

# Wisdom in the Old Testament—1 Proverbs: Wisdom in Life

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The purpose of this study, while giving something of an overview of the book of Proverbs, is to show the place of this book in the whole of the Scriptures, in how it relates to the nature, plan and action of God as Creator and Redeemer.

## PROVERBS OF SOLOMON

The title of the book of Proverbs is:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel (Prov. 1:1).<sup>1</sup>

The bulk of the book is made up of two collections of Solomon's proverbs: 10:1–22:16, headed 'The Proverbs of Solomon' (Prov. 10:1), and 25:1–29:27, with the ascription: 'These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied' (Prov. 25:1). These amount to 513 verses, and so are likely to be a distilled selection of all that Solomon wrote, since we are told:

He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish (1 Kings 4:32–33).

The writer of Kings is very clear as to where this wisdom of Solomon came from:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore (1 Kings 4:29).

God had said to Solomon, 'Ask what I should give you', and Solomon had asked for 'an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil'. God willingly responded: 'Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you', after which

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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‘All Israel . . . stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice’ (1 Kings 3:5, 9, 12, 28). We see from this that Solomon’s wisdom came directly from God, and that it had to do with discerning good and evil, and practicing justice. This, then, is what we would expect to find when we read the book of Proverbs.

### WISDOM, LAW AND PROHECY

Before David died, he solemnly charged his son Solomon:

I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn (1 Kings 2:2–3).

No doubt it was in this spirit that Solomon made his request to God, and God responded. The battle between wisdom and foolishness is inextricably tied up with paying heed to the law of God:

Those who forsake the law praise the wicked,  
but those who keep the law struggle against them (Prov. 28:4).

The word for ‘law’ here in Hebrew is *torah*; the same word used for a mother’s and father’s ‘teaching’ in 1:8 and 3:1.<sup>2</sup> The wisdom in Proverbs extends the law of God to practical everyday situations:

Those who keep the law are wise children,  
but companions of gluttons shame their parents (Prov. 28:7).

This applies also to the practice of religion:

When one will not listen to the law,  
even one’s prayers are an abomination (Prov. 28:9).

All of this is from God. For all of one’s professing of the law of God, how can one have wisdom without paying heed to the word that comes from God?

Even the stork in the heavens  
knows its times;  
and the turtledove, swallow, and crane  
observe the time of their coming;  
but my people do not know  
the ordinance of the LORD.  
How can you say, ‘We are wise,  
and the law of the LORD is with us,’

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<sup>2</sup> The word for ‘instruction’ in 1:2–3, etc. is *musar*, which has overtones of discipline. While they complement one another, sometimes running parallel, sometimes intersecting, a direct equation between the wisdom of Proverbs and the law of Moses cannot be made.

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when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes  
has made it into a lie?  
The wise shall be put to shame,  
they shall be dismayed and taken;  
since they have rejected the word of the LORD,  
what wisdom is in them? (Jer. 8:7–9).

The word of the prophets recalled the people to the law of God. What does the wisdom of Solomon say about that?

Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint,  
but happy are those who keep the law (Prov. 29:18).

What then was the relationship in the Old Testament between law, wisdom and prophecy? They were seen to be all of a piece, and to belong together. As long as they were all from God, they would prevail:

... instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet (Jer. 18:18).<sup>3</sup>

### **THE COVENANT-MERCY OF YAHWEH**

When God revealed Himself to Moses, it was not as sheer law, but as Yahweh the redeeming Covenant-God of Israel:

The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation<sup>4</sup> (Exod. 34:6–7).

This revelation inculcates a high standard of moral righteousness, a strong sense of sin, a dependence upon the forgiving grace and mercy of God and, above all, an answerability to God in direct relationship with Him. All of this is essential for a right reading and understanding of the book of Proverbs.

While Proverbs commends and fosters prudence and sagacity in life, it is not in the interests of self-seeking at the expense of justice and truth. While it may be true that:

Misfortune pursues sinners,  
but prosperity rewards the righteous (Prov. 13:21);

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<sup>3</sup> Even though this was said by Jeremiah's detractors, probably with reference to their own preferred false prophets, nevertheless the principle and the belonging together holds true.

<sup>4</sup> That is, of those who persist in rejecting Him; see Exod. 20:5.

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this is no recipe for a self-interested ‘prosperity gospel’, for:

Better is a little with righteousness  
than large income with injustice (Prov. 16:8);

Better is a little with the fear of the LORD  
than great treasure and trouble with it.  
Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is  
than a fatted ox and hatred with it (Prov. 15:16–17);

Better the poor walking in integrity  
than one perverse of speech who is a fool (Prov. 19:1).

One does not pursue righteousness in order to become prosperous nor, in an imperfect world, does righteousness necessarily guarantee prosperity. Righteousness and integrity are valued above personal gain at the expense of others.

