

Ch. 20 – Proverbs

Outline

- 1:1 Title: “Solomon’s Sayings” (970-931 B.C.)
1:2-6 Prologue
1:7 Theme: “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom;” → 9:10; 15:33

Seven collections

- I. 1:8–9:18 First: Ten Reports + Five Supplements (A-E below)¹
- | | | MT Insertions (minor)
+ LXX |
|-----|---|---|
| 1. | 1:8-19 Gangs of violent delinquents
<i>A 1:20-33 Woman Wisdom warns the youth</i> | |
| 2. | 2:1-22 Zealous search for wisdom | |
| 3. | 3:1-12 Whole-hearted trust in Yahweh
<i>B 3:13-20 Supreme value: wisdom</i> | [3rd minor insertion]
[LXX + 3:16a] |
| 4. | 3:21-35 A wise person is trustworthy | [LXX + 3:22a] |
| 5. | 4:1-9 Always embrace and love Woman Wisdom | |
| 6. | 4:10-19 The path of the just is like the dawn | |
| 7. | 4:20-27 The straight path: keep an eye on the heart | [LXX + 4:27a, 27b] |
| 8. | 5:1-23 The Strange Woman, the woman herself (adultery)
<i>C 6:1-19 Four epigrams of foolishness and evil</i> | [6:8a-8c, 11a] |
| 9. | 6:20-35 Fiery passions and fatal adultery | |
| 10. | 7:1-27 The tactics of the temptress who kills
<i>D 8:1-36 Woman Wisdom praises herself</i>
<i>E 9:1-6, 11 + 13-18 Invitations to two banquets</i> | [LXX + 7:1a]
[8:13a, 19 + LXX 21a]
[9:7-10,12; + LXX + 9:10a, 12a-12c, 18a-d] |
- II. 10:1–22:16 Second: “Solomon’s Sayings”
- III. 22:17–24:22 Third: The thirty sayings of the wise
(from Egypt: *The Instruction of Amenemope*, ca. 1100 B.C.)
- IV. 24:23-34 Fourth: Other “Sayings of the Wise”
- V. 25:1–29:27 Fifth: “Solomon’s Sayings”,
compiled by the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah (716-687 B.C.)
- VI. 30:1-33 Sixth: “Sayings of Agur, son of Jakeh of Massa”
(Ishmaelite tribe of northern Arabia)
- VII. 31:1-9 Seventh collection: “Sayings of King Lemuel [of Arabia], with which his mother
gave him instructions”
- 31:10-31 Appendix: Praise to the exemplary woman, an acrostic (alphabetical) poem

As in all ancient wisdom literature, the fundamental theological methodology of Proverbs does not start from received dogmas but from personal *experience*:²

*I passed by the field of one who was lazy,
by the vineyard of a stupid person;
and see, it was all overgrown with thorns;
the ground was covered with nettles,
and its stone wall was broken down.
Then I saw and considered it;
I looked and received instruction.
A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty (reysh) will come upon you like a robber,
and want (makhsor), like an armed warrior (Prov. 24:30-34).*

Like Job and Ecclesiastes, a wise person can have ample experience, which reflects a variety of historical contexts, and their theology and teaching prove to be dialectical – and for a rationalist, non-historical mentality even appear contradictory. By bringing together some “contradictory” teachings, Proverbs makes evident its dialectical character (see human wisdom and Woman Wisdom, 1.1-4 below):

*“Do not answer fools according to their folly,
Or you will be a fool yourself.
Answer fools according to their folly,
Or they will be wise in their own eyes” (Prov. 26:4-5); see the notes NISB, HCSB, NIVSBNJB:*

26:4-5 A pair of verses living contrasting advice. The juxtaposition emphasizes the situational nature of sentence wisdom: The sage will know when one or the other applies (NISB)

26:4-5 Proverbs are not timeless absolutes but must be applied in their season (HCSB)

26a The contradiction between this and the preceding proverb is deliberate and plays on the two meanings of the phrase ‘in the terms of his folly’ (NJB)

Dos proverbios aparentemente contradictorios y que, sin embargo, son ciertos en distintas circunstancias. Hay momentos en que no es prudente rebajarse al nivel del necio; otras en que es necesario taponarle la boca. El sabio sabrá a discernir el momento para cada una (NVIBE). Two apparently contradictory proverbs, which, nevertheless, are true in distinct circumstances At times it is not prudent to lower oneself to the fool’s level; at other times it is necessary to shut him up. The wise person will know how to discern the moment for each response (my translation; see NIVSB)

The great danger for the modern reader is to take a proverb as a “scientific law” without exceptions or as a dogma of “systematic” theology or an “ethical” or “moral” universal absolute (Greek philosophical categories, foreign to the historical mentality of the Bible).³ In the Bible itself the books of → Job and Ecclesiastes make a strong criticism of such distortion of the wisdom traditions. However, a careful reading of Proverbs also teaches us to be sensitive to the different historical and sociological contexts:⁴

4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
*it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to desire strong drink;*
5 or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed,
and will pervert the rights of all the oppressed-poor (‘ani).
6 *Give strong drink to one who is perishing,
and wine to those in bitter distress;*
7 let them drink and forget their poverty (rish),
and remember their misery no more (Prov. 31:4-7).

(Compare the medicinal use of morphine today for the dying.)

Such recognition of the character and historical context of the wisdom sayings and of the *diversity* that results in the Proverbs collections in no way denies that we can also discern in the book certain *historical continuities* which reflect a *unity* in the traditions and norms of conduct. For example, Yahweh always is a just God who liberates the oppressed, not an oppressor, and commands that the authorities – be they Israelite kings or of other cultures – reflect this same praxis:

8 Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute (*khalof*);

9 Speak out, judge justly,
defend the rights of the poor (*'ani*) and needy (*'ebyon*).

(Advice of the mother of Lemuel, a non-Israelite king of Massa; Prov. 31:8-9.)

As the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5) offer the wisdom necessary to make community and national life viable, Proverbs also communicates such wisdom, with its prohibitions against practices that make community life impossible: against violence, oppression, robbery, adultery, false testimony, etc. Gerhard von Rad pointed out the great effort, evident in the wisdom literature, to find *unity*, coherence and meaning in the *diversity* and great variety of experiences. The theme of Proverbs, also a favorite text in other wisdom literature, seeks to summarize all this effort to find some “order” in all the diversity and dialectical experiences:⁵

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction (Prov. 1:7).

(See this theme, with variations, in Prov. 9:10; 15:33; 31:30; Job 28:28; Sal. 111:10.)

The international perspective of Proverbs (see the Arabic mother of Lemuel, above; the sayings of the Arab Agur, 3:1-33; the use of the Egyptian Amenemope in 22:17–24:22) suggests that, for the wise, “the fear of Yahweh” (the liberating God of the exodus) was not a quantitative issue (of being able to correctly count the number of gods or of participating in the worship of Yahweh), but of *praxis* – of demonstrating in daily conduct the same solidarity with the oppressed that the God of Israel had demonstrated in the exodus (→ Job; also see Jesus in → Matthew 25:31-46).

The majority of the individual proverbs could have come originally from rural and small town contexts. But both the titles of the collections (which name Solomon, Hezekiah and Lemuel) and the major part of the content reflect urban conflicts and concerns of the elite and the administrators of the royal bureaucracy.⁶ The urgency of not falling into the temptation of gluttony at a banquet with the king is not a concern of the poor (Prov. 23:1-3). We have no explicit evidence of schools in Israel, except a reference to a “study house” in Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus 51:23, ca. 190 B.C.); children traditionally received their education at home (Deut. 6:4-6; see the references to mothers and fathers in Proverbs). Despite the lack of explicit archeological evidence, schools probably also existed in Israel since Solomon (as in the neighboring nations), perhaps in houses, palaces, or other buildings, for the preparation of scribes and administrators of the royal bureaucracy.⁷

The fact that the sages of the elite were responsible for the final writing of the collections of proverbs led many to conclude that the ideological perspective of the book is totally “conservative” and insensitive to the situation of the poor and other oppressed and marginalized groups.⁸ However, a label such as “conservative” is very tricky, since it depends totally on the historic context and on the socio-economic situation the “conservatives” are attempting to conserve.⁹ A “conservative” who attempted to *conserve* the achievements of the American Revolution (after 1776), or the French (after 1789), or the liberation of Latin America or of the slaves in the nineteenth century, or the revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba or Nicaragua in the twentieth century represents an ideology totally contrary to the “conservatives” who sought to conserve the status quo of previous monarchies and dictatorships.

