

# OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

## *Lesson 41*

### Proverbs

#### Lessons for Life

Our daughter, Gracie, got her puppy “Kingsley” early this year. A handsome, young, 8-week old boxer, Kingsley came with no training, but that was no problem for Gracie. She had researched and learned over the years how to train a dog. She put her best energies into making sure Kingsley learned the things he needed to know to be the best pet possible.

The summer brought the return of Gracie to Houston, and it was a chance for our household and Kingsley to get acquainted. Kingsley came to his Houston home well trained! He could sit. He did not yelp and bark (much). He stayed off the furniture. He understood his name as well as “No!” Most importantly, Kingsley knew when to go outside and not pollute the carpet!

Gracie’s training of Kingsley was a good example of taking principles of behavior and integrating them into the behavior of the dog. Now, let us shift from dogs to people.

I read a book as a young man that had quite an influence on me. The book was *He is There and He is not Silent* by Francis A. Schaeffer.<sup>1</sup> What impressed me, and has remained to this day, is the principle that a personal communicating God, would certainly want to communicate to the personal communicating beings he created. It does make sense. Even setting aside the Bible, if there is a Supreme Being, and if he is able to communicate, and if he created humanity, then the most logical conclusion is that the Supreme Being would reach out and communicate with humanity.

Of course, the Bible explains this in a myriad of ways. The Bible explains that God has communicated directly, through his creation, through others, and in so doing, he has set out a revelation of historical interactions with mankind. Among God’s communications in Scripture is the book of Proverbs. This is a book where we read principles of behavior and instructions for wise living. These are concepts that understandably a communicating God would want to give to his people. They are also concepts that are applicable, and to some extent evidenced, by the lives of all peoples, whether Godly or not. There is a reason that the book of Proverbs has always been associated with wisdom for living. We make this book the study of this lesson.

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<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer, Francis A., *He is There and He is not Silent*, (Tyndale 1972).

## BACKGROUND

What exactly is a “proverb”?

The English word “proverb” means “a short pithy saying in common and recognized use” according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*. If we were reading the Hebrew Book of Proverbs, then the title would call the substance of the book *Mishle*, which indicates a saying of wisdom with a basic sense of poetic balancing of similarity between thoughts.

In translating the book into Greek, the Septuagint writers titled the book *Paroimiai Salomontos*, or the “Parables [or Proverbs] of Solomon.” The Latin version, the Vulgate, titled the book *Liber Proverbiorum*, or Book of Proverbs.

In the Hebrew, the reference is most accurate for Proverbs. The book has plenty of “short pithy statements,” but it has more than just that! There are also a number of exhortations in address form that are basically teaching poems to help one live a life of wisdom.

Because the proverb is an art form in the Hebrew, we should remember the basics of Hebrew poetry set out in the Psalms lesson. That parallelism is followed in the book of Proverbs.

*Who wrote Proverbs?*

The book begins with “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel (Pro. 1:1)” and it is clear from this verse that a good portion of the proverbs were thus associated with Solomon. As we read through the book, it is also clear that a number of the proverbs were from people other than Solomon. For example, chapter 30 references the words of Agur. A number of other chapters are said to be “words of the wise.” Solomon himself did not necessarily write even those proverbs of Solomon. It would be more appropriate to understand those verses as words of wisdom with Solomon’s “seal of approval.”

Collections of wisdom sayings were common in Near Eastern cultures at that time. In fact, a number of scholars have found and noted close similarities between many of the Biblical proverbs and those of nearby cultures. Whether the proverbs were borrowed from one culture or another is irrelevant to one’s appreciation of the lessons taught by the proverbs. God’s wisdom is no less wise if pagans figured it out as well as God’s people!

