

# A SHORT STUDY OF PROVERBS

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## Introduction

### I. Title

A. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of collections of Hebrew poetry that falls within the broad category denoted by the Hebrew word *māšāl*, which is (in construct plural form, *mišlê*) the first word in the book.

1. It includes not only the short, pithy statements of popular wisdom that we typically associate with the word proverb but also what we would call parables and even some extended instructional discourses.

2. A. S. Herbert wrote decades ago (1954) in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* that in the Old Testament the "proverb"/*māšāl* had "a clearly recognizable purpose: that of quickening an apprehension of the real as distinct from the wished for ... of compelling the hearer or reader to form a judgment on himself, his situation or his conduct ... This usage ... comes to its finest expression in the Parables of Jesus" (quoted in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:533-534).

3. Rhyme and rhythm are not significant in Hebrew poetry, which would be lost anyway in translation. Rather, its major characteristics are terseness, parallelism in which the thought of one line is related to the thought of the following line or lines, and intensive use of imagery.

B. Our English title comes through the Vulgate, which is the ancient Latin translation done by Jerome. The title in the Vulgate is *Liber Proverbiorum*.

### II. Nature of the Book of Proverbs

A. The Book of Proverbs is divine instruction for skillful living in God's world. It reveals principles for navigating life, guidance for the conduct of one's affairs, which lead to blessing, to a good life. In this day when people are paying for "life coaches," one would hope that the message of Proverbs would resonate. In Robert Alden's words (p. 12), "The purpose of proverbs is to make us less often foolish and more often wise, or to improve our overall performance in life."

B. God has made this wisdom available through a number of avenues that are recognized in the Book of Proverbs: observation and experience (e.g., Prov. 6:6-8); instruction from others (e.g., Prov. 4:1-4, 22:17-18); and discipline and correction (e.g., Prov. 10:17, 12:1). And he has provided a concentrated revelation of it in this book; but one must fear him, must recognize his awesomeness and the fact he is the center of all

things, to absorb rightly what he has provided. So we read in 1:7 (ESV): *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

C. Proverbs were common throughout the ancient Near East, and some proverbs from other cultures are very similar to the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs and predate them.

1. This has caused consternation among some Bible believers because they take this lack of uniqueness as evidence against the Bible's divine inspiration, but that is misguided.

2. The fact pagans have through observation and experience perceived principles at work in God's world does not mean God cannot inspire writers to reveal those principles to his people. Divine inspiration is a guarantee that what is affirmed is true not that what is affirmed is unique or heretofore unknown.

3. Moreover, true wisdom is more than perceiving principles at work in God's world; it includes and depends on proper recognition of the one true God. That's why the preamble of the book concludes with the statement (1:7, ESV) *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.* Longman writes (p. 58):

Pagans may well stumble on some interesting and helpful truth that provides insight on how to avoid a problem or achieve a desired goal. They may even be able to formulate that bit of advice in a way that is memorable. The Israelite sages may even adapt the advice for inclusion in the book of Proverbs. However, based on 1:7, they still would not judge pagan wisdom teachers as truly and authentically wise, because they lack fear of Yahweh.

### III. Authorship and Date

A. The opening verse states, "The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel." That fits well with what we are told about Solomon in 1 Kings. He pursued and received wisdom (1 Ki. 3:1-15) and was internationally famous because of his wisdom (1 Ki. 4:29-35, 10:1-13). We're told in 1 Ki. 4:32 that he uttered or spoke three thousand proverbs and that his songs numbered 1,005.

B. Whatever Solomon's connection to the Book of Proverbs, it is clear from the text of Proverbs that he was not the author or source of everything in the collection.

1. Proverbs 22:17 and 24:23 indicate that the proverbs in 22:17 – 24:34 were from a group called simply "the wise."

2. Proverbs 30:1-33 are the sayings of an unknown man named Agur.

3. Proverbs 31:1-9 are the sayings of an unknown king named Lemuel in which he repeats what his mother had taught him.

4. And it seems unlikely that Solomon was the author or source of the teaching in the first nine chapters because Prov. 10:1 is titled "The proverbs of Solomon." If the first nine chapters were proverbs of Solomon, one would expect 10:1 to be worded like 25:1, which says "These *also* are the proverbs of Solomon."

C. On the other hand, Solomon is stated explicitly to be the author or source of the teachings in Prov. 10:1 – 22:16 and 25:1 – 29:27. So he clearly is the dominant contributor to the collection. That, coupled with the fact he was the greatest of Israel's wisdom teachers, may explain why the entire collection is associated with him. It is essentially a collection of proverbs of the great Solomon that has been introduced and supplemented by others in conformity with his wisdom. Even the supplementation is fruit of Solomon's root.

D. As for the date, the Book of Proverbs is a collection of material from different sources that appears to have been put together over a significant period of time.

1. You can see this in the fact the second group of Solomon's proverbs, those in 25:1 – 29:27, were copied by men associated with King Hezekiah. Solomon died in 931/930 B.C., and King Hezekiah reigned in Judah from 715 to 687 B.C. So apparently the collection was still "in process" over two centuries after Solomon's death.

2. When the collection reached its final form is impossible to say. We know the Book of Proverbs was considered authoritative Scripture by the second century B.C., but we do not know how long before that its form was finalized or the steps in that process. But as Longman points out (p. 26), "that is of no major importance; what is of interest is the final product and how the proverbs function in their present context."

#### IV. Structure of Proverbs

A. Outline (adapted from Longman, 37-38):

I. Extended discourses on wisdom (1:1 – 9:18)

- 1:1 – Superscription for entire book
- 1:2-7 – Preamble (stating the purpose)
- 1:8-19 – Avoid evil associations
- 1:20-33 – Don't resist Woman Wisdom
- 2:1-22 – The benefits of the way of wisdom
- 3:1-12 – Trust in Yahweh
- 3:13-20 – Praising wisdom
- 3:21-35 – The integrity of wisdom
- 4:1-9 – Embrace wisdom!
- 4:10-19 – Stay on the right path
- 4:20-27 – Guard your heart

- 5:1-23 – Avoid promiscuous women: Part I; love your wife
- 6:1-19 – Wisdom admonitions: Loans, laziness, lying and other topics
- 6:20-35 – The dangers of adultery
- 7:1-27 – Avoid promiscuous women: Part II;
- 8:1-36 – Wisdom's autobiography
- 9:1-6, 13-18 – The ultimate encounter: Wisdom or folly
- 9:7-12 – Miscellaneous wisdom sayings
- II. Assorted Advice, Observations, and Warnings (10:1 – 31:31)
  - 10:1 – 22:16 - Solomonic proverbs
  - 22:17 – 24:34 – Sayings of the wise
  - 25:1 – 29:27 – More Solomonic proverbs (from Hezekiah's men)
  - 30:1-33 – Sayings of Agur
  - 31:1-9 – Sayings of King Lemuel (his mother's teaching)
  - 31:10-31 – Poem to the virtuous woman

B. There is a fundamental division between chapters 1 – 9 and chapters 10 – 31.

1. The former consists almost entirely of speeches or extended discourses mainly from a father to his son, but in some cases the speaker is a woman named Wisdom who addresses the crowds of naïve young men who walk by her (1:20-33; 8:1 – 9:6). At the end of the section, the words of another woman named Folly are reported.

2. I think there is something to Longman's claim that the competing appeals at the end of this section by Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly to become intimately associated with them, to make them an integral part of our lives, is a call to the readers to decide how they will treat the following material. Will they embrace God's way and be blessed through it, or will they turn a deaf ear to it and thus choose to embrace Woman Folly, who may well represent the false gods who compete for Israel's allegiance?

