

## A Brief Introduction to Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs is a book of moral and ethical instructions, dealing with many aspects of life. The teachings in this book guide its readers in how to lead wise, godly lives and how to avoid the pitfalls of unwise, ungodly conduct.

It has a broad, timeless appeal because of its great variety of subjects and their relevance to everyday life. Proper and improper attitudes, conduct, and characteristics are referred to repeatedly and in succinct, penetrating ways. Proverbs is God's book on "how to wise up and live." It is His treasure book of wisdom.

If the Israelites would follow God's decrees and laws, they would be considered a people of wisdom and understanding (Deut. 4:5-6). This is true for all believers because "the statutes of the LORD" make "wise the simple" (Ps. 19:7). The Book of Proverbs showed the Israelites how their faith in the Lord and His Word should affect their daily lives. And it shows how believers in all ages can be wise in God's and others' eyes.

### Authorship and Date

The authorship and date of Proverbs cannot be considered apart from understanding the book's structure. The book is comprised of eight sections written at various times and including several authors or editors. The heading "The Proverbs of Solomon" in 1:1 introduces chapters 1-9 (sections I and II). Since Solomon reigned from 971 to 931, the Proverbs he wrote may be dated in the 10th century. According to 10:1, Section III (10:1-22:16) is also the work of Solomon.

Section IV (22:17-24:34) is called the "sayings of the wise" (22:17; 24:23). The identity of these wise men is uncertain so the date of their sayings is also uncertain. Perhaps they lived before Solomon's time and he compiled their sayings, adding them to his repertoire. Or they may have lived in Solomon's day and their sayings were added by an anonymous editor.

The proverbs in Section V (chaps. 25-29) were written by Solomon but were compiled by men of Hezekiah (25:1). Since Hezekiah reigned from 729 to 686 those chapters were recorded sometime in those years.

Sections VI (chap. 30) and VII (31:1-9), were written by Agur and King Lemuel, respectively. Those men were non-Israelites, perhaps Arabians; their identities and origins are obscure.

Section VIII (31:10-31) may be a continuation of the words ascribed to Lemuel (31:1) but its construction as a separate acrostic poem and its stylistic distinction from 31:1-9 mark it off as an independent piece. If it is, its authorship is not known.

The book took its final form at least as late as Hezekiah's time (because of 25:1). Whether his men compiled the entire book is uncertain. The final date of compilation is generally considered to be around 700 B.C., assuming Agur and Lemuel wrote before then. Of course the writing and compiling were done under the superintending work of the Holy Spirit, the divine Author of all Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16).

It is appropriate that Solomon authored most of the book since he, the wisest person in his day (1 Kings 4:29-31, 34), authored 3,000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32; cf. Ecc. 12:9).



2. *Parallelism*. Proverbs is written entirely in poetic style. The predominant structural feature of Hebrew poetry is so-called poetic parallelism. Usually the two poetic lines in a verse have a parallel relationship.

In *synonymous parallelism* the terms or units of thought in one line are paralleled by similar terms or units of thought in the second line. Sometimes every unit in one line is matched in the next line (e.g., 1:2; 2:11). This is called complete synonymous parallelism. Other times only some of the units in one line are matched in the next line (e.g., in 1:9 the words “They will be” are not matched in the second line). This is called incomplete synonymous parallelism.

In *antithetical parallelism* one line is the opposite of or contrasts with the other line (e.g., 10:1; 11:1). Most of the verses in chapters 10-15 are antithetical.

In *emblematic parallelism* one line illumines the other by a simile or a metaphor (e.g., 10:26; 25:12, 23).

In *synthetic parallelism* the second line simply continues the thought of the first line. Sometimes the second line gives a result of the first line (3:6; 16:3) and other times the second line describes something in the first line (6:12; 15:3). Sometimes one line gives a preference over what is referred to in the other line. There are 19 such “better . . . than” verses (12:9; 15:16-17; 16:8, 16, 19, 32; 17:1, 12; 19:1, 22; 21:9, 19; 22:1; 25:7, 24; 27:5, 10; 28:6). “How much worse” or “how much more” is another kind of synthetic parallelism (11:31; 15:11; 17:7; 19:7, 10; 21:27). Most of the verses in 16:1-22:16 have either synonymous or synthetic parallelism.

