

# Why wisdom?

## Introducing the Book of Proverbs

Proverbs is a book from the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. It is an example of a type of literature known as 'wisdom'. There are other books in the Bible which fall into this category and there are also blocks of wisdom material scattered throughout the Bible. Some of the wisdom sayings of the Bible have become an integral part of English language and British culture, for example, 'Pride comes before a fall' (page 26) and 'Love covers a multitude of sins' (page 41).

The wisdom of the Bible is personal, pragmatic and practical: it is about living in community. Sayings such as, 'Don't visit your neighbours too often, you will wear out your welcome,' (Proverbs 25.17) are common sense. Some of it probably started as traditional sayings handed down by word of mouth. Other sayings are polished and literary and may have been written for an educational purpose. The Book of Proverbs is concerned with three areas of life:

- The home - advice for parents and children
- The village - advice for living in the wider community
- The royal court - political advice

This book uses mostly the first two forms of wisdom, namely wisdom for the family and the village.

Other communities such as Egypt and Babylon, had their own wisdom literature which shared some similarities with that of the Bible. Biblical wisdom, however, starts from a different basis. It is not just about getting on in life and how to be successful. It starts from a relationship with God. Biblical wisdom deals with motive - after all, why should anyone bother to be wise? Why not enjoy being evil? The Bible's answer is God is wise: people are made in his 'image' and should imitate him. Throughout the Old Testament, people are told to imitate God: God is just, therefore people should be just. God is wise, therefore people should be wise. Biblical wisdom has a religious starting point.

Christians believe God has built a certain order into his creation. God is wise, and therefore his creation reflects that wisdom. Just as we can discover certain physical 'laws' in nature, such as gravity, so, as we experience life, we can discover certain moral 'laws' built into the structure of the universe. An example of this would be the value of honesty in relationships. In practical terms, this means that people from many different traditions often agree on certain rights and wrongs. Christians believe this is so because they reflect the way God created the world. People from different traditions have all discovered the same moral 'laws' that are built into the universe. Christians describe this as 'general revelation.' That means there are some things you can find out about God just by living in the world. The sayings in the Book of Proverbs reflect this God given human wisdom.

Underlying the Book of Proverbs is a fundamental commitment to God, although superficially it looks like common sense wisdom which can be taken at a non-religious level. It certainly contains much good advice for living which is not tied exclusively to the Jewish or Christian traditions. Many of the proverbs are universal in their application, which makes them very suitable for schools. However, on another level, the proverbs are deeply spiritual. A friendship with God is the religious framework within which to understand their full significance. Proverbs is a book on how followers of God can live alongside others with integrity and put their faith into action. It shows how a relationship with God can permeate every action and thought, hence the practical proverbs on speech, thought, weights and measures, and marriage. As such Proverbs should be understood as part of the Old Testament, which provides its wider context and which relates the history of God's dealings with Israel, particularly through the Law and the prophets.

In Western culture, wisdom is often seen as synonymous with intelligence. In the Bible, it is far more than that. Wisdom may include intelligence, but

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it goes beyond it to include:

- a ) The ability to tell the difference between right and wrong, good and evil.
- b ) The ability to write poetry.
- c ) Practical skill (technology, craft, etc).
- d ) Problem solving.
- e ) Political skill and settling legal disputes.
- f ) The ability to offer sound counsel and make judgements.

This book concentrates on a ) and f ), both of which reflect the moral and spiritual aspects of wisdom. One definition of wisdom is ‘reason matured through experience.’ Wisdom is also knowing how to live in right relationships with God and others. It is described as coming from God but showing itself in wise behaviour towards others. This is illustrated from the following quote from the New Testament book of James

‘True wisdom which comes from God is pure, peaceful, gentle and friendly. It is compassionate, free of hypocrisy and prejudice and produces a harvest of good deeds.’ (3.17)

There are three problems that can occur when using the Book of Proverbs.

- a ) Individual proverbs can become isolated from the rest of the Book of Proverbs and the context of the Bible as a whole. If a proverb is cut loose from its context, it can be made to mean anything.
- b ) Proverbs are sometimes applied, blanket-fashion, to any situation. Many proverbs were the result of specific experience. The wisdom is knowing when a proverb applies and when it doesn’t! For example, the proverb ‘A wise person ignores an insult’ could be misused. There is a right time to ignore insults: there is also a time not to. Wisdom lies in knowing the right proverb for the situation.
- c ) Many of the proverbs use images and analogies which help people to understand the meaning. For example, insincerity is likened to a fine glaze on a cheap pot (page 64). However, most analogies have

a point of breakdown. For example, the shamrock can be used to explain the Trinity: the shamrock has one leaf divided into three, and the Trinity is one Godhead but three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). This analogy breaks down if pressed too far: the Trinity is not small and green! (as suggested by Eric Idle in the film ‘Nuns on the Run’). It is not advisable to make the analogies in this book apply too widely.

### **Proverbs in a Christian context.**

The Book of Proverbs was originally written by and for the Jewish community. It is part of the Hebrew Bible and part of a strong Jewish wisdom tradition. As an Old Testament book, Proverbs is also part of the Christian Bible. The main difference between Jews and Christians is that Christians interpret Proverbs in the light of the New Testament. Jesus is seen by Christians as the living embodiment of God’s wisdom (Mark 1.22). There are three factors which Christians believe make it possible to see Jesus in this way:

- a) the content of what he taught - what he said struck people as wise.
- b) the way he taught - it had a familiar form to Jewish listeners. For example, the parable is a development of the proverb.
- c) the way in which he lived - he showed people how to live in relationship with God and others.

This assembly book has been specifically written to help teachers with delivering broadly Christian assemblies. Therefore the proverbs have been interpreted from a Christian perspective, in particular by linking them with Jesus and his teaching. If the proverbs were being used as part of an act of worship which was reflecting the Jewish tradition, they would need interpreting in a Jewish way and in a Jewish context, not linked to the New Testament. Both Christian and Jewish ways are legitimate ways of understanding the proverbs. However this book, in line with the requirements of the appropriate legislation, reflects a Christian understanding.