



HOW TO READ
PROVERBS

TREMPER LONGMAN III

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To My Son
Andrew Eastwick Longman

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*Plans go wrong for lack of advice;
many advisers bring success. (Proverbs 15:22)*

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*Tremper Longman
Summer 2002*

P A R T

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UNDERSTANDING PROVERBS



WHY READ PROVERBS?

Life isn't easy. We may enjoy temporary rest from the battle, but no one is completely immune to the complexities of circumstances and relationships. These problems range from minor annoyances such as getting called to jury duty at an inconvenient moment, to major disasters such as a serious illness or a significant rupture in an intimate relationship. Sometimes we wake up in the morning and see the day as a series of obstacles to be avoided. We would love to be able to navigate life in a way that minimized the problems.

The Bible never suggests that the life of a follower of God will be devoid of problems. If anything, it says exactly the opposite. Life has its joys, but, according to 2 Corinthians 1:5 ("You can be sure that the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ"), even the joys are in the context of suffering. Unalloyed joy will come only in heaven. On this earth, we will have problems.

How do we handle life's problems? How do we deal with difficult people or uncomfortable situations? What do we say and how do we act? How do we express our emotions? The Bible has a word to describe the person who navigates life well; that word is "wise." A wise person lives life with boldness in spite of the inevitable difficulties.

But where do we find wisdom? We begin to answer this question by looking at the prologue to the book of Proverbs.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs leaves its readers in no doubt as to its purpose. After the superscription associating the book with Solomon,¹ the writer has a clear statement of its intention toward the reader:

*Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline,
to help them understand the insights of the wise.*

*Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives,
to help them do what is right, just, and fair.*

*These proverbs will give insight to the simple,
knowledge and discernment to the young.*

Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser.

*Let those with understanding receive guidance
by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables,
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

*Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Prov 1:2–7)*

TO TEACH WISDOM

At the very top of the list of the book's purposes is teaching the people wisdom. The words "wisdom" (*hokma*) and "wise" (*hakam*) run through the prologue and the rest of the book. To truly understand the book of Proverbs, it is important to understand this fundamental concept. Since the book's purpose, after all, is to make you, the reader, wise, it is clearly important to understand the nature of wisdom in order to benefit from reading the book.

Wisdom is a rich concept and is not easily summarized. We will develop our understanding of it as we proceed through the book. However, since we have to start somewhere, we will begin with the basic idea that wisdom is the skill of living. It is a practical knowledge that helps one know how to act and how to speak in different situations. Wisdom entails the ability to avoid problems, and the skill to handle them when they

present themselves. Wisdom also includes the ability to interpret other people's speech and writing in order to react correctly to what they are saying to us.

Wisdom is not intelligence pure and simple. It does not necessarily exclude intelligence, but that is not the focus. Proverbs itself attributes wisdom to a series of animals, not because they have great intelligence but because they know how to navigate life well:

There are four things on earth that are small but unusually wise:

Ants—they aren't strong,

but they store up food all summer.

Rock badgers—they aren't powerful,

but they make their homes among the rocks.

Locusts—they have no king,

but they march in formation.

Lizards—they are easy to catch,

but they are found even in kings' palaces. (Prov 30:24–28)

These animals don't have a high I.Q., but the verses plainly describe a skill in living that is remarkable.

Speaking of I.Q., a recent book compares Intelligence Quotient to emotional intelligence.² The book, *Emotional Intelligence*, never once mentions the Bible or the book of Proverbs. But when the author, Daniel Goleman, describes the concept of emotional intelligence, it sounds very similar to the concept of wisdom in the book of Proverbs—at least at this initial stage of our definition.

People who have a high I.Q. know many facts; they can solve difficult mathematical equations. Their ability to reason and use logic is superior to others'. People with emotional intelligence have other abilities, including "self-control, zeal and persistence and the ability to motivate oneself."³ They also have "abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope."⁴

Biblical wisdom is much closer to the idea of emotional intelligence

than it is to Intelligence Quotient. Wisdom is a skill, a “knowing how”; it is not raw intellect, a “knowing that.” Goleman’s remarkable conclusion is that E.Q., not I.Q., correlates with success in life—success being the ability to get and hold a good job, enjoy life and sustain healthy relationships.

