

Article

The Laughter of Fools: The Relevance of Wisdom in Today's World

Katharine Dell

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9BS, UK; kjd24@cam.ac.uk

Academic Editor: Peter Iver Kaufman

Received: 20 April 2016; Accepted: 18 July 2016; Published: 25 August 2016

Abstract: This paper explores different facets of the character type of the fool in the book of Proverbs and looks at his primary characteristics in the context of some of the main themes of Proverbs. Particular concerns are with the difficulties of parenting a fool and the idea of life as a path full of choices, with problems with communication and with other characteristics of the fool such as not listening to others, a tendency to hasty anger, wiliness and getting into unsuitable social situations. This paper puts this discussion in the context of the wider wisdom quest and its theological themes. It ends with images of the fool from Ecclesiastes and some insights for modern application.

Keywords: fool; path; communication; anger; theology; wisdom; Woman Wisdom; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes

1. Introduction

I first gave this paper to a church group on April Fools' Day (1 April), an appropriate day to be addressing the nature of "the fool". Who is this unfortunate character? In addition, why does he feature so prominently in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament? There are over seventy proverbs that mention him [1]. Further mentions occur in Ecclesiastes, another wisdom book, notably where the author is citing proverbs [2]. My questions of these biblical proverbs about the fool are as follows: What is the fool accused of? How might he mend his ways? His opposite number is the wise person and so, who is he? Why do the wise judge fools so vociferously? Finally, does any of this have anything to say to our modern context? [3]

"The fool" as he is presented in Proverbs is clearly a "type" [4,5]. Proverbs is full of opposite characters, i.e., the righteous/the wicked; the friend/the enemy; the hard-worker/the indolent and so on, and it seems that listing the two alternatives is a way of characterizing ethical behavior at its opposite extremes. Each of us knows from our own experience of human nature that it is in fact difficult to classify any one person as a complete fool, or indeed as completely wise. Characters are complex and any such designation would probably be simply a hasty judgement on someone for a particular action that has caused annoyance. Thus, I might say that my neighbor was a fool because he put his green dustbin out on a black dustbin week. However, that does not mean I generally think of him as foolish all of the time or that the adjective "foolish" was his overriding characteristic. Thus, "the fool" is a type rather than a real person, but to study the different facets of his foolishness through the lens of the wisdom writers is to tune in to a subtle portrayal of human character in its roundness and to experiential wisdom in its applicability to all human beings and their characteristics. To study the fool is also to contemplate what it means to be wise, for advice against foolish behavior always contains an admonition to do its opposite. Furthermore, this survey of the nature of the fool provides an introduction to many of the main themes of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Whilst individual proverbs tend to be rather "black and white" in their judgements, the proverbs are an interesting vehicle for conveying subtle insight into human behavior, which, after all, has not changed significantly. Social

contexts change of course, but essential human behavior is the continuum that links our world with that of the bible.

2. Parenting a Fool

A prime concern seems to be with parenting a fool. The very first proverb of the sayings section (Proverbs 10:1–22:16) is: “A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother’s grief” (Prov. 10:1). The contrast between wise and foolish as direct opposites is often made, as in this proverb. Father and mother are equals here in the parenting role. Many proverbs make this kind of contrast with two halves linked by “but”. A variant of this proverb is 15:20, which uses the same first line “A wise child makes a glad father” but has a second line which reads “but the foolish despise their mothers”. It is a well-known technique of the wisdom writers [6] to lead you to expect a duplicate and then make a subtle change in the second half. This second line, “the foolish despise their mothers”, suggests a more active dislike on the part of the fool. The ethical norm is of course that the wise person admires and listens to their mother (e.g., Prov. 6:20). The fool is used then to heighten the wrong attitude, making a person a “fool” rather than “wise”. Two proverbs in chapter 17 address the same issue of parenting a fool notably verse 21 “the one who begets a fool gets trouble: the parent of a fool has no joy” and then “Foolish children are a grief to their father and bitterness to her who bore them” (17:25). Both refer to the begetting role of the parents, the second more specifically to the childbearing role of the mother, and then to the emotional bitterness that ensues when the fool’s true character emerges. It is interesting that this “type” seems to be recognized from birth and that fools are then trapped in that designation. No amount of good parenting changes the situation. Fools are described as having an addiction to being foolish: “Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, but the folly will not be driven out!” (Prov. 27:22) and “Like a dog that returns to its vomit, is a fool who reverts to his folly” (Prov. 26:11). This suggests that such characteristics are deeply ingrained and might lead a modern audience to reflect on the nature/nurture debate. Are children simply born a certain way and how far can their behavior be shaped? What is the role of the parent in that shaping? How does a parent form their child towards appropriate moral behavior and responses in all manner of different situations?