V. "Classical" Proverbs of Chaps. 10 – 31

A. Chapters 10 – 31 contain mainly what we typically understand as "proverbs." They are brief, pointed statements that express ideas commonly accepted as true. They state an insight, make an observation, or offer advice in the form of an admonition or prohibition.

B. Such proverbs usually do not teach absolute truths. Rather, they are statements of general principles to which there can be exceptions or statements that apply only in certain circumstances.

1. The general nature of proverbs

a. Proverbs 10:4 states (ESV), *A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.* That is generally true, but certainly there are cases where lazy bums have inherited a fortune and diligent workers have been left in poverty. That

doesn't mean the proverb is wrong; it means the proverb is a general rather than an absolute truth.

b. When Prov. 12:21 says (ESV) *No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble*, it is not intended as an ironclad pronouncement to which there can be no exceptions (like Job). The point is that righteous living produces fewer problems than wicked living. It could easily be an abuse of Scripture to cite this text to someone experiencing much hardship as proof that they were wicked.

c. Proverbs 22:6 states (ESV): *Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it*. It generally is true that a child trained in godly ways will continue to walk in that path, but the proverb is not intended as an absolute promise or guarantee that no child trained in God's wisdom will ever abandon that path. As Longman states (p. 85):

Parents are here encouraged to train their children in God's way since that will lead to their godliness – all other things being equal. It is much more likely that children will go the right way if so trained than if their spiritual education is ignored. But all things might not be equal. Perhaps the children fall in with a bad crowd who persuade them to go a different direction. Or there may be a host of other reasons for why a child rejects God's way. A single proverb does not intend to address all the nuances of a situation; it just gives a snapshot of life to motivate proper behavior.

d. For any who might be tempted to over-interpret Proverbs as establishing an ironclad link between godly behavior and earthly blessings, as teaching that good people experience only good things in life and that bad people experience only bad things in life, the wisdom books of Job and Ecclesiastes show that is not the case. As Longman states (p. 62), "[Those books] quash any presumption that one invariably and immediately receives rewards for good behavior and punishments for bad behavior." That's why he says those books "beg to be read in conjunction with Proverbs."

(1) Qoheleth speaks repeatedly of the observational (under-the-sun perspective) disconnect between behavior and circumstances.

(2) Job, of course, was blameless and upright and yet suffered tremendously.

## 2. The circumstantially limited nature of proverbs

a. Proverbs 26:4-5 states (ESV): <sup>4</sup>*Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.* <sup>5</sup>*Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.* There are times and circumstances when it is wise to ignore a fool and times and circumstances when it is wise to engage him. Part of wisdom is being able to tell the difference. As Longman states (p. 464): "[T]he wise person must assess whether this is a fool who will simply drain one's energy with no positive results or

whether an answer will prove fruitful to the fool or perhaps to those who overhear. The wise not only know the proverb but also can read the circumstances and the people with whom they dialogue."

b. This same phenomenon is present in our modern proverbs. We say "Too many cooks spoil the broth," but we also say "many hands make light work." Well, which is it? It's both, depending on the circumstances. Additional workers interfere in the accomplishment of some tasks and aid in the accomplishment of others. Part of wisdom is recognizing the time and circumstances to which the proverb applies.

c. When proverbs are applied in inappropriate circumstances they are useless and can even be dangerous. That's the idea behind Prov. 26:7 and 26:9, which state, respectively (ESV), *Like a lame man's legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools.*

C. Some proverbs, on the other hand, do seem to express universal truths. For example, Prov. 11:1 states (ESV), *A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is his delight.* As Longman says (p. 33), "If there are exceptions to this proverb, they are so rare as to be unimportant."

## VI. Woman Wisdom

A. There is much debate about the particulars of the figure Woman Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. Rather than examine that debate, I will just give my opinion that Woman Wisdom personifies or represents God's wisdom as it includes aspects that have been purposed for human perception and discovery. In other words, Woman Wisdom represents God's wisdom in which a subset has been distinguished, a subset that God determined prior to creation would be accessible to mankind. As the personification of God's wisdom in both its communicable and noncommunicable aspects, the time of that distinction is expressed poetically as the time of her being begotten or brought forth.

B. As a personification of God's wisdom, Woman Wisdom was present when God created the heavens and the earth and was involved in that process (Prov. 8:22-31). As Longman states (p. 209), the obvious point of that picture is that "[i]f one wants to know how the world works and therefore how to navigate life with its problems and pitfalls, then Wisdom is the one to get to know. Who would know better how to act in the world than the one through whom it was made?"

C. Woman Wisdom's relationship to Christ has a long and turbulent interpretive history. From at least the mid-second century, Christians equated Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with Jesus Christ, and in the early fourth century, Arius and his followers argued from that identification, leaning heavily on Prov. 8:22, that Jesus was a created being. This was rightly recognized as heresy by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

D. There certainly are similarities between the portrait of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs and Jesus Christ, but the two are not to be equated. Jesus is the second person of the Godhead, whereas Woman Wisdom is a metaphor for divine wisdom that humans are called to seek in relation to revering God. As Longman comments (p. 70), "Prov. 8 is not a prophecy of Jesus or any kind of literal description of him. We must remember that the text is poetry and is using metaphor to make important points about the nature of God's wisdom."

E. Of course, Jesus is the embodiment of God's wisdom, the perfect example of a life lived rightly. Moreover, the choice between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly that is presented in chapters 8 and 9 must now be understood in terms of Christ's appearing. Woman Wisdom's appeal to embrace her is subsumed by Christ's call to embrace him, the embodiment of divine wisdom, and to deny all competing allegiances.

## VII. Relevance of Proverbs to the Church (see Waltke, 1:126-127 and Longman, 72-74)

A. As part of Holy Scripture, the Book of Proverbs is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17 NIV).

B. The New Testament writers repeatedly apply Proverbs to the church. There are some 60 direct quotations, definite allusions, and parallels of Proverbs in the New Testament. They often are used to teach the church how to live godly lives.

C. Though the immediate addressees of the various proverbs are young men, Prov. 1:2-7, which serves as a kind of preamble for the entire collection, identifies the ultimate audience as the simple (v. 4), the young (v. 4), and the wise (v. 5) without specifying their sex. And since Proverbs in its final form is part of the canon, part of Holy Scripture, its audience includes all of God's people, men and women.

1. So it's appropriate and necessary for women to apply the proverbs to themselves, which may require changing the sex of a person in the proverb. For example, Prov. 21:9 says to a man (ESV), "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife." I think the advice when applied to a woman is "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome *husband*."

2. It's similar to the process one goes through when trying to hear correctly other writings of Scripture that were directed to specific audiences in the past. In studying 1 Corinthians, for example, you first seek to comprehend what God through Paul was saying to the Corinthians; you then are in a position to hear what God is saying to you today through what he said initially to the Corinthians. By hearing what God through Solomon was saying to men in Prov. 21:9, one is in a position to hear what God is saying to women through that text.

## VIII. Wisdom as Achievement and Divine Gift

A. Longman rightly notes (p. 15) that wisdom is both something one is to strive for through hard study *and* a gift from God (see Prov. 2:3-6). He writes, "Somehow these two truths do not undermine each other."

B. So we have a role to play in the pursuit of wisdom. We must apply ourselves to the task. As a hungry man cannot be content merely to come within the vicinity of food, we must reach out and partake of wisdom if it is to be of benefit.

