

Introduction to the Proverbs

Background and Foreground

The *Book of Proverbs* belongs to that portion of the Old Testament we refer to as the Poetic Books or the Wisdom Books. They were collected over a period of some 150 years from 900–750 B.C.: from the time of King Solomon to that of King Hezekiah. They were originally used as instruction for those entering the service of the king, but are at home in all the corners of everyday life. The proverbs themselves are short and concise statements in the place of many words—that they may be readily recalled when needed. After almost 3000 years, they still serve as good advice for navigating the storms of life.

Resources **Alden, Robert L.** Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice. **Garrett, Duane A.** NAC Vol. 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (along with Waltke, one of the best regarding discovering the structure of the collections). **Fox, Michael V.** Anchor Bible: Proverbs 1-9. **Keil and Delitzsch.** Commentary on the OT Vol. 6: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon. **Kidner, Derek.** The Proverbs. **Kitchen, K. A.** The Bible and Its World (see especially pp. 106-107, “Solomon the Sage”). **Kitchen, K. A.** On the Reliability of the OT (see especially pp. 134-136, “Cultural Aspects”). **Longman, Tremper, III.** Baker Commentary on the OT Wisdom and Psalms: Proverbs. **Murphy, Roland E.** FOTL Vol. 13: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. **Murphy, Roland E.** WBC Vol. 22: Proverbs. **Ross, Allen P.** Expositors Vol. 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. **Van Leeuwen, Raymond C.** NIB Vol. 5: Introduction to Wisdom Literature; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs; Book of Wisdom; Sirach. **von Rad, Gerhard.** Wisdom in Israel. **Waltke, Bruce K.** NICOT: Book of Proverbs (2 vol; along with Garrett, one of the best regarding discovering the structure of the collections). **Walton, John H.** Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context, ch. 7: “Wisdom Literature” (esp. re: Sayings of Amenemope). **Westermann, Claus.** Roots of Wisdom.

Wisdom Literature

The *Book of Proverbs* belongs to that portion of the Old Testament we refer to as the Poetic Books or the Wisdom Books.

- The entire Bible contains wisdom, but we are referring here to a genre called “wisdom literature.”
 - ◆ E.g., the Old Testament books of Job (wisdom regarding suffering), Ecclesiastes (wisdom regarding the meaning of life), and Song of Solomon (wisdom regarding romantic love).
 - ◆ Many psalms fall into the wisdom genre.
 - ◆ In the New Testament Christ’s Sermon on the Mount and the epistle of James are heavily influenced by the wisdom genre.
- This wisdom **keeps our Bible balanced**.
 - ◆ Wisdom books and passages focus on practical matters about the way life is ordered.
 - ◆ They **guard against a false division: *the sacred v. the profane***
 - ◆ ...from treating religion as a private affair.
- This is **not** to say that the Book of Proverbs is **anti-religious**.
 - ◆ The ***wise and the fool*** are also the ***righteous and the wicked***.
 - ◆ “Yahweh”—is used 84 times (proportional to Deuteronomy).
 - ◆ The **“fear of the LORD”** is a dominant, central theme of Proverbs and other wisdom literature. The *fear of the LORD*, which is the beginning of wisdom, is about trusting the One behind the order and rhythms of life. The fear of living out of touch with him and his Word draws us into relationship with God.
 - ◆ All wisdom is ultimately **“Torah-based wisdom”**—certainly the wisdom of Solomon is presented as “Torah-based.”

Collection and Outline

They were collected over a period of some 150 years from 900–750 B.C.: from the time of King Solomon to that of King Hezekiah.

- Solomon, living in “the fear of the Lord,” knowing he was entrusted with the responsibility to be the guardian of God’s Word, both authored and collected the major portions of Proverbs.
- Others, e.g., the “men in the time of Hezekiah” (25.1) contributed to their final form.
- The appendix includes additional collections.
- The basic structure of *Proverbs* is found in its **eight headings** (1.1a, 10.1a, 22.17a, 24.23a, 25.1, 30.1a, 31.1, and 31.10), its prologue (1.1-7), and its shifts in literary form. The prologue sets this section apart from the odes that follow. A marked change in literary form occurs with the longer odes of 1.8–9.18. An appendix of three additional collections concludes the book. Based on these observations, most would recognize the following basic structure after reading the book:^a

Prologue: The purpose of proverbs (1.1-7)

“The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:” (1.1a)

