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Transformation in the Wisdom Books of the Hebrew Bible and its application to the context of Southern Africa

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the transformation of theology and society through biblical wisdom. The first section explores the realms of wisdom and the relevance of king Solomon for the wisdom tradition. The second section shows how the books of Job and Proverbs transformed other parts of the Hebrew Bible. The third section explores the transformation of Southern African theology and society through the books of Job and Proverbs. The book of Job is viewed as a paradigm for HIV-positive people. The book of Proverbs is expounded upon with reflections on the ubuntu principle and the postcolonial-critical method Imbokodo. It is shown how folk sayings can be relevant for the transformation of South African university education and how biblical proverbs may transform folk proverbs. Finally, the article proposes that a secular society should be an enabler of different religious traditions.



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1. TRANSFORMATION – IN SOUTH AFRICA AND IN BIBLICAL WISDOM TEXTS

Biblical scholarship asks: "How does transformation take place in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible?" and "How can theology and society be transformed by it?" The latter

question is especially relevant for the Southern African context. For this purpose, transformation and biblical wisdom should be defined.

Since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, the term "transformation" has been widely used for the

transition from the apartheid dispensation to an inclusive democratic era ... [and] has become the simple way to signify this radical change taking place in the South African society, and at public institutions of higher learning (Venter 2015:173).

Transformation signifies "a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that that thing or person is improved" (Transformation 1989). Transformation by biblical wisdom tends to be more general and causes a gradual change in a variety of ways. It is not a revolution, but a change, where a former state becomes a better one. What is better is always a subjective assessment. Where there are winners, there are also losers who are left behind in the change or who must pay a high price.

Transformation of theology or society by biblical wisdom is the result of an interaction with another context that initiates a change in understanding or behaviour. Transformation is wrought by confluences and influences. Confluences are part of transformation, where different circumstances of a changing society come together. Influences are based on the power of people who influence society, and whose world views affect theology.

According to Dell (2005:8), there are three types of wisdom: the corpus of biblical wisdom literature, wisdom as a genre, and wisdom as a female personification. I follow her with some modification.

The wisdom text of the Hebrews includes the sapiential books of Job, Proverbs and Qoheleth, along with traces of wisdom in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. The Song of Songs is partially included, although this is open to debate.¹ The deuterocanonical books of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon are part of the biblical wisdom tradition. They are not part of the Hebrew Bible and belong to a secondary transformational process.

Secondly, wisdom as a genre appears in other predominantly non-wisdom texts. This is the case in the garden of Eden narrative,² the didactic

1 Pro: Steinberg 2013; Oosthuizen 2014; Kingsmill 2016. Contra: Dell 2005; Schellenberg 2016; Heereman 2018.

2 The garden of Eden narrative is strongly influenced by wisdom tradition. It refers to central themes such as the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life (Prov. 3:18, 11:30, 13:12, 15:4). The vocabulary and the train of thought are shaped by wisdom (Schmid 2002:21-39).

narratives of Joseph (von Rad 1985:46), the narratives on Solomon's wisdom, and some psalms, because of their content and didactic style. To some extent, the book of Ruth and the deuterocanonical books of Baruch and Tobit belong in this group.

Thirdly, wisdom is a figure of speech. It appears as a female personification (Prov. 8:12-36; Sir 24; Wisdom 6:22-11:1).

This article mainly draws on the books of Job and Proverbs, including Woman Wisdom, and refers occasionally to the other texts.

1.1 Domains of wisdom

1.1.1 The scope of wisdom

Wisdom moves back and forth between human experience, the quest for mastering life and understanding the world of God, the creator. Wisdom is mediated by life skills, which can be obtained by observation, reflection and learning from people and their texts. Wisdom is concerned with what is taking place "under the sun" (Qoh. 1:3); it is not speculative wisdom about a world to come. Epistemologically, it is interested in an empiric understanding of the world, usually by observation of creation (Prov. 6:6). Wisdom is educational and paradigmatic, aiming at coping with everyday life and judging situations appropriately. It is based on the fear of God.

1.1.2 Wisdom is accumulating lexical knowledge

The epistemic purpose of Wisdom is to grasp the existing world in its totality. This means to have knowledge and, by this, control over the world. Therefore, men had to name the world. As early as in the garden of Eden narrative, "the man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field" (Gen. 2:20), and Adam names his wife Eve (Gen. 3:20). From the onset, Wisdom can be achieved by grasping this world as completely as possible, as this narrative presupposes.

Historically, this aiming for totality can be observed in Assyrian cuneiform lexical lists. In Assyriology, von Soden (1936) introduced the term "*Listenwissenschaft*". Bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform words would name and list the world to perceive the nature of things as an inventory of the world. Wisdom was viewed as a progressive accumulation of knowledge. Landsberger prepared the multivolume edition of materials for the Sumerian lexicon.³ In his view, the

3 The 17 volumes were started by Landsberger in 1937 and completed by Miguel Civil in 2004.

collection and ranging of the names, which at the same time presented the order of things, was the first act of science (Landsberger 1976:13).

An iconographic example of grasping the world by collecting is the so-called botanical garden of the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmosis III, in the Karnak temple of Luxor. The walls of the Festival Hall are decorated with limestone plates depicting the fauna and flora of his collection. Several plants are drawn in an enlarged form, so that, for example, their seeds can be examined in detail.⁴

In the biblical wisdom tradition, King Solomon's wisdom is comprehensive and simultaneously shaped as creational wisdom (see Fischer 2015:83):

He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish (1 Kgs. 5:12-13).

To sum up, wisdom needs knowledge, and knowledge is based on observation of creation, which is the beginning of natural science.⁵

1.1.3 Wisdom begins with the fear of God

Wisdom considers God as being part of, or taking part in this world, right from creation. Wisdom is not atheistic or neutral towards religion. Men and creation are on a different ontological level than God. The introduction of God in the field of wisdom adds to the relational dynamics between God and humankind, and between God and the whole of creation.

The relationship between God and wisdom, differs in the wisdom books, but somehow results in the fear of God, who is usually mentioned by his name YHWH (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; Qoh. 12.13). In this regard, wisdom is exclusive as the wisdom of the God of Israel. A certain superiority is associated therewith, even if the themes of wisdom are inclusive. The success of learning is based on listening, that is, internalising the teachings that should form the character in the fear of God. Education aims for the fear of YHWH, which is viewed as the beginning of wisdom. The fear of

4 In this regard, zoos did not only depict wealth but also knowledge of the world. Kings would import and exchange rare animals as gifts. The Assyrian king Aššūr-bēl-kala (eleventh century BC) had a collection of rare animals that he displayed to the people of his land (Shigeo 2000:253). Solomon imported apes and peacocks (2 Chr. 9:21).

5 "Creation" implies the existence of a creator, who might even intervene intentionally, while the term "nature" does not. The usage of the term "nature" is anachronistic.

YHWH is so important that it encompasses the first collection of Proverbs 1-9 (Prov. 1:7, 9:10) as well as the entire book (Prov. 31:30).

In the process, the “fear of YHWH” and the “teaching of the wise” become synonymous (Prov. 13:14, 14:27).

1.2 Solomon and the wisdom tradition

Solomon represents wisdom. He accumulates wisdom and is knowledgeable about creation and universal wisdom.

The narratives of King Solomon assign to him the most prominent position. He is introduced as a leader with international relations, as evidenced by his marriage to an Egyptian princess (1 Kgs. 3:1). In Gibeon, he asks YHWH for wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:5-15) and through dream incubation becomes a person with a wise and discerning heart (1 Kgs. 3:12). He can apply wisdom appropriately when acting as a judge (1 Kgs. 3:16-28).

Solomon exceeds the wisdom of all neighbouring nations: The legend goes that people of all nations had heard of his wisdom and came to him (1 Kgs. 5:14), for example the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs. 10:1-13). The Chronicles summarise and exaggerate Solomon’s riches and his wisdom even further: “Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.” (2 Chr. 9:22). He exchanges his views on wisdom with other nations.

Even if, as a narrative, this is making up a glorious past and may be considered a political propaganda, it still reflects an unprejudiced dialogue between the nations. The universality of the subjects of wisdom makes them the ideal field of texts.

Solomon is presented as the referential character for Israelite wisdom, a role model of a wise and rich king. He takes over an ideal-typical role. This made him eligible to be the author of the books of Proverbs, Qoheleth and the Song of Songs.

Critique is only uttered about his later religious apostasy and inclination to foreign women (1 Kgs. 11:1-11).

1.2.1 Making up a fictive past

History tends to glorify the past and make up a fictive history as a point of identification. This is also the case with King Solomon. For von Rad (1962:62), Solomon was a historical figure who had a great impact. He reigned in a brilliant court and was at the height of its time in the cultivation of intellectual assets. This was the reign of Solomonic humanism (von Rad 1962:68).

This historical picture has drastically changed. Solomon is viewed as a legendary figure. The historical claims of the book of Kings have been deconstructed and archaeology has not produced any evidence of a glorious past monarchy. The books of Kings mediate Solomonic traditions that reflect the conditions of much later epochs, that is, towards the end of the Persian period and the early Hellenistic period.⁶

1.2.2 Extra-biblical wisdom in the Hebrew Bible

Wisdom as a genre has a universality that makes it open to themes and motifs from Israel's neighbours. Some foreign wisdom is explicitly referred to, for example, in the "Proverbs of Agur" (Prov. 30:1), and the "Words of the mother of Lemuel, the king of Massa" (Prov. 31:1). Nevertheless, even if these are historical or fictive statements, their inclusion shows a positive attitude to foreign wisdom. Besides this, the vast majority of extra-biblical wisdom texts found their way into the biblical text unnoticed.⁷ The biblical Wisdom books were transformed by intercultural exchange. For example, Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom was reshaped at the royal court or in Wisdom schools. Terminology, phrases, and topics were taken up and reapplied in one's own theological or religious framework, as Schipper (2005:240) shows, using the example of Proverbs. The confluences of the circumstances of a changing society and the influence of an intentional incorporation of extra-biblical wisdom resulted in the biblical wisdom texts as we have them. In this regard, re-interpretation is an act of transformation.

This contrasts with the religious exclusiveness of the Israelites in the non-wisdom texts of the Hebrew Bible. This is not syncretism. Instead, creation and the praise of the creator, the reflection about *memento mori*

6 For example, Mathys (2019:208) points to the Persian Adapana Relief: „Und alle Welt suchte das Angesicht Salomos“ sieht man gleich das Adapanarerelief aus Persepolis vor sich, auf dem Vertreter der Völker – an ihren unterschiedlichen Kleidungen zu erkennen – zum persischen Großkönig pilgern, um ihm dort ihre Huldigungsgeschenke zu überbringen.“ "And all the world sought the face of Solomon", one immediately imagines the Adapana Relief from Persepolis, on which representatives of the peoples – recognisable by their different dresses – make a pilgrimage to the Persian Great King to present him with their gifts of homage" (my translation, SF).

7 For roughly a century, close links between Egyptian texts and biblical wisdom literature have been observed. Erman (1924) suggested the Instruction of Amenemope as a source for the Words of the Wise in Proverbs 22:17-24:22. Ahiqar inspired several sayings in Proverbs (Fox 1985:767). The "heretic" Harpers' Songs has an effect on Qoheleth (Fischer 1999), and there was a literary transmission between Egyptian Love Songs and Song of Songs (Fox 1985:191). Furthermore, a generic and structural similarity has been observed between Akhenaton's Great Hymn to the Aton and Psalm 104 (Auffret 1981:137). The book of Job has been read in light of Ancient Near Eastern texts, especially against the background of Sumerian and Babylonian literature. The universal motif of suffering grasped the attention and made people talk about a Sumerian or Babylonian Job, a Babylonian theodicy, and so on (von Soden 1990:110; Day 1995:57; Moran 2002).

and the enjoyment of life in the book of Qoheleth and education in the book of Proverbs are universal subjects open to be transformed by extra-biblical wisdom texts. This is in accordance with the view of Solomon as a wise man with international relations.

2. INTERTEXTUALITY OF JOB AND PROVERBS

The growth of the canon at the end of the Persian and the early Hellenistic period coincides with the biblical Wisdom literature in its entirety, while foreign traditions might date to the pre-exilic period (Carr 2011:409). Intertextuality can be observed between the Wisdom books and all other parts of the canon. There are indicators of an intertextual relationship: overlap in vocabulary, parallels in topics, lexical synonyms. To assess the plausibility, for instance in textual criticism, the shorter version seems to be the earlier. If a topic or motif is widespread in early, pre-Israelite instructional (wisdom) literature, it is more likely that its

appearance in similar generic material in Proverbs is original, while the parallel to the Proverbs – if specifically related to that Proverbs text – is probably later (Carr 2011:426).

If distinctive language of a tradition stream appears only in one text, then this one is later (Carr 2011:426).

Even if large portions of the book of Proverbs are older than Deuteronomy and prophetic texts, it would be wrong to assume that they were a template for the other texts. It is more likely that they rely on common sources within Israelite society which are not quoted directly. Therefore, intertextuality

does not establish a specifically “sapiential” influence on texts such as Deuteronomy, Isaiah or Jeremiah ... [but] ... books such as Proverbs were used more generally in education, and we have little, if any, access to a broader sapiential tradition aside from books like Proverbs (Carr 2011:428).

2.1 The book of Job in the context of the Hebrew Bible

The biblical figure of Job serves as a model example for dealing with the theological questions of the postexilic period (Heckl 2015:222). As Solomon surpassed all in his wisdom and riches, the same is the case with Job who, according to the book of Job, “was the greatest of all the people of the east” (Job 1:3).

The book of Job is critical towards a firm and rational world order of a priestly theology, as well as of the connective world order of justice and well-being of a deuteronomistic theology (Schmid 2007:224). Several concepts are transformed in the book of Job.⁸ Job's fears and his personal catastrophe are couched in deuteronomistic diction. The frame narrative of the book of Job is connected to the deuteronomistic theology and the book of Deuteronomy. How Satan "struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7) alludes to Deuteronomy 28:35 (Heckl 2015:223):

YHWH will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.

Furthermore, Job's summary of his personal catastrophe (Job 3:25-26) shows compliance with the catalogue of curses (Deut. 28) (Schmid 2007:251). Job 3:3-13 also reminds one of the priestly account of creation (Gen. 1:1-2:4a), where Job utters a "counter-cosmic incantation" (Fishbane 1971:154).

Job is placed in the milieu of the Patriarchs, probably in the Edomite setting of Genesis 36; even the names of some figures might be drawn from this chapter (Schmid 2007:242).

Heckl reads 1 Samuel 1-4 against the book of Job, because it is "supplied by a group of motives, allusions, and structural content, as well as by connections with the content" (Heckl 2015:223). He refers to intercession (1 Sam. 2:25a; Job 42:7-9) and the cursing of God and death, as is the case with Eli's sons (1 Sam. 3:13, even more explicit in LXX) and Job's fear concerning his sons (Job 1:5; 18-19), that they might have sinned against God.⁹ Heckl (2015:225) concludes that the book of Job is

intended to be a counter story to the Deuteronomistic History of the Kingdom of Israel and Judah ... Job, as the pious sufferer who is able to intercede for others represents a pious Israel that keeps its relationship with God in spite of the suffering of exile and diaspora.

Assuming that the intended readers of the book of Job were aware of the books of Samuel and the Kings, Job takes part in this discourse: he

8 Heckl (2010) did this extensively in a monograph and summarises some arguments in an article (Heckl 2015).

9 "When Job's children die, the narrative leaves open the question whether the sin happened" (Heckl 2015:223, n.3).

provides an answer for the people of Israel in exile as to how to deal with their suffering.

2.2 The book of Proverbs – Transformation of the deuteronomic theology

Two lines of tradition can be drawn between the Wisdom texts and the Pentateuch. First, several Psalms with an affinity to wisdom are linked to the Torah and, secondly, several instructions of Deuteronomy were received in the book of Proverbs (Mihalik 1946), especially in the collection of Proverbs 1-9 (Lang 1972; Schipper 2012). Schipper (2012:282) assumes a conceptual connection and claims that

die Weisheitsliteratur Anteil hatte an einem Diskurs über die Größe, Tora' in nachexilischer Zeit und sich dies im Proverbienbuch und seiner Redaktionsgeschichte widerspiegelt.¹⁰

The theology of Proverbs 1-9 is representative of the retributive system of connective justice. It belongs to the genre of instructional wisdom. It applies the deuteronomic laws and makes them explicit for the life circumstances of young men. It is part of a “discourse on “Wisdom and Torah” in the second temple Period that also influenced Deuteronomy” (Schipper 2019:22). Not in a manner of direct quotations, but with the usage of nomistic coloured terminology, Wisdom and deuteronomic theology are intertextual (Schipper 2012:284).

The transformational process remains open. Does the identification of Wisdom and Torah transform Wisdom into Torah, so that obedience to the Torah is Wisdom, or is the Torah interpreted from the characteristics of Wisdom, as von Rad (1985:244) assumes? The one probably does not contradict the other. If Wisdom literature took place in a discourse on Torah, then the mutual exchange between Torah and Wisdom would lead to a sapientialisation of the Torah, which influenced all areas of life (Prov. 6:23; Ps. 119:105) (Schipper 2019:30, n.35), and was taught from generation to generation (Deut. 6:1-2).

The personified wisdom in Proverbs 8 conveys a critique of the Torah by announcing a search for wisdom in the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomic paradigm. The acceptance of wisdom is the choice between life and death, blessing and curse. Thus, personified Wisdom offers herself as an alternative to the fulfilment of the Torah. Furthermore, the creational references (Prov. 8:23-31) show a reception of the first creation account

10 The wisdom literature had a share in a discourse about the entity “Torah” in postexile times and this is reflected in the book of Proverbs and its redactional history (my translation, SF).

and, therefore, promote creational wisdom as another line of wisdom, where personified Wisdom as a created figure of YHWH cannot be a competing concept (Heckl 2015:232). Later, these concepts were transformed into a unified view. The wisdom, who was created in the beginning, represents the presence of God at the changing places in the history of Israel and appears as much-admired and fragrant plants of nature and as an erotic woman, and is finally likened to the Torah (Sir 24:27-33).

3. TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN BEING – THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF BIBLICAL WISDOM

Lemmelijn (2007:121) summarises wisdom as wisdom for, or of life:

Spreeken over bijbelse wijsheid, is eigenlijk spreken over levenswijsheid. Immers, de oudtestamentische wijsheidsliteratuur oriënteert zich bovenal op de verwerkerelijking van een zinvol leven.¹¹

Wisdom is brought about in small units, as is the case with the proverbial sayings of the second (10:1-22:6) and fourth (25-29) collection of the book of Proverbs, originating in folk wisdom.¹² Clines (1989:269) emphasises the didactic contents of the Wisdom books:

among the books of the Old Testament they are distinctive in that they deliberately set out to be instructional about right living or right thinking.

This didactic purpose is most evident in the book of Proverbs, especially the first instruction (Prov. 1-9), which promotes education to transform young Israelites.

In Proverbs 1-9 both the teacher and the learner bear responsibility for the success of the pedagogical experience. The role of the learner is to receive wisdom by listening attentively to instruction (Estes 1997:148).

It is not the transfer of information from the teacher to the student that makes a person wise, but “the attitude of learning and embodiment form the character” (Bland 2015:173). Bland (2015:71) emphasises the instruction of the small units with the components of a “memorable form,

11 To speak of Biblical Wisdom is to speak of life wisdom. After all, the Old Testament wisdom literature orientates itself above all on the realisation of a meaningful life (my translation, SF).

