

3. INSTRUCTIONS

PROVERBS 22:17 – 24:34

Introduction to 22:17 - 24:22

To the first part of this section (22:17 - 23:11) there are many parallels in the Egyptian *'Instruction of Amenemope'* (see Dermot Cox OFM *Proverbs*, Michael Glazier, 1982, page 189; William McKane *Proverbs* page 373). The constant use of the imperative identifies this section as instruction, as distinct from the lists of wise sayings in Sections 2 and 4.

¹⁷Words of the wise:

**Incline your ear and hear my words,
and apply your heart to my teaching;**

**¹⁸for it is well that you keep them
within you, if they come readily to
your lips.**

**¹⁹So that your trust may be in the
YHWH, I make them known to you
today – yes, to you.**

**²⁰Have I not written for you thirty
sayings of admonition and knowl-
edge, ²¹to show you what is right
and true, so that you may bring back
a reliable report to the one who sent
you?**

**²²Do not rob the poor because they
are poor, or crush the afflicted at
the gate; ²³for YHWH pleads their
cause and despoils of life those who
despoil them.**

**²⁴Make no friends with those given
to anger, and do not associate with
hotheads, ²⁵or you may learn their
ways and entangle yourself in a
snare.**

**²⁶Do not be one of those who give
pledges, who become surety for
debts. ²⁷If you have nothing with
which to pay, why should your bed
be taken from under you?**

**²⁸Do not remove the ancient land-
mark that your ancestors set up.**

**²⁹Do you see those who are skillful
in their work? they will serve kings;
they will not be serving the shades.**

The Instruction of Amenemope opens in the same way:

Give your ears, hear what is said, give your heart to understand them.

It is typical of instruction manuals to call on the student to listen to the teacher, and to reflect on the light that the teaching sheds on life and its implications for behaviour. The pupil should be ready to repeat what he has learned, so long as what he repeats comes from the store of wisdom in his heart.

Verse 19 is a typically Israelite perspective on what would otherwise be a view shared with Israel's neighbours. The call is to trust YHWH (compare 3:5; 16:20). The Instruction of Amenemope has thirty sections, hence the 'thirty' of verse 20.

It is easier to oppress the poor and get away with it. Those learning the art of public administration must resist the temptation to do so (verse 20; also in Amenemope). This is especially true for those committed to Yahwism (verse 23). The second saying (verses 24-25) is also in Amenemope.

The third saying (verses 26-27; see already 6:1-5) is not in the Egyptian Instruction.

Amenemope also speaks of the importance of respecting traditional land ownership (verse 28). Verse 29 echoes Amenemope:

As for the scribe who is experienced in his office, he will find himself worthy to be a courier.

If a young person wished to get on he should be diligent in learning wisdom from his teacher.

Dinners for a diplomat are often ‘working dinners’. One’s table manners are not irrelevant to the impression one gives as a diplomat (verses 1-3).

Wealth is ephemeral (verses 4-5). As Amemope says:

Cast not your heart in pursuit of riches.
Like geese they take wing and fly off
heavenwards.

Verses 6-8 warn against accepting the false hospitality of those who begrudge the cost and whose conversation cannot be trusted. You’ll live to regret the food you have eaten.

The ninth saying (verse 9) speaks for itself.

For the tenth saying (verses 10-11) see 22:28.

Verse 12 is a reminder of 22:17 (see 19:20).

Verses 13-14 stresses the necessity of discipline. Spare the rod and spoil the child. An undisciplined child will fall victim to ways that lead only to death.

In verses 15-16 the teacher speaks of the delight he will experience from a docile and committed student. Wise words spoken by a student give joy to the heart of the teacher.

In the fourteenth saying (verses 17-18) the pupil is reminded that the apparent benefits of sin are always illusory. Only a life of communion with God is worth living.

¹When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, ²and put a knife to your throat if you have a big appetite.

³Do not desire the ruler’s delicacies, for they are deceptive food.

⁴Do not wear yourself out to acquire wealth; be wise enough to stop.

⁵When your eyes light upon it, it is gone; for suddenly it takes wings to itself, flying like an eagle toward heaven.

⁶Do not eat the bread of the stingy; do not desire their delicacies; ⁷for like a hair in the throat, so are they. “Eat and drink!” they say to you; but they do not mean it. ⁸You will vomit up the little you have eaten, and you will waste your pleasant words.

⁹Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, who will only despise the wisdom of your words.

¹⁰Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, ¹¹for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.

¹²Apply your mind to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge.

¹³Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die. ¹⁴If you beat them with the rod, you will save their lives from Sheol.

¹⁵My child, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. ¹⁶My soul will rejoice when your lips speak what is right. ¹⁷Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always continue in the fear of YHWH. ¹⁸Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.

¹⁹Hear, my child, and be wise, and direct your heart in the right way. ²⁰Do not be among winebibbers, or among those who glut themselves with meat; ²¹for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags.

²²Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother because she is old. ²³Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. ²⁴The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who begets a wise son will be glad in him. ²⁵Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.

²⁶My child, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways. ²⁷For a prostitute is a deep pit; an adulteress is a narrow well. ²⁸She lies in wait like a robber and increases the number of the faithless.

²⁹Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? ³⁰Those who linger late over wine, those who keep trying mixed wines. ³¹Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. ³²At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. ³³Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things. ³⁴You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. ³⁵"They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink."

Drunkenness and gluttony are typical of those who fail to apply to themselves the disciplines of wisdom. Those who behave like this will be disinherited and end up destitute (verses 19-21).

The sixteenth saying (verses 22-25) focuses on the home, the first place where wisdom is taught. For the teaching of a mother see 1:8 and 6:20. See also the Decalogue: 'honour your father and your mother' (Exodus 20:12).

The seventeenth saying (verses 26-28) calls for undivided attention and a resolute determination to heed the wisdom being offered. As in chapter 5 and chapter 7, the young man is being warned against having sex with a prostitute or adulteress.

The eighteenth saying (verses 29-35) warns against excessive drinking (lingering late over wine), and mixing your drinks. The teacher knows how tempting wine can be. If his pupils keep gazing at its sparkling red colour and remembering the feeling as the wine 'goes down smoothly', they'll suffer the discomfort and disorientation of the physical and psychological consequences. Yet they can't resist having another drink.

**¹Do not envy the wicked, nor desire to be with them;
²for their minds devise violence, and their lips talk of mischief.**

Psalm 73 is a reflection on this:

Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.
Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.

Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.
And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.

If I had said, "I will talk on in this way,"

I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.
But when I thought how to understand this it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.
Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!
They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms.

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.
Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour.
Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
you put an end to those who are false to you.
But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord YHWH my refuge, to tell of all your works.

³By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; ⁴by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.

⁵Wise warriors are mightier than strong ones, and those who have knowledge than those who have strength; ⁶for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counsellors there is victory.

⁷Wisdom is too high for fools; in the gate they do not open their mouths.

⁸Whoever plans to do evil will be called a mischief-maker. ⁹The devising of folly is sin, and the scoffer is an abomination to all.

¹⁰If you faint in the day of adversity, the limits of your strength are revealed.

¹¹If you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death, those who go staggering to the slaughter; ¹²if you say, "Look, we did not know this" – does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay all according to their deeds?

¹³My child, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. ¹⁴Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, you will find a future, and your hope will not be cut off.

The primary meaning of the twentieth saying (verses 3-4) concerns the running of a good household, the first place for the teaching and learning of wisdom.

Verses 5-6 declare that brains are more important (and powerful) than brawn. On wise counsellors see 11:145; 20:18.

There is no point in fools speaking out in public. No one will listen for they have no valuable contribution to make (verse 7).

People shun the fool who sees only the negative and is fixed in his cynicism (verses 8- 9).

We only know our strength when we are put to the test (verse 10).

The twenty-fifth saying (verses 11-12) requires that we do not abandon those condemned to death. Nothing is said that limits this requirement to the situation when the condemned person is innocent. We should not abandon him in his time of need, but stand by him. If we fail, God will see through our lame excuses.

The twenty-sixth saying (verses 13-14) likens honey to wisdom. Honey is good for our physical health, and the consuming of it is pleasant. If we want our whole being to be healthy we should consume as much wisdom as we can.

On enticing others to do evil see 1:1:11-18. The twenty-seventh saying (verses 15-16) contrasts the life of the righteous with that of the wicked. Experience shows that the righteous fall. However, in the final analysis, it is the righteous who ‘rise again’; the wicked ‘are overthrown by calamity’

¹⁵Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against the home of the righteous; do no violence to the place where the righteous live; ¹⁶for though they fall seven times, they will rise again; but the wicked are overthrown by calamity.

Verses 17-18 fall a long way short of Jesus’ injunction to love one’s enemies (Matthew 5:44), but they do warn against rejoicing when an enemy falls. A wise person should rise above such feelings. Yet the Psalmist can say:

People will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.”

– Psalm 58:11.

When we see the evil prospering we are inclined to fret. The twenty-ninth saying (verses 19-20) warns against this. In the long run nothing is gained from evil.

¹⁷Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, ¹⁸or else YHWH will see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from them.

The Psalmist writes:

Transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the irreligious will be cut off.

– Psalm 37:38

Wisdom in Israel came under royal patronage. It is fitting that the last of the ‘thirty sayings’ (22:20) should speak of respect for YHWH and for the king who is YHWH’s anointed one. It is foolish to stir up the wrath of the king, for that is to stir up the wrath of YHWH, ‘and who knows the ruin that both can bring’ (verse 22).

¹⁹Do not fret because of evildoers. Do not envy the wicked; ²⁰for the evil have no future; the lamp of the wicked will go out.

²¹My child, fear YHWH and the king, and do not associate with those who rebel against them; ²²for disaster comes from them suddenly, and who knows the ruin that both can bring?

²³These also are sayings of the wise:

Partiality in judging is not good.

²⁴Whoever says to the wicked, "You are innocent," will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations; ²⁵but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.

²⁶One who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips.

²⁷Prepare your work outside, get everything ready for you in the field; and after that build your house.

²⁸Do not be a witness against your neighbour without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. ²⁹Do not say, "I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done."

³⁰I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; ³¹and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. ³²Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. ³³A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ³⁴and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed warrior.

The opening verse reveals this to be an appendix.

Verses 23-25 focus on the justice system. Judgment is to be based on the facts of the case. The judge is not to be influenced by partiality to people he likes (verse 23; compare Deuteronomy 16:19). Obstructing the course of justice is a crime against the community (verse 24). Concern for the welfare of the community by rebuking the wicked coincides with the best interests of the individual.

Verse 26 likens the pleasure of receiving an honest answer to the pleasure of a kiss on the lips.

Verse 27 functions as a proverb: don't start something before you have the resources to finish it (compare Luke 14:28-30).

Verse 28 returns to the judicial system. It is a criticism of perjured witnesses who give their evidence as a way of getting personal revenge. This is carried on in verse 29 which denounces revenge.

Verses 30-34 is a poem against laziness (compare 6:10-11; see 10:4 for list of texts).