



*The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs - Isaiah Vol. 6*

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# Introduction

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## 1. BACKGROUND

The book of Proverbs is a marvelous collection of wise sayings and instructions for living a useful and effective life. The collection forms part of the larger group of biblical writings known as Wisdom Literature. This literature gives instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life. Proverbial wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements; but speculative wisdom, such as Ecclesiastes or Job, uses lengthy monologues and dialogues to probe the meaning of life, the problem of good and evil, and the relationship between God and people.<sup>1</sup>

The genre of wisdom literature was common in the ancient world, and a copious amount of material comes from ancient Egypt.<sup>2</sup> From the Old Kingdom (2686–2160 BC) we find pieces of wisdom in the “Instruction of Kagemni” and the “Instruction of Ptah-hotep” (2450 BC), which advise the proper decorum for a court official. As in Proverbs, Ptah-hotep counsels on persuasive speech: “Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones.”<sup>3</sup> He further warns against going after a woman like a fool, for “one attains death through knowing her.”<sup>4</sup> The “Instruction of Merikare” (2160–2040 BC) records a monarch’s advice for his son on the wise qualities needed by a king, including this saying: “The tongue is a sword ... and speech is more valorous than any fighting.”<sup>5</sup>

In the New Kingdom period (1580–1100 BC), the “Instruction of Amenemope” stands out. Amenemope instructs his son regarding proper conduct. This work, arranged in thirty sections, contains many

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1. See D.A. Hubbard, “Wisdom Literature,” in *NBD*, 1334.

2. See Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979).

3. *ANET*, 412.

4. *ANET*, 413.

5. *ANET*, 415.

instructions that are similar in form and content to various laws of the Pentateuch and teachings of Proverbs. These instructions are generally seen as forming the background of Proverbs 22:17–24:22. Although the two collections are not identical, they are similar enough to attest direct influence. General knowledge of wisdom sayings across the ancient Near East as well as specific interchange between Egypt and Solomon’s court make a literary connection likely. Because of the dates involved, it is unlikely that Amenemope borrowed from Solomon.

Similar teachings in the Pentateuch might suggest a greater antiquity for biblical wisdom sayings, but there is insufficient material to draw a firm conclusion. Many ancient laws, sayings, songs, poetic couplets, and proverbs found their way into inspired Scripture. Inspiration does not exclude the divine use of existing material; but in Scripture it takes on a new force, a higher meaning, and becomes authoritative.

In the “Instruction of Amenemope” morality is defined as what is pleasing to the god, and it forms the basis for life and prosperity. For example, the instructions include the following:

Do not associate to thyself the heated man,  
Nor visit him for conversation (cf. Pr 22:24).<sup>6</sup>  
Do not strain to seek an excess,  
When thy needs are safe for thee.  
If riches are brought to thee by robbery ....  
(Or) they have made themselves wings like geese  
And are flown away to the heavens (cf. Pr 23:4–5).<sup>7</sup>

After “Amenemope,” wisdom literature again surfaces with the “Instruction of Ani” (ca. 1100 BC). Here a father instructs his son about personal piety, ritual purity, and appropriate speech. He enjoins fulfillment of religious and filial obligations, good manners, generosity, and reserve in speech; and he warns against adultery, clamor, and presumption before the god. He says, “Be on your guard against a woman from abroad ... a woman who is far away from her husband.... She has no witnesses when she waits to ensnare thee.”<sup>8</sup> Much later there is the “Instruction of ʾOncheheshongy” (ca. 400–300 BC), a large collection of about five hundred sayings and proverbs like those in Proverbs that reflect the practical and religious concerns of the community. But they do not have the poetic parallelism characteristic of Hebrew proverbs. For example, their instructions include: “Do not go to your brother if you are in trouble, go to your friend” (cf. Pr 27:10); and “Better [to have] a statue for a son than a fool” (cf. 17:21).<sup>9</sup>

Mesopotamia also had collections of proverbial material.<sup>10</sup> The “Instruction of Shuruppak” (ca. 2000 BC) records the advice of a king to his son Ziusudra, the hero of the flood in the Sumerian version. For example, it says, “My son, let me give you instructions, may you pay attention to them,” and “[My] son, do not sit [alone] in a [chamber] with someone’s wife.”<sup>11</sup>

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6. *ANET*, 423.

