

## The Bipolarity of Sapiential Theology

JAMES ALFRED LOADER (VIENNA AND UNISA)

### ABSTRACT

*It is shown that the wisdom of the sages represented in the Book of Proverbs pushes at the limits of wisdom's rational basis in such a way as to question its own possibilities. The assumption that the Book of Proverbs represents the affirming side of wisdom whereas the Books of Ecclesiastes and Job represent its critical counter-pole is queried. It is argued that the theological stance of the anthology of Proverbs is based on a default affirmative system with a critical counter-position grafted onto it. Conversely, in Ecclesiastes and Job the critical perspective is the main stance, while they nevertheless proceed from the same affirmative basis they find problematical. This basic tenet of biblical wisdom is brought to bear on Walter Brueggemann's thesis that a biblically informed theology must be "bipolar."<sup>1</sup>*

### A INTRODUCTION

In the comprehensive commentary on the Book of Proverbs by Michael Fox<sup>2</sup> the following two statements about the consequences of human conduct occur on the same page:

[The] lack of concern for a tight fit between deed and result is common in Proverbs, especially Part I. It runs contrary to the theory of the "deed-consequence connection" – the notion of tit-for-tat recompense – which is thought to be the essence of the Wisdom doctrine of retribution...

And, shortly afterwards:

Wisdom is like a fractal pattern in which the whole is replicated in every segment, so that each area implies the entire pattern of reward. Wise behaviour of any and every sort is rewarded by a happy life in all regards.

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<sup>1</sup> Pun intended. The term and therefore the title is derived from Walter Brueggemann's construct of a theology that reflects "the central tension" of the relevant literature. See Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation," in *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000); Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). The quotations are from Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 170.

The second quotation is a good formulation of a "tight fit" and must mean a nexus of one hundred percent between wise behaviour and its reward. Yet Fox denies any tight fit of the correspondence, not only here, but often in his commentary. How is this tension between tight fit and non-tight-fit possible? His suggestion is that it could be explained by regarding wisdom as a self-duplicating pattern "in which the whole is always replicated in every segment." This seems too easy a harmonising metaphor. When inexplicable contradictions of the deed-consequence-nexus appear, their sharp edges can be smoothed out in this way by fitting them into a (new) rational system so that they fit (again). In this case Fox explains it with a fractal-pattern theory "in which wisdom as a whole brings about the total array of blessings." This assumes that sapiential thought ("wisdom as a whole") is a system without inner discrepancies. When the tensions that do appear seem to make any closed system unlikely, they can be ironed out by an appeal to "the larger picture," that is, again a closed system on a higher level. This is not completely dissimilar to the way in which theology has often found itself able to make plain contradictions in the Bible say the same thing (e.g. universalism versus particularism). An appeal to "the larger picture" sounds good, but is not quite convincing when employed to get rid of tensions.

I would now submit that the two sides can be understood in quite another way, which not only does justice to the insight of the ancient sages, but can also be theologically valuable. Is it not possible that the woolliness is an ingredient of the very reality that wisdom tries to come to grips with? If so, the "fractal pattern" can still be used as a metaphor to describe the phenomenon, not as a logically conclusive equation, but as a description of an inconclusive or – if the pun be permitted – *fractured* (w)hole visible in its parts.

The assumption from which to start, would not be that the tension in wisdom literature, "*there is / there is not a tight retributive order*" needs to be resolved. Rather, the existence of the tension is to be observed and respected for what it is, namely an enigmatic opposition or polarity of a disruptive nature that can often be disturbing.<sup>3</sup> I propose to focus on texts that seem to undermine the idea of a deed-consequence-nexus both from a sceptical or critical angle and from a pious angle and to then interpret them together with the default position on retribution in Proverbs, while keeping in mind the perspective on the issue provided by Ecclesiastes and Job.

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<sup>3</sup> It should perhaps be pointed out that in this article I do not use the terms "polarity," "pole" and "polar" in the same way as in the early book, James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979). There the reference was to the composition of the reflections by means of motifs constructed in tension with each other. In this essay I mean opposing thought patterns maintained alongside each other.

## **B ADAGES GRAPPLING WITH THE PARADOXES OF REALITY**

There are many sayings in the Book of Proverbs that wrestle with the problem of the deed-consequence-nexus. But they themselves are not a coherent group. Some approach the question from a critical or sceptical perspective, while others do so from a pious vantage point in conservative faith.

### **1 Sceptical Sayings**

We begin with some examples in which the ability and reach of human knowledge are called into question.

