

The Relationship between God and Man in Proverbs¹

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WHEN WE OPEN the Book of Proverbs at random and take samples of its wisdom, we may form the impression that its religious content is somewhat thin and indefinite. Many of its maxims, and some even of its theological assertions, could be transplanted acceptably into non-Israelite, non-biblical soil. We are tempted to ask whether anything so specific as a covenant-relationship with God is presupposed here, and, if so, whether it is fundamental. A hostile reader might go even further, and ask whether the real God and master in this book is not Man himself, and the real goal prosperity.

Although this last question can be answered quite quickly, it is not enough to point to the recurrent motto: 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge' (i. 7 and parallels); for this could be itself a mere counsel of prudence, a crowning example of a policy of cultivating the powers that be. The answer is seen rather in the relation throughout the book of prudential considerations to moral. It is the moral that always take precedence. To be sure, Proverbs is concerned to point out that what is right and what pays may travel long distances together, but it leaves us in no doubt which we are to follow when their paths diverge. It is in no hurry to anticipate that point. E.g. on the question of gifts and bribes, it will go as far as to say, without demur, 'A man's gift (מִתְּנָה) maketh room for him, and bringeth him before great men' (xviii. 16); but it will not go a step further. 'A wicked man', says xvii. 23, 'taketh a bribe (שֹׁחַד) out of the bosom, to pervert the ways of justice' – and it is at once clear that justice, not success, is our proper concern, and that the unscrupulous will get no praise for their fancied wisdom. You have to be good to be wise – though Proverbs is

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particularly concerned to point out the converse: that you have to be wise to be fully good. To take it further back, you have to be *godly* to be wise; and this is not because godliness pays, but because the only wisdom by which you can handle everyday things in conformity with their nature is the wisdom by which the LORD Himself made and ordered them. Proverbs viii, which states this superlatively, is therefore far from being a non-functional pinnacle of the book's eloquence, but an exposure of a large part of the framework of its thought.

So far, it appears that God is no afterthought here, and goodness no poor relation to cleverness. But are we left with nothing stronger than moralistic theism? An indication of the answer appears as soon as the sayings which mention God are searched out. Of about 100 such proverbs, all but a dozen use the covenant name YHWH. As far as terminology goes, then, the book belongs unashamedly to the Covenant People. When God's activities and attitudes are examined, the findings are similar. Three times He appears as the 'Maker' of rich and poor alike; and at first we are on ground that is shared by many religions. Xiv. 31 and xvii. 5 state that he who oppresses or mocks the poor man reproaches his Maker. But xxii. 2 moves on: 'The rich and poor meet together: YHWH is the maker of them all'. What was broached in merely theistic terms has become explicitly Yahwistic. A further step is taken in xxii. 23 where the vindication of the poor is based not on the idea of a common Maker, but on the personal interest of YHWH. 'YHWH will plead their cause'. (Cf. xxiii. 11, 'for their *go'el* is strong: he shall plead their cause against thee'.) So we are not left with merely the kind of inference that might suggest itself to any Gentile who had got as far as the idea of a sole Creator. Such an argument is not disdained, but it is supported by a declaration based on YHWH's known character. The same kind of thing happens in Agur's oracle. In xxx. 1-4 he is reduced to awed agnosticism before the creator's handiwork: '... Neither have I knowledge of the Holy One' (a quite general title for the Deity). '... What is his name, and his son's name if thou knowest?' But he has not been left to an Unknown God. He has come to this point in order to speak of God's reliable and sufficient revelation: verses 5, 6, 'Every word of God is tried; ... add not thou to His words';

and it soon emerges that he too knows God as YHWH (9). This is not Natural but Revealed Religion.

There is no need to deny that many of the functions of YHWH in Proverbs are functions which any religion would attribute to its gods. It is common belief that one's God is Maker and Disposer, and the Protector of the poor. What is noteworthy is, rather, that Proverbs has no interest in moving into this neutral territory except to claim it for YHWH.

So far, we have seen that the God of this book is confessedly and emphatically the God who revealed His name to Moses. It remains to enquire whether the basis and form of His dealings with men appear to be those of the Covenant. If we can find indications that there is a stable relationship assumed, filial on man's side, rather than servile, we shall have found as much as a collection of proverbs can be expected to yield.

We may start with the motto, and ask whether the 'fear' of the LORD implies anything more than a healthy respect for the Almighty. It does. In two passages, ii. 5 and ix. 10, it is made synonymous with the '*knowledge*' of YHWH or of The Holy One — a knowledge which is given by revelation ('out of His mouth', ii. 6), and fostered by obedience ('The upright are in His confidence', i.e. His **רֵיחַ**, His intimate circle, iii. 32) and by what could be called the practice of His presence: iii. 6, 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him' — literally, 'know' Him, which means more than acknowledge: rather, enjoy fellowship. We are reminded of the goal of the New Covenant: 'they shall all know Me'.

Such intercourse 'in all (one's) ways' implies, in addition to reverence and obedience, *trust*; and it is notable that Proverbs, for all its emphasis on common sense, exalts faith above sagacity (iii. 5, 7, 'Trust in YHWH with all thine heart; and upon thine own understanding lean not; . . . Be not wise in thine own eyes' . . .); and for all its advocacy of prudence it refuses prudence the last word. Planning, proper as it is ('Plans are established by counsel: by wise guidance wage war', xx. 18) — planning is subject to *God's* Yes or No (xix. 21, 'Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of YHWH that will be established'); equipment guarantees nothing (xxi. 31, 'The horse is prepared against the day of battle, but safety is of

the LORD'); and caution can be fatal in a way that faith cannot ('The fear of man bringeth a snare; but they that trust in YHWH shall be safe', xxix. 25). Such teaching is virtually that of Isaiah in his dealings with those who looked to Assyria or to the horses of Egypt for help; indeed, one writer can declare that the object of his maxims is to foster not self-reliance but faith: 'That thy trust may be in YHWH I have made them known to thee' (xxii. 19).

This faith is not regarded as a last resort; and it is more than a useful habit of mind: it can be traced, here and there in Proverbs, down to its roots in a steady relationship of exactly the kind which the Covenant established between God and man. There is admittedly only one mention of the covenant in the book, and even this shows the human participant in an all too characteristic position: ii. 16, 17, 'the strange woman . . . which forsaketh the friend of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God'. It may be asked whether this is merely a reference to the marriage covenant which God witnessed (Mal. ii. 14); but the natural sense of the words favours the general covenant, and the expression 'strange women' does not require us to suppose that a non-Israelite is being specified; it is, rather, a standing term for what we might call an adventuress, one who has no right in your circle (cf. Dt. xxv. 5). In any case, God is referred to as '*her* God', and it is this that makes her sin specially heinous. The same personal bond with God is prominent in Agur's thoughts, immediately after the passage to which earlier reference was made (xxx. 7-9). His fear is not so much of isolated sins (though he does abhor them) as of a breach of loyalty: 'lest I *deny* Thee' — for the LORD is not simply 'God' to him, but '*my* God' (9c). This is the essence of covenant language. The quintessence is found in the statement of father-and-son relationship in iii. 11, 12: 'My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his reproof: For whom the LORD loveth he reproveth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth'.

The covenant idea leaves traces of itself elsewhere. Parallel to such universal terms of moral approval as 'righteous' and 'upright', we find (just once, but it is there, and must be accounted for) the special term for the true son of the covenant, the **תָּסִיד**

(ii. 8: 'He preserveth the way of His *ḥasidīm*') — an unobtrusive witness to the bond. If it is objected that these sayings, from chs. ii and xxx, lie in subsidiary strata of the book, it can be replied that xvi. 6, from the heart of the main Solomonic section, speaks the same covenant language: 'By loyalty (חֶסֶד) and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of YHWH a man turns aside from evil'.

This last quotation raises a final question. Granted that in Proverbs the covenant relationship is assumed, is it a purely private bond which has no place for the institutions of Israelite religion? We have just heard that iniquity is atoned for (יָכַפֵּר) by חֶסֶד; and in xxi. 3 we are told that 'To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to YHWH than sacrifice'. On these two sayings it is enough to remark, first, that this is the language of the prophets, and secondly, that the marriage of religion and morality is well expressed in xv. 8: 'The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination to YHWH, but the prayer of the upright is his delight'.

Nor is this a religion (as indeed we have already seen) without revelation. In a similar saying to the last we find the *Torah* exalted: 'He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination' (xxviii. 9). Proverbs is at pains to show that the unaided spirit of man is a very uncertain 'candle of the LORD' (xx. 27); that what is right in a man's own eyes may be morally or factually miscalculated (xxi. 2 '... but YHWH pondereth the hearts'; xiv. 12, 'but its end is the way to death'). Therefore where the law of God has been given, no one but a scoundrel can reject it (xxviii. 4, 'Those who forsake the law praise the wicked'). As for a people deprived of revelation, xxix. 18 holds out little hope for them. 'Where there is no vision' (an apparent allusion to the gift of prophecy) 'the people run wild; but he that keepeth the law' (the other main form of Old Testament revelation), 'happy is he'.

To end on this note, however, would be to disguise the fact that the explicitly religious material has to be hand-picked from a large mass of sayings in which religion is only implicit. And we should do Proverbs a poor service if we contrived to vest it in a priestly ephod or a prophet's mantle, for it is a book which seldom takes you to church. Like its own figure of Wisdom, it

calls across to you in the street about some everyday matter, or points things out at home. Its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes; to name business and society as spheres in which we are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord, and in which we are to look for His training.

If we could analyse the influences that build up a godly character to maturity, we might well find that the agencies which we call natural vastly outweighed those that we call supernatural. It is a familiar phenomenon that a sheltered man of great devoutness may not in a lifetime notice (still less, be delivered from) the defects of character which a few years of rougher treatment might have cured in his youth. The Book of Proverbs reassures us that this, if it is true, is no reflection on the efficiency of God's grace, for the hard facts of life, which knock some of the nonsense out of us, are *God's* facts and His appointed school of character: they are not alternatives to His grace, but means of it.

Yet while all go to God's school, few learn wisdom there. God may have His staff, His curriculum and His prizes; but the knowledge which He aims to instil is the knowledge of Himself; and this too is the ultimate prize. In submission to His authority and majesty (that is, in 'the fear of the LORD') we start our education, as the motto verse indicates, and by the diligent search for wisdom 'as for hid treasures' we shall find our reward in a growing intimacy with the same LORD. He is the beginning; He is also the end: 'Then shalt thou understand the fear of YHWH, and find the knowledge of God' (ii. 5).