

SESSION ELEVEN

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Proverbs—Part I

I. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Proverbs represents an essential part of the wisdom literature of the Bible. Before discussing the details of the book itself, it would be helpful to see how this material contributes to God's overall program. We would do well to see Proverbs against the background of God's missionary call upon the nation of Israel:

"See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deut 4:5-6).

Biblical wisdom should not be confused with *intellectual acumen*, for biblical wisdom is skillful living that flows from a relationship with the Lord and an obedience to Him.

II. WISDOM TRADITION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Many studies have been conducted comparing the wisdom literature of the Bible with other cultures of the Ancient Near East. Wisdom literature resembling what we have in Proverbs is well attested in other ANE cultures such as Egyptian and Babylonian/Assyrian.

- A. **Waltke** notes, "The comparison made in 1 Kings 4:29-34 between Solomon's wisdom and that of the ancient Near Eastern sages strongly implies that his proverbs were a part of an international, pan-oriental, wisdom literature."¹

"Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. And Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations" (1 Kgs 4:29-31).

1. Examples of Babylonian sources of wisdom literature:
 - a. *Counsels of Wisdom* (ca. 1500-1000 BC)

¹Bruce Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *BibSac* 136:543 (Jul-Sep 1979): 221-238.

- b. *Akkadian Proverbs* (ca. 1800-1600 BC)
- c. *The Words of Aḫiqar* (700-670 BC)²

The Words of *Aḫiqar*

“I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than [grief].”

Proverbs 27:3

“A stone is heavy and the sand weighty; But the provocation of a fool is heavier than both of them.”

2. Biblical References to Babylonian wise men

Isa 47:1,10; Jer 50:35; 51:57; Dan 1:4,20; 2:13-14; 5:8

- B. At Ebla**, tablets containing collections of proverbs were found whose paleography points to a period around 2450 BC.
- C. Edmund Gordon** has found and published two collections of Sumerian proverbs that have strikingly similar form to the Solomonic collection. Date: ca. 1700 BC.
- D. Instructional literature from Egypt** is very similar to the admonitions in Proverbs 1:2–9:18 and 22:17–24:34.

1. Egyptian Sources (examples):

- a. The Instruction of Ptah-ho-tep (ca. 2450 BC)

Ptah-ho-tep was an old counselor (and high court official) who had the responsibility of instructing the king's son on the actions and attitudes which would make a successful official of the state. His responsibility was to prepare the son to replace the father in court by teaching self-control in temperament, speech, and action, so that the son might be successful.

- (1) "Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones"³
- (2) Comparison with Proverbs 25:13

²*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 429.

³*Ibid.*, 412.

Ptah-ho-tep	Proverbs 25:13
"If thou art a man of intimacy, whom one great man sends to another, be thoroughly reliable when he sends thee. Carry out the errand for him as he has spoken" (<i>ANET</i> , 413).	"Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest, is a faithful messenger to those who send him, for he refreshes the soul of his masters."

(3) Comparison with Proverbs 23:1-3

Ptah-ho-tep	Proverbs 23:1-3
"If thou art one of those sitting at the table of one greater than thyself, take what he may give when it is set before thy nose. Thou shouldst gaze at what is before thee. Do not pierce him with many stares, (for such) an aggression against him is an abomination to the <i>ka</i> . Let thy face be case down until he addresses thee, and thou shouldst speak only when he addresses thee" (<i>ANET</i> , 412).	"When you sit down to dine with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you; and put a knife to your throat if you are a man of great appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for it is deceptive food."

b. The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope (*ca.* 1300-900 BC)

This contains a king's teachings to his son about life, using words and phrases similar to Proverbs.

Examples: Listen, my son
path of life
the way

c. *The Instruction of Ani* (11th-8th cent. BC)

"Be on thy guard against a woman from abroad, who is not known in her (own) town. Do not stare at her when she passes by. Do not know her carnally: a deep water, whose windings one knows not, a woman who is far away from her husband."⁴

d. Biblical data related to Egyptian wisdom

Gen 41:8; Ex 7:11; 1 Kgs 4:30; Isa 19:11-12

E. Conclusion

1. "In short, wisdom literature existed around the Fertile Crescent not only before Solomon but even before the Hebrews appeared in history!"⁵
2. The uniqueness of Israel's wisdom: the crediting of Yahweh as the source and bestower of true wisdom (1:7). Allen Ross adds, "To the Hebrews the success of wisdom did not simply require a compliance with wise instructions but trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord (Prov 1:7; 3:5-6; 9:10), who created everything and governs both the world of nature and human history (3:19-20; 16:4; 21:1)."⁶

While Proverbs does exhibit similarities to wisdom collections of other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, these other collections were not anchored in the one Creator, the covenant-keeping God. Instead, there was an impersonal sense to their gods and the application of their brand of wisdom was most often left up to the good will of the individual rather than an appeal to YHWH. To be wise in the biblical sense, one must begin with a proper relationship to YHWH.

