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Echoes of Eden in Proverbs: Towards a Biblical Theological Ethic

Abstract

Abstract:

This study argues for a biblical-theological approach to the ethics of Proverbs. It proposes that the ethical foundation for Proverbs lies in the principles established in Genesis 1-4. The argument unfolds as follows: Tracing the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, one sees Solomon, the author of Proverbs, as a partial fulfillment of the promised seed in Genesis 3:15. Furthermore, other biblical writers depict Solomon as an Adamic king ruling in an Eden-like context. Consequently, understanding Proverbs' position within redemptive history encourages readers to interpret it through an Edenic framework. In other words, a biblical-theological approach compels readers to interpret Proverbs in light of Genesis' early chapters. This perspective equips readers with the key to consider applying Edenic principles within the book's ethical teachings. Readers then discover that Proverbs emphasizes and elaborates on Edenic principles related to work, marriage, loving one's neighbor, and progeny.

Keywords

Ethics/Proverbs/Biblical Theology

Cover Page Footnote

Echoes of Eden in Proverbs: Towards a Biblical Theological Ethic Armen Oganessian, PhD, University of Aberdeen

Echoes of Eden in Proverbs: Towards a Biblical Theological Ethic

In Reformed Ethics, Herman Bavinck attempts to construct a Christian ethic "from the ground up."¹ He starts by examining Christian history, tracing the development of the Church's ethics. Using this historical foundation, he then establishes his concept of Christian ethics.² Observing Bavinck's approach, one is prompted to ask, "Would not a truly 'ground-up' Christian ethic begin with the Bible?" In other words, in constructing a concept of Christian ethics, should one not begin with Scripture rather than history?

Richard Hays captures the main challenge of this approach with the proverb, "the Devil can cite Scripture to his purpose."³ Though the Bible is believed to be the foundation of the Church's faith and practice, Hays argues appeals to it are inherently suspect. It contains diverse viewpoints and allows for various interpretations, leading to a wide range of readings.⁴

Many scholars have grappled with this interpretive challenge. Some propose overarching lenses to guide ethical reasoning from Scripture. David Gushee and Glen Stassen, in *Kingdom Ethics*, advocate for "God's kingdom" as the central interpretive lens.⁵ John Frame suggests "Lordship" as that key interpretive lens.⁶ Others take a more direct approach. In *Biblical Ethics*, T. B. Maston surveys the ethical teachings of each biblical book.⁷ Wayne Grudem takes a topical approach, attempting to collect and synthesize relevant Bible passages for specific ethical topics.⁸ Hays himself proposes a fourfold method to navigate the hermeneutical challenges.⁹ Despite these valuable contributions, a crucial attempt remains missing—a Biblical Theological Ethic.

¹ Herman Bavinck and John Bolt (eds.), *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen and Converted Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 1.

² Ibid, 2-3

³ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2013), 1

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David P. Gushee and Glen Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 1.

⁶ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 3.

⁷ T.B Maston, *Biblical Ethics: A Guide to the ethical Message of the Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), I

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 37.

⁹ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 3-7.

What is Biblical Theology?

To address the above hermeneutical challenge, biblical theology draws on the interplay between individual biblical books and the Bible's grand narrative. Miles Van Pelt offers an insightful analogy to illustrate this interplay. Imagine the 66 biblical books as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each book represents a unique piece with its own image and shape. However, the complete picture on the front of the puzzle box provides the context to understand each individual piece.¹⁰

This complete picture on the box serves as a metaphor for the Bible's grand narrative of redemption. It represents God's singular plan of salvation culminating in Jesus Christ.¹¹ This narrative unfolds progressively, conveyed by various authors across different historical periods.¹² These historical periods correspond to the individual pieces of the puzzle.

The interpretive interplay between the individual pieces and the complete picture is what gives biblical theology its unique task. This approach allows us to integrate a specific text into the broader theological framework of both the Old and New Testaments.¹³ Simultaneously, it aids in the exegesis of individual canonical books.

Therefore, I will explore the topic of ethics within a specific book—Proverbs—which holds particular interest for Christian ethicists. To interpret Proverbs within its redemptive historical context,¹⁴ I will establish its place within the Bible's grand narrative. I will analyze how it contributes to the complete picture on the front of the puzzle box. Subsequently, I will examine the book's structure and literary context, essentially its own unique image and shape within the larger picture.

