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Weaving the New Creation, James Fowler

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Book Reviews

Markus McDowell,
Eleanor Daniel, Editors



Linda J. Vogel, *Teaching and Learning in Communities of Faith: Empowering Adults Through Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 219 pages including references and index. Reviewed by Robert Countiss.

Vogel defines religious education as “knowing and soul nourishing that take human development seriously and focuses on the intersections of life” (p. 47). For the church, this means that adequate time and effort need to be spent on examining and understanding the transition points of life so that people can begin to integrate their personal stories into God’s story.

Because of this, and appropriately so, Vogel emphasizes the biblical stories as an important element in Christian education. She notes that there are several stories, not just one. True enough, and yet we cannot forget to take a canonical

approach to the Bible. Differences among the stories can and should be noted, but the Bible should ultimately be seen as one Master Story. Still, despite this criticism, Vogel’s approach is thoroughly biblical. Unlike some authors, she does not attempt to abandon biblical metaphors and images for a new set. She recognizes that these biblical metaphors, such as Kingdom of God, Sabbath, Grace, Authority, and Trinity are still meaningful and important, even to those with little or no history in the church.

Vogel’s point is supported by her analysis of 2 Kings 18–19 (p. 7). She suggests that adult Christian education makes people bilingual and able to integrate faith into daily activities. This concept is at first hard to imagine in a society that still tends to regard itself as basically Christian oriented. The traditional metaphors that are part of the history and language of faith are the language “behind the wall” that enables

Christians to begin to integrate their stories into God’s story. Vogel discerns and explains four metaphors that are helpful here: Schooling, Pilgrimage, Household of Faith, and New Earth. All of the styles explained by these metaphors are biblically based; Vogel offers both strengths and precautions for each.

Vogel also develops her own model for Christian education based on the feeding of the five thousand (p. 124). A key found in this model is the sacramental connection, which could have some interesting connections with education, particularly in the emphasis of the gathered community at worship. For Vogel this is a significant element in remaining true to the language “behind the wall.” It is in the reliving and retelling of this event of Christ’s life that the church is enabled to communicate its prime story. There is more emphasis here on individuals and less on a plan or developed program. Individuals learn by dialogue (p. 67), and teachers may

not have ready-made answers yet may be willing to risk conflict (p. 68). So then teachers are servant-leaders (p. 98), and curriculum resources are “maps for the journey” rather than ends in themselves (p. 146). The real action of teaching is between the individual and God, with the teacher acting as “midwife” (p. 158). “Learning about” becomes secondary to invitation (p. 165).

This is Vogel’s model; to her credit, she recognizes that it may not be entirely appropriate for others. For that reason, she offers steps for developing other models and then invites those who develop programs to consider these principles to see what would guide them. Vogel recognizes that what she has written should not be seen merely as a

program to be lifted from the pages and installed in any church. She is true to her own model in encouraging dialogue and invitation.

I like much of what Vogel has to say. However, she says little about motivation for the journey that she asserts to be so important. I am also a bit troubled by her statement that learning scripture is secondary to invitation (p. 165). Though I agree in the sense that a simple knowledge of Bible content is not the definition of being Christian and that the church must continually extend the invitation to individuals to accept salvation and discipleship, I think that Vogel does not really address modern biblical illiteracy. The church must teach content; an important aspect of Christian education is purely content.

We cannot assume that adult learners have had this opportunity as children. Many people come to the church having had no previous Christian experience, and they want to know what is in the Bible.

Even so, there is much in Vogel’s book that is helpful and inspiring. Any church can be greatly helped by taking a comprehensive look at its education program and by giving intentional direction to what Christian education seeks to do for adults.

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James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), 204 pages. Reviewed by Jones Oliver.

James Fowler describes the structure of this book as being like one of the narrative tapestries hung in the papal palace in Avignon, France (p. vii). The story of the tapestry is told as new patterns are woven of the same threads from the community. Fowler’s tapestry seeks to faithfully guide the church into participation in God’s continuing work in the world.

