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John Higgins on the Bible as Art

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Today I am joined by John Higgins of The Bible is Art YouTube channel to discuss his work, the literary character of Scripture, and the book of Proverbs.

To see more of John's work, visit his channel here:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9sPRleqnVlasw8wnUGBVyA>

'The Literary Art of the Proverb': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBLgQNtYy8M>

'The Story of Proverbs': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2lsJ3CkSYM>

The Bible is Art Audio page: <https://www.thebibleisart.com/audio>

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm joined by a person whose YouTube channel I have been following for quite some time and I highly recommend that you do too. John Higgins of the Bible is Art.

Welcome to the podcast, John. Thanks so much for having me, Alastair. I really appreciate it.

Would you tell us a bit about your work over at the Bible is Art? Sure, sure. Yeah. So the Bible is Art was started, or at least the genetics of it were started about 10, 12 years ago when I was in graduate school and undergraduate school.

And I was originally studying or reading philosophy. And that's what originally I thought I was going to get into. But then I started discovering authors who just completely blew my mind with the scriptures.

And so there's a host of authors. The first one, Meredith Klein was the first one. And he was the one who sort of opened my eyes to the depth of scripture, specifically the Old Testament and just real careful readings of the Bible.

And that's what sort of like piqued my interest originally, because one thing that I'd found is, and one of the reasons for starting it was, I found that in my training, some of my professors and scholars I found were very sort of historically oriented. And so I kind of characterize it like this, is that, you know, when you're reading a text, you read the text, and then you want to interpret it, explain it. And so in the next step, the next thing that you bring to the text is like, what do you think is going to unfold this text? And for some of the really like historically A&E backgrounds type people that I was trained from, is that, you know, you would read a text, and then you would jump over to the closest possible A&E, you know, like similarity or difference.

And, you know, when you're an undergrad, you don't really know any different, you're just like, I don't know, I guess that's just how you're supposed to read the Bible. So then you run home and you're like, oh my goodness, we've all been reading the Bible wrong this whole time. Man, there's all this stuff.

And if we really just understood, you know, the Ancient Near East or Greco-Roman backgrounds for the New Testament, like this text will really unfold for us. But the thing that I found is that with those kind of readings, and of course, no one's ever going to say the backgrounds are unimportant, or you shouldn't do this, or it's not, you know, of course, it's just a question of proportion. Right.

And I found that the proportions were way off, because I found that when you, that typically, my experience with those kind of scholars and interpretation is that the insight that they would provide would either be already in the text, and so it didn't really add anything. Or it would be so far outfield that you're just like, I don't know, I guess so. You

know, like, I mean, you've got a PhD, so I guess you just kind of understand what's going on.

But I never found it 99% of the time, terribly insightful, you know, so it's like, if one of the hallmarks of a good hypothesis is that it is explanatory power, I just felt like it didn't bring anything together. And, and, but then I would read these other authors, Meredith Klein, Warren Austin Gage, Peter Lightheart, James Jordan, and then a whole swath of Jewish commentators, Meir Sternberg, Robert Alter, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Jerome Walsh, well, he's Catholic, Fockelman. And, and it was like, the thing that they brought to the text to unfold it was the text.

Yeah. And so like, so like, I always think about it as like, I'm like, okay, and the way I communicate it to people is, it's like, if you don't understand something in the text, 99% of the time, it's because you haven't understood something that came before in the text. It's, it's most of the time, it's not because, oh, I got to pull out Tacitus, and he's really gonna like unfold this text to me.

And so, so those two things, and the kind of with all of those commentators, if they're slightly different, you know, character, were just really good noticers of the text. And they were like, look at this, and look at this, and look at how the dialogue works in this story, as opposed to this story. And why was this word used? And it's just this really careful, and all those authors, like, I always felt like with the best authors is that they, when you read them, they're teaching you how to read.

And I feel like it's not just, whereas, whereas with like other, other commentators, sometimes I like, I'm like, yeah, I kind of read them. And they're like, here are the options. And here's the one I pick.

And you're like, okay, I guess I, you know, with a really good authors are like, well, they use this word in this phrase, and this sequence, because this reason, and you're like, oh, my goodness, I'm learning how to notice well, you know. And there comes a point where you're producing readings of a similar type yourself. And I've found certainly in my experience that I'll go to a particular text, I'll develop a reading of it.

And then I'll go to some of these authors and find they've written on it. And they've arrived at the same conclusions. And yeah, reassuring thing, knowing this is not just in my head.