An example of this we can draw from an earlier lesson on Solomon and wisdom.<sup>2</sup> In that lesson, we noted the Egyptians had teaching texts that were directed at training people in order, justice, and truth. Among the proverbs and precepts of ancient Egypt are the Instruction Texts of Pharaoh Amen-em-opet. Most scholars date the initial production of these texts prior to the time of Solomon.<sup>3</sup> A portion of this Egyptian work is often noted as closely related and perhaps a source material for some of Proverbs 22:17-23:14.<sup>4</sup>

Compare, for example, these passages from The Instruction of Amen-em-opet<sup>5</sup> with the similar Proverbs passages:

The Instruction of Amen-em-opet	Proverbs
Give thy ears, hear what is said, Give thy heart to understand them. To put them in thy heart is worth while. (1:9-11)	Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you. (22:17-18)
Guard thyself against robbing the oppressed And against overbearing the disabled. (2:1-2)	Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate. (22:22)
Do not carry off the landmark at the boundaries of the arable land (6:1)	Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set. (22:28)

<sup>2</sup> All these lessons are available for download, listening, or watching at [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com).

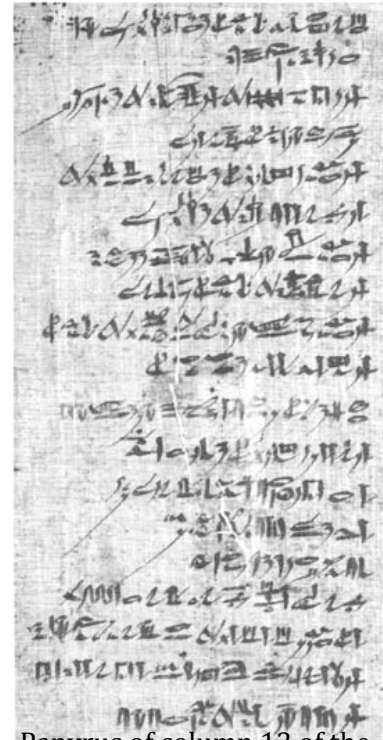
<sup>3</sup> Toronto Egyptologist Ronald Williams dates the text as 1200-1100 BC. See “The Sage in Egyptian Literature” in Gammie, John and Perdue, Leo, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, (Eisenbrauns 1990), at 23.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this “related/borrowed” section of Proverbs comes in an area that most scholars separate out as a new division in the book. Scholars call this section the “Words of the Wise,” getting the title from the first line of verse 17, “Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise...” In the Hebrew, the verb “mood” changes markedly in this section, setting it apart from the previous Proverbs. Proverbs 10:1-22:16 are largely written in the “indicative mood” (as “sayings”) whereas the Proverbs in 22:17-24:23 are written in the “imperative mood” indicating an admonition or command.

<sup>5</sup> Pritchard, James B., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, (Princeton 1969), at 421ff.

Other similarities are found in Amen-em-opet's writings on eating with a king (Ch. 23) and Proverbs 23:1-3, as well as the folly of relying on riches (Prov. 23:5; Amen-em-opet ch. 8).

Some evangelicals initially recoil over the idea that some portions of the Old Testament might have as a source material writings from other cultures. Such is not surprising really. Solomon took a princess of Egypt as a wife. Israel lived in and among the Egyptians for hundreds of years. There is nothing surprising that Solomon or other Israelites would have learned the wisdom of others. Similarly, it does not invalidate the premise of inspiration for God to have used such literature selectively in Scripture. Egyptologist James Hoffmeier teaches his students that 1 Kings 4:30 ("so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt") implies that Solomon had access to and knew of Egyptian Wisdom, perhaps through his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is not any different than Scripture's teaching that God instructed the Israelites leaving Egypt in the Exodus to "plunder the Egyptians" (Ex. 3:22), taking Egyptian valuables and making them useful for God's purposes with his people.



Papyrus of column 12 of the Instruction of Amen-em-opet in the British Museum

This illustrates well Paul's statement about those without the benefit of Scripture that,

...what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Rom. 1:19-21).

My friend Steve Taylor has told me in this sense that,

God has manifested himself to mankind through nature and the conscience he placed in every man so that we might seek him out and know him. He has also set certain principles into place that govern the way the universe

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<sup>6</sup> Personal correspondence.

exists. For man to recognize some of those does not mean that man is the originator of the concept – he simply recognized what God had chosen to reveal. That God wants an orderly universe with principles that apply to all creatures should not surprise us. In fact, it should comfort us that God has done so much to help whet our appetite to know him.

Notwithstanding similarities and sourcing issues, the Hebrew proverbs are unique when measured against those of contemporary cultures. The Hebrew proverbs contain within them clear affirmations of faith in Yahweh absent from those of others. Indeed, the proverbs teach that without an intimate relationship with Yahweh, all is foolishness rather than wisdom. They tie the instruction and guidelines to Yahweh’s revelation to and relationship with his people.

So even as we see the possible influence of other sources upon the Biblical Proverbs, we must not think that the Bible simply duplicated other sources. In writing about the relationship with Amen-em-opet, the *ISBE* notes,

...the material in Proverbs has not been slavishly copied but has been artistically incorporated into its present contexts...even these parallels are cast to reflect biblical faith, e.g., the injunction against robbing the poor has a Yahwistic reason in Proverbs: “for the Lord will plead their cause” (22:23a).<sup>7</sup>

*How are the Proverbs organized?*

The first eleven chapters are teaching poems of various lengths that are more addresses or exhortations than simple proverbs in the English sense of the word. R. K. Harrison gives a typical outline of the book as follows:<sup>8</sup>

Title of the work and motto (1:1-7)

Various discourses (1:8-9:18)

First collection of the Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)

First collection of the “Sayings of the Sages” (22:17-23:14)

Additional Discourses (23:15-24:22)

Second collection of the “Sayings of the Sages” (24:23-34)

Second collection of the Proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27)

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<sup>7</sup> Bromiley, G. W. , *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans 2002), at 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Harrison, R. K., *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson 2004).

The words of Agur (30:1-33)

The words of Lemuel (31:1-9)

The Praises of the prudent wife (31:10-31)

In our review of the Proverbs, we will grab from several sections in an effort to give a good overview of the book. Before doing so, we should address one last preliminary issue of reliability.

*Are Proverbs absolutely reliable?*

Here, we need to remember our view of inspiration of scripture. As we have set forth earlier in the class, we view scripture as inerrant in what it claims to be. In other words, where scripture claims to be a decree from God on how to sacrifice, we see it as a command from God on how to sacrifice. Where scripture claims to be a parable from Jesus on how to live, we believe that Jesus literally told that parable on how to live. Applying that view here, we see this as the Bible's poems of how to live wisely.

These are, then, poems that will teach us how to love wisely. That perspective is different from viewing these as absolute statements, which never fail in their application. For example, Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." This is not an absolute rule that would indicate that any child straying from God's path as he ages is the fault of bad parenting! Now, of course, it may be bad parenting. However, it might also be the choice of a well-parented child who succumbed to the wiles of Satan out of his own free will. Proverbs 22:6 is a general rule that indicates in a poetic sense that if a child is taught to walk a road at an early age, the child will continue to walk the same road as he ages.

Similarly, Proverbs 22:11 teaches "He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend." This proverb is obviously not a promise that a pure heart and gracious speech will bring us into a relationship with the king (or the President, as the case may be!). Rather, it is the wisdom saying that our relationships will thrive and prosper as we live lives of pure hearts and gracious speech.

**VARIOUS DISCOURSES**  
**(Instructions to Seek Wisdom)**  
**Prov. 3:5-6**

Proverbs 3:5-6

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

This passage advocates intellectual humility for those who would be wise. To “trust in the LORD with all your heart” means to rely on or depend on. Although we read “heart,” we should not necessarily think this means an intuition or emotion.

**With all your heart** means with all your mind, with the full force of the mental faculties, totally and without reservation.<sup>9</sup>

The Proverb then contrasts trusting in the Lord with leaning on one’s own understanding. Some translate “lean” as “rely” and that functions well, but misses the picture in the Hebrew. The word “lean” is the same as used in 2 Samuel 1:6 where Saul leans on his spear as well as 2 Kings 5:18 where the king leans on Naaman’s arm.

This passage is not an anti-intellectual passage telling one not to use their brain! Leaning *not* on one’s understanding, speaks to one’s moral standards as well as intellect. This passage tells one to trust in the Lord and his ways, rather than what one thinks of and devises in opposition to God’s ways. This is because one’s own thinking is not fully reliable, especially when matters of moral choices are concerned. The Proverbs are quick to say as much:

*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*  
(Pro. 14:12).

*Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.* (Pro. 28:26)

This proverb also sets forth the answer to many “what path does God want me to take?” questions. When faced with monumental choices in life, people often want writing on the wall to tell them what choice God wants them to make. God often makes the choice clear — other times, God doesn’t. The proverb assures us that as we seek God’s guidance, as we trust in his teachings and ways, he is faithful to make sure we take the right paths. So, when faced with those difficult choices, we need to be truly willing to do whatever God wants us to do. We need to seek out what God would have us do. If God indicates his choice for us, then we need to follow it in faith. If, after sufficient seeking, we need to make a choice and God has not made one clear to our open and willing hearts, we should make the choice trusting that God will make the path a straight one! We should remember that

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<sup>9</sup> Reyburn, W.D., Fry, E. M., *A Handbook on Proverbs*, (United Bible Societies 2000).

often God himself is giving us choices with an assurance of his blessing for whichever choice we make.

### **Point For Home**

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths!*

As we say in Lubbock, “Enough said!”

### **FIRST COLLECTION OF THE PROVERBS OF SOLOMON (10:1-22:16)**

Here, we consider several of the “Proverbs of Solomon”:

*Proverbs 11:22*

*Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.*

A classic! Equally true, one might add, for a man – if there was such a thing as a beautiful man!

This proverb is a wonderful illustration of humor in the Bible. With a graphically funny illustration, the contrast is drawn between items that do not belong together. A gold ring has no business in the snout of *any* animal, especially that of an unclean pig!

This proverb also wonderfully illustrates the parallelism of Hebrew poetry discussed in an earlier Psalms lesson. The Hebrew words map out clearly in their original order:

Ring (of)	gold	(in) snout (of)	pig
Woman	beautiful	without	discretion

Play connect-the-dots with the two parallel phrases. The ring, in itself a nice adornment, is paralleled to a woman. Having the ring *gold*, is like the woman who is beautiful. The snout of the pig and “without discretion” are the contrasting final phrases. This parallel structure is nicely complimented in the Hebrew where the sounds are similar and alliterative. That is the woman without discretion!



*Proverbs 15:1*

*A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

The Hebrew for “soft” means “gentle” or “mild.”<sup>10</sup> It means that when faced with anger, a gentle or soft response that is *without* the anger or wrath “turns away” or “turns back” anger. The goal of the idea is that when faced with wrath, one can best calm the anger by a calming response.

As noted earlier in overview, this is not an absolute statement, but a general rule that will be confirmed over and over again in one’s life. It is a verbal approach to the counsel of Jesus, “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39). This is a proverb worth putting into constant practice. It will get a lot of use!

*Proverbs 22:1*

*A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be  
esteemed is better than silver or gold.*

Again, this proverb does a wonderful job of illustrating Hebrew parallelism. A “good name” relates to being “esteemed.” “More desirable connects in parallel structure to “better.” Then the phrases end with “great riches equating to silver and gold.”

Few folks hold this proverb as truth in their hearts. Those who do can confirm its truth. Those who cannot do not seem too happy.

**Point for Home**

*A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better  
than silver or gold (Prov. 22:1).*

This one is worth solemn consideration for a moment. It is also worth honest evaluation. What would we choose, a good name, a trustworthy reputation, or lots of money? Do our actions convey our belief in the wisdom of this proverb?

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<sup>10</sup> Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M, and Stamm, J.J., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill 1999).

