

Who Can Read Wisdom?

The Implied Virtues of the Readers of Wisdom's Narratives

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the attempt to reformulate hermeneutical questions about 'how to read the Bible' in terms of theological characterisations of the kind of reader best placed to read the Bible well. It is thus situated amidst renewed interest in the intersection of character ethics and biblical interpretation. It addresses two related issues, before pointing in the direction of a substantive third concern. First, it explores what is at stake in reading wisdom texts as narratives, finding it persuasive to construe wisdom in narrative terms. Secondly, it considers what virtues are presupposed in these narrative constructions. The reading of Job draws us to consider patience; from Proverbs we consider the virtue of perceptiveness; and from Ecclesiastes a virtue of honesty. Thirdly, the larger question of how one might begin to characterise the implied reader of these texts is considered, building on a canonically constructed portrait of the reader informed by the virtues considered.

Keywords:

wisdom; virtue; character; patience; perception; honesty

For all the hermeneutical attention given to the question of how to read the Bible, it is perhaps surprising how little has been made of the nature of the reader in question, surely an important component in any such reading. Although there has certainly been discussion of matters such as the significance or role of faith in the life of the interpreter, and the desirability or otherwise of bracketing out one's broader commitments, questions relating to the hermeneutical significance of the interpreter's *character* have been less commonly asked and less constructively discussed. But rather than ask straightforwardly 'how does one read the Bible?', might it be worthwhile to consider the related question: who can read the Bible? More specifically: what kind of person is best placed to read the Bible well?

Work in this area has focused on the question of how to describe the character and virtues of the implied reader of scriptural texts.¹ For these purposes little theoretical precision is required in the category of 'implied reader', and the

¹ E.g. Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

overlapping constructs of an implied or model or ideal reader will all serve equally well to get at the notion of the kind of reader appropriate to a close and attentive reading of the text at hand.² The point is that the broad category of implied reader allows one to address, indirectly as it were, the portrait that the biblical writers were assuming of who their ideal reader was; and this may be just as interesting as the portrait of the wise or virtuous character that is constructed *in the texts themselves*. It would also be a matter of interest if one were to discover that the assumed reader were different in some way from the portrait of the reader constructed in the text, especially if such differences were pertinent to questions of character.

Wisdom literature is certainly interested in the question of character, even if this concern has not always been framed this way. Ellen Davis has proposed that ‘the Israelite wisdom literature, especially the book of Proverbs, [may be taken] as an exegetical base for renewing a biblically informed virtue tradition’, a task which she describes as ‘useful’ and even ‘urgent’ for our day.³ Davis was contributing to one of the three volumes that emerged from the SBL ‘Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation’ group, which included a handful of essays addressing wisdom literature.⁴ These essays model precisely the project of focusing on the portrait of the virtuous character that is constructed *in the text*. More programmatically, the obvious reference point for our enquiry is William Brown’s *Character in Crisis*, subtitled ‘A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament’, which in 1996 set out to explore the ways in which wisdom literature cultivated virtue in its reader.⁵ Brown noted that most of what little attention to virtue thinking there had been in biblical studies had been preoccupied with narrative, but he correctly observed that this topic exceeds the bounds of one genre,⁶ and that ‘biblical wisdom ... is not without its narrational dimensions’ in any case.⁷ What Brown hints at here is that the more familiar concerns of virtue ethicists with narrative are not in fact incompatible with wisdom literature as we find it in the Hebrew Bible, or indeed the

² Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 36–38.

³ Ellen F. Davis, ‘Preserving Virtues: Renewing the Tradition of the Sages’, in William P. Brown (ed.), *Character & Scripture. Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 183–201, here 186 and 184 respectively.

⁴ In addition to Brown (ed.), *Character & Scripture*, see also M. Daniel Carroll R. & Jacqueline E. Lapsley (eds.), *Character Ethics and the Old Testament. Moral Dimensions of Scripture* and Robert L. Brawley, (ed.), *Character Ethics and the New Testament. Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (both: Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

⁵ William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis. A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). His focus is broadened slightly in the revised edition: *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

⁶ Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 18.

