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PROVERBS
A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

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COMMENTARY

I. A COLLECTION OF WISDOM INSTRUCTIONS: 1:1—9:18

A. Title, Prologue, and Motto (1:1-7)

IN THE TEXT

I. Title (1:1)

■ **I** The title identifies this book as a collection of **proverbs** (*mēšālīm*). This Hebrew term includes several genres such as short sayings, instructions, admonitions, numerical sayings, parables, and characterizations. It is used even to describe a few prophetic oracles (e.g., Isa 14:4; Mic 2:4). This wisdom collection is associated with **Solomon son of David, king of Israel**, because of his fame in composing three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kgs 4:29-34). He had this ability because God endowed him with extraordinary wisdom (1 Kgs 3:10-14). He became known as the father of Israelite wisdom. The inclusion of his name in the title validates this collection as the finest Israelite wisdom. However, it does not convey that **Solomon** composed all of the sayings and instructions preserved in this collection. This view is supported by the titles at the head of the six sections (1:1—9:18; 10:1—22:16; 22:17—24:34; 25:1—29:27; 30:1—31:9; 31:10-31). Two of these titles identify the material within a section as “the sayings of the wise” (22:17; 24:23*a*). Since “wise” is plural, i.e., **wise men**, “the sayings” in these sections come from various sages. The titles at 30:1 and 31:1 identify the material in those chapters as coming from non-Israelites.

That the sayings and instructions in Proverbs have diverse origins is not surprising, for wisdom is an international enterprise. Many of the proverbs in this book are likely Solomon's. It is also easy to imagine that his proverbs and songs inspired other Israelites to compose proverbs and aphorisms. Some of those have likely been included in this collection. Unfortunately, there are no criteria for identifying the author of a particular saying or instruction other than those in chs 30 and 31.

2. Prologue (1:2-6)

OVERVIEW

The prologue sets forth five objectives of this collection. Each objective is introduced by an infinitive (vv 2-6) except for the exhortation in v 5. These objectives employ eleven words for the domain of wisdom. Being abstract terms, their precise definition is not possible. Since these terms have overlapping senses, they are used interchangeably. This characteristic leads to wide variations in the way these wisdom terms are rendered in English translations.

The prologue identifies two audiences. The first is “*the simple*” (*pētāyīm*) or “*the young*” (*nā'ar*). Youths, being naive, are unaware of the complexities of life. Oblivious of the dangers they will face in life, it is urgent that they gain wisdom.

The second audience is “*the wise*” or “*the discerning,*” those who have acquired a solid foundation in wisdom (v 5). In identifying the wise as an audience, the sages were aware that learning is a lifelong process. Through advancing in “*learning*” the wise become more adept at strategizing, particularly in giving “*guidance.*” At this point it is important to note that the encouragement to gain wisdom is extended to everyone. The book of Proverbs makes no distinction as to a person's social status, mental aptitude, or professional goals in its instructions.

■ **2** The primary goal of this collection is that youths *gain* [*yāda'*] **wisdom and instruction**. To realize this goal they must dedicate themselves to pursuing **wisdom** diligently under a sage's **instruction** (*mūsār*; → sidebar “Reference to Liturgical Practices in Proverbs” at 3:9-10). Sages employed a variety of **disciplines** (*mūsār*)—physical, social, and mental—to overcome the innate resistance in students to change. Those who respond to **instruction** come to understand the **words of insight** (*bînā*) recorded by the sages. A variety of genres preserve the **insights** of the sages (see the list in v 6). Youths need to be trained in skills for interpreting these genres.

Wisdom stands for a sound, comprehensive view of life. In particular it refers to ideas, concepts, and paradigms that provide perception into human experience. By pondering a sage's **wisdom** a youth develops a worldview for understanding and coping with the multifaceted aspects of life. That worldview includes insight into the relationship of the temporal and the eternal. Since God brought forth **Woman Wisdom** as the first of his works (see 8:22-31), **wisdom** is a true guide for equipping humans to live in a meaningful,

productive way. Humans have the ability of benefiting from **instruction** in **wisdom** because they have been made in God's image.

