Introduction to the Book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is not easy to read or study. A first impression is that it is an anthology, a book to be sampled, not read straight through. This is how it is most often used—like a coffee-table book, to be dipped into for the tidbits that fall from its pages. But what in reality is it? How did this book come to be?

A Book of Poems

Proverbs is a book of poems—not proverbs in the traditional sense. We usually think of a “proverb” as a short, pithy saying. This is not what we encounter in the book of Proverbs [Genre Issues]. While many of its teachings are short, many are not, and “pithy” is not an apt description for most of them. For this reason the book’s name in English is misleading. It comes from Proverbia, the name of this book in the Latin Bible of the Middle Ages. Proverbia is a translation of the first word in the Hebrew text, mišlē, a plural construct of mashal (māšāl). A mashal is a poem-like composition (either short or long) that states a truth or teaches a lesson in a picturesque, compelling manner.

Hebrew poems of this type are almost always made up of two-line verses (or couplets), in which the first line states a point one way, and the second states it another way (or presents a new thought). Each line is short, not more than four or five words (in Hebrew). The book’s opening poem in 1:8-9 is an apt illustration. Line 1 states: Listen . . . to your father’s instruction; line 2 repeats: and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. This is followed by a second couplet: They will be
a garland to grace your head (line 1), and a chain to adorn your neck (line 2). Poems like this might be as short as a single couplet—as in the case of the 375 two-line poems in the book’s main collection (10:1–22:16)—or couplets might be combined to make longer poems like those in chapters 1-9.

A Book About Wisdom

A mashal can be a poem on almost any topic. The opening verses of Proverbs state that its “poems” have a single theme and purpose: for attaining wisdom (1:2). Wisdom as we think of it is also not exactly what is meant by the Hebrew term ḫokmah used here. Its nearest equivalent in English is “expertise” (Fox: 33). Two of its most often used synonyms are “knowledge” and “understanding” (also translated “discernment”). So one might say that the wisdom referred to is the “expertise” that results from having “knowledge” with “understanding” (8:12). “Knowledge” in Hebrew refers to data derived from the bodily senses: eyes, ears, nose, touch (Harris: 366). “Understanding” has to do with the way knowledge is assessed and applied. When we have factual “knowledge” and know how to understand or use it, this in general is the “wisdom” this book is talking about [Words for Wisdom and Folly].

At the time it was believed that thoughtful learning of this kind occurred in the “heart,” not the head, and that the wisdom thus acquired was manifest in different ways [“Heart”]. Those with expertise in a trade are called wise (Exod 31:2-4). A king whose heart is skilled in interpreting laws and discerning good and evil is also thought to be wise (1 Kgs 3:9). Solomon is eulogized as one of the wisest kings of the time because of his knowledge of plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish (4:33); for his giftedness in composing thousands of songs and proverbs (4:32); and because of his insight (3:28) and breadth of understanding (4:29).

A Manual for Educating Young Men

The teachings in Proverbs represent yet another type of wisdom: the kind young people need as they approach adulthood. Aristotle in book 6 of his Ethics defined wisdom of this kind as “prudence,” knowing “what is conducive to the good life generally” (Aristotle: 209). Something similar is said in Proverbs about its teachings. They are for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young (1:4). In this verse the word young is more accurately translated as a young man. The book’s teachings are often addressed to a
son or sons (1:8; 4:1). These sons are not small children but young men on the verge of (or at the beginning of) adulthood, like the young man so vividly described in Proverbs 7.

This focus on “sons” gives the impression that Proverbs might have served (initially at least) as a manual of instruction for young men. This impression was confirmed in 1923 with the discovery and publication of a booklet from ancient Egypt entitled The Instruction of Amenemope (Pritchard: 421-24). Amenemope was an employee of the Egyptian government living in the twelfth century BC. His “Instructions,” written initially, he informs us, for his own son to “steer him in the ways of life,” were widely used in schools where young men were trained for the Egyptian civil service. It was noted right away how strikingly similar Amenemope’s teachings were to those in Proverbs, especially those in 22:17–24:22 (see commentary notes). A number of teachings in both books imply a governmental setting. Many additional manuals of this kind from this ancient world have been found and published (Walton: 172-78). An initial edition of Proverbs might well have been written for a similar purpose and setting, as a manual for steering young men “in the ways of life” who were preparing to be civil servants (see the reference to “teachers” and “instructors” in Prov 5:13).

