



PROVERBS



Eric Lane





Eric Lane trained to be a minister in the Church of England where he remained for 7 years. He was then called to be the minister of an Independent Evangelical Church where he pastored for 30 further years. Now retired Eric's special interest is in the 'Wisdom' books of the Old Testament. He has also written Focus on the Bible commentaries on the book of Psalms:- *Psalms 1-89: The Lord Saves* (ISBN 978-1-184550-180-8) and *Psalms 90-150: The Lord Reigns* (ISBN 978-1-84550-202-7)





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Everyday Wisdom for Everyone



Eric Lane

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



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MT means Masoretic Text, the Hebrew Text most commonly in use.

LXX (70) is the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament.

f./ff. means following verse/verses. cf. means compare. mg. means marginal reading.

ISBN 1-84550-267-1
ISBN 978-1-84550267-6
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First edition published in 2000
(ISBN 978-1-85792-451-0)
Reprinted in 2007
in the
Focus on the Bible Commentary series
by
Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.,
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,
IV20 1TW, Great Britain.

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Danie Van Straaten
Printed by CPD Wales

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Introduction

Before coming to grips with the text of the book there are certain things it would be helpful to know.

A. WHAT PROVERBS IS ALL ABOUT

Most of the books of the Old Testament are either *narrative* (the story of Israel in 17 books) or *prophecy* (in 16 books). But there are also 6 books of *poetry*: **Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs** and **Lamentations**. Of these, three are books of *Wisdom*: **Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes**. So we first need some idea of what the Hebrews meant by *Wisdom*.

The concept of *Wisdom* is about how best to find our way through the maze of this world. 'Basically wisdom is the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results' (*New Bible Dictionary*). This does not make it selfish calculation or put it on a par with, 'How to make friends and influence people'. That is the wisdom Satan offered through the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6). The *Wisdom* of the Bible is the fruit of 'the tree of life' (3:18), since it is born of 'the fear of the LORD' (1:7). It is the *Wisdom* found in God himself and stamped on his creation (3:19, Ps. 104:24). The wisdom that made the world will help us understand why it is as it is and how we can make the best of our lives in it. It is therefore supremely expressed in the great plan of redemption by which we are delivered from the world's evil (Eph. 3:10f) and is personified in the redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).

However, to possess wisdom involves more than believing the Creator and trusting the Redeemer. It is a study in its own right, for which God has given us these three great books. But they are not all alike. JOB and ECCLESIASTES are

speculative wisdom, for they investigate **why** things are as they are and **how** we can make sense of them. PROVERBS is **practical** wisdom, showing us **what** we can do to get on in this puzzling world without losing our way and ending in disaster. Whether or not we ever come to solve the problems aired in the other two books, we can still come to terms with this world. We don't have to opt out and spend the whole of our lives **thinking**. We can get on with **living** in the real world, conquer our limitations and get along with other people. No book gives us more help in this than PROVERBS.

To put it another way, PROVERBS gives us a **window on the world**. It is truth in street clothes. It provides some keys as to how things work and how people behave. It gives 'understanding' and 'insight' (1:2). Even if it doesn't answer the deep questions raised in JOB and ECCLESIASTES it does give us stepping stones across the raging torrent that perplexed the writers of those books, by showing what to expect from people and how to react to them. The Christian needs this more even than the Israelite, who lived in a society sympathetic to godliness, whereas the Christian faces a hostile one. This was what moved JAMES to do for the Christian what PROVERBS did for the Israelite. PROVERBS, however, is far more extensive and therefore still needed, provided we view it through the eyes of Jesus and the new covenant.

B. WHO WROTE IT

PROVERBS is a composite work, bringing together the writings and sayings of a number of 'the wise'. It appears to have been compiled in the reign of Hezekiah (25:1), although some think the final complete edition did not appear until after the Exile and may be the work of Ezra. The body of it comes from the mouth of **Solomon**: chs. 10 – 22:16 and 25 – 29. Yet this is only a selection from his complete works, which number 3000 sayings, of which only about 800 appear in PROVERBS (see 1 Kings 4:29-34).

