

## Proverbs

In the Hebrew Bible, the title is “The Proverbs of Solomon, the Son of David, King in Israel.” The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) called this book “Proverbs of Solomon.” The Latin Vulgate called it “The Book of Proverbs.” Proverbs claims to be a collection of the wise sayings of several different individuals like Solomon, Agur, and King Lemuel, who are unknown, and many unnamed wise men. The book of Proverbs is a collection of proverbs from during the monarchy of Israel and compiled by an unknown author sometime during the exile.

The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job are considered wisdom literature. While narrative uses stories to reveal the character of Yahweh and the nature of humanity, and poetry is the expression of human emotions to Yahweh, wisdom literature instructs and provides the practical skills to obtain a good and full life. The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job are all asking the question “What does it mean to live well in the world?” Each book explores what it means to have the good life, with three different perspectives.<sup>1</sup> The good life is directly connected to the retribution principle, which means that the righteous will be rewarded justly for good behavior and the wicked will be punished justly for bad behavior. It is not possible to have a good life if there is no justice for good and bad behavior in the world.

Proverbs provides the perspective of Lady Wisdom who is a wise teacher, who believes that Yahweh is wise and just, and there is a clear cause and effect between doing the right thing and being rewarded or doing the wrong thing and suffering. Ecclesiastes speaks as the cynic who makes the observation that this is not always true. Life is not just; sometimes bad things happen to good people and good things happen to foolish people. And Job is the old man who has seen and suffered a lot in his life and questions justice of Yahweh when good people suffer. All three of these books together address the wisdom of Yahweh and how one is to live wisely and obtain the good life in a fallen world.

Wisdom (*hokhmah*) is both a mental knowledge and a skill. First, wisdom is the ability to know the will of Yahweh to apply it to one’s life. Yahweh is the only true wise being in the universe, who designed creation with wisdom and wove it into the fabric of the universe (Prov. 3:19-20; 8:22-31). Only He knows how humans and creation are supposed to function, according to their design. Therefore, one must learn and apply His wisdom, revealed in the Torah and wisdom literature, to one’s life in order to experience life to the fullest. To ignore this is to reap chaos in one’s life. Second, it is the ability to discern right and wrong in life and to make good decisions. This is the ability to see people and the world for who they truly are and to make wise decisions in interacting with them. Third, it is the skill of crafting and building good things in creation (Ex. 31:1-3). Since Yahweh created a good (functioning the way it was supposed to function) and orderly creation, then humanity as the image of God is to do likewise. Humans are called to create families, art, and technology with wisdom in order to bring godly function to creation.

Wisdom comes only through the fear of Yahweh (Prov. 1:7; 2:5; 9:10; Ecc. 12:13; Job 1:1, 8). The fear of Yahweh is a deep awe, respect, and trust in Yahweh as the ultimate king and judge who is good. It acknowledges that one is not Yahweh and that one needs to embrace His definition of right and wrong and live by it. True wisdom is learning the boundary lines and not

---

<sup>1</sup> See Temper Longman III. *Proverbs*, pp. 61-63.

crossing them. If one does not learn this, then they will not experience the good life, and their life will fall into chaos.

“Wisdom is not simply a matter of learning certain principles in life and applying them mechanistically. Wisdom begins with a relationship with God. That this relationship is described as characterized by fear means that the sages understand their place in the universe. While fear is not to be equated with terror, it is probably more than mere respect (see 1:7). After all, people are totally dependent on Yahweh, who created and sustains them. The sages understood this and therefore trembled in the presence of God.

Pagans may well stumble on some interesting and helpful truth that provides insight on how to avoid a problem or achieve a desired goal. They may even be able to formulate that bit of advice in a way that is memorable. The Israelites sages may even adapt the advice for inclusion in the book of Proverbs. However, based on 1:7, they still would not judge pagan wisdom teachers as truly and authentically wise, because they lack fear of Yahweh.

The bottom line is that there is no wisdom apart from a relationship with Yahweh. The very concept of wisdom is a theological concept. And it runs throughout the book. The pervasiveness of the theological perspective of the book is underlined by the role of Woman Wisdom.”<sup>2</sup>

## Purpose

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to show how wisdom brings the good life. The good life is a life of peace, stability, joy, and prosperity. It is the life that Yahweh intended humans to have before the fall and is what is offered through the wisdom of Yahweh. However, Proverbs is not promising that if one lives wisely then he or she is guaranteed the good life. Proverbs offers wise principles to live by, and if one does this, then generally life will work out for them. Though Proverbs does not address the nature of the fallen world and how this affects wisdom and the good life, it does acknowledge that this a reality of life and makes no promises. In general, wise people tend to do better and live healthier lives. Ecclesiastes and Job with deal with the nature of wisdom and the good life in a fallen world.

The goal of the wisdom of Proverbs is to mold the reader’s character into the image of Yahweh so they can conduct themselves morally in society before Yahweh and join Him in redeeming creation. The goal is to mold the character of the individual. The method is both demanding and experiential. It may command or prohibit, but most of the time it will attempt to persuade.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to understand that the book of Proverbs is not meant to be read through chapter by chapter like the other books of the Bible. It is more of a reference book, where one should a read a proverb or two, then meditate on them and pray them into one’s life over a period of time before moving on to the next proverb.

---

<sup>2</sup> Temper Longman III. *Proverbs*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>3</sup> See Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, pp. 3-4.

## Structure

The book of Proverbs is arranged in five major divisions. The first division is more of a discussion on what wisdom and folly are and how to pursue the former and avoid the latter. The remaining divisions are self-contained proverbial statements.

