

Terminology of didactic wisdom in the ancient Israelite scribal schools as presented in Proverbs 1:1–7


Authors:

Jenry E.C. Mandey^{1,2}
Pujiastuti E. Sindoro¹

Affiliations:

¹Faculty of Theology, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Moriah, Tangerang, Indonesia

²Faculty of Theology, Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany

Corresponding author:

Jenry Mandey,
jenry.mandey@sttmoriah.ac.id

Dates:

Received: 20 Aug. 2024

Accepted: 22 Nov. 2024

Published: 15 Jan. 2025

How to cite this article:

Mandey, J.E.C. & Sindoro, P.E., 2025, 'Terminology of didactic wisdom in the ancient Israelite scribal schools as presented in Proverbs 1:1–7', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(1), a3271. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i1.3271>

Copyright:

© 2025. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 encompasses an important section of the Hebrew bible related to ancient didactic wisdom terminology. This article analyses the Masoretic Text in Hebrew to categorise and examine the terminology concerning the theory of the scribal schools that developed in ancient Israel. The issue is the absence of an undisputed indication of the text's *Sitz im Leben*. Consequently, the proposal concerning the *Sitz im Leben* in this text pertains to the scribes. The employed method is textual exegesis, aimed at investigating the text's background through historical analysis. The study is conducted by examining the terms in each verse, considering their textual meaning and historical contexts, with an emphasis on their usage in scribal schools, to reveal the text's historical background.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study examined the significance and application of educational terminology in ancient Israel as presented in the introductory passage of the book of Proverbs. This article contributes to historical studies of the ancient education system and biblical studies.

Keywords: didactic wisdom; Hebrew Proverbs; Mishle Shlomo; scribal schools; scribes.

Introduction

The book of *מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה*, which is translated in English as 'Proverbs of Solomon', imparts knowledge and education by exploring the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel. The wisdom literature of Israel is a distinctive tradition that provides insight into the wisdom of life and its relationship with the God of Israel. In my book, *Analysing the connection between Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions*, I explored ancient Israelite wisdom through the writings of Zenger and Frevel, specifically by examining the role of wisdom as practical knowledge pertaining to life [Zunächst wird die Weisheit als praktisches Wissen über das Leben kategorisiert] (cf. Mandey 2023:40; Zenger & Frevel 2012:407–408). This aligns with Curtis' (2017:24) perspective that in the Hebrew bible, wisdom is frequently linked to the practical ability to attain certain objectives, rather than merely gaining knowledge or developing theories. The wisdom found in the bible, as opposed to the wisdom of the neighbouring nations of Israel, is characterised by its consistent use of phrases such as 'fear of the Lord', its acknowledgement of God's guidance and its understanding that true wisdom originates from God (Curtis 2017:27).

Within the domain of literature, the book of Proverbs is categorised as wisdom literature. This book exemplifies the features of the wisdom literature more distinctly than any other portion of the Hebrew bible. The primary components of the book of Proverbs consist of guidelines for practical ethics, which were of particular interest to the 'wise' individuals. Cohen (1967:xi) asserts that the text includes discussions on moral philosophy that illustrate the teaching material delivered by educators to their students. Many specific themes in Proverbs can be found in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. However, while the collections may have some overlapping themes, the biblical material stands out because of its requirement of a personal belief in God (Ross 2008:26). According to Cohen (1967:xii), it is likely that Proverbs was not written by a single author but rather is a compilation of ethical writings that originated during the time of Solomon. These writings were first edited during the period of Hezekiah and were later finalised with the addition of more content, possibly by the *סופרים*, who were the scribes that followed Ezra.

Chapters 1–9 of the book of Proverbs contain instructional material that can be classified as 'teaching'. In contrast to the concise aphorisms found in Proverbs 10:1–22:16, the instructions are overtly pedagogical (Horne 2003:19). The book of Proverbs prominently focusses on the topic of education, as seen from even a little examination. The teacher's voice emanates from the pages, addressing his students (Estes 1997:13). This article will focus on Proverbs 1 verses 1–7, which can

Read online:


Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

be categorised not merely as wisdom literature, but more accurately as didactic wisdom in ancient Israel. The *Sitz im Leben* of this text will also be analysed in relation to the theory of the emergence and development of scribal schools or scribal education in ancient Israel.

Socio-historical background of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7

Comprehending the socio-historical context of the book of Proverbs poses certain difficulties. As Perdue describes, 'Any attempt to provide some social and historical background to Proverbs is fraught with peril' (Perdue 1997:79). However, Dell (2009:229) tries to analyse the dating of Proverbs 1–9 which is attributed to the period of the Israelite exile or the immediate aftermath. According to her, it is crucial to differentiate between the oral and written stages of the content. These chapters may contain oral transmissions that existed before the exilic or post-exilic period, when a final form may have been achieved (Dell 2009:229). The manner of guidance to young men in this setting serves as an obvious educational tool, with the knowledgeable acting as their mentors to guide them in navigating life's complexities. Moreover, there exists a significant religious framework and profound theological concepts that unequivocally establish the Israelite God YHWH as the focal point of interest. YHWH is portrayed as guiding the pursuit of wisdom, orchestrating the events and manifesting his presence through the embodiment of Wisdom (Dell 2009:240).

