

Proverbs as a Manual for Holiness: Reading Proverbs with the Author of Hebrews  
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*There is no such thing as 'wisdom' apart from  
covenant relationship with God ('righteousness')  
that leads to holy living ('sanctification')  
made possible by God's act of delivering  
us from slavery ('redemption') through the cross.  
~Richard B. Hays on 1 Corinthians 1:30<sup>1</sup>*

Abstract: The author of Hebrews asserts that Yahweh's discipline aims at our participation in His holiness (Heb. 12:5-11). This assertion establishes a theological reading frame for new covenantal appropriation of Proverbs: its canonical form serves as a revelation of Yahweh's holiness, as a guide to sharing His holiness, and as a means of sanctification.

Throughout history students of Proverbs have treated it as a guide to holiness, as a means of sanctification. Examples can be found among patristic figures and medieval theologians.<sup>2</sup> The Puritans in particular, among them Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Bridges, treasured Proverbs as a "practical guide to devout and upright living."<sup>3</sup> This focus has waned in modern scholarship, though it is not entirely absent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Wisdom According to Paul" in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?: Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World*. Edited by Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 117.

<sup>2</sup> As Duane Garrett notes, although "early and medieval Christian exegetes ... gave relatively little attention to Proverbs ... [and] early Christian reading of Proverbs quickly gravitated to its portrayal of Wisdom ... Frequently their comments directly expound on the practicalities of virtuous living." ("Proverbs 3: History of Interpretation," ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (IVP Academic, 2008), 570-71). For example, Cassiodorus connects divine discipline and progressive sanctification in his comments on Psalm 89:33, "Clearly each of these [the rod and whips] befalls Christian people according to the nature of their sin, enabling them to make progress toward [final] salvation. As Solomon puts it: 'For whom the Lord loves, he chastises; he whips every son whom he accepts.'" Cassiodorus, *Cassiodorus: Explanation of the Psalms*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas Comerford Lawler, trans. P. G. Walsh, vol. 2, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 363. Other examples include comments by Gregory the Great and Bonaventure.

<sup>3</sup> "Protestant Reformed theology, especially that of the English variety, looked upon Proverbs as a treasure. Both Matthew Poole (1624–1679) and Matthew Henry (1662–1714) extolled Proverbs as a practical guide to devout and upright living, and both gave it considerable attention. The most expansive meditation on Proverbs in this tradition is the massive commentary by Charles Bridges (1794–1869). But perhaps the greatest theologian to read Proverbs in this manner was Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)." (D. Garrett, "Proverbs 3: History of Interpretation," 571.) Garrett notes that Jonathan Edwards, in particular, "came more and more to recognize ... the wisdom of Proverbs was not merely instruction in righteousness but was ultimately Christ himself, who draws us into holiness by his grace and beauty" (572).

<sup>4</sup> More recent descriptions of Proverbs in this vein include: "[Proverbs is] a primer of right conduct and proper attitudes" designed "to give moral prudence and skillfulness for holy living." Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 153; Proverbs is among the "inspired traditions that carry a mandate for a holy life from ancient sages, the greatest of whom was Solomon ...." Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2004), xxi; "The proverbs in this book ... are intended to make life more godly, to reinforce the relationship the righteous have with Yahweh through his grace, which they receive in his Word as it comes to them in Scripture and in the wisdom of others who fear

The following paper seeks to strengthen and extend this practical theological approach to Proverbs in two ways: 1) by making an exegetical argument from Hebrews 12 for reading Proverbs as a guide to holiness, and 2) by offering a practical framework for using Proverbs as a means of sanctification. Specifically, this paper argues that the use of Proverbs 3:11-12 in Hebrews 12 establishes a theological reading frame for new covenantal appropriation of Proverbs.