### **Extended Discourses on Wisdom (1:1 – 9:18)**

#### I. Superscription and Preamble (1:1-7)

A. As I said in the introduction, I think the Book of Proverbs is ascribed to Solomon not because he was the author or source of everything in the collection – he wasn't – but because he was the dominant contributor and Israel's greatest wisdom teacher. It is essentially a collection of proverbs of the great Solomon that has been introduced and supplemented by others in conformity with his wisdom. Even the supplementation is fruit of Solomon's root.

B. The purpose of the collection is given in vv. 2-6.

1. The purpose is to impart to all readers wisdom and instruction, to provide understanding of insightful sayings and instruction in wise dealing, which involves acting with righteousness, justice, and equity.

2. The "simple" or "simpleminded" are inexperienced, naïve. They are paralleled with the young. Unlike the fool and the mocker, the simple are teachable. Proverbs seeks to provide the simple prudence, the ability to gauge circumstances calmly and to navigate the problems of life. The book seeks to give the young knowledge and discretion, the latter being the ability to make right judgments so as to avoid pitfalls in life.

3. The wise and discerning are encouraged in vv. 4-6 to absorb what is offered in Proverbs that they may enhance their wisdom and gain further guidance for life. The book can make them more adept at comprehending various kinds of wisdom sayings whose meaning is not readily apparent and thus better equipped to gain from them.

4. The preamble climaxes with the declaration that the fear of Yahweh – fear of the true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – is foundational to knowledge, which here is used as a near synonym for wisdom. This is apparent from the contrasting clause in which fools despise wisdom and instruction and from Prov. 9:10 where the word wisdom is used in the same statement.



a. To fear Yahweh means to be in submission to him, to be committed to living in accordance with his will, and thus to value the way of life he intends for his creatures. That attitude drives one not only to learn God's ways but to adopt them, to walk in God's path, to live life as a godly man or woman. In addition, acceptance of God's sovereignty is foundational for true wisdom because it puts life and all of its experiences in their proper context. We are creatures made in God's image and intended to reflect his glory; our lives are part of a history that is unfolding under God's direction.

b. This attitude is in contrast to that of the fool who, because he has no fear of God, despises wisdom and instruction, meaning he places no value on God's map for life. This prideful rebellion, this refusal to accept reality, closes the fool's eyes to God's light for living.

## II. Avoid Evil Associations (1:8-19)

A. This first discourse or instruction of the father to the son is an exhortation to avoid evil associations, not to get drawn into the evil intentions of others. It begins with a call for the son to *heed* the teaching of his parents, not simply to be aware of it. That teaching when applied adorns a one's life like a wreath and a neck ornament adorn one's body; it is something attractive and desirable. There is a reward to be gained in this endeavor. (Note that the parents in Proverbs are assumed to be wise parents and thus are assumed to reflect divine wisdom in the teaching of their child.)

B. The son is warned not to allow himself to be lured into evil by other people. When people eager for wrongdoing try to entice you to join with them by appealing to the alleged benefits of their sin, the wise course is to resist. Do not step onto that path.

C. Whereas even birds will not walk into an obvious trap, the evildoers are trapping themselves by things of which they are fully aware, the very things they do! By their lives they are plotting disaster for themselves and don't have the sense to realize it.

D. Greed for unjust gain, coveting what rightfully belongs to another, leads to a destroyed life, literally or figuratively. Trying to get rich quick by theft and even murder is no way to navigate life.

## III. Don't Resist Woman Wisdom (1:20-33)

A. Woman Wisdom is introduced here. As I said in the introduction, there is much debate about the particulars of this figure. My opinion is that Woman Wisdom personifies or represents God's wisdom as it includes aspects that have been purposed for human perception and discovery. In other words, Woman Wisdom represents God's wisdom in which a subset has been distinguished, a subset that God determined prior to creation would be accessible to mankind.

B. You see in vv. 20-21 that she cries out in public places. She cries out trying to get the attention of the crowds that are busy going about their lives. And it seems that many have no interest in listening to her.

C. In vv. 22-25 she denounces those who spurn her appeal. She has called to them, stretched out her hands to them, but to no avail. She longs to bless them through her teaching, but the people generally, those she classifies as simpletons, mockers, and fools, choose to ignore her.

D. Because of their rejection of her, she says in vv. 26-31 that she will laugh at the disaster they reap as a result of rejecting her, the disaster into which their lack of wisdom will drag them.

E. Whereas the unwise, the simple and the foolish, suffer disaster (v. 32), those who heed Woman Wisdom will dwell secure and be at ease (v.33).

#### IV. The Benefits of the Way of Wisdom (2:1-22)

A. The son is urged in vv. 1-2 to pursue wisdom *actively*, to "receive" his father's word, to "treasure up" his commandments, to "make" his ear attentive to wisdom, and to "incline" his heart to understanding. This active role is then amplified in vv. 3-4. The son is to "call out" for insight and to "raise his voice" for understanding; he is to seek wisdom like it was silver and search for it like it was a hidden treasure.

B. If he does that, then he will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God (v. 5) and will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path (v. 9).

1. I think the point is that through the diligent pursuit of wisdom one will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God, which experiences involve or are related to a growing understanding of the way God calls one to live, to seeing more clearly what a life lived in righteousness, justice, and equity really involves. To gain insight into God's ethical course, a new moral sensitivity, is to gain insight into God; it is to advance one's knowledge of God and to comprehend more deeply how fear of the Lord is to be translated into living with others.

2. Verses 6-8 elaborate on the result of seeking that is stated in v. 5. Those who pursue wisdom diligently will gain new insight into fearing God and grow in knowledge of him because the Lord is the giver of wisdom. He bestows wisdom on those who truly seek him (the upright) and thus guards their way through it.

3. Verse 10 elaborates on the result of seeking that is stated in v. 9. The reason diligently pursuing wisdom will result in a greater insight into God's ethical course is that it opens the door to God's gift of wisdom.

C. Verses 11-15 describe further fruit of the wisdom and knowledge that are given by God in response to diligent pursuit: one is guarded from evil ways and those who would entice one in that direction.

D. Verses 16-19 speak of a particularly dangerous threat from which wisdom can deliver the son: the threat of the "strange" woman, who also is described as a "foreign" woman (v. 16).

1. She is "strange" (*zārâ*) and "foreign" (*nokrîyâ*) (as literally translated in ASV and noted in ESV) in the sense she is willing to flout moral, legal, and customary restraints and/or in the sense she is one with whom one has no right to a sexual relationship. Most modern versions translate the words loosely to capture her immorality and forbidden nature. She is variously called an immoral woman and seductress (NKJV), a loose woman and adulteress (NRSV), an adulterous and wayward woman (TNIV), and a forbidden woman and an adulteress (ESV).

2. Her lack of restraint is described in v. 17. It says she forsakes the intimate relationship (companion in ESV) of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God. She commits adultery, thereby violating her marriage vows and breaking her covenant with God.

3. A primary tool of her seduction is mentioned: smooth words, meaning flattering speech.

4. She is very enticing, but she also is very deadly. That's the point of vv. 18-19.

E. Verses 20-22 conclude the unit. Acquiring wisdom will keep the son on the right path, the path that is traveled by good and righteous people. The ultimate consequences of the two paths differ radically. Those who walk the right road will remain in the land, whereas those who reject that way will be removed. Longman summarizes chapter 2 this way: "[T]he father has presented a strong argument and an impassioned plea for his son to accept the wisdom that begins with the fear of Yahweh. Only in this way will he escape life's threats and move toward life and away from death."

## V. Trust in Yahweh (3:1-12)

A. The father urges the son in vv. 1-2 to internalize his teachings for they are a key to a long and peaceful life.

B. He urges him in vv. 3-4 to internalize and hold fast to the qualities of loyalty (steadfast love or covenant love) and faithfulness, which are characteristic of God (e.g., Ex. 34:6) so that both God and people will view him favorably.