I am uncertain regarding the precise date of the emergence of the book of Proverbs, as the linguistic evidence does not provide more insights into its historical context. Nevertheless, the inquiry that arises in this article pertains to the social and historical setting of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7. An interpretation that can be associated with the overarching framework of the book of Proverbs, especially Proverbs 1 verses 1–7, is the notion that the text originated inside an educational setting (cp. Shupak 1987). This is evident in the terminology pertaining to the educational context. Its interpretation may extend farther; however, its application signifies a formal context, specifically an educational institution, exemplified by *the scribal school with wisdom materials in ancient Israel* (Gottwald 1987:568).¹ This article will further explore the text of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 from the perspective that the terminology employed specifically pertains to the context of scribal schools.

Textual analysis of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7

Translation of the text

The main source of this translation is the Masoretic text of the Codex Leningradensis (Codex L). Textual criticism is not carried out in depth because the significance of the differences in textual variants is not too great in this section. The usual source of comparison of the main textual

1. Gottwald contends that one of the sociohistoric horizons of wisdom in ancient Israel was state scribalism that was centred in the royal court schools.

variants with the Septuagint (LXX) as the first translated text from Hebrew to Greek was not necessary as the textual differences in the LXX Greek translation were not found to be significant for this discussion. The exception is the Aramaic Syriac (S) copy found in 1:3 – more on the S textual variant in this verse will be discussed in the analysis of this section (see Table 1).

Analysis of the text

Structure and style of the text

The structure of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 (Introduction to the book of Proverbs) can be described as follows:

Verse 1: Book title.

Verse 2: The opening of the introductory section – the purpose of the proverbs, especially for pupils in the scribal school.

Verse 3: The purpose of proverbs: usage in the scribal schools.

Verse 4: The purpose of proverbs: usage in the scribal schools – specifically to the new and young students.

Verse 5: Expectation of wisdom: usage in the scribal schools.

Verse 6: The purpose of proverbs: usage in the scribal schools – learning from the seniors.

Verse 7: The closing of the introductory section – the main motto of the book.

This section can be characterised as an introduction, either to the collection of proverbs in chapters 1–9 or to the entire book of Proverbs (Gemser 1963:18; Müller 2000:22). The emergence of this text (1 vv. 1–7) requires further analysis concerning its historical context, as this text exhibits a distinct textual form in contrast to the remainder of the book (Müller 2000:23). This introduction portion exhibits a writing style akin to that of the ancient Egyptian wisdom tradition, particularly resembling the prose of the book of Proverbs, characterised by lengthy phrases that encompass both the title and the intended aim and benefits (Gemser 1963:18). Therefore, the designation *מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלָמָה* [Solomon's proverbs] should not be

TABLE 1: English translation from Hebrew text.

English translation	Hebrew (Masoretic text)
1. The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel	מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלָמָה בֶּן־דָּוִיד קֶדֶגֶן יְהוָנָן:
2. To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of understanding	לְלַعֲנָת חַכְמָה וּמוֹדָר קְבָדָן אַמְלִי בִּינָה:
3. To receive instruction of the intelligence, ^a righteousness and just judgement, and uprightness	לְלַעֲנָת מוֹדָר הַשְׁבָּל אַזְקָד אַמְשָׁלָת וּצְדִיקָה:
4. To give intelligence to the naïve (young), and knowledge and wisdom to the young	לְתַחַת לְפָתָחָה עֲרָמָה לְעֵנֶר גָּעַת וּמִזְמָה:
5. That the wise may hear and increase in learning, and that the understanding ones may obtain counsels	יִשְׁמַע חֲכָם וַיַּסְפֵּר לְלַעֲנָת וְנוּבָר תְּחִכּוֹת יִקְנָה:
6. To understand proverbs and parables, the words of wise (men), and their riddles	לְבָבוֹן אַשְׁלָל וְאַלְאָה דְּבָרִי תְּבָלָלִים וְחִידָה:
7. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction	רָאַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר גָּעַת חַכְמָה אַזְגָּדָה אַזְגָּדָה בָּבָה:

^a מִזְמָה = S: *mrwt' wdhlt* מִזְמָה = upbringing and cleverness. In BHQ (Biblia Hebraica Quinta), this variant seems not to be so important (cf. De Waard 2008).

construed literally; it rather be understood more in relation to the nature of Solomon's proverbs and his authority instead of the origin of authorship (Gemser 1963:18).

