

Scholia et Homiletica

Proverbs: An Introduction

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I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Proverbs is an Old Testament concentrated graduate course in the art of living ("for attaining wisdom and discipline. . . for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. . ." 1:2-4). It urges the young man above all else to get a good education ("Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom, though it cost all you have, get understanding" 4:7). Only wisdom will lead into the full promise of life ("Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor" 3:16. "She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed" 3:18). But this education must be grounded in the knowledge-and acknowledgment--of Yahweh. True wisdom begins with godliness ("The fear of LORD is the beginning of Wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" 9:10. See also 3:5-12). Wisdom shuns all perverse ways and the enticements of perverse persons--in the social structures of those days that meant for the young man primarily those men who tried to get ahead in the world by exploiting others (1:10-19) and those women who sought sexual pleasure outside the bond of marriage (5:1-23; 6:20-25; 7:1-27). It embraces "what is right and just and fair--every good path" (2:9) and rejects "the ways of wicked men. . . (who) walk in dark ways, who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil. . ." (2:12-14) For

The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble. (4:18-19)

The wisdom here offered to the young man is that which is to be learned at the feet of his elders ("Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" 1:8)~those already experience in life and who had learned well from those who were before them ("When was a boy in

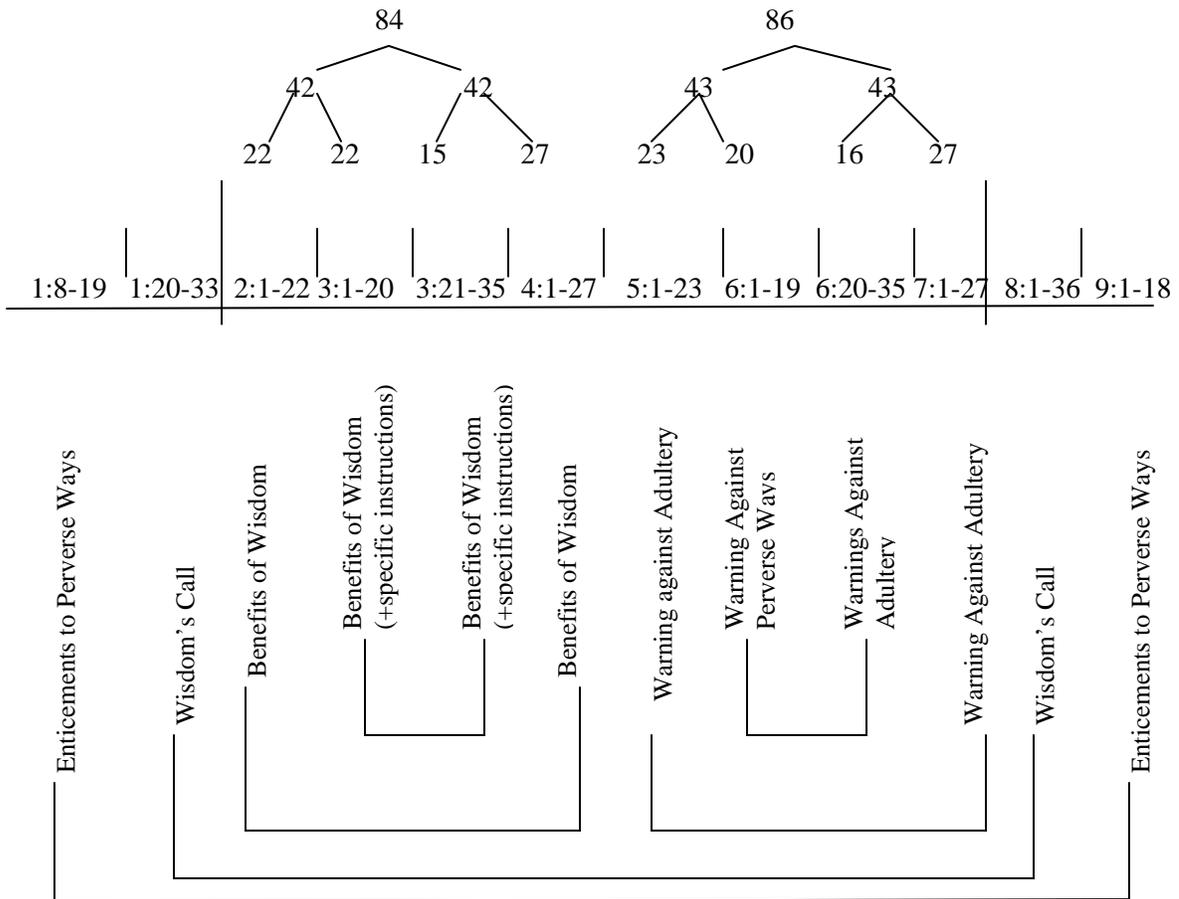
my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, 'Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live'" 4:3-4). Ultimately, it is to be taught by Yahweh himself ("For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding" 2:6) so that the young man can participate in the very wisdom with which Yahweh created the world in which we humans live, move, and have our being.

