

CHURCH BIBLE STUDY

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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It is said that in the old days every Jewish father or mother would recite the book of Proverbs to their infants as they sleep. This was done throughout the day in order that the wisdom of this wonderful book might somehow hide in their tender hearts. The parents hope that their children will live their lives according to the wisdom taught in this book.

"Many persons who have become overwhelmed by a theoretical approach to Christianity have been able to get a 'handle' on the faith by reading the book of Proverbs. For this book represents the commonsense approach to life and faith. It touches the shared concerns of all who are given the gift of life and struggle with how to live it. For those who are recipients of the gift of faith, this book distills the theological substance of the Old Testament religion into its practical essence." (Bullock, 146)

I. SOME INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL ON PROVERBS

A. The Title of the Book

1. ORIGINAL TITLE -- The original title is probably "The Proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel." (1:1)
2. SEPTUAGINT TITLE -- The LXX has a slightly different title, "Proverbs of Solomon son of David, who ruled in Israel."
3. LATIN VULGATE TITLE -- The Latin Vulgate simply has the title, "*Liber Proverbiorum*" (i.e. The Book of Proverbs).
4. SUB-TITLES -- The abbreviated title, "The Proverbs of Solomon" in 10:1 is a subtitle within larger collection (Prov. 1-24). There is another subtitle in 25:1, "These are also proverbs of Solomon," which begin the second Solomonic collection (chapters 25-29).

B. Date and Authorship of Proverbs

1. DISTINCTION BETWEEN COMPOSITION AND COMPILATION – Composition relates to authorship whereas compilation relates to editorship. Their dates will therefore be different.
2. TRADITION -- The **Jewish Tradition** preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a) recalled the role of Hezekiah's men and ascribed the writing of the book of Proverbs to them. This we believe referred more to the editorship rather than to authorship.

Most of the **early Church Fathers** ascribed the entire book to Solomon. This was due to the obscurity or absence of the titles in chapters 30 and 31 in the Greek and **Latin manuscripts**.

3. SOLOMONIC AUTHORSHIP -- From 1 Kings 4:29-34, we know that Solomon was associated with the authorship of 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. The subjects were taken from the flora and fauna of Palestine.
4. CONCLUSION -- It is our understanding that 1:1-29:27 were written by Solomon. Thus, the date of these proverbs would be during the forty-year reign of Solomon, which was 970-930 B.C. Chapters 30, and 31 were written by Kings Agur and Lemuel respectively. The identities of these two kings are unknown to us. Thus, the dating of

these two chapters cannot be determined with any finality.

C. Nature, Function, and Purpose of Proverbs

1. WISDOM IN PROVERBS -- The basic nature of wisdom as mentioned in the Book of Proverbs is summed up in the statement, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7; cf. 9:10). In other words, THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF WISDOM IS THEOLOGICAL. The underlying basis of life is our relationship with God. "Out of that relationship grow moral understanding and the ability to judge what is right (2:6-22), a proper attitude toward material possessions (3:9-10), industrious labour (6:6-11), the necessary equilibrium and sense of security for living in the world (3:21-26), and the right relationship toward one's neighbour (3:27-29), etc." (Bullock, 148)

Proverbs deal with the day-to-day life of the individual with other human beings and with the natural world. This is the horizontal emphasis of the book. It must be noted that the person-to-person relationship is not dealt with in a theological vacuum. They are viewed within the context of the Mosaic covenant and law. Thus, the silent question asked throughout the book is "HOW OUGHT WE THEN TO LIVE?"

Wisdom is also PERSONIFIED AS A WOMAN WHO SPEAKS¹ in Proverbs 8 and 9. "The purpose of personification in this instance is to help us understand God by abstracting one of His attributes and endowing it with personality and consciousness. The author wants to teach that wisdom is a divine attribute that is eternally related to Him, understood only in relation to Him, and is an extension of His dynamic Being to mankind. The method of personification is the means by which the practical perspective of wisdom is connected to God. It is the closest thing wisdom has to the prophetic formula "Thus saith the LORD." By means of personified wisdom, the knowledge of God's nature is delivered to and integrated with the everyday life of men and women." (Bullock, 148)

The word used to designate the content of the book is *mashal* usually translated "proverb." The root is derived from the verb, *mashal*, which means, "to represent, be like" (BDB, 605a). The meaning in the noun would be "likeness." Therefore a proverb would be "A STATEMENT THAT SEEKS TO REVEAL THE TRUE NATURE OF ONE THING BY COMPARING IT TO SOMETHING ELSE." (Bullock, 149)²

2. FUNCTION OF PROVERBS -- The function of Proverbs was TO SHAPE MEN AND WOMEN INTO SOCIALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY USEFUL MEMBERS OF SOCIETY. (Bullock, 149)

Although the book of Proverbs cannot and should not be construed as entertaining but it does have a lighter side. It is a kind of entertainment that instructs. There is an honest humour in Proverbs. E.g.