This is not just an arbitrary reading. There is some consistency here. Oh, yeah, yeah.

That's a really good point. Because, because I found that it's like, and I don't, I don't want this to sound terrible. But like, I always I feel like I can interpret much faster now than like 10 years ago.

Because you're kind of accustomed to, like, I mean, it's like a language and you're like

learning the language. And, and you're like, oh, I kind of know how to speak this and like the kinds of things that author does. And you know, the types of illusions and the purpose of illusions and stuff like this.

Whereas like 10 years ago, you'd kind of just be like, or for me, you know, it's like, you'd read a text and you're like, I don't know, open up a commentary. And it's like, it means this, you know, like, okay, Bible study, you know, and yeah, so I so I found so that's, that's the one sort of gene of the Genesis. The negative part about it is I find that the historical kind of thing.

The other the other gene of it was that there's some sort of streams in, in evangelical interpretation that are kind of want to look cool in front of this larger audience. And so that's very reticent and restrained. And, you know, we don't want to shake the apple cart too much.

And, and I'm like, I'm like, listen, here's what I want to do. Let's just start with the proposition that this is a work of high genius. And let's just see where that gets us.

And so like, for me, this is just like a research project. And I'm like, I don't even, I don't even necessarily think that everything is true. I'm just like, let's just have this as a heuristic and see where it gets us.

Because for a long time, many people have been working on that, like, well, because I kind of think like, maybe because of the scientific revolution or anything like that, that, that we think that, oh, if you just have this like, really tight method, that's going to do the work for us for like uncovering this text. And like, if you do your word study, where I'm like, not really, you know, because like, of course, a method is important, but like, but you have to be oriented in certain ways. And if you have, if you have some pieces of knowledge about the kind of thing that this is, and the kind of offer that it is, it's going to get you to places.

And there's a big difference between forming interpreters and just following a method where you sort of crank the handle and out comes the interpretation. Rather, there's a certain formation that you must undergo to become someone who's a good noticer. And I've found, again, it's particularly following people who are good noticers and readers, people like, I mean, the names that you mentioned, Meredith Klein, James Jordan, Peter Lighthouse, and others.

I've found exactly the same thing. And also a number of Jewish commentators, also people like Richard Hayes, some of his work on echoes, which gets me into another issue that people like Robert Alter and Richard Hayes focus a lot upon literary categories. And that's something you do a lot.

Your description of your site, The Bible is Art. It's one that sets us up to approach the

Bible as a work of genius, a literary work, an artistic work. And what particular influences did you find moving you in that specific direction? Because that has a particular shading to an approach.

It's not just typology. It's more literature. Yeah.

Yeah. I mean, one of it was just the authors that I read, a lot of those Jewish literary people, Warren Austin Gage was a huge influence on me and his, he formed the whole, not there anymore, but at Knox Seminary, the whole literature and kind of classical stuff that he was doing there. And so partly it was just like my teachers and my formation.

Another reason is more ideological in nature. And that was some of the theological categories that we have, like typology, I sort of wonder, and I'm not at all against it. I mean, not at all by any means, but I sort of wonder, I'm like, I wonder if it would help people because typology is just illusion, right? I'm not sure if there's, I'm sure there's some differences, but I'm like, it's just an illusion.

We have a literary term for it. And I think that, there's a really awesome article, simple article, but- I would argue it's slightly more than illusion. Yeah.

Yeah. And I'm sure that it is. Mediated.

As textually mediated, it is illusion. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. And so, yeah. And so what would you probably say that there's like the big ontology behind it that is more than just literary stuff? Well, I think when we're talking about literature, literature can often collapse the temporal dimension.

We think of a text very much as a synchronic presence. Whereas if we're thinking about typology, it gets the diachronic aspect of events and history. I think it places those more to the forefront.

And so for that reason, I prefer those categories while recognizing, for instance, if you're reading someone like Robert Halter or Richard Hayes, they're using more literary categories and they have a great deal of purchase within a broader audience. And when you're approaching the scripture in that way, I think it really does open it up. Yeah.

So the other thing I was going to say is Fogelman has this great article, it's like a few pages on his website that talks about how often people conceive of the literary means of interpretation as like another method. And he's like, no, no, no, it's not another method. The kind of thing, the genus of the scriptures is a book.

