

The Wisdom Books

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (Psalms, Song of Songs)

It is difficult to place these books in a chronological study of the Old Testament because much of their content is timeless. They deal with subjects such as the true nature of wisdom, the good life and the meaning of suffering, which are valid and important at all stages of history. Moreover the books as we have them today are all collections of material coming from different times.

In Proverbs, a clear indication of this is Proverbs 25:1, the heading to a supplementary collection of wisdom sayings. Job is basically a long poem or group of poems extending from chapters 3 to 26 with several supplements: 27, 28, 29 - 31, 32 - 37, 38:1 - 42:6. Surrounding this collection of poems is a narrative intended to give them a context, which may have been written by the person or group who collected the poems and put them into their present form. Ecclesiastes is a group of poems around a single theme, the apparent futility of life.

Proverbs 25:1 also demonstrates the link between wisdom and the royal court. Many of the proverbs are about how to get on with the king. In the early years of Israel Hushai and Ahithophel are typical wise men. They are based at court and are advisers to the king (2 Samuel 15:12,31-34; 16:20 - 17:14). By the later period the typical wise man had become a scribe of the Torah. Between these times people from a wide spectrum of society were involved in the wisdom tradition.

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is conventionally ascribed to Solomon in the same way that the Law is ascribed to Moses. Solomon is remembered as a wise man and composer of proverbs (1 Kings 4:29-34) and as the ruler of a great empire he was part of a tradition that was international.

The proverb is a short saying consisting of a generalisation about some aspect of life. It requires wisdom to utter the proverb - to state the

generalisation in a memorable way - and it also requires wisdom to apply the proverb correctly. As the book repeats several times, a "fool" can make no use of a proverb. This is because he cannot recognise the situation it applies. Israel's wisdom was never the formal speculative philosophy of the ancient Greeks. It is rooted in concrete experience and can only be used well by the person who has learned the complex ins and outs of life from their own direct experience.

Proverbs 1 - 9 shows a later development, from the simple two-part sentence to the wisdom song. Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73 and 139 are also wisdom songs. The force of this type of wisdom is very different, as shown by the addresses at the beginning of many of the songs. Its purpose is exhortation as well as instruction. It frequently opens with a summons to listen or a rhetorical question. One example of this development can be seen by comparing 13:24 with 3:11-12. An item of ordinary experience has been made into a teaching about God.

Day 88. Proverbs 10 - 12

The Reward of Righteousness

The proverbs are conventionally addressed from a father to a son. The collection begins with a simple contrast between the son who pursues wisdom and the one who does not, which stands as an introduction to the whole.

The proverbs divide the human race into two categories: the "righteous" and the "wicked". It might be better to see these as two kinds of behaviour, but habitual behaviour of one type or another tends to define character.

The original literal meaning of "righteousness" was "straightness". It means something firm, something which ought to be, which conforms to accepted standards. To be righteous meant to be aware of social obligations and conform to them. In Genesis 38:26 Judah concedes that Tamar is more righteous than he because he had broken his promise to give her in marriage to his youngest son. In 1 Samuel 24:17 Saul realises that David is more righteous than he. David has treated Saul as he should, as the anointed king, while Saul has distrusted David for no reason. On the other hand the root meaning of "wickedness" is slackness, easily extended to slackness in recognising and fulfilling social obligations.

The proverbs strongly express a belief that righteousness leads to blessing and wickedness to curse. Righteousness is its own reward: it brings long and prosperous life (10:2,6,7,16,24,25,28; 11:3,4,5,6,8,19; 12:21,28), it is recognised and rewarded by the Lord (10:3), it brings blessing to others (10:11; 11:10,11) and it secures a lasting memory (10:7). Wickedness brings all the opposites (11:21,31). Herein lies the biggest problem of the book of Proverbs, one with which men and women of faith have wrestled from earliest times. In the experience of many people it is anything but self-evident that righteousness brings its own reward. Moreover, if it was the case why would it need to be taught so emphatically? In fact the suffering of righteous people and the success of wicked people is one of the most difficult trials of faith and one which is extensively dealt with elsewhere in the wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes, Job). The simple certainties of Proverbs provide the conventional background against which this question is courageously addressed. It requires faith and struggle to trust the Lord to reward a righteous and obedient life, despite appearances.

Another major theme of Proverbs is the importance of speech. To hold one's tongue when necessary and to speak wise words which instruct is a virtue highly rated. On the other hand, to be always talking is the mark of the "fool", the one who thinks he understands but does not (10:11,19,20,21; 11:12,13,26; 12:17,18,19,22).

The virtues of kindness and generosity are praised (11:16,17,24,25,26; 12:10,25).