I believe that Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 was composed later than the primary sections of the book of Proverbs. The majority of the reasons are related to its more developed theological position compared to the other sections (cp. Dell 2006:18). The view regarding historical precision in a particular historical event in ancient Israel is considered too speculative to determine the emergence of this text. This is because the first part of the book of Proverbs does not provide specific information about events related to the history of the Hebrew Scriptures or the history of Israel and its surroundings (Dell 2006:18). Consequently, I maintain that the introduction in chapter 1 verses 1–7 was composed after the remainder of the book. Another reason is that the distinct linguistic style implies that the content precedes, followed by the preface, which elucidates the authority and intent of the proverbs within this book.

We will examine the topic of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 in detail through a discussion on each verse in this section.

Verse 1

מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶּן־צְדָקָה פָּלָךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

The tradition of Solomon's authority is maintained in the naming of the book. This is associated with the tradition of the wise King Solomon, which can be linked to the main purpose of the early part of the book of Proverbs: the purpose of education by wisdom (Whybray 1994:11). The meaning of the word *מִשְׁלֵי* comes from the root *מִשְׁלָל* itself, which is commonly translated as 'proverbs'. It could also be translated as 'allegory' or 'parable'. In this regard, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki argues: 'מִשְׁלָה דְּבוּרָה גָּדוֹת וּמִשְׁלָלִים. כֹּל הַתּוֹרָה בְּאֶשְׁתָּה טוֹבָה וּמִשְׁלָל' [all his words {i.e. *the words of the author of this text*} are illustrations and allegories. He compares {*מִשְׁלֵי*} the Torah to a good woman, and he compares idolatry to a prostitute] (Yitzhaqi 1075:1).

One way to comprehend the word *מִשְׁלֵי* is by the explanation provided by Cohen (1967), for instance:

The English title *Proverbs* is the rendering of the Hebrew *mishlē*, a term which has a variety of significations. It corresponds to the word 'proverb' in 1 Sam. x. 12, xxiv. 14. Other meanings are: 'a prophetic discourse' (Num. xxiii. 7, 18, etc.; Isa. xiv. 4; Micha ii. 4); 'parable, allegory' (Ezek. xvii. 2, xxi. 5, xxiv. 3) and this is probably its sense in 1 Kings v. 12; 'ethical aphorism' (Job xiii. 12, xxvii. 1, xxix. 1; Eccles. xii. 9). It is mainly in this last connotation that the word is attached to this book. (p. xii)

Parallel with Cohen's perspective, Longman contended that the term *מִשְׁלֵי* is unique and may possess many interpretations (Longman 2006:99). However, the root word of *מִשְׁלֵי* actually signifies 'to compare' in the *hif'il* form. This parallels the Akkadian root *mšl*, which also signifies the meaning of

'to compare' (eds. Botterweck, Ringgren & Fabry 1984:70). The aforementioned connotation of 'comparison' gives rise to the definition of 'proverbs' as wisdom literature that juxtaposes themes of knowledge through allegories or parables. This section represents the initial part of the text and functions as both the title of Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 and the title of the entire book.

Verse 2

לְקַנְעַת חָכְמָה וּמוֹפֵר לְהַבְּזָן אִמְרִי בִּינָה:

To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of understanding.

Following the description of the book's authority and title, verse 2 subsequently presents the proverbs' purpose as a guide (Keefer 2020:2). The necessity for knowledge [דעת] of wisdom [חכמה], instruction or moral teaching [מוסר], and instructional material (words of understanding [בינה] (אִמְרִי בִּינָה) is articulated as fundamental prerequisites for the reader to effectively comprehend the proverbial content derived from these elements (Keefer 2020:3). Verse 2 serves as the commencement of this introduction segment, paralleling the diction employed in 1 verses 1–7 – which concludes the introductory portion and encapsulates the book's principal motto. The term 'to know' [דעת] in this context might be interpreted as a variant of 'to study', particularly concerning the realm of scribal education.

חכמה, a major notion in wisdom literature, is frequently associated with the phrase 'knowing' [דעת], which appears 37 times in the book of Proverbs. The phrase דעת is consistently interpreted as 'knowledge' (v. 4b), and together with חכמה establishes the overall framework for the other terms (Horne 2003:25). The terms 'מוסר' and 'בינה' represent the lexicon of ancient wisdom and reflect a rigorous educational regimen that fosters a disciplined and rigorous intellectual mindset. מוסר is often associated with the Egyptian term *sbjt*, which means 'instruction'. This is linked to the need for openness and willingness to listen to the student (see verse 5), as well as the requirement to obey the teacher's authority (McKane 1970: 263–264) in the context of the scribal school in ancient Israel.

The employment of these phrases inside the literary framework serves as an opening segment, yet their significance and role in context explain the intent behind the use of these proverbs, that is in the scribal school. They are acquainted with the essence and basis of learning: חכמה, followed by the study of morality in the form of מוסר, which must thereafter be comprehended through the explanation of the words of understanding, אִמְרִי בִּינָה, as provided by their instructors.

Verse 3

לְקַנְעַת מוֹפֵר הַשְׁפֵּל אָזְקָה אֶמְשָׁפֵט וּמִשְׁרִירִים:

To receive instruction of the intelligence (knowledge), righteousness and just judgement and uprightness.

The purpose of the proverbs is further explained in verse 3. The word מוסר is understood not only as 'instruction' and

'upbringing' but also as 'discipline'² (cf. Gemser 1963:19). In the form of a construct noun, it is directly linked to the next word, **השכל** (understood as a specific type of knowledge). However, text variant S translates one phrase מושר השלל into Syriac Aramaic with two separate objects, namely with **אַתָּה** or **מְוֹרָתָה וְדָהֲלָתָה** (Hebrew: **מוֹסֵר וְהַשְׁכֵל**) ('instruction and the intelligence'). I prefer the Masoretic version as the purpose is to give a set of instruction [**מוֹסֵר**] based on the intelligence [**הַשְׁכֵל**].

Rabbi Moshe Qimkhi (ReMaQ), in his commentary on the book of Proverbs,³ sees the word **השכל** as having undergone a copyist's distortion. It should be a verb and not a noun: 'שם הפועל והוא חסר ו' (it should be) a verb, and lacks the form ו' (Qimkhi 1155:3), meaning that the word **השכל** should be read as **וַיִּשְׁכַּל** [that they may become clever]. However, Qimkhi's argument lacks philological evidence and has no support from other ancient manuscripts. The next clause is associated with the social actions of **צדק** [righteousness in societal norms], **משפט** [justice of judgement] and **מישרים** [honesty – social relations with others] (Gemser 1963:19; Yitzhaqi 1075:3). These three terms should be regarded as essential social abilities for the scribes' inclusion in an elite social group of ancient Israel.

The *Hiphil* infinitive [**השכל**] denotes the outcome or consequence in the genitive case: discipline yields prudent life, which refers to smart conduct or sound judgement. To act cautiously is synonymous with acting circumspectly (Ross 2008:48–49). The three phrases that come after **צדק**, **משפט** and **מישרים** are adverbial accusatives of manner, indicating how the actions of the prudent are demonstrated. These three tests serve as safeguards against the misuse of wisdom and intelligence (Ross 2008:49). The third quality is 'equity' [meaning 'fairness'] – the term **מישר**, derived from the word **ישר**, meaning upright or straight, can be used to indicate something that is aesthetically beautiful (Ross 2008:49). The follower of Proverbs will gain self-control, which will lead to a wise and cautious lifestyle, and this lifestyle will be exemplified by the practice of righteousness, justice and fairness (Ross 2008:49).

The students at the scribal schools are additionally supplied with the following objects: **מוֹסֵר**, **צדק**, **משפט**, **מישרים**, and **מִזְרִים**. Consequently, the situation inside the scribal schools is elucidated by the ongoing provision for pupils to acquire instruction grounded in wisdom [**חכמָה**]. These objects are seen as more evidence of the education they gained at the institution of scribal training.

2. German: 'discipline'.

3. This commentary is often attributed to Ibn Ezra's work because of its philological model of interpretation.

Verse 4

לְתֹתֵת לְפָתָאִים עַרְמָה לְנָעַר דָּעַת וַיּוֹדֵה:

To give intelligence to the naïve (young), and knowledge and wisdom to the young.

The teaching of the sages is necessary for naïve and innocent youths in a unique manner (Murphy 1998:4). This term **פתאים** [inexperienced] refers to individuals who lack knowledge or guidance. It is used in a neutral manner to suggest a need for training. In verse 22, it is used with a negative connotation. The Hebrew term seems to indicate those who are receptive to influence and can be easily guided (Toy 1959:7), especially if we connect it with the context of the early learners of scribal skills.

The term **ערמה** [prudence] is employed in a negative connotation of cunning or deceit, similar to the alluring serpent mentioned in Genesis 3:1; however, here it denotes 'cunning' or 'cleverness', which serves as a protection against being deceived (Cohen 1967:2).

The parallel word for youth [**נער**] also highlights the concept of immaturity, according to Toy (1959:7). But in my view, both the terms **פתאים** and **נער** denote inexperience; however, they mostly refer to an initial stage of education wherein the pupils lack the experience necessary to acquire the wisdom and moral principles essential for scribes.

These terms **דעת וּזֹמֶה** may combine to produce a hendiadys, which can be interpreted as 'purposive knowledge', specifically referring to the cognitive capacity to create practical and effective plans. This skill is also essential for the inexperienced young people in the society (Ross 2008:49).

