," *ZPEB* 1.674.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. Garrett, *Proverbs* 178; but note A. Meinhold, *Die Sprüche* (Zürich: Theologischer, 1992) 2.322.

state and federal, do not allow the death penalty for striking, cursing or dishonoring a parent. In fact, this is not practiced in modern Israel, and there is no record of it being applied in the OT.<sup>46</sup> While the main point of the proverb is the importance of parental discipline, it would be inappropriate to apply the second line of the admonition. The strength of the statement in Hebrew is unmistakable (literally "do not lift yourself up to cause his death").<sup>47</sup> The idea may be present that the lack of discipline may contribute passively to a child's death, but the verb seems to call for a more active meaning.

Other practices or social institutions that are no longer current are those that refer to the casting of lots to determine the future or to decide a course of action (16:33; 18:18), slavery (12:9; 19:10), the monarchy (24:21–22; 25:6–7), and so on. If a proverb addresses a social institution no longer in existence, caution should be exercised when seeking to apply that proverb. The point here is similar to that above regarding situation-specific proverbs. When an ancient proverb addressing the honor due to parents and the punishment for the lack of honor is noted we can immediately see that modern law codes will not allow the application of this proverb. Thus the proverb's function in its original setting is no longer in force.

The four factors just mentioned should caution the modern reader against hardening these sayings or proverbs into dogma<sup>48</sup> as well as encourage sensitivity to the fact that these are proverbs that were current in a culture and society that no longer exists.

5. *The danger of dogmatizing.* The danger of placing too much doctrinal weight on the oversimplifications of Proverbs can be illustrated by the arguments of the three counselors in the book of Job. While it is impossible to be comprehensive in this discussion, we can note that each one tied suffering directly to sin, arguing backward from effect to cause, using statements that sound convincingly "Proverbial."<sup>49</sup> Job was suffering, and therefore he was obviously a sinner, according to his friends. They essentially compartmentalized suffering according to the principles of conventional wisdom, many of which are found in Proverbs, stating that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. This would have been expressed in Job's case by the use of the following syllogism:

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of punishment as prescribed in the law see G. J. Wenham's excellent excursus, "Principles of Punishment in the Pentateuch," *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 281–286.

<sup>47</sup> Hubbard, *Proverbs* 305. Though he points out the strength of the verb Hubbard stops short of placing this prohibition in a legal context. The Hebrew text reads *wē'el-hāmītō 'al-tiššā' nap-šēkā*. The hiphil form of the root *mwt*, "to die," is used in many passages to refer to executions, hence the suggestion for a legal setting (see Lev 20:4; Deut 13:9[MT 10]; 17:7; 1 Kgs 11:40; Jer 26:21, 24; 43:3; etc.).

<sup>48</sup> See Kidner, *Wisdom* 26, for discussion along similar lines. Also helpful in this regard are Murphy, *Tree of Life* 10–13; La Sor *et al.*, *Survey* 557–558.

<sup>49</sup> Kidner, *Wisdom* 117–118, has a short list of statements from the book of Job and observations from Proverbs that sound very much alike.

Sin causes suffering.  
 Job is suffering.  
 Therefore Job sinned.<sup>50</sup>

There are correlations between the arguments of the three friends and the conventional wisdom of Proverbs. Eliphaz encouraged Job to think through his situation in Job 4:7–8, similar to the observations in Prov 14:11; 15:16. The principle of retribution espoused by Eliphaz was carved in stone as far as he was concerned. This idea seems to have the backing of several proverbs and is alluded to in Gal 6:7.<sup>51</sup> The reader of the book of Job, however, knows from the first two chapters that the principle of retribution, though often true, is wrongly applied to Job's situation.

Bildad, in taking the doctrine of retribution to its logical conclusion, explains the death of Job's children in Job 8:4. The implications of his statement are very much like Prov 10:27; 11:19.

We gain very little from the third friend, Zophar, who is the most caustic of the three. Zophar's intent is to denounce Job's disrespect for God (Job 11:3) and warn him of the fate of the wicked (11:20). A similar message is found in Prov 3:33–34.<sup>52</sup> Zophar's concern over Job's spiritual rebellion, though not communicated in a very loving way, led him to call on Job to repent, pray and be restored to fellowship with God (Job 11:13–20). Obviously the reader knows this is not Job's problem at all and can only sympathize with Job as his three friends attempt to help him with their shortsighted views.

Clearly, using individual proverbs to dogmatically categorize every situation goes beyond the intention of the wisdom presented in a proverb.<sup>53</sup> A balanced view of life (along with a complete reading of Proverbs) shows that prosperity is not always the lot of the righteous and the wicked do not always suffer.<sup>54</sup> A proverb can present only a very "narrow slice of reality,"<sup>55</sup> and set in an antithetic format the poetry leaves no room for discussion, elaboration or exceptions. There are no options listed, no shades of gray or disclaimers since a proverb would no longer be a proverb if it carried the weight of so many words.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. F. I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) 201: "The wicked suffer, Job suffers, therefore Job is wicked."

<sup>51</sup> Kidner, *Wisdom* 60, comments: "The New Testament can treat certain words of Eliphaz as Scripture" and then compares Job 5:13 with 1 Cor 3:19; Job 5:17 with Heb 12:5.

<sup>52</sup> The Hebrew words translated "mock" and "mockers" by NIV in Job 11:3; Prov 3:34 are different words. In Job 11:3 the root is *lā'ag*, "to mock, deride." In Prov 3:34 it is *lîš*, "to scorn, mock." See D. E. Garland, "Mock," *ISBE* 3.398–399, for a discussion of the wide range of meanings these words and their synonyms have.

<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to improve on the assessment of Kidner, *Wisdom* 60: "The basic error of Job's friends is that they overestimate their grasp of the truth, misapply the truth they know, and close their minds to any facts that contradict what they assume."

<sup>54</sup> Note Prov 1:11; 6:17; 17:13, 15; 24:16; etc., for statements regarding the suffering of innocent people or the occurrence of injustice in the courts.

<sup>55</sup> Murphy, *Tree of Life* 10.

## III. THE USE OF "PATH" OR "WAY" AS A METAPHOR FOR CONDUCT OR LIFESTYLE

In wisdom literature conduct or lifestyle is often referred to metaphorically as a "path" or "way." The image of traveling or walking down a path, road or way is communicated through a variety of terms, by far the most common of which is *derek*,<sup>56</sup> occurring 75 times in Proverbs alone.<sup>57</sup> According to Norman C. Habel, this term forms the basic or nuclear expression of chaps. 1–9, and "the way" is itself interpreted in 4:11 as the "way of wisdom."<sup>58</sup> Habel draws attention to the duality of the message of the book by examining the symbolism of the "two ways," the "two companions," the "two hearts" and the "two women."

While the noun *derek* is prominent as an image of a "path" or "way," it is not used exclusively. Other terms found in the poetic statements as virtual synonyms are *ʾōrah*, *maʿgāl*, *nētibā*, and so forth.<sup>59</sup> This is an important image in wisdom literature, but it is not limited to the wisdom books. For example, the root *dārak* occurs over 700 times in the OT and in the majority of cases it refers figuratively to human activity in general and not to the concrete sense of a stretch of road.<sup>60</sup>

This metaphor or symbol functioned as a way of communicating concepts that people could readily grasp and understand.<sup>61</sup> The image of a path or road representing life is based on the correspondence or resemblance between the two. As Leland Ryken notes: "Metaphors are bifocal utterances that require looking at two levels of meaning. They are a form of logic in the sense that the comparison between A and B can be validated by ordinary means of logic or observation."<sup>62</sup> In order to comprehend the figurative level one must first be able to grasp the literal. If the correspondence between the two levels of meaning is not clear, the intended lesson of the proverb or saying will be lost. Interpreting a metaphor is dependent on transferring the meaning(s) from one level of meaning to another. Ryken adds: "Whenever a biblical poet speaks in metaphor or simile, he entrusts to the reader the task of completing the process of communication. He leaves it up to the reader to discover how A is like B."<sup>63</sup>

There are two longer passages that will be examined in this respect, along with a few other individual proverbs. The first passage under consideration is 1:8–19. It is important in the current discussion because it immediately

<sup>56</sup> H. Wolf, "*dārak*," *TWOT* 1.197. The noun is based on a root meaning "to tread, trample" (p. 196).

<sup>57</sup> K. Koch, A. Haldar and H. Ringgren, "*derek*," *TDOT* 3.286.

<sup>58</sup> N. C. Habel, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9," *Int* 26 (1972) 133.

<sup>59</sup> See Koch *et al.*, "*derek*" 276–282, for a discussion of these and related words. As Koch points out, there is no comprehensive, systematic study of this (p. 270).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 276.

<sup>61</sup> A metaphor is an implied comparison, while a symbol is something that represents something else or points to a reality beyond itself.

