



An Introduction to the Book of Proverbs

Author and Date

Proverbs itself mentions Solomon, who reigned circa 971-931 BC, as the author or collector of its contents (1:1 and 10:1), including the proverbs copied by Hezekiah's men (25:1). There are also two batches of sayings from a group called 'the wise' (22:17-24:22 and 24:23-34), as well as oracles from Agur (30:1-33) and Lemuel (31:1-9). However, no author is named for the song in praise of the excellent wife that ends the book (31:10-31).

Solomon's interest in proverbs is corroborated by 1 Kings 4:29-34: <<***Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. ... He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five***>>. However, the proverbs mentioned in Kings are not necessarily identical to those of the Book of Proverbs. First Kings speaks of Solomon composing proverbs about trees, beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish (1 Kings 4:33), but there are few such sayings in the Solomonic parts of Proverbs. Even so, there is nothing in the Bible to contradict the idea that Solomon was responsible for the portions of this book attributed to him. It is possible that he sponsored those who collected material from other sources, i.e the wise, Agur and Lemuel, but no one can be sure. At any rate the book does not claim that Solomon put it into its final form, since Hezekiah (Proverbs 25:1) reigned circa 715-686 BC, long after Solomon's time. There is a discussion regarding the identities of Agur and Lemuel in the comments made on the relevant chapters.

Today, many scholars assert that most of Proverbs was written much later than the time of Solomon, and many interpreters ascribe most of the contents of the book and certainly its final form to the postexilic period, i.e. after 539 BC, when the Hebrews were in contact with the Persians and then the Greeks. There is little clear evidence to support such scepticism, however. The Hebrew of Proverbs is not demonstrably of a late variety, and there are no bits of historical evidence within the text that speak against an origin in the 10th Century BC for the Solomonic

portions of Proverbs. To the contrary, there are three principal arguments for dating this material to the reign of Solomon, apart from the claim of 1:1.

First, wisdom texts very similar to Proverbs predate the Book of Proverbs by as much as a millennium. In addition to proverb texts from early Mesopotamia, a wide array of wisdom literature from Egypt has numerous and striking parallels to Proverbs. Some important ones are: The Instruction of Vizier Ptah-hotep, written in the 5th or 6th Egyptian Dynasty, circa 2500-2190 BC; The Instruction for Merikare, 10th Dynasty, circa 2106-2010 BC; and The Instruction of Amenemope, probably written circa 1250 BC. The existence of these and other wisdom texts shows that the practice of composing discourses on wisdom and collecting wise sayings was already ancient by the time of Solomon. The notion that interest in such material could not have evolved until late in Israelite history conflicts with the evidence.

The second argument is based in the nature of the Solomonic kingdom as described in the Bible. It is referred to as a golden age of peace, prosperity, and international prestige for Israel. As a rule, it is in such times that a flowering of literature occurs. For example, of the above Egyptian texts, Ptah-hotep is from the powerful Old Kingdom period, and Amenemope is from the New Kingdom period. Merikare is an exception, coming from the weaker First Intermediate Period of Egypt, but it is rooted in the wisdom of the Old Kingdom. Similarly, the giants of Greek dramatic literature: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, emerged in the 5th Century BC, during the time of the Athenian Empire, and it was also at that time that Socrates propelled Western philosophy forward. The greatest works of Latin literature, and in particular the Aeneid of Virgil, were written in the golden age of Augustus. Based on these analogies, it is much more likely that the bulk of Proverbs comes from the golden age of Solomon than from the much more humble age of Hezekiah, to say nothing of the postexilic period, when Jerusalem was a cultural backwater.

Third, the Jewish wisdom literature known to be from the postexilic period, especially Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus, circa 180 BC; and the pseudepigraphal Wisdom of Solomon from the 1st Century BC is noteworthy for being quite unlike Proverbs, clearly displaying the concerns of Hellenistic Judaism. Sirach seeks for a pious ideal based in following the already completed Hebrew Scriptures, and mentions particular figures in biblical and post-biblical history. The Wisdom of Solomon is concerned with matters of immortality, eschatology, and philosophy in a different way from Proverbs. There is a Lady Wisdom in the Wisdom of Solomon but, although clearly derived from Proverbs Chapter 8, this Lady Wisdom is described as an 'emanation of the glory of the Almighty' and the 'radiance of eternal light' (Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26), i.e. using terms unlike any used for Lady Wisdom in Proverbs Chapter 8 and thus reflecting a later era. Proverbs itself shows no indication of the postexilic age, either of the Persian or the Hellenistic period.

In summary, there is nothing that speaks against and much that speaks in favour of dating the materials in Proverbs to the Solomonic era. This does not mean that Solomon personally composed every proverb in the book, and the text does not say that he did. Further, the present form of the book is from a later time than the age of Solomon, but probably no later than Hezekiah.

Theme

Proverbs states its theme right at the book's beginning (1:1-7): its goal is to describe and instil 'wisdom' in God's people, a wisdom that is founded in the 'fear of the Lord' and that works out covenant life in the practical details of everyday situations and relationships.

Purpose

Proverbs is the prime example of 'Wisdom Literature' in the OT, the other books being Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon, together with the wisdom psalms, e.g. Psalm 112. In the NT, James is usually counted as a wisdom book, and parts of Jesus' teaching belong in this category as well.

It is sometimes said that the Wisdom Literature is separate from the rest of the OT, lacking an interest in God's choice of Israel and his overarching purpose for the nations, the law, the temple and priesthood, and sacred history. Wisdom Literature, it is said, is more about living in the creation than it is about God's work of redemption. This is a false opposition for several reasons.

Firstly, the OT presents God's redemption as restoring the damaged creature man to his proper function as set out in the creation narrative of Genesis. This covenant given through Moses does not specify all of God's rules; its purpose is to set out the constitution of the theocracy, to give general moral guidance, and to provide a system by which God's people can know his forgiveness. Some principles like those in Proverbs can be discerned by wise observation of God's world, and not all of the worthy observers come from Israel. Secondly, the wisdom psalms take wisdom themes and make them a part of Israel's hymnody and thus of its public worship. Thirdly, Proverbs bases its instruction on the fear of the Lord (1:7), using the special covenantal name of God, implying that its audience is the covenant people, as confirmed in Deuteronomy 6:2, 6:24 and 10:12. Fourthly, Proverbs has plenty of connections to the law: e.g. as confirmed in Proverbs 11:1 to Deuteronomy 25:13-16; and refer to Proverbs 29:18 for a positive assessment of both prophetic vision and the Law of Moses.

Nevertheless, Proverbs is not at all the same as the Law or the Prophets. The difference is one of emphasis rather than basic orientation. The Law and the Prophets lay their stress on the covenant people as a whole, called to show the world what restored humanity can be; Proverbs focuses on what such restoration should look like in day-to-day behaviour and in personal character.

A key term in Proverbs is of course 'wisdom'. The word, Hebrew *khokmah*, can have the nuance of 'skill', as it does in Exodus 28:3, particularly the skill of choosing the right course of action for the desired result. In the covenantal framework of Proverbs, it denotes 'skill in the art of godly living'.

The opening of the book also discloses its intended audience (Proverbs 1:4-5): the simple, the youth, the wise, and the one who understands. Questions about the book's purpose have focused on the identity of 'the youth' (1:4): is this any Israelite boy or girl, or is it specifically young men on the verge of adulthood, or is it young men who will serve the royal court?

The last option gets most of its support from the wisdom literature found in other lands of the ancient Near East, particularly Egypt and Mesopotamia, which seems to be oriented to preparing diligent and honest men to serve the royal bureaucracy. Since Proverbs has points of contact with this larger wisdom tradition, and since the 'words of the wise' (22:17-24:34) show an even closer connection to Egyptian wisdom, it can seem reasonable to attribute to Proverbs a similar function to wisdom in these other lands.

Such an attribution, however, runs into the simple fact that the collection of Proverbs, taken as a whole, repels the idea of a selective, elite audience, stressing instead the home and life in the village and farm. For example, the instructions are father, and sometimes mother (1:8) to son, and the situations envisioned are staples of ordinary life: marriage, raising children, discreet speech, diligence in harvest, concern for the poor neighbour, etc. Indeed, when Lady Wisdom offers her benefits, she calls out to everyone (8:4-5), particularly to every member of the covenant people.

