**Introduction**

The Book of Proverbs, nestled within the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, offers practical guidance and timeless wisdom for living a life of integrity, righteousness, and discernment. Written by King Solomon and other sages, Proverbs contains pithy sayings, wise instructions, and insightful observations on topics ranging from morality and relationships to work and wealth.

There are about 915 individual proverbs in the books. These proverbs are like maxims, general truths. The key verse of the book is Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (NIV)

**Structure and Argument**

(1) An Outline of Proverbs (cf. Dillard, An Introduction to the O.T., p.238)

Preamble (1:1-7)

Extended Discourses on Wisdom (1:8-9:18)

Solomonic Proverbs (10:1-22:16; 25:1-29:27)

Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:34)

Sayings of Agur (30)

Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-9)

Poem to the Virtuous Woman (31:10-31)

“The opening chapters are radically different from the later ones in terms of form. While the last part of the book is dominated by the characteristic proverb form of short ...aphorisms, the first nine chapters contain longer wisdom sayings. The discourses have two forms: either a teacher addresses his son...as, for instance, in 1:8-19, or personified wisdom speaks for herself.”

(2) The Structure of Proverbs 1-9 (cf. Dorsey, The Literary Structure of the O.T., p.191)

1. invitation of folly (1:8-19)

b invitation of wisdom (hokmot) (1:20-33)

c invitation to call out for wisdom: call out and cry aloud (2:1-9)

d the loose woman (2:10-22)

e good consequences of wise living (3:1-20)

f practical advise about right social behaviour (3:21-35)

g embrace wisdom (4:1-27)

g’ don’t embrace the adulteress *(5:1-23)*

f’ practical advise about wrong social behaviour (6:1-19)

e’ bad consequences of adultery *(6:20-35)*

d’ the loose woman (7:1-27)

c’ invitation of wisdom who calls out and cries aloud (8:1-36)

b’ invitation of wisdom (hokmot) (9:1-12)

a’ invitation of Lady Folly to her house (9:13-18)

**Significant Themes**

(1) The Wisdom of God (Dillard, 243-244)

“A key to understanding the nature of Wisdom in Proverbs 9 is the location of her house on the ‘highest point of the city’ (9:3). In the ancient Near East, only one person had the right to dwell on the highest point in the city, the god of that city. In Jerusalem as well, the building on the highest point was the temple of Zion...she stands for God’s wisdom and ultimately (as a synecodoche) for God himself.

On the other hand, the reader encounters Folly, also personified as a woman and also appealing to the naive young men who are walking by the path of life. Significantly her house too is ‘at the highest point of the city’ (9:14). She also stands for the divine, but in this case for all the deities of the ancient Near East who stand over against Yahweh. Throughout its history, Israel was tempted to worship gods like…Baal and Asherah.

The reader is thus confronted with a decision. Both women are calling him to come to them to dine, to share intimacy, and unpacking the metaphor, to worship them. Will it be Wisdom or Folly? Will it be Yahweh or Baal?

Thus now we clearly see the alternative before us as we walk along the path of Proverbs that is really the path of life...So the practical situation for the Israelites was exactly that of Proverbs 9...

Once passing through the prism of Proverbs 1-9, we recognize how deeply theological the individual proverbs that follow really are...each individual proverb exceeds the ‘good advice’ that it imparts on a surface reading.

...the alternative...is a matter of life and death [cf. 3:18 and 9:18].”

Robert Chisholm (D.T.S, O.T. Introduction. Notes) relates various assumptions the book makes about the character of genuine wisdom:

* genuine wisdom originates with God (2:6) [not man cf. 3:5-6; 14:12]; it displays order and operates by certain laws and principles (3:19-20; 8:22-3 1);
* the way to find wisdom is not via mere intellectual pursuit but by coming to grips with who God is and responding to him with fear (1:7; 9:10); to fear the Lord means “humbly submitting to God’s sovereign authority, turning from evil behaviour, and striving to live uprightly”;
* to gain wisdom, one must be teachable, “the wise man or woman thrives on instruction, advice, and even correction (see 9:8-9; 13:10)”;
* “Wisdom is more valuable than material wealth, for its rewards include material wealth and a great deal more (see 3:13-18, 21-26).”

