

Proverbs

Scripture: Proverbs

Code: MSB20

Title

The title in the Hebrew Bible is “The Proverbs of Solomon” (1:1), as also in the Greek Septuagint (LXX). Proverbs pulls together the most important 513 of the over 3,000 proverbs pondered by Solomon (1 Kin. 4:32; Eccl. 12:9), along with some proverbs of others whom Solomon likely influenced. The word “proverb” means “to be like,” thus Proverbs is a book of comparisons between common, concrete images and life’s most profound truths. Proverbs are simple, moral statements (or illustrations) that highlight and teach fundamental realities about life. Solomon sought God’s wisdom (2 Chr. 1:8–12) and offered “pithy sayings” designed to make men contemplate 1) the fear of God and 2) living by His wisdom (1:7; 9:10). The sum of this wisdom is personified in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).

Author and Date

The phrase “Proverbs of Solomon” is more a title than an absolute statement of authorship (1:1). While King Solomon, who ruled Israel from 971–931 B.C. and was granted great wisdom by God (see 1 Kin. 4:29–34), is the author of the didactic section (chaps. 1–9) and the proverbs of 10:1–22:16, he is likely only the compiler of the “sayings of the wise” in 22:17–24:34, which are of an uncertain date before Solomon’s reign. The collection in chaps. 25–29 was originally composed by Solomon (25:1) but copied and included later by Judah’s king Hezekiah (ca. 715–686 B.C.). Chapter 30 reflects the words of Agur and chap. 31 the words of Lemuel, who perhaps was Solomon. Proverbs was not assembled in its final form until Hezekiah’s day or after. Solomon authored his proverbs before his heart was turned away from God (1 Kin. 11:1–11), since the book reveals a godly perspective and is addressed to the “naive” and “young” who need to learn the fear of God. Solomon also wrote Psalms 72 and 127, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. See Introduction: Author and Date for Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.

Background and Setting

The book reflects a 3-fold setting as: 1) general wisdom literature; 2) insights from the royal court; and 3) instruction offered in the tender relationship of a father and mother with their children, all designed to produce meditation on God. Since Proverbs is Wisdom literature, by nature it is sometimes difficult to understand (1:6). Wisdom literature is part of the whole of OT truth; the Priest gave the *Law*, the Prophet gave a *Word* from the Lord, and the Sage (or wise man) gave his wise *Counsel* (Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26). In Proverbs, Solomon the Sage gives insight into the “knotty” issues of life (1:6) which are not directly addressed in the Law or the Prophets. Though it is practical, Proverbs is not superficial or external because it contains moral and ethical elements stressing upright living which flow out of a right relationship with God. In 4:1–4, Solomon connected 3 generations as he entrusted to his son Rehoboam what he learned at the feet of David and Bathsheba. Proverbs is both a pattern for the tender impartation of truth from generation to

generation, as well as a vast resource for the content of the truth to be imparted. Proverbs contains the principles and applications of Scripture which the godly characters of the Bible illustrate in their lives.

Historical and Theological Themes

Solomon came to the throne with great promise, privilege, and opportunity. God had granted his request for understanding (1 Kin. 3:9–12; 2 Chr. 1:10, 11), and his wisdom exceeded all others (1 Kin. 4:29–31). However, the shocking reality is that he failed to live out the truth that he knew and even taught his son Rehoboam (1 Kin. 11:1, 4, 6, 7–11), who subsequently rejected his father's teaching (1 Kin. 12:6–11).

Proverbs contains a gold mine of biblical theology, reflecting themes of Scripture brought to the level of practical righteousness (1:3), by addressing man's ethical choices, calling into question how he thinks, lives, and manages his daily life in light of divine truth. More specifically, Proverbs calls man to live as the Creator intended him to live when He made man (Ps. 90:1, 2, 12).

The recurring promise of Proverbs is that generally the wise (the righteous who obey God) live longer (9:11), prosper (2:20–22), experience joy (3:13–18) and the goodness of God temporally (12:21), while fools suffer shame (3:35) and death (10:21). On the other hand, it must be remembered that this general principle is balanced by the reality that the wicked sometimes prosper (Ps. 73:3, 12), though only temporarily (Ps. 73:17–19). Job illustrates that there are occasions when the godly wise are struck with disaster and suffering.

