

## ***The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs***

**F.F. Bruce**

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The Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is entitled *Mishlé Shelomoh*—‘the Proverbs of Solomon’—from the words with which it opens. The wisdom of Solomon was itself proverbial, and his gift for proverbial utterance is recorded in 1 Kings 4:32 ff: “And he spake three thousand proverbs... and he spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: He spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes.”

The word translated ‘proverb’ is Heb. *mashal*, which has a wider sense than that which we usually associate with ‘proverb’. Its root meaning is ‘to resemble’, and so it might be rendered ‘similitude’ or ‘parable’. And this is the character of many of the proverbs in this book, the point of which consists in a comparison between two situations, e.g. “As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him” (Prov. 10:26). The word *mashal* is as applicable to the parables of a greater than Solomon as to the proverbs of Solomon himself.

The Book of Proverbs contains seven smaller collections. These are:

(i) chapters I to 9, a number of passages in praise of wisdom, entitled “The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel”. Indeed, the whole paragraph, 1:1-6, forms the title both to this smaller collection and to the complete book.

(ii) chapters 10:1-22:16, another collection of shorter and more isolated saws, entitled “The proverbs of Solomon”.

(iii) chapters 22:17-24:22, entitled (in the Septuagint) “The words of the wise”.<sup>\*</sup> This is followed by a short section, 24:23-34,

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which bears the title, “These also are sayings of the wise”, and forms an appendix to it.

(iv) chapters 25 to 29, a collection similar in character to No. ii, and entitled “These also are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.” Presumably they had circulated orally before Hezekiah’s time. Hezekiah’s reign appears to have been a period of considerable literary activity in the southern kingdom, in spite of the Assyrian menace.

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<sup>\*</sup> This is the section which shows closest contact with the Wisdom of Amenemope, mentioned in our previous paper. In its original form it seems to have contained 38 small sections, and the difficult verse 22:20 is now generally held to mean “Have I not written for thee thirty sayings?” The Wisdom of Amenemope contains the passage: “Consider these thirty chapters”. Put, whatever the literary relationship, the Hebrew writer preserves an independent outlook.

(v) chapter 30, entitled (as we should probably translate) "The words of Agur the son of Jakeh of Massa". Massa was a region in North Arabia, referred to in Gen. 25:14 and 1 Chron. 1:30, and mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions; the name may survive in the modern Masani, north-east of Dumah. Agur may have been one of the "children of the east" mentioned in I Kings 4:30. A number, of the sayings of Agur are cast in a readily recognizable fourfold pattern; cf. verses 11-14, 15b-16, 18-19, 21-23, 24-28, 29-31.

(vi) chapter 31:1-9, entitled "The words of Lemuel king of Massa, which his mother taught him" (so R. V. margin, as in 30:1), and therefore probably emanating from the same quarter, as the preceding collection. The maternal advice in this brief section urges that a king, to perform his duty properly, must avoid the temptations of wine and women.

(vii) chapter. 31:10-31, an acrostic poem celebrating the praises of the virtuous woman, or 'woman of worth'. Each of the 22 verses of this section begins with the corresponding letter, of the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew text gives no clue to the authorship of this poem.

The Septuagint exhibits a different order here and there, but the order of the Hebrew text is preferable. Thus, the Septuagint places Collection iv between Collections vi and vii, and thus makes it appear that Solomon himself was the author of the acrostic in praise of the 'woman of worth'—which, in view of his unhappy matrimonial career, is hardly likely. An equally unconvincing change of order in the Septuagint is the placing of the appendix entitled "These also are sayings of the wise" (24:23-34) between verses 14 and 15 of chapter 30.

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## ***The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs (continued)***

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Many of the sayings in the Book of Proverbs, taken by themselves in isolation from their context, might be regarded as samples of ordinary worldly wisdom such as the proverbial lore of all nations provides in abundance. The warning against becoming surety for a stranger (Prov. 6:1-2; 11:15) is something that one can learn from experience in any part of the world; while simple people in all ages have proved the blessedness of the saying:

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,  
Than a stalled ox and hatred therewith (Prov. 15:17).

But it is not merely as counsels taught by experience that these and many other sayings are included here. In the context in which they appear in the Book of Proverbs the wisdom that they enshrine is seen to be an aspect of the *wisdom of God* which is the main subject of the whole work. The lessons learned from experience are lessons taught by God; experience is one of His methods of teaching. When the matter is viewed thus, the Book of Proverbs is recognized as a storehouse of spiritual and not merely secular teaching.

We may think of the spiritual teaching of Proverbs under a number of heads.

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First of all comes the teaching of the book about *the being and character of God*.