**THE SAYINGS OF THE SAGES**  
**(Words of the Wise)**  
**Prov. 22:17-19**

*Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips. That your trust may be in the LORD, I have made them known to you today, even to you.*

Here, we return to one of the selections that seem to have been taken from an Egyptian wisdom text. The Egyptian wisdom literature recognized the merit in one's ears and hearts living by words of wisdom, but it is the Biblical text that adds the reason: that your trust may be in Yahweh! This takes the wisdom to a much different level. One is no longer seeking wisdom simply to improve one's lot in life. The implication is that growing in wisdom, in understanding, and in moral purity will reciprocate in bringing one closer to the Lord. Toward that end, we see the proverb.

To "incline your ear" (literally, "bend" or "stretch" you ear) is a Hebrew idiom meaning "pay attention!" The "words of the wise" is a plural giving another indication that these sayings are those of "wise people", and not simply words authored by Solomon for the express scripture we know as Proverbs. As we work through the second phrase we see it closely parallels the first. "Apply your heart" tracks the idea of "incline your ear." The second phrase then adds the idea that what is being read or heard ("apply your heart *to my knowledge*") is part and parcel of the words of the wise.

The reasons for learning and having these words to use for both living and speaking are multifold. It is pleasant, but even more, it moves one to put their trust or confidence in the Lord. That is the greater reason, which motivates the writer to "make them known to you today!"

**Point For Home**

*Incline your ears and hear...that your trust may be in the LORD (Prov. 22:17, 19).*

It is always a good reminder that our lives are built around God. Any other center or driving force behind life is a waste. Even the accumulation of true wisdom is directed around moving one to greater dependence and trust upon God. Let us commit ourselves to seeking him 24/7, micro- and macro-, *i.e.*, at all times and in all things!

## THE WORDS OF AGUR Prov. 30

There are two sections of Agur. The first is Agur's prayerful lament in humility expressing his frustrating fatigue from trying to handle the bold and important things in life:

*I am weary, O God, and worn out. Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.*

*Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? (Prov. 30:1-4).*

Agur goes on to acknowledge God as the source of truth and the protector of those who entrust themselves to him. As evidence not only of his true wisdom, but also of the only strength he needs for his predicament, Agur prays to God for help. His prayer shows both insight and wisdom:

*Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God (Prov. 30:7-9).*

What an interesting prayer! Scholars see the comment for God to remove from his life any presence of falsehood and lying as an introduction to the requests. The two requests are to make sure the man has neither too little money nor too much money! As Old Testament scholar D. A. Garrett wrote,

The former convinces one that God is not necessary; and the latter, that either he is of no help or that his laws are impossible to keep.<sup>11</sup>

This man had seen those who become self-important over their riches, as well as those moved to theft by their poverty. Both were not the wish of this wise man!

The rest of Agur's proverbs are quite fun and provocative to read. I readily admit they are some of my favorites and urge everyone to consider them carefully!

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<sup>11</sup> Garrett, D. A., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, (Broadman and Holman 1993), at 238.

## **THE PRAISES OF A PRUDENT WIFE**

### **Prov. 31:10-31**

This most famous of passages recounts the characteristics of a wonderful wife. Of course, those characteristics are not outward but flow from within. Her actions come from “wisdom,” and her words are words of kindness.

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue (Prov. 30:26).

She does this as a woman who “fears the LORD” (Prov. 31:30). This is a woman who works hard for the good of her family. She will rise early and stay up later as the need arises (Prov. 31:15, 18). She ensures her children are clothed, while she wears strength and dignity as her clothing (Prov. 31:21, 25). She actively sees to the needs of her home (Prov. 31:27). She also looks outside her home to help those in need (Prov. 31:20). Importantly, she finds the core of her being in Yahweh himself:

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised (30).

This is a woman that her children are called upon to praise, as is her husband. Indeed, all people, not just the family, should honor such a woman! (Prov. 31:28, 31)

### **WANT MORE?**

There are 31 chapters of Proverbs. There are 31 days in most months! Make a decision to seek out the wisdom of Proverbs in God’s word. Decide to read the corresponding chapter of Proverbs for each day of the week. On the seventh day of the month read Proverbs 7, on the eight day Proverbs 8, etc.

As you’re doing so, email us at [wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com](mailto:wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com) and tell us which Proverbs have special significance or meaning for you!