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Lesson 1

Background of the Book of Proverbs

God inspired the writing of Proverbs partly as an antidote to the spiritual apostasy of His people Israel. 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 this twentieth book of the Bible will greatly enhance our study of its text. This in turn will make it easier for us to apply Proverbs to our lives. Such is the scope of this opening lesson.

I. 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 appropriate, since most proverbs use comparison to teach their truths. (An example: “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls,” 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 “small pictures crowded together on the walls of a large gallery.” Read the following verses where the word “proverb(s)” appears:

- 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

II. 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 larg-

est 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 attributed to “the wise men” (22:17; cf. 24:23). 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 B.C.). Some think that this group, called “men of Hezekiah” (25:1), may have included Isaiah and Micah, who were contemporaries of Hezekiah.

Solomon was a unique character in many ways. Consult a Bible dictionary for a sketch of his colorful career. From 1 Kings 3:12 and 4:29 we learn that his wisdom was a direct gift from God. This was 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 of the books’ being written at different stages of his career:²

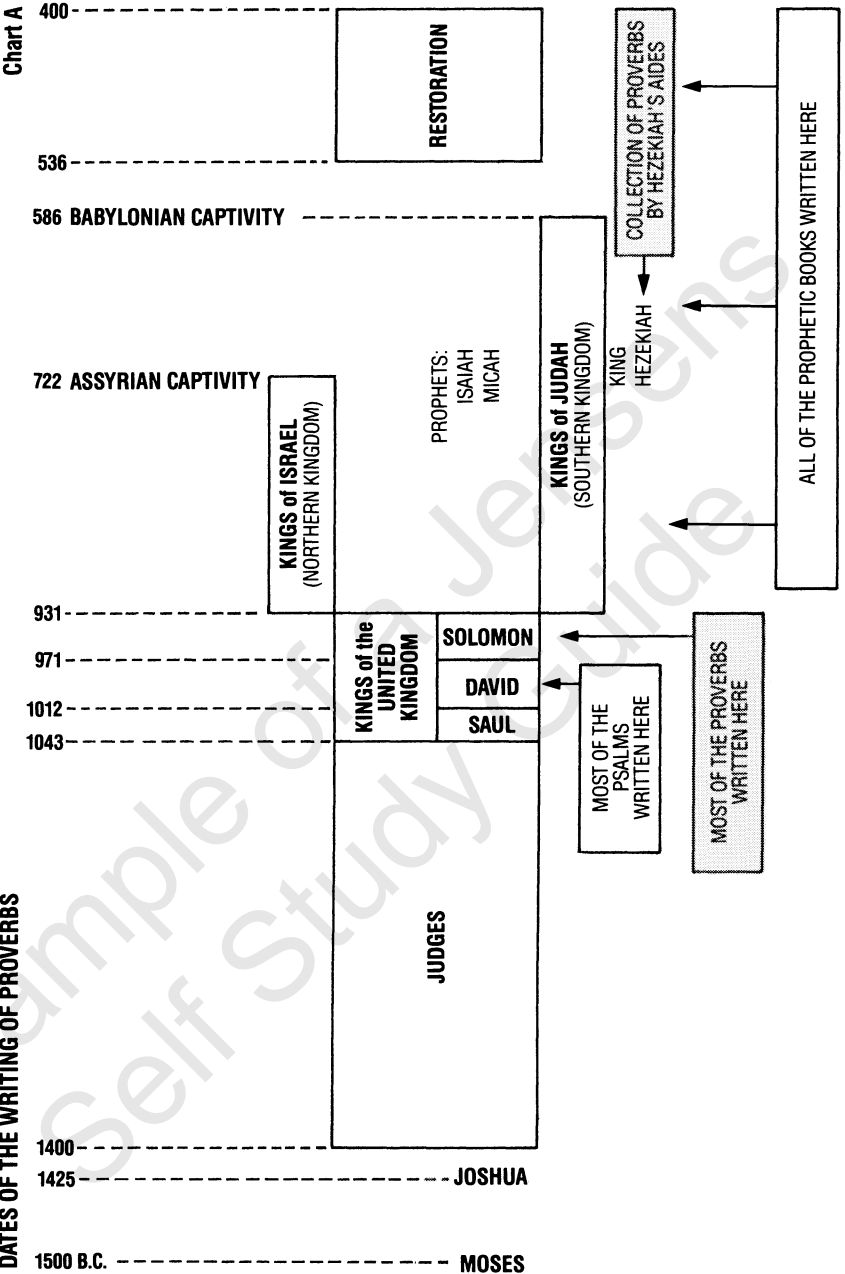
1. Song of Solomon—written when he was young, and in love
2. Proverbs—written when he was middle aged, when his intellectual powers were at their peak
3. Ecclesiastes—written in his old age, when he was disappointed and disillusioned with the carnality of much of his life.

III. DATE

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

1. Some hold that these two names may be poetic references to Solomon himself.
2. John Phillips, *Exploring the Scriptures*, p. 108.
3. The historical background of chapters 1–29, though sparse, corresponds closely to the conditions of Solomon’s reign. See G. T. Manley, *The New Bible Handbook*, p. 199. Read Proverbs 29:18; 15:8; 21:3, 27 for references to the law and sacrifices of Israel.
4. This assumes that Agur, Lemuel, and “the wise men,” noted earlier, lived no later than Hezekiah.

Chart A



Refer to Chart A 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.

IV. 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. But though 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 are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Read 1:2-4, and note the book's own statement of its purpose: to impart wisdom. This wisdom is not mere head knowledge but divinely enlightened understanding of what is good and what is evil (1 Kings 3:9), and an experiential knowledge of the Lord personally.

Solomon also wrote about the purpose of his proverbs in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14. Compare this passage with the phrase "instruction 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 Saviour, and our Lord!

V. 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 B shows comparisons of its contents with that of other Old Testament books.

Kenneth Taylor has written this testimony about his experience when composing the paraphrases of Psalms, Proverbs, and the Prophets for *The Living Bible*:

PROVERBS COMPARED WITH OTHER OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS**Chart B**

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

Then 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.⁵

The New Testament writers quote and allude to Proverbs several times. Read the references listed on the following page.

One book of the New Testament 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."

Can you recall things Jesus spoke that were similar to these proverbs:

25:6-7

14:11

27:1

The relation of Proverbs to Christ is deeper than appears on the surface. Some see Christ foreshadowed in such explicit passages

5. Kenneth N. Taylor, Preface to *Living Psalms and Proverbs* (Wheaton, Ill.:Tyn-dale, 1967).

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

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).”⁶ 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.

VI. LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

Any reader of Proverbs quickly observes that its style and content are different from other parts of the Bible, such as Genesis or Matthew. Let us look at the various literary characteristics of this book. This will help us in our later studies.

A. Type

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 was ministered to

6. Norman L. Geisler, *Christ: The Theme of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), p. 96.

by such groups as priests, prophets, scribes, historians, singers, and “wise men,” or philosophers. King David was both a king and singer. His son Solomon was both a king and 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. The following comparisons of the three groups, prophets, priests, and wise men (see Jer. 18:18), show how practical the wise men were:⁷

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

B. Style

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

1. *Various forms.* The forms are: poetry, brief parables, sharp questions, minute stories. For two examples of poems, read the following:
 - 1:20-33 “Wisdom’s Cry of Warning” (a dramatic monologue)
 - 3:1-10 “The Commandment and Reward” (a sonnet)
2. *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)
3. *Prominent teaching method.* The prominent method is contrast. Scan chapters 10-15, and note 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

7. See W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*, 1:128.

presented as to put before the reader a clear-cut choice, leaving him no ground for wretched compromise or vacillating indecision.⁸

4. *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.

5. *Symmetry*. Most of the proverbs are symmetrical (e.g., the antithetical maxims of two lines connected by the word “but”). But 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.”⁹

Proverb-type writings were not exclusively Israel’s. Archaeologists have uncovered proverbs of other nations as well.¹⁰ The main difference is not in style but in content. Compare the following two proverbs. What is the notable difference?

a. “Do not lean on the scales, nor falsify the weights, nor damage the fractions of the measure” (proverb of Amen-em-ope of Egypt).

b. “Divers weights, and divers measures, both of them are alike abomination to the Lord” (proverb of Solomon, 20:10).

VII. SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERPRETATION

Before we can apply a passage of Scripture, we first need to interpret the passage, 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 book as righteousness or holiness, which describes the heart of that person who truly knows God. Likewise interpret such words as “fool” and “folly” as meaning 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

8. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 452.

9. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, p. 28.

10. There is strong evidence that pagan writers even borrowed from the canonical Proverbs for their own purposes. See W. Jones and Andrew Walls, “The Proverbs,” in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson, p. 516.

not primarily an individual person as such, but spiritual folly or wickedness (the opposite of spiritual wisdom, or righteousness).

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 (e.g., in another chapter or even in another book) where a similar phrase appears, for its clarification. (For example, the phrase “strange woman” in 20:16 is partly explained by 2:16.) An exhaustive concordance is a valuable help here.

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

6. If a proverb is unclear or ambiguous in the King James Version, compare the reading of a modern paraphrase.¹¹

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

VIII. APPLYING PROVERBS

Proverbs is filled with commands and exhortations about daily conduct. The reader has hardly begun when he is confronted with such words as “If sinners entice thee, consent thou not” (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 purpose 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,” etc.

(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 move-

11. Modern paraphrases are the interpretations of those writing the paraphrases. They are not intended to be a word-for-word translation of the Bible text. One of the main purposes of a paraphrase is to clarify an ambiguous word or phrase of the Bible text.

ment, 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.¹²

Proverbs truly shows how the believer “may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Titus 2:10).

A Christian who applies Proverbs consistently is more than a Sunday-go-to-church Christian. His faith will show forth at the office or shop, in a traffic jam, at the store counter, when meeting a stranger on the street, at the supper table or voting booth, and before a television set.

More than a hundred years ago this was the testimony of a Scotsman:

The day was in Scotland when all her children were initiated into the art of reading through the Book of Proverbs. . . . I have no doubt whatever . . . that the high character which Scotsmen earned in bygone years was mainly due to their early acquaintance with the Proverbs.¹³

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. Do you recall any experiences of each person, illustrating the proverb?

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. Why not try reading 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 fellowmen. . . . Reading this much in each book regularly takes me through them once each month. You

12. Otto Zockler, *Commentary of The Holy Scriptures, Proverbs*, ed. John Peter Lange, p. 3.

13. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4.

cannot imagine the blessing this encounter with the Scriptures has been in my life, especially in recent years.¹⁴

Refer to the Appendix for a list of familiar proverbs.

IX. A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

H. A. Ironside once wrote that the soul that most deeply enters into the reality of the new creation in Christ will most appreciate the instruction of this great practical book of the Bible, Proverbs.¹⁵ As you prepare your heart to study this book of God, why not thank Him again for His interest in the smallest details of your daily life, and claim the power of the Holy Spirit to obey His instruction?

14. Billy Graham, Introduction to *Living Psalms and Proverbs*.

15. H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Proverbs*, p. 10.