

The Book of Proverbs

Introduction

Name

The title of the book, which comes to us from the Latin Vulgate, reflects to some degree its content. The root of the noun in Hebrew means “parallel,” “comparison,” or “a saying.” The comparison is often between folly and wisdom in everyday life. A proverb teaches through graphic contrasts. It is “Wisdom Literature.” In essence a proverb is an ethical maxim or a saying that describes human behavior. The function of such literature is to instruct the people of God in practical living.

Authorship

1. While the initial verse of the book reads, “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, King in Jerusalem,” we know that this requires qualification. See also 10:1, 25:1. It seems valid that he either composed or collected most of what we find in the book.
2. Chapters 1:2-9:18 is narrative in form, not pithy, contrastive statements. This has led some to suppose that 1:1 was inserted later to become the title of the book.
3. Chapter 30 was composed by Augur (v. 1).
4. Chapter 31 by Lemuel (v. 1)
5. We also know that two centuries after Solomon the scribes of Hezekiah collected various proverbs of the wise king. “These are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed (25:1).”
6. Some of the proverbs are “the sayings of the wise (24:23).” “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise (22:17).

Collection or Outline

1. Introduction (1:1-7)
2. A Father’s Admonition (1:8-9:18)
“Hear my son, your father’s instruction (1:8).
3. The first collection of Solomon Proverbs: Part I (10:1-22:16)
“The proverbs of Solomon (10:1).
5. The Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:34)
6. The Proverbs of Solomon collected by Hezekiah (25:1-29:27)
“These also are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed (25:1).”
7. The Wisdom of Augur (30:1-33)
8. The Words of Lemuel (31:1-9)
9. The Wise Wife (31:10-31)

Date of Collection

1. The compositions by Solomon can be safely dated in the 10th century BC (his reign was forty years, ca. 970-930. He was known for his wisdom (“And all the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom which God put in his heart [I Kings 10:24].” “He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005 [I kings 4:23]”).
2. A collection of Solomon Proverbs took place in the reign of Hezekiah (ca. 715-687, he reigned 29 years assuming the throne at the age of 25). His reign was characterized by the intrusion of the Assyrians, though defeated by the intervention of God as Isaiah predicted, and religious revival. In retrospect, it was a brief interlude in the nation’s downward spiral.

Purpose of the Collection

Several terms in the poetic collection: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. "Wisdom" in Proverbs is basically expertise, expertise in living life skillfully. "Knowledge," again practical in orientation, means data derived through the bodily functions: eyes, ears, nose, touch.

"Understanding (discernment)" has to do with the ability to assess and apply knowledge. When we have factual "knowledge" and know how to understand it or use it, this is what the Bible describes as "wisdom." The book instructs us on how to prudently conduct our lives.

1. The collection is beneficial to us because the blight on our natures has not been erased by redemption, that awaits a reality yet future. We all need reminders and instruction; it is a universal volume for all the ages. It is what we all lack, skill for living (wisdom, even common sense).
2. The source of most of the collection is from Solomon. David addressed his son in his last days with a prayer: "Only the Lord give you wisdom and understanding and give you charge over Israel... (I Chron. 22:12)." Upon Solomon's succession to the throne, he recognized his weakness to rule the people of God and prayed for wisdom ("I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in" [II Kings 3:7]). His prayer to God was this: "Give thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, to discern between good and evil (II Kings 3:9)." God's gift to him was a wise and discerning heart "so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall like one arise afterward (II Kings 3:12)." He composed over 3,000 proverbs and 1,000 songs (I Kings 4:32).

However, even for Solomon, wisdom did not prevent folly when other attractions turned his heart to lesser pleasures. Point: we all need to seek wisdom for practical living. Yesterday's successes may not be tomorrows!

Neither does a close walk with God as in the life of David, or even Moses ("the man of God (I Chron.23:14)," nor the experience of God's recognized outpourings of grace is a guarantee that folly will not overtake us in life (the Bathsheba episode [Solomon's mother], the numbering of the people at the end of his life). Regardless of our age, experience in knowing God, or knowledge of the ways of God, we all need reminders at a very practical level. "Prone to wander Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."

The original audience

This collection of wise insights for daily living was, though timeless, written to "my son" or "my sons."

1. "My son" appears 15 times in chapters 1-7, twice in the Hezekiah collection (19:27, 27:11), five times in the Sayings of the Wise (23:15, 19; 23:26; 24:13, 21), and twice by Lemuel's mother (31:2).
2. "My sons" is found four times, all by Solomon (4:1, 5:7; 7:24, 8:32).

Some think that originally it was composed for students in the royal court since learners were sometimes called "sons," as well as teachers "fathers."

Commentary and Comment

- I. Introduction or Preface, 1:1-7

- A. The Title and Literary Form, v. 1

Though we have discussed authorship of the entirety of the book, Solomon was the main contributor and the greatest example of skillful living.

The literary form, as stated above, is that of wise insights for daily living. The word proverb suggests comparisons, some quite lengthy (1:8-9:18), others quite pithy. We have them commonly in our culture: “A penny saved is a penny earned,” “A stitch in time saves nine.” A proverb is an object lesson based on comparison or analogy. Examples outside the book can be found in I Samuel 10:12 (“Is Saul among the prophets?”) and Samuel 18:7 (“Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousand”).

B. The Purpose of Wisdom Literature, vv. 2-6

1. The first purpose statement, vv. 2-3

a. Stated, v. 2

“To know:” the sphere of knowledge is not merely cognitive; it extends beyond the intellect to experience. Without evidence the claim to knowledge is at best questionable.

“To discern:” the fruit of wisdom is skillful living. The essence of discern is the ability to distinguish between things through comparison. Without instruction, wisdom is impossible to acquire.

b. Fruit, v. 3

The consequence of knowledge is discernment leading to prudence (wise living, common sense). An example might be found in the story of Abigail, Nabal, and David (I Sam. 25).

Three terms describe how a prudent person’s acts are manifested, exhibited.

“Righteousness:” conformity to standards (Deut. 25:15). In a religious context, it means conformity to the Law of God as one’s moral standard. Knowledge and discernment that that does not lead to moral rectitude is not wisdom (Josiah’s recovery of the Law, for example, as well as Ezra’s reading of the Law to the former exiles).

“Justice:” propriety in choice-making.

“Equity:” literally it means that which is pleasing, upright, fair.

2. The first digression, the teacher’s task v. 4

Here is the teacher’s perspective. The goal of the teacher is to teach the means of skillful living, shrewdness to the “naïve (literally the “simple” or “brainless”, a person easily enticed, gullible).

The second line parallels the first. “Youth” suggests the immature, inexperienced. Instruction brings with it perspective and prudence (discretion). In that culture, a “youth” was one into their thirties (Timothy came to Christ on Paul’s first missionary journey [ca. 48] and joined the team on the second [ca. 50]. Paul wrote the letter in the early 60s). He was at least in his late 30s [I Tim. 4:12, “Let no one despise your youth...”]).

3. The second digression: An exhortation, v. 5

Here the writer speaks to those on the other end of the spectrum, the wise. One never exhausts the need for wisdom.

“A wise man will hear” and “will acquire counsel (guidance).” He will do this by listening to the true sources of knowledge and discernment.

4. The second purpose statement, v. 6

The second major purpose of the collection is found in the promise that the one who follows the wisdom of the sages will understand parables, figures, the sayings of the wise, and riddles. He will obtain the tools for skillful living.

C. The Foundation of the Wisdom Literature, v. 7

1. Stated, v. 7a

Here is the foundation upon which the “edifice” of skillful living is constructed. It encapsulates what is basic to living wisely (See 9:10, Ps. 111:10).

“Beginning” refers to the controlling principle of knowledge (chief, first).

The phrase, “fear of the Lord,” appears 14 times in the book. A study of the word reveals several nuances. It can mean dread (Deut. 1:29), the state of being terrified (Jonah 1:10), standing in awe (I Kings 3:28), or the expression of reverence (Lev. 19:3). With the Lord as the object, each of these nuances are valid. However, here it leads to life (9:10, 15:33) and revulsion to what is foolish (10:27).

2. Contrasted, v. 7b

The fool (thick-brained, conceited, stubborn) despises instruction that leads to skillful living; They are not acquainted with the virtues of wisdom. Examples in the Bible are found in the behavior of Esau (Gen. 25:34) or Sanballat and Tobiah, belittled the construction of Jerusalem’s walls (Neh. 4:4). A fool is one who is not a true worshipper of God.

Thoughts

1. While we live in a culture that has embraced the assumption that failings can be assuaged through management techniques and governmental planning, which need not to be denigrated, though limited to temporal, non-enduring effect. Could it be that the root-cause is theological? Have we forgotten that wisdom comes from outside of us and is obtain through listening to God in reverential awe? A wise, skillful person sits at the feet of transcendence.
2. I think we should be thankful for numerous teachers that embodied the skills in living and took the time to teach us (parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, neighbors, mates, co-workers). Take a few minutes to quietly think of those who shaped your moral choices making you what we are today.
3. Knowledge alone will not cause skill and wisdom in life’s choices. Skillful living requires a standard that is greater than our intellects which along with the other faculties of the soul are blighted. We all need something greater than what we have. It requires the life of God, the character of God, engraved in our very being by the Spirit of God. A greater love than love of ourselves is what we all need. It begins in God. What the unskilled lack is not wisdom or intellectual insufficiency, it is an awe for the excellency of the transcendent God. Conformity because of reverential fear is true wisdom. The motive for obedience is not to impress God; it is because He is impressive!
4. What are some of the life-choices that you have made that were rooted in prudence and discernment? We all wish we had more of them. Knowledge and wisdom are not synonyms. We all know people that are brilliant in their fields of study and accomplishments yet lack wisdom in the choices they make. We know people that lack in knowledge yet are fountains of wisdom. How do you explain this reality?