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Wisdom's Pedagogy:
Engaging Biblical Wisdom Literature with Young People

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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This dissertation constructs a pedagogical framework for exploring biblical wisdom literature with young people in a way that cultivates wisdom, not by *imparting* wisdom in a way that tells young people what to believe, think, or do, but by inviting them to experience the thought processes characteristic of wisdom.

Biblical education has been an underexplored topic in the field of youth ministry, resulting in an abundance of youth curriculum that uses a “key text and takeaway” model to help young people apply the Bible to their life. However, this model of biblical education seeks to *impart* wisdom rather than to *cultivate* it by inviting young people to experience and practice wisdom's cognitive and affective processes. This project proposes an alternative model of biblical education that is focused less on “doing what the Bible says” and more on “doing what the Bible does,” a model that invites young people to think theologically with and alongside the biblical text.

When applied to the wisdom literature, this model examines how the rhetorical and pedagogical strategies of the wisdom literature function to cultivate wisdom in the reader, and it seeks to teach the wisdom literature in ways that are informed by its own pedagogy. Examining the commonalities in the pedagogy of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, I propose five pedagogical practices for cultivating wisdom: playfulness, attentiveness, wonder, reflection, and dialogue.

The second part of this dissertation draws on curriculum analysis, survey data, and interviews with youth ministry practitioners to analyze how wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry, identifying the issues in common approaches and lifting up alternative pedagogical strategies that can cultivate wisdom in youth. It concludes with a case study reflecting on the experience of exploring the book of Job with young people and offering an example of what this theory might look like in practice.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Project and Methodology	6
A Pedagogical Hermeneutic: Hebrew Bible Methodology.....	9
The Teaching Practices of Youth Ministers.....	16
Exploring Wisdom Literature with Youth	22
Overview of Chapters	25
Part I: Educating for Wisdom in Youth Ministry.....	25
Part II: Biblical Wisdom Literature as Case Study.....	30
Chapter One Cultivating Wisdom in Youth Ministry.....	34
Defining Wisdom	34
Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.....	34
Modern Wisdom Scholarship	42
Toward a Definition of Wisdom	46
Can Young People Be Wise?.....	55
Educating for Wisdom.....	68
Wisdom in Youth Ministry	75
Assessing Wisdom in Youth Ministry: An Embedded Approach.....	80
Conclusion	83
Chapter Two Doing What the Bible Does: Biblical Education with Youth.....	85
The Bible as a Sacred Text.....	87
Implicit Curriculum and Biblical Education.....	91
The Key Text and Takeaway Approach	93
Cultivating Wisdom in Biblical Education.....	106
From “Doing What the Bible Says” to “Doing What the Bible Does”	108
Discerning What the Text Is Doing.....	114
Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy.....	117
Historical-Critical Methods	119
Literary-Critical Methods.....	124
Conclusion	130
Chapter Three Wisdom’s Pedagogy: How the Wisdom Literature Cultivates Wisdom in the Reader.....	132
Wisdom Literature as Educational Literature.....	132
Wisdom’s Pedagogy.....	139
Proverbs	139
Ecclesiastes.....	148
Job.....	152
Wisdom’s Practices	157
Playfulness.....	157

Attentiveness.....	163
Wonder	168
Reflection	173
Dialogue	179
Conclusion	184
<i>Introduction to Chapters Four and Five</i>	<i>186</i>
<i>Chapter Four Teaching Wisdom, Part I: Overall Trends and Themes.....</i>	<i>191</i>
Challenges and Gifts: Wisdom Literature’s Characteristic Features	196
The Wisdom Literature’s Focus on Human Experience	196
Wisdom Literature as Poetry	205
Ambiguity and Tension in the Wisdom Literature	213
Content: Main Themes Taught from Wisdom Literature	224
Friendship	225
Difficult Emotions.....	229
Null Curriculum: Creation.....	236
<i>Chapter Five Teaching Wisdom, Part II: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job</i>	<i>243</i>
Proverbs.....	244
Interpretation	244
Content.....	247
Challenges	250
Pedagogy	256
Case Studies: Matt and Sara	258
Ecclesiastes	265
Interpretation	265
Content.....	268
Challenges	274
Pedagogy	277
Case Studies: Brianna and Lydia.....	280
Job	286
Interpretation	286
Content.....	293
Challenges	300
Pedagogy	304
Case Studies: Danielle and Adam.....	306
Pedagogy: Trends in How Wisdom Literature is Taught.....	312
Conclusion	317
<i>Chapter Six Theological Collage: Exploring the Book of Job with Youth.....</i>	<i>319</i>
Methodology and Curriculum Design.....	322
Exploring Job as a Polyphonic Text	324
Thinking Theologically Through Collage.....	332
Engaging Complexity Through Collage	340
Conclusion	347

<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>349</i>
<i>Bibliography.....</i>	<i>357</i>
<i>Appendix A: Survey Questions.....</i>	<i>373</i>
<i>Appendix B: Interview Questions</i>	<i>378</i>

Introduction

We live in a culture that is inundated with information, but gravely lacking in wisdom. In the era of smartphones—theoretically, at least—we have access to any knowledge we desire at our fingertips.¹ And yet we often do not have the skills to discern the true from the false, nor the insight to consider the ramifications of our own words and actions. Many of the habits engendered by social media demonstrate a lack of wisdom: circulating information without taking time to ascertain its truth, firing off instant responses without careful reflection, curating friend lists to silence dissenters and create an echo chamber. In the technological age, we have instant resources at our disposal of which our ancestors could not have dreamed, yet our relationship with knowledge has become warped and distorted. As educator Parker Palmer writes, we objectify and exploit knowledge for our own selfish ends, rather than seeing the goal of knowledge as the “reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds.”² While equal access to information is vital for a healthy democratic society, it has become increasingly clear that information alone is not enough.

In the introductory essay to the *Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*, psychologist and wisdom scholar Robert J. Sternberg begins with a plea for the practical necessity of wisdom.³ Over the course of the 20th century, he points out, the average IQ has risen by nearly 30 points,

¹ This observation is not to diminish the relationship between privilege and access to information; restriction or lack of internet access, lack of federal funding in some school districts, and disparity in knowing *how* to access reliable information, all play a role in educational inequality. Here I am gesturing broadly toward the changes that technology has brought about in the past few decades to provide information and facts more quickly than ever before.

² Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 8.

³ Over the past few decades, scholars in the fields of psychology, education, philosophy, ethics, and neurobiology have all collaborated in the field of secular wisdom studies, which will be discussed further in chapter 1. Throughout this work, I use the terms “wisdom studies” or “wisdom scholarship” to refer to this field to differentiate it from “wisdom literature,” which I use exclusively to refer to the biblical wisdom literature.

yet humankind appears no better off than before. Citing a number of ongoing global conflicts, including poverty and climate change, Sternberg concludes, “Higher IQ’s have not brought with them solutions to any of the world’s or the country’s major problems...Intelligence is insufficient for creating a better world.”⁴ Similarly to Sternberg, Palmer’s book *To Know As We Are Known* opens with a vignette about the creation of the atomic bomb, a testament both to humanity’s scientific genius, and, simultaneously, our utter foolishness. According to Palmer, such an invention is the result of a distorted relationship with knowledge rooted in the desire for control, rather than in love.⁵ It is clear that a different relationship with knowledge is needed: one that leads to wholeness and flourishing. American culture, and American churches, need wisdom.

Many youth ministers would agree. In youth ministries across the United States, young people are taught about the importance of making wise decisions, which features as a common topic in youth curricula. For example, in *Orange*, a popular interdenominational curriculum, “wise choices” is one of six desired outcomes that guide the high-level curriculum planning.⁶ Adults are often anxious about young people’s decisions, fearing that missteps can ruin their future. Because of this, lessons on making wise choices tend to focus on avoiding high-risk behaviors, like alcohol and sex. The Bible is often seen as a counter-cultural source of divine wisdom; if young people can understand and apply the counsel within, they will know right from wrong and thus be able to make wise decisions. A lesson on wisdom from the popular youth

⁴ Robert J. Sternberg, “Race to Samarra: The Critical Importance of Wisdom in the World Today,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Judith Glück (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4.

⁵ Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 7-8.

⁶ Ashley Bohinc, “How the XP3 Student Curriculum Roadmap was Formed,” *Orange Students*, April 26, 2018, <https://orangestudents.com/scope-cycle-xp3-student-curriculum-roadmap-formed/>. The other “responses” are developing an authentic faith, recognizing and honoring God’s ultimate authority, practicing sexual integrity, experiencing healthy relationships with family and friends, and serving others in their home, community, and world.

curriculum website *Ministry to Youth* exemplifies this tendency when it teaches that wisdom is “know[ing] the right thing to do (how to live God’s way)” and “actually do[ing] it.”⁷ However, this approach falls short of its goal of helping young people become wise, because it misunderstands what wisdom is and how one acquires it.

First, it equates *wise* decisions with *right* decisions.⁸ It prioritizes behavior management over the ability to engage complexity, and it values the merit of the decision itself over the thought processes that underlie wise decision-making.⁹ In reality, wisdom often entails making complex decisions when the categories right and wrong are too simplistic. Second, with the emphasis on behavior management, it limits wisdom to making personal life decisions rather than navigating complex social problems. Part of the reason that youth ministers focus on personal decision-making may be because of young people’s limited ability to participate in civic issues; teaching on wisdom tends to focus on choices that are considered to be within a young

⁷ Nick Diliberto, “Youth Group Lesson on Wisdom,” *Ministry to Youth*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://ministrytoyouth.com/youth-group-lesson-on-wisdom/>.

⁸ In contrast, Sternberg writes that “Wisdom is not about ‘right’ answers, but about reflective responses that balance considerations in search of a common good.” Robert J. Sternberg, “Why Schools Should Teach for Wisdom: The Balance Theory of Wisdom in Educational Settings,” *Educational Psychologist* 36, no. 4 (2001), https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3604_2, 235.

⁹ In *Sticky Faith*, Kara Powell and Chap Clark borrow Dallas Willard’s concept of “the gospel of sin management” to describe the way that many young people have been taught to understand the Christian faith. Noting that Christian education often entails “a list of what to do and what not to do,” Powell and Clark argue that such an approach is not sustainable for a life of faith. See Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 33-34. However, they do emphasize the importance of “choices and actions” that reflect an inner faith commitment: “These behaviors include regular attendance in a church or campus group, prayer and Bible reading, service to others, and lower participation in risky behaviors, especially engaging in sex and drinking alcohol” (p. 22). The opening anecdote focuses on such “risky behavior” as evidence of dwindling faith, telling the story of a Jesus-loving young woman’s descent into “dark, heavy makeup,” short skirts, poor grades, sporadic church attendance, and finally, having a baby out of wedlock, which left her “confused and ashamed, [wanting] nothing to do with our church.” The anecdote ends with the question, “Why did Tiffany’s faith—a faith that seemed so vibrant at first—fail to stick?” (p. 15). This anecdote focuses on surface-level risk behaviors rather than examining the factors in Tiffany’s life that might have caused these changes, exploring her reasoning in deciding to keep the baby, or considering whether her choice to stop attending church might have had more to do with the church’s judgmentalism than her own shame. As an opening anecdote, it is designed to attract the attention of parents who desire a different outcome for their children, which demonstrates Christian parents’ perceived concern with behavior management.

person's realm of agency. However, reducing wisdom to personal life choices limits the possibilities for engaging young people in wise deliberation about important ideas, concepts, and larger social issues.

Finally, wisdom is not static content that can be *imparted*; it is a way of engaging knowledge that must be *cultivated*. To speak of wisdom as something that is cultivated assumes that young people have resources within themselves that can thrive if their environment nurtures growth. To impart wisdom, however, implies that young people have no wisdom until it is given to them by someone else. Educational theorist and critical pedagogue Paulo Freire famously coined the term “banking education” to refer to the educational approach in which the teacher deposits information into the minds of students.¹⁰ This approach, Freire wrote, treats content as “magical,” thinking that it can somehow transform the learner by its own merit, without the learner's cognitive engagement.¹¹ Young people do not acquire wisdom through being given information, advice, or biblical injunctions. They can only acquire wisdom through their own processes of wondering, reflecting, questioning, and meaning-making. If youth ministers desire to cultivate wisdom in youth, their task is to create a space where those processes are invited and guided.

One of the most significant claims and underlying assumptions of this project is that young people are not passive consumers of church teaching or youth ministry programming. Instead, they are actors and agents in their own right, endowed with their own gifts and vocations and coming to youth group with valuable knowledge and experience to contribute. Young people

¹⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 72.

¹¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (1994; repr., New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 102.

are not incomplete adults; they are persons capable of deep insight and meaningful action in the world.¹² The role of the youth minister is to nurture the gifts of youth, facilitate opportunities for them to utilize those gifts, and empower them to participate in God's work in the world. Thus, a model for cultivating wisdom in youth cannot be based on educational approaches that tell young people what to think or what to do. Instead, the task of cultivating wisdom should draw out and amplify the resources of spiritual insight, intellectual pursuit, compassion, and calling that young people *already have*.¹³

At its core, this is what this project aims to do: to develop a framework for biblical education that cultivates and evokes the wisdom of youth. Such a goal necessitates reimagining the task of biblical education in youth ministry in three ways. First, it requires re-visioning young people not as passive consumers of what youth ministers teach, but as active participants in the tasks of biblical interpretation, theological reflection, and vocational action. Second, it requires re-visioning the Bible not just as a repository of content but as a text that requires interpretation, invites exploration, and helps young people to interpret God's work in the world.¹⁴ Third, it

¹² See Michael Warren, "The Imaginations of Youth," in *Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian Resistance in a Consumer Culture*, by Brian J. Mahan, Michael Warren, and David F. White (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 51; Elizabeth W. Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education: Overcoming Silence, Transforming Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 9-12; Wesley W. Ellis, "Human Beings and Human Becomings: Departing from the Developmental Model of Youth Ministry," *JYT* 14, no. 2 (2015): 119-137, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-01402001>.

¹³ This does not mean that the youth minister never has insight to share with young people, only that they are not the only ones with knowledge to share; learning is a process of mutual discovery. What I am arguing for is an approach that centers the experience and insight of young people, helping them find words for their experience and locate it within the Christian tradition as they reflect theologically together. Others who share this approach include Mark Yaconelli, whose contemplative method of noticing, naming, and nurturing I find compelling. See Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), chs. 11-13; and Dori Baker, whose Girlfriend Theology method recognizes and reflects upon theological themes in the stories of young women. She writes that people are "inherently theological"; her pedagogical encounters are shaped by the belief that girls are already doing theology in their everyday lives, and her role as a facilitator is to help bring those theological reflections to the surface. See Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 13.

¹⁴ See Andrew Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry, A Theological Journey Through Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 40.

requires re-visioning the educational task not as *imparting* content *to* young people, but rather *engaging* content *with* young people.¹⁵

In this introduction, I will identify the foundational questions this project seeks to address, as well as the methodological commitments that undergird my work. As this is an interdisciplinary project at the intersection of youth ministry, religious education, and Hebrew Bible, I will describe the methodological considerations and concerns inherent to such a project, as well as reflect on the methodological value of the qualitative research I conducted. Along the way, I will review some of the relevant literature in youth ministry and religious education, situating myself in the field and identifying the ways in which this project contributes to the study of youth ministry. Finally, I will describe the structure of this dissertation, outlining the major themes of each chapter.

Project and Methodology

The seeds for this project were planted during my second semester of seminary. An illuminating lecture by C.L. Seow on the book of Ecclesiastes, including his own experience with Ecclesiastes as a young person, helped me see the rich educational possibilities in a book I had previously considered fatalistic and depressing. At the same time, I was frustrated by approaches to youth ministry that I felt privileged the experience of white middle-class teenagers. The way that young people's "raging hormones" and "teen angst" was often joked

¹⁵ Freire writes that the liberative educator "does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students." Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80. That is, the role of the teacher is not to do the work of interpreting for students, but to invite the whole group to participate together in the construction of knowledge. My use of the word "engaging" is also influenced by Parker Palmer, who argues that the educational task is not about harnessing or mastering knowledge, but rather by attending to the voice of the subject itself and entering into relationship with it. While this idea permeates Palmer's work, for an example, see Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 31.

about betrayed certain privileged assumptions about the problems (or lack thereof) facing young people. What I had been taught of adolescent development fell flat in my youth ministry context, where most of my students were people of color, and many came from underprivileged backgrounds. My students' anxieties centered not on identity crises or relationship drama, as I had been taught to expect, but on issues of injustice and violence: police brutality and the fear of deportation. Within this context, Qohelet's stark depictions of life under the sun were infused with new relevance.

I developed a four-week series on Ecclesiastes for my youth group, which was met with deep interest and engagement, sparking important conversations on the complex lived realities of my students. I remember the lively debate over whether life really *has* stayed the same since the time of Qohelet, or whether things have changed. Ultimately, the group decided, human technology has improved, but we still use it for the same purposes: killing each other. I remember the moment when Alex,¹⁶ a high school senior, blurted out after a passage was read, "This guy is a total pessimist!" I laughed and asked him whether he agreed with Qohelet's musings. He thought about it for a moment before exclaiming, "I mean, yeah! He's right about literally everything!" I remember too the way that my students stayed one step ahead of me the whole way, anticipating the natural progression of themes in Ecclesiastes: "You know, all these status symbols we chase after, they're really all pointless in the end." "If everything is meaningless, it seems like the best thing we can do is just live in the moment and enjoy the little things."

From that point on, I was captivated by the idea of teaching the wisdom literature to young people, as it was a genre I suspected received little attention in youth ministry. However,

¹⁶ All participants in this study have been assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information has been removed, to preserve confidentiality.

as I spent more time studying the wisdom literature as well as educational theory, I came to realize that merely teaching young people the content of these books would undermine the books' capacity to cultivate wisdom in, and evoke wisdom from, youth. Wisdom, I realized, cannot be attained through passive reception of information; it requires young people to do the difficult work of thinking and discerning for themselves. A different pedagogical approach was needed: one that would invite young people to explore the generative themes in these texts and in their lives, that would allow them to wrestle with the text, and that would create invitations for young people to practice the thought processes that are constitutive of wisdom.¹⁷ Thus, this project was born: an exploration of how to cultivate wisdom through biblical education in youth ministry, and how such an approach might influence the way wisdom literature is taught.

As such, this project is interdisciplinary in nature. It seeks to attend carefully to the wisdom texts and their own rhetorical and pedagogical aims; to theories of religious education, pedagogy, and wisdom; to the teaching practices of youth ministry practitioners; and to the voices and wisdom of young people themselves. These voices are all in conversation with one another, illuminating and challenging each other, with no one perspective serving as the definitive word on the subject. Over the course of the project, my theory has been shaped, critiqued, and enlarged by the various disciplines with which I engage, as well as by my

¹⁷ The term "generative themes," as used by Paulo Freire, refers to "ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede the people's full humanization." See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 101. For example, Freire identifies domination (and liberation as its opposite) as key generative themes (p. 103). Generative themes appear "in concentric circles, moving from the general to the particular" (p. 103); that is, while domination might be the most universal theme, the smaller circles might contain a specific iteration of domination (for example, in the United States, the theme of racism); and the yet smaller circles might contain specific instances of that iteration. Freire's pedagogy focused on recognizing instances of, and unpacking, the generative themes relevant to the lives of his students as they identified those themes in photos and other media. In terms of biblical education, themes appear in the text which resonate with the lived experience of students; for example, Qohelet's theme of life's meaninglessness discussed above. They are "generative" in that they provide an opportunity to explore the theme and the ways in which it is experienced in students' lives, rather than merely telling students how to understand a text.

qualitative research. My reading of the biblical text is influenced by my pedagogical commitments and modern conceptions of wisdom; my understanding of a wisdom-cultivating pedagogy is shaped by my study of the text; and my work with both youth ministers and youth have, at multiple points, forced me to look again at both the text and my pedagogy with fresh eyes. The result is a project that has been steeped over the course of several years in a mixture of mutually informative disciplines.

A Pedagogical Hermeneutic: Hebrew Bible Methodology

As an interdisciplinary project concerned with both the biblical text and the pedagogical task, this project requires a methodology that adequately attends to both. My methodological considerations have been influenced by two other scholars who have pursued projects at the intersection of text and pedagogy. The first is Amanda Jo Pittman, whose dissertation *Knowing the Way: Scriptural Imagination and the Acts of the Apostles* develops a framework for pedagogically constructed encounters with the Bible that respect the nature of the reader on the one hand, and the integrity of the text on the other. By the “integrity of the text,” she means “pedagogical approaches that engage the biblical text in its literary, historical, and contextual particularity and complexity.”¹⁸ Pittman rightly identifies the need to engage the text with concern for its own voice and not merely for its utility to the reader. As I will discuss further in chapter two, it is common for biblical education to derive principles from the text to apply to modern life; particularly in youth ministry, the teacher’s pedagogical concern for relevance and application tends to overshadow the complexity of the text itself. A methodology is needed that, while retaining its pedagogical concerns, does not impose those concerns upon the text in a way that obscures its “particularity and complexity.”

¹⁸ Amanda Jo Pittman, “Knowing the Way: Scriptural Imagination and the Acts of the Apostles” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2016), 69, <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/12922>.

Seeking a pedagogical approach that respects both reader and text, Pittman suggests the formation of Scriptural imagination as a pedagogical goal adequate to the task. Imagination, she argues, is central to the reader's way of knowing and engaging the text, and the formation of Scriptural imagination as a goal coheres with the expressed authorial intent of the book of Acts. Pittman describes her interpretive methodology as a "historically disciplined literary analysis" which "does not adopt any rigid literary-critical framework, but instead uses the tools and approaches of literary criticism on [an] ad-hoc basis."¹⁹ Literary approaches are often attractive to practical theologians and religious educators who seek to work with the biblical text in depth, because they allow for "intuition and play"²⁰ while also attending closely to the literary features of the text. My own approach is similar; while my task is normative as well as descriptive, I seek to attend carefully to what the text is trying to accomplish rhetorically in hopes of finding a pedagogical approach suitable to the text.

The second scholar working at the intersections of text and pedagogy is Charles F. Melchert, whose work in *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* is very similar to this current project in that he explores the wisdom literature for its insights about teaching and learning. He notes with surprise that scholars have rarely thought to ask pedagogical questions of this literature, which Walter Brueggemann identifies as "the most self-consciously educational" literature in the canon.²¹ For each book he explores—Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon—Melchert asks four questions: What is worth

¹⁹ Pittman, "Knowing the Way," 78, fn 28.

²⁰ Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 101.

²¹ Charles F. Melchert, *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1998), 11; Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 99.

learning (curricular content)? How is it to be learned (methodology and pedagogy)? Why learn and teach (educational aims)? What counts as education (the nature of the educational task)?²²

Melchert rightly identifies the methodological concern of the gap in time and culture between the biblical text and the present day, and between authorial intent and the reader's agenda. Similarly to Pittman, Melchert asks, "How can a dialogue between pedagogy and biblical texts proceed so that each has a fair opportunity to say what is most important to it while being heard by the other? We need to provide critical rigor in our study, yet remain hospitable to our educational interests by identifying questions we bring as educators to these texts."²³ What Melchert seeks in the text is implicit; although in some cases the texts identify their educational goals (for example, Prov. 1:1-7 and Eccl. 12:9-10), the texts "never directly reflect upon their own pedagogy."²⁴ Thus, the task of the scholar reading for pedagogical insight is to discover how the text shapes the reader in ways that may reflect, but may also go beyond, authorial intent. These concerns lead Melchert to identify his methodology as reader-response criticism, an approach that focuses on the interaction between the text and reader, leaving behind the historical author who "is now resident only in the text."²⁵

While I agree with Melchert's identification of the methodological concerns, I question his self-identified method of reader-response criticism. Phyllis Tribble describes reader-response criticism as a methodology that "dethrones the literary work"²⁶ to center the reader, which Melchert does not do. He closely analyzes the rhetorical strategies of the text, rather than engaging in creative situated readings. While biblical scholars would likely disagree over

²² Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 13-14.

²³ Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 11-12.

²⁴ Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 13.

²⁵ Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 12-13.

²⁶ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 66.

whether his work could properly be termed rhetorical criticism, it is instructive to consider the ways in which his work shares affinities with the discipline. Rhetorical criticism is a method of inquiry that addresses the concern of attending to both the text and the reader's interaction with the text. Specifically, rhetorical criticism examines how the text is designed to shape the reader. Tribble writes of rhetorical criticism that it "works at the boundary of text and reader, with emphasis on the former."²⁷ As such, it also does not limit meaning to authorial intent.²⁸ Rhetorical criticism applied to educational texts like the wisdom literature results in uncovering not just the *persuasive strategies*, but more specifically, the *pedagogy* of the text, which is what Melchert does.²⁹

Most of the scholars of wisdom literature whose work I engage situate themselves in the field of rhetorical criticism. Through close literary analyses of the text, they explore the ways in which the text functions pedagogically to shape the reader. Although my reading of these texts is informed by the methods of rhetorical criticism and the insights of rhetorical-critical scholars, I do not claim it as my own methodology, primarily because the scope of this project does not allow for the kind of sustained close reading rhetorical criticism requires. Instead, I have chosen to focus my observations on a few overarching rhetorical strategies of each book and how they function pedagogically. But if not reader-response criticism and not rhetorical criticism, what

²⁷ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 99.

²⁸ As Tribble writes, "Whereas Muilenburg stressed authorial intention as the goal of the process, that concern recedes (though it does not disappear) in favor of a text-centered focus. Text designates the received tradition. The flesh-and-blood reader holds responsibility for articulating the meaning, an activity that happens in the presence of other readers (friends, foes, and foils) and other texts. Choices made by the reader shape and receive meanings, but they do not harness the text. Other meanings lie in wait." Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 99.

²⁹ For examples of rhetorical-critical Hebrew Bible scholars who discuss the pedagogy of wisdom texts, see Anne W. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs: Wisdom Literature and the Shaping of the Moral Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002); and William P. Brown, "From Rebuke to Testimony to Proverb: Wisdom's Many Pedagogies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature*, ed. Katharine J. Dell, Suzanna R. Millar, and Arthur Jan Keefer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022): 433-454.

shall we call a methodology that explores a text's rhetorical strategies with an eye toward pedagogical concerns?

In her endorsement of Melchert's work, Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore refers to his methodology as a "pedagogical hermeneutic."³⁰ Although Moore does not define this phrase explicitly, using it only to describe Melchert's work, I find her language to be a concise and illuminating way to describe a methodology that attends to the literary features and rhetorical goals of the text, while also bringing to the text questions of 1) how its rhetoric functions pedagogically and 2) pedagogical approaches that are appropriate to the text. A pedagogical hermeneutic meets the goal of attending to both the text and the reader, the interpretive task and the educational task. Thus, I borrow Moore's language to describe my own methodology as a pedagogical hermeneutic, informed by rhetorical criticism. In more colloquial terminology that will be further explored in chapter two, I utilize this approach to explore not just what the text is saying, but what it is *doing*: how its form as well as its content proves instructive for the pedagogical task.

I have found Pittman and Melchert to be helpful conversation partners in an interdisciplinary project requiring methodological care. Few scholars work at the intersection of text and pedagogy, giving equal weight to both, and reflecting explicitly on their methods and commitments. Pittman and Melchert have helped me reflect on the possibilities and challenges inherent to such interdisciplinary work, and they have given me language and frameworks for such a task. While both of their projects are similar to mine in different ways, there are also important ways in which this current project expands upon them. Pittman's work resonates with my own in that she proposes a pedagogical goal for biblical education that coheres with the text's

³⁰ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, back cover endorsement of Melchert, *Wise Teaching*.

own goals. In Pittman's case, this pedagogical goal is the formation of Scriptural imagination; in my work, it is the cultivation of wisdom. Pittman's definition of imagination and my definition of wisdom are similar in that they both emphasize multiple ways of knowing.³¹ However, as I will explain more thoroughly in chapter one, wisdom includes a practical component (making thoughtful decisions) and an ethical component (concerned with wholeness and flourishing). Imagination is closely tied to playfulness and wonder, two of the practices I suggest for cultivating wisdom in chapter three. Thus, I conceive of imagination as an aspect of wisdom that enables a person to see the world in light of, and make decisions based on, the goal of flourishing.

Melchert's project shares affinities with mine in that we both explore the pedagogy of the wisdom literature, drawing out insights that might influence the pedagogy of modern religious educators. His work has helped me identify some of the overarching themes in the pedagogy of the wisdom literature, as well as provided thoughtful reflections on bridging the gap between the rhetoric of the text and the task of religious education. However, this current project goes beyond both Pittman's and Melchert's in a few ways. First, my work focuses primarily on the context of youth ministry, reflecting on how the pedagogical insights and practices derived from wisdom literature cohere with, or challenge, common beliefs and practices in youth ministry. As I will explore further in chapter two, the task of biblical education is a significant gap in youth ministry scholarship. The field of youth ministry needs new ways of conceptualizing biblical education, and to that end, my work moves beyond Pittman's and Melchert's to apply insights from biblical studies and religious education to youth ministry specifically. Second, while Pittman's and

³¹ Pittman defines imagination as "the integrative, constructive capacity that works at the intersection of ways of knowing located in both bodily and cognitive, conscious and non-conscious, and personal and social forms of human experience." Pittman, "Knowing the Way," 43.

Melchert's proposals are largely theoretical, my project includes insights derived from qualitative research with youth ministry practitioners as well as young people. As I will discuss further in the following pages, this research has been important for understanding popular reception of the texts, current teaching practices, and a variety of pedagogical possibilities for engaging the wisdom literature.

In this project, I focus on the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. The bounds of the wisdom corpus are widely debated, with some scholars questioning whether wisdom literature should even be considered a distinct genre.³² Some would include some or all of the Psalms and/or the Song of Songs, while others might prefer to speak of a wisdom influence in these books. Katharine Dell considers Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to be the “core” of the wisdom tradition, identifying Job as something like a “cousin” of the wisdom tradition that is actually more closely related to psalms of lament.³³ One must also decide whether or not to include the deuterocanonical books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon. I chose to limit my inquiry to the three books named above for a few pragmatic reasons. First, in youth ministries, discussion of the wisdom literature centers around Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. When curricula offer, or youth ministers teach, series on “the wisdom literature,” these three are the most commonly represented. According to my survey responses, very few Protestant youth ministers have taught on the deuterocanonical wisdom texts, so there would be very little data to analyze in terms of how it is taught. Second, it seemed fruitful to explore more than one book to gain a broader

³² See Will Kynes, *An Obituary for Wisdom Literature: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Mark R. Sneed, “‘Grasping After the Wind’: The Elusive Attempt to Define and Delimit Wisdom,” in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, ed. Mark R. Sneed (Atlanta: SBL, 2019).

³³ Katharine Dell, “Deciding the Boundaries of Wisdom: Applying the Concept of Family Resemblance,” in Sneed, 156. For her more sustained argument on the genre of the book of Job, see Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991).

understanding of the pedagogical strategies of wisdom literature, but to expand the analysis to include more than three would make it difficult to explore them in any depth. The Psalms are a lengthy and generically diverse collection of prayers, which would introduce several more categories of analysis;³⁴ to include the Song would necessitate analyzing the way youth ministers teach about sexuality. This would be a worthy study, but one which goes beyond the scope of this project. Despite the contested nature of the genre, then, when I refer to the “wisdom literature” or the “wisdom corpus” throughout this project, I use it as shorthand to refer to the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

The Teaching Practices of Youth Ministers

This project also employs qualitative research of biblical education in youth ministry through curriculum analysis, surveys, and interviews. Analyzing published curriculum resources provides a helpful window onto common interpretations of texts and pedagogical approaches, but it does not tell the full story of how the curriculum is used. Survey responses indicated that most youth ministers who use curriculum edit and customize it as they use it, and many write their own lessons from scratch after consulting a variety of resources. Thus, a curriculum analysis alone cannot adequately portray the way a text is actually taught in youth ministries. To achieve a fuller sense of how the wisdom literature is engaged in youth ministry, I conducted thirteen 60-90 minute interviews with youth ministers who had taught on one or more of the wisdom books. The survey results and curriculum analysis were helpful in establishing common themes, helping me develop early hypotheses to guide my interview questions and analysis.

³⁴ Unlike Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, the Psalms are comprised of speech directed toward God. This is not to say that prayers cannot be educational; indeed, Maria Harris reminds us that the religious education curriculum includes the ministry of leiturgia, or prayer and worship. See Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), ch. 5. However, the liturgical nature of the Psalms forms the reader differently than does the wisdom literature.

Ultimately, however, the most reliable insight into what actually happens in youth ministry classrooms came from the interviews.

One of the methodological claims of this project is that the teaching practices of youth ministers are a valuable source of knowledge. As the ones who facilitate encounters with the Bible and serve as mediators between biblical scholarship and young people, they provide valuable insight into popular receptions of the text, the ways in which young people interact with the text and with their pedagogy, and creative new ways of understanding and teaching the Bible. The most common qualitative research in the field of youth ministry is conducted with young people themselves, either interviewing youth to learn more about their faith, or implementing new pedagogies with focus groups.³⁵ However, when youth ministry scholars employ qualitative research with youth ministry practitioners rather than youth, that research tends to fall into one of three categories. First, some research projects work with churches or institutions to implement innovative programs, providing insight into new ways of doing youth ministry.³⁶ While these projects highlight the creative ways practitioners implement those programs, they are garnering

³⁵ For examples of research that seeks to understand the faith lives of young people, see the research that came out of the National Study on Youth and Religion, including Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), as well as Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chapter 1, and Nathan T. Stucky, *Wrestling with Rest: Inviting Youth to Discover the Gift of Sabbath* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), chapter 3, to name a few. For examples of research that implements new pedagogies with focus groups, see Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology*; Frank Rogers, Jr., *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories*, Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011); and Bob Yoder, *Helping Youth Grieve: The Good News of Biblical Lament* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2015).

³⁶ For examples, see Mark Yaconelli, *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), which came out of the Lilly-funded Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project; Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson, ed., *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), which reflects on the Lilly-funded high school theology programs in seminaries; and Flagler College's ongoing *Missing Voices Project*, another Lilly-funded program that works with a cohort of churches to reimagine youth ministry in light of the voices absent from their congregations (<https://missingvoices.flagler.edu>, accessed August 4, 2022).

insight from an intervention rather than from everyday practices of congregations and youth ministry professionals. Second, some youth ministry research explores what youth ministers are doing and teaching for the purpose of improving practice, often identifying deficits in youth ministry practice and filling the gap with more robust theory, theology, and practice.³⁷ Third, some research projects study the practices of youth ministry professionals so that other churches and ministry leaders can see the breadth of approaches that exist, situate themselves within the broader landscape of youth ministry work, and learn from what other youth ministries are doing.³⁸

I situate my own research with youth ministry practitioners between the second and third categories. When I began this project, I anticipated that it would primarily identify gaps in current practices of teaching wisdom literature. I did find some common themes in the curricula, surveys, and interviews that confirmed some of my hypotheses; generally speaking, the way wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry does not take full advantage of its potential for cultivating wisdom. Thus, my project does propose a new framework for teaching wisdom literature that amends this gap. However, I also found that youth ministers were teaching wisdom

³⁷ For example, in *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, Almeda Wright analyzed curriculum and sermons used in Black churches to identify the ways in which religious leaders and educators contributed to young people's fragmented spirituality, using her observations as a basis for constructing a better approach that fosters an integrating spirituality. More recently, Montague Williams employed ethnographic research with three congregations to understand their approaches to race, racism, and racial reconciliation. Finding that congregational leaders in these churches tended to underestimate or ignore racial concerns, Williams proposes healthier alternatives for ministries that recognize and attend to the realities of race in the lives of youth. See Montague R. Williams, *Church in Color: Youth Ministry, Race, and the Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020).

³⁸ For example, see Richard R. Osmer and Katherine M. Douglass, *Cultivating Teen Faith: Insights from the Confirmation Project* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), which studied thousands of confirmation programs across multiple denominations, synthesizing insights and themes from the project and lifting up models of excellent confirmation programs; and the Fuller Youth Institute's ongoing *Character and Virtue Development in Youth Ministry* project, which identifies the virtues youth ministers desire to cultivate in their youth and examines how they describe and work toward character-forming discipleship. See "Fuller Youth Institute Receives Grant to Research Character and Virtue in Young People," August 6, 2018, <https://www.fuller.edu/posts/fuller-youth-institute-receives-grant-to-research-character-and-virtue-in-young-people/>, accessed August 4, 2022; and Tyler Greenway, "The Future of Discipleship," July 9, 2019, <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/future-of-discipleship>, accessed August 4, 2022.

literature in more creative and innovative ways than I had imagined, and that the collective sum of their insights was greater than the parts. Seeing the big picture of the data helped me realize that this project could do more than identify gaps; it could give language to, and offer theoretical grounding for, what many youth ministers are already doing, as well as provide an opportunity for practitioners to learn from one another's best practices.

As a practical theologian, I understand the work of practical theology to include analyzing religious practices and how theology is lived out on the ground, seeing it as a source of insight for fields of theological inquiry. I want to avoid approaches that merely distill academic ideas and declare them normative for practitioners. And yet, the teaching practices of youth ministers are not impervious to critique merely because they represent the lived experience of religious practice. I understand the practical theological task as a dynamic conversation between theory and practice, between the academy and the church, as each area of knowledge illuminates, nuances, and challenges the other.³⁹ I believe that my theoretical conversation partners, as well as my own constructive work, can offer youth ministers a helpful and critical framework for biblical education. Yet over the course of this project, through my interviews with youth ministers engaged in the daily work of biblical education, my working theories and categories of analysis were challenged and expanded.

³⁹ Thomas H. Groome proposes three basic movements that underlie his model of shared Christian praxis: critical analysis of praxis, critical analysis of theology (or "the story and vision...of the Christian faith community"), and placing the two sources in a "dialectical hermeneutic with each other so that people may come to a lived response within history that is transforming for self, for church, and for society toward the coming of God's reign." Thomas H. Groome, "Theology on Our Feet: A Revisionist Pedagogy for Healing the Gap Between Academia and Ecclesia," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Polling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69. As I hope for youth ministers to invite young people to place their lived experiences in a dialectical hermeneutic with various Christian texts, theologies, and traditions, I attempt to use the same dialectical hermeneutic when placing youth ministers' biblical interpretations and teaching practices in conversation with biblical and pedagogical scholarship.

For example, my understanding of diverse perspectives within the wisdom literature had been influenced by the language of the scholars I had been reading, particularly Peter Hatton's *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, and I designed my interview questions with that language.⁴⁰ When I asked interviewees whether they feel that the wisdom literature ever contradicts itself, while they all acknowledged that it at least *seems* to, almost all of them chose different words to describe it. For some, terms like “tension” or “different perspectives” allow them to recognize complexity in the text without questioning Scripture's inerrancy.⁴¹ Other youth ministers, who do not consider the Bible inerrant, preferred to speak of more than one thing being true at once. For them, contradiction is too stark a term, influenced by Western ways of knowing and thus anachronistic to the biblical text.⁴² As a result of these conversations, I have chosen to use other terms, such as tension, to describe ideas and perspectives in the wisdom literature that seem to be at odds with one another.

In another example of mutually illuminating conversation, I was initially quite critical of youth group games that I felt bore no relevance to the pedagogical encounter, writing them off as an outdated vestige of 1990's youth ministry. My conversation with Adam,⁴³ a Latino youth

⁴⁰ Peter T.H. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

⁴¹ For example, when I asked Matt, a white seminary student and Southern Baptist youth pastor, “Do you feel like the wisdom literature ever contradicts itself?”, he answered, “Well, I believe the Bible is inerrant, so no, but I could understand sometimes the wording is confusing, so it may seem that way on the surface.” He went on to explain that seemingly contradictory proverbs are “different vantage points of biblical wisdom; it's giving us a fuller picture.” For more examples of how youth pastors explained contradiction or tension, see chapter 4.

⁴² Jonathan, a white Episcopal priest and spiritual director who runs a summer theology program for youth, paused when I asked whether the wisdom literature ever contradicts itself, then responded, “My first response is ‘absolutely’...But I would challenge the ground of the question in a way....Contradiction means, ‘Either this is true or this other thing is true, and only one can be true.’ So I think the Western mind would say ‘These contradict each other,’ [but] I think a contemplative spirituality or even an Old Testament imagination would say, ‘These are important voices in a conversation that was going on, and that's still going on now. [So] I wouldn't say they're contradictory, I would say they're different perspectives and a conversation we're having with God and each other.’” Similarly, Michael, a white 25-year youth ministry veteran in the United Methodist Church, explained that “I look at wisdom literature...as sort of a precursor to that rabbinic model where different rabbis have different takes on things. Those folks weren't asking, ‘Was he right, or is he right?’ They were saying, ‘Oh, they're both right!’, and I think that's not a Western mindset.”

⁴³ Adam's treatment of the book of Job will be explored in depth in chapter 5.

minister at a Free Methodist church, helped me to understand that the games and activities are, at least for him, not a default method of youth ministry but a very intentional choice, designed to provide relief from the heaviness of the theological topics he addresses in the teaching time. This forced me to reconsider the role of lighthearted games, and I began to wonder about whether there is space for playfulness not only in contrast to, but even in the midst of, heavy or difficult topics. Other youth ministers equated playfulness with imagination, creativity, and openness, providing me with new theoretical lenses to understand playfulness, particularly as it relates to the “heavier” or more serious themes in Job and Ecclesiastes. Ultimately, as I argue in chapter three, I still believe that classic “icebreaker” games tend to reinforce a divide between learning and playfulness. However, my conversation with Adam refined my understanding in two ways: first, it helped me see the legitimate and intentional reasons for wanting to provide a mental and emotional break for students. Second, it led me to look for new themes in my interviews, which paid rich dividends in my conception of playfulness as a practice.

My conversation with Adam illustrates another benefit of studying the teaching practices of youth ministers. Youth ministers across all denominations, ages, races, genders, orientations, and levels of theological education have very different ways of approaching the text, of interacting with students, and of crafting pedagogical encounters. Their ministries could all benefit by learning from the vast diversity of approaches to the sacred text we all hold in common. Aside from this kind of qualitative research and synthetic analysis, however, the thirteen youth ministers I interviewed, as well as those who may read this work, have limited opportunities to interact with and learn from one another. When youth ministers gather for conferences or other professional development opportunities, it is often fruitful and generative, but the groups who gather are typically more homogeneous than the group of interviewees whose

insights shape this work. By putting their interpretations of these texts and pedagogical approaches in conversation with one another, I hope to broaden and enrich practices of biblical education across lines of difference.

Exploring Wisdom Literature with Youth

Building on the key conviction named above, that young people are to be taken seriously as agents in the pedagogical encounter, another important methodological claim of this project is that the wisdom of young people themselves should be highlighted. Much is written *about* youth, *for* youth, and *to* youth, without listening closely to young people themselves and valuing their contributions as co-normative for theology and biblical interpretation.⁴⁴ I argue for a pedagogy that cultivates and evokes the wisdom of youth, which is a goal I do not want to lose in the academic discussion that follows. It is possible, of course, to use a wisdom-cultivating pedagogy as a method to achieve one's own educational agenda for one's students, while failing to respect their own agency and failing to allow oneself and one's theology to be challenged and transformed by the wisdom of youth.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ A common approach to youth ministry research is to apply a theological concept to the practice of youth ministry. Consider, for example, Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), in which Dean provides theological grounding for the passion that characterizes adolescence; Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), which applies incarnational theology to youth ministry as a response to traditional "relational youth ministry"; Andrew Zirschky, *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), which addresses the problem of networked individualism with a theology of *koinonia*; and Stucky, *Wrestling with Rest*, which explores the theology of Sabbath to address the problem of young people's chronic busyness. Although these projects do employ qualitative research with youth, it is used more to define the problem than to solve it; the solution comes from the field of systematic theology. Youth ministry scholarship that is particularly notable for its commitment to young people's own theological constructions includes Baker's *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, which utilizes the theological reflection of young women to construct alternative God-images and metaphors, and Wright's *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, in which Wright explores the spoken word poetry of youth as an expression of young people's own theodicies. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, chapter 4.

⁴⁵ Freire reminds his readers that no pedagogical method is inherently liberative unless it is accompanied by the educator's commitment to liberation. Reflecting later on his earlier work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire further clarified the purpose of dialogue, as some educators had wrongly understood the dialogical method as the takeaway of his work, distorting it into what Donaldo Macedo called "a new form of methodological rigidity laced with benevolent oppression." Freire wrote, "In order to begin to understand the meaning of a dialogical practice, we

As this project puts forth a pedagogical proposal for engaging the Bible with youth, it is important to me that young people's own voices and interpretations are part of the process. Over the years, the conversations that have arisen as my students and I have explored the wisdom literature have continued to shape my thinking. I ponder often quips and questions from students in my youth groups that have become part of me and part of this work. While my past experiences exploring wisdom literature with youth are an implicit guiding force throughout this project, in chapter six, I explicitly focus on the voices of young people in the final part of my qualitative research. In the final chapter, I highlight the voices of youth in hopes of accomplishing two goals. First, I hope that the questions, comments, and insights of young people can help readers of this project discover new ways of reading and understanding the book of Job, as well as other complex theological issues that were discussed. Opportunities to learn from young people are often foreclosed by educational approaches that assume the teacher is the source of information, which greatly impoverishes the classroom experience for everyone. Despite my years of study on the book of Job, the YTI scholars shared perspectives on the book that I had not considered. I hope that the reader of this project, too, will come away from this chapter with new wisdom and insight from the young people themselves.

Second, I hope to demonstrate the kind of robust dialogue and mutual learning that can occur when youth ministers explore the wisdom literature with youth in ways that invite them to

have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique... Dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task." See Paulo Freire and Donaldo P. Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (fall 1995): 377-403, here 379 and 377, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.65.3.12g1923330p1xhj8>. Similarly, Parker Palmer writes, "There are plenty of pedagogical experiments around these days... but most of them deal only with techniques. They leave the underlying epistemology unexamined and unchanged.... One does not develop a new pedagogy simply by choosing from a grab bag of teaching tricks. To find new ways of transmitting knowledge, we must first find a new knowledge." Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 30. These reflections are a helpful reminder that one can implement any of the five wisdom-cultivating practices I identify in service to a different goal for youth ministry than I have in mind. Wisdom-cultivating pedagogy is not a matter of pedagogical tricks but a commitment to invite young people to engage in wise thinking.

practice wisdom's cognitive and affective processes. Over the years, when I have shared with others the insights and ideas shared by my students, I have been met with disbelief. A senior minister once went so far as to tell me, "They didn't say that; you made it up." Others have dismissed it as a fluke: "Well, your students must be way smarter than mine," despite the fact that every group of young people with whom I have worked have been capable of the same quality of analysis. Tragically, young people themselves tend to buy into the myth that they are incapable of rigorous intellectual work or wise insight. I recall writing a mini-ethnography on my youth group for a doctoral seminar and sharing the results with the students, who were surprised by their own direct quotes. One young woman exclaimed, "Wow, you made us sound so smart!" One of my strongest commitments as a youth ministry scholar is to use my positionality to amplify the voices of young people, and in doing so, to encourage youth ministry practitioners to invite, attend to, and trust the wisdom of youth.

With such a strong emphasis on the wisdom of young people themselves, a natural question that arises is whether youth ministers should guide their students' reading of the biblical text at all, or let young people read and interpret it for themselves. How directive should the facilitator be, or how much of their own knowledge should they share? In *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, Dori Baker provides helpful insight into the role of theologically-educated adults in her focus groups as those with a "trained ear" who can "tease out" theological themes that arise from the stories of youth, helping to provide language for the insights that are shared.⁴⁶ However, the facilitator's own reflections should be "offered as suggestions, which can be accepted, rebuffed, adapted, discarded, or owned"; Girlfriend Theology is a "conversational" method of theological reflection.⁴⁷ In terms of biblical education, which begins with an external source of

⁴⁶ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*, 20.

⁴⁷ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*, 63.

theology rather than autobiographical stories, a teacher with some biblical knowledge and theological education can frame the biblical text in such a way that makes its ideas more accessible for young people to understand and engage. Ultimately, however, their knowledge should be offered to students as a way to explore the content more deeply; it should be generative, rather than definitive.

Overview of Chapters

This project is divided into two main parts: first, my theoretical proposal for cultivating wisdom through biblical education, and second, the application of that proposal to the wisdom literature. Part I identifies and describes the cultivation of wisdom as an important goal in youth ministry and explains how youth ministers can educate for wisdom. It then applies the goal of wisdom cultivation to the task of biblical education: How can youth ministers read the Bible with youth in a way that invites them to explore, wonder about, and think theologically alongside the text? I propose that youth ministers can cultivate wisdom through an approach to biblical education that seeks not only to “do what the Bible says,” but to “do what the Bible does.” Part II uses the wisdom corpus—the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job—as a case study for a pedagogy for biblical education that cultivates wisdom. In literature purportedly intended to cultivate wisdom in youth, what does it look like to reframe biblical education as “doing what the Bible does”? What is it that the wisdom literature *does*? That is, how does it cultivate wisdom? Finally, how can youth ministers teach it in ways that are consonant with its own pedagogy?

Part I: Educating for Wisdom in Youth Ministry

Chapter one, *Cultivating Wisdom in Youth Ministry*, lays out many of the foundational assumptions of this project and addresses some key questions that arise when one considers the

task of cultivating wisdom in young people. It begins by exploring the concept(s) of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible and as it is understood in the biblical wisdom literature, then it reviews some of the literature on wisdom theory that has proliferated in the past few decades, identifying some common themes among the modern definitions of wisdom. Pulling together concepts from ancient Israelite conceptions of wisdom, Greek philosophers, and modern wisdom scholars, I posit my own definition of wisdom as *an integrative approach to knowledge characterized by a love for learning and a desire for deep understanding, that values multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, that considers the meaning and implications of ideas and events, and that gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations in ways that lead to wholeness and flourishing*. After exposing each phrase of this definition, I move to consider an important question: Can young people be wise? Given the commonly-held notion that age and life experience are necessary for wisdom, is it possible to cultivate wisdom in young people? If so, can they be wise in the same way that adults can be wise, or is the wisdom of youth qualitatively different than the wisdom of adults? I argue that young people can in fact be wise, and I reflect on some of the reasons that adults may have difficulty perceiving wisdom in young people.

I then turn to the task of educating for wisdom. As mentioned in the opening pages of this introduction, it is common to think of wisdom as content to be imparted to others. Such content often refers to advice derived from life experience, but also to authoritative biblical truth. Such an understanding of wisdom leads to educational approaches that prioritize direct instruction, in which the teacher gives information to students, who are passive receivers of that information. But if wisdom is understood as an approach to knowledge and a way of thinking, educational approaches that seek to *impart* wisdom will be unsuccessful; wisdom must be *cultivated* through pedagogies that help students think for themselves. Building on the argument of wisdom scholars

Robert J. Sternberg, Alina Reznitskaya, and Linda Jarvin that educating for wisdom entails inviting students to experience the “cognitive and affective processes that underlie wise decision-making,” I explore what it looks like to educate both the cognitive and affective spheres.⁴⁸

Having established a definition for wisdom, explored the possibility of wisdom in young people, and described the task of educating for wisdom, I discuss wisdom in the specific context of youth ministry. I review the work of other youth ministry scholars who have influenced my own and explain how this current project builds upon that work to contribute to the field of youth ministry. Finally, I address the issue of assessing an educational goal as ambiguous and subjective as the task of cultivating wisdom. I argue that assessment cannot be based only, or even primarily, on individual decisions made by a student. Such assessment risks falling into a “behavior management” model. Instead, it requires careful attentiveness to the ways in which a student’s reasoning, decisions, and ways of engaging with ideas, people, and situations, reflect characteristics of wisdom.

Chapter two, *Doing What the Bible Does: Biblical Education with Youth*, examines the role of the Bible in youth ministry education. I approach biblical education from the belief that the Bible is an inspired sacred text that is simultaneously human and divine, a faithful—albeit complex and sometimes messy—witness to the character and work of God. It shapes its readers into the kind of people who can discern God’s presence and action in their own contexts, and who can imagine faithfully what it looks like to inhabit God’s world well. From this perspective, I reframe the Bible not just as a source of moral principles or wise advice, but as fertile soil for the cultivation of wisdom and a space in which young people can practice wisdom’s cognitive

⁴⁸ Robert J. Sternberg, Alina Reznitskaya, and Linda Jarvin, “Teaching for Wisdom: What Matters Is Not Just What Students Know, But How They Use It,” *LRE* 5, no. 2 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460701440830>, 151.

and affective processes. The chapter begins by identifying biblical education as a significant gap in youth ministry scholarship that has led biblical education to be less intentional and less robust than it might otherwise be. This gap in the youth ministry literature reflects a similar gap in the academy between the fields of biblical scholarship and practical theology. Youth ministers are not taught how to incorporate the insights of biblical scholarship into their teaching, which reinforces the tendency to teach the Bible without giving significant thought to the *why* and *how* of biblical education. In the absence of guidance on how to engage the Bible with youth, many curriculum writers and youth ministers default to a common way of reading the Bible: looking for answers to life's problems within its pages. I explore the pedagogical approach that dominates biblical education in youth ministry: what I call the "key text and takeaway" approach. This approach, whether it begins with a topic or with a biblical text, chooses a few key verses that seem relevant and applicable to young people, then interprets the text and summarizes it with an easily memorizable "takeaway." For example, a sample lesson from *Ministry to Youth's* three-year bundle draws on Prov. 28:1, Hebrews 11:1, Romans 8:17, and James 2:14-19 to teach students that "When you know who you are in Christ, you become bold and fearless in your faith."⁴⁹ Other lessons in the three-year series follow the same format, including a header with the lesson's title, key verses, and "bottom line." Analyzing this pedagogy through the lens of pedagogical theory and wisdom studies, I demonstrate how it is unable to cultivate wisdom in young people.

I identify two main problems with the key text and takeaway approach, which can be summed up in the critique that it preserves the integrity of neither the reader nor the text. First, this approach does not equip or even invite young people to think for themselves; the teacher

⁴⁹ Carrie Bush, "Fierce Faith," ed. Gabrielle Lewis, *Ministry to Youth*, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://ministrytoyouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Fierce-Sample.pdf>.

does the work of interpretation for students and tells them how the text is relevant for their lives. In the language of Bloom's taxonomy, the approach engages students in only the first three levels of cognition: remember, understand, and apply. The key text and takeaway approach does not provide space for young people to analyze, evaluate, or create, which are modes of thinking that are important for the cultivation of wisdom.⁵⁰ Second, this approach misunderstands the nature of the biblical text by treating it as a reference book, setting young people up for disillusionment when they read it for themselves and realize that it is far more opaque than the key texts make it seem. Peter Enns argues that there are three characteristics of the biblical text that make it impossible to read as a reference book or instruction manual. First, it is ancient; a great gap in time and culture separates modern readers of the text from its authors. Second, it is ambiguous; there is often a lack of clarity in the text that the key text and takeaway approach smooths over. Third, it is diverse, a compilation of works from different times, authors, perspectives, and genres. Rather than providing answers, Enns argues, the Bible gives us something better: the opportunity to cultivate wisdom as one wrestles with the text and seeks understanding.⁵¹

Based on Enns' understanding of the Bible as ancient, ambiguous, and diverse, I propose a pedagogy for engaging the Bible in a way that cultivates wisdom: moving from doing what the text *says* (the key text and takeaway approach) to doing what the text *does*. I draw on the work of biblical theologians Gerhard von Rad and Walter Brueggemann to explore what it might look like to shift normativity in the biblical text from its *content* to the *process* by which it engages in

⁵⁰ Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathwohl, ed., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001).

⁵¹ Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather than Answers—And Why That's Great News* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019), 11.

theological reasoning. The movement toward “doing what the Bible does” corrects the problems with the key text and takeaway approach by restoring complexity and agency to both the text and the reader. First, it recognizes the biblical text for what it is and respects what it is trying to do, valuing its methods of theological meaning-making and its rhetorical aims. Second, it invites young people to engage critically and imaginatively with the text, thinking theologically with and alongside it. I conclude the chapter with practical examples of how this pedagogical reframe might shape classroom practice, demonstrating how various types of biblical tools and criticism can help practitioners understand what a text is doing so that they can invite young people into the process.

Part II: Biblical Wisdom Literature as Case Study

Chapter three, *Wisdom’s Pedagogy: How the Wisdom Literature Cultivates Wisdom in the Reader*, examines how the wisdom literature constructs its pedagogy and proposes pedagogical practices for engaging this literature with youth. The chapter begins by exploring Walter Brueggemann’s assertion that the wisdom literature is “the most self-consciously educational” literature in the canon.⁵² What does it mean for the wisdom literature to be educational? I look at two aspects of its educational nature: how it functioned as educational literature in ancient Israel, or how it *was taught*, which is a historical endeavor; and how its literary features function pedagogically, or how the text itself *teaches*, which is a rhetorical endeavor. These two tasks are not the same; there are numerous ways one can teach the wisdom literature, and not all of them do justice to the rhetorical goals of the text.

In the first half of the chapter, I employ a pedagogical hermeneutic to explore the ways in which each book cultivates wisdom in the reader and invites the reader to practice the cognitive

⁵² Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 99.

and affective processes that underlie wise thinking. Drawing on the work of Hebrew Bible scholars who employ rhetorical approaches, I show how the wisdom literature models ways of thinking and knowing that are characteristic of wisdom, and that are intended to invite the reader to participate in those modes of thinking. Proverbs, for example, leans heavily on ambiguity to draw the reader in to its wisdom, and the final form of the book creates juxtapositions of proverbs that invite the reader to seek connection and meaning among the sayings. In Ecclesiastes, Qohelet teaches the reader to think in the way of wisdom by making the reader follow along his own path to wisdom and experience his thought processes of observing, questioning, reflecting, and re-considering. The book of Job prioritizes dialogue over answers, inviting the reader to participate in the dialogic process.

In the second half of the chapter, synthesizing insights from the pedagogy of the wisdom literature, wisdom studies, and educational theory, I posit five pedagogical practices for cultivating wisdom: playfulness, attentiveness, wonder, reflection, and dialogue. I explore each of the five practices in conversation with educational theorists, showing how each practice is modeled by the wisdom literature and offering examples of ways that youth ministers can incorporate the practice into their pedagogy.

Chapters four and five present the integrated results of the curriculum analysis, surveys, and interviews to explore the ways in which wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry. Chapter four, *Teaching Wisdom, Part I: Overall Trends and Themes*, begins by exploring three key features of the wisdom corpus: its focus on the human experience, its poetic style, and its proclivity for ambiguity. I then explain how these features are experienced as both gifts and challenges by youth ministers who teach on these books, arguing that the challenge and gift of these features are intertwined and an intentional pedagogical strategy of the wisdom tradition to

cultivate wisdom. I then discuss some of the most common topics and themes that often arise when youth ministers teach on these books. First, all three books of the wisdom corpus are used to talk about friendship: how to be a good friend, and how to choose good friends. Second, a common theme that arises, particularly from the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, is the validation of difficult emotions. The last theme I discuss in this section is one that, despite its centrality to the wisdom literature, does not appear frequently in youth curriculum: the role of nature and creation in the wisdom books.

In chapter five, *Teaching Wisdom, Part II: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job*, I examine in detail each of the three wisdom books in terms of how they are engaged in youth ministry education; I consider how youth ministers interpret them, identify the most commonly-taught texts from each book, explain the unique challenges of teaching each book, and describe the pedagogical approaches and learning activities that youth ministers use to teach them. One of the most important findings, consistent across all three books, is that it is typical for youth ministers to teach only on the beginning and/or the ending of each book. This choice of content is greatly reductive of the complexity and overall message of the wisdom books. The discussion of each book includes two in-depth case studies of interviewees who have taught on that book, adding texture and depth to the analysis and illuminating the ways in which individual experiences both confirm and challenge generalized observations. The chapter concludes with reflection on some common pedagogical approaches from the research, demonstrating how youth ministers tend to explain the wisdom texts to youth rather than exploring them with youth.

In the final chapter, *Theological Collage: Exploring the Book of Job with Youth*, I reflect on the process of teaching a workshop on the book of Job to high school students at Emory's Youth Theological Initiative, a summer program where young people from all over the world

come to study theology. This chapter shows the practical outworking of the theory developed in this project, demonstrating practically what it might look like to “do what the text does” when engaging wisdom literature with youth, and lifting up the insights and wisdom of the YTI scholars as they engaged with the material. I begin by highlighting the creative collage project of one of the YTI scholars that came out of this workshop, theorizing it as a *mashal*. In the wisdom literature, a *mashal* is a wise saying that is often allegorical and puzzle- or riddle-like, requiring interpretation and reflection.⁵³ The collages created by the scholars, like the *meshalim* of the wisdom literature, represent both the crystallization and communication of the scholars’ thought processes, as well content that invited the other scholars to practice wisdom-related thinking. I then describe the thought process behind the workshop’s curricular design, showing how I developed the workshop to engage the book of Job as a polyphonic text or “theological collage.” In the second half of the chapter, I explore the artistic medium of collage as a way to explore complex and ambiguous issues without needing to resolve them, which makes it a valuable pedagogical tool for cultivating and evoking wisdom.

My hope is that this project will provide youth ministry practitioners with new ways of understanding wisdom and imagining the task of religious education. I further hope that the reflections and creative appropriations that this project may engender will, in turn, provide new and further insight into the sacred task of engaging the Bible with youth.

⁵³ Kathleen M. O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, Message of Biblical Spirituality (Wilmington, DA: Michael Glazier, 1988), 37-40.

Chapter One

Cultivating Wisdom in Youth Ministry

In the introduction, I argued that educational approaches that seek to *impart* rather than *cultivate* wisdom are inadequate to the task of helping young people become wise, because they misunderstand what wisdom is and how it is acquired. Thus, I begin this chapter by addressing the question: what is wisdom, and how is it acquired? How does one educate for wisdom? I will begin by examining the concept of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, then commonalities in conceptions of wisdom by modern wisdom scholars, before positing my own definition of wisdom and exploring its components. While there are some similarities between ancient Israelite and modern secular understandings of wisdom, there are also important differences, and my own understanding of wisdom has been influenced by both. In arguing for the wisdom literature's potential to cultivate wisdom, it is important to clarify what I mean by wisdom and how it both does and does not cohere with what the sages of ancient Israel may have meant. I will then explore the task of educating for wisdom in a way that cultivates, rather than imparts, wisdom. I conclude by thinking about the task of cultivating wisdom in the context of youth ministry.

Defining Wisdom

Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible

Wisdom, as construed in the Hebrew Bible, is a complex and multifaceted concept. Not only is it described by a constellation of different words, each with a broad semantic range, but conceptions of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible are sometimes in tension with one another. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, showing how its

dialectical nature points to wisdom as a disposition and practice, rather than something one can possess. First, I will consider a few of the Hebrew terms that denote wisdom and their lexical meanings. Second, I will consider the content of the wisdom books and what they communicate about the concept of wisdom.¹

The Hebrew word most often translated as wisdom is *ḥokmah*. This word in itself has a broad semantic range; it can refer to craftsmanship, to erudition, to good judgment, to the ability to understand implications of situations, to the skill of formulating plans, and to the knowledge of right living.² Michael Fox synthesizes these definitions to summarize *ḥokmah* as expertise, or “a high degree of knowledge and skill in any domain.”³ Douglas Miller and James Kugel, however, each highlight a very different aspect of *ḥokmah*. Miller emphasizes skill; for him, *ḥokmah* “indicates the ability...to assess complex situations, determine the issues involved, and then make the best possible decision.”⁴ Miller’s understanding foregrounds the analytical and practical components of *ḥokmah*; for Miller, *ḥokmah* is the ability to reason. Learning wisdom would thus mean sharpening one’s skills of analysis and judgment. Kugel, on the other hand, emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge. He points out that *ḥokmah* often refers to a body of content, or the things known, rather than the ability to know.⁵ The work of the sages, then, is to

¹ As noted in the introduction, I have chosen to include the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job in this study. Thus, most of the following observations are drawn from these three books.

² Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9* (AYB 18A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 32-33. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* notes that *ḥakam* can mean “wise, competent in politics and administration, astute, prudent, skilful,” and *ḥokmah* refers to “wisdom, prudence, skill,” as well as “good sense” and “insight.” David J.A. Clines, ed., *DCH* 3:219, 222.

³ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 32.

⁴ Douglas Miller, “Wisdom in the Canon: Discerning the Early Intuition,” in Sneed, 89.

⁵ James Kugel points out that in 1 Kings 5:10-13, the vastness of King Solomon’s wisdom refers not to his “power of understanding” but to “the body of learning that Solomon had acquired...three thousand proverbs, a thousand and five songs, plus a knowledge of plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish.” James L. Kugel, “Ancient Israelite Pedagogy and Its Survival in Second Temple Interpretations of Scripture,” in *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wasserman (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 16. However, another demonstration of King Solomon’s wisdom lies in his judicial discernment between two women claiming to be the mother of an infant (1 Kings 3:16-28), an anecdote which is referenced by several modern

uncover knowledge bit by bit, filling in “little square[s] on the divine graph paper.”⁶ Thus, for Kugel, learning wisdom means “mastering the wisdom of the past.”⁷

In addition to *hokmah*, however, a host of other terms contribute to the overall picture of wisdom in the wisdom literature. Fox succinctly outlines and defines the various terms used to describe wisdom in Proverbs, noting that Proverbs “includes several intellectual powers in its concept of wisdom.”⁸ Taking all these terms together, wisdom includes the possession of content knowledge,⁹ the intellectual capacity to understand and interpret knowledge,¹⁰ and the pragmatic task of applying knowledge.¹¹ As reflected in the Hebrew term *binah*, often translated “understanding,” wisdom can also refer to “the *faculty* of intellectual discernment and

wisdom scholars to indicate skills of problem-solving and perspicacity. See Sternberg, “Why Schools Should Teach for Wisdom,” 234; Shih-Ying Yang, “From Personal Striving to Positive Influence,” in *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom: From Contemplative Traditions to Neuroscience*, ed. Michel Ferrari and Nic M. Weststrate (New York: Springer, 2012), 118; Karen Strohm Kitchener and Helene G. Brenner, “Wisdom and Reflective Judgment: Knowing in the Face of Uncertainty,” in Sternberg, 213. The judicial incident comes directly after Solomon’s request for wisdom and concludes by noting that the people were in awe “because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him” (1 Kings 3:28, NRSV), so the point of the story is to illustrate that Solomon’s prayer was answered. In this scenario, Solomon’s wisdom cannot refer to his “body of learning,” as he does not know which woman is the mother; instead, it refers to his ability to reason and discern in the face of uncertainty.

⁶ Kugel, “Ancient Israelite Pedagogy,” 18-19.

⁷ Kugel, “Ancient Israelite Pedagogy,” 19.

⁸ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 28.

⁹ *Hokmah* and *da’at* have a broad semantic range, but both include a sense of knowledge accumulation in addition to a capacity, skill, or cognitive process. *Da’at* often refers to “objects of knowledge”: “knowledge of specific facts, propositions, or entities,” as well as “knowledge beyond one’s scope.” *Hokmah* includes “communicable information, that which is known and can be learned,” but Fox makes clear that it is not “inert” content knowledge alone but an interplay between knowledge and application: “You could memorize the book of Proverbs and not have *hokmah*. *Hokmah* always implies ability to carry out what one knows. But it is never an innate talent devoid of knowledge.” Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 31-32, 33.

¹⁰ Some of the words relating to this capacity include *hokmah*, which in one of its many senses refers to “the ability to understand the implications of situations and interpret signs and text”; *binah*, which “includes reason, the intellectual faculty used in solving problems and deducing truths, as well as intellect, the ability to comprehend meanings and perceive relations and causes”; and *sekel*, whose “core meaning is ‘insight,’ the ability to grasp the meanings or implications of a situation or message.” Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 33, 30, 36.

¹¹ Although *hokmah* and *binah* “may be brought to bear in pragmatic decisions,” the terms that best encompass the pragmatic aspect of wisdom are *tebunah*, which is the “pragmatic, applied aspect of thought, operating in the realm of *action* [which] aims at efficacy and accomplishment” and *tušiyah*, which “is used in determining a course of action and dealing with difficulties rather than in comprehending intricacies or deducing conclusions.” Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 30, 37, 38. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* defines a broad range for *tebunah*, which refers to the “(faculty of) understanding,” the “(practical application of) understanding,” and the “(result, benefit of) understanding.” Clines, *DCH* 8:587. *Tušiyah* refers to “practical ability, competence,” as well as *effectiveness*: “success, effective aid, effectual working.” Clines, *DCH* 8:617.

interpretation, the *exercise* of that faculty, and the *product* thereof.”¹² The range of these terms presents a dynamic understanding of wisdom that is both content and process, practice and product.

While different conceptions of wisdom are present in the three wisdom books, there are also consistencies across the wisdom corpus that seem foundational to an understanding of wisdom. I will begin with the unity, then address the diversity. First, all three books name the fear of the Lord as foundational to wisdom (Prov. 1:7; Job 28:28; Eccl. 12:13). This gives Israelite wisdom a distinctively religious foundation; one cannot be wise without recognition of God. The fear of the Lord entails awe and reverence before God, which motivates ethical action even in the absence of legal obligation,¹³ as well as awareness of one’s own creaturely status before God.¹⁴ Between the two lies a proper understanding of what can and cannot be known, which entails epistemic humility. Second, all three books have a substantial focus on creation as a source of wisdom. God created the world by wisdom, so careful discernment of the order and patterns in the world is revelatory for how to conduct oneself in God’s world.¹⁵ Third, all three books are concerned with how to live well; they provide the reader with insight on desiring and living a good life.¹⁶ The wisdom literature’s focus on living well also has an ethical dimension,

¹² Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 30, emphasis added. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* defines the verb form of *binah* as “to understand, discern, recognize, acknowledge, show understanding, apply understanding, be intelligent,” showing its broad semantic range. Clines, *DCH* 2:143. As noted in fn 11 above, *ṭebunah* includes the same range of faculty, application, and result. Clines, *DCH* 8:587.

¹³ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 70-71.

¹⁴ Eunhy P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), ch. 4.

¹⁵ As Walter Brueggemann writes of the wisdom epistemology, “The appropriate way to knowledge is by engagement with the world. This requires fascination, imagination, patience, attentiveness to detail, and finally, observation of the regularities that seem to govern.” Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 108-109.

¹⁶ Douglas Miller identifies this emphasis as “realized eschatology,” that is, “the goal of making the most of present existence,” seeing it as one of three distinct features of the wisdom corpus. Miller, “Wisdom in the Canon,” 96. In Job, this reflection on living well is left implicit, but the epilogue gives the reader clues that Job has somehow figured out how to live in the world presented in the Divine Speeches, perhaps with a bit more freedom than before. One example is that Job grants his daughters inheritance alongside his sons, breaking social convention. See

particularly in Proverbs, which identifies the goal of its instruction as righteousness, justice, and equity (Prov. 1:3).¹⁷ The commonalities of the wisdom books thus indicate that wisdom is a process of attentiveness, observation, and reflection on how the world works, tempered by a recognition of one's creatureliness and finitude based in the fear of the Lord, for the purpose of living well in God's world.

Within the wisdom tradition, however, there is also diversity in how wisdom is conceptualized. First, as noted above, wisdom is both content and skill. As Kugel describes it, *hokmah* is the entirety of divine wisdom, of which humans can discover bits and pieces.¹⁸ One's wisdom is the sum of content one knows, albeit a small percentage of the wisdom that is potentially available to discover. However, wisdom also refers to the skill of discernment or intellectual/moral reasoning as well as "the exercise of that faculty."¹⁹ This tension points to the fact that wisdom in the Hebrew Bible is both possessed and practiced. Wisdom can, in some sense, be acquired, and yet one is always engaged in the work of wisdom.

Second, wisdom is both divine and human, an attribute of God and an ability of human beings.²⁰ In wisdom literature scholarship there has been a tendency to explain this dual understanding of wisdom as a shift in thought over time, from the practical human ability to

Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Job*, (NCBC 19; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 100; William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 76. Another example is that in the epilogue, unlike the prologue, Job feasts with his family and friends (Lauren Calvin Cooke, "Dove, Cinnamon, and Eyeshadow: Life After Covid-19," unpublished sermon, August 1, 2021, <https://www.northlake.org/sermon/sermon-for-august-1-2021/>, accessed May 6, 2022).

¹⁷ Fox writes that "Wisdom is always prudential, conducive to the individual's well-being, but it weighs the effect of an action on others as well. It is an ethical quality, never merely instrumental." Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 29.

¹⁸ Kugel, "Ancient Israelite Pedagogy," 18-19.

¹⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 30.

²⁰ As Brown writes, "Wisdom is deemed both a gift from God and an object of human striving, divinely endowed and humanly sought and practiced." Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 25.

“assess a situation and choose effective means to carry out one’s intentions”²¹ to a divine attribute often hidden from humans, whose acquisition is by means of revelation rather than experience.²² Others push back against the notion of the divine/human tension as a diachronic development or evolution of thought, preferring to see it as a “true dialectic”²³ in the wisdom literature. Although understandings of wisdom do tend to morph over time, new ideas do not replace, but rather enrich, earlier ones. The presentation of wisdom in the canon preserves both meanings of wisdom, as the divine wisdom that created and ordered the world, and as the human capacity to seek understanding, practice discernment, and exercise good judgment. As I will explore in depth in chapter four, this dialectic continues in the ways wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry. I utilize the shorthand of “theological” and “experiential” to describe these two approaches to wisdom and wisdom literature.²⁴ While all the youth ministers in this study

²¹ Fox, *Proverbs 10-29*, 925. Fox writes that the proverb collections in 10-29 represent wisdom “in its oldest and broadest sense” as a practical human ability, but that the prologue and lectures reflect an understanding of wisdom as a religious and moral virtue tied to the fear of YHWH.

²² Karel van der Toorn argues that between the second and first millennia BCE, as literacy developed, and wisdom became a written rather than oral phenomenon, conceptions of wisdom shifted from a human capacity to a “virtue solely of the gods,” and the manner of its acquisition shifted from experience to revelation. See van der Toorn, “Why Wisdom Became a Secret: On Wisdom as a Written Genre,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. Richard J. Clifford (Atlanta: SBL 2007). I am less sure that the divine/human conceptions of wisdom represent a clear temporal shift; both seem to be present in Ecclesiastes, for example, and not as a result of redaction. Van der Toorn’s case study is the comparison between the Old Babylonian and Standard Babylonian versions of Gilgamesh; in the Old Babylonian version, Gilgamesh is given sage advice by the tavern keeper, while in the Standard Babylonian version, wisdom comes from the larger-than-life antediluvian character Atrahasis. However, the tavern keeper’s wisdom in the Old Babylonian version is remarkably similar to the advice Qohelet gives the reader to find enjoyment in everyday life, and yet Qohelet also reflects on wisdom as an inscrutable divine mystery hidden from humans.

²³ Leo Perdue writes that the dialectic between anthropology and cosmology (wisdom as a divine attribute in creation) “should be regarded as a true dialectic, and not as a development from one (anthropology) to the other (cosmology) or from an emphasis on one to a greater stress on the other.” Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 48. See also Brueggemann, who writes, “The notion of evolutionary movement from secular to religious wisdom will not hold. Nor will any of the other developmental schemes from simple to complex, from ethically simple to theologically sophisticated. Rather, this is a rich and varied phenomenon which goes in many directions but which seems to have a common tendency in it.” Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 99.

²⁴ In *Character in Crisis*, William Brown identified the divine/human tension as wisdom literature’s “theocentric and anthropocentric poles.” See William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1-4. Similarly, Katharine Dell writes that “the anthropocentric and theocentric are in a crucial dialectical relationship” in the wisdom literature. Katharine

reflected both on the nature of God and on human experience, they tended to foreground one in the way they talked about, and taught, the wisdom literature. Some youth ministers emphasized what the wisdom literature conveys about the nature and character of God, while others foreground its focus on the value and validity of human experience.

The third tension in the wisdom tradition, related to the second, is regarding wisdom's accessibility: wisdom is both knowable and unknowable, attainable but always out of reach. In Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed as a woman standing in the public square, calling out to any who will listen (Prov. 1:20-33). Job and Ecclesiastes do not reflect the same confidence about the human ability to find wisdom; in these books, wisdom is hidden from and inaccessible to humans.²⁵ For Brueggemann, the epistemology of the wisdom literature is rooted in the dialectic between the human ability to know, on the one hand, and divine mystery and inscrutability on the other.²⁶ Humans live in the tension between disclosure and concealment, discovery and mystery, knowing and not knowing. And, despite Proverbs' optimistic take on wisdom's accessibility, it recognizes that wisdom is never fully achieved. In the opening verses, the author of the introduction tells readers that the proverbs are not only for the young or simple: "Let the

Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 129. However, the term "anthropocentric" now connotes a lack of regard for non-human life, which is counter to wisdom. To replace it with the term "humanistic," however, would connote a secularism that is not characteristic of the youth ministers I interviewed. While no language is perfect, I chose "theological" and "experiential," in part because they are *not* opposites; they are always inextricably intertwined, a reality that is demonstrated in the youth curriculum. For a more in-depth exploration of how youth ministers and curriculum writers deal with the tension between theological and experiential approaches, see chapter 4.

²⁵ And yet even in these books, as Brueggemann succinctly notes, "wisdom is not so hidden that we cannot act wisely day after day." Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 131.

²⁶ Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, chapter 4, especially pp. 107-109. Brueggemann identifies the key question of the wisdom tradition as the question of Job 28:12: "Where can wisdom be found?" At its key juncture in the book, Brueggemann argues, the question looks backward to the dialogues as well as the book of Proverbs to locate wisdom in human experience; but it also looks forward to the inscrutability of the Divine Speeches at the end of Job, as well as to the book of Ecclesiastes, in which wisdom is inaccessible to humans.

wise, too, hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill” (Prov. 1:5).²⁷ Several of the sayings also indicate that “the wise” are always in need of wisdom: “Rebuke the wise, and he will love you. Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous, and they will gain in learning” (Prov. 9:8-9). Thus, wisdom is something that humans can attain in a limited way but can never claim to have mastered.

These various ways of understanding wisdom as content and skill, as divine and human, as out of reach and yet attainable, provide a framework for understanding wisdom as a *disposition* and a *practice*. Human wisdom is the practice of seeking out, discovering, interacting with, and in a limited way participating in, the divine wisdom present in creation. The divine wisdom that ordered the world is experienced by humans as content; that is, there is an order and rationality to the cosmos, and lessons to be learned from attentiveness to creation. That divine wisdom gives meaning and direction to human wisdom as humans seek it out. However, because the full wisdom of God and the full knowledge of the mysteries of the universe are out of reach for humans, the human experience of wisdom is not that of achieving or possessing wisdom. Rather, it is the ongoing work of searching out and discerning how the world works and how to live well in it. William Brown, reflecting on the inaccessibility of wisdom in Job 28, notes that the final verse equating wisdom with the fear of the Lord gives the reader a way forward:

Wisdom is not simply some entity of inestimable worth, placed forever out of reach of human grasp, of which only God can lay claim. Wisdom, unfathomable as it may be, becomes accessible only in practice. Wisdom, as unreachable as it may be, does not sever its ties from character. There is an ethical component to inscrutable wisdom that cannot be discarded, even if ignorance is lamentably the ultimate end of the sagacious quest.²⁸

²⁷ Throughout this dissertation, when quoting biblical texts, I use the NRSV translation unless otherwise noted. When referring to the use of the text in curricula or in interviews, I indicate the translation preferred by the curricula or the youth minister.