C. Verses 5-8 the son is told that his trust in God must be absolute.

1. He is told, in essence, in v. 5 to bet his life on God's truth and wisdom, to trust wholeheartedly in God's way rather than in any contrary course that he in his own so-called wisdom may think is better.

2. According to v. 6, the son needs to acknowledge Yahweh *in all his paths*, meaning he needs always to walk in God's ways. As he does so, God will keep the path straight, which is a way of saying he will ease the journey and remove obstacles.

3. In v. 7 he is told that rather than being wise in his own eyes, thinking he knows best, he is to fear the Lord, meaning he is to live as God desires, which involves turning away from evil.

4. God's path of life is one that generally leads to one being healthy and refreshed. A sinful lifestyle is not only spiritually destructive; it often is physically destructive as well, no doubt in some ways we do not yet appreciate.

D. Verses 9-10 speak of honoring God with one's wealth as an aspect of the trusting and fearing of God that he has just mentioned.

1. Giving up some of one's wealth in accordance with God's will is one of the ways one exhibits a trust in and fear of Yahweh. And God will, as a general proposition, bless the one who so honors him by providing a material abundance. The faithful steward will be supplied with additional wealth to manage.

2. It is a mistake to read this reward of material abundance as an absolute promise. God can have reasons for depriving the faithful, whether it be for reasons of discipline (vv. 11-12) or something else, as in Job's case. Derek Kidner writes in *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 64: "The generalization that piety brings *plenty* chimes in with much of Scripture (e.g. Dt. 28:1-14; Mal. 3:10) and of experience. If it were *more* than a generalization (as Job's comforters held), God would be not so much honored, as invested in, by our gifts."

E. The son is urged in vv. 11-12 to remain open to the Lord's correction, which can be direct or be communicated by a teacher of wisdom (in this case the father) serving as God's agent. Correction is an act of love designed to benefit its object, so it is a foolish thing to turn a deaf ear or blind eye to it; that deprives one of its benefit. Wisdom is learned, and discipline serves that process.

## VI. Praising Wisdom (3:13-20)

A. This poem pronounces a blessing on those who find wisdom, which is again personified as a woman. It serves to encourage the readers to begin their quest for wisdom.

B. Verses 14-15 say that wisdom is of greater value than such precious and expensive items as gold, silver, and pearls. Solomon realized this, which is why he chose wisdom over wealth (1 Ki. 3:5-12).

C. Verses 16-18 connect wisdom to a long and blessed life. Her great value is explained in terms of some benefits associated with acquiring her. Longman writes (p. 137):

Wisdom is the insight into life and the way the world works, so that people avoid the pitfalls that might lead to an early death or a damaged reputation. They also allow one to have the insight that will accrue in great material wealth. In this passage the sage wants to motivate people to pursue wisdom. Other passages will grapple with the fact that some wise people are not wealthy, healthy, and powerful, while some wicked people are (Ps. 73; Job; Ecclesiastes).

D. Verses 19-20 speak of Wisdom's role in creation. Creation did not happen by chance; it is the product of God's thought and purpose, an expression of his wisdom. This is further motivation to acquire Wisdom. She is divine insight into how the created world works. So knowing her will lead to blessing and spare one much trouble and heartache.

## VII. The Integrity of Wisdom (3:21-35)

A. In verses 21-22 the father urges his son to keep or protect sound wisdom (or sound judgment or resourcefulness) and discretion. The result of doing so is that they will be a blessing and adornment for his life.

B. That blessing and adornment are stated more particularly in vv. 23-25. Fruit of wisdom (or its related concepts) includes safety and confidence. The Lord provides these to those who walk in his way, who live according to his "life map." One is not always looking over one's shoulder or wondering when one's foolish ways will catch up with one.

C. Verses 27-31 are examples of living sound wisdom and discretion.

1. Verses 27-28 are connected and together speak of not withholding from one's neighbor whatever helpful thing to which that neighbor is entitled within the understood obligations of neighborliness, kindness, and charity. Don't blow him off with some excuse because you don't want to give what you should give to him.

2. Verse 29 says not to plan evil against one's neighbor, violating his rightful expectation that you will act neighborly.

3. Verse 30 is aimed at making false accusations against others. That is a foolish course that creates nothing but strife.

4. Verse 31 indicates that sound wisdom and discretion involve resisting the temptation to choose violence as a way to get what one wants. Though it seems sometimes that violence yields rewards in this life (e.g., Psalm 73), it is in reality the fool's path.

D. Verses 32-35 are motivations for living the life of wisdom rather than the life of folly as illustrated in vv. 27-31. The devious, the wicked, and the scorners are an abomination to and are cursed and scorned by God. The upright, the righteous, and the humble are in the Lord's confidence, are blessed, and receive favor. As summarized in v. 35, the wise will inherit (or possess) honor, but fools get (or exude) disgrace.

#### VIII. Embrace Wisdom! (4:1-9)

A. This is further urging for the sons to embrace the way of wisdom. The urging is done by highlighting the benefits wisdom will bring to one's life. The father calls them in vv. 1-2 to heed his teaching because it is able to give them insight.

B. In vv. 3-9 he recounts for his sons what he, as one loved by his parents (expressed in terms of his mother's fondness), had been taught by his father. This bolsters the father's appeal to his own son.

1. His father urged him to heed his words as a source of wisdom and thus as a path to blessed living.

2. He told him that if he would embrace Wisdom she would guard, exalt, honor, and adorn him.

3. The statement in v. 7 that "the beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom" probably means, in Derek Kidner's words (p. 67), "What it takes is not brains or opportunity, but a decision. Do you want it? Come and get it." The beginning of wisdom is the commitment to its pursuit, which commitment flows from fear of the Lord (1:7), from an acknowledgement of his greatness and a submission to his will for life.

#### IX. Stay on the Right Path (4:10-19)

A. In vv. 10-12 the father urges the son to heed his words, the wisdom he has imparted that is the upright path, so that things will go well with him.

B. In vv. 13-19 the focus is on guarding the wisdom one has acquired, staying the course in the midst of temptations to abandon it. Longman remarks (p. 151), "[T]his shows that wisdom is not a once-for-all decision but involves a lifetime of commitment and rededication." However enticing the path of evil may appear, it leads to trouble and heartache and thus is a fool's path.

#### X. Guard Your Heart (4:20-27)

A. The father here again encourages his son to strive to stay on the right path. He must not only heed his words and sayings; he must hold onto them. He must not let them escape his sight and must keep them within his heart, for those words are life and healing.

B. He urges his son in v. 23 to keep or guard his heart with all vigilance, because from the heart, from the innermost personality or core being, flows the spring of life. One must preserve the integrity of one's heart, keep it submissive before God, because the heart sets the course for one's life. It determines one's conduct and thus must be kept clear of evil intentions.

C. As part of the process of guarding his heart, the son is to keep his distance from smooth talkers, those who through crooked speech and devious talk threaten one's heart. One is to focus on God's way and not be distracted or diverted from that way.

D. The son is to be aware of where he is walking so he can stay on course. He is not just to bop along with no ongoing assessment of where he is in relation to the life God calls him to lead. And being aware of where he is, he is not to swerve from that path.

#### XI. Avoid Promiscuous Women: Part I; Love Your Wife (5:1-23)

A. The power and danger of illicit sexual relations has already been noted in Prov. 2:16-19. This is the first of three large blocks of teaching in the first nine chapters that further address that threat (5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27). So clearly the temptation of illicit sexual relations has a huge potential to derail one's life.

