
BOOK OF PROVERBS

Approximate date: 900s B.C.E. (Right); 900s B.C.E. for composition of source material, 715-686 B.C.E. for redactions (conservative-moderate); 500s-300s B.C.E. (Left)

Time period: sometime during Israel's monarchy, both the United and Divided Kingdom eras

Author: Solomon exclusively (Right); mostly Solomon with later redaction and addition (conservative-moderate); anonymous teachers (Left)

Location of author(s): Land of Israel or Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel, Jerusalem, and/or Babylon (Left)

Target audience and their location: people of Israel, later people of Judah (Right, conservative-moderate); Southern Kingdom returning or returned from Babylon (Left)

People:

Solomon, David, men of Hezekiah, Agur (son of Jakeh), Ithiel, Ucal, Lemuel

Places:

Israel, Judah

Places mentioned:

Egypt

Key Themes:

the purpose of Proverbs is stated / exhortations to embrace wisdom are issued / an emphasis on the supremacy of wisdom is seen / a warning against adultery is given / warnings against folly are seen / more warnings against adultery are given, along with warnings about an adulteress / a personified Wisdom contrast is seen between Wisdom and Folly / King Solomon issues his specific proverbs, which are largely sayings focused on no particular theme (10:1-22:16) / an extended list of sayings of the wise is seen (22:17-24:34) / more proverbs from King Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah, are issued (25:1-29:27) / sayings from Agur are issued (30:1-33) / an oracle from King Lemuel is recalled / an epilogue praising a virtuous wife is recited

Key Scriptures: Proverbs 1:7; 2:2-6; 3:5-7, 13-18; 5:20-23; 6:16-19; 8:32-36; 9:10-11; 25:2; 30:4-6; 31:8-9, 10-12 / **Wisdom for Young Men** (1:1-9:18); **Wisdom for All People** (10:1-24:34); **Wisdom for the Leaders** (25:1-31:31)

Theological Summary: The Book of Proverbs makes up the largest collection of wisdom sayings in canonical Scripture. Proverbs is a text that most people turn to when requiring

advice so they can be guided in a proper way of living. Proverbs has important lessons to teach anyone, regardless of their age, gender, or social status.¹ Many of the admonitions that it includes orient the reader as a child being instructed by a teacher, often being parental in tone.² Proverbs embodies the essence of practical theology, seen in one of its first major admonitions: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7). Proverbs is intended to guide individuals to perform actions that are right, just, and pious,³ and to be productive members of their communities.

The Hebrew title of Proverbs is *Mishlei* (מִשְׁלֵי), derived from the verb *mashal* (מָשַׁל), which in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice) can mean “to **compare with**” (*HALOT*).⁴ Many theologians are keen to point out that *mashal* represents a wide variety of types of sayings and admonitions.⁵ The Septuagint title for Proverbs is *Paroimiai* (ΠΑΡΟΙΜΙΑΙ), followed by the Latin Vulgate’s *Liber Proverbiorum*. In the Jewish theological tradition, Proverbs is placed among the Writings between Psalms and Job, but in Christian tradition Proverbs is considered a Wisdom text along with Job and Ecclesiastes.

Traditionally, Proverbs has been the first of three books that are given Solomonic authorship. Songs of Songs is believed to have been composed early in Solomon’s life, Proverbs composed during his midlife, and Ecclesiastes composed in his late life (*Song of Songs Rabbah* §10). It is notable for us to consider today that there is no conservative consensus on Solomonic authorship for all three of these books (not to be confused with Solomonic involvement). “Most scholars who have studied the problem intensely have favored the historical nature of the Solomonic tradition to a greater or lesser degree, though some have been far from certain about it, and others have entertained the presence of legendary accretions” (Harrison).⁶ Rabbinic tradition in the Talmud actually ascribes the composition of Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes to the men of Hezekiah (b.*Bava Batra* 15a).⁷

The general title that is given to this text is “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David” (1:1). Its author is designated by a specific name for at least some of the text, with Proverbs beginning with ascribed Solomonic authorship (chs. 1-24).⁸ Standing against complete Solomonic authorship is the fact that 22:17 refers to a second author known by the description “the words of the wise,” followed in 24:23 with the same reference.⁹ The “general view [of exclusive Solomonic authorship]...stands in need of some revision” (*EXP*),¹⁰ “As with the question of Davidic authorship of certain psalms, there must always be some uncertainty

¹ Allen P. Ross, “Proverbs,” in *EXP*, 5:897-903.