⁷ Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 19.

Christian Old Testament. Does this angle of approach allow us to access the *implied* character of the virtuous reader of wisdom texts?

More generally, all who write on character and textual interpretation must in the end cross the path, in some way or other, of Henry James' famous aphorism: 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?'⁸ If there is no narrative in the text, no 'incident', no plot or onward development, then we may have snapshots of the moral life, but we do not have character. But the very fact that wisdom texts are so strongly predisposed to address questions of character is perhaps one reason why attention to their narrative dimensions should not strike us as so odd.

This article therefore addresses two related issues, before pointing in the direction of a substantive third concern. First, we explore what is at stake in reading wisdom texts as narratives. Secondly, we consider what virtues are presupposed in these narrative constructions. This allows us to begin to address the larger question of how one might begin to characterise the implied reader of these texts, which is a question that lies along the broader pathway to a theological conception of the reader of the Bible.

Reading Wisdom Texts as Narratives

One could perhaps attempt to work head-on with the question of the narrative dimensions of wisdom texts; and explore whether or to what extent biblical wisdom books were intended to function as narratives. However, a relatively quick way through the tangle of issues that such questions raise is to put the matter in terms of reading strategies: in other words, how do wisdom texts work when read as narratives? One need not hold a strong theory about the narrative dimensions of all texts or of human experience in general, largely persuasive as I think such claims are, in order to observe that one can construe wisdom texts in narrative ways. This 'reading as' offers some hermeneutical purchase on key aspects of the texts as they are presented to us in the canon.

For the purposes of this initial foray we may limit our focus to the three books found within the Jewish canon that have frequently been recognised as wisdom texts: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. A fuller study would need to engage Will Kynes' excellent point that 'wisdom literature' is a construct best left open to cross-comparison to other texts, but this need not mean that one cannot ask about Job,

⁸ Henry James, *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 13. The quote is from the title article, originally written in 1884.

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in themselves, even if one might sit looser to the category ‘wisdom books’.⁹ Thus clearly the Song of Songs would make for an interesting study here too. To go on and extend the exploration to texts such as Ben Sira and perhaps Wisdom of Solomon would not add complexity on a hermeneutical level: one can read any text as a narrative and ask the same questions about its implied reader. Nevertheless, these further texts seem to invite narrative readings in somewhat less obvious ways, and an initial study has to start somewhere.

The long poem of Job is framed by narrative devices that separate out the reader from the characters within the dialogues that follow. One of the results, as Carol Newsom has explored, is that the book can be read a little like a dramatic performance. Newsom imagines the moral address of the book through a staging of a Bakhtinian polyphony of voices: enchanted listeners wend their way home from the theatre debating which speeches best captured the moral insights of life, and the play ‘shifts to the audience much of the work of teasing out the implicit quarrels among the disparate voices’.¹⁰ The implied reader hears the author’s dialogically-framed instruction (or construction) as a way of being challenged to explore complex moral issues. In many cases, though not all, to extract a particular text from this overarching ‘theodrama’ would risk losing its force as a contribution to the book of Job’s ‘contest of moral imaginations’, as the subtitle of Newsom’s study has it. The book has to be read as a narrative in order to work this way.

