

Session 7: The Wisdom Tradition

C. The wisdom of Proverbs

Having looked at the Succession Narrative, that remarkable source document embedded in the Deuteronomic history, we turn to the book of Proverbs, a recognised part of Israel's wisdom literature. Here we will find echoes of the narrator's outlook, which we studied in the previous section.

Activity 7.2

Read Proverbs 16

Note down all that strikes you about the content and tone of these sayings.

A number of features emerge from these sayings, each of which is characteristic of Israel's wisdom tradition:

1. They are OBSERVATIONS RATHER THAN PRECEPTS. Other parts of the wisdom literature, such as Proverbs chapters 1 to 9, contain precepts: warnings and advice, as well as praise of wisdom for its own sake. But these short sayings are simply observations drawn from experience intended to be applied to experience. They do not say: 'you should be honest' but rather 'honesty is the best policy'.
2. Sayings invoking the Lord and sayings without him are interspersed. In other words, life is seen as a whole: there is no division between 'sacred' and 'secular'. In verse 20 for example success is seen as the result of BOTH attentiveness to the task AND the blessing of the Lord, and there is no attempt to separate them.
3. There is a DIVINE PROVIDENCE that determines the outcome of life and cannot be fully understood. In verse 3, if you commit your work to the Lord your plans will be established. In verse 9, the human mind plans the way but the Lord directs the steps.
4. God's providential ordering of human life tends towards JUSTICE. In verse 5, he punishes the arrogant; in verse 11, he like honest scales and balances; in fact, where you find these, you find the Lord's work. Here is that underlying picture of 'shalom' towards which the Lord's providence is always invisibly working like a current in human affairs, such that, when we commit our lives and work to him, we allow him to bring shalom into being. Throughout the proverbs there is a picture of social harmony underwritten by the Lord. Not only is it unjust to oppress the poor, but the Lord is actively on the side of the poor and makes himself their 'redeemer'.

Proverbs 23:10-11

Do not remove an ancient landmark
or encroach on the fields of orphans,
for their redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you.

5. There is a strong interest in CHARACTER. In verse 18, pride goes before destruction; in verse 19 it is better to be of a lowly spirit than to divide the spoil with the proud. In fact the proverbs are particularly critical of pride: to be proud means that you are not very good at listening so you will not learn wisdom; it also means that you forget your place in society, and the proverbs are very keen on a harmonious society in which everyone knows their proper place.

The emphasis on character can also be illustrated from several other angles: the value of kind words (verse 24); the danger of perversity (28); the danger of keeping quiet when you see evil taking place (30); the virtue of controlling your temper (32). As a particular factor in good character, the proverbs particularly commend good speaking: as in verse 23, the mind of the wise makes their speech 'judicious' and 'persuasive'. Chapter 15 contains a series of maxims about speech:

Proverbs 15:1-2,4

A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.

A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

and again:

Proverbs 18:2

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing personal opinion.

In fact, the ethics of Proverbs is an ethic of character. It does not set out to teach universal moral rules. Rather, the person with good character will do good things and bring blessing on the community as a whole; the person with bad character will do wrong and bring trouble on others. Moreover, good character is based on the fear of the Lord. In verse 6, loyalty and faithfulness atone for iniquity (in other words, good character does the job of sacrifices) and it is the fear of the Lord that enables one to avoid evil. Several other verses illustrate the fundamental place given to this 'fear' or reverence towards the Lord:

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction

Proverbs 14:27

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life,
so that one may avoid the snares of death.

Proverbs 15:33

The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom,
and humility goes before honour.

Finally, according to 16:2, one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit: in other words, the Lord knows our real motives, and will show us if we allow him. Verse 1, in which we know our own plans but 'the answer of the tongue is from the Lord', probably means that when you tell others about your plans their responses will reveal your real motives. By implication, the proverbs seem to be telling us: purity of motive is what we should be most concerned about.

6. Another characteristic of Proverbs is its interest in the COURT. The succession narrative shows us a local wise woman (in 1 Samuel chapter 14) but equally wise men whose role was to advise the king. One part of wisdom teaching is how to carry on at court: in verse 13, righteous lips are the delight of kings; in verse 14 a king's wrath is to be appeased.
7. These maxims of wisdom do not apply exclusively to Israel: they are UNIVERSAL. Justice is justice whoever a people may be; wisdom is wisdom wherever you go; if a precept is right, it is right for everyone. In verse 7 the Lord protects *any* people that pleases him. He is not simply the protector of Israel as under the covenant, but the protector of all and is at work wherever people obey him. As 14:34, declares:

Proverbs 14:34

Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a reproach to any people.

8. Another feature of Proverbs is the PRAISE OF WISDOM itself. Many times in the book the young are urged to listen to their teachers in order to get wisdom. In verse 16, wisdom is better than gold or silver; in verse 22 wisdom is its own reward, a fountain of life for those who pursue it. The theme of chapters 1 to 9, in which precepts abound, is the search for wisdom and the blessings that ensue her discovery.
9. And finally, it is noteworthy that the wisdom of Proverbs is overwhelmingly optimistic. Verse 3 confidently advises us to commit our plans to the Lord; verse 10 expects good decisions from the mouths of kings; verse 4 sees everything in creation playing its proper part and even the evil allowed for.

In fact, we know that the state of the world is very far from well. One of the greatest questions of our day is that of apparently undeserved suffering. This is a question that is explicitly addressed in other parts of the wisdom literature and the Old Testament as a whole, and we will be examining their answers in the next session.

But the positive point conveyed by the wisdom of the proverbs is that God's providential ordering of the world tends towards justice. To live under his laws and with proper reverence for him leads to 'shalom': prosperity and social harmony; and, moreover, a community where moral worth is recognised for what it is and arrogance, laziness, deceit and selfishness frowned upon. This may be very far from what we experience as everyday reality, but it is what God is continually working towards.