

SAPIENTIAL INSTRUCTIONS TO ‘MY SONS’ (PROVERBS 1-7; 31:2) IN AFRO-NIGERIAN EXISTENTIAL ENVIRONMENT

Essay in Honour of Emeritus Professor Hendrik L. Bosman

By

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Abstract

The role of wisdom in the upbringing of ‘my sons’ is underscored in the book of Proverbs at a literary level (Proverbs 1-7; 31:2) and is here interpreted and applied to the Nigerian existential environment. There is an inexorable link between obedience to parental, formal or informal instructions and the inculcation of social and moral values of accountability, integrity and responsibility in ‘my sons’. This could be true of the social world of Proverbs, but hardly so in the Nigerian existential environment. The problems of cultural hybridity, identity and mimesis still stares Nigerian youths in the face and can hopefully be addressed using a literary-critical analysis of our pericope. It could serve as an expository tool for inculcating accountability, integrity and responsibility in ‘my sons’ if interpreted from a perspective resonating with the sapiential heritage of Nigerian society. The fact that youths who are amenable to discipline and instruction at the familial, collegiate and/or rabbinical levels are more likely to mature and become morally sound, responsible and accountable citizens are underscored in the findings. While it recommends parental instructions in motivating the youth towards moral excellence and creativity, the imperatives of self-discipline on the part of the latter are stressed. It concludes by highlighting the importance of expositions of wisdom literature at familial, formal and collegiate levels to enable ‘my sons’ grow into morally sound and spiritually mature members of the society.

Keywords: Discourse, Sapiential, Hybridity, Mimesis, Youth, Discernment and Plurality

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is written in honour of a brilliant and indefatigable Old Testament Biblical scholar, Emeritus Professor Hendrik L. Bosman¹. It is based on a theme: ‘my sons’ from an Old Testament *pericope* in the book of Proverbs (Prov.1-7; 31:2). Proverbs is literally defined as short, pithy folk sayings; consisting of oracles, parables and taunts. The book is uniquely transcendental in application and transnational in scope. They are intended to convey truth to the ordinary mind in a quick, illustrative and often familiar tone.² They instill discernment, discipline, prudence and wisdom. When its teachings are adopted and its precepts imbibed, efficient and good character is the result. Obedience to godly parental instructions yields understanding, knowledge and discernment. These are qualities so desperately desired in Nigerian youths today.

On *prima facie* assessment the authorship of the book of Proverbs is variously assigned to a King Solomon son of David among many eponymous others. Apparently, the moral dilemma associated with palace turmoil, intrigues and conflicts brought upon the house of David in the aftermath of David’s love affair with Bathsheba have not gone unnoticed by the one who was more or less a compromise child!³. Neither the historical evidence nor the literary style supports any ascription of wholesale single authorship.⁴ Harrison⁵ has pointed out however that some sections of the book which include Pro.10:1-22:16 is of considerable antiquity and could not but be Solomon’s. Regardless of authorial plurality, ethics and morality is of primary concern to the authors of Proverbs.⁶ This section consists of about three hundred and seventy-five proverbs most of them

¹ The author studied under the celebrant Emeritus Professor Hendrik L. Bosman in the Department of Old and New Testament University of Stellenbosch in a Masters and later Doctoral program. He served as Research Assistant and now as a Fellow of the Department.

² Harrison R. K. (2009) *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 1010-1011 lays emphasis on this point.

³ Ahiamadu A. E. (1993) *Ministerial Impressions* see also 2 Sam. 12:24-25; Acts 7:47

⁴ Brown, Fitzmeyer and Murphy (2007) *The New Jerome ...*p. 448

⁵ Harrison, (2009) p. 1020

⁶ Harrison, (2009), p.1020

unrelated.⁷ Our pericope captures the opening instructions to ‘my sons’ in Proverbs 1–7 (see 3:15-18) which are more or less prologues, while Pro. 31:2 is part of its sprawling epilogue.

II. FORMAL INSTRUCTIONS IN WISDOM LITERATURE

During the first Temple era, wisdom’s fame attracted to Solomon the presence of learners from far and wide particularly from the surrounding ancient Near Eastern world of his day. This in the opinion of scholars could not be unconnected with the royal and court concerns in ancient Near Eastern kingdoms, including ancient Israel. Collegiate as this was, the instructions were skewed to coach the young ones, not only in the art of governance and administration but also in the avoidance of evil and in the maintenance of personal decorum and hygiene.

