

Proverbs 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 02 March 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 1. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity, to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth. Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head, and pendants for your neck.

My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, come with us, let us lie in wait for blood, let us ambush the innocent without reason. Like Sheol, let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit. We shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder. Throw in your lot among us, we will all have one purse. My son, do not walk in the way with them. Hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood. For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird. But these men lie in wait for their own blood. They set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. It takes away the life of its possessors. Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the market she raises her voice. At the head of the noisy street she cries out. At the entrance of the city gate she speaks. How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing, and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you. I will make my words known to you, because I have called and you refuse to listen, have stretched out my hand, and no one has heeded. Because you have ignored all my counsel, and would have none of my reproof. I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind. When distress and anguish come upon you, then they will call upon me, but I will not answer. They will seek me diligently, but will not find me, because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them. But whoever listens to me will dwell secure, and will be at ease, without dread of disaster. As we start the book of Proverbs, we should consider its significance as a book of wisdom. Themes of wisdom pervade the biblical text from the very beginning of the scripture, where the Lord acts to create the world in wisdom, as Adam and Eve seek wisdom through eating of the forbidden fruit, as characters like Jacob display cunning in their actions, and Joseph through wisdom interprets the dreams of Pharaoh, and administers the grain supply of Egypt with great prudence. Wisdom is associated with knowledge, with skill, with the ability to get things done. The Lord created using his wisdom. Psalm 104 verse 24, O Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom have you made them all! The earth is full of your creatures! Wisdom is associated with the art of living well, with the practical reason that is honed over time. It's associated with experience and maturity. It can be spoken of as a gift of God, as we see in the story of Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 3.

It's also a result of searching and listening, as we will see in Proverbs chapter 2 and in chapter 3 verse 13. The practice of obedience is foundational for its attainment. It's also realised in community with the wise, as you spend time in the counsel of those who have already attained it. Wisdom is a prerequisite for just judgment and ruling. The knowledge of good and evil is associated with wisdom in various parts of scripture. Wisdom is especially needed for those who act as kings. Wisdom is also something that acknowledges the riddle character of life, the patterns of human life that have to be puzzled out and understood over time. The book of Proverbs, in Hebrew, Greek and English, is named after its distinctive genre of the proverb. There is abundant evidence that the book of Proverbs was considered authoritative from earlier on. Its ordering in our canon connects it with other books that are attributed to Solomon. The Hebrew canon divides the scriptures into the law, the prophets and the writings, and in that canon the book of Proverbs is found among the writings. The writings in turn are divided into three poetic books, Psalms, Job and Proverbs, five festival scrolls, Ruth, Song of Songs,

[5 : 17] Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Esther, and then Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. The book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon in the superscription, as in Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Within the historical narrative, King Solomon is synonymous with wisdom. That there should be an association with Solomon and the book of Proverbs and its wisdom is as natural as the association between King David and the Psalms. Whereas the law in scripture presents people with a do this, don't do that pattern for behaviour, the wisdom literature works in terms of the categories of wisdom and folly, focusing not so much upon commandments, but upon the rationale for behaviour and the consequences of good and bad courses of action. In the process it helps us to understand more of the logic behind the law, of the goodness of the law, that the law is not just arbitrarily imposed upon us, but that it is reasonable and good, and that those that follow it will typically prosper. While the primary form of the law is a word imposed upon people from without that they submit to and acknowledge, wisdom is arrived at through reflection upon the world. The law itself already makes movements towards helping people to understand its inner rationale. In books like Deuteronomy we see the condensed form of the law in the Ten Commandments and then that expounded in the chapters that follow. As the hero of the law meditates upon the connection between these things and the connection between the law and the narrative, a deeper understanding will emerge. Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 5 to 8 gives some sense of the wisdom that will arise as people live in terms of and seek to understand the logic of the law.

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules, so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Just as the law in its wisdom was supposed to draw other nations to look to and learn from Israel, so the wisdom literature was also something that should have drawn other nations to learn from Israel.

