

PROVERBS

I. Basic literary form

A. Etymology of “Proverb,” מָשָׁל *mashal*

1. Improbable suggestions

- a. From מָשַׁל *mashal*, “to rule,” since a new controlling situation is presented
- b. From a cognate of Assyrian *mishlu*, meaning “half;” i.e., most proverbs are couplets

Some suggest that these couplet-type proverbs were catechetical—that the pedagogue would prompt the child with the first half of the couplet and have him complete the proverb.

2. Probable etymology: from a root meaning “to compare;” thus, a similitude, representation, comparison.

B. The LXX, with few exceptions, translates *mashal* as παραβολη *parabole*. After all, the parable is an extended comparison using “like/as,” while the proverb in general is a condensed, pithy comparison.

One time in the NT (Lk. 4:23, “Physician heal thyself”), “parable” is used to express “proverb,” and our English versions give an accurate translation.

C. Types of Proverbs

1. Approach / Purpose of the Form

Proverbs (Lat., “before a word;” cf. Eng. “byword,” “next to a word/saying”), aphorisms (Grk., “from the horizon, boundary), and maxims find their value in their **brevity** (condensed truth) and their **simplicity** (complex truth distilled into succinct form), and/or in their **new association with some graphic description**.

Proverbs should be characterized by “shortness, sense, and salt.” They are “pithy, pungent, and popular” (Paterson). Like salt, not many condensed proverbs can be digested at one time.

Because of their succinctness, proverbs are easily distorted through carelessness if one word is lost or misplaced, e.g., “...money is the root of all evil.”

2. Forms

“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.” Allen Ross in *Proverbs, EBC*, p. 883.

- a. **Riddles or cryptic comparisons** in order to evoke reflection and to make an impression through personal discovery, e.g., 17:3, “The refiner’s pot is for Ag and the furnace is for Au, but the Lord tries the hearts.”
 - b. **Clear and concise comparisons**; brevity aids recollection: “...the wellspring of wisdom is a flowing brook” –18:4
 - c. **Anti-proverbs** which use sarcasm/irony to make an impression via the ridiculous or abnormal: “Let a man meet a bear robbed of her cubs, Rather than a fool in his folly” –17:12
 - d. The **long, didactic discourse**. The descriptions above basically fit one literary genre, the short, pithy statement. This genre of the longer discourse is illustrated largely in the first section of Proverbs, as opposed to the single, disjointed verses after chpt. 9.
 - e. **Numerical collocations**: a perfect “3” or a “6” is not enough: 6:16-19; 30:15,16,18,19,21,23,24,29-31
 - f. Bible **acrostic**: Prov. 31:10ff.
 - g. The *mashal* outside of Proverbs is used in other functions in the OT: allegory (Ezk. 17:2), taunt song (Is. 14:4), lament (Mic. 2:4), etc.
3. Two classes of proverbs by origin
- a. **Folk proverbs**: “the wisdom of all and the wit of one man;” unfortunately, the identity of the originator is lost as the proverb is passed down through generations of social consciousness. Ezekiel (18:1,2) probably didn’t know who had contrived the proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”
 - b. **Gnomic proverbs**: (γνώμικον = Greek for “thought”); a wise man may distill into a maxim a keen observation or statement of truth in an especially memorable way.

Paterson’s remark that “the proverb has no father” applies only to folk proverbs, and that in a loose sense, in that they belong to a culture or civilization.

D. Design

1. Didactic nature

“...they help transmit the wisdom of the years and are thus a source of practical, moral, and political guidance.” —Frank Gabelein in “Proverbs,” *ZPBE*. Wisdom is generally the product of age and experience; the proverb takes wisdom and makes it simple and appealing to youth by “...endowing it with a youthful vigor” (Bullock, 146).

This purpose and its effective form (brevity and simplicity) aptly fit the learning needs of children and youth (note audience of Proverbs) and saves the breath of the instructing sages/parents, a matter of economy not lost on the Jewish mind.

