

EMBASSY COLLEGE



ανηρ ὃς εμπροσθεν μου γεγονεν, οὐκ ἄλλος
μου ἦν. 31 καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἤδειν αὐτόν, ἀλλ' ἵνα
φανερωθῆ τῷ Ἰσραὴλ διὰ τοῦτο ἦλθον ἐγὼ
ἐν ὕδατι βαπτίζων. 32 Καὶ ἐμαρτύρησεν
Ἰωάννης λέγων ὅτι Τεθέαμαι τὸ πνεῦμα.



SYLLABUS AND STUDY GUIDE

The Book of Proverbs

OT450

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COURSE SYLLABUS

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Course Syllabus

I. Course Description

This course is a topical study of the Book of Proverbs.

II. Course Rationale

A. Philosophical

1. To examine the components of wisdom literature in the Book of Proverbs and its significance for belief and the practice of Christian life.
2. To produce a profound respect for the value of Proverbs in the life of the Christian and the Church.
3. To introduce the student to the key topics of Proverbs in their proper contents.

B. Practical

The Book of Proverbs is foundational to understanding the eternal, incarnational truth of the work of God, in and with His people. This course will assist the student to develop both knowledge and skill with O.T. scripture for use in his or her personal life and ministerial vocation.

III. Course Objectives

- A. The student will be able to demonstrate and explain a working knowledge of Proverbs and its impact on the scriptures (Knowledge).
- B. The student will be able to understand and relate the significance of the parts of Proverbs to the whole of the book and scripture as a whole (Comprehension and Synthesis).
- C. The student will be able to identify and summarize the basic aspects of wisdom literature contained in Proverbs (Comprehension and Synthesis).

- D. The student will be able to discuss the relationship between the knowledge gained in this class and his or her own theological and spiritual development (Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation).

IV. Suggested Tools of Study

- A. The Bible - The King James and the New King James recommended. Used by permission from Thomas Nelson, Inc. Scripture not noted is either the KJV or the NKJV. All other translations are noted.
- B. This study guide.
- C. Textbook required: Derek Kidner. *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, D. J. Wiseman, general editor.

IV. Suggested Study Habits

- A. Read through Proverbs prayerfully before the course begins.
- B. Study this course workbook and the textbook as much as possible before the course begins.
- C. Do not miss a single class session.
- D. Take many notes - it will help if you share notes with a study partner at the end of each class.

V. Classroom Methodology

- A. Lecture followed by class discussion.
- B. Questions and answers are encouraged at appropriate times.

VI. Final Exam

The final exam is taken from the textbook and the syllabus.

VII. Selected Bibliography

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Gerlemann, Gillis. *Studies in the Septuagint, III: Proverbs*. Lunds Universitets Arsskrift, 52:3. Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1956.

Gladson, Jerry A. "Retributive Paradoxes in Proverbs 10-29." Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1978.

Nel, Philip Johannes. *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft. Volume 158. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982.

Postel, Henry John. "The Form and Function of the Motive Clause in Proverbs 10-29." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1976.

Schachter, J. *The Book of Proverbs in Talmudic Literature*. Jerusalem, 1963.

Thompson, John Mark. *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974.

Waltke, Bruce K. "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979): 221-38.

Whybray, Roger N. *The Book of Proverbs*. Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

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_____. *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*. *Studies in Biblical Theology*, I/45. London: SCM, 1965.

Williams, James G. *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature*. Sheffield: Almond, 1981.

LESSON ONE: “THE INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS”

1. WHAT IS THE MAJOR THEME OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS?

The proverbs: the opening Hebrew noun “*misle*” gives the book its name in the Hebrew Bible as in ours. The Hebrew term basically means “a comparison.” Prov. 1:6 states that one of the book’s purposes is to give understanding to the “dark sayings.” This word, which also can be interpreted “riddles,” was used by Samson (Judg. 14:12); and of the Queen of Sheba’s tests (1 Ki. 10:1). Another purpose of Proverbs is to introduce the reader to a style of teaching that provokes his thought, getting under his skin by thrusts of wit, paradox, common sense and teasing symbolism, in preference to the preacher’s tactic of frontal assault.