The Queen of Sheba and various other people in the region came to learn from Solomon in his day. The wisdom of Solomon came from an insight into the world, from a knowledge of a natural law, the logic that God had built into his creation. It is not directly dictated, as the law is, rather it arises from the insight that the Lord gave to Solomon into his world and the way that it works.

The revelation of the wisdom literature is not so much an object in itself, a body of special revelation delivered by God like the Ten Commandments, rather it is the result of the Holy Spirit opening people's eyes to see the revelation in the world. Consequently, there is a very strong empirical character to the book of Proverbs. This is the result of reflection upon God's world and upon society. On account of this empirical character and the fact that its character is special revelation arises more from the manner of its disclosure than from the truths disclosed, we can see a great many parallels between the book of Proverbs and other works of wisdom literature in the ancient Near East. This shouldn't surprise us. They are all looking at the same world.

[8 : 51] Wisdom is a sort of order imminent in creation. It is a matter not primarily of speculative reason, but of practical reason. It is discovered as the art of living well. In scripture, such wisdom can be seen in rule and the exercise of power. It can also be seen in the cunning of those who are in positions of weakness, but manage to outwit those who are more powerful. Some have suggested that the books of Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes can be related to different periods of the wise person's life. The Solomon of Song of Songs is the youthful Solomon, the Solomon of Proverbs is the father of the young man, and the Solomon of Ecclesiastes is the older Solomon looking back over his life. Although this is a speculative theory, and many would dispute it, it does bring to light the importance of time and wisdom. Wisdom is learned through experience, through passing through various seasons of life.

As the wise person grows through these various seasons in life, they colour and help him to grow in his insight. While the book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon at the beginning, other people are mentioned as authors or compilers of it. In chapter 22 verse 17 and 24 verse 23, the wise are mentioned as authors of some of the material. In chapter 30 verse 1, Agur is mentioned, and King Lemuel is mentioned in chapter 31 verse 1 as passing on the teaching that his mother gave him. Advisors of King Hezekiah are also mentioned as exercising a scribal or editorial role in chapter 25 verse 1.

Proverbs generally emerge in an oral context, and then they are authored and collected. Solomon did not write the whole book, but he seems to be foundational to the collection. The historical account of 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29 to 34 records the fact that Solomon was the author of many proverbs. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Calcol, and Dada, the sons of Mahal. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon, to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. Several proverbs speak to situations that seem to be rather distant from the life of the court. Even in chapter 1 there is the warning to the young man against falling in with gangs, expressing a temptation that a young prince would probably not feel as keenly in the same form. Solomon is not necessarily the author of chapters 1 to 9, and various other parts of the book. The book seems to have been open and added to for quite some time. There are various verses that are nearly repeated.

Chapter 14 verse 12 is very similar to chapter 16 verse 25, verses 10 and 11 of chapter 6, to chapter 24 verses 33 to 34, chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 15 verse 20. It is important to recognize various editorial hands in compiling and gathering the material together and forming it into a unified work. It is important, however, to pay attention to the final product and the context of this work.

It is a canonical text with a unified character of its own. Its material is not ordered in a haphazard manner, but there is a logic and an overarching order. The superscriptions of the text give us some indication of the structure of the book. Chapter 1 verses 1 to 7 is the preamble. That's followed in chapter 1 verse 8 to 9 verse 18 with an extended discourse on wisdom. Chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 22 verse 16 is a collection of Solomonic proverbs. Chapter 22 verse 17 to 24 verse 34 are the sayings of the wise. Chapter 25 verse 1 to 29 verse 27 are more Solomonic proverbs. Chapter 30 verses 1 to 33 are the sayings of Agur. Chapter 31 verses 1 to 9 are sayings of King Lemuel. And then the final part of the book in verses 10 to 31 of chapter 31, it's a great poem to the virtuous woman. Although the main body of the book contains classic proverbs, there are genre distinctions. Chapters 1 to 9 contain discourses and speeches, whereas chapter 10 to 31 contain the more typical form that we think of as proverbs.

