


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introductory matters: Tracing the aims of Proverbs 1:1–7 through the book's first collection

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Abstract

While the introductory role of Prov 1:1–7 is well recognised, its relationship to subsequent sections has received less attention. This essay argues that Prov 1:1–7 introduces, not the entire book, but specifically the first collection in chapters 1–9. Building on Arthur Keefer's analysis, it posits that a single audience, 'the wise' in v. 5, is exhorted to listen to instruction and thereby acquire a sense of direction, with the expectation that, in doing so, they will be equipped to attain three primary aims: (1) to enhance understanding oriented towards the fear of Yhwh, (2) to cultivate moral virtue and (3) to instruct the next generation to do likewise. The introduction's programmatic function is then demonstrated as these aims are traced throughout the first collection.

Keywords: fear of the Lord; instruction; introduction; Proverbs; wisdom

The often-made observation that Proverbs 1:1–7 stands as an introduction to the book's first collection (chs. 1–9), and by extension, the book as a whole, is hardly controversial. They provide, in Roland Murphy's words, a 'majestic introduction to the book' that 'sweeps the reader up into the goal of wisdom instruction'.¹ Timothy Sandoval refers to these verses as 'the hermeneutical key to the entire literary work',² and William

¹Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 16. It is worth noting at the outset that there has been no uniformity among scholars for terminology for the different sections of Proverbs. Murphy here refers to this opening section as an 'introduction'; others have referred to it as the 'prologue' (e.g. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [London: Yale University Press, 2000], pp. 325–6; Timothy J. Sandoval, 'Revisiting the Prologue of Proverbs', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126/3 [2007], pp. 455–73); and still others, a 'preamble' (e.g. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004], pp. 10–13). I will be referring to it as an 'introduction', since, as I will argue, it does not really form its own section in the context of the whole book, but forms part of the opening collection in chapters 1–9. Insofar as Prov 1–9 can be taken as an introduction to the collections to follow, 1:1–7 can be taken as an introduction to the introduction, but since it only introduces the rest of the book by extension, insofar as it forms part of the opening collection, I do not think it necessary to give it its own term. Readers may disagree with my nomenclature; it does not significantly detract from my argument.

²Sandoval, 'Revisiting the Prologue', p. 456; also, Murphy, *Tree of Life*, p. 16.

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Brown, 'an all-embracing purpose statement', setting the agenda for what is to come.³ While the significance of these opening verses and their introductory role have generated no shortage of scholarly discussion, however, inadequate attention has been given to showing how these opening verses function *in relation to what follows*.

A good place to begin is with what exactly it is that Proverbs 1:1–7 is supposed to be introducing. As implied in the words of Murphy, Sandoval and Brown cited above, it has been typical to assume that these verses introduce, not simply the first collection in chapters 1–9, but the book as a whole.⁴ This assumption, however, has not been especially well supported. Michael Fox, for instance, contends that '[i]t is likely that the Prologue [Prov 1:1–7] was written by the author of the Ten Lectures as an introduction to the *entire* book', noting, quite non-specifically, that it exhibits the same overarching pedagogical aims.⁵ Only a few sentences earlier, however, he observes that the aims expressed in Proverbs 1:1–7 are 'oriented more to the goals of the lectures than the rest of the book'.⁶ Fox also notes that *מזמה* ('prudence'), one of the virtues that will be imparted to the youth in 1:4, is presented as a positive quality only in chapters 1–9 (viz., at 2:11; 3:21; 5:2; 8:12); elsewhere in the book, it is presented in quite a different light (see 12:2; 14:17; 24:8).⁷

It seems more plausible to suggest, then, that Proverbs 1:1–7 was written as an introduction specifically to the book's first collection in chapters 1–9, not the book as a whole.⁸ Further support for this can be found in the repetition of the 'motto' in 1:7 and 9:10, that the fear of Yhwh is the beginning of wisdom/knowledge, underscored by the repeated injunction for the wise to 'increase in learning' (*וַיִּסְף לִקְחוֹ*) in 1:5 and 9:9. These create a frame around the first collection, bracketing it off as its own self-contained unit within the book of Proverbs.⁹

Further questions emerge when we get into the introduction itself. While there is widespread agreement on how Proverbs 1:1–7 function at a general level, there is in fact significant disagreement on the details. How is it structured? Who is its audience – and is there more than one? What are the aims it hopes to communicate, and how are they weighted – are some more significant than others? While Sandoval breaks these

³William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), p. 30.