There are a number of important themes addressed in Proverbs, which are offered in random order and address different topics, so that it is helpful to study the proverbs thematically as illustrated.

I. Man's Relationship to God

A. His Trust Prov. 22:19

B. His Humility Prov. 3:34

C. His Fear of God Prov. 1:7

D. His Righteousness Prov. 10:25

E. His Sin Prov. 28:13

F. His Obedience Prov. 6:23

G. Facing Reward Prov. 12:28

H. Facing Tests Prov. 17:3

I. Facing Blessing Prov. 10:22

J. Facing Death Prov. 15:11

II. Man's Relationship to Himself

A. His Character Prov. 20:11

B. His Wisdom Prov. 1:5

C. His Foolishness Prov. 26:10,11

D. His Speech Prov. 18:21

E. His Self Control Prov. 6:9-11

F. His Kindness Prov. 3:3

G. His Wealth Prov. 11:4

H. His Pride Prov. 27:1

I. His Anger Prov. 29:11

J. His Laziness Prov. 13:4

III. Man's Relationship to Others

A. His Love Prov. 8:17

B. His Friends Prov. 17:17

C. His Enemies Prov. 19:27

D. His Truthfulness Prov. 23:23

E. His Gossip Prov. 20:19

F. As a Father Prov. 20:7; 31:2-9

G. As a Mother Prov. 31:10-31

H. As Children Prov. 3:1-3

I. In Educating Children Prov. 4:1-4

J. In Disciplining Children Prov. 22:6

The two major themes which are interwoven and overlapping throughout Proverbs are wisdom and folly. Wisdom, which includes knowledge, understanding, instruction, discretion, and obedience, is built on the fear of the Lord and the Word of God. Folly is everything opposite to wisdom.

Interpretive Challenges

The first challenge is the generally elusive nature of Wisdom literature itself. Like the parables, the intended truths are often veiled from understanding if given only a cursory glance, and thus must be pondered in the heart (1:6; 2:1-4; 4:4-9).

Another challenge is the extensive use of parallelism, which is the placing of truths side by side so that the second line expands, completes, defines, emphasizes, or reaches the logical conclusion, the ultimate end, or, in some cases, the contrasting point of view. Often the actual parallel is only implied. For example, 12:13 contains an unstated, but clearly implied parallel, in that the righteous one comes through trouble because of his virtuous speech (cf. 28:7). In interpreting the Proverbs, one must: 1) determine the parallelism and often complete what is assumed and not stated by the author; 2) identify the figures of speech and rephrase the thought without those figures; 3) summarize the lesson or principle of the proverb in a few words; 4) describe the behavior that is taught; and 5) find examples inside Scripture.

Challenges are also found in the various contexts of Proverbs, all of which affect interpretation and understanding. First, there is the setting in which they were spoken; this is largely the context of the young men in the royal court of the king. Second, there is the setting of the book as a whole and how its teachings are to be understood in light of the rest of Scripture. For example, there is much to be gained by comparing the wisdom Solomon taught with the wisdom Christ personified. Third, there is the historical context in which the principles and truths draw on illustrations from their own day.

A final area of challenge comes in understanding that proverbs are divine guidelines and wise observations, i.e., teaching underlying principles (24:3, 4) which are not always inflexible laws or absolute promises. These expressions of general truth (cf. 10:27; 22:4) generally do have "exceptions," due to the uncertainty of life and unpredictable behavior of fallen men. God does not guarantee uniform outcome or application for each proverb, but in studying them and applying them, one comes to contemplate the mind of God, His character, His attributes, His works, and His blessings. All of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge expressed in Proverbs are hidden in Christ (Col. 2:3).

Outline

I. Prologue (1:1-7)

A. Title (1:1)

B. Purpose (1:2–6)

C. Theme (1:7)

II. Praise and Wisdom to the Young (1:8–9:18)

III. Proverbs for Everyone (10:1–29:27)

A. From Solomon (10:1–22:16)

B. From Wise Men (22:17–24:34)

C. From Solomon Collected by Hezekiah (25:1–29:27)

IV. Personal Notes (30:1–31:31)

A. From Agur (30:1–33)

B. From Lemuel (31:1–31)

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).