Proverbs obviously seeks to “conserve” Israelite traditions, but it is an Israel that had been liberated from Egypt, in the exodus, and for which the land had been equally distributed. Also it had a tradition of a jubilee year (Joshua 1321; → Leviticus 25), an endeavor to maintain social justice. The prophets of the eighth century B.C. attacked the leaders for their infidelity to the covenant with Yahweh, the Liberator God. David Pleins insists that the “conservative” ideology of Proverbs is far from the prophetic perspective and without doubt marked differences exist. But in Proverbs we can also discern several elements that continue to reflect and inculcate the subversive ideas of the exodus – the preferential option in favor of the oppressed poor – but extended universally now to the poor of all nations and supported by a new emphasis in God as creator of the poor.¹⁰

Relative to the date of the book, obviously individual proverbs had a long history of oral transmission, conservation and written propagation, collection and editing.¹¹ The second collection, which names Solomon (10:1), may well contain a Solomonic nucleus (from the tenth century B.C.), as well as the fifth, which names Solomon (25:1) and the scribes of King Hezekiah (716-687 B.C.). However, the five supplementary texts in the first collection (I, 1:8–9:18; see A-E in the outline above) may have originated in the first century of the Greek era (333-168 B.C.) and thus reflect certain Platonic influences (427-347 B.C.) and of the Greek symposiums (see Woman Wisdom’s banquet of the wise, below).

As Fox points out: “The book of Proverbs, read as a whole, pursues a central theme throughout its numerous and diverse maxims and observations. This theme, scarcely touched upon elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature, is *wisdom*—not just wise behavior or wise teaching, but wisdom itself. The book of Proverbs is not only about doing, it is about *knowing*.¹² Fox concludes that the universal, eternal wisdom figure in the five supplements approaches the Platonic concept of universal ideas: “a single substance or Form, existing timelessly and independently of any of its particular manifestations and apprehended not by sense but by intellect.”¹³ The transcendental figure of wisdom in the five supplements thus constitutes the dialectic cross entry of wisdom in the ten reports – something purely human, concrete, particular and practical (avoid violence and adultery).

1. Wise, foolish, prostituting, foreign, strange women. As Gilberto Gorgulho and Ana Flora Anderson point out: “The surprising thing in Proverbs is that the symbol that determines the significance of the entire book is *woman*. We encounter five distinct women, all symbols that confer unity and meaning to the entire entity.”¹⁴

1.1 Woman Wisdom builds her house, adorned with seven columns, and sends invitations to a great banquet (Prov. 9:1-6, 11). Michael Fox points out that such a banquet would reflect the famous Greek practice, “(2000:305).”¹⁵ In Plato’s *Symposium* (427-347 B.C.), the seven men who participate consider it a given that love, as a serious emotion, usually will be between men (homosexual). The reading of Plato’s classic work so affected a professor and Republican judge in the United States (appointed by President Ronald Reagan), that he abandoned his homophobic prejudices and wrote a book which defended the rights of sexual minorities.¹⁶ However, a fundamental difference exists between the “banquets of the wise,” for certain men of the elite of Athens, and the banquet in Proverbs, since Woman Wisdom invites all the “simple/inexperienced” people (9:4-5) and seeks the democratization of wisdom, universal education. Nevertheless, by comparing the banquet offered by Woman Wisdom with Plato’s *Symposium* Fox helps us understand why Proverbs reflects such a diversity of sexual perspectives and ideologies – instead of a simplistic defense of “family values” in the fundamentalist style. Thus, no proverb or discourse should be interpreted as “the absolute Truth” concerning sexuality, but as wise counsel that reflects as much its historical/cultural context as something of the Divine Wisdom of the Creator of human beings in all of their diversity (poor, rich, men, women, hetero-, homo- and bisexuals). In Greek philosophy this dialectic, between *diversity* (wise human advice) and *unity* (transcendental Wisdom next to God/gods), always remained a problem without solution. The development of the doctrine of the trinity in patristic Christian theology offered a solution, inasmuch as the creation reflects the same dialectic between unity and diversity that exists in the Creator. Furthermore, later, in the New Testament, certain authors identify Jesus as Divine Wisdom incarnate (Proverbs 8; → Colossians).

1.2 Foolish Woman also invites to a banquet (Prov. 9:13-18).¹⁷ Many have thought that Foolish Woman profiles as a cultic prostitute¹⁸ or a fertility goddess.¹⁹ Incidentally, she appears to be a prostitute, but in the text she does not offer fertility – only stolen sweet pleasures (9:17). Her banquet surpasses the intimate party that the strange woman had offered the inexperienced young man (7:14-17), but none of the banquets in Proverbs 9 is private, inasmuch as both have many invited guests. Neither the strange woman nor Foolish Woman lies – rather they cleverly present partial truths: “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (9:17; see the serpent in Gen. 3:4-5). The water in Proverbs 5:15-20 is a symbol of sexual relations, and adultery in the Hebrew Bible is the theft of the sexual property of a neighbor, not an infidelity that betrays the wife.²⁰ According to Fox, “Stolen, clandestine pleasures have a special tang because they give a feeling of surplus of possession, of having more than is one’s due. There is also a special sense of power to be had from defying authority and transgressing boundaries, and in that way furtively imposing one’s will on a corner of the moral economy.”²¹

1.3 Strange Woman (*zarah*), foreigner (*nokriyyah*), Prov. 1-9. More controversial is the strange or foreign woman who appears in five texts (Prov. 2:16-19/22; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27; 9:13-18; cf. 23:27-28). After many investigations no consensus has been reached on the interpretation of this mysterious figure. Six principal interpretations remain (which are not mutually exclusive in some cases):

- 1.3.1 foreign goddess
- 1.3.2 idolatrous foreign prostitute
- 1.3.3 secular foreign prostitute
- 1.3.4 Israelite prostitute
- 1.3.5 socially marginalized woman
- 1.3.6 adulteress, wife of another man

For example, for Richard Clifford she combines: (1) the traditional warnings against a foreign woman (unknown in the village) with (2) the epic scenes where a goddess invites a hero to make love to her or marry her to initiate a new life.²² According to Gail Streete²³ and Michael Fox,²⁴ this woman is “strange” to the young man only because she is the wife of another man – and her seductive acts represent the greatest threat to the patriarchal house and to the very life of the tempted youth--adultery. For Leo Perdue she is a many-sided figure, a metaphor for foolish behavior, cultural seduction and adultery.²⁵ Compare:

- 2:16-19/22: *zarah* (v. 16), foreigner, strange + *nokriyyah* + covenant; companion ‘*aluf*;
- 5:1-23: esp. vv. 3,20, *zarah* + *nokriyyah*; see strangers vv.10,17; permanent relationship, not exclusive, → Eph 5:22-33
- 6:20-35: esp. v. 24, *nokriyyah*; v. 26, *zonah* + adulteress; see the male adulterer, 6:29, 32;
- 7:1-27: v. 5, *zarah* + *nokriyyah*; v. 10, as *zonah*; vv. 19-20; perhaps married (and thus an adulteress); but “the man” (*ish*, 19) need not necessarily be her husband?
- 9:13-18 (cf. 23:27-28): The “stolen water” (v. 17) is a metaphor for adultery.
- 22:14: *zarah*, strange (women), lit.; see NRSV note; “loose woman” NRSV text.
- 27:13: *zar* + *nokriyyah*, “a stranger” + “a foreign woman” (NRSV note);
- 23:27-28: v. 27, *zarah* (alien woman) + (*tsar I*) // *nokriyyah*; MT *zonah*, (prostitute); v. 28, “robber”;
- *29:3b: prostitutes (*zonoth*) squander the resources of a man;
- 30:20: the adulteress (*mena’afeth*), fast sex = fast food; see I Corinthians 6;
- 31:3: a warning against the women of the royal harem?

As Michael Fox recognizes: “Wisdom literature, like the rest of the [Hebrew] Bible, does not seem much troubled by prostitution in itself... The reason that Prov 29:3 gives for its warning against consorting with prostitutes is just that it’s a waste of money.”²⁶

Furthermore, much discussed is the question of whether the “covenant” that the strange woman makes (2:17, “the covenant of her G/god” literally) refers to the alliance

- (1) that she made “with her own god” (pagan),²⁷ or
- (2) with the God of Israel (prohibiting adultery, Ex 20:14; see NIVSB note), or
- (3) as a marriage covenant between the couple;²⁸ → Mal. 2:14?²⁹

1.4 The mother (foreigner, “sterile” woman, widow) of King Lemuel (31:1-9). Lemuel’s mother is a good example of multiple identities, since she is not Jewish but a foreigner. Her reference to Lemuel as “son of my vows” probably indicates that she spent years as a dishonorable “sterile” woman (see Hannah, 1 Sam. 1:11). Since she, not the father, educated her son, probably she was widowed (see the vulnerable widow in 15:25 and the orphan, or literally “without father-defender” in 23:10). Her wise and strong teaching, included in the Hebrew Bible as inspired by God, demonstrates the high intellectual level of the women and their capacity to teach men, even the kings (see the ideal woman, 31:26). When she warns the king, “Do not give your strength to women,” she is not referring to women in general but to the women of the royal harem, with their ability to manipulate the politics of the rulers in favor of the oppressors³⁰ (see → Esther for a positive example of this influence). Kings should always produce heirs, but surprisingly the king’s mother appears to recommend total abstinence from sexual relations with women (see the total abstention from wine, 31:4-5). Sexual relations with men or the court’s eunuchs could produce similar destructive consequences. Perhaps the queen mother reflects the common myth that a man loses strength as a result of sexual relationships.³¹ Such recommendation of total abstinence of sexual relations with women appears to contradict any interpretation of Prov. 30:19 as a basis for compulsive heterosexuality. Regardless, in accordance with the values of this queen mother, solidarity with the poor and vulnerable was more important than the pleasures of sex or wine.

Although mothers have the supreme role in this last collection (VII, 31:1-9) and in the epilogue (31:10-31), the preceding collections also emphasize the importance of the mothers of Israel. The first collection begins with a text that points out that mothers share with the fathers the responsibility of instructing their children (I, 1:8; cf. 4:3-4) and the second demonstrates at the beginning how mothers shared the joy and pain of parenthood (II, 10:1; see 15:20; 17:25). A strong mother could utilize corporal punishment against a young son, but we also find proverbs that unmask and denounce the way children oppressed their elderly and weak parents and abused them (II, 19:26; → the fifth and eighth broken commandments; see 20:20; VI, 30:11, 17). The *priority* of honoring parents, the fifth of the Ten Commandments (before murder or adultery in Exodus 20:12 // Deuteronomy 5:16) indicates the patriarchal background of the texts but also the vulnerability of fathers and mothers of advanced age.

1.5 The ideal wife, a strong and capable woman: (Epilogue, 31:10-31). A justly famous poem praising the ideal wife ends the book. Of ten other texts in Proverbs concerning wives, five share the enthusiasm of the epilogue (I, 5:18; II, 12:4; 14:1; 18:22; 19:14). However, the dialectic character of wisdom in Proverbs is made clear by the fact that five other texts about wives are negative (II, 21:9; V, 25:24; 27:15-16; VI, 30:16, 23).

The ideal wife of the epilogue does not appear to be beautiful (31:30) but works day and night (vv. 15, 18) like a modern wife, loaded down with multiple careers (profession, mother, homemaker and wife). She has slaves, but appears to work for them (v. 15) and is strong (v.14; cf. Psalm 128:3!). Despite such appearances, she is quite pious (v. 30) and dedicated not only to the members of her household but also to the poor in the city (v. 20). She is well-educated and also educates others (v. 26), undoubtedly not having studied sufficiently a pair of texts mistakenly attributed to St. Paul (→ 1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-15). She undertakes successful businesses of all kinds in “the world of men” (vv. 16, 18, 24), with the apparent result that her husband has nothing left to do but sit in the city gates and receive the compliments of his companions (vv. 23, 31). Thus, almost all of this exceptional woman’s lifestyle appears to refute the stereotypes of women as weak and inferior (→ 1 Peter 3:7). In many texts, Proverbs appears to be very patriarchal, but this ideal woman of the epilogue, so wise, almost appears to deconstruct the patriarchal house in order to construct her own house (Prov. 14:1).

Perhaps the only fly in the soup is that, as the poem at the beginning of this chapter suggests, it is almost impossible to find such a perfect woman (31:10). The lack of concern for her sexual attractiveness (v. 30) almost

gives the impression of representing the perspective of a confirmed wise bachelor like → Qoheleth. Incidentally, to refute such a scandalous hypothesis, we may appeal to Prov. 5:18-19 which speaks of the enchanting breasts of “the wife of your youth” – but unfortunately the one who appears to be so fascinated with these breasts is a father exhorting his son (5:1,7,20). Why exhort a child so fervently to appreciate chocolate ice cream if he or she is already addicted to it? Thus perhaps the shadow of Qoheleth falls even over the most “heterosexual” text of Proverbs (could this anxious father be a candidate for PFAG?). Especially since our wise professors complain about the “contentious wife” (21:9, 25:24). “Contentious” husbands, from the patriarchal perspective of Proverbs, are not in view. Especially revealing is the third repetition of the complaint against the contentious woman because two sayings follow that praise masculine friendship:

Iron sharpens iron,
and one man sharpens the wits of another.
Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit,
and anyone who takes care of a master will be honored (27:17-18).

Thus, the wise at times appear to reflect the Greek perspective: Wives to procreate children, but for sexual pleasure and friendship many turn elsewhere (30:15-16 complains of a “barren” wife).

Even texts that speak positively about wives, such as the poem of the epilogue, suggest that to find a good wife almost requires a miracle (she is “from Yahweh”: 18:22, 19:14) and unhappy, destructive marriages are common (12:4, 14:1). Furthermore, far from insisting that the relationship with the wife of one’s youth be sexually exclusive, the sages recognized the practice of replacing the wife (sterile or loathed?) with a slave (30:23b; see Sarah, Hagar and Abraham, Genesis 16; 21):

21 Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up:
22 a slave when he becomes king,
and a fool when glutted with food;
23 an unloved woman when she gets a husband,
and a maid when she succeeds her mistress (30:21-23).

2. Sexual Minorities, Sexual Sins and “Family Values”. In the last decades of the twentieth century it was common to interpret Proverbs as a primary source of “family values,” although the word “family” never occurs in the Bible. Instead, it speaks of the “household”, primarily patriarchal. As Leo Perdue points out, the patriarchal household of Proverbs commonly was much more extensive than the modern “family” (nuclear) and included many sexual minorities:

One social location for the wisdom tradition was the Israelite and Jewish household, which typically included several families whose members could span linearly several generations (great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, children) and could also extend laterally (uncles, aunts, cousins, unmarried brothers and sisters, and widows....Marginal members of the household at times included foreigners, sojourners, day laborers and slaves.³²

Furthermore, although women constitute a fundamental theme in Proverbs, they always act as the “other” (see the “strange” woman), since the sages were dedicated to the education of the male youth, tempted by women or scouring the earth to find their ideal wife.³³

2.1 The repeated reference in Proverbs to **slaves**, as a normal part of the patriarchal households, forces us to recognize that the prohibitions of adultery with the neighbor’s wife do not necessarily imply an exclusive sexual relationship with a wife. The traditional attribution of Proverbs to Solomon, with his 700 wives and 300 concubines (slaves) makes it clear that some of the early readers did not live with illusions of sexual exclusivity with just one woman as a norm taught in Proverbs. As William Countryman comments concerning the references against prostitution, the wise counsel of the Hebrew Bible is: “don’t rent – buy.”³⁴ See the 13 references to slaves

in Proverbs: (*na'arah*) 9:3; 27:27; 31:15; (*shifkhah*) 30:23; (*'ebed*) 11:29; 12:9; 17:2; 19:10 NIV; 22:7; 29:19, 21; 30:10, 22; see “household” (*beth*), 31: 21, 27.³⁵ In antiquity the work and the body of a slave belonged to the owner and both sexual use (30:23; homo as well as hetero) and physical punishment (29:19) were common; see the oppression and sexual use of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21; → Rev. 18:13; also the **concubines** of Lemuel’s royal court, Prov. 31:3.

2.2 Virgins ?. To the five types of women (see above, 1.1-5) commonly described in Proverbs, we could add the only reference in the book to a virgin, since among the four surprising and mysterious things pointed out among the sayings of the Arab wise man, Agur (30:18-19), we read of:

“the way of a man (*geber*) with a young woman/virgin (*'almah*)”

Notably, the age of this feminine figure increases over time in different Spanish translations. However, as the English HCSB note at 3:19 indicates, *'almah* means “a young woman of marriageable age,” which in Israel would suggest a certain presupposition of virginity (see Isa. 7:14 notes in NJB, NIVSB). Also notable is the way modern translations avoid the traditional translation, “virgin” (exception: KJV in Isaiah 7:14; the LXX translated *'almah* with the Greek word *párthenos*, which means “virgen”; → Mat 1:23). When the Revised Standard Version (RSV) appeared in 1952 with the translation “young woman” in Isa. 7:14, the fundamentalists, throwing dust in the air, attacked it as “liberal” and as a traitor to the faith. Again, the incoherence of the fundamentalisms in their selective literalism is made clear. And the “liberalism” of yesterday becomes the “orthodoxy” of today.

As for the rest, in Prov. 30:19, “way” may be a euphemism for sexual relations (Jer. 2:23, 33; 3:13). Clifford concludes that “The verse refers to the remarkable fact that a man and a woman are mutually attracted; their course is *toward each other*.”³⁶ However, the young woman appears to be passive and, like the sky, the rock and the high seas, only provides the space in which the man, an active figure (like the eagle, the serpent and the ship in the previous lines), makes his moves to win her (see the mobile male in → Song of Songs). Others understand the mystery to refer to procreation obtained through the sexual act of the man “in” (Hebrew *bet*) the woman (30:19, literally) but it would be even more miraculous for the woman involved in this process to remain a “virgin.”

