

Wisdom's Feast: Proverbs as a Resource for Theological Education

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Abstract

This article argues that the biblical book of Proverbs offers a humane, generous pedagogy that has the power to helpfully address those currently engaged in Theological Education. This is a pedagogy grounded in a relationship that seeks to draw both teachers and learners into an engagement modelled on the familial and commensal – 'host:guest', rather than 'instructor:passive recipient' – while prompting a participatory, questioning learning style. It reaffirms the importance of the acquisition of wisdom and the formation of character at the heart of enterprise. It cautions against pedagogical methods that reduce residential and commensal elements in theological education.

Keywords: Wisdom, theological, education, pedagogy, feast, invitation, character, commensal, Alpha.

Introduction

Short commons seem to be the rule in theological education nowadays.¹ Few institutions delivering it are exempt from deep concerns about their finances. Denominations have commissioned reports and consultations exploring how limited resources can be used most fruitfully. In the case of British Methodism, this has led to an attempt at radical reshaping, the closure or withdrawal of support from most residential colleges, and the re-direction of resources to a 'learning network' around a pair of 'hubs'. By way of contrast, the consultation document 'Resourcing Ministerial Education in the Church of England' called for a major expansion of existing provisions to meet present and future needs with a corresponding increase in funding.² Here however, we may detect a deficit of another kind. Alister McGrath's strictures on

¹ As one who is currently a tutor in a 'Theological Education Institution' (TEI), my main context is that of ministerial formation and of tutoring both ministerial and non-ministerial students for academic awards but, of course, I understand the term more broadly. Our TEI offers modules from access to doctoral level. Moreover, in twenty-five years of pastoral ministry I saw 'theological education' as one of the main tasks to which all God's people are called.

² See the 'General Synod of the Church of England Report No. GS1979' (January 2015), <www.churchofengland.org/media/2140023/gs%201979%20-%20resourcing%20ministerial%20education%20task%20group%20report.pdf>, last accessed 24 May 2016.

how little the report has to offer in terms of, as it were, spiritual nourishment, do not seem to me misplaced:

'RME is pragmatic in its outlook, favouring a corporate, management-driven institutional approach to ministerial training [...] on the whole, it avoids advocating any explicitly theological engagement with ministry, apparently seeing this as peripheral (something the Church doesn't need), a luxury (something the Church can't afford), or - crucially - divisive (causing needless controversy within the Church).'³

We should not be surprised if, in such an atmosphere of supposed scarcity, students are tempted to apply a rigorous calculus to their own learning. For instance, they may hesitate in the face of the 'investment' of time and energy in truly mastering a biblical language – even if they found it stimulating and enriching at an often compulsory elementary level – given the relatively low number of credits to be gained in this pursuit.

This is one example of how such perceptions of scarcity can be self-reinforcing. Unaddressed they will ultimately lead us, I fear, into that parlous state of which the prophet speaks, where there is a famine in the land: 'not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water but of hearing the words of the LORD' (Amos 9.11). There are many places we might look for nourishment in these times of dearth; in this paper I want to explore what the biblical book of Proverbs - and the pedagogy implied within it - might have to sustain us in such times.

Why Bother with Proverbs?

At first sight it would seem counter-intuitive to suggest that this ancient text, for all its canonical status, offers much to sustain anyone in the third millennium. After all, Heinrich Brunner, Egyptologist and expert on ancient education, reminds us that

Es hat im Abendland Zeiten gegeben, in denen die Weisheit der Bibel, voran das Buch der Sprüchwörter (Proverbien) eine dominante Rolle im Geistesleben, nicht nur in der

Erziehung, gespielt hat. ...

(There have been times in the West in which the wisdom of the Bible, above all the Book of Proverbs has played a dominant role in intellectual life, not only in education ...).⁴

However, nowadays, while the wisdom books of Job and Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) may be valued by a church conscious of a need to engage with the sharp questions put to faith by modernity, Proverbs is generally regarded as a shallow and uninteresting text. Roland Murphy may have lamented 'the proverbial neglect of the book of Proverbs' in the Academy and elsewhere – one notes how few are the passages se-

³ McGrath, A. 'It's the theology, stupid', (*Church Times* 17 April 2015) 2

⁴ H. Brunner, 'Geleitwort', in N. Shupak *Where Can Wisdom be found? The Sage's Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Fribourg/Göttingen: UP Fribourg/Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1993) p.xxviii – the translation is my own.

lected from it in liturgical lectionaries – but he was an exception.⁵ The scholarly consensus appears to have settled on the opinion that Proverbs is a repository of tired banalities; as Harry McKeating puts it:

‘The contents of the book of Proverbs are of very uneven worth. Many of the sayings are mere truisms. Many contain such general advice that we are bound to wonder why the collector bothered to set them down...’⁶