¹Wisdom offers wealth and prosperity to all who embrace her (8:18, 21), witnesses her own existence before the creation of the world (8:30), and possesses a house and servants (9:1-6).

²In the Old Testament, the term is used variously. It may signify a simple folk saying (1 sam. 10:12; 24:13), an allegory (Ezek. 17:2), an enigmatic saying (Ezek. 20:49), a taunt (Isa. 14:4; Hab. 2:6), a lament (Mic. 2:4), a prophetic discourse (Num. 23:7; 24:15), a didactic discourse (Psalm 49:4), or a plea (Job 29:1). In the book of proverbs it signifies either aphorisms (as in 10:1-22:16) or discourses (as in chapters 1-9; and 23:29-35; 27:23-27). [Crawford H. Toy, **A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs**, in **The International Critical Commentary** (NY: Scribner's Press, 1904), 4].

- How would you describe a woman who is without discretion? Solomon did it humorously this way . . .
Proverbs 11:22 (KJV) “As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, *so is* a fair woman which is without discretion.”
- The seriousness of folly evokes a chuckle in . . .
Proverbs 17:12 (KJV) “Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man, rather than a fool in his folly.”
- What about the danger of being a busybody and meddle in other people's arguments?
Proverbs 26:17 (KJV) “He that passeth by, *and* meddleth with strife *belonging* not to him, *is like* one that taketh a dog by the ears.”
- A contentious wife . . .
Proverbs 19:13 (KJV) “A foolish son *is* the calamity of his father: and the contentions of a wife *are* a continual dropping.”
Proverbs 21:9 (KJV) “*It is* better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house.”
Proverbs 21:19 (KJV) “*It is* better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman.”
- A slothful man . . .
Proverbs 19:24 (KJV) “A slothful *man* hideth his hand in *his* bosom, and will not so much as bring it to his mouth again.”
- Putting one's trust in a faithless man . . .
Proverbs 25:19 (KJV) “Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble *is like* a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint.”
- Some Proverbs are products of the apodictic laws of God. There is a MUTUAL FUNCTION OF LAW AND PROVERBS. For examples:
Proverbs 20:10 (KJV) “Divers weights, *and* divers measures, both of them *are* alike abomination to the LORD.” (cf. Deu 25:13-16)
Proverbs 22:28 (KJV) “Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.” (cf. Deu. 19:14)
- Proverbs has ETHICAL INSTRUCTIONS for all ages but more so for the young. The reason might be that the young with their surging emotions and untried idealism need to be tempered by experience or else they will pay the price for their folly. Their lives could still be shaped in the ways of wisdom. For examples:
Proverbs 29:5 (KJV) “A man that flattereth his neighbour spreadeth a net for his feet.”
Proverbs 27:7 (KJV) “The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.”
Proverbs 25:25 (KJV) “As cold waters to a thirsty soul, *so is* good news from a far country.”
Proverbs 17:16 (KJV) “Wherefore *is there* a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing *he hath* no heart *to it*?”
Proverbs 14:15 (KJV) “The simple believeth every word: but the prudent *man*

looketh well to his going.”

Proverbs 22:1 (KJV) “A *good* name *is* rather to be chosen than great riches, *and* loving favour rather than silver and gold.”

Proverbs 20:4 (KJV) “The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; *therefore* shall he beg in harvest, and *have* nothing.”

3. **PURPOSE OF PROVERBS** -- The DIDACTIC NATURE OF THIS BOOK IS A FUNCTION OF ITS PURPOSE. Solomon sets forth the purpose of Proverbs in the first six verse of the Book.

Proverbs 1:1-6 (KJV) “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel;

- **2** To know wisdom and instruction; AIMS # 1
- **to perceive** the words of **understanding**; # 2
- **3** To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; # 3
- **4** To give subtilty to the simple, # 4
- to the young man knowledge and discretion. # 5
- **5** A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; # 6
- and a man of **understanding** shall attain unto wise counsels:
- **6** To **understand** a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.” # 7

Note – “perceive” and “understand” same word that means “to have ability to distinguish.”

From these verses, we see that Proverbs is a primer for "right conduct and essential attitudes toward life, aimed at producing lives in conformity to the divine will. The immediate object was to train and educate for the preservation of the family unit, and social stability of the society as a whole. Therefore, prominent in wisdom was the recognition that fulfillment of God's will is actualized in the personal and social conduct and institutions of His people." (Bullock, 152)

D. Proverbial Forms

1. **BASIC FORM** -- In its basic form, the proverb is succinct and loaded with gems of truth for living a wisdom filled life. It is short and pithy. The proverbs dressed up "wisdom" with a garment of life and excitement making it very easy to grasp and apply to one's life.