Regardless, although many interpreters wring from Proverbs 30:19 an exclusive divine approval of heterosexual relations and an implicit condemnation of homoerotic relations (with reference to Genesis 1–2), one could also conclude that the love between persons of the same sex are so natural and common that they do not cause any surprise (→ David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus and the beloved disciple, Paul and Timothy). As the following proverb points out, the sexual condemnation of Proverbs is not directed against homoerotic sexual relations but against heterosexual adultery (30:20), punished by the death penalty in the Pentateuch laws (laws universally ignored by homophobic fundamentalists who pretend to “take seriously” [fulfill literally] the entire Bible). At any rate, the concern of Proverbs with the role of parents in the education of their children leaves virgins so marginalized that they only appear at the moment when they are about to lose their virginity (cf. → Jesus, Mat. 19:19; Paul, 1 Corinthians 7; Rev. 14:4). The zeal of certain translators to take from Prov. 30:19 a heterosexist dogma perhaps affects the growing tendency to refer to a “woman,” ignoring the tender age of the girl. They would never want to support the practice of the youth in → Song of Songs of enjoying sexual relations apart from marriage. Nor would they want to motivate modern youth to marry at such a tender age.

2.3 Homoerotic kisses: One who gives an honest answer
gives a kiss on the lips (Prov. 24:26).

In ancient cultures (as in some modern ones), such kisses on the lips were common not only between lovers (Song of Songs 1:2; 7:9) but also between friends, especially those of the same sex.³⁷ Thus, when Paul and Peter directed (five times in the New Testament) that the members of the churches greet each other with a kiss, it refers to kisses on the lips and especially between members of the same sex (→ Romans 16). In the case of such commandments, few fundamentalists in Anglo-Saxon cultures are willing to “take the Bible seriously” and “obey everything it says without exception;” literalism in such churches is always selective.

Stuart, Elizabeth (2006). "Proverbs". In *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache, 325-37. London: SCM. Synthesis and critique of some key ideas.

Undoing Judith Butler points out that an open future [see Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*] is frightening. The common response is to seek to "foreclose futurity" with a rush for a "foundational fix," a cultural reverse gear common to both left and right ideologues (*Undoing Gender* 2004:180-81). The task of queer politics is "to act as a resistant movement to the cultural lurches towards foundationalism...which inevitably ossify into oppressive 'truths' which underpin systems of exclusion. The task of queer politics is to persistently undermine 'reality' with its outrageous fantasies, forever positioning all that is obvious, natural and evident on the precipice of unknowing and unreality" [see Jacques Ellul's critique of *Commonplaces*] (326). Butler's avoidance of deep engagement with the religious and the theological deprives her of much that would underpin her theory. In terms of Christianity "it deprives her of a community under a divine mandate to be queer, to make cultural trouble, to perform humanity subversively for the sake of different reality and greater cause, the kingdom of God (326, citing Stuart 2003). Stuart reads the post-exilic book of Proverbs as reflecting its historical context of social and theological upheaval: The nation was in danger of dissolution and thus "The future had been rent asunder and rendered radically uncertain by the deconstruction of the 'certainties' upon which the nation had built itself: election and promise" (327). She thus reads Proverbs as "a space in which the competing cultural tensions of foundational fix and [its] undoing are evident and played out" (327).

The Queer God Wisdom/Sophia/*Hochma* "bursts unapologetically into the book of Proverbs in 1:20 literally shouting in the street. Her appearance cuts a swathe through...the propositional proverbs with which the book begins [See Outline above, Ten Reports + Five Supplements (A-E)], disrupting their flow, dissolving their controlled 'natural' advice of a father to a child or a teacher to a pupil....She demands attention with her thunderous, raucous voice" (327). When Sophia reappears in 8:22-23 to explain her role in creation "we learn that we are dealing with something theologically disruptive, the undoing of the divine....a female figure who is...brought forth before creation and somehow coexisting with [the Lord]....Divinity is undone and queered by *Hochma*....The gender of God is no longer entirely clear. A solo performance in creation is suddenly revealed to be a team effort. Divinity is broken open to reveal plurality at its heart and thus ceases to be a stable, solid foundation to cling to in a cultural earthquake" (327). *Hochma* is "wisdom in drag....claiming not only preexistence but also an equal hand in creation....*Hochma* takes gender further than Butler is able, into the space of the divine, the only space where gender is not, a space beyond our knowledge.... *Hochma* offers 'a journey without direction, uncertainty and no sweet conclusion' [citing Derek Jarman's film, *The Garden*, 1990 on the uncertainties created by the AIDS crisis in gay communities; cf Abraham, Gen 12:1-3].... *Hochma* is revealed...in Proverbs as an impossibly queer figure" (328-30).

Nothing like a Dame [Song from *South Pacific*]. "But even queerer than *Hochma* is the figure that is positioned against *Hochma*, the strange or foreign woman, often referred to as Dame Folly....(Prov. 1:16-18).... What is most interesting about the Strange Woman is that the contrast drawn between *Hochma* and herself [9:1-5, 13-18] is not all that absolute....In fact they are remarkably similar...*Hochma* represents a mystical approach to the divine, and in the mystical experience the dualisms between death and life, light and darkness, knowing and unknowing are dissolved and the bridge between humanity and divinity becomes a terrifying unstable one to cross over a treacherous chasm.... The encounter with the women of wisdom in Proverbs is then an experience of the carnivalesque as defined by Bakhtin (1964). What is being parodied is the foundational fix....Two types of wisdom interact with and critique each other in the book of Proverbs, and both are responses to cultural crises: one decidedly and quietly complexly queer, one seeking a nostalgic foundational fix; one leading to the edge of knowing, one securing in the concrete of knowledge" (330-32).

She is Family "The reader is constructed as the son, the recipient of the father's (or more likely teacher's) wisdom and is exhorted to listen and respect the teaching of both his parents....The way of the wise is therefore associated with the family and the patriarchal family at that. There are no proverbs about husbands, and daughters are only mentioned once in pejorative terms....But...even in the propositional sections of Proverbs, family life is not

always romanticized and the raw brutality and tension of relationships are realistically represented....friendship is valorized at several points...(18:24).

Refusing to be Son [See the Prodigal Son and welcoming father in Luke 15]. “The queer reader refuses to be the son addressed in this material. S/he positions herself as a difficult pupil, the son who causes pain to his parents (as many do) by refusing to play the role outlined in the text. S/he seeks to undo the foundations and the melancholia buried in them, by mourning those who the text may seek to exclude....She mourns those who live ‘good’ lives and yet do not receive their reward in this life [→ Job, Ecclesiastes]....The queer reader is the non-ideal wife and the daughter of the family who subvert the natural order and the ethical system attached to it by causing trouble....This is not to say that s/he rejects all of the teaching or fails to appreciate the wisdom contained in some of it. (335-36).

Two-Timing The queer reader is ‘naturally’ more attracted to the drag show. *Hochma* is a fabulous figure, the personification of undoing, a disruptive, dangerous, demanding divinity, who in her public performances rearticulates the concepts of wisdom, diety and gender. We call her ‘she’ but we are not clear if she is she or he is in drag....We sense that *Hochma* will confront us with Otherness and foreignness and with ideas that will challenge and undo our own....[However,]We need to hold together *Hochma* and the Strange Woman....[Then] We need to two-time *Hochma* and the Strange Woman in order to retain the possibility of transformative politics and to prevent queer becoming a foundational-fix of its own. Karl Rahner noted that, ‘Revelation does not mean that mystery is overcome by gnosis bestowed by God, even in the direct vision of God; on the contrary, it is the history of the deepening perception of God as the mystery’ (1999:269)....The divine is queer and summons us all into queerness.” (336-37).

Another approach would be to start from the dialectical nature of the wisdom in Proverbs (see on Prov 26:4-5 above, p. 2). Dame Folly and her foolish actions would represent the dialectical antithesis to the received wisdom represented in the sentences (the thesis). Dame Wisdom, would then constitute the synthesis, the discerning of appropriate times and circumstances--for instance when to respond to a fool and when to refrain.

Appendix **Lawrence of Arabia (1888-1935)**

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars (Prov. 9:1).

In 1935, only after the death of “Lawrence of Arabia” (Thomas Edward Lawrence, 1888-1935), was *The Seven Columns of Wisdom* published, his famous book with the title taken from Proverbs 9:1. The book, which Lawrence had written between 1919 and 1922, narrates the experiences of the legendary military leader, who made himself an ally of the Arabs of Syria and helped them win their independence from Turkey in 1918.

Lawrence admitted that he felt no sexual attraction for women and he avoided sexual contact with them. However, in Syria in 1911, Lawrence developed an intimate friendship with a handsome Arabic boy, “Dahoum” (Selim Ahmad), with whom he shared his house. Shortly later Lawrence sculpted a statue of Dahoum in the nude, and he placed it on the roof. It was to this boy, who died of typhoid before the end of the war, that Lawrence dedicated his book (“To S. A.”). On the book’s second page Lawrence included a scene of Arab youth playing sexually on the beach.

During the war, Lawrence learned that the cannons in the city of Aqaba, Jordan, were pointed toward the Red Sea and that the Turks could not change their direction. Consequently, Lawrence decided to march with the Arabic soldiers across the enormous, “impassable” desert to attack the forces of the Turkish Empire from behind, thus winning a legendary triumph (→ **Romans**). Lawrence is one of many military heroes who refute the lie that the open official acceptance of sexual minorities in military institutions would damage their effectiveness. One of the “columns of wisdom” today should be the rejection of racial, sexist and homophobic prejudices, in military institutions and in all of society.

Plato (427-347 B.C.) and *Symposium*

The debate concerning sexual love in *Symposium*, especially in homoerotic expressions, reflects the very distinct sexual ideologies in Greek society of that period. And Plato's later works reflect more negative attitudes that influenced the growth of homophobia in the West. Both Plato and Socrates freely admit that they were sexually attracted to young males, but they endeavored to control/repress their sexual passion with the hopes of thus experiencing beauty as a universal. Cf. Paul's deconstruction of his own homophobia in → **Romans**.

3. The Poor. Although certain prophets and Job speak with eloquence and force against the oppressors of the poor, Proverbs contains more teaching about the poor and the rich than any other book of the Bible.³⁸ It is an important theme in all seven collections of the book and *both the order of the collections and the placement of sayings and the vocabulary concerning the poor within those collections emphasize the importance of the theme for the final editors* (who could represent the "repentant elite" after the exile; → Lamentations). We will study the seven collections, then, beginning with the last, to see the course and goal of the final editors, indicating the Hebrew vocabulary for the poor and oppressed (sometimes obscured in the translations) and observing the placement of the sayings concerning the poor in the structure of each collection.³⁹

3.1 In the Epilogue (31:10-31), concerning the ideal woman which ends the book, she is concerned about her husband, children and servants, but the charity which "begins at home" does not end there, since she also

She [also] opens her hand to the oppressed-poor ('*ani*),⁴⁰
and reaches out her hands to the needy ('*ebyon*; 31:20; see Deut. 15:7-8).

To the poor person, indigent because of oppression, who asks for bread at the door of his or her house, the woman can only offer charity, since this poor-oppressed person is not in the city gates demanding justice, which would be the responsibility of the husband (31:23). However, the vocabulary ('*ani*) makes the reader aware of oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty.⁴¹ And given that this wise woman is the counterpart to Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, we are reminded that, although a wise person works for those of her household (31:19), she also shows solidarity with the poor out of the house (31:20; see 1 Thes. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 5:4; Titus 3:14). The charity offered to the *poor* at the door of their house is not a substitute but complements the justice clamored for by the *oppressed* at the city gate.

3.2 In Lemuel's Words (VII, 31:1-9), following the exhortation to abstinence of sexual relations with women (31:2-3), the Arabic king's mother dedicates all her instruction to exhorting him to abstain from drinking wine and to demonstrate solidarity with the poor:

- 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to desire strong drink;
- 5 or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed,
and will pervert the rights (*din*) of all the *oppressed-poor* ('*ani*).
- 6 Give strong drink to one who is perishing,
and wine to those in bitter distress;
- 7 let them drink and forget their poverty (*rish*),
and remember their misery no more.
- 8 Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights (*din*) of all the destitute (*khalof*)
- 9 Speak out, judge (*shafat*) justly (*tsedeq*),
defend the rights (*din*) of the *oppressed-poor* ('*ani*) and needy ('*ebyon*).

Thus, Proverbs ends showing how household charity for the poor-oppressed on the part of the wise and just woman (31:10-31) is complemented with the liberating justice for the poor-oppressed (*'ani*, 31:5, 9),⁴² practiced in the courts (gates) by the wise and just king (see Psalm 72, for Israel). To “judge” for the poor (30:9) means to “to intervene on their side, to become their champion.”⁴³ The king was a man with much more power than the ideal woman, but the role of the queen mother, as instructor and educator of the primary heir, underscores the authority of women to educate men (→ 1 Tim. 2:11-15; Acts 18:26).

3.3 In the Words of Agur (VI, 30:1-4/14/33), another oracle of Arabic origin, we have a vivid denunciation against a “generation” (*dor*, four times, vv. 11-14) of violent arrogant oppressors who, like cannibals, “devour” (*le'ekol*) the oppressed-poor (*'aniyyim*) and indigents (*'ebyonim*) in the entire world (30:13-14, “indigents” because they are “oppressed”⁴⁴ (the noun *khamas* occurs seven times in Proverbs; see below). In the only prayer that occurs in Proverbs, in addition to avoiding false vows the author asks only for “daily bread,” since he wants to avoid the extremes of being a satiated rich person or a hungry poor person (30:7-9). Receiving only one’s “daily bread” represents an extremely simple life – a level of poverty, although not the lowest – and far from achieving all the comforts of a modern “middle class” (see The Lord’s Prayer).⁴⁵ See also the warning against slandering a slave in the presence of her or his owner (30:10). The commentators find a great deal of dialectics in the chapter, and there is no consensus concerning where the words of Agur end (30:1-4?/14?/33?).⁴⁶

3.4 The Second Solomonic Collection (V, 25:1–29:27), compiled by King Hezekiah’s men, contains little explicit teaching concerning the poor, although several texts in the first two chapters (25–26) refer to oppression (25:5 and 26, *rasha'*; 25:19-21, *tsarah* I; 26:6, *khamas*; 26:26, *ra'ah*; 26:28, *dakkayw*). One text (27:23-27) counsels diligence in the work of the land owner with his female slaves in order to avoid poverty (*reysh*) and to enjoy his prosperity. Another text warns that whoever runs after fantasies will become impoverished (*reysh*, 28:19-20). However, the poor become the principal theme in the final two chapters (28–29) of this fifth collection, where strong denunciations against oppressors also abound (see “wicked oppressor,” *rasha'*, 29:2). In the contexts of five of the ten texts concerning the poor and poverty, oppression is cited as the cause:

- An evildoer (*rasha'*; MT *rash*, poor person) who oppresses (*'ashaq*) the poor (*dallim*) is like a strong rain that destroys the harvest (28:3). [Schwantes supports the LXX, “evildoer”; NIV, “ruler” changes the MT to *ro'sh*, head; NJB and Cliffords support the MT “poor”]
- One who augments wealth by exorbitant interest gathers it for another who is kind to the *poor* (*dallim*; 28:8).
- Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a *poor people*.
A ruler who lacks understanding is a *cruel oppressor*;
but one who hates unjust gain will enjoy a long life.
If someone is burdened with the blood of another,
let that killer be a fugitive until death;
let no one offer assistance (28:15-17).
- To show partiality is not good –
yet for a piece of bread a person may do wrong.
The miser is in a hurry to get rich
and does not know that loss (*kheser*) is sure to come (28:21-22).
- The poor and the oppressor have this in common:
Yahweh gives light to the eyes of both.
If a king judges the poor with equity,
his throne will be established forever (29:13-14).

Of the other five texts in this collection that refer to the poor and poverty, two speak of the *virtues* of certain poor people (a pious *rash*; a discerning *dal* – surprising, unexpected virtues) and of the *vices* of the rich (evilly disposed, arrogant; 28:6, 11). One text promises prosperity to the one who practices charity with the poor (*rash*, 28:27). And another stresses justice for the poor (*dallim*) by a common and just man (*tsadiq*, 29:7; cf. the just king who this way establishes his throne, 29:14; the just king contrasts with the oppressor-tyrant of 29:13).⁴⁷ Notably, Proverbs (25:5, 31:1-9) insists that even the stability and permanence of the monarchy depends on the practice of liberating justice in favor of the poor and oppressed (→ Psalm 72; Is. 11:4; Jer. 22:13-19).⁴⁸ One text warns youth who pursue fantasies (lit. “emptiness”) that they will lose their inherited land and become poor (*rish*; 28:19; see 12:11). The concentration of texts concerning the poor, in the concluding chapters of this collection (28–29), surely reflects the intention of the editors (also see the previous collection: 24:23-34, below).

3.5 The brief fourth collection, “**More Sayings of the Wise**” (IV, 24:23-34), contains only six sayings, begins with a proverb condemning the oppression/injustice of the judges (24:23-25) and ends warning children of property owners not to lose their inheritance for laziness (24:30-34, cited in this introduction, above). Two extended sayings concerning oppression and poverty constitute eight of the 12 verses. The denunciation of oppression (24:23-25) complements the warning against laziness (24:30-34), but both texts are directed against the rich (not oppressing, not losing the inheritance from sloth) and do not target the poor.

