



Calling the Fool a Fool Reflections on Proverbs

by Mike Mennard

"It reads like a codgerly old man barking at a teenager," a professor of mine once said of Proverbs. If one reads Proverbs in large doses, my professor's critical assessment probably rings true.

Proverbs is an instruction book for youth—the biblical equivalent to *Messages to Young People*. Many of the individual sayings are directed at young men, children, and, on a few occasions, young women. However, like *Messages to Young People*, Proverbs is a pithy compilation that is at times preachy, dense, and, dare I say, dated. It's difficult for today's reader to buy wholeheartedly Proverbs' primary assumption: that there is an easily identifiable cause for every effect. What Proverbs seems to suggest in its long series of couplets is that good things ensue from good decisions—and vice versa. In other words, the fool is a fool because he has consciously chosen to be a fool.

Admittedly, Proverbs often is that simple and simplistic. Still, I believe Proverbs offers something useful for the modern reader. Yet to fully appreciate this collection of wise sayings, we must understand its origin and purpose.



From the Vats of the World's Wisdom

Tradition has long attributed Proverbs to Solomon, David's son and successor. In particular, chapters 10-22:16 and 25-29 seem very old indeed, and many scholars are willing to say they might date back to Solomon.

Did Solomon utter these sayings? Or is this a compilation made in honor of Solomon's much-ballyhooed wisdom? Although we can never know for sure, there are some facts worth considering.

We know very little about Solomon's court or the subsequent courts of Judah, but archaeology has uncovered evidence of a large library that dates back to Solomon's kingdom. Such a find speaks volumes—no pun intended—about Solomon himself. Apparently, Solomon—and perhaps his son Rehoboam—mandated the collection of the world's literature.¹ One must assume, then, that Solomon also employed translators and archivists who made the collection accessible to Solomon and his court. If this assumption is correct, it's hardly a stretch to imagine that at least a portion of Proverbs could offer a smattering of wisdom gleaned from the known world of the time.

The sayings in Proverbs are quintessential examples of ancient wisdom literature found throughout the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern region. Most sayings are presented in a conventional couplet form called parallelism, with one line stating a thought followed by a second line that restates the thought. In form and content, Proverbs is consistent with the wisdom literature produced among the Egyptians, the Canaanites, and the Babylonians. It's a form that was later refined and championed by the Greeks.²

Although the parallelism survives the cruel wringer of translation, so much else is lost. The sayings are rich with alliteration, puns, and clever wordplay that are untranslatable. Some sayings, such as the "woman of worth" poem (31:10-31), are acrostic poems, each line beginning with a successive letter in the alphabet. All of this playfulness gets lost in translation, leaving behind a stodgy, oppressive text that does not reflect the exuberance of the original.



Is Ancient Wisdom Still Wisdom?

Still, the question must be asked: Can ancient wisdom be regarded as wisdom at the start of the twenty-first century? Few of us today readily accept that the one “who lives alone is self-indulgent” (18:1). Or that the “rich must rule the poor” (22:7). Some sayings have saddled countless parents with intense guilt, such as Proverbs 22:6: “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” When children grow up and permanently stray from the values of their youth, does that mean their parents failed to train them “in the right way”? Sometimes. But not always.

I believe, nonetheless, tremendous value remains embedded in these ancient sayings. According to biblical scholar James G. Williams, everything about Proverbs, “from its basic ideas to its literary forms, affirms order.” According to Williams, “Wisdom in Proverbs is a way of looking at the world and finding order, an order based on personal responsibility and individual discipline.”³

In short, the sayings don’t offer unbending truth as much as consistent principles. And if principles such as “personal responsibility” and “individual discipline” aren’t badly needed antidotes for today’s “victim” mentality, I don’t know what is. What’s more, if we must glean this kind of wisdom from ancient civilizations, so be it.

As a theme, personal responsibility provides not only the basis for order, but also a means for balance when reading Proverbs. The saying, “Train children in the right way” is a good principle, because, more often than not, children come around to the instruction of their youth. However, if they do not, the principle still holds, because those wayward children—not their parents—are responsible for their decisions and actions. And in that principle lies a timely sense of order—order enough on which to build a sound society.

Proverbs 14:29—15:5, translated by Mike Mennard

The one who quells his temper keeps cognizant,
while the one whose temper runs amok is recklessly stupid.

A mind at peace equips the body with power,
while hot passions decompose the bones.

Those who oppress the poor exasperate their Maker,
while those who show the poor compassion make him proud.

Unprincipled people are toppled by their own poisons,
while people of virtue are safely housed by their integrity.

Wisdom feels at home at the table of the wiseman's mind,
while it lingers homeless outside the fool's heart.

Morality makes a nation excel,
while disgrace is a splotch on all the people.

The worker who gets a job done right earns his foreman's approval,
while the one with shoddy work earns his ire.

A coolheaded answer douses hot anger,
while the curt retort fans a flame.

The wise man's tongue dispenses facts,
while fools' mouths gush with flippancy.

YHWH's eyes extend to every point,
and they detect both the immoral and the ethical deed.

Kind words are a tree of life,
while cantankerousness cracks the spirit.

The fool mocks a parent's help,
while the one who takes advice well is smart, indeed.

Notes and References

1. David Rosenberg, *The Book of David* (New York: Harmony Books, 1997), 21.
2. *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), s.v. "Proverbs."
3. *A Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), s.v. "Proverbs and Ecclesiastes."

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