That instructions of this kind were needed in the days of Solomon is apparent from what is said in 1 Kings about his vast national enterprises. At one point, we are told, 550 officers were employed (9:23) to supervise 3,300 foremen, who were in charge of 70,000 carriers and 80,000 stonecutters (5:15-16). In “grandeur and complexity” Solomon’s kingdom rivaled that of ancient Egypt (Heaton: 59). Small wonder that right at this time “the ‘wisdom’ of Egypt, upon which its scribal meritocracy had been nurtured for centuries, first gained entrance to Israel and began to shape its instructions, literature and intellectual life” (Heaton: 12).

**Two Editions: Solomon and Hezekiah**

In our Bibles the book of Proverbs is not as it was in the time of Solomon. We know this to be the case because of editorial headings interspersed throughout, seven in all (1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1). One of the things they do is call attention to two very different time periods when the book’s teachings were compiled and published. The headings in 1:1 and 10:1 refer to the book’s origins in the days of Solomon. The heading in 25:1 alludes to a supplemental block of proverbs added in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. This implies that there were, at least, two quite distinct editions of this
book: the one created in the time of King Solomon, and another enlarged edition produced two centuries later during the reign of King Hezekiah.

A thesis of this commentary is that the Hezekiah Edition of this book (as called below) was created by adding supplements reflective of the views of those who did this to an intact older version of the Solomon Edition (as called below). For the most part these supplements are readily identifiable and were inserted into all parts of the book’s older edition [Solomon Edition]. That Proverbs might have been enlarged in this manner during Hezekiah’s reign is not a totally new idea; as mentioned, the book itself indicates as much, and this too is what the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud imply when they ascribe it to “Hezekiah and his Colleagues” (Baba Bathra 15a). Heretofore, however, scant attention has been paid to this aspect of the book’s composition. This commentary is the first to present a detailed study of the book from this perspective [Distinctive Approach].

Approaching the book in this light was for me personally a godsend that helped resolve many otherwise puzzling features of the book. Naturally, I hope others too will be helped by this approach. With this in mind I now take some first steps in introducing the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs as I have come to understand it.

The Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs

Hezekiah’s Reforms

To begin to understand the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs, it is essential that we pay attention first of all to what is known about King Hezekiah himself. The book of 2 Kings informs us that this king was unique among the kings of Israel for his devotion to “the commands the LORD had given Moses,” and for the sweeping religious reforms enacted as a consequence (2 Kgs 18:1-6). With respect to these reforms, the text says, “There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah” (18:5). In the course of his reforms, he rid Judah of the cult objects of alien gods, including “the Asherah poles” of the Canaanite mother goddess Ashtoreth (18:4). Surprisingly, a prior account in 1 Kings states that it was none other than King Solomon who first inaugurated this practice of worshipping alien gods in Israel of the kingdom period. He did this after he himself became a follower of the goddess Ashtoreth (consort of Baal, the Canaanite storm and fertility god) and of “Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites” (1 Kgs 11:5). As a consequence shrines devoted to these and “other gods” became commonplace in both Israelite kingdoms, and remained
so for some two centuries, with catastrophic moral and spiritual con-
sequences. In the eighth century Assyrian armies destroyed the north-
erm kingdom and were threatening to do the same in Judah (2 Kgs 17). This is the context in which the books of Kings tell us of Hezekiah’s reforms (2 Kgs 18).

Hezekiah’s “Men”

The period of Hezekiah’s reforms is increasingly recognized as a
time of intense literary activity. In support of these reforms, a collec-
tion of books was produced that would over time be expanded and
become the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity [Hezekiah Reform
Literature]. In this light the brief reference in Proverbs 25:1 to the
men of Hezekiah producing an enlarged edition of Solomon’s
proverbs takes on enhanced importance. It signifies that it too was
published at this time in support of these reforms.