7. *ANET*, 422.

8. *ANET*, 420

9. See Robert B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), xlv.

10. Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), 92–117.

11. See B. Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer* (2 vols.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1997), 15, 37.

The “Counsels of Wisdom” (ca. 1500–1000 BC) are a collection of moral exhortations about avoiding bad company and careless speech, being kind to the needy, and living in harmony with one’s neighbor and in loyalty to the king. For example, it says,

Do not return evil to your adversary;  
Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you,  
Maintain justice for your enemy.<sup>12</sup>

The “Words of Ahiqar” (700–670 BC) is a collection of proverbs, riddles, short fables, and religious observations by a court official for the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon; the work gives advice on disciplining children, guarding the tongue, respecting secrets, and being circumspect in dealing with the king. For example, it says, “Withhold not thy son from the rod” (cf. Pr 13:24); and, “I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than [grief]” (cf. 27:3).<sup>13</sup>

Thus Proverbs has affinities with literature from other countries, and the Bible itself alludes to the wisdom of Egypt and Mesopotamia (1Ki 4:30; Da 1:4, 17, 20). This literary background is helpful in understanding the biblical book. First, these other works provide help in understanding the forms of wisdom literature—proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions. Second, it indicates the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, especially Proverbs 1–9, which was once considered to be the latest form. But it now can be demonstrated that the literary proverb of two lines may be as old as the Sumerian proverbs and that collected instructions may be as old as the Old Kingdom of Egypt.

In making these comparisons, commentators find help in dating the various collections within the book of Proverbs. Kitchen, for example, has argued for the plausibility of the Solomonic date of Proverbs 1:1–24:34 on the basis of its similarities with the genre of instruction demonstrated in the first part of the second millennium. This form includes a title (cf. 1:1); statement of purpose (cf. 1:2–7); lengthy prologue exhorting and encouraging compliance to instruction (cf. 1:8–9:18); and collection of maxims, proverbs, precepts, and admonitions (10:1–22:16). Kitchen also argues for the early inclusion of 22:17–24:34 based on the dating of the “Instruction of Amenemope.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this comparison with the great collections of wise instructions, there is also value to be gained from tracing similar concepts. For example, paralleling the Hebrew concept of wisdom is the Egyptian presentation of *maʿat*—a fixed, eternal religious order, manifested in the stability of nature, justice in society, and the integrity of the individual’s life.<sup>15</sup> Another concept found in both Hebrew and Egyptian literature is the rhetorical use of personification to convey abstract concepts such as intelligence, understanding, justice, and skill. The biblical figure of personified wisdom (Pr 8) corresponds to the personification of *maʿat* in Egyptian art and literature.

Finally, many specific emphases in Proverbs find parallels in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. But even though the collections share some of the same interests, the biblical material is unique in its

12. *ANET*, 595.

13. *ANET*, 428.

14. Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East: The Factual History of a Literary Form,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 69–114.

15. James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 214.

prerequisite of a personal faith in a personal God. To the Hebrews the success of wisdom did not simply require compliance with wise instructions but also trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord (Pr 1:7; 3:5–6; 9:10), who created everything and governs both the world of nature and human history (3:19–20; 16:4; 21:1). Any ancient wisdom used by the Hebrews had to harmonize with this religious worldview, and any ancient wisdom used in this collection took on greater significance when subordinated to the true faith.

The biblical writers occasionally used literary forms and expressions that were common to their culture. While the fullness of the Yahwistic faith in all its distinctions came by direct revelation, God did include Semitic customs, standard laws, treaty forms, poetic expressions, and wise sayings that were compatible with the truth and useful in the communications of the divine will. One may speculate how and when concepts such as wisdom, justice, and holiness, or sacrifice, sanctuary, and priesthood—to name but a few—found their place in primitive societies. But apart from that speculation, to recognize the biblical texts as divine revelation does not necessarily mean that all of their contents had to be comprised of previously unknown information. On the contrary, before many of these facts and concepts were written down, they were passed on verbally from generation to generation and consequently could have circulated over vast distances and found their way into many diverse cultures; therefore, whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the word of the Lord. Such inclusions then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will.

Likely the writers deliberately used well-known concepts and expressions from the pagan world to subordinate them to the true religion. For example, while Ma<sup>c</sup>at was a deity of justice and order in Egypt, no such deity existed in Israel. Rather, *ḥokmâ* (“wisdom”; GK 2683) was personified and spoke its message in the first person—something *ma<sup>c</sup>at* did not do. By incorporating wise sayings and motifs (in addition to producing new and unparalleled sayings) and investing them with higher religious value, the Hebrew sages were in a sense putting new wine into old wineskins. They could forcefully teach, then, that true wisdom was from above and not from below.

## 2. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The traditional view that Solomon wrote the entire book of Proverbs is supported by the titles in 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1. Moreover, Solomon was a wise man, writing proverbs and collecting sayings from other wise men (see 22:17–24:34). Proponents of this view have also frequently assumed that Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1) were pseudonyms of Solomon.

This general view, however, stands in need of some revision. It is now recognized that Agur and Lemuel were probably not pseudonyms for Solomon and that 22:17–24:34 forms a separate collection of proverbs, for it has a distinct form, bears a separate title and purpose, and seems to be directly related to the “Instruction of Amenemope.” It is impossible to determine who added this material to the collection of Proverbs. Furthermore, on closer examination the title of 1:1, which has generally been taken to head up 1:8–9:18, may not actually refer to these chapters; it may simply be the heading for the whole book in its final form and may not necessarily indicate that the first nine chapters are from Solomon.

It is unreasonable, however, to deny that the largest portions of the proverbs are Solomon’s, as older critical scholars often did. Otto Eissfeldt is only willing to say that “one or another of the sayings” is Solomon’s

and that “one or another of the quite small collections” goes back to Solomon.<sup>16</sup> More and more scholars, however, acknowledge that the earlier period is an appropriate setting for the composition and collection of such wisdom sayings. The age of Solomon was characterized by national consolidation, the organization and development of the temple staff, and the collection of traditional literary works, including wisdom sayings. It was also a period of broad international exchange; for through his many alliances and trade contracts, Solomon would have had scribes of foreign lands in his courts. It is easy to see how similarities between Proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern literature could have developed.

Yet it is not possible to date the book of Proverbs only on the basis of literary style or content. All the literary forms and perhaps the overall structure can be demonstrated in early parallels as well as late parallels.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the same sociological, theological, and educational background can be demonstrated for much of the wisdom literature in the ancient Near East. The instruction frequently came from a royal father concerned with preparing his son to replace him in court and teaching self-control in temperament, speech, and action so that his son might be successful. Also, the theology of Proverbs is consistent with the theology of the Law and the Prophets, thus making parallel references as a basis for dating rather difficult.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even the earlier attempts to parallel motifs, such as the personification of wisdom with later Greek philosophical thought, are no longer definite, for examples of such personification have been discovered all over the ancient world.<sup>19</sup>

An examination of the titles of the book is important to the study of its authorship. The heading in 10:1 clearly credits Solomon for the subsequent material. In 10:1–22:16 there may be two collections (chs. 10–15; 16:1–22:16)—a determination based on differences in style (the second collection has greater variety of parallelism). The heading in 25:1 also affirms that Solomon was the author (or editor) of a larger collection from which the scribes of Hezekiah’s court excerpted the proverbs in chs. 25–29. There are also differences of style between chs. 25–27 and chs. 28–29, the former having more illustrative parallelism and more grouping of topics.

The title in 1:1 has been taken variously as the heading (1) to the book as a whole, (2) to 1:1–9:18, and (3) to other delimited sections, such as 1:1–24:34.<sup>20</sup> The title probably cannot be limited to 1:1–9:18, for then we might have expected the heading in 10:1 to be like that in 25:1—“these *also* are the proverbs of Solomon.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, the term *mišlê* (“proverbs”; GK 5442) does not describe any of the sayings in 1:8–9:18; so the title is inappropriate if specifically introducing just that section. Finally, 1:2–7, which belongs with the heading of 1:1 by its grammatical construction, best expresses the general purpose of the whole collection; as an introduction it forms part of the prologue (1:1–9:18) to the major collection of 10:1–24:34.

This introductory section (1:1–7), however, may have functioned as the introduction to an earlier collection as well. Since the expression “the proverbs of Solomon” fits the dominant form found in the collections of 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27, the introduction of 1:1–7 may have formerly introduced a

16. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. P. R. Ackroyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 476.

17. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 2005), 223–26.

18. *Ibid.*, 302–17.

19. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament,” *TynBul* 5–6 (1960): 4–6.

20. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East,” 98–99.

21. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 22.

collection now found in 10:1–31:31. Yet, since there seems to be no reason for dating 1:8–9:18 any later than the first Solomonic collection, this prologue may have been written for the core collection.

There are also titles in the book that are non-Solomonic. Any borrowing that took place may have been based on firsthand knowledge of the Egyptian material.<sup>22</sup> This dependence, confined to similarity of concepts and similarity of figures and not to precise wording, seems to be limited to 22:17–23:11. Since “Instruction of Amenemope” dates from at least as early as 1100 BC, the time could fit the Solomonic era. Scott thinks this Egyptian document was still being copied centuries later and “may well have been studied during his training by an Israelite scribe of the prophetic period.”<sup>23</sup>

The title in 31:1 credits Lemuel with the sayings that follow. Although the NIV translates *māssā* as “an oracle,” it may be that it refers to a kingdom named “Massa” that is attested in the annals of the Assyrian kings from the time of Hezekiah (roughly 715–687 BC). The poem in 31:10–31 has no heading and cannot be readily connected with Lemuel. The heading of 30:1, “the sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an oracle [‘of Massa’; NIV margin],” is also obscure. These issues will be discussed in the commentary.

In conclusion, then, Solomon is responsible for 10:1–22:16 and perhaps all or part of chs. 25–29. Most scholars, including many conservatives, see some dependence of 22:17–24:34 on the “Instruction of Amenemope.” The nature of this dependence is debatable, but it may be that Israel knew these sayings by the time of Solomon. Most scholars also see chs. 30–31 as non-Solomonic and from a later date, perhaps from a time contemporary with Hezekiah.<sup>24</sup> The prologue to the book (1:8–9:18) may have been added to form an introduction, certainly by the time of Hezekiah, and possibly in Solomon’s time. But a final editor may have put it all together during the Persian period (540–322 BC) or later, carefully safeguarding the traditional collections. The old title and introductory purpose (1:1–7) then headed up the final collection.

### 3. LITERARY FORMS

A casual reading of Proverbs reveals the general form of a proverb. A proverb, as Scott says, is a short, pregnant sentence or phrase whose meaning is applicable in many situations.<sup>25</sup> A thorough analysis of the proverbs reveals that these short sayings follow many patterns and constructions that bear on the meanings.

As with all Hebrew poetic discourse, the proverbs use the different types of parallelism.

- *Synonymous* parallelism expresses one idea in parallel but slightly different expressions: “A fool’s mouth is his undoing, / and his lips are a snare to his soul” (18:7).
- In *antithetical* parallelism the second line contrasts with the first: “The plans of the righteous are just, / but the advice of the wicked is deceitful” (12:5). This type of parallelism is the most common in the book; in 12:5 it sets before the reader the wise and profitable way and the foolish and disastrous way.
- *Emblematic* parallelism uses a figurative illustration as one of the parallel units: “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, / so is a sluggard to those who send him” (10:26).

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22. For the connection of “the sayings of the wise” (22:17; 24:23) to the “Instruction of Amenemope,” see J. Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 65.

23. Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes*, xxxv.

24. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East,” 100–102.

25. Robert B.Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 59.

# Text and Exposition

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF PROVERBS (1:1–7)

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### A. Title: The Proverbs of Solomon (1:1)

<sup>1</sup>The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

#### COMMENTARY

.....

**1** This verse provides the general heading for the entire book, even though the proverbs of Solomon probably do not begin until ch. 10. But the title most naturally uses a genitive of authorship to indicate that most of the collection following was either written by Solomon or collected by him. Interestingly, this book lacks an addressee and in that respect is unlike all the other wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. Those collections were primarily addressed to the crown prince, but here the material is written for the whole nation of Israel.

But what is a proverb? The use of *māšāl* (GK 5442; here *mišlê š'ōmōh*, “proverbs of Solomon”) suggests the idea of likeness. Toy, 3, referring to the Niphal, suggests the meaning “to become like, be comparable with.” For example, Psalm 49:12[13] says that the one who lives only for this life is “like [*nimšal*] the beasts that perish”; and verse 4[5] of the psalm identifies the poem as a wisdom psalm

(*l'māšāl*, “to a proverb”). The word appears also in 1 Samuel 10:12 to report how a proverb (*māšāl*, “a saying”) came into being: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” His prophesying invited comparison to the prophets. This idea for *māšāl* is also supported by the Akkadian *mišlu* (“of like portions”) and the Arabic *mitlu* (“likeness”).