The addressee of the sentence literature in Proverbs is the young man (‘my son’; 1:8, 10, 15, and so forth) who is invited on to the way of wisdom by his father, whether it is the biological family relationship in view or whether it is being used as an image of the apprentice being instructed by his mentor. The young man is warned to watch out along the way for women who will lure him to the right or to the left (e.g. 5:1–14; 6:20–35; 9:13–18), in order that, successfully resisting them, he might arrive at a happy marriage with Lady Wisdom in chapter 31. Not much theatre-going in view here. But the aphorisms of chapters 10–30 must be understood against the background of the question of how the young man looks at the world. Each saying is in itself a contribution to the picture being built up by the implied reader. In Robert Alter’s helpful characterisation, such sayings are

... very neat, but, we may ask, is that the way the world is? Obviously not—obvious, I think, not only to us but also to the poet in Proverbs, who ... [gives us] an

⁹ Will Kynes, *An Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially 259–64. The citation here is from 260.

underlying principle of moral causation that he believes to be present in reality but that he knows would never be so perspicuous in the untidiness of experience outside literature.¹¹

Each individual insight, therefore, needs to be understood in the context of a broader picture that the book is building up from verse to verse through these chapters. This is narrative artistry in poetic form. It may be true that direct forms of narrative address, from a first person voice in the text to a reader, are rare in Proverbs,¹² and certainly one need not suggest that narrative is the only way to make sense of the book, either as a whole or in its various parts, but clearly it offers one illuminating angle of insight.

The narrative strategies of Ecclesiastes are perhaps harder to discern, but are clearly there, as Eric Christianson has shown in his study of the shifting strategies in play in the book.¹³ Christianson catalogues the various narrative events of the book, and their distribution into a kind of plot, before addressing the questions of how the frame does or does not alter the narrative reference. In conclusion he remarks how the book feels like a ‘one-man play’, and invites us back into the theatre again, to imagine a performance by the central character, Qoheleth, as he reminisces, reflects, and sometimes addresses the audience directly (with the frame narrator being, in Christianson’s words, ‘the stage itself’).¹⁴

Clearly the narrative dimensions of each text are different, and were we to consider further texts that raise wisdom reflections then they would each need addressing on their own terms. At minimum, though, we have established enough ground to proceed with an analysis of the implied reader of these three texts as narratives. We may also point out that their canonical location invites the further question as to who can read all three of these books, and how such an implied reader might differ from the person who only reads one of them. We shall return to this point below.

The Virtues of Wisdom’s Implied Reader

¹¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 169.

¹² Only 7:6–27 and 24:30–34 really fit this model. I owe this observation to Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTS 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 35, n. 62.

¹³ In addition to his *A Time to Tell*, see also Eric S. Christianson, ‘The Ethics of Narrative Wisdom: Qoheleth as a Test Case’, in Brown (ed.), *Character & Scripture*, 202–10.

¹⁴ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 257–58.

It would be easy at this point to retreat to bland generalities concerning the desirability for any reader of these wisdom texts to be wise, which is doubtless true, but not particularly illuminating. To go further, the implied virtues of the text may only be addressed by careful exegesis in the framework of a suitably informed and imaginative moral vision. The virtue (rather than the devil) is in the detail. The initial examples that we have the space to explore here may also leave the impression of merely translating familiar interpretive insights into a new hermeneutical framework. Nevertheless, without examples, the hermeneutical case remains of minimal interest.

The narratives of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes offer three different portraits of an implied reader: they range over such virtues as the willingness to entertain a variety of questions and perspectives; the desire to grow toward maturity; and the ability to laugh at the difficulty of holding it all together in one coherent vision. In what follows I will offer very brief explorations of three virtues that all relate in various ways to the practice of reading, after first considering them on their own terms. From the reading of Job we consider the well-known virtue of patience, though attuned to the virtue of patient attention in particular. From reading Proverbs we pick out the virtue of perceptiveness. From reading Ecclesiastes we might learn a virtue of honesty, understood in a particular way. None of these are intended to capture more than one small part of the bigger task of thinking about the three books in their entirety.

Job and the Patient Reader

We owe the phrase ‘the patience of Job’ to Tyndale’s rendering of *tēn hupomonēn Iōb* in James 5:11, and so startlingly successful has this translation been that it can obscure the real work of patience that is enjoined upon the reader of the book of Job. There is no straightforward notion of ‘patience’ in the Hebrew conceptuality of the book itself—many modern translations offer the word only at 6:11 (‘what is my end, that I should be patient’ (NRSV); where *ki-’a’arik naphshi* is ‘that I should lengthen/prolong myself’). Perhaps the nearest we have is hope, which encourages perseverance.¹⁵ But how is the persevering reader to be understood?