Proverbs in the mouths of skilled speakers/writers effectively drive home their ideas, thus short-cutting the old-fashioned way of each generation learning anew by trial and error. The impact of Jesus’ teaching, besides its content, may be credited to the fact that He was the Master of the timely proverb/parable, e.g., “strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.”

Note Joseph Pulitzer’s advice to Journalists: *“Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light.”*

2. Purpose of the Book of Proverbs

To inculcate **higher wisdom** (= theology for the questions of life, e.g., chpt. 7) and **lower wisdom** (horse sense for every day living).

In training the malleable youth, the ultimate purpose was “...to subtract from the number of fools and add to the number of the wise” (Paterson, *Wisdom in Israel*, p. 54). “The instruction frequently came from a royal father concerned with preparing his son to replace him in court and teaching self-control in temperament, speech, and action so that his son might be successful” (Ross, *EBC*, p. 887).

The aim of the Hebrew sages is engraved in Hebrew letters in Andrew Bonar’s church in Glasgow: “He that winneth souls is wise” (11:30).

E. Definition of an OT Proverb:

“A terse, often graphic, expression of some generally acknowledged truth or experience.”

II. Historical background

A. Biblical proverbs before the Book of Proverbs

1. Ancient sources ante-dating David: e.g., I Sam. 24:13, “as the proverb says, ‘out of the wicked comes forth wickedness;’” and from the time of David, “Is Saul also

among the prophets?” (I Sam. 10:11,12)

2. **Job** is replete with proverbs, one of the most theologically significant being Job 28:28
–“Behold, the fear of the Lord, that *is* wisdom, And to depart from evil *is* understanding.”
3. Solomon was the patron of wisdom literature and the master of the proverb (I Kings 4:32), even as Moses gave the Law and David gave the nation’s hymnody. The comparative fact that Solomon’s wisdom excelled that of the other wise men of history (I Kings 4:30) implies that Solomon was quite familiar with the wisdom and proverbs of the eastern tradition.

I Kings 4:30 Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 For he was wiser than all men -- than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. 32 He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.

B. Neighboring cultures

1. Ancient teaching tool, recorded as early as 2500 bc — “Precepts of Ptah-hotep” from Egypt
2. The Egyptians had numerous other collections of proverbial sayings addressed to youth before and after the time of Solomon. The latter’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter may have cross-fertilized his breadth of wisdom in the realm of epigrammatic expression.

Many conservative scholars (e.g., Allen Ross) hold that Proverbs 22:17-24:22 was based upon the collection of Egyptian wisdom found in “The Instruction of Amenemope” (ca. 1100 b.c.). The content and form of this section of Proverbs is strikingly similar to the earlier Egyptian pattern.

III. Authorship and Date

A. Clarification

Because the book is admittedly a composite work (25:1), a distinction must be made between the time of composition and the time of final collection.

1. Internal indications of authorship: Solomon, ca. 950 bc (1:1; 10:1; 25:1)
Proverbs 1:1 “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:”
2. Internal indications of later compilation
 - a. Statement about Hezekiah’s scribes: 25:1

25:1 These also *are* proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied:

- b. Addition of other authors, Agur and Lemuel (30,31)
- c. The acrostic alphabet poem on the virtuous wife (31:9ff.) apparently was separate from Lemuel's proverbs due to its literary form as self-contained unit. A later collector appended these proverbs about the **wise woman** to the end of the Proverbs, probably (and significantly) as a counter-balance to the opening verses of the book which address the [hopefully] **wise son** (1:4,8).
- d. Repetition (exact or near) of individual proverbs in different collections. Cf. repeated Psalms (e.g., 14 & 53)
- e. Ross also observes on the basis of stylistic differences that there are collections within the collections
 - (1) 10:1-22:16 can be broken into chpts 10-15 in first half and 16:1-22:16 in second half. The latter half uses more kinds of parallelism than the first
 - (a) Bruce Waltke notes [in his *NICOT*] an example of a further subdivision in this block of Proverbs.

Proverbs 15:30–16:15 is a pericope set off by an inclusio of the image of “light.”

—15:30-33 = Introduction of gnomic sayings tied together with key word, “hear”

—16:1-9 = Main body: God in the affairs of man, set off by inclusio of “Yahweh”

—16:10-16 = Conclusion cohering around the word, “king” who is God's earthly representative
 - (b) Such pericopés (self-unified extract of a body of literature) are conspicuous by inclusios (parallel bookends of imagery, word, or theme), Janus verbs (transitional thoughts looking backward and forward; e.g., 16:4), repetitions, and chiasms (symmetrical outlines of thought).
 - (2) 25-29 = 25-27 in the first half and 28-29 in the second half. The first half has more topical groupings of proverbs and more illustrative parallelism

B. Traditional authorship

1. Solomon

- a. His reputation for wisdom (I Kings 3,4) and his known activity in producing proverbial material (I Kings 4:32) set Solomon off as the likely candidate for

this collection that became revered in Jewish literature. This is despite the objection that the king knew better how to coach than to play, cf. 7:6-23. The intertestamental *Wisdom of Solomon* tried to ride on the coattails of Solomon's reputation.

Approximately only 800 of his 3,000 proverbs are recorded in Proverbs. Proverbs 10:1–22:16 are collection of 375 of his proverbs. This block may be based on the numerical value of the name, **שלמה** *Shlomoh*.

5 40 30 300

- b. External witness: Talmudic tradition (*Shabbat* 30b) gathers this book with Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs as being Solomonic.
2. The words of Agur and Lemuel were likely added in the days of Hezekiah. These figures are unknown in history. King Lemuel may have been an eastern king or sheik; at least there is no Israelite king of that name, unless it is a cryptic name for Solomon.

C. Canonicity

1. Jewish tradition

The Book of Proverbs was disputed somewhat at the end of the first century by Jewish scholars, mainly because its composition was identified with the author of Ecclesiastes and Song (*Shabbat* 30b). This fact helped confirm its authenticity and canonicity. Talmudic tradition arranged Proverbs variously after Psalms and Job or else between Psalms and Job.

2. NT use: Proverbs is quoted nine times with many allusions

- a. Peter, the practical-minded fisherman, makes the most use of the book in his writings (I Peter 4:8,18; 5:5; II Peter 2:22).
- b. James 4:5,6 introduces Prov. 3:34 as being inspired, q.v.: λεγει *legei* = "it/he says" i.e., "the Scripture of vs. 5." See NIV translation.

James 4:5-6 ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealousy"? ⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

Proverbs 3:34 ³⁴ Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble.

- c. The NT refers to the OT Writings, "The Kethubim," as being sacred scripture. This section of the OT contains the Proverbs.
- d. Jesus referred to Solomon's reputation for wisdom (as preserved in the Scriptures)

D. Parallels in “The Instructions of Amen-em-opet” and Proverbs 22:17-24:22

Amenemope (*ANET*, pp. 421-24; *ANE* 1:237-45) was an Egyptian land superintendent, as well as a sage and scribe. Scholars date his collection of 30 chapters of sayings from 1300-600-300 bc. The early date is favored by the discovery of an ostrakon containing an extract of one of his proverbs. This does not prove that the ostrakon extract was not from an earlier common source.

One third of Solomon’s Proverbs in this section show a relation to Amenemope’s work. Many critical scholars believe that the Israelites copied the proverbs from the Egyptians.

See K.A. Kitchen in “Egypt,” *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 348, and Archer, *Survey of OT Introduction*, p. 457f. for a summary of conservative scholarship arguing that the Egyptian doc’t borrowed from Solomon, not vice-versa. The following arguments are from Archer:

1. “There are proportionately far more Semitisms in Amenemope’s Egyptian text than in any other Egyptian work on morality...”
2. Some of the parallel proverbs in the Egyptian work have garbled words or thoughts, indicating a misunderstanding of the exact meaning of the corresponding [obscure] words in the Hebrew proverb. “...while satisfactory reconstructions of the Egyptian can be made on the basis of the Hebrew original, it is never possible to reconstruct the Hebrew text on the basis of the Egyptian original.”
3. Contrary to the critical view, the English versions properly translate 22:20 as “excellent things,” not “30 sayings” contrary to the RSV which would make it parallel to Amen’s 30 chapters. The Proverbs section doesn’t even have 30 vss. in it

IV. Outline

Various outlines of Proverbs have been constructed on the basis the book’s internal structure of authorship (a collection), or by literary genre, by content, or by theological motifs (synthetic rearrangement).

A. Short form analysis

1. Prologue — 1:1-7
2. Solomon’s Proverbs extolling **Wisdom** — 1-9
3. Solomon’s Proverbs extolling **Practical Morality** — 10-24 (Paterson notes that there are 375 vss. in this section, a numerical equivalence to be found in the name “Solomon”)
4. Solomon’s Proverbs compiled by Hezekiah’s scribes — 25-29

5. Appendices: Proverbs of Agur and Lemuel — 30-31
6. Epilogue: the virtuous wife as the epitome of wisdom, 31:10-31. The whole chpt may be a unit since Lemuel's mother introduces the chpt.

B. For a detailed outline: see Bullock, pp. 165ff.

V. Content

A. Three major themes (A.K. Helmbold in *ZPBE*)

1. Appeal to forsake folly and pursue wisdom — 1-9
2. Specific examples (gnomic sayings) of wise or foolish conduct — sections II-V = chapters 10-29
3. Vivid description of the virtuous wife (cf. 18:22) —chapter 31

—a suggested counterbalance to the wise son of 1-9, this appendix seems to correspond well to the introduction of the fear of the Lord found in Proverbs 1:1-7

B. Different categories of fools (Paterson, *ZPBE*, 919)

The fool, seen as the anti-agent of wisdom, serves as a foil to draw out the need and advantages of wisdom. Four different Hebrew words are employed more than 100 times in Proverbs to describe the resistance in the world to God and His wisdom.

1. Fool; simpleton

(**פֶּתִי** *pethi*: openness) → implies emptiheadness and ignorance, yet accessibility and teachableness. The proverbs are largely intended for this audience, to lead them to maturity in attitude and action. 1:4 suggests that the simpleton is often found among the youth.

A parallel term (7:7,8) is “without heart,” (**לֵב** *chaser leb*), “heart” meaning “mind” here. Paterson identifies this character with Shakespeare's Mr. Lackbrain in *Henry IV*, part 1.

In summary, there is hope for the teachable simpleton (21:11) as opposed to the hardened fool (1:7b).

21:11 When the scoffer is punished, the simple is made wise;
1:7b “*But* fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

2. Fool; hardened fool

(כֶּסִּיל *kesil* / אָוִיל *ewil*): to be thick or fat -> phps. implying thick-headedness or undisciplined indulgence (cf. Ps. 73:7). The hardened fool’s swinishness is revealed in his lack of discretion in his impudently trumpeting his own foolishness (10:23; 20:3). There is no sense of morality or social propriety in the fool who revels in his folly (he calls it “originality and cleverness of an independent mind unshackled by conventions of society”).

10:23 “To do evil *is* like sport to a fool,”

20:3 “*It is* honorable for a man to stop striving, Since any fool can start a quarrel.”

3. Fool; arrogant scoffer

(לֵץ *letz*: scoffer/scorner). Pride singularly sets this fool apart from the others (21:24); pride will lead him to do insane things (29:8). Mental attitude here was the problem, not the mental capacity, making the wise man’s task of reaching him most formidable.

21:4 A proud *and* haughty *man* -- “*Scoffer*” *is* his name; He acts with arrogant pride.

29:8 Scoffers set a city aflame, But wise *men* turn away wrath.

4. Fool; brutish fool (used 4X)

(נָבָל *nabal*: fool). The fullest commentary on nabal is in I Sam. 25:25. Paterson describes him as the “churl dead of all decency and order. Devoid of all intellectual interest and religious faith, he says, ‘There is no God’ (Ps. 14:1)” pp. 67,68. His brute nature is depicted in 26:3.

26:3 A whip for the horse, A bridle for the donkey, And a rod for the fool's back.

C. Wisdom: “President of the World” (Paterson, 70ff.)

See also Waltke’s discussion of the feminine nature of wisdom in *Prebuterion*, Spring 1988, 14:1, and Roland Murphy in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Spring 1994, 24:4.

Chpt. 8 is the essence of the nature and purpose of wisdom. Here wisdom is frequently viewed as a “hypostatization,” an attribute or activity of deity that has been given personal identity. Here, it is the personification of the attribute of God’s wisdom/omniscience, which is set off against the foil of Dame Folly in this section (phps. being one reason why this attribute is made a feminine attribute).

For the close correspondence of the activity of wisdom to God’s manifold activity, see Helmbold, *ZPBE*, p. 917.

Some have seen the Son of God in this chpt., correlating wisdom with the “Word” of John 1. Bullock offers some helpful reservations:

“Yet wisdom does not have the ontological distinction that it has in the Wisdom of Solomon or that the Logos (Word) has in John’s gospel. The purpose of personification in this instance is to help us understand God by abstracting one of His attributes and endowing it with personality and consciousness. The author wants to teach that wisdom is a divine attribute that is eternally related to Him, understood only in relation to Him, and is an extension of His dynamic Being to mankind. *** It is the closest thing wisdom has to the prophetic formula “Thus says the Lord” (p. 148).

Chpt 9. This chapter sets true wisdom, religious wisdom, in contrast to the folly of pagan religions. Competing religious shrines are found on the high points of the city (9:3,14). See Dillard and Longman, p. 243

VI. Theology

A. God

1. The personal name Yaweh is a very commonly used for God (e.g., “fear of the Lord”), although “covenant” is mentioned but once, 2:16f.

2. Sovereignty: 16:4,9,33; 19:21; 22:2

16:4 The LORD has made all for Himself, Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom. 9 A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps. 33 The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision *is* from the LORD.

19:21 There are many plans in a man's heart, Nevertheless the LORD's counsel -- that will stand.

22:2 The rich and the poor have this in common, The LORD *is* the maker of them all.

3. Creator: 14:31; 17:5; 20:12

14:31 He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, But he who honors Him has mercy on the needy.

20:12 The hearing ear and the seeing eye, The LORD has made them both.

4. Omniscient: 15:3,11;21:2

15:3 The eyes of the LORD *are* in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good. 11 Hell and Destruction *are* before the LORD; So how much more the hearts of the sons of men.

21:2 Every way of a man *is* right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts.

5. Ruler and Judge: 10:27,29; 12:2; 15:11; 16:2; 17:3

12:2 A good *man* obtains favor from the LORD, But a man of wicked intentions He will condemn

16:2 All the ways of a man *are* pure in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the spirits.
17:3 The refining pot *is* for silver and the furnace for gold, But the LORD tests the hearts.

6. Source of divine wisdom: 21:30; 1:7

21:30 *There is* no wisdom or understanding Or counsel against the LORD.

7. Holy: 9:10

9:10 “And the knowledge of the Holy One *is* understanding.”

a. Things Preferred by God: 15:8,9; 21:3

b. Things Hated by God: 6:16-19; 12:2

B. Man

1. Mainly viewed in a horizontal relationship, yet

2. Crown of God’s creation: 8:30,31; 20:27

8:30 Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; And I was daily *His* delight, Rejoicing always before Him, 31 Rejoicing in His inhabited world, And my delight was with the sons of men.

3. No auto-salvation; man must repent of sin: 28:26, 13

28:26 He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, But whoever walks wisely will be delivered.

28:13 He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy.