

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ENGAGING HEBREW WISDOM FROM A ‘WHOLE OF LIFE’, SAMOAN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE: A READING OF PROVERBS 27:19

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is primarily to show how the indigenous wisdom of Samoa, as part of the wider tradition of Pasifika indigenous wisdom, provides a valuable and transformative conceptual framework for understanding Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. For the purposes of this essay, my key text is Proverbs 27:19, a proverb whose text appears to be deliberately ambiguous in form and content, which thus presents an interpretative conundrum for its readers. I argue that this interpretative problem can be resolved in a positive and life affirming manner when the proverb is approached by means of the ‘whole of life’ framework of Samoan indigenous wisdom. In conclusion, I suggest that this ‘whole of life’ framework, offers a viable and critical approach not only to reading biblical Wisdom texts but also texts of the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

Keywords

Samoan wisdom, biblical wisdom, Proverbs, translation, ‘whole of life’

Introduction

In the last 200 years or so, wisdom in biblical studies has always been narrowly defined, i.e., only as wisdom strictly found in books categorised as wisdom literature in the Bible. But defining what wisdom literature is and determining the limits of its corpus has always been a matter of debate (see e.g. Kynes 2021a, Longman III 2022). More recently, however,

a movement in biblical scholarship is attempting to break the ties between wisdom as a concept and wisdom literature as a category. It's an effort to understand wisdom as a concept in its own right, and finding connections with extra-biblical wisdom traditions (Kynes 2021b, 1).

I see this movement as a decolonising move away from the control of an elite guild (largely confined to the West), and into the hands of the general population of biblical readers whose contexts are vastly varied and different. It is not a movement away from biblical wisdom as such. Rather it's a movement towards finding correlations, affiliations, connections, and resonances between biblical wisdom and other wisdom traditions around the world. A recent work that reflects this concern from the Asia and Pasifika contexts is called *Reading Ecclesiastes from Asia and Pasifika* (Havea and Lau 2020), where the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is critically engaged by the wisdom traditions of Asia and Pasifika.¹ For the purposes of this essay, a comment by Gerhard von Rad in his two-volume work *Old Testament Theology* (1962) is instructive. Writing about wisdom in ancient Israel, he contends that

[a]ny sound discussion of Israel's wisdom means taking the concept as broadly as it was in fact taken. For [Israel], thinking in terms of wisdom was something *common to humanity*. Wisdom had to do with *the 'whole of life'*, and had to be occupied with all of its departments. (1962, 428 emphases mine)

For me, von Rad had touched on something that is critically fundamental to an understanding of wisdom, not just in ancient Israel but throughout the world. Wisdom is 'common to [all] humanity', it is concerned with the 'whole of life', and as such, is occupied with all of life's many constituent parts: its multiple disciplines, cultures, and religions, and life's different manifestations in the physical, mental, and spiritual.

Proverbs in the Context of Biblical Wisdom

Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible (HB) is generally understood as a collective term that describes a variety of Hebrew words, namely, *hokmah* 'wisdom' and *binah* 'understanding' (Prov 1:2), *tevnah* 'good sense' (Prov 8:1), *da'at* 'knowledge' (Prov 1: 4), and *sakal* 'discretion' (Fox 2007, 669).² Wisdom is also personified in Proverbs, e.g. *hokmot* (1:20), *hokmah*,

1 See esp. the chapters by Waga (Oceania); Tong, Goh, Kim (China); Gnanaraj, Mascenghe (Tamil).

2 Other nuances of these words include, skill, learning, perceptiveness, cleverness, prudence, and sagacity (Fox 2000, 33, cited in Kynes 2021a, 2, n.5). Useful also in this regard is Maimonides's understanding of wisdom in the Bible as (a) the apprehension of true realities, (b) acquiring arts, (c) acquiring moral virtues, (d) the aptitude for stratagems and ruses (cited in Kynes 2021b, 2, n.5).

tevunah (8:1), *binah* (8:14). Samuel Balentine provides a useful summary of what wisdom is in the Hebrew Bible, and how it relates to knowledge and understanding:

In the broadest sense, ‘knowledge’ is information—anything a person acquires through thinking or experience. ‘Understanding’ is discernment, the result of a cognitive process of analyzing and interpreting information to clarify meaning lying beneath its surface. ‘Wisdom’ is a combination of knowledge elevated to expertise and understanding enacted in moral and ethical behavior. To acquire wisdom is to be able to weigh all options, decide which is morally compelling, and to act accordingly. The link between knowledge, understanding, wisdom, *and* moral/ethical conduct is critical (2021, 502).

