

INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON
THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

“The essence of the Book of Proverbs is the teaching of moral and ethical principles. The peculiarity of this book is that it is largely given over to teaching by *contrasts*.”²

Authorship: “In 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1, we’re told that King Solomon is the author of the proverbs in this book. God gave Solomon great wisdom (I Kings 3:5-15), so that people came from the ends of the earth to listen to him and returned home amazed (4:29-34; Matt. 12:42). He spoke 3,000 proverbs, most of which are not included in this book. The Holy Spirit selected only those proverbs that the people of God should understand and obey in every age...But other servants, guided by God’s Spirit, were also involved in producing this book. ‘*The men of Hezekiah*’ (Prov. 25:1) were a group of scholars in King Hezekiah’s day (700 B.C.) who compiled the material recorded in chapters 25-29, and in Proverbs 30 and 31, you meet ‘*Agur* the son of Jakeh’ and ‘*King Lemuel*,’ although many scholars think ‘Lemuel’ was another name for Solomon. Most of the material in this book came from King Solomon, so it’s rightly called ‘the proverbs of Solomon’ (1:1).”³ “The name of Solomon occurs in three parts of the book—1:1; 10:1; and 25:1. There is thus a claim of Solomonic authorship for the major sections, indeed for all sections except 22:17-24:22; 24:23-24; and 30:1-31:31.”⁴

Main Theme of the book of Proverbs: “One word answers the question: *wisdom*. In Proverbs, **the words wise and wisdom are used at least 125 times**, because the aim of the book is to help us acquire and apply God’s wisdom to the decisions and activities of daily life.”⁵

Definition of Wisdom: “It isn’t enough simply to be educated and have knowledge, as important as education is. We also need wisdom, which is *the ability to use knowledge*. I (Wiersbe) like Zuck’s definition: ‘Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one’s relationships and responsibilities...observing and following the Creator’s principles of order in the moral universe.’...**Biblical wisdom has little if any relationship to a person’s IQ or education, because it is a matter of moral and spiritual understanding. It has to do with character and values; it means looking at the world through the grid of God’s truth.**”⁶

Definition of a Proverb: “**Proverbs are pithy statements that summarize in a few choice words practical truths relating to some aspect of everyday life.** The Spanish novelist Cervantes defined a proverb as ‘*a short sentence based on long experience.*’ From a literary point of view, that isn’t a bad definition...“The Hebrew word *mashal* is translated ‘*proverb*,’ ‘*parable*,’ and even ‘*allegory*,’ but its basic meaning is ‘*a comparison.*’ Many of Solomon’s proverbs are comparisons or contrasts (see 11:22; 25:25; 26:6-9), and some of his proverbs present these comparisons by using the word ‘better’ (see 15:16-17; 16:19, 32; 17:1; 19:1)...Traditional man-made proverbs don’t always agree with each other and aren’t always right, but you can trust the book of Proverbs. ‘*Look before you leap*’ advises caution, while, ‘*He who hesitates is lost*’ warns you not to miss your golden opportunity. Which maxim do you follow? ‘*Many hands make light work*’ is contradicted by, ‘*Too many cooks spoil the broth.*’ However, the proverbs in Scripture are consistent with each other and with the total pattern of divine truth given in the Bible.”⁷

“**Why did Solomon use proverbs** and not some other kind of literary approach... apart from kings, prophets, and priests, the average Jewish adult didn’t own copies of their sacred books and **had to depend on memory** to be able to meditate on God’s truth and discuss it (Deut. 6:1-9). If Solomon had written a lecture on pride, few people would remember it, so he wrote a proverb instead: ‘*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall*’ (Prov. 16:18, NIV). There are only seven words in the original Hebrew, and even a child could memorize seven words!”⁸

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¹ Compiled by Rev. Mike Edwards, St. Vincent, West Indies, April, 2008 (revised 11/2014, Madison, Ohio). All material in parentheses (), unless otherwise noted, appear as such in the original. All material in brackets [], as well as all bolding & underlining & some italicizing has been added by me. –mwe

² Charles F. Pfeiffer & Everett F. Harrison, “*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*” (Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1962), Proverbs-R. Laird Harris, p. 553

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, “*The Bible Exposition Commentary-Wisdom and Poetry*” (Cook Communications Min.: Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2003), p. 389

⁴ Pfeiffer & Harrison, p. 554

⁵ Wiersbe, p. 387

⁶ Ibid, p. 388

⁷ Ibid, pp. 389-390

⁸ Ibid, p. 391

General outline of the book of Proverbs:

Chapters 1-9: “The first nine chapters of Proverbs form a unit in which the emphasis is on ‘*wisdom*’ and ‘*folly*,’ personified as *two women* (The Hebrew word for wisdom is in the feminine gender.) In chapters 1, 8, and 9, Wisdom calls to men and women to follow her and enjoy salvation, wealth, and life. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Folly calls to the same people and offers them immediate satisfaction, but doesn’t warn them of the tragic consequences of rejecting Wisdom: condemnation, poverty, and death”⁹ Harris: “In the first section...there is also a use of contrast-between good and evil. The good in this section is denominated by several words-wisdom, instruction, understanding, justice, judgment, equity, knowledge, discretion, learning, counsels—but especially wisdom, which occurs seventeen times in this portion and twenty-two times in the rest of the book...**Peculiar to this section of Proverbs is the personification of wisdom as a woman.** This is first seen in 3:15. Actually, in 3:15-18 the pronouns referring to wisdom could be translated ‘it’ as well as ‘she,’ but the personification is accepted because of later references. Proverbs 7:4 opens the way for the personification...**only in Proverbs and only in this first part is wisdom thus personified.** It is essential to the understanding of this first part to recognize this personification. Since ‘wisdom’ in Hebrew is a feminine noun, it therefore is naturally and readily personified as a woman. More important, the author here is contrasting ‘wisdom,’ the virtuous woman, with the harlot, the strange woman. And just as wisdom stands for all virtue, so probably the strange woman typifies and includes all sin.”¹⁰

Chapters 10-15: “...form the next unit and present a series of *contrasts* between the life of wisdom and the life of folly.”¹¹

“In the second section, the Proverbs of Solomon, 10:1-22:16 [note the differing chapter breakdown from Wiersbe above-*mwe*], the teaching is presented almost exclusively by the single verse treatment. Through chapter 15, the teaching is by contrast, indicated by a ‘but’ in the middle of nearly every verse. Thereafter there are parallels of thought more often than contrasts. This section covers a wide range of subjects and defies outline. The viewpoint, however, is fairly consistent. Solomon is contrasting wisdom and folly. And, as in Section I [chapters 1-9], this is not intelligence versus stupidity; it is moral wisdom versus sin. In this section wisdom is never personified, but the same synonyms for it as occur in Section I are used here—understanding, righteousness (and) instruction. The fool also has his parallels: the scorner, the slothful, the froward. The following [section] continues in this vein.”¹²

Chapters 16-31: “The closing chapters of the book (16-31) contain a variety of proverbs that give us *counsel* about many important areas of life.”¹³

Key Verse:

“I suggest that **1:7** is the key verse... ‘*The fear of the Lord is the beginning (chief part) of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*’ This statement is amplified in 9:10—‘*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy (Holy One) is understanding.*’ (See also Job 28:28 and Psalm 111:10.) There are at least eighteen references to ‘*the fear of the Lord*’ in Proverbs (1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 26-27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 31:30). If you read all these verses carefully, you’ll get a good idea of what this important biblical phrase means. If we truly ‘*fear the Lord*,’ we acknowledge from our hearts that He’s the Creator, we’re the creatures; He’s the Father, we’re His children; He’s the Master, we’re the servants. **It means to respect God for who He is, to listen carefully to what He says, and to obey His Word, knowing that our disobedience displeases Him, breaks our fellowship with Him, and invites His chastening.**”¹⁴ Harris agrees: “What amounts to a text for the book is the well-known statement of 1:7, ‘*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*’ which is repeated near the end of the [1st] section (9:10).”¹⁵

(cont.)

⁹ Ibid, p. 391, italics added.

¹⁰ Harris, op cit., in Pfeiffer & Harrison, p. 553.

¹¹ Wiersbe, op cit., p. 391.

¹² Laird, op cit., in Pfeiffer & Harrison, pp. 553-554.

¹³ Wiersbe, op cit., p. 391.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 392, italics added.

¹⁵ Harris, op cit., in Pfeiffer & Harrison, p. 553.

Keys to interpreting the book:

“Solomon often uses the phrase, ‘*my son*’ (Prov. 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1; 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11), which suggests that Proverbs contains truths that loving godly parents would pass along to their children. As God’s children, we need His loving counsel, and He gives it to us in this book... **The first essential for an effective study of Proverbs is faith in Jesus Christ so that you can honestly call God your Father. You can’t make a life until you first have life**, and this life comes through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16, 36)... [2] Unless we are spiritually prepared, diligent, disciplined in study, and obedient to what God tells us, we won’t really understand very much of God’s Word. **A willingness to obey is essential (John 7:17)**. F.W. Robertson said that, ‘*obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge.*’ **The Holy Spirit teaches the serious, not the curious.**”¹⁶

“As you study, keep in mind that Hebrew proverbs are **generalized statements** of what is **usually** true in life, and **they must not be treated like promises**. ‘*A friend loves at all times*’ (Prov. 17:17, NKJV), but sometimes even the most devoted friends may have disagreements. ‘*A soft answer turns away wrath*’ (15:1, NKJV) in most instances, but our Lord’s lamblike gentleness didn’t deliver Him from shame and suffering. The assurance of life for the obedient is given often (3:2, 22; 4:10, 22; 8:35; 9:11; 10:27; 12:28; 13:14; 14:27; 19:23; 21:21; 22:4) and **generally speaking**, this is true. Obedient believers will care for their bodies and minds and avoid substances and practices that destroy, **but** some godly saints have died very young, while more than one godless rebel has had a long life. David Brainerd, missionary to the American Indians, died at [twenty-nine]. Robert Murray M’Cheyne died just two months short of his thirtieth birthday. Henry Martyn, missionary to India and Persia, died at thirty-two. William Whiting Borden, who gave his fortune to God’s work, was only twenty-five years old when he died in Egypt on his way to China. ‘*The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead*’ (11:8 NIV) certainly happened to Mordecai (Esther 7) and Daniel (Dan. 6), but millions of Christian martyrs testify to the fact that the statement isn’t an absolute in this life. In fact, in Psalm 73 Asaph concludes that the wicked get the upper hand in this world, but the godly have their reward for eternity. The book of Proverbs has little to say about the life to come; it focuses on this present life and gives guidelines for making wise decisions that help to produce a satisfying life.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Wiersbe, op cit., p. 393.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 394, italics added.