

Background Notes for the Book of Proverbs:

(compiled by David Hentschel)

Author: Primarily Solomon. 1 Kgs 3-4 describes him as knowing all about many areas (zoology, musicology, botany, entomology), as the wisest person in the ancient world and the fountainhead of Israel’s wisdom literature. It is not all written by him personally, but he is where the wisdom tradition began. Other collections of Proverbs inside the book were added later and the book had a final editor. (*Note – those who question Solomon’s authorship inconsistently regard attributions to Hezekiah, Agur, and Lemuel as authentic.)

Purpose of Proverbs: Originally it was written as a manual for training the future king of Israel. This is why it says “my son” over and over again (especially ch 1-9), as it was for preparing diligent and honest men to serve the royal bureaucracy. Eventually its purpose was broadened and it became a manual to raise up a generation with wisdom, under wise teachers and mentors. “It’s goal is to describe and instill wisdom in God’s people a wisdom that is founded in the fear of the Lord and that works out covenant life in the practical details of everyday situations and relationships.” (ESV Study bible, p 1130)

Structure of Proverbs: The book of Proverbs divides into 4 main sections. It begins with a preamble (1:1-7), and is followed by 10 lessons of wisdom. (1-9:18) These are “didactic poems.” *Note that the words “my son” begins each lesson. The main body of Proverbs is the anthology (Ch 10-30 - Proverbs proper). These are those little pithy proverbs, usually one every verse and there’s hundreds of them which apply to every area of life: marriage, work, family, friendship, money, anger, poverty, alcohol, debt, speech, etc. etc. It concludes with an epilogue (Ch 31), including an acrostic poem.

Preamble	10 Lessons of Wisdom	Proverbs Anthology 10:1-30:33					Epilogue
1:1-7	1:8-9:19	10:1-22:16	22:17-24:22	24:23-34	25:1-29:27	30:1-33	31:1-31
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “My son” (1:8-33) 2. “My son” (2:1-22) 3. “My son” (3:1-12) 4. “My son” (3:13-35) 5. “My son” (4:1-9) 6. “My son” (4:10-19) 7. “My son” (4:20-27) 8. “My son” (5:1-23) 9. “My son” (6:1-29) 10. “My son” (7:1-9:18) 	Collected Proverbs of Solomon	30 sayings of the Wise	Further Sayings of the Wise	Hezekiah’s Collection	The Sayings of Agur	The Noble King and the Valiant Wife

Interpreting Proverbs. This book must be interpreted according to its genre. Proverbs is in the genre of Hebrew *wisdom* literature. “Hebrew wisdom was not theoretical and speculative. It was practical, based on revealed principles of right and wrong, to be lived out in daily life.” (TWOT) Proverbs is poetry (using synonymous and antithetical parallelism and vivid imagery throughout). Proverbs are general principles, not promises or guarantees. “Fundamental to the proverbial form is the fact that it bears a truth that has been tested by time.” (Bullock). A “proverb” is “a short, pregnant sentence or phrase whose meaning is applicable in many situations, with imagery or striking verbal form to assist the memory.” (Scott, The Way of Wisdom in the OT, p 22, 58) The Expositor Bible Commentary says, “A proverb may then be described as an object lesson based on or using some comparison or analogy. It may be a short saying that provides a general truth.” Here are some key questions to ask to unlock the deeper meaning of a proverb:

1. What virtue does this proverb commend?
2. What vice does it hold up for disapproval?
3. What value does it affirm?

Unique Features of Proverbs:

Two roads: There are 10 lessons in the beginning describing two roads, the way of wisdom vs. the way of folly. This is a fork and anyone is here at any given moment of any day.

Personification of Wisdom: Wisdom is personified as a woman. Folly is also personified as a woman, an adultress, with both of them calling to us at any moment in time. The path of wisdom calls to virtue, integrity and generosity and brings honor, life, safety, exaltation, success and peace; whereas the path of folly calls us to selfishness, evil and pride and brings dishonor, calamity, shame, turmoil ruin, and death. There are four poems from Lady Wisdom (1:20-33, 3:13-20; ch 8, ch 9). Some see chapter 31 as an appendix personifying wisdom as the ideal wife.

Christ in the Book of Proverbs: The writer asks, "Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know!" (30:4) Jesus is the ultimate Sage / King and wise "son." Jesus is also the ultimate personification of wisdom (Col 2:3) Note, some scholars also see the poem of chapter 8 as speaking of Christ. (Note 8:22 – the problem with the word "created" (qanah), but this can also mean "possessed.").

Outline of Proverbs:

- I. Preamble (1:1-7)**
- II. 10 Lessons of Wisdom (1:8-9:18)**
 - a. Lesson 1 (1:8-33)
 - b. Lesson 2 (2:1-22)
 - c. Lesson 3 (3:1-12)
 - d. Lesson 4 (3:13-35)
 - e. Lesson 5 (4:1-9)
 - f. Lesson 6 (4:10-19)
 - g. Lesson 7 (4:20-27)
 - h. Lesson 8 (5:1-23)
 - i. Lesson 9 (6:1-35)
 - j. Lesson 10 (7:1-9:18)
- III. Proverbs Anthology (10:1-30:33)**
 - a. The Collected Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
 - i. Proverbs Contrasting Righteous and Wicked (10:1-15:29)
 - ii. Proverbs about the Lord and His King (15:30-22:22)
 - b. Other Collections of Proverbs
 - i. 30 Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:22)
 - ii. Further saying of the Wise (24:23-34)
 - iii. Collection of Hezekiah's men (25:1-29:27)
 - iv. The Saying of Agur (30:1-33)
- IV. Epilogue - The Sayings of King Lemuel (Prov 31:1-31)**
 - a. The Noble King (31:1-9)
 - b. The Valiant Wife (31:10-31), an acrostic poem.