So it's not just like, oh, you've got redaction criticism and you've got this whole cornucopia and someone can come in and just like, hey, whatever you want to do in graduate school, go ahead. He's like, no, no, no, this is not... And that's kind of like the

secret that I tell people. It's called the Bible of Zahran and it's all this literary stuff.

At the end of the day, I'm like, I just think this is how you should read the Bible. I don't actually think I'm doing anything particularly niche or whatever. I mean, in many ways, it's recognizing the weight of the literal sense of the text, that the literal sense, it's not just the concrete events that are being referred to and the means by which they're being referred to in a non-metaphorical manner or something like that.

Rather, it's the fact that this is a literary text with a clear or an immediate sense to it. And you need to read as a literary text. And that literal reading of the text is one that will lead to other forms of interpretation and insight.

It will lead to maybe an allegorical sense of the text. For instance, if you're reading the story of Jonah, which you've commented upon, you'll see connections with the story of Noah. You've explored that in one of your videos.

And that helps you to get a deeper meaning, but that arises out of a literary reading of the text. It's the literal sense. The text as a text points in that direction.

I always find it funny that, and I'm sure yours, but in all of our training, allegory is always a naughty word. And I'm like, literally, it's only used one time in the Bible and it's positive. It's like, this is an allegory.

I was never taught that. And then when you asked the question, how did Paul arrive at that reading of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians? You can actually see how he got there. It's not something that's divorced from the literary sense of the text.

It's just a very deep reading of that. And it's recognizing certain trajectories that that opens up for the interpreter that can be viewed retrospectively. Now that takes a bit of discipline.

It takes a bit of skill to read the text in that way. But we should be striving for. Oh, 100%.

I always felt like with that or my other favorite examples, when Paul quotes Genesis 2 and he quotes, a man shall leave his father and mother, two shall become one. This is a mystery. And I'm telling you, it refers to Christ and the church.

And I'm thinking, I didn't read Genesis 2 thinking that. So something's going on. And sort of like what I worried about with like, when I would read some of the evangelical interpreters of that, or your standard evangelical, I should say, is that you would, they would have enough sort of like, they're like, let me do enough work, just so that this feels like okay.

This feels like there's nothing wrong going on. And I'm like, no, bro, we need to understand what they're doing and adapt to those principles. Yeah.

We're not trying to get Paul to pass our hermeneutics classes. Get our hermeneutics classes to understand Paul. Yeah.

Yeah. And, and, well, and one of the great things I learned from Greg Beal, and he taught a course called the use of the old and the new. And the first thing he does is he says, there are nine presuppositions that New Testament authors have.

And for you to understand what they're doing, you have to adopt those presuppositions. And it's like, Jesus is the new Israel and eight others I forget. But, but yeah, it's that like, you, you have to, we have to become students of the apostles as hermeneutes, you know, and not just like, justify that and be like, hey, everyone, it's okay.

It's okay. They're not doing anything horrible. And there, I think it's the concern so often is defusing the text, rather than actually pursuing the text and seeing where it might lead us.

And pursuing the text and seeing where it leads us is exciting. It will lead you to some strange and unusual places. But those places will often, often I find it's the tough questions as you pursue those questions, that you arrive at the greatest insight.

It's welcoming the challenge and answering the challenge, not trying to defuse the difficult. Yeah. Well, and I always think about it like that presupposition, whether it's those that Beal talked about, or the presupposition that I work with is high work of literary genius, is that I'm like, you know, when you, when you read Shakespeare, and you don't understand something or Plato, you're, because you operate, perhaps just culturally with a presupposition as, oh, this is a genius, then you say, the problem must be with me, not, not the text.

And so with, with, for instance, Proverbs, you know, that we'll discuss in a little bit, you know, there'll be like, I can't stand it when I read in commentators say, oh, there's no structure here, or something like this. I'm like, well, why are you attributing something to the text? Like, why don't you attribute something to yourself, especially, not only if there's a divine author, but with the human author, he says that he was the wisest man who ever lived. That is to say, he's far above us, every question that I could have ever, ever asked, he will have answered, he was considered.

And you comport yourself differently to texts, when you when you come in thinking that, oh, this thing is so beyond me, you know, as opposed to, you know, and obviously, evangelicals are not like this, that's only, you know, more of the mainline commentators that are going to say, well, this is like redacted poorly, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, you know, like, you can't just have a method. Yeah, you've got to understand the nature of the thing. And that confidence within the text as a work of literary genius, as an inspired text, I think allows you to see things that would not be possible for the person who lacks patience, and the discipline to actually pursue the text to the point where it

starts to unfold in its meaning.