■ **3** *Youths* need to **receive** instruction in **prudent behavior** (*haškēl*). By learning to conduct oneself **prudently** a person gains self-confidence. That one also inspires trust in associates and acquaintances.

Prudence equips a person with the ability to develop strategic plans for dealing with critical or difficult issues. This is very evident in David's life. Soon after joining Saul's army as a youth, he had great success in defeating the Philistine armies. He was skilled at developing shrewd strategies that led to a series of victories over stronger Philistine forces. His skill inspired his soldiers, giving them confidence to fight fiercely. Consequently, David is described as "successful" (*yaškīl* [1 Sam 18:5, 14-15, 30]). Therefore, Saul made him commander of the army (1 Sam 18:5).

Prudence gives insight into judicial and moral matters, being conveyed by three terms: **right**, **just**, and **fair** (Prov 1:3; 2:9). **Right** (*šedeq*) stands for that which conforms to an accepted standard, a precept on behavior that is in accord with the Law. In regard to material objects it describes that which is exact, such as a proper weight. **Just** (*mišpāt*) describes strict conformity to a standard. It is used to describe an accurate judicial decision and upright behavior. These two terms often occur together. Together they describe justice as the solid foundation on which to build a vibrant community. These qualities establish harmony in a community and inspire confidence in the leadership. **Fair** (*mēšārīm*; lit. **straight**) stands for honest, unbiased treatment of others in all matters. A **fair** decision is rendered free from bias or emotions such as anger. Thus, leaders who are **fair** rule reasonably and equitably, promoting a community's sense of well-being.

■ **4** Instruction in wisdom gives **the simple** a depth of character by equipping them with special intellectual skills: **cunning**, **knowledge**, and **discretion**. These skills are inherently amoral (Fox 2000, 61). Consequently, in acquiring these skills a person needs prudence to use them circumspectly. **Cunning** or **craftiness** (*ormā*) is the ability of devising clever strategies for dealing with complex situations such as devising a plan to increase the yield of the crops or a scheme for escaping an enemy's trap. This skill enabled David to continually elude Saul's efforts to capture him (1 Sam 23:22). This trait enables youths to escape being enticed into evil behaviors (Prov 22:3; 27:12). It enables the simple to reflect critically on their behavior and discover how to become more astute (14:8, 15). However, those who are wicked use this trait to concoct complex, deceptive schemes that trap even those who diligently seek to avoid getting caught in a scam. The Gibeonites, occupants of Canaan whom the Israelites were to drive out, used this skill to devise "a ruse" that tricked Joshua into making a treaty that allowed them to remain in Canaan (Josh 9, esp. v 4; see Exod 21:14).

By learning under a sage, youths acquire **knowledge**. The deeper and wider a person's **knowledge** about a wide variety of topics, the better one is

equipped to formulate accurate generalizations and to deal astutely with all kinds of issues.

Another skill youths need to develop is **discretion** or *shrewdness* (*mězimmā*). On the positive side, **discretion** gives a youth the resourcefulness for devising astute strategies to address complex problems or troubling situations. It equips a person for making better decisions and more appropriate responses in dealing with all kinds of situations. Jesus praised this skill, “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). Like any skill, this trait may be used for selfish ends. In such cases it is rendered “schemes” (Ps 10:2).

■ **5** The style of the prologue shifts to an exhortation, a frequent style in Section I. **The wise** and **the discerning** (*nābôn*), those who have already advanced in the acquisition of wisdom, are exhorted to **listen**, that is, focusing one’s attention to hear exactly what is being said.

The discerning are exhorted to **acquire guidance**. That is, they are to strive to improve their skills at strategic planning and providing insightful counsel for addressing complex issues (Prov 20:18; 24:6).

