

Notes on  
**Proverbs**  
2 0 0 2 E d i t i o n  
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## Introduction

### TITLE

The title of this book in the Hebrew Bible is "The Proverbs of Solomon, the Son of David, King in Israel" (cf. 1:1). The Greek Septuagint called this book "Proverbs of Solomon." The Latin Vulgate named it "The Book of Proverbs."

There is some debate about whether 1:1 is the title of the whole book or just the title of the first section (chs. 1—9). The first view has in its favor the fact that the Hebrew Bible took the verse as the title of the book. According to this view the references to Solomon in 1:1 are an indication that he was the primary author of the proverbs in the book.<sup>1</sup>

The second view is that 1:1 simply introduces the first major section of the book. The support for this view is that some succeeding sections begin with a similar caption (cf. 10:1; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1).<sup>2</sup>

In either case the book got its title from the proverbs it contains. The whole book is a book of proverbs so the title is appropriate.

"To read straight through a few chapters of Proverbs is like trying to have a conversation with someone who always replies with a one-liner."<sup>3</sup>

### WRITER

Proverbs claims to be a compendium of the wise sayings of several different individuals.<sup>4</sup> Solomon originated some of them (10:1—22:16 and chs. 25—29 definitely, and probably chs. 1—9 as well).<sup>5</sup> Unnamed wise men (sages) wrote other parts (22:17—24:34 definitely, and possibly chs. 1—9). Hezekiah's men copied some of Solomon's proverbs and added them to this collection (chs. 25—29). Agur and King Lemuel produced chapters 30 and 31 respectively.

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<sup>1</sup>See Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>See Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 328. He believed that 22:17 also contains a heading.

<sup>3</sup>John J. Collins, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Only Proverbs and Psalms in the Old Testament claim composite authorship for themselves.

<sup>5</sup>See Andrew E. Steinmann, "Proverbs 1—9 as a Solomonic Composition," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:4 (December 2000):659-74.

We do not know who the sages were who wrote 22:17—24:34 nor do we know the names of the men whom King Hezekiah instructed to compile some of Solomon's sayings. Agur and Lemuel are unknown to us also, though Lemuel seems to have been a non-Israelite monarch.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the proverbs appear to have been copied from, or at least influenced by, earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian books of wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

". . . whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the Word of the Lord. Such inclusions then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will."<sup>8</sup>

### DATE

Solomon reigned from 971 to 931 B.C. and Hezekiah from 715 to 686 B.C.<sup>9</sup> We do not know when the sages, Agur, or Lemuel lived.

The earliest the Book of Proverbs could have been in its final form was in Hezekiah's day, but it may have reached this stage later than that. We have no way to tell.

The contents of the book could have been in existence in Solomon's lifetime though not assembled into the collection we know as the Book of Proverbs.

### OUTLINE

- I. Discourses on wisdom chs. 1—9
  - A. Introduction to the book 1:1-7
    - 1. The title of the book 1:1
    - 2. The purpose of the book 1:2-6
    - 3. The thesis of the book 1:7
  - B. Instruction for young people 1:8—7:27
    - 1. Warning against consorting with sinners 1:8-19
    - 2. Wisdom's appeal 1:20-33
    - 3. Wisdom as a treasure chs. 2—3
    - 4. Encouragements to obey these instructions ch. 4

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<sup>6</sup>See my comments on 31:1.

<sup>7</sup>See Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 883-86.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 885-86.

<sup>9</sup>Edwin R. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*, pp. 75, 78.

5. Warnings against unfaithfulness in marriage ch. 5
  6. Other dangerous temptations 6:1-19
  7. Further warnings against adultery 6:20—7:27
- C. The value of wisdom and wise conduct chs. 8—9
1. The function of wisdom ch. 8
  2. Wisdom and folly contrasted ch. 9
- II. Couplets expressing wisdom 10:1—22:16
- A. The marks of wise living chs. 10—15
1. Things that produce profit 10:1-14
  2. Things of true value 10:15-32
  3. Wise living in various contexts 11:1-15
  4. Wise investments 11:16-31
  5. The value of righteousness 12:1-12
  6. Avoiding trouble 12:13-28
  7. Fruits of wise living ch. 13
  8. Further advice for wise living chs. 14—15
- B. How to please God 16:1—22:16
1. Trusting God ch. 16
  2. Peacemakers and troublemakers ch. 17
  3. Friendship and folly ch. 18
  4. Further advice for pleasing God 19:1—22:16
- III. Wise sayings 22:17—24:34
- A. Thirty sayings of the wise 22:17—24:22
1. The first group 22:17—23:11
  2. The second group 23:12—24:22
- B. Six more sayings of the wise 24:23-34
- IV. Maxims expressing wisdom chs. 25—29
- A. Instructive analogies 25:1—27:22
1. Wise and foolish conduct ch. 25
  2. Fools and folly ch. 26
  3. Virtues and vices 27:1-22

- B. A discourse on prudence 27:23-27
  - C. Instructive contrasts chs. 28—29
- V. Two discourses by other wise men chs. 30—31
- A. The wisdom of Agur ch. 30
    - 1. The introduction of Agur 30:1
    - 2. Wisdom about God 30:2-9
    - 3. Wisdom about life 30:10-33
  - B. The wisdom of Lemuel ch. 31
    - 1. The introduction of Lemuel 31:1
    - 2. The wise king 31:2-9
    - 3. The wise woman 31:10-31

## Exposition

### I. DISCOURSES ON WISDOM CHS. 1—9

Verse one introduces both the book as a whole and chapters 1—9 in particular. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of at least five separate groups of proverbs. There are those that Solomon spoke and or wrote (possibly chs. 1—9 and definitely 10:1—22:16) and those that unknown sages produced (22:17—24:34). Next come proverbs of Solomon that King Hezekiah's men compiled (chs. 25—29), those that Agur spoke and or wrote (ch. 30), and finally those that King Lemuel spoke and or wrote (ch. 31).

"We're living in the 'information age,' but we certainly aren't living in the 'age of wisdom.' Many people who are wizards with their computers seem to be amateurs when it comes to making a success out of their lives. Computers can store data and obey signals, but they can't give us the ability to use that knowledge wisely. What's needed today is wisdom.

"The Book of Proverbs is about godly wisdom, how to get it and how to use it. It's about priorities and principles, not get-rich-quick schemes or success formulas. It tells you, not how to make a living, but how to be skillful in the lost art of making a life."<sup>10</sup>

Since the sum total of human information now doubles approximately every year and a half, T. S. Eliot's questions are more apropos today than when he wrote them:

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"<sup>11</sup>

### A. INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK 1:1-7

#### 1. The title of the book 1:1

The Hebrew word translated "proverb" (*masal*) essentially means a comparison. However through usage it came to mean any profound pronouncement including maxims, observations, sermons (e.g., ch. 5), even wisecracks (cf. Ezek. 18:2), and revelations from God (cf. Ps. 49:4).<sup>12</sup> Etymologically the English word means "in place of (i.e., for) words." A proverb is usually a succinct statement that stands in place of a long explanation and expresses a truth about reality.

"In its basic form, the proverb is an ancient saying that takes wisdom and endows it with youthful vigor. In a few, piquant phrases the proverb

<sup>10</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Skillful*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup>For word studies of *masal*, see Allen H. Godbey, "The Hebrew *Masal*," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 39:2 (January 1923):89-108; and A. S. Herbert, "The 'Parable' (*Masal*) in the Old Testament," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954):180-96.

capsulizes a practical idea or truth in such a way as to lift the commonplace to a new level of mental consciousness. It reweaves the threadbare idea and shows the ordinary to be quite extraordinary.

"Fundamental to the proverbial form [genre] is the fact that it bears a truth that has been tested by time."<sup>13</sup>

"The Book of Proverbs has always been regarded as containing the concentrated deposit of ancient Israelite morality."<sup>14</sup>

## **2. The purpose of the book 1:2-6**

"The Book of Proverbs has two purposes: to give moral skillfulness and to give mental discernment. The first purpose is developed in vv. 3-4; then, after a parenthetical exhortation in v. 5, the second purpose is developed in v. 6."<sup>15</sup>

This book claims to offer wisdom (Heb. *hokmah*) to the reader. It is this wisdom that the Apostle Paul commanded us to walk in (cf. Eph. 5:15).

Wisdom is "God's fixed order for life, an order opposed to chaos and death.

"No longer can wisdom be defined simplistically as 'the practical application of knowledge.' Instead wisdom must be thought of as a broad, theological concept denoting a fixed, righteous order to which the wise man submits his life."<sup>16</sup>

"'Wisdom' (*hokmah*) basically means 'skill.'"<sup>17</sup>

". . . wisdom means being skillful and successful in one's relationship and responsibilities. It involves observing and following the Creator's principles of order in the moral universe."<sup>18</sup>

"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. Wise men and women have the competence to grasp the meaning of a situation and understand what to do and how to do it in the right way at the right time. . . .

<sup>13</sup>C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Poetic Books of the Old Testament*, pp. 155, 156.

<sup>14</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p. 74.

<sup>15</sup>Ross, p. 904. The words "wise" and "wisdom" occur about 125 times in Proverbs.

<sup>16</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136:543 (July-September 1979):234, 238.

<sup>17</sup>Ross, p. 904.

<sup>18</sup>Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 232.

"The pages of history are filled with the names of brilliant and gifted people who were *smart* enough to become rich and famous but not *wise* enough to make a successful and satisfying life. Before his death, one of the world's richest men said that he would have given all his wealth to make one of his six marriages succeed. It's one thing to make a living, but quite something else to make a life."<sup>19</sup>

This is not to say that everyone who submits to God will be able to make equally wise decisions in life. Some Christians, for example, demonstrate more wisdom than others. This is another sense in which Proverbs uses the word wisdom. Nevertheless essentially wisdom is a proper orientation toward God.<sup>20</sup>

"Proverbial wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements; but the speculative wisdom, such as Ecclesiastes or Job, uses lengthy monologues and dialogues to probe the meaning of life, the problem of good and evil, and the relationship between God and people."<sup>21</sup>

The key words in verses 2 through 4 have the following meanings.

<b>Word</b>	<b>Verse</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Wisdom	2a	Skillfulness
Instruction	2a	Taught by discipline
Understanding	2b	Discernment
Righteousness	3b	Right behavior
Justice	3b	Correct decisions
Equity	3b	Moral integrity
Prudence	4a	Sensibility in practical matters
Discretion	4b	Thoughtfulness

Riddles (v. 6) are any puzzles that are unclear and need interpreting, not just what we call riddles today (cf. Num. 12:8; Judg. 14:12; 1 Kings 10:1; Ezek. 17:2; Hab. 2:6).<sup>22</sup> A second purpose of the book is to solve such thought-provoking problems about life.

These verses set forth four objectives. God gave us these proverbs to impart an intimate acquaintance with wisdom and discipline (v. 2a) and to impart understanding of wisdom

<sup>19</sup>Wiersbe, pp. 10-11, 12.

<sup>20</sup>For a study of the subject of wisdom as Proverbs uses it, including the shades of meaning the various Hebrew synonyms provide, see Kidner, pp. 36-38; and Zuck, pp. 209-19, 232-38. Several commentaries have helpful topical indexes to the proverbs (e.g., Ross, pp. 897-903; W. G. Plaut, *Book of Proverbs*, pp. 333-36; Kidner, pp. 31-56).

<sup>21</sup>Ross, p. 883. Cf. *New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Wisdom Literature," by D. A. Hubbard, p. 1334.

<sup>22</sup>See Harry Torcszyner, "The Riddle in the Bible," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1 (1924):125-49.

sayings (vv. 2b, 6). He also wanted to impart moral insight (v. 3) and to identify the intended recipients of wisdom (v. 4).<sup>23</sup>

"The Book of Proverbs was not intended to be read as an exhaustive book of right actions but as a selective example of godly wisdom."<sup>24</sup>

### **3. The thesis of the book 1:7**

This verse enjoys almost universal recognition as the key statement not only in Proverbs but in all the wisdom literature of the Bible (cf. 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Eccles. 12:13). Some people think of it as the motto of the book, others the foundational principle, others the major premise, or something similar. The verse contains a positive statement followed by its negative corollary.

The "fear of the Lord" occurs at least 18 times 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). "Fear" includes not only a correct way of thinking about God but a correct relationship with Yahweh. It is an affectionate reverence that results in humbly bowing to the Father's will. It is a desire not to sin against Him because His wrath is so awful and His love is so awesome.

"Beginning" does not mean that the fear of the Lord is where one starts learning wisdom, but then he or she can move away from it as from the starting line in a race. Rather the fear of the Lord is the controlling principle, the foundation, on which one must build a life of wisdom. "Knowledge" is a relationship that depends on revelation and is inseparable from character. Even though many unbelievers have acquired much information without the fear of God, true knowledge rests on a relationship to God that revelation supports. We can learn the really important lessons in life only this way.

Other ancient Near Eastern countries produced wisdom literature in addition to what we have in our Old Testament.<sup>25</sup> However the wisdom literature outside Israel did not contain advice to look to a personal relationship with a god as essential to obtaining wisdom. The references to fearing the Lord in Proverbs, including 1:7, are unique and make this book distinctive and theologically relevant. The demand for faith underlies the whole book. Only in a right relationship to the true and living God can one enter into God's foreordained, righteous order for life and find true success and happiness. The fool despises God's revealed order for life and the instruction that would lead him or her into it (v. 7b).

<sup>23</sup>John E. Johnson, "An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:576 (October-December 1987):425-28.

<sup>24</sup>John H. Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (Fall 1991):247.

<sup>25</sup>See, for example, Cullen I. K. Story, "The Book of Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64 (1945):319-37; Giovanni Pettinato, "The Royal Archives of Tell Mardikh-Ebla," *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (May 1976):45; Edmund J. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 24, 152; W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, pp. 92, 97, 222; James M. Lindenberger, "The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1974); and Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, pp. 28-61.

The Hebrews believed people could acquire knowledge in three ways. One way was through observing nature and human behavior. Another way was by drawing analogies between traditional beliefs (e.g., creeds) and reality. A third way was through encounter with the transcendent God.<sup>26</sup>

### **B. INSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE 1:8—7:27**

The two ways (paths) introduced in 1:7 stretch out before the reader (cf. Matt. 7:13-14). In this section Solomon spoke to his son guiding him into God's way. "My son" was and is a customary way of addressing a disciple.

"It derives from the idea that parents are primarily responsible for moral instruction (Prov 4:3-4; Deut 6:7)."<sup>27</sup>

The frequent recurrence of the phrase "my son" in this part of Proverbs indicates that the instruction specially suited a young person. This person's life lay in front of him, and he faced major decisions that would set the course of his life from then on. Though the whole Book of Proverbs gives help to youths, chapters 1—7 can be of particular benefit to them.

Various individuals have proposed suggestions concerning how we should understand the phrase "my son." The best explanation I have seen is that the instruction that follows was originally the type of counsel a courtier father gave his son or sons in his home. This seems to have been a traditional form of ancient Near Eastern education, especially among the ruling classes.

In Egypt, for example, "The authors of the [wisdom] 'teachings' do not present themselves as priests and prophets. They appear as aged officials at the end of active and successful careers, desirous to let their children profit by their experience."<sup>28</sup>

This instruction did not replace a formal education but supplemented it.<sup>29</sup>

Earlier Akkadian officials evidently practiced the same custom.

"The advice given in the section 'My son' can have had relevance for very few people. . . . This suggests that we are to construe the text as being in the form of admonitions of some worthy to his son who will succeed him as vizier to the ruler."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup>James L. Crenshaw, "The Acquisition of Knowledge in Israelite Wisdom Literature," *Word & World* 7:3 (Summer 1986):247-52.

<sup>27</sup>Ross, p. 907.

<sup>28</sup>Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 60. Cf. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup>William Kelly Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Egypt*, p. 54, cf. pp. 178-79.

<sup>30</sup>Lambert, p. 96.