(2) Skillful living before God

The Proverbs touch on many areas of life including:

* Wisdom and knowledge (Pr 4:7)
* Character and conduct (Pr 22:1)
* Relationships (Pr 18:24)
* Work ethic and diligence (Pr 6:6-8)
* Speech and communication (Pr 15:1)
* Wealth and finances (Pr 21:20)
* Discipline and education (Pr 22:6)
* Decision making and planning (Pr 16:3)
* Godliness and faith (Pr 3:5-6)

**Points of Interest**

(1) Solomonic Authorship

“...the book of Proverbs is an anthology composed of a number of texts from different authors and various time periods. Frequently, the sections are marked by captions that indicate authorship. They cite a group called ‘the wise’ (22:17; 24:23), Agur (30:1), King Lemuel (31:1), and Solomon (1:1; 10:1; *25:*1)as sources for the wisdom of the book...Following the information given by the captions, it is best to limit Solomon’s contribution to 10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27. [cf. 1 Kings 3:1-15;4:29-31; 10:1-13]...the ‘men of Hezekiah.’ While early Jewish tradition may have ascribed authorship of the book to them (‘Hezekiah and his company wrote the Proverbs,’ Baba, Bathra 15a), Proverbs 15:1 clearly gives them a scribal and perhaps redactional role.” (Dillard, 236-237)

(2) Interpretation

Do not press the Proverbs too far - “some proverbs are true, but only in certain situations. The proverbs embody wisdom, only a wise person knows the situation in which a particular proverb applies... [e.g., 26:4-5 it depends on the fool as to how one should answer him]” (Dillard, 244)

Chisholm gives an excellent framework by which to understand the Proverbs, particularly in light of the prosperity they seem to assure should one follow their advise.

“In a society where the principles of genuine wisdom are foundational and are valued, the wise will experience the kind of success envisioned in chapter 3. The Proverbs seem to assume such a societal framework where the principles of God’s covenant law are valued and upheld. However, in a society where such principles are not valued as highly, the wise cannot expect such success, at least to the degree promised in Proverbs. Of course, the fact of the matter is, most human societies do not value genuine wisdom. However, this fact does not push the book of Proverbs into the category of well meaning, but impractical and obsolete, idealism. Two things must be kept in mind: First, the demise of human societies which reject genuine wisdom validates the claim of Proverbs that order and success only come when God’s way of wisdom is followed. Any other path leads inevitably to destruction. Second, since genuine wisdom and righteousness are inextricably linked, and God will eventually reward the righteous, then it logically follows that the one who lives wisely will ultimately experience God’s blessings, if not in the here-and-now material ways foreseen in the book of Proverbs, then certainly in the future.” (O.T.I. Notes)

(3) The Perfect Wife (cf. Prov. 31:10-31)

“Verses 10-31 are an acrostic poem about the excellent wife. Commentators differ over whether to interpret the poem literally or figuratively. If it is literal, the description is of the ideal wife that a man should seek to marry. An excellent wife is a rare and valuable asset because of how she diligently takes care of her family. In the end she will be praised by her family and recognized by the community (vv. 28-31). Thus the poem would be an expansion of the teaching of 18:22, which says, “He who finds a wife, finds good and obtains favor from Yahweh.”

However, good arguments also exist for taking the poem as a figurative and fitting epilogue to the entire book. Now that wisdom has been heard and the writer is concluding the book, the appropriate response is for the reader to embrace wisdom as a “wife.” If he does, all the benefits illustrated by a literal excellent wife will accrue to him. The father has already urged his son to treat Wisdom like a wife in 7:4-5. Chapter 9 likewise offered the choice between Lady Wisdom and the woman Folly. Perhaps the writer is being intentionally ambiguous. For the most part, in chapters 1–9 the adulterous woman was a literal danger to avoid, though she later became a figure for folly in 9:13-18. Perhaps Wisdom, which was used figuratively in chapters 1–9, takes on a more literal portrayal here.” (Golding, Proverbs pp.32-33)

Purpose

Dr Chisholm writes concerning the books’ purpose, “The book’s purpose is clearly stated in its introduction (see 1:1-5). In a nutshell, the purpose...is to impart wisdom, which we could define as insight and skill--in the context of proverbs, insight and skill for living life effectively, uprightly, and most importantly, in a way that pleases God.”