■ **6** “The discerning” (v 5) are to enhance their skills at interpreting various literary genres, including **proverbs**, **parables** or **satirical sayings** (*mēlišā*), **the sayings and riddles of the wise**. While the sense of many **proverbs** is clear, others are obscure. That obscurity is often difficult to penetrate given that **proverbs** circulate free from a context. Certainly applying a proverb to a specific situation requires discernment. An interpretation must be done adeptly, for misapplying a proverb may lead to an unpleasant outcome. Interpreting **parables** requires special skills of discernment. Jesus’ disciples recognized that many of his parables were opaque. Often they asked him to explain the meaning of a parable he had just given (e.g., Matt 13:36; Mark 4:10, 13, 34b; Luke 8:9-10; see John 16:25).

Another skill is needed for solving **riddles**, that is, various types of word games. The key to a riddle often centers on a pivotal word or a phrase being used with a meaning other than the sense that first comes to mind. Until that distinctive sense is discovered, the riddle remains an enigma. Samson was highly skilled at composing riddles (see Judg 14:10-18). His riddles appear simple, but the key to their interpretation is so well hidden that the Philistines could not solve them. Numerical sayings such as those found in Prov 30:15-31 may be a type of riddle. A group at a gathering was asked to name a certain number of items that fit a category. After naming them, they were challenged to come up with one more.

3. Motto (1:7)

OVERVIEW

The motto is tied structurally to the prologue in that its last two nouns, “wisdom and instruction,” form an inclusio with their presence in the first line of the prologue. It functions as the key theme of this volume. Standing here

and in 9:10 this proposition encircles the first section of instructions. It also forms an inclusio with the final description in the book, that of the noble wife. She is portrayed as embodying the many traits that wisdom bestows on one who fears Yahweh (31:30).

■ **7** The fear of *Yahweh* is the beginning of knowledge (9:10). *Fearing Yahweh* means that a person has a deep reverence for Yahweh as a result of acknowledging Yahweh as the Holy One, the Sovereign of all creation. Since humans are inherently unworthy in the presence of the holy, their innate response is **fear**. Out of fear the sinful cringe in God's presence. But those who are devoted to Yahweh express fear in worship or devotion. Fear leads them to always address God with deep respect. They never relate to him presumptuously as in overstepping his word or in exalting the self before him.

The fear of *Yahweh* is the beginning or the basis of knowledge or wisdom. Devotion to God serves as the foundation on which all knowledge is erected. Those who fear Yahweh conduct themselves according to his commandments, for this fear "motivates and informs right conduct" (Yoder 2009, 7). Furthermore, this fear equips them to deal with situations, especially those not addressed by the Law, in a way that is morally right. For example, in Egypt the Hebrew midwives spared newborn Israelite boys despite Pharaoh's order to kill them. It was their fear of Yahweh that gave them the courage to disobey Pharaoh's contemptible command (Exod 1:15-22).

Fools, however, **despise wisdom and instruction**. Their self-centered, stubborn attitude makes them defiant. That defiance leads to contempt for that which is virtuous and for those who strive to live righteously. This attitude keeps them from accepting the call of Woman Wisdom. Moreover, their desire for pleasure and ease makes them stubbornly resistant to enduring the disciplines necessary to learn from **instruction**. Until that attitude changes, there is little hope for any *fool* to gain wisdom.

FROM THE TEXT

The phrase **the fear of *Yahweh*** describes devout followers of Yahweh. Trusting him fully, they strive to live righteously. They seek to lead their communities in following the standards God has given his people.

The wise submit their intellectual prowess to their commitment to Yahweh, recognizing his claim on their lives (see Deut 10:12-13). When there are tensions between their fear and their knowledge, they live with that tension in anticipation of a time when their insight will give perspective on that tension. Their fear is truly genuine when it is exercised in the face of doubt.

Without **the fear of *Yahweh*** the acquisition of knowledge often leads to a sense of self-sufficiency and pride. As one becomes recognized for extraordinary insight into a subject, one is tempted to feel superior. Yielding to that temptation leads to placing the self at the center of one's world. However, **the fear of *Yahweh*** alerts one's conscience to the danger of that attitude and prods

one to overcome it. Thus, *fearing Yahweh* nurtures in a person attitudes that build relationships. Consequently, Godfearers inspire others to be diligent in the pursuit of wisdom.

