

The Structure and Content of *Proverbs*

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:¹

Basic Outline

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)

¹ Some call the section of longer odes or discourses the prologue; it certainly has an introductory function. Some divide Solomon I into A and B and Solomon II into C and D (e.g., Skladny; cf. Waltke). Some do not group the two collections of “The Sayings of the Wise” under a larger heading. Some make the poem “The Excellent Wife” part of the Lemuel collection. Generally speaking, however, debate centers, not on the overall structure of the book, but on the question of structure within Solomon I (10.1–22.16) and Solomon II (25.1–29.27): are these random collections of individual proverbs, with occasional groupings, or, is there a more conscious structure within these collections? Our detailed outline assumes that there is a conscious structure within these larger collections of “individual” proverbs. It is the search for this structure that contributes to the development of wisdom.

Detailed Outline and Summary: A Preliminary² Analysis

Prologue: The purpose of proverbs (1.1-7)

Heading: “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: ...” (1.1a). A motivational prologue begins the book, summarizing the purpose and benefits of studying proverbs, and identifying the first principle of wisdom: the fear of the LORD.

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

One-third of the book of Proverbs is devoted to an introductory encouragement regarding the value of wisdom. In the form of ten odes, the father, Lady Folly, and Lady Wisdom each vie for influence over the affections of the young men in the royal court.

1. The father’s first exhortation (1.8-19)

“Avoid the fools’ enticements!” — The son is encouraged to hear his father’s instruction and not forsake his mother’s teaching (1.8-9) in order to resist the enticing offers of others to join with them in evil (1.10-14) and to avoid their tragic end (1.15-19).

2. Lady Wisdom’s first appeal (1.20-33)

“Do not reject my call!” — Lady Wisdom, the personification of objective reality, warns the gullible to listen and not reject her shouts, otherwise, she will laugh at the calamity brought about by their rejection (1.20-27). They will experience the inevitable consequences of spurning reproof and failing to fear the LORD (1.28-33).

3. The father’s second exhortation (2.1-22)

“Seek wisdom!” — Two equal sections, the first (2.1-11; note: “if you will receive... for if you cry ... if you seek ... then you will discern ... for ... then you will discern ... for ...”) focuses on the attitude to God’s Word and the resulting discernment. If the son seeks wisdom (2.1-4) then he will discern two things (2.5-11): “the fear the LORD” (2.5-8) and “righteousness,” etc. (2.9-11). The second section (2.12-22; note: “To deliver ... To deliver ... so you will walk ...”) focuses on the application of this discernment in life. The son is promised deliverance from two types of evil (2.12-19): that of the wicked man (2.12-15) and that of the strange woman (2.16-19); so delivered, he will be able to walk in the way of the good (2.20-22).

4. The father’s third exhortation (3.1-35)³

“Value wisdom!” — The father appeals to his son not to forget, but to value wisdom so he can experience “favor and good repute in the sight of God and man” (3.1-4). He gives advice to his son regarding trusting, fearing, honoring, and listening to the LORD (3.5-12). He reminds his son of the blessings and security that come from finding wisdom (3.13-26). He warns his son against mistreating neighbors and reminds him of God’s desire to bless the righteous (3.27-35).

² An exegetical study of individual proverbs in the original Hebrew will increase sensitivity to additional rhetorical devices, e.g., Hebrew word meanings, synonyms, assonance, etc. This will provide additional supports for or alterations to this preliminary outline. Additional sensitivity will, of course, also come with increased exposure to life and increased wisdom, especially as it is developed in the life of a community growing together in wisdom.

³ Some divide chapter three into multiple exhortations (cf. Murphy, *FOTL*: 3.1-12, 3.13-24, 3.25-35).

5. The father's fourth exhortation (4.1-27)⁴

"Acquire wisdom!" — The father makes an urgent appeal for the son to acquire wisdom (4.1-9), choosing between the way of wisdom and the path of the wicked, between light and darkness (4.10-19), watching over his heart, tongue, and steps with diligence (4.20-27).

6. The father's fifth exhortation (5.1-23)

"Avoid the strange woman!" — The father alerts his son to the deceptive nature of the adulteress (5.1-6), the personal cost of giving in to her (5.7-14), and the better alternative of finding satisfaction with his wife (5.15-23).

7. The father's sixth exhortation (6.1-35)⁵

"Deliver yourself from follies!" — The father calls on the son to deliver himself from various follies: financial entanglements (6.1-5), poverty-inducing sloth (6.6-11), spreading strife (6.12-19), and the evil woman (6.20-35).

8. The father's seventh exhortation (7.1-27)

"Do not be gullible regarding the strange woman!" — The father again calls on the son to welcome the warnings of Lady Wisdom regarding the adulteress (7.1-5). Lady Wisdom tells the story of a naïve person, persuaded to follow the evil woman, unaware that it will cost him his life (7.6-23). Finally, another appeal is made for the son to avoid this path which is followed by so many (7.24-27).

9. Lady Wisdom's second appeal (8.1-36)

"Find me and find life!" — Wisdom calls out at the city gates, urging the leaders to recognize her incomparable value (8.1-11). Wisdom gives those who love her both the ability to lead others with justice and the rewards that go with this ability (8.12-21). God possessed wisdom before creation and God's wisdom in creation brought about that which was just and that which was delightful (8.22-31). Therefore, find wisdom and find life; reject wisdom and find death (8.32-36).

10. Lady Wisdom's third and final appeal (9.1-18)

"Choose between Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly!" — Wisdom invites the naïve to her feast (9:1-6). A series of proverbs identifies what is at stake in the choice that must be made between the appeals of these ladies (9:7-12). Folly invites the naïve to her feast (9:13-18).