⁴See also, Christopher B. Ansberry, *Be Wise, My Son, and Make My Heart Glad: An Exploration of the Courty Nature of the Book of Proverbs* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 45–6; Ryan O'Dowd, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), pp. 51–2; Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 68–9; Bernd U. Schipper, 'Wisdom for Beginners and for the Advanced: The Prologue of the Book of Proverbs and the System of the Seven Superscriptions', in Corinna Körting and Reinhard Gregor Kratz (eds), *Fromme Und Frevler: Studien Zu Psalmen Und Weisheit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), pp. 469–78; Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, pp. 174–5.

⁵Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, p. 326 (emphasis added).

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸See also, Katharine J. Dell, *The Theology of the Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: CUP, 2023), p. 58.

⁹It has been noted that the fear of Yhwh also reappears in 31:30, creating a frame around the book as a whole; see e.g. Arndt Meinhold, *Die Sprüche: Teil 1: Sprüche Kapitel 1–15* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1991), pp. 47–8. This is noteworthy, but not as strong a connection as the repetition of the claim that the fear of Yhwh marks the beginning of wisdom/knowledge in 1:7 and 9:10. It is also noteworthy that, while the fear of Yhwh reappears at numerous points throughout the book (1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 16, 26–27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21), it is only here that it is presented in this programmatic fashion as the beginning of wisdom/knowledge.

verses into *two* literary units that address a *single* audience,¹⁰ Brown sees a *single* unit, arranged as a chiasm, addressed to *two* possible audiences.¹¹ More recently, Bernd Schipper has combined these proposals, arguing for *two* units that together form a chiasm, addressed to *two* audiences – ‘wisdom for beginners and for the advanced’;¹² but this, too, is balanced by Arthur Keefer’s proposal of a *single* unit, addressed to a *single* audience.¹³

In what follows, I will begin by looking at the structure and syntax of these verses with a view to identifying the introduction’s audience and addressees. Building on Keefer’s analysis, I argue that a single audience is addressed, ‘the wise’ of v. 5, who, as they listen to instruction and increase in their learning, can expect (1) to grow in understanding; (2) to grow in moral virtue; and (3) to take up the mantle and instruct the younger generation to do likewise. From there I will show how these three aims can be traced through the rest of Proverbs 1–9 to demonstrate the programmatic function of the introduction for the book’s first collection.

Setting out the aims: an analysis of Proverbs 1:1–7

משלי שלמה בן־דוד מלך ישראל	1	The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel
לדעת חכמה ומוסר	2	To know wisdom and instruction
להבין אמרי בינה		To understand words of insight
לקחת מוסר השכל	3	To receive instruction in the discretion:
צדק ומשפט ומישרים		righteousness, justice, and fairness
לתת לפתאים ערמה	4	To impart to the naive shrewdness
לנער דעת ומוזמה		To the youth, knowledge and prudence
ישמע חכם ויוסף לקח	5	Let the wise listen and increase in learning
ונבון תחבולות יקנה		and the understanding acquire a sense of direction
להבין משל ומליצה	6	To understand a proverb or enigma,
דברי חכמים וחידתם		the words of the wise and their riddles
יראת יהוה ראשית דעת	7	The fear of Yhwh is the first instance of knowledge
חכמה ומוסר איילים בזו		Fools despise wisdom and instruction

The introduction is comprised of a title in v. 1; a string of infinitives in vv. 2–4, resumed in v. 6 after what many have seen as an interpolation in v. 5; and it is capped off with the ‘motto’ in v. 7, which, while not syntactically connected with the introduction, thematically fits with what came before. Current consensus is to see the infinitives in vv. 2–4 and perhaps v. 6 as dependent on the title in v. 1, listing off what the reader can expect to gain as they study the proverbs and other sorts of literature contained in the book – so: ‘The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, *are for* knowing

¹⁰Sandoval, ‘Revisiting the Prologue’.

¹¹Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, pp. 30–2.

¹²Schipper, ‘Wisdom for Beginners’, pp. 469–73; also, idem., *Proverbs 1–15: A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs 1:1–15:33*, trans. Stephen Germany (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2019), pp. 61–3.