In the NT the descriptor of the devout shifts to faith in Jesus. God accepts their faith as righteousness (Rom 3:21-26). While faith or belief occurs a few times in the OT (e.g., Gen 15:6; Exod 14:31; Hab 2:4), it becomes the key term for a person's relationship to God in the NT. This change has taken place because Jesus redefined the character of his disciples' relationship with God. They are no longer servants but friends (John 15:9-17). Now believers have the assurance of their new standing with God because Jesus represents them before God in the heavenly temple (Heb 9:11—10:25). Consequently, for NT believers faith is the foundation of wisdom.

B. Instructions in Wisdom (1:8—9:18)

I. Instruction: Invitation from Sinners and Woman Wisdom's Calling (1:8-33)

OVERVIEW

This instruction has three parts: exhortation to listen (vv 8-9), counsel to reject the invitation of sinners to join their gang (vv 10-19), and counsel not to delay in accepting the call of Woman Wisdom (vv 20-33).

The sage addresses this instruction to a son or an apprentice, a person who is naive in regard to the intricate ways of folly and wisdom. He is alerting the son to the strong appeals that he will receive for his allegiance from sinners and from Woman Wisdom. He begins with a detailed description of the enticements sinners will offer, encouraging him to join their gang. The sage's goal is to embolden the son so that he will reject their appeals. The other call the son will receive is from Woman Wisdom. In this case the sage's goal is to motivate the son to overcome any hesitancy in accepting her call.

a. Introduction (1:8-9)

■ **8-9** The sage or parent opens by exhorting *the son* or the apprentice to **listen . . . to your father's instruction and . . . your mother's teaching** (*tôrô*). **Teaching** has a wide range of meanings from a very general reference as here to a specific body of authoritative material like the Pentateuch. That restricted meaning probably developed in the Second Temple era. It is possible that at some stage in Israel's history teaching came to stand for a collection of wisdom sayings like the Book of Proverbs.

Reference to *the mother's teaching* indicates that her instruction was highly regarded in wisdom circles. This is supported by the fact that **mother** parallels **father** seven times in Proverbs (4:3; 6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 23:22; 30:17; see 31:1). These references indicate that both parents played a significant role

in raising their children to pursue wisdom. Also they suggest that the original setting for training a youth, either a son or an apprentice, was the home.

The son is to highly prize their *teachings*. He is to let them adorn his **head** like a **garland** or wear them about his **neck** like a **chain**. The sage is speaking metaphorically, drawing on the custom of high officials wearing clothing and jewelry that symbolized their position (see Gen 41:42; Dan 5:16). It is very possible that youths in training wore some kind of symbol that reminded them of their status and their parents' teaching.

My Son in Proverbs

A parent's or a sage's addressing an instruction to **a son** is found in the earliest wisdom instructions, for example, Egyptian Instruction of Ptahhotep (line 50, *AEL*, 1:63) and Amenemhet (1:1). In the Egyptian Old Kingdom high government officials, trained as scribes, composed instructions for training a son to succeed in the governmental bureaucracy. As the central government grew, it probably established schools for training scribes to serve throughout the bureaucracy. Even though the majority of students in these schools were males, **my son** is to be taken as gender and status inclusive (Murphy 1998, 12). The wisdom tradition recognized the essential role of women in teaching youths. While the instruction of women took place in the home, it is possible that some women served as teachers and advisers beyond the home in light of the references to wise women in ancient texts (2 Sam 20:16; Prov 14:1). In order to teach, these women certainly had been taught. This claim is based on the fundamental axiom that to teach, a person needs to have had formal training. The reference to the Queen of Sheba's coming to test Solomon's skill at wisdom is instructive (1 Kgs 10:1-10). Having such an interest in conversing with a person noted for his wisdom suggests that she had been highly trained in wisdom.

