

Introduction To Proverbs

I. **General Observations**

- A. The book of Proverbs is a marvelous collection of wise sayings and instructions for living a useful and effective life. The collection forms part of the larger group of biblical writings known as "wisdom literature" -- literature that gives instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life.
- B. Proverbial wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements; but books like Ecclesiastes and Job use lengthy monologues and dialogues to probe the meaning of life, the problem of good and evil and the relationship between God and people. This type of literature was common throughout the ancient Near East.
- C. The Hebrew term "proverb" means "a comparison," and it came to be used for any sage or moralistic pronouncement (cf. Ezekiel 18:2; Psalm 49:4). A proverb presents truths that are "parallel" or "similar." Many proverbs are condensed parables. This type of literature goes back in written form to about 2700 B.C. in Egypt. The second section (22:17-24:34) is similar to the proverbs of an Egyptian writer, Amenemop, who apparently antedated Solomon.

II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. The traditional view that Solomon wrote the entire book of Proverbs is supported by the titles in 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1. Moreover, Solomon was a wise man, writing proverbs and collecting sayings from other wise men (cf. 22:17-24:34). Proponents of this view have usually assumed that Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1) were pseudonyms of Solomon.
- B. This general view, however, is incorrect. Agur and Lemuel were not pseudonyms for Solomon and 22:17-24:34 forms a separate collection of proverbs because it has a distinct form, separate title and purpose. It is impossible to determine who added this material to the collection of Proverbs. Furthermore, the title of 1:1, which has generally been taken to head up 1:1-9:18, may not actually refer to these chapters; it may simply be the heading of the whole book in its final form and may not necessarily indicate that the first nine chapters are from Solomon.
- C. An examination of the titles in the book is important to the study of its authorship. The heading in 10:1 clearly credits Solomon for the subsequent material. In 10:1-22:16 there may be two collections (10:1-15:33; 16:1-22:16) due to the difference in style. The heading in 25:1 also affirms that Solomon was the author (or editor) of a larger collection from which the scribes of Hezekiah's court excerpted the

proverbs in 25:1-29:27. Once again there are differences of style between 25:1-27:27 and 28:1-29:27.

- D. In conclusion, then, Solomon is responsible for 10:1-22:16 and perhaps all or part of 25:1-29:27. The final section (30:1-31:31) was written at a later date by Agur, Lemuel and an unknown author. The prologue to the book (1:8-9:18) would have been added to form an introduction, certainly by the time of Hezekiah, and possibly in Solomon's time. Finally, 1:1-7 headed up the final collection as a title.

III. *Literary Forms*

- A. As with Psalms, Proverbs is classified as Hebrew poetry. Poetry was more common in Bible times in the ancient Near East than it is today in our Western civilization. About 40% of the Old Testament is written in poetry.
- B. A casual reading of the Proverbs reveals the general form of a proverb. It is a short sentence or phrase whose meaning is applicable in many situations. Many, but not all, of the proverbs use a likeness or comparison ("like" or "as") to teach their truths. A thorough analysis of the proverbs reveals that these short sayings follow many patterns and constructions that have bearing on the meanings.
- C. As with all Hebrew poetry, Proverbs uses different types of parallelism.
1. Synonymous parallelism expresses one idea in parallel but slightly different expressions: "A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul" (18:7).
 2. In antithetical parallelism the second line contrasts with the first: "The thoughts of the righteous are right: but the counsels of the wicked are deceit" (12:5).
 3. Emblematic parallelism uses a figurative illustration as one of the parallel units: "As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him" (10:26).
 4. Another helpful category is the general one of synthetic parallelism, in which the second line amplifies the first in some way: "The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil" (16:4).
 5. Lastly, proverbs whose second line simply completes the idea begun in the first are said to exhibit formal parallelism. One part may contain the subject and the second the predicate (15:31); the first line may state a condition and the second its consequences (16:7), its cause (16:12), or its purpose (15:24); and one part may state a preferred value or course over the other (15:16).
- D. Proverbs are essentially intended to teach, whether they follow the pattern of a formal instruction using imperatives or prohibitions (16:3; 23:9), are expressed in sayings that observe traits and acts that are to

- be followed or avoided (14:31), tell a story (7:6-23), make a speech relating to wisdom (8:1-36) or develop numerical sayings (6:16-19).
- E. Instructions often use motivations -- reasons for complying. The poet does not simply tell the facts. He arouses the emotions and stimulates the imagination. The most common form of motivation is a subordinate clause stating the purpose, result or reason for the instruction: "Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end" (19:20). Sometimes the motivation is implied in a general observation: "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth" (3:11-12).

