

## Introduction to Proverbs 10-31

### I. Various Collections

A. Prov 10-31 Contain various proverb collections

B. The collections include:

1. 10:1-22:16 - The Proverbs of Solomon
  - a. This collection contains 375 sayings<sup>1</sup>
  - b. There appear to be 2 Sub Sections
    - 1) 10 - 15
      - a) Mostly antithetic sayings of two lines
      - b) Contrasts righteousness and wickedness
    - 2) 16 - 22:16
      - a) Mostly synonymous or synthetic parallelism
      - b) Content is more varied
  - c. Organization
    - 1) Some scholars believe this to be a random collection of proverbs with no particular order.<sup>2</sup>
    - 2) Others see occasional indications of structure where groups of proverbs are meant to be read together as a unit.<sup>3</sup>
2. 22:17-24:22 - Words of the Wise
  - a. The form is more like a wisdom discourse, similar to the form of Proverbs 1-9
    - 1) This collection is full of exhortations
    - 2) "My son" appears several times
    - 3) The exhortation to heed a father and mother's instruction also appears
  - b. The themes include:
    - 1) Ethical instructions
    - 2) Proper attitude and behavior before a king
    - 3) Good friendships and associations
    - 4) The dangers of drinking alcohol

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<sup>1</sup> 375 is the numerical value of Solomon (שלמה) ש= 300, ל= 30, מ=40, ה=5. This is not an uncommon Jewish literary convention. This literary convention is called "gematria." Scholars have noted it's possible use in the Gospel of Matthew's genealogy, which is made up of three groups of fourteen generations. "David," is made up of three Hebrew characters with a total numerical value of 14 (ד=4, ו=6, ו=4). This does not aid greatly in the interpretation of Proverbs, but does say something about the Hebrew passion for order, which is an underlying theme in Hebrew Wisdom literature.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 139-140.

<sup>3</sup> Sid S. Buzzell, "Righteous and Wicked Living in Proverbs 10" in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs* edited by Roy B. Zuck, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 267-268.

- 5) Proper relationships with other people
3. 24:23-34 - These also are words of the wise
  - a. The form is the same as the previous collection
  - b. The themes include:
    - 1) Judging rightly
    - 2) Taking care of what is important
4. 25:1-29:27 - Proverbs of Solomon transcribed by the men of Hezekiah
  - a. The form returns to the sentence sayings of 10:1-22:16
    - 1) Chapters 25-26 has an abundance of similitudes  
"Like \_\_\_\_\_ so is \_\_\_\_\_"
    - 2) Chapters 27-29 has mostly sentence sayings
      - a) Contrast of the wicked and the righteous through antithetic parallels
      - b) Synthetic parallels
      - c) "Better than" sayings that weigh the advantages of things such as righteousness and wisdom over riches, strife and foolishness
  - b. There appears to be an abundance of instructions pertinent to rulers and servants<sup>4</sup>
    - 1) 25:1 - 27:27 - Instructions for servants
    - 2) 28:1 - 29:27 - Instructions for rulers
5. 30:1-33 - The Words of Agur
  - a. A non-Israelite name
  - b. The introduction in verse one calls it an "oracle"
  - c. The form is different than the rest of Proverbs, the number "four" is a recurring ordering device
  - d. Outline:
    - 1) v.1 - Introduction
    - 2) v.2-3 - Four statements stating the stupidity of the author.
    - 3) v.4 - Four "who" questions, followed by a "what" question.
    - 4) v.5-10 - Four prohibitions and consequences
    - 5) v.11-14 - Four descriptions of evil doers
    - 6) v.15-31 - Five paragraphs of four things
      - a) v.15-17 - Four things that never say enough
      - b) v.18-20 - Four things difficult to understand
      - c) v.21-23 - Four things that shake the earth
      - d) v.24-28 - Four small but wise creatures
      - e) v.29-31 - Four creatures stately in their walk

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<sup>4</sup> Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 574-575.

- 7) v.32-33 - Conclusion highlighting the need for humility and avoidance of strife
- e. What is the purpose of this second to last collection?
  - 1) Highlights the often elusive nature of wisdom<sup>5</sup>
    - a) Many things are hard to understand
    - b) Animals can be wiser than men
  - 2) The study of wisdom should be with humility
    - a) Pride is a recurring theme in this chapter
    - b) Pride leads to stupidity and ruin
- 6. 31:1-3 - The Words of King Lemuel
  - a. A non-Israelite name
  - b. The introduction in verse one calls it an "oracle"
  - c. This chapter specifically mentions two women
    - 1) v.1 - Lemuel's mother
    - 2) v.10 - The woman of valor
  - d. This chapter highlights the importance of women in a man's life, especially the king
    - 1) The mother who teaches
    - 2) Women who can sap the strength of a king
    - 3) The blessing of a good wife
  - e. Two sections
    - 1) v.1-9 - Admonitions for the king to rule justly
      - a) v.3 - Do not give your strength to women
      - b) v.4-7 - do not drink and forget decrees
      - c) v.8 - Defend the mute, afflicted, and needy
    - 2) v.10-31 - The woman of valor brings good to her husband and family
      - a) Description of the woman of valor
      - b) Implicit in this description is for the king to find a woman such as this
  - f. Why end the book of Proverbs on this note?
    - 1) Wise instructions for the king?
      - This highlights the need for righteous wisdom in governing a people
    - 2) Description of a woman of valor?
      - This highlights the importance of a good spouse in order to do your job well
- 7. A thought about the "Woman Wisdom" image in Proverbs.

*"Wisdom will teach Christ's church by word and example, and she will mediate the guidance of God - not by telling us what we are to do in a particular situation but by instilling in us the capacities to*

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<sup>5</sup> Job 28 also has this same perspective, which stands in contrast to Proverbs 8-9, which shows that wisdom is readily available to all who seek her.

*make such decisions for ourselves, based on the qualities of teachability, discernment, foresight, industry, honesty, charity, and fairness that will guide our attitudes and actions."*<sup>6</sup>

## II. Function

- A. Prov 1-9 seems to serve as the introduction to the Proverbs collections that begin in chapter 10
- B. The form has changed
  1. Prov 1-9 uses extended wisdom teaching, admonitions, object lessons, etc.
  2. The theme of Prov 1-9 was choose good and not evil
  3. The theme is the same beginning in Prov 10, but communicates it through sentence proverbs and aphoristic sayings
  4. *"The discrete sayings beginning in chapter 10, no matter how non-religious they may appear to be, no matter how experiential and homespun, are presented as the nourishing food that Woman Wisdom offers (e.g., 9:2). It is imperative that we recognize our standards of sacred and profane, secular and spiritual, and other such distinctions are largely due to our cultural conditioning. Israel measured by different standards and was able to embrace a wide span of conduct under the umbrella of wisdom."*<sup>7</sup>

## III. How to study the collection

- A. Attention to context
  1. The book has a three part teaching strategy<sup>8</sup>
    - a. 1:1 - 9:18 - Part 1, Extended wisdom discourse
    - b. 10:1 - 22:16 - Part 2, Proverbs collection
    - c. 22:17 - 31:31 - Misc. Collections of Proverbs
  2. Often individual sayings are linked with their context<sup>9</sup>
    - a. Some proverbs are paired by a recurring theme, image, catchword, or other such device
    - b. Paired proverbs are to be interpreted in light of each other
    - c. Example - Prov. 26:4-5
      - 1) Two different responses for handling a fool

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Koptak, *Proverbs*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 685.

<sup>7</sup> Roland E Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Koptak, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 284-285.

- 2) Readers need to discern which is the best option
3. There is likely some intentional arranging of the proverbs by the authors and editors of these collections
4. Difficulty
  - a. Unlike Proverbs 1-9, it is difficult to read large portions in one sitting and gain the same benefit
  - b. Attending to a small portion usually yields more results

#### B. Thematic

1. There are those who suggest studying proverbs thematically<sup>10</sup>
2. This method would involve studying various proverbs that deal with the same subject or theme together
3. Strength of this method: You can cover a larger amount of material dealing with a particular subject or theme
4. Drawback : This method overlooks any contextual link of single proverbs to their context.
5. Observation: A single proverb will wind up being interpreted not in light of its context, but of another proverb in a different part of the collection. This can yield additional insights.

#### C. A combination approach

1. Both be attentive to context and to what other proverbs contribute to what the immediate text says
  - a. Identify overarching motifs or recurring images
  - b. Determine how individual proverbs contribute to the overarching themes
2. Give attention to wisdom sayings in other parts of scripture
  - a. Books and stories with wisdom themes
    - 1) Wisdom Psalms
    - 2) The Joseph cycle in Genesis
    - 3) The narrative portions of Daniel
    - 4) The teachings of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount
    - 5) The book of James
  - b. One should be especially discerning when reading these in light of Job and Ecclesiastes. Job and Ecclesiastes do not have the same character as the proverb collection
    - 1) These books are more existential than theoretical
    - 2) Neither really deal directly with the search for wisdom, though they are related to it
    - 3) Job is more about the search for divine presence and an elaboration of the nature of God's rule over the cosmos

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<sup>10</sup> Some scholars do not see any relationship between one proverb and the next, such as David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 139-140. However, there often is some link of one proverb to the next in some way, which can yield beneficial results.

- 4) Ecclesiastes is more about the search for meaning in life
3. Summarize the results of your insight and how it illumines your life and experience
  - a. A good way to do this is to journal
  - b. Share your insight with a partner
4. Pray, keeping in mind that God gives wisdom generously and without reproach to those who ask (James 1:5).

## **Studying Themes in Proverbs**

### **I. This is perhaps the most useful and practical way of studying the Proverbs collections that begin at chapter 10.**

- A. Even though there may be an underlying structure in each of the collections, it is not obvious enough to be useful to the average reader
- B. The sages most likely did not teach huge doses of unrelated proverbial material from the proverbs collections

### **II. A suggested method<sup>11</sup>**

- A. Step one: Select a topic
- B. Step two: Read through the whole book and note the verses that deal with the topic
- C. Step three: Write or type out the relevant proverbs and study them together
- D. Step four: Reflect on each proverb and how they interact with each other
- E. Step five: Write or journal on personal insights you receive from the study
- F. Step six: Note how your insights interact with the rest of scripture.

### **III. Some overarching themes throughout Proverbs**

- A. Wealth and Poverty
- B. Right Women and Wrong Women
- C. Wise Speech and Foolish Speech
- D. Industriousness and Laziness
- E. Pride and Humility
- F. Integrity and Crookedness
- G. Life and Death
- H. Friendship
- I. Conducting Business
- J. Marriage
- K. Parents
- L. Justice
- M. Wisdom and Foolishness
- N. God

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<sup>11</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002.), 118-120. Longman suggests a workable method by which to grasp the big picture on a given topic in the book of Proverbs. The method listed here is an adaptation of his method.