## Reading Proverbs as a Guide to Holiness: An Exegetical Argument

The exegetical argument from Hebrews 12:5-11 will proceed by first, briefly summarizing its context and content; second, clarifying the meaning of ‘holiness’ and ‘discipline’; third, tracing the grounds for the author’s claim, and finally, by identifying five hermeneutical principles for engaging Proverbs. The paper will conclude by suggesting a practical framework for using Proverbs as a means of sanctification.

### Contextual Summary of Hebrews 12:5-11<sup>5</sup>

Following his litany of faithful saints (Heb. 11), the author of Hebrews urges his brothers to run (τρέχωμεν) the race with endurance, fixing their eyes on Jesus despite opposition from sinners (Heb. 12:1-4). He reminds them of Jesus’ victorious example (Heb. 12:2-3). He notes that their suffering has not yet involved shedding blood (Heb. 12:4). And then, he reminds them of an exhortation (παρακλήσεως) from Proverbs 3 and develops its encouraging entailments (Heb. 12:7-13).

Proverbs’ exhortation speaks (διαλέγεται) to them as to sons (ὡς υἱοῖς) and takes the form of two prohibitions along with an explanation:

Do not despise the discipline of the Lord, neither faint when you are being rebuked by Him, for whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and scourges every son whom He receives (Prov. 3:11-12).

Using the quotation from Proverbs 3, the author frames his audience’s difficulties (cf. 10:32-39) in terms of divine discipline (παιδεία). Their sufferings are not merely the opposition of sinners (12:3). They are intended by God for moral training. If submitted to respectfully, such training entails proof of our sonship (7-8), a promise of life (9), the profit of sharing His holiness (10), and the peaceable fruit of righteousness (11).

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him.” Andrew E. Steinman, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 30.

<sup>5</sup> This summary assumes a conceptual continuity running through Hebrews 12. For a helpful detailing of the lexical and syntactical features supporting continuity as well as associated bibliography, see Ched Spellman, “The Drama of Discipline: Toward an Intertextual Profile of Paideia in Hebrews 12,” *JETS* 59, no. 3 (2016): 488, fn 6. For a discussion regarding categories of approaches to literary structure in Hebrews 12, see Annang Asumang, “Strive for Peace and Holiness: The Intertextual Journey of the Jacob Traditions from Genesis to Hebrews, via the Prophets,” *Conspectus* 17 (2014): 2–4.

Transitioning from explanation to application, the author calls the community to action on behalf of the weak and weary (12-13).<sup>6</sup> He then urges the pursuit of peace and holiness, accompanied by diligent guarding against a set of related dangers (14-17).

For the purposes of this paper, the key point the author makes is found in Hebrews 12:10, “For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.” Among the questions this conclusion raises are three that will be explored here: 1) What do ‘holiness’ and ‘discipline’ mean? 2) How did the author come to the conclusion that God’s discipline aims at our sharing His holiness? and 3) What does this imply for how we should read Proverbs?

## The Meaning and Reference of Holiness and Discipline

Holiness is a theme that runs throughout the epistle to the Hebrews in various ways.<sup>7</sup> In this context, commentators are generally agreed that the phrase “that we may share his holiness” (εἰς τὸ μεταλαβεῖν τῆς ἁγιότητος αὐτοῦ) includes sharing “in God’s holy life and character here and now.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the ultimate fulfillment of our partaking of God’s holiness will be found in God’s presence beyond death.<sup>9</sup> But, as George Guthrie writes, “The whole context suggests that

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrews author combines Isaiah 35:3 “Strengthen *the* weak hands and make *the* staggering knees firm” with Proverbs 4:26 (LXX) “Make straight tracks for your feet, and straighten your ways” to urge his audience to look out for one another. The Christian race is a corporate marathon not an individual competition. “All for one and one for all” aptly captures the appropriate approach.

<sup>7</sup> For introductory discussions of holiness in Hebrews, see Wayne G. McCown, “Holiness in Hebrews,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16, no. 2 (1981): 58–78, and Kevin Anderson, “Purity in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Purity: Essays in Bible and Theology* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2017): 153-176.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Peterson, “Hebrews,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1350. “God’s holiness is his distinctive life and character. He will share this ultimately and completely with everyone whom he brings into his kingdom. Meanwhile, he uses various trials to sustain faith and produce a *harvest of righteousness and peace* in those who have been *trained* or ‘exercised’ by his discipline. In other words, by his grace, we can begin to share God’s holy life and character here and now.” In his *New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, Peterson explains further: “To share God’s holiness is to enjoy life in his presence (cf. 12:9), transformed into his likeness (cf. 1 Jn. 3:2). In the final analysis, it is the same as being brought ‘to glory’ through Christ (Heb. 2:10). But even now, by faith, we experience some of the blessings of the age to come in anticipation (cf. 6:4–5; 12:22–24). So Hebrews 12:9–10 suggests that, as we learn to submit to God’s will in suffering, something of his holiness is reflected in our lives. We learn to acknowledge him as the Holy One, who is supreme over all, perfectly loving, wise and righteous. At the same time, he molds and shapes us into the kind of people he wants us to be. Trials of various kinds are necessary for the formation of godly character (cf. Rom. 5:3–5; Jas. 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:6–9).” *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 1, New Studies in Biblical Theology (InterVarsity Press, 1995), 72. Similarly, Herman Bavinck writes, “Participation in the divine nature is not something for the future alone but a goal envisaged already by the granting of God’s promises here on earth (2 Pet. 1:4) and again ethically mediated (Heb. 12:10).” *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*. Vol. 2. Editor, John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 539.

<sup>9</sup> John Gill helpfully locates this participation within the *ordo salutis*: “men are naturally destitute of this holiness; they have it not by nature, but by participation; as God’s gift; and they first partake of it in regeneration; and here an increase of it is designed, a gradual participation of it; and it may include perfect holiness in heaven: afflictions are designed as means to bring persons to this end; to bring them to a sense of sin, an acknowledgment of it, an aversion to it, and to a view of pardon of it; to purge it away; to wean the saints from this world; to increase

right parental discipline involves training or instructing in right living. So the discipline of God, when received in the right manner, trains the Christian in right character, purifying the heart.”<sup>10</sup>

The nature of the holiness we share is clarified by the language that the author uses in conjunction with it. It leads to life (‘we shall live’; 12:9), which is a key benefit promised to those who heed the reproofs of discipline (Prov. 6:23), e.g., the righteous (Prov. 10:16), the wise (Prov. 15:24), and Yahweh-fearers (Prov. 19:24). It is ‘for our good’ (ἐπὶ τὸ συμφέρον; 12:10), indicating that holiness is the means and necessary condition for human flourishing (cf. Prov. 21:21). That divine discipline ‘yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness’ (καρπὸν εἰρηνικὸν ... ἀποδίδωσιν δικαιοσύνης; 12:11), shows that holiness finds expression in righteous behavior (cf. Prov. 10-12) that is peace-making and peace-keeping (Prov. 12:20; 16:7). Thus, the holiness that the author has in view is behavioral and character-focused.<sup>11</sup> It is the consequence of Yahweh’s discipline, as we respectfully submit to and persevere through it.

The word ‘discipline’ (παιδεία) may be defined in terms of the event it signifies: “the act of providing guidance for responsible living” (BDAG) or it may be defined, as Louw-Nida do, in terms of the reasons for the event, as in instruction, discipline, punishment.<sup>12</sup> As it is used in Hebrews 12, the sense seems to be primarily formative,<sup>13</sup> though corrective discipline is within its semantic range.<sup>14</sup> The inciting cause for the discussion of suffering seems to have been the persecution the author notes in Hebrews 10:32-39 to which he connects ‘the opposition of

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their grace, and lead them on to a perfect state of glory, where there will be no more sin, and no more sorrow.”  
*Exposition of the New Testament*, ad. loc.

<sup>10</sup> George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2007), 987. So also, Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2012), 626–627. Lane, on the other hand, states the phrase’s reference is “almost certainly to a future conformity to God’s character through persevering faith.” William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, vol. 47B, WBC (Word, 1991), 425. Precisely why the phrase must refer to a future conformity Lane does not seem to make clear. Given the contextual features noted above by Peterson and Guthrie, I currently find Lane’s view unpersuasive.

<sup>11</sup> It is common to note that the word for holiness (ἀγιότης) in Hebrews 12:10 is relatively rare, occurring only here in the NT and perhaps in 2 Cor. 1:12 (v.l. for ἀπλότητι). It occurs in the Greek OT in 2 Macc. 15:2 where it refers to the holiness of the Sabbath and in Psa. 28:2 “in one translation of the Hexapla” (cf. BDAG, s.v., ἀγιότης). Other than a reference to the holiness of the Holy of Holies in the Testament of Levi 3.4, its later use appears to be confined to Origin and Gregory of Nazianzus (so TLG, but cf. Procksch, TDNT, 114.). Despite its lexical paucity, the sense seems to be indistinguishable from that of the more common terms used for holiness in Scripture.

<sup>12</sup> Louw-Nida provide three senses for παιδεία under the semantic subdomains of Teach (33.224-250), Guide, Discipline, Follow (36.1-9), and Punish, Reward (38.1-20). The three senses are respectively, a) “to provide instruction, with the intent of forming proper habits of behavior”; b) “to train someone in accordance with proper rules of conduct and behavior”; and c) “to punish for the purpose of improved behavior.”

<sup>13</sup> Note the use of γυμνάζω in 12:11 in clarifying the nature of παιδεία. Similarly, N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12.1–13 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> The KJV’s translations of παιδεία as “corrected” (9) and “chasten” (passim) directs the contemporary English reader’s mind to corrective discipline for misbehavior. Whether those terms are “false friends” or properly convey the translator’s interpretive understanding, I have not investigated. For discussion of “false friends,” see Mark Ward, *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* (Lexham Press, 2018).

sinner's in 12:3. No specific transgression is identified in Hebrews 12 as leading to their experience of discipline.

Behind the Greek παιδεία in Prov. 3:11 is the Hebrew word 'discipline' (מוֹסֵר), which occurs 30 times in Proverbs.<sup>15</sup> Its semantic potential includes "instruction, correction, chastisement, discipline, punishment."<sup>16</sup> Its primary sense in Proverbs appears to be formative instruction rather than corrective chastisement, as evidenced by, *inter alia*, the fact that it is known (1:2), heard (1:8; 4:1), and taken hold of (4:13).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, its sense in Proverbs 3:11-12, particularly as understood by the Greek translators, seems to be corrective. In verse 11 it is parallel with 'reproof' (תּוֹכַחַת; G: ἐλεγχόμενος). In verse 12, where the MT points the text to read "as a father," the Greek OT apparently reads it as "scourges" (μαστιγοῖ), which also seems to point toward a corrective design.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately the thesis advanced here does not depend on determining the unmarked (default) sense of 'discipline' in Proverbs generally or in Prov. 3:11 specifically.<sup>19</sup> Corrective and formative discipline are not mutually exclusive. They are generally mutual implicates. Corrective discipline rightly aims at forming or reforming the character of its object. Formative discipline entails the correction of ignorance, at the least. In Proverbs, formative discipline corrects folly and naiveté. Thus, whether divine discipline shades to the formative or the corrective side does not change its relevance for our sharing in God's holiness so far as I can see.

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<sup>15</sup> The Greek OT (G) consistently translates מוֹסֵר with παιδεία or its cognates. παιδεία occurs 22 times in Rahlfs' LXX (Prov. 1:2, 7, 8; 3:11; 4:1, 13; 5:12; 6:23; 8:10; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:5, 10, 32, 33; 16:22; 19:20, 27; 22:15; 23:12; 24:32) and with cognates of παιδεία three times (ἀπαίδευτος in 5:23; παιδεύω in 13:24, 23:13). Alternate translations occur at 1:3; 7:22; 13:1. Proverbs 8:33 and 23:23 are not present in G. Origen's Hexapla notes that in contrast to the LXX, Symmachus and Aquila also use παιδεία at 1:3.

<sup>16</sup> NIDOTTE, 2:480, s.v., מוֹסֵר. Merrill notes, "Fundamentally, [*musar*] has to do with teaching/learning by exhortation and example, with warning as to the consequences of disobedience, and with the application of penalty following failure to adhere" (2:480-81). For argumentation supporting taking *musar/paideia* in Proverbs as "multiplex," including formative, preventative, and punitive/corrective dimensions of discipline, see Spellman, "The Drama of Discipline," *JETS* 59, no. 3 (2016): 493-94.

<sup>17</sup> DCH 5:177-178 glosses the primary sense of מוֹסֵר in Proverbs as formative: "discipline, as instruction, training," while identifying a handful of passages where the sense seems to be corrective: "discipline, as correction, chastisement" (7:22; 13:24; 15:10; 22:15; 23:13). Similarly, BDB and HALOT. Strangely, all the lexical items DCH identifies as synonyms parallel its primary sense: wisdom, understanding, teaching, knowledge, counsel, answer, and proverb (5:178). It seems clear enough that reproof (תּוֹכַחַת; G: ἐλεγχόμενος) parallels מוֹסֵר in Prov. 3:11.

<sup>18</sup> For discussions of the MT-LXX relationship here, see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary*, The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Edition (SBL Press, 2015), 99-100; and Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and G. S. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), ad loc.

<sup>19</sup> For an alternative, though not aggressively argued, reading of *musar* in Proverbs see Kyle C. Dunham, "Structure and Theology in Proverbs: Its Function as an Educational Program for Novice Leaders in Ancient Israel," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29, no. 3 (2019): 367 and passim.

## Contextual and Canonical Grounds for the Author's Claim

As already noted, the author of Hebrews infers from Proverbs 3:11-12 a divine motive which is not explicit in its literary context: that we share Yahweh's holiness. This raises the question of how the author might have arrived at this conclusion. Admittedly, no definitive answer can be provided. However, there are several plausible lines of evidence that could lead to such a conclusion.

First, Proverbs itself states that God's discipline (מוֹסֶר) is intended, among other things, to direct us **away** from sinful men (1:10-19; 2:12-15), sinful women (2:16-19), folly, fools, and their ilk (1:20-32), and to direct us **into** the paths of justice (Prov. 2:8), uprightness (2:13), righteous men (Prov. 2:20) and life (Prov. 10:17). In other words, separation from all sinful folly to likeness to Yahweh in wisdom, word, and deed, is the purpose of Yahweh's discipline (*musar*). What is that but holiness?

Second, Proverbs twice refers to Yahweh/God as the Holy One (קֹדֶשִׁים; Prov. 9:10; 30:3). Given that the wisdom of Proverbs comes from Yahweh (2:6) and its discipline directs the wise to fear Yahweh (15:33) and to walk in the way of Yahweh (10:29), it seems reasonable to conclude that Yahweh's discipline in all its dimensions leads to likeness to the Holy One and thus to sharing His holiness.<sup>20</sup>

Third, the Pentateuch teaches that Yahweh's people are to imitate Him in their moral character.<sup>21</sup> This is perhaps most obvious in Yahweh's calls to holiness: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2ff; 20:26; 25:17).<sup>22</sup> Less obviously, Yahweh calls Abraham "so that He will keep the way of Yahweh, to do righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). Since justice, uprightness, and righteousness are all elements (hyponyms) of the set of holy behaviors commanded by Yahweh (cf. Lev. 19:2ff; 20:22-26), it is but a small step to see the virtues of "righteousness, justice, and equity" which Proverbs' מוֹסֶר develops (1:2-3; 2:9) as expressions of Yahweh's holiness.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Another suggestive piece of intra-Proverbs data that may have contributed to reading Proverbs as addressing holiness is the fact that forms of ὁσιός (holiness) occur in Greek Proverbs ten times (Prov. 2:11, 21; 10:29; 14:32; 17:26; 18:5; 20:11; 21:15; 22:11; 29:10) (cf. the use of ὁσιός in Heb. 7:26).

<sup>21</sup> "The way God had acted on behalf of Israel was to provide not merely the motive for ethical obedience but also the model for it." Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 1992), 199-201.

<sup>22</sup> Deut. 10:17-19 is another text that explicitly calls God's people to imitate His character and behavior: "For Yahweh your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe." <sup>18</sup> "He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing." <sup>19</sup> "So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

<sup>23</sup> For accounts of the role that "righteousness, justice, and equity" play in Proverbs' theological structure see, Kyle C. Dunham, "Structure and Theology in Proverbs: Its Function as an Educational Program for Novice Leaders in Ancient Israel," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29, no. 3 (2019): 361-388, and A. Philip Brown II, "Righteous, Justice, and Rectitude: Structure in Proverbs 2 and the Final Shape of Proverbs" in *The Old Testament*

Finally, Deuteronomy 8:3-5 likely forms the background for Proverbs 3:11-12. Solomon reflects the language Moses used regarding Yahweh's discipline of Israel both before and after Sinai:

He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of Yahweh. ... Thus you are to know in your heart that, just as a man disciplines his son, Yahweh your God disciplines you.

Yahweh's discipline of his redeemed people humbled them and instructed them of their ultimate dependence upon God, thus promoting their growth in holiness.

Taken individually or together, these lines of contextual and canonical evidence provide plausible routes by which the author might have reached his conclusion. They also strongly support the theological inference that Yahweh's discipline in all its forms aims at His people's sanctification.<sup>24</sup>

### Hermeneutical Implications of Hebrews' Use of Proverbs 3

Several observations may be made about the author's use of Proverbs 3. First, he takes a general principle (Yahweh disciplines his sons) and applies it to a specific situation (enduring persecution). This specific situation is not in view in Proverbs 3, nor does persecution figure largely in Proverbs as a whole.<sup>25</sup> However, nothing in the context of Hebrews suggests that it is only when God's discipline involves persecution that He intends it "for our good, that we share in his holiness." Given the nature of divine holiness as encompassing at least all God's communicable attributes, such a restriction would be unwarranted.<sup>26</sup> We may therefore apply the

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*Yesterday and Today: Essays in Honor of Michael P. V. Barrett* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 197–220

<sup>24</sup> I am also comfortable affirming the possibility that the author's conclusion is solely dependent upon the Spirit's inspiration in the moment of writing, though such an affirmation is not necessitated by inspiration.

<sup>25</sup> Persecution or oppression is not entirely absent from Proverbs. For example, Prov. 14:31 references the oppression of the poor by the wicked.

<sup>26</sup> I understand God's holiness to be His transcendent separateness from all things due to the unique excellence of His being and character. God's holiness, secondarily and only as a consequence of the primary sense, is his separateness unto all that is good and thus his separation from all that is evil, i.e., purity. Thomas Oden writes: "Holiness is not to be conceived as one trait among many other divine traits in such a way that these other traits may or may not include holiness. Rather, holiness summarizes, unifies, and integrates all the other incomparably good characteristics of the divine life." *The Living God: Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 100. Similarly, Ken Casillas writes, "When biblical writers describe God as holy, often they're communicating the broad concept that he is incomparable or unique. ... God is separate from anyone and anything that isn't God. In other words, he is the only one in his category, one of a kind. In this general sense, God's holiness means the totality of what makes him God." *Beyond Chapter and Verse: The Theology and Practice of Biblical Application* (Wipf & Stock, 2018), 28.

larger principle articulated in Proverbs in the same way the author of Hebrews does: all God's discipline aims at our transformation into His likeness.

Second, the author reads Proverbs 3 as actively speaking directly to his contemporary audience. In keeping with his pattern of introducing Scripture with present tense verb forms,<sup>27</sup> he states that the exhortation of Proverbs "is instructing" (διαλέγεται) them. Scripture is not just something that has been spoken with ongoing results.<sup>28</sup> It is the Holy Spirit speaking now (cf. 10:15). As such, his 1st c. audience is among the intended addressees of Solomon's "my son." In other words, the author of Hebrews understands Proverbs, indeed all Scripture, to be the living word of God presently speaking to all His sons (cf. Heb. 4:12). This authorizes new covenant believers to read Proverbs in the same way. When we read Proverbs, God *is speaking* to us today.

Third, the author of Hebrews identifies the speaker in Proverbs 3:11 as God the Father who addresses his sons when he tells them not to despise the chastening of Yahweh. God, like a human father, disciplines His children. Unlike a human father, God unerring disciplines his children for their profit so that they may share in His holiness. When Proverbs introduces its wisdom with "my son," God the Father is speaking, and we should receive it as his fatherly word to us.<sup>29</sup>

Fourth, given the role of παιδεία in Proverbs, the author of Hebrews likely regards the entire Book of Proverbs as a form of Yahweh's παιδεία. Consequently, Proverbs as a whole may be understood to be aimed at our sanctification. All that it teaches is designed to help us share Yahweh's holiness. Specifically, it teaches us to think like Yahweh, value what Yahweh values, act like Yahweh acts (excluding vengeance), and so to become persons who share the holy character of Yahweh.

Fifth, the author sees the virtues and values of Proverbs as reflective of Yahweh's holiness. It is through His discipline that we share *His* holiness. Since Yahweh is calling his children to embrace and embody His virtues and values, Proverbs is a revelation of Yahweh's holiness. New covenant believers should approach it as such.

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<sup>27</sup> λέγει 10x (Heb. 1:6, 7; 3:7; 5:6; 8:8, 9, 10; 10:5, 16), λέγων 7x (Heb. 2:6, 12; 4:7; 6:14; 9:20; 10:8; 12:26), ἐν τῷ λέγεσθαι 1x (3:15), μαρτυρεῖ (10:15), etc.

<sup>28</sup> The author of Hebrews does use perfect tense forms to introduce Scripture citations (Heb. 1:13; 4:3, 4, 7; 10:7, 9, 15; 12:26; 13:5). I am aware of challenges raised by Constantine Campbell and others regarding the traditional understanding of the aspectual significance of the perfect tense. At present I remain unconvinced that the traditional understanding is incorrect.

<sup>29</sup> Arguably, believers are stated or implied to be the children of all three persons of the Godhead in Scripture. The best way to acknowledge that reality and integrate it with texts which seem to focus our status as children in relation to God the Father is not yet clear to me.



## Discerning and Engaging Holiness in Proverbs

If Proverbs is a revelation of Yahweh's holiness, how is the NT believer to gain insight into that revelation? First and most simply, by observing the texts that speak about Yahweh. There are more than 100 such texts in Proverbs.<sup>30</sup> The theological picture these texts yield is rich. For example:

Proverbs displays many facets of Yahweh's holy character. He is **awesome or fearsome** as evidenced in the "fear of Yahweh" theme that pervades the collection (1:7; 9:10; 24:21; 31:30). Yahweh is incomparably **wise** (21:30), gives wisdom (2:6), and possesses and acts with wisdom (3:19; 8:22). Yahweh is **discerning**, able to see and weigh spirits (16:2) and hearts (21:2), i.e., the hidden motives of human action. Yahweh is **good**, for he seeks the best interest of his sons—long life (9:11), well-being (3:2), honor (3:16), and it is the good whom He favors ("A good man will obtain favor from Yahweh"; 12:2). Yahweh is **kind**, for by kindness and truth he atones for iniquity (16:6), and he grants kindness and truth to those who devise good (14:22).<sup>31</sup>

Second, we may gain insight into Yahweh's holiness with a simple rubric that proceeds from the fact that Proverbs is God speaking to us. Every passage reveals, in some way, one or more of the following: Yahweh's perspective, Yahweh's preferences, Yahweh's practices, and Yahweh's person, that is, his nature and character. I have yet to find a proverb which does not provide a window on Yahweh's perspective. Yahweh's preferences are seen both in what he affirms and commands as well as in what he condemns and prohibits. Yahweh's practices shine in texts that personify His wisdom, that recount his creation, and that speak of his interactions and reactions. Yahweh's nature and character are the ground of His perspective, preferences, and practices and so are always revealed by them.

If Proverbs is a manual for holiness, a guide for sanctification, then the virtues and values which it promotes are aspects of Yahweh's holiness we are to imitate and embody. Given this understanding, it follows that Proverbs addresses at least the following aspects of holiness/sanctification:

- 1) holiness of mind – thinking like Yahweh = wisdom, understanding, prudence, patience, generosity, etc.
- 2) holiness of life – acting like Yahweh and as Yahweh in His wisdom directs, righteousness, uprightness, blamelessness, etc.
- 3) holiness of heart – valuing and delighting in what Yahweh delights in, rejecting and hating what Yahweh hates
- 4) sanctification as a process – the simple are to become wise, the wise are to become wiser

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<sup>30</sup> 87 explicit uses of Yahweh are distributed throughout the Proverbs. Divine titles (e.g., Maker, Redeemer, Righteous One) may be found in Prov. 2:7, 8; 3:6, 12, 20, 34; 8:26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31; 23:11; 30:6). Adding in pronominal references (cf. brings the total verses well above 100.

<sup>31</sup> This is excerpted from *A Theological and Devotional Commentary on Proverbs*, which I hope to publish in the near future.

- 5) sanctification via social interaction – wisdom is gained from walking and counseling with the wise, iron sharpens iron, the wounds of a friend, the wise avoid quarrelsome isolation, etc.

Perhaps a Pauline example will clinch this point. After calling the Romans to present themselves as holy, living sacrifices, he directs them to avoid conformity to the world and to ongoing transformation by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:1-2). In the rest of Romas 12, he develops key areas in which their minds need renewing: their self-estimate (3-8) and their love for others (9-21). I find it confirming for this paper's thesis that Paul quotes at least three times from Proverbs as he addresses areas in which they are to grow in holiness: be not wise in your own eyes (12:16; Prov. 3:7), repay no one evil for evil (12:17; Prov. 20:22), and if your enemy is hungry, feed him, etc. (12:20; Prov. 25:21-22). Paul viewed and used Proverbs as guide to holiness.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Lest it appear that growth in holiness is a human endeavor, Proverbs clarifies that no one can make their own heart pure (Prov. 20:9), that a man's steps are from Yahweh (Prov. 20:24), and that transformation comes in the contexts of trusting (3:5), knowing (3:6), and fearing (3:7) Yahweh. If Proverbs aims at our sanctification, it does so through teaching us to accept Yahweh's discipline. The Holy One is the source of our sanctity and our sanctifier. We may engage His discipline in Proverbs in the confidence that He who chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless and calls us to holiness in all our behavior will be faithful to accomplish it in us, for His glory and our good.

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<sup>32</sup> Other NT examples include the use of Proverbs by James (e.g., Jam. 4:6; Prov. 3:34) and Peter (e.g., 1 Pet. 4:18; Prov. 11:31).