Other evidence exists that it was common throughout the ancient Near East for high officials to pass on this special instruction to their heirs. In Proverbs we have the record of what Solomon told his son Rehoboam.

" . . . the Book of Proverbs has a definite masculine focus because in the ancient Jewish society daughters usually weren't educated for the affairs of life. Most of them were kept secluded and prepared for marriage and motherhood. For the most part, when you read 'man' in Proverbs, interpret it generically and read 'person,' whether male or female. Proverbs isn't a sexist book, but it was written in the context of a strongly male-oriented society."<sup>31</sup>

In the teaching that follows there is advice for many situations a king would encounter and have to deal with effectively. These matters included the administration of justice, leadership, behavior, as well as urban and agricultural concerns. Consequently there seems to be no reason to take these references to "my son" as anything other than what they appear at face value to be (cf. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 12:24; Deut. 4:9-11).

In some parts of the ancient world the mother shared the duty of instructing the son with the father (cf. 1:8; 4:3; 6:20; 31:1, 26).<sup>32</sup>

"Here the father and mother are placed on exactly the same footing as teachers of their children. . . . The phraseology of these sentences corresponds almost exactly to that of their Egyptian counterparts . . . and this throws into greater relief the one feature which is entirely unique in them: the mention of the mother. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this feature is an example of the adaptation of the Egyptian tradition to the peculiar situation in which the Israelite instructions were composed: a domestic situation in which the father and mother together shared the responsibility for the education of the child."<sup>33</sup>

Archaeologists have found most of the documents that contain extrabiblical instruction of the "my son" type in excavated scribal schools. This suggests that even though the teaching took place in the home the teachers preserved their instructions in writing with a view to sharing them with people outside the family circle. This means that what we have in Proverbs is not atypical. Probably when Solomon recorded his counsel to his son he adapted it to a more general reading audience, namely, all the people of Israel. Eventually all people profited from it.

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<sup>31</sup>Wiersbe, p. 172, n. 1.

<sup>32</sup>Kidner did a subject study on the family in Proverbs. See pp. 49-52.

<sup>33</sup>R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, p. 42.

### **1. Warning against consorting with sinners 1:8-19**

In the pericope before us the wise way (vv. 8-9) does not have the personal appeal, the excitement and hope of power, that the second way does (vv. 10-19). Its only reward is goodness as opposed to acceptance by one's peers.

"The Bible is the basic textbook in the home. It was once the basic textbook in the educational system, but even if that were still true, the Bible in the school can't replace the Bible in the home. I note that many modern parents sacrifice time and money to help their children excel in music, sports, and social activities; I trust they're even more concerned that their children excel in knowing and obeying the Word of God."<sup>34</sup>

Verse 19 articulates the point of the comparison. The Hebrew word translated "gains" (v. 19) implies a money-grabbing attitude (cf. 15:27).

### **2. Wisdom's appeal 1:20-33**

This is one of several passages in Proverbs where the writer personified wisdom. Her call comes to people in the market, in the hustle and bustle of life, not in the seclusion of the home or sanctuary (cf. v. 8).<sup>35</sup>

"To whom does Wisdom speak? To three classes of sinners: the simple ones, the scorners (scoffers, mockers, NIV), and the fools (v. 22). The *simple* are naive people who believe anything (14:15) but examine nothing. They're gullible and easily led astray. *Scorners* think they know everything (21:24) and laugh at the things that are really important. While the simple one has a blank look on his face, the scorners wear a sneer. *Fools* are people who are ignorant of truth because they're dull and stubborn. Their problem isn't a low IQ or poor education; their problem is a lack of spiritual desire to seek and find God's wisdom. Fools enjoy their foolishness but don't know how foolish they are! The outlook of fools is purely materialistic and humanistic. They hate knowledge and have no interest in things eternal."<sup>36</sup>

It is clear here that people have a choice about which way they will go. Their lives are to a large measure the result of their choices. The fool is one by his own fault, not by fate (vv. 30-31).<sup>37</sup> Wisdom laughs at the fool's calamity (v. 26), not because she is hard-hearted but because it is so absurd to choose folly (v. 26).

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<sup>34</sup>Wiersbe, p. 104.

<sup>35</sup>See Phyllis Tribble, "Wisdom Builds a Poem: The Architecture of Proverbs 1:20-33," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975):509-18.

<sup>36</sup>Wiersbe, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup>Kidner, p. 60.

"The figure of laughing reveals the absurdity of choosing a foolish way of life and being totally unprepared for disaster."<sup>38</sup>

Verses 32 and 33 contrast the ultimate destruction of the unresponsive with the peaceful condition of the responsive.

### **3. Wisdom as a treasure chs. 2—3**

#### **The difficulty of obtaining wisdom 2:1-5**

Even though wisdom wants people to adopt her (1:20-33) she is hard to get. The person who wants her has to work hard to obtain her (v. 3). If understanding does not come easily, one should work harder to obtain it.<sup>39</sup> He or she must start with revelation and study it diligently to obtain spiritual rather than merely academic wisdom. The "fear of the Lord" emphasizes awe, and the "knowledge of God" stresses intimacy.<sup>40</sup>

"If you want wisdom, you must listen to God attentively (Matt. 13:9), obey Him humbly (John 7:17), ask Him sincerely (James 1:5), and seek Him diligently (Isa. 55:6-7), the way a miner searches for silver and gold.

"Obtaining spiritual wisdom isn't a once-a-week hobby, it is the daily discipline of a lifetime. But in this age of microwave ovens, fast foods, digests, and numerous 'made easy' books, many people are out of the habit of daily investing time and energy in digging deep into Scripture and learning wisdom from the Lord. Thanks to television, their attention span is brief; thanks to religious entertainment that passes for worship, their spiritual appetite is feeble and spiritual knowledge isn't 'pleasant to [their] soul' (Prov. 2:10). It's no wonder fewer and fewer people 'take time to be holy' and more and more people fall prey to the enemies that lurk along the way."<sup>41</sup>

#### **The giver of wisdom 2:6-9**

The searcher for wisdom will find what God gives when he or she searches revelation (v. 6). The knowledge of how to live comes with the knowledge of God (v. 7). The success in view is correct behavior (vv. 7-9). Lovers of wisdom are godly (v. 8, Heb. *hasidim*, loyal sons of the covenant).

This is another passage in which we can see the difference between Hebrew wisdom literature and that of other ancient nations. Solomon identified Yahweh as the source of wisdom. Only through relationship with Him can a person be truly wise and experience the blessings of wisdom.

<sup>38</sup>Ross, p. 910.

<sup>39</sup>See Julius H. Greenstone, *Proverbs with Commentary*, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup>For a synthesis of what the Book of Proverbs reveals about God, see Zuck, pp. 238-39.

<sup>41</sup>Wiersbe, p. 36.

### The fruit of moral integrity 2:10-22

Wisdom safeguards a person morally. The first part of this pericope shows how God protects (vv. 10-11; cf. vv. 7b-8). The last part presents the temptations one can overcome (vv. 12-15 and 16-19). When a person submits himself or herself to God and gains wisdom, the ways of the wicked will lose some of their attractiveness. The wise person will see that the adventuress who promises thrills is offering something she cannot deliver except in the most immediate sensual sense.

The "strange" woman (v. 16) is one "outside the circle of [a man's] proper relations, that is, a harlot or an adulteress."<sup>42</sup> The word does not necessarily mean that she was a foreigner. Probably she is a stranger to the conventions of Israel's corporate life.<sup>43</sup>

"If the evil man uses *perverse* words to snare the unwary [v. 12], the adulteress uses *flattering* words. Someone has said that flattery isn't communication, it is manipulation; it's people telling us things about ourselves that we enjoy hearing and wish were true."<sup>44</sup>

The "covenant" she has left (v. 17) seems to refer to her own marriage covenant (Mal. 2:14) rather than to the covenant law that prohibited adultery (Exod. 20:14).<sup>45</sup> The "land" (vv. 21-22) is the Promised Land of Canaan.

This chapter, like the previous one, ends by contrasting the ends of the wicked and the righteous (vv. 21-22; cf. 1:32-33). It is a long poem that appeals for wisdom and then identifies the benefits of following wisdom.

Chapter 2 emphasizes moral stability as a fruit of wisdom, and chapter 3 stresses serenity. As chapter 2, chapter 3 also has three sections.

### The fruit of peace 3:1-10

The trust of the wise son (vv. 5-6) comes from heeding sound teaching (vv. 1-4), and it leads to confident obedience (vv. 7-9).

"Teaching" (v. 1, Heb. *torah*) means "law" or, more fundamentally, "direction." Here the context suggests that the teachings of the parents are in view rather than the Mosaic Law, though in Israel their instruction would have rested on the Torah of God.

"Where it [*torah*] occurs unqualified (28:9; 29:18) it is clearly the divine law (it is also the Jewish term for the Pentateuch); but *my law*, 'thy

<sup>42</sup>Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup>William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, p. 285.

<sup>44</sup>Wiersbe, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup>Ross, p. 914.

mother's law' (1:8), *etc.*, refer to the present maxims and to the home teachings, based indeed on the law, but not identical with it."<sup>46</sup>

Verse 3 pictures devotion to kindness and truth (cf. Deut. 6:8-9, which says that God's law should receive the same devotion). "Kindness" or "love" translates the Hebrew word *hesed*, which refers to faithfulness to obligations that arise from a relationship.<sup>47</sup> "Truth" or "faithfulness" (Heb. *'emet*) refers to what one can rely on because it is stable.<sup>48</sup> Together they may form a hendiadys: true kindness or faithful love. "Repute" (v. 4) connotes success, as in Psalm 111:10.

"Trust" and "lean" (v. 5) are very close in meaning. Trusting means to put oneself wholly at the mercy of another (cf. Jer. 12:5b; Ps. 22:9b). Leaning is not just reclining against something but relying on it totally for support. "Acknowledge" (v. 6) means to be aware of and have fellowship with God, not just to tip one's hat to Him. It includes obeying God's moral will as He has revealed it. The promise (v. 6b) means that God will make the course of such a person's life truly successful in God's eyes. This is a promise as well as a proverb, and it refers to the totality of one's life experience. It does not guarantee that one will never make mistakes.

How can we tell if a proverb is a promise as well as a proverb? We can do so by consulting the rest of Scripture. If a proverb expresses a truth promised elsewhere in Scripture, we know it is a promise. In the case of 3:5-6 we have the repetition of a promise made numerous times in Scripture that people who trust God will experience His guidance through life (cf. Heb. 11). In our attempt to "handle accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) we must carefully distinguish proverbs that restate promises from those that do not and are only proverbs.

Verses 7-10 suggest some of the ways God will reward the commitment of verses 5-6. Verse 7a gives the converse of verse 5a, and 7b restates 6a (cf. Rom. 12:16). This is the act of acknowledging God in all one's ways. Verse 8 describes personal invigoration poetically.

"Scripture often uses the physical body to describe inner spiritual or psychological feelings."<sup>49</sup>

Verse 9 applies the principle of acknowledging God to the financial side of life.

"To 'know' God in our financial 'ways' is to see that these honour Him."<sup>50</sup>

The prospect of material reward (v. 10) was a promise to the godly Israelite (cf. Deut. 28:1-14; Mal. 3:10). We should take this verse more as a proverb than a promise since the

<sup>46</sup>Kidner, p. 63.

<sup>47</sup>Ross, p. 916. Cf. Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, p. 55.

<sup>48</sup>Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, p. 167.

<sup>49</sup>Ross, p. 917. Cf. A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>50</sup>Kidner, p. 64.

Lord has revealed that as Christians we should expect persecution for our faith rather than material prosperity (2 Tim. 3:12; Heb. 12:1-11).

### **The importance of continuing to seek wisdom 3:11-20**

Even though the price one has to pay for wisdom (i.e., life within the will of God) includes submitting to God's discipline (vv. 11-12), it is worth it (vv. 13-20).

"Loath" (v. 11b) means to shrink back from (cf. Heb. 12:5-6). Rejecting with the will and recoiling emotionally are opposite actions from trusting (v. 5). God's discipline may not produce all God desires if we respond to it improperly. Long life, riches, and honor (v. 16) were the rewards God promised the godly under the Old Covenant. The tree of life figure (v. 18) implies that wisdom is the source and sustainer of a long and beneficial life (cf. v. 16).<sup>51</sup> The point is that by pursuing the way of wisdom a person can obtain the best things God has to offer him or her.

"It's good to have the things money can buy, provided you don't lose the things money can't buy. What good is an expensive house if there's no happy home within it? Happiness, pleasantness, and peace aren't the guaranteed by-products of financial success, but they are guaranteed to the person who lives by God's wisdom. Wisdom becomes a 'tree of life' to the believer who takes hold of her, and this is a foretaste of heaven (Rev. 22:1-2)."<sup>52</sup>

### **Manifestations of wisdom 3:21-35**

In these verses we can see the quality of love in the wise son. Verses 27-30 deal with neighborliness. The situation in view in verses 27-28 is one in which someone owes money, not one in which giving is an act of charity (cf. Lev. 19:13). The point is pay your debts promptly.<sup>53</sup> We could apply verse 30 by taking it as a warning against hauling someone into court on flimsy accusations.<sup>54</sup>

"The Book of Proverbs is the best manual you'll find on people skills, because it was given to us by the God who made us, the God who can teach us what we need to know about human relationships, whether it's marriage, the family, the neighborhood, the job, or our wider circle of friends and acquaintances. If we learn and practice God's wisdom as presented in Proverbs, we'll find ourselves improving in people skills and enjoying life much more."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup>See Ralph Marcus, "The Tree of Life in Proverbs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 62 (1943):117-20.

<sup>52</sup>Wiersbe, p. 40.

<sup>53</sup>Kidner also included a subject study on the friend (vv. 29-30), pp. 44-46.

<sup>54</sup>McKane, p. 300.

<sup>55</sup>Wiersbe, p. 97.

Verses 31-35 warn against the temptation to resort to violence when we deal with neighbors. One must decide if he or she wants to be odious to God or be His intimate friend (v. 32). That is the issue in choosing the ways of the wicked or those of the upright. James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 quote the Septuagint version of verse 34. Verse 35 probably means fools display dishonor because that is what they get for their choices in contrast to the wise who get honor.

#### **4. Encouragements to obey these instructions ch. 4**

"This chapter is comprised of three discourses on the value of wisdom, each including the motifs of instruction, exhortation, command, and motivation."<sup>56</sup>

#### **Teaching the love of wisdom 4:1-9**

The first section of verses in this chapter shows how parents can pass along the love of wisdom, mainly by personal influence. Note how positive Solomon's instruction is. Rather than saying, "Don't do this and that!" which he does elsewhere (cf. 3:27-31), he wanted his sons to realize that by cooperating with his counsel they could find the best life possible. This father structured formal times of instruction for his sons. His is not a bad example for other fathers to follow.

The Hebrew word translated "instruction" (v. 2) can also mean "law" (cf. 3:1). Normally those who keep God's commandments live (v. 4), but there are exceptions.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless this is good motivation. One writer paraphrased verse 7a as follows: "What it takes is not brains or opportunity, but decision. Do you want it? Come and get it."<sup>58</sup> The second half of this verse probably means, "Be willing to part with anything else you may have to get understanding."

#### **The two paths 4:10-19**

In verses 10-19 two paths again lie before the youth, the way of wisdom (vv. 10-13) and the way of the wicked (vv. 14-17).<sup>59</sup>

"Upright" paths (v. 11) are straightforward ways of behaving morally and practically. God's way is the best route to take through life. It offers the fewest potholes, detours, and dangers. God's commands are similar to the lines on modern highways. They help travellers stay on the proper part of the road so they do not have accidents and hurt themselves and other people.

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<sup>56</sup>Ross, p. 922.

<sup>57</sup>R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, p. 52.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>59</sup>See Norman C. Habel, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1—9," *Interpretation* 26:2 (April 1972):131-57, for a study of "the way" as a nuclear symbol in this section of Proverbs; and Daniel P. Bricker, "The Doctrine of the 'Two Ways' in Proverbs," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:4 (December 1995):501-17.

