

WISDOM LITERATURE - Proverbs: Making right choices...

The purpose of the wisdom literature is to instruct in making good choices in life. They teach us that God is concerned about the day by day details of living - that they are of real significance to the godly man. The purpose of the wisdom literature is spelled out clearly in Prov. 1:1-7 and Eccl. 12:9-14: *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline."* Proverbs, written in Solomon's middle years (though a substantial part of Proverbs is of other authorship), is made up of many verse couplets, triplets, etc. that set forth practical wisdom.

Each of the wisdom books makes a different contribution to our education in wise living, and they integrate in such a way that they need to read in the context of each other. Proverbs presents the basic rational, ordered norms of life; and the others cover the exceptions – the suffering of the righteous (Job); the failures of intellectual approaches to life (Ecclesiastes), and the irrationality of romantic love (Song of Songs). These books are concerned with teaching us guidelines for right thinking and building character.

Gleason Archer sums Proverbs' purpose up: *"The characteristic type of mashal or proverb in this book is the balanced antithesis which incisively contrasts the wise man and the fool, the good man and the wicked, true value and false, in such a way as to set forth the two sides of truth in clearest opposition to each other and thus perform an incisive didactic function. The constant preoccupation of the book is with the elemental antagonisms of obedience vs. rebellion, industry vs. laziness, prudence vs. presumption and so on. These are presented as to put before the reader a clear-cut choice, leaving him no ground for wretched compromise or vacillating indecision."* (A Survey of O.T. Introduction, p. 452)

The purpose and nature of the Proverbs have some effect on our interpretation of it. We must not forget they are verse nor that they are concerned with day-by-day holiness. Nor must we separate them from the source of true wisdom, Jesus Christ. "Wisdom" is personified in the first 9 chapters of Proverbs. It is more than knowledge, it becomes a person. Jesus said *"But wisdom is proved right by her actions"* Paul says: *"Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God"*. A commentator on Proverbs says; *"It is in the life of the believing community, in the study of the Holy Scriptures, that a person is filled with the Holy Spirit and discovers the wisdom of life. As such, the book of proverbs provided one of the most comprehensive statements of the divine wisdom anywhere in the sacred book. Its message is timeless. But it can never be used apart from him toward whom the whole message points- Jesus Christ. Unless we move beyond the wise laws of the book to the Person of wisdom, our study will but lead to folly. In seeking wisdom, we seek Christ."* (Larsen, Wise Up and Live, p. 232)

Much of the book of Proverbs appears to have no clear organized structure, however...

Proverbs 1 - 9 offers **the fatherly approach** to wisdom and personifies It in Chapter 8.

Proverbs 10 - 22 offers **a plain man's approach** of sentence sayings generally attributed to Solomon. Chapters 10- 5 are mostly antithetical contrasts ("but...") and Chapters 16-22 are mostly synonymous or synthetic sayings.

Proverbs 22:17 - 24:22 and **24:23 - 34** have **two groups of sayings by wise men**.

Proverbs 25 - 29 offers **a ruler's approach** and consists of sentence sayings of Solomon compiled by Hezekiah's men and often topically grouped into a number of little clusters.

Proverbs 30 gives **an observer's approach** - notable for its disclaimer of wisdom and numerical sayings.

Proverbs 31 offers **the womanly approach** - and includes the alphabetic acrostic of the godly woman in vss 10 - 31.

Guidelines for the study of the wisdom literature:

- Respect the difference between a proverb and the moral law. Proverbs should not be absolutized into commandments for every situation, or taken as “guarantees” from God. By their nature, they are generalized examples of applying wisdom to specific situations, rather than setting forth universal principles. Some even contradict others - example: Prov 26:4,5; *“A common mistake in biblical interpretation and application is to give a proverbial saying the weight or force of a moral absolute they reflect principles of wisdom for godly living. They do not reflect moral laws that are to be applied absolutely to every conceivable life situation.”* (Sproul, Knowing Scripture, p. 89.)
- Proverbs are worded to be memorable, rather than theologically accurate or technically precise. The same qualities that make them easy to remember make them pithy, but inexact statements that are easily misapplied. The Proverbs and Sayings are not intended to be exhaustive, applying to every situation. Some Sayings are didactic instructions, but some are merely experiential observations.
- Because they are verse we can expect an extensive use of imagery and figures of speech - such as personification, metaphor, simile, overstatement, understatement, etc. These need to be handled carefully. These will prove to be a rich source of insights, calling our attention to things the author desires to highlight in the text.
- Because much of Proverbs is a collection of often unrelated verses, the remote context must be searched out with careful use of concordance and examination of parallel proverbs and expressions and considered. Study all the references to the “fool”, “the sluggard”, etc. before drawing conclusions.
- Wisdom should be read as a collection - wrongly used it seems to justify a crass materialistic lifestyle and selfish short-sighted behavior. *“Bits and snatches of wisdom teaching taken out of context can sound profound and seem practical, but can be easily misapplied. . . . do not engage in the kind of wisdom Job’s friends did, equating worldly success with righteousness in God’s eyes.”* Fee and Stuart, p. 207 and 222.
- An understanding of how Hebrew poetry is constructed is important. The determination of the forms of parallelism used and the comparisons and contrasts that are an integral part of it is an important part of interpretation. Most proverbs consist in the Hebrew of just six or seven words - two stanzas of about 3 word “beats” each.
- Be aware of the wide range of literary conventions and styles used in Wisdom literature: **Alphabetic acrostics, Numerical sayings, “Blessed” sayings, “Better” sayings, Comparisons and Admonitions** (both **commands** and **prohibitions**), **Addresses of father to son - “listen to me”, riddles, parables, allegories, dialogues** (these most extensively in Job), etc.
- Follow carefully any lines of argument. Job’s comforters seem very orthodox and “churchy” as do their seemingly “pious” arguments, until God condemns them. Until the last two verses, Ecclesiastes looks at life as if God does not play a direct, intervening role and as if there is nothing beyond death.
- Many of the Proverbs need to be “translated” into our cultural situations. The degree to which we take each one literally, figuratively or parabolically has to be carefully weighed.