



## Wisdom Literature

### Proverbial Wisdom

The Book of Proverbs is made up of seven distinct collections:

1:1–9:18: The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

10:1–22:16: The proverbs of Solomon.

22:17–24:22: The words of the wise.

24:23–34: These also belong to the wise.

25:1–29:17: Other proverbs of Solomon that the men of Hezekiah collected.

30:1–14: The words of Agur, son of Jakeh.

31:1–9: The words of King Lemuel, with which his mother instructed him.

The numerical sayings in 30:15-33 and the poem on the capable woman also appear to be distinct units.

These units appear in different order in the Greek translation (LXX), where the sequence is: 22:17–24:22; 30:1-14; 24:23-34; 30:15-33; 31:1-9; 25:1–29:27; 31:10-31. There are also several additional verses in the LXX. The fact that the order varies supports the view that the units were originally independent.

The proverbial core of the book is found in chapters 10–29. Chapters 1–9 contain more developed instructions and more general reflections on the nature of wisdom. Chapters 30–31 contain miscellaneous additions to the book, including the sayings of two individuals who are otherwise unknown and are not evidently Israelites (Agur and Lemuel). The proverbs in chapters 25-29 are said to have been copied by “the men of Hezekiah.” Those in 22:17-24:22 are modelled on a section of the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope.

Chapters 10-31, the main body of Proverbs, contains short sayings. In some cases, these may have originated as traditional proverbs. In others, they represent the advice of the sages who compiled the collection.

## The Nature of Proverbial Wisdom

Proverbs are short, pithy, sayings, that incorporate time-tested insights. They are meant to be used contextually. So, for example, the prophet Ezekiel cites a proverb that was popular at the time of the Babylonian Exile: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezek 18:2). The saying is a typical proverb, insofar as it cites a highly specific instance that has analogical implications. In this case, the implication is that the people of Judah at the time of the Exile were suffering for the sins of their fathers. Ezekiel cites the proverb to deny its relevance. But this is how proverbs are meant to be used: single proverbs cited in a context where they are apt. Properly used, proverbs can be witty and entertaining (e.g., “Like cloud and winds but no rain is one who boasts of a gift never given”; Prov 25:14). Collections of proverbs are sources from which they can be cited. To try to read the collection through would be a stultifying and pointless exercise.

Perhaps the most fundamental objective of proverbial wisdom is simply to make observations. Several sayings have the character of simple propositional statements. “Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up” (Prov 12:25). “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (13:12). The numerical sayings in chapter 30 are likewise attempts to observe and categorize phenomena. Four things are small but exceedingly wise (ants, badgers, locusts, the lizard). Four are stately in their gait (the lion, the rooster, the he-goat, and the king). This latter kind of observation is related to riddles: Name four things that are small and wise, or what do these four things have in common? How is a king like a rooster? There is, of course, also an element of humor in noting the similarity between his majesty and the farmyard fowl.

Observational sayings implicitly appeal to experience. This appeal is only rarely made explicit (e.g., Proverbs 24:30-34: “I passed by the field of one who was lazy. . . .”). In most cases, these observations were passed on from father to son, or from teacher to student, and accepted on the authority of tradition. Qoheleth was exceptional in attempting to verify traditional wisdom for himself. Observations are often quite tendentious. They may attempt to preempt discussion by stating that something is simply the case, when it may not be so obvious. Ps 37:25 claims: “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.” Either the psalmist had not looked very far, or he simply assumed that anyone whose children were begging bread was not righteous. Many assertions in Proverbs also are debatable. “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (11:4; cf. 11:8). But none of these observations claims to derive from revelation or any kind of divine authority. This is human knowledge, and open to verification and dispute. It can also be insightful, humorous, and on target. See, for example, the description of the drunkard in 23:29-35.

The observations of traditional wisdom are extended by the use of analogies. Again, comparisons can be tendentious and provide opportunities for biting humor. “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without good sense” (11:22). “Like clouds and wind without rain is one who boasts of gift never given” (25:14). “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool that reverts to his folly” (26:11).

Another important way in which things are linked together is the chain of cause and effect. “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling” (26:27). Drunkenness leads to “wounds without cause” and “redness of eyes” (23:29). Laziness and idleness lead to poverty (24:30-34). The connection between act and consequence is crucial to the ethics of proverbial wisdom. Virtue is not recommended as an end in itself. Righteousness is ultimately the most profitable course of action. Herein lies the main problem of wisdom ethics, since the profitability of righteousness is not always in evidence. This problem is treated at length in the book of Job.

The ethical teaching of Proverbs is highly pragmatic. This literature was designed to help the student succeed in life. It was not narrowly religious. Proverbs 23:1-8 (in the section modeled on the Instruction of Amenemope) gives advice on table manners if one is invited to eat with a ruler. There is scarcely a moral issue involved here, but social behavior could have a huge impact on the career of a scribe. Concern for practical results informs the advice of the sages on ethical issues. Even though it is good to help one’s neighbor, it is folly to go surety for the debt of another: “If you have nothing with which to pay, why should your bed be taken from under you?” (22:27). A bribe “is like a magic stone in the eyes of those who give it; wherever they turn they prosper” (17:8; cf. 18:16). Advisers to kings and rulers were supposed to be “wise,” and their wisdom was no more preoccupied with morality than is the case with political advisers in the modern world. But the opportunism of the wise in the book of Proverbs is always limited by “the fear of the Lord.”

We also find moments of idealism in Proverbs, when the conduct recommended cannot easily be identified with self-interest, e.g., concern for the poor. There is some tension within Proverbs on this subject. On the one hand, there is a tendency to blame the poor for their condition and to assume that poverty is the result of laziness (10:4; 13:18). Yet Proverbs also warns frequently against oppressing the poor. This is one of the few occasions where Proverbs appeals to YHWH. “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him” (14:31). “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full” (19:17; cf. 22:22-23). We find a similar concern in the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope: “Beware of robbing a wretch, of attacking a cripple; don’t stretch out your hand to touch an old man. . . . He who does evil, the shore rejects him, the floodwater carries him away” (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2:150). The idea that justice required the protection of the needy was recognized throughout the ancient Near East from very early times.

The tension between pragmatism and idealism in Proverbs sometimes results in contradictory advice (contrast Prov 24:11 and 26:17, and 17:23 and 21:14 on bribery). It is of the essence of the wisdom literature, however, that advice that is right for one situation may be wrong for another. As Qoheleth will say, there is a time for everything. Proverbs 26:4-5 juxtaposes two contradictory sayings: “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” Wisdom is not a matter of knowing a stock of universal truths. It is a matter of knowing the right response on a specific occasion. “To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in

season, how good it is!" (15:23). Conversely, a proverb in the mouth of a fool is said to hang limp like the legs of a cripple (26:7).

There is also some tension in Proverbs between the pragmatic, hardheaded wisdom that we have considered and a moralizing tendency that appears in other sayings. Several such sayings appear in chapter 10. "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked" (10:3; cf. 10:6. 9). The moralizing tendency is often thought to represent a later stage in the wisdom tradition.

The Deity functions in the wisdom literature primarily in two ways. First, God guarantees the cosmic order, which ensures that the chain of cause and effect takes its course. "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good" (15:3). Proverbs has no place for miraculous interventions in history, nor does it encourage prayer for extraordinary deliverance. The role of the deity in this kind of universe has been compared to that of a midwife. God sees to it that nature takes its course. Second, God is encountered in human affairs as the power that limits human capability. "The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (16:1; cf. 27:1). Hence, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, an attitude of humility and reverence that recognizes our dependent status as creatures.

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