<sup>62</sup> L. Ryken, "I Have Used Similitudes: The Poetry of the Bible," *BSac* 147 (1990) 263.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 264.

follows the title (1:1), purpose (1:2–6) and theme (1:7) of the book.<sup>64</sup> Even though the word *derek* does not occur in these verses the stage is being set for it by the use of the extremes in 1:7, which introduce the basic polarity of the entire book of Proverbs: the way of the wise and the way of the fool.<sup>65</sup>

Following the theme is the first instruction of the book, which uses an illustration of ambushing unwary travelers along a *nētibâ* (“path,” 1:15), usually thought of as a lesser traveled byway.<sup>66</sup> The “two ways” here are illustrated by the results in the lives of those who choose to follow either of the two roads.

In 1:8–9 the poem begins with a call to attention (*šēma*<sup>c</sup>, “hear”) and an instructional address (*bēnî*, “my son”), followed by a motive clause beginning with the preposition *kî* (“for,” “indeed”), where the reward for following wise instruction is likened to a garland and a chain. In 1:10 the instructional address “my son” is repeated with the prohibition against joining in with “sinners” who entice others to go with them. The purpose of the invitation is given in an extended imagined quote found in 1:11–14. The instructional address “my son” appears once more in 1:15 and precedes another set of prohibitions against following the way or path of those who would waylay innocent travelers in order to live off the spoils, thus avoiding the hard work of survival that people living in agrarian societies faced. A motive clause begins 1:16–17, further explaining the foolishness of following a criminal lifestyle since the reward to the brigands is boomerang justice. Their actions will come back upon them, the two verbs in 1:18 being from the same roots as those in 1:11.<sup>67</sup>

Hence choosing to follow wise instruction, while less glamorous and exciting, has positive rewards. But the one who is enticed by the call of the ruffians to attain wealth without work in 1:11–14 will meet with severe consequences.<sup>68</sup> The repeated use of the first-person-plural pronouns shows the peer pressure exerted on young people that can be so alluring. This instruction was likely aimed at those whose lot in life might be farming or some other occupation that was tame, or less lucrative, by comparison.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Meinhold, *Sprüche* 1.46–50, calls these elements *Überschrift*, *Vorspruch* and *Motto*. Garrett calls 1:1 the title and 1:2–7 the prologue (*Proverbs* 66–67). This passage will be addressed below.

<sup>65</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs* 68.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Jer 18:15; Habel, “Symbolism” 137.

<sup>67</sup> The roots are <sup>c</sup>*arab*, “to lie in wait, ambush” (see V. P. Hamilton, *TWOT* 1.68), and *šapan*, “to hide, conceal,” which often carries with it a definite purpose, either for protection or for sinister reasons (see J. E. Hartley, *TWOT* 2.774).

<sup>68</sup> The issue of retribution, which forms a large part of the thought behind the wisdom literature and is first implied here in Proverbs, has already been mentioned in the previous section. A comprehensive treatment would be too vast in a study of limited scope such as this. For a recent analysis see L. Boström, *The God of the Sages* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1990) 90–140. For a discussion of this issue in its broader ancient Near Eastern setting see J. H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 180–189.

<sup>69</sup> Other proverbs that promote the value and reward of work are 10:4–5; 12:14; 14:23; 27:18, 23–27; 28:19; etc.

A second passage that clearly illustrates the doctrine of the “two ways” by use of the metaphor of a “path” or “way” is 4:10–19. In this poem the vocabulary of a journey is the dominating feature, with two paths or ways set before the reader by the use of *derek* (4:11 twice; 4:14, 19), *ma<sup>c</sup>gāl* (4:11) and *ʿōrah* (4:14, 18), as well as verbs of motion, movement or traveling.<sup>70</sup> The way of wisdom is described in 4:10–13, beginning with a call to attention and an instructional address (4:10a) identical to the same elements in 1:8. Then there is an admonition to accept the teaching about to be offered and some results of doing so (4:10b–12), followed by a series of tightly knit imperatives in 4:13–15. The first three (4:13) are positive in nature and admonish the pupil to take hold of instruction, followed by a motive clause containing *kī* (“for”). The imperatives in 4:14–15 are negative in nature, being prohibitions against walking in the way or path of the wicked. These too are followed by a motive clause in 4:16–17 (also beginning with *kī*) explaining the reasons for the prohibitions. Concluding this instructional poem, the two paths are compared in 4:18–19.<sup>71</sup> As in the first chapter, criminal activities tied to violence (4:17) are warned against. The results show the wisdom or folly of the two paths ahead. One choice leads to a journey free of obstacles (4:12). The other leads to wickedness, violence (4:17) and stumbling along a dark path (4:19).