A proverb may then be described as an object lesson based on or using some comparison or analogy. It may be a short saying that communicates a general truth (Eze 16:44), a lesson drawn from experience (Ps 78:2–6), a common example (Dt 28:37), or a pattern of future blessing or cursing (Eze 21:1–5). The purpose of a proverb is to help one choose the best course of action among those available—the foolish way is to be avoided and the wise way followed (A. R. Johnson, “*Māšāl*,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955], 162–69).

### B. Purposes: To Develop Moral Skill and Mental Acumen (1:2–6)

#### OVERVIEW

.....

This book has two purposes: to nurture moral skillfulness and mental discernment. The first purpose is developed in vv.3–4; then, after a parenthetical

exhortation in v.5, the second purpose is developed in v.6.

- <sup>2</sup>for attaining wisdom and discipline;  
for understanding words of insight;
- <sup>3</sup>for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,  
doing what is right and just and fair;
- <sup>4</sup>for giving prudence to the simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the young —
- <sup>5</sup>let the wise listen and add to their learning,  
and let the discerning get guidance —
- <sup>6</sup>for understanding proverbs and parables,  
the sayings and riddles of the wise.

## COMMENTARY

.....

**2** The first purpose is that the disciple will develop skillfulness and discipline in holy living (v.2a). “Attaining,” from the infinitive *daʿat* (lit., “to know”; from GK 3359), encompasses an intellectual and experiential acquisition of wisdom and discipline, for the expression “to know” wisdom not only means to become conscious of it but also to observe it, to realize it, and to experience it.

“Wisdom” (*hokmā*; GK 2683) basically means “skill.” This word describes the “skill” of the craftsmen who worked in the tabernacle (Ex 31:6), the “wits” of seasoned mariners (Ps 107:27), administrative abilities (1Ki 3:28), and the “wise advice” of a counselor (2Sa 20:22). In Proverbs “wisdom” signifies skillful living—the ability to make wise choices and live successfully according to the moral standards of the covenantal community. The one who lives skillfully produces things of lasting value to God and to the community.

The other object to be acquired is “discipline” (*mūsār*; GK 4592; cf. 4:5), the necessary companion of wisdom. *Mūsār* denotes the training of the moral nature, involving the correcting of waywardness toward folly and the development of reverence for the Lord and personal integrity. Waltke, 1:175,

asserts that wisdom cannot be possessed without this instruction to correct moral faults.

The second major purpose of Proverbs is to help the disciple acquire discernment (v.2b). The meaning of the Hiphil infinitive *hābîn* (“to understand, discern”; GK 1067) can be illustrated by the cognate preposition *bên* (“between”). “To discern” means to distinguish *between* things, to compare concepts, form evaluations, or make analogies. One cannot gain wisdom and instruction without understanding.

The object of this infinitive is cognate to it: “words of insight” (*ʿimrê bînā*, with “words” referring to complete statements, of course). Proverbs will train people to discern lessons about life, such as distinguishing permanent values from immediate gratifications. Both writing and speaking these words were used in the instruction.

**3** The first purpose statement is now developed. Once again an infinitive is used—the disciple will receive (*lāqah*, “acquire”) something worth having. In 2:1 this verb (“to accept”) is parallel with *šāpan* (“to treasure, store up”). What the student receives is discipline (*mūsār*) and prudence (*haśkēl*; GK 8505). The Hiphil infinitive *haśkēl* indicates the

(genitive of) result: discipline produces prudent living, i.e., wise behavior or good sense. To act prudently means “to act circumspectly.” The concept may be illustrated by the actions of Abigail, the wife of the foolish Nabal (1Sa 25).

The three terms that follow — *ṣedeq* (GK 7406), *mišpāt* (GK 5477), and *mēšārīm* (GK 4797)—are adverbial accusatives of manner, expressing how the prudent acts manifest themselves. These three tests prevent wisdom and understanding from being misused. *Ṣedeq* (“righteous” or “righteousness”) denotes conformity to a standard, as in Deuteronomy 25:15, where weights and measures were required to be right. The religious use of the term signifies what is right according to the standard of God’s law (see Dt 16:18–20), viz., conduct that conforms to the moral standards of the covenantal community (see Jer 22:13; Hos 10:12). Knowledge and understanding that does not lead to righteousness is not wisdom at all.

Prudent acts will also exhibit “justice.” *Mišpāt* (“just,” NIV) essentially signifies a “decision” like that of an arbiter (see Dt 16:18). It is applied to litigation (2Sa 15:2) and the precedent established by such (Ex 21:9; used of a custom in 1Ki 18:18). The term also connotes that which is fitting or proper (Jdg 13:12). Proverbs will develop a life that has a sense of propriety in making decisions.

The third quality is “equity” (“fair,” NIV). *Mēšārīm*, related to *yāšār* (“upright, straight”) can describe that which is pleasing (Jdg 14:3 [“right one”], 7 [“liked”]; lit. “she was right”). The book will instruct a lifestyle that is equitable, one that incorporates the most pleasing aspects (see Ps 9:8[9]).

So the disciple of Proverbs will acquire discipline that will produce a prudent life, and that prudent life will be demonstrated by “doing what is right and just and fair.”

**4** The first purpose statement is now developed from the teacher’s point of view—he will give

shrewdness to the naive or “simple,” what Waltke, 1:177, calls the morally brainless *petī* (GK 7343). (For a discussion of the simple person, see Kidner, 39.) This naive person (*petī*) is one who is gullible (14:15) and easily enticed (9:4, 16), and falls into traps (22:3). Although this person may be a youth, the characteristics are by no means limited to young people. The term describes anyone on the verge of becoming mature—some never get there. The instructor wants to give such a one a sense of shrewdness (‘*ormā*; “prudence,” NIV; GK 6893), the ability to foresee evil and prepare for it (13:16; 22:3). With ‘*ormā* the naive will be able to avoid the traps in life (see Mt 10:16).

The second half of this verse parallels “simple” or “naive” with “[immature] youth” (*na‘ar*) and “shrewdness” or “prudence” with “knowledge” (*da‘at*; GK 1981) and “discretion” (*m‘zimmā*, from *zāmam*, “to devise”; GK 4659). This latter expression refers to devising plans or perceiving the best course of action for gaining a goal (Toy, 7). *Da‘at* and *m‘zimmā* may form a hendiadys to be translated “purposive knowledge,” viz., the perceptive ability to make workable plans. Such ability is crucial for the immature youth in this world.

**5** Before elaborating the second purpose statement of the book, the writer digresses to exhort those on the other end of the spectrum. The first verb advises the wise to hear, and the second gives the purpose—“[to] add to [*w‘yōsep*] their learning.” By using the verb “add” the writer is emphasizing that each new hearing of wisdom should increase their wisdom and understanding and not merely confirm them in the wisdom already achieved.

Parallel to this advice is the counsel for the “discerning” (*nābôn*, participle of *bîn*; cf. comment on v.2) to get guidance. This person has the capacity of *bīnā*—one who is discerning. The “guidance” to be obtained is the term *taḥbulôt* (GK 9374; from *ḥābal*, meaning “to bind”; cf. *hebel*, “rope, cord”). The term may be illustrated with the cognate *ḥōbēl*, the

rope pulling done by sailors to steer or guide a ship. Cohen, 2, says *taḥbulôt* is the discernment to steer a right course through life. Proverbs is not simply for the naive and the gullible; everyone can grow by learning from its teachings. Discerning people can obtain guidance from this book so that they might continue in the right way.

6 The second major purpose of the book is to give mental acumen to the student (see comment on v.2). The repetition of *l'hābîn* from verse 2b shows that this line expands that one and stresses the importance of understanding truth. The point here is that one needs to develop the ability to understand the language of the sages.

The teachings will develop one's ability in discerning "proverbs" (*māšāl*) and "parables" (*m'lišā;* GK 4886). This latter term can refer to a satire, a

mocking poem, or an alluding saying. The verb *liš*, related to the Arabic *lāša* ("to turn aside"), may have the idea of speaking indirectly. It may have included the idea of a spokesman, for a *melīš* is an interpreter (Ge 42:23). *M'lišā* may then refer to a saying that has another sense to it that needs uncovering (see H. Neil Richardson, "Some Notes on לִשׁ and Its Derivatives," *VT* 5 [1955]: 163–79).

