

# WEALTH AND POVERTY IN PROVERBS AND ECCLESIASTES

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## **I. Introduction**

"Proverbs seems to say, 'These are the rules for life; try them and find that they will work'. Job and Ecclesiastes say, 'We did, and they don't.'"<sup>1</sup> David Hubbard's well known words, taken from a paper published in 1966, form a convenient starting-point for this essay. Hubbard did not mean what he said as a definitive statement on the theology of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes; he was simply setting out an issue which must be faced in the study of these three books. But many would accept his words as an accurate description of how the

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<sup>1</sup> D.L. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966): 3-33; quotation from p. 6.

teaching of Proverbs relates to that of Job and Ecclesiastes: Proverbs sets out conventional teaching, Ecclesiastes and Job give a cynical rebuttal; Proverbs is "establishment thinking," Ecclesiastes and Job provide a welcome dose of radical realism.

I shall not be addressing Job in what follows. My claim is that, when it comes to wealth and poverty at least, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, though not identical in their teaching,<sup>2</sup> are much closer to each other than this widely accepted view implies.

## II. Proverbs

### 1. Introductory points

I begin with Proverbs, presenting what is in effect a "final-form" reading of Proverbs which focuses on the themes of wealth and poverty, and going on to consider the possible social locations of those responsible for different sections of Proverbs.<sup>3</sup>

An important question in studying Proverbs is: what were Israelites who read Proverbs (whenever we think the book reached its final form) supposed to do with the sayings in the book? Many of the sayings, it seems, could be taken pretty well at face value as principles to live by. But for a number of them the rubric "principles to live by" seems implausible (one thinks of sayings like 18:16 and 21:14 which seem to commend bribery); and a number of others are hardly

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. R.L. Schultz, "Unity or Diversity in Wisdom Theology? A Canonical and Covenantal Perspective," *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997): 271-306, esp. 279-89.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent discussion of these issues, see A. Chalmers, *Exploring the Religion of Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 2012), 67-88.

presented as practical advice at all, but more as observations for the reader to reflect on (for example, 14:20 and 22:2, discussed below).

Further, we should guard against assuming that even those statements which seem to commend a particular way of looking at the world or a particular course of action were meant to be accepted more or less unquestioningly. Take 28:8, for example: "He who increases wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor." Robert Alter comments on this verse: "the notion that ill-gotten gains will end up in the hands of the charitable is clearly wishful thinking."<sup>4</sup>

But we must ask: what response was expected to this and similar sayings? Simple acceptance? ("Very well: that's how I shall think about these matters from now on.") A more reflective response? ("That's how it should be, but do things always turn out like that?") Or maybe even indignant rejection? ("Nonsense! When did you ever see that happen?").

Why suppose that the sayings in Proverbs were all meant as neat statements of accepted opinions whose intended function was to put an end to argument? Perhaps our default assumption should be that they were intended as the beginning, not the end, of thought, that is, as stimulants to further reflection.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, we must say that if some of the sayings in Proverbs did indeed originate as conventional

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<sup>4</sup> R. Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2010), 316.

<sup>5</sup> I.W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 35: "Proverbs for the most part does not tell us anything about what the earliest users of proverbs thought about them and how they used them; rather, it simply records some of the proverbs that formed the basis of their reflection and use." Provan makes these comments as part of a larger argument questioning the tendency to draw a sharp contrast between "traditional wisdom" and the teaching of Ecclesiastes.

statements of the obvious, these sayings have now been edited into a book in which less conventional opinions are also expressed. We turn, then, to consider the editing of Proverbs.

There is a clear structure to Proverbs:<sup>6</sup> it begins by setting out general principles for living in the "fear of the LORD" (chaps. 1-9), followed by a section of mainly antithetical sayings (chaps. 10-15) which set out the "two ways," the way of wisdom/righteousness and the way of folly/wickedness, from a number of different angles. From about the middle of the book, we start to encounter a high density of "better than" sayings whose effect is to qualify some of the teachings in earlier chapters.<sup>7</sup> We also encounter sayings which suggest life's unpredictability and God's inscrutability: from these it is clear that earlier sayings about the different consequences of righteousness and wickedness are not iron laws.<sup>8</sup> The more "advanced" topics (particularly regarding how to conduct oneself before rulers) come towards the end of the book. Bartholomew rightly notes that this order of presentation (moving from general principles to exceptions, from issues faced by everyone in daily life to situations where particular skills are called for) reflects sound pedagogical principles.<sup>9</sup>

Can we go into more detail regarding the structure? In particular, is there a discernible structure in chaps. 10-31, the section dominated

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<sup>6</sup> R.C. van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, New Interpreter's Bible V (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 17-264, esp. the Introduction (19-30).

<sup>7</sup> The bulk of them are in chaps. 15-22, though note earlier texts which commend wisdom over wealth (3:14; 8:11, 19); also 25:7, 24; 27:5, 10; 28:6.

<sup>8</sup> 16:33; 20:24; 21:30; 27:1. Cf. van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 23: "...the second Solomonic subcollection (16:1-22:16) presents a more complex view of acts and consequences. Here the focus on God's freedom and on the king (16:1-15) introduces the notion of limits to human wisdom and of mystery in the divine disposition of events. Here we see that sometimes the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper."

<sup>9</sup> C.G. Bartholomew, *Reading Proverbs with Integrity* (Grove Biblical Series; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001).

by one-verse sayings? (Structure is easier to discern in the longer discourses of chaps. 1-9.) I find myself in general agreement with Longman's conclusion that "we should be suspicious of complex schemes to find under-the-surface arrangements."<sup>10</sup>

More can be said, of course. In the section of Instructions beginning at 22:17, units of meaning extending over two or more verses start to appear;<sup>11</sup> the same is true in chaps. 30-31, most notably in the acrostic poem about the Capable Wife which ends the book (31:10-31). There are numerous examples of two or more one-verse proverbs linked by catch-words;<sup>12</sup> also cases where two or three proverbs have been interestingly juxtaposed so as to suggest connections between them.<sup>13</sup> But further than that it is hard to go.

Turning to my main theme, then, it seems a legitimate procedure to make a selection of the texts relating to wealth and poverty in the Proverbs and arrange them under certain heads; or at least, this procedure does not do obvious violence to the way in which Proverbs presents its teaching. That is what I will now attempt.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Longman, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 42, responding particularly to the proposals of K.M. Heim, *Like Grapes of Gold Set in Silver; An Interpretation of Proverbial Clusters in Proverbs 10:1-22:16* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001). Longman further suggests (40): "a systematic collection of proverbs may give the wrong impression. It would give the sense that life is systematic and that Proverbs was a 'how-to' fix-it book. In other words, the random collection of Proverbs reflects the messiness of life" -- though he immediately qualifies this by saying: "Of course, even this comment is pure speculation as to the conscious strategy of the redactors of the book."

<sup>11</sup> 22:22-23 (not robbing the poor), 24-25 (avoiding hotheads), 26-27 (not entering into pledges); 23:4-5 (not setting your heart on wealth), 29-35 (avoiding drunkenness).

<sup>12</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 149-50, notes the following in Proverbs 15: vv. 8-10, linked by "abomination," "delight," "loves," "way"; vv. 13-17, linked by "heart"/ "mind," "good"/ "better," "with it."

<sup>13</sup> E.g. 14:19-21, discussed below.

<sup>14</sup> Compare the similar procedures in C.L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 62-69 and

## 2. Wealth and Poverty in Proverbs: A Survey

(a) A number of verses in Proverbs teach that *wealth is a good and desirable thing*: "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but the poverty is the ruin of the poor." (10:15) It is worth working to retain (27:23-27). Along similar lines, the description of the "capable wife" of 31:10-31 clearly commends her for engaging in trade, earning money, and producing valuable items for her family.

(b) *Wealth can be God's reward for certain commendable attributes*. These include: wisdom ("Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour," 3:16; cf. 8:21); righteousness ("The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble," 15:6); godly humility ("Humility and fear of the LORD bring wealth and honour and life," 22:4; cf. 31:30).