My son also functions as a literary marker in Section I of Proverbs. Frequently it identifies the beginning of an instruction (Prov 1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; also **sons** in 4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:32). Within an instruction it marks a subsection (1:15; 3:11, 21; 4:10, 20; 6:3, 20). Once it stands after a digression to signal a return to the main theme (5:20; Whybray 1994a, 39). The frequent occurrence of **my son** in section I is solid evidence that these instructions were assembled to train youths for serving as officials throughout the government and religious centers.

b. Counsel to Reject the Call of Sinners (1:10-19)

OVERVIEW

The sage alerts the son to the enticing appeal sinners will use to sway him to join them. They will emphasize the great opportunities he will have: (1) exerting power over others (vv 11-12), (2) even exercising as much power as the grave or Sheol (v 12), (3) gaining wealth quickly and with little effort (v 13), (4) sharing fully in the loot (v 14), (5) shedding someone's blood (v 11), and (6) enjoying camaraderie in dividing up valuable items taken as spoils (v 14). Against this background the sage pleads with the son to reject their invita-

tion (v 15). He supports the plea by describing in detail the cruel ways that a gang treats people. He also points out the terrible fate that will befall him if he joins up with them (vv 16-19).

This unit is closely knit by the repetition of several terms: “go”/“come” (*hālak* [vv 11a, 15a]), “blood” (*dām* [vv 11b, 16b]), “lie in wait” (*šāpan* [vv 11b, 18b]), **for no reason** / “useless” (*hinnām* [vv 11b, 17a]).

IN THE TEXT

■ **10** To make sure of the student’s attention the teacher again addresses him directly: **my son**. He enjoins him **not to give in to** the efforts of **sinner**s (i.e., gang members) to draw him into joining their gang. The teacher is aware that a youth may be prone to accept their offer out of curiosity. They want to experience how sinners live. To counter this thought the sage seeks to make the youth aware that sinners will not easily let him leave the gang. They do not want anyone who knows their whereabouts and plans outside of their control. Clearly, the sage is motivating the son to exercise caution in yielding to their call. If **the son** reflects on the sage’s counsel, he is likely to heed the admonition: **do not give in to them**.

■ **11-12** The teacher apprises the son of specific incentives sinners will use to lure a person to join them. They offer the exciting opportunity of **lying in wait** to shed **an innocent person’s blood wantonly** (*hinnām*). That is, he will be able to participate in a dastardly deed just for the thrill of flaunting his power. Committing such a crime will give him a sense of invincible power. He will boast of having power like the fiends of the grave, those who transport souls **to the pit**, the abode of the dead (see Job 18:11-14). But such arrogant boasting reveals degraded morals.

■ **13-14** Sinners will add the enticement of **sharing** in whatever valuables they take from their victims. With little chance of a youth’s having a way to earn much money, this offer is very enticing. They make it even more enticing by adding that he will receive from their take **valuable things** to fill his **house**. For the first time in his life he will be able to take pride in his house. An even greater appeal is the opportunity of **sharing the loot** (lit. **one purse**). When the **loot** is divided up, no preference will be shown (Whybray 1994a, 40). A youth gets excited at the chance of being on par with members of the gang. The sage quickly adds that for him to share in the spoil he has to **cast his lot with them**. This idiom means that he must make the gang his family. It also means that there will be no easy exit from the gang. Moreover, he will be placing himself in jeopardy of being subject to harsh penalties society inflicts on gang members for violent deeds.

■ **15-16** To get the youth to focus his attention, the sage addresses him again as **my son**. He sets before him two prohibitions: **do not go along with them; do not set foot on their paths**. The son must firmly resist the powerful draw of these enticements. He must not even consider taking one step in their direction.

Appealing to the youth's morals, the sage points out that **the feet** of these sinners **rush into evil**, even to **shed blood**. By mentioning **the shedding of blood** the sage is seeking to get the youth to realize that these sinners commit heinous crimes. They act impulsively. Spurred on by malicious emotions, they commit very cruel acts.

■ **17-18** Using an analogy the sage seeks to impress on the youth the utter folly of connecting with sinners. A fowler knows that it is **useless to spread a net** in full view of **birds** he wishes to catch. **Birds** are sufficiently aware to avoid jumping about on a net placed in front of them. But that is not the case with gang members. Their bragging is similar to a fowler's spreading a net before what he hopes to capture. As a result of their boasting, they take bold risks. They become more careless in their daring exploits. As a result, their behavior alerts observant citizens that they are about to make a heist. Therefore, these citizens set a trap to capture them in the act of committing a crime. Thus, their bragging puts them in jeopardy of shedding their own **blood**. These sinners **are ambushing themselves** (see Ps 35:4-8). The sage is basing this argument on the principle of retribution, namely that those who scheme to harm others wantonly will suffer greater harm than they planned to inflict.

