

SESSION TWELVE

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Proverbs—Part II

I. LITERARY FORMS: PARALLELISM

In the Book of Proverbs, we have numerous examples of "parallelism." This is a poetic technique in which pairs of statements are laid alongside one another in order to clarify or amplify a thought.¹

- A. Synonymous** — both lines have similar intent, meaning, or theme but stated in different words. The second line often repeats the first in changed form to maximize the clarity of the concept.

Ex: Prov 16:28

*"A perverse man spreads strife,
And a slanderer separates intimate friends."*

- B. Antithetical** — the lines have opposite outcomes and are in contrast to each other.

Ex: Prov 10:1

*"A wise son makes a father glad,
But a foolish son is a grief to his mother."*

- C. Emblematic** — when the first line is an emblem, illustration, type or example drawn from nature or daily life. The connection is between the tangible, concrete emblem and the wisdom principle that it symbolizes in the second line.

Ex: Prov 27:15

*"A constant dripping on a day of steady rain
And a contentious woman are alike."*

- D. Synthetic** — the lines are a pair of ideas that have subtle relation to each other.

Ex: Prov 21:27

*"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination,
How much more when he brings it with evil intent!"*

II. HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PROVERBS

Note: Credit for much of the material in this section goes to Greg W. Parsons.²

¹For more help with Hebrew parallelism, see William Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983); and James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, Conn: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).

A. Interpret individual passages in light of the overall structure, purpose, and "motto" of the book of Proverbs.

1. Structure — see the previous session on Proverbs–Part I
2. Purpose and Setting [stated in 1:2-6]
 - a. to give moral prudence and skillfulness for holy living (1:2a, 3-5)
 - b. to give mental discernment (1:2b,6)

This includes discerning the meaning of various kinds of wisdom sayings such as proverbs, riddles, and figurative maxims or expressions (6).
3. Setting

Parsons suggests, ". . . 'instructional manual' designed 'for use by the young men of Israel's society who were being groomed for positions of leadership.'"³
4. Motto

See 1:7 (and note the inclusio with 9:10). Bullock writes,

Thus in Proverbs the underlying basis of life is one's relationship to God. Out of that relationship grow moral understanding and the ability to judge what is right (2:6-22), a proper attitude toward material possessions (3:9-10), industrious labor (6:6-11), the necessary equilibrium and sense of security for living in the world (3:21-26), and the right relationship toward one's neighbor (3:27-29) to mention only a few of the more practical benefits of that relationship.⁴

B. Recognize the various literary forms and devices (the "building blocks" of the individual passages or proverbs) as a clue to the context.

1. Two Basic Literary Forms
 - a. The Wisdom Sentence — An observation based on experience which is stated in the indicative mood (e.g., Prov 12:4).
 - b. The Admonition — In the imperative mood, either a positive command or negative prohibition (found in ch 1–9 & 22:17–24:22).
2. Poetic Parallelism

The two most common ones in Proverbs are "antithetic" (e.g., 12:5) and "emblematic" (10:26; 25:25; and 26:20). The clue to the first is the word "but," and the clue to the second is a word such as "like" or "as." In the latter, one must determine the common denominators in the comparison.

²Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *BibSac* 150 (Apr-Jun 1993):151-70. For further help in the area of hermeneutics, see David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989, 17-30; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 195-203; and C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 146-65.

³Parsons, 153-54 (citing Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 26).

⁴Bullock, 148.

C. Beware of the erroneous assumption that Proverbs are unconditional promises.

1. Assumptions of Proverbial wisdom

Creation is viewed as the basis for order in the universe. An implication of this is that God through wisdom placed "order" in the very fabric of the cosmos.

There is a certain assumption that the physical and moral universe operates by cause and effect. Hubbard states that the various

analogies and comparisons between animal life and human experience make sense (see chap. 30) because behind both stands the hand of the one Creator. It is that hand which underlies the *cause-and-effect* pattern of proverbs, where good conduct carries its own reward and bad behavior brings its own woe.⁵

2. The Nature of Proverbial Wisdom

a. These are not *legal guarantees* from God, but rather poetic guidelines for good behavior.

b. The proverbs tell what generally takes place without making an irreversible rule that fits all circumstances.

c. "The very literary form necessitates that they overstate the case and oversimplify without including 'fine print' or 'footnotes' with 'lists of exceptions.'"⁶

d. Illustration: Prov 3:1-2

Here we have a command followed by a motivation/reward. We need to keep the distinction, for the command is always true while the motivating reward must be tempered by the sovereignty of God (e.g., Jesus would be an exception to this).