Already here we begin to note an ambiguity: what sort of riches do texts like these have in view? Do they consist entirely in money and possessions, or are there other entities which are equally desirable but cannot be expressed in financial or material terms?<sup>15</sup>

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Longman, *Proverbs*, 573-76. Longman summarises Proverbs' teaching under seven heads: (i) God blesses the righteous with wealth (8:18-19); (ii) Foolish behaviour leads to poverty (10:4-5; 14:24); (iii) The wealth of fools will not last (11:4, 18; 13:11); (iv) Poverty may sometimes be caused by injustice and oppression (13:23); (v) Those with money must be generous (28:27; 29:7, 14); (vi) Wisdom is better than wealth (16:16; 28:6); (vii) Wealth has limited value (11:4; 13:8; 23:4-5; 30:7-9).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, when 3:16 follows 3:14-15 ("for she is *more profitable than silver*... she is *more precious than rubies*...") with "in her left hand are riches and honour," is it still speaking of material riches or it using the word "riches" metaphorically? This issue is, I gather, one of those explored by T.J. Sandoval, *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), my information on this volume coming from the reviews by J. Holloway (JSCE 28.1 [2008]: 257-59), M.S. Moore (CBQ 70 [2008]: 808-10) and W.J. Houston (VT 57 [2007]: 418-19). Brill publications raise the issues of wealth and poverty in a way that is all too familiar to scholars and the staff of academic libraries!

(c) *Poverty is a miserable condition, to be shunned*: it comes upon one "like a bandit... like an armed man" (6:11; 24:34); it brings ruin (10:15) and leaves one without friends (19:4). But these teachings are somewhat qualified by 15:15: "All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast."

(d) *Habits of life which can lead to poverty are equally to be shunned*. These include: refusal to listen ("He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honoured," 13:18); idleness ("Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry," 19:15); improvidence ("The lazy person does not plough in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found," 20:4); words without action ("All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty," 14:23). The giving of pledges is also frequently discouraged (6:1-5; 20:16; 22:26-27).

(e) *Wealth has many advantages over poverty*: it brings friends ("The poor are shunned even by their neighbours, but the rich have many friends," 14:20); it brings power and influence ("The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant of the lender," 22:7); it can provide protection ("The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall," 18:11); a rich person does not have to be polite ("A poor man pleads for mercy, but the rich answer harshly," 18:23).

This last set of verses highlights one aspect of Proverbs' teaching style: Proverbs sometimes describes things the way they are, not necessarily the way they should be (for surely 18:23 does not commend rich people who answer the poor roughly); or in some sayings there seems to be an ironic thrust, as at the end of 18:11, which implies that the protection provided by wealth is partly illusory ("they imagine it an unscalable wall").

(f) *Wealth may be good, but other things are better*: "Choose my [wisdom's] instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire

can compare with her." (8:10-11) These verses sum up the entire thrust of cc. 1-9; they are one of a number of texts in these chapters which compare wisdom favourably to gold, silver and jewels (2:4; 3:18-19; 8:18-19; cf. 16:16).

Many other qualities or entities are also described as better than wealth: righteousness (11:4, 18, 28); integrity and loyalty (19:1, 22; 28:6); justice (28:16; 29:4); peace and quiet (17:1); a good name (22:1); love and the fear of the LORD ("Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred," 15:16-17). All in all, Proverbs teaches that there are many better kinds of wealth than mere money!<sup>16</sup>

Here too belongs 30:8-9: "Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches; but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God." If poverty has its temptations, so too does wealth: it may undermine fear of the LORD; it may also lead to strange pretences (13:7), devious behaviour (20:14) and self-delusion (18:11; 28:11).

(g) *It matters how one acquires wealth*: "The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment;" (10:16) "A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live;" (15:27) "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice." (16:8; cf. 28:8)

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<sup>16</sup> Also to be included here are those verses where gold and silver are used as metaphors for something which is by implication at least as desirable or significant: the "tongue of the righteous" (10:20); wise and appropriate speech (20:15; 25:11-12); testing the heart (17:3; 27:21); removal of the wicked from the king's presence so that "his throne will be established through righteousness." (25:4-5)

Other verses discourage using unequal weights (20:23), robbing the poor and afflicted (22:22-23), moving landmarks (22:28; 23:10-11), trying to "get rich quick" (28:20-22).<sup>17</sup>

A minor theme in Proverbs which belongs under this head is that there comes a time to stop acquiring wealth: "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone; for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle." (23:4-5; cf. the somewhat enigmatic verse about the two daughters of the leech, 30:15) Ecclesiastes will dwell on this theme at greater length.

(h) *It matters how one uses wealth*: you should be generous with wealth, using it to help others when the opportunity arises (3:27-28), and to benefit the poor (14:20-21, 31; 28:27);<sup>18</sup> you should avoid excessive luxury (21:17; 23:20-21); you should not use wealth to subvert justice (18:16-17).<sup>19</sup>

(i) In particular, there are many verses regarding *one's attitudes towards the poor*. A number of verses (already cited) suggest that many become poor through their own fault.<sup>20</sup> Other verses urge readers to avoid behaviour which leads to poverty. But when Proverbs

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<sup>17</sup> Also to be included here is 1:8-19, an extended warning against resorting to violence to "fill our houses with booty" which comes at a significant point in the book, immediately following the prologue in vv. 1-7.

<sup>18</sup> R.N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 35-38, notes that we should not assume that only the rich practice either generosity or oppression.

<sup>19</sup> This is good example of how Proverbs can juxtapose two at first sight unconnected proverbs in a thought-provoking way (van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 174).

<sup>20</sup> An exception is 13:23, where a poor man's field has yielded a large harvest, but injustice sweeps it away. There is no suggestion here that the poor man was also wicked. The outrageous state of affairs described in this verse is highlighted by the context, made up of four antithetical sayings (vv. 21-22, 24-25) in which wickedness/laziness and righteousness/diligence each lead to the conventionally expected outcomes (misfortune and want; prosperity and plenty).

turns to the issue of how you should think about the poor, and how you should treat them, the answers include: treat the poor with respect ("He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God," 14:31; cf. 17:5); recognise what rich and poor have in common, that "the LORD is the maker of them all" (22:2); uphold their rights (29:7; 31:8-9); be generous ("If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered," 21:13, cf. 22:9). One of the things said about the "capable wife" in chap. 31, one of the last notes sounded in the book, therefore, is: "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy." (31:20)

It seems, then, that when it comes to practical action, Proverbs does not distinguish "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. This raises the question: does Proverbs expect its readers to be as open-handed towards a person known to have become poor through laziness, folly, unrealistic ambitions and excessive luxury as towards one who had become poor through no fault of their own (cf. 13:23)? Proverbs does not resolve the issue; or perhaps here (as elsewhere) readers were expected to think for themselves.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Further Comments

Pulling these observations together, we can make the following comments.

First, wealth and poverty are major themes in Proverbs: computer searches for key words (e.g., "riches," "silver," "poor") yield many "hits," but the themes are yet more pervasive than this would suggest.

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<sup>21</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 16, n. 1, rightly attacks the suggestion that the two main words for "poor" in Proverbs, *dal* and *rāš*, are to be distinguished as denoting deserving and undeserving poor respectively. He argues that there is no significant distinction between these two words in Proverbs (16-22).

Whybray makes this point in connection with 10:1-22:16 and chaps. 25-29 by listing 95 words relating to wealth and poverty which occur 261 times in 158 out of the 513 verses which make up these two sections of Proverbs. The words in question denote wealth and its acquisition, eating and feasting, silver, gold, jewellery, commercial activities, inheritance, income and profit, generosity, meanness, bribery, accepting pledges, social status, poverty, hunger, simple living, laziness and diligence, forced labour.<sup>22</sup>

As one reads through Proverbs the topics of wealth and poverty continually surface in the text, clearly on a par with, and linked to, other major themes such as wisdom and folly, justice and righteousness, the power of the spoken word, friendship, family and sexual relations. Clearly for Proverbs money is a major theological issue, and it is a pity that Christian preaching so often neglects to address it.

