EXCURSUS

PROVERBS AND QOHELETH
IN AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The worldviews represented by the two books and pieced together in the preceding chapters raise certain questions of an historical nature which have not been addressed so far, mainly because they do not lie at the heart of the present work. Yet, since the study has a direct bearing on these questions, at least a few brief comments are appropriate.

I am convinced that the origins of Prov 1–9 are very closely tied together with the rest of the book. I have pointed out that the principal function of Prov 1–9 is to motivate the reader to take the sayings that follow seriously, while containing only limited practical advice. In my view this imbalance is such that the opening section of the book is not capable of a genuinely independent existence, for it speaks of the significance of acquiring wisdom without largely defining what constitutes such wise living. These observations strongly suggest that Prov 1–9 was composed specifically as a foreword to the sayings that follow it. In other words, it is not possible to do justice to the material of Prov 1–9 when it is treated as a wisdom text in its right; such a treatment can throw important light on the composition and the internal dynamics of the text, but not on its overall function and aims.

It was noted in chapter 4 that the theological perspective expressed in the Wisdom speeches of Prov 1–9 serves as a backbone to the proverbial paradigm, on the one hand fitting exactly the needs of this paradigm, on the other hand failing to provide theologically satisfactory answers to the problem of the origins of Folly and its power over humanity. This led us to the conclusion that the theological perspective was derived from the wisdom paradigm itself, or in other words, that the theological perspective is subservient to it. The significance of this emerges when it is held together with the observations mentioned in the previous paragraph, namely, that the proverbial concept of wisdom

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1 By composed I do not mean here necessarily the production of an entirely original composition, for the inner makeup of this material is rather complex (see for instance Whybray, 1994a), but rather the editorial activity that formed it into its present shape.
is mostly formulated in the sayings of Prov 10–31. This implies that the theo-cosmological framework we find in Prov 1–9 is principally derived from the worldview of the sayings in Prov 10–31; it is not an external framework imposed on it, and it does not represent a tradition radically different from that of Prov 10–31. This casts very serious doubt on the claims that Prov 1–9 has to be much later than the other parts of the book, because it contains much more developed theological perspective—it does not, it is merely formulated in a more eloquent manner. Consequently, the arguments for the feasibility of more ancient origins of this section of the book made by several scholars in the past, should, I think, be reconsidered afresh.3

In chapter 4 it was observed that the use of the personal name הַיָּהָ毗 appears to be mainly apologetic, trying to identify the sages’ God with Yahweh. This, it was argued, would seem to suggest that the origins of the proverbial wisdom come from the time when the mainstream religious perception of Yahweh was as a tribal God. Thus, it is likely that the perspective that Proverbs represents originates before the exile, and it is most likely that the book attests to early stages of conscious interaction of wisdom with the cult. In contrast, Qoheleth’s systematic reference to God as בְּיָדָהו, yet, accompanied by a strictly monotheistic perspective, suggests that Qoheleth is writing at a time when Yahweh is no more seen as a tribal deity, but as the only God, i.e., in a time when what initially appeared to be the perspective reserved to the wisdom sages became widespread. Considering the point made above concerning the relationship between Prov 1–9 and the rest of Proverbs, this in my view decreases the probability that Prov 1–9 was written in an historical proximity to Qoheleth. Further, these observations suggest that in fact the shift from tribal to global theological perspective was influenced by the wisdom enterprise, giving some credence to Sheppard’s (1980:13) claim that rather than speaking of theologisation of wisdom, we should speak of ‘wisdomisation’ of theology, at least concerning one stage in the development of the relationship between the two.

While dealing with the epistemology of the two books in chapter 3 we noted a critical epistemological shift between the outlook of

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2 Compare the conclusion reached by Kassis (1999:275) that distinct stages of religious development cannot be discerned in the present shape of the book.
3 See Kayatz’s (1966) work on the affinity of Prov 1–9 with ancient Egyptian wisdom, Lang’s (1986) observations about possible rooting of the Dame Wisdom figure in an ancient Hebrew goddess, and Kitchen’s (1977) comparative work on the development of wisdom forms in the ANE.