

## DOES PROVERBS PROMISE TOO MUCH?

BRUCE WALTKE

Marshall Sheppard Professor of Biblical Studies  
Regent College  
Vancouver, BC  
Canada V6T 2E4

### *Introduction*

This essay, "Does the Book of Proverbs Promise Too Much?" is poignantly fitting in this memorial volume to Professor Hasel, who exemplified both in his life and in his scholarship the highest Christian ideals. The untimely death of one of the finest Old Testament scholars makes the Book of Proverbs' heavenly promises seem detached from earth's reality.

Evangelicals confess the Book of Proverbs' inspiration and intellectually assent to its authority, but emotionally many cannot take the book seriously because its promises seem removed from the harsh reality of their experience. Prov. 3:1-12 brings the problem into sharp focus. I will divide this essay into four parts: (1) translation; (2) poetics; (3) theological reflection on the problem, "does it promise too much," and finally (4) exposition of 3:5.

### *1. Translation*

- 3:1 My son, do not forget my teaching,  
and let your heart guard my commandments;  
3:2 for length of days and years of life,  
and peace they will add to you.  
3:3 Kindness and reliability let them not leave you,  
bind them upon your throat;  
3:4 and find favor and good repute,  
in the eyes of God and humankind.  
3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and in your own understanding do not rely;  
3:6 in all your ways know him,  
and he will make your paths straight.  
3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes,  
fear the Lord and depart from evil;  
3:8 healing let there be to your navel,

and refreshment to your bones.

- 3:9 Honor the Lord from your wealth,  
from the first fruits of all your produce;  
3:10 and your granaries will be filled with plenty,  
and with new wine your vats will overflow.  
3:11 The discipline of the Lord, my son, do not reject,  
and do not loathe his rebuke;  
3:12 because whom the Lord loves he rebukes  
even as a father the son in whom he delights.

## 2. Poetics

The encomium to wisdom in 3:1-12 is distinguished from that in 2:1-22: (1) by the renewed address, "my son" (cf. 2:1, 3:1); (2) by the change of form on the syntactic level from a lengthy protasis (2:1-4) and very expanded apodosis (vv. 5-22) to six strophes essentially consisting of admonitions in the odd verses (3:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11) and to argumentation in the even (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12); and (3) by changing the theme on the paradigmatic level from admonitions to embrace the father's teaching (2:1-4) in order to find piety (2:5-8) and ethics (2:9-11), and so be protected against the fatal voices and ways of apostate men (2:12-15) and women (2:16-19), to admonitions to accept the teaching (3:1) and embrace ethics (3:3) and piety (3:5, 7, 9) in order to obtain palpable physical and social benefits.

This teaching is even more strongly anchored in God than chap. 2. First, the admonitions progress from the typical introduction, to keep the father's teaching (v. 1), to the command not to abandon covenant love and fidelity (v. 3), to establishing and retaining a relationship with God: trust the Lord (v. 5), to be humble before God (i.e., not to be wise in one's own eyes and so think and behave impiously and wickedly) (v. 7), to honor the Lord (v. 9), and not to reject the Lord's correction (v. 11).

Newsom argues that by these six strophes or quatrains the father anchors his teachings even more strongly in Israel's transcendent God.<sup>1</sup> The father begins, she observes, using the parallel, "my law" and "my commands," that "has resonances of God's *torah* and *miswot* to Israel and so subtly positions the father in association with divine authority." His appeals to have a right relationship with God (vv. 5-12) parallel, she further observes, "in structure and motivation the father's call for obedience to himself in 2:1-4." Finally, she notes, "it comes as no surprise that . . . the passage concludes in v. 12 with the metaphor of

<sup>1</sup>Carol A. Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 149-151.

God as a father reproving his son.”

In theological terms, the admonitions in the odd verses of 3:1-12 present the obligations of the son, the human covenant partner; the argumentation in the even verses shows the obligations of the Lord, the divine covenant partner. The human partner has the responsibility to keep ethics and piety, and the divine partner the obligation to bless his worshiper with peace, prosperity, and longevity.

The argumentation for keeping the Lord's commands is based on the tangible rewards that only he can give: long life and peace (v. 2), favor with God and humanity (v. 4), a smooth path (v. 6), psychological and physical health (v. 8), abundant harvests (v. 10), and a heavenly father's love (v. 12).

We can outline the pericope as follows:

Admonition	Argumentation
1. Keep my commands	2. Life and peace
3. Don't let go of unfailing love	4. Favor with God and people
5. Trust the Lord	6. Straight path
7. Don't be wise in own eyes	8. Healing
9. Honor the Lord	10. Prosperity
11. Don't reject the Lord's discipline	12. The Lord loves you

Overland notes, after the introductory strophe which sequences a negative and a positive command, the alternation between negative commands in vv. 3, 7, 11 and of positive admonitions in vv. 5, 9.<sup>2</sup>

The last strophe distinguishes itself from the preceding by renewing the address, “my son,” and by changing the argumentation from promising tangible benefits to explaining that God's love finds expression in discipline. Its syntax and content, however, show it is part of the poem (cf. 5:20), not an introduction with an imperative to hear the teaching (cf. 1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1, 21; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1; 6:1, 20; 7:1). According to McKane, in Egyptian instruction “my son” may also be resumptive.<sup>3</sup> Overland notes that the two pairs of identical terms, found only in initial vv. 1-2 and terminal vv. 11-12, constitute an *inclusio* for this block of material; namely, *benî*, “my son” (vv. 1, 11), and *kî*, “for/because” (vv. 2, 12).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Paul B. Overland, “Literary Structure in Proverbs 1-9” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1988), 87.

<sup>3</sup>William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, in *The Old Testament Library*, ed. Peter Ackroyd and others (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 289.

<sup>4</sup>Overland, 79.

### 3. *Theological Reflection*

The palpable rewards to which the gracious Lord obliges himself in the even verses of 3:1-10 confront us with the theological problem, "Do they promise too much?" When applied to ordinary members of the covenant community, the interpreter of the text and of life may try to resolve the tension by explaining that the problem lies in the human partner's failure to keep the commands, not in the Lord's failure to keep his obligations. The expositor, with Job's friend Eliphaz, might conclude that individuals do not experience these promises because of original sin: "Can a mortal be righteous before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker" (cf. Job 4:16-21). As does Job, however, most expositors, though conceding the problem of original sin, insist that this is not the reason for the apparently failed promises.

Their rejection of the facile explanation by the likes of Eliphaz is validated by the life of Jesus Christ. Though without sin, he apparently did not enjoy these promises. Instead of enjoying long life, he died in the prime of life. Instead of enjoying favor with God and man, on the cross he lamented, "my God, my God, why did you forsake me" (Matt 27:46), as the crowds jeered, "He trusts in God to deliver him; let God rescue him!" (Matt 27:43). Instead of a smooth path he experienced rejection at birth, escaped the slaughter of the innocent, lived as an exile in Egypt, confronted hostility every day of his ministry, and ended up a lonely figure on the cross (cf. Isa 50:4-6). Instead of psychological and physical health, in the Garden of Gethsemane he experienced such trauma that his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:44). On the cross his malefactors so abused him that he no longer appeared human (cf. Isa 52:14). How can it be said that the devout have barns overflowing with grain and vats that burst with new wine, when the Epitome of Wisdom cautioned, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt 8:20)?

To resolve this obvious tension created by failed covenant promises, I will reject three false solutions and propose four others to help us toward a resolution of the problem.

#### *Unacceptable Solutions*

First, I cannot accept that **Solomon was a dullard**. He certainly was no less aware than Job that "God destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent" (Job 9:22-23).

The sage is characterized by astute observation and reflection. Note how he composes his proverb in 24:30-34:

I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a vagrant and scarcity like an armed man.

His laboratory was the field of the sluggard, “I went past the field of the sluggard,” and his method, scientific (i.e. astute observation and cogent reflection), “I applied my heart to what I observed.” Observing that the inedible growth of thorns replaced the edible and that chaos replaced the diligently constructed cosmos, he drew the conclusion that some hostile power informed the fallen creation and that this deadly hostile force, if not overcome by wisdom, had the same damaging effects as a bandit plundering a man’s house. Surely a person with these powers of observations and reflection knew with Qoheleth that under the sun:

all share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them (Eccl 9:2).

Another solution unacceptable to me is that **these promises are false**, not true. Nonevangelical academics, tend to pit the optimism of the so-called older wisdom represented in the Book of Proverbs against the pessimism of the so-called younger, reflective wisdom represented in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. Von Rad, for example, says:

The most common view of the radical theses of Koheleth has been to see in them a counter-blow to older teachings which believed, too ‘optimistically’, or better, too realistically, that they could see God at work in experience. . . . According to the prevailing point of view, it would appear as if he were turning only against untenable statements, as if he were challenging a few, no longer justifiable sentences which presented the divine as too rational and too obvious a phenomenon. Such sentences may in fact have existed. . . . This explanation breaks down, however, for the reason that Koheleth is turning against not only outgrowths of traditional teaching but the whole undertaking. . . . Anyone who agrees with him in this can scarcely avoid the conclusion that the whole of old wisdom has become increasingly *entangled in a single false doctrine* [italics mine].<sup>5</sup>

William James agrees: “But the tradition that he [Qoheleth] knows is more of a foil for him than anything else; his use of gnomic forms,

<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), 233.

for example, is often in order to *contradict traditional wisdom* [italics mine].<sup>6</sup> He also said of Qoheleth: "His primary literary mode of representing the paradox of the human situation is the citation of contrasting proverbs, some of which may be his own aphorisms, is in order to *contradict traditional wisdom* [italics mine]."<sup>7</sup>

This common academic solution is not open to me—as it would also have been unacceptable to Professor Gerhard Hasel—because it undermines sound theology, which must be based on the integrity and trustworthiness of Scripture. Paul said that "all Scripture"—including Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—"is God breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Yet if Job and Qoheleth contradict Proverbs, we are left with God contradicting himself and speaking what makes no rational sense (i.e., nonsense). Moreover, our Lord, who himself on the cross does not seem to have experienced these promises, trusted this book. The Book of Proverbs was part of the Scriptures which he said "cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Indeed the apostles use the Book of Proverbs about sixty times as sacred Scripture.

A third solution not open to me is that **the argumentation in the even verses of 3:1-10 presents probabilities**, not promises. As we shall see, there is an element of truth in this explanation, but it formulates the solution badly.

As noted, the odd verses of our text set forth the obligations of the human covenant partners; the even, those of the divine. Now does sound theology countenance that the human partner must keep his obligations perfectly, but not the divine partner? How unlike the faithful Lord to command his people to "trust in the Lord" with all their heart "and lean not" on their own understanding, and not obligate himself to "make their paths smooth." Rather, even "if we are faithless he will remain faithful" (2 Tim 3:13).

Moreover, if it were a matter of probabilities, then I for one want to know the odds. If these arguments are true 99 percent of the time, the audience would be well advised to keep the command to "not forget the teaching and to keep his commands in our heart"; but if they are true only 51 percent of the time, then maybe it is not worth the sacrifice and the effort to keep the human obligation.

Finally, how can the human partner trust in the Lord with a whole heart, when there is uncertainty as to the Lord's keeping his part of the bargain?

These three solutions—that the sage is a dullard, presents false

<sup>6</sup>James G. William, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981), 53.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 60.

teachings, or states probabilities, not verities—are not acceptable for me.

### *Acceptable Solutions*

Let us now turn to four solutions that I find helpful. First, most would agree that these **promises are partially realized in our experience**. Though keeping the proverbs does not guarantee “success” under the sun, nevertheless, experience often vindicates them. The sober (23:29-35), the diligent (10:4-5), the sexually moral (26:23-28), the peaceful, and the wise in general—not the drunkard, the sluggard, the sexually unclean, the hot-tempered, and the fool—enjoy abundant life and peace.

The sluggard, for example, as represented in Prov 24:30-34, does not enjoy longevity, social esteem, smooth sledding, health, and prosperity. The same applies to the drunkard:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow?  
 Who has strife? Who has complaints?  
 Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?  
 Those who linger over wine,  
 who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.  
 Do not gaze at wine when it is red,  
 when it sparkles in the cup,  
 when it goes down smoothly!  
 In the end it bites like a snake  
 and poisons like a viper.  
 Your eyes will see strange sights  
 and your mind imagine confusing things.  
 You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,  
 lying on top of the rigging.  
 ‘They hit me,’ you will say, ‘but I’m not hurt?’  
 They beat me, but I don’t feel it!  
 When will I wake up  
 so I can find another drink?’ (Proverbs 23:29-35).

Second, we need to take into consideration **the epigrammatic nature of proverbs**. Individual proverbs express truth, but, restricted by the aphorism’s demand for terseness, they cannot express the whole truth. By their very nature they are partial utterances which cannot protect themselves by qualifications. Von Rad rightly said:

It is of the nature of an epigram that a truth is expressed with the greatest concentration on the subject-matter and with a disregard of any presuppositions, attendant circumstances, etc. In the case of a sentence from antiquity, [how easily] can one reach the point where the meaning of a sentence is falsified for the simple reason that one has lost sight of ideological and religious facts which were constitutive

for the sentence.<sup>8</sup>

Because of this stylistic constraint, proverbs must be read holistically, within the total collection. The character-act-consequence nexus (i.e., you reap what you sow) represented in the strophes of our text must be modified by proverbs that qualify the nexus. The "better-than proverbs" (e.g., 15:16-17; 16:8, 19; 17:1; 19:22b; 22:1; 28:6) link righteousness with poverty and wickedness with wealth and so make it perfectly plain that piety and morality do not invariably lead immediately to social and physical benefits. Moreover, many proverbs recognize the failures of justice. Van Leeuwen notes: "There are many sayings that assert or imply that the wicked prosper . . . while the innocent suffer"<sup>9</sup> (e.g., 10:2; 11:16; 13:23; 14:31; 15:25; 18:23; 21:6, 7, 13; 19:10; 22:8, 22; 23:17; 28:15-16a, 27). Too many scholars fail to recognize the restraints of these counter-proverbs. Insisting the book of Proverbs teaches a tidy dogmatism of morality and piety, these scholars pit the so-called unrealistic sayings of Proverbs, such as the five strophes in Prov 3:1-10, against the realism of Qoheleth and Job, thereby easily discrediting the former. This solution regarding the epigrammatic nature of proverbs must be held in connection with the next two arguments; otherwise, it would appear to reinforce the solution that the proverbs present probabilities, not guarantees.

Third, the Book of Proverbs teaches Israel's youth the "A, B, Cs" of morality. Solomon kept before them the end of the matter, how it all turns out, not the temporary exceptions when the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. The future will ultimately validate the character-act-consequence nexus, turning the present, often upside-down world right (cf. 11:4, 7, 18, 21, 23, 28; 12:7, 12; 15:25; 17:5; 19:17; 20:2, 21; 21:6-7, 22:8-9, 16; 23:17-18; 24:20). The genre-effect of Proverbs, in contrast to that of Job and Ecclesiastes, is clearly brought out in 24:15-16:

Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man's house,  
do not raid his dwelling place;  
for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again,  
but the wicked are brought down by calamity. (Prov 24:15-16)

The concessive clause, "though a righteous man falls seven times," assumes that righteous people come to ruin. Seven, recall, is the number of perfection, of completeness. To paraphrase the proverb, "The righteous may be knocked out for the count of ten." However, the

<sup>8</sup>Von Rad, 32.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 29.

proverb throws that reality away in a concessive clause, rushing ahead to how it all turns out: namely, "he rises again." Job and Qoheleth, however, have a different focus, a different genre effect. They are concerned with events under the sun and focus on the righteous man flattened on the mat for the count of ten; they do not focus on his rising, though they do not rule that out. To recast the proverb into their genre, it would reverse the concessive and main clauses, "though a righteous man rises again, he falls seven times." Proverbs differs from the younger reflective wisdom because it is presenting the primer on morality, the way things turn out. The wisdom books differ fundamentally due to this genre effect.

Fourth and finally, **the future beyond the temporarily failed promises outlasts clinical death** (see 2:21-22). To be sure, the future is not accessible to verification, as Gladson notes critically,<sup>10</sup> but without faith in the ethical God who controls the future, one cannot please God. If one can live by sight in realized promises, not by faith in God to fulfill them, why is there need to command, "Trust in the Lord" (3:5)?

Before turning to three or four proverbs that teach an immortality that outlasts death wherein the promises such as those found in the argumentation of 3:1-10 find their fulfillment, let us note that *the argument of the book implies such a perspective*. The book's second pericope (1:10-19) after its preamble (1:1-7) and first pericope to heed the teaching (1:8-9), represents innocent blood going to a premature death at the hand of thugs:

My son, if sinners entice you,  
do not give in to them,  
If they say, 'Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood,  
let's waylay some innocent soul;  
let's swallow them alive, like the grave,  
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;  
we will get all sorts of valuable things  
and fill our houses with plunder;  
throw in your lot with us,  
and we will share a common purse . . .' (1:11-14).

"Blood" in 10a and "innocent" in 10b are parts of a broken stereotype phrase; together they refer to innocent blood. Admittedly, Solomon does not represent the innocent as actually being dispatched to a premature death, but he unquestionably assumes the possibility as real. On the other hand, the inspired king clearly and repeatedly teaches that

<sup>10</sup>Jerry Allen Gladson, "Retributive Paradoxes in Proverbs 10-29" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1978).

the Lord will cause the righteous to triumph over the wicked: "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies to surrender to him" (16:7). In order for the innocent—such as righteous Abel, who are dispatched to a premature death—to triumph over the wicked, their victory must take place in a future that outlasts Sheol. Since the biblical doctrine of retribution fails to reflect human experience, Farmer rightly says that "one either has to give up the idea of justice or one has to push its execution into some realm beyond the evidence of human experience."<sup>11</sup> However, this doctrine came to full light only through the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Tim 1:10).

We now turn to consider three or four texts that explicitly teach immortality.

Proverbs 12:28 reads: "In the path of righteousness is life, in the course of its byways is immortality." This synthetic parallel, which concludes the pericope of chap. 12, expresses in a creative and intensive way that the righteous retain a relationship with God forever. Here we need to define "life" in verset a, and defend the translation "immortality" in verset b.

*Hayyim*, "life," in 12:28a occurs thirty-three times in the book, and the verb *hāyâ*, "to live," four times. After analyzing its uses W. Cosser draws the conclusion that "life" in the Canonical Wisdom Literature sometimes has a technical significance, viz., the fuller, more satisfying way of living to be enjoyed by those who 'seek Wisdom and find her,' a sense which can best be rendered in English by some such phrase as 'full life,' 'fullness of life,' 'life indeed.'<sup>12</sup> In Egyptian instruction, which shares many points of continuity with Proverbs, life entails eternal life beyond clinical death. Its schools were called 'schools of Life.'<sup>13</sup> Solomon gives us no reason to think that his concept of life was any less eternal.

In biblical theology "full" life is essentially a relationship with God. According to Gen 2:17 disruption of the proper relationship with the One who is the source of life means death. Wisdom is concerned with this proper relationship and so with this kind of life. God continues forever to be the God of the wise, delivering them from the realm of death (see 10:2). Jesus Christ regarded life in the same way. In his argument against the Sadducees, who denied resurrection, he said: "But

<sup>11</sup>Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

<sup>12</sup>William Cosser, "The Meaning of 'Life' (*Hayyim*) in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes," *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions* 15 (1955): 51-52.

<sup>13</sup>Causse, *Les Dispersés d'Israël*, 115, cited by Cosser, 52.

about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). Clinical death is only a shadow along the trail in the relationship of the wise with the living God.

Death in Proverbs is the eternal opposite of this full life. The wisdom teachers never describe the wicked as being in the realm of light and life; rather they are in the realm of darkness and death, a state of being already dead, because they have no relationship with the living God though they are not yet clinically dead. The texts predicting the eternal death of the wicked do not refer to a premature clinical death.<sup>14</sup> For example, the father’s caution to his son not to apostatize because, “at the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent” (Prov 5:11), implies a normal life-span.

In sum, death and life are eternal states that extend from the present into the eternal future. The condition of the righteous lies before the Lord (see Prov 15:11; 16:2 [= 21:2]), who admits them into the realm of eternal fellowship with him (cf. 2:19; 3:18,22; 10:11). The wise in the book of Proverbs enjoy an unending relationship with the living God.

We now turn to defend the gloss, “immortality” in 12:28b. All the ancient versions and more than twenty medieval codices read “unto death” (*’el māwet*), not “immortality” (*’al māwet*), the text of the great majority of codices within the Masoretic tradition. Text-critical, philological, contextual, and theological arguments favor the majority reading of the Masoretic text.

Regarding the text, three factors must be borne in mind. First, the phrase *’al māwet* is a *hapax legomenon*, and so the more difficult reading to explain away. Second, the reading of the versions demands that one emend “byways” *n’tîbâ* as well. Third, one cannot account for *’al*, the negative verbal particle, before a noun unless rooted firmly in a reliable oral tradition: “A complex body of evidence indicates the MT could not, in any serious or systematic way, represent a reconstruction or faking of the data.”<sup>15</sup> In cases involving the oral tradition, the Masoretic text is preferred to the ancient versions.<sup>16</sup>

From a philological point of view, we note that though this phrase is otherwise unattested in biblical Hebrew, it is attested in the Northwest Semitic languages from mid-second millennium B.C. to

<sup>14</sup>C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1977), 48.

<sup>15</sup>Bruce K. Waltke and M. P. O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 26, par. 1.6.3i.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

Mishnaic Hebrew. Even-Shoshan lists the term as an ordinary word for "immortality" in postbiblical Jewish sources. Moreover, the term also denotes immortality in a Ugaritic text (ca. 1400 B.C.).<sup>17</sup> The combined evidence, says Sawyer, "indicat[es] a remarkable continuity of meaning from second Millenium [sic] B.C. Syria to the post-biblical Jewish literature."<sup>18</sup>

From the contextual point of view one expects a synthetic, not antithetic, parallel.<sup>19</sup> Blocks of proverbs in the A Collection (Proverbs 10-15) regularly end in the rare synonymous parallelism, and a new block begins with an aphorism pertaining to the teachability of the wise and the incorrigibility of fools. The relationship of 12:28 to 13:1 exactly matches that of 11:31 and 12:1. Delitzsch agrees:

The proverb xii. 28 is so sublime, so weighty, that it manifestly forms a period and conclusion. This is confirmed from the following proverb, which begins like x.1 (cf. 5), and anew stamps the collection as intended for youth.<sup>20</sup>

Theologically, the book of Proverbs consistently implies the immortality of the righteous (see 2:19; 10:2,16; 11:4,19; 12:3, 7, 12, 19); its explicit expression here is no surprise. Delitzsch comments: "Nothing is more natural than that the Chokma in its constant contrast between life and death makes a beginning of expressing the idea of the *athanasia* [i.e., 'without death']."<sup>21</sup> The doctrine is stated even more clearly in the Wisdom of Solomon: "for righteousness is immortal" (1:15); "God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity" (2:23).

Another verse that more explicitly teaches the righteous have a future that outlasts death is Prov 14:32: "The wicked person is thrown down by his own evil, but the righteous is one who takes refuge in the Lord when he dies."

Although "wicked" and "righteous" are precise antithetical parallels, "thrown down by his own evil" and "takes refuge in the Lord" are not.

<sup>17</sup>*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner and others, trans. and ed. under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson in collaboration with G. J. Jongeling-Vos and L. J. De Regt (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:48.

<sup>18</sup>J.F.A. Sawyer, "The Role of Jewish Studies in Biblical Semantics" in *Scripta Singa Vocis: Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribs and Languages in the Near East*, ed. H. Vanstiphout and others (Gröningen: Forsten, 1986), 204-205.

<sup>19</sup>Against McKane, 451.

<sup>20</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, trans. from the German by M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 1:269.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

These ideas need to be projected appropriately into their antithetical parallels. In sum, the wicked, who perish through their evil, do not trust in the Lord when dying; and the righteous, who trust in the Lord when dying, are not thrown down by evil. Thus the proverb admonishes the disciples to show community loyalty and not to be guilty of antisocial behavior because of their radically opposed expectations.

However, here too we face a textual problem. Instead of the reading “when he dies” *b̄môtô*, the LXX reads *ὁ δὲ πεποιθὼς τῇ εἰπαντοῦ ὁσιότητι δίκαιος*, “the righteous is one who trusts in his holiness,” which is retroverted as *b̄tummô* (cf. 1 Kings 14:41; 3 Kings 9:4). The difference in the unvocalized text involves the slight metathesis from *bmtw*, “when he dies” (MT) to *btmw*, “in his integrity” (LXX).

The resolution of this textual problem is found in a lexical study of *hōseh*, glossed here as “the one who takes refuge in the Lord.” This qal active participle derives from the same root as the noun translated “refuge” in 14:26. In an antithetical parallel similar to this one, the Lord says: “A mere breath will blow [the idols] away, but the man who makes me his refuge [*habhōseh*] will inherit the land” (Isa 57:13).

The root *hsh* occurs 37 times in the Old Testament and always with the meaning “to seek refuge,” never “to have a refuge” (*pace* NIV) or “to find a refuge” (*pace* NRSV). Thirty-four times, not counting Prov 14:32b, it is used more or less explicitly with reference to taking refuge in God/the Lord or under the shadow of his wings (cf. Prov 30:5). The two exceptions are Isa 14:32 and 30:2, but these two exceptions prove the rule. In Isa 14:32 the afflicted take refuge in Zion, a surrogate for God. In Isa 30:2 the prophet gives the expression an exceptional meaning because he uses sarcasm: *lahsôt b̄šēl mišrayim*, “to take refuge in the shadow of Egypt.” His intended meaning is that the Jerusalemites should have sought refuge in the Lord, not in Egypt.

The qal participle of *hsh* or *hsh* in a relative clause always denotes a devout worshiper, “one who seeks refuge in the Lord.” One other time besides Prov 14:32b the qal participle is used absolutely: “Show the wonder of your love, O Savior of those who take refuge” (*môšīaʿ hōsîm*; Ps 17:7). NIV here rightly glosses, “Savior of those who take refuge in you.” Gamberoni<sup>22</sup> agrees that the qal participle of *hsh* has the same “religio-ethical” sense in Prov 14:32b as in Ps 17:7. O. Plöger and A. Meinhold independently also reached the conclusion that YHWH is always the stated or unstated object of *hōseh*.<sup>23</sup> W. McKane, citing A.

<sup>22</sup>TDOT, 5:71.

<sup>23</sup>Otto Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)*, BKAT 17 (Neukirchen-Vluyn:

Barucq (*Le Livre des Proverbes*), also recognizes this is the meaning of the Masoretic text.<sup>24</sup> In the light of this consistent use of *hōseh* with the object "Lord," never "integrity," "to seek refuge in the Lord when he dies" is far more probable than "to seek refuge in his integrity."

Not only does this lexical study support the Masoretic text over against the LXX, but so does the book's overall theology. The book of Proverbs teaches its audience to trust in the Lord, not in their own integrity. Prov 3:5 commands, "Trust in the Lord." Likewise the Prologue to the so-called Thirty Sayings of the Wise asserts: "That your trust may be in the Lord, I teach you today, even you" (Prov 23:19). Toy responds against Delitzsch that "seeks a refuge in his righteous" does not involve self-righteousness . . . , but is simply the general teaching of Proverbs as "the reward of the righteous."<sup>25</sup> If *hsh* meant "to find a refuge," the notion of reward could be read into the text; but since it means "to seek a refuge," it cannot. McKane implicitly confesses he rejects the MT for dogmatic, not exegetical, reasons: "I do not believe that the sentence originally asserted this [a belief in the after-life]."<sup>26</sup> Against exegetical and theological expectations he follows the LXX, "But he who relies on his own piety is a righteous man." Meinhold reluctantly concedes this proverb, which sees a refuge for the righteous that lies beyond the limits of death, is exceptional.<sup>27</sup> In truth, however, the proverb as witnessed in the MT is entirely consistent with the historical context of the ancient Near East and with the rest of Proverbs.

In short, in this proverb ultimate destinies are clearly in view. Even when dying, the righteous has all the security of a devout worshiper, but the wicked will find his evil boomerangs on him at that time (see 10:25). Rashi comments: "When the righteous man will die, he is confident that he will come to the Garden of Eden."

Finally, we need to take note of the important term *'abʾrît*, in Proverbs 23:17-18 and 24:19-20. Literally it refers to "the end" of something, and is rightly glossed "future hope" by NIV in these Proverbs: "Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord. There is surely a future hope [*'abʾrît*] for you,

Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 176; Arndt Meinhold, *Die Sprüche in Zürcher Bibelkommentar AT* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag), 1:245.

<sup>24</sup>McKane, 475.

<sup>25</sup>Toy, 300.

<sup>26</sup>McKane, 475.

<sup>27</sup>Meinhold, 245.

and your hope will not be cut off" (23:17-18). Again, "Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope [*'ab-rîit*], and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out" (24:19-20).

Commenting on this important term in its similar use in Psalm 49:16, Von Rad helpfully notes:

One can never judge life in accordance with the appearance of the moment, but one must keep 'the end' *'ab-rîit* in view. This important term which is so characteristic of thinking which is open to the future, cannot always have referred to death. One can also translate the word by 'future.' What is meant, therefore is the outcome of a thing, the end of an event for which one hopes.<sup>28</sup>

Commenting on Ps 49:16, he says, "The most likely solution, then, is to understand the sentence as the expression of a hope for a life of communion with God which will outlast death."<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Exposition of 3:5

"Trust" *bth* is a primary term in the human covenant partner's relationship to the Lord. The verb essentially means "to feel secure, be unconcerned." D. Kidner, citing G. R. Driver, says "the Heb for *trust* had originally the idea of lying helplessly face downwards—an idea preserved in Jer 12:5b (see RSV) and Ps 22:9b (Heb 10)."<sup>30</sup> Jepsen notes aptly: "With an affirmation as to the reason for the security it [*bth*] means 'to rely on something, someone.'"<sup>31</sup> The preposition "in" *'el* in the phrase "in the Lord" refers to making the Lord the goal or object of trust.<sup>32</sup> The wise trust the Lord who stands behind the book of Proverbs, not in the proverbs themselves. The promises of proverbs are no better than God who fulfills them. The Lord, not some impersonal natural law, upholds the act-consequence nexus (cf. Prov 22:19).

Von Rad incredibly dismisses the many proverbs that call for trust in the Lord (3:5; 14:26; 16:3, 20; 18:10; 19:23; 28:25; 29:25; 30:1-14) as essentially irrelevant. According to him, the wise men did not teach trust in God, but "something apparently quite different, namely the

<sup>28</sup>Von Rad, 202.

<sup>29</sup>Von Rad, 204.

<sup>30</sup>Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1964), 63; citing G. R. Driver, "Difficult Words in the Hebrew Prophets," in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1950), 59.

<sup>31</sup>*TDOT*, 2:89.

<sup>32</sup>Waltke and O'Connor, 193, par. 11.2.2a.

reality and evidence of the order which controls the whole of life, much as this appeared in the act-consequence relationship. This order was, indeed, simply there and could, in the last resort, speak for itself."<sup>33</sup> His substitution of "order" and "act-consequence relationship" for the Lord has become highly influential in wisdom studies. Some scholars remove God altogether from involvement in the world, or at best reduce him to a first cause within a deistic view of reality. E. F. Huwiler rightly complains:

In its extreme form, the deed-consequence syndrome removes the deity from activity in the world. According to this view, the consequence follows the deed of itself, and Yahweh, whose power is limited, is directly involved merely as a midwife or a chemical catalyst, although indirectly involved as creator, who set into motion the deed-consequence syndrome.<sup>34</sup>

To be sure, many sayings claim a connection between character-act-consequence, but as Huwiler infers, they do not "presuppose divine inactivity."<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, God upholds that connection.

The Lord, however, does not uphold a moral order in a tidy calculus wherein immediately righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. If that were so, people would confound pleasure with morality; all would behave righteously for selfish reasons, not out of pure virtue based on faith, hope, and love. They would substitute eudaemonism (i.e., the system of thought that bases ethics, moral obligation, on personal pleasure) for true virtue (cf. Rom 5:2-5; 1 Pet 1:5-8). The wise trust the Lord to uphold his ethical proverbs in his own time and in his own way, even when the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer.

Trust in the Lord, however, without definition, is platitudinous; it cuts no ice in one's thinking unless the Lord revealed himself. Here the Lord's revelation, which Solomon puts into the covenant parent's mouth, is in view. Of his wisdom, Solomon said: "From the Lord comes wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov 2:6). The parent's mouth is God's mouth. The son must don the entire armor forged in this book.

This trust must be exercised *entirely*, "with all your heart." Since the Lord alone gives wisdom and provides protection (2:5-8), one's eternal security depends only on him.

<sup>33</sup>Von Rad, 191.

<sup>34</sup>Elizabeth Faith Huwiler, "Control of Reality in Israelite Wisdom" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1988), 64.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 68-69.

This reliance must also be exercised *exclusively*. "Do not lean in your own understanding" functions as the negative synonym of "trust" (see nominal form in 1:33). To put it another way, "to rely in/to" is a figure for "trust" (BDB 1043; cf. Isa 50:10).

Whoever relies on inadequate human understanding is a fool (26:5, 12; 16:28;26a). Human wisdom is prejudicial, partial, and insecure. As philosophers are aware, none can know the real world objectively. That which is known is inescapably relative to the person who does the knowing. The way we see things is colored by a mix of previous experiences and stereotypes perpetuated by our families, friends, peers, movies, and television. Moreover, unaided human reason cannot come to absolute truth; it is a recipe for disappointment and disaster. And yet to come to absolute meaning and values, one must know all the facts. A play does not make full sense as one views only an isolated act or scene. It is not until the final act, until the last word is spoken and the curtain drops, that the play takes on its full meaning. Human beings, however, are confined to the tensions of the middle acts; without revelation they are not privy to their resolution in the final act (1 Cor 13:12). Moreover, facts are known only in relation to other facts. We distinguish one object from another by its similarity to some and its dissimilarity from others. To see any object "truly," one must see all objects comprehensively. Unaided rationality cannot find an adequate frame of reference from which to know. C. Van Til noted that to make an absolute judgment, human beings must usurp God's throne:

If one does not make human knowledge wholly dependent upon the original self-knowledge and consequent revelation of God to man, then man will have to seek knowledge within himself as the final reference point. Then he will have to seek an exhaustive understanding of reality. Then he will have to hold that if he cannot attain to such an exhaustive understanding of reality, he has no true knowledge of anything at all. Either man must then know everything or he knows nothing. This is the dilemma that confronts every form of non-Christian epistemology.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, this trust must be exercised *exhaustively*, "in all your ways know him."

### *Conclusion*

If the life of Christ came to an end on the cross, the covenant promises of Proverbs, such as those found in the strophes of 3:1-10, failed. However, if we pursue the career of Christ to Easter Sunday,

<sup>36</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 17.

then God faithfully fulfilled the obligations he graciously took upon himself. Today our Lord enjoys life and prosperity. Saints around the world praise him, and at his name every knee will bow. When we travel the road from the cross to the tomb to his resurrection and ascension into heaven, we can say, his is a straight path. As the writer of Hebrews says of Jesus: "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down on the right hand of God." Let us then fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Professor Gerhard Hasel modeled this faith.