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**Front Cover:** The cover artwork is a stylized photo by Steve Buffington. “An image of a Christian leader is the rope braking device used in repelling. If its integrity is compromised, your life could be in danger. However, a braking device that functions as its creator intended allows risks and activities unable to be experienced in any other way.”

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THE VALUE OF WISDOM:
LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES FROM
A BRIEF INNER TEXTURAL
ANALYSIS OF PROVERBS 4

Carlo A. Serrano
Regent University

ABSTRACT: Although leadership is one both broadly defined and widely researched, it has yet to be thoroughly explored through exegetical methodologies. Moreover, there is much room in the literature for in-depth exegetical studies that also provide the reader with practical application. Since applied theory is the goal of most scientific inquiry, it seems important to examine a critical theme of leadership theory that accomplishes the goal: wisdom. This research uses an inner texture analysis of Proverbs 4 to extrapolate practical leadership principles. This brief exploration reveals that acquired and applied wisdom is foundational to bibliocentric leadership. Future exploration into the value of wisdom as seen in Proverbs 4 should positively impact ethical and moral issues amongst church leaders.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative, Exegetical, Socio-rhetorical
The Value of Wisdom: Contemporary Leadership Principles from A Brief Inner Textural Analysis of Proverbs 4

One could argue that the point of studying leadership is to define good leadership as it pertains to functional effectiveness and morally good behavior (Crowther, 2012). Simply put, leading is a matter of both doing and being. Furthermore, the literature indicates that the ontological nature of leadership directly impacts the functional aspects of leadership (Winston & Patterson, 2006). Since good leadership involves internal issues, it is important to understand the principles that may or may not influence the issues. Although several leadership theories have a conceptual base that is built upon the Sacred Text (e.g. servant leadership, charismatic leadership, transformational leadership), it seems that the full volume of Scripture remains untapped as a viable source for leadership theory and principles (Crowther, 2012). Thankfully, more work is being done, at least within the Christian leadership dimension, to extrapolate bibliocentric leadership principles through sound exegetical methods such as socio-rhetorical criticism.

Socio-rhetorical criticism is an interpretive method that analyzes Scripture from multiple dimensions and angles (Robbins, 1996). Although the methodology is widely used to explore the Christian Scriptures in connection to leadership theory, there is much room for its application within the Hebrew Scriptures. In socio-rhetorical criticism, the goal of the interpreter is to move past a mere defining of propositional statements and toward an understanding of the inner textual, intertexture, social/cultural, and ideological dimensions of the text (Robbins, 1996). Inner texture analysis is the process of dissecting syntax and patterns within a text to find “networks of signification” (Robbins, 1996, “Inner Texture”, para. 6). According to Robbins, the five kinds of inner texture in texts are: repetitive-progressive, open-middle-closing, narrational, argumentative, and sensory-aesthetic. This study focuses on the inner texture of Proverbs 4.

