PROVERBS
AND
ECCLESIASTES

AMY PLANTINGA PAUW
Contents

Publisher’s Note xi
Series Introduction by William C. Placher and Amy Plantinga Pauw xiii
Acknowledgments xvii
Abbreviations xix
Introduction: Why Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? Why Now? 1

COMMENTARY

PROVERBS

Introduction to Proverbs 15

1:1–7 The Purpose of the Book of Proverbs 18

1:8–4:27 The Surpassing Value of Wisdom 21
Further Reflections: Strangers 27

5:1–7:27 Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places 39
Further Reflections: Poverty and Work 42

8:1–9:18 In the Beginning Was Wisdom 48
Further Reflections: Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom 53
Further Reflections: Preaching on Proverbs from the Lectionary 59

10:1–15:33 Practicing Wisdom’s “Regular Verbs” 62
Further Reflections: Preaching on Proverbs 10–15 without Sounding Like Job’s Friends 71
16:1–22:16  *Deeper Wisdom*  
Further Reflections: Divine and Human Agency  
Further Reflections: The Vice of Pride and the Virtue of Humility

22:17–24:34  *Words of the Wise*  
Further Reflections: Biblical Revelation and the Universal Search for Wisdom

25:1–29:27  *Political Wisdom*  
Further Reflections: Jesus as Sage

30:1–31:9  *The Limits of Wisdom*  
31:10–31  *The Domestication of Transcendence*

**ECCLESIASTES**

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

1:1  *The Words of Qohelet*  
1:2–11  *All Is Vanity*  
1:12–2:26  *The Royal Search for Wisdom*  
Further Reflections: Qohelet and the Missional Church

3:1–22  *Life under the Sun*  
4:1–16  *Power and Its Discontents*  
5:1–20  *Fearing God*  
Further Reflections: The Command to Rejoice

6:1–9  *When Life Doesn’t Add Up*  
6:10–7:29  *Death and Life, Wisdom and Folly*  
8:1–17  *God and the King*  
9:1–18  *Earthly Joy*  
10:1–20  *Collected Sayings*  
11:1–6  *Living Life Forward*  
11:7–12:8  *The Sweetness of Youth*  
Further Reflections: Death and Life Everlasting

12:9–14  *A Word from Qohelet’s Sponsors*
CONTENTS

Afterword 210
For Further Reading 213
Index of Ancient Sources 215
Index of Subjects 225
Series Introduction

Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth’s concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are “no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary.” Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God’s merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church’s great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the church but also to encourage all
theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative and the results were rich. Much of the series’ shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series’ authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors’ chief dialogue will be with the church’s creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both “high” and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of why the church needs this book and why we need it now, in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents
more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than any other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher
Amy Plantinga Pauw
Introduction:
Why Proverbs and Ecclesiastes?
Why Now?

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes may seem to be among the least promising biblical books for contemporary theological reflection. Until rather recently, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes were viewed by many modern Christian biblical scholars as stepchildren of the canon, awkward presences whose concerns were largely alien to the center of Israel’s faith. As John Bright put it, “Some parts of the Old Testament are far less clearly expressive of Israel's distinctive understanding of reality than others; some parts (and one thinks of such a book as Proverbs) seem to be only peripherally related to it, while others (for example Ecclesiastes) even question its essential features.”

Even to the average Bible reader, Proverbs appears banal, and Ecclesiastes, disturbing. These books have been largely ignored by contemporary theologians and are rarely preached from in contemporary Western churches. They are loose cannons within the canon. So why bother with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes?

There are at least four reasons why it makes sense to pay new attention to these biblical outliers:

1. Biblical scholars have shown intense new interest in biblical wisdom literature in the last forty years or so, and their work prompts broader ways of thinking about the unity of the biblical message and, by implication, about the task of preaching. (Preaching on Proverbs may seem particularly daunting, and I offer some guidance in this commentary.)

2. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes speak to our context of religious pluralism. They are both the products of a complex

international quest for wisdom in the ancient Near East. The sages of Israel exhibited a willingness to learn from their cultural and religious others. In our own pluralistic context, it is a willingness that we need to cultivate as well.