One word answers the question: *wisdom*. In Proverbs, the words *wise* and *wisdom* are used at least 125 times, because the aim of the book is to help us *acquire* and *apply* God’s wisdom to the decisions and activities of daily life. The theme of Proverbs can be summed up in the question, “Is this wisdom or folly?”

The Book of Proverbs belongs to what scholars call the “wisdom literature” of the Old Testament, which also includes Job and Ecclesiastes. The writers of these books wrestled with some of the most difficult questions of life as they sought to understand life’s problems from God’s point of view. After all, just because you’re a believer and you walk by faith, it doesn’t mean you put your mind on the shelf and stop thinking. The Lord expects us to apply ourselves intellectually and do some serious thinking as we study His Word. We should love the Lord with our minds as well as with our hearts and souls (Matt. 22:37). Proverbs encourages the reader to count the cost or reward of his or her actions.

Wisdom was an important commodity in the ancient Near East; every ruler had his council of “wise men” whom he consulted when making important decisions. Joseph was considered a wise man in Egypt and Daniel and his friends were honored for their wisdom while serving in Babylon. According to Jer. 18:18, the three branches of ministry are the priest, prophet, and the counsel of wisdom.

God wants His children today to “walk circumspectly [carefully], not as fools but as wise” (Eph. 5:15, NKJV). Understanding the Book of Proverbs can help us do that. It isn’t enough simply to be educated and have knowledge, as important as education is. We also need wisdom, which is the ability to use knowledge. Wise men and women have the competence to grasp the meaning of a situation and understand what to do and how to do it in the right way at the right time.

To the ancient Jew, wisdom was much more than simply good advice or successful planning. I like Dr. Roy Zuck’s definition: “Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one’s relationships and responsibilities . . . observing and following the Creator’s principles of order in the moral universe.” In that definition, you find most of the important elements of biblical wisdom, the kind of wisdom we can learn from the Book of Proverbs.

Biblical wisdom begins with a right relationship with the Lord. The wise person believes that there is a God, that He is the Creator and Ruler of all things, and that He has put within His creation a divine order that, if obeyed, leads ultimately to success. Wise people also assert that there is a moral law operating in this world, a principle of divine justice which makes sure that eventually the wicked are judged and the righteous are rewarded. Biblical wisdom has little if any relationship to a person’s IQ or education, because it is a matter of moral and spiritual understanding. It has to do with character and values; it means looking at the world through the grid of God’s truth.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “wise” (*hakam*) is used to describe people skillful in working with their hands, such as the artisans who helped build the tabernacle (Ex. 28:3; 35:30-36:2) and Solomon’s temple (1 Chron. 22:15). Wisdom isn’t something theoretical, it’s something very practical that affects every area of life. It gives order and purpose to life; it gives discernment in making decisions; and it provides a sense of fulfillment in life to the glory of God.

The wisdom tradition lived in Judaism, leaving its most notable deposits in two books to be found in the Apocrypha; Ecclesiasticus (more conveniently known by its author’s name, Ben-Sira) and the Wisdom of Solomon. These two books stand parallel in form to the Book of Proverbs.

2. WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND HOW IS IT WRITTEN?

Author

In 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1, we're told that King Solomon is the author of the proverbs in this book. God gave Solomon great wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-15), so that people came from the ends of the earth to listen to him and returned home amazed (4:29-34; Matt. 12:42). He spoke 3,000 proverbs, most of which are not included in this book. Scholars now know that the Egyptian writer, Amenemope, lived before the time of Solomon and thus, Solomon may have collected some of the Egyptian proverbs.

Even conservatives know that Solomon did not write all the proverbs, as other authors have clearly stated. But other servants, guided by God's Spirit, were also involved in producing this book. "The men of Hezekiah" (Prov. 25:1) were a group of scholars in King Hezekiah's day (700 B.C.) who compiled the material recorded in chapters 25-29. Prov. 25:2 appropriately opens Hezekiah's collection, for he was exemplifying the maxim by his enquiring zeal.

In Proverbs 30 and 31, you meet "Agur the son of Jakeh" and "King Lemuel," although many scholars think "Lemuel" was another name for Solomon. Lemuel was no king of Israel (unless the name—"belonging to God"—is a *nom de plume*. The ancient versions give some support to the RSV's "king of Masa," an Ishmaelite clan or place-name. The language here shows traces of a foreign or regional dialect.

Most of the material in this book came from King Solomon, so it's rightly called "the proverbs of Solomon" (1:1). The last section of Proverbs was written by an anonymous author.

Wisdom literature from other nations in the Mesopotamia region often sought answers to the very questions occupied in the biblical wisdom books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The Babylonian book, often called Babylonian Job because of its similarity to the O.T. Book of Job, does not show and speak of a god whose way is perfect and his will sufficiently revealed. Many scholars believe the content of Proverbs fits an earlier Phoenician period of Solomon's time rather than a later Greek period.

While the O.T. scorns the magic and superstition which debased much of this thought (Is. 47:12, 13), and the pride which inflated it (Job 5:13), it can speak of the gentile sages with a respect it never shows towards their priests and prophets. The Bible often alludes to the wisdom and wise men of Israel's neighbors:

- Egypt (Acts 7:22; 1 Ki. 4:30; Mt. 5:10; Is. 19:11,12)
- Edom and Arabia (Jer. 49:17; Ob. 8; Job 1:3; 1 Ki. 4:30)
- Babylon (Is. 47:10; Dn. 1:4, 20)
- Phoenicia (Ez. 28:3; Zech. 9:2)

Approach

Almost every tribe and nation has its share of proverbs expressed in ways that make it easy to "hang" proverbial wisdom in the picture gallery of your memory. "Every invalid is a physician," says an Irish proverb, and a Serbian proverb reads, "If vinegar is free, it is sweeter than honey." A proverb from Crete is a favorite of mine: "When you want a drink of milk, you don't buy the whole cow." Centuries ago, the Romans smiled at timid politicians and soldiers and said to each other, "The cat would eat fish, but she doesn't want to get her feet wet."

Some people think that our English word *proverb* comes from the Latin *proverbium*, which means "a set of words put forth," or, "a saying supporting a point." Or, it may come from the Latin *pro* ("instead of," "on behalf of") and *verba* ("words"); that is, a short statement that takes the place of many words. The proverb "Short reckonings make long friendships" comes across with more power than a lecture on forgiving your friends.

The Hebrew word *mashal* is translated “proverb,” “parable,” and even “allegory,” but its basic meaning is “a comparison.” Many of Solomon’s proverbs are comparisons or contrasts (see 11:22; 25:25; 26:6-9), and some of his proverbs present these comparisons by using the word “better” (see 15:16-17; 16:19, 32; 17:1; 19:1).

But, we still have to answer the important question, “Why did Solomon use proverbs and not some other kind of literary approach as he recorded these divine truths?” Keep in mind that, apart from kings, prophets, and priests, the average Jewish adult didn’t own copies of their sacred books and had to depend on memory to be able to meditate on God’s truth and discuss it (Deut. 6:1-9). If Solomon had written a lecture on pride, few people would remember it, so he wrote a proverb instead: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18, NIV). There are only seven words in the original Hebrew, and even a child can memorize seven words!

Analysis

The first nine chapters of Proverbs form a unit in which the emphasis is on “wisdom” and “folly,” personified as two women. (The Hebrew word for wisdom is in the feminine gender.) In chapters 1, 8, and 9, Wisdom calls to men and women to follow her and enjoy salvation, wealth, and life. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Folly calls to the same people and offers them immediate satisfaction, but doesn’t warn them of the tragic consequences of rejecting Wisdom: condemnation, poverty, and death. Chapters 10-15 form the next unit and present a series of *contrasts* between the life of wisdom and the life of folly. The closing chapters of the book (chaps. 16-31) contain a variety of proverbs that give us *counsel* about many important areas of life.

A reader of Proverbs may find a number of notes which refer to the Greek Septuagint (often known as LXX) begun in the third century B. C., the Syriac “Peshitta,” the Latin Vulgate, and other Targums. Our understanding of Hebrew is incomplete. A growing knowledge of related languages and literatures has already thrown light on many words which had been the despair of translators, and should encourage us to treat a hard text more often as awaiting explanation than as needing correction.