

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Introductory Issues

Title

The original Hebrew title of the book, [חמל צ]ל ןמ, “Proverbs of Solomon,”¹ is apparently derived from the superscription in 1:1.² The Septuagint utilizes PAROIMIAI which means “parallel” or “similar.” The Latin Vulgate called it *Liber Proverbiorum* or the “The Book of Proverbs.” The English title derives from the Vulgate. Unlike English versions which place Proverbs within the poetic section (Job through Song of Solomon), Proverbs is placed among the Writings in the Hebrew arrangement.

Authorship

Although we have already noted that the original Hebrew title of the book was “The Proverbs of Solomon,” it is clear from statements in the book itself that Solomon is not the sole author of the proverbs, though the majority of the proverbs are credited to him. The authors that are credited with proverbs are as follows.

Solomon, the son of David

Solomon is credited with 1:1–9:18 (see 1:1), 10:1–22:16 (see 10:1), and 25:1–29:27 (see 25:1).³ A little over five hundred individual proverbs are attributed to Solomon in the book.⁴ But this is a mere fraction of the three thousand proverbs attributed to Solomon in 1 Kings 4:32.

“Sayings of the wise”

Proverbs in 22:17–24:22; 24:23–34 are attributed to unspecified sages. Some have linked these sages to Solomon’s court (1 Kgs 4:31; 12:6). Other interpreters have noted that the Proverbs of Amenemope of Egypt contain striking similarities to some material in these sections and interestingly both consist of thirty sections. In any case, these proverbs are generally considered to be non-Solomonic.⁵

Agur the son of Jaketh

Proverbs 30:1–33 is attributed to Agur. He is unknown elsewhere in Scripture. His name probably means “he who gathers” or a “collector” and one wonders whether this name relates to the gathering or collecting of proverbs.

¹ Later Judaism abbreviated the title to simply *Mishlê*.

² There is some debate about whether 1:1 is the title for the whole book or just the first section (chs. 1–9).

³ This latter section was compiled and transcribed by a group identified as the men of King Hezekiah.

⁴ Interestingly there are three hundred and seventy five proverbs attributed to Solomon in 10:1–22:16 a number which corresponds to the numerical equivalent of Solomon’s name in Hebrew.

⁵ However, there is some evidence that chapters 1–24 were considered Solomonic in Hezekiah’s day.

King Lemuel

Proverbs 31:1–9, 10:31(?) are attributed to King Lemuel. This otherwise unknown king is likely a non-Israelite since this section contains several sayings with Aramaic spelling that point to a foreign background. Gleason Archer suggests that he may be a “North Arabian prince, living possibly in an area not far from Uz.”⁶ It is also not entirely certain that 31:10–31 should be attributed to Lemuel.

Date

The dating of Proverbs concerns at least two related issues: (1) the date of the proverbs contained in the book, and (2) the date of the final compilation of the book. Concerning the date of the proverbs themselves, if one takes the Solomonic ascriptions to be accurate then at least some of the material goes back to the tenth century (971–931 B.C.). Uncertainty regarding the other authors (i.e. Agur, Lemuel, the unnamed wise men) makes dating this material difficult.

Concerning the date of the final compilation of Proverbs there have been three basic proposals.

	Pre-Exilic	Post-Exilic
Early Date	Moderately Late Date	Very Late Date
Tenth to Sixth Century B.C.	Seventh-Sixth Centuries B.C.	Fourth Century B.C. or Later

The reference in 25:1 to Hezekiah’s men indicate that the final form could not have been completed until the eighth century since Hezekiah reigned from 715–686 B.C. But that being said does not settle the issue because of the uncertainty regarding the non-Solomonic material. If the Book of Proverbs was intended for training young men in the royal court (see the discussion on recipients below) then it seems likely that the book would have been completed before the Babylonian exile brought an end to the period of the Monarchy. Thus, perhaps a date of the final compilation between the 715–686 is possible.

Historical Setting

The historical setting for the Book of Proverbs probably relates to the period of the monarchy, specifically from the time of Solomon until the defeat of the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C.