Despite the uniqueness of the biblical wisdom literature, comparative studies with other ANE literature can be beneficial as Ross has noted,

This literary background is helpful to understanding the biblical book. First, it provides help in understanding the forms of wisdom literature—proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions. Second, it indicates the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, especially Proverbs 1–9, which was once considered to be the latest form. But it now can be demonstrated that the literary proverb of two lines may be as old as the Sumerian proverbs, and that collected instructions may be as ancient as the Old Kingdom of Egypt. . . .

Another concept found in both Hebrew and Egyptian literature is the rhetorical use of personification to convey abstract concepts such as intelligence, understanding, justice, and skill. The biblical figure of personified wisdom (Prov 8) corresponds to the personification of *maat* in Egyptian art and literature.⁷

⁴Ibid., 420.

⁵Waltke, 223.

⁶Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 5:885.

⁷Ibid. "Maat" is described as a fixed, eternal religious order, manifested in the stability of nature, in justice in society, and in the integrity of the individual's life (cf. James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 214).

III. AUTHORSHIP OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

- A. In light of statements found in 1:1, 10:1 and 25:1, Solomon is certainly responsible for much of the material in the book (cf. 1 Kgs 4:29-32).
- B. Mention of Agur in 30:1 and Lemuel in 31:1 indicates that wisdom material from others was included.
- C. The material in 22:17–24:34 seems to have a distinctive form, separate title and purpose (which could imply different authorship).⁸
- D. If the material in 1:1-7 is an introduction to the entire book rather than the first major section of 1:8–9:18 (as seems to be the case, since we do not really encounter individual "proverbs" until 10:1), this would leave open the question about the authorship of the first major section.
- E. Reference to the work of Hezekiah's men in 25:1 indicates that the editing of some of Solomon's material was finalized long after his death. [Hezekiah's reign is dated 729-686 BC, though the first 15 years were a coregency with his father].
- F. Though Lemuel is responsible for 31:1-9, the final section about the "virtuous woman" (31:10-31) may have come from a different hand.

IV. THE COMPOSITION OF THE BOOK

- A. "A collection of collections of wisdom material"
- B. **Headings:** 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1
- C. **Outline**
 - 1. Introduction (1:1-7)
 - 2. A father's admonition to acquire wisdom (1:8–9:18)

"Proverbs 1:8–9:18 appears to be an organized introduction to the book with many admonitions and prohibitions as well as example stories and personified wisdom-speech. This section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1-7), but folly may interrupt 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 advantages to finding wisdom (6:20–9:12), but folly may prevent this too (9:13-18)."⁹
 - 3. First collection of Solomonic proverbs (10:1–22:16)
 - 4. Appendices to the first Solomonic collection (22:17–24:34)
 - a. First appendix: 'the sayings of the wise' (22:17–24:22)

⁸Regarding the possibility that the material in 22:17–24:34 may even have some dependence on the "Instruction of Amenemope," see J. Ruffle, "The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection With the Book of Proverbs," *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977): 65.

⁹Ross, 5:889.

- b. Second appendix: supplement to the 'sayings of the wise' (24:23-34)
- 5. Second collection of Solomonic proverbs, done by the "men of Hezekiah" (25:1–29:27)
- 6. Appendices
 - a. First appendix — words of Agur, son of Jakeh (30:1-33) *Numerical Proverbs*
 - b. Second appendix — words of King Lemuel (31:1-9)
 - c. Third appendix — the acrostic ode to the virtuous woman (31:10-31)

V. THE INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS (1:1-7)

A. The Title (1:1)

1. *Proverbs* (*māšāl* – מִשְׁלָּל) = a comparison
 - a. Despite the title, we do not actually encounter "proverbs" until 10:1.
 - b. The word "proverb" has the basic idea of "likeness"
[the noun is derived from the verb מִשְׁלָּל meaning "represent, be like"]
Notice how the niph'al verb form is used in Ps 49:12 [MT 13]:

"But man in *his* pomp will not endure;

He is like (מִשְׁלָּל) the beasts that perish."

Thus, a proverb is basically an object lesson based on or using some comparison or analogy. It is a statement in concise form of a principle or sentiment whose meaning is applicable in many situations.

- c. The purpose of a *proverb* is to help one choose the best course of action.
2. *of Solomon*
 - a. An example of the grace of God is that a son of David and Bathsheba could rise to such heights as being a king and an author of Scripture.
 - b. An example of the sovereignty of God is using a situation that began with immorality, murder and death to ultimately bring forth a great king, the wisest man who lived [though the end of his life was rather tragic].

B. The Purpose (1:2-6)

1. In verse two, we are given *two basic purposes* for the proverbs:
 - a. to give moral prudence and skillfulness for holy living (1:2a)
 - b. to give mental discernment (1:2b)
2. Verses 3-6 serve to elaborate the two basic purposes presented in verse two.

- a. The first point (about moral prudence and skillfulness in holy living) is developed in vv 3-5, culminating in verse 5 with an exhortation.
 - b. The second point (about mental discernment) is developed in vs 6.
3. A Detailed Look at Verse Two
- a. Literally, the text says in vs 2a "to know wisdom and discipline." The *NIV* translates "know" as "attain," because the verse implies that one has put this into practice in his life. In the Hebrew sense, one does not "know," if he has not truly lived out the truth.
 - b. "Wisdom" (*hokmâ* - חֹכְמָה) - basically means "to have a skill" (cf. Ex 31:6).
In Proverbs, "wisdom" does not mean encyclopedic knowledge, but *skillful living*, i.e., the ability to make wise choices and live successfully.
 - c. "Discipline" (*mûsâr* - מוֹסֵר) - basically means "discipline, correction"
Note that the *NASB* translates as "instruction," but the *NIV* renders this more properly as "discipline." Ross (5:905) points out that this "denotes the training of the moral nature, involving the correcting of waywardness toward folly and the development of reverence to the Lord and personal integrity."
 - d. The second purpose (vs 2b) has to do with discernment (from the Hebrew verb *bîn* (בִּין) meaning "discern, distinguish").
NASB = "to discern the sayings of understanding"
NIV = "for understanding words of insight"
The book of Proverbs will train people through various literary devices (including proverbs) to discern lessons about life.
4. Verses 3-5 (which develop the first purpose given in 2a)
- a. Verse 3a — the infinitive "to be prudent" is in construct to "discipline." The idea is that one acquires discipline that produces prudent living. The one who is "prudent" is able to *look ahead*, to *have foresight* (anticipating the outcome of things). Proverbs 22:3 states,
*"The prudent sees the evil and hides himself,
But the naive go on, and are punished for it."*
 - b. Verse 3b — such prudent living will manifest itself in one's life in three ways: righteousness, justice and equity.
 - c. Verse 4 — presumes that one does not know these virtues intuitively, and thus there is a need to come to the Lord for such training. It is not necessarily wrong for one to be "naive," for that is simply the state of *youth* when one is untrained and inexperienced. But the one who is "naive" must be open to being taught, lest he be taken advantage of. The word translated "naive" (or "simple") comes from the verb *pātāh* (פָּתַח) which

means to "be spacious, wide, open." Thus, the one who is "naive" is *wide-open*, and hence gullible (not discerning). Yet this is not a morally neutral world, and one must know how to avoid foolish mistakes and not be *taken in* by evil.

- d. Verse 5 — a brief digression to provide an exhortation. The book is not simply for the naive, for even those who have already embarked upon the path of wisdom can learn even more to navigate this life successfully.
5. Verse 6 (which develops the second purpose given in 2b)

One must develop the ability to understand the language of "the wise," because wisdom can come in several forms.

C. The Motto (1:7)

1. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

Fear = reverential awe which leads to submission to God's authority and majesty.

Yet this is more than just a polite reverence for God. One should realize that He is a God to whom man is accountable and by whom man is evaluated and disciplined. Out of this perspective of God—that He is a holy God who holds man accountable—the man of wisdom develops a hatred for all that is evil (Prov 8:13).

2. "Fools despise wisdom and instruction."

The fool is the one who fails to see any value in God's wisdom and instruction, and therefore makes no effort to inculcate this in his life. He thinks he knows everything to handle life, and stubbornly refuses to heed correction and therefore never learns from his mistakes.