Second, proverbial sayings should not be taken as statements of universal truths, that is, as setting out principles which apply under all circumstances. This is a general point which applies to proverbs from many cultures; it does not cease to apply in the case of biblical proverbs.<sup>23</sup> Among the verses from Proverbs cited in the previous section there are sayings which clearly qualify or relativise each other: thus, on the one hand, riches are a reward for righteousness (15:6) but, on the other, those who have "a little with righteousness" are better off than the unjust rich (16:8).

In similar vein Longman presents his summary of the theme of wealth and poverty in Proverbs in the form of seven "snapshots,

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<sup>22</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 11-15.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, E.C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament III: A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature* (London/Downers Grove: SPCK/IVP, 2003), 95-97, which includes a brief section on "contradictory proverbs."

none of which are complete in themselves."<sup>24</sup> In his view, "the topic of wealth and poverty is a good example of the dangers of isolating a single proverbial saying and taking it as representative of the teaching of the book as whole." He particularly attacks the tendency to interpret 3:9-10 as teaching that "godliness automatically leads to wealth" and then treat this as a summary of the entire book's teaching.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, one effect of rereading Proverbs in preparation for this paper has been to make me wonder how the book could ever have been seen as a collection of "promises" made by God and waiting to be "claimed" by his people (a view I have encountered in some Singaporean churches). The God of Proverbs is not a "slot-machine deity" who will automatically deliver material or other blessings in response to certain specified patterns of behaviour.

Third, and following on from this, Proverbs does not teach a simplistic theology of retribution, according to which wickedness and righteousness automatically draw down curse and blessing. Wealth can be a reward for righteousness, diligence, wisdom (all virtues commended in Proverbs), but it is not an infallible sign of God's favour. Similarly, poverty may be the result of one's own laziness, folly, injustice or wickedness, but this is not an invariable link. One can be rich and wicked in Proverbs, as well as righteous and poor. All this lies fairly obviously on the surface of Proverbs, if one takes the trouble to read it through in its entirety, rather than plucking pleasant-sounding verses from their context.

We should remember, too, the point noted above, that Proverbs leaves it open what we are to do with its many sayings. Proverbs does

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<sup>24</sup> See fn. 14 above.

<sup>25</sup> Longman, *Proverbs*, 573. Pr 3:9-10 reads: "Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine."

indeed contain its share of "platitudes," statements of fairly obvious points which seem clearly to commend particular courses of action: "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (10:4) — not much subtlety there, one may feel. But other sayings obviously call for a more reflective response: "Rich and poor have this in common; the LORD is the maker of them all." (22:2) What follows from this second saying? Many things *might* follow, it seems.

This point (that the sayings in Proverbs require further reflection) is particularly obvious in those cases where different sayings on the same topic are interestingly juxtaposed. Take, for example, Proverbs 14:19-21, which reads:

Evil men will bow down in the presence of the good,

and the wicked at the gates of the righteous.

The poor are shunned even by their neighbours,

but the rich have many friends.

He who despises his neighbours sins,

but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.

What are these three consecutive verses saying? Each verse seems to presuppose the same basic set-up: a rich man's house, and a poor man waiting outside hoping for some favour from the rich man. But from that point on the three verses go in different directions.

In v.19 the reason one man is rich and the other is poor lies in the moral quality of their lives: the verse contrasts a "good" and "righteous" man whom God has blessed with wealth and an "evil," "wicked" man who is poor because of his wicked ways. Two different ways of life each lead to what seem to be fitting ends. But in v.20 the picture is not so clear: the rich are popular, and the poor have few friends, but this does not seem to have anything to do with morals; it is simply because the rich have money and the poor have none. In this verse the link between righteousness and riches is nothing like so

clear. And in v.21 the opposite link is made: here we have a rich man who falls into the category of a "sinner" precisely because of how he uses his money — he isn't generous to those in need.

So the three verses taken together tell us: don't be simplistic in your thinking; riches and righteousness may belong together, but so, too, may riches and wickedness. Discernment is necessary, and one should avoid jumping to conclusions.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Further Questions

Further questions suggest themselves in relation to Proverbs.

Proverbs mentions luxury items like gold, silver and fine cloth quite frequently. But how many Israelites would have owned such items in any abundance? A number of proverbs say or imply that there are many better things than wealth; would not these proverbs have been powerfully reinforced by the life circumstances of most of Proverbs' readers, for whom copious silver and gold were not part of everyday reality? Surely the practical implications for most readers of sayings about wisdom being better than gold and silver would have been: seek the "silver" and "gold" (wisdom, righteousness) which lies more readily to hand; why wear yourself out for what you will never get much of, and what is not that worth having in the end?

Is Proverbs, then, a book which, in effect upholds the *status quo*, which advocates the pursuit of individual virtue rather than social change? This was Whybray's view of the one-verse sayings of 10:1-22:16 and cc. 25-29:

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<sup>26</sup> Further examples of "suggestive juxtapositions" relating to the themes of wealth and poverty are: 18:10-12; 21:5-7; 28:20-22.

...the point of view expressed in the "sentence-literature" of Proverbs is "static" to an exceptional degree: it shows no awareness of the social problems and conflicts which are so evident in the teachings of the pre-exilic prophets. Although these speakers could experience a twinge of conscience over the sufferings of the poor, they did not call for a radical change in the social system, which they regarded as essentially stable.<sup>27</sup>

Further:

The notion of social reform was apparently not conceivable. Concern for the poor, then, was necessarily limited in its expression to the protection of such persons from exploitation and if possible their preservation from actual starvation by acts of charity.<sup>28</sup>

But is this true? Clearly Proverbs does not contain sustained attacks on institutional injustice like those in (for example) Amos 2 or Isaiah 5. Indeed the very form of the proverbial saying (an aphorism reflecting *traditional* wisdom) may seem to lie at odds with any intention to bring social reform. But the *content* of many of the sayings in Proverbs about injustice and attitudes towards the poor could fit perfectly well with an agenda for social change. In addition to those quoted previously, consider:

Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked (25:26); A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops (28:3); A tyrannical ruler lacks judgement, but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life (28:16)

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<sup>27</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 22-23, n. 2, referring to G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (ET; London: SCM, 1970), 76. It is not clear how this fits with the point that Whybray makes on the same pages (main text) that the sayings paint an unsympathetic picture of the rich (*āšîr*): "not a single virtue is attributed to the *āšîr* in these chapters." (23)

<sup>28</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 113.

Once again, we come back to the question: what were readers supposed to *do* with the sayings? In theory readers could do many things: the verse previously cited about rich and poor having one Maker (22:2) could be used as a revolutionary slogan!

I conclude that the charge of social conservatism in Proverbs may not be justified.<sup>29</sup>

So far we have treated different sections of Proverbs as more or less on a par, without attempting to differentiate blocks of teaching on the basis of their origins in different sections of Israelite society and (corresponding to this) their possibly different viewpoints. Are there multiple voices and interests represented in Proverbs, rather than one single viewpoint?

Whybray's study explored this issue in some detail.<sup>30</sup> Among his conclusions were that different parts of Proverbs (identifiable as such by clear headings in the text<sup>31</sup>) show widely differing attitudes towards wealth and poverty.

The "sentence literature" (the one-verse sayings in 10:1-22:16 and cc. 25-29, along with similar sayings in 5:15-23; 6:1-19; 24:23-34) "expresses the views of persons of moderate means mainly engaged in farming their own land," for whom "increased prosperity was, in general, desirable, and also within the bounds of possibility."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> To be fair to Whybray, he did note that the "royal instructions" of 31:1-9 were more radical in content (107-109).

<sup>30</sup> See n. 18.