Who were the “men” who did this? It is often thought that they
were scribes or sages [Modern Study], but this is not how they are
designated. In 2 Chronicles 29-31 we are told of “Levites” whom
Hezekiah had “consecrated” at the beginning of his reign (29:5) and
who were his associates in all aspects of his reforms. Were these the
“men” referred to in Proverbs 25:1? It becomes apparent that the
Levites were Hezekiah’s men when we consider their history. First
Kings informs us that when Solomon became king, he banished cer-
tain priests from Jerusalem because they had opposed him as success-
or to his father, David (2:26-27). The leader of the banished group,
we are told, was Abiathar, the sole survivor of the Levites of Shiloh
who traced their appointment as priests in Israel to Moses (Exod 32:29; Deut 10:8; 33:8-11). Earlier, David had installed two priest-
hoods in Jerusalem, one headed by Zadok, the other by Abiathar
(2 Sam 8:17). So, when dismissing the priesthood headed by
Abiathar, Solomon was (in effect) dismissing the Levites whom his
father had appointed and whose primary loyalty was to the teachings
of Moses. The Zadokite priests who remained in Jerusalem (1 Kgs
2:35) worshipped Yahweh the God of Israel, but not (at the time) to
the exclusion of other gods (as taught in the Decalogue [Ten
Commandments] that Moses advocated). This is why they raised no
objections when Solomon permitted other gods to be worshipped

Against this background the report in 2 Chronicles 29-31 of
Hezekiah’s action in enlisting Levites as colleagues in his reforms is
both credible and illuminating. To reverse Solomon’s policies,
Hezekiah needed associates who were as loyal to Moses’ teachings as
he was—and who would act meaningfully and decisively on his behalf. The Levites, even though banished from the national shrines of both Judah and the northern kingdom, Israel (see 1 Kgs 12:31), still remained faithful in their respective communities to their calling as custodians of Moses’ teachings. At Hezekiah’s request they returned to Jerusalem and were restored to temple duties. Some of them were set apart to be devoted full time to the study of “the Law [torah or teachings] of the LORD” (2 Chr 31:4-8). This group of state-supported Levites, I suggest, were the “men of Hezekiah” who created the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs.

**Agur Son of Jakeh**

Proverbs 30:1 refers to Agur son of Jakeh. That the book even mentions an individual other than Solomon is significant, but that his name appears in chapter 30 may also be important, since the editor or author of a scroll was sometimes recognized at its end (cf. Ps 72:20; Eccl 12:9-14). There are reasons for thinking that chapter 30 is the last chapter of the Hezekiah Edition, with chapter 31 being added later (see following section). Agur’s name and sayings appearing at this point in the edition might well be an indication of his leadership role in creating it.

The poems of Agur that follow in 30:2-33 (the first two in particular) are fully consistent with this suggestion. The first poem (30:2-6) is termed an oracle or inspired message (30:2; cf. Isa 13:1). Agur thereby addresses two individuals, Ithiel and Ucal, possibly professional scribes involved in the literary productions of the time. His message to them is that despite the fact he (Agur) has not learned wisdom (studied it professionally as they have), there is something he does know about: Knowledge of the most Holy One I know (30:3; for this translation, see notes). Then, in language echoing that of Moses in Deuteronomy, he chides them for their futile speculations about what is in heaven (30:4; cf. Deut 30:11-16) and concludes with a warning not to add to God’s words (30:6; cf. Deut 4:2; 5:22; 12:32).

From this oracle and Agur’s devout prayer in 30:7-9 (where he expresses the fervent wish to remain faithful to Yahweh whatever may come), it is evident that Agur too (like the men of Hezekiah referred to in 25:1) was a devout Levite. He was deeply engrossed in the words of God revealed to Moses [Distinctive Approach].
Purpose and Design of the Hezekiah Edition

In Agur’s oracle and prayer—seen in the light of the account of Solomon’s reign in 1 Kings 2-11 and the follow-up record of Hezekiah’s reforms in 2 Kings 18—there is a hint as to the underlying motive for creating a second edition of Proverbs. Agur’s oracle points to the passionately held conviction that God’s “words” to Moses (Prov 30:5-6) should not be subverted, replaced, or added to, something Solomon had himself done when worshipping “other gods” and permitting Israel to do the same. Hence, when “the men of Hezekiah” began to create a new edition of Proverbs, they intended to produce a book firmly linked to and consistent with the teachings of Moses in Deuteronomy.

How did they carry out this daunting project? What was the book like before they began editing? What was it like when they were finished? Details and specifics of what they did are discussed in the notes (below). The contents of the book they began with can only be surmised as one begins to understand the multiple ways in which the men of Hezekiah supplemented it [Solomon Edition]. The following are just a few introductory examples of what they did.

They Redesigned It with Meticulous Care

A first impression of Proverbs is that it is disorganized and was created in a rather haphazard manner. Studying it more closely reveals the opposite to be the case. It has three large well-defined sections: an Introductory Collection (1:1–9:18), the Main Collection (10:1–22:16), and Supplemental Collections (22:17–31:33). The Introductory Collection (1:1–9:18) and Supplemental Collections (22:17–31:33) are quite similar in size—in fact, without chapter 31 (added later) these two sections are virtually identical, with 256 verses in the introduction and 253 in the appendixes. Noteworthy too is that the Main Collection has exactly 375 proverbs. As often observed (Murphy, 1981:50), this number equals the numerical value of the Hebrew consonants of the name “Solomon” (in 10:1), which in Hebrew are: š (300), l (30), m (40), h (5).

My conjecture is that these 375 proverbs may have been arranged for study in panels of five (see notes). These five-proverb panels are in turn arranged in two equal sections, with a set of 37 five-proverb panels in section 1 (10:1–16:1) and another set of 37 five-proverb panels in section 2 (16:7–22:16), with the remaining five-proverb panel at the center of the two sections (16:2-6). Given the fact that the Main Collection is at the center of the book (with about the same number
of verses before and after), these five proverbs at the center of it are at the epicenter of the Hezekiah Edition as a whole. These several observations may be diagrammed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design of the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 1 Introductory Collection (256 verses)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:1–9:18</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:1–16:1</td>
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We might wonder why the Hezekiah editors would have created a book with such a carefully crafted symmetrical form. A reason for doing so may be related to the fact that its contents were initially written on a scroll (not in a book). A scroll is a horizontal strip of papyrus or vellum, with writing in narrow perpendicular columns on one side only. When read, it was held in two hands and rolled and unrolled from both ends a little at a time. When not in use, it likely was customary to keep larger scrolls rolled up from both ends so that when opened its contents (being equidistant from that point) would be readily accessible. Thus, when opened for reading, a scroll’s middle column would be the first to be seen. My suggestion is that the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs was designed so that the five couplets in 16:2-6 would be among the first to be seen when it was opened for reading.

Not surprisingly, these five proverbs are unique in that—unlike any other five-proverb panel in the whole collection—every one of them mentions Yahweh, the God of Israel. Each states a theological truth that we sense is expressive of the core convictions of those who created the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs [Middle Poems].
They Supplemented It with Specified and Unspecified Additions

To achieve the symmetrical form just described (the equal size of its first and third parts as well as the precise number of proverbs in its middle collection) required supplementing the book throughout.

Supplements in Part 3. In Part 3 (22:17–31:31) the editors attached supplemental collections with headings explicitly informing the reader of what they were doing. The first two of these headings (22:17; 24:23) identify “sages” other than Solomon as the source of the collected teachings that follow. The third heading (25:1) indicates that these too were proverbs of Solomon (as were the earlier ones in 10:1–22:16) and that certain “men of Hezekiah” added them (25:1). The fourth heading (30:1) identifies Agur son of Jakeh as the source of the sayings in chapter 30.

These four headings are stylistically similar and interconnected. In each case the source of the collected sayings added is identified, followed by the sayings themselves. The fifth heading (31:1), unlike the others, names the person to whom the added “sayings” are addressed (sayings for Lemuel, not “sayings of Lemuel”) before identifying their source (which his mother taught him). This chapter’s contents are also quite unique (see notes). They most likely were added in postexilic times, when Proverbs became part of a larger collection of scrolls [Wisdom of Proverbs].

The specified supplements added in Part 3 of Proverbs were not the only additions made when the Hezekiah Edition was created. There is at least one significant instance where the contents make it clear that supplements were inserted without being so identified, such as the block of poems in Proverbs 25-29. The heading to the large supplemental collection in 25:1 identifies the poems that follow as “proverbs of Solomon.” However, when we examine the contents of these five chapters more closely, it is evident this heading applies to chapters 25-27 only, not to chapters 28-29, since the poems in these latter chapters are so strikingly different (see notes).

Supplements in Part 1. A closer look at the book’s Introductory Collection in 1:1–9:18 reveals that blocks of teachings were added here as well [Solomon Edition]. There are marked differences between the several distinctive blocks of poems in this section. To cite just one example, the poems in 4:1–5:14 are introduced in a manner clearly indicating that the person speaking is Solomon (4:3). This was likely the opening poem of the older Solomon Edition. The sons addressed in 4:1 are not Solomon’s sons—he does not call them “my sons” (as in NIV) but simply sons. After saying a bit about himself
Solomon shares several poems that he says his father taught him (4:4-27; the “son” in these poems is Solomon being addressed as such by his father). Solomon then addresses the sons with whom he is sharing these poems in the concluding poem of this section (5:7-14) and in doing so refers to their teachers (5:13). The sons are students; the implied setting is the royal schools. There is not a single reference to God in these poems (in 4:1–5:14), only to wisdom. They seem right at home in the court of Solomon and were likely part of the Solomon Edition.

Other blocks of poems in this opening section are strikingly different (1:8–3:35; 5:15–7:27). They are introduced in a way that implies that the one speaking is a “father” teaching his own “son.” He addresses him not as “son” (or sons) but as my son, and urges him to listen to the instruction of both his father and his mother (your father . . . and your mother; 1:8; 6:20). The implied setting of these poems is the home. They are replete with references to Yahweh, the God of Israel. The son addressed is taught to put his trust in this God to direct his paths and not to rely on his own understanding (3:5). This group of poems seems right at home in the court of the reformer king Hezekiah. They were likely added by Hezekiah’s men (for details, see notes).

Supplements in Part 2. Did the men of Hezekiah also add supplements of this kind to the book’s Main Collection (10:1–22:16)? There is much to suggest they did. In its present form this section of the book has some sixty sayings about Yahweh and the fate of those who serve or reject him (see notes). Right in its center (as observed) is a panel of proverbs, each mentioning Yahweh (16:2-6): how Yahweh weighs a person’s motives (16:2), how he blesses those devoted to his ways (16:3), his oversight of all that happens (16:4), his abhorrence of the proud (16:5), and how fear of the LORD/Yahweh helps avoid evil (16:6). This is hardly what Solomon or his schools were teaching (see above). It seems apparent that the book’s Main Collection was also supplemented with proverbs reflective of the convictions of Hezekiah’s men.

They Were Motivated by a Core Conviction

I want to comment yet on a core conviction of Hezekiah’s men as they prepared their edition of Proverbs. When reading their supplements, it quickly becomes evident that they were troubled over one teaching in particular in the older Solomon Edition. As noted above, the opening poems of the Solomon Edition are likely those in 4:1–5:14. The very opening poem of that block states, Wisdom is
supreme [Heb.: rēšît]; therefore get wisdom (4:7a). In this verse the Hebrew word translated “supreme” means “first” or “beginning” (as in Gen 1:1). What this verse is saying is that “wisdom” being “first” or the “beginning” (cf. 8:22), the foremost thing to be done is to “get wisdom.” In other words, wisdom being first or supreme, its acquisition takes priority over everything else in life: it is that important.

The men of Hezekiah did not reject this idea (otherwise they would have deleted it from their edition), but they were obviously not fully in agreement with it either. In 1:7a, at the forefront of their edition, they placed a statement that takes issue with it: The fear of the LORD is the beginning [rēšît] of knowledge (1:7a). In this carefully formulated sentence, fear of the LORD [Yahweh] replaces acquiring wisdom (in the counterpart statement in 4:7a) as the beginning. In effect it says: It is not acquiring wisdom that is the beginning, but fear of the LORD that is the beginning of knowledge. Significantly, there is a similar sentence in 9:10: The fear of the LORD is the beginning [tēhîllah] of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. With these two strategically placed sentences (at the beginning and end of the enlarged Introductory Collection), the editors of the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs have crafted a new conceptual framework for the entire book. The starting point for acquiring wisdom in the Solomon Edition is simply getting wisdom (4:1-7); the starting point for acquiring wisdom in the Hezekiah Edition is the fear of the LORD (1:7; 9:10b). The goal is the same: acquiring wisdom—in that sense wisdom is still supreme, but the starting point for acquiring it is different.

They Enlarged Its Audience

Finally, the way the Hezekiah Edition editors enlarged the audience of the Solomon Edition manual should be recognized. As previously observed, the Solomon Edition of Proverbs was likely designed to serve as a manual for young men preparing for civil service (Heaton: 12). Was the Hezekiah Edition meant to function in a similar way? I believe it was; this, I sense, was one of the reasons for appending the several fairly large supplemental collections (22:17–30:33). Many of the poems in these collections are about kings and those who do their bidding (see, for example, 25:1-10). Like Solomon, King Hezekiah needed reliable civil servants to oversee his endeavors and implement his reforms, and a manual like this for training them.

Yet another purpose for the Hezekiah Edition is indicated in the insertion in 1:5: it provides instruction for those who are already wise
by virtue of their prior training. The wise referred to in this verse are not young men but educated teachers (see notes), but they too are urged to ponder the book’s teachings and add them to their [previously acquired] learning (1:5a). This admonition implies that this edition of the manual presents added teachings with which even they (experienced teachers as they are) are not familiar.

The men of Hezekiah envisioned yet a third audience for their new edition of Proverbs. As noted, the blocks of poems they added in chapters 1-9 are introduced as teachings for a son by his own parents (1:8-9; 6:20). Implied is a home where parents instruct their children in the teachings of this edition of Proverbs. A similar instructional setting is presupposed in Deuteronomy, which admonishes parents to instruct their own children in the words of God revealed to Moses (Deut 6:6-9; 11:18-21). This admonition suggests that the Hezekiah reformers may have been positioning their edition of Proverbs as a companion volume to Deuteronomy in a curriculum for homeschooling. This curriculum included not just the laws revealed to Moses, but this enlarged volume of Solomon’s poems about wisdom for life [Distinctive Approach].

For successful homeschooling, not just fathers but also mothers were expected to embrace these values and be prepared to teach them to their sons. This suggests that while this edition of Proverbs is still directed to sons, its teachings were deemed relevant for daughters as well. They too will one day marry and play a role as wives and mothers in teaching their sons—and their success or failure in doing so will have profound consequences for them no less than their husbands (cf. 10:1).

**Why the Gender-Specific Focus**

It is a serious mistake to think (as many now do) that the book of Proverbs is prejudiced against women just because it is addressed to young men. In my opinion it likewise is a disservice to the reader when translators rid the book of its gender-specific language by substituting gender-neutral nouns and pronouns [Translation Issues]. Obliterating its gender-specific focus in this way robs it of its “voice” as a wake-up call to parents and educators regarding the unique, specific, and often urgent needs of young men in their growing-up years. That young men do in fact need specific guidance and help, targeted to their special needs, is a fact of life that is recognized in a variety of ways in virtually every society (Gilmore).

Why this is the case has also become increasingly apparent through developmental studies tracking the growth of children from
infancy onward. An important truth is that a boy’s journey from childhood to adulthood is markedly different from that of a girl (M. Van Leeuwen: 115-16). A girl’s growth to maturity involves separation from the mother and entry into an independent social status like that of her mother. For the boy “the task of separation and individuation carries an added burden and peril” because he must enter into a new and independent social status “distinct and opposite” from the mother’s (Gilmore: 28).