¹⁰ Miles V. Van Pelt, "Introduction," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, edited by Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2016), 23-42.

¹¹ Michael Kruger, "Introduction," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, edited by Michael Kruger (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2016), 1-27.

¹² G.K. Beale. *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 9.

¹³ Kevin J Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 13-25.

¹⁴ Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 9.

The Front of the Box

My analysis begins by examining Proverbs within its historical context. As Proverbs is attributed to Solomon, my attention naturally turns to him.¹⁵ Other Biblical authors portray Solomon as “a new Adam”¹⁶ or “Adamic King”¹⁷, partially fulfilling God's promise in Genesis 3:15. This parallel between Adam and Solomon is pivotal to my interpretation.

The Melody

An analogy offers a helpful tool for understanding this parallel. Imagine Genesis 3:14-19 as a foundational melody within the Bible's grand narrative. Throughout Scripture, historical figures and events echo or rearrange this melody's themes. It has three keynotes: (1) the seed of the woman, (2) triumph over evil, and (3) humanity's return to Eden. In simpler terms, the prophecy foretells that *the woman's seed (an Adamic King) will ultimately reverse the Fall's curse and restore humanity to Eden.*

Central to the melody is God's promise in Genesis 3:15: the woman's seed will crush the serpent's head. The surrounding verses detail the curses that accompany humanity's fall. Death enters the world (Gen 3:19), the ground is cursed, and humanity faces hardship in toil (3:17-18). Essentially, violence enters the world. Life becomes a constant struggle. Humans now contend not only with the natural world (animals and plants, 3:18) but also with each other (3:16). The inevitable outcome of this struggle is death (3:19).¹⁸

Despite the bleak outlook, the serpent's destruction prophesied in Genesis 3:15 offers hope for humanity's eventual triumph over evil. Verses 14 and 15 deliver the first announcement of good news, signifying that evil will not forever hold dominion over humanity.¹⁹ In the immediate context, this triumph over evil suggests not only the reversal of the curse but also a return to Eden.²⁰

¹⁵Assuming Solomon's authorship. Though it is my view that Solomon wrote Proverbs, the author is irrelevant to my interpretation. What is relevant is that the author of Proverbs presents himself as Solomon, which is clear in Proverbs 1:1.

¹⁶James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2010), 179.

¹⁷G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 63-73.

¹⁸Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 29-41.

¹⁹Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 65.

²⁰Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 68; 77.

Solomon as a New Adam: Echoes of the Melody

Building upon this narrative, the Bible's portrayal of Solomon resonates with Edenic themes. As I will show, in the Books of Samuel and Kings, the author models Solomon and his reign after Adam, casting him as a new Adam who restores Israel to an Edenic state. This depiction positions Solomon as a partial fulfillment of the promise in Genesis 3:15. Furthermore, the view of the Abrahamic Covenant as chiefly a means to accomplish the promise made in Genesis 3 further emphasizes this connection.

The Abrahamic Covenant: A Response to Curses

The Abrahamic Covenant, established in Genesis 12, offers hope in response to the curses pronounced in Genesis 3. In 12:1-3, God bestows five blessings upon Abram, contrasting the five-fold curse pronounced upon Adam and Eve.²¹ The five blessings thus hold the promise of overcoming the earlier curses.²²

Like Genesis 3, the path to overcoming the curses lies through future generations.²³ Genesis 12:2 reads, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." In context, this promise is ultimately accomplished when Abraham's descendant crushes the serpent's head. This connection is further emphasized in Genesis 12:3, where God declares that "all the families of the earth" will be blessed through Abraham's descendants.²⁴ Abraham's lineage then becomes the key to reversing the curses placed upon humanity in Genesis 3.

The covenants established in Genesis 15-17 further amplify the promises of Genesis 12.²⁵ God elevates Abraham's status, proclaiming him "the father of many nations" (17:4), expanding on the earlier promise to make him "into a great nation" (12:2). These chapters also emphasize physical biology, particularly Sarah's role in producing Abraham's heir (17:15-21).²⁶ Here again, echoes of

²¹ Hamilton, *Song of Songs*, 26.

²² James M. Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessings of Abraham," *Tyndale Bulletin* 58.2 (2007), 253-273.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 81.

²⁵ And an Oath. Waltke sees the expansion of the chapter 12 promises in the oath of Genesis 22 (Charles Yu and Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011], 317-20).

²⁶ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 312.