3. Examples of Specific Limitation⁷ (stated or implied)

Prov 26:4-5

Prov 15:1

4. The Literary Context of Wisdom Literature as a Whole

Some balance is provided by Job & Ecclesiastes:

"The message of these two books, illustrates that the proverbs are ultimately limited by the mystery of Yahweh's sovereignty."⁸

D. Realize that some proverbs are unconditionally true

(E.g., Prov 16:2,12,33)

This is especially true when connected to an attribute or action of God. Parsons writes,

⁵Hubbard, 25.

⁶Parsons, 159.

⁷See Parsons, 160, for discussion.

⁸Ibid., 160.

. . . ultimately the way to decide whether a proverb is always true or limited to certain circumstances is not by means of a subjective 'vote' but by correlation with the rest of the biblical canon, beginning with the context of the Book of Proverbs and of wisdom literature as a whole and concluding with the New Testament evidence.⁹

E. Interpret the Book of Proverbs in light of the historical-cultural context of extrabiblical wisdom literature¹⁰

1. Some of these are wise sayings from other cultures, of which Solomon is the inspired editor or collector (see 31:1).
2. Prov 26:17 — Not a pet dog but a wild scavenger similar to a jackal.

III. FURTHER GUIDELINES FOR THE PROPER HANDLING OF PROVERBS¹¹

1. Proverbs are often parabolic, i.e., figurative, pointing beyond themselves.
2. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.
4. Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior—just the opposite!
5. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture may need sensible "translation" so as not to lose their meaning.
6. Proverbs are not guarantees from God, but poetic guidelines for good behavior.
7. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any of a variety of literary techniques to make their point.
8. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life, but are not exhaustive in their coverage.
9. Wrongly used, proverbs might justify a crass, materialistic lifestyle. Rightly used, proverbs will provide practical advice for daily living.

IV. WORDS AND SPEAKING IN PROVERBS

The following list on the use of words and speaking in Proverbs is taken from the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament), ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 918. Cf. Allen Ross, Topical Index in "Proverbs," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1991), 897-903.

A. The Wrong Uses of Words

1. Lying

⁹Ibid., 161.

¹⁰See Waltke ("The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *BibSac* 136:543 [Jul-Sep, 1979]: 223-26) for commonality of literary forms between Proverbs and the Egyptian literature.

¹¹ Acknowledgment: Fee & Stuart, *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 203.

- 6:16-17a; 10:18a; 12:19, 22a; 17:4b, 7; 19:5b, 9b, 22b; 21:6; 26:28a
2. Slandering
10:18b; 30:10
 3. Gossiping
11:13; 16:28b; 17:9b; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20, 22
 4. Constant Talking
10:8, 10b, 19; 17:28; 18:2; 20:19b
 5. False Witnessing
12:17b; 14:5b, 25b; 19:5a, 28a; 21:28; 25:18
 6. Mocking
13:1b; 14:6a; 15:12; 17:5a; 19:29a; 21:11a; 22:10; 24:9b; 30:17
 7. Harsh Talking (perverse, reckless, harsh, evil, sly words)
10:31b-32; 12:18a; 13:3b; 14:3a; 15:1b, 28b; 17:4a; 19:1, 28b
 8. Boasting
17:17a; 20:14; 25:14; 27:1-2
 9. Quarreling
13:10; 15:18; 17:14, 19; 19:13; 20:3; 21:9, 19; 22:10; 25:24; 26:17, 20-21; 27:15
 10. Deceiving
7:19-20; 12:2; 15:4b; 25:23
 11. Flattering
26:28b; 28:23; 29:5
 12. Ignorant or foolish words
14:7; 15:2b, 7-14; 18:6-7

B. The Right Uses of Words

1. Words that help and encourage
10:11a, 20a, 21a; 12:14a, 18b; 15:4a; 18:4, 20-21
2. Words that express wisdom
10:13a, 31a; 14:3b; 15:2a, 7a; 16:10, 21b, 23b; 20:15
3. Words that are few
10:19; 11:12b; 13:3a; 17:27a
4. Words that are fitting (kind, appropriate, pleasant)
10:32a; 12:25; 15:1a, 4a, 23; 16:24; 25:11, 15
5. Words that are true

12:17a, 19a, 22b; 14:5a, 25a

6. Words that are carefully chosen

13:3a; 15:28; 16:23a; 21:23