A. Odes on the value of wisdom (1.8–9.18)

B. Collections of proverbs (10.1–29.27)

1. Solomon I: Collection of Solomon’s proverbs (10.1–22.16)

“The proverbs of Solomon....” (10.1a)

2. The Sayings of the Wise (22.17–24.34)

a. Collection of thirty sayings (22.17–24.22)

“Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise....” (22.17a)

b. Collection of four sayings (24.23-34)

“These also are sayings of the wise.” (24.23a)

3. Solomon II: Collection of Solomon’s proverbs at the time of Hezekiah (25.1–29.27)

“These are also the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed.” (25.1)

Appendix: Additional collections of proverbs (30.1–31.31)

1. The words of Agur (30.1-33)

“The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle.” (30.1a)

2. The words of Lemuel (31.1-9)

“The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him.” (31.1)

3. The excellent wife (31.10-31)

“An excellent wife, who can find?” (31.10)

^a See also ncBc’s “The Structure and Content of Proverbs” (BcResources.net).

Original Use

The collections of proverbs were originally used as instruction for those entering the service of the king, but are at home in all the corners of everyday life.

Instruction for those entering the service of the king

- The use of “wisdom” was not restricted to the realm of the religious.
 - ◆ It was very common; a part of the **folk wisdom**—gathered by wise men because it has stood the test of time.
 - ◆ Especially in **Egypt** (compare *maat*), but throughout the ANE (Mesopotamian, Hittite).
 - ◆ Compare **Daniel**: the nobles, advisors, and wise men
- Wisdom was part of the political language of the time (compare use of difficult international words); part of an international conversation.
 - ◆ At home in **the palace school** where the purpose was to meet the **demands of a well-trained civil service**.
 - ◆ **High officials**, nearing the end of their lives, **passed on their wisdom** to the sons that would follow.
 - ◆ The students challenged each other to **contests** involving riddles and subtle insults.
 - ◆ Revealed **political acumen**: international diplomats needed the sharpness of mind to make quick and accurate judgments about people and situations.
- **Solomon** conducted such a “school” and had an international reputation for such wisdom:
 - ◆ Compare 1Kgs 4—there was no obvious right and wrong.
 - ◆ He knew it was absolutely **impossible to administer justice without this approach** to truth; we encounter all kinds of **situations without precedent**.

At home in everyday life

- After the exile, this tradition took the form of a sage school.
 - ◆ The **focus moved** from wisdom for a successful kingdom...
 - ◆ ...to wisdom for a successful life
- So this wisdom is at home...
 - ◆ in the **palace** (re: pleasing the king; not angering him)
 - ◆ in the **courts** (re: justice)
 - ◆ in the **temple** (guarding against religiousness”)
 - ◆ in the **marketplace** (“don’t cheat with the scales”)
 - ◆ in the **community**
 - ◆ in the **home** (e.g., the nagging wife or the rebellious child)

Form and Interpretation

The proverbs themselves are short and concise statements in the place of many words—that they may be readily recalled when needed.

We call them “proverbs” (compare Heb., *mashal*)

- We use the word “proverb” to translate the Hebrew word *mashal* (to influence).
- The translation “proverb” is appropriate: “pro” (before, compare in place of) + “verb” (words).
- Some definitions used by others:
 - ◆ “Timeless teaching for everyday living” or “timeless truth based on everyday experiences” (“timeless” implies that a setting is not critical)
 - ◆ “A rich storehouse of short sentences drawn from long experiences”
 - ◆ “Lessons on how to have a less problematic life”
- Proverbs are **comparisons**
 - ◆ Comparisons that reveal **the divine order of life**.
 - ◆ A wise person’s reflections, observations on **the way things are**.
 - ◆ But the Proverbs have few imperatives.
 - ◆ They call us to **check it out** and to **figure it out**.
 - ◆ The **big question** is always: “**Is this wisdom or folly?**” You will have a useful and effective life only if you allow yourself to be trained to answer this question.
- E.g., in English: “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” “All is not gold that glitters.” “A penny saved is a penny earned.” “A stitch in time saves nine.”
- Designed **for memory and easy recall**; for **passing on** to others.
- Actually **many forms**:
 - ◆ Saying
 - ◆ Admonition
 - ◆ Numerical Saying
 - ◆ Rhetorical Question
 - ◆ Wisdom Poem
 - ◆ Exhortation (e.g. by “Wisdom”)
 - ◆ Appeal (e.g. by “Wisdom”)
 - ◆ Controversy Speech or Disputation
 - ◆ Example Story
 - ◆ Confession or Reflection
 - ◆ Riddle
 - ◆ Allegory
 - ◆ Didactic Narrative

