CHAPTER 1

Proverbs

Jacqueline Vayntrub

Introduction

The book of Proverbs is a multifaceted collection of instructions, allegorical poetry, sayings, and riddles, with many of its aphorisms and themes making their way into Jewish and Christian liturgical traditions. The reception of this work in biblical scholarship has greatly influenced the study of biblical wisdom literature as well as theories of biblical poetry. The following overview covers the predominantly canonical lens through which Proverbs has been received in scholarship and how this lens has shaped the scholarly category of biblical wisdom literature. Throughout, the overview considers the form and content of texts contained within Proverbs against the background of ancient Near Eastern instructional literature, as well as various themes explored in Proverbs, such as speech, skill, deception, beauty, desire, and the acquisition of wisdom. A single, unifying form, principle of organization, or thematic focus cannot be identified for the book of Proverbs. However, the broader ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean literary genre of the “instruction” – as well as the relationship between instructor and student (frequently, father and son) which this genre configures and also the promises and obligations implied by the genre – can contextualize much of what is found formally and thematically in the book of Proverbs.
Organization and Presentation

As a collection of poetry, the book of Proverbs is in some ways comparable in its most superficial presentation as a text to other collections of poetry found in the Writings of the Hebrew Bible. Narratives in the Hebrew Bible, like Ruth and Esther, are organized through the chronology of unfolding events and a narrative voice (Vayntrub 2018). Poetry in the Hebrew Bible is either presented within a story in the voice of speaking characters or it is outside of a narrative framework, organized in collections. A good example of such a collection of poetry, where the organization follows a principle rather than the chronological sequence of events is the book of Psalms. Like Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations, the book of Proverbs can be seen as a collection of self-contained poetic units. But unlike these works, and therefore unique within the Hebrew Bible, the book of Proverbs presents itself as a collection of collections. As an anthology that brings together units attributed to individuals other than its titular King Solomon – for example, “The Wise” in 24:23 (and reconstructed in 22:17) and “King Lemuel” in 30:1 – the book of Proverbs resembles Psalms in its presentation. In Psalms, there are 150 more or less self-contained poems, many with titles that attribute and dedicate them to a variety of figures, such as David, Solomon, Sons of Korah, and Asaph. But while in the Masoretic version, the Psalter is divided into five books (Psalms 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150), there is little other than the closing doxological statements of each “book” within the Hebrew Psalter (for example, at 41:13, 72:19, etc.) to identify these as independent collections (Kraus 1988, 16–20). By contrast, the collections brought together in the book of Proverbs, whether or not these were in fact originally independent collections, the titles and distinct attributions framing these sections give the sense that Proverbs brings together a variety of preexisting collections. This is because while each “book” of the Hebrew Psalter indicates a division between sections, the individual psalms are still self-contained and delimited poems with their own individual titles and attributions. The comparison to the manner in which Proverbs is presented – since both of these works are collections bearing multiple titles and attributions – helps to contextualize what ancient authors and readers may have understood in the organization of these texts. The various sections of Proverbs – Chapters 1–9; 10:1–22:16; 22:17–24:22; 24:23–34; 25–29; 30; 31:1–9; and the alphabetic acrostic in 31:10–31 – are designated by initial titles attributing the respective sections to a variety of figures. The rearrangement of these sections by the Septuagint (in which the book is ordered 1:1–24:34; 30:1–31:9; 25–29; and the alphabetic acrostic in 31:10–31) only reinforces the sense that these sections are self-contained collections, delineated by their framing title (see also Chapter 8 in this volume). The Sections “Proverbs and the Question of Solomonic attribution” and “Sections of Proverbs” below will deal with the distinction between the Masoretic and Septuagint arrangements of the collections and offer some suggestions as to what these different arrangements might communicate to readers.
The title for the work in 1:1 in Hebrew is a framing statement of attribution similar to those found in Eccl. 1:1, Song 1:1, and various psalms. The title is translated simply in nearly all English Bible translations as “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel,” which is where the common English title for the work, “Proverbs,” seems to derive. How we ended up with “Proverbs” as the work’s title is a bit more complex than a straightforward translation of the Hebrew into English may appear. The Hebrew term translated for “proverbs” is mishle, the first word of the entire work. First words, or “incipits,” functioned frequently as the titles of works in antiquity. Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets written in Sumerian and Akkadian were often identified by their incipits, a practice that continues in our reference to some of these more famous works today. For example, the Babylonian epic of creation, Enuma Elish (meaning “When above”), is named for the opening two words of the work. This practice continues in the biblical literary tradition as well, where Genesis is referred to in Hebrew, for example, as Bereshit, Lamentations is called Eicha, and Song of Songs as Shir HaShirim, etc. However, this is not a consistent practice. A number of works are named in Hebrew for their protagonists (e.g. Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Job) or main speakers (e.g. most of the latter prophets, Qoheleth), while others are named for their contents (Psalms, as Tehillim, and Chronicles, as Divre HaYamim). The Hebrew title for the book of Proverbs is an intersection of the practice of naming a work by its incipit and a term that in some way designates the work’s contents. The Hebrew term mishle often translated in English as “proverbs of,” is the plural construct form of the term mashal. However a brief study of how the incipit mishle shelomoh has been translated by the Greek and Latin versions gives a glimpse into the complicated past lying behind the English title for the work. The translation of mashal as “proverb” is not reflective of the term’s usage in Biblical Hebrew more broadly. The term is used in three titles in the work, always attributed to Solomon, in 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1. English “proverb” might be an appropriate description of the numerous brief prosodic sayings in Chapters 10:1–22:16 and 25–29. An accepted broad definition of “proverb” among folklorists is that they are “traditional expressions in which there is a topic and a comment” (Vayntrub 2019b). However, the material that the term mashal is meant to describe in chapters 1–9 could hardly account for the type of texts found there: father-to-son instructions interspersed by poetic interludes on Lady Wisdom and her adversary, Lady Folly.