In a society that traveled primarily on foot the metaphor of the path or way functioned as an illustration of everyday living. The importance of making good choices on a journey through a wilderness was obvious. The wrong choice could lead at best to delays until the proper path could be relocated and at worst to becoming hopelessly lost and victimized by predators or bandits, and possibly death. In this light “to stumble” (*kāšal*) is one of the most serious consequences of walking on the wrong path. In sparsely settled, lightly traveled regions a fall leading to an injury such as a severe sprain or a broken bone could virtually be a death sentence.<sup>72</sup> Other proverbs that use the metaphor of a path to communicate the value of right conduct are 12:28; 16:25, 29; 15:24; 22:6. While 12:28 has generated some discussion over the translation of the second line<sup>73</sup> it can be noted that the journey depicted here may be one of temporal existence without reference to eternal life. If so, the issue in this proverb is one of safety, using the metaphor of travel to teach the value of righteousness.

A very similar idea is present in 15:24:

The path (*ʿōrah*) of life leads upward for the wise  
To keep him from going down to the grave.

<sup>70</sup> See Hubbard, *Proverbs* 84. W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 306, entitles this poem “The Two Ways.” Cf. also the comments of R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 78.

<sup>71</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs* 67.

<sup>72</sup> Note other occurrences of *kāšal* in 4:12, 16, 19; 16:18; 24:16–17; *nāpal* “to fall” in 11:5, 14, 28; 13:17; 17:20; 22:14; 28:14; etc.

<sup>73</sup> See McKane, *Proverbs* 450–452; M. J. Dahood, “Immortality in Prov. 12.28,” *Bib* 41 (1960) 176–181. The issue is the understanding of *ʿal māwet*, literally “no death.”

Again the motif of life as a journey shows through here, with some scholars allowing for hints of the afterlife,<sup>74</sup> although *šēʾōl* is probably better rendered “grave” (NIV) or transliterated “Sheol” (NASB, RSV, NRSV). Whether the “two ways” end in a temporal setting or an eternal destiny is an open question, but it is certain that the teaching method here is the use of “path” as a metaphor for daily living (see also 16:25, 29; 22:6).

Each of these proverbs can function easily in both the metaphorical sphere or in the literal sense. The actions of someone taking a wrong fork in a road that later leads to their death, or being enticed into a criminal lifestyle, show the flexibility of individual proverbs to function at more than one level of meaning.<sup>75</sup> Here the use of “path” or “way” metaphorically illustrates the activities of everyday life. But at another level it can function in a concrete sense, showing the danger in youths allowing a criminal to talk them into following the lifestyle of a highway robber.

#### IV. THE DIDACTIC PURPOSES OF PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs begins by telling us its purpose. Following the heading in 1:1, the purpose of the book is given in 1:2–6. This passage shows (1) the multifaceted nature of wisdom by piling up an impressive array of synonyms: discipline (*mūsār*), insight (*binā*), wise behavior (*haskēl*, translated “prudent life” in NIV), prudence (*ormā*), knowledge (*daʿat*), discretion (*mēzimmā*), learning (*leqaḥ*), guidance (*taḥbūlōt*);<sup>76</sup> (2) the moral character of wisdom: righteousness (*šedeq*), justice (*mišpāt*), fairness (*mēšārīm*); (3) the target audience: the simple (*pētāʾim*), the young (*naʿar*), the one who is wise (*ḥākām*), the discerning one (*nābôn*); and (4) the teaching techniques: proverb (*māšāl*), parable (*mēlišā*), sayings of the wise (*dibrē ḥākāmim*), riddles (*ḥīdōt*).<sup>77</sup>

The book of Proverbs is, in the final analysis, a book of education. It may be more accurate, however, to refer to it as training rather than formal education since our knowledge of this process in ancient Israel is sparse. Modern scholarship is limited to drawing conclusions from implications rather than from direct references in the OT,<sup>78</sup> but it seems necessary to posit some type of training process, whether formal or informal, to account for the government scribes, secretaries, and so forth, listed in 2 Sam 8:15–18; 20:23–26; 1 Kgs 4:1–6 who would have kept official records as well as the literature that arose from ancient Israel.<sup>79</sup> Along with the lists of officials

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Hubbard, *Proverbs* 329; McKane, *Proverbs* (with reservations) 480; A. P. Ross, “Proverbs,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (ed. F. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 5.998–999. Kidner disagrees, saying, “Life after death lies beyond the horizon of Proverbs”; see his “Subject Study: Life and Death,” *Proverbs* 53–56.