² Robert E. Clements, “Proverbs,” in *ECB*, 438.

³ Michael V. Fox, “Proverbs,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1447.

⁴ *HALOT*, 1:647; cf. J. Ruffle, “Proverbs,” in *NBCR*, 549; James L. Crenshaw, “Proverbs,” in *ABD*, 5:513.

⁵ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1010-1011; Lawrence Boadt, “Proverbs, Book of,” in *EDB*, 1090.

⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1013.

⁷ “Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Qohelet” (b.*Bava Batra* 15a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

⁸ Dillard and Longman, pp 239-240.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 240-241.

¹⁰ Ross, in *EXP*, 5:886.

as to the exact amount of the proverbial literature that may be said to be strictly Solomonic” (Harrison).¹¹ Chs. 25-29 are accredited to Solomon being copied by the men of Hezekiah in Judah (25:1). Ch. 30 is attributed to Agur son of Jakeh (30:1). 31:1-9 is attributed to King Lemuel.¹²

While most of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon, its words and sayings undoubtedly had to be collected and edited into a composite work. This work included an added prologue (1:1-7) and longer epilogue (31:10-31). Some of the discourses of interchange may have been added by a later redactor as well. As a consequence, Proverbs should be best understood as an anthology¹³ with seven distinct sections, breaking at: 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; and 31:1.

The bulk of Proverbs would have been written during the reign of Solomon during the Tenth Century B.C.E. Isaiah 29:14 makes reference to “the wisdom of their wise men,” possibly being some kind of grouping. Conservatives assert that Proverbs was probably edited in its final form in the Eighth-Seventh Centuries B.C.E., although some others believe that Proverbs reached its final form before the end of the Babylonian exile.¹⁴

Liberals deny any Solomonic involvement in the composition of Proverbs and often date Proverbs entirely to after the Babylonian exile¹⁵ in a period when a large number of pseudonymous works were circulating.¹⁶ While the proverbs attributed to Solomon are considered spurious, those attested to have been written by the men of Hezekiah are considered to be legitimate, pre-exilic sources,¹⁷ although some liberal sources note that a few of the wisdom sayings of Proverbs do possibly originate from the royal court of Jerusalem.¹⁸

A standard liberal position on Proverbs has been, “Attributed (as a courtesy) to King Solomon, it was compiled and for the most part probably also composed during the fifth and fourth pre-Christian centuries by the masters who taught in academies for young men of the ‘better’ families” (*IDB*).¹⁹ Liberals widely consider the wisdom of proverbs as being mostly, if not entirely, human. Likewise, a large number consider some sayings in Proverbs to be influenced by the latter Hellenistic era.²⁰ Ironically, the literature and concepts that Proverbs parallels²¹ from ancient times often predates the liberal propositions by over a millennium.²²

¹¹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1014.

¹² Dillard and Longman, pp 241-242.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁴ Ruffle, in *NBCR*, 549; Dillard and Longman, 237.

¹⁵ Fox, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1447.

¹⁶ S.H. Blank, “Proverbs,” in *IDB*, 3:938.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:939.

¹⁸ Cf. R.N. Whybray, ‘Proverbs,’ in *IDBSup*, 703.

¹⁹ Blank, “Proverbs,” in *IDB*, 3:936.

²⁰ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1016.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp 1016-1017.

²² Ruffle, in *NBCR*, 549.

