Recent scholarly opinion on the sayings assembled in Prov 10:1-22:16 has tended to view this “sentence literature” as purposely arranged and ordered by the editor of these “Proverbs of Solomon.” In line with this trend, Knut Heim presents his doctoral research, carried out under A. R. Millard at Liverpool. Heim sets out to study how individual sayings in this collection function in context and provides an enjoyable study of proverbs and their contextual connections.

The beginning of this work is occupied with a survey of scholarship. Heim begins by examining positions of those scholars who have denied that sentence literature is to be read in literary context. They believe that sayings are to be read individually and that interpretation of them is not to be colored by surrounding proverbs. Heim offers a fair reading of these scholars but deftly points out the deficiencies of such approaches and the fallacies of arguments used to defend them. His major contention is that readers of Proverbs tend to read sayings without reference to their context because of the very nature of proverbs as self-contained units. Therefore, many have a legitimate concern to safeguard the integrity of individual proverbs that denies any external constraint (such as context) on their meaning.

A second chapter surveying scholarship on proverb performance demonstrates that paroemilogists agree that in oral usage the performance context provides clues for understanding and applying proverbs. While paroemilogists consider proverbs in collections to be “dead,” Heim argues that they are basing this assessment on the field
notes and anthologies compiled by anthropologists. These tend to be random collections of sayings. Heim contends that the editor(s) of Proverbs purposely arranged sayings into small groupings based on features such as theme, catchwords, paronomasia, and the like, thereby providing them with a literary performance context. His argument is persuasive, if not totally new.

A third chapter explores recent scholarship that has recognized coherent editorial groupings in Proverbs. Heim’s concern here is twofold: to demonstrate the growing consensus that sayings were purposely arranged by the editor and to show deficiencies in method that have hindered reliable delimitations of clusters of proverbs. He concludes that there has been an overreliance on chapter divisions and literary features as delimiters. Heim also expresses doubt about using paronomasia and catchwords absolutely to determine coherence between adjacent proverbs. Instead, he advocates control mechanisms for evaluating their significance as tools producing coherence among individual sayings. Most importantly, he notes that most scholars who favor reading the sayings in their literary context also identify two major sets of appellations throughout these sayings: the righteous are identified with the wise, and, in binary opposition to this, fools are identified with the wicked. These identifications are not possible when the sayings are read atomistically.

The second section of Heim’s study aims at three goals. The first goal is to develop a theory of reading Proverbs contextually. This is addressed by theorizing about the use of proverbs in oral contexts. He notes that speakers of proverbs have a mental collection of sayings from which they choose one that they feel best applies to a given situation. Hearers, conversely, reverse this process. They begin by comparing the situation with the perceived truth expressed by the proverb and either accept or reject its application. Reading proverbs in a collection is different, according to Heim. Readers who do not perceive any editorial organization generally read the proverbs independently. Such readers find numerous truths expressed by these proverbs, and each proverb can be applied to a wide range of situations. These unwary readers lack criteria for selecting relevant proverbs when they are called upon to use them. However, more sophisticated readers recognize that there are editorial groupings of proverbs that provide guidance for applying them to an editorially implied range of situations. They are able to receive practical guidance. Thus, Heim concludes (correctly, in my opinion) that the editor of Prov 10:1-22:16 arranged the sayings contextually, thereby providing a communicative intention to the collection. This assumes that the reader of Proverbs also has an intention: to receive guidance for faith and practice.

Heim’s second goal is to defend the identification of the righteous with the wise in opposition to the identification of the wicked with the foolish. He presents a detailed analysis of all the appellations in Prov 10 and shows quite convincingly that, taken as a system, these proverbs lead the reader to just such identification. The only drawback of this chapter is Heim’s use of linguistic theory and terminology with little introduction to
the methods and terms used. Since the previous chapters did not rely on technical linguistic methods, this chapter may prove challenging to some readers who will not expect this sudden shift. Considering the abrupt plunge into linguistic methodology, a more extensive introduction and explanation would have been in order. Nevertheless, Heim does offer a spirited and competent argument for the righteous-wise versus wicked-foolish opposition in Proverbs. I am inclined to agree with his conclusion.