If Fowler’s book is a narrative tapestry, then each chapter is a scene from the narrative. The first scene declares the reality and profound breath of change in the immediate past and the present. Fowler emphasizes the dual nature of this change as

potential opportunity and ominous peril for the church. In the second scene, Fowler portrays the concept of “divine praxis” through biographical sketches of Martin Luther King Jr.; Thomas Merton; Carlyle Marnay, a personal mentor; and Suzanne Massie. He describes “divine praxis” as focusing on “the question of the characteristic patterns of God’s involvement in and providential guidance of the processes of our evolving universe, including God’s interaction with humankind” (p. 31).

The third chapter presents Fowler’s case for substituting the imagery of Sallie McFague—God as Mother/Parent, Lover, Friend, and the world as God’s body—for the traditional imagery of God as Sovereign, Father, and Creator. The fourth scene summarizes Fowler’s work on

the stages of faith. Several of the seven stages closely parallel stages of cognitive development found in the work of others. Fowler concludes that “the stages of faith are sequential and invariant” (p. 17), but the illustrating stories in chapter 4 demonstrate that faith development is complex and personal.

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of vocation, which Fowler describes as “finding a purpose in Christ that aligns your life with the purposes of God” (p. 126). The focus then shifts to the importance of expressing Christian faith in poetry and hymnody. The work of Brian Wren is used to illustrate Fowler’s goal of fresh and theologically sensitive expression.

The sixth image of Fowler’s tapestry describes what he terms

“public church.” Public church “seeks to be faithful to a biblical grounding in its claim that ecclesial community, formed by the presence and fellowship of Christ, points beyond itself to the praxis of God in the process of history” (p. 151).

The final panel of the tapestry seeks to weave together the personal dimension of the stages of faith with the corporate character of “public church.” Assumed in this pattern is a perpetual need for rebirth and reformation within the church and faithfulness to the defining characteristics basic to the church. He lists five such characteristics: preaching, worship, mission, community, and instruction.

Fowler writes, as all authors must, with a set of values, assumptions, and experiences not shared by all readers. He invites the reader to interact and participate in weaving the tapestry of God’s new creation.

I felt able to do that, with the exception of substituting Sallie McFague’s imagery of God for that which is more directly biblical. Fowler rejects the traditional images of God because, he claims, they distance the believer from God and are beyond rehabilitation because of human sin. I believe that the purposes of God are better served by a process that calls the believer to live according to God’s praxis than one that substitutes new images that are easily subjected to the perversions of a renewed “Mother Earth” paganism.

Fowler’s book presents at least four significant concerns for Christian ministry. First, the goal of Christian instruction is not just the perpetuation of information. The church must seek to call and form people into Christian vocation. Second, the nature of faith is dynamic through life. The church should deliberately work toward the

lofty goal of “universalizing” faith that seeks to “participate in the perspective of God” (p. 113). Third, the church must recognize the profound changes that are occurring in the world. Prayerful and creative responses to those changes will help the church reap the potential of their opportunities and avoid the perilous pitfalls of their dangers. Finally, the church must prepare people to apply the gospel faithfully on a multitude of levels. The church has an obligation to speak to the individual, the community, the society, and the world. Let us heed Fowler’s pleas to actively and faithfully discover and participate in God’s praxis in the world—his new creation.

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Albert Y. Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 194 pages. Reviewed by Ruth Picker.

Hsu’s *Singles at the Crossroads* challenges the twentieth-century church’s theology in its meager support of singleness. In the United States, where nearly half the population is single, the church’s approach to programming in Christian education must change to fit the biblical model or lose its mission—to minister to *all* people. Hsu reminds us that few congregations reflect the demographic realities. Beginning a token

singles’ group may at times further entrench our faulty assumptions about singleness. Hsu quotes one single: “I want to go to church and be part of the body, not part of a database” (p. 25). We must remember, he cautions, that “there is no such thing as a ‘typical single’ any more than there is a ‘typical marriage’” (p. 28). “A new vision of singleness for the twenty-first century” is in order (p. 31).