The proverbs use a variety of poetic devices

Poetic patterns

- Monocolon
- Bicolon
- Tricolon
- Quatrain
- Pentad
- Hexad
- Larger Units, more complex

Parallelism

Parallelism refers to the intentional pairing of lines (couplets, triads, quatrains, etc.) to achieve a combined effect, greater than the meaning of each line in isolation. There are two primary types of parallelism.^b

- **Antithetical:** *Contrast* is the key idea—the second line is set in opposition and further exposes the folly (compare *merismus*).
- **Synthetic:** *Completion* is the key idea—the second line supplements the first by taking the thought a step further.

Collection indicators and mnemonic aids

- The parallelism extends to larger poetic units. These devices serve as collection indicators. They also aided memorization.
- Parallel Collections (e.g., ABAB, and more complex)
- Chiastic Collections (ABBA, ABCDDCBA – compare 14.8-15)
- Catchword Collections (e.g., 15.15-17)
- Thematic Collections
- Inclusio (Sandwich) Collections (e.g., 11.23-27 or 14.18-24 – AABCCBA)
- Janus (e.g., a transitional verse, looking back and forward)

Other poetic devices

- Repetition
- Alliteration
- Assonance
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Paronomasia (Play on words)

Rhyme

Rhyming in Hebrew is primarily via the repetition of suffixes (e.g., conjugational endings)

^b Traditionally there was a third category: synonymous, in which comparison was the key idea. The second line repeats the thought of the first in an only somewhat altered form. Today it is recognized that most of what was formerly called synonymous is actually synthetic.

Interpreting Proverbs

1. Proverbs come at us from every angle—the way life comes at us

- Anthologies, like Proverbs, are typical of ANE wisdom literature.
- We are **not** looking for a **closely-knit argument**—let the images and words strike you.
- **Avoid artificial** arrangements. Note how the **use of inclusio** may assist in the recreation of a real-life setting for individual proverbs; seemingly independent issues are **interwoven in real life** (all of life is connected). **Enjoy finding images and parallels**; the meaning is found in the key thought of the couplet, influenced by the broader themes of its sections (cf. *inclusio*, etc.).

Identify the parallelism, inclusio, and other collection indicators

2. Proverbs are maxims—not promises

- They serve **as a guidebook** for how life works, **not as a rulebook** for what to do (right and wrong). They reveal universal truth re: the divine order; we live in a world of probabilities. The young, without experience (cf. “naïve”), will have difficulty grasping. The sage hates those who try to reduce life to right and wrong.
- We are dealing with probabilities—why strive to be the exception?

Articulate the maxim

3. Proverbs focus on natural consequences—not divine rewards and punishments

- They give **clues to the divine order** of life—the **key is to live in harmony** with its rhythms. God ordered life in a way to help us see our need for salvation (cf. Ecclesiastes). Chaotic, self-destructive forces oppose this divine order. Those who obey the divine order find the rhythm of life and enjoy the consequences. Focusing on “right vs. wrong” will hinder us from evaluating attitudes and choices in terms of their ends.
- This is not to say that the Book of Proverbs is anti-religious. The *fear of the LORD*, which is the beginning of wisdom, is about trusting the One behind the order and rhythms of life.

Note the consequences

4. Proverbs speak for themselves—there is no need to defend them

- Proverbs are the **inspired and authoritative Word of God**, gathered with skill and care by the wisest men of their time, those with a “fear of the LORD.” There is no need to defend individual proverbs or to argue the exceptions.
- King Solomon spoke as God’s anointed king. Israel was to take his words seriously. These words call us to trust the One behind the order rather than the order itself.
- His words were studied by the leading statesmen of the day.

Accept their authority

5. Proverbs are designed to stick—for ready use

- They are **easily remembered, compact, and intelligible**. The wise person is not overly cautious. There is often no time to stop and reflect before a decision. Proverbs were designed to **allow quick recall for instinctive actions**. The wise person develops an instinct, the skill of being able to act wisely on the spot.
- The proverbs are designed for passing these skills to others in the context of everyday life.

Visualize potential applications

Present Use

After almost 3000 years, they still serve as good advice for navigating the storms of life.

