ISSN 1556-3723 (print)

Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion

Volume 16 2020 Article 2

WISDOM, MASCULINITY, AND HEALTH IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Abstract

"Being a man" in today's world is a challenging and confusing task. Culture and religion, the two main sources from which men construct their identities, now have an important addition: the popular media. How men perceive themselves, however, is important because it has repercussions for women with respect to how they relate with women. Indeed, emerging studies on masculinity show that perceptions of what it means "to be a man" equally affect men who may be at risk because of their disposition to life. Previous studies on masculinity in the Hebrew Bible largely isolate and explain the qualities or traits that embody the concept of maleness in ancient Israel. Apart from the social practice of sexual relations, most of the studies, however, are removed from social life practices of Israelite men. For instance, little is known about the relationship between masculinity and health within the Israelite society. Nevertheless, several profane studies indicate that among the factors that shape health related beliefs and behaviours is the sociocultural element of gender. This paper, therefore, departs from previous studies on masculinity in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), by exploring the relationship between wisdom genre (specifically Proverbs) and masculinity, and how they impinge on health.

Introduction

"Being a man" in today's world is a challenging and confusing task. Culture, religion, and now the popular media have become the main sources from which men construct their identities. Taking the media, for instance, because of its power and scope, their portrayals of men foreground "culturally accepted social relations, define sexual norms and provide 'common sense' understandings about male identity for the contemporary audience".[1] What is more, the vagaries of these sources lead to multiple and shifting identifies of what constitute a "man". Ulla Hakala argues that ideas of what constitutes a man are "fluid, time-related and variable across cultures and eras as well as subject to change over the course of a person's life, and within any given society at any time".[2] How men perceive themselves, however, is important because it has repercussions for women. Emerging studies on masculinity show that perceptions on what it means "to be a man" do not only affect women, but also the men who may be at risk because of their disposition to life. The works of feminists and other social theorists reveal the damaging trails of patriarchy in history. Traditional masculinity, for instance, has come under several criticisms, with some calling for its rejection.[3]

The intellectual quest for an informed insight into men and their constructed identities has spilled over into biblical studies. As in profane studies, the impetus for the search for the Bible's representation of men comes from the tremendous works of feminists who have laboured to show that, to the contrary, the portrait of men in the Bible is not the norm, but constructed gender. Armed with this knowledge, biblical scholars interested in the portrayal of men take maleness as an interpretive category.[4] According to Susan E. Haddox, biblical masculinity deals with "examining the social construct and power structures at play in the textual presentation of men and masculinity".[5] This interesting but challenging quest is not just an intellectual exercise removed

from the realities of contemporary societies. There is a dynamic reciprocity in as much as our modern understanding of maleness affects how we read men in the Bible and vice versa.

Relatively new, masculinity studies on the Hebrew Bible have produced interesting insights into ancient Israelite society and its construction of maleness. This paper, therefore, departs from previous studies, by exploring the relationship between wisdom[6] and masculinity, and how they relate to good health. Previous studies on masculinity in the Hebrew Bible largely isolate and explain the qualities or traits that embody the concept of maleness in ancient Israel. Apart from the social practice of sexual relations, most of the studies, however, are removed from social life practices of Israelite men. For instance, little is known about the relationship between masculinity and health within the Israelite society. Nevertheless, several profane studies indicate that among the factors that shape health related beliefs and behaviours is the sociocultural element of gender.

Wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible offer an interesting prospect for exploring the relationship between masculinity and health. Proverbs specifically, has generated interesting and nuanced discussion on the kind of masculinity it portrays. But what makes Proverbs apt for this discussion is its pragmatic orientation. Proverbs details the daily life and concerns of the Israelite people. The book provides insight into the beliefs and practices that characterised social life. It is therefore an important resource in exploring how health related beliefs and practices were informed by masculinity constructions.

The argument this paper seeks to defend is that the constructed male in Proverbs is one who is conscious of health matters and takes less risk. This proposal largely contrasts with several profane studies which indicate that many men today are negatively disposed to healthy practices

due to the identity they carve for themselves. In what follows, I first take a look at scholarly discussions on the relationship between wisdom and masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. I then proceed to explore the constructions of health and well-being in the Hebrew Bible and Proverbs in particular. Finally, I examine the interplay between health-related beliefs and practices on the one hand and masculinity on the other hand as contained in Proverbs. Although the topic makes the bold claim of using the book of Proverbs as the interpretive object, what really transpires is a purposeful selection of relevant sayings mainly concentrated in the lectures or instruction genre and the aphorisms. And this is necessary because of the constraints of space: a faithful commitment to the topic will demand a larger space.

