

The Book of Proverbs

An Introduction

The Biblical Book of Proverbs¹ is a marvelous collection of wise sayings and instructions for living a useful and effective life. The collection forms part of the larger group of biblical writings known as wisdom literature or “The Writings.” This literature gives instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life. Proverbial wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements; but speculative wisdom, such as Ecclesiastes or Job, uses lengthy monologues & dialogues to probe the meaning of life, the problem of good and evil, and the relationship between God and people.

There were many proverbial lists in the ancient world. But even though the collections share some of the same interests, the biblical material is unique in its prerequisite of a personal faith in a personal God. The success of wisdom did not simply require a compliance with wise instructions but trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord (1:7; 3:5-6; 9:10), who created everything and governs both the world of nature and human history (3:19-20; 16:4; 21:1). The book has the form of instruction from a royal father preparing his son to replace him in court.

The book of Proverbs applies to human problems and relationships in general and can be characterized in four ways:

- 1) The focus is on individual behavior, setting forward the qualities needed and dangers to be avoided in living successfully in the world before God.
- 2) Applicable to all people anywhere at anytime
- 3) Based on faith & trust in God, authority, traditional values and teachings handed down by mature teachers.
- 4) Very practical, stating that virtue leads generally to prosperity & well-being, while vice leads to poverty and disaster.

¹ These notes are excerpted and adapted from “The Expositor’s Bible Commentary”.

Authorship: The author of most of the book of Proverbs was Solomon (1:1, 10:1, 25:1). He was a wise man, who both wrote and collected wise sayings (22:17-24:34). Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1) wrote a chapter each.

Literary form: The writer of proverbs uses a literary form called “parallelism” to convey individual truths. Some of the more common forms of parallelism are as follows:

Synonymous parallelism: expresses one idea in parallel but slightly different expressions:

“A fool’s mouth is his undoing, / and his lips are a snare to his soul” (18:7).

Antithetical parallelism the second line contrasts with the first. This is the most common type of parallelism in the book; in 12:5 it sets before the reader the choice between the wise and profitable way and the foolish and disastrous way.:

“The plans of the righteous are just, / but the advice of the wicked is deceitful” (12:5).

Emblematic parallelism uses a figurative illustration as one of the parallel units:

“As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, / so is a slug-gard to those who send him” (10:26).

Synthetic parallelism. This is used for passages where the second line amplifies the first in some way:

“The LORD works out everything for his own ends-- / even the wicked for a day of disaster” (16:4).

Formal parallelism, where the second line simply completes the idea begun in the first. One part may contain the subject and the second the predicate (15:31); the first line may state a condition and the second its consequences (16:7), its cause (16:12), or its purpose (15:24); and one part may state a preferred value or course over the other:

“Better a little with the fear of the LORD / than great wealth with turmoil” (15:16).

Proverbs are designed to teach:

1. Using imperatives or prohibitions (16:3; 23:9)
2. Observing traits and actions to be followed or avoided (14:31)
3. Telling an example story (7:6-23)
4. Making a wisdom speech (8:1-36)
5. Developing numerical sayings (6:16-19)

Often, but not always, the reason for the instruction is given:

“Listen to advice and accept instruction: / and in the end you will be wise” (19:20)

General Outline for Proverbs

1. Introduction to wisdom versus folly
 - a. Wisdom is portrayed in female terminology calling out to the young man (1:20)
 - b. Folly is portrayed as an adulteress wooing a young man away from wisdom (9:13)
2. First collection of Solomon’s Proverbs (10:1-22:16)
3. Second collection of Solomon’s Proverbs (22:17-24:22)
4. Third collection of Solomon’s Proverbs (25-29)
Collected by Hezekiah
5. Augur’s Proverbs (30)
6. Lemuel’s Proverbs (31)

Four main kinds of people that are contrasted in Proverbs:



Simple (1:22, 14:15) – lacks wisdom, simply does not know it and has not learned it. Someone who lacks the capacity for wise decisions.



Fool (1:7, 22, 3:25) – has the capacity for wisdom, but consistently chooses that which is not wise. Rejects wisdom without malice.



Scoffer (1:22, 13:1) – mocks wisdom and those who are wise. Rejects wisdom with malice.



Wise (1:5, 10:8) – has capacity for wisdom and makes wise choices.

Sluggard (6:6, 10:26) – A minor character in Proverbs: one who may know wisdom, but is too lazy to make the wise decisions.