<sup>31</sup> 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1. On the basis of these headings Proverbs can be divided up as follows: 1:1-9:18; 10:1-22:16; 22:17-24:22; 24:23-34; 25:1-29:27; 30:1-14; 30:15-33; 31:1-9; 31:10-31. The sections 30:15-33 (mainly numerical sayings) and 31:10-31 (the poem in praise of the capable wife) do not have headings, but are sufficiently distinct from their context to be identified as separate units.

<sup>32</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 114.

These sayings include protests against those who oppress the poor, though the perspective from which these protests are made is that of "an observer of, rather than... a sufferer from, a social and economic evil."<sup>33</sup>

The same is generally true of the "miscellaneous collection of material in c. 30."<sup>34</sup> The exception here is the prayer in 30:7-9, which "rejects both wealth and poverty as likely to corrupt, and asks for a bare sufficiency," a viewpoint which Whybray regards as more or less unique in Proverbs.<sup>35</sup>

The Instructions in 22:17-24:22 and chaps. 1-9, by contrast, reflect "the world of educated, well-to-do, acquisitive urban society... little concern for the poor is expressed, though the urban poor were no doubt in as much need as the rural poor."<sup>36</sup> He notes that 22:17-24:22 contains references to "various forms of robbery" (22:22-23, 28; 23:10-11; 24:10-12) and concludes that this section seems to reflect a "lawless and violent society," unlike that reflected in the "sentence literature."<sup>37</sup> On chaps. 1-9 he comments:

apart... from the two passages about Wisdom's role in the creation of the world, God's role in these poems is superfluous. He appears here merely as supporting the teaching of Wisdom as an additional guarantor of success, long life and happiness to the wise, never as the protector or guardian of the rights of the less fortunately endowed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> See further comments on these verses on Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 78-81.

<sup>36</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 114. "Instructions" are texts concerned with education (of young men).

<sup>37</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 94-98; quotations from 98.

<sup>38</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 106.

31:1-9, which also recognisably belongs to the genre of "Instructions," is strikingly different in tone: the main theme of these verses is the obligation of kings to care for the poor.<sup>39</sup>

The final poem about the "capable wife" (31:10-31) also stands out: "a picture of a family which has achieved wealth simply by honest labour and industry, and probably also because it 'fears Yahweh'... This family remembers the needs of the poor and is generous to them [v. 20]."<sup>40</sup>

These are interesting arguments, mainly well grounded in a detailed study of the text.<sup>41</sup> Particularly striking is Whybray's comment: "The voice that is inevitably missing in the book is that of the poor — that is, of the totally destitute — themselves. All those who speak in the book have material possessions, though in a greater or lesser degree."<sup>42</sup> It is perhaps hard to see how this might have been otherwise, given that the destitute would not likely have included many literate among them; nonetheless the point is valid.

But it is with the present form of Proverbs that I want to deal, the form which has brought together these originally separate collections and the different points of view that they may once have represented. A collection like Proverbs 1-9 or Proverbs 22:17-24:22 does not remain the same when it is edited together with other collections of sayings.

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<sup>39</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 115-16.

<sup>40</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 117.

<sup>41</sup> Though I note that Whybray's decision to treat texts such as 5:21-23 (on God as judge) and 6:1-19 (on a variety of topics including refusing pledges and hard work) separately from the rest of chaps. 1-9 seems somewhat to skew his evaluation of these chapters. Further, while it is true that chaps. 1-9 contain no reference to the poor, in 22:17-24:22 there are two such references, the verses about not robbing the poor (22:22-23) and about not moving boundary stones (23:10-11). These texts invoke God as the defender of the poor/orphans, and it is not clear on what basis Whybray dismisses these statements as more or less empty formulae, with the words, "It was important to have God on one's side if one was to be successful in life." (115)

<sup>42</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 113.

Whatever may be said about chaps. 1-9 considered as a separate unit in Proverbs, the fact is that in the present form of the book the numerous exhortations to seek wisdom in chaps. 1-9 lead directly on to the one-verse sayings of 10:1-22:16, as much as to suggest that these sayings (in which themes such as justice and attitudes to the poor *are* represented) constitute part of the wisdom teaching that the "sons" of chaps. 1-9 must reflect on.

The same applies to the other collections: the different themes, the different viewpoints possibly reflected in them, are now modified by the fact that these collections have been united into a larger collection.<sup>43</sup> Everything in Proverbs now forms part of the teaching which is commended to those who would walk in the "fear of the LORD."<sup>44</sup> And if we wish to choose a short text in Proverbs which sums up a lot of this teaching in brief, practical form, we might well pick 30:7-9, and particularly the phrase "give me neither poverty nor riches" in v. 8. Coming as it does near the end of Proverbs, 30:7-9 may in fact be meant to function as a convenient summing up of its teaching on the topics of wealth and poverty.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Similar points have been made about individual psalms and the Book of Psalms: the effect of a lament psalm read by itself is different from the effect of that same psalm when read as part of a collection which contains many praise psalms and ends (in Ps 146-150) on a sustained note of praise.

<sup>44</sup> The references to the "fear of the LORD" in 1:7 and 31:30 at either end of Proverbs act (in the present form of the book) as brackets which place the wide range of teaching contained in the book under this all-encompassing rubric. In a similar way, the portrait in 31:10-31 of the characteristic behaviour of a woman who fears the LORD clearly corresponds to chaps. 1-9, addressed to young men who would walk in the fear of the LORD (1:7; 2:5; 3:7; 9:10), the two sections as a whole having a similar "bracketing" function.

<sup>45</sup> As noted above, Whybray (78-81) argues that 30:7-9 represents a viewpoint without parallel elsewhere in Proverbs, particularly in its radical rejection of wealth, which seems to go against those verses which commend seeking and retaining wealth as worthy human goals. 30:7-9 is certainly an unusual text in one respect, that it takes the form of a prayer. But is it so radically divergent from the rest of the book? I would say that 30:7-9 quite well sums up the practical implications of the many verses in Proverbs which: (i) represent wealth as only a limited good; (ii) link the acquisition of wealth with injustice; (iii) commend a simple but happy life-style over one which is marked by both wealth and unhappiness.

### III. Ecclesiastes and Proverbs Compared

Ecclesiastes says more or less the same as Proverbs on the issues of wealth and poverty. That is a controversial statement, but it can easily be documented in some detail, starting from Ecclesiastes 2, and continuing throughout most of the book, for the themes of wealth and poverty are as pervasive in Ecclesiastes as they are in Proverbs.

#### 1. Some Texts from Ecclesiastes

In every example I shall cite, the teaching of Ecclesiastes can be paralleled quite closely, in some cases almost exactly, in Proverbs; or, in a minority of cases, a text from Ecclesiastes can be read in a way that brings it close to something taught in Proverbs, so that a Proverbs-like reading of the Ecclesiastes text is, as the phrase goes, "not excluded" in these cases. All the Ecclesiastes texts I cite either mention wealth or poverty directly or deal with what are clearly related topics (e.g., work, human and divine justice).

Proverbs counsels against spending one's fortune on luxurious living (21:17; 23:20-21). Qohelet's account in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 of how he tried and failed to find fulfilment in creating great buildings and pleasure gardens, in amassing wealth in various forms (slaves, animals, silver and gold), and in the delights of sex (if that is the significance of the obscure phrase *šiddâ vešiddôth* in v.8b) similarly concludes that luxurious living is ultimately pointless.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 notes that inherited wealth is easily lost; compare Proverbs 20:21; 21:20, the only difference being that Ecclesiastes expresses this point from the perspective of the one who must leave his wealth to a potentially unworthy heir.

Ecclesiastes 2:26 speaks of a "sinner" gathering wealth which will be enjoyed by the "one who pleases God" (cf. Pr 10:16; 15:6, 27), language which reflects a "two ways" teaching like that more frequently found in Proverbs (e.g. chaps. 10-15). The same verse makes clear that there are gifts of God much more worth having than

wealth, such "wisdom, knowledge, and joy," also a point frequently made in Proverbs.