⁴ Some divide chapter four into multiple exhortations (cf. Murphy, *FOTL*: 4.1-9, 4.10-27).

⁵ Some divide chapter six into multiple exhortations (cf. Murphy, *FOTL*: 6.1-19, 6.20-35).

B. Collections of proverbs (10.1–29.27)

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

Heading: “The proverbs of Solomon...” (10.1a).

a. Pursuits of wealth and security; use and abuse of the tongue (10.1b-32)⁶

A frame concerning pursuits, security, and duration (10.1b-5; 10.22-32) surrounds a core of three sections regarding speech (10.6-21; cf. also 10.31-32⁷).

1) Pursuit of wealth or righteousness (10:1b-5)

An inclusio (10.1b: “wise son ... foolish son” — 10.5: “son who acts wisely ... son who acts shamefully”) frames themes related to wealth and work.

2) Use and abuse of the tongue (10.6-21)⁸

Three groupings connected by themes related to speech...

a) The tongue and outcomes (10:6-11)

An inclusio (10.6: “mouth ... violence” — 10.11: “mouth ... life ... violence”) frames themes related to the tongue and outcomes, e.g., blessed/rot, ruin, secure/fool out.

b) Covering wrong vs. spreading slander (10:12-18)

An inclusio (10.12: “hatred stirs up strife ... love covers all transgressions” — 10.18: “conceals hatred ... spreads slander”) frames themes related to the tongue, ruin, and discipline/reproof.

c) The tongue restrained and used to benefit others (10:19-21)⁹

An inclusio (10.19: “many ... lips” — 10.21 “lips ... many”) frames themes related to the value of words for others when used with discipline.

3) The duration of security and speech (10:22-32)

Unified by themes related to the enduring kind of security that God gives (vv. 22, 27) vs. the fleeting pursuits and speech of the fool.

⁶ The identification of smaller divisions within Solomon I (10.1–22.16) and Solomon II (25.1–29.27) recognizes that its individual proverbs have more than random or occasionally intentional arrangements. The redactor has consistently used inclusio, keywords, catchwords, and other rhetorical devices to place individual proverbs into larger contexts, consciously re-creating more true-to-life situations. This arrangement deliberately stretches the readers, challenging them to discover these connections, to analyze and think more deeply about how life works. Individual proverbs are best interpreted in connection with their larger context. As stated earlier, the search for these connections is a pedagogical tool in the development of wisdom.

⁷ The theme of endurance or duration connects 10.31-32 closely with 10.22-30: compare v. 31, “perverted tongue will be cut out” with v. 24, “will come upon,” v. 25, “no more” vs. “everlasting,” v. 27, “shortened,” v. 28, “perishes,” v. 29, “ruin,” and v. 30, “never be shaken ... not dwell in the land.”

⁸ The inclusio words of the three sections could be viewed simply as catchwords for a larger section on speech.

⁹ Alternatively, 10.19-32 could be viewed as a separate section, consisting of a frame that concerns speech (10.19-21 and 10.31-32) surrounding a core that addresses security/insecurity. If so, it would still show a close connection with 10.1b-18

b. Delivered from being an abomination to God (11.1-21)

An inclusio in verses (11.1, 20-21: “abomination”) creates a frame concerning the contrast between what is an “abomination” to God and what is a “delight” to God. This frame surrounds a core that concerns deliverance from death, greed, trouble, etc., via righteousness, especially in regard to financial dealings and speech: What a person seeks (11.2-8); what a person says to their neighbor, and who they listen to for guidance (11.9-14); what a person seeks (11.15-19).

c. Generous living (11.22–12.4)

An inclusio (“woman” in 11:22 and “excellent wife” in 12:4) highlights the role of the woman or wife in managing the household, in influencing whether honor comes upon her husband and the household through generous living, the theme at the core of this section (11.23–12.3).¹⁰

d. Reality vs. pretence (12.5-15)

An inclusio with the word “counsel” (12.5, 15; cf. 11.14) frames a core with the themes of listening to advice in order to really know and become wise vs. not listening, but only pretending to be someone of wealth, importance, and character.

e. Prudence and speech (12.16-23)

An inclusio (12.16: “fool’s anger is known at once ... prudent conceals honor” — 12:23: “prudent conceals knowledge ... proclaims folly”) frames a core concerning speech.

f. Diligence and speech (12.24-28)

Unified by themes of diligence vs. laziness and anxiety vs. the ability of the righteous to encourage and guide.

g. Discipline and the control of the tongue, desires, behaviors (13.1-6)

United by “discipline” and other keywords (cf. “mouth ... lips ... craves ... acts”).

h. The illusions of wealth (13.7-11)

An inclusio regarding “wealth” and additional themes emphasize that true riches are not always what they seem nor as enduring as they might seem.

i. Hope deferred (13.12-19)

An inclusio (13.12: “hope deferred ... desire fulfilled”— 13.19: “desire realized”) is part of larger chiasmic pattern (A/A’: “hope deferred ... desire fulfilled ... desire realized,” B/B’: “despises the word ... neglects discipline,” C/C’: “fountain of life ... brings healing,” etc.) with 13.14-17 at its center. The disciplined person whose hopes are realized is contrasted with the undisciplined person, who wants immediate fulfillment but finds only frustration.

j. A prosperous household (13.20–14.4)

United by themes regarding the rewards of wisdom and the destructiveness of foolishness; set in a household context (cf. “prosperity,” “inheritance,” “abundant food,” “rod ... son” in both 13.24 and 14.3, “wise woman,” and “oxen”).

¹⁰ Compare the similar emphasis on generosity and the husband’s reputation in the carefully constructed poem regarding the excellent wife (Proverbs 31.10-31).

k. Speaking truth (14.5-7)

The section is unified by themes regarding the wise vs. the mocker, and the ability to find truth and knowledge in their speech. A transitional *janus*?¹¹

l. Looking deeper (14.8-15)

A chiasmic pattern (A/A': "sensible," B/B': "sin" and "backslider," C/C': "heart," D/D': "destroyed ... death") encourages the wise and disciplined to not be deceived, but to look beyond appearances and give thought to their choices.

m. Fear of the LORD and benefit to others (14.16-27)

An inclusio (14:16-17: "cautious" is literally "fears" — 14:25-27: "fears") introduces and reinforces the themes of fear and benefit. The core (14.18-24) has a chiasmic pattern of AABCC'B'A' (AA/A': "crowned ... bow down — crown," B/B': "poor ... rich — profit ... poverty," C/C': "gracious to the poor — devise good") that also centers on the theme of benefit to the needy.

n. The success of a king and his people (14.28-35)

An inclusio (14.28: "a king's glory — 14.35: "king's favor") frames and focuses attention on the success of a king and his kingdom. The core consists of meditations inspired by the topic of leadership and themes that are of great concern to those in leadership.

o. God's commitment to righteousness (15.1–16.8)¹²

Many clear parallels connect 15:1-17 with 15:18–16:8. In order to highlight their message, Solomon may have intentionally given these two groups of proverbs central place in this first collection. The pervasive presence of God in these proverbs emphasizes the necessity of relating to God in the fear of the LORD in order to grow in wisdom and righteousness.

1). Part I (15.1-17)

Themes, many with parallels in Part II: Anger (15.1; cf. 15.18); the fear of the LORD: God's intervention maintains justice in speech (15.2-4; cf. 15.24-27); correction and guidance (15.5; cf. 15.20-23); righteousness and wealth: righteousness opens the way to wealth (15.6; cf. 15.19); religion and speech: the relationship between how someone speaks and how they approach God in their religious life (15.7-9; cf. 15.28-29); the fear of the LORD: God's administration of justice (15.10-11; cf. 15.33–16.7); correction and happiness: the cheerful person is the one open to correction (15.12-15; cf. 15.30-32); righteousness and riches: righteousness is better (15.16-17; cf. 16.8).

¹¹ Perhaps 14.5-7 belongs with the previous in a larger unit, 13.20–14.7. The clear chiasm in 14.8-15 argues against incorporating it with what follows. Waltke views 14.1-7 as a chiasmic unit, "Walking in wisdom." However, 14.3 echoes 13.24 ("rod").

¹² Udo Skladny divides Solomon's first collection at the end of chapter 15, noting the change in the proportion of antithetical proverbs from IA, 10.1–15.33 (163 of 183) to 1B, 16.1–22.16 (47 of 190; of the remaining, he classifies 52 as synonymous and 37 as synthetic). Waltke generally agrees, but makes the break after 15.29, resulting in the two subdivisions of 10.1–15.29 and 15.30–22.16.

2). Part II (15.18–16.8)

Themes, many with parallels in Part I: Anger (15.18; cf. 15.1); righteousness and wealth: righteousness opens the way to wealth (15.19; cf. 15.6); correction and guidance (15.20-23; cf. 15.5); the fear of the LORD: God’s intervention maintains justice in behavior (15.24-27; cf. 15.2-4 and 15.33–16.7); religion and speech: the relationship between how someone speaks and how they approach God in their religious life (15.28-29; cf. 15.7-9); correction and happiness: the cheerful person is the one open to correction (15.30-32; cf. 15.12-15); the fear of the LORD: God’s administration of justice (15.33–16.7; cf. 15.10-11); righteousness and riches: righteousness is better (16.8; cf. 15.16-17).

p. God’s control and his better way (16.9–17.1)

The theme of God’s sovereign control over justice continues from 15.33–16.7 (cf. 15.10-11). The theme is developed in four sections, each beginning with a clear statement of God’s involvement and ending with a “better than” statement.¹³ The first and last frame the two core sections, focusing on speech: God controls the king (16:9-15) and his way is better (16:16-19); God controls instructive speech (16:20-24) and a way that is right (16:25);¹⁴ God controls destructive speech (16:26-31) and his way is better (16:32); God controls every decision (16:33) and his way is better (17:1).¹⁵

q. Behavior and speech of a prince and friend (17.2-28)

The impact of a prince’s behavior and the grief it can bring to his parents is the theme of a frame surrounding a core focusing on love among friends vs. strife among fools.¹⁶

1) Behavior and speech of a prince (17.2-8)

An inclusio (17.2: “rule over a son” — 17.7-8: “prince”) draws attention to the son/prince in his rule. This is reinforced by other family terms: “brothers ... grandchildren ... sons ... fathers.” The focus is on behavior and speech appropriate to a prince or the inappropriate behavior and speech that can bring disgrace on a father.

2) Love among friends v. strife among fools (17.9-20)¹⁷

An inclusio (17.9: “seeks love ... separates intimate friends” — 17:17, 19-20: “friend loves ... loves strife”) introduces the main theme, reinforced by the repetition of keywords (love, strife, friend, heart/sense).

¹³ However, note what could be an inclusio with “gray head is a crown of glory” (16.31) and “grandchildren are the crown of old men” in 17.6. Compare Waltke’s section, “The Splendid Crown of Old Age through Righteousness” (16.31–17.6).

¹⁴ The “better than” formula is not used, but a comparison is made and the topic changes.

¹⁵ Or, 16.32–17.1 could be an extended “God’s way is better” section, similar to that in 16.16-19

¹⁶ Waltke notes the high number of references to the word fool and its synonyms in 17.7-28, calling these verses “A Collection of Proverbs on Fools.”

¹⁷ Verse 20 could also go with the following: it serves as a transitional janus; cf. “pervert” in v. 23.

3) Behavior and speech of a son (17.21-28)¹⁸

The repeated concern with the foolish son's response to his parents (17.21: "sires ... father ... no joy" — 17.25-26: "son ... grief ... father") again highlights themes regarding a son's perversion of justice (17.23; cf. 17.20) and the resulting grief and bitterness for father and mother.

r. Security and settling disputes (18.1-21)

An introduction sets forth the theme of the section: quarrels, divisiveness, and settling disputes. The body of the unit consists of a frame (18.4-8; 18.13-21) addressing the words, attitudes, and kinds of speech necessary to settle these disputes, and the core (18.9-12) addressing the source of true security. Only the person looking to God for security will be able to bring wisdom to bear in the settling of disputes.

1) Introduction (18.1-3)

An inclusio ("quarreling against all sound wisdom ... [showing] contempt ... scorn") highlights the quarrels, contempt, and scorn that accompany arrogance, and frames the core verse regarding the fool's lack of desire for understanding.

2) Words: refreshing or divisive? (18.4-8)

An inclusio ("words") sets the boundaries of the unit, introduced (18.4) by the theme of the positive, refreshing value of wise words. The main body of verses concerns the danger of listening to the wicked (18.5-8). They are arranged in a chiasmic pattern of ABB'A': (A/A': "partiality to the wicked ... words of a whisperer" [i.e., gossip]; B/B': "lips ... strife/snare" and "mouth ... blows/ruin").

3) Security: strength in God or in wealth? (18.9-12)

A chiasmic pattern of ABB'A': (A/A': "destroys ... destruction," B/B': "strong tower ... safe — strong city ... a high wall in his own imagination") draws the connection between the destructiveness of laziness/pride and the deeper issue of a true or false sense of security. Verse 12 is a transitional janus (cf. "destruction" in 18.9 and "heart/spirit" in 18.14-15).

4) Settling disputes in the court (18.13-21)

The transitional janus (18.12), the introduction (18.13-15), and the conclusion (18.20-21) combine to provide a frame that gives the key attitudes and kind of speech necessary to settle disputes—the theme in the core of the section (18.16-19). The introduction contrasts the spirit/heart of the fool, who does not hear, with the prudent/wise, who seek knowledge. The settling of disputes takes place in an official court setting ("before great men ... case ... cast lot ... decides between the mighty ones ... brother offended"). The conclusion addresses the power of words to produce fruit.

¹⁸ Alternatively, 17.27-28 might be part of a section on the disciplined tongue (17.27–18.4). In this case, an inclusio (17.27, 18.4: "words") draws attention to the overall thematic pattern of ABCB'C'A' (A/A: "restrains his words has knowledge ... understanding" — "words ... deep waters," B/B': "fool ... silent ... closes — only revealing his own mind," C/C': the arrogance of "quarreling against all sound wisdom ... [showing] contempt ... scorn"). The fool's contempt for wisdom is revealed by his undisciplined tongue. On this view, see Duane Garrett.

s. Household success (18.22–20.4)

The section is united by the theme of household success/failure, focusing first on the wife (18.22–19.14) and then on the lazy son (19.15–20.4).

1) The influence of the prudent wife (18.22–19.14)¹⁹

An inclusio/frame (18.22: “He who finds a wife ... from the LORD” — 19.13-14: “foolish son ... contentions of a wife ... but a prudent wife is from the LORD”) highlights the role of the wife. The core themes highlight the nature of her influence on the household: avoiding poverty, encouraging generosity, promoting friendship, avoiding false witness, and avoiding the king’s wrath upon the household.

2) The influence of the lazy son (19.15–20.4)

An inclusio and repetition of its keyword (19.15, 24, 20.4: “laziness ... sluggard”) now highlights the household’s son: his laziness, lack of discipline, and mocking bring poverty and the king’s wrath upon the household.

t. Discernment (20.5–21.3)

A frame concerning the discerning and discriminating abilities of God and the king surrounds a core that emphasizes the character of the heart. God and the king work together to discern and address harmful evil.

1) The Lord and the king discern (20.5-12)

Note the references to the “LORD” (though not as many as in 20.22–21.3). The theme that ties this group together is that the LORD judges or discerns the evil hidden in hearts, often through the one in leadership (“plans in the heart ... draws it out ... who can find ... disperses evil with his eyes ... hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both”).

2) Various negative character qualities (20.13-21)

The core consists of a list of character qualities: laziness, greed, foolish talk, religious obligation, fraud, humility, gossip and disloyalty, disrespect, and, again, greed.

3) The Lord and the king discern (20.22–21:3)

Note the repeated references to the “LORD.” Again, the LORD judges or discerns hearts, often through the one in leadership. God uses his king to discern and avenge wrong.

u. Justice and the fate of the wicked (21.4–22.5)

The theme of the fate of the wicked, introduced in the previous section, is further developed. The quarrelsome wife (21.9, 19) is also a springboard for Solomon’s meditations. Protecting evil leads to a lack of mercy and to oppression. The leader needs to address the problem with justice (love). In the following, note the repetition of the key themes.

¹⁹ Compare 11.22–12.4 and 31.10-31.

1) Fate of the wicked (21.4-8)

The section is united by themes related to the fate of the proud, hasty, deceitful, violent, and guilty. Compare the negative character qualities listed in 20.13-21.

2) The quarrelsome wife (21.9)

The theme of this section, the quarrelsome wife, will be repeated in 21.19. The meditations easily turn from her contentious character to the merciless and the need for justice, perhaps to emphasize that those under authority will quarrel against those leading them.

3) The fate of the merciless (21.10-13)

A chiasmic pattern of ABB'A' (A/A': "finds no favor ... shuts his ear," B/B': "scoffer/house of the wicked ... punished/ruin") emphasizes the opportunity to learn from the fate of the merciless: they give no mercy (21.10) and find no mercy (21.13).

4) Justice exercised with character (21.14-15)

A section united by themes that highlight justice ("gift ... bribe ... justice") and contrast the experience ("joy/terror") for the righteous and the unrighteous.

5) Fate of the wicked (21.16-18)

A section united by themes related to fate ("dead ... will become a poor man ... will not become rich ... a ransom for the righteous").

6) The quarrelsome wife (21.19)

With verse 9, forms either the ending inclusio for a subsection (21.9-19), or, if connected with 20-22, it is part of a thematic arrangement, perhaps a janus.

7) Fate of the wicked (21.20–22.5)

a) Those trying to live without discipline (21.20-26)

A section united by themes related to disciplined desires, and the discipline of the tongue.

b) Those trying to live falsely (21.27-29)

A section united by themes related to the false: false religion, false witness, and false impressions.

c) Those trying to live outside God's control (21.30–22.5)

Note the references to the "LORD" and the pattern: AABACAC. This section may deserve a separate, higher level section.

v. A child's need for training (22.6-16)

This section serves as a fitting conclusion to Solomon's first collection. The need of a child for discipline serves as the starting and ending point of Solomon's meditations. An inclusio/frame highlights the need for training (22.6: "train up a child" — 22.15: "heart of a child ... rod of discipline") and its benefits (22.7: "the rich rules over the poor" — 22.16: "will only come to poverty"). The core details these rewards.

1) The need for discipline; its reward (22.6-7)**2) The rewards detailed (22.8-14)**

A section united by themes related to benefits of discipline and wisdom, e.g.,: will avoid fruitlessness, enjoy blessings of being generous, avoid contentious surroundings, enjoy the friendship of the king and the preservation of God, and avoid the consequences of sloth and the adulteress.

3) The need for discipline; its reward (22.15-16)

2. The sayings of the wise (22.17–24.34)

The change in literary genre and the two new headings indicate a new section, sandwiched between the two collections of Solomon’s proverbs. The central location may serve to emphasize their use by the royal diplomats: the Sayings had a central role in testing for and revealing wisdom among active diplomats of the ANE; they also had a critical place in the training of the young diplomats for this task.²⁰

a. Collection of thirty sayings²¹ (22.17–24.22)

Heading: “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise...” (22.17a). Some of the challenges studying the thirty sayings are the determination of whether there are, in fact, exactly thirty sayings, where individual sayings begin and end (translations and commentators differ), and whether the individual sayings fall into intentional groups. An introduction begins the sayings, encouraging its readers to learn from what follows (cf. Proverbs 1:1-7). Following this, exactly thirty sayings can be identified, progressing from a decalogue of ten sayings that revolve around the need for restraint (#1-10 in 22.22–23.11), to nine sayings revolving around a son’s need to learn (#11-19 in 23.12–24.2), to six sayings that revolve around the need for wisdom to face challenges (#20-25 in 24.3-12), and, finally, to five sayings that revolve around the need for wisdom to avoid the fate of the wicked (#26-30 in 24.13-22). The collection as a whole begins with an introduction; after the first sub group, each additional sub group also begins with its own introductory saying.

Introduction (22.17-21)²²

1) Need for restraint (22.22–23.11)²³

Although it occurs elsewhere, the phrase “do not” occurs in 9 of the following 10 sayings and is implied in all. To be successful as a representative of the king, there is a need for restraint, the ability to discipline our desires.

#1: Exploiting the weak (22.22-23)

#2: Associating with the angry (22.24-25)

#3: Associating with the greedy (22.26-27)

#4: Theft and property (22.28)

#5: Developing skills (22.29)

#6: Restraining desires (23.1-3)

#7: Pursuit of wealth (23.4-5)

#8: Taking from the selfish (23.6-8)

²⁰ This form of wisdom collection finds parallels in other ANE royal courts. The “Thirty Sayings of the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenem-Ope,” although much longer and with significant differences, obviously belong to a similar genre.

²¹ Translations and commentators vary in their identification of the thirty sayings.

²² Some identify this prologue as the first of the thirty sayings. Waltke, for example, views this as the first saying and as the introduction to the first sub grouping of sayings (22.17–23.11). He then combines 24.10 and 24.11-12 into one saying to maintain a total of thirty.

²³ Waltke identifies 22.22–23.11 as a distinct section, “A Decalogue of Sayings About Wealth.”

#9: Speaking to a fool (23.9)**#10: Property rights (23.10-11)****2) A son's need to learn (23.12–24.2)²⁴**

Verse 12 acts as an introduction to a second section of the “sayings.” The “Sayings of Amenem-Ope” are not repeated from this point forward (evidence supporting a break at this point). The section is characterized by frequent references to “father” and “mother,” admonitions to “my son” to embrace their wisdom, and references to the “heart” as the place where this wisdom should be received.

#11: *Introduction*: Embrace discipline for yourself (23.12)²⁵**#12: Disciplining others (23.13-14)****#13: Encouraging your teachers (23.15-16)²⁶****#14: Envy v. hope (23.17-18)****#15: Association with the undisciplined (23.19-21)²⁷****#16: Encouraging your teachers (23.22-25)²⁸****#17: The treachery encouraged by the adulterous woman (23.26-28)****#18: The cycle of excessive drinking (23.29-35)****#19: Envying the wicked (24.1-2)****3) Need for wisdom to face challenges (24.3-12)**

Verses 24.3-4 begin a new section, marked by recurring references to the theme of “wisdom” introduced here. This wisdom gives strength (24.5, 10) to face various challenges that threaten to destroy a household or kingdom.

#20: *Introduction*: Wisdom builds a house of true riches (24.3-4)**#21: Wisdom gives strength for gaining victory in battles (24.5-6)****#22: Kept from having nothing valuable to share (24.7)****#23: Kept from a reputation as a schemer and scoffer (24.8-9)****#24: Strength in troubles (24.10)²⁹****#25: Able to deliver those threatened by death (24.11-12)**

²⁴ A definite break occurs between the 10th and 11th saying, but this may represent a natural flow of thought rather than a conscious construct. NASB makes no break, keeps verse 12 with vv. 10-11. D. Romheld identified this as the first of seven sayings (23.12-28) united by a common theme, “The Obedient Son.” Waltke labels 23.12–24.2 as “The Obedient Son,” adding 23.29-35 and 24.1-2 as appendices.

²⁵ The introductory nature of verse 12 opens up the possibility that it, like the introduction in 12.17-21, should not be counted as one of the thirty sayings.

²⁶ Compare 23:22-25.

²⁷ NASB makes no break, keeps vv. 19-21 with vv. 17-18.

²⁸ NASB breaks this group into two sayings. Compare 23:15-16.

²⁹ Some, e.g., Waltke, keep 24.10-12 together as one saying.

4) Need for wisdom to avoid the fate of the wicked (24.13-22)

Verses 24.13-14 begin a new section, beginning with a typical introduction and followed by a series of paired verses, each with double admonitions, usually prohibitions (“do not ... do not”) and an explanatory validation (“for ... or”).

#26: *Introduction: Wisdom gives hope for the soul* (24.13-14)

#27: *Making a recovery from failures* (24.15-16)

#28: *Kept from a vengeful, gloating spirit* (24.17-18)

#29: *Kept from fret and envy* (24.19-20)

#30: *Kept from the calamity awaiting the rebellious* (24.21-22)

b. Collection of four sayings (24.23-34)

Heading: “These also are sayings of the wise” (24.23a). The themes of this collection are justice and work. The four sayings of this collection follow an ABA’B’ pattern, encouraging us to ask the question, “What is the relationship between justice in the courts and hard work/wise priorities?”

#1: *Justice in the law courts* (24.23b-26)

#2: *Hard work and wise priorities* (24.27)

#3: *Justice in the law courts* (24.28-29)

#4: *Hard work and wise priorities* (24.30-34)

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

Heading: “These are also the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed” (25.1). This second collection of Solomon's proverbs was assembled during the reign of King Hezekiah. It is worth remembering that we have only about 900 of the 3000 proverbs of Solomon. The theme of rulers and their rule comes up often in this collection.

a. The king's faithful messenger, in and out of court (25.2-27)

A chiasmic inclusio (25.2, 27, “glory of God to conceal... glory of kings is to search out” and 25.5, 26, “wicked ... righteous”) marks off the large section, which in turn divides into two sub-groups. In addition to the features noted below, note also that in each of these sub-groups the third to the last proverb concerns what refreshes a king: 25.13, “cold snow ... faithful messenger” and 25.25, “cold water ... good news.”

1) Understanding the heart of a ruler (25.2-15)

The locus is the royal court. An inclusio (25.2-3: “glory of kings is to search out ... heart of kings is unsearchable” — 25.15: “a ruler may be persuaded”) highlights the focus and theme of the section: the need for wisdom in order to understand, persuade, and act according to the unsearchable concerns of a king, especially the removal of wickedness from his court (25.4-5), particularly wickedness in the forms of pride and the unwise use of the tongue.

a) *Introduction: the ruler's concern* (25.2-5)³⁰

b) *Admonitions to humility* (25.6-10)³¹

c) *Sayings regarding the use of the tongue* (25.11-14)

d) *Conclusion: the persuaded ruler* (25.15)³²

2) Understanding the need for restraint and caution (25.16-27)

The locus moves from the court to the neighborhood and household; the focus remains the need for wisdom to be a faithful messenger of the king. An inclusio using the word “honey” (25.16, 27) becomes the starting and ending point for Solomon's meditations on the need for restraint. There is a need to show restraint in the face of conflict and contentions.

a) *Introduction: admonition to show restraint* (25.16)

b) *An admonition and sayings regarding conflicts between neighbors* (25.17-20)

c) *An admonition and sayings regarding public, secret, and household contentions* (25.21-24)

d) *Conclusion: summary sayings* (25.25-27)

³⁰ The key to understanding the king's seemingly unsearchable heart is found in his desire for the removal of wickedness and the establishment of his throne in righteousness.

³¹ For the interpretive context, compare 25.27, “Nor is it glory to search out one's own glory.”

³² The idea of a “soft tongue” functions as a janus with the next section, regarding restraint.

b. The fool in his folly (25.28–26.12)³³

The keyword “fool” ties together this collection, appearing in every verse except 25.28 and 26.2. The catchword “honor” (26.1, 8; cf. 25.2, 27) links this section to the previous: the fool does not deserve the “glory” that belongs to God and kings.

1) Introduction: lack of control (25.28)

A janus verse, 25.28, links this section with the previous: a fool is epitomized by his lack of control.

2) Honor is not fitting for the fool (26.1)

3) Fitting responses to the fool (26.2-5)

4) Why honor is not fitting for the fool (26.6-10)

A chiasmic pattern of ABCB'A' (A/A': “a message ... hires,” B/B': “proverb in the mouth,” C: “honor to a fool”)³⁴ again emphasizes that honor is not appropriate to the fool—one who is employed in the king’s service, but unable to handle proverbs with wisdom.

5) Conclusion: no hope for the fool (26.11-12)

c. Sloth, the sluggard (26.13-16)

The keyword “sluggard” appears in each verse. The framing verses (26.13, 16) emphasize that a person’s speech is the most apparent sign of laziness. But the core verses (26.14-15) highlight the self-absorption that lies at the heart of laziness.

d. Harmful speech (26.17-28)

The section is united by themes related to harmful speech, expressing an underlying hatred.

1) The slanderous gossip (26.17-22)

The section is united by themes, e.g.,: “meddles ... deceives ... whisperer ... contention ... kindle strife.”

2) The malicious liar (26:23-28)

The section is united by themes related to lying speech that betrays a hateful, wicked, deceitful heart: “burning lips ... wicked heart ... he who hates disguises it with his lips ... deceit in his heart ... speaks graciously, do not believe him ... hatred covers itself with guile ... wickedness revealed ... lying tongue hates ... flattering mouth works ruin.”

³³ Waltke’s “Seven Perverted Types of Humanity” in 25.28–26.28 is a forced attempt to arrive at a perfect number of seven: the undisciplined, 25.28; the fool, 26.1-12; the sluggard, 26.13-16; the busybody, 26.17; the mischief maker, 26.18-19; the slanderer, 26.20-22; the son’s personal enemy, 26.23-28.

³⁴ See Duane Garrett.

e. True relating (27.1-10)

The section is united by themes concerning friendship, neighbors, and other relational dynamics.³⁵ This collection addresses the kinds of attitudes that promote or destroy relationships and the resulting need for reproof. The dangers form a frame around the core: the central need for reproof.

1) The danger of pride and jealousy (27.1-4)**2) The need for reproof (27.5-6)****3) The danger of disloyalty (27.7-10)**

Note the ABA'B' pattern (A/A': "sated ... honey ... sweet" — oil and perfume ... heart glad ... counsel is sweet," B/B': "wanders from his home" — "forsake your own friend ... do not go to your brother's house ... better is a neighbor who is near than a brother far away").

f. Father's advice to his son: avoid evil; develop character (27.11-22)

An antithetical inclusio (27.11-12: "Be wise, my son .. a prudent man sees evil ... the naïve proceed and pay the penalty" — 27.27: "Though you pound a fool ... his foolishness will not depart from him") marks the limits of this collection concerning the behaviors and attitudes of the son that benefit the father—and the whole community.

1) Introduction: the call to be a wise son (27.11-12)

The son is exhorted to be wise for the sake of the father. Verse 12 serves as part of the introduction as well as a janus, transitioning into 27.13-15: the "prudent" is able to "see evil" while the "naïve," not seeing it, "pay the penalty."

2) Evil to be avoided (27.13-16)

The section identifies three evils (foolish surety, superficial relating, contentious relationships) and their consequences.

3) Character to be developed (27.17-21)

Verse 17 introduces the section, focusing on the wise person's need for others in sharpening character ("one man sharpens another"). Four areas are then identified for "sharpening:" caring for one's master, watching one's heart, contentment, and praise.

4) Conclusion: the resistance of the fool (27.22)

The antithesis to the wise son is identified: the intractable fool.

³⁵ Waltke unites 27.1-10 with 27.11-27, primarily on the basis of "pride" as an inclusio, secondarily on the continuance of synonyms for friendship in 27.14, 17.

g. Diligence with multiple responsibilities (27.23-27)

This section is a poem, rich in the imagery of the flock, herds, and harvest. During the abundance that accompanies the harvest, the son and ruler (“crown”) is warned to not lose sight of the transitory nature of riches and rule (“riches are not forever ... nor does a crown endure”) or the practical benefits for his household of taking care of his flocks and herds (“clothing ... food of your household ... sustenance for your maidens”).

h. Righteousness v. wickedness in rule, reproof, and correction (28.1–29.27)

Recurring antithetical couplets bring together the themes of the “wicked” and “righteous” (28.1, 28.12, 28.28, 29.2, 29.16, and 29.27; cf. also 29.7). The first and last occurrence serve as *inclusio*, framing the entire section, the other occurrences serve as transitional, *janus* verses. Together, the six occurrences of these “wicked/righteous” couplets frame five sections: the two major sections in the first half (28.2-11 and 28.13-27) emphasize the ruler and his rule; the central proverb (29.1) underlines the critical importance of responding to reproof; the two major sections in the second half (29.3-15 and 29.7-26) emphasize correction and its consequences.³⁶

— *Righteousness v. wickedness (28.1)*

1a) Rule and Consequences: I (28.2-11)

The section is united by keywords and themes related to rule, poverty, oppression, justice, and, especially, attitudes toward the law. After an introductory verse regarding lasting influence (28.2), an *inclusio* (28.3, 11: “poor man”) frames the body of the section (28.3-11),³⁷ which exhibits an ABCDBABCD pattern of themes (A/A’ in 28.3, 8: economic oppression; B/B’/B’’ in 28.4, 7, 9: attitude to the law; C/C’ in 28.5, 10: justice; D/D’ in 28.6, 11: better to be poor with wisdom). Occurring three times in the pattern, a ruler’s attitude toward the law is the key to lasting influence.

