

LESSON ONE INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS

I. OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

a. Genre

According to Jewish tradition, the Old Testament (or the Hebrew Bible) is divided into the Torah (the first five books of the Bible,) the Prophets, and the Writings. Proverbs, along with Job, Psalms, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes, belongs to the category called Writings. Additionally, the book of Proverbs belongs to a category of literature that is called Wisdom literature. Wisdom literature in the Bible is termed so because rather than dealing with the Law or addressing specific situations in the history of Israel, it tackles the theme of applied wisdom and it appeals to a broader audience than either the Torah or the prophets. The book of Proverbs is very practical in nature, and it does not require a covenant relationship with God in order for the principles set forth to make sense. It does however make the claim that all wisdom has its beginning point in God, and that a truly wise person would necessarily seek to have a proper relationship with Him. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures have their wisdom traditions and writings, but Proverbs is unique in making God the focal point of wise living.

b. Authorship

The book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings authored by several different men who were noted for their wisdom. Proverbs is traditionally attributed to King Solomon who is reputed to be one of the wisest men ever to live. Although much of the book is authored by Solomon, he is not the only one to contribute to this volume. Agur, Hezekiah, and Lemuel's mother are all said to have contributed portions to Proverbs. (We know nothing more of Agur and Lemuel's mother than what appears in Proverbs.)

c. Structure of the Book of Proverbs

I.	1:1-9:18	Prologue
II.	10 :1-22 :16	Proverbs of Solomon
III.	22:17-24:22	30 Sayings of the Wise
IV.	24:23-24	Further Sayings of the Wise
V.	25:1-29:27	Hezekiah's Collection of Solomon
VIA.	30:1-14	Agur's Oracle
VIB.	30:15-33	Agur's Numerical Sayings
VIIA .	31:1-9	Lemuel's Mother to Son
VIIIB.	31:10-31	Lemuel's Mother on Noble Wife

Although there is a definite structure to the book of Proverbs, there is a natural division between chapters 1-9 and 10-31 based on literary style. A cursory reading of the book will reveal that chapters 1-9 of Proverbs are much different in nature from the remainder of the book. Chapters 1-9 consists of a series of 12 poems or speeches, 10

of which are written from the perspective of a father counseling his son, with the remaining 2 poems presenting wisdom as a woman who calls out to all who will listen to her. The poems are extended teachings that contain their own structure. As such they are intended to be read and understood differently from the material that is presented in chapters 10-31. Most scholars believe that chapters 1-9 of Proverbs comprise the interpretive key for the rest of the book. The main thrust of the first nine chapters in Proverbs is that ethical behavior is rooted in relationship, and in particular a relationship with God. Wisdom can be gained from the rest of the book, but according to the teaching of the sages of Israel, unlike the wisdom literature of other cultures, there is no point to wisdom unless it is founded in the covenant relationship that God has with Israel.

Proverbs chapters 10-31 are what most what most people think of when they hear the term “proverb,” a short pithy saying that vividly depicts the truth about life. Although there is some structure to the rest of the book, chapters 10-31 are generally ethical admonitions. The point however again, is that the first nine chapters of Proverbs set the stage for the rest of the book. Proverbs 1:7 states that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The first nine chapters plead wisdom’s case for following her ways. The ultimate argument is that Wisdom has her source in God, and not just a generic god, but the covenant God of Israel, Yahweh. To give ethical commands to a person who has no relational base with Yahweh is pointless. There is no motivation other than living a decent life. Proverbs 1-9 makes the argument that the goal is not to live a good life, but to experience a relationship with the living God, and in and through that relationship, ethics will flow. Without that relationship, not only is it difficult to maintain the demands made by Proverbs 1-9, but they almost become oppressive. With an understanding of who this God is who makes these demands on our lives, and a very detailed presentation of all of the benefits of life with God, we have the hope and the source of strength to enable us to live a life garnered with wisdom. The reader of Proverbs today is encouraged to read and apply wisdom’s words as a means to a deeper relationship with God and not just as a way to a better life.

II. PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to teach wisdom and for the listener/reader to acquire wisdom. Both the father and the personified wisdom character are depicted as pleading with their audience to listen, acquire, internalize, and live out the principles that are set forth.

a. What is Wisdom

Webster’s dictionary gives the following definition of wisdom:

1. The right use or exercise of knowledge; the choice of laudable (praiseworthy) ends, and of the best means to accomplish them.
As a faculty of the mind: the faculty of discerning or judging what is most just, proper and useful. *Practical Wisdom*: Discretion

As an acquirement: the knowledge and use of what is best, most just, most proper, most conducive to prosperity or happiness.

(Wisdom vs. Prudence. Prudence is the exercise of sound judgment in avoiding evils; wisdom is the exercise of sound judgment either in avoiding evils or in attempting good.)

2. In Scripture, human learning; erudition; knowledge of arts and science.
3. Quickness of intellect; readiness of apprehension; dexterity in education.
4. Natural instinct and sagacity.
5. In Scripture theology, wisdom is true religion; godliness; piety; the knowledge and fear of God, and sincere and uniform obedience to his command. This is the wisdom that is from above. Psalm 90, Job 28
6. Profitable words or doctrine.

The Hebrew word for wisdom is *(hokmah)* and it essentially means “skill.” It is the skill of living, the ability to apply knowledge to our situations so that we will make wise choices, so that we will know how to speak, how to act, and when not to speak or act. It goes far beyond mere knowledge and/or intelligence. Many of us know people who are incredibly bright, but make very poor choices in their lives. There are also people who, although they do not have college degrees, they have made great choices in their lives and are living in the fruit their wise decisions.

In his book, *How to Read Proverbs*, Tremper Longman cites a book entitled *Emotional Intelligence*. He writes, “People who have a high I.Q. know many facts: they can solve difficult mathematical equations. Their ability to reason and use logic is superior to others’. People with emotional intelligence have other abilities, including “self-control, zeal and persistence and the ability to motivate oneself.” They also have “abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; empathize and to hope.” Biblical wisdom is much like emotional intelligence.”ⁱ The hope of the author of Proverbs is that his readers will be emotionally wise, that they will possess all the qualities listed above, and in doing so that they will experience depth and peace in their relationship with God.

b. Wisdom’s Associatesⁱⁱ

Throughout the book of Proverbs, wisdom is linked together with several other words to give a fuller orbbed definition of the quality of wisdom.

Discipline/correction (*musar*): Discipline/correction implies the threat of punishment or the application of punishment if the instruction is not obeyed. This punishment can be verbal (Prov. 12:1) or physical (Prov. 13:24). It is the duty of the teacher to apply such correction if the students disobey. Sometimes, though, the punishment comes naturally on the person who takes the wrong road.

Successful (*skl*): Can also mean to have insight, and refers to a moment of recognition of the true nature of a situation. This recognition allows the wise person to act or speak in an appropriate way.

Understanding (*bin*) or knowledge (*da'at*): Closely related to the idea of wisdom as discussed above.

True knowledge is always for a purpose and in relationship with other people, God, or creation.

Discretion (*mezimma*): discernment, the ability to differentiate the right way to handle life from the wrong way. Prudence is closely related. It describes one's ability to use reason to navigate the problems of life. Prudence carefully considers a situation before rushing in.

Right (*sedaq*), Just (*mispal*), and Fair (*mesarim*): These are ethical terms, and one cannot possess them without wisdom—nor wisdom without righteousness, justice, and virtue. In other words, wisdom in Proverbs is an ethical quality. The wise are on the side of good.

III. HOW DO WE READ AND INTERPRET PROVERBS?

a. Context

As in any study of the Bible, the most important element to keep in mind is to understand the entire context of the passage. It is very easy to take a verse out of Proverbs and misapply it as a specific promise for our lives. For example, Proverbs 10:27 says, "The fear of the LORD prolongs life, But the years of the wicked will be shortened." Is this a specific promise that if I live in a right relationship with the Lord that I will live a long life? Jesus only lived into his mid-thirties, does that mean that there was something inherently wrong in his relationship to God? Of course not. ***The most important principle to keep in mind when reading and studying Proverbs is that the book is about general truth and general principles, not specific promises. These general truths are shared within the broader context of Proverbs and so they need to be understood in light of what is taught throughout the whole book.*** The general principle in Proverbs 10:27 is that if I live according to God's principles then I will be avoiding behaviors and practices that are likely to shorten one's life. It does not promise that I will not get sick, but the bad guy will. We are in danger, not only of hurting ourselves, but also of misunderstanding who God is when we read Proverbs incorrectly.

b. Themes

Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly

It will also be helpful in reading Proverbs to understand the themes that are presented in the first nine chapters as they provide a rubric for understanding the

individual sayings. The grand theme in Proverbs 1-9 is that of two different paths. The author presents the path of righteousness that leads to life and the path of wickedness that leads to death; the reader is forced to make a decision between the two. These paths are represented by two women in the story: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. In chapters 1-9 Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly both plead with their audience, entreating them to come along with them. Both women make appealing offers and at the end of chapter nine, a banquet is laid out by both hostesses. The reader is left to decide whose banquet looks the most attractive. When reading the individual sayings in chapters 10-31, we need to keep in mind that although the banquet of the two women is not mentioned, in each of the sayings is the idea that our ethical behavior is an indicator of the path we are choosing. The individual proverbs are set forth to provide guidelines as to how we can stay on the right path and how truly destructive the wrong path can be in our lives. Ultimately, the choice is to either walk with or without God in one's life.

God's Covenant Relationship with Israel

Just beneath the surface of the majority of the book of Proverbs is the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, chapters six and eleven in particular. These two chapters of Deuteronomy are the cornerstone of Israel's faith. There are several similarities between the two books. The first is that of covenant faithfulness. God has made a promise to be faithful to Israel. He has promised never to leave or forsake His people. He may discipline them for turning away from Him, He may allow them to go their own way and suffer the natural consequences, but He will never abandon His own. Although God extends incredible graciousness to the Israelites, He also lays out the details of the relationship that He desires to have with them and so provides a guideline for living. To live in obedience is to experience His blessing, to live in disobedience is to bring about His curse.

The second similarity between the books is the idea of blessing and curse. The promise God makes is that to those who abide in Him and follow His ways, there will be blessing. For those who turn away from Him, there will be consequences. It is necessary to understand that the idea of curse in this context is simply that—negative consequences for choosing to follow God.

Deuteronomy 30:14-20

"But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. ¹⁵ "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; ¹⁶ in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. ¹⁷ "But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. ¹⁹ "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, ²⁰ by loving the LORD your God, by

obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

A third similarity important to notice is that of idolatry (which is also understood in terms of adultery.) Deuteronomy explains that to turn away from God is to turn toward idols and the sin of idolatry is extremely abhorrent to God. Proverbs explains this in terms of the wicked path, which is characterized by adulterous relationships. We will read more about the image of adultery in Lesson Two, but adultery is commonly used in the Old Testament to describe the Israelites worshipping other gods.

All three of these ideas, God's covenant faithfulness, blessings and curses, and idolatry/adultery serve as the undercurrent to the teachings throughout Proverbs. All of Proverbs needs to be read with these concepts swirling in the background.

c. Poetry

It would be counterproductive to read Proverbs without acknowledging that it is a form of Hebrew poetry. We read and understand poetry in a much different way than we do a narrative or a historical piece. Poetry uses different language that is not meant to be taken literally. Some of the poetic devices you will encounter in Proverbs are:

PARALLELISM: A poem of two lines with a correspondence that occurs between the two lines. The second part sharpens or intensifies the first.

