

Training Desire in Proverbs: A Response to “Capitalism, the Crash, and Christianity” by  
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Professor Douglas has offered a helpful point of entry into the kind of theological and ethical reflection that the current economic crisis demands. His claim that “there aren’t any non sinful or eternal ways of shaping economies” aptly reminds us of the scope of that task in the real world. There can, finally, be no utopian answers, which seem inevitably to end badly—in totalitarianism or fascism or intolerable inequalities. Yet responses there must be, and followers of Christ, in seminaries, churches or other communities of faith, can and ought to respond. Although not all of us, or even many of us, possess the expertise to weigh in meaningfully on certain technical economic matters (e.g., how precisely certain financial tools ought to be structured), we do as communities of disciples possess much. We remember a long history of Christian doctrine; we share in meaningful rituals like the Lord’s Supper; we know the struggles and pitfalls of attempting to build just communities; we dare to pray together the Lord’s Prayer; and we hope to welcome the Holy Spirit when together we gather around scripture seeking to hear a fresh word from God in our days. These are not inconsiderable resources.

Professor Douglas’s sketch of how capitalist economic arrangements awaken desire, in particular the desire to accumulate more and more wealth, struck me as particularly important. As Douglas intimates, any economic system will make “some particular kinds of sin more likely than others.” For capitalism, the “first vice” is greed—an excessive desire to acquire and possess wealth in ways, which in the Augustinian language Douglas adopts, reflects disordered desire. Yet Douglas (and Augustine) reminds us of the possibility of training our desires. In fact, Douglas urges us to understand the “disciplining our desires” as one of the ways that Christians today might ‘hopefully engage’ the current economic crisis.

Professor Douglas’s words regarding the training of desire struck a cord with me because such a concern resonates profoundly with at least one particular moral language that the Bible deploys. Israelite wisdom literature, especially the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs, too, is very concerned with identifying and training desire. This is important for I would dare wager that although the insights of Augustine and other theologians may help crystallize important problems for us—as Professor Douglas’s essay so ably demonstrates—most of the communal ethical and theological reflection that goes on in our churches and other communities of faith around contemporary issues regularly turns quickly to Bible Study. Proverbs 1-9 makes the question of the proper ordering of one’s desires a major theme—maybe *the* major theme—of its instructional work. Hence, if Douglas is correct that the current economic crisis has at least something to do with disordered desire, study of this portion of scripture may prove a valuable tool for Christians as we attempt to discern how we ought to respond to the present economic turmoil.

The Book of Proverbs almost immediately addresses questions of desire. Already in chapter one, just after the book's introductory lines (or Prologue, to which we will return below) we read:<sup>1</sup>

My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us wantonly ambush the innocent; like Sheol let us swallow them alive and whole, like those who go down to the Pit. We shall find all kinds of costly things; we shall fill our houses with booty. Throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse"—my child, do not walk in their way, keep your foot from their paths; for their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood. For in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on; yet they lie in wait—to kill themselves! and set an ambush—for their own lives! Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors. (Prov. 1: 10-19 NRSV)

The rhetoric of desire, and of training desire, is evident in the first line of this passage. The teacher or instructing voice of Proverbs knows well that the one hearing these words, the addressee or student, may very well be “enticed” (1:10) by sinners. The student, however, is told to turn away from this temptation and not to “consent” (1:10) As the passage continues we learn what is potentially so desirable about the sinners’ ways, what it is that might lure the addressee to the sinners’ path. It is the promise of “all kinds of costly things,” or “all precious wealth,” in Hebrew *kol hon yaqar* (1:13).

Proverbs thus knows well that its readers know well the worth of wealth. But the problem for Proverbs here is not merely that wealth is desirable. The problem is that the sinners’ (and potentially the addressee’s) desire for wealth is not properly ordered. The images of lying in wait, shedding blood and ambushing innocents reveals that the sinners (and potentially the addressee) are disposed to pursue gain by any and all means, including obviously unjust violent robbing. The disordered nature of the sinners’ desires is also implicit in the teaching voice’s counter to the sinners’ invitation. The sinners promise the addressee “all precious wealth.” Yet the instructing voice says what they truly offer is nothing other than a “greedy” quest for “gain” (v. 19). It is this inordinate desire for gain—the robbers are ready to kill for wealth—that the instructing voice ironically claims will lead to the sinners’ own “death.”