12 Some of them may belong to the oldest Proverbs of Israel, which originated in folk wisdom, according to Westermann (1995).

flexibility, situational quality, familiarity, brevity and wit, and universal appeal". He notes that Proverbs can be used in both a destructive and a constructive manner. Usually, they have a constructive function to manage social behaviour (Bland 2015:69-71). But, in the case of Job, the words of his friends are to him proverbs of ashes (Prov. 13:12). They are platitudes. Apparently, there have been collectors of oral wisdom, the king's men (Prov. 25:1), scribes of foreign origin,¹³ and members of the royal court with their international relations. As redactors, they will have "had certain purposes with the selection, editing and transmission of proverbs" (Loader 1999:233).

Despite the original familial, rural, and agricultural setting of several proverbs, their collectors and redactors have put them into a different *Sitz im Leben*. They were part of a broader wisdom tradition rooted in folk wisdom and transmitted, on the other hand, to the elite of society for education or even enculturation (Carr 2011:429). This explains that "both folk and school evidence [is] found in the individual proverbs" (Loader 1999:233).

These collections have been set into proverbial clusters of indicative sayings. They are well-structured clusters that must be analysed against their literary performance contexts (Heim 2001:314). They are inseparable from their discourse contexts, which are the "various spheres of private and public life", to which they are to be applied for social interaction (Heim 2001:316). These proverbs teach ethical conduct and prepare young men for social action in the various realms of life (Heim 2001:316).

The instructions have an exemplary character. They do not form a normative code of conduct, but are illustrations of the educational ideal – this is how a person, who has learned to be disciplined, just, lawful, and honest, behaves. A wise person, who has been prepared for all possible contingencies, is able to assess a situation and act accordingly. For that reason, contradictory proverbs can be placed alongside each other:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes (Prov. 26:4.5).

13 Cody (1965:381) suggests that the scribe Shavsha (שׁוּשָׁא; 1 Chr. 18.16) and variants (2 Sam. 8:17, 20:25; 1 Kgs. 4:3) is linked to the Egyptian words for "scribe".

4. TRANSFORMATION OF THEOLOGY AND SOCIETY BY BIBLICAL WISDOM

I will now turn to the present and ask: How are or could the theology and society of the Southern African context be transformed by the biblical Wisdom literature.

Wisdom texts differ from other parts of the Hebrew Bible, as they are not at the foundation of the theology of Jewish or Christian communities. As mentioned earlier, they focus on creation, education, and social matters. They are part of a non-foundational theology that “accepts the culturally conditioned character of all human knowledge” (Du Toit 1995:44). This agrees with Masenya’s (1991:171) hypothesis:

[I]t is possible to contextualise Old Testament proverbs ... through the use of cultural hermeneutics, since proverbs in all languages are basically the same as far as their metaphorical and sapiential nature go[es] and are therefore compatible.

After her study on Northern Sotho proverbs, Masenya (1991:188) narrows her hypothesis, because she observed that, despite “the common characteristics of proverbs in all languages, their contextualisation depends upon their degree of compatibility”.

In her comparative study, Masenya combines the text and the context of the proverbs and concludes that the Hebrews and the Northern Sotho people shared an optimistic, simple, and uncritical world view. They both had similarities and differences on the subject matter, in her case the responsibility of the parents for education (Masenya 1991:185-186). Such a comparative study is not a transformation, but it paves the way for it, since “cultural differences will always limit understanding, but also open up new ways for understanding” (Masenya 1991:188).

4.1 Transformation by the book of Job

As noted earlier, the intertextuality of the book of Job makes Job a paradigmatic character (Heckl 2015:224). Boloje and Groenewald (2016:6) state it generally: “Modern readers can both empathise with and learn from Job’s experiences in his journey of faith.” Wittenberg undertook a transformation of the wisdom of the book of Job into an African context. He views it as a paradigm “both for the counsellor and for the suffering person” (Wittenberg 1994:62). He contextualises it to the HIV disease in South Africa under three dimensions of suffering: the physical, the psychic, and the social:

There is first of all the physical side, the illness itself, which for those tested HIV positive will perhaps not be immediately apparent but which will become more important as the virus breaks down the immune system of the patient. The illness also puts great demands on the mental and spiritual resources of the patient who needs to cope with the awareness that there is no cure for the illness, that death is its sure goal. The third dimension of suffering is social, the problem of rejection by family and friends, perhaps loss of job and ostracism in society (Wittenberg 1994:61).

This approach was taken up by Matadi (2007:23) who interprets the book of Job in his own Congolese context of a “religious Africa suffering from AIDS”. He reads Job’s lament carefully and observes that it finally becomes a prayer; Job’s suffering helps him to mature (Matadi 2007:93). He finds hope in the book of Job and learns

that suffering does not have the last word, and that those who may find themselves in the ultimate reaches of serious and incurable illness – as is the case for AIDS patients – may take up Job’s cry as their own (Matadi 2007:98).

Even if HIV-positive people are now able to get medical treatment, they – unlike Job – are not healed. Partly, they are still misunderstood, isolated, and stigmatised. The suffering and lamenting Job is still a role model to whom people can refer for their individual transformation.

4.2 Woman Wisdom, the Woman of Substance, and her social implications

In the book of Proverbs, wisdom and folly are personified in the contrasting images of Woman Wisdom (even if the term is not used) and “Woman Folly” (Prov. 9:13).

Together these two metaphorical figures embody the social roles, positive and negative, which women filled within society at large and the wisdom movement in particular. While the goddess traditions of surrounding cultures and within Israel itself may have had a significant impact in its shaping the portrait and meaning of these two characters, the actual lived experience of the women contributed as well (Fontaine 1995:46-47).

Woman Wisdom speaks for herself in the first person (Prov. 8:12; Sir 24:40.47). Woman Wisdom is the embodiment of wisdom, who, metaphorically speaking, has built her house on seven pillars (Prov. 9:1). Even if the grammatical gender of an abstract noun does not imply a specific gender, the femininity of the Hebrew term for wisdom (חָכְמָה)

has added to this identification. Her self-praise of wisdom (Prov. 8:7) and her presence in the primordial world (Prov. 8:22-36) transfer her into the realm of YHWH, the God of Israel. This paved the way for an interpretation of Christ/the Logos being present, in this instance,¹⁴ as the wisdom of Yahweh.

While already in the early church the Holy Spirit was understood as the female side of God, even as Christ's mother (Van Oort 2016), Masenya addresses the feminine side of God in the person of Jesus, whom she acknowledges as the (female) Sophia Wisdom of Yahweh in distinction from the (male) Holy Spirit. She states in the acknowledgements of her doctoral thesis, giving thanks to

Modimo,¹⁵ my Maker; to Jesus, the Sophia (Wisdom) of Yahweh, my Saviour and to the liberating Spirit, my Sustainer, for the strength and ability to complete this work. (Masenya 1996:Acknowledgement 10).

The Woman of Substance (Prov. 12:4, 31:10) designates an ideal woman who follows the paths of Woman Wisdom. In the instructional poem Proverbs 31:10-31 that, as an acrostic, could be learned by heart, the Woman of Substance is not only interpreted as a metaphor for personified wisdom, but also as an idealised picture shaped on a Phoenician trade woman.

She is the ideal type of a Phoenician entrepreneur (Mathys 2019:223), and not a "woman who works and lives on farms" (Bland 2015:172). The poem invites – probably young women from the elite class – to imitate and thus surpass the Phoenicians as economic competitors (Mathys 2004:27). She serves as a role model to be emulated (Fischer 2019:117).

It is obvious that she is a member of a privileged society. She has servants, buys property, merchandises, has plenty of cloth, even fine cloth. She "opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy" (Prov. 31:20). This distinguishes her from them. Trading with exotic goods shows success and wisdom, irrespective of whether this is portrayed by the stereotype of a Phoenician (foreign) woman or King Solomon.

14 Loader (2014:367-375) summarises the widespread reception of personified wisdom from the deuterocanonical literature to the time of reformation.

15 The usage of *Modimo* for God is more than adding some Southern Sotho flavour, but it allows traditional ideas of God to flow in. Since Masenya does not explain why she uses *Modimo*, one can only assume that this is an etymological or traditional understanding. For this, see Manyeli (1995:40-111).

Taking her as a role model has been challenged by several scholars, who are concerned with disadvantaged people. In this instance, feminist and liberation theologies step in.

Masenya's doctoral thesis entitled "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African context: A Bosadi (womanhood) perspective" became known to a wider audience after a summary was published in *Semeia* in 1997. There she asks: "How did the women of the time react to a text such as this one? Did they find it to be liberative or demeaning?" (Masenya 1997:62).

Even if she assumes that this is "a male text addressed to a male audience" (Masenya 1997:62), she uses the text as a role model for women from a different social class, namely South African northern Sotho women in a rural environment. She does so despite the observation

that the picture of the woman presented here is not representative of all the women of that time, for it excludes rural and poor women, for example. Consequently, it would appear to be a problematic text if read from an African-South African woman's liberation perspective. A sceptical reader may ask what a poor Northern Sotho woman may benefit from a male elitist text (Masenya 1997:62-63).

She reads the text for the transformation of the life circumstances of her target group, by pointing out that the Woman of Substance is also responsible for the household economy. She is "a family woman, she has the interests of her family at heart" (Masenya 1997:64). She is working from home. Observing a society where not working from home is more esteemed, she urges

that anyone (man or woman) who would like to operate from home, which is in my view an important sphere, should not be looked down upon. That person is also making a contribution in that sphere (Masenya 1997:64).

Masenya (1997:65) specially emphasises the observation that the woman is portrayed as a very rich woman, who is "not just mentioning the need to care for the poor, not just involved in charity work for the poor", but caring for the needy "by actually extending (שלח) her hands to reach out to them". She transforms the woman into an

African-South African woman ... a very rich woman who cares for the poor. In apartheid South Africa, one would think of a picture (a rare one I suggest) of a very rich White woman reaching out her hands to the poor of the land (Masenya 1997:65).

Finally, Masenya (1997:65) links this caring quality to the “ubuntu / botho concept of the African culture”. It is only at the end that she considers that this text may create some problems for people in other life circumstances, namely those who do not live in the ideal family pictured in Proverbs 31 and acknowledges that

many African families are single-parented, being managed by women, and some are part and parcel of extended families. ... Women in these families may not find the picture of אשת חיל wholly liberating (Masenya 1997:66).

Her close reading as an academic task finds points of identification and difference for her target groups. Both contribute to the transformation of society by this wisdom text. This is driven further by Stiebert (2012) who applies and contrasts the *ubuntu* principle¹⁶ and the postcolonial-critical method called *Imbokodo*¹⁷ as she does a suspicious reading¹⁸ of the text. Nzimande (2005:22) introduced this term as a metaphor, because it signifies “the active rolling stone in the grinding process, imbokodo effects transformation from one texture to another”.

This is “a postcolonial and hence distinctly political form of reading, which also seeks to effect social justice” (Stiebert 2012:253-254). It aims to uncover and redress domination and oppression. Stiebert focuses on Proverbs 31:8-9, the verses before the Woman of Substance, in context spoken by the same person, the mother of King Lemuel (Prov. 31:1), a foreign king, placing her among the elite¹⁹ and making the poem on the Woman of Substance part of a royal instruction. As in Proverbs 31:20, the woman advocates for the needy, but she does not “address the roots of poverty, nor does she demonstrate a deeper understanding of human misery” (Stiebert 2012:277). Nzimande views her as a representative of an oppressive and exploitative *status quo*. “She is a cagey figure who

16 There is no uniform definition of the *ubuntu* concept; it follows a line of humanity according to the proverb “A person is a person through other persons”. For a discussion, see Stiebert (2012:247-253).

17 “The literal meaning of the Zulu word *imbokodo* is ‘grinding stone’. It has the connotations of sharpening, crushing, pressing against, processing, and destroying completely” (Nzimande 2005:21, n. 37).

18 The hermeneutic of suspicion was introduced by Schüssler Fiorenza, who interprets a text according to its underlying and questionable contexts. A short summary of this method is found in Schüssler-Fiorenza (2005:284).

19 Unlike many commentators, Waltke (2005:502) argues that the absence of a new superscription suggests that this poem should not be separated and that “diverse poems with unique forms do not prove different authorship”.

can dupe black women into believing that she is advocating for justice” (Nzimande 2005:Abstract). In fact, her instruction is

disempowering to women in post-colonial contexts whose quest is for the complete removal of oppressive structures, not for charity-based relief which does very well in keeping them perpetually servile and economically dependent on their masters and madams but does not bring them to the same socio-economic pedestal as their oppressors (Nzimande 2005:206).

Even if a woman has a prominent position, she is not a role model, because she does not take part in a “total transformation of the systems of power that oppress and exploit” (Stiebert 2012:277). This example shows how a different method can unfold the power of biblical wisdom to transform theology and, it is hoped, society, if it is read against the grain.

4.3 Transformation by folk sayings

Proverbial folk sayings are a continuous source of inspiration and can mutually enrich each other. They occur in the narrative and prophetic sayings of the Hebrew Bible (for example, 1 Sam. 24:14). Despite their original orality, they are part of a fixed text and are re-interpreted in a new context for the transformation of the audience.

When a proverb is formulated, it is applied to a specific situation. When a wider group of people have accepted this saying, it becomes their lore, a “possession of the society” (Mokitimi 1997:52). The collections of proverbs in the book of Proverbs have gone this path. They are a written possession of the Jewish and later also Christian community. But they are still oral literature as far as they are remembered by the people.

In every new oral performance, ... they can be applied flexibly. In variability and changeability, they are adaptable to their contexts (Mokitimi 1997:51).

This is the case with a Sesotho proverb that might have its roots in or be influenced by a biblical proverb. The Sesotho proverb goes:

Lerato le monate joalo ka mahe a linotsi empa lebaba ho feta leshkhoa²⁰ moo lefellang.²¹

20 The plant *Xysmalobium lapathifolium/undulatum* is more commonly known as Pohotshehla, Bitter Root or Uzara.

21 I have not found this proverb in any written collection, yet. I learned it in a class with Basotho students at the Morija Theological Seminary of the LEC in Lesotho.

Love is as sweet as honey while it lasts but very bitter like Bitter Root when it ends.²²

This proverb on love compares love to the sweetness of honey and its end to the bitterness of a plant that is usually not eaten as a vegetable, but used as a remedy, an antacid for the stomach, and to expel intestinal worms (Maliehe 1997:46). Nothing to be favoured.

The proverb can be interpreted as follows. When people are in love, everything seems to be good; if the affair is ended, everything becomes awfully bad. Even though this proverb has no specific situation, it is used to warn young people who start dating not to play with love. The proverb is close to Proverbs 5:3.4a: “For the lips of a strange woman drip honey, ... but in the end, she is bitter as wormwood.”

As a metaphor for desire and love-making, honey is a well-known motif (Songs 4:11, 5:1). The strange woman is a forbidden woman. The bitterness at the end is the result not only of her speech, but also of the illicit relationship, just as a relationship between two youngsters in a traditional African society is illicit (Loader 2014:236). That she is a forbidden woman is not explicit in the Sesotho proverb, but its usage fits the educational setting of young men in the book of Proverbs.

The biblical saying possibly found its way into Sesotho. If this was the case, the bitter plant wormwood would have been replaced by a local plant. This saying must have been orally transmitted, since the Sesotho Bible translation of Proverbs 5:3.4a has a different wording and sense (talking about the bitterness of the home).

The transformation of the simile with the comparative point “sweet/pleasant words” (Prov. 16:24) in the new context of Torah is already attested to in the book of Psalms: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Pss. 119:103, 19:10). In this instance, it is transformed from the love of a woman in an educational setting to the love of Torah in another educational setting.

4.4 Transformation by biblical proverbs

The gnomic sayings in the narrative and prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible show the importance of proverbs as a “teaching tool for an oral culture” (Bland 2015:89). The prophets of the Hebrew Bible were inspired by proverbs.

22 My translation, SF.

Jeremiah quotes or creates a proverb: “Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots?” (Jer. 13:23). The obvious answer is “no”. The second part of the proverb has developed a life on its own. Jansen (2012) used this proverb for his article entitled “Can the theological leopard change its spots? On the transformation of university knowledge”. If the answer were also “no”, he would have a hopeless message for the future of theological education in South Africa. Instead, Jansen (2012:16) develops guidelines for epistemological transformation:

[W]e need to bring young academics into universities outside of the ideological and epistemological comfort zones. ... Received knowledge must be challenged, extended, engaged, and enriched by other perspectives of knowledge. And the best way to do that, in sum, is through the appointment of academics from outside of the institution.

He suggests that the change of universities leads young scholars to other perspectives of knowledge. They view things from a different angle. Regarding the proverb, he uses the double entendre of the term “spot”. He applies it to refer to his location and point of view, from which he can move, and not to the pattern of the leopard’s fur.

4.5 The application of biblical Wisdom for the transformation of theology and society

This article expounded on the domains of wisdom and on the Solomonic Wisdom tradition. It showed the development, renewal, and re-interpretation of biblical Wisdom. The books of Job and Proverbs served as examples of intertextuality, helping to constitute new meanings and transforming the audience, for example, when personified Wisdom offers herself as an alternative to the fulfilment of the Torah.

Biblical Wisdom points us to the choices we must make in life. We must judge a situation and then decide if we are going to answer or not answer a fool according to his folly (Prov. 26:4.5).

The wisdom of Job is a call not to forget those who suffer or to blame them for their situation. Job’s story is one of perseverance. Retelling it enables people to reorient themselves. They might find paradigms to develop their own language of protest and lament (Wittenberg 1994:68). When the Bible develops its truly liberating potential, people may cope with their situation, but the book of Job also demonstrates – and that should be understood as a warning –

how talking about God can aggravate the misery instead of leading to a productive transformation and acceptance of suffering (Wittenberg 1994:62).

If we recall the Woman of Substance, we note how Judean society used foreign economy for the well-being of the nation. At the same time, xenophobia, especially against foreign women, was common and a subject dealt with in biblical Wisdom literature (Fischer 2019:109-123). I assume that this tension between economy and dealing with strangers, who are viewed as a threat, is a constant battle to be considered.

Because of their general validity and humanity, folk sayings are important texts in a society. They put important truth in a nutshell. They give guidance for specific situations. They transform a society and link it to the *ubuntu* concept of the African culture as well as to liberal Western society that is based on freedom, equality, and fraternity.²³

Transformation “has a clear primary reference: apartheid” (Venter 2015:174). This is true when observing South African society and politics and the concepts of decolonisation. These are backward-looking concepts to understand the past, in order to bring about a better change in the future. Therefore, we should also find orientation in texts of the past. Stories of the past, like those legends of King Solomon, sketch a person who puts his skills of wisdom at the service of the people, because he fears God. A good leader is a person whose life is shaped and transformed by the fear of God. A leader who does so is concerned for the welfare of his people. What does it mean for a secular society?

We must be like a leopard that changes its spots. We need a new understanding of our society. It would be wrong to define a secular society as an atheistic society. Atheism has helped deconstruct dogmatic power systems of theology, especially during apartheid, but it has no corrective reference. Instead, the wise person lives in the fear of God.

Secular society should be an enabler of the different religious traditions, as they occur in biblical Wisdom texts. This has consequences for education at school, for example. Religion and ethical values must be school subjects. Excluding them does not reflect society, but it implements atheism as a new religion.

For this reason, teaching theology at a governmental faculty such as the University of the Free State is an important task that will stabilise and enrich a society with good leaders.

23 In this instance, I would emphasise one aspect of *ubuntu*, namely its “inclusiveness as a positive constructive theology for the continuing transformation of South Africa” (Stiebert 2012:251).

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