



# At Home with Wisdom: Structural Observations in Proverbs 7–9

KRISTIN J. WENDLAND

This essay builds on work from a number of scholars who have addressed the theme of Wisdom’s home in Proverbs 1–9, each from a different methodological approach. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen has approached the theme of Wisdom’s home from a socio-historical perspective, identifying a connection within ancient Near Eastern thought and literature linking house building and filling with divine creation and wisdom.<sup>1</sup> William P. Brown, focusing on moral imagination and the ethos at work in Proverbs 1–9, similarly reads Wisdom’s house in Proverbs 9:1 as a home that mirrors the delightful cosmic domicile created for her by YHWH in Proverbs 8:22–31.<sup>2</sup> Silvia Schroer reaches a similar conclusion through an analogy to home worship in early post-exilic Yehud, with Wisdom’s cultic aspect in Proverbs 9:1–6 mirroring her cosmic aspect in Proverbs 8:22–31.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel,” in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny, *Alter Orient Und Altes Testament* 366 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 399–422.

<sup>2</sup> William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 279–95.

<sup>3</sup> Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 15–51.

*The idea of “home” is supposed to be a positive concept. But are all homes so attractive? In the book of Proverbs, the teacher suggests that they are not, and that the seeker looking for God should seek out that home where God’s Wisdom is to be found.*

The contribution of this essay is to show that the literary structure of Proverbs 1–9, and specifically of Proverbs 7–9, supports this claim.<sup>4</sup> When reading Proverbs 7–9 as a single instruction within Proverbs 1–9, the theme of Wisdom’s home as the cosmos is highlighted as the chiasmic center of the instruction.<sup>5</sup> I will first discuss the genre and structure in Proverbs 1–9 before turning specifically to Proverbs 7–9.

## GENRE AND STRUCTURE IN PROVERBS 1–9

Norman Whybray’s identification of ten distinct instructions within Proverbs 1–9 (Prov 1:8–19; 2:1–19; 3:1–10; 3:21–31; 4:1–19; 4:10–19; 4:20–26; 5:1–21; 6:20–32; 7:1–27), interspersed with additional material outside the instruction genre (Prov 1:20–33; 3:13–20; 8:1–36; 9:1–18), has become nearly standard.<sup>6</sup> While there is ample disagreement concerning the role that redaction has played in the final form of these instructions, there has been relatively little opposition to the substance of Whybray’s thesis.<sup>7</sup>

Instruction literature is well known within the ancient Near Eastern wisdom canon. A primary characteristic in the instruction is that a superior offers advice to an inferior. Egyptian examples focus on public role, as when the Egyptian vizier Ptah-hotep offers instruction to his son in order to prepare him for becoming vizier after him,<sup>8</sup> or when Merikare receives instructions from his predecessor to

<sup>4</sup> It is with gratitude to Dr. Mark Throntveit that I contribute this essay. It was in his classroom that I was introduced to the ways in which literary structure supports the broader themes and arguments of biblical texts. For that I remain profoundly grateful.

<sup>5</sup> Reading Proverbs 7–9 as a single instruction with the structure identified in this essay yields several other observations that cannot be adequately addressed here. For instance, a consequence of Proverbs 7–9 being a single instruction is that all the speech within the instruction is ultimately that of the father, who quotes the women. Carol Newsom, with attention to the overall setting of Proverbs 1–9 as a father’s household rather than the literary structure of Proverbs 7–9, argues that this patriarchal context so permeates the text that the women described, Wisdom included, become caricatures of good and evil, leaving women readers little space to find themselves within the text or in the instruction offered. I would suggest that attention to home alongside the choice of woman softens this just a bit, largely through the surprisingly subversive move to remove both Wisdom and the son from the traditional home. Much more needs to be said in this area. Carol A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom,” in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1997), 116–31.

<sup>6</sup> Roger N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (London: SCM, 1965), 72–73. Whybray identified much of the material within the instructions as late insertions, but basic boundaries of the instructions have not been greatly disputed.