Genesis 3 are present. The "woman's seed", who ultimately defeats the serpent, will come from Abraham's lineage.

Beyond genealogy, these chapters establish a royal dimension.²⁷ By promising to make "nations" of Abraham, God implies that kings will descend from him (17:6-7). Thus, the seed will be an Abrahamic King, or better stated, an Adamic king descended from Abraham. This King will fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15, returning humanity to a restored Eden.

The Samuel-Kings Portrayal of Solomon

Samuel-Kings' portrayal of Solomon builds directly upon the themes established in the Abrahamic covenant. Through Judah,²⁸ Abraham's family line leads to David, with whom God establishes a covenant in 2 Samuel 7. This Davidic covenant echoes the promises made in Genesis 12 at several points.²⁹ The reference to "seed" in 2 Samuel 7 links it to the Abrahamic covenant.³⁰ This seed, through whom God will fulfill his promises, is explicitly described as physical offspring from David's body (2 Samuel 7:12). The Davidic covenant also echoes the Abrahamic in its royal aspect. In 2 Samuel 7:13, God promises to "establish the throne" of David's descendants' "kingdom forever".

Therefore, within the narrative of Samuel-Kings, God expands his covenantal purposes.³¹ He will achieve his promises to Abraham within the particular framework of the Davidic covenant.³² The Davidic covenant, in turn, becomes the means for accomplishing the Genesis 3:15 promise.

Solomon as the Seed of the Woman

The Davidic covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. However, at least to some degree, readers of the Books of Samuel and Kings would naturally apply the covenant to Solomon, David's direct heir. Since this

²⁷ Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 76.

²⁸ In Genesis 49:10, Jacob states, "the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." Thus, in Genesis 49, there is a further narrowing of the Adamic king's lineage. The expected king will not only come from Abraham's family in general but specifically the Judaic line.

²⁹ Hamilton, *Song of Songs*, 26.

³⁰ Wellum, *God's Kingdom Through God's Covenants*, 424.

³¹ Michael K. McKelvey, "1-2 Samuel," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 203-222.

³² Hamilton, *Song of Songs*, 26.

paper focuses on him as the author of Proverbs, it becomes crucial to ask: to what extent should the reader make this application of Solomon to the Davidic covenant? In other words, what is the canonical conception of Solomon's relationship to the Davidic covenant? Consequently, how does this same conception view him in relation to the promise in Genesis 3:15?

The answer to these questions begins with the stipulation of the promised heir in the Davidic covenant. It reads, "he shall build a house for My name" (2 Samuel 7:13). In the immediate context of the Samuel-Kings narrative, "the house" refers to the Temple. The author then associates the Temple's construction with Solomon in 1 Kings 6-9. Thus, the Samuel-Kings author views Solomon as partially fulfilling the Davidic covenant.³³

In doing so, the author presents Solomon's reign within an Edenic framework. The idyllic nature of Israelite life during Solomon's reign echoes the paradise of Eden.³⁴ More importantly, the Temple's construction signifies God's permanent presence in Israel.³⁵ This presence at the center of the nation makes it an Edenic land.³⁶ Like in Eden, humanity dwells with God in Solomon's Israel.³⁷

In addition to portraying Solomon's Israel as an Edenic land, the Samuel-Kings author draws parallels between Solomon and Adam: Adam names all the animals (Gen 2:19); Solomon describes all the animals (1 Kings 4:33). Adam eats from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:4-3:24); Solomon asks for an understanding mind to "discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). Adam was King (having dominion over) all the earth (Gen 1:26); "King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon" (1 Kings 10:23-24).³⁸ These echoes suggest a thematic link to Genesis 3, indicating that Solomon partially accomplishes the promises found there.

The Woman's Seed as Author

Thus, to understand the author of Proverbs according to the canonical conception, readers must view the text as written by an Adamic King who envisions a restored Eden. This interpretation builds upon the idea that the

³³ Gregory Beale, "Eden, Temple, and the Church's Mission in the Creation," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (March 2005), 5-31.

³⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 168.

³⁵ Of course, Yahweh dwelled with Israel in the Tabernacle.

³⁶ Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 169.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁸ G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 69-70.

Davidic King partially fulfills the promises given to Abraham in the canonical narrative. The Davidic King, in turn, fulfills a portion of the promise found in Genesis 3:15. This parallel becomes even clearer when the author of Samuel-Kings presents Solomon, the Davidic King, as the Second Adam ruling over a New Eden.

Finally, assuming Solomon intended it to serve as the entire book's title,³⁹ his identification in Proverbs 1:1 as "son of David, king of Israel" becomes significant within the full canonical context. Readers, then, should understand the author as associating himself with the Davidic covenant.⁴⁰ In turn, understanding the above conception of the covenant reveals a connection between the author and the woman's seed from Genesis 3. Therefore, its reader should view Proverbs as written from an Edenic perspective.

The Individual Piece

Having explored the parallels between Solomon and the temple with Adam and Eden, as well as Solomon's connection to the woman's seed, I now shift my focus to the Book of Proverbs. This work, I argue, develops the ethical principles established in Genesis 1-4. Imagine the ethical principles in those chapters as an acorn. In Proverbs, Solomon cultivates and expands upon these principles, transforming the acorn into an oak. These principles include dwelling with God, work, marriage, loving one's neighbor, and progeny. Since these principles are either present at creation or stem from humanity's fall, I will refer to them as "Edenic echoes".

My thesis is this: By tracing the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, one can link the author of Proverbs to the woman's seed. Additionally, other canonical authors depict him as an Adamic King ruling in Eden. Consequently, the canon positions Proverbs within the context of Eden. In other words, a biblical theological approach encourages readers of Proverbs to view the book through an Edenic lens. This perspective equips readers with the interpretive key to consider Edenic principles within the book's ethical teachings. Following this approach, its reader discovers that Proverbs emphasizes and elaborates on Edenic principles of work, marriage, loving one's neighbor, and progeny.

³⁹ Bruce Waltke and Ivan De Silva, *Proverbs: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 65.

⁴⁰ Assuming that David told Solomon about the covenant, or, assuming the late date for Proverbs, that the compiler of the Proverbs associates it with the Davidic covenant. To see the full conversation on the subject, consult James Hamilton's introduction to his commentary on Song of Songs (Hamilton, *Song of Songs*, 1-27).

Dwelling with God in the Land

The first echo of Eden in Proverbs emerges when viewing the book's overall structure. The book presents two paths: the way of wisdom and the way of the fool. Wisdom's path is the righteous one. In Proverbs, wisdom and righteousness are intertwined (Prov 10:1-2).⁴¹ The way of wisdom leads to life (10:16; 19:10).⁴² Life is not mere physical existence. Rather, it is the full and meaningful existence in Yahweh's ordered world⁴³ in fellowship with him (3:26)⁴⁴ in the land (10:30). In contrast, the fool's path is that of wickedness.⁴⁵ It leads to death (8:36; 10:16; 11:19; 14:12), exile from the land (10:30), and alienation from God (15:29).

The defining characteristic that distinguishes these two paths is the fear of the Lord. Proverbs states that the beginning of knowledge is the fear of the Lord (1:7; 9:10; 19:23). Conversely, the fool rejects the fear of the Lord (1:29).⁴⁶

Like in Deuteronomy (Deut. 30:19),⁴⁷ Solomon lays out life and death before his son, hoping he will choose life. Choosing life allows the son to dwell in the land (Proverbs 2:21-22), signifying a life lived in fellowship with God. One of the clearest illustrations of this choice appears in Proverbs 8:35-36. Solomon presents two divergent paths. Those who find wisdom find life, while those who despise wisdom choose death.

This echoes the narrative of Eden. God places Adam in the garden (the land) and offers him a choice between life and death through the two trees (Gen. 2:9). The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represents death, as God warns Adam that eating from it will lead to his death (Gen. 2:17). In contrast, the Tree of Life symbolizes a life lived in fellowship with God.⁴⁸ Continuous consumption of this fruit would have prevented Adam's death (Gen. 2:9; 3:22).⁴⁹

⁴¹ Waltke, Silva, *Proverbs: A Shorter Commentary*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41

⁴³ Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 52.

⁴⁴ Waltke, *Proverbs*, 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁶ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 37.

⁴⁷ Perhaps an earlier typology of Eden.

⁴⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 27-28.

⁴⁹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 228.