Susannah Ticciati’s theological reading of the book offers an interesting way in to the question of how one might conceptualise the characteristics of patience with

¹⁵ Over a dozen of the thirty or so uses of *tiqvah* (‘hope’) in the Old Testament are found in Job. See also below on the LXX.

respect to the kinds of patience required of the reader of the finished work.¹⁶ She is responding to Karl Barth's reading of Job, which translated the core notion of patience into an analysis of Job's obedience. However, Barth then transposed the book into two simultaneous portraits whereby the prose prologue and epilogue portray Job's obedience in an 'eschatological' and eternal relation to God outside of time, while the central poetic section contrasts this with the history of Job as a fallible human being, hence the title of his discussion: 'The Falsehood and Condemnation of Man'.¹⁷ For Ticciati, what this misses is the sense of a 'developmental dynamic,' or the ability 'to do justice to history'.¹⁸ She suggests that such readings are to some extent typical of a theological framework that is so keen to assert the newness of divine grace that it posits all ethical transformation as a kind of *creatio ex nihilo* that stands in an obscure (lack of) relationship with the original person. Her own 'rereading of Job' sees the whole book as a coherent text that narrates the transformation of Job through an inward reflective journey of self-examination.

The manner in which the book of Job proceeds, then, is not just an elegant framing of an occasion on which to rehearse the real issues (whether such issues are supposed to be concerned with theodicy, anthropology and cosmology, or whatever), but is itself an essential part of its purpose. As Ticciati puts it, the focus lies as much on the process, wherein transformation is enacted, as the content. For our purposes, the key point her analysis makes is to be found in the links she deduces between Job's journey and the reader's. Job journeys through questioning and doubt, accusation and defence, and eventually profoundly searching divine encounter in the whirlwind speeches of chapters 38–41. But Ticciati notes that 'Job cannot live in this state of encounter', and neither can such a moment of transcendence 'be severed from the process which leads up to it'.¹⁹ Correspondingly, she suggests that the reader of the book is likewise led through journeys of questioning and reconceptualising the interpretive frames of reference which are brought to bear in any reading, and that while readings can achieve moments of encounter (such that the reading self is transformed), they must always return again to consideration of further texts in the book.

What sort of reader is best placed to be caught up in this 'disruption of their identity', to borrow the phrase used in the subtitle of her book? While Ticciati's study is heavily couched in the theological conceptualities of a reading suggested by

¹⁶ See Susannah Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity. Reading Beyond Barth* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, §70, 368–478. I owe this summary to Ticciati, *Job*, 1–48.

¹⁸ Ticciati, *Job*, 5, 7.

¹⁹ Ticciati, *Job*, 113.

Karl Barth's approach to the text, there is a more general hermeneutical point that we might express in terms of the character of the kind of reader that such a transformative text imagines. This is a reader patient to endure the proposals and counter-proposals of the friends' and Job's arguments, which in certain key ways circle around the vexed question of how rightly to discern divine agency and human agency in the moral life with its trials and tribulations.

Job's 'endurance'²⁰ may or may not be rightly construed as patience. But patience is a virtue both assumed and demanded of the reader of the book of Job, as a result of the way the text weaves its narrative web, and encourages the reader to the on-going journey of self-examination. On another occasion it would be appropriate to pursue the question which can follow from this, namely whether one can describe the kind of goal to which this self-examination brings the reader, but the more general hermeneutical point may suffice for our present purposes.