3. Life as a Path

In order fully to understand the wise/fool dichotomy, one needs to appreciate the wider context of thematic emphasis in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs has the wider theme of life as a path on which one has to tread but which involves choices [7,8] that both reveal wise or foolish character and lead to wise or foolish consequences. A key text for path imagery is Proverbs 4:10–19, an admonition to the child from the parent to keep to the “right path” along the “way of wisdom”. The parent asks the child to accept “my words” (v 10), teaching and example (v 11). The warning is “do not enter the path of the wicked...avoid it...turn away from it and pass on” (v 14). The contrast here is with “the wicked” but it could equally have been “the fool” and the two descriptions are closely linked. It is an attractive idea in Proverbs that one decides on one’s direction in life, on the choices for good or ill that one is going to make, and then one sets off on a chosen path: “the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (v 18), unlike the way of the wicked (or the foolish) which is “like deep darkness” (v 19). Every act has a consequence that can more or less be known. Of course one might object that sometimes unforeseen circumstances arise, but the confident answer of the wise is that if one is on the right path, that of wisdom, one will be able to cope with whatever comes along. Armed with the right value-system, the right character and ability to make moral choices, the road is clear and smooth; make the wrong choices as the fool does and the way is strewn with thorns, making life difficult (Prov. 15:19). And the path is not static. Understanding increases with age, and conversely foolishness becomes more set in so that the path is a journey through life which takes people inexorably forwards [9]. The gradient is at times steep, at times smooth and straight and at times downhill all the way, and at each stage desires may change and choices have to be made. The

importance of planning one's direction in life is advocated by the wise and of course planning for good rather than ill is advised. However, ultimately God is in charge: "The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord...Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established." (Prov. 16:1,3). The idea of life as a path is an appealing one for a modern audience and tales of 'the journey' proliferate in our literature, a prime example being Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Life is an adventure that can potentially take people on many different roads and so navigating choices and options is a challenging matter. This is where some advice from those who have navigated the road before us can be useful, or even invaluable.

4. Communication

One of the key themes of the book of Proverbs is the nature of communication, i.e., the importance of the careful selection of words, knowing when to speak and when to be silent, avoiding gossip and too much [10]. The fool, unsurprisingly, engages in too much talk and does not know when to stop. Proverbs 10:8 contrasts the "wise of heart" who "will heed commandments" and the "babbling fool" who "will come to ruin". The parallel between heeding commandments and over-talking is not an exact one, but the implication is that the fool is so busy listening to himself that he does not hear important instruction or pay heed to external factors. Additionally in chapter 10, "The wise lay up knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near" (v 14), which suggests that the overtalkative fool has not got time to learn or heed the knowledge that is being passed down to him. Proverbs 14:3 moves on to the thought that "The talk of fools is a rod for their backs, but the lips of the wise preserve them." Imagery of lips and mouth is often used in these "communication" contexts. The idea here is that the fool is making a rod for his own back by his incessant chatter. He is not doing himself any favors, whilst the wise person, who chooses his words carefully and is sparing with them, is living according to wise behavior as defined by these writers. Imagery of the tongue is also used, as in 15:2, "The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly". Finally in 18:6-7 there is a double proverb on the fool, with no contrasting picture of the wise: "A fool's lips bring strife, and a fool's mouth invites a flogging. The mouths of fools are their ruin, and their lips a snare to themselves." A wholly negative view of the verbal activity of the fool is given here and discipline is the only way to control his wayward behavior.