An important trait of the Book of Proverbs is its focus on life experiences (supposedly of the wise), and how seekers of wisdom would do well in life if they were to learn from their life experiences, and from the life experiences of the sages.³ So, despite Proverbs being traditionally tied to king Solomon, the book itself doesn’t make any explicit references to the narrated history of Israel in the Bible (e.g. the exodus, etc.), nor to traditions concerning the covenant, the torah, the prophets, etc.⁴ In other words, the teachings of Proverbs are predominantly based on what John Goldingay calls, ‘the way life actually works’ (2014, 4). To seek wisdom is to seek the good life, i.e., living wise is living the good life.

Proverbs’ teachings also find connections with other traditions prevalent in the ancient world like Egypt and Babylon (Goldingay 2014, 4; Balentine 2021, 496–97). This association of ancient Israelite wisdom with other traditions of the ancient world suggests that wisdom is a global phenomenon practised amongst different communities around the world.

For the purposes of this essay, my key text is Proverbs 27:19, a proverb whose text appears to be deliberately ambiguous in form and content, and thus presents an interpretative conundrum for its interpreters. I have settled on a study of this proverb not only for the textual-linguistic challenge it presents, but more so for its astute integration of observation of, and participation in the ‘whole of life’.

A Preliminary Look at Proverbs 27:19

בָּמַיִם הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים כִּן לִבִּי־הָאָדָם לָאָדָם:

Kamaim haphānīm laphānīm ken lev-hā‘adam lā‘adam.

‘Like water face to face thus the heart of man to man’.

3 See however, the counter argument by Michael V. Fox (2007).

4 See however, the comprehensive counter-claims made by Katharine Dell (2006) on this issue.

This is Robert Alter's translation which for him, 'reproduces the strong compactness of the original [Hebrew]' (Alter 2010, 389–90; c.f., Goldingay 2012, 174). I prefer Alter's translation to most others I have come across because Alter's translation closely represents the form and literal sense of the Hebrew text. Furthermore, the 'compactness' of the proverb in both the Hebrew and Alter's English, presents a paradox. In other words, it is both very brief (which lends to its ambiguity), and also quite unassuming (which leads to uncritical interpretations). The Hebrew sage has packed into a very short space, or in a very few words, an analogy that looks straightforward at first sight, but is by no means easy to unpack. It reminds me of a Samoan metaphor, '*O le i'a iviivia*', a fish full of undetected bones, i.e., a body of complex knowledge requiring much analytical thought and contemplation.

With reference to Prov 27:19, imageries of water, face, heart, and man,⁵ and the idea of one reflecting another, all present a '*i'a iviivia*' that requires full attention to their meanings and their relationships within the proverb.

The Nature of the Problem

An initial question that comes to mind is: what is the point of the analogy? I will offer two possibilities to consider-

Possibility (a):

If the first part (*Like water face to face*) is about the **reflection** of a face, then by analogy, the second part (*thus the heart of man to man*) is about the **reflection** of a heart. Now, it seems clear in the first part that the face is reflected in water. But in the second part, it's not at all clear how the heart is reflected. Is the proverb saying that the heart is reflected in another heart, or not? This is where the proverb is ambiguous. And because of its brevity, it's not giving enough detail for a fuller understanding of the second part.

Possibility (b):

The position of *face to face* is **analogous** to the position of *heart of man to man*. We know that in the first position, the face is facing itself in water. In the second position, the heart of man is facing either the same man or facing another man. Again, the proverb is not at all clear on what the second position actually looks like.

5 The word 'man' (Hebrew, *adam*) here functions in two possible ways: firstly, denoting a single human being, and secondly, denoting humankind as a whole. This double function is probably why Alter has kept 'man' in his translation, i.e., as an abbreviated form in keeping with the compact nature of the proverb.

Approaching the Problem from Traditional Biblical Exegesis

Scholarly analysis of the book of Proverbs reveals that the proverb (27:19), belongs to a collection of proverbs which seems to have been randomly selected, given the fact that they don't readily display any formal or thematic continuities with each other (Fox 2007). This is an independent collection of proverbs found in chapters 25–29, which also has connections with the collection found in chapters 10–22 (Dell 2006, 76–82).

