

GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING AND PROCLAIMING THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Greg W. Parsons

The Book of Proverbs includes many practical and down-to-earth sayings. Yet few sermons are preached from this book. For many preachers the Book of Proverbs apparently seems like "nothing more than a deserted stretch of highway between Psalms and Ecclesiastes" that appears "dry and barren."¹ Collins asserts that "the crisis of relevance" for the preacher is particularly acute for the Book of Proverbs since it provides little inspiration or excitement. He opines, "With the exception of Leviticus, it is doubtful that any biblical book is viewed with less enthusiasm by the preacher."² Why is it that, although Proverbs is a rich source of devotional reading, preachers and teachers normally bypass Proverbs for public presentation?³

Several problems face the expositor in seeking to understand and proclaim the Book of Proverbs. (1) Some proverbs seem to conflict with human experience (10:27; 22:4) or seem contradictory to one another (26:4-5; cf. 6:6-11 with 15:16).⁴ (2) Many

Greg W. Parsons is Professor of Biblical Studies, Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary, Jacksonville, Texas.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 53.

² John J. Collins, *Proverbs Ecclesiastes, Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), 1.

³ David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs, The Communicator's Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 17.

⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 171.

proverbs, on the whole, appear to be secular common-sense sayings, almost devoid of theological content. (3) Some proverbs seem excessively moralistic (20:13) or overly concerned with the status quo (24:21).⁵ (4) Others seem totally amoral observations of society (14:20; 17:8). (5) Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and chapters 25-29 consist of hundreds of individual sayings seemingly unconnected with what comes before or after.⁶ (6) Some proverbs may be culturally problematic. Can Proverbs 23:13 be utilized by the Ipreacher who faces a society full of child abuse?⁷ How can the biblical expositor deal with such enonnous obstacles to his understanding and proclaiming the Book of Proverbs? Are there any guidelines to assist him in running through this "obstacle course"? Few have written even minimal guidelines for either interpreting or preaching biblical poetry or the Book of Proverbs in particular.⁸ Recently Hubbard has laid an excellent foundation for understanding the Book of Proverbs.⁹ Other authors offer some insights for preaching from Proverbs but seldom in detail.¹⁰ Collins gives a brief "preaching guide" to Proverbs from a neoorthodox perspective.¹¹ However, he offers no specific guidelines.

Therefore this article offers guidelines for both understanding and proclaiming the Book of Proverbs.

⁵ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 53-54.

⁶ Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, 171. However, chapters 25-29 sometimes have small clusters of proverbs on certain subjects (apparently the work of Hezekiah's scribes, 25:1). See Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 32.

⁷ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 61-62.

⁸ For instance, the recent helpful book by Sidney Greidanus (*The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988]) contains nothing on the poetic books or Proverbs in particular.

⁹ Hubbard lists six useful guidelines for interpretation and proclamation that the present author has adapted (Proverbs, 17-30). However, though Hubbard's guidelines rightly emphasize the hermeneutical, few remarks specifically interface with proclamation. Valuable hermeneutical "rules" for Proverbs have been suggested by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 195-203). See also the helpful work of C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 146-65, esp. 161-65.

¹⁰ See Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 53-66. Achtemeier treats the Book of Proverbs in conjunction with her treatment of wisdom literature (*Preaching from the Old Testament*, 165-76).

¹¹ Collins, *Proverbs Ecclesiastes*.

1. SUGGESTED HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES FOR PROVERBS

GUIDELINE ONE: INTERPRET INDIVIDUAL PASSAGES IN LIGHT OF THE OVERALL STRUCTURE, PURPOSE, AND "MOTTO" OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS.