IV. **Content**

- A. Proverbs 1:8-9:18 is an organized introduction to the book with many admonitions and prohibitions as well as stories and personified speech concerning wisdom. This section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1-7), but folly may hinder this purpose (1:8-33); there are advantages to seeking wisdom (2:1-4:27), but folly may prevent one from seeking it (5:1-6:19); there are likewise advantages to finding wisdom (6:20-9:12), but folly may prevent this too (9:13-18).
- B. Proverbs 10:1-22:16 is a collection of 375 unrelated proverbs. Then, there are two more collections of proverbs (22:17-24:22; 25:1-29:27). The last two sections include numerical sayings of the wise (30:10-33) and the acrostic poem on wisdom (31:10-31).
- C. The book of Proverbs covers a wide variety of topics, most of them connected with daily living. Almost every facet of human relationships is mentioned, and the teaching of the book is applicable to all people everywhere. Topics include such areas as wisdom in general, personal conduct, human attitudes (i.e., foolishness, humility, vengeance, strife, love, lust, laziness, pride), child-rearing, marital relationships, business tactics, use of money, friendship, instructions for rulers and judges and the use of alcohol.

V. **Scriptural Values**

- A. This collection of wise sayings is not exclusively religious; its teachings generally apply to human problems. The teacher concerns himself with plain, ordinary individuals who live in the world. Accordingly, the sayings exhibit several distinctive characteristics.
1. They focus attention on individuals rather than on the nation, setting forth the qualities needed and the dangers to be avoided by people seeking to find success with God.

2. They are applicable to all people at any period in history who face the same types of perils and have the same characteristics and abilities (1:20; 8:1-5). Proverbs was an antidote to the spiritual apostasy of Israel in the days of Solomon and Proverbs will help the spiritual apostasy of God's people today.
 3. They are based on respect for authority, traditional values and the wisdom of mature teachers (24:21).
 4. They are immensely practical, giving sound advice for developing personal qualities that are necessary to achieve success in this life and to avoid failure or shame, and warning that virtue is rewarded by prosperity and well-being but that vice leads to poverty and disaster.
- B. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Proverbs is a secular book; its teachings are solidly based on "the fear of the Lord" (1:7), making compliance with them morally and spiritually necessary.
1. In fact, the book teaches that this fear of the Lord is the evidence of faith; for the wise teacher tells people to trust in the Lord whose counsel stands (19:21) and not their own understanding (3:5-7).
 2. The purpose of proverbial teaching, then, is to inspire faith in the Lord (22:19). Such fear requires a personal knowledge of the Lord ("fear" and "knowledge" are parallel in 9:10) -- to find this fear is to find knowledge (2:5), a knowledge that comes by revelation (3:6).
 3. Ultimately, however, the fear of the Lord is manifested in a life of obedience, confessing and forsaking sin (28:18) and doing what is right (21:3), which is the Christian's job before God (17:3).
 4. Since the motivation for faith and obedience comes from the scripture, Proverbs relates the way of wisdom to the law (28:4; 29:18). So there really are no secular proverbs that can be contrasted with religious ones; everything on earth serves the purposes of God.
- C. Care must be given when reading Proverbs.
1. Proverbs are general maxims, not absolute guarantees.
 - a) A proverb states a general rule of godly living, but the reader must remember that often there are exceptions to the rule.
 - b) General rules are not always applicable in every circumstance (cf. 6:20; 10:3; 15:25; 16:3; 22:6, 26; 29:12).
 2. Proverbs are not complete statements of truth.
 - a) Do not isolate an individual proverb from the rest of Bible teaching.
 - b) Compare all of what the Bible says about a topic.
 3. Proverbs are often parabolic.
 - a) This means that they use figurative language, metaphors, exaggeration and other poetic devices.

- b) They point beyond themselves to a certain truth; therefore, they must not be read literally.
- 4. Proverbs often reflect ancient, Middle Eastern practices which must first be understood and then “translated” into our modern, Western world before they can be effective (cf. 11:1; 14:4; 17:3; 25:24; 26:8).