**The book of proverbs**

**SUMMARY**

The book of Proverbs is a collection of essays, poems, and sayings expressing the wisdom of ancient Israel. Some of the material probably originated as folk wisdom, circulating in the family or the clan. Other parts reflect the life of the royal court. Arrangement began during the time of Solomon (about 961-922 B.C.E.), and the final edition was likely produced during the exile in Babylon (about 587-539 B.C.E.). Jeremiah 18:18 refers to the priest, the wise, and the prophet as leaders in Israel; the book of Proverbs is the product of the work of "the wise."

**SO WHAT?**

One does not need to deal with the big questions each day, like the meaning of life or the problem of evil or why bad things happen to good people. In day by day living there are all sorts of smaller questions: How should I handle my financial affairs? How should I relate to friends and colleagues? What about falling in love? What can I do to maintain a healthy marriage? How can I responsibly help the poor? These are the sorts of things that the book of Proverbs can help with. If the major theme in the Psalms is the praise of God in heaven, the chief concern of Proverbs is the pursuit of a happy and good life on earth.

**WHERE DO I FIND IT?**

Proverbs is the twentieth book of the Old Testament, falling immediately after Psalms and just before Ecclesiastes.

**WHO WROTE IT?**

The book came into being through a long process. Some of these sayings no doubt originated with Solomon or with those in his court (1 Kings 4:29-34; Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1). Much of it originated in folk wisdom of the sort found in all cultures at all times. Other parts were composed as essays or poems (chapters 1-9, 31). As is characteristic of such materials, the names of the composers and poets are mostly lost to us.

**WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?**

The original impetus for the collection of folk wisdom and also much new composition likely came during the time of Solomon, around 961-922 B.C.E. These materials were preserved, collected, expanded, and edited by persons in the royal courts (25:1). The book was likely put into its final form during the flurry of literary activity which took place in the period of the Babylonian exile and beyond (587 B.C.E. and after).

**WHAT'S IT ABOUT?**

The book of Proverbs is a manual for conducting one's everyday affairs in a manner that is happy and successful in worldly matters and responsible before God.

**HOW DO I READ IT?**

Proverbs lends itself to being read a chapter a day, matching the number of the day of the month (there are 31 chapters). The short sayings should be taken individually, like a variety of expensive chocolates in a gift box. Some may be enjoyed and savored; others can be swallowed quickly or even skipped over.

AUTHOR: [James Limburg, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament](http://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=922)

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# Notes from Pastor Ben & enterthebible.org – James Limburg, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament

# Proverbs 1:2-7 – Getting Off to a Good Start

## SUMMARY: The book of Proverbs is a manual for navigating one's way through life.

## ANALYSIS

Proverbs 1:2-7 nicely sets forth the purpose of the entire book. Here is instruction intended for the young, but also for senior citizens (vv. 4-5), teaching the art of "steersmanship" (1:5; NRSV, "skill"), that is, providing instruction on how to navigate the ship of life through the world with its delights and dangers. The Greek Old Testament uses the word kybernesishere, from which we get the English "cybernetics," meaning "control, steer." Gerhard von Rad has wisely written:

These maxims, saturated as they are by experience, resemble buoys set out on the sea by which one can find one's position. Herder says very shrewdly that one has not to learn "from" such maxims, but "with their help."…And people had also to learn how to manage money, and their own bodies and--what was hardest of all--their tongue, which had no less than life and death in its power (Prov. XVIII.21). (Old Testament Theology, vol. 1, [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962] 421, 434)

The popular painting of a young boy standing at the wheel of a ship, piloting it through stormy weather, with the figure of Jesus in the background, unseen by the lad, is a good illustration of Proverbs as a manual for "steersmanship" under the hidden but steady guidance of God.

# Proverbs 1:7 – The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom

## SUMMARY: A proper relationship with God is the first element of wisdom.

## ANALYSIS

# Here is a reminder that the most important feature in the pursuit of all learning is acknowledging and honoring God, the creator of all. This statement properly stands at the entrance to the library at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, reminding visitors about the first step in gaining knowledge.

# A Theme Verse: Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

There is a relational sense to being. “*Faith Seeking Understanding”* (Anselm) vs *“I think therefore I am”* (Descartes)

**T.S. Elliot’s Four Quartets: [[1]](#footnote-1)**

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from…

 We shall not cease from exploration

And at the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

**Gerhard von Rad:** “Humans are always entirely in the world, yet are always entirely involved with Yahweh.”… “the experiences of the world were for [Israel] always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experiences of the world.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

# Proverbs 1:20-33 – The Call of Woman Wisdom

## SUMMARY: Wisdom is personified as a woman.

## ANALYSIS

The text here seems to indicate an actual practice where women are portrayed as street teachers or preachers. Especially significant in Proverbs is the personification of wisdom as a woman, found especially in chapter 8. In the first chapter of the book it becomes apparent that the production, teaching, and promoting of wisdom is not just a matter for the male of the species. The Bible tells us that women also were "wisdom teachers" (2 Samuel 14:2; 20:16).

“Women are conspicuously absent from the address of Provers; they appear mainly in relation to the young males whom it addresses. It thus requires an extra act of interpretive imagination for women to appropriate the wisdom of Proverbs. Yet, Israelite mothers taught wisdom, Lady Wisdom is personified as a woman, and the human incarnation of wisdom is a “capable woman”(31:10-31).”[[3]](#footnote-3)

# Is Proverbs merely social instruction for young men?

* Can God speak Truth about God’s self and our lives despite the patriarchal writing?

# Proverbs 2:1-6 – A Treasure Hunt

## SUMMARY: Wisdom is a treasure worth seeking.

## ANALYSIS

Chapter 2 is one of the essays that make up the first section of the book (chapters 1-9). Two important features of the kind of wisdom being advocated in this collection are described here: first, wisdom is a treasure, worth seeking and hunting for (one is reminded of Jesus' story about the treasure hidden in the field [Matthew 13:44]); second, wisdom is theological wisdom, here associated with honoring the Lord and knowing about God, and seen as a divine gift (Proverbs 2:5-6).

Proverbs 3

Does God discipline? See Proverbs 3:11-12

Bonhoeffer: “Not everything (evil) that happens is the will of God, yet in the last resort nothing happens without his will (Matthew 10:29), i.e, through every event, however untoward, there is always a way through to God.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

# Proverbs 5:1-23 – The Consequences of Sexual Sins Contrasted with the Joys of Marriage

## SUMMARY: Don't engage in illicit sexual behavior; do enjoy sex within marriage.

## ANALYSIS

Here is one of several warnings in Proverbs about the dangers of illicit sexual activity. Sexual promiscuity and prostitution was a problem in the time when Proverbs was written, as, of course, it is in every age, including our own. The writers of Proverbs pull no punches about the consequences of loose sexual behavior: what may begin with words that are all sweetness and honey is likely to end in death (vv. 1-5)! Or, in another run at the same topic, the teacher says that irresponsible sexual behavior will result in disease and disgrace (vv. 8-14). In contrast is a portrayal of the joys, delights, and intoxications of a faithful marriage (vv. 15-19).

In the Garden Adam and Eve knew what was good. When picking from the tree (of the knowledge of good and evil) what were they seeking to learn? Such is the temptation of Forbidden Fruit.

# Proverbs 6:6-11 – The Sin of Sloth

## SUMMARY: Learn from the ants: Don't be lazy!

## ANALYSIS

This is the first and one of the most memorable of a good number of warnings against sloth in Proverbs. One of the classic seven deadly sins has been identified as laziness or, to use the more ancient and colorful word, sloth. The device of learning from nonhuman creatures is another one that comes up often in Proverbs (see also 30:24-28).

Laziness is a subset of folly and the opposite of wisdom. The Slothful person is out of tune with the cosmic rhythms of reality. How we spend our time in this world matters.

Proverbs also constantly reminds us that the arena in which wisdom and folly contend is this world, with its goods and powers. The way we use our resources, especially our sexuality and our money reveals either godly wisdom or folly.

# Proverbs 7:6-27 – A Story about Seduction

## SUMMARY: Illicit sex has severe consequences.

## ANALYSIS

Once again the wisdom teachers provide a lesson dealing with sexual behavior. This time the instruction takes the form of a story, clearly and dramatically told. Note that the seduction takes place in the evening (v. 9). The woman is "loud" (v. 11; also 9:13) and thus quite the opposite of the ideal woman portrayed in chapter 31 (note vv. 25-26). She piously claims to be returning from worship services (v. 14). She is married and her husband is away on a long business trip (vv. 19-20). The willing young man is pictured as a pitiful creature unwittingly headed for a trap (vv. 22-23). And the penalty? "It will cost him his life" (v. 23; see also v. 27).

# Proverbs 8:1-36 – Woman Wisdom

## SUMMARY: Wisdom is personified as a woman who is active in creation.

## ANALYSIS

This is one of the central texts in the book of Proverbs expressing a notion that has implications throughout Scripture, from Genesis 1 through the New Testament, especially John 1. As was the case in Proverbs 1:20-33, wisdom is personified as a woman, perhaps reflecting an actual practice of women street preachers or teachers. As in 2:1-6, wisdom is a treasure to be sought (8:10-11, 19). Right relationship to God is a component of this wisdom, here described as "the fear of the LORD" (1:7; 9:10). Wisdom is described as the means by which God carries out God's activity of sustaining and guiding humans, in this case rulers (8:15-16).

What is truly astonishing about wisdom as described here is that wisdom is said to have been present at the time of "beginning" (the Hebrew reshithis the same as be-reshith "in the beginning," the first word in the Bible) participating in creation. The creating activity of wisdom is described in verses 23-31, which follow. This speech of Woman Wisdom ends with a declaration of the joys of those who find her. In contrast to the women of chapters 5 and 7, whose ways end in death, those who find Woman Wisdom find life and favor from the Lord.

# Proverbs 9:1-18 – Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly

## SUMMARY: Listening to Woman Wisdom leads to life; listening to Woman Folly means death.

## ANALYSIS

Continuing with the theme of chapter 8, here are two contrasting pictures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. Those who listen to the call of Woman Wisdom find life (v. 6); those who listen to Woman Folly end up as guests in the depths of Sheol (v. 18)! In between these two pictures is a restatement of the theme sounded in 1:7, this time with benefits of finding wisdom added (vv. 10-12).

1. T.S. Elliot, The complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952) 144-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Von Rad, wisdom in Israel, 95, Van Leeuwen’s Translation [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. New Interpreters Bible Commentary: Volume V pg 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bonhoeffer, “Letter of December 18th, 1943” in *Letters and papers from Prison*, pg 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)