Overall context of the book as an anthology. The overall literary structure of Proverbs suggests that the book is not only an anthology of sayings but is also "a collection of collections of wisdom materials."¹² The headings that introduce its major sections at 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; and 31:1 may indicate seven distinct collections that vary in form and content. Therefore initially it seems prudent to interpret each individual proverb or wisdom unit primarily within the context of its own individual collection. Then one must consider the context of the Book of Proverbs as a whole. The use of a concordance is essential for the precise meaning of words in the wisdom (or proverbial) vocabulary.¹³

Purpose and setting. In contrast to many books of the Bible, the purpose for Proverbs is clearly stated in 1:2-6. As a primer of right conduct and proper attitudes, Proverbs gives the inexperienced youth (1:4)--or even the older Immature person--wisdom and instruction necessary to conform to God's will.¹⁴ A twofold emphasis is indicated: to give moral prudence and skillfulness for holy living (1:2~, 3-5); and, to give mental discernment (1:2b, 6).¹⁵ The latter includes discerning the meaning of various kinds of wisdom sayings such as proverbs, riddles, and figurative maxims or expressions (v. 6).¹⁶ The proverb in the mouth of a fool is inappropriate and can even be hazardous (26:7, 9). Discernment may also refer to knowing the difference between sham and reality so as to sift out the satanic counterfeit of wisdom.¹⁷

Though the setting of Proverbs has been debated (whether it was the royal court or the home), the data seem to indicate that the Book of Proverbs in its canonical form was an "instructional manual"¹⁸ designed "for use by the young men of Israel's society

¹² Hubbard, Proverbs, 18.

¹³ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁴ Bullock, Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books, 152-53.

¹⁵ Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:904-6.

¹⁶ The precise interpretation of the Hebrew word *מִלְּיָצָה* "parable" (NIV) or "figure" (NASB) is disputable.

¹⁷ Ross states that this involves insight concerning lessons of life "such as distinguishing permanent values from immediate gratifications" ("Proverbs," 905).

¹⁸ See Bullock, Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books, 152-53.

who were being groomed for positions of leadership,"¹⁹ However, the individual sayings reflect the family (or clan) wisdom of centuries past handed down from father to son throughout the generations (cf. Prov, 4:1-4),²⁰ As Johnson states, the Book of Proverbs is "the boiled-down summation of many generations of experience in living."²¹

Motto. The motto of the book is found in 1:7 and 9:10 ("The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom"), This serves not only as a literary inclusio²² but also as the compass to give orientation to chapters 1-9,²³ This motto rectifies the view that Proverbs is basically secular in its orientation,²⁴ Proverbs is designed to teach people how to steer their lives properly (cf, 1:5)²⁵ under the command of Yahweh.

GUIDELINE TWO: RECOGNIZE THE VARIOUS LITERARY FORMS AND DEVICES (THE "BUILDING BLOCKS" OF THE INDIVIDUAL PASSAGES OR PROVERBS) AS A CLUE TO THE CONTEXT.

The purpose of Proverbs involves "the enhancement of understanding through an instrument of finely turned language that needs to be properly grasped" (see 1:2, 5-6),²⁶ The terms in

¹⁹ Hubbard, Proverbs, 26. He cogently argues that the centralization of government under David and Solomon called for many administrators to be trained for positions of responsibility. Beginning in Solomon's day there may have been some kind of schooling system such as was known in Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. Hezekiah may also have had a similar system (Prov. 25:1).

²⁰ Hubbard, Proverbs, 26-27. However, at the same time, the frequent use of "my son" (or my child) in Proverbs apparently indicates that the wisdom teacher was a sort of substitute parent to the person seeking wisdom from him (Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 190). i

²¹ L. D. Johnson, *Israel's Wisdom: Learn and Live* (Nashville: Broadman, 1975), 30. Waltke says that the original setting of the wisdom material in Proverbs was the home of the courtier, a high court official addressing his son (Bruce K. Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 [July-September 1979]: 230-32).

²² "The woman who fears the Lord" (31:30) is part of an inclusio for the whole book. The technical term inclusio is the literary envelope structure whereby a unit begins and ends with the same or similar phraseology, .

²³ Bullock observes, "Thus in Proverbs the underlying basis of life is one's relationship to God. Out of that relationship grow moral understanding and the ability to judge what is right (2:6-22), a proper attitude toward material possessions (3:9-11), industrious labor (6:6-11), the necessary equilibrium and sense of security for living in the world (3:21-26), and the right relationship toward one's neighbor (3:27-29) to mention only a few of the more practical benefits of that relationship" (*Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 148; cf. 166).

²⁴ Cf. Collins, Proverbs Ecclesiastes, 4-6, 10,

²⁵ The NIV translation "guidance" in 1:5 reflects the Hebrew term *תְּהַלֵּל*, an apparent nautical term cognate to *הַלֵּל* ("sailor") who is "the one who pulls the ropes" to guide a ship.

²⁶ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 167.

verse 6 (especially מְשָׁל and מִלֵּי יִצְחָק) are preeminently literary terms that indicate that the reception of wisdom requires careful reading of Proverbs to determine its literary forms.²⁷ Consequently it is essential for the expositor to recognize its various literary forms and devices.

Two basic literary forms. In general there are two basic literary forms or types of proverbs: the wisdom sentence and the admonition. The wisdom sentence (or saying) is an observation based on experience which is stated in the indicative mood (e.g., Prov. 12:4). This type occurs primarily in 10:1-22:16 and chapters 25-29.²⁸ The admonition, which occurs in the imperative mood (in either the second or third person),²⁹ is found mainly in chapters 1-9 and 22:17-24:22.³⁰ It may be a positive instruction or command or a negative prohibition. The admonition may add the reason(s) or motivation(s) often introduced by "for" (see 3:1-2 and 1:15-16, which combine both negative and positive components). Frequently there are extended admonitions to the "son" (esp. chaps. 1-9).³¹

Basic types of poetic parallelism. Though all the basic types of poetic parallelism can be illustrated from the Book of Proverbs, the most significant are antithetic and emblematic parallelism.³²

Antithetic parallelism is the most common category in Proverbs, particularly in chapters 10-15, in which about 90 percent of the proverbs are of this type.³³ This type emphasizes the importance of choosing correctly to avoid the fate of the fool. It

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 167-08 175.

²⁸ The two main literary subtypes of the wisdom sentence are comparisons and numerical sayings (the latter being frequent in chapter 30 and sometimes involving several verses). See Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 20-21, for more details.

²⁹ The Hebrew jussive (third person positive or second person prohibition) is featured in this type.

³⁰ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 21. His statement that both collections of the wise (22:17-24:22 and 24:23-34) feature the admonition is not precisely stated. Only a small part of the second collection (*viz.*, 24:27-29) contains admonitions.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18. These extended wisdom speeches or poems of 10 or 20 lines make up roughly one-third of the Book of Proverbs, according to Alter (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 179).

³² Synonymous parallelism is fairly common (see Prov. 20:1a; cf. 17:4 and 18:7), especially in chapters 18 and 19. Synthetic parallelism, frequent in chapters 16-22, has two main variations—either completing the thought (16:3, 6-7, 10, 12) or advancing the thought (16:4) (Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 19, and Ross, "Proverbs," 888). Also see Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (April-June 1990): 179-81.

³³ This estimate comes from Johnson, *Israel's Wisdom: Learn and Live*, 20.

contributes greatly to the teaching of "the two ways,"³⁴ setting "before the reader the choice between the wise and profitable way versus the foolish and disastrous way" (cf. 12:5).³⁵

Emblematic parallelism is actually a type of synonymous parallelism in which one line is figurative and the other line is literal³⁶ (see 10:26; 25:25; and 26:20). Proverbs of this type may also qualify as riddles since every statement "A is like B" implies the question "How is A like B?"³⁷ Therefore one must determine the common denominators in the comparison, ascertaining the main point of the comparison within its historical-cultural milieu.³⁸

In analyzing the meaning of half of the parallelism, one must consider the proverb as a whole, utilizing both halves of the verse. For instance Proverbs 10:1 reads, "A wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother." The two halves of this antithetic proverb must not be isolated so as to conclude mistakenly that a mother has no joy in a wise son or that the "macho" father shows no grief over a foolish son. Rather the parallelism of "father"/"mother" means "parents" who share emotions of joy or grief.³⁹ Thus the total message may be greater than the sum of its independent components; it emerges from the harmonious interaction between the two lines.⁴⁰

The clues in the various English translations as to the probable kind of parallelism need to be observed carefully. Antithetical parallelisms normally use the word "but." Emblematic parallelisms have the word "like" or "as" at the beginning of one line. However, since a translator frequently has added these

³⁴ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 19.

³⁵ Ross, "Proverbs," 888. However, as Hubbard observes, this type also plays a significant role in chapters 1-9 in numerous antithetic summaries where "two back-to-back verses or lines state the positive and negative outcomes of heeding or spurning wisdom" (*Proverbs*, 19). See 1:32-33; 2:21-22; 3:33-35; 4:1&-19; 8:35-36; 9:12.

³⁶ William S. LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederick W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 308.

³⁷ See William E. Mouser, Jr., *Walking in Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 60.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 60-64. The expositor must avoid the temptation to judge the significance of the parallelism from a modern Occidental perspective.

³⁹ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 309, 316.

⁴⁰ Alter notes that one problem for many readers is that much of Proverbs has indeed become proverbial in English with the result that only a portion of the individual proverb is quoted. This tends to divorce one half from its mate and distorts the proverb's meaning (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 164). Ronald Barclay Allen gives the analogy of stereophonic sound to illustrate the need to "hear" both lines of Hebrew poetry (*Praise! A Matter of Life and Breath* [Nashville: Nelson, 1980], 51).

words from the context (as in 25:25-26, 28),⁴¹ the reader must be cautious about the "announced" kind of parallelism. These clues may sometimes convey an incorrect message.⁴²

Since so much of the Book of Proverbs consists of individual proverbs (which may be compared to color slides placed somewhat randomly in a projector tray), the hermeneutical caveat implied in the proverb, "A text without a context is a pretext," must be applied in a unique manner. (a) The internal context of each individual proverb is heightened. (b) Other verses in the immediate paragraph(s) or chapter(s) are not nearly so important as the literary and theological context of the whole collection. A topical study of the subjects and words will provide a perspective helpful in interpreting an individual proverb.⁴³ Proverbs employs the technical jargon of wisdom literature. Through the use of a good concordance (especially in Hebrew), the expositor can analyze the specialized meanings of such words as "way" (or "path") or "law." A study of these words will reveal rich dividends.⁴⁴ Though a study of "way" (דֶּרֶךְ) in Proverbs 22:6 will not resolve all difficulties, the expositor may find help in coming to his own conclusions.⁴⁵ The word "law" (תּוֹרָה) usually does not mean the Law of Moses but the authoritative instruction of a parent or teacher (cf. Prov. 3: 1).⁴⁶

⁴¹ Students of Hebrew realize that the conjunction וַ may be translated "and" or "but" or "so" or a variety of other ways. Sometimes the two lines are connected in asyndetic fashion (a mere juxtaposition) with no conjunction at all.

⁴² Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom*, 32-33, 74.

⁴³ Though all usages of a specific word or phrase in Proverbs are important, perhaps the first priority should be occurrences within the primary context of a specific subcollection (e.g., 10: 1-22: 16).

⁴⁴ Proverbs uses several Hebrew words for "path" or "way." Proverbs 4:11-19, 25-26 illustrates most of them. Verse 11 refers to the "way" (דֶּרֶךְ) of wisdom and the right "paths" (lit., "wagon-tracks" [מַעַבְּרֵי לָ] of uprightness. Verse 14 contrasts the "pathway" (אֲרָח) of the wicked with the "way" (דֶּרֶךְ) of the evil ones. Verses 18 and 19 contrast the "pathway" (אֲרָח) of the righteous as light and the "way" (דֶּרֶךְ) of the wicked as darkness.

⁴⁵ The specific use of this word with the pronominal suffix suggests that the translation of "his way" may mean "his (own) way" (cf. 16:9; 11:5) in contrast to the traditional viewpoint of "the way he should go." Cf. Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 51-52. This may mean training should be given with consideration for his individuality (or habits). However