■ **19** The teacher concludes this topic by describing the sinners' demise. With this picture he is making an earnest effort to persuade the son not to yield to their invitation.

The end of all who grasp greedily for gain is forfeiture of their own lives. They need to be aware that **ill-gotten gain . . . takes away the life of those who get it**. The sage is making the son aware of the high price that comes with keeping company with a band of renegades. It is likely he will forfeit his own life. That price is far too steep for a youth to give any consideration to their invitation.

1:17-22

c. *The Urgency of Accepting the Call of Woman Wisdom (1:20-33)*

OVERVIEW

Woman Wisdom, pictured as walking throughout the city, calls out to the simple (vv 20-21). She urges them to cease delaying their acceptance of her invitation (vv 22-23). To motivate them to change course she depicts the shameful consequences they will bear for having rejected her call (vv 24-27). She goes on to warn them that if they call out to her later, she will not answer because they have refused to fear Yahweh (vv 28-29). Their refusal will bring on them serious consequences (vv 30-31). She concludes by emphasizing the vastly different outcomes that attend rejecting or accepting her call (vv 32-33). Astutely she states the benefits in the last line.

■ **20-22** *Woman Wisdom* walks through the city **calling out** to everyone. Her going throughout the city is accented by four terms: **the open, the public square**, that is, places where people congregate to converse, **the head of noisy streets**, and **the city gate**. She directs her call to **the simple** (*pētāyīm*), **scoffers** (*lēšīm*), and **fools** (*kēšilīm*). It is remarkable that *Woman Wisdom* also directs

her call to stubborn **fools**, for they are viewed as incorrigible in wisdom texts. Possibly she still holds out some hope that they will respond to her invitation.

It is noteworthy that *Woman Wisdom* searches for followers rather than merely setting up a booth in the marketplace where people may come by and talk to her. Her approach corresponds to many scriptural descriptions of God's reaching out to humans (Deut 7:7-8). This is seen in Jesus' saying, "[I] came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). In fact, Jesus personally called those who became his closest disciples. This picture of God's calling out heartens all who hope to find wisdom.

To those within hearing *Woman Wisdom* poses two probing questions. Of *the simple* she asks, **How long will you . . . love your simple ways?** Of *scoffers* she inquires, **How long will you delight in scoffing?** **How long** brings to their attention her distress at their having failed to respond to her call. Forthrightly she declares that the reason they have not accepted her call is because they **take delight in folly and hate knowledge**. It is a marvel that humans continually crave that which is distorted and unfulfilling over that which is good and wise. Her addressing *hardened fools* (*kēsīlīm*) warns *the simple* as to the kind of persons they will become if they persist in ignoring her call (Waltke 2004, 203).

■ **23** At this point *Woman Wisdom* forcefully implores them to change direction: **turn on the basis of my rebuke**. They must **turn** from the folly they delight in and **turn** to accept her **rebuke**. By describing her call as **a rebuke** she underscores the necessity of their making a radical change. That change will be an enlightening experience. It will cause them to adopt a completely different way of viewing the world order (see Van Leeuwen 1990, 114).

Woman Wisdom promises to enable them to make such a radical turn. She **will pour out her thoughts** (lit. *spirit* [*rūah*]) on them. **Pour out** describes the gushing of water from a spring (see Isa 44:3). This imagery means that she will generously give her *spirit*. This picture is similar to the description of the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:17, 18). Her *spirit* will open their minds to grasp fully the meaning of her **words** or **teachings**. Her *spirit* will create in them attitudes, values, and desires that are like hers. With this promise *Woman Wisdom* reveals that she will enable those who follow her to overcome their craving for folly and empower them to pursue wisdom. Her *spirit* will give them a depth of understanding that comes only through God's presence in a person's life.

■ **24-27** The attitude of these fools reveals that they are **refusing to listen when she calls** and to **pay attention when she stretches out her hand**, a gesture that signals that she welcomes them to join her. In fact, they **disregard her advice and do not accept her rebuke**. Therefore, *Woman Wisdom* seeks to change their stubborn attitude by calling to their attention that they are at risk of being **overtaken** by **disaster** and **calamity**. The certainty of punishment is underscored by these two terms standing in a chiasmic pattern: **disaster:calamity::**

calamity:disaster (vv 26-27). These terms stand for natural catastrophes: a **powerful storm** like a tornado and a **whirlwind**. Any who are caught in such storms suffer great losses and possibly personal injuries. If they continue to reject her call, they set their own fate.

When Woman Wisdom sees them facing **disaster**, she will rejoice triumphantly. Because they have mocked her, she **will mock them when calamity overtakes** them. Her taunting will add to their misery. In antiquity taunting was a common way of heaping shame on the arrogant who were finally getting their comeuppance. From the perspective of retribution, shame is the appropriate punishment for pride, especially for those who pride themselves in the pursuit of folly. By underscoring their shame, Woman Wisdom hopes to alert the simple to the critical importance of responding to her call without further delay. She earnestly desires to keep them from such an ill-fate.

Mocking as a Form of Punishment

Woman Wisdom's response seems cold and uncivil to a contemporary audience. Nevertheless, she is justly venting her fury caused by their continued rejection of her invitation. It is important to remember that mocking was and remains a common practice in many cultures. References to mocking are attested in various scriptures. In the Song of Moses, which recounts Israel's victory at the Red Sea, the singers taunt the fallen Egyptians (Exod 15:9-10). Mocking is also heard in the Song of Deborah. The poet mocks Sisera's mother by picturing her as looking out a window watching anxiously for her son's return. Unaware that he has been killed in battle, she imagines that he has been delayed in returning solely because he is enjoying the spoils of the battle (Judg 5:28-30; see Isa 37:22-25). In some psalms God's sovereign power is exalted by describing him as mocking Israel's foes (Pss 2:4-5; 37:13; see Ps 52:6-7 [8-9 HB]).

Taunting is still present in a variety of ways in Western cultures. E.g., when a prize fighter defeats a vaunted foe, he boasts of having decimated his opponent. Here Woman Wisdom mocks fools for snubbing her. She is revealing to them that their brazen rejection of her offer to become wise warrants their present shame.

■ **28** Woman Wisdom alerts these fools that they will not find any way of escaping punishment. When misfortune strikes, **they will call out to her, but she will not answer**. Even if they **search diligently for her**, they will not find **her**. The opportunity for their entering into alliance with Woman Wisdom has passed. In the Law Yahweh states that he will be found by those who seek him (Deut 4:29). This promise, however, does not mean that God may be found at any time a person chooses to seek him (see Hos 5:6; Amos 8:12).

■ **29-31** Their inability to find Woman Wisdom is grounded in their **hating knowledge** as expressed in their **not choosing to fear Yahweh**. She brings again to their attention that instead of **accepting her advice** they **have spurned her rebuke** (see Prov 1:25). Thereby Woman Wisdom makes it very clear that their

punishment resides in their own decision. They would not respond even to the urgent note in *her rebuke*. They judged her call to be too demanding.

Woman Wisdom makes it clear that they have brought this ill-fate on themselves with an analogy from nature. As a result of rejecting her advice **they will eat the fruit** produced by **their ways** and **their schemes** (*mô'āšôt*). They have exercised lordship over their own lives rather than submit to Wisdom's lordship.

■ **32** Woman Wisdom concludes by describing the two opposing fates that all humans face. (1) **The waywardness of the simple will kill them.** Waywardness (*mēšūbā*) stands for a disposition of contrariness or deviance. Fox (2000, 103) describes it as “the tendency to turn away . . . from right behavior.” **The complacency or indecisiveness of fools** [*kēsīlīm*] **will destroy them.** Those who keep putting off making the decision to pursue wisdom drift deeper and deeper into foolish practices. **Hardened fools** indulge in luxuries afforded by their self-centered, unjust practices. Their enjoying these indulgences makes them complacent. That complacency ends up destroying them.