#### **1a Agur**

The words of Agur in Prov 30 present many problems, both as far as the text is concerned (especially in v. 1) and as far as the demarcation is concerned (vv. 1-14 or 1-9 or 1-4?). These problems do not have to deter us here because the point of interest for us is the clear denial of Agur to possess human wisdom:

I am too stupid to be human;  
I have no understanding.  
I have not learned wisdom,  
nor have I knowledge about the holy one.  
Who has ascended to heaven and come down?  
Who has gathered the wind in his lap?  
Who has wrapped the waters in a garment?  
Who has established all the ends of the earth?  
What his name or the name of his son?  
Surely you know! (Prov 39:2-4).

The point is that Agur despairs of wisdom. In a series of rhetorical questions reminiscent of the divine speech in Job 38-39 (v. 4) he states that there is no human knowledge or wisdom that can explain the enigmas of nature. Even if this does prepare the "riddle"<sup>4</sup> of God's name at the end of v. 4, it still questions any optimistic view of human knowledge.

#### **1b "Numerical Sayings" in Proverbs 30**

In the same chapter as the words of Agur there are several numerical sayings in which wonder at as opposed to knowledge of inexplicable phenomena in the world is expressed:

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
and four I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle in the sky,

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<sup>4</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 228-229.

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the way of a snake on a rock,  
the way of a ship on the high seas,  
and the way of a man with a woman (Prov 30:18-19).

It is but one step from such amazement to a relativised wisdom.

Four things are small on earth,  
yet they are wiser than the wise:  
the ants are a weak people,  
yet they provide their food in the summer;  
the badgers are not a strong people,  
yet they build their home in the rocks;  
the locusts have no king,  
yet all of them march in rank;<sup>5</sup>  
the lizards you can grasp in the hand,  
yet they are found in kings' palaces (Prov 30:24-28).

In a well-ordered world success is expected from the strong (cf. Prov 28:1). But when animals are wiser than the wise among people,<sup>6</sup> that is paradoxical, unintelligible and relativises the default system.

Somewhat earlier in the chapter wisdom is relativised in a striking way:

Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before I die:  
Let falsehood and lying be far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor wealth; feed me with the bread that I  
need,  
lest I be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is Yahweh?"  
lest I be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God (Prov  
30:7-9).

If wisdom brings success, it would be logical that wealth should increase proportionally to wisdom. But the insight that moderation is positive because it harmonises with the cosmic order makes the deed-consequence-nexus impossible. In the only prayer in Proverbs the sage undermines the default position. It thereby pushes against its own limits and carries its own antibody within itself. Therefore the faith of the sage and the rational structure of the sapiential consciousness of order necessarily relate to each other and just as necessarily stand in tension with each other.

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<sup>5</sup> הַצֵּן a key term ("in order"); LXX εὐτάκτως, the order of nature is expressly related to the incomprehensible.

<sup>6</sup> מִחֲכָמִים תָּרַשׁ לְ ( *pu'al* participle) is perhaps intended to soften this blow; מִחֲכָמִים תָּרַשׁ לְ, "more than the wise."

### 1c Aphorisms

A number of adages contain a basic stratum of belief in God's decisive influence in the world, but simultaneously express the *inability* of humans to determine results.

It is Yahweh's blessing that makes rich,  
and toil adds nothing to it (Prov 10:22).

The *casus pendens* shows that it is *only* Yahweh from whom success can be expected. The second hemistich does not advocate laziness, but does undermine the premise that sapiential effort can achieve its own success.<sup>7</sup>

The lot is cast into the lap,  
but from Yahweh alone comes the decision (Prov 16:33).

Although the casting of lots is not specifically sapiential, the observation of and the reflection on what people do in life is typically sapiential. Here human conduct is related to causality. The statement denies explanation in terms of any nexus of deed and consequence. No human action, but only God determines results. This is particularly clear in the categorical saying,

Many plans are in the mind of humans,  
but it is the plan of Yahweh that comes to pass (Prov 19:21).

Human calculations (מחשבות) are typically sapiential, but are counterpoised here to the divine will. The antithetical parallelism subordinates human plans so categorically to the divine counsel that it means *only* God's plan happens (cf. Prov 16:1; Eccl 7:13; 11:5). This is concentrated even sharper when the fundamental sapiential activity is questioned. Understanding belongs to the constitutive core of wisdom (cf. Prov 1:2, 5 etc.). On the one hand, this is stated quite clearly in Prov 14:8,

It is the wisdom of the clever to understand his way.

But on the other hand it is just as clearly questioned in Prov 20:24:

From Yahweh come the steps of a person,  
but a human – how can he understand his way?