²⁸ Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 70-71.

Here the understanding of wisdom as a hidden divine attribute does not preclude humans from seeking, participating in, and practicing wisdom. Thus, human wisdom is the *orientation toward* divine wisdom, and the *practice of pursuing* divine wisdom as humans discern how to live well in God's world.

Modern Wisdom Scholarship

In the past few decades, scholars in education, philosophy, ethics, psychology, and neurobiology have begun to take a renewed interest in the concept of wisdom, which is a quality long-standing in the popular imagination that has eluded clear definition. What *is* wisdom, and how does it differ from other categories like intelligence or creativity?²⁹ What attributes must a person possess who is considered wise? Are some more naturally inclined to wisdom than others, or is wisdom something that can be cultivated? If so, how does one educate for wisdom? There are as many definitions of wisdom and lists of its attributes as there are scholars of wisdom. However, most modern wisdom scholars agree on a few key ideas that are also shared by various strands of wisdom traditions through the ages; although most modern wisdom scholars are not working within a theological framework, some of the key aspects of wisdom they identify resonate with aspects of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.

First, wisdom has a moral and ethical component that differentiates it from raw intelligence.³⁰ In the introduction to the *Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*, Robert J. Sternberg

²⁹ See Robert J. Sternberg, "Wisdom and Its Relations to Intelligence and Creativity," in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁰ In the Hebrew Bible, wisdom's moral component is rooted in the fear of the Lord, which motivates ethical action. Michael Fox writes that "wisdom is always prudential, conducive to the individual's well-being, but it weighs the effect of an action on others as well. It is an ethical quality, never merely instrumental." Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 29. Fox's observation about wisdom in the Hebrew Bible resonates with Sternberg's "Balance Theory" of wisdom, which proposes that wisdom requires a balance among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests. See Sternberg, "Balance Theory of Wisdom," accessed September 8, 2022, <http://www.robertjsternberg.com/wisdom>.

points out that although essays in the volume contain many different definitions of wisdom, “almost all of them point to wisdom as a key to creating a better world.”³¹ Wisdom seeks cooperation rather than competition; a wise person uses their knowledge, intellect, and creativity for the well-being of others rather than for personal gain.

Second, wisdom is also differentiated from intelligence in that it is not exclusively a cognitive capacity or skill.³² As Sternberg has written, although the average IQ has risen substantially over the past several decades, wisdom seems as elusive as ever.³³ Wisdom requires more than a sharp mind and involves more than logic; it is also constituted by *affect*. In part because of wisdom’s moral/ethical orientation, empathy, emotional intelligence, and emotional regulation are considered important aspects of wisdom.³⁴ However, wisdom’s affective component refers to more than just emotional skills that give one tact and self-control, or empathy that orients one toward the good of others. Wisdom is also comprised of affective and subjective *ways of knowing* like embodied knowledge, interpersonal relationships, intuition, and imagination. Gisela Labouvie-Vief contrasts these “inner, subjective, organismic” forms, which

³¹ Sternberg, “Race to Samarra,” 5.

³² Judith Glück and her colleagues note this as one of the aspects of wisdom that “most authors agree on.” See Judith Glück, Susan Bluck, Jacqueline Baron, and Dan P. McAdams, “The Wisdom of Experience: Autobiographical Narratives Across Adulthood,” *IJBD* 29, no. 3 (2005): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650250444000504>. Similarly, in the Hebrew Bible, wisdom involves more than cognition. As Anne Stewart writes, “The poetic articulation of desire within Proverbs reveals a holistic view of the moral self. There is no sharp distinction between reason and passion, intellect and emotion, mind and heart. Rather, the book indicates that knowledge equally arises from and is influenced by cognitive, emotional, and sensory activity. Knowledge is not solely the product of rational calculation. Accordingly, the formation of the moral self is more than an intellectual project, but also requires the cultivation of one’s emotions, senses, and desires...Proverbs suggests a more complex view of the human person that demands a more complex pedagogy.” Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 161-162.

³³ Sternberg, “Race to Samarra,” 4.

³⁴ For a helpful overview of the literature on wisdom dealing with emotion, see Ute Kunzmann and Judith Glück, “Wisdom and Emotion,” in Sternberg and Glück, 575-601.

she refers to as *mythos*, with *logos*, or the more outward, logical forms of processing characteristic of cognitive skill.³⁵

Third, wisdom understands and values interconnectedness and integration.³⁶ As a blend of cognition and affect, wisdom itself is an integrative phenomenon that balances and holds together diverse ways of knowing and points of view; part of its uniqueness is that it comprises an “integrative and holistic approach toward life’s challenges and problems.”³⁷ Wisdom recognizes the relationships among phenomena and considers the interrelatedness of all life, keeping the big picture in view while also seeing the intricacies of a given situation.³⁸ For example, a wise person considers the relationship of humans to the earth, can trace the connection between historical events and present realities, and sees how the solution to one problem may create another problem elsewhere. Wisdom also sees connections among ideas and seeks to balance, assess, and reconcile contradictory perspectives through dialectical or integrative thinking.³⁹ It seeks to understand and assess the relationships between the part and the whole, between actions and consequences.⁴⁰ It is this ability to look at relationships between

³⁵ Gisela Labouvie-Vief, “Wisdom as Integrated Thought: Historical and Developmental Perspectives,” in Sternberg, 52.

³⁶ Interconnectedness and integration show up less in the terminology used to describe wisdom in the Hebrew Bible and more in the content of the wisdom literature itself, which draws connections between patterns of nature and human behavior, reflects on act-consequence relationships (particularly Proverbs), debates the relationship between God and humans (Job and Ecclesiastes), and contains inner-biblical argumentation that seeks a way forward through contradictory ideas.

³⁷ Kunzmann and Glück, “Wisdom and Emotion,” 575.

³⁸ Deirdre Kramer takes an “organismic” approach to understanding wisdom, pointing out the “*the central tenet*” of organicism is “integration...All phenomena are inherently interdependent.” Dierdre A. Kramer, “Conceptualizing Wisdom: The Primacy of Affect-Cognition Relations,” in Sternberg, 280. For Kramer, relativistic and dialectical thinking are particularly important for wisdom; they allow one to recognize complexity in oneself and others, rather than dichotomize good and evil or engage in defensive mechanisms like projection. Relativistic and dialectical thinking help one to facilitate wisdom by, among other things, recognizing the contextual embeddedness of judgments rather than thinking in absolute terms. Kramer, “Conceptualizing Wisdom,” 301.

³⁹ See Eeva Kallio, “Integrative Thinking is the Key: An Evaluation of Current Research into the Development of Adult Thinking,” *Theory and Psychology* 21, no. 6 (2011): 785-801, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354310388344>; and Kramer, “Conceptualizing Wisdom,” 288-291.

⁴⁰ David White, whose work will be discussed in more depth towards the end of this chapter, notes that “loving God with one’s mind” connotes not “abstract intellectualization” but “coherence”: it can be conceived as

issues, and not just the issues themselves, that gives the wise person their ability to navigate complexity with skill.

Fourth, wisdom has implications for life and real-world problems; it enables one to live well in the concrete realities of everyday life.⁴¹ Shih-ying Yang writes that while intelligence deals in abstractions, wisdom requires “coping with real-life challenges.”⁴² Aristotle differentiated between *phronesis*, the practical wisdom that enables one to make good judgments in everyday life, and *sophia*, a more philosophical kind of wisdom that devotes itself to the pursuit and contemplation of truth. Although Aristotle believed *sophia* to be the highest and purest form of human intellectual pursuit, for many modern wisdom scholars, knowledge or theoretical contemplation by itself does not constitute wisdom.⁴³ Although it may be a necessary condition of wisdom, it is not in itself sufficient; part of what it means to be wise is to be able to navigate life well.⁴⁴

“Love God by the way you put things together.” Recognizing the interrelatedness of life is an important part of the practice of discernment: “How we put the world together, envisioning the parts in relationship to our whole view of the world, is a significant matter of faith. Many activities, such as eating fast food or watching television, taken by themselves, seem innocent enough. Yet when considered in relation to how they use the resources of the earth or exploit human labor, or how their habitual use removes us from other relationships important for sustaining just communities, responsible Christian commitments may require limiting or refraining from these activities. It matters more than ever, how we envision the multiple contexts of our lives—familial, communal, commercial, political, global—and their interrelationships.” David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*, Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 120-121. He goes on to explain that one step of “loving God with one’s mind” is the practice of moving back and forth from part to whole as one analyzes a complex issue: “We must engage youth in focusing directly upon one small dimension of their lives—one tension or one joy. But periodically we must engage them in grasping the gestalt of their social reality to determine how the parts relate to the whole. By moving back and forth between the parts and the whole we find that youth and congregations weave together an increasingly accurate picture of the relationships that constitute their social world and beyond.” White, *Practicing Discernment*, 126.

⁴¹ As noted above, wisdom in the Hebrew Bible leads toward practical action that enables one to live well in God’s world.

⁴² Yang, “From Personal Striving,” 121. Similarly, Sternberg and Hagen write that in a wisdom approach to education, students need practice solving complicated “unstructured real-world-type problems” rather than “structured, knowledge-based, factual problems.” Robert J. Sternberg and Emily S. Hagen, “Teaching for Wisdom,” in Sternberg and Glück, 377.

⁴³ See Barry Schwartz and Kenneth E. Sharpe, “Practical Wisdom: What Aristotle Might Add to Psychology,” in Sternberg and Glück, 227; and Daniel N. Robinson, “Wisdom through the Ages,” in Sternberg, 17.

⁴⁴ See Jason Swartwood and Valerie Tiberius, “Philosophical Foundations of Wisdom,” in Sternberg and Glück, 13.

Toward a Definition of Wisdom

My own understanding of wisdom is influenced by conceptions of wisdom present in the Hebrew Bible and modern conceptions of wisdom, as well as by pedagogues and educational theorists who value the agency of the learner in the educational process. While it has elements in common with Hebrew Bible wisdom, it is different in some important respects, most notably in a movement away from internalizing the counsel of one's forebears.⁴⁵ The way that I understand wisdom and define it throughout this project is (a) *an integrative approach to knowledge characterized by a love for learning and a desire for deep understanding*, (b) *that values multiple perspectives and ways of knowing*, that (c) *considers the meaning and implications of ideas and events*, and that (d) *gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations in ways that lead to wholeness and flourishing*. As an integrative approach to knowledge, wisdom is far more than the sum of one's life lessons, a personality trait, or a set of intellectual skills. It constitutes an orientation toward knowledge and a way of being in the world. Thus, wisdom as I define it is perhaps best understood as an epistemology.

Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge, with not only *what* one can know, but also and more importantly, *how* one knows it. One's epistemology is the way one approaches and relates to knowledge, and it has important implications for how one engages the world and lives within it. As Parker Palmer writes, "The way we interact with the world in knowing it becomes the way we interact with the world as we live in it...Our epistemology is quietly transformed into our ethic."⁴⁶ A rationalist-objectivist epistemology, for example, values dispassionate, objective ways of knowing. It leads one to a posture of mastery, in which one

⁴⁵ For further discussion on how my proposal for cultivating wisdom in young people differs from the goals of Israel's sages, see the beginning of chapter 3.

⁴⁶ Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 21.

objectifies and instrumentalizes the world.⁴⁷ Conversely, what Jennifer Ayres calls an ecological epistemology values relational, embodied, affective ways of knowing; it leads one to know, and thus to live, in ways that deepen one's connection with nature.⁴⁸ Because of wisdom's close relation to creation in the Hebrew Bible, Ayres's ecological epistemology has strong resonances with the way that I conceive of a wisdom epistemology.⁴⁹ Implicit in my definition of wisdom, then, is an epistemology that seeks integration and connectedness; one that is rooted in love and desire, rather than acquisition or control; one that values multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, relying not only on the intellect but also on affective, embodied, and relational ways of knowing; and one that has as its goal the flourishing of the created world. In the pages that follow, I will further explain each phrase of this definition with attention to how it shapes one's ways of knowing and being in the world.

First, wisdom is an *approach to knowledge*, not a type or quantity of knowledge. A wise person is not one who has attained wisdom, but rather one who constantly seeks it. Christine Hong expresses a similar idea when she writes of intelligence not as *mastery*, but as *posture*: “Intelligence framed as posture does not seek mastery of knowledge to wield it against others but aims to be open to it.”⁵⁰ Part of what it means to be wise is to understand that one can never

⁴⁷ Jennifer R. Ayres, “Recovering Mystery: Ecological Encounters and Practical Theological Ways of Knowing,” *IJPT* 25, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2020-0040>, 84; Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 21-32.

⁴⁸ Ayres argues that ecological education is often based in a rationalist-objectivist epistemology and is thus unable to form “ecological character and identity.” Instead, a different epistemology is needed, an ecological epistemology that “grounds an integrated and comprehensive way of knowing, loving, and caring for a dynamic and mysterious world, and the place of human life within it.” Ayres, “Recovering Mystery,” 77.

⁴⁹ As Brueggemann writes, the epistemology of the wisdom literature sees that “the appropriate way to knowledge is by engagement with the world. This requires fascination, imagination, patience, attentiveness, and finally, observation of the regularities that seem to govern.” Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 108-109. Such an approach to knowledge relates to creation not as its master, but as its student.

⁵⁰ Christine J. Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 16.

master knowledge or attain perfect wisdom.⁵¹ To speak of wisdom as an approach, orientation, or posture, then, seeks to capture the sense that wisdom is something one practices rather than possesses.⁵² As Jonathan, a white Episcopal priest and spiritual director who runs a summer theology program for youth, put it, “Wisdom isn’t something that eventually I’m going to find and then I’ll be wise, so I can stop. That’s, like, kind of the most foolish thing you could think, right? So seeking wisdom seems like a way of life and a posture.” Wisdom is thus not about possessing a certain level of knowledge or attaining perfection; rather, it is one’s attitude toward knowledge and learning that makes one wise.⁵³ Wisdom is paradoxical; it is characterized by desire for, and constant pursuit of, what cannot be attained, and yet it is found along the way in the act of desiring and pursuing. In the classic film *The Wizard of Oz*, the four friends ask the Wizard to grant their wishes: the Scarecrow asks for a brain, the Tin Man for a heart, and the Lion for courage. The Wizard tells them that he will grant their wishes, if they can bring him the

⁵¹ Epistemic humility has been considered an important aspect of wisdom throughout the ages and in many different traditions of wisdom theory. In the book of Proverbs, the “wise” are those who are open to rebuke (Prov. 9:8). For Socrates, to be wise is to be aware of one’s own ignorance, and to let that knowledge motivate one to pursue understanding. See Swartwood and Tiberius, “Philosophical Foundations of Wisdom,” 12. For several modern wisdom scholars, particularly Glück and Bluck, whose work is discussed at length in this chapter, wisdom is characterized in part by openness to change and new perspectives.

⁵² In thinking of wisdom as something that is practiced rather than possessed, a theoretical understanding of wisdom as “state vs. trait” can be helpful. Igor Grossmann, Franki Y. H. Kung, and Henri C. Santos explain that while some scholars see wisdom through an essentialist perspective as a “trait,” or a “stable and invariable entity” which one either has or does not have, others see it through a constructivist lens as more as a “state,” that is, that “wisdom develops through the process of *active* construction.” While my own position falls more on the constructivist side, I also recognize that there is some assumption of trait-like wisdom in saying that a person is “wise” or “has wisdom” to share. In this sense, Grossman, Kung, and Santos provide a helpful lens for understanding state and trait as complementary, rather than “antagonistic”: “The trait of wisdom can be conceptualized as a density distribution of situation-specific expressions of the construct.... A person’s distribution of states across situations/over time indicates the typical frequency with which the individual is at each level of the continuum (i.e., the trait-level tendency). Thus, the density distribution perspective suggests that an individual has an overall tendency to think and act more or less wisely (i.e., trait). At the same time, this person’s wisdom can still vary from situation to situation (i.e., state).” Igor Grossmann, Franki Y. H. Kung, and Henri C. Santos, “Wisdom as State versus Trait,” in Sternberg and Glück, 261. That is, although a person never possesses perfect wisdom (as they point out, even exemplars of wisdom like Buddha, Confucius, and Gandhi “exhibited much inconsistency in their wisdom across different domains of their life”), a person can be considered more or less wise to the degree that they practice wise thinking and decision-making.

⁵³ Similarly, Sternberg writes that sagacity, a primary component of wisdom, “involves as much an attitude toward knowledge as knowledge itself.” Sternberg, “Wisdom and Its Relations,” 157.

broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West.⁵⁴ After accomplishing their mission, however, the friends realize that they found what they had asked for within themselves along the way. Similarly, when one seeks wisdom, wisdom is not the prize at the end of the journey. Rather, the journey itself cultivates wisdom.

As an approach to knowledge, wisdom is characterized by a *love for learning and a desire for deep understanding*. For the wise person, the learning process and the pursuit of knowledge is loved for its own sake. The quality of desiring understanding for its own sake gives wisdom a sense of playfulness and unhurriedness as the wise person enjoys observing and learning about the world, pursuing ideas that call to them. As I noted above and will discuss further in this definition, wisdom also involves practical judgment and action in the world. Its practical component, as well as its acknowledgment of multiple perspectives and context-specific variables, rather than ultimate truth, ties it closely to Aristotle's *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.⁵⁵ However, wisdom's love for learning and pursuit of deeper understanding also resonates with *sophia* or theoretical wisdom, the contemplative pursuit of truth for its own sake.⁵⁶ Wisdom as an approach or posture toward knowledge delights in the process of discovery itself. The way a child delights in exploring, discovering, and practicing new skills without concern for how it will be useful to them, so too the wise person loves learning whether or not it is immediately practical

⁵⁴ *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by King Vidor, Victor Fleming, George Cukor, Richard Thorpe, Norman Taurog, and Mervyn LeRoy (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [MGM], 1939).

⁵⁵ As Aristotle writes, "Practical wisdom... is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate... but no one deliberates about things invariable.... Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only- it must also recognize the particulars; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with particulars." *Nicomachean Ethics* book VI, section 7, trans. W.D. Ross, accessed August 16, 2022, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.6.vi.html>.

⁵⁶ Unlike *phronesis*, *sophia* is "a contemplative knowledge of metaphysics not directly linked to practical value." Bernard McKenna and David Rooney, "Wise Leadership," in Sternberg and Glück, 656. It is pursued "for its own sake." Ricca Edmondson and Markus H. Woerner, "Sociocultural Foundations of Wisdom," in Sternberg and Glück, 47).

or marketable.⁵⁷ Unlike Aristotle's *techne*, the technical knowledge aimed at producing goods or services for personal or financial gain, wisdom as I define it is not merely pragmatic or utilitarian.⁵⁸ A wise person does not seek out only the information they need to accomplish a goal; rather, they engage in wonder, contemplation, and reflection as ends in themselves.

Another way to think about the combination of *phronesis*'s action and *sophia*'s contemplation is in terms of two Hebrew words related to wisdom, *binah* (understanding) and *tebunah* (competence). While *tebunah* is the "pragmatic, applied aspect of thought operating in the realm of *action*," which "aims at efficacy and accomplishment," *binah* is more "conceptual [and] interpretive"; it "operates in the realm of meaning and aims at insight and comprehension."⁵⁹ While *binah* "may be brought to bear in pragmatic decisions," it does not seek an end other than itself.⁶⁰ However, as Fox points out, these two words often appear together in the book of Proverbs, demonstrating that they are closely linked although distinct, and they both contribute to the overall picture of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, I understand wisdom to include a love for learning and desire for understanding itself, as well as a more pragmatically-oriented skill of discernment (see definition part D below).

Second, wisdom *values multiple perspectives and ways of knowing*. As an *integrative* approach to knowledge that desires *deep understanding*, wisdom examines ideas and situations from many different angles. The wise person values the perspectives of other people, embraces dialectical and dialogical thinking, and combines epistemological approaches. While intelligence

⁵⁷ Similarly, David Orr critiques Western culture's obsession with "fast knowledge," which values profit over wisdom as the goal of knowledge: "Knowledge that lends itself to use is [considered] superior to that which is merely contemplative." David W. Orr, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36.

⁵⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the difference between *techne* and *phronesis*, see McKenna and Rooney, "Wise Leadership," 657.

⁵⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 37-38.

⁶⁰ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 30.

is a function of the cognitive sphere, involving skills like problem-solving, memory, and logic, wisdom is differentiated from intelligence in that it also includes non-cognitive skills and ways of knowing like empathy, imagination, attentiveness, contemplation, and openness. As Labouvie-Vief writes, wisdom is a “dialogue between two modes of knowing”: the more objective mode (*logos*) providing “logical cohesion and stability,” and the more subjective, “organismic” mode (*mythos*) providing “experiential richness and fluidity.”⁶¹ Throughout this project, I generally refer to these two modes of knowing using the shorthand of *cognitive and affective*.⁶² While Monica Ardelt describes wisdom’s affective dimension as “positive emotions and behavior toward other beings,”⁶³ I use the term “affective” in a broader sense more akin to Labouvie-Vief’s term *mythos*, encompassing many different non-cognitive ways of knowing that are more related to emotion or intuition than logic. This includes embodied knowledge, as the body both reflects and creates emotion; “affects are not enclosed in an inner mental sphere” but rather are bound up with the intuitive knowing of the body.⁶⁴

Wisdom’s integration of cognitive and affective ways of knowing, as well as its desire to listen to and learn from others, leads beyond knowledge or mastery of facts; it leads to a more relational understanding and knowing. Parker Palmer writes about Western culture’s obsession with objective thought and rationality; it is typical to hold knowledge at arm’s length, objectifying it, inspecting it, and attempting to master it. The objectification of knowledge leads to a distorted relationship with it, in which humans use knowledge for their own ends rather than entering into relationship with it as a beloved Other.⁶⁵ In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is

⁶¹ Labouvie-Vief, “Wisdom as Integrated Thought,” 52-53.

⁶² See Kramer, “Conceptualizing Wisdom.”

⁶³ Monika Ardelt, “Empirical Assessment of a Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale,” *Research on Aging* 25, no. 3 (2003): 275-324, here 278-279, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027503025003004>.

⁶⁴ Thomas Fuchs and Sabine C. Koch, “Embodied Affectivity: On Moving and Being Moved,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014), conclusion, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00508>.

⁶⁵ See Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, particularly 31.

personified as a woman; Wisdom is thus not an object to be acquired or used, but a person with whom to be in relationship. Relational knowing implies that one engages knowledge reverently, respecting its alterity and mystery.

Third, wisdom *considers the meaning and implications of ideas and events*. Wisdom requires reflectivity; rather than passively allowing events to happen to them, the wise person actively seeks meaning in those events and dwells on their potential for learning and growth. As Judith Glück and Susan Bluck argue, wisdom is not passively gained through life experience; rather, it is cultivated through the way one processes those experiences and the resources they bring to interpret them.⁶⁶ Similarly, Nic M. Weststrate concludes that self-reflection, or “the intentional and effortful processing of life experience” that “examin[es] the deeper meaning of an event,” is important to the development of wisdom.⁶⁷ In addition to the meaning of events (autobiographical or otherwise), the wise person reflects on the deeper meaning of *ideas*. They analyze the assumptions and historical factors that underlie a concept and consider how an idea fits into their larger belief system. Wisdom does not only consider the *meaning* of ideas and events, however; it considers the *implications* of them. The ability to imagine implications brings together the cognitive and affective modes of knowing. On the one hand, the wise person is able logically to think through the ramifications of a doctrine or the potential consequences of a decision. On the other hand, their thought process goes beyond the purely analytical to consider implications from a relational and empathetic perspective; the wise person considers how a decision or belief might affect them, other people, and the planet.

⁶⁶ Judith Glück and Susan Bluck, “The MORE Life Experience Model: A Theory of the Development of Personal Wisdom,” in Ferrari and Weststrate.

⁶⁷ Nic M. Weststrate, “The Mirror of Wisdom: Self-Reflection as a Developmental Precursor and Core Competency of Wise People,” in Sternberg and Glück, 502, 509.

Fourth, wisdom *gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations*.⁶⁸

Insight (or perspicacity) refers to the ability to see through a situation to discern what is going on that may be implicit or veiled. Patrick McKee and Clifton Barber argue that the “essence of wisdom” is being able to see through illusion, including self-deception and distraction.⁶⁹ By integrating multiple perspectives and ways of knowing (part B) to reflect on the meaning of ideas or events (part C), the wise person is able to see deeply, penetratingly, and with insight into situations that others may observe on a more simplistic surface level. *Discernment* refers to the ability to weigh various options and make thoughtful judgments about what one should do, particularly in *complex or uncertain situations* that have no definite answer or clear sense of right and wrong. Adept at seeing through illusion and reading between the lines, the wise person is able to recognize whose interests are at stake and which factors are most relevant in a given situation, and to determine a way forward where others might be paralyzed by uncertainty or lack of clarity.⁷⁰

Those thoughtful judgments and decisions lead to *wholeness and flourishing*, not just for the person making the decision, but as far as possible, for all who are involved. This is the ethical and moral component that differentiates wisdom from intelligence or creativity; wisdom is not

⁶⁸ Although the last part of my definition focuses on what wisdom *gives one* or *enables one to do*, these are still important components of wisdom, without which one cannot be considered to be wise. Similarly, Deirdre A. Kramer presents a model of wisdom in which “cognitive and affective development reciprocally interact to produce a number of wisdom-related skills or processes that enable wisdom to operate through the individual in a variety of ways (e.g., in making life decisions, advising others, and engaging in spiritual reflection). These serve the function of enabling the person to resolve the many and ongoing tasks and stressors of adult life, which in turn fosters continued cognitive and affective development.” Kramer, “Conceptualizing Wisdom,” 281.

⁶⁹ Patrick McKee and Clifton Barber, “On Defining Wisdom,” *IJAHD* 49, no. 2 (1999), 153, <https://doi.org/10.2190/8G32-BNV0-NVP9-7V6G>. Similarly, in one of Sternberg’s studies, “perspicacity” emerged as a key component of wisdom. Sternberg, “Wisdom and Its Relations,” 146.

⁷⁰ John Vervaeke and Leonardo Ferraro argue that an important part of wisdom and insight is “relevance realization,” that is, recognition of which factors are most contextually important in any given situation. John Vervaeke and Leonardo Ferraro, “Relevance, Meaning and the Cognitive Science of Wisdom,” in Ferrari and Weststrate.

for the purpose of having or mastering information, nor self-protection or self-aggrandizement. Rather, wisdom is oriented toward and actively seeks the well-being and harmony of creation.⁷¹ Wisdom has long been connected with *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing; in Aristotle's thought, the one who is wise makes decisions that promote flourishing.⁷² Wisdom thus entails an orientation toward the good and toward a *telos* of flourishing, but it also requires imagination about what *eudaimonia* might look like; the wise person is able to envision and enact a future in which all are able to thrive.

Although wisdom is a concept shared across time and culture, often with overlapping characteristics, it also has a wide variety of definitions and descriptors. Even in the Hebrew Bible one finds multiple perspectives on what wisdom is and how one acquires it; wisdom is both content and skill, both divine and human, both attainable and always out of reach. And yet there are also common themes: the fear of the Lord, attentiveness to and reflection on creation, an emphasis on living well. Similarly, in modern wisdom studies, scholars from a wide variety of fields have posited frameworks for understanding wisdom. While there are as many definitions for wisdom as there are scholars who define it, several core features stand out: wisdom has an ethical component, it is both cognitive and affective, it seeks interconnectedness and integration, and it enables one to navigate life with skill. In my own definition of wisdom, I have incorporated these commonalities in modern wisdom scholarship, as well as some aspects of wisdom from the Hebrew Bible. Ultimately, however, my understanding of wisdom has important differences from the way Israel's sages conceived of it: namely, it focuses more on one's approach toward knowledge than on content knowledge, and it does not include the same

⁷¹ Hence Sternberg and Palmer's identification of global warming and nuclear threat, despite the scientific intelligence behind the development of nuclear weapons, with foolishness. Such are oriented toward the destruction, not the flourishing, of living creatures and the earth.

⁷² Robinson, "Wisdom through the Ages," 16-17.

emphasis on internalizing tradition. Throughout this project, when I refer to the task of cultivating wisdom in young people, I am referring to my own definition of wisdom. Thus, as I explore in the following pages what it looks like to educate for wisdom, I emphasize pedagogical practices that cultivate an integrative approach to knowledge, rather than ones that impart information. Before I explore the task of educating for wisdom, however, I will first examine arguments against and for young people's capacity for wisdom.

Can Young People Be Wise?

When one considers wisdom cultivation as a goal of youth ministry education, it raises the question of what it means for young people to be wise, or if it is even possible for a young person to be wise. Can youth ministers do anything more than teach right and wrong as a way to safeguard against poor decisions and possibly lay a foundation for the future emergence of mature wisdom? Or can young people truly be wise now, in their youth? Are young people capable of the kind of critical thought, reflectivity, perspective-taking, and discernment that wisdom entails? Young people's capacity for wisdom is not often explored in depth in wisdom scholarship, but when it is mentioned in passing, scholars are often not optimistic that young people can be wise.

There are three main arguments against the possibility of wisdom in young people: first, they do not have the necessary life experience for wisdom; second, from the perspective of developmental theory, they do not have the cognitive ability for postformal reasoning; and third, from a neuroscientific standpoint, their brains are not fully developed to allow deliberation and good judgment. I will present evidence to show why each of these arguments is inadequate, then revisit two important aspects of wisdom to argue that young people are capable of wisdom: first,

wisdom is not merely cognitive, and second, one of the most foundational components of wisdom is one's openness to learning and growth.

Erik Erikson, to whom much of youth ministry scholarship is indebted for his concept of the adolescent identity crisis, believed that wisdom was the crowning achievement of the final developmental stage of life; it integrates all the crises and resolutions that came before.⁷³

Because developmental stage theory is hierarchical, meaning that one must successfully resolve one stage before attaining the next, Erikson's theory implies that young people are not capable of wisdom. As Joan Erikson put it in a 1988 New York Times interview, "You don't get wise unless you age."⁷⁴

The correlation between old age and wisdom is longstanding in the popular imagination. Life experience is a criterion for many people's conceptions of wisdom, both in implicit theories (lay conceptions) and explicit theories (scholarly constructions). Not everyone who attains old age is necessarily wise, however, because life experience alone does not guarantee skills of discernment; Nic M. Weststrate argues that it is the quality of reflection on life experience that contributes to wisdom,⁷⁵ while Judith Glück and Susan Bluck argue that it is the internal

⁷³ Erikson's developmental stages are experienced as a crisis between two opposing forces, and successful resolution of these crises results in an ego strength. His first four stages of infancy and childhood are about establishing hope (trust vs. mistrust), will (autonomy vs. shame), purpose (initiative vs. guilt), and competence (industry vs. inferiority). When children reach the adolescent years, they encounter a new crisis and one that is key for the life span: identity vs. role confusion, with the resulting ego strength of fidelity to one's freely chosen role, values, and commitments. In young adulthood, people deal with the crisis of intimacy vs. isolation, successful resolution of which results in love; in middle age, generativity vs. stagnation, resulting in care; and only in older age can one achieve the ego strength of wisdom, which emerges from resolution of the crisis between integrity and despair. That is, in their later years, people reflect on their life and must determine whether they have lived a meaningful and fulfilling life. If they are able to overcome despair, seeing their life as meaningful despite mistakes or regrets, their life review culminates in the ego strength of wisdom. See Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), and Erik H. Erikson and Joan R. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

⁷⁴ Daniel Goleman, "Erikson, in His Own Old Age, Expands His View of Life." June 14, 1988. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/14/science/erikson-in-his-own-old-age-expands-his-view-of-life.html>.

⁷⁵ Weststrate, "The Mirror of Wisdom."

resources one brings to interpreting life experiences.⁷⁶ Either way, for many scholars, life experience is a necessary but insufficient condition of wisdom. If life experience is a necessary condition for wisdom, however, this would exclude children, adolescents, and young adults from being wise. At least for children, in Glück and Bluck's view, this is correct. "In childhood," they write, "wisdom development is only emergent both because the person has encountered very few experiences and because they do not have the social or cognitive skills necessary to integrate challenging experiences."⁷⁷ They go on to say that "the emergence of the life story in adolescence allows for wisdom development to begin in earnest,"⁷⁸ so young people have the capacity to begin developing wisdom, perhaps, but it seems doubtful that Glück and Bluck would say young people themselves *are* wise or *have wisdom* to share with those who are older than they.

The issue of life experience raises the question of *how many* and *what types* of life experiences a person must have before they can reasonably be considered wise. Glück and Bluck suggest that wisdom-cultivating experiences are often "fundamental life challenges"; in addition to negative or painful events, this can include positive changes, like becoming a parent or moving to a new culture, that push people outside their comfort zone and become catalysts for growth.⁷⁹ Their model coheres well with the concept of gaining wisdom through navigating disorientation, cognitive dissonance, and ambiguity, a concept that will be discussed further at various points throughout this project.⁸⁰ However, adults are often too quick to assume that

⁷⁶ Glück and Bluck, "The MORE Life Experience Model."

⁷⁷ Glück and Bluck, "The MORE Life Experience Model," 77.

⁷⁸ Glück and Bluck, "The MORE Life Experience Model," 78.

⁷⁹ Glück and Bluck, "The MORE Life Experience Model," 86.

⁸⁰ For more in-depth reflections on tension, ambiguity, and cognitive dissonance, see the discussion of wisdom's pedagogy in chapter 3, and the discussion of tension and ambiguity in chapter 4.

young people do not experience “fundamental life challenges” or situations that provoke cognitive dissonance.

For example, many young people *do* move to new cultures with their parents, an experience that causes children and teens in particular to wrestle with their cultural identity and feeling out of place.⁸¹ Another example of a fundamental life challenge for some adolescents includes discerning their sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly if they are in conservative religious contexts. In fact, queer young people have regularly been among the most reflective, analytical, and wise students with whom I have interacted. Other examples include adopted children wrestling with identity and belonging, young people who struggle with mental illness, or those who have lost a parent. One could also argue that a toddler becoming a big sibling is a fundamental life challenge. If wisdom-cultivating life challenges are about *new experiences* that substantially shift a person’s perspective or identity, as Glück and Bluck’s examples seem to demonstrate, then younger people with less life experience may actually experience those challenges more often than adults. While Glück and Bluck would say that children and young teenagers do not have the “social or cognitive skills necessary” to process these challenges,⁸² I argue that they do, even if they are not able to articulate their inner struggles and meaning-making to adults in a way that adults perceive as wise. Peter Cariaga, in a study on the grief of Third Culture Kids, quotes a prayer of lament written by a young high school student who was reflecting on their experience of displacement: “There is a time to mourn and one to weep, but when is that? I can’t do it in front of [my sibling] or my parents....As you know well,

⁸¹ See Peter H. Cariaga, “Reading the Bible, Learning Ourselves: A Contextual Bible Study with Culturally Hybrid Youth,” *RE* 117, no. 5 (2022): 426-438.

⁸² Glück and Bluck, “The MORE Life Experience Model,” 77.

my grieving time is often late at night when all is silent.”⁸³ As this quote demonstrates, young people can be reluctant to process their experiences of loss or grief with adults, but their reluctance does not mean they are not grieving or that they are not actively processing it. Below I will discuss further why adults may have difficulty perceiving wisdom in youth.

The second issue related to young people’s capacity for wisdom is whether adolescents have the cognitive ability of critical thought and meta-reflection. Youth ministry scholar David White argues that “critical thought lies outside the comfort zone but not the capacity of young people.”⁸⁴ From a developmental perspective, Jean Piaget believed that children entered the final stage of cognitive development, formal operational thought, around the age of eleven. This cognitive stage involves moving from concrete to abstract thought. In this stage, young people are able to engage in hypothetical reasoning; they are able to consider potential outcomes of a situation or possible solutions to a problem.⁸⁵ While people continue to hone their skills of critical thought throughout adulthood, Piaget’s stages indicate that at the onset of adolescence, young people are cognitively capable of adult reasoning. However, some neo-Piagetian scholars believe that adult cognition does differ from adolescent cognition. In the 1970’s and 80’s, scholars posited another stage of cognitive development: postformal reasoning, which goes beyond the formal operations to include metacognition and dialectical thinking. Many wisdom scholars consider this type of cognition characteristic of, and necessary for, wisdom.⁸⁶ Again, the

⁸³ Peter H. Cariaga, “Reading the Bible, Learning Ourselves: Ingredients for Biblical Study with Culturally Hybrid Youth,” conference presentation at the Religious Education Association annual meeting, July 6, 2022.

⁸⁴ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 48ff. White’s work on practicing discernment with youth will be discussed in more depth toward the end of this chapter.

⁸⁵ William Crain, *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 138-140.

⁸⁶ For discussion on postformal “adult” cognition as distinct from adolescent or young adult cognition, thus making wisdom out of reach for young people, see Patricia Kennedy Arlin, “Wisdom: The Art of Problem-Finding,” in Sternberg, 239; Kramer, “Conceptualizing Wisdom,” 296-297; Karen Strohm Kitchener and Helene G. Brenner, “Wisdom and Reflective Judgment: Knowing in the Face of Uncertainty,” in Sternberg, 212; Juan Pascual-Leone, “An Essay on Wisdom: Toward Organismic Processes That Make It Possible,” in Sternberg, 255ff.

hierarchical nature of the developmental stage theory implies that adolescents are excluded from the thought processes considered necessary for wisdom.

However, the thought processes and cognitive capabilities of young people often seem to defy the linear progression suggested by developmental theorists. For example, Weststrate examines autobiographical self-reflection as a characteristic of wisdom, noting that self-reflection requires “aspects of postformal reasoning—for example, relativistic and dialectical thinking, dynamic integration of cognition and affect, self-criticism and epistemic humility, and emancipation from cognitive biases.”⁸⁷ In Dori Baker’s qualitative research with young women, she guides them in precisely the kind of autobiographical reflection and “exploratory processing”⁸⁸ that Weststrate describes, demonstrating their capacity for postformal reasoning.⁸⁹ Her pedagogical method of Girlfriend Theology invites young women to share in a group an autobiographical experience “about which they [are] curious” and that they wish to explore further.⁹⁰ The group processes and reflects on the experience together: they share their feelings and questions evoked by the story, consider what new theological insight might arise from the story and the ensuing conversation, and identify ways in which the insights of the group might shape their lives going forward. In doing so, the Girlfriend Theology method elicits from young people the kind of wise thinking assumed to be the domain of adults.

The third argument against young people’s capacity for wisdom comes from neuroscience, at least as it is popularly understood in the concept of the “teen brain.” In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, technological advances in brain imaging enabled neuroscientists to better study brain development. They found that the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for

⁸⁷ Weststrate, “The Mirror of Wisdom,” 503.

⁸⁸ Weststrate, “The Mirror of Wisdom,” 509.

⁸⁹ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*.

⁹⁰ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*, 43.

decision-making and impulse control, is not fully developed in adolescence. More specifically, psychologist B.J. Casey and others have posited that the issue is not merely that the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed, but that it develops more slowly than the limbic region, which processes emotional responses, incentives, and rewards.⁹¹ Thus, as the prevailing “teen brain” theory goes, young people make decisions based on emotions rather than rationality. The general public latched onto these findings to explain adolescent mood swings and impulsivity; adolescent brains are “far from mature,”⁹² or in the words of a 2017 *Time* article, “nowhere near fully baked.”⁹³ However, psychologist Robert Epstein explains that the sweeping claims of news headlines are often not supported by the scientific data, whose findings are far more modest than the way they are popularly interpreted.⁹⁴

In recent years neuroscientists have tried to offer a more complex picture of adolescent brain development. As Eva Telzer, director of the Developmental Social Neuroscience Lab at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, puts it, “The adolescent brain was long portrayed as broken, immature, or contributing to problematic behaviors. But in the last five years, there’s been a huge shift toward seeing the developing brain as malleable, flexible, and promoting many positive aspects of development in adolescence.”⁹⁵ However, the more negative assumptions about the “teen brain” continue to shape the imaginations of adults about the perceived

⁹¹ See B.J. Casey, Sarah Getz, and Adriana Galvan, “The Adolescent Brain,” *Developmental Review* 28, no. 1 (2008): 62-77.

⁹² In *Teen 2.0*, psychology scholar Robert Epstein cites multiple news articles from the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, including this quote from a 1999 *U.S. News & World Report* cover story. See Robert Epstein, *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence* (Fresno: Quill Driver Books, 2010), 199-200.

⁹³ Alexandra Sifferlin, “Why Teenage Brains Are So Hard to Understand,” *Time*, September 8, 2017, last accessed August 11, 2022, <https://time.com/4929170/inside-teen-teenage-brain/>.

⁹⁴ Epstein, *Teen 2.0*, 194-200.

⁹⁵ Eva Telzer, quoted in Zara Abrams, “What Neuroscience Tells Us About the Teenage Brain,” *Monitor on Psychology* vol. 53, no. 5, July 1, 2022, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/07/feature-neuroscience-teen-brain>.

incompetence of youth. Ironically, as I wrote these pages, a fellow member of a social media group for youth ministry professionals shared a post to the group from the blog *Grown and Flown*, for parents of teens and young adults: “Dear Mom and Dad, *please stick with me*. I can’t think clearly right now because there is a rather substantial section of my prefrontal cortex missing. It’s a fairly important chunk, something having to do with rational thought. You see, it won’t be fully developed until I’m about 25.”⁹⁶

To say that a developing brain is “incomplete” is a matter of interpretation, not a fact, because the brain continues to change throughout the life span. The corpus callosum continues to grow, gray matter continues to disappear, and brains shrink as we age.⁹⁷ In addition, intelligence and incidental memory peak in the teenage years, then decrease throughout adulthood.⁹⁸ Thus, the brain never reaches a single ideal stage of development, never to change again. One can say, perhaps, that the brain of a sixteen-year-old is *different* than that of a thirty-year-old, but to consider a brain at one stage of the life span “incomplete” seems to be based more on assumptions about young people than on actual neuroscientific data. As Epstein points out, the data itself is relatively ambiguous. The interpretations assigned to it are often based on preconceived notions about adolescent development that young people are in-process, incomplete adults.

The arguments against young people’s capacity for wise thinking thus do not hold up. But despite the fact that young people have perfectly good brains and are capable of critical, dialectical, and integrative thinking, the argument for their wisdom capacity does not depend solely on their cognitive ability. The more important criteria for wisdom, as defined above, are

⁹⁶ Helen Wingen, “Dear Mom and Dad, Please Stick with Me,” *Grown and Flown*, November 3, 2020, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://grownandflown.com/letter-from-teen-to-parents/>.

⁹⁷ Epstein, *Teen 2.0*, 200-202.

⁹⁸ Epstein, *Teen 2.0*, 172, 182-185.

one's approach to knowledge and attitude toward learning. Wisdom is more than intelligence or effective problem-solving; it requires an open and reflective stance toward knowledge. The desire to seek understanding is more important than perfect understanding, and one's openness to correction is more valuable than not needing correction. To return to the neuroscientific perspective, then, the neuroplasticity of the "teen brain"—that is, their ability and desire to learn, and their desire to seek out new experiences—does not demonstrate immaturity or incompleteness but rather "a cognitive, behavioral, and neurological flexibility that allows teens to explore and adapt."⁹⁹ Children and young people are often far more open than adults to trying new things without fear of failure, and that wide-eyed openness that they bring to life experiences is a valuable characteristic of wisdom.

Wisdom also requires affective ways of knowing as well as cognitive and analytical skills. For example, Peter and Susan Pitzele write that Bibliodrama, an improvisational role-playing method of biblical study, lends itself well to intergenerational groups because, while adults may be more able to engage in meta-reflection on the activity, children are "less inhibited" in their role-playing, which provides rich content on which to reflect.¹⁰⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, Bibliodrama democratizes the practice of biblical interpretation, as participants' dramatic choices interpret the text for the group and are just as valuable as the verbal reflection that follows.¹⁰¹ It seems inconsistent to consider that the embodied insight of a child or young person can spark wise thinking in adults, but not to consider the young person wise who provided the insight.

⁹⁹ Zara Abrams, "What Neuroscience Tells Us."

¹⁰⁰ Peter Pitzele and Susan Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama* (1998, repr. Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2018), 67.

¹⁰¹ Lauren Calvin Cooke, "Deep in the Body: Neurodiversity and Embodied Knowledge in Youth Ministry," *JYM* 19 no. 1 (2021), 83.

Wisdom's more affective approach to knowledge includes characteristics that are intuitive and not strictly cognitive, such as the skill of insight. Children and young people often have skills of attentiveness, perspicacity, and keen insight that many adults lack. As Rachel Carson writes, young people have a "clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring," which is "dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood."¹⁰² This clear-eyed vision enables them to see the world in its beauty and possibility, as well as to recognize the ways in which the world is not what it could be. Often, the simplicity of a child's logic or an insightful question from a young person can cut through the distortions and deceptions of cultural myths that limit adult imagination. Hans Christian Andersen illustrated this tendency of children in his folktale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which charlatans weave garments for the emperor that they assure him are invisible to simpletons. For fear of being thought a simpleton, no one, including the emperor, dares to question the invisible (nonexistent) clothes. In fact, to keep up the pretense, everyone in the kingdom remarks on the beauty and quality of the "clothes." In the end, it is a child who reveals to everyone that the emperor is, in fact, wearing nothing at all.¹⁰³ David White writes that, because of their search for coherence, young people are naturally attuned to inconsistencies and contradictions, and they are able to point out the places in which adults have failed to practice integrity.¹⁰⁴ Patrick McKee and Clifton Barber write that their understanding of wisdom as seeing through illusion "easily accommodates the possibility of wisdom in young people,"¹⁰⁵ which suggests that when wisdom is understood in a

¹⁰² Rachel Carson, "Help Your Child to Wonder," *Woman's Home Companion*, July 1956, last accessed August 12, 2022, https://rachelcarsoncouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/whc_rc_sow_web.pdf, 46.

¹⁰³ Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/68/fairy-tales-and-other-traditional-stories/5637/the-emperors-new-clothes/>.

¹⁰⁴ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 148.

¹⁰⁵ McKee and Barber, "On Defining Wisdom," 155.

broader sense than cognitive processes, young people are more likely to be considered capable of wisdom.

Adults may have difficulty recognizing wisdom in young people for a few reasons. First, adults do not often encourage wise thinking or evoke wisdom from young people in the way that Baker's method does. Wisdom is not taught or rewarded in schools, which tend to emphasize the transmission of facts over the thought processes that cultivate wisdom.¹⁰⁶ Students are encouraged to perform well on tests, not to love learning; to acquiesce to what they are taught, rather than question it; to conform to an educational standard, rather than thinking creatively. As a result, young people's relationship with knowledge is distorted. Educational theorist Elliott Eisner posits four values that are communicated implicitly by the educational approaches of American schools.¹⁰⁷ First, schools teach compliance through the way the teacher exercises authority and the way students learn to submit to it. Second, they teach competition over cooperation. Third, the educational system is marked by a cognitive bias; math and science are valued over humanities and the arts. Fourth, the educational system as a whole (not necessarily individual teachers, many of whom push back against these systemic tendencies) prizes economy and efficiency over the spirit of students. Compliance, competition, cognitive bias, and efficiency: all of these values are antithetical to wisdom. If schools do not encourage wise thinking in youth, churches are hardly better; as I will explain further in the next chapter, youth ministry education often does not allow for the questioning and creative thinking needed for wisdom. Thus, adults actively suppress the wisdom of young people while insisting they are not capable of it.

¹⁰⁶ As Sternberg and Hagen note, "schools essentially provide no incentive for the development of wisdom-related skills." Sternberg and Hagen, "Teaching for Wisdom," 373.

¹⁰⁷ Elliott Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3rd edition (New York: Macmillan, 1984), chapter 4. Eisner's work will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

The second reason adults may have difficulty perceiving wisdom in youth is because they curb the agency of young people and limit their realm of influence; young people are restricted from voting, kept from leadership positions in society or in their churches, and have very little control over where they live, what they study, and how they spend their time. Yet adults then consider the decisions young people make as unimportant and do not see their contributions as meaningful. In a refreshing moment of honesty, Almeda Wright reflects on her own skepticism toward the agency of youth:

I noted that when a sixteen-year-old says she wanted to walk around her community and her school, getting to know people and telling them that she loves them and God loves them, I got suspicious. But when we read about clergy walking the streets in Boston or Los Angeles, we herald it as innovative responses to systems of violence.¹⁰⁸

By her reflexivity, Wright brings clarity to adults' double standards for themselves and youth. The wisdom young people apply to their decision-making processes may go unnoticed by adults who are dubious about young people's ability to make meaningful decisions. A child might use wise reasoning in deciding to share a toy, or a young person might exercise wisdom in ending a relationship, but because they are not in positions of power and influence, their decisions are not seen as wise.

Finally, adults base their judgments about whether young people can be wise on their own understandings of what wisdom is. Young people themselves may understand wisdom differently or value different aspects of wisdom than adults do. In a study that examined participants' autobiographical experiences of wisdom, that is, decisions participants had made that they themselves considered to be wise, Glück and Bluck noted that young people's self-described experiences of wisdom were more likely to correlate with empathy than with other

¹⁰⁸ Wright, *Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 200.

aspects of wisdom, such as self-determination and assertion, or knowledge and flexibility.¹⁰⁹

This finding suggests that young people themselves may consider the interpersonal skill of empathy as being more integral to wisdom than one's intrapersonal psychic processes or the quantity of knowledge or life experience one has; they may be more attuned to the ethical dimension of wisdom than its cognitive dimension. The young people involved in my research at Emory's Youth Theological Initiative anecdotally illustrated this hypothesis; when asked to identify a person they consider to be wise, most of them responded by talking about people who were involved in social justice or humanitarian work.¹¹⁰

In discussing how young people and adults may understand wisdom differently, a question that naturally arises is whether wisdom is qualitatively different in young people than adults. Because wisdom is a multivarious, integrative approach to knowledge, certain aspects of wisdom may come more naturally to young people, like a love for learning and a capacity for wonder. Other aspects of wisdom may come more easily to adults, like quantity of life experience or the ability to hold ideas in tension.¹¹¹ It would be a mistake, however, to essentialize either youth or adulthood to say that *only* young people are capable of wonder or *only* adults have the resources to process life experience in a wisdom-cultivating way. Thus, while I want to highlight young people's capacity for wisdom, I also want to be cautious not to romanticize youth itself or say that young people are wiser than adults, destined to lose their

¹⁰⁹ Glück and Bluck, "The Wisdom of Experience," 203.

¹¹⁰ Responses included, "A man from my church; he's done a lot of stuff, he was involved in the civil rights movement, and he founded an organization that provides low-income housing, and an organization that provides water in Africa"; "My dad; he's taught me a lot about social justice issues and also God and life itself"; "My dad has helped me learn things about myself and my faith, and about social justice."

¹¹¹ John A. Meacham argues that although the *essence* of wisdom (a balance between knowing and doubting) remains the same across the life course, "there can be differences in the quality with which wisdom is expressed"; namely, that children and young people may express wisdom more simply, whereas the "accumulation of information, experiences, and insights" as one ages results in more "profound" wisdom. See John A. Meacham, "The Loss of Wisdom," in Sternberg, 201.

wisdom as they age. For both youth and adults, regardless of which aspects of wisdom come more easily, it is important to practice and grow in wisdom throughout the life span.

Educating for Wisdom

When one considers the task of educating for wisdom, another question that arises is whether wisdom can be taught, or whether it is more akin to an innate disposition or even a personality trait.¹¹² There are some characteristics of wisdom, such as empathy or perspicacity, that seem to come more naturally to some people than others. For Glück and Bluck, wisdom is cultivated through the way one navigates, interprets, and integrates life experiences, and one is more likely to do that well if one possesses certain internal resources, like the quality of openness. People who are less receptive to new experiences and perspectives may find that they have to leave their comfort zone to cultivate wisdom more than those who are naturally open and receptive. However, this does not mean they are incapable of learning to be more open, and thus wiser. Glück and Bluck write that “while openness is partly an innate personality trait,” it can be cultivated in children whose caregivers encourage openness to new experiences and tolerance of others.¹¹³

As noted above, characteristics of wisdom that may be innate in many young people, such as a love for learning, a desire to ask questions, and a willingness to explore and innovate, are often stifled by systems that silence them, discourage creativity and critical thought, and deaden their love for learning. If wisdom can be repressed by educational approaches that reward uncritical absorption of material and conformity of thought, however, it stands to reason that wisdom can also be cultivated through educational approaches that encourage and enliven young people’s desire for knowledge and ability to think for themselves. David White writes of his

¹¹² See Grossmann, Kung, and Santos, “Wisdom as State versus Trait.”

¹¹³ Glück and Bluck, “The MORE Life Experience Model,” 81.

experience teaching young people at a summer theology program at Claremont School of Theology, and watching their curiosity and love for learning come alive: “Their excitement seemed to signal something like a conversion, a qualitative shift in their capacity for learning about themselves and their world, the discovery of a new delight that involved more than the passive consumption promoted in our culture.”¹¹⁴ White’s pedagogy, in creating the space for his students to participate in their own learning, was cultivating wisdom in them.

Thus, some people may be more predisposed toward wisdom than others, and some have been actively discouraged from the pursuit of wisdom while others have been nurtured into it. In both cases, however, wisdom can be cultivated through educational practices that foster a love of learning and invite students to experience the thought processes characteristic of wisdom. Because wisdom is something that must be actively sought and practiced, a pedagogy for cultivating wisdom must invite students to practice “modes of thinking” that comprise wisdom.¹¹⁵ This is a significant pedagogical reframe from the way most schools and churches teach. The practice of high-stakes testing in the United States puts tremendous pressure on teachers to ensure that their students perform well on exams. This pressure leads to educational approaches that “teach to the test”: teachers are more likely to exclude non-tested subject areas like art, music, and physical education, and more likely to forego “cooperative learning and creative projects in favor of more traditional lecture and recitation to prepare students for high-stakes tests.”¹¹⁶ In youth ministry education, as will be explored further in the next chapter, curriculum is designed to teach students key concepts and how to apply them, not to help them

¹¹⁴ David F. White, “Pedagogy for the Unimpressed,” in *Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian Resistance in a Consumer Culture*, by Brian J. Mahan, Michael Warren, and David F. White (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 23.

¹¹⁵ Sternberg and Hagen, “Teaching for Wisdom,” 375.

¹¹⁶ Christie Blazer, “Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing,” *Research Services, Miami-Dade County Public Schools* vol. 1008 (January 2011), accessed August 15, 2022, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED536512.pdf>, 3.

practice skills like asking good questions, seeing issues from different perspectives, or considering possible outcomes of situations.

However, educating for wisdom is less about the *content* one teaches, and more about the *way in which* one teaches it.¹¹⁷ Robert Sternberg, Alina Reznitskaya, and Linda Jarvin write that educating for wisdom “is not accomplished through a didactic method of ‘imparting’ information about wisdom,” but rather by inviting students to “actively experience various cognitive and affective processes that underlie wise decision-making.”¹¹⁸ That is, educating for wisdom is primarily a matter of inviting students to encounter, engage with, construct, and pursue knowledge for themselves. The role of the teacher is not to do the thinking for students, but rather to create invitations and craft learning environments in which students do the thinking for themselves. Although Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin do not explicitly name the “cognitive and affective processes” underlying wisdom, wisdom’s cognitive processes include skills of logic, inquiry, analysis, and metacognition. Affective processes include skills like empathy, imagination, attentiveness, contemplation, and openness. Some “modes of thinking” that underlie wisdom, such as wonder and reflection, which will be explored further in chapter three, do not fall neatly into either category but are a blend of cognition and affect.

¹¹⁷ This insight resonates with what Freire wrote about liberative pedagogy. The liberative educator cannot awaken critical consciousness in students by *telling them about* structures of inequity and oppression, because such an approach is an “attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication.” Liberative pedagogy is not about teaching liberation but rather enacting it. See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 65, 79. Similarly, the one educating for wisdom cannot do so by giving students wisdom or teaching them about wisdom.

¹¹⁸ Robert J. Sternberg, Alina Reznitskaya, and Linda Jarvin, “Teaching for Wisdom: What Matters Is Not Just What Students Know, But How They Use It,” *LRE* 5, no. 2 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460701440830>, 151. This argument is in direct contrast to Michel Ferrari and Juensung Kim, who argue that education for wisdom “should progress from being predominantly tacit, indirectly developing habits and values in students, to predominantly explicit” in high school and college. See Ferrari and Kim, “Educating for Wisdom,” in Sternberg and Glück, 358.

Educators can help students experience the *cognitive processes* of wisdom by teaching students to think critically and analyze situations and ideas. Categories of questions that can help students practice analysis include questions of assumptions (“What does this argument or idea take for granted?”), motivations (“Why might someone think or do this?”), influences (“How do social institutions, economic pressures, political forces, and/or religious beliefs impact this situation?”),¹¹⁹ and implications (“How does this policy or belief affect a certain group of people?”). Questions like these help young people understand an issue more deeply, and they also help young people practice metacognition as they learn to analyze their own thinking.

In a youth ministry context, inviting students to practice analysis might look like what Elizabeth Corrie calls “learning theology deliberately.” Presenting her students with multiple images of Jesus (as friend, martyr, teacher and healer, and God’s Son), she asked them to consider:

What is appealing about this image of Jesus? What do you imagine is appealing about this image for other Christians? What concerns do you have about this image of Jesus? What concerns do you imagine other Christians might have about this image? If you made this the primary image of Jesus to focus on for your spiritual growth, what would you be giving up? What concerns would you be ignoring? Can we identify any shared values among some or all of these different images of Jesus Christ?¹²⁰

In the context of Bible study with youth, it might look like asking questions as diverse as, “What does this text assume to be true about God?” (assumptions), “Why do you think these two different translations might have made the choices they did?” (motivations), “How do you think the experience of exile shaped this author’s understanding of God?” (influences), or “How does this passage confirm, nuance, or challenge your beliefs?” (implications).

¹¹⁹ White, “Pedagogy for the Unimpressed,” 31.

¹²⁰ Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 65.

Educators must be intentional in crafting pedagogies that invite critical thought; some students may resist active learning at first because it chafes against the passivity into which they have been socialized. Freire writes about a time when his students felt uncomfortable speaking up and participating in their own learning; because Freire was the expert, they suggested that he should be the only one talking.¹²¹ In my own experience teaching young people to ask questions of the biblical text (and thus practice the wisdom-cultivating skill of inquiry), they were simply unable to formulate questions at first.¹²² This did not mean that they did not have the capacity for curiosity, but merely that the capacity had been so deadened by lack of use that it required sustained effort and intentional cultivation to bring it back to life. Once they began to formulate questions, however, the transformation was like the one White described above; it was as if the floodgates were opened to thought processes long suppressed, and to the delight of the learning task itself. The one who educates for wisdom, then, must be aware that it takes patience and commitment to cultivate the cognitive processes of wisdom.

Educators can create invitations for students to practice wisdom's *affective processes* by moving beyond intellectual analysis and attending to more embodied, relational, and spiritual ways of knowing. bell hooks, a black feminist educator, provides a lens for seeing education as a more holistic enterprise that goes beyond cognitive processes. Although she was deeply influenced by Freire, hooks saw the limitations of a pedagogical approach that focused primarily on the mind. Drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy of engaged Buddhism, hooks emphasized the importance of mind, body, and spirit in an "engaged pedagogy" that focused on the holistic well-being of students to "enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply."¹²³ hooks'

¹²¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 37.

¹²² Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 69-70.

¹²³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14-15, 22.

pedagogical approach values the role that emotions play in epistemology and education; joy and playfulness are seen as an important part of learning, not a distraction from it. In her focus on healing and holistic well-being, hooks' engaged pedagogy also reorients education toward flourishing.

Parker Palmer's work, too, moves beyond critical analysis to a more affective engagement with knowledge. He suggests that the learner's engagement with content should not be with an attitude of control or mastery but with reverence and respect for its mystery and otherness, and learners should aim toward *love* as the goal of knowledge. By reframing the learner's approach to knowledge, Palmer's work helps to cultivate the love for learning characteristic of wisdom. One of the ways in which Palmer suggests educators can foster a more contemplative learning environment is to practice silence.¹²⁴ Many teachers are uncomfortable with periods of silence in the classroom, barely able to wait a few seconds for student responses before nervously filling in the silence with a re-statement of a question or moving on to another topic. However, transformative learning can happen in long periods of silence in which students are able to process and reflect on the content, as well as practice the metacognitive process of paying attention to, and reflecting on, their own engagement with the content.

Like processes of critical thinking, affective processes can feel foreign and intimidating to students at first who have been taught to prioritize the mind or distrust non-cognitive processes in learning environments. The body rarely plays a role in the classroom, and practices like "contemplation, wonder, appreciation, or merely *sitting with* an object of study are dismissed as a waste of precious instructional time."¹²⁵ In school, students' bodies are engaged in physical

¹²⁴ Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 80-82.

¹²⁵ Brett Bertucio, "The Cartesian Heritage of Bloom's Taxonomy," *SPE* 36, no. 4 (2017), 495, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-017-9575-2>.

education; in youth group, in high-energy opening mixer games. But embodiment and affect are often viewed as separate from the task of learning, which is assumed to reside in intellectual comprehension. The educator who desires to cultivate wisdom must value, and teach students to value, embodied, relational, and affective processes in their engagement with knowledge.

Many pedagogical techniques blend cognition and affect to great effect. For example, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed draws out the intuition and embodied knowledge of students through improvisational exercises designed to illuminate social realities. Image Theatre, which is one of the core practices of Theatre of the Oppressed, invites participants to "[sculpt] their own and others' bodies into static images that can depict concrete situations or abstract ideas," thus "making thought *visible*."¹²⁶ The facilitator then engages participants in critical analysis of what they have brought to light in the theater games. In the realm of Bible study, Pitzele's Bibliodrama technique is another method that engages participants in both cognitive and affective processes; he invites participants to role-play characters in the biblical text, reading between the lines and imaginatively filling in the script as they go. The role-play itself is an affective enterprise, but the debriefing process afterward takes a more cognitive turn as the group analyzes what transpired and more intentionally reflects on the insights that arose in the process.¹²⁷

As I argued in the introduction, wisdom is not content to be imparted, but rather an approach to knowledge to be cultivated. A pedagogical approach adequate to the task of cultivating wisdom, then, must invite young people to experience and practice the cognitive and

¹²⁶ Alexander Santiago-Jirau and S. Leigh Thompson, "Image Theatre: A Liberatory Practice for 'Making Thought *Visible*,'" *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed*, ed. Kelly Howe, Julian Boal, and José Soreiro (London: Routledge, 2019), 156, emphasis original. For a description of Theatre of the Oppressed in a youth ministry context, see White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, 101-103, 128-130.

¹²⁷ Pitzele and Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*.

affective processes of wisdom: modes of thinking and knowing that characterize wisdom as I have defined it in this chapter. Education for wisdom, therefore, should facilitate students' own encounters with content rather than transmitting content to them as in the banking model. It should foster embodied and affective ways of knowing as well as critical thinking and dialogue; it should invite young people to reflect on the meaning and implications of ideas and events, considering processes of cause and effect as well as adjudicating among perspectives; and it should give them space to process complexity and navigate ambiguity without premature resolution. What might such a pedagogy for cultivating wisdom look like in youth ministry? In the next section, I will discuss the work of youth ministry scholars whose vision for youth ministry resonates with my own. Then, in chapter two, I will look more closely at the practice of biblical education in youth ministry, and what it might look like to cultivate wisdom in biblical education with youth.

Wisdom in Youth Ministry

My work shares affinities with other youth ministry scholars and the practices and pedagogies they have developed, particularly around the concept of vocational discernment. Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, David White, Elizabeth Corrie, and others have written about empowering young people to live out their vocation, which overlaps with wisdom's concern for flourishing.¹²⁸ Many of the creative pedagogies suggested by these and other scholars engage young people in ways of thinking, knowing, wondering, and imagining that cultivate wisdom.

¹²⁸ Most of the books in the Youth Ministry Alternatives series revolve around the concept of vocation and empowering young people to be agents of change and healing in the world. See Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007); Fred P. Edie, *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007); Frank Rogers, Jr., *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011); Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006); and White, *Practicing Discernment*. See also Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*.

Within the field of youth ministry, David White comes the closest to articulating a vision for youth ministry that cultivates wisdom in youth. In his book *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, White argues that young people are naturally drawn toward loving God and neighbor, thinking critically, and acting meaningfully in the world, but that our culture domesticates youth, tamping down these innate longings. He suggests reclaiming the ancient Christian practice of discernment as a way to awaken the agency of youth and help them live out their God-given vocation to love God and neighbor and heal the world. Borrowing language from the Shema of loving God with one's heart, mind, soul, and strength, White identifies four broad pedagogical movements of discernment that should shape the agenda of youth ministry.

The first step, loving God with one's heart, is to help young people identify "generative heart themes"¹²⁹—that is, to recognize and name the social issues that are important to them—through a number of Freirean pedagogical exercises designed to draw out their questions and concerns. The second step, loving God with one's mind, invites young people to use cognitive skills to practice critical thinking and analyze these generative themes. Beginning with the assumption that "young people's alienation from their intellect...is not natural or normal,"¹³⁰ but that it is a result of modern education deflating their love for learning, White explores ways of awakening youth's intellect as part of the practice of discernment. The third step, loving God with one's soul, is the practice of contemplation. For this step, White explores the practices of remembering and dreaming: looking backward to draw wisdom from the faith tradition, and forward in hope, using the prophetic imagination to envision a better and more just future. This Janus-faced approach helps youth to understand, appreciate, and appropriate the resources of

¹²⁹ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 98. The language of "generative themes" is borrowed from Paulo Freire, which is discussed earlier in this chapter.

¹³⁰ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 115.

their faith tradition without being bound to the status quo. Finally, White's pedagogy of discernment culminates in the fourth step, loving God with one's strength. This step is action-oriented, helping youth engage in public social action as a result of their process of discernment and theological reflection.

White's work has several resonances with my own, perhaps most obviously in our shared goal of cultivating habits and practices of discernment with youth, inviting them to practice the cognitive and affective processes that undergird wise thinking, such as reflection, critical analysis, and imagination. We share a commitment to valuing the agency of young people, believing that our culture disempowers youth and fails to take seriously their voices, their contributions, and their wisdom. Another significant strength of White's work is his acknowledgment of multiple ways of knowing. His work is heavily influenced by Freirean critical pedagogy and places a strong emphasis on the intellect, but he does not neglect more affective ways of knowing, particularly in the movements of loving God with one's heart and soul. And yet, while there is significant overlap, there are also some important differences and ways in which this current project contributes to the field of youth ministry.

The first difference is subtle but important: White's work focuses on *practicing discernment*, while mine focuses on *cultivating wisdom*. Wisdom and discernment are different although closely related.¹³¹ For White, discernment is a process with specific steps and tasks,

¹³¹ My differentiation between wisdom and discernment is primarily rooted in the fact that my definition attempts to combine some aspects of *sophia* and *phronesis*. While discernment is the practice of judgment and wise decision-making, and it is an *aspect* of wisdom, wisdom is an approach to knowledge that pursues understanding for its own sake, for the love of it. In modern wisdom studies, although the word "discernment" itself is not used frequently, scholars often refer to decision-making as a part of wisdom, but not as synonymous with it. In the Hebrew Bible, while the book of Proverbs does focus substantially on discernment (that is, making wise decisions in particular situations), making wisdom and discernment seem nearly synonymous, Job and Ecclesiastes seem to be less concerned with decision-making and more concerned with meaning-making, which still falls under the rubric of wisdom.

applied to particular justice issues raised by the first step. The concept of wisdom features very little in his work, receiving less than two pages of attention. In this brief treatment, White equates the wisdom epistemology of the Hebrew Bible with intellectual exploration, logic, and reason, a move which oversimplifies the wisdom literature.¹³² More central to White's vision of discernment is Brueggemann's concept of the prophetic imagination.¹³³ White's usage of the prophetic imagination points toward his main goal: the practice of discernment as he understands it is more about young people challenging and deconstructing the status quo than it is about an invitation to know more deeply, to contemplate unanswerable theological questions, or to pay attention to a wandering insect merely for the sake of being present in the world.

Wisdom, on the other hand, marvels at the wandering insect without concern for how it might lead toward any particular goal. It is a disposition to be cultivated, an inner resource that undergirds, and is strengthened by, the practice of discernment. As noted above in my definition of wisdom, wisdom *gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations*. Thus, wisdom is not merely theoretical; it includes a practical dimension that acts in the world with a vision toward flourishing. But it is not practiced or cultivated in order to achieve a particular aim; wisdom loves and pursues understanding for its own sake. At the conclusion of each chapter, White reflects briefly on the "internal goods"¹³⁴ of each practice: that is, the way that each practice contributes to the healing and well-being of young people themselves, helping

¹³² White, *Practicing Discernment*, 118-119.

¹³³ For more on the prophetic imagination, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniversary edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018). The prophetic imagination and the prophetic capacities of youth are explicitly named in White's movements of listening (94-95) and remembering and dreaming (144-149). The thrust of White's work, however, seems more shaped by the overall vision of prophetic challenge and social critique than the more wondering, wandering way of wisdom. For further reflections on the relationship between wisdom and imagination, see the discussion on Amanda Pittman's work in the introduction.

¹³⁴ White's usage of the term "internal goods" is borrowed from Alisdair MacIntyre. For more on MacIntyre's definition of internal goods, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 188-189.

them make sense of their lives, fall in love with learning, see clearly and compassionately, and find fulfillment in their vocation.¹³⁵ He acknowledges that while he tends to speak of the four practices in a “utilitarian fashion,”¹³⁶ it is important to reflect on their intrinsic value “apart from a full-blown discernment process with ultimate aims.”¹³⁷ It is within those last few pages of each of White’s chapters that my work comfortably resides. Both White and I value both self-actualization and social action but we each choose one over the other to foreground. White’s work focuses on young people shaping the world; my work focuses on shaping young people.

The second difference between White’s work and my own is one that differentiates this project from most other youth ministry scholars who have developed creative and liberative pedagogies: White’s pedagogy is about structuring youth programs in general. Bible study is explored as a practice that facilitates dreaming,¹³⁸ but not much attention is given to the nature of the biblical text, practices of interpretation, or how the Bible is actually used in youth ministry. My work centers more on biblical education, constructing a framework for engaging the Bible with youth and applying it to the task of teaching wisdom literature. While the goal of cultivating wisdom and the pedagogical practices I suggest can apply more broadly across youth ministry programming, in this dissertation I seek to apply them specifically to the practice of biblical education with young people.

My work has also been deeply influenced by Mark Yaconelli’s vision for youth ministry as laid out in *Contemplative Youth Ministry*. Like White, Yaconelli begins with the lived experience of young people and culminates in action. His three steps to nurturing the

¹³⁵ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 112, 136, 171, 198-199.

¹³⁶ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 136.

¹³⁷ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 112.

¹³⁸ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 152-159.

contemplative life in students are *noticing* how God is already present and working in their lives, *naming* their experience of God by “[locating it] within the language...of the Christian tradition,”¹³⁹ and *nurturing* the outgrowth of contemplation by following where God is leading. Yaconelli’s work, like White’s, helps young people discern how they are called to participate in God’s work in their immediate context. Because Yaconelli frames his paradigm in terms of contemplation, however, there is a bit more “for-its-own-sake-ness” to it; he focuses on nurturing students’ *being* more than their *doing*. Similarly, Dori Baker’s *Doing Girlfriend Theology* also lifts up the healing practice of listening to the stories of young people; Baker values wonder, exploration, reflection, and theological imagination for their own sake, as life-giving practices for girls.¹⁴⁰

My work in this project pulls together the pedagogical practices of discernment from White’s action-oriented paradigm and the more contemplative, exploratory models of Yaconelli and Baker to propose a model for youth ministry that cultivates wisdom in young people. Although all three of these scholars’ visions for youth ministry create learning spaces conducive to the cultivation of wisdom, none of them frame their work in terms of wisdom. By theorizing wisdom, as well as applying the goal of wisdom cultivation specifically to biblical education with youth, I hope that this project can provide a new lens for understanding and evaluating other philosophies of, and pedagogies for, youth ministry.

Assessing Wisdom in Youth Ministry: An Embedded Approach

How does one assess an educational goal as ambiguous and subjective as cultivating wisdom? How can youth ministers ascertain if young people are indeed growing in wisdom? It is difficult to quantify a student’s approach to knowledge or openness to ambiguity. It is easier to

¹³⁹ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 203.

¹⁴⁰ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*, especially 2, 11-19.

observe the decisions young people make than the thought processes underlying those decisions, but it is reductive of wisdom's complexity to evaluate it only on the basis of young people's decisions. Such an approach falls back on an inadequate understanding of wisdom as behavior management and avoidance of immoral activities or risk behavior. Assessing wisdom thus cannot be a matter of behavioral expectations, nor can it proceed by way of a checklist. Instead, it requires sustained attentiveness to the voices, thought patterns, and decision-making processes of young people.

Although scholarly assessments of wisdom are for the purpose of theoretical research rather than evaluation of an educational paradigm, they provide three important insights for the task of assessing wisdom in youth ministry. First, in scholarly research, the most fruitful methodologies for studying and assessing wisdom are based on close listening to participants' thought processes and careful analysis of wisdom characteristics that arise.¹⁴¹ Interviews are then coded for certain thought processes the researcher considers characteristic of wisdom. The methodology of close listening demonstrates that wisdom assessment is a time-intensive process that requires paying attention, listening, and reflecting on what arises. Second, when analyzing participant responses, wisdom scholars look for complex thought patterns, *not* any given answer to a problem. In fact, the hypothetical scenarios given to participants are designed to be complex enough that there is not one clear solution.¹⁴² In this way, scholarly research on wisdom provides a model for assessing wisdom in a richer and more complex way than a right/wrong paradigm.

¹⁴¹ Some researchers have presented participants with complex hypothetical scenarios and asked them to reflect aloud on the issues involved, either in monologue or in dialogue with the researcher. Others have asked participants to reflect on autobiographical experiences in their life. All of these methods require more in-depth engagement and analysis by the researcher than less time-intensive methods, like having participants self-report characteristics or measures of wisdom, but they also yield richer insight. See Ute Kunzmann, "Performance-Based Measures of Wisdom: State of the Art and Future Directions," in Sternberg and Glück, 277-296.

¹⁴² Kunzmann, "Performance-Based Measures of Wisdom," 280.

Third, because people tend to exhibit more wisdom in some moments or situations than others, it is important not to let any single decision be the sole determining factor in whether a young person is practicing or growing in wisdom.¹⁴³

Thus, assessment of wisdom in youth ministry must be contextual and embedded, rather than the objective kind of assessment represented by quizzes. Youth ministers look for signs of wisdom in their interactions with youth, paying attention and listening patiently with contemplative eyes and ears. A youth minister seeking evidence of wisdom might consider whether their students seem more excited to learn, more willing to ask questions, more able to consider ideas from different angles, than they did a few weeks or months ago. An embedded approach to wisdom assessment requires that youth ministers develop the habit of looking and listening to what is said and what is left unsaid, reflecting mindfully and prayerfully on their encounters with their students to discern signs of growing wisdom. To assess wisdom, then, is itself a task of discernment. The insightful youth pastor looks for evidence of wisdom's components in students' openness and overall attitude toward learning, ability to think critically and relationally and to make connections between ideas, in the thoughtfulness with which they make decisions, and in their consideration for the flourishing of others.

For example, I recall a moment when a high school junior approached me after youth group and asked, "Back when people were racist, did they support their racism with ideas from the Bible?" The question did not demonstrate perfect knowledge or fully attained wisdom, as evidenced by the assumption that racism is a past problem. (To the student's credit, they were not defensive when I pushed back on this assumption but acknowledged that they had

¹⁴³ Grossmann and his colleagues, in discussing how wisdom is both a context-dependent state as well as an overall trait, suggest that "researchers interested in a trait-level profile of a person's wisdom are well advised to assess wisdom-related characteristics across multiple domains and/or time points." Grossmann, Kung, and Santos, "Wisdom As State Versus Trait," 262.

misspoken, which is in itself a characteristic of wisdom.) Based on other conversations I had had with this student, I knew that they were wrestling with their church's attitude toward LGBTQ issues, which was background knowledge that helped me read between the lines.

This question, along with multiple other observations I had made of this student, was an indication of wisdom in several ways. In addition to demonstrating curiosity and a desire to learn and understand, the question demonstrates complex thought processes and underlying motivations. The question reasons from a known situation (people use the Bible to argue against LGBTQ rights) to discover if there are analogous situations that might shed light on the legitimacy of the biblical arguments. It considers how the Bible can be interpreted differently by different people. Furthermore, it considers the implications for real people of certain ideas and interpretations of the Bible, and it has in mind the flourishing both of people of color and LGBTQ folx. Finally, to return again to the student's desire for understanding, this question modeled that desire on a deeper level than merely seeking information. It was a question whose answer could not provide an answer to the student's deepest question: "Is it okay to be gay?" My answer to the student's explicit question would not end their searching process but would instead prompt further reflection on how racism is, or is not, analogous to homophobia; what the Bible says that might illuminate both issues; and by what standards one judges the merit of biblical interpretations. The student could easily have asked the core question with which they were wrestling, but they never did. Instead, they were determined to do the hard work of navigating a complex issue to make thoughtful decisions that would lead to flourishing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have defined wisdom as an integrative approach to knowledge characterized by a love for learning and a desire for deep understanding, that values multiple

perspectives and ways of knowing, that considers the meaning and implications of ideas and events, and that gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations in ways that lead to wholeness and flourishing. On the basis of this definition, I argue that young people have the capacity for wisdom. However, this capacity is often overlooked by adults, who may judge wisdom by a behavioral standard or by cognitive ability as described in developmental stage theories. Furthermore, wisdom can be cultivated through educational approaches that invite students to experience the “modes of thinking,” the cognitive and affective processes, that characterize wisdom. In youth ministry, this might look like encouraging young people to ask questions, presenting multiple viewpoints and asking students to analyze and evaluate them, practicing contemplation together, or integrating cognition and affect through the use of exercises like Bibliodrama. Youth ministry programming may look very different across geographic location and culture, denomination, youth group size, and youth ministry goals. Despite the diversity in how youth programs are structured, however, an important component of most youth ministries is biblical education. The Bible is the sacred text held in common by Christian communities and considered in some way to be normative for faith and practice. Thus, it is to this unifying practice of biblical education, as well as framing our task in terms of wisdom cultivation, that we now turn.