In the case of Prov 27:19, it doesn't appear to be *thematically or formally* connected to any of the proverbs within its immediate textual context. On the other hand, the analogous style and the synchronic parallelism of 27:19 is found also in several of the proverbs in this section. For instance, see 25:3, 26:1, 26:11, and 27:8. But what makes 27:19 different from all the others is that while the analogies of all these ones are easily identifiable and clearly understood, 27:19 seems to be *deliberately ambiguous*.

A historical analysis of this section of Proverbs including 27:19 shows that this is an old collection of proverbs belonging to King Solomon, which were collected and copied by King Hezekiah's scribes in the 8th cent BCE (25:1). But as with many of these proverbs, whether these all belonged to King Solomon cannot be historically verified. In other words, because the collection consists of proverbs that are loosely connected, if at all, it is quite likely that many of them have different origins (Dell 2006, 76–79).

At the end of this brief analysis, we're not any closer to resolving the problem of Prov 27:19. And so we're back to the two possibilities that I proposed above. Let us now see how these possibilities present themselves in the various ways that the proverb has been translated.

Translating and Interpreting Proverbs 27:19

The proverb states: *Like water face to face thus the heart of man to man.*

While Alter's translation might be the closest to the Hebrew, it doesn't make it any easier to understand. And I think this is the point of the proverb; it is deliberately worded to be ambiguous, which is not a bad thing. Ambiguity is an occasion for further reflection and contemplation, giving rise to new meanings. One sure sign of the proverb being ambiguous is the variety of ways it has been translated. Consider the following:

1. NRSV: *Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another.*
2. NIRV: *When you look into water, you see a likeness of your face. When you look into your heart, you see what you are really like.*
3. TaNaK: *As face answers to face in water, So does one man's heart to another.*

All three translations give different interpretations of the proverb. Note that each translation tries to give meaning to the text with the addition of a verb, like 'reflect', 'see', or 'answer'; verbs not provided in the Hebrew text (cf. Alter's translation), a

condition that gives rise to the proverb's ambiguity.

4. Even the Greek translation (LXX) of the HB gives yet another reading of the proverb:

As faces are not like other faces, so neither are the thoughts of men.

Here, the reference to water is missing or has been omitted.⁶

The NRSV and NIRV translations have chosen to take different paths, each deciding on a definite trajectory of one of the two possibilities discussed above. On the other hand, the Jewish translation (TNK) has opted to give meaning to the analogy by adding a dialogic element into it. For the Greek translation of the Hebrew, the agency of the water is removed so that the elements of diversity and distinctiveness are emphasised.

Pasifika Translations

The following are translations taken from bibles in Pasifika vernacular:

1. Translating my Samoan version goes like this: *Like eyes facing each other in water, such is the heart of one person to another.*⁷
2. From the Tongan Bible, it says: *Just like the appearance of ones' face when looking at the water, So like the appearance of ones' heart when looking at a different person.*⁸
3. From the Kiribati Bible: *Seeing the reflection of one's eyes in water, is the same as seeing one person's behaviour representing the behaviour of the whole community.*⁹
4. From the Kanaky Bible: *Same face with the face in water, it's the same for the feelings for each of them.*¹⁰

What I see in these Pasifika translations is an underlying holistic or communal worldview where 'the one' is understood and defined in terms of 'the other(s)'. This is despite the fact that Pasifika bibles in the vernacular were mostly translated from English versions (especially the KJV). Furthermore, these translations demonstrate the truth of Manulani Meyer's axiom: 'We are all the same, differently' (2024, 48).

Wisdom as a 'Whole of life' Concept

The 'whole of life' perspective frames our Pasifika indigenous understanding of wisdom, and the three key principles of this framework according to Upolu Vaai are, (a) 'integration', (b) 'interwoven multiplicities and complexities' and, (c) 'relationality' (2024,

6 See Clifford (1999, 239–40), where he claims the LXX reading is superior to the MT which he believes is based on a corrupt text.