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<sup>7</sup> Hans H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit: Eine Untersuchung zur altorientalischen und israelitischen Weisheitsliteratur* (BZAW 101; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966), 148, following Udo Skladny, *Die ältesten Spruchsammlungen in Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 27, 75, unsuccessfully tries to rhyme the divine and human roles by making a human deed responsible for the success, but only after this had been determined by God – which over-strains the possibilities of the syntax and effectively renders the concept of deed and consequence meaningless.

The second hemistich uses the powerful form of a rhetorical question with negative impact to deny that such understanding is possible at all. The political dimension of this scepticism is far-reaching when read in the context of an absolute monarchy:

Streams of water in the hand of Yahweh is the king's heart,  
he directs it wherever he pleases (Prov 21:1).

If that is true, all advice by means of which the wise endeavour to influence a king (cf. Prov 16:13-14; 19:12; 20:2; 25:6-7) is questioned in principle. This even extends to the judicial function of a ruler, which is presented as nothing more than a façade for God's justice to prevail:

Many seek the favour of a ruler,  
but it is from Yahweh that justice for humans comes (Prov 29:26).

Proverbs 21:30-31 forms an *inclusio* with vv. 1-2 of the same chapter (see above) and denies the meaning of wisdom relative to God in the clearest of terms.

There is no wisdom, no understanding,  
no counsel against Yahweh.  
The horse is made ready for the day of battle,  
but the victory is from Yahweh (Prov 21:30-31).

Three synonyms expressing everything that wisdom stands for (חכמה, תבונה and עצה) are employed to relativise the whole sapiential enterprise as eloquently as Qohelet (Eccl 7:24; 8:16-17), Agur (Prov 30:3) or the Poem on Elusive Wisdom (Job 28:12, 20) could. This does not only mean that human wisdom cannot compare with divine wisdom, but that the totality of human wisdom (the three encompassing terms) is worthless *in principle*.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Pious Grappling with a Flawed System

Consciousness of the instability of a sapiential system working with reward and punishment or deed and consequence is also shown by texts in which a pious faith wrestles with the problem.

### 2a Proverbs 3:11-12

Do not, my son, reject Yahweh's discipline,  
nor despise his reproof,  
for Yahweh reproves the one he loves,  
and as a father the son in whom he delights

<sup>8</sup> Three times יא "nonexistence" is used in Prov 21:30, once before each of the words for human wisdom or achievement.

As a couplet these two stichs are an appeal to acceptance of the chastening discipline of God. The teacher has been advising the pupil with precepts for piety, regularly adding the rewards that will ensue. At the end of the poem extending from vv. 1-12 it seems as if the doctrine of reward is denied, because the pupil is enjoined not to reject or despise God's chastisement. Although not limited to wisdom literature<sup>9</sup>, the words for "discipline" and "chastisement" (מוסר and תוכחה) are typical sapiential terms<sup>10</sup> and therefore suitable for a poem such as this, by which piety is promoted in a sapiential context. The couplet addresses the situation that would arise when hard times come the pupil's way. That would seem to deny the expansively set out rewards promised by every second line of each couplet in the poem. Verse 11 deals with the matter by assuming from the outset that this is a chastisement coming from Yahweh. According to Waltke,<sup>11</sup> "[t]he strophe presupposes that the son has not kept his obligations and that the LORD has meted out punishment instead of blessings." But that is only necessary on the *reader's* presupposition that the doctrine of retribution is upheld in this case too. This assumption is forced and the context suggests that the occurrence of adversity *despite* piety is here explained as chastisement and not as punishment. The sage is categorically appealing for acceptance of adversity as God's chastisement. The experience of many that the rewards promised in the poem may actually not realise, is addressed by sages who knew that suffering was possible despite not deserving it in terms of retribution. As answer they submitted the theory of chastisement.

Verse 12 bears out (כי) the appeal of v. 11 by connecting them with a fundamental statement, namely that Yahweh chastises those whom he loves. The verb יכה *hip'il* (the same root as תוכחה) is used in the imperfect to state a general principle. It does happen that the pious suffer, therefore it can neither be excluded as a possibility nor be affirmed for certain under specific circumstances. When it does happen, this is the way to look upon it: it is chastisement for the pious who, while not being able to explain it in terms of any system or doctrine, can at least know that it comes from God who metes it out "like a father"<sup>12</sup>. The couplet inculcates the right attitude to suffering, but not as a denial of the deed-consequence nexus. God does reward and punish where necessary, but sometimes the limit of the principle becomes evident. The sage knows that there is no "tight fit" in terms of any theoretical framework and articulates this conviction by expressing the two possible poles alongside each other. The de-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Liedke, "יכה *jkḥ* hi.," *THAT* 1: 730-732; M. Sæbø, "יכר *jsr*," *THAT* 1: 738-742.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. below, Paragraph 2.3.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2004), 248-249.

