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Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9

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Hear, My Son

Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1–9

Daniel J. Estes
For Jonathan, my son,
truly a good gift from the Lord
(Psalm 127:3–5)
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Series preface

*New Studies in Biblical Theology* is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (*e.g.* historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God’s universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the footnotes interact with the best of the scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

This volume, the fourth in the series, is an exposition of prominent themes in Proverbs 1 – 9, dealing with what the French would call *formation*. Our English word ‘education’ doesn’t quite catch it, as our word is a bit too restricted to the merely cerebral. Nevertheless, it is the holistic vision of ‘instruction’, of *formation*, that occupies the attention of Dr Estes. His work not only illumines some important chapters of the Old Testament, but serves as a salutary reminder for the people of God today to keep certain fundamental priorities clear.

D. A. Carson  
*Trinity Evangelical Divinity School,*  
*Deerfield, Illinois*
Preface

This monograph is the product of several years of reflection, research and discussion. It began as a paper for a seminary class, in which I used Proverbs 1 – 9 as a framework for constructing a biblically informed philosophy of education. In recent years I have studied Proverbs 1 – 9 in more detail in preparation for an honours seminar at Cedarville College, in which I compared and contrasted the implicit pedagogical theory in this biblical text with the explicit philosophy of education propounded in the writings of John Dewey. My students, with their keen questions and penetrating insights, have been a continual impetus to my own study.

When I was asked to contribute a volume to the *New Studies in Biblical Theology* series, this subject was my natural choice. I determined to research the considerable literature on Proverbs 1 – 9, as well as surveying related areas such as biblical wisdom and the wisdom of the ancient Near Eastern world. The parameters of the series have required that I summarize my argumentation at many points. Although that necessarily means a loss in thoroughness, the compensating gain in succinctness will doubtless make the study more useful to a wider audience.

I owe a great debt to many people who have supported me in this project. My series editor, Professor D. A. Carson, has been an inspiration by his ever-gracious support and his own stimulating example of scholarly excellence. I am grateful that the friendship which we began a decade ago in Cambridge, England, has been renewed through this endeavour. My colleagues at Cedarville College, especially within the Biblical Education department, have encouraged me through their cheerful words and faithful prayers. The library staffs at Cedarville College and at Trinity Lutheran Seminary have provided excellent facilities and assistance, which have enabled me to complete my research.
I am most grateful to my family, who have lived with this project for the last two years. My wife, Carol, has taught me much of what I know about teaching, and our children, Jonathan, Christiana and Joel, have been my first and most delightful students. They were continually in my mind throughout the research and writing of this book.

My prayer is that this study will glorify the Lord God, who is the source of all true wisdom and knowledge.

December 1996

Daniel J. Estes
Cedarville College
Ohio
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td>Biblical Theology Bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZAW</td>
<td>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQMS</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQ</td>
<td>Evangelical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUCA</td>
<td>Hebrew Union College Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDB</td>
<td>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAOS</td>
<td>Journal of the American Oriental Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBR</td>
<td>Journal of Bible and Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNSL</td>
<td>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOTSupp</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTS</td>
<td>Journal of Theological Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>The Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS</td>
<td>New series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTS</td>
<td>Oudtestamentliche Studiën</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDOT</td>
<td>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TynB</td>
<td>Tyndale Bulletin</td>
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<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td>Vetus Testamentum</td>
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<tr>
<td>VTSupp</td>
<td>Vetus Testamentum, Supplements</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZAW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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Introduction

Description of the study

Only rarely does the Bible speak systematically when it discusses theological, philosophical and ethical issues. For the most part the writers of the Scriptures addressed specific occasions that shaped the form in which the narratives, laws, oracles, poetry, epistles and wisdom utterances were communicated. When the present-day interpreter endeavours to move beyond the original context of the biblical data to consider more universal concerns, different modes of investigation must be used.

Even a cursory reading of the book of Proverbs reveals that it is dominated by the subject of education. The voice of the teacher addressing his pupils resounds from its pages. A wide array of topics is presented, and frequent exhortations challenge the learner to hear and heed the instruction from the teacher.

This material, however, comes for the most part without recognizable order or sequence. Much of Proverbs consists of apparently random collections of maxims. The reader sees many individual pieces, but the puzzle as a whole remains unclear.

This monograph endeavours to synthesize the unorganized data from a portion of the book of Proverbs into a more systematic statement of the pedagogical theory that underlies its teachings. In its biblical form, the pedagogy of this corpus is not explicit or structured, but implicit and unstructured. This study seeks to organize the data into seven categories typical of pedagogical discussion.

1. **Worldview**
   
   What assumptions shaped the concept of education in the wisdom tradition in which Proverbs 1 – 9 was written?
2. **Values**
   What attitudes and commitments were the preeminent concerns of Proverbs 1–9?

3. **Goals**
   According to Proverbs 1–9, what outcomes should education produce in the learner?

4. **Curriculum**
   What subject matter was taught to the learner?

5. **Instruction**
   What processes did the teacher use in instructing the learner?

6. **Teacher**
   What role or roles did the teacher play, and what was the nature of his responsibility in the educational endeavour?

7. **Learner**
   What role did the learner play in the accomplishment of a successful educational experience?

To the contemporary reader, the term 'education' often suggests a highly organized system, frequently controlled and financed by various levels of government, that equips the younger generation with the knowledge and skills necessary for useful service in the work-force. This study, however, uses the concept of education more in the sense of the French notion of *formation*, that is, for the development of the learner toward intellectual and ethical maturity. Proverbs 1–9 has much to say to this sense of education as personal formation.

This monograph is not primarily a work of exegesis, though it builds upon an extensive analysis of exegetical studies. It is not a historical reconstruction of the development of the extant texts, nor is it a literary analysis of its structural features. Though it is part of a theological series, its concern is not to fit the content of Proverbs into the traditional categories of systematic theology.

Instead, this study focuses on a single major unit of Proverbs, the first nine chapters. Working from the standard Hebrew text, it organizes the data into the seven pedagogical categories outlined above. As a result, it reconstructs a synthetic statement of the pedagogical theory that lies embedded in the text. By this procedure, the content of Proverbs 1–9 is used in a way that agrees with, but transcends, the original purpose of the text.
INTRODUCTION

Modern literary convention uses gender-neutral language for reference to general human phenomena. This study follows that pattern when discussing education in non-specific contexts. It must be recognized, however, that Proverbs 1 - 9 most often uses distinctively masculine language, such as the frequent address ‘my son’, and it teaches by means of images, such as the women of wisdom and folly, that are particularly suited to communicate to an audience of young men. To use gender-neutral language when the text is speaking explicitly to young men introduces an anachronism that dulls the clarity of the textual meaning. Consequently, in this study neutral language will be used when possible, but when Proverbs 1 - 9 speaks to the learner as a young man, the masculine language of the text will be retained.

Rationale for the study

The first nine chapters of Proverbs gives ample evidence of being a discrete unit within the context of the extant book. This section is marked by extended discourses, which contrast with the individual proverbs that characterize the rest of the book. In addition, it is framed by the similar statements in Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 which define the fundamental significance of the fear of Yahweh. Furthermore, the content of the section is more explicitly theological than the material found in the remainder of Proverbs. An additional striking feature is its frequent use of the address ‘Hear, my son’, which adds a strong didactic cast to its observations and exhortations. The introductory statement in Proverbs 1:1-7 may well have been composed to preface the entire book, but the notice in 10:1 certainly distinguishes Proverbs 1 - 9 from the collection that begins in chapter 10. For these reasons, it is appropriate to study this section as a unified composition.

Although scholars for the most part agree on the distinctness of Proverbs 1 - 9, they diverge widely on the question of its original date. Most contemporary scholars view these chapters as a redactional introduction that the final editors of the book composed in the post-exilic or even Hellenistic era (Cox 1993: 3). Two major lines of evidence are used to argue for the late dating of this section. Proverbs 1 - 9 uses longer literary units, whereas the rest of the book has a heavy concentration of couplets. Form criticism reasons that literary development
proceeds from the simple to the complex. However, as Nel (1981b: 139–140) points out, this theory, though plausible, is not necessary. Nel himself does hold to a post-exilic date for the section, but on theological rather than literary grounds. The theological line of evidence points to the content of Proverbs 1–9, in particular the personification or hypostasis of wisdom in Proverbs 1:20–33 and 8:22–31, as proof of its origination in the post-exilic community.

Although the majority of scholars have been persuaded by the literary and theological arguments for the post-exilic date of Proverbs 1–9, a pre-exilic date is championed by some. With regard to the literary aspects of the section, Kayatz (1966), Lang (1986) and Boström (1990) demonstrate that comparable literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia derives from the second millennium BC. Thus, the literary form of Proverbs 1–9 could well reflect the time of the united monarchy as the introductory notice in 1:1 purports. Kitchen analyses closely the literary affinities between Proverbs and its ancient Near Eastern parallels, and he concludes on the basis of the literary evidence that 'the most probable literary date of Solomon I [Proverbs 1–24] is entirely compatible with that of the named author in the title of the work, i.e., king Solomon, of c. 950 BC' (1977: 99).

In a similar way, the theological argument for the post-exilic date of Proverbs 1–9 has also been questioned. As von Rad contends, the notion that intensive theological thought came to Israel only in the post-exilic period rests more on the theory of the evolutionary development of religion than it does on explicit evidence. He says:

> The proof that only in the post-exilic period could such teaching be given has still to be produced. Perhaps, with regard to the teachings of Prov. 1–9, we must simply think of different transmitters who, at the same time, stood in different teaching traditions (1972: 114).

Nel argues: 'The method of handling stylistic forms of the proverb as a development from a single sentence into a two-membered sentence and eventually to a composition, sounds reasonable (form-critically), but it is not sufficient for the postulation of a linear development. The occurrence of greater semantic units does not indicate an evolutionary process. The smaller and the bigger units could have existed side by side.'
A further support for the early dating of the section is the implicit social setting that permeates it. The entire book of Proverbs reflects prosperity and optimism, which would certainly suit the affluent times of Solomon more than the impoverished post-exilic community. The wisdom sayings reflect a stable monarchy with a recognizable class system more closely than life under a Persian overlord (Fox 1968: 56-57).

The predominant scholarly position regarding the post-exilic date for Proverbs 1 - 9 rests on questionable assumptions about the development of literature and theology in ancient Israel. The parallel literary artefacts in Egypt and Mesopotamia predate Proverbs 1 - 9 by several centuries, which undermines the plausibility of extended literary compositions originating in Israel only after the exile. Similarly, concrete evidence for theological development of the concept of wisdom only in the post-exilic time has not been produced. The implicit social setting in the stable monarchy period suggests that, contrary to the common scholarly opinion, it might be most appropriate to read Proverbs within its purported setting in the time of Solomon, while recognizing that later editorial work, especially in the time of Hezekiah (Pr. 25:1), may have shaped the canonical form of the book.

Although the prehistory of the extant text of Proverbs may be debatable, what is certain is that from ancient times Proverbs 1-9 has served as the opening section of the book. As a discrete unit it can be studied on its own terms, but at the same time it should also be viewed in terms of its connection to the rest of the book. In a thematic way, Proverbs 1 - 9 serves as a general overview of the subjects that Proverbs 10 - 31 explores in specific detail. This extended prologue to the book discusses in elegant portraits what the maxims of the body of Proverbs picture in quick snapshots. As Childs notes, Proverbs 1 - 9 is the prism through which the remainder of the book is read (1979: 552-553).

Both the discreteness of Proverbs 1 - 9 as a literary unit and its larger canonical dimension lend legitimacy to this study. Though it would be ideal to examine the complete corpus of wisdom literature in the Bible in order to discover its implicit pedagogical theory, that procedure would be both overwhelming and problematic. The biblical wisdom literature encompasses several complete books of the Bible, as well as portions of
numerous other books. In addition, extensive extrabiblical sources would need to be analysed. This investigation would also entail thorny, and probably insoluble, issues of literary history, for the wisdom corpus spans several centuries.

The present study is much more modest in scope, for it focuses only on Proverbs 1 – 9. It recognizes that this section in its canonical location functions as an overview of the themes and priorities of the book of Proverbs. Nevertheless, the specific purpose for this monograph is to identify what this particular portion of biblical literature says and implies about education.

Fox notes that though Proverbs 1 – 9 is clearly a didactic text, modern scholars have given only scant attention to the issues of pedagogy that it raises, preferring rather to view it in literary, philosophical or theological terms (1994: 233–234). This study endeavours to remedy that oversight. Its conclusions, however, are distinctive to Proverbs 1 – 9. Only thorough similar investigations of the other texts of the wisdom corpus could justify elevating the pedagogical philosophy of this section to the level of a paradigm of pedagogy for wisdom literature as a whole. Nevertheless, because Proverbs 1 – 9 functions canonically to introduce the book of Proverbs, it would not be surprising if a comprehensive analysis of the wisdom corpus were to support in large measure the implicit pedagogical theory found in Proverbs 1 – 9.

2 A useful survey of wisdom literature with the history of its interpretation is found in J. Day et al. (eds.) (1995).
Chapter One

The worldview of Proverbs 1 – 9

No book is written in a vacuum, for every literary text is shaped by historical, cultural and sociological factors. Even more influential are the ideological assumptions, or the worldview, of the author. In order to understand the implicit pedagogical theory in Proverbs 1 – 9, one must first define the worldview which produced it. What were the assumptions that shaped the concept of education in the sense of personal formation in the wisdom tradition in which Proverbs was written?

Wilhelm Dilthey reasoned that humans have a world picture (Weltbild) that precedes a conscious view of the world. Upon reflection, this pre-theoretical picture is developed into a worldview (Weltanschauung) (Holmes 1983: 32). A worldview is not a full-blown philosophy of life, but the beliefs, attitudes and values that cause a person to see the world in a certain way. It is not a system of thought, but a perceptual framework for viewing the world (Walsh and Middleton 1984: 17). As Sire states, ‘A world view is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of our world’ (1988: 17).

It is evident that a worldview implies a prior faith commitment. Even in areas of life in which empirical testing is impossible, the worldview makes assertions about the nature of reality. From the question of the origin of life to the search for ultimate meaning, what one believes sets the course for how all of the world is viewed. Of course, this worldview must in time be evaluated and validated so that it can provide a solid epistemological foundation for life. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that even apart from verification a worldview is a powerful force in shaping the actions, attitudes and values of an individual or a society. To understand how education was conceived in ancient Israel, then, one must first determine how
Israel's concept of teaching and learning was shaped by its view of the world.

Sire (1988:18) helpfully describes a worldview in terms of the answers to the following questions:

1. What is prime reality – the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?

Not all of these questions impinge directly on Proverbs 1 – 9. The discussion in this chapter will summarize the worldview of this section of Proverbs in four general propositions that appear to be of special significance in the shaping of pedagogy in the wisdom tradition.

It is crucial to realize that a worldview is not just a description of how one sees life as it actually is. It also provides a vision for seeing life as it ideally ought to be. "Our worldview determines our values. It helps us interpret the world around us. It sorts out what is important from what is not, what is of highest value from what is least" (Walsh and Middleton 1984: 32). In other words, the worldview of Proverbs 1 – 9 was a powerful causative factor in resolving issues such as the values and goals of education, the curriculum, and how the teacher and the learner relate to one another. There is an integral relationship between the assumptions that shaped the worldview of ancient Israel and the concept of education that developed in that society.

From the time of Solomon onward ancient Israel was profoundly involved in international affairs. Politically, Israel entered into alliance with foreign powers, sometimes with Egypt to the south, and at other times with the Mesopotamian powers of Assyria and Babylon. Commerce forged numerous links with other cultures in the Mediterranean world and beyond.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the biblical wisdom literature includes language and concepts that parallel what is found in Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts. Where Israel's worldview was compatible with that of its neighbours, the
concepts were integrated into the biblical wisdom corpus with little material change. What typically happened, however, was that Israel borrowed language and concepts generated within other worldviews, and then adapted them to fit into its own view of the world (von Rad 1972: 5). Just as a speaker may well use a quotation from an author without suggesting total agreement with the originator, so Proverbs uses material that may have originated with Egyptian and Mesopotamian scribes, but in a way that fits into the biblical worldview.

Although Proverbs does share many resemblances with its ancient Near Eastern neighbours, it is most fundamentally connected to the rest of the Hebrew Bible. As Waltke concludes,

... the sages and the prophets were true spiritual yokefellows sharing the same Lord, cultus, faith, hope, anthropology and epistemology, speaking with the same authority, and making similar religious and ethical demands on their hearers. In short, they drank from the same spiritual well (1979b: 304).

This unity of thought with the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, however, is not demonstrated by explicit reference to prescriptions of the law or the acts of salvation history. Proverbs has a different agenda from that of the Torah and the prophets. Its ethical message builds upon the assumed base of theology that was already known to the hearers (Craigie 1979: 8). Just as a text in calculus presupposes familiarity with algebra without necessarily making overt reference to it, so the pedagogy of Proverbs assumes that the reader shares its worldview and only rarely makes explicit reference to what is taught elsewhere in the Bible. Whybray concludes rightly:

There is nothing here which is contradictory to the public affirmations of salvation-faith found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and there is no reason to suppose that that historic faith was not taken for granted by its authors (1994b: 10).
Creation: The universe is Yahweh’s creation

The most fundamental assumption of the worldview represented in Proverbs 1 – 9 is that the universe is Yahweh’s creation. The world did not come into being because of a primeval struggle between rival deities. Neither was it the product of impersonal time and chance. Instead, the whole world which exists at the present time was created by Yahweh alone.

It has often been claimed that Israel’s wisdom traditions developed from early secular sayings that were reinterpreted and recast with theological language. Crenshaw (1981a: 92) agrees in part that Israel’s later wisdom literature is more theological in its content, but he points out rightly that ‘this editing process must surely have found a kindred base upon which to work. It follows that wisdom contained a religious element from the beginning’. In fact, the parts of Israel’s wisdom tradition that include the greatest concentration of theological language can be compared with Egyptian parallels that predate the purported secular portions of Old Testament wisdom. It is more appropriate, therefore, to view the biblical wisdom literature ‘as the unfolding of a philosophy and worldview which did not change in essentials’ (Eaton 1989: 4).

It appears, then, that Old Testament wisdom was always theologically grounded, even though its theological language may have become more or less explicit in different times and genres. In addition, though the wisdom literature had its own emphases that distinguished it from the legal, prophetic and hymnic literature, its worldview reflected the understanding of reality shared by all Israelites (Murphy 1981c: 3). Wisdom is therefore a form of instruction that is not incompatible with the law and the prophets, but is complementary to the rest of the biblical texts (Wilson 1987: 330).

This worldview sees all of reality as a universe. Yahweh’s creation encompasses the entire world, for he is the maker of heaven and earth, not merely a limited tribal deity. Though he did indeed initiate a special covenant relationship with Israel, Yahweh is Lord over all of the nations, for he has created all of the earth.

Because the entire universe has its source in the creative activity of Yahweh, there is a common ethical system that applies to all humans. Clements observes:
Beyond the ethic of the clan and of the nation, wisdom established an ethic grounded in creation itself and valid for all humanity. It addressed its teachings to persons as members of the human race, and not as members of a specific clan, or even a national community (1990: 25).

In agreement with both narrative and poetic biblical accounts, Proverbs asserts that Yahweh created the world. Proverbs 3:19–20 places Yahweh at centre stage by positioning his name, rather than the customary verb, as the first word in the statement (Whybray 1994: 68). The verbs ‘founded’ and ‘established’ are standard terms used to describe divine creative activity. As the creator, Yahweh is actively involved in the world which he made. In contrast to deistic notions of an absent designer, Yahweh brought about the flood as judgment upon the earth in the time of Noah (cf. Gn. 7:11). In a beneficent vein, he prompts the skies to water the earth so that the crops may grow.

Proverbs 8:22–31 views the time that preceded the divine creation. The major focus of this passage is the function of wisdom in the created order, but it also speaks of the creator as the one who fashioned the entire universe and who pre-dates it all (Bostrom 1990: 148). Far from being a hypostasis, wisdom is regarded as being established, or installed (cf. Ps. 2:6), by Yahweh (Alden 1983: 73–74). Wisdom is not his rival, but a tool in his hands.

Nevertheless, the crucial role of wisdom in Yahweh’s creation must not be neglected. Proverbs 3:19 states that Yahweh founded the earth by wisdom and set the heavens in place by understanding. Within the same passage the teacher exclaims, ‘Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding’ (3:13). This collocation indicates that ‘... the wisdom that directs life is the same wisdom that created the universe; to surrender to God’s wisdom is to put oneself in harmony with creation, the world around one’ (Ross 1991: 919).

2 This subject is discussed in length in the major commentaries on Proverbs. Kidner (1964: 78–79) offers a succinct rationale for regarding this reference as a personification rather than as a hypostasis.
As has been noted already, the main feature of Proverbs 8:22-31 is the presence of wisdom during Yahweh’s creative activity. Two thorny interpretive issues are determinative for understanding the significance of wisdom in creation. First, the verb qānā in verse 22 has been translated ‘created’ (Ross 1991: 946; Cohen 1952: 48) or ‘possessed’ (Scott 1965: 71-72; Whybray 1994b: 130, with reservations). The uses of qānā in Proverbs 1:5, 4:5 and 7 support the sense of ‘possess’, such that wisdom was an attribute of Yahweh that guided his creation of the world.

The second term, 'āmōn, in 8:30, has prompted renderings of ‘craftsman’ (Kidner 1964: 80–81; Delitzsch 1971: 191), ‘nursling’ (Aitken 1986: 83; Whybray 1994b: 135) and, less likely, ‘binding together’ (Scott 1965: 72). Throughout this passage wisdom is pictured as being with Yahweh as his companion during his creation, but not as an active agent of the creative work. The repeated verb ‘give birth’ in 8:24–25 fits better the image of a child than it does a craftsman. It seems more appropriate therefore to adopt the sense of nursling, or young child, for 'āmōn.

When the high poetry of Proverbs 8:22–31 is reduced to prose, wisdom emerges as the divinely ordained order that permeates God’s world. Yahweh embedded wisdom in his creation, so only through wisdom can one discern how to live successfully in his world (Boström 1990: 53–54). As Garrett notes, ‘... if the very universe is made in accordance with the

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3 Excellent discussions of the interpretive options can be found in Farmer (1991: 54–55) and Scott (1965: 72).

4 Fox (1996: 699–702) argues well that the term is an infinitive absolute meaning ‘being raised/growing up’, which serves as an adverbial complement to the main verb of Proverbs 8:30. Thus, he concludes (702): ‘Lady Wisdom is declaring that while God was busy creating the world, she was nearby, growing up like a child in his care (v. 30a) and giving him delight (v. 30bα) by playing before him (v. 30bβ) in the world that would be inhabited (v. 31a). Now that humans are on the scene, she is the guardian and teacher and declares, “And my delight is in mankind” (v. 31b).’

5 Clements (1990: 19) observes well: ‘Hitherto the almost exclusive concern of scholars with this cosmic role of wisdom has been with its personification as a female figure, possibly originally as a goddess, and with the femininity of wisdom. Yet this was certainly not the central intellectual feature that has motivated the development of this imagery, and may have been little more than a convenient literary device. In fact, the primary feature of this poem celebrating the role of wisdom in creation is the strong emphasis that it places upon the cosmic range and authority of wisdom.’
principles of Wisdom, it is folly for anyone to live contrary to those principles' (1993: 109).

Implicit in the assumption that the universe is Yahweh’s creation is the conviction that human meaning is found only in relationship to the creator. Because Yahweh created the world in a purposeful way, the world is not random and meaningless. The order that God established when he made the world provides the ground for human significance in the cosmos. Holmes reasons that a person’s meaning is found in the relationship between the human and the Maker, for ‘God is the source not only of all being but also of value, hope, and purpose’ (1983: 62). In the wisdom literature, this relationship is delineated under the rubric of the fear of Yahweh, which is the beginning of wisdom (Pr. 9:10).

A final implication of the premise of the divine creation of the world is that there is no legitimate division between sacred and secular spheres of life. The world as created by Yahweh is a universe in which the divine order permeates each part. The teacher does not hesitate to draw insights from observations of nature, for the activity of the ant (Pr. 6:6–8) is maintained by God’s order just as is the activity of humans. Since Yahweh’s creation ‘underlies all reality, also what moderns call the secular is part of God’s domain’ (Malchow 1983: 112).

The modern dichotomy between secular life and religious faith, or between the profane and the sacred, is foreign to the worldview of biblical wisdom. In Proverbs, the juxtaposition of the routine details of daily life with reminders of Yahweh’s evaluation of those activities (cf. Pr. 3:27–35) reveals that all of life is regarded as a seamless fabric. As O’Conner comments:

... ordinary life and the life of faith are not two separate spheres but one unified experience of God’s creation. When Israel’s wisdom literature concentrates intensely on mundane human concerns, it is not ignoring faith but assuming it (1988: 16–17).
Order: Yahweh is sovereignly controlling the world

The worldview of Proverbs begins with the assumption that Yahweh was the sole creator of the universe. In addition, it holds that Yahweh’s control over the world is continuing, active and personal. Because of this, the world is not driven about by erratic, arbitrary and accidental forces, but it is maintained and directed by the order which Yahweh established at creation. Right from the beginning Yahweh willed that the world be stable and orderly (Brueggemann 1972: 23).

This divine order for the world functions at several levels. The physical world manifests purposeful design from the intricate movements of the celestial objects to the complex interrelationships among diverse ecosystems. Moreover, as Proverbs teaches repeatedly, there is a predictable relationship between acts and consequences which holds true in most situations in life. This order encouraged the search by wise teachers to regulate life in accordance with the intrinsic order of the universe. Yahweh has already constructed the world with pervasive orderliness, so ‘each human being must accept the fact that the world is put together this way and must learn to live accordingly’ (Barré 1981: 41).

In the thought of Proverbs, wisdom is skill in living according to Yahweh’s order. Folly is choosing to live contrary to the order which he embedded in the universe. Just as wisdom was present at the creation as Yahweh established his structure for the world (Pr. 8:22–31), so each person is obliged to live by wisdom if success is to be achieved. As Matlack notes:

Wisdom is in this sense a kind of orderly meaningfulness structuring creation. If you attempt to live by its guidelines and submit to its strictures, then you

As Nel (1982: 112) reasons, Yahweh’s moral order rules out human autonomy: ‘Subordination to the created order means in fact re-established order in human conduct. Accordingly man cannot autonomously design his own ethical imperative, but the ethical imperative heteronomously originates in God, the creator of order. Thus, wisdom’s morality is not autonomous, but on the contrary, it is diametrically opposed to Greek and philosophical ethics which ascribe priority to man’s reason. Human conscience cannot be the starting point for knowledge of good and evil.’
will do well. This principle would not work unless it was implanted by God in the very act of creation (1988: 427).

A basic contention of the wisdom literature is that the divine order in the world is knowable, at least in part. The proverbs frequently draw lessons from nature as well as from observations of social behaviour. For example, in Proverbs 6:6 the wise teacher exhorts his student, ‘Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!’ Lessons drawn from the animal world were part of the repertoire of Solomon (1 Ki. 4:33), and they can be found in numerous passages of the Old Testament (cf. Jb. 12:7; Is. 1:3; Je. 8:7; Whybray 1994b: 96).

If order can be learned through observation of the world, then it can also be taught. Consequently, the curriculum of wisdom focuses on life, for in observing life the student can become adept at recognizing how Yahweh constructed his world. In discerning this wisdom, the individual is equipped to function successfully in life.

It is crucial to remember that the divine order for the world derives from the righteous character of Yahweh. There is moral governance in the universe because God’s justice directs and delimits all that he does. Wisdom, then, is not amoral pragmatism, which alleges that whatever works is right. Living wisely in Yahweh’s world is living according to his justice.

This fact is demonstrated in Proverbs 5:21–22. In warning the learner against the allurements of the adulteress, the teacher gives this rationale: ‘For a man’s ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths’ (5:21). Lest this be construed as speaking merely of divine omniscience and not divine governance, the teacher speaks of the righteous standard by which human deeds will be recompensed: ‘The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast’ (5:22). Waltke notes well that ‘wisdom must be thought of as a broad, theological concept denoting a fixed, righteous order to which the wise man submits his life’ (1979a: 238).

The sovereign control of the world by Yahweh means that the wise life conforms to the norm of his righteousness. He has given to humans the ability to perceive the order which he maintains. As they live in accordance with this order, they ‘follow wisdom’s path to justice, knowledge, and well-being’ (Perdue
1993: 75). It is Yahweh’s righteousness which provides the standard by which human government maintains justice in society (Eaton 1989: 4).

Just as Yahweh created the world, so he himself sustains order in it. The act of creation was not merely the initiation of an ongoing process of existence. Personified wisdom states that it was present when Yahweh ‘gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not overstep his command . . .’ (Pr. 8:29), but Yahweh’s involvement with the world did not cease with his original creative activity. The wisdom literature, including both the practical wisdom of Proverbs and the speculative wisdom works of Job and Ecclesiastes, affirms that Yahweh continues to be alive and active in the world (McKenzie 1967: 4; Duhaime 1980: 195).

Proverbs 8:31 substantiates this point, for it presents wisdom as ‘rejoicing in his whole world’. It is Yahweh’s world, the universe which he created and which he sustains, in which wisdom finds its delight. Biblical wisdom, then, at its heart holds to the ongoing control of Yahweh over the world.

Because Yahweh himself sustains order in his world, the world is governed by a personal agent, not propelled by impersonal forces. Many scholars have drawn parallels between the concept of Maat in the Egyptian wisdom literature and the sense of the order of the world evident in biblical wisdom. In Egyptian thought Maat was the order which Re instituted when he overcame chaos. The pharaohs were god-kings who governed society by this static order. The responsibility of each person was to conform to this order across the full range of activities (Fox 1968: 58). The society in Egypt was regarded as perfect in its inception, so history becomes simply ‘the inevitable working-out of its original and immutable constitution’ (McKane 1970: 58). The continuing involvement of the deity, therefore, was unnecessary, for humans merely worked out the details of the unalterable plan.

It is undeniable that there are significant similarities between Maat and the concept of order in the biblical wisdom. Both recognize the divine source of order in the world. Both acknowledge the need for humans to live in accordance with this order if they are to prove successful. Both insist that the order encompasses all areas of existence, making it the foundation for personal and societal life. In fact, Emerton’s
description of Maat could easily serve for the biblical sense of order as well: '... this order is manifest in nature in the normalcy of phenomena; it is manifest in society as justice; and it is manifest in an individual’s life as truth' (1979b: 215).

Boström, however, raises some legitimate objections to an essential linkage between Maat and biblical order. He argues that Egyptologists themselves are beginning to entertain different notions of Maat, viewing it as a concept which changed over time in Egypt (1990: 95). Furthermore, the Egyptian concept of Maat viewed order as an impersonal governing principle, in distinction from the biblical worldview which posits Yahweh as the active, personal director of history (1990: 93).

Even the sections of Proverbs which have been deemed by scholars as the most 'secular' contain clear witness to Yahweh’s personal involvement in the world. For example, Proverbs 16:1 states, 'To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the L ORD comes the reply of the tongue.' In a similar vein, Proverbs 21:31 observes, 'The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the L ORD.' According to the biblical worldview, there is much predictability in the world which Yahweh has ordered, but he maintains his personal involvement so that the consequences of human actions may not always be anticipated. It seems best, therefore, to conclude with Murphy: 'Although some characteristics of maat ... appear in the biblical description of wisdom, there is no justification for transferring the Egyptian experience of reality to Israel' (1970: 228).

It is important, then, to define carefully what order implies in the worldview of Proverbs 1 – 9. When Yahweh created the universe he embedded within it elements of causality and predictability. Through observation humans can discern the ways in which Yahweh has structured the world, and teach these patterns to others. The universe is not arbitrary, for Yahweh has constructed it with recognizable design. Neither is the world amoral, for Yahweh’s order is intimately related to his righteous character. 7

In addition to creating the world, Yahweh also sustains order in the world which he made. Unlike the Egyptian concept of

7 As Waltke (1979b: 314) notes, Proverbs agrees with the rest of the Old Testament in affirming that 'Yahweh as the Judge of all men will reward the righteous and punish transgressors.'
Maat, which reflected a worldview assuming a closed, static world, biblical wisdom viewed Yahweh as personally involved in the ongoing progress of history. As Holmes concludes, ‘The world should not therefore be thought of just mechanistically, in terms of impersonal causal mechanisms, even of mechanisms created by God, for a living and loving God remains active in it’ (1983: 64). The world is ordered, because Yahweh is sovereignly controlling the world which he created.

Rationality: Yahweh’s world is knowable, but also mysterious

Because Yahweh created the world and he is sovereignly controlling it, the world is knowable, at least in part. The universe manifests intelligent design in its order. This fact is the foundation for human understanding in the cosmos.

Yahweh planted truth within his universe, and he endowed humans with the capacity to discover it by using their intelligence (Crenshaw 1981a: 209). In fact, wisdom is portrayed as calling out to humans, seeking to elicit their attention and response. This invitation is addressed to all humans, regardless of social class (Pr. 8:4). Wisdom utters its cry at the gates, the centre of public life in the ancient city (Pr. 1:20–21; 8:1–3). As Cox notes,

Wisdom is competing for attention in precisely that arena where people live their lives, and where they are already preoccupied with affairs. Wisdom’s place is thus not the ivory tower, but the arena of daily life, and she wishes to become involved with mankind at every level (1982b: 148).

This call is clearly heard by all, for the rhetorical question which introduces the invitation in Proverbs 8:1 has the force of a strong positive assertion (Farmer 1991: 51; Whybray 1994b: 122).

This appeal, however, must be answered by a conscious, decisive commitment to acquire wisdom. As Proverbs 4:7

Cohen (1952: 44), comparing Ps. 49:3, defines īm as those possessing high social status and b'ne ādām as a term for the masses.
teaches, the beginning of wisdom is a decision to get it, even at the cost of all that one possesses. The search for wisdom, then, is not a supplement, but it must be a radical reorientation of life, in which wisdom becomes the prime priority. Wisdom promises much to those who seek it, but it also requires 'constancy of allegiance and affection' (McKane 1970: 305).

This commitment is pictured as an intensive search for precious metals. In four lines ascending to a climax, this search is seen to require perseverance, diligence and hard work (Pr. 2:3–4). Just as miners go to heroic efforts in locating and extracting ore from the earth (cf. Jb. 28:1–11), so wisdom is found only by those willing to put forth the same painstaking effort. Aitken remarks well: 'Neither silver ore nor wisdom is got in a day, or got without industry; but for miner and student alike, the prize is worth the toil. But toil there is; and so an earnest desire to obtain wisdom must be uppermost' (1986: 27).

In practical terms, the search for wisdom involves careful observation of life through personal experience and through the experiences of others as passed down through teachers. In life actions are repeated, and similar consequences recur. The wise person generalizes from observation of recurrent patterns, in order to formulate rational explanations for life in Yahweh's world. These patterns serve then as guideposts for making wise choices (Scott 1965: xvii).

The wisdom tradition gathered these observations into a traditional corpus of tested information. Instead of each person

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9 Ross (1991: 912) notes well: 'The elevation in the lines from "call out" to "cry aloud" suggests that, if understanding does not come immediately, one should put forth greater efforts. So the ear hears the teaching, the mind understands what is said, and the voice is used to inquire for true knowledge. This search for wisdom and understanding should be as diligent as the search for precious metal (v. 4, "silver"), the simile suggesting both the value of the treasure and the diligence of the search.'

10 Bloomfield (1984: 19) develops the significance of this emphasis of wisdom in the larger context of intellectual history: 'We must understand that wisdom is man's first and most basic step towards rationality. Out of it came the fundamental world-view of science before statistical principles redefined the notion of science in our century and for many people it is still the basic view. It was the drive to overcome the arbitrariness of things that led to the discovery or, in some cases, invention, of order underlying the apparent disorder and chance of the universe. Repetition occurs in nature and life and thus some kind of order can encompass the apparent irrationality of things.'
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having to discover wisdom through individual experience, the
teachers of wisdom accumulated the insights which the past
generations had observed. Thus, each new generation inherited
the aggregate wisdom of its ancestors, but it also was challenged
to continue the process of observation so that succeeding
generations would be the beneficiaries of its searching for
wisdom.

Wisdom is learned through the observation of life and
through the reception of tradition. The exhortation to observe
the ant leads to a moral for human behaviour (Pr. 6:6–11). Just
as the ant demonstrates foresight and diligence in securing its
food supply without supervision to compel it, so the sluggard
needs to discipline himself so as to prevent future ruin. A similar
approach is used in the realm of human behaviour, when the
teacher rehearses the allurement and destruction of a young
man by the strange woman (Pr. 7) as a pre-emptive warning to
his pupil.

Traditional wisdom is transmitted both by parents and by
teachers. The paired references to father and mother in
Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20 are unique to Hebrew wisdom literature
in comparison with the ancient literature of Egypt and
Mesopotamia (Whybray 1994b: 37). It is likely that most of the
frequent references in Proverbs 1–9 to father and son fit best
into the teacher-pupil relationship. Nevertheless, the explicit
reference to the mother in these verses makes it plausible that
the home was a significant contributor to the education of the
young in ancient Israel.

The instruction in Proverbs 4:1–9 gives a glimpse into the
transmission of truth. The teacher calls upon his pupils to hear
the instruction which he, as their intellectual and moral father,
is giving to them. This teaching is not original with him, for it is
legah, traditional information transmitted from past generations
(Cohen 1952: 21). He proceeds to cite the words of his father or
teacher in 4:4–9, and thereby gives increased credibility to his
appeal.

As the wisdom teachers observe the world, their attention
turns from seeing what is in the world to explaining why actions
typically produced predictable results. The question of causality
assumes that the world possesses inherent order, which is a
prerequisite for rational thinking (Bloomfield 1984: 20; Toombs
1988: 8–9). The wisdom teachers attempt to understand how the
order in Yahweh's world functions, so that they can define the relation between acts and consequences.

This rational order in the world is presented in numerous forms. For example, Proverbs 3:1-12 contains six pairs of causes with corresponding consequences. If the learner fulfills the protasis, then the apodosis is certain to follow. Proverbs 5:8-14 gives a warning (8) followed by consequences which justify the warning (9-14). These consequences include personal exploitation, regret and public disgrace (Kidner 1964: 70). The teacher substantiates his prohibition in Proverbs 7:25 with the dire consequences which follow (7:26-27). On a positive note, the person who finds wisdom (3:13) is blessed by its beneficent rewards (3:14-18).

Many of the statements in Proverbs 1-9 present actions as pregnant with inherent consequences for good or evil. McKane argues from this that 'the relationship between the actions of the fools and the bad end which overtakes them is inward and necessary, not superimposed as the consequence of a forensic verdict and penalty' (1970: 271), which he relates to the impersonal concept of Maat in Egyptian wisdom literature.

It is true that a passage such as Proverbs 1:10-19 does not include explicit reference to divine retribution. On the other hand, Proverbs 2:21-22 points to a moral dimension embedded in consequences, for the upright will live in the land, but the wicked will be cut off from it. In Proverbs 5:21-23 an explicit statement of divine causality (21) juxtaposed with human responsibility (22-23) suggests that consequences are ultimately determined by Yahweh's governance of the world, even when they are not specifically stated as such in the text. Though reference to the divine dimension is not always at the fore, it is justifiable to conclude that 'wisdom then is the fixed cause-effect order that God created and upholds . . .' (Waltke 1987: 73). Even in a passage such as Proverbs 1:10-19, in which Yahweh is not at all mentioned, his moral order directs life in such a way that evil actions reap evil consequences (Hubbard 1989: 54). 

11 Boström (1990: 116) argues reasonably that even formally impersonal statements of act and consequence do not necessarily rule out divine governance: ' . . . the causation of the destruction of the wrong-doer was viewed in a variety of ways. The relationship between life-style and fate was indeed regarded as close, but the predisposition for the passive formulation of especially the negative judgments neither necessitates nor justifies the
At the same time that the wisdom literature demonstrates the causal relationship between acts and consequences, it also teaches that some of life is inscrutable. Although Proverbs 1 – 9 does not yield clear examples of this teaching, the larger corpus of wisdom includes sayings such as these: ‘A man’s steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?’ (Pr. 20:24), and ‘There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD’ (Pr. 21:30). Taken together with the predominant witness to divine retribution, Proverbs portrays Yahweh as governing the world in justice, but also remaining free to act in ways which are inscrutable to humans (Whybray 1994b: 11). In describing how Yahweh typically acts, wisdom does not domesticate him into total predictability.\(^\text{12}\)

Because Yahweh is just, both in his essential character and in his actions, his rule is not arbitrary, even though it is not always knowable. What transpires in his world may not appear to be logical to humans. It must be remembered, however, that ‘logic itself is subject to God’s law’ so ‘to elevate logic to the level of the norm for all creation is implicitly to assert its autonomy, to deny that all things (including logical thought) are subject to God’s law’ (Walsh and Middleton 1984: 177). Yahweh does not have to submit to the canons of human logic as he governs the universe which he created.

The sense of mystery which humans necessarily have as they seek to understand the world impels them to faith in Yahweh,

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\(^\text{12}\) Yahweh’s ordered world remains mysterious in part to humans because human knowledge is limited. Humans, though possessing rationality because they are made in the image of God (Gn. 1:26-27), are finite, ever deficient of the omniscience of God. In addition, the noetic effects of fallenness distort that which humans do see, so that they are unable to construe it accurately (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3-4). The problem of finiteness in all humans, and the additional problem of fallenness in unregenerate humans, are necessary limitations on their ability to understand the world. This human disability, however, should not call into question the viability of Yahweh’s ordered universe. Rather, it is better to affirm that ‘there is indeed a cosmic order but the human mind cannot grasp all of its ramifications, even those which impinge upon human experience’ (Bergant 1984: 17, in agreement with von Rad).
which gives stability for life. Wisdom does not deny mystery or avoid it, but rather wisdom embraces Yahweh, who alone knows the world exhaustively. The fact that life cannot be explained and secured by human effort alone prompts humans to place their trust in the Lord, for it is the fear of Yahweh which is the beginning of wisdom (Pr. 9:10).

Fear of Yahweh: Humans must reverence Yahweh in their lives

The expression ‘the fear of Yahweh’ frames Proverbs 1 – 9, occurring both near the beginning of the section (1:7) and near the end (9:10) to form an inclusio. In addition, the expression also occurs in 1:29; 2:5; 3:7; and 8:13. Thus, the significance of the term is indicated both by its frequency and by its positioning in the section.

This emphasis on the fear of Yahweh is not unique to Proverbs 1 – 9, however, for it is a key concept throughout the wisdom literature. In Proverbs 10 – 31 the expression and close parallels are used twelve times. Especially significant is the final reference in Proverbs 31:30, which states: ‘Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.’ In the larger structure of Proverbs the virtuous woman fulfils the challenge set forth in the thesis of the book in 1:7.

The other biblical wisdom books also contain significant uses of ‘the fear of Yahweh’, or the comparable expressions ‘fear of God [Elohim]’ or ‘fear of the Lord [Adonai]’. Job is described both by the narrator and by Yahweh as one who fears God (Jb. 1:1, 8; 2:3). The majestic hymn to wisdom concludes with the word of God to humans, ‘The fear of the LORD [Adonai] – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding’ (Jb. 28:28). Furthermore, Ecclesiastes ends with this word of instruction: ‘Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter; Fear God [Elohim] and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man’ (Ec. 12:13). Though the literary history of each of these books has been debated extensively, what is evident is that in their canonical form from antiquity all three

Among the many useful studies of the fear of Yahweh are Fuhs (TDOT VI:290–315); Blocher (1977); Brongers (1948); Cox (1982a); and Derousseaux (1970).
major wisdom books maintain that the fear of Yahweh (Elohim/Adonai) is the key principle for wisdom (Blocher 1977: 5).  

The fear of Yahweh is an implication of his creation of the universe. Because Yahweh alone fashioned the world, all of life proceeds from him. Yahweh, then, is the foundational authority for the whole ethical system of wisdom. As Craigie remarks, 'Hebrew moral wisdom presupposes the existence of God, which in turn gives the whole system coherence, authority and integrity' (1979: 8).

If everything in the universe is dependent upon Yahweh, the sovereign creator, then nothing should be interpreted independently from him. According to Hebrew wisdom, the notion of the autonomy of human reason is false, for Yahweh's creation of the world means that 'it is consequently impossible to obtain an understanding of man's place in the design and purpose of living without a humble approach to Him' (Cohen 1952: 3).

As Proverbs 1:7b states, only a fool would ignore the creator and endeavour to live in opposition to his moral will. The creative order mandates that the proper stance for humans is humble submission to the ethical demands of the just God, rather than arrogant insistence on choosing their own way independent of the Lord who made them.

In the wisdom tradition, knowledge is not divorced from faith, but its ultimate connection with Yahweh the creator is always affirmed. The existence and authority of Yahweh are constantly in view, so that no division between the sacred and the secular spheres of life is allowed. Instead, 'every act bore religious consequences and arose from a religious understanding of reality. Life with people was at the same time existence in God's presence' (Crenshaw 1981a: 24).

Because every facet of life has a religious dimension, wisdom calls its hearers to a whole-life response to Yahweh. In this worldview every action and choice in life, including even the most apparently mundane, is imbued with theological significance. In other words, service to God is not a part of a person's

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14 Aitken (1986: 14-15) notes that the theme of the fear of Yahweh is important throughout the Old Testament, both in the sense of awe (Ex. 3:6), and of obedience to the divine law (Dt. 6:2).
agenda, but it flavours the entire agenda of life.\textsuperscript{15}

The term ‘fear’ (yir\'a) in the Old Testament can refer to dread (Dt. 2:25) or terror (Jon. 1:10, 16), or more positively to awe or reverence. The expression ‘the fear of Yahweh’ combines the senses of ‘shrinking back in fear and of drawing close in awe’ (Ross 1991: 907). This response is not abject terror which causes humans to cringe before Yahweh, but a sense of awe before the exalted Lord, such as Isaiah experienced when he saw the vision of Yahweh in the temple (Is. 6:1–5).

Awe before Yahweh precludes arrogant defiance of the creator or flippant disregard of his moral demands (Barré 1981: 42). Instead, the fear of Yahweh is profound respect which causes the human to acknowledge creaturely dependence upon him. The one who fears Yahweh admits that the Lord alone possesses total knowledge and control in the universe he has made. Rather than questioning or rejecting the dictates of Yahweh, the reverential worshipper adopts the position of the submissive servant before him.

Even when it is not stated explicitly, the fear of Yahweh governs the thoughts of Proverbs 1 – 9 (Brueggemann 1972: 40). It is the critical initial point which necessarily affects all of life. As Clements notes rightly, ‘this was the indispensable first step of commitment without which the voice of wisdom could not be heard’ (1992: 156).

Proverbs 3:7 draws an antithesis between fearing Yahweh, which causes one to turn away from evil, and being wise in one’s own eyes. Wisdom chooses to renounce autonomy and to place its trust in Yahweh. Instead of pursuing personal preferences, the wise person places confidence in Yahweh’s direction.

The fear of Yahweh as the crucial principle for wisdom indicates that in biblical wisdom knowledge is impossible

\textsuperscript{15} Speaking more generally of a biblical worldview, Walsh and Middleton (1984: 67–68) declare: ‘The paths of wisdom-obedience and folly-disobedience cut across everything we do. We are called to serve the Lord and acknowledge his kingship in the whole range of our cultural activities. There are no sacred-secular compartments here. Our service to God is not something we do alongside our ordinary human life. The Bible knows no such dichotomy. In the biblical world view all of life, in all of its dimensions, is constituted as religion. From our economic choices to our recreation, from our prayer life to the way in which we bathe our babies, in every cultural action and deed, we live only in response to the cosmic, creation law of God. This is God’s universe throughout. And we are called to be responsible respondents to his overarching Torah.’
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without belief. In other words, it teaches that faith seeks understanding. At the same time, Proverbs 2:5 states that the fear of Yahweh is also the consequence of the search for wisdom. The paradox which this suggests is more apparent than real. Taken together, the statements about the fear of Yahweh in Proverbs 1 – 9 teach that 'it is wisdom in search of understanding that penetrates everything created, becomes acquainted with it and sees God as the Creator of it all' (Nel 1982: 101). As Proverbs 1:7 states, apart from this fundamental commitment to reverence for Yahweh there is only folly, for fools despise the wisdom and instruction that are derived only from him.

The fear of Yahweh produces a new way of looking at all of life, for it 'sees each moment as the Lord’s time, each relationship as the Lord’s opportunity, each duty as the Lord’s command, and each blessing as the Lord’s gift' (Hubbard 1989: 48). This reverence for Yahweh orientates a person to the kind of moral life that corresponds to the creator’s values. As Yahweh is just in his character and conduct, so his justice becomes the standard for measuring right and wrong in the realm of human behaviour. The fear of Yahweh represents the desire to please him in all things by respecting the divine order he has constructed in the world (Clements 1992: 62).

Only this kind of transcendent value could truly motivate humans to virtue across the full range of their activities and attitudes. Not only does the fear of Yahweh direct toward positive righteousness, but it also produces hatred of evil (Pr. 3:7b; 8:13). Consequently, all relativistic value systems are rejected by wisdom as inferior because they fail to honour as absolute Yahweh’s just order in the world (Brongers 1948: 164; Zornberg 1982: 32).

Conclusion

The worldview of Proverbs 1 – 9 is constructed on four prominent assumptions. First, the universe is Yahweh’s creation. Yahweh is not a limited deity as in polytheistic religions, but he is the sole God who has created the entire world. He fashioned the world by his wisdom and understanding, so it is not random and meaningless, but it demonstrates intelligent design. Yahweh’s singular creation implies that all of the universe is ultimately
dependent upon him. Consequently, there is no dichotomy between sacred and secular spheres of life in the worldview of wisdom. All of life is viewed in terms of its relationship with the creator.

Second, Yahweh is sovereignly controlling the world which he created. This divine order produces a significant degree of predictability between acts and consequences, because the righteous character of Yahweh provides moral governance to the universe. Wisdom seeks to discover the order which Yahweh has embedded in the universe by observing both the physical world and human behaviour. The wise person is skilful in living according to Yahweh’s order, but the foolish person diverges from it. Order, however, does not imply deistic mechanism or fatalistic determinism, because Yahweh personally directs the universe which he created.

Third, Yahweh’s world is knowable, but it is also mysterious in part. Wisdom is offered to all humans, but only those who fervently seek it will find it. Through observation of life and reception of tradition as transmitted through parents and teachers, one can understand how Yahweh’s moral order typically functions in the world. Nevertheless, Yahweh has chosen to leave some of life inscrutable to humans. This sense of mystery is not intended to undermine faith, but to impel humans to faith in the creator who alone comprehends life thoroughly.

Fourth, humans must reverence Yahweh in their lives. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning point for wisdom and knowledge. Every facet of life has a religious dimension, so humans should submit in humble awe as servants to Yahweh. In the worldview of Proverbs 1 – 9 faith seeks understanding, because reverence for Yahweh cultivates the kind of life that mirrors the creator’s values.