In part this judgment is based on the notion that the book teaches a counter-factual doctrine that the cosmos is so arranged that acts always have condign, appropriate consequences. This view was so vigorously asserted by Klaus Koch that, in spite of some dissenting voices, it has been accepted as an ‘assured result’.⁷ Thus Walter Brueggemann comments that

‘The *theodic settlement* of Proverbs had insisted in an endless recital of close, didactic observations that the world works so that deeds have consequences guaranteed by the Creator in the very fabric of creation. Sowing leads to reaping. Righteousness and wisdom lead to life; wickedness and foolishness lead to death.’⁸

Here we might note Brueggemann’s tacit assumptions about the pedagogy of Proverbs; assumptions conveyed in his choice of such words as “insist”, “didactic” and, not least, “endless recital”. It appears this influential scholar sees Proverbs as imposing its teaching upon those who learn; grinding them down, by rote, until they submit. It offers, on this account, pedagogy of power, both oppressive and domineering.

A Pedagogy of Oppression?

Such an impression might be reinforced when we consider that the first voice we hear in Proverbs, after the introduction, could be held to be that of patriarchy, loud and authoritative: ‘Hear, my son, your father’s instruction’ (Proverbs 1.8). However, the notion that this sort of biblical pedagogy is inevitably oppressive can be challenged at several points. Indeed, if we read the verse to its end, so harsh a judgment requires immediate modification: ‘[...] and do not reject your mother’s teaching’. Arguably, the parallelism here works, as it often does in Hebrew verse, to intensify and emphasise the second part of the poetic line and hence to assert the relative importance of the maternal input into the son’s education. At the very least, even if the

⁵ See R. Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 22: Proverbs* (Nashville TN: Nelson, 1998) ix; in terms of passages in lectionaries, there are a total of only six examples in three years in the version of the JLG lectionary in the *Methodist Worship Book*. Moreover, all but one of these is the same reading, viz. Proverbs 8.22-36.

⁶ H. McKeating, *Studying the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1979), p.159.

⁷ See K. Koch, ‘Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?’ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52.1 (1955), 1–42. Translation in J. Crenshaw (ed.) *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1983); for an opposing opinion see R. Clifford, *Proverbs: a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), vii; and P. Hatton ‘A Cautionary Tale: The Acts-Consequence Construct’, *JSOT* 35.3 (2011), pp.375-384.

⁸ B. Birch, et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1999), p. 393.

voice of the mother here is, as some would claim, merely the voice of a woman as envisaged by patriarchy, the teaching of both parents is linked so closely together that they speak as one. As Michael Fox remarks 'the voice of the teacher is not simply the male voice. It is (at least by its own testimony) the *parental* voice.'⁹ However, we shall see that, in the pedagogy of Proverbs, the teaching role of the wise woman is repeatedly stressed. It should also be noted that the status of what the mother is offering is strengthened by the word used to describe what she offers; rendered 'teaching' in the English versions, the original is *torah*, (more literally 'instruction') a term so prominent and so honoured elsewhere in the scriptures - particularly in the Pentateuch and, above all, in Deuteronomy.

Indeed, the echoes of Deuteronomy in Proverbs 1.8 and 1.9 are not limited to the use of this single, deeply significant, word. As many commentators have pointed out, these verses that arguably set the tone for the educational programme of the book contain notable similarities with another programmatic passage, namely Deuteronomy 6.4-8.

Not only do both these passages share a profound pedagogical commitment to an educational method grounded in relationship – Proverbs asks us to listen to those who love us, while the teaching LORD of Deuteronomy is the one to be loved with all our 'heart and soul and might' (6.5) – but they also contain verbal echoes of varying degrees of precision. Deuteronomy 6.4 begins with the word *shem'a*, 'hear' or 'listen', as does Proverbs 1.8. Subsequent verses go on to urge that the words taught will not only be internalised – 'keep these words that I am commanding you today in your hearts' (Deuteronomy 6.6) – but are also to be offered for inspection by others: 'you shall bind them as a sign between upon your hand and fix them as an emblem on your forehead' (Deuteronomy 6.8). Likewise, in Proverbs 1, the parents' teachings are not simply to be received, but they are, as it were, to be ostentatiously displayed: 'for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck' (Proverbs 1.9). In both passages is an implied understanding of teaching and learning that emphasises their public significance within a community; individuals who have heard and obeyed these words become significant for others.

Nevertheless, in spite of this assertion of the public importance of wisdom, the assumption in Proverbs that instruction and teaching are given by parents to their children in a familial context is, apart from anything else, a valuable corrective to the arrogance of professional educators, like myself, who may be tempted to believe that 'higher education' is always delivered in formal, classroom-based environments. The question of whether anything like schools existed in ancient Israel is hotly debated.¹⁰ To my mind it is unlikely to be resolved one way or another and, in

⁹ M. Fox, *The Anchor Bible; Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York NY: Doubleday, 2000) p.83.