Hsu begins his shift toward better theology by discussing the history of singleness. He traces ideologies from the Jewish stigmatization of the unmarried, to the Catholic elevation of celibacy, through the current

evangelical idolization of the family. In between, he highlights the New Testament role models of the single life: Jesus and Paul. He carefully stresses that neither marriage nor singleness is in itself more holy than the other. Neither is a permanent state. Neither makes a person whole. Relationship with Jesus Christ, not a marriage partner, is the pinnacle of intimacy and identity.

Hsu’s most helpful section debates the frequently faulty exegesis of the gift of singleness. He asks, ironically, “[If being single] really is a gift, why doesn’t anybody want it?” (p. 49). He answers with a seven-point refutation of the myth that the

gift of singleness means God makes some singles supernaturally happy without a partner. Within this list he debunks the idea that gifted singles have perpetually good feelings about being unmarried and face no sexual temptations. He calls into question the "two-tier class system" (p. 52) that creates the married, the singles with the gift, and the singles without the gift. Hsu says, "Paul gives no hint that marriage is normal, while celibacy is a 'special' condition" (p. 54). He believes that the current popular view of singleness leaves singles who desire marriage yet never marry in the lurch. He says the goal is to become content with whichever gift the Lord bestows. He warns that we must not "penalize the virtue of contentment" (p. 55) by calling it an unsolicited gift for some. All Christians must seek the spiritual maturity of being at peace with their circumstances. Marriage is a gift. Singleness is a gift. All good gifts come from God. Whatever one's status, it is God's gift for the moment. The point is to become satisfied therein and to seek God's will for service in and through the church.

In Hsu's further discussion about God's will, he points out that the passages that state God's desire for man not to be alone do not have to imply that God wants all people to be married. "Aloneness is what is not good here, not the lack of a spouse," Hsu exhorts (p. 68). Companionship is a must for everyone. He notes that the many current sitcoms about friendship give evidence of this need for singles. The desire for closeness

need not, and cannot, be fulfilled exclusively in a sexual way, Hsu asserts. "Companionship with Christians is the cure for aloneness" (p. 123).

Besides the boon of companionship, Hsu also suggests the discipline of solitude. Personal aloneness need not be loneliness. Resting in Christ can be the greatest peace of all. "Solitude and community are parallel disciplines" (p. 123) for the single.

Sound theology of singleness further rests on the biblical truth that the church is "the first family" (p. 124). Hsu calls into question the trend of evangelicalism to view the nuclear family as the first priority. Where does that leave the single or the church? He states, "There is nothing inherently noble or virtuous about the nuclear family" unless it is engaged in the larger context of "the first family. . . . For singles who yearn for a sense of belonging to a spouse and family, God reminds us that we are part of a family far more significant and enduring than the biological family. In one sense we are already married—as the bride of Christ" (p. 126).

Hsu gets to the heart of the matter for adult education. Church ministries for singles must see beyond current misuse as pathetic dating services or group therapy sessions. Such models presuppose dysfunction in singleness or singles' need to move on to a better state. He wonders if it wouldn't be more beneficial to incorporate accountability, partnership in ministry, and fellowship into our singles' minis-

tries. He asks whether we shouldn't just treat singles as functioning members of the body of Christ with special gifts of mobility and autonomy. Hsu astutely continues, "In the first family of the Church, it is still true that blood is thicker than water" (p. 136).

Hsu follows up this wisdom for the re-education of the church with poignant advice about the temptations and the false cultural views of romance with which singles struggle today. He leaves no area of singleness unaddressed. This book is the most thorough discussion in print for the most neglected half of our population.

I read this book with interest because the author was once one of my students. I expected to appreciate it much as a mother appreciates each of her child's "masterpieces." To my great joy, I found it to be the most accurate theology I have seen on the subject. It is about time!

Furthermore, the book is extremely cogent and reader friendly. In my opinion, this is the most important book a Christian director of adult education could read at this moment in history. Hsu's parting words to singles apply to us as adult educators, as well: "Let us put our lives on hold no longer. Let us start today" (p. 175).

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R. Wade Paschal Jr., *Vital Adult Learning: Choices to Fit Your Church*, Effective Church Series, ed. Herb Miller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 151 pages. Reviewed by Frank H. Floyd Jr.