[13 : 38] And the proverbs themselves seem to speak to and come from various contexts. Some speak to a court context, for instance chapter 23 verses 1 to 3. Others are more agricultural, as in chapter 10 verse 5.

As in the book of Jeremiah, which was also compiled of various material over time, the book of proverbs has an order difference between the Masoretic Hebrew and the Septuagint text. The later part of the book is ordered as follows. The sayings of Agur come first, followed by the further sayings of the wise, then the numerical parallelisms of chapter 30 verses 15 to 33, then the sayings of King Lemuel, more Solomonic proverbs compiled by Hezekiah's men, and then finally the poem to the virtuous woman.

Most of the proverbs that we have in this book are brief statements of truth. They can be observations, exhortations, or other sorts of declarations. However, it is important that they be used properly, in the right time and circumstance. There are conditions for the truth of a proverb that must be understood. Many hands make light work, and too many cooks spoil the broth, seem to have opposing meanings. But in the right context, they are both true.

In the mouths of the wise, they are powerful, but in the mouths of fools, they are destructive. Improperly used, they can be useless or worse, something that the book of proverbs itself highlights.

Chapter 15 verse 23 speaks of the importance of the apt answer, the word that's spoken in season. Chapter 26 verse 7 declares, Proverbs are typically poetic and usually terser in Hebrew than they are in translation.

[15 : 26] As we move forward in the book, we'll see different types. There are antithetical ones, there are better than proverbs, there are proverbs that compare things to others, saying that they are like them. There are also number parallelisms, such as we see in chapter 30 verses 18 to 19.

The prologue of the book, in chapters 1 to 9, largely contains speeches from the father to the son, and from lady wisdom to young men. Within these chapters, the fundamental lessons are taught about the correct posture towards wisdom. Young men are taught about the danger of evil associations, the importance of giving their heart to wisdom, the blessings and the goodness and the integrity of wisdom, the importance of being mindful of your path and guarding your heart, the danger of gangs and promiscuous women, the importance of the fear of the Lord over everything else, and the long-term benefits of the way of wisdom. The chapter begins by introducing us to the source of the book, Solomon, who is the author and perhaps also compiler of some of the foundational material.

He's the son of David and the king of Israel, both things that qualify him as someone to learn wisdom from. It's not addressed to a particular named person, which perhaps, as Bruce Waltke suggests, gives it a more democratic character. Following the introduction of the author, there is a preamble containing the purpose of the proverbs, to know wisdom and to understand its mode of expression, words of insight. The submissive learner receives practical wisdom, mastery, the art and skill of living well, and the teacher gives prudence to the inexperienced, the immature and the morally unformed. This is also written for the sake of the wise. Those who have already gained a great deal of understanding can return to and reflect upon these proverbs and these words of wisdom with great prophet. Fundamental to everything is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is perhaps the great refrain of the wisdom literature, and much of the material of scripture returns to this theme. Job is described as one who fears the Lord, and in chapter 28, verses 23 to 28 of his book, we read,

Psalms 111 and 112.

are a great pair of wisdom psalms. The last verse of Psalm 111 reads, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All those who practice it have a good understanding.

[18 : 18] His praise endures forever. The first verse of Psalm 112 reads, Praise the Lord. Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments.

We find similar statements at many points in the book of Proverbs. Chapter 1 verse 7, chapter 9 verse 10, chapter 15 verse 33, chapter 16 verse 6, chapter 19 verse 23.

We also find related statements in Ecclesiastes chapter 12 verse 13, and Isaiah chapter 11 verses 1 to 5. There are various facets of the fear of the Lord that help to explain why it might be the beginning of wisdom.

It's associated with humility, a recognition of your place and your limitations, and a need to be subject to the teaching of the Lord. It's associated with obedience, a commitment to follow the Lord's commands and to learn through that practice.

It's associated with love, a desire to seek after wisdom, and to pursue it until you've found it. It's associated with reverence, and a posture of wonder and awe towards the Lord, true wonder that is not enthralled or enslaved by anything lower than God himself.