¹³Arthur Jan Keefer, ‘A Shift in Perspective: The Intended Audience and a Coherent Reading of Proverbs 1:1–7’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136/1 (2017), pp. 103–16; also, John E. Johnson, ‘An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1–7’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (1987), pp. 419–32.

wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight...' Verses 4–5 identify the book's audience. Whether the 'naïve and young' of v. 4 and the 'wise and understanding' of v. 5 comprise one audience or two, a constant among interpreters is to see both verses as identifying the book's addressees.

Recently, however, Keefer has called this reading into question.¹⁴ Beginning with v. 1, Keefer notes that, despite their similarities, nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible do we see titles functioning in this way, woven in with what follows – neither in Proverbs nor elsewhere.¹⁵ Looking outside the Hebrew Bible, Fox finds support for this reading in the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*, which shares numerous parallels with the book of Proverbs in general and its introduction in Proverbs 1:1–7 in particular.¹⁶ However, the parallels identified with the latter are hardly decisive; while there certainly are similarities, Fox himself notes: 'The nature of the affinities between the two, which lie in formal structure and background assumptions rather than in wording and specifics, points to a more diffuse influence.'¹⁷

It is of course possible that, while titles do not *usually* function this way, this particular title, which unlike any other is followed by a string of purposive infinitives and stands as an introduction to the book, is a notable exception. However, this is not the only possibility – nor, suggests Keefer, is it the most likely. It is at least as plausible to see the infinitives in vv. 2–4 and 6 as dependent, not on the title, but on the finite verbs in v. 5:¹⁸

Let the wise listen (ישמע) and increase (ויוסף) in learning
and the understanding acquire (יקנה) a sense of direction.

This possibility is strengthened by the repetition of דעת, חכמה, and מוסר in vv. 2 and 7, which create a frame, bracketing these verses as a distinct, self-contained literary unit apart from the title.¹⁹ The repetition of these terms can also be taken to imply that they are mutually interpretive, with v. 7 spelling out the theological orientation of knowledge, wisdom and instruction in the preceding.

What then are we to do with v. 4? As noted above, this verse is unanimously read as introducing us to the *audience*, whether in part or whole. Accompanying this, however, is a shift in perspective between vv. 2–3 and v. 4: while the implied agent in vv. 2–3 is

¹⁴See previous footnote.

¹⁵See Prov 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1; outside Proverbs, see e.g. Isa 1:1–2; Obad 1; Nah 1:1–2; Neh 1:1; Song 1:1–2; Eccles 1:1–2. See Keefer, 'Shift in Perspective', pp. 105–6.

¹⁶Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, pp. 71–8; also, Michael V. Fox and Suzanna R. Millar, 'Egyptian Wisdom', in Katharine J. Dell, Suzanna R. Millar, and Arthur Jan Keefer (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2022), pp. 323–43; Bernd U. Schipper, 'Die Lehre des Amenemope und Prov 22,17–24,22 – eine Neubestimmung des literarischen Verhältnisses (Teil 2)', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117/2 (2005), pp. 232–48; Stuart Weeks, *Instruction & Imagery in Proverbs 1–9* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 33–8.

¹⁷Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, p. 73. Fox here suggests that it cannot be taken as a given that 'the authors of Proverbs knew the book of Amenemope itself, even in a Hebrew form'. In a later study, however, he modifies this position, suggesting that Amenemope was likely known in full in Israel, albeit in an Aramaic translation; 'From Amenemope to Proverbs: Editorial Art in Proverbs 22,17–23,11', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 126/1 (2014), p. 77.

¹⁸Keefer, 'Shift in Perspective', pp. 106–7; also, Johnson, 'Analysis of Proverbs 1:1–7', pp. 428–9.

¹⁹See e.g. Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), p. 34; Perdue, *Proverbs*, p. 70; Waltke, *Proverbs* 1–15, pp. 180–1.

the *student*, in v. 4 it shifts to *the proverbs* (or perhaps the teacher thereof), which have been bracketed out with the title.²⁰ But this is only a problem if the young and naïve are taken as (part of) the audience. If, in line with what we saw above, the infinitive in v. 4 depends not on the title in v. 1, but the finite verbs in v. 5, its agent is clarified, the supposed shift in perspective is done away with, and the audience of the book is clearly identified solely as the wise and understanding in v. 5, who in v. 4 are tasked with teaching the naïve and young in the way that they should go.