— *Righteousness v. wickedness (28.12)*

1b) Rule and Consequences: II (28.13-27)

The unit begins (13-14), returns to (17-18), and ends (25-27, esp. 25-26) with an emphasis on relating to God blamelessly, with a proper fear (13-14: “conceals his transgressions ... confesses and forsakes them ... fears ... hardens his heart” — 17-18: “laden with guilt ... walks blamelessly will be delivered” — 25-26: “trusts in the Lord ... trusts in his own heart is a fool ... walks wisely will be delivered”). This emphasis on relating to God controls the remaining two sections (15-16, 19-24) with their emphasis on proper attitudes toward the poor, generosity, and the pursuit of wealth. Verse 27 again emphasizes this theme.

— *Righteousness v. wickedness (28.28)*

* **Central proverb: Responding to reproof (29.1)**

— *Righteousness v. wickedness (29.2)*

³⁶ Based upon Waltke; see esp. pp. 404-405.

³⁷ Alternatively, an *inclusio* with “understanding” would make 28.2 and 28.11 the frame verses for 28.2-11.

2a) Correction and consequences: I (29.3-15)

The emphasis shifts to correction, a theme introduced with 29.1 and highlighted in this section by the inclusio (29.3: “loves wisdom ... father glad” — 29.15: “rod and reproof give wisdom ... shame to his mother”). Within this outer frame is another level of inclusion (29.4: “king gives stability to the land by justice” — 29.14: “if a king judges the poor with truth, his throne will be established forever”), showing that the rule of the king is still in view, even as the emphasis changes to the discipline required to train him up to be a righteous ruler.

— *Righteousness v. wickedness (29.16)*

2b) Correction and consequences: II (29.17-26)

In the first part of the section (17-21), the themes alternate (ABABA), shifting back and forth from the need for discipline in the household (A/A'/A': “correct your son ... a slave will not be instructed by words alone ... pampers his slave from childhood will in the end find him to be a son”) to more general expressions of the need for public discipline (B/B': “people are unrestrained ... man who is hasty in his words”). In the second part of the section (29.22-24) the need for discipline is underlined by emphasizing the consequences of anger, pride, and theft. The third and last part of the section (29.25-26) again (cf. 28.25-26) lays emphasis on relating to God blamelessly, with a proper fear and trust.

— *Righteousness v. wickedness (29.27)*

Appendix: Additional collections of proverbs (30.1–31.31)

The appendix supplements the collections associated with King Solomon, adding to it the Words of Agur, the Words of Lemuel, and the acrostic poem regarding the “Excellent Wife.”

1. The words of Agur (30.1-33)

Heading: “The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle” (30.1a). In the “Words of Agur,” like the earlier “Sayings,” a king or other significant ruler expresses his fundamental burdens for his sons, the future leaders of the community. The use of a decalogue structure has limited Agur to only ten sayings, heightening the significance of what he has included. The themes this ruler considered important for his sons are frequently put forward in the form of numerical sayings, with admonitions.

Preface (30:1)

Introduction: The Need for Humility (30:2-6)

- a. Kept needy before God (30:7-9)
- b. Avoiding slander of a slave to his master (30:10)
- c. Arrogant attitudes and harmful actions (30:11-14)
- d. Greed—never satisfied (30:15-16)
- e. The look that reveals an unteachable spirit (30:17)³⁸
- f. The wonder and weakness of men with women (30:18-20)
- g. The weak in elevated positions (30:21-23)
- h. Wisdom among the small (30:24-28)
- i. The king with his army (30:29-31)
- j. Plotting evil stirs up strife (30:32-33)

³⁸ NASB makes no break.

2. The words of Lemuel (31.1-9)

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

Another ruler, this one definitely identified as a king, shares three key lessons that he was taught by his mother. These lessons had such a significant impact on Lemuel that he wants to share them with others who will also be in positions of leadership. Some, also connecting the following poem on “the excellent wife” with Lemuel,³⁹ call this section “the noble king.”

Introduction (31.1)

a. The destructiveness of giving one’s strength to women (31.2-3)

b. Forgetting responsibilities by desiring strong drink (31.4-7)

c. The king must speak up in defense of the weak (31.8-9)

3. The excellent wife (31.10-31)

Heading: “An excellent wife, who can find?” (31.10)⁴⁰ This is an acrostic poem: in Hebrew, each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. The passage also shows an overriding chiasmic structure. This literary device uses a stair stepping in (ABCDEF) and a stair stepping out (FEDCBA) of parallel themes, to draw attention to the controlling theme of the entire collection (G): the contribution that a wife can make to the respect given the husband at the city gate.⁴¹

A. She is valuable (31.10)

B. She has the confidence and praise of her family (31.11-12)

C. She works hard (31.13-19)

D. She gives (materially) (31.20)

E. She does not fear (31.21)

F. She makes... (31.22)

G. Climax: She contributes to her husband’s respect (31.23)

F’ She makes... (31.24)

E’ She does not fear (31.25)

D’ She gives (spiritually) (31.26)

C’ She works hard (31.27)

B’ She has the confidence and praise of her family (31.28)

A’ She is valuable (31.29-31)

³⁹ An argument against this pairing is the household setting of “the excellent wife,” rather than the royal setting for “the noble king.”

⁴⁰ This heading clearly differs from the others, but this fits a poem added to the end, in the appendix.

⁴¹ Compare similar themes in 11.22–12.4, 18.22–19.14.