3. The theological horizon for both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is creation rather than redemption or consummation. In an age when ecological concerns are raising urgent questions about our identity as creatures and our relationship to the rest of creation, these books deserve closer study.

4. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes seem to have a special appeal for the religiously disaffected. In their different ways, they set forth theology that grapples honestly with the problems of daily life and can serve as an attractive path to (or back to) biblical faith for both skeptics and seekers.

---

**Rethinking the Unity of the Biblical Message**

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are part of biblical wisdom literature. Job and perhaps Song of Songs also belong to this genre, and a majority of the Christian world regards the later wisdom books Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon as canonical. As Roland Murphy puts it, ”The most striking characteristic of this literature is the absence of what one normally considers as typically Israelite and Jewish.” Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon are partial exceptions to this pattern. In Sirach 44–50 the figure of Wisdom is identified with Torah and finds her resting place in Israel. In Wisdom of Solomon 11–19, Israel’s salvation history is retold as the story of Wisdom’s redeeming acts. By contrast, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are paradigmatic wisdom books. They show little interest in issues of worship and cultic purity. Even more strikingly, the big events in Israel’s history—the covenant with Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law, the stories of the kings of Israel, the exile and return—are all missing.

For Christian readers of Scripture, these gaps cause larger problems: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes’ lack of attention to “the mighty acts

---

of God” on Israel’s behalf subverts a common theological and homiletical strategy for construing the unity of the whole biblical canon. Appeals to salvation history have not only been a means for unifying the disparate books of the Old Testament but have also supplied the crucial link to the New Testament narratives of Jesus, thus establishing a basis for reading the entire Bible as the story of salvation. It has proved easier for theologians and preachers to ignore the dissonant voices of the wisdom books than to reconsider Christian understandings of canonical unity. Though they have been treasured by both Jews and Christians for centuries, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have in modern times often been regarded as disconnected from the authentic faith of Israel and irrelevant to the good news of the gospel.

Yet as the author of Hebrews affirms, “God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways” (Heb. 1:1). Seeking wisdom is an integral part of Israel’s faith in God, neither contradicting nor derivative of its other emphases on law, cult, and sacred history. In the Bible, the law is associated with Moses, the psalms with David, and wisdom with Solomon. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are both ascribed to Solomon, though, as modern biblical scholarship has shown, this ascription should be construed less as a claim about historical authorship and more as a certificate of authenticity. The ascription functions primarily to establish that the wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is a bona fide dimension of Israel’s faith. Both books, in different ways, reflect Israel’s struggle to find its identity in a time of cultural crisis, when the monarchy and the priesthood were no longer sources of authority and stability. They can also speak to contemporary people who search for meaning and purpose in an uncertain world.

Rather than silencing or excluding their voices, we should accept the opportunity Proverbs and Ecclesiastes offer to broaden our understanding of biblical faith. As Eberhard Busch notes, “The witness of Scripture is there for us only in the fullness of the various witnesses, which resists our manipulating grasp. These witnesses need to be seen, each in its own particular color.”

to the particular color of biblical wisdom, we start noticing that its influence reaches far beyond the books usually designated as wisdom literature. It extends into the Law, Psalms, and Prophets, and into the New Testament as well, especially the book of James and the teachings of Jesus. Wisdom is a biblical witness that needs to be better seen—and heard.

**Intellectual Ecumenism**

Wisdom literature looks at the world through a wide-angle lens. It is concerned with the meaning and purpose of human life in general, not with the story of a particular nation or tribe. Israel’s sages probed everyday human experiences of the world. “Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another” (Prov. 27:19). Or, in a more prosaic vein, “Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor’s house, otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and hate you” (Prov. 25:17). Proverbs sounds the dominant themes of Israel’s wisdom traditions: it can be understood as “writing for the majority.” Ecclesiastes, by contrast, is “writing for the minority,” casting a critical eye over Israel’s wisdom traditions. It provides an ironic overview of the mainstream wisdom such as we find in Proverbs: “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all” (Eccles. 9:11). Despite their differences, both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes speak from within Israel’s wisdom traditions. Both model and commend the attempt to discern God’s presence in human life without appeal to direct visions or messages from God or to the unique experience of one people.

The wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes was developed and honed in the company of Israel’s ancient Near East neighbors. Egypt and Mesopotamia were the motherlands of this wisdom. It is likely that the influence of their wisdom teaching spread to smaller nations like Israel in part through the phenomenon of second-language instruction. While oral wisdom traditions have deep roots in ordinary Israelite life, biblical wisdom literature as literature is closely
Why Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? Why Now?

connected with the international phenomena of scribal formation and education in literacy in the ancient Near East. Sages and scribes in the courts of Israel’s kings had at least some hand in the articulation and preservation of Israel’s wisdom. Biblical wisdom thus has a pronounced international flavor.

The Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye tells about how she discovered this feature of the book of Proverbs while still a girl attending a British boarding school in Kumasi, Ghana: “I remember clearly our morning ritual assembly for prayers and announcements. Each girl, in turn, was required to recite a biblical text. It was our tradition to quote from the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or the Sermon on the Mount; the book of Proverbs was our favourite.” That was because proverbs were already part of their culture, and so in a pinch “school girls could easily get away with converting Akan proverbs into King James language and then simply inventing chapter and verse numbers.” Both the universality of Proverbs’ wisdom and her teachers’ lack of familiarity with that biblical book contributed to the success of Oduyoye’s scheme!

The idiosyncratic teachings of Ecclesiastes also reflect cross-cultural exchange of some sort, perhaps with currents of Persian or Hellenistic thought, though there is little scholarly consensus about this. The agnosticism of many in the Persian period about conventional expressions of religiosity seems to be echoed in Ecclesiastes. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is less connected to Israel’s larger testimony than that of Proverbs. Ecclesiastes’ message speaks to our current cultural context, in which traditional religious certainties have waned for many. The robust communal setting of Proverbs’ quest for wisdom is also missing in Ecclesiastes. As William Brown notes, Ecclesiastes “depicts communal institutions, such as the family and government, on the verge of collapse or plagued with the withering effects of indifference.” This institutional skepticism is also a feature of our own time.

Wisdom addresses questions that all human beings ask. So it is

not surprising that every religious community has wisdom traditions—Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Taoist—and that these traditions are often a promising place to begin interfaith conversations. Like the sages of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, most of us do not live in a self-sustaining religious society clearly demarcated from others. Our faith survives and flourishes amidst a variety of cultural and religious currents. The theological traditions we have inherited are themselves the result of scavenging and borrowing from the traditions of others. While other parts of the Old Testament strongly admonish Israel not to learn from their neighbors, the sages of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes model receptivity to the wisdom of others. Their confident assimilation of the wisdom of other nations is evidence that their devotion to the God of Israel was a devotion to the creator and sustainer of all peoples. All true wisdom, no matter what its proximate human source, ultimately comes from God. As we today confront problems too big for any single religious community to handle—violence, poverty, ecological degradation—searching out the commonalities and connections of our wisdom with those of our religious neighbors is a good place to start.

Our Identity as Creatures

“The profit and pleasures we pursue lay waste the land and pollute the seas.” This line in a prayer of confession from the Christian Council of Asia acknowledges our failure to be faithful creatures. From large-scale ecological disasters to the small destructive patterns of our daily lives, we have violated our relationship with our Creator and with our fellow creatures. Attempts to lay all this at the feet of Christian faith, particularly the mandate in Genesis 1:28 for human beings to have dominion over the earth, seem overblown. Yet it is true that Christians have developed ways of reading the Bible that have undermined serious theological attention to our identity as God’s creatures. Here too, the wisdom books are valuable resources.

David Kelsey argues that Christian faith tells three interrelated

but distinct stories about how God relates to us. The triune God is the One who creates us, who draws us to eschatological consummation, and who reconciles us when we have become estranged from God.7 Creating us obviously has a kind of logical priority: without creation, there would be no human subjects for consummation and reconciliation. Creation, however, does not imply consummation or reconciliation. God declares the finite creation “very good” (Gen. 1:31). There is no obligation on God’s part to bring all or part of it to eschatological consummation. Reconciliation presupposes some sort of estrangement from God, yet God continues to relate to us creatively even in the midst of our estrangement—the sun rises and rain falls on the just and the unjust alike (Matt. 5:45). Kelsey insists that each of these ways of God’s relating to us has its own logic and that theological anthropology should be faithful to all of them.

Christian theology and preaching in the West has often focused on the reconciliation story alone, narrowing the rich economy of God’s dealings with us. Creaturehood in particular becomes an elaborate scenic backdrop for the salvation story. Whereas the creation stories in Genesis serve as a preface to the story of God’s deliverance in Exodus, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes help us consider our relationship to God as creatures in its own right. As Walther Zimmerli notes, canonical “wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation.”8 The physical and temporal limits of created life are accepted in biblical wisdom. They are not viewed as something human creatures can or need to get out from under. The focus of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is on finite creaturely life lived before God.

As creator, God gives human creatures a lifelong vocation to pursue wisdom. Human wisdom is patient, attentive discernment of the character and quality of life as God has given it. Human beings flourish not by evading or overcoming the ambiguities of their finite and contingent life as creatures but by recognizing and coming to terms with them and by seeing the opportunities of this creaturely life as God’s gracious gift. As David Ford and Graham

Stanton comment, “Wisdom is about trying to integrate knowledge, understanding, critical questioning and good judgment with a view to the flourishing of human life and the whole of creation. Theological wisdom attempts all that before God, alert to God, and in line with the purposes of God.”

Proverbs is more confident than Ecclesiastes about the scope and competency of human wisdom. As Proverbs portrays it, the created world is sufficiently stable and reliable to permit human beings to seek the wisdom that will enable them to flourish in it. This is because the created world in all its intricacy and beauty is a reflection of God’s wisdom. Wisdom is woven into the fabric of the universe, and God invites us to become wise by paying attention to the patterns of creation. We ignore or flout those patterns at our peril. In our own time, environmentalists are perhaps the voices closest to the sages of Proverbs. They share Proverbs’ sense of moral urgency about the communal cultivation of a wise and just way of life. They warn us of the terrible consequences of ecological folly. The stock characters of Proverbs—the wicked, the scoffers, the lazy, the foolish, the wise—all have their counterparts in ecological discussions.

God’s gift of wisdom is not confined to human creatures. According to Proverbs, even ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards display wisdom that can aid human creatures in their quest for a wise way of life (Prov. 30:24–28; cf. Job 12:7–9). We human creatures are realizing that we need to spend more time listening to the “speechless voice” (Ps. 19:3–4) of the rest of creation—the glaciers of the Arctic, the ozone layer, the rain forests. As Gerhard von Rad notes, Israel’s wisdom shows us that truth about the world and ourselves “can never become the object of our theoretical knowledge; that reliable knowledge can be achieved only through a relationship of trust with things.” In a time of ecological crisis, we sorely need to restore that relationship of trust with our fellow creatures.

An Invitation to the Religiously Disaffected

Ecclesiastes made it into the canon by the skin of its teeth (see p. 139, “Introduction to Ecclesiastes”). Precisely the features of Ecclesiastes that imperiled its acceptance into the canon—its ambiguities and contradictions, its voicing of radical doubts—have endeared it to many subsequent biblical readers. Qohelet, the renegade wisdom teacher of Ecclesiastes, is not afraid to question received religious commonplaces, not afraid to say out loud that life experience and theological convictions sometimes clash. When sudden disaster makes us feel like “fish taken in a cruel net” (Eccl. 9:12), when the ironies and perplexities of life pile up, Ecclesiastes is a welcome biblical companion, a freethinker within the canon of Scripture. The robust communal setting of Proverbs’ quest for wisdom is missing in Ecclesiastes. Qohelet was a seeker and gives voice to the seekers of our own day, who also exhibit a passionate search for wisdom without a confidence in communal structures to guide the way.

