

Resource: Study Notes - Book Intros (Tyndale)

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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PRO

Proverbs

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Each day, life confronts us with many decisions. The book of Proverbs is a compass that helps us navigate the murky waters of life. It provides wisdom, instructions for living, and guidance for achieving strong character. Proverbs tells us how to succeed in any situation by remaining calm-headed in a crisis, patient when pressed, gentle when challenged, and firm when confronted with temptation. Above all, Proverbs shows us that the source of all wisdom is a right relationship with God.

Setting

Proverbs is a collection of sayings from various times and social contexts. Many individual proverbs find their primary setting in the royal court, addressing matters such as how to act in front of a king. Some proverbs have a family setting and best fit an agricultural context. Others pertain to the world of commerce, trade, and business. Much of Proverbs is directed toward a young man who seems to be at the age of beginning a profession. Proverbs offers wisdom and guidance for success in all the spheres of life that a person in ancient Israel might face. Yet it is also timeless, with significant application to readers today.

Summary

Proverbs is ancient Israel's anthology of wise sayings, advice, instructions, and warnings. The book has two major sections: It begins with talks that a father gives to his son ([chs 1–9](#)). These are followed by collections of wise sayings ([chs 10–31](#)) from a variety of authors on a wide range of topics; most frequently mentioned are wealth and poverty, planning, laziness, prostitutes, hard work, relationships, pride, and humility.

Genre and Style

Wise Sayings. In the ancient Near East, wise sayings were collected into anthologies for people to consult for guidance on a correct course of action. In Israel, as in neighboring nations, the purpose of these collections was to educate the young and give them direction for living well. Evidence suggests that Babylonian and Egyptian wisdom collections were incorporated in the curriculum of schools.

A proverb expresses an insight, observation, or piece of advice that has been popularly accepted as general truth. Often, uttering the right proverb at the appropriate time is all it takes to resolve a discussion.

Hebrew Poetry. Proverbs is also poetry. Its compact language holds a lot of content in few words. It is literature that rewards reflective time and meditation on its rich nuances. Many proverbs teach through poetic imagery. For example, laziness is discouraged through the use of a comparison with common irritants:

Lazy people irritate their employers,

like vinegar to the teeth or smoke in the eyes ([10:26](#)).

One important characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Many proverbs use *synonymous* parallelism—the second part continues and sharpens the thought of the first part:

The king is pleased with words from righteous lips;
he loves those who speak honestly ([16:13](#)).

Other proverbs are *antithetical*, meaning that the first and second parts are opposites:

A wise woman builds her home,

but a foolish woman tears it down with her own hands ([14:1](#)).

Still other proverbs make comparisons:

Better to have little, with fear for the Lord,

than to have great treasure and inner turmoil (15:16).

Awareness of these elements of Hebrew poetry enhances one's ability to understand and interpret the proverbs.

Authorship

Proverbs was begun by Solomon (1:1), a wise king (1 Kgs 3:5-15) who collected wise sayings and composed his own (1 Kgs 4:29-32). Material written or edited by later teachers was then added. For example, two hundred years after Solomon, "the advisers of King Hezekiah of Judah" collected additional proverbs of Solomon and added them to the anthology (Prov 25:1). Other composers or editors mentioned in Proverbs include Agur (30:1), Lemuel (31:1), and "the wise" (22:17; 24:23).

Some of the sayings are influenced by neighboring nations, such as the "thirty sayings" of the wise (22:17-24:22), which appear to have borrowed heavily from an Egyptian writing called *The Instruction of Amenemope* (around 1100 BC). Proverbs was edited to its final form several hundred years after Solomon's time.

Readers

Proverbs 1:8-9:18 contains a series of discourses from a father to a son. There is some debate as to whether this was a biological son or an apprentice since the recipient of the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* was an apprentice. However, the presence of the "mother" in Proverbs (e.g., 1:8) suggests a biological son.

Much of the material is more appropriate for young males than for women (such as warnings to avoid immoral women), yet Proverbs has a much broader audience than just young men. Its purpose is to teach wisdom to people (1:2), both to the simple (1:4) and to the wise (1:5). Proverbs is addressed to everyone—but not everyone will receive it (1:7).

Meaning and Message

Proverbs is a book of practical wisdom for life. It often takes the form of a father teaching his son. As the son walks the path of life, he will come to crossroads where he must make decisions about which way to go.

The book of Proverbs helps us to make right choices today. It teaches that there are rewards for wise behavior and punishments for foolish behavior. But while these rewards motivate us to

heed instruction, they are not universal promises. Proverbs offers principles that are generally true, but these principles do not always guarantee a favorable outcome. For example, a person who works hard and has integrity is likely to have more material resources than a lazy and shiftless person. However, a lazy person might inherit wealth, and a hard worker might lose wealth when exploited by a corrupt government official. (This disjunction between righteousness and material reward is a major theme of Job and Ecclesiastes.)

The advice of Proverbs sometimes seems to contradict itself, but wisdom and careful reading reveal the circumstances to which each piece of advice applies. Should we answer a fool's arguments? Or should we be silent when we realize that we are arguing with a fool (26:4-5)? It depends. We find the same thing with English aphorisms. On some occasions "Look before you leap" applies; other times we are reminded that "He who hesitates is lost." Contradictory sayings might both be true in different situations. The truly wise person knows when to apply a particular proverb and when not to.

The wisdom of Proverbs is practical, but the sayings contain much more than good advice. Real wisdom is based on a reverent, faith-filled relationship with God, who is the true source of all wisdom. This message is expressed in 1:7: "Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge." Proverbs invokes a fundamental spiritual choice, because there is no true wisdom apart from a living relationship with God.