3.6 The third collection, “**30 Sayings of the Wise**” (III, 22:17–24:22), comes from the sapiential Egyptian work, “*The Instruction of Amenemope*” (ca. 1100 B.C.; see HCSB note). After the introduction (22:17-21) the very first of the 30 sayings denounces oppression against the poor (see above the mother of the Gentile king, Lemuel, Prov. 31:1-9; Psalm 72):

- 22 Do not rob (*gzl*) the poor (*dal*) because they are poor (*dal*),
or crush (*dk'*) the oppressed-poor (*'ani*) at the gate;
- 23 for Yahweh pleads their cause
and despoils (*qb'*) of life those who despoil (*qb'*) them
(22:22-23; see 22:16 which ends the previous collection).

The *dal* is a weak poor person, thin,⁴⁹ one who is easy to exploit and rob. The judges are in the “gate” (lit.) of the city, where, in case of oppression, Yahweh will come, as in the exodus, to impose liberating justice in favor of the oppressed – but now including all the oppressed of any nation. This denouncement of oppression is complemented by saying #15, a warning to the son of the elite to avoid drunkenness, gluttony and slothfulness, which impoverish (*yrsh*) and leave one dressed in rags (23:19-21; see 23:4-5 concerning another impoverished rich man).

Sayings #4 and #10 (22:28 // 23:10-11) condemn a too-common mechanism of oppression, both in Israel (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Lev. 25:23; Hosea 5:10) and among the Gentiles:

- 10 Do not remove an ancient landmark
or encroach on the fields of orphans,
- 11 for their redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you (23:10-11).

As indicated in the HCSB notes, in this text (and in Prov. 15:25) the strong “redeemer” may be a reference to Yahweh, the liberator God of the exodus. But now the subversive and liberating God of the exodus is a “conservative” in that Yahweh conserves the original just distribution of the land among all the patriarchal households (Joshua 13–21, Leviticus 25).

Saying #19 (24:1) condemns the violence (*shod*) of the wicked. And saying #25 insists on courage and solidarity with the victims of oppression and violence:

- 10 If you faint in the day of adversity,
 your strength being small;
 11 if you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death,
 those who go struggling to the slaughter;
 12 if you say, “Look, we did not know this” –
 does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
 Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it?
 And will he not repay all according to their deeds? (#25, 24:10-12)

The queen mother had exhorted King Lemuel about *speaking* in favor of the oppressed who had no voice (31:8-9). This text, also of Gentile origin, exhorts all to demonstrate the type of solidarity with the victims of oppression and violence which implies risking one’s life (*tsarah* I).⁵⁰ The excuse “we didn’t know” echoes the Nazi holocaust and other situations in which remaining silent is safer. In such texts Proverbs comes close to the perspective of the eighth century B.C. prophets – and perhaps surpasses them. The collection ends (#30, 24:21-22) counseling faithfulness to Yahweh (first) and to the king (supposedly just and in common cause with the oppressed and the poor, in accord with the exhortations from the beginning – #1, 22:23; #10, 23:10-11; #25, 24:10-12). Consequently, although the collection appears to be “conservative,” what it seeks to “conserve” is a just system against the lots of the violent (24:15-20). The God whom a wise youth should honor (24:21) is the same “Yahweh” of the exodus, defender of the oppressed poor (22:22-23; 23:10-11, an example of inclusion).

Nota: NIVSB indicates one possible division of the collection into 30 sayings, but Richard Clifford’s division (1999:199-204) may be preferable. Although almost identical, he makes two sayings of 23:11-12 (#16) and 13-14 (#17), and he leaves 24:10-12 together as only one saying (#25). The division of III into 30 sayings makes clear that collection II ends with a focus on oppression toward the poor (22:16), which is then the focus of the first saying of collection III (#1, 22:22-23; cf also Bruce Waltke 2005:217-88).

3.7 The second collection, the “Sayings of Solomon” (II, 10:1–22:16), the longest, has the least emphasis (in relation to its length) on the poor (30 texts). However, the majority of the texts on poverty link it to oppression. Moreover, the collection ends with a stern warning against oppression toward the poor (as in the following collection, where such a denunciation occurs in the first saying):

Oppressing (‘*ashaq*) the poor (*dal*) in order to enrich oneself,
 and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss (*makhsor*; 22:16; cf. 22:22).

Injustice (oppression) also is the cause of the peasant’s poverty:

The field of the poor may yield much food,
 but it is swept away through injustice (*mishpat*; 13:23; see notes in NJB, HCSB, NIVSB).

Thus, while the prophets denounce oppression, starting from the national paradigm of the exodus, the wisdom literature develops the *international* perspective, starting from a theology of Yahweh (the liberator of the exodus) as universal creator (29:13; → Amos 9:7):

Those who oppress (‘*ashaq*) the poor (*dal*) insult their Maker,
 but those who are kind to the needy (‘*ebyon*) honor him (14:31).

The rich and the poor (*rash*) have this in common:
 Yahweh [the liberating God of the exodus] is the maker of them all (22:2).

Out of context, 22:2 might suggest an acceptance of an unjust *status quo*. However, in the light of 14:31 and 22:16, the fact that Yahweh, the liberating God of the exodus, has created the poor as well as the rich dignifies the poor and suggests that the rich should not consider themselves superior (see also 17:5, the Creator and the poor,

rash). Richard Clifford cites a similar saying of *Amenemope* and then comments: “Oppressing the poor ‘oppresses’ God, and honoring the poor honors God.”⁵¹

The character of Yahweh in Proverbs, as the liberating God of the exodus, is also evident when Proverbs speaks of God as defender of widows:

Yahweh tears down the house of the proud,
but maintains the widow’s boundaries (15:25).

According to another text, the exploitation of the poor is the source of the prosperity of the rich:

It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor (*ʿanayim*)
than to divide the spoil with the proud (16:19).

Prov. 10:15 refers to the ruin, manifest in the catastrophes (violence), which provokes poverty (*reysh*) of the poor (*dallim*). Another text refers to the weak-poor (*dal*) who suffer violence (*khamas*, 10:6, 11) and shout for help.⁵²

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor,
you will cry out and not be heard (21:13).

In addition to the technical vocabulary for oppression and violence (*khamas*, 13:2; 16:29),⁵³ many proverbs condemn the *mechanisms of oppression*: bribery (17:8,23; 21:14), false weights (20:10,23), moving land markers, corvée (unpaid forced labor), etc.⁵⁴

Of course, many texts concerning the poor in the second collection do not refer to oppression, violence or justice, but they speak of poverty and its possible causes from other perspectives. For example, five texts only mock the loafer:

10:26 The loafer is like smoke to the eyes of those who employ her or him.
12:27 The loafer does not roast his game.
15:19 The path of the lazy is overgrown with thorns.
19:24 The loafer...is not even capable of bringing his hand to his mouth.
22:13 The lazy one shouts: “There is a lion outside!” and does not leave his house.

Six texts explicitly warn wealthy youths that sloth may leave them impoverished, losing their inherited wealth, but no text judges the poor for being lazy (see below, Collection I):

10:4 A slack hand (*rash*) causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.
12:24 The lazy one will be dominated (*mas*; forced labor of a slave).
19:15 An idle person will suffer hunger.
20:4 The lazy person does not plow in season...no harvest.
20:13 If you love sleep, you will come to poverty (*yarash*).
21:25 The greed of the lazy person will lead to death.

In addition to oppression or sloth, several other factors can lead to impoverishment:

21:5 well-laid plans... // hurried... poverty (*makhsor*);
21:17 to wholly devote oneself to pleasure, wine and perfumes leads to poverty (*makhsor*);
13:18 one who scorns discipline (*musar*) will have poverty (*reysh*) and dishonor;
14:23 much talk instead of work results in poverty (*makhsor*).

The rich person, who has many friends is contrasted to the poor person (no friends):

14:20 the poor (*rash*) are disliked even by their neighbors;
19:4 the poor (*rash*) are left friendless;
19:7 the poor (*rash*) are hated even by their siblings..., shunned by their friends;

Advice to show kindness to the poor, be they weak or oppressed.⁵⁵

14:21 happy are those who are kind to the oppressed- poor (*aniyim*);

22:9 blessed for sharing their bread with the poor-weak (*dal*).

The relationship between God and the poor:⁵⁶

17:5 Yahweh, the Creator, defends the dignity and the honor of the poor (*rash*);

19:17 giving to the weak-poor (*dal*) is giving to God (→ Mat. 25:31-46).

Contrasts (diverse) between the poor and the rich in their style of life:

13:7 rich people who appear to be poor (*mithroshesh*) and vice versa;

13:8 the poor (*rash*) never hear threats;

15:15 the daily misery of the poor-oppressed (*'ani*) – an exceptional use in Proverbs;

16:8 better to be poor (have little, *me'at*) and just (*tsedeqah*) than rich and be an oppressor;

18:23 a poor person (*rash*) asks for mercy; a rich person responds with haughtiness;

19:22 better to be a truthful poor person (*rash*) than a rich liar;

22:7 the rich man rules over the poor (*rashim*) // slave (*'ebed*).

3.8 The first collection, of ten “**sapiential poems (I, 1:8–9:18)**, first warns the young against the bands of thievish and violent delinquents who spill innocent blood (1:8-19). Adultery with a “strange woman” appears to be the most common temptation of the well-educated youth in the first collection (five texts, see **2. Women** above), since it is the subject of the first sermon. However, violence stands out as the most serious sin (see the order of the Ten Commandments: #6, Do not kill; #7, Do not commit adultery). Furthermore, the first collection includes violence (shedding innocent blood), but it does not indicate any sexual sin in the list of seven abominations that Yahweh hates (6:16-19) and repeats the prohibitions against violence (*khamas*) in 3:31 and 4:17 (cf. the verb *khamas* in 8:36 for self-destruction).

In the first collection we find a famous text concerning the poor: “Go the ant, you lazybones....” (6:6-11). It is frequently cited as representative of the ideology and supposed prejudices in Proverbs against the poor.⁵⁷ However, the text does not seek to explain why the poor are poor – it is directed toward the elite youth, exhorting them not to lose their inheritance:⁵⁸

and poverty (*re'sh*) will come upon you like a robber,
and want (*makhsor*), like an armed warrior (6:11).

In addition to the six texts in the second collection (II, 10:4; 12:24; 19:14-15; 20:4, 13; 21:25; cited above), three more in Proverbs (a total of nine) warn rich youth that sloth can cause them to lose their inheritance (6:6-11; 24:30-34; 28:19; see Eccl. 10:18). However, even in Proverbs, 16 texts point out oppression as the cause of poverty (13:23; 14:31; 19:7,13,14; 21:13; 22:16; 22:22-23,28; 23:10-11; 28:3,6,8; 30:14; 31:5,8-9; see Eccl. 4:1; 5:8-10). Thus, in Proverbs, as in the entire Bible, oppression is the fundamental cause of poverty.⁵⁹ On the other hand, in the sapiential poems God also manifests a preferential option for the poor-oppressed:

Toward the scorners [Yahweh] is scornful,
but to the humble (*'anayiyim*) [Yahweh] shows favor (Prov. 3:34; → James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

The sapiential poems of Proverbs 1–9 contain moreover another basic teaching for the poor. Two texts emphasize the democratization of wisdom (1:20-33; 8:1-21).⁶⁰ In other cultures education was a privilege of the elite, but in Israel universal literacy was the norm (Deut. 6:4-6). And, as Wisdom indicates, the normal result of possessing her is prosperity (8:18-21). Western history suggests that where universal literacy and education become the norm, the common result is prosperity. But where a powerful elite makes universal literacy and education impossible for a people, centuries of ignorance and poverty follow (see the historical effects of Bible reading in the first centuries A.D. and again after the Reformation).

Only the **Prologue (1:1-7)** lacks explicit references to the poor, but it does emphasize the vocabulary for “wisdom” and “justice” – and it is evident in the following chapters that *justice* is largely the liberating justice that shows solidarity with the oppressed, and that to be really *wise* implies a solidarity with the poor and oppressed and a praxis of this liberating justice. The theme of the book (1:7) speaks of the “fear of Yahweh” (the liberating God of the exodus), but such reverence is expressed above all in the wise praxis of liberating justice, be it on the part of the Israelites or the Gentiles (see the Arabic contributions of Agur, 30:1-33, and of the mother of King Lemuel, 31:1-9).

4. Liberating Justice for the Poor and Oppressed. In order to understand Proverbs’ perspective concerning the poor, in addition to the indications that oppression is the basic cause of poverty, we must note that oppression is the starting point for understanding both justice and injustice (the exodus paradigm). Liberating justice frees from oppression and a “just” person is characterized by such praxis (➔ Matthew 25:31-46). The final editors of Proverbs made the central position of this justice clear, since according to the **prologue (1:1-7)**, proverbs impart wisdom to facilitate a praxis characterized by “justice” (*tsedeq*), fairness (*mishpat*) and rectitude (*yesharim*)” (1:3). However, like the majority of texts that use this vocabulary, this does not help us concretely understand what justice meant to the authors and editors. Neither does the **epilogue (31:10-31)**, since the ideal woman “fears Yahweh” (31:30; see 1:7) and practices charity with the poor (31:20), but nothing is said about justice.

The final collection (**VII, 31:1-9**), **the words of King Lemuel**, is the one that best deciphers the meaning of justice in the entire book:

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights (*din*) of all the destitute (*khalof*).
Speak out, judge (*shft*) justly (*tsedeq*),
defend the rights (*din*) of the poor (‘*ani*) and needy (‘*ebyon*) (31:8-9).

Lemuel and the queen-mother are Arabs, and make clear that non-Israelites also understand justice as a justice that strives to liberate the poor and weak from injustice and oppression – and furthermore they refer to laws that decree such liberating justice in favor of the poor-oppressed:

or else they [kings] will drink and forget what has been decreed,
and will pervert the rights (*din*) of all the oppressed-poor (‘*ani*) (31:5).

The prophets referred to the exodus paradigm, when Israel, enslaved and oppressed, had experienced Yahweh’s liberating justice. Proverbs speaks of a Creator who had decreed such justice for all nations – and even inspired certain laws (decrees) among the Gentiles to reflect this same justice.

The great majority of the texts concerning justice in Proverbs do not provide a context that clarifies the meaning. However, in almost all of the collections (except the fourth and sixth) some illuminating texts occur. Although the **sixth collection (VI, 30:1-33)** contains important texts which denounce oppression and violence against the poor (30:7-14; see above), Agur’s oracle never speaks explicitly of justice. Nor does the **fourth collection (IV, 24:23-34)**, mention justice, but see “oppressor” in 24:24 (*rasha*’, singular).

In the **fifth collection (V, 25:1–29:27)** one proverb affirms:

The just (*tsadiq*) recognize the rights (*din*) of the poor (*dallim*);
the wicked (*rasha*’) have no such understanding (29:7).

And if it is this way with ordinary humans, the responsibility of the king is so much more:

The poor (*rash*) and the oppressor (*tok*) have this in common:

Yahweh gives light to the eyes of both.

If a king judges (*shafat*) the poor (*dallim*) with equity ('*emet*),
his throne will be established forever (29:13-14; see Psalm 72).

The other 14 texts that refer to just persons and justice largely contrast the oppressors (*resha'im*): 25:5 + *rasha'*, singular, 26 + *resha'im*; 28:1 + *rasha'*, sing., 4-5 + *resha'im*, 12 + *resha'im*, 15+ *rasha'*, (sg), 28 + *resha'im*; 29:2 + *rasha'*, (sg), 4 + bribes/taxes, 6, 10 + violence, 16 + *resha'im*, 26-27 + *rasha'*, sg.).

In the **third collection (III, 22:17–24:22)**, the 30 sayings parallel the 30 of Amenemope, some explicit texts concerning justice do not clarify the meaning (23:16, 24), but see the references to the *rasha'im*: 24:1 + violence (*shod*, v. 2); 24:12 (just retribution); 24:15 sing.-16 + just two times; 24:19-20. However, the collection includes two proverbs which reflect the norm of maintaining the just distribution of property and not moving the land markers which protected the rights of the weak:

Do not remove an ancient landmark
or encroach on the fields of the orphans,
for their redeemer (*go'el*) is strong;
he will plead their cause against you (*rib*; 23:10-11; see 22:28; 15:25).

That the powerful Liberator is Yahweh is made clear in another text of this third collection:

Do not rob (*gazal*) the poor (*dal*) because they are poor (*dal*),
or crush (*daka'*) the oppressed-poor ('*ani*) at the gate;
for Yahweh pleads their cause (*rib*)
and despoils (*qb'*) of life those who despoil them (*qb'*; 22:22-23).

In such texts, Yahweh obviously intervenes in accordance with Yahweh's way of acting in the exodus. Richard Clifford cites the Egyptian texts of *Amenemope* (ca. 1100 B.C.) where the power of *maat* functions in the same way to establish liberating justice for the oppressed poor.^{61,62}

The second collection (II, 10:1–22:16) emphasizes the contrast between the *just* and the *rasha'im* (wicked oppressors). Years ago, Jose Miranda pointed out: "Given the abundance of items offered us by the Psalter for understanding who the *resha'im* are, I think we are at the Archimedean point of our interpretation of the Psalter" – and we can affirm that also in Proverbs the abundant references to the *resha'im* makes clear that they are ungodly in the concrete sense of oppressors.⁶³ The second collection of proverbs contains 58 references to the *resha'im* and the context frequently makes it clear that in Proverbs, as in the Psalms, the wicked are characterized as violent and oppressors:

10:3 + greed, 6-7 + *khamas*, 11 + *khamas*, 16, 20, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 32;
11:5 + *rish'ah*, 7-8 + *tsarah* I, 10, 11, 18, 21, 23, 31;
12:3, 5, 6 + violence, 7, 10, 12 + plunder/spoil, 21, 26;
13:5, 6, 9, 17, 25; 14:11, 19, 32;
15:6, 8, 9, 28, 29;
16:4, 8 = injustice, 12; 17:15, 23 + bribe; 18:3, 5;
19:28 + false testimony; 20:26; 21:4, 7 + violence (*shod*), 10, 12, 12, 18, 27, 29.

