

## Introduction to wisdom literature<sup>1</sup>

### Resources and bibliography

- Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: an introduction and commentary*
- Graeme Goldsworthy, *The tree of life: reading Proverbs today*
- Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and wisdom*
- *Walking with the wise* (Sovereign Grace children's songs, based on Proverbs). See [http://sovereigngracemusic.org/Albums/Walking\\_with\\_the\\_Wise](http://sovereigngracemusic.org/Albums/Walking_with_the_Wise)
- R.B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An introduction to the OT*
- Mark Dever, *The message of the OT*
- Lindsay Wilson, *O.T. wisdom literature and the book of Proverbs* (unpublished Oak Hill lectures, 2005)
- Bruce Waltke, *The book of Proverbs* (NICOT, two volumes)
- Doug Johnson, *Lectures on Proverbs*, (Cornhill Training Course)

### 1. What is "wisdom?"

#### (a) "wisdom" = \* SKILL IN LIVING \*

Biblical wisdom is practical know-how about life. It is not just classroom learning. It concerns how to order life in order to achieve God-given ends. It is learned, taught and practiced – but it is given by God. For example, we see that wisdom helps the temple builders, shipwrights and farmers to exercise their respective crafts:

<sup>ESV</sup> Exodus 31:1-5 The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, <sup>3</sup> and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, <sup>4</sup> to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, <sup>5</sup> in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.

<sup>ESV</sup> Exodus 35:10, 25-26, 30-35, "Let every skillful craftsman among you come and make all that the LORD has commanded... <sup>25</sup> And every skillful woman spun with her hands, and they all brought what they had spun in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. <sup>26</sup> All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goats' hair... <sup>30</sup> Then Moses said to the people of Israel, "See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; <sup>31</sup> and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, <sup>32</sup> to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, <sup>33</sup> in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft. <sup>34</sup> And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab the son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan. <sup>35</sup> He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, or by a weaver- by any sort of workman or skilled designer.

<sup>ESV</sup> Ezekiel 27:8-9 The inhabitants of Sidon and Arvad were your rowers; your skilled men, O Tyre, were in you; they were your pilots. <sup>9</sup> The elders of Gebal and her skilled men were in you, caulking your seams; all the ships of the sea with their mariners were in you to barter for your wares.

<sup>ESV</sup> Isaiah 28:23-28, Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech. <sup>24</sup> Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? does he continually open and harrow his ground? <sup>25</sup> When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border? <sup>26</sup> For he is rightly instructed; his God teaches him. <sup>27</sup> Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod. <sup>28</sup> Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever; when he drives his cart wheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it. <sup>29</sup> This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Largely drawn from Lindsay Wilson, *Old Testament wisdom literature and the book of Proverbs* (unpublished Oak Hill lectures, 2005)

**(b) “wisdom literature” = Bible books and passages which have a common concern for wise living**

Different sections of scripture have different characteristics. We often refer to these as different “genres” or types of writing. Those Bible books and passages which we call “wisdom literature” have a common concern for wise living and some common stylistic features. These are the wisdom books: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, possibly the Song of Songs, and some Psalms (e.g. Psalm 1). There is also a wisdom influence in other OT books, in James, and in the Sermon on the Mount.

**2. What are the distinctive characteristics of wisdom literature?**

What are the distinctive characteristics of wisdom literature, as opposed to other OT books and types of writing?

**(a) Its focus: everyday life (rather than salvation history or the supernatural)**

Christians find it hard to fit “wisdom” into Biblical theology. It is rarely included in a Bible overview or in our “story” of the Bible’s big picture. In part this is because wisdom focuses on everyday life rather than *either* the great events of Israel’s history (e.g. it ignores the Exodus) *or* the supernatural. This means that wisdom literature feels more cosmopolitan and more universally applicable (bluntly, on face value it feels less distinctively “Christian”, such that many proverbs could be read and apparently understood by an unbeliever).

