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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 07: PROVERBS – 1

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the citations given from the book of Proverbs as you study the units on this book.

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Download a copy of the textbook for this unit: *Spotlight on the Proverbs* from the CornerstoneCourses.org website or from FreeChristianEbooks.org. The book is free to download. Readings are given below.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROVERBS:

While it is true that the book of Psalms is utilized far more in Jewish and Christian religious tradition, the book of Proverbs must certainly be considered the most important work of the five books generally classified as Wisdom Literature in terms of wisdom itself (see Note 1). As we saw, wisdom is only one aspect – though a more important one than many realize – of Psalms, but wisdom concerns and ideas permeate every part of Proverbs. While the other works of this genre are more focused on certain aspects of life (as in the case of Job, Ecclesiastes, or the Song of Songs), Proverbs deals with almost every aspect of human action and interaction. It also contains far more spiritual principles than is often recognized and is a work of major importance in its own right.

As a result of its importance, we will look in detail at Proverbs by means of selected readings from the course textbook, as well as the additional material given in the course units on this book. Before proceeding, read the “Introduction” in the course textbook *Spotlight on the Proverbs*, which covers the background, authorship, and main types of compositions found in the book of Proverbs.

THE PROVERBS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT:

Our understanding of Proverbs can be considerably increased through knowledge of the parallel forms of wisdom literature in the ancient world. Wisdom writings were particularly popular throughout the ancient Near East and especially in the great cultural centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia – both of which influenced ancient Israel considerably. There were schools of wisdom in the cultural centers in which the teachers functioned as “father” of the students – bringing to mind the repeated statements in the book of Proverbs such as “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction” (Proverbs 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; etc.).

Wisdom works such as the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* [pronounced *amen-em-opay*] (c. 1300–1075 BC) clearly influenced the development of the biblical Proverbs, and there are a number of points of contact between these wisdom works. If we consider the following examples, we can see the similarities in both form and content of Egyptian and biblical proverbs:

Do not rob the poor, because he is poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate. (Proverbs 22:22 ESV)

Guard yourself from robbing the poor,
from being violent to the weak. (Amenemope iv, 4–5)

And compare the following:

Have I not written thirty sayings for you,
sayings of counsel and knowledge. (Proverbs 22:20)

See for yourself these thirty chapters,
they are pleasant, they educate. (Amenemope xxvii, 7–8)

Like Egyptian wisdom writings, the biblical book of Proverbs consists of both short “sayings” and longer poetic units. Each type represents approximately half of the material in Proverbs. Given these and other similarities, it is certainly possible that some of the biblical proverbs were based on the *Instruction of Amenemope* and other Egyptian sources, as we will see below. But the book of Proverbs clearly includes sayings from far more than any one source or culture, though many were native to Israel itself (Note 2).

THE AUTHORS OF PROVERBS:

The majority, if not all, of the material in the book of Proverbs was composed or collected by King Solomon, as we will see below.

The two final chapters of the book are said to have been composed by Agur and Lemuel respectively, but the identity of these individuals is not certain. Chapter 30 is introduced with the words “The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh – an inspired utterance” (Proverbs 30:1). Neither Agur nor Jakeh is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible or in other Israelite sources, and nothing further is known of them as individuals. But it is possible that these are titles rather than names, and that the whole sentence refers to “the collector of proverbs” – someone who compiled the proverbs in that chapter, and conceivably Solomon himself.



Artist's impression of King Solomon. Image: Wikimedia

In the same way, while Proverbs chapter 31 is introduced with the statement “The sayings of King Lemuel,” no Judean king is known to have had the name of Lemuel – though Lemuel could possibly refer to Solomon, as in Hebrew *lemu-el* literally means “for God” or “devoted to God,” and the wording of Proverbs 31:1 could be understood as “the words of the king, for [or devoted to] God...”

So it is possible that all the individuals referred to as writers or compilers of proverbs within the book were in fact Solomon, though even if this were not the case, Solomon certainly produced a great many of the wise sayings himself (1 Kings 4:32-33), and we are told that Solomon “pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs” (Ecclesiastes 12:9) – some of which were doubtless from other wisdom sources such as the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROVERBS:

Proverbs can be divided into seven distinct sections based on what is said of their authorship or compilation (the discussion of the woman of noble character found at the end of Chapter 31 may be part of the words of Lemuel or may be a separate appendix).

Collections within the Book of Proverbs:

1. Proverbs 1–9: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel”
2. Proverbs 10–22:16: “The proverbs of Solomon”
3. Proverbs 22:17–24:22: “sayings of the wise” [This is plural – indicating multiple authors.]
4. Proverbs 24:23–34: “These also are sayings of the wise” [This is plural – indicating multiple authors.]
5. Proverbs 25–29: “proverbs of Solomon, compiled by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah”
6. Proverbs 30: “The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh”
7. Proverbs 31:1–9: “The sayings of King Lemuel ... his mother taught him”
Epilogue. Proverbs 31:10–31: “The Wife of Noble Character”

Of these sections, the third (22:17–24:22) titled “the sayings of the wise” has the most connections with Egyptian wisdom, including the *Instruction of Amenemope*, which may have reached the Hebrew compiler directly or through an Aramaic translation. The fifth section (25–29) indicates that it was compiled in the reign of Hezekiah in the late eighth century BC and may contain proverbs composed and/or collected by Solomon. Nothing is known of the origin of sections 6 and 7 (30 and 31:1-9), though the possibility that they also represent proverbs of Solomon cannot be discounted.

For a summary of the smaller groups of proverbs within the seven sections, and for the structure of the individual proverbs themselves, read the section titled “The Structure of Proverbs” in the Introduction to the textbook *Spotlight on the Proverbs*, and also review the information on parallelism given in the section “The ‘Mechanics’ of Wisdom Literature” on page 4 of Unit 2 of this course.

THE TEACHING METHODS OF PROVERBS:

More than any other book of biblical Wisdom Literature, the central purpose of Proverbs is to teach. We see this in its introduction (1:2-6) and throughout the book (8:6; 22:17; etc.). When we keep this in mind, we realize that understanding its teaching methods helps us to better grasp the book’s message. Fortunately, we know quite a lot about the teaching techniques used in the ancient Near East, and although some of these methods may seem basic to us, knowing them and keeping them in mind can make a great difference in better seeing the subtlety and substance of many of the proverbs.

1. Repetition

Unlike the individual psalms, which are all different (teaching us something about prayer), a number of proverbs are identical or nearly so. This highlights the respective purposes of the genres: the purpose of psalms is to express, that of proverbs, to teach. Proverbs is thus not afraid to reiterate its teachings and we see this in the synonymous parallelism of the two halves of many proverbs, as well as in repeated proverbs. Study tip: Don't just skip proverbs that are the same as ones you found earlier in the book. Ask which proverbs are repeated, and why.

2. Variation

Even when two or more proverbs seem to say the same thing, they are often varied slightly – sometimes with only a few letters different in the Hebrew. But the slight variation in wording and meaning can open up new lines of thought and understanding. Study tip: Examine the wording of similar proverbs closely – is there a slightly different meaning in each case? Look at the context to see if the setting of each reveals anything about its particular wording.

3. Addition

Many proverbs occur in groups with a related subject or theme. This is not coincidental, and the compilers of the various sections of the book evidently arranged the material they had carefully and with thought. Studying the individual proverbs within each group can be like seeing a gemstone from different angles – we see different facets of the same principle. Study tip: Try to see the groupings in which proverbs occur and to see what is being added in each case.

4. Contradiction

A number of biblical proverbs seem to contradict each other. Just as we say both “look before you leap” and “he who hesitates is lost,” famously, Proverbs tells us both not to answer (26:4) and to answer (26:5) a foolish person. The difference, of course, is one of context and situation – sometimes one principle applies, sometimes another. Study tip: Always consider contradictory proverbs together and think about the circumstances in which each should be applied.

5. Inoculation

One of the most important teaching techniques employed in the Proverbs is that of moral inoculation – providing glimpses of the results of wrong decisions that act as deterrents to sin or self-destructive behavior. We see this not only in obvious cases such as the warnings against violent men (2:12-15) or immoral women (2:16-19), but also in many more subtle areas. Study tip: Do not see descriptions in Proverbs of what is not good as simply condemnations of wrong, but as warning signs to potential trouble ahead. Think about possible ways in which the sayings may be helpful as personal inoculations.

6. Reflection

Above all else, proverbs are designed as guides to reflection, pondering, and coming to greater understanding of the principles they deal with. They are not self-contained nuggets of truth, but small signposts to truths they hint at or express as examples. Proverbs thus teach us to learn from our successes and mistakes as well as from those of others. Study tip: Treat proverbs as scriptures to be worked with, not just morsels of wisdom to be memorized. Remember that they are frequently tiny treasure maps for a happier and more successful life.

FURTHER KEYS FOR STUDYING PROVERBS:

Read “Appendix 3: Reading the Book of Proverbs” in the course textbook *Spotlight on the Proverbs*. Although there may seem to be a little overlap with some of the points given above, the material given here is supplemental and can be combined with that found in the textbook reading.

Now that we have looked at the background of Proverbs and ways to approach the book, in the next unit we will be able to focus on coming to a deeper understanding of the proverbs themselves.

* Note 1: The book of Proverbs – called in Hebrew *Mishley (Shlomoh)*, “Proverbs (of Solomon)” – is found in the third section (the *Ketuvim* or “Writings”) of the Hebrew Bible, and is the third book of the wisdom writings in the Christian Old Testament.

* Note 2: It is impossible to give precise dates for the sayings in Proverbs, as the book represents a “collection of collections” – each of which brought together individual sayings that were probably both old and new at the time of their compilation. The collections themselves were put together over several centuries.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Background Basics

1. What is the key difference between a psalm and a proverb?
2. Does Proverbs exactly reproduce material found in the *Instruction of Amenemope*? Explain your answer briefly.
3. Write a paragraph summarizing what we know about the authorship of the book of Proverbs.
4. Review the Study tips given in “The Teaching Methods of Proverbs” section of this unit and make a note of any that you have not used and that might be helpful in your own study of the book.

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