

Dave Bland. *Proverbs and the Formation of Character*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015. 202 pages. \$25.

Twenty years ago or more I sat down next to Dave Bland on a shuttle bus at an Academy of Homiletics meeting. As we began talking we discovered a mutual interest in Proverbs. Through the years I have followed Professor Bland's work and used his helpful book reviews, articles and commentaries in my own research and teaching. His excellent 2002 volume in the College Press NIV Old Testament Commentary Series: *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs* is always on my required reading list in courses on preaching biblical wisdom literature.

It is no surprise, then, that I was delighted to learn of the publication of *Proverbs and the Formation of Character*. From the beautiful dedication of the book to his and his wife Nancy's six grandchildren to the eloquent conclusion on the closing pages, this book is one to buy, read, re read and cherish.

Bland's stated goal is to bring together the best scholarship from the fields of character formation and biblical wisdom. And the book lives up to this ambition. It combines insights from the fields of proverbs study, the psychology of character formation, studies of the dynamics of faith formation, and theological and biblical studies of Proverbs.

Bland traces the shifts in our cultural perspectives on character, what he calls a move from a moral to a therapeutic culture, as we have moved from emphasizing virtue to stressing personal values, from community-focused identity to each person as the center of their own world, from character to personality.

Bland perceives Proverbs to be a biblical antidote to this cultural trend. "The aphoristic sayings of Proverbs...are an enduring challenge to a therapeutic mindset that is primarily concerned with making us feel good rather than equipping us to be good" (2). They are a challenge to the notion that wealth is the mark of success, since the sages viewed character as what determines success or failure (xiv).

In Chapter One: The Journey of Character Formation, Bland describes wisdom as a lifelong journey grounded in God and inextricably related to the lives of others. He dispels the trivialization of proverbial wisdom in the now famous quip by Will Willimon that reading Proverbs is "like being trapped on a long road trip with your mother" (8). Bland is out to recover the rhetorical power and theological insights of these chapters, "to usher the sentence literature back into the mainstream of discussion and to showing their vitality as a resource in the process of character education" (8).

Chapter Two: The Process of Character Formation, examines the tools the sages used to instill wisdom in listeners/readers. They include verbal instruction, negative and positive reinforcement, observation of life experiences, role playing and the art of discernment. These tools are explored in more detail in chapters four through six.

Chapter Three: The Content of Character Formation, compares and contrasts biblical sentence wisdom with cultural alternative. Bland brings the insights of psychological study of character formation into the conversation, comparing and contrasting them with biblical wisdom. It becomes clear that the sages were not content, as we often are, to help people clarify their values, leaving the content up the individual. They were out to teach core values that shape the young that contribute to the integrity and stability of the faith community. Those values can only be instilled in a theological, communal context.

Chapter Four: The Proverb in Character Formation, brings insights from rhetorical studies and paremiology (the study of proverbs) to bear to unleash the unique character-forming

power of the seemingly innocent proverb, a tool of character formation found across centuries and cultures.

Chapter Five: Character Formation Through Human Dialogue, brings alive the strategy of dialogue in the sages' pedagogy, since, as Bland points out, "Character is formed in conversation" (10).

Chapter Six, and Chapter Seven explore the sages' wisdom with regard to two crucial areas: the use of language and the use of wealth. Chapter Six: Language and Character Formation, explores the theme of the use and abuse of language. Chapter Seven: Wealth and Character Formation, examines the theme of material possessions and poverty. In both chapters Bland makes the profound point that the way we handle gifts from God, language and wealth, not only forms character but also exposes character.

Chapter Eight: Yahweh and Character Formation, focuses on the character of God in Proverbs. God's presence for the sages is neither sporadic nor dramatic, but constant and daily, a persuasive presence behind the scenes in the experiences of daily living.

Chapter Nine: Community and Character Formation, focuses our attention on an aspect of wisdom contemporary culture often neglects: community. The whole community is responsible to mold individuals into responsible members of God's kingdom.

The clarity and depth of Bland's treatment of proverbial wisdom make this a versatile volume. Study groups in churches would find it accessible and practical. Biblical scholars will find it a welcome addition to their bibliographies. Homiletics scholars and professors will want to add it to their reading lists. Preachers will find it valuable in sermon preparation. While I am a big fan of lectionary preaching, I would be pleased to see some lectionary preachers go "off roading" now and then and invite their people to spend some time with the sages of Proverbs as Bland brings their wisdom to life in this important work. It will be time well spent!

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