One implication of this ironic language about “death” seems to be that the sinners believed their pursuit of wealth would produce something worthwhile, something like “life.” And in this particular belief they may have not been far from the truth, since for the sages who composed the book of Proverbs it does seem that a rightly regulated desire for gain, one that is subordinated to, or properly ordered under, a quest for other (non material) “goods,” can contribute to something like a full and abundant life. Indeed Proverbs knows that a good and flourishing life requires a certain degree of material prosperity. The sinners’ error is in placing the pursuit of wealth first. For the sages, by contrast, the highest good—that which should most fundamentally form the object of one’s desires—is Wisdom.

We can, in fact, see how the teaching voice in the rest of Prov. 1-9, via the poetic language of instruction, seeks to properly (re)order the addressee's desires. It is not wealth and its pursuits that should primarily occupy the student's attention, but the acquisition of Wisdom. Thus the next time the rhetoric of wealth is deployed in Proverbs it functions not to highlight the importance of material gain, but to figure the desirability of wisdom. In Prov. 2: 1-5, after exhorting "my child" to "treasure up" instruction (v. 1), the teaching voice tells the addressee:

If you seek it [wisdom] like silver,  
And search for it as for hidden treasures-  
Then you will understand fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.  
(NRSV)

Here the instructing voice compares the value of wisdom (or insight and understanding—both synonyms for wisdom) to the worth of silver and hidden treasures. Wisdom, the student needs to understand, is as desirable as any precious metal.

In Proverbs 3, however, the instructing voice does not simply liken wisdom's worth to the value of material wealth, but explicitly tells the addressee that wisdom, now personified as a woman, is *better than* precious metals and in fact *better than any* precious item, whether it be jewels or riches, or even non material goods like "long life" or social standing ("honor").

For her [Wisdom's] income is better than silver,  
and her revenue better than gold.  
She is more precious than jewels,  
And nothing you desire can compare with her.  
Long life is in her right hand;  
In her left hand are riches and honor. (NRSV; Prov. 3:14-16)

Proverbs 4:7 also attempts to train the addressee's desires by insisting that one use whatever resources may be at hand in order to acquire wisdom.

The beginning of wisdom is this:  
Get wisdom,  
And whatever else you get, get insight. (NRSV)

Although here the NRSV speaks of "getting" wisdom, the Hebrew idiom that underlies the translation is an economic one. It points to the practice of economic exchange, of buying and selling, and would be better rendered something like: "The beginning of wisdom is this: buy wisdom, and in exchange for all your possessions, buy insight." The point: Wisdom is so valuable that one should use all of one's resources to acquire it.<sup>ii</sup>

The next time Proverbs speaks of the value of wisdom in terms of wealth is Prov. 8: 10-11. Here the student of wisdom is commanded to:

Take my instruction instead of silver,  
and knowledge rather than choice gold,  
for wisdom is better than jewels  
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. (NRSV)

This language of value and desire is by now familiar to the addressee and in fact recalls explicitly 3:14-16. But it is slightly different as well. First, whereas in earlier verses it was the teacher's voice that we heard speaking of the value of Woman Wisdom, now it is Wisdom herself who speaks. In addition, in 8:10, her rhetoric is more pointed than the NRSV rendering suggests. Rather than saying "Take my instruction instead of silver" she says literarily, and perhaps more urgently, "Take my instruction, not silver."

We can thus up to this point trace a progression in how Proverbs attempts to (re)order or train the addressee's primary desires—away from the pursuit of wealth and toward the quest for wisdom. Wisdom, the teaching voice first made clear, is valuable *like* precious metals. We next learned, however, that wisdom is not only desirable like precious metals, it is "better than," even *more valuable* than anything the hearer might desire. This was followed by the claim that one ought to *use whatever possessions one has* in order to "buy" or acquire wisdom, so much greater is the worth of this 'good' than material goods. Finally personified Wisdom herself, in an urgent tone, commands the addressee to acquire wisdom, again because she/it is so much more valuable than anything one might desire.

After all this, Woman Wisdom in 8:18 speaks one last time of her own value in terms, at least in part, of material wealth.

Riches and honor are with me,  
Enduring wealth and prosperity.

Here Wisdom speaks of her own desirability by claiming to possess both riches and "enduring wealth" as well as honor and "prosperity"). Presumably the one who acquires Wisdom will acquire Wisdom's wealth as well. Yet what is this enduring wealth that wisdom offers? To answer that question we need to detour back to the beginning of Proverbs, and ask first about the *content* of the wisdom that Proverbs values so highly in terms of material riches and which the teaching voice claims ought to be the object of one's highest desire?