This excellent little volume is packed with practical advice for churches who are seeking to rebuild and grow their adult education programs. Paschal presents a rationale for and a description of adult learning that avoids much of the jargon associated with modern adult learning theories. He garners insights conservatively from those theories without intensive excursion into them, making this an excellent volume to place in the hands of lay leaders. Christian education committees will find Paschal an invaluable resource as they struggle with defining their task and will gain insightful suggestions that are immediately applicable in situations where the luxury of extended study may not be available.

The chapter "Classes Have Personalities" is a creative way of describing why classes thrive or fail to do so, and what one can reasonably expect from various class "personalities." This chapter recalls Carl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson's *Energizing the Congregation: Images That Shape Your Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993) and can be read productively in concert with that volume. What Dudley and Johnson do with the church as a whole, Paschal does with the adult Sunday

school class. Subsequent chapters that treat the formation of new classes, teacher recruitment, and curriculum choices contain valuable suggestions. There is nothing startlingly new in these chapters, but the material is well organized and clearly presented—again, making the book an excellent resource for volunteers who organize educational programs for adults.

Paschal admirably meets the goal of the series of which this book is a part: to present "how-to" answers in specific areas of church life. There are some weaknesses, however, in the work. One is that many of the suggestions are geared to the medium-to-large congregation and would require significant adaptation for congregations where personnel and resources are limited. While recognizing that adult learning in the small church presents its own challenges, the book makes few suggestions for meeting those challenges except to grow and change.

Chapters are devoted to the topics of singles and small groups. There are good insights for both. For example, "singles" have significant variations among them and cannot be treated all the same, and small groups have drawbacks and must be supplemented by other larger treatments. But this book primarily treats the adult married population in the standard Sunday school class.

A third weakness, to my way of thinking, is the market approach to Christian education. Paschal writes: "Needs that we know and see moti-

vate us best. Needs that our friends know and see motivate us second best" (p. 21). This fits modern adult learning theories that adults "come to classes with a more specific sense of need" (p. 27). Some educators take this to mean that adults should choose their own courses of study. Indeed, it is argued that our educational efforts must be pitched toward people's felt needs. No one wishes to be understood as believing people's needs are unimportant. Adult religious education, however, must help people recognize their true needs, not assume that all felt needs are equally valid. Indeed, Paschal recognizes that the purpose of the church is to "challenge in the name of the gospel, the normal tendencies of individuals and cultures," because "individuals are not always their best guides" (p. 30). This statement notwithstanding, Paschal most frequently aims at the felt needs of adult learners. The book would be stronger if greater attention were given to balancing felt needs with the challenge the gospel presents to the tendencies of individuals and cultures.

In spite of these drawbacks, Paschal has performed a valuable service for the church. He has written an understandable, practical work for use by both ministers and lay volunteers. We need more books like this one.

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William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (New York: Broadway, 1997), 382 pages including notes and indexes. Reviewed by James Riley Estep.

"History repeats itself." Strauss and Howe affirm this cliché, but they also ask, If it is true, why can't the history of the future be projected based on the successive cycles of history's past? If history is cyclical, containing the same basic pattern with only the events within the common pattern differing, why cannot the *trajectory* of history allow the reader to virtually predict the outcomes of events before they occur? In short, this work is a study of the past and present, particularly the latter half of the twentieth century in America, with "prophecy" about the coming generation in America that extends well into the twenty-first century.

Strauss and Howe present their cyclical pattern of history in part 1. They maintain that cultures develop cyclically, with each cycle having four eras, or "turnings" (hence the title of the book), each lasting about one generation. The four turnings are High, Awakening, Unraveling, and Crisis.

The first, the High turning, denotes a time of *growth and progress*, confidence in the new cultural developments. Individuals born during this period will flock to "prophetic" personalities because of the positive and visionary messages they bring. Awakening, the second turning, symbolizes a time of *maturing*, wherein the confidence in the High institutions is questioned and ultimately rejected. Strauss and

Howe characterize those born during this period as "Nomads," distrustful of the culture's institutions and lacking allegiances.