By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
 by understanding he set the heavens in place;
 by his knowledge the deeps were divided,
 and the clouds let drop the dew." (3:19-20; cf. 8:22-31)

This, in a nutshell, is the substance of the opening series of lectures (1:8-9:18). The wise teacher sets before the young man the way of wisdom and the way of folly, the way of life and the way of death, commending the one--heed the invitations of wisdom--and warning against the other--reject the enticements of folly.

II PROVERBS 1:8-9:18

The opening series of lectures (1:8-9:~8) has been carefully structured, utilizing certain common features of the Israelite literary traditions. Two of these are especially worthy of note: symmetry and inclusion (envelope pattern). Diagrammatically the symmetry and envelope pattern of the opening series of speeches can be shown as follows (the encircled numerals refer to the number of poetic lines devoted to the several speeches):



It is to be noted that the first and last speeches have to do with enticements with which the young man is confronted as he faces life: 1:8-19, the enticements of wicked men to get ahead in the world by doing violence to others; 9:1-18, the enticements of Lady Folly (depicted as an adulterous woman to steal life's pleasures-in competition with virtuous Wisdom who invites one to share in her banquet. The second speech from the beginning, and the corresponding second speech from the end, are both urgent calls by personified Wisdom, hailing the "simple" as they make their way in the city and urging them to heed her warnings and advice.

These four speeches, with their A-B-B-A pattern, bracket the main body of speeches (chaps. 2-7). Careful attention to the central series of speeches makes clear light that chapters 2-4 are devoted to the commendation of wisdom, while chapters 5-7 are warnings against being led astray-predominantly warnings against yielding to the temptations of the adulterous woman, who is illustrative of and emblematic for Lady Folly. The symmetry of this section comes to light when it is noted that chapters 2-4 contain four speeches (2:1-22; 3:1-20; 3:21-35; 4:1-27), with a total of eighty-four poetic lines, and that chapters 5-7 also contain four speeches (5:1-23; 6:1-19; 6:20-35; 7:1-27), with a total of eighty-six poetic lines. Moreover, the four speeches of the second series (chaps. 5-7) repeat the pattern (in the number of poetic lines) of the four speeches of the first series: cf. 22/20/15/27 with 23/20/16/27. (Speeches one and three of the second series each being extended by one poetic line beyond the length of the corresponding speeches of the first series.) Although within each series the four speeches all vary in length, in both, the sum of the first two speeches is equal to the sum of the last two. This symmetry is too precise and complex to be coincidental; the overall pattern is carefully designed. There remains the question whether in each series the first and fourth speeches have been designed to bracket the intervening speeches two and three.

It is evident that speeches one and four of the first series (chap. 2 and 4) are extended speeches commending wisdom as the way that guards from evil and leads to life. Speeches two and three (3:1-20,21-35) differ in form and content from these but are both formally and materially alike. Both contain an introduction, a body of specific instructions, and a conclusion. In both, the introduction and instructions together are composed of twelve poetic lines (w. 1-12; 21-32). The first of these is devoted to instructions regarding positive virtues ("love and faithfulness," w. 3-4) and a proper relationship with Yahweh ("trust in the LORD," vv. 5-6; "fear the LORD," vv. 7-8; "honor the LORD with your wealth," vv. 9-10, accept the LORD's loving discipline, w. 11-12). The second is devoted to warnings against wicked ways in dealings with fellowmen ("Do not withhold good," w. 27-28; "Do not plot harm," w. 29-30; "Do not follow perverse men," vv.31-32).

In the second series (chaps. 5-7), the first and fourth speeches (chaps. 5 and 7) are extended speeches warning against the adulterous woman. Thus, they formally parallel the first and fourth speeches of the first series. However, the

two speeches of chapter 6 (vv.1-19; 20-35) not at first glance relate to each other in the same manner as the two speeches of chapter 3. They mirror each other neither formally nor materially. They do, however, continue the theme of warning that dominates the second series. It is also noteworthy that the two speeches juxtapose warnings pertaining to the same threats to life that are the pervasive concern of the author of chapter 1-9, viz., the perverse ways of evil men and the adulteress, chapter 2:12-19. It is likely, therefore, that the juxtaposition of these two speeches within the bracketing speeches one and four was intended, in spite of their formal dissimilarity, to function within the second series (chapt. 5-7) in a manner parallel to the function of the two speeches in chapter 3 within the first series (chaps. 2-4).

As has already been noted concerning the two speeches in chapter 3, symmetry also characterizes the structure of some of the separate speeches. This is especially true of the extended speeches found in chapters 2 and 4.

The twenty-two poetic lines (= verses) of chapter 2 fall into two equal halves, verses 1-11 and verses 12-22, each of which has a three-line conclusion. The NIV somewhat obscures the fact that the first eight verses of each half also (repeat the same formal structure. In each the first four lines specify a condition, while the last four lines indicate the consequences:

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| vv. 1-8: | 1-4 If you heed my wise instruction... |
| | 5-6 you will find the knowledge of God who gives wisdom... |
| | 17-8 and he will surround you with his protecting care. |
| vv.12-19: | 12-15 If you heed wisdom and so are kept from the ways of wickedmen ... |
| | 16-17 you will be made. pervious to the seductions of the adulteress |
| | 18-19 whose enticements lead down to death. |

The twenty-seven poetic lines of chapter 4 fall into four strophes, of which the first (nine lines) is clearly introductory. The remaining three strophes have a line structure of 8 -2 -8. The two-line middle strophe (the center and heart of the main body of the speech) contrasts the two ways: the way of righteousness, which is the way of light; and the way of the wicked, which is the way of darkness. Furthermore, the two eight-line strophes that bracket it are each divisible into two four-line subunits. Note parallel between verse 13 and verse 23 (v. 13: guard well the instruction give, "for it is your life"; v. 23: guard your heart-where instruction takes root "for it is the wellspring of life").

The second series of speeches (chaps 5-7) is also not devoid of symmetry. The poetic speech in chapter 5 is made up of four strophes, with a line structure of 6 -8 -6 -3. Here the last strophe serves as a conclusion--similar to the three-line conclusions found in 2:9-11; 2:20-22; 3:33-35. The first warns against the adulteress, the third commends fairness to the wife of your youth. The intervening strophe expands the warning in eight lines, which, like the

eight-line strophes of chapter 4, is thematically subdivided in two four-line units.

In the first speech of chapter 6, two three-line strophes are devoted to rebukes of the sluggard, and two four-line strophes warn against villainy. Note that each of these last two is composed of a series, and they each contain a like physiological catalogue of human instruments of evil: mouth, eye, feet, fingers, heart (w. 12-14); eye, tongue, hands, heart, feet (w. 17-18).

Chapter 7 is a speech of six strophes, of which the first (five lines) is introductory. The five strophes of the body of the speech have the line structure 4 -4 -7 -4 -4. The seven-line strophe contains the enticing speech of the adulteress.

Before leaving the introductory speeches, note should be taken of the symmetrical structure of the final speech, chapter 9. Here Lady Wisdom invites, and Lady Folly entices. Both appeal to the young men who are on the threshold of public life but not yet matured in judgment ("who are simple," w. 4, 16). The speech contains four strophes with the line structure 6 -3 -3 -6. The first (Lady Wisdom) and the last (Lady Folly) strophes are also perfectly balanced internally: each has a 3 -3 substructure. In this way, the author has set up the sharpest possible contrast between Wisdom and Folly, both of whom appeal to the young men "from the highest point of the city." Both invite to a banquet—Wisdom invites to a banquet of the fruits she has produced; Folly tempts with stolen delights. Notice, too, that Wisdom is depicted as a hostess who "has built her house. . . prepared her meat. . . mixed her wine. . . set her table. . . sent out her maids" (w. 2-3), while Folly is depicted only as "sitting at the door of her house" (v. 14).

The two middle strophes, formally balanced, offer Wisdom's contrast between the "mockers" (who as a confirmed follower of wickedness mocks at wisdom's ways) and the "wise."

The opening series of lectures in this graduate course in wisdom thus lays out the fundamental issues in a clear and balanced format. What follows is a series of collections of particulars that illumine various recurring moments in human life lived within the created order of Yahweh's world.