The intended audience of this proverb comprises young individuals, specifically two groups: the innocent [**פתאים**] and the youth [**נער**]. The essence of the imparted wisdom is: **ערמה** [intelligence characterised by shrewdness in navigating situations] with **דעת וּזֹמֶה** [knowledge and wisdom, namely early education and excellent judgement] (Yitzhaqi 1075:4). The application of these concepts pertains to their utilisation in institutional contexts. Therefore, this verse may be construed to contain further evidence suggesting that the setting pertains to young students. Not solely for regular students, but particularly for the adolescents in training as scribes and the educated elite in ancient Israel.

Verse 5

יִשְׁמַע חָכָם וַיּוֹסֵף לְלֹחֶךְ אֲנָבָן מִחְכָּלֹת יָקְנָה:

Let the wise may hear and increase in learning, and that the understanding ones may obtain counsels.

Verses 5 and 6 specifically pertain to the individual who possesses wisdom [**חכמָה**]. This suggests a distinct category from what we observed in verse 4, when the focus was on addressing the simple or young person. The wise individual exhibits a higher level of maturity (Longman 2006:98).

What benefits would the wise or knowing individual [בָּנוּן] derive from the subsequent information? First of all, there is a rise in the concept of 'teaching' [לִקְחָה]. This phrase is found in the bible on only nine occasions. The concept suggests that the wise individual will actively improve and amplify their wisdom (Longman 2006:98). The word לִקְחָה, which appears just five times in Proverbs, is derived from the verb 'to take' [לִקַּח], and hence refers to the act of learning (Horne 2003:26).

However, the word we interpret as 'guidance' [חַבְלָוֹת] poses a greater level of complexity in terms of its meaning. This term is infrequently found in the Hebrew bible, primarily appearing in the book of Proverbs (Longman 2006:98). The presence of חַבְלָוֹת demonstrates the wisdom teacher's desire to teach practical skills. McKane associated חַבְלָוֹת with בְּנִלְתָּה meaning 'to bind' and בְּנִילָה meaning 'rope'. The most accurate connections of this formation are likely, as often believed, related to navigation expertise. The term denotes a certain nautical skill, the ability to steer a course across the expansive ocean without discernible markers. This term can also be employed metaphorically to illustrate the difficulty of performing each work accurately and timely (McKane 1970:266).

The focus has shifted from the young social circles and pupils inside the scribal schools to the more experienced social circles and the educators of the institution, referred to as חַכְמָה [wise individuals] and בָּנוּן [understanding individuals, denoting greater expertise]. The material provided to the חַכְמָה [wise man] is a לְקָחָה [lesson – pertaining to an educational context]. The בָּנוּן [person of insight] continues to receive חַבְלָוֹת [counsels] despite possessing adequate material capital.

Verse 6

לְהַבְּנִין אֶמְשָׁל וּמְלִיאָה דְּבָרִי חַכְמָם וְחִידָּה:

To understand proverbs and parables, the words of wise (men) and their riddles.

The use of the word להבין in the *infinitive hif'il* form appears morphologically in 1:2. In such morphological forms, it can give a causative nuance of meaning, that is 'to teach' (Keefer 2020:4). This also illustrates the context of an educational institution, specifically the schools of scribes. The word ממשל appears once again as a continuation of the purpose of 1:1. ממשל still has a similar meaning to מליצה, here translated as 'parable', but refers more to '[dark] saying' (Keefer 2020:5) or 'dark or hidden words' according to Keefer. חידת [riddle] is associated with חכמים [wise men], that is, people who speak the words of the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel with the metaphor (Yitzhaqi 1075:6).⁴

Cohen (1967:2) discusses ממשל in his writing, 'The context suggests that the term here means a form of literary composition unintelligible to the unlearned'. While for מליצה he argues,

4. An exegete of the medieval period, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (Rashi) interprets this phrase 'words of the wise' by linking wisdom and Torah. The ultimate goal is the Torah: 'דְּבָרֵי חַכְמָם וְהַדּוֹתָם. דָּרְשֵׁי רְשָׁמָתוֹת מִקְרָא מְלָא וְסִפְרֵי דָּמְיוֹן וְהַדּוֹתָם' ("the words of the wise": [Those who interpret the Torah metaphorically, complete verses and ellipses, allusions, comparisons and riddles]).

'Some think that "satire" is intended, for the comprehension of which mental alertness is necessary' (Cohen 1967:2). The stem of מליצה seems to denote the action of turning or bending. In Genesis 42 verse 23, an interpreter is described as someone who translates speech from one language to another. This term in this context seems to refer to a phrase or expression that has a symbolic or metaphorical meaning, comparable to a parable. In its lone occurrence in Habakkuk 2 verse 6, it carries the implication of mockery or sarcasm, similar to the way proverbs might be used (Toy 1959:8–9).

The term 'words of the wise' [דְּבָרֵי חַכְמָם] likely pertains more to written compilations of wisdom rather than casual sayings. This aims to enhance the comprehension of profound wisdom regarding the purpose of life, particularly in relation to the scribes' expertise in interpreting and transcribing texts. These wise individuals are the knowledgeable mentors who impart wisdom to the younger generation, specifically the students at the scribal schools. Finally, the prologue mentions 'their enigmas' [חִידָּה], with 'their' referring to the enlightened individuals. Several Hebrew proverbs possess a certain degree of ambiguity, rendering them challenging to comprehend on occasion. This is likely the accurate interpretation of the term [חִידָּה] (Longman 2006:100). This verse continues its explanation in the context of the schools of scribes, notably detailing the relationship between pupils and teachers, as well as their educational resources. Deep learning signifies a riddle (Botterweck & Ringgren 1977:870) that learners must comprehend.

Verse 7

וַיַּרְאֶת יְהֹוָה בְּנֵת חַכְמָה אֶמְשָׁל אֶזְרָאֵלִים בָּזָן פ

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The expression of obedience to God's will is not driven by fear, but rather by a deep respect and reverence for him [יראת יְהֹוָה]. This expression refers to a feeling of deep respect and admiration that is not mixed with servile fear and is completely compatible with ambition, confidence and affection (Cohen 1967:3). Waltke says, '[יראת יְהֹוָה] is the book's theological and epistemological foundation' (Waltke 2004:180–181). Furthermore, the idea of רָאשִׁית might mean, philosophically, 'principal thing' (Waltke 2004:181). It means that the idea of 'fearing God' is the primary focus in initiating the knowledge. Without 'fearing God', acquiring knowledge would be in vain.

As mentioned earlier in the texts, the diction is similar to the opening of verse 2, with three key words: דעת [noun: knowledge, verb: to know], חכמָה [wisdom] and מוסר [instruction]. This also shows the structural connection between verse 2 as the opening of the introductory section of the book of Proverbs and the closing of this section which is also the motto of the whole book. The opposite of this is described by the term אֶזְרָאֵלִים [fools], those who are unwilling to learn and reject wisdom outright with בָּזָן [contempt].

Thus, verse 7 serves as the final segment of the introduction to the book of Proverbs (1 vv. 1–7) and establishes the guiding principle and foundation for the study of this text and its compilation of wisdom, which underpins the education of scribes at their institution. The initial disposition that precedes the acquisition of wisdom is “יִרְאָתָּה” [fear of the LORD or *HaShem*]. Learning and acquiring knowledge and wisdom are impossible without the fear of God.

Conclusion: The connection between the wisdom terminology and the scribal schools

The book of *מִשְׁלָי שֶׁלֶמֶה* [Proverbs of Solomon] compiles precepts of wisdom in the ancient Israelite tradition. The wisdom teachings of Sacred Scripture remain relevant. Every proverb imparts wisdom, guidance and knowledge. This is undoubtedly beneficial in various circumstances, locations, cultures and eras. The perspective articulated in Proverbs 1–9 is predicated on several foundational assumptions that shaped the comprehension of education. The universe is the creation of YHWH, the only God. The entire universe is fundamentally dependent on YHWH for its origin and continued existence (Estes 1997:151).

In the early 20th century, ancient Near Eastern instructional writings were discovered that display comparable lexical, thematic and structural features to the book of Proverbs. The re-evaluation of the literary styles in the book of Proverbs has been initiated to illuminate the educational methods and institutions of ancient Israelites. All of these instructional compositions from the ancient Near East have a common compositional element: a narrative that presents the instructions as the paraphrased utterance of a well-known broadcaster (Vayntrub 2016:98–99). The current version of the book of Proverbs does not have a clear overall narrative structure, and the attribution to Solomon does not indicate that the subsequent talk is a direct quote from him (Vayntrub 2016:99). In its final literary phase, Proverbs 1–9 fulfils an educational function by conveying knowledge to its audience, facilitating their understanding of the content of Proverbs 10–31 regarding different character archetypes, pedagogical aims and references to God (Keefer 2018:2).

Chapter 1 verses 1–7 of the book of Proverbs elucidates the purpose of ancient Israel's knowledge, particularly the wisdom compiled inside this text. The book's authority is ascribed to King Solomon (1 v. 1), recognised as the wisest ruler of Israel (see the account of King Solomon in 1 Ki vv. 3–4). The author used language associated with wisdom and education, namely: *דעת* [noun: knowledge, verb: to know], *חכמתה* [wisdom], *מוסר* [upbringing], *בינה* [understanding], *ערמה* [intelligence], *יוזה* [wisdom in judging], *לחק* [lesson] and *תחכחות* [judgement]. The aspects of knowledge and education are multifaceted, encompassing several paradigms and profound ideologies. This is exemplified in the vocabulary employed in the elucidation of this section. Moreover, Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 concludes with the principle and

fundamental attribute of wisdom, which is “יִרְאָתָּה” [fear of the LORD]. This final portion asserts that all matters pertaining to wisdom and education ought to be grounded in a connection with God.