Further support for this reading can be found in v. 5 itself, wherein the ‘wise and understanding’ are presented not simply as those favourably disposed to receiving instruction, but who proceed to disseminate it to others. The noun לקח, typically translated ‘learning’ in this verse, derives from the root meaning ‘to take/receive’. Usually, the connection is quite plain to see: in Deuteronomy 32:2 it is placed in parallel with Moses’ ‘words’ (אמרת), referring to the teaching he hopes the Israelites will take to heart. In Isaiah 29:24 it is placed in parallel with ‘insight’ (בִּינָה), referring to the instruction the Israelites will one day learn to accept. Elsewhere in Proverbs it refers more loosely to persuasive speech – the learned speech of the wise in 16:23, or the seductive speech of the foreign woman in 7:21. Thus, Stuart Weeks explains, לקח refers not simply ‘what is learnt or taught, but also the ability to put one’s teachings or ideas across’.²¹ This is clearest in Proverbs 4:2, where it refers to the instruction the father received from his father, which he now passes on to his son.²²

A similar case could be made for the meaning of תְּהַבִּילוּת. Bruce Waltke explains that, as a derivative of the word הָבֵל (‘rope’) or הַבֵּל (‘sailor’), it is used as a nautical metaphor to refer to ‘guidance that enables the insightful to lead himself and others through life like a well-steered ship’.²³ That it could be used to refer to directing *others* is suggested elsewhere in Proverbs, where it is placed in parallel with ‘many advisors’ (11:14; 24:6) or ‘plans with counsel’ (20:18), which imply not simply of one’s own know-how, but the wise counsel of others. Thus, both לקח and תְּהַבִּילוּת in Proverbs 1:5 refer not simply to the instruction or guidance one might receive, but also to that which is disseminated to others – particularly the naïve and young of v. 4.

It is thus possible to summarise the introduction in Proverbs 1:2–7 in the following way: the ‘wise’ and ‘understanding’ in v. 5, who constitute the sole audience addressed in the introduction, are invited to ‘listen and increase in learning’, and to ‘acquire a sense of direction’, and, in doing so, can expect to imbibe the various moral and intellectual virtues set forth in vv. 2–4 and 6–7: (1) to grow in understanding – which, in light of the connection between vv. 2 and 7 is cast in terms of *theologically oriented* wisdom; (2) to grow in moral virtue;²⁴ and (3) to take up the mantle and themselves pass on the wisdom they are taught.

²⁰Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, pp. 60–1; Schipper, *Proverbs* 1–15, pp. 66–7; Waltke, *Proverbs* 1–15, pp. 177–8.

²¹Weeks, *Instruction & Imagery*, p. 193; also, Keefer, ‘Shift in Perspective’, pp. 113–5; J. A. Loader, *Proverbs* 1–9 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), p. 61; H. Seebass, לקח, in Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, G. Johannes Botterwck, and Holger Gzella (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018–2021), 8:21; R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), pp. 33–4.

²²Keefer, ‘Shift in Perspective’, p. 114; Waltke, *Proverbs* 1–15, p. 179.

²³Waltke, *Proverbs* 1–15, p. 96; also, Keefer, ‘Shift in Perspective’, p. 115; Loader, *Proverbs* 1–9, p. 61; Whybray, *Proverbs*, p. 34.

²⁴The first half of Prov 1:3 refers to ‘the instruction of discretion’ (מוֹסֵר הַשֵּׁכַל); whatever intellectual capabilities this includes, it must also come with a moral focus, given its specification in the second half of the verse as comprising ‘righteousness, justice, and fairness’; see Sandoval, ‘Revisiting the Prologue’, pp. 461–2.

Tracing the aims through the rest of the collection

These being the aims set forth in the introduction, it seems reasonable to suppose that they would permeate – or at least prominently feature – through the rest of the collection. In what follows, I seek to demonstrate that this is in fact the case.