Another aspect of this communication theme is that the fool cannot manage fine speech or eloquent proverbs for he is ignorant and any attempt to prove otherwise is disastrous. Thus, Prov. 17:7 makes the point that "Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a ruler." Glib words are ridiculous in the mouths of fools, but the more important point in this proverb is the comparison with a ruler who has power and should know better than to utter lies with his smooth speech. The wise show great respect for their betters, notably the king who is at the top of the social scale. In addition, the advice of Prov. 23:9 to the wise is "Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, who will only despise the wisdom of your words." Fools do not listen, so do not waste your words. Along similar lines, proverbs are useless in a fool's mouth. Thus, 26:9 reads, "Like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of a fool". A fool may learn a proverb and even proclaim it, but it is not clear that he has any real understanding of what he is saying.

Before leaving the communication theme a particularly insightful proverb is found in Proverbs 17:28, "Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent." This brings out a certain contradiction in that if the fool chooses to shut his mouth then you cannot tell whether he is wise or foolish and of this one has to beware. The fool could be trying to pass for what he is not. Contradiction is at the heart of the proverbial worldview because experience itself is often contradictory. If a person is silent one does not know whether they are wise or foolish and one needs to be wary. The communication theme brings this contradiction out quite sharply. It is interesting that the wise latch on to communication as such a key theme for a successful life. It is seen to be at the heart of human relationship. So the importance of a careful choice of words, of thinking through what one wants to say, of speaking concisely and not too often, of restraining oneself from

gossiping and spreading secrets is all emphasized over and over again by the wise. There are plenty of warnings against evil words, hasty words, foolish words and the bad consequences that will inevitably ensue. Words have great power and so their use and abuse is of prime importance. Arguably, changes in how humans communicate with each other have dominated our lifestyles with the rise of the internet, of email, of texting and of social media. The advice of the wise on communication is pertinent to this in that the brevity of our communications in a text or tweet means that even more care needs to be taken in our choice of words and self-expression. There is also a chance to reflect on whether the written word is always the best means of communication in that nothing replaces a face to face discussion and interchange.

5. Further Characteristics of the Fool

The speech and other behaviors of the fool arise from his character type, which is clearly an over-drawn type for the purposes of instruction. In narrative texts characters tend to be complex and many-dimensional but in this kind of ethical instruction, a character is deliberately one-dimensional and used as a paradigm [11]. Thus, a picture is starting to emerge of this unfortunate fool [12] and there are various proverbs that give away clues as to the chief characteristics that can be identified.

5.1. *Self-Absorption*

Fools generally think that they are right all the time. This is in contrast with the advice of the wisdom writers to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight” (3:5). In 12:15 this point is used to make a contrast with the wise and hence with the correct way of behaving—“Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice.” Prov. 26:12 puts it the other way around: “Do you see persons wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for fools than for them.” Whilst some self-reliance might be seen as a good thing in life, being overconfident in one’s own view and ability is seen to be a false path. Prov. 28:26 puts it succinctly, “Those who trust in their own wits are fools, but those who walk in wisdom come through safely.” Fools then tend to be opinionated people who lack deeper understanding. As Prov. 18:2 puts it, “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion.” It is clear that listening to the advice of others is a key part of wisdom. Most of us no doubt know others who have high opinions of themselves and prefer to rely on their own insight rather than listen to the advice of others. As people become more senior in their careers and in society that tendency is even greater. There is a balance to be found between listening to the advice of one’s elders and yet also being allowed to shape one’s own views from one’s own experiences.