B. After getting his son's attention and urging him to "listen up" for his own benefit (vv. 1-2), the father warns the son not to get sexually involved with a "strange" (forbidden, ESV) woman, meaning a woman who is morally aberrant and/or one with whom one has no right to a sexual relationship.

1. He says in v. 3 that her lips drip honey and her palate is smoother than oil, which refers to her flattering speech that feeds the ego but also probably is a double entendre that refers to the pleasure of physical contact with her.

2. But despite how pleasurable and satisfying a sexual relationship with her may appear, the truth expressed in v. 4 is that illicit sexual relationships produce tremendous pain. The reality behind the lips dripping honey and the palate smoother than oil is that she is as bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword. Verses 5-6 point out that this woman gives no serious thought to her way of life, but she is on the road to destruction. The implication is that those who join with her join her on that road.

3. After reiterating the need to listen up (v. 7), the father tells his sons in v. 8 not even to go near such a woman. The pull is that powerful, especially for young men. The father then enumerates in vv. 9-14 some of the negative consequences of getting involved with her.

a. One's honor and respect in the community will be squandered, and the years of building a reputation will be put in the hands of a person who will take vengeful delight in destroying it by exposing one's deeds.

b. Verse 10 seems to point to the possibility of one being financially exploited or ruined by people associated with the woman.

c. Verses 11-14 portray the regret one will feel at the end of one's life for having foolishly ignored the instruction to stay away from such a woman. The physical pleasure will be nothing in light of the bitterness of the wormwood and wounds of the double-edged sword.

C. In vv. 15-19 the father urges the son to maintain a vital sexual relationship with his wife as a defense to sexual temptation.

1. In v. 15 he tells the son to find sexual fulfillment with his own wife, referred to by the images of a well and cistern, rather than with another woman.

2. The point of v. 16 is that the son should not be sleeping around but should restrict his "springs" and "streams of water" to his wife. This is reinforced in v. 17 from a practical angle: his sexual vigor should be used for his own benefit in the sense of building up his own family rather than for impregnating women in other families.

3. The son is to let his "fountain" be blessed (with progeny) by having sexual relations only with his wife, and toward that end he is instructed to rejoice in the wife of his youth (v. 18). She is to remain the focus of his sexual interest (v. 19).

D. In vv. 20-23 the father urges the son to sexual fidelity on the basis that God is aware of all a man's ways, even those done in secret, and he will hold him accountable for sexual immorality.

## XII. Wisdom Admonitions: Loans, Laziness, Lying and Other Topics (6:1-19)

### A. Humble oneself to seek release from rash pledges (6:1-5)

1. The situation addressed in v. 1 is unclear, but I think it is a case where one has rashly agreed, perhaps to impress the community, to insure payment of a stranger's debt to a neighbor. It is where shooting off one's mouth has put one in financial jeopardy.

2. The implication, of course, is that one should avoid the circumstance, but the actual advice deals with what to do if one finds oneself in that circumstance. As David Hubbard says (p. 98), "The lesson, then, is, 'Swallow hard and eat your humble pie.'" He adds:



In a society where pride and self-esteem governed public conduct and made apology rare and groveling before a creditor even more rare, this lesson would have cut to the quick. It called for admitting a faux pas, reneging on a promise, and badgering a powerful neighbor for relief from it. Distasteful but necessary. And a wholesome reminder that prudence would have avoided the predicament in the first place. It was not brother or uncle for whom he rashly pledged collateral and cosigned an agreement. It was someone to whom he had no primary obligation and who, in turn, was not at all accountable to him.

3. The larger lesson is that when you make a foolish commitment to someone who has the moral right to free you from that commitment, don't let your pride and ego keep you from seeking that person's mercy. It is better to take the medicine of humiliation than to suffer ruin for the sake of pride.

4. This teaching is not intended to discourage being generous to the poor (e.g., 28:27).

#### B. Warning against laziness (6:6-11)

1. The sluggard is told to learn from the behavior of ants. The point about them having no ruler or authority structures is that they labor diligently without them. They illustrate a self-motivated worker in contrast to a lazy person who works only under the compulsion of an authority figure. If he can get away with it, meaning if there is no authority to hold him accountable, the sluggard will do no work.

2. If a person is unwilling to work hard, to be industrious, he can expect a life of poverty and want. The sluggard foolishly chooses the immediate, momentary pleasure of rest over the far greater reward that diligent labor produces.

#### C. Other topics (6:12-19)

1. Verses 12-14 describe the wicked person as one whose mouth or speech is crooked, meaning he utters lies and slander, and one who employs secretive, scheming gestures. He has a perverse heart, one bent on evil, and he creates discord in the community. However things may now look, verse 15 makes plain their ultimate end: irreversible disaster.

2. Verses 16-19 refer to seven things the Lord absolutely despises. As Longman notes, it is hard to imagine a more definitive way to express God's displeasure than with the sayings he "hates" these things and they are "an abomination to his soul." The literary device of a numerical ladder, where a writer gives a certain number and then gives that number plus one, is generally understood to mean that the number does not exhaust the list; there are other things that qualify but they are not being included.

a. Haughty eyes is a reference to pride. God hates pride and respects humility. Prideful people wallow in wrongdoing because their pride keeps them from seeing themselves honestly.

b. A lying tongue obviously refers to those who lie. We tend to make light of lying – in fact politicians have made it an art form – but God hates it.

c. Hands that shed innocent blood refers to those who murder human beings.

d. A heart that devises wicked plans refers to those who pervert God-given intellect and creativity into tools of evil.

e. Feet that hasten to run to evil refers to those who are eager to act on their evil impulses. They cannot get down to wrongdoing fast enough!

f. A false witness is a specific manifestation of a lying tongue. It is somebody who testifies falsely against someone else.

g. One who sows discord among brothers is one who disturbs the harmony within a family. The application to the church is painfully clear.

### XIII. The Danger of Adultery (6:20-35)

A. In v. 20-22 the father tells the son to keep the father's command and not to forsake his mother's teaching. The wisdom the father conveys is that of both parents. The son is to internalize this command and teaching, and he will be benefited constantly in so doing; they will lead him when he's active, protect him when he's lying down, and get his attention when he first awakens.

B. The father says in v. 23-24 that his command and the mother's teaching are sources of light and that disciplined correction is the way of life that can protect the son from the danger of the adulteress ("foreign woman").

1. The fact the sage speaks so often about sexual temptation and does so with such forceful rhetoric indicates the power and danger of this temptation.

2. Note that the son is first warned about the adulteress's flattering speech. Longman writes (p. 178), "This comment shows psychological insight: the sage is aware that men falter not always for the obvious reasons of beauty but also because of an appeal to self-vanity."

C. In vv. 25-26 the father warns the son not to be captivated by the married woman's beauty. Whereas a prostitute will take your things (a loaf of bread), a married woman hunts a man's life in the sense that having a sexual relationship with her may well lead to death at the hands of her husband.

D. The point of vv. 27-29 is that just as one can expect to get burned by carrying a fire next to one's chest and by walking on hot coals, so a man who is sexually intimate with another man's wife can expect to be harmed.

E. Verses 30-35 emphasize the danger of adultery by contrasting it to a thief who steals to satisfy his hunger. People are not morally outraged at such a thief, but he still is required to pay a fine of seven times the value of what he stole. The adulterer, on the other hand, will be disgraced and will suffer the wrath of the jealous husband who will accept no monetary fine in substitution for the death penalty. Longman states (p. 181):

The logic of vv. 34b-35 depends on the nicety of Hebrew law. The penalty for adultery is death for both the man and the woman (as in Deut. 22:22). However, technically, it would be possible to substitute a monetary fine in place of the death penalty. This can be gathered from Num. 35:31-32, which states that a ransom (a fine) cannot be substituted for murder. The implication is that other capital offenses can be commuted into monetary fines. Furthermore, the goring-ox law also provides for such a substitution at Exod. 21:30. It is not clear who can "demand" such a substitution, but likely the victim (in the case of adultery, the offended husband) would be involved in the decision. This implication makes sense of our present passage, which implies that the husband's jealousy would be such that he would refuse any suggestion to commute the death penalty.

#### XIV. Avoid promiscuous women: Part II (7:1-27)

A. This teaching, which addresses the same theme as 6:20-35, begins with a familiar appeal to take the instruction to heart, to become intimately associated with Woman Wisdom (vv. 1-4). The purpose of the appeal, stated in v. 5, is to keep the son from the forbidden (strange) woman, from the adulteress (foreign woman) with her smooth words.

B. In vv. 6-9 the father tells his son a story about what he's seen happen to others. He witnessed a naïve young man walking at dusk down a street where a married woman resided, a woman who was looking for an illicit sexual relationship.

C. In vv. 10-13 the woman, who is dressed provocatively, appears and aggressively "comes on" to the young man. She's described as "wily of heart" (with guarded heart) because she is scheming, seeking to lure this man into a sexual relationship. She's a woman "on the prowl," one who is not content with her home life. She kisses the fellow and then flat out propositions him (vv. 14-20).

D. She tells him in vv. 14-15 that she came out to meet him because she just offered fellowship (or peace) offerings and completed her vows. Some scholars believe this is a reference to the woman's participation in a pagan religion that involved ritual sex, but I am with those who think it more likely that the woman is enticing the man not

only with sex but with a scrumptious meal. Most of the meat of a fellowship (or peace) offering was available to be eaten by the worshipers and was to be eaten on that day (see, Leviticus 3; 7:11-21). She's pulling out all the stops. As Longman notes (p. 190), "She not only is engaging in illicit sex; she is also blaspheming the holy things of God."

E. In vv. 16-20 she tells the young man she has her place fixed up in a sensually pleasing way, and then explicitly invites him for a night of lovemaking while her husband is out of town on a business trip.

F. In vv. 21-23 she pours on the seductive talk and flattery, and the young man chooses to follow her. In so doing, he is like various animals that walk into deadly situations without appreciating the consequences.

G. In vv. 24-27 the father warns his sons not to repeat that young man's mistake. He tells him to stay away from such women. Her invitation sparkles with fantasies of pleasure, but she is a death trap.

#### XV. Wisdom's autobiography (8:1-36)

A. In vv. 1-3, an unidentified speaker, perhaps the father who has been instructing his son(s), makes clear by means of rhetorical questions that Wisdom, also called Understanding, is crying out. She stands at the highest point beside the path, which means she can be heard by passersby, and at the crossroads, which is where many people travel. She shouts at the gate, at the entrances of the city.

B. Woman Wisdom's speech begins in v. 4. She says in v. 4-5 that she is crying out to people, urging the simple ones to learn prudence and the fools to learn sense. Clearly fools here does not refer to those who are hardened so as to be equated with mockers; these fools are paralleled with the simple, those who are naïve or immature but capable of responding to the message.

C. In vv. 6-9 Wisdom declares that her speech is noble, right, truthful, righteous, and straight and that there is nothing wicked, twisted, or crooked in it. One can trust completely what she says.

D. Verses 10-11 say that "[w]isdom and her associates, 'discipline' and 'knowledge,' are to be preferred over precious metals and jewels" (Longman, 200-201).

E. Verse 12 begins Wisdom's autobiography proper. She indicates there that she is characterized by prudence, knowledge, and discretion; these qualities are bound up with her. In v. 13, the fear of the Lord is equated with hating evil. Those submitted to God (Yahweh) hate what he hates, and what he hates includes pride and arrogance, evil ways, and perverted speech. Wisdom says she hates these things, and since she is a personification of God's wisdom, God hates them.

F. Verse 14 associates counsel (advice), sound wisdom (resourcefulness), insight (understanding), and strength (power) with Wisdom. These qualities obviously are valuable in navigating life, and thus are very desirable. The point is that if readers want them they must obtain Wisdom.

G. Verses 15-16 state that Wisdom is the means by which kings and princes rule well, rule with justice and righteousness. The classic illustration being Solomon's handling of the two women who claimed to be the mother of the same baby in 1 Ki. 3:16-28.

H. Verse 17 states that Wisdom can be found by those who will seek her diligently. Actively pursue her, and you will find her.

I. Verses 18-21 speak again of the rewards that accompany a relationship with Wisdom. The wise are blessed with wealth, honor, and righteousness; the consequences of being wise, the fruit of Woman Wisdom, is better than gold and silver.

J. In vv. 22-31 Wisdom emphasizes that she was brought into existence before the creation of the world.

1. She witnessed and participated in creation, as suggested by the reference to her in v. 30 as a "craftsman" or "master workman." Yahweh created the world through wisdom. Longman states (p. 209): "If one wants to know how the world works and therefore how to navigate life with its problems and pitfalls, then Wisdom is the one to get to know. Who would know better how to act in the world than the one through whom it was made?"

2. If Woman Wisdom is a personification of God's wisdom, the question is how she can be said to have been created. My suggestion is that Woman Wisdom is a personification of God's wisdom after God purposed aspects of that wisdom for human perception and discovery; it is a personification of divine wisdom in both its communicable and noncommunicable elements. That divine purposing prior to creation of the world is alluded to poetically as Woman Wisdom's creation.

K. In vv. 32-36 Wisdom urges the young men to heed her words. The result will be life and God's favor, whereas the result of rejecting her words will be harm and death.

## XVI. The Ultimate Encounter: Wisdom or Folly (9:1-18)

### A. Wisdom's invitation

1. Woman Wisdom has built a mansion indicative of wealth and social status. This is a poetical way of expressing her importance.

2. In v. 2-3, she has prepared a luxurious feast and issued invitations by sending out her servant girls and by calling out herself from the top of the heights of the city. (ESV is almost alone in ascribing the calling out of v. 3b to the servants.)

3. In vv. 4-6 Wisdom appeals to the simple, the naïve or immature, to accept her invitation. Longman remarks (p. 217), "In the Ancient Near East, for a woman to invite a man to a meal has erotic overtones. What Woman Wisdom wants is an intimate relationship with the man." It is an appeal for the man to turn from simplemindedness and gain understanding.

#### B. Wisdom and Folly contrasted

1. Verses 1-6 and 13-18 clearly are parallel appeals by Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, but it is not clear how vv. 7-12 relate to either.

2. Perhaps vv. 7-12 are best seen as a kind of parenthetical comment by Woman Wisdom designed to enhance her invitation in vv. 4-6. The contrast between the wise/righteous and the scoffers/wicked in vv. 7-9 suggests that the simple people Woman Wisdom is inviting to learn from her have more in common with the wise than with the mockers. Mockers are to be left alone because they will not receive correction or instruction, whereas correcting and teaching the wise yields much fruit. The very fact Woman Wisdom is appealing to the simple implies they share with the wise the potential for growth. Wisdom's implicit association of the naïve with the wise and her distinguishing of the naïve from the outright hostile, the mockers, may be designed to make it easier for the simple to accept her invitation.

3. In v. 10 Woman Wisdom announces the prerequisite for accepting her invitation: fear of Yahweh. As I said in regard to 1:7, submission to the Lord's authority is foundational to acquiring wisdom. She adds that knowing God and his ways is the definition of insight, real wisdom, which is what she represents.

4. She, being the personification of God's wisdom, will provide a long life in that she will direct one down the right paths, paths that avoid the fool's fate. Whether a person chooses wisdom or mockery, that person is the primary and ultimate recipient of the consequences.

#### C. Folly's invitation

1. Woman Folly is loud and attention getting, but she is full of simpleness (ESV footnote) and knows nothing. She certainly is not one from whom advice should be taken.

2. She sits at the doorway of her house, on a seat at the highest place of the city. Unlike Wisdom's luxurious house, her house is not described. The reference to the highest place of the city, the place where a temple would be built, may suggest that she stands for the false gods that vie for Israel's allegiance.

3. In any event, Woman Folly is calling the simple, the same immature group to whom Woman Wisdom is appealing, to choose a relationship with her. They are rivals for the same young men. Her appeal calls for a decision on the part of the reader: will he (or she) embrace Woman Wisdom through heeding the teaching of Proverbs or will he cast his lot with Woman Folly by failing to heed that teaching?

4. In contrast to the sumptuous feast offered by Woman Wisdom, Woman Folly seeks to entice the simple with the excitement of forbidden fruit, described as stolen water and bread eaten in secret. This symbolizes illicit pleasures, certainly including the sexuality of another man's wife, the taking of water from another man's cistern (see 5:15).

5. Those to whom Woman Folly appeals are unaware of the danger she represents. Her invitation is an invitation to death.

### **COMMENTS ON MISCELLANEOUS PROVERBS**

**11:22** – Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

A pig not only is ugly and dirty but was ritually unclean under Jewish law (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8). Later Jewish thought elevated the pig to the ultimate of unclean animals and food. A gold ring is expensive and attractive and diverts one's attention from what the pig is really like. The point is that physical beauty can distract you so you don't recognize the person's undesirable character, her lack of sense or judgment.

**11:24** – One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.

2 Cor. 9:6 – <sup>6</sup> The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

**12:9** – Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread.

Reality is more important than appearances. In this case, actually having wealth is more important than the appearance of wealth. Reputation is important; it's just not as important as reality.

**12:10** – Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.

Righteous people are so sensitive to others that they're sensitive even to their animals. On the other hand, even the mercy or compassion of the wicked is cruel.

**15:17** – Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

Love is more important than the finer things in life.

**16:2** – All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit.

The "spirit(s)" here stands for motives and intentions. We can deceive ourselves about the nobility of our actions, but we cannot deceive the Lord. He knows the truth about all our deepest motives, affections, attitudes, and desires. He knows even the things we will not admit to ourselves.

**17:3** – The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the LORD tests hearts.

Metalworkers separate impurities from gold and silver by heating the metal until the dross can be poured off. God puts us in situations that will reveal our sin (the impurity of our hearts) and through that process help rid us of it, pour it off so to speak.

**18:2** – A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

A fool is unwilling to expend the effort to gain understanding but loves to hear himself talk.

**18:17** – The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.

This is a caution against making hasty judgments. Evidence must be probed and tested to determine its reliability.

**20:5** – The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.

I think this means that a wise person is able to get a person to "show his hand," to reveal his ulterior motives and hidden agendas.

**20:9** – Who can say, "I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin"?

The wise person needs to know that even though he may be righteous in a relative sense, righteous as Job was righteous, he is not free of sin. Being blind to one's sin leads one to ignore it and to cease relying on the Lord's mercy.

**23:17** – Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day.

**25:2-3** – It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out. 3 As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable.



God is praised for his wisdom expressed in the unfathomable things of creation. Rulers, on the other hand, are praised for knowing what's going on, for being well informed, first with regard to matters of governance but also with regard to other mysteries of life.

**25:26** – Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.

A spring or fountain that was once good, valuable, and even life-giving, is rendered worthless by being muddied or polluted. So a righteous man, who once was good, valuable, and even life-giving, is rendered worthless by compromising with the wicked.

**26:4-5** – Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. 5 Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

As I've said, Proverbs typically are not universally true laws but circumstantially relevant principles. There are times when one should not answer a fool because it is simply a waste of time and energy and there is a danger you'll be pulled to his level. But there are other times when one you just cannot let something go.

**26:17** – Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

The point is that it's a stupid thing to do, the assumption being it's a mean dog that will bite. If you butt into a fight, you're asking for trouble.

**26:20** – For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

**26:27** – Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling.

The evil we seek to dish out to others has a way of coming back on us.

**27:1** – Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

We don't control the future; it's in God's hands.

**27:21** – The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise.

A man's character is tested by his being praised because it tempts him with pride and conceit. Resisting that temptation helps to refine one's character.

**28:1** – The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.

The wicked flee even before there is a fight because they know God is not with them. The righteous, on the other hand, stand confidently in the power of the Lord.

**29:18** – Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.

Without inspired direction, divine revelation, people tend to "run wild." But blessings are in store for those who follow God's will.

### **The Excellent Wife (31:10-31)**

This poem is an acrostic, meaning its 22 verses begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. An acronym is a word formed from the first letters of a group of words, such as scuba (self-contained, underwater breathing apparatus) or WIMP (weakly interacting massive particle).

This woman is well off but not from the highest stratum of society, as evident from the fact she does work that the wealthiest class of women would relegate to servants.

This amazingly energetic and competent woman is an ideal, the "dream wife" of that particular culture. Not everyone will have all the gifts and resources she has, so not everyone can do all that she does. But we all can learn from her description as one who is a blessing to her husband, her children, and her household.

V. 11 – Her husband has complete confidence in her. He trusts her to follow through and take care of him and the household. The second clause (11b) literally says "he does not lack plunder (or spoil)." Longman states, "The idea of the verse seems to suggest that the woman is a warrior in the battle of life. She goes out and fights on behalf of her family and comes back with the victor's spoils."

V. 13 – She's out in the market purchasing the materials she needs for making clothes, and she not only works with her hands, she does it joyfully.

V. 14 – She's like a trading ship in that she take the products she has made to "the port" of the public market, and then brings back to her "home port" food for the family.

V. 15 – She is up before dawn taking care of business, which includes providing food for her household. It says literally that "she gives prey to her household," which again has overtones of effort and struggle.

V. 16 – She buys (or takes over managing) a field and then plants a vineyard, presumably as a business venture.

V. 17 – She is described as physically powerful, capable of hard work.

- V. 18 – She realizes that her merchandise, what she has produced and traded for, is profitable, and she works late hours.
- V. 19 – A distaff is "a wooden staff onto which the wool or flax was attached before it was spun into thread." A spindle is "the flywheel or stick used to collect the yarn or thread." She is making clothes, but Longman suggests there may be another underlying reference to her as a warrior in the battle of life. Anat, the warrior goddess of Ugarit, used her distaff and spindle as a weapon.
- V. 20 – She is generous to the poor, as a wise person should be.
- V. 21 – She is not afraid of coming cold weather because she prepares her household for it.
- V. 22 – Her making bed coverings for herself, which make the bed soft, comfortable, and attractive, may hint at her sexual availability for her husband (see 7:16). Her clothing is made of fine and expensive materials, which may indicate the wealth she has generated and the fact she dresses up.
- V. 23 – Her husband has an important status and function in part because her work makes that possible. As the saying goes, behind every great man is a great woman.
- V. 24 – This speaks again of her dealing in garments.
- V. 25 – She conducts herself as though clothed in strength and honor. She has regarding the difficulties and obstacles the future will bring because her wisdom, which is rooted in her relationship with God, will sustain her.
- V. 26 – She is a woman of wisdom.
- V. 27 – She diligently cares for the needs of her household.
- V. 28-29 – She elicits praise from her children and husband, as well she should.
- V. 30 – Charm can hide a nasty personality and beauty without godliness is meaningless (see 11:22). Longman states: "The verse does not mean that a noble woman is abrasive and ugly; it simply contrasts these relatively worthless traits (charm, beauty) with what is truly important: fear of Yahweh."
- V. 31 – Such a wife should benefit from her hard work, and she should be praised not just at home but also publicly.

### **SKETCH OF A WISE PERSON**

These topics are drawn mainly from the commentaries on Proverbs by Derek Kidner and Tremper Longman and from the outline in the NIV Study Bible.

## I. Some general attitudes and characteristics

### A. He is submissive to the will of God.

1. fears the Lord (1:7, 9:10, 14:27, 15:33, 19:23, 22:4, 23:17, 24:21, 28:14, 31:30)

2. trusts in the Lord rather than in his own understanding (3:5, 14:12, 16:20, 16:25, 28:25-26, 29:25)

3. shuns evil (3:7, 4:27, 8:13, 14:16, 16:6) and does what is righteous (2:20, 15:9, 21:21); hypocritical worship is unacceptable (15:8, 21:27)

a. illicit sexual relations (23:26-28; see also, 2:16-19, 5:1-23, 6:20-35, 7:1-27)

b. drunkenness (20:1, 21:17, 23:19-21, 23:29-25, 31:1-9)<sup>1</sup>

c. stealing and defrauding (11:1, 16:11, 20:10, 20:23, 22:28, 23:10, 29:24, 30:9)

d. laziness (6:6-11, 10:4-5, 10:26, 12:11, 12:24, 12:27, 13:4, 14:23, 15:19, 18:9, 19:15, 19:24, 20:4, 20:13, 21:25, 22:13, 22:29, 24:30-34, 26:13-16, 28:19, 31:27)

e. lying (6:16-19, 12:17, 12:19, 12:22, 13:5, 14:5, 14:25, 19:5, 19:9, 19:28, 21:6, 21:28, 24:28-29, 25:18, 30:7-9)

g. greediness (1:19, 15:27, 28:25)

h. quarreling (17:14, 20:3, 26:21)

B. He is humble, not proud (3:5, 3:7, 6:17, 11:2, 15:25, 15:33, 16:5, 16:18-19, 21:4, 21:24, 22:4, 25:6-7, 25:27, 26:12, 29:23).

1. confesses his sin (28:13)

2. submits to the Lord's discipline (3:11-12, 27:22)

3. is teachable (8:33-34, 9:7-9, 10:8, 10:17, 12:1, 13:1, 13:18, 15:5, 15:12, 15:31-32, 17:10, 18:15, 19:20, 19:25, 19:27, 25:12, 29:1)

4. is open to advice (3:11-12, 9:7-9, 12:15, 13:10, 15:22, 19:20, 27:5-6)

C. He is self-controlled (17:27, 25:28), especially with regard to anger (14:17, 14:29, 15:18, 16:32, 19:11, 29:11).

D. He is forgiving, not vindictive (19:11, 20:22, 24:29, 25:21-22).

E. He plans wisely for the future (21:5).

1. involves seeking advice from wise people (20:18, 24:5-6)

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<sup>1</sup> I believe Prov. 31:4-7 is advice that the king should avoid intoxication. The king is too important and his responsibilities are too great to have his mind clouded by drink. Verses 6-7 reinforce this point by saying that getting drunk should be left to failed kings, those who have been vanquished or expelled and thus stand to forget nothing more important than their own misery and poverty. In my mind, it's as if a high school basketball coach told his players to avoid alcohol and then added, "give the booze to those who got cut, let them drown their sorrow." The point of such a comment would be that drinking is unfitting for a team member, not that they should literally ply "the losers" with drink or that drunkenness is an appropriate response to getting cut. Standing alone, Prov. 31:6-7 certainly could be interpreted as recommending that the king supply alcohol to his suffering subjects so they might ease their pain via intoxication. But in light of the clear condemnation of drunkenness elsewhere in Scripture, I do not see how that interpretation can be correct. Indeed, I doubt there can be much worse advice than to tell someone to drown his sorrows in a bottle.

2. includes awareness and acceptance of the fact God's plans may override (16:9, 19:21, 27:1); plans are to be committed to Yahweh in that sense (16:3)
- F. He is reliable (10:26, 25:13).

## II. His relationship with his family

- A. To his parents
  1. respects them (17:6, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, 30:17)
  2. listens to them (6:20, 13:1, 15:5, 23:22)
  3. seeks to bring them honor and joy (10:1, 15:20, 23:24-25)
- B. To his wife
  1. appreciates her as a gift from the Lord (18:22)
  2. is faithful to her (5:15-20)
- C. To his children
  1. wants what is best for them (3:1-2, 4:10, 4:20-22, 23:15, 24:21-22)
  2. blesses them by modeling godly behavior (20:7, 23:26)
  3. trains them in the way they should live (22:6), which includes disciplining them (13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13-14, 29:15, 29:17)

## III. His relationship with his friends and neighbors

- A. values them (14:21, 17:17, 18:24, 27:9-10)
- B. meets his social obligations to them (3:27-28)
- C. does no evil against them (3:29, 11:9, 11:12, 24:28, 25:18, 26:18-19)
- D. is merciful toward them (21:10)
- E. is not naïve about them (20:6)
- F. is a positive influence on them (and vice versa) (12:26, 27:6, 27:9, 27:17 [see KJV, ASV, NET], 29:5)
- G. doesn't wear out his welcome with them (25:17)

## IV. His speech

- A. is truthful (see lying above)
- B. is measured and thoughtful (10:19, 13:3, 15:28, 17:27-28, 29:20)
- C. is spoken at the appropriate time (15:23, 25:11, 26:7, 26:9, 27:14)
- D. is not boastful (27:2)
- E. is gentle and gracious (12:18, 15:1, 15:4, 16:24, 22:11)
- F. is not gossip or slander (10:18, 11:13, 20:19, 30:10)

## V. Miscellaneous topics

- A. Bribes and gifts (15:27, 17:8, 17:23, 18:16, 21:14, 28:21)
- B. Emotions and health (3:7-8, 14:30, 16:24, 17:22, 18:14)
- C. Wealth and poverty
  1. wisdom is associated with wealth (3:16, 8:18, 12:27, 14:24, 22:4)
  2. foolish behavior, especially laziness, is associated with poverty (6:10-11, 10:4, 13:4, 20:4, 22:16, 24:30)
  3. wealth of fools will not last (13:11, 13:22)
  4. poverty can be caused by injustice and oppression (13:23, 22:16)

5. wise are generous to the poor (14:21, 14:31, 19:17, 21:13, 28:27, 31:20)  
and defend their rights (29:7, 29:14, 31:9)

6. wisdom and righteousness are better than wealth (3:13-14, 8:10-11,  
8:19, 16:16, 28:6)

7. wealth has limited value (11:4, 11:28, 22:1, 23:4-5, 30:7-9)

D. Securing loans (6:1-5, 11:15, 17:18, 20:16, 22:26-27, 27:13)

VI. Miscellaneous proverbs – 11:22, 11:24, 12:9, 12:10, 15:17, 16:2, 17:3, 18:2, 18:17,  
20:5, 20:9, 23:17, 25:2-3, 25:6-7a, 25:20, 25:26, 26:4-5, 26:17, 26:20, 26:27, 27:1, 27:5-  
6, 27:21, 28:1, 29:18

VII. Poem to the Virtuous Woman (31:10-31)