

Unit 1 Introduction

Introduction to Wisdom and Proverbs

James implored his audience to consider this important question, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (James 3:13). The wisdom that James referred to is a significant topic of concern in the Bible, and it is a central theme in the book of Proverbs, along with Job and Ecclesiastes. While wisdom can be found in other sections of the Old Testament, these three books essentially comprise what scholars refer to as the wisdom tradition in our Bibles.

Wisdom, according to the biblical text, was not exclusively equated with a high IQ, but could manifest itself in many ways. A wise person possessed technical skills, such as a craftsman (Exodus 31:3-4), artisan (1 Kings 7:14), or an experienced navigator (Ezekiel 27:8-9). Others, like Solomon, who displayed an encyclopedic knowledge about animal and plant life, were deemed to be prudent (1 Kings 4:32-33). Wisdom also extended into the social realm of life. An individual who could adeptly read people and successfully navigate relationships in various contexts exhibited insight. Moreover, the person who acquired a proper understanding of God and lived according to God’s instructions with a sense of reverential awe and respect demonstrated understanding. Based on this criteria, the truly wise person was able to make sound, godly choices in life. Just as Proverbs aptly proclaims, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7), so James also noted that a wise person is one who lives a good life and whose works are “done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13).

Since the wisdom in Proverbs is the focus of study for this unit, an introductory word about the book is in order. Proverbs derives from the Hebrew word *meshallim*. As such, the term is translated “wise sayings” or “figures of speech.” As the title suggests, the book of Proverbs is a collection of short, pithy aphorisms that contain brief expressions of truth. These compact sayings were meant to be easily remembered so their message could be applied to life (i.e., “a penny saved is a penny earned”). Proverbs is also qualitatively different than the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. While Proverbs is referred to as “practical” wisdom, Job and Ecclesiastes are more “reflective” or “speculative” in nature. The latter are more philosophical as they wrestle with the deep and difficult questions of life such as, “Why do the righteous suffer?” (as in the case of Job), and “What is the meaning of life?” (which is central to Ecclesiastes). Proverbs, on the other hand, is more hands-on as it contemplates the types of decisions and actions that lead to a successful and productive life. Although religious language can be found in Proverbs (1:7; 3:5-12; 15:3, 8-9, 11; 16:1-9; 24:18, 21), it does not dominate. Furthermore, references to the stories of Israel’s ancestors, the exodus from Egypt, God’s

covenant with Israel, the history of the people in the land, and the prophets are missing. It is on this basis that some have said Proverbs has a “secular” feel to it. As Fee and Stuart rightly note, however, “not everything in life has to be religious to be godly.”

It is difficult to say with certainty the historical setting in which Proverbs was composed. Wisdom writing was an international affair, and it permeated the ancient Near East. The biblical writers were aware of these various wisdom traditions and likely drew from them as well. Parallels to Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources within Proverbs are possible to detect. Proverbs 22:17—24:22, for example, shows a close resemblance to the sayings of the Egyptian sage, Amen-em-opet. The superscriptions in 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1 attribute Proverbs to King Solomon. Ancient Jewish interpreters, according to the Babylonian Talmud, also believed that much of the material was composed by the son of David. The Old Testament seems to reinforce this idea by referencing the great wisdom Solomon received from God (1 Kings 3:1-15) and the 3,000 proverbs he composed as the king of Israel (1 Kings 4:29-33). Information from the book itself, however, seems to speak of a more complex literary history. Certain sections of Proverbs, for example, are ascribed to various wisdom teachers such as Agur (Proverbs 30:1-14) and Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1-9), while other parts are attributed to unidentified authors (Proverbs 24:23-34). In addition, scribes associated with King Hezekiah appear to have played a role in the transmission of certain wisdom sayings (Proverbs 25:1—29:27). On the basis of this and other information, modern scholars contend that the book is most likely comprised of a wide collection of materials as the book grew in stages over time.

Scholars have also tied instructional literature to royal courts since government officials would draw upon this information to train young men for public leadership in royal, priestly, and other administrative roles. Wisdom also had domestic origins as it developed and was transmitted in the home. Since the family represented the first and most important social order, parents created wise sayings and used them to teach important lessons about life, the world, and their children’s place in it. Wisdom was then shared with other members of society through trade or times when the community gathered. Elders of the community imparted wise sayings, like those incorporated in Proverbs, to young men so as to guide them in the paths of prudent living. Wisdom teachers enticed young men to follow their teachings by personifying wisdom as a woman whom they called “Lady Wisdom” (Proverbs 1—9). Lady Wisdom was often contrasted with the promiscuous and adulterous woman (Proverbs

5:2-6; 7:6-23) and/or the foolish woman (Proverbs 9:13-18). Since these women were considered dangerous, the sages discouraged associations with them as they had the tendency to lead many young men to their own destruction. Conversely, young men were strongly encouraged to pursue Lady Wisdom, because she would bestow blessing, honor, and life to those who chased after her (Proverbs 3:13-18).