A. Formal Instructions in Proverbs

Hans Heinrich Schmidt⁸ is one Biblical scholar who also affirms that ancient Near Eastern wisdom, collegiate as it was generally had parental and formal inputs as the case may be, rather than just being oral and pragmatic. This formal and parental nature of wisdom informs the instructions extant in our pericope. Furthermore, Schmidt counters the frequent claim that wisdom is non-historical. However, wisdom is certainly not mythical, nor devoid of ever-valid truths. The former may appeal to an ancient Near Eastern audience, while the latter would carry the insignia of Greek philosophical orientation.

Interestingly, Wisdom does not shy away from the realities of the existence of evil. It observes that evil has one sole purpose in mind, and that is to take away the lives of those who practice it and those who go after ill-gotten wealth. Children should therefore be hedged in by the discipline and nurture of concerned parents. Ben Sirach⁹ further mentions a ‘home of instruction’ where Sages impart Wisdom to “my sons”. In fact, children who lack the discipline and nurture necessary to live a prudent life end up as ‘fools’, ‘mockers’, and as ‘simple ones. Conversely, they end up receiving the Spirit of God as they ruminate on parental counsel (Pro. 1:20-23, 24-27). Proverbs describes the simple as wayward, as fools who hate knowledge, and as loving complacency.

⁷ Harrison (2009) p. 1016-1017.

⁸ H. Schmidt 1972 *Die Thronfahrt Jahoes* in S.H. Hooke (ed) *Myth and Ritual* 1983

⁹ Sirach, Jesus ben. Ecclesiasticus (Sir. 51:23) in the *Apocrypha*.

Similarly, mockers are those who ignore all God's advice and who spurn his rebuke (Pro. 1:22-30; cf. 21:24; 9:7-8; 22:10; 29:8; 13:1; 15:12). Neither a formal nor an informal setting may add or subtract the value of careful parental instruction as we shall see presently.

B. Wisdom in Informal Settings

Schmidt¹⁰ summarizes the use of proverbs in the informal sector as a three-step processes of observation, interpretation or sifting and application. This he applies to the existential problem of “evil” along with a prescription of how to avoid it which is clearly of major concern in sapiential literatures. Moreover, it is such informal features of Wisdom that resonates with the Afro-Nigerian sapiential culture and *orature*.¹¹ The home serves as the focal point from which theologies and moral instructions originate and are dispensed for the benefit of “my sons” – the youths.¹² This mostly is supplemented by yet a secondary source of wisdom, namely popular sayings or folk wisdom. Evidences of these abound before, during and after the Kingdom era in Israel (see Judg. 8:2, 21; 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kgs 20: 11). Our pericope apparently captures the Sages' concern for “my sons” who ought to be as disciplined, humble, prudent and wise¹³ as the Joseph of Egyptian fame (Gen.37-46).

Returning to our earlier argument, Gerhard von Rad¹⁴ has convincingly argued that the older wisdom of Proverbs was both of formal and informal origin. Moreover, it rested securely in a context where the main lines of historical faith could be discernible. Hence the wisdom teachers

¹⁰ H. Schmidt 1972 *Die Thronfahrt Jahoes* in S.H. Hooke (ed) *Myth and Ritual* 1983

¹¹ A popular parlance for or oral communication or oral-literature (*ora-ture*) introduced by the popular Nigerian Nobel prize laurette Wole Shoyinka in his book *...sand the man died* (1968).

¹² J. L. Crenshaw 2005: *Wisdom and Authority: Sapiential Rhetoric and its Warrants. V.T. Supplement* 32 (1980), p.29.