The Tree of Life and Dwelling with God

Solomon's reference to the Tree of Life further reinforces the aforementioned structure. Three books in the Bible mention the Tree: Genesis (2:9; 3:22), Revelation (2:7; 22:2;14;19), and Proverbs (3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4). In Genesis and Revelation, the Tree of Life is linked to Eden, representing a state of fellowship with God. As established earlier, the Tree symbolizes life with God in Genesis. Similarly, in Revelation, the Tree of Life represents God's life-giving presence⁵⁰ and humanity's reunited dwelling with Him in the "new Jerusalem."⁵¹ The new Jerusalem and the resurrection signify the regaining of what humanity lost in Genesis 3.⁵²

Turning to Proverbs, in 3:18, wisdom is described as a tree of life. In 11:30, righteousness produces a tree of life. Interpreting these verses within the broader context of scripture, the reader comprehends that both wisdom and righteousness lead to an Edenic state. In this state, one enjoys life and fellowship with God.

Solomon further develops this principle by connecting three concepts: righteousness, fellowship with God, and deliverance from death. Proverbs states that God loves the righteous (15:9). He shows them favor (11:11), blesses them (3:33), and takes care of their needs (10:3). God also hears their prayers (15:29). Additionally, Solomon declares that "righteousness delivers from death" (11:4). Even in death, the righteous seek refuge in God (14:32). Ultimately, righteousness leads to immortality (12:28).

Wisdom and Creation

Solomon strengthens this structure further in Proverbs 3:19 and 8:22-31 by linking wisdom to creation. God uses wisdom to establish the earth. Consequently, humanity should utilize it to navigate God's creation effectively.⁵³ Since He is the sole creator of the cosmos, wisdom ultimately leads back to God, as established in Genesis 1-2.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ G.K Beale and Sean McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K Beale and D.A Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1081-1161.

⁵¹ Or the "Holy City."

⁵² Francesca Aran Murphy, "Revelation ('The Apocalypse of Saint John the Divine')," in *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 233-247.

⁵³ Estes, *Hear, My Son*, 109.

⁵⁴ House, *Old Testament Theology*, 445.

This association with creation compels the reader to consider Edenic humanity in verses 8:30-31. At the conclusion of her creation speech in verse 31, Wisdom expresses delight in the children of men. In the preceding verse, this "delight" becomes a daily occurrence. Within the context of creation, Wisdom's delight refers to her joy during the days of creation recounted in Genesis 1.⁵⁵ Verse 31 then refocuses this delight on a specific part of creation - humanity. Her renewed expression of delight echoes God's special regard for humanity within the creation narrative. Thus, the reader is drawn to consider Edenic humanity, with Wisdom guiding them towards understanding humanity's original purpose.

Ethics of Work

Solomon's ethics of work in Proverbs also echoes themes found in Genesis 1-4. The emphasis on work in Proverbs resonates with the concept of work in Genesis in two ways: the mandate for creation and the curse placed upon the ground. Solomon builds upon these Edenic themes in Proverbs.

Understanding how Solomon develops these themes starts with the contrasting paths of the wise and the foolish, differentiated by their attitudes towards labor. The wise person demonstrates diligence, while the fool is characterized by sloth. In Proverbs 14:22-23, Solomon directly connects wisdom and work. He states that hard work offers the crown of wealth to the wise. Proverbs 26 further emphasizes the distinction. Here, Solomon equates the sluggard with the fool. In verse 12, he declares that the fool is wise in his own eyes, followed by verse 16 where he states the sluggard considers himself exceedingly wise. As seen in Proverbs 10:4, Solomon presents a clear choice: one path leads to wealth, the other to poverty.

The Curse of the Ground

The curse of the ground manifests in the Book of Proverbs' dichotomous paths. The righteous, blessed by the Lord, manage to avoid the curse and accumulate wealth (Proverbs 10:22). Conversely, the curse brings poverty upon the sluggard. Proverbs 24:30-34 illustrates this connection between laziness and the curse. It reads, "I went by the field of the sluggard, by the vineyard of the one who lacks sense. Thorns had sprung up everywhere, the ground was completely covered with weeds, and the stone wall was broken down."

This passage delivers a clear lesson: laziness leads to poverty. Solomon paints a stark picture of the sluggard's fate: destitution. The imagery includes a dilapidated house overrun with thorns and weeds. This choice of imagery by

⁵⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs*, 164.

Solomon is not accidental. The thorns and weeds evoke specific images from the "curse of the ground" described in Genesis 3:18. Through his laziness, the sluggard allows the curse to take its course, ultimately leading to his own poverty.