Nevertheless, wisdom literature like Proverbs *presupposes* salvation history, even though it doesn’t refer to it. It is distinctively “Israelite” – i.e. belonging to the covenant people of God. It’s not an alien body of literature that was parachuted into the OT Bible. It is very much part of the OT worldview.

It’s no accident that Proverbs isn’t the first book in the Bible: it rests on God’s dealings with his people as recorded in the first part of the OT – in redeeming a people, giving them the temple and the law, setting them in the promised land, and appointing over them a king as means of God’s blessing.

After all, all truly wise men in the OT knew that God the creator was the redeemer. Plus, Proverbs does make explicit reference to the individual’s prayers (15:8, 15:29, 28:9) and sacrifices (7:14, 15:8, 21:3, 21:27) and also to the Law (Torah; 28:4, 7, 9, 29:18). The covenant relationship with Yahweh is assumed.

**(b) It’s style: “teaching” (didactic)**

Much wisdom literature has a very distinctive style or form. Often it is cast in terms of a teacher instructing a pupil – either explicitly or in tone. Some of the forms it uses are distinct in being “teachy.” Elsewhere it shows the reader how there are only two ways to live – clearly distinguishing between the fear of the Lord and the way of folly.

**(c) The importance of experience**

Knowledge is obtained largely by means of observation – e.g. of the natural world, through activities of observation and classification. For example:

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 6:6-11, Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. <sup>7</sup> Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, <sup>8</sup> she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. <sup>9</sup> How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? <sup>10</sup> A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, <sup>11</sup> and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

These observations often concern the usual outcome of a behaviour. This is a different mode of teaching to the prophets, for example. One says “Thus says the Lord.” The other makes observations about behaviours and their outcomes. Both are God’s Word to us, but using a different mode of revelation. For example:

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 16:18, Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 10:4, A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

**3. How is wisdom connected to the rest of the Bible (i.e. to the rest of the OT and to Jesus and the Gospel)?**

**(a) The doctrine of creation**

A key foundation in Biblical wisdom is the doctrine of creation – both its fact and its implications. We see variously:

- i. Wisdom is involved in the search for order in our experience and in nature. There is an order, because the world is made by God. Wisdom allows us to enquire into that order; it makes the world comprehensible, within limits.

ii. The world was brought into existence by God's wisdom:

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 3:19-20, The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; <sup>20</sup> by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew  
<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 3:8, It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

iii. It expresses appreciation for beauty and variety in the world.

iv. The order in creation buttresses belief in divine justice. Retribution is a prominent theme.

v. The nature of creation causes humans to recognise their limitations (as in the closing chapters of Job). We are creatures, not the creator. For example:

<sup>ESV</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

### **(b) The fear of the Lord**

Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. You cannot be wise unless you are rightly related to God. To "fear" implies reverence, an acknowledgement of his holy majesty and a humble confession of our own sin and smallness. Wise living in God's world flows in the lives of people who are thus related to their creator and redeemer. Of course, as we look at the message of the whole Bible, we know that fearing God means coming to His Son Jesus for grace and mercy.

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 1:7, The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 2:5, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 8:13, The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 9:10, The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Plus Proverbs 1:29, 10:27, 14:26, 14:27, 15:16, 15:33, 16:6, 19:23, 22:4, 23:17, 29:25

<sup>ESV</sup> Job 28:28, And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'"

<sup>ESV</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13, The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

<sup>ESV</sup> Psalm 34:11, Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

<sup>ESV</sup> Psalm 111:10, The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

### **(c) God is actively and majestically present**

This is a third connection between wisdom and the rest of the OT (and indeed the rest of the Bible). God is actively and majestically present in his world. This is perhaps the central theme of the whole Bible (with the NT revealing that Jesus is this ruling king) and key in wisdom literature. For example, in Job chapters 38-41 we see how God sovereignly orders his creation.

Or, among the "sentence proverbs" (see below for explanation of this term) which often seem statements of very general wisdom we sometimes find references to the person and work of Yahweh the King. For example, here in Proverbs 16 he is revealed as sovereign in his control of man's tongue, as judge, as provider, as creator, etc.