Wise persons in Proverbs know they are not on their own in this life, and are not answerable only to themselves:<sup>5</sup>

If you faint in the day of adversity,  
your strength being small;  
if you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death,  
those who go staggering to the slaughter;  
if you say, ‘Look, we did not know this’ —  
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?  
Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it?  
And will he not repay all according to their deeds? (Prov. 24:10–12).

They know that the One who watches over their souls is the One who rescues the poor and needy (as He did Israel from slavery in Egypt):

Do not remove an ancient landmark  
or encroach on the fields of orphans,  
for their redeemer is strong;  
he will plead their cause against you (Prov. 23:10–11).

Before Him, we are all one, and not over against each other:

The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the LORD is the maker of them all (Prov. 22:2).

We are to reflect in our actions the nature of the One in whose image we are made:

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,  
but those who are kind to the needy honor him (Prov. 14:31; compare 17:5).

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<sup>5</sup> A number of these references are listed in a Subject-Study on ‘God and Man’ in Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Comm., Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1964, p. 32.

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This is at the heart of true religion:

To do righteousness and justice  
is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice (Prov. 21:3).

To fall short of this righteousness of God is not something that can be shrugged off:

Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean;  
I am pure from my sin?’ (Prov. 20:9).

Knowing the mercy of God, however, is to know that our evil can be faced rather than concealed:

No one who conceals transgressions will prosper,  
but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy (Prov. 28:13).

For we know that God provides the means of atonement:

By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,  
and by the fear of the LORD one avoids evil (Prov. 16:6).

And so we can take refuge in God:

The name of the LORD is a strong tower;  
the righteous run into it and are safe (Prov. 18:10).

For, knowing God, we know that there is a love that ‘covers all offenses’ (Prov. 10:12).

### **THE WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS**

Such assurance and relationship with God is not present in the wisdom writings that have come down to us from the rest of the ancient world. Here is a sample:

God, known or unknown—my transgressions are many . . . The transgression I have committed—I know not . . . Whether one does wrong or right one knows not.<sup>6</sup>

I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to one’s god!<sup>7</sup>

Solomon, on the other hand, as we have seen, was grounded in the ‘law of Moses’, concerning which Moses had already said:

See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ (Deut. 4:5–6).

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<sup>6</sup> A Sumerian *Prayer to Any God*, quoted in Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Babylonian Job’, quoted in Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 21.

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Hardly surprising is it, then, when we hear that as a result of God’s gift:

... Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations . . . People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kings 4:30–31, 34).

We see from this that Solomon was not the only wise person in the ancient world. There was a widespread interest in wisdom, particularly among the ruling classes. Some collections of ancient wisdom have survived to this day, and make interesting comparisons with the wisdom of Israel. Much of it contains satirical observations on human nature, lessons from experience, and tactful worldly-wise advice on personal advancement, sometimes mixed with dubious morality and polytheistic relativism—all such as we might hear from a modern-day, highly paid ‘motivational speaker’! Sometimes it reaches heights of moral insight that match what we find in Proverbs; in a number of instances the two run closely parallel. There was clearly much interplay in this field between Israel and its neighbours.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, Solomon’s writings are not the only ones included in the book of Proverbs. Alongside the two collections of Solomon’s proverbs are two other collections entitled, ‘The words of the wise’ (22:17–24:22), and ‘These also are sayings of the wise’ (24:23–34). Added to these are, ‘The words of Agur son of Jakeh’ (30:1–33), and ‘The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him’ (31:1–9). The sources of these sayings are by no means necessarily Israelite: ‘Lemuel’ is the name of no known king in Israel—just as Job was ‘a man in the land of Uz’.

### WISDOM AND CREATION

We might expect the wisdom in Proverbs to extend beyond the confines of Israel, since:

The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it (Ps. 24:1).

God had said to Israel:

... all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:5–6, RSV).

Israel’s appointed task, then, was to head up the worship of all the nations before God, where:

... from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 1:11).

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<sup>8</sup> See Kidner, *Proverbs*, pp. 17–25.

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This was in anticipation of the reality of the holy city in the new heaven and new earth where ‘People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations’, purged from all that is unclean (Rev. 21:26–27). Hence Paul the apostle was able to say to the Corinthians, ‘all things are yours’—not only ‘Paul or Apollos or Cephas’ but also the world, life, death, the present, and the future, because the Corinthians belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Cor. 3:21–23). The book of Proverbs is not narrowly religious, nor ethnically specific. It ranges across the whole of life and human experience, and the whole of creation.

Nothing less than this could do justice to the wisdom of the One who has created all things ‘in wisdom’ (Ps. 104:24; 2:19–20). Chapters 1–9 of Proverbs set the tone and provide the interpretive key to the right understanding of the whole book. Part of what that introduction does, especially in chapter 8, is to make the point that ‘the only wisdom by which you can handle everyday things in conformity with their nature is the wisdom by which they were divinely made and ordered’.<sup>9</sup>

### THE FEAR OF THE LORD

The keynote of the whole book is ‘the fear of the LORD’. This phrase occurs at significant points in the introductory chapters 1–9,<sup>10</sup> and also at other points throughout the book.<sup>11</sup> We have already said that this is not just any ‘god’, but the God whom Israel knew by covenant as their ‘father’ and ‘Redeemer from of old’ (Isa. 63:16). Of about one hundred proverbs that mention God, ‘all but a dozen use the covenant name Yahweh’.<sup>12</sup> It is the fear of this God that is ‘the beginning of knowledge’, ‘hatred of evil’, ‘the beginning of wisdom’, and ‘a fountain of life’ (Prov. 1:7; 8:13; 9:10; 14:27).

What is ‘the fear of the LORD’? We have looked at this in an earlier study (see Study 3, pp. 23–24), and saw that it has much to do with obedience to God and His law, and a healthy and wholesome regard for moral consequences. Here in Proverbs we note particularly that it subsists in a vital relationship with God. See how the two parts of this verse parallel each other:

... then you will understand the fear of the LORD  
and find the knowledge of God (Prov. 2:5).

Here ‘the fear of the LORD’ is equated with ‘the knowledge of God’, and ‘knowledge’ in the Bible is not just intellectual but relational. It is knowing God, not just knowing about God. So also:

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<sup>9</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Prov. 1:7; 1:29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10.

<sup>11</sup> Prov. 10:27; 14:26–27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 31:30; see also 14:16; 28:14; 29:25. ‘Where chapters 1–9 act as a starting point for the attainment of wisdom, clearly indicating that fear of the LORD is the point of departure, chapters 10–31 demonstrate what a life directed by fear of the LORD might look like’ (Sam Bleby, ‘What is the relationship between Proverbs 1–9 and 10–31? How does this affect the message of the book as a whole?’ Unpublished essay, Ridley College, Melbourne, 2006, p. 15. Used by permission).

<sup>12</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 33.

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The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov. 9:10).

This relational knowledge of God—as in any personal relationship, comes by God revealing Himself to a person, and out of that relationship will come all the wisdom that is needed in life:

For the LORD gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;  
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,  
guarding the paths of justice  
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.  
Then you will understand righteousness and justice  
and equity, every good path;  
for wisdom will come into your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;  
prudence will watch over you;  
and understanding will guard you.  
It will save you from the way of evil . . . (Prov. 2:6–12).

Such a relationship with God necessarily involves trust—it is the relationship of faith:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths (Prov. 3:5–6).

This is no less true in Proverbs than it is in Isaiah (see Isa. 7:9; 26:2–4; 28:16; 30:15), Habakkuk (see Hab. 2:4), and Paul (see Rom. 3:24–26). The purpose given for ‘The words of the wise’ could well apply to the whole book of Proverbs:

So that your trust may be in the LORD,  
I have made them known to you today—yes, to you (Prov. 22:19).

True wisdom is knowing the One ‘who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will’ (Eph. 1:11):

The human mind may devise many plans,  
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established (Prov. 19:21).

## WISDOM IN LIFE

We will now see how this is borne out in some of the wisdom in living that Proverbs imparts. Derek Kidner reminds us:

. . . the *introduction* (1:2–6), an extension of the title, makes it clear that this book is no anthology, but a course of education in the life of wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 22.



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One essayist has commented:

... because 1–9 seeks to orient the student towards wisdom not just with the mind, but the whole person, its message is not one of lists of wise choices to be learnt by rote, but is a message of character forged by fear of the LORD and tested in day-to-day life. Proverbs then should not be read as a list of commands, a list of rules for wise living, but as a compendium of character-formed choices towards wisdom and away from folly.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, we will look briefly at four related areas of life touched on in Proverbs: business, friendship, family, and marriage.

### Business

Business savvy, whether in primary production (Prov. 27:23–27: knowing your flocks; 24:27: getting infrastructure in place before you look after yourself), or in manufacture and trade (31:24: clothing industry; 16:11: fair trade), is based on an awareness that you need to know God (16:1–7, 9: ‘the LORD directs the steps’) and to work with others (15:22; 20:18: taking advice)—effectively, the two great commandments (Matt. 22:37–40). There are stern warnings against the folly of trying to make a quick buck (Prov. 1:19: ‘greedy for gain’; 20:21: ‘an estate quickly acquired’; 24:3–4: ‘by wisdom’; 28:22: ‘in a hurry to get rich’; 28:8: ‘exorbitant interest’)—the peril of ‘covetousness, which is idolatry’ (Col. 3:5, RSV). Diligence and hard work pay off (10:4–5; 12:11; 14:23; 20:4; 24:30–34; 28:19)—this is ‘the business that God has given everyone to be busy with’ (Eccl. 3:10; compare Gen. 2:15). Honesty and justice are to be the hallmarks of business dealings, because that is the way God is (Prov. 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23: diverse weights and measures; 3:28; 11:26: withholding sales). There is to be a shrewd understanding of people’s self-serving propensities (Prov. 20:14: bargaining; 17:8: allurements of bribery; 18:16; 21:14: power of a gift), but scrupulous straightforwardness in matters of justice (17:23; 15:27)—in keeping with the God ‘who is not partial and takes no bribe’ (Deut. 10:17; compare 16:19; 27:25; Exod. 23:8; Isa. 33:15; Amos 5:12)—a matter of being ‘wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ (Matt. 10:16). The foolishness of accepting unlimited liability for another (easy credit!) is to be eschewed (Prov. 6:1–5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26–27)—only God can ransom another person’s life (Ps. 49:7–8; Job: 17:3).

### Friendship

Forgiveness and love lie at the heart of stable friendship (Prov. 17:9, 17; compare Exod. 34:6–7; 1 Pet. 4:8: ‘love covers a multitude of sins’), rather than what we can get out of people (Prov. 19:4, 6). This can leave room for mutual correction (Prov. 27:5–6; 17:10; 27:17; 28:23). Friendship is to be actively fostered, even on a level with family relationships (Prov. 27:10; 18:24), but it is as well not to live too much in each other’s pockets (Prov. 25:17; 27:14), and we need to know when to lay off (25:20; 26:18–19)—friendship with God (Exod. 33:11; John 15:12–15) is the true way to friendship with others.

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<sup>14</sup> Sam Bleby, ‘Proverbs’, p. 18.

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## Family

The entire format of Proverbs, as teaching and advice of parents to their children (Prov. 1:8; 6:20–22; 10:1; 19:27; 22:6; 23:22–25; 31:1), is a practical exposition of the heart of Israel’s law (Deut. 6:4–9) that was to be heard by parents and children alike (Josh. 8:35; Neh. 8:1–3), and an application of the commandment with a promise (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2). Discipline of children (Prov. 13:24; 23:13–16; 29:17) is to be in the light of God’s disciplining of us as our Father (3:11–12; compare Heb. 12:5–11; Eph. 4:6; 6:1–4; Col. 3:20–21).

## Marriage

The one mention in Proverbs of the covenant of God is in connection with marriage:

You will be saved from the loose woman,  
from the adventuress with her smooth words,  
who forsakes the companion of her youth  
and forgets the covenant of her God (Prov. 2:16–17, RSV).

Marriage between one man and one woman for life is highly prized as being approved by God (Prov. 5:15–21; 18:22; 19:14). The downside of difficult marriages is recognised (Prov. 12:4; 19:13–14; 21:9, 19; 25:24). In the introductory chapters, dalliance with foolishness is represented as sexual immorality and unfaithfulness with a loose woman or an adulteress (2:16–19; 5:1–14; 6:20–35; 7:4–27; 9:13–18), in contrast to a right relationship with wisdom, as with a sister or a wife (3:13–18; 4:5–9; 5:15–23; 8:1–21; 9:1–6).

Right at the end of the book of Proverbs is a depiction of the ‘capable wife’ (Prov. 31:10–31).<sup>15</sup> She is a remarkable figure in herself: a wise and caring ministry with her husband and family (31:11–12, 15a, 21, 23, 27–29), a competent, diligent and astute business-woman in trade (31:14), real estate, primary production (31:16–17), and cottage industry—manufacturing and value-adding with a view to merchandising (31:18–19, 24)—small business and personnel management (31:15), and service to the wider community, especially the poor and needy (31:20, 26), all the while not neglecting herself and her own appearance (31:21–22), being held in high esteem by her husband, children, and all others (31:28–29, 31). The secret of her inner strength and beauty is that she ‘fears the LORD’.

She is a real-life person, but there are also what appear to be deliberate cross-references to the allegorical female figure of wisdom in the earlier chapters. ‘She is far more precious than jewels’ (Prov. 31:10)—compare what is attributed to wisdom:

She is more precious than jewels,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her (Prov. 3:15; compare 8:11; 20:15).

At the end of the depiction of the good wife, we feel the same ‘vibes’ coming through as we feel with regard to the earlier female figure of wisdom. It appears that the book of

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<sup>15</sup> This is a Hebrew alphabetically acrostic poem.

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Proverbs concludes with the virtual incarnation of wisdom in a good wife—perhaps in anticipation of what the New Testament will have to say about the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:21–32; Rev. 19:6–9; 21:1–22:5; contrast foolish ‘Babylon’ in Rev. 17–18). If this is so, then this is wisdom in life indeed!