The book’s title in English appears to derive from the Latin Vulgate but not from the work’s incipit in that translation, since in 1:1, mishle is translated parabolae. The Latin title, proverbium (later appearing in the Douay-Rheims 1582 English translation of the Vulgate as “Proverbs”), appears to derive from the incipit of the Greek version, the Septuagint, which gives the term paroimiai. The Septuagint, as mentioned, attests a distinct organization from the Masoretic text. It varies in its titles for the various collections, and so where the Hebrew has two distinct titles in 1:1 and 10:1, defining these two sections as distinct collections, the Greek has only the one title in 1:1, with no heading in 10:1. Therefore the title in 1:1 governs the entirety
of 1:1–22:16, that is, until a separate title is given in 22:17 identifying it as a new section: logos sophôn, “The Words of the Wise.” But the Greek does not consistently translate mishle in the titles for sections of Proverbs as paroimiai. This leads us to conclude that the title Proverbs for the entire work – first paroimiai, as incipit in the Septuagint for all of 1:1–22:16, next as in the Vulgate title, yet in the work’s incipit in 1:1, and subsequently as “proverbs” in English – as we have received it, is the result of ancient and early modern reception of the work as mostly, but not entirely, comprising proverbial statements. As discussed below, an accurate translation of the Hebrew mishle, given this complex history and the way the term is used in the rest of the biblical text “proverbial statements,” but is not limited to this translation. A better translation would be “saying” or even “instruction.”

While many have focused on the Solomonic attribution to Proverbs, discussed below, equal if not more attention should be given to Proverbs’ anthological and multivocal character. As a collection of multiple collections, attributed not only to Solomon, but to a slew of abstract, unknown, or obscure characters such as “The Wise,” “Agur,” and “King Lemuel,” the work reads distinctly, if not intentionally, as a curated, irreducible collection of the best of ancient advice.

Proverbs and the Question of Solomonic Attribution

How might we understand the attribution of Proverbs to Solomon in 1:1, as well as his appearance in 10:1 and 25:1? The first hint as to how we might understand the Solomonic attribution in Proverbs is understanding Solomon’s character in the Deuteronomistic History – his gift for wisdom, his penchant for excess, and in particular, his performance of many sayings. To understand the array of Solomonic ideals evoked in the attribution in Proverbs, we must first outline how Solomon’s literary character integrates his divine gifts of wisdom, his material success and penchant for excess, and the collection of speech-items such as the mashal (see also Chapter 9 in this volume).

In 1 Kings, as David is on his deathbed, he instructs his son Solomon who is to succeed him to “walk according to [God’s] ways,” to follow his laws in order to find success, that this path will lead to an eternal dynasty (1 Kgs. 2:1–4). While the language echoes Deuteronomy (“with all of their mind and all of their being,” e.g. 6:5), the description of behavior as a “path” also recalls much of the language and thematic focus on walkways and correct action in Proverbs. Shortly after Solomon assumes the throne of his father David, the Israelite deity appears to Solomon at night. The Deity grants Solomon a wish, to which Solomon responds by affirming the continuity of relationship between the king and the Deity from the previous generation to the present. Solomon laments his youth and lack of knowledge and requests “a wise and discerning mind” from the Deity, who bestows this unto him, in addition to the traditional rewards of wisdom: long life, material wealth, and
glory (a weighty reputation). These rewards, the Deity says, are granted so long as Solomon walks according to God’s ways (3:14).

It is on this background, on the knowledge of Solomon’s gifted wisdom and success, that his great achievements are enumerated in 1 Kings 5, in particular, how his great wisdom manifested itself. The Israelite deity “granted Solomon wisdom and great discernment, and a mind as vast as the grains of sand on the seashore,” (5:9). It is particularly the description of Solomon’s breadth of mind (leb) that contextualizes the Solomonic attribution in Proverbs. Only a few verses later, Solomon is described – among the many of his enumerated excesses in this chapter – as having performed “3000 mashal” and that “his shir (songs) numbered 1005” (5:12).