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 15:33-16:9, The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor. <sup>1</sup> The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD. <sup>2</sup> All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit. <sup>3</sup> Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established. <sup>4</sup> The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble. <sup>5</sup> Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished. <sup>6</sup> By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil. <sup>7</sup> When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. <sup>8</sup> Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice. <sup>9</sup> The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

**(d) Jesus is the wise king, the perfect son, the personification of wisdom and the one in whom we become wise sons of God the King**

The book of Proverbs introduces itself to us as words *from* the son of a king *to* the son of a king (Proverbs 1:1). This refrain is repeated throughout the opening chapters of Proverbs.<sup>2</sup> For example:

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 1:1, The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

<sup>ESV</sup> Proverbs 4:1-5, Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight,<sup>2</sup> for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching.<sup>3</sup> When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother,<sup>4</sup> he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live."<sup>5</sup> Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.

Thus, we conclude that one of the aims of wisdom is to make wise the son of the king, for his role in ruling the people of God.

In the OT the classical wise man is King Solomon. Solomon requests and is given wisdom to govern the people of God properly. He is (initially) a wise king, a prodigious writer of proverbs and a great observer of the natural world. People and kings from all nations came to marvel at his wisdom. Thus, the gift of God to the wise king serves to bless the rest of the world. Wisdom – therefore – is within and serves to promote God's covenant promises (cf. Genesis 12:1-6):

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Kings 3:9-12, Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"<sup>10</sup> It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.<sup>11</sup> And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,<sup>12</sup> behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Kings 4:29-34, And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore,<sup>30</sup> so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.<sup>31</sup> For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.<sup>32</sup> He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.<sup>33</sup> He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.<sup>34</sup> And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.

Of course, Solomon and his successors failed and fell. The gospels teach us that Jesus is the wise king (he alone fears the Lord and lives wisely), that he is the perfect and obedient son who harkens to the words of his father, that he is in fact wisdom incarnate. The only person truly to live well before God is Jesus. Solomon is an imperfect type – of which Christ is the fulfilment. Hence he is portrayed as the true wisdom of God.

<sup>ESV</sup> Colossians 2:1-3, For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,<sup>2</sup> that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ,<sup>3</sup> in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30, He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

<sup>ESV</sup> Luke 2:47,52, And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers...<sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

<sup>ESV</sup> Luke 11:31, The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

But as we fear the Lord (= trusting in God's Son, by the power of the Spirit) we too may be wise sons of God. Proverbs wants all children (be they young or old) to be wise like Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> "My son" texts are at Proverbs 1:8, 1:10, 1:15, 2:1, 3:1, 3:11, 4:1, 4:10, 4:20, 5:1, 5:20, 6:1, 6:3, 6:20, 7:1, 10:1, 23:15, 23:19, 23:26, 24:13, 24:21, 27:11, 31:2.

## The book of Proverbs

### 1. Authorship

The authorship of Proverbs is commonly associated with Solomon – who is mentioned in 1:1, 10:1, 25:1. Also mentioned are the “wise men”, Agur and Lemuel (we don’t know who these people are).

The book was put together over at least 300 years – from Solomon (c.1000BC) through to the period of the men of Hezekiah (c.700BC). There may have been some editorial/redacting work later on.

But above all 1:1 gives credit to Solomon as THE archetypal wise man in Israel – and the one who (in God’s purposes) was the initiator of wisdom literature in Israel.

### 2. Outline and summary of Proverbs

#### (a) Structure

A simple structure would be:

Chapters 1-9 = longer sections

Chapters 10-31 = more unrelated sentence sayings

Here is a fuller outline taken from Kidner (most scholars have the same break-down, and similar section headings):

Title, introduction and motto	1:1-7
1. A father’s praise of wisdom	1:8-9:18
2. Proverbs of Solomon	10:1-22:16
3a. Words of wise men	22:17-24:22
3b. Further words of wise men	24:23-34
4. Further proverbs of Solomon (Hezekiah’s collection)	25:1-29:27
5. Words of Agur	30:1-33
6. Words of King Lemuel	31:1-9
7. An alphabet of wifely excellence	31:10-31

There are about seven collections of Proverbs, with marker posts of different kinds indicating where new collections begin. Let’s briefly discuss the contents of each section:

#### (b) The aim of Proverbs: title, introduction and motto – 1:1-7

The opening 7 verses of Proverbs tell us that the fear of the Lord is the pre-requisite for living well. They explain the purpose of the whole book: FEAR GOD. FEAR GOD. The first main section also climaxes with a call to “fear God” in 9:10.

Verse 7 is critical. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. “Beginning” can mean starting point, but can also mean chief principle. Both meanings fit.

The fear of the Lord means *being rightly related to God*. He is God and I am not. Get him in proper perspective – he is totally unlike us. For us: we view the fear of the Lord in the light of the gospel, which means coming to God through Jesus Christ.

Something utterly crucial to grasp is that fear of God leads to wisdom – and *not the other way round*.

YES! Fear → wisdom,  
NO! Wisdom → fear.

In other words: you need a relationship with God to start with. It’s NOT “get wise and then have a relationship with God.” Note what is said of the fool in v7b: he DESPISES GOD and his Word.

And the book of Proverbs doesn’t just commend the way of wisdom – it also commends fearing God. When, for example, we are presented with a choice between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly, that’s just another way of saying “Fear God.” So, the whole book says: “be rightly related to God... and walk a way of wisdom.”

Alec Motyer says that the way of wisdom is “God’s education programme.” He wants us to grow up into a way of life which is in accord with fearing him. Proverbs is both to teach us AND to shape us.

Wisdom is not just knowledge for the mind but quality of character. Note different aspects of wisdom in vv1-5 (See Kidner commentary on “wisdom”): prudence, wise dealing, justice, knowledge, discretion, guidance.

**(c) Section 1 – 1:8-9:18**

Many Christians imagine the book of Proverbs to be a collection of small and dis-connected sayings. But not so in this section. It is a series of discourses on wisdom and folly, expanding on the introduction. Section 1 mainly consists of instruction poems beginning “my son.” Wisdom and folly are sometimes personified.

This section gives a filter or a grid through which we are to read the rest of the book which does contain what we tend to associate with Proverbs (namely individual sayings and little groupings).

<p><b>Instruction poems beginning “my son”</b>  1:8-19   2:1-22  3:1-12  3:13-35 (v21, “my son”)  4:1-9  4:10-19  4:20-27  5:1-23  6:1-19  6:20-35  7:1-27</p>	<p><b>Interludes:  lady wisdom calls</b>   1:20-33          8:1-36</p>	<p><b>Epilogue:</b>           9:1-18</p>
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**(d) Section 2 – Proverbs of Solomon 10:1-22:16**

This section contains little groups of related proverbs and lots of individual proverbs which are apparently randomly collected. This is Proverbs as we tend to think of them.

The content from 10:1 onwards is to be interpreted through the framework of chapters 1-9 – this is the crucial and immediate context of those later chapters. (See below).

The later sections of book of Proverbs are arguably best covered by theme, rather than sequentially. (See below for the most prominent themes).

In these chapters is a lot of *parallelism*. Mainly in chapters 10-15 this is *antithetical parallelism* which contrasts wisdom and folly. (The characteristic form is “The X is... But the Y is...”). From 15:30-22:16 it is mainly *synonymous parallelism* (“This is like X.”).

The pattern of thought in this section is that one’s actions shape our character which in turn determines our destiny.  
Action → Character → Destiny.

**(e) Section 3a – Sayings of the Wise 22:17-24:22**

Here we move back to a more direct didactic/teaching tone. This section has “bookends” (an *inclusio*) – two statements which parallel each other and frame the material which is in between:

22:19, *trust* the Lord,  
24:21, *fear* the Lord.

The material in the middle is instruction as to HOW the believer is to trust and fear the Lord.

**(f) Section 3b – Further words of wise men 24:23-34**

Either this is a later collection, or words added later by King Solomon.

**(g) Section 4 - Further proverbs of Solomon (Hezekiah’s collection) 25:1-29:27**

This section was written up later under Hezekiah. The order and arrangement here is chiefly stylistic, rather than according to content, i.e.

- Mainly comparative proverbs in 25:1-27:27
- Then mainly antithetical proverbs 28:1-29:27

**(h) Section 5 – Words of Agur 30:1-33**

Verses 1-9 are an unusual autobiographical confession. Verses 10-33 are formed by 10 sayings, often numerical (4 things...).

**(i) Section 6 – Words of King Lemuel 31:1-9**

An oracle his mother taught him.

**(j) Section 7 – An alphabet of wifely excellence 31:10-31**

This is an acrostic poem, with each verse starting with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is an excellent wife! In fact she is the personification of wisdom.

**3. Key themes we're invited to study**

Here are some key themes in Proverbs, taken from Derek Kidner's commentary. Particularly in chs 10-30 a thematic approach is quite fruitful.

- God and man
- Wisdom
- The fool
- The sluggard
- The friend
- Words
- The family: husband and wife, parents and children (see below)
- Life and death

**4. Who is Proverbs for? All... but especially for the young**

It's for all people. But it is particularly for the young. Thus Bruce Waltke writes:

“As the course and bulk of biblical wisdom, the book of Proverbs remains the model of curriculum for humanity to learn how to live under God and before humankind. As a result, it beckons the church to diligent study and application. To uncommitted youth it serves as a stumbling stone, but to committed youth it is a foundation stone. But, tragically, the church has practically discarded the book of Proverbs, which was written for young people as a compass by which to steer their ship of life (1:2-6).”

Bruce Waltke, *Proverbs* (NICOT) p.xxi

What is the evidence for this statement? Firstly, the introduction specifically states that it is about helping the “youth.”

Secondly, much of the whole book of Proverbs is about a wise king and father addressing his son and holding out to him the way of wisdom (see above). (My son” texts = Prov 1:8, 1:10, 1:15, 2:1, 3:1, 3:11, 4:1, 4:10, 4:20, 5:1, 5:20, 6:1, 6:3, 6:20, 7:1, 10:1, 23:15, 23:19, 23:26, 24:13, 24:21, 27:11, 31:2). This points to Jesus the perfect Son (not in a prophetic way, but by way of pattern or typology). But it also indicates our calling to be wise sons and kings in Christ, and points towards the parental responsibility to pass on wisdom.

Thirdly, this is reinforced by many specific texts concerning parents and children (see appendix below):

- Being a wise or foolish son - 10:1, 10:5, 13:1, 15:20, 17:2, 19:26, 19:27, 23:24-25, 28:7.
- Being a wise or foolish “child” - 20:11.
- The parents’ job re: sons - 13:24, 17:25, 19:13, 19:18, 29:17.
- The parents’ job re: children - 22:6, 22:15, 23:13, 29:15.

We infer that our children and young people need Proverbs – and that parents have the primary role in bringing up their children (a common theme in Scripture).

## **5. Tips for reading Proverbs well**

**(a) Watch out for moralism (“Do this and get saved”). It all begins with the fear of the Lord.**

**(b) Coherence is sometimes supplied by structure not content (eg. types of parallelism)**

**(c) Proverbs are presented as generally true and unqualified, but sometimes they are true *sometimes* or are *perspectives* on the truth. Knowing when and how to apply a Proverb is itself an act requiring wisdom (eg. Prov 26:4-5).**

**(d) Proverbs often describe reality but don’t evaluate it (eg. 14:20, 19:4, 20:14, 16:18, 13:21).**

**(e) Not all Proverbs are absolute promises (eg. 22:6)**

Proverbs describes what USUALLY happens what is GENERALLY true as we observe life. Proverbs presents a well-ordered world, where generally the way of wisdom will lead to a good life. It DOES anticipate suffering in the form of the Lord’s discipline (e.g. 3:9-12) and it does argue that material possessions are not everything (eg. 3:13-18). But overall Proverbs says that fearing God and walking in wisdom will lead to a good life. And we would want to say from experience that generally it’s true.

*However*, both our experience AND other Bible books speak of a world in which God’s order is hidden: good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people. The two Bible books which particularly speak to that are Job and Ecclesiastes. They complement Proverbs. We must never understand or teach Proverbs without having Job and Ecclesiastes (or the central part of Romans 8) in the back of our minds.

**(f) Read Proverbs in context to avoid some of these pitfalls:**

- Read sentence sayings from chs 10-31 in the light of chs 1-9.
- Read the whole book in the light of the rest of the Bible and of the Gospel.

**(g) Parallelism: an important tool for reading Proverbs**

Some Bible-reading tools are more appropriate for some genres of Bible literature than others. Parallelism is an important tool for Proverbs and for poetry more generally. (And for other places too – e.g. 2 Tim 2:11-13).

The basic idea is that two halves of a verse PARALLEL each other. Together, the two halves teach us something that each half on its own would not. The key thing is to work out the relationship between the two parts.

Synonymous parallelism: the second line restates the first, e.g. 1:8, 18:6

Antithetic parallelism: the second line states the opposite view to the first, e.g. 3:33, chapters 10-15.

Synthetic parallelism: the second line advances or fills out the sense of the first line, e.g. 3:12, chapters 16-22.

**(h) Other important tools**

- Note different genres within the book of Proverbs: instruction, wisdom speeches, observations.
- Note how commands and motivations are balanced together.
- Remember it’s poetry: imagery, hyperbole used to drive it home.
- Look out for repetition of words across sections
- Use of synonyms: saying the same thing using different words (e.g. 1:2-7)
- Acrostic – 31:10-31. An aid to memory, which speaks of completeness.

**(i) Proverbs are to be chewed over – on our own and together**



## **Appendix: parents and children in Proverbs**

### **ON BEING A WISE SON/CHILD:**

**Proverbs 10:1** A wise son makes a glad father,  
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.

**Proverbs 10:5** He who gathers in summer is a prudent  
son,  
but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings  
shame.

**Proverbs 13:1** A wise son hears his father's instruction,  
but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

**Proverbs 15:20** A wise son makes a glad father,  
but a foolish man despises his mother.

**Proverbs 17:2** A servant who deals wisely will rule  
over a son who acts shamefully  
and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.

**Proverbs 17:25** A foolish son is a grief to his father  
and bitterness to her who bore him.

**Proverbs 19:13** A foolish son is ruin to his father,  
and a wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain.

**Proverbs 19:26** He who does violence to his father  
and chases away his mother  
is a son who brings shame and reproach.

**Proverbs 19:27** Cease to hear instruction, my son,  
and you will stray from the words of knowledge.

**Proverbs 20:11** Even a child makes himself known by  
his acts,  
by whether his conduct is pure and upright.

**Proverbs 23:24-25** The father of the righteous will  
greatly rejoice;  
he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him.  
Let your father and mother be glad;  
let her who bore you rejoice.

**Proverbs 28:7** The one who keeps the law is a son with  
understanding,  
but a companion of gluttons shames his father.

### **PARENTS' TASK WITH SONS / CHILDREN**

**Proverbs 13:24** Whoever spares the rod hates his son,  
but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.

**Proverbs 19:18** Discipline your son, for there is hope;  
do not set your heart on putting him to death.

**Proverbs 22:6** Train up a child in the way he should go;  
even when he is old he will not depart from it.

**Proverbs 22:15** Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,  
but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.

**Proverbs 23:13** Do not withhold discipline from a child;  
if you strike him with a rod, he will not die.

**Proverbs 29:15** The rod and reproof give wisdom,  
but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.

**Proverbs 29:17** Discipline your son, and he will give you rest;  
he will give delight to your heart