Proverbs and the Perceptive Viewer

The implied reader of Proverbs, to explore a second example, likes to see the world the right way up: prudence, practical wisdom, *phronēsis*—however one articulates it—is the key virtue which commends itself to the reader. The reader wants a good wife, an honest job, justice ... if one is not careful the portrait starts to sound like that of a man who desires nothing more than a quiet life in a decent society. In light of such a temptation, one significant verse of Proverbs is

‘The hearing ear and the seeing eye—
the LORD has made them both.’ (20:12)

In a book where the message is so prone to being translated into an ancient Israelite version of the Protestant work ethic, this is key. We might term the relevant virtue ‘perceptiveness’: ‘True perception is a gift from God’, as Fox parses the thought in his commentary.²¹ But this perceptiveness is combined with a recognition that all insight comes from YHWH, and hence the virtuous reader will perhaps seek, in their reading, to have their eyes opened; a passive construction taken up, famously, in the Christian Bible on the road to Emmaus.²² If wisdom is, at least in part, the ability to see rightly, then Proverbs 20:12 suggests that the very ability to see anything at all, in the morally significant sense of discernment, is a gift of YHWH.

²⁰ Cf *hupomonē*, Jas 5:11. In the LXX the word usually means hope, as in Job 14:19.

²¹ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* (AB18B; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 668.

²² Luke 24:31: ‘their eyes were opened’ — *diēnoichthēsan*, an aorist passive.

How does one cultivate such ‘insight’? Not by sheer force of will, or by practicing the art of positive thinking. This example from the book of Proverbs wagers that eyes to see will only come through the cultivation of character: age; experience; the development of the moral will through the repeated decision to dine with lady wisdom rather than lady folly; the repeated choice of soft words rather than hard words; the discipline of wise sexual practices ... all these contribute to the formation of a character that will recognise that the reader sees with eyes that are given by YHWH. As with all such exercises in articulating a virtue ethic interpretation, there is the potential for the link between reader and text to collapse into a vicious circle—whereby the wise reader reads wisdom to affirm precisely the wisdom they already possess—but let us rather imagine Proverbs 20:12 in the context of a virtuous circle, and suggest that its implied reader might be one who sees how the ability to apprehend the gift is itself part of the gift. Although we have only looked at one verse here, it exemplifies a start on how one might build up the character portrait of the implied reader of the book of Proverbs.

Ecclesiastes and the Honest Speaker

The interpretation of Ecclesiastes is endlessly contested, ranging across many points of detail right up to the fundamental framing question of whether the book offers what might be termed an optimistic or a pessimistic perspective on human endeavour under the sun. What might be the benefit of asking after the implied reader of Ecclesiastes in terms of virtue or character?

At the end of his thorough and engaging review of the reception history of the book, Eric Christianson suggests that ‘readers have not ‘received’ a coherent idea from Qoheleth. What they have received, in abundance, is the spirit of his persona, the whole distilled essence of his brooding presence’.²³ Indeed one might make more progress with the book by taking it as preoccupied with a mood rather than a particular message, and perhaps the notable take-up of the book among those of postmodern inclination chimes with the sense that the postmodern is itself more of a mood than a definable position. But nevertheless, inseparable from the general disposition of the reader of the book is a range of specific character qualities that facilitate the reading of the text.

Perhaps primary among these is the virtue of honesty. Qoheleth gives an honest account of human experience. One reason why the book is susceptible to such a wide range of plausible construals, positive and negative, is precisely that it

²³ Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 256.

recounts both the good and the bad with open eyes and an awareness of the complexity of putting it all together. In other words, the fact that readers do not receive one coherent idea from Qoheleth is because the world that lies open to Qoheleth's gaze is not itself presented as one coherent world.

