

**Laying Hold of Wisdom:
Application from Proverbs without Overpromising or Undermining**

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Proverbs has presented peculiar challenges for church and classroom. These obstacles may discourage some from teaching or preaching Proverbs. “With the exception of Leviticus, it is doubtful that any biblical book is viewed with less enthusiasm by the preacher.”¹ Some see Proverbs as “nothing more than a deserted stretch of highway between Psalms and Ecclesiastes.”² This reticence is not new. Some rabbis doubted that Proverbs even belonged to the canon.³ More recent “ministers” have misused the proverbs to the injury of the Church. “Riches and honor are for the person that gets wisdom. This is prosperity. If you get wisdom...riches are not far behind.”⁴

Still other interpreters jump to the broader wisdom context of Job and Ecclesiastes to prevent misuse of Proverbs. Longman argues that Job “guards against an overreading of the covenant and of the book of proverbs. It denies a mechanical application of the connection in Proverbs between wise behavior and material.”⁵ Others leap quickly from Proverbs into the New Testament to make sense of the sayings. “The Book of Proverbs is like a thousand-word puzzle with no picture to show us what the puzzle is supposed to look like. But we have found the

¹ John J. Collins, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), 1.

² Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 53.

³ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 48-9.

⁴ Robert Tilton, successinlifeonline.org.

⁵ Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), p. 87.

picture: Christ.”⁶ While other wisdom contexts and the New Testament certainly join the interpretive process, the book of Proverbs itself has spoken more clearly than it is often given credit.

The purpose of this paper is to consider two key elements that demonstrate how Proverbs communicates its intent. These elements, the book message and literary context, often omitted or slighted in the Proverbs interpretive process, can clarify the meaning of individual sayings and correct some abuses of proverbs. This paper will examine the book message and its relationship to individual sayings and then consider the potential for immediate literary context for understanding specific sayings.

Reading Individual Sayings in Proverbs’ Message

The starting point of finding the meaning of any passage is grasping the message of the entire book. Osborne notes that “through the influence of form criticism, the emphasis to date has been upon isolated parts rather than upon the whole of a section, and scholars have dissected books into separate and independent units before analyzing their meaning.” However, he concludes, “Only when the message of the whole passage [in his example a biblical book] is considered can the parts be studied for details of the central message.”⁷ Elliott Johnson also, “Thus the basic unit of meaning as regards the author’s intent is not the word; rather, it is the author’s text considered at first as a whole. The process legitimately goes, not from the smallest unit to larger ones, but from the largest context to smaller ones.”⁸ As with other biblical books, the message of Proverbs directs the meaning of its constituent texts.

⁶ See for example, E. Langston Haygood, “How to Preach Christ from Proverbs,” *Preaching* (November-December 1991): 48-51.

⁷ Grant Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), p. 22.

⁸ Elliott Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 10.

The overall message of Proverbs bubbles from multiple springs. The nine chapter prologue sets the moral and religious stage for all individual sayings that follow. Opening that prologue is a seven verse introduction (1:1-7) both spelling out the purpose of Proverbs and voicing the book motto. Following the prologue are strategically scattered Yahweh sayings and comparative sayings. These serve to cast Yahweh's shadow across the entire proverbial landscape and to highlight the pinnacle virtues of Proverbs. Funneling these springs together ought to establish an overarching message that clarifies the meaning of the individual sayings in the collection.

Introduction and Prologue/Epilogue. Unlike other biblical books, Proverbs clearly articulates its purpose and major emphases. Scholars widely acknowledge that section comprised of chapters 1-9 “serves as a thematic introduction or preamble to the whole document.”⁹ Here the competition for the learner's heart rages between Lady Wisdom and Madame Folly. Having established the poisonous enticements of folly and the exquisite rewards of wisdom (chs. 1-9), Proverbs then offers specific sayings (10-31) applying this overarching theme.

Opening the prologue, Proverbs spells out the specific purposes for the collection of wisdom sayings. The series of infinitive phrases in Proverbs 1:2-7 utilizes a “grand array” of wisdom terms to express the collection's purpose.¹⁰ John Johnson synthesizes these statements into four key purposes: 1) “To impart an intimate acquaintance with discipline and wisdom (v. 2a);” 2) To impart understanding of wisdom sayings;” 3) to impart moral insight (v. 3);” and 4) “to identify the intended recipients of wisdom.”¹¹ For the intended learners (all are learners as

⁹ Daniel Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), p. 19.

¹⁰ Robert Alden, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 21.

¹¹ John Johnson, “An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December 1987): 419-432.

seen by the use of the merisms simple/young with wise/discerning (1:4-5), the collection serves to instruct in grasping the sayings themselves so that they can be appropriately applied with disciplined wisdom and moral insight.

This introduction surfaces the essential virtue of discernment (בִּינָה/בִּינָה vv. 2,5,6) for grasping wisdom sayings. Later sayings build on this foundation by demonstrating the importance of proper appropriation of the proverbs. Proverbs 26:7 and 9 vividly describe the misuse of a proverb as effective as a lame man's legs and as dangerous as a drunk waving a thorn bush. Further, surely the requirement of discernment of proper proverb application rests at the center of the Proverbs 26:4-5 answer/don't answer a fool conundrum. Any individual proverb rests in the context of the necessity of applying sayings with discernment.

So the prologue highlights the priority of seeking wisdom in its full array. Its introduction further specifies this righteous pursuit as rightly grasping the wisdom sayings for the purpose of growing in understanding, discipline and discernment; growing wise. The introduction concludes by surfacing the motto of the collection. Growing wise in literature and life must be rooted in a reverential awe of Yahweh.

Motto of Book. Proverbs' introduction climaxes in revelation of the source of all true wisdom:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (1:7)

John Johnson likens the seven verse introduction to a foundation with this motto the cornerstone.¹² Van Pelt and Kaiser agree, concluding that “the relationship between the fear of

¹² Johnson, “Proverbs 1:1-7.” 430.

Yahweh and both wisdom and knowledge serves as the theme for the entire work.”¹³ This motto is rehearsed in 19 more proverbs throughout the collection.¹⁴ The repetitions include 9:10 where the motto serves to complete the inclusio of the nine chapter prologue. The motto also reappears as a conclusion in the epilogue of Proverbs 31. These three crucial literary locations demonstrate the significance of the motto for grasping the meaning of the collection.

The word for “fear” (יִרְאָה) ranges from terror to respect, but in this context refers to a revered worship that drives one to proper moral response (Prov 3:7; 8:13; 14:16; 16:17; 28:14). This revered worship is the beginning and focus of wisdom and knowledge. The term רֵאשִׁית (“beginning” 1:7) refers to that which is the beginning of an action in time (cf. Gen 1:1) or that which is superior among choices (cf. Deut 33:21). The matching term in 9:10, הַרְחֵקָה, refers more specifically to that which comes first in time (cf. 2 Sam 17:9). With the use of the two terms, it is clear that Proverbs intends that reverential worship represents the first requisite to wisdom.

Both repetition and strategic location communicate that this recurring motto represents a seminal theme of Proverbs. One cannot be truly wise if the wisdom does not follow the primary step of fearing Yahweh. As a starting point of wisdom, all wisdom sayings ought to be understood in light of this reverential worship.

Shadow of Yahweh. As seen in the motto, Yahweh rules the center of biblical wisdom. Proverbs is not a collection of secular wisdom for temporal life. Instead, it discloses worship that infiltrates work, words, all ways of life. When compared to other Old Testament books, Proverbs mentions Yahweh as often as books such as Genesis, 2 Samuel, Ezra and nearly as often as many

¹³ Miles Van Pelt and Walter Kaiser, “יִרְאָה” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 2:533.

¹⁴ Prov 1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 16, 26, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 28:14; 31:30.

of the prophetic books.¹⁵ So though His name is not constantly repeated in the collection, Yahweh appears enough and in crucial places to cast His shadow throughout the book.

While the motto demonstrates that Yahweh stands at the starting line of wisdom, key proverbs show that He also determines the outcome of the race. This divine prerogative colors the expectations of reward for righteousness.

Agur recognized that ultimately wisdom resided only in God. In language reflective of Job's confrontation with God, Agur acknowledged his inability to grasp God's wisdom and ways:

I am the most ignorant of men;
I do not have a man's understanding.
I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. (30:2-3)

His humble confession results from the reality that God alone has established this world and its ways:

Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name,
and the name of his son?
Tell me if you know! (30:4)

Yahweh's knowledge extends from eternity past in creation to the human heart today. His eyes see all that happens on the earth (15:3). He sees even the motives of mankind. Using imagery of weighing on a scale and testing in a crucible, the sage teaches that Yahweh discerns the intents of His human creation (16:2; 17:3).

¹⁵ A search of the relative frequency of "Yahweh" in Proverbs reveals it is found 12.5 times per 1000 Hebrew words. This compares to 8.0 in Genesis, 13.5 in Judges, 13.7 in 2 Samuel, and 9.5 in Ezra.

God's power extends past His knowledge into control of all outcomes. No wickedness or wisdom succeeds against Him (21:30; 22:12). Each planned course, decision and word ultimately spring from and accomplish God's purpose (16:9; 16:33; 16:1). All flows toward His directed end (16:4).

The divine prerogative theme serves to clarify the intent of the individual sayings in the collection. They cannot simply be formulaic, turning God into a heavenly vending machine, but rather must be understood in light of God's sovereign reality. One cannot presume to know his own way, if God directs each step and every journey (20:24).

Comparative Sayings. Another key element that serves to clarify the author's intent in Proverbs is the group of comparative sayings. These are typically characterized by the comparative מן, coupled with טוב ("good" or in these contexts "better"). They place the temporal rewards of many proverbs into proper priority.

People often wrongly equate prominence and power with God's blessing. The proverbs remind us however that meager resources surpass one who merely projects importance (Prov 12:9). Further, the ability to conquer angry urges (אָרְרֵ אַפַּיִם) impresses the sage far more than greatness (גְּבוּרָה) or military subjugation (Prov 16:32). So place and power may result from piety, but they cannot become the goal of the learner.

For the one seeking riches through righteousness, the comparative proverbs draw attention to a more significant bottom line. Many virtues exceed prosperity. A reputation (שֵׁם) and favor (חֵן) bring greater value than many riches (Prov 22:1). One who lives among the oppressed, but possesses humility (שְׂפִלְיֹתָהּ) stands in superior position to those enriched by plunder but impoverished by pride (Prov 16:19). A millionaire, though self-impressed, is surpassed by a poor individual with discernment (דַּל מְבִינִין) (Prov 28:11). Riches also fall to a distant second behind other virtues, such as integrity (אֱמוּנָה Prov 28:6), righteousness (צְדָקָה Prov

16:8), and love (אהבה Prov 15:17). In fact, with the trouble often associated with riches (Prov 15:16), the sage asks for the financial middle road, lest in his riches he forgets Yahweh (Prov 30:9). So though riches may result from the exercise of personal virtues, the virtues themselves ought to draw the learner's attention and energy.

Finally, the twin peaks of Proverbs, the "fear of Yahweh" and "wisdom," tower above the foothills of prosperity. After their establishment in the introduction as the key concerns for the learner, these lofty virtues peak through on occasion throughout the book to remind the reader of their importance. Proverbs 3:13-15 emphasize that the one who lays hold of wisdom has grasped a richer treasure than silver and gold can ever provide. This theme echoes in Lady Wisdom's call in 8:11 and 19. To choose her is to choose true riches. The wealth of wisdom appears again in 16:16 and then shines a final time in the actions of the Proverb 31 portrait. The fear of Yahweh also echoes from the introduction. This reverence makes a little (קצת) to exceed the capacity of multiplied treasure rooms (אוצר) (Prov 15:16). The resounding triumph of fearing Yahweh rings again in the epilogue of Proverbs: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (Prov 31:30). The appearance so often longed for fades soon, but righteous virtue glows always.

The authors of Proverbs do not intend to shift the learner's focus to the result of wise living. Though enjoyable results often come, the central virtues themselves stand as the true reward. The comparative sayings make it clear that the learner's investment strategy needs to accumulate moral assets over temporal possessions.

Proverbs, therefore, educates all comers in the godly discernment of words and life for the purpose of producing a worshipful wisdom worked out in every sphere of human existence. This broad message; established in introduction, capped in epilogue, and buttressed throughout; serves to clarify each saying in the book.

Reading Individual Proverbs in Literary Context

After the book message, the next largest context that shapes meaning is literary context. To discuss the role of literary context in interpreting Proverbs opens a hermeneutical mystery. Is there actually context? Von Rad declares that “each sentence, each didactic poem, stands on its own and does not expect to be interpreted on the basis of similar poems.”¹⁶ Longman adds that “reading the proverb in context does not change our understanding of either proverb. It doesn’t even enrich our understanding.”¹⁷ Is there truly no literary context for a proverb? Is the literary genre so unique that the ordering of the text makes no difference, while in all other genres the text order carries great significance? Are scholars close to finding the Giant Panda or fruitlessly seeking Bigfoot?¹⁸

The discussion at hand will assume that the interpreter already works within the historical-cultural contexts as well as within the literary genre of wisdom literature. Attention instead will focus on the issue of existence and extent of literary context of Proverbs. While scholars acknowledge that one may study Proverbs topically, recognizing that remote proverbs on the same subject may be gathered for study, this section will focus on the possibility of immediate or cluster context for interpreting an individual saying.

This question of literary context for a proverb refers specifically to those individual sayings in chapters 10-31. Chapters 1-9 have long been recognized as a unit serving to introduce the major themes of Proverbs. One should also note that chapters 10-31 contain some units of proverbs, such as the Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:22), Sayings of Agur (30:1-33), and the climactic Noble Wife Poem (31:10-31). With these brief exceptions, the chapters seem to be a

¹⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (SCM Press, 1972), p. 6.

¹⁷ Longman, *Proverbs*, p. 41.

¹⁸ The Giant Panda was thought a mythical creature by the West until P re David, a French priest and scientist, found one in the mountain bamboo forests of China. Bigfoot remains a mythical beast ☺

random collection of wisdom sayings. Do these “random” collections in fact reflect a divine ordering and therefore an interpretive demand to discover this order and its implications?

Current evangelical scholars answer this question in three ways: No! Yes! Maybe! Tremper Longman notes that since 1980 we have “seen a growing consensus among interpreters that there is more here than meets the eye.”¹⁹ Spurred by the groundbreaking work of Gustav Boström in 1928,²⁰ several contemporary scholars have pursued possible connections among the individual sayings of 10-31. Connections may show through aural links (consonance, assonance, alliteration) or through rhetorical devices (catchwords, parallel syntax) or through theme (similar circumstances or theological emphasis). Longman, however, remains suspicious of such arrangements. He notes that no prevailing scheme has surfaced. “There are as many different nuances in the schemes suggested to unravel the mystery as there are scholars.”²¹ He suggests that Proverbs follows the random pattern of other ancient Near East wisdom collections. Perhaps as well, this randomness is intentional and “reflects the messiness of life.”²²

Daniel Estes follows Longman in his approach to the proverbs, but with less skepticism of design. He interprets individual sayings and then compares the result with the interpretation of sayings of similar theme and content. He concludes that one best understands an individual saying as part of a larger picture within all of Proverbs. “That portrait emerges only when all of the relevant sayings on the topic are considered together.” He does believe though that “promising efforts have been made by Whybray (1994b), Murphy (1998b), Heim (2001) and others.” However, at present it remains to Estes “difficult to discern the order to the proverbs,

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 38.

²⁰ *Paronamasi i den alder hebreiska Maschallitteraturen*, (Lund: Gleerup).

²¹ Longman, *Proverbs*, pp. 38-9.

²² *Ibid*, p. 40.

especially in chapters 10-31.”²³ Therefore, Estes does not attempt to interpret individual sayings within literary units.

Bruce Waltke represents the definite Yes group. His commentary introduction traces the attempts to discern structure within Proverbs 10-31. He describes approvingly the work of Skladny, Boström, Whybray, Goldingay, and others as well as his own efforts in discovering proverb arrangement.²⁴ He concludes, “By knowing the poetics biblical narrators and poets of all sorts, including sages, used to give their compositions coherence and unity, the interpreter can discern unstated and often implicit, not explicit, connections between verses.” Further, “By matching the text’s surface rhetorical techniques (or syntagmatic connections) with the deep structure of its meaning (paradigmatic connections) one may discern a proverb’s or saying’s meaning-rich literary context.”²⁵

Waltke’s commentary then demonstrates his understanding of the arrangements and their significance by defining the units and then interpreting individual sayings within the unit context. He concludes the single-line “educative” proverbs serve as a heuristic guide, pointing out the beginning of larger units. Within those units, a number of rhetorical devices reveal sub-units.²⁶

Some examples help illustrate the possible significance that this literary context may have for interpretation. First, intentional placement in the editing process seems likely in the arrangement of Proverbs 10:24-11:11. The frequency of the use of righteous/wicked terminology seems to be the magnet that draws these sayings into a unit. Terms for righteousness and wickedness (צַדִּיק and רָשָׁע) appear 20 times in this brief section. This forms a centerpiece for a

²³ Estes, *Wisdom Books*, p. 220.

²⁴ *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 14-21.

²⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs*, pp. 45-48.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

larger unit (chs 10-13) in which these terms occur more than 68 times. The concentration of these righteous/wicked sayings appears to extend the emphasis of the prologue (1:8-9:18) into the more thematic sayings. Therefore, an individual saying within the group ought to be interpreted in light of the surrounding proverbs and in relation to the wisdom-foolly competition for the heart in the prologue.

A second possible example is the oft problematic verse of Proverbs 22:6. Too many parents have expected guaranteed results or shouldered unfair blame for their children's lives. Though debated by some, most acknowledge that this proverb emphasizes the parents' role in moral training of their children.²⁷ Waltke places this saying in a unit emphasizing Yahweh's sovereignty in wealth and in moral instruction.²⁸ Within this unit, the saying in 22:6 ought to be understood along with the 22:15 reminder that foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child. A parent has a tremendous responsibility for moral training, but it does not remove the sin nature nor the moral obligation of the child. Further, the introductory saying for the next subunit calls on every learner to be a responsive hearer: "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise" (22:17). So the danger of formulaizing Proverbs 22:6 may be answered by clarifying statements in its immediate context.

A third potential example clarifies the blessing of wealth in the well-known sayings of Proverbs 3:9-10.

Honor Yahweh with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
then your barns will be overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.

²⁷ See Longman, pp. 404-5 for discussion.

²⁸ Waltke (Proverbs II, pp. 196-7) marks off the unit as 22:1-16 by thematic elements, repeated catchwords and by inclusion formed by 22:1 and 22:14-15.

An uninformed overreading of the text suggests that honoring Yahweh produces massive agricultural success. However, the intent of the proverb becomes clearer in light of surrounding texts. Proverbs 3:13-16 declares that the virtues of wisdom exceed temporal success. The value is more than silver, gold, or any temporal prosperity. The true value rests in the virtue itself, apart from potential reward.

A final example shows how textual arrangement may affect interpretation. Waltke suggests that Proverbs 10:1b-16 form a unit contrasting the righteous and wicked in the arenas of speech and wealth. An introductory “rearing proverb” (10:1b) marks the unit beginning. A mix of chiasm, paronomasia (pun), and catchwords adhere the sayings into a cohesive unit. The strategic use of life (חַיִּים) and death (מָוֶת) in each of the three subunits (2, 11, 16) serves to heighten the significance of the individual sayings. “In short, the stakes are high: one’s deportment with money (vv. 2-5, 15-16) and speech (vv. 6-14) are matters of life and death.”²⁹

The above examples demonstrate that indeed if Proverbs 10-31 represents cohesive design, then the contextual setting of the design can impact the interpretation of individual sayings within a unit. If this is the case, then the intent of the authors/compiler of proverbs into Proverbs is expressed not only in individual pithy sayings, but also in carefully constructed units of sayings. Perhaps, since a single proverb encases such a narrow slice of life, groups of sayings better deal with the complexity of life. If cohesive design exists in these chapters, an interpreter hears not a series of solos, but a choir cantata.

At this stage in our study of textual arrangement of Proverbs, one cannot make dogmatic assertions. Longman’s observation concerning the diversity of schematic arrangements and their seeming subjectivity rings clear. Literary design and subsequent interpretive context cannot be

²⁹ Waltke, *Proverbs I*, p. 450.

decisively demonstrated. However, as Waltke noted, there are some clear evidences of literary design within Proverbs. If some have clear arrangement, perhaps arrangement of other proverbs will be discovered. So current scholarship as a whole answers the literary context existence question with a definite maybe, leaning toward Yes. It seems interpreters may actually be on the verge of finding the Panda rather than imagining another Bigfoot.

Two considerations surface before dismissing possible text arrangement in Proverbs. The first is historical. Parallelism was essentially unknown until discovered and explained by Robert Lowth in 1753. Until then an important textual arrangement of poetry was unnoticed and unused. Now it represents a basic element of interpreting Hebrew poetry. The arrangement existed, but took centuries to surface. A similarly delayed discovery rose from the Old Testament psalter. Past interpreters of Psalms seldom interpreted an individual poem in light of its canonical context within the collection. However, most current books on Psalms now discuss the overall significance of the collected arrangement.³⁰ The second consideration is philosophical. If as evangelicals we believe God has inspired the writings of Scripture, we recognize that involves the arrangement of the text. This seems obvious with the logical arrangement of epistles or the narrative arrangement of the Gospels. It appears important as well in the design of prophetic oracles and psalm collections. Therefore, if inspiration includes literary arrangement and context in other biblical genres, may it also be a part of the divinely guided composition/compilation process of Proverbs?

Given the clear examples, along with the historical and philosophical considerations, one concludes at this point that interpreting an individual saying should involve checking for possible literary context. If an interpreter discovers clear linkage of a saying with surrounding sayings,

³⁰ For two current examples, see Estes, *Proverbs*, 145-146 and C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 58-82.

these should influence the understanding of the single proverb. The clearer the cohesion of the unit and thematic connection of the sayings within it, the more certain one can conclude that the arrangement expresses an element of the author's intended meaning.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the message of Proverbs, worshipful practical wisdom produced by discernment and producing moral virtue, ought to guide our interpretation and application of individual sayings. While wisdom genre, broader context of Job and Ecclesiastes, and the still broader New Testament context are important elements of interpreting Proverbs, they should not be used to the exclusion of the book's message and literary context. In fact, these two closer contexts should have higher priority than more remote ones. Rather than having other biblical texts interrupt interpretation by speaking too soon, it is better to let Proverbs finish its own sentences.

Further, this paper has shown that enough evidence of cohesive literary design exists for an interpreter to seek to locate a saying within a literary unit. These units must exhibit clear literary and thematic consistency. The stronger and clearer the connection, the more influence the unit should exert on the interpretation of a single saying. Allowing these two voices to speak in the Proverbs interpretation process at their proper time can lead to a clearer interpretation and communication of the intended meaning of this beloved portion of Scripture.