Consequently, based on the previously mentioned study, the terminology of Ancient Israelite Didactic Wisdom in Proverbs 1 verses 1–7 can be concisely articulated as follows:

- Verse 1: *מִשְׁלָל* [proverb, parable].
- Verse 2: *דעת* [knowing], *חכמתה* [wisdom], *מוסר* [instruction, discipline], *אמרי בינה* [words of understanding].
- Verse 3: second *מוסר* [instruction, discipline], *חשכל* [intelligence, knowledge], *צדק* [righteousness], *משפט* [judgement], *מישרים* [honesty].
- Verse 4: *חכמה* [intelligence], second *דעת* [knowledge], *חכמה* [wisdom of sound judgement].
- Verse 5: *חכם* [wise {people}], *לחק* [didactic lesson], *נבו* [understood {people}], *תחכחות* [counsels].
- Verse 6: second *מִשְׁלָה* [proverb, parable], *מִלְיצָה* [parable], *דבר חכמים וחידות* [words of wise people and their riddles].
- Verse 7: *יִרְאָתָה* [fear of YHWH], third *דעת* [knowledge], second *חכמתה* [wisdom], third *מוסר* [instruction, discipline].

Upon further analysis, the terminology employed can be associated with a specific type of educational training for students, particularly the scribes in ancient Israelite society. These phrases may have served as an ideological impetus, imparting wisdom to early pupils embarking on their education as scribes. Consequently, the terminology employed in this work alludes to the notion of the schools of the scribes. However, the existence of these scribal schools in ancient Israel is a subject of debate. Recent research by Rollston, through an analysis of ‘The Old Hebrew Epigraphic Evidence’ concerning the ‘schools’ of the *סופרים* [scribes], demonstrates that a formal institution indeed existed. However, the term ‘schools’ should be understood as ‘formal, standardised scribal education’, rather than as a type of institution comparable to modern educational establishments. Rollston (2006) writes in his abstract:

Based on the nature of the palaeographic evidence, the orthographic evidence, and the use of hieratic numerals, it is here argued that formal, standardised scribal education was a component of ancient Israelite society during Iron II. (p. 47)

Should the notion of the scribal schools be seen as the *Sitz im Leben* of the text in Proverbs 1:1–7, additional investigation into this institution is imperative. The scribes, or *סופרים* in Hebrew, were skilled writers and copyists of texts. From the etymology of the word, they also produced *ספר*, which denotes the writing of narratives [*ספרים*]. The term *ספר* can also be interpreted as ‘the product of writing’ or even ‘book’. The activities of the *סופרים* are traceable to the period preceding the exile. Jamieson-Drake's research elucidates the activities of scribes and their educational institutions in the region of Judah. However, the structure of these schools is challenging to ascertain with certainty. Jamieson-Drake (1991) argues that:

[T]he evidence suggests that institutions for teaching writing as an integral part of information management and regional control in our period would have been quite different from those which developed in Egypt and Mesopotamia. (p. 154)

The distinctiveness of scribal schools in ancient Israel can be highlighted when contrasted with the tradition of scribal schools in the surrounding region. He pointed out that these schools are not spread across every corner of Israel, but 'schools would be located in Jerusalem, if schools even existed' (Jamieson-Drake 1991:156).

The activities of the Jewish scribes persisted during the monarchy before the exile and extended into the Second Temple era, as evidenced by Schams' research. Nevertheless, Schams (1998) finds it also challenging to determine both the presence and the specific characteristics of the schools associated with these scribes:

Many views on schools, the training of scribes, the production, publication and circulation of books seem too rigid and sometimes too modern to provide an adequate backdrop for the understanding of scribes in ancient Jewish society. (p. 35)

Saldarini's research on the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes suggests a possibility concerning the existence of scribal schools in ancient Israel, 'The sheer necessity for administration in a centralised kingdom demands the hypothesis of scribal schools' (Saldarini 2001:244). To comprehend the structure of the scribal schools in ancient Israel, one may reference the model of the scribal schools in Egypt, despite notable differences as already highlighted. Saldarini (2001) also posits this type of education in ancient Egypt, as he writes:

In Egypt boys were brought to the court or temple and trained to read and write. Practice ostraca found behind one temple testify to an open air schools and one text suggests that initial training took four years. (p. 243)