<sup>12</sup> כּאב should not be emended with the Septuagint (μαστιγοῦ δὲ) to ויכּאב, "and he afflicts," because then the object בן, "son," would be God's son, which is not possible in the OT (so Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 152).

fault is: good leads to good and bad leads to bad, but when it does not happen, also that does not mean that God’s love has been forfeited. Though not nearly as grandiose, passionate or as intricately weaved as the Book of Job, this is a miniature very close to the position of the Job poet.

## 2b Proverbs 3:31-35

Do not envy a violent man  
and do not choose any of his ways –  
for a crooked person is an abomination to Yahweh,  
but his counsel is with the upright.  
Yahweh’s curse is in the house of the wicked,  
but the home of the righteous he blesses.  
As far as mockers are concerned, he mocks,  
but on the humble he bestows favour.  
It is honour that wise people inherit,  
but fools acquire disgrace.

The א-*admonition* (v. 31) warns the pupil not to covet the success of the “man of violence.” חמס is anti-social behaviour as the opposite of justice (cf. Jer 22:3; Ezek 45:9; Amos 3:10).<sup>13</sup> The second hemistich quite logically warns against imitating any of the violent man’s ways of doing things. The motif of envy implies that the violent man has success and again touches on the problem that was never satisfactorily “solved.” It reaches the limits of the possibilities to explain reality in terms of the deed-consequence nexus. While not being reflected upon in the same way as in Pss 37 and 73,<sup>14</sup> the verses now following provide essentially the same answer. The conjunction כי (v. 32) provides the reason why one should not envy the success of the violent. The sense of the genitive תועבת יהוה, “the abomination to Yahweh,” is clear.<sup>15</sup> But God is the subject in the parallel phrase מארת יהוה, “the curse of Yahweh,” for it is he who curses the house of the wicked. On the other side, admittance to God’s inner circle of fellowship and the benefit of the counsel in his סוד is what those can expect who do not allow themselves to be enchanted by the success of anti-social violence. The prospect itself implies that the success of the violent cannot match it and can therefore be of no more than fleeting value. The problem of having to see the wicked prosper is thus handled with the appeal to

<sup>13</sup> Cf. H.-J. Stoebe, “החמס *hms* Gewalttat,” *THAT* 1: 586.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. especially Pss 37:1 and 73:3, where the topic of v. 31a, jealousy, is explicitly mentioned.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ronald E. Clements, “The Concept of Abomination in Proverbs,” in *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. Michael V. Fox *et al.*; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 220, who shows the anti-social connotation of the term in Proverbs (as distinct from cultic abomination).

transitoriness, the same technique used in Ps 37:2.<sup>16</sup> The scoffers are the impertinent fools who do not heed wise words. Where they are concerned, God scorns. The verb לִיץ and the noun לֵץ have the same root and thereby suggest the close nexus or a “tight fit” of what they do and what they get for it. It is of the same ilk as the *lex talionis*, eye for eye and tooth for tooth. This is a good example to show that the connection of deed and consequence is not just an automatic mechanism by which the world reacts to human behaviour, but that, on the one hand, God personally is involved and, on the other hand, that humans’ basic disposition and not just mechanical actions are at stake.

In verse 34 comes a case of Ketib and Qere, which can be important for our purpose. The Masoretes noted that not עניים, but עניי, are the chiasmic complements of the חכמים, the “wise” in verse 35. The fact that they found it necessary to insist on the alternative reading (which is in effect a change in the consonantal text) must mean that they understood the two forms as significantly different in meaning, or they would not have tinkered with the text. The fact that they related עניי and not עניים chiasmically with the wise (חכמים) in verse 35 may help in this regard. Both can mean “poor” and “humble” and therefore refer to a financial condition or a modest disposition.<sup>17</sup> In the light of the fundamental and repeated insistence of Proverbs on the necessity of modesty as opposed to arrogance (cf. Prov 15:33; 16:18, 19; 18:12; 29:23), it seems reasonable that the Masoretes understood עניי to mean people characterised by this humility and not by poverty.<sup>18</sup> Otherwise a kind of *Armenfrömmigkeit*<sup>19</sup> would have undermined the premise that wisdom brings prosperity. By its very negativity, the fact that later reception of the text tried by means of Qere to eliminate the incongruence in the default view, supports that it was experienced as such in this text.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. James A. Loader, “Zum Preis der Rechtfertigung Gottes im Alten Testament,” *BTZ* 18/1 (2001): 3-23.

