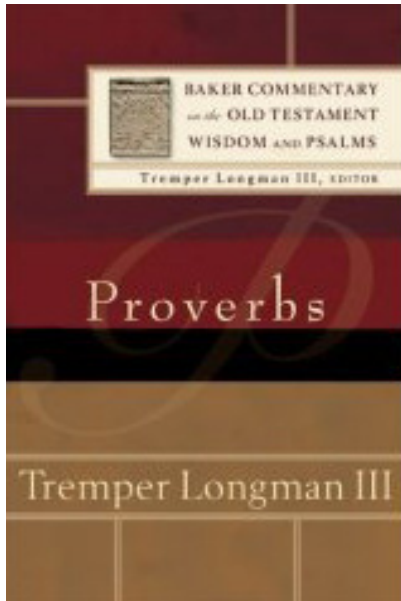


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**Longman, Tremper, III**

***Proverbs***

Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms

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Katharine Dell  
The Faculty of Divinity  
Cambridge, United Kingdom

Tremper Longman III is the general editor of this commentary series on wisdom books and Psalms. The stated audience is scholars, ministers, seminary students, and Bible study leaders, and hence there is a Christian focus to the interpretation. This manifests itself in a section in the introduction on Proverbs and the New Testament, drawing out Jesus' role as a wise man and his links to the Woman Wisdom figure. It also influences Longman's view that "life" in Proverbs, taken in a fuller canonical context, may have the overtone of "afterlife." Longman makes a particular point of emphasizing Proverbs' theological contribution. He states in the preface that, while Proverbs has been widely regarded, and more so in recent times, "as a source for navigating life and imparting advice about how to live life wisely" (15), its theological contribution has been given no more than a "grudging acknowledgement." He notes that "fear of God" is first mentioned in the prologue in Prov 1:7 and is a leitmotif throughout the book, the prologue being regarded as a hermeneutical lens for reading the whole (and probably later in date than the rest of Prov 1–9). Another rather innovative emphasis of Longman in this commentary is his stress on the connection between wisdom and law and through that connection an important link with covenant and the covenant community (see initial discussion on 82). It would be interesting to know more about Longman's views here in relation to an

overall theology of the Old Testament—and he tantalizingly hints that more on this will be forthcoming from his pen!

Longman also refreshingly challenges recent arguments, most notably that of K. M. Heim in *Like Grapes of Gold Set in Silver: An interpretation of Proverbial Clusters in Proverbs 10:1–22:16* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), about a structured arrangement to the sayings in Prov 10–31. He challenges such assumptions, arguing for a more or less random arrangement that has been added to over time (hence the repetitions), indicating “the messiness of life” (40), and he presents a quite full argument against Heim’s views on pages 38–42 of the introduction. He argues that Heim’s criteria of association are so broad and varied and ultimately lacking in a unified coherence that deciding on different associated units becomes too subjective an enterprise, as shown already in the scholarship. Longman draws on evidence from the ancient Near East to back up his argument, noting that only the late Papyrus Insinger shows evidence of some thematic ordering but not earlier wisdom-style works.

Longman presents an interesting theory on page 31 that “A proverb ... does not teach a universally valid truth. On the contrary, proverbs are true only if stated at the right time and in the right circumstance.” He gives examples of proverbs that mention the right time to say things (e.g., 15:23), noting in passing that part of the author of Ecclesiastes’ despair is that he cannot discern a right time (Longman makes quite frequent cross-references to Ecclesiastes, on which he wrote a commentary in 1997). He concedes that certain proverbs are always true (e.g., 11:1) but that many are “time-sensitive.” He uses 27:14 as an example, but it is arguable that what is being referred to here is not a “cheerful greeting” that might at any other time of day be acceptable but rather a comment about overenthusiastic displays of neighborliness. I wonder whether the true nuance of the matter is that proverbs can be used and used again in different contexts and hence are essentially universal sayings that can be applied to the particular situation. Being universal does not mean there is no contradiction because, as Longman points out, two opposites can be equally true of a situation, nor does it preclude exceptions to the general rule (e.g., his comments on 10:1, 4), in that it is general rules that are being expressed, not fixed dogmas. He argues later on (41) that Proverbs only comes alive in the “right context” as determined by the wise person—that I would agree with, as each proverb gets reapplied in a lively way in ever-new situations, hence the worldwide tendency toward maxim-making. He goes on to comment that Proverbs does not provide guarantees; rather, the maxims point the best way forward and indicate the optimal path to reward or, indeed, to punishment, should one choose that way. This comment enters the debate on whether there is a mechanistic act-consequence relationship (von Rad) presumed by the various proverbs or whether it is left more open than that, as Longman maintains. He notes that

the agent of retribution is only rarely named and that there are no immediate promises even for the wise.

The introduction is very full and gives considerable space to an interesting listing of Egyptian and other parallels from the ancient Near East (see chart on 43), to which Longman rightly attaches considerable importance as the background for this material, and to cross-reference with other Old Testament books. He notes that the praise of Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kgs 4:29–30 is done in comparison to that of the peoples of the East and Egypt, thus indicating appreciation of the latter. He argues that a deeper understanding of Proverbs can be gained by studying it in the context of ancient Near Eastern parallels, not just Egyptian but Sumerian, Akkadian and Northwest Semitic parallels such as the Wisdom of Ahiqar as well. He notes that when there are exhortations in Proverbs itself to become well-versed in wisdom, that call is not restricted to Israelite wisdom. However, some of his sections in the introduction are very brief (e.g., eight lines on the wise and the foolish [56], a very significant proverbial theme that might have deserved more attention here or arguably in the thematic summary at the back of the book), and on some key issues such as authorship and social setting, lack of decisive evidence leads him to sit on the fence a little more than some readers might expect.

On the well-worn discussion about the relationship of Prov 22:17–24:22 with the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope, Longman decides that there is no specific relationship between the two texts; rather, both are a part of a wider international wisdom tradition. However, in the body of the commentary he helpfully sets out the Amenemope parallels in a way that highlights the similarity with Proverbs, and one cannot help wondering if he is really convinced by his own argument here. He explores other similarities between Proverbs and wisdom from the ancient Near East such as the father-son (and mother-son) relationship, which he sees as an essentially biological one; the dangerous woman theme; and the wise and foolish contrast. He notes as a major difference between the ancient Near Eastern material and Proverbs the emphasis on the role of Yahweh in the latter. This prepares the ground for his section on the theology of the book, in which he states his major thesis that “Proverbs is not rightly understood if it is taken as a book of practical advice with an occasional nod of the head to Yahweh. The book is thoroughly and pervasively theological” (57). I would fully agree with this statement (see my book, published at much the same time as this one and hence not in the bibliography here, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], notably chs. 4 and 5). However, Longman also contends that there would be no wisdom at all without relationship to Yahweh, suggesting that the whole attempt to become wise would flounder without faith (58). (e.g., he writes on Prov 1:1–7 that “What the prologue makes clear is that the benefits of wisdom are available only to those who have already made a fundamental religious commitment” [103]). While this may well be

true within the worldview of this ancient text, where a secular life without God would probably be inconceivable, I wonder how useful stressing that point is today. Unusually, within the canon of the Old Testament, with its nonparticularist stance, the wisdom literature does speak to religious and unreligious alike, and although it may suggest that the path of God via wisdom is the most nourishing and satisfying one (and in this passage it is in many ways the climax of a list of benefits that arguably could be taken on their own terms without that climax), I wonder if there is not, in the very fact that many proverbs are nontheological, a life-giving message about human experience that has a broader remit. This links up with Longman's emphasis on Woman Wisdom representing God and Woman Folly representing idols or modern-day equivalents—Is it so black and white as this?

Longman makes an association between Wisdom and the location of her house on the highest point of the city, likewise Woman Folly. He argues that this suggests the temple for Wisdom (and hence God) and, by contrast, the temples of false gods and goddesses of which Folly is representative. This makes a direct link of Wisdom with cultic life, a feature that is usually seen as absent from her characterization and in Prov 1–9 generally (with the exception of Prov 3:9–10). The association of Woman Folly with cultic practices from the ancient Near East is more well-established. Longman thus sees the figure of Wisdom as representing Yahweh himself, not just his Wisdom, and the call to choose Wisdom is thus to choose God rather than false gods. He does not make much of the point that Yahweh and Wisdom seem to be interchangeable between different instructions, which might add to his argument here. By setting the two figures on a par as religious alternatives, Longman is led to statements such as this: “They both issue invitations for dinner. The invitations suggest intimate, perhaps even sexual relationships. The call then is to become intimately involved with Wisdom or Folly, to make one of them an integral part of our lives.” The equation of Wisdom with God leads this possibility of the sexual to be a curious emphasis here that some commentators, including myself, might well take issue with.

The consideration of Woman Wisdom takes Longman on to the relationship with the New Testament and his noting of texts that indicate Jesus' own wisdom (e.g., Luke 2:40; Mark 6:2; Matt 11:18). He stresses Paul's emphasis on Jesus as the incarnation of God's wisdom in particular in Col 1:15–17, which recalls language from Prov 8, as do significant passages in Rev 3:14b and John 1. He concludes that, in the same role as Woman Wisdom, “The NT presents Jesus as the mediator of our relationship with God” (68). “Thus, to understand the invitation of Woman Wisdom as the invitation of Christ to relationship with God makes the book contemporary to Christian readers” (69). The modern-day idols that might detract us from such a path are listed as “power, wealth, relationships, status and so forth” (69) One might question whether this list represents a

bad alternative per se—it all depends on context!—power, wealth, and status used properly are commended by the sages, wealth is a worthy goal, and there is no sense that relationships are “idols.”

The wisdom and law connection is an interesting one; the chart on page 81 shows close connections to the Ten Commandments, and Longman labels the two “close cousins.” He might have made more of specific Deuteronomic links, particularly in Prov 1–9, as in his comment on 3:1–3 and 7:1–3. Longman gives a very brief overview of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon and says in a footnote that Sirach makes explicit the connection between the two that is already implicit in Proverbs. The discussion of the Wisdom of Solomon leads him into a discussion of Arianism. Of particular interest is the way Prov 8 was used as a text to demonstrate the “createdness” of Jesus and hence to argue for his not being an equal part of the Trinity. Longman notes the dangers of taking a text such as Prov 8 too literally and points to modern-day feminist views that seek to worship God through Sophia as containing similar pitfalls. In relation to the problem of gender in Proverbs, in that the whole seems to be addressed to “my son” (a translation Longman follows), Longman makes the point that there is no gender designation in Prov 1:1–7, the preamble to the whole suggesting a broader application, backed up by the canon. He argues that it would be equally appropriate to apply many proverbs to both sexes but uses the unfortunate example of Prov 21:9, which, he says, could just as well apply to a man. It strikes me that the breed of “nagging wife” is probably a uniquely female one, so I would question whether that proverb is so easily transferable! Longman helpfully lists ways to grow wise: through observation, instruction, learning from mistakes, and revelation through fear of the Lord. He gives short shrift to the wisdom and creation theme in Proverbs, so emphasized by Perdue in his book *Wisdom and Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), in rectification of a previous lack of engagement with that theme in the scholarship. Longman notes that the theme is not extensively developed in Proverbs, unlike in the God speeches in Job. However, many would argue that God as creator is presupposed throughout, and thus, rather like the paucity of mention of Yahweh, this theme informs the whole worldview of Proverbs.

The body of the commentary contains a fresh translation with footnotes containing translational notes. Discussion of Hebrew terms (in transliterated form) features quite strongly in relation to each passage, which will advantage the reader who has at least a smattering of Hebrew. The section on “theological implications” draws together thematic concerns and relates the issues to today (Longman cites Kidner, *The Proverbs* [TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984] as the only author he knows who has taken a thematic approach—he clearly has not seen my own *Seeking a Life That Matters: Wisdom for Today from the Book of Proverbs* [London: DLT, 2002]!). This features only in the discussion of Prov 1–9 and is brought in at the end of the book in the helpful thematic

overview of Prov 10–31. Otherwise the proverbs of Prov 10–31 are taken individually or in short pairings, as befits his theory about randomness.

Overall this is a very thorough and thought-provoking commentary from an experienced scholar in the field. The scholarly and church audiences are both clearly addressed here in a very readable writing style—as Perdue put it in his “blurb” on the back cover of the commentary, “What sets this commentary apart is that Longman keeps his audience firmly in mind ... [possessing] the ability to engage readers at each of these levels by clearly articulating his understandings of the text and by pointing to its theological influence on the church of the present.”