Original Audience

The original recipients of Proverbs are not explicitly identified. In chapters 1–9 there are generic addresses to “the young” (1:4), “son(s)” (1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1), and both the “simple” and “the wise” (1:4). The emphasis in this first section tends upon the young in age. Later in the book more mature persons might be under consideration (see 19:13; 21:9; 22:6). While dogmatism is certainly unwarranted we suggest that the original audiences were the young men in the royal court. This identification would be consistent with the recurring references to “son(s)” in

⁶ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Updated and Revised ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 518.

Proverbs 1–9 and proverbs which would be more appropriate and relevant for those in the royal court (e.g., 16:10, 14; 19:12; 25:6–7; 25:1–3). That being said, a more rural/familial setting cannot be ruled out given the general nature of the introduction in 1:1–7 and passages such as 11:26; 27:23–27. One problem with this setting though is that given the general lack of personal possession of written materials in the ancient Near East one wonders how these materials would have been disseminated in a rural setting. But difficulty in pinpointing a specific social setting need not imply that Proverbs is a secular work (contra M.V. Fox).⁷

The Genre of Proverbs

Proverbs clearly falls into the category of wisdom literature and as such is usually included with Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.⁸ At a broad level, “Wisdom literature consists of those documents preoccupied with human responses to God and the world.”⁹

Occurrence of *HKM*, ‘Wisdom’ in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes¹⁰

	Proverbs	Job	Ecclesiastes
<i>hokmah</i> (wisdom)	39	18	28
<i>hakam</i> (wise)	47	8	21
<i>hakam</i> (to be wise)	12	2	4
<i>hakmot</i> (wisdom)	3		

The origins of and uniqueness of Proverbs is debated. Critical scholars have often suggested that Wisdom Literature, including Proverbs, was imported from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Along these lines one must admit that there are interesting and sometimes striking parallels between Proverbs and non-Israelite Wisdom Literature.¹¹ However, there are also significant differences. For

⁷ Fox argues that, “the social setting of the book of Proverbs is open to dispute, but it is clearly a secular work. It makes no pretense to an origin in divine revelation or inspiration. God is never quoted or addressed. It never had a role in the ritual life of Israel, in neither temple nor synagogue. In fact, it never was, and still is not, a subject of deliberate study in the rabbinic academies. With the exception of a few passages, it treats everyday life, not the grand affairs of state, history, cult, or law. It gives guidance in challenges we all face: how to get along with people, how to be a good decent person, how to make the right choices in personal and business affairs, how to win God's favor and avoid disaster- all issues of great importance, but still modest and prosaic ones” (Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, ed. William F. Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 7. My disagreement is at least fourfold. First, I do not think that this conclusion really squares with the numerous occurrences of the “Fear of YHWH” passages in the book (1:7; 2:5; 3:7; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; cf. also 1:29; 8:13; 14:26; 24:21; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30). Second, Fox’s statement does not appear to acknowledge the close connection between Proverbs and Torah both in terminology used and content (see Tremper Longman, III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], 80–1). Third, the association of Proverbs with Solomon would seem to undermine a purely secular document. While Scripture presents Solomon as a mixed character spiritually, the reason that he is a mixed character is that he should have been a king obedient to Torah. Fourthly, I think it unlikely that a book as secular as Fox suggests would have made it into the Hebrew Canon.

⁸ One can distinguish here between philosophical or speculative wisdom (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) and proverbial or didactic wisdom (Proverbs)

⁹ Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 6.

¹⁰ Ernest C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 79.

¹¹ This literature includes Egyptian wisdom texts, e.g., The Instruction of Ptahhotep (c.2400), The Instruction of Merikare (c. 2100), The Instruction of Amenemhet, The Instruction of Ani (1580–1080), The Instruction of Amenemope (c. 1200), The Instruction of Onchsheshonqy (c. 400), The Dispute over Suicide (c. 2100), The Song of

example, the foundational concept in Israelite Wisdom Literature is the fear of YHWH, a concept absent from the Egyptian and Babylonian literature.

