

Proverbs, V

I would like to finish discussing the basic content of Proverbs. There remain some sections we have not discussed, which include some of the best proverbs in the whole book. Some of my favorites come toward the end of the book. Thus far we have discussed the first 9 chapters, and began discussing the Solomonic collection, 10:1-22:16. Before we leave that section, let me tell you something that Ray Van Leuven says in his essay on the Proverbs. He says that in chapters 1 to 9 we have the opposition of wisdom versus folly. There is the appeal of wisdom made to the simple and the appeal of folly made to the simple. The reader and the young person being addressed are presented with a choice. There is a wise path to follow and there is a foolish path to follow. Van Leuven goes on to say that as we come to this central Solomonic collection, which has so many antithetical proverbs, we have the presentation of the righteous as opposed to the wicked. An example would be, “An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk, but a righteous man escapes trouble.” This is true of the righteous, but this is true of the evil. And then he says, interestingly, that in chapters 16 to 22:16, we have what he calls an advanced course in wisdom, including exceptions. He explains it this way: “The literary sequence of sections A and B thus seems to embody a form of developmental teaching. Young persons need first to learn the basic rules of life, time enough later to learn its painful, mysterious absurdities. As in language, so in life we first learn basic rules and patterns, the exceptions come later. On returning from the country my city-reared toddler excitedly told his mom, ‘We seed a cow.’ He had mastered the ‘ed’ ending (the normal, regular past tense ending) but not the irregular verb.”

He had gotten the basics, but the exception still eluded this young toddler. And Van Leuven’s suggestion is that we see that kind of development in Proverbs. Thus it is not surprising that as Proverbs progresses we get more of the difficult cases, the exceptional cases, where the complexity of life is considered more.

We move now to the next section that follows this: Proverbs 22:17-24:22. The title of this section, found in 22:17, is simply, “Sayings of the wise.” This is a very interesting section. Proverbs 22:17-21 says,

Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise;
 apply your heart to what I teach,
 for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart
 and have all of them ready on your lips.
 So that your trust may be in the LORD,
 I teach you today, even you.
 Have I not written thirty sayings for you,
 sayings of counsel and knowledge,
 teaching you true and reliable words,
 so that you can give sound answers
 to him who sent you?

“Thirty sayings” could also be translated as “excellent things.” It is likely, however, that the translation “thirty sayings” is correct, and we learn this from comparative literature. We have from Egypt the instruction of Amenemope. What is interesting about this is this is an Egyptian book of wisdom that contains 30 sayings, and that suggests that 30 sayings may be a standard form. Interestingly, there are many similarities between what we read in the Egyptian instruction of Amenemope and the biblical text. However, do not let that confuse you. That does not at all mean that they are identical or that we should reduce the biblical text somehow to the level of the Egyptian document. Though there are many parallels and many of the proverbs are somewhat similar, there are also distinct differences. The chief difference,

of course, is that the biblical proverbs have a Yahwistic tenor, that is, they focus on the LORD—YHWH, the covenant God of Israel. The collection begins with the reference to the Lord in verse 19, “So that your trust may be in the Lord, I teach you today, even you.” It also ends with another reference to the Lord in 24:21: “Fear the Lord and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious.” There is also a reference to the Lord just about in the middle of the collection, in 23:17: “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord.” Thus the collection begins, ends, and climaxes in the middle with this emphasis on the fear of the Lord. That is the main difference between this collection of proverbs and the Egyptian document. Let us look at one specific example. Proverbs 22:22 has a parallel with an Egyptian proverb, which reads this way: “Do not steal from the poor nor cheat the cripple.” Then they go on to another proverb: “Do not abuse the elderly nor refuse to let the aged speak.” Let us look at Proverbs 22:22 and we will see that it is quite similar in some ways: “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor, and do not crush the needy in court.” This is not exactly the same as the Egyptian proverb, but it has the same general sentiment. But notice how it goes on in verse 23, “For the Lord will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them.” Do you see how a theological motivation for right behavior is given there? Thus we see that this difference alone, if nothing else, distinguishes this collection of thirty sayings from the Egyptian counterpart.

How should we view comparative material? These are extensive literatures that can serve to help us understand sometimes the form, shape, and genre of the biblical literature. But what can we learn from comparative religions? We believe that God has given us eyes of faith to see rightly that Christianity is the true religion. It is *the* religion, and all other religions are false. Does that mean we cannot learn something about the nature of religion? What if you had not come to know Christ, or had not even been exposed to the Christian religion? Could you not learn something about the shape of religion from looking at other religious faiths? Could you not learn that there is a belief in a supreme being, or more than one, and that there is a notion of prayer and accountability to the supreme being? We could learn some of these things from other religions, and in the same way we can learn something about the form, shape, and expected structure of what we may find in Scripture from comparative literature. It may open our eyes to something. But we do not want the comparative literature to become imperative literature and mandate for us what the Bible is. I like to compare it to wax fruit and real fruit. If you have never seen an apple you could learn a great deal about the real thing by looking at a wax apple. But the wax apple will not nourish you. In fact, to consume it might kill you, depending on what it was made of. That is the way I view comparative literature. Be careful not to allow your knowledge or your reading of comparative literature to cause you to begin to think, “The Bible is just like everything else.” No, it is not. Just as there is one true religion and many false religions, this is God’s word and many others may have something of a similar form but are not the same.

