

Proverbs

Literary Genre

The Proverbs consist of a wisdom anthology of two types: extended wisdom discourses and short, pithy sayings (extended discourse and short sayings).

Authors

They were written by different authors from different time periods. The main section is ascribed to Solomon (see the outline, IOT 238).

1A. Structure (outline)

1B. Preamble 1:1-7 (introduces the main contributor and purpose)

2B. Extended discourses on wisdom 1:8-9:18 (an unusual proverb)

3B. Solomonic Proverbs (10:1-22:16; 25:1-29:27)

4B. Sayings of the wise (22:17-24:34)

This section adapts, assimilates, and/or integrates Egyptian material to the biblical worldview (Dillard, 240-241).

5B. Three Perspectives (30-33)

Skepticism, kings, and the virtuous woman

31:10-31 is about the wife of noble character. She is not necessarily home bound (16, 18). She is giving (20, note the parallelism, both opening her hands and reaching them out to those in need). She is hard working, practical, and has a sense of humor and confidence, dignity and wisdom (25-26). Her ultimate resource is that she fears the Lord (30b).

Solomonic Proverbs (10:1-22:16; 25:1-29:27)

The form is biola, short, two-phrased parallel lines with most in antithetical parallelism (15:28; IOT 239). They cannot be absorbed all at once for their sheer number, separateness, and the extensive use of metaphor and simile. So they call for individualized and prolonged reflection. Let's make some observations about Proverbs 10:18-21.

1) The fool (18b), the opposite of the wise (19b) is described as a liar (18a). Thus, the wise restrain themselves from lying and slander.

2) How is the inner attitude concealed at the same time that it is revealed (concealed - in the lying & revealed in the form of lying, outward slander).

3) In v. 19 how do we discover that wisdom is not solely or primarily an intellectual thing? Opposite of sin is wisdom, moral righteousness.

4) What is wrong with many words (v. 19, the number, that people talk too much)? More specifically, the wrong is in the lack of self-discipline (holding the tongue, restraining the lips is wise).

5) In v. 20, note the mix of values in relation to the inner man and his outward acts.

Outward - 20a (tongue of the righteous is disciplined/restrained and does not lie and slander), therefore it is like choice silver (of great worth, valuable).

Inner man - 20b (heart of wicked that is filled with hatred and that manifests undisciplined, lying, etc.) is of little value.

6) Fruit and consequence, v. 21. Here being righteous contrasts with the fool; thus the righteous are wise and fools are unrighteous.

Outer (lips) vs. inner (judgment) yields life to many vs. death.

2A. Theme

The theme: to be wise is to be intelligent, practical, and righteous in your conduct before God. It directs us in how to please God. We learn how to acquire a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair (1:3) rooted in understanding (1:2).

So, it is not simply good practical advice for successful survival on life's pathway. It is concerned with godly living (wisdom is godliness or God-like-ness).

Secularism?

The proverbs appear to give guiding principles of survival with little mention of God, covenant or redemption. Is it therefore a secular book? (cf. LaSor 553; most of the proverbs are not related directly to Israel's faith but are based on practical observations of everyday life; "a son who gathers in summer is prudent, but a son who sleeps in harvest brings shame," 10:5).

3A. The preamble (1.1-6)

The preamble gives the purpose of the book, which is to impart wisdom, to guide young men as they seek their way in the real world (IOT 238). *Mutatis mutandis*, it is a guide to young women as well (ch. 31).

1.7 gives the foundational attitude for all wisdom, the fear of God. Therefore, relationship to God is key to ethics since to be wise means to be ethical (IOT 238). Those who are unethical dispise wisdom and discipline. Fear involves awe, commitment to learning, and determination to please God in all areas of life (verses for each? 1:7 with 3:5-8). But the emphasis is on the righteous life that is to be lived by God's people in light of the covenant keeping action of God (cf. 16:4 w/ Job 42:2 and Ps. 33:10-11)

4A. Interpretation

Two helpful hints should be kept in mind as we read the proverbs for understanding.

1B. We must avoid the Absolutizing Pitfall

The Proverbs are not absolute divine promises for the here and now (the immediate place and time?), but true observations that time will bear out (IOT 244).

It is misleading to take them as "magical sayings which always and automatically bring results" (LaSor 558).

They are generalizations that are stated as absolutes in their literary form. Thus, "they are meant to be applied in specific situations and not indiscriminately. Knowing the right time to use a proverb was part of being wise" (LaSor 557).

The principles are applied like hitting a tennis ball; it all depends on where the opponent is at the moment (see answering a fool, 26:4-5; 9:7-9, IOT 244; cf. Paul on the need of the moment, Eph 4.29).