This excess of speech is, in fact, directly related to his “breadth of mind,” in that speech-items, like instructions, are stored and collected in the body. Speech, as text-like instructions, is described in Proverbs as an object that is transmitted from the teacher to the passive, attentive student without any alteration. These instructions are attributed with life-protecting properties, and described as amulets, necklaces, or objects fastened around one’s head or fingers. In Prov. 3:3, the instructed son is told “Do not let devotion and fidelity forsake you, tie them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your mind” (emphasis added). Not only are these instructions life-saving, and amulet-like, they are also collected in the leb, the mind. Likewise, Prov. 7:3 instructs the son to “Tie them,” that is, the words of the teacher, “around your fingers, write them on the tablet of your mind” (emphasis added). Throughout the father to son instructions of Proverbs 1–9, the mind (leb) is where these instructions are stored, fully intact. A particularly rich literary tradition of Solomon as an exemplary collector of instructions, one whose mind is broad enough to contain vast numbers of mashal, is evoked in the attribution to him in the titles of Proverbs.

While the narrative background evoked by these titles seems more or less clear, the actual role Solomon plays both in these titles – as well as in 1 Kgs. 5:12 as the speaker of many mashal – requires some further discussion. In ancient reception of this title, as early as the second century CE, Solomon was understood to be the work’s author. Traditionally, Solomon is connected to three works: Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth). Origen explained that Solomon first “taught” morals in Proverbs, the course of nature in Ecclesiastes, and loving communion with God in Song of Songs (Wright 2005, 287; Greer 1979, 217, 219). In Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1.6, the pattern of three is extended to the works themselves. Solomon was believed to have spoken – not authored in the contemporary sense – three sets of mashal in Proverbs (according to the Hebrew titles framing chapters 1–9; 10–22:16; 25–29); three “vanities” in Ecclesiastes (hebel as one, and habalim as two or more); and three “songs” in Song of Songs (shir as one, and shirim as two or more). There was even speculation among the rabbis as to which of these three works came first in the course of Solomon’s lifetime, with Ecclesiastes as the work of Solomon’s old age, and Proverbs as either first, according to the order in
1 Kgs. 5:12 (*mashal*, then *shir*), or as the mark of mature wisdom, coming after his youthful songs (Vayntrub 2019b, 26–27). Modern biblical scholarship, however, does not find historical value in the Solomonic attributions; as one scholar notes, “[they are] of a fanciful kind, surely marked by legendary tendencies, useful for canonical consideration, but out of which no certain historical judgement can be made” (Brueggemann 1990, 118–19; see also Vayntrub 2019b, 183–84). Another writes, “Historically, it is improbable that many – if any – of the proverbs were written by Solomon,” but adds, “Solomon was famed as an author of wisdom” (Fox 2000, 56). The important distinction, therefore, to make in understanding the attribution of Proverbs and its sections to Solomon is that while the titles should not be looked at as historical claims to actual Solomonic authorship, the titles themselves are not unimportant elements of the composition.

In fact, when seen outside of the category of authorship, and in alignment with ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean practices of text production, it becomes clear that attribution designates not authorship, in the modern sense, but a blend of literary genre designations, narrative situating of non-narrative texts, and broad characterization of legendary voices (Vayntrub 2018). Solomon, for example, functions in the title of Proverbs as a figure of wisdom, just as David functions in Psalms as a figure of prayer. As legendary voices framing non-narrative collections, the poems are resituated in a broad literary context that evokes the narrative biography of these characters, or in the words of Eva Mroczek (2016, 75), the work done by attribution is more biography than bibliography.

Two important pieces of evidence lend themselves towards this reading. The first is simply the way Solomon is described in 1 Kgs. 5:12 as the figure associated with *mashal* and *shir*: he is said to have spoken them, not written them. Related to this notion is a text, known as “David’s Compositions,” found in the Psalms scroll from Qumran. The text, identified by scholars as 11QPs² XXVII, describes David’s compositional activity in very similar phrasing as Solomon’s performance and compositional activity in 1 Kgs. 5:12. The text states that “David the son of Jesse was wise,” that “Yahweh gave him a discerning spirit,” and that he “composed three thousand six hundred psalms.” A further accounting is given in this text enumerating David’s composition of “song” (*shir*), a total of 450. Altogether, the text enumerates 4050 compositions of David. In 1 Kgs. 5:12, Solomon is credited with 4005 total compositions – 45 fewer than the number David claims in the Psalms scroll. Beyond the clear competition between the compositional activity of Solomon and David set up by this remarkable text in the Psalms Scroll, we should note that David is not only appropriating Solomon’s “wisdom and discernment” in claiming success; David is also appropriating Solomon’s characteristic excess in the process: to be a Solomonic voice, one must configure oneself as a prolific voice. As one scholar helpfully describes, wisdom in the biblical literary tradition has an “anthological temper” (Kugel 1997). Proverbs, in its curation of multiple collections of self-contained instructions, allegories, riddles, and advice, evokes this characteristic prolific
notion – a Solomon with a mind as vast as the sands on the seashore, containing and giving voice to multitudes.