The next section is a very short one that begins in 24:23 where it simply says, “These also are sayings of the wise.” Well, if these are also sayings of the wise like the preceding section, why were they not simply included in the preceding section? That would have messed up the book of 30 sayings. Something that strikes me in this section is the first little couplet of proverbs: “These also are sayings of the wise: To show partiality and judging is not good: Whoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent’—peoples will curse him and nations denounce him. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come upon them.” I think we can learn something from that in terms of our own system and understanding of justice in our American society. Often our temptation is to think that the worst possible scenario would be that an innocent person would be wrongly charged and wrongly convicted. The Bible tends to hold things in tension. Proverbs says, “Whoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent’—peoples will curse him and nations denounce him. But it will be well with those who convict the guilty and rich blessing will come upon them.” There are other proverbs that talk about the protection of the innocent. But the right path is a narrow path. If we back so far away from a potential

abuse, then we fall off the other side and into the opposite abuse. God cares both that the innocent be vindicated and that the guilty be convicted.

Proverbs 25 to 29 is the fifth section, entitled, "More proverbs of Solomon." This is one of my favorite sections. Proverbs 25:1 says, "These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah." This is clear evidence that this book of the Bible, at least, was not written in one sitting by one individual. This is true of many books in the Old Testament, but more so in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. It does seem clear that this book, at least, was begun and then was augmented at a later time, some 200 years after Solomon, by the men of Hezekiah under his direction. This is Solomonic material, according to the text, that they had available to them and thought ought to be added to Proverbs. Perhaps Solomon had limited himself to 375 sentence sayings in keeping with the numeric value of his name. But Hezekiah thought these proverbs ought also to be included. So they brought together this Solomonic material in a rather systematic fashion. If you are making marginal notations of the topic of each proverb, you may notice that you are writing the same thing over and over again. There are little thematic groupings of proverbs. For instance, 26:1-12 is mainly dealing with the fool. Then 26:13-16 moves into talking about the sluggard. Proverbs 26:18-22 is a grouping of proverbs concerning gossip. That is a good one for all of us to think about. Proverbs 26:23-28 talks about deceitful lips.

I think this collection contains some of the best proverbs, some of the ones that strike me as being really brilliant. Proverbs 27:5 says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love." Can you think of a life situation in which that would be a good proverb to espouse? There are situations when a rebuke may be the loving thing. And hidden love, as with an absentee parent, is not helpful. There are many parents who truly love their children but do not deal with them. The hidden love that they feel in their hearts does not come out in any meaningful way, in a corrective way, or in any way that is helpful to the child. This proverb reminds us that we need to be proactive in our relationships. Again, we must recognize the nature of a proverb: it is situation specific. If I were berating my children in angry tones, going on and on, and my wife were to say to me, "You are speaking angrily and making too much of this." If she were to say that to me in the middle of my tirade and I were to say, "Well, better is open rebuke than hidden love," and then continue on, that would be a misapplication of that proverb. But if, on the other hand, she were to say, "You know, you really need to talk to your son about that," and I say, "I do not want to hurt him," then it would be appropriate for her to remind me, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love." Another favorite of mine, Proverbs 28:5, says, "Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully." Can you think of a life situation where you have seen that happen? The most telling examples I have seen are the highly educated lawyers who defend something like abortion, which even our children understand to be evil and unjust. Our minds can be clouded by our own sin and wickedness.

Another of my favorites is 29:25: "Fear of man will prove a snare, but whoever trusts the Lord is kept safe." How would this proverb apply? Taking the example of the workplace, our tendency is to want to play up to the boss, curry favor with the boss. We are worried about what our boss thinks of us. We are fearing man, and that will prove a snare. But the man who fears the Lord is kept safe. Taking the example of being at home, if you are afraid of losing your spouse's favor you miss the opportunity to be the instrument of God's grace in his or her life because of that fear. Fear the Lord and know that the Lord will help you weather the storm and keep you safe. Speak the truth in love. Be a partner to that person. Do not be a silent partner, but be a partner who speaks in love. "Better open rebuke than hidden love," but we can only give loving, open rebuke when we are fearing the Lord and not man.

Chapter 30 is the section of the sayings of Agor. We do not know who Agor was. There are some mystifying theories about what this name may mean. I will not get into them because they are mystifying to me and not very helpful for understanding Proverbs. The sayings of this section are also rather mystifying. There are many “numeric sayings,” which are those proverbs that say, “Four of this, yes even five.” Proverbs 6:16-19 is an example of this: “There are six things the LORD hates, there are seven that are detestable to him [...]” One of these that is interesting is 30:18-19: “There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.” And it is interesting that it goes on to say in verse 20, “This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I have done nothing wrong.’” Derek Kidner, in his commentary on Proverbs, ties that one in with 18-19 and says that it is a jarring fifth thing that is difficult to understand.

Proverbs 31, the last section, also has its own heading: “The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him.” All of these sections have their own points of interest, but what I particularly like about this one is the section on the wife of noble character. It is interesting that Proverbs begins with wisdom personified as a woman, making her appeal to passers by that they come to her rather than to the house of madam folly. What began with wisdom personified as a woman ends with this focus on the wife of noble character. Again, I think that is because this is in the setting of parents instructing their son. Of course, this does apply to women and daughters, but we need to recognize that it was sons who were being addressed in the original setting. Thus it is appropriate that wisdom be personified as a woman inviting the son to come to her. And this focus on the wife of noble character at the end nicely finishes off the book. It may be reassuring for women to note that this description of the wife of noble character is an alphabetic acrostic. It is the complete A to Z description of the character of a noble woman. No woman should take this description as the description of what her life and character must look like. Rather, women should read this and say, “These are noble virtues, and I would like to see these virtues in my own life.” And men should say, “I appreciate when I see these virtues in a woman’s life.” When I proposed to my wife I quoted from the end of Proverbs 31: “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.” Men should look for women who meet at least that criterion, without necessarily demanding that their lives include all these other different activities. This is the complete description of the ideal, virtuous woman. Do not expect anyone other than a superwoman to be doing all of this all of the time.