

UNDERSTANDING OLD
TESTAMENT WISDOM
LITERATURE:
Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

A DEFINITION OF WISDOM:

“Wisdom is the discipline of applying truth to one’s life in the light of experience.”

Israel’s ancient educators were the “wisdom teachers” or “wise men.”

They devoted themselves to gaining wisdom, and to serving as teacher-counselors to those who sought their wisdom.

The foundation of all of their wisdom was ...

1. to study together and correctly understand the Scripture,
2. to love and obey Yahweh the God of Israel and God of Scripture, and
3. to know how to correctly apply the Scripture, in light of Yahweh’s covenantal lovingkindness and faithfulness, to all of life.

The Wise originated around 1,000 B.C. and came to occupy a place similar to priests and prophets.

Jeremiah 18:18 “They said, “Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.””

Genre – a “kind”, a category. Usually used of the different kinds or categories of literature, including biblical literature. Examples: Narrative, history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, epistle, apocalyptic. Sub-genres are further divisions of a genre: Narrative sub-genres include epic, short story, and several others.

Genre is the “key” to reading a passage correctly. Genre is the author telling you how to read what he is writing, what to expect, what to watch for, how to understand what he is trying to say.

Every Genre must be read differently, because each genre is structured differently, uses words differently, uses different literary conventions, conveys the author’s meaning in different ways.

God inspired the author’s choice of genre before he inspired the author’s choice of words. If you try to read all genres at “plain face value” as if they are conveying meaning in the same way, you will misunderstand and misapply the Scripture. **You will be denying God’s inspiration of Scripture, because you are refusing to accept God’s choice of genre.**

Wisdom literature encompasses a variety of sub-genres:

Job - a long narrative piece of literature containing numerous sub-categories like disputation speeches, poetry, hymns, complaint, poetic soliloquy, etc.

Proverbs - a collection of sayings (succinct expressions that are normally true) using poetry, parallelism, comparison, description, prescription, etc., covering many subjects of life.

Ecclesiastes - a unique book of “personal reflection” using poetry, parallelism, instruction, comparison, etc.

Job is completely unique in ancient and biblical literature. It must be read very carefully.

Proverbs is almost always *conditional*, covering many subjects. Proverbs are *not* absolute promises.

Ecclesiastes is often disillusioned or cynical.

Wisdom literature presents various perspectives, and should therefore always be read *canonically*, in the context of the whole book and the whole Bible.

The Primary Misuses of Wisdom Literature

“People often read these books only in part.”

They fail to read a passage in the context of the whole book, the whole Bible, and therefore misunderstand and misapply the passage.

“People often misunderstand wisdom terms, categories, styles, and modes.”

They mis-define the terms, misunderstand the meaning, and misapply the teaching.

“People often fail to follow the line of argument the wise man was making.”

They misunderstand the point and end up trying to live by what the author actually said was *incorrect* or the wrong way to live!

Who is wise?

“Wisdom is not something theoretical and abstract - it is something that exists only when a person thinks and acts according to truth as it has been learned through experience.”

The OT recognizes that some people have so devoted themselves to gaining wisdom that they can be called “wise” (Hebrew - hakam).

Responsible, successful living is the goal of wisdom.

Wisdom literature focuses on people and their behavior.

Anyone who seeks to apply God’s Truth daily and learn from his or her experience can become wise eventually.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

AUTHOR

Prov 1:1 – Solomon

Many of the proverbs would have been written by other wise men as well. They were gathered into this collection, perhaps by Solomon, perhaps by Solomon and wise men assisting him.

It was a common and accepted custom for the followers / assistants of a great man to write or to edit material "in his name." They did so as part of following the teaching of their leader, writing down things he had said, *doing the work in the way that he would have done it, and crediting it to him.* This was a common, accepted, and honorable practice.

A proverb is "a concise, memorable statement of something generally true, that has been learned over extended human experience." Proverbs are NOT:

1. Statements of absolute truth, true universally true in every place and time regardless of circumstances.
2. Promises from God to you which you can "claim" and which God "must do" in every time and place.

Proverbs are ... **PROVERBS!!!**

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of these sayings written by different wise men and collected into one book.

Proverbs have a great variety in form and content.

I. CATEGORIES or KINDS OF PROVERBS

Descriptive proverbs - state a simple observation about life, without describing any exceptions or application.

Proverbs 11:24 "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty."

Prescriptive proverbs - states a truth about life intending to influence human behavior.

Proverbs 19:17 "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done."

Some proverbs make their point by comparison, such as the importance of love in the home.

Proverbs 15:17 "Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred."

Numerical proverbs emphasize their point using a formula in the first line: $x / x + 1$.

For example, “Three, no four” or “Six, even seven.”

Proverbs 30:18-19 18 "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: 19 the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and *the way of a man with a maiden.*

In Numerical proverbs, the emphasis is always on the last item. *The last item is the point!*

Proverbs 6:16-19

16 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: 17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, 18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,
19 a false witness who pours out lies *and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.*

Antithetical proverbs paint a stark contrast between two things, intending to make you choose the good over the evil.

Proverbs 15:18 “A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.”

The wise men observed this phenomenon of hot temper in contrast to patience in human behavior over many years, saw it to be a general truth, and were inspired by God to include this in the Scripture.

II. GENERAL or PROBABLE TRUTHS – PROVERBS ARE NOT ABSOLUTE TRUTHS

REMEMBER: Proverbs teach general or probable truth, NOT absolute truth.

They are NOT absolute promises from God guaranteeing a particular outcome of you follow the proverb!

They point out patterns of behavior that, if followed, offer the best chance of success, all other things being equal.

For example:

Proverbs 14:23 “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”

This is NOT an absolute truth or promise for all times and places, regardless of circumstances.

The Wise men and Solomon KNEW that there were exceptions to this proverb, but they also knew that most of the time, this proverb was true, and offered the wisest course and best opportunity for material blessing in life.

Sometimes even our own limited experience proves that a proverb is a general, but NOT an absolute, truth.

Proverbs 13:4 “The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.”

We must remember:

The proverb teaches a *general* or *probable* truth. It is still usually subject to the wise man’s experience, particular situations, etc. **The proverb does not deal with every possible situation or with exceptions.**

We cannot place modern, Western meanings into the proverb: *Here, the original thought would have been of a small dwelling, enough food to live on, and a happy family.*

The reality of our fallen world must factor into all interpretations: all things are not equal in all times and places (soil, climate, economy, society, rulers, etc.).

III. CONTEXT – PROVERBS MUST BE INTERPRETED IN CONTEXT:

THE PASSAGE, THE BOOK, THE BIBLE

The proverb must be interpreted in the **context** of the **whole passage**, the **whole book**, and the **whole Bible**. What do other proverbs say about this topic? What does the whole Bible say?

An example of taking a passage out of context:

Proverbs 6:2 “...if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth,”

Some people use this as a proof text for the supposed metaphysical power of words to create good or bad reality, to bring it into being. That is, “*Don’t speak something negative, it might come to pass!*” **Merely reading the passage in its immediate context shows that interpretation to be completely in error:**

Proverbs 6 - Warnings Against Folly

“My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have struck hands in pledge for another, if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands:

Go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbor!

Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids.

Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler.”

In other words, you have co-signed on a loan, and if your friend defaults you are responsible for the whole debt! **GET OUT OF THAT DEAL NOW!!!** This is EXACTLY what this passage is teaching, and nothing else!!! It is usually a very bad idea to co-sign for a friend’s loan.

Remember that a proverb like this teaches a *general* or *probable* truth which would normally apply in *most* life situations, but there may be some circumstances which would justify putting up some security for some loans or cosigning on some occasions.

The point is that you should be extremely careful about such practices, do it very seldom under extraordinary circumstances, and avoid putting yourself and your family at risk.

This is the inherent nature of a proverb.

Since Proverbs 6:1-6 is similar to an instructive proverb of wisdom speech, it almost reaches the level of an absolute prohibition.

This passage does NOT teach the “creative power of the tongue” to bring some immaterial thing into physical being! That is an occult New Age idea, a heresy brought into Christianity from the metaphysical cults (such as Christian Science, etc.) through the Word of Faith / Hyper-faith / “positive confession” movement. *The Assemblies of God has officially condemned that teaching.*

IV. CONDITIONALITY – PROVERBS ARE SUBJECT TO DIFFERENT PREVAILING CONDITIONS

There are many examples of the conditionality of proverbs.

Proverbs 10:3 “The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.”

Proverbs 11:8 “The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead.”

Proverbs 12:21 “No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.”

The rest of Scripture, and all of history, confirm that these are proverbs, **not** absolute promises.

They are *usually*, **but not always**, true.

Sometimes the righteous DO suffer, die, and are forgotten, while the wicked DO prosper, live long, and are remembered well.

When people read these proverbs as absolute promises, they will blame themselves, or God, or the suffering person when the righteous suffer.

ALL proverbs must be understood in the context of the rest of Scripture.

Proverbs which apply to the character and attitude of God, and which are confirmed by the rest of Scripture, should normally be understood as always true.

Proverbs 6:16-19 “16 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and *a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.*”

(REMEMBER: the last in the list is the point. God DOES hate all the other things listed as well, BUT in a Numerical Proverb it is the LAST item that is the main point.)

There are many Contrast Proverbs that confirm this Numerical Proverb. ...

Proverbs 11:1 "The LORD abhors *dishonest scales*, but accurate weights are his delight."

Proverbs 12:22 "The LORD detests *lying lips*, but he delights in men who are truthful."

Proverbs 16:5 "The LORD detests all the *proud of heart*. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished."

V. INSTRUCTIVE PROVERBS – COMMANDS THAT REQUIRE or FORBID an ATTITUDE or BEHAVIOR

Instructive proverbs - are written in the imperative (command), directing or forbidding particular attitudes and behaviors.

Proverbs 22:22-23 "22 Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, 23 for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them."

This explicitly teaches (instructs) what Proverbs 14:31 only implied (a Contrast proverb):

Proverbs 14:31 "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God."

Some parts of Proverbs contain long instructive passages (see Proverbs 1 – 9). ...

Here Wisdom is often personified as a woman speaking forth wisdom publicly. This subgenre is called "wisdom speech."

Highly symbolic genres (cosmogony, poetry, wisdom, apocalyptic, some prophecy – genres that use a lot of symbolic language) often use the literary convention of "Personification." This technique creates a person and puts words in that person's mouth and gives them behaviors. *This enables the author to convey and the reader or listener to see far more deeply into the true character of the truths being conveyed, because we are used to reading people more than we're used to reading words.*

When reading Instructive proverbs, always do the following.

This literary form presents absolute demands for obedience, not suggestions for consideration. It is a unique form and must be taken seriously and obeyed.

You must approach this form (instruction / wisdom speech) as if hearing a woman passionately pleading with people to follow her advice. She is pleading as a friend, bringing them truth to obey lest they fall to the imminent danger of disobedience.

You must pay careful attention to any "motive" clauses which give the reasons for this instruction.

You should rephrase the passage by saying, "The shouting woman is urging me to..."

PERSONIFICATION – Often used in Instructive proverbs.

Wisdom is often personified, spoken of as if it were a person, usually a woman.

Proverbs 1:20-23 “20 Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech:

How long will you simple ones love your simple ways?
 How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?
 If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you
 and made my thoughts known to you.”

(Compare Proverbs chapter 8.)

Folly (refusal to obey God) is also personified as a woman.

Proverbs 9:13-15 “13 The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge.

She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city,
 calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way.

"Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment.

"Stolen water is sweet ;food eaten in secret is delicious!"

But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.”

(The woman Folly is basically the same as the Adulteress.)

The book of Proverbs is filled with poetry, figurative language, similes, metaphors, and so forth, all with the goal of arresting your attention and expressing things in memorable ways.

For example:

Proverbs 3 “3 Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
 bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding,

for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.

She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.

Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.”

NOTE: Wisdom is explicitly described as far more valuable than any natural wealth or blessing. Natural blessings usually accompany wisdom, but it is Wisdom alone that is inherently valuable.

Proverbs 10:26 “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.”

Proverbs 11:22 “Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.”

Proverbs 25 “11 A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

12 Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.

.... Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land.

Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.”

Proverbs often use humorous word pictures and phrases to arrest your attention and tell you the truth. The mental image created is meant to powerfully impact your thinking and emotions and be highly memorable.

Some are meant to be hilarious and unforgettable.

Proverbs 26 (examples of outlandish excuses a lazy person might make, funny descriptions, ...)

"13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!"

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed.

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. "

PROVERBS ABOUT SPEECH HAVE BEEN BADLY MISINTERPRETED BY SOME PENTECOSTALS

A proverb on a particular topic, such as the power of speech for good or evil, **MUST** be read in context, and **ALSO** read alongside other proverbs on the same topic in order to properly understand and apply what that proverb is teaching.

Proverbs 18:21 "21 The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

(... The immediately preceding proverb (18:20) tells you what verse 21 is truly saying ...)

20 From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied."

(... other proverbs on the topic of speech further explain what all proverbs about speech are saying ...)

Proverbs 10:19-21 "19 When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.

The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value.

The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment. "

Proverbs 12 "13 An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk, but a righteous man escapes trouble.

14 From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him."

Proverbs 13:2 "From the fruit of his lips a man enjoys good things, but the unfaithful have a craving for violence." 3 He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin."

AGAIN, you MUST read any particular proverb in its immediate context, in the context of other proverbs on the same topic, in the context of all other wisdom literature, and in the context of all of Scripture.

In these examples of proverbs on the power of speech, improperly interpreting such proverbs has caused millions of people to live in fear of saying "negative" things no matter how truthful they were, because they were afraid of "bringing something bad" on them or their loved ones.

That is false doctrine, heresy!

People have believed that if they simply confessed or "claimed" a proverb as a "promise" that God was forced to give them something.

That is false doctrine, heresy!

Simply understanding these simple and true principles of correct interpretation would have spared millions of people totally needless fear and grief.

You **CANNOT** interpret or apply ANY PROVERB without correctly using COMPARISON to similar proverbs, the **CONTEXT** of the proverb in the passage, whole book, and whole Bible, the **CATEGORY** or kind of proverb you are reading (descriptive, prescriptive, instructive, numerical, antithetical, etc.), the **CONDITIONALITY** of proverbs (depends on real conditions), and the **GENERAL / PROBABLE** nature of proverbs.

REMEMBER

Proverbs are NOT promises and they are NOT legal guarantees.

Proverbs are wise sayings which are usually true in most circumstances. They usually are not absolute truth.

Proverbs are poetic - they are filled with figurative, symbolic language.

Proverbs are written to be memorable, not to be absolutely theologically accurate.

Proverbs are not written to justify a selfish, materialistic, or greedy life - JUST THE OPPOSITE!!!

Proverbs were meant to be intensely practical.

Proverbs were written in an ancient culture and must usually be “translated” for application in modern cultures, or they will lose their true meaning.

Wrongly used, Proverbs can justify a crass, selfish, materialistic lifestyle.

Wrongly used, Proverbs can cause tremendous misunderstanding of God, blame of others, guilt, or self-condemnation.

Proverbs must be read as a collection, comparing each proverb to the teaching of the rest of the book, the rest of wisdom literature, and the rest of Scripture.