¹³ For a discussion of the Joseph narratives in Genesis as of Wisdom genre see Gerhard von Rad (1984) “The Joseph narrative and ancient wisdom” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays (E.W.T. Dickens trans. London SCM Press, 293-294* cited in Philip A. Nggada (2018) “The Use of Old Testament Wisdom Literature in Practical Life: An African Reflection” in Tambiyi and Dan-Fulani *Rethinking Biblical Studies in Africa – Essays in honour of Danny Keith McCain* (Jos: African Christian Textbooks press) pp. 360 -361

¹⁴ Gerhard von Rad (1972) *Wisdom in Israel* Nashville: Abingdon

could devote themselves to the uncharted areas of daily life that lay along the highway of historical faith. More than that, von Rad¹⁵ has drawn attention to three kinds of explicit theological statements in the older sections of Proverbs: First, Proverbs with the central theme of **accountability** to God in all human actions (e.g., Pr. 2:1; 4:10, 12; 6:1, 3; 31:1-2). Second, Proverbs dealing with the **integrity** of conduct as a prerequisite to divine favour (e.g., Prov. 1:8, 10, 15, 17, 16; 5:20, 23; 7:1, 4) much like the Deuteronomist would say. Third, most telling theologically is a group of Proverbs speaking of human **responsibility** in the midst of God's sovereign rule over the family (e.g., Pro. 3:1,21-22; 5:1,2; 6:20,22; 7:1-4 etc.). This can easily be mistaken for fatalism, but it is not. There is the freedom to act on the part of the youth, which is embedded in wise actions and within the limits of God's sovereignty.

III. ACCOUNTABILITY, INTEGRITY AND RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH SAPIENTIAL INSTRUCTIONS (PROV. 1-7; 31:2)

The parental instructions given to “my sons” is to elicit a wholehearted response “in truth and in spirit” (Pr.2:1-5; Ps.119:11; Job 28:12; Jn. 4:24). Moreover, there are three vital weapons - discretion, understanding and wisdom – which are indispensable for spurning perverseness and for maintaining a godly path. These weapons when correctly applied helps the youth to keep good company. It also facilitates the objective of making room for everyone to live happily in the land (Pro.2:20-22; Psa.9:17). These are the sapiential instructions which translate into an accountable, responsible and integrated lifestyle to which we now turn.

A) Instilling Accountability

In order to strengthen the resolve of “my sons”, motive-clauses are added to enable the prohibitions of an unaccountable life become even clearer (Pro.2:1-2; 4:10, 12; 6:1-3; 31:1-2). Wisdom is the foundation upon which all God's creation stands, and “my sons” must stand thereon in an accountable manner bearing in mind the Divine image and likeness. Divine wisdom continues to demand for a life of accountability in an on-going anthropomorphic and fiduciary order. In the embrace of Wisdom (i.e., in the knowledge and actualization of sapiential teachings) by “my sons” this attribute is by the ‘students’ embodied in the same cosmic knowledge which the Creator shares with the creatures. In other words, God's creation and government of the universe is implemented

¹⁵ Gerhard von Rad (1972) *Wisdom in Israel* Nashville: Abingdon

through humans and particularly the youth in an atmosphere in which accountability is allowed to flourish. To be accountable both to God and fellow humans, Nigerian youths would of necessity acquire the nurture and admonition of concerned parents, mentors and instructors who eagerly build on the Creator's precepts and postulates so to speak. As stated in the holy oracles "children obey your parents in the Lord...the first commandment with a promise" (Exo. 20:12; Eph. 6:1-3).

B) Fostering Integrity

Similarly, the pithy sayings of Proverbs 1:8,10,15-17; 4: 10-12; 5:20-23; 7:1,4) are styled as addresses from the older generation to the younger, from the wise teacher to "my son." This stands in some sharp contrast to the priestly instructions that follow later. They, too, apply at times to Israelites in general, as for example, when they insist on healthy living and ritual correctness for longevity and stability.

Wisdom and foolishness are seen as dimensions of character more than labels of individual actions (Pro.3: 21; 4:20; 5:1; 7:24). Individual acts of integrity, wise or foolish, contribute to the balance and imbalance of human affairs. It is the attentiveness of the youth to parental or collegiate instructions that helps in strengthening the moral fabric for the achievement of seemingly impossible feats by the youth. In Israel, the human relationships are not outside of God's oversight. However, only the disciplined and attentive youth may likely attain to a life of integrity and success. This includes acts on the natural and the supernatural plane as the case might be. Integrity is indeed at the centre of human character building and is indispensable to youth moral efficiency and social identity within of course the created or natural order.