¹⁰ Notable among those who argue for the existence of such schools are: André Lemaire in *Les Écoles et la Formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* (Fribourg & Göttingen: Éditions Universitaires, 1981); Eric Heaton in *The School Tradition of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Graham Davies, 'Were There Schools in Ancient Israel?' in J. Day et al. (eds.) *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of John E. Emerton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 199-211. Friedemann Golka, 'Die Israelitische Weisheitschule Oder Des Kaisers Neue Kleider' in *Vetus Testamentum Vol 33.3* (1983), pp.257-60, and E. Lipinski 'Royal and State Scribes in Ancient Jerusalem' in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986: SVT 40*, (Leiden; Brill, 1988) pp.157-64, are equally convinced that nothing like the scribal schools of Mesopotamia and Egypt with their complex syllabi (see Rochberg and Schneider) could have been supported by the sort of society found in ancient Israel.

any case, even scribal education could have been conducted on an apprenticeship model as a family trade. Be that as it may, Proverbs rightly puts its focus on the home as a pedagogical environment, the place where, if children are given security and their curiosity is stimulated, the foundation for all future learning is laid.

Wisdom's Cries

However, the voice that dominates the first chapters of Proverbs is neither that of the father or the mother of 1.8, but rather the exultant cry of another female figure, 'Lady Wisdom' (the Hebrew *hokhmoth*, in 1.20 is a so-called 'plural of majesty' indicating her exalted status). She, like the parents of 1.8, addresses potential learners in ways that might be thought, at first sight, to infantilise them; e.g. 'my son' (e.g. 2.1; 3.1; 3.11), 'simple ones' (1.22). However, what she is offering is no mere passive reception of a formed body of knowledge. Her wisdom is something that must be sought for, like hidden treasures (2.4, cp. Mathew 13.44-46). Indeed, only those who 'call out for insight and raise their voice for understanding' (2.3), that is, those who respond to her call with their own cries, are able to receive what she offers.

David Ford has sought to understand the ministry of Jesus in terms of his expression of a divine wisdom that cries out, not just to command but also to communicate many other 'moods of faith'.¹¹ Ford speaks of Wisdom's cries sounding in the indicative mood, to affirm those who cry and to be affirmed in them; in the interrogative, to question and be questioned; in the subjunctive, where awareness of new possibilities provokes a cry of surprise; and in the optative, expressing desire and yearning. It is my contention that all these 'moods' can be detected in Wisdom's cries in the book of Proverbs. Her calls – commanding, yearning, questioning – do demand a response but it is not, as Koch and others suppose, one that is to be expressed in terms of actions, but rather in terms of being. Her plea is that those who hear her call find a new way of being characterised by blessings:

'Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels and nothing you desire can compare with her.' (Proverbs 3.13-15)

Accordingly, wisdom does not call us merely to commit wise actions, so much as to be wise - not so much to deal justly, as to be righteous people. Yes, the reward for heeding her calls may be that we receive some material benefits:

'Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil
It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to you bones.' (Proverbs 2.7-8)

Nevertheless, if 'the gain from her is' truly 'better than gain from gold and silver' (3.14) then we may conclude that wisdom is its own reward, that to be truly educated – that is, to be wise – is to be rich; this blessed state requires no further justifica-

¹¹ D. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp.45-51.

tion – perhaps in terms of other benefits to oneself or, indeed, the wider community – than its own end self-evidently gives it.

Thus, the Wisdom that calls out in Proverbs reminds us forcibly of the original root meaning of the word ‘vocation’, ‘calling’, from the Latin *vocare* ‘to call or cry out’. In modern educational usage ‘vocational’ can describe training for roles and their related tasks, and may then be contrasted with supposedly more rigorous, broader, more prestigious inquiries. If we take Wisdom’s cries seriously, should we not rather say that all truth seeking after wisdom and insight, indeed all curiosity, is, in a profound sense, ‘vocational’; and that to limit the notion of vocation to utilitarian aims represents a potentially disastrous misunderstanding of Wisdom’s insistent call that we should grow wise and good.