Why read Proverbs, then? To gain wisdom, which is an ability to navigate life. We are, to be sure, just getting started in our understanding of this idea of wisdom. We will see that it means much, much more than how to make and keep friends or say the right word at the right time. But that it does mean those things should contribute to our interest in this book.

WISDOM’S COLLEAGUES

At the heart of the book of Proverbs stands wisdom, but this word is supported by a formidable collection of related ideas and words. As scholars study the various words that are closely related to the Hebrew word for “wisdom” (*hokma*), we get a fuller understanding of what wisdom is.

At this point, we won’t discuss every word in the prologue that is associated with wisdom, but we will briefly mention those that most commonly occur, beginning with the word “discipline(d),” which also can be translated “correction” (*musar*). This word indicates just how serious wisdom is. Discipline/correction implies the threat of punishment or the application of punishment if the instruction is not obeyed. This punishment can be verbal (Prov 12:1) or physical (Prov 13:24). It is the duty of the teacher to apply such correction if the students disobey. Sometimes, though, the punishment comes naturally on the person who takes the wrong road.

The biblical word that is translated “successful” (from the Hebrew root *skl*) can also mean “to have insight,” and refers to a moment of recognition of the true nature of a situation. This recognition will allow the wise person to act or speak in an appropriate way. Insight, therefore, is a key element of a wise person’s inventory, since, as we will see, a wise person needs to read correctly not only the text but also the circumstances and the people with whom the text is dealing.

Perhaps closest to wisdom in meaning, or at least the hardest for us to differentiate, are the words “understanding” (*bin*) and “knowledge” (*da’at*). These words are used so many times that it is likely they are general terms. They may emphasize the knowledge or understanding of facts in a way that *hokma* does not. As mentioned above, *hokma* is not focused on intellectual knowledge, but the words “understanding” and “knowledge” remind us that such knowledge is an important aspect of wisdom. Not so, the idea of abstract knowledge or knowledge simply for knowledge’s sake; that is not valued in the book of Proverbs. True knowledge is always for a purpose and in relationship with other people, God, or creation.

Discretion (*mezimma*) is another part of the arsenal of the wise. The word can also be understood as discernment, the ability to differentiate the right way to handle life from the wrong way. Prudence (*‘orma*, rendered “insight” in the NLT) is closely related. It describes one’s ability to use reason to navigate the problems of life. Prudence carefully considers a situation before rushing in. It implies cool-headedness.

Finally, we turn to a group of words that reveals a crucial dimension of the idea of wisdom in the book of Proverbs. They describe actions that are right (*sedeq*), just (*mispal*), and fair (*mesarim*). These are ethical terms, and as we read on we will see that one cannot possess them without wisdom—nor wisdom without righteousness, justice and virtue. In other words, wisdom in Proverbs is an ethical quality. The wise are on the side of the good.

So, the prologue says in essence that the purpose of the book of Proverbs is to present wisdom, and the prologue’s related vocabulary provides a rich picture of what it means to be wise. But we are still not done. The prologue applies these abilities in one special area, that of interpretation.⁵

THE ABILITY TO READ

The latter half of the prologue dwells on the ability of the wise person to interpret. Specifically, the following types of sayings are listed: maxims, proverbs, difficult sayings, words of the wise and enigmas. The exact translation and reference of some of these words are debated. For in-

stance, many people understand the word translated as “guidance” (*tah bulot*) to be maxims, the word translated as “parable?” (*melisa*) to be difficult saying and the word translated as “riddles?” (*hidot*) to be enigma.⁶ In spite of the quibbles over the exact meaning of these words, they all clearly represent Hebrew words that are difficult to understand not because they have a secret meaning or a code, but because they are forms of writing that address their subject indirectly rather than spelling it out in cold, factual language.

The book of Proverbs itself is full of difficult sayings and occasional enigmas. It is filled with imagery, which by its very nature is indirect language. In what way is wisdom like a “chain of honor” (1:9)? Who is Woman Wisdom? Indeed, we should point out that the Hebrew of Proverbs is much more difficult to understand and read than any English translation. Translations, after all, are really a commentary with no notes. Experts in Hebrew language and literature must make interpretive decisions in the very process of rendering the book into a modern language. Still, there are plenty of interpretive issues left when the work of translation is done.

Reading the book of Proverbs itself takes a skill that may be called wisdom, and the prologue dwells on the interpretation of writings. As we enter more fully into the book, we will see that an effective use of the book takes far more than an ability to simply read and understand the words on the page. The wise person is one who knows when and how to apply a particular proverb. Again, a full discussion awaits in a later chapter, but note the following:

*A proverb in the mouth of a fool
is as useless as a paralyzed leg. (Prov 26:7)*

*A proverb in the mouth of a fool
is like a thornbush brandished by a drunk. (Prov 26:9)*

Proverbs like these indicate that memorizing proverbs doesn’t do the trick; in other words, mere knowledge of a proverb does not help a person navigate life well. There is nothing wrong with knowing the proverbs, to be sure, but such knowledge is not sufficient. After all,

*Everyone enjoys a fitting reply;
it is wonderful to say the right thing at the right time! (Prov 15:23)*

Running throughout Proverbs and wisdom literature in general is the idea that proverbs are not universal truths that are always relevant and rightly applied; rather, they are context-sensitive. We will consider this idea later in the book, but for now, notice how it expands the scope of interpretation. Wise people know not only how to interpret the words on the page or the words spoken by other people but also how to interpret people themselves and, more broadly, the situation in which they find themselves.

Proverbs claims to be able to enhance our ability to interpret. Since all of life involves interpretation, this is no small claim.

TO WHOM IS THIS BOOK ADDRESSED?

The prologue identifies the book's intended audience. True, the discourses of the first nine chapters are addressed to a "son." That will be important to bear in mind as we try to understand the imagery in this initial part of the book. But the prologue is more inclusive and shows us that the final form of the book intends a broader audience for the whole.

As we explore the issue of the book's addressees, we observe that the prologue may be divided into three parts. The first part (Prov 1:2-3) is addressed to "people" in general. But the rest of the prologue, when divided into two parts, specifies narrower groups of readers. The first are the simpleminded, also referred to as the young (Prov 1:4). The simple (*peti*) are neither wise nor foolish. They are, in a sense, unformed. They can do stupid things, to be sure, and later in the book (e.g., Prov 1:22) will sometimes be grouped with the fool (*kesil*) or mocker (*lason*). But the difference between the simpleminded and the fool or the mocker may be summed up in one word: teachability. Fools "despise wisdom and discipline" (Prov 1:7), but the simpleminded will listen. A modern word that describes the simpleminded in this context is "immature." The purpose of the book of Proverbs toward this group is to develop them as people along the right path.

The second specific group mentioned in the prologue is the wise or,

maybe better, the mature. They too may benefit from the book. It will “increase teaching” and in particular enhance their interpretive ability.

In the final analysis, the book of Proverbs is for everyone—but with one notable exception. The fool is excluded. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that fools exclude themselves. But why? The answer comes when we consider the final, climactic verse of the prologue.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

The final verse of the prologue (Prov 1:7) gives what has been called the motto of the book: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Later this will involve us in a more extensive discussion; for now we want to note that there is no wisdom without God. The wise must be open to God’s foundational role in the world and in their lives. The fool is excluded because

*only fools say in their hearts,
“There is no God.” (Ps 14:1)*

By definition, fools cannot participate in wisdom because they reject God. It is important, therefore, to begin with God. We do that by taking a close look at the leading metaphor of the first nine chapters: encountering Woman Wisdom on the path of life.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. The prologue to the book of Proverbs identifies three types of people: immature, mature, foolish. Where do you find yourself in that trio? Why?
2. What do you expect to find in the book of Proverbs? What are your goals in reading it?
3. Would you consider yourself intelligent? Wise? Both? Neither? On what grounds?
4. Can someone be smart without having a relationship with God? Can someone be wise?
5. Can you think of someone—a family member, a friend, a well-known person—you would characterize as wise? On what grounds?

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