C) Managing Responsibility

Wisdom's emphasis on the value of responsibility through "service and sacrifice" (Pr.3:1, 21-22; 5:1, 2; 6:20-22; 7:1, 4) is noteworthy. It is only as youths yield to a self-giving service to God and to fellowmen, that they fulfil the ultimate divine purpose. Moreover, learning from Wisdom and applying understanding are both basic to the good life envisaged by sages and philosophers. In Proverbs as in real life "practice makes perfect" and better still as the English say "examples are better than precepts" or as the African saying goes "*hne anweye omumu bu ekwna*".¹⁶ The teaching

¹⁶ Literally meaning '*tears often accompany lack of knowledge*'. In other words, and in my own words "*ignorance breeds tears, while learning wipes it*"

by Sages presumably is what gives the young pupils practical instructions in wisdom and also the capacity to tackle life's challenges. The aim is for "my sons" to live out their social and moral lives in an environment of coherent identity, increased responsibility and enhanced integrity. The existential environment in which Nigerian youths live out their lives, espouses the need for insight into the Biblical text (Pro.1-7; 31:2) with a view to addressing some, if not all of those challenges.

IV. "MY SONS" IN NIGERIAN EXISTENTIAL ENVIRONMENT

The Nigerian existential environment is replete with the admonition that one may never attain to the pinnacles of wisdom until one realizes that it is impossible to "know the ascent to and descent from the sky"¹⁷, to "wrap water in linen"¹⁸, or to "scoop water with a straw basket"¹⁹. Raising accountable and responsible youths is arduous without careful formal and informal parental instructions. The triad problems of *identity*, *hybridity* and *mimesis* earn an equally triad solution of accountability, integrity and responsibility through a concerted effort at inculcating in the youths early in life the virtues of spiritual maturity and moral excellence. A continual instruction in the literary style of Proverbs as well as by the African sapiential heritage of communal or "collective memory" is a parental assignment that must be taken seriously.

As already discussed elsewhere in Ahiamadu 2020²⁰, existential issues in the instructional upbringing of youths in Nigeria borders on the tripartite problem of *hybridity*, *identity*, and *mimesis*²¹. For instance, the Nigerian youth suffers from a hybrid (not schizophrenic) nature: *the voice may be Esau's but the body Jacob's*. It consists of youths growing up with a West European orientation in a micro or null African mind-set. In this context, Nigerian youths often have

¹⁷ Wise saying of the Ogba and Ekpeye, Rivers State Nigeria

¹⁸ Wise saying of the Ogba and Ekpeye, Rivers State Nigeria

¹⁹ Wise saying of the Ogba and Ekpeye, Rivers State Nigeria

²⁰ Ahiamadu, Amadi E *Redefining Stewardship of Land and Oil Mineral Resources in Nigeria* (Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers (2020), a reprint of Ahiamadu, Amadi E. *Redefining Stewardship of Land and Oil Mineral Resources IN Nigeria – a Theological and Ethical Response to Oil Minerals Management and Land Use in a Developing Country* (Saarsbrucken, Germany: Lambert Academic Press (2011).

²¹ The author is grateful to the New Testament Professor Jeremy Punt who showed these concepts to me.

leadership roles thrust upon them under the close watch of a gerontocratic or monarchic superstructure²². In this case the ideas are of Western orientation, sublimated and groomed on the norms of an African gerontocracy. Moreover, there are those who associate wisdom with the ability of youths to effectively manage that hybridity both in character and learning. The associated problems of mimesis bear similar scenario with the youths always attempting to mime the more *successful other*²³. Let us discuss these briefly hereunder:

A) Existential Issues of Hybridity, Identity and Mimesis

Our *pericope* portrays a contrast between the constructive ways of wisdom and the destructive paths of violence (1:11-18), immodesty and immorality (2:16-18). The adulteress with her seductive words tries to lure a young man to her house and ultimately to death (chap. 5, 7). The most vulnerable to seductions are the young men caught in the web of a hybrid culture. Although a child of his parents, he is taken away into a public space where other cultures predominate. Like Joseph he could fall under the sway of an ‘imperious whorish woman’ (Prov. 5; Ezek.16:16-20). He could mock at or ignore all God’s advice and spurn His rebuke (1:22-30), or he could be a wise young person who loves knowledge and discipline who frowns at seducers and enticers.²⁴ The aftermath would be a life amenable to accountability, integrity and responsibility, which three are the very antidotes to triad crisis of *hybridity, identity and mimesis*.