To grow in understanding

If it is not through ‘the proverbs of Solomon’ that one can expect ‘to know wisdom and instruction’ and ‘understand words of insight’ (Prov 1:2), then how is this supposed to come about? Put differently, to what is the reader supposed to ‘listen’ (שמע) so as to increase their learning and ‘acquire’ (יקנה) a sense of direction (v. 5)? An initial answer comes as soon as we get out of the introduction and into the first instruction:

Listen (שמע) my son, to your father’s instruction (מוסר)
And do not forsake your mother’s teaching (Prov 1:8).

This injunction to listen, in fact, runs all through Prov 1–9, as the son – who can be taken to stand for the reader – is urged to take up a disposition of receptiveness to what the parents have to teach him.²⁵ It is even more pronounced in chapter 4, where even more key terms from the introduction are found:²⁶

Listen (שמע), sons, to fatherly instruction (מוסר)
And pay attention to know insight (לדעת בינה; Prov 4:1).

And a little further on:

Acquire wisdom; *acquire* insight (קנה חכמה קנה בינה)
Do not forget, nor deviate from the words of my mouth
Do not abandon her, and she will watch over you;
love her, and she will protect you.
Wisdom is foremost – *acquire* Wisdom (קנה חכמה)!
And with all you have, *acquire* insight (קנה בינה)! (vv. 5–7).

There is some variation in the language, but in *all* the exordia – Fox’s term for the opening lines of the ‘lectures’ that make up this first section – we find this same sort of appeal from the parents to pay attention to their (or in the case of Prov 3:11, Yhwh’s) instruction.²⁷ The most significant for present purposes, though, is in chapter 2, which is widely seen as a sort of table of contents for the collection, summarising its main argument.²⁸ Here wisdom is associated with the fear of Yhwh, as it is in the book’s motto (Prov 1:7; cf. 9:10), albeit somewhat differently: *if*, in 2:1–4, the son gives heed

²⁵Prov 1:33; 4:1, 10; 5:7, 13; 7:24; 8:6, 32–34.

²⁶Otto Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1984), p. 46; Schipper, *Proverbs* 1–15, p. 166.

²⁷Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, p. 324.

²⁸Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 34–5; Meinhold, *Sprüche* 1–15, pp. 41–6; Bernd U. Schipper, ‘Das Proverbienbuch und die Toratradition’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 108/4 (2011), pp. 397–9; cf. n. 35 below.

to his parents' instruction and pursues wisdom, *then*, in v. 5, he will 'understand the fear of Yhwh' (תבין יראה יהוה) and 'find the knowledge [דעת] of God'.

On a first look, these verses do not appear to line up: while the motto in 1:7 and 9:10 says that the fear of Yhwh is the *beginning* of wisdom – usually taken to imply that it is the *source* of wisdom – the opening of chapter 2 flips the relationship: the fear of Yhwh *derives from* wisdom. Numerous attempts have, of course, been made to show how these two statements do in fact work together, perhaps by marking different stages of one's education²⁹ or different positions in a scribal dispute.³⁰

When we take a closer look at the language, however, it is possible to see how these verses are in fact saying the same thing in different ways. Much of this rests on how we understand the word 'beginning' – ראשית in Proverbs 1:7, and תחלה in the parallel statement in 9:10. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible do either of these terms actually convey the idea of a thing's *source*, whether in a temporal or some other sense. They refer, rather, to the first event in a sequence, like the first-fruits of a harvest which give a taste of the crop that is to come.³¹ As such, the introduction in 1:2–7 can be seen to summarise, not subvert the contents of the collection, presenting wisdom as theologically *oriented*, and in this telic sense, characterised by a right disposition towards Yhwh.

To grow in moral virtue

Though they arrive there by different routes, Sandoval and Brown place this second aim as the foremost of those set forth in the introduction.³² Both of them overstate their case. Nevertheless, when we trace this aim through the rest of the collection, its prominence is difficult to dispute. Picking up where we left off in Proverbs 2, a second apodosis running parallel to the one in vv. 5–8 is given in vv. 9–11:

My son, *if* you accept my words
 ...
then you will understand righteousness, justice
 and fairness – every good path (vv. 1a, 9).

The connection with Proverbs 1:3 is plain to see; it is the only other place, not just in Proverbs, but in all the Hebrew Bible to contain these three terms, 'righteousness, justice, and fairness' (צדק ומשפט ומישורים), together in this order.³³ More broadly, however,

²⁹So Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, p. 111; O'Dowd, *Proverbs*, p. 79; somewhat differently, Knut Martin Heim, *Poetic Imagination in Proverbs: Variant Repetitions and the Nature of Poetry* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 59–60.