Wisdom’s Feast

Moreover, Wisdom’s calling has another highly significant mood: the invitatory. In Proverbs 9, after we have been told that she figures forth the divine *logos* that played before God in creation and is woven into the very fabric of things (8.22-31), we hear that:

‘Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table.
She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town.’ (Proverbs 9.1-3)

Wisdom in Proverbs does not primarily offer a philosophy of education, rather she puts a space for learning at the disposal of ‘the simple’ (*patim*). Many commentators assume that Proverbs views being ‘simple’ (*peti*) as a blameworthy condition. Warrant for this view can be found in 1.22 where Wisdom cries out in exasperation:

‘How long, O simple ones will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’

However, before we draw the conclusion that the simple are being equated with scoffers and fools we should recall again the intensification typical of biblical parallelism and note that elsewhere in scripture to be ‘simple’ is a good thing; its opposite is to be deceitful and devious, not to be wise. As Fox notes, ‘the *peti* is not inherently culpable; indeed, outside Proverbs he never is’.¹² We should, accordingly, be alert to the possibility that Proverbs views this class of learners not as fools or even as ‘empty vessels waiting to be filled’ but rather as those whose straightforwardness and sincerity make them teachable; and that she offers them not only instruction but a method of growing wise. Moreover, that method is surprising, in that we may grow wise by commensality, by feasting together.

I see the rest of the book of Proverbs – that is, the *meshalim*, the 375 pithy one-liners that make up Proverbs 10.1 to 22.16, together with the more complex poetic units that dominate the final chapters of the book – as providing, as it were, a textual feast. As I have sought to show elsewhere, the fare that Wisdom offers in these chap-

¹² Fox (2000), p.43

ters is emphatically not the bland pap envisaged by the standard scholarly account of the book.¹³ It is, rather, a rich, spicy, complex repast - a *vindaloo* not a *biryani*! If we read these sayings with attention, we are repeatedly provoked into reflection, objection, wonder and, sometimes, profound disagreement by words that need to be savoured and chewed before they can be properly digested.

However, we need not limit the wisdom that is offered here purely to the textual realm. Wisdom's invitation to a feast is saying something powerful about the way that learning can take place around the table.

Julie Walton teaches nutritional science in a Christian College in the United States. Disturbed by the way competitive pressures were affecting the learning of students on a gateway course to a much sought after nursing programme, she offered them the opportunity to eat with her and other classmates in small groups on a rota basis as the course progressed. She was surprised both by the uptake of a completely voluntary activity and on the impressive effects of this simple innovation, both on classroom morale and outcomes. Competitive pressures were reduced and, so, in a course with a case-based and participative learning methodology, students co-operated together in ways that were more profoundly fruitful. Walton notes that in large, formal classes students see only the back of each other's heads, here it is much easier to encourage co-operative ways of learning if they sit facing each other and share food together.¹⁴

Feed me with the food that I need...(Proverbs 30.8)

In light of this discussion, it is intriguing that what is arguably the most influential and effective catechetical programme for adults today, the *Alpha* course, puts eating together at the centre of its offering. Churches running these courses often use them as vehicles for a rather coercive presentation of Christian faith in which no real questioning is encouraged (and significantly commensality is often reduced to coffee and cake) but this does not negate the essential insight that we can grow 'wise unto salvation' (2 Timothy 3.15) in the context of a host/guest rather than a teacher/student relationship. Certainly, when the churches I served as a pastor ran such courses - paying close attention to the originators' methodological guidelines - we found it abundantly possible to preserve the generosity and openness that eating together encourages.

Can Wisdom's feast be shared in the more formal contexts of Theological Education Institutions? Of course. Indeed, if my own institution is anything to go by, such sharing already takes place here, as I know it does in many other TEIs. My teaching colleagues do not see students as empty vessels to be filled. Rather we see ourselves as learning together, and - to borrow the language of Proverbs - as fellow guests at Wisdom's feast. And, yes, we eat together often, at least daily in study days during term and sometimes more often. In my view, such sharing of food, of time, of opinion, and of much else, is not an optional extra: it is a profoundly pedagogical requirement. Our students are not fully residential; most, however, are in residence

¹³ See Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel* SOTS Monograph (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

¹⁴ J. Walton, 'Eat This Class: Breaking Bread in the Undergraduate Classroom' in D. Smith and J. Smith (Eds.) *Teaching and Christian Practices: Developing Faith & Learning* (Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans 2011), pp.94-101.

for two or three days a week and this too is an important element in the sharing of hospitality that is at the heart of what Wisdom offers in Proverbs.

Can theological education – particularly if it is offered to those being formed for ministry where questions of character and how it is assessed come to the fore – provide rich and sustaining fare if, as some now advocate, it is processed mainly by means of video links at a distance with occasional excursions to a 'hub'? Personally, I remain to be convinced; 'the proof of the pudding will be in the eating'.

Moreover, Wisdom's claim in Proverbs that 'all you may desire cannot compare with her' (8.11) – which implies again that to be wise is sufficient reward in itself – may be in some tension with the language of 'learning outcomes' and with the processes of assessment and award which are linked with, and underpinned by, such language. That the evaluation of such outcomes is a legitimate part of theological education in the present circumstances is indisputable; but surely it must always be seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. The true end of study in theological education is to enjoy the food that will nourish us in our discipleship, the wisdom that leads to salvation, not, in the first instance, to gain awards. We must not exalt the restaurant critic over the cook.

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