

PROVERBS

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The people of ancient Israel, like the people of the surrounding nations (indeed, like people everywhere) looked up to men and women who were perceived as being wise. We all want to get on in the world, but we have to learn how best to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves. Life is complex and we know from experience that some decisions we make lead to outcomes that work for us and for our neighbours; other decisions lead to consequences that are unpleasant, and worse.

A farmer needs to be able to read the seasons and to manage unseasonable weather, drought, grasshopper plague, and much beside. Some things are completely beyond our control and we just have to accept and make the best of misfortune. But in ordinary circumstances managing a farm has to be learned, so we seek the advice of an experienced and wise farmer. It is the same for raising a family and managing a home. Husbands and wives seek advice, then as now, and they seek out a wise person to direct them along a path that works. Parenting, too, is a skill that can be learned. Similarly with getting on with one's neighbours and contributing to the community of the village rather than being a neutral or destructive presence.

It is here that we should look for the origin of many of the wise sayings collected in this book. These sayings are, for the most part, the fruit of experience. They became part of the oral tradition. They had a lesson for everyone, but were used especially to prepare the young to help them avoid falling into the many pitfalls that life presents by instructing them how to live in such a way as to find personal fulfilment, as well as to contribute to the welfare of the community. For the most part these sayings consist in memorable one-liners. There are hundreds of them in what appears to be the oldest sections of the Book of Proverbs: the collections found in Section 2 (Proverbs 10:1 - 22:16) and Section 4 (Proverbs 25:1 - 29:27).

Most of these 'wise sayings' are simply that: they state a value that sheds light on behaviour that is considered appropriate in a particular area of personal or social activity. Some, but only a relatively small number, of these 'wise sayings' can be categorised as 'proverbs'. While a proverb is drawn from experience, and makes obvious sense, the lesson it presents is not found in its literal meaning. It is meant to capture our attention and get us to reflect on our own lives and draw wise conclusions that go beyond the literal sense of the saying. Let us look at two examples from our own culture. We say 'a stitch in time saves nine'. The point being made is important whether or not we are occupied in sewing. Similarly with 'it is better to light a candle than to curse the dark'. We are not being advised to run out and buy candles! Proverbs state the obvious, but we know to delve beneath the surface meaning, confident that there is a lesson there for us.

We will find some proverbs in this book, but the lesson presented in most of the one-liners lies in its literal meaning. Examples of sayings that can strictly be called proverbs can be found in 1:17; 6:27-28; 10:5, 10; 13:7; 14:4 and 16:26. The essential characteristic is the evident need to seek an application beyond the surface meaning contained in the words (compare 1Kings 20:11; Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2).

Of course, we are reading a book that is the product of literary activity. We should not be surprised to find that brief and memorable one-liners from the oral tradition are sometimes expanded by scribes eager to direct the reader's attention to consider a specific application of the wisdom contained in the saying or proverb. They did this by adding one or two sentences to motivate learning and to draw out consequences of heeding or disregarding the lesson.

As the tribes of Israel moved beyond subsistence farming, formed a state and built up the complex systems needed to manage a state and to relate to surrounding states in a way that worked to their own advantage, many skills had to be acquired. Statesmen, military commanders, and public servants, can make foolish decisions. They can make wise decisions. Israel needed people who had successfully applied their intelligence to learn from their experience how best to make decisions that benefited the nation. In matters of administration and diplomacy, Israel drew on the experience of older cultures.

Many of the 'wise sayings' collected in the book of Proverbs focus on teaching keen young men who were aspiring to a career in government or administration, and many of these sayings were influenced by the experience of cultures that were much older than Israel, cultures such as Assyria and Babylonia, but especially Egypt. We see examples of this among the wise sayings and proverbs in the collections found in sections 2 and 4, but especially in Sections 1 (Proverbs 1:1 - 9:18) and 3 (Proverbs 22:17 - 24:34). The origin of these sayings is literary. They function as manuals for the instruction especially of the young. They are not statements that briefly indicate a value. They instruct a pupil, telling him what to do and what not to do to have a successful career for himself, as well as to make a contribution to his community.

William McKane in his *Proverbs* (in the Old Testament Library Series, SCM Press 1970) examines examples of instruction from Egypt (pages 51-150), examples of instruction from Assyria and Babylonia (pages 151-182) and examples of Assyrian and Babylonian proverbs (pages 183-208). One of these is an instruction manual from the middle of the 3rd millennium. Ptahotep, the chief minister to the Pharaoh, sets out rules of diplomacy and administration for his son whom he is grooming to succeed him (see pages 51-75). Another is an Egyptian instruction manual from Amenemope (pages 102-110), probably composed during the late New Kingdom (1300-1075) when Israel was a tribal agrarian confederacy, before the period of the monarchy. McKane (page 373) suggests that the authors of Proverbs 22:17 - 24:34 were influenced by Amenemope, as does, among others, Dermot Cox OFM in his *Proverbs* (Michael Glazier, 1982, page 189).

So far we have been focusing on sayings and instructions that are based on experience, whether it be the ancient experience of everyday life the origins of which are lost in the mists of time, or more recent experience that came with the development of the city-state and interaction with foreign nations. The vast bulk of the material found in the Book of Proverbs has its basis in these experiences. Some of the sayings and instruction, however, are based on faith in God and in the religious traditions of Israel.

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In Egyptian wisdom literature the stability and continuity of the state relies on respect for divinely established order. In Israel wisdom is seen as a gift of YHWH. The aim of wisdom is to live a good, productive life. The people of ancient Israel knew that such a life has its source in God, the Creator, and has as its goal a life of communion with God, a communion experienced in nature, in communal living whether in the country or the city, and in the events of daily life.

What sets the teachers of wisdom apart from the priests and prophets is that their primary focus is not the Torah, or obedience to divine inspiration, but shrewd observation of life experience. Day to day running of a farm or managing a family cannot wait for prophetic revelation or priestly instruction. People need to apply their mind honestly to what is happening in their lives and behave as mindfully as they can, learning from the wise. God has given us intelligence so that we will think things through. Decisions should, to use a modern term, be evidence based. They respected the Torah (and at times relied on it), but it could not substitute for mindful living. A person who is faithful to the Torah but who stumbles from one foolish decision to another is a prisoner of circumstances.

Wisdom liberates. It opens a person up to possibilities of living well. A wise king, a wise statesman, a wise administrator of justice, a wise public servant, a wise farmer, a wise artisan, a wise trader, a wise grandmother, a wise teacher, are blessings from God. But wisdom does not come automatically or cheaply. It is the fruit of living a thoughtful, intelligent life in the real world. The aim of the Book of Proverbs is to help educate people in how to do this, by sharing traditional and current wisdom. The instructions and most of the wise sayings state how a person is to behave in his personal life or public career. The proverbs that are scattered throughout the book offer astute observations drawn from experience which suggests a line of behaviour that has a more general application. They aim to teach, but more importantly to get people to think about their lives. A person may object to what is implied by a proverb, but, even if they disagree, the proverb will have been successful if it has got them to think seriously about the choices and decisions they are making. Each person has to make the best decision they are capable of in their own unique situation. Sometimes, as we will see in examining Proverbs, different points of view are offered. Sometimes the views expressed are incompatible, even contradictory. What matters is that people live a reflective life. Traditions, however wise, cannot be inflexible. New situations require new thinking and new decisions.

Every now and then, however, we will find instructions and exhortations that are based, not on experience, but on the demands of the Torah. The wisdom teachers of Israel are integrating wisdom with religious commitment.

The Introduction to the Book of Proverbs opens with the words: ‘The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel’(1:1). This attribution is based on the attribution to Solomon in sections 2 and 4. In the Book of Kings we read:

Solomon composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five.

– 1Kings 4:32

It is not possible to determine how much of this portrait of Solomon is idealised. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are post-exilic. The oldest sections of the Book of Proverbs draw on ancient oral tradition. They also, as we have seen, incorporate sayings drawn from the experience of the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah in their efforts to build more complex urban communities (such as Samaria and Jerusalem) and to manage their relationships with surrounding nations, economically and politically.

The attribution to 'Solomon' is found also in the *Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes* in the Hebrew Bible and *Wisdom* in the Greek Septuagint Bible – all linked to the man whom tradition saw as the wisest of men.

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore.

– 1Kings 4:29

King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.

– 1Kings 10:23

We find this tradition present in the New Testament.

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

– Matthew 12:42

The editors are claiming that the book of Proverbs offers authoritative wisdom.

Though the Book of Proverbs looks back to Solomon, it is likely that we should look to the eighth century BC for the beginnings of the literary activity that produced it. It is probably in the northern kingdom of Israel that the nucleus of the Book of Deuteronomy took shape. Perhaps it was there also that the first list of sayings (Section 2) was assembled, as well as the instructions contained in Section 3.

When Samaria was captured in 721, this material along with the scrolls of Amos and Hosea came to Jerusalem with the refugees and stimulated writing among the scribes of Judah (witness the scrolls of Micah and Isaiah ben Amoz). The king at the time was Hezekiah. Section 4 claims to have been assembled by his scribes. The process of editing, re-interpreting and updating the Book of Proverbs probably continued down to the 4th century. Section 1 (chapters 1-9) appears to be the work of the final editors.

Of course, it was not a matter of paying attention to everyone who claimed to be wise. People who made such a claim were capable (then as now) of making mistakes, or of self-serving, or of being blind to the consequences of their counsel. Jeremiah challenged them, just as he challenged the priests and the prophets:

How can you say, “We are wise, and the law of YHWH is with us,”
when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie?
The wise shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken;
since they have rejected the word of YHWH, what wisdom is in them?

– Jeremiah 8:8-9

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It is interesting to read the following complaint made against Jeremiah:

Let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet.

– Jeremiah 18:18

As is seen also in Ecclesiastes, what was considered wise behaviour in earlier times was inadequate in the changed circumstances of post-exilic Judah. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the end of the monarchy, called much of traditional wisdom into question. People questioned the very existence of God (see Psalm 14:1; 53:1). The prophet Habakkuk, who lived through these troubled times, asked questions that could not be easily dismissed:

YHWH, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous — therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

– Habakkuk 1:2-4

Traditional ‘wisdom’ that saw God as rewarding the good with success and punishing the rebellious (we will see examples of this in Proverbs), could not satisfy people’s questions. Prosperity and success could no longer be thought of as necessarily indicating divine blessing. A new understanding was required. Exilic and post-exilic wisdom literature stresses the fact that we cannot comprehend God. We must apply our minds as honestly as we can, but ultimately wisdom shares in the mysterious transcendence of God. We must trust. We must also live a ‘righteous’ life. The English word ‘righteous’ picks up an important nuance. It derives from two words: ‘right’ and ‘wise’. To be righteous (rightwise) is to be wise as to what is right: right with God primarily, and also right with the world. This is expressed beautifully in a number of so-called ‘Wisdom Psalms’. As Dermot Cox writes (page 60):

‘Wisdom’ is clearly an art to be learned by all who are caught up in daily affairs – the art of choosing the right way, of knowing how to distinguish, in each situation of life, what is right, what is conducive to the good.

Ultimately goodness is experienced by being in communion with God:

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour.

– Psalm 73:23-24

We are to find our delight in this communion:

Take delight in YHWH, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

– Psalm 37:4

The psalter opens with a psalm that speaks of the foundations of wisdom:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of YHWH,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for YHWH knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

While wisdom is essentially practical, and evidence based, its goal is for the individual and the community to enjoy ‘peace’ (šālōm), a fullness of life that can come only as a gift from God. Trust in the important enterprise that is the seeking of wisdom is founded on the belief that God ‘knows the way of the righteous’ (Psalm 1) – a knowing that implies intimate communion.

That is why ‘fear of YHWH’ is seen as the foundation for wisdom (see Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 15:33). Perhaps the ‘of’ is better translated ‘from’. The ‘fear’ is seen as a gift from God. In the words of Isaiah:

The spirit of YHWH will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH.
His delight will be in the fear of YHWH.

– Isaiah 11:2-3

The Psamist states:

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

– Psalm 111:10

Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments.

– Psalm 112:1

Happy is everyone who fears YHWH, who walks in his ways.
You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy,
and it shall go well with you.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots around your table.
Thus shall the man be blessed who fears YHWH.

– Psalm 128:1-4

Job declares:

Truly, the fear of YHWH, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

– Job 28:28

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In the Newer Testament, as a response to God as revealed in Jesus, John can write:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

– 1John 4:18

Prior to Jesus it is understandable that God was, at times, seen as an object of fear. The expression ‘fear of YHWH’, however, focuses more radically on a gift received from God, the source of all wisdom: a sense of the sacred at the heart of the world, a sense that inspires awe and wonder and an openness to mystery. It is this reverence that expands our experience of the every day. Relying on God, and putting our trust in God, we have the courage to explore experience, knowing that, however easy or hard our circumstances may be, God, who has chosen us as his own, is at the heart of the world that he transcends.

This is also why ‘Wisdom’ is personified – something that appears to be unique to Israel. To quote Cox again (page 74):

Wisdom is a channel by which God can reach out to humanity, and draw humanity to himself, led by the voice of creation and its inherent mystery.

We cannot comprehend God, and we cannot comprehend life. God appeals to us through ‘Wisdom’ to live reflective lives. In this way we will play our part in ordering the world for God and in building communities that will bring about the reign of God in this world.