The famous catalogue of 3:1–8 rehearses many of the conflicting dimensions of human life (birth/death; war/peace; weeping/laughter, and so forth). Through the course of the book, the scope of what is perceived to be *hebel* varies in striking ways. While 1:2, framed with 12:8, invites the reader strongly to see everything as *hebel*, there are plenty of further sub-categorisations: toil (especially in chapter 2), pleasure (e.g. 6:9), wisdom, speech, life, death ... even the ways in which the wicked and the righteous are evaluated seem to be *hebel* (8:10–14). And yet in these same categories Qoheleth finds potential meaning and reasons to apply oneself to the tasks of daily living. In his fine treatment of *hebel* in the book, which he suggests comes close to the modern category of 'absurd', Michael Fox points out that 'The fear of God, for example, or justice (when it works), or wisdom (when it is not violated) is not absurd'.²⁴

This is not the place to try to resolve any of the interpretive conundrums of the book, nor even whether its repeated cry of *hebel* is indeed best classified as a marker of absurdity. Rather, we may simply observe that Qoheleth—in some senses—simply observes. He speaks plainly. There is an honesty to the observations made which serves as the necessary prelude to reflecting on how one evaluates God and God's ways in the light of so much chasing after the wind. Further, corresponding to the temptation that interpreters face to construe one coherent perspective (of whichever sort) in Qoheleth's outlook, readers are perhaps implicitly reminded that they may too easily seek to read the book in one way, sure of what it must say rather than open to what it in fact does say.

Interpreters of the book must press on to ask what it is that Qoheleth sees. Notably, it does not seem to loom large in his narrative that one should speak honestly about what one sees. But in terms of the implicit virtues that enable him to construct his narrative in the first place, and which are thereby commended to the reader, this is a highly valued characteristic indeed.

The Implied Reader of Wisdom

There is no space to explore the exegesis of many other details in these and other wisdom-related texts. However, what of the canonically shaped observation, above,

²⁴ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1999), 41. The whole of the above paragraph draws out points from Fox's discussion.

that the implied reader of any one of these books as they are typically encountered today will actually be reading them as part of the canon, rather than as self-sufficient moral portraits? Here the notion of an implied reader does perhaps offer a helpful insight into how the texts are to be read. It is arguably too easy for interpreters of individual texts to suggest that the moral insights sustained from this or that text need to be taken more seriously without paying attention to the wider ramifications of such moral judgments. The value of recognising that all these texts are received as part of a broader canon is in part that it focuses the broader task. The reader encouraged by Ecclesiastes to a non-judgmental honesty in their observation of the text is also invited to factor in to their perception of the text their wider knowledge of YHWH as the God who enables their observation in the first place. Then in turn they might consider how the insights of particular texts are held together in the interplay of disruption and narrative progression that makes up any attempt to engage with complex and identity-probing texts.

In a rare study of the Writings in their canonical setting, within which all our three focal books are found, Donn Morgan suggests that they do not in themselves provide unitary conceptions of many key points in the life of faith.²⁵ Nevertheless, he adds, even in their diversity, these books are all engaged in a common search for the way in which life is best understood to be lived.²⁶ Morgan's own view is that they are (canonically) united by virtue of being responses to the earlier canonical divisions of torah and prophets. Thus while they complement each other in such a way that their differences remain clear, and no straightforward 'clean' synthesis may be offered, they still offer an attempt at 'the systematization of diversity'.²⁷ My claim here is that carefully tracking the implied reader of each text in turn, and then noting that that reader is expected to go on and read the other texts, offers one way of building up the diverse insights into a larger picture.

Interpretive Virtues and the Implied Reader

The present article may offer a modest initial contribution to the larger project of pursuing a theologically-informed portrait of the implied reader of scriptural texts. Since that project must in due course consider the whole canonical range of

²⁵ See Donn F. Morgan, *Between Text & Community. The 'Writings' in Canonical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 5 and *passim*. A helpful collection exploring this and related issues is Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone (eds.), *The Shape of the Writings* (Siphrut 16; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

²⁶ Morgan, *Between Text & Community*, 41.

²⁷ Morgan, *Between Text & Community*, 127–28.

scriptural witness, it seems best to make progress towards it piecemeal, by considering smaller collections of texts within the canon.

