

Demystifying the
Proverbs 31
Woman



Key Terms for This Chapter

Acrostic Poem: Poem in which the first word of each line begins with a letter of the alphabet. Each successive line begins with the next letter of the alphabet (in order). For poetry originally written in Hebrew, the acrostic nature unfortunately does not come through in English translations.

Fear of Yahweh/ of the LORD: The “fear of Yahweh” can encompass trembling fear on being confronted with His holiness or when we remember our sins. But the “fear of Yahweh” that is praised in the Proverbs is that which is a gift of God to those whom He has made His children. It is faith and trust in His good and gracious promises above all things and puts us into a relationship of child to Father. It causes us to turn from evil and walk in His ways.

Torah: The first five books of the Bible, which comprise what is considered the “Law”: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Wisdom: Wisdom has two sides. One is the practical side whereby people acquire the wisdom to live day to day. All wisdom of that nature flows out of the Wisdom of God, which is the divine side. Wisdom is an attribute of God that is gifted to His people. By it, we grasp the things of God— His grace and mercy to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Jesus is Wisdom Incarnate.

Yahweh: Proper name of God given to Moses in the encounter at the burning bush (Exodus 3). It is the name by which God’s people called upon Him. It is represented in the English text as LORD in uppercase letters. During the intertestamental period, with the rise of Judaism, Jewish scribes placed the vowel pointings for the Hebrew word for Lord (Adonai) under the consonants for the name of Yahweh (YHWH) to signal the reader to avoid accidentally taking Yahweh’s name in vain by saying “Adonai/ Lord” instead of Yahweh. As God’s people by our Baptisms, we have also been given His name. I will use Yahweh throughout this study.

Introduction

When most people think of the Book of Proverbs, they think of pithy sayings such as “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22: 6) or “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble” (Proverbs 21: 23) or “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Proverbs 20: 1).

When thought of in this way, the book seems choppy and disconnected. It often leads us to treat Proverbs as being only about these seemingly stand-alone snippets of advice, warning, or general life-truths. However, as R. Reed Lessing and Andrew Steinmann remind us in their introduction to the Old Testament, Prepare the Way of the Lord: “Proverbs is not known for great passages that show us God’s love, but to read it without this perspective is to misread its message. . . . However, with an understanding of the centrality of the gospel, the sayings in this book reveal life in this world that anticipates the glorious life in the eternal kingdom that God wishes to grant to all people.”

In other words, the heart of the Proverbs is God’s love for us in His Son, Jesus Christ, and they point us forward to fulfillment in Him. In Him, they are connected; in Him, they are more than just pithy sayings. In Him, they are a picture of how life was meant to be and how it will be when He returns in glory.

In this chapter, we’ll explore some of the background information concerning the Book of Proverbs to help us have the framework we need to interpret it, especially with regard to Proverbs 31: 10– 31.

Date, Authorship, and Form

While the Proverbs were written by several writers and were gathered together by later editors, they are tied together by themes and content. Also, it seems that the final editor(s) gathered them in ways that make them flow together around certain themes and which bring them full circle. Lessing and Steinmann break down the parts of the Proverbs and their authors:

Outline of Proverbs and Attested Authorship

| Section | Author |
|----------------------|---|
| Prov. 1: 1– 9: 18 | Solomon |
| Prov. 10: 1– 22: 16 | Solomon |
| Prov. 22: 17– 24: 22 | Wise People |
| Prov. 24: 23– 34 | Wise People |
| Prov. 25: 1– 29: 27 | Solomon (as copied by Hezekiah’s men) |
| Prov. 30: 1– 33 | Agur, Son of Jakeh |
| Prov. 31: 1– 9 | Lemuel (or his mother) |
| Prov. 31: 10– 31 | Unknown, but possibly written by the final editor |

Portions written by Solomon would have been written between 971 and 932 BC. The rest of the Proverbs were likely finished by some time around Judah's late monarchic period, which places the writing of Proverbs 31: 10– 31, if written last by the final editor, between 686 and 457 BC. This period took place after Hezekiah's rule (during which time some proverbs were copied by his men) and just prior to the time of Ezra. By the time of Ezra, the Old Testament canon was closed, so nothing could have been added to Proverbs at that time. Everything that we see now had to have been in place.

Both of the poems in the final chapter (vv. 1– 9 and 10– 31 form two differing poems) are acrostic in nature, meaning that each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order. This similarity, however, does not guarantee that they are by the same author. Scholars are split on whether the two acrostic poems in chapter 31 are written by the same author. It is most often thought that the first nine verses were written by King Lemuel as a record of his mother's advice or by his mother herself. Most then think that the second half of the chapter was written later by the final editor and arranged here in this way quite intentionally. Some scholars do assert that the similarities between the two poems— which we'll explore in chapter 5— make a single author more of a possibility.