Wisdom and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible

In his study of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible, Clines identifies intelligence and persuasiveness as a characteristic of males in ancient Israel.[7] He links this quality to wisdom when he writes, "Intelligent, eloquent, persuasive speech forms part of a wider category of 'wisdom'…".[8] Using David as his case, Clines argues that the quality of intelligence and persuasive talk enables a man to control others. It is a display of power, "which is not an alternative to, and far less a denatured version of, physical strength, but part of the repertory of the powerful male".[9] Clines's evaluation of David's masculinity in the Davidic narratives fits under hegemonic masculinity. Although he admits that David displays conflicting masculinities, he writes:

> There is no 'new man' here in the David story. There is a fully fledged traditional male, who for the most part recapitulates everything scripted for him by his culture, but now and then conspicuously fails—so conspicuously that any non-feminized reader knows immediately that it is a failure that is not to be excused or imitated, but is a sorry example that serves only to reinforce the value of the traditional norms.[10]

Clines worked with a narrative text, a different genre from the Wisdom Literature. He isolated the character David within the narrative and focused on the distinguishing traits that characterize or project David's understanding of himself as a man. In this respect, Clines uses wisdom as a quality, a defining trait, and not a genre. However, in order to explore more deeply the nexus between wisdom as a quality and the concept of masculinity, one cannot ignore the wisdom books, since the wisdom traditions are the major sources through which we can gain greater insights into the qualities of wisdom. This probably accounts for the reason why the few scholars who have attempted exploring the nexus between wisdom and masculinity resort to the wisdom books as the main source for their studies.[11]

One such scholar is Hilary Lipka. She holds a contrary view from Clines on the association between wisdom and masculinity. Lipka sees the wisdom book of Proverbs as projecting alternative masculinity as opposed to hegemonic masculinity. Alternative masculinity traits such as inner strength and honor are upheld, while hegemonic traits such as physical strength and skills in warfare are subordinated. Being a man in Proverbs revolves around values of integrity and social harmony. The presentation of small, weak, but clever animals as models to look up to shows how Proverbs moves away from the external display of physical strength to inner strength and diplomacy. For Likpa, a historical development lies behind the association of wisdom with alternative masculinity. She argues that the changes in ancient Israel's historical landscape accounted for the shifts or changes in how Israelite men constructed their identities.[12] During the monarchy, for instance, Israelite society demanded strength and valor, traits that were central to sustaining a society that needed to justify its presence through wars. The social circumstances during the exilic and post exilic period called for reflection and display of inner strength.

Clines and Likpa agree that wisdom is a quality of masculinity, but they differ on how it positions one to act and think. While Clines is of the view that wisdom enables one to exercise control and power over others, Lipka sees wisdom as guiding one to place value on inner strength and diplomacy as opposed to external domination over others. Thus, Clines sees wisdom as instrumental to hegemonic masculinity, while Lipka conceives wisdom as foundational to alternative masculinity. Wilson who enters into the argument sides with Clines over Likpa when he places wisdom under hegemonic masculinity.[13] He argues that apart from Proverbs, which Likpa used to build her arguments, the data outside Proverbs do not support her views. For Wilson, Likpa makes a mistake when she pushes the view that a new paradigm for masculinity emerged because of the emphasis on wisdom traits.[14] Rather, he sees the emphasis on inner strength and social harmony as a matter of preference, since Proverbs is a wisdom book. Although agreeing with Lipka on the shift from hegemonic masculinity to alternative masculinity among the colonized Jewish men, he insists that even in Proverbs there are traces of hegemonic traits such as physical strength which the sages promote.

It is not the goal of this paper to identify the type of masculinity manifested in Proverbs. Nevertheless, the above arguments are important in as much as they reveal the different perspectives on the nexus between wisdom and masculinity. I particularly find Lipka's argument on alternative masculinity useful since it provides a good foundation for appreciating the complexity in determining the masculinity of ancient Israel, especially when its literary heritage is the main source of our argumentation.

Construction of Health and Wellness in the Hebrew Bible and Its Relation to Proverbs

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as the "state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".[15] Although this definition reflects the modern person's understanding of health, it has continuities with ancient and traditional/indigenous notions of health and well-being. For instance, the notion that health transcends the physical into areas of mental and spiritual aspect of life is common among ancient societies. In the Hebrew Bible, the word that comes close to health is Shalom. This word is often translated as well-being or vitality in all dimensions of life. Shalom is achieved when one maintains the right relationship with God and fellow humans. For the Israelites, God ultimately upholds health, and the only way to protect one's health was through obedience to God (cf. Ex 15:26). This understanding flows from the Israelite conception of humans as a union of both the physical and the spiritual; the inner and the outer dimensions of life are dovetailed into each other. In other words, ancient Israelites did not conceive human life as an antithesis between the physical life and spiritual life. Human life is perceived in its wholeness, having its roots in the divine power of God.

One of the sources in the Hebrew Bible that reveals the Israelite wholistic concept of health and well-being is the book of Proverbs. Several literary genres populate the book of Proverbs, such as the lectures or instructions in 1-9 as well as the wisdom interludes, and the aphorisms of 10:1-22:16. As an international genre, the lectures appear within a pedagogical framework of an interaction between a father (teacher) and his son (student), where the former passes on set(s) of information to the latter. Within this framework is the assumption that a young man who has come of age needs guidance and direction. As Wilson indicates, the "most significant social and psychological transition in a man's life is the change from childhood to adulthood", a change that cannot be left arbitrarily to the young man if the best is to be expected from him.[16] The lectures,

therefore, serve as an important medium through which the son imbibes societal ideals, including expectations of what constitutes a "good man". The aphorisms, on their part, play similar roles as they present their messages in a concise and witty manner with a penetrating effect on the heart. As practical knowledge, wisdom offers itself as an alternative to other orientations to life. In order to persuade its audience, wisdom promises several benefits, including good health and long life. For Bland, proverbial wisdom is all about healthy living, especially when health is construed as total well-being, and not the mere absence of physical illness.[17] The truth of this assertion is borne out in two main ways.

First, wisdom is basically about life and living, and not just about good life/living. Although there is no explicit claim to a good life in the prologue of Proverbs (Prov. 1:1-7), where the purpose of the book is spelt out, such a goal is latent in the ideals outlined which are; attaining wisdom, discipline, and understanding words of insight (v. 2), acquiring prudent life and doing what is just and fair (v. 3), and gaining knowledge and discretion (v. 4). These ideals are not ends in themselves; rather they are instrumental (through character building) to achieving the good life. Notably, character formation is key to the Israelite sages. Wisdom is not for mere cognition of knowing what is good, but also for character building as in having the will to do what is right. Character traits such as self-control, judiciousness, moderation, and tolerance are presented as desirable traits that should be learned. As Fox intimates such character disposition led to several benefits including health.[18]

Second, the subject of health permeates the entire wisdom corpus, both explicitly and implicitly. Proverbs uses words and ideas that expressly convey meanings of health and healing. Such words include, **rif'ût (**3:8**)**, **marpē'** (4:22; 12:18: 16:24) and **gēhāh** (17:22). There are also

a number of figurative expressions for health such as, **ʻēṣ-ḥayîm (**tree of life – 3:18) and **ʻāleh** (green leaf -11:28).

Health and Masculinity in Proverbs

Health behaviours, here construed as the conscious and unconscious actions of people which impinge on their health, are informed by wider sociocultural factors including gender.[19] For instance, some studies indicate that men are more likely than women to engage in riskier behaviours such as drunk driving, and unprotected sex because of men's attempt to demonstrate dominant views of manhood.[20] Since ancient Israel's understanding of health was holistic and ties into WHO's definition, the latter is apt for our purposes here and will serve as the framework for the discussion below.

a. **Physical Health and Masculinity**: Physical health deals with the optimal functioning of the body. It is the most visible of all the dimensions of health as well as the foundation of a healthy life. Physical health consists of many components including physical activity, alcohol and drug use, and nutrition and diet. The discussion below focuses on dangerous activities of gangs, and sexual exploits.

- **Gangs and Violence**: Men's understanding of power and how it ought to be displayed affects their disposition to physical health. Because men see themselves in relation to women as the more powerful sex, they are predisposed to search and express power in their relationship with women and among themselves. According to Clines, ancient Israelite men were disposed to display power through violence and their ability to overcome and even kill other men.[21] This image pops up in the first lecture (Prov. 1:8-19), where we see a gang enticing a young man to join.[22] Three offers by the gang are placed before the young man: adventure (v, 11), wealth (v. 13), and

camaraderie (v. 14). Although the gang openly admits the evil or antisocial nature of their engagements, they do not shy away from indicating that they enjoy the violent life. The offers from the gang, as important markers of manhood, point to the danger they pose to the young boy.[23]

In countering the persuasive claims of the gang, the sage employs images of life and death to dissuade the young man from joining the group. Two key ideas in the rhetoric of the sage are **derek** (way) and ***nepeš*** (life). A common word in the Hebrew Bible, **derek** has many figurative usages in the wisdom corpus. According to Waltke, the word projects these figurative nuances: "(1) 'course of life' (i.e., the character and context of life); (2) 'conduct of life' (i.e., specific choices and behavior); and (3) 'consequences of that conduct' (i.e., the inevitable destiny of such a lifestyle)."[24] On its part, **n*epeš***, basically refers to one's life, precisely the physical dimension of life. It appears the sage's conclusion is that one's way (**derek**) has a qualitative and quantitative effect on one's life (**n*epeš***).

Preservation of life emerges as one of the key persuasive strategies the sage uses to dissuade the youth from identifying and internalising notions of masculinity associated with violence and abusive use of power. Research indicates that young boys today do not hesitate to jeopardise their health as they strive to demonstrate their manhood.[25] Such may be the case in ancient Israel, which leads the sage to offer wisdom as a better alternative since it promises to deliver the youth from **sheol** (the place of the dead). Wisdom then is life; the gang offers the youth what appears to be good life through violence and bloodshed, and the sage counters it with wisdom which is the good life – one devoid of violence and ill intention. In such competing proposals, the young boy would have to make a choice which reflects his self-understanding of what constitutes maleness.

- **Sexual Activity**: A pressing physical health problem is sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In one report, it stated that "Men are more at risk for STDs because they are more likely to be sexually active, begin sexual activity early in life, have more sexual partners, have sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol …".[26] This disposition of men, according to Seidler, lies in the complex connection between sex and power on one hand and male identity on the other hand.[27] For some reasons, sex has been a major medium men use to prove their masculinity. From the biological theoretical perspective on masculinity, men are more prone to be promiscuous than women. Steve Robertson explains this theory as follows:

> The Y chromosome, and related hormonal influences (particularly testosterone) are seen as creating a drive towards particular behaviours in men - hunter (breadwinner), being territorial, sexual promiscuity - that are expressions of evolutionary mechanisms designed to ensure the survival of the species and the procreation of the strongest genetic pool.[28]

Whether men's proneness to sexual promiscuity is biological or social, Proverbs is aware of this disposition of men and its health implication. Majority of the lectures are warnings against promiscuous life, including adultery (Prov 2:16-19; 6:23-35;5; 7). As Fox posits, wisdom in the lectures is mostly about how the young man can avoid temptation, especially that posed by the "strange woman".[29] Unfortunately, the lectures elaborate more on the strange woman than the young man. However, in the last of the lectures (Prov 7) we get a glimpse into the disposition of the young man. In 7:7, the sage observes a group of young boys, among whom exists one who is "without sense" (**ḥăṣr-lēv**). First, the sage observed a group of young boys from the window of his house. This group is labelled as **pětā'yim**, which translates as "gullible" or "naive", and it is from this group one particular youth departs. ventures way. The reason for his adventurism is not explicitly stated, but one cannot be far from right in conjecturing that the young man's movement

from the group may have been due to the pressure he felt in the group. His actions in the following verse (v. 8) give credence to this stance. The verse reads

‘obēr baššûq ’ēṣel pinnāh; wĕderek bêtāh yiṣ‘ād
Passing through the street near her corner; and the way to her house he went.

Exiting the group, the young man sets off on a road and he appears to know what lays in store for him. As several commentators point out, the young man was not going specifically to the house of the “strange woman” but it was also that he did not mistakenly end up on the path.[30] The phrases **’ēṣel pinnāh** (*near her corner*) and **wĕderek bêtāh (***and the way to her house*) suggest prior knowledge and intentionality on the part of the young man. Indeed, the verb **yiṣ‘ād** (*he strode*) shows the confidence with which the young man acted. In the words of Fox, the word “suggests a bold and deliberate step”.[31] My understanding of this scene, therefore, is that the young man might have been challenged by his peers to prove himself a man by daring to venture into the path of the “strange woman”. Subsequently, the young man is dominated by the “strange woman” when she appears on the scene (cf. vv. 10-21). Her dominance makes some posit that the young man is unassuming, but from the above analysis complete innocence on his part cannot be ascribed to him.[32]

In order to dissuade young men from proving themselves men through sexual promiscuity, the sages outline series of negative consequences including venereal diseases and exhaustion of the body. In Prov 5: 11, the sage retorts;

wĕnāhamtā bĕ’aḥărîtekā biklôt bĕśārĕkā ûšĕ’ērekā
And in the end you will groan, as your body and flesh waste away.

Scholars such as C. H. Toy do not see a physical health issue here, but rather a social problem as a result of the loss of wealth as intimated in v. 9-10.[33] However, the diction of the verse makes it

difficult to rule out physical health problems. Opening the verse is the *qal* active verb, **nāham**, which means to *groan* or *growl* indicating pain and discomfort on the part of the young man. Such pain emanates from the debilitating condition of the body as captured by the nouns **bāśār** (*flesh*) and **šĕ'ēr** (*body*). However, it is the verb, **kālāh**, which puts into perspective the subject of health. According to Baker and Carpenter, the primary meaning of the word "is to consummate or bring to a completion".[34] This meaning reinforces the phrase **bĕ'aḥărîtekā** (*in the end*), indicating an event in the future which will call for the excruciating pain. With flesh and body in a state which causes pain and with an end in sight, it is not farfetched to suggest a health problem. Also because of the context of promiscuity, Fox pushes for the possibility of venereal diseases as the cause of pain.

However, it is important to note that the risk to young men who commit adultery is not limited to venereal diseases. There is also the risk of being harmed by the strange woman's partner/husband. In most of the lectures on promiscuity, adultery emerges as the subject under discussion. The strange woman is presented as the wife of another man (cf. 2:16-19; 5:20; 6:23-35). Israelite laws were clear on what to do with the adulterous man. In Lev. 20:10 the married man and woman who commit adultery are to be put to death. So, when the sages warned young men of death and the destruction of self (2:18; 6:32), they were only rehashing what the laws stipulated.

b. **Mental Health and Masculinity**: The absence of mental health compromises one's physical health. However, what exactly constitutes mental health is difficult to say. Many people approach mental health from the perspective of mental illness, but as Katherine Weare points out the two are different.[35] While mental health is positively oriented, mental illness focuses on the negative, the presence of disorders and problems. There is also the issue of the social construction

of mental health as well as the issues of the causes of mental disorders, which are "a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors".[36] Indeed it will be extremely difficult to come up with what constituted mental health in ancient Israel. So, the approach this paper takes is to use evidence from the book of Proverbs to construct the notion of mental health. This approach does not mean that what exactly emerges as mental health in Proverbs has nothing to do with present understandings of mental health; clearly there are continuities in human cultures that space and time cannot erode. Also because of literary limitations, social and psychological casual factors will be the focus. Therefore, the approach used here seeks a dialogue between ancient Israelite perspective and modern perspectives on mental health.

According to Bland, Israelite understanding of health integrates mental and emotional health.[37] Right thinking and proper expressions of emotions are preconditions for a healthy and productive life. The importance of mental and emotional health is demonstrated in the wise person who contrasts the fool. According to Proverbs, a wise person is prudent, capable of discerning, has understanding, and is composed in life (3:13-14; 14:15-17; 15:1; 15:31; 19:20). On the contrary, the fool is stubborn, lacks ability to make decisions, empty-headed, gullible, and mentally sluggish (10:23; 12:15; 14:16; 18:6; 26:11). Because of the qualities he displays, the fool may engage in behaviours that lead to health risk. An important dimension to mental health within ancient Israelite society as Fox points out is the relationship between morality and spirituality on one hand and mental health on the other. He writes, "the sages believed that intellectual powers—even pragmatic ones that others might regard as morally neutral—were inherently conducive to morality.[38] What this means is that mental health in Proverbs has an intricately ethical basis. Right behavior and right thinking should create in one feelings of self-efficacy, competence, intellectual and emotional potential, and interdependence.

Traditional notions of masculinity encourage men to be strong and not to be emotive. Emotional displays, especially those characterized by crying and remorse, depict a weak man; one who is not fit to be in the circles of men.[39] In Proverbs, an ambivalent picture emerges on how men are to deal with their emotions. On the one hand, Proverbs encourages submission and dependence in relationships, two qualities that traditional masculinity considers disdainful. Two important relationships where men are to be open and dependent are relationships with one's spouse and parents. Men's relationship with their spouses can have far reaching health implications. According to Clines, Israelite men were womanless. What Clines means is that Israelite

> males are so casual about women, and that women are so marginal to the lives of the protagonists. There is in this story, on the whole, no sexual desire, no love stories, no romances, no wooing, no daring deeds for the sake of a beloved. This is not a world in which men long for women.[40]

For Clines, the above description is applicable in relationships between couples. He writes, "It may seem strange to speak of David, a man with eight principal wives and at least ten others of secondary rank … as 'womanless'". Proverbs, however, constructs a different identity for married men by encouraging openness between spouses, one built on trust and love. In Prov 5, the sage encourages the son to endear himself to his wife in a manner in which he completely surrenders himself to the wife's love.[41] Although sexual intimacy between the couple is the immediate concern, ultimately what the sage encourages the young man to do is to totally surrender his love and desires to the wife. Interestingly, such complete surrender of a man's love to his wife is perceived by some men to be dangerous and unwise. A probable reason for such fears, according to Pollack, lies in the nature of the relationship young boys develop with their female caregivers.[42]

Pollack argues that by toughening boys up through limiting their dependency on female caregivers, boys learn to fear intimacy, which affects their emotional health. He explains further,

> Having experienced a sense of hurt in the real connection to their mothers … many boys, and later men, are left at risk for emphatic disruptions in their affiliative connections, doomed to search endlessly…and yet fend women off because of their fear of traumatization.[43]

Because men fear to fully express their love and commitment to their partners, they are likely to adopt unhealthy behaviors such as refusal to discuss a pressing problem.

Proverbs also encourages young adult males to submit and depend on their parents for guidance. The young man who has reached the threshold of adulthood is still admonished by the father and mother. Words and phrases indicate the kind of bond in which the young man is continuously dependent on the wisdom and direction of the parents. In the first lecture (Prov 1:8), for instance, the word **bĕnî** (my son) establishes the nature of the relationship between the father and son. The father and mother are the instructors, the bearers of the teachings, wisdom, and knowledge while the son is the student and the receiver of the parent's wisdom. Implicit here is the understanding that the father and mother by virtue of their experience in life are in a better and superior position than the son relative to life experiences. A constructed male in Proverbs thus is one who is continuously dependent on his parents (elders), because he is teachable. Prov 10:1 says,

bēn ḥākām yĕśammaḥ ʾāv ûbēn kĕsîl tûgat ʾimmô
A wise son makes a glad father; but the foolish son is a sorrow to his mother

Success in life depends on the son's continuous dependence on the parents' instructions. Such proposition is contested by many young men who see their advent of adulthood as a sign of independence. According to Pollack the ability of boys to be stoic and independent strengthens their image.[44] J. Arcaya adds that Hispanic American boys, for instance, are encouraged to be independent as early as possible in order to meet societal expectations of manhood.[45]

On the other hand, Proverbs encourages young men to be tough and resilient. Mostly concentrated in the Solomonic collection of Prov 10-22:16, these sayings teach young men to develop self-control and to persevere, two qualities that traditional masculinity also promote. For instance, in Prov 12:16, the sage condemns young men who cannot control their anger or lack self-control. Perhaps the height of the sayings on self-control is captured in 16:32:

ṭôv ’erek ’apayim miggibbôr; umošēl bĕrûḥô milked ‘îr
Better the one who is slow to anger than the mighty;
And he who rules his spirit than he who takes the city

As a better saying, Prov 16:32 juxtaposes two values and makes an explicit choice of one over the other. In the first clause, patience is chosen over anger, and the second presents self-control over physical power. There is a complex interplay between control of emotions and health. Traditionally, men have been socialised to be tough on their emotions. Shelling their “true” emotions is hailed as a positive identity for men. According to Seidler, within the Western culture, masculinity has been identified with self-control since the Reformation. Individuals such as Kant championed reason over emotions and hailed a man who uses reason to construct his moral order over one who succumbs to desires and emotions. However, the association between male identity and suppression of emotions has been largely negative for men. In the words of Seidler,

> “[men] develop very little ongoing relationship with our emotional selves. This is why, as men, we can so easily be overwhelmed by our emotionality when it takes hold. It is often men who are ‘swept off their feet’ in love or who suddenly have emotional breakdowns. It is as if our very lack of relationship with our emotional and somatic selves means that when they make an entrance, they can so easily overwhelm us.[46]

Although Proverbs advocates for control of emotions, it does not treat emotions as a suspect, something antithetical to men’s development. Control of emotions is placed within the larger framework of emotional intelligence, in that there is an attempt on the part of the sages to direct attention on emotional awareness for proper management of the emotions.[47] For instance, in Prov

14:10, we get to know that living is about experiencing the full gamut of emotion – **mārat** (*bitterness*) and **śimḥāh** (*joy*), of which only the individual and God (cf. 15:11) can completely understand. Other sayings such as Prov 14:13 teaches the need for better understanding of the shifting or impermanence of moods. One's appreciation of his emotional alternations could lead to proper management of emotions.

c. **Social Health and Masculinity**: Social health is an important component of well-being. As part of WHO's conceptualisation of health, social health encompasses all aspects of one's social life which promote one's well-being. It can be perceived from various levels such as the social health of a community or state, a group, or an individual. The paper focuses on the social health of men as a group as well as the individual man. It also considers social health from the relational perspective, and conceptualises it as "that dimension of an individual's well-being that concerns how he gets along with other people, how other people react to him, and how he interacts with social institutions and societal mores".[48] Research indicates that men tend to rank lower on social health than women.[49] This is compounded by the cliché that men are unwilling to ask for help when they experience problems in life.

Proverbs places premium on relationship and by extension a sense of community. An important tenet of wisdom is to pursue it in community with others, and not in isolation from others.[50] With the goal of encouraging young men to live life to the fullest, Proverbs sees companionship as instrumental in attaining such goals. Several sayings dwell on the power of friendship in promoting well-being (cf. Prov 13:20; 18:24; 27:17). What is interesting is that Proverbs is not oblivious to the danger that bad company or friends pose to young men, with quite a number of sayings directing one to choose his associates wisely (cf. Prov 4:10-19 and 13:20). For instance, a direct association between friendship and health is given in 13:20 which reads:

Hôlēk[51] **ʾet-ḥăkāmîm weḥĕkām; wĕroʿeh kĕsîlîm yērôaʿ**

He who walks with the wise becomes wise; but he who associates with fools will be harmed

Wisdom and stupidity could be learned from the associates or friends one keeps. When one associates with a bad company, the person is likely to suffer some form of harm (**yērôaʿ**). As Waltke points out, the use of the *niphal* stem shows that one inflicts the harm on oneself.[52] But how does bad company cause one to inflict harm on oneself? Bad company has the ability to shape the desire and resolutions of the young entrant. In most cases, the interests of these groups collide with societal values and mores (cf. Prov 1:8-19; 4:14-17). This means that the young entrant will begin to act against the expectations of society. Although the harm suffered can be of various forms, an immediate harm will be the loss of respect and dignity of the young entrant within his society. Ultimately, walking with fools can lead to social ostracism, which in turn reduces social capital such as trust and mutual support one would have enjoyed.

Besides bad company, Proverbs also warns against arbitral formation of friendship as well as bad neighbourliness, a case being Prov 18:24. Despite the textual difficulty in this saying, there seem to be consensus on the fact that the saying contrasts quantitative and qualitative friendship. True value of friendship is not in its quantitative values, that is possessing many friends. Rather it is about the one true friend, the quality such a friend brings to the relationship is what is important. By employing the word **dāvēq** (*cling*), the sage characterises a true friend as one who stays and commits in the relationship. As essential factors of quality relationships, time and commitment are alluded to through the comparison between **ʾoēv** (*a friend*) and **ʾāḥ** (*a brother*). Young men, therefore, should not necessarily be looking for bands or groups to join. Rather, they should be interested in lasting relationships, in which partners commit to each other.

Social health thrives on the rich connection between people through their commitment to assist, support, and care for each other. Prov 15:17, for instance, communicates the simple message

that love for others is better than fine food.[53] Commenting on this, Rowland E. Murphy admits that although the criterion for judgment is not given, the value of the proverb lies in the imponderable and the immaterial.[54] The saying draws attention to the spirit of trust and love. For Bland, it is about the sense of community which transcends material things.[55] Such connections, based on trust and respect for one another, are essential for the support men can give to each other.

Conclusion

Largely a manual for young men, Proverbs aims at shaping individuals into responsible and decent members of their society. Such an agenda impinges on the identity Proverbs constructs for men. Israelite sages appear to be weary of the competing identities young men faced, such as display of power and machoism through joining gangs or the display of sexual prowess and pride in engaging in sexual exploits all in attempt to prove oneself as having come of age. What emerges from the discussion so far is that the constructed male in Proverbs differs from Cline's constructed male of the Hebrew Bible. While the former is a man who is sensitive to social norms and to the preservation of life, the latter is a man who at the very least seems indifferent to social norms. One implication of this is that the constructed male in Proverbs is inclined towards health promoting behaviours. As an orientation to life, Wisdom directs and shapes men's disposition towards life in a manner which makes them adopt less risky behaviours. A possible reason for this could be that for the sages, being a man is a task that needs conforming to the moral and ethical framework of the society. This is a thesis that can be explored fully in another paper. What is important for now is that knowing that behavioural and psychosocial processes are significant and fundamental to health and well-being, Proverb's construction of male is an appealing prospect for our world today where young men face the difficulty of conforming to competing identities, some of which are detrimental to their health and well-being.

Endnotes

1. Rebecca Feasey, *Masculinity and Popular Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 4.
2. Ulla Hakala, *Adam in Ads: A Thirty Year Look at Mediated Masculinities in Advertising in Finland and the US* (Tampere: Esa Print Tampere, 2006), 57.
3. Cooper Thompson, "We should reject masculinity," in *To be a Man: In Search of the Deep Masculine*, ed. Keith Thompson (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc, 1991), 4-9, argues that traditional masculinity thrives on violence and creates societal costs. See also R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 3-6, who contends that the damaging effect of masculinity has propelled into force a worldwide commitment to reorienting men in their understandings of what constitutes maleness, an understanding that should ultimately lead to positive practical consequences for humanity. Victor Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), 5, on his part, also calls for change among men. He writes, "It is our experiences and relationships as men that must be changed".
4. Some works include; David J. A. Clines, "He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets and their Interpreters", in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, ed. D. J.A. Clines and P.R. *Davies* (JSOTSup 348; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002): 311-28; H. Eilberg-Schwarz, *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994); J. Goldingay, "Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4 and Masculist Interpretation", in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athayla Brenner (Feminist Companion to the Bible, 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 161-68.
5. Susan E. Haddox, "Masculinity Studies of the Hebrew Bible: The First Two Decades," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, 2 (2016): 117.
6. My use of the term "wisdom" is in two folds. First, it is used as a reference to what scholars call Wisdom Literature. Used in this sense as a genre, the term refers to those literary works in the Hebrew Bible that display certain distinctive qualities from the rest of the OT books. These qualities of the wisdom books are discernible in their form and content. See Dave Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 2002), 14-18. Second, I use the term as a descriptive trait or as a characteristic. It also refers to one's approach or orientation to life. In these usages, wisdom is a quality exhibited by one deemed to be wise. Wisdom, as a characteristic/orientation, positions one to demonstrate certain actions and attitudes. As a result, it differentiates by placing people under the rubric of being wise or unwise. The difference in these usages will be indicated in the course of the paper.
7. Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew*, ed. D. J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 212-43.
8. Clines, "David the Man," 220. Suffice to note that Cline uses the term "wisdom" as a characteristic or a quality trait that manifest in men.
9. Clines, "David the Man," 220.
10. Clines, "David the Man," 231.
11. Relatively little work exists on masculinity in the Writings. On the wisdom books specifically, very few works exist including: Hilary Lipka, "Masculinities in Proverbs: An Alternative to the Hegemonic Ideal," in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă and Peter Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 86-103.
12. Lipka, "Masculinities in Proverbs," 90-103.
13. Stephen M. Wilson, *Making Men: The Male Coming-of-Age Theme in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)
14. Wilson, *Making Men*, 177.
15. The World Health Organisation defines health as "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". World Health Organisation (WHO). Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health conference, New York, 19 June – 22 July 1946: 1948 Available online: http://www.who.int/suggestions/faq/en. (accessed on 14 November, 2018).

16. Wilson, *Making Men*, 1.
17. Bland, *Proverbs*, 71 writes, "Proverbial wisdom is about health, health that incorporates the whole person."
18. Michael V Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 75.
19. Will H. Courtenay, "Constructions of Masculinity and their Influence on Men's Well-being: A Theory of Gender and Health," *Social Science and Medicine* 50, (2000): 1385-1401.
20. See Sharon A. Petronella et al., "Gender Differences in Risk Behaviors among High School Youth" *Global Advances in Health and Medicine* 2, no. 5 (2013): 18-24.
21. Clines, "David the Man," 216-218.
22. Similar cases are 4:14-17; 27.
23. See K. T. Aitken, *Proverbs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 19.
24. Bruce K Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 194.
25. Joan Evans et al., "Masculinities (HIMM): A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Men and their Health," *Journal of Men's Health 8*, 1(2011): 7-15.
26. James R. Mahalik et al., *Men at Risk: The Physical, Mental, and Social Health of Men in Massachusetts* (Massachusetts: The Mosakowski Institute of Public Enterprise, 2011).
27. Seidler, *Rediscovery Masculinity*, 23-28.
28. Steve Robertson, "Theories of Masculinities and Men's Health-Seeking Practices," *Nowhere Man Press* (2009): 2.
29. Fox, "Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 4 (1997): 619-620.
30. See Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 372; Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 242.
31. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 242.
32. See Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 245.
33. Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), 109.
34. Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003), 507.
35. Katherine Weare, Promoting Mental, Emotional and Social Health: A Whole School Approach. (New York/London: Routledge, 2000), 12.
36. WHO, *Mental Health: New understanding, New Hope* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001), 4.
37. Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 80.
38. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 61.
39. According to J. M. Robertson and D. S. Shepard, boys and girls have similar developmental pattern of the brain's part that regulates emotion and that emotional expressions are just as important to infant girls as they are for the boys. However, in the process of socialization, environmental factors such as parents, school teachers, and the media modify neurological blueprints of infant boys into masculine-typical behaviors, "The Psychological Development of Boys," in Counselling Troubled Boys: A Guide for Professionals, ed. Mark S. Kiselica, Matt Englar-Carlson and Arthur M. Horne (New York, London: Routledge, 2008), 11-12.
40. Clines, "David the Man" 225.
41. See Kojo Okyere, "The Pedagogy of Sexual Morality in Proverbs Five" *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 32 no.2 (2013): 114.
42. W. S. Pollack, "No Man is an Island: Toward a New Psychoanalytic Psychology of Men," in *A new psychology of men*, ed. R. F. Levant & W. S. Pollack (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 40 - 43.
43. Pollack, "No Man is an Island," 41.
44. Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 23.

45. J. Arcaya, “Hispanic American Boys and Adolescent Males,” in *Handbook of Counseling Boys and Adolescent Males: A Practitioner’s Guide*, ed. A.M. Home and M. S. Kiselica (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 1999), 101-116.
46. Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity*, 49.
47. Okyere, “Emotional Resilience and Mental Health: Perspectives from the Book of Proverbs,” in *Communication, Culture and Health*, ed. Joseph B. A. Afful et al. (Cape Coast: Faculty of Arts, 2015), 137-150.
48. R. D. Russell, "Social Health: An Attempt to Clarify this Dimension of Well-Being." *International Journal of Health Education* 16 (1973): 75.
49. Russell, “Social Health”, 75-80; Sasa Wang, Xueyan Yang, and Isabelle Attané, “Social Support Networks and Quality of Life of Rural Men in a Context of Marriage Squeeze in China”, *American Journal of Men’s Health* 12, no. 4 (2018): 706-719; P. C. Jr. Burda, A. Vaux, and T. Schill, “Social support resources: Variations in sex and sex-role” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 10* (1984):119–126.
50. Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 52
51. The reading here follows the Qere. Qere means ‘what is read’. This refers to the critical signs added by the Masoretes of the $9^{th} – 10^{th}$ centuries to aid in the reading of the Hebrew consonantal text.
52. Waltke, The Book of *Proverbs*, 571.
53. William David Reyburn and Euan McG Fry, *A Handbook on Proverbs* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 336.
54. Rowland E. Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary: Proverbs* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 113.
55. Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 146.

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