



*The NIV Application Commentary: Proverbs*  
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# Contents

7

## **Series Introduction**

11

## **General Editor's Preface**

13

## **Author's Preface**

15

## **Abbreviations**

19

## **Introduction**

49

## **Outline of Proverbs**

51

## **Select Bibliography on Proverbs**

57

## **Text and Commentary on Proverbs**

687

## **Scripture and Apocrypha Index**

705

## **Subject Index**

# Proverbs 1:1–7



**T**HE PROVERBS OF Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

- <sup>2</sup>for attaining wisdom and discipline,  
for understanding words of insight;
- <sup>3</sup>or acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,  
doing what is right and just and fair;
- <sup>4</sup>for giving prudence to the simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the young—
- <sup>5</sup>let the wise listen and add to their learning,  
and let the discerning get guidance—
- <sup>6</sup>for understanding proverbs and parables,  
the sayings and riddles of the wise.
- <sup>7</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.



THESE SEVEN VERSES form a distinct unit of introduction. An introduction, contrary to much of our common experience in listening to popular speakers, is not a warm-up or a time for pleasantries. Biblical writers waste no time with anything less than matters of highest priority. They go to the heart of the matter, especially when dealing with first things: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1); “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). At the beginning of Proverbs we have an introduction that declares without apology that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7).

We should always pay attention to beginnings and endings of literary works because writers tend to put their most important thoughts and images there. We should pay especially close attention to a literary introduction when it includes a phrase that is also found in the work’s conclusion. In this case, “fear of the LORD” not only concludes this prologue and the first part of the book of Proverbs (i.e., chs. 1–9; cf. 9:10), it also appears at the end of the entire book (31:30). The writer’s use of this framing device of *inclusio* tells us to watch for “the fear of the LORD” as it recurs throughout the Proverbs and guides our reading of it. For now we observe that as Yahweh is the source of every beginning, so our fear of him (worship and faithfulness) is the beginning of the study of wisdom as well as its primary goal.

The introduction, most of it one long Hebrew sentence, not only honors the book of Proverbs with the names of its most revered kings, Solomon and David, it states the book's purpose. In a series of Hebrew infinitive verbs (six in all after verse 2; infinitives begin every verse but verses 5 and 7), we readers are told not only what the book is (a collection of *mešalim*) and who receives the credit for the collection (Solomon),<sup>1</sup> but what the book is *for*. In a word, this book was written to pass on wisdom. Such a statement of introduction was not unusual in the ancient world. Egyptian instructions in wisdom often named the speaker and recipient as part of their statement of purpose: to pass on wisdom for successful living from one generation to the next. So Ptahhotep taught his son, "There is no one born wise."<sup>2</sup>

We should also notice that this introduction includes a list of literary forms ("proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise"), reasons for studying them ("for attaining wisdom . . . for giving prudence"), and qualities of character that readers should cultivate ("a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair"). Finally, the prologue describes different sorts of people who will read and respond to the teaching of this book ("the simple . . . the young . . . the wise . . . [and] fools").

The different terms for wisdom, knowledge, and understanding have puzzled commentators, who have tried to determine what distinguishes one from another. Some have looked for patterns and progressions.<sup>3</sup> Others have been content to say that the many terms are brought together to show that no one word can describe the reality and splendor of wisdom. Kidner put it well, comparing the prologue to a prism that breaks "the plain daylight of wisdom (*hokmah*) into its rainbow of constituent colors."<sup>4</sup>

The first of the purpose clauses says that the proverbs are "for attaining wisdom and discipline" (1:2). "Wisdom" in its most general meaning is the acquired learning that helps one know what to do in a given situation.<sup>5</sup> It includes knowledge and skill, whether that skill is applied to craft work (Isa. 40:20) or to the business of right living, as it is here. In this prologue, the Hebrew root *hkm* is used twice of wisdom (Prov. 1:2, 7) and twice for the wise persons who both acquire and teach it (1:5, 6). Therefore, one learns wisdom from those who are farther along in the process (cf. 12:15; 13:20). Yet such

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1. See the introduction on these topics.

2. *AEL*, 1:63; *ANET*, 413 (sec. 40).

3. W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 23–30, sees a chiasmic or mirror pattern that distinguishes: comprehensive intellectual virtues (1:2a and 7), literary expressions of wisdom (1:2b and 6), instrumental virtues (1:3a and 4–5), and, at the center position of greatest importance, moral and communal virtues (1:3b).

4. Kidner, *Proverbs*, 36.

5. See the section "Wisdom in the Old Testament" in the introduction.

wisdom does not come apart from a right relationship to the Lord, here expressed as “fear.” Therefore, before going on, this prologue wants us to know that wisdom, taught by elders and received in the fear of God, is the primary goal for human life.

