

# PROVERBS

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## OVERVIEW

The book of Proverbs is one of the three wisdom books in the Old Testament (alongside Job and Ecclesiastes). The book of Proverbs is built on the assumption that proper action will lead to proper outcomes. Those who act properly have wisdom, and those who act improperly follow foolishness, or folly. The book of Proverbs bases this search for wisdom on a relationship with God. We are told in Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The outlook of the book of Proverbs is not dissimilar to what we find in the Doctrine and Covenants, where we are told that “the glory of God is intelligence” and to “seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:36; 88:118). Thus, the words found in the book of Proverbs are both the results of study and faith and another opportunity to continue to learn by study and faith. Wisdom is not just having knowledge but implies practical skill.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the Old Testament, craftsmen who have the skill and knowledge to build beautiful things are said to have wisdom.<sup>2</sup> If wisdom in the book of Proverbs is about having the skill and ability to build something beautiful, we might ask ourselves, what are we supposed to be building with it? The short answer is a better world. In Proverbs, the entire world is described as a cosmic house that God has built and provided for with His own wisdom.<sup>3</sup> The house, or world, that God has made only functions properly with righteousness and justice; thus, the book of Proverbs is here to teach “righteousness, justice, and equity” (Proverbs 1:3

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1 Richard J. Clifford, “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 5 of 12 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 11.

2 Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. Richard J. Clifford (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 67–90. See Exodus 31:2–5; 1 Kings 7:13–15.

3 Proverbs 3:19–20. My discussion about wisdom’s role in building and providing for households is heavily indebted to Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House.”

English Standard Version). To skillfully live in the world that God has made means to help in its construction by building our own houses or households that are likewise built and provided for through justice and righteousness.

Even though it is distinctly Israelite in its message, the book of Proverbs, like the other wisdom books in the Old Testament, does not focus on the relationships between Jehovah and Israel. Unlike most books in the Old Testament, it does not reference the great acts of God for Israel such as the Exodus, nor does it mention specific covenants like the Abrahamic covenant or the Sinai covenant. Proverbs is emphatic that humanity's acquisition of wisdom can only take place through a relationship with God: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10), but this relationship does not focus on the covenantal relationship between the nation of Israel and God. The focus in the book of Proverbs is the relationship between God as the Creator and His creations. Thinking about God as the Creator is not to just to think about the past; for the Israelites, God's creative power is something that is used in the present. Creation was about establishing and maintaining order in the world. The reader of Proverbs is invited to participate in God's created order by building and providing for a household of their own. Although the book was originally addressed to young men, both men and women have important roles in building and providing for their households.

In keeping with this metaphor, the son is told to care for the woman he marries (Proverbs 5:18). He is told to be faithful to the wife of his youth and to stay away from the "strange woman," or the woman that would destroy his family or household (see, for example, 2:16–19; 5:3–14). Wisdom is personified as a woman in the book of Proverbs (1:20–33). The son is told to develop a relationship with Lady Wisdom (7:4) and to stay away from Lady Folly (9:13–18). Faithfulness to Lady Wisdom is represented by faithfulness to one's wife, and a relationship with Lady Folly is represented by going after the strange woman.

The path that one takes to build and provide for one's house is essential for its stability; thus the book of Proverbs talks about two paths: wisdom and righteousness lead to the path of life and light, while folly and wickedness lead to the path of death and darkness.<sup>4</sup>

The book of Proverbs is made up of many collections:

1. Introduction to the book (1:1–7)
2. Instructions from father to son (1:8–9:18)
3. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Proverbs 1:15; 4:14–19; 5:3–6.

4. Words of the wise (22:17–24:22)
5. More words of the wise (24:23–34)
6. More proverbs of Solomon (25–29)
7. The words of Agur (30:1–14)
8. Numerical sayings (30:15–33)
9. Words of King Lemuel (31:1–9)
10. Poem of the virtuous woman (31:10–31)

Although the book of Proverbs begins with the statement “The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel,” the book is not composed entirely of proverbs, nor do they all come from Solomon. The actual proverbs of Solomon are found in Proverbs 10:1–22:16. This section is 375 lines in the Hebrew text and corresponds to its heading found in Proverbs 10:1. Hebrew letters developed a numerical value, and the name Solomon in Hebrew adds up to 375, the exact number of lines found in Proverbs 10:1–22:16.<sup>5</sup> This is good evidence that this section was deliberately crafted. Another section, Proverbs 25–29, is also described as the “proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out” (25:1).

The book of Proverbs is made up of other additional collections and units not directly attributed to Solomon. For example, there are the “words of Agur” (30:1–14) and the “words of King Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him” (31:1–9). The section called “Words of the Wise” (Proverbs 22:17–24:22) is thought to have been influenced by an earlier Egyptian text called “The Instructions of Amenemope.” The book of Proverbs ends with a poem about a virtuous woman, and although it does not have a distinct heading, the poem is written as an alphabetic acrostic. This is a common poetic device in Hebrew poetry, and in it each verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Proverbs 1–9 participates in the instructions genre, where a father or official teaches a son or pupil; this kind of genre is found in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Although this section can be read as Solomon teaching one of his sons, it is not expressly attributed to Solomon, and it was certainly meant to be more widely applicable than a specific father giving a specific son advice.

The book of Proverbs is meant to be an aid and guide as we follow Jehovah by acquiring wisdom and learning to skillfully live in the world that God has created for us. Those who become students of God’s creations learn to leave the world and its inhabitants better than they found them.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 108.

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