A second reason to understand Solomonic attribution, and attribution in bibli-cal texts more generally, as reflections of literary practices rather than actual historical claims, is that ancient scribes frequently attributed their texts to much older, possibly fictional, figures of renown. This was especially the case with Egyptian and Mesopotamian instruction texts. Naming the text for a famed figure from the hoary past did not simply authorize the advice for its readers, it provided a narrative frame for the advice. These were not disembodied bits of wisdom collected up on one tablet or sheet of papyrus, they were the displaced words of known figures of wisdom spoken to a passive listening son. Their advice, which had led them to considerable success, was therefore reliable in a similar way. Mesopotamian instruction texts, such as the Instructions of Shuruppak, and Šimâ Milka, and Egyptian instruction texts, such as the Instruction of Prince Hardjedef, Instruction to Kagemni, the Instruction of Ptahhotep, the Instruction of Amenemope, and the Instruction of Ani, frame their advice as speech from a famed father to his son – often hailing from a period much earlier than the work’s composition, and in the case of the Instructions of Shuruppak, featuring altogether literary characters: Shuruppak’s son Ziusudra who is the recipient of his father’s wisdom in the text, was also, according to the Sumerian flood account, the figure whose wisdom enabled his survival and immortality (see Chapters 17 and 18 in this volume). The notion that Proverbs’ Solomonic attribution is either an indication of authorship or otherwise a false historical claim neglects these rich dimensions of compositional practices in biblical and wider ancient Near Eastern literary traditions.

The distinct arrangement of Proverbs in the Septuagint is in itself significant for considering both the anthological nature of the work and its Solomonic attributions. Some scholars have seen the Septuagint’s arrangement and titles as privileging a notion of Solomonic authorship and resisting the multivocality of the distinct sections attributed to other characters (Fox 2000, 56; Cook 2012, 94). It has been argued, in particular, that the Septuagint order of the work may have been a deliberate change in the Greek translation for the specific purpose of promoting Solomon as the work’s primary compositional figure. It remains, however, a curiosity of Proverbs that Solomon, the work’s patron, never appears beyond the titles, and even from these titles, never speaks. This stands in contrast to ancient Near Eastern instruction texts, where as an authorizing feature of the text’s frame the named instructor speaks his wisdom for the benefit of his student. In this sense, the Solomonic figure remains even more distant in Proverbs than he does in Song of Songs, where Solomon is directly addressed by one of the speakers in 8:12, or in Ecclesiastes, where the main speaker, Qoheleth, is never Solomon by name but a former king and son of King David who frequently evokes a Solomonic voice.
Sections of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs, if divided by its headings, can be seen as a compilation of at least eight discrete sections. Following the order of the Hebrew these are: (i) chapters 1–9, “proverbs of Solomon”; (ii) 10–22:16, “proverbs of Solomon”; (iii) 22:17–24:22, “words of the wise”; (iv) 24:23–34, “also words of the wise”; (v) 25–29, “also proverbs of Solomon...transcribed by Hezekiah’s men”; (vi) 30, “words of Agur”; (vii) 31:1–9, “words of Lemuel,” an instruction issued by his mother; (viii) 31:10–31, the alphabetic acrostic poem of the “Woman of Valor.” While the final section does not bear its own heading as the others do, it is a clearly self-contained work in its alphabetic structure, with the first line beginning with aleph and the final line beginning with the letter tav. As previously noted, the title of the third section, 22:17–24:22, is not found in the Hebrew in v. 17 but is found in the Greek.

“Proverbs of Solomon” as Instruction and Allegory (Prov. 1–9)

This initial section can be described as a series of 10 father-to-son instructions, framed by an initial statement of purpose (1:2–7), and interspersed with five poems that do not take the form of instruction but rather the form of extended imagery of personified Wisdom, Folly, and their respective benefits and dangers. As Fox outlines in his commentary, the 10 instructions follow a particular shared structure that can be compared to Egyptian and Mesopotamian instructions (Fox 2000). They begin with a call to attention in which the relationship between the speaker (the father) and the addressee (the son) is identified. The father usually begins, therefore, with a vocative “My son!” or “My children!” A command that the addressee listens usually follows, along with the speaker’s identification of the source of the advice, “My son, listen to my words,” and once as advice that the speaker had himself received from his father (4:1–4). In the case of the latter, it is unclear whether the words spoken are those of the speaker or a quotation of words his own father had spoken to him. Perhaps such a distinction, in the context of transmitted instruction, is unnecessary in any case, since instruction transmission in biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature appears to be shaped by an underlying concept of the unaltered and complete transmission of words from one generation to the next (Vayntrub 2019a). The instruction’s “call to attention” continues with a claim of the potential benefits of the instruction to the addressee, often a praise of its life-preserving qualities. The instructions in Proverbs 1–9 do not identify specific situations but tend to speak in generalities, for example, that the son not be lured into criminal behavior (1:8–19), the path and benefits of wisdom (2:1–22; 3:1–12; 3:21–35), and the distinct attitudes one should have towards good and bad choices (4:1–9; vv. 10–19; vv. 20–27). These more general instructions on behavioral choices, described as paths, lead to instructions on correct choice of women—to
choose one’s own wife and not be seduced by desire of the wife of another (5:1–23), and how the incorrect choice will lead to death (6:20–35). Anne Stewart (2016, 3) has argued that Proverbs, particularly in this section, uses not only message but poetic form to shape “emotions, motivations, desires, and imagination, not simply [one’s] rational capacities.” Stewart shows how the poetic compositions, particularly the personifications of Wisdom and Folly, hone desire and shape choice using extended imagery and activating visualization through language. These messages as well as these rhetorical techniques are resumed and reconfigured in the acrostic poem concluding the work, in 31:10–31.

“Proverbs of Solomon” as Pithy Statements (Prov. 10–22:16)

While this collection is also designated as the “proverbs of Solomon,” its form and structure are distinctive from the preceding chapters. A notable feature of this section, analyzed at great length by Patrick Skehan (1948, 117), is that the collection contains “precisely 375 single-line proverbs, and that the numerical value of the Hebrew name Solomon in the title ‘Proverbs of Solomon’ (10:1) is likewise 375.” While readers should be cautious with such claims to numerical architecture in the composition of biblical texts given their largely unknown redaction history and frequently spotty manuscript history, this particular datum is of interest given the fact that a related type of scribal game – an alphabetic acrostic – concludes the entire work, with other potential compositional games lurking elsewhere in the text. Whatever the provenance of the numerical game, it allows for a loose organizational principle that would make otherwise hundreds of independent poetic units seem completely arbitrary. The form of these sayings was described by scholars as “sentence literature,” to be distinguished from the longer and thematically connected poetic units of the preceding chapters, 1–9 (von Rad 1972, 26). A number of scholars have attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to find other types of unifying schemes in this collection and in the following collections. Several attempts have been made, specifically, through identifying patterns in the repetition of various “expressions” (Snell 1993; Heim 2013). A number of scholars divide Prov. 10–22:16 into two sections, with disagreement on where the division exactly should be located, but with the notion that the sayings in the first section, from chapter 10 to somewhere in chapter 15, are more structurally similar (for example, a high concentration of “antithetical” sayings) than those in the second section (Fox 2009, 509). Many of the sayings in this section focus on distinguishing between the consequences of good and bad behavior and the relationship of this behavior to wisdom and folly, respectively.

There are a number of approaches to thematizing and organizing the material of these chapters (along with the similarly anthological section of chapters 25–29). One approach already mentioned, is to explore the repetitions of verses, half-verses,
and phrases found throughout (Snell 1993; Heim 2013). Snell finds several, usually pairs, of whole verses and half-verses repeated in 10–22:16 (1993, 35–54). The “antithetical” structure Fox observes corresponds to commonly found themes in this section of the rewards of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked (2009, 509). Chapters 16:1–22:16 are more diverse in the topics covered (Fox 2009, 509). The theme of speech, specifically the effects of the speech of the righteous and of the wicked, is prominent in this collection of sayings. For example, the words for organs of speech (“mouth” and “tongue”), occur many more times in this collection than they do in chapters 1–9 or chapters 25–29. Likewise, deception appears more frequently in this section than elsewhere. For example, the term sheqer (“lie”), appears over a dozen times in this section and only a handful of times in both chapters 1–9 and 25–29 combined. Falseness is connected in this section to the speech and activities of the wicked (10:18; 12:17, 19; 13:5; 14:5; 17:4, 7; 19:5, 9; 21:6). At times the sayings evoke images of physical pain and sensory discomfort in false speech. For example in 20:17, profit born of deceit, while initially filling one’s mouth with food, will eventually “fill one’s mouth with gravel.” In 10:31, the lying tongue itself will be cut off. As in chapters 1–9, the imagery of following a particular pathway is prominent and evocative: the path of the righteous is straight, unencumbered by blockages or sharp and dangerous objects, and leads directly to reward, while the path of the wicked, foolish, and lazy is winding, full of dangers, and leads to death.

Another theme, more prominent in chapters 16:1–22:16 than in chapters 10–15, is the figure of the king. In this section, kings are idealized as figures of truth in speech (16:10, 13; 20:28; 22:11) but also as paradigmatic figures of authority and judgment (16:14–15; 19:12; 20:2; 21:1). Finally, the figure of the “lazy” man and “laziness” feature as a recurring theme in chapters 10:1–22:16. The lazy man is not exactly wicked, but his path ends similarly: the lazy do not plow in winter and do not reap their harvest (20:4), they go hungry for their laziness (13:4; 19:15), their path is paved with thorns (15:19), and their laziness leads them ultimately to their demise (21:25).