7 My translation.

8 Translation by Fe'ofa'aki Veamatahau, Masters Student, PTC 2024.

9 Translation by Arobati Tetoa, BD Yr 2 Student, PTC 2024.

10 Translation by Sailugeje Sailugeje, BD Yr 1 Student, PTC 2024.

25–26). These three principles are not only interconnected; they also overlap and support each other. ‘Integration’ describes the wholeness of all life where all things are connected and interconnected in multiple dimensions of reality. This principle also designates the interdependence of all things in the cosmos. The principle of ‘interwoven multiplicities and complexities’ describes the multiple ways of knowing, of being, and of doing; and the complexities of relationships afforded by the ‘whole of life’ way. ‘Relationality’ simply put, speaks of the ‘continuities, flows, and fluidities’ of life (Vaai 2024, 26). It is not about fixed and absolute systems and structures. Rather it designates a complex web of relationships and interconnections characterised by fluidities and continuities, between all of life. In certain ways it can be likened to the holistic understanding of the hermeneutic circle¹¹ where the whole is understood in terms of the individual parts, and the parts understood only in relation to the whole.

Relationality¹² therefore describes the multidimensional and multilayered connections between all things, where the one is indelibly connected and understood in relationship with other(s) and vice versa. So, a self, an individual, or entity, is never fully known as a ‘thing in itself’, but rather always known and understood in relationship with other(s) and as part of the ‘whole of life’. This notion is succinctly expressed by one of our well-known custodians of the Samoan indigenous reference, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi who stated,

I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a *tofi* (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging. (2018b, 105).

Rooted in the ‘sense of belonging’ that Tui Atua speaks of is the Samoan understanding of wisdom. Our *faasinomaga* (‘designation’ or ‘identity’ as Samoans) and our *tofi* (‘inheritance’) are fundamental to a proper understanding of Samoan indigenous wisdom. They are fundamentally ‘whole of life’ concepts. Samoan indigenous wisdom, understood as the ability to make and implement moral and ethical decisions based on indigenous knowledge and experience, must always be guided by the principles of the ‘whole of life’ way.

11 The origin of the concept of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is generally attributed to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1864), the ‘father of modern hermeneutics’. See e.g. Schleiermacher (1998).

12 For a comprehensive articulation and elucidation of the concept of ‘relationality’ from a Pasifika perspective, see Vaai (2007); Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2022 [2017]).

Fa'aaloalo (Respect)

Fa'aaloalo in the Samoan language literally means 'the face-to-face way'. The face-to-face way of *fa'aaloalo* is the symbolic representation of respect. When people are oriented toward each other face-to-face, it is a mark of mutual respect, acknowledgement, recognition, and mutual inclusion. Turning one's back on the other is a mark of disrespect and rejection. In many facets of Samoan life as well as its architecture, the face-to-face way of *fa'aaloalo* is always present. An example is the Samoan *fale-tele* (meeting house) which is designed in a circular fashion. This ensures that people, when seated in the *fale*, are always facing each other. Similarly, in many cultural rituals and ceremonies, people make sure they face each other to respect the relational spaces between them.

In Samoan culture, the relational space between people (and other things) is called *va*. This is why *fa'aaloalo* is the key guiding principle in the life of Samoans. It is inherent in the way they behave and act, the way they think, and the way they spiritualise. *Fa'aaloalo* is a relational way of life. It guides the way we relate to each other, to the land, the ocean, and the sky. But *fa'aaloalo* is also sacred, because in the indigenous Samoan cosmology we are all descendants of the progenitor God *Tagaloaalagi* (Tagaloa of the Heavens).¹³ This means that relationships between human beings, between human and non-human, and between the human and spirit world, are relationships of *fa'aaloalo*.¹⁴

In all *fa'aaloalo* relationships, recognition is always given to the space that exists between those in relationship. This space is, called *va fealoaloa'i* 'social space' (Iuogafa 2022), and *va tapuia* 'sacred space' (Tui Atua 2018c [2009]), which must always be attended to for a proper and harmonious functioning of *fa'aaloalo*. In other words, those in relationship must *teu le va* which means, 'to nurture, to beautify, to cherish (*teu*), the space in between (*vā*)'.¹⁵

Teu le Va (Nurture, Beautify, Cherish the Space)

Vā, also referred to as *va fealoaloa'i* and *va tapuia*, is the relational space between people, and between people and everything else in the cosmic community. While this space is both physical and temporal, Samoans always understand it not as empty space, but space filled with relationality and spirituality. The two spaces are distinct but closely interrelated. *Va fealoaloa'i* recognises the dignity and value of all human and non-human beings, by virtue of their 'mutual inclusiveness' (Vaai 2007, 184). *Va tapuia* is sacred space and signifies the sacred origins of both human and non-human beings, living and non-living. Nurturing the

13 Alternatively in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we are both the created image(s) and children of God, through Christ.

14 Upolu Vaai characterises the Samoan '*fa'aaloalo* relational way' in terms of three main features: (i) 'Mutual inclusiveness' (2007, 184), (ii) 'Responsibility towards the other' (2007, 175; 184), (iii) 'Holism' (2007, 185).

15 My personal translation.

two spaces (*teu le va*), through appropriate language use and acts of reciprocity, performed through ritual, ceremony, oratory, etc., all contribute to the maintenance of balance and harmony in life. *Teu le va* is a way of connecting and communicating with those in the present as well as with our ancestors who have gone before us. *Le va*, (the space) between faces in the ‘face-to-face way’ of *fā’aaloalo* is multidimensional and relational. Living in relationships of *fā’aaloalo* (respect) therefore, ensures that the sacredness and sanctity of ‘the space between faces’ is maintained. *Teu le va* is therefore both ethical and spiritual. It is living in the mode of *fā’aaloalo* and ‘the ‘whole of life’ way.

***Alofa* (Love, Compassion, Care)**

Inherent in the ethic of *fā’aaloalo* (respect) is the ethic of *alofa* (love), and the two could be understood as the same because both are relational and spiritual. Rooted in relationality in the same way as *fā’aaloalo* and the ‘whole of life’ way, *alofa* is holistic, mutually inclusive, and driven by a sense of responsibility towards the other. In terms of these principles, therefore, *alofa* ‘love, compassion, care’ is not limited or restricted to the one or the other. Differences are not irreconcilable opposites of an ‘either-or’ binary, but rather complementary opposites that evolve towards a ‘mutual emergence’ (Meyer 2024, 47–58). *Alofa* is the recognition and acknowledgement of the inclusivity of the whole. Whether it is relationships between people or between people and the land, sea and sky, *alofa* is extended to all. It is a responsibility for the other and for the whole community, borne out of the inseparable connection of the one to the other and to the whole. *Alofa* is not a matter of choice,¹⁶ but a matter of relationship. *Alofa* enacted is reciprocal, sacred (*tapu*), and powerful (*mana*). Allow me to give a short portrayal of a slice of my life as a child in Samoa, which puts context into my reading of Prov 27:19.

16 While we are free to choose whom we ‘love’ in special relationships (e.g. marriage), *alofa* never relinquishes its inclusivity and responsibility to others.

A Personal Story



Image 1, Samoan ecosystem, reproduced with permission by the owner, Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson.

The above picture shows part of an ecosystem that is central to my village in Samoa. I was born in this village called Moata'a, one of the many villages I belong to,¹⁷ in this case, on the maternal side of my family. When I was born, my placenta was buried in our family land at this village. Everyone who is of this village is called "*tama a le 'ele'ele*" meaning, "an offspring, or a child of the land" (specifically belonging to this village). Every Samoan is in fact a *tama a le 'ele'ele*. The burying of my placenta (*fanua*) in the family land (*fanua*), validates the wisdom of my belongingness, i.e., my fundamental connection to the land, to my family, my village, etc. It is the most basic link between us and the world, between us and the cosmos as a whole. As it were, I spent most of my early formative years in this place before I left Samoa as a young adult for further education.

The near side of the pond leads toward the main road, the school, the church, the village shop, and the *malae*.¹⁸ The photograph shows the widest part of a natural water system that covers a large part of the village. The system itself is fed by a number of freshwater springs located further inland. All the water from the springs come together around the point where the photograph is taken, and from here, the water gently weaves its way between the mangroves towards the sea. Such ecosystems are common in Samoa.

17 In Samoa, people belong to more than one village, depending on where your parents and ancestors come from.

18 The *malae* is the traditional social, cultural, and sacred centre of the village where most of the important cultural activities of the village are done.

One important feature of this ecosystem is that it was the place where the mullet fish come to spawn every year. And every year, our village community would harvest big catches of mullet, close to the estuary. The water system was and still is an integral part of our community life. Unfortunately, there's a sad side to the story. Under the banner of economic development, a huge part of our ecosystem by the estuary was buried over, for the purpose of building a beach resort. Needless to say, our village community no longer harvests the mullet fish like they used to in the old days.