Considering these aspects, and the list of addressees in 1:4-5, it is easy to see that the book is addressed to all the people of Israel, and through them to all mankind. The situations faced by the youth receive much attention, probably because they supply concrete examples from which others can generalise. Additionally, the 'wise' who pay attention will also benefit (1:5), so the audience is not limited to the youth. The best way to put this in light of the rest of the ancient Near East is to say that Proverbs represents the 'democratisation' of wisdom, the offer of it to all people.

The nature of Proverbs shows why Christians, who do not live in the theocracy established by the Mosaic covenant, should still find in this book wisdom for their lives. God gave the Mosaic covenant to his people out of his grace, in order to restore human life to its proper functioning within the specific context of the Israelite theocracy. In the same way the Christian message is God's gracious way of restoring human life for all kinds of people, fulfilling the promises made to the patriarchs. Both situations express the same grace of God, and both have the goal of restoring the image of God in man. Further, many of the proverbs make use of

wise observations of God's world, which is the same world in which Christians live today. For all the local features found in the book, e.g. a society based on agriculture, Palestinian climate and Mosaic institutions, its wisdom is universally applicable. Therefore it is no surprise that NT authors readily make use of its individual proverbs, e.g. Romans 12:20, using Proverbs 25:21-22; Hebrews 12:5-6, using Proverbs 3:11-12; and its broader themes, e.g. James as a wisdom book, setting the pattern for Christians of all ages.

Key Themes

Proverbs covers a wide array of topics from daily life: diligence and laziness (6:6-11); friendship (3:27-28 and 18:24); speech (10:19-21); marriage (18:22 and 19:14); child rearing (22:6); domestic peace (15:17 and 17:1); work (11:1); getting along and good manners (23:1-2, 25:16-17, 26:17-19 and 27:14); eternity (14:32 and 23:17-18); and much more. In each of these areas it offers wisdom for realising the life of the covenant in the details; it shows that **<<godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come>>** (1 Timothy 4:8). It demonstrates clearly that:

1. God's will is intensely practical, applying to every aspect of his people's lives. A proper relation to God involves trying hard to understand his truth, and then embracing and obeying what one understands.
2. A life lived by God's will is a happy life (3:21-26).
3. A life lived by God's will is a useful life (3:27-28, 12:18 and 12:25).
4. A life lived by God's will does not just happen; one must seek after it, study, pursue it, and discipline oneself.
5. Such a life is available to those who go after it (9:1-6).

History of Salvation Summary

The history of salvation generally deals with the overarching story of God's work in calling, preserving, and shaping a people for himself, through whom he will bring blessing to the whole world. It also takes up the unfolding of God's revelation, especially the developing idea of who the Messiah will be and what he will do. At first glance, Proverbs has little to do with this, focused as it is on the daily life of particular members of God's people. However, it has much in every way to offer. First, the people in Proverbs are God's covenant people, and the kings are Davidic. Second, concern for the well-being of the people as a whole is never absent from the book.

The connection of Proverbs to salvation history can be seen more fully from noticing how Psalms 111-112 work together: Psalm 111, a hymn of praise, celebrates the great works of the Lord that further his redemptive purpose for his people, while Psalm 112 is a wisdom psalm, looking very much like Proverbs set to

music. The two psalms have much in common, which invites the reader to connect them. The wisdom described in Psalm 112 and in Proverbs guides the particular Israelite in his priorities and choices, and enables him to contribute to the whole body of God's people. It is what leads the covenant members toward the ideal of likeness to God and properly functioning humanity, so that their lives carry something of a taste of Eden, and this is what the Gentiles need to see in them.

Character Types in Proverbs

To read Proverbs well, one must have a good grasp of who the character types are and what function they serve in the book.

The most obvious characters in the book are the wise, the fool, and the simple. Proverbs urges its readers to be wise, that is, to embrace God's covenant and to learn the skill of living out the covenant in everyday situations, as confirmed in 2:2. The wise person has done that, as confirmed in 10:1; usually Proverbs focuses on the one who has made good progress in that skill, whose example is worth following, as confirmed in 9:8b.

The fool is the person steadily opposed to God's covenant, as confirmed in 1:7b. The setting of Proverbs assumes there can be fools even among God's people. There are three Hebrew terms translated 'fool' (*kesil*, *'ewil* and *nabal*), with little difference among them. This kind of person resists even the offer of forgiveness found in the covenant (14:9 and 15:8). These people are dangerous in their influence (13:20 and 17:12), and cause grief to their parents (10:1); but they are not beyond hope (8:5).

