

Introduction to Proverbs

Where is it in the Bible?

Proverbs is the twentieth book of the Old Testament in Christian Bibles and comes between Psalms and Ecclesiastes. In Hebrew Bibles, Proverbs is the second book in the last section, the Writings or Kethuvim; it is between Psalms and Job.

What is it about?

Proverbs is probably what most people think about when they think of wisdom literature. It is “a collection of essays, poems, and sayings expressing the wisdom of ancient Israel.”¹ However, there is no mention of Israel or its history. The book is concerned with practical matters to help a person live in a proper relationship with God and have a happy life on earth. Parts of the book may have served as training material for newcomers to the royal court.

Who wrote it?

The book is traditionally identified with Solomon, perhaps because of his reputation for being a wise man (1 Kings 3-4). However, it was written by a number of authors over a span of hundreds of years. Some of the proverbs probably originated in Solomon’s court. Others are bits of folk wisdom that were passed on orally for a time and is common in all cultures. Still others may have been written specifically for a collection like this book. None of the authors is known.

When was it written?

Assuming that some of the material comes from the time of Solomon, the earliest parts of the book would date to 961-922 B.C. The book evolved over centuries and was probably put into its final form during the Babylonian exile or afterward.

How is it structured?

- I. Prologue: Purpose and Theme (1:1-7)
- II. The Way of Wisdom (1:8-9:18)
 - a. Advice for Young People (1:8-33)
 - b. Benefits of Wisdom (2:1-4:27)
 - c. Warnings against Folly (5:1-7:27)
 - d. Woman Wisdom and Dame Folly (8:1-9:18)
- III. Proverbs Associated with Solomon (10:1-22:16)
- IV. Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:22)
- V. More Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)
- VI. Sayings of Solomon Collected by Hezekiah (25:1-29:27)
- VII. Sayings of Agur (30:1-33)
- VIII. Teaching of King Lemuel’s Mother (31:1-9)
- IX. The Ideal Wife (31:10-21)

¹ James Limburg at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=40>

What are some things to look for?

- **Fear of the Lord** – This phrase does not refer to being afraid, but to having respect and honoring the Lord. It is found in 1:7, which states the theme of Proverbs, as well as in other places throughout the book.
- **Poetic Elements:** Many of the elements found in Hebrew poetry can be found in Proverbs including the following:
 - **Alphabetic acrostic** – in 31:10-31
 - **“Better x than y” statements** – these may have been written just for their own merit or they may have been memory aides; examples include 16:19, 17:1, and 25:24.
 - **“x,x+1” sayings** – these could also have been used for teaching; for example, 30:18-19; see also Psalm 62:11-12a
 - **Similes** – as in English, these are comparisons using *like* or *as*; see 11:22, and 25:11-14
 - **Synonymous parallelism** – a verse in which the second part repeats the thought of the first using different words; for example, 1:8
 - **Parallelism using opposites** – a pair of statements where the first makes a statement that is contrasted with its opposite in the second statement; for example, 10:4, 11:11-13
- **Woman Wisdom** – Wisdom is personified as woman in chapters 1, 8, and 9 of Proverbs. She is contrasted with Lady Folly. In both Hebrew and Greek, the words for wisdom have feminine gender, but this explanation seems too simple. This figure has prompted much scholarly discussion and many proposed explanations.