[19 : 27] Wisdom is how God formed the world, and to live by wisdom is to live with the grain of God's universe. And this posture of thought is a personal and a moral one.

Out of the heart spring the issues of life. For the book of Proverbs, wisdom and folly are not primarily matters of the mind, but matters of the heart. The man with great intelligence, but with a disordered heart, will often only end up pursuing the way of folly with greater intensity.

His intelligence can be used to rationalise more fully his folly to himself. The book is framed by the address to the son by the father. Throughout, the figure of the young man is the most prominent and primary addressee.

The book is especially concerned with the temptations and dangers, the duties and possibilities, that present themselves to the young man. Considering the prominence of the figure of the young man will also help us to appreciate the overarching theme of the choice of a spouse or female companion that runs throughout the book, and gives it much of its order.

The period of young adulthood is a time of sowing, for which the reaping will come later. Wisdom comes with time and experience, as people have passed through periods of sowing and reaping in their lives, and realised the consequences of good and bad choices in those periods of sowing.

[20 : 47] The father's voice, importantly, is not alone. The young man is told to hearken to his mother's teaching, And in chapter 31, we encounter teaching given to King Lemuel by his mother, as the conclusion and the summation of the book's message.

The authority of parents is of great importance in the communication of wisdom. This is the fifth commandment, to honour father and mother, second only to the fear of the Lord. We might recognise something of the logic of the Ten Commandments here.

As people fear the Lord and keep the first four commandments, and honour their father and mother, keeping the fifth, wise obedience to the rest of the commandments will follow more naturally.

In Exodus and Deuteronomy, the fifth commandment comes with promise, and this one does too. Hearing and keeping the words of father and mother result in a sort of adornment of the faithful son.

When we think about character, we might think in terms of virtues and graces. Virtues are particularly associated with characteristics of action. But graces, things that people can see in us, traits of character.

[21 : 51] These are attractive facets of our character. If the person obeys his father and mother, he will discover over time that his obedience to their teaching is a glory to him. Through his honouring of his father and mother, he himself has become honourable.

Heeding father and mother is prudent for various reasons. They are generally the people who most have our good in mind. They are best acquainted with us, and they have demonstrated their character and values to us in their own actions, making both trust in them and emulation of them well-founded.

All of this makes the posture of trust in them, as our initial guides, quite reasonable. Contrasting with the path of the son who heeds his parents is the path of the son who heeds the call of sinners.

It might be notable that the book of Psalms also begins with a similar juxtaposition of two paths, and warns against bad company. Psalm 1 verses 1 to 2 Verses 11 to 14 describe the temptation presented by the gang to the young man.

Gangs appeal to young men's virility, their desire to exercise their strength, to enjoy companionship and respect of male peers, to belong to a tight-knit band of brothers, and to obtain wealth and status.

[23 : 16] Here the young man is presented with the possibility of getting rich quickly through violence, murder and robbery. As in the case of the adulterous woman, who will later appeal to the impulses of his lust, the appeal of the gang is, as Mark Horne observes, the appeal to the desire to obtain something good without diligence, self-mastery, sustained effort, self-restraint, faithfulness or patience.

It is good for the young man to desire power, camaraderie, honour and wealth. His virility is not a bad thing in itself, but it requires self-mastery. Indeed, much of the book of Proverbs teaches such men how to obtain these things.

The father warns his son against the young men of the gang. Such men can easily be driven by a hunger for violence itself, for the expression of unconstrained power. Evil becomes attractive to such men, not merely as a means to some other end, as a shortcut to wealth and power, but in itself, as an experience of lawless power.

High on their own testosterone, they desire the thrill of using their strength in service of their unchecked desires, and to subdue others beneath them. However, in contrast to the man who has mastered his own strength, and expresses it in a self-controlled manner, such men are running to their own ruin.

Their chosen course is both evil and foolish. It will bring their destruction upon their head. In Proverbs chapter 4 verses 14 to 19, we read of this in more detail.

[24 : 45] Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it. Do not go on it. Turn away from it and pass on. For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong.

