

Book of Proverbs Explained

Title: The title in the Hebrew Bible is “The Proverbs of Solomon” (1:1), as also in the Greek Septuagint (LXX). Proverbs pulls together the most important 513 of the over 3,000 proverbs pondered by Solomon (1 Kings 4:32; Eccl. 12:9), along with some proverbs of others whom Solomon likely influenced. The word “proverb” means “to be like”, thus Proverbs is a book of comparisons between common, concrete images and life’s most profound truths. Proverbs are simple, moral statements (or illustrations), that highlight and teach fundamental realities about life. Solomon sought God’s wisdom (2 Chron. 1:8-12), and offered “pithy sayings” designed to make men contemplate:

- (1) The fear of God; and
- (2) Living by His wisdom (1:7; 9:10).

The sum of this wisdom is personified in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).

Authorship – Date: The phrase “Proverbs of Solomon” is more a title than an absolute statement of authorship (1:1). While King Solomon, who ruled Israel from 971 – 931 B.C. and was granted great wisdom by God (see 1 Kings 4:29-34), is the author of the didactic section (chapters 1-9), and the proverbs of (10:1 – 22:16), he is likely only the compiler of the “sayings of the wise” (in 22:17 – 24:34), which are of an uncertain date before Solomon’s reign. The collection (in chapters 25-29), was originally composed by Solomon (25:1), but copied and included later by Judah’s king Hezekiah (ca. 715 – 686 B.C.).

Proverbs was not assembled in its final form until Hezekiah’s day or after. Solomon authored his proverbs before his heart was turned away from God (1 Kings 11:1-11), since the book reveals a godly perspective and is addressed to the “naïve” and “young” who need to learn the fear of God. Solomon also wrote Psalms 72 and 127, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Though Solomon’s name is traditionally attached to the entire book, it is clear for 22:17; 24:23; 30:1 and 31:1), that unidentified wise men, as well as two who are identified (Augur and Lemuel), also shared in the composition of the book. There are three Solomonic collections in the book (1:1; 10:1; 25:1). Since Solomon authored most of the book, the attachment of his name to it is warranted.

Because most of the book was authored by Solomon, its contents should be dated in the middle of the tenth century B.C. On the other hand, the book’s final form could not have existed earlier than the time of Hezekiah (ca. 700 B.C.), since Solomon’s proverbs were still being collected at that time (25:1).

Background – Setting: The book reflects a 3-fold setting as:

- (1) General wisdom literature;
- (2) Insights from the royal court; and

- (3) Instruction offered in the tender relationship of a father and mother with their children, all designed to produce meditation on God.

Since Proverbs is Wisdom literature, by nature it is sometimes difficult to understand (1:6). Wisdom literature is part of the whole of Old Testament truth; the Priest gave the law, the Prophet gave a Word from the Lord, and the Sage (or wise man), gave his wise Counsel (Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26). In proverbs, Solomon the Sage gives insight into the “knotty” issues of life (1:6), which are not directly addressed in the Law or the Prophets. Though it is practical, Proverbs is not superficial or external because it contains moral and ethical elements stressing upright living which flow out of a right relationship with God. In 4:1-4, Solomon connected 3 generations as he entrusted to his son Rehoboam what he learned at the feet of David and Bathsheba. Proverbs is both a pattern for the tender impartation of truth from generation to generation, as well as a vast resource for the content of the truth to be imparted. Proverbs contains the principle and applications of Scripture which the godly characters of the Bible illustrate in their lives.

Historical – Theological themes: Solomon came to the throne with great promise, privilege and opportunity. God had granted his request for understanding (1 Kings 3:9-12; 2 Chron. 1:10-12), and his wisdom exceeded all others (1 Kings 4:29-31). However, the shocking reality is that he failed to live out the truth that he knew and even taught his son Rehoboam (1 Kings 11:1, 4, 6; 7-11), who subsequently rejected his father’s teaching (1 Kings 12:6-11).

Proverbs contains a gold mine of biblical theology, reflecting themes of Scripture brought to the level of practical righteousness (1:3), by addressing man’s ethical choices, calling into question how he thinks, lives, and manages his daily life in light of divine truth. More specifically, Proverbs calls man to live as the Creator intended him to live when He made man (Psalms 90:1-2, 12).

The recurring promise of Proverbs is that generally the wise (the righteous who obey God), live longer (9:11), prosper (2:20-22), experience joy (3:13-18), and the goodness of God temporally (12:21), while fools suffer shame (3:35), and death (10:21). On the other hand, it must be remembered that this general principle is balanced by the reality that the wicked sometimes prosper (Psalms 73:3, 12), though only temporarily (Psalm 73:17-19). Job illustrates that there are occasions when the godly wise are struck with disaster and suffering.

The two major themes which are interwoven and overlapping throughout Proverbs are wisdom and folly. Wisdom, which includes knowledge, understanding, instruction, discretion, and obedience, is built on the fear of the Lord and the Word of God. Folly is everything opposite to wisdom.

Interpretation – Purpose: The purpose of the book is clearly to show the reader how to live life wisely or skillfully. As a matter of fact, the entire structure of the book is arranged to carry out this purpose. In the Introductions (1:1-7), the title, purpose, and motto of the book are clearly spelled out. Beginning (in 1:8), there are 10 consecutive exhortations or homilies, each beginning with the words “my son”. In this series of exhortations, the father sets before the son what might well be called “the theology of the two ways”: the way of wisdom and the way of folly. These

passages do not contain individual proverbs, but consist of brief, logically argued treatises that serve to whet the son's appetite to apply the actual proverbs (which begin at 10:1). The juxtaposition of such discourses in the same book with the two-line saying is common in the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. In (10:1 – 22:6), there are 375 proverbs of Solomon, each of which represents in some way the choice to be made between wisdom and folly. The remaining 284 verses are divided among several authors, but they likewise carry on the same theme.

There is an ordered flow of thought in the first nine chapters of the book, but this is not true (beginning at 10:1). The best way to study the latter section is by topics. A simple perusal of the subjects covered leaves the distinct impression that wisdom is prerequisite to skillful dealing in every area of life. Indeed, this is the very aim of the authors! These topics include: the family, death, life, discretion, eating, enemies, the fear of the Lord, the fool, friendship, God, the heart (or mind), the home, the king, knowledge, labor, law, lazy people, love, neighbors, peace, poverty, prayer, pride, riches, righteousness, sex, shame, sin, sleep, soul, spirit, the tongue, trust, the wicked, wine, wisdom, women and words. If one inculcates into his life the moral discipline commanded (in chapters 1-9), and masters the practical application of wisdom expressed (in chapters 10-31), he will truly have an abundant and successful life.