■ **33** *Woman Wisdom* concludes on a high note. (2) She declares that those who **listen to her** [i.e., **hear** and thus heed her call] **will live in safety.** They are secure because she will construct a wall of protection about them (see Job 1:10). They will have opportunities to enjoy life without being tormented by **the dread** (*paḥad*) of suffering a tragic loss like that which awaits fools (Prov 1:26-27).

The Hebrew word for **dread** or **fear** (*paḥad* [v 33b]) is a different Hebrew word than the one used in the phrase **the fear of Yahweh** (*yir'at yhwḥ*). This difference needs to be noted given that these two terms, translated the same in the NIV, stand at the head (v 7) and at the base (v 33) of this chapter. Proper fear (*yir'ā*), that is, reverence of God produces a spiritual confidence that enables a person to grow in wisdom. But **dread** (*paḥad*) is debilitating anxiety at being overcome by a catastrophe. It can cause a person deep depression on realizing that one must face the hard consequences of life alone. That is, these two types of fear are at the opposite ends of a spectrum: devotion to God in contrast to ominous fright.

FROM THE TEXT

Every youth is faced with deciding on which life path to take. The choice is critical. It often determines one's course throughout life. That is the reason that the sage begins the instructions in Prov 1—9 by describing in detail the two major options before youths. One is an invitation to join a gang. The other is to accept the call of Woman Wisdom. The sage warns of the dangers that attend joining a gang. Similarly, Woman Wisdom gives a stern warning by describing the ill consequences that befall those who delay too long in accepting her call.

The sage's guidance is very significant for contemporary youths. Today many of them are sorely distressed by feelings of loneliness, insignificance, and inadequacy. These feelings make them prone to accept the opportunity

of becoming a gang member. This is especially true for those who have never received recognition for a special talent or who have never been encouraged to consider their potential for achieving. The many benefits that attend joining a gang are very attractive to them. They will gain a sense of belonging. They get to engage in exciting activities. Then they will have something to brag about. Also they share in a common purse. This will give them access to more money than ever imagined. However, they will develop a lifestyle that will prevent them from becoming honorable citizens. But, given these enticements, a youth is not likely to give much consideration to the negative impact on one's moral character that comes from belonging to a gang. Neither does a youth consider being culpable for the crimes the gang commits.

Other youths, especially those from the middle and upper classes, will be encouraged to pursue advanced education in order that they may find employment at a good-paying job. Nevertheless, along that path they too will be enticed by the call of Woman Folly. She will seek to convince them that since they are special, they have many entitlements. They will come to believe that they are entitled to receive good grades regardless of how hard they study. When it is time to join the work force, they will feel entitled to a high salary, even if they are deficient at reading, writing, and mathematics. Folly has persuaded them that their inherent rights trump their achievements.

As a result of the sense of entitlement, they show little respect to those in authority. They are not inclined to follow directions. Convinced that the world owes them, they are confident that no one can deny them. However, orienting one's life according to this perspective is as foolish as joining a gang.

Youths are offered another choice. Woman Wisdom goes about calling out to all regardless of class, nationality, race, or gender. She invites all to accompany her on the path of understanding. Those who take this path must make a firm commitment to the pursuit of wisdom. That commitment includes submitting to the disciplines and rebukes that accompany Wisdom's instructions.

Those who travel the path of wisdom will gain intellectual acumen and acquire virtues. Their achievement is guaranteed because Wisdom endows them with her spirit. Spending time with her makes them competent, reliable, and conscientious. Those who develop these qualities will be sought after by employers. They will receive a good starting wage. Over time they will increase in competence at their task or profession. Consequently, they will earn sufficient income to support a vibrant family that fears Yahweh.

2. Instruction: Wisdom Gives Understanding and Protection (2:1-22)

BEHIND THE TEXT

This instruction serves as an index to key topics discussed in the instructions found in Section I (Murphy 1998, 14). The primary thesis, the pursuit