One writer restated verses 14-15 as follows.

"Don't take the first step, for you may not be master of your destiny thereafter."<sup>60</sup>

A person can become as zealous for evil as for good. However this is upside down morality (v. 16; cf. Rom. 14:21). Another writer commented on verses 16-17 in these words.

"How sick to find peace only at the price of another man's misfortune!"<sup>61</sup>

This section closes with another summary comparison (vv. 18-19; cf. 1:32-33; 2:21-22; 3:35).

"With the goodness of God to desire our highest welfare, the wisdom of God to plan it, and the power of God to achieve it, what do we lack? Surely we are the most favored of all creatures."<sup>62</sup>

The main elements in the contrast in verses 10-19 are between safety and danger, and between certainty and uncertainty.

### **The importance of persistence 4:20-27**

The last pericope of this chapter emphasizes the importance of persisting in the good practices that will lead to life. Success usually comes to those who keep concentrating on and perfecting the basics in their work. Our temptation is to leave these when we become adequately proficient. These verses give the reader a checkup on his or her condition.

Advocates of the "prosperity gospel" who teach that it is never God's will for anyone to be sick appeal to verses 20-22 as support for their position (along with Exod. 15:26; 23:25; Ps. 103:3; Isa. 33:24; Jer. 30:17; Matt. 4:23; 10:1; Mark 16:16-18; Luke 6:17-19; Acts 5:16 and 10:38).<sup>63</sup>

"By using ears, eyes, and heart, the teacher is exhorting the whole person to receive the traditions."<sup>64</sup>

"Heart" (v. 23) usually means "mind" (3:3; 6:32a; 7:7b; et al.), but it has a much broader meaning that includes the emotions (15:15, 30), the will (11:20; 14:14), and even the whole inner person (3:5).<sup>65</sup> Here the affections are particularly in view. With verses 20-22, verse 23 helps us see that the life in view is not some prize that one gains all at once.

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<sup>60</sup>Plaut, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup>Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice*, p. 47.

<sup>62</sup>A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 70.

<sup>63</sup>For a critique of this movement, see Ken L. Sarles, "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143:572 (October-December 1986):329-52.

<sup>64</sup>Ross, p. 925.

<sup>65</sup>See. R. J. Bouffier, "The Heart in the Proverbs of Solomon," *The Bible Today* 52 (1971):249-51.

It is rather a growing spiritual vitality that enervates the wise person and enables him or her to reach out and help others effectively (cf. Mark 7:15-23; Luke 6:45; John 4:14 and especially 7:38).

One's words (v. 24) reflect his or her heart's affections. We must be singleminded in our pursuit of wisdom (v. 25; cf. Ps. 101:3; 119:37). We must also give attention to practical planning so we end up taking the steps we need to take to arrive at our destination (vv. 26-27; cf. Heb. 12:13).

### **5. Warnings against unfaithfulness in marriage ch. 5**

Chapters 5—7 all deal with the consequences of sexual sins: eventual disappointment (ch. 5), gradual destruction (ch. 6), and ultimate death (ch. 7).<sup>66</sup>

Chapter 5 first reveals the ugliness under the surface of the attractive seductress (vv. 1-6). Then it clarifies the price of unfaithfulness (vv. 7-14). Finally it extols the wisdom of marital fidelity (vv. 15-23).

#### **The danger of seduction 5:1-6**

The lips of the youth (v. 2) contrast with those of the seductress (v. 3). Knowing what is right and being able to articulate that with one's lips is really a protection against the power of the seductress's speech (vv. 1-6).

The temptress comes with words that are sweet (flattering) and smooth (delightful, v. 3).<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless if swallowed, they make the person tempted by them feel bitter (ashamed) and wounded (hurt, v. 4). Even flirting produces this effect sometimes. The seductress will lead a person down a path that takes him or her to death and the grave (v. 5), though one can experience a living death as a result of following her, too. She has no concern with living a truly worthwhile life but only with gaining some immediate physical and emotional thrill (v. 6).

"God created sex not only for reproduction but also for enjoyment, and he didn't put the 'marriage wall' around sex to *rob* us of pleasure but to *increase* pleasure and *protect* it."<sup>68</sup>

#### **The price of unfaithfulness 5:7-14**

The price of unfaithfulness is so high that it is unreasonable. Therefore one is wise to avoid tempting himself or herself by continuing to admire the "merchandise." Most marital infidelity occurs because the parties involved continue to spend time together. Here Solomon advised avoiding the company of a temptress (cf. 2 Tim. 2:22; Matt. 5:28-29).

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<sup>66</sup>Wiersbe, p. 48.

<sup>67</sup>M. Dahood, "Honey That Drips. Notes on Proverbs 5:2-3," *Biblica* 54 (1973):65-66.

<sup>68</sup>Wiersbe, p. 48.

The price of unfaithfulness is not just physical disease (v. 11b), though that may be part of it, but total personal ruin. Infidelity dissipates all of one's powers (v. 9a). Others will exploit him (vv. 9b-10), he will hate himself (vv. 11-13), and he will quite possibly suffer ruin in his community (v. 14). Verse 9b would fit a situation involving blackmail, a not uncommon accompaniment to marital unfaithfulness.

"The use of both 'flesh' and 'body' [v. 11] underscores the fact that the whole body is exhausted."<sup>69</sup>

### **The importance of fidelity 5:15-23**

Verses 15-23 point out a better way, namely, fidelity. Strict faithfulness will not result in unhappiness or failure to experience what is best in life, as the world likes to try to make us think. Rather it guards us from the heartbreak and tragedy that accompany promiscuity. The figures of a cistern and well (v. 15) refer to one's wife (cf. Song of Sol. 4:15) who satisfies desire.

The Hebrew text favors taking verse 16 as a positive statement ("Let your streams . . .") rather than as a question, as in the NASB. The meaning of verses 17-18 then becomes, "The influence of the faithful man (His 'springs') become a blessing to others."<sup>70</sup> Another view is that the springs and streams in view belong to the man being warned who might share them with a woman of the street.<sup>71</sup>

The erotic language of verses 19-20 is unusual in Scripture, but it shows that God approves sexual joy in marriage and it is a prophylactic against unfaithfulness (1 Cor. 7:5). A man can either find his exhilaration (v. 19, i.e., sexual stimulation, also translated intoxication in 20:1 and Isa. 28:7) in his wife or in another woman. The same Hebrew word reads "go astray" in verse 23b. The issue is self-discipline.

"Lack of discipline" (RSV, v. 23a) is better than "lack of instruction." People usually do not become unfaithful to their spouses because they do not know better but because they do not choose better.<sup>72</sup>

". . . if the young man is not *captivated* [Heb. *sagah*] by his wife but becomes *captivated* with a stranger in sinful acts, then his own iniquities will *captivate* him; and he will be led to ruin."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Ross, p. 928.

<sup>70</sup>Kidner, p. 70.

<sup>71</sup>Ross, 929.

<sup>72</sup>See Zuck, pp. 239-43, for a summary of the revelation concerning man in Proverbs.

<sup>73</sup>Ross, p. 931.

### **6. Other dangerous temptations 6:1-19**

Solomon singled out a few more serious errors to avoid in addition to marital unfaithfulness. These include assuming liability for the debts of others (vv. 1-5), being lazy (vv. 6-11), being untruthful (vv. 12-15), and seven other practices that need no clarification (vv. 16-19).

The advice in this section provides a good example of what prudence is. A prudent person is one who is capable of exercising sound judgment in practical matters. He or she is cautious and discreet in conduct, is circumspect, and is sensible. We often describe a prudent person by saying he or she has common sense. A prudent person can foresee the consequences of possible actions. A godly person can and should be prudent because God's revelation helps us see the consequences of our actions.

"Surety" (v. 1) means "security" in the sense of taking on another person's obligations as one's own, as when a person co-signs a note to pay another person's loan, for example. Paul offered to pay Onesimus' past debts, but not his future ones (Phile. 18-19). "Neighbor" and "stranger" (v. 1) together mean anyone; these two kinds of people are not the only ones in view.<sup>74</sup> Solomon strongly counseled avoidance of this obligation. If one finds himself in it already he should do everything he can to get himself out of it before he discovers he is in even worse trouble (v. 3).

Verses 6-11 warn against laziness.<sup>75</sup> A "vagabond" is a "highwayman," namely, a robber.<sup>76</sup>

The person in view in verses 12-15 is one who, for the amusement it gives him or her, causes other people to experience inconvenience or suffering. A simple joke is different from joking at someone else's expense. The latter practice is what Solomon urged his sons to avoid. He called such a mischievous prankster "worthless" and "wicked" (v. 12). "Worthless" is literally "of Beliel," a word that became a name for Satan (2 Cor. 6:15).

The list in verses 16-19 repeats some of what Solomon mentioned before. It may have been one whole proverb he added because it carried on the idea of other temptations to avoid. The phrase "six . . . yes, seven" (v. 16) implies that this list is not exhaustive of what God hates, though it is explicit.<sup>77</sup> These seven practices deal with attitude (v. 17a), thought (18a), speech (17b, 19a), action (17c, 18b), and influence (19b).

### **7. Further warnings against adultery 6:20—7:27**

This extended warning against one of life's most destructive practices is classic.

<sup>74</sup>This is a figure of speech called a merism in which two extremes represent the whole.

<sup>75</sup>See Kidner's subject study on the sluggard, pp. 42-43.

<sup>76</sup>Toy, p. 125.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

### **The guilt of adultery 6:20-35**

Verses 20-23 indicate the start of a new section and stress again the importance of the precepts that follow. Solomon regarded the instruction he was giving as an expression of God's law (cf. v. 23; Ps. 109:105).

The immoral act begins with the lustful look (v. 25). That is the place to weed out the temptation, when it is still small.

"Playing with temptation is only the heart reaching out after sin."<sup>78</sup>

In verses 27-29 we have a series of physical analogies designed to illustrate spiritual cause and effect. Adultery brings inescapable punishment. One may contain the fire (v. 27) at first, but others will discover it if it continues to burn. "His clothes" (v. 27) may imply outward reputation, namely, what others see, as often in Scripture. "Touches her" is probably a euphemism for sexual intimacy (cf. Gen. 20:6; 1 Cor. 7:1).

"'But sex is a normal desire, given to us by God,' some people argue. 'Therefore, we have every right to use it, even if we're not married. It's like eating: If you're hungry, God gave you food to eat; if you're lonely, God gave you sex to enjoy.' Some of the people in the Corinthian church used this argument to defend their sinful ways: 'Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods' (1 Cor. 6:13, NKJV). But Paul made it clear that the believer's body belonged to God and that the presence of a desire wasn't the same as the privilege to satisfy that desire (vv. 12-20)."<sup>79</sup>

Verses 30-35 draw another kind of comparison. Adultery is a practice everyone looks down on because it is never necessary. It is always the product of lack of self-control. It is this lack of self-restraint that seems to be the reason an unfaithful husband should not be a church elder (1 Tim. 5:6).

"The picture of the adulterer as social outcast may seem greatly overdrawn. If so, the adjustment that must be made is to say that in any *healthy* society such an act is social suicide."<sup>80</sup>

### **The lure of adultery ch. 7**

This chapter dramatizes the arguments Solomon advanced in the previous section (6:20-35).

The prologue (vv. 1-5) again urges the adoption of this advice, not just the reception of it. The apple (pupil) of the eye (v. 2) is its most sensitive part (cf. Deut. 32:10).

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<sup>78</sup>Ross, p. 937.

<sup>79</sup>Wiersbe, p. 54.

<sup>80</sup>Kidner, pp. 74-75. Also, hyperbole is quite common in Hebrew poetry.

Verses 6-9 describe the victim of temptation as one who has not adopted Solomon's council. He or she is "naive" (v. 7), foolish innocently or deliberately.

Verses 10-12 picture the huntress on the prowl for sensual gratification preying on anyone foolish enough to encourage her.

"Woe to the marriage whose partners cannot find values in their home and must constantly seek outside stimulation!"<sup>81</sup>

Verses 13-21 show her tactics: sensual assault (v. 13), justification of her intent (v. 14), flattery (v. 15), visualization of delight (vv. 16-17), proposition (v. 18), and reassurance of safety (vv. 19-20). We should probably favor the marginal reading of verse 14: "Sacrifices of peace offerings are with me." The idea is that she had made a peace offering and had some of the food that was her portion of the offering at her house where she needed to eat it. Some peace offerings followed the end of a vow (votive offerings). This seems to have been the case here. This woman appears to be indulging herself after a period of self-sacrifice, as some people who fast during Lent do at the end of that season. It is quite clear that this woman knew exactly what she wanted.

Verses 22-23 portray the kill. Evidently the youth hesitated but then "suddenly" (v. 22) yielded. Sin leads to death (cf. James 1:15) so Solomon looked at the result of the youth's action, not its immediate effect.

In the epilogue to this story (vv. 24-27) Solomon advised a three-fold defense against this temptation. First, guard your heart (v. 25a). We are in danger when we begin to desire and long for an adulterous affair. Fantasizing such an affair is one symptom that we are in this danger. Second, guard your body (v. 25b). Do not go near or stay near someone who may want an adulterous affair. Third, guard your future (vv. 26-27). Remember the consequences of having an adulterous affair before you get involved.

"A man's life is not destroyed in one instant; it is taken from him gradually as he enters into a course of life that will leave him as another victim of the wages of sin."<sup>82</sup>

### **C. THE VALUE OF WISDOM AND WISE CONDUCT CHS. 8—9**

Solomon explained the value of wisdom in many ways already in Proverbs. Now he put wisdom at center stage to emphasize its function.

#### **1. The function of wisdom ch. 8**

Chapter 8 is an apology (defense) of wisdom. The argument of this section develops as follows. Wisdom would be every person's guide (vv. 1-5; cf. Gal. 5:18, 22-23). She is

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<sup>81</sup>Plaut, p. 102.

<sup>82</sup>Ross, p. 942.

morality's partner (vv. 6-13), the key to success (vv. 14-21), the principle of creation (vv. 22-31), and the one essential necessity of life (vv. 32-36).

### **Wisdom as guide 8:1-5**

By personifying wisdom Solomon was able to illustrate two things about it in these verses both of which concern the guidance that is available in wisdom. Wisdom is available everywhere (vv. 2-3) and to anyone (v. 5). It does not take a superior intellect to be wise in the biblical sense.

### **Wisdom and morality 8:6-13**

Wisdom and godliness are practically synonymous (cf. 1:7). Verse 9 means that the person who already has walked down wisdom's path for a distance can appreciate the moral rightness of wisdom better than someone who has not. True wisdom is resourceful and discreet (v. 13). This pericope speaks of the essential excellence of wisdom.

### **Wisdom and success 8:14-21**

Wisdom is the key to many material and immaterial benefits, but mostly the latter type. Wisdom is better than gold in two senses: the wise man is able to earn gold, and he is able to use wisdom to do more than he can with gold. Yet wisdom is available only to those who seek it.

### **Wisdom and creation 8:22-31**

As Creator, God counted wisdom most important. Wisdom is older than the universe, and it was essential in its creation. Nothing came into existence without wisdom. Wisdom leads to joy because creation produces joy (vv. 30-31) both for the Creator and for the creature. God made and did nothing without wisdom. Therefore it is very important that we obtain it.

"What has the voice of wisdom to say concerning the integration debate in Christian counseling? The wisdom literature of the Old Testament invites the study of human nature, behavior, and change from sources outside the canon of Scripture as well as in Scripture itself. Wisdom also exemplifies the use of methods that neither emerge exegetically from the Bible nor utilize the words of Scripture itself. Even when Scripture is used, wisdom often dictates which texts are most appropriate for a given situation and how application needs to take shape. At the same time, wise counselors recognize that the Bible is the only perfect authority for guiding faith and practice. Since the essence of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, a heart of adoration and submission to God is the foundation for skillful living, especially in the face of life's most severe experiences. Not only in

counseling, but in all aspects of life, wisdom calls for a deeper reverence for God in conforming one's life to the Creator's design."<sup>83</sup>

The beginning of God's way (v. 22) probably refers to the beginning of His creative work (Gen. 1) since that is what Solomon described in the verses that follow.<sup>84</sup> Wisdom always existed as an attribute of God.<sup>85</sup> Verse 30 pictures wisdom as God's constant and intimate companion.<sup>86</sup> As such we should value it highly.

### **The appeal to gain wisdom 8:32-36**

On the basis of all that precedes Solomon exhorted his sons to live by his words and thereby gain wisdom. Again wisdom leads to life, but those who lack wisdom begin to die.

"Many have equated wisdom in this chapter with Jesus Christ. This connection works only so far as Jesus reveals the nature of God the Father, including his wisdom, just as Proverbs presents the personification of the attribute. Jesus' claims included wisdom (Matt 12:42) and a unique knowledge of God (Matt 11:25-27). He even personified wisdom in a way that was similar to Proverbs (Matt 11:19; Luke 11:49). Paul saw the fulfillment of wisdom in Christ (Col 1:15-20; 2:3) and affirmed that Christ became our wisdom in the Crucifixion (1 Cor 1:24, 30). So the bold personification of wisdom in Proverbs certainly provides a solid foundation for the revelation of divine wisdom in Christ. But because wisdom appears to be a creation of God in 8:22-31, it is unlikely that wisdom here is Jesus Christ."<sup>87</sup>

## **2. Wisdom and folly contrasted ch. 9**

This chapter contrasts wisdom and folly in a very symmetrical structure. Verses 1-6 correspond to verses 13-18 remarkably. This chiasmic form of presentation sets off the central verses (vv. 7-12) as the most important in the chapter.

### **Wisdom's feast 9:1-6**

The parallel between wisdom's invitation and the one Jesus Christ extended to everyone to come to His feast shows the similarity between wisdom and responding positively to God's Word (Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24). The "seven pillars" (v. 1) may represent a typical banquet pavilion, or they may be an allusion to the cosmos (cf. 8:22-31) that God

<sup>83</sup>John W. Hilber, "Old Testament Wisdom and the Integration Debate in Christian Counseling," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:620 (October-December 1998):422.

<sup>84</sup>See Hans-Jurgen Hermission, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, pp. 43-47, 54-55.

<sup>85</sup>William A. Irwin, "Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961):142.

<sup>86</sup>R. B. Y. Scott, "Wisdom in Creation: The 'AMON of Proverbs VII 30,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960):211-23, concluded that wisdom is a link or bond between the Creator and His creation.

<sup>87</sup>Ross, p. 943.

made in seven days. Some of the ancients envisioned the world as resting on seven pillars. Possibly the seven pillars refer to seven sections of text in chapters 2—7.<sup>88</sup> "Seven" to the Jews indicated perfection. Wisdom's invitation (v. 5) sounds like a gospel invitation (cf. John 6:51, 55). Again note the parallel between wisdom and walking in God's ways.

### **The open or closed mind 9:7-12**

People do not live or die because of only one decision usually. They develop a pattern of life that ends in either death or life. This section helps us see the outcome of these styles of life. If a person is open to God and teachable he will become wise, but if he does not accept this instruction and closes his mind he becomes a fool.

The person who tries to help a fool by correcting him will get no honor from the fool. The fool's folly has closed his mind to correction (vv. 7-8; cf. Matt. 13:12-16). A wise man will continue learning from God all his life (v. 9; cf. 2 Pet. 3:18). Verse 10 restates 1:7. The wise life is the righteous life (vv. 9-11). Verse 12 is a strong statement of individual responsibility. It stresses that the person himself or herself is the ultimate loser or gainer in his or her decision to choose wisdom or folly (v. 12).<sup>89</sup>

"Verse 12 reminds us that the Lord wants to build godly character into our lives, and we can't borrow character from others or give our character to them. This is an individual matter that involves individual decisions. Belonging to a fine family, attending a faithful church, or studying in an excellent school can't guarantee the building of our character. Character is built on decisions, and bad decisions will create bad character."<sup>90</sup>

### **Folly's feast 9:13-18**

Verses 1-6 personify wisdom in the figure of a lady preparing a feast and issuing invitations. Verses 13-18 personify folly in the guise of a harlot doing the same thing. The contrasts between these sections are full of nuances. Verses 4 and 16 are almost identical invitations.

In view of what God has revealed so far about wisdom, any person can determine just how wise or how foolish he or she may be. This is not a mystery. It has little to do with intelligence but everything to do with commitment. If a person recognizes divine revelation as such and decides to understand it, submits to it, and lives by it the best he can, he is wise. On the other hand if he rejects God's Word and decides to live his life with no regard to what God has said, he is a fool.

<sup>88</sup>Patrick W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, pp. 9-14.

<sup>89</sup>See Rick W. Byargeon, "The Structure and Significance of Prov 9:7-12," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:3 (September 1997):367-75.

<sup>90</sup>Wiersbe, p. 32.

## II. COUPLETS EXPRESSING WISDOM 10:1—22:16

Chapters 1—9, as we have seen, contain discourses that Solomon evidently wrote urging his sons to choose the way of wisdom for their lives.<sup>91</sup> At 10:1 we begin the part of the book that sets forth what the wise way is in a variety of life situations.

"Until now the book of Proverbs has been identifying the truly wise man. From this point on, it will describe how such a man should conduct his life from day to day. This logical topical order appears in many New Testament epistles, where the saved person is first identified, and then the daily life he should live is described [e.g., Rom. 1—5 and 6—8; Eph. 1—3 and 4—6]."<sup>92</sup>

There are 184 maxims in chapters 10—15 and 191 in chapters 16—22 for a total of 375.<sup>93</sup> This represents only a few of the 3,000 proverbs Solomon wrote (1 Kings 4:32). Most of the proverbs in this section are one verse long and contain two lines each; they are couplets. The second line contrasts, compares, or completes the idea expressed in the first line. In chapters 10—15 most couplets contain antithetic parallelism. The key word is "but." In chapters 16—22 there are more synonymous parallelisms marked by the conjunction "and." There are also continuous sentences in which the second line continues the thought of the first line (e.g., 14:26). Some couplets contain comparisons in which the relative value of two things is set forth (e.g., 11:31). Some contain a statement in the first line followed by an explanation in the second line (e.g., 20:2).<sup>94</sup>

Is there any logic to the arrangement of these seemingly unrelated proverbs? In some places there is a general association of ideas, and in some places there is a recurring key word (e.g., "king" in 16:12-15, and "Yahweh" in 16:1-7). However many of these couplets have no logical connection with what immediately precedes or follows in the context. This anthology style is typical of other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.

"The absence of a systematic arrangement is due to the traditional character of the contents. There is no need of a closely knit argument; striking images, incisive wording are all that is required to give a fresh appeal to the truth of familiar viewpoints."<sup>95</sup>

"It is also surprising to find lofty precepts mixed with more 'trivial' apothegms. Of course, this is a misconception based on the modern-day viewpoint of life. From the sages' perspective each proverb is an expression of 'wisdom,' which is . . . the fixed order of reality. Viewed from this perspective no sentence is trivial . . ."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup>Kidner, however, believed that if Solomon had written the first nine chapters, 10:1 would read, "These also are proverbs of Solomon" (p. 22).

<sup>92</sup>Irving L. Jensen, *Proverbs*, p. 64.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>94</sup>For further discussion, see R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, pp. 57-59.

<sup>95</sup>Frankfort, p. 61.

<sup>96</sup>Waltke, p. 226.

Why did the Holy Spirit not arrange these proverbs topically so we could study all of them that deal with one subject together? Probably He did so because the method He chose is "a course of education in the life of wisdom."<sup>97</sup>

"As we read Proverbs chapter by chapter, the Spirit of God has the freedom to teach us about many subjects, and we never know from day to day which topic we'll need the most. Just as the Bible itself isn't arranged like a systematic theology, neither is Proverbs. What Solomon wrote is more like a kaleidoscope than a stained-glass window: We never know what the next pattern will be."<sup>98</sup>

In the notes that follow (on 10:1—22:16) I have commented only on those proverbs that appear to me to need clarification in the NASB.

### **A. MARKS OF WISE LIVING CHS. 10—15**

#### **1. Things that produce profit 10:1-14**

10:2 At face value both statements in this verse may seem untrue. The solution to this puzzling proverb, as well as the solution to many that follow, lies in remembering this. Solomon had the whole course of a life in view, not just the immediate consequences of an act or condition. The righteous escape death in that they have greater true riches than the wicked simply because they are righteous, regardless of their financial condition.

10:3 Again the righteous will not lack what is most important in life, though they may lack food. Conversely God will not meet the deepest cravings of the wicked because they have rejected His ways.

"The wicked are condemned to live forever with their unfulfilled, and so sterile, desires, which cannot be transformed into practical attainment."<sup>99</sup>

10:6 The righteous receive blessings from God and other people. The wicked, on the other hand, conceal violence within themselves.

10:10 The winking eye is a clue to insincere speech or behavior. As a tiny gesture, it can do greater damage than many larger overt acts. Similarly the words of a fool though small will result in his or her own destruction eventually. However the power of words is greater than that of "shifty signs."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Kidner, p. 22.

<sup>98</sup>Wiersbe, p. 16. See also p. 59.

<sup>99</sup>McKane, p. 426.

<sup>100</sup>Ross, p. 954.

## **2. Things of true value 10:15-32**

- 10:15 Even though wealth is not most important, it still can result in security or poverty, and therefore people should not despise it.
- 10:19 Transgressing means breaking across. When we speak too much, we break across into an area where we should not go. This can happen in private as well as public speech. Some people transgress when they engage in inappropriate transparency. We should only share our lives with people to the degree that they have committed themselves to us.
- 10:30 The righteous person will never be permanently or ultimately shaken, though he or she may experience hardships. However the wicked will not experience God's blessing ultimately. Dwelling in the land of promise was the wandering Israelite's hope of eventual divine blessing. The alternative was exile from the land.
- 10:32 Speech indicates character. "Acceptable" is better "fitting" (NIV), and "perverted" means "unfitting."

## **3. Wise living in various contexts 11:1-15**

- 11:2 A proud person refuses to accept instruction from God, which, if he or she would follow it, would result in his or her receiving honor. The humble take God's advice, and that is their wisdom.<sup>101</sup>
- 11:4 Riches do not profit in the day of God's wrath (cf. Job 21:30; Ezek. 7:19; Zeph. 1:18).<sup>102</sup>
- 11:8 The wicked do not experience deliverance from trouble ultimately, but finally they go to the place reserved for them forever.
- 11:12 "Despises" means "belittles" (RSV).

## **4. Wise investments 11:16-31**

- 11:19 The full quality of life is in view (cf. John 10:10), not just the possession of life.

"Since life and death result from moral choices, righteousness must be pursued. . . . 'Life' and 'death'

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<sup>101</sup>See Plaut, p. 136.

<sup>102</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 67.

describe the vicissitudes of this life but can also refer to beyond the grave."<sup>103</sup>

- 11:29 "Wind" here probably represents something that cannot be grasped (27:16; Eccles. 1:14, 17). It may also imply something bad and destructive such as the dreaded Palestinian sirocco (cf. v. 17). The foolish man who mismanages his accounts may also have to sell himself as a servant to the wise person who is a better manager.
- 11:30 A righteous person exercises a life-giving influence. Furthermore a wise person wins others to wisdom. That is, he or she captures others with ideas or influence (cf. 2 Sam. 15:6).<sup>104</sup> While it is true that evangelistic soul-winning is wise work, soul-winning is not all that this verse is talking about. The idea here is that wise people influence others to follow the way of wisdom, which includes turning to God for salvation.
- 11:31 No one sins with impunity. God will judge every sin. 1 Peter 4:18 quotes this proverb.<sup>105</sup>

### **5. The value of righteousness 12:1-12**

- 12:6 The words of the wicked, particularly their false accusations, are an ambush, but the words of the upright are straightforward and sincere (cf. 1:18).<sup>106</sup>
- 12:9 A better translation is, "Better is a man of humble standing who works for himself than one who plays the great man but lacks bread" (RSV).
- "The point seems to be that some people live beyond their means in a vain show . . . whereas, if they lived modestly, they could have some of the conveniences of life, e.g., a servant."<sup>107</sup>
- 12:12 The contrast appears to be between two kinds of people. The wicked want to gain from the work of other evil people (e.g., skimming money off the top of a gambling operation). On the other hand, the righteous are content to earn wages from their own honest toil.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup>Ross, p. 963.

<sup>104</sup>See Daniel C. Snell, "'Taking Souls' in Proverbs 11:30," *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983):362-65.

<sup>105</sup>See J. Barr, "b'rs—molis: Prov. 11:31 and 1 Pet. 4:18," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 20 (1975):149-64.

<sup>106</sup>Cf. Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 73.

<sup>107</sup>Ross, p. 969.

<sup>108</sup>Cf. Toy, pp. 249-50; Ross, p. 970.

**6. Avoiding trouble 12:13-28**

12:16 A prudent person "ignores an insult" (RSV). The insult is dishonor to himself or herself. A fool's reaction is "like an injured animal and so his opponent knows that he has been wounded."<sup>109</sup>

12:18 Thoughtless or critical speech can wound others. Transparent sharing can wound the speaker. Transparent sharing is good, but we must practice it wisely.<sup>110</sup> Wise people do not cause harm by their reckless talk.

12:21 ". . . decent people do not have frequent trouble of their own making . . ."<sup>111</sup>

The verse is also true when one considers what happens to people after death as well as before.

"The rigid application of this law was the mainstay of Job's comforters; but taken rightly, it is a stimulating truth as valid for Paul (Rom. 8:28 with 36, 37) as for Joseph (Gn. 50:20)—cheaply held in prosperity, precious in adversity."<sup>112</sup>

12:22 "When words can't be trusted, then society starts to fall apart. Contracts are useless, promises are vain, the judicial system becomes a farce, and all personal relationships are suspect."<sup>113</sup>

12:25 What is the "good word?" It could be any word that gives encouragement. Solomon was evidently general deliberately.

12:26 The antecedent of "them" in 26b is "the wicked" (plural).<sup>114</sup>

12:27 The lazy man does not finish his projects; he does not roast and eat the game he has hunted. He throws away his chances for something better by quitting too soon. However the person who has mastered diligence and finishes his task has a precious tool at his disposal (i.e., perseverance).

"I recall hearing some of my student friends say at seminary graduation, 'Thank the Lord, no more Greek and Hebrew!' They had spent several years learning to use the

<sup>109</sup>McKane, p. 442.

<sup>110</sup>See my comments on 10:19.

<sup>111</sup>Ross, p. 972.

<sup>112</sup>Kidner, p. 98.

<sup>113</sup>Wiersbe, p. 118.

<sup>114</sup>Cf. J. A. Emerton, "A Note in Proverbs 12:26," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964):191-93.

Bible languages, and now they were selling their valuable language tools and thereby wasting their gains."<sup>115</sup>

### **7. Fruits of wise living ch. 13**

13:3 This caution applies to transparent sharing as well as verbose communication. Both can bring ruin to the speaker.

13:4 The "soul" stands for the whole person (cf. Matt. 16:24-27; Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9; 9:56; Rom. 13:1; 1 Thess. 5:20; James 1:21; 5:20).

"The slothful wishes and dreams of prosperity and abundance . . . but his desire remains unsatisfied, since the object is not gained but only lost by doing nothing; the industrious gain, and that richly, what the slothful wishes for, but in vain."<sup>116</sup>

13:8 The idea in this contrast is that a rich man may lose his money by having to buy himself out of trouble. A poor man is not the target of robbers and kidnappers because he has little money. The more money a person has the more financial obligations become his, but a poor man is free of these distractions. Another view is that the poor man cannot buy himself out of trouble since his means are limited.<sup>117</sup>

13:11 Wealth obtained by fraud would be money gotten by not working for it (e.g., in gambling). This kind of income dwindles in that though it is "easy come" it is also "easy go."

"This is a warning against wild speculation."<sup>118</sup>

13:19 Even though it is pleasant to hope for something better and then see it happen, a fool will not do so because he would rather continue practicing evil. Fools characteristically do not hope for higher things. They only want to continue in evil.

"In spite of the sweetness of good desires accomplished, fools will not forsake evil to attain it."<sup>119</sup>

13:25 This proverb illustrates the difference between a proverb and a promise. It expresses a condition that is generally true in this life all other things

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<sup>115</sup>Wiersbe, pp. 64-65.

<sup>116</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, 1:272.

<sup>117</sup>McKane, p. 458.

<sup>118</sup>Ross, p. 977.

<sup>119</sup>T. T. Perowne, *The Proverbs*, p. 103.

being equal. However, God never promised that He would keep every righteous person from starving to death (cf. Matt. 6:33; Lev. 26).

### **8. Further advice for wise living chs. 14—15**

These proverbs are more difficult to group together under a general heading because there are fewer common ideas that tie them together.

- 14:1            This verse makes better sense if for "house" we read "household."
- 14:3            The antecedent of "them" (3b) is "the wise" (plural).  
                     "Words come back to roost."<sup>120</sup>  
                     "What people say has a great bearing on how they are received."<sup>121</sup>
- 14:12           Without the additional light of divine revelation we might conclude that any number of courses of action will lead to good ends. Nevertheless God's Word helps us see the end of some of these paths so we can avoid them. Salvation by works is one example of this. As someone once told me, "I was climbing the ladder of success, but then I discovered that it was leaning against the wrong wall." This proverb warns that apparently good roads may prove fatal to the moral life (cf. 7:27; 16:25; Matt. 7:13-14) because their destination is wrong.
- 14:24           The ends of the wise and the foolish are in view.  
                     "The wise are crowned, that is, blessed with wealth (cf. 3:16; 8:18, 21; 15:6; 22:4) because of their diligence (14:23), but foolish conduct results not in blessing but in more folly (cf. v. 18)."<sup>122</sup>
- 14:28           It is a credit to a ruler when he rules over many people and they prosper and increase, but it is a discredit to him when his people decline in number and wealth. This is so because part of a governmental leader's responsibility is to generate prosperity.
- 14:33           A paraphrase of this verse could be, "A wise man does not parade his knowledge; a fool does."<sup>123</sup> Fools may have knowledge but not wisdom.

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<sup>120</sup>Kidner, p. 106.

<sup>121</sup>Ross, p. 983.

<sup>122</sup>Sid S. Buzzell, "Proverbs," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 936; cf. Toy, p. 296; McKane, p. 466.

<sup>123</sup>Kidner, pp. 111-12.

15:2 The contrast here is not between the quantity of words that the wise and the fool utter. It is the fact that the wise man considers what he says before he says it, but the fool does not. Consequently what the wise says is "acceptable" (lit. "good") and what the fool says is "folly" (unwise). This proverb deals with responsible speech.

"When you summarize what Proverbs teaches about human speech, you end up with four important propositions: (1) speech is an awesome gift from God; (2) speech can be used to do good; (3) speech can be used to do evil; and, (4) only God can help us use speech to do good."<sup>124</sup>

15:20 The full thought behind this verse seems to be, "The wise son honors and gladdens his father, the foolish laughs at and saddens his mother."<sup>125</sup> It may imply that the fool is callous toward his mother.<sup>126</sup>

15:22 A person who makes his or her plans without asking for advice or comments from other people shows that he or she is excessively self-confident. However someone who consults others and asks for their advice shows that he realizes he may be overlooking some factors and is not entirely self-confident.

15:24 Everyone goes to Sheol (the grave) eventually (except believers who experience translation at the Rapture and do not die). However the wise avoid Sheol as long as they can by being wise. Living wisely tends to prolong life.

"We may at least say that the language [of this proverb] anticipates what later Scripture will clearly teach about the ultimate destination of the way of life."<sup>127</sup>

15:30 Happy people and good news both have a heartwarming effect. Good news has an uplifting effect. Healthy bones (lit. fat bones) pictured health and prosperity to the Jews (cf. 17:22; 25:25; Gen. 45:27-28; Isa. 52:7-8).

15:33 The fear of Yahweh is not just the foundation of a wise life (1:7; 9:10). It is also the whole path of wisdom. To fear the Lord amounts to being wise in one sense, though it is the foundation for wisdom in another (1:7).

Though 33b presents a universal truth, the humility in the context (33a) is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the willingness to humble oneself before God and to let His Word guide us.

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<sup>124</sup>Wiersbe, p. 111.

<sup>125</sup>Toy, p. 311.

<sup>126</sup>Kidner, p. 116.

<sup>127</sup>Ross, p. 999.

## **B. HOW TO PLEASE GOD 16:1—22:16**

### **1. Trusting God ch. 16**

There is a shift in emphasis in Solomon's anthology here. Pleasing God (cf. Col. 1:10; 1 John 3:22) becomes a greater factor in the proverbs that follow whereas those in chapters 10—15 had living successfully more in view. Nevertheless this is only a change in proportion of emphasis. Both ends are present in both sections of the book (chs. 10—15 and 16:1—22:16).

In this section there is also a slight change in the form of the proverbs. Solomon expressed the earlier proverbs (chs. 10—15) mainly in antithetical parallelisms, but the proverbs in this section are mainly synonymous and synthetic parallelisms. Instead of the key word being "but" it now becomes "and."

16:1           The meaning of this proverb is similar to that of 16:9. Even though man has freedom to plan, in the end he only fulfills the will of God by what he says. Man plans his words, but what really comes out takes place because God sovereignly controls. "Man proposes, God disposes," is a common equivalent.

". . . when someone is trying to speak before others, the Lord directs the words according to his sovereign will."<sup>128</sup>

16:3           When we cast (lit. roll) our cares on God (1 Pet. 5:7), He will arrange our plans. The AV and RV have "thoughts" for "plans," but the idea is the same. This proverb stresses the importance of depending on the Lord.

16:6           We do not atone for our own iniquity by being loving and truthful. This proverb is not a denial of our need for God's atonement. However, we can and should cover (atone for) the mistakes of others lovingly and truthfully (1 Pet. 4:8) as God covers our sins. What will keep us all away from evil is the fear of Yahweh.

"The fear of Jahve is subjection to the God of revelation, and a falling in with the revealed plan of salvation."<sup>129</sup>

16:10          A king's edict becomes law for his people.<sup>130</sup> His ordinances are the will of God for them (unless he commands contrary to God's revealed will; cf.

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid., p. 1002.

<sup>129</sup>Delitzsch, 1:339.

<sup>130</sup>For the meaning of "divine decision" or "oracle," see E. W. Davies, "The Meaning of *qesem* in Prv 16:10," *Biblica* 61 (1980):554-56.

Acts 4:19-20). Consequently it is very important that the ruler not err in his judgment.<sup>131</sup>

- 16:22 Understanding (good sense) is a source of life for a wise person, but folly is a source of discipline for a fool. Thus a person's wisdom or lack of it determines his or her prospects in life. Proverbs has little that is positive to say about a fool.

"It is highly unlikely that Solomon would accept the idea that all men are created equal and thus deserve education at government expense."<sup>132</sup>

## **2. Peacemakers and troublemakers ch. 17**

- 17:8 The owner of the bribe is the person who gives it. A bribe is an effective tool. It works like a charm. This proverb is not advocating bribery, only acknowledging that money talks. God's view of bribery becomes clear in 17:15 and 23.<sup>133</sup>

- 17:16 The idea here is that it is foolish for a fool to try to buy wisdom when he does not have the brains to comprehend it<sup>134</sup> or does not intend to follow that wisdom. Why go to school and pay good money for tuition if you do not plan to put into practice what you are learning?

- 17:19 Raising the door does not mean opening it but building a higher, more splendid door for the sake of impressing others. Just as a person who loves transgression thereby sets himself up for strife, so the person who loves to display his wealth is setting himself up for destruction. His door publicizes his wealth and attracts the interest of burglars. Other interpreters take the gate figuratively.

". . . the gate is the mouth, and so to make it high is to say lofty things—he brags too much (see 1 Sam 2:3; Prov 18:12; 29:23)."<sup>135</sup>

- 17:24 A man of understanding concentrates on wisdom, but a fool lacks concentration. His mind roams everywhere.

"The eyes of the *mebin* [discerning man] are riveted on the teacher, for he is fascinated by her instruction and is a

<sup>131</sup>See W. Lee Humphreys, "The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Book of Proverbs," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, pp. 177-90.

<sup>132</sup>Alden, p. 129.

<sup>133</sup>Toy, p. 341.

<sup>134</sup>McKane, p. 505.

<sup>135</sup>Ross, p. 1019.

picture of unbroken concentration. The *kesil* [fool] has the wandering eye and the vacant distracted mind, and his condition is expressed by a hyperbole. As a student who is hearing nothing of what his teacher says might let his eyes rove to every corner of the classroom, so the fool who is inattentive to the instruction of Wisdom is said to have his eyes on the ends of the earth."<sup>136</sup>

### **3. Friendship and folly ch. 18**

- 18:1 Evidently the intent is, "He who separates himself [from other people]" does so because he wants his own way and does not want others to restrain him. Such an approach runs counter to sound wisdom because we all need input from other people to make wise decisions. It is unwise to be antisocial in the schismatic sense of that word (cf. Gen. 13:11).<sup>137</sup>
- 18:11 Wealth does provide some security, but one may imagine that it is a higher safeguard against calamity than it really is.
- 18:16 "Gift" is not necessarily a "bribe." The Hebrew word here (*mattan*, cf. 15:27; 21:14) is not the same as the one translated "bribe" in 17:8 and 12 (*sohad*). It can be an innocent courtesy. It means what a person gives to someone else (cf. Gen. 43:11). Therefore it seems legitimate to apply it to one's personal abilities (gifts) that he or she uses in the service of others as well as to material presents.
- 18:20 The sense here is that we will have to be content to accept the consequences of what we say. "Satisfied" does not mean happy but filled. Yet "productive speech is satisfying."<sup>138</sup>
- 18:21 The antecedent of "it" is "tongue," and "its fruit" refers to "death and life." This proverb is a warning to the talkative. Much talk will produce death and life, so be prepared for both if you determine to talk a lot.
- 18:22 The favor God bestows is His blessing.

"The wording, especially in the Heb., strikingly resembles that of 8:35, and so suggests that after wisdom itself, the best of God's blessings is a good wife. 31:10 makes a similar comparison, putting her price, like wisdom's (8:11), above rubies."<sup>139</sup>

<sup>136</sup>McKane, p. 504.

<sup>137</sup>Toy, p. 354.

<sup>138</sup>Ross, p. 1028.

<sup>139</sup>Kidner, p. 130. Cf. Gen. 2:18.

Not just any wife is a good thing though; only a good wife is (19:13, 14).

- 18:24 The NASB translation of 24a is more true to the Hebrew than the AV that reads, "A man (who hath) friends must show himself friendly." The RV is perhaps the easiest of all to understand: "He that maketh many friends (doeth it) to his own destruction."

Why is it unwise to have many friends? Probably because when one has many friends the possibility that some of them will be false friends is greater (cf. Jer. 38:22). It is better to have one or two good friends than many false friends.

Christians have often applied the second part of this verse to Jesus Christ. While that is appropriate, Solomon's point was that in contrast to false friends (24a) some friends can be more faithful than our closest blood relatives. Such a friend is a true treasure.

#### **4. Further advice for pleasing God 19:1—22:16**

As was true in the chapter 10—15 section, this one (16:1—22:16) also becomes more difficult to outline as it ends because there are fewer groupings of proverbs.

- 19:7 The first part of this verse is hyperbole (overstatement to make a point). The point is that people avoid the poor—their relatives do, and even more, their friends do. Even their own overtures of friendship are ineffective (7c).
- 19:18 If a parent does not discipline his child while there is hope of correcting him, he is really, though perhaps not consciously, willing for him to die. The child's folly will lead to his death if his parents do not curb it with discipline.<sup>140</sup> Some parents allow their children to go astray out of neglect. "Discipline" (Heb. *yasser*) includes chastisement as well as instruction.

"Better the child is corrected by a parent than by a law enforcement officer in a correctional institution."<sup>141</sup>

- 19:19 An uncontrolled temper will repeatedly send its owner into fresh trouble. The implication is that it is an exercise in futility to bail such a person out of the trouble he gets himself into with his temper.
- 19:24 This humorous picture is of a person so lazy that he cannot even lift his food from his plate to his mouth (cf. 26:15). The point is that a lazy person

<sup>140</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 110.

<sup>141</sup>Wiersbe, p. 105.

will bear the consequences of his own laziness. This warning is applicable to those who are too lazy to finish the projects they begin.<sup>142</sup>

20:16 Solomon advised that a person who takes on the obligations of another person who is a stranger or a foreigner to him is not very wise. Such a stranger is a bad risk. If you lend to him, make sure you have some collateral such as his garment or some other pledge so he will repay you. The proverb encourages us to hold people to their obligations. Much more than simply giving a pledge for a prostitute must be in view.<sup>143</sup>

20:21 The inheritance in view evidently comes prematurely by request or by dishonesty (cf. 19:26; Luke 15:12). In either case the consequence is often lack of divine blessing.

"Such wealth may be squandered and often squelches initiative and work."<sup>144</sup>

20:25 The situation in view here is that of a person who impulsively pledges something to God and then upon reconsidering wishes that he had not done so (cf. Eccles. 5:5; Mark 7:11). It is better to wait to make the pledge until we think through the implications of the decision carefully. In a larger application, we should avoid all unconsidered action.<sup>145</sup>

"Too many people will make promises under the inspiration of the hour only later to realize that they have strapped themselves; they then try to go back on their word."<sup>146</sup>

20:27 God searches out our innermost thoughts and feelings. Solomon compared our "spirit" (lit. "breath," Heb. *nishmat*, cf. Gen. 2:7) to a lamp God uses to investigate all the darkened crannies of our being in this very graphic proverb. Here the spirit is almost equivalent to the conscience.

21:4 The "lamp" of the wicked seems to be their life (cf. 13:9b) or, more particularly, their conscience (cf. 20:27). If this is so, the verse is saying that arrogance and pride are the sum and substance of the life of the wicked, and that is sin.

21:9 This proverb makes sense if we keep in mind that roofs in the ancient Near East were flat and people used them as patios. It is better to live alone outside, exposed to the elements, than in the sheltered, comfortable

<sup>142</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 111.

<sup>143</sup>M. Dahood, "To Pawn One's Cloak," *Biblica* 42 (1961):359-66, argued for this limited meaning.

<sup>144</sup>Buzzell, p. 949.

<sup>145</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 116.

<sup>146</sup>Ross, p. 1047.

interior of one's house if one has to share the inside with a scolding woman. Spartan conditions with peace are better than physical comforts with strife.

21:18 A ransom is a payment given to free a person from some penalty he has incurred similar to posting bail to get out of jail. In this case it appears that God punishes the wicked and in doing so sets the righteous free. Such would be the case if the wicked were oppressing the righteous (cf. 11:8). God delivers the righteous by punishing the wicked who oppress them.

21:28 The contrast is between the person who listens to falsehood and repeats it, and the person who listens to the truth and repeats it. The first person has little concern for listening carefully, but the second person does. Heeding the truth makes all the difference.

"The key phrase is *a man who hears*: his first aim is to know and understand, not to grind some axe. . . . the man who listens (Is. 50:4) is the man worth listening to."<sup>147</sup>

Ross believed that the verse teaches that "false witnesses will be discredited and destroyed."<sup>148</sup>

21:29 A wicked man puts up a show of confidence, but it is a bluff. His bold face reflects a hard heart that holds the opinions and views of others in contempt.<sup>149</sup> The upright on the other hand does not need to pretend to be something he is not because he is walking on the right path.

22:6 "Train" (Heb. *hanak*) means to dedicate (cf. Deut. 20:5; 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chron. 7:5; Dan. 3:2). It has the idea of narrowing and in this verse implies channeling the child's conduct into the way of wisdom. That guidance might include dedicating him or her to God and preparing the child for future responsibilities and adulthood.<sup>150</sup>

"In the way he should go" is literally "according to his way." It may mean according to his own personality, temperament, responses, or stage in life. On the other hand it could mean the way in which he ought to go. The Hebrew grammar permits either interpretation. However the context favors the latter view. "Way" in Proverbs usually means the path a person takes through life, not one's personality, disposition, or stage in life. Consequently the verse is saying the parent should train up a child in the way of wisdom to live in the fear of God.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>147</sup>Kidner, p. 146.

<sup>148</sup>Ross, p. 1058. Cf. McKane, p. 556.

<sup>149</sup>Plaut, p. 224.

<sup>150</sup>Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 252.

<sup>151</sup>Ross, pp. 1061-62; Toy, p. 415; McKane, p. 564; Kidner, p. 147; Greenstone, p. 234.

The second part of this verse has challenged the faith of many a godly parent. Obviously many children who have received good training have repudiated the way of wisdom later in life. The explanation for this seemingly broken promise lies in a correct understanding of what a proverb is.

"A proverb is a literary device whereby a general truth is brought to bear on a specific situation. Many of the proverbs are not absolute guarantees for they express truths that are necessarily conditioned by prevailing circumstances. For example, verses 3-4, 9, 11, 16, 29 do not express promises that are *always* binding. Though the proverbs are generally and usually true, occasional exceptions may be noted. This may be because of the self-will or deliberate disobedience of an individual who chooses to go his own way—the way of folly instead of the way of wisdom . . . It *is* generally true, however, that most children who are brought up in Christian homes, under the influence of godly parents who teach and live God's standards (cf. Eph. 6:4), follow that training."<sup>152</sup>

This proverb clearly does not state a Scriptural promise. Rather, the revelation of Scripture elsewhere is that God always allows people to make their own decisions. He does not force them to do what is right.

22:7

This verse does not forbid borrowing. In Israel the Jews borrowed from one another. The Mosaic Law permitted this but condemned charging other Jews interest (Exod. 22:25; Deut. 23:19), though the Israelites could charge foreigners interest (Deut. 23:20). The New Testament does not forbid borrowing. It forbids not paying debts (Rom. 13:6-8). It may be unwise to go into debt in some situations, but it is going too far to say that the Bible condemns going into debt.

"While a certain amount of honest debt is expected in today's world, and everybody wants to achieve a good credit rating, we must be careful not to mistake presumption for faith. As the familiar adage puts it, 'When your outgo exceeds your income, then your upkeep is your downfall.'"<sup>153</sup>

This verse warns the borrower that he puts himself in a vulnerable position by borrowing. He becomes dependent on another or others by borrowing. An unscrupulous lender might take advantage of him. Most lenders will

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<sup>152</sup>Buzzell, p. 953.

<sup>153</sup>Wiersbe, p. 93.

not take unfair advantage of someone who borrows from them, but the borrower should be aware of this possibility.

"The verse may be referring to the apparently common practice of Israelites selling themselves into slavery to pay off debts (see Exod 21:2-7). It is not appreciably different from the modern debtor who is working to pay off bills."<sup>154</sup>

22:8 This verse provides encouragement for the oppressed. The last line assures the sufferer that God will eventually break the oppressing rod of the person who sows iniquity.

### III. WISE SAYINGS 22:17—24:34

A third major section of the Book of Proverbs begins with 22:17. This is clear from several indicators. The proverbs lengthen out again from the typical one verse couplet that characterizes 10:1—26:16 (cf. chs. 1—9). The phrase "my son" appears again as in chapters 1—9. The reason the writer gave the following proverbs (22:17-21) introduces the first sub-section (22:17—23:11). We read in 22:20 (in the Hebrew text) that a group of 30 sayings will follow.

The emphasis in 22:17—24:34 is on the importance of applying the instruction previously given.

<b>Emphasis</b>	<b>Section</b>
The value of wisdom	chs. 1—9
The examples of wisdom	10:1—22:16
The application of wisdom	22:17—24:34

The reason many scholars believe Solomon did not write the 36 sayings of the wise (22:17-24:34) is this. The title, "These also are sayings of the wise [or sages, plural]," in 24:23a suggests several writers rather than one.

"The plur. *sages* points to the existence of a special class of wise men, who were oral teachers or writers. The utterances of these men formed a distinct body of thought, part of which is preserved in the Book of Proverbs . . ."<sup>155</sup>

The word "also" in 24:23a apparently refers to the similar title in 22:17 suggesting that these sages, not Solomon, wrote the proverbs in 22:17—24:22.

The 36 sayings divide into two groups: "the [30] words of the wise" (22:17), and six more "sayings of the wise" (24:23).

<sup>154</sup>Ross, p. 1062.

<sup>155</sup>Toy, p. 451.

### **A. THIRTY SAYINGS OF THE WISE 22:17—24:22**

Many scholars have called attention to the similarities between Proverbs 22:17—24:22, the 30 sayings of the wise, and *The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope*.<sup>156</sup> *The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope* is a piece of Egyptian wisdom literature that scholars have dated in the New Kingdom period (ca. 1558-1085 B.C.). Both sets of proverbs contain 30 sayings each, both use the "my son" terminology, and both follow the same structural design. This design includes an introduction stating why the writer gave the instruction followed by 30 independent sections of sayings on diverse subjects. However a difference between these two collections is significant. The writer or writers of the biblical proverbs, evidently not Solomon, said their purpose was that the readers' "trust may be in the Lord" (22:19). However, Amen-em-Ope expressed no such hope nor any belief in a personal God. As I mentioned earlier in these notes, the biblical writers' purpose and faith distinguish the Book of Proverbs from all other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.<sup>157</sup>

#### **1. The first group 22:17—23:11**

##### **Introduction to the first 10 sayings 22:17-21**

As in chapters 1—9, the writer began this section of the book with an exhortation to hear and give heed to the words of wisdom that follow (22:17-21).

"This extended introduction reminds us that the wise sayings were not curiosity pieces; they were revelation, and revelation demands a response."<sup>158</sup>

First, there is a call (v. 17) followed by three motivations: a pleasing store of wisdom (v. 18), a deeper trust in the Lord (v. 19), and a greater reliability (vv. 20-21).<sup>159</sup>

The Hebrew word translated "excellent things" (v. 20; *slswm*) has also been rendered "heretofore" (RV margin), "triply" (Septuagint, Vulgate), and "30 sayings" (RSV, NIV). Since 30 sayings follow, that seems to be the best option for translation. "Him who sent you" (v. 21) is probably the original reader's teacher, who may have been his father.

"Notwithstanding the difficulties of the text, the general thought of the paragraph is plain: the pupil is to devote himself to study, in order that his religious life may be firmly established, and that he may be able to give wise counsel to those who seek advice."<sup>160</sup>

<sup>156</sup>E.g., McKane, pp. 369-74.

<sup>157</sup>For an introduction to the study of comparative ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, see Waltke, pp. 221-38.

<sup>158</sup>Ross, p. 1065.

<sup>159</sup>Kidner, p. 149.

<sup>160</sup>Toy, pp. 424-25.

**The first 10 sayings 22:22-23:11**

- 22:22-23 Note the chiasmic structure in these four lines that unifies the thought of the passage: violence, litigation, litigation, violence. God will avenge the poor on those who oppress them.
- 22:24-25 The writer gave a reason for almost all the pieces of advice contained in the 30 sayings (cf. 1:10-19). The influence of a hothead can prove fatal (cf. 1:10-19; 14:17, 29; 15:1).
- 22:26-27 Solomon previously warned of the folly of making promises to cover the debts of others (6:1-5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16). This is a good way to lose what one has.
- 22:28 Moving boundaries in fields resulted in individuals losing and gaining property and wealth. In Israel this was also a sin against God since God owned and apportioned all the land. In the Roman Empire, people suffered execution for doing this. The warning is against appropriating someone else's property.
- 22:29 The quality of a person's work, not his bribes or flattery, will ultimately determine how his career progresses. Therefore a person should seek to improve his or her skills.
- "Anyone who puts his workmanship before his prospects towers above the thrusters and climbers of the adjacent paragraphs."<sup>161</sup>
- 23:1-3 The point of this advice is to be humble and restrained in the presence of a prestigious host. The guest should put a knife to his throat rather than to his food (i.e., curb his appetite, control himself).<sup>162</sup> The fact that the host serves delicacies may not indicate that he esteems the guest highly. The host may simply be getting him in a good mood for his own selfish reasons. He may want something from him or be evaluating him. "What" (v. 1) is better than "who."<sup>163</sup>
- 23:4-5 Wealth is just as illusive as social prestige (cf. Luke 12:20; 1 Tim. 6:7-10). Therefore, people should not wear themselves out trying to get rich.
- 23:6-8 It is better to decline a dinner invitation from a miser because if you accept you will only have a miserable experience. One writer paraphrased verse 8

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<sup>161</sup>Kidner, p. 150.

<sup>162</sup>Delitzsch, 2:104.

<sup>163</sup>Waltke, pp. 237-38.

as follows: "It takes away the relish . . . to have one's grudging host . . . doing mental arithmetic (7a) with each dish."<sup>164</sup>

- 23:9 "Hearing" should be "ears." The speaker is addressing a fool. His words are not what the fool overhears. As always in Proverbs, the fool is one who rejects God's words. The words spoken on this occasion are in harmony with God's since they are words containing wisdom. Trying to teach a fool wisdom is a waste of time.
- 23:10-11 Here the writer added a reason to the warning in the fourth saying (22:28). God is the rescuing avenger of the defenseless in Genesis 28:16; Exodus 6:6; Job 19:25; and many times in Isaiah 41—63. Here it is evidently God who is in view rather than a human kinsman redeemer (Heb. *goel*, cf. Gen. 48:16; Exod. 6:6; Job 19:25; Isa. 41—63). This is another warning against taking unfair advantage of a defenseless person.

## **2. The second group 23:12—24:22**

### **Introduction to the last 20 sayings 23:12**

We should probably take this verse as a general exhortation rather than as part of either the preceding or the following saying. It is a general admonition to apply these wise declarations to life. It provides an intermission in this list of proverbs and introduces the remaining 20 appeals in the 30 sayings of the wise.

### **The last 20 sayings 23:13—24:22**

- 23:13-14 The sage again advocated discipline. Beating with a rod is not the only form of discipline advocated in Proverbs. It is simply one form used here as a poetic parallel to discipline (Heb. *musar*, moral correction). Other forms of discipline (reproof, temporary isolation, "grounding," etc.) may be more appropriate in some situations with children of differing ages and temperaments. These verses assure the parent that the child will not only survive the discipline, but he or she will survive because of it.

"The idea is that discipline helps the child to live a full life; if he dies (prematurely), it would be a consequence of not being trained. In Proverbs such a death might be moral and social as well as physical."<sup>165</sup>

- 23:15-16 This saying balances the previous one. The child's choice is as vital as the parent's discipline. The affectionate "My son" adds a warm touch and removes any inference that the writer enjoyed whipping his child. This

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<sup>164</sup>Kidner, p. 151.

<sup>165</sup>Ross, p. 1070.

father's greatest concern was that his son should learn wisdom. Parents receive joy when they observe their children making wise choices.

- 23:17-18 The long view, even beyond death, is essential to avoiding envy of the wicked who frequently prosper in this life. We should always be zealous for the fear of the Lord. Looking up (v. 17) and looking ahead (v. 18) can help us avoid envying sinners.<sup>166</sup>
- 23:19-21 Overindulgence in food and drink normally leads to sleepiness, then laziness, then poverty. We should avoid the constant companionship of people marked by these characteristics. Excessive eating and drinking are usually symptoms of deeper problems.<sup>167</sup> This saying also implies that the influence of bad companions is strong.
- 23:22-23 Heeding wise parental instruction is hard for some children, but it is necessary for them to become wise. By listening to and obeying his or her parents the child learns to listen to and obey God. Submission to parental authority makes submission to divine authority easier. Honoring parents here means listening (paying attention) to their instructions.<sup>168</sup>
- 23:24-25 Note again that righteousness and wisdom were synonymous in the mind of the writer (v. 24). Children who follow God's way of wisdom not only bring joy to themselves but also to their parents.
- 23:26-28 Another exhortation to apply what follows prefaces this saying. It is especially important. Our culture glamorizes sexual promiscuity, but these verses reveal its true consequences: entrapment, constraint, painful loss, and treachery. Two types of harlots are in view: the unmarried (Heb. *zonah*, "harlot" or "prostitute") and the married (*nokriyah*, "adulterous woman" or "wayward wife," v. 27).
- 23:29-35 This classic description of drunkenness ironically illustrates the folly of that vice. The father urges his son to remember how too much drinking will end so its present enjoyment will not captivate him.
- "While alcoholism is a medical problem, it is also a moral problem because it involves choices and brings danger to other people."<sup>169</sup>
- 24:1-2 Previously the writer cited the end of evil companions as motivation to avoid their company (23:17-18). Here it is their essential character that is the basis for the same advice.

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<sup>166</sup>Kidner, p. 152.

<sup>167</sup>Plaut, pp. 241-42.

<sup>168</sup>Toy, p. 436.

<sup>169</sup>Ross, p. 1072.

24:3-4 The house in view is probably one's life experience including literal houses, one's household, his business, etc. (cf. Matt. 7:24-27). If it takes wisdom to build a house, it takes even more wisdom to build a household. Wisdom is essential for all domestic enterprises.

"The replacement of book shelves by television sets and of the study by the 'den' in modern homes (regressing from human to bestial habitats!) is a sad commentary on our times."<sup>170</sup>

24:5-6 Again we see that the wise person is not completely self-reliant. He recognizes his own imperfection and looks to others to supplement his own personal deficiencies. "Wage war" means to seek to overcome any obstacle one may face in life. Wise strategy is always more important than mere strength.

Christians need to overcome the obstacle of understanding the meaning of Scripture before we can apply it to our own lives and explain it to others. For this God has given us a multitude of counselors in the writers of commentaries and other Bible study aids. The Christian is a fool who does not listen to these counselors by reading what they have written to supplement and check his or her own understanding of the text.

24:7 Wisdom is beyond the fool's reach. Therefore he does not—if he has any wisdom at all—seek to give advice in the decision-making places of his world.<sup>171</sup>

24:8-9 Other people will despise the person who dreams up plans that end in evil. Such planning is sin and the work of a fool. Fools are not necessarily unintelligent, but their plans result in sin.<sup>172</sup>

24:10 The day of distress is a day when trouble comes. If a person does not persevere but quits under this pressure, he shows that he does not have strength that is a fruit of possessing wisdom (cf. 24:5a). We never know our true strength until we find ourselves in situations that demand much from us. Weak people plead adverse conditions so they can justify quitting.<sup>173</sup>

24:11-12 The people carried away in verse 11 are evidently innocent captives or oppressed individuals. We have a responsibility to help such people. If we claim ignorance of their condition as a reason for not helping them, we

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<sup>170</sup>Plaut, p. 247.

<sup>171</sup>See Kidner's subject study on the fool, pp. 39-42.

<sup>172</sup>McKane, p. 399.

<sup>173</sup>Kidner, p. 154.

need to remember that God knows the true condition of our heart and will requite us accordingly. We are responsible to rescue those who are in mortal danger. This includes warning and teaching those who are hastening to destruction.<sup>174</sup>

"In Proverbs 24:12 Yahweh is represented as one 'who weighs the heart.' This figure goes back to the Egyptian god Thoth, who is often represented as standing at the judgment of the dead beside the scales with the human heart."<sup>175</sup>

The concept of God weighing the heart was also very old in Israelite theology going back as far as the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:17-19).

- 24:13-14 The writer pictured the pleasantness and desirability of wisdom in this saying. It prepares for the future. Folly does not.
- 24:15-16 To make a point the speaker spoke to his son as though he was addressing a wicked man in this saying. This device gives the warning more force since the wicked man's main concern is his own self-interest. The point is that the righteous is resilient because he trusts in God. Furthermore God defends the righteous. Virtue triumphs in the end.<sup>176</sup>
- 24:17-18 To complete the thought we might add at the end of this saying "and turn it on you." Gloating over someone else's misfortune is a practice God disapproves even if the other person is the adversary of the righteous (cf. Matt. 5:44). Fear of God's displeasure should warn the wise away from this attitude and activity.
- 24:19-20 The sage again addressed the problem of envying wicked people who enjoy temporary prosperity (cf. 23:17; 24:1). The lamp is the life of the wicked. They are doomed; they will have no good outcome for their lives.<sup>177</sup>
- 24:21-22 The change in view is deviation from the will of God or the laws of the king. The phrase "both of them" (v. 22) refers to God and the king. The structure is again chiasmic to emphasize the central thought of the proverb. People should fear God and the government because they both punish rebels (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:17).

This concludes the so-called 30 sayings of the wise as is clear from 24:23a.

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<sup>174</sup>Toy, p. 445.

<sup>175</sup>Waltke, p. 237.

<sup>176</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 140.

<sup>177</sup>Toy, p. 449.

### **B. SIX MORE SAYINGS OF THE WISE 24:23-34**

The first sentence in 24:23 indicates that what follows was not part of the collection of 30 sayings that preceded. Other wise men (lit. sages) evidently provided these proverbs.

24:23-25 This saying advocates justice and straight talk. It is particularly relevant for judges of all kinds.

24:26 One paraphrase of this verse is as follows: "The right word spoken seals all, like a kiss on the lips."<sup>178</sup> Truthful speech is a mark of friendship.

"As a sincere kiss shows affection and is desirable, so an honest (and perhaps straightforward) answer shows a person's concern and therefore is welcomed."<sup>179</sup>

24:27 The farmer must pay more attention to the cultivation of his fields than to his personal comfort. Likewise everyone should put a well-ordered life, including financial security, ahead of getting married and starting a family. In a broader application, we should keep first things first.<sup>180</sup>

24:28 Being a witness against a neighbor means testifying against someone. Keep quiet unless your testimony is necessary, and keep truthful when you do speak.

24:29 The quotation expresses the opposite of the golden rule (cf. 20:22; Matt. 5:43-45; Rom. 12:9).

24:30-34 Poverty comes as a robber in that it overtakes the sluggard surprisingly and or suddenly. Continued laziness leads to poverty.

This section of 36 wise sayings begins and ends with a reference to the poor (cf. 22:22-23; 24:30-34). Poverty has some obvious connections with folly, though not every poor person is a fool.

### **IV. MAXIMS EXPRESSING WISDOM CHS. 25—29**

We return now to the proverbs of Solomon (cf. 1:1—22:16). Chapters 25—26 contain proverbs that are mainly comparisons. The key words in these chapters are "like . . . so." Chapter 27 is a mixture of comparative and antithetical proverbs. Chapters 28—29 contain maxims that are mainly contrasts marked by the word "but." In all these chapters there are mostly couplets but also some longer proverbs. I counted 66 proverbs in the group of analogies (25:1—27:22) and 54 in the group of contrasts (chs. 28—29). This

<sup>178</sup>Knox cited by Kidner, p. 156.

<sup>179</sup>Buzzell, p. 959.

<sup>180</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 153.

gives us 120 proverbs in this major section of the book if we exclude the discourse on prudence in 27:23-27.

I will again (in chs. 25—29, as in 10:1—22:16) comment only on those verses that seem to me to need clarification.

### **A. INSTRUCTIVE ANALOGIES 25:1—27:22**

#### **1. Wise and foolish conduct ch. 25**

25:1 A group of scholars who served during King Hezekiah's reign (715-686 B.C.) added more of Solomon's 3,000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32) to the former collection (1:1—22:16). These men lived about 250 years after Solomon. Solomon ruled from 971-931 B.C. This verse introduces chapters 25—29.

"The proverbs in these chapters differ in that there are more multiple line sayings and more similes; chapters 28—29 are similar to chapters 10—16, but chapters 25—27 differ in having few references to God."<sup>181</sup>

25:2 The fact that God has chosen not to reveal everything human beings want to know has resulted in our holding Him in awe and glorifying Him (cf. Deut. 29:29). However a king's subjects hold him in awe and glorify him when he diligently investigates a matter and does not make his decisions on the basis of superficial understanding.

25:8-10 This proverb advises us to settle disputes out of court whenever possible. It is not wise to drag someone hastily into court to argue. We should be cautious about divulging information. This may lead to embarrassment (v. 8). We should not divulge secrets to clear ourselves in arguments or we may ruin a friendship. The plaintiff should debate his case with his neighbor out of court. Then the point of disagreement will not become public knowledge (v. 9) and give the plaintiff a bad reputation (v. 10).

"To run to the law or to the neighbors is usually to run away from the duty of personal relationship—see Christ's clinching comment in Matthew 18:15b."<sup>182</sup>

25:11 "Gold" may refer to the color of the fruit or possibly to the metal. "Settings" suggests an appropriate background such as an attractive basket or frame if the picture of an apple is in view. The point is that just the right

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<sup>181</sup>Ross, p. 1078.

<sup>182</sup>Kidner, p. 157.

words spoken at the right time in the right way can be as pleasing as a beautiful piece of fruit in a suitable container.<sup>183</sup>

25:15 By adding a few words the idea of this verse becomes clearer. "By forbearance [of speech] a ruler may be persuaded." That is, do not speak too long. A gentle tongue can be very powerful.

"Calm and patient speech can break down insurmountable opposition."<sup>184</sup>

25:16 Anything overindulged, even the most desirable of things, can become distasteful and repulsive.

"Since Eden, man has wanted the last ounce out of life, as though beyond God's 'enough' lay ecstasy, not nausea."<sup>185</sup>

25:21-22 Clearly the point of this proverb is to return good for evil (cf. Matt. 6:4-6; Rom. 12:20). Such conduct will bring blessing from God and remorse to the evildoer. Still what does heaping burning coals on the head of the abuser mean? Evidently this clause alludes to an ancient custom. When a person's fire went out at home, he or she would go to a neighbor and get some live coals to rekindle the fire. Carrying the coals in a pan on the head involved some danger and discomfort for the person carrying them, but they were an evidence of the neighbor's love. Likewise the person who receives good in return for evil feels somewhat uncomfortable even though he receives a good gift. His discomfort arises over his guilt for having wronged his neighbor in the first place. So returning good for evil not only secures the blessing of God (v. 22b), it also convicts the wrongdoer of his ways (v. 22a) in a gentle way.

25:23 The angry countenance belongs to the person who is the target of the backbiting (slandering) tongue. Sly words can infuriate people just as a northerly wind brings rain. These are inevitable results.

25:27 Both practices in this verse are pleasant for the person who engages in them, but they can affect him adversely if he pursues them to excess.

## **2. Fools and folly ch. 26**

The analogies in chapter 25 dealt with both wise and foolish conduct, but those in chapter 26 deal mainly with fools and folly.

<sup>183</sup>Cf. Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 148.

<sup>184</sup>Ross, p. 1082.

<sup>185</sup>Kidner, p. 159.

26:2 If someone curses another person who does not deserve it, the curse will not be effective (cf. Num. 23:8). It will not attach itself to the person cursed, so to speak.

"It was commonly believed that blessings and curses had objective existence—that once uttered, the word was effectual. Scriptures make it clear that the power of a blessing or a curse depends on the power of the one behind it (e.g., Balaam could not curse what God had blessed; cf. Num 22:38; 23:8). This proverb underscores the correction of superstition. The Word of the Lord is powerful because it is the word of the Lord—he will fulfill it."<sup>186</sup>

26:4-5 These pieces of advice do not contradict each other because each is wise in its own way. Verse 4 means that in replying to a fool one should not descend to his level by giving him a foolish response. Verse 5 means that one should correct a fool so he will not conclude that he is right. Some of a fool's comments do not deserve a reply (v. 4), but others require one (v. 5). In unimportant matters one should ignore the foolish comment, but in important matters one needs to respond lest others conclude that the fool is correct.<sup>187</sup>

26:8 By giving honor to a fool one arms him to do damage. This can happen, for example, by promoting him to a position of greater responsibility. The figure of binding a stone in a sling seems to suggest that the person doing the binding did not know how to operate a sling. People did not bind stones in slings but simply laid them in the sling so when the sling was slung the stone would fly out. Similarly one who expects a fool to accomplish something honorable does not know how things work. Fools cannot do something honorable.<sup>188</sup>

26:11 A wise man does not repeat his folly, but a fool does. Similarly a dog returns to eat his vomit, but a man does not. A fool behaves like a dog rather than like a man when he repeats his folly (cf. 2 Pet. 2:22).

### **3. Virtues and vices 27:1-22**

Many of the analogies in this pericope deal with virtues and vices that are characteristic of the wise and the foolish.

27:7 The point of this proverb seems to be that the quantity of a person's material possessions affects his attitude toward them.

<sup>186</sup>Ross, p. 1087.

<sup>187</sup>Plaut, p. 266. Cf. 2 Cor. 11:16-17; 12:11.

<sup>188</sup>Whybray, *The Book . . .*, p. 152.

"Hunger is the best sauce."<sup>189</sup>

Those who have much do not appreciate some things, even some things that are valuable. On the other hand a person with little tends to appreciate even the comparatively insignificant items he receives or owns. For example, a person who receives much praise may find it nauseating, but someone who gets very little praise may savor what little he gets.<sup>190</sup>

- 27:10 The first statement makes the point of the proverb: friends are important allies that we should retain if possible (v. 10a). The second needs some additional clarification. The thought seems to be, "Do not go all the way to your blood brother's house in a crisis if he lives far from you." The third statement gives the reason for the second. A friend at hand who is not a blood relative can be of more help than a close relation who lives farther away. A friend at hand should be more desirable than a brother who lives miles away.
- 27:13 See 20:16. The point of these parables is the same. We should hold people to their obligations.
- 27:19 If you want to see what your face looks like, look in a placid pool of water. If you want to see what a man is really like, look in his heart. That is, find out what he loves and values and you will know what kind of person he is. One's thoughts reflect his or her true character. Jesus taught that what a person says reveals what is in his or her heart (Matt. 12:34).
- 27:23 As the family manager, a man needs to know what he has and what condition his possessions are in to lead wisely. Moreover he needs to care for what he has to preserve his livelihood. Verses 24-27 go on to advocate preserving one's income poetically.

### **B. A DISCOURSE ON PRUDENCE 27:23-27**

This poem recalls the earlier discourses in chapters 1—9. In this one, Solomon gave some basic and practical advice designed to assure success in the context of Israel's most common occupation, animal husbandry.

The essentials stressed here are the care of one's resources, hard work, and a recognition and appreciation of God's provisions. The reader should apply these essentials to whatever occupation he or she may pursue. These are the basics for wise living in practical daily work.

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<sup>189</sup>Toy, p. 483.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid.

### C. INSTRUCTIVE CONTRASTS CHS. 28—29

Most of the proverbs in this section are couplets, and most of them set forth a truth by means of a contrast.

- 28:2           When wickedness abounds in a land there is usually a high rate of turnover in the leadership (v. 2a). The Northern Kingdom of Israel is a case in point. Nevertheless a single wise ruler can bring stability to a land (v. 2b). God blessed the Southern Kingdom of Judah with relative stability because of David's godly leadership.
- 28:8           When authorities discover a person who gets rich by charging exorbitant interest and they bring him to justice, they usually turn his money over to others who are trustworthy and less greedy. This illustrates the fact that a person who amasses a fortune dishonestly normally loses it eventually.
- 28:11          Sometimes rich people think they are wise because they have accumulated much money (cf. 1 Tim. 6:17). However a wise person, even a poor wise man, can see that that is not the ultimate reason he is rich.
- 28:14          Fearing sin is in view here, not having a timid disposition or fearing God.<sup>191</sup> The contrast of hardening the heart supports this view.
- 28:22          The evil eye represents the wicked purposes of a person. In this case it is a selfish desire to get rich. The person with the evil eye is misanthropic whereas the person with the good eye (22:9) is philanthropic.<sup>192</sup> The person in view here fails to look far into the future when he will be in need before God if not before men. Avarice leads to poverty.
- 28:27          Those who give to the poor will not lack what they need, which is God's blessing. They may also receive the blessing of other people and material benefits that God promised generous Israelites. We may supply the idea of blessing to the first statement legitimately since the contrast is with curses in the second statement.
- 29:11          "Always" is a poor translation. The idea is that fools customarily vent their feelings ("let it all hang out") whereas wise individuals control themselves.
- 29:13          The poor man is the oppressed, and the oppressor is the rich. They are opposites in this regard. Both owe God their sight and really all the common blessings He bestows on everyone. Giving light to their eyes may mean giving them life (cf. Job 33:30; Ps. 13:3).<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup>Ross, p. 1106.

<sup>192</sup>McKane, p. 627.

<sup>193</sup>Ross, p. 1114.

- 29:16 We must take the divine perspective here as in all the proverbs. Individual cases may not fit the principle, but generally the principle holds true. The righteous will prevail, and the wicked will fail, eventually.
- 29:18 The AV translation has resulted in misunderstanding of this proverb. The "vision" (Heb. *hazon*) does not refer to some dream of success a person may have but to a prophetic vision that was a revelation from God (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1). The Hebrew verb translated "perish" (AV; *para*) does not mean "die in their sins" (e.g., because someone did not see the "vision" of the importance of evangelism). It means "cast off restraint." Without divine revelation people abandon themselves to their own sinful ways. God's Word restrains human wickedness, and those who keep it are happy. Thus "a nation's well-being depends on obedience to divine revelation."<sup>194</sup> There must be knowledge of divine revelation through preaching for there to be obedience to it.<sup>195</sup>
- 29:21 On the surface this verse sounds as if it is a wise thing to pamper one's slave. However the point is that pampering, as opposed to disciplining, makes slaves disrespectful. A slave is not a son. To bring this parable over into modern life, an employee should not normally receive the same privileges as a son. If he does, the relationship essential to the effective operation of the business will suffer.
- 29:24 The bad thing about being a thief's partner is that when the thief gets caught and the authorities haul his partner into court he finds himself in a "no win" situation. If he defends his partner, he shares his guilt, but if he says nothing (or pleads the fifth amendment), his accusers assume he shares his guilt. Many a business man has discovered this to his sorrow.

## **V. TWO DISCOURSES BY OTHER WISE MEN CHS. 30—31**

Chapters 30 and 31 form a distinct section in Proverbs because neither Solomon (1:1—22:16; chs. 25—29) nor the unnamed sages (22:17—24:34) wrote them. Two other wise men whose names the text records did. Some expositors speculate that because these men's discourses occur at the end of the book the writers probably lived later than the men of Hezekiah.<sup>196</sup> Nevertheless who Agur and Lemuel were, as well as when and where they lived, remain mysteries.

### **A. THE WISDOM OF AGUR CH. 30**

The most distinctive features of Agur's proverbs are his numerical style of grouping similar items, his picturesque speech, and a unique phrase he used. This phrase, "There

<sup>194</sup>Ibid., p. 1116.

<sup>195</sup>Cf. Alden, p. 202.

<sup>196</sup>E.g., Toy, p. 517.

are three things . . . even four," occurs with minor changes five times (vv. 15, 18, 21, 24, 29; cf. vv. 11-14).

"The purpose of such a device may be simply to indicate that the list is not exhaustive, though specific (see Amos 1:3, 6). Or the purpose may be to emphasize the fourth item on the list."<sup>197</sup>

### **1. The introduction of Agur 30:1**

Scripture does not refer to either Agur or his father (or ancestor) Jakeh elsewhere. At least one writer felt he may have been a contemporary of Solomon.<sup>198</sup> An "oracle" is a weighty message from God (cf. Zech. 9:1), or the Hebrew word, *massa*, may refer to a place.<sup>199</sup> Ithiel and Ucal (the only university mentioned in Scripture) may have been Agur's sons.

### **2. Wisdom about God 30:2-9**

Agur began with three declarations. The subject of each is God.

30:2-4 Behind this ironical section one can perhaps imagine Agur's sons claiming to be wiser than their father. Agur confessed his own limited understanding while at the same time making it clear that those he addressed knew no more than he did.

If wisdom is essentially a proper orientation to God, how could Agur say he had not learned wisdom but he knew God (v. 3)? In view of the context (vv. 2, 4) he probably meant that he had not reached a high level of wisdom. "Wisdom" in Proverbs means understanding as well as godliness (e.g., 1:1b; 2:2; et al.). Agur humbly regarded his own discernment as limited, but he did not claim to be a fool.

The only Person who meets Agur's qualifications in verse 5 is God (cf. Job 38—41; Prov. 8:24-29). He is the only One with perfect understanding. "What is His name?" implies, "Do you fully understand Him?" In the ancient world knowledge of a god's name implied understanding of his characteristics, power over him, and closeness to him. The question about His Son's name evidently means, "Has He imparted His nature or attributes to any other who may in any sense be called His Son?"<sup>200</sup> In the fullness of time God sent His Son to reveal His character and nature more completely than anyone had known them previously (Heb. 1:1-2).

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<sup>197</sup>Jensen, p. 105.

<sup>198</sup>Kidner, p. 178.

<sup>199</sup>Ross, p. 1119.

<sup>200</sup>Perowne, p. 180.

30:5-6 Agur treasured the revelation that God had given. "Tested" means "smelted," purified (cf. Ps. 12:6). It was trustworthy. Agur regarded the aim of revelation to be the promotion of trust in God, not just knowledge (v. 5b). Adding to God's revelation is a serious offense (v. 6; cf. Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18).

30:7-9 Agur asked God not to lead him into temptation (Matt. 6:13). He had more concern for his purity before God than about his place among men. Poverty and wealth both bring with them certain temptations that the middle-class citizen does not face, at least as strongly. Abundance tempts us to feel unrealistically self-sufficient (cf. Deut. 8:11-14; John 15:5). Need tempts us to stop trusting God and resort to acts that harm others.

### **3. Wisdom about life 30:10-33**

Though his view of and awareness of God are very much behind what Agur said in the rest of this chapter, his counsel deals primarily with practical prudence from this point on.

30:10 It is unwise to meddle in the domestic affairs of other people. The case in point in this couplet is falsely accusing a slave to his master. Probably "he" (v. 10b) refers to the master. The slave might never discover that someone had slandered him. It is more likely that the master would investigate the charge and discover it false.

30:11-14 Agur sketched four verbal pictures and simply placed them side by side in these verses to illustrate the folly of arrogance. He had demonstrated humility himself (vv. 2-4, 7-9). Each thing listed begins with *dor* ("generation") meaning a class or group of people (cf. Matt. 11:16).<sup>201</sup>

30:15-16 Here the warning is against greediness.

*"Give! Give!"* [v. 15] can be taken as the names—with more pointed wit than as the cries—of these identical twins, who are made of the same stuff as their mother—other people's blood."<sup>202</sup>

Greediness is not just silly (v. 15), it is dangerous ("Sheol" and "fire," v. 16) and pathetic (being childless and parched, v. 16).

30:17 Disrespect for one's parents is as bad as arrogance and greed. Agur's graphic descriptions visualize the terrible consequences of this folly. Whereas we should obey our parents as long as we live under their authority, we should honor them all our lives. We should do so simply

<sup>201</sup>Ross, p. 1121.

<sup>202</sup>Kidner, p. 180. F. S. North, "The Four Insatiabiles," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965):281-82, argued that the two daughters are the two suckers on the leach.

because they have given us physical life if for no other reason. This proverb warns that severe punishment awaits those who disrespect their parents.

- 30:18-19 These four "ways" (Heb. *derek*) have several things in common that make each of them remarkable. All are mysterious (inexplicable), non-traceable, effective in their element, and aggressive. "The way of a man with a maid" refers to the courting process. The point of these four snapshots seems to be that in view of remarkable phenomena such as these arrogance is absurd and humility only reasonable (cf. Job 38—41).
- 30:20 The mention of the woman in verse 19 seems to have triggered this pigtail comment about another unexplainable phenomenon. That is how some women can commit adultery as easily as and without any more remorse than they can eat a meal. The sage could have said the same of some men.
- 30:21-23 These are four more pictures of arrogant folly. One writer saw Adolf Hitler as an example of the kind of servant who became a king that the writer envisioned (v. 22a).<sup>203</sup>
- 30:24-28 In contrast to the arrogant, here are four examples of humble creatures functioning as God created them to, each remarkably effective and successful. Animals (vv. 24-28) are sometimes wiser than humans (vv. 21-23). The small are often more effective than the large. The basic contrast, however, is between humility and arrogance.
- 30:29-31 To keep us from concluding that little is always better than big (in view of vv. 24-28) Agur produced four more illustrations of stately noble behavior. He showed the balance between groundless pride (cf. vv. 21-23) and false humility (cf. vv. 24-28). These stately things demonstrate that proper bearing in life comes neither from exalting nor from depreciating oneself. It comes from functioning as God created one to function (i.e., to be oneself, sincere).
- 30:32-33 These verses call for personal application of this counsel if necessary. Peaceable behavior manifests humility, the key virtue in this chapter.

". . . the intent of this concluding advice is to strive for peace and harmony through humility and righteousness."<sup>204</sup>

### **B. THE WISDOM OF LEMUEL CH. 31**

Some commentators have regarded only the first nine verses of this chapter as Lemuel's writing. One reason for this is that the Septuagint translators separated verses 1-9 from

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<sup>203</sup>Greenstone, p. 324.

<sup>204</sup>Ross, p. 1126.

verse 10-31 by five chapters (chs. 25—29). However the Hebrew text implies that Lemuel wrote the whole chapter since it connects these two sections.

### **1. The introduction of Lemuel 31:1**

King Lemuel was evidently not a king of Israel or Judah. No king by this name appears in Kings or Chronicles. Some scholars have suggested that "Lemuel" (lit. "Devoted to God") may have been a pen name for Solomon. There is no evidence for this.<sup>205</sup> Yet this is the only reference to a king by name in Proverbs, an unusual feature in wisdom literature from the ancient Near East.<sup>206</sup>

We have seen that Proverbs generally contains the counsel of aged courtiers to the sons who were in line to succeed them as government officials. We have also noted that both parents normally shared the training of these young men.<sup>207</sup> In chapter 31 we have King Lemuel's recollections of the instruction he had received from his mother earlier in life. Perhaps his father had died or was unable to instruct him or gave him other teaching not recorded here. According to Jewish legend, Lemuel was Solomon and his mother was Bathsheba.<sup>208</sup> There is no factual basis for this tradition.

### **2. The wise king 31:2-9**

31:2 The unusual address, "What, O my son?" is "affectionately reproachful."<sup>209</sup> She was getting his attention and appealed to him strongly to give heed to her words for two reasons. She had borne him, and he had some connection with vows she had made to God.

31:3-9 Her counsel was that it is not wise for a king to make himself dependent on women (v. 3) or wine (vv. 4-7). Positively he should uphold justice, especially for those whom other people might take advantage of (vv. 8-9).

"It is the responsibility of the king to champion the rights of the poor and the needy, those who are left desolate by the cruelties of life (see 2 Sam 14:4-11; 1 Kings 3:16-28; Pss 45:3-5; 72:4; Isa 9:6-7)."<sup>210</sup>

"I think verses 6-7 are spoken in irony and not as a commandment, because nobody's problems are solved by forgetting them, and who wants to spend his or her last minutes of life on earth drunk? [cf. Matt. 27:33-34]."<sup>211</sup>

<sup>205</sup>For the meaning of "oracle," see my note on 30:1.

<sup>206</sup>Leah L. Brunner, "King and Commoner in Proverbs and Near Eastern Sources," *Dor le Dor* 10 (1982):210-19.

<sup>207</sup>See my comments on 1:8-19.

<sup>208</sup>Greenstone, p. 329.

<sup>209</sup>Kidner, p. 182.

<sup>210</sup>Ross, p. 1128.

<sup>211</sup>Wiersbe, p. 149.

### **3. The wise woman 31:10-31**

We have read much in Proverbs already about unwise women. Solomon personified both wisdom and folly as women (chs. 8—9). Perhaps God wanted us to finish reading this book assured that women are not essentially evil or foolish but that they can be very good, wise, and admirable. Jewish husbands and children traditionally recited this poem at the Sabbath table on Friday evenings.<sup>212</sup>

The form of this discourse is an acrostic poem. Each of the 22 verses in the Hebrew Bible begins with the succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Such a device not only made for more interesting and beautiful reading but also aided the Hebrew reader in memorizing this passage.

The woman in view in this passage is probably no one individual. This seems clear from the fact that the writer described her impersonally in verse 10 as "an excellent wife" rather as Lemuel's mother or some other specific lady. Furthermore throughout Proverbs the writers described people generally. They did not use particular individuals as examples positively or negatively.

Some scholars believe this chapter does not describe women at all but deals with wisdom personified as a woman.<sup>213</sup> I believe this is too extreme. Wherever a writer personified wisdom elsewhere in the book it is always clear to the reader that he was using personification as a literary device (cf. 8:1; 9:1, 13). That is not the case here. Lemuel's mother seems to have been describing an eminently wise woman, not just wisdom as a woman.<sup>214</sup>

In this chapter the wife in view does the things that the wife of a prince or courtier in the ancient Near East would do.

"The woman here presented is a wealthy aristocrat who runs a household estate with servants and conducts business affairs—real estate, vineyards, and merchandise—domestic affairs, and charity. It would be quite a task for any woman to emulate this pattern."<sup>215</sup>

Lemuel said nothing of her intellectual interests or pursuits because those things were not significant for his purpose, which was to stress her wisdom. He did not mention her relationship to God or to her husband. The absence of her husband's involvement in domestic matters fits her station in life. He would have been busy with public affairs.

<sup>212</sup>Y. Levin, "'The Woman of Valor' in Jewish Ritual [Prov. 31:10-31]," *Beth Mikra* 31 (1985-86):339-47.

<sup>213</sup>E.g., Ross, pp. 1128-30; Kenneth T. Aitken, *Proverbs*, p. 158. It is interesting, however, that even those who hold this symbolic view occasionally speak of the woman in this poem as a real woman.

<sup>214</sup>Tom R. Hawkins, "The Wife of Noble Character in Proverbs 31:10-31," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:609 (January-March 1996):12-23, argued that this woman is a role model who epitomizes wisdom.

<sup>215</sup>Ross, p. 1128.

Probably Lemuel's mother intended the qualities and characteristics that follow to be a guide to him as he considered marrying. They provide a standard of godly wisdom for women. However this standard is not within every woman's reach since it assumes certain personal abilities and resources that are not available to all.

The poem presents the height of female effectiveness. Within the sphere of the house we see that the wife has opportunity for great influence and achievement not only succeeding herself but enabling her husband to succeed as well.

I do not believe we should interpret this poem as denigrating a woman's work outside the home. It simply addresses a certain kind of woman in a particular social and historical context whose arena of activity was domestic, in the largest sense, almost exclusively. It also advocates characteristics that women can demonstrate in many different contexts in life. Women can manifest them in any period of history and in any culture.

31:10-12      The Hebrew word translated "excellent" (v. 10, *hayil*) means noble, virtuous, fine. It denotes strength, wealth, ability, valor, and dependability. The sense of verse 10 is "a good wife is not easy to find, but, when found, she is of inestimable value."<sup>216</sup> She will not bring her husband to ruin by overspending (v. 11b). Furthermore she is not contentious (v. 12; cf. 27:15).

31:13-15      "Wool and flax" reflects the eastern economy; she is industrious (v. 13a). "In delight" reveals her positive motivation. Rather than using whatever is handy she wisely shops for what is best that she can afford (v. 14). She puts the needs of others in her household ahead of her own comfort and convenience. She is self-sacrificing (v. 15).

31:16-18      Eastern culture is again obvious in these verses. She is thrifty, and she augments her husband's income (v. 16). Today supplementing her family's income may be a possibility for her (cf. v. 34). However, husband and wife should agree that this is best for the family. She should make sure her motives and priorities are in order before committing herself to such a job. Is the income essential to meet needs or wants? Is she doing the work to avoid her other higher priority responsibilities? Is she hoping that her job or career rather than her relationship with God and her family members will satisfy her needs?

She is industrious (not an amazon, v. 17). She has a legitimate sense of self-respect, and she works hard (v. 18).

31:19-22      The "distaff" was the rod that held the raw wool while spinning. The "spindle" was the stick the spinner twirled between her fingers that took up the spun wool (v. 19). She is generous rather than selfish (v. 20). She provides security for her family by providing them with clothing that is

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<sup>216</sup>Toy, p. 543.

both warm and attractive (v. 21). She also tends to her own appearance. She dresses in quality garments (v. 22).

- 31:23-24 The implication of verse 23 is that she helps her husband advance. She is a credit and an ornament to him (cf. 12:4). She is both thrifty and industrious (v. 24).
- 31:25-27 "Strength and dignity" are outstanding qualities, what people see when they see her as they see her clothing (v. 25a). She is also optimistic about the future because she has prepared for it (v. 25b). She is able to speak of wisdom because she has learned it (v. 26a). She is a kind person because she wisely realizes the importance of that virtue (v. 26b). Moreover she manages her home well (v. 27). She gives her home high priority.
- 31:28-29 Her husband and children, those who know her best, appreciate and praise her for her many excellent qualities.
- 31:30-31 Here is the key to her greatness (v. 30). Charm can be misleading and physical beauty is only temporary, but the fear of Yahweh is the indispensable core of a woman like this. Such a woman deserves to share in the fruits of her labors and to receive public recognition for her greatness (v. 31).

A wise woman will enjoy many benefits. Her husband will value, bless, and praise her (vv. 10, 28b, 31). She will be secure (v. 25). Moreover her husband will also cherish and honor her (Eph. 5:28-29; 1 Pet. 3:7b).

## Conclusion

The quality of wisdom that Proverbs presents is much more than the ability to apply knowledge to various situations in life effectively. It also involves submission to the way of God that is the order of life God has revealed as best for men and women. It is possible for people to think correctly and to speak and act wisely with no direct knowledge of divine revelation. However people of this type possess only limited wisdom.

The wise person is one who takes God into account. He realizes his own limitations and his need for divine guidance. He listens to and applies what God has revealed to his own life. The foolish person believes he does not need God's help. He closes his ears and his mind to God's revelation. He goes his own way. The wise person becomes a success eventually while the fool suffers destruction.

Proverbs begins with appeals to listen and submit to God's revealed wisdom (chs. 1—9). Then the writers cite particular cases of wise and foolish behavior to help us live wisely (chs. 10—31).

The Book of Proverbs deserves more exposition by preachers and Bible teachers than it gets.

"With the exception of Leviticus, it is doubtful that any biblical book is viewed with less enthusiasm by the preacher."<sup>217</sup>

One writer suggested these hermeneutical and homiletical guidelines for interpreting and proclaiming Proverbs.<sup>218</sup>

### Hermeneutical guidelines

1. Interpret individual passages in light of the overall structure, purpose, and "motto" of the Book of Proverbs.
2. Recognize the various literary forms and devices (the "building blocks" of the individual passages or proverbs) as a clue to the context.
3. Beware of the erroneous assumption that proverbs are unconditional promises.
4. Realize that some proverbs are unconditionally true.
5. Interpret the Book of Proverbs in light of the historical-cultural context of extrabiblical wisdom literature.

<sup>217</sup>Collins, p. 1. Cf. Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, p. 53.

<sup>218</sup>Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines of Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:598 (April-June 1993):151-70.

**Homiletical Guidelines**

1. In seeking to apply a proverb, be sure to validate the application through the context of the Bible.
2. Utilize the characteristics and nature of proverbial wisdom as a foundation for graphic communication of timeless principles.
3. Explore the creative use of proverbial characters.

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