

PROVERBS 1-9

Graham S. Ogden

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Readings, A New Biblical Commentary

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SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS

2025

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First published in hardback, 2025

First published in ePDF, 2025

Published by Sheffield Phoenix Press

www.sheffieldphoenix.com

Sheffield Institute for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies (SIIBS),
University of Sheffield, Sheffield S3 7RA

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-914490-70-5 (HB)

ISBN: 978-1-914490-73-6 (ePDF)

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Fifty years ago, I found myself in a doctoral seminar in Princeton studying Qoheleth. That seminar sparked a life-long interest in the biblical Wisdom tradition. Several years later, teaching in Taiwan, appreciating the richness and longevity of the Chinese wisdom traditions only added to that interest, and though I cannot claim any expertise in the latter, the fact that in the Confucian Analects (論語) and in the Daodejing (道德經) one can find multiple examples of identical advice that are completely synchronous with those of ancient Israel and its neighbours, raised again the question of the ecumenicity of the Wisdom tradition, while acknowledging the unique linguistic and cultural contexts of each. In terms of the high status that Christians accorded the biblical text as of 'divine' value, one had to ask, Why was this extra-biblical material not worthy of the same recognition? Wisdom, in every case, biblical or extra-biblical, arises from humans intent on making sense of their lived experiences by deeply reflecting on them, drawing conclusions therefrom, then passing on practical insights gained to the next generations for the individual's and community's well-being.

Wisdom's importance transcends the tribal and national, for it is truly ecumenical. As for the Hebrew Scriptures and ancient Israel's Wisdom tradition, its ecumenical reality defies relegating it to a status inferior to that voted more 'spiritual' and theologically notable; it defies labelling Wisdom as 'secular', over against what is claimed to be 'divinely revealed' spiritual truths. It also defies elevating Biblical Wisdom to a plane higher than that honoured in other ancient cultures and communities simply because of one's view of the Bible as 'God's word'; it defies imposing a Christian teleological agenda on a body of literature that is not concerned with historical matters.

That teleological view imposed upon a co-opted tribal history has been universalized by the Christian church, aided by its integration into the Roman Empire and its spread, especially its spread into Europe. The Hebrew Bible is not the story of all humanity by any stretch of the imagination; rather, it is the story of a small family and its gods that began some

4,000 years ago with Abraham's migration from Haran in modern-day Iraq to Canaan, modern Palestine. The family gradually grew to become a peripatetic tribe that later occupied a region that they claimed God had assigned them (though they never were able to drive out the local inhabitants—see Judges 1). They later formed a short-lived tiny kingdom that was eventually lost to greater neighbouring powers, its descendants finally driven from Judaea and scattered by the Romans in 135 CE. It is a story that belongs exclusively to Abraham's descendants themselves, as do its claims about a God, YHWH, who rescued the family from Egyptian slavery, having 'chosen' it and covenanted with it alone. That private history is not applicable to the global family; it cannot be universalized. Israel's valued history is not the story of China, Japan, Korea, or India, nor of the Mayans, nor of Australia's aborigines, or the Bantu. National or regional histories, religions and cultures are unique, individual and non-transferable.

What is universal is Israel's Wisdom, its sound advice about how best to live locally within the constraints of our shared humanity. Being ecumenical, Wisdom does not focus on what is unique to one tribe's or nation's story, but it concentrates on what is our common human experience. Wisdom defines our options as humans. The book of Proverbs and the other Wisdom material in the Hebrew Bible make no reference to the specific events, personalities or concepts that underpin ancient Israel's other literature. Wisdom's perspective begins and ends with timeless human reflection and considered advice, not with divine revelation claimed in specific acts and events bound to one particular tribal story. Wisdom's counsel must not be relegated, therefore, to some lesser significance if one is seeking a full biblical witness.

This reading will explore Proverb's connections with Chinese wisdom via Confucian texts in demonstration of Wisdom's full ecumenicity.

'At fifteen I thought only of study; at thirty I began knowing my place; at forty I was sure of myself; at fifty I was aware of my life under heaven; at sixty I was no longer argumentative; and now at eighty I can follow my heart's desire without offending'. (子曰：吾十有五而志於學；三十而立；四十而不惑；五十而知天命；六十而耳順；八十而從心所欲；不逾矩)—with apologies to Confucius for updating.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my Chinese friends and colleagues, especially in the Bible Society in Taiwan, and Rev. Dr. David Chee in Singapore, for their friendship, encouragement and assistance over the many years spent within their world.

Graham S. Ogden (歐可定)
Ballarat, Vic., Australia
July 2024

