

Proverbs

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
But fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7)

Authorship

On the basis of the section statements in 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1 most of the book is attributed to Solomon, the third king of Israel. However, 25:1 says that the “men [scribes] of Hezekiah” were involved in copying some of Solomon’s proverbs, indicating editorial activity. Other contributors include Agur (chapter 30), Lemuel (31:1–9) and various unnamed wise men (22:17—24:22; 24:23–34; 31:10–31). Solomon was a prolific author of proverbs and songs and was known internationally for his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29–34). Though modern scholarship has questioned Solomonic authorship, there are no persuasive reasons to deny that he was responsible for a substantial part of the book.¹ The English title comes from the Latin and means “for (many) words” since a proverb is a compact saying that contains much truth.

Date

Accepting Solomonic authorship for most of the book sets the end date for those portions as 931 B.C. The activity involving Hezekiah’s scribes would have been ca. 700 B.C. The rest of the material cannot be dated for certain. There are no compelling reasons for dating any of the material after the exile since the genre, subject matter, and form are all attested in the ancient Near East during the first and second millennia B.C.²

¹ See C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979, 1988), 156-59 and Allen P. Ross, “Introduction to Proverbs,” in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, edited by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 39-41.

² Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, “The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature,” in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, edited by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker

Historical Setting

As wisdom literature, Proverbs does not arise out of any specific historical situation. Rather, the situations and issues dealt with by wisdom literature in general are those that all people encounter in life simply because they are alive and live in the created universe. This is why most of the sayings are so readily understandable by the a modern person apart from acquaintance with ancient Near Eastern cultures or even Old Testament theological thought forms, though the latter does inform the whole.

Original Readers / Occasion

Though a basic intent of Proverbs must have been to equip Israelites to live appropriately in the world created by their God, the book has a universal appeal and is applicable by mankind in general. This does not mean that true wisdom is possible apart from faith. However, the basic principles found in Proverbs will often “work” when applied regardless of one’s theological stance.

Special Issues

Hebrew Poetry and Meaning. Proverbs is written in the language of poetry, that is in words that stimulate the senses and invoke deep feelings. As such, there is an immediacy about Proverbs, something about its sayings that “reach out and grab” the reader. Form-wise Hebrew poetry utilizes parallelism, where two lines are related to each other in various ways. These include synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, and comparative or as Allen says “restatement, cross-statement, completion or sharpening.”³ This

Book House, 1995), 49-65.

³ Ronald B. Allen, “Notes on the Book of Proverbs,” unpublished class notes (Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.), 4. See also Bullock, *Poetic Books*, 159-60 and for a more extensive study of form in Proverbs see James G. Williams, “The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs,” in *Sages*, 73-97.

basic device of restatement is what clarifies and drives home the point of individual proverbial sayings.

Personification and Meaning in Proverbs. An obvious feature about the Book of Proverbs is that rather than an author merely writing about wisdom, wisdom speaks directly to the reader by means of personification. By this literary device “we are able to think more directly about an abstraction. By this we may ponder more directly the wonder of the wisdom of God, an attribute of his excellence singled out for special display. Also, there is something in Lady Wisdom that points to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3), and who has become the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24, 30).”⁴

On Proverbs and Promises. Much confusion, and even disillusionment, has resulted from people reading certain proverbs as promises rather than general maxims on the way life generally turns out with respect to what we put into it. Such statements as “raise up a child in the way he should go . . .” (22:6) must not be taken as guarantees of the outcome of a concerted action or activity. Proverbs are about how life, as God designed it, generally works rather than what He has committed Himself to do in response to man’s effort. There is an aspect of cause and effect that God has built into His universe that is generally anticipatable. However, there is also a realm of cause and effect that man cannot control or even understand. Proverbs deals with the former (and Ecclesiastes the latter).

“Contradictory” Proverbs. Skeptics have posited error to the Bible on the basis of the alleged contradiction between 26:4 and 26:5. At one time this seemed to pose

⁴ Allen, “Notes on Proverbs,” 9.

a question with respect to the book's canonicity. However, there are satisfactory solutions to such supposed contradictions that do justice to the statements within the context of the rest of the wisdom sayings in the book.

Relationship to other Ancient Wisdom Literature. Similarities between Proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, like the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemopet*, has raised the issue of ideological dependence. Since wisdom instruction was common place in the ancient Near East, similarity in certain themes and forms should not be surprising. However, Israel's wisdom is rooted in Yahwism, making whatever may have been borrowed and adapted thoroughly orthodox with respect to the rest of the Old Testament. It is the inspired content of wisdom sayings that controls any borrowing of forms so that the reader can rest assured that he or she is dealing with revealed Truth.⁵

Message

The book of Proverbs is a collection of extended discourses and self-contained maxims that, as more or less self-confirming generalizations about how life works in God's world, are designed to produce in the hearer a successful life experience to the degree that such an experience depends upon his or her choices and actions.

⁵ A detailed analysis of the Amenemope comparison is given by John Ruffle, "The Teaching of Amenemope and its Connection with the Book of Proverbs," in *Sages*, 293-331. While discounting dependence in ideology Ruffle does allow that "the sort of relationship that can be demonstrated can be adequately explained by the suggestion that this passage was contributed by an Egyptian scribe working at the court of Solomon based on his memories of a text that he had heard and, may be, used in his scribal training . . . I think it is not at all unreasonable to suggest that in his search for wisdom Solomon would extend his interest beyond his national boundary. 1 Kings 4 demonstrates a knowledge of the existence of the wisdom of the people of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt and what could be more reasonable than that Solomon should question a cultured Egyptian at his court about this wisdom?" (ibid., 329). Likewise Bullock concludes that "natural revelation can offer evidence for the existence of God but cannot fill in the details of His personal nature and redemptive work. Faith in Israel's God was viewed in ancient times to underlie and validate all that was good, for no other gods existed. Therefore, to stake a claim upon a piece of literature from a pagan culture and adapt it for the only true faith was not incompatible with the universal perspective of ancient Israelite wisdom." (Bullock, *Poetic Books*, 165).

Outline

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| I. | Prologue: To be instructed in knowledge and wisdom. | 1:1–7 |
| A. | Title: The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. | 1:1 |
| B. | Purpose: To impart wise insight and train in skillful living. | 1:2–6 |
| C. | Key: The Fear of the Lord in the foundation of knowledge. | 1:7 |
| II. | Instruction on Folly and Wisdom. | 1:8—9:18 |
| A. | The call to get wisdom rather than fall prey to folly. | 1:8–33 |
| 1. | Introductory exhortation: listen to instruction. | 1:8–9 |
| 2. | Cautionary admonition: do not pursue the resources of life by violence. | 1:10–19 |
| 3. | Sobering warning: wisdom spurned will lead to ruin. | 1:20–33 |
| B. | The value of gaining wisdom. | 2:1–22 |
| 1. | Wisdom is guaranteed to the person who seeks it. | 2:1–6 |
| 2. | Wisdom is beneficial to the person who finds it. | 2:7–22 |
| a. | It will bring God’s protective provision. | 2:7–8 |
| b. | It will result in wholesome, positive relationships. | 2:9 |
| c. | It will preserve from destruction of the wicked. | 2:10–15 |
| d. | It will protect from seduction to unfaithfulness. | 2:16–22 |
| C. | Admonition to pursue wisdom with a whole heart. | 3:1–35 |
| 1. | The Upward Life: Complete trust in the Lord will secure His direction and blessing. | 3:1–12 |
| 2. | The Inward Life: The person who finds wisdom is enriched and established in all things. | 3:13–26 |
| 3. | The Outward Life: Wisdom blesses others instead of selfishly gaining by oppression. | 3:27–35 |
| D. | A father instructs in the way of wisdom. | 4:1–27 |
| 1. | He passes on the instruction of his father to acquire, love, and exalt wisdom. | 4:1–9 |
| 2. | He admonishes his “son” to retain his instruction in wisdom. | 4:10–13 |
| 3. | He contrasts the paths of the wicked and just for motivation. | 4:14–19 |
| 4. | He exhorts his “son” to be diligent in the way of wisdom. | 4:20–27 |
| E. | A father gives warning to guard against the seductress. | 5:1–23 |
| 1. | He describes her way and end. | 5:1–6 |
| 2. | He advises to avoid contact with her. | 5:7–14 |
| 3. | He counsels faithfulness to and delight in one’s own mate. | 5:15–20 |
| 4. | He reminds that all are ultimately accountable to the Lord. | 5:21–23 |
| F. | Warnings to avoid some things that rob of wisdom. | 6:1–7:27 |
| 1. | Warning against guaranteeing another’s debt. | 6:1–5 |
| 2. | Warning against laziness. | 6:6–11 |
| 3. | Warning against worthless people. | 6:12–15 |
| 4. | Warning against seven abominable practices. | 6:16–19 |
| 5. | Warning against adultery and the adulterer. | 6:20–7:27 |
| G. | Wisdom is exalted and contrasted with foolishness. | 8:1–9:18 |
| 1. | Wisdom calls to the receptive to receive her instruction. | 8:1–11 |
| 2. | Wisdom characterizes herself as the key to a profitable and productive life. | 8:12–21 |

