The problem of paraenesis is one of the unresolved questions of New Testament research. Not only is the definition of the term disputed, but also the derivation of the genre and the origin of the paraenetic material. To start with the problem of definition: Martin Dibelius, in his groundbreaking work, used a term found in Greek sources, but barely in the New Testament—which in this connection prefers παρακαλεῖν—to designate texts mainly in the NT epistles, beside the Pauline letters, especially James and 1 Peter, where the recently baptized are instructed in the ethical consequences of baptism for everyday life. Not with theological arguments as in Rom 6, but with traditional material which is stored up in the memory of the hearers and can be called up later (cf. 1 Thess 4:1; 6:2, 6, 11). From the point of view of pragmatics, Dibelius underscores the uniform address and the general bearing of the admonitions. They have usuelle, not aktuelle Bedeutung that is, they are not triggered by a specific situation. Stylistically, unconnected small units (which Dibelius designated Spruchreihen) can be distinguished from “treatises” (Dibelius: Abhandlungen); these treat a concrete subject in a coherent manner. This concept of paraenesis is more practical than the wide definition given,

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* Thanks to my friend Anthony Pateman for improving my English.
§ Dibelius, Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur, 140: „einheitliche Adressierung.“ This does not necessarily mean personal address as Thomas, Der jüdische Phokylides, 271 seems to understand. See, for example, Rom 13:1–7 where impersonal law-style changes with diatribe-elements and finally with second-person plural imperatives.

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for example, by Wiard Popkes. For him, paraenesis means any kind of moral advice and permeates the whole New Testament. In contrast to Popkes, Engberg-Pedersen goes back to Dibelius. Looking for Hellenistic predecessors, Engberg-Pedersen draws a parallel between the Pauline dichotomy of indicative and imperative (“theology” and “ethics”) and the Stoic doctrine of the ultimate good which needs as its complement paraenesis (Latin praecepta). The analogy may hit an essential point, but the hint at philosophical paraenesis cannot be exploited genealogically. NT paraenesis hardly reflects on the same theoretical and technical level as does Stoic philosophy.

It seems more promising to search for stylistic and ideological parallels in more popular literature. This I did in a paper given at a conference of German Religionswissenschaftler in 1991, comparing the sayings of the Seven Sages to Pauline paraenesis. At the time the paper was conceived, there also appeared the dissertation of Walter T. Wilson, Love without Pretense. Though he too centers on Rom 12, his horizon of comparison is much broader. He not only adduces “Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Literature,” but “Gnomic Wisdom” in general in Greece, in OT-Jewish tradition as well as in the literature of the Ancient Near East and Egypt.

In Greek gnomic wisdom literature we can distinguish four main genres:

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7 Ibid. 65–66. Cf. Seneca, Ep. 94; 95,1, 12. In Ep. 94,1, however, it becomes evident, that the Stoic praecepta are classified corresponding to the different roles a male has to play in society.
9 The paper appeared under the heading “Die Worte der Sieben Weisen und die neutestamentliche Paränese," in Horst Bürkle (ed.), Grundwerte menschlichen Verhaltens in den Religionen (Religionswissenschaft 6; Frankfurt am Main etc.: Lang, 1993) 89–100. This essay underlies the following discussion.