Solomon is prominent because he attained his wisdom as a gift of God in answer to prayer (1 Kings 3:5-15). It is hard not to feel that someone who is offered a *carte blanche* by God and chooses wisdom must already be wise! He probably was to

some extent through his father David's instruction (Prov. 4:1-4). But he asked God for a particular kind of wisdom – the ability to adjudicate and to govern his people. JAMES turns us **all** into Solomons, telling us we too can ask God for the wisdom we need (James 1:5).

Although he overshadowed all others Solomon was not the only wise man in Israel. In his own time there were Ethan and the sons of Mahol: Heman, Calcol and Darda (1 Kings 4:31). Previously under David there had been Ahithophel (2 Sam. 15:12), Jonadab the friend of Amnon, 'a very shrewd man' (2 Sam. 13:3), and 'the wise woman of Tekoa' (2 Sam. 14). Since David quoted 'a proverb of the ancients' (1 Sam. 24:13), wisdom was even older than this. It is possible that some of the above are represented in a section called 'Sayings of the wise' (22:17–24:34).

Nor was wisdom confined to the covenant people. Ch. 30 gives us 'Sayings of Agur' and 31:1-9 has 'Sayings of King Lemuel', both thought to be from northern Arabia. The anonymous Epilogue may have been the work of the final editor, as may the Prologue (1:1-7) or even the extended Prologue (chs. 1–9).

C. THE TIMES IN WHICH IT WAS WRITTEN

Knowing the background to the book's composition will help explain how this other material came to be included, especially that of foreign sages. Solomon's reign was one of expanding horizons for Israel as it traded with other nations (1 Kings 10:22, 28f). For this Solomon built a large navy (1 Kings 9:26-28). Trading was not only in goods but culture and ideas. Solomon had many foreign women in his harem, which involved visits to their countries and families. Here he learned something of 'the wisdom of the men of the east', especially Egypt (1 Kings 4:30). Because of his special gift he soon outshone them all, so that they began to come and visit him and learn from him (1 Kings 4:29-34, 10:1-13). Could it have been at this period that the story of Job was brought from Arabia to Israel and his book written and published? As F. D. Kidner has written, 'shared ground existed between the truly wise of any nation' (*Wisdom to Live By*, p.15).

D. THE WAY IT WAS WRITTEN

PROVERBS is not a book which a man sat down and wrote according to a fixed plan. Even those parts attributed to Solomon were not written down at one time. They are sayings uttered at different times and put together without much regard for an overall plan. The book is more like Luther's *Table Talk* or Pascal's *Pensees* than Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* or Marx's *Das Kapital*. There is no necessary connection between one saying and the next and the chapters are not given to one particular theme. Sayings on a particular topic recur throughout the book and some are repeated verbatim more than once.

Apart from the Prologue (1–9) and Epilogue (31:10–31) the body of the book consists of these separate sayings, to which the term 'proverb' (Hebrew MASHAL) is applied. Literally the word means a 'comparison', which might be a brief simile (11:22, 12:4) or a whole allegory (Ezek. 17:2ff, Judg. 9:8ff). Later it came to be used of any wise pronouncement, from a maxim to a sermon (ch. 5), or from a wisecrack (Ezek. 18:2) to a revelation (Ps. 49:4).

For the purposes of this book we may say that a proverb is:

(a) *terse*. It is complete in itself, not requiring development or qualification. Much is contained in little. This can at times produce a paradox, as when we are told in one verse not to 'answer a fool according to his folly' and in the next to do just that (26:4–5)! But we have a similar problem with secular proverbs, as in: 'Many hands make light work' but 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'; 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder' but 'Out of sight out of mind'. This is bound to happen where generalizations are drastically condensed. Usually the development of a statement will clarify the apparent confusion, as in the passage referred to above.

(b) *poetic*. Although it may not be obvious to us, the proverbs are in verse. Hebrew poetry is unlike English, lacking both rhyme and precise rhythmic forms. It consists mainly in parallelism, in which the second member of the sentence balances or contrasts with the first, as in 1:7, 10:1. This helps explain the book's 'black and white' view of life, in which people are either 'wise' or 'foolish', 'righteous' or 'wicked'.

(c) *popular*. The wisdom of PROVERBS is overtly practical. There is no abstract discussion of theories of the universe, as in some Wisdom literature. There is little of what can be called 'Theology'. The subjects are all everyday ones: honesty, money, children, the tongue, sloth, pride, anger. We see ourselves and each other as nowhere else in Scripture. We see the man who is bright and cheerful first thing in the morning and expects everyone else to be the same (27:14); the woman who is always popping next door for a cup of tea and a chat (25:17); the shopper in the market who tricks the stall-holder into a bargain (20:14), and even the practical joker (26:19)! It penetrates our own mind and exposes our self-images and delusions (13:7). A true 'window on the world'. To use a different illustration, it puts us under the microscope and magnifies those little blemishes which can spoil both our character and relationships, the flies in the ointment which turn its odour bad (Eccles. 10:1). It is James' 'mirror', showing how we appear to others (James 1:23-25).

E. WHY IT WAS WRITTEN

Clearly it was written for the purpose of education (1:8). Since in ancient Israel education was in the hands of parents, its method had to be very simple. Terse, poetic sayings on common themes are easily taught, grasped and remembered. The role of education in old covenant Israel was very different from that in a modern secular state. Its purpose was simply to ensure that each new generation knew what God's covenant with his people was and how to keep it. This information was essential if the people were to remain in their land and enjoy God's presence and blessing (see the 5th Commandment). So 'obedience' as well as 'knowledge' was part of their education.

To us 'education' means a whole range of specialized subjects, unlike education as PROVERBS saw it. But this doesn't make PROVERBS out of date, since the matters it covers are not those taught in our schools. PROVERBS is education for the whole of life, designed to produce mature people, free from the naivety which sucks them into the clutches of thieves and harlots on one hand or on the other makes them vulnerable



to exploitation by the rich and powerful. This does not make PROVERBS mere worldly wisdom, since its spiritual basis and aim is declared at the outset (1:7). But spiritual people are not to be soft touches; they should have the wisdom of the serpent without his deadly bite (Matt. 10:16).

This wisdom is depicted as a beautiful lady, to be wooed and won like a lover (4:5-9, 8-9:6). This personification is often seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3) and who is 'greater than Solomon' (Matt. 12:42). He who embraces this wisdom shares the beauty of Jesus, who did not despise the kind of details to which PROVERBS draws attention, but in fact taught us to begin by learning trustworthiness in small things (Luke 16:10) and that we will be judged by our idle words (Matt. 12:36). 'If the Psalms bring a glow upon the heart, the Proverbs make the face shine' (Bridges).

F. HOW IT IS TO BE INTERPRETED

Now that we know something about the book we are in a position to decide how to interpret it. The following are the main principles:

1. *Each verse is an entity in itself.* With other books of the Bible the meaning of a verse is determined largely by the context. Not so here. Each saying is self-contained and bears no necessary connection with what precedes or follows. Whereas 'other parts of Scripture are like a rich mine where the precious ore runs along in one continuous vein, this is like a heap of pearls, which though unstrung are not therefore less valuable' (Ezekiel Hopkins). This of course applies to the body of the book rather than to the more continuous passages which begin and end it.

2. *Most of it is in the spirit of the old covenant (the Law).* While there are sayings that still apply literally, most are addressed to the people to whom the promises of the old covenant were given. These said that those who obeyed the Law were assured of plenty of the good things of life, whereas those who disobeyed would be deprived of them (Deut. 11:26-28). This teaching colours PROVERBS, for example when it promises peace and prosperity to the righteous (8:21, 35) and trouble to the wicked (8:36).

Under the new covenant life is not so simple. Christians are like grown-up children, weaned from the carrot-and-stick approach. We are promised suffering and deprivation **as part of God's blessing** (Phil. 1:29) and his way of fellowship with us (Phil. 3:10). Yet many of the sayings are universal in their application. Even those which are 'dispensational' in the above sense have a principle on which we may build some profitable New Testament teaching.

3. *Allegorizing, typologizing and spiritualizing are inappropriate.* These do not accord with the purpose of the book. We must face the fact that there is little 'gospel' in PROVERBS and to read it in will make us miss God's message to us. It is a book to be taken at its face value. This is not to say that the points made are incapable of application to Christ, the gospel and the Christian life. But these must be derived from an understanding of the plain meaning.

G. WHAT ITS VALUE IS FOR CHRISTIANS

This unique book is, as it claims, worth its weight in gold (2:4, 4:9, 8:10f, 17-19), for it fills a gap in our knowledge. The Bible is mainly about how we come from sin to salvation and are born into the family and kingdom of God. But how do we go on and grow? How do we live in this corrupt world? There is a tendency for believers to be naive, unsophisticated, gullible and credulous in the things of the world (Luke 16:8). Jesus told us to be 'wise as serpents' without copying their deceit and malignity, and to learn from the people of the world. In fact 'prudence' in 1:4 is the word used of the serpent in Gen. 3:1 (KJV 'subtle', NIV 'crafty'). This quality is capable of either good or bad use. PROVERBS encourages the cultivation of this quality and shows how to direct it to holy ends, which it does in a number of ways, for example:

1. *It teaches us shrewdness in the common things of life, showing us how to discern the motives and methods of the people we deal with.* Even in God's Israel there were gangs on the lookout for recruits, prostitutes on the lookout for punters, and swindlers on the lookout for the gullible.

2. *It teaches us tact in handling our relationships, such as with our friends (25:17, 27:14, 17), with the bad-tempered (26:17), with*

the *foolish* (23:9) and the *powerful* (23:1-3, 25:15). The very first instance of Solomon's wisdom the Bible gives us is one in which he discerned character, and on the basis of that exposed the truth (1 Kings 3:16-28).

3. *It teaches us to be aware of the dangers which surround us* and the kind of people it is best to avoid altogether, lest we come off worse. Don't try to take a mad dog by the ears (26:17).

Because it is rooted in the old covenant much of this can only work in a godly society (e.g. 10:2f, 6f, 9-11). This is why it is good to study it along with JAMES, which is a book of wisdom for Christians in an ungodly society. These books are not so much about how to be saved as about how to equip yourself for everyday life in the real world and become a street-wise Christian.

H. HOW IT IS STRUCTURED

Because of its composite authorship and the various editions it passed through, PROVERBS has a literary structure like this:

Chs. 1-9:	The Prologue.
Ch. 10-22:16:	The main collection of Solomon's sayings.
Ch. 22:17-24:34:	The sayings of other sages of Israel.
Chs. 25-29:	A further collection of Solomon's sayings.
Ch. 30:	The sayings of Agur.
Ch. 31:1-9:	The sayings of Lemuel.
Ch. 31:10-31:	The Epilogue.

We do not need to take much notice of this in studying the book, but can give our attention rather to the themes which emerge as we proceed. In spite of the lack of a logical structure it is possible to highlight themes that dominate particular chapters and concentrate our thoughts on these. This will involve some rearrangement of the order of verses but this should make more sense to the ordinary reader than a painstaking verse-by-verse approach more appropriate to the scholar. Since the same themes crop up repeatedly throughout the book, a certain amount of cross-referencing is necessary. This will avoid tedious repetition and reduce the size of the book to manageable proportions.



The Prologue: Wisdom and its Benefits Proverbs 1–9

As mentioned in the Introduction, these opening chapters are not strictly speaking proverbs. They introduce the Proverbs proper by explaining what Wisdom is, why it is so desirable and how to acquire it. They are therefore written in continuous style and do not require the reclassification described in the Introduction. We shall simply follow the paragraphs as they stand.