The turning which follows, Unraveling, captures the idea of cultural *entropy*, wherein the institution is subject to the individual's interests, and into which "Heroes" take center stage as those who have overcome the institutions. Finally, the fourth turning is Crisis, from which comes rebirth of the culture and the loss to history of the institutions of the High turning. The advent of the "Artist" occurs in this turning, with a period of creativity and new ideas. These new ideas are destined to become the institutions of the next High turning, and hence the cycle is rejuvenated.

Part 2 of the book applies the cycle to American history since 1946, the close of World War II. The first turning (High) is identified as 1946–64, roughly corresponding to the Boomer generation. The second turning (Awakening) is equated with 1964–84, corresponding to the thirteenth generation (more commonly known as Generation X or Busters). It is at this point that the text takes on its prophetic voice. The third turning (Unraveling) is said to extend from 1984 to 2005 (?), a period marked with ensuing "culture wars" in America, paralleling the arrival of the Millennial generation into adult life.

The final turning (Crisis) is actually addressed in two chapters. Chapter 9 presents other "fourth turnings" in history, so as to develop possible patterns of development in the years 2005+. The following chapter then applies those possible patterns of cultural development to

America, making what Strauss and Howe call "A Fourth Turning Prophecy." It is this prophecy that could develop into the Crisis stage of American culture, which provides a platform for part 3, "Preparing for the Fourth Turning."

Strauss and Howe do *not* speak of how to avoid the final turning, since its occurrence, to them, is natural, inevitable, and necessary. Rather, they address how individuals and institutions can survive by moving *through* the fourth turning by taking advantage of the Unraveling and coming Crisis seasons in American culture (p. 306). Of all the parts of this work, part 3 proves to be most beneficial for adult education.

Christian educators, and educators in general, have often made use of generational studies to develop programs of education. The first valuable aspect of this part of the book is the presentation of the generational differences. The description includes the Millennial generation just preparing to enter higher education. In fact, chapter 11 goes so far as to "age" the generational voices (e.g., how a Boomer will sound in 2010 as a senior citizen), providing "scripts" for each generation including a hypothetical script for the generation that follows the Millennials.

The second valuable aspect of part 3 is Strauss and Howe's suggestions as to how individuals and institutions can weather the change of seasons between the Unraveling and Crisis turnings. One need not accept the premise of cyclical historical development in culture or the possibility of establishing historical trajectories in culture to find value in this section. The prepara-

tions for turnings described in chapter 11 would generically apply to any period of intense or unprecedented change in the lives of individuals or institutions. These recommendations can be readily applied to the church as an institution.

While the authors do have a pluralistic view of religion, even criticizing Christianity's perspective of time (pp. 9–11), Strauss and Howe are not silent on the place of evangelicals in their prophetic future:

Boomer evangelicals will join the search for a spiritual old age. Elder conservative Christians will sharpen their sermonizing

about good and evil, implant God and prayer in public life, and demand more divine order in civic ritual. They will view as sacrilegious many of the unraveling era's new pro-choice life-cycle laws, from genetically engineered births to non-traditional marriages to assisted suicides. They will desecularize birth, marriage and death to reauthenticate the core transitions of human life. (p. 281)

If there is one innate and cardinal criticism of the book, it is that it rests on the premise that history is somehow predictable. Can historians really predict the future? Also, how

valuable is a *pattern* of history if it doesn't explain and identify the *events* leading to or from it? For example, what kind of "crisis" will America face? Will it be nuclear holocaust, famine, natural disaster, civil revolution, economic collapse—or even positive crisis, such as spiritual revival or radical social reformation? In short, while the book is valuable for some of its content, its claim to be a prophecy "about America's next rendezvous with destiny" seems a bit presumptuous.

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Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 219 pages. Reviewed by Morris Yates.

Robert Stein offers the common, untrained, believing reader a basic nontechnical guide on how to read the Bible to discover what the original authors meant. This is followed by showing how the ordinary reader "can discover the legitimate implications that flow out of this meaning, and how this applies today" (9). The author tackles these goals by considering three major elements in two distinct parts of this clearly written book. In the first part, he discusses the first major element, the roles of the writer, the text, and the reader. In an effort to increase understanding and to minimize confusion, he next presents his second major element, the need for a precise vocabulary, which he supplies and uses consistently. In the second part he presents his third major element by briefly introducing the reader to various literary genres found in the Bible and by setting forth guidelines to help the uninitiated reader more accurately read the texts.