<sup>17</sup> The debate whether there has been a development from “poor” to “humble” in postexilic times has not been resolved and it seems wise to accept Martin-Achard’s position that a decision should therefore be made from text to text on its own merits. See R. Martin-Achard, “ענה<sup>c</sup> *nh* II elend sein,” *THAT* II (1971): 343-344.

<sup>18</sup> In 15:33; 18:12 and 29:23 the humble frame of mind is expressly promised “honour” (כבוד), which is not identical, but related to “favour” (חן) and does occur parallel to it in v. 35, the second line of the chiasmus.

<sup>19</sup> Literally, “piety of the poor,” a kind of idealisation of poverty.

## 2c Chastisement Proverbs

There are many references to chastisement in Proverbs.<sup>20</sup> The good results to be expected from rebukes, caning and other forms of chastisement, which could be very harsh,<sup>21</sup> are often evinced. I find no evidence that the many references to the beneficial effects of chastisement were related to the discrepancy between the ideal nexus of good/good and bad/bad. But the texts entail the tension. The wicked and the fool get the same treatment as punishment for their deeds (cf. Prov 10:13; 19:29; 26:3). The sages must have known that the doctrine is blurred. If suffering can in some cases be punishment and in others beneficial chastisement, the experience of pain for them was not one-dimensional, especially in the light of the fact that such adversity could sometimes be piously interpreted as God's acts of love. From all of this the conclusion seems necessary that the sages maintained the two perspectives alongside each other without attempting to force them into a logical system.

## C THE DEFAULT SYSTEM<sup>22</sup>

In the seventies Roland Murphy judged the concept of order in biblical wisdom as a fixed result of OT research.<sup>23</sup> While he and others remained uneasy,<sup>24</sup> the idea has regained its ground, as can be seen among others in its use by Eckardt Otto to sketch sapiential ethics.<sup>25</sup> This can be epitomised in the words of David,

... as is said according to an ancient proverb,  
"from the wicked comes wicked" (1 Sam 24:14).

<sup>20</sup> Prov 1:3, 7, 8; 3:11; 4:1; 5:12, 23; 6:23; 7:22; 8:33; 10:17; 12:1; 13:1, 18, 24; 15:5, 10, 32, 33; 19:20, 27; 22:15; 23:13; 24:32 (מוסר); 1:30; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:5, 10, 31, 32; 27:5 (חוכמה).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 117, 147-149, 165-167, 170, 203, 208, 281.

<sup>22</sup> For a fuller discussion of passages given in this section, cf. James A. Loader, "Lebensgestaltung als weisheitliche Lebensverantwortung," in *Leben: Verständnis, Wissenschaft, Technik* (VWGTh 24; ed. Eilert Herms; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom – Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. John G. Gammie et al.; Missoula, Scholars Press, 1978), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Roland E. Murphy, "Hebrew Wisdom," *JAOS* 101 (1981): 21-34; Claus Westermann, *Wurzeln der Weisheit: Die ältesten Sprüche Israels und anderer Völker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), *passim*; Hartmut Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit: Studien zu den Sprüchen Salomons und zu dem Buche Hiob* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1958), 3; Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (WMANT 28; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968), 140.

<sup>25</sup> Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (ThW 3,2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1994), 117-174.

That shows that a wicked nature generates wicked behaviour.<sup>26</sup> The context shows that David has *not* done evil, and therefore the practical application of the proverb assumes a positive counterpart, notably that good naturally brings forth good. This is how humans are, which exemplifies the regularity of the human condition as part of a natural order. That is what I mean by the "default system," the "normal" situation in the absence of specific factors that may bring about a different situation. The Book of Proverbs contains many examples of the default position. I give a selection here and refer to others in the footnotes.

In autumn the sluggard does not plough;  
when he expects harvest, there is nothing (Prov 20:4).

Who wishes to profit from the nourishing power of nature, must work in harmony with the order of the natural season. That is plain common sense.

When you take the dross from the silver,  
the smith can make a vessel;  
when you take the wicked from the presence of the king,  
his throne will be established in righteousness (Prov 25:4-5).

This couplet is particularly instructive, for it uses the default order of the metallurgical properties of silver to explain the parallel default in the human character and behaviour within the political system.<sup>27</sup>

When you find honey, eat only as much as you need,  
so that you do not get sick and vomit (Prov 25:16).

There is a natural order of human physiological processes, which brings forth positive results when respected (as shown in 1 Sam 14:27), whereas running counter to it naturally results in negative physiological consequences (cf. Prov 27:7, where consciousness of this physiological schema is just as apparent). The proverb is followed by its own parallel in social relations:

Let your foot seldom come in your neighbour's house,  
lest he become sick of you and dislike you (Prov 25:17).