Proverbs 1-9 actually provides few concrete suggestions as to the precise content of the wisdom of which it speaks. Yet we do receive a strong clue as to what this wisdom consists in the opening lines of the book, in its "Prologue." Proverbs 1: 2-6 reads:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,  
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
to teach shrewdness to the simple,

knowledge and prudence to the young—  
Let the wise also hear and gain in learning,  
and the discerning acquire skill,  
to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles. (NRSV)

Verses 5-6 of this opening passage tell us that the book's instruction will be offered to us in a poetic idiom, which like tropes (e.g., proverbs), figures and riddles, will require a bit of 'wise reading' to understand. Indeed we have already seen how the book values wisdom by metaphorically comparing its worth to the worth of material riches as well as how it employs the literary technique of personification in figuring wisdom as a woman. Verses 2-4, by contrast, sketch the broad purposes that Proverbs itself claims it is designed to accomplish. Verse two in particular indicates that Proverbs is at least in part concerned to instill what I call intellectual virtues. It is "for learning about wisdom and instruction" and "understanding words of insight." According to v. 4, the book also hopes to instill in the addressee what I call practical virtues. It is designed "to teach shrewdness" and "knowledge and prudence."

The poetic structure of these initial lines, however, reveals that verse three stands at the pinnacle of the Prologue.<sup>iii</sup> This literary structure in turn suggests that the virtues which this line highlights will hold pride of place in Proverbs' teaching about wisdom. However rather than underscoring intellectual or practical virtues, v. 3 speaks of gaining instruction in "wise dealing," which the text immediately defines as "righteousness, justice, and equity," or *mishpat*, *zedek* and *meysharim*. These terms, especially the first two, *mishpat* and *zedek*, are well known from the biblical tradition's discourse of social justice (e.g., Deut. 16: 19-20; Amos 4:4-5; Isaiah 1:10-20). For Proverbs, to acquire wisdom, is thus to have properly directed one's desires toward the acquisition of particular kinds of virtues, of which social virtue or social justice is primary.

Yet what precisely the content of this social virtue is, which Proverbs values so highly, is still not obvious. Simply because the book deploys the rhetoric of social justice known from the prophets (and elsewhere) does not mean that the sages who composed Proverbs meant the same thing by social justice as did Amos or Isaiah. Although as we said Proverbs 1-9 does not put much meat on the bone of wisdom, the following chapters in Proverbs (10-31) do begin to fill in the gaps about what the book means by social virtue.

As it turns out, Proverbs' conception of social justice is broadly similar to what one finds in other parts of the Hebrew canon. Thus, for instance, Proverbs reveals a deep concern that the wise person show compassion to the poor and vulnerable (14:31; 15:25; 17:5; 21:13; 22:9; 23: 10-11; 28:27; ). The sages likewise highlight the importance of protecting the poor's rights in the legal realm (22:22; 29:7) as well as the responsibility kings, or other political elites, to insure a minimal degree of social justice in their realms (16:12; 25: 4-5; 28:16; 29:4, 14; 31:8-9). Proverbs, too, stresses the need for honesty in economic dealings, particularly the importance of accurate weights and measures (11:1; 16; 11; 20:10; 20:23). The sages, however, also more subtly speak of the strength, and

thus the value of, ties of kinship and community over the comparatively weak social ties that wealth produces (14:20-21; 17:17; 18:24; 19:4, 6-7; 27:10).

Having clarified some of the content of the wisdom Proverbs claims should form the highest object of one's desires, we can thus now say more clearly what the "enduring wealth" or *hon 'ateq* that Wisdom holds is. Most importantly we need to recognize that Wisdom's claim to possess "enduring wealth" is in a real sense a direct response to the sinners' promise of "precious wealth" in 1:13. The sinners enticed the addressee with the hope of acquiring *hon yaqar*. Now Wisdom promises *hon 'ateq*. Wisdom's "enduring wealth," however, is not the same as the *precious*, material riches the sinners offer. It is rather a figurative wealth, which the possession of wisdom's virtues provides.

Two specific aspects of the texts suggest this. First, we noted that the Prologue tells the reader at the outset of the book that its teaching is going to involve some figurative dimensions. The book itself thus both cautions its readers against understanding wisdom's rewards in an overly literalistic fashion and warrants efforts to read beneath the text's surface.

Yet despite this direction from the Prologue, many commentators understand Proverbs teaching about wealth in what appears to be overly literalistic terms. Wisdom is associated with good things, including riches, and so the text surely means that the one who lives a life of wisdom is promised material prosperity as well, or so the logic goes. Proverbs thus is seen by some as a kind of simple guide to success or prosperity. In fact, some interpreters who work out of this general understanding of Proverbs render 1:3a, not as the NRSV does, "for gaining instruction in *wise dealing*," but more along the lines of the NJPS's translation, "for acquiring the discipline for *success*" (NJPS).<sup>iv</sup>

Yet understanding wisdom's "enduring wealth" to be the figurative wealth of acquired virtue is not solely dependent on reading after the Prologue's direction. It is also suggested by the term in 8:18 that immediately follows the words *hon 'ateq*. Wisdom possesses not merely "enduring wealth" but what the NRSV renders as "prosperity." What is this prosperity? Does it, for example, connote primarily a high level of economic well being and thus perhaps support the view that Proverbs is largely a guide to prosperity?

The term in 8:18, interestingly, is not the same word one finds in 1:3a, which the NJPS renders as "success." In fact, it is not one of the usual terms used in the Bible for success or prosperity. Quite to the contrary it is *tsedekah*, a word that is regularly translated justice or righteousness, as it always is two verses later in 8:20. *Tsedekah*, of course, is etymologically related to, and recalls, the *zedek* of Proverbs' Prologue (1:3) and hence belongs to that broader biblical teaching about social justice. The "enduring wealth" that Wisdom possesses thus has fundamentally to do with *tsedekah*—justice or social virtue. It is precisely this sort of virtue that is of lasting worth and stands in contrast to the value of (impermanent) material goods.

Another ancient Jewish sage, Jesus of Nazareth, took a similar view regarding the desirability of certain virtues and dispositions over material wealth when he taught his followers:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19-21)

The wisdom tradition of Proverbs thus attempts to train desire in a manner analogous, perhaps, to the sort of training of our own desires that Professor Douglas suggests might be a part of a Christian response to the current economic crisis. Careful study of Proverbs can thus potentially serve churches and communities of faith as a valuable entry point into reflection on the current economic crisis. Or more to the point, reading Proverbs 1-9 in the midst of economic turmoil can help us begin an examination of the nature of our own desires, or the location of our heart, as Matthew puts it.

In these difficult economic days there will likely be more and more in our midst who have lost jobs and homes and who suffer poverty and economic hardship. As Professor Douglas notes in such times, as always, disciples of Jesus are called to “attend to the poor and oppressed” and to “support the pursuit of justice.” The sages who composed Proverbs and placed a premium on the wisdom of social virtue would no doubt urge the same.

Yet, for especially those of us who experience the economic downturn more as an inconvenience than as a disaster, it may be that we are being called to consider afresh where our hearts lie, how our desires may be disordered. Indeed we may be being called to ask how our broader economic arrangements and institutions reflect our disordered desires and how we might support the transformation of these realms in the direction of greater justice and social virtue, as both the ancient sages of Proverbs and Professor Douglas invite.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you agree with Proverbs that the pursuit of wisdom, especially social virtue, ought to take precedence over the pursuit of material goods? Why or Why not? What might social virtue “buy” that money cannot? Why are such products of social virtue so valuable?
2. Proverbs speaks of social virtue and justice largely in terms of showing kindness to the poor and insisting on honest economic practices. Is this a sufficient economic ethic for our day? Why or why not? What might be lacking or inadequate in the proverbial vision of social justice?

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<sup>i</sup> For more in depth discussion of much of the following and some possible practical implications, see my *Money and the Way of Wisdom: Insights from the Book of Proverbs* (Woodstock VT: Skylight Paths, 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting that the patriarchal instruction of Proverbs, which imagines Wisdom in terms of the feminine and its primary addressees as young men, has placed this verse between two others that speak of Wisdom's desirability in erotic terms as well. In v. 6, the addressee is told to "love" Woman Wisdom and in v. 8 he is instructed to "embrace" her. These lines are examples of how throughout Prov. 1-9, the way of wisdom is presented in terms of what the text views as legitimate erotic desires. Wisdom is presented as a marriageable woman. The wrong way of folly and wickedness, by contrast, is represented in terms of illegitimate erotic desire. The strange or foreign woman in Prov. 1-9 is both symbolically linked with Woman Folly (9: 13) and presented as sexually desirable—e.g., an adulteress. Hence, Proverbs attempts to train its addressee's desire for wisdom not merely via the sorts of economic metaphors we are exploring, but also by linking it symbolically to the desires and promises that an ancient patriarchal audience would have associated with legitimate marriage.

<sup>iii</sup> This poetic structure is more easily discerned in the Hebrew. For a fuller study of the Prologue, see my "Revisiting the Prologue of Proverbs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126.3 (2007): 455-73; cf. *Money and the Way of Wisdom*, 23-27. See too the helpful work of Columbia Theological Seminary Professor William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), especially Chapter 2.

<sup>iv</sup> For details regarding these translations choices, see "Revisiting the Prologue of Proverbs."