Summary of Project

The paper I am presenting to OTSEM is a spin-off from my doctoral thesis, viva-ed in Feb 2018. The thesis was entitled *Open Proverbs: Exploring Genre and Openness in Proverbs 10-22*, and will be published in early 2020 with SBL. The OTSEM paper explicit presents an argument which is woven in a more complex fashion throughout the thesis.

Blurb

The first proverb collection (Prov 10:1-22:16) is often caricatured as a dead-end. Declaring clear, cold, disengaged dogma, it is closed-off to literary explorers, and closed-off from the realities of the world. But the sayings are in fact open – to many interpretations and many applications. And this openness is essential to their genre and function. This book employs recent genre theory to argue that the sayings have a hybrid genre – at once 'didactic' and 'proverbial'. As part of their 'didactic' strategy, they train their student's intellect by opening out to many possibilities of interpretation, filled with poetic complexities. As 'proverbs', they are open to application in many situations, with many functions. Here, the book draws upon paremiology (the technical study of the proverb genre), which until now has rarely appeared in Proverbs' scholarship. Exploring the sayings' openness proves a fruitful reading strategy. It sheds new light on some classic scholarly debates, investigated in depth in this study – character categories, the act-consequence connection, the king, and wisdom acquisition. With this fresh illumination, the reader is prompted and provoked to 'open proverbs'.

Chapter break-down

- **Introduction:** This introduces the investigation, and gives some important preliminary explanations, particularly of the genre descriptor 'didactic proverb', and of the literary feature 'openness'.

Part 1 – The Openness of the Didactic Proverb. Part 1 develops a reading strategy for Proverbs 10:1-22:16 that is sensitive to the 'openness' of the sayings, and to how they function as at once 'didactic' and 'proverbial'.

- **Chapter 1 – The 'Didactic Proverb'.** The sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 are best understood as having a flexible hybrid genre: they are at once 'didactic' and 'proverbial'. This is argued on the basis of their generic relations (Didactic Instructions and folk proverbs); likely social settings (court and family); media (written and oral); self-presentation ('proverb' and 'riddle'); and literary form (proverb and aphorism; collection and individual saying).
- **Chapter 2 – Literary 'Openness'.** The sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 are often seen as formulaic, and closed in their meanings. But in fact, they are much more 'open'. Using literary and linguistic theory, and illustrated with examples from the text, this chapter explains three phenomena which can generate openness: polysemy, parallelism, and imagery. These theoretical foundations will undergird the explorations in later chapters.
- **Chapter 3 – The Openness of the Didactic Proverb.** This chapter ties together the previous two by showing how 'openness' contributes to the functioning of the 'didactic proverb' genre. Here, insights from 'paremiology' (the technical study of the 'proverb' genre) are utilised. These highlight how proverbs are open to multiple applications and multiple functions.

Part 2 – Exploring the Openness of Didactic Proverbs. Part 2 uses the proposed reading strategy to explore sayings which shed light on four classic debates within Proverbs' scholarship. In the course of the explorations, Part 2 draws out the didactic and proverbial effectiveness of the verses, and the contribution which openness makes.

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- **Chapter 4 – Openness and Character Categories.** It is often argued that the character categories in Proverbs (wise/foolish, righteous/wicked) are abstract, closed, and cut off from the world. However, when analysed in light of cognitive prototype theory, they are found to be much more flexible. They have 'fuzzy borders' and are open to many referents. This increases their pedagogical potential and suggests that character development is possible.
- **Chapter 5 – Openness and the Act-Consequence Connection.** In Proverbs, acts lead to corresponding consequences. Some proverbs open up metaphorical worlds in which these two are intrinsically related. Exploring these worlds trains and motivates students to develop their character accordingly. The openness to multiple interpretations also suggests, however, that the connection is not inviolable. This makes the sayings applicable to more situations, and trains the mind to deal with ambiguities.
- **Chapter 6 – Openness and the King.** The king has an important cameo in Proverbs. These sayings may be applied in a royal court, but may also express general principles, the king pedagogically providing a paradigm for emulation or standard for evaluation. However, the proverbs' openness also allows for darker interpretations. They provide no sycophantic idealisation, but an example of a human character in its irreducible complexity.
- **Chapter 7 – Openness and Acquiring Wisdom.** The double 'didactic-proverbial' genre can explain certain dualities in Proverbs' view of wisdom: wisdom is general and specific, moral and intellectual, 'religious' and 'secular'. Both 'textual' and 'extra-textual' worlds can be trusted to reveal this wisdom. But they are also open to ambiguity, and must be scrutinised. In the process, the human mind is trained and also confronts its limits. Ultimately, wisdom depends on trusting the inscrutable God.

Conclusion. Here, the threads of the investigation are drawn together. The previous discussions have revealed the sayings' potency in both didactic and proverbial functions, their openness to extensive exploration, and the implications of this for several key debates. This conclusion highlights the key aspects of the argument, suggests directions for further research, and advocates that the sayings be read as 'open didactic proverbs'.

More recent work

Since graduating, I have been employed as a Teaching Fellow, first at the University of Leeds, and now at the University of Edinburgh. My time for research has been limited, but I have continued to work the wisdom literature and questions of genre. My most recent work, however, is moving in a different direction.

I have become fascinated by the role of animals in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the book of Job. I want to apply some insights from the nascent field of Critical Animal Studies to the biblical texts. I am hoping to apply or Postdoctoral funding for a project on "Animal Intersections". Animal theorists are increasingly calling for species to be thrown into the intersectional matrix of e.g. feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ecological ways of reading. Though there are of course many differences, there are also many similarities in the ideologies, institutions, discourses, and practices that have been used to subjugate e.g. women, people of colour, and animals. I want to look at how this entanglement inscribes itself into biblical texts.