The social aspect of reality is perceived to be predicated on the same order. In the OT there is no sign of a bifurcation between the natural and the so-

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<sup>26</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament: A Contextual Study* (BLS 5; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 109-127.

<sup>27</sup> A comparable combination of aspects from the natural order is provided by Prov 25:13-14 (meteorological data, the appreciation of cooling in the heat of summer, the natural appreciation of dependability in the human psyche – all of these work on the premise of a default order. Cf. also Prov 25:19, 23; 26:1; 28:3.

cial sides of reality. Social intemperance just as naturally leads to social rejection as eating intemperance leads to peristaltic rejection.<sup>28</sup>

As snow in summer and rain at harvest-time,  
so honour does not fit the fool (Prov 26:1).

The meteorological order would be disturbed by unseasonal weather, which underlines the natural normativity of the "default" weather. It is not said that such abnormal phenomena do not occur. On the contrary, it is suggested that they do, but when that happens, it is as "unfitting" as the social misfit of a fool being honoured.<sup>29</sup>

Several proverbs use phenomena from the animal world to compare the invariability of aspects from this sphere of reality with the invariability of aspects from cultural, social, moral and political reality in the human world, so as to illustrate the universal validity of the rules for the latter by the universality of the rules for the former.

Better to meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs  
than a fool in his folly (Prov 17:12).  
Like a bird that strays from its nest  
is one who strays from home (Prov 27:8).

The likeness between the natural destructiveness of a bear without cubs and a fool without brains as well as the contrast between an expatriate fleeing from home and the security of those who can enjoy the protection of the home clan are both clear.

The wicked flee when no one chases,  
but the righteous are as confident as a lion (Prov 28:1).  
Like a roaring lion or a charging bear,  
so a wicked ruler over a weak people (Prov 28:15).

Here the natural strength and the danger of certain animal species illustrate the strength of the righteous and the danger of a tyrant king in the natural order of things.

Iron sharpens iron,  
and one person the other.  
Who tends his fig tree will eat its fruit,  
and who looks after his master is honoured (Prov 27:17-18).

<sup>28</sup> In both verses the construction is the same: imperative plus motivation and consequence of not heeding the injunction (twice פן + שבע + ו + consequence).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Prov 27:4 for the typical nature of certain human psychological conditions, the general truth of which is the clearer for the rhetorical question used to state it with.

The sharpening of capabilities and the reciprocal influencing of personalities of interacting humans are as fixed in the socio-psychological order of human coexistence as the characteristics of metals are in the metallurgical sphere. As a farmer should tend his fig trees according to the demands of the natural seasons, so a servant should tend (שָׁמַר) his master's needs at specific times.

All these proverbs demonstrate that knowledge of the natural order of phenomena is relevant for a sapiential shaping of life. There is an order prevailing in nature, the human mind and the handling of agriculture, industry, politics, society and culture. The cosmic order is a thoroughly Israelite idea and forms the groundwork for decisions, the organisation of life and the running of its institutions. Therefore the experience of a normal order constitutes the default position for Israelite wisdom.<sup>30</sup> Therefore it is quite understandable that Fox, despite his reservations, can say, "Nevertheless, Wisdom literature does tend to formulate retribution as an automatic process of cause and effect."<sup>31</sup> If there is such a default order according to which the whole of reality is organised, then there is *ipso facto* a nexus of deed and consequence, whether this is seen as an automatic and immanent given<sup>32</sup> or as retribution practiced by God. This is the "pole" over against which the "counter-pole" set out in Section B above is pitted in the Book of Proverbs.

## D TWO PERSPECTIVES GRAFTED ON EACH OTHER

The word "nevertheless" used by Fox says it all. It indicates that he notices a tension within the whole concept of a nexus of deed and consequence. On the one hand there clearly is a normal position, which works in terms of a logical consequence that can be expected. On the other hand there is an equally clear scepticism as to whether this nexus can cover all aspects of reality. We could illustrate it in terms of common-sense education of children in the modern traffic system. The default position is that the system works. If traffic lights are red, one should not cross, because that leads to accidents. If they are green, one can safely cross, because oncoming traffic stops. All children are taught this and it makes good sense in terms of the ordering of traffic. But even those who teach their young this wisdom know that the system sometimes (often) does not work this way. Speedsters may jump red traffic lights or drunks may crash into the sidewalk, causing harm to children obeying the traffic rules. Where justice remains when such children are maimed for life, cannot be explained in terms of the system. Neither can it credibly explain why criminals making their getaway by jumping red traffic lights do escape. Answers to these questions are beyond the limits of the system. But we keep on telling the children green lights mean safety and red lights mean danger, and it is right because it makes sense. But that is the default

<sup>30</sup> For further examples, cf. Loader, "Lebensgestaltung," 222.