Proverbs teaches about the need to be busy in season (10:5; 20:4). Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 speaks of different times for different activities.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 contrasts human and divine activity: humans labour and try to plan for the future, but only what God does lasts, and the fact that his activity remains to an extent inscrutable means that there is an element of uncertainty built into all human plans. This is a significant theme in the second half of Proverbs (16:33; 20:24; 21:30; 27:1).

Justice can be perverted (Ecc 3:16); this results in grievous ills for those who suffer oppression (Ecc 4:1-3); one of the roots of injustice is envy which leads to a desire for more (Ecc 4:4). This cluster of themes is also found at Ecclesiastes 5:8-9, where oppression and injustice are linked to corrupt officials and rulers, all of whom want a cut: "the surplus must be divided between everybody; a ploughed field has a king (i.e., a ruler or official who wants some of the profits)."<sup>46</sup> Proverbs frequently notes that a desire for wealth can lead to injustice and oppression (16:8; 28:16).

In fact the themes of wealth, poverty, work and injustice arguably run through most of Ecclesiastes 4:5-5:7, where there are also parallels with Proverbs. Thus in Ecclesiastes 4 laziness may bring poverty (4:5; cf. Pr 6:7-11), but there is virtue in knowing when to stop accumulating wealth, which may well harm you and others (4:6-8; cf. Pr 23:4-5); the friends who work together (4:9-12) seem to be a kind of co-operative formed partly to resist the economic depredations of others (cf. Pr 18:24; 20:6; 27:10 on the value of good friends);

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<sup>46</sup> This translation of 5:9 makes better sense in context than (e.g.) that of NRSV: "But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a ploughed field."

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16, which describes the thankless task of ruling a people, may have particularly in mind the difficulty of establishing economic justice.

The passage about reverence before God and keeping one's vows (5:1-7) also probably does not represent a change of topic: these verses likely have in view vows sworn before God for economic gain; the attitude of one who promises God a share of his gains but then breaks his promise when the gains come in may not be far from that of the one who oppresses fellow-citizens for profits (there is the same failure to "fear God," cf. Pr 1:7, etc.).

Ecclesiastes 5:10 focuses on the harm one can do to oneself by wrong attitudes towards wealth, this theme continuing into chap. 6. We read of the dangers of loving money (5:10); the threat that hoarded money will vanish (5:11; Pr 23:5); that sound sleep is better than money (5:12, echoing the "better than" texts in Proverbs). We are told that wealth can be lost in unwise ventures, so that one's children inherit nothing (5:13-17): were these wicked ventures (which would bring the verse into line with verses like Pr 13:21-22; 20:17)? Or perhaps the point is that the wealth in these cases would have been better shared with the poor, as Proverbs recommends.<sup>47</sup>

Ecclesiastes 6:1-6 speaks of a man "to whom God gives wealth, possessions and honour... yet God does not enable him to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them." Who is this man? A victim of injustice? Or one who has acquired wealth unjustly and finds his wealth given to a righteous man?<sup>48</sup> In either case, he would find

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<sup>47</sup> This falls into the category of a reading "not excluded" by the text.

<sup>48</sup> Given how Qohelet on occasions speaks of God's agency (1:13, 15; 7:13; 8:16) in connection with ambiguous or even evil human behaviour, the fact that God is said to have "given" these things to this man would not necessarily imply that he had acquired them justly.

his counterpart in Proverbs (13:23 and 28:8). Ecclesiastes 6:7-9 reintroduces the theme, familiar from Proverbs, of wisdom being more desirable than wealth; v. 9 also notes the folly of empty dreaming (cf. Pr 14:23; 28:19). Ecclesiastes 6:10-12 closes this section by emphasising the sovereignty of God in human affairs, in line with texts from the second half of Proverbs (previously referred to).

Ecclesiastes 7:1-12 is a section of proverbial sayings which, like much of Proverbs, contrasts wisdom and folly. It contains teaching on: the value of a good name (7:1; cf. Pr 22:1); the subversion of justice and wisdom through bribery (7:7; cf. Pr 15:27; 18:5, 16); the value of wealth (it offers protection); the superiority of wisdom to inherited wealth (7:11-12; cf. Pr 21:20).

Most of what follows in Ecclesiastes 7:13–8:17 stresses the limits of wisdom: the things that even a wise person cannot understand, and the things that wisdom cannot accomplish. In this section Qohelet often links his argument about wisdom to the issue of wealth and poverty.

Thus: God sends both prosperity and adversity, and not necessarily to those one would expect, so that humans cannot be certain about the future (7:14-18). This theme of the apparent inequity of God's dealings is restated in 8:11, 14, where it comes across even more starkly for being juxtaposed with apparently contradictory assertions in vv. 12-13 that "sinners" and those who "fear God" will (contrary to what seems to be the case) each receive what they deserve. Proverbs makes similar points about the difficulty of "reading" God's providence (13:23; 16:33; 20:24; 21:30; 27:1), though it does not problematize the issue as obviously as Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9 returns to the theme of the unjust ruler, and how to deal with him, an important theme in the second half of Proverbs (25:15), and one which relates to the issue of wealth and poverty (Pr 31:8-9). Ecclesiastes 8:6-8 may perhaps hold open the possibility that God will thwart such a ruler (cf. Pr 14:28; 21:1; 29:14,

26);<sup>49</sup> what is clearer in v. 9 is the harm that an unjust ruler can do, economic injustice being an obvious case in point (cf. Pr 28:3; 29:4).

Ecclesiastes 9:11 notes that riches do not always end up in the hand of the wise and discerning, an idea for which we have already noted parallels in Proverbs. This is part of a sustained argument in 9:1-12 that the righteous are not always rewarded nor the wicked always punished, that in fact on the basis of what often happens to them it is not clear that God "loves" the one group and "hates" the other, an argument that clearly continues the thought of 8:10-17.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 also contains the last of the "joy" texts (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-10). Some care seems to have gone into the ordering of these texts: three longer texts (2:24-26; 5:18-19; 9:7-10), the longest and most emphatic of them coming last, with two shorter texts in between (3:12-13; 8:15).<sup>50</sup>

Further, each of the texts clearly suits its context: 2:24-26 follows vv. 18-23, in which the speaker complains about the pointlessness of amassing wealth, this idea being picked up in what v. 26 says about "gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God;" 3:12-13 picks up the themes the passing of time ("as long as they live," v.12) and "toil" (v. 13) from its context (cf. vv. 9, 11); 5:18-20 is set in a context describing how people fail to enjoy their wealth (5:10-17; 6:1-6), this theme being picked up at 5:19 in the reference to "those to whom God gives wealth and possessions and *whom he enables to enjoy them*;" the phrase "through the days his life that God gives him" in 8:15 corresponds to "neither will they prolong their days like a

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<sup>49</sup> For this reading of 8:6-8, see Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 165-66.

<sup>50</sup> 9:7-10 is the most extensive and emphatic of the "joy" texts: not just "eat and drink" as in the earlier texts, but "eat... with gladness, and drink... with a joyful heart," along with injunctions to wear fine clothes and to "enjoy life with your wife, whom you love."

shadow" in 8:13; finally, 9:7-10, placed in a context whose themes are death and the unpredictability of life, is expressed so as to reflect those themes ("the days of your breath-like [brief] life [author's translation];" "that is your lot in life").

The care with which Qohelet has linked the "joy" texts to their contexts suggests that he intends them as his practical response to the perplexities of life: the sense of futility, injustice, and even divine cruelty which seems to mark the experience of many people (which the context in each case dwells on).<sup>51</sup> All these texts make the same positive point: there are clearly unresolved enigmas in life, but there are also uncomplicated pleasures which lie within the reach of many if not all: eating and drinking; marriage and family; the rhythm of toil and relaxation, of hard work followed by pleasure in the company of those you love. Why not enjoy what lies readily to hand rather than frantically pursuing what lies out of reach? In a similar way, why not leave the unresolved issues for God to sort out?

The teaching of the "joy" texts has much in common with Proverbs 30:7-9, which, we suggested, seems to summarise much of what Proverbs has to say regarding wealth and poverty. Note in particular how Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 and 5:18-19, when read in context, commend a moderate enjoyment of accessible pleasures; Proverbs 30:7-9 also commended a "modest sufficiency" as most likely to keep the speaker's heart close to God.

We can, further, link Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, which includes a happy family among God's blessings, with texts in Proverbs such as 15:15-17 and 17:1, which commend domestic peace over luxurious living; compare also Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:12, where the main point is that

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<sup>51</sup> This comes across particularly clearly in the climactic 9:7-10, which, unlike the other "joy" texts, is in the 2nd person, and thus presents itself as advice given directly to the reader.

making the pursuit of wealth one's main aim can lead to missing or losing these simple, relatively accessible blessings.

Ecclesiastes 9:13-16, the narrative of the poor, wise man, is another text (cf. 4:13; 6:7-9) to note that poverty and wisdom can go together (cf. Pr 8:10-11; 16:16). Ecclesiastes 10:6 ("I have seen slaves on horseback") reiterates the point that wealth and power do not always end up in the right hands (cf. Pr 16:8).

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, which is the nearest the Bible comes to recommending a "diversified investment portfolio" ("cast your bread upon the waters"), may have in mind the kind of joint ventures that 4:9-12 commended; it may also have in mind kindness to the poor. In either case its teaching would be in line with parts of Proverbs. The teaching in the same verses that one must in the end decide on a course of action rather than waiting for perfectly favourable circumstances (which may never arrive) has some overlap with the familiar warnings against laziness in Proverbs. The concluding plea of 11:7-12:8 also by implication criticises sluggards, though that is hardly its main aim.

## **2. The Different Frameworks of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes**

The previous was meant as a *tour de force*, an attempt to push a line of argument as far as it would go. I hope it has been illuminating to see how far individual statements and teachings of Ecclesiastes can be paralleled in Proverbs. Similar points of contact could be noted between the teaching of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes on other topics as well.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> A number of them can be found in Ecc 7 and 8; 7:2 on avoiding drunkenness (cf. Pr 23:29-35); 7:5-6 on the wisdom of listening to a rebuke (cf. Pr 12:1; 13:1); 7:16, which more or less says that "there is a way that seems right to a man" (cf. Pr 14:12; 16:25); 7:20-22 on the wisdom of not starting arguments (cf. Pr 15:18; 17:14); 7:26 on avoiding "loose" women (cf. Pr 5:1-6; 7:10-27); 7:23-25 and 8:16-17 on wisdom as something lying beyond one's grasp (cf. Pr 30:1-4). Like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes commends wisdom over against folly (2:12-17; 7:1-13;

But of course, it is not enough to make comparisons at the level of individual teachings; we need also to consider larger issues such as the different tone of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and the different frameworks in which teachings are set in the two books.

Notoriously, the issue of framework in Ecclesiastes raises major interpretative questions: the meaning of the key term *hevel* (1:2, etc.); the relation of the epilogue (12:9-14) to the rest of the book; the non-systematic way in which the book presents issues, which has led to wide disagreement about the structure and main argument (or arguments). What does Qohelet really think about the big issues? His meandering, questioning, open-ended presentation seems to leave many options open.

Proverbs takes as its starting point the "fear of God" (1:7). Ecclesiastes may end by telling the reader to "fear God, and keep his commandments" (12:13-14), but it begins with the haunting statement, "everything is a vapour" (1:2, cf. 12:8),<sup>53</sup> clearly a less stable starting point. This launches a discourse whose tone is much more questioning, much less accepting of conventional wisdom than Proverbs may seem to be.

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9:13-18; 10:12-15), even if the same texts which commend wisdom also note its limitations. Ecclesiastes 10:4-11 focus on the issue of working for justice in the kingdom of an unjust ruler, no matter what it costs (Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 195-96; cf. Pr 25:26). Ecclesiastes 10:12-15 commends making plans with realistic expectations, in contrast to the behaviour of the fool who, wise in his own eyes, talks himself into believing that his ill thought-out schemes will succeed (cf. Pr 2:12-15; 10:14, 19-21).

<sup>53</sup> I prefer to translate *hevel* with "vapour" or "breath," retaining the metaphor of the Hebrew, which has a variety of nuances throughout the book: "futile" (2:11); "frustrating" (2:17); "incomprehensible" (8:10); "brief" (11:10). To unpack the metaphor in translation (e.g., "vanity," NRSV) has the effect of excluding some of these nuances; cf. Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 346. I have little enthusiasm for NIV's and NLT's "meaningless," particularly at the end of the book, where it seems to me to reduce Qohelet's powerful closing appeal in 11:7-12:8 to near-incoherence.

Certainly, Ecclesiastes does not in general *sound* like Proverbs. It has a distinctive vocabulary which creates a mood very different from that of Proverbs:<sup>54</sup> *hevel* ("vapour"), which is used throughout the book to portray reality as something brief, frustrating and hard to understand; *chēleq* ("portion," "lot"), suggesting human limitations; *yitrōn* ("profit") and *yōtēr* ("gain"), generally used in contexts which suggest that there is little of either to be found in this world;<sup>55</sup> *'āmāl* ("labour," noun and verb), terms which represent work as hard toil; *'ēt* ("time"), *qārâ* ("happen") and *miqreh* ("fate"), which suggest the uncertainty of human affairs, particularly when seen in a longer perspective; *'ôlām* ("long stretch of time");<sup>56</sup> *tachat haššemeš* ("under the sun"), again suggesting human limitations and also the deliberately narrowed focus in which Qohelet conducts his investigations for much of the book.

Most of these key terms are either absent from Proverbs, or much less frequently used in Proverbs:

	Proverbs	Ecclesiastes
<i>Hevel</i>	3	38
<i>Chēleq</i>	0	8
<i>yitrōn, yōtēr</i>	0	17
<i>'āmāl</i>	3	36
<i>'ēt</i>	5	40
<i>qārâ, miqreh</i>	0	10
<i>'olam</i>	6	7
<i>tachat haššemeš</i>	0	29

<sup>54</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 25-27.

<sup>55</sup> *môtār* ("advantage," "profit") occurs twice in Proverbs, once in Ecclesiastes (3:19, which denies that humans have any advantage over animals).

<sup>56</sup> Used in Proverbs in contexts which suggest the permanence of what God or human justice has ordained (8:23; 22:28; 23:10) or the permanence of the righteous compared to the wicked (10:25, 30), and only once (27:24) to suggest the impermanence of riches and glory (but note that the context in which it occurs, 27:23-27, suggests that there are practical steps one can take to ensure that one's riches do not dwindle); used in Ecclesiastes in contexts which suggest how little difference humans make during their lives (1:4, 10; 2:16), the irreversibility (but also the mystery) of what God brings about (3:11, 14), and the finality of death (9:6; 12:5).

It is true, as we have noted, that Proverbs contains texts which suggest the uncertainty of human affairs and the limits of wisdom. But these texts in Proverbs, while significant, are relatively infrequent, and set in a context which implies that one can generalise with a fair degree of reliability about the likely consequences of particular patterns of behaviour. Ecclesiastes takes what could be termed minor themes in Proverbs (minor at least as regards the number of verses in which they occur) and brings them centre stage, as vexing problems to which there seem to be no easy answers.

Is Ecclesiastes as confident as Proverbs usually seems to be that wisdom, diligence, prudence and righteousness will generally yield positive results (including material blessings)? Much of the time that appears not to be the case. Some would go further, and interpret Ecclesiastes as directly contradicting the teaching of Proverbs, and perhaps written with this very aim:

The form of the book of Ecclesiastes is not unlike that of Proverbs, that is, a collection of wisdom sayings that comment on life, but with no obvious form or structure. While the form of the book is not unlike Proverbs, the mood and theological horizon are quite contrasted. Whereas Proverbs affirmed that human choice and human conduct would decisively influence one's own future and the future of the community, the voice of Ecclesiastes asserts that human conduct is meaningless and a matter of indifference in relation to the future, which is blindly governed. Whereas Proverbs affirmed that God benignly ordered and guaranteed a viable life-world structured as a reliable sequence of deeds and consequences, Ecclesiastes can just barely affirm the reality of God. Indeed, the God who governs is remote, hidden, indifferent, and unmoved by human conduct. That is, the world is governed in inscrutable ways to which human reason has no access.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> B.C. Birch, W. Brueggemann, T.E. Fretheim and D.L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 408; N.K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew*

But that is just one reading of a book which can be interpreted in what seems a bewildering diversity of ways.

For Crenshaw Qohelet is a sceptic, though his editor attempted to tone down his radical teaching with a more orthodox epilogue (12:9-14).<sup>58</sup> Longman agrees that Qohelet is a sceptic, but argues that the epilogue is a kind of health warning from the editor in which he tells us that Qohelet's teachings (presented in the main body of the book 1:2-12:8) are precisely how one should *not* view God and the world.<sup>59</sup>

For Fox the message of the book is that our attempts to make sense of everything fail, teaching us epistemological humility.<sup>60</sup> Provan, while accepting the point about epistemological humility,

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*Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 575, gives a more nuanced version of this approach: he speaks of a "dogmatic authoritarian voice" (one that saw prosperity and success as infallible indications of wisdom and righteousness) which over time became dominant among the "many voices" in Proverbs and called forth two works (Ecclesiastes and Job) that "openly challenged and rebutted the easy self-confidence that it voiced;" but he adds that this voice was "loud and insistent, *perhaps far more so than the text of Proverbs indicates* (italics mine)," which leaves open the possibility that Proverbs is a more subtle book than in the quotation from Birch *et al.* indicates, and also closer to Ecclesiastes and Job in its teaching.

<sup>58</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1987), 23: "Life is profitless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strangest book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death." Cf. his comments on the Epilogue (189-92).

<sup>59</sup> T. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 38: "...if Qohelet's lengthy speech is pessimistic and out of sorts with the rest of the OT, why is it included in the canon? Qohelet's speech is a foil, a teaching device, used by [the editor] in order to instruct his son (12:12) concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel. Just as in the book of Job, most of the book of Ecclesiastes is composed of the non-orthodox speeches of the human participants in the book, speeches that are torn down and demolished in the end."

<sup>60</sup> M.V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 49: "The causal order fails, leaving only disconnected occurrences, which are meaningless from the human perspective ... When the belief in a grand causal order collapses, human reason and self-confidence fail with it. This failure is what God intends, for after it comes fear, and fear is what God desires (3:14). And that is not the end of matter, for God allows us to build small meanings from the shards of reason."

does not agree that Qohelet regards the world as fundamentally meaningless: he sees Ecclesiastes as essentially orthodox (its teaching is in line with the rest of the Old Testament), though sharp and provocative in its teaching style. In Provan's view, Qohelet enjoins realism about the limits God has placed on human existence.<sup>61</sup>

Bartholomew sees the book as reflecting two different ways of looking at the world: Qohelet attempts to make sense of existence through the lens of "a sort of autonomous Greek epistemology," but ends up by rejecting this approach in favour of a way thinking about and living in the world that is based on the "fear of God."<sup>62</sup>

Enns suggests yet another interpretative option (and yet another way of conceiving the relation of the epilogue to the main body of the book): the editor affirms the validity of Qohelet's despairing vision, but still insists that the only viable response is the traditional Israelite one.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes / Song of Songs*, 39: "It is best... to give up any attempt to control destiny and simply to live life out before God. This 'simple living' involves human activities like work and wealth-creation; it also involves the employment of wisdom. These activities will be undertaken in the fear of God, however, and with no illusions about the nature of the universe or about what can be humanly achieved within it. Undertaken in this way, we can find joy whether in work or in wealth and find in wisdom valuable help for living."

<sup>62</sup> C.G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 94, 95: "[Qohelet's] autonomous epistemology keeps running up against the enigma of life when pursued from this direction, and it appears impossible to find a bridge between this enigma and the good that he experiences and that the biblical tradition alerts one to. The resolution of this paradox is found in the fear of God (rejoicing and remembrance), which enables one to rejoice and apply oneself positively to life in the midst of all that one does not understand, including especially death." In Bartholomew's view, Ecclesiastes dates from a time when Greek philosophy was to some extent known in Israel (he suggests the 3rd century BC, 43-59).

<sup>63</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 134: "...dismissing Qohelet's words is not an option left open for us. We are forced into his world of despair, and then we emerge, hearing: 'You have gone to the edge, much further than you have ever gone, and peered over.' It does not get any worse. But even here, especially here, you are to continue as generations before you have done: fear God and keep his commandments."

It may seem that, depending on what parts of Ecclesiastes one emphasises and even what tone of voice one reads particular passages in, the "message" of the book can be more or less what each reader desires!<sup>64</sup>

### **3. The Overlap between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes**

As I implied at the beginning, I am inclined to a reading that emphasises what Ecclesiastes has in common with Proverbs, as opposed to those approaches which (it seems to me) unnecessarily polarise them. Like Ecclesiastes, Proverbs accepts that there are exceptions to the general principles implied by the "two ways" teaching, that there are inexplicable mysteries, that God is sovereign. Proverbs may not make the problematic aspects of life the main focus of discussion as in Ecclesiastes, but it still acknowledges these aspects.

Coming at the same point from the other direction, the sharpest and harshest sayings in Ecclesiastes are set in contexts which imply that the picture is more complicated than the sayings taken by themselves might imply. I suggest that in these cases Qohelet is "trying on" an idea rather than giving a definitive statement of his worldview; that these sayings are in fact deliberate over-simplifications deployed as part of a larger rhetorical strategy.

Just as in Proverbs, we must raise the question: what are we to do with Qohelet's teachings? The directness with which he seems to express himself in some of his most negative sayings may incline us to take what he says in these texts at face value. But things are not so simple. A good example of this is Ecclesiastes 9-10.

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<sup>64</sup> See D. Ingram, *Ecclesiastes: A Peculiarly Postmodern Piece* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2004).

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 makes some extraordinarily blunt declarations: "the righteous and the wise are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know;" (v. 1) "madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead;" (v. 3) "like fish taken in a cruel net... so mortals are snared at a time of calamity." (v. 12) But Qohelet's reflection on these issues does not stop here: in what follows he seems to give different perspectives on some of what he has just said. Ecclesiastes 9:13-16, the narrative of a city under siege, gives an example of the kind of calamity that v. 12 has mentioned: Qohelet notes that wisdom can rescue you from calamity (v. 15), but also that wisdom often goes unheeded (v. 16). This leads him (9:17-10:3) to ask the question: why do calamities arise? Is it not often because people listen to fools rather than to the voice of wisdom? Is that not the source of many human catastrophes (wars, misguided economic policies, unjust laws)?

So these verses give the other side of the coin compared to 9:1-12. If the earlier passage seemed to raise questions regarding God's dealings (Why does God allow the bad times? Why is life so uncertain?), then 9:13-10:3 make a complementary point: "bad times" often arise because of bad *human* choices, because humans listen to fools.<sup>65</sup> And now, perhaps, Ecclesiastes proves to be closer to Proverbs than at first sight appeared.

As a further example of overlap between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, I note a passage near the end of Proverbs which seems strikingly to echo Ecclesiastes both in tone and in the general tenor of the argument, Proverbs 30:1-9.<sup>66</sup> Proverbs 30:1-4 reads:

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<sup>65</sup> This point can be pursued through the rest of chap. 10: see Provan, *The Wisdom Books*, 191-97. The above argument implies that Ecc 9-10 can be read as a theodicy.

<sup>66</sup> On which see the helpful treatment in Longman, *Proverbs*, 517-26, who discusses the textual issues in this passage, and also the curious fact that Agur seems to be a non-Israelite, from Massa (cf. 31:1 and Ge 25:14).