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| | 3. | Wisdom certifies her primeval role in Yahweh’s creation of the cosmos. | 8:22–31 |
| | 4. | Wisdom pronounces blessing on those who listen to her. | 8:32–36 |
| | 5. | Wisdom and folly are contrasted with respect to those who choose them. | 9:1–18 |
| | a. | Wisdom provides a banquet leading to life. | 9:1–12 |
| | b. | Folly proffers the food that leads to death. | 9:13–18 |
| III. | | Proverbs of Solomon, Folio I: Three hundred and seventy-five maxims containing the way of Wisdom applied to the breadth of life: a sampler. | 10:1–22:16 |
| | A. | Taming the Tongue for Life. | |
| | 1. | “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.” | 10:19 |
| | 2. | “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,
But those who deal truthfully are His delight.” | 12:22 |
| | 3. | “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,
Sweetness to the soul and health to the bonds.” | 16:24 |
| | 4. | “A fool’s mouth is his destruction,
And his lips are the snare of his soul.” | 18:7 |
| | 5. | “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
And those who live it will eat its fruit.” | 18:21 |
| | B. | Money’s Morals and Meaning. | |
| | 1. | “The blessing of the Lord makes one rich,
And He adds no sorrow with it.” | 10:22 |
| | 2. | “He who trusts in his riches will fall,
But the righteous will flourish like foliage.” | 11:28 |
| | 3. | “An inheritance gained hastily at the beginning
Will not be blessed at the end.” | 20:21 |
| | 4. | “The rich rules over the poor,
And the borrower is servant to the lender.” | 22:7 |
| | 5. | “He who has a bountiful eye will be blessed,
For he gives of his bread to the poor.” | 22:9 |
| | C. | Friends and Foes. | |
| | 1. | “He who walks with wise men will be wise,
But the companion of fools will be destroyed.” | 13:20 |
| | 2. | “When a man’s ways please the Lord,
He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” | 16:7 |
| | 3. | “He who covers a transgression seeks love,
But he who repeats a matter separates the best of friends.” | 17:9 |
| | 4. | “A friend loves at all times,
And a brother is born for adversity.” | 17:17 |
| | 5. | “A man who has [many] friends may come to ruin,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” | 18:24 |
| IV. | | Wisdom with an International Flavor. | 22:17—24:34 |
| | A. | Thirty Sayings After an Egyptian Model. | 22:17—24:22 |
| | B. | Wisdom from Another International Sage. | 24:23–34 |
| V. | | Proverbs of Solomon, Folio II. | 25:1—29:28 |

VI.	Instruction from Agur.	30:1–33
	A. Agur’s Identity.	30:1
	B. Agur’s Ignorance and Need before God.	30:2–9
	C. Agur’s Instruction.	30:10–33
VII.	Instruction from the mother of king Lemuel on ruling wisely.	31:1–9
VIII.	Epilogue: Personified as the Ideal Wife, Wisdom exemplifies the sum of her teaching in the everyday hustle and bustle of life.	31:10–21

Argument

Much of Proverbs consists of isolated and repeated sayings in a layout that defies structural analysis. However, the first nine chapters do present a thematic development on the foundation, purpose and ways of wisdom.

I. Prologue: To be instructed in knowledge and wisdom (1:1–7).

Solomon writes with the purpose of giving the person who is capable of receiving it (the “simple” and the “young man”) the tools to understand how life works and to live that life skillfully. The foundation to all is the fear of the Lord, that is, the attitude that Yahweh is the sovereign creator and ruler of the universe who demands the respect due to His awesome nature but who also grants by His grace the gift of life and the resources to live it profitably.

II. Instruction on Folly and Wisdom (1:8—9:18).

Using “son” as the customary term for a disciple, Solomon invites the “young” to sit at the seat of instruction in the skill of living life, instruction that is the normal province of a person’s father and mother (1:8–9). The existence of the Book of Proverbs means that no “youth” need be deprived of training for successful living; in the absence of parents of faith Solomon will serve as father and wisdom itself as mother. However, there are always competing invitations, illustrated by the enticement of sinners to acquire the resources of successful living by violence (1:10–19). To that course

wisdom personified admonishes all to follow her way of life (1:20–23). All who fail to respond can expect to be overcome by the tempests of life because her counsel has been despised and rejected (1:24–32), implying that the way of wisdom is open to all who would pursue it (1:33).

The wisdom of seeking wisdom is that it is truly attainable, being granted by Yahweh Himself (2:1–6) and that it is truly valuable in that it affords protection (2:7–8), positive relationships (2:9), preservation from the destruction of the wicked (2:10–15) and from the seductress (2:16–22), the latter of which can be understood both literally and metaphorically as anything that perverts a relationship of devoted commitment. This instruction (Torah) must be pursued with a whole heart because it secures life in every realm; spiritual (3:1–12), emotional/psychological (3:13–26), and social (3:27–35).

Having been instructed by his father, Solomon admonishes his young disciples to acquire wisdom by following his own example, avoiding the path of the wicked and following the path of the just (4:1–27). Likewise, the warning against being enticed by the immoral woman is further developed (5:1–23). Violation of the most sacred of human relationships, marriage, will bring temporal ruin and is entirely contrary to the way of wisdom. An extended section (6:1—7:27) lists various situations and attitudes which are contrary to the way of wisdom and must be avoided. These include guaranteeing another's debt (6:1–5), laziness (6:6–11), wickedness in general (6:12–15), various defiling attitudes and hostile activities against others (6:16–19), and another extended treatment of adultery and the adulterer (6:20—7:27). The repeated, and progressively more elaborate, warnings with respect to sexual seduction has a two-fold purpose. The first is to protect the most sacred human relationship, which was crucial to Israel's life as

the covenant people. Secondly, the destructive power of the seductress powerfully illustrates everything in the realm of fallen man that detracts from and competes with the way of wisdom, which is altogether bound up in one's relationship with the Lord. Thus, the warning against adultery sets the stage for the final description and admonition of wisdom in the section (8:1—9:18).

To this point in Proverbs the claim that skill in living (wisdom) may be learned and successfully applied has been made repeatedly. Chapter 8 summarizes that claim and demonstrates its veracity. Through personification Wisdom cries out for all to receive her instruction (8:1–11) and reap her extensive and profitable benefits (8:12–21), noting that her primeval role in creation qualifies her to dispense skill for living in tune with the cosmic order of things (8:22–31).⁶ As a result she knows how to give life and favor to the one who receives her wares (8:32–36). Continuing in the technique of personification the ways of wisdom and folly are contrasted, the outcome of which is no less than life and death (9:1–18).

III. Proverbs of Solomon, Folio I: Three hundred and seventy-five maxims containing the way of Wisdom applied to the breadth of life: a sampler (10:1–22:16).

This section contains mostly short, pithy two-line sentences, sometimes doubled, that cover a wide range of subjects from every area of life. These include instruction on attitudes like pride and humility, on emotions like anger and fear, and on

⁶ For a discussions of the issues of personification, participation in creation, and the relationship of Proverbs 8 to Jesus Christ see Cleon L. Rogers, III, "The Meaning and Significance of the Hebrew Word *ʾōmā* in Proverbs 8:30." *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109 (1997): 208-221; Kathleen A. Farmer, "Wisdom List Her Credentials: Proverbs 8:22–31," in *Sages*, 237-40; and Gale A Yee, who concludes that "Wisdom who addresses herself to humanity (8:1–9) makes seemingly fantastic claims for that humanity (cf. 8:15–16). It is in such a context that the hymn is placed. Through it Wisdom justifies her claims and the veracity of her words by her antiquity, by her station next to God when he ordered the world for humankind, and by her indispensable mediation between God and that humanity." ("An Analysis of Proverbs 8:22–31 According to Style and Structure," in *Sages*, 229-36).

activities ranging from employment to the use of time. They deal with all areas of family living and with interpersonal relationships in society in general. There is a great deal of teaching on the proper and improper use of words and their effects on others. A major theme in Proverbs concerns the fool, of which there are five varieties ranging from the naïve, yet teachable youth, to the hardened, impenitent scoffer. The overall goal of the book is to move people from their naivety to the ways of wisdom, lest they become the hardened scoffer, destined to reap the consequences of such living. When applied in the fear of the Lord, the aphorisms of Proverbs will produce successful living, as much as that depends upon the attitudes and actions of the individual.

Friendship is a major topic in Proverbs. The Hebrew word can mean “neighbor,” “friend,” or “associate.” Hence, its meaning ranges from “casual acquaintance” to “partner” to “intimate companion.” The context determines the closeness of relationship being considered. Since anyone may become an intimate companion, everyone ought to be treated with that possibility in mind. Friends should be chosen carefully because wicked ones can lead astray (12:26). True friends avoid gossip in order to preserve the relationship (16:28; 17:9). Poverty can put severe strains on friendship (19:4, 7) as can financial entanglements (17:18). True friends are able to give and receive rebuke (27:5, 6) and can endure the tough times (17:17).

Another major theme has to do with speech. Much talking inevitably results in foolish or damaging words (10:19). Since the Lord is truthful in character, He disdains the person who lies (12:22). There are words that bring healing and pleasantness to the hearers (16:24) just as there are words that damage and destroy (18:21). A fool is known by his words and is ultimately undone by them (18:7).

IV. Wisdom with an International Flavor (22:17–24:34).

The first of two sections ascribed to unknown sages (22:17—24:22) reveals similarities with Egyptian wisdom material associated with one Amenemope.⁷ Though containing the simple two-line proverb of the preceding section, the four-line proverb predominates; the proverb ode is here as well.⁸ The same types of subjects are dealt with including relating to the poor and to angry people, personal habits and practices, interpersonal responsibilities, and certain family issues like discipline of children and respect for parental advice.

The second section is fairly short and contains mostly two-line proverbs (24:2–34). Topics are similar to the rest of the book. A longer segment on the folly of laziness stands as an excellent summary of the work ethic found in Proverbs (24:30–34).

V. Proverbs of Solomon, Folio II (25:1—29:28).

Apparently these proverbs of Solomon were copied by scribes during the reign of king Hezekiah, indicating that more of Solomon's work was available centuries after his literary activity. The emphasis on kings and rulers is instructive with respect to the responsibilities of Israelite kings.⁹ This section of proverbs is comprised mostly of the two-line type.

VI. Instruction from Agur (30:1–33).

The otherwise unknown Agur often sounds like Job or Qohelet in his wisdom deliberations. His confidence and advice reveal him to be a man of faith. His method

⁷ See above, on page 4.

⁸ Bullock, *Poetry*, 173.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 175. See Bruce V. Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarchs: Proverbs 27:23—29:27," in *Sages*, 353-60.

reveals the provocative questioning of the Lord himself. A notable feature of Agur's teaching is the number sayings ("there are three / four") often taking the form "three . . . yes, four . . ." His distinctive contribution lies in method rather than theme.¹⁰

VII. Instruction from the Mother of King Lemuel (31:1–9).

Reminiscent of the Hezekiah collection with respect to wisdom and kings, this unknown mother advises her son to guard his strength so as not to pervert justice nor disregard the cause of the poor. As Bullock observes, "the content of this discourse is an apropos conclusion for a book largely written by a king and collected by one. It focuses, not upon the privileges of kingship, but upon the responsibilities of the office."¹¹

VIII. Epilogue: Personified as the Ideal Wife, Wisdom exemplifies the sum of her teaching in the everyday hustle and bustle of life (31:10–21).

Two debated issues of this section are (1) whether it continues the words of Lemuel's mother and (2) whether it is a poem about the ideal Israelite housewife or a concluding metaphor about the embodiment of wisdom. Noting the technique of personification earlier in the book and comparing 31:30 with the opening motto (1:7) argues that this forms an epilogue rather than a continuation of the words of Lemuel's mother. Though most commentators and readers take this to describe the godly woman, a strong case can be made that it contributes to the overall purpose of proverbs by capturing the ideals of wisdom, serving as a symbol, Lady Wisdom in contrast to Dame folly (cf. 9:13–18).¹² Thus, wisdom "lives" a blessed life that flourishes through foresight and disci-

¹⁰ For a discussion of Agur's contribution see David A. Hubbard, "Words of Agur: Proverbs 30:1–33," in *Sages*, 361–73,

¹¹ Bullock, *Poetry*, 177.

¹² See Allen P Ross, "Proverbs," in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991),

plined response to the needs and challenges of living. She is a blessing to others and will be honored by those who appreciate life lived in the fear of the Lord.

Conclusion

In the days of the “one minute manager” the Book of Proverbs has a very modern ring to it. With more or less equal opportunity, life is “there to be lived” for everyone. Proverbs affords the uninstructed and the novice guidance and skill required to make life work as it should from a naturalistic viewpoint, that is from the standpoint of God’s design of the cosmos as discoverable and applicable by man. However, the fear of the Lord is the indispensable prerequisite for putting into practice these “laws” of living. While God cannot be manipulated for man’s own selfish ends, He has put within a human being’s grasp the principles of living life successfully, as far as it depends on him or her. Proverbs provides the *modus operandi* of exercising dominion in this creation to the extent possible under the consequence of the fall. Blessed are the man, woman, and child who hearken to Wisdom’s call and calling.

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