

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 36

PROVERBS

I. Background

What exactly is a “proverb”?

The English word “proverb” means “a short pithy saying in common and recognized use” according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*. If we were reading the Hebrew Book of Proverbs, then the title would call the substance of the book *Mishle*, which indicates a saying of wisdom with a basic sense of poetic balancing of similarity between thoughts.

In translating the book into Greek, the Septuagint writers titled the book *Paroimiai Salomontos*, or the “Parables [or Proverbs] of Solomon.” The Latin version, the Vulgate, titled the book *Liber Proverbiorum*, or Book of Proverbs.

In the Hebrew, the reference is most accurate for Proverbs. The book has plenty of “short pithy statements,” but it has more than just that! There are also a number of exhortations in address form that are basically teaching poems to help one live a life of wisdom.

Because the proverb is an art form in the Hebrew, we should remember the basics of Hebrew poetry set out in the Psalms lesson. That parallelism is followed in the book of Proverbs.

Who wrote Proverbs?

The book begins with “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel (Pro. 1:1)” and it is clear from this verse that a good portion of the proverbs were thus associated with Solomon. As we read through the book, it is also clear that a number of the proverbs were from people other than Solomon. For example, chapter 30 references the words of Agur. A number of other chapters are said to be “words of the wise.” Even those proverbs of Solomon were not necessarily written by Solomon himself. It would be more appropriate to understand those verses as words of wisdom with Solomon’s “seal of approval.”

Collections of wisdom sayings were common in Near Eastern cultures at that time. In fact, a number of scholars have found and noted close similarities between many of the Biblical proverbs and those of nearby cultures. Which borrowed from which is irrelevant to one's appreciation of the lessons taught by the proverbs. God's wisdom is no less wise if pagans figured it out as well as God's people! Still, the Hebrew proverbs are unique when measured against those of contemporary cultures. The Hebrew proverbs contain within them clear affirmations of faith in Yahweh absent from those of others. Indeed, the proverbs teach that without an intimate relationship with Yahweh, all is foolishness rather than wisdom.

How are the Proverbs organized?

The first eleven chapters are teaching poems of various lengths that are more addresses or exhortations than simple proverbs in the English sense of the word. R. K. Harrison outlines the book as follows:

1. Title of the work and motto (1:1-7)
2. Various discourses (1:8-9:18)
3. First collection of the Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
4. First collection of the “Sayings of the Sages” (22:17-23:14)
5. Additional Discourses (23:15-24:22)
6. Second collection of the “Sayings of the Sages” (24:23-34)
7. Second collection of the Proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27)
8. The words of Agur (30:1-33)
9. The words of Lemuel (31:1-9)
10. The Praises of the prudent wife (31:10-31)

Are Proverbs absolutely reliable?

Here, we need to remember our view of inspiration of scripture. As we have set forth earlier in the class, we view scripture as inerrant in what it claims to be. In other words, where scripture claims to be a decree from God on how to sacrifice, we see it as a command from God on how to sacrifice. Where scripture claims to be a parable from Jesus on how to live, we believe that Jesus literally told that parable on how to live. Applying that view here, we see this as the Bible's poems of how to live wisely.

These are, then, poems that will teach us how to love wisely. That perspective is different from viewing these as absolute statements that never fail in their application. Look, for example, at Proverbs 22:6 which

says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” This is not an absolute rule that would indicate that any child straying from God’s path as he ages is the fault of bad parenting! Now, of course, it may be bad parenting. However, it might also be the choice of a well parented child who succumbed to the wiles of Satan out of his own free will. Proverbs 22:6 is a general rule that indicates in a poetic sense that if a child is taught to walk a road at an early age, the child will continue to walk the same road as he ages.

Similarly, Proverbs 22:11 teaches that “He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend.” This proverb is obviously not a promise that a pure heart and gracious speech will bring us into a relationship with the king (or President Bush, as the case may be!). Rather, it is the wisdom saying that our relationships will thrive and prosper as we live lives of pure hearts and gracious speech.

II. Proverbs in detail

There are a number of proverbs that are required reading for “Biblical Literacy!” Before they are unfolded, a word of recommendation is in order. There are 31 chapters of Proverbs. Reading one a day gives a full reading of the book in about a month. That’s a lot of wisdom one would be adding to their life! Each verse contains something quite helpful. We will examine certain passages that always rise to the top generation after generation.

A. Proverbs 3:5-6

“Trust in Yahweh with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

This proverb sets forth the answer to many “what path does God want me to take?” questions. When faced with monumental choices in life, people often want writing on the wall to tell them what choice God wants them to make. God often makes the choice clear — other times, God doesn’t. The proverb assures us that as we seek God’s guidance, as we trust in his teachings and ways, he is faithful to make sure we take the right paths. So, when faced with those difficult choices, we need to be truly willing to do whatever God wants us to do. We need to seek out what God would have us do. If God indicates his choice for us, then we need to follow it in faith. If, after sufficient seeking, we need to make a choice and God has not made one clear to our open and willing

hearts, we should make the choice trusting that God will make the path a straight one! We should remember that often God himself is giving us choices with an assurance of his blessing for whichever choice we make.

B. Proverbs Chapters 5 and 7

These chapters are warnings against adultery. They should be read and heeded. They make common sense and understanding them is not difficult. Therefore, rather than parse them out verse by verse, an overview is adequate here: Stay away from adultery, it leads to no good!

C. Proverbs 8

This chapter takes the concept of “wisdom” and treats it like a person. In English class, we would say that wisdom is “personified” in chapter 8. Some scholars have seen in this a reference to pre-incarnate Christ (Jesus as part of the Godhead before his birth and incarnation.) Most scholars see this as more a reference to wisdom as the character or trait that forms the foundation of our world and system. The verses that specifically reference this are in the middle of the chapter where it says:

“Yahweh brought me forth as the first of his works...I was appointed from eternity...before the world began...before he made the earth...I was there when he set the heavens in place...I was filled with delight day after day...rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind” (8: 22-31).

As wisdom is personified, one is struck with the awe and wonder that goes with it. The point seems to move one with any sense at all into saying, “I want some of that in my life!” Indeed, a proper response to the chapter is to seek wisdom as the core of one’s life. Important here is an understanding of Biblical wisdom. It is NOT “head knowledge.” It is NOT “reading, writing and arithmetic.” It is NOT “school smarts.” It is NOT even “common sense.” Now, it may INVOLVE some of those things. At its core, however, wisdom begins with the respect, awe and fear of Yahweh (Pro. 1:7) and finds its fullness in seeing things as God sees them. Wisdom distilled to its essence is “God-vision,” having the perception and heart of God in matters. That wisdom we should seek with our full hearts. That wisdom is what leads to life and joy. That wisdom is what provides understanding and perspective for both the ups and downs of life.

D. Proverbs 11:22

“Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.”

A classic! Equally true, one might add, for a man – if there was such a thing as a beautiful man!

E. Proverbs 15:1

“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Again, not an absolute statement, but a general rule that will be confirmed over and over again in one’s life. This is a proverb worth putting into constant practice. It will get a lot of use!

F. Proverbs 22:1

“A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.”

Few folks hold this proverb as truth in their hearts. Those who do can confirm its truth. Those who cannot do not seem too happy.

G. Proverbs 30:7-9

Jesus echoes part of this proverb in the Lord’s Prayer. The proverb states:

“Two things I ask of you, Yahweh...Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say ‘who is Yahweh?’”

H. Proverbs 31:10-31

This most famous of passages recounts the characteristics of a wonderful wife. Of course, those characteristics are not outward but flow from within. This is a woman who works hard for the good of her family. She will rise early and stay up later as the need arises (31:15, 18). She wears strength and dignity as her clothing (25). She actively

sees to the needs of her home (27). She also looks outside her home to help those in need (20). Importantly, she finds the core of her being in Yahweh himself. “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised” (30). Indeed, all people, not just the family, should honor such a woman! (31)

III. Points for Home

- A. Wisdom is worth getting.
- B. Read the proverbs, wisdom is yours.
- C. Acknowledge and trust God.
- D. Let wisdom guide your life.