1) Issues of hybridity

Hybridity in this context is defined as cross-breeding using two or more agents, in this case African and Western or foreign culture. It depicts an African youth alienated from his own culture and steeped in the use of foreign or European culture. It could lead to all forms of social vices including xenophobia and immorality generally which literally are the antitheses of wisdom (Pr.5, 7). At the heart of parental instructions are the antidotes to social vices such as sexual immorality, indolence,

²² The word ‘superstructure’ is borrowed from Karl Marx (*Das Kapital* 1851) but with a slight difference in in meaning to show that Nigerian youths in leadership roles often have to be sensitive to the ideas of seniors and superiors.

²³ Gerrie Snyman 2012 “The African and Western Hermeneutics Debate: Mimesis, the Book of Esther and Textuality” in *Old Testament Essays* Vol. 25 No. 2 pp. 657-684; see also David Tuesday Adamo 2018 “The Extent to which OTSSA Journal (OTE) Reflects the Indigenous African Culture and Tradition from 2001 – 2016” in *Old Testament Essays* Vol 31 No.1, pp. 42-65.

²⁴ To use a favourite Nigerian parlance by William F. Kumuyi founder and president Deeper Life Bible Church of Nigeria.

and theft to which youths especially are allergic. In the Wisdom sections of Genesis, we see Joseph (Genesis 37, 39-41) shunning a hybrid lifestyle, and instead stuck with personal and corporate integrity. Not the same can be said of Joseph's identity in the land of Egypt.

2) Issues of identity

The role of wisdom in fostering personal and corporate identity and integrity has been emphasized earlier. Gerstenberger²⁵ particularly stresses the holistic nature of wisdom. The identity crisis rocking our youths in Nigeria elicits such a holistic analysis, which space does not permit. It has therefore resulted in an identity crisis at individual and corporate levels which sounds a dismal and confused note²⁶. Wisdom is a universal feature of the human mind when imbued with the Divine afflatus – the creative essence of Deity. This is so only if excellently embodied in primordial values undergirded by mother-tongue communications. The use of indigenous languages enhances the personal and corporate identity of users, and better still if they do so as youth. A concern for coherent identity should at best be proffered, neither should such concerns be seen as mundane or even profane.²⁷ The present trend where everything African is suspect and despised is unhealthy and antithetical to youth personal, positive and corporate identity.

The resources for such a positive identity abound in the book of Proverbs, and especially in our *pericope*. Here we are given a practical application of wisdom to life's realities and as an enhancement of the qualities of a good life on this "terrestrial ball". Qualities such as filial honour, honesty, hard work, chastity, charity and charism and godliness. The parental instructions in Proverbs resounds with the Divine echoes of "do not forget" (Pro. 3:1-4, 5-8) along with assurance of a good understanding. Yet my sons must keep what they have learned constantly in mind, and like "sheep" be constantly chewing and ruminating at it, as it were a curd (Pro.4:1-3, 20-23). One wonders if Nigerian youths can be separable from the seductions of Western media and internet culture without a conscious government policy.

²⁵ Gerstenberger, Erhard (2002) *Theologies in the Old Testament*. London: T & T Clark, 101-134

²⁶ Ahiamadu, Amadi E. (2016) "Imago Dei: Albert Schweitzer's 'Reverence for Life' in Dialogue with African Humanism" in Izak Spangenberg & Christy Landman (eds) *The Legacies of Albert Schweitzer Reconsidered*. Durbanville: AOSIS. p.95.

²⁷ Murphy, Roland E. and Carm O." Introduction to Wisdom Literature" in Brown R.E.; Fitzmyer, Joseph; Murphy, Roland E. and Carm O. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary* London: Burns and Oates (2007) p.449.

3) The issue of mimesis

Miming is an inveterate part of youth because children and youth usually learn by observation and imitation. As so aptly stated in a similar context by this author:

*Nigerian youths mime their Western counterparts in dressing, music, language and art. They are exposed to all forms of foreign dressings and lifestyles, and in so doing compromise the standard values and norms of a healthy and integrated society*²⁸.