The Creation Mandate

The sluggard's destitution stems not only from the curse of the ground but also from a defiance of the creation mandate. That is, he refuses to work.⁵⁶ This is evident in his refusal to do agricultural work (10:5). He fails to plow during the appropriate season, and come harvest, he finds nothing (20:4). Instead of honest labor, he seeks shortcuts through ill-gotten gains (1:13-14). The wicked person attempts to earn wages through deceit (11:18). He eats stolen meat (20:17).

This pursuit of ease ultimately leads to poverty and destruction. The wealth of the wicked man dwindles (13:11). His lack of hard work guarantees his descent into poverty (6:11; 24:34; 28:19). His ill-gotten food brings no nourishment, tasting like gravel in his mouth (20:17). Finally, the snares he sets for others entrap him (1:18; 29:6), leading to his death (1:12; 1:19).

In contrast, the righteous are industrious and diligent, working hard to subdue the earth.⁵⁷ They are prudent and industrious in agricultural work (6:8; 10:5; 12:11; 14:4). The ant's industriousness serves as a teacher to them (6:6). Their wealth endures (8:18) and extends to the third generation (13:22). Instead of seeking shortcuts, they understand that wealth is built gradually (13:11). They are not plagued by hunger (10:3; 13:25) and find profit in all their endeavors (14:21). This hard work also leads to life. In Proverbs 13:12, Solomon, echoing Eden, highlights how diligent work and delayed gratification lead to the tree of life.⁵⁸

The Ethics of Marriage

Solomon's teachings on marriage in Proverbs resonate with the ideal presented in the early chapters of Genesis. Just as he emphasizes the importance of work, Solomon dedicates significant space to the topic of marriage, echoing the themes established in Genesis. These early chapters not only establish the ideal of marriage and sexual ethics but also outline how the fall distorted this ideal through its curses upon the institution.

The ideal itself is presented in Genesis 2:24, where a man is instructed to "hold fast" to his wife, and they become "one flesh." This relationship embodies

⁵⁶ Assuming the creation mandate is manifested in all work not just agricultural work (see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013], 146-50).

⁵⁷ Waltke, *Proverbs*, 165.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

the ideal of unity within a monogamous union between a single man and a single woman.⁵⁹ Within this ideal, marriage is not ethically neutral; it is explicitly presented as a "good" thing (Gen 2:18).

However, this ideal is distorted in Genesis 3:16. Addressing Eve, God states, "Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, and he shall rule over you." This curse introduces alienation and disunity into the marriage relationship.⁶⁰ The previously harmonious 2:24 relationship degenerates, replaced by harsh domineering, lustful desire, and the possibility of other sexual partners⁶¹ and divorce.⁶²

Genesis' ethics of marriage manifest again in the book's dichotomous paths. Solomon exhorts his son to seek an "excellent" wife (Proverbs 18:22; 30:10). Wisdom encourages finding sexual fulfillment within the marriage bond (2:16-19; 5:15-21). Conversely, wisdom warns against the dangers of the "forbidden"⁶³ woman (2:16; 5:2-3; 7:5). In contrast, the fool is easily enticed by the forbidden woman (7:6-23), leading to his financial ruin (29:3) and even death (5:6; 6:26; 7:23; 7:27).

Proverbs also echoes the principle established in Genesis 2:18, where a wife is considered a "good" thing. A prudent wife is from the Lord (Proverbs 19:14). She is more valuable than precious jewels (31:10), serving as the crown of her husband (12:4). Yet, the clearest articulation of this principle comes in Proverbs 18:22, where finding a wife is explicitly described as finding a "good thing." This verse, in its simplicity, evokes the statement in Genesis 2:18, where God declares that "it is not good for man to be alone." Mirroring this simplicity, Proverbs 18:22 offers a reversal of the Genesis statement: since it is not good for man to be alone (without a wife) (Genesis 2:18), then finding a wife is indeed a good thing (Proverbs 18:22).

In stark contrast to the ideal wife stands the quarrelsome woman. Solomon vividly warns against a contentious marriage relationship in five graphic images: Proverbs 19:13; 21:9; 21:19; 25:24; 27:15. Each proverb uses a vivid illustration to caution against such a relationship. Through these verses, Solomon instructs his son to avoid the curse of disunity in marriage brought about by the fall. Instead of experiencing a good thing, his son will lead a diminished life. When contrasted,

⁵⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 330.

