CHAPTER 3

HOW DOES THE SAGE KNOW?

In the previous chapter I argued that the wisdom undertaking is pragmatic, with paradigm being its primary mode of thought. The paradigm is the conceptual end-product of the quest for practical understanding of the world pursued by the sages; its formulation is preceded by a twofold undertaking, consisting of the collection of data followed by its assessment. By assessment I do not mean here the process of drawing conclusions from the data, for in that sense I prefer to talk of formulation of the paradigm. Rather, by assessment I mean a process through which a value is given to that which is observed; essentially a method of sorting out bad data from good data, a method through which differences between separate observations are handled and through which it is decided that a particular observation should be included in, or may need to be excluded from, the formulation of the paradigm itself. Both the methods used to collect and assess data are an essential part of any epistemology, and while in our case the latter may not be overtly explicit, it nevertheless constitutes a critical part of the sages' worldview.

The Epistemological Perspective of Proverbs

Direct Observation

The first method of collecting data found in the book is by personal observation, although it should be noted immediately that in Proverbs direct observation is presented as the source of the sages' knowledge only on a limited number of occasions. Such observations are typically marked by the presence of its form of the verb הָנָה. A prime example is found in Prov 7:

Say to Wisdom: 'you are my sister,' and call understanding a relative—to keep you from an adulteress, from the foreign woman, who makes her words smooth. For through the window of my house, through my

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1 For 6, ₣ have the whole of the following narrative in 36s. The difference is probably stylistic rather than textual, the version with the three narrative planes (that of the
shutters I was looking down, and I saw among the immature, I noticed among the sons, a boy who lacked sense. Crossing the street by her corner, and step by step heading in the direction of her house ... And behold, the woman [comes] to meet him ... She seduced him by her persuasiveness, by the smoothness of her lips she beguiled him. He follows her in an instant, like an ox to the slaughter he keeps on going, ... for he does not know [that] with his life he [will pay]. And now sons, listen to me, and pay attention to the words of my mouth. Do not turn your mind in her direction, do not stagger by mistake onto her paths. For she caused the fall of many corpses, and those she killed are numerous. Paths to Sheol are her house, descending to the chambers of death. [Prov 7:4–27]

The father’s insight into what happens to a youth who falls prey to a strange woman is based on his personal knowledge of a case of such a young man in the past. Here I disagree with Fox’s (1987:146) view that the father’s conclusions are not derived from observation, but are based on prior knowledge. While, due to the future frame of reference in v. 23, the father could be regarded as reporting the outcome without observing it and thus relying on prior knowledge, it is better to understand the shift from past to present (v. 22) and future (v. 23) as the result of a difference between the story time and the narrative time, the latter being delayed against the former. The narrative time is chosen so that the present, i.e., the most vivid, section appears at the critical moment of the narrative, when the point of no return is crossed. Instead of leaving the story with the primary focus on the consequences, the reader is left to contemplate mainly what led to the critical twist in the plot, which is what the narrator intends, as is clearly indicated by the imperatives of v. 25—the primary role of the story is preventative. Further, the father’s claim that she has caused the fall of many [v. 26], indicates clearly that the whole paradigm relies on reoccurring experience, so that even if some prior knowledge is used here in evaluating the story, it is based on observation of the same type.

father, of the characters and of the addressees) is much more dynamic and preferable.

2 The Px has here a past iterative sense which creates a special dramatic effect; the observer hangs on each step of the youth with anticipation.

3 מַעְבַּד; גּ רָבַּבַּדְּפָּד, cajoled, i.e., נָפָד. גּ בּ נָפָד, i.e., reading פָּדָה most likely on the analogy of the following פָּדָה; this is unlikely to be the correct reading since the character in the story is נָפָד not just like פָּדָה.

4 מַעְבַּד; גּ וָנָר, possibly reading Hophal, is led. I prefer the מ active voice to the ג passive, for the point being made here is that the boy fails to put up any resistance; the emphasis is on the boy’s actions.