

# THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of short, “common sense” guides to living a good and wholesome life. It was compiled over time and likely was shaped into its final form in the late 6<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries B.C. Although much of it is attributed to Solomon, there is no clear linkage and many wisdom writings invoke his name because of his reputation for wisdom. Some wise men are cited anonymously and some who are named are unknown otherwise.

The first nine chapters contain instructions on the value and benefits of Wisdom, as well as warnings against following certain other influencers. Both virtues and vices are personified, i.e., presented as women giving advice or tempting one to stray from right conduct. At the end of this section, Wisdom and Folly each invite the reader to her banquet, and the following chapters illustrate what each choice represents.

Chapters 10-29 present various collections of sayings. The longest sections (chapters 10-22:16 and 25-29) are attributed to Solomon. They contain 2-line proverbs, sometimes developing a common theme, other times, jumping from subject to subject. Through chapter 15, they are structured as antithetic parallels, presenting contrasts:

*A wise son makes his father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother. (10:1)*  
*The fruit of virtue is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away. (11:30)*

Starting with chapter 16, there are more synthetic parallels, showing similarities or restating the first line's point:

*Entrust your works to the Lord, and your plans will succeed. (16:3)*  
*Pride goes before disaster, and a haughty spirit before a fall. (16:18)*  
*The fool's mouth is his ruin; his lips are a snare to his life. (18:7)*

Two shorter collections of sayings of the wise are found from 22:17 through Chapter 24. The first seems related to an Egyptian instruction about proper court and diplomatic etiquette, though with some Israelite traits. The second has sayings related to honesty and hard work.

The material in the final two chapters tends to be longer and of unrelated topics. The first (30:1-14) deals with knowledge of God and offers a prayer. A series of numerical proverbs follow (30:15-33). Then there is advice to a king from his mother on court conduct (31:1-9). The book ends with a long poem praising a worthy wife – quite likely Wisdom, here seen as an everyday, domestic counterpart to the exalted teacher of chapters 1-9. An excerpt ending, *Give her a reward of her labors, and let her works praise her at the city gates*, is sometimes read today at a woman's funeral.