- The inspired proverbs do not cover the full gamut of wisdom.
- We grow in wisdom as we go through life.
- The following is a suggested approach for using Proverbs in your devotions.

Preparing for the Proverbs

1 Prepare to be challenged.

- re: your desire to work for the interests of the king.
- re: your value for wisdom/learning.
- re: how much you really know of any significance.
- re: specific, practical areas of your life (long ignored)

... especially in these areas:

1. Wise tongue (the influential deal in a few, well-chosen words)
2. Stable character
3. Generous spirit
4. Compassionate heart

2 Prepare to work hard and to wait long.

- This is rich food, to be meditated on slowly.
- Recreate the "story" of each proverb.
- There are some hard sayings (do not get too bogged down)
- Practice on small selections.

3 Prepare to find answers—or, think differently about what you do not know.

- In the AM:
 - Keep a journal
 - Talk openly with God
 - Make a 3x5
 - Record that which will change your life
- After breakfast:
 - Read in one of the more basic commentaries (e.g., Kidner, Expositors)
- In the PM:
 - Evaluate your day by what you wrote in the AM
 - Ask: what would you like to do differently tomorrow?

Learning vs. Not Learning
Present Reality

	<i>When I'm learning, I...</i>	<i>When I'm not learning, I...</i>
<i>1:7</i>	Fear the Lord	Despise wisdom and instruction
<i>1:22</i>		Love looking at life superficially, delight in scoffing, and hate knowledge
<i>3:11-12</i>	View discipline and reproof as a sign of God's love	Reject God's discipline, loathe God's reproof
<i>6:23</i>	Accept reproof as a way to life (vs. death)	
<i>9:7-8</i>	Love the one reproving me	Dishonor, insult, and hate the one reproving me
<i>12:1</i>	Show that I love knowledge	Show that I am stupid
<i>12:15</i>	Show that I am wise by listening to counsel	Always think my own way is right
<i>13:14</i>	View the teaching of the wise as the way to experience life and to avoid destroying myself	
<i>14:8</i>	Work at understanding my motives and behavior	Deceive myself about my motives and behavior
<i>15:12</i>		Hate the one who reproves me; avoid the wise
<i>15:32</i>	Acquire understanding	Despise myself
<i>17:10</i>	Let a rebuke go deep	
<i>18:2</i>		Delight only in expressing my own opinions
<i>25:12</i>	Value the one reproving me	
<i>27:5</i>	Value open rebuke as a sign of love	
<i>27:9</i>	Love getting a friends' counsel	

<i>Learning vs. Not Learning</i>	
Future Consequences	
<i>If I learn, I will...</i>	<i>If I don't learn, I will...</i>
1:23 Become wise	
1:24-27	Have a life of calamity, dread, distress, and anguish
1:28-30	Finally call for wisdom, but fail to get it
1:31	Suffer the consequences of going my own way
1:32	Be destroyed by feeling self-satisfied and always wanting my own way
1:33 Live securely, at ease, without fear	
2:5 Learn to know God and to live God's way	
2:9 Know what is right before God and what to do	
2:10 Enjoy my knowledge	
2:11 Be protected by understanding and good judgment	
3:2 Gain added years of life	
3:13-14 Receive benefits beyond measure	
4:8 Gain respect and honor from others	
9:12 Reap the consequences for myself	Reap the consequences for myself
10:17 Remain within the will of God	Move outside the will of God
15:31 Spend my life surrounded by wise people	
29:1	Be headed for disaster beyond remedy

Learning

1. Involves a deep, spiritual choice (one rooted in the fear of the Lord)
2. Thinks in light of the ends (there are serious consequences for the choices we make)
3. Requires a wise teacher (vs. listening to fools)

Levels of Thinking

1	Recognize	Know a concept in the most basic sense—apart from remembering or understanding.
2	Memorize	Remember or recall a concept presented in the past—still short of understanding what it means.
3	Understand	Understand the meaning of a concept—and explain its meaning to others.
4	Apply	Use your understanding in skillful ways to solve problems in varying situations.
5	Analyze	Break down a concept into basic elements and understand the relationships among its parts.
6	Synthesize	Create something “new” (to you) combining the parts of this and other concepts that have been analyzed.
7	Evaluate	Judge the value of your “new” creation to accomplish a given purpose (compare Biblical idea of wisdom).

Based on Bloom's Taxonomy