In the words of Bullock, "the proverb is ancient saying that takes wisdom and endows it with youthful vigour. In a few, piquant phrases the proverb capsule a practical idea or truth in such a way as to lift the commonplace to a new level of mental consciousness. It reweaves the threadbare idea and shows the ordinary to be quite extraordinary." (Bullock, 146)

2. **NOT TO BE DIGESTED IN LARGE QUANTITIES** -- Easy to read and understand but many are hard to digest in large quantities. Like any excellent cuisine, proverbs must be carefully savoured for its full flavour to be appreciated by the reader. W. A. L. Elmslie has correctly called the basic form of Proverbs a "compressed experience".³ We need time to benefit from some of the proverbs. Only after much meditation will unfold the full meaning of:

³W. A. L. Elmslie, **Studies in Life from Jewish Proverbs**, (London: Clarke & Clarke, 1917), 16.

Proverbs 21:21 (KJV) “He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, righteousness, and honour.”

But there are others which are highly volatile and yield their content "with a sudden burst," which is part their appeal and power: (Bullock, 147)

Proverbs 17:1 (KJV) “Better *is* a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices *with* strife.”

Still others convey their truth with a bit of humorous wit:

Proverbs 17:16 (KJV) “Wherefore *is there* a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing *he hath* no heart *to it*?”

3. BEARS TIME TESTED TRUTHS -- Fundamental to the proverbial form is that "it bears a time-tested truth." (Bullock, 147) Time and experience are the soil in which truth is germinated and sustained. However, to the ones who do not possess the innate substance of new life (i.e. born again), the proverbs are stony ground.

E. Poetic Structure of Proverbs

1. TWO-LINES PROVERBS PREFERRED -- The book of Proverbs did not employ any one-line popular proverb like "A Rolling Stone Gathers no Moss" as the basic form. Rather the two-line proverb (*distich*) was used which was the basic form of *mishal* poetry. The two-line proverb takes four basic form with the second line being the variant. They are (taken from Bullock, 159-60):

- a) SYNONYMOUS PARALLELISM -- where the second line repeats the sense of the first in slightly different words. E.g.

Proverbs 11:25 (KJV)

“The liberal soul shall be made fat:
and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.”

Proverbs 16:13 (KJV)

“Righteous lips *are* the delight of kings;
and they love him that speaketh right.”

Proverbs 16:16 (KJV)

“How much better *is it* to get wisdom than gold!
and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!”

Proverbs 16:18 (KJV)

“Pride *goeth* before destruction,
and an haughty spirit before a fall.”

- b) ANTITHETICAL PARALLELISM -- which is predominant in 10:1-15:33 where the second line expresses the antithesis or contrary sense of the first line. E.g.

Proverbs 11:11 (KJV)

“By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted:
but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked.

Proverbs 11:12 (KJV)

“He that is void of wisdom despiseth his neighbour:
but a man of understanding holdeth his peace.”

Proverbs 11:13 (KJV)

“A talebearer revealeth secrets:
but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter.”

Proverbs 11:17 (KJV)

“The merciful man doeth good to his own soul:
but *he that is* cruel troubleth his own flesh.”

- c) **SYNTHETIC PARALLELISM** -- where the sense of the first line is extended in an expanded or amplified form. Rather than reiterating (*synonymous*) or contrasting (*antithetical*) in the second line the sense of the first, the synthetic form adds to the primary idea. E.g.

Proverbs 10:18 (KJV)

“He that hideth hatred *with* lying lips,
and he that uttereth a slander, *is* a fool.”

Proverbs 17:11 (KJV)

“An evil *man* seeketh only rebellion:
therefore a cruel messenger shall be sent against him.”

Proverbs 18:10 (KJV)

“The name of the LORD *is* a strong tower:
the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.”

- d) **COMPARATIVE OR EMBLEMATIC PARALLELISM** -- where some ethical point or practical truth is explained by an illustration from nature or experience. The primary idea may appear in the first or second line. E.g.

Proverbs 25:25 (KJV)

“*As* cold waters to a thirsty soul,
so *is* good news from a far country.”

Proverbs 17:12 (KJV)

“Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man,
rather than a fool in his folly.”

Proverbs 26:14 (KJV)

“*As* the door turneth upon his hinges,
so *doth* the slothful upon his bed.”

Proverbs 28:15 (KJV)

“*As* a roaring lion, and a ranging bear;
so is a wicked ruler over the poor people.”

2. **FOUR-LINE PROVERBS** -- The four-line proverb is based upon the multiple two-line proverb. Four-line proverbs are called *tetrastich*. They normally gives the variant element in the last two lines. E.g.