<sup>31</sup> Fox, Proverbs 10-31, 91.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Klaus Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?," in *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (ed. Klaus Koch; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 130-180.

system. Grafted onto it should be an extra dimension showing that the system, though necessary, cannot cater for every possibility.

My submission is that the sages knew this and expressed it by maintaining the two sides alongside each other without attempting to devise a new system in which both can be satisfactorily brought together in a closed logical theory. Somewhat like a modern city's traffic system is thought of, complete with pithy instructions and advice. We may follow Gerhard von Rad in calling this the sceptical reverse to an obverse of "imposing faith."<sup>33</sup> Not being able to see beyond the horizon does not however mean that there *is* nothing beyond it. The sages recognised this. That is why the "sceptical" proverbs attribute the mysterious side of the issue of causes and effects to God. This not only applies to the Book of Proverbs, but also to the two books known for their foregrounding of the limits of wisdom, namely Ecclesiastes and Job.

The Book of Job has no qualms with the deed-consequence-nexus or the doctrine of retribution. Indeed, it presupposes the validity of the theory. Its problem is the *application* of the theory. In the great divine speech of Job 38-39\* the end position is reached where the only answer given is wonder and awe at the divine enigma in the world of lifeless and living nature and therefore also in the inexplicable vicissitudes of humans. Likewise, the other famous poem, that of the unattainable wisdom in Job 28, makes it unambiguously clear that ultimate wisdom cannot to be found by humans. Human skill can produce wonderful things (illustrated by the industrial wonder of mining skills, vv. 1-6), but real wisdom cannot be found by anyone (vv. 12-14). Again, the "normal" position of effective wisdom is relativised.<sup>34</sup>

The same happens time and again in the Book of Ecclesiastes. For instance, Qohelet uses an ordinary sapiential injunction to give advice like all sages:

Sow your seed in the morning,  
and do not let your hands rest at evening;  
for you do not know  
which will prosper,  
this or that,  
or whether both alike will be good (Eccl 11:6).

He relates his advice to practical observations of realities in ordinary agriculture. There is a fascinating natural order (Eccl 1:4-7; 3:11), but the relativising

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<sup>33</sup> Gerhard von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," *VTSup* 1 (1953): 123-125, who makes the statement only in reference to a few of the proverbs I have advanced above.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Loader, "Zum Preis der Rechtfertigung Gottes," 19-20 where I discuss the Job texts in a broader context of the deed-consequence-tension.

aspect lies in the substantiation: you do not know whether this wisdom will be successful. Humans cannot explain the enigmas of reality (Eccl 1:8; 3:11), there are so many manifestations of the contrary of the deed-consequence-nexus that such a doctrine cannot be upheld (Eccl 3:19; 4:1; 8:17; 9:2, 11 etc.). But nevertheless, nobody can compare with the sage (Eccl 8:1) and a fool is as much a fool for Qohelet as for any sage in the Proverbs-mould (Eccl 10:3).<sup>35</sup> In stating that Qohelet, in his concern for the rationality of existence, denies this rationality, while "even in failure, rationality remains an irreducible value, one by which life must be judged," Fox formulates his first main conclusion about Qohelet's thought, by which he seems to be saying essentially the same.<sup>36</sup>

In these books we have the reverse of the default position. For them, the critical questions are primary and therefore the predominant theme is sceptical of human capabilities. But this needs the conventional basis. *Cum grano salis* it can be said that the "normal" position is grafted onto the critical and questioning one.

## D CONCLUSION

We may call the two sides "positive" and "negative" (which does not really do justice to either), or "affirmative" and "sceptical" (where the latter is not to be identified with the totality of a philosophical stance). Or we may just speak of them as poles, which means different sides or aspects of looking at the world. We have found them in the Book of Proverbs, so that at least for the edited book they need to be interpreted together. But because of their own literary character as adages, they cannot be a redactional creation. They occur in different genres, in aphorisms, numerical poems, pious poems and connected texts in sub-collections all over the book. We have also found the same phenomenon in

<sup>35</sup> Cf. further Eccl 4:13-16; 7:5-7; 11-14; 15-22; 7:23-8:1; 8:16-17; 9:11-12; 9:13-10,1; 10,2-7. 8-11; Loader, *Polar Structures*, 35-66.