There are significant parallels between Proverbs and other Ancient Near Eastern works.²³ One of the major works that is considered in Proverbial scholarship are similarities seen with the Egyptian Wisdom of Amenemope/Amenophis²⁴ dating from the First Millennium B.C.E. This makes dating Proverbs' material contemporary to Solomon quite plausible. Some of these parallels when pointed out have led liberals to confirm the veracity of at least some of the text.²⁵

Also important for one to consider are that the words of the wise (22:17-24:22; 24:23-34) and the words of King Lemuel (31:1-9) may not be Israelite in origin.²⁶ This information incorporated into Proverbs could have come into Israel via some kind of royal contact.²⁷ Some modern interpreters have compared Proverbs to being like *Poor Richard's Almanac*.²⁸

The Hebrew Masoretic Text of Proverbs has been relatively well preserved, even though there are about twenty-five difficult readings in the MT.²⁹ These have been difficult to translate, but concurrent studies in Ugaritic have helped significantly with English translation. The most notable difference to consider between the MT and Septuagint is that the LXX version includes 130 more proverbs.³⁰ Conservatives have often attributed this to the LXX being based on an older Hebrew text, but liberals claim that this is evidence of Proverbs being composed after the Babylonian exile.

Sayings in Proverbs are not intended to be interpreted so much as "prophecies" as much as they are to be viewed as statements of practical reality. Proverbs is dominated by longwinded instruction sections and short sentence wisdom.³¹ What one frequently finds in Proverbs is that a problem is given and a solution will be proposed in a pair of statements. Some of the remarks found in Proverbs are clearly figurative, with some others making comparisons and contrasts. The overarching theme of Proverbs is how to understand Earthly life and the human condition. Modern interpreters encourage people to read Proverbs as a whole, and for them to consider the context of certain sayings (both in the text itself and in history).

The personification of Wisdom in Proverbs is a noticeable and important feature,³² especially as the various Judaismisms of the Second-First Centuries B.C.E. appropriated concepts of Wisdom and applied them to their Messianism. It is also noticeable to consider how *torah* (hr'AT) is sometimes applied to human teaching and not just Divine instruction. Some consider Proverbs to be a commentary on the Torah commands of love (Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5) and covenant faithfulness to God.

²³ Blank, "Proverbs," in *IDB*, 3:938; D.A. Hubbard, "Proverbs, Book of," in *ISBE*, 3:1015-1016; Ross, in *EXP*, 5:883-884.

²⁴ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1014-1015; Crenshaw, "Proverbs," in *ABD*, 5:516.

²⁵ Ruffle, in *NBCR*, 548.

²⁶ Crenshaw, "Proverbs," in *ABD*, 5:513.

²⁷ Ross, in *EXP*, 5:886.

²⁸ R. Laird Harris, "Proverbs, Book of," in *NIDB*, 830.

²⁹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1018; Ross, in *EXP*, 5:890.

³⁰ Boadt, "Proverbs, Book of," in *EDB*, 1091.

³¹ Blank, "Proverbs," in *IDB*, 3:937-938; Ross, in *EXP*, 5:888-889.

³² Dillard and Longman, pp 242-244, 24.

Proverbs was an important text for Yeshua and His Apostles,³³ as many allusions and teachings can often find their origin in this book. Many of the sayings of James the Just found in his epistle, in particular, undoubtedly find their root in Proverbs.

“Many Christians use the book of Proverbs as an anthology of ‘mottos’” (Dillard and Longman).³⁴ It is not uncommon to find that contemporary Christians often read through Proverbs once a month, focusing on one chapter a day. Proverbs has been an important book that has affected Christian attitudes toward contemporary society, and is generally favored among books of the Tanach.

Some of today’s Messianic handling of Proverbs is quite similar to that of evangelical Christians. However, there is certainly room for improvement as more teaching and exposition could certainly focus on this text—with consideration of Proverbs among other Ancient Near Eastern works. Likewise, when examining Proverbs’ composition, do any of us consider Proverbs as *not* being exclusively Israelite, but a product being influenced by the larger world surrounding Ancient Israel? Proverbs definitely asks us the questions of how we relate the Bible’s truths to today’s world and embody its principles in our daily lives.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON PROVERBS:

1. Having just surveyed the Book of Proverbs, which saying, oracle, or section of the text impacted you the most? Explain.

2. Do you think there is a deliberate pattern or outline to the Book of Proverbs? Why or why not?

³³ Ross, in *EXP*, 5:890.

³⁴ Dillard and Longman, 244.

3. What role might Proverbs 1:8-9:18 play in prefacing the specific proverbs issued by King Solomon?

4. What role does the figure of “Wisdom” play in the Book of Proverbs?

5. What lessons might today’s Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Proverbs?

REFLECTION ON PROVERBS’ PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Proverbs: