

## SESSION NINE: POETRY IV: PROVERBS

- I. Identify Hebrew Proverbs
  - a. Proverbs as Hebrew wisdom literature
    - i. What is wisdom in the Hebrew Bible?
      1. “Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life.”<sup>1</sup>
      2. “In the Hebrew Bible wisdom refers to predominantly practical activities. Action and thinking are inseparable.”<sup>2</sup>
      3. “Wisdom indicates skill or ability: to perform manual labor like spinning (Exodus 35:25), to discern good and evil (Job 28:28), to solve riddles (Proverbs 1:6), or, generally, to know how to live well.”<sup>3</sup>
      4. Wisdom concern with<sup>4</sup>:
        - a. Divine reward of good and punishment for evil
        - b. Living responsibly or recklessly
        - c. Knowing the truth of God’s creation
        - d. Good citizenship.
    - ii. Hebrew Wisdom literature will thus focus on the above subject.
    - iii. Proverbs is categorized under Wisdom literature.
  - b. Definitions
    - i. Wisdom sayings that are “short, self-contained, poured out apparently at random.”<sup>5</sup>
    - ii. It is “a brief, particular expression of a truth.”<sup>6</sup>
  - c. There are two major types<sup>7</sup>
    - i. Instructions
      1. Usually second person in nature.
      2. Didactic in nature, for the listener to do something.
      3. Largely found in Proverbs 1-9, 22:17-24:22, 31:1-9.
    - ii. Sayings
      1. Usually third person in nature.
      2. General observation about life.
      3. Largely found in Proverbs 10-22:16.
- II. Principles in interpreting Proverbs
  - a. All the principles in Session Six apply here as well.
  - b. Identify whether it is an instruction or a saying.
    - i. Instructions should be treated as instructions.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart., *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 206.

<sup>2</sup> Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom And Poetry Of the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Broadman And Holman Publishers), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature: The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart., *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 217.

<sup>7</sup> Ted A. Hildebrandt, “Proverb” *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company), 239.

- ii. Proverbs that are in the sub-genre of Sayings must especially take note of principle “d” and “e” here.
- c. Proverbs as slice of reality
  - i. Biblical Proverbs cannot be false, because the Word of God is never false.<sup>8</sup>
  - ii. Biblical Proverbs are thus true, but they present a slice of reality.
  - iii. Given that life is complex with various acts and consequences, a “proverb is always true in the slice of reality it describes. It does not pretend to describe all of reality, just one segment of it.”<sup>9</sup>
  - iv. Thus, a Proverb should not be view alone, but compared with the canonical whole for more fullness.<sup>10</sup>
  - v. Objection: This “slice of reality” is unbiblical and a theory invented to get away from the problem of Proverbs being not true.
    - 1. First off, this “slice of reality” approach does not conflict with any Biblical truth.
      - a. Rather, this approach makes the entirety of Biblical Proverbs (and its relationship to other Scripture) coherent.
      - b. It is important that one might not like the idea of “slice of reality” because it make sense of proverbs, but that is a far from attributing the “slice of reality” approach as not making any sense.
    - 2. Examples of Biblical evidence for “slice of reality”
      - a. Proverbs 15:22 and Proverbs 19:21
        - i. In planning for success, it is wise to have many counselors (Proverbs 15:22).
        - ii. Yet, it is God’s counsel and will which will be fulfilled over the plans of man (Proverbs 19:21).
        - iii. Synthesis: One seek wisdom from those who can be deem counselors, while acknowledging that God’s plan will prevail over man’s plan. Thus, seeking the Lord’s wisdom and guidance is essential.
      - b. Proverbs 13:23 and 13:25
        - i. Does the wicked always get their punishment in this side of eternity, such as the wicked being in need of food such as suggested in Proverbs 13:25?

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller treatment of the theological basis for this claim, see “Doctrine of Inerrancy” Part I through III, under systematic theology articles at <http://www.teamtruth.com>.

<sup>9</sup> Ted A. Hildebrandt, “Proverb” *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company), 248.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

- ii. Yet, injustice can also be done against the poor on this side of eternity (Proverbs 13:23).
      - iii. Synthesis: While injustice can be done by the wicked, God disapprove of the wicked and can even bring punishment such as with hunger even before the commencement of the final judgment.
    - c. Proverbs 26:4-5
      - i. Note its near proximity, where it is highly implausible that the writer write contradictory statement back to back.
      - ii. The “Slice of Reality” paradigm make sense of the text.
  - 3. Yet, “slice of reality” is used in secular context, but there is no objection to it.
    - a. “We need no telling that a maxim like ‘Many hands make light work’ is not the last word on the subject, since ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth’.”<sup>11</sup>
      - i. The first proverb captures a slice of reality that in some circumstances, many help makes things easier.
      - ii. Yet, the second proverb captures a slice of reality that in some circumstances, many help makes things more difficult.
      - iii. Both slice of reality are equally true.
    - b. Thus, “slice of reality” is not just an approach only toward Biblical Proverbs, but in other areas as well and not a ploy to run away from a problem.
  - vi. Since a Proverb is a slice of reality, interpreting and applying a Proverb also require wisdom.
    - 1. Requiring the wisdom to properly interpret and apply a Proverb should lead a believer to be on his knees, praying for wisdom which is given by God (James 1:5).
    - 2. Requiring the wisdom to properly interpret and apply a Proverb should lead a believer to practice interpreting Proverbs.
 

With all pun intended, “Practice makes perfect!”
  - d. Proverbs provides no middle ground between proper and improper conduct
    - i. “The choice of a ‘one or the other’ mode of conduct is the premise for nearly all the ethical content of the book.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature: The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom And Poetry Of the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Broadman And Holman Publishers), 122.

- ii. This is also known as the Doctrine of the Two Ways.<sup>13</sup>
    - iii. This framework is helpful when one encounter proverbs that provide indicative observations, with no written instructions.
  - e. Pay attention for the any values given.
    - i. Proverbs provide the lens for value judgment.
    - ii. There are equational proverbs
      - 1. This is when a subject's value is stated as the same with another object.
      - 2. For example, see Proverbs 10:15, 10:20, 10:23.
    - iii. There are Better-Than proverbs<sup>14</sup>
      - 1. This is a comparison of two objects, where one's value is greater than another.
      - 2. For example, see Proverbs 12:9.
    - iv. There are abomination sayings<sup>15</sup>
      - 1. This tells the reader God's view of right and wrong.
      - 2. For example, see Proverbs 15:8.
  - f. Be aware of personification
 

Examples:

    - i. Wisdom and folly as women<sup>16</sup>
    - ii. Fire speaking (Proverbs 30:16)
  - g. Pay attention to sarcasm
    - i. This has a way of capturing the truth in anS ironic and memorable way.
    - ii. See Proverbs 18:11
  - h. Concentrate on what the text teach about who God is.
    - i. It is always important to be theo-centric in our interpretation.
    - ii. The fear of the Lord is foundational in grasping Proverbs (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10).
    - iii. The fear of the Lord is what keeps the "shrewdness of Proverbs from slipping into mere self interest."<sup>17</sup>
    - iv. Lennart Bostrom, has identified Proverbs' creation theology, God's retribution and order, and theology proper (God's transcendence, sovereignty and personal).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> T. A. Perry, *Wisdom Literature and the Structure of Proverbs*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press), 40-44.

<sup>15</sup> Ted A. Hildebrandt, "Proverb" *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company), 243.

<sup>16</sup> Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom And Poetry Of the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Broadman And Holman Publishers), 129-131.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature: The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Lennart Bostrom, *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs*, (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International).