The book of Proverbs is widely regarded as the principal book of wisdom within the Hebrew Scriptures. Most scholars believe that the book was written and compiled by King Solomon of Israel and multiple sages who sought to connect the theoretical nature of moral reasoning with the practicality of moral living (Stewart, 2016). According to Traüffer (2008), wisdom is practical knowledge that a leader can apply to situations involving organizational tasks and relational dynamics. Harris (2002) suggested that a deeper understanding of wisdom’s role in ethical decision making may counter the current trend in leadership failures. Wise leaders are “people who can bridge contradictions, act selfless, integer and sometimes paradoxically with a sense of taking care of the whole” (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015, p. 122). If leadership is ultimately about transformation, then it seems appropriate to understand how a leader makes decisions that set a clear vision, influence follower behaviors, and guide the organization toward its shared goals (Traüffer, 2008). The acquisition, safeguarding, and application of knowledge are central to these decisions and the leadership process. Thus, good leadership is wise leadership. This study of Proverbs 4 examines four principles: Value Wisdom (Overview of Pericope; Get Wisdom (Prv 4:1-9); Apply Wisdom (Prv 4:10-19); and Guard Wisdom (Prv 4:20-27). The results of this study, when applied at all levels of leadership, should influence the heart transformation that leads to positive organizational and behavioral transformation.
Wisdom is an elusive concept that is difficult to define (Dey, 2012; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). However, the cognitive and affective dimensions of wisdom have a critical link with the various dimensions of ethical, servant, and transformational leadership (Dey, 2012; Harris, 2012). Therefore, it seems to reason that a good leader should place a high value on wisdom. The Book of Proverbs was written for two purposes: to teach moral adeptness and to develop mental discernment via the acquisition and application of wisdom (Gaebelein, 1990; Prv 1:2-6). The first nine chapters of Proverbs reflect a father’s admonitions to his son to value wisdom above all other things (Gaebelein, 1990). Proverbs 4 is comprised of three discourses on the value of wisdom (Gaebelein, 1990). The discourses follow a repetitive-progressive pattern, which uses the motifs of instruction/command and motivation (Gaebelein, 1990). Table 1 illustrates that structure of Proverbs 4.

Table 1: Structural Analysis of Proverbs 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Instruction/Command</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Verses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get Wisdom</td>
<td>Hear instruction; Be attentive;</td>
<td>Gain insight and</td>
<td>v. 1-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not forsake teaching (Pr 4:1);</td>
<td>good precepts (Prv 4:1-2);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get wisdom; Get insight (Pr 4:5,7);</td>
<td>Wisdom will keep and guard youis; Wdom will exalt and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not forsake her/wisdom;</td>
<td>honor you (Pr 4:7-9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love her/wisdom (Pr 4:6);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prize her/wisdom;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embrace her/wisdom (Pr 4:8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply Wisdom</td>
<td>Hear and accept wisdom (Prv 4:10);</td>
<td>The years of your life may be many (Prv 4:10);</td>
<td>v. 10-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep hold of instruction; Do not let go;</td>
<td>Your steps will not be hampered, and if you run, you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not take or go near the path of the wicked (Prv 4:14-15)</td>
<td>will not stumble (Prv 4:12);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wisdom is your life (Prv 4: 13); You will not end up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>like the wicked (Prv 4:16-19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guard Wisdom</td>
<td>Be attentive; Listen (Prv 4:20);</td>
<td>Wisdom brings life and healing</td>
<td>v. 20-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep sight of wise words;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internalize them (Prv 4:21);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guard your heart (Prv 4:23);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Watch your mouth (Prv 4:24);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fix your eyes (Prv 4:25);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Watch your step; Do not swerve (Prv 4:26-27)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the most striking repetitive-texture features of Proverbs 4 is the constant refrain to value wisdom by way of “keeping”, “guarding”, “acquiring”, “listening”, and “watching”. In fact, wisdom is mentioned directly or indirectly 27 times in the 27 verses of the pericope.
Wisdom goes a long way in achieving personal and organizational goals. For example, Traüffer (2008) used a socio-rhetorical analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7 and Proverbs 8:1-21 to explore the connections between discernment/wisdom and decision making in organizational leadership. The analysis produced the Discernment Practices Inventory (DPI) scale, which consists of 14 items representing the underlying dimensions of a leader’s decision-making process (Traüffer, 2008). The results of the Traüffer’s study indicate that the biblical principle of wisdom-based discernment is appropriate for organizational leadership studies and may aid in future leadership development (Traüffer, 2008). This study builds on Traüffer’s work by further proving the connection between wisdom and leadership as well as confirming socio-rhetorical analysis an effective methodology for leadership studies in the Hebrew Scriptures.

GET WISDOM: PROVERBS 4:1-9

DePree, as cited in Traüffer (2008), argued that while people cannot buy wisdom; they can find it. However, the Hebrew word qanah (get) implies procurement by purchase with the intention of possession such as a landowner buying property or cattle. Perhaps the sentiment of the pericope is that one should put the same diligence and vigilance into acquiring wisdom that they would put into making a life-changing purchase. Simply put, wisdom does not just happen; one must put forth an effort to gain it (Traüffer, 2008). Proverbs 4:1-9 sets the tone for the entire chapter by emphasizing the importance of getting wisdom and insight.

The opening of Proverbs 4 introduces the narrator (father), the audience (sons), and the intention (instruction) of the pericope (Prv 4:1). The middle of the pericope follows the repetitive-progressive textural pattern of exhortation and motivation (Prv 4:1-7). One could argue that verses 8-9 summarize the value of attaining wisdom. However, since the entire chapter follows the same repetitive-progressive flow, it seems that verses 8-9 are more of an intermission than a closing section. What is clear from the opening-middle-closing texture of verses 1-9 is that wisdom is not something that should be taken lightly or let go of once one has acquired it.

The Old Testament reveals that King Solomon, who according to Scripture was the wisest king of the ancient near east and is believed to be the primary author/compiler of the Proverbs, made the acquisition of wisdom his top priority (1 Kgs 3:9, 4:30-34; Gaebelein, 1990; Traüffer, 2008). Leadership wisdom is developed through inquiry and reflection via a process that first starts with an understanding that wisdom will not simply show up when a leader is faced with a challenge or problem to solve (Wei & Yip, 2008). The beginning of said process is encapsulated in verse 7 of the pericope: “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.” In summary, the wise leader places a high value on wisdom.

APPLY WISDOM: PROVERBS 4:10-19

The wisdom that is valued in Proverbs 4 transcends the cognitive supremacy of a maven or an intellectual. The wisdom of the pericope implies a supernatural gift that offers spiritual and physical protection when applied properly (Traüffer, 2008; Waltke, 2008). It seems that wisdom is the application of knowledge and discernment is the application of wisdom (Traüffer, 2008). Thus, it is not enough for a leader to value or acquire wisdom, he or she must also “do” something with
wisdom. This principle is evident in the frequent exhortations to apply the father’s teachings: “Keep hold of instruction; do not let go” (Prv 4:13, ESV); “Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil” (Prv 4:14); and “Turn away from it and pass on” (Prv 4:15).

The narrational texture of the pericope offers insight into the principle of applied wisdom. Scholars agree that Solomon wrote or compiled most of the Proverbs (Gaebelien, 1990). The openings of all 3 discourses utilize the familial terms son or father (Prv 4:1,10, 20). Since the Sacred Text gives several examples of King David’s (Solomon’s father) and Solomon’s failure to apply wisdom, it makes sense that the author of Proverbs 4 would encourage his sons (biological or relational) to go beyond knowing the right thing and toward doing the right thing (2 Sm 11; 1 Chr 21; 1 Kgs 11). In fact, scholars believe that verses 3-4 are a reference to young Solomon learning at the feet of King David (Gaebelien, 1990; Serrano, 2017). Since Solomon was literally a product of his father’s biggest failure in leadership, it seems logical that the firm exhortations of the pericope come from a genuine place of parental guidance.

Applied wisdom manifests as humility, love, consideration for others, fairness, equity, justice, and integrity (Jas 3:17; Traüffer, 2008). The converse produces anxiety, the “bread of wickedness” and the “wine of violence” (Prv 4:16-17; Serrano, 2017). All the positive traits are descriptors of servant, beatific, and transformational leadership (Ayers, 2006; Niewold, 2007; Winston & Tucker). Thus, it is paramount that leaders ensure that they are not just stockpiling best practices or lessons learned on a theoretical level; wisdom must be applied if it is to be true wisdom (Traüffer, 2008). Simply put, wisdom is as wisdom does.

GUARD WISDOM: PROVERBS 4:20-27

The final discourse in Proverbs 4 reiterates the importance of valuing, getting, and applying wisdom. However, the concept of guarding or keeping wisdom is introduced through a series of exhortations: “Be attentive” (Prv 4:20); “Let them not escape” (Prv 4:21); “Keep your heart with all vigilance” (Prv 4:23); “Put away crooked speech and devious talk” (Prv 4:24); “Look directly forward” (Prv 4:25); “Ponder/examine the path of your feet” (Prv 4:26); and “Do not swerve” (Prv 4:27). These exhortations summarize the argumentative texture of the entire chapter:

Thesis in the form of a command: “My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.” (Prv 4:20).

Argument from the contrary: “Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all vigilance” (Prv 4:21-23a)

Rationale: “from it flow the springs of life” (Prv 4:23b)

Restatement of rationale: “then all your ways will be sure” (Prv 4:26b)

Conclusion: “Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil” (Prv 4:27)
The sensory-aesthetic texture of the final discourse in the pericope evokes the senses of hearing (Prv 4:20), touch (Prv 4:22), and sight (Prv 4:25) as well as the cognitive-emotive function of reflection (Prv 4:21, 23, 26). This implies giving due diligence to what one allows into their most sacred spaces - the heart and mind. The phrase “pay attention” (Prv 4:20) literally means: to prick up your ears, to give heed, to attend to (Goodrick & Kohlenberger, 1999). When the author says, “Put away from you crooked speech” (Prv 4:24) or “put away perversity from your mouth” (Prv 4:24, NIV) the author is not talking about cursing. Perversity or crooked speech in this section means, marked by violations of God law or straying sharply from what God has defined as good and right (Goodrick & Kohlenberger, 1999). Thus, a key to guarding wisdom is to guard what comes out of the mouth. When the bulk of a leader’s speech is spent speaking negatively about others then they are hindering their ability to stay on the path of wisdom. Simply put, to walk in wisdom one must first speak wise words.

One perceptual phenomenon common to the human experience is called optical flow (Goldstein, 2010). If one is moving toward an object, the objects closest to them flow faster while the object in which they are moving toward seems to stand still (Goldstein, 2010). Thus, every step one takes, the finish line seems farther away. For example, on a track, one tends to run slower, not only because their muscles may work harder on the turns, but mentally they see that they are running in circles. In fact, on a track one passes the finish line seven times during a two-mile run before it becomes the finish line! On a straightaway course, looking too far away toward the finish line can exhaust a person due to optical flow. The secret is to fix one’s eyes about 5-10 yards in front and toward the ground to counter the phenomenon. Therefore, if good leadership is the goal, one would do well to pay attention to where they are walking by keeping a vigilant perspective on the main thing: the value of applied wisdom (Prv 4:25-27). In summary, wisdom should be guarded at all costs.

CONCLUSION

An inner texture analysis of Proverbs 4 reveals multiple modes of communicating a simple message: A good leader is first and foremost a wise leader. Although limited research exists regarding the relationship of biblical wisdom to leadership theory, it seems that the concept of wisdom has a place in leadership theory. Contemporary leadership theories have much to offer the leader who wishes to be both morally and systemically effective. However, one should not neglect the relevance that Sacred Text has on leadership theory and practice. Moreover, one could argue that Christian leadership must maintain a bibliocentric posture if it is to be Christologically mimetic (Bekker, 2008). Practically, this means that modern leaders who wish to gain the most from the wisdom found in scripture will strive to move from the theoretical toward the practical. This movement is accomplished by applying wisdom in the same type of mentoring relationship modeled in the Gospels and in the father and son narrative of Proverbs 4. For example, several assessment programs for future church leaders consider education, spiritual gifts, personality type, and in some cases, education when evaluating one’s capacity to start new churches (Serrano, 2017). However, research suggests that ethical and moral failure amongst this segment of leadership is connected to character issues than practical issues (Allen, 2006). Thus, future studies would do well to explore the connections between the acquisition of knowledge and failures in applying said knowledge.
The principles outlined in this manuscript are drawn from one chapter out of the entire Bible. If 27 verses contain this much insight into wisdom and leadership, it seems apparent that the surface has not yet been scratched when it comes to drawing leadership principles from the Sacred Text.

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