5.2. *Quick-Temperedness*

One aspect of the fool is that he is quick to rise to anger. He is hasty and ill-judged in his reactions. Thus, Proverbs 12:16 reads, “Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult”. Prov. 14:17 condemns quick-temperedness, “One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly, and the schemer is hated.” The opposite to quick-temperedness is recommended by the wise, “Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.” (14:26). One of the key attributes of God in the Old Testament is that he is ‘slow to anger’ (Exod. 24:6; Num. 14:18; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8) and this is regarded as a positive, praiseworthy characteristic. Prov. 29:11 makes the point definitively, “A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.” It is clear here that the fool even gets angry with God for things that he knows in his heart are the result of his own ill-judged actions: “One’s own folly leads to ruin, yet the heart rages against the Lord.” This is one of the few proverbs about folly that brings God directly into the picture in that the rest of the time God is behind the scenes and the main focus is on human experience. So, the wise person uses restraint, and thinks about what he wants to say rather than rising to a bait. The fool shows none of these characteristics for he likes to pick arguments: “It is honorable to refrain from strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel” (20:3). The wise were very cautious about anger and about hasty judgements and recommend restraint

in every context. Little has changed on this for our modern context. One should always be cautious of those given to a hot temper and many ill-advised deeds have been done in such a frame of mind. Restraint and careful thought before acting has to be essential advice for all to learn of whatever age, persuasion, religion, creed or color.

5.3. *Lacking Receptivity and Sensitivity*

The wise were sensitive to the views of others and showed respect for friends, family, neighbors and those in authority and there are proverbs on all these relationships that one might form in life. The fool is set up here as the opposite of such recommendations. Ultimately, the fool is thick-skinned and does not notice the subtlety of a situation. He is unteachable in sharp contrast to those who exercise prudence and understanding in their dealings (e.g., Prov. 2:11). As Prov. 17:10 instructs: "A rebuke strikes deeper into a discerning person than a hundred blows into a fool." Lack of receptivity can be one of the most frustrating challenges for an educator. Today's teachers do not have the option of physical discipline and it all has to be verbal (so linking up with the importance of communication). A carefully chosen rebuke can hit hard and the wisdom is in knowing when and how to speak out if the situation demands.

The fool is also complacent and this can only mean trouble: "For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them" (Prov. 1:32). The fool is careless and unrestrained: "The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, but the fool throws off restraint and is careless" (14:16). It is as if the fool lacks a conscience. He certainly lacks sensitivity and subtlety in relation to other people. Here, for the first time, a link is made with evil and, as mentioned earlier, at times foolishness and wickedness are aligned, e.g., in 5:22–3: "The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the toils of their sin. They die for lack of discipline and because of their great folly they are lost." Whilst fools are generally more misguided than wicked, it is interesting that this link is made with evil and wickedness as it is a short step from insensitive actions to actions that are morally reprehensible. Lack of restraint is again the keynote here and sooner or later such a lack will lead an insensitive person into trouble.

5.4. *Manipulative, Lazy and Profligate with Money*

The fool lacks application in contrast to the listening pupil (e.g., Prov. 5:1), but can be wily and try to manipulate situations. In Prov. 17:16 the fool would rather try to buy wisdom than learn: "Why should fools have a price in hand to buy wisdom, when they have no mind to learn?" Presumably real wisdom is not for sale, but the fool can see its worth from afar and tries to get wisdom by underhand means. He does not want to work for gain. The wise advice hard work but not working overhard in that they believe in a balanced life. Work, though, is certainly high on their agenda for a fulfilling life. The fool then is often lazy and indolent and looks for the quick fix rather than the lasting gain. Fools often seem to have money, but they never keep it for long, so Prov. 21:20 describes the fool spending money with rapidity, "Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise, but the fool devours it." The fool has an appetite for spending, but no desire for the prudence of saving for a rainy day. Money was a very important theme for the wise and they believed in the need for a certain amount of wealth for security. They were critical of excess, but believed in prudence and careful saving. They also believed in helping others financially in a philanthropic way whilst at the same time being wary of moneylenders. Wealth and poverty and the interrelationship between the two is a key, dominant theme of Proverbs [13,14]. These themes speak powerfully to today in an age where wealth and influence through successful working careers are highly valued. Many are looking to "get rich quick" through lotteries and other forms of gambling or by playing the stock market or the property market. Whilst some do put in hours of hard work, there are many who sit back and let others work for them, who dominate and manipulate others and who are after their own gain to the detriment of others. Attitudes to money open up a range of perspectives and opportunities for conflict, and arguments on such topics

divide families, communities and nations. It is as well for us all to listen to the advice of these ancient sages on such topics.