⁶⁰ John D. Currid, "Genesis," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2016).

⁶¹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 215.

⁶² Reading Genesis 3:16 in light of Matthew 19:8. In Matthew 19:8, divorce and sexual promiscuity are a result from the fall as indicated by Jesus stating, "it was not this way from the beginning."

⁶³ Or evil woman (6:24) or neighbor's wife (6:29).

the excellent wife and the quarrelsome woman present a picture of the ideal Genesis 2 marriage and its degradation by the Genesis 3 curse.

Having found an excellent partner, wisdom guides one to "hold fast" to them in a monogamous relationship. Solomon warns his son against allowing another to take his wife (5:17). He should find his sexual fulfillment in her. He also warns a woman not to "forsake the companion of her youth" (2:17a).

The Importance of Monogamy in Marriage

The ethic of monogamy in marriage originates from the concept that married individuals are "one flesh." Solomon develops this principle negatively, cautioning against adultery. He expresses a profound value for all marital relationships, irrespective of the individuals involved. The marital bond establishes a sacred space that both those within the relationship and third parties should honor.

This regard for marriage is apparent in Solomon's admonitions against engaging in a sexual relationship with a married woman. He stresses the wisdom in abstaining from involvement with one's neighbor's wife (Proverbs 2:16; 6:24), safeguarding them from violating another couple's covenant union (2:17b). Proverbs 6:26 underscores this with a sharp contrast: "For the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts down a precious life." The crucial distinction lies in the married woman's covenantal status – she is one flesh with another man. Any breach of this union will provoke the husband's wrath. He will not entertain any form of compensation (6:31-35), demanding the perpetrator's life (6:34).

The Ethic of Loving Your Neighbor.

Like marriage and work, Solomon's proverbs advocating for an ethic of harmonious living with one's neighbor comes from Genesis' early chapters. This emphasis on peaceful coexistence evokes Edenic principles. However, while the themes of marriage and work directly reference the creation story, the principle of neighborly love originates from the subsequent chapter. It derives from Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4:1-10.⁶⁴

The narrative of Cain's murder reveals a stark parallel to the previous chapter's transgression of eating from the forbidden tree and its subsequent curses. This connection is evident through the deliberate repetition of key phrases from

⁶⁴ Solomon is perhaps referencing the story in Proverbs 15:8.

Genesis 3 within chapter 4's account of the murder and its consequences.⁶⁵ The shared language, coupled with Cain's position as Adam's direct descendant and the two stories' proximity, suggests that Cain's violence is a direct consequence of the Fall.

Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve (representing the entirety of humanity) existed in a state of perfect harmony. However, the curse introduced tension and conflict into human relationships (Genesis 3:16b). This disruption extends beyond the immediate couple, affecting all future relationships. There is a downward spiral of jealousy, anger, violence, and vengeance (Genesis 4), culminating in humanity being characterized by wickedness and evil (6:5).⁶⁶ In essence, Genesis 4 presents an illustration of the Fall's immediate consequence: disharmony between neighbors, manifested through violence between brothers.

Genesis' ethics of living harmoniously with one's neighbor surfaces again in the book's dichotomous paths. Those who despise wisdom (Proverbs 1:7) plot violence against the innocent (10-12; 21:10) for material gain (1:13). Their aggression extends beyond physical harm; they use words as weapons, engaging in verbal assaults, deceit, and false witness in court (11:12; 22:22; 24:8; 25:8; 26:19; 27:14). Ironically, the harm they intend for their neighbors boomerangs back upon them (3:18; 22:16; 25:18; 29:5). Ultimately, all their scheming leads to their own demise (3:19).

Conversely, wisdom dictates a different path. It prohibits withholding good from a neighbor (3:27) or plotting their harm (3:28). Rather than resorting to theft, a wise person gives generously (14:31; 19:7; 22:9; 28:27). They actively seek their neighbor's well-being (14:21; 27:10), refusing to take pleasure even in an enemy's misfortune (24:17-18). Wisdom also rejects deceit and encourages one to 'buy truth' (23:23). It advises one to speak truthfully and to remain honest (22:21). A wise person never resorts to false witness (24:28).