The author uses the analogy of an athlete playing various sports. The rules for playing different sports vary, and the players must know and observe the rules in order to play a particular game. In the same way, the reader must know the rules of the various genres (games) in order to play the game of interpretation. This analogy functions as a kind of controlling metaphor throughout the book, but it is especially prevalent in the second part.

The first chapter, "Who Makes Up the Rules? An Introduction to

Hermeneutics," discusses the three necessary components of communication: the writer, the text, and the reader. He asks the basic question of where meaning originates. Stein argues that it originates with the author or encoder of a given text. He briefly discusses linguistic theories that hold that the text has semantic autonomy when it gains the questionable classification status of literature and is thus the source or origin of meaning. He discusses how and why he finds these theories wanting. The chief reason is that the text is an inanimate object and cannot consciously will meaning, thought, or reason any of which require a sentient being. To omit consideration of the intent of the writer leaves open the possibility that the reasoning source might be the reader. Thus, he takes up theories that argue for the reader or decoder as the person who determines the meaning of a text or code. He rejects the contention of some synchronic methods such as "reader-response-criticism" (20) that hold that a text can have as many legitimate meanings as it has readers.

A person engaged in the newer literary criticism could thus have problems with Stein's arguments. This very potential is seen by Stein as a significant argument, in that before what he has written could be argued with, his meaning in the text would have to be understood by the reader, thus demonstrating his point that the writer originates the meaning. He describes the argument of "intentional fallacy" (23) and finds it to have missed the point that the reader is looking for the consciously willed meaning that the author "intended to communicate" (23) in the text, rather than climbing

into the mind of the author to determine his psychological state at the time of writing.

Within the framework of the author being the determiner of meaning, Stein discusses the role of the author, the role of the text and the role of the reader in interpretation. He discusses historical particularity, specific meaning, pattern of meaning, and legitimate implications that grow out of specific meaning. He uses several illustrations and biblical texts as examples to help the reader understand the interpretive process. Several charts and line drawings are used to make remarkably clear this many-faceted task of interpretation. He does an especially fine job throughout the text of showing how context functions to help the reader understand a text. He clearly shows how and where various tools like lexicons, concordances and Bible dictionaries can help the reader who is not familiar with the original languages to more accurately get the authors' meaning by staying within the "norms of language" (54). He shows how both literary and historical context are involved in arriving at the meaning of the writer.

The role of the Holy Spirit in the writing of scripture is discussed in chapter three. Stein states, "Throughout the entire process of interpreting the Bible, the Holy Spirit is intimately involved" (61). He is viewed as the cause of the writing of the scriptures, as having guided the canonization process, and finally as helping the believer apply the Bible to her or his life. Stein believes that when the reader has the authors' originally intended meaning, that reader also has the meaning intended by the Holy Spirit.

In chapter four, entitled "Different Games in the Same Book: Different Forms of Scripture," the author discusses commissive and referential language and explains the purpose and function of both. He shows numerous examples within common experience where one has likely heard or will hear each type of language. He explains that both types of language can be found in a given biblical genre, but he carefully explains where a reader is most likely to find each type.

In chapters five through thirteen Stein defines and discusses proverbs, prophecy, poetry, idioms, hyperbole, parables, narrative epistles, treaties, laws and songs. All of these discussions are helpful and provide many illustration from the Bible. They are clearly and cogently presented. The extended discussions advocating the historicity of all narratives was finally declared to be beside the point in determining the meaning of a text. The matter as to whether or not the text's narrative actually happened is, in the end, considered to be an evaluation of the subject matter of the text and has to do with signification rather than meaning. Balance and depth might have been improved in analysis. Chapter five, "The Game of Wisdom: Proverbs," was too brief to be of very much help with the interpretation of this genre. However, one must keep in mind that this book is an introductory work, a good starting place. The work concludes with a brief, usable glossary of technical terms, a selected bibliography dealing with hermeneutics, and a very good scriptural index.

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