6. Unnatural Living and Comparison with the Natural World

Certain situations are deemed inappropriate for fools, in 19:10: “It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury, much less for a slave to rule over princes.” Additionally, in 26:1: “Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool.” Inappropriate things are listed in other spheres of life so that a slave ruling over princes would not be right, nor snow in summer. The point is made that these behaviors are unnatural just as many characteristics of the fool are unnatural. Luxurious living, honor and ruling should be linked with wisdom instead. It is even deemed inappropriate that the fool overeat in a list of inappropriate things in 30:21–3: “Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up; a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when gluttoned with food; an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress.” All these things run against the natural order that the wisdom writers perceive and so cause them grief. There is a sense here of a “right” way of doing things, of the importance of a known set of boundaries, a known social hierarchy, a known prioritization of suitable activity. This links to a natural human desire for order, for knowing where one fits in and for boundaries and social guidance. Human beings are communal and enjoy relating to one another in community and yet it is important that there is guidance as to the forms and procedures and moral norms that should be followed in any communal or societal system.

One might notice here the use of either physical images such as snow or rain or wider images from the natural world. The wisdom writers have a unique relationship with the environment around them as they go about their observations and the basic essentials of everyday life provide endless illustrations for them [15,16]. They see the world as a created, ordered whole and so inappropriate or unnatural happenings undermine that order set up by God and sustained by him, but also perpetuated by human beings in the way they interact with the world. Hence the fool is a part of the chaos that threatens the health of the natural order of life and society in relation to the natural world, which has its own patterns. The fool does not heed such lessons. The orderliness of life and society is mirrored in the natural world to which all human beings have an essential relationship and it is a pleasure to the human mind to perceive harmony in all such areas of life. In our modern cities and busy lifestyles we all too often lose sight of our key relationship to the natural world and our spirits are rejuvenated by the times when we do outdoor activities that bring us back to our wider environment.

7. Wider Social and Theological Context

It is time to step back to analyze the original social and theological context of all this wise advice. It is clear that the technique here being employed by the wise is to set the fool up as a type whose path is not to be recommended. It is a means of educating those who are listening in moral formation of their own characters [17]. By hearing of the blunders of these hapless fools, the young learn what kind of behavior really pays in life. They learn how to form relationships, how to communicate, how not to offend people and on a deeper level how to tune in to a wider “order” that is known through experience and through which society can flourish without descending into chaos. This is a more theological dimension, for the whole idea of choices is grounded in “fear of the Lord” which promotes the acquisition of wisdom (Prov. 2:1–11) [18].

So where does this proverbial material originate and how did it come to be passed down in the biblical corpus? It is very unlike other material in the Old Testament—a genre all of its own—and yet it deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms. Its relevance to our modern situation is clear and immediate in the light of the unchanging nature of human beings and the way they behave. But how about the origins of the quest? If one looks at almost any culture in the world one will find the coining of proverbs. Whether it be the Sayings of the Vikings, African proverbs, our own English proverbs, it seems to be a natural human phenomenon. Although the social contexts of each of these examples would be very different, human beings seem to enjoy writing down truths that are learned

from experience into pithy memorable sayings. Biblical proverbs are pithy sayings coined over the years, their origins probably lost in the mists of time. They may well have been coined in an oral, pre-literary culture, back in the earliest times of the Israelites, in nomadic circles, around the camp fire. Most proverbs do not betray any particular context but there are a few which indicate a city background (Prov. 1–9), or speak of the king, or mention God and so clearly not all proverbs are primitive, some come from more developed cultures [19]. So it seems that proverbs were probably circulating in Israel over a long period of time, including the time of the monarchy when Israel was a nation in its own right. In fact King Solomon, the son of David, has a special reputation for his wisdom (I Kings 1–11) and may have acted as a magnet for the collection of proverbial material and writing down of the sayings. In I Kings 10 the Queen of Sheba is described as deeply impressed by his wisdom and they are said to have spent some time riddling with each other. Whilst these accounts were written up later than the events they purport to describe, they do provide an insight into the reputations that biblical characters gained within the biblical canon. Proverbs then seem to have had a wide currency and have been owned by large sections of the uneducated population. Yet wisdom was practiced at the courts of kings where scribes (e.g., Hezekiah's officials in Prov. 25:1) wrote them down and used them for specific educational purposes within a broader ethical context [20,21].