His third goal is to provide criteria for delimiting small clusters of sayings in Proverbs. In the third section of his study he lays out the entire text of the collection in Hebrew and English, cluster by cluster, and provides a defense of each group’s integrity as well as a commentary aimed at demonstrating how they can be read contextually. Heim argues that these clusters are an important feature of this collection and that the precise sequences of proverbs in these editorial groupings are of little importance. Instead, it is important to read each individual proverb as linked to an organic whole, which is the small grouping itself. But how are such small groups delimited by the editor, and how can the reader discern these groups? Heim argues that the primary criteria for the delimitation of proverbial clusters are not boundary markers but each cluster’s use of common linking devices among its individual sayings. The focus must be on what links sayings into clusters, not on what separates one cluster from another. Linking devices are primarily repetitive: repetition of sound, sense, consonants, word roots, words, synonyms, and other textual features. However, Heim cautions that not every repeated word or instance of paronomasia is a link. Some clusters will have boundary markers, but no fixed devices set aside for this purpose exist in the proverbs. Instead, an important criterion for the delimiting of clusters is the significant change of linking devices from one group of sayings to the next.

It is in this attempt to lay down definitive rules for delimiting clusters of proverbs that Heim’s thesis is most vulnerable, and it ultimately leads to a failure to demonstrate convincingly that in the third section of his book he has produced clusters as the editor intended. If not every instance of a catchword is significant, how does one determine which are insignificant? Is it because few catchwords are used in the vicinity? Does this mean that the editor did not want the readers to assign much significance to the catchword in such an instance? Perhaps it means the editor wanted them to assign more significance, because the catchword stands out against its context. Though I am in agreement that the editor of Prov 10:1-22:16 consciously arranged the sayings in a specific order and that order provides a context in which to read and apply them, I am suspicious that Heim is attempting to prove too much here. Why do these proverbs need to be delimited in clusters? What is the evidence that the editor worked with such groupings or wanted readers to perceive them? Heim offers none, and I am convinced that no evidence exists. Could it be that the editor wanted a more continuous and seamless reading to take place? Do the proverbs stand as individual sayings but simultaneously flow, sometimes easily, at other times with more turbulence, from one into another from beginning to end? Heim never considers this possibility and seems to
think that if clusters do not exist, then the contextual reading of the sayings is discredited. However, that leap of logic is neither necessary nor helpful.

Moreover, Heim has to purposely downplay certain links to produce his groupings of proverbs. For instance, he views 11:1 as contextually isolated, despite a catchword link with the preceding proverb, a link that he characterizes as “weak.” The reason this is a supposedly weak link is that the catchword is used in two different senses in the two proverbs. However, I would argue that this is a rather strong link in that it is quite striking to find this surprising change of meaning. It also indicates the fascination of the collection’s editor with language and its possibilities and may even point to the editor’s playfulness and sense of humor. In other cases Heim seems to overemphasize the unity of his groups of proverbs. Thus he argues that Prov 10:6b and 10:11b, which are identical, should be translated identically because of their cluster’s cohesion. I would argue that they should not be understood as identical but that the subject and object are reversed in the second instance, adding to the surprise and delight of the reader. Thus, Heim’s method seems to suppress the creativity of the editor in favor of Heim’s pursuit of clusters. In other cases Heim seems to produce links that are rather dubious. For example, though 12:2 appears to have no link to its immediate context, he argues that it is part of a cluster that extends from 12:1 through 12:7. His justification is that 12:1-3 and 12:5-7 have a similar thematic flow: instruction—the Lord’s verdict-consequences. Even if one accepts this pattern in 12:1-3 (and I am doubtful), it is difficult to sustain in 12:5-7, since YHWH never occurs there. Thus, in solving one cohesion problem, Heim creates another. Moreover, Heim fails fully to appreciate repetition of entire proverbs or single lines of proverbs throughout the collection. He sees them as possible delimiters of clusters, but it never occurs to him that they may be invitations by the editor to read the sayings cross-contextually!

Despite my reservations about Heim’s clusters of proverbs, the third section of this book is well worth reading. Heim offers a number of elegant contextual readings of proverbs, lays out (often in tabular form) the links that unite sayings to their neighbors, and ably discusses a number of grammatical, textual, and translational difficulties.

Heim’s book is a welcome addition to the discussion of the contextual reading of individual proverbs and offers a number of new insights into the connections among sayings in the Proverbs of Solomon and into their interpretation in context. However, he fails in the goal stated in his title because he fails to prove that perceiving proverbial clusters is necessary for reading the proverbs in context.