Be that as it may, miming could be positive when it ensures the living of the *good life* according to one's means, but especially if it avoids deeds that are evil (Pro. 4:14-17; 6:23; Psa. 36:4; Mic.2:1).

On the other hand, when people discover themselves and become self-actualized, they tend to be less inclined to miming. They live more sublime lives and exhibit more independent capabilities that smacks of accountability, integrity and responsibility. In Ogba and Ekpeye it is often said that “*ebo bu ohna, eto bu ohna*”²⁹ or to put it more succinctly “*ishi ebo a ka ohnu ishi.*”³⁰ Emphasis is on solidarity, and miming is the outcome.

The book of Proverb has a spectacular paedocentric pericope when brought into dialogue with the sapiential *orature* of selected Nigerian communities – namely the Ogba and Ekpeye. Both the ancient and modern sayings often highlight a common concern for family health and public wealth. Of course, the sublimity and altruism that characterizes ancient Hebrew wise sayings also differentiates the former from the contemporary Ogba and Ekpeye ones. Conversely, the latter feature such vulgarity as to make them repugnant to good taste which regrettably space does not allow us to delve into them.

V. CONCLUSION

The link between wisdom and accountability, integrity and responsibility are such a close factor that the book of Proverbs is adept at urging youths and humans in general to incorporate within their lives the teachings of the Book and of the Sage. Usually, spiritual maturity does not spring

²⁸Ahiamadu, Amadi E. “*Imago Dei: Albert Schweitzer’s ‘Reverence for Life’ in Dialogue with African Humanism*” in Izak Spangenberg & Christy Landman (eds) *The Legacies of Albert Schweitzer Reconsidered*. Durbanville: AOSIS (2016) p.95.

²⁹ Literally, ‘two makes a town, three a community’

³⁰ Literally ‘Two heads are better than one’

from an outstanding intellectual giftedness, but is often the product of compliance with parental instructions imbued with communal experiences of faith or what Hendrik Bosman would occasionally describe as “collective memory”³¹. Our pericope (Pro.1-7; 31:2) illustrates popular or folk wisdom as extant in the Writings, but the message comes out clearly that wisdom is a never ending and lifelong quest of which impartation, like charity must begin at home.

When viewed in the context of morals and ethics parental instructions serves as a veritable oral tool for repairing the breach which education without religion could bring upon “my sons”. Moreover, it should be an ongoing process of inculcating sound moral values of integrity, identity and responsibility in the younger generation of Nigerians. This of course would translate into moral upliftment and so transcends the accusation that Nigerian youths are docile. Moreover, careful parental guidance would undermine the divergence between the older and younger generations.

Neither has the present lopsided educational system in Nigeria helped matters. Charity as the old saying goes should begin at home and this to bridge this gap and increase the parental impartation of wisdom to the young. This is necessary for molding the character and identity of Nigerian youths. Moral excellence and spiritual maturity would be the result when youths are brought up by parents who underscore the values of accountability, integrity and responsibility in both domestic and public life. Experience has shown that there are rich sapiential resources in the Nigerian existential environment that can be brought into dialogue with the morality and ethics of the literary traditions as shown in our pericope. The current situation whereby Nigerian youths mime the Western societies make it difficult for them to exert their creative energies in solving both domestic and national problems without depending on the gerontocracy and patriarchal structures of contemporary African societies.

It is however recommended that hybridity must be marched with integrity, identity marched with accountability and mimesis marched with responsibility for a vibrant and proactive youth culture to emerge and reverse the current trend of laxity and exasperation among Nigerian youths. No nation grows into greatness when the younger generation are at best divorced from the sapiential

³¹ Bosman, Hendrik L. “Ants, Spiders or Bees... and Ticks? A Typology of Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa since 1994 within Its African Context” in *Old Testament Essays* Vol. 28 No 3 (2015), pp. 636-654

wealth of their parents, or are at worst abandoned to their own puerile whims and caprices. The same emphasis on parental instructions steeped in religious and spiritual fervour should be embraced at all levels of academic and ecclesiastical experience. This ought to mark Nigeria's sapiential and existential environment today and tomorrow.

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