III. 10:1-22:16: The Proverbs of Solomon

The first collection, entitled "The Proverbs of Solomon," contains 375 one-line maxims. This number corresponds exactly with the numerical value of שלמה ($\text{ש} = 300 + \text{ל} = 30 + \text{מ} = 40 + \text{ה} = 5 = 375$). This correspondence is no doubt intended. The first 180 maxims are virtually all antithetic (the second half-line presents some kind of contrast to the first half-line). It may be significant that the second half of this section (10:1-15:29) begins as follows:

In the way of righteousness there is life;
along that path is immortality.
A wise son heeds his father's instruction,
but a mocker does not listen to rebuke. (12:28; 13:1)

The remaining 195 maxims of "The Proverbs of Solomon" are more varied in form.

IV. 22:17-24:22: Sayings of the Wise

Following a five-line introduction, the author of this section offers thirty wise sayings of varying lengths (from one to eight lines) on a wide variety of topics. It seems to be in some degree dependent on the Wisdom Teaching of Amenemope, an Egyptian work of thirty brief sections usually dated to about 1000 B.C. Out of the first eleven sayings of the present work, ten appear to have been borrowed from the Israelite composition. In that case, the Egyptian writing must be dated some five hundred years later. In any event, this section of Proverbs appears clearly to have been originally an independent work that was taken up into Proverbs in its final editing.

His instruction is composed of sixty-eight lines, of which precisely half (thirty-four) are devoted to two-line sayings. The remaining sayings are a mixed lot as to length (six of one line; four of three lines; two of four lines; and one of eight lines). Seventeen of the instructions are warnings. The first saying of the second half (23:22-25) is a renewed exhortation to heed the "father's" instructions.

V. 24:23-34: Further Sayings of the Wise

Proverbs 24:23-34 represents a small collection of five wise sayings (vv. 23b-25; v. 26; v. 27; w. 28-29; w. 30-34 of diverse content (but one and four touch on judicial matters). They are from an unknown source and date.

VI. 25:1-29:27: More Proverbs of Solomon

Since it is ascribed to the "men of Hezekiah," this collection can be dated about 700 B.C. It is composed of 130 lines. As with the former collection, it is largely made up of one-line sayings, and there is a section that is predominantly sayings of the antithetic type. Here, however, this section comes last (chaps. 28-29 [fifty-five lines] rather than first. The first part of this collection (chaps. 25-27 [seventy-five lines]) differs from the earlier collection in that there are a larger number of multiple-line sayings (eight of two lines; one of three lines; one of five lines). A five-line saying advising the king to look well to the cultural base of his personal economy concludes this first portion of the second collection (27:23-27).

VII. 30:1-33: Sayings of Agur

It may be that Agur was a member of the Ishmaelite tribe of Massa (Gen. 25:14)¹ and that King Lemuel was from the same tribe.² If so, these portions of

¹ See NIV footnote on 30:1.

² See 31:1 and NIV footnote.

Proverbs were borrowed from the south, perhaps by way of Edom. In any event, they both spring from non-Israelite sources.

This unit is made up of forty lines. It contains eleven multiple-line sayings, with three one-liners interspersed (w. 10, 15, 20). Unique to the section are seven units composed of lists.³ The first differs from the others in that it contains a list of only two, followed by a two-line elaboration (vv. 7-9). The other six all offer lists of four, with the first (w. 11-14) and the fifth (vv. 24-26) lacking the numerical formula that introduces the remaining four (vv. 15b, 16-19; 21-23; 29-31).

VIII. 31:1-9: Saying of King Lemuel⁴

Eight lines developing three topics (2-4-2) make up this section. They are ascribed to King Lemuel, but he credits them to his mother and the sage advice she gave him as king: (1) don't spend your strength on women (vv. 2,3); (2) don't befuddle your wits with alcohol (w. 4-7); and (3) be the defender of the powerless (w. 8,9)--advice hardly to be improved on, especially for a king!

IX. 31:10-31: Epilogue: The wife of Noble Character

The final unit is a twenty-two-line alphabetic acrostic (each succeeding line begins with the next succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from Aleph to Tau--or, as we would say, from A to Z) in praise of the virtuous wife. The young man addressed in the opening series of speeches (chaps. 1-9) is thus exhorted to seek, and subsequently honor, such a wife. As the dissolute Wife is there depicted as illustrative and emblematic of Lady Folly, so here the virtuous wife is illustrative and emblematic of Lady Wisdom (compare especially 9:1-6). This final section, therefore, constitutes a subtle return to a central theme of the opening speeches and forms with them an envelope around the book of instruction as a whole. Hence, it appears to be a closing recommendation to marry Lady Wisdom.

³ See 6:16-19 for the only other example in Proverbs. The formula occurs also in nonbiblical wisdom literature from the ancient Near East.

⁴ See the introduction to the previous section.

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