"Righteous lips are the delight of kings, And he who speaks right is loved."
Proverbs 16:13

PARALLELISM OF OPPOSITES: antithetical parallelism, presents the same truth but from different perspectives.

"The wise woman builds her house, But the foolish tears it down with her own hands."
Proverbs 14:1

BETTER-THAN PROVERBS

"Better is a little with the fear of the LORD Than great treasure and turmoil with it. ¹⁷
Better is a dish of vegetables where love is Than a fattened ox *served* with hatred."
Proverbs 15:16-17

IMAGERY: to catch our attention.

"As a ring of gold in a swine's snout So *is* a beautiful woman who lacks discretion."
Proverbs 11:22

ACROSTICS: one that starts each new line with a consecutive letter of the alphabet. Proverbs 31 is one example. It is thought that this served to aid in memorization.

NUMERICAL PARALLELISM: X—X+1 pattern.

"There are three things which are too wonderful for me, Four which I do not understand:

¹⁹ The way of an eagle in the sky, The way of a serpent on a rock, The way of a ship in the middle of the sea, And the way of a man with a maid."

Proverbs 30:18-19

d. As it applies to us

A final very important thing to keep in mind when studying Proverbs is that wisdom is always on a continuum. The author of Proverbs uses the imagery of walking on either the path of righteousness or the path of destruction. It can be easy to dismiss the advice given because we don't see ourselves in the behavior that is described, but we need to take a step back and ask ourselves if we have taken any smaller steps toward that behavior. The father continually warns the son about the wiles of the adulteress woman. It isn't likely that the woman comes and scoops the boy up out of his home, rather he has taken some steps toward the trouble and if he continues on this path, it will result in ruin.

The point of Proverbs is to force us to examine our lives and to see where we are in each of these individual behaviors. We may not be a hothead as described in the book, but do we speak out of anger at our children or spouses, or other loved ones or strangers? It is important once again to keep in mind that the book of Proverbs is not primarily addressed to fools, because the fool will not listen. The book of Proverbs presents a picture of the fool so that both the mature and the immature will know what to avoid.

PRINCIPLES FOR READING THE BOOK OF PROVERBSⁱⁱⁱ

Proverbs are situation sensitive. We must not apply them mechanically or absolutely. Experience, observation, instruction, learning from mistakes and, most importantly, revelation—all these lay the groundwork for reading the text, reading people, and reading the situation.

1. Keep in mind the structure of the whole book of Proverbs as you read any part of it. In particular, make sure you read any passage of the book in the light of the imagery concerning the [two] path[s] and the two women that is developed in Proverbs 1-9 and reaches its climax in Proverbs 8-9.
2. Reflect on the parallelism of a proverb by asking how the second colon [line] sharpens or intensifies the thought of the first.
3. Identify the imagery in a passage, then unpack it by asking how the two things compared are similar and how they are different.
4. Think about the source of the wisdom of a passage. Does it come from observation, experience, tradition, revelation or any combination of these sources?
5. Is the passage an observation, a bit of advice, a warning, a reflection, or some other kind of teaching?
6. Since proverbs are not true in any and every circumstance, ask under what circumstances the proverb may or may not apply to a situation. How can you tell?
7. Does the proverb mention or imply a reward or punishment that will result from obedience or disobedience?
8. If the passage is addressed to a young man, ask how it applies to you.
9. When doing a topical study, read through the book of Proverbs and pinpoint the relevant verses. Group them together, then study each group.
10. Try to identify biblical stories or characters who may illustrate the truthfulness of the proverb(s) you are studying.
11. Does the New Testament address the topic or teaching of the passage you are studying?
12. Think of Christ as the fulfillment of wisdom and how he might illustrate the wisdom of the passage you are reading.

ⁱ Longman III, Tremper, *How to Read Proverbs*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 15.

ⁱⁱ Longman III, Tremper, *How to Read Proverbs*, 16-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Longman III, Tremper, *How to Read Proverbs*, 56-7.