

Introduction to Proverbs

What is a proverb?

- A short, pithy statement of wisdom; especially an insight into human character and behavior—like the following common (non-biblical) sayings:
 - “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”
 - “Marry in haste; repent at leisure.”
- A short saying that provides a general truth (Ezek. 16:44—“Like mother, like daughter!”)
- A lesson drawn from experience (Ps. 78:2-6 refers to telling children about the Lord’s past faithfulness to Israel and calls it a proverb or a parable.)
- An object lesson using a comparison or an analogy (Prov. 25:11—“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” [NKJV]).

The book of Proverbs is Hebrew poetry, characterized by parallelism, which survives in translation!

- Synonymous parallelism—second line restates the first in parallel, but different words.
 - “A fool’s lips bring strife,
And his mouth calls for blows” (Prov. 18:6).
 - “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
A stranger, and not your own lips” (Prov. 27:2).
- Antithetical parallelism—second line contrasts with the first (the most common type of parallelism in Proverbs).
 - “The plans of the righteous are just,
but the advice of the wicked is deceitful” (Prov. 12:5).
 - “The memory of the righteous is blessed,
But the name of the wicked will rot” (Prov. 10:7).
- Emblematic (or comparative) parallelism—one line gives a figurative illustration of the other line.
 - “As a ring of gold in a swine’s snout,
So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion” (Prov. 11:22).
 - “As the door turns on its hinges,
So does the sluggard on his bed” (Prov. 26:14).
 - “Like clouds and wind without rain
Is a man who boasts of his gifts falsely” (Prov. 25:14).
- Synthetic parallelism—the second line amplifies the first in some way (such as completing the thought or expanding on it).
 - “The first to plead his case seems just,
Until another comes and examines him” (Prov. 18:17).
 - “Listen to your father who begot you,
And do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov. 23:22).

Another technique typical of Hebrew poetry is the acrostic.

- Each section begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet (cf. Psalm 119).
- The Virtuous Woman passage (Prov. 31:10-31) is an acrostic.

Overview of Proverbs

- I. Introduction to Wisdom; Contrast of Wisdom and Folly (chs. 1-9)
 - A. Purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1-7).
 - B. Folly may interrupt this purpose (1:8-33).
 - C. Seeking wisdom is beneficial (2:1-4:27).
 - D. Folly may prevent one from seeking wisdom (5:1-6:19).
 - E. Finding wisdom has advantages (6:20-9:12).
 - F. Folly may prevent one from finding wisdom (9:13-18).
- II. Collection of Solomon's Proverbs (chs. 10-24)
 - Examples for us: Ask "Is this wisdom or folly?"
 - Chs. 10-11—Contrasts between wicked and righteous
 - Chs. 12-15—The contrasts become more subtle.
 - Chs. 16:1-22:16—Positive, encouraging instructions
 - Chs. 22:17-24:34—Many of the DO NOT proverbs
- III. More of Solomon's Writings, Edited by Men of Hezekiah's Time (chs. 25-29)
 - Many of the comparative (or emblematic) proverbs here (using "like" or "as").
 - Getting along with or knowing how to handle rulers, neighbors, enemies, fools, sluggards, gossips, etc.
 - What people are like and how to handle them
- IV. The Words of Agur (including the numerical proverbs, ch. 30)
- V. The Words of Lemuel (31:1-9)
- VI. The Virtuous Woman (31:10-31)—An Acrostic Poem

Note: Some of the material in this handout comes from Alan P. Ross, *Proverbs. The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gæbelein vol. 5. Zondervan, 1991. Logos Bible Software. Some of it comes from notes of Karen Y. Davis, our former teaching leader.