Not all verses in Proverbs have two lines. Some have three (e.g., 1:27; 6:13, 17; 27:22; 30:20, 32-33; 31:4), a few have four (e.g., 30:9, 14-15, 17, 19), and one verse has even six lines (30:4). In the three-line verses, usually the first and second lines are related in some way and the second and third lines are parallel in some way (e.g., in 27:27 the second line is in synthetic parallelism to the first line, completing its thought, and the third line is in synonymous parallelism with the second line). However, the three lines in 1:27 are all in synonymous parallelism. The book *Walking in Wisdom: Studying the Proverbs of Solomon*, by William E. Mouser, Jr., is a helpful discussion of how to analyze the points being made in various kinds of parallelism in the Book of Proverbs.

Usually, though not always, the second line in a two-line parallelism does more than merely repeat the words or thought of the first line. The second line may expand the first, or complete it, define it, emphasize it, be more significant than it, enlarge on it, be the opposite of it, an alternative to it, or a counterpart of it. This pattern in which the second line is underscored is what James L. Kugel calls “A, and what’s more, B” (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981, pp. 7-27, esp. p. 13).

As brief maxims, the verses in Proverbs are distilled, to-the-point sentences about life. They boil down, crystallize, and condense the experiences and observations of the writers. The brief but concentrated nature of the maxims cause their readers to reflect on their meanings. They tell what life is like and how life should be lived. In a terse, no-words-wasted fashion, some statements in Proverbs *relate* what is commonly observed in life; others *recommend* or exhort how life should be lived. And when advice is given, a reason for the counsel usually follows.

Many of the proverbial maxims should be recognized as guidelines, not absolute observations; they are not ironclad promises. What is stated is generally and usually true, but exceptions are occasionally noted (e.g., cf. Prov. 10:27 with Ps. 73:12).

## Subject Matter

The Book of Proverbs focuses on human character and conduct. The book's observations and admonitions about life are addressed to individuals, not to the nation Israel as such. As already stated under "Purpose," the Book of Proverbs stresses wise living. This is synonymous with godly living, for one who is godly or righteous is wise in God's eyes. By contrast a wicked or unrighteous person is foolish. The characteristics and consequences of these two paths of living are referred to repeatedly in Proverbs. They are summarized in Psalm 1:6: "For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Many human emotions, attitudes, and relationships are spoken of in Proverbs, and often they are set in contrast. One common method of studying Proverbs is to compile the verses dealing with a topic and to analyze all that is said on that topic. Various verses in Proverbs deal with rural life and urban life; with business ethics, social contacts, and civil justice; with family relationships, moral standards, and inner attitudes and motives. No wonder the book has such universal appeal!

Little is said in Proverbs about the afterlife. The stress is on life now. Rewards for godly living are said to be given in the present, and ungodly living results in problems in this life (cf. comments on Ecc. 2:24-26; 11:9). Life's choices, as Proverbs stresses, are clear-cut.

The Book of Proverbs also focuses on God: His character (sovereign, faithful, holy, omniscient, omnipotent, just, etc.), His works, and His blessings. The name Yahweh ("LORD") occurs 87 times in Proverbs.

Man's relationship to the Lord is also stressed in the book. A person can lead a godly, wise life only as he fears and trusts the Lord. Proverbs stresses being rightly related to God and then being rightly related to others.

## OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (1:1-7)
- II. Thirteen Lessons on Wisdom (1:8-9:18)
  1. (1:8-33)
  2. (2:1-22)
  3. (3:1-10)
  4. (3:11-20)
  5. (3:21-35)
  6. (4:1-9)
  7. (4:10-19)
  8. (4:20-27)
  9. (5:1-23)
  10. (6:1-19)
  11. (6:20-35)
  12. (7:1-27)
  13. (8:1-36)
  14. Summary of 13 lessons - The call of wisdom and folly (9:1-18)
- III. The Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
- IV. The Sayings of the Wise Men (22:17-24:34)
- V. The Proverbs of Solomon Collected by Hezekiah's Men (chaps. 25-29)
- VI. The Words of Agur (chap. 30)
- VII. The Words of Lemuel (31:1-9)
- VIII. The Noble Wife (31:10-31)