The practical nature of Proverbs is embedded within creation itself. The Israelite sages believed that the world was created on the principles of wisdom, order, and logic. Proverbs claims that wisdom was with God when God established the universe, and that God patterned the world upon the precepts of wisdom (Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:22-31). Consequently, they believed that a person could perceive the inherent stability and order of the universe with God's assistance (Proverbs 1:7; 2:6-7; 3:5-8) and by carefully observing the inner workings of the natural world and taking note of the lessons they provided. The writers encouraged people to pay attention to the daily habits of creatures like the ant, for example, whose hard work and preparation provided valuable life instructions (Proverbs 6:6-10). By observing ants carefully store away food for times of uncertainty, attentive individuals realized that virtues like diligence, perseverance, and preparation successfully prevented social ills such as poverty and hunger.

Since wisdom was woven into the very fabric of the universe, the wise person would seek to live in concert with its basic tenets. To the sages, this meant that individuals should live their lives in such a manner that respected, promoted, and maintained the stability wisdom provided; whether on the religious, societal, and/or political level. Thus, the wise person helped to preserve the harmony and well-being of society by maintaining self-control (Proverbs 16:32; 15:28; 17:27), by responsibly teaching and training one's children (Proverbs 1:8; 4:3-4; 6:20; 22:6), by respecting government leaders (23:1-3; 24:21-22), by ensuring justice (Proverbs 17:15, 23; 18:5), and displaying generosity (Proverbs 14:21; 17:9; 21:23; 25:21) within the community. The foolish individual upset this order by exhibiting destructive behaviors (such as anger, hatred, greed, and maliciousness) that undermined the well-being of the family and society (Proverbs 10:12; 15:18; 16:28; 24:29; 28:25).

Because the patterns of life within the universe displayed a sense of stability and predictability, the wisdom writers were able to detect a direct correlation between human choices and their consequences.

Proverbs, therefore, embodies the accumulated knowledge of people who lived life and observed the results of making sound choices as opposed to unwise ones. One source notes, "Wisdom was a product of the people, rooted in the experiences of life and representing the distillation of those experiences." Given that practical wisdom arose out of lived experience, those sages and elders, who had accrued important life lessons over the course of their lives, desired to pass this knowledge on in order to help the younger generation avoid the pitfalls into which they had seen foolish people fall.

Proverbs is also practical in the sense that it applies to a wide range of issues pertaining to daily life. According to Proverbs, wise individuals are not controlled by their emotions or passions. They know how to restrain their speech/tongue, avoid gossip and lying, and learn to speak an appropriate word at the right time (Proverbs 11:13; 12:6, 19, 22; 13:3; 15:1-2; 25:11). The wise are slow to anger; they control their emotions and tempers so that they do not respond in ways that they will later regret (Proverbs 14:29-30; 15:18; 16:32; 17:27-28). The wisdom writers also stressed the importance of hard work, industriousness, preparation for the future, and honest business practices (Proverbs 11:1; 20:17). They understood that undesirable qualities such as laziness and slothfulness would lead to a life of hunger and destitution (6:4-11; 10:3-5; 12:11; 19:15). In addition, they were sensitive to the fact that the wise are not given over to habits and behaviors that would impede success in life such as drunkenness and irresponsibility (23:29-32; 24:30-34). Moreover, they noted that wise persons were teachable and open to correction. The wise did not eschew discipline, but accepted and learned from reproof (Proverbs 3:11-12).

The writers of Proverbs demonstrate throughout the book that the path of wisdom produces a bounty of blessings and rewards. They stressed that the "fruits" of wise living far outweigh the harmful results of foolish decisions. Wisdom produces long life, peace, happiness, riches, honor, pleasantness, and peace (Proverbs 3:13-18). The kind of life that is available to those who would hear and follow wisdom's call.

KEVIN MELLISH is professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament at Olivet Nazarene University. He has written a commentary on *1 and 2 Samuel* in the *New Beacon Hill Commentary Series* and is presently writing a volume on *Interpreting the Historical Books* in the *Reading and Interpreting the Bible Series*.