³⁰So Bernd U. Schipper, 'When Wisdom Is Not Enough!', in Bernd U. Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter (eds), *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of 'Torah' in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 55–79.

³¹ראשית is used in this sense in Prov 3:9, and תחלה in 2 Sam 21:10. For a fuller articulation of this view, see Matthew A. O'Kelly, 'Wisdom and the Fear of YHWH: Rethinking Their Relationship in Proverbs 1–9', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47/1 (2022), pp. 98–113; Weeks, *Instruction & Imagery*, pp. 113–8. A survey and discussion of positions on this can be found in Zoltán Schwáb, 'Is Fear of the Lord the Source of Wisdom or Vice Versa?', *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (2013), pp. 652–62; idem., *Proverbs: Wisdom Calls: An Introduction and Study Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), pp. 36–7.

³²Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, pp. 30–2; Sandoval, 'Revisiting the Prologue', pp. 461–2.

³³Bernd U. Schipper, *The Hermeneutics of Torah: Proverbs 2, Deuteronomy, and the Composition of Proverbs 1–9* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2021), p. 169. The only other occurrence of these terms together comes in Ps 99:4, where the order is reversed.

the theme can be seen to permeate the rest of the chapter, and indeed the collection as a whole. The two apodoses in Proverbs 2:5–11 are followed by two expected results in vv. 12–19. The first is that giving due attention to wisdom and instruction will serve:

to rescue you (להצילך) from the path of evil
from a man perverse with his speech (v. 12).

Warnings about the ‘wicked men’ in turn map onto concerns about ethical behaviour elsewhere in the collection. In Proverbs 4:10–19, the son is urged to pursue wisdom which will ‘direct him on straight paths’ where his ‘steps will not be hindered’ (vv. 11–12),³⁴ in contrast with the paths of the wicked, which here and in chapter 2 lead to all places dark and deathly (2:13–15; 4:14–19).³⁵ Many of these same concerns are also addressed in chapter 3, where we also find a positive case of moral virtue spelled out in terms of how to treat one’s neighbour and to maintain peace in society (vv. 21–35).

Returning to Proverbs 2, moral virtue is also spelled out in terms of avoidance of the foreign woman (זרה/אשה זרה; vv. 16–19). The foreign woman has, in recent years, been in the limelight of a great many scholarly debates, none of which I intend to enter into here.³⁶ Suffice it to say, the foreign woman is presented in Proverbs 1–9 as posing a threat to social cohesion in the community such that the parents warn in no uncertain terms, both here and throughout chapters 5–7, that falling for her seduction will lead to disaster.³⁷

To pass on the mantle

The final aim we saw in the introduction, while present through the rest of the first collection, is not quite as prominent as the others:

to impart to the naïve (לפתאים) shrewdness
to the youth (לנוער), knowledge and prudence (Prov 1:4).

³⁴This is picked up again in the following instruction, Prov 4:20–27.

³⁵The programmatic nature of Prov 2 as a sort of ‘table of contents’ for chapters 1–9, noted above (n. 28), has been mapped out by Meinhold, *Sprüche 1–15*, pp. 43–7. Not all have been persuaded by the connections Meinhold proposes; Fox (*Proverbs 1–9*, p. 323), for instance, suggests that ‘[t]oo much violates Meinhold’s design for it to be effective in guiding reading or even to be recoverable to most readers.’ Whether we follow Meinhold on the specifics, however, his basic point stands that in Prov 2 we are introduced to the collection’s key themes, including the ethical concerns with potential influence of the wicked men and their questionable decisions.

³⁶For a useful survey of views, see Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, pp. 252–62. Some noteworthy recent discussions include, Joseph Blenkinsopp, ‘The Social Context of the “Outsider Woman” in Proverbs 1–9’, *Biblica* 72/4 (1991), pp. 457–73; Tova Forti, ‘The Isha Zara in Proverbs 1–9: Allegory and Allegorization’, *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007), pp. 89–100; Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, pp. 134–41; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, ‘Aux Origines de l’interdit Des Mariages Mixtes: Quelques Réflexions Exégétiques et Historiques à Partir de Proverbes 2,16–22’, *Theoforum* 43 (2012), pp. 243–67; Christl M. Maier, *Die ‘Fremde Frau’ in Proverbien 1–9: Eine Exegetische und Sozialgeschichtliche Studie* (Göttingen: V&R, 1995); Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The ‘Foreignness’ of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008); Harold C. Washington, ‘The Strange Woman (זרה/אשה) of Proverbs 1–9 and Post-Exilic Judean Society’, in Kent H. Richards and Tamara C. Eskenazi (eds), *Second Temple Studies II: Temple and Community in the Persian Period* (London: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 217–42.

