

LITERARY OVERVIEW

Title: The Hebrew word for Proverb (משל *mashal*) means be like, similar, compared to, similitude.

Author: Portions by Solomon (c.971-931B.C.), wise men during Hezekiah's time (c.715-686B.C.) (25:1), the wise (22-24), Agur and Lemuel (30-31), and an unknown royal son quoting his mother (31:10ff).

Date: from the time of Solomon to at least the time of Hezekiah, with a late final compilation date.

Purpose: To give instruction in wisdom, "the art of holy living."

Form/Genre: The books is an anthology of collected proverbs. We also call them maxims or aphorisms.

Challenges: (1.) **A lack of systematic organization** – this could be a help in exposing us to topics we may not be inclined (in reading 1 chapter a day); this could be a "seek and find" activity when studying a specific topic. (2.) **The challenge to both interpret and apply.**

EXPLORING THE LITERARY FEATURES OF PROVERBS

- Proverbs are a **sub-genre of ancient poetry**, and thus use many of the literary devices found in parallelism (especially 2-line). Proverbs are not limited to this book, but many examples throughout Scripture.
- There are examples of **pre-Solomonic** wisdom literature which have the same proverbial form. Almost every human culture has had some kind of collective proverbs, many of which parallel the biblical book of Proverbs. This shows how in common grace there are those who God has given ability to observe how things work in God's world.
- What makes Proverbs unique is that it has as its foundation **the fear of the LORD**, the covenant God revealed to the nation of Israel.
- As wisdom literature, it has a **motivational purpose**. It isn't merely to inform, but to persuade to live a certain way.
- *"The wise" had a specific kind of calling (Jeremiah 18:18), not as one who directly received a Word from God (like a prophet) or taught and applied the law of Moses (like a priest), but one who was skilled in observing the creation and human behavior from a God-centered perspective and turn those observations into literary snippets to instruct others. Through observation generally predictable consequences can be seen.*

A proverb is an insight into the repeatable situations of life, and its aim is to make an insight permanent by expressing it in a short, memorable saying. (Leland Ryken)

- While much of the Hebrew Scriptures had as a dominant concern the community life, Proverbs is **more intensely individual**.
- Also, the book is more intensely focused on **every day life** (as opposed to corporate worship or ceremonies).
- The burden of the book is particularly for the young to instruct them while they are being established, though its application reaches to all ages.
- Proverbs reminds us that **information is not the same thing as wisdom**. True understanding in life is not primarily built on memorized facts, but rather **how to apply** what is known to live a life that is first and foremost glorify to God as creator, and how to live in the world that He has created.
- One of our greatest hindrances to wisdom may be the **deluge of information**. We can lose the capacity to think beyond the particulars and think biblically about universals.

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
(T.S. Eliot)*

- This book is in contrast to the **contemporary ideas** that newer is better, the parents are fools, and the old are outdated and to be shut out.
- As the book is read through repeatedly, a kind of **"atmosphere" of wisdom** is created, and one learns how to observe life and become wise even if the specific issue is not addressed.
- There is **no explicit narrative**, but there is a kind of sub-narrative running through especially with the personification of Wisdom (the wise woman) and the Adulterous (the strange woman). We are invited to take hold of and love the one and to reject and keep from the other.
- There is a **caricatured representation** of certain kinds of people: Sluggard, Adulterer, Unfaithful, Fool, Whisperer, Rich Man, Proud, Humble, etc. These are not intended to represent only and always what these kinds of people do, but the dominate character.
- The **imagination** needs to be engaged, as it was a different kind of society and the examples are very "earthy." Don't make the mistake of thinking these are just a series of commands, but see that they are very imaginative.

- The most important thing is to come with a **disposition of teachability** and desire to change. A bridge will need to be built between the similitude and the application.
- **Caution** – do not make the mistake of concluding that a wise observation is the same thing as Divine promise. (i.e. 10:22 16:17, 22:6).

Unlike moral commands, proverbs tend to state general principles to which there might be exceptions. Those who utter proverbs do not worry about possible exceptions (neither do lyric poets); they trust people to use their common sense in recognizing that a proverbs need not cover every possible situation. (Ryken)

Dominant Features of Proverbial Literature (Ryken):

- 1.) **They are striking and memorable** – This takes skill to be good at, and the primary goal is that it would be remembered.
- 2.) **They are both simple and profound** – They are simple in that they are brief and simple statements about things that go on around us all of the time. The wise have the gift of observation of things that may pass us by every day. They are profound in that the general applies to a wide variety of circumstances.
- 3.) **They are both specific and general** – The specific topic is addressed, but it is addressed in a general way (i.e. not a specific example of circumstance).

OUTLINE

- I. **Title, Goal, and Motto (1:1–7)**
- II. **A Father's Invitation to Wisdom (1:8–9:18)**
 - A. First paternal appeal: do not join those greedy for unjust gain (1:8–19)
 - B. First wisdom appeal (1:20–33)
 - C. Second paternal appeal: get wisdom (2:1–22)
 - D. Third paternal appeal: fear the Lord (3:1–12)
 - E. A hymn to wisdom (3:13–20)
 - F. Fourth paternal appeal: walk securely in wisdom (3:21–35)
 - G. Fifth paternal appeal: wisdom is a tradition worth maintaining (4:1–9)
 - H. Sixth paternal appeal: the two ways (4:10–19)
 - I. Seventh paternal appeal: maintain a heart of wisdom (4:20–27)
 - J. Eighth paternal appeal: sexuality (5:1–23)
 - K. Warnings relating to securing debt, sloth, and sowing discord (6:1–19)
 - L. Ninth paternal appeal: adultery leads to ruin (6:20–35)
 - M. Tenth paternal appeal: keep away from temptations to adultery (7:1–27)
 - N. Second wisdom appeal (8:1–36)
 - O. Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly (9:1–18)
 - P. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)
- III. **The Thirty Sayings of “the Wise” (22:17–24:22)**
- IV. **Further Sayings of “the Wise” (24:23–34)**
- V. **Hezekiah's Collection of Solomon's Proverbs (25:1–29:27)**
- VI. **The Sayings of Agur (30:1–33)**
- VII. **The Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1–9)**
- VIII. **An Alphabet of Womanly Excellence (31:10–31)**