Before we had running water at home, this pond and its springs were an important part of our community life. It was the place for drinking water, for bathing, washing, and for swimming. It was our waterway to and from the sea. It also provided us with fish, mud-crabs, eels, etc. The whole ecosystem was an integral component of our life; it was in our blood. Every time we walked the track across the pond, my friends and I would look at our reflections in the water because the water is so close.

A Samoan Indigenous Reading of Proverbs 27:19

1. *Relational face*¹⁹

Whenever I see my face in water, I am not just seeing my face. In my cultural understanding, my face is not just mine alone. It is the face of all my *aiga* (family), my community, and all my ancestors (e.g. Tui Atua 2018a, 93).²⁰ These faces will continue to be transmitted from generation to generation, and will be reflected in the faces of our descendants. The mere reflection of a face in water tells a story. It is a story of knowledge and wisdom, of genealogies, of relationality, and of coloniality and decoloniality. It's a story that goes all the way back to the beginning of all things. The face is *tapu* (sacred) because it is rooted in divinity, whether we are 'images' and 'likenesses' of the Creator God *Elohim*, or 'descendants' of the Progenitor God *Tagaloaalagi*. It symbolises all different dimensions of who we are: culturally, socially, spiritually, emotionally, etc. Not only as individuals, but also in terms of our collective identities, our connections, continuities, and relationships, in and with our families, communities, and ancestors.

2. *Faces on the water, in the water, and through water.*

The use of water imagery by the Hebrew sages is very apt when reflecting on it from a 'whole of life' perspective. While the proverb appears to focus only on personal relationships with

19 For a useful discussion of the significance of the 'relational face' (*alo*) in theology and hermeneutics, see Aiava 2017.

20 See for instance, Tui Atua 2018a, 93..

oneself, or relationships between oneself and another, the imagery of water brings new dimensions and perspectives to understanding this piece of Hebrew wisdom.

Water is a variable medium, so reflections on its surface can vary from one extreme to another, like from near perfect to very distorted or simply unrecognisable. Such variables will also impact how we understand the second line of the proverb. The Hebrew writers could easily have referred to an object like polished bronze as a mirror instead of water. However, they deliberately used water, and not necessarily by some textually transmitted error as some biblical scholars have claimed (e.g. Clifford 1999, 239–40),²¹ but as a conscious effort perhaps to show the complex relationships between human and human, and between human and non-human beings.

For my present purposes, I will focus on the smooth surface of water like that of my village pond in the picture. Long ago when I used to peer into the water from the stone track, I not only saw a reflection of my face, but I saw also the reflections of the clouds and the sun in the sky, as well as the trees and the birds above and around the pond. When fishing for mud-crabs at night during full moon, we used to see the reflections of the moon and the stars in the water. The knowledge and skill for fishing and trapping comes from observing the integrated relationship between the biodiversity of the ecosystem and the moon. Abundant harvests are always shared instead of sold for money.

So, whether we look at the water during daytime or night time, we see reflections not of our faces only, but reflections of the world and the sky all around us. Here we see, alongside our faces, other faces not specifically human, but which are nonetheless faces of our ecological *aiga* (family). Those faces tell their own stories and many of those stories intersect with our own. For instance, a well-known myth in Samoa tells of the origins of the coconut tree. The tale is about the love affair between a young woman Sina and a young man who became an eel (*tuna*). Woven into the story are some of the springs at our village that became the locations of affectionate meetings between the two lovers. These springs still have the names given to them by our ancestors in reference to events in the story. For example, some of the springs at our village are named: ‘*Puna o le se’e*’ (slippery spring), ‘*Puna lilo*’ (mysterious spring), and ‘*Tanoa-a-le-i’a*’ (pool of the eel). These names commemorate the story of Sina and her *Tuna*.²² Eventually Sina got tired of the relationship and wished to terminate it. At which point, *Tuna* realised he couldn’t endure the sense of losing Sina, so he determined to end his life. But before *Tuna* died, his parting words to Sina were: ‘When I die, cut my head off and bury it in the ground. When a tree grows out of it, the fruit will be good for your refreshment and sustenance. The fruit will

21 See e.g. Clifford 1999, 239–40.

22 This rendering of the story does not include other parts that extend to the island of Savaii.

also serve as a token and memory of my love for you, because every time you drink from it, you will see my face and drink out of my mouth'. That tree was the coconut tree.