The key move from the analysis of specific texts to the broader theological and hermeneutical questions of good reading is to translate the texts' various implied virtues into 'interpretive virtues.' Richard Briggs defines this concept, drawn from a combination of the emphases of Kevin Vanhoozer and Gregory Jones, as 'a disposition of the mind and heart that arises from the motivation for achieving good interpretation'.²⁸ According to Briggs, the point is to ask how readers can see their way ahead to read texts better, acknowledging all the while that 'better', or 'good interpretation', will remain contested concepts.

In key ways, and by no means as an exhaustive account, wisdom-related literature thus prompts us to envisage the person who may read the Bible well as a reader informed by patient attention, perceptiveness, and empirical honesty. Arguably these have long been recognised as valuable features of good interpretive practice. My contention here is that they may be most helpfully understood not as technical skills to be deployed in a process, but rather as characteristics of the reader, that relate with equal significance to the reader's life more generally as well as to their disposition toward the text. The loss of focus on the character of the reader as a part of the hermeneutical task, rather than as an optional add-on for the spiritually inclined, has been a regrettable lack in theological reflection in the modern period. That taking scripture seriously with respect to character and virtue suggests renewed attention to the character of the reader of scripture in the first place should not surprise. Patient, perceptive and honest readers are well placed to read scriptural texts that attest to patience, perceptiveness and honesty as character virtues. In so saying, one admits to many further questions that may now be seen to deserve study: what does a patient reading of scripture look like, for example? Or: how far does the honest accumulation of detail go before the importance of essaying a constructive synthesis becomes urgent? The study of interpretive virtue always loops back to provoke further interpretive questions about how these texts look from newly-characterised perspectives.

Such a study could also profitably engage with the rather limited range of texts (wisdom or otherwise) that directly consider such matters as reading or the handling of texts. Evidently the framework of assumptions regarding literacy and the social significance of texts in the ancient world is vastly different from today. It is

²⁸ Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 21. For an elegant overview of the issues see L. Gregory Jones, 'Formed and Transformed by Scripture: Character, Community, and Authority in Biblical Interpretation', in Brown (ed.), *Character & Scripture*, 18–33.

relatively clear that most people could not read; and that the ways in which they accessed texts, such as our three focal books, was via the mediation of an elite consisting of scribes or priests, who did the professional job of reading for them.²⁹ Yet this in itself need not invalidate the relevant insights about how readers engage virtuously with texts. It would simply mean that the modes of ancient textual engagement were different to those of today. In any case, the point is that the virtues one develops more generally in life are not entirely separable from (nor of course entirely the same as) those one deploys in reading, and therefore that interpretive virtues can be explored by way of discussion of implied virtues more generally.

In short, then, and as one would expect, there is no direct discussion of 'interpretive virtue' in our texts, but the concept retains its heuristic use in assessing the moral vision of these books, if we have the 'eyes to see' how they construct their portrait of the implied reader. These virtues are not the subject matter of these wisdom texts—rather they are implicit in the manner of presentation of the texts. As such they are 'implied virtues', and perhaps allow us to get closer to the estimation of what the books commend in practice, rather than what they wish to be seen to commend.

It is not (necessarily) that these two sets of commended virtues are at odds with each other, though we have perhaps seen enough to recognise that they are not identical. It seems plausible that there is considerable overlap between the virtues assumed and internalised by the author, as it were, and the ones they explicitly commend. Arguably the implied virtues will emerge more easily in conceptual terms that are congenial to hermeneutical reflection today, in the nature of the model that we have been discussing. But at the very least they will enrich and render more subtle the portrait of the character of the wise person that the texts are painting, and which I have also suggested might be understood as the portrait of one who can read these texts well.

²⁹ See the persuasive study of Ian M. Young, 'Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence', *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1998), 239–53 and 408–22, who concludes that 'we cannot be completely certain that our evidence demonstrates anything more than that certain senior priests (government appointees?) belonged to the literate stratum and used literacy skills in their professional activities'. (415–16)