Solomon further emphasizes the importance of words in neighborly relations by referencing the tree of life, evoking reflection on Eden. Proverbs 15:1-4 specifically focuses on how language shapes these relationships. The wise person uses their words to restore or uphold harmony (15:1a), while the fool uses harsh language that provokes tension (15:1b). Solomon then warns of the Lord's omnipresence (15:3) as a reminder to guide one's use of language.⁶⁷

This focus on words directly connects to the imagery of the tree of life. In 15:4, he states, "a soothing tongue is a tree of life." The proverb is another contrast. The wise use their words to give life, building harmony with their

⁶⁵ James M. Hamilton, *Typology-Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 18-40.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 215.

⁶⁷ Waltke, Silva, *Proverbs*, 240.

neighbors. The fool uses their words to destroy, creating discord and division. Solomon thus connects neighborly relations with Eden. He sees living in harmony with one's neighbor, using words to build rather than break, as a return to humanity's original state.

Progeny In Proverbs

Proverbs' final ethical principle gleaned from Genesis' early chapters concerns progeny. Like the other themes explored, progeny is a central concern throughout Proverbs. Solomon frames the entire book as a message from a father to his son, emphasizing the importance of lineage. This emphasis is mirrored in the Edenic narrative of Genesis. Before the fall, God instructs Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, as part of the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28). After the fall, humanity's hope rests on the promised child who will crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15).

Genesis' reader gains a deeper understanding of the narrative's ethic regarding progeny when considering it in relation to the land. In Genesis 1:28, God links the growth of Adam and Eve's family to the submission of the world. That is, a parallel connection exists between the expansion of the Adamic family and the flourishing of the Edenic land. After the fall, however, God enacts the death sentence through expulsion from Eden. Thus, Genesis 1-3 weaves a narrative that intertwines life, the land, and progeny.

The Edenic ethic, as illustrated in the narrative of Genesis 1-3, portrays the growth of the Adamic family paralleling the expansion of the place where humanity and God dwell together. In this, the reader sees an expansion of life itself. After the fall, Eve's progeny is meant to reverse the curse, bringing forth life in the land once again.

Solomon's development of this ethic surfaces again in the contrasting paths presented throughout Proverbs. God protects the descendants of the righteous (Proverbs 11:21). The righteous are blessed with a long lineage (17:6) and leave an inheritance to their children's children (13:22). God's favor extends to the righteous' children (20:7; 31:28). Righteous parents actively care for and discipline their children (13:24; 22:6; 23:13), bringing life to both themselves (29:17) and their children (19:8; 23:14). The Lord serves as a refuge for the children of the righteous (14:26). Finally, the children of the righteous, being righteous themselves, bring joy to their parents (10:1; 23:14).

These blessings underscore the significance of righteousness not only for the individual but also for future generations. Proverbs further reinforces this connection by explicitly linking hope to progeny. The joy a wise son brings to a

family is the central theme announced in Proverbs 10:1,⁶⁸ which continues through the main section of the book (10:1-22:6).⁶⁹ A similar announcement appears at the beginning of each paragraph within this major section (10:1; 13:1; 15:20).⁷⁰ Additionally, the entire book's style, presented as advice to Solomon's son, emphasizes his belief in placing hope in one's children.

The consequences for the wicked stand in stark contrast. They forfeit both future and hope (2:22; 10:30; 24:20). A sinner's wealth, instead of becoming an inheritance for their children, ultimately passes to the righteous (13:22). The foolish actively hate their children and neglect to discipline them (13:24). This failure leads to the child's death (19:18). The child of a fool, being foolish themselves, becomes a source of sorrow (10:1; 17:25).

Proverbs thus paints a clear picture: the children of the righteous inherit life and hope, continuing to live and flourish in the land. It teaches progeny as essential to fulfilling the creation mandate and living joyfully. Thus, the righteous are called upon to have children. Echoing Genesis 3:15, Proverbs links hope itself to these offspring. Conversely, it teaches that the wicked are cut off and have no future in the land.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through an examination of the ethics presented in Proverbs, I explored how they echo the themes found in Genesis 1-4. This exploration involved investigating Proverbs' emphasis on progeny, loving one's neighbor, marriage, work, and dwelling with God, all of which have roots in the creation narrative. Guided by the concept of Solomon as an Adamic King, striving to fulfill the promise hinted at in Genesis 3:15, my analysis aimed to contribute to the development of a biblical theological ethic

⁶⁸ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 47-48.

⁶⁹ Using Derek Kidner's structure (Kidner, *Proverbs*, 22).

⁷⁰ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 48.

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