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BACKGROUND AND SETTING OF PROVERBS

God inspired the writing of Proverbs partly as an antidote to the spiritual apostasy of His people Israel. His purpose is clear when one considers that the Bible was written primarily to show sinful man how he can be transformed and restored to fellowship with God. That doctrine of salvation pervades all of Scripture and is especially prominent in certain books (e.g., Romans). The Bible was also written to show the transformed sinner how to live a life pleasing to God, now that he is saved. Such practical instruction is found throughout Scripture, but it is the *main* theme of particular Bible books. Proverbs is one of them.

Like all Scripture, the book of Proverbs arose out of an immediate, local setting, involving people and their relationships to each other and to God. An understanding of the setting and characteristics of the twentieth book of the Bible greatly enhances one's study of its text. That in turn makes it easier to apply Proverbs to Christian living today.

TITLE

The common title of the book is "Proverbs," from the opening phrase "The proverbs of Solomon" in 1:1. The Hebrew word for

“proverb,” *mashal*, comes from a root meaning “to be like,” or “to represent.” This is very appropriate, since most proverbs use comparison to teach their truths. (An example: “Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit,” 25:28.) Proverbs are terse maxims about conduct and character, primarily in the spiritual, moral, and social realms. When brought together in an anthology such as the book of Proverbs, they are like what someone has described as small pictures crowded together on the walls of a large gallery. Read the following verses where the word “proverb(s)” appears in books other than Proverbs:

- Numbers 21:27—first appearance of the word in the Bible
- 1 Samuel 10:12—first citation of a proverb
- 2 Peter 2:22—a New Testament citation of a biblical proverb

AUTHORSHIP

Most of the proverbs originated with Solomon, son of David. (Read 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1, which are the opening verses of the three largest sections of the book.) Chapters 30 and 31 are assigned to Agur and Lemuel, respectively, whose identities are unknown.¹ The section 22:17–24:34 is referred to as “the words of the wise” (22:17; cf. 24:32). Read 1 Kings 4:31 for a reference to such a class of men. If the wise men of Proverbs 22:17 lived before Solomon’s time, Solomon may have been the one to assemble their writings and add them to his own. The proverbs of chapters 25–29 were written by Solomon and edited about two hundred years later by a committee appointed by King Hezekiah (c. 700 BC). Some think that this group called “men of Hezekiah” (25:1) may have included Isaiah and Micah, who were both contemporaries of Hezekiah.

Solomon was a unique character in many ways. From 1 Kings 3:12 and 4:29 we learn that his wisdom was a direct gift from God, in answer to Solomon's petition (1 Kings 3:5–9). Solomon was the author of 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). Read 1 Kings 3:16–28; 4:29–34; and 10:1–9, noting other things said about him, such as his knowledge of natural science and his wealth.

Solomon is the author of three books of the Bible. One commentator has suggested the possibility that the books were written at different stages of his career:²

- SONG OF SOLOMON—written when he was young and in love
- PROVERBS—written when he was middle aged, when his intellectual powers were at their peak
- ECCLESIASTES—written in his old age, when he was disappointed and disillusioned with the carnality of much of his life

DATE

As noted above, most of Proverbs was written by Solomon. This would date his work around 950–900 BC.³ (See chart 1.) Hezekiah's collection was formed around 700 BC. It is reasonable to conclude that the various groups of proverbs were brought together as one book around that date, namely 700 BC.⁴

Refer to chart 1 again and note how close Proverbs and Psalms are as to time of writing. David's psalms give us a vivid view of the worship by God's people before the kingdom's decline, and Solomon's proverbs reflect the zealous concern of believers for a righteous walk. The prophets came later, during the years of Israel's apostasy and idolatry, to call the people to a saving knowledge of God.

PURPOSES

The proverbs are God's detailed instructions and exhortations to His people concerning their thought-and-deed life. Much of the book is addressed especially to young people (e.g., 1:4, 8). The proverbs are mainly about personal ethics—not as the sinner's way to God, but as the believer's walk with God on this earth. Although the book is not intended to elaborate on the way of salvation, such key phrases as “the fear of the LORD” (1:7) tell basically how a sinner is brought into fellowship with God. The counsel of Proverbs is profitable for all people, saved and unsaved, but the unsaved cannot claim salvation by doing its good deeds. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

The passage in Proverbs 1:2–4 is the book's own statement of its purpose to impart wisdom:

To know wisdom and instruction,
To discern the sayings of understanding,
To receive instruction in wise behavior,
Righteousness, justice and equity;
To give prudence to the naive,
To the youth knowledge and discretion.

This wisdom is not mere head knowledge, but divinely enlightened understanding of what is good and what is evil (1 Kings 3:9) and experiential knowledge of the Lord personally. The wide spectrum of Solomon's treatment of this aspect of a believer's life is suggested by the fact that in the book he uses eight different Hebrew words translated “wisdom” and three different words translated “fool.”

PROVERBS

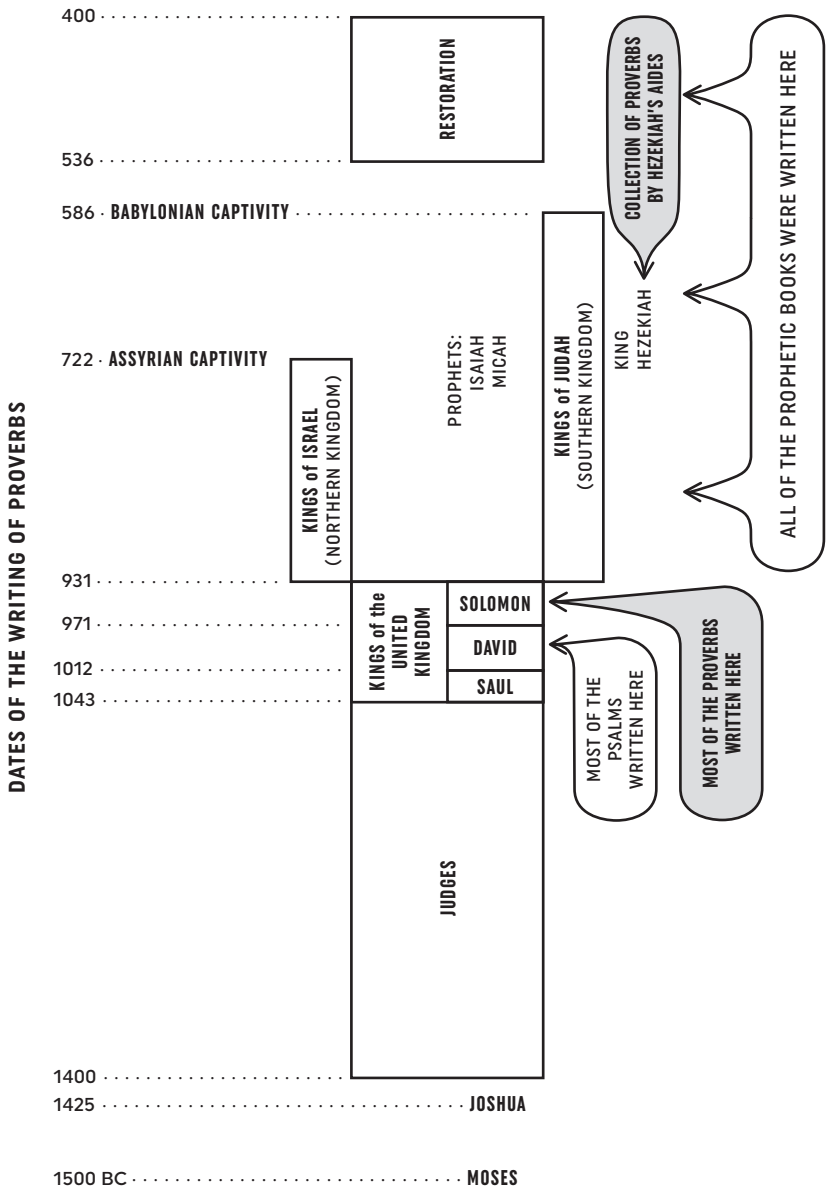


CHART 1

The fact that the word *wisdom* (and related words) is used in the book as a contrast to evil indicates that a moral and spiritual quality is intended, not an intellectual one. R. Laird Harris writes of this,

It should be observed that this is a special usage. In most of the Old Testament, wisdom is mere skill or sagacity. . . . Proverbs adds to the concept of mental acumen the moral rectitude that alone makes intelligence worthwhile.⁵

Solomon also wrote about the purpose of his proverbs in Ecclesiastes 12:9–14. Compare this passage with the phrase “training in righteousness” of 2 Timothy 3:16.

One cannot help but be impressed after reading Proverbs that God is so vitally interested in the smallest details of the daily walk of His children. This is our God, our Creator, our Savior, and our Lord!

PLACE IN THE BIBLE

Although isolated proverbs appear in different books of the Bible, Proverbs is unique among the sixty-six books. In the English canon it is the third of the five poetical books. Chart 2 shows comparisons of Proverbs and the other poetical books. (Lamentations, usually classified as a prophetic writing, is included in the comparison because it is poetic in style.) Observe the diversity of key subjects in the books.

The Old Testament is usually divided into four sections: Law, History, Poetry, and Prophecy. The Old Testament of the Jews (including Jesus) divides the same content into three sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings. Chart 3 shows how Proverbs, as one book of Writings, may be compared with books of Law and books of Prophets.

Kenneth Taylor has written this testimony about his experience

PROVERBS

	POETICAL BOOKS COMPARED	KEY THOUGHTS	KEY SUBJECTS
3 DIDACTIC BOOKS	PROVERBS	WISDOM	Description and fruits of the righteous man
	ECCLESIASTES	FUTILITY	The way to God
	JOB	TRIAL	Crucible of testing
3 DEVOTIONAL BOOKS	PSALMS	WORSHIP	Meditations and worship of the righteous man
	SONG OF SOLOMON	LOVE	The way of God
	LAMENTATIONS	DESTRUCTION	Crucible of judgment

CHART 2

PROVERBS COMPARED WITH OTHER OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS

BOOKS	KEYNOTES	USES
BOOKS OF THE LAW	Revelation and guidance	Manual of history and legislation
BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS	Authority	Message for today and tomorrow
JOB	Questions and reasonings	Answers from God and men
PSALMS	Worship	Handbook of devotion
PROVERBS	Observation and reflection	Guide to practical living

CHART 3

when composing the paraphrases of Psalms, Proverbs, and the Prophets for the *Living Bible*:

. . . something happened. For these marvelous portions of the Word of God have become my meat and drink! Now I ask sincerely how anyone can live without these precious messages of hope and trust. It's true that other parts of the Bible give the same assurance, warnings, and joy—but no others are quite like the Psalms; no others have such exciting, thoughtful wisdom as the Proverbs. No others contain the awesome pathos of the Prophets.⁶

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND PROVERBS

The New Testament writers quote and allude to Proverbs over twenty times. Some of the references are listed on chart 4.

NEW TESTAMENT QUOTES OF PROVERBS

PROVERBS	N.T. QUOTE OR ALLUSION
3:7	Romans 12:16
25:21–22	Romans 12:20
3:34	James 4:6
24:21	1 Peter 2:17
16:7	1 Peter 3:13
11:31	1 Peter 4:18
26:11	2 Peter 2:22
3:11–12	Hebrews 12:5–6
4:26	Hebrews 12:13
10:12	1 Peter 4:8
22:9	2 Corinthians 9:7
25:6–7	Luke 14:10

CHART 4

There is one book of the New Testament that concentrates on the conduct of believers, just as Proverbs does in the Old Testament. That book is the epistle of James. In fact, James is sometimes referred to as the “Proverbs of the New Testament.”

Some of Jesus’ words reported in the gospels indicate that He used the Proverbs from time to time to teach His lessons (see Prov. 14:11; 25:6–7; and 27:1).

The relation of Proverbs to Christ is deeper than appears on the surface. Some see Christ foreshadowed in such explicit passages as 8:22–31; 23:11; and 30:4. A foundational connection is that the wisdom spoken of in Proverbs is found completely in Christ (1 Cor. 1:30). “The aspiration in Proverbs is for wisdom to become incarnate (Prov. 8), as indeed it did when ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ became flesh in Christ (Col. 2:3).”⁷ The “wise” man of Proverbs is the righteous man, and no man is righteous except as he is clothed with the righteousness of Christ. So the truly wise man today is the born-again Christian.

VARIETY OF SUBJECTS

The list of different subjects written about in Proverbs seems endless. Here are a few examples:

Social and ethical virtues: industry, thrift, discretion, love, pleasure, temperance, purity, truthfulness, stewardship, chastity, kindness, forgiveness, justice, equity, humility.

Contrasting subjects: God and man, time and eternity, truth and falsehood, wealth and poverty, purity and impurity, justice and injustice, pleasure and misery.

Evil people: prating fool, talebearer, whisperer, backbiter, false boaster, speculator.

Social relations: master and servant, rich and poor, husband and wife, parents and children.

Areas of life: domestic, agricultural, urban, commercial, political, military, religious. Concerning religion, there is no direct reference to a messiah, temple, priests, Moses, or prophets.

Religious Experience: The book assumes monotheism (belief in one God). The name “LORD” (*Jehovah*) appears throughout the book, eighty-six times. The name “God” (*Elohim*) appears only eight times. There is no reference to other supernatural beings, such as angels or evil spirits.

In Proverbs there are only a few specific references to the Law and prophecy (3:1; 29:18) and to the priesthood and sacrifices (15:8; 21:3, 27). It was the Holy Spirit’s intention that instruction in those foundational areas be written in other inspired books.

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

Any reader of Proverbs quickly observes that its literary style and content are different from other parts of the Bible, such as the book of Genesis, or the gospel of Matthew.

Type

The book of Proverbs is classified as “wisdom literature.” (Other wisdom books are Job, Ecclesiastes, and parts of Psalms.) In Old Testament times Israel was ruled by judges and kings, and ministered to by such groups as priests, prophets, scribes, historians, singers, and “wise men,” or philosophers. David was both a king and a singer. His son Solomon was both a king and a philosopher. Hebrew “wise men” were usually elders, associated with schools of wisdom, who shared their practical views of life and the world with their Jewish brethren. On chart 5 the comparison of the three groups, prophets, priests, and wise men (see Jer. 18:18), show how practical the wise men were⁸:

HEBREW PROPHET, PRIEST, AND PHILOSOPHER COMPARED

SUBJECT	PROPHET	PRIEST	PHILOSOPHER
Righteousness	It is just	It is commanded	It is prudent
Sin	It is disobedience	It is defilement	It is folly

CHART 5

Style

The following descriptions show the variety of styles and forms in which the proverbs appear:

Various Forms

The forms are: poetry, brief parables, sharp questions, minute stories. Two examples of poems are:

- 1:20–33: “Wisdom’s Cry of Warning” (a dramatic monologue)
- 3:1–10: “The Commandment and Reward” (a sonnet)

Common Devices

The devices are:

- antithesis: comparing opposite things (16:22)
- comparison: comparing similar things (17:10)
- imagery: using picture language (26:27)
- personification: assigning personality to an inanimate thing (9:1)

Prominent Teaching Method

The prominent method is contrast. A scanning of chapters 10–15 shows the repeated word “but.” Gleason Archer writes,

The constant preoccupation of the book is with the elemental antagonisms of obedience versus rebellion, industry versus laziness, prudence versus presumption, and so on. These are

so presented as to put before the reader a clear-cut choice, leaving him no ground for wretched compromise or vacillating indecision.⁹

Length

Unit proverbs are one to four verses, and clusters are groups of unit proverbs. In the early chapters the common unit proverb is one verse. An example of a cluster is the passage about fools in 26:1–12.

Below is a list of the various lengths of the proverbs of the book. The length of each proverb depended on *what* the author wanted to say and *how* he wanted to communicate the truth.

- a. distich—the simplest form—two lines of related things
 - 1) synonymous distich—repeated thought (11:25)
 - 2) antithetic distich—contrasting thoughts (10:1)
 - 3) synthetic distich—two different truths, with a common denominator (10:18)
 - 4) integral distich—the uncompleted thought of the first line is completed in the second (11:31; 13:14; 16:10; 19:20; 22:28)
 - 5) parabolic distich—comparison using illustration from nature and everyday life (10:26; 27:15)
- b. tristich—three lines (27:22)
- c. tetradistich—four lines
 - 1) synonymous (23:15–16)
 - 2) synthetic (30:5–6)
 - 3) integral (30:17–18)
 - 4) comparative (25:16–17)
 - 5) emblematic (25:4–5)
- d. pentastich—five lines (23:4–5)

- e. hexastich—six lines (23:1–3; 23:12–14)
- f. heptastich—seven lines (23:6–8—the only one in Proverbs)
- g. octastich—eight-lines (23:22–28)

Symmetry

Most of the proverbs are symmetrical (e.g., the antithetical maxims of two lines connected by the word “but”). Even so, Hebrew writers were not bound by symmetry. “Modern hands itch to smooth away irregularities—often overlooking the fact that an asymmetrical proverb can be richer than a symmetrical.”¹⁰

Proverbial writings were not exclusive to Israel. Archaeologists have discovered proverbs of other nations as well.¹¹ The main difference is not in style but in content. The following examples illustrate this difference.

- a. “Do not lean on the scales, nor falsify the weights, nor damage the fractions of the measure” (proverb of Amenemope of Egypt).
- b. “Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD” (proverb of Solomon, 20:10).

INTERPRETING PROVERBS

Before one can apply a passage of Scripture, he must interpret it, that is, learn what it means. This follows the order: observation first, then interpretation, then application. Here are some suggestions for interpreting the maxims of Proverbs:

1. *Recognize that the proverbs are instructions from the Lord, not mere secular maxims.* It is not by accident that the name “LORD” (*Jehovah*) appears eighty-six times in the book!

2. *Interpret “wisdom” in the books as righteousness or holiness, which describes the heart of the person who truly knows God.* Like-

wise, interpret words such as “fool” and “folly” as the wickedness of the unsaved man.

3. *Recognize the device of personification whenever it appears in the book.* For example, the foolish woman of 9:13–15 is not primarily an individual person as such, but spiritual folly or wickedness (the opposite of spiritual wisdom or righteousness) embodied, although usually the persons of Proverbs are people, not figurative representations.

4. *Let the surrounding verses shed light on a proverb when its meaning is unclear.* However, because of the miscellaneous character of the listings of many proverbs, it may be necessary to refer to more distant verses (in another chapter or even in another book) where a similar phrase appears, for its clarification. An exhaustive concordance can be a valuable help here.

5. *When the most obvious interpretation of a proverb seems to contradict another Scripture, seek its deeper meaning* (compare Prov. 10:27 to Gen. 4:8; and Prov. 16:7 to Acts 14:19).

6. *If a proverb is unclear or ambiguous in the Bible version being used, compare it with another version or a modern paraphrase.*¹²

7. *Let the key verse (1:7) be the controller of all your interpretations of the many proverbs in this book of God.*

APPLYING PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is filled with commands and exhortations about daily conduct. The reader has hardly begun reading the book when he is confronted with such words as “if sinners entice you, do not consent” (1:10). God knew that His people would need to be reminded again and again about how to think, speak, and act, so He inspired the writing and collection of Proverbs. No Christian today can afford to neglect its counsel!

As noted earlier, Proverbs does *not* teach salvation by works.

It *does* teach the righteous works of a saved person. It does *not* include much doctrine. It *does* emphasize practice. One writer describes its Christian purposes thus:

While other parts of Scripture show us the glory of our high calling, this may instruct in all minuteness of detail how to “walk worthy of it.” Elsewhere we learn our completeness in Christ (Col. ii.10); and most justly we glory in our high exaltation as “joint heirs with Christ. . . .” (Rom. viii.17; Eph. ii.6). We look into this book, and, as by the aid of the microscope, we see the minuteness of our Christian obligations; that there is not a temper, a look, a word, a movement, the most important action of the day, the smallest relative duty, in which we do not either deface or adorn the image of our Lord, and the profession of His name.¹³

H. A. Ironside glorifies the divine purpose of the mundane collection of proverbs when he cites its balance:

it may seem a far cry from Pauline flights to the commonplaces of Solomon, but to the Christian who would. . . hold the balance of truth, the precepts and warnings of Proverbs will have their place along with the precious truths of Ephesians.¹⁴

Proverbs truly shows how the believer “will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (Titus 2:10). Even unbelievers recognize the value of Proverbs as a manual for conduct. How much more should it apply to Christians who have the indwelling Spirit to help them live the life it describes.

Some of the best illustrations of the truth of the biblical proverbs are to be found in the lives of Bible characters. Listed below are names that might be associated with the proverb cited.

10:7a—Elisha, Dorcas

10:7b—Cain, Balaam, Jezebel, Judas Iscariot

16:18—Nebuchadnezzar, Herod Agrippa

Observe that Proverbs contains thirty-one chapters, which is the number of days of many of our months. Some Christians read one chapter a day, as a daily spiritual tonic. This is the testimony of Billy Graham:

For a number of years, I have made it a practice to read five Psalms and one chapter of Proverbs a day. The Psalms teach us how to get along with God, and the Proverbs teach us how to get along with our fellow men. . . .

Reading this much in each book regularly takes me through them once each month. You cannot imagine the blessing this encounter with the Scriptures has been in my life, especially in recent years.¹⁵