“Words of the Wise” and Amenemope (Prov. 22:17–24:22)

This particular section of Proverbs is known for its relationship to an Egyptian instruction text, the Instruction of Amenemope. A curious phenomenon of modern biblical scholarship is that the book of Proverbs – now frequently studied against the background of ancient Near Eastern instruction literature – was seen outside of this international wisdom context prior to the publication of landmark studies by Adolf Erman and Hugo Gressmann in 1924, which identified affinities between this section of Proverbs and the Egyptian text. These comparisons were made possible by the translation and edition of the Egyptian text by E. A. Wallis
Budge in the previous year. These publications significantly shifted scholarship in Proverbs towards comparative studies. For example, Crawford H. Toy’s commentary, published in 1899, did not compare Proverbs to other arguably similar texts outside of the biblical corpus, such as the works of Hesiod, even though those texts were readily available in Toy’s time. Thus, the comparison of Proverbs to broader ancient Near Eastern literary traditions comes out of a particular set of interests and discoveries of modern scholarship in the twentieth century. Proverbs 22:20 can be understood to refer to 30 instructions, “Have I not written for you thirty,” although the Hebrew text has a reading tradition in which the text says not thirty but “threefold” or “noble words” (Fox 2009, 710). The Instruction of Amenemope refers to itself as an instruction of “thirty chapters.” Some scholars even identify 30 instructions in this section of Proverbs, though others disagree (Shupak 2005). While the earliest manuscript fragment of the Egyptian text dates no earlier than the eleventh-century BCE and was copied for hundreds of years, it is believed that the text itself originates from an even earlier period. The exact nature of the relationship between the Egyptian instruction and this section of Proverbs remains a matter of debate among scholars. What can be observed between the two texts, regardless of the perspective taken, is shared themes, specific advice (e.g. diligence in one’s work, avoiding confrontation, and not stealing from the poor), and terminology (e.g. to store up instruction in one’s “belly”). The advice seems to be directed towards skilled professionals, possibly those employed by the court. Following the identification of a strong relationship between Prov. 22:17–23:11 and the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope, scholars have also in more recent years identified affinities between 23:12–24:22 and other Egyptian instruction texts, suggesting “a general connection” with Egyptian wisdom but not an explicit connection as we see with the Instruction of Amenemope (Shupak 2005). The title of the section, “Words of the Wise,” only appears in the Greek but can be reconstructed by the Hebrew of 22:17, where the advice opens: “Incline your ear, attend to the words of the wise.” Considering the title of the subsequent section, “These too are the words of the wise,” perhaps here we have a case of scribal erroneous deletion, where seeing the title and the initial call to attention, inadvertently erased the title.

“These Too are the Words of the Wise” (Prov. 24:23–34)

Unlike the preceding section, there seems to be a looser organization of the material in this very short section. It is singled out as its own section here because the author(s) and/or collector(s) of Proverbs gave it a title of its own, connecting it to the preceding section but also distinguishing it from it. The advice is focused on professional behavior, whether in the specific context of a court (vv. 23–28), or more generally in advocating for a diligent disposition (vv. 30–34).
“These Too are the Proverbs of Solomon, ‘Copied’ By Hezekiah’s Men” (Prov. 25–29)

Like 10–22:16, scholars continue to debate whether an overall structure or intricate organizational pattern governs this section. A curiosity of this section has to do with its title, which not only attributes it to Solomon, but identifies a legendary transmission of the collection, from Solomon to Hezekiah’s men, who “copied” or “collected” them. The “these too” element of the title, like the similar phrasing in Prov. 24:23, imparts the sense of a larger collection, accreted over time, whether or not this was actually the case or deliberate design in its presentation. Another feature shared between the sayings in 10–22:16 and this collection is a focus on the wisdom of kings: over a dozen references to kings can be found in 10–22:16 and seven in 25–29. Chapter 25 opens with an explicit discussion of the role of kings in uncovering wisdom concealed by God. Some scholars conclude that such sayings originated in a court setting, though there is little in the texts themselves to corroborate such a claim. A more sustainable line of interpretation is that instruction as a discourse, both in Proverbs and in ancient Near Eastern literary traditions, are closely connected to kingship and the anxieties surrounding succession. We see in this section a number of themes and rhetorical strategies used elsewhere in Proverbs, such as the observation of natural phenomena and animal behavior to make analogies to human relationships and behavior, as well as praises of “true” speech and recurring warnings against deceptive speech and its connection to an “other” or a “foreigner.”

“The Words of Agur” (Prov. 30)

The title of Proverbs 30 is similar to titles of other sections of Proverbs that describe the contents as “words of,” and not “proverbs of.” The latter, of course, is only used to attribute sections of Proverbs to Solomon, whereas the former is attributed to any of the other figures in the titles of Proverbs, for example, “the wise,” or “Lemuel.” Proverbs 30:1a begins with the formula similar to these other sections identifying the type of speech (“words” or “proverbs”), the name of the figure and the patronymic, or name of the father: “The words of Agur, son of Jakeh.” The second half of the title is distinct from the others found in Proverbs, linking it with titles found in prophetic collections: “the pronouncement: the utterance of the man.” Sometimes the term which I have translated here as “pronouncement” is identified as a geographic designation, since other titles like those in Prov. 1:1 or Eccl. 1:1, indicate a title (“king”) or a geographic designation (“Israel” or “Jerusalem”) following the attributed figure’s name and patronymic. In the Septuagint, neither Agur’s name nor his title are given, and the Aramaic translation helps us read the term as “pronouncement” instead of a title or a place name, since it reads “the utterance of the man who received prophecy” (emphasis added). The remainder of
the title in 30:1 is difficult to translate: the Hebrew might read “To Ithiel: to Ithiel and to Ukal,” but none of those figures are known. The Greek gives an entirely different frame than the Hebrew: “My son, fear my words, and repent when you receive them, this is what the man says to those who believe in God, now I stop.” Another interesting feature of this section is how it is introduced with first-person speech. The speaker makes an unusual statement – particularly given that the context of his speech is instruction or knowledge more broadly – that he has no authority to give advice: “Indeed, I am more ignorant than any man, I do not possess human discernment, I have not acquired wisdom, nor do I have knowledge of holiness” (30:2–3). While many scholars divide the chapter into two sections, at vv. 1–14 and vv. 15–33, one scholar divides the chapter into two discrete sections, vv. 1–9 and vv. 10–33, arguing that vv. 1–9 “form a cohesive first-person meditation,” and that its subsections “cohere and presuppose one another” (Fox 2009, 849). In this scheme, the speaker builds towards a message of freedom from deception and simple living in four steps: an initial statement of ignorance (vv. 1–3); a claim structured as four rhetorical questions, the final one a double rhetorical question, on the limitation of human knowledge and ability (v. 4); a statement regarding the Deity’s perfection in speech (vv. 5–6); and “a prayer for honesty and simplicity” (Fox 2009, 850–60). The significance of this section for broader themes meditated upon in Proverbs, however, is not limited to the unusual first-person orientation of the speech or the message of human inadequacy in the face of divine capability. The passage in vv. 5–6 blends a concern throughout Proverbs for faithfulness in speech – a concern observed in the depiction of the “foreign” or “strange” woman’s deceptive and “slick” speech in Proverbs 1–9 – with a broader scribal statement for faithfulness and obedience in the transmission of words. This passage reads, “The entirety of God’s speech is pure, he is a shield for those who trust in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you are discovered a liar.” This recalls other warnings, scattered throughout the biblical text, to those reading or hearing instructions that they should maintain these instructions intact as they received them. These warnings command the reader to neither add nor subtract from these instructions. For example, in Deut. 4:2, the Israelites are told to preserve God’s commandments as transmitted to them: “Neither shall you add to what I command you, nor shall you take from it.” One scholar has made the connection between these warnings found in biblical literature and ancient Near Eastern treaties and instructions that bear a similar message, that those who encounter the words are prohibited from adding to them or subtracting from them (Weinfeld 1972, 262; 1991, 200). Many versions of this warning, such as Ben Sira’s, that “Nothing added and nothing taken away, he has no need in his understanding” (42:21) appear to refer to the completeness of God’s wisdom and revelation to the scribe. However the version in Prov. 30:5–6 makes an important connection of the completeness of instruction to a native concept of “truth,” connecting this so-called “scribal principle” of neither adding nor subtracting to the dangerous potential of speech to prove deceptive
(Vayntrub 2019a: 514). The remaining section, 30:10–33, has been described as a “miscellany of epigrams,” with numerically structured riddles similar to those found in the mishnaic tractate *Avot*, chapter 5.

*Lemuel and his Mother (Prov. 31:1–9)*

This section and the alphabetic acrostic which follows can be seen as bookends that thematically, and in some ways generically, link themselves to the initial section of the work, Proverbs 1–9. First, the form of instruction, a major feature of chapters 1–9, is the structuring element of 31:1–9, though in this case it is not the father’s instruction to the son (King Lemuel) but the mother’s. Instruction from a woman is otherwise unknown from the broader ancient Near Eastern record. Second, the categorizing and stereotyping of feminine characters is a shared focus in Proverbs 1–9 as well as in 31:1–9 and the acrostic poem in 31:10–31. In both bookends of the work, these feminine characters are explored through the lens of male desire and choice, and presumably, this advice is directed towards an audience of young men. For example, in Proverbs 7, the father warns his son against “strange” and “foreign” woman whose speech is deceptive and can lead one towards the dangers of adultery. The father illustrates this point through describing a hypothetical situation where a particular type of (married) woman seduces a young, naïve man to commit adultery and transgress the exclusive rights of her husband by appealing to the young man’s desire for the momentary pleasures of feasting and sex. The point of the instruction appears to be a call to temper and thoughtfully direct desire, away from temporary and harmful pleasures of folly, toward the long-term but hard-fought pleasures afforded by wisdom. This notion is resumed in the instruction of Lemuel’s mother in 31:1–9, who warns him against giving his “valor” or “strength” to women (v. 3). This oblique warning is contextualized by the subsequent warning (in vv. 4–5) against the dangers of intoxicating drink and its interference with the responsibilities of ethical leadership: “Wine is not for kings … lest they drink and forget the rules, and undermine the rights of the poor.” We learn from the juxtaposition of these two warnings – one against women who might diminish a king’s ability to rule and a second against drink that might do the same – that an important aspect of “knowledge of good and bad” is maintaining one’s basic capacity to make discerning judgments. This is the skill of choice at a fundamental level.