Fun Fact: Scholars think it is possible that “Lemuel” is the “throne name” of one of Judah's kings. Steinmann and Lessing offer either Hezekiah (716– 687) or Josiah (641– 610) as the likeliest possibilities. However, Raymond Apple notes that rabbinic tradition holds Lemuel to be Solomon. In his commentary on Proverbs, Steinmann argues that this is not likely because the use of the Hebrew word for “good” (tov) is not similar to the formulaic use in the earlier Solomonic proverbs. He argues that the final editor wrote it, but drew on Solomon's proverbs and deliberately connected them back. Whoever the human author, the two poems in chapter 31 are ultimately inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore contain words of life for us and all Christians.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: Even though there are several different authors of the Proverbs, as well as final editors, what is at the center of all of the Proverbs (think back to Steinmann and Lessing’s quote in the introduction)?

Proverbs 1– 9 as the Lens for Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs opens with several chapters in which wisdom plays a main role. In these first nine chapters, Solomon contrasts the way of wisdom and the way of folly, with this contrast most clearly embodied by the figures of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly. The way of wisdom is the way of Yahweh; the way of folly is the way of other gods, or the way that rejects Yahweh and His gifts.

Solomon opens his initial section of writings (chs. 1– 9) with a thesis statement of sorts. The goal of his writings is instruction in wisdom. While this is written as the opening for the initial section of Solomon’s writings, it stands also as the thesis of the Book of Proverbs as a whole, from the more poetic imagery of Solomon’s initial Proverbs to the short sayings to the final acrostic poems.

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1: 1– 7)

Solomon is not talking about just any wisdom here. He is talking about the deep riches of the wisdom of God that come only to those who “fear Yahweh.” This wisdom from Yahweh instructs a person in righteousness and shapes the whole of their lives. This wisdom given by Yahweh leads to life, and those who reject it lead to their own deaths. In verses 20– 33 of chapter 1, wisdom is personified and speaks. At the end of this section, she offers a warning that will echo throughout this section and beyond:

Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
would have none of my counsel
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,
and have their fill of their own devices.
For the simple are killed by their turning away,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but whoever listens to me will dwell secure
and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.

(Proverbs 1: 29– 33)

As chapters 1– 9 unfold, they build on this personification of wisdom and the two paths: the way of wisdom, which leads to life, and the way of folly, which leads to death. This comparison between the two ways culminates in chapter 9, where Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly are most directly contrasted. Those who come in to Lady Wisdom eat and live, but those who come in to feast on the food of Dame Folly “are in the depths of Sheol” (Proverbs 9: 18).

The rest of the Proverbs should be read in light of the two possible ways in life. For those who fear Yahweh and are beckoned by His wisdom, the words of even the shorter Proverbs hold promise and warning. For those who do not fear Yahweh, these words are not understandable, and they will be the drunkards and the fools of which the Proverbs speak, ultimately walking the path to death. In the end, all people will embrace either Yahweh or other gods.

Later in this study, we’ll look at how closely Proverbs 31: 10– 31 connects to these first nine chapters and the themes set up within them.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: What are the two ways (as personified by two women) contrasted in the Book of Proverbs, and to what ends do they lead?

The Fear of Yahweh (“fear of the Lord”) in Proverbs

The fear of the Lord (or of Yahweh) is a major theme in the Book of Proverbs, but also beyond it in many Old Testament passages, as well as in a few key New Testament ones. Often, we think of “fear” as meaning only that one is afraid of something. Surely, there are things to fear concerning Yahweh. He is righteous and perfect; we are sinful and unclean. Therefore, there is an element of trembling fear when we are confronted with the perfect Yahweh, who cannot abide our sinful selves. This kind of trembling fear has its place. “Fear of Yahweh” is used in this sense, for example, in several passages in 2 Chronicles when God’s people are facing battle or warning against disobeying Yahweh. In chapter 14, Asa and the army of Judah defeat their enemies. The text then states that they are successful “for the fear of the LORD was upon them” (2 Chronicles 14: 14). Similarly, in 17: 10, the narrator says: “And the fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah, and they made no war against Jehoshaphat.” For those who are not of God’s chosen people, the fear of Him is a literal terror of His wrath and might.

However, the “fear of Yahweh” also refers to a healthy awe, reverence, and recognition of Yahweh’s might and of His grace and mercy as well. For those who are a part of Yahweh’s flock, fear of Him is faith and trust in Him. It is the kind of fear and respect that “causes a person to want to please the heavenly Father,” as Steinmann says.

The fear of Yahweh most often depicted in the Scriptures is that which is given by Him as a gift and sustained by Him. It is a “filial relationship initiated by God when He reckons sinners as righteous through faith.” This type of fear, as the Proverbs passages above repeatedly bear out, is the beginning of Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. It instructs us in the ways of wisdom, but not to the point of pride in ourselves. Rather, humility is a result (Proverbs 15: 33).

References to “The Fear of Yahweh” in Proverbs

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|---------------------|-----------------|
| Proverbs 1: 7 | Proverbs 15: 16 |
| Proverbs 1: 29 | Proverbs 15: 33 |
| Proverbs 2: 5 | Proverbs 16: 6 |
| Proverbs 8: 13 | Proverbs 19: 23 |
| Proverbs 9: 10 | Proverbs 22: 4 |
| Proverbs 10: 27 | Proverbs 23: 17 |
| Proverbs 14: 26– 27 | Proverbs 31: 30 |

The “fear of Yahweh” leads those who have it to “[turn] away from evil” (Proverbs 16: 6), it “leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm” (Proverbs 19: 23), and he will be given “riches and honor and life” (Proverbs 22: 4). These results of being one who fears the Lord (completely by gift of His hand) stand in stark contrast to those who do not fear Yahweh. Those who do not fear Yahweh are “simple” or “fools.” They are led into folly, disaster, and ultimately death. This dichotomy is set up from the beginning of Proverbs: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1: 7). When Wisdom is first personified in chapter 1, she offers a warning: “Then they [those who are simple/ scoffers] will call upon me, and I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD” (Proverbs 1: 28– 29).

Ultimately, it is Jesus Christ who fears Yahweh perfectly:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

And His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what His eyes see,
or decide disputes by what His ears hear,
but with righteousness He shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth,

and with the breath of His lips He shall kill the wicked. (Isaiah 11: 1– 4)

Jesus delighted in the fear of Yahweh. He delighted in trusting in Yahweh above all things. He trusted in Yahweh’s might, mercy, and gracious will. That delight in the fear of Yahweh He gifts also to us.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3: What is “the fear of the LORD,” and to what does it lead?

DISCUSSION QUESTION 4: Who is the giver of “the fear of the LORD” and who is the one who fears the Lord perfectly? Why is this good news for us?

Wisdom in Proverbs

There are two “levels” of wisdom. One is the everyday wisdom that many of the Proverbs address. All wisdom is divine in that it comes from God through human authorities (such as kings and priests in the world of the Old and New Testaments). The wisdom we often see and think of when we reflect on the Book of Proverbs is the practical knowledge type of sayings. These practical bits of wisdom address what to do, sometimes how, and the consequences that come either from acting in the recommended way or from despising the advice. Generally, wisdom is directed toward the individual. When the individual abides by wisdom, there is a positive effect on society. For instance, when people make good decisions concerning not drinking and driving, this affects society as a whole in that it creates a safer environment. Obviously, when a person chooses not to heed the wisdom of avoiding driving when drunk, it can have dire consequences for society.

Many of the Proverbs address the type of wisdom that guides us all in making good choices for the sake of ourselves and those around us. They often also contain general truths that flow from making wise decisions. As my professor once wrote in a course book, “Wisdom literature is practical direction for obtaining substantial wholeness out of the brokenness of natural life,” and Proverbs specifically hones in on providing “skill at living life from the parameters of the Torah and natural order.” In other words, many of the practical teachings of the Proverbs help to guide a person in living according to the order of creation (natural law) and the revealed Law given in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). As Horace Hummel writes, another aspect of wisdom is the ability “to attune one’s own life to the eternal rhythms . . . of the cosmic order” (natural law). Functionally, wisdom equals the ability to cope with all of what life has to offer. The fool “tries to be a law unto himself,” and this ends in his destruction.

Ultimately, though, this kind of practical wisdom that reflects the natural law is part and parcel of divine wisdom. It flows out of divine wisdom and is a result of it. “Wisdom is first and foremost an attribute of God. All true wisdom is godly wisdom.” Those who have true wisdom have it because it is a gift given by God. It is God who possesses wisdom: “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens” (Proverbs 3: 19). Wisdom is a divine attribute of God, and through it He formed the creation. It predates humanity and therefore cannot be of our making. We did not decide what was wise or create wisdom, and we cannot obtain it for ourselves; rather, “the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2: 6).

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom Literature is a form of literature such as narrative or fiction with its own set of rules and conventions. Wisdom Literature can be seen in pockets within other books of the Bible that are largely narrative or historical in nature, but the Books of Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes are considered to be the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament. The Psalms also contain strong strains of wisdom characteristics and forms. Wisdom Literature must be properly understood in the light of the rest of the Scriptures (so not in isolation) and in the light of Christ as Wisdom Incarnate.

That wisdom is God’s and is bestowed by Him as a blessing that enlightens humans, and that Wisdom ultimately is God as He comes to us in His Son, is the key to understanding the Proverbs, including Proverbs 31: 10– 31. In Proverbs, “the concept of wisdom is completely theocentric and Christocentric.” In other words, wisdom is centered in God and in Christ. It is a gracious gift of God to His people, allowing them the ability to “obtain wisdom and live wisely,” as Solomon said in his opening lines. By means of our Baptism, wisdom becomes an attribute of all Christians, just as it is an attribute of God. We do not yet have it fully, but we acquire it by His grace and grow in wisdom through His Word.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 5: What are some different types of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs? Ultimately, from whom does all wisdom flow? What is the ultimate form of Wisdom?

DISCUSSION QUESTION 6: How do Christians come to have the attribute of wisdom, and what is the content of that wisdom?

Conclusion

Into this milieu, Proverbs 31: 10– 31 is situated. It is no accident that it is placed where it is, and it is no accident that it shares much language with the first nine chapters of Proverbs. By setting it into the context here, we can shed important interpretive light on a passage that is too often lifted out of its context and moorings. When we see and understand it as intricately tied to the whole of the Book of Proverbs, we will better and more rightly understand it.