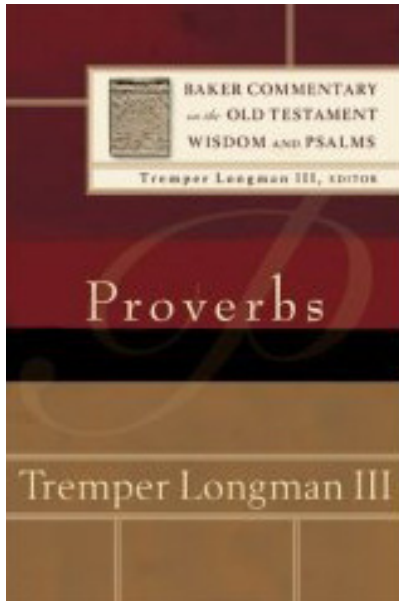


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Longman, Tremper, III

Proverbs

Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms

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Tremper Longman III's commentary is the second in the Baker Commentary on the Old Testament and Psalms series. Longman, who is also the series editor, notes in the series preface that the intended audience of the commentaries includes "scholars, ministers, seminary students, and Bible Study leaders," although they target especially clergy and future clergy (12; see also 16). Besides an author's preface and a list of abbreviations, Longman's work also includes an introduction, a discussion of Proverbs divided into five parts, an appendix that discusses various topics in Proverbs, a bibliography, subject and author indices, and an index of Scripture and other ancient writings.

Longman's introduction treats a wide range of the usual topics, including authorship, date, social setting, ancient Near Eastern background, and more. It likewise includes discussions of matters such as "Reading Proverbs in the Light of the New Testament" and the "Afterlife." These topics, along with the author's institutional setting (Westmont College), the general orientation of Baker, and other clues (e.g., the interest in pointing out the unorthodox christological views of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses [71]), suggests that Longman's primary target audience is not merely pastors and seminarians but especially evangelical Christian pastors and seminarians.

The five sections of the commentary proper treat, in order, Prov 1–9; 10:1–22:16; 22:17–24:34; 25:1–29:27; 30:1–31:31. Longman provides his own translation of Proverbs and includes substantial notes on the Hebrew text. In a section entitled “Interpretation,” Longman offers his commentary on a particular verse or verses and seeks to emphasize “the meaning of the text in its original historical setting” (13). This is followed in part 1 (which treats Prov 1–9) by a section called “Theological Implications,” in which the author notes “connections with other parts of the canon, both OT and NT,” and seeks to sketch “the continuing relevance of each passage for us today” (13). Parts 2–5 do not include a “Theological Implications” section, and the intercanonical connections and contemporary relevance of the verses are offered together with L’s more historical and literary interpretive work. In these sections the author also regularly refers the reader to appropriate sections in the appendix or introduction.

Longman’s commentary possesses a number of strengths. First, his exposition and style of writing is clear and accessible throughout. The commentary also possesses the virtue of keeping his primary audience of especially (evangelical) Christian pastors and seminary students in mind. These readers will likely appreciate Longman’s concern regularly to draw connections between Proverbs and the New Testament and his efforts to point to the significance of different aspects of Proverbs’ teaching for Christians today.

Longman’s translation of Proverbs is also fresh and lively, as evidenced, for example, by his rendering of 29:4: “A king with justice causes the land to endure, but the tax man tears it down.” Lay Bible study leaders, seasoned Hebrew Bible scholars, and everyone in between will benefit from consulting Longman’s translation. This is true even if, as one would expect, scholars will at points take issue with his rendering of particular words and phrases, and even if at points Longman does not offer explanations for all his decisions in either the textual notes or commentary proper. For instance, one wonders why Longman’s translation of 22:9 does not reflect the passive verb in that line or why he renders as he does the first stich of a difficult verse such as 10:4.

Longman is also in conversation with much of the best Proverbs scholarship available (Fox, Whybray, Murphy, Clifford, Van Leeuwen, and others) and offers a clear and reliable guide to the various issues in Proverbs studies. His own conclusions on matters tend to reflect conservative positions in biblical scholarship, but not uncritically so. For instance, he does not accept Solomonic authorship for all of Proverbs and speaks instead of Solomon’s “foundational importance” to different collections (25). Yet unlike those who more fundamentally question the existence of even a “historical” Solomon, Longman speaks of those proverbs “that may have been *collected* rather than composed by Solomon” (27; emphasis added).

Longman rejects especially recent efforts to find significant editorial principles at work in the different sayings collections of Proverbs (38–42). His criticism is generally apt and fair, although some will want to remain more open to attempts to discern coherencies in the collections than Longman himself appears to be. Moreover, Longman himself, like most other scholars, occasionally will read clusters of sayings together. Indeed, his appendix is largely an effort to synthesize the teaching of the sages throughout the book, an effort that seems to assume not merely a canonical perspective but some coherency in and between the various collections.

Longman’s treatment of the important motifs of retribution and wealth and poverty in Proverbs is consonant with much other scholarship. He contends, for instance, that the sages never meant to offer an ironclad system for gaining wealth but that “all things being equal,” a phrase he repeats throughout the book, wisdom is a route to economic prosperity. Similarly, the way of folly and wickedness generally leads to undesirable situations such as poverty, although the wise person will nonetheless treat the poor kindly and with justice. Yet one wonders if Longman does not understand the sages’ promises of material wealth in too literalistic a fashion and if Proverbs wealth-and-poverty rhetoric is not more fundamentally designed to motivate adherence to wisdom’s way and is much less concerned about offering real material gain to the addressee.

Moreover, and related, Longman’s repeated claim that wealth, and the pursuit of wealth, is not inherently problematic for the sages may be overstated. Proverbs in fact associates a real danger to the life of wisdom with material wealth and its pursuit that Longman only partially recognizes when he notes merely that sometimes one might have to choose between wealth and wisdom. Besides obviously problematic wicked wealth, the sages also speak of wealth without any modifier as something that hinders one’s pursuit of wisdom. Longman does not appear to recognize fully the import of verses such as 11:4 and 11:28 that point to the human tendency to seek wellbeing in, or to “trust in,” material wealth rather than the way of wisdom, that which for the sages alone can produce real flourishing.

Longman, moreover, does not note fully the fact that throughout Proverbs the “rich,” those who actually possess wealth, are as a “type” of person regularly cast in an unfavorable light. They are associated with the wrong way (28:6) and are implicitly contrasted with the righteous as those who wrongly trust in their wealth (18:10–11; see also the less explicit 10:15). In 22:7 the rich are also said to “lord over” the poor, and in 18:23 their response to them is “harsh.” Proverbs 14:20 likewise suggests that others are bound to the rich only by weak social ties, and 22:16 hints that attempts to seek their favor are doomed and perhaps associated with injustice. Elsewhere the rich are called “arrogant” (28:11) and described as gluttonous (21:17). Longman, of course, does point to

much of the above when considering individual verses but does not take into account the cumulative effect of such descriptions.

Not recognizing fully how the sages note the dangers of wealth and how they criticize the “rich” is why Longman is puzzled at 30:8, which has the sage asking not only to be spared poverty but riches as well. When one recognizes the subtleties of Proverbs wealth-and-poverty discourse, this is entirely expected. Both pose a threat to the virtuous life of wisdom. Interestingly, the negative symbolic associations with the “rich” that Proverbs constructs are also developed in Hellenistic Judaism, including the New Testament texts that Longman is very concerned to relate to Proverbs (see B. Malina, “Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World,” *Int* 41 [1987]: 354–67).

Elsewhere Longman notes that the sages were particularly keen to point out the dangers of laziness and the virtues of industriousness. He suggests that the sages recognize that, “all things being equal,” laziness usually does produce poverty. Yet even if in some original subsistence agricultural context such proverbs would regularly be literally true, one wonders if the *sages* who produced the *book* of Proverbs appropriated such sayings in order to offer quasi-sociological observations about the origins of rich and poor people or if they were again not primarily concerned with promoting virtue and censuring vice—especially since elsewhere Proverbs motivates industriousness without any promise of material gain (e.g., 10:26; 15:19).

Yet whether or not this is the case, today about half of the world’s population lives on two dollars a day or less, most working extremely hard to do so. One thus wonders about the virtue of telling contemporary readers, most of whom will be among the richest people in the world, that the basic point “that laziness leads to destitution or want” is “relevant in 99 percent of the cases” (562)—even if this is not quite the same thing as saying poverty is caused by laziness. Similarly, one wonders if Longman is on target when he suggests that the sage’s desire for neither poverty nor wealth in 30:8 is “in modern sociological terms” a hope for “middle-class status” (525). Surely the sociology of ancient Israel cannot be translated that easily to today’s world. Furthermore, one might suspect that middle-class status in modern North America at least often entails an income level, as well as leisure and educational opportunities, that would be more akin to ancient elite status (i.e., the rich), even if contemporary middle-class status is also obviously distinct from ancient elite status in significant ways (for an approach to a number of the issues associated with wealth and poverty in Proverbs different from Longman’s, see my *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* [Leiden: Brill, 2006]).

Elsewhere in his commentary Longman argues interestingly for positions not commonly asserted in much of Proverbs scholarship. For instance, he contends not merely that

Woman Wisdom is a personification of YHWH's wisdom but that she represents YHWH himself. She is, after all, found on the heights of the city, the usual locus of a deity's temple in the ancient Near East. By implication, then, Woman Folly represents other gods and the temptation to idolatry. From Longman's particular Christian perspective, it is likewise possible "to understand the invitation of Woman Wisdom as the invitation of Christ to relationship with God." Indeed, according to Longman, this is one of the factors that make "the book contemporary for Christian readers" (69).

Longman also wants to recognize in a number of verses (e.g., 12:28; 15:24; 23:13–14) an insipient view of the afterlife that moves beyond the ancient conception of Sheol (87), although ultimately he declares "certainty" to be "impossible." His subsequent appeal to the "fuller revelation of the NT," in this regard, however, suggests that this view is tied up with his commitment to offering a certain kind of Christian reading of Proverbs.

Of course, readers of this commentary who are not Christians or evangelical Christians will likely not find his overtly Christian way of proceeding always to be helpful and will likely find some matters problematic. Longman himself recognizes that his approach runs the risk of distorting "the distinctive contribution of the OT," on the one hand, and "wresting the Hebrew Bible away from" Jewish friends and colleagues, on the other. Longman's concern to engage in Christian interpretation of Proverbs is, of course, not only legitimate but a very worthy task. His appeal to Jon Levenson's work in this regard is likewise apt (64). However, although Longman asserts the need to study the "OT/Hebrew Bible on its own terms first" (64), his discussion of the broader hermeneutical issues around Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures is not as clear as perhaps it ought to be. Given that Christian supersessionism played a significant ideological role in paving the way to the tragedy of the Shoah, a Christian commentary on an Old Testament text that regularly invokes the New Testament and the further revelation of Christianity ought to thematize more explicitly the issues and possible problems associated with this sort of interpretation. The question for this sort of commentary perhaps has less to do with the legitimacy of a Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and more with how, or to what extent, a *non-Christian* reading of the Hebrew Scriptures is legitimate and can be recognized or defended, even by Christians (on some of these issues, see, e.g., M. Knowles et al., eds., *Contesting Texts: Jews and Christians in Conversation about the Bible* [Fortress]).

These are questions, of course, with which Christians historically have struggled. They are perhaps particularly vexing for evangelical Christians who regularly insist on the exclusive validity of Christianity and salvation alone through Jesus Christ. Indeed, one imagines that many of Longman's Christian readers might welcome some guidance in working through the theological positions, both historically and constructively, that

might be open to them when considering the validity of non-Christian readings of the Hebrew Scriptures. Interestingly, when alluding to the New Testament Longman himself often only simply describes how certain proverbs call to mind certain New Testament texts or notes how the New Testament writers made use of certain motifs from Proverbs in order to make certain claims about Jesus a Nazareth, something that few would dispute. Likewise, Longman's "Theological Implication" sections and comments elsewhere regarding the contemporary relevance of Proverbs often simply reiterate aspects of the text he is discussing. A significant exception is his discussion of the afterlife. In addition, Longman gives significant space (perhaps more than other critical commentators) to amplifying the relevance of the traditional sexual ethic of the sages and the importance they set on family relations, two contested areas of Christian social ethics of concern to both conservative and progressive believers.

Other aspects of the book will likewise frustrate many (though certainly not all) readers who fall outside of his primary target audience. Longman, for instance, appears quite suspicious of much feminist work and dispenses rather quickly with feminist critiques and contributions. For instance, although Proverbs is addressed to young men, he asserts repeatedly that woman readers of Proverbs today can and ought simply to identify with the young men who are the text's original addressees. He also appears so concerned to reject any notion that a Sophia figure might function as an alternative mediating figure between God and humanity alongside Christ (71–72) that he loses the opportunity for theological reflection on the validity of nonmale images for the deity that the personification of Wisdom can invite.

Longman, however, is not oblivious to questions of gender and strives to show how the teaching of the book might be relevant for both contemporary men and women. In regard to gender-inclusive translations of Proverbs, for instance, he recognizes the historically gendered nature of the text and acknowledges his conviction that the scripture speaks today to all humans. He thus concludes that, when it comes to inclusive translations of Proverbs, "there is not a right or wrong answer" and that students would be well served to consult a variety of translations (74).

Although obviously some of the concerns noted above may not be as important to Longman's primary target audience as to others, they do raise an interesting issue that perhaps is of broad interest, even (especially?) to Longman's (evangelical) readers: how exactly Longman understands the authority of scripture in Christian life and what precisely the task of Christian theological appropriation of the Bible is. Longman notes that there are different sorts of commentaries written from a variety of theological and methodological perspectives, but also that "we want commentaries that share our fundamental beliefs about the biblical text" (11). Likewise he notes that he and the other

contributors to the Baker series “share similar convictions about the Bible as God’s word and the belief that it must be appreciated not only as ancient literature but also as God’s word for us today” (13). Yet Christians with a range of theological perspectives could affirm such statements, and his comments beg certain questions: What exactly are the “fundamental beliefs” and convictions that Longman speaks of? In what sense, precisely, is Proverbs “God’s word”? An obviously erudite commentary such as Longman’s that is so concerned with theological interpretation of the biblical text would likely prove still stronger if a range of answers to these kinds of general questions were offered the reader, even briefly. Indeed, even evangelical Christians, who, as noted, appear to form Longman’s primary target audience, are not a monolithic group and may disagree with one another around such important issues.

The above critical observations and comments notwithstanding, Longman is to be congratulated for producing a valuable translation of Proverbs and a user friendly commentary that takes seriously the needs of the contemporary audience for which he writes. Pastors and seminary students will gain much from studying Proverbs with an expert interpreter who is attuned to the rhetoric of the text, its ancient context, and its possible contemporary import. Scholars, too, will profit from Longman’s often provocative and creative work. Indeed, his commentary will join those others on my shelf that I regularly consult.