Chapter Two

Doing What the Bible Does: Biblical Education with Youth

In his book *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, Andrew Root opens with an anecdote about Nadia, his fictional youth pastor whose narrative grounds his Theological Journey through Youth Ministry series. When Nadia is challenged by a member of the church about the way she engages the Bible in youth ministry, she recognizes in the middle of the conversation that “she hadn’t really done much thinking about her view of Scripture. She’d never really stopped to think about what she really wanted kids to do with the Bible—or what she hoped the Bible would do to them, for that matter.”¹ Nadia’s realization reflects the experience of many youth ministers for whom biblical education is a taken-for-granted aspect of youth ministry. Because the Bible is Christianity’s sacred text, it seems like a given that it should play some role in the religious education of youth. However, youth ministry professionals and scholars alike do not give enough attention to important questions of interpretation and hermeneutics, what role the Bible actually plays in youth ministry education and why, or how one’s pedagogy shapes young people’s engagement with the Bible. What function is the Bible actually serving? How are young people, their thinking, and their theology shaped by the way they encounter the biblical text, and to what end? What beliefs and values are communicated by the way youth ministers present the text and ask their youth to interact with it?

Few resources exist to help youth ministers think through these questions. Biblical education is a surprising lacuna in youth ministry scholarship. Much of the literature on youth ministry focuses on a purpose or agenda for youth ministry, or on creative pedagogy more

¹ Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 19-20.

generally, but very little has been written specifically on engaging the Bible with youth either in theory or practice. To my knowledge, the most in-depth treatments of biblical education in youth ministry are Root's book referenced above, which is a 114-page volume in his *Theological Journey through Youth Ministry* series, and Andrew Zirschky's *Teaching Outside the Box*, which applies five different philosophies of youth ministry and religious education to the task of engaging the Bible with young people.² Zirschky's book is immensely practical and helpful, and his five approaches help practitioners think deeply about their goals for biblical education. However, the approaches he describes are different ways youth ministers can teach the Bible; there is little discussion of the nature of the biblical text itself. Most recently, Elizabeth Corrie has devoted a chapter in her book *Youth Ministry as Peace Education* to biblical education with youth, in which she suggests a pedagogy of questioning and argumentation based on her belief that the text itself models such an approach.³ The Bible shows up somewhat incidentally in other youth ministry literature, as practices like lectio divina or Bibliodrama are suggested, but these pedagogical suggestions are more in service to a vision for youth ministry than they are an outworking of reflections on the Bible itself.⁴ Very little has been written in the field of youth ministry to help youth ministers think deeply about the nature of the Bible, the role it should play in youth ministry, and the purpose of studying the Bible with young people.

For youth ministers with theological education who have taken courses in biblical interpretation, a gap often still exists between biblical scholarship and youth ministry. As a scholar whose work intersects both fields, I have experienced this gap firsthand. I was not taught

² Andrew Zirschky, *Teaching Outside the Box: Five Approaches to Opening the Bible with Youth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

³ Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, ch. 4.

⁴ For example, see White, *Practicing Discernment*, 152-159; Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 85-87; Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 218-219.

either in my undergraduate theology studies or in seminary how to apply the insights of biblical criticism to the way that I taught the Bible. Youth ministry classes focused on pedagogical technique, program development, and the developmental capacity and psychological needs of young people. When the Bible was discussed in youth ministry classes, it was more about whether one's pedagogy was engaging and attention-getting than what that pedagogy communicated about the Bible. For example, in one of my undergraduate classes on "Educating Adolescents in the Church," students were assigned to teach different types of lessons, one of which was mastering the art of the object lesson as a way to engage teens' attention and to make a lesson memorable and "sticky." Students were graded on the lesson's creativity and "stickiness," but no feedback was given on our use of the biblical text. The gap in the academy between biblical scholarship and practical theology reinforces youth ministry's tendency to teach the Bible without reflecting deeply on the *why* and *how* of biblical education.

In this chapter, I will begin by offering my own answer to the question: What is the Bible, and why do we read it in youth ministry? I will then describe and evaluate a common approach to teaching the Bible in youth ministry, which I call the "key text and takeaway" approach, and what it implicitly communicates about the Bible and its role in youth ministry. I then propose an alternative approach to biblical education that moves from "doing what the Bible says" to "doing what the Bible does": that is, at its most foundational level, doing theology. The chapter concludes by showing how the tools of biblical criticism can help youth ministers analyze what the Bible is doing, or how it is constructing its theology, in any given text, and use those insights to construct a lesson in which youth are invited to do the same.

The Bible as a Sacred Text

As a young person growing up in the Churches of Christ, a tradition that proclaimed itself as having “no creed but the Bible” and sought to replicate the patterns of worship described in the New Testament, I strived to learn as much as I could about the Bible. I participated in a yearly Bible Bowl, for which I spent months studying to answer questions like, “How many Ephraimites were slaughtered at the Jordan because they couldn’t pronounce the word ‘Shibboleth’?”⁵ In Sunday School, it was common to practice what we called “sword drills”: the teacher would call out a biblical reference, and students would race to see who could find it first. Because the Bible was considered the inspired, inerrant Word of God, knowledge of the biblical text was valued for its own sake; even Bible trivia that had no obvious relevance to matters of faith and practice was worthy of attention and study. My love for the Bible led me to major in biblical studies and theology in college, including a minor in biblical Greek. As I went deeper into the original languages, methods of biblical criticism, and the history of biblical interpretation over the centuries, two things happened.

First, my understanding of what the Bible *is*, and what it means for it to be authoritative, began to change. As I learned about the history of the Bible and its composition, particularly the historical context of its authors and the layers of redaction present in the text, it became more difficult for me to see the Bible as the trans-historical, purely Holy-Spirit-dictated document I had believed it to be. It was more complicated and required more interpretation than I had previously realized. Second, despite the occasional uncertainty and anxiety caused by the growing pains of shifting understandings of biblical authority, I fell even more deeply in love with the Bible than before. My growing awareness of its mystery and complexity, as well as the limitations of my understanding, inspired a new reverence for the text as an Other. Rather than

⁵ The answer, found in Judges 12:6, is 42,000.

seeing it as something to be mastered or used, I began to see it as a vast and deep ocean of spiritual insight that invited endless exploration but whose depths could never be fully plumbed. Although I could no longer understand the Bible as a repository of unambiguous rules or principles, or a complete blueprint for a faithful Christian life, I came to see the ways in which its theological language, images, and frameworks shaped the way I understood, interpreted, and participated in God's ongoing work in the world.

Now, as both a pastor and a scholar, I recognize the Bible as inspired and authoritative, but this confession is tempered by the recognition that the Holy Spirit works in more mysterious, complex, and collaborative ways than I had previously imagined. God was not the only agent involved in the production of the Bible; rather, human beings in their messiness and complexity and imperfect understanding were invited to participate with God in passing down the faith. What I had not accounted for in the biblical theology of my upbringing was the presence of communities of faith throughout the ages who had engaged in the tasks of reading, interpreting, translating, and canonizing my beloved sacred text. This complicated my understanding of the Bible because I could no longer read it as coming directly from the mouth of God, unmediated and unmarred by human hands. Instead, I have come to understand it as a more complex process of God working through human flesh, as God has done throughout history and as God did in the person of Jesus Christ, to reveal Godself to humanity *through humanity*. This recognition shifted my understanding of the Bible to something that is simultaneously human and divine: It is the collective witness of God's people to God's action in the world, and it is through the faithful witness of human beings that God chooses to be revealed to us.

I believe that the Holy Spirit inspired and worked through those who wrote the earliest texts that would become the Bible. However, the work of the Holy Spirit did not end when pen

met paper; it continued through the complicated processes of redaction, translation, and canonization that brought us the Bible in its current form, even in the midst of the uncertainty and disagreements that characterized those processes. And just as the Holy Spirit continued to inspire those involved in the history of the text, the Holy Spirit continues to be present to modern readers of Scripture, enlivening their understanding as they are open to being shaped and transformed by the sacred text that has been passed down to them.

Similarly, the Bible's authority comes not from the Bible itself or the words on the page, as though they were sacred in and of themselves. Rather, the Bible's authority resides in the encounter between text and reader(s). The Bible on a shelf cannot force anyone to do anything; without readers submitting themselves to the witness of the text as they seek God, it holds no authority. As Root points out, the Bible can only be authoritative *in a context*, as communities of faith encounter God through its testimony.⁶ The authority of the Bible thus comes from the confession of communities of faith throughout the centuries who have recognized and affirmed it as a faithful witness to the character and work of God. And yet, as Root's quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, there is always an interplay of agency between the text and the reader. We *do* something with the Bible, but the Bible also *does* something to us.⁷ As readers of the text, we must do the work of interpreting it, discerning its meaning and its relevance for us. We may—as those who redacted, canonized, and translated the Bible did—wrestle with it, disagree

⁶ Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 81.

⁷ When I speak of the text itself as an agent, or say that the text *does* something, I mean several things that are all in interplay with one another and are difficult to disentangle. First, from a historical perspective, I mean the intent of those who authored and redacted the text, which cannot be fully known to us but is always a matter of interpretation. Second, from a rhetorical perspective, I mean the words of the text which may contain meanings that go beyond the author's intent, particularly when placed in juxtaposition with other theologies within Scripture. Third, from a theological perspective, I mean the work of the Holy Spirit that guided all these processes and continues to speak to us through the text. These three aspects work together to produce a text that itself possesses a kind of agency to shape the theological imagination of the reader.

with it, or value some parts over others. And yet the Bible is a book that “reads us even as we read it,” interpreting our experience even as we interpret it, surprising us, convicting us, changing us.⁸

Although we live in a time and culture far removed from that of the Bible’s authors, facing new and unforeseen cultural shifts, philosophies, and ethical dilemmas, the witness of the Bible provides its readers with the theological resources to discern and interpret God’s work in our own contexts, and to imagine faithfully what it looks like to inhabit God’s world and to live as the people of God.

Implicit Curriculum and Biblical Education

In many churches, as in Nadia’s and in the church of my upbringing, as long as young people are being exposed to the biblical text and learning about it, little thought is given to what is communicated in the *way* that it is taught. However, curriculum design and pedagogy matter in more ways than whether they can keep students’ attention. The way the Bible is used in youth ministry communicates something about the nature of the Bible and trains youth in certain ways of reading it.

Introduced briefly in chapter one, educational theorist Elliott Eisner argues that the curriculum one teaches is far broader than what appears in a scope and sequence. He identifies three curricula that all schools, and by extension, all Sunday schools, teach.⁹ The *explicit* curriculum is what is typically thought of when one thinks of “curriculum”: the subject matter and content that is intentionally taught. However, as Eisner shows, the explicit curriculum is only the tip of the iceberg of what students actually learn. There also exists a vast *implicit* curriculum,

⁸ Eugene Peterson, introduction to *The Message Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 9.

⁹ Eisner, *The Educational Imagination*, chapter 4.

which is what students learn through the way in which the explicit curriculum is taught.

Seemingly mundane and inconsequential decisions, such as how the chairs in the room are arranged or how a youth room is decorated, are all implicitly teaching alongside the intentional curricular content. Through the lens of implicit curriculum, learning activities are far more than a vehicle for a lesson; they become part of the lesson itself.

Eisner's third type of curriculum is the *null* curriculum: that is, what is *not* taught. The null curriculum includes the *content* that is not taught; as noted in chapter one, the teach-to-the-test approaches into which teachers are pressured lead to the neglect of fine arts and practical life skills like home economics. In the same way that the implicit curriculum includes certain ways of thinking and behaving, the null curriculum also includes *thought processes* that are not taught. According to Sternberg and Hagen, wisdom is included in the null curriculum of public schools, neglected in favor of information transferals and purely cognitive skills; "schools essentially provide no incentive for the development of wisdom-related skills."¹⁰ What is neglected in the explicit curriculum, Eisner argues, communicates to students what is and is not important; it shapes and limits young people's imagination.

Although Eisner writes about secular education, his theory applied to a youth ministry context provides a lens for understanding the theological import of pedagogical decisions. Every pedagogical choice that a youth minister makes in biblical education, whether intentionally crafted or a default mode of teaching, implicitly communicates something about the nature of the biblical text and the role that it plays in shaping the life and faith of their students. For example, to pray a text or read it aloud together communicates an understanding of the text as liturgical. The Bible is more than a textbook of facts to be learned; its language permeates the lives of its

¹⁰ Sternberg and Hagen, "Teaching for Wisdom," 373.

readers, shaping faith and practice. A small group approach shows that the text is to be interpreted communally, while a consistent lecture-based approach to teaching communicates that the text must be explained by an expert. If one consistently ignores any part of the canon, this null curriculum communicates that that book or corpus is not important for faith formation. For better or worse, the ways in which youth ministers do, and do not, engage the Bible shape the way young people understand and approach their sacred text.

The Key Text and Takeaway Approach

In the absence of resources on how to engage the Bible with youth, many youth ministers default to a very common way of teaching the Bible: the key text and takeaway approach, which focuses on a brief applicable Bible passage and provides students with a clear theological principle or moral imperative derived from the text.¹¹ As Amanda Pittman recalls from her youth group days, the task of understanding the Bible meant “being able to rightly discern the (typically restrictive) moral precept for application to my adolescent life.”¹² This goal led to a pedagogical approach concerned with “a persistent, often narratively reductive, search for the

¹¹ For example, in *Grow* youth curriculum, each lesson has a key text, supplemented with a few other brief texts, and a “Big Idea.” A series from their 2021-22 scope and sequence, entitled *With You*, is illustrative of the curriculum as a whole. Lesson 1 focuses on Job 2:11-13, “Job’s friends sit with him in silence,” supplemented with Mark 10:46-52 (the healing of Bartimaeus) and Matthew 18:20 (“for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”). The “Big Idea” of the lesson is to “Be with people when they’re grieving.” Lesson 2 focuses on Ruth 1:1-18, “Ruth sticks with Naomi,” supplemented with 1 John 4:13, for the Big Idea “Be with people when they’re lonely.” Lessons 3 and 4 of the series, and the curriculum as a whole, follow the same pattern. “2021-22 Scope and Sequence,” *Grow*, shared with the author upon request. *Ministry to Youth* follows a similar pattern in their lessons and series; many of their free lessons are based on a brief key text and a “Bottom Line.” For example, a sample lesson on “Letting Go” is based on Isaiah 43:18-20 (although no context is given to explain the text), and the “Bottom Line” is “Let go of the past and look forward to what God is doing in your life right now.” Nick Diliberto, “Youth Group Lesson on Letting Go,” *Ministry to Youth*, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://ministrytoyouth.com/youth-group-lessons-on-letting-go/>. For further examples of the key text and takeaway approach from *Ministry to Youth*, see chapter five, where I discuss their series on Proverbs. Lifeway’s *Explore the Bible* curriculum on Job and Ecclesiastes will be explored in depth in chapter five, but it follows the same general pattern, with a key text and a “Central Truth” to ground the lesson. See also the following pages for examples from *Orange*.

¹² Pittman, “Knowing the Way,” 15.

clear principle for application.”¹³ In *Teaching Outside the Box*, Zirschky identifies this as the “instructional approach” and defines its goal as helping students “understand a small portion of Scripture and then help them apply it to their lives.”¹⁴ This approach works either for exegetical or topical lessons. For topical lessons, the key text may be very brief and illustrate the point the teacher desires to make. For exegetical lessons, the text that is explored is often longer, but from that text the teacher often chooses a smaller excerpt to serve as the key text.

Key texts are brief, usually only a verse or two, and they make sense as a unit, seemingly easily understood without context and applicable to an individual. They are usually either inspirational and encouraging (like Jeremiah 29:11), or they appear to have a straightforward “go and do” injunction or moral. One typically does not see a key text from Leviticus, or a verse that recounts the generations of a patriarch, because these texts cannot stand alone or convey an applicable message without context or explanation. The key text approach relegates to the null curriculum texts that seem complicated or boring, and, perhaps most importantly, texts that acknowledge pain, doubt, or the absence of God. Students are unlikely to be asked to recite together, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” or write it on an index card to tape to their mirror. An approach that consistently chooses key texts implicitly communicates that the Bible is a repository of helpful one-liners, much like a day-by-day calendar full of motivational sayings, but this neglects the complexity of the biblical text as well as the complexity of life.

The takeaway is also brief and memorable; it is the lesson summed up in a single sentence, often prefaced by “If you don’t remember anything else I’ve said today, remember this.” The takeaway is the application of the key text, telling students how the text is relevant to their lives and how it should inform their faith and practice. There are two main problems with

¹³ Pittman, “Knowing the Way,” 15.

¹⁴ Zirschky, *Teaching Outside the Box*, 12.

the takeaway: the first is that it is concerned with giving students *content* to learn, rather than engaging them in *processes* of thinking and learning. The takeaway represents the teacher's, or curriculum writer's, own interpretation and application of the text in a pre-digested nugget that does not require the student to do their own interpretive work. It falls into what Freire calls the "banking model" of education, in which the teacher deposits information into the minds of students, rather than asking students to engage content for themselves.¹⁵ As Freire writes, there are two stages in the banking model: first, the teacher "cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons," (that is, the teacher studies the material for herself), and second, the teacher "expounds to his students about that object."¹⁶ In this process, "the students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher."¹⁷ The two stages of the banking model describe perfectly what happens in much of youth ministry education, as will be demonstrated further by the data in chapters four and five: educators come to their own conclusions about the meaning of a biblical text and distill it into a catchy takeaway. Then, educators provide students with the takeaway to memorize, rather than presenting them with the text itself to explore.

The second problem with takeaways, stemming from the first, is that they value convergence and uniformity. Rather than students "taking away" different ideas from an encounter with the text, they all learn the same principle. Takeaways tend to be definitive, rather than generative; rather than beginning conversation, they end it. By telling students what to think and how to understand a biblical text, takeaways limit, rather than cultivate, students' theological imaginations. The uniformity of thought engendered by the takeaway is made even more

¹⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

¹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

¹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

problematic by the fact that the takeaway is shaped by the educator's own concerns and biases. Rather than discerning the meaning of Scripture in community, students are expected to internalize uncritically the teacher's interpretation.

A caveat is in order here: when I discuss the limitations of takeaways, I do not mean that educators should not have learning goals for their students. It is important for educators to approach curriculum design with goals for what they want students to know or do as a result of their teaching; otherwise, teaching becomes unfocused and directionless. Unlike a takeaway, which distills the content students are expected to learn, a learning goal describes the skills students will acquire and the thought processes in which they will engage as they learn.

For example, in a lesson on the Passion narrative(s) in the Gospels, one might approach a lesson with the learning goal that students will be able to “identify several factors contributing to Jesus’s death,” or in simpler terms, to “explain why Jesus died.” To that end, the educator might provide students with copies of the text, asking them to highlight people who were involved in Jesus’s death, or other phrases that indicate a reason or cause for his crucifixion.¹⁸ On the other hand, a *takeaway* from a lesson on the Passion might be, “Because Jesus died for us, we should live for him.”

In this example, the learning goal is generative; it invites student engagement with the material, rather than distilling the teacher's own engagement with it, and in so doing, it makes space for divergent interpretations. Although a teacher might also help students identify some of the contributing causes, the goal is to help students read and interpret the text for themselves.

¹⁸ For example, in John's Gospel, potential causes include Judas' betrayal (John 18:2), Caiaphas' recommendation to the Jewish leaders (John 18:14), because Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God (John 19:7), because Pilate was afraid (John 19:8), because Pilate had been given power “from above” (John 19:11), and because of Pilate's loyalty to Caesar (John 19:12). While the learning goals identified here are cognitive, describing what learners should be able to understand, other learning goals might be more affective, describing a desired outcome of learners' emotional engagement with the narrative.

The takeaway, on the other hand, is definitive; it tells students how they should understand and apply the text, rather than inviting them to engage with the text for themselves. By presupposing one certain reading and interpretation of the Passion (namely, that Jesus died “for us”), it excludes other interpretations. However, if another reason Jesus died is “because leaders wanted to hold onto their power,” as an astute eighth grader in my youth group once pointed out, this provides a whole new lens on the text and potentially suggests some very different life applications than “living for Jesus.” In this instance, supplying the students with a takeaway would have foreclosed other fruitful readings of the text.

Thus, a well-written learning goal avoids the two issues with the takeaway. First, it avoids the two-step process of the banking model Freire describes; a learning goal, rather than engaging the material on behalf of students and explaining it to them, identifies how educators want students to engage the content and practice their own “acts of cognition.” Second, although the learning goal provides a *direction* for the lesson, it does not assume the *conclusion*; it is open to divergent interpretations and opinions.

Despite these problems with the key text and takeaway approach, there are several reasons why this approach is a natural choice for youth ministers. First, the key texts are memorable. If one of the goals of biblical education is for young people to have a repository of familiar Scriptures to which they can turn, the key text approach is a way to build up their repertoire and encourage them to memorize passages. Second, the takeaway makes the text seem relevant. Getting teenagers interested in the Bible is a perennial concern of youth ministers, and their buy-in is more likely if they can see how this ancient text applies to their experience and is

immediately relevant for their life.¹⁹ Third, as Zirschky points out, this approach may be the only way of engaging Scripture in youth ministry that has been modeled for youth ministers, or to which they have had exposure either in their own church experience, or because this is the approach taken in the curricula they use.²⁰

For example, *Orange*, a popular curriculum used by many youth ministers, is representative of the key text and takeaway approach to biblical education in youth ministry. The overview for their 6-8th grade curriculum describes it as “helping you break down concepts for your middle schoolers and navigate the difficult transition from childhood to adolescence.”²¹ Note that the language here refers to *concepts*, not necessarily *texts*, which is reflected in the curriculum’s topical emphasis. Although every lesson contains a biblical text, the point of this curriculum is not to teach exegetical skills. For 9-12th graders, the curriculum is about “helping your students navigate the unique challenges of high schoolers in a way that will stick with them long after they graduate.”²² In both cases, the goal of the curriculum is to “navigate” transitions and challenges that are unique to adolescence. Perhaps it is simply assumed that, because this is a Christian curriculum, these goals will be accomplished through the lens of faith. However, the

¹⁹ Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 24. In surveys conducted for this dissertation, youth ministers identified getting/keeping youth interested or engaged, and helping youth see the relevance of the text, as the top challenges of biblical education.

²⁰ Zirschky writes, “Almost all of them [youth ministry curricula] approach teaching from what can be called the instructional approach. . . . The goal of this approach, as it is often described by curriculum writers, is to help students understand a small portion of Scripture and then help them apply it to their lives. This approach is used over and over and over again in most churches because it is replicated over and over and over again in most published curriculum and teaching resources. Even those youth workers who write their own curriculum tend to fall into the instructional approach because it’s all they’ve ever experienced.” Zirschky, *Teaching Outside the Box*, 12.

²¹ Orange, “XP3 Youth Ministry Curriculum,” accessed March 9, 2022, <https://thinkorange.com/xp3-youth-ministry-curriculum/>.

²² Orange, “XP3 Youth Ministry Curriculum.”

fact that developmental challenges feature in the description, rather than references to growing in faith, or studying and understanding the Bible, is telling of the curriculum's key goals.²³

The way the curriculum is developed reflects these goals: the curriculum really is focused on *concepts* (not biblical texts) that address challenges of adolescence. The three-year scope and cycle, which is a rough sketch to be filled in with more detail as each year's curriculum is written, contains general topics like identity, resilience, and wise choices.²⁴ However, no biblical texts have yet been selected for the upcoming years, which seems to indicate that the developmental challenges, not the Bible, drive the curriculum. Although the 2020-2021 curriculum cycle begins with a four-week series about reading the Bible, the rest of the year is topical, with series on comparing oneself to others, sex and dating, dealing with family, and spiritual disciplines. Each lesson contains a key text of 1-4 verses and a takeaway: "Don't compare your worth with their [social media] posts," "Jesus knows your potential," "When your family changes, your mindset matters."²⁵ Some series stay within one book of the Bible, but like many topically-based curricula, the key texts come from all over the canon, making it difficult for students to establish an understanding of the larger biblical context. In a series about emotions, for example, the texts come from Romans, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, James, Philippians, Matthew, and Mark.

²³ Michael Warren observed the same issue in an analysis of vision statements for young adult ministries, and he critiques youth and young adult ministry's over-reliance on developmental theory. He concludes that the "standard account" of young people is "individuals in psychological pain needing psychological healing and little else." Warren, "The Imaginations of Youth," 48.

²⁴ Crystal Chiang, "It's Here! Meet the All New 2021-2022 XP3 Scope and Cycle," *Orange Students*, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://orangestudents.com/its-here-meet-the-all-new-2021-2022-xp3-scope-cycle/>.

²⁵ Orange, "XP3 2020-2021 Scope and Cycle." While this particular Scope & Cycle is no longer accessible, the Scope & Cycle for the current year is available to download at https://thinkorange.com/xp3-youth-ministry-curriculum/?__hstc=212212683.d93f754f7695d71d98ddef059fb7225d.1664331113456.1664331113456.1664331113456.1&__hssc=212212683.2.1664331113456&__hsfp=1047695623.

A stand-alone lesson in the 2020-2021 cycle is on “Coping,” and its key text is Lamentations 3:22: “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail” (NIV for high school, NLT for middle school).²⁶ This passage from Lamentations is a classic inspirational “key text” from the Old Testament, one of the few rays of hope in a rather bleak text. The book of Lamentations is a communal lament over the horror of war and exile, a context that seems far removed from twenty-first century American youth, but this text finds its application in helping young people cope with difficult feelings.

The way the Bible is used in this curriculum reveals a few key assumptions about its role in youth ministry. As established above, *Orange* uses the Bible as a tool for helping young people navigate adolescence and survive the tumultuous transitions it brings. By foregrounding topics and then choosing key texts from various parts of the canon to address them, the *Orange* curriculum implicitly communicates that the Bible is a reference book of sorts: for each challenge of adolescence, for each life lesson or key takeaway that will help youth navigate middle and high school, a corresponding Bible passage exists that will illuminate their situation and provide sage advice. The key text and takeaway approach can be more or less fleshed out with context, but as the steady diet of a youth ministry’s biblical education, it trains young people to see the Bible as a kind of handbook for navigating adolescence as a Christian. I have poor body image? There’s a Bible verse for that. My parents are getting divorced? Scripture talks about how to cope with that. People are gossiping at my school? I have a porn addiction? The Bible tells me how to handle it.

There are two problems with the key text and takeaway approach, which can be succinctly summarized in Amanda Pittman’s language that it respects neither the nature of the

²⁶ Orange, “XP3 2020-2021 Scope and Cycle.”

reader nor the integrity of the biblical text.²⁷ The first problem is that it treats young people as passive consumers of the Bible's content; it does not invite young people to explore the text critically or equip them to think theologically. Educational theorist Benjamin Bloom, in his hierarchical taxonomy for teaching and assessing, provides a helpful heuristic device for educators to consider how they might engage students in increasingly complex ways of thinking.²⁸ The revised version of Bloom's cognitive-domain taxonomy includes six levels of cognition that build on each other: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create.²⁹ *Remember*, the foundational level, involves assimilating content from the teacher and is assessed by a student's ability merely to repeat it. With *understand*, a student demonstrates comprehension by stating a concept in their own words. With the third level, *apply*, the student builds upon their understanding and is able to transpose a piece of information to a different context, like applying a mathematical equation to a word problem, or a key text to a modern scenario. *Analyze* is about making connections between different pieces of information; it asks the student to compare and contrast different ideas, ask critical questions, and examine the assumptions behind ideas. It is the process by which one comes to a deeper kind of understanding than the surface-level comprehension of what one is taught. *Evaluate* asks the student to critique and offer their own judgment of ideas, as well as to defend their own. In the final level, *create*, the student synthesizes their knowledge, skills, and judgment to create something new.

²⁷ Pittman, "Knowing the Way," 69.

²⁸ Bloom's taxonomy, like all taxonomies, can be a bit too simplistic. Learning is not quite as linear as the taxonomy suggests; there is often some overlap between levels, and the top two levels were switched in the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. There is also some disagreement about which verbs or learning objectives fit into which level. However, the taxonomy still provides a helpful framework for thinking about different modes of learning.

²⁹ Anderson and Krathwohl, *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing*.

The key text and takeaway approach typically ends with application, Bloom's third level, of the key text or principle, often with questions like "How can you love your enemies at school?" But the lessons end there, while the higher levels of learning (analyze, evaluate, and create) are often neglected. Students are not typically asked to analyze what Jesus is doing with the Law in the Sermon on the Mount, or to evaluate whether it is ethical to love one's enemies when it might cause harm to one's friends. In the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy, there are endless possibilities for exploration of the biblical text that rarely materialize in youth curriculum. It is less theologically risky to interpret the text for young people and end with application than to invite them to interpret the text themselves, to question core doctrines, to disagree with the biblical text, or to construct their own theology. As Kenda Dean writes, the church prefers to treat young people as consumers of theology, rather than people who help to construct it.³⁰

The second problem with the key text and takeaway approach is that it perpetuates a misunderstanding of, and inadequate ways of reading, the Bible; it sets young people up for confusion and disappointment when they realize the Bible is not as simple as finding a key verse that clearly addresses whatever situation they may be facing. When young people's primary exposure to the Bible is through key texts and takeaways that are divorced from the larger biblical context and assumed to apply directly to their twenty-first century adolescent experience, it provides an unrealistic picture for young people of what the Bible is and how to read it. Such an approach can set young people up for failure when they attempt to use the Bible to find answers to life's challenges the way they learned in youth group, and they discover instead that it

³⁰ Kenda Creasy Dean, "Fessing Up: Owning Our Theological Commitments," *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 30.

is full of confusing ancient laws, prophetic oracles of judgment against nations with strange names, and downright boring genres like genealogies, lists of tribal inheritance, or catalogs of proper atonements. Even beloved childhood stories like Noah's Ark are more complex and troubling than they remember from their youth, and these stories do not articulate clear-cut morals the way they were presented in Sunday school flannel graphs. As Root writes in critique of the reference-book approach, "When kids read it [the Bible] expecting direct advice about what to do, they often find it impenetrable... They page through it, looking for the section about high school humiliation or college choices, only to find stories about kings and lepers, and debates about circumcision."³¹

Similarly, in her chapter on biblical education in *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, Elizabeth Corrie draws on the work of biblical scholar Timothy Beal, who shares his own experience reading the Bible as a teenager. Beal's experience serves as a perfect illustration for the issue Root describes. Growing up with an understanding of the Bible as an instruction manual or Magic 8-Ball, Beal believed that "all the answers he needed about life would be found easily and clearly in the Bible."³² When he failed to find clear answers, Beal became discouraged and stopped reading it altogether. Reflecting on the way Beal, and so many other young people, are implicitly taught to understand the Bible as a topical guidebook, Corrie warns, "When we treat the Bible as if it were 'God's textbook,' a source that speaks directly and unambiguously

³¹ Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 58.

³² Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 77. Beal writes, "I conceived of the Bible as God's book of answers, which if opened and read rightly would speak directly to me with concrete, divinely authored advice about my life and how to live it. This way of thinking about the Bible was not just my own private notion. It was, and still is, the most common understanding of the Bible: the literal Word of God, God's own book, The Book of all books, plainly revealing who God is and what God wants me to do and believe, from everyday things like dating and diet to ultimate things like heaven and hell." Beal goes on to note the number of instruction manuals that call themselves "Bibles," a choice that reveals a popular cultural understanding of the Bible as authoritative, univocal, practical ("a reference manual and dependable guide"), comprehensive, and exclusive. Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 3-4.

about everything from dating to career choices to current social debates, we set young people up for disillusionment when they actually try to read it and discover how messy and cacophonous it actually is.”³³ By “messy and cacophonous,” Corrie is referring to the fact that the Bible does not always (or even often!) speak with a unified voice about any given issue, the way that key text approaches imply. Instead, it contains multiple genres and perspectives from various authors in different social locations and contexts that are sometimes in conflict with one another.

In his annual lecture on hermeneutics in Introduction to the Old Testament, Joel LeMon unpacks what he refers to as “proof-texting”: essentially, the key text and takeaway approach. LeMon makes clear that this is not intended to be a derogatory term, but simply describes what is happening when someone finds a Scriptural passage to answer a modern question, or that supports a modern argument, without paying attention to its ancient context. Proof-texting is the natural hermeneutic that derives from an understanding of the Bible as a book that provides answers to today’s questions. However, proof-texting is not a sustainable way to read the Bible, or a guaranteed way to prove one’s point or win an argument, precisely because of the diversity (or cacophony) of voices and perspectives in the Bible. As LeMon explains, “When someone takes up an argument about a particular belief or practice, chances are, they are going to find a text that they think provides a proof for the position that they espouse.”³⁴

The tensions created by diverse perspectives within the Bible undermine the simplicity of the key text and takeaway approach. Because the Bible does not speak with a unified voice, the key text approach can lead to confusion later on when young people try to read and interpret the Bible on their own. For example, in the *Orange* lesson on “coping” referenced above, the key

³³ Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 81.

³⁴ Joel LeMon, “Holy Analogies: How to Interpret God’s Word Today,” lecture at Candler School of Theology, October 22, 2020.

text from Lamentations 3:22 actually presents a minority perspective in the book, a brief moment of reflection and hope that God will not actually punish Zion forever. Its glimmer of hope emerges from surrounding texts about babies dying in the streets and priests slaughtered in the sanctuary. Within the same book or even the very same chapter, one could choose a key text that discusses the violence of God against Zion, which is significantly less comforting to young people struggling to cope with their own suffering and feelings of abandonment. Which perspective is “correct”? How does a young person decide which key texts are normative?

In his book *How the Bible Actually Works*, making arguments that resonate with those above, biblical scholar Peter Enns explains why the Bible should not (really, why it *cannot*) be understood as a rulebook or reference manual. Three characteristics of the biblical text make it impossible to read this way: first, it is ancient. A great gap in time and culture exists between the text and its readers that makes it impossible to cut and paste directly into one’s life without interpretation and discernment. Second, it is ambiguous; the Bible often does not lay out in clear, direct terms how one should think or live. Instead, it is comprised of narratives and ancient laws, poetry and prayers, and personal correspondence written to struggling churches. If the Bible were intended to be a rulebook, Enns argues, it would be laid out in a more orderly, perhaps topical, fashion. Instead, when we come to the Bible looking for answers, “we find we are usually left to work things out for ourselves at the end of the day.”³⁵ Bringing up several questions and needs for clarification raised by the ambiguity of the Old Testament law codes, Enns reflects, “Even biblical laws, where one can’t be faulted for expecting absolute crystal clarity, invite—even instigate—a lively discussion.”³⁶ If this is the case even with law, how much more so with deriving clear answers from poetry! Third, it is diverse: The Bible is

³⁵ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 8.

³⁶ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 59.

comprised of a multitude of human voices over the centuries, some of which are in conflict with one another or are constantly reinterpreting the old to make sense in a new context. The writers of the Bible, then, were themselves doing what Enns encourages in place of looking to the Bible for answers, what Andrew Root encourages youth ministers to help young people learn to do: learning from and building on the tradition in order to discern and interpret the work of God in their lives and in the world today.

Cultivating Wisdom in Biblical Education

Several years ago, my spouse and I, interviewing for a youth ministry position, sat across the table from eight members on the search committee. A parent of one of the teens, clearly hesitant about our seminary education, spoke up: “We want our teens to see the Bible as a coherent, unified whole. So, are you going to come in and introduce a bunch of, you know, tensions and controversies?” Her question reflected a common concern in youth ministry. If biblical education is supposed to help young people navigate the confusion of adolescence, the Bible needs to be a solid foundation and trustworthy resource, a guidebook that speaks clearly and univocally on matters of faith and practice and provides young people with the timeless truths that they can apply to their lives. If one acknowledges that the contents of the Bible are time-bound, or that the Bible says more than one thing on any given topic, how can one find a way through to what is normative? Isn’t it better to give students a coherent, harmonized biblical theology so that they can graduate with their faith intact? Furthermore, if the Bible does not provide answers or a coherent theology, what does it provide? Dismantling the key text approach and engaging the Bible in all its messy complexity can be a frightening prospect.

Enns’ three characteristics of the text—that it is ancient, ambiguous, and diverse—may seem like difficulties that need to be explained away or smoothed over so that one can find

answers to adolescent problems or rules for righteous living. Instead, Enns argues, these very characteristics are “what make the Bible *worth reading at all*.”³⁷ Rather than clear-cut rules or fail-safe guidance for living, the Bible offers its readers something better: the opportunity to wonder, question, puzzle, and reflect on its contents in a way that leads us to wisdom. Enns writes,

The Bible...was never intended to work as a step-by-step instructional manual. Rather, it presents us with an invitation to explore. Or better, the Bible, simply by being its ancient, ambiguous, and diverse self, blocks us from the simple path of seeking from it clear answers and rather herds us toward a more subtle, interesting, and above all sacred quest. That quest is summed up in one beautiful, deep, too often neglected, but absolutely central and liberating biblical idea...*wisdom*. ...Shepherding us toward wisdom, kicking and screaming if need be: that is the Bible’s purpose.³⁸

The gift of the Bible, Enns writes, is in its invitation to its readers to do this hard intellectual and spiritual work of wisdom, “not to keep that hard work from happening” by providing answers that take away the need to think and interpret.³⁹ This is why young people are shortchanged by biblical education that smooths over the difficulties of Scripture as well as using Scripture to smooth over the challenges of adolescence: tension is productive for cultivating wisdom and necessary for growth.

In the previous chapter, I argued that educating for wisdom is about inviting young people to experience and practice the modes of thinking, the cognitive and affective processes, that lead to wisdom. When youth ministers or curriculum writers do all the thinking and interpreting for them, choosing an easily applicable key text and telling them what it means, young people are not given an opportunity to work the muscles of wisdom by engaging and wrestling with the biblical text themselves. If one accepts that the Bible is best understood not as

³⁷ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 6.

³⁸ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 11.

³⁹ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 20.

a reference book or an index of answers to adolescent problems, how should one's pedagogy reflect that? How can youth ministers teach the Bible differently than the key text approach, in a way that recognizes and takes advantage of its wisdom-cultivating potential and invites young people to do the "hard work" of puzzling over it, wrestling with it, and doing theology in conversation with it?

The answer, I suggest, is in focusing biblical education less on "doing what the Bible says," which is a proof-texting approach that ends with application, and more on "doing what the Bible does," which invites young people to analyze how the Bible is doing theology, evaluate what they are reading, and construct their own theology. The move toward "doing what the Bible does" addresses both problems with the key text approach: first, by having a more realistic understanding of the complexity of the Bible and its way of making meaning, and second, by inviting young people to participate in the process of interpretation and theological reflection by critically engaging the biblical text on its own terms.

From "Doing What the Bible Says" to "Doing What the Bible Does"

The same concern for theological coherence that led the youth group mom to ensure we would not introduce "tension and controversy" has been an issue in the field of biblical theology as well, and for the similar reason that much of biblical theology is concerned with normative claims for the faith community. In the history of Old Testament theology in particular, scholars have tried to identify the *Mitte*, or the theological center, of the Old Testament. What were the overarching theological concepts that continually re-surfaced in various contexts, unifying the Old Testament as a coherent theological system? Those must be the claims that are timeless and universal, and thus relevant for ecclesial communities. However, in the work of two prominent scholars of Old Testament theology, Gerhard von Rad and Walter Brueggemann, we see a

different approach that moves away from seeking the unifying center of the Old Testament, toward exploring the Old Testament's diversity of witness and plurality of voices. Thus, their work provides a model for what it might look like to do biblical education in youth ministry while acknowledging the Bible's ancientness, ambiguity, and diversity. While von Rad used traditio-historical criticism to analyze how Israel's faith developed over time, Brueggemann used rhetorical criticism to examine how Israel's faith is constantly argued and adjudicated on a canonical level. Both scholars moved toward a biblical theology based not only on what the Bible *says*, but on what it *does*.

Von Rad was the first to take the Old Testament's diversity, rather than its unity, as his starting point for theology. Combining this approach with his interest in the history of Israel, he traced the historical development of Israel's confessions of faith. He began with what he believed to be the earliest creedal formulation found in Deuteronomy 26:5-9, a recitation of Israel's history in light of God's mighty acts on their behalf, which traces the history from Abraham to the Exodus and the Promised Land.⁴⁰ Von Rad traced how this confession was gradually reworked and added to in times of crisis, leading to larger and larger bodies of material surrounding the confessions, interpreting and expanding them. But unlike other Old Testament scholars who sought key theological principles from the text to apply to modern faith and practice, von Rad considered it impossible to extract theology from the re-tellings of the confession while leaving the history of the traditions behind.⁴¹ Indeed, von Rad did not even

⁴⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* vol. 1, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 122.

⁴¹ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 112.

consider that there was much theology proper in the confessions or the recounting of salvation history, asserting that “Israel was always better at glorifying God than theological reflection.”⁴²

But if Israel’s confessions do not contain theology that can be neatly packaged and applied as a key text or takeaway, where was the locus of theological reflection for von Rad? It was *in Israel’s process of re-telling historical events through the lens of faith*. The way in which the theology of the Old Testament evolved and took shape was just as important as the content of Israel’s confessional utterances, and it was necessary for understanding them. Brueggemann helpfully summarizes the contrast between von Rad and what came before him: “Israel’s faith is not a series of variations behind which lies a single coherent constancy; the series of variations is the *thing itself*.”⁴³ With the theological content de-centered, and thus no timeless constants, no underlying theme of the whole or key takeaways, what was the normative claim of von Rad’s project? Brueggemann writes that because von Rad’s work traces the *development* of Israel’s theology, rather than pulling out the theology itself, it is this “ongoing process itself that is normative.”⁴⁴ Von Rad’s Old Testament theology was not a concept like redemption or God’s faithfulness; instead, it was Israel’s constant pattern of reflecting on her history, reflecting on those reflections, and in so doing, re-contextualizing theology and re-working tradition for new contexts and circumstances. If it is this process that is pulled forward as normative, rather than theology proper, what implications might this have for religious and biblical education?

⁴² Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 122. It should be noted that the downplaying of Israel’s “theological reflection” has recently been critiqued by Brent Strawn. See Strawn, “What Would (or Should) Old Testament Theology Look Like if Recent Reconstructions of Israelite Religion Were True?,” *Between Israelite Religion and Old Testament Theology: Essays on Archaeology, History, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Robert D. Miller II (Leuven: Peeters, 2016): 129-166.

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 41, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 34.

First, it can help faith communities understand the Bible as the result of a dynamic theological process, shaped and conditioned by the historical circumstances of its authors. Rather than a trans-historical document from heaven, the Bible is a testament to human experience of God's action in the world in certain times and places. Second, it shows that contemporary theology and even biblical interpretation, even the choice of key texts in the curriculum we use, is always in some sense a process of re-traditioning. We do not do theology independently of the tradition laid out for us in the Bible and in the history of our denominations and churches, but neither do we interpret or live out that tradition without reading our own life circumstances into it and thus, inevitably, participate in the ongoing process of re-traditioning. Whenever we engage in reading and interpreting the Bible, we join a community of theologians across the ages, positing our own ideas about the text and, inevitably, about God, the same way Israel did.

Other scholars after von Rad began to emphasize the diversity of theologies within the Old Testament, while still attempting to make sense of the Old Testament as a whole. This impulse led to what Brueggemann recognized in 1980 as a convergence of works that attempted to hold contrasting ideas, themes and "counter-themes," like the ethical and the aesthetic, or the cosmic and the teleological, in tension.⁴⁵ Brueggemann recognized in these works a shift in Old Testament theology methodology, away from the "constant...behind the dialectic" (by which he means the themes and counter-themes) to a recognition of "the dialectic itself [as] the shape of the constant."⁴⁶ Brueggemann's work participated in this trend but expanded it to such a degree

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "A Convergence in Recent Old Testament Theologies," *JSOT* 5, no. 18 (1980): 2-18.

⁴⁶ Brueggemann, "A Convergence," 11. By "dialectic," Brueggemann seems to refer to the themes and counter-themes, or pairings of opposites, that are held in tension within the canon. As noted in a footnote below, however, Brueggemann's interest in the concept of "dialectics" leads to neglect of categories that do not appear to be in direct tension with other categories.

that the whole of the Old Testament was subsumed under this dialectical emphasis. Thus, Brueggemann's comprehensive work of Old Testament theology was premised on his conviction that, because the Old Testament's diversity resists thematization, he could only synthesize the Old Testament under a theme that was "not *substantive*, but *processive*."⁴⁷ That is, like von Rad, Brueggemann does not foreground the theological themes of the Bible as much as the "ongoing adjudication" (and yes, the theological tension and controversy) that characterizes the Bible's way of doing theology.⁴⁸ Where von Rad had employed traditio-historical criticism to trace the development of the Bible, Brueggemann chose to move beyond the thorny questions of historicity, using rhetorical criticism to focus on the final form of the text itself.

Brueggemann suggests doing Old Testament theology through the lens of a metaphor: a courtroom trial, in which the "core testimony" concerning the nature of Yahweh is called into question by the cross-examination of the witness, which yields a "countertestimony."⁴⁹ The core testimony consists of Yahweh's acts on behalf of Israel as the God who creates, promises, delivers, commands, and leads; the God who is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6). The countertestimony consists of those assertions about Yahweh which question or contradict the "characteristic" claims by presenting evidence of God's "hiddenness, ambiguity or instability, and negativity."⁵⁰ Within the

⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," *BTB* 27, no. 1 (1997), 5, <http://doi.org/10.1177/014610799702700102>, emphasis original. See also Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, xvi.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 64.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann's other categories of testimony ("unsolicited" and "embodied") also constitute part of his theology, but they are beyond the scope of this chapter to address. I read Brueggemann's work, both in *Theology* and *The Creative Word*, as wanting to treat the entirety of the canon but ultimately focusing on the dialectic that interests him the most. Other scholars have critiqued the fact that Brueggemann's work tends to treat the Writings as an afterthought. See, for example, Brevard Childs, "Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*," *SJT* 53, no. 2 (2000), 229.

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 318.

category of countertestimony, Brueggemann includes texts which speak of God's arbitrariness, anger, or abandonment. The fact that competing theologies stand side-by-side in the Old Testament leads Brueggemann to argue that "theological interpretation as ongoing adjudication is faithful to the character of the text itself."⁵¹ He does not attempt to smooth over the tensions in the text, but rather celebrates the tension itself as the subject matter of Old Testament theology. By looking at the ways in which the Bible argues out its truth claims, rather than privileging any claim as definitive or worthier of use as a normative "key text" for faith communities, Brueggemann, like von Rad, shifts the locus of normativity from the Old Testament's theology to its theologizing.

Whereas von Rad provides a lens for understanding the diachronic historical development of theology, Brueggemann shows the stark theological contradictions at work in the text. His dialectical project demonstrates that there is no unified theology of the Old Testament that can be easily appropriated without grappling with how it is both true and not true. In faith communities today, this recognition can legitimize conflicting theologies that arise within the community, rather than silencing dissenting voices. As Andrew Root argues, when one reads the Bible with young people, discerning and interpreting God's work in the world, one must allow young people to "give testimony not only to where God is present but *also* to where God feels absent...Attention to both the presence and absence keeps the group from sliding into easy answers, it keeps them struggling with the Bible as they seek for God's action in their lives."⁵²

I remember an occasion several years ago when a tense theological argument arose in my high school Sunday school class, when one student wondered aloud why bad things happen since God is good. Another responded, "Maybe it's simple. What if God is actually bad, and we

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 64.

⁵² Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 104-105.

shouldn't always jump to defend him and assume he's good?" Students who were tuned out immediately jolted to attention. Jaws dropped all over the room, and all eyes were on me to see how I would rebuke the heretic who dared give voice to such questions in church. But the student's theologizing was countertestimony at its finest, and not without precedent in the Bible. Some of the more challenging accusations of Job have not made it into many churches' mainstream theological consciousness, but the countertestimony still speaks, and Brueggemann's work provides a model for wrestling with views in the Bible that challenge inspirational key texts and takeaways.

If youth ministers can shift the way they think about and utilize the biblical text, from abstracting its theological content to exploring the way in which it constructs theology, they can invite young people to a more critical and imaginative engagement with the Bible. This is the kind of thinking and engagement with the text that ultimately leads to wisdom, as Enns explains. What Scripture offers to students then is more than answers to problems or bite-sized nuggets of truth and encouragement; it offers a model of how to think theologically and interpret God's work in the world, through which young people can "encounter the living God."⁵³ The Bible is much more than a guidebook for adolescence; it is a tutor in the art of doing theology, a sage beckoning its readers to wisdom, and an invitation to know and encounter the God to whom the Bible bears witness.

Discerning What the Text Is Doing

Although both von Rad and Brueggemann emphasize what the Bible *does* more than what it *says*, they talk differently about what it is that the text is doing. As we have already noted, von Rad looked at how Israel's faith developed over time, while Brueggemann looked at

⁵³ Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 84.

how Israel's faith is constantly argued out and adjudicated. Other scholars point toward other things that the Bible *does* which can be used as a model for one's own theologizing, and which can be imitated in biblical education with youth. Root, Corrie, and LeMon, whose critiques of the reference book approach appeared earlier in this chapter, each propose a different process of theological reflection that they see in the Bible.

In *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, Root argues that biblical education with young people should help them use the Bible to discern and interpret the work of God in the world today. Throughout the book, he draws on the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) as a model for reading the Bible with and alongside youth. He writes that Philip, instead of being concerned about what the passage from Isaiah says or how to interpret it, is "much more concerned with what the text *does*. He talks about how these words of Scripture point to the crucified and risen Jesus."⁵⁴ This is what the Bible *does* for Root that he believes should be carried forward as the agenda for biblical education in youth ministry: it should not serve as an end in itself, but rather, it should point young people toward God. Pedagogically, for Root this translates into reading full chapters of the Bible with young people and using that communal reading as a springboard to reflect on, and share testimony about, the activity of God in the world.

Corrie also uses the story of the Ethiopian eunuch as a model for biblical education with youth, but she points out different aspects of this text than Root: that the eunuch and Philip begin their reading by asking questions of each other and the text, a detail that demonstrates the importance of asking questions as one reads the Bible with youth.⁵⁵ From a framework similar to Brueggemann's, Corrie acknowledges the diverse perspectives in the Bible that argue with each

⁵⁴ Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 32-33, emphasis original.

⁵⁵ Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 75.

other and question each other. Drawing on Timothy Beal's image of the Bible as a "library of questions," she suggests that youth ministers follow the lead of the biblical text, doing what it does by "making questions the heart of Bible study."⁵⁶

Finally, LeMon's suggestion for studying Scripture in place of the proof-texting approach is also based on what the Bible itself does: making "holy analogies,"⁵⁷ in which one recognizes a point of connection between the context into which a text was written, and one's own context. Rather than trying to prove one's point with a stand-alone text, one can reflect on how one's situation might be more or less analogous to a situation in Scripture. Such holy analogies abound throughout the Bible. Some of the examples LeMon gives are of Isaiah 40, which compares the journey home from exile to a new Exodus, and Revelation, which draws an analogy from the creation accounts in Genesis to express its hope, in a context of suffering and persecution, that God can create anew. While resonant aspects of the text can still be appropriated, the practice of holy analogies acknowledges that a text was not written to address modern concerns. It goes beyond merely applying a key text; it engages young people in analysis by reflecting explicitly on what might be similar or different between the worlds of the text and the reader, and it invites them to evaluate whether analogies are more or less appropriate.

When youth ministers make the move from teaching young people to do what the Bible *says*, to inviting them to do what the Bible *does*, it opens up a new realm of possibilities for biblical education and the way that it can invite young people to participate in making meaning, doing theology, discerning and interpreting the work of God in the world, and becoming thoughtful and wise as they reflect theologically on their lives. But as these examples have shown, the idea of "doing what the Bible does" leads scholars to a diverse range of conclusions

⁵⁶ Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 81.

⁵⁷ LeMon, "Holy Analogies."

about what it is that the Bible does and what biblical educators should do in response, even when they are reading the same story: re-traditioning, arguing, sharing testimony, asking questions, making holy analogies. If the Bible *does* so many things, how does one decide what it is doing in any given passage and invite young people into the process?

Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy

Tools of biblical criticism, like uncovering historical context, conducting word studies, and exploring how a text came to be in its current form, all help the reader discern the various meaning-making processes in which a text is engaged. However, when it comes to biblical criticism, seminary students are often left to their own devices to know how they ought to apply these new insights to their teaching and preaching. In the absence of guidance, two approaches are common. First, students might study enough to pass the class, make the arguments they think the professor would like them to make, then put biblical criticism away in a closet and continue reading and teaching the Bible the way they always have. Second, students might be excited to put their new knowledge to use or share it with others, but they lack the tools to weave it artfully in with their pedagogy in a way that is appropriate for their context.

In *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, Root recalls a high school retreat at which a young seminarian, insistent that young people need to learn theology, lectured for nearly an hour on abstruse concepts like atonement theory and Israelite sacrificial practice that left the students confused and disengaged.⁵⁸ Root shares this story as an example of what the “theological turn” in youth ministry is *not*. Instead, he writes, youth ministers need to understand “how theology itself is constructed, and how it is that you go about thinking theologically with...young people.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 79-80.

⁵⁹ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn*, 81.

Like Von Rad and Brueggemann, Root emphasizes the theological process over the raw theological content; it is not only the *what* of theology that informs one's teaching, but the *how*. I remember a similarly awkward moment when a youth volunteer excitedly shared with a group of students something she had just learned: that the creation account was an "origin story," not historical. The term "origin story" was language for which the students had no frame of reference and which did not help them understand the creation story any better. As John Bracke and Karen Tye note, biblical educators who utilize biblical criticism risk making "information about the text" more important than transformational encounters with the text itself:

We focus on information about the author of a text, the situation in which a text was written, or the larger historical context of that time, and never ask how the text witnesses to God or how God encounters us through the text. We know about the way a biblical story uses plot or how a psalm uses the imagery of a thunderstorm but miss the way the text invites us to encounter God.⁶⁰

But if giving seventh graders a lecture on Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis is not the right way to go about assimilating the insights of biblical scholarship into youth ministry education, what *is* the role of biblical criticism in youth ministry? I suggest that various exegetical tools, approaches to the text, ways of reading, and forms of biblical criticism can help youth ministers understand what a text is doing, so that they can construct an encounter with the text that invites their youth to explore it accordingly, not just regurgitate seminary knowledge to their students. Youth ministers should not trade one type of content (the Bible) for another (a textbook on Ancient Near Eastern religions), but rather use the latter to help students engage the former more deeply.

In the same way that the use of traditio-historical criticism led von Rad to trace the evolution of Israel's confessions of faith, and the use of rhetorical criticism led Brueggemann to

⁶⁰ John M. Bracke and Karen B. Tye, *Teaching the Bible in the Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 7.

his courtroom analogy of countertestimony and ongoing disputation, different forms of biblical criticism can illuminate different aspects of what a text is doing, how it is functioning within the canon, how it is making meaning and constructing theology. The youth minister can then design a lesson in which students are not just told what the text is saying or doing, but are rather invited to explore the text on its own terms and its own way of doing theology. Below we will look at different types of biblical criticism and practical examples of how they might shape one's pedagogy. First, I will explore approaches under the rubric of historical-critical methods, including socio-historical context, redaction criticism, and comparative approaches. Then I will move to the tools of literary criticism, discussing literary context, genre and form criticism, rhetorical analysis, and the usage of metaphor.

Historical-Critical Methods

Socio-Historical Context

The most basic form of historical criticism is understanding the social and historical context in which a text was written: who wrote it, when, where, and what was happening in their culture or context at the time that might have influenced the text. This helps the reader to understand the message of the text for its original audience, and how its authors saw God at work in the midst of their context. It also gives the reader a model of theological meaning-making within the reader's own context, enabling them to make comparisons or holy analogies to their own lives.

Historical context is one of the most common types of criticism that is incorporated into youth ministry curriculum. In *Orange's* 2020-2021 four-week series on reading the Bible, one of the lessons focuses on the importance of understanding historical context for making sense of

biblical texts.⁶¹ The curriculum acknowledges the disillusionment that can occur when students look for answers in the Bible, only to find texts like Paul asking Timothy to bring him his cloak (2 Timothy 4:13), and it explains to students that the texts were written to people in a specific time and place.⁶²

The lesson focuses on the context of the classic “key text” Philippians 4:13 (“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength”), explaining that while it is “great on coffee mugs and Instagram bios,”⁶³ it does *not* mean that they can fly, or that they can pass their math test without studying just because they believe in God. Instead, it teaches students Paul’s context in prison, and that the passage is more about finding contentment than achieving success or accomplishing impossible feats. In small groups, one of the suggested discussion questions asks how knowing Paul’s context changes the way they understand Philippians 4:13.⁶⁴ When students come across a Bible verse they do not understand, the lesson encourages them to ask questions that might help them understand the context: “Who wrote it and who was this written to? Why was it written down?....Is it helpful to me or not?”⁶⁵

The *Orange* lesson is a thoughtful and helpful introduction to the importance of context that could be further strengthened by moving beyond understanding and applying a text, to analyzing, evaluating, and creating. With the Philippians 4:13 text, for example, one might go beyond explaining that Paul was in prison and talking about contentment (understand), to compare his writings with other Christian leaders who have been imprisoned: early church martyrs or, in more recent history, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*

⁶¹ The lesson on historical context is Week 2 in the high school curriculum *Explained: A Series About the Bible* (The ReThink Group, 2020), as well as the middle school curriculum *Break It Down: A Series About Reading the Bible* (The ReThink Group, 2020).

⁶² Orange, “Week 2 Communicator Guide,” *Explained*, 1-2.

⁶³ Orange, “Week 2 Communicator Guide,” *Break It Down*, 9.

⁶⁴ Orange, “Week 2 Small Group Leader Guide,” *Explained*, 1.

⁶⁵ Orange, “Week 2 Communicator Guide,” *Explained*, 8.

(analyze). One might ask whether their writing truly reflected how they felt, or whether they were trying to encourage themselves or others despite their fear, or perhaps a bit of both (evaluate). Finally, one might ask students to remember a time of fear, loneliness, or need, and share what they learned about God through the experience (create).

Another example of the way sociohistorical context might inform a lesson is in the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1, which is commonly believed to have been written in the exilic or early postexilic period.⁶⁶ There are several subtle ways in which Genesis 1 speaks to the context of a people in exile, but to explain them to students would be tedious.⁶⁷ Instead, knowing the historical context, a youth minister might first ask their students how a people in exile might feel, what they might need, what might be important to them. Then they might ask how the creation story addresses those issues, or what an exilic people might find meaningful or comforting in it. To invite students to think theologically alongside the text, they might ask students to think of a need, crisis, or loss in their own life, a friend's life, or in the culture at large, and ask them either to write or artistically depict a version of the creation story that offers hope in that context.

Redaction Criticism

The historical-critical method also includes redaction criticism, or the study of how texts were edited and compiled over time. This may be beyond the scope of criticism that many youth

⁶⁶ Throughout the following pages, I draw on various sample texts to illustrate the ways in which youth ministers might utilize the tools of biblical criticism to inform and shape their pedagogy. I chose *not* to use texts from the wisdom literature in this section, because chapter 3 will explore in greater depth what the wisdom literature is doing and how youth ministers can use this knowledge to craft their pedagogy, and because I wanted to provide an example of how the “doing what the Bible does” approach can work with a variety of texts. I intentionally chose familiar texts, including texts from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, to demonstrate what this approach might look like with different texts and genres. I also use the same text, Genesis 1, for a few different examples as a way to show (similarly to Zirschky’s *Teaching Outside the Box*) how one text can be “doing” more than one thing, and that there are multiple ways to teach any given text.

⁶⁷ See, for example, William P. Brown, *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 166-167.

ministers feel comfortable engaging in the classroom. However, there are places where careful reading of the Bible points it out, which is an opportunity for discussion that is lost if the text is chosen for students in the key text approach, rather than reading the Bible together. One example is Acts 8:36-37, in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Verse 37 (in which the eunuch confesses, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”) is present in some ancient texts, but it has been removed in many modern translations because it is believed to be a later scribal addition to the text. Another example is John 8:1-11, the story of Jesus rescuing an accused woman from a mob; many Bibles include a heading informing the reader that this story does not appear in early manuscripts. Redactions like these and others provide excellent opportunities to reflect on why someone might have found a passage important to add. For example, the missing verse in Acts 8 may prompt a discussion about liturgical formulas and whether or how they reflect language and concepts in the Bible.

Some astute students may notice the discrepancies between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, which indicates an editor weaving together different sources. Knowing this, a youth minister might ask, “How are these stories similar and different? Why do you think someone would have put these two stories side-by-side instead of choosing one? What does the second one add to the first? How do these two stories together give us a fuller picture of what God is like and how God relates to creation?”⁶⁸ In discussing together what the text is doing, the students may begin to follow its lead in positing their own experience of what God is like and their own theologizing about the origins of the universe. Other discussion questions that help young people think theologically alongside the text might include, “Is there ever something you

⁶⁸ As William Brown writes, “At some point in the literary development of Genesis, it was felt that one creation tradition alone was not sufficient, that two accounts were needed, two with quite different foci and orientations. So one question to ask is, How does one creation text complete the other?” Brown, *Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*, 153.

wish you could add to the Bible? What would it be, and why?” Or, “If you were a scribe copying this text down, what kinds of notes might *you* write in the margin?”

Comparative Approaches

Comparative approaches are another tool in the toolbox of historical criticism.

Comparative approaches study other law codes, wisdom literature, or suzerainty treaties from the Ancient Near East,⁶⁹ as well as consider how Israel might have appropriated imagery or stories from their neighbors in service of their own theology. Yet another way one can answer what the creation accounts are doing is that they are drawing on a shared Ancient Near Eastern genre of creation myths and modifying it with Israel’s theological commitments. However, students can be invited to discover this for themselves rather than being told. I once invited a group of high school students to compare selected portions of Enuma Elish with Genesis 1, asking them what differences they saw and what claims the Genesis narrative might be making in its way of telling the story. A few of the theological differences they pointed out were that, in Genesis, God does not appear to need humans to serve God, that humans were created from dust rather than blood, and that the earth was created in peace rather than violence. This observation led a bold student to ask, however, whether Enuma Elish might make more sense of the human tendency toward violence, leading to a robust and animated discussion among the group. Another example: In several texts, God is described as riding on the clouds, language borrowed from the Canaanite deity Baal, the storm god. Youth ministers might show students where similar language is used of Baal, asking why the author might have made such a choice, what that choice might

⁶⁹ Ancient Hittite suzerainty treaties were an agreement between a suzerain (an overlord), and a vassal. Such treaties typically outlined deeds that the suzerain had performed on behalf of the vassal, listed stipulations that the vassal was obligated to follow, and included blessings if the stipulations were followed and curses if they were not. Such suzerainty treaties are similar in style to the covenant in Deuteronomy. For more on suzerainty treaties, see Christopher B. Hayes, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 179-189.

communicate about God, and analyze the risks and benefits of borrowing language and imagery from non-Christian sources.

Literary-Critical Methods

Literary criticism is another major category of biblical criticism that can illuminate what a text is doing. In the following sections, I will address a number of literary tools: contextual analysis, genre and form criticism, rhetorical analysis, and, as a sub-category of rhetorical analysis, the use of metaphor in the biblical text.

Literary Context

As with historical-critical methods, in literary-critical methods, context is key: an important part of understanding how a text functions is to read it as part of a larger unit, rather than untethering it to use as a key text. For any given text, it is important to look at what immediately surrounds it, moving outward in concentric circles: what else is happening in this chapter? What is in the chapters immediately before and after it? How does it fit into a larger section of the book? The book as a whole? The genre, or the rest of the author's corpus? The whole Bible? This can help readers understand how a text fits into a larger narrative or argument, and how it builds on, nuances, or critiques other texts in the canon.

Looking at the literary context of the temptation of Jesus according to Matthew (Matt. 4:1-11) helps the reader to see several things the text is doing. First, the temptation narrative comes immediately after the baptism of Jesus, in which God proclaims Jesus to be God's Son. In the first two temptations, the devil begins by saying, "If you are God's Son," questioning the proclamation of identity that Jesus had just received. Immediately following the temptation, Jesus begins his ministry; his isolated experience in the wilderness seems to have been somehow an important transition between the public proclamation of his Sonship and his public ministry.

Second, if one looks to the book of Matthew as a whole, the devil is not the only one who frames temptations with reference to Jesus's Sonship. At his crucifixion, passersby taunt Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40). Third, one can look at the other Gospels' renderings of this event; for example, Matthew and Luke order the temptations differently. For Matthew, it is an intentional choice to conclude with the temptation to kingship, which is an important theme in Matthew's gospel.

If one broadens the scope to the whole canon, the literary context of this passage also includes Deuteronomy, from which all three of Jesus's refutations come. Although any of the observations made thus far could be starting points for determining what the text is doing, here I will focus on the fact that the text quotes Scripture, alluding to Israel's own wilderness experience. It would be an easy application merely to say that, because Jesus quoted Scripture to fight temptation, youth should do the same. However, that choice still ends with cut-and-paste application, without engaging young people in theological reflection on what the text is doing. Instead, a youth minister might invite students to analyze *how* Jesus is using Scripture: where it comes from, what its original context was, and why he uses it. It is beyond the scope of this example to treat each text and its history in depth, but it will suffice to say that the author of Matthew wants readers to view the temptation of Jesus in light of similar tests Israel failed in the wilderness. The text sees events in the life of Jesus through the lens of Israel's history; it is making a holy analogy. To invite students to reflect on their own lives through the stories and language of the Bible is a more synthetic process than merely quoting Scripture to keep temptation at bay.

Examining the Scripture quotations in this passage reveals another interesting feature: the devil quotes Scripture as well (Ps. 91:11-12), but Jesus refutes the devil's text with one of his

own.⁷⁰ The text is an example of inner-biblical argumentation that is ripe for exploration with youth. What text is the devil using, and how is he using it? Why does Jesus' text win out over the devil's? When two Scriptures seem to be in conflict, how does one decide which is normative?

Genre and Form Criticism

Form criticism deals with identifying the genre of a text and key features of that genre. It helps readers understand common structures and tropes, and how a given text might be participating in and/or subverting a genre. Drawing on the insights of form criticism, a youth minister might ask students to discern the structure of a text, to compare and contrast two different parables or prophetic oracles, or to write something in the same genre, structure, or style.

Lament psalms are a genre that share a common structure, including invocation, complaint, petition, and a vow of praise. Because Psalm 13 is brief, concise, and paradigmatic of the lament form, I have used it in lessons on lament. Instead of giving a lecture on form criticism, however, I have students analyze the structure for themselves by asking them to share a few words that summarize how the psalmist is feeling in each stanza. After each stanza has words attached to it, I ask them how the psalm seems to move or change from the beginning to the end. Form criticism can help answer what Psalm 13 is doing by showing how it moves from complaint, to petition, to vow of praise. The structure of the lament psalm can become a model for students to write their own prayers of lament. The rest of the lesson introduces students to two different musical renditions of Psalm 13 that make different interpretive choices about the vow to praise; one is upbeat and celebratory, the other still wistful and sad in its expression of

⁷⁰ Recall LeMon's critique of proof-texting: "When someone takes up an argument about a particular belief or practice, chances are, they are going to find a text that they think provides a proof for the position that they espouse." LeMon, "Holy Analogies."

trust.⁷¹ The movement from petition to vow of praise contains no explanation for the shift, leaving readers to guess whether the psalmist praises *because* circumstances have changed, or whether the psalmist chooses to praise *despite* the circumstances.

Notably, Psalm 88 does not follow the standard lament form by concluding with a vow of praise; its complaint ends as bitterly as it begins. Form criticism helps one notice this omission; when one understands Psalm 88 in terms of its deviation from the lament form, the lack of praise becomes noteworthy. It then provides an opportunity to wonder with students why it is missing and how its omission changes the tone of the psalm.

Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical analysis, which shares overlapping boundaries with form criticism, examines the literary features of a text, like structure and narrative arc, characterization, repetition, wordplay, irony, and other rhetorical devices, and how these literary features create meaning in the text. It looks at how the text is constructed to appeal to the reader, not just by what the text is saying, but *how* it is saying it.

Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, is a disturbing text but also a skillfully crafted narrative. It opens by telling the reader that YHWH tested Abraham, thus giving the reader information that Abraham does not have. Abraham is then given information that Isaac does not have; Isaac's lack of understanding is highlighted when he asks his father, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Isaac's ignorance becomes a painful irony. The text is fraught with subtle emotional language and images that emphasize Isaac's importance to Abraham,⁷² but these subtle cues also

⁷¹ To read more about how I structured this lesson, see Lauren Calvin Cooke, "How Long, O Lord? The Lament Psalms." <https://laurencalvincooke.wordpress.com/2021/11/25/how-long-o-lord-the-lament-psalms/>.

⁷² For example, the repetition of the phrase "my son," as well as YHWH's escalation of Isaac's importance in Gen. 22:2 ("your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love").

point to what is missing: any mention of Abraham's inner state, thought processes, or emotions regarding the sacrifice of Isaac.⁷³ While the reader has privileged knowledge of YHWH's intention (Gen. 22:2), they do not have insight into the mind of Abraham. The text describes neither distress nor guilt at the prospect of sacrificing Isaac, nor relief or joy when God provides a ram. Instead, in a series of straightforward verbs (built an altar, laid the wood, bound his son, laid him on the altar, and took the knife [Gen. 22:9-10]), Abraham robotically prepares the sacrifice, leaving the reader to guess what is going through his mind. What is left unsaid functions as an invitation to the reader to enter into the narrative, to read between the lines, and to imagine the event from the perspective of the characters. As Jean Louis Ska writes, "The reader's task or role is to participate as much as possible in Abraham's (and Isaac's) tragic plight. The meaning of Genesis 22 is not exactly an idea, a message, a moral lesson, or even a truth. The real meaning is the active participation of the reader."⁷⁴

Genesis 22 is a difficult text, and a particularly dangerous one for a simple "go and do" takeaway. The point of the story is not necessarily that one should *do* anything; in Ellen Davis' interpretation, this story "exists to help people...make sense of their most difficult experience,

⁷³ The terseness of the narrative is not unique to this one but rather characteristic of narratives in the Bible more generally; as Richard Lischer writes, "The Bible famously avoids psychological explanation of its characters' behavior. Rarely does it explain a character's action from the inside out. We never hear a biblical actor ask the director, 'What's my motivation?' This is in keeping with the Hebrew use of *parataxis*, the narrative technique that takes its power from the juxtaposition of events, not the explanation of them. The story of David and Bathsheba is illustrative. Its drama moves from event to event without providing a single window into the characters' interior life: 'So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her...Then she returned to her house' (2 Sam. 11:4). Throughout the story of the actions and the dialogue are powerful but emotionally blunted." Richard Lischer, *Reading the Parables*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 117. While the lack of emotion in this story is thus not unique, it does include less insight into the characters' emotions than other stories in the Abraham cycle, including the foretelling of Isaac's conception in which Sarah's inner thoughts are revealed (Gen. 18:12-15), Abraham recounting his fear and inner thoughts to Abimelech (Gen. 20:11), and Abraham's "distress" because of Isaac and Ishmael, as well as the resulting grief of Hagar as she weeps, unable to watch her son die in the wilderness (Gen. 21:16).

⁷⁴ Jean Louis Ska, "Genesis 22: What Question Should We Ask the Text?" *Biblica* 94, no. 2 (2013), 264.

when God seems to take back everything they have ever received at God's hand."⁷⁵ The text invites the reader to step into the narrative in all its painful complexity. Bibliodrama is a pedagogy that meets the invitation of the narrative. Based on the Jewish practice of midrash, which reads between the lines of the text and expands upon it with one's interpretation of the gaps, Bibliodrama encourages participants to role-play characters in a narrative, imagining aspects of their experience left unsaid in the text.⁷⁶

Metaphor

Within the realm of rhetorical analysis, an important sub-category is the use of metaphor, because it is so important for how one imagines God. L. Juliana Claassens, in her book *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, explores the marginal feminine metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible. While she draws on content already present in the Bible, she emphasizes the historical context which gave rise to these metaphors, as well as gesturing toward the educational value of uncovering these metaphors. The verbs that Claassens uses correspond with Bloom's higher levels of knowledge. She writes, "Students can learn to reflect critically on traditional formulations regarding God [analyze]...They can evaluate various metaphors to describe God [evaluate]...As a result of this critical thinking about God-language, students and parishioners may begin to explore alternative ways of looking at God and at the world around them [create]."⁷⁷

In a former youth ministry context, a conversation much like the one Claassens describes unfolded naturally with a group of middle school girls one night. We had read John 15 together ("the vine and the branches"), and one student asked why Jesus had used that metaphor. I responded, "Well, let's see what we think he means by it [*understand*], and then maybe we can

⁷⁵ Ellen F. Davis, "Abraham's Radical Trust," *The Christian Century* 133, no. 22 (2016), 29.

⁷⁶ Pitzele and Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*.

⁷⁷ L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 92.

figure out why he used it [*analyze*].” They began to explore the metaphor: “Well, he says they have to remain in him. So, like, they can’t live without him, kind of.” “Yeah, and they’re always connected.” “Like grapes can’t just exist in midair, they have to grow from a vine.” Based on their understanding, I shifted to the *evaluate* and *create* modes: “So did he have to use that metaphor? What other metaphors might he have used?” Their answers were very thoughtful: “Maybe like a plant in the soil!” “Maybe like a fish needs to be in water.” “Maybe like a mother with her children.” It is worth noting that these students had grown up in a patriarchal church context where they have never seen women in church leadership, and likely have never heard the feminine imagery for God in the Bible. Yet, when invited to do what the Bible was doing and posit metaphors for the divine-human relationship, they were able to think beyond the limitations of what they had been taught of God to imagine God in new and life-giving ways.

Conclusion

These types of biblical criticism tend to blend into one another with porous boundaries. Each approach reveals different aspects of what the text is doing and how it is constructing its theology. There is never a single correct answer to the question, “What is this text doing?”, neither is there a single correct way to teach a text. Further, not every rhetorical aim of a text is equally worthy of emulation. There are, however, ways of teaching texts that are intentional about inviting young people to explore, interpret, wonder, puzzle, and ultimately, posit their own experience of and ideas about God; in short, to do theology.

Much of biblical education in youth ministry utilizes the key text and takeaway approach, which treats the Bible as a reference book for modern problems and teenagers as consumers of the Bible’s wisdom. However, rather than ironing out the ambiguities in the text to present youth with a univocal theology, a wisdom-cultivating approach honors the complexity of the biblical

text and invites young people into that complexity as a community of interpreters and theologians. The model of “doing what the Bible does” rather than using the key text and takeaway approach builds a foundation for part II of this project. In chapter three, I will describe what the wisdom literature is doing from a rhetorical perspective and how its pedagogy can cultivate wisdom in the reader. Based on observations from each of the three wisdom books, I posit five pedagogical practices for cultivating wisdom. In chapters four and five, I will examine how youth ministers are currently teaching the wisdom literature, analyzing their teaching practices in light of the biblical education models laid out in this chapter.

Chapter Three

Wisdom's Pedagogy: How the Wisdom Literature Cultivates Wisdom in the Reader

In chapter two, I introduced the idea of “doing what the Bible does” in biblical education with youth. In this chapter, I will employ a pedagogical hermeneutic to explore what the wisdom literature is doing, how it communicates its message, and how its literary and rhetorical features function pedagogically to cultivate wisdom in the reader. First, I will explore the wisdom literature as educational literature: how it might have been used in ancient Israel for literacy as well as moral formation, and how this usage differs from the educational engagement I am suggesting. After a brief overview of the pedagogical design and techniques of each of the three books, I identify five wisdom-cultivating practices that are reflected in the wisdom literature, practices that invite the reader to experience the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom, as Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin suggest.¹ By employing these same practices in their teaching, youth ministers can move from a model of “downloading” nuggets of wisdom from the wisdom literature, to a model that stimulates critical engagement and cultivates wisdom.

Wisdom Literature as Educational Literature

Walter Brueggemann has referred to the wisdom literature as “the most self-consciously educational” literature in the canon.² But in speaking of the wisdom literature as educational or didactic literature, we must consider two aspects of what it means to say that it is didactic literature. The first aspect is how it functioned as educational literature in ancient Israel, or how it *was taught*, which is a historical endeavor. The second aspect is how the wisdom literature

¹ Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin, “Teaching for Wisdom,” 151.

² Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 99.

teaches, which is a rhetorical endeavor that seeks to understand how the text in its current form was crafted with a pedagogical purpose and how it shapes the reader. How a text *teaches* and how it *is taught* are not necessarily the same; as I will demonstrate in chapters four and five, common approaches to teaching wisdom literature in modern youth ministry often fall short of the wisdom literature's potential to teach. While this chapter focuses on the rhetorical aspect of the wisdom literature, it is important to consider the historical context of these books, for whom they were composed, and how they might have been used to educate. Questions of method plague any project of biblical theology that seeks to make normative claims for faith communities. What exactly are we doing with the text? How faithful is it to the original spirit of the text, and how faithful is it necessary to be? To bridge the gap to teaching wisdom literature in youth ministry, it is necessary to address the issues that arise in terms of what it means for the wisdom literature to be "educational," to avoid making facile or anachronistic connections between the text and our own time, between education as it was conceived in ancient Israel and as I am proposing it. Mark Sneed has argued that the "primary function" of Hebrew wisdom literature was the "enculturation of elite youth."³ This assumption succinctly summarizes two issues that need to be addressed, two gaps between ancient and modern contexts: the *audience* (elite youth) and the *intended pedagogical outcome* (enculturation) of these texts.⁴

The first issue that needs to be addressed is that of the assumed worldview present in the wisdom literature, by whom and for whom it was written. First, wisdom literature is framed as

³ Mark R. Sneed, "Is the 'Wisdom Tradition' a Tradition?", *CBQ* 73, no. 1 (2011), 68.

⁴ In this section, most of the discussion centers on the book of Proverbs, in which the discussion of status quo features more prominently in the literature. Proverbs is generally considered the most simplistic, authoritative, and upholding of the status quo, while Job and Ecclesiastes have been considered more edgy in their challenge to established wisdom. In reality, all three of the books are more complex than they are popularly portrayed. For critiques of this "simplicity thesis," see Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 71-77.

educational literature for youth, but one must not too easily equate the concept of youth in ancient Israel with the concept of adolescence in the United States in the 21st century. Indeed, “adolescence” as it is conceived today is a relatively recent phenomenon whose genesis is typically traced back to the work of G. Stanley Hall in 1904.⁵ The concept of youth in ancient Israel is difficult to reconstruct, but it was shaped by very different cultural assumptions about age, gender, authority, and agency than our own.⁶

Second, wisdom literature was for “elite” youth. Wisdom literature in Israel and the Ancient Near East was typically produced by a class of scribes who worked for the king, and it thus reflects the values of elite men. Much of it was written, or framed, as instruction or advice for the authors’ sons. As literature written by men, for men, and the upper strata of society at that, wisdom literature reflects a certain privileged perspective. The book of Proverbs, for example, is addressed to “my son,” and the father’s admonitions to the son to seek wisdom revolve around the cultivation of desire for wisdom as one desires a woman, while warning against folly as a seductress. Although many of the proverbial sayings seem universally applicable, and some seem to have arisen from outside the royal court, many others clearly reflect a male perspective and sexist assumptions about women, speaking derogatorily about “contentious” wives (Prov. 21:9, 21:19, 25:24) and “women without discretion” (Prov. 11:22). Ecclesiastes encourages the reader to “enjoy life with your wife” (Eccl. 9:7) while also reflecting

⁵ See Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter 2; Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, chapter 1, particularly pp. 10-11; David White, “The Social Construction of Adolescence,” in Mahan, Warren, and White, particularly 10-11.

⁶ For an in-depth exploration of the various Hebrew words used to denote children and youth, see Julie Faith Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), chapter 2.

on “the woman who is a trap” (Eccl. 7:26). In Job, the debate about life’s ultimate questions is left for the men to discuss, while Job dismisses his wife as a “foolish woman” (Job 2:10).

While acknowledging the male orientation of wisdom literature, many scholars are optimistic that it can nonetheless apply to a broader audience, but they are perhaps a bit too optimistic.⁷ As William Clifford writes of Proverbs, “It has in view every Israelite, young and old, skilled and unskilled, male and female. True, some scenes portray young men as actors, but readers of both sexes and all ages may apply the scene to themselves.”⁸ However, it may not be as simple as Clifford assumes for women to envision themselves as the son choosing between the seductress and Woman Wisdom. Androcentrism is deep in the structure of the framing lectures, making the rhetoric of desiring and pursuing wisdom more complicated. While the male readers of Proverbs are assumed to *desire* women, female readers will find themselves *identifying* with the women. Identifying with these characters, rather than desiring them, is a difference that substantially changes women’s experience of Woman Wisdom’s invitation. Consider, for example, the pressure put on some women in Christian contexts to embody the ideals of the “Proverbs 31 Woman.” And for women who identify with aspects of both Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly as they are presented, the rhetoric of the introduction becomes even more

⁷ Michael Fox, for example, argues that the presence of the encomium to the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 provides a way for us to expand its audience. Although the scribe could have concluded with a portrait of a wise man, Fox argues, he chose a woman instead, demonstrating that women as well as men can embody the qualities of wisdom. Thus, “the whole book of Proverbs, despite its male orientation, is made to apply to women as well.” Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 18B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 916. Ellen Davis subordinates the sexist proverbs and negative characterization of the Strange Woman to the “unambiguously flattering” portrait of the woman in ch. 31. See Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 151. William Clifford argues that the opening verses of Proverbs gesture toward its broad applicability in that it identifies “the wise” as its target in addition to “the simple” and “the young.” William J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 46. While it should be clear to the reader at this point that I am an advocate for young people of all genders engaging with the wisdom literature, it is necessary to face its androcentrism head-on and wrestle with how it both does, and does not, apply to youth outside the purview of the original social location.

⁸ Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 46.

confusing.⁹ What does it mean to pursue wisdom or be wise when one's own self or body is identified as folly? We must thus acknowledge the difficulty of what it means for female readers of Proverbs to desire and seek after wisdom.

Peter Enns has a simpler argument for wisdom's universal applicability, one that appeals not to certain chapters or verses in the text, but rather appeals to its inclusion in the canon. The fact that it was included in the Hebrew Bible, Enns argues, shows that the rabbis responsible for the formation of the canon saw the book of Proverbs (and presumably, the rest of the wisdom literature) as having value beyond its original purpose of educating elite young men. He concludes, "Because Proverbs was included in a collection of sacred books meant for all, it now flies off the pages of its ancient origins and invites us to bring it into our own time and place—ruler, peasant, and everyone in between."¹⁰ Scripture as canon seems a more honest approach to bridging the gap between the text's imagined audience and the broader audience that now engages it as sacred text. Rather than arguing that the editors of the book somehow intended for it to apply to women, this approach can acknowledge the text's androcentric bias while inviting modern readers to adapt and appropriate it in creative ways. Part of the work of biblical education in youth ministry is to grapple with, and help students grapple with, how the text both does and does not make sense of their experience.

The second issue that arises when we speak of the wisdom literature as educational material has to do with how it might have been used to educate in ancient Israel, which was quite

⁹ Brianna, one of the youth ministers I interviewed who will be introduced in the chapter five in one of the case studies on Ecclesiastes, shared with me that her girls' small group wrestled with the presentation of the Strange Woman in Proverbs. Because of their church's stance on premarital sex, some of the girls who were sexually active struggled with seeing themselves reflected in the Strange Woman. The girls aspired to the Proverbs 31 ideal, Brianna told me, but they also felt like "their mistakes made them have characteristics of this wicked woman as well. So what did that mean for them?"

¹⁰ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 37.

a different task than the religious education that occurs in youth groups today. As noted above, wisdom literature was used largely in the training of scribes, in what David Carr refers to as a dual process of “education-enculturation.”¹¹ Individual proverbs in particular may have been used as material to practice reading and writing, “but also to socialize youths in the basic values and worldview of the given culture.”¹² Literacy meant something different in the ancient world than it does in modern Western culture; although it included the ability to read and write, it was more about memorizing large bodies of traditional material and mastering the scribal tradition that was being handed down.¹³ James Kugel writes that learning wisdom meant “mastering the wisdom of the past,” and to this end, Proverbs was intended to “indoctrinate” students, “pounding in wisdom’s basic doctrines...until they came to be accepted without question.”¹⁴ His view of Proverbs’ pedagogy is rather bleak; he argues that the purpose of its riddles and metaphors is merely to make the “pounding” palatable to the student. However, the nature of education in ancient Israel is more nuanced and complex, as Michael Fox describes: although the learner is expected to internalize the father’s teaching and counsel, it is “complemented by the learner’s own thought and inquiry,” as well as the God-given gift of wisdom.¹⁵ The riddle-like quality of the Proverbs that Kugel sees as a spoonful of sugar, so to speak, is understood by Anne Stewart to “subtly permit the development of a more independent capacity of moral agency.”¹⁶ Although it is important to recognize the gap between the wisdom literature’s historical context

¹¹ David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 6.

¹² Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 126.

¹³ Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, ch. 6.

¹⁴ Kugel, “Ancient Israelite Pedagogy,” 19, 20-21.

¹⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 132.

¹⁶ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 199. See also Eunmy Lee, who writes, “Proverbial material is often situational in character and may blatantly juxtapose antithetical sentences. In doing so, biblical wisdom invites moral subjects to engage their environment and exercise discernment in making judgments about what is good.” Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 55.

and one's own, my project draws on literary approaches that, while gaining insight from historical-critical methods, can transcend the historical usage of the wisdom literature. As noted in the introduction, rhetorical criticism "works at the boundary of text and reader," acknowledging that the rhetoric of the text may go beyond authorial intent.¹⁷ Thus, rhetorical-critical scholars may speak of how a text "permits" (Stewart, quoted above) or "invites" (Lee, footnote 17 above) the reader to practice discernment, whether or not the text's earliest teachers intended for learners to exercise independent thought.

In arguing for the wisdom literature's potential to cultivate wisdom in youth, then, I am arguing for something that the sages of antiquity may not have intended. As noted in chapter one, my understanding of wisdom, although shaped in part by the wisdom literature, is also shaped by centuries of intellectual tradition and my own academic context. My goal in exploring the wisdom literature with youth is not to socialize them into the cultural values of ancient Israel's scribal tradition. Some of my goals may overlap with those of Israel's sages: fostering an awareness of one's creatureliness before God, for instance, or cultivating the virtues of honesty, compassion, and justice. But as someone using the wisdom literature in a wholly different context with a different audience than it envisions, ultimately, I am proposing that youth ministry educators do something different with the wisdom literature than was done with it in ancient Israel. This move is justified for two reasons.

First, such a move is faithful to the genre of wisdom literature itself, which self-critiques, hosts competing perspectives, and borrows from the wisdom of other cultures. Within the wisdom literature itself one sees earlier material being reworked for new contexts. The search for wisdom is an ongoing, dynamic process. Second, the rhetorical features of the wisdom literature

¹⁷ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 99.

provide an invitation to the reader to participate in a way that other genres do not. Stewart points out that, unlike didactic narrative, which leaves little room for agency or imagination, didactic poetry allows for exploration and the cultivation of independent thought.¹⁸ Regardless of how these poetic features were intended, and whether they were in fact meant to “pound” truths into the reader, biblical educators can lean into these openings for critical thought, treating them as opportunities to spark imagination and discussion, and to maximize the wisdom literature’s potential to invite students into those “modes of thinking”¹⁹ that lead to wisdom.

Wisdom’s Pedagogy

Moving from the historical question of how and to whom wisdom literature was taught, we now engage the rhetorical aspect of wisdom’s pedagogy. What are these books doing? How do their literary features invite the reader to participate in the modes of thinking capable of cultivating wisdom?

Proverbs

Anne Stewart writes that Proverbs does not simply tell the reader *what* to think, but rather, the form of the poetry teaches them *how* to think: “Its function is not only to convey wisdom but to ensconce the skill of discernment and understanding within the student.”²⁰ That is, to use the language I introduced earlier, rather than *imparting* wisdom as content, the book of Proverbs can *cultivate* wisdom. Proverbs in its final form is pedagogically crafted to cultivate wisdom on three different levels: the individual proverb, the juxtaposition of proverbs in a collection, and the introductory lectures.

¹⁸ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 199. See also Carol Newsom on the didactic narrative in the prologue of Job as “the impregnable word.” Newsom, *The Book of Job*, chapter 2.

¹⁹ Sternberg and Hagen, “Teaching for Wisdom,” 375.

²⁰ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 50.

Individual Proverbs

The main unit of poetry in Proverbs is the *mashal*, or aphorism: a short, pithy saying that can also be a kind of riddle or puzzle. It is through these puzzles and metaphors, William Brown argues, that proverbs evoke a sense of wonder in the reader.²¹ The genre of the *mashal* allows for a significant amount of play in its meaning; readers must work to understand it, and it is this process of thinking that begins to develop wisdom. The individual saying lends itself to the practice of wisdom in several ways.

First, the proverbs are often open to multiple interpretations. Hebrew is notoriously terse, which enhances the ambiguity and thus the discernment quality of a proverb as one puzzles over what is meant. An example that Stewart gives is the famous proverb “Train up a child in his way, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6, Stewart’s translation).²² It is ambiguous, however, what “his way” refers to. Does “his way” refer to the preference of the child, meaning that if he is spoiled, he will never amount to anything? Or does it mean “the discipline appropriate to him,” so that he flourishes under individualized instruction? Or does “his way” mean, as it is often interpreted, “the way he should go,” or correct path in life? The proverb could mean any or all of these, and the truth in all of these interpretations is worth pondering. Another example is the proverb, “Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another” (Prov. 27:17). Does this mean that at our core, we are all the same? Or does it mean that we see ourselves in other people? If the latter, does it mean in a positive way, as in recognizing our shared humanity, or in a negative way, as in misunderstanding others because we assume they are like us? Or, as Dave Bland suggests, because one’s reflection in water is

²¹ William P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 58-63.

²² Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 50.

rippled and distorted, does it mean that our vision of one another is unclear, or that people are constantly changing and shifting?²³ Again, the language of the proverb is open to interpretation, and as one ponders its possible meanings, one is practicing thought processes characteristic of wisdom: wondering, analyzing, seeking understanding, making meaning.

Second, the proverbs (and Hebrew verse writ large) use parallelism, a poetic feature in which the first line introduces a thought, and the second line compares to the first, expands the thought, or qualifies it in some way. Most of the proverbs follow this form. Occasionally, however, there is disjointed parallelism, which occurs when the lines do not match up precisely, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps in their mind.²⁴ Fox offers Proverbs 10:5 as an example: “He who builds his stores in the summer is an astute son; he who drowzes off at harvest is a disgraceful son.” *Disgraceful* is not a clear antonym for *astute*, which makes the reader consider the relation between the two: “The couplet reminds the reader that a lazy son shames his parents, while a diligent one makes them proud.”²⁵ Fox reflects on the pedagogical value of disjointed proverbs:

By actively supplying the missing assumptions and conclusions, the reader participates in the reasoning process...teach[ing] himself....The gapped proverbs not only transmit packets of truths, they *train* the reader in a mode of thinking: identifying behaviors and associating them with their consequences. In other words, they train the reader to think like a sage.²⁶

Another way that parallelism lends itself to the imagination is through what Fox calls “proverb permutations,” which are proverbs that have the same or similar first line, but a diverging second

²³ Bland notes that the image of water in this proverb, rather than a mirror, prompts further reflection about human nature than a pure reflection: first, that water implies depth, and second, that “reflection on the surface of the water is ever changing, a quality also characteristic of people.” Dave Bland, *Proverbs and the Formation of Character* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 100.

²⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 494.

²⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 495.

²⁶ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 498.

line.²⁷ One example is the template “The crucible is for silver and the furnace is for gold,” which is finished in Prov. 17:3 as “but the Lord tests the heart,” and in Prov. 27:21 as “so a person is tested by being praised.” Proverb permutations like this likely either arose from a shorter original proverb that gained different endings in different contexts, or from someone reflecting on the first half of a proverb and recognizing that it could lead to another, very different, conclusion. Now, because multiple versions are preserved in the canon, they invite the reader to ponder other possible endings.

Finally, proverbs are full of figurative language, with rich and creative images and metaphors to spark the imagination: thornbushes in the hand of drunkards (Prov. 26:9), dogs returning to their vomit (Prov. 26:11), a bear robbed of her cubs (Prov. 17:12). In addition to being memorable, metaphors function to invite the reader’s imagination to supply the rest. How exactly is a proverb in the mouth of a fool like a thornbush in the hand of a drunkard (Prov. 26:9)? Because it will hurt him, or because it will hurt others? How did the drunkard end up with a thornbush, and how do fools end up quoting proverbs? Prov. 17:12 asserts that it is “better to meet a she-bear robbed of its cubs than to confront a fool immersed in folly.” In the key text and takeaway approach, proverbs like these are often explained to students, which takes away the opportunity to explore the metaphor.²⁸ If the writer of Proverbs had wanted to convey a single unequivocal point, they could merely have said, “Fools are dangerous,” or “Stay away from fools.” But the figurative language lends itself not to *explanation*, but to *exploration*. How is a fool like, and unlike, a mama bear? If a fool is in some way comparable to a mama bear (albeit the worse option between the two), what are their “cubs”? Why are they protective of them?

²⁷ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 487-492.

²⁸ For a more in-depth discussion and examples of proverbs being explained to students, rather than explored with students, see chapters 4 and 5.

Might someone's foolish actions be prompted by feelings of loss? How does that shape the way one thinks about folly? The rich imagery in Proverbs is ripe for interpretation.

Juxtaposition

In addition to the ambiguity of the proverbs themselves, their juxtaposition creates another layer of puzzle for the reader. The book of Proverbs is unique in that it has neither narrative structure nor a building argument; instead, it is a seemingly haphazard collection of old proverbs. These proverbs, which each originally had a context into which they were spoken, have been frozen in their current literary form as a collection. This means that situational proverbs are now juxtaposed with others that are often unrelated or even completely contradictory. Peter Hatton argues that Proverbs is deliberately arranged in such a way that contradictory truths are set side by side as “goads for the wise,” to prod and provoke the reader into critical thought.²⁹ The most famous contradiction in Proverbs is 26:4-5, which deliberately sets completely opposite instructions next to each other: “Do not answer fools according to their folly, lest you be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, lest they be wise in their own eyes.”

The juxtaposition of these two verses shows us that proverbs are not one-size-fits-all advice, and to obey them thoughtlessly or apply them indiscriminately would in fact be very unwise. Discernment is required to know which proverb to apply at which time. To see such a glaring contradiction immediately provokes the reader to wonder which situation might call for which proverb, and whether or how both can be true. When I have pointed out these verses to high school students and merely asked, “Which one is right?”, it has sparked remarkably lengthy and passionate discussions in which the practice of wondering, thinking, and arguing cultivates

²⁹ Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, 12.

wisdom. Although this is the most obvious contradiction, Proverbs is full of others: different attitudes toward retribution theology, poverty, and other topics.³⁰

Proverbs 13-14 provides an interesting case study to examine the ways in which juxtaposed proverbs expand, nuance, or contradict each other, leading to deeper reflection on the topics they address. First, these two chapters include several different proverbs on poverty. Chapter 13, verse 4 asserts that “the appetite of the lazy . . . gets nothing” but “the diligent [are] richly supplied.” However, Prov. 13:23 says that “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.” This is a classic contradiction of the type that Hatton identifies in Proverb’s retribution theology: is poverty the result of laziness or injustice? The poor might have been diligent, but they were not “richly supplied.” Talk of the poor and needy continues in two associative proverbs: “The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends. Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor” (Prov. 14:20-21). The first appears to be descriptive of reality; the second, motivational. Just because the first proverb describes the way things *are* does not mean that is the way they *should be*. Presumably, the reader is being encouraged to be one of those who are kind to the needy, because it is in their best interest; they will be happy if they do. A few verses later, another proverb moves beyond the personal motivation of Prov. 14:21 to appeal to the reader’s sense of moral obligation: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him” (Prov. 14:31). What is the reader to make of all these related, but multivocal, proverbs?

³⁰ For a more thorough treatment of contradictory proverbs on various topics, see Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*.

First, the proverbs seemingly accusing the poor of laziness are proverbs of motivation: they are intended to warn the student away from laziness and toward diligence.³¹ However, the student is also to consider that the plight of the poor can be a result of injustice. They are thus urged to be kind to the needy, both because it is in their best interest, and because it honors God. Thus, the reader of Proverbs is urged to be both *diligent* and *compassionate*. Yet another proverb complicates the matter more: “Some pretend to be rich yet have nothing; others pretend to be poor yet have great wealth” (Prov. 13:7). This proverb seems to suggest that one cannot always trust one’s judgment at first glance, and thus this proverb becomes, as Charles Melchert says, an invitation to see truly.³² When one thinks one understands a situation, one should look again, for looks can be deceiving.

A second interesting feature in chapters 13-14 are the proverbs dealing with the relationship between wisdom and discipline. Chapter 13 opens with two proverbs (Prov. 13:1, Prov. 13:14) that emphasize rebuke and external discipline as necessary to make one wise. Between the two is a proverb that states, “Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin” (Prov. 13:3). Here the discipline is self-imposed, as one watches one’s own mouth and thus guards one’s life; the motivation for life is employed to urge self-restraint. Prov. 14:3, however, adds a fascinating nuance. Although the first line of the couplet is uncertain, the second line reads, “The lips of the wise preserve them.” Do the wise watch their mouths, or do their mouths watch them? It seems that the answer is both. Although Proverbs has no narrative structure, the meaning-making mind of the reader can supply one: one is trained through external discipline when young, and internalizes it, learning how to self-discipline and regulate their actions. But as they form habits of discernment and self-restraint,

³¹ See Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 117-120, and O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 42-43.

³² Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 51-53.

those same habits protect them. Just as Wisdom loves those who love her, the lips of the wise protect those who protect them.

These readings are, of course, subjective, but the text itself invites such reflection. This is merely one example of the ways in which the reader might think through the relationship between and among proverbs, puzzling over their contradictions, attempting resolutions, and reflecting on how they illuminate one another. By engaging the natural human desire to seek meaning and patterns, the juxtaposition of proverbs in a collection, although they have been removed from their performative context and are ossified in that sense, demands the reader's cognitive engagement to connect the dots. In that sense, the form of the text is indeed pedagogical: it trains the reader in the habits of thinking. And, as Proverbs' "course objectives"³³ indicate, interacting with proverbs and riddles cultivates the habits of reflection and critical thought. The objectives, Brown writes, assure the reader that "perplexity...leads to discernment";³⁴ the act of puzzling over one proverb leads to the ability to understand others.

Introductory Lectures

The introductory lectures of Proverbs are the third layer of pedagogy in the book. The first nine chapters are a father's lectures to his son, interspersed with interludes on Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman. Anne Stewart, in her rhetorical study of *musar* (discipline) in Proverbs, shows how the lectures engage the reader's imagination and allow them to experience the fool's life path, as a way to teach discernment. In Woman Wisdom's opening speech, Stewart notes that the reader experiences both direct and indirect rebuke through the clever poetry. At first, Woman Wisdom addresses "you" directly, and the reader is experiencing it through the eyes of a failed future self. The ominous sense builds as Woman Wisdom speaks of dread, terror,

³³ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 31.

³⁴ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 33.

and disaster. Then, suddenly, the pronouns switch to the less threatening “they”: “*They* will call me, but I will not answer; *they* will seek me, but not find me” (Prov. 1:28). The pressure lets off of the reader, who now overhears Woman Wisdom’s rebuke to someone else and feels relieved that it is not them.³⁵

The same pedagogical technique is used in the lengthy sensual monologue of the Strange Woman (Prov. 7:14-20), presumably to pique the student’s interest before springing on them the consequences of her allure: it leads to Sheol. J.L. Andruska, in her work on the Song of Songs, argues that this chapter in Proverbs draws on characteristics of the “beloved” in the Song as a way to make the student hone his skills of discernment.³⁶ When a woman greets him with “lips dripping honey,” promising exotic spices and lovemaking, is she the sensual-but-honest woman of the Song, to whom he should aspire, or is she a seductress whose way will lead to death? Stewart argues that the lectures, in a “pedagogically risky move,” intentionally make the Strange Woman attractive, inviting the student to “enter deeply into...the nefarious desire that the father warns against.”³⁷ Her comparison with Woman Wisdom serves as a “practicum in the evaluation of desire.” The student learns to be discerning and “look before he leaps,” because appearances can be deceiving, and the results can be disastrous.³⁸

Thus, Proverbs is pedagogical on several levels: on the level of the individual saying or aphorism, which is intended to spark the reader’s imagination or serve as a riddle that must be deciphered or puzzled over; on the level of proverbs as a written collection, whose juxtaposition creates various new riddles and contradictions to “goad the wise” into critical thought; and as framed by the lectures, which aim to shape the student to desire and seek wisdom, particularly

³⁵ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 92-93.

³⁶ J.L. Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 37-42.

³⁷ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 160.

³⁸ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 169.

through the use of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman, and the imaginative description of possible paths the youth might take.

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes utilizes several rhetorical features that contribute to its pedagogical effectiveness: episodic thinking, ambiguity, observations, questions, and circular thinking. All of them come together to form Qohelet's pedagogical strategy: he teaches the reader how to think in the way of wisdom by taking them along on his own journey, making them experience the patterns of his musings.

First, the material in Ecclesiastes has a discursive, wandering quality. Unlike the sayings material in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes has an argument that builds, yet the progression of thought is not quite linear.³⁹ Michael Fox describes Qohelet's thought as having an "episodic, discontinuous, staccato character."⁴⁰ The words on the page reflect Qohelet's inner state, making visible his scattered observations and reflections. W. Sibley Towner writes that Ecclesiastes is best understood as a "notebook of ideas by a philosopher/theologian" in which Qohelet shares with the reader his own internal dialogue, then offers the wisdom that he has synthesized from his musings.⁴¹ Although he does give explicit advice to his readers, eventually moving from observation of "what is good" to exhorting his readers in the imperative voice, the reader is not given his wisdom freely but must follow along on the tortuous path to finding it. Thus, readers experience for themselves what it feels like to seek wisdom.

³⁹ As Mette Bundvad writes, "Insofar as the book presents an argument at all, it is not a linearly unfolding one that, after surveying a number of issues, moves neatly to a conclusion. Instead, it retraces its steps endlessly and allows the presence of multiple, contradictory viewpoints throughout." Mette Bundvad, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature*, ed. Katharine J. Dell, Suzanna R. Millar, and Arthur Jan Keefer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 185.

⁴⁰ Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 12.

⁴¹ Sibley W. Towner, "Ecclesiastes," in *Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach*, vol. 5 of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 278.

Second, Ecclesiastes is full of ambiguity. Many of the words and phrases that Qohelet uses are polyvalent and open to interpretation; for example, Douglas Miller points out that Qohelet's usage of the word *hevel* seems inconsistent, referring sometimes to what is transitory and fleeting, and other times to something insubstantial or ungraspable.⁴² While *hevel* is often translated as "meaningless" (NIV), "vanity," (NRSV) "pointless" (CEB), or "futility" (NASB, HCSB), its literal meaning of *vapor* is more ambiguous and polyvalent. Miller argues that this word choice thus presents a "puzzle" for the reader as they try to understand what Qohelet means, and that the process of solving the puzzle gives the reader hope for (and, I would add, practice in) "addressing life's other paradoxes and contradictions."⁴³ Similarly, Doug Ingram argues that Ecclesiastes is "ambiguous by design," "presented in a way that *requires* the reader's involvement (to a greater extent than usual) to generate 'meaning' because of the indeterminacies of the text."⁴⁴ Ingram sees the ambiguity as an intentional pedagogical tactic to give students practice in navigating the ambiguity they will encounter in life. Rather than presenting "clear, ready-made conclusions," Qohelet uses ambiguity as a "heuristic device to encourage readers to engage themselves in the challenges that the text throws up, hone their own interpretive skills, and then implement these skills in relation to the ambiguities and uncertainties of life and faith."⁴⁵ The ambiguity is heightened by Qohelet's tendency toward self-contradiction, as he seems to come to different conclusions on pleasure and toil, the value of wisdom, and other topics.⁴⁶ Where interpreters through the centuries have tried to harmonize

⁴² Douglas Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* 62, no. 2 (2000), 233.

⁴³ Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 231.

⁴⁴ Doug Ingram, "'Riddled with Ambiguity': Ecclesiastes 7:23-8:1 as an Example," *The Words of the Wise are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013): 219-240, here 219.

⁴⁵ Ingram, "Riddled with Ambiguity," 239-240.

⁴⁶ For a concise description of Qohelet's perspectives on toil, pleasure, and wisdom, see Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 229, and C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor

Qohelet's contradictions, see them as additions by another author, or read them as quotations that Qohelet refutes, Michael Fox understands them as "the essence of the landscape" of Ecclesiastes, an important part of Qohelet's rhetoric.⁴⁷ Qohelet's pedagogy capitalizes on ambiguity because the world itself is ambiguous, requiring insight and discernment to navigate its uncertain terrain. In the process of seeking understanding, puzzling over the meaning of words, and reconciling seemingly contradictory statements, the reader engages in and practices the thought processes characteristic of wisdom.

Third, Ecclesiastes has an emphasis on the observation of life. Chapter one opens with a poem about the cycles of nature, chapter three with the poem on the "times" of human life. Naoto Kamano argues that these two texts, these observations on the world's "eternal sameness" and "constant fluxation,"⁴⁸ set the foundation for Qohelet's argument that humans are not in control of the vagaries of human life.⁴⁹ With the recurrent refrain "Again I saw," Qohelet tells the reader all the things that he has "observed under the sun" and his subsequent reflections on these observations. He observes oddities in the order of the world, situations that do not seem right or fair: that entire fortunes are worked for and lost in the blink of an eye (Eccl. 5:13-16), that the righteous perish while the wicked enjoy long life (Eccl. 7:15), that no one remembers the wise (Eccl. 9:13-15). This is how Qohelet thinks: he pays attention to the world, observing and taking in what he sees, puzzling over it and reflecting on its meaning and implications for human life, and letting those observations trouble the cracks and crevices of retribution theology.

Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 38-43. For a more in-depth study of Qohelet's contradictions and their rhetorical function, see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. As I will explain further in chapter 4, contradiction and ambiguity are not synonymous. However, contradictions within the biblical text can lead to an experience of ambiguity for the reader, as the contradictions and tensions contribute to the wisdom literature's puzzle-like nature.

⁴⁷ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 28.

⁴⁸ Hartmut Gese, quoted by Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 11.

⁴⁹ Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 11.

Fourth, Qohelet uses rhetorical questions. In light of the observations he has made, he routinely asks, “What profit is there...?” or “What is good for humanity?” While many scholars read these questions as having presumed negative answers, Kamano shows how Qohelet answers them through the course of his own autobiographical reflections. Kamano sees this question-and-answer formula as key to Qohelet’s pedagogy: he asks the question to pique the reader’s interest, then proceeds to answer by setting up his persona as the wisest, wealthiest king, then deconstructing that persona by describing his own failure to find lasting enjoyment.⁵⁰ The question-and-answer form allows the reader to participate in the search for wisdom, rather than having life’s answers handed to them. The questions invite the reader to ponder the answer in light of Qohelet’s observations so far; the autobiographical reflections invite them to experience Qohelet’s own search for the answer. Miller writes that through his questions and delayed answers, Qohelet “raises tension and uncertainty for the reader,” and in the process, draws them into his deliberation: “This delay not only engages the reader’s attention but also requires that the reader engage the assumptions and values of the speaker for as long as it takes to reach the answer.”⁵¹ Refusing to smooth over difficult questions about the meaning of life with religious platitudes, Qohelet shows his readers what it looks like to pursue wisdom by painstakingly working through those questions, reflecting on whether and how God is involved in human life.

Finally, there is a circularity to Qohelet’s thought process. He begins with the assertion that all is *hevel*. He makes observations about the nature of the world, concludes again that all is *hevel*, then tells the reader what he has seen to be good: to eat, drink, and enjoy one’s life. Then he returns to another round of observations, names it as *hevel*, then reiterates the goodness of eating and drinking. Each time, his advice becomes more certain, moving from observation (“this

⁵⁰ Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 89-93.

⁵¹ Miller, “What the Preacher Forgot,” 229.

is what I have seen to be good,” Eccl. 5:18) to commendation (“So I commend enjoyment,” Eccl. 8:15) to imperative (“Go, enjoy,” Eccl. 9:7).⁵² And yet his reflections end the way they began – with the assertion that all is *hevel*. The circularity of his argument is the process of his wisdom thinking and his rhetorical strategy to entice the reader to think along with him. Qohelet becomes surer of his conclusions as he goes, but his growing certainty does not keep him from returning again to observe and reflect. The search for wisdom is ongoing, and even the conclusions that he reaches do not absolve him, or his readers, from continuing to learn and seek deeper understanding.

Job

The book of Job is such a lengthy and complex work, filled with irony, parody, subtle allusions, and ambiguities, that anything that can be said about its pedagogical strategies is necessarily reductionistic. However, here I will focus on a few observations about the structure of the book as a whole and how it functions pedagogically: namely, the lack of conclusive answers in the book, the centrality of dialogue to the story, and the juxtaposition of different genres.

The book of Job raises questions that it does not seem to resolve. Throughout the majority of the book, Job and his friends argue back and forth about divine justice and who is responsible for Job’s suffering. When God finally speaks, thirty-eight chapters in, the reader expects that God will set the record straight. However, scholars have long noted that the Divine Speeches (Job 38-41) do not answer or even seem to address the issues that have been raised throughout the book. The Speeches make no reference to the Divine Council at the beginning in which God and the Accuser make a wager, nor do they address the issue of retribution theology

⁵² For more on the progression of the enjoyment passages, see R.N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 7, no. 23 (1982): 87-98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908928200702305>, and Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*.

at all; instead, God takes Job on a grand tour of the cosmos, showing him the mysteries of wildlife, the water cycle, and the great chaos monsters Behemoth and Leviathan. If the Divine Speeches constitute an explanation for Job's suffering (which I believe they do), it is implicit and veiled, an ambiguous non-answer. Furthermore, even the Divine Speeches do not have the last word in the book. When the narrative resumes (Job 42), God restores double what Job has lost, a move that seems to affirm the doctrine of retribution which has been denied. As Charles Melchert writes, "The reader-learner arrives at the end of the book having explored a whole series of contradictions and discovering that each position is somehow wrong and yet also somehow true."⁵³ The epilogue is a rather disquieting "happy ending" for those who have waded through the entire book only to find all their questions left hanging. At the end of the book, has one accomplished anything at all by reading it?

Rather than being a failure of the book, its lack of conclusive answers constitutes an important part of its pedagogy. Wisdom is gained not when answers are found; rather, it is gained along the way in the process of seeking them, even if the answers are never found. This approach is very different from the unambiguous takeaway approach that characterizes most youth curricula. An easy answer can cause students to disengage, whereas a difficult and probing question can draw them in for a lifetime of pondering and the insights that arise in the process. There is wisdom to be gained in the tension of unanswerable questions, opposing viewpoints, and unresolvable dilemmas. But if the book of Job does not provide answers, what does it provide?

The fact that the majority of the book is comprised of the dialogues between Job and his friends serves as an important clue to what the author finds important: the dialogue itself is

⁵³ Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 108.

valued more than definitive answers to the questions it engages. The genre of the wisdom dialogue does more than merely preserve an ancient argument, however; it draws the reader in to participate in the dialogues, evaluating the perspectives that are shared and offering their own.⁵⁴ The redaction history of Job demonstrates a reader interpolating their own response to the dialogues. The character of Elihu is the only character with an Israelite name, and who is thus often assumed to be a later scribal addition. Elihu's self-insertion represents a reader of the story who, dissatisfied with the dialogue thus far, inserted himself into the conversation with his own theology, utilizing a later Hellenistic genre to respond to Job and his original three friends.⁵⁵ Carol Newsom has used the role of Elihu as an invitation for students to insert themselves into the text in a similar way, assigning students to write their own response to the dialogues in Elihu's place.⁵⁶

Finally, the wisdom dialogues are only one part of the book, which is an amalgam of various genres and perspectives. The book opens with narrative, setting up the story of Job, who is unknowingly caught in a divine wager between God and the Accuser and made to suffer unjustly to discover if "Job fears God for nothing" (Job 1:9). Job responds to his suffering with unwavering faith and piety (Job 1:20-22, 2:10). However, the simplicity of the narrative gives way to Job's outburst in Job 3, a dramatic change in tone that ruptures the humble piety of Prologue Job. Job's opening lament begins the three speech cycles between Job and his friends, which continue through Job 27. The speech cycles begin to break down and finally come to an end, followed by an abstract reflection on the elusiveness of wisdom (Job 28), Job's soliloquy

⁵⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 222; Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 92; O'Connor, *Job*, 5.

⁵⁵ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 220-233.

⁵⁶ Newsom, "Declaration of Innocence," class lecture, Emory University, November 1, 2017.

(Job 29-31), and then Elihu's interruption (Job 32-37). When God finally speaks in Job 38-41, relentlessly questioning Job about his knowledge of creation (or lack thereof), God does not engage the generic conventions of the wisdom dialogue but shatters them with a radically different framework. The Divine Speeches are a genre that Newsom characterizes as the sublime, which is both disorienting and reorienting, painful and wondrous.⁵⁷ Then, suddenly, the book concludes in Job 42 by returning to the prose tale with which it began. The reader is no longer privy to Job's inner thoughts but must accept the conclusion of the story, and its happy ending, as it is matter-of-factly described by the narrator.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory of a polyphonic text, Newsom argues that the rhetorical goal of Job is to juxtapose different genres that each have their own rhetorical framework and goals, and to force a conversation among them to reveal the possibilities and limitations of the genres and their assumptions about the world.⁵⁸ The juxtaposition of genres is itself dialogic, but it accomplishes something the wisdom dialogues alone cannot. By contrasting genres that are not intended to speak to each other, that do not engage ideas in the same arena, the book of Job goes beyond mere intellectual argumentation; it creates aesthetic tension. Juxtaposition is an art form that embodies tension where explanations fail. The didactic narrative, the wisdom dialogues, and the Divine Speeches cannot argue against one another because they do not share a language; they can only stand together as unresolvable complexity. A skilled pedagogue, the author of Job does not help readers reconcile the contradictions; instead, they must enter into the fray and wrestle with the tension themselves. If answers are to be found, the reader must do the slow and difficult work to find them.

⁵⁷ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, chapter 9, particularly 236-237.

⁵⁸ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 24.

In chapter one, I defined wisdom as an integrative approach to knowledge characterized by a love for learning and a desire for deep understanding, that values multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, that considers the meaning and implications of ideas and events, and that gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations in ways that lead to wholeness and flourishing. Based on this definition, I argued that wisdom is not static content that can be imparted, but it is rather a way of knowing that must be cultivated.

The wisdom literature cultivates wisdom in the reader not by telling them what to do in a given situation, but by inviting them to practice the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom, and to gain skills of insight and discernment as they puzzle over the meaning and implications of the text. Even Proverbs, which is comprised of many aphorisms that *do* seem to tell the reader what to do, is complicated by the fact that juxtaposed sayings give the appearance of contradictory advice. In its final form, then, the pedagogy of Proverbs requires the reader to practice navigating complex situations so that they develop the ability to navigate them thoughtfully and wisely in the course of lived experience. Ecclesiastes cultivates wisdom in the reader by modeling and inviting them to experience the “modes of thinking”⁵⁹ characteristic of wisdom: paying attention to the world, reflecting on it, asking questions, and returning again and again to consider ideas afresh. In its ambiguity, Ecclesiastes also requires the reader to practice navigating the ambiguities of life. The book of Job cultivates wisdom by presenting the reader with a text that provides no easy resolution or answers but instead invites them into its dialogue. In doing so, the reader engages multiple perspectives, considering their meaning and implications, and thus practices the habits of wisdom. Overall, the wisdom corpus fosters a love

⁵⁹ Sternberg and Hagen, “Teaching for Wisdom,” 375.

for learning and a desire for deep understanding by inviting students to pore and puzzle over its contents, rather than foreclosing exploration by offering an easily applicable takeaway.

Wisdom's Practices

Having explored the rhetorical-pedagogical characteristics of the wisdom literature, several themes begin to emerge: practices that characterize a disposition toward wisdom and that can cultivate wisdom in those who practice them. If youth ministers engage the wisdom literature through the lens of these practices, doing what the text does and teaching the way it teaches, it enables them to move beyond the key text approach into a pedagogy that invites young people to experience the practices and thought processes of wisdom. In this section, I will introduce some reflections from interviewees, whose treatment of these books will be analyzed in greater depth in the following chapters.

Playfulness

The first practice of wisdom is *playfulness*. As a wisdom-cultivating pedagogical practice, playfulness is more than merely having fun or playing games. Playfulness is about engaging material in creative ways without predetermined outcomes, which opens students up to new ways of knowing.⁶⁰ Three aspects of this definition bear further explanation. First, pedagogical playfulness is about *engaging material*, not as a distraction from or supplement to the “real” teaching, but as the mode in which the content itself is explored. Thus, illustrative icebreaker games do not constitute the kind of playfulness I am suggesting. In biblical education,

⁶⁰ Both Jerome Berryman in *Godly Play* and Jürgen Moltmann in *Theology of Play* argue that play is for its own sake. As Berryman writes, “To make play instrumental is to turn play into work, to demand a product from the activity.” Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 12. Moltmann insists that play, in its openness to the future and new possibilities, contradicts rather than upholds the status quo. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 12.

playfulness as a mode of engaging material means that the text itself becomes a playground for theological imagination.⁶¹

Second, playfulness is open-ended, *without predetermined outcomes*. In interviews, the most common words that were used in conjunction with playfulness were imagination and wonder, both of which are open-ended, inviting divergence rather than conformity. As will be illustrated further below, it is possible to use play as a tool in the service of the banking model to reinforce the teacher's point. However, to do so would be a distortion of playfulness as a disposition, which necessarily requires openness to new ideas.

Third, playfulness invites *new ways of knowing*; it helps one to see reality differently and to envision new possibilities. Grace, a white United Church of Christ pastor serving two small Midwest congregations, and who holds master's degrees in both theology and dance, put it this way: "Play engages a different part of our spirit. [Often] when we're trying to find answers and trying to learn, we get very caught up in our brains. Imagination and play bring us back into our bodies and help us lean into mystery." For Matt, a white Southern Baptist youth pastor whose lessons on Proverbs will be explored in depth in chapter five, there is a kind of surprise or vulnerability to playfulness that opens one up to new ways of being: "I think when students are having fun, their walls are torn down a little bit, and when walls are torn down, life change happens." Religious education scholar Courtney Goto theorizes play similarly as a conduit of "revelatory experiencing" in learning, as moments of "little interruptions"⁶² and new insight that

⁶¹ G. Sujin Pak has written about the "playground of Scriptural imagination," by which she means that the formation of Scriptural imagination is flexible while boundaried. While a playground has structure, it also invites open-ended play within those boundaries. See G. Sujin Pak, "A Playground for the Formation of a Scriptural Imagination," *Divinity Magazine* (Spring 2013): 10-13, https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/divinity-magazine/DukeDivMag_Spring13.3_pages.pdf. When I speak of the biblical text as a playground, I envision it as a space within which young people can explore, imagine, and play, in contrast to understandings of the text as a rulebook from which to derive clear principles.

⁶² Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 127.

allow one to catch a glimpse of an alternate reality, the experience of which transforms one's own. Through imaginative and creative play, one comes to know in a different way than one does in the schooling, or banking, model of education that teaches to the test and emphasizes learning and recalling facts.

Playfulness infuses the pedagogy of the wisdom literature, whose mode of theological reflection is imaginative and open-ended.⁶³ Rather than making dogmatic claims or providing unambiguous takeaways, the wisdom books play in and around difficult questions and stimulating ideas, refusing any easy answers or simplistic reassurances. They see puzzles and contradictions as playgrounds for the practice of discernment. In Proverbs, Woman Wisdom describes herself as a little girl playing within creation, delighting in human beings (Prov. 8:30-31). This is a very different picture than the stern and serious lectures from the father in chapters 1-7, and it reveals wisdom to be a more playful enterprise than it is often conceived. As William Brown writes, wisdom's authority is "playfully creative, an authority that is more generative than restrictive....To revel in Wisdom's world is to experience the joy of discovery, the delight of discernment, and the thrill of edifying play."⁶⁴ With Proverbs' breadth of imaginative metaphors (dogs returning to their vomit, words that pierce like a sword), the intellectual challenge of its riddles, and its "[delight] in paradox and incongruity,"⁶⁵ Proverbs invites the reader into its colorful world of playful wisdom.

But what of Job and Ecclesiastes, which can hardly be considered lighthearted or fun? Is there space for playfulness in subject matter that is so serious? The youth ministers I interviewed

⁶³ As Walter Brueggemann writes, "There is a playfulness and delight that goes with it [wisdom teaching]. The play involves not only good humor, but the 'play' about which we speak in a steering wheel. There is slippage that cannot be overcome or explained. To want more certainty is to crush the wonder that belongs to knowing." Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 117.

⁶⁴ Brown, *Sacred Sense*, 59-60.

⁶⁵ Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, 11.

seemed to think there is. When I asked about the role of playfulness in teaching the wisdom literature, I was surprised by how often Job came up as the first example. For Sara, a white Lutheran youth pastor in the Midwest, whose teaching of Proverbs will be explored in depth in chapter five, the fact that Job is written as a dramatic play demonstrates the coexistence of seriousness and play: “It’s a play, [although] it’s not a fun one. And you know, sometimes wisdom does that: it makes us go to those ocean depth moments of life. So play is a skill and a tool that we can use in those moments.” Several youth ministers I interviewed talked about how playfulness can provide deeper insight into one’s own complicated feelings, as well as how imaginative play can build empathy for others. Similarly, Goto critiques understandings of play that too easily equate it with joy and contrast it with suffering; because playing is about imagination and revelatory experiencing, it can include experiences that are frightening or even painful. She writes about monastic “holy fools” in the Middle Ages, who often feigned madness to awaken those around them to their own worldly values.⁶⁶ She writes, “Their playing with people was...sometimes threatening and subversive. Confronting people with what might be painful and difficult suggests a higher order of experiencing” than other, more lighthearted forms of play.⁶⁷

In this sense, even Job and Ecclesiastes take a playful approach to education. Qohelet plays through his happiness experiment in Eccl. 2, seeking to learn through experience what is good for humans to do. The author of Job plays by creating a disturbing thought experiment that causes readers to confront difficult questions about God, suffering, and justice. And, even in the face of suffering and death, Job and Ecclesiastes recognize a kind of playfulness to life in spite of, or because of, its futility and randomness. Their playful search for wisdom helps them to see

⁶⁶ Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 68-73.

⁶⁷ Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 72.

new possibilities in life. For Qohelet, the enjoyment of life is found in the playfulness of feasting, lovemaking, and dressing in luxurious garments (Eccl. 9:7-9). In Job, the playfulness of the Divine Speeches reflects the patterns of the world itself, which is characterized by “ambiguity, unpredictability, and play.”⁶⁸ In the epilogue, having experienced God differently through intense and serious play, Job himself seems to live with more freedom and openness than before. He challenges social convention by giving inheritance to his daughters alongside his sons, and he chooses to feast with his family and friends, something his anxiety kept him from doing in the prologue.

The same playfulness modeled by the wisdom literature should infuse the study and teaching of these books. Because youth ministry has a reputation for creative object lessons and over-the-top games, it might seem at first blush that youth ministry has already cornered the market on playing in religious education. Its teaching of the wisdom literature is no different. For instance, a *Ministry to Youth* lesson on Job begins with a game where youth dig through kiddie pools full of cooked oatmeal looking for coins, to “demonstrate just how messy life can get.”⁶⁹ While youth ministry games like these appear to be an example of playful learning, they are actually symptomatic of the deep divide between play and learning. They often function as a bait-and-switch technique to bribe young people for attention, drawing them in with play so that they can settle in and sit through the lesson. Wesley Ellis similarly notes that we often “treat play and playfulness as pesky things we have to do to keep kids interested, the warm-up act to the *real* ministry.”⁷⁰ Rather than engaging the material playfully, youth ministers separate the play

⁶⁸ Terence E. Fretheim, “God in the Book of Job,” *CTM* 26, no. 2 (1999), 89. See also Francis I. Anderson, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976), 271.

⁶⁹ Nick Diliberto, “Youth Group Lesson on Job,” *Ministry to Youth*, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://ministrytoyouth.com/youth-group-lessons-on-job/>.

⁷⁰ Wesley W. Ellis, “Ain’t Never Had a Friend Like Me: Rethinking Friendship in Youth Ministry,” *Delighted: What Teenagers are Teaching the Church About Joy*, by Kenda Creasy Dean, Wesley W. Ellis, Justin Forbes, and Abigail Visco Rusert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 42.

from the teaching. This separation stems from, and reinforces, the belief that deep, challenging learning is not fun, stimulating, or enjoyable. Games like the oatmeal kiddie pool cannot cultivate wisdom, because they neither engage deeply with the material itself (in this case, the content and ideas of the book of Job) nor invite open-ended imagination. As the following chapters will show, most of the games in youth curriculum lead to a single conclusion that illustrates the lesson, and students are told what the “point” of the game is. They do not invite students to explore, to imagine, or to see things differently; they do not facilitate the revelatory experiencing of which Goto writes.

Activities that are truer to the spirit of playfulness are those that invite students to engage the material in their own way: drama, art, or imaginative exploration of the text, like writing new proverb permutations. The most playful discussion questions are those that have no answers or explore a contrary-to-fact scenario—questions like, “How do you think Job would have responded if God had told him about the wager?”—because these are open-ended questions asked for the sake of imaginative exploration, and not to “demand a product” from the discussion.⁷¹ Bibliodrama is one such playful activity that explores the text without predetermined outcomes. A blend of improvisational theater and the Jewish practice of midrash, Bibliodrama is “interpretive play” in which participants role-play characters or even objects in the text to imagine their perspective.⁷² As participants dialogue with each other in character, they experience the text differently; their playfulness becomes a commentary on the text, yielding new insights for themselves and their peers.

The kind of playfulness that cultivates wisdom is not one that gets visitors in the door or makes learning palatable, but one that sees learning itself as a delightful task and engages the

⁷¹ Berryman, *Godly Play*, 12.

⁷² Pitzele and Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*, xix.

biblical text with imagination and creativity. As Moltmann writes, theology should be done not out of obligation or necessity, but from freedom, curiosity, and pleasure, for its own sake.⁷³ Such an approach to biblical interpretation and theological reflection is not without risks. It may make youth ministers feel out of their depth when a simple takeaway is traded for theological debate. Even more risky, it may very well lead youth to ask difficult questions or posit heterodox ideas. However, making the biblical text off-limits to imagination and play comes with its own risks. Jillian, a white United Church of Christ youth pastor currently serving at a United Methodist Church in Atlanta, put it this way:

We can't let the Scriptures be so dainty and fragile that we can't take them off the shelves and play with them. I had a grandparent who always used to get me these very fragile porcelain figurines for my birthday, and they were the most boring thing ever, because I couldn't take them out of their glass cases and actually play with them. I was always more excited about my other grandparents' gifts to me, because they were things like a jump rope or play dough. Things that I could examine with my hands and mold and put back together again and reuse. And I would so much rather the Scriptures be play dough than a little porcelain figurine, because the figurine is either going to break or collect dust, neither of which feel interesting to me. Whereas play dough may end up all over my clothes, but then I carry the Scripture with me everywhere I go, and isn't that really beautiful?

A playful approach to biblical education challenges the takeaway model. To engage the biblical text playfully, youth ministers have to cede control of the text and allow students to explore and experiment, even when it gets messy. Rather than teaching their own interpretation as the only right one, they must be open to the interpretations of their youth, which means that lessons may not wrap up as neatly. However, engagement of the biblical text must be done for pleasure, for its own sake, rather than to prove a point. It is only in the sheer delight of exploration and discovery that the desire for deeper understanding, for wisdom, is cultivated.

Attentiveness

⁷³ Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 66.

The second practice of wisdom's pedagogy is *attentiveness*. Creation theology is a major shared characteristic of the wisdom literature; in each of the wisdom books, wisdom arises from paying close attention to creation, what it has to teach us, and the wonder it sparks in us.

Proverbs urges its readers to learn from the order in creation, even from the industriousness of the ant (Prov. 6:6-11). Ecclesiastes notes the cyclical nature of the sunrise, of the water cycle, of the generations, probing it for the wisdom it contains (Eccl. 1:1-11). In Job, the Divine Speeches urge attentiveness to the large and small of creation, describing in rapt detail the characteristics and behaviors of the natural world (Job 38-41). Wisdom literature also pays close attention to human behavior and social mores. Whatever the sages find that is of interest, they study it, taking their time observing it, appreciating it, and being attentive to it, waiting patiently to see what insight it might reveal to them.

The wisdom literature chooses quality of learning over quantity, comfortable dwelling with ideas that are fruitful for reflection rather than worrying about learning the "right" information. Proverbs are an ideal example of this, as they cannot be read and digested in a single sitting. Instead, proverbs must be savored, each in their turn, and each riddle pondered at length until its nuances of meaning reveal themselves.⁷⁴ As Dave Bland writes, the ambiguity of the proverbs "requires the reader to dwell on it and probe it more deeply. Thus, one must wrestle for a while with even the most mundane proverb, not turning it loose until it reveals its deeper meaning."⁷⁵ Because of the haphazard organization of the book, Ellen Davis notes that it cannot serve as an ethics manual; one cannot "'look up the answer' to the problem at hand." The only way to learn from the proverbs, she writes, is by "living with the book for a long time."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See Davis, *Proverbs*, 11-12; Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 58.

⁷⁵ Bland, *Proverbs and the Formation of Character*, 76.

⁷⁶ Davis, *Proverbs*, 21.

Ironically, using Proverbs as an easy reference book is precisely the way many youth ministers treat it, but to skim it looking for relevant information is to miss the gift of its pedagogy.

Qohelet's tendency toward circularity in his thought patterns is another example of attentiveness; he does not answer a question, check it off, and move on, but rather returns again, like the sun and the sea he observes, to the ideas that call to him. Job too embodies the nature of unhurried reflection, getting 39 chapters of mileage out of a folk tale describing a righteous sufferer: it leads to questioning God's justice, the order of the world, the brevity of life, the human-divine relationship, and more. It meanders its way through these topics, in no hurry to provide the right answer or definitive solution. Rather, it invites the reader to see them from different angles, to dwell on them, to experience the ultimate questions of life as a brilliant work of poetry. Richard Clifford notes that modern readers prefer to "cut to the chase"⁷⁷ on the theological issues that Job addresses, but the book intends something else: "The author loved words, reveled in complicated arguments, and was in no hurry to conclude."⁷⁸

Attentiveness requires that one be fully present, undivided and undistracted. In a culture of efficiency and multitasking, attentiveness is rare; young people and adults alike are often not present enough to the world around them to notice all the wonders waiting for their attention. As such, attentiveness requires unhurriedness; in order to pay attention, one must slow down and focus on quality of knowledge over quantity. Rather than rushing to cover material, the practice of wisdom dwells with the object of inquiry. It sees the time spent in contemplation as valuable in and of itself, even if it does not immediately yield a marketable insight. In his book *The Nature of Design*, David Orr contrasts Western culture's obsession with "fast knowledge" with the more wisdom-like orientation of "slow knowledge." The culture of fast knowledge, Orr

⁷⁷ Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 74.

⁷⁸ Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 75.

writes, believes that knowledge and information are interchangeable. Profit, not wisdom, is valued as the goal of knowledge: “Knowledge that lends itself to use is superior to that which is merely contemplative.”⁷⁹ Slow knowledge, on the other hand, is the collective wisdom of a culture acquired over time with “thoroughness and patience,”⁸⁰ based on the steady rhythms of nature. It is not as flashy as fast knowledge, but its roots are deep, forming us over the course of our lifetimes as we wonder, contemplate, and linger over the questions and ideas that call to us. It is common for youth ministry leaders to be more concerned with the efficacy of their scope and sequence than with the unhurried “slow knowledge” that takes time to ponder what seems most fruitful or generative. But it is in those unhurried moments of exploring an important idea together that wisdom can grow and flourish.

In his book *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli writes about the time when his four-year-old son, tired of being hurried by his parents and preschool teachers, announced that he was starting a “Slow Club.” Yaconelli recalls, “He told us about the things he noticed during the day and shook his head at the other children who always seemed too busy to see the marvels and treasures so clearly visible to the patient eye: a piece of wire, a bottle cap, an especially smooth rock, a line of ants.”⁸¹ Inspired by his son’s contemplative orientation toward life, Yaconelli reflects on the need for youth pastors to cultivate this skill in themselves and in their students:

Like Joseph, those of us who minister among young people seek to be members of Slow Club. We invite youth to attend to their lives; we encourage them not to overlook the signs of God’s presence. Every time we’re among youth, we look and listen with slow

⁷⁹ Orr, *Nature of Design*, 36. Similarly, Brett Bertucio writes that teaching to achieve measurable learning objectives pushes out important affective modes of learning: “Contemplation, wonder, appreciation, or merely *sitting with* an object of study are dismissed as a waste of precious instructional time.” Bertucio, “The Cartesian Heritage of Bloom’s Taxonomy,” 495.

⁸⁰ Orr, *Nature of Design*, 39.

⁸¹ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 198.

eyes and ears. We listen for the deep sounds of God. We look patiently for the little signs of grace. We cultivate wonder. Like Joseph, we walk beside them saying ‘What do you notice? What do you see? How is God present in this moment?’⁸²

If youth ministers model attentiveness in their pedagogy, they can create a learning environment where young people have the time and space to notice, wonder, reflect, and discuss things that are meaningful to them. Following the students’ interests and the generative topics of discussion is a far more valuable use of time than trying to cover *more* material, or the *right* material. When a conversation goes off-topic, it can be tempting for teachers to try to steer it back on track so that they can cover the material they intended. But to try to control the movement of learning in that way cannot help but fall into the banking method, because it believes that the teacher, not the students, knows what is generative. Instead, teachers must be open to what educator Stephen Brookfield calls the ambiguity of teaching: able to go with the flow, listening carefully enough and paying enough attention that they can recognize when “teachable moments arise that cry out for [them] to depart from [their] script for the day,” when an unexpected and off-topic discussion is more fruitful and valuable than what they may have planned.⁸³

Pedagogies of contemplative reading are a natural way to practice attentiveness with the biblical text. The *CEB Student Bible* concludes each book with practices for “reading differently” that often include contemplative practices like lectio divina with well-known and loved texts. In interviews, several youth ministers mentioning using lectio divina as a common practice, either in their preparation, as a learning activity, or both. A bold twist would be to meditate on a non-inspirational text from the wisdom literature, one that seems unfamiliar or strange. How might it

⁸² Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 199.

⁸³ Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*, third edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 266-267.

shape students' encounter with Scripture to listen for a word from God in a text like "One person pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth" (Prov. 13:7), or "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9)?

Another way to practice attentiveness in the treatment of the wisdom literature is to follow its example of attention to creation. An exercise might be to observe carefully something in the natural world for a full minute and reflect together on new insights that arise. Having read the opening poem of Ecclesiastes, a group could sit in silence watching a stream or the waves of the ocean, then note how the experience shapes the way they read Qohelet's reflections. After a trip out west, William Brown has assigned students to expand the Divine Speeches in Job with what God might say about desert creatures, and provides examples of their reflections: "Job, can you weave a garment of silk as beautiful as the tarantula?...Can you give birth to a thousand babies and tenderly teach them all they need to know for life in six days...?"⁸⁴

Wonder

The next practice of wisdom is *wonder*, or the experience of fascination and amazement with something awe-inspiring, mysterious, or surprising. It involves a desire to engage more deeply with the object of wonder, as well as an awareness of one's limited understanding.⁸⁵ Wonder is a complex and diffuse concept; as Anders Schinkel summarizes it, "Wonder can take various forms—it can be more or less 'inquisitive' (involving a drive to solve one's puzzlement through understanding and explanation), more or less aesthetic, more or less joyful, more or less

⁸⁴ Brown, *Sacred Sense*, 80.

⁸⁵ Anders Schinkel, "Introduction," *Wonder, Education, and Human Flourishing: Theoretical, Empirical, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Anders Schinkel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2020), 11; Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 20-23.

unsettling.”⁸⁶ Here we will explore two aspects of it that attempt to encapsulate its diversity: wonder is both orientation and disorientation, and it is both cognitive and affective.

First, wonder is connected both to experiences in which one marvels at the perfection of order in creation (as in Proverbs), and to experiences of disorientation in which that order seems to be turned upside down (as in Job).⁸⁷ Like playing, then, wonder is not always a pleasant phenomenon; it can include a sense of fear and dread.⁸⁸ Similarly, Yannis Hadzigeorgiou sees the two faces of wonder as *thaumazein* (admiration) and *aporia* (“that is, puzzlement over contradictions, discrepancies, paradoxes”).⁸⁹ Hadzigeorgiou’s conception of wonder reflects its first aspect, orientation and disorientation, and connects easily to the second: wonder, like wisdom itself, has both cognitive and affective dimensions. One *feels* a sense of wonder, and one *wonders about* the precipitating experience.⁹⁰ Under this umbrella of wonder’s dual nature as cognition and affect we may also include Hebrew Bible scholar William Brown’s understanding of wisdom as *awe* and *inquiry*,⁹¹ as well as Marina Bazhydai and Gert Westermann’s description of *passive wonder* (“wondering *at*,” more akin to awe) and *active wonder* (“wondering *about*,” more akin to curiosity).⁹² What unifies these diverse aspects of wonder is that, whether one is experiencing joy or fear, marvel or perplexity, wonder evokes a desire for understanding that draws one closer to the object of wonder to engage with it more deeply.⁹³ As defined in chapter one, wisdom is characterized by the desire for deep understanding. Experiences of wonder, then, help to cultivate wisdom.

⁸⁶ Schinkel, “Introduction,” 11.

⁸⁷ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 20.

⁸⁸ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 20-21; Schinkel, “Introduction,” 11; Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, 9-11.

⁸⁹ Yannis Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder: Its Nature and Its Role in the Learning Process,” in Schinkel, 187.

⁹⁰ Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder,” 189; Marina Bazhydai and Gert Westermann, “From Curiosity, to Wonder, to Creativity: A Cognitive Developmental Psychological Perspective,” in Schinkel, 151.

⁹¹ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 23.

⁹² Bazhydai and Westermann, “From Curiosity, to Wonder, to Creativity,” 151, emphasis added.

⁹³ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 20-23.

In the wisdom literature, Brown sees that the primary way the wisdom literature cultivates wisdom and shapes character is by evoking a sense of wonder in the reader. Scholars have long acknowledged creation theology and character formation to be significant themes in the wisdom literature, even definitive of the genre. Brown explores wonder as the link between the two; wonder arises from the experience of creation and leads to wisdom and the formation of character. Wonder serves as the pedagogical tool of the wisdom literature that leads the student, through awe and desire, toward the object of wonder to engage it, and in so doing, to become wise. The sense of awe and the awareness of one's own finitude that accompany wonder, however, do not permit one to harness knowledge, to capture it and study it under a microscope, but rather invite one to revere it as a sacred Other. Wonder cannot be objective but is a relational knowing: "to know something in wonder is not to control or use but to know passionately, ever provisionally, and always reverently."⁹⁴

In the wisdom literature, wonder also has strong resonances with the fear of the Lord, an important concept in all three wisdom books. The first is the connection between wonder and fear. Often in youth curricula, explanations of the fear of the Lord hasten to assure students that it does not mean to "be afraid" of God, presumably because it seems unhealthy to be afraid of someone we love and who professes to love us. Popular conceptions of wonder, too, tend to bypass or repress "wonder's capacity to arouse and inflict terror, worship, and grief."⁹⁵ Although the fear associated with both wonder and the deity causes one to draw closer rather than cower, it is nonetheless real and should not be downplayed. To define the fear of the Lord as "respect"

⁹⁴ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 22.

⁹⁵ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 10. Rubenstein briefly discusses the concept of the "fear of the Lord" in the Hebrew Bible as an example of the kind of fear and dread associated with the "wound of wonder." Rubenstein, 9-10.

falls short of its meaning, which is more akin to real awe and wonder with its capacity to overwhelm and even frighten.

The second resonance is about one's attitude toward oneself as well as the object of wonder. The youth curricula I analyzed tended to emphasize two different aspects of the fear of the Lord: the first, typically in evangelical curricula, had to do with respect and reverence before God; the second, attested in mainline curricula, was about awareness of human limitations. These two understandings converge in the concept of wonder, which has to do with reverence for the object of wonder as well as acknowledgment of one's own finitude and the limits of understanding.⁹⁶

Finally, the fear of the Lord in the biblical wisdom tradition is both the "epistemological foundation and aim" of wisdom.⁹⁷ Wonder, similarly, is considered both the beginning and end of inquiry. Socrates said that "wonder is the only beginning of philosophy."⁹⁸ And yet exploration and discovery leads to further wonder at the beauty and delight of new ideas.⁹⁹ In the same way, wisdom begins in, and also finds its culmination in, the fear of the Lord. Because of these resonances, I suggest that *wonder* may be a helpful way to understand the fear of the Lord.

How can youth ministers cultivate wonder in their pedagogy? As an experience that often takes one by surprise, a sense of wonder (particularly passive wonder) is difficult to create. However, educators can create conditions that make it possible by facilitating encounters in which students might experience wonder. Practicing unhurried attentiveness helps make space for such experiences; Hadzigeorgiou suggests that an educational implication of wonder is

⁹⁶ Schinkel, "Introduction," 12.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 20.

⁹⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 54-55.

⁹⁹ Hadzigeorgiou, "Wonder," 202.

“starting with the ‘richness’ of an object or phenomenon (e.g. a tree leaf, a waterfall, a flash of lightning) through attentive observation...and ‘letting them speak to us’ (i.e. moving away from cognitivism).”¹⁰⁰ Laura D’Olimpio suggests that the arts can provide an opportunity for students to slow down and see things differently, helping to cultivate deep contemplative wonder.¹⁰¹ In its more cognitive dimension, wonder can be piqued by ambiguity and by paradox. Valentine Banfegha Ngalim and Fomutar Stanislaus, reflecting on the value of traditional African pedagogy for cultivating wonder, write that African proverbs and riddles spark wonder through their “oblique and veiled” nature, in much the way that the biblical proverbs do.¹⁰² Thus, educators can create space for wonder by introducing students to the *meshalim* of the wisdom literature and allowing students to wrestle with their ambiguity, rather than resolving them.

Active wonder, which is more akin to curiosity than passive wonder, comes naturally to young people; youth ministry scholar David White writes that young people are intrinsically curious and love to learn.¹⁰³ Rather than being stimulated and nurtured, however, their curiosity is often tamped down and suppressed; White writes that “youth’s alienation from their intellect...is not natural or normal,” but results from an educational system whose focus on teaching facts rather than awakening wonder “drain[s] them of their intrinsic intellectual interest.”¹⁰⁴ He goes on to say that churches have followed schools in “fail[ing] to spark

¹⁰⁰ Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder,” 207.

¹⁰¹ Laura D’Olimpio, “Education and the Arts: Inspiring Wonder,” in Schinkel, 259, 266.

¹⁰² Valentine Banfegha Ngalim and Fomutar Stanislaus, “Using Oral Traditions in Provoking Pupils to Wonder and Grow in Moral and Intellectual Values,” in Schinkel, 242.

¹⁰³ Although curiosity and wonder are often used interchangeably, Bazhydai and Westermann seek to differentiate them: where curiosity “drives knowledge acquisition,” wonder is about “affective response, reflection on obtained information, and seeking deeper and broader knowledge” (Bazhydai and Westermann, “From Curiosity,” 150-152). Similarly, Hadzigeorgiou notes that curiosity can be satisfied, while wonder cannot; it lingers, experienced just as or even more intensely at the end of an intellectual discovery than at the beginning (Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder,” 200-203). While I agree that there is distinction between the two, particularly with curiosity as the more cognitive endeavor, they are similar in that they both evoke a desire for knowledge and understanding, drawing a learner toward engagement with the object of curiosity/wonder.

¹⁰⁴ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 115.

intellectual curiosity and capacity.”¹⁰⁵ In the same way that wonder is suppressed by educational approaches that discourage exploration, it can be cultivated through educational approaches that legitimize, encourage, and teach students how to ask good questions. Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, creators of the Question Formulation Technique, argue that asking good questions is a skill that can be developed and should be taught in schools.¹⁰⁶

In the past, I have led youth group Bible studies around the practice of reading the biblical text together and having youth formulate questions about the text to discuss together. In the beginning, students were unable to formulate their own questions, telling me that they had none, then attempting overly-broad questions like “What does this passage mean?” With practice, however, I saw their capacity for wonder blossom as they began to ask imaginative questions (“What do you think this character did after meeting Jesus?”) and wonder about the mysteries of their faith (“When Jesus died, was there no God for three days?”).¹⁰⁷ Over time, they no longer looked to me for answers or asked for the purpose of seeking information; the questions interrupted and spilled over one another as they wondered aloud with the group. The practice of asking questions had become the practice of wonder.

Reflection

The fourth practice of wisdom is *reflection*, which is how one processes and makes meaning of events, phenomena, and ideas. The practice of considering meaning and implications is key for wisdom as defined in chapter one; rather than experiencing life passively, the wise person takes time to reflect on their life, a practice which gives them the resources they need to navigate new situations in thoughtful ways. In its more cognitive aspect, reflection is intentional

¹⁰⁵ White, “Pedagogy for the Unimpressed,” 23.

¹⁰⁶ Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2011.

¹⁰⁷ See Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 69-70.

and disciplined processing and analysis. In its more affective aspect, it involves contemplation, through meditation or artistic engagement. Whether it is more cognitive or affective in a given situation, reflection is the practice of entering more deeply into an event, phenomenon, or idea to examine it from different angles and come to a fuller understanding of it; is a focused exploration of themes, patterns, relationships, and connections for the purpose of meaning-making, which in turn enables one to apply the understanding gained from reflection to future decisions. The practice of reflection does not shy away from complexity or ambiguity, but rather enters into them, viewing them as a fruitful opportunity to cultivate wisdom.

Theological reflection is a more specific type of reflection that “explore[s] individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage.”¹⁰⁸ It goes beyond considering the meaning of an event, phenomenon, or idea to consider its meaning in light of, and in relation to, theological propositions. As Patricia Killen and John de Beer write, such reflection is a “genuine dialogue” between experience and tradition that “may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition.”¹⁰⁹ Although most modern wisdom scholars discuss wisdom and reflection through a secular lens, within the context of youth ministry, it is important to involve young people in reflection that has a distinctively theological bent. This is, after all, what the wisdom literature does: it reflects on the world in light of God’s relationship to it, seeking to understand how events, phenomena, and ideas nuance, challenge, and/or expand theological understanding.

¹⁰⁸ Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (1994; repr., New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), viii.

¹⁰⁹ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, viii.

The first source of reflection is *events*. Autobiographical reflection—that is, reflection on events or experiences in one’s life—is the type of reflection most often discussed in literature on wisdom. Reflection on one’s life experiences is more than mere reminiscence; it is what Nic M. Weststrate refers to as “exploratory processing,”¹¹⁰ which considers questions like how a life event relates to what came before and after it, and what insight can be gained from the experience. In theological terms, it also considers how God may or may not have been present in the experience. Dori Baker’s pedagogical method of Girlfriend Theology is an excellent example of theological autobiographical reflection that moves beyond reminiscence into more intentional structured reflection. In this method, Baker asks participants to recall a life experience that seems particularly meaningful, and the group reflects together on it. How does the story make them feel? Does it remind them of stories in their own lives or in Scripture? Where do they see God in the story, and what new images of God can arise from their reflection?¹¹¹

The second source for reflection is natural and/or social *phenomena*, or the relationship between the two. Theological reflection on natural phenomena appears in all three wisdom books, constituting their substantive creation theology. As in Proverbs, however, reflections on natural phenomena are often connected with social phenomena, making analogies and drawing conclusions about human life based on observation of nature. Social phenomena, particularly complex social problems and systemic injustices, also require reflection. In *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, David White explores the practice of critical reflection on social phenomena as “loving God with one’s mind.” For White, the “root question” to be explored is, “What forces and relationships impact the situation we are trying to understand?”¹¹² A

¹¹⁰ Weststrate, “The Mirror of Wisdom,” 509.

¹¹¹ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*, 33-34.

¹¹² White, *Practicing Discernment*, 123.

pedagogical strategy White suggests is to ask the question “But why?”, uncovering progressively deeper layers of history, politics, and ideology that contribute to situations of injustice and oppression in the world. White demonstrates how this method might work in discussions of racism: “Why did Rosa Parks’ feet hurt? But why were there racist policies? But why did white people see black people as inferior?”¹¹³ The “But Why” method helps to uncover proximate and ultimate causes of any given social phenomenon. Other questions that can help one reflect on phenomena include the following: What is your relationship to, or experience with, this phenomenon? What is others’ relationship to it? How does it shape society or impact the world? Does it remind you of other things? How has it changed over time? In his next chapter, on “loving God with one’s soul,” White moves from critical analysis to theological reflection, putting the insights from the previous step in conversation with the Christian tradition.¹¹⁴

Finally, one can reflect on *ideas and concepts*, higher-level philosophical and theological propositions. Ideas are never fully abstract, as they arise from our own or others’ reflection on phenomena and/or experiences, but they take on “a life of their own” and become a source of reflection in their own right.¹¹⁵ Reflection on ideas may involve uncovering their origin (What assumptions are behind this idea? How was this idea influenced by its time and place?), pondering whether and how an idea coheres with one’s own experiences and values, and, from a theologically reflective position, whether and how it coheres with one’s theological tradition(s).

The wisdom literature demonstrates the ways in which these three sources of reflection (autobiographical events, natural and social phenomena, and ideas) weave in and around one

¹¹³ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 127.

¹¹⁴ White, *Practicing Discernment*, chapter 6.

¹¹⁵ Killen and de Beer refer to what I call “ideas” as “positions,” or “the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and convictions that one holds.” They write, “Positions are the statements of the meaning we have made, our interpretation of life....Positions seems almost to have a life of their own.” Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 58.

another. For example, the book of Job is a lengthy reflection on the phenomenon of human suffering. In the course of its reflection, it also explores and evaluates theological ideas and concepts that have been employed to explain suffering, like sin, sanctification, and chaos. But with the inclusion of the prose tale, the entire book is then framed in terms of autobiographical reflection; the character of Job is determined to wrestle meaning from his own experience of suffering. He refuses to engage in what Weststrate refers to as “redemptive processing,” or seeking to make positive meaning out of a difficult life event.¹¹⁶ Instead, Job enters the fray of exploratory processing, painful though it may be, in an effort to understand his experience, and its relationship to his theological tradition, more deeply and honestly.

In Ecclesiastes, too, the three types of reflection intertwine. The autobiographical portions of Ecclesiastes demonstrate meaning-making that arises from life experiences. Rather than living an unexamined life, Qohelet examines his in excruciating and self-critical detail for the insights it reveals about the meaning of life. Finding himself unfulfilled despite his wealth and success, Qohelet reflects on how his own experience connects with both natural phenomena, such as the endless repetition of nature’s cycles, and larger social phenomena he has witnessed, such as greed and endless toil. These reflections combine with reflection on theological ideas and concepts, like retribution theology, that Qohelet has been taught. The sum of all his reflections is his philosophy on enjoyment of life, which itself becomes a new idea for his readers to ponder and reflect.

Youth ministers can incorporate the practice of reflection into their pedagogy in two main ways. The first is to help students reflect theologically on their *lives* in the way modeled by the wisdom literature, through practices and pedagogies like Girlfriend Theology, David White’s

¹¹⁶ Weststrate, “The Mirror of Wisdom,” 509.

“But Why” method, and others.¹¹⁷ Another practice of reflection is the Ignatian Examen, in which one reflects on one’s consolations and desolations, which are moments during the day in which one was drawn toward God or distanced from God. The Ignatian Examen helps practitioners notice patterns in their spiritual life, hear the ways in which God speaks to them, and discern the vocation to which God might be calling them.

The second way youth ministers can incorporate the practice of reflection is to reflect on the *biblical text* itself and the ideas and concepts within it. There are a number of ways to give students space and opportunities to practice reflection: through discussion, journaling, art, drama, or periods of silence. As I will show in chapter five, however, not all discussion questions, journaling prompts, or debriefing exercises stimulate reflection. In chapter two, I introduced Bloom’s Taxonomy as a way to think through different levels of cognition and observed that most youth curricula end with “apply,” which is only the third of six levels in the taxonomy. The practice of reflection, which is concerned with exploring how things relate to one another, lives primarily in the fourth level of the taxonomy, “analyze,” dipping occasionally into “evaluate.” Reflection questions and prompts should ask students to consider causes, relationships, and implications. In biblical education with youth, this might look like asking students to compare and contrast the perspectives in two different texts, to consider various translations or interpretations of a given verse and evaluate them, or to imagine why a certain concept might have been important to the author.

In addition to modeling the practice of reflection, the wisdom literature also invites it. For example, proverbs arise from reflections on natural and social phenomena, but as discussed above, they also leave much of the meaning and implications ambiguous or implicit, to be teased

¹¹⁷ For more practices of reflection, see David White, *Practicing Discernment*, 126-134.

out by the reader. The tensions in the wisdom literature also invite reflection as youth pastors and students wrestle together with how an idea relates to other aspects of their theology. The curriculum *Journey to Adulthood*, in a lesson on Job, gives an excellent example of an analytical reflection question: “Let’s assume that Job 13 is a model of Job’s overall attitude and argument. Does Job still fear God? Why or why not? If Job still fears God, what does this chapter tell us about the fear of God and what it looks and sounds like?”¹¹⁸ Here the curriculum takes two concepts that might be at odds (fearing God and questioning God) and discusses the relationship between them, inviting students to reflect on how the book of Job shapes their understanding of the fear of the Lord.

Dialogue

The last practice of wisdom is *dialogue*. Job is the most explicitly dialogic of the three wisdom books, as it consists of the actual debate between Job, his friends, and God as they argue out various perspectives on the nature of suffering and the divine-human relationship. But even in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, there is a sense of dialogue through the juxtaposition of various perspectives and traditions. The wisdom literature as a whole is also in dialogue with itself; as Brown writes, “no other biblical corpus exhibits greater inner tension and diversity of perspective.”¹¹⁹ The wisdom literature demonstrates that wisdom is found in the intersection, mutual exchange, and even tension between different life experiences and viewpoints. No one perspective contains all the wisdom there is to be had, and the wisdom that exists at the intersection of multiple perspectives is more than the sum of its parts. While there is wisdom to

¹¹⁸ J2A, “Questioning God,” *4Ward* module; *Journey to Adulthood* (Church Publishing Incorporated), 12, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://www.churchpublishing.org/journeytoadulthood#>.

¹¹⁹ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 2.

be gained through quiet contemplation on one's own, ultimately, one becomes wiser through dialogue with others refining and enlarging one's own perspective.

Dialogue helps to cultivate wisdom in two key ways: in wisdom's affective sphere, and in its cognitive sphere. Dialogue's affective value lies in its ability to foster empathy and understanding for others. An important aspect of wisdom that differentiates it from intelligence is its ethical component: a wise person considers how their decisions impact others, and they make choices that lead to flourishing for others as well as themselves. As such, "understand[ing] and valu[ing] diverse points of view" is key for wisdom.¹²⁰ When one understands what matters to others and what is at stake for them, one is able to make more better-informed, more compassionate choices.

The cognitive value of dialogue is the way that it nuances and challenges one's thinking. Paulo Freire argues that "only dialogue...is capable of generating critical thinking."¹²¹ When teachers lecture to students in an attempt to deposit information into their minds (what Freire called the "banking model" of education) students may be learning rote facts but are not growing in their ability to think critically. Liberation was the goal of education for Freire, and he recognized that he could not accomplish this goal if he lectured his students about their oppression rather than empowering them to think for themselves. His pedagogy had to match his values. Thus, Freire employed a pedagogy he called "problem-posing education," which presents a "generative theme" for the learning community to unpack together, so that both teacher and students are mutually engaged in the process of discovery.

The dialogue that Freire proposes, however, is different than the discussion often employed in youth groups. Youth group discussions are often dominated by the agenda of the

¹²⁰ See, for example, Sternberg and Hagen, "Teaching for Wisdom," 375-6.

¹²¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 92.

leader, who comes with a set list of discussion questions. As I will explore in more detail in chapter five, however, those discussion questions are often not open-ended; they either have a predetermined answer or a range of acceptable answers. They often stay at the surface level with questions of comprehension or application, rather than inviting students to interact with one another or the subject matter. What differentiates Freirean dialogue from discussions like these is the teacher's goal for the dialogue. Freire's use of dialogue invited students to explore a topic more deeply; dialogue requires "a cognoscible object around which to revolve."¹²² As Donalddo Macedo writes, "Dialogue must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. Thus, dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge."¹²³ Later in life, however, Freire found himself trying to clarify his dialogical method, which some educators had wrongly understood as a "mere technique."¹²⁴ Dialogue as a pedagogical tool without a clear purpose leads nowhere at best (what Freire refers to as "chewing the fat").¹²⁵ At its worst, it reinforces domination; as Macedo put it, it becomes "a new form of methodological rigidity laced with benevolent oppression."¹²⁶ Without the goal of liberation and without a central topic that learners are seeking to understand and engage critically, "dialogue" devolves into pseudo-dialogue that is often used to lead to, and reinforce,

¹²² Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 108.

¹²³ Donalddo Macedo, introduction to Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 18.