Day 89. Proverbs 13 - 15

Good Speaking

Right speaking is an important theme throughout the book. What a person *says* arises from what he *is* (10:32); a truthful person speaks truthfully, a dishonest person tells lies (12:17; 14:5). We are known by what we say, so it important to set a guard over our lips, to avoid rash words and learn to speak well.

In order to speak well we also need to listen. The mark of a wise person is to be able to heed a rebuke (13:1,10,13,14; 15:5,31,32; 19:20). It is the mark of a fool to be airing one's own opinions without listening to others (18:2,13). It is also important *not* to listen to the wrong people (14:7).

The goal is to be able to give an apt reply (15:23; see 25:11). A word aptly fitted to the situation can teach much more than the most profound generalisation which is not applied. In particular the right words are needed in situations of conflict. Those without the gift of choosing the right words can make matters worse (15:18), while those able to curb their spirit and emotions can turn situations for good. To be able to defuse anger is an especially valuable gift (15:1).

Behind the words we speak is a deeper level, where the real relating takes place. Words that seem harmless on the surface can hide malice and these, where the real meaning is hidden from others but clear to the intended victim, are those which break the spirit (15:4; see 10:18; 12:6).

In the end words can only achieve so much (14:23). It is much better to remain silent or to weigh one's answer carefully (10:14; 11:12,13). Careful thought is a surer guide (14:8,12,15,16,29; 15:28). As in the case of speech, the attitudes to riches and poverty in the proverbs cover a broad spectrum. Hard work is commended because it leads to prosperity (10:4,5,26; 12:11,24; 13:4; 14:23). In economics, as in life in general, goodness and dishonesty bring their appropriate reward (13:11,22). The proverbs recognise the laws of economics by which wealth generates itself (14:4). But they also abhor injustice and commend those who support the poor (13:23; 14:21,31). On the one hand poverty has many difficulties (14:20), but on the other contentment can make the lot of the poor man bearable (14:30; 15:15,16,17). All alike are subject to the ups and downs of life (13:12; 14:13; 15:13).

Day 90. Proverbs 16 - 18

God's Providence and Human Wisdom

Many of the proverbs seem to be merely comments on everyday human experience, but others attempt to give an insight on the relation of human conduct to God's ways and God's providence. On the one hand, human common sense is a valuable guide to life; we should not necessarily expect divine guidance on matters which lie within our own competence to decide. On the other hand, what we think of as simply "common sense" may reflect our limited experience of the world, our human perspective unrelated to God and self-deception about our own motives. To trust to human wisdom alone may lead to evil (3:7). So the sages insist that the "fear of the Lord" is the beginning of wisdom (1:7; 8:13; 16:6), the key to steering clear of evil and receiving his blessings. Through the fear of the Lord our "common sense" will be sanctified by a divine perspective. One of the chief purposes of Proverbs is the education of common sense by divine wisdom.

The sayings at the beginning of chapter 16 provide some insights on the relation between divine and human wisdom. First, the Lord does not override the human will. Our plans are our own (16:1,2,9; 19:3). On the other hand, we may not always be entirely clear and honest with ourselves about our motives (16:2,5,9,25). The Lord, who weighs the heart, knows our real motives (17:3). 16:1 seems to mean that people's responses to our ideas can sometimes lay bare our motives for putting them forward.

To live in the fear of the Lord will mean avoiding evil (16:6). It will also mean success, even to the extent of smoothing out bad relationships (16:3,7). This is because God's ways will always lead to "shalom," which can mean equally "prosperity" and "social harmony." Finally, although God does not interfere with human decisions or overrule them, his providence is ultimately more powerful (16:4,33; 18:10; 19:21; 21:30,31). How this can be is a mystery, as is everything which has to do with the relation between divine providence and free human decision.

The same relationship between the human and the divine is also traced in the public sphere. There are wise ways of dealing with kings and those in authority (16:10,12,13,14,15; 18:16). But God's requirement of justice in the public realm is also to be reckoned with (11:1; 14:31; 16:11; 17:5,15).

In the previous study, we saw some of the fruits of the Spirit commended: kindness, generosity, self-control in speech. In these chapters, more of the fruit of the Spirit is on display: kind words (16:21,23,24), patience (14:29; 15:18; 16:32) and self-control (14:17). The importance of forgiveness (10:12; 17:9; 18:19; 19:11) and controlling the tongue (11:13; 17:14,19; 18:8) is also emphasised. Gospel qualities appear in this most down-to-earth of books, showing us how penitence and love for God is meant to sanctify common sense and thus to guide our everyday actions.

Day 91. Proverbs 19 - 21

The Ethics of Character

The ethic of proverbs is not one of either rules or consequences but an ethic of character. Moral goodness is not simply about applying rules of good conduct; it is achieved by the training that leads a child to become a good person (19:8,20; 20:7). The ultimate "character" to be reckoned with is God himself (19:23). Good conduct is rewarded because it accords with God's providential ordering of the world and wickedness punished because it runs against the grain of God's character. The righteous man is not only successful in the end, but by his righteous character and conduct promotes the welfare of the society in which he lives.

Character is built "from the outside in": by learning social obligations and performing them until the appropriate rules of conduct become ingrained as habitual qualities of character. The most important way for this to take place is by listening to parents and respecting them. The importance of the fifth commandment and its accompanying promise of long life is therefore emphasised (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-3). Children must listen to parents and learn from them (10:1; 13:1; 15:5,20; 19:27). From childhood a person is known by their actions (20:11). Where instruction and natural understanding fails, discipline is needed (19:18; 22:6). Corporal punishment is seen as entirely appropriate, so long as its aim is to train children to avoid folly (13:24; 20:30; 22:15). Disobedience and lack of respect for parents is a grave sin (19:26; 20:20). Discipline is not only important for children, but throughout life (10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 21:17). In the public sphere, it is important for penalties to be appropriate so that all learn rules of conduct (19:25,29; 20:26).

Prosperity is also a result of character, in particular the willingness to work hard. Laziness is not only unwise, it is seen as a defect of character and a disgrace (10:4,5; 12:24; 18:9; 19:15,24; 20:4,13; 21:5,25; 22:13; 24:30-34). On the other hand, wealth is not to be sought as a goal in itself, but only by hard work and reliance on the Lord. It the blessing of the Lord which makes rich (10:22). Wealth got too quickly without working for it or by deceit will be a snare (20:21; 21:6).

Day 92. Proverbs 22 - 24

Thirty Wise Sayings

Which is best, riches or reputation? 22:1 unhesitatingly plumps for reputation, because these are the values of community not of individualism. To gain wealth at the expense of others cuts a person off from community and leads in the end to unhappiness.

22:17 begins a new collection in which the proverbs have a different character. They are longer and take the form of direct advice. They are known as the Thirty Wise Sayings and are similar in some ways to an Egyptian collection of 30 sayings known as the *Teaching of Amenemope* which may be as old as 1300 B.C. The *Teaching* not only has 30 sayings but several which are similar to some of those in this collection. The Hebrew wisdom teachers have borrowed from the Egyptians, but their borrowings are not slavish; they have put their own stamp on the sayings they have used. The *Good News Bible* has clearly divided the sayings from 22:17 to 24:30 into 30 with an introduction, but there are some left over attached to this collection (24:23-end).

The sayings are all about how to conduct relationships. The division between private and public life was not known in Israel and would not have been recognised as valid. For a man, what he was in his family life he was in the community, which is why a good wife was such a blessing (31:23). Similarly, there is no division between inner character and outward reputation. A person is to be known for who they are and hypocrites will soon be exposed.

To move a boundary (22:28; 23:10-11) was a high-handed action. Boundary markers had the sanction of the community and one of their functions was to protect the poor against the rich and powerful. A poor man could look to his "go'el", translated "redeemer" or "defender" to stand up for him. The "go'el" was usually the person's nearest relation and had the responsibility of looking after his interests when the person could not do so for themselves. This would apply especially in the case of poor people, widows and orphans. In the book of Ruth, Boaz is the "defender" or "go'el" of Naomi and fulfils his obligation by marrying Ruth. In 23:11, the "defender" is the Lord himself. Responsibility for others is carried further in 24:11-12. No one should fail to give evidence and defend another, even a stranger,

for the sake of peace and quiet. The courage to get involved is also a test of character, which is why this saying is coupled with 24:10.

Gluttony and drunkenness also mark a person out. They are public rather than private vices (23:1-3,6-8,19-21,29-35). To have enough should lead to contentment (23:4-5).

Day 93. Song of Songs 1:1 - 5:1

A Celebration of Love I

Ephesians 5:31-32 tells us that the physical union of man and woman is an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church, and because of this Song of Songs has often been taken as an allegory of the Christian's relationship with Jesus. Although this tradition is well-established it should not obscure the fact that these poems are a celebration of one of God's greatest gifts, sexual love, and refer directly, though poetically, to sex (2:6-7,16-17; 4:6; 4:16 - 5:1; 6:2-3).

The setting is not the royal court but the countryside and the lovers are a shepherd and a village girl (1:7-8,16-17). But like all lovers, to one another they are a king and queen, and compare one another to the most magnificent of kings and lovers, Solomon himself and his queen. The title, in 1:1, means simply "Solomon's loveliest song," and although it is unlikely to have been written by Solomon, it is certainly lovely. The descriptions of nature and of the feelings of both the man and the woman are some of the most beautiful in all poetry.

The way the songs should be divided up, where one ends and another begins and exactly who is speaking at certain places is not entirely clear. Here, we will follow the division of the Good News Bible into six songs, but within each part there are distinct sections.

In the first song (1:1 - 2:7) the lovers are apart and dreaming of one another. She is afraid he will be put off by her defects (1:5-6), but he is dreaming of her perfections (1:9-11). In 2:1 she says she is only a 'Rose of Sharon', which is a common wild flower, but he replies in 2:2 that she is a flower among brambles; she replies that he is an apple tree among forest trees. One of the most important parts of a love relationship is that each person should be more beautiful in the eyes of the lover than in their own, and each partner should see themselves through the eyes of the lover. The girl is eager for the love of her bridegroom to be, but content to wait until the right moment for fulfilment (2:4-7).

In the second song (2:8 - 3:5) the woman is still dreaming but this time she thinks of her lover as near (2:8-9). It is springtime, the time for outdoor pursuits and lovemaking, and a beautiful passage evokes the coming of

Spring (2:10-13). Eagerly, she dreams of his embraces and offers her body as "undulating hills" on which her lover will play like a gazelle (2:17). Then follows a nightmare (3:1-4). The wedding is close and she is afraid of losing him, yet in the refrain she still waits the right time for consummation (3:5).

At last the wedding arrives (3:6 - 5:1). The bridegroom's party approaches; the dust cloud is seen in the distance and the bride imagines Solomon coming with his retinue (3:6-end). Now the lover speaks of his beloved as his bride (4:9-12) but rather than simply take her, he woos her, describing her perfection in his eyes and eagerly urging her to the bridal bed (4:1-11). Then he praises her virginity; she is like a locked garden, sweet with the smell of fruit and spices (4:12-15). In response she unlocks the garden and invites her husband to taste her fruit, while the wedding guests add their blessing to the union (4:16 - 5:1).

Day 94. Song of Songs 5:2 - 8:end

Celebration of Love II

The beautiful poems of Song of Songs affirm that sex is good, evoking the delight of the couple in one another's bodies. They demonstrate that it is possible to take delight in sex without needing pornography, innuendo or loose morals. This reverence and enjoyment spring from a monogamous union in which husband and wife wait for the appropriate time for the consummation.

In the fourth song (5:2 - 6:3) the bride has another dream expressing the fear of losing her lover. This time he comes to her in the early morning but she is too sleepy to respond. By the time she gets up to let him in, he has gone (5:2-6). Setting out to look for him she is insulted and maltreated by the watchmen and calls her friends to search for her lover (5:7-8). This gives her the opportunity to describe the man they are to look for (5:10-16). Her description balances the raptures of the lover in the first and third songs. He is one in ten thousand (5:10), altogether lovely (5:16)! The friends set out to search but the beloved wakes to find it all a dream. She is married and her lover is hers (6:1-3).

The newly-weds are overwhelmed by the new experience of sexual intimacy. They have been dreaming of it before the wedding day, but now it has come they find it even more wonderful than they expected. To the man, his bride is stunning (6:4-7; G.N.B's "breathtaking" in verse 4 is better than "majestic" or "imposing"). He is amazed at the practice of kings like Solomon, who wanted wives and concubines in abundance. The lovers are quite sufficient for one another; the women of the harem must be envious of the humble country girl who enjoys the complete devotion of her husband (6:8-9).

6:10-13 are the introduction to the dancing scene of 7:1-9. The bride is taking part in a "dance of Mahanaim," a formation dance whose steps are now unknown. The bridegroom watches fascinated and his excitement is kindled. But she is shy and needs to get away from the crowds before she can be wholly his. This time it is she who calls him away, in comparison to the second song (7:10-13, see 2:10-13). The mandrakes which grow in the country will serve as an aphrodisiac to kindle her desire. As they go, she remembers their courtship, before she could kiss him openly. Then she

must wait for the time of their consummation, not allow her love to be aroused before the time. Now the time has come and she has to overcome that hesitation (8:1-4).

In the final song, the lovers return, praising their experience of sexual intimacy. It is the woman, so reserved in song 5, who now describes the joy of sexual passion fulfilled (8:5-7). She remembers her youth when her brothers watched over her courtship (8:8). Had she been too reticent they would have increased her dowry with silver to attract a husband. Had she been "a door", ready to take the first man who offered, they would have "boarded her up" (8:9). But she has done quite well without them. She has found her love and is happy (8:10). 8:11-12 recalls Solomon's many wives and concubines. Solomon leased out his vineyard, but for the lovers, their fruit is for each other alone, and this is true happiness.