Young men face very different challenges in becoming husbands and fathers than young women do in becoming wives and mothers. A woman becomes a mother when a child grows in her womb and is born of her body. From the beginning a mother’s bond with her child is tangible and intimate. A man’s relationship to a child is far less obvious. His knowledge that a given child is his is based upon inferences. Apart from insemination there is no tangible bond connecting him to his own child. For a male to become a father to his own children, he must be mature and responsible enough to have united with a wife who will be faithful to him and he to her, so that the children born to her are known to be his. He must be present and remain involved in the care of these children as they grow to maturity.

That young men will mature to the point where they can assume the demanding roles of husband and father (not to speak of other adult responsibilities) cannot be taken for granted. Both boys and girls need the help of fathers or father-surrogates in becoming autonomous from their mothers, but boys much more so. Without such help many simply will not make it. Due to the marginality of males in the reproductive process, fatherhood is a cultural acquisition to an extent that motherhood is not. Hence, a culture needs to support young men in becoming responsible, caring, faithful husbands and fathers through its teachings, laws, mores, symbols, models, and rituals (Miller, 1999:11), exactly what we see happening in the teachings of Proverbs.

What about young women? Girls also need help in growing up—especially today when they are being bombarded at an early age with “the junk values of mass culture” (Pipher: 23). They need to be warned against the temptations of rebellious peers and male sexual predators. They need to be encouraged to stand firm for what is right and avoid foolish actions and activities that might ruin their lives. A companion volume to the book of Proverbs is urgently needed, one that would replicate many of the values in Proverbs but in a form that addresses the specific challenges faced by maturing girls. It is no service to young women to change the book of Proverbs into a gender-
neutral manual. This only weakens it as a manual for either gender. Because the needs of boys and girls in growing up are so different, guidance needs to be targeted to each.

The advice and guidance in the book of Proverbs is intended for young men, but their adherence to this advice also benefits women. I am not aware of anything in the book of Proverbs that is demeaning to women; just the opposite appears. One of the book’s foremost themes is finding a wife, loving her, remaining faithful, and building a home in which she will be honored and respected for all she does for her family and the wider community. To be sure, warnings are given to young men to be on their guard against the temptations posed by a certain kind of woman [Identity of the Foreign Seductress]. Warnings of a similar kind are given regarding resisting the clever enticements of a certain kind of lawless, evil-minded man. In neither case is it implied that all women or all men are persons of this type. Nor is the fact that young men are presumed to be gullible and an easy prey to temptations of this kind meant to excuse them when they yield and bring irreparable harm to themselves and others.

This manual’s sole purpose is to hold young men accountable to a high standard of conduct through warnings and teachings that will steer them away from destructive paths, not to provide them with excuses for their failures.

The Book of Proverbs in the Life of the Church

Quite possibly the chief contribution of the book of Proverbs to the life of the church through the ages has been the way it fosters an integration of faith and knowledge, revelation and reason. Nevertheless, theologians of the church have rarely taken its point of view to heart. Why this neglect? It may be that Paul’s sharp contrast between the divine wisdom revealed in Christ and “man’s wisdom” (1 Cor 1:25) has left its mark [Wisdom in Proverbs]. An outstanding example is the influential Latin Church theologian Augustine (354-430), who came to believe, like Paul, that human beings are unable to grasp truth, or wisdom, without divine grace and enlightenment. “This, combined with his pastoral work, . . . led to an emphasis on faith in the authority of the Church and its Scriptures, and pre-eminently, upon a humble following of Christ, which made Christianity the only, and universal, way to wisdom” (Harrison: 137).

When too sharp a contrast is drawn between revealed wisdom and human wisdom, the wisdom spoken of in the book of Proverbs tends to be viewed as an inferior type of human wisdom. A recent case in point is the vigorous debate over “natural theology” versus “revealed
Proverbs seems more concerned about a reasoned approach to right and wrong and says nothing about the “saving acts” of God in the exodus or at Sinai. Hence, some regarded its teachings as a type of “natural theology” (based on human experience and reasoning) and wondered whether “wisdom literature” (so called) deserves any place at all in a truly biblical theology (Murphy, 2002:121). Roland Murphy is one of a number of biblical theologians who believe the time has come to rethink these “theological prejudices,” as he terms them (123). His own views are that Israel’s historical narratives, which recount the revelatory “acts of God,” are themselves unique in the way they reflect on the past and do not just take it for granted (123). Furthermore, “it would be a mistake,” he writes, “to characterize the wisdom experience [in Israel] as a species of ‘natural theology’” and see it as something inferior to “supernatural theology.” On the contrary, he writes, those who produced the book of Proverbs were ardent believers in the God of Israel. Therefore, “what they learned about the Lord from creation and experience was [therefore] necessarily associated with what they learned from their historical traditions” (124).

The tensions between “revealed” wisdom and human wisdom persist to the present time. This issue in the church’s theologies is difficult to resolve and remains an inhibiting factor in the way Christians approach the Bible generally and the book of Proverbs in particular. As a consequence, it affects the way they approach the explosion of knowledge in the modern world.

As I reflect on the relevance of Proverbs for the church today, this stands out as possibly one of its major contributions. The book’s introductory poems state categorically and repeatedly that acquiring wisdom of the kind alluded to in its pages is the supreme challenge facing young men and their society. This may seem an exaggeration, but did not Jesus say something similar at the end of the Sermon on the Mount with his parable of the two houses (Matt 5-7)? And is John’s Gospel saying anything different when it points to Jesus as the incarnate “word” (or “wisdom”) of God that has been shining in the world since the dawn of time (John 1:1-5)?

While completing this commentary, I came across an interview with the British theologian David Ford (who now teaches in the United States). He was asked why the theme of “wisdom” runs through so much of his recent writings (Cunningham: 30). Some of his answers struck me as echoing the kind of synthesis between faith and wisdom testified to in the book of Proverbs. One of the purposes of the Believers Church Bible Commentary is to stimulate a conversation
about the relevance of the texts being studied and the life of the church (see sections on TLC). The following brief excerpts from the interview with David Ford in which he comments on the role of “wisdom” in his theology may perhaps serve as a starting point for the ongoing conversations we will be having in the following pages about these and other matters. Ford writes:

The wisdom tradition represents the self-critical side of the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s thus a very good model for what theology should be doing: paying close attention to tradition while thinking through the difficult and dark questions. Wisdom demands an integration of rigorous thought with imagination and also practical concerns—how things actually work out in the living of life. Part of its fruitfulness for me has been that it acts as a check on theology’s being too doctrine-centered, and not taking account of the imaginative and the practical. . . . I spend a lot of my time reminding people that you need to be at least as intelligent in your faith as in the rest of your life.

A Note About Translations
The translation used in this commentary is the New International Version (NIV). Its citations in the textual commentary are in italics rather than quotes. My choice of this translation was partly determined by its fidelity in most instances to the gendered language of Proverbs. Many modern translations seek to hide or mute the fact that Proverbs is a manual for sons by deliberately mistranslating the words son or sons as child or children on the assumption that a book addressed to sons is prejudicial to daughters. On the face of it, this is misleading. Hence, the NIV may be characterized as a more literal translation of Proverbs than are some others (at least so far as the translation of this book is concerned).

However, like most translations this one too is designed for public reading, not just for study. With that in mind, the book’s poems are invariably rendered as complete sentences with verbs when in fact many are not such, especially those in the Main Collection. The poems of this book are generally terser and more allusive in Hebrew than in any of the English translations [Translation Issues]. My frequent resort to literal translations in the commentary (signified by the abbreviation “lit.”) is an attempt to convey what the Hebrew text actually says, not usually a criticism of published versions.

Another related issue merits a brief comment. Following a long-standing tradition NIV uniformly substitutes “LORD” for the divine name “Yahweh.” “LORD” is an honorary title; “Yahweh” is a transliteration of the sacred name of the God who spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:15). At that time “other gods” with other names
were being worshipped in this region of the world. This was also the case in Israel itself at the time the Hezekiah Edition of Proverbs was created. Seen in this context, the use of the divine name in Proverbs served as a clarion call to its readers to trust this God and no other. [Proverbs and the Birth of Ethical Monotheism]. With this historic struggle and development in mind, I have for the most part retained the transliterated name Yahweh in my translations and comments.