Synonymous

Proverbs 23:15-16 (KJV)

“My son, if thine heart be wise,
my heart shall rejoice, even mine.
16 Yea, my reins shall rejoice,
when thy lips speak right things.”

Proverbs 24:3-4 (KJV)

“Through wisdom is an house builded;
and by understanding it is established:
4 And by knowledge shall the chambers be filled
with all precious and pleasant riches.”

synthetic

Proverbs 30:5-6 (KJV)

“Every word of God *is* pure:
he *is* a shield unto them that put their trust in him.
6 Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee,
and thou be found a liar.”

Comparative or emblematic

Proverbs 25:16-17 (KJV)

“Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee,
lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it.
17 Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour's house;
lest he be weary of thee, and *so* hate thee.”

3. SIX-LINE PROVERB -- The longer and more reflective proverbs take the six-line proverb (*hexastich*). Frequently, the first two lines compose a prologue, and the following four lines provide the substance. E.g.

Proverbs 23:19-21 (KJV)

“Hear thou, my son, and be wise,
and guide thine heart in the way.
20 Be not among winebibbers;
among riotous eaters of flesh:
21 For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty:
and drowsiness shall clothe *a man* with rags.”

4. EIGHT-LINE PROVERB -- The eight line proverb may also be identified. E.g.

Proverbs 23:22-25 (KJV)

“Hearken unto thy father that begat thee,
and despise not thy mother when she is old.
23 Buy the truth, and sell *it* not;
also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.
24 The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice:
and he that begetteth a wise *child* shall have joy of him.
25 Thy father and thy mother shall be glad,
and she that bare thee shall rejoice.”

5. *A MASHAL ODE* -- The longer proverbs may be called the *mashal ode*, or song. Many of these are incorporated in 1:7-9:18 as well as in 22:17-21; 30:7-9.
6. The variety of forms from the different sections of the book of Proverbs may be tabulated as (taken from Bullock, 161):

POETIC FORMS IN PROVERB

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 1:7-9:18 | The predominant form is the <i>mashal ode</i> . |
| 10:1-22:16 | All are two-line proverbs, with the greatest number antithetic in form. |
| 22:17-24:22 | Most forms occur, although the four-line proverb is preferred. |
| 24:23-34 | The two-line as well as the four-line proverb is identifiable, along with the one <i>mashal ode</i> . |
| 25:1-29:27 | These are largely two-line proverbs, with the antithetic and comparative forms predominant. |
| 30:1-33 | This section contains the two-line, four-line, and numerical (<i>middah</i> - measure) proverbs. |
| 31:2-9 | The two- and four- line proverbs are identifiable. |
| 31:10-31 | This is an alphabetical acrostic poem. |

II. HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON PROVERBS

Unlike the books of Job and Ecclesiastes where each of them sets out to present a theological argument in a highly structured way, the book of Proverbs is not a theological treatise like them at all. Yet Proverbs is highly theological in its own way. "Underlying the book is a wisdom theology that seeks to bring individuals into a right relationship with God and with their neighbours." (Bullock, 161)

A. Theological Assumptions

1. **FIRST HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE** -- The first hermeneutical principle to bear in mind in the study of Proverbs is that the theological assumptions are often more important than the textual context. This is because the verse under consideration may be completely independent of the preceding verse or verses. It is in this sense that the context takes the back seat to theology.
2. **KNOW YOUR THEOLOGY** -- One's knowledge of the Bible becomes the framework from which we will understand Proverbs. For example Proverbs can be misconstrued as a book of do's and don't's where a person by obeying them can draw near to God.

Obedience to the wisdom taught in the book of Proverbs must be done by depending upon God's grace. We, especially the believer, cannot obey any of the instructions with our own strength. John 15:1-11 succinctly describes the great necessity for the believer to abide in Christ. Without Him we can do nothing.

B. Natural and Social/Moral Orders

1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NATURAL AND SOCIAL ORDER -- What we observe from the natural order has implications for our understanding of the social and or moral order. E.g.

PRO 6:6 Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise:

C. Principles Verses Promises

PROMISES IT IS NOT -- It is inappropriate to regard Proverbs as a book of promises. They are theological and pragmatic principles. E.g.

Proverbs 22:6 (KJV) “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

We may see this verse as a promise but upon closer consideration, we see that this verse states a principle of education and commitment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your impression of the Book of Proverbs? Is it a book that you have read before and are still reading today?
2. Why are you attending this Church Bible Study? Why is the Word of God important in the believer's life?
3. Find an example of an antithetical parallelism and explain its significance.
4. Find an example of an emblematic parallelism outside of the Book of Proverbs and explain its meaning.