<sup>7</sup> The more often debated question is whether Proverbs 1–9 might best be considered a disparate collection (e.g., Whybray, Lang) or a unified composition either by a single author or through redactional work (e.g., Meinhold, Skehan, Fox, Weeks). Patrick William Skehan, “The Seven Columns of Wisdom’s House in Proverbs 1–9,” *CBQ* 9 (April 1947): 190–98; Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 33–52; Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986); Arndt Meinhold, *Die Sprüche: Kapitel 1–15*, vol. 1, ZBAT 16 (Zurich: Theologischer, 1991), 43–46; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18a (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 323; Stuart Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1–9* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 44–57. For a detailed literature review on this question see Weeks, 44–57.

<sup>8</sup> “The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-Hotep,” trans. John A. Wilson in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 412–14. See also William McKane,

prepare him for becoming king.<sup>9</sup> In the Sumerian “The Instructions of Šuruppag,” Šuruppag’s public role is less clear, and his instructions to his Zi-us-sura focus on affairs such as theft, slander, proper speech, appropriate sexual activity, and honest business transactions.<sup>10</sup> The instructions in Proverbs 1–9 bear a family resemblance to these and other examples but are specifically set within a household, with a parent speaking to a son.<sup>11</sup> The parent’s instructions focus much more on issues such as choosing and maintaining appropriate friendships (Prov 2:12–15; 6:1–3), appropriate sexual activity (Prov 2:16–19; 5:8–20; 6:26–31; 7:6–23), industriousness (Prov 6:4–12), and proper speech (Prov 4:24; 6:12–15).

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While avoiding a detailed description of the instructions, Whybray identifies the parental appeal found at the beginning of each instruction as a structural marker (Prov 1:8ff.; 2:1ff.; 3:1ff.; 3:21ff.; 4:1ff.; 4:10ff.; 4:20ff.; 5:1ff.; 6:20ff.; 7:1ff.).<sup>12</sup> By his classification, each appeal addresses “my son” (בְּנִי), or in one case “sons” (בְּנֵי); Prov 4:1); calls for the child to pay attention to the instruction being given or, alternatively, for the child to not turn away from it; and asserts the personal authority of the teacher.<sup>13</sup> To this one may add that the majority of the appeals include a causative clause introduced with וַיִּצְוֶה (Prov 1:9; 2:6; 3:2; 4:2, 22; 5:3; 6:23).

Other structural components within the instructions are more elusive. Although some scholars maintain that the instructions regularly contain conclusions or epilogues, there are few identifiable markers of these. Fox, following Otto Plöger, acknowledges that these epilogues are variable in form but goes on to describe them in some detail as containing a combination of summary statements,

*Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 51–65, 75–78.

<sup>9</sup> “Merikare,” translated by Miriam Lichtheim (COS 1.35). See also McKane, *Proverbs*, 67–82.

<sup>10</sup> “The Instructions of Šuruppag,” *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature t.5.6.1*, University of Oxford, January 6, 2003, <https://tinyurl.com/ybv35m8g>. For a more thorough review of instructions in the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature canon, see McKane, *Proverbs*, 51–182; Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery*, 4–32.

<sup>11</sup> I have used the language of family resemblance here as way of acknowledging a shared genre without delving into the complexities of genre theory. In fact, the instructions in Proverbs 1–9 are quite complex in terms of genre, as they are framed as instructions but include additional genres such as the wisdom poem (Prov 3:13–20) and proverbial aphorisms (Prov 6:1–19; Prov 9:7–12). See M. M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 61–62; Carol A. Newsom, “Spying Out the Land: A Report from Genology,” in *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, ed. R. Boer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

There has been much discussion about the household as a cipher for school. For a helpful overview see Jacqueline Vayntrub, “The Book of Proverbs and the Idea of Ancient Israelite Education,” *ZAW* 128 (2016): 100–105. Even if the home is a cipher for school, the literary setting is certainly that of a home.

<sup>12</sup> Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 34–35.

caveats, final arguments, and final appeals.<sup>14</sup> Glenn D. Pemberton, in his work on the rhetoric of the instructions, delineates the various ways that these elements come together to form the epilogues.<sup>15</sup> In the ten instructions he identifies in Proverbs 1–9, Pemberton points out eight different combinations of elements.<sup>16</sup> This is quite a lot of variety for a supposedly consistent structural component, and it would seem, with all the variability in form, vocabulary, and purpose, that nearly anything could be identified as an epilogue so long as it occurs at the end of the instruction.

The exception to this is Proverbs 4:1–9, which both Fox and Pemberton agree contains no epilogue. Instead, they recognize the parental appeal in Proverbs 4:10 as the marker that one instruction has ended and the next has begun. Such a process might also settle disagreement about where to end the instruction beginning in Proverbs 3:1. Whybray identifies this instruction as ending in verse 10 with secondary sources inserted in 11–12 and 13–20.<sup>17</sup> Pemberton agrees with this structure, if not with Whybray's redactional analysis, and also identifies verses 11–12 as the epilogue to the instruction. Fox, too, identifies the instruction as ending in verse 12 but claims that the instruction lacks a concluding statement.<sup>18</sup> Neither does Gerlinde Baumann find an epilogue or conclusion to this instruction but rather includes verses 13–20 in the instruction.<sup>19</sup> Such challenge in identifying epilogues affirms their unreliability as structural markers. Better is to use the parental appeals as the sole structural marker.

What is missed in reading Proverbs 3:11–12 as an epilogue or as a part of the body of the instruction is that these two verses contain all the markers of a parental appeal. Beginning with the usual “my child” (בְּנִי), the parent entreats the son to not despise the Lord's discipline, because (כִּי) “the Lord reproves the one he loves” (Prov 3:11–12). What follows in verses 13–20, then, is the body of the instruction. Thus, I read eleven instructions in Proverbs 1–9 (Prov 1:8–33; 2:1–22; 3:1–10; 3:11–20; 3:21–25; 4:1–9; 4:10–19; 4:20–27; 5:1–6:19; 6:20–35; 7:1–9:18). The inclusion of the material often denoted as “wisdom poems,” or what Fox calls “interludes,” poses no problem when one recognizes multiple genres within other examples of instruction in the ancient Near East.<sup>20</sup> Stuart Weeks, in his defense of reading Proverbs 1:8–8:36 as a single instruction, further notes that the common practice

<sup>14</sup> Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 45; Otto Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)*, BKAT 17 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981), 23–24.

<sup>15</sup> Glenn Pemberton, “The Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9,” *JSOT* 30 (2005): 79.

<sup>16</sup> לְמַעַן in Proverbs 2:20 does seem to indicate a summary statement, but this single occurrence does not suggest a pattern.

<sup>17</sup> Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 154. Fox allows that verses 13–20, a section he classifies as an interlude, nicely complement it. It appears to be Fox's identification of Proverbs 3:13–20 as a macarism, set off by אֲנִי־אֶשְׁרָא in verse 13, that causes him to separate the two sections. Fox reads this passage along with four other “interludes” written as additions to the ten lectures he identifies in Proverbs 1–9. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 326–29.

<sup>19</sup> Gerlinde Baumann, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverben 1–9: traditionsgeschichtliche und theologische Studien*, vol. 16, FAT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 258.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, “The Instruction for King Meri-Kare” includes a collection of proverbs (approx. lines 125–30) and a cosmology (approx. lines 131–39) alongside instruction, and “The Instruction of King

of differentiating the poems from the instruction genre on the basis of a perceived difference in literary quality also fails to pass muster when comparing Proverbs 1–9 with other examples of the instruction genre.<sup>21</sup>

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My reading of Proverbs 1–9 is similar to that of Weeks save two details. First, Weeks reads Proverbs 9:1–18 as the conclusion to the instruction rather than part of the instruction itself. He bases this on an observed summative role of the chapter and concern that reading chapters 7–9 together makes for an outsized section in comparison to the others. I see no compelling reason to separate Proverbs 9 from its context other than a desire for a conclusion, which, as we have seen above, is an unreliable sign of a structural marker. Secondly, whether Proverbs 1–9 is a single instruction as Weeks maintains or a redacted collection of instructions, the structure varies little. I find Weeks’s arguments in that area unconvincing and continue to read Proverbs 1–9 as a collection of instructions—albeit one that is redacted into a unified whole. I move now to a closer exploration of the instruction in Proverbs 7–9.

## GENRE AND STRUCTURE IN PROVERBS 7–9

Following the traditional structure and genre arguments summarized above, Proverbs 7–9 has typically been understood as three discrete passages composed of an instruction in chapter 7, a wisdom poem in chapter 8, and a comparison between personified Wisdom and the foolish woman in Proverbs 9. This has been largely due to the tendency to read the passages having to do with personified Wisdom as being outside the instruction genre, but also through attention to theme and voicing. While the entirety of chapter 7, including the overheard speech of the strange woman in verses 14–20, is indisputably in the voice of the parent, all but the first verses of chapter 8 is a speech by Wisdom herself. The clear comparisons between the women in chapter 9 suggest that this chapter, too, may fruitfully be read as an independent section. Reading the three chapters as a single instruction retains these structural cues but understands them as parts of a unified whole, highlighting comparisons typically made on the basis of similar content, such as those often made among the women.<sup>22</sup>

Amenemhet” includes both instruction and biography. “Merikare,” trans. Miriam Lichtheim (COS 1.35); “Amenemhet,” trans. Miriam Lichtheim (COS 1.36).

<sup>21</sup> Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery*, 57–60.

<sup>22</sup> For a sampling of such works see Norman C. Habel, “Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” *Interpretation* 26 (1972): 131–57; Claudia V. Camp, “Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, O. Carm., ed.

A 7:1–5 Appeal: My son, keep my word . . .

B 7:6–23 *Father describes a strange woman and her house*

A' 7:24–8:3 Transition: And now children, listen to me . . .

X 8:4–31 *Wisdom speaks*

A" 8:32–36 Transition: And now children, listen to me . . .

B' 9:1–18 *Father describes houses and meals of Wisdom and the foolish woman*

In the instruction, the parental appeal (A) and its echoes in the form of transitional statements (A'; A") serve as the foundational structure of the piece. These two transitional statements (רְעוּתָהּ בָּנִים שָׁמְעוּ-לִי), while similar to the parental appeals in bidding the son—here sons—to listen, these two phrases begin with the transitional רְעוּתָהּ, absent in the parental appeals, and occur in places where it is difficult to see an instruction beginning.<sup>23</sup> In Proverbs 5, the only other place in Proverbs 1–9 where this transitional statement appears, verses 3–6 concern the strange woman. The transitional statement appears in verse 7, and the topic of the strange woman continues in verse 8 with a warning to keep far from her. However, following the transition in verse 7, the strange woman is referred to only with a pronoun, requiring one to read back before the transitional statement to determine an antecedent. Here, too, no new instruction begins but that this phrase serves as a transitional statement, echoing the first line of the parental appeal at the beginning of the instruction (Prov 5:1).

In Proverbs 7:24–27 (A') the transitional statement functions not only to restate the father's warning against the strange woman but to introduce the next speaker: personified Wisdom. Likewise, in Proverbs 8:32–36 (A") Wisdom concludes her speech with the same line (רְעוּתָהּ בָּנִים שָׁמְעוּ-לִי) and an almost ironic echo of the parental appeal, admonishing the children to listen to her. The transition ends with the assurance that those finding her find life, while those hating her love death, a fitting sentiment to introduce the dueling meals described in Proverbs 9:1–6 and 13–18.

## AT HOME WITH WISDOM IN PROVERBS 7–9

Turning to the longer sections of Proverbs 7–9 (B, B', X), one quickly identifies the theme of home. The three longer sections form a chiasm with Proverbs 8:4–31 at the center. In Proverbs 7:6–23 (B), the parent enters into a lengthy description of an observed encounter between a youth and a "strange woman."<sup>24</sup> He looks out from

Kenneth G. Hoglund et al., *JSOT Supplement Series 58* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987), 45–76; Gale A. Yee, "I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh: The Foreign Woman ('iššā Zārā) in Proverbs 1–9," *JSOT* 43 (1989): 53–68; Carol A. Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 116–31.

<sup>23</sup> Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery*, 48–51.

<sup>24</sup> The Hebrew here reads אִשָּׁה זָרָה, literally "strange woman." Parallel vocabulary suggests further understanding her as foreigner (נְכַרִּי); Prov 2:16; 5:10, 20; 7:5), while context suggests an additional context of illicit sexual activity (Prov 2:16–17; 7:10).

his בַּיִת (Prov 7:6) to see a youth passing near the בַּיִת (Prov 7:8) of a “strange woman” (אִשָּׁה זָרָה), bedecked in the clothes of a prostitute (Prov 7:10). The parent describes this strange woman as loud and rebellious, as one who does not stay at home (הַבַּיִת; Prov 7:11). Yet it is to her home that the woman compels the youth to come, specifically to her lavish, scented bed where they can enjoy the delights of love on account of her husband not being at home (בַּיִת; Prov 7:16–19). Although the public nature of the strange woman’s presence is one of the things that the father critiques, her house fares no better, and when the youth follows her home, he is likened to an ox going to the slaughter (Prov 7:22).

In chapter 9 (B’), the structural counterpart to Proverbs 7:6–23, the parent describes two feasts, which take place at the home (בַּיִת) of Wisdom and at the home (בַּיִת) of the foolish woman, respectively (Prov 9:1–12; 13–18). The feasts are similar in many aspects. Each woman prepares a meal (Prov 9:1–2, 17), calls from the heights of the city (Prov 9:4, 16), and uses identical words to do so (מִי־פָּהִי יָסֵר; הִנֵּה; Prov 9:4, 16). The differences serve to warn the son away from the foolish woman’s feast. Wisdom’s life-giving feast consists of bread and wine, while the foolish woman’s feast consists of stolen water and bread (Prov 9:17). The guests of the foolish woman are already, unknowingly, in the depths of Sheol (Prov 9:18).

Several details show Proverbs 8:4–31 to be the chiasmic center of the instruction. First, it contains none of the narrative descriptions found in 7:6–23 (B) and 9:1–18 (B’). Rather, the entire section is a quotation offered by the parent. Secondly, while 7:6–23 and 9:1–18 both emphasize aspects of house or home (בַּיִת), this aspect, at least in a literal sense, appears to be absent from Proverbs 8:4–31.<sup>25</sup>

Much could be said—and has been said—about the introduction and self-praise sections of Wisdom’s speech (Prov 8:4–21).<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of this essay, however, it is the famous cosmology presenting Wisdom as YHWH’s firstborn (Prov 8:22–31) that holds importance.<sup>27</sup> Wisdom describes her presence as YHWH creates, at the very beginning before the mountains or the fields, before the waters above and the waters below were bounded. There I was, says Wisdom, growing up beside him.<sup>28</sup> If there is a home in this passage, and there is, it is nothing less than the cosmos itself.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Reading בַּיִת in Proverbs 8:2 as an alternate form of בַּיִת. See HALOT בַּיִת II and compare Ezek 41:9; Job 8:17; and 2 Kgs 11:15 // 2 Chron 23:14.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Christa Bauer-Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9. Eine Form- und Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung Ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966), 92, 98–102; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 52–55.

<sup>27</sup> A variety of verbs in Proverbs 8:22–31 emphasize a procreative context here, including קָנָה (8:22); קָנָה (8:24); חָיַל (8:23).

<sup>28</sup> Reading אֲמַנֵּן in 8:30 as an infinitive absolute from the root אָמַן, “to nourish or support,” being used as an adverbial complement. For fuller explanation and outline of possibilities see Michael V. Fox, “Amon Again,” *JBL* 115, no. 4: 699–702; Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos*, 274.

<sup>29</sup> Christine Roy Yoder’s work convincingly joins Proverbs 31:10–31 with Proverbs 1–9 as a framing mechanism for the entire book of Proverbs. In this reading the woman of valor (אִשָּׁת־חַיִל; Prov 31:10) mirrors personified Wisdom as a more immanent expression of divine Wisdom, this time largely within the home. Again, ways that this observation intersects with the literary structure of Proverbs 1–9 require additional

The choice of the son, often interpreted as that of the women presented, is also a choice of home. Will the son choose a home filled with secrets (Prov 7; 9:17)? Will the son choose a home filled with insight and wisdom (Prov 9:6)? Will the son choose a home that is aligned with the very cosmos (Prov 8:22–31)? The question—and the choice of the son—is one of life and death. As others have shown from their various methodological perspectives, I have demonstrated that the structure of Proverbs 1–9 isolates Proverbs 7–9 as a single instruction, which, in turn, shows Wisdom’s home—and thus the son’s true home—to be nothing less than the cosmos itself. Thus, in choosing Wisdom’s house over that of the foolish woman in Proverbs 9, the son also chooses to be aligned with the whole created order. The observations of Van Leeuwen, Brown, and Shroer, then, find their echo in the literary structure of Proverbs 7–9. ⊕

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attention. Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31*, BZAW 304 (New York: de Gruyter, 2001).