¹²⁴ Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue," 379. In Freire and Macedo's discussion, they were particularly concerned about "feel-good" pseudo-dialogue that encouraged students to share their life experiences without involving the group in reflecting critically on it. As Macedo writes, dialogical teaching is transformed into "a romantic pedagogical mode that exoticizes discussing lived experiences as a process of coming to voice," and "a method invoking conversation that provides participants with a group therapy space." Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue," 381. While this type of pseudo-dialogue often occurs in youth ministry as well, particularly when youth leaders are debriefing an experience like a mission trip or summer camp, what I see as most problematic in biblical education with youth is the way in which discussion questions reinforce the teacher's interpretation of the text rather than inviting young people to explore it for themselves. For either issue, Freire and Macedo's point remains that true dialogue must involve both a commitment to liberation *and* an object of knowledge about which students dialogue in an attempt to understand it more deeply.

¹²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 108.

¹²⁶ Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue," 377.

the teacher's point. Instead, true dialogue in youth ministry—dialogue as a practice of wisdom—is an open-ended opportunity for a group to explore an idea together, rather than a roundabout means of lecturing, as it often is in youth curriculum. This type of dialogue requires that youth ministry leaders re-frame the way they approach discussion in a number of ways.

First, dialogue should stem from what Freire called “problem-posing.” The teacher introduces a stimulating idea or concept (the “generative theme”) that is seen as the shared property of the group and prompts its members to dialogue. Because of their riddle-like nature and openness to interpretation, proverbs are an excellent example of generative themes for dialogue. Ngali and Stanislaus write that while direct questions often require cookie-cutter answers, which “limits the extent to which a child may wonder imaginatively,” proverbs as a didactic tool invite open interpretation and enhance creativity.¹²⁷ Similarly, questions should not assume a “right” answer. Instead, they should be crafted in such a way that the whole group can explore an idea together deeply. Sparkhouse's *Colaborate* curriculum provides some good examples of dialogue-generating questions on the wisdom literature: “What [is] the connection between wisdom and love? If you could only have one, which one would you choose? Is it possible to have one without the other?”¹²⁸ “Why do you think [the theodicy question] keeps coming up for Christians? Think about the answers to this question. Which one makes the most sense? Which one is hardest to believe?”¹²⁹ “Is it okay that Job lost everything if it's all restored? How would the story change for you if it ended at v. 6?”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Ngali and Stanislaus, “Using Oral Traditions,” 242.

¹²⁸ *Colaborate Leader Guide* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2015), accessed September 27, 2022, available at <https://www.wearesparkhouse.org/store/category/286837/Colaborate-Bible-Study>, 103.

¹²⁹ *Colaborate Leader Guide*, 109.

¹³⁰ *Colaborate Leader Guide*, 111.

Second, the youth ministry leader should share their own opinion as one helpful contribution, rather than the definitive answer. By virtue of their position of authority as the teacher, students are socialized to assume that the teacher has the final word. To keep the conversation going, youth leaders need to recognize this power dynamic and make an intentional effort to invite disagreement and ongoing dialogue.¹³¹ It can be more inviting to students for youth leaders to preface their contributions by saying, “Different people think different things about this, but I think...” or, “This is my experience, but I’m curious if others have had a different experience.”

Third, youth leaders should engage in mutual conversation with their students, neither shutting down a contribution with which they disagree, nor affirming all comments regardless of quality. Instead, students need to be pressed to think critically about their ideas. Youth leaders can continue the dialogue by responding to their students, “I wonder if that’s true in all circumstances, though. Can you think of a situation where that might not be true?”, or, “What are some other ways of looking at this issue?”

Fourth, youth leaders should engage the whole group in dialogue. Often, student responses to discussion questions are disconnected from each other; the students respond to the leader’s question, not to each other. Instead of accepting a response or two and moving on, the youth leader should involve the whole group in dialogue: “Has anyone else had an experience like that? How was it similar or different?” When a student asks a question, youth leaders should resist the urge to answer it, which often cuts off the opportunity for deeper engagement. Instead, they should again invite the group to engage with the question: “Marie just asked whether God

¹³¹ In true dialogue, Freire writes, there is a movement from thinking of “teachers” and “students” to thinking of the teacher as a “teacher-student” and students as “student-teachers.” When the content is not the private property of the teacher to be mediated to students, but rather becomes the shared property of the group to reflect upon together, the whole group participates in both learning and teaching. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

makes everything happen, or just knows everything in advance. What do you all think? Are there other options besides those two?”

When youth leaders engage dialogue in these ways, they create a learning community where old ideas can be challenged, new ideas can sprout, and difficult puzzles can “goad the wise” to deeper learning and wisdom.¹³²

Conclusion

As the reader may have noticed, the five practices of wisdom weave in and around one another, sometimes nearly indistinguishable from each other. Playfulness requires a sense of wonder, which arise from unhurried attentiveness. Wonder leads to reflection, and reflection to dialogue. Dialogue can be a playful enterprise that invites further wonder and reflection. Each of these practices also cultivates desire for deeper engagement and further learning, a key characteristic of wisdom as defined in chapter one. Together, these five practices constitute a pedagogical approach that helps students experiences the modes of thinking, the cognitive and affective processes, that both characterize wisdom and continue to cultivate it.

Although the wisdom texts arose in a time and place far removed from the twenty-first century youth ministry classroom, their inclusion in the biblical canon has invited readers in all times and places to seek wisdom within their pages and pore over the richness of their poetry and paradoxes, riddles and reflections. Rhetorical-critical scholars have explored the literary features of the texts and the ways in which their form creates meaning; in this chapter, we have synthesized some of those insights and explored their pedagogical implications. How might youth ministry practitioners implement these practices in their teaching of the wisdom literature? What possibilities for cultivating wisdom might be missing in their current teaching practices

¹³² The metaphor of wise sayings as “goats” comes from Eccl. 12:11 and is used by Peter Hatton to talk about the way in which Proverbs spur critical thinking. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, 12.

and in the curricular materials available to them? The next two chapters will analyze the way wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry, identifying gaps in practice and suggesting ways in which youth ministers can cultivate wisdom in youth as they teach the wisdom literature. Then, in the final chapter, I will reflect on an example of how one might explore one of the wisdom texts with youth in a way that is consonant with its own pedagogy, by inviting young people to “do what the text does”: in this case, to reflect on a complex theological issue in a manner inspired by the book of Job.

Introduction to Chapters Four and Five

Part I of this project proposed the cultivation of wisdom as an important goal in youth ministry, reframing wisdom not as content to be imparted but as an approach to knowledge to be cultivated. I proposed a model for biblical education with youth that focuses not on “doing what the Bible says” (the key text and takeaway approach which focuses on applying principles), but rather on “doing what the Bible does,” or inviting youth to participate in the modes of theological reflection modeled by, and in many cases invited by, the text. In part II, I explore the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job as a case study for this model of biblical education, analyzing what these books are doing pedagogically to cultivate wisdom in the reader and how youth ministers can engage them in a way that is consonant with their own pedagogy. As literature concerned with wisdom and intended for the education and character formation of the young, the wisdom corpus resonates with the goal of cultivating wisdom in youth.¹ However, it remains to be seen whether it is taught in ways that facilitate that goal. In the next two chapters, I take up the task of answering that question by analyzing the ways in which wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry.

I began my qualitative research by surveying 139 youth ministers about their practices of biblical education generally, and their teaching of the wisdom literature specifically.² For general aspects of biblical education, I asked respondents the following: to identify which curricula they use, as well as whether and how they customize it; to list which books of the Bible they had

¹ For reflections on how wisdom literature was intended to shape youth in Israel, see Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, chapter 6. Character formation has also long been identified as a primary goal of the wisdom literature; see Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 4.

² For a full list of survey questions, see Appendix A.

taught in the past three years; to describe a recent lesson they had taught; to name the goals they hope to achieve through biblical education; to identify the main challenges they face in biblical education with youth; and to describe the learning activities they often use in their teaching. For wisdom literature specifically, I asked respondents the following: to share which wisdom books they had taught; to identify the main texts, themes, and takeaways from any lessons or series on the wisdom literature; to state what challenges they faced in teaching wisdom literature; and to describe how their youth responded to the lessons/series. Upon my request, youth ministry professors and practitioners shared the survey with their networks, including several denominational organizations and ecumenical youth ministry conferences. I also shared it in several different social media groups centered on youth ministry, from “Women in Youth Ministry” to “Progressive Youth Ministry,” which garnered a diverse respondent pool. Toward the end of the response window, the survey was shared by an influential leader in a Southern Baptist youth ministry network, and the response from this community weighted the results toward white Southern Baptist men in their 20’s and 30’s. At the end of the survey, respondents were given an opportunity to provide their name and contact information if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview or to share their lesson plans. When I followed up, several respondents did share their lesson plans, which became another source of data.

The survey results helped to identify common curricular resources used by youth ministers, information which became my starting point for a curriculum analysis. I examined the scope and sequence of eleven different youth ministry curricula, including denominational curricula like Cokesbury’s *Fathom* (UMC) and *Here We Stand* (ELCA) as well as popular interdenominational curricula like *Group, Orange*, and *Ministry to Youth*, to see whether and how the wisdom literature appeared. I reached out to several companies to request samples of

lessons or series that included texts from the wisdom literature, downloaded some lessons through free trials, and purchased some others. I analyzed six series on the wisdom literature as a corpus, most of which summarized each book in a single lesson,³ and three in-depth, multi-week series on specific books.⁴ I also examined several topical lessons that included texts from the wisdom literature: from *Orange, Grow*, Sparkhouse, *Ministry to Youth*, Urban Ministries, the UMC *Connecting Faith and Justice* lectionary curriculum, and *Journey to Adulthood*. Finally, I included three youth study Bibles in my analysis: the *CEB Student Bible*, *The Guidebook* study Bible, and the *NIV Teen Study Bible*.⁵ For each curriculum I analyzed, I noted which texts were used (or notated/highlighted in the study Bibles), what themes arose, what learning activities were used, and what the guiding interpretation of each book seemed to be. As I began to identify some themes, I went back over my notes with more specific questions: Which emotions of Job are identified in the curricula? How do they treat the theme of enjoyment in Ecclesiastes?

The surveys and curriculum analysis identified some important trends and themes in the ways wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry, and the insights garnered from the curriculum

³ D6, *Beginnings* series (Job), *Forward Teaching Guide* and *Velocity Teaching Guide*, fall 2020 (Nashville: Randall House Publishing, 2020), *The Story of My Life* series (Ecclesiastes), *Forward Teaching Guide* and *Velocity Teaching Guide* vol. 15, no. 3 (D6 2019), and *Wise Up* series (Proverbs), *Forward Teaching Guide* and *Velocity Teaching Guide* vol. 15, no. 2 (D6 2018); *Here We Stand Confirmation* (Augsburg Fortress Press), accessed September 27, 2022, available for download through Sparkhouse Digital at <https://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/category/286470/Here-We-Stand-Confirmation>; *Colaborate Leader Guide* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2015), accessed September 27, 2022, available at <https://www.wearesparkhouse.org/store/category/286837/Colaborate-Bible-Study>; Charlie Baber, *Fathom: The Wisdom of the Kingdom: Job-Song of Songs Leader Guide*, ed. Ben Howard (Nashville: Youth Ministry Partners and Abingdon Press, 2018); Skip Masback, *Quest for Truth Seven Weeks to Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale Youth Ministry Institute), accessed September 27, 2022, https://yaleyouthministryinstitute.org/resource_type/quest-for-truth/; The Bible Project, *The Wisdom Series*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH0Szn1yYNeeKPNly7YXjO3MGD8h8ifhr>.

⁴ Rob Quinn, *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, ed. Sue Verner (MinistrytoYouth.com), accessed September 27, 2022, available for download at <https://ministry-to-youth.com/products/youth-group-lessons-proverbs>; Drew Dixon, ed., *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide, Explore the Bible for Students* vol. 7, no. 4, summer 2021 (Nashville: Lifeway, 2021); Doug Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job* (El Cajon, CA: Zondervan Youth Specialties, 2008).

⁵ Elizabeth W. Corrie, ed., *The CEB Student Bible* (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2015); Marlene Baer Hekkert, Janna Jones, and Jeremy Jones, ed., *The Guidebook: The NRSV Student Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012); Larry and Sue Richards, *The NIV Teen Study Bible* (1993, repr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

analysis helped me develop interview questions and coding categories. Respondents who volunteered for a follow-up interview were overwhelmingly white Southern Baptist men. To gather a more diverse pool of interviewees, I once again turned to social media to share a very brief survey asking youth ministers who had taught on the wisdom literature to provide their demographic information, their denomination, and which wisdom books they had taught. From that pool I selected eight interviewees, and I followed up with five others from the surveys. I ended up interviewing thirteen youth ministers: six women (two Black, one Korean, and three white) and five men (one Caribbean, two Latino, and two white). They represented a broad range of denominations: African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Church of Christ, Church of God, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Episcopal, Free Methodist, Korean Presbyterian, Presbyterian Church (USA), Southern Baptist, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ.

The interviews were conducted over Zoom, and each lasted 60-90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured; although I came with prepared questions, I followed themes that seemed fruitful and generative.⁶ The nature of the interviews allowed me to explore in-depth questions that the surveys could not adequately answer; I asked interviewees why they chose to teach on the wisdom literature, how they understood the main message of each book, and whether or how the wisdom literature is helpful for making young people wise. Several interviewees offered to share their lesson plans with me after the interview, which provided an interesting point of analysis; in the interview, some had portrayed what they taught somewhat differently than the lesson plan they provided. One interviewee had heavily borrowed from Lifeway's Explore the Bible curriculum but customized it with her own discussion questions.

⁶ For the interview questions I used, see Appendix B.

Taken together, the surveys, curriculum analysis (including personal lesson plans from survey respondents and interviewees), and interviews provided a rich data pool from which I was able to identify common themes in how youth ministers teach the wisdom literature to youth. In these two chapters, I pull together the insights garnered from all three stages of the qualitative research to present an in-depth analysis of current trends in teaching the wisdom literature.

Chapter four will begin with some introductory remarks on how often wisdom literature is taught in youth ministry. The rest of the chapter is organized thematically. I explore three distinctive features of the wisdom literature—its focus on the human experience, its poetic style, and its penchant for ambiguity—and how these features are experienced as both gift and challenge by the youth ministers who teach on these books. Next, I identify two key topics which the wisdom literature is often used to address—friendship and difficult emotions—and consider the theme of nature or creation, which is often left out of youth curriculum on the wisdom literature. Chapter five is organized book-by-book; for each book of the wisdom corpus, I explore in greater detail the interpretation, content, challenges, and learning activities that comprise youth ministers' approaches to the book. The discussion of each book includes two case studies, drawn from the interviews, to add texture and depth to the more general observations that precede it. Chapter five concludes with summary reflections on youth ministers' pedagogical approaches.

Chapter Four

Teaching Wisdom, Part I: Overall Trends and Themes

Wisdom literature does not appear frequently in youth ministry curricula, which may contribute to the infrequency with which it is taught in youth ministry. Several survey respondents identified the lack of resources as a significant challenge they faced in teaching wisdom literature.¹ When wisdom literature does appear in youth curriculum, it is rarely covered in depth. More often, curricula utilize popular verses (which will be identified and discussed in the following chapter) to illustrate a topical lesson. In popular interdenominational curricula like *Group*, *Grow*, or *Orange*, a young person could go through middle and high school having heard only one or two lessons that use a brief text from the Wisdom Literature. In *Group*'s four-year scope and sequence for high school, for example, wisdom literature appears in only one lesson. The lesson, on relationships, uses Prov. 17:17 ("a friend loves at all times") and Prov. 27:17 ("iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another").² In other curricula, wisdom literature may not appear at all. In the PC(USA)'s *Feasting on the Word* curriculum, although it follows the Revised Common Lectionary, not a single text from the wisdom literature appears.³

¹ Only 22% of respondents indicated that they write their own curricula most of the time, but 65% of those who taught on wisdom literature wrote their own lesson plans for those lessons/series, which is another indication that curricula on the wisdom literature may be lacking or unsatisfactory. One interviewee, Jillian, commented on the lack of resources that would fit her church's beliefs: "People who are producing resources for the wisdom literature have a particular theological bend, and so if you're not, you know, very conservative, infallibility kind of drive... You know, 'let's not talk about poetry or anything [other than] 'this happened exactly how it is written,' that is the bend of the resources that are financially available, and findable." She went on to say that it is also important to her that resources are produced by marginalized groups: "I'm looking for, do we have queer people producing resources? Do we have members of the disability community producing resources? Do we have people who are members of the LGBTQ community and maybe also people of color?"

² Group, "LIVE Curriculum High School Scope and Sequence," accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/youth-ministry/curriculum.do>.

³ PC(USA), "2020-2021 Scope and Sequence," *Feasting on the Word Curriculum*. Available for purchase at <https://www.pcusastore.com/Pages/Item/14709/Feasting-on-the-Word-Curriculum.aspx>. I reached out to the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation and requested samples of lessons on the wisdom literature, and I was sent the Scope & Sequence instead, presumably because, as I found when looking it over, no lessons cover the Wisdom

In *Here We Stand*, a Lutheran confirmation curriculum, the youth leader can choose between a two-year and three-year scope and sequence.⁴ While all the sections are shortened for the two-year confirmation plan, only one section is cut out entirely: Wisdom and Poetry. Along with most of the other non-narrative Old Testament literature, the majority of youth ministers and curriculum writers do not seem to find wisdom literature particularly important for the spiritual development of youth.

As noted above, it is far more common for wisdom literature to be used in topical lessons, or to be taught as one-lesson overviews of each book, than it is to be treated in a multi-week exegetical study.⁵ The chosen texts differ depending on how the book is taught. Topical lessons tend toward individual proverbs or inspirational sayings from various places in Job and Ecclesiastes. One-lesson overviews, which are typically used in confirmation curricula or other Bible overview series, gravitate toward the beginning and/or the ending of all three books. Focusing on the bookends is a textual choice that greatly reduces the books' complexity, even to the point of missing what seems to be the author's main intention. The D6 curriculum is an informative example of what is lost when brief overviews on these books are substituted for longer studies. Up until 2020, D6 had a 6-year scope and sequence in which Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes were each treated in a five-week series. In 2020, D6 moved to a three-year scope

Literature. Rather than making connections among lectionary texts, this curriculum chooses just one of the texts to focus on, and wisdom literature never makes the cut.

⁴ See "HWS 2 Year Scope and Sequence," *Here We Stand Confirmation*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://ms.augsburgfortress.org/downloads/2%20Year%20HWS%20Scope%20and%20SequenceRv3.pdf?redirected=true>; "HWS 3 Year Scope and Sequence," *Here We Stand Confirmation*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://ms.augsburgfortress.org/downloads/3%20Year%20HWS%20Scope%20and%20Sequence.pdf?redirected=true>.

⁵ The curricula, surveys, and interviews all indicated that those who teach the wisdom literature in the most depth are likely to be conservative evangelicals, who tend to be stronger on exegetical study as well as firmer in their belief that the whole Bible is valuable for faith and practice.

and sequence, condensing all of their material.⁶ Each of the wisdom books was cut by more than half, and, as one might expect, the result was that the treatment of these texts became shallower. Proverbs, which had initially treated several different themes in Proverbs, was condensed to a single lesson on chapter 1 and the importance of wisdom. The book of Job lost everything but the prologue and its takeaway to trust God through trials and be a friend to the suffering. Ecclesiastes kept the first and last chapter. With that reduction, the Ecclesiastes series shifted from exploring several of Qohelet's messages, to the takeaway that meaning is found in obeying God.

When I asked survey respondents whether they had ever taught lessons or series on the wisdom literature, the numbers were higher than I anticipated; out of 123 respondents who answered the question, 70% have taught on Proverbs, 58% on Job, and 48% on Ecclesiastes over the course of their youth ministry tenure. However, the survey did not discriminate between those who had taught extensive series on one or more books, and those who had only used a verse or two to illustrate a point.⁷ Several respondents indicated in follow-up questions that they use Proverbs “sporadically” with topical lessons or that wisdom literature is “supplementary” to other texts. A few had taught one or more of the wisdom books in a single-lesson overview. Several others could not remember what texts they had taught, as it had been many years since they had taught on wisdom literature. Overall, the survey data seemed consistent with what I saw in the youth curriculum: While some youth ministers teach in-depth studies on the wisdom literature, and it is relatively common to use brief passages in topical lessons, its usage seems to

⁶ Danny Conn, Director of Editorial and Strategic Projects for Randall House Publications, personal communication with the author.

⁷ I had hoped to gain a better sense of the scope with which respondents had taught wisdom literature by asking them which texts they had used in their lessons or series on the wisdom literature. Because the question was open-ended, however, many respondents did not answer it directly and several did not answer it at all.

be infrequent and limited to a few common texts.⁸ Thus, many young people are not exposed to the wisdom literature beyond an occasional proverb or the story of Job as an exemplar of faith.

The infrequency and selective usage of wisdom literature in youth ministry is reflective of a larger trend in the church. The Revised Common Lectionary is selective in its usage of the wisdom literature and often makes similar textual selections to what is found in youth ministry curriculum: Proverbs is the most common, Ecclesiastes the least, and Job is somewhere in between. In the lectionary, Proverbs appears seven times, with the texts coming largely from the introductory material rather than the sayings. Selections from Job include the prologue and epilogue, part of the Divine Speeches, the famous Redeemer passage in Job 19:23-27a, and two other excerpts from Job's speeches.⁹ Ecclesiastes appears very little. The Times poem in Eccl. 3:1-8 is read each New Year's Day, which many parishioners will not hear unless New Year's Day falls on a Sunday, and one reading appears in Year C, comprised of selections from Eccl. 1-2. For William Brown, the infrequency of wisdom texts in the lectionary is indicative of the church's ambivalence about the value of wisdom literature for spiritual formation.¹⁰

Perhaps because of the wisdom literature's relative obscurity in youth ministry contexts, it has a sort of cult following among the youth ministers I interviewed who have explored it in depth with their students. Some chose to teach on wisdom literature specifically because it is an

⁸ This claim and its implications will be explored more in depth in the following chapter with more examples given, but one survey respondent, a white male Church of Christ youth minister, provides a succinct example that exemplified my findings. He had taught on all three wisdom books. While he did not specify the text used for Job, the theme was God's sovereignty ("God is in control and we are not"), signaling that it was likely either the prologue or an excerpt of the Divine Speeches in Job 38-41. The text from Ecclesiastes was the Times poem in Eccl. 3. The text from Proverbs was Prov. 1:7. Another respondent, a white nondenominational woman, had taught on Job 42 and various proverbs in topical lessons.

⁹ One of those is from chapter 14, which is discussed later in this chapter in the section on Job. The Revised Common Lectionary and the Lifeway curriculum make the same choice to cut off this pericope before Job declares that God has destroyed the hope of mortals, leaving the text open as a question instead: "If mortals die, will they live again?" (Job 14:14). See Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 14.

¹⁰ Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 1.

uncommon choice, and its unfamiliarity made it seem more interesting to their youth. Lydia, a youth pastor at a Korean Presbyterian Community Church whose lesson on Ecclesiastes will be explored in chapter five, explained, “Not many of [my youth] had heard of or read Ecclesiastes, so I thought, ‘Okay, this might intrigue the kids,’ because it’s something new that they haven’t already dealt with.” Others taught on wisdom literature because they were asked to do so by their students, and in the process, they fell in love with it. One of these was Danielle, a Black youth pastor who has worked with youth in both the Church of Christ and the Church of God, and whom we will meet again in chapter five. When I asked Danielle why she chose to teach on the wisdom literature, she admitted that it was her students’ choice and one she resisted: “Wisdom would constantly come up and I’d be like, ‘If I’m being honest, I don’t want to do this,’ you know, because these are some hard books to really grasp.” After studying the books to prepare her lessons, however, Danielle came to a deep appreciation for them, noting that Proverbs 3 is now her “favorite favorite favorite” chapter in the Bible. For Brianna, a Black AME Zion youth pastor whose treatment of Ecclesiastes will be explored in chapter five, Ecclesiastes became her favorite book after she studied it in her Old Testament class in seminary. Tyler, a white Southern Baptist youth pastor in Oklahoma, noted that he had richer and deeper discussions with his youth when teaching wisdom literature than any other genre: “I’ve probably had more deep conversations from those books. Even though there are [other] meaningful ones that matter that should be taught, I still have more in-depth discussions whenever we tie it into the wisdom literature.”

Thus, the youth ministers I interviewed were not representative of the general ambivalence toward wisdom literature in the church. Many of them expressed a strong desire to see other youth ministers begin to teach on this corpus. I concluded each interview by asking

what they would like other youth ministers to know about teaching wisdom literature, and the most common response was “just do it”: “You can do it; it’s hard, but it’s doable, and it *matters*” (Matt); “They should do it. We lean a lot on the New Testament...but there is wealth in the Old Testament” (Jillian); “If we believe it to be God’s word, we have to believe it’s worth teaching” (Tyler); “Just try it, [even though] it can get messy” (Lydia); and “Do it, don’t avoid it, that’s my advice” (Michael). Although it can be a challenging genre to teach, for these youth ministers, the gifts of engaging the wisdom literature with youth far outweigh the challenges.

Challenges and Gifts: Wisdom Literature’s Characteristic Features

As a corpus, wisdom literature has some distinct features that set it apart from other parts of the canon. Although these features are not exclusive to wisdom literature, they are particularly characteristic of it, and interviewees reflected on both the gifts and the challenges of these features in their teaching.

The Wisdom Literature’s Focus on Human Experience

Scholars of wisdom literature have long noted that it is more focused on the human experience than other biblical genres; as C.L. Seow writes of Ecclesiastes, “True to the tendency of the wisdom tradition, the sage’s starting point in his reflection is not God, but the cosmos, society, and humanity.”¹¹ While the wisdom books assume Yahwism and reflect on God’s role in the world, there is little explicit reference to law, covenant, or the history of Israel in these texts. Instead, the texts have a timelessness and universal resonance to them. Because of this, one of wisdom literature’s strengths for exploring with youth is that it reflects the human experience in

¹¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 54. Similarly, Katharine Dell writes that “the starting point of wisdom is clearly in the human attempt to make life comprehensible and manageable, to seek to understand its nature and its patterns. In that sense, wisdom is non-revelatory and experiential.” She also notes, however, that “the wisdom enterprise is to be characterized by this tension between the two emphases [the human and the divine].” Katharine J. Dell, *Get Wisdom, Get Insight’: An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature* (Macon, Ga: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2000) 6.

a way that other genres do not. Its inclusion in the canon legitimates the existential questions and the everyday struggles and experiences that comprise the human condition. Michael, a white 25-year youth ministry veteran in the United Methodist Church who has done doctoral work in Hebrew Bible, noted that the wisdom literature's focus on human concerns makes it a helpful entry point into reading Scripture:

In a time when young people are struggling with why...the Bible is relevant, I think using literature that comes from the human perspective—that starts there and looks up without being able to part the clouds and see what's going on on the other side—is a very helpful doorway into the Bible. Because so much of the rest of the Bible is sort of giving you a peek into what God is thinking and doing, [which] wisdom almost intentionally avoids. It's really just the human side of the struggle and then some puzzling about what God might be doing in the midst of that.

Youth ministers also appreciate that its acknowledgment of the “rawness of human experience” makes their students feel seen and validated. As Jonathan, a white Episcopal priest and spiritual director who runs a summer theology program for youth, put it, “One of the major messages from the wisdom literature is that every part of our human experience belongs, every emotion that we have belongs, every question that we have for God belongs, and God can handle all of it.”

The wisdom literature's focus on human concerns also presents a challenge for youth ministers: how does it relate to Jesus and the Gospel? This difficulty was noted by several survey respondents, and even when it was not named explicitly by interviewees, they reflected on the different ways in which they wrestle with the wisdom literature's relevance for Christians. For evangelical youth ministers, the challenge lies in connecting wisdom literature with the proclamation of the Gospel and the call to discipleship. When connecting the themes of Job with the Gospel, Adam, a Latinx Free Methodist youth pastor whom we will meet again in chapter five, talked about God's solidarity with humans through Christ's suffering; the fact that God has

experienced human pain is a source of hope and comfort. Tyler focused on discipleship in his reflections, talking about the need to “count the cost” that life as a believer entails suffering, and the need to remain faithful to God.

Other youth ministers encourage students to think about how Jesus might relate to the wisdom literature in other ways: thinking about how Jesus himself might have read these texts, for example, or struggling with proverbs whose attitude toward the poor, in Jonathan’s words, does not seem “consonant with the way Jesus saw the world.” There were several different ways in which interviewees connected the wisdom literature to Jesus and the Gospel. Surprisingly, however, none of them talked about wisdom Christology, which has a long and rich history of understanding Jesus as Wisdom. No one mentioned the reception history of connecting Jesus (particularly as the Logos in John 1) with Sophia or dealt with Paul’s assertion that Jesus is the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24).¹² They also did not mention Jesus speaking in wisdom-like forms through the parables.¹³ Thus, as youth ministers discern the wisdom literature’s relevance for Christians, discussions of wisdom Christology or Jesus as a wisdom teacher may prove a fruitful avenue to explore.

As I mentioned in chapter one, youth ministers and curriculum writers wrestle with the tension between what I call experiential and theological approaches to the wisdom literature. I chose these terms in part because they are *not* complete opposites; even in the Bible, theology and experience are always inextricably intertwined.¹⁴ One’s understanding of God is filtered

¹² For a thorough treatment of wisdom Christology in Paul’s epistles and the Gospel of John, as well as in the theology of early interpreters, see Elizabeth Johnson, “Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology,” *ETL* 61, no. 4 (1985): 261-294.

¹³ For some helpful reflections on ways of conceiving the relationship between wisdom and Jesus, including wisdom Christology as well as Jesus as a wisdom teacher, see Kathleen O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 185-192.

¹⁴ Recognizing the interrelatedness of theology and human experience, Seow labels Ecclesiastes a “theological anthropology”: “Commentators are reluctant to refer to Qohelet’s thoughts as ‘theology’ The text has

through one's experience, and one's experiences are interpreted through the lens of one's theology. All of the youth ministers I interviewed, and all of the youth resources I analyzed, have something to say about both humans and God, life and faith; theology and experience are always in a dynamic relationship. However, their overall approaches tend to lean to one side or the other, *beginning with* either experience or theology and moving to the other. Although there are exceptions, mainline youth ministries tend to begin with the value and validity of human experience as the basis for theological reflection; non-denominational and evangelical youth ministries tend to begin with theological propositions about the nature and character of God as the basis for human action in the world.

Consider, for example, two different curricula's treatment of the book of Job: *Journey to Adulthood*, a progressive mainline curriculum whose high school curriculum "[emphasizes]...discernment and vocation" (focus on the human experience of discernment),¹⁵ and Lifeway's *Explore the Bible*, a Southern Baptist publication that aims to teach "the whole truth for the whole student" (focus on theological truth).¹⁶ There is a significant amount of crossover in some of the themes that are discussed; both curricula emphasize the importance of trusting God in times of suffering,¹⁷ and they define the fear of the Lord similarly, in terms of

more references to humanity than to God....So the book is arguably better characterized as an 'anthropology,' a discourse about humanity. But that, too, is not a satisfactory label, for the deity's presence is pervasive in the book. Qohelet thinks of humanity in relation to what God has done in the universe....If Qohelet's thought may be called a 'theology,' then it is a 'theology from below,' It begins with humanity, but it also reflects on the fate of humanity in God's hands and it speaks of the mysterious ways of God. The author begins not with divine revelation, nor with divine demands, but with the cosmos that the deity has brought into being, a complex web in which mortals are inevitably caught. It is a world with no discernible design, no order. Everything seems to be in the power of the deity who determines it all. In such a world and before such a God the mortal lives. This is Qohelet's 'theological anthropology.'" Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 54-55.

¹⁵ "Journey to Adulthood," *Church Publishing Incorporated*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.churchpublishing.org/journeytoadulthood>.

¹⁶ "Explore the Bible: Students," *Lifeway*, accessed August 23, 2022, <https://explorethebible.lifeway.com/students/>.

¹⁷ J2A describes one of the activities in the lesson as "us[ing] the book of Job as a launching point for a discussion on trusting God in the midst of evil circumstances." J2A, "Questioning God," 8.

reverence and respect for God.¹⁸ However, the overall thrust of each curriculum is more toward the experiential (*Journey to Adulthood*) or the theological (*Lifeway*).

In *Journey to Adulthood* (*J2A*), the goal of the lesson on Job is “to learn about the prominent place of doubt and questioning in the life of faith, [and] to use Scripture for guidance and encouragement for times of doubt and questioning.”¹⁹ While *J2A* acknowledges Scripture as a source of guidance, the focus is on using the story of Job to affirm the human experience of doubt more than to make assertions about the nature and character of God.

In contrast, Lifeway’s takeaways from the book of Job emphasize the nature of God:

God is worth following, no matter what – even when there is nothing in it for us.
 Hope and purpose in life can be found only in God.
 Even in our darkest times, there is a Redeemer who loves us and offers us hope.
 We learn how to live rightly by loving and honoring God more than anything else.
 God’s presence and power sustains believers in the midst of suffering.
 God is wiser and more powerful than you think.
 God honors those who repent and humbly depend on him.²⁰

While Lifeway’s takeaways still acknowledge the human experience of hopelessness, “dark times,” and suffering, as well as the need to “live rightly,” they tend towards statements of who God is and what God does, and how those theological truths should influence human experience and human behavior.

A closer look at each curriculum’s treatment of Job 13 shows the same tendencies. Although Lifeway’s lesson on hope is taken primarily from Job 14, the memory verse is Job 13:15: “Though he kill me, yet will I hope in him” (HCSB). One of the key discussion questions asks, “What hope do followers of Jesus have in the midst of suffering and difficulty?” The next

¹⁸ While *J2A* allows for discussion about what it means to fear God, it also explains that it means “having a healthy reverence for God.” *J2A*, “Questioning God,” 11. Lifeway defines the fear of the Lord as “to respect Him above all things.” Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 41.

¹⁹ *J2A*, “Questioning God,” 1.

²⁰ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 4, 14, 24, 34, 44, 54, 64.

section of facilitator notes, seeming to answer the question definitively, states that “the resurrection of Jesus is a game changer. It means that our current suffering is a blip on the radar of eternity.”²¹ The concluding discussion questions make the link explicit, asking students to reflect on how the “hope of resurrection should change your outlook...in the here and now.”²² The lesson focuses on a core theological conviction (the resurrection of Jesus) and moves toward the human response to that conviction (our outlook should change to one of hope).

J2A treats this text through a more experiential lens, pointing out that Job 13:15 can also be translated “He will kill me, I have no hope” (NRSV and CEB). After asking students which translation makes more sense in the context of the passage, the lesson concludes by asking students, “As we enter our troubled world this week, do we carry with us ‘I have no hope’ or ‘I will hope in God’? Can it be both? Why or why not?”²³ Thus, rather than telling students that God is trustworthy or that they *should* have hope, the curriculum focuses on their experience of “our troubled world” and their feelings about it, asking them to decide which aspects of the text resonate with their experience.

Another example of the tension between theological and experiential approaches is found in the way youth resources explain the “fear of the Lord.” The most common interpretation in youth curricula across denominational lines is that the fear of the Lord means respect, reverence, and awe toward God. However, Cokesbury’s *Wisdom of the Kingdom* curriculum (a United Methodist publication) defines it as “the acceptance of our human limits in the face of God’s eternal nature.”²⁴ In this interpretation, although God’s nature serves as the basis for recognizing

²¹ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 21.

²² Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader guide*, 22.

²³ J2A, “Questioning God,” 12.

²⁴ Baber, *Fathom: Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 13. Cokesbury’s understanding of the fear of the Lord is similar to the interpretation that Eunhy P. Lee offers in her work on Ecclesiastes: “This, after all, is what it

human limitations, the definition foregrounds a more experiential interpretation that is less focused on worship and more on self-knowledge.²⁵

The tension between theological and experiential approaches shows up most clearly, and most importantly, in how youth ministers and curriculum writers understand wisdom itself: as human discernment in navigating an ambiguous world, or as obedience to divine rules and guidance. The majority of curricula analyzed for this project fall into the latter category; they assume decision-making to be fairly straightforward, based on knowing the rules and having the moral fortitude to apply them. For example, *Ministry to Youth*'s 8-week series on Proverbs begins with a game in which students race to complete Lego creations, but some students have been given incomplete instructions. The point is that one needs clear and complete directions to figure out how to live; the lesson assures us that "we DO have that. It's called the Bible."²⁶ This game illustrates some key themes of an obedience-centered approach to wisdom. First, it understands wisdom as something that comes from external sources: from God, from the Bible, and from older and wiser people. Second, this approach to wisdom has a clear sense of right and wrong. Wisdom is about following the rules and making objectively *right* decisions, rather than good or thoughtful decisions.²⁷ It also emphasizes the role of wisdom in helping youth avoid sin and temptation.²⁸

means to fear God according to the worldview of the ancient sages: to recognize both the tragic limitations and the joyous possibilities of human existence." Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 8.

²⁵ Similarly, the Bible Project video on Proverbs defines fear of the Lord as a "healthy sense of reverence and awe for God and my place in the universe," which, while reversing the order of God and humans and thus foregrounding the reverence, still acknowledges human awareness of their finitude as creatures. See The Bible Project, "Overview: Proverbs," May 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzmYV8GNAIM&t=6s>.

²⁶ Quinn, "Week 1: Wisdom: The Purpose of Proverbs," *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*.

²⁷ For example, *Ministry to Youth*'s lesson on Wisdom/Proverbs says that wisdom "at its core means students know the right thing to do (God's way of living) AND actually do it." Diliberto, "Youth Group Lesson on Wisdom."

²⁸ See D6, *Forward Teaching Guide* vol. 15 no. 2, 10, which says, "Wise students plan their weekends so they are less prone to be tempted to do wrong by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is the wisdom found in the book of Proverbs, and it helps young and old alike avoid sinful activities and the consequences that

For others who take a more experiential view, the point of the Lego game might be precisely that we do *not* have clear and complete directions for life, which is why we need wisdom. Grace, a United Church of Christ pastor, says that wisdom “helps us look at the world [in a way that is] not so black-and-white, but we can embrace the color and the gray, and understand that there isn’t always a clear right or wrong.” Similarly, *Wisdom of the Kingdom* quotes Peter Enns to say that “wisdom is about learning how to work through the unpredictable, uncontrollable messiness of life so you can figure things out *on your own*.”²⁹ In Enns’s and *Wisdom of the Kingdom*’s interpretation of wisdom, wisdom does not come from external sources but is rather an internal resource. Scripture can shape us into the kind of people that can make wise decisions, but wisdom is more than merely reading and applying biblical principles. It recognizes gray areas that require discernment when there is no clear way forward, when “right” and “wrong” are too simplistic of categories.

The tension between wisdom-as-obedience and wisdom-as-discernment points to the complex interplay between divine and human agency in the acquisition and application of wisdom. Two interviewees, Matt and Jonathan, talked about wisdom aiding young people in vocational discernment. For Matt, a Southern Baptist youth pastor, his response to students wrestling with college or career choices is to pray about it and ask God which path they should take or which school they should attend. Here God is the external source who bestows wisdom. Jonathan, an Episcopal priest and trained spiritual director, has his students practice the Ignatian Examen, journaling their consolations and desolations and reflecting on themes that arise.

come from them”; Quinn, “Week 6: Wisdom Stops Sin,” *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 3. When I asked Matt, a Southern Baptist youth pastor, what wisdom there was for youth in Proverbs, he answered in terms of the “warnings against lust, warnings against laziness, warnings against the path of wickedness.”

²⁹ Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), 138, quoted in Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 19, emphasis added.

Jonathan explains it this way: “If you trust that God speaks to us through our lives, then pay attention so that you can know how your deep joy meets the world’s deep pain, and then you can steer your life in ways that are faithful to that.” Jonathan and Matt both employ spiritual practices, and they both consider that they are teaching youth to listen to God. However, there is a different emphasis in the kind of human agency required.

As I noted in chapter one, the experiential/theological and discernment/obedience tensions appear in the wisdom literature itself. Wisdom is a diffuse concept shaped by various strands of tradition that are sometimes in conflict, sometimes conflated, and not always cohesive.³⁰ Within the canonical and deuterocanonical wisdom literature, there is diachronic development (changes in understanding wisdom over time) as well as contemporaneous conflicting ideas that reflect different understandings of wisdom and different responses to cultural shifts.³¹ The book of Proverbs preserves both kinds of wisdom and holds them in tension. A more experiential, discernment-oriented wisdom is found in the proverb collections of

³⁰ For example, Daniel N. Robinson writes that Christian wisdom is a “complex amalgam” of Hebraic wisdom (which he says “prepared the Christian mind for *revealed* truth”) and Hellenic wisdom, which is non-revelatory and focused on observation and analysis of the natural world. He is correct that Christian wisdom borrows from different intellectual traditions. Like most brief historical surveys, however, Robinson’s paints with broad strokes; Hebraic and Hellenic ideas are not monolithic and are not so easily parsed from one another in the Hebrew Bible. It is unclear exactly what Robinson means by “Hebraic” wisdom, but Ecclesiastes certainly seems to fit his understanding of Hellenic wisdom, and as we will see below, the oldest portions of Proverbs also seem more focused on observation than his description of Hebraic wisdom does. What is most interesting for our purposes is Robinson’s explanation of how different streams of thought feed a complex understanding of wisdom that “rang[es] from...nearly blind obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ to Thomistic conceptions that are often scarcely distinguishable from Aristotle’s.” Robinson, “Wisdom through the Ages,” 19-20.

³¹ For example, Samuel Adams argues that, as retribution theology became eschatologized (that is, one will receive a reward in the afterlife even if not in this life), Qohelet represents a voice of dissent during this major transition of thought. See Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Boston: Brill, 2008). Thus, conceptions of wisdom are shifting over time as well as standing in contrast during the same cultural shifts. Similarly, Kathleen O’Connor writes about the ways in which Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon represent two different responses to Hellenic wisdom; Sirach is a traditional response to Hellenism that doubles down on wisdom’s connection to Yahweh and equates wisdom with Torah. Wisdom of Solomon is a more progressive response that appropriates more Hellenistic philosophy into its theology. See O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, chapters 6-7.

Prov. 10-29, the earliest portions of the book which likely arose during the monarchy.³² Michael V. Fox, tracing the development of wisdom over time, writes that these older collections show that “wisdom in its oldest and broadest sense is the expertise that allows one to assess a situation and choose effective means to carry out one’s intentions.”³³ A more theological, obedience-centered wisdom features in the opening lectures of Proverbs, which were added later after the monarchy’s collapse, likely during the Persian or early Hellenistic period.³⁴ In these lectures, the father, who is the external source of wisdom, urges the son to listen and obey his teachings and warns him against the temptations of folly and wicked companions. Fox writes that with this shift, wisdom is now “religious at its very foundations,” and has “become a moral virtue, almost identical with righteousness.”³⁵ The tension is preserved in Ecclesiastes as well. Throughout the book, Qohelet reflects on how to navigate an ambiguous world in the seeming absence of divine guidance. In the epilogue, however, the editor of the book concludes with an exhortation to fear God and keep God’s commandments (Eccl. 12:13).

As I noted in chapter one, wisdom in the Hebrew Bible is both a divine attribute and an ability of human beings. Human wisdom thus expresses itself in the pursuit of discovering the divine wisdom present in creation, and in using this knowledge to live well in the world. Because this project is focused on cultivating the practices and thought processes of wisdom in young people, it tends toward a more experiential, discernment-oriented approach to wisdom. However, whichever approach a youth minister takes in any given lesson or series, it is important to hold the experiential and theological aspects of wisdom in tension.

Wisdom Literature as Poetry

³² Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 505; Davis, *Proverbs*, 16.

³³ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 925.

³⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 6; Davis, *Proverbs*, 16.

³⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 930-31.

Another notable feature of wisdom literature is that it is written in poetic style. While this is not unique to the wisdom literature, as the majority of the Hebrew Bible is poetry, it is another feature of wisdom literature that presents itself as both gift and challenge to the youth ministers who teach it. Because of its emphasis on universal human experience, wisdom literature (along with the Psalms, which several survey respondents and interviewees included with the wisdom literature) is an approachable introduction to Hebrew poetry, a middle ground between the perceived accessibility of narrative and the opaqueness of prophetic oracles. Interviewees noted that wisdom literature is a helpful bridge to reading other parts of the Old Testament because it can seem more immediately relevant to youth than other genres like law or prophecy. When I asked Jeremiah, a Caribbean youth pastor at a Church of Christ in South Florida, what his goals were in teaching on wisdom literature, he responded,

The biggest thing I wanted to do was to dispel the myth that everything in the Old Testament is hard and nonsensical....Going into it through the wisdom literature gives you a—well, I don't want to say *easy* entry—for cultivating an appreciation for [the Old Testament]. But because of the imagery there and allusions to general life, I think it's more exciting. It's crafted [to] hit those people who are visual learners or connect to the arts...so because of the imagery in there, I think it's a natural bridge [to] help us get into the Old Testament, as opposed to jumping into, like, you know, Numbers or Leviticus.

However, teaching the wisdom literature is admittedly still challenging for many youth pastors who are more comfortable teaching either narrative or didactic literature. Youth ministers identified two main challenges of teaching wisdom literature as poetry: its poetic style and its figurative language.

First, poetry even in one's native language can be more difficult to teach than other genres because it has less of a plot than narrative, and it approaches its subject matter more circuitously than didactic prose. It asks the reader to experience it rather than derive principles from it, which is a challenge when youth ministers feel the need to provide a clear takeaway.

Biblical poetry, like the rest of the Old Testament, has the added difficulty of having been translated from Hebrew. In translation, much of the rhythm and assonance has been lost, leaving readers with a text written in verse that often does not sound very poetic according to the standards of most modern English poetry. Most youth ministers are also not familiar with the particular conventions of Hebrew poetic style, such as parallelism, that would give them a framework for reading and appreciating these texts as poetry. The difficulties of reading Hebrew poetry led surveyed youth ministers noted that the wisdom literature sounds “choppy” to them and their students, or they can “get lost” while reading it in a way that they might not while following a narrative plot.³⁶

Second, the vocabulary and figurative language inherent to poetry makes reading comprehension difficult for students (as well as for the youth ministers themselves!). For some youth ministers, this factored into the challenge of time constraints, as it took the majority of the allotted class time for students to understand the words on the page before they could move on to discussion of the ideas. One youth minister, Danielle, recalled having to read the text multiple times in different translations just for students to comprehend the language.³⁷ The heavy use of

³⁶ Many of the biblical narratives are in fact more confusing or difficult to interpret than the ways they are commonly taught in churches. For example, Tiffany Mangan Dahlman points out the difference between a Christian student’s summary of the Transfiguration in Mark 9:2-13, and the summary of a student without a church background, for an assignment in an introductory-level college course on the Bible. The Christian student summarized the Transfiguration this way: “God announces Jesus is the Savior, sent to us from heaven to save us from our sins. He is glorified because he is perfect and holy, and he will die for our sins, rise on the third day, and if we believe and obey all of his commandments we will be glorified too.” The student without a church background summarized it this way: “A cloud, who is the father of Jesus, tells the disciples to listen to him and this voice, plus the ghosts of Elijah and Moses scare the disciples. The cloud tells them to listen to Jesus. Jesus and the disciples talk about Elijah and the future. (I’m as confused as the disciples.)” Tiffany Mangan Dahlman, Facebook, July 23, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/tiffany.m.dahlman/posts/10159896862610993>. Thus, youth ministers’ assumptions that narratives are more coherent or easier to teach than poetry may reflect their familiarity and comfort with certain biblical narratives, rather than biblical narrative as a genre being objectively easier to teach. However, a detailed discussion of biblical narrative is outside the scope of this project.

³⁷ Similarly, survey respondents named as challenges of teaching wisdom literature “helping [youth] understand the poetic language and style of the book,” and “helping [youth] see the relevance when the language is confusing.”

metaphor can pose a challenge for students who are unused to thinking figuratively. Youth ministers noted that because younger students are still thinking more concretely, the abstract language and ideas are difficult for them to process.³⁸

How do youth ministers deal with the challenge of teaching poetry? Most often, they turn it into other genres with which they are more comfortable. For Proverbs, youth ministers and youth ministry curricula often mine the poetry for the “point,” distilling it into a clear principle or takeaway, and base the lesson on the derived principle rather than on the text itself. For example, a *Ministry to Youth* lesson treats the proverb, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). The curriculum reads, “This is a great proverb. Can anyone tell me what it means? [Take responses.] Right, this means, make sure your close friendships are with people who will help you walk with Jesus.”³⁹ Although Prov. 27:17 has a long history of interpretation in which it is understood to refer to positive influence, it mentions neither close friendships nor Jesus, and it is framed as an observation rather than an imperative.⁴⁰ Thus, its meaning is not unambiguous enough to warrant the facilitator’s assumption that it should be obvious without a discussion of how one might arrive at that conclusion. Nevertheless, the curriculum then asks students to reflect on whether they help their friends walk with Jesus, making the ensuing discussion based on a concept that is not found in the text at all. In this

³⁸ A survey respondent noted that a challenge of teaching wisdom literature was “those who struggled with more abstract concepts and wanted more black and white answers”; Jillian noted, “At a young age of twelve, thirteen, fourteen, they are still thinking in a pretty concrete way, and getting into sort of a more metaphysical conversation can be a bit more challenging, and I think Job requires that”; and as we will see in the following chapter, Sara teaches wisdom literature through fun activities that do not require abstract thought: “[A difficulty of teaching Ecclesiastes] was just the reading comprehension level of our sixth graders and trying to understand all this abstract thought. That’s when we made the switch from more discussion questions to more activity-based things.”

³⁹ Quinn, “Week 4: Relationships,” *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 8.

⁴⁰ In fact, Ronald L. Giese, Jr., has argued that this proverb does not have a positive meaning at all but rather refers to people stirring up and escalating violence against one another. For Giese’s argument, as well as a helpful summary of the interpretive tradition of this proverb, see Ronald L. Giese, Jr., “‘Iron Sharpens Iron’ as a Negative Image: Challenging the Common Interpretation of Proverbs 27:17,” *JBL* 135, no. 1 (2016): 61-76.

move, the lesson discusses the curriculum writer's takeaway rather than exploring the language of the original proverb, which fades away into the background. Jeremiah explained that in his lesson preparation for Proverbs, he read the text and then condensed it into a theme or principle: "Well, this sounds like cooperation and communication, let's just go with that." Then, when teaching the lesson, he "use[d] allusions to the text to reinforce that principle," rather than asking students to interpret the text for themselves or derive their own principles from the figurative language.

As I discussed in chapter three, the genre of the *mashal*, or proverb, is a more of a riddle or puzzle than a clear injunction; the terseness of the language and the exploratory nature of metaphor make the meaning of a proverb ambiguous. Anne Stewart argues that the form of the poetry in Proverbs is essential to its pedagogy, and that "the import of poems cannot be appreciated by paraphrasing their main point."⁴¹ I also showed that allowing students to wrestle with the ambiguity of proverbs is a way to cultivate wonder in students. When youth ministers use the key text and takeaway approach to summarize or paraphrase proverbs rather than exploring them with young people, they foreclose the opportunity to practice playfulness, attentiveness, wonder, reflection, and dialogue, and thus to cultivate wisdom. As Charles Melchert writes, "If we make the metaphor too clear, if we settle the ambiguity in our drive for clarity and precision, we destroy the metaphor...and thus inhibit the learning possibilities."⁴² Rather than identifying the "point" of a proverb, a better way to design a lesson on Proverbs is to identify ways in which the meaning of the proverb is *unclear*. Youth ministers can then capitalize on the proverb's ambiguity to invite students to ponder its meaning. They might

⁴¹ Anne W. Stewart, "Poetry as Pedagogy in Proverbs 5," in *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, ed. J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 80-92, here 92.

⁴² Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 72.

suggest a few possible meanings and ask students to argue for one interpretation over another, or they might invite students to explore the possible implications of a metaphor.

For example, in chapter three I briefly discussed the imagery of Prov. 17:12, which advises the reader that it is “better to meet a she-bear robbed of its cubs than to confront a fool immersed in folly,” and I suggested that it invites reflection on the connections between the fool and the mama bear. If a fool is in some way comparable to a mama bear, what are their “cubs”? Why are they protective of them? Can foolish actions be prompted by feelings of loss or fear? I asked these questions to a group of high school students at Emory University’s Youth Theological Initiative in the summer of 2022, which led to discussions on the human tendency toward self-preservation, particularly when one fears the loss of tradition or identity. One student pointed out that the foolishness of racism is often motivated by xenophobia, the fear of diversity. When I asked why people might fear diversity, students responded that they fear change and they fear the unknown. Although the group agreed that xenophobia is a foolish response to these fears, they were also able to acknowledge these fears as a shared human experience. We also discussed together various strategies for surviving a bear attack (running away, appearing threatening, playing dead), and how the correct response differs depending on the situation. I tied the different defense strategies to Prov. 26:4-5, which suggest different strategies for engaging with a fool.⁴³ Thus, exploring the figurative language of the proverb led to a more robust conversation than if I had offered a simple takeaway from the proverb, such as “Fools are dangerous, so stay away.”

While the poetry of Proverbs is often turned into didactic prose, a common approach to Job and Ecclesiastes is to narrativize them. This is particularly easy to do with the book of Job,

⁴³ Prov. 26:4-5, a pair of contradictory proverbs placed side-by-side, will be discussed more in chapter 5.

which is framed by a prose narrative in chapters 1, 2, and 42. As will be explored further below, the most common texts taught from the book of Job come from the narrative rather than the poetry. Although narrativization is a less common approach with Ecclesiastes than with Job, some youth ministers place Ecclesiastes in a narrative framework by telling the story of King Solomon-cum-Qohelet, who sought out wealth and pleasure and still found himself empty and lacking fulfillment.⁴⁴ When I asked Tyler what texts are important for understanding Ecclesiastes, he answered not with texts from Ecclesiastes but rather from the historical narratives:

To get a good understanding of Ecclesiastes, with the understanding that Solomon wrote it, you have to take time to go back and familiarize yourself with Kings and Chronicles to remind yourself of Solomon's life, of his choices...God came to him and imparted this wisdom. Solomon was the wisest man, and yet even the wisest person can make such bad decisions....I think that the framework of Ecclesiastes has to be found not only in Solomon's writings and Solomon's history in Kings and Chronicles, but it also has to be found in Scripture as a whole, and I think it has to be taught together.⁴⁵

When poetic texts are read, situating them in a narrative framework helps make them more accessible for students. The texts themselves provide narrative frameworks, modeling the ways that narrative can infuse poetic reflections or dialogues with contextual meaning. However, when the tendency to narrativize a text leads youth ministers to teach *only* the narrative, as in the case of Job, a substantial portion of the book's message is lost. A detailed study of biblical

⁴⁴ For example, D6 introduces its series on Ecclesiastes by referring back to previous lessons from the life of Solomon: "We have studied Solomon's prayer for wisdom. We learned about the Temple he built for the Lord. We know of his astonishing wealth and the huge extent of his kingdom. We also studied Solomon's proverbs, an entire book of the Bible of his collected wisdom. So this month we turn to his philosophical memoirs, the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon, blessed by remarkable wisdom from God, examined the empty pursuits of man—finding no fulfillment in wealth or wisdom or work or pleasure. Indulgence and fame cannot satisfy. The only lasting satisfaction is in knowing God and obeying His commandments. Journey with Solomon to identify what really matters in the story of your life." D6, *Forward Teaching Guide* vol. 15, no. 3, 5.

⁴⁵ Although most scholars believe Ecclesiastes was not actually written by Solomon, the author intentionally invoked the persona of Solomon as a way to contextualize Qohelet's reflections. In addition to demonstrating youth ministers' penchant for narrative, Tyler's response also suggests the importance of understanding authorship and historical context to situate a biblical text. For more on historical context and how it might inform biblical education, see chapter 2.

narratives, and how youth ministers teach them, is beyond the scope of this project. However, youth ministry curriculum's tendency toward the key text and takeaway approach leads youth ministers to teach narratives, like poetry, with an application in mind. Particularly when a narrative features a well-known perceived moral exemplar or so-called "hero of the faith" like Noah, David, Daniel, or Job, the takeaway often encourages emulation of these characters' positive traits like courage, faith, or obedience.⁴⁶ When youth ministers reduce poetry to narrative, then, particularly in the case of Job, they tend to oversimplify the complexity of the book. Overall, the use of narrativization as a way to *avoid* rather than *frame* the poetry does a disservice to the wisdom literature by neutralizing the evocative power of its poetic form.

Despite the challenges of reading Hebrew poetry, however, for some youth ministers, the wisdom literature's poetic style is a gift, providing an invitation for young people to explore it in open-ended ways. Jillian noted the difficulty of discussing abstract ideas with younger students, yet she sees the wisdom books as unique in their ability to be "conversation partners with present-day poetry in a way that a lot of other biblical texts cannot." Rather than exegete the text or give her students a moral takeaway, Jillian prefers to "plop down Ecclesiastes and a Rumi or Nayyirah Waheed [poem]," and let her students reflect on the resonances. This pedagogical move helps Jillian to situate the wisdom literature in its poetic genre and give students an interpretive lens through which to read it.

⁴⁶ For example, in the survey I conducted, I asked youth ministers to describe a recent lesson they had taught that was typical of their teaching style, including the text, the main point, and the learning activities they used. Only a small percentage (20%) of the 133 responses to this question discussed a lesson on an Old Testament text, and because it was Advent, several of those focused on showing how Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecies in Isaiah. Aside from the Psalms, the most common Old Testament texts in those recent lessons were on high-profile male biblical characters and the moral lessons we can learn from them. Multiple lessons focused on the life of David as an example of faith, waiting on God's timing, relying on God, and "becoming a man after God's own heart." Two lessons were about Joseph, focusing on God's ability to bring bad out of good, and our responsibility to forgive those who have hurt us. Daniel was used as an example of what it might look like for "a follower of Christ [to respond] to an ungodly culture."

As noted above, Jeremiah tends to focus on a theme when teaching Proverbs, but as we will discuss further later in this chapter, he also sees the rich imagery as an opportunity to pay attention to, and reflect on, the lessons nature has to teach. Jeremiah taught on Prov. 6:6 (“Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways and be wise”), and although he came with a predetermined takeaway of the need for humans to communicate and cooperate, he also capitalized on the imagery by showing his students pictures and video footage of a busy ant colony. Jeremiah’s choice to *show* the students how they might “consider [the ant’s] ways,” rather than merely tell them, was something they remembered two years later. Jeremiah was also surprised by the ways in which his students, unprompted, wrote their own poetry or created other artistic pieces as they explored the wisdom literature. For him, the poetic style of the wisdom literature was worth the challenge of teaching it, because of the way it inspired his students to express their theology through art.

Although it requires more work and pedagogical creativity to explore biblical poetry with youth than to distill it into an easy takeaway for them, its evocative language pays rich dividends for those who put forth the effort. Its poetic form is not incidental, nor secondary in importance to the content. Rather, the form and content are deeply intertwined, providing opportunities for students and youth pastors alike to cultivate wisdom as they explore the poetry together.

Ambiguity and Tension in the Wisdom Literature

Another hallmark of wisdom literature is its proclivity for ambiguity. Ambiguity is a lack of clarity or certainty in meaning, often due to the possibility of more than one interpretation.⁴⁷ As I explained in the previous chapter and will revisit in the pages that follow, the wisdom

⁴⁷ For a thorough discussion of the meaning of ambiguity and review of the relevant literature, see Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), ch. 1.

literature resists giving unequivocal statements, clear solutions to life's problems, or answers to questions that are raised in the course of reading it.

In addition to the ambiguity inherent to poetry and the authorial equivocations in Ecclesiastes, the wisdom literature also includes several instances of what I will call *tension(s)*, both within each book and in the inner-biblical dialogue among them. When the youth ministers I interviewed referred to tension in the wisdom literature, they were referring to logically opposed ideas, like contradictory sayings in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, or to the difficulty of reconciling certain ideas in the wisdom literature with other parts of the canon, with their experience, or with their systematic theology.⁴⁸ Hebrew Bible scholars have used terms like contradiction,⁴⁹ paradox,⁵⁰ dissonance,⁵¹ and tension⁵² to describe the conflicting ideas within and among the wisdom texts. While these terms do not mean the same thing or refer to the same literary phenomena, they are often used somewhat interchangeably by scholars to describe the

⁴⁸ Brianna used the word “tension” to describe the way her group of junior high girls saw themselves embodying characteristics of both Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in Proverbs, who are presented as unambiguously positive and negative (tension between the text's portrayal of women, and the young women's experience of themselves). She also used it to describe Ecclesiastes as a book that is “full of tension and has several different messages.” Lucas, a Latinx PC(USA) youth pastor in the Northeast, talked about the underlying theologies of Proverbs and Job being “in tension,” and spoke of the value of “living in the tension of conflicting truths.” For Danielle, “tension” was her word of choice to replace my suggested “contradiction.” She used it to refer to God's seemingly insensitive response to Job in the Divine Speech creating “tension,” as well as the “tension” embedded in the concept of fearing God: how can one fear God but also love God? Other interviewees spoke about the “different perspectives” in the wisdom literature, which can still make it difficult to interpret and thus, in some ways, ambiguous. Although Adam did not use the word “tension,” his examples of “contradiction” or “difference” included Proverbs' emphasis on the importance of wisdom versus Ecclesiastes' saying “wisdom doesn't matter” (tension between books), as well as the fact that God “gambles [with Satan] over Job's life, and there's other parts of the Bible that say don't gamble” (tension with the rest of the canon as well as with his concept of who God is or ought to be).

⁴⁹ See Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*; Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*; Dell, ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight,’ 18; Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 199; Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 55; Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 1; Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 83-84; Mette Bundvad, “Ecclesiastes.”

⁵⁰ O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 20; Craig G. Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2017), 18; Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, 1.

⁵¹ David Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

⁵² O'Connor, *Job*, 5; Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 96; Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 11; Bundvad, “Ecclesiastes,” 184; Dell, ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight,’ 18.

characteristically equivocal nature of the wisdom literature. Indeed, for some of these scholars, ambiguity is nearly conflated with contradiction.⁵³ Ambiguity (indeterminacy of meaning) and contradiction (logically opposed statements) are not the same literary phenomenon, particularly when contradiction resides at the intertextual level; while one saying or text may present an unambiguous message, its comparison with another may produce contradiction or tension. However, conflicting perspectives within or among texts contribute to their indeterminacy of meaning for the reader, particularly if the reader is coming to the text anticipating coherence and looking for clear moral precepts to apply to their life. The various literary phenomena that give the wisdom literature its puzzle- or riddle-like nature ultimately lead to a lack of clear resolution for the reader. Thus, ambiguity is the term that I use to encompass the variety of rhetorical features in the wisdom literature that contribute to the way it eludes clarity and certainty. Because I used the term “contradiction” when designing interview questions, however, much of the following discussion centers on how youth ministers approach contradiction or tension.

As I discussed in greater depth in the previous chapter, ambiguity is prevalent in each of the three wisdom books. In Proverbs, ambiguity is inherent to the genre of the *mashal*, whose

⁵³ For example, see O'Connor, quoted below, who writes that “opposing truths” in the wisdom literature require the reader to “enter into ambiguity,” O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 19-20. Lee writes of Ecclesiastes that “it confronts the contradictions inherent to the human condition and speaks about them with candor. Moreover, it effectively conveys those contradictions through forms of discourse that seem to revel in ambiguity and indeterminacy.” Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 8. Bundvad refers to contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions in Ecclesiastes interchangeably (Bundvad, “Ecclesiastes,” 184, 186, 188, 189). Douglas Miller does not use the word ambiguity directly, but he talks about hevel as “a metaphor with multiple valencies” and argues that solving the puzzle of what hevel means gives the reader hope for “addressing life’s other paradoxes and contradictions.” Miller, “What the Preacher Forgot,” 221, 231. Christopher B. Ansberry writes, “The complexities of life expressed through contradictory aphorisms [in Proverbs] correspond with the interpretive ambiguities that characterize many sayings in Proverbs,” Christopher B. Ansberry, “Proverbs,” in Dell, Millar, and Keefer, 147. Charles Melchert writes that contradictory proverbs “evoke a sense of the ambiguities of life.” Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 56. Katharine Dell writes that one of the main “themes” in Proverbs is “ambiguity in events,” following this observation by saying that “sometimes experience was contradictory” and that the book reveals “tension...between human knowledge and the ultimate meaning of events which is unknowable apart from Yahweh.” Dell, *Get Wisdom, Get Insight*, 18.

terseness and figurative language often allows for multiple interpretations.⁵⁴ The opening verses of Proverbs identify its content as containing riddles (Prov. 1:6), a genre that is far more tenebrous than simple commands. As Tyler put it, a proverb is “more of a pearl in an oyster than a golden nugget in the stream.” That is, proverbs do not easily yield their meaning; one has to do the difficult work of interpreting a proverb before one can reap the benefits of its wisdom. Tensions also abound in Proverbs through the juxtaposition of contradictory sayings; for example, some proverbs ascribe poverty to laziness, while others recognize it as the result of injustice (e.g. Prov. 13:4 and Prov. 13:23).⁵⁵

Ecclesiastes is similarly full of ambiguity. As Douglas Miller points out, Qohelet’s key term *hevel* is intentionally multivalent, a way to provoke the reader to solve the puzzle of its meaning.⁵⁶ Qohelet also seems to equivocate on the value of pleasure, toil, and wisdom, seeming to affirm and yet deny that they provide any advantage for the reader. Although he revisits the same themes throughout the book, Eccl. 2 provides a succinct summary of his ambiguous conclusions. Toil is *hevel* and cannot provide security (Eccl. 2:18-22), yet it can provide enjoyment (Eccl. 2:24). Pleasure is also *hevel* and Qohelet asks “What use is it?” (Eccl. 2:1-2), yet ultimately, there is “nothing better” for humans than to find enjoyment in life (Eccl. 2:24). Wisdom is better than folly, but it too is *hevel*, for the wise person dies just like the fool (Eccl. 2:12-16). Where interpreters through the centuries have tried to harmonize Qohelet’s contradictions, see them as additions by another author, or read them as quotations that Qohelet refutes, Michael Fox understands the contradictions as “the essence of the landscape” of

⁵⁴ For more on the ambiguous nature of the *masal*, see the discussion of Proverbs’ pedagogy in chapter 4.

⁵⁵ For a more detailed treatment on contradictory proverbs, see Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*.

⁵⁶ Miller, “What the Preacher Forgot,” 221, 231.

Ecclesiastes, an important part of Qohelet's rhetoric.⁵⁷ An example of ambiguity engendered by tension in Ecclesiastes lies in the book's two different solutions to *hevel*: to enjoy one's life (Eccl. 2:24, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10), and to fear God and obey God's commandments (Eccl. 12:13), a tension that will be explored further in chapter five.

Robert Polzin argues that "discrepancy and contradiction" are "central to [the] makeup" of Job, as the book explores the contradiction between what is believed about divine justice, and what is experienced in everyday life.⁵⁸ Ambiguity abounds in Job as the text resists clear resolution in multiple ways. Here a few examples will suffice. First, the dissonance between the prose tale and the poetry is one example of the polyphony that resists closure and refuses to let any one voice have the final word.⁵⁹ Second, it is unclear whether or how the Divine Speeches serve as an answer to Job's complaint.⁶⁰ Third, God says that the Accuser "incited me against [Job]" (Job 2:3) but never corrects Job's assumption that God is the one responsible.⁶¹ Fourth, when Job expresses contrition in Job 42:5-6, the meaning of the Hebrew is unclear. Is Job

⁵⁷ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 28.

⁵⁸ Robert Polzin, "The Framework of the Book of Job," *Interpretation* 28, no. 2 (1972), 182.

⁵⁹ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, ch. 1. For more on Newsom's interpretation of Job, see chs. 3 and 5 of this dissertation. Of the genre of the wisdom dialogue in particular, Newsom writes, "In the imagination of the wisdom dialogues...the world [is] most adequately grasped at the point of contradiction. Rather than concealing or softening contradictions as other forms of discourse may do, the structure of the dialogue highlights them. Indeed, contradiction is the governing tope for the wisdom dialogue, represented formally in the binary structure of the dialogue, represented rhetorically in the argumentative contradictions by each speaker of the other's claims, and represented existentially in the contradictions between expectation and experience on the sufferer's part." Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 83-84.

⁶⁰ As Gerhard von Rad wrote, "All commentators find the divine speech highly scandalous, insofar as it bypasses completely Job's particular concerns." Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 225. Kathleen O'Connor writes, "A major interpretive question of the book is how the speeches relate to what precedes and follows them. To this point, the major question of the debate has been why Job suffers, and thus far, no consensus has emerged among the speakers. Readers might, therefore, expect God to settle matters between Job and his friends. Instead, God changes the subject." O'Connor, *Job*, 85. Terence Fretheim asserts that "God's speeches are certainly no 'answer' to the suffering of Job, but that constitutes their strength." Fretheim, *God and the World in the Old Testament*, 238.

⁶¹ The role of the Accuser is a particularly interesting ambiguity in light of the same tension in youth curricula, some of which teach, based on the prologue, that suffering comes from Satan rather than God, while also encouraging youth to trust God no matter what. See the section on Job in ch. 5 for examples.

repenting, or is he comforted? If he repents, is he repenting of his words to God, or of his “dust and ashes”, meaning he “has stopped grieving and gotten on with his life”?⁶² Placed between the Divine Speeches and Job’s restoration, Job’s statement seems to be an important key for understanding both the Speeches and the epilogue, and yet his words resist easy interpretation. In the context of such a puzzling book, it seems to Kathleen O’Connor that the ambiguity of this key verse is “deliberate, a means to invite readers to enter Job’s experience and come to terms with it for themselves.”⁶³

The wisdom corpus as a whole is also marked by internal tension that creates ambiguity for the reader, as Job and Ecclesiastes question the retribution theology that characterizes the worldview of Proverbs. Similarly, youth ministers see Job and Ecclesiastes, particularly the theme of meaninglessness in Ecclesiastes, as being in tension with other theologies in the canon.⁶⁴ As Lydia described the tension: “Other parts of the Bible are trying to say, ‘There is meaning in your life,’ and then Ecclesiastes is like, ‘Maybe there is not.’”

When I asked interviewees whether they felt the wisdom literature ever contradicts itself, they all acknowledged that it seems to, even if they preferred to use a word other than “contradiction.” Several began by saying “Absolutely,” or “A thousand times yes,” but they went on to qualify their answer and use their own choice of terminology. Danielle’s response summed up the general consensus: “Yes. Well...maybe not contradicts, but there’s definitely tension.”

⁶² O’Connor, *Job*, 97.

⁶³ O’Connor, *Job*, 97. Similarly, Carol Newsom writes, “Job’s reply suggests that the divine speeches have provided him with a transformed vision of God and thus a very different basis for reverence (42:5); but his brief and enigmatic words (42:1-6 do not make clear exactly how his understanding has changed. If the author had made Job’s interpretation of the divine speeches more explicit, then the reader would have been left with little to do beyond approving or disapproving of Job’s response. By making Job’s response so elusive, however, the author forces the reader to grapple more directly with the meaning of the divine speeches and so enter the world of theological reconstruction that they invite.” Carol A. Newsom, “Job,” in *1 & 2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, and Psalms*, vol. IV of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 337.

⁶⁴ This feature of Ecclesiastes will be explored in more detail below, as various curricular resources have different ways of addressing this tension.

For some youth ministers who were concerned about biblical inerrancy, the Bible cannot contradict itself, so they spoke about different viewpoints giving readers a “fuller picture” of biblical wisdom (Matt), or something being lost in context or translation due to the gaps in time, culture, and language between the biblical authors and modern readers (Jeremiah). As Matt put it, “Well, I believe the Bible is inerrant, so no, but I could understand sometimes the wording is confusing and it may seem that way on the surface. But when you start to dive into it, you begin to see that it’s not a contradiction...If you and I are looking at the same sunset on two different sides of the hill, we’re going to see a different sunset. Well, it’s the same, but from a different vantage point.”

Other youth ministers (Jonathan and Michael) pushed back on the notion of contradiction, not out of a concern for inerrancy, but rather because they understand “contradiction” as arising from a “Western” mindset that does not easily hold space for tension, and they prefer to think of different perspectives in the Bible as a more dialogical phenomenon. As Jonathan put it when I asked whether the wisdom literature ever contradicts itself,

My first response is ‘absolutely’...But I would challenge the ground of the question in a way....Contradiction means, ‘Either this is true or this other thing is true, and only one can be true.’ So I think the Western mind would say ‘These contradict each other,’ [but] I think a contemplative spirituality or even an Old Testament imagination would say, ‘These are important voices in a conversation that was going on, and that’s still going on now. [So] I wouldn’t say they’re contradictory, I would say they’re different perspectives and a conversation we’re having with God and each other.’

Like the other idiosyncrasies of the wisdom corpus, the tensions in wisdom literature were named as a challenge for some youth ministers, a gift for others, and for still others, a bit of both. In survey responses, apparent contradictions and lack of conclusive answers were named as some of the top challenges of teaching wisdom literature in youth ministry. Evangelical youth ministers who expressed their belief in biblical inerrancy were more likely than mainline youth

ministers to explain to their students exactly how to reconcile the seeming contradictions. As Matt put it, “This may sound like a contradiction, but it’s not, and here’s how I know that, and here’s how to understand it.” In that sense, they are not open to engaging and wrestling with the tensions of the wisdom literature with their students. However, those same evangelical youth ministers (particularly Matt and Tyler, the two Southern Baptists I interviewed) consistently expressed the theology that the whole Bible is the Word of God, and no part of it should be neglected merely because it is difficult to understand or to teach: “Every part of the Bible is good for teaching, not just some of it, not just the parts that are easy to...[understand],” and “It has to be taught; it’s God’s word. Too often, I think that if it’s difficult to teach, we just give up...[but] if we believe it to be God’s word, we have to believe that it’s worth teaching.”

Youth ministers in more progressive denominations were more comfortable with the idea of the Bible contradicting itself, but they were also more likely to avoid (or to admit avoiding) texts that do not cohere with their personal theology or that they struggle to explain to their students. Jonathan noted that although he personally appreciates what Ecclesiastes adds to the canon, he prefers not to teach on it during his summer youth theology program, as he believes it reinforces a “deistic and disengaged” attitude toward God that he is trying to challenge in his students. While Jillian said that she “doesn’t believe in [setting problem texts aside],” and that Job had come up in youth group before, she has not taken her students through a study of Job. She told me this in the context of admitting that she “has never been the biggest fan of Job,” in part because of the “conspiracy...between the forces of good and evil” in the prologue, and in part because of the damaging way Job had been taught to her. She recalled, “For me personally, Job was [taught] with so much of the ‘suffering for God’ and ‘we suffer here on earth in order to receive a reward in heaven’ [theology], and that was so much of the deconstructing work that I

personally had to do for myself.” The evangelical youth ministers I interviewed are more likely to *explain* tensions between texts, or between a text and their theology, while the mainline youth ministers are more likely to *avoid* them. Either way, the end result is that students are often not invited to explore the tensions in the wisdom literature beyond the way their youth pastor presents them.

For a few youth ministers I interviewed, however, tension and ambiguity do not pose a challenge at all; in fact, it is one of the primary reasons they choose to teach the wisdom literature. They lean into the tensions, using them as a way to explore biblical interpretation, theological diversity, and dialogue among different perspectives. Lucas, a Latinx PC(USA) youth pastor in the Northeast, teaches an overview of the wisdom literature in his confirmation class as an example of inner-biblical tension. He points out to his students that the theology of Job is in tension with the retribution theology of Proverbs, but this does not mean that either is untrue or untrustworthy. Instead, life is complex, and there is often not an easy resolution to the tensions that we experience. His goal in teaching this class is twofold: first, to introduce students to the complexities of biblical interpretation, including the concept of different genres within the canon; and second, to let the Bible model for students that it is okay for faith to be complex. As he explained to me, “The fact that there is space allowed for both expressions of faith hopefully introduces them to a faith journey that lives in that tension.” While some more conservative youth ministers might be uncomfortable with Lucas’s approach, feeling that it undermines the authority of Scripture, it is precisely Lucas’s respect for Scripture that leads him to teach it in this way. If youth ministers try to present students with a perfectly organized, coherent theology, he says, they risk “making the Bible bow down to our understanding of truth, as opposed to letting it speak to us the complexity of the truth.” For Lucas, the fact that the canon preserves

conflicting theologies speaks to the truth that God is beyond what any one perspective can comprehend or articulate.

For those youth ministers who neither avoid nor seek out ambiguities or tensions, the challenge of this feature of wisdom literature may also be an unforeseen gift: an invitation to confess the limits of their own understanding and explore the tensions with their youth, rather than explain them. In interviews, youth ministers across all denominations, races, genders, and education levels said that the tensions in the wisdom literature compel them to tell their students, “I don’t know,” often followed by “let’s talk about it,” or “let’s wrestle with that.”⁶⁵ Even youth ministers who tend toward explanation, or who feel pressure to answer their students’ questions, sometimes unexpectedly find themselves admitting that they do not have all the answers. It is there in that posture of humility, recognition of mystery, and practice of wondering together, that wisdom can begin.

In the previous chapter, I explained how ambiguity often functions pedagogically in the wisdom corpus to invite the reader to wrestle with the text to determine its meaning. The wisdom literature’s predilection for ambiguity is experienced by youth pastors as both gift and challenge precisely because it is meant to be. The sages’ use of ambiguity and tension is a “pedagogy of

⁶⁵ The interviewees’ reflections on telling their students ‘I don’t know’ did not arise from any answer to a specific question, but rather came up organically in the midst of the semi-structured interview. Their comments included the following: “The best thing I’ve ever been able to tell students is, honestly, I don’t know. I think we get caught up as pastors, as theologians, as scholars...that we’ve got to have all the answers. And there have been plenty of times where I’ve said to a student, ‘Hey, I don’t know. I will look it up for you, I will do research, I will do my best to figure out the “why”, but I don’t know”’ (Adam); “Although we are adults, we don’t have all this figured out either, and there are things about the Lord that we cannot grasp” (Danielle); “I’m totally okay with [saying] ‘I don’t know,’ or ‘I have no clue,’ or ‘I’ve never thought about that,’ like, ‘Let’s talk about it more”’ (Brianna); “I try to create a space in which I am willing to be vulnerable with them and ask questions and say, ‘I don’t know the answer to this either”’ (Michael); “Sometimes I’ll say ‘I wish I could give you an answer, but sometimes there isn’t one’...I like to use the phrase ‘I don’t know,’ or ‘Let’s wrestle with it,’ ‘Let’s talk about it”’ (Grace); and “There are so many opportunities for a minister to say, ‘Hey, here’s the great thing, I don’t know and I don’t understand fully. Let’s dig in together, and let’s be okay with walking away with the fact that we may not understand, but it doesn’t mean that it’s not good”’ (Tyler).

discomfort”⁶⁶ that creates cognitive dissonance, moving the learner beyond their comfort zone and toward new ways of thinking. When one is confronted with uncertain meanings or conflicting truths, it can feel confusing and destabilizing. But when one enters into the discomfort of tension, determined to wrestle for meaning, saying with Jacob, “I will not let you go until you bless me” (Gen. 32:26), one receives the gift of wisdom. Rather than shying away from ambiguity and tension, then, these texts embrace and dwell within them, valuing them as a fruitful opportunity for reflection and growth. The discomfort of ambiguity is the grain of sand in the oyster that produces the pearl of wisdom.