*Eshet Hayil*, “Woman of Valor” (*Prov. 31:10–31*)

This cleverly and well-crafted alphabetic acrostic links, in the Hebrew, with the word for “strength” (*hayil*) in the instructions of Lemuel’s mother in vv. 1–9. This is not the order, however, of the Greek, where the alphabetic acrostic poem is preceded
not by the “Words of Lemuel” but by the “Proverbs of Solomon” in chapters 25–29. The poem, a praise of the female subject, the “Woman of Valor,” describes the woman’s work, growing skill, and success from her selection as a wife (v. 10: “A woman of valor, that one might acquire!”), her handiwork (vv. 13–19), her growing reputation as successful in the wider community (vv. 20–25), the transmission of her skill to others (vv. 26–27), and finally, her praise by her family, who have benefited from her (vv. 28–29). The poem concludes with a statement on beauty’s ephemerality and deceptiveness and the superiority for adherence to a system (the “fear of Yahweh”) which admits to the Deity’s determination of reward and punishment (v. 30), and praises the woman for her handiwork (v. 31). Within (or without) the context of the warnings of Lemuel’s mother in Prov. 31:1–9 on the dangers of women to diminish a man’s potential success, the entire poem is framed as a prediction of how correct choice of wife and her subsequent acquisition of skills lead to overall success for the extended family and community. The poem, an extended meditation on how handiwork leads to skill and success, weaves this message through its choice of phrasing and an ingenious construction within the device of the alphabetic acrostic itself in the poem’s center (Vayntrub forthcoming). The words for “hand” and “palm” are used throughout the poem to express the woman’s growing skill: she seeks out raw materials with “her willing hands” (v. 13); she plants a vineyard with the “fruit of her hands” (v. 16); the poet calls on the audience to praise her for the “fruit of her hands” in the poem’s conclusion (v. 31). The most remarkable intersection of this theme of “handiwork” and the structure of the alphabetic acrostic in the poem, however, comes in vv. 19–20, the only chiastic (ABB’A’) structure of the poem. There, the verses pivot on the words for “hand” and “palm” in alternation, in coordination with the very same names of the letters of the alphabet which open these lines: “Her hands, she sends out to the distaff, her palms grasp the spindle, her palm, she spreads out to the poor, her hands she sends out to the needy.” These two poetic lines, vv. 19 and 20, begin with the sequential letters of the Hebrew alphabet, yod and kaf – letters whose very names correspond to the words used in the poem: yadeha, “her hands,” and kappah, “her palm” (Vayntrub forthcoming). The book thus concludes with a poem whose clever arrangement of the intersection of verbal arts with a message of skilled living resumes calls in Proverbs 1–9 for correct choices in life and in language.

Conclusion

The book of Proverbs, as we might see from its various titles found in the Masoretic version, delineates distinct collections and attributes them to a variety of figures – legendary (Solomon, Hezekiah’s men), abstract (The Wise) and obscure (Agur, Lemuel’s mother). The speakers and figures depicted in these various collected sayings are paradigmatic as they are impersonal and unnamed: they are the
wise, the foolish, the father, the son, Lady Wisdom, Lady Folly, and the king. Beyond the Solomonic attribution, the various collections and their sayings, in their own self-presentation and organization, stand outside of historical narrative. This feature of the work frustrates scholars seeking to place the collections in broader geopolitics or even trends in textual production. At the same time, this feature is perhaps part of the anthology’s continued relevance to contemporary readers seeking the “self-help section” of the biblical literary tradition. The advice contained within the work cannot be systematized or reduced, and often one piece of advice can be seen to contradict or cut against another saying.

Two conclusions may be drawn of this work. The first is that whatever any given saying may emphasize, claim, or advocate, its aim is to sharpen the intelligence of the reader: wisdom can be acquired, and skill of speech seems to be directly related to skill of good living. The second conclusion has to do with the work’s self-presentation: its diversity and anthological nature is not a bug or problem for scholars to solve but rather a feature. Proverbs, for whatever reasons due to its compositional and editorial history, comes to the reader as a carefully organized display of the best of ancient advice.

References


Further Reading


A recently published commentary on Proverbs.
