

OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE

March 14, 2018

PROVERBS

The Book of Proverbs is very different from the Old Testament books we've already studied: there are no references to Israelite history or to Temple worship. Instead, it is a book in the wisdom literature tradition of the Near East during that time period. (Individual psalms in the wisdom literature category do have references to verses or thoughts in Proverbs; parts of Job are also considered to be wisdom literature in addition to Ecclesiastes.)

The literal Hebrew meaning of the word "wisdom" is "listening heart." During that time period the heart was considered to be the seat of intelligence as well as of emotions.

Wisdom literature is a genre that was popular in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Greece before it was introduced to Israel. The sayings in Proverbs were developed by "wise men" (scholars and people in court and temple schools) and sometimes within family groups; there was a role for women, especially mothers, who also taught these sayings in the home. The main purpose then was to teach young men how to live all areas of their lives successfully (i.e., practical knowledge as well as moral instruction) – see introduction in Prov. 1:1-7.

Wisdom thinking is rooted in creation. The wise men observed nature and society as foundations for their instructions. There are multiple references to creation in Proverbs.

The book is associated with Solomon, known for his wisdom*, but he is not the only author. In addition to scholars who would develop sayings "in the style of Solomon," there is evidence of wisdom literature from outside the Israelite communities. Some of the content dates from the time of Solomon (10th century BCE) but the book was likely not completed in its current form until at least the 4th century BCE.

* I Kings 4:32 says this of Solomon: "He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five."

So what is a proverb?

A general dictionary definition = "a short pithy saying in general use, stating a general truth or piece of advice." Some might use the word "adage" or "truism" instead. The Hebrew word can be translated as "oracle" or "parable." Proverbs are not prophecies or promises.

Several different literary forms are found in the content of the Book of Proverbs, e.g:

- mini-essays (especially in ch. 1-9)
- couplets (two-line sayings, especially in ch. 10-22:16 and ch. 25-29)
- numerical sayings (ch. 30:21-29)
- an acrostic poem (ch. 31).

Figurative language appears throughout. Such language and different forms help people to learn/remember verses; instruction is the purpose of this book. There are similes (some a bit more sarcastic than others):

- “Like cold water to a weary soul / is good news from a distant land.” (25:25)
- “Like a gold ring in a pig's snout / is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.” (11:22)

and metaphors:

- “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life.” (15:4)
- “Pleasant words are a honeycomb.” (16:24)

Theme of the book of Proverbs

The theme of the book is found first in 1:7 (repeats at 9:10 and in other verses):

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

It is important to remember that “fear of the Lord” doesn’t mean being afraid; instead, it refers to being in awe of the Lord and responding with reverence and obedience. So, being or becoming wise isn’t just an intellectual activity.

Also, the “fools” in this context are not foolish or silly people but are people with less than the best intentions. In some of the proverbs, this characterization is very clear-cut but not realistic: the wise are good and the fools are evil; good things happen to the wise and bad things happen to the fools.

Collections within the book

A first or second glance at the Book of Proverbs could result in a conclusion that the book is just a random collection of sayings, some wise and some confusing or even contradictory. But there is a definite arrangement of the separate collections within the book (not all translations have all these superscriptions):

- Proverbs 1–9: “Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel”
- Proverbs 10–22:16: “Proverbs of Solomon”
- Proverbs 22:17–24:22: “The Sayings of the Wise”
- Proverbs 24:23–34: “These Also Are Sayings of the Wise”
- Proverbs 25–29: “These are Other Proverbs of Solomon that the Officials of King Hezekiah of Judah Copied”
- Proverbs 30: “The Words of Agur”
- Proverbs 31:1–9: “The Words of King Lemuel of Massa, Which his Mother Taught Him”
- Proverbs 31:10–31: “Ode to a Capable Wife”

Proverbs 1-9: “Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel”

These nine chapters are actually the latest content of the book and are more “religious” than the remainder of the book. They date from the post-Exilic period and were added by the editors as an introduction to the other chapters.

The personification of “wisdom” and “folly” as women is found in ch. 1-9. Each tries to convince young men to follow her: wisdom speaks in ch. 2-4 and folly speaks in ch. 5-7; they are contrasted in ch. 8-9. We’ll see “wisdom” appearing again as a woman in ch. 31.

But the Biblical characterization of wisdom as a person is much broader than just that of giving advice to young men. The personage of Wisdom was present with God at the creation of the world:

- Prov. 3: 19: “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens;”
- Prov. 8:22-31 [wisdom speaking]:

²² The LORD created me at the beginning^[a] of his work,^[b]
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—

²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields,^[c]
or the world’s first bits of soil.

²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,

when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;^[d]

and I was daily his^[e] delight,
rejoicing before him always,

³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

- In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), the term *logos* is used for the “word of God” in the creation of heaven in Psalm 33:6: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.”
- But the commentaries say that we’re not to think that presence at creation means that “wisdom” was a separate being, in effect another god. Rather it is that wisdom was the mind of God.

- Then, this connection to wisdom at the beginning of the world is connected to Christ in John 1:1-5, 14-15 with the same Greek word *logos*:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")

- Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, makes the same connection between Jesus Christ and wisdom (I Cor. 1:22-24, 30): "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ... He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

Proverbs 10-22:16; Proverbs 25-29

These two groupings are also identified as being proverbs of Solomon. In the first group, most are two lines long and many present a contrast (e.g., Prov. 13:9: "The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked goes out."). The second group follows the same pattern but adds additional lines in some places. The proverbs address many topics worthy of instruction: e.g., generosity, laziness, boastfulness, trustworthiness.

Proverbs 22:17-24:22; Proverbs 24:23-34

These proverbs are identified as "sayings of the wise." They reflect the foreign influence of the wisdom movement in the book. For example, the content at the beginning of this section (ch. 22:17-23:11) parallels the content of an already-well-known Egyptian wisdom book.

Proverbs 30; Proverbs 31:1-9

These two short sections represent contributions on random topics from non-Israelite wise men who were likely to have been famous during that time period although there is no further information about them.

Proverbs 31:10-31

It is in this section that we return to the personification of wisdom as a wise woman. She is identified as a "capable wife" in verse 10 but her actions and responsibilities (she buys property, she sells her own merchandise, etc.) in the remainder of the chapter are more expansive than our

understanding/stereotype of what women were allowed to do during that time period. The description is included as the type of wife the young men should hope to have.

Where else do we see verses from Proverbs?

- In the New Testament (some examples):
 - “No, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.’” (Rom. 12:20; Prov. 25:21-22)
 - “But he gives more grace; therefore it says ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” (James 4:6; Prov. 3:34)
 - “And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—
‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him
For the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he receives.’” (Heb. 12:5-6; Prov. 3:11-12)

- In common usage, without always realizing the sayings are from Proverbs:
 - “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways and be wise.” (6:6)
 - “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (15:1)
 - “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” (16:18)
 - “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” (22:6)
 - “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.” (27:1)

Lessons from Proverbs to be read at worship in 2018:

Easter Vigil, Mar. 31 (night before Easter Sunday): Prov. 8:1-8, 19-21; Prov. 9:4b-6

Aug. 19: Prov. 9:1-6

Sept. 9: Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Sept. 16: Prov. 1:20-33

Sept. 23: Prov. 31:10-31

Assignment for March 21

Complete the two exercises on p. 89.

Read Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs or the sections of those books listed on p. 86.

Sources (the 1st-2nd were also sources for the *Psalms (90-150)* handout):

The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible

Lutheran Study Bible

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/proverbs/>