Not only is Proverbs Wisdom Literature, but it is cast almost entirely in poetic form (excepting the superscriptions). As such it bears the characteristics of poetry including but not limited to terseness and aphorisms, imagery or figures, and parallelism.¹²

The Book of Proverbs is also as the name would suggest proverbial. As such, proverbs are typically brief, grounded in experience, derived from careful observation of life and the world, expressed in memorable form, and claim to present valuable insight.¹³ “On this basis a biblical Hebrew proverb might be defined as “a reflection of life crystallized in a brief, memorable sentence.”¹⁴ While this definition is good, there is a bit more to it. But this only tells part of the story since the Book of Proverbs contains two kinds of sayings: (1) instruction: longer developed statements (Prov 6:20–35), and (2) maxims: short pithy statements (e.g. Prov 10:1ff.). What unifies these two forms of wisdom material is the overall purpose, that is, to teach. As Allen Ross states, “Proverbs are essentially didactic, whether they follow the pattern of a formal instruction using imperatives or prohibitions (16:3; 23:9), are expressed in didactic sayings that observe traits and acts that are to be followed or avoided (14:31), tell an example story (7:6–23), make a wisdom speech (8:1–36), or develop numerical sayings (6:16–19).”¹⁵

Purpose

The Book of Proverbs was written for at least three reasons. First, Proverbs was written to teach people to live according to the fear of YHWH. Second, Proverbs was written to teach people to skillfully and wisely navigate the circumstances of life. Third, Proverbs was written to affirm the wise, correct the teachable, and rebuke the fool.

Structure

It is generally agreed that Proverbs is made up of a number of sections, each of which is headed by a superscription: 1:1–9:18; 10:1–22:16; 22:17–24:22; 24:23–34; 25:1–29:27; 30:1–33; 31:1–9; 31:10–31. There is some debate as to whether the superscription in 1:1 introduces only the first section or the entire book. We suggest that it does both. Similar discussion surrounds whether 31:10–31 merely concludes the book rather than function as an epilogue for the entire book.

Message

Trying to identify a single message for Proverbs is a daunting task. First, Proverbs is not a book but a collection of books written or collected by different people. Second, the rich variety of subject matter also complicates the task of identifying a single message. Thus, the material has

the Harper (c. 2100), The Satirical Letter of Hori (c. 1580–1080). Mesopotamian wisdom texts include The Instruction of Shuruppak (c. 2000), Lamentation of a Man to His God (c. 2000), The Counsels of Wisdom (c. 1500–1200), I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom (c. 1300), The Dialogue of Pessimism (c. 1200), The Babylonian Theodicy (c. 1000), The Words of Ahiqar (c. 500).

¹² Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, ed. Robert L. Hubbard Jr., New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 38-45.

¹³ Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature*, 95.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 888.

forced us to look at a broader message than you might have in other books. That being said, we suggest that the message of the book is, “A wise life is the desirable expression of the fear of YHWH.” The fear of YHWH is a recurring phrase in the book and a concept which appears to undergird the book as a whole. We define the fear of the Lord as the proper *recognition* of and *response* to YHWH (e.g., Prov 1:7; 9:10).

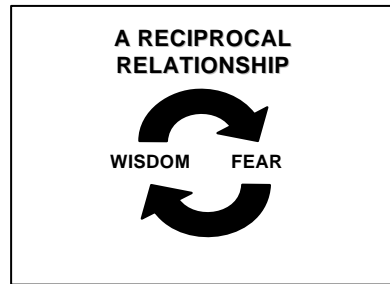
Basic Outline

- I. Prologue: The author, content, purpose, and the foundational premise for the section and the book are identified (1:1–7).
- II. A “son” is admonished to acquire and apply wisdom as a desirable expression of the fear of YHWH (1:7–9).
- III. Solomon’s maxims are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (10:1–22:16).
- IV. The “sayings of the wise” are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (22:17–24:34).
- V. Solomon’s maxims as collected by Hezekiah’s men are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (25:1–29:27).
- VI. Agur’s words are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (30:1–33).
- VII. King Lemuel’s mother’s words are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (31:1–9).
- VIII. An excellent wife is described to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (31:10–31).

Exposition

- I. **Prologue: The author, content, purpose, and the foundational premise for the section and the book are identified (1:1–7).**
 - A. The content (proverbs) and author (Solomon) are identified (1:1).
 - B. The purpose of Proverbs is to reveal wisdom and encourage its appropriation (1:2–6).
 - C. The foundational premise of the book is that the fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge but fools (those who do not fear YHWH) despise wisdom and instruction (1:7).