Considering the analysis that suggests the schools of scribes would have existed in ancient Israelite society, I conclude that the schools provided an early education. This is attributable to the terminology employed in Proverbs 1 verses 1–7. Not only providing training on writing and copying ancient texts, one type of material for the scribal schools could also be grounded on wisdom. The significance of the first provision of education with wisdom is demonstrated by verses 2–6, which also provide the background of the use of the terminology of wisdom within the scribes' formal education. Wisdom was essential as a fundamental asset for becoming a significant component of ancient Israelite society. Verse 2 serves as the preamble to the introductory portion, elucidating the purpose of the proverbs, particularly for students in the scribal institutions. Verse 3 presents the fundamental essence of wisdom. Verse 4 thereafter concentrates on the early learners, the youth who commenced their studies in these scribal institutions. Subsequently, verse 5 represents an advanced skill that remains essential in the context of wisdom. Verse 5 represents the apex of the discourse on the necessity of wisdom for the pupils, indicating that wisdom is transmitted from the senior educators to the students. Consequently, wisdom emerged as the fundamental capital in education for the erudite, particularly for the scribes, who constituted the elite segment of society with extensive educational expertise.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.E.C.M. was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing of the article. P.E.S. was responsible for conceptualisation, writing of the article and funding acquisition.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Botterweck, G.J. & Ringgren, H. (eds.), 1977, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testamente*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart.
- Botterweck, G.J., Ringgren, H. & Fabry, H.-J. (eds.), 1984, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testamente*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart.
- Cohen, A., 1967, *Proverbs: Hebrew text and English translation with an introduction and commentary*, 4th edn., The Soncino Press (Soncino Books of the Bible), London.
- Curtis, E., 2017, *Interpreting the wisdom books: An exegetical handbook*, Kregel Publication (Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis), Grand Rapids, MI.
- De Waard, J., 2008, *Proverbs*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft (Biblia Hebraica Quinta 17: Proverbs), Stuttgart.
- Dell, K.J., 2006, *The Book of Proverbs in social and theological context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Dell, K.J., 2009, 'Proverbs 1–9: Issues of social and theological context', *Interpretation* 63(3), 229–240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430906300302>
- Estes, D.J., 1997, *Hear, my son: Teaching and learning in Proverbs 1–9*, Inter-Varsity Press (New Studies in Biblical Theology 4), Downers Grove, IL.
- Gemser, B., 1963, *Sprüche Salomos*, Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Gottwald, N.K., 1987, *The Hebrew Bible: A socio-literary introduction*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Horne, M.P., 2003, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary), Macon.
- Jamieson-Drake, D.W., 1991, *Scribes and schools in Monarchic Judah: A socio-archaeological approach*, Almond (JSOT) Press, Sheffield.
- Keefer, A.J., 2018, 'The didactic function of Proverbs 1–9 for the interpretation of Proverbs 10', PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge.

Keefer, A.J., 2020, *Proverbs 1–9 as an introduction to the Book of Proverbs*, T&T Clark, London.

Longman, T., III, 2006, *Proverbs*, Baker Academic (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament – Wisdom and Psalms), Grand Rapids, MI.

Mandey, J., 2023, 'Die Koheletische Denkbewegung' Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Weisheit und Apokalyptik im hellenistischen Zeitalter, LIT Verlag (Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel), Berlin.

McKane, W., 1970, *Proverbs: A new approach*, SCM Press Ltd (Old Testament Library), London.

Müller, A., 2000, *Proverbien 1–9: Der Weisheit neue Kleider*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.

Murphy, R.E., 1998, *Proverbs*, Nelson Reference & Electronic (Word Biblical Commentary 22), Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Perdue, L., 1997, 'Wisdom theology and social history in Proverbs 1–9', in M.L. Barre (ed.), *Wisdom, you are my sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the occasion of his eightieth birthday*, vol. 29, pp. 78–101, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, Bath.

Qimkhi, M., 1155, *Commentary on Proverbs*.

Rollston, C.A., 2006, 'Scribal education in ancient Israel: The old Hebrew epigraphic evidence', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (344), 47–74. <https://doi.org/10.1086/BASOR25066977>

Ross, A.P., 2008, *Proverbs. The expositor's Bible commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah*, vol. 6, T. Longman, III & D.E. Garland (eds.), Zondervan (The Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised Edition 6), Grand Rapids, MI.

Saldarini, A.J., 2001, *Pharisees, scribes and saducees in Palestinian society: A sociological approach*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Schams, C., 1998, *Jewish scribes in the second-temple period*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.

Shupak, N., 1987, 'The "Sitz im Leben" of the Book of Proverbs in the light of a comparison of biblical and Egyptian wisdom literature', *Revue Biblique* (1946-) 94(1), 98–119, viewed 1 July 2024, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44088840>.

Toy, C.H., 1959, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, T&T Clark (The International Critical Commentary), Edinburgh.

Vayntrub, J.E., 2016, 'The Book of Proverbs and the idea of ancient Israelite education', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 128(1), 96–114. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaw-2016-0009>

Waltke, B.K., 2004, *The Book of Proverbs chapters 1–15*, William B. Eerdmans (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament), Grand Rapids, MI.

Whybray, R.N., 1994, *The composition of the Book of Proverbs*, JSOT Press (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 168), Sheffield.

Yitzhaqi, S., 1075, *Commentary on Proverbs*.

Zenger, E. & Frevel, C., 2012, 'Die Bücher der Weisheit', in E. Zenger (ed.) *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 8th edn., pp. 407–416, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart.