

## ***Proverbs: Finding God’s Wisdom in Life***



***“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, wisdom, and instruction”*** says Proverbs 1:7, introducing a major theme for the book. Yet *Proverbs* contains more than simple statements of belief or the mental concepts of faith. Knowledge is a lifestyle, characterized by “wise” choices that align a person with the very structures of the world as created by God, resulting in blessings. *Proverbs* invites us to enter into a pedagogical relationship and live out those truths as a way of devotion and worship.

### ***Author & Date***

*Proverbs* brings together a collection of writings from different sources into a single book. The nature of the genre (wisdom literature) and the literary style point to wisdom sages, a group of scribes responsible for the legal documents of the government, formal teaching in schools, the poetry and song of the court, and other activities. The author(s) of *Proverbs* demonstrate superior skill in their usage of poetry, allusions, personification, and stories, pointing to a sophisticated level of education. It reflects the pinnacle of their art, melding human observations with theological faith in a high literary form.

Attempts to date *Proverbs* returns scattered results. The earliest date possible for the book is the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah, the late 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, per 25:1. The book mentions additional figures outside of Solomon and Hezekiah in superscriptions such as “King Lemuel of Massa” that are unknown to us today. Scholarly studies examining word choice and patterns, thematic structure, and other factors for dating the book prove inconclusive. Most scholars see *Proverbs* taking shape over a long period of time – from the monarchy period (starting 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) into the post-exilic period (starting late 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) when the book was finalized at some point in its current form.

### ***Wisdom Literature in the Bible***

*Proverbs* fits within a specific genre within the Hebrew Bible called “wisdom literature.” Other examples include *Ecclesiastes*, *Job*, some of the *Psalms*, as well as the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Wisdom of Ben Sira*. Wisdom literature was written all over the Ancient Near East. Israel’s scribes recognized the contributions to knowledge made by wise men and women from other nations (1 Kings 4:29-34, Obad. 8-9) because of the understanding that the powers of observation and reason were divinely gifted to all humanity. As such, Hebrew wisdom literature makes no explicit claim such as in Deuteronomy to a special corporate relationship with God until *Ben Sira* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE. The genre thus expresses an early form of natural theology, i.e., that God reveals knowledge to the whole world via human faculties. Three elements express the conceptual framework of the genre:

*Wisdom as a flexible tradition of knowledge.* While the sages who wrote *Proverbs* saw themselves as bearers of a received knowledge, they did not see this tradition as consisting of divine, eternal truths that transcend time and place (that idea is a modern construct). These pieces of wisdom were to be tested by each generation to determine its proper application. This perspective underlays the famous passage in *Ecclesiastes*, “There is a time for...” The scribes understood their task to include reception, study, and application of the texts as well as passing them on to the next generation.

*Wisdom as moral instruction.* Wisdom literature focuses on teaching the ideas of proper action within society. These moral instructions are general in nature but provide guidance for the young that can be applied according to the situation. They help students understand the roles they will play as they are elevated in the social order (via marriage, family, and career).

*Wisdom as order.* God has created the world to function a certain way and acting in harmony with this knowledge brings blessings. As such, wisdom literature reflects a conservative approach, upholding the current cosmic and social structures as designed by God. To be sure, the sages readily admit their limitations to understand all of God’s purposes (see *Job*) and that some situations cannot be anticipated. However, a wise person’s behavior always acknowledges these God-ordained functions and acts in concert with them.

### **Themes of the Book of Proverbs**

Although *Proverbs* covers several collections of material built over a long period of time, several common themes run through the book:

*Wise vs. Fools:* Contrasts are drawn throughout on the actions of the wise and foolish

*Relationship with Wisdom:* *Proverbs* asks the audience to engage personally with its teaching

*Advice for rulers:* Written for the purpose of pedagogy, *Proverbs* instructs future kings in protocol

*Proper family relations:* Wisdom is equated with supporting the roles of the family/clan structure

### **The Structure of Proverbs**

Collection	Title	Passage
1 <sup>st</sup>	“The Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel”	Ch. 1 - 9
2 <sup>nd</sup>	“The Proverbs of Solomon”	10:1 – 22:16
3 <sup>rd</sup>	“The Sayings of the Wise”	22:17 – 24:22
4 <sup>th</sup>	“These Also Are Sayings of the Wise”	24:23 – 24
5 <sup>th</sup>	“These Are Other Proverbs of Solomon That The Officials of King Hezekiah of Judah Copied”	Ch. 25 - 29
6 <sup>th</sup>	“The Words of Agur”	Ch. 30
7 <sup>th</sup>	“The Words of King Lemuel of Massa, Which His Mother Taught Him”	31:1 - 9
8 <sup>th</sup>	“The Ideal Wise Woman”	31:10 – 31