The simple is the person who is not firmly committed, either to wisdom or to folly; he is easily misled (14:15). His trouble is that he does not apply himself to the discipline needed to gain and grow in wisdom.

Proverbs also uses other terms, both positive, e.g. righteous, upright, diligent, understanding and prudent, and negative, e.g. wicked, lazy and lacking sense. These do not designate different groups of people from the wise and the fools; rather, the terms are commonly 'co-referential', i.e. they apply to the same people looked at from different angles. The righteous is the one who has embraced the covenant, seen from the perspective of his faithfulness to God's will; the wise is the same person, seen from the perspective of his skill in living out God's will; the prudent is the same individual seen as one who carefully plans out his obedience. Likewise, the wicked is the one who rejects God's covenant, seen from the angle of his opposition to God; the fool is this same person, seen from the angle of the stupid course of life he has chosen.

The co-referential use of these terms helps the reader to discern the many-sided fruits of godliness and ungodliness.

Also, these characters usually serve as idealised portraits: that is, they denote people exemplary for their virtue and wisdom or especially despicable for their evil. The literary name for this is caricature: portraits of people with features exaggerated for easy identification. The positive figures serve as ideals for the faithful, to guide their conduct and character formation. The negative figures are exaggerated portraits of those who do not embrace the covenant, so the faithful can recognise these traits in themselves and flee them.

Beyond the co-referential negative terms, there are some gradations: the scoffer is worse than a fool (21:24), and the person wise in his own eyes is almost beyond hope (26:12). The difference is one of hardness in un-teachability, the great sin in Proverbs. The simple is not as far gone as the fool. All of these are what the OT calls 'uncircumcised in heart', and what Christian theology calls unregenerate.

Personified Wisdom and Christ

Proverbs commends pursuing wisdom, portraying it as a virtue. In four poems in Chapters 1-9, wisdom is also personified as a noble lady whom one should pursue:, contrasted with Lady Folly. The poem of Chapter 8 seems to go beyond personification to describing a personality, which has led to discussions of whether Christians should relate this description to Christ.

In the first few Christian centuries it was widely accepted that Christ was the incarnation of Wisdom in Chapter 8. The Septuagint translation of 8:22 was read to mean, 'the Lord created me', and thus the Arians, who denied the deity of Christ, found here a proof that the *Logos*, the 'Word' of John 1:1, was a creature, and not God. But Athanasius, defending the deity of Christ, took the text to refer to Christ's incarnation, and not to his pre-existence. The verse means that wisdom is the character of God by which he created (3:19), and therefore should not be taken as his creature; this is the wisdom he gives to those who will learn from Proverbs. In this light, neither side of those who based their discussion on the Septuagint had the correct understanding of the original Hebrew text.

It would appear, however, that Proverbs Chapter 8 played a role in the way NT authors described Christ. Paul's 'before all things' in Colossians 1:17 seems to draw on Proverbs 8:23-26, with its repeated 'before'. Wisdom in Proverbs Chapter 8 seems to be a personality. Indeed, it seems to be what rationality would be if it were a person by which God made the world. This is like Psalm 33:6a <<**By the word of the Lord the heavens were made**>>. The NT authors further expand this idea in texts such as John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16-17, Hebrews 1:3 and 1:10-12, all of which insist that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of that divine person through whom God made the world.

Literary Features

The Book of Proverbs is what the title implies – a collection or anthology of individual proverbs. In addition to being teachers and authority figures, the wise men of ancient cultures were literary craftsmen, careful observers of the human condition and masters of a particular kind of discourse. the proverb.

The first nine chapters of the book are wisdom poems that extend over several verses, urging the reader to pursue wisdom. The proverbs proper, the concise, memorable statement of two or three lines, begin in 10:1.

A proverb works by making a comparison, and leaving it to the reader to work out how the proverb applies to different situations, following current cultural conventions. In English, ‘You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink’ is regularly applied to human relationships rather than ranching, and the competent reader knows this.