Image 2, 'face' of a coconut, photo by the author

In the picture above, the 'face' of the coconut is referred to by Samoans as the face of the *tuna* with its two eyes and mouth clearly visible. The 'mouth' is the only point on the 'face' of *tuna* (i.e., the coconut) that can be easily pierced for drinking the juice from the coconut. Significant in this story is the appearance of the face which represents not only the tuna and his genealogy and kin; it also represents the *alofa* (love) extended to someone who did not wish to reciprocate that love. Ironical, however, is the fact that the wisdom of love is always enacted and commemorated every time the ritual of drinking the coconut takes place.

The story of Sina and her *tuna* together with many such stories and folklore in the Samoan indigenous traditions serve as constant reminders of the sacred intersections between human and non-human relationships and their genealogies. They all speak of the power of *alofa* (love) and *fa'aaloalo* (respect) that are embedded in the relational connections between people and the natural environment.

Water is also transparent. Every time we peer into the water, we don't just see reflections on it. We can also see through the water. In my story, we used to see what's in the water like fish, as well as what's beneath the water, like rocks, sand, mud, etc. And this ability to see in and through the water affords us a unique experience of relating to the water itself, the world underwater, and the world above-water. In this regard, the water

is many things to us. It is our storehouse of knowledge, our hermeneutical lens, our life-giver, and our means of knowing ourselves in relation to everything else in the world. The water is in our blood, and in our souls. We are the water, and the water is us. We are related to the water in a multidimensional way, just as we are related to all the faces of nature and of ourselves, that we see in and through the water.

Analogy of Face-to-Face, with Heart of Man to Man

Whichever way you look at the proverb, it seems that the second verset of the analogy (i.e., ‘the heart of man to man’) refers to one’s ability to see one’s own heart, just like being able to see one’s own face in water. The question then is, how does one see one’s own heart? The first answer is through the heart-to-heart method, just like the face-to-face method in the first verset of the analogy. In other words, when two hearts face each other, one is able to see itself in the other. One is dependent on, and incorporates the other for knowledge of itself.²³

The second answer is that one’s heart has no need of another, because it can see for itself. In other words, truth is found in the individual self and not elsewhere. A caution against this approach is that it can lead to a polarising attitude to knowledge, one that prioritises an ‘either-or’ formula for truth. However, while it is important to see into your heart and gain an understanding of yourself that way, that knowledge can only be limited, because it reveals only part of the bigger story of who you are.

Epistemologically speaking, the first method of face-to-face (heart-to-heart) is communal and relational, the second is self-sufficient and self-dependent. The English versions we looked at before, all reflect in one way or another, these two ways of knowing. I have yet to see a translation where the two different ways of self-understanding are laid out side by side, thus affirming that the two are not incommensurable opposites, but are mutually complementary to each other.

A word that has inclusive denotations in Prov 27:19 is *adam* (‘man’). *Adam*, means both an individual ‘human being’ or ‘humankind’ (see Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907, 9). So, if we use humankind in the place of man, we have the second verset reading: ‘thus the heart of humankind to humankind’. Obviously, this translation subverts the individualist reading into a holistic and relational understanding of the phrase in question. Furthermore, this holistic understanding is consolidated by the fact that *adam* (‘humankind’), is derived from *adamah* which means ‘earth’, ‘soil’, or ‘land’. In other words, the heart of humankind is also the heart of earth. Humankind and earth are *aiga*, ‘family’.

23 Cf. Manulani Meyer, ‘We know our self through others’ (2024, 52).

Proverbs 27:19 in the World of *Fa'aaloalo*

Reading Prov 27:19 through the lens of *fa'aaloalo* reveals a relational understanding of the expressions 'Like water face to face' and 'the heart of man to man'. Seeing one's face in water gives the imagery of a person in relationship with herself/himself. But understanding it in the *fa'aaloalo* 'face-to-face way' means that one's relationship to oneself is a multistranded and multidimensional set of relationships. A one-to-one relationship of the self to itself is not, therefore, confined to a unipolar relationship of the self to itself *per se*. This is because in the *fa'aaloalo* way of understanding and knowing, we define and know ourselves only in terms of our relationships. These are relationships with people in family, community, ancestors, etc., and relationships with the land, the sea/waters, and the sky. By the same token, when any notion of a self-examination of one's heart as suggested by some readings of the proverb is analysed in the *fa'aaloalo* 'whole of life' framework, it means that the self examines itself always in relationship to, and with, others in the cosmic *aiga* (family). It's not that the individual is unimportant. Rather, the individual is important always insofar as he/she/it is understood as a constitutive part of the 'whole of life'. This individual is related to human and non-human beings in many different ways, e.g. historically, socially, spiritually, emotionally, etc. Self-understanding therefore, or the quest for knowledge of oneself, is never about knowing the self 'in-itself', as it were. It is about knowing the self in relationality.

This relational approach to knowledge and wisdom, as well as to all of life's disciplines, is the Pasifika indigenous response and resistance to coloniality. Particularly against the individualistic element that is prominent in colonial and Western culture, a culture that sets itself up at the centre of the world. In the culture of the centred-individual, everything around it must conform to its singular and homogenous version of the truth.²⁴ Resistance to this colonial culture would either have to be overpowered by means of physical force, or be mentally controlled through education, indoctrination, and other cultural means. Under the control of this individualistic colonial culture, people and things, as well as disciplines and faiths, are segmented into factions depending on their conformity or non-conformity to the one-truth promulgated by the centre. So, we're caught up in a world of dualistic thinking, where everything is judged under the criteria of the 'either-or'. You are either civilised (enlightened) or uncivilised (primeval); developed (progressive and advanced) or under-developed (primitive); saved (Christian) or doomed (heathen or pagan); modern (Western culture) or barbaric (indigenous); central (the West) or peripheral (all others); and so on. The one-truth system means things stay fixed in one way, and relationships become stale and die. The 'whole of life' approach demonstrated in and by the Samoan concepts of *fa'aaloalo*, *teu le va*, and *alofa* is part of the Pasifika

24 Further on this point, see Upolu Vaai's notion of 'oneification' (Vaai 2021; 2024).

alternative to the 'one truth' of the centre. In the 'whole of life' way, there is no centre or margin, only the whole.

One important feature of this 'whole of life' way is the sense of responsibility towards everyone in the human and the cosmic community, and vice versa. The cultural ethic rooted in *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *teu le va* (nurture the relational space), and *alofa* (love), maintains resilience, balance, and harmony in the 'whole of life'. Reflections of our faces in water tell a story of who we are, of what we have become, and what will emerge out of the conditions of possibility we provide for our descendants.

Conclusion

In this essay I have presented a 'whole of life' hermeneutic framework in terms of the Samoan concepts of *fa'aaloalo*, *teu le va*, and *alofa* in which Samoan indigenous wisdom is rooted, understood, and practised. I have also attempted to interpret Proverbs 27:19 (from this hermeneutic perspective), a proverb unique in its own way in comparison to other proverbs of similar form and content in the book, and which also presents a problem of how best to understand its meaning(s). In my reading of the proverb, I have highlighted the use of a heuristic device which I believe is pertinent to my understanding of Proverbs 27:19. This device is a sketch of my own personal history, my family, and the community I belong to, which gives context my reading. It is not external to or separate from the Samoan hermeneutic framework, but is integral to it.

Here, I want to conclude as follows:

1. Reading Proverbs 27:19 from the perspective of Samoan indigenous wisdom is a reading that is methodologically viable and rewarding. Viable for its ability to respect different interpretations of the proverb, while also providing a framework in which these differences can be viewed as mutually complementary. It is rewarding because it provides an alternative way of reading wisdom in the Bible; a way that is holistic, inclusive, life affirming, 'whole of life'.
2. Samoan indigenous wisdom is a way of life, just as much as ancient Hebrew wisdom is a way of life. Both are 'whole of life' in their observations of reality, their reflections on that reality, and their participation in that reality.
3. Samoan indigenous wisdom does not hold a monopoly on Pasifika indigenous wisdom. Similar frameworks are also present in the wider Pasifika community, with properties that are unique to each.

4. My reading of Proverbs 27:19 can be seen as part of the *re-weaving of the biblical mat*, Pasifika style. This is because any interpretation of biblical texts or any text for that matter is not only **contextual** but is also part of the process of **re-writing that text**. I have called it *re-weaving*, in solidarity with a Pasifika cultural icon. Needless to say, the hermeneutic lens of the Samoan indigenous wisdom has important implications for reading other biblical texts.

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