³⁷J. N. Aletti, ‘Seduction et Parole En Proverbes I–IX’, *Vetus Testamentum* 27/2 (1977), pp. 129–44; Weeks, *Instruction & Imagery*, pp. 141–6; Gale A. Yee, ‘“I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh”: The Foreign Woman (Tšša Zārā) in Proverbs 1–9’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13 (1989), pp. 53–68.

While they are introduced to us in the introduction, it is worth noting that neither the naïve (פתאים) nor the youth (נער) are mentioned very often in the first collection. The naïve are addressed several times by Woman Wisdom, who berates them for their love of ignorance (Prov 1:22, 32) or invites them to ‘come to understand shrewdness’ (הבינו פתאים ערמה) 8:5; cf. 9:4, 6). The only other relevant mention of the youth comes in Proverbs 7:7, where the two terms are again used in parallel to a youth who has already begun down the track of falling for the foreign woman.

Nevertheless, the third aim set forth in the introduction is evidently a posture of instruction that is modelled to the reader throughout, providing an example to follow as they take up the mantle to impart shrewdness and discretion to those who need it.³⁸ This is most pronounced in Proverbs 4, which opens with the usual injunction to listen to instruction. Several differences here, however, are worth highlighting. Instead of the usual ‘my son’ (בני; singular), v. 1 is addressed to ‘sons’ (בנים; plural). And instead of calling attention to ‘the instruction of *your* father’ (מוסר אביר) or ‘the teaching of *your* mother’ (תורת ימך) 1:8; 6:20), we have something more generic: ‘a father’s instruction’, or perhaps, ‘fatherly instruction’ (מוסר אב; 4:1).

These differences have, unsurprisingly, sparked considerable debate. Some have tended to downplay their significance, seeing simply another iteration on the generic setting of father–son instruction.³⁹ Others have taken the plural בנים as a possible clue for some sort of school setting, noting parallels with several Egyptian instruction texts.⁴⁰ Neither of these proposals, however, are without problems, albeit on opposite poles. On the one hand, the latter reads in too much. The school setting for Proverbs 1–9 remains contested,⁴¹ and in any case, there is little in these verses to contradict the idea that a familial setting might be in view.⁴² On the other, the former reads too little. While the change is not a dramatic one, the point remains that it is the only instance of the plural בנים in an opening appeal (though it is used as well in the resumptive appeal found in 5:7; 7:24; and 8:32), and the only instance of אב that actually refers to the father figure without a pronominal suffix.

Taken together, these differences gesture towards the fact that what the son is being invited to participate in is something bigger than himself. It is not just ‘my son’ or ‘your father’s instruction’, limiting the scope of the instruction just to this particular family unit, because, as the father goes on to explain, what he passes on is that which he received from *his own* father:⁴³

³⁸Keefer’s qualification here is worth noting, that ‘the summons of [Prov 1:5] does not exclude the young or nascent student from the school of Proverbs. The introduction neither distinguishes nor exclusively invites the “wise in real life” or “the simpleton in real life”; rather, it distinguishes between *literary types* that function rhetorically to invite any interpreter’; ‘Shift in Perspective’, pp. 112–3 (emphasis added).

³⁹Clifford, *Proverbs*, pp. 60–61; Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, pp. 172–3; Loader, *Proverbs 1–9*, pp. 201–2; Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 148.

⁴⁰Schipper, *Proverbs 1–15*, pp. 166–7; John Goldingay, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2023), pp. 65–7. Fox points out that while most Egyptian instruction texts are addressed to a single son, the instruction to Kagemeni stands as an exception, addressed throughout to a single son, but expanded out to the plural in the epilogue; see Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, pp. 172–3; also, O’Dowd, *Proverbs*, p. 108.

⁴¹Dell, *Book of Proverbs*, pp. 24–34; Michael V. Fox, ‘The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs’, in Michael V. Fox et al. (eds), *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), pp. 227–39; Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), pp. 191–8.

⁴²Longman, *Proverbs*, p. 148; William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM, 1970), p. 303.

⁴³Similarly, Meinhold, *Sprüche 1–15*, pp. 90–1.

He instructed me, and said to me,
 'Hold onto my words in your heart;
 keep my commands and live' (v. 4).

The expectation, though implicit, is that, having received and internalised his own parents' instruction, the son will go on to do likewise – indeed, if the tradition is to continue, he must.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In the analysis of Proverbs 1:1–7 above, we saw that the keynote of its address is found in its exhortation for the reader, with the 'wise and understanding' as their proxy, to 'listen and increase in learning' and thereby 'acquire a sense of direction' (v. 5). With that, a latent emphasis is placed on the central role of instruction within the theological vision of Proverbs 1–9, which, not unlike Deuteronomy, sets out a theological framework grounded in divine instruction, mediated by the parents, and oriented towards fearing Yhwh and keeping Yhwh's commands.

The expectation is that, as the reader follows this exhortation, they will be equipped to attain three main aims: (1) to grow in understanding, cultivating a sort of wisdom that is characterised by a right disposition towards Yhwh; (2) to grow in moral virtue, both in the pursuit of 'righteousness, justice, and fairness', as well as being equipped with the sensibility to steer clear of the collection's more sinister characters; and (3) to pass on the mantle to the next generation, keeping the tradition passed down in generations gone by alive for generations yet to come.

The introduction's programmatic function in relation to what follows was then demonstrated in the way that each of these aims could be traced through Proverbs 1–9. However, the introduction does not just outline the agenda of Proverbs 1–9 itself; it also indicates how the first collection functions in relation to the collections that follow. Given the likelihood that Proverbs 1–9 was itself written as an introduction to the collections in chapters. 10–29,⁴⁵ it could plausibly be suggested that the 'proverb' (משל) and the 'words of the wise' (דברי חכמים) in Proverbs 1:6 refer not simply to the contents of chapters 1–9, but to the book's later collections as well – not least because the proverb collections that follow are headed with the 'proverbs of Solomon' (משלי שלמה; 10:1; 25:1), or 'words of the wise' (דברי חכמים; 22:17; 24:23).⁴⁶

This being the case, the introduction in Proverbs 1:1–7 not only sets out the perspective and agenda of the first collection in and of itself, but, as an introduction to the introduction, goes further to underscore the first collection's prefatory function within the context of the book as a whole. Under the umbrella of the first expectation listed

⁴⁴ As several others have also noted, this portrait matches what we find in Deut 6:1–9 of parents instructing their children to fear Yhwh and keep Yhwh's commands. There too the picture is intergenerational, promising 'you, your child, and your grandchild' long life, so long as they are obedient to Yhwh (Deut 6:2); see Meinhold, *Sprüche 1–15*, p. 91; O'Dowd, *Proverbs*, pp. 108–9. It is quite likely, in fact, that these verses were not far from the author of Prov 4's mind. Allusions to this text in other parts of Prov 1–9, most prominently in 3:1–3; 6:20–23; and 7:1–3, have long been noted; see e.g. Maier, *Fremde Frau*, pp. 153–66; Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, pp. 244–56.

⁴⁵ For the most in-depth treatment of this in recent times, see Arthur Jan Keefer, *Proverbs 1–9 as an Introduction to the Book of Proverbs* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

⁴⁶ The heading in Prov 24:13 reads, 'These too are by/for the wise' (גם־אלה לחכמים). While the phrase דברי חכמים is not included, 'these too' (גם־אלה) suggests a hearkening back to the more explicit reference in 22:17.

above, to grow in understanding (taken as a further corollary of listening to parental and divine instruction, in accordance with the paradigm set forth in chapters 1–9) is that the reader will be equipped with the necessary theological perspective and framework to properly appropriate what the rest of the book has to say. Along these lines, Proverbs 1–9 ends where it began:

Impart wisdom to the wise and they will become wiser still,
Make it known to the righteous and they will increase in learning
The first-fruit of wisdom is the fear of Yhwh
and knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov 9:9–10).