<sup>75</sup> Note the comments of Murphy, *Tree of Life* 21, in this regard.

<sup>76</sup> See Hubbard, *Proverbs* 45–46, for a brief explanation of these terms.

<sup>77</sup> This breakdown of Prov 1:2–6 is adapted and expanded from D. A. Hubbard, “Proverbs, Book of,” *ISBE* 3.1015.

<sup>78</sup> The first reference to a school in Israel is found in the noncanonical Sir 51:23: *bēt midrāš*.

<sup>79</sup> For discussion of these officials see R. F. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 3.910–913, 1049–1050; S. J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC 12; Waco: Word, 1985) 69–70.

the work of the "men of Hezekiah" (Prov 25:1) and the influence of the *Teaching of Amenemope*, an Egyptian school text, show the possibilities of formal training.<sup>80</sup> But a great deal of this is still hypothetical, since much of the evidence for schools must be drawn from analogies with what is known to have existed in Egypt and Mesopotamia. It would seem that some sort of training would have been required to support the government bureaucracy developed by David and Solomon.<sup>81</sup>

The references in Proverbs to behavior in the royal court, though comparatively few, may be an indication that collections of proverbs were part of the training given to young men in preparation for government service.<sup>82</sup>

If the above is correct, it should stand to reason that the didactic purpose behind the book of Proverbs is one of the chief reasons for the doctrine of the "two ways." If the ancient Israelite teacher's purpose was to see students succeed in life, then drawing clear lines between good and bad choices would have been of utmost importance.<sup>83</sup> The choices offered are deliberately set up to impress on the youthful audience the possible dangers of taking the wrong path and the rewards of walking the way of the righteous. Making good choices was important for everyone, but even more so for those who served in official capacities.

The idea of the "two ways" is not limited to the book of Proverbs or the other literature of the ancient Hebrews. The concept is also in Deut 30:15–20, Jer 21:8 and Psalm 1, as well as in Gilgamesh 10:11 and the Egyptian Hymn to the Aten.<sup>84</sup>

One of the purposes of Proverbs according to 1:5 is to give "guidance," or "the art of steering."<sup>85</sup> Navigating over the difficult terrain of Israel provided background for the illustrations used in Proverbs for dealing with the journey of life. Proverbs were intended to guide a young person around and

<sup>80</sup> J. A. Wilson, "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet," *ANET* 421–424. See J. Ruffle, "The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs," *TynBul* 28 (1977) 34, for its school setting, and note McKane, *Proverbs* 108. See Murphy, *Tree of Life* 23–25, 165–168; Kidner, *Wisdom* 44–45, for a more general discussion.

<sup>81</sup> See Murphy, *Tree of Life* 5; Dearman, *Religion* 202–203; A. Lemaire, "Education (Israel)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2.305–312, for evidence of educational training. The debate on this continues. The best evidence for schools in ancient Israel remains the argument from analogy and the inferences drawn from the lists of officials in Samuel and Kings. For a summary and bibliography see J. L. Crenshaw, "Education in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 104 (1985) 601–615.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. 14:28, 35; 16:10, 12, 13, 14, 15; 17:7; 19:10, 12; 20:2, 8, 26, 28; 21:1; see Hubbard, *Proverbs* 26–27, 245–253; J. L. Crenshaw, "Proverbs, Book of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5.518, who says that the monarchy brought a need for "a professional class of courtiers equipped to handle the complex affairs of state on behalf of royalty" and that these courtiers may also have had the responsibility for educating young princes.

<sup>83</sup> La Sor *et al.*, *Survey*, comment: "Hebrew wisdom is the art of success, and Proverbs is a guidebook for successful living" (p. 547).

<sup>84</sup> See E. A. Speiser, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," *ANET* 93; J. A. Wilson, "The Hymn to the Aton," *ANET* 371.

<sup>85</sup> McKane (*Proverbs* 266) connects this word with *hābal* "to bind," the noun *hebel* meaning "rope." He says its more precise association is to navigational skills. According to H. J. Fabry, *TDOT* 4.178, the root can also be used to refer to a sailor, i.e. "one who pulls the rope" in order to steer a vessel. The word can also be found in 11:14; 12:5; 20:18; 24:6.

through the obstacles found along the way as various forks in the road were encountered. The message was not limited to the young, however. In the first chapter, where the purposes for the book are delineated, the one who has acquired wisdom and understanding is targeted along with the naive and the youth (1:4–5). In Proverbs *hokmâ* is always life skill, the ability of individuals to conduct their lives in the best possible way and to the best possible effect. This shows that the quest for wisdom and a well-managed life is never-ending.<sup>86</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

After examining the poetic format in which proverbs are expressed, we can conclude that they are by nature and design intended to address only a thin slice of reality. Individual proverbs have no intention to cover the whole range of issues and options that may arise from any particular situation. The limitations imposed on them due to their literary format should lead the modern reader to be wary of forcing a proverb to say everything at once. This limitation also cautions us not to dogmatize concerning the proverbs, as if they are commandments. To the one who would do this we need only point to Prov 26:4–5 (see above). Neither of these prohibitions can be true at all times, since they encourage opposite actions. Their particular observations on wise behavior are true only in the situations wherein they apply. This may be the reason why they were placed next to each other. Part of wisdom is knowing not only what to do but also when, as can be seen in 27:14, where doing the right thing at the wrong hour can be just as bad as doing wrong.

It was also observed that antithetic parallelism, so useful to the ancient sages for pointing out the potential dangers of living as a fool or the possible blessings of founding one's life on the fear of Yahweh, shows the basics, but not often the exceptions. In dealing with polar opposites such as wisdom and folly, righteousness and wickedness, and the like, the sage had no better way of expressing the contrast than to couch the saying antithetically. The predominantly binary nature of the literary format allowed for a very limited expression of possibilities. The use of antithetic parallelism in a proverb dealing with personal or public behavior stresses the importance of choosing correctly in order to avoid the fate of those who do not. The pedagogical intention is to mark clearly the differences between wise/righteous and foolish/wicked behavior and the consequences of each.<sup>87</sup> The expression of the "two ways" was never intended to teach that all people could be classified in strict categories.

The motif of life as a journey was one of the most prominent aspects of the sages' teaching methods. Virtually everyone can understand the dangers

<sup>86</sup> Whybray, *Proverbs* 4. The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmâ*, which has "skill" as one of its basic meanings; see L. Goldberg, "*hokmâ*," *TWOT* 1.283. H.-P. Müller, "*hākām*," *TDOT* 4.378, ties it to the idea of craftsmanship.

<sup>87</sup> Hubbard, *Proverbs* 19.

involved in getting lost or injured while traveling. Though modern society travels more by automobile or aircraft than on foot, many sermon illustrations are drawn from the realm of travel because most people can relate not only to the concreteness of the illustration but also the spiritual lesson behind it. Traveling across Israel's rough terrain provided a graphic backdrop for illustrating the difficulties of life.

Finally, part of the didactic purposes of the sages was to see young people develop life skills. When a young person is being instructed in a pursuit as complicated as living successfully the place to begin is with the simple and gradually move to the complex. Anyone who has ever tried to acquire a life skill such as, for example, a foreign language can verify the fact of exceptions to rules. And like learning a foreign language or any other skill, the basics must be mastered before the exceptions are approached. So the simplified statements of Proverbs are not intended to define hard and fast categories. Making the right choice obvious is part of a proverb's intent. It places the issues in black-and-white statements so those who are being trained can begin the process of successful living, with their relationship with Yahweh always in view.

In every situation or action that is considered, the implied and underlying question in Proverbs is the matter of counting the cost: "Is this wisdom or folly?"<sup>88</sup> This is the basic polarity of the book as reflected by the theme in 1:7.

The wisdom taught in the book of Proverbs is not shrewdness, cunning or intelligence any more than foolishness is portrayed as mental deficiency.<sup>89</sup> Wisdom is based on a relationship in covenant with Yahweh,<sup>90</sup> and all that is done must be evaluated in light of it. The "two ways" in Proverbs encourages those who are on life's journey to walk in a manner pleasing to God—in essence, "to acknowledge him in all our ways so he can direct our path."

<sup>88</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs* 13.

<sup>89</sup> Kidner, "Subject Study: The Fool," *Proverbs* 39–42, esp. 40.

<sup>90</sup> D. A. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," *TynBul* 17 (1966) 3–33; Parsons, "Guidelines" 154; H. Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom," *TynBul* 28 (1977) 24.