Kathleen O’Connor writes that, in the wisdom literature as a whole, ambiguity is revelatory:

According to wisdom, life is not a simple set of truths to be followed scrupulously, but a continual encounter with conflicting truths, each making competing claims upon the seeker....Opposing truths are set side by side, and in some instances not resolved at all. This requires that readers enter into the ambiguity themselves and discover their own resolutions to the conflict of truths....The point of highlighting ambiguity or paradox is not to bring the individual to an intellectual impasse but to lead her beyond the obvious into deeper, transcendent truth.⁶⁷

The ambiguity present in the wisdom literature is an indication that its wisdom does not lie in neatly parceled morsels of truth that can be dispensed like medicine for fools. Instead, the text is pedagogically crafted in such a way that it invites readers to think for themselves, to wonder over the puzzles and mysteries it presents, and, in the course of wondering, to develop the skills and habits of wisdom. Grace put it this way: “When we see these contradictions happening in Scripture, it helps us embrace the contradictions that happen in life all the time....Hopefully, leaning into these contradictions will help [my students] be a little [wiser] and know that there

⁶⁶ Michalinos Zembylas and Claire McGlynn, “Discomforting Pedagogies: Emotional Tensions, Ethical Dilemmas and Transformative Possibilities,” *BERJ* 38 no. 1 (2012): 41-59.

⁶⁷ O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 19-20.

isn't always right or wrong, but give them the ability to discern where God is speaking to them.” Grace’s observation dovetails with Doug Ingram’s argument that Qohelet’s use of ambiguity gives readers practice in navigating the “ambiguities and uncertainties of life and faith” itself,⁶⁸ and she recognizes that such practice in ambiguity has the potential to cultivate wisdom. According to Robert Sternberg, comfort with ambiguity is one of the characteristics that distinguishes wisdom from intelligence or creativity. Wise persons do not shy away from ambiguity but see it as “something to be understood, appreciated, and treated as fundamental to the nature of things.”⁶⁹ Rather than seeking clear answers, wisdom acknowledges that life itself is complex and even ambiguous, and it requires those who would be wise to learn how to engage that ambiguity.

The three defining characteristics of wisdom literature discussed above—its focus on the human experience, its poetic style and language, and its proclivity for ambiguity—were all identified by survey respondents and interviewees as both gifts and challenges of teaching the wisdom literature. Although youth ministers did not explicitly identify a connection between the gifts and challenges of these three features, I suggest that the challenge of teaching the wisdom literature is inseparable from the gift of its pedagogy. Or, to put it more succinctly, the challenge *is* the gift. The more that youth ministers lean into the unique challenges of teaching wisdom literature with playfulness, attentiveness, wonder, reflection, and dialogue, the more opportunities they will have to cultivate wisdom in themselves and their students.

Content: Main Themes Taught from Wisdom Literature

⁶⁸ Ingram, “Riddled with Ambiguity,” 239-240. Similarly, Sara reflected, “Proverbs is way different than Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiastes is way different than Job. But life always contradicts itself...and you need different wisdom for different moments of life.”

⁶⁹ Sternberg, “Wisdom and Its Relations,” 155.

In addition to identifying the three characteristic features of the wisdom corpus as named by youth ministers, my research uncovered two common themes that youth ministers associate with the wisdom literature as well as one theme that, despite its centrality to the wisdom literature, is notably absent in youth curricula. The second half of this chapter will examine these themes and the ways they appear when youth ministers teach the wisdom literature.

Friendship

“It’s Complicated: Dealing with Relationships.” This was the title of a lesson sent to me by Michael, a 25-year youth ministry veteran in the United Methodist Church, when I asked for his materials on the wisdom literature. After starting with an opening game where pairs of students sat on the floor, linked arms, and tried to stand up together, Michael asked students to share the challenges they often face in relationships. After a brief lecture on the “top ten ways to avoid drama,” Michael passed out cards printed with various Bible verses about friendship, asking students to read over their verse and take it as “a reminder to approach every relationship as Christ would.” Three-quarters of the twelve Bible verses came from the wisdom literature: six from Proverbs, two from Job, and one from Ecclesiastes.

Michael’s lesson illustrates a surprising finding of this study: wisdom literature is often associated with friendship in youth curriculum. Topical lessons on friendship, like Michael’s, often use texts from the wisdom literature, but friendship is also a common theme in expository lessons on the wisdom books. The takeaways on friendship fall into two categories: choose wise friends, and be a good friend. *Ministry to Youth*, an online youth curriculum resource used by many survey respondents, offers a series on friendship that utilizes texts from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, paired with other biblical texts, to convey those two takeaways. For example, the first lesson uses Prov. 12:26 (“One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the

wicked leads them astray,” *Ministry to Youth*’s translation of choice) to emphasize the importance of “choos[ing] the right friends that will help us grow.” Some of the suggested small group discussion questions include, “Do you know how to choose the right friends?”, and “Have you ever been with a friend who...did bad things that made you uncomfortable?”⁷⁰ Lesson 3 tells the story of four friends who brought their friend to Jesus for healing (Mark 2), pairing it with Eccl. 4:9-10: “Two are better than one...and when one person falls down, the other can help them up.” The curriculum asks students to reflect on whether they are good friends who cheer up those around them: “When was the last time you helped a friend get through a difficult time by being positive or encouraging them to smile? Do you...keep all your friends laughing or are you the negative one in the group?”⁷¹

Because Proverbs contains many different sayings about friendship and communication, there is some variation in the proverbs used to describe a good friend. However, three proverbs are by far the most common when talking about friendship. The first is Prov. 13:20: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.” The common takeaway from this text is nearly identical to the first *Ministry to Youth* lesson, described above: stay away from friends who are bad influences. The second common proverb is Prov. 17:17: “A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.” This proverb is often used to talk about loyalty, and both choosing and being a loyal friend. Finally, another curriculum favorite is Prov. 27:17: “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.” As discussed above, although the interpretation of this proverb is ambiguous (what exactly does it mean for a person to “sharpen” another?), it is almost universally understood to mean that good

⁷⁰ Toni Spearman, “Week 1 – Choosing the Right Friends,” *Friendship: 4-Week Series*, ed. Becky Forkel (MinistrytoYouth.com), accessed February 11, 2022, <https://ministry-to-youth.com/products/friendships-4-week-series>.

⁷¹ Spearman, “Week 3 – What Kind of Friend Are You?” *Friendship: 4-Week Series*.

friends bring out the best in one another. These three proverbs are often mixed and matched with each other in lessons on friendship.

In Ecclesiastes, the classic friendship text comes from Eccl. 4:9-12, which concludes with the saying: “Though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” The most common takeaway from this text is about investing in healthy friendships; although it takes time and effort, it is worth it to have the support one needs. Even when it does not feature as the key text in a lesson, the familiar language finds its way into the curriculum; Cokesbury’s curriculum on the wisdom literature does not discuss this passage but does include a homework activity based on this text entitled “A Three-Ply Cord is Hard to Break,” encouraging students to spend intentional time with two wise peers and two wise adults.⁷² Jillian uses this text in a tongue-in-cheek way to remind students that they must stay in groups of three while traveling: “Woe to those who wander alone at Six Flags!”

In the book of Job, Job’s friends largely serve as a foil to debate the nature of God and suffering. And yet, when Job is taught in youth ministry, friendship is again the most common theme. Surprisingly, Job’s friends often serve as a model for how to be a good friend to those who are suffering.⁷³ To Adam, Job’s friends are a “picture of Jesus.” The chosen text on friendship usually comes from the end of the prologue, in which Job’s friends come and sit with him in silence (Job 2:11-13). Curricula often advise students that a “ministry of presence,” or just being with friends, is an important display of solidarity when words are inadequate. According to

⁷² Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 23.

⁷³ For example, *The Guidebook* includes a note on Job 2:11-13 entitled “Being There,” which says, “Although Job’s friends get a bad reputation for their assumptions and words later in the story, they deserve credit for their initial actions. They were there, spent time with Job, and let him know they cared. That’s all we have to do for a friend who is hurting – offer a hug and a simple ‘I’m sorry,’ and then just be there to listen.” *The Guidebook*, 495. D6 says, “In Job 2:11-13 we see a great initial response from Job’s friends. They came to Job with open hearts. They cried out with him and wept. They sat with him for a whole week without speaking, all because they recognized the suffering of a friend.” D6, *Forward Teaching Guide* fall 2020, 95.

the *Urban Ministries* curriculum, this is “the greatest lesson we can learn” from the book of Job.⁷⁴ Some curricula have students practice responding to hurting friends through case studies and role plays. However, it is also common to acknowledge that Job’s friends were imperfect, that (in Matt’s words) “they were good till they started talking,” that they serve as a model of how *not* to be a friend as well. In Michael’s lesson on friendship, he used two texts from Job: the one mentioned above, and Job 16:20: “My friends scorn me, but I pour out my tears to God.” More commonly used is Job calling his friends “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

Friendship is a fairly common theme in Proverbs, but the frequency with which youth ministers draw friendship out of Job and Ecclesiastes is surprising. Although Job’s friends play an important role in the book to set up the dialogues, friendship itself does not seem to be of primary interest to the author. In Ecclesiastes, there is hardly any mention of friendship at all. Why then do so many youth ministers talk about friendship when they teach the wisdom literature? First, when adults think about young people needing wisdom, or making wise choices, they often think about choosing friends who are good influences. As the description of *Ministry to Youth*’s series on Proverbs explains, wisdom is important because “teenagers...need help navigating friendships, especially when those relationships negatively influence them.”⁷⁵ Peer pressure is a perennial concern of parents and youth ministers, who fear their youth falling in with the wrong crowd and making poor decisions. Friendship is also one of the few arenas in which young people have the autonomy to choose for themselves, making it a more relevant topic in Proverbs than marriage, parenting, work, or money. Second, friendship is a simple and practical theme to latch onto in some theologically complex and difficult books. If young people

⁷⁴ La Nej A. Garrison, ed., “Lesson 12: Bildad Misunderstands God’s Justice,” *InTeen Teacher* vol. 41, no. 1 (Chicago: Urban Ministries, 2021), 89.

⁷⁵ *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, curriculum description, *Ministry to Youth*, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://ministry-to-youth.com/products/youth-group-lessons-proverbs>.

are not developmentally or emotionally ready to engage in a theological discussion of God's role in suffering, an easier way to engage the topic is to talk about how to be a friend to others who are suffering. Youth ministers are looking for relevance and applicability, and friendship is an easier arena in which to apply wisdom than complex theological, social, or political issues.

Difficult Emotions

Although “emotions” do not feature as a lesson topic as often as friendship does, it is another common theme that arises when youth ministers teach the wisdom literature. The range and depth of feeling expressed in the wisdom corpus is a gift of its focus on human experience; it reflects a range of experience and makes space for deep and difficult emotions. One of the main takeaways from the wisdom books, particularly Job, is that young people can bring their anger, their grief, and their difficult questions to God, and that “God is big enough” or “God can take it.”⁷⁶ Youth pastors expressed their concern that these “un-fun” or even “ugly” emotions are unwelcome in church, a concern which often stems from their own experience of being made to feel that their anger or grief were inappropriate in a faith context: “When Job is crying out to the Lord, for so long, I felt like I didn’t have the right to do that” (Brianna). Their students expressed similar experiences, commenting after the lessons that they “didn’t know they could talk to God like that.” As one survey respondent wrote, “They were surprised that even their ugliest feelings

⁷⁶ For example, *The Guidebook* includes a study note on Job 7:1-21 entitled “Be Honest,” which encourages students to “be honest with God and yourself” and to “let all your feelings out, just as Job did—including your anger. God is big enough to handle it.” *The Guidebook*, 499. *Here We Stand* confirmation curriculum assures facilitators in the leaders’ guide, although it does not say it to students, that it is okay to ask questions and even to “rage. God is big enough; God can handle our anger and fear.” “Job Leader Guide,” *Here We Stand*.

Adam, quoted below, quoted God as saying to Job, “I can take [your anger],” and included the takeaway “God can take our pain” in his series on emotions taken from Job. As Jonathan was quoted earlier in this chapter, the wisdom literature shows us that “Every emotion that we have belongs, every question that we have for God belongs, and God can handle all of it.” Danielle commented that “The Lord is big enough to handle my emotions: the good, the bad, the ugly.”

have a place in the story of God. They were unflinchingly honest: ‘I didn’t know I was allowed to think things like this and that they didn’t make me a bad Christian.’”

Recognizing how often the theme of emotions arose in the interviews and curricula, I began to analyze which emotions of Job were represented. The two most common emotions were anger and sadness, which were often paired. For example, the Youth Specialties curriculum on Job acknowledges that “it’s okay to be sad, upset, and even angry about suffering,”⁷⁷ while Jonathan noted that Job models a kind of prayer “where you’re given permission to be pissed off and sad.” Lydia, whose church tends to emphasize Job’s faithfulness, specifically wanted to show her students that sometimes “you have to go through that process of being angry with God.” Grace expressed that, because the wisdom literature represents a range of human emotion, students “don’t have to feel shame when they feel angry at God, they don’t have to feel shame when they ask questions. These are just a part of who we are, and this is part of our sacred text as well.” Although the themes of “doubt” and “questioning” are not emotions, as Grace’s quote indicates, they often appear alongside affirmations of Job’s anger and sadness.⁷⁸

Adam, a Latinx Free Methodist youth pastor who widely shares his curriculum resources with other youth ministers, has designed and taught a four-week series on emotions based on the book of Job. Adam identified a wider range of emotions than any of the other youth ministers I interviewed, mentioning anger, doubt, fear, disappointment, and even depression. Job’s range of emotions and his “highs and lows” make Job Adam’s favorite book of the Bible, as “we see Job being angry with God and crying out to God and yelling at God, and God is saying, ‘Hey, I can take it. It’s okay that you’re angry with me.’” For Adam, Job legitimizes the difficult emotions that his students experience, letting them know that “it’s okay to not have all the answers, it’s

⁷⁷ Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 10.

⁷⁸ See also Adam’s quote in-text below, as well as Jonathan’s quote, footnoted on the previous page.

okay to ask the questions, it's okay to be angry at God and disappointed and upset, and these very real emotions that...we just kind of brush over [in church] because they're not fun emotions, they're not fun to talk about, they're hard to talk about. But we see them right here in the Bible."⁷⁹ Adam was the only youth minister I interviewed who mentioned depression as well as suicidal ideation, which he mentioned in passing while talking about the need to provide trigger warnings when discussing painful topics in youth group. Of the curricula I analyzed, the *CEB Student Bible* was the only one that dared broach Job's suicidal ideation in a study note on Job 6:8-13, in which Job expresses his desire for God to "crush him" and "cut him off" (CEB). The note, entitled "Depression," assures students that "The inclusion of Job's suicidal thoughts in the wisdom literature means that even these feelings are seen by God and can be offered to God in prayer."⁸⁰

While acknowledging the difficult emotions of Job was an overall strength of the book's treatment in youth ministry, some curricula found ways to mitigate the intensity of Job's emotions, particularly his anger, by choosing milder emotions to highlight. Particularly notable in this regard was Lifeway's curriculum, which says that Job "questioned his suffering," rather than that he questioned God, and that he experienced grief and frustration.⁸¹ While "frustration"

⁷⁹ Seow writes that the presence of Job within the canon of Scripture, and God's later declaration that Job had spoken rightly of God, "[reaffirms the lament tradition], even for laments *in extremis*, even for words that border on blasphemy." C.L. Seow, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 92.

⁸⁰ *The CEB Student Bible*, 597. Although *The CEB Student Bible* does not include a learning activity for students to write their own prayers, it includes in a sidebar a prayer written by 13-year-old Elizabeth Blackmun, which provides a model for other young people inspired to do the same: "God, you who are the creator – I saw you as being above bragging, above being beguiled. It seems so human to flaunt what you have made. Why are you using your power to destroy the lives of others? It's not right to kill to prove a point, and yet you kill Job's children in the pursuit of showing the worth of your creation. Why do you torture this man, despite his worthiness that you praise? You are supposed to put the wicked in their places, to protect the weak, but Job is not wicked, and before your power we are all weak." *The CEB Student Bible*, 623.

⁸¹ Drew Dixon, ed., "Job's Faith and Doubts" poster, in *Job and Ecclesiastes: Explore the Bible for Students* vol. 7, no. 4, summer 2021 (Nashville: Lifeway, 2021).

appears three times on Lifeway's poster outlining Job's statements of "Faith and Doubts," anger does not. As Carol Newsom observes in her commentary on Job, anger is often discouraged in faith communities because it "claims...that something is fundamentally not right about the situation, that what has happened *should not* have happened."⁸² Particularly when anger is directed at God, then, it implicitly calls God's sovereignty into question. Foregrounding Job's "sadness" or "frustration" thus limits the array of emotions that are allowed to serve as a model for honest prayer.

Youth ministers often invite their students to explore their difficult emotions by writing down the feelings as well as the situations causing those feelings, often offering them to God in prayer.⁸³ For some, writing is a private journaling activity; for others, the feelings are written anonymously to be read by others as a way to increase empathy and solidarity. Brianna encourages youth to write down their difficult feelings because it was a practice that helped her as a teenager. Raised in a church context where she felt like she couldn't verbalize her frustration, anger, and sadness, Brianna found that writing it down made it "okay for me to say it to God." Thus, writing seems to be a helpful way to mediate the experience of praying anything other than praise; Brianna's experience seems to indicate that pencil on paper somehow feels less blasphemous than speaking it out loud.

Younger youth ministers choosing to validate students' emotions, in contrast to their own experience in church, corresponds with a larger cultural movement toward emotional literacy.⁸⁴

⁸² Newsom, "Job," 372.

⁸³ Adam, Jonathan, and Brianna all provided opportunities for their students to write down honest prayers or angry feelings. See also Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 82; "Is It Okay to Be Angry at God?" *Re:Form Leader Guide* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2010): 219-223, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://www.wearesparkhouse.org/store/category/286822/Re-form>.

⁸⁴ For example, in 2017, Forbes reported on the Millennial generation's emphasis on emotional intelligence and how it impacts the way they approach their careers. See Sarah Landrum, "Millennials and the Resurgence of Emotional Intelligence," *Forbes Magazine*, April 21, 2017, accessed September 17, 2022,

Public schools have increasingly begun to implement social-emotional learning standards in the past decade, recognizing that young people need better tools to identify, understand, and regulate their emotions, as well as to respond to the emotions of others with empathy.⁸⁵ Social-emotional learning is linked with positive outcomes for youth, including stress and behavior management and academic performance.⁸⁶ For youth programs that aim to increase students' overall well-being, practicing emotional awareness in conjunction with religious education may be a helpful strategy. In the same way that the Bible served as a tool of literacy in the earliest Sunday schools, wisdom literature can serve as a tool in the practice of emotional literacy, helping students practice identifying and naming their feelings.⁸⁷ In addition to contributing to overall well-being and positive life outcomes, practicing emotional literacy in conversation with the wisdom literature is beneficial in three other ways: it is important for young people's faith development, it provides an opportunity to process the emotions surrounding doubt or a crisis of faith, and it helps to cultivate wisdom.

First, the practice of exploring emotions in wisdom literature is important for young people's faith development. In their landmark study on the religious landscape of American

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahlandrum/2017/04/21/millennials-and-the-resurgence-of-emotional-intelligence/?sh=17542b5676e0>.

⁸⁵ For a brief history of social-emotional learning (SEL) in schools, see CASEL, "Our History," <https://casel.org/about-us/our-history/>, accessed September 17, 2022. In 2016, CASEL's Collaborating States Initiative worked to implement CASEL in 40 states. CASEL, "Collaborating States Initiative," <https://casel.org/about-us/our-mission-work/collaborating-states-initiative/>, accessed September 17, 2022. As SEL becomes more common in schools, however, it is also facing backlash from those who are concerned about its possible connections to Critical Race Theory. See Katie Reilly, "How 'Social and Emotional Learning' Became the Newest Battleground in the Classroom Wars," *Time Magazine* (April 27, 2022), <https://time.com/6170755/social-emotional-learning-schools-conservative-backlash/>, accessed September 17, 2022.

⁸⁶ See Joseph A. Durlak, Roger P. Weissberg, Allison B. Dymnicki, Rebecca D. Taylor, and Kriston B. Schellinger, "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions," *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405-432, <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/impact-enhancing-students-social-emotional-learning-meta-analysis-school-based-universal-interventions.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Interviewees spoke about the same qualities in the Psalms, which is outside the scope of this study. For more on the benefits of engaging lament psalms with youth, see Yoder, *Helping Youth Grieve*.

teenagers, Christian Smith's team of researchers found that the prevailing religious expression of youth is a shallow spirituality they termed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). The basic tenets of MTD are that God is not all that involved in human life but wants people to be generally good, the goal of life is to "be happy and to feel good about oneself," and that good people go to heaven.⁸⁸ One of the glaring omissions of MTD is that it provides no framework for navigating experiences of grief or loss, which leaves young people without religious resources to process difficult or painful experiences or feelings.⁸⁹ When young people see their "un-fun" emotions reflected in their sacred text, particularly by characters they see as moral exemplars, those emotions are validated as legitimate expressions of faith. The wisdom literature acknowledges those difficult feelings and models how to process them through the lens of faith.

Second, exploring the range of emotions in Job provides an opportunity to discuss the experience of doubt or faith deconstruction, and the complicated feelings of anger, guilt, loss, and often loneliness that accompany a faith crisis. The book of Job does not only express Job's feelings about loss itself but also his feelings about the faith crisis created by the loss; his experience has contradicted the retributive belief system of Job and his friends, and his understanding of God has been challenged. Carol Newsom notes that at the end of Job's soliloquy in Job 3, when he grieves that "what I feared has come upon me" (Job 3:25), he identifies the thing he feared not as the loss of his family or wealth, but rather as *turmoil*. As Newsom explains, "The reliability of his world...has been shattered."⁹⁰ While some youth ministers encourage youth to explore their feelings related to specific incidents in their life, like

⁸⁸ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162-163.

⁸⁹ See Almeda Wright's discussion of fragmented faith in *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*. As Wright notes, "For many African American Christian youth, a naïve belief in a wonderfully good and all-powerful God is already operative. However, a blind embrace of the goodness and power of God conflicts with their lived realities, even if only on a subconscious level." Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 108. See also Yoder, *Helping Youth Grieve*, 91-93.

⁹⁰ Newsom, "Job," 370.

anger over a parent leaving or a friend dying, they are less likely to talk about the experience of faith deconstruction that might be precipitated by that event. However, the book of Job can also model for young people what it looks like to navigate the painful experiences of doubt, disorientation, bewilderment, and alienation caused by a shattered belief system.

Third, practicing emotional literacy can help to cultivate wisdom in young people. Several wisdom scholars have written about the importance of emotional intelligence and competence as characteristics of wisdom.⁹¹ Because wisdom comprises both cognitive and affective ways of knowing, young people who learn to recognize and accurately identify their feelings are better able to draw on their emotions as a source of insight. While some wisdom scholars have marginalized the role of “negative emotions” like anger and grief, arguing that wise people experience them more infrequently than other people,⁹² Ute Kunzmann and Judith Glück argue that emotions “provide important information to the self and others, motivate adaptive behavior, and guide judgment and decision processes,” all of which play an important role in wisdom.⁹³ Kunzmann and Glück identify three dimensions of emotional competence that are important for wisdom: emotional regulation, emotional understanding, and empathy.⁹⁴ Focusing on emotions in the wisdom literature can help to foster the latter two dimensions. Emotional understanding, or emotional literacy, can be developed by identifying Job’s emotions in various texts, for example.⁹⁵ Beyond sadness and anger, the wisdom literature offers a wide

⁹¹ See, for example, Glück and Bluck, “The MORE Life Experience Model,” and Kunzmann and Glück, “Wisdom and Emotion.”

⁹² See Kunzmann and Glück, “Wisdom and Emotion,” 594-595.

⁹³ Kunzmann and Glück, “Wisdom and Emotion,” 575.

⁹⁴ Kunzmann and Glück, “Wisdom and Emotion,” 576.

⁹⁵ In one curriculum that I developed on the book of Job, I included a lesson in which small groups of students read select texts and work to identify the emotion in their text, choose a color they feel represents that emotion, and share a time they have felt that emotion. Selected texts included Job 7:11-21 (Job’s parody of Psalm 8), Job 13:3, 13-19 (Job’s introduction of the legal metaphor), Job 14:7-10, 18-22 (the erosion of hope), Job 16:12-18 (the divine violence of God), and Job 29:1-6 (Job longs for the way things used to be).

range of emotions that can expand young people's emotional vocabulary; the speeches of Job convey complex and nuanced emotions like dread, disgust, and nostalgia. The wisdom literature also provides an opportunity to learn about and process compound emotions that are not easily parsed into positive or negative. Jeremiah, reflecting on the book of Ecclesiastes, remarked that students may, similarly to Qohelet, experience "joy and sorrow mixed up in one." Empathy, too, can be developed as students identify with the character of Job or with the difficult experiences and emotions of their peers.⁹⁶ Some youth ministers, like Adam, are already cultivating empathy through their creative learning activities on the wisdom literature as they invite students to share their painful life experiences and their feelings with one another.

Exploring difficult emotions is not always pleasant either for the individual or for the faith community. However, by naming and affirming them, youth pastors are providing students with tools and resources they need to process troubling life experiences through the lens of faith, and in doing so, to cultivate wisdom.

Null Curriculum: Creation

"The role of nature or creation in the book of Proverbs? [Pause.] Well. [Pause.] Um, can you give me some context behind that question?" Matt was not alone in having never considered the purpose of creation imagery in the wisdom literature. When I asked other youth ministers whether they had mentioned nature or creation when teaching the wisdom literature, most of them had not. Grace responded, "Hmm, I don't know that I've engaged nature when I've talked about it...I guess, if I were to bring nature in, I would look at the creation story that appears in Job." Sara explained that, because her confirmation curriculum covers creation through the

⁹⁶ For a study on how reading fiction can increase empathy, see Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, Jacob Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, and Jordan B. Peterson, "Bookworms Versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction Versus Non-Fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds," *JRP* 40, no. 5 (2006): 694-712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.002>.

Genesis narrative, she did not discuss it in the wisdom literature. Despite being a major theme in the corpus, any discussion of nature is conspicuously absent in nearly all the curricula, regardless of denominational affiliation. Of the curricula that I analyzed for this project, only two (which will be discussed below) gestured briefly toward the importance of creation for wisdom. In chapter two, I drew on Elliott Eisner's theory of null curricula to explain the ways in which the theological imaginations of students are limited by what is *not* taught in youth ministry. When the wisdom literature is taught without reference to its roots in creation theology, it implicitly reinforces an ideology that abstracts knowledge and education from nature.

Scholars of wisdom literature have long noted that creation theology is one of the defining characteristics of the wisdom genre.⁹⁷ In the sages' thought, because God created the universe by wisdom, wisdom is woven into its fabric, so that creation itself is a source of instruction and wisdom for humankind. One gains wisdom by observing patterns in creation and learning how the world works, and thus one's own place in it. Many of the proverbs draw analogies from nature: from ants (Prov. 6:6), mama bears (Prov. 17:12), changing seasons (Prov. 26:1), muddied springs (Prov. 25:26). The opening reflections of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes are based on his observations of nature's cycles: the sun rising and setting, the wind's circular patterns, the streams running to the sea (Eccl. 1:5-7). The Divine Speeches in Job contain remarkable reflections on the intricacies of wildlife (Job 38:39-39:30) and the water cycle (Job 38:25-38). In all three of these books, nature itself serves as an important source of wisdom, and in the authors' own careful observation and reflection on the patterns of nature, they model for readers how to pay attention to the wisdom of creation.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*. For an overview of scholarship on wisdom and creation, see Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 16-17, and Dell, *The Book of Proverbs*, 130-146.

Yet the wisdom books' distinctive emphasis on creation and natural imagery goes largely unnoticed by youth ministers and curriculum writers. It is a testament to Western culture's alienation from nature that this significant theme in the wisdom corpus is almost completely overlooked. Parker Palmer, introduced earlier in this dissertation, argues that Enlightenment rationality objectifies and seeks to master content rather than enter into a relationship with it.⁹⁸ Instead of learning from nature's rhythms and cycles, humans impose upon it their own.⁹⁹ As a product of the Enlightenment, most of Western education is abstracted from the natural world, prioritizing sterile classrooms over nature and intellectual formation over embodiment.¹⁰⁰ Youth ministry is not exempt from these cultural trends. As I have argued elsewhere, religious education in youth ministry prioritizes intellectual assent to religious propositions over embodiment and experiential formation.¹⁰¹ In *Lives to Offer*, youth ministry scholars Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer show that even when youth ministers offer outdoor experiences like ski trips or whitewater rafting, nature serves as a "staging ground or backdrop" for recreational

⁹⁸ Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*. For a helpful brief summary of how Enlightenment thinking led to the "metaphysics of mastery" that pervades modern Western culture, see Michael Bonnett, *Environmental Consciousness, Nature and the Philosophy of Education: Ecologizing Education* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 13-15.

⁹⁹ On the ways in which this imposition of human rhythms on nature impacts education, Michael Bonnett reflects, "In mainstream educational contexts, typically time for different areas of study and the activities to be engaged in is carefully (often rigidly) structured and measured out. Linear segmented clock-time rules. Discussion undertaken in Chapter 4 made clear that this is precisely *not* the kind of time in which nature participates and that the masterful projection of clock-time upon it occludes our full participation in its occurring such that we are left with a knowledge only of reified objects rather than things themselves." Bonnett, *Environmental Consciousness*, 137.

¹⁰⁰ As Bonnett notes, "The space in which education is conducted frequently is far removed (both physically and psychologically) from the unique and vibrant places in which nature as a dimension of experience can be keenly felt. Undoubtedly, these fundamental oppositions are reflected more broadly in the underlying motives and conventional views on 'effective' pedagogic strategies that operate within much mainstream education and that are likely to be in conflict with what is required for the growth of environmental consciousness." Bonnett, *Environmental Consciousness*, 137. The "conventional views of 'effective' pedagogic strategies" to which Bonnett refers are related to the prevailing Western mindset of instrumental rationality and the tendency to objectify knowledge. For a further critique of the objectification of knowledge, and the call for an epistemology and pedagogy of relatedness, see Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, and Ayres, "Recovering Mystery," particularly pp. 83-86. For more on the need for embodiment in education, see bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, chs. 1 and 13.

¹⁰¹ Cooke, "Deep in the Body," especially 71-73.

experiences rather than “engag[ing] the youth in any significant sustained attention to nature itself”: “[Without] an encounter with the land, water, or creatures within that ecology, the relationship between youth and the earth remains one of a user to a resource.”¹⁰² The way that nature and creation appear in youth ministry programming reinforces humans’ alienation from nature and is thus not conducive for cultivating wisdom. It comes as little surprise, then, that youth ministers do not recognize the significance of creation as teacher in the wisdom literature.

For one youth minister I interviewed, however, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of creation for wisdom. Jeremiah is a Church of Christ youth pastor serving at a church in South Florida with a core group of about twelve students. When I asked Jeremiah to tell me a bit about himself, he led not with his work experience or educational background, but with his deep connection to nature growing up in the Caribbean. A “son of the soil,” he called himself. Our conversation about the wisdom literature turned to nature before I could ask about it; he described his learning activities including nature videos of animals in their habitats as well as stock footage of landscapes in Israel. When I asked him to elaborate on why he chose to show those videos, he explained that creation itself is a source of wisdom. His reflections are worth repeating in full:

Wisdom is not just in the realm of humanity.... I think sometimes we forget as human beings that we are connected to the earth. Man has actually been formed from the ground. So wisdom is not just in the psyche of man and his relationships, but in his relationship with the environment, with the animals.... If you want wisdom, you know, Proverbs says ask the ant. Observe the water cycle, observe a plant who defends itself when it’s touched, you know, it’s everywhere. It saturates this world...It is nestled in the economy and the practices and habits of not just animals, but really small creatures, inconsequential creatures, that we step on every day, that we take for granted.

Jeremiah’s observation reflects the recognition of the sages that God’s wisdom permeates creation and serves as a teacher for those who would be wise. His choice to show nature videos

¹⁰² Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, 55-56.

demonstrates his belief that students can learn from watching the patterns and processes of nature in ways that they cannot merely by talking about them. His learning activities value experiential knowledge and not only propositional knowledge, because he recognizes that wisdom resides not just in “the psyche of man” but in one’s relationship with nature. If attentiveness to creation is necessary for the cultivation of wisdom, how can youth ministers teach the wisdom literature in a way that honors the role of nature as teacher?

The two curricula that mention creation provide examples of the ways in which reflecting on creation might help us better understand God as well as humankind’s place in the world. First, Cokesbury’s *Wisdom of the Kingdom* curriculum includes a learning activity designed to help students think through the concept of the fear of the Lord. Students are asked to write “The Fear of the Lord” in the center of a sheet of paper and circle it, then create a “mind map” by listing traits of God on one side of the circle, and traits of creation on the other. Then, students are asked to reflect on how God and creation are similar and different. Finally, the facilitator asks, “Now that you’ve had time to think about it and talk about it, why do you think that Proverbs says wisdom begins with the fear-of-the-Lord?”¹⁰³ While this learning activity has the potential to provoke meaningful conversations about the ways in which God’s wisdom is reflected in creation, the curriculum offers no meta-reflection or follow-up discussion questions on the activity, nor does it ground the activity in a shared experience of nature.

Second, in its reflection questions on the book of Job, the *CEB Student Bible* asks the following: “How does our knowledge of nature contribute to our understanding of God? Of human suffering? Of morality? Of the place of humans in the universe and God’s creation?”¹⁰⁴ Similarly to the *Wisdom of the Kingdom* activity, however, the discussion questions could spark

¹⁰³ Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 20.

¹⁰⁴ *The CEB Student Bible*, 624.

more meaningful conversation if they were rooted in an embodied encounter with nature, perhaps asked under the stars or by the ocean.¹⁰⁵ In a section entitled “Reading Differently,” the *CEB Student Bible* suggests just such an encounter with nature when it recommends reading the Divine Speeches during a thunderstorm, or at a zoo, a farm, or a park: “How do the sights, sounds, and smells of natural phenomena affect your understanding of God’s speech in these chapters?”¹⁰⁶ The “Reading Differently” suggestions provide open-ended opportunities for students to reflect on how their experience of creation shapes their reading of the biblical text.

Baker and Mercer suggest immersive, contemplative experiences in nature as a way to shape young people’s processes of vocational discernment. They share a description of such an experience with young people in a protected wilderness setting and recall the way the experience evoked new insights for many of the youth:

They reflect on their experiences and their encounters with plants, fish, birds, animals, water, wind, and soil. Several of these youth mention new awareness and insight about the creatures and ecology they have encountered. Some speak too of new insights about themselves in relation to the nonhuman creation. And many of them identify something about their encounter with nature that they relate to God—an awareness of the divine presence, a sense of awe in relation to creation, a feeling of inner calm or disturbance that they associate with the Holy as known in nature.¹⁰⁷

Such immersive experiences that encourage attentiveness to creation can be helpfully placed in conversation with the wisdom texts. As described in the previous chapter, William Brown reflects on an experience with seminary students in which, after an immersive experience in the desert, they were invited to rewrite parts of the Divine Speeches with desert habitats and creatures in mind.¹⁰⁸ If youth ministers desire to model their pedagogy after the wisdom

¹⁰⁵ Jennifer Ayres points out that “Western ways of thinking *about* our ecological context have too often failed to nurture meaningful relationship *with* it.” Thus, she argues for an ecological epistemology rooted in “embodied, affective, and situated” encounters with nature. Ayres, “Recovering Mystery,” 77-78.

¹⁰⁶ *The CEB Student Bible*, 624.

¹⁰⁷ Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *Sacred Sense*, 80.

literature, the significance of paying attention to and learning from creation can hardly be overstated. Youth ministers should teach the reflections of the sages where they originated: in rich encounters with the mysterious, wondrous elements of creation. In doing so, they create opportunities for the imagination of their youth to be drawn into new insights, new wisdom.

As a whole, the wisdom corpus includes characteristic features that are experienced as both gifts and challenges by the youth ministers who teach on it, and it is commonly used by youth ministers to teach on choosing good friends, being a good friend, and processing difficult emotions. However, when youth ministers teach on a book from the corpus, what challenges do they face unique to that particular book? What texts and themes tend to arise from each? What learning activities are common to the teaching of each? The next chapter will explore these questions as I analyze the ways in which youth ministers teach Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job to youth.

Chapter Five

Teaching Wisdom, Part II: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job

Having explored some characteristics and themes shared among books of wisdom literature, we now turn to examine in greater detail how each book of the wisdom corpus is taught in printed curricula and by youth ministry professionals. My analysis of each book begins with an overview of the ways in which the book as a whole is understood by the youth ministers that I interviewed and curricula that I analyzed. What is the theology espoused by the book? Why is it in the Bible? What are the common interpretations and mis-interpretations of the text? Second, I explore the content that is commonly taught from each book: what are the main texts, themes, and takeaways? What is the “null curriculum,” or the significant themes in each book that are left out, and how does the null curriculum shape and limit the ways young people experience the book? Third, I identify the characteristics unique to each book, in their style or theology or both, that pose a challenge for youth ministers who teach this literature and suggest ways of navigating these challenges. Finally, I examine the pedagogy and teaching processes for each book: What are the common pedagogical approaches used by youth ministers? What learning activities are used to explore the texts or apply the takeaways? Each section concludes by introducing two youth ministers who have taught on these books and exploring their process in greater detail as a way to contextualize the broader summary observations. Throughout, based on the observations made in chapter three about the pedagogy of the wisdom books, I offer my own interpretation and analysis of youth ministers’ pedagogical choices, as well as constructive reflections on how youth ministers can more intentionally cultivate wisdom in young people through the way they teach the wisdom literature.

Proverbs

Interpretation

When I asked youth ministers to share how they understand the book of Proverbs and its purpose, their reflections centered on two main themes: righteousness and practicality. First, Proverbs is concerned with *righteousness*, rather than prosperity or intellectual gain. As Brianna, a Black seminary student and youth pastor in the AME Zion Church, put it, “Wisdom in Proverbs is striving to live a righteous life.” Matt, a white Southern Baptist youth pastor in Kentucky, explained that Proverbs “shows us how to walk the path of righteousness.” In *Ministry to Youth*’s curriculum, Proverbs is presented as an “instruction manual on how to...honor God.”¹ Thus, Proverbs is more than a random collection of pithy sayings; even sayings that do not explicitly mention God are framed by the book’s overall orientation toward morality based in the fear of the Lord.

However, youth ministers also talked about Proverbs being uniquely *practical* among the books of the Bible. Michael, a white United Methodist youth pastor with twenty-five years of youth ministry experience, observed that his students saw in Proverbs “practical, real-life relevance that they didn’t see in the rest of the Bible because it talks about some very practical things.” Tyler, a white Southern Baptist youth pastor in Oklahoma, spoke of Proverbs as “common-sense guidance for a teenager” as it provides guidance on issues like dealing with anger, lust, and difficult people. Along with its practicality, Proverbs was described as making wisdom accessible. As Jeremiah, the Church of Christ youth pastor mentioned above who taught on theme of creation, said, “I think the purpose of Proverbs is to make us understand that

¹ Quinn, “Week 8: Happiness from Within,” *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 5.

wisdom is attainable, it isn't aloof. You don't have to go to a palace, you don't have to be a prince. If you open your eyes, wisdom is there to greet you." Thus, wisdom is not found, nor is it practiced, in esoteric philosophy but rather in the concrete realities of lived experience.

The two themes work together in that Proverbs helps its readers see what righteousness looks like in the context of everyday life. That is, Proverbs is more concerned with honoring God in the context of daily life and decision-making than it is with honoring God in liturgical settings or through silent contemplation. Proverbs offers guidance in the areas of life that characterize the daily grind: work, friendship, finances, marriage, and parenting. It shows how the sacred infuses the secular, how faith shapes everyday life.

While Proverbs offers wisdom for daily life, it does not do so by offering the reader a comprehensive rulebook or "instruction manual," as *Ministry to Youth* describes it. Rather, it offers the reader an invitation to be shaped by its approach to wisdom. In chapter three, I noted that one learns from the book of Proverbs through slow and unhurried formation, rather than by using it as a reference book. Proverbs does not address every possible situation, it utilizes contradictory advice to address some situations, and the lack of topical organization in Proverbs prevents one from easily "look[ing] up the answer to the problem at hand."² Proverbs is not a book of advice to copy and paste into everyday life. Instead, as Michael explained it, Proverbs "gives us a helpful way to think about what a walk with God looks like." While it does not provide solutions to every problem or advice for every situation, Proverbs models wise thinking in a variety of situations. Thus, it can shape its readers into the kind of people who can navigate complex situations that are not mentioned in the text. As Jonathan, a white Episcopal priest, explained, "Part of the invitation of Proverbs is to seek wisdom through observation and

² Davis, *Proverbs*, 21.

reflection and noticing and responding, and through...being committed to a process of learning about God, about yourself, about how life works.”

When interviewees talked about their interpretation of Proverbs, retribution theology was often either explicitly or implicitly at the forefront of their reflections. That is, Proverbs is governed by a worldview in which the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. Although he ultimately finds Proverbs’ perspective too narrow, Lucas, a Latinx PC(USA) youth pastor, explained that God is “like a genie” in Proverbs; if one does the right things, one will have a good life. Some youth pastors were more skeptical of this theology than others. For some, like Danielle, a Black Church of God youth pastor, the promises of “healing and strength for the body, blessings overflowing, and peaceful sleep” that accompany wisdom are a source of comfort; the retribution theology of Proverbs is taken at face value and received as a personal gift. Others approach Proverbs more analytically, describing its retribution theology as being at odds with other theologies in the canon.³

Regardless of how youth ministers feel about retribution theology, however, Proverbs’ act-consequence formula is largely assumed to be uncomplicated; there was little acknowledgment of complexity or tension within Proverbs itself. As Lydia, a Korean youth pastor at a Korean Presbyterian Community Church, described it in contrast to Ecclesiastes, “Proverbs is pretty much simple wisdom.” Proverbs scholar Anne Stewart critiques what she refers to as the “simplicity thesis”: when scholars assume diachronic development in the wisdom tradition from the “traditional” wisdom of Proverbs to the “crisis of wisdom” represented by Job and Ecclesiastes, they devalue the complexity of Proverbs, seeing it as simple and

³ As described above, Lucas in particular emphasizes for his students the tension between Proverbs and Job, specifically describing Job as questioning “retribution theology.” Similarly, Jonathan uses Job to show students that “the Bible authorizes us to move from the Deuteronomic theology of cause and effect to something that might be a little more mysterious or complex or unresolved.”

underdeveloped in comparison. She argues that the ‘simplicity thesis’ falsely assumes that the style and language of Proverbs “corresponds to a simplicity of moral worldview,” when in fact Proverbs has a complex view of human motivation and the pedagogies needed to educate the moral self.⁴ As Peter Hatton also argues, the “overall complexity of [Proverbs] actually requires some sayings to possess a high degree of simplicity and straightforwardness,” as their face-value meaning is made more complex by their contrast with other proverbs.⁵ As will be explored further below, when the simplicity thesis dominates youth ministers’ interpretation of Proverbs, it leads to pedagogical approaches that largely assume, rather than explore, the meaning of individual proverbs. Thus, the assumption that Proverbs is governed by a simplistic cause-and-effect theology leads to lost opportunities for wisdom-cultivating pedagogy.

Content

As noted above, when Proverbs features in topical lessons, the most common texts are those having to do with friendship. However, when Proverbs itself is the subject matter, it is often taught in a brief overview that uses Prov. 1:1-7 as its text: Proverbs’ introduction that sets forth its learning goals, concluding with the aphorism, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” These overviews typically begin by defining wisdom and differentiating it from knowledge. The main point of these lessons is that wisdom is important, and that youth should desire and seek it. The problem with this text choice and resulting takeaway is that the opening lectures of Proverbs (Prov. 1-9) were written to frame the collections of sayings; they were never intended to stand alone. Because of their role as introductory material, the opening lectures of Proverbs convince the reader of the importance of wisdom and exhort them to seek it out *as a way to whet their appetite* for the smorgasbord of wisdom that follows. When

⁴ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 77.

⁵ Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, 4.

a lesson summarizes the entirety of Proverbs by telling students that wisdom is important, but it does not include an encounter with wisdom, the exhortation to wisdom falls flat. It is like providing a menu with no dinner to follow, or like giving graduate students a syllabus and never showing up to teach class. As a case in point, *Ministry to Youth* offers a lesson that identifies Proverbs as a book filled with “information about wisdom,” rather than wisdom itself.⁶ As Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin write, when one desires to educate students toward wisdom, one should *not* “didactically convey information about wisdom” but rather help students encounter the modes of thinking that “underlie wise decision-making.”⁷

When youth ministers teach on texts from the introductory lectures, how might they do so in a way that invites students to the modes of thinking characteristic of wisdom? Here Stewart’s analysis of the pedagogy of Proverbs can provide insight into how youth ministers can help students encounter Wisdom herself, as the introductory lectures do. As described in chapter three of this dissertation, Stewart explores the ways in which the opening lectures engage the reader’s imagination as a way to shape their desires and cultivate the skill of discernment. In what Stewart refers to as a “pedagogically risky move,”⁸ the lectures devote attention to the allure of folly. In Prov. 1:10-19, the text describes the motivations of the violent who might “entice” the reader, giving the reader a taste for what it might feel like to join them, before warning that such an alliance will lead to their downfall. In Prov. 7:6-27, the reader is invited to experience the allure of Woman Folly at length as she presents herself to the “young man without sense” (Prov. 7:7). Proverbs thus invites the reader to imagine different life paths they might take, what those choices might feel like before the fallout, and where they ultimately lead. The takeaway model

⁶ Diliberto, “Youth Group Lesson on Wisdom.”

⁷ Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin, “Teaching for Wisdom,” 151.

⁸ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics*, 160.

often bypasses this kind of imaginative experience, telling students to seek wisdom and avoid folly without giving adequate attention to the desires and motivations underlying foolish behavior.

The introductory lectures are also full of metaphorical language that is often overlooked by the takeaway model. As noted above, the poetic language in Proverbs is often neutralized by approaches that mine the “point” from the poetry. Instead of telling students wisdom is important, however, which allows very little space for imagination, youth ministers might consider offering a more figurative or ambiguous “takeaway” to explore together. “Wisdom promises a rich feast” (Prov. 9:1-6) or “Wisdom cries out in the street” (Prov. 1:20) are more likely to leave students pondering the nature of wisdom, and their relationship to it, than a takeaway that summarizes the figurative language as “We should desire wisdom.”

Another common text choice from Proverbs is Prov. 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” In Group’s *LIVE Books of the Bible* curriculum, this text is the single one chosen to represent the book of Proverbs; the lesson title is “God is Trustworthy.”⁹ Teaching only Prov. 3:5-6 obscures the unique genre, style, and subject matter of Proverbs, as “trusting God” is a common theme in youth ministry education regardless of the key text that is used. For example, in *Ministry to Youth*’s lesson on this text, students compete with Bibles and concordances to see which team can find the most Bible verses about trusting God. The point of the exercise is that the theme of trusting God is so common in the Bible that students can be

⁹ Group, “LIVE Books of the Bible Scope and Sequence,” accessed October 29, 2022, https://services.group.com/media/5580320/live-booksofthebible_scopeandsequence.pdf.

assured this text is not only a proverb “but also a **promise**” that if we trust God, God “will take care of us.”¹⁰

Prov. 3:5-6 is often combined with Prov. 1:1-7 in overviews of Proverbs, but it is also a popular supplemental text for lessons on trust. For example, it appears in *Grow*’s 2021-22 curriculum in a series on Jesus’ passion and resurrection, as a supplemental text to the narrative of “Doubting Thomas” (John 20:24-29). The “Big Idea” of the lesson is that “Jesus can be trusted.”¹¹ In all three of these lessons (*Group*, *Ministry to Youth*, and *Grow*), one can see the curriculum writers’ tendency toward a theological approach, rather than an experiential approach; they focus on God’s character as trustworthy more than on an awareness of human limitations (“do not rely on your own insight”) or how students can navigate everyday life and make decisions in a way that “acknowledges God.”¹² When the theme of trust is abstracted from this proverb, theologized, and discussed in terms of other, unrelated biblical texts on trust or faith, Proverbs loses its distinctively practical way of doing theology and practicing righteousness in everyday life.

Challenges

The scattered, haphazard nature of the proverb collections makes them difficult to teach. To read through Proverbs chapter by chapter with a youth group would create confusing and unfocused lessons, because there is little rhyme or reason to their organization. As wisdom scholar Michael Fox writes, “A proverb is like a jewel, and the book of Proverbs is like a heap of

¹⁰ Quinn, “Week 2: Trusting God,” *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 5, emphasis original.

¹¹ Grow, “2021-22 scope and sequence,” shared with the author upon request.

¹² Raymond C. Van Leeuwen writes that in this passage, trust in God is “contrasted to a self-reliance that trusts in its own insight, power, and wealth, quite unaware of human limits.” Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” in *Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach*, vol. V of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 48. Fox writes that this proverb cautions against confidence that “a man can predict the outcome of his deeds.” Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 149.

jewels.”¹³ It is difficult to appreciate the beauty of each jewel when one is faced with hundreds of all shapes, sizes, colors, and clarities. The structure of the book thwarts attempts to consume large quantities of information, leading Ellen Davis to assert that “the only way to learn from the Proverbs is by living with the book for a long time.”¹⁴ Slow steeping in Proverbs may indeed be the *best* way to learn from the book, but practically speaking, when youth pastors are tasked with teaching Proverbs in a limited number of Sundays, they must figure out a way to sort, organize, and choose their material. Proverbs is a case study in the classic teaching conundrum of breadth versus depth. One can quickly read the entirety of Proverbs and digest very little, or one can home in on a proverb or two, leaving the rest of the book untouched. There is no perfect solution, so different youth pastors and curriculum writers wrestle with the challenge in different ways.

The data from the surveys, interviews, and curriculum analysis revealed three approaches to teaching the sayings material of Proverbs (Prov. 10-30). The first, and by far the most common, is to teach proverbs topically. Individual proverbs are often used as primary or supplemental texts in topical lessons, like those on friendship or trust. Series on the book of Proverbs tend to be organized thematically with topics like communication, wealth, and pride.¹⁵ For youth ministers who write their own lessons, the process often begins with reading one or more chapters of Proverbs and finding a theme that stands out to them. As Jeremiah explained his planning process, “In my reading, things would jump out...I thought, ‘Well, this sounds like cooperation and communication, let’s just go with that.’” While organizing proverbs topically can be a helpful way to sort the jewel heap, it is not without its pitfalls. As noted above, the

¹³ Fox, *Proverbs*, 481.

¹⁴ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song* 21.

¹⁵ Quinn, *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*.

nuance of the proverbs themselves tends to be sublimated to the youth minister's interpretation of their main themes.

Ministry to Youth's series on Proverbs exemplifies this tendency: although its first few lessons are rooted in texts from Proverbs, the series gradually devolves into a topical series, as later lessons focus more on New Testament texts and theological themes than they do on their chosen proverb. For instance, lesson six of eight is ostensibly about how wisdom helps us avoid sin, but there is no reflection in the lesson on discernment in navigating difficult situations or "avoiding sin." Instead, the lesson focuses more on the topic of sin itself. Students play a game in which they drop buttons into a glass of soda to hide them, but the buttons then rise to the top, illustrating that students cannot hide their sins from God. "This button is that time you lied to someone. This button is that time you did not want to share with your friend. And this button represents that television show your parents told you not to watch, but you did anyway."¹⁶ The lesson concludes with the need to confess our sins (1 John 1:9) and with offering an opportunity for students to invite Jesus into their hearts to forgive their sins. The connection between wisdom and avoidance of sin is based on an understanding of wisdom as obedience, but even the theme of obedience is sublimated to the lesson's focus on sin, confession, and forgiveness. The lesson becomes entirely abstracted from the context of Proverbs. Lesson seven, on serving others, mentions a single proverb: "A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need" (Prov. 17:17, NLT). However, the bulk of the lesson actually comes from Phil. 2:5-11, reflecting on how "Jesus served us...by dying on the cross."¹⁷ Both of these lessons illustrate a common tendency in topical lessons on Proverbs to use a proverb as a springboard for sharing the Gospel, rather than seeking to understand the proverb itself.

¹⁶ Quinn, "Week 6: Wisdom Stops Sin," *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 8.

¹⁷ Quinn, "Week 7: Serving Others, Serving God," *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 7.

A curriculum on wisdom from the Yale Youth Ministry Institute offers a different spin on topical proverbs, however, and one that gives sustained attention to the book of Proverbs itself. In one of its lessons, it mentions a pair of completely contradictory proverbs placed side-by-side in Prov. 26:4-5. These verses read, “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” The proximity of these proverbs makes them the most obvious contradiction in the book, but Proverbs is full of conflicting sayings on other topics, including wealth and poverty.¹⁸ Aside from the *CEB Student Bible*, Yale’s curriculum is the only one analyzed in this study that dealt with contradictory proverbs. However, the tensions within Proverbs provide a valuable opportunity to explore complex topics together. Instead of choosing proverbs that all seem to express similar ideas, using them to converge to a single takeaway, youth ministers can choose proverbs with different takes on a topic and use them as a springboard for discussion. Yale’s curriculum uses the proverbs on dealing with fools, as well as another pair of contradictory proverbs (Prov. 24:11-12, and Prov. 26:17, which seem to disagree on whether one should meddle in someone else’s affairs), to talk about the importance of knowing the “proper time.”¹⁹ Whether youth ministers choose to emphasize direct contradiction or not, proverbs approach topics from different perspectives and assumptions (for example, see the discussion of Prov. 13-14 in chapter three). Analyzing the ways in which they nuance and complement one another is more conducive to cultivating wisdom than using the proverbs to converge to a single takeaway.

¹⁸ For more on proverbs with different perspectives on wealth and poverty, see Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs*, as well as the discussion on Prov. 13-14 in the previous chapter. Similarly to the Yale curriculum’s acknowledgment of contradictory proverbs, Grace reflected on an influential learning activity from one of her professors in college. He handed out to each student a document containing every Bible verse on wealth and poverty and “had us look through it to see all the various times the Bible contradicted itself.” Grace noted that she “leans heavily on” that activity as a model for her own teaching and her willingness to explore contradictions with her students.

¹⁹ Masback, “Lesson 6: The Importance of Knowing ‘The Proper Time,’ Part 1,” *Quest for Truth*.

The notion of knowing when to apply which proverb at which time leads to the second way youth ministers organize the jewel heap: not by topic, but by *situation*. Two of the youth ministers I interviewed, Adam and Tyler, make it a regular practice to immerse themselves in the Proverbs. One reads through the book each year; the other each month, a chapter a day. Through the years, the proverbs have become a part of them, a tool of wisdom always at their disposal. Where other youth pastors demonstrated a lack of familiarity with the content of Proverbs, quoting nonexistent proverbs like “A word of kindness makes all the difference,” Adam and Tyler were fluent in the language of the proverbs. Unsurprisingly, given their easy familiarity with its content, they were also the ones who mentioned that the best way to teach Proverbs is situationally, in casual conversations with youth as the situation calls for it. As Tyler put it, “I just don’t know how to teach through Proverbs in an expository way. I think it’s communicated best in a mentorship role.” Adam noted he finds himself “just going back to the Proverbs in the middle of a message, in the middle of talking to a student, in the middle of daily life, going back to the Proverbs.”

For youth ministers who are not familiar enough with the Proverbs to incorporate them into everyday conversations, Cokesbury’s *Wisdom of the Kingdom* curriculum models another way to take a situational approach in teaching them. For one learning activity, students are divided into small groups and given two items: a scenario that they might encounter in life, and a list of proverbs that might relate to, or inform the way they handle, that scenario. Students are asked first to imagine the outcome of various responses to the situation in light of the proverbs, then to choose the response they think is best for their scenario, and finally to act out the full scenario for the group. For example, one scenario is about a dreaded group project in which the other students do not help. The given options are to 1) do all the work, 2) challenge the other

students, or 3) talk to the teacher. Although the given proverbs include one about lazy people (Prov. 26:16), several others are only tangentially connected, leaving students to decide whether or how they apply to the situation.²⁰ Rather than assuming that all proverbs are equally applicable in all times and places, the curriculum acknowledges that discernment is required to know how and when to apply them: “How did you decide which choice was wisest for your scenario? Do you think every situation in life has a one hundred percent right choice to make? If not, how can growing in wisdom help you make the best choice?”²¹

The situational approach most nearly resembles the original context of the proverbs, which were spoken into situations at which one can only guess. A proverb on a page is understood only in the abstract; as Michael Fox writes, “A proverb receives its full meaning only in application, when it is spoken to a particular end.”²²

The Yale Youth Ministry Institute’s curriculum, *Seven Weeks to Wisdom*, models a third way that proverbs can be organized: not by topic or situation, but by *type*. In this series, there are two lessons on the act-consequence construct. Several act-consequence proverbs are chosen for students to discuss together in small groups with the following questions: “What is the act described by the proverb? What is the consequence the proverb says follows from the act? Do [you] think the proverb’s prescription is true to [your] life experience? Can [you] think of an example of this dynamic in [your] own lives or in history or media?”²³ Although the Yale study

²⁰ Charlie Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Student Journal*, ed. Ben Howard (Nashville: Youth Ministry Partners and Abingdon Press, 2018), 21-23. The list of proverbs provided for the three scenarios include Prov. 3:27, 15:22-23, 16:18, 17:17, 18:1, 26:4, 26:5, 26:16, and 26:27-28.

²¹ Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 22. The second and third questions in this set, however, are leading questions that do not allow for creative responses. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will explain further how these types of questions shut down, rather than generate, dialogue.

²² Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 484.

²³ Masback, “Lesson 4: The Proverbial Wisdom of Cause and Effect/The Act-Consequence Relationship, Part 1,” and “Lesson 5: The Proverbial Wisdom of Cause and Effect/The Act-Consequence Relationship, Part 2,” *Quest for Truth*.

only offers these two lessons, other types of proverbs that could be treated include “better-than” proverbs,²⁴ comparisons or similes (“as X, so Y”),²⁵ contrast proverbs (“X, but Y”),²⁶ and parallel proverbs that repeat, emphasize, or build on an idea.²⁷ Such an approach would familiarize students with the content of two or three proverbs, as well as helping them analyze a certain proverb style: Is the first scenario of a “better-than” proverb really better, or would they prefer the second? Why?²⁸ Does this proverb provide a fair comparison? Why or why not? Introducing students to variations on a type of proverb can give them a framework for understanding another proverb of the same type, as well as language for crafting their own.

Pedagogy

Across these approaches, two learning activities are common in lessons on Proverbs. The first is a game that asks students to guess whether a saying is from the Bible or another source. Various versions use common proverbs, Ben Franklin,²⁹ Dumbledore,³⁰ Yoda,³¹ or even Peeta

²⁴ Examples include Prov. 15:17, “Better a meal of greens with love than a plump calf with hate,” and Prov. 16:32, “Better to be patient than a warrior, and better to have self-control than to capture a city.”

²⁵ Examples include Prov. 26:11, “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats foolish mistakes,” and Prov. 27:19, “As water reflects the face, so the heart reflects one person to another.”

²⁶ Examples include Prov. 15:1, “A sensitive answer turns back wrath, but an offensive word stirs up anger” (a proverb often used to talk about the topic of communication), and Prov. 10:19, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.”

²⁷ Examples include two very common proverbs: Prov. 16:18, “Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall,” and Prov. 17:17, “Friends love all the time, and kinsfolk are born for times of trouble.”

²⁸ When I facilitated a workshop in the summer of 2022 with YTI scholars on Prov. 17:12 (“Better to meet a she-bear robbed of its cubs than to confront a fool immersed in folly”), I began with a game of “Would You Rather,” then asked them “would you rather” meet a mama bear robbed of her cubs, or a fool in their folly. All of the students said they would rather meet the fool. After I asked a few of them to explain their choice, I asked them why they thought the writer of this proverb would say the reverse. At that point, they began to think beyond the surface-level threat of the bear, noting that maybe bears are dangerous in the short-term whereas fools are dangerous in the long-term, or that maybe fools are actually *more* dangerous than the bear because we *think* they are *less* dangerous and thus are less likely to avoid them. This learning activity provided an opening to explore the proverb together and allowed students to ponder the writer’s meaning and motivations, rather than being told what the proverb meant or which scenario they *should* prefer.

²⁹ D6, *Forward Teaching Guide* vol. 15, no. 2 (D6 2018): 6-12.

³⁰ Aaron Helman, “Dumbledore or Proverbs,” accessed August 30, 2022, available at <https://www.downloadyouthministry.com/p/dumbledore-or-proverbs/games-314.html>.

³¹ Sara, a white Lutheran youth pastor, played “Yoda or Proverbs” with her group. For more on how Sara taught Proverbs, see the case study below.

from *The Hunger Games*.³² The purpose of this game seems to be threefold. First, it is an easy way to introduce young people to several unrelated proverbs to give them an idea of the breadth of Proverbs's content, a goal that can be difficult to accomplish in a single lesson. Second, the activity helps to situate the Proverbs in their proper genre of wise sayings, making them more intelligible to young people. Third, it is a tool of biblical literacy: it helps students know which common sayings come from the Bible and which do not. Versions of the Proverbs-or-not game are most often used in conservative evangelical curriculum. The game focuses on students' ability to differentiate between biblical wisdom and other wise sayings, which is a skill that dovetails with the commitment to biblical literacy and the theology of biblical infallibility common in evangelical circles. For these youth ministers, it is important to know which sayings actually come from the Bible because, unlike worldly proverbs, biblical proverbs are inspired: as Matt put it, "We know without a shadow of a doubt that they are true and can be trusted."

The second common activity is to invite young people to write their own proverbs or otherwise compile a mixed-media collection of wisdom. For example, *Seven Weeks to Wisdom* has students compile "The Great Book of Our Youth Group's Wisdom" over the course of the seven-week series, with different assignments each week that contribute to the book. In week two, students are asked to revise a wisdom saying in light of their own experience with it.³³ In week three of the curriculum, students are encouraged to have a conversation with someone who is different than them, and then to draft a proverb based on what they learned from that person.³⁴ In contrast to the Proverbs-or-not game, inviting students to write their own proverbs is an

³² Ken McIntyre, "Peeta or Proverbs," accessed August 30, 2022, available at <https://www.downloadyouthministry.com/p/peeta-or-proverbs/games-514.html>.

³³ Masback, "Week 2: What is Wisdom? Part 2," *Quest for Truth*.

³⁴ Masback, "Week 3: The Wisdom of Youth," *Quest for Truth*.

activity that typically appears in mainline Protestant curriculum with more progressive theology.³⁵ The focus is less on familiarizing students with the content of the Bible and more on constructing their own wisdom; it implies that twenty-first century teenagers are capable of producing wise sayings similar to those which appear in their sacred text.

Neither of these activities on its own helps students to explore the Proverbs in depth or to be shaped by the book's pedagogy. The process of writing one's own proverbs is more conducive to cultivating wisdom than guessing the origins of a wise saying, because it requires students to reflect on an experience and consider its meaning and implications in a way that might help them navigate other situations in the future. However, writing one's own proverbs is not a replacement for exploring the biblical text itself. In "doing what the Bible does," the goal is not to leave the text behind, but to do theology alongside and in conversation with it. Thus, the practice of writing one's own proverbs should arise from a deep engagement with the Proverbs themselves.

Case Studies: Matt and Sara

"What do you think are some practices that can cultivate wisdom in youth?" I asked Matt, a white Southern Baptist youth pastor who hails from Kentucky. Without missing a beat, he responded, "If they would get off TikTok." His friendly eyes crinkled as he broke into a grin. "Naw. I think studying the Bible, memorizing Scripture. Talking to people that are older than them. Those things are huge for cultivating wisdom." As Matt's response illustrates, he tends toward an understanding of wisdom as obedience to external sources, a conviction that influences the way he understands and teaches Proverbs.

³⁵ *Colaborate*, a United Methodist publication, is the only curriculum I analyzed that suggests both activities as possible additions to the lesson. *Colaborate Leader Guide*, 102-103.

A full-time youth pastor to over a hundred students, a masters' student, and a father of newborn twins, Matt somehow still finds the time to do in-depth Bible study preparation and write his own lessons rather than using prepackaged curriculum. For his summer series on Proverbs, the entire youth group went through a 31-day reading plan. Matt's process for lesson preparation was to read through the seven chapters covered each week with his teaching team as well as a few of his students, and to choose a text or theme for the main teaching time. Sometimes a theme would arise from the group, and he would link together the proverbs that spoke to the theme. Other times, the team would come across a proverb "so rich and deep" that Matt would center the lesson on understanding and applying that one proverb. Either way, Matt's main criterion for choosing his text was whether he felt it was something his students needed to hear in this particular season.

When I asked Matt why he chose to teach on Proverbs, his response surprised me: "Because the Gospel is so interwoven in it." Where other youth ministers struggle to relate the wisdom literature to Jesus, for Matt, the connection is easy. The main theme of Proverbs is righteousness, which comes from Jesus, he explained. So, when one lives righteously, following the wisdom of Proverbs, it points them to Jesus. As he explained it to his students, "In Proverbs we don't just see nice little quotes; we see a path that leads us straight to the throne of Jesus."

For Matt, the righteousness to which Proverbs calls its readers is based primarily in avoidance of negative behaviors: lust, laziness, anger, and of course, TikTok, which is a breeding ground for temptation and folly. Such warnings are more than recommendations; in Matt's mind, because they show up in other places in the Bible, including the Sermon on the Mount, they are "biblical principles to live by." They differ from the Law, however, in that "the Law is what to do, and wisdom is how to do it." It is that ability to apply principles that differentiates wisdom

from knowledge. This differentiation was a key takeaway that Matt wanted his students to remember. Along with memorizing Prov. 1:7, his students were encouraged to learn a saying that would help them remember the difference between knowledge and wisdom. At the beginning of each lesson, he would prompt students: “Knowledge is knowing that...” They would respond, “A tomato is a fruit.” “Wisdom is knowing...” “Not to put it in a fruit salad!”³⁶ The fruit salad analogy points to a tension in Matt’s understanding of wisdom between wisdom as discernment and wisdom as obedience. When I asked him to define wisdom, he joked, “Knowing that a tomato is a fruit, but not to put it in a fruit salad.” He laughed and then gave me a more measured response: “I think wisdom is a rightful understanding of who God is and what God has called us to do, and walking that path faithfully.” When I asked him if he could help me make the connection between fruit salad and right knowledge of God, his clarification did little to bridge the gap. Matt seems to work with two different understandings of wisdom that he has not fully harmonized: one theological and the other experiential. The two lesson plans he shared with me, however, emphasized a theological approach to wisdom.

Matt’s series on Proverbs began with two lessons from the opening lectures whose main points were nearly identical to other curricular overviews of Proverbs. The first lesson, “Desire for Wisdom,” drew on selections from Prov. 1-2, as well as the 1 Kings narrative of Solomon asking for wisdom, to emphasize three key points: Wisdom comes from God, God wants us to have wisdom, and God wants us to ask for wisdom. The application was to pray for wisdom, like Solomon did: “If the message is the desire for wisdom, well, when’s the last time you asked God to give you wisdom?....So let’s take a specific situation you’re dealing with and pray for wisdom in that specific spot.” The second lesson, based on Prov. 3:5-12, was entitled “Life-Changing

³⁶ The same fruit salad analogy is also used by William Brown as he explains that wisdom “is more than knowledge; it involves making sound judgments and doing the right thing.” Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 25.

Trust.” The main point Matt wanted his students to take away from this lesson was that trust in Jesus leads to obedience. Although trust can be difficult and sometimes scary, obedience is promised a reward; even if we do not receive a reward in this lifetime, we look forward to “the ultimate reward” of being with Jesus. This move in Matt’s lesson reflects the retribution theology of Proverbs, but with a Christian flavor, shifting the promise of reward to the afterlife. In these lessons, Matt demonstrates the common tendency to use texts from the introductory lectures of Proverbs to lead to takeaways about desiring wisdom and trusting God, without inviting young people to explore the text in ways that cultivate wisdom. Bypassing the metaphorical language and imaginative contours of the text for an easily applicable takeaway, the lessons tell students how to be wise (pray and obey) rather than pedagogically modeling the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom.

Sara, a white ELCA youth pastor in the suburbs of Chicago, teaches a brief overview of wisdom literature each year as part of her sixth-grade confirmation curriculum, in which Proverbs shares a lesson with Ecclesiastes. For Sara, a key part of the lesson was defining wisdom and differentiating it from knowledge, a difference which she described very similarly to Matt: “Knowledge is knowing that spiders have eight legs, versus wisdom is staying away from black widow spiders because those are the scary ones.” Although Matt and Sara described wisdom very differently from each other when I asked them to define it (see more on Sara’s understanding of wisdom below), their fruit salad and spider analogies both tend toward an understanding of wisdom as the ability to apply information or knowledge.

Instead of grounding her lesson in a key text, Sara introduces her students to a range of various proverbs through two activities that comprise the majority of the lesson. The first is an icebreaker opening game in which students guess whether a saying came from Proverbs or Yoda,

which her students find very entertaining. The second is a worksheet in which students match the first half of a proverb to the second half, then guess whether the proverb came from the Bible or another source. When I asked Sara if they discussed the proverbs they learned, she said discussion centered more on unpacking the game: “We asked ‘Are you surprised by any of these answers?’, so like, ‘I was surprised that “beauty is only skin deep” isn’t in the Bible,’ or, ‘I wasn’t surprised.’ That’s really what we do for discussion on Proverbs.” The first year that she taught the confirmation curriculum, she tried to go more in-depth but found that her sixth-grade students struggled with comprehending the language as well as the abstract concepts. In light of this challenge, Sara decided to make her curriculum more activity-based, a change that has made the content more accessible for her students. While she may not be able to teach everything she would like, she hopes that “those seeds are planted.”

The Proverbs lesson helps connect to one of Sara’s confirmation goals: that students will start to read the Bible for themselves. The games and activities help them to see that not everything they hear comes from the Bible, and they need to be able to know the difference. This is the conclusion and main takeaway of the lesson: “We want you to be able to read so you can know the truth for yourself.” While the Proverbs-or-not game can be a fun supplementary exercise, when it serves as the primary learning activity on the book of Proverbs, it greatly diminishes Proverbs’s potential to cultivate wisdom. Activities like these could be strengthened with additional discussion or meta-reflection on the activity. For example, when Sara has her students match the first and second halves of proverbs, she could include a proverb permutation as a way to spark more in-depth reflection on how observations can lead to more than one conclusion. The learning activity could still introduce students to a broad range of proverbs, but

this simple change would allow them to explore one proverb in depth, introduce them to an unusual feature of Proverbs, and invite them to imagine alternative endings to the proverb.

A secondary takeaway that Sara wanted her students to remember from the confirmation lesson on wisdom is that there are different kinds of wisdom, including emotional intelligence, spiritual maturity, justice, or even the ability to dance, and that God values all kinds. Sara's understanding of wisdom corresponds well with the breadth of the Hebrew word *hokmah*, which is used outside of the wisdom literature to describe the skill of artisans or crafters.³⁷ Later in the conversation, when I asked Sara what has influenced her understanding of wisdom literature, she talked about living in Rwanda for a year. Her experience of seeing how different cultures do things differently opened her eyes to the "individualistic oddness of wisdom." For Sara, wisdom is less about following the rules or doing things right, and more about using one's unique knowledge, skills, and gifts to "be the Imago Dei in the world, showing God's love to others and...point[ing] others to God." Although Sara, like Matt, would say that wisdom is a gift from God, in her theology wisdom is open-ended, creative, and playful. Wisdom is not characterized by doing the objectively right thing, the way it is for Matt. Rather, it is characterized by the ability to think and act contextually in ways that lead to flourishing.

Although there are many different approaches and methods that youth ministers use to teach on the book of Proverbs, very few of them explore a proverb in depth, play with its figurative language, or invite students to reflect on what it means. Introductory lessons to Proverbs rarely include material from the collections of sayings; instead, they tell students that they should desire wisdom without giving them the opportunity to explore the wisdom the book has to offer. Topical approaches shift the focus away from the proverb itself, abstracting a theme

³⁷ For a more in-depth description of *hokmah*, as well as other words translated "wisdom" or "knowledge," see the discussion in chapter 1, as well as Michael Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 32ff.

or takeaway from the proverb and discussing the theme in general. Games like Proverbs-or-not provide a shallow overview of several proverbs without exploring any of them. Sara's students may come away knowing that they should read their Bible, and Matt's students may come away knowing that they should pray for guidance, but neither of their lessons on Proverbs invites students to engage in the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom as they explore the text together.

What pedagogical approaches to Proverbs *can* cultivate wisdom in youth? In chapter three, I demonstrated how Proverbs functions pedagogically at the level of individual sayings, the juxtaposition of sayings in a collection, and the framing lectures. The pedagogical approach a youth minister might take thus depends on what text they want to teach. If they want to explore an individual saying in depth, they should capitalize on the way its poetic form creates ambiguity. In what ways is its meaning unclear? Are there gaps in the analogy? How is the metaphor like, and unlike, the phenomenon that is described? If they want to explore multiple proverbs, rather than using them to converge to a single takeaway, they might play with the new meanings created by their juxtaposition with other proverbs. Are there proverbs with a different perspective on this idea? Proverb permutations to analyze? How does a saying take on new meaning when placed next to this proverb or that proverb? Finally, if a youth minister teaches on a text from Prov. 1-9, they should remember that these chapters were written to frame the proverb collections and awaken the reader's desire to study them. Thus, the book of Proverbs cannot adequately be summarized by its framing lectures; texts from Prov. 1-9 should serve as an introduction to a lesson or series that includes some exploration of the sayings material. When texts from the framing lectures are taught, they should be taught in a way that evokes students' imagination and desire to learn, something the key text and takeaway model, in its haste to

provide applicable conclusions, does not do. Youth ministers should endeavor to teach these texts in a way that begins, rather than ends, the conversation.

Ecclesiastes

Interpretation

Interpretations of Ecclesiastes tend to fall to one side or the other of the experiential-theological spectrum. While many of the same themes appear regardless of the approach youth ministers take, they are inflected differently. For youth ministers who take an experiential approach, the main message of Ecclesiastes is that because of life's futility and death's inevitability, one should hold loosely to what one has, living in the present and enjoying everyday gifts. This interpretation often leads to the theme of sharing, with interviewees attempting to paraphrase the message of Qohelet: "Enjoy [what you have], just make sure you're sharing" (Sara) and "Woe to some people who believe that...we should aspire to having shiny things, rather than saying, 'If I have something, doesn't it make it better if we share it?'" (Jillian). When I asked Sara where Ecclesiastes talks about sharing, she hesitated, then responded, "Well, we talked about 'you can't take it with you' more than anything, so like, what's the point of storing up your treasures?" In fact, Qohelet does not talk explicitly about sharing, but in my own experience teaching Ecclesiastes, students also anticipated that the series would take a turn toward generosity.³⁸

³⁸ C.L. Seow and Eunmy P. Lee, however, both see a potential gesture toward sharing in Eccl. 11:1-2, which exhorts the reader to "send out your bread upon the waters" (NRSV). In the NIV translation ("ship your grain across the sea"), the intent seems to be about investing one's fortune. However, Seow argues based on Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the text that it may be a way of speaking about generosity. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 341-344. Lee writes that it is "a call to perform charitable deeds with abandon, and it constitutes an important expansion of Qoheleth's ethic of enjoyment. One must enjoy the bread in one's possession; one must also gladly release it for the benefit of others." Eunmy P. Lee, "Ecclesiastes," *The Old Testament and Ethics: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Joel B. Green and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 106. While it might be an "important" expansion of Qohelet's ethic, it is not an obvious one; Qohelet does not make the same attempt to emphasize "charitable deeds" that he does with enjoyment.

For those who read Ecclesiastes through a theological lens, the emphasis is on God's eternal nature in contrast to human finitude; they argue that one should place one's trust in God rather than earthly things that do not last. As one anonymous survey respondent put it, "Everything fails one day, but God remains." They are less likely to address Qohelet's reflections on present earthly enjoyment (addressed in more depth in the "content" section below) than those who take an experiential approach. Instead, they focus on the need to prioritize what is eternal as the true source of happiness.³⁹ Tyler, a Southern Baptist youth pastor, does more than highlight God's eternal nature in Ecclesiastes; he reads his theology of the afterlife back into the text. For him, teaching about heaven is not just a Christian response to Ecclesiastes; rather, heaven is the main topic of Ecclesiastes itself: "The common message in Ecclesiastes is that the most meaningful thing is the life we have after this earth...Solomon wrote that riches hold nothing to the fact that we are going to walk the streets of gold one day in heaven...That's the general theme that we see when we look at Ecclesiastes." In fact, Qohelet says nothing about heaven or streets of gold; his view of the afterlife is rather bleak, as he asserts that "the dead...have no more reward" (Eccl. 9:5). Tyler is not alone in believing that Ecclesiastes points the reader toward heaven; some early interpreters of Ecclesiastes read it as a call to practice asceticism as preparation for the afterlife.⁴⁰ However, the text itself does not provide evidence

³⁹ The takeaway from a *Ministry to Youth* lesson which deals with Eccl. 2:10-11, 26 in conjunction with Prov. 3:13-18, is that "true happiness comes from God, not things in this world." This takeaway seems to negate Qohelet's texts on enjoyment of material gifts in favor of a more theological approach. Quinn, "Lesson 8: Happiness from Within," *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 2.

⁴⁰ Douglas Miller, summarizing various interpretive approaches to Ecclesiastes throughout history, notes that "advocates of a second early position understood the speaker as an ascetic who challenges those who are living superficial and materialistic lives to deny themselves in preparation for the afterlife. By this understanding Qoheleth cites numerous examples of the failure to find satisfaction in the *present* world in order to convince his readers to prepare for the *next* world. *Hebel*, in this case, refers to activity which is irrelevant or detrimental in light of eternity." Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 217. Although several of the youth ministers I interviewed and curricula I analyzed also focused on the next life and interpreted *hevel* as activity conducted apart from God, none of them mentioned asceticism. Rather than *preparing* for the next life, they tended to focus on *putting one's faith in* the next life.

for such a reading; not only is Qohelet ambivalent about the prospect of the afterlife (Eccl. 3:19-21), but he also commends enjoyment of earthly pleasures (Eccl. 8:15).⁴¹ While he does warn against depending on wealth for one's security, he does not advise the reader to place their trust in a heavenly reward instead.

For at least three of the youth ministers I interviewed, then, their understanding of Ecclesiastes's main message reflects their theological and ethical commitments, but it is not apparent in the text itself. While there is precedent for readers seeing the themes of generosity and heaven in Ecclesiastes, Qohelet does not explicitly call on readers to share their possessions, nor does he compare earthly riches with heavenly riches. As we will see below, the textual choices a youth minister makes will shape the way students experience Ecclesiastes, and unless students read the whole book, the youth minister will have to fill the context gaps with their own interpretation of Qohelet's message. However, it is important for youth ministers to have an accurate understanding of what is in the text, so that they do not misrepresent Ecclesiastes.

A better way to introduce the themes of "sharing" or "heaven" would be to introduce them as ideas that, while not explicit in the text, may still shape the way one reads it. Such an approach helps students engage critically with Ecclesiastes and reflect on the relationship between ideas, which are important practices for cultivating wisdom. Michael provides a helpful example of how to teach in this way as he struggles with the relationship between Ecclesiastes and the Gospel: "I try not to read the Old Testament...as prophecy [about] Jesus. But I do read some of these more challenging Old Testament passages through a Gospel lens: that [our] relationship with Christ helps us read Ecclesiastes with a sense of hope that maybe even Qohelet didn't have." Michael acknowledges that Ecclesiastes is not a book about heaven, and that

⁴¹ Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 218.

Qohelet has an important perspective to offer, but that a “New Testament theology of hope” can shape the way young people engage with the themes of Ecclesiastes.

Content

“I mean, I love Ecclesiastes 3, but I think everybody does, so like, what’s new with that?” Jillian, a white youth pastor seeking ordination in the United Church of Christ, waved offhandedly to demonstrate the unoriginality of her response when I asked her what texts are most important for understanding Ecclesiastes. Jillian is right that “everybody” loves Eccl. 3; aside from the passage on friendship in chapter 4, discussed above, the most common text taught from Ecclesiastes is the “Times” poem in Eccl. 3:1-8, often introduced through the Byrds’ song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” As one survey respondent put it, this text is a meaningful way to talk about “living through change with courage, hope, and resilience.” It is often taught at times of transition: graduations, the beginning of a new school year, or the beginning of a calendar year. It has been used to talk about friends moving away, relationships ending, and parents getting divorced. At the United Methodist church where Jillian currently works (“on loan” from the UCC, as Jillian put it), 70% of the members identify as LGBTQ. Her ministry context, and her own identity as a queer person, shapes the way she reads this text; Jillian joked that she uses the Times poem in service to her “gay agenda” as she talks with her students about the process of coming out: “You don’t have to come out right now to be valid as a queer person, and you don’t have to come out all at once. Not that there’s a time to be born and a time to die, necessarily, but that who you are is going to unravel in time. Your timing is your timing and it doesn’t have to look like anyone else’s.”

In fact, the Times poem is not at all about “our timing.” As C.L. Seow notes, despite the fact that this text is commonly interpreted through the lens of human agency, “people cannot

actually choose a time of birthing or dying...Indeed, people do not decide when to heal, weep, laugh, mourn, lose, love, hate, or be in war or peace.”⁴² However, the various ways that youth ministers use this poem, and the range of situations into which it speaks, are a testament to the poem’s open-endedness and broad appeal. Although within the larger context of Ecclesiastes the poem refers to God’s determination of events and the human inability to discern, much less control, these “times,”⁴³ W. Sibley Towner points out that the unique style of the poem, which sets it apart from the surrounding text, “invites attention to this pericope on its own terms” as well as inviting other interpretations.⁴⁴ He acknowledges that “much can be gained by reading it independently of context...and thereby seeing it in a different light from that given it” by the larger context of the book. When one reads the Times passage as a stand-alone poem, one can “hear in this poem a challenge to be wise, to be ethical, to discern when one’s actions are in keeping with God’s time and then to act decisively.”⁴⁵

Towner’s reflections highlight a common tendency I observed among youth ministers and curricular materials. As Qohelet himself did, youth ministers and scholars alike seek to determine the action or response to which this poem might be calling its readers. While many youth ministers lean into the poem’s descriptive quality,⁴⁶ finding comfort in knowing that ups and downs are merely part of the rhythm of life,⁴⁷ it is also common for them to interpret it (and

⁴² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 169, 171.

⁴³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 169, 171.

⁴⁴ Towner, “Ecclesiastes,” 308.

⁴⁵ Towner, “Ecclesiastes,” 308.

⁴⁶ As Brown points out, “It is important to note that Qoheleth’s most famous passage is entirely descriptive, as opposed to prescriptive.” Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 149, fn 51.

⁴⁷ For example, in addition to asking students what they needed to tear down and build up, Adam also emphasized multiple times that whatever season one finds oneself in, “it’s okay.” “Sometimes there’s a time to cry, and that’s okay.... Yes, sometimes relationships end, sometimes our jobs or things that we really love come to an end, and that’s okay, that’s part of life.”

suggest an application) that allows for human agency.⁴⁸ Yale's *Seven Weeks to Wisdom* curriculum uses Eccl. 3:1-8, alongside proverbs giving contradictory advice, to emphasize the importance of "knowing the proper time" and how to act appropriately in various situations.⁴⁹ Adam, a Free Methodist youth pastor whose lessons on Job will be explored below, urged his students to consider how this passage might be calling them to act: "Of the stuff in your control, what do you need to tear down and what do you need to build? Of the stuff in your control, what do you need to keep and what do you need to throw away?" These two takeaways invite *discernment* and *action*; they assume that humans can determine, if not consciously affect, what "time" it is.

Seow and Ellen Davis, who both emphasize the human inability to determine or plan the times of life, nevertheless acknowledge that humans can choose their *response* to the times in which they find themselves.⁵⁰ As Davis writes, "There is a crucial element of choice involved in living well. We must decide whether our posture will be one of acceptance or resistance, whether we will fight to the death the ever-changing rhythms of life, or whether we will dance to them."⁵¹ Lifeway's curriculum takes this approach: the "Central Truth" from this text is that "God calls us to make the most" of life's "joys and challenges."⁵² Although the lesson also emphasizes the

⁴⁸ For example, *The CEB Student Bible* asks in a sidebar on Eccl. 3:1-8, "If God has all things in order, then should human beings just accept their capabilities and limitations? What does it mean to be co-creators with God in the midst of change?" *The CEB Student Bible*, 761. Although it allows readers to decide for themselves "what it means to be co-creators," it suggests that humans have more agency in the way they respond to life's seasons than merely accepting them.

⁴⁹ Masback, "Lesson 6: The Importance of Knowing the 'Proper Time,' Part I," *Quest for Truth*.

⁵⁰ Seow writes, "The poem is popularly understood to mean that there are appropriate moments for people to act and, at the proper moment, even an ordinarily objectionable situation can be 'beautiful in its own way.' There is an appropriate time for everything. Placed in its present context, however, it becomes clear that the poem is not about human determination of events or even human discernment of times and seasons. It is about God's activity and the appropriate human response to it...All that mortals can do in the face of these times is to be open to them." Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 169, 171.

⁵¹ Davis, *Proverbs*, 184.

⁵² Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 84.

importance of “trusting God through both the good and the bad” and “glorify[ing] him in whatever life may bring,”⁵³ Lifeway lets the students decide exactly what “making the most” of the times means, posing the discussion question: “What might it look like to make the most of the various seasons mentioned in these verses?”⁵⁴

For Danielle, the human response to the times of life is to trust God’s timing. She shared with me that Ecclesiastes took on new relevance for her while her mother was in the hospital in critical condition. As Danielle was crying and praying, she opened her Bible, which happened to fall open to Ecclesiastes 3. Danielle recalled asking herself, “Can I really, really trust the Lord and his timing? If it doesn’t all align the way I want it to, can I still hold onto the promise that he’s good and that he really does make everything beautiful in its time?” That experience became pivotal for how Danielle understands Ecclesiastes: “For me, a lot of Ecclesiastes is about being able to trust the Lord and his timing, even when I don’t understand exactly what he’s doing.” Danielle and the Lifeway curriculum thus emphasize one’s *posture* toward and *acceptance* of the seasons of life, rather than one’s discernment or manipulation of the “times.”

Qohelet himself suggests what the human response to the vagaries of life might be, and, in Lifeway’s words, “what it might look like to make the most of the various seasons.” However, when the Times poem is typically abstracted from its context, particularly if it is the only text from Ecclesiastes that students hear, Qohelet’s discovery of “what is good for mortals to do” (Eccl. 2:3) goes unnoticed.

When Ecclesiastes is covered in one- or two-lesson overviews, the texts that typically appear come from the first and last chapters. The first chapter begins with Qohelet’s main theme: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Teacher, ‘vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’” (Eccl. 1:2). The

⁵³ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 86.

⁵⁴ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 87.

Teacher goes on to describe how there is nothing new under the sun, and that “all the deeds done under the sun” are *hevel* and a chasing after the wind. In the final chapter, the editor of the book summarizes the teachings of Qohelet and adds their own conclusion: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (Eccl. 12:13). The choice of these two texts turns a complex book into the simple takeaway that life is meaningless *unless we obey God*. The D6 youth curriculum exemplifies this tendency. When D6 shortened their scope and sequence in 2020, Ecclesiastes was reduced from five lessons down to two, and with the cut material went most of its complexity and nuance.⁵⁵ What remains of Ecclesiastes is the first and last chapters. The first lesson, “Search for Fulfillment,” teaches students that earthly things cannot bring meaning or satisfaction and urges them to “pursue meaning through knowing and following God.” The second lesson, “Whole Duty of Man,” asserts that “awareness of the coming judgment” should motivate students to “have proper reverence for God and obey His Word each day.”⁵⁶

The epilogue to Ecclesiastes, which urges the reader to fear God and keep God’s commandments, is not necessarily at odds with Qohelet’s message, but it does “put a different spin on Qohelet’s work.”⁵⁷ As Eunmy Lee argues, both the main body of Ecclesiastes and its epilogue are needed to fully understand the book as a whole. She writes that readers can and should read the closing injunction to “fear God” as the summary of all that came before it. To

⁵⁵ Because the full lessons of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes had not yet been released for the new cycle—only the scope and sequence—analysis of these books in the D6 curriculum was based on the full lessons from the previous cycle that covered the texts used in the new shortened scope and sequence.

⁵⁶ D6, “Lesson 1: Coming Up Empty,” and “Lesson 5: What’s the Point?” in *The Story of My Life* series; *Forward Teaching Guide* vol. 15 no. 3 (D6, 2019), 6, 34. Note that the titles given here are the titles from the new cycle; the content of the lessons, however, came from the old cycle.

⁵⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 395. Towner, however, does say that Eccl. 12:13 contradicts Qohelet’s message: “Not only [does it] lack the nuance and probing energy of the rest of the book, but also [it] contradict[s] two of its most important claims—namely, that human beings can know neither the future nor the activity of God.” Towner, “Ecclesiastes,” 359.

fear God means to recognize one's creaturely status and all its "tragic limitations and joyous possibilities," and part of that recognition is to live life fully in enjoyment.⁵⁸ The entire book thus explicates what it means to fear God. When youth ministers teach on the epilogue without giving adequate attention to the rest of the book, however, the meaning is lost. Qohelet himself is not given a fair hearing; instead, the editor's summary is elevated above Qohelet's own message. As Towner aptly notes, "It is ironic that much of the preaching and thinking about this fascinating book is based on the words of someone other than its real author."⁵⁹

While it is common in youth curricula to turn to the editor's epilogue as the solution to life's meaninglessness, Qohelet offers a different solution: to "eat, drink, and enjoy your life," a refrain which is repeated 6 times throughout the book, growing in intensity as the book progresses.⁶⁰ In its initial formulations, it is framed merely as an observation: that it is good for one to eat and drink and find enjoyment in one's toil. In the fourth passage, Qohelet invites the reader to "see" (Eccl. 7:29) along with him. In the fifth passage, he commends enjoyment (Eccl. 8:15); in the sixth and final refrain, Qohelet uses a series of imperatives to exhort the reader (Eccl. 9:7-10). Eunni P. Lee notes that this passage is "his most exuberant and most expansive endorsement of enjoyment thus far.... It swells into a veritable celebration of life."⁶¹ The invitation is no longer merely to eat and drink, but to eat "with enjoyment" and drink "with a merry heart." Qohelet also expands the list of celebratory activities to include donning white garments, anointing one's head with oil, and enjoying the love of one's partner.

The repetition of the refrain, as well as its intentional build to a climax, should be a clear indication of its thematic importance, yet when Ecclesiastes is taught in youth ministry,

⁵⁸ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 8.

⁵⁹ Towner, "Ecclesiastes," 359.

⁶⁰ See Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, and Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy."

⁶¹ Lee, *Vitality of Joy*, 63-64.

enjoyment is typically not treated as a substantial theme in the book. The motif of enjoyment is usually noted in passing if at all, framed in terms of gratitude, and subordinated to the conclusion. One survey respondent sent me his lesson plan for Ecclesiastes, which concludes with the question, “Is it possible that living a meaningful life has nothing to do with what you enjoy or experience on this earth, but instead knowing God through believing in Jesus Christ?” The suggestion that earthly enjoyment has “nothing to do” with meaning is a direct rebuttal of Qohelet’s argument. Or, as Lifeway’s curriculum puts it: “Although the book recommends, among other things, that we should enjoy our brief time under the sun, the advice to fear God trumps over everything.”⁶² One can only reach that conclusion if an ending carries significantly more rhetorical weight than a refrain—or if one is coming to the text with a predetermined conclusion.

Despite youth ministers widely regarding Ecclesiastes as being in tension with Proverbs, their students are often not made privy to those tensions. Instead, some of the most common themes in the teaching of both books are the same: to trust God, to fear God, and to obey God. The selective use of texts smooths over the nuances and complexities of the books, so that students may come away from an introduction to Ecclesiastes thinking its theology is very similar to that of Proverbs.

Challenges

The most significant challenge youth ministers face in teaching Ecclesiastes is that parts of Qohelet’s theology are difficult to reconcile with their own. This challenge is nothing new; it dates back to the formation of the canon. At the Council of Jamnia in 90 CE, concerns over

⁶² Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 131.

Ecclesiastes's orthodoxy, as well as its internal incoherence, led the rabbinic schools to debate over whether it should be included.⁶³ Ecclesiastes contains several difficult texts that youth ministers mentioned in interviews: those that deny an afterlife, the provocative saying in Eccl. 7:16 that one should not be “too righteous,” and the pervasive theme of life's meaninglessness. The first two texts are easier to relegate to the null curriculum, but the issue of meaninglessness is the most prevalent theme in the book, the most difficult to avoid, and the one that poses the most common challenge for youth ministers. Seeing Qohelet as “indifferent” and his theology as “deistic and disengaged,” Jonathan prefers not to teach on Ecclesiastes with his youth, because he is trying to awaken his students out of the “cynicism” they are already developing. In his interview, Tyler demonstrated how he wrestles with the theme of meaninglessness within its larger canonical context: “I think it's Ecclesiastes 1 where the writer says, ‘Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless,’ and yet Scripture tells us nothing is without a purpose. We all are called to glorify God. Everything in creation has been made for God's glory. So we know not everything is meaningless.”

Of the curricula analyzed for this project, only the *NIV Teen Study Bible* dared to argue that “Solomon was wrong,” having written Ecclesiastes “after he'd turned away from God.”⁶⁴ For most, Ecclesiastes' legitimacy goes unquestioned; the challenge is to interpret it in such a way that it coheres with the rest of the canon. The standard evangelical explanation is that life *without God* is meaningless; the phrase “under the sun” refers to life outside of the kingdom of God. The D6 lesson on Ecclesiastes 1 begins each section heading with the qualifier emphasizing this interpretation: “*Apart from God*, all human activity is meaningless. *Apart from God*, life is

⁶³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 3-4.

⁶⁴ *NIV Teen Study Bible*, 812.

monotonous. *Apart from God*, human achievement is...empty.”⁶⁵ As one survey respondent wrote, their students were initially surprised by the tone of Ecclesiastes, but they came to understand over the course of the study that life is “meaningless *without* Christ, but with Him is everything.” Qohelet, however, makes no such distinctions.

For those who find the theology of Ecclesiastes difficult or troubling, there are three main ways that they address this challenge. First, they can simply choose not to teach on Ecclesiastes and thus avoid theological discussions that may be too challenging for their students. As noted above, a second way that youth ministers address the challenge of Ecclesiastes is to focus on the epilogue’s admonition to fear God and keep God’s commandments (Eccl. 12:13). As Seow notes, the “orthodox-sounding statement” at the conclusion of the book may also have played a role in Ecclesiastes’s acceptance into the canon.⁶⁶

Third, youth ministers address Qohelet’s more challenging ideas by explaining to their students how to interpret them in a way that coheres with their theology or with other parts of the canon. Again, Tyler’s interview illustrates the common need to explain difficult texts or finesse the language to make Qohelet’s seemingly unorthodox ideas appear less confusing or troubling. Following the Lifeway curriculum on Ecclesiastes, Tyler had come across the passage in which Qohelet advises his readers, “Do not be too righteous...and do not be too wicked” (Eccl. 7:16-17). Tyler explained, “That’s not saying don’t be righteous, you know, the Bible is clear in calling us to that.” He went on to explain, as the Lifeway commentary does, that this text means not to be *self-righteous*, or to think that we can earn God’s love by religious asceticism.⁶⁷ Tyler went on to unpack the second part of the passage: “Don’t be excessively wicked. Don’t be

⁶⁵ D6, *Forward Teaching Guide* vol. 15, no. 3: 7, 9, 11, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 4.

⁶⁷ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 108-109.

wicked, period. Run from [wickedness].” The interpretation flattened a provocative saying into a rather orthodox recitation: Be righteous and flee from wickedness. On the rare occasion that a youth minister broaches a text like this one, they typically explain how students can reconcile the text with their theology, rather than asking students what they think it means, why it might be in the Bible, or whether and how it coheres with their theology.

Two curricula model a different way to deal with difficult texts in Ecclesiastes, however, that does not shy away from difficult ideas or interpret them for students. In their discussion of the Times poem in Eccl. 3:1-8, both *Here We Stand* and *Colaborate* ask students why times for killing, hate, and war are included in the passage or in the Bible.⁶⁸ This simple question invites students to wrestle with how God is or is not involved in these times, trusting students to meet the challenge of the text for themselves, and in doing so, to work the muscles of wisdom.

Pedagogy

The one learning activity that several curricula have in common, as well as one of the youth ministers I interviewed, is to play the Byrds’ song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” as a way to introduce the Times poem in Eccl. 3:1-8.⁶⁹ “Turn! Turn! Turn!” is one of only a few mainstream songs that is composed almost entirely of lyrics from Scripture, which makes the text seem more accessible to students. Interestingly, the learning activity is merely to play the song as a different way of experiencing the text. None of the curricula discuss or even point out the differences between the text and the song. At first glance, the lyrics seem to be taken verbatim from the Bible, but there is one key difference: the order of the “times” is rearranged. The fourth verse contains “a time of love, a time of hate, a time of war, a time of peace”; in the fifth and final

⁶⁸ “Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide,” *Here We Stand; Colaborate Leader Guide*, 100.

⁶⁹ *The CEB Student Bible*, 761; “Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide,” *Here We Stand; Colaborate Leader Guide*, 102; Masback, “The Importance of Knowing the Proper Time, Part I,” *Quest for Truth*.

verse, these “times” are repeated, but the order is changed, and “a time of war” gives way to one additional line: “A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late.”⁷⁰ The addition of this line reveals the song’s anti-war sentiment, a nuance which goes unnoted. For the Byrds, who recorded this song during the Vietnam war, the prescriptive takeaway derived from the Times poem is not to praise God in life’s challenges or trust God’s timing, but to work for peace.

Lessons on Ecclesiastes, characteristic of youth curricula as a whole, often begin with attention-getting games or object lessons. However, these activities are typically used to illustrate the main point or takeaway of the lesson, rather than to explore the text or invite students to learn through an experience. For example, Lifeway’s final lesson on Ecclesiastes opens with a game in which the teacher gives students a mixture of real and satirical news headlines and invites them to guess which headlines are, or are not, real. The teacher then tells the students, “The source we get our information from is really important. Today we will see that true wisdom comes from God—we find meaning by obeying and fearing Him.”⁷¹ This activity is a classic “icebreaker” game; it is tangentially related, but it does not help students engage more deeply with the ideas in Ecclesiastes. After the opening game(s), curricula typically center on lecture and discussion, explicating a brief passage and then discussing how to apply it.

Two curricula, *Wisdom of the Kingdom* and *The CEB Student Bible*, however, provide excellent examples of learning activities for Ecclesiastes that provide an opportunity for students to cultivate wisdom. Although *Wisdom of the Kingdom* also includes icebreaker games, its lesson on Ecclesiastes takes advantage of the ambiguity in the book by crafting a learning activity that invites students to play with the meaning of the word *hevel*, rather than merely telling them what it means. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher writes two headings on opposite ends of a

⁷⁰ “Turn! Turn! Turn!,” track #1, The Byrds, *Turn! Turn! Turn!*, Columbia Records CL2454, 1965.

⁷¹ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 125.

dry erase board: “Pointless” and “Meaningful.” The teacher then asks students to name some things in life that they find pointless, and that they find meaningful, explaining that the book of Ecclesiastes deals with these themes. Then, after reading Eccl. 1:2, 1:9-10, and 1:14, the teacher explains that the word translated “pointless” also translates as “vapor” or “breath,” and they write the heading “Vapor” on the board, between “Pointless” and “Meaningful.” The teacher then prompts the students, “Let’s work together and see if we can come up with four different adjectives that could be used to describe a vapor.” After listing the students’ suggested adjectives under the heading, the teacher invites students to read the verses again, replacing the word “pointless” with one of the “vapor” adjectives from the board. The group then discusses: “How did this change the meaning of the passage for you? What adjective did you think worked best?”⁷² In chapter three, I introduced Douglas Miller’s reading of the word *hevel* as a puzzle for the reader to solve and thus gain experience in navigating the ambiguities of life.⁷³ This particular learning activity thus draws on an aspect of Qohelet’s pedagogy to shape its own. *Wisdom of the Kingdom* models one way that youth ministers might invite students to explore the sense of the word and the range of its meaning. Other possibilities include asking students to list all the things Qohelet names as *hevel*, reflecting on how its usage might suggest its meaning; or having students blow bubbles or dandelion seeds as a way to experience the transience suggested by *hevel* on an embodied, rather than cognitive, level.⁷⁴

The CEB Student Bible concludes each book with suggestions for “Reading Differently,” which can easily be adapted into learning activities if it is used as a curriculum. For Ecclesiastes,

⁷² Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 49-50.

⁷³ Miller, “What the Preacher Forgot,” 231.

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Lapsley suggests that blowing a dandelion gone to seed is an appropriate image for *hevel*. Jacqueline Lapsley, personal communication with the author, October 2016.

it suggests that readers meditatively walk a prayer labyrinth. As they do, they should “recall and rediscover the movements of the day and remember when you felt the presence or absence of God and offer these reflections as prayer.”⁷⁵ This learning activity, unlike *Wisdom of the Kingdom*’s, does not focus on interpreting the text of Ecclesiastes. Instead, it lifts up the tension between God’s presence and absence and invites students to reflect and meditate on how they personally experience this tension. In doing so, it invites students to engage with the themes of the text in a deeper way than an illustrative game or activity. Of the five practices of wisdom, *The CEB Student Bible*’s learning activity most encourages attentiveness and reflection. It encourages students to “do what the text does” by taking the time to reflect on their experience of God in their daily life, as well as to wrestle with the concept of a God who seems, at times, both present and absent.⁷⁶

The learning activities suggested by *Wisdom of the Kingdom* and *The CEB Student Bible* model what wisdom-cultivating pedagogy might look like in the youth classroom. Although the activities are very different from one another, they both invite students to explore and experience the themes of Ecclesiastes, rather than explaining them. Neither activity has a takeaway; youth are given space to do their own interpretation and reflection, and in doing so, they are experiencing and practicing wisdom.

Case Studies: Brianna and Lydia

“Before seminary, Ecclesiastes was just ‘for everything there is a season,’ which is a very romanticized passage. But then you read the entirety of Ecclesiastes and you wonder, like...what is this actually about?” When I talked to Brianna, a Black youth pastor in the AME Zion church,

⁷⁵ *The CEB Student Bible*, 768.

⁷⁶ Andrew Root writes that in Bible study with youth, it is particularly important to allow young people to give voice both to God’s presence and absence in their lives. Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 105.

she had just completed her first year of seminary and was trying to integrate what she had learned in her Old Testament class with her previous understanding of Ecclesiastes. She had taught a single lesson on Ecclesiastes to a group of middle school girls a few years before. It was at the beginning of a new school year, Brianna remembered, and some of the girls were going into high school. She taught on the Times poem in Eccl. 3 as a way to help the girls reflect on the transitions ahead of them: “What does it mean for us right now that everything has a season? Maybe you’ll encounter new things this year that you didn’t last year. You may have new teachers that you don’t like. How do we wrestle with that?” The main point of Brianna’s lesson reflected a common takeaway for this text: to wait on God, because everything happens in God’s timing. Because Brianna only had one lesson in which to cover Ecclesiastes, she also gestured toward the themes of Eccl. 1, reflecting on Qohelet’s phrase “vanity of vanities.” In retrospect, knowing what she knows now, Brianna would have talked differently about those themes: “I was like, ‘Material things will pass away, and you have to rely on God,’ and that type of language that now, given the opportunity to re-teach...I think I would redo how that lesson was structured.”

When I asked Brianna about her understanding of Ecclesiastes now, the main points of interpretation were not substantially different. She talked about the ebbs and flows of life, about God’s eternal nature, and the need to honor and revere God. She still summed up the message of Ecclesiastes in similar theological terms: “All we’re left with in the end is God. That’s the only thing that’s permanent.” What *had* changed for Brianna is that her understanding of Ecclesiastes had shifted slightly from a more theological interpretation to a more experiential one. Previously, she talked about the seasons in terms of God’s perfect timing; now she preferred the language of life’s “ebbs and flows.” God’s eternal nature remained a key point of the book, but now it was

mirrored by the concept of human finitude. If she were to teach Ecclesiastes over again, the takeaway to “rely on God” would be replaced by a different takeaway, one framed as a question: “How do we choose to live these impermanent days?” It was Ecclesiastes’s portrayal of the human experience, along with its comfort with tension, that made it Brianna’s favorite book from her Old Testament class. Although she acknowledged that Ecclesiastes is a more difficult read than Proverbs, it also “more closely relates to what life is. Because life is chaotic, and it’s the ebbs and flows that we navigate as best we can.”

Although she did not reference the enjoyment passages in Ecclesiastes over the course of the interview, Brianna’s understanding of wisdom seems to dovetail with Qohelet’s. For her, a wise young person is one who lives with a sense of balance and is able to enjoy the present moment. As a teenager, Brianna was a chronic overachiever who was always working toward the next thing. Looking back now, she realizes that she missed out on a lot of time with her family and friends because she was “so focused on getting to that next step.” Like Qohelet, she now recognizes that the real value of work lies in her enjoyment of it, an attitude she was determined to take with her into seminary, where she seeks to be present in the moment while also remaining open to the growth God has in store for her.

When I interviewed Lydia, a part-time youth pastor at a Korean community church in Toronto, her experiential approach to Ecclesiastes was immediately apparent in the way she spoke about it. For Lydia, the main takeaway of Ecclesiastes is not obedience but rather vulnerability: “Ecclesiastes teaches us how to be helpless.” She sees Ecclesiastes as being in contrast with the retribution theology of Proverbs, illustrating how doing the right things does not necessarily lead to a good life. Lydia was teaching her wisdom series on Zoom during the

ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which made her interpretive framework all the more relevant: that Qohelet shows his readers how to live in a world where one has no control.

Many youth ministers find Ecclesiastes challenging because of their own discomfort with its unorthodox-sounding ideas, but for Lydia, the challenge lay in the fact that she was far more comfortable with it than she anticipated her students would be.⁷⁷ They had never read or even heard of Ecclesiastes, so Lydia saw this gap as an opportunity to let them experience this unusual book for themselves, rather than relying on the out-of-context usage or simplistic interpretations they might hear in sermons. The Bible itself is challenging, and Lydia was not about to let her students off the hook by telling them how to reconcile it with the rest of their theology. In fact, in teaching Ecclesiastes, she hoped to complicate what she saw as a simple, univocal reading of the Bible: “I wanted them to see that there are different, more layered messages in the Bible than just a clear-cut ‘this is this.’ That was my primary goal.”

In light of that goal, Lydia did not shy away from some of the more unorthodox-sounding parts of Ecclesiastes. She selected a text that is unusual for one-lesson overviews, Eccl. 8:14-9:12, which includes two of Qohelet’s enjoyment passages as well as one of his reflections on the finality of death: “The dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost” (Eccl. 9:5). Her students were surprised and unsettled by this verse, which conflicted with their understanding of salvation, heaven, and eternal life. For Lydia, it was interesting to see how actually reading the Bible challenged their preconceptions of what was in it: “They never expected that those kinds of words would be in the Bible. They have this idea of what the Bible is...but when they actually see something different, it throws them off.”

⁷⁷ In this context, “unorthodox” refers to ideas in Ecclesiastes that seem to be at odds with Christian theology or that youth ministers struggle to reconcile with their church’s teaching.

Lydia noted that her students were also surprised and challenged by the lack of a prescriptive takeaway in the lesson. When they returned to the main Zoom room from their breakout discussion groups, she remembered that some of her students commented that Ecclesiastes “didn’t really tell them” where to find meaning. Lydia reflected, “I [had told them that] Ecclesiastes [talks about] the meaning of life, and [our series on wisdom was called] ‘The Good Life,’ so I guess they expected this Scripture to tell us what is the good life. Some Scriptures tell us straightforward, like, ‘Love your neighbor,’ but Ecclesiastes didn’t, so that surprised them.” Lydia’s students, like many others, have been taught to expect the Bible to tell them what to think and how to live, an expectation that is thwarted by the wisdom literature’s ambiguity. Where many youth ministers hasten to fill the ambiguity with the admonition to “fear God and keep his commandments” (Eccl. 12:13), Lydia took advantage of the ambiguity. Rather than providing her students with the prescriptive takeaway they anticipated, Lydia followed Qohelet’s lead in inviting them to puzzle over the meaning of life for themselves.

Despite the challenges of Ecclesiastes’s ambiguity and its unfamiliar perspective on death, the students seemed to find the honesty of Ecclesiastes helpful and even comforting in light of the pandemic. Having the illusion of control stripped away is scary, but as Lydia explained it to her students, it is “the best worst thing that can happen to us”; Qohelet’s willingness to confront a painful reality becomes an invitation and gift, modeling a way of living when circumstances are out of one’s control. Lydia introduced her students to the theme of enjoyment in Ecclesiastes, inviting them to consider it in relation to the theme of vulnerability. After ten or fifteen minutes of direct instruction, Lydia sent the students into breakout groups to discuss the following questions: “What do you need to accept rather than control in your life? What are the beautiful things in life that you want to appreciate more? Imagine what it looks like

to hold these with open hands.” As Lydia wrapped up the lesson, she gave her youth a blessing of enjoyment: “Make a special meal or take too long of a walk, enjoy this amazing weather, hug the people you love a little longer today.”

The editor of Ecclesiastes wrote that “the sayings of the wise are like goads,” prodding the reader to wisdom (Eccl. 12:10). As Seow writes, “The imagery of a herder using goads and pricks implies that there is some pain involved. The lesson may be difficult to learn, but the pain is necessary.”⁷⁸ Ecclesiastes itself is like a goad, full of challenge and ambiguity, inviting the reader to wisdom through their encounter with the book. In many ways, however, youth ministers dull the prick of the goad when they teach Ecclesiastes. As the previous pages have demonstrated, youth ministers often teach themes “in” Ecclesiastes, like the obligation to share or the promise of heaven, that do not actually appear in the text, to make it more coherent with their theology. The most common texts that are taught from Ecclesiastes are the Times poem in Eccl. 3:1-8, and brief selections from the first and last chapters. Youth ministers and curriculum resources are likely to deal with the challenge of Ecclesiastes’s message by avoiding it, explaining to students exactly how to understand it, or moving to the editor’s conclusion before wading through the body of Qohelet’s reflections.

Some of those same youth ministers and curriculum resources, however, also point to other possibilities for teaching Ecclesiastes through their discussion questions and learning activities. Michael’s approach to discussing Ecclesiastes in light of the New Testament can help youth ministers imagine ways of inviting students to consider how other canonical ideas shape the way they read Ecclesiastes, or how Ecclesiastes might reshape their understanding of those ideas. Rather than avoiding either the enjoyment passages or the injunction to “fear God,” for

⁷⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 393.

example, youth ministers might follow Eunmy Lee in asking students to consider how Qohelet seems to understand the fear of the Lord.⁷⁹ *Wisdom of the Kingdom* and *The CEB Student Bible* demonstrate learning activities that invite young people to explore the text or meditate on its themes without needing to provide a resolution or definitive explanation. As I mentioned in chapter three, Ecclesiastes's pedagogy is characterized by Qohelet's episodic thinking, ambiguity, observations, questions, and circular thinking. These characteristics of Qohelet's thought teach the reader to think like a sage, and by leaning into those characteristics, youth ministers can design learning activities that invite young people to practice wisdom.

Job

Interpretation

Jerome once said that understanding the book of Job is like holding a slippery eel; “the more you squeeze it, the sooner it escapes.”⁸⁰ The book of Job is a complex and richly textured exploration of several theological themes, making it difficult to pin down what the book is trying to do or what questions it seeks to address. Youth ministers and curricula make different choices about what themes to address. The book opens with the wager between God and the Accuser that centers around the question of disinterested piety: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9). Lessons that treat the question of whether humans can serve God without reward often use Job's confession of faith in Job 1:21 as an example of how to suffer well.⁸¹ As Tyler summed up one

⁷⁹ J2A's lesson on Job provides an example of how one might connect the fear of the Lord to the rest of the book. The teacher asks the students, “Let's assume that Job 13 is a model of Job's overall attitude and argument. Does Job still fear God? Why or why not? If Job still fears God, what does this chapter tell us about the fear of God and what it looks and sounds like?” J2A, “Questioning God,” 12. Similarly, a youth minister might read one of Qohelet's enjoyment texts and ask students how it might offer a new lens on what it means to fear God.

⁸⁰ Seow, *Job 1-21*, 2.

⁸¹ For example, D6's first lesson on Job intends for “learners [to] choose to trust God when trials...come their way.” It asks students, “What kind of responses to trials bring God glory?” and prompts the facilitator with the answers: “Worship; continued trust; seeking to learn from the trials.” D6, *Forward Teaching Guide* fall 2020, 89. Lifeway's first lesson on Job, “No Matter What,” emphasizes the takeaway that “God is worth following, no matter

of his lessons on Job: “Let our testimony be that even in moments of suffering we have praised God, that we have refused to question or turn against God.”

The interaction between God and the Accuser in the prologue raises other questions about the relationship between cosmic forces of good and evil: how do God and Satan interact? Who is responsible for suffering? The youth ministers with whom I spoke struggled with this aspect of the narrative. Adam mentioned his discomfort with the fact that God seems to “gamble with Satan over somebody’s life.” Jillian struggled with “how [to] talk about the forces of good and evil in a co-conspiracy.” And as Grace, a United Church of Christ pastor, summed up, “The hard part [of Job] is that God stood by and watched it happen and made a deal with the devil. That is really hard.” D6’s second lesson on Job begins by reminding students that God created everything good (Gen. 1:31) and telling them to “place blame where it really belongs”: “The blame for pain and suffering belongs at the feet of our enemy who wants to destroy us, and at our own feet because of our sin.”⁸² Such an assertion is a confusing way to open a lesson on Job, who is never corrected for his assumption that God is responsible, and who was in fact completely innocent. Youth Specialties approaches the God-Satan issue in a different way, pointing to the fact that Satan does nothing without God’s permission to remind students who is “really in control.”⁸³ Thus, although God does not cause suffering, God allows it.

The book of Job thus also raises the age-old question of theodicy, or how God can be both good and all-powerful and yet allow innocent people to suffer. However, over the course of

what—even when it seems like there is nothing in it for us,” and encourages students to memorize Job 1:21. Similarly to D6, it includes a discussion question that asks “What does it look like to grieve in a way that honors God?” Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 12.

⁸² D6, *Velocity Teaching Guide* fall 2020, 91-92.

⁸³ Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 20. Similarly, Matt emphasized that in Job, “You see God’s sovereignty over all things, including evil... You also see that even Satan submits to God’s authority because he has to ask permission.”

the book, theodicy is shown to be a “red herring,”⁸⁴ only a set-up for another theological issue: the divine-human relationship.⁸⁵ While God’s response to Job reveals God’s ways to be beyond Job’s understanding, it also demonstrates that God is willing to dialogue with Job.⁸⁶ This tension undergirds some common takeaways on the book of Job: that we are not alone in our suffering and that we can talk honestly with God about our questions, but that we may not understand the answers, and we must accept the limits of our knowledge.

The subject matter of the Divine Speeches (Job 38-41) indicates yet another question at play in the book of Job: that of order and chaos within creation.⁸⁷ As noted above, however, creation theology is often left unexplored in youth curriculum on the wisdom literature, so this theme is not a common one when youth ministers teach on Job. Finally, the ambiguity of the Divine Speeches reveals another theme in the book of Job: sometimes, there are no hard-and-fast answers. Although youth ministers chose to emphasize some of these themes over others, they all agreed on this one: suffering happens, and humans do not always understand why. As Danielle put it, “The reality is like, there is suffering, we live in a broken world and there’s going to be suffering, and sometimes you’re not going to have the answers to that suffering on this side of heaven, you know? That’s just 100% the reality of it.”

The presence of all of these themes makes the book of Job more than a slippery eel: it becomes a mirror that reflects the theology of those who read it and teach it. In interviews, the themes that each youth minister emphasized in Job were the same themes that arose when they

⁸⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001), 122.

⁸⁵ Kathleen O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 104.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Ministry to Youth’s lesson on Job, which explains in the leader preparation section that questions about suffering may arise over the course of the lesson: “Why is there suffering? Why is there evil? Does God cause it? Why doesn’t God stop it?” However, it notes that “this lesson doesn’t dig into these questions per se, but speaks more about how God speaks to Job in the midst of his pain.” The lesson objective is for students to understand that “God is with us and wants to speak to us in the storms.” Diliberto, “Youth Group Lesson on Job.”

⁸⁷ Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 228.

talked about other biblical books, their own faith journeys, and their youth ministry goals. For Grace, the main theme of Job is embracing the mystery of God. The concept of mystery was not limited to the book of Job, however; it came up thirteen other times over the course of the interview, when talking about epistemology, hermeneutics, and embodiment. It was mentioned as the subject of other lessons she had taught, of theological discussions with her spouse, and as a potential research topic for a future Ph.D. For Danielle, the main takeaway from Job is to trust God when we do not understand what God is doing, which was also a significant theme that resonated with her from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (see above on Danielle's interpretation of Eccl. 3:1-8). For Adam, one of his favorite things about the book of Job is that it encourages readers to ask questions and acknowledge their difficult feelings, which is a theme that pervades other series he has taught and his ministry as a whole.

The Divine Speeches, in which God finally responds to Job (Job 38-41), have a complicated relationship to the rest of the book. They influence one's interpretation of the book as a whole, because one might assume that the words of God provide the answers to the questions raised throughout the book. If they do so, however, it is indirectly, as God does not speak about Job, his situation, or his friends at all. Instead, God talks about the mysteries of the cosmos and the habits and habitats of the animal kingdom. Because the Speeches are an ambiguous non-answer to the problems raised in the book, one's understanding of the book is also read into the Divine Speeches, so that they take on the flavor of whichever theological theme seems most salient to the reader. In interviews, the Divine Speeches served as a window onto youth ministers' interpretation of Job and the themes that they found most resonant. Although I did not ask them to summarize the Divine Speeches in their own words, several of them offered their own paraphrase. All of them shed light on a different angle of the Divine

Speeches, showcasing the range of possible interpretations, as well as various inflections of God's tone.

Adam: *"Hey, I can take it. It's okay that you're angry with me. It's okay that you're crying out to me in this way."* Like a cool youth pastor, the God reflected in this version of the Divine Speech begins with "hey," which is the address of choice for Adam himself. When God speaks, it is not to correct Job, but rather to assure him that God is big enough to handle his hardest questions and biggest feelings. This assurance became the main takeaway for Adam's series on Job, which will be explored further below. As discussed earlier, the theme of difficult emotions is a common point of discussion in youth ministry, and Adam's reading of the Divine Speeches particularly highlights the book of Job's invitation to honesty.

Matt: *"Who are you? Did you create the stars? No. Did you create the sun? No. You're coming at me with questions that you don't need to worry about, you just need to trust me."* Here the openness and availability of Adam's God gives way to sarcasm and dismissal; the welcoming "Hey" of Adam's God is traded for a more belittling "Who are you?", which more closely reflects the opening words of the Divine Speeches ("Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" [Job 38:2]). God knows what God is doing and is unconcerned with helping Job understand. More so than Adam's, Matt's paraphrase of the Divine Speeches emphasizes the ontological divide between God and humanity. In doing so, however, it also highlights God's omnipotence, which gives one confidence to place one's trust in God. The God of Matt's interpretation also softens the sarcasm by assuring Job that he does not need to "worry" and that he can trust God.

Jeremiah: *"Job, I've given you space to speak. Now let me impart some wisdom...there are bigger things at play that you cannot see."* In this reading of the Divine Speech, God's tone

loses the sarcasm and becomes that of a patient, gently chiding parent or mentor. God does not ask who Job is; God knows who Job is and calls him by name, a choice which highlights the intimacy of God's relationship with Job and God's care for Job. For Jeremiah, God is like "a chaplain who is working with [Job]," helping him process his suffering and giving him a new theological perspective. Jeremiah's perspective on the Divine Speeches resonates with William Brown's, who notes that "YHWH's rebuke aims to edify Job, not to demoralize him. Such is the way of wisdom...a Teacher stands behind the tempest."⁸⁸

Grace: *"I'm here through all of it, through all of it. All of the creation, all of the devastation, and everything in between, I'm here through it all."* For Grace, the comfort in the Divine Speeches is not God's wisdom or omnipotence, but rather in God's *presence*. The recounting of creation is not a way for God to flex God's power, but rather a way for God to communicate God's constancy. In Grace's reading of the Divine Speeches, knowing the reason for the suffering matters less than knowing one is not alone.

While most themes that youth ministers mentioned are legitimate themes in the book of Job, two surprising interpretive issues arose in my conversations with youth ministers. First is the issue of Job's righteousness. When I taught a workshop on the book of Job as part of my qualitative research, some of the adults present were taken aback by the language in the text describing Job as "blameless and upright." One of them asked me to explain the Hebrew root, "because I know it doesn't mean...blameless." Another noted that because "no human is blameless," for Job to call himself blameless is self-deceptive. I dismissed their unwillingness to accept Job's blamelessness as an odd fluke, but the issue arose again when an interviewee mentioned off-handedly that of course "Job isn't perfect." Job's blamelessness is given in the

⁸⁸ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 110.

text; it is not Job who calls himself blameless, but God (Job 1:8). The omniscient narrator agrees (Job 1:1). The issue of Job's blamelessness may arise in part because of the Pauline assertion that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23) and the belief that Jesus is the only perfect human to have lived. Particularly if Job is understood as historical fact rather than parable, the logical contradiction must be reconciled. The doctrine of sin takes precedence over Job's blamelessness, and thus the word "blameless" cannot be taken at face value. On another level, however, the tendency to downplay the righteousness of Job may be an indication that the book has hit its mark: if Job is truly perfect, God's treatment of him becomes unconscionable.

The second surprising interpretation, shared by several interviewees, is that Job's friends caused him to doubt God. In this reading of the book, Job was steadfastly trusting and defending God until his friends planted seeds of doubt in his mind. However, his friends' repeated insistence that God did not love Job caused Job's faith to waver. Eventually, he started to "believe those lies," which ultimately led him to question God.⁸⁹ In fact, however, Job is the one who questions God from the very beginning, while his friends rebuke him for doing so. In a skit that Sara wrote to give her youth a brief overview of the book, however, every single one of Job's responses to his friends includes a defense of God: "The only thing God is trying to tell me is to trust God; God is my friend!", "I love God and God loves me," "God is good and I don't blame God for anything." The skit summarizes the rest of the speech cycles by saying that "Job

⁸⁹ As Matt described the role of Job's friends, "You see Job's dependence on God in response to his friends, right? They're like, 'There's sin in your life,' and he's like, 'No, that's not who God is,' right? He's like, 'God is this, this, this, and this.' But it shows that who's around us matters, because eventually Job does kind of start to believe some of those lies, and then he goes to God and he's like, 'God, why are these things happening?'" Matt's summary of the dialogues is not entirely internally consistent, as he does quote the friends correctly as saying "There's sin in your life," but the rest of the summary indicates that Job was defending God to his friends, rather than the other way around, and that it was Job's friends that caused him to question God. The other interviewee who gestured toward this interpretation was Danielle, discussed below, who mentioned that when her small group was discussing Job's friends, one of the young women in the group shared that her friends said she was "stupid for trusting the Lord," a situation that, in Danielle's mind, "really played into what we were talking about."

kept protesting his innocence and love for God....But he started to wonder if God could hear his cries.”

The misinterpretation of the dialogues in Sara’s skit is subtle; Job’s friends do say that he has sinned, and Job does maintain his innocence. However, the roles are reversed in terms of who was accusing and who was defending God. The reversal may arise from an extrapolation of the interaction between Job and his wife in Job 2:9-10, in which she asks if he is still holding to his integrity, urging him to curse God. The interpretation that Job’s friends are the ones who question God also smooths over two difficulties in the narrative. First, in the epilogue, God declares that Job’s friends have not spoken of God what is right, as Job has (Job 42:7). God’s judgment comes as a surprising reversal, given that Job’s friends have upheld the classic doctrine of retribution, while Job rails against God’s injustice and cruelty. The statement is less confusing if Job, rather than his friends, has been the one defending God. If one reads the ending without having thoroughly read the speeches, it might be natural to assume that Job “spoke rightly” of God by defending God. Second, this interpretation seems to be a way to reconcile the dissonance between Job’s piety in the prologue and his later expressions of doubt, while minimizing Job’s own anger and despair.

Content

“The main idea behind Job 1-2 for that lesson was God’s sovereignty. Other times I’ve used Job 1-2 for worship, I’ve used it for suffering, I’ve used it for friendship.” Matt’s choice of texts and themes when teaching on Job is representative of what I saw in my qualitative research. As with Ecclesiastes, youth ministers and curriculum writers teach from the bookends while leaving out much of the middle. Aside from the part of the narrative in which Job’s friends come to be with him (Job 2:11-13), discussed above in the section on friendship, the most common

texts taught from the book of Job are Job's famous declaration of faith in Job 1:21 ("the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away"), his contrition in Job 42:5-6, and his restoration in Job 42:10-17. When Job is taught in brief overviews, the prologue and/or the epilogue are often the only texts that appear. For example, in a *Ministry to Youth* lesson on Job, the group reads excerpts of Job 1-2, the Divine Speech in Job 38-39, and Job's restoration in Job 42:10-17. As an overly simplistic summary of what happens in between, the lesson states, "Through it all, through all 42 chapters of this book, Job never loses his faith in God."⁹⁰ Even in the rare multi-week studies that treat Job in depth and cover other texts, these bookends are key; for example, in Lifeway's 7-week exegetical study of Job, Job 1:21 and Job 42:5-6 are the ones chosen to put up on classroom posters.⁹¹

The narrative frame story is important for understanding the poetry that comprises the majority of the book. However, when *only* the prologue and epilogue are taught, or when they are elevated above other parts of the book, it substantially changes the message of the book of Job. The prologue and epilogue together comprise a moral tale about a righteous man named Job whose faith was tested by God. Despite losing everything, Job held to his faith and continued to worship God (Job 1-2). Having passed the test, Job was rewarded by having all his possessions restored twofold (Job 42). Treating only the frame narrative leads to the most common takeaways on Job in youth ministry: to trust God when trials come, and to respond in faith the way Job did.

The problem with lessons derived from the bookends is that the poetry between them is not a continuation of the narrative. Rather, it is a drastic shift away from it, both in the style and

⁹⁰ Diliberto, "Youth Group Lesson on Job."

⁹¹ Drew Dixon, ed., "Job 1:21" and "Job 42:5-6" posters, in *Job and Ecclesiastes: Explore the Bible for Students* vol. 7, no. 4, summer 2021 (Nashville: Lifeway, 2021).

genre of the text, and in Job's attitude.⁹² The Accuser disappears completely, and so does Job's worshipful humility. As the narrative closes at the end of Job 2 with Job's friends sitting with him in silence, the book takes an abrupt turn: Job 3 opens with Job cursing his birth and calling for the undoing of creation. In the following chapters, Job accuses God of stalking humans and delighting in their suffering, twists and parodies the language of the psalms, and demands that God answer for his suffering.⁹³ Scholars debate whether the poetry was inserted into a traditional moral tale, or whether the book is the product of a single author. Either way, the interpolation of the poetry into the narrative intentionally complicates the simplicity of the prose tale, using it as a foil for the dialogues.⁹⁴ As Carol Newsom argues, "Far from being an embarrassment, recognition that the book is at odds with itself is key to understanding its meaning and purpose. Dialogue is at the heart of the book of Job."⁹⁵ To draw moral takeaways from only the prose tale, then, misses an important part of the author's intention, as well as a valuable opportunity to cultivate wisdom by exploring the juxtaposition of various genres and perspectives.

When curricula on Job do treat material from the speeches, texts are often used selectively to reinforce the themes of faith and hope. For example, in Lifeway's curriculum on Job, lesson two is entitled "Hope Defined." It draws on Job 14:1-14, in which Job complains that

⁹² As Seow puts it, there is a "tension between the patient and pious Job of the framework and the impatient and vitriolic Job of the poetic dialogue" which should not be ignored. Seow, *Job 1-21*, 28.

⁹³ Seow's catalogue of Job's near-heretical accusations demonstrates the intensity of the book that is often relegated to the null curriculum: "Job calls for the undoing of God's creation (3:3-10) and declares that God is his gratuitous enemy (6:4-7; 13:24; 16:7-17; 19:6-20). He suggests that God is myopic in equating him with cosmic chaos (7:12), or at least in not recognizing the innocent (10:4-7), and is blind to injustice (9:22-24). He avers that God acts like a bully (9:17-18, 34; 13:21) and behaves like a ruthless robber (9:12). God deliberately sullies him even though he tries to make himself clean (9:30-31) and hunts him for sport just to look awesome (10:16). God even destabilizes society (12:16-25), places unreasonable restrictions on his freedom, and keeps him under unrelenting surveillance (13:26-27; cf. 7:18, 14:3a, 5). God destroys hope (14:19c) and acts like a father who disingenuously avows outsiders or worse, evil, while his own children are aggrieved (17:5). Job imagines taking God to court (9:2-3, 14-16; 13:17-18) and even formalizes a judicial plea against God for cruelty and abuse of power (29:1-31:40)." Seow, *Job 1-21*, 87-88.

⁹⁴ See Seow, *Job 1-21*, 65; Newsom, "Job," 319.

⁹⁵ Newsom, "Job," 323.

trees have more hope than humans, since they are able to regrow from their roots. Lifeway's lesson acknowledges that Job is "frustrated with God" and "deeply embedded in his own pain,"⁹⁶ but it focuses on Job's rhetorical question in Job 14:14 ("When a person dies, will he come back to life?") as evidence that Job found hope in the prospect of resurrection.⁹⁷ In context, however, the question has a presumed negative answer; in Job 14:12, Job makes his belief clear that, unlike trees, "mortals lie down and do not rise again." The lesson's "Central Truth" is that "hope...can be found only in God";⁹⁸ however, the chosen text conveniently ends just a few verses before Job concludes that God destroys the hope of mortals (Job 14:19).⁹⁹ The memory verse for this lesson comes from Job 13:15, which the NIV and HCSB translate "Though he kill me, yet will I hope in him." However, this inspiring key text can also be translated in a far less comforting way: "He will kill me, I have no hope" (cf. NRSV, CEB). Although there is a valid case to be made for each reading, to pin the theme of hope on these texts is tenuous at best. Reflecting on the ambiguous words in Job 13:15, Newsom writes, "Meditating on alternative interpretations is more valuable than choosing one too quickly."¹⁰⁰ The *Journey to Adulthood* curriculum, mentioned in the previous chapter, demonstrates what it might look like to invite students to consider both interpretations. The lesson explains to students that the verse can be translated either way and asks them which translation they think makes more sense in the context of the passage. In a concluding discussion question, the teacher asks, "As we enter our troubled world this week, do we carry with us 'I have no hope' or 'I will hope in God'? Can it be both?"

⁹⁶ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 21.

⁹⁷ Lifeway shares the interpretation of some early Christian interpreters, as Seow notes: "To early Christian exegetes, Job's use of questions [including 'Will that one live?' (v. 14a)] opens the hermeneutical window just a bit for a positive reading of the text (so Cyril of Jerusalem)." He writes that interpreters' desire to find "a note of hope" in this text throughout the centuries is itself a "testimony to the resilience of human hope." Seow, *Job 1-21*, 681-682.

⁹⁸ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 14.

⁹⁹ The Revised Common Lectionary makes the same choice in delimiting the text.

¹⁰⁰ Newsom, "Job," 435.

Why or why not?”¹⁰¹ By asking students which reading seems to fit the passage, this learning activity invites them to read the text for themselves, analyze its content, evaluate the options, and consider the meaning and implications of each. By asking whether both interpretations can be true at once, it encourages them to think dialectically. Thus, the *Journey to Adulthood* lesson provides an excellent example of how youth ministers might lean into the text’s ambiguity as a way to cultivate wisdom.

The next lesson in Lifeway’s curriculum, “The Redeemer,” comes from Job 19:19-29, a text in which Job declares his confidence in a *goel*, or redeemer, that will stand upon the earth. This text has long been interpreted as referring to Jesus, a tradition which Lifeway and Youth Specialties’ curricula maintain.¹⁰² It is unclear to whom Job is referring in this text, whether it is God, a member of the Divine Council, or another human who will take up his cause, but the implication seems to be that someone who outlives Job will avenge his blood. Lifeway’s teacher guide includes a sidebar with additional information on the meaning of the word *goel*, acknowledging the text’s ambiguity and noting that while it is “appropriate to see a connection to Jesus,” Job may not have been talking about Jesus.¹⁰³ A Jesus interpretation is assumed in the discussion questions, however, which ask students how the hope of redemption is a “game changer.”¹⁰⁴ The curriculum also interprets the phrase “in my flesh I will see God” as Job’s longing for intimacy and a personal relationship with God, rather than longing to argue his case before God.¹⁰⁵ Youth Specialties offers an even less nuanced reading of this text in their

¹⁰¹ J2A, “Questioning God,” 12.

¹⁰² The tradition of reading this text as a prophecy of Jesus dates back to Jerome in the fourth century C.E. and, as a promise of resurrection, to Clement of Rome in the second century C.E. See Seow, *Job 1-21*, 803.

¹⁰³ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Carol Newsom argues that Job’s declaration that “I would see God from my flesh” is a realization that an arbitrator, a witness, or a defender—figures that Job has imagined defending him—“would not truly satisfy him.

curriculum on Job, referring to the Redeemer text as a “happy statement,” saying that “joy is what held Job’s faith intact during his darkest hours.”¹⁰⁶ This text also serves to conclude the entire twelve-week Youth Specialties study, as students are asked to stand and recite it together.¹⁰⁷ Although Seow acknowledges the long history of interpretation that sees hope in this text as well as in Job 14, he disagrees with scholars who read it too optimistically, arguing that it “provides no evidence for a ‘sudden burst of faith’ or a theological crescendo on Job’s part.”¹⁰⁸

As discussed in the previous chapter, the validation of doubt and difficult emotions is another common theme in lessons on Job. Lessons will often assure students that God is big enough to handle their questions. However, as Lifeway and Youth Specialties’ treatment of Job’s speeches demonstrate, the validation of difficult emotions is equally matched by unwarranted optimism that attempts to assuage those feelings before they are fully felt. Youth curricula’s attempts to find key texts that speak of hope and joy betray a discomfort with those negative feelings and an unwillingness to let them go too far. However, continually returning to the piety of the prose tale or emphasizing themes of faith and hope in Job is like standing close to “base” in a game of tag, fearful to wander too far from the safety and security it represents. When youth ministers broach the topic of suffering, pain, and doubt, but offer a neatly packaged resolution whether or not students are ready for it, they shortcut the process of vulnerability they have invited.

Finally, excerpts of the Divine Speeches are a common choice of text for lessons on Job. Despite the length and exquisite poetic detail of these speeches, they are often reduced to a single

He desires what he described in 13:13-22, a direct presentation of his case to God and God’s reply.” Newsom, “Job,” 479.

¹⁰⁶ Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 156.

¹⁰⁸ Seow, *Job 1-21*, 804.

point: God is powerful, and Job knows nothing. The *CEB Student Bible* is representative of the majority interpretation when it says that God's interrogation of Job is intended "to demonstrate Job's...limited knowledge."¹⁰⁹ While this is indeed part of the rhetoric of the Divine Speeches, this brief treatment does not explore anything that the speeches might have to contribute to the discussion of suffering in the book of Job. As William Brown writes, "God is God and Job is not. And for many interpreters that seems to be the only lesson. But...the poetic content is far too rich to be reduced to a single affirmation of divine omnipotence."¹¹⁰

In fact, the Divine Speeches have their own perspective on suffering in the world, which Kathleen O'Connor suggests that readers might find by "shift[ing] the hermeneutical emphasis of the questions from their interrogative aspects—'Who? Where? Do you know? Have you?' (alleged to be intimidating)—to the content of the questions."¹¹¹ While Job and his friends have argued over who is to blame for Job's suffering, God does not engage this question. In fact, God's response indicates that this is the wrong question altogether; Job and his friends' explanation for suffering is far too narrow and anthropocentric. Although the experience of suffering has changed Job, Newsom points out, it has not fundamentally changed his understanding of how the world works.¹¹² His worldview is "quite without resources for dealing with the ineradicable presence of the chaotic."¹¹³ In the Divine Speeches, however, God takes Job on a tour of creation that demonstrates God's delight not only in its beauty and grandeur, but also in the aspects of creation that are chaotic and frightening (the Sea [Job 38:8-11], the gates of

¹⁰⁹ *The CEB Student Bible*, 621. Similarly, *The Guidebook* writes, "When God asks Job a series of questions about creation and good and evil, he's trying to make one simple point: 'You can never understand me. I am too big. You are too small.'" *The Guidebook*, 523.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 110-111.

¹¹¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Wild, Raging Creativity: Job in the Whirlwind," in *Earth, Wind, and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, ed. Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 50.

¹¹² Newsom, "Job," 423.

¹¹³ Newsom, "Job," 625.

Death [Job 38:17], and the great chaos monsters Behemoth and Leviathan [Job 40:14-41:34]) as well as seemingly randomly tragic (the foolish ostrich who leaves her eggs to be trampled [Job 39:13-18] and the eagle's young drinking the blood of the slain [Job 39:29-30]). God's cosmic exhibition shows Job that the beauty and value of creation is inseparable from its wildness and freedom.¹¹⁴ In the rhetoric of the Divine Speeches, Job's suffering was neither a test nor a punishment, nor indeed God's intentional cruelty, but it is rather "simply...[a condition] for participation in creation."¹¹⁵

Challenges

The book of Job consists almost entirely of dense and lengthy dialogues, which makes it unique in the canon and uniquely difficult to teach. As Newsom has argued, Job is a polyphonic text, that is, a text that engages multiple competing perspectives without privileging any one of them, resisting certainty or closure.¹¹⁶ As noted above, it also introduces several complex theological issues without resolving any of them. The genre of Job as a polyphonic text grates against the genre of the typical youth ministry lesson with its unambiguous takeaway and memory verse, and it creates several pedagogical challenges.

First, the book of Job contains abrupt shifts in genre, most noticeably between the prose narrative and the poetic dialogues. The language of the prologue is simple, repetitive, and highly stylized.¹¹⁷ Within the bounds of the genre of didactic narrative, there is no room for Job to

¹¹⁴ See, for example, Fretheim, *God and World*, 244; Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 117; O'Connor, "Wild, Raging Creativity."

¹¹⁵ Clinton J. McCann, "Wisdom's Dilemma: The Book of Job, the Final Form of the Book of Psalms, and the Entire Bible," in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Michael L. Barre, S.S. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), 23.

¹¹⁶ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 3-31.

¹¹⁷ "Exaggeratedly simple narrative style" and "verbal repetition" are particularly characteristic of didactic narrative, as Newsom points out: "[In the didactic tale] the simple language, conceptual clarity, and redundant

respond in any way but one that paints him as a faithful hero who has passed the test and proven God right.¹¹⁸ Thus, Job's sudden outburst in Job 3 "confounds narrative expectations."¹¹⁹ The monologic world of the didactic prose tale has been left behind, and readers have entered a wholly different "moral imagination."¹²⁰ Not only has the simple narrative style of the prologue given way to highly sophisticated poetry, but Job's character has "shift[ed] from the stoically flat to the passionately complex."¹²¹ His attitude changes from meek acceptance to rage and despair, with no apparent precipitating cause, since the testing has come to an end. This is not the only dramatic shift in genre, however; after 39 chapters of poetic dialogues, the book of Job abruptly changes back to the didactic narrative for a happy ending that seems overly simplistic after the complexity of the dialogues. Readers are left feeling disoriented as they adjust to, and seek to reconcile, the disjunction between genres.

The second pedagogical challenge in teaching Job is that the majority of the book consists of the argumentation between Job and his friends, and it is not entirely clear who is right. On the one hand, the reader wants to side with Job, whom they know to be innocent; on the other hand, the friends' theology resonates with that found elsewhere in the canon. There is truth in both perspectives, and yet, when God finally responds, God seems somehow displeased with all of them. God accuses Job of "darken[ing] counsel by words without knowledge" (Job 38:2), but then states in the epilogue that Job's friends "have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). How does one choose a key text for a lesson when each speech is

structures of narrative and moral authority all work together to produce an infantilized reader." Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 41, 83.

¹¹⁸ As Newsom writes, "In such a didactic story, inexplicable suffering is a plot device designed to allow the hero's character to be foregrounded, but suffering is not a topic of reflection in its own right." Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 17.

¹¹⁹ Newsom, "Job," 362.

¹²⁰ Newsom describes the book of Job as a "contest of moral imaginations." Newsom, *The Book of Job*.

¹²¹ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 128.

multiple chapters long and only represents one of multiple conflicting perspectives? Such is the nature of the polyphonic text; its power is in the whole, not in the individual parts, which makes it very difficult to choose texts that adequately represent the book.

Finally, the book seems to provide no clear answers or easy resolution.¹²² As noted above, the Divine Speeches do not directly address why Job has suffered or who is at fault, and the sudden happy ending leaves many readers uneasy. Several youth ministers reflected on the fact that the book of Job seems to raise more questions than it answers, and that it was hard not having answers to their students' questions.¹²³ As Michael put it, "Job to me is so frustrating. I love the book, but the answer is really 'None of your business, Job, who do you think you are?' And then Job gets everything back. I feel sorry for his kids because they all died, but it's sort of like everything [else] is restored... That is the worst ending to the story I could have imagined, it's just a frustrating book."

Youth ministers often address the challenge of Job's genre(s) in one of two ways when they teach the book of Job. First, as mentioned above, it is common for youth ministers to treat

¹²² The *Here We Stand* confirmation curriculum addresses Job's lack of definitive answers in an opening skit in which a science teacher tells her students that an experiment may leave them with more questions than answers. The skit is followed with the discussion questions: "Think of a time when you ended up with more questions than answers. What did you learn? Just because something doesn't have an easy answer, should we stop asking questions?" "Job Leader Guide," *Here We Stand*.

¹²³ When I asked Danielle what was most challenging about teaching wisdom literature, she said that "one of the hardest parts for me was the questions that were asked" about the book of Job, because she felt that she did not fully understand it herself: "I was like, 'God, I don't really understand.' Like, reading through, the point of it—like yes, I get that suffering is—it was just really hard for me to grasp all of this." When I asked Grace the same question, she responded, "I'd say the most challenging thing is feeling like it's all still a mystery to me too. [I try to] answer [students' questions] with questions, but sometimes it's hard, sometimes I wish I could just give them a straight answer, or give them something decisive to hold onto, and I think that is the hardest part. Particularly with Job, the hard part is that God stood by and watched it happen and made a deal with the devil. That is really hard. Answering kids' questions about the devil is hard. I wish I could give them answers, and sometimes there just isn't an answer." Michael, whom I later interviewed, noted in his survey response to the question "What challenges did you face in teaching wisdom literature to youth?" that "it raises more questions than it answers." In keeping with the theme of wisdom literature's challenges being experienced as gifts as well, however, Michael also noted in the interview that "raising more questions than it answers" is a trait he finds valuable as well: "It's the journey of pursuing the questions that becomes the walk of faith."

only the texts from the frame narrative. This approach keeps the genre consistent, and it also makes it easier to develop a takeaway or application from a brief section of text. Second, some youth ministers or curricula have students perform a shortened version of Job as a skit, in which each multi-chapter speech is summed up in only a sentence or two.¹²⁴ This approach helps give students an overview of the book's structure and the friends' perspectives, without having to read large swaths of dense poetry. As mentioned above, Sara wrote a skit like this for her confirmation curriculum. When I asked Sara later in the interview about the role of playfulness or imagination in teaching wisdom literature, she mentioned that Job itself is a play: "Job is like a drama, right? That's one of the reasons we do a skit, is to help remind youth that this might be a skit. This is a drama unfolding of itself." While not all biblical scholars believe that Job was composed as a drama to be performed, such an interpretation has been attested throughout history.¹²⁵ As Seow writes, even those who do not believe it originated as drama may find it meaningful to read it through that lens.¹²⁶ Indeed, Newsom begins the conclusion to her book on Job by imagining it as a theatrical production that highlights the generic shifts: Job and his friends on stage "freeze in their stance" as the wisdom poem of Job 28 coming through the sound system interrupts their dialogues, and Elihu is a character planted in the audience who stands up to break the silence when Job concludes his monologue.¹²⁷ While putting on a full-length drama is beyond the time constraints and capabilities of many youth ministers, a condensed version can

¹²⁴ Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 65. The full text of the skit appears in Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Student Journal*, 58-62. In addition to acting out the prologue, the readings include one speech from each of the three friends in the first speech cycle, a speech from Elihu, the Divine Speech, and the full text of Job's confession in Job 42:5-6. As will be explored in more depth in the next chapter, I used the same learning activity when teaching on Job, although I included a representation of each speech cycle as well as the wisdom poem of Job 28.

¹²⁵ For a brief overview of the history of reading Job as a drama, see Seow, *Job 1-21*, 48.

¹²⁶ Seow, *Job 1-21*, 48.

¹²⁷ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 259-260.

give students an idea of the whole, as well as helping students experience the juxtaposition of the book's various elements.

Pedagogy

Learning activities on Job tend to fall into three broad categories: imagining the experience of pain or injustice, responding to others who are in pain, and expressing negative emotions in prayer. The first is the most common; many lessons on Job open with an illustrative game or activity in which students experience loss or pain to “imagine what it felt like to be Job.” Some are lighthearted, like holding an ice cube for an entire minute,¹²⁸ or having the youth minister give out potato chips to each student, only to arbitrarily crush the chips of a few unlucky students.¹²⁹ Others are more serious; Sara had her students write down on slips of paper the things and people that matter the most to them, then called on students to discard them at random and discuss how it felt to lose them.

Second, students practice responding to others in pain through case studies and role plays, sometimes playfully saying the most unhelpful thing they can imagine, and sometimes crafting appropriate responses to different scenarios of loss.¹³⁰ One lesson has students sit in

¹²⁸ Baber, *Wisdom of the Kingdom Leader Guide*, 63.

¹²⁹ *Colaborate Leader Guide*, 108.

¹³⁰ In the *Youth Specialties* curriculum, one lesson has students practice responding in “appropriate” ways to case study scenarios like a friend losing his sister, or a friend losing his home in a fire. Another lesson includes two different activities, one in which students “create...the worst things people might say or do in response” to certain scenarios (death, terminal illness, breakups, and failing grades), and one in which a student role plays one of these scenarios of loss, for one student to “offer a short statement of comfort using words that are helpful” and another to play the “Bad Friend” by offering “words that aren’t helpful.” Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 105, 46-50. *Here We Stand* includes the “Blame Game” as an optional activity in its lesson on Job: “Form groups of four people for a role-play activity. One person should assume the role of Job, and the other three people will be Job’s friends. The person acting as Job should think of a situation that would require a young person to seek out friends for support. Examples include getting grounded, being injured, or being ‘dumped’ by a boyfriend or girlfriend. The friends should respond by blaming the Job character for what happened. They could say things like, ‘It’s your fault you sprained your ankle because you were playing basketball.’ When the large group reassembles, debrief the experience with these questions: How did the “Jobs” feel when they were being blamed for their problems? How did the friends feel about their role and what they said? What other ways could they have responded to their friend’s suffering?” “Job Leader Guide,” *Here We Stand*.

silence for seven minutes as they imagine what it might have been like for Job's friends to sit with him for seven days.¹³¹ Some activities have the dual purpose of imagining loss and responding to others; Urban Ministries' lesson on Job has students randomly draw a tragic scenario and tell the story as if it happened to them, imagining how it might feel to be that person. The rest of the group is then invited to offer words of comfort to the pretend-sufferer.¹³²

A commonality in these learning activities is that students are asked to *imagine*, or to experience mimics of, loss or injustice, rather than to reflect on suffering that has actually occurred. It is unclear what rationale undergirds this choice. In some cases, it may be driven by assumptions of young people's privilege and/or lack of life experience, that young people have not yet experienced significant suffering and must therefore imagine a hypothetical loss rather than reflect on a real one. In others, it may stem from a desire to de-personalize the discussion and thus protect students from having to relive their own painful memories. In the latter case, however, case studies that hit too close to home may still prove triggering.

The third category of learning activity, expressing negative emotions to God, does invite students to explore their own experiences of doubt, anger, and grief, often through journaling. One of the more creative spins on this activity comes from Youth Specialties, which uses Job's courtroom metaphor as a basis for asking students to choose a situation in their life or a friend's, and to argue their case point-by-point to God.¹³³ While it provides students the opportunity to name their grief, it allows them to process it at a level of engagement that is comfortable for them. Although they may choose to reflect on a past experience, the assignment is to name present feelings, which may lessen the pain of reliving traumatic memories.

¹³¹ "Job Leader Guide," *Here We Stand*.

¹³² Garrison, "Lesson 12: Bildad Misunderstands God's Justice," 84.

¹³³ Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 86.

Case Studies: Danielle and Adam

When Danielle's students asked her to teach on the wisdom literature, she chose to start with Job. She mistakenly thought it would be the easiest of the wisdom books to teach, because most people are familiar with the story. When she started to study and prepare the series, though, she realized there was much more to the book of Job than she realized: "For so long I've been okay with the children's church version of Job. And so, for me to have to dig deep into it, it was like...whoa. There are a lot of things that I missed." Danielle based her study on Lifeway's Explore the Bible curriculum, which treats more than just the frame narrative. The curriculum also includes two of Job's speeches (Job 14:1-12 and 19:19-29), the wisdom poem (Job 28), part of Elihu's speech (Job 36:8-23), and part of the Divine Speeches (the lesson focused on Job 42:1-11, but Danielle also read Job 38:1-7 to get a sense of "the kinds of questions God asked Job"). Reading the book anew, Danielle found the Divine Speeches particularly challenging: "At the end, with the Lord's response, it's kind of like—oh, the Lord is a smart aleck!" While reading it, she was surprised to find herself getting angry on Job's behalf. How could God inflict so much suffering on Job, and then rebuke Job for not handling it better? "If it was me," Danielle confessed, "I would ask way worse than Job ever did, you know? I would just, I would be so angry."

While she found Job's faith inspiring and challenging, Danielle herself is no stranger to trusting God when it is difficult. Growing up as a Black woman who felt called to ministry in the Church of Christ, a predominantly white denomination that does not typically allow women to be ministers, she had to learn early on to tune out the naysayers as she pursued her calling: "You may [not agree], but I got a word from the Lord, and I'm taking it and running with it." As a student at a small, conservative Church of Christ university, Danielle routinely had professors

take her aside and tell her that she was misguided, that God had not called her to ministry. After college, she left the Church of Christ to serve as the youth pastor at a young and growing Church of God. Over the course of her five-year tenure, the youth group grew from thirteen students to over a hundred. At the height of the church's growth, however, Danielle inexplicably felt called to step away. She returned to her hometown and the church in which she grew up, a place where she has experienced blatant racism and sexism, to volunteer her time with the youth group girls while she waits for God to show her the next step. At the beginning of the interview, Danielle shared all this dispassionately as the background to her ministry. Later in our conversation, however, she began to reflect on her own experience in light of Job's: "I was part of a thriving church, and I felt like that was all ripped away from me. It wasn't exactly the same situation as Job, but I felt alone and like I didn't have anyone, and I really had to trust the Lord in that season. Like, 'Okay, even if you don't give me all of those things back, can I still trust you?'"

Danielle's reliance on God's leading, even when it does not make sense, spills over into her teaching. Her pedagogical flexibility is rooted in her pneumatology; she studies and prepares carefully, but she told me that "the presence of Jesus trumps whatever's going on," so when the Holy Spirit comes, "sometimes that means completely throwing out every single plan."

Danielle's attentiveness to the Spirit corresponds with her attentiveness to her youth, as she believes that they too are capable of hearing from God; she places more emphasis on student-led discussion than on "preaching at them," recognizing the wisdom that they bring to the classroom. When a difficult question arises, instead of Danielle answering it, sometimes the group commits to study and pray about it for a week before coming back together to share what they learned or "what the Lord [showed them]." Danielle is incredibly responsive to her students' needs and willing to adapt the lesson plan as needed, even to the point of throwing it out altogether: "There

are times where we are in class going over something heavy, and someone will go, ‘Can we just pray about this now?’, and it’s like, YES. We’ll stop whatever we’re doing and spend that time in prayer.”

On one such night, one of the girls in Danielle’s group “broke down in tears” when they were talking about Job’s friends. Putting the lesson aside, Danielle invited her to share: “Okay, tears are welcome, what’s going on?” The student shared that she was having friend troubles of her own; “one of her friends had told her that she was stupid for trusting the Lord for something,” which in Danielle’s mind, dovetailed perfectly with the text. This brief anecdote is a window into Danielle’s interpretation, shared by other interviewees, that the problem with Job’s friends lay not in their defense of God’s justice but in their undermining Job’s trust in God.

Although trusting God no matter what is key for Danielle, she recognizes the need to honor negative experiences of grief and doubt before moving too quickly to hope. As the following quote illustrates, she wrestles with the tension between taking pain seriously and not letting it have the final word: “Our students have had to endure real suffering, and I don’t want to [minimize] that, but...our suffering is temporary, which gives us hope to cling to. But I don’t want to just always talk about the good of who God is, because we have to address the reality of the world, but I always want to hone in on who God is and what his promises are.” However, one of the things that Danielle realized on a fresh reading of Job is that one can share one’s deepest and most troubling feelings with God, a realization that influenced her pedagogy: “I wanted to create an environment where it is okay for us to be completely and totally honest with the Lord.” Danielle created that space by meeting her students’ vulnerability with her own, openly acknowledging her own struggles with the book: her desire for clear resolution, her frustration with God in the book, and her fear that she could not live up to Job’s faithfulness if she were in

his situation. She told me that although it was challenging, she felt the need to be “very real, raw, and transparent” with her students about her lack of understanding: “Although [I am an] adult, [I] don’t have all this figured out either, and there are things about the Lord that [I] cannot grasp.”

It is Job’s invitation to honesty that makes it Adam’s favorite book of the Bible: “We see Job being angry with God, crying out to God, yelling at God, and God’s saying, ‘I can take it. It’s okay that you’re angry with me.’” Adam, a twelve-year youth ministry veteran in the Free Methodist church, has written several different lessons and series on Job that he shares widely with other youth ministers. His four-week curriculum on Job, which has been taught at more than fifteen other churches, centers around the theme of pain. Unlike most of the published curricula on Job that prefer to illustrate loss with low-stakes object lessons, Adam’s series comes with a content warning; the material and learning activities delve deep into students’ own experience of pain. When he teaches it, he makes sure to have extra adult volunteers on hand to help care for any youth who are overwhelmed, and he tells his youth that it is okay to respond however they need to: “If you need to talk to anybody, if you need to walk out, if you need to cry, you can.”

Predictably, the first lesson begins with an overview of the prologue, focusing on Job’s confession of faith in Job 1:21. The takeaway from that first week is that “in our pain, we can still worship.” The second week is based on Job 2:11-13, the conclusion of the frame narrative in which Job’s friends come to be with him. Although Adam acknowledges that Job’s friends are “a little misguided,” the fact remains that they were there for Job when he needed them. The truth that Adam hopes his students take away from this lesson is that they are “not alone in their pain.” While many youth ministers use this text to talk about *being* a good friend to the suffering, Adam wants his students to know that they *have* a friend when they are suffering: Jesus.

In the third week, Adam turns toward the theme of empathy for others through an unusual choice of text: “Even if it is true that I have sinned, my mistake concerns only me” (Job 19:4, HCSB, Adam’s choice of translation). In the same way that Job’s friends believe his suffering is a result of his sin, Adam explained, “Here in America, when we see someone who’s down on their luck or who’s fallen on hard times, we look at them and go, ‘They must have done something to deserve that.’” The promise of the American Dream, that if one just works hard enough, one can succeed, is a secular version of the retribution theology espoused by Job’s friends and challenged by Job. Adam’s takeaway in this lesson is to be there for people, rather than criticize them; the circumstances that led to their suffering are no one’s business but their own.

Either in the second or third week, Adam facilitates a group activity to foster solidarity and/or empathy, depending on which lesson it accompanies. The activity begins with all of the students standing on the same side of a line that has been marked on the floor. Adam calls out various categories or experiences, and if a student fits the description, they step over the line: “Cross over the line if you’ve ever been bullied at school. Cross over the line if your parents are divorced.” Through this exercise, students are able to connect with others who have had similar experiences of suffering, and hopefully learn to see each other with compassion.

The final week of the series concludes with the opening verses of the second Divine Speech, with the takeaway that “God can take our pain.” Adam connects this lesson to the Gospel through the incarnation: in the person of Jesus, “God not just understands [our pain] but has experienced it and can take it. He can take our questions, he can take our anger.” For this lesson, Adam asks students to write anonymously something that made them feel angry with God and put the slip of paper into a box. Afterwards, he passes the box around so that each

student can draw one out and read it aloud. This exercise serves a dual purpose: the youth are able to practice expressing their own anger to God in prayer, and they are also able to hear the struggles of their fellow students.