<sup>36</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 10. Also Fox's second main programmatic point for understanding Qohelet, namely that Qohelet's esteem for wisdom goes hand in hand with his disappointment at its failure, seems to square with this. So does the third main conclusion, that Qohelet's embrace of inner experience brings no meaning either but should "nevertheless" be embraced for its own sake (p. 11). I do not see how these three aspects of Qohelet's "message" necessarily clash with my earlier analysis of polar patterns in the way Qohelet builds up his arguments, neither how that analysis is a "harmonization" of any sort (Fox, *Qohelet*, 20; the reworked version of his book under the title *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], has not changed the point). On the contrary, I argue that Qohelet's thought should be accepted with its unresolved tension, just as the tensions in the Book of Proverbs should. Though now dated, that analysis tried to show the argumentative structure for his reflections, which adds up to the conclusion that everything (הכל) remains הבל, which is also Fox's point.

quite different literary contexts such as in the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. This literary variety rather suggests an inherent trait of wisdom, notably the ability to recognise a default order in the world and the vicissitudes of life, *and* to simultaneously notice that human insight in the order cannot provide the closure of a logical coherent theory.

This is not merely a question of different schools of thought, the one "traditional" and the other "critical" or "sceptical," waging battle against each other. To be sure, there are signs of one-sidedness and even dogmatism, for instance the three friends of Job and their rigid lines of argument so clearly rejected despite their piety in the last chapter of the book (cf. Job 42:7). Qohelet too knew sages who thought that they understood reality while not being capable of such at all (Eccl 8:17). But that does not justify categorising sages into either the "traditional" or the "critical" camp (as I myself tended to in my early work on wisdom literature). Rather, the evidence suggests that both at the redactional level and in the earlier stages the two identified dimensions were noticed and held together without being integrated into a unified system. That is a bipolar position. It seems to me a necessary stance for the sages to have taken, because unifying what can be known and what cannot be known into a logically conclusive system is impossible.

Does this have theological relevance? I submit that it is of vital importance. Theology working with texts, literature, motifs, concepts, themes, historical forms of faith and religious societies, must itself distinguish between its own abilities and limits. This is *a fortiori* the case when its basic text contains major, though historically neglected, strands that do precisely this. There are things that cannot and should not be harmonised.

At this point my submission may dovetail with a lead provided by Walter Brueggemann.<sup>37</sup> Taking his cue from Claus Westermann's dialectic between different traditions in the OT (creation theology and redemption theology)<sup>38</sup> and from others such as Samuel Terrien<sup>39</sup> and Paul Hanson,<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann argues that a "new shape" for OT theology is necessary to replace the "comprehensive designs of Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad." His proposal is an OT theology shaped by two trajectories or poles, respectively that of "struc-

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology," 1-21; Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of Pain," in *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 22-44).

<sup>38</sup> Claus Westermann, *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen*, ATD Ergänzungsreihe 6; 2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), *passim*.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Dynamic of Transcendence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), *passim*.

ture legitimation" (which he also calls "common theology") and that of the "embrace of pain" (also "crisis" or "protest" theology). I am not saying that these two trajectories relate precisely to respectively the default sapiential position and the critical or questioning one as I have described them above. But there are resemblances. On the one hand, Brueggemann's "high contractual theology" is the "celebration of order" and supports the *status quo*<sup>41</sup> – which is what the default wisdom modality also does. But, on the other hand, says Brueggemann,

"[t]here is something else going on here to which we must pay careful attention. As the Old Testament is a statement of common theology, it also states the crisis in common theology. The crisis comes about because that theology does not square with Israel's experience of life or Israel's experience of faith, that is, Israel's discernment of God."<sup>42</sup>

That, in turn, is what the grappling and sceptical sapiential texts testify to. Although there were undoubtedly the privileged as well as the underprivileged in Israel who could easily identify with the respective theological sides, Brueggemann's words just quoted can be repeated to express my point: "there is something else going on here." The source for these theological modalities is not opposing factions, but rather different appropriations under different conditions of the deeply elemental polarity of understanding and its limits. *Fides quaerens intellectum*, that is, theology, must necessarily be bipolar.

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<sup>41</sup> Brueggemann, "Structure Legitimation," 17.

<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, "Embrace of Pain," 23.

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Prof. Dr. James Alfred Loader, Faculty of Theology, University of Vienna, Schenkenstrasse 8-10, A-1010 Vienna. Professor Extraordinarius in the Department of Bible and Ancient Studies, P.O. Box 392, Unisa, 0003, and in the Department of Ancient Languages and Cultures as well as the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. *Email*: james-alfred.loader@univie.ac.at.