In this material God is creator of the world and sustainer of the order by which society and the natural world functions. He is the same Yahweh but his role is much more “behind the scenes” as the one to whom fear and reverence is due and who ultimately knows the answer to deeper questions that human beings seek to discover through wisdom (see Proverbs 2:6–8). This is what is meant by the “fear of the Lord” (which is “the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7)). In this context Proverbs 8 provides an encounter with a female personification of Wisdom who is described as having been created by God but as delighting in his created world as he formed it. She is the means through which God sustains this order and calls human beings to wisdom. She is depicted as standing on street corners calling to passers-by (Prov. 1:20–21) to “get wisdom” [22]. Thus, wisdom is associated with the feminine and the path to wisdom is the path to life [23]. In true proverbial style she also has her opposite—the femme fatale, the loose, strange or foreign woman who is a seductress, also calling young men, but to her bedchamber, which is perfumed with precious spices. Her path is ultimately the way to death rather than life. Interestingly she is sometimes described as foolish and so aligned with the path of the fool. She is described in 9:13–18: “The foolish woman is loud; she is ignorant and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the high places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, ‘You who are simple, turn in here!’ To those without sense she says ‘Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ But they do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.” The gullible fool would probably be the first to rush to savor her delights, but that would unwittingly lead him on the inexorable downward path.

8. Ecclesiastes on Fools

My title, “the laughter of fools”, comes not (perhaps surprisingly) from the book of Proverbs, but from another part of the wisdom literature, the book of Ecclesiastes [24,25]. This is a much later book than Proverbs coming probably from the post-exilic period when Israel was a vassal state to the Persians and then the Greeks, but fools are just as prevalent and it is solely on this character that I shall focus here.

The first proverb that airs this theme is this one: “The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness.” (2:14). The author cites the proverb but provides some wider context. He introduces the proverbs by the positive insight that wisdom excels folly “as light excels darkness”, but then he goes on to muse on the more negative point that actually both wise people and fools will ultimately meet the same fate which is death. What then is the point of being so wise, when in fact death will come to both? The author decides that “this is vanity”, his most significant catchphrase, [26] and he worries that ultimately not only will wise and fool alike die, but they will also be long forgotten. This view of death as the great relativizer of everything, then, makes him question the whole point of the wisdom

quest. The tone here is very different from Proverbs, which simply accepts a rather black and white view of the world and sees different moral options as clearly spelt out. Here the author is undermining the very point of doing wisdom at all, or of being wise—this is why he has a reputation as a sceptic. He too airs familiar themes about fools such as the point that they are generally too verbose as in Eccl 10:12–15: “The words of their mouths begin in foolishness, and their talk ends in wicked madness; yet fools talk on and on.” My title quotation comes from Eccl 7:6—“For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools” followed by the author’s comment “this also is vanity”. This is in the context of a wider point about sorrow being better than laughter. Perhaps this is the author erring towards a pessimistic view, but he is making the point that deeper feeling for the cares of life is better than a shallow mirth at all aspects of life. In this, as in all things, he is a realist, balancing the extremes of optimism and pessimism. He writes, “Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.” Then our proverb “For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools.” This is a very apt image for conveying the sound of cackling laughter. It suggests a pointless, careless mirth that lacks sense.

9. Insights for Today

Relevance to today has been implicit in much that I have already said and I have explored this already in relation to many of the key themes under discussion [27]. Whilst applying such stereotypical categories to people nowadays as these biblical authors did may seem inappropriate, each one of us can no doubt think of a few fools of our own acquaintance who may not fulfil all of these criteria, but probably do fulfil some of them. This is to re-emphasize the point that these characters are “types” in that they tend to be one-dimensional until seen in wider contexts of cumulative advice. We can perhaps think of character types in novels that we have read or films that we have seen. A good book or film is often made successful in the similar use of extreme character types that are “larger than life” and yet people can successfully relate to such a type because of our shared humanity and human experience. Just as literature can be accessed on more than one level, and one of those levels can be instruction and insight into moral issues of appropriate behavior and responses to situations, so this proverbial wisdom functions in the same way to teach by example using character types and situations that are familiar and every day.

The point about shallowness and cheap laughs actually may have some resonance in a world of individuals who are often self-concerned and frightened of addressing deeper issues. The fool is clearly a vehicle for teaching what it is to be wise and that is ultimately linked up in this literature with being God-fearing. Fools are addicted to being foolish and basically do not understand wisdom and so generally choose to ignore it or even despise it. Wise people are called to beware of associating with fools too much as their behavior might “rub off” on them: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm.” (Prov. 13:20). This antithesis between wise and fool is a reminder to ourselves of our own consciences. Perhaps all of us have occasional tendencies to act like a fool, to explode in a situation and then regret our rash anger afterwards, or to be a bit wily and seek a quick fix rather than putting in the hard work, or to dress a situation up with smooth words to be something that it is not, and the list goes on. In my view the wisdom literature is remarkably modern—it is timeless and its insights into human nature are pearls that go on having a great price. In today’s globalized world, it tunes into our common experience and gives us teaching and moral instructions for our lives.

10. Conclusions and Further Implications

Through the lens of discussion of the fool, I have tried to draw out some of the deeper themes of concern to the wise such as the importance of money, the place of work, the essential nature of communication and importance of good relationships, the place of restraint and interaction with the

natural world. These themes all resonate strongly with our modern context. The proverbial material, despite its disparate and sometimes contradictory nature, provides an ethical framework for life that is built upon the accumulated wisdom of the sages over the centuries. It is a pragmatic view of the world that invites questioning, challenge and change for each individual. Although it springs from a biblical context, it is easily applicable to a much wider context of humanity as a whole, and indeed most religious traditions contain similar types of advice. The key is experience. Cumulative experience, probably that of many generations, was distilled by the biblical sages into pithy, memorable sayings that could be easily learnt. The topics are everyday and the advice is predominantly about relationship with others, with God and with the world. The wise person can use the maxims to steer an ethical path through a baffling set of options. Reliance on one's own sense of right and wrong, which is only learnt through our own experience and through listening to the experiences of others, is what human beings do and how they operate. This advice then strikes at the core of our nature as humans faced with everyday choices and decisions.

Underlying the more everyday themes are even deeper theological themes of God as creator and orderer of the world, an order that, in the view of the sages, is reflected in human society. There is the idea of life in its fullest sense as the supreme good and goal of all human endeavors; and the importance of the quest for wisdom, knowledge, understanding and insight, all those qualities to which the wise person aspires and which have their ultimate grounding in God's Wisdom and in God himself. I have shown how the wise promoted the central idea of life as a path and so ultimately it is your choice—get onto the right track of wisdom and you will go far, get onto the path covered with thorns and you will find your way to Sheol, the land of the dead, with the laughter of fools ringing in your ears.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