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some suggest that the fear of the Lord is the unifying principle in OT theology • The phrase fear of the Lord or fear the Lord occurs thirteen times in Proverbs (1:7; 2:5; 3:7; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; cf. also 1:29; 8:13; 14:26; 24:21; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30) • The fear of the Lord is a proper <i>recognition</i> of and <i>response</i> to YHWH. |
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II. A “son” is admonished to acquire and apply wisdom as a desirable expression of the fear of YHWH (1:8–9:18).

- This section is a major part of the proverbs associated with Solomon (chapters 1–24).
- This section consists of longer, well-crafted discourses¹⁶ as opposed to the rest of the book.
- Many of the sections are introduced by the phrase “my son(s).”
- There is a thematic contrast between “mistress folly” and “lady wisdom.”
- Some suggest that Proverbs 1-9 is a “hermeneutical prism through which we should read the rest of the book”¹⁷

- A. A “son” is admonished to heed instruction which is like valuable adornments to one’s life (1:8–9).
- B. A “son” is admonished to reject the call of evildoers and to follow the call of wisdom (1:10–33).
1. A “son” is admonished to reject the call of evildoers (1:10–19).
 2. A “son” is admonished to follow the call of wisdom (1:20–33).
- C. A “son” is admonished to be teachable and to seek wisdom so that through discernment he will receive the benefits of righteousness and avoid the pitfalls of the wicked (2:1–22).
- D. A “son” is admonished to have a right relationship with YHWH, wisdom, and others (3:1–35).
1. The learner is encouraged to have a right relationship with YHWH (3:1–10).
 2. The learner is encouraged to have a right relationship with wisdom (3:11–26).

¹⁶ The exact number of discourses vary among interpreters. Longman identifies sixteen (Temper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], 89). Fox identifies ten “lectures” and five “interludes” (Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 44–5).

¹⁷ Longman, *Proverbs*, Baker, 81.

3. The learner is encouraged to have right relationship with others (3:27–35).
- E. A “son” is admonished to acquire wisdom recognizing its value (4:1–9).
- F. A “son” is admonished to follow the path of uprightness and to avoid the path of the wicked (4:10–19).
- G. A “son” is admonished to watch his heart and his actions (4:20–27).
- H. A “son” is admonished to reserve sexual intimacy for his own wife because YHWH is watching and adultery is destructive (5:1–23).
 1. A “son” is admonished to reserve sexual intimacy with one’s wife by avoiding the adulteress (5:1–14).
 2. A “son” is admonished to reserve sexual intimacy with one’s wife by finding satisfaction only in her (5:15–20).
 3. The reason for reserving sexual intimacy for one’s wife is because YHWH is watching and adultery is destructive (5:21–23).
- I. A “son” is admonished to avoid three follies and seven abominations (6:1–19).
 1. A “son” is admonished to avoid the folly of debt (6:1–5).
 2. A “son” is admonished to avoid the folly of laziness (6:6–11).
 3. A “son” is admonished to avoid the folly of associating with the wicked and worthless (6:12–15).
 4. A “son” is admonished to avoid seven abominations (6:16–19).
 - a. The enumeration (6:16).
 - b. The identification (6:17–19).
- J. A “son” is admonished to value instruction as a means to avoiding adultery and its destructive effects (6:20–35).
- K. A “son” is admonished to resist the enticements of the adulteress because of its deadly consequences but to follow the invitation of Lady Wisdom (7:1–8:36).
 1. A “son” is admonished to resist the enticements of the adulteress because of its deadly consequences (7:1–27).
 2. A “son” is admonished to follow the invitation of Lady Wisdom (8:1–36).

- L. A [“son”] is admonished to understand the difference between Lady Wisdom and Mistress Folly (9:1–18).
 - 1. A [“son”] is admonished to note that Lady Wisdom offers her meal of wisdom for those who have been starving on folly (9:1–6).
 - 2. A [“son”] is admonished to note that the wise becomes wiser and the fool becomes more foolish (9:7–12).
 - 3. Mistress Folly offers fleeting pleasure but the end result is death (9:13–18).