Also see *resha'* (opresión)

I, 4:17 + violence;⁶⁴ 8:7;
II, 10:2; 12:3; 16:12 (five times total); *rish'ah* (oppression); II, 11:5; 13:6 (two times);
cf. the verb *rasha'*, II, 12:2 = "condemns".

By recognizing that the “ungodly” are violent and oppressive, we can understand that:

The just are delivered from trouble (*tsarah* I), and the wicked (*rasha*) get into it instead (11:8).
The just (*tsedaqah*) of the blameless (*tamim*, integral) keeps their ways straight,
but the wicked (*rasha'*) fall by their own wickedness (*rish'ah*, 11:5).

In addition to demonstrating a parallelism with the wicked oppressors (*resha'im*), several texts contrast the just or justice with oppression and its mechanisms:

bribes (17:5, 23);
balances and false weights (11:1; 20:10, 23); cf. 16:11 (God creates honest balances), holding back the grain (11:26).

Other texts emphasize the liberating function of the justice that the just experience:

Treasures gained by wicked oppression (*resha*) do not profit,
but justice (*tsedaqah*) delivers from death (10:2).
Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,
but justice (*tsedaqah*) delivers from death (11:4).
The justice (*tsedaqah*) of the upright saves them,
but the treacherous are taken captive by their schemes (11:6).
The just (*tsadiq*) are delivered from trouble (*tsarah* I),
and the wicked oppressors (*rasha'*) get into it instead (11:8; cf. 17:17).
The evil (*ra'*) are ensnared by the transgression of their lips,
but the just escape from trouble (*tsarah* I, 12:13; cf. 21:13).

In addition, some texts contrast liberating justice with a mechanism of oppression (prejudice in a judicial process):

It is not just to be partial to the guilty (*rasha'*),
or to subvert the innocent (*tsadiq*) in judgment (*mishpat*, 18:5).

Besides the texts that link justice with oppression and liberation, several texts speak in a more general way of the blessings of the just, without specifying the concrete meaning: 10:21; 11:3, 9, 19, 28, 30; 12:13, 15, 28; 13:21, 22; 14:2, 9, 12, 34; 15:19; 16:10, 17; 18:10, 17; 20:7; 21:3, 8, 18, 21, 26, 29.

The ten sermons of the first collection (**I, 1:8–9:18**) mainly compare the wise and the foolish. Of the 12 texts which refer to justice, nine link it with wisdom (to be wise implies doing justice): 2:9,20-21; 8:6,8-9,15,20; 9:9. One text compares the honest (*yesharim*) or just (*tsadiqim*) with the violent (*khamas*), the wicked (*galoz*), and an oppressor (*rasha'*), and concludes by pointing out how Yahweh favors the poor-oppressed (*'anayim*, 3:31-34; see above, under **3. The Poor**, → James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). Also see the oppressors (*resha'im*): 2:22 + just, 21; 3:25,33 (singular.) + just; 4:14, 19 + just, 18; 5:22 (sing.); 9:7 (sg.).

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- Also see David Lean's famous film (1962), *Lawrence of Arabia*, with Peter O'Toole as Lawrence.

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- Note.** Fox seeks to refute the common view that the wisdom literature is characterized by an empirical epistemology that starts from experience; he shows how traditional morals impact the conclusions; cf. → Job.
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Endnotes

¹ Fox 2000:323-324.

² But now cf. Michael Fox 2007:699-84. Fox seeks to refute the common view that wisdom literature is characterized by an empirical epistemology that takes experience as its starting point. He shows how moral traditions affect the conclusions; see. → Job.

³ See Leo Perdue 2000:43, 53.

⁴ Ibid., 268.

⁵ Gerhard von Rad, 1970/72/1973 and 84.

⁶ Pleins 2001:453; Fox 2000:6-12.

⁷ Fox 7-11; Pleins 454; James Crenshaw 1998b.

⁸ Pleins 2001:470-472.

⁹ *pace* Perdue 2000:80 *ypassim*.

¹⁰ Milton Schwantes 1977:209-264.

¹¹ Fox 2000:6, 48-49.

¹² Ibid., 346.

¹³ Ibid., 356.

¹⁴ Gilberto Gorgulho y Ana Flora Anderson 1999:787. “Lo sorprendente en el libro de los Proverbios es que el símbolo que determina el significado de todo el libro es la *mujer*. Encontramos cinco mujeres distintas, símbolos todas que confieren unidad y significado al conjunto” (Gilberto Gorgulho y Ana Flora Anderson 1999:787).

¹⁵ Fox, 305.

¹⁶ Richard A. Posner, *Sex and Reason*; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992:1.

¹⁷ See Fox 2000:300-306.

¹⁸ McKane 1970: 360-65.

¹⁹ Perdue 1994:98-100

²⁰ William Countryman 1988:157-159, 176-178, 247-248

²¹ Fox, 302

²² Richard Clifford 1999:27-28

²³ Gail Streete 1997:105-113

²⁴ Michael Fox 2000:134-141, 252-262

²⁵ Leo Perdue 2000:92

²⁶ Fox 2000:138, citing also Ben Sira 9:6; 26:22; cf. 19:2 with doubtful text.

²⁷ McKane 1970:286; Pleins 2001:477

²⁸ Michael Fox 2001:120-121

²⁹ Gordon Hugenberger 1993:296-302

³⁰ Richard Clifford 1999:270

³¹ Carole Fontaine 1998:159

³² Leo Perdue 2000:16; see 1997

³³ Pleins 2001:461

³⁴ William Countryman 1987:165.

³⁵ Luis Alonso Schökel 1984:574.

³⁶ Clifford 1999:266

³⁷ Clifford 1999:217

³⁸ Craig Blomberg 1999:58

³⁹ David Pleins 2001:465-483; 1992:402-414

⁴⁰ Thomas Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 15-17

⁴¹ Milton Schwantes 1977:250-251

⁴² Schwantes 1977:239-240

⁴³ Richard Clifford 1999:271

⁴⁴ Milton Schwantes 1977:229-232; concerning violence, see Jacques Pons 1981:27-52

⁴⁵ Norman Whybray 1989b:334-335, cited in Craig Blomberg 1999:67-68

⁴⁶ Richard Clifford 1999:256-268

⁴⁷ concerning *tok*, tyrant, see Hanks 1983:28-29; Tamez 1982:26, 37

⁴⁸ Schwantes 1977:239, 252

⁴⁹ Schwantes 1977:237-239, 243

⁵⁰ Hanks 1983:17-19

⁵¹ Richard Clifford 1999:147

⁵² Schwantes 1977:235

⁵³ Concerning *aritsim*, “tyrants?”, 11:16, see Hanks 1983:32

⁵⁴ Tamez, 1979/82:31-55; Young Kim, 1981:220-289; Pons, 1979/81: 105-106

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- ⁵⁵ Schwantes 1977:249
- ⁵⁶ Schwantes 1977:243-244
- ⁵⁷ See David Pleins: "An Attack on the Poor in Proverbs," 2001:465-470
- ⁵⁸ Schwantes 1977:213-214; Hanks 1983:35; Elsa Tamez 1982:43
- ⁵⁹ Hanks 1982:45 / 1983:38; Norman Gottwald 1985:573; Craig Blomberg 1999:65
- ⁶⁰ Perdue 2000:49,139; Clifford 1999:193-194
- ⁶¹ Richard Clifford 1999:207
- ⁶² Concerning *gazal* (to rob, exploit) and *daka'* (crush), see Hanks, *gazal* (1982:31); *daka'* (14-15, 126 note 16); Young Kim, *gazal*, (1981:42-43) and Elsa Tamez, *gazal*, (1982:22-23, 30, note 7); *daka'* and *dak*, (24-27, 30, note 18); cf. Prov. 26:28 (*dak*) and Richards (1999:230, note h).
- ⁶³ José Miranda, 1971:126-129 / 1974:100; Hanks, 1983:31, 129 nota 8; 2000:9-11; Jacques Pons, 1981: 41,47,133,143s.; Young Kim, 1981:277-279, concerning the enemies in the Psalms.
- ⁶⁴ Pons 1981:417