The disciple must understand also the "sayings" of the wise. *Dībrê* is a general term, but with the genitive *h'kāmitm* ("the wise") it becomes specific—the words come from the sages. Their teachings at times take the form of "riddles" (*ḥîdôt*). This word, if related to the Arabic *hāda* ("to turn aside, avoid"), may refer to what is obscure or indirect, such as the riddles of Samson (Jdg 14:13–14) or the queen of Sheba (1Ki 10:1).

### C. Motto: The Fear of the Lord (1:7)

<sup>7</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

### COMMENTARY

7 Here we have the theological foundation of the book—the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (cf. Ps 111:10). This statement is different from the purpose statements given so far. It tells us what is basic to the understanding of the book: Reverential "fear" (*yir'ā*, GK 3711) of the Lord is the prerequisite of knowledge. This term can describe dread (Dt 1:29), being terrified (Jnh 1:10), standing in awe (1Ki 3:28), or having reverence (Lev 19:3). With the Lord as the object, *yir'ā* captures both aspects of shrinking back in fear and drawing close in awe. (The expression "the fear of the LORD" occurs fourteen times in the book.)

Such fear is not a trembling dread that paralyzes action, but neither is it a polite reverence (Plaut, 32). "The fear of the LORD" ultimately expresses reverential submission to the Lord's will and thus characterizes a true worshiper. In this context it is the first and controlling principle of knowledge ("beginning" can refer to the first thing, the chief thing, or the principal thing). Elsewhere in Proverbs the fear of the Lord is the foundation for wisdom (9:10) or the discipline leading to wisdom (15:33); it is expressed in hatred of evil (8:13), and it results in a prolonged life (10:27).

By contrast, fools disdain wisdom and discipline. They are not able to grasp this prerequisite, for in

their pride they have chosen to reject the teachings of wisdom. Verse 7b is the antithesis of verse 7a. The term *ʿuflīm* (“fools”; GK 211) describes those who are thick-brained, conceited, and stubborn (Greenstone, 6). They lack understanding (10:21), do not store up knowledge (10:14), fail to attain wisdom (24:7), talk loosely (14:3), are filled with pride (26:5), and are contentious (20:3). They are

morally unskilled and refuse any correction (15:15; 27:22).

Fools are people who “despise” wisdom and discipline; they treat these virtues as worthless and contemptible. This attitude is illustrated in Genesis 25:34, where Esau despised the birthright, and in Nehemiah 4:4, where Sanballat and Tobiah belittled the Jews.

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## II. A FATHER’S ADMONITION TO ACQUIRE WISDOM (1:8–9:18)

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### A. Introductory Exhortation (1:8–9)

<sup>8</sup>Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction  
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.

<sup>9</sup>They will be a garland to grace your head  
and a chain to adorn your neck.

### COMMENTARY

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**8** The disciple is exhorted to heed parental guidance. Youths are in the greatest need of admonition—the passions are strong, self-confidence is growing, and group acceptance is important—but the experience of real life has not yet tempered them. “My son,” the customary form of address for a disciple, derives from the idea that parents are responsible for moral instruction (4:3–4; cf. Dt 6:7). Here the disciple is to respond (*šemaʿ*; “Listen” [NIV], with the attitude of “taking heed to”) to “discipline” (*mūsār*; “instruction,” NIV), which is normally the father’s responsibility (except in Pr 31:1, where it is the warning of the mother).

The son is also to follow his “mother’s teaching.” *Tôrâ* (“teaching”) may be cognate to a verb meaning “to point, direct” (cf. BDB, 434–35), so that

the idea of teaching can be illustrated as pointing in the right direction (see Ge 46:28). At any rate, in Proverbs this instruction is for ordering the life (see also 6:20; 31:26).

**9** As a result of heeding instruction in the law, the disciple receives a special promise. “Grace,” the charm that teaching brings to the disciple, refers to those qualities that make him agreeable. The metaphor compares these qualities to an attractive wreath worn around the head.

Obedience will also improve the disciple, as the metaphor of the neck pendant speaks of adorning the life. The one who loses the rough edges through disciplined training will present a pleasing presence to the world (McKane, 268).