III. **Solomon’s maxims are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (10:1–22:16).**

This section consists of 375 varied maxims. While the arrangement of the maxims is not entirely haphazard, the sheer variety and brevity of the topics resist rigid structuring. However, some recent commentators have noted that in 10:1–15:33 the sayings are primarily antithetical in form whereas in 16:1–22:16, the form is predominantly synonymous.¹⁸

- A. Solomon’s mostly antithetical maxims are given to encourage wise living (10:1–15:33).
- B. Solomon’s mostly synonymous maxims are given to encourage wise living (16:1–22:16).

IV. **The “sayings of the wise” are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (22:17–24:34).**

This anonymous section begins with a brief introduction (22:17–21) followed by thirty sayings of exhortations and warnings (22:22–24:22). We have also included 24:23–34 although many interpreters treat it as entirely separate section. We include it since both sections are ascribed to the “sayings of the wise.” It is often noted that the first section (22:17–24:22), bears striking similarities to the work of the Egyptian sage Amenemope (ca. 1558–1085 B.C.), whose text is also divided into thirty sayings. The general consensus is that the author(s)/compiler(s) of this section made “creative use” of Amenemope.¹⁹ However, Bruce Waltke has noted that Proverbs’ “material dependence on Amenemope extends only for the first eleven sayings (22:16–23:11).”²⁰

¹⁸ So Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, ed. Terry Muck, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 282–83. Van Leeuwen makes a similar division, but calls 16:1–22:16 “The Royal Collection (Raymond C Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume 5: Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997], 30).

¹⁹ Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” 201.

²⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, ed. Robert L. Hubbard Jr., New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 217.

- A. The first “sayings of the wise” are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (22:17–24:22).
1. The first “sayings of the wise” are introduced with an exhortation to apply the mind (22:17–21).
 2. Thirty exhortations and warnings are given for wise living (22:22–24:22).
 - a. Those who fear YHWH are not to take advantage of the socially vulnerable (22:22–23).
 - b. Those who fear YHWH are warned against associating with hot-tempered people (22:24–25).
 - c. Those who fear YHWH are warned against co-signing for people (22:26–27).
 - d. Those who fear YHWH are warned against encroaching on another’s property (22:28).
 - e. Those who fear YHWH are encouraged to be skillful in their work (22:29).
 - f. Those who fear YHWH are warned to exercise discretion before rulers (23:1–3).
 - g. Those who fear YHWH are warned against being consumed with obtaining riches (23:4–5).
 - h. Those who fear YHWH are warned about associating with a selfish person (23:6–8).
 - i. Those who fear YHWH are warned against wasting wisdom on fools who despise wisdom (23:9).
 - j. Those who fear YHWH are warned against encroaching on the property of the fatherless and taking advantage of the helpless for they have a strong Kinsman Redeemer (23:10–12).
 - k. Those who fear YHWH are to discipline their children (23:13–14).
 - l. Those who fear YHWH are to please their teacher by embracing wisdom (23:15–16).
 - m. Those who fear YHWH are warned not to be envious of sinners but rather to fear Him with whom there is a future (23:17–18).
 - n. Those who fear YHWH are warned not to associate with those who overindulge in food and drink (23:19–21).

- o. Those who fear YHWH are encouraged to listen to parental advice and strive to obtain truth, wisdom, instruction, and understanding (23:22–23).
- p. Those who fear YHWH are to act righteously so their parents would have cause to rejoice (23:24–25).
- q. Those who fear YHWH are warned to avoid sexual immorality (23:26–28).
- r. Those who fear YHWH are not to overindulge in drinking (23:29–35).
- s. Those who fear YHWH are warned against envying and desiring to associate with evil men (24:1–2).
- t. Those who fear YHWH recognize that wise living is the way to build one’s “house” (24:3–4).
- u. Those who fear YHWH recognize that wisdom and wise people are the key to success and victory (24:5–6).
- v. Those who fear YHWH recognize that wisdom is not suitable for fools (24:7).
- w. Those who fear YHWH recognize that trouble makers are fools and mockers (24:8–9).
- x. Those who fear YHWH are warned about letting their guard down in times of distress (24:10).
- y. Those who fear YHWH are encouraged to assist those who have been unjustly condemned to death (24:11–12).
- z. Those who fear YHWH recognize that wisdom, like honey, is sweet and beneficial (24:13–14).
- aa. Those who fear YHWH are warned not to act against the righteous for God’s blessing rests upon him (24:15–16).
- bb. Those who fear YHWH are warned not to gloat or rejoice at the misfortune of the wicked lest it cause God to withdraw that punishment from him (24:17–18).
- cc. Those who fear YHWH are warned not to be envious of the wicked for their prosperity is temporal (24:19–20).
- dd. Those who fear YHWH are warned to fear God and the king for both have the ability to bring sudden judgment (24:21–22).

- B. The further “sayings of the wise” are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (24:23–34).
1. Those who fear YHWH are warned against partiality in legal matters (24:23–25).
 2. Those who fear YHWH recognize the importance of honesty (24:26).
 3. Those who fear YHWH recognize that labor comes before enjoying the fruits one’s labor (24:27).
 4. Those who fear YHWH are not to perjure themselves in order to exact revenge (24:28–29).
 5. Those who fear YHWH are warned against laziness (24:30–34).

V. Solomon’s maxims as collected by Hezekiah’s men are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (25:1–29:27).

The introduction (25:1) notes that what follows relates to Solomon as collected and copied by Hezekiah’s men. This section may be viewed as an appendix of sorts to Solomon’s main collection in 10:1–22:16.²¹ This editorial effort may explain why the proverbs in this section are more organized topically than Solomon’s first collection. The section itself is generally considered to consist of two parts. Chapters 25–26 contain mainly synonymous maxims, that is, proverbs of comparison. Chapters 28–29 generally contain antithetical maxims that are marked by contrasts (“but”). Together these proverbs continue to emphasize the message that wise living is to be pursued as an expression of one’s fear of YHWH.

- A. Solomon’s mostly synonymous maxims are given to encourage wise living (25:1–27:27).
1. Solomon’s maxims collected by Hezekiah’s men are introduced (25:1).
 2. Solomon’s maxims are presented (25:2–27:27)
 - a. Those who fear YHWH act properly before the king (25:2–7).
 - b. Those who fear YHWH act wisely in court cases (25:8–10).
 - c. Those who fear YHWH speak wisely (25:11–15).
 - d. Those who fear YHWH live moderately (25:16–17).
 - e. Those who fear YHWH avoid inconsistent treatment of people (25:18–20).

¹ Ibid., 301.

- f. Those who fear YHWH treat their enemies graciously (25:21–22).
 - g. Those who fear YHWH avoid backbiting and a contentious spirit (25:23–24).
 - h. Those who fear YHWH give that which is good but hold their ground against the wicked (25:25–26).
 - i. Those who fear YHWH exercises humility (25:27).
 - j. Those who fear YHWH exercise self-control (25:28).
 - k. Those who fear YHWH recognize the fool and treats him accordingly (26:1–12).
 - l. Those who fear YHWH avoid relationships with sluggards (26:13–16).
 - m. Those who fear YHWH avoid those who sin in speech (26:17–28).
 - n. Those who fear YHWH act wisely regarding interpersonal issues (27:1–22).
 - o. Those who fear YHWH act wisely in relation to farming (27:23–27).
- B. Solomon’s mostly antithetical (wicked vs. righteous) maxims are given to encourage wise living (28:1–29:27).
- 1. Those who fear YHWH need to know the difference between wicked and righteous attitudes (28:1–28).
 - 2. Those who fear YHWH need to know the difference between wicked and righteous relationships (29:1–27).

VI. Agur’s words are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (30:1–33).

As noted earlier the identity and time of Agur is unknown although most believe that he was a non-Israelite who embraced YHWH (see 30:9). After a brief introduction (30:1), Agur proclaims the greatness of God (30:2–4) and of His Word (30:5–6). This is followed by a series of mostly numerical proverbs in 30:7–33. Here Agur prays that God will keep him from sin (30:7–9) and offers general advice about meddling in another person’s business (30:10). He Agur identifies four kinds of unwise behavior (30:11–14), four things that are never satisfied (30:15–31), four things that are amazing (30:18–19), four things that are improper (30:21–23), four small but instructive animals (30:24–28) and four stately creatures who act their part (30:29–31). The section is concluded with a proverb concerning pride, anger, and strife (30:32–33).