“Wisdom” is in first position as an indication of its primary importance (1:2), yet wisdom does not stand alone. It is paired with “discipline,” not only here but again in 1:6. “Discipline” (*musar*) basically refers to instruction, especially in the sense of correction. The word is used for God’s discipline in Deuteronomy 11:2; Isaiah 26:16; and Psalm 50:17. Some of the proverbs use it for corporal punishment (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13). When paired with “wisdom” (*hokmah*), discipline means submitting to instruction in order to reach the goal of wisdom. “Listen to advice and accept instruction (*musar*), and in the end you will be wise” (19:20; cf. 23:23). The pairing of wisdom and discipline suggests that both are a way of life that one comes to know and learn.<sup>6</sup> No one is born wise or without the need for discipline.

Discipline (*musar*) is also paired with “a prudent life” (*śekel*)—a term for practical wisdom (1:3; cf. 16:22).<sup>7</sup> Throughout Scripture, *śekel* refers to understanding and insight that can lead to good ends (Ezra 8:18) or bad (Dan. 8:25). It speaks of the ability to size up a situation and respond accordingly. When tempered with discipline, this practical wisdom leads one along good paths.

The second half of verse 3 continues to describe the disciplined and prudent life; it is characterized by actions that are “right and just and fair.” The break in the series of infinitive verbs adds extra emphasis on this trio of virtues (in Hebrew they appear in noun forms, “righteousness, justice, and equity”). We will meet them again in the next chapter, where they speak of how and why God gives wisdom (2:9). This triad is at the center of the prologue’s structure, and its goal for life is at the heart of the whole book.<sup>8</sup> Righteousness, justice, and equity are also often used of God in the Psalms (Ps. 9:8; 33:5; 89:14; 96:10; 97:2; 103:17), and as attributes of God they set the standard for human interaction (58:1). They appear throughout Proverbs to show us how disciplined and prudent living is recognized.<sup>9</sup>

In Proverbs 1:4 we meet, for the first time, the person who is to receive this instruction in wisdom. That person is “simple” or “untutored” (*peti*; some

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6. Scott, *Proverbs*, 36.

7. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 36, understands *śekel* as insight, “the ability to grasp the meanings or implications of a situation or message,” combining understanding and expertise.

8. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, 42. See also footnote 2. Brown sees a chiasmic structure in verses 2–7 with these three terms at the center focus.

9. Whybray, *Proverbs*, 32.

translations even use “ignorant”),<sup>10</sup> more lacking in instruction than intelligence. Remember that the statutes of the Lord make the simple wise (Ps. 19:8). The simple can be led astray (Prov. 1:10 uses the same root for “entice”), so there is sometimes a sense of “gullible” or “naive” included as well. It is a significant term, for we will see in this same chapter that personified Wisdom rebukes the simple for remaining in ignorance (1:22). So also both Wisdom and Folly address their invitations to the simple in chapter 9.

The term “simple” is set in parallel with “the young”; thus, it seems that the first objects of wisdom teaching are those who need education in every area of life. They are to learn “prudence,” “knowledge,” and “discretion.” “Prudence” is here used as a positive description of hidden, private thoughts. Not saying everything that comes to mind has its advantages, but if thoughts are hidden in deceit, they appear as shrewdness or even cunning or scheming (Gen. 3:1; Ex. 21:14; Josh. 9:4). Likewise, “discretion,” the ability to make plans, can, when used for evil purposes, become the kind of craftiness that the Lord condemns (Prov. 12:2).<sup>11</sup> “Knowledge,” by contrast, is a positive term that will receive a greater positive charge in 1:7 by its association with the fear of Yahweh.

Verse 5 brings another group of persons into view. Wisdom instruction is not only for the unlearned; the “wise” also listen and continue to learn while the “discerning get guidance” or strategies (see 11:14; 20:18; 24:6; 12:5 for a negative sense). The Hebrew grammar of the first phrase will allow a jussive sense of “let the wise hear.” But whether the statement is directive or descriptive, it is clear that the character of learners determines their actions and the actions of learners reveal character.

Who are these wise ones? Coming after mention of the simple, the term “wise” may indicate those who are more experienced and accomplished in learning, those who would require skills of discernment that are more finely honed.<sup>12</sup> Contrasted with the fools who are mentioned in 1:7, the wise are any who choose to follow the path of learning instead of passing it by. By placing the wise and discerning between the simple and the fools, the writer highlights the inevitable decision that all must make. The simple must choose to become one of the wise or by default will become one of the fools.

In 1:6, the last of the purpose clauses, “for understanding” (*lʿhabin*), takes as its object “proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.” Two

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10. Scott, *Proverbs*, 33.

11. McKane, *Proverbs*, 265, noting that both terms “border on the pejorative,” takes this as an indication that early wisdom teaching was secular and pragmatic to a fault. But there is no reason to look to a hypothetical history of the text to explain the jarring use of terminology here.

12. Scott L. Harris, *Proverbs 1–9: A Study of Inner-Biblical Interpretation* (SBLDS 150; Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1995), 191–93.