One question in reading Proverbs concerns context, namely, is there any? The Purpose section has already argued that the covenant provides the theological context, hence God’s grace and Israel’s life in the land are always assumed; likewise, one can easily recognise subsistence agriculture i.e. living from one crop to the next, as the basic cultural context, hence wealth and poverty are understood in that setting. There is also literary context: Chapters 1-9 provide the ideals and motivation for pursuing wisdom, giving the right frame of mind in which to read the one-sentence proverbs. Additionally, Chapters 1-9 are composed of coherent paragraphs in which the individual verses have their meaning. But do paragraphs occur in Chapters 10-31, besides the acrostic poem (31:10-31)? It appears that in many cases they do, and so in reading the individual one-sentence proverbs, one must take account of their possible location in a paragraph context. The comments aim to apply this principle.

A feature of wisdom literature is its concreteness: i.e. the principle is often given in terms of a specific circumstance or a specific person, rather than in terms of a generalisation about people. The false balance, contrasted with the just weight (11:1), is a particular instance of the difference between swindling and honesty in one’s work ethic and commercial dealings. A father speaks to his son, recalling his own boyhood (4:1-4), as a specific parent speaking to a particular child rather than to one’s children or to children in general. The idea is not to exclude, say, fathers speaking to daughters or mothers speaking to sons and daughters; rather, by reflecting on a specific instance the wise reader will perceive the application to his or her own situation, and making the appropriate adaptations.

In some cases individual proverbs seem to supply contradictions; the best example is 26:4-5, admonishing not to answer a fool, and then to answer a fool. These are only contradictory if it is forgotten that they are proverbs and not laws: the

successive verses apply in different situations. Most languages have the same phenomenon: English has ‘Many hands make light work’ and ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth’. At first sight these seem contradictory, but wisdom includes competence in matching the proverb to the right situation.

Proverbs of necessity focus on consequences, and this raises the question of whether they are promises. Proverbs by nature deal with general truths, and are not meant to cover every conceivable situation. Consider the English proverb, ‘Short cuts make long delays’; the very form of the proverb forbids adding qualifiers, whether of frequency, e.g. often, usually, four times out of five; or of conditions, i.e. except in cases where ...; these would lessen the memorability of the sentence. The competent reader knows that the force of the proverb is not statistical, but behavioural, in the case of the English proverb cited, to urge due caution. In biblical proverbs, the consequences generally make God’s basic attitude clear, and thus commend or discourage behaviour.

Proverbs often seem to be mere observations about life, but their deeper meanings will reveal themselves if the following grid is applied:

1. What virtue does this proverb commend?
2. What vice does it hold up for disapproval?
3. What value does it affirm?

Outline

- I. Prologue (1:1-7)
- II. A Father’s Invitation to Wisdom (1:8-9:18)
 - a. Warnings against Evil Companions (1:8-19)
 - b. The Call of Wisdom (1:20-33)
 - c. The Value of Wisdom (2:1-22)
 - d. Admonition to Trust and Honour God (3:1-12)
 - e. A Hymn to Wisdom (3:13-20)
 - i. The True Wealth (3:13-18)
 - ii. God’s Wisdom in Creation (3:19-20)
 - f. The True Security (3:21-35)
 - g. Parental Advice (4:1-9)
 - h. Admonition to Keep to the Right Path (4:10-27)
 - i. The Two Ways (4:10-19)
 - ii. Maintain a Heart of Wisdom (4:20-27)

- i. Warning against Impurity and Infidelity (5:1-23)
- j. Practical Admonitions (6:1-35)
 - i. Warnings Relating to Securing Debt, Sloth, and Sowing Discord (6:1-19)
 - ii. Adultery Leads to Ruin (6:20-35)
- k. The False Attractions of Adultery (7:1-27)
- l. Second Wisdom Appeal (8:1-36)
 - i. The Gifts of Wisdom (8:1-21)
 - ii. Wisdom's Part in Creation (8:22-36)
- m. Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly (9:1-18)
 - i. Wisdom's Feast (9:1-6)
 - ii. General Maxims (9:7-12)
 - iii. Folly's Invitation and Promise (9:13-18)
- III. Wise Sayings of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
- IV. Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:22)
- V. Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)
- VI. Further Wise Sayings of Solomon (25:1-29:27)
- VII. Sayings of Agur (30:1-33)
- VIII. The Teaching of King Lemuel's Mother (31:1-9)
- IX. Ode to a Capable Wife (31:10-31)