- A. Agur's words are introduced (30:1).
- B. Agur proclaims the greatness of God (30:2–4).
- C. Agur proclaims the greatness of the Word of God (30:5–6).
- D. Agur prays that God will keep him from sin (30:7–9).
- E. Agur offers general advice about meddling in another person's business (30:10).
- F. Agur identifies four kinds of unwise behavior (30:11–14).
 - 1. It is unwise to disrespect one's parents (30:11).
 - 2. It is unwise to be hypocritical regarding personal morality (30:12).
 - 3. It is unwise to be proud and haughty (30:13).
 - 4. It is unwise to be oppressing the poor (30:14).
- G. Agur identifies four things that are never satisfied and offers a warning concerning parents (30:15–31).
 - 1. Agur's words are introduced with a leech illustration (30:15).
 - 2. *Sheol* is never satisfied (30:16a).
 - 3. The barren womb is never satisfied (30:16b).
 - 4. The dry earth is never satisfied (30:16c).
 - 5. Fire is never satisfied (30:16d).
 - 6. Those who mock their parents will be judged (30:17).
- H. Agur identifies four things that are amazing and offers a warning concerning the adulteress (30:18–19).
 - 1. Agur's words are introduced (30:18).
 - 2. The way of an eagle in the sky is amazing (30:19a).
 - 3. The way of a snake on a rock is amazing (30:19b).
 - 4. The way of a ship on a high sea is amazing (30:19c).
 - 5. The way of a man with a maid is amazing (30:19d).
 - 6. An adulteress is also amazing because she is oblivious to her sin (30:20).

- I. Agur identifies four things that are improper (30:21–23).
 - 1 Agur’s words are introduced (3:21).
 - 2. An unprepared person taking leadership is improper (30:22a).
 - 3. A fool who is full of food is improper (30:22b).
 - 4. An unloved wife is improper (30:23a).
 - 5. A maidservant who supplants her mistress is improper (30:23b).
- J. Agur identifies four small but instructive animals (30:24–28).
 - 1 Agur’s words are introduced (30:24).
 - 2. Ants who are small and weak but work and plan ahead instruct about preparation (30:25).
 - 3. Rock badgers who are small and weak but live in rock where they are safe instruct about protection (30:26).
 - 4. Locust who are organized without a leader instruct about working together (30:27).
 - 5. Lizards that can be held in the hand can live in a king’s house teach that the insignificant can rise to positions of significance (30:28).
- K. Agur identifies four stately creatures who act their part (30:29–31).
 - 1 Agur’s words are introduced (30:29).
 - 2. A lion retreats before nothing (30:30).
 - 3. A rooster struts (30:31a).
 - 4. A he-goat struts (30:31b).
 - 5. A king with his army around him struts (30:31c).
- L. Agur teaches that pride and anger result in strife (30:32–33).

VII. King Lemuel’s mother’s words are given to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (31:1–9).

This section is interesting at a number of levels. It is interesting because nothing is known of King Lemuel. Presumably, he is a non-Israelite king. Second, this section highlights the

teachings of a mother, rather than the more common emphasis on the father, especially in 1:8–9:18. Third, for whatever reason, the Septuagint translators separated 30:1–9 from 30:10–31 by five chapters (chapters 25–29). In any case, the words of Lemuel's mother are given to her son the king to encourage him to live and rule wisely. Thus after an introduction (31:1), King Lemuel's mother warns about the destructive results of sexual immorality (31:2–3), the dangers of drinking and drunkenness that impair the ability of a king to rule properly (31:4–7), and the responsibility of a king to defend the vulnerable of society (31:8–9).

- A. King Lemuel's mother's words are introduced (31:1).
- B. King Lemuel's mother warned him about the destructive results of sexual immorality (31:2–3).
- C. King Lemuel's mother warned him about the dangers of drinking and drunkenness that impairs the ability of a king to rule properly (31:4–7).
- D. King Lemuel's mother admonished to defend the vulnerable of society (31:8–9).

VIII. An excellent wife is described to encourage wise living as an expression of the fear of YHWH (31:10–31).

Interpreters differ over whether to attribute this acrostic poem to Lemuel's mother introduced in the previous section. Koptak has made a compelling case to view this section in connection with 31:1–9 although we have chosen to give it a separate section as an epilogue to correspond with the opening prologue (1:1–7). Another disputed issue is whether the excellent wife in this section should be viewed literally or metaphorically. If viewed literally, the wife serves as an example or model for the qualities of an ideal wife. If viewed metaphorically the excellent wife should be viewed as a personification of wisdom similar or equivalent to Lady Wisdom introduced earlier in the book.²² The issue is difficult to decide and perhaps a certain level of ambiguity was intended. A man should look for wisdom as diligently as he seeks an excellent wife and an excellent wife like wisdom can be identified by her character. Both wisdom and an excellent wife are invaluable (31:10), an asset to her husband (31:11), brings good not harm, to her husband (31:12), enjoys her work (31:13), is creative in her provision for the family (31:14), prepares ahead (31:15), is financially prudent (31:16), works hard (31:17), and even harder when she senses an opportunity (31:18). She works diligently (31:19), is generous to the poor and needy (31:20), clothes her family well (31:21), dresses well herself (31:22), and enhances her husband's standing in the community (31:23). Wisdom and the excellent wife produces abundantly (31:24), is clothed in strength, dignity and confidence concerning the future (31:25), speaks with wisdom and kindness (31:26), is industrious and never idle concerning her household (31:27), praised by everyone in her family (31:28), able to be called the very best by her husband (31:29), ultimately characterized by the fear YHWH and not temporal external beauty (31:30) and is to be recognized and praised (31:31). In sum, an excellent wife encourages wise living and is an embodiment of the fear of YHWH (31:10–31).

²² See Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31," *Révue Biblique* 92 (1985): 25–

- A. An excellent wife is invaluable (31:10).
- B. An excellent wife is trustworthy and an asset to her husband (31:11).
- C. An excellent wife brings good not harm, to her husband (31:12).
- D. An excellent wife enjoys her work (31:13).
- E. An excellent wife is creative in her provision of food for the family (31:14).
- F. An excellent wife rises early to prepare for the day (31:15).
- G. An excellent wife is financially prudent (31:16).
- H. An excellent wife works hard (31:17).
- I. An excellent wife works harder when she senses an opportunity (31:18).
- J. An excellent wife works hard at spinning (31:19).
- K. An excellent wife is generous to the poor and needy (31:20).
- L. An excellent wife clothes her family well (31:21).
- M. An excellent wife dresses well (31:22).
- N. An excellent wife enhances her husband's standing in the community (31:23).
- O. An excellent wife produces enough fine clothes and is able to sell the excess (31:24).
- P. An excellent wife is clothed in strength, dignity and confidence concerning the future (31:25).
- Q. An excellent wife speaks with wisdom and kindness (31:26).
- R. An excellent wife is diligent and never idle concerning her household (31:27).
- S. An excellent wife is praised by everyone in her family (31:28).
- T. An excellent wife is able to be called the very best by her husband (31:29).
- U. An excellent wife is ultimately characterized by the fear of YHWH and not temporal external beauty (31:30).
- V. Epilogue: An excellent wife is to be recognized and praised (31:31).

APPENDIX: USING PROVERBS

Five Hermeneutical Guidelines for Interpreting Proverbs²³

Guideline One: Interpret Individual Passages in Light of the Overall Structure (a collection of collections of wisdom materials), Purpose (a primer of right conduct and proper attitudes), and “Motto” (“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom”) of the Book of Proverbs.

Guideline Two: Recognize the Various Literary Forms and Devices (the “Building Blocks” of the Individual Passages or Proverbs) as a Clue to the Context.

Guideline Three: Beware of the Erroneous Assumption that Proverbs are Unconditional Promises.

Guideline Four: Realize that Some Proverbs are Unconditionally True (e.g., Prov 16:2, 12, 33).

Guideline Five: Interpret the Book of Proverbs in Light of the Historical-Cultural Context of Extrabiblical Wisdom Literature.

Three Homiletical Guidelines for Preaching Proverbs²⁴

Guideline One: In seeking to apply a Proverb, be sure to validate the application through the context of the Bible.

Guideline Two: Utilize the characteristics and nature of proverbial wisdom as a foundation for graphic communication of timeless principles.

Guideline Three: Explore the creative use of proverbial characters.

²³ Gregory W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 151-71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*