At bottom, we must see the proverbs as general rules that have exceptions; the reason is the sovereignty of God. God is at work; the general rules hold up but He is free in His working, he is not bound to these rules. The mechanical view is countered by Job (blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience is a general way of God's working that will be ultimately manifested in the final judgment, but blessings and cursings are not distributed in an automatic way).

God is sovereign, a balancing point in Proverbs. God is spoken of as Yahweh (1:7), the self-existing God of the covenant who works out his purposes in the individual lives of the wise. He tries the heart (17:3). He works out His "sovereign surprises" (LaSor 558) in our life journey (16:4, 9, 33; v. 1 is strong; 21:1, 30-31; 22:12; all these acts of God are not automatic but matters of God's free choice). Thus, the Proverbial guidance for conduct is to be applied thus: 1) as general principles not absolutes, 2) at the right time and times change, 3) with recognition of the free actions of God that serve His time table of covenant realization in history.

Wisdom looks at wealth (a case in point)

30:8-9 with 28:20 (a faithful man will be rightly blessed). But even this rich blessing is qualified by the prayer for only daily bread with neither poverty nor riches (30:8,9; this seems to be the prayer of the faithful man who feels tempted toward independence from God).

23:4-5, do not wear yourself out to get rich!

These principles balance each other off.

A good summary is this: God will economically prosper you who are faithful (wise and ethical) according to how it serves His glory and your good in the outworking of His purposes in history (Note how the plans of men fail but God's stand, 16:1-9; 21:31; LaSor 558; cf. the promise "ask and it shall be given to you" is qualified by ask according to God's will; His will according to His sovereign purposes is the balancing point).

On 22:6 and training children in the way of the Lord

Is Bridges correct when he says: "If then the promise is not fulfilled, it is because the duty is not performed" (Proverbs 405)? Would it not be better to read this as a general principle summarizing the usual workings of God through the family? But it is not an absolute; we must take up our duty trusting God but also submitting to His sovereign will (Jesus does bring a sword that divides the family, Matt. 10:34-36; and He also saves households, Acts 16:31-34).

2B. We must use the Hermeneutical Grid

We must read the entire book through the hermeneutical grid of chapters 1-9. Long sections guide us in reading the short one verse proverbs.

Especially central is the analogy of two women in chapter 9, Wisdom and Folly. The reader is part of the extended metaphor and imagined to be a young man walking along the path of life. As he travels, he hears the two voices, vying for his attention (9:4, 16).

Wisdom invites to an education in relationship with God and stands for God himself. True nourishment derives from the fear of the Lord (v. 10). Folly stands for idol worship in the place of God, it describes those who are undisciplined and without knowledge (v. 13).

Note how theological the short sayings become in this context (IOT 243-244 for examples). On 10:1, "If children bring joy to their parents, then they are wise. In the language of Proverbs 9, they have shown by their behavior that they have embraced wisdom, which means they have committed themselves to Yahweh. On the other hand, if children bring grief to their parents, then by their behavior they have shown their allegiance to Dame Folly" (IOT 243- 244). The choice is between life and death (3:18; 9:18), between God and the creature (cf. Romans 1).

5A. The message for us

1) We are called to a thoughtful righteousness; to be wise and discerning in all of life. LaSor takes the proverbs as a commentary on the law of love (by godly living with others before God; 559).

2) Where shall we as NT saints go for wisdom with the book of Proverbs in our hands? We must go to the one who is greater than Solomon (Matt. 12:42). Jesus revealed the wisdom of God in his teaching, in his very method and in the contents he spoke. He taught by parable which is the Greek for the Hebrew masal, a proverb. According to Matthew 13, His parables reveal and conceal and thus call for a seeking and meditative faith to be understood (10-11).

He revealed the wisdom of God in his actions (Matt. 12:19, His defense to the Pharisees was his conduct).

In life and death, Jesus is the wisdom of God as a treasure (1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3). To adjust a hymn, "see from his head, his hands, his crown, love and wisdom flow mingled down.

Thus, the book of Proverbs directs us to the wisdom that is found in Christ and that is to be displayed in us in a very practical and loving godliness.

Jesus informs us as to who is wise (Matt. 5-7; 7:25-27).

We must face the same question, will we dine with wisdom or with folly (Jesus or the creation; autonomy or theonomy).

For NT application see how wisdom is applied in the Sermon on the mount: in poverty of spirit, with hunger and thirst for righteousness that is defined by the law in its true spirit and intent, keep and teach others. Then you are wise with your life founded on the rock that will stand the storms of life.