

Proverbs...the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge...

1. Who wrote the book of Proverbs?

While Proverbs appears to be authored by different authors: Solomon (Prov 1:1), the wise (Prov 22:17; 24:23), Agur (Prov 30:1), and King Lemuel (Prov 31:1), Solomon contributed most of the book and perhaps initiated the collection of proverbs.

Among the authors, Solomon's qualifications are unparalleled:

He asked for and received wisdom from God (1 Ki 3:1-15).

His wisdom was renowned and his proverbs were numerous (1 Ki 4:30-32; 10:1-13).

2. What are Proverbs?

Based on observation of human nature and behavior, Proverbs is a collection of truths that are concisely and poetically stated so that they could be easily remembered and taught. Considered wisdom literature, Proverbs does not focus on the nation of Israel and instead contains practical and sound advice for everyday life and encompassing all levels of society: government and civil life, trade and justice, crafts and agriculture, family and slaves, and work and holiday.

Yet Proverbs is distinctive from pagan wisdom writings or philosophy, because its emphasis is on the establishment of a relationship with God as the basis from which biblical wisdom is acquired. Throughout Proverbs, three terms for wisdom is used:

1. *Hokhmah*, the most common term found in Proverbs, refers to a wisdom based on a moral standard established by God and known only to those who have a relationship with Him. Discerning between good and evil, virtue and vice, duty and self-indulgence, this wisdom reflects the relationship that one may have with God: one of obedience or rebellion. (1)

2. *Bînah* refers to a wisdom that can analytically discern what is truth and error, valid and invalid, or sham and reality. (2)

3. *Tûšiyah* refers to a wisdom derived by an insight or deduction as to the appropriate principle to apply to current life situation. (3)

In this context, wisdom is the practical and skillful ability to make godly choices in life.

3. What is the literary genre represented in Proverbs? Do you see any examples in Proverbs 1:1-7?

Proverbs is largely a book of Hebrew poems. Either *lyrical*, which are poems intended for singing and music or *didactic*, which are poems intended to teach and instruct, Proverbs is principally didactic in nature.

Yet the actual sound of biblical poetry is unknown. Without knowledge of the original system of vowels or their accents, audible changes or nuances of phonetic diction are left to speculation. What is available for study is the literary structure of biblical poetry.

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The predominant structural feature of Hebrew poetry is in the form of a couplet (known as the *bicolon*) consisting of two lines. Because of their relationship in form and content, this fundamental poetic form is recognized as poetic parallelism. Proverbs is primarily composed of poetic parallelisms, and while there are various types, three are the most common:

1. Synonymous Parallelism – the words of the first verse is repeated with synonyms in the second verse.

Example: Proverbs 1:2-3

To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding,
to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity;

2. Synthetic Parallelism – the second verse explains or expands on the first verse.

Example: Proverbs 1:4

to give prudence to the naive,
to the youth knowledge and discretion,

3. Antithetical Parallelism – the concept of the first verse is emphasized by the contrast in the second verse.

Example: Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

4. Study Proverbs 1:1-7. What is the purpose of the book of Proverbs?

Written primarily as a guide to young men, Proverbs' specific purpose was to lay a strong foundation by imparting wisdom to both the simple and the wise. Proverbs 1:7, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*", is perhaps the most important and key verse for the whole book; ethical development comes *after* an established relationship with God.

This key must be emphasized: *fear of the Lord* is what determines progress in wisdom. There is a commitment to the supernatural in all the wisdom writings of the Bible in understanding the natural order of life.

When directed towards God, the Hebrew term for "fear" may be in a healthy sense or a harmful one.

In a harmful sense, the term "fear" can describe the feeling of dread (Deut 1:29) or terror (Jonah 1:10).

In a healthy sense, the term describes awe (1 Kings 3:28) or having respect or reverence (Lev 19:3).

"*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*" uses the term "fear" in the context of expressing "awe", "respect", and "reverence", because wisdom is the consequence of a loving relationship with God.

References

1. Archer GL, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Chicago, IL: Moody (1974), p.475.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

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