Discourses on Wisdom (Prov. 1:1-9:18)

Couplets Expressing Wisdom (Prov. 10:1-22:16)

A Collection of Wise Sayings (Prov. 22:17-24:34)

Maxims Expressing Wisdom (Prov. 25:1-29:27)

The Wisdom of Agur and Lemuel (Prov. 30:1-31:31)

## Discourses on Wisdom (1:1-9:18)

This division claims to be the teachings of Solomon son of David, king of Israel. This division begins by stating that these proverbs were gathered together for the purpose of gaining wisdom, instruction, and understanding, and that “the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 1:7). There are then twelve poems (Prov. 1:8-8:36) that contain the instructions of a father to his son and wisdom personified as a woman giving instructions to a naïve youth. The father encourages obedience and warns against two main threats. First is the warning, to naïve youth, of the appeal of conforming to the lifestyle of greedy, rebellious, and violent men (Prov. 1:10-19). They offer the promise of quick wealth and success that seems better than pursuing righteousness but in truth offers only death.

Second is the temptation of seductive women and sexual immorality. This kind of woman puts herself outside the loyalties and structures of society and Yahweh’s covenant law. This is what makes her so fascinating to naïve youths and ultimately destructive.<sup>4</sup> On one hand she is empty headed and slippery, yet on the other hand she is cunning and persistent. Yet if she has no morals or principles, her victim has no excuse, for he is unprincipled; the fear of Yahweh does not even enter his mind.<sup>5</sup> The man who surrenders to her loses his dignity and becomes in bondage to sin and death. He loses the love, security, meaning, and hope of a close-knit family and is filled with regrets.

In contrast, the father offers the hope and bliss of a faithful marriage and a connected and stable family (Prov. 5:18-19). The father encourages his son to pursue Lady Wisdom, who is one’s true bride, counselor, and the offspring of Yahweh the Creator. Lady Wisdom is the personified concept of wisdom rather than a specific personality. Wisdom is an attribute of Yahweh that was used to create the world and has been woven into the fabric of the universe (Prov. 3:19-20; 8:22-31).<sup>6</sup> Whenever someone is making wise decisions, they are working with wisdom; when they are making unwise decisions, they are working against wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 32-33). When one makes decisions or creates something with wisdom, they are working with the fabric of the universe, building the kingdom of Yahweh, and will experience the good life. But she is not a mystical experience; rather, one is to listen to her truth, learn prudence, and find knowledge.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Derek Kidner. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> See Derek Kidner. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> See Derek Kidner. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes*, pp. 23-24.

The third section (Prov. 9:1-18) is a contrast between the instructions and benefits of pursuing Lady Wisdom and avoiding Lady Folly. The son is to listen to wisdom and live a life of virtue and integrity, which will lead to success and peace. He is warned against folly, which produces selfishness and pride and leads to ruin and shame. This first division is the moral reasoning that is the basis for the rest of the book.

### **Maxims Expressing Wisdom (10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27)**

These divisions contain the self-contained proverbial statements from many unnamed wise men. These proverbial statements that cover all aspects of life and guide one in making good decisions so that one can have the good life. Occasionally there will be small clusters of proverbs concerning a specific topic. These proverbs are not meant to be read through quickly like narrative but to read one and meditate on the weightiness of what has been stated. Prov. 25:1-29:27 were organized by Hezekiah's scribes who had more of an eye for topically grouping proverbs.

### **A Collection of Wise Sayings (22:17-24:34)**

This division begins with the thirty sayings of the wise. The tone is warmer and more personal, mostly appealing to the reader with "do not's" and the occasional "do," rather than stating a matter-of-fact, practical statement.<sup>7</sup> There are two themes that are developed through this division. First is the importance of quiet trust in Yahweh rather than fretfulness. Second is the importance of generous compassion towards strangers that goes beyond one's normal actions. The section ends with a small group of other sayings.

### **The Wisdom of Agur and Lemuel (30:1-31:31)**

Proverbs 30 was written by Agur, probably an Ishmaelite convert from Arabia. Agur warns against the self-assured learning that sees the gaining of knowledge of Yahweh and creation as simplistic. He declares that it is impossible to think true thoughts about Yahweh without revelation from Yahweh (Prov. 30:1-5). And it is impossible to be loyal to Yahweh except by His grace (Prov. 30:7-9).<sup>8</sup> Most of his proverbs are a call, with a few short statements, to a moral life that brings blessings.

Proverbs 31 was written by King Lemul, who gathered the wise sayings of his mother into a collection. The first part is guidance on being a wise leader (Prov. 31:1-9). The second part is an alphabet acrostic containing her instructions to her son on the importance of finding a wife of noble character (Lady Wisdom) who lives righteously and brings stability to life.

### **Conclusion**

The book of Proverbs teaches that wisdom is an attribute of Yahweh that He wove into the fabric of the universe. Just as Yahweh created and governs creation with wisdom, His people are to allow wisdom to guide and govern their lives. Thus, if one is guided by wisdom, they will experience the good life of abundance. Though Proverbs teaches that there is a clear cause and effect between doing the right thing and being rewarded or doing the wrong thing and suffering,

---

<sup>7</sup> See Derek Kidner. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes*, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> See Derek Kidner. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes*, p. 33.

it does not always guarantee this. This is seen in the repeated phrase “better than” in many of the proverbs. Proverbs believes that these principles are the best route to the desired conclusion. However, in a fallen world of much suffering and injustice, one could seriously question this idea, and this is the point the book of Ecclesiastes addresses.

## Bibliography

Kidner, Derek. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985.

Longman III, Tremper. *Proverbs*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

Mackie, Tim, and John Collins. “Wisdom Literature.” The Bible Project, 2016.  
<https://thebibleproject.com/explore/wisdom-series>.

Murphy, Roland E. and Elizabeth Huwiler. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*. New International Biblical Commentary series. Peabody: Hendrikson Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Waltke, Bruce K. *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament series. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.