



Creation, History, and the Ethics of the Book of Proverbs

RONALD W. DUTY

Maynard-Wang Lutheran Parish, Maynard, Minnesota

It is now commonplace to hold that the practical knowledge and conduct discussed in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is grounded in a theology emphasizing the orderliness of creation, even if it does not refer specifically to the creation accounts in the Pentateuch, which make creation the first historical event. Wisdom is a prime example, of course, of the weakness of the salvation history view of the Bible, for there are no references to the mighty acts of God in wisdom literature until rather late in the tradition, when historic events and figures and the Law begin to be mentioned. This anomaly invites reconsideration of what the faith of the Hebrews was all about. This will not result in the exclusion of history, but it will reorder the relationship of history to creation in our understandings of the Bible.

This, in turn, will affect our understanding of Old Testament ethics. Under the tradition of interpretation emphasizing salvation history, the ethics of Israel derived from the Law which was given in historical revelation. But the ethics of the wisdom tradition appeals more to the moral order inherent in creation and generally revealed through it without much reference to salvation history.

In this sorting out, we must distinguish senses and uses of “creation,” “history,” and “ethics.” Nature and history are constituents of creation. The common distinction between nature and history emphasizes their discontinuity at the expense of elements of their continuity. But the discontinuity must be seen in relation to the underlying continuity. Nature is generally viewed as an order governed by invariant laws. But even nature is now recognized to have a history, though we generally affix the term “natural” to it. And the distinction between humanity and the rest of creation, including the animals, is made despite their common status as biological creatures. Certain biblical themes contribute to this. For example, humanity and the animals are distinguished from plants by virtue of their sexual reproductive power. Humanity is also explicitly recognized as created in the image of God and given dominion over other

creatures and plants.¹ But history and biography eventually collapse into a dust heap, as our remains return to the realm of nature which, of course, we never really left. And on the historical side, not all history is salvation history, though the mundane human affairs that take place in time need not exclude God.

What about “ethics”? Current approaches sharply distinguish the right from the good and call the ethical systems “deontological” and “teleological” which make right and good, respectively, the object of moral conduct. Given the prominence of consequences in the book of Proverbs, it is a great temptation to call its ethics teleological. But Proverbs construes the relation

between right and good in away that makes the application of modern ethical categories to its ethics misleading, as we shall see.

The distinction in Old Testament scholarship between creation theology and the theology of salvation history points to different traditions in Israel in which certain historical or natural symbols interpret the reality experienced by Israel in relation to God in their own light. These symbols construe God, humanity, the world, and the nature of the ethical in particular ways.² The salvation history tradition tends to see God as an autonomous agent acting freely on behalf of Israel in history. Israel freely responds to God's liberating acts. Knowledge of God comes through historical revelation. The world of the natural order assumes secondary importance as the stage of God's action, and of Israel's free response as a community of autonomous agents created in the image of God, the actor in history. The ethical implication requires discerning what God is doing, and responding appropriately.

The book of Proverbs generally conforms to a model of creation theology in which the symbol of the order implicit in creation is used to construe the action of human beings in history as conforming or failing to conform to amoral order inherent in creation. Accordingly, creation is used in the broad sense inclusive of both nature and history. The ethical, seen as wisdom (practical moral knowledge), consists of conformity to the order inherent in creation. The ethical task is to discern this order, and the moral task is to follow in the way indicated. This requires knowledge of God and God's doing. The wise, the righteous one acts in conformity to, or follows, the way of the righteous; the fool, the wicked one acts in opposition to it and follows the way of the wicked. The corresponding notion of God is of the one who graciously creates and sustains the order of creation. *How* God does so is rather important. So history, broadly construed, is not absent. God is active in the created order. And there are consequences arising from human conformity or non-conformity to this order. But God is implicated in these consequences as well. And at this point, the limits of the con-

¹Klaus-Dietrich Schunck, "Die Auffassung des Alten Testaments von der Natur," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 104 (1979) 406-407.

²The following summations generally cohere with similar theological models of transcendence and theological ethics discussed by James M. Gustafson in "Ecumenism and Ethical Methodology: The Theological Choice," The Wattson Lecture delivered at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 26 October 1981. I thank Professor Gustafson for letting me read his unpublished manuscript.

ventional wisdom view of the relation of God, humanity, the world, and the ethical are reached.

My suspicion, which I think finds support in Proverbs, is that history is more important to the wisdom tradition—to creation theology in this broad sense—than the usual understanding of that theology indicates. In a sense, this is the mirror image of the suspicion of Rolf Knierim and others that creation is more important to salvation history theology than is ordinarily assumed.³ If these suspicions are correct, a rethinking of the relation of nature and history will be in order, both in biblical studies and in contemporary theology, involving our understanding of God, humanity, the world, and the ethical. For there are hints and indications in Proverbs—both in the way the act-consequence relationship is understood and in the muted acknowledgment of limits to our understanding of the order of creation—of features which become more prominent in later wisdom literature, such as the demand for theodicy and the appeal to symbols more associated

with salvation history.

I. CREATION AND THE ORDER OF NATURE

Wisdom literature sees the order in creation reflected in nature. Emphasizing the continuity between the wisdom tradition and other Old Testament traditions, Klaus-Dietrich Schunck notes that God is distant and distinct from creation as its creator, standing over against it.⁴ Norman Habel notes the mediating role of Dame Wisdom in creation and in continually providing ordering principles.⁵ Yet, as the sustainer of creation, God is close to it, for “his care for nature results precisely from this: he gives all creatures what is necessary.”⁶

Proverbs regards the regular relation of events, including human actions, and their consequences to be part of the natural order. Klaus Koch argues that the vocabulary of Proverbs 25-29 entails “a built-in and inherent connection between an action and its consequences,”⁷ and virtually dissolves the distinction between cause and effect, transgression and punishment, righteousness and reward. Indeed, there is also an intimate connection between action and character marked by the locative sense of the particle *be*. Koch says that such passages as 11:5-6 “describe a person surrounded by or even enveloped by one’s own actions.”⁸ Hence, the consequences of human actions are reflexive and do not only affect others. The “way” or “path” of wisdom is thus to choose

³Rolf Knierim, “Cosmos and History in Israel’s Theology,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 3 (1981) 62, regards history to be a realm of struggle for the meaning of creation, and H. H. Schmid argues that history be viewed within the framework of creation. Cf. James L. Crenshaw, “Prolegomenon,” *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw (New York; KTAV, 1976) 27.

⁴K. D. Schunck, “Die Auffassung des Alten Testaments von der Natur,” 405.

⁵Norman C. Habel, “The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” *Interpretation* 26 (1972) 150-151.

⁶K. D. Schunck, “Die Auffassung des Alten Testaments von der Natur,” 405 (my translation).

⁷Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?,” *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 58-59.

⁸*Ibid.*, 71.

those actions which are likely to have good consequences and to conform to the natural order which is seen to have a moral aspect set and sustained by God.

How is this order sustained by God? In one sense, it is sustained by God’s care in giving to all creatures what is needed through the operation of this order. But in another sense, God is an active operator in using the order’s functioning to mediate that giving. Though mediated in sustaining action, God is nevertheless very close. And God has a hand in the connection of events and their consequences. Koch notes the use of the verb *šillem* (reward) in Proverbs 25:21-22 in the ancient sense of “making complete” human action and refers to Yahweh as a midwife who facilitates the completion of that which is already set in motion.⁹ Koch’s understanding of God’s role in human action and the act-consequence relationship is debatable. It doesn’t account for such occasional proverbs as: “A man’s steps are ordered by Yahweh, and who is the man that can discern where he is going!” (20:24). Nor does it account for important anomalies in the schema of which the redactor of Proverbs was aware. Yet it seems to underlie many of the proverbs, and gives force to the demand for resolution of anomalies.

There are a number of proverbs which point to the continuity and fundamental connection of humanity and nature:¹⁰

I passed by the field of a lazy man,
and by the vineyard of one lacking in sense.
Thistles had sprung up all over it,
chickweed covered its surface,
its stone dyke had become a ruin.
I looked, I took note,
I observed, I learned the lesson.
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to lie down,
and poverty comes to you like a vagrant,
and want like a beggar. (24:30-34)

If you find honey, eat what suffices you,
lest you have surfeit of it and vomit it up (25:16)

The tilth of grandees produces an abundance of food,
but it is swept away for lack of equity. (13:23)

I Keep a close eye on your sheep,
pay careful attention to your flocks;
for wealth does not last forever,
riches are not inexhaustible.
When the hay is taken off and the second growth appears,
and the hill grass is gathered,
lambs will supply you with clothing,
and goats provide the price of a field.
There will be goat's milk in plenty to feed you and your household,
and there will be sustenance for your housemaids. (27:23-27)

⁹Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁰Throughout this article, I use the English translation of William McKane which appears in his *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). Other translations, such as RSV or the Jerusalem Bible, differ in some details. But these do not affect the general points being made with the proverbs quoted here.

A man who works his soil has enough to eat,
but one whose pursuits are empty feeds on poverty. (28:19)

Many such proverbs stress the interaction of humanity and nature, and in most of them this interaction goes both ways. Thus, industriousness produces food for the farmer, but inequity destroys the tilth of the grandee. Even when nature proverbs are metaphorical, as in "He who digs a pit falls into it, he who sets a stone rolling is caught up by it" (26:27), the metaphor works

precisely because fools do such things. One point of such nature proverbs as this is neither that nature is an enemy of humanity, nor that humanity is a slave of nature. Rather, they function to point out the human place and role in the natural order and belie the illusion that humanity is above nature.

II. YAHWEH AND THE ORDER OF HUMAN HISTORY

We noted above that the way or path of wisdom was in accord with nature. Indeed, however, these metaphors are pregnant with significance for history as well. Although human beings are situated within the natural order and its consequential nexus, the way or path of the righteous is something one may voluntarily follow. And the consequential nexus serves in part to hold persons responsible for following or not following it. To the degrees, then, that we leave the realm of invariant order and enter the concurrent sphere of human responsible action and interaction, we enter also the realm of history.

Habel notes a Yahwistic account of wisdom in Proverbs 1:1-3:12 and 21-35.¹¹ Here, the way of wisdom becomes the way of Yahweh. While there are no references to specific covenant symbols in this section of broad Yahwistic import, there are a few allusions, as in 3:3 and 2:17. Habel does not want to strain credulity by forcing Proverbs into the mold of the historic covenant tradition. The sages were neither uninterested in history nor unaware of the historic covenant tradition. But that does not mean that they saw themselves to be apart of that tradition. Yet, even the redactor of Proverbs does not decline to invoke the name of Yahweh and to interpret Yahwistic tradition for his own purposes. And in doing so, he characterizes Yahweh as the God of Wisdom who acts. Yahweh instructs, reproves, and disciplines so as to give wisdom. He also shields the blameless, guards the paths of justice, and watches over the faithful. He saves from the strange woman. Finally, Yahweh curses the wicked man's household, but blesses that of the righteous man; he scorns the scoffer and favors the humble (3:33-34).

This again serves to highlight Yahweh's role in the relationship between acts and consequences, which is the very stuff of history. Proverbs and other wisdom literature conceive of human history as the interaction of persons within the nexus of acts and consequences in which Yahweh is intimately and actively involved. This history reveals "something of the truth of God in regard to man and the world," namely, that "God is the God of the normal chain of cause and effect, who is involved in *every* historical event," and "this involvement results

¹¹N. Habel, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," 143-147.

in the everyday world working in a moral way."¹² History thus has an order which is natural to it—morally, if not always descriptively. That order is both revealed and played out in human relations and their consequences.

The working of the world is also related to human moral agency, for history involves the interplay of human acts and their consequences. In the moral world of Proverbs, the moral agent is one, first of all, who fears the Lord, or fails to do so. One who fears the Lord is able to take instruction, whether from Yahweh, Dame Wisdom, the sage, or one's parents. Having taken instruction, the wise one is able to discern from experience and reason what the structure of creation is. Our stress on the act-consequence relation might tempt the conclusion that the ethics of Proverbs is strictly consequentialist. But this is not the case. For acting wisely is also seen to

be good in itself. Moreover, in viewing moral conduct as that which conforms to the order of creation, there is a certain stress on conduct that is appropriate to circumstances, relationships, and persons.

These features of moral agency will be more apparent as we delve into proverbial wisdom about the historical realm. It is perhaps useful to establish now the obvious point that such wisdom is not a matter of mere individual biography but pertains to interaction among persons and its social consequences. Hence, these consequences not only reflect back upon the agent but affect others as well, as we noted above.

He who regards instruction is a path to life,
but he who spurns reproof leads others astray. (10:17)

The speech of an impious man destroys his neighbour,
but rescue is effected by the knowledge of righteous men. (11:9)

When righteous men prosper, a city rejoices,
when the wicked perish, there is a shout of joy.
Through the blessing of upright men a city is raised up,
but by the speech of wicked men it is demolished. (11:10-11)

A community curses one who withholds grain,
but there is a blessing on the head of one who sells it. (11:26)

A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
but an even-tempered man quiets contention. (15:8)

When righteous men come to power, people rejoice,
but when a wicked man rules, they groan. (29:2)

Formally, of course, these particular proverbs are descriptive statements. But if they are true descriptions, then they raise moral questions. The one most immediately apparent has to do with what consequences are desirable. But this desirability is not only concerned with hedonism, but also with what sort of world is worth living in, and hence intrinsically good. The moral issue of example is also raised. What kind of person is it good to be like? What kind of life is worth living? And this applies not only to oneself, but to others as well. The question of what is right or just for others is implied in the proverbs, and it has

¹²John Goldingay, "The 'Salvation History' Perspective and the 'Wisdom' Perspective within the Context of Biblical Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 51 (1979) 202-203.

implications for moral agency. Either implicitly or explicitly, the example of the wise one and the society of those following the path of wisdom are commended.

Proverbs is also concerned with the moral order of important social institutions. One of these is the family household, which is seen as a primary source of instruction in wisdom as well

as an important context of human relationships. As such, its relationships are to be respected, guarded, and cherished.

A fool despises his father's instruction,
but a shrewd man accepts reproof. (15:5)

Correct your son, for there is hope,
and do not bring about his death. (19:18)

If a man repays good with evil,
evil is never absent from his household. (17:13)

An able servant will become the master of a worthless son,
and share an inheritance with brothers. (17:2)

A foolish son is a vexation to his father,
and a bitter pill to the mother who bore him. (17:25)

An aggrieved brother is more inaccessible than a fortified city,
and quarrels are like the bars of a palace. (18:19)

Proverbs 17:13 is beautifully ambiguous, and implies that even if the evil occurs against persons outside the household, it will rebound against the entire family. Conversely,

A righteous man's conduct is blameless,
happy are his sons after him! (20:7)

Another institution which is the object of considerable attention is the court of law, where verity and equity are prized, and false witness and injustice are condemned:

A reliable witness tells the truth,
but a false witness (speaks) lies.
There is the person whose speech is like sword-thrusts,
but the speech of wise men is a therapy. (12:17-18)

He who acquits a wicked man and he who condemns a righteous man,
both of them are loathed by Yahweh. (17:15)

A false witness is not acquitted, and a perjurer perishes. (19:9)

To give a verdict which is not impartial is an evil.
He who says to a guilty man, "You are innocent,"
people curse him, nations fume at him:
but it is well with those who exact the right penalty,
true prosperity overtakes them. (24:23-25)

Failure to be impartial is an evil,
a man commits injustice for a piece of bread. (28:21)

A king who gives a fair trial to the poor,
his throne is established forever. (29:14)

The courts, like the family, are a scene of complex interaction where the deeds and motives of many come into play. The schema of acts and consequences requires this complexity to uphold the moral order so that justice is done not only to the accuser and defendant, but for all participants. Indeed, the courts are the

page 268

tangible social embodiment of that moral order, so that injustice in the courts is likely to raise questions about the soundness of the underlying moral order of creation and ultimately about God. Hence, God's role in the act-consequence relationship comes in for explicit treatment in Proverbs:

A man's whole conduct is right in his own eyes,
but it is Yahweh who weighs up motives. (21:2)

Do not say, "I shall get revenge for injury,"
Wait for Yahweh and he will give you your rights. (20:22)

Do not rob a poor man just because he is poor,
and do not crush a needy man In court,
for Yahweh will fight his case,
and beat to death those who beat him. (22:22-23)

Do not remove the boundary markers which have always been there,
nor encroach on fields belonging to orphans;
for their redeemer is powerful,
he will fight their case with you. (23:10-11)

With the exception of the first of these, which may not refer to a legal setting, Yahweh emerges from within the relationships of acts and consequences to take a partisan adversarial role on behalf of the offended and the oppressed in trial proceedings. Because of the pivotal role of courts in upholding the moral order, Yahweh has reason to do so, not only to vindicate the wronged, but to vindicate Yahweh himself. And, of course, in becoming an adversary, Yahweh takes up an explicit role as an historical actor.

Proverbs also treats social justice in human relationships outside the context of courts of law. These generally treat of the behavior and responsibility of individuals to act with justice and equity in their various relationships. And they often treat the consequences for the actor and for others within the usual act-consequence schema.

Ill-gotten gains are not profitable,
but righteousness brings deliverance from death.
Yahweh will not let the righteous man go hungry,
but he will obstruct the desire of the wicked. (10:2-3)

There is the man who disburses his wealth freely and yet is always getting richer,
there is another whose miserliness leads only to want.
He who creates prosperity is himself prosperous,
and he who satisfies others is himself satisfied.
A community curses one who withholds grain,
but there is a blessing on the head of one who sells it. (11:24-26)

Variations in weights and measures are loathed by Yahweh,
and falsified scales are an evil. (20:23)

He who stops his ear to the cry of a poor man
will himself cry out and not be answered. (21:13)

Rich and poor live side by side,
It is Yahweh who makes them all. (22:2)

A man in authority who oppresses the poor,
[is a] beating rain and starvation. (28:3)

It is by justice that a king makes a country stable,
but one who levies taxes makes a ruin of it. (29:4)

As was the case with the proverbs about the courts of law, these proverbs reflect the complexity of human interaction and its relation to the moral order. Taken one at a time, the correlation of acts and consequences seems to hold up fairly well. Both the righteous and the wicked get their due reward according to the appropriate consequences which God sets in motion. But, because human actions affect not only the actor, but also other persons, the picture is more complicated and also more unclear. "Rich and poor live side by side, it is Yahweh who makes them all." This sounds fine if one is talking about lazy farmers who end up in poverty, such as some in our so-called nature proverbs do. But what if the poor are victims of human injustice, in whose consequences God as the midwife is implicated? If the oppressed cry out but receive no relief, are they not, like Job, entitled to protest and call God into question? Why has not Yahweh taken up their case in court? Where is their strong redeemer? Why, after all, should one be righteous and seek after justice? What, finally, is the basis for ethics and morals? The questions multiply, and there is no apparent answer. The juxtaposition of proverbs in paradox, and of the paradox of God's actions, remains.

III. THEODICY AND THE REDEMPTION OF CREATION

History, it seems, fails to conform to the moral order of creation sometimes. History and nature apparently fail to correlate to the detriment of both. Human life does not always turn out as the sages counsel. The presence and activity of God is not always manifest. Occasionally the limits of wisdom seem to be reached, and leave one bewildered:

A man's steps are ordered by Yahweh,
and who is the man that can discern where he is going! (20:24)

When life is out of control and incomprehensible, we seem to share the sentiments of Agur, for we too are discouraged:¹³

The words of Agur, the son of Yaken, of Massa;
the utterance of the man. There is no God, there is no God
and I am exhausted;
for I am more a beast than a man,
and human discernment is not given to me.
I have not learned wisdom,
nor do I have knowledge of the holy one.
Who has ascended to heaven and come down again?
Who has held the wind in his fists?
Who has wrapped the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name and his son's name, if indeed you know (them)?
Every saying of God has stood the test,
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words,
lest he put you right and you are seen to be a liar.

¹³Verse 1 is obscure and difficult to translate. RSV translates it as: "The man says to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal." But the editors of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* note that McKane's translation may be correct. In any case, the general point remains unchanged.

Two things I ask of you,
do not deny them to me as long as I live.
Remove falsehood and lying far from me;
do not give me poverty or wealth;
let me eat the bread that is my due;
lest when I am well fed I become a renegade,
and say, "Who is Yahweh?"
Lest when I am reduced to poverty I become a thief,
and violate the name of my God. (30:1-9)

Agur's questions and confession in the first four verses have the air of a theodicy in which God

vindicates God's own self by an appeal to creation theology. This is reinforced by the witness voiced in verses five and six. James Crenshaw notes that such theodicies function to reassert God's control over the creation, and to reassert the moral order inherent in it.¹⁴ For innocent suffering and the disharmony of creation are enigmas which count as evidence against God and in favor of the reign of chaos. The orderly structure of the world serves as God's theodicy. Crenshaw contends that such theodicies defend God's honor at the expense of denigrating human integrity.

Curiously, the anomalies which give rise to the impulse for theodicies seem not to cause serious revision of the conception of the relation between acts and consequences, or the order of history and nature. Rather, God is called into question first, as if humanity binds God to human conceptions of justice and history.¹⁵ But if, as I have suggested, the complexity of historical reality exceeds the capacity of the usual conception of the relation of acts and their consequences to bear it, perhaps that conception is in need of revision. Perhaps this is what is behind the sadder but wiser sophistication of Qoheleth and the eventual appeals to the covenant traditions in later wisdom literature. But we should bear in mind that whatever the circumstances of the composition of that literature which contribute to these developments, the roots of the problem seem to occupy the attention of *the redactor of Proverbs himself*. And if I am right, those roots are to be found in the way that the wisdom tradition orders the relation between God, humanity, nature, history, and the ethical.

There is some movement in the wisdom tradition toward a resolution of the dilemma. It is a movement from theodicy toward redemption, which is perhaps a different sort of theodicy. Theodicy is asserted in the face of evidence to the contrary in history and in nature. If God is to make good on the asserted theodicy, perhaps God must finally redeem creation, redeem *both* nature *and* history. Appeals in later wisdom literature to the covenant tradition—to the Law and the historic figures of Israel—and even Job's declaration of certainty about his redeemer may be read in this light. But so may references in Proverbs to the redeemer of orphans and the advocate of those who suffer injustice in the

¹⁴James L. Crenshaw, "Introduction: The Shift from Theodicy to Anthropodicy," *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, 1-5; idem, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, 381; and idem, *Hymnic Affirmation of Divine Justice: The Doxologies of Amos and Related Texts in the Old Testament* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 24; Missoula: Scholar's Press, 1975) 120.

¹⁵J. Crenshaw, "From Theodicy to Anthropodicy," 6-7.

courts, be read in the same manner where Yahweh appears to participate in history in a peculiar way.

I do not mean to suggest that if this hypothesis holds up, one can then collapse the creation theology of the wisdom tradition into salvation history. Each is distinctive and incommensurable with the other.¹⁶ They remain in dialectical tension as different ways of seeing. But being in such tension does not preclude their mutually affecting one another.¹⁷

¹⁶For an important discussion of incommensurability, see Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983) 51-108.

¹⁷My thanks go to Diane L. Jacobson for her very helpful critique of an earlier draft of this article, and for her encouragement to pursue it further. The present work is entirely my own responsibility, of course.