In its own way, Proverbs is also a biblical refuge for those who wonder about the plausibility and relevance of faith in God. The philosopher Charles Taylor has described with great learning and at great length what it is like to live in a “secular age.”11 One of his recurring images for our secular age, following Max Weber, is of life in a “disenchanted” world. According to Taylor, humanity since the throes of modernity is consigned to existence in a mechanistic world with no porosity between the realm of ordinary daily experience and a mysterious realm of spiritual powers. This is not the world of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: biblical wisdom presents an everyday world permeated with God’s presence. Yet it is fair to say that if the world of Proverbs is not a disenchanted world, it is in a sense unenchanted. Mesopotamian wisdom texts reflect a keen interest in spells, omens, and sorcery. But Proverbs presents a world devoid of magic, devoid of what Rowan Williams has called “short cuts in the management of reality.”12 Proverbs urges us to work hard, to learn

12. Rowan Williams (sermon, King’s College London 175th anniversary service, Westminster Abbey, October 19, 2004).
from others, to control our tempers and our tongues, to be generous and just in all our dealings. Proverbs sees no disconnection between the reality of God’s active presence, on the one hand, and the need for human discernment, struggle, and patience, on the other. God is not a superhero who can be called upon to swoop down and solve all our problems. Faith in God is not a matter of believing the right things or saying the right words so that all will go well for us. Nor does Proverbs have a sense of divine powers embedded in certain sacred places or objects. Proverbs is a spiritual guide on the days when, in Ellen Davis’s words, “water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come for lunch.”¹³ Most days in the church are like that. The honesty and practicality of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs are appealing to seekers and veteran Christians alike.

**Theological Companions**

There is an implicit theological perspective at work in every biblical commentary, but a self-proclaimed theological commentary needs to be more explicit about it. A deliberate attempt will be made in this commentary to read Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in conversation with a broadly Augustinian tradition. There are both negative and positive reasons for this theological decision.

The negative reason is to provide some resistance to popular appeals to biblical wisdom as presenting an upbeat, positive alternative to classical Christian views of human nature.¹⁴ According to this view, the wisdom provided by communal teaching and honest self-reflection is enough to turn us from sin and folly and enable us to realize our creaturely wholeness and human potential. In Augustine’s time, this view was represented by his opponent Pelagius. In my Augustinian reading of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, human sin and folly are much more stubborn and tragic than a Pelagian view allows. Both books puzzle over humanity’s persistent attempts to live at

---


¹⁴. See, for example, Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality in Four Paths, Twenty-six Themes, and Two Questions* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear Press, 1983).
cross purposes to God’s intentions and attend to the roles of self-deception and habit in human folly and wickedness. The tragedy of a misdirected heart is never explained in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, much less resolved. For Israel’s sages, being “wise in one’s own eyes” is the height of human folly (Prov. 3:7a). Wisdom in any full sense of the term belongs to God, and a central part of human wisdom is to acknowledge “our necessary passivity and neediness in a world that we do not control.”

The positive reason for pursuing an Augustinian reading is that it makes sense of the pervasive emphasis in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes on the human heart and its passions. Human beings always act out of love for some good, and sin and folly are the consequences of our disordered pursuit of these goods. Wisdom is finally about ordering our desires aright, and this is to be sought in the context of a trustful acknowledgment of God’s transcendent wisdom. Augustine sees no contradiction between the desperate human need for grace and the importance of striving for wisdom, and his writings abound with appeals to biblical wisdom. Indeed, according to Marcus Plested, wisdom emerges as “the alpha and omega” of Augustine’s theology.

In my commentary on Proverbs, the Augustinian tradition will be mediated especially through Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, who have some claim to being America’s wisdom theologians. Both brothers understood the life of faith as an ongoing communal response to the God who is present and active everywhere. They evinced a keen attention to the texture of the daily life of faith and resolutely rejected deus ex machina solutions to human dilemmas. Their intertwining of personal faith with social ethics and their realism about human sin and self-deception resonate with the perspective of Proverbs. In my commentary on Ecclesiastes, I turn to a more tormented Augustinian soul, Søren Kierkegaard. Like Qohelet’s

wisdom, Kierkegaard’s thought is “frequently iconoclastic and rife with tension”; it “subverts tidy explication and defies coherent summarizing.” Kierkegaard’s disillusionment with the philosophical and religious establishments of his day and his frequent recourse to personal narrative and ironic parables echo Qohelet’s approach. Like Qohelet, Kierkegaard found that faith in God created space for joy in the midst of the absurdities of life.