Nowhere is it deemed necessary in the Book of Proverbs to prove the existence of God; God's existence is the basic postulate of the book, as it is of the whole Bible. Nor is it deemed necessary to prove the unity of God; it is taken for granted that there is but one God. This God has created all things:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
By understanding He established the heavens (Prov. 3:19).

The Creator of all is also the Disposer supreme:

The lot is cast into the lap;  
But the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord (Prov. 16:33).

His purpose cannot be thwarted, whatever the plans of men may be:

There are many devices in a man's heart;  
But the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand (Prov. 19:21).

F.F. Bruce, "The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs (*continued*)," *The Bible Student* ns 22.3 (July 1951): 116-118.

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He is omniscient, and nothing escapes His attention, especially in all that affects mankind:

The eyes of the Lord are in every place,  
Keeping watch upon the evil and the good (Prov. 15:3).

And, above all, He is righteous and merciful; He delights in righteousness and mercy on the part of men, and everything that is unrighteous or unmerciful is an abomination in His sight. The wisdom of God is so imbued with the ideal of righteousness that it is as much ethical as intellectual in quality:

All the words of my mouth are in righteousness;  
There is nothing crooked or perverse in them (Prov. 8:8).

And those who learn the divine wisdom show now well they have learned their lesson by manifesting righteousness and mercy in their lives and actions; this is the fear of the Lord, which is the first lesson taught in Wisdom's school.

God takes care of His people:  
The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish;  
But He thrusteth away the desire of the wicked (Prov. 50:3).

In particular, the destitute and underprivileged have a special place in His interest:

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Rob not the poor, because he is poor,  
Neither oppress the afflicted in the gate:  
For the Lord will plead their cause,  
And despoil of life those that despoil them (Prov. 22:22-23).

He is the true defence of men, "a shield to them that walk in integrity" (Prov. 2:7):

The name of the Lord is a strong tower;  
The righteous runneth into it, and is safe (Prov. 18:10).

He is the Hearer of prayer (15:29); the Rewarder of righteousness and mercy (19:17); the One whose blessing is enrichment in itself (10:22).

Men ought therefore to render Him grateful worship and show their appreciation of His goodness:

Honour the Lord with thy substance,  
And with the firstfruits of all thine increase (Prov. 3:9).

But sacrifice is no substitute for uprightness:

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord;  
But the prayer of the wicked is His delight (Prov. 15:8).

F.F. Bruce, "The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs (*continued*)," *The Bible Student* ns 22.3 (July 1951): 116-118.

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To do justice and judgment  
Is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (Prov. 21:3).

Men's truest gratitude to God lies in their manifesting the character and conduct that He delights in, and in putting all their trust in Him. Time and again throughout the book an attitude of complete confidence in God is inculcated: "whoso trusteth in the Lord, happy is he" (Prov. 16:20).

Thus all that the Book of Proverbs teaches about God is not only in complete agreement with the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, but is also seen to be in harmony with the teaching of the Gospels, where we read that the tithing of mint and anise and cummin is no substitute for judgment and mercy and faith; and that a confident trust in God is the attitude which He delights to find in men.

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## ***The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs (continued)\****

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'The Scriptures principally teach', says the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 'what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.' This is as true of the Book of Proverbs as of any other part of the Bible. We have already considered the teaching of this book with regard to God; now we turn to look at its portrayal of the whole duty of man.

This last expression, 'the whole duty of man', is actually a quotation from another of the Old Testament Wisdom books, Ecclesiastes, but the sentence in which it appears—'Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man' (Eccl. 12:13)—may be said to sum up the ethical teaching of all the Wisdom literature. The fear of Jehovah is not only the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7; 15:33); it is the essence of true worship. The sage, as we have seen, agrees with the prophet and the psalmist that the mere offering of material sacrifices without a right attitude of heart and a right manner of life is worse than useless.

What then has the Book of Proverbs to teach about the right attitude of heart and right manner of life?

'Let not mercy and truth forsake thee' (Prov. 3:3) is an admonition which brings together two attributes which found their perfect manifestation in our Lord: 'grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Again:

Mercy and truth preserve the king;  
And his throne is upholden by mercy (Prov. 20:28)—

had Shakespeare these words in his mind when he wrote concerning the quality of mercy?

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown...  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings.

So mercy, not vengeance, should be shown to one's enemy:

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'If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat;  
And if he be thirsty, give him water to drink:  
For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head,  
And the Lord shall reward thee' (Prov. 25:21 f.).

It is noteworthy that, when Paul quotes these words in Rom. 12:20, he omits the fourth line of the quatrain.

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\* The previous article appeared in the July issue of last year, page 116. It will be well to read that portion again before reading this.—*Ed.*

But mercy is not enjoined at the expense of justice: 'it is a joy to the righteous man to do judgment' (21:15); the just man's memory is blessed (10:7); his tongue is as choice silver (10:20); his mouth is as a fountain of life and brings forth wisdom (10:11, 31); his path—

'is as the shining light  
That shineth more and more unto the perfect day' (4:18).

'Love coverall all transgressions' (10:12) is a sentiment that is echoed in the New Testament (1 Cor. 13:7; 5:20; 1 Pet. 4:8); a similar thought appears in Prov. 17:9, 'He that covereth a transgression seeketh love.'

Paul urges his readers not to be slothful in business (Rom. 12:11); and the Book of Proverbs anticipates him a number of warnings against sloth and exhortations to diligence. The sluggard is advised to learn a lesson in industry from the ant (6:6 ff.), and a similar passage later in the book draws a moral from the sorry picture presented by the sluggard's field and vineyard (24:30 ff.). But contrariwise:

Seest thou a man diligent in his business?  
He shall stand before kings;  
He shall not stand before mean men (22:29).

And a number of other passages might be cited, emphasizing the blessings of diligence and industry.

Self-control, moderation, and humility are urged, as against all forms of intemperance, excess and pride. Here are a few samples:

He that is slow to anger is of great understanding:  
But he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly (14:29).

Before destruction the heart of man is haughty,  
And before honour goeth humility (18:12).

Better is a dry morsel and quietness therewith,  
Than an house full of feasting and strife (17:1).

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The last example reminds us that the sage has no great opinion of the value of wealth.

Weary not thyself to be rich...  
For riches certainly make themselves wings,  
Like an eagle that flieth toward heaven (23:4 f.)

Contentment may be enjoyed with but a small portion of this world's goods:

Better is little with fear of the Lord,  
Than great treasure and trouble therewith.  
Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,  
Than a stalled ox and hatred therewith (15:16 f.).

Over against the various virtues which are thus inculcated, frequent warnings are given against a number of vices—revenge, falsehood, oppression, hatred, idleness, drunkenness, unchastity, bad temper, covetousness and envy. It is interesting, indeed, to compare the practical teaching of Proverbs rather minutely with the ethical parts of the New Testament, and to note how far in this respect the New Testament dots the i's and crosses the t's of the Wisdom literature.

The part played by women in the Book of Proverbs is also worthy of note. High praise is given to the 'virtuous woman' (or 'woman of worth'), not only in the alphabetic acrostic which rehearses her accomplishments in 31:10-31, but in a number of sayings scattered throughout the book. It is evident that monogamy is contemplated throughout as the regular married relationship (cf. 5:18 f.), whatever deviations might be permitted by the law for the hardness of men's hearts.

Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing,  
And obtaineth favour of the Lord (18:22)—

provided, of course, that she be a good wife. There is another kind of wife, whose shortcomings are denounced in forthright language:

A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband:  
But she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his  
bones (12:4).

By contrast with the woman of worth, the sage utters stern warnings against the foolish woman, the brawling and ill-tempered

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woman, and above all the 'strange woman' whose 'house is the way to Sheol' (7:27).

In all these moral precepts it is presumed that men and women are free agents, responsible for the way in which they exercise the power of choice. Yet there is no suggestion that it is possible to lead a moral life without having any regard to religious considerations. Disregard of God leads to moral ruin (cf. 22:14), but 'by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil' (16:6). Divine grace and guidance keep a man in the right way:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart,  
And lean not upon thine own understanding:  
In all thy ways acknowledge Him,  
And He shall direct thy paths (3:5 f.).

These words may be said to put in a nutshell the prime lesson of Proverbs.

Little is said about divine judgment, but it is made plain that men are answerable to God for the conduct of their lives, and that the last word rests with Him.

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes:  
But the Lord weigheth the hearts (21:2; cf. 17:3).

But ample room is left for repentance and forgiveness: 'by mercy and truth iniquity is purged' (16:6).

He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper:  
But whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall  
obtain mercy (28:13).

Since God is a righteous God, the universe which He controls is a moral universe, marked by retribution for evil and reward for virtue, but the retribution and reward alike generally to be found in this life. 'Length of days, ... rich, and honour' are held out by Wisdom as a prize for following her paths. This indicates for the Book of Proverbs a date when righteousness was on the throne, and rulers were not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. A day was to come later in history when persistence in keeping the commandments of God meant an early and a violent death, and when that day came, it was found insufficient to restrict retribution and reward to this life only. A worthier understanding of the life to come, and a more balanced sense of its relation to the present life, were attained as a result.

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