Yeah, yeah. And I'd so much rather make interpretive errors on that side of the equation, than on the side of the equation that, well, there's no structure, there's no purpose, you know, whatever. And I've found, again, you mentioned earlier, Jewish commentators, often, you will see them engaging in that sort of close reading.

And they put a lot of weight upon the odd details of the text. They're very gifted noticers. I mean, read someone like Rashi, or, and get into some of the details that he's attending to.

And you think, there's something there, I've not noticed that at all. He gives a strange interpretation. But again, let's think about why he gives that interpretation.

And often you find great insight. Yeah, I was just listening to a thing by David Zilber, one of the Jewish commentators, and he, he was, it was on numbers. And he was like, he was like, yeah, we, it's not exactly clear where the first generation ends, like the narrative of the first generation, the second generation begins.

And I was like, I had never thought about that before. And his whole point was like, why would this be like, what would be, because clearly Moses knows when this happens. He, he clearly decided not to indicate it explicitly, you know, and his interpretation is that, you know, that the people are one, even though you have a death of this generation and a resurrection of the next, nevertheless, there's a continuity.

And it's like, yeah, that's interesting. I don't even know if it's true. But it's like, but just just to like, pay attention to those like weird things.

And especially like, in the most common texts we read, you know, whereas like, there can be very strange things that we have never noticed before. I mean, some of the most familiar texts of all, people just don't pay attention to some of the details. I mean, why do we have some of the details in the story of the Good Samaritan that we have? Why is it that has a sort of symmetry with other parts of Luke, where Jesus is on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, sees a man by the side of the road, takes mercy of compassion upon him, etc.

As he cries out for mercy. And why do we see the innkeeper in that story, Augustine pays attention to that detail, and other patristics, but many modern commentators, they just skate over that. And yet, verse and the ending of the parable ends upon a surprising note, a detail that maybe would not attend to.

And yet, it's one of the most familiar stories of all. Yeah. Yeah.

Well, and that gets to the point about why I named the channel, The Bible as art. And I mean it art, and some people have misunderstood it, and I thought it had to do with

visual arts. But no, it's an old sense of art having to do with skill, of *techne*.

And that this thing is like, there's not a moral proposition hiding in an aesthetic husk. It's this one big crafted thing with all of the ethics, and all of the aesthetics, and all of the ontology, rolled into one big beautiful package that you can't extricate the parts. And so I just wanted to pay attention to be like, this is a piece of fine craft that we need to pay attention to the details, and not just a vessel for a moral or a theological proposition.

There's obviously moral and theological propositions all over, but it's not just that. So when we're talking about the reading of the text, often people will set that literary dimension and off against the content. And that can come even in the way that we translate the text in some cases.

But how can paying attention to the literary form sometimes help us to understand the meaning of the text? Any particular examples that you can give of places where a careful attention to the structure, to the art of the text, whatever it is, particular word choices, anything along those lines can help us to understand the meaning so we don't set form against content? Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

So two thoughts on this. One is some particular texts. And the other thing is sort of like bigger philosophical issues.

So to a few textual examples, I wrote down here three, one of small, medium, and large. So that is to say, paying attention to the art, the literary craft of things happens at every level from word or syllable all the way up to sections and multiples. So it's not just, and I think originally, I was thinking, oh, just like find all the literary structures you can.

But no, no, no, no. It's all the way down. And so I want to give one example at each level very briefly.

The first one is in Genesis 22 with Abraham and Isaac when he's bringing him up and Isaac asks him, where is the lamb for the sacrifice? And Mayor Sternberg points this wonderful and devastating detail out where Abraham says, God will provide the lamb, my son. And so Moses has constructed the dialogue or recorded the dialogue in such a way that my son functions in two ways. One is direct address saying God will provide the lamb, Isaac.

But it can also mean and does also mean meaning modifying the lamb. So the lamb is the son. And so it's just like devastating detail.

And now after I have a son, it is like very hard to like read those texts anymore. And I'm sure that's intentional by the author. And I think the purpose of that is that this is driving down the weight of this text, even more the weight of what's going on in this text is that Abraham indicates this to just pierce the reader's soul.

You know, so that's a little one, a medium one. And this has to do with how narrators use dialogue. So one of the interesting features of the whole Noah cycle is how silent he is.

And I think, does he ever speak? I don't know. I don't know that he... Judgment upon Ham. Okay.

Okay. So the whole flood, he never says anything and he's a major character. And the purpose of that by the narrator, it's not because he didn't say anything during those times, but the narrator chose to not record any of his speech to focus on his just stalwart obedience.

You know, and so this literary feature gets, as is often the case, gets permuted and theme and variation all throughout scripture. You have a similar quietness of Abraham, like in the beginning of the Abraham story where he's surprisingly quiet through all of these big things. I wonder if you have a same sort of thing with Joseph in the New Testament, who's also very quiet.

And I also wonder about, does this also set expectations because he was... Noah was quiet, but he also had this major event of a covenant and this great catastrophe and this great salvation. Are those things brought into the other narratives? I don't know. But I think it helps us to understand those other characters.

And the large one would be, for instance, the structure of the Pentateuch as a whole, and specifically Exodus Leviticus and Numbers, where Nahum Sarna pointed out, and I think it was in his little Exodus commentary, that you have all these parallels between the Exodus wanderings and the Numbers wanderings away. So to Mount Sinai and away from Mount Sinai. And it forms this chiasmic structure around the book of Leviticus, which is where the narrative pace of the Pentateuch slows down to almost nothing.

And so you have the book of Leviticus, which is almost entirely God's speech at Mount Sinai. So it's this focusing effect on the importance of Leviticus, which we don't pay attention to. And so, yeah, I think it works on all levels of the text.

You've shown me some of your work on Proverbs, and you've done some videos on the subject. I thought it would be interesting to talk about the way in which the proverb is a literary structure that itself trains us to read well. Yeah, this was so fascinating to me.

And, you know, as I was just sort of interested in these literary features and treating things as wholes as they were previously chopped up, I sort of stumbled on little by little an article here, an article there, whatever about Proverbs. And so it just kind of got me jamming on it. And so one of the fascinating things I think about the proverb is it's like, okay, it's just like a little jewel, right? This typically two lined thing.

And our common thought about what this thing is, is that, well, this is a piece of sort of like simple moral knowledge. We kind of all know it. It functions more to reinforce things

that we already know, not really to teach us any significant moral knowledge.

And so, and I think, I mean, I would never say that out loud, of course, but I think I tacitly thought that for years, until I started like paying attention. And once again, as before, once I had adopted this belief, oh no, this text is way above me. It is a work of genius.

And so I need to give it the proper attention. So I started looking at these and I said, well, if these are these sort of simple moral propositions, then we should be able to do a very simple experiment. And that is just read the first line and we should be able to fill in the second line.

Because typically it's just, it's like antithetical or synonymous. Those are the language we've inherited. And I'm like, okay, so let me just do this right now.

It's a fun experiment. And so I'm just going to open up to where sort of the Proverbs proper begins, that's in chapter 10. And just the second verse here.

And the first line reads this, treasures gained by wickedness do not profit. Okay. That's really simple.

So like, what would the second line be? I guess it would be a treasures gained by righteousness do profit. Or maybe it's treasures not gained by wickedness do not profit or treasures gained by goodness do profit. Something like that.

No, not even close. First line, treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. And you're like, what? Okay.

Maybe that's a mistake. Okay. Let's just grab another one.

Blessings are, this is a verse six, blessings are on the head of the righteous. Okay. Curses are on the head of the unrighteous.

No. Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. You're like, what? And the fascinating thing is that like, this is most of the Proverbs.

And the fascinating thing to me, and this just completely blew my mind is that it's not only that the Proverbs are not these sort of simplistic moral propositions that we already know. And it's not just like my argument being, here, wait, let me show you how they're not. It's like, no, no, no.

They are actually composed to be the opposite of that, to actually be difficult. And so all of a sudden I'm like, oh my goodness. And so I tried to just start working through these Proverbs and they're difficult.

I find them, and it takes me a long time to get through a proverb because you have to

and I actually kind of wonder if the Proverbs are written for differing levels of people in their journey to wisdom, because the first part is just like understanding the statements, right? But the next level of the... Because like most people could understand that treasure is gained by witness and without profit and that righteousness delivers from death, right? But the real insight into the nature of the Proverbs comes in when you understand why these two are one. Like why is this one proverb? And how does that second line relate to the first? And I kind of liken it to, sometimes insight happens by discovering new things. Other times insight happens by understanding the relationship between things.

And so the example I use in my video was like with Einstein's great equation, E equals MC squared, where there's nothing... We knew about all of those constants before, we just didn't understand how they were related, right? So he comes in and he says this. And so what I take Proverbs to be is this massive moral architecture that's helping us to understand the relationships between all of these moral characters of virtues and vices, and in this very complex way. One last thing and I'll shut up.

I was just recently reading Bartholomew and Another Dude, Introduction to Wisdom book. And he references, I think it's a Van Leeuwen article where he has this chart with four quadrants and it's like wicked, righteous, poverty, wealth. And it's like one, two, three, four.

And he's like, the Proverbs deal with all of these quadrants. So what sometimes gets characterized as like, oh, well, the wisdom of literature is this character consequence thing. And the Proverbs are just telling you, you do this... The idea is that you take this action and this is what's going to happen.

And I'm like, no, no. It is this web of complicated moral relations. And it's like a masterclass in moral thought where you have to... It's not just that you have to understand what courage is, but you have to understand how courage relates to gluttony, how courage relates to lust, and all of these things.

And it became wildly fascinating to me. That sounds really helpful. I think I've found even reading through the wisdom literature and scripture, Proverbs, and also things like Psalms and Song of Songs, it's a training in interpretation.

When you learn to read the sort of metaphors and analogies that you have in Song of Songs, it trains you to think about texts in a rather different way. Likewise, with the book of Proverbs, when you're reading the law itself, the law has something of a literary structure that encourages its readers to reflect and ruminate and meditate, not just to take the text as a series of commandments, but to understand there is a hidden logic to that. That logic is revealed through understanding literary structure.

Why do we have the 10 commandments in this particular order? What structure can be

discerned within that? Why is it that the book of Deuteronomy is framed with the 10 commandments in chapter 5, and then in the chapters that follow to about chapter 28, you have, end of chapter 26 I think it is, you have each one of those unpacked loosely in the chapters that follow. What can you learn by relating those two things together? And then thinking about why is it that this particular case law is related to that particular commandment? When you think about those sorts of relationships, it's amazing what emerges. Understand why David could say that he was wiser than all his teachers because he meditated on God's law.

It's not just giving us a series of things that we're supposed to know that we can, we're trained in the modern world to be swift readers, to have texts that are written for speedy reading and that they can be accessible to anyone. They're supposed to put all that information up front, but scripture is designed for rumination, for meditation, for chewing over this again and again and again until it reveals great insight. And I've found that with particularly the wisdom literature, it brings that to the forefront.

That's always part of the literature of scripture elsewhere, but in the wisdom literature, that's very clear that that's how you read a text. Beyond that, I think there's a great piece that was written on, I think it was Venkatesh Rao on the Ribbon Farm blog, which is about refactoring certain concepts. So trying to get certain frameworks to rethink familiar concepts to help us to understand the world better.

So one of the things that he was talking about was the concept of literacy. He talked about literacy. How do we define literacy? He suggested that the way to define literacy is the ability to condense and expound.

And very often that's what we find within the wisdom literature of scripture, in the law of scripture, is that ability to condense something into this very intense, pregnant statement and the ability to expound it and unpack it and to show all the... Yeah. Yeah, that's really fascinating. Huh? Huh.

So when we're reading the Proverbs, how do we see not just literary structures at the level of individual Proverbs with the parallelism, that Hebrew poetic structure, but how do we see it on the larger scale of the book as a whole of Proverbs? Yeah. So this is one of the things that sort of got me interested in it because it was one of the things where I'd read little dabblings here and there. And then at some point, I think that I noticed something in the text and I'm like, oh, I want to try to see if I can figure this out.

And so just for people's reference, for things that are helpful, Peter Lighthouse had a piece on the dramatic structure of Proverbs. I think that's what it's called. And then there was a piece by William Brown.

I think it was a chapter in a book. I don't remember what it was, but I'll get it. And then the other thing is there was a dissertation by Chris Ansberry at Wheaton.

And he had a chapter on this as well. I think he's at Oak Hill, isn't he? I'm not sure. I think so.

Anyways. And so there's a couple of helpful things out here. This is a very live issue and I don't have... This is not absolute gospel, what I'm going to say.

It's just me trying to work these things out. But in the clearest form, the most obvious thing is that this is a story of the development of a son. And so you have Solomon writing to his son, teaching him wisdom.

That's the obvious thing that's right there on the surface. Now, the book of Proverbs is clearly segmented into seven sections. We have these introduction and conclusion, and then you have these big fat sections of Proverbs, of what we think is Proverbs.

And so Proverbs is introduced. It tells us that you're going to get all these things. It tells us what's going to happen at the end.

You're going to get wisdom and insight and all these things at the end. The next section is this sort of encouragement, the next nine chapters, encouragement to why we should seek wisdom and what will that get us and what will it do? And it does that in large part through these images of women. So you have lady wisdom and lady folly.

And because it's the son and because, for instance, the sexual drive is the most potent thing at that age, he says, listen, this is as potent a decision, more important than your selection of a woman is to select the right lady. And you want to select the wise woman. And so we get these images of these two women, and they're both building houses.

And fascinatingly, lady wisdom is like, she shows up in the street and in the marketplace, right? With the idea that this is the location where you will gain wisdom and where she operates because wisdom covers everything in life. Okay. So wisdom and folly as figures are so clearly juxtaposed with each other.

They're coming out with exactly the same introductory words, and then they diverge. And it's very interesting seeing how, again, that's a literary structure. If you're just reading those single statements by themselves, you will miss the way that they're playing off against each other.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

So then in chapter 10, you get the first chunk of proverbs, and it starts like this. The Proverbs of Solomon. And the first proverb is this, a wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.

Okay. And in this first section from 10 to 20 something, you get this first big chunk, Solomon teaching his son proverbs. And one thing that William Brown points out is that

as you move through these major sections of proverbs, is that they get more complicated.

And I'll come back to that for a second. When you get to the central section in proverbs, it says this, this is 22 and verse 17, where it says, incline your ear and hear the words of the wise. Now, what's fascinating in terms of the development of the book of Proverbs is that the last section was Proverbs of Solomon, and now we get a new speaker.

Is it Solomon? Is it someone else? I don't know. It's just not identified as Solomon. And so we get someone else here.

And the only thing, this character is only identified by his wisdom. And as you read through these sections, it's fascinating because it seems like we're out in the world. We're getting instructions about what to do in the field and in this king's court and stuff like this.

And so it seems that the setting has changed where we've left the confines of our Solomonic home and we've moved out into the world, which makes sense because that's where Lady Wisdom first appeared out in the world. And this sort of matches that kind of, sort of natural development as you grow older and you move out into the world. Well, then we move back.

And into the last big section of Solomon's Proverbs. And it says this, we're in chapter 25. These are also are the Proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah copied.

Now, of course, if we were just thinking about this as a historical text, we would say, oh, well, it's just kind of like detailing this information for us about who copied it. Well, but there has to be some, if this is written by the wisest person who ever lived or organized, then perhaps there's a plot reason, a reason for the development of some theme or something in the story. And what I take it to be is that we're back at home, but something has changed because Solomon is no longer here.

We have a copy of Solomon, our father's Proverbs, but they're no longer here. So it's like we returned home, but perhaps I'm saying too much, but Solomon is dead. This is the next generation.

And so we have to learn here now. Now, in terms of the content, it's gotten much more complicated. If you remember in that first section where he said, the first proverb was a wise son makes a glad father, but something is a sorrow to his mother, a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother, which is fairly straightforward.

Let's listen to the first proverb in this section. It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of Kings is to search things out. And I just find this the most fascinating contrast because you're like, we started with like, don't be a foolish son.

Your parents will be sad. And I don't mean that to sound bad, negative at all, or simplistic, but then we move over to this one and it's like, hey, God hides things. And you're like, what? And your job is to figure the things out that God has hidden.

And I'm like, this is a different kind of thing. And our author has selected it at this later stage. We've been out in the world and we've discovered this new wisdom.

And so there's like a development there. And as William Brown notes, you get a complexity of literary forms and everything like this. And so it's getting more complex as you move through the book and you move through life.

And then I won't be laborless too long, but in the last two sections, you have two sections in 30 and 31, and you have the words of Agor, son of Yaqaq, and then you have the words of King Lemuel, and two people who we know nothing about, nothing. And so we're slowly moving away from the familiarity of home into this new place where we're having to learn wisdom from people who are presumably outside our home, perhaps outside of our nation and our experience. And interestingly, in both of these last sections, they're not called proverbs.

They're introduced as oracles, which are typically what prophetic sayings are called. And so there's even been a progression in what we are learning. And I take it to be something like if we've worked through this body of wisdom, the kind of speech that we end up with is oracles of God.

It's this wildly exalted type of speech that's reserved for prophets, but this is where we're going. I mean, you do have that movement, even within the law, that movement from reflection upon the law, deep reflection into wisdom. And then in the literature, it's almost as if you have that bridge into a more prophetic form of speech and insight.