1. I say "he" for the fool—and that is the language of the text—but of course one could easily translate that into "she" in today's world. So I shall use "he" with both genders understood.
2. The author of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth (Eccl. 1:1), could well be citing pre-existent proverbs in his text but since there is no known source for this material he could have made them up for his own purposes. For the idea of quotation see Robert Gordis. "Quotations in Wisdom Literature." *JQR* NS. 30 (1939–40): 123–47. reprinted in *Poets, Prophets, Sages*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971, pp. 160–97.
3. I use the NRSV translation of the Bible throughout this article.
4. See Christopher Ansberry. *Be Wise My Son and Make My Heart Glad: An Exploration of the Courtly Nature of the Book of Proverbs*. BZAW422. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011, pp. 44, 76–78.
5. See William P. Brown. "Introduction: 'The Ethics and Ethos of Biblical Wisdom'." In *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
6. The wisdom writers are those sages or "wise men" who composed the proverbs. They are also, at times, designated "the wise" (not to be confused with the "wise" character type in the proverbs themselves).
7. See William P. Brown. *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, p. 34.
8. See Christine Yoder. *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. p xxx and in her commentary on the instruction texts of Proverbs 1–9 in particular.
9. Brown (1996) in his final chapter, "The Journey of Character", makes this important point about journey and change in the formation of character.
10. The power of the spoken word in a more primitive culture than ours should be stressed. Although there were written documents few could read, and so ideas and messages were primarily verbally communicated. Proverbs lent themselves to this as they were pithy and easy to remember. Education largely took the form of using the memory and reciting rather than excessive amounts of writing. Our culture is so "text-orientated" that one tends to forget how important verbal communication was in biblical times.

11. See Brown (1996), chapter 1 “Introduction: The Ethics and Ethos of Biblical Wisdom” on different character presentations in varying genres of literature.
12. Derek Kidner. *Proverbs, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*. London: Tyndale Press, 1964. Kidner has a brief and insightful section on the fool and his characteristics.
13. See Timothy J. Sandoval. *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
14. See R. Norman Whybray. *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990 who has explored this key theme in depth.
15. See Katharine J. Dell. “The Use of Animal Imagery in the Psalms and Wisdom Literature of Ancient Israel.” *SJT* 53 (2000): 275–29. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. See Tova L. Forti. *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
17. See Sun Myung Lyu. *Righteousness in the Book of Proverbs*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012. (on the educational function of using “types” such as the fool)
18. On the theological nature of Proverbs, see Katharine J. Dell. *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006, especially chapter 4 “Mention of Yahweh in Proverbs”.
19. See discussion in Dell (2006), notably chapters 1–3 on “Social contexts in Proverbs 1–9; 10:1–22:16 and 22:17–31:31” on the different social context(s) indicated by different sections of Proverbs.
20. See Laura Quick. “Recent Research on Ancient Israelite Education.” *Currents in Biblical Research* 13 (2014): 9–33. [[CrossRef](#)] (for a recent summary of the state of play in the field)
21. See J L Crenshaw. *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence*. New York and London: Doubleday, 1998. (for a shrewd assessment of our lack of definite information on the social context of Proverbs and wisdom in general)
22. The admonition to “get wisdom” is repeated throughout Proverbs 1–9 in particular. See Katharine Dell. *Get Wisdom. Get Insight: An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000.
23. See Claudia V. Camp. *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985. (for a full analysis of the significance and scope of this female character)
24. There are three books that are assigned to the genre of wisdom, all of which share a general concern with human nature and experience. Having said that, the books are very different, and Job is, in my view, the odd one out in its discussion of the problem of innocent suffering in the context of the wisdom view of retributive justice—i.e., good things to the righteous, punishment for the wicked. The form of Job is mainly of a dialogue between the main character and three friends and the proverbial form is almost entirely lacking in the book. Ecclesiastes however is more like Proverbs in that proverbs are often “cited” and they are refuted too by the author who has his own “take” on life, but he is arguably more steeped in the wisdom tradition than the author of Job. See Katharine J. Dell. “Ecclesiastes as Mainstream Wisdom (without Job).” In *Goochem in Mokum: Papers on Biblical and Related Wisdom Read at the Fifteenth Joint Meeting of The Society of Old Testament Study and the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap, Amsterdam July 2012*. Edited by George J. Brooke and Pierre Van Hecke. *Oudtestamentische Studien (OTS)* 68. Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 43–52.
25. See also Mark Sneed, ed. *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015. (on the problems of defining wisdom)
26. The concept of “vanity” is key to Ecclesiastes and dominates the book. It is usually taken to give a negative sense to the message, but I would argue that it actually functions as a “reality check” from an author seeking to weigh positives and negatives in life.
27. See Katharine Dell. *Seeking a Life that Matters: Wisdom for Today from the Book of Proverbs*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002.