Adam recalled a time when a moment of levity eased the tension of the activity; one student drew out a slip of paper that read, “I’m mad that God allows socialism.” The group had a chuckle, as it was obvious to them who had written it. The student passed the box, and the very next paper that was pulled out read, “I’m mad that God allows capitalism.” Rather than being annoyed, Adam saw the situation as a valuable opportunity for the students to laugh together in the middle of an emotionally taxing lesson. Later, he overheard a conversation about the activity, as one student confided in another, “I’m the one who wrote that I’m mad at God because I have to take medicine for depression.” His friend responded, “Don’t be an idiot, it’s because of God that you *have* medicine for depression.” Laughing and hugging, the two of them went and joined the group in playing games. For Adam, the ability to move seamlessly between seriousness and levity is key to making space for difficult questions, vulnerable conversations, and deep relationships. Some curricula incorporate levity through opening icebreaker games, a choice that I noted in chapter three can actually reinforce the contrast between learning and play. Through his openness to his students’ humor, however, Adam is able to facilitate playful encounters with the content itself that can be both serious and lighthearted.

As Danielle pointed out, on the surface Job may seem like an easy book to teach because the narrative is familiar to many people. In its entirety, however, Job is very complicated to teach, not only because of its challenging content and its poetic style, but because its dialogic form and conflicting perspectives make it difficult to teach with the key text and takeaway approach. Like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Job is most often represented in youth curriculum by

its bookends; youth ministers often teach the prologue and the epilogue, occasionally supplementing it with an excerpt of the Divine Speeches and/or Job's confession in Job 42:5-6. When texts from the dialogues are treated, they are typically used to emphasize the themes of faith and hope. Although a common takeaway from Job is that it is okay to be honest with God and that God can handle our questions, the choice of texts and themes from Job demonstrates a tendency to resolve doubt prematurely.

How can youth ministers teach the book of Job in a way that cultivates wisdom? As I argued in chapter three, the dialogic nature of Job is an important part of its pedagogy. The text cultivates wisdom in the reader by inviting them into the dialogue¹³⁴ and by requiring them to make sense of the gaps and disjuncture created by the juxtaposition of genres.¹³⁵ Thus, approaches to teaching Job that cultivate wisdom should take advantage of the tension between perspectives in the text as well as the ambiguities in the text, including the ambiguous translation of Job 13:15 and Job 42:6. Rather than condensing Job to a definitive takeaway, youth ministers should invite students to play the role of Elihu: to identify gaps in the arguments, to express their dissatisfaction with the text, and to offer their own constructive opinion. There are innumerable ways to teach the book of Job that cultivate wisdom: innumerable texts to use, learning activities to design, and open-ended discussion questions to ask. In the next chapter, I will offer one example of how youth ministers might explore the book of Job with youth, but the possibilities are myriad.

Pedagogy: Trends in How Wisdom Literature is Taught

¹³⁴ Fretheim, *God and World*, 222; Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 92; Kathleen O'Connor, *Job*, 5; Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 30.

¹³⁵ As Newsom writes, "The presence of so many perspectives in close proximity, yet not always directly engaging one another, shifts to the audience much of the work of teasing out the implicit quarrels among the disparate voices." Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 260.

In analyzing the teaching practices of youth ministers through curriculum, surveys, and interviews, I recognized some common themes in their pedagogical approaches that do not invite students to experience the modes of thinking characteristic of wisdom. These themes are not specific to the wisdom literature but rather reflect teaching practices in youth ministry more broadly. They are characteristic of the key text and takeaway approach and contribute to the issues I named with this approach in chapter two: they perpetuate an understanding of the Bible as a reference book and treat young people as passive consumers of its content, rather than inviting them to wrestle with, interpret, and think theologically alongside the text. While some of these pedagogical themes have already arisen over the course of this chapter, here I will name and reflect on them more explicitly.

First, creative learning activities (that is, games or activities that go beyond the most common learning activities of lecture, discussion, and videos) are often only tangentially connected to the lesson and often serve to illustrate or reinforce the main point of the lesson. The activities are usually intended to be fun and catchy, like the Lego game mentioned earlier in this chapter whose point was that we find clear and complete instructions for life in the Bible. Another example is an opening activity in Lifeway's curriculum on Ecclesiastes, in which students are shown several caution signs and asked to guess their meaning. The facilitator is then told to "point out that the purpose of each of these signs is to keep us safe from potential danger. Today we are going to see that God has placed two important tools in our lives to keep us safe...His Word and other believers."¹³⁶ As these examples demonstrate, students are often told precisely what the point of the game or activity is. The learning activities explain, rather than explore or engage, the content. There are very few learning activities in which the experience

¹³⁶ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 95.

itself is a source of knowledge or a spiritual experience. Notable exceptions include some of the learning activities suggested in the *CEB Student Bible* described above, like walking a prayer labyrinth¹³⁷ or reading the Divine Speeches in a thunderstorm or at a zoo,¹³⁸ or in Sparkhouse's *Colaborate* curriculum, like creating a spiritual timeline of highs and lows or drawing parts of the Divine Speeches.¹³⁹ These activities model what a creative learning activity can be at its best: an open-ended opportunity to interact with the content in a way that provides a new perspective and reveals new insight for the student. It is far more common, however, for learning activities to summarize, explain, or reinforce the takeaway of the lesson.

Second, youth ministers often tell students what a biblical text means, rather than inviting them to explore it together or offer their own interpretations. As noted above, a common approach to crafting a lesson is to distill the text into a main theme or takeaway, then center the lesson around the takeaway (often adding complementary texts from elsewhere in the canon) rather than the text itself. The topical usage of brief verses from the wisdom literature, particularly from Proverbs, contributes to this trend as the verses are used to illustrate or prove a point. The interpretation of the curriculum writer or youth minister serves as the definitive interpretation of the text, which often forecloses the opportunity for the group to explore and interpret the text together. Even youth ministers who celebrate the tensions and ambiguities in the wisdom literature often tend to err on the side of explanation. Consider, for example, a brief quote from Lucas, a PC(USA) youth pastor who uses the wisdom literature as a case study for divergent theologies in Scripture: "And then we get to that—and I name it for them—that unsatisfying conclusion [in Job]." Lucas's entire point is to encourage diversity of thought, and

¹³⁷ *The CEB Student Bible*, 768.

¹³⁸ *The CEB Student Bible*, 624.

¹³⁹ *Colaborate Leader Guide*, 110-111.

in many ways, his confirmation curriculum does. In this specific instance, however, by telling his students how to understand the conclusion of Job, his pedagogy forecloses a closer reading.

Third, discussion questions often reinforce the takeaway, rather than opening up dialogue or inviting students to think creatively. Most of the discussion questions in most of the curricula analyzed for this project fall into three categories.¹⁴⁰ The first category is basic comprehension questions that have only one right answer, like “Who is really in control?”¹⁴¹ These questions often even give the verse reference to find the answer: “What does Job wish his friends would do instead (vv. 5-6)?”¹⁴² “The second verse of Proverbs tells us exactly what this book was written for. What was it written for?”¹⁴³ or “What has God put into human hearts (v. 11)? What should we do in light of this (v. 12)?”¹⁴⁴ Lifeway’s curriculum says that “these questions are designed to get students to dig into Scripture, training them to look to the Bible for the answers to their questions.”¹⁴⁵ True to the key text and takeaway approach, the logic undergirding this “discussion” method views the Bible as a guidebook that provides answers to all questions. Particularly in a curriculum on the wisdom literature, an approach that tests comprehension and reads the Bible for answers communicates an understanding of wisdom that focuses on getting things right rather than encouraging exploration, wonder, or discernment.

¹⁴⁰ As a general observation, progressive mainline curricula tend to include more open-ended discussion questions than conservative evangelical curricula, but the three types of questions identified here are found across most curriculum in varying amounts. A rarer subcategory of this type of question is *rhetorical questions*, in which a legitimately good question is asked, but the answer is assumed; students are not given an opportunity to discuss the question. For example, *Youth Specialties* asks after reading about the Divine Council in Job 1, “Are God and Satan having conversations about us? Are we merely puppets in their hands? In the next exercise we want to go back to a few basic facts about God and Satan to remind us who’s really in control.” Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 20.

¹⁴¹ Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons in Job*, 21.

¹⁴² J2A, “Questioning God,” 10.

¹⁴³ Quinn, “Lesson 1: Wisdom: The Purpose of Proverbs,” *Proverbs: How to Be Wise*, 6.

¹⁴⁴ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 88.

¹⁴⁵ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 2.

The second category of discussion questions focuses on application: “How can we navigate challenges...in a way that honors God?”¹⁴⁶ or “How can you apply this understanding of God’s presence to your life right now?”¹⁴⁷ Application questions are vital for the key text and takeaway approach. As noted in the previous chapter, the skill of application is the third level in Bloom’s taxonomy, and it is where most curricula stop. Having been given the takeaway, students are asked to consider how they can apply it to their lives. They are not often asked to do the work of comparing or contrasting different perspectives (analyze), offering their own judgment of an idea (evaluate), or positing their own theological reflection (create).¹⁴⁸

The third category of discussion questions is a type of leading question that follows a presumptive formula: “Why is it important that we know/understand/do X?” or, “How does knowing X help us do Y?” I had anticipated that curricula would heavily feature comprehension and application questions, but the ubiquity of this particular question formula came as a surprise. For example, Lifeway’s curriculum asks, “Why is it important to remember that God is exalted above us and is perfect in His understanding? How do these realizations help us navigate life in a broken world?”¹⁴⁹ The UMC Justice curriculum asks, “Why is it important to understand that God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts?”¹⁵⁰ These questions take a premise for granted and limit the discussion to the terms of the question; the students cannot

¹⁴⁶ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 92.

¹⁴⁷ “Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide,” *Here We Stand*.

¹⁴⁸ Although some curricula include a few questions that go beyond comprehension and application, the first three levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, with very limited opportunities for open-ended answers, is the steady diet of most youth curriculum. A notable exception in this study was Sparkhouse’s *Colaborate* confirmation curriculum on the wisdom literature which, on the whole, had the most open-ended, exploratory discussion questions of any curriculum I analyzed.

¹⁴⁹ Dixon, *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide*, 42.

¹⁵⁰ Rev. Rezolia Johnson, “Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost: Job 38:1-7 (34-41),” *Connecting Faith and Justice Youth Curriculum* (Washington, D.C.: The United Methodist Church, 2020): 207-212. Accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/152>.

answer the question without acquiescing to the importance of X. It is not up for debate whether X is actually important or even true, or whether X is in fact helpful for Y or even related at all.

The sum of these three common pedagogical approaches—providing activities that illustrate the main point, presenting principles rather than engaging the text, and asking leading discussion questions that reinforce or apply the point—is that the biblical text is *explained to* students, rather than *explored with* students. Much of the religious education that occurs in youth ministry contexts is closed-ended rather than open-ended, driving toward one particular takeaway and allowing very little opportunity for imagination or curiosity. It does not invite students to experience or practice the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom as described in chapter one; it treats them as passive recipients of the product of others' wisdom. Without such invitations, biblical education cannot make young people wise.

Conclusion

There is remarkable diversity and creativity in how youth ministry practitioners engage the wisdom literature with youth. For those who have taught series on the wisdom literature, the experience has been full of both challenges and gifts as the wisdom books have taken them outside their comfort zone to explore new genres and themes with their students. As they have studied and taught these texts, the wisdom literature has also done its wisdom-cultivating work in them: engendering questions, planting seeds, goading them to deeper engagement and inviting them to continue seeking wisdom in its pages.

And yet, there are certain trends in the content engaged in these books, the conclusions drawn from them, and the pedagogical approaches common to teaching them, that do not maximize the potential of this literature to cultivate wisdom. By deriving takeaways from the beginnings and endings of each book, as well as select inspirational texts from each one, youth

ministers neglect a wealth of opportunity to explore complex and challenging theological ideas and ways of making meaning. To teach these books in a way that makes full use of their educational potential, youth ministers should consider what these texts are doing rhetorically and pedagogically, and how they invite the reader to the processes and practices characteristic of wisdom. As this chapter has demonstrated, many youth ministers as well as curricula provide creative examples of pedagogical techniques, discussion questions, and learning activities that *can* cultivate wisdom. However, these creative examples are often sporadic, used alongside a reductive takeaway or leading discussion questions. By exploring the pedagogy of the wisdom literature and analyzing youth curricula through the lens of “doing what the Bible does,” I hope to give youth ministers a more coherent framework for understanding what constitutes wisdom-cultivating pedagogy, so that they are more equipped to evaluate curriculum on the wisdom literature as well as design their own. In the final chapter, I will present one example of how the framework of “doing what the Bible does,” as well as the five practices of wisdom identified in chapter three, might shape a curriculum that invites students to practice the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom.

Chapter Six

Theological Collage: Exploring the Book of Job with Youth

“It’s always better when we’re together, yeah we’ll look at the stars when we’re together. Well, it’s always better when we’re together, yeah it’s always better when we’re together.”¹ These lyrics, typed in a whimsical cursive font, are the first picture that caught my eye in the collage on the screen. The lyrics become incredibly poignant in the light of the other pictures making up the collage: a church building, split in half, with people on a path that diverges as they approach the two halves of the building. People arguing at a business meeting, pointing and shouting, talking over each other with overlapping speech bubbles; all of them have risen to their feet except one, who sits at the table with a weary and dejected look on his face. A church whose sign boldly proclaims, “All are welcome,” with bold text pasted over the picture: “But are they?” Hands making a heart, viewed through a rainbow prism. The logo of the United Methodist Church, split in half by a lightning bolt. More song lyrics, from the Avett Brothers: “Three words become hard to say: I and love and you.”² A phoenix rising. All set against the background of breaking glass.

It was beautiful and devastating. Quickly brushing away the tears gathering in my eyes, I invited the group to reflect on what they saw. Lucy, a high school junior, had spent three hours making her collage, a testament to how much emotional energy she was investing in thinking about the division in the UMC, and to how committed she was to portray the tensions in her denomination, and her conflicted feelings about it, perfectly.³ Her work created a rich wisdom-

¹ Jack Hody Johnson, “Better Together,” track 1 of *In Between Dreams*, Brushfire Records, 2005.

² The Avett Brothers, “I And Love And You,” track 1 of *I And Love And You*, American Recordings, 2009.

³ Here, as throughout this project, participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

cultivating source of reflection for her peers: a *mashal*.⁴ The *mashal* is a characteristic form of wisdom literature: an ambiguous saying, puzzle, or riddle intended both to communicate and cultivate wisdom. It expresses the wisdom of its author(s), making their thought visible, and in doing so it becomes an opportunity for further reflection for those who encounter it. The *mashal* is an art form; rather than merely stating an observation, it is crafted with careful thought to communicate a truth in a way that is compelling and memorable, and that invites the engagement and reflection of the reader. Lucy's collage itself was a *mashal*, the product of her own deep reflection on a complex issue, artfully expressed in a way that invited its viewers to practice the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom. In crafting her collage and offering it up to the reflection of the group, Lucy carried on the wisdom tradition, adapting its forms from a literary to a visual *mashal*, to address new issues and concerns.

The collage project wrapped up a three-day workshop on the book of Job with high school students attending Emory University's Youth Theological Initiative (YTI) Summer Academy. Begun in 1993, YTI is a project funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment which provides an opportunity for high school juniors and seniors from all over the world to gather together on Emory's campus each summer. The young people who attend YTI are referred to as "scholars," which is an intentional choice meant to communicate their status not just as "students" but as participants in the process of doing theology. While on campus, YTI scholars participate in a robust program of worship, scholarship, community, social justice, and public theology. Those who attend have the opportunity to learn from internationally-recognized scholars and professors at Emory's Candler School of Theology, as well as to connect with other theologically-minded young people. In the past, YTI has also included elements of service

⁴ The concept of the *mashal* is discussed more in depth in chapter 3 in the discussion of Proverbs's pedagogy.

learning opportunities as well as field trips to attend worship at local mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship. While elements of YTI have changed over the years, as the program has been shortened, and various aspects of the program have been added or removed, the core remains the same. YTI involves young people in the task of public theology: that is, doing theology in the public arena, bringing theological insights to bear on social issues and participating in society as people of faith.⁵

Since its conception, YTI has also served as a research laboratory for academic scholars to learn more about the lives and faith of young people, by observing and participating in the activities of the summer program and by conducting interviews with the young scholars who attend.⁶ As part of my qualitative research, I designed and implemented a workshop on the book of Job, which I presented at YTI in the summer of 2021. The goal was to explore in practice what this project has suggested in theory, to demonstrate the value of exploring wisdom literature with youth, and to continue refining my theory and practice through the process of implementing and evaluating the workshop curriculum. The practice of discerning what the text is doing, and how to invite students to engage it in a way that cultivates wisdom, is a creative and dynamic process that never looks quite the same from week to week. Thus, I offer not a replicable step-by-step model, but a single snapshot of what it might look like to teach the wisdom literature in a way that learns from, and teaches with, the pedagogy of the text itself. In

⁵ As the YTI webpage writes, “We believe that teenagers are already-whole human beings, living in some of the most important years of their lives. This is why we introduce youth to theological skills often reserved for seminary. Together we ask hard questions about why the world is as it is and how we can change it.” “YTI Summer Academy,” accessed October 14, 2022, <https://yti.emory.edu/yti-summer-academy.html>. For more on YTI, see Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*. Corrie describes the YTI Summer Academy in brief on p. 16, and several of her chapters focus on anecdotes from, or pedagogies implemented at, the Summer Academy. See pp. 21-23, 91-92, 117-119, 145-148.

⁶ Several of Emory’s Ph.D. candidates have conducted dissertation research at YTI, and although YTI looked different during my own candidacy than it has in the past, both because the program is shorter and because it was held online due to Covid-19, I am grateful to be among those who have had this valuable opportunity.

this chapter, I will describe the process of designing the curriculum as an outworking of the theories developed in this dissertation. I will also reflect on the implementation of the curriculum, the scholars' creative projects, and the rich wisdom-cultivating dialogue that resulted. In chapter one, I argued that assessment of a wisdom-cultivating pedagogy needs to be contextual and embedded, rather than relying on behavioral benchmarks or rubrics. As such, in this chapter I share insightful comments, questions, analyses, and artistic reflections from the scholars as a way for the reader to see the patterns of thought characteristic of wisdom. While I occasionally comment on how certain reflections are indicative of wisdom's modes of thinking, much remains to be interpreted by the reader. The workshop project was not intended to measure whether the YTI scholars were "wiser" at the end than the beginning, but rather to demonstrate what it might look like to invite them to experience the practices of wisdom as they engage with the biblical text.

Methodology and Curriculum Design

As noted above, the workshop described in this chapter was offered at Emory's YTI Summer Academy alongside other workshops on theology, biblical interpretation, and social analysis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Summer Academy was held online over Zoom, with the group (consisting of seven scholars, five adult mentors, the YTI director, and me) meeting for a few hours each day for one Core Week, then attending other elective workshops throughout the summer. The Job workshop was offered during the Core Week in three ninety-minute sessions. The first two sessions were held on consecutive days at the beginning of the week as the group explored the book of Job together; the last session was on the final day, which allowed the YTI scholars time to process what they had learned and craft their collages. Occasional connectivity issues and inconsistent participation on the part of some

scholars resulted in less robust discussion than I had hoped. However, most of the scholars seemed invested in the experience and in their art projects, despite the fact that they were not able to craft together and share creative energy. I concluded the workshop with an anonymous evaluation in which I asked scholars what was most interesting or helpful and what was confusing or unhelpful, and I asked them to reflect briefly on the experience of making and sharing their collage. The YTI scholars were informed of the research ahead of time and consented to having the Zoom sessions recorded, which enabled me to be fully present without having to take notes. I then had the opportunity to re-watch the sessions and download the transcripts for further analysis. This close analysis has revealed new insights that were passed over much too quickly in real time.⁷

I designed the curriculum for the workshop as a case study to explore in practice the theories developed in this dissertation. I chose the book of Job in part because it was the wisdom book I had the least experience engaging with youth. Having taught a workshop on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes at YTI the previous year, I wanted to take what I had learned and apply the framework to a different text. In chapter three, using a pedagogical hermeneutic to examine what the book of Job is doing and how it cultivates wisdom in the reader, I showed how Job prizes dialogue over answers and tension over resolution. When I was designing this curriculum, then, I knew at the outset that I wanted to engage Job as a polyphonic text, helping the YTI scholars see the juxtapositions as a fruitful set-up for theological reflection and dialogue. I wanted the scholars to see Job as an invitation to lean into difficult theological issues, to probe the places

⁷ As the YTI scholars have not spent hours poring over transcripts and reliving the workshop in the way that I have, it is likely that they have forgotten much of the dialogue and engagement I will relay in this chapter. The sustained reflection inherent to the research task likely enabled me to see more in the interactions than the scholars themselves did. However, this does not negate the value of what occurred in the moment. Because wisdom is practiced rather than attained, each opportunity that is given for young people to practice it gradually shapes them to be wiser and more thoughtful. Insights long forgotten on the surface level can still be deeply formative, and the patterns of thinking remain a model for future learning.

where systematic explanations fall short or where their experience contradicts what they have been taught, and to come to a fuller understanding by holding competing concepts in tension. Rather than providing a clear takeaway or resolving the difficulties of Job, I also knew I wanted the scholars to think critically, to analyze and evaluate the text and its theologies, as well as to participate in a creative process in which they could construct their own theology.

To achieve these goals, I divided the workshop roughly in half. The first half of the workshop (the first session and half of the second) focused on the text itself, helping the scholars experience Job in its complexity and multivocality. In the second half of the workshop, I designed a learning activity to “do what the text does”: I used the structure of Job as a model for theological reflection, asking the scholars to engage complex and multifaceted theological concepts without trying to resolve the contradictions. In the rest of this chapter, I will explore these two halves of the workshop, and conclude with reflections on how the collage project enabled the scholars to process complexity and cultivate wisdom.

Exploring Job as a Polyphonic Text

I designed the first half of the workshop as an opportunity for the scholars to move beyond the Job narrative with which they were familiar, and to encounter the book of Job as a polyphonic text. Two learning activities met this goal. First, I wrote a condensed version of the book for the scholars to read dramatically as a way to experience the structure of the book as a whole, as well as the content from the dialogues they may not have heard. In chapter five, I showed that the book of Job is most often taught in youth ministry by focusing on the narrative portions found in the prologue and epilogue. The YTI scholars corroborated this finding as they expressed a lack of familiarity with the dialogues. Because of their limited exposure to the book

of Job, I wanted to represent the dialogues adequately, albeit in a condensed form. Each speech was represented by 1-3 lines of text, and none of the speeches were left out.

The dramatic reading was a similar concept to the way Sara, one of the youth ministers I interviewed, had taught Job to her youth. However, while Sara's version summarized the dialogues and paraphrased them to highlight Job's consistent faithfulness, I hoped to demonstrate the disjunction between genres.⁸ I wanted the scholars to *experience* this disjunction for themselves over the course of the dramatic reading, rather than telling them about the genre shifts or tell them how they should experience it. To help them experience the polyphony, I made the following choices: I included the prologue and epilogue almost word-for-word in their entirety to preserve the narrative flow and thus highlight the interruption of Job's outburst in Job 3; I included excerpts of the wisdom poem of Job 28 that comes between the speech cycles and Job's soliloquy; and I included the narrator's conclusive statement, "The words of Job are ended" (Job 31:40), before Elihu speaks.

The dramatic reading helped to highlight places where the flow of the dialogues is disrupted. When I asked the YTI scholars what surprised them in the dramatic reading, or if there were any parts that seemed strange to them, Heather, the scholar who read for Elihu, commented that her speech felt out of place: "[I was surprised by] my character coming in like, 'I'm [wiser] than you, so listen to what I'm saying.'" Another scholar thought it strange that according to the narrative, Job's friends came to comfort him, but in the dialogues, they begin to blame him for his suffering. Another noted in their workshop evaluation that they wondered what happened to the Accuser, who does not appear in the Epilogue. For yet another scholar, a high school senior

⁸ As noted in the analysis of how Job is taught in chapter five, Carol Newsom has posited reading the book of Job like a dramatic play with different acts as a way to highlight the disjunction between genres, which influenced the way I wrote the dramatic reading. See Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 259-260.

named Mackenzie, God's sarcasm in the Divine Speeches did not seem to fit with what happened in the prologue: "It was interesting to me how angry God seemed at Job when it's like, this is all on you, God! You're the one who was like 'Ok Accuser, go ahead and ruin his life,' and now [Job] is mad and you're like, 'Why are you mad?' It seems pretty obvious why [Job] would be mad at [God]."

In the second learning activity in which scholars experienced Job as a polyphonic text, the group explored the various perspectives on suffering in the book of Job. I broke the scholars up into small groups, assigning each group a different perspective: the prologue (Job 1:6-12), Job's friends (represented by Eliphaz in Job 22:5-11, 21-23), Job himself (Job 16:12-18), and Elihu (Job 33:14-20, 26-30). I asked them to discuss why Job was suffering according to each text, where they have heard a similar sentiment expressed, and how each perspective might be both helpful and unhelpful. The YTI scholars discussed the resonance of the friends' theology with meritocratic logic. As Mackenzie put it, "I think [people want to believe it] because it's an easy explanation. Like, when you see someone suffering it's easy to think, 'They must [deserve] this,' because we talk about it with good things too: how, if you put the work in, you'll earn this reward: good college, good job, you know. So it's like the flip side of that."

However, the scholars struggled to understand or articulate Job's own perspective on his suffering. I chose a selection from Job 16, which is some of Job's most clearly accusatory language against God's violence: "He set me up as his target...He slashes open my kidneys and shows no mercy" (Job 16:12-13). I opened by asking why Job seemed to think he was suffering. After a long period of silence, Mackenzie responded, "There's not really a reason, he's just suffering." After another silence, Heather added, "I don't know, it just seems like he's really sad and doesn't know what to think." I prompted them to look more closely at what Job says about

God, but they only suggested that God did not seem to care about Job's suffering. I wondered if the concept of divine violence was too far outside their theological frameworks to register. When I asked if they could think of examples of someone blaming God for their suffering, they responded, "Not necessarily blaming God so much as questioning God." Their word choices reminded me of the toned-down language of much of the youth curriculum described in chapters four and five that talked about Job being "sad" or "questioning his suffering," and it also served as a reminder of just how radical Job's accusations are. If I were to facilitate this discussion again, a better approach would be to explore the metaphors Job uses of being God's target and adversary in battle, and to consider the meaning and implications of those metaphors. This approach would replace the person of God with a metaphor, which may feel less risky and which can be explored with more freedom.

Because of the length and complexity of the Divine Speeches, I chose for the group as a whole to discuss them together. As noted in chapter five, in youth curriculum the Divine Speeches are often summarized as a display of God's omnipotence intended to shame Job into silence. Instead, I wanted the scholars to engage the content of the Speeches in more depth and explore what they contribute to a theology of suffering. To do so, I asked scholars to read Job 38:39-39:30 silently to themselves and share verbally or in the chat box where they saw suffering in the Divine Speech. Responses included the prey eaten by the lions (Job 38:39), the ravens crying out for food (Job 38:41), the doe in labor (Job 39:1-3), the doe's offspring leaving and never returning (Job 39:4), the crushed ostrich eggs (Job 39:15), and the horse going into battle (Job 39:23-25). The group then discussed together the role that suffering plays in the Divine Speech, and what the Divine Speech might communicate about God's perspective on suffering in the book of Job. They offered several possibilities: that suffering is universal among the species

and not unique to Job; that suffering is an intrinsic part of life and something into which one is born, rather than punishment for any wrongdoing; that what is survival for one group (predator) may be suffering for another group (prey); and that beauty and suffering coexist and are sometimes intertwined.

This last observation caused one of the YTI adult mentors present to point out the danger of too closely associating suffering with beauty, as though suffering is redemptive or a necessary prerequisite to joy. The mentor's comment provided an important perspective to consider, but as other mentors (some Candler students, others former YTI scholars) jumped into the discussion to share their thoughts, the scholars fell silent. This was one of several times over the course of the workshop in which the voices of the adult members of the group overshadowed the voices of the young people themselves, which is a difficult dynamic that illustrates the need for balance between theologically-educated adults and youth. As I noted in the introduction, drawing on Dori Baker's work, it is helpful to have someone with a "trained ear" who can recognize and name theological themes identified by young people.⁹ However, the facilitator can sometimes lose the emphasis on the *listening ear*, becoming too eager to share their own theological knowledge with the group.¹⁰ Mutually reflective groups like this are a delicate balance between sharing that illuminates and sharing that obscures.

The first half of the workshop concluded with a synthetic discussion about the competing perspectives on suffering: Which of these do you most resonate with? Can they all be true? Which one does the book of Job seem to endorse, if any, and why? Why do you think someone might have put all these pieces together? Mackenzie insightfully, and pastorally, noted that there

⁹ Baker, *Girlfriend Theology*, 20.

¹⁰ See, for example, Andrew Root's memory of a young seminarian who was overly excited to teach his youth what he had learned in his systematic theology class. Root, *Theological Turn*, 79-80.

may be some truth in each perspective, but that “it doesn’t really matter *why* you’re suffering when you’re in the middle of it...I don’t know if any of them would be helpful while you’re suffering.” Lucy shared that she most resonated with the perspective of the Divine Speeches because, rather than giving a reason or clear explanation for suffering, it acknowledges that suffering is part of life and inextricable from the more joyful and beautiful parts of life.

Reflecting on Job as a composite work, Mackenzie expressed that the tensions in Job mirror the tensions in the Bible as a whole: “It reminds me of the Bible overall and how it sometimes contradicts itself. You’ll read it and be like, ‘Wait, didn’t you just say the opposite of that two books back?’ It can be very confusing sometimes, like, whose idea was it to stick this in here, and why do we have it? So I think Job kind of fits in, in that it doesn’t fit in.” Later in the week, her collage reflected on this very issue: that tensions and competing theologies in the Bible cause people to come away from the same text with very different ideas. Here Mackenzie’s observation dovetails with the belief of a few of the youth ministry professionals that I interviewed that the wisdom literature serves as a helpful bridge into the rest of the canon, and that in its multivocality it serves as a kind of microcosm of the Bible as a whole.

Over the course of the workshop, YTI scholars identified aspects of the book they found challenging. One of these was, unsurprisingly, the ending of the book. As Lucy put it, “All of his kids died, and they just moved on!” Rather than naming the prose tale as simplistic, however, I wanted the scholars to consider what it might have to say as a legitimate part of the text, and how their experience of the story changed after having heard the (condensed) dialogues. For one of the scholars, a high school senior named Sofia, the dialogues made Job “more human” and relatable, as a character who modeled what it might look like to wrestle with God even in his faith and piety. For another, Heather, the dialogues made her question why the book needed a

happy ending, and why Job was given things for which he did not ask. Finding this a fruitful avenue to explore, I asked, “Yeah, that’s not what Job asked for, is it? What did Job ask for?” Mentors and scholars pointed out that Job asked for answers, for justice, for the ability to argue his case, for God to leave him alone, and for death. Instead, he received recompense and long life, absent from any explicit answers.

For those who did find the epilogue troubling, I invited them to practice a little redaction of their own: “If you found the ending less satisfying [after reading the dialogues], let’s Elihu this thing. How would you like for it to end instead?” The consensus was that Job should have been informed of the Accuser’s role in his suffering. Time constraints did not permit me to explore this theme as fully as I would have liked, but I would have been interested to discuss it further, perhaps through role play. How might Job have responded to finding out about the wager? Would it have satisfied him, or made him angrier? Is there a reason that the author chose the canonical ending? Does it give the reader something that a different ending would not?

Aside from the unsatisfying ending, the issue that seemed to bother the YTI scholars the most was not Job’s suffering, but rather the suffering of the side characters: Job’s wife and children. Although Job was innocent, the fact that he was the target of God’s test, that there was a *reason* for his suffering, if not a justified one, seemed somehow to assuage the injustice of his suffering for the scholars. However, they were very indignant when talking about Job’s family as collateral damage: “Did his kids deserve to die? They weren’t part of that wager...They just happened to be Job’s kids.” As the group reflected together on the marginal characters in the text, Mackenzie offered an insightful comparison: “Job’s wife can kind of stand in for a lot of forgotten groups that are harmed....You might think about the impact something will have on Job, but you don’t necessarily stop to think about the impact on his wife and kids.” Mackenzie’s

insight demonstrates the scholars' ability to consider the implications of the divine wager for the marginal characters, despite the narrative's apparent lack of self-awareness in this regard. An important component of wisdom, as I have defined it throughout this project, is the ability to consider the meaning and implications of ideas and events. The YTI scholars were able to recognize the unjust harm suffered by Job's wife and children, and to look beyond the text to other "forgotten groups" who are collateral damage of political power struggles. In doing so, the scholars both demonstrated and continued to grow their ability to make thoughtful decisions that lead to wholeness and flourishing for all.

Again, time constraints kept the group from exploring these themes as thoroughly as I would have liked; the scholars' indignance for Job's wife and children merited further exploration both textually and analogically. For example, their recognition of the side characters highlights the potential for practicing Bibliodrama with the text. Through improvisational role play, the scholars would be able to give voice to the silenced characters who so captivated them, revealing new insights into the text as well as into the world. In hindsight, I also wish I had asked Mackenzie to elaborate on her comparison and whether she had any particular people or situations in mind.¹¹ To explore a complex topic like this one provides valuable opportunities for social analysis as well as returning to the text again with new and difficult questions: Did God consider the collateral damage? Are there other situations in which God has seemingly failed to consider the impact of God's actions on marginalized groups? In the back-and-forth between the text and their world, between theology and lived experience, young people develop and practice

¹¹ One analogous situation that comes to mind is the way that young people themselves are collateral damage of ongoing political debates over gun control, when they themselves are unable to vote; as Parkland survivor David Hogg challenged lawmakers, "We're children. You guys are the adults. You need to take some action... Work together, come over your politics, and get something done." Lindsey Ellefson, "School Shooting Survivor to Lawmakers: 'You Need to Take Some Action,'" *CNN*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/15/us/david-hogg-school-shooting-new-day-cnntv>.

the characteristic components of wisdom: loving learning, seeking understanding, thinking critically, knowing in relational and affective ways, considering meaning and implications, making thoughtful decisions, and pursuing wholeness and flourishing.

Thinking Theologically Through Collage

After the group explored the book of Job together, the second half of the workshop moved toward theological construction. Even here, however, the goal was for the scholars to explore complexity and embrace tension more than to come away with a well-developed articulation of a theological concept. Tension is uncomfortable; cognitive dissonance seeks resolution. Because of the discomfort, it can be tempting to expedite the process of seeking answers rather than dwelling in the uncomfortable space of wrestling with complexity. However, as Almeda Wright writes in her reflections on young people's spoken word poetry, youth "do not need another theology of suffering" (or, I would argue, definitive answers to any of the complex theological issues with which they are wrestling); rather, "the primary need is offering youth a better process and space in which to reflect and ask these questions of God, themselves, and their lives."¹² An important characteristic of wisdom is the desire to seek deeper understanding, even when it does not immediately yield a practical solution. Thus, I hoped for the scholars to "live the questions"¹³ rather than try to answer them, to practice deep and unhurried attentiveness to a generative idea. Like the book of Job does through its juxtaposition of genres, I wanted the scholars to create something artistic that would communicate complexity in a different, and more aesthetic, way than explaining it or arguing it out. Art speaks where words fall short.¹⁴ It is also a

¹² Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 152-153.

¹³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Mark Harman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 45-46.

¹⁴ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Sarah Frances Farmer, *Raising Hope: Four Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth* (Wesley's Foundery Books, 2017), 148.

space in which young people can experience playfulness, even as they engage difficult or painful issues.¹⁵

I settled on the medium of collage as a way to present complex concepts and juxtapose different genres, the way the book of Job does, without needing to articulate the tensions in prose. In an essay on practices that resource one's activism, Ellen Ott Marshall and Katherine Marshall suggest making and meditating on collages as a helpful way to process contradictions without needing to resolve them. In a collage, they write, "Contradictory things or paradoxical ideas can occupy one space, which creates a challenging and important resource for reflection."¹⁶ Collage does not argue, and it does not resolve; it simply bears witness to complexity. By bringing together different media that do not share the same style or generic conventions, collages allow competing ideas to stand in tension and help both artist and observer see ideas and connections among them in new ways.

The first step in guiding scholars toward making their collage was to divide into small groups and ask them to share with their group a theological issue with which they were wrestling and which they would like to explore further. I asked them to analyze together some aspects of the issue that made it complex: What are different ways to look at this issue? What do other people think about it? What is going on beneath the surface? Does your experience contradict what you've been taught about this? As each scholar introduced the theological issue that would become their collage topic, other scholars helped them see new aspects of, and perspectives on,

¹⁵ Courtney Goto and Lakisha Lockhart, "Holding Lightly: Cultivating Playfulness in Youth," lecture for the Yale Youth Ministry Institute, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://yaleyouthministryinstitute.org/playlist/holding-lightly/>.

¹⁶ Ellen Ott Marshall and Katherine Marshall, "Meditation with Collage," in *Parenting for a Better World: Social Justice Practices for Your Family and the Planet*, ed. Susanna Snyder and Ellen Ott Marshall (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2022), 124.

their topic that they may not have considered before. The group then brainstormed together how each scholar might begin to represent some of these complexities in their collage.

Lucy, whose collage opened this chapter, shared that she was wrestling with the tensions in the United Methodist Church over LGBTQ inclusion. Although she is affirming, Lucy nonetheless does not want to leave non-affirming Methodists behind: “If we want to include all people, like, the people we’re splitting from are still part of [all people]. I wish we could include all of us together. And the idea of splitting is so sad to me because we are all children of God, so why can’t we celebrate it all together? So I’m trying to figure out how to say all that in a collage.” Although Mackenzie is PC(USA), she offered a helpful lens on some of the factors complicating the issue: the UMC is a worldwide denomination, and churches in the global South tend to be conservative on issues of gender and sexuality. The inclusion of queer folx then would alienate other important voices in the church, seeming to trade one type of diversity for another. As one of the adults in the group put it, “How do we include everyone when that includes people who exclude others?” Playing on the tragic irony of a divided United Methodist Church, one of the scholars suggested that Lucy could represent this in her collage by breaking the word “united” in half, which Lucy ultimately did, drawing a lightning bolt through the center of the UMC logo.

After the group discussion, the scholars were given two days to make their collages. Because the YTI workshop was online, scissors and paper and glue were traded for a quick Canva tutorial as I modeled for the scholars how to search for stock images, upload photos, change background colors, and add text. I encouraged scholars to consider different genres for their collage (photos, Bible passages, newspaper clippings, screenshots from hymnals) and to think about how color, background, and font might play a role in communicating the ideas they

wanted to express. Creating the collage online was a different experience than it would have been for an in-person workshop, with both losses and gains. First, it lost the sense of thinking with one's hands that accompanies physical cutting, arranging, and pasting, which is a process that Katherine Marshall identifies as an important part of the art form.¹⁷ Second, because scholars were attending virtually, each worked on their project alone. Thus, the collage project lost the sense of community and collaboration that it might have had in person, both in the process of creating the collage and in the ways it might have been shared with the broader community at YTI. For an in-person workshop, I would have liked to display the collages on poster board and leave them for the remainder of the program to serve as a source of reflection for all participants, both youth and adults. On the other hand, having access to internet resources gave scholars a broader repository from which to draw their sources, enabling them to find the right images to represent their thoughts. The asynchronous element also enabled the scholars to work on their collages as much or as little as they liked. Despite the limitations of the online collage project, it was nonetheless clear that the scholars thought deeply about various aspects of the issue they chose and how to represent its complexity well; more than half of them spent well over thirty minutes making their collage, in addition to the time spent processing it with the group before and after.

In the final workshop session, each YTI scholar had the opportunity to share their collage with the group. The ensuing discussion followed a structured format. First, I invited the group to spend a few moments looking at the collage in silence as a way to encourage unhurried attentiveness, and to allow the collage to speak for itself before it was dissected by the group.¹⁸

¹⁷ Marshall and Marshall, "Meditation with Collage," 126-127.

¹⁸ This moment of silence follows Parker Palmer's reflections on silence as a way to hear the voice of the subject. See Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 80-82.

Then, instead of asking the artist to tell the group about their collage, I invited the rest of the group to comment on it first, asking simply, “What do you see in this collage?” I did this for three reasons. First, it reflects the reality of biblical interpretation; readers are always interpreting the work of an author whose intent they do not fully know.¹⁹ Second, I wanted to be pedagogically consistent. As each scholar shared their collage, they became the teacher of the group and the collage became the content to be engaged. As we had done with the biblical text, I wanted the collages to be explored rather than just explained. Third, I did not want the artist’s intention to curb other creative interpretations that might arise from the group. In the same way that the biblical text is full of ambiguities created by authorial intent or translational issues, the collages contained ambiguities that were ripe for interpretation.

For example, in my own collage on (un)answered prayer, I included a picture of a man’s hand flipping a coin. To me, this coin represented the seeming carelessness and arbitrariness with which prayers are, or are not, answered. However, the meaning of this image was debated among the group; it was interpreted as the practice of casting lots, as tithes and offerings, and as evoking imagery of a wishing well, all of which provide an interesting and different angle on the collage as a whole. In Lucy’s collage, the background of breaking glass was understood by one person to be a positive statement about LGBTQ folx “breaking the glass ceiling” in the church. Lucy herself intended it to represent a denomination that is breaking but not yet broken, with the implication that one must “step lightly or it’s going to crack.” In their evaluation, one scholar noted that it really made them think when someone interpreted an item in their collage to mean the opposite of what they had intended.

¹⁹ An important difference, however, is that the authors of the biblical text are not present in the room as young people interpret their work, waiting to share what they intended the text to mean. As such, although readers can employ the tools of biblical criticism to attempt to ascertain authorial intent, there is no clear resolution or final authority on what the author intended; ultimately, the task of meaning-making is left to readers.

After the group spent some time sharing what they saw in each collage, I invited the artist to share their intention for their work by prompting them, “Tell us about your collage.” As the artist walked the group through each element of their collage, I realized that the artwork became a medium for them to share complex ideas and difficult feelings that they might have otherwise not been able to articulate or willing to share. It also provided an opportunity for more reticent scholars to have the floor for a few minutes as they were able to process and share uninterrupted.

For the final step of discussion, I drew on the redaction history of the text to invite scholars to “do what the text does”: I invited an “Elihu” to chime in, suggesting what they would add to the artist’s collage to represent their own perspective or make the collage more complete, or more complicated.²⁰ For example, Mackenzie’s collage wrestled with the tension between biblical texts of hospitality and judgment, ultimately seeming to show the two concepts at odds, with hospitality, inclusion, and grace winning out over sin and judgment. One of the adults in the group chose to play the role of Elihu in the discussion of Mackenzie’s collage. He wondered aloud where she might place Jesus’ condemnation of the inhospitable in Matthew 25, which is a text that further troubles Mackenzie’s already-complex portrayal of Scriptural tensions.

The effort the scholars put into their collages, and the resulting quality, were beyond what I had hoped for the assignment. Aside from the two collages already mentioned, the scholars brilliantly portrayed issues as diverse as the church’s impact on mental health for better and worse, different conceptions of hell juxtaposed with the idea of a loving and forgiving God, various atonement theories (a reflection prompted by another Core Week workshop), and the complex relationship between faith and doubt. Each scholar seemed to lean into the complexity

²⁰ The “Elihu” portion of the conversation would also have occurred differently in person. I would have actually invited the scholars to add to each other’s collages, which in its physicality and permanence would create a very different experience than merely commenting what they *might* change.

of their chosen concept, demonstrating a remarkable amount of nuance and understanding of multiple perspectives. As Sofia explained her collage on mental health, “Research shows there is a positive correlation with wellbeing, happiness, satisfaction, and hope if one joins a religious organization. But it can also promote rigid thinking and overdependency on rules. [There can be] gaslighting and emphasis on guilt and sin, which can be really negative....So even though it wasn’t exactly a theological issue, I wanted to show how theology itself can really affect people.” James, in his collage on atonement theories, divided the canvas into four squares with pictures to represent four models: penal substitution, Christus Victor, moral exemplar, and God’s solidarity in human suffering. He placed a circle in the center which overlapped all four, including John 3:16 within the circle, as a way to communicate that “all of them sort of share a little bit of truth in them” and interpret Jesus’ saving work differently.

The discussion that followed each collage was also rich; scholars and mentors reflected aloud on what they saw in the image, nuancing and expanding each other’s interpretations and insights. Consider the following discussion on Mackenzie’s collage.²¹ The background was an open book. On the left-hand page, there were two Bible verses sans reference: “Man shall not lie with man,” and “I do not let women teach men or have authority over them.” Beneath these verses was the word “sin” with an arrow leading to “hell,” and a flame coming up the side of the page. On the right-hand page, there were three other Bible verses: “Welcome the immigrant.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “In Christ there is no male and female.” The same sin-arrow-hell formula was beneath it, but this time, there was an X over the arrow and “God’s grace” written across it. Large water droplets were positioned just above the page, raining down onto it.

Lauren: What do you all see in this collage?

²¹ The conversation has been condensed slightly for clarity.

Heather: I see opposites: the fire and the water, and turning people away and welcoming them.

Sofia: I see it contradicting itself in that one side is talking about men having authority over women, while the other side is saying that there's no difference in gender.

James: The positioning of each side. Like on the left side, most of those things are quotes from the Old Testament and on the right, they're quotes from the New. And that's how it would be in a Bible because the Old Testament is first, and then the New.

Mentor 1: "Welcome the immigrant" might sound like it's from the New Testament because it seems more friendly and welcoming, but it's actually from Leviticus, which is in the Old Testament.

Lauren: And actually, "man shall not lie with man" also comes from Leviticus, so Leviticus is represented on each page. That's interesting.

Mentor 1: I also notice the fire and water, not as opposites, but as representing the Holy Spirit who has to guide our interpretation.

Mentor 2: I notice the fonts. The ones on the left side are really stark and easy to read and in bold. But then on the right you have the beautiful cursive that's a bit harder to read...but it's artistic and creative. And I think there's a more creative way we can view the text on the right, as opposed to just being stuck in obvious.

Christine: On the left it has sin-arrow-hell, and on the right there's sin-arrow-hell with God's grace over the arrow, which is a very Protestant thing of you to do, Mackenzie.

Lauren: I actually wasn't sure about the X over the arrow. The X is thin and white and doesn't show up very well, so it's not clear whether the arrow is actually fully crossed out. So I wonder if it represents some uncertainty about whether God's grace fully negates judgment.

Mackenzie: So the book is meant to be the Bible, to symbolize how two groups can read the same book and come away with very different points. So I pulled some quotes from both the Old and New Testament, and then I picked fire on the left as a kind of hell symbol, like hell being very fiery, and then I was like, ah, I don't know what to put on the right! So I went with water. But this morning when I opened it up to share, I thought, "Oh, it's like the water of baptism and God's grace coming and saving you!" So that's something I got out of it. And with the fonts, it's basically like what Mentor 2 said. And then—yeah, you can't really see it, but God's grace is on top of the X, so it's replacing the pathway to hell.

In this conversation, there were innumerable opportunities to explore an idea in greater depth. For instance, there was a whole conversation waiting to be had on the Old Testament-New Testament dichotomy and how the portrayal of judgment and grace in the Bible is more complex

than many people assume, which is an issue that Mentor 1 pointed out in his “Elihu” addition to the collage. The discussion on the fire and the water also merited further exploration. Mackenzie intended them to represent death and life, but as Mentor 1’s comment pointed out, they can also together represent the Holy Spirit. Both fire and water can be life-giving or life-taking, a dynamic that brings new opportunities for reflection on the collage. Finally, the main point of Mackenzie’s collage was a topic ripe for discussion: that people “can read the same book and come away with very different points.” This observation could have led into a fruitful discussion on hermeneutics and the interpretive lenses with which people approach the text, as well as how to evaluate different readings. Mackenzie’s recognition of this interpretive phenomenon indicates her ability to think metacognitively about her own reading of Scripture, and the life experiences, assumptions, and goals that drive her reading. The collage and ensuing discussion also set a foundation for thinking more dialectically about judgment and grace, rather than seeing them as diametrically opposed.

Engaging Complexity Through Collage

After the workshop, I asked the scholars to fill out a brief anonymous evaluation, asking them what parts of the workshop were helpful or unhelpful, how they experienced the process of making and discussing the collage, and what questions the workshop raised for them. One scholar wrote, “A lot of the collages centered around some form of doubt or asking questions, which I think shows how little we are allowed to ask questions. I found it reassuring that I’m not the only one asking questions or having these doubts, and it’s comforting that there are people [with whom I] can have those hard and honest conversations.” As this scholar’s comment shows, young people are often not invited to ask difficult questions in a faith context. As other youth ministry scholars and practitioners have argued, young people need spaces in which they can ask

questions.²² Recognizing this need, many youth ministers are becoming more comfortable inviting student questions, often through anonymous question boxes.²³ Anonymous question boxes can provide an opportunity for young people to share without feeling self-conscious, but they can also reinforce the idea that young people *should* feel self-conscious about their questions. A better way to make young people feel more comfortable asking questions, although it takes time as trust is built, is consistently to encourage, validate, and seriously engage all student questions.

Beyond merely asking questions and having them answered, however, young people need spaces in which they can process complexity, which is a need demonstrated by the time, thought, creativity, and vulnerability that the YTI scholars poured into their collages. The world is full of complex ideas and problems that are prematurely ironed out by simplistic thinking. Theological and political issues alike are more complex than they are often made out to be, and young people are often already recognizing and probing the places where simplistic explanations fall short.²⁴ However, they often lack the structured space and vocabulary with which to articulate complexity; their discomfort with simplistic answers may remain an abstract misgiving in their mind, something they know is not quite right but on which they cannot quite put their finger. Young people need to be given tools and methods by which they can examine multiple angles of

²² See, for example, Kara Powell and Brad Griffin, “Can I Ask That? Imagining a Church Big Enough for Teenagers’ Hard Questions,” in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016): 221-232, and Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 53-54.

²³ In survey results, anonymous question boxes were named as the most common way to invite young people to ask questions.

²⁴ David White writes that young people are particularly attuned to inconsistencies and contradictions, examining the ways in which what they are taught does not line up with their experience: “We also require prophetic leadership that points to the gaps between the promises of the Torah and our lived reality.... Youth operate within a developmental stage which drives them to seek a coherent hermeneutic or ideology through which to understand the world. But this same search for ideological coherence provides a unique perspective from which they can identify inconsistencies.” White, *Practicing Discernment*, 148.

a complex issue, analyze causes and assumptions, consider implications, recognize inconsistencies and contradictions, evaluate various perspectives, and imagine new possibilities or ways of addressing the issue.

The ability to engage complexity is a key component of wisdom, which delights in deep understanding and excels at hosting competing perspectives.²⁵ Wisdom is not satisfied with simple explanations but seeks a more nuanced understanding that is informed and tempered by multiple types and sources of knowledge. The wise person understands that there is more than one way to see an issue or solve a problem, but also that there is no perfect understanding or solution. As such, the wise person is able to hold ambiguity even as they make thoughtful decisions and judgments. As the book of Job shows, one aspect of wisdom is the ability to consider multiple perspectives on a complex issue, even if there is no easy resolution. And as the scholars' concern for Job's family illustrates, wisdom also considers the implications of an idea or event and how it affects others. Wisdom understands that ideas are never quite as simple, abstract, or innocuous as they may seem. An inability or unwillingness to acknowledge complexity runs the risk of "forgetting Job's wife" and causing collateral damage.

Collage is one way for young people to reflect on complex issues. There are other ways to engage complexity that are more verbal, more linear, or more cause-and-effect oriented. For example, David White suggests using the "But Why" method to explore complex social issues. By repeatedly asking "but why?" to each successive explanation for a phenomenon, the facilitator helps students move from surface-level proximate causes to ultimate systemic

²⁵ This is not to say that simplicity has no place in the life of a wise person, but simplicity born of wisdom is found on the far side of complexity as a second naivete. It is more a reflection of the wise person's comfort with complexity and ambiguity than a rejection of complex thinking. As is often attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. in various versions, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."

causes.²⁶ While some of those underlying causes may arise in the course of discussing a collage, the collage itself allows various aspects of an issue to stand in simultaneous tension. Like Marshall and Marshall write, the collage provides a way to meditate on unresolvable contradiction. It does not demand synthesis or resolution, but it externalizes tension in a medium that can speak for itself, or that can sit and wait for further reflection.

The practice of making and reflecting on a collage helps young people do several things that are important processes of wisdom as defined in chapter one. First, it helps them identify issues that are important to them, a practice White calls “identifying generative heart themes.”²⁷ In *Raising Hope: 4 Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth*, Anne Streaty Wimberly and Sarah Farmer write that artistic expression as pedagogy invites young people to “creative truth-telling” about “their lived reality and the injustices within it.”²⁸ However, encouraging young people to process their experiences through artistic expression accomplishes more than telling the truth to an audience; as the artist expresses their reality, it may help them come to a deeper understanding of their own reality and the depth of their feelings about it. As Lucy wrote in her post-workshop evaluation, the practice of making the collage helped her to see how much the UMC division was affecting her.²⁹ Although her choice to work on that issue already indicated that it was important to her, until she spent three hours on her collage, she had not realized quite how much it mattered to her or how deeply she felt about it.

In addition to the creation process revealing what matters to a young person, the finished product may also provide further insight into their own thoughts and feelings as they notice, or others point out, the way their aesthetic reveals their subconscious feelings about an issue. In the

²⁶ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 127-128.

²⁷ White, *Practicing Discernment*, 98.

²⁸ Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 149-150.

²⁹ Although the evaluations were anonymous, Lucy chose to identify herself in her evaluation.

collage on hell and forgiveness, for example, the group agreed that a deep sadness and sense of alienation pervaded the collage, which the artist, a high school junior named Heather, later said she did not intend. Even where she tried to portray love and connection, somehow the choice of elements, from the song lyrics to the background design, still communicated isolation. Although it was unclear whether it actually reflected her subconscious feelings or whether the group misinterpreted it, I have often wondered since then whether the group consensus caused her to re-examine her own relationship to the theological issue through a more affective lens.

Understanding oneself and one's values and motivations is key for wisdom, and the practice of making and reflecting on a collage can help young people learn about the ideas and emotions that animate them.

Second, making collages helps young people see differently. Perspicacity, or the ability to see deeply and clearly into an issue, is an important component of wisdom, and a collage invites young people to see differently in a number of ways. First, by trying to represent multiple perspectives in the creation of the collage, and by dialoguing with others about the finished product, young people can see an issue through someone else's eyes. One scholar wrote in their evaluation that the initial discussion around the issues, as well as unpacking the collages, allowed them to "view the topics through lenses that we may otherwise have missed." Second, there is enough interpretive space in each element of a collage that young people might see something new in it each time they look at it. Recall Mackenzie's reflection on her collage. She had included an image of water as a way to indicate the opposite of fire, but she had not given much thought to the symbolism. When she looked at the collage again the next morning, however, she saw the water in a new way, through the lens of baptism. As I write this with Lucy's collage pulled up on my screen, I notice another detail in the photo of people arguing that I had not

noticed previously; one person is turned away from the group, looking at her phone. This one small detail provides yet another angle on the large and complex issue facing the UMC: the role that social media plays in our culture, in terms of raising awareness but also causing distraction and division. Finally, as noted above, the collage also brings together different genres; it can be a space where history, theology, current events, art, and poetry meet. Because it is not limited by genre, it can be a space where young people see new connections between ideas, see an issue through a new theoretical lens, and imagine new possibilities for addressing the issue or for making a way forward. For example, the inclusion of the phoenix in Lucy's collage models courageous hope for the future, even if that future is uncertain. As Anne Streaty Wimberly and Sarah Farmer write, artistic endeavors "can be pathways to bringing forth young people's bold embrace and expression of hope...that spur courageous action."³⁰

Finally, the practice of collage helps young people articulate and bring clarity to a complex issue that may be vague and hazy in their minds, or that they may not feel comfortable discussing. After all, as the use of multiple genres and media in a collage attests, the various components of the issue may not even speak to each other in the same language, making it very difficult for young people to formulate logical explanations, clear connections, or linear arguments. One scholar noted in their evaluation that the practice of discussing their collage "was really helpful for my confidence in asking and discussing that specific question, or other questions like it." Particularly for introverted young people, it can be invaluable for them to have time and space to process their thoughts before being asked to share them with the group. This is particularly the case in online facilitation, in which the lag time makes it likely that one will accidentally interrupt or be interrupted; to speak up takes more courage, effort, and decisiveness.

³⁰ Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 146.

For Sofia, who was less outspoken than some of the other scholars, the length of time she spent explaining her collage was greater than all her other comments combined over the course of the week.

While it can feel vulnerable to share one's artwork, the collage also serves as a mediator through which young people can share their ideas, what Parker Palmer calls a "third thing." By exploring an important topic indirectly or "on the slant," through poetry, narrative, music, or art, a learning community can create space for vulnerable truths to be spoken that might not be otherwise volunteered. Palmer writes, "Mediated by a third thing, truth can emerge from, and return to, our awareness at whatever pace and depth we are able to handle—sometimes inwardly in silence, sometimes aloud in community—giving the shy soul the protective cover it needs."³¹ By externalizing their thoughts, many of which were too complex to articulate, the scholars were able to let the finished product speak for them.

Pedagogical practice is always *in process*; the practice of teaching is constantly being refined through implementation, reflection, feedback, and re-imagining. Looking back on this workshop, there are certainly aspects of it that I would have approached differently. One tension with which I constantly wrestle is the tension between breadth and depth in biblical education: how much content to cover, and how deeply to cover it. I have rarely taught a class in which I ran out of material. My more common regret is not having had, or made, the time to explore fruitful avenues of discussion more fully. The discussion of the collages felt particularly rushed, an issue I would have liked to resolve in an in-person format by leaving them up for further observation. Given the opportunity to offer the workshop again, I would also like to engage the various perspectives on suffering in the book in a more aesthetic way than merely discussing

³¹ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 92-93.

each one, perhaps by creating an initial collage of images, chosen by scholars, that represent each perspective on suffering in Job.

Conclusion

As this study has shown, there are numerous ways to explore the wisdom literature with youth that are consonant with its own pedagogy and that cultivate wisdom in youth. Here I have explored only one possibility among many: a way of teaching Job that celebrates its complexities and tensions rather than smoothing them over, that invites young people both to explore the text deeply and also to follow its example in theological reflection of their own. The possibilities are nearly limitless for engaging the book of Job with youth, a few of which have been gestured toward in passing in this chapter or others: Bibliodrama with the marginal characters, writing oneself into the dialogues, exploring Job's psalmic parody in chapter 8, writing or painting a meditation on the Divine Speeches that draws on one's own attentiveness to creation. In reflecting on the experience of this workshop, I have also tried to indicate several fruitful strands that could have been followed had time permitted, such as rewriting the ending or musing on the way that Job's wife and children stand in for other marginalized groups who end up as collateral damage of the powerful—themes that arose not from my explanation of the text, but from the process of engaging the text together.

As many ways as there are to teach on the book of Job alone, there are countless other possibilities for engaging the wisdom literature with youth, some of which were illuminated in chapters four and five by the practitioners who are already engaged in this work. Even beyond that, there are infinite ways to employ a framework of "doing what the Bible does" in biblical education with youth throughout the canon, as well as to incorporate the pedagogical practices of wisdom in religious education more generally. My hope is that this project will open up new

possibilities for facilitating encounters with the biblical text in youth ministry, and that it will spark new ideas for creative pedagogies that invite youth to practice wisdom.

Conclusion

As I noted in the introduction, one of the most foundational claims of this project, as well as of my philosophy of youth ministry more generally, is that young people need to be taken seriously as full participants in the work of the church. As Kenda Dean has aptly noted, the church prefers to view young people as *consumers* of theology, rather than participants in *constructing* it.¹ Instead of seeing youth as passive recipients of youth ministry programming or catechesis, adults should value the voices and vocations of young people; and young people should be participating in the work of doing theology and interpreting the Bible. The framework for biblical education that I have put forth in this dissertation requires that young people do the work of thinking, interpreting, and engaging with the biblical text themselves, rather than being told how to understand and apply it. It also requires that the youth minister be willing to *be shaped by* the interpretive work of young people, to rethink their own understanding of the biblical text and tradition in light of new wisdom and insight shared by their students. In the introduction, I pointed out that the field of youth ministry tends to apply theory to practice, creating a normative agenda for what should be done with and for youth for their faith formation, but it has often failed to account for the voices of young people themselves. In contrast, practical theology acknowledges the role that lived practice plays in the formation, critique, and revision of theology and tradition. Similarly, in the field of youth ministry, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the lived experience and theological reflections of youth and how they contribute meaningfully to the church, enriching and enlarging our experience of Scripture and tradition.

Another key claim of this project is that wisdom is not content that can be *imparted* to youth; instead, it is an approach toward knowledge that must be *cultivated*. In chapter one, I

¹ Dean, “Fessing Up,” 30.

defined wisdom as an integrative approach to knowledge characterized by a love for learning and a desire for deep understanding, that values multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, that considers the meaning and implications of ideas and events, and that gives one the insight and discernment to navigate complex situations in ways that lead to wholeness and flourishing. As such, educating for wisdom cannot be a matter of telling young people what to think or what to do. Giving advice, relaying biblical injunctions, or providing clear takeaways for life application cannot cultivate wisdom in youth. Because wisdom is a multivarious way of knowing, educating for wisdom must invite young people to experience wisdom's cognitive and affective processes. The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning experiences in which young people do their own thinking and processing. The learner becomes wise not by assimilating knowledge or following advice, but by actively practicing the modes of thinking characteristic of wisdom.

A third key argument in this project has been for more thoughtful ways of engaging the Bible in youth ministry. In the introduction, I identified the need for a pedagogical approach that respects both the text and the learner, by engaging in robust and critically-informed interpretation of the text as well as respecting the agency of the learners and inviting them to be part of the interpretive process. As Christianity's sacred text, it is often taken for granted that the Bible *should* play a role in the religious education of youth, but there is often not enough thought given to *what* role it plays or *how* it should be taught. In the absence of resources on engaging the Bible with youth, many youth ministers default to a common way of teaching the Bible, which I identified in chapter two as the "key text and takeaway approach." In this approach, youth ministers and curriculum writers derive a clear principle from a few verses that young people can easily apply to their lives. However, this approach neither mines the rich complexities of the text nor invites the learner's participation in the processes of interpretation and theological reflection.

The key text and takeaway approach treats the Bible as a kind of guidebook for navigating adolescence, rather than as an ancient text that requires careful attention to its historical context and its own ways of meaning-making. The Bible is far more ambiguous and confusing than the key text approach makes it seem, which, as Elizabeth Corrie notes, “set[s] young people up for disillusionment when they...discover how messy and cacophonous it actually is.”² Rather than smoothing over the complexity and cacophony, youth ministers should intentionally engage it, inviting young people to practice biblical interpretation and theological reflection in the midst of the Bible’s diverse theologies. In chapter two, drawing on Peter Enns’ observation that reading the Bible leads not necessarily to clarity but to *wisdom*, I proposed a model of biblical education that moves away from the key text and takeaway approach and toward a more open-ended process of theological reflection that cultivates wisdom.³ Instead of “doing what the Bible says,” which ends with application of a principle, I suggested that biblical education focus on “doing what the Bible does,” that is, discerning the various ways in which the text engages in meaning-making and theological reflection, and inviting young people to participate in the same processes. Of course, a text can “do” many things, including glorifying violence or inciting fear and guilt, and some are worthier of emulation than others. Constructing a pedagogy based on what the Bible does is thus a creative and dynamic process that requires one to move back and forth between the integrity of the text and one’s pedagogical concerns and pastoral sensitivity.

These three core arguments can be summarized thus: Young people should be viewed as active participants in biblical interpretation, theological reflection, and vocational action; the Bible should be understood not as a reference book, but as an “ancient, ambiguous, and diverse”

² Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*, 81.

³ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 11.

text that “shepherds us toward wisdom” as we wrestle with it;⁴ and the educational task should be conceived not as imparting content to young people, but rather as exploring content with young people. Together, these three claims undergird the core purpose of this project: to develop a framework for biblical education that cultivates and evokes the wisdom of youth.

Throughout this dissertation, I have drawn on the wisdom literature as a conversation partner and case study in the development of such a model of biblical education. As literature intended for the education of the young and concerned with wisdom and character development, the wisdom corpus provides insight into pedagogical strategies for cultivating wisdom. In chapter three, seeking to develop a model for teaching wisdom literature that is consonant with its own pedagogy, I explored a few of the rhetorical strategies of each wisdom book and how they function to cultivate wisdom in the reader. From juxtaposition and proverb permutations in Proverbs, to observation and reflection in Ecclesiastes, to dialogue and lack of conclusive answers in Job, the wisdom literature invites its readers to participate in their own formation in wisdom. Based on the pedagogy of the wisdom literature, I suggested five pedagogical practices for cultivating wisdom that invite youth to experience wisdom’s cognitive and affective processes: playfulness, attentiveness, wonder, reflection, and dialogue. By incorporating these practices into their pedagogy, youth ministers can begin to shift their biblical education away from the key text and takeaway approach, and toward an approach that provides opportunities for young people to practice wisdom’s cognitive and affective processes.

Chapters four and five analyzed the way youth ministers teach wisdom literature in light of the findings of chapter three. In chapter four, I identified three characteristic features of the wisdom corpus that youth ministers named as both gifts and challenges of teaching wisdom

⁴ Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, 5-13.

literature: its focus on the human experience, its poetic style, and its tendency toward ambiguity. I argued that these three characteristics are important aspects of the pedagogy of wisdom literature, and that the challenge of each feature *is* its gift: one grows in wisdom by embracing the challenges posed by the wisdom literature. Youth ministers can help to cultivate wisdom in their youth by wrestling with the tension between experiential and theological aspects of the wisdom literature, by allowing students to experience the evocative language of its poetic form rather than summarizing it for them, and by exploring the ambiguities of the wisdom literature rather than explaining or resolving them.

In chapter five, I analyzed in greater depth how youth ministers teach the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, including their interpretation of each book, the most common texts that are taught from each book, the unique challenges they face in teaching each book, and the learning activities that they use to teach each book. Although there is great diversity in youth ministers' interpretations of these books and the learning activities they employ to teach it, some of which are more conducive to cultivating wisdom than others, a few key themes arose. First, the most common texts taught from each book of the wisdom corpus come from the beginning and ending of each book, as well as a select few inspirational texts like the Times poem in Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 3:1-8) or Job's assertion that "I know my redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). These content choices omit much of the theological meat of the books, often reducing their message to a simple moral takeaway to obey God. In doing so, many youth ministers and curriculum writers hamper the wisdom literature's potential for cultivating wisdom. Second, many of the learning activities and discussion questions are designed to lead to a single conclusion and reinforce the main point that is taught. While some curricula have space for creative work or divergent interpretations, most tend to *explain* the text *to* students, rather than *explore* the text *with*

students. To cultivate wisdom, however, youth ministers need to design learning activities that invite youth to do their own thinking and processing. The text itself does not merely tell the reader what to think or do, but rather, it requires the reader to wonder, to make connections, to discern meaning, to adjudicate perspectives.

In the final chapter, I synthesized all of these insights to show one example of what this theory might look like in practice, by describing the process of designing and implementing a workshop curriculum on the book of Job. I designed the workshop to invite young people to explore the text in a way that facilitated the five practices of wisdom, as well as to give them an opportunity to “do what the text does” by creating a theological collage. I showed how collage is a valuable learning tool that cultivates wisdom by inviting young people to experience some of the cognitive and affective processes of wisdom: it helps them identify issues that are important to them, giving them insight into their own feelings, values, and motivations; it helps them see issues from multiple angles and in new ways as they identify connections between ideas and learn from the perspectives of others; and it helps them process, articulate, and bring clarity to a complex issue without needing to resolve it fully.

This project has argued for a pedagogy that values young people’s own capacity for thoughtful reflection and judgment rather than merely giving them advice. A natural implication of this argument is that young people themselves have wise insight to share with adults, who should be open and receptive to mutual discovery with youth. A pedagogical framework for cultivating wisdom falls flat if it is imposed upon students for the purpose of advice-giving or behavior management, without mutually constructive exploration and dialogue. Because of my commitment to valuing the wisdom of youth, the voices of young people themselves are an important part of this project. Thus, the final chapter highlighted YTI scholars’ insights into the

biblical text itself as well as their constructive theological reflections in the collage project. Over the course of the workshop, scholars shared many thoughtful insights into the book of Job, some of which I had never considered despite years of disciplined study. With empathetic eyes and ears, they recognized important implications of the story for those who suffer or are harmed by thoughtless or foolish decisions. I do not want to give the impression that we should invite young people to read and explore the biblical text solely because it is a better way to engage *their* interest or because it is formative for *them*. Instead, I want to emphasize the communal nature of reading, interpreting, and pursuing wisdom. I *need* the readings of young people to inform my own reading of the text. I *need* their perspective to illuminate, refine, and critique my own limited perspective. In short, I *need* the wisdom of youth.

I began this dissertation by reflecting on the need for wisdom in our society, which is a concern often shared by youth ministers who hope for their students to make wise decisions and consider the consequences of their actions. It will not suffice, however, to pass down our own advice and best practices to our youth without cultivating the resources for wisdom that are already present within them. The world is constantly changing, and new and complex situations arise that demand creative innovation and theological improvisation to address them. The wise insights of the past, while instructive, are inadequate for the task of navigating an uncertain future. If parents, youth pastors, and churches desire to instill wisdom in the younger generation, it will require pedagogical approaches that *cultivate* rather than *impart* wisdom: that lift up young people's own capacity for discernment, and that kindle their curiosity, love for learning, and desire for deeper understanding of the issues they face. It will require that educators give young people the opportunity to practice the cognitive and affective processes that lead to thoughtful and wise decision-making. And finally, it will require that youth pastors themselves

engage in the practices of wisdom: playfulness, attentiveness, wonder, reflection, and dialogue.

In the practice of pursuing wisdom themselves, youth pastors will be shaped into the kind of educators that are ever more open to understanding and insight, and to learning from, even as they cultivate, the wisdom of youth.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Biblical Education

1. Which of the following best describes your work with youth?
 - a. I am employed as a full-time youth minister at a church.
 - b. I am employed as a part-time youth minister at a church.
 - c. I am not employed by my church, but I hold regular responsibility for youth programming and teaching.
 - d. I teach/work with youth in a parachurch context (please describe context in the box below).
 - e. Other (please specify).
2. Which of the following best describes your approach to curriculum?
 - a. I use published curriculum resources as written.
 - b. I use published curriculum resources, but spend time customizing the lesson plan.
 - c. I design my own curriculum and lesson plans.
 - d. Sometimes I used published resources, and sometimes I design my own curriculum.
 - e. Other (please specify).
3. What published curricula do you use (denominational curriculum; popular youth ministry curricula such as Group, Orange, or Youth Specialties; video curriculum; free resources online; etc.)?
4. How do you choose what content to cover?
 - a. I follow the lectionary.
 - b. I follow a curriculum.
 - c. I choose my own topics and series based on the needs of my group.
 - d. The content is chosen by someone other than me (committee, preaching minister, Religious Education coordinator, etc.).
 - e. Other (please specify).
5. Do you (or the curricula you use) tend to start with a topic, or with the biblical text?
 - a. I almost always start with a biblical text, then develop a lesson from it.
 - b. I almost always start with a topic, then choose accompanying biblical texts.
 - c. I most often start with the text, but occasionally start with a topic.
 - d. I most often start with a topic, but occasionally start with a text.
 - e. It's a pretty even split.
 - f. Other (please specify).
6. What genres in the Old Testament have you taught on in the past 3 years?
 - a. Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).
 - b. Historical Narratives (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther).
 - c. Wisdom (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs).
 - d. Psalms.
 - e. Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel).
 - f. Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micha, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi).
7. What genres in the New Testament have you taught on in the past 3 years?

- a. Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).
 - b. Acts.
 - c. Traditional Pauline Epistles (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Philemon).
 - d. Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus).
 - e. General Epistles (Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude).
 - f. Revelation.
8. Please briefly describe one recent lesson you taught that is representative of your typical teaching style. What was the topic? Text? Main takeaway? What learning activities did you use? How did your youth receive/respond to it?
 9. What are some challenges you face in doing Bible study with youth?
 10. After a year of Bible study with you, which of the following changes would you most like to see in their engagement with the Bible? Please choose your top 3.
 - a. They spend more time reading the Bible devotionally at home.
 - b. They have a broader knowledge of the Bible's content.
 - c. They turn to the Bible to find guidance when they have a problem.
 - d. They feel comfortable asking hard questions about the Bible.
 - e. They memorize more passages in the Bible.
 - f. They can analyze how stories and themes in the Bible might relate to their cultural context.
 - g. They have the tools and skills they need to read and interpret the Bible for themselves.
 - h. They are more excited about studying the Bible in youth group.
 - i. They understand the social and historical context (of Israel, the early church, etc.) behind the Bible and how it influences the message of a biblical text.
 - j. They understand basic moral/ethical principles from the Bible.
 - k. Other (please specify).
 11. Please give an example of how one of your goals might influence the way you teach. For example, if your goal is for your youth to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, what tools are you giving them? How are you helping them practice interpretive skills?
 12. After a year of participation in Bible study with you, which of the following changes would you most like to see in their spiritual life? Please choose your top 3.
 - a. They know they are loved and are more emotionally and spiritually healthy.
 - b. Their faith leads them to be more involved in the public realm through service or activism.
 - c. They are more involved in church/youth group activities.
 - d. They feel comfortable asking hard questions about their faith.
 - e. They have a personal relationship with Jesus and/or a robust prayer life.
 - f. They share their faith with others.
 - g. They consider the social implications of theological beliefs.
 - h. They can confidently articulate what they believe and value.
 - i. They are open to learning from others who believe differently.
 - j. They make good moral and ethical choices.
 - k. Other (please specify).
 13. Please give an example of how one of your goals might influence the way you teach. For example, if your goal is for your youth to be able to articulate their beliefs, how do you

help them figure out what they believe? Do you give them opportunities to practice talking about it?

Wisdom Literature

1. What would you consider to be some characteristics of a wise young person?
2. In the past 3 years, have you taught any lessons or series on the following:
 - a. Proverbs
 - b. Job
 - c. Ecclesiastes
 - d. Song of Songs
 - e. Apocryphal Wisdom Text (Sirach or Wisdom of Solomon)
3. Have you ever taught any lessons or series on the following? If you have never taught on any of these books, you may move on to the next section.
 - a. Proverbs
 - b. Job
 - c. Ecclesiastes
 - d. Song of Songs
 - e. Apocryphal Wisdom Text (Sirach or Wisdom of Solomon)
 - f. I have never taught on any of these books.
4. Did you use a curriculum or write your own lessons?
5. If you used a curriculum, which one did you use? Please include publisher and title.
6. Did you edit or customize the curriculum? If so, how?
7. If you wrote your own curriculum, what texts did you choose to cover, and why? What ideas/takeaways from the books were most important to you?
8. What was the title of your series?
9. What resources, if any, did you use for developing the curriculum? (Please include any curriculum or online resources consulted, books or commentaries you read, videos you watched, previous education or experience drawn on, etc.)
10. What learning activities did you use to teach on these books (Powerpoint and lecture, showing videos, small group discussion, art projects, drama, games or activities that tie into the lesson, etc.)?
11. How did your youth respond to the series—were they engaged? Were they surprised or confused by anything? What memorable comments or questions did they have?
12. What challenges did you face in teaching the wisdom literature to youth?

Demographic Information

1. What are the age of the youth with whom you work? Please check all that apply.
 - a. 6th grade
 - b. 7th grade
 - c. 8th grade
 - d. 9th grade
 - e. 10th grade
 - f. 11th grade
 - g. 12th grade

- h. Other (please specify)
- 2. What is the denomination or church tradition in which you currently work?
- 3. How many years have you been involved in youth ministry?
 - a. 0-5
 - b. 5-10
 - c. 10-15
 - d. 15-20
 - e. 20+
 - f. Other (please specify)
- 4. Gender
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer not to say
 - e. Other (please specify)
- 5. Which of the following best describes you?
 - a. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic or Latino/a/x
 - d. Native American or Alaska Native
 - e. White or Caucasian
 - f. Multiracial or biracial
 - g. Other (please specify)
- 6. Age
 - a. 18-24
 - b. 25-34
 - c. 35-44
 - d. 45-54
 - e. 55-64
 - f. 65+
- 7. Do you have an undergraduate degree in theology, ministry, or religion? If you have or are currently working on one, please specify your degree and/or area of study.
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I am currently working on one
 - d. Other (please specify)
- 8. Do you have a master's degree in theology, ministry, or religion? If you have or are currently working on one, please specify your degree and/or area of study.
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I am currently working on one
 - d. Other (please specify)
- 9. Do you have a terminal degree in theology, ministry, or religion? If you have or are currently working on one, please specify your degree and/or area of study.
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

- c. I am currently working on one
- d. Other (please specify)

Follow-Up

1. Would you be willing to be contacted for follow-up questions, or to have a more in-depth follow-up interview on Zoom? If so, please provide your name and email address.
2. If you have taught on the wisdom literature, do you still have your lesson plans, and would you be willing to share them? If so, please provide your name and email address.
3. Is there anything else you would like to share that was not covered?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your ministry. If I were to introduce you in a paragraph, what would you want me to say?
 - a. What is the denomination/church tradition in which you serve?
 - b. What is the size of your youth ministry? The age of your youth?
 - c. How long have you served in youth ministry, and in what capacity?
2. Wisdom literature isn't a very common genre to teach on in youth ministry. What made you choose to teach on this/these book(s)?
3. Tell me about your understanding of Proverbs/Job/Ecclesiastes. What is the purpose of this book? The main point? What parts of the book are most important for understanding it?
4. Do you feel that the wisdom literature ever contradicts itself, or seems to? How do you handle that in your teaching?
5. What role do you think playfulness or imagination have in the study or teaching of these books?
6. What do you think is the role of nature or creation in the wisdom literature? Did you ever talk about nature or creation when you taught it?
7. Tell me more about your lesson plans and how you taught this book to your youth.
 - a. How many lessons did you teach?
 - b. What kind of learning activities did you use?
 - c. What texts did you teach?
 - d. What were the main points or takeaways?
 - e. Can you give some examples of discussion questions you asked?
8. What was the most challenging thing about teaching the wisdom literature?
9. How did your youth respond to the series? What parts did they find most engaging, surprising, or confusing? What questions did they have? How did you respond to those questions?
10. What were your goals in teaching this book? What did you hope your youth would learn? How did you hope it would shape them?
11. Can young people be wise? What would be some characteristics of a wise young person?
12. Do you think studying the wisdom literature can help young people become wise? How?
13. What kinds of practices do you think can cultivate wisdom?
14. Is there anything I haven't asked that you wish I had?
15. What would you like other youth ministers to know about teaching wisdom literature?