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, and then the last point in the last section, you have the Aish-e-Hiyal, the woman of valor.

And it's interesting because you end with these feminine things where it's the words of King Lemuel, but it's actually says an oracle that his mother taught him. It's like, this is from Lemuel, but it's actually from his mother. And then his mother tells us about another woman.

And so we end with this, and I think there are tons of things going on, but the sort of major narrative thread is that by the end, this wise son has chosen the right woman. We get this wise woman. So we get this allegory at the end of this wise woman who has taken, and so she's an image of wisdom.

I mean, this is obviously practical insight as well. It's not one or the other, of course. So we've come full circle.

So we began with this son who has to select the right woman. He goes through life, he learns in all these different spheres from different people. And in the end, he's able to triumph and be faithful in his quest for wisdom.

I think that particular section in chapter 31, which the passage that launched a thousand women's Bible studies as I've termed it, this text is often under read. It's not read for what it is. In many ways, it is a clue to the whole book.

As you say, it's a story of a son. It's a story of a son leaving his father and mother and being joined to his wife. It's the story.

Also, the wise woman here takes up the themes that are connected to the specific woman. You're choosing between the adulterous woman and also the wife of the youth. And then you're choosing on the more metaphorical allegorical level between lady wisdom and the woman folly.

And then you see here that the wise woman described in chapter 31 picks up many different phrases from earlier on that are used to describe wisdom. It's coming together, those themes uniting at this point. And it's also an acrostic.

It's following the Hebrew alphabet letter by letter. And it's summing up in this one powerful image. Wisdom is the one that builds the house.

Wisdom builds the creation as working with God. And then here, we see that wisdom will build your house too. And she will be a very specific woman.

She'll be your wife, but she'll also be representing everything that wisdom does. If you give your heart to her, then she will end up building you up and glorifying you. Yeah, that's fascinating.

And you have a similar thing here to, I think, what's going on in John's gospel, where we think of John's gospel as one of the most mystical or symbolic, and it absolutely is. But it's also some of the most fleshly, which I find fascinating thing about some of the details in the text. Even to the degree of the chronology of it, we get this idea about a three-year ministry from John's gospel, the one that's supposed to be this most mystical one.

And it's like, oh, this most mystical one, we get this idea about even the geography or the chronology of it. And I think you think of that same thing, this book that has all of these clear allegories going on here is also the most practical book in the Bible. Yeah.

I would love to see people preach Proverbs more. It's a hard book to preach certain sections of it, but certainly the opening chapters, the invitation of wisdom and the contrast with folly and the concluding chapters are more straightforward. But the whole book is one that really needs to be addressed, I think, to the church.

And I think there was an appetite for it. People need this. I think of many of the people, particularly young men who are looking for some sort of insight in how to live their lives.

And the book of Proverbs has it, but it's just not often taught. And I think we're missing out for that reason. Well, it's fascinating that it's our preaching has gone wildly practical, but yet not in any interesting, deep way.

And I'm like, oh, there's a book for that. Yeah, that would be good. It's been absolutely wonderful to have you on.

I would highly recommend that my listeners and viewers take the time to subscribe to your channel. The Bible is Art. And also, I would recommend to support John's work on his Patreon account.

I'll leave the links for both of those in the show notes. If you'd like to give a very brief description of what you do over there, some of the videos that you have coming up, some of the videos you've already done, just to advertise and encourage people to visit, that would be great. Yeah, sure.

So I make videos on short, five to 10 to 12 minute video essays on different themes and literary features and interesting stuff on the Bible. My next video is going to be on John 21, the last chapter in the Bible with strange stuff about fishing in the night and eating and 153 fish. Oh, well, I'm not going to deal with that.

Yeah, that's already done. So that strange last chapter, it seems to some people extraneous. That's the next video that's coming out.

The other thing that might be interesting to people is I just, from my years of just scouring the web, I recently put up a sort of like website web tool at thebibleisart.com/slash/audio, where it has every book of the Bible, what I take to be the best available audio lectures, sermons, courses, or whatever on each book of the Bible, you can filter really easily. And you can also filter according to whether it's like paid or free. And so that's everything I know.

Fantastic. Thank you so much for coming on. Yeah, you who, whoever has been listening to this has found it helpful.

I recommend that you follow John's work and read what he writes. Listen to what he produces. God bless and thank you very much for listening.

Thanks so much, Alistair. Appreciate it.