The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh — an oracle:

This man declared to Ithiel,

to Ithiel and to Ucal:

"I am the most ignorant of men;

I do not have a man's understanding.

I have not learned wisdom,

Nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

Who has gone up to heaven and come down?

Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hand?

Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is his name,

And the name of his child?

Tell me if you know!

These are remarkable sayings: suddenly Proverbs sounds like Psalm 73 or Isaiah 40 or Job 38, texts whose theme is the limits of human understanding! It is particularly striking that the speaker here confesses, "I have not learned wisdom," after 29 chapters whose aim was to teach wisdom.

What follows seems to redirect our attention back to a reliable source of wisdom (vv. 5-6):

Every word of God is flawless;

He is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

Do not add to his words,

Or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

In context, "every word of God" could be teachings such as those found in Proverbs up to this point; or it could refer to God's covenant promises (cf. the similar wording at Ps 18:30//2Sa 22:31); or it could be a reference to the law of Moses (cf. the similar injunction not to add to what God has commanded at Dt 4:2, 12:32). In any case, the verses sound a note of distinctly Israelite piety, seemingly a response to the despair and bewilderment expressed in vv. 1–4. The same could be said of 30:7-9 (discussed above), with which we could compare the thought of Deuteronomy 8:11-20.

The effect of vv. 5-9 following vv. 1-4 is rather like that of the epilogue in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 following Qohelet's words in 1:2-12:8: the epilogue in Ecclesiastes also warns against adding to what has been said (v. 12) and commends keeping God's commands (v. 13); and it follows a discourse which has often sounded notes of despair and frustration. Now, it may seem ridiculous to compare nine verses from near the end of Proverbs with virtually the whole of Ecclesiastes, particularly as the relative proportions are so different: if Proverbs 30:5-9 roughly matches Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 in length, Proverbs 30:1-4 in no sense matches Ecclesiastes 1:2-12:8! And yet it may be said that both books have a similar sequence of thought at or near their conclusions, which further supports that suggestion that the two books overlap more closely in their thought than may at first sight appear.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See, further, R.D. Moore, "A Home for the Alien: Worldly Wisdom and Covenantal Confession in Proverbs 30, 1-9," *ZAW* 106 (1994): 96-107 (104): "Doesn't it seem significant that a book which begins with exuberant invitations to young men to pursue the promise of wisdom, winds down with reverent reflections of an old man which point towards essentials which wisdom cannot give?" My interpretation, like Moore's, proposes that 30:1-9 is more than an interesting snippet of non-Israelite wisdom included as an appendix to the book (or maybe, a non-Israelite text in vv. 1-4 followed by verses which reflect a more distinctively Israelite piety): rather, these verses have been placed near the end of the book to form some kind of a summarising response to the sayings in the first 29 chapters. Like all theories regarding the editing of Proverbs, my proposal cannot be proved, and can only be judged by how convincing it seems as a reading of the book.

I conclude then, not only that Proverbs and Ecclesiastes agree in what they say about many issues relating to wealth and poverty, but also that the underlying world-views of both books are much closer than has often been argued. This point is controversial: as noted above, opinions regarding the "message" of Ecclesiastes in particular differ widely. But it should be noted (as a kind of second line of defence against those who do not accept the argument I have just been mounting) that Qohelet's attitude towards wealth and poverty is not usually one of the disputed issues! Commentators who disagree on other aspects of the book's teaching do not differ significantly regarding Qohelet's views on: the emptiness of luxurious living (2:1-11); the fragility of wealth and the possibility of squandering a good inheritance (2:18-23); the harm one can do to oneself and others by pursuing wealth (4:4-6; 5:10-6:6); the misery caused by injustice and oppression (4:1-3; 5:8-9), and particularly by an unjust ruler (8:1-9; 10:4-11); the fact that wealth does not always end up in deserving hands (8:10-9:6; 9:11-12); the need to "do something" in life (11:1-6).<sup>68</sup> These are all issues where we have noted common ground between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.<sup>69</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

If two independent witnesses agree, their testimonies confirm each other. In the previous section we have argued that on the one hand Ecclesiastes can certainly be considered as an independent

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<sup>68</sup> Compare, for example, the comments of Crenshaw and Provan on these texts.

<sup>69</sup> More disputed would be the interpretation of the "joy" texts in Ecclesiastes: is the apparently positive tone of these texts finally revealed to be a hollow pretence (verses like 5:20 and 9:10 would be important for such a view; cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 125, 163), or are they a seriously meant, though not final, response to life's frustrations and perplexities? How one reads these texts will depend on one's reading of Ecclesiastes as a whole.

witness compared to Proverbs: its method of argument and tone are very different from those of Proverbs, irrespective of whether we conclude that its message substantially overlaps with, or is almost totally divergent from, that of Proverbs. But on the other hand, we have also noted many agreements between the two books regarding different aspects of the general theme of wealth and poverty.

In conclusion let us note some of these points of agreement:

- Wealth is worth having, offering protection from the misery of poverty, but it is far from being an absolute good.
- Hard work is worthwhile, though it may not always bring the reward you hope for.
- If you have enough to live on, and the freedom to enjoy it, that is a true blessing. There are other forms of wealth: joy, love, enjoying the fruits of your toil.
- Wealth can bring misery to its possessors, and particularly to those who pursue wealth obsessively.
- Wealth can be lost, bringing yet more misery.
- The pursuit of wealth can lead to injustice and oppression.
- As one has opportunity, one should work against economic injustice and the systems which perpetuate it, while recognising that one's efforts may be futile and may also bring personal risk.

Taken together, these points form a coherent body of teaching, which can play an important role not only in forming personal ethics in regard to wealth and poverty, but also in shaping Christian responses to major contemporary issues such as globalisation, Third World debt and our care of the environment. The wisdom of this teaching is apparent in the 21st century AD as when it was first given. The challenge to us is to hear the Word of God, and to be doers and not merely hearers of the Word.

## ABSTRACT

For much of the past century there was a tendency to set Proverbs over against Ecclesiastes, the one being characterized as "conventional," "establishment" wisdom teaching, the other as more "radical," "questioning" and "paradoxical" in its approach and tone. In more recent years this has come to be regarded as something of an oversimplification, and unfair (in different ways) to both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. An important question in the study of both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is: how were readers supposed to respond to wisdom teaching (whether one-verse sayings as found in Pr 10-29 and Ecc 7 and 10 or longer discourses as found elsewhere in these books)? A hermeneutic that sees wisdom teaching as designed to stimulate further reflection rather than put an end to discussion may conclude that Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have more in common than has often been thought to be the case. This paper compares the teaching of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes on riches and poverty, and concludes that, while there are differences between the two books on this topic (both in what is said and how it is said), there is also significant overlap: both books have a clear sense of the benefits which wealth can bring and of the dangers that lie in wait for those who seek it too eagerly or use it wrongly once acquired.

## 撮 要

過去一個世紀，許多學者喜歡將箴言和傳道書聯繫一起來研究，認為前者是「守舊」、「屬建制」的智慧教導，而後者則在寫作手法和語調上較「激進」、「存疑」和「吊詭」。近年這觀點被認為過於簡化，對於箴言和傳道書（在多方面）都不公平。在這兩本書卷的研究中，一個重要的問題是：讀者要怎樣回應智慧的教導（無論是箴十~二十九章或傳七和十章中的一節經文，還是書中一段篇章較長的講論）？認為智慧教導的目的是要刺激進深反省，而非立下定案終止討論的釋經進路，會發現箴言和傳道書比過往所以為的有更多共通點。本文比較箴言和傳道書有關貧富的教導，發現即使兩卷書在這題目上存有歧見（無論是講論的內容或講論的方式），還有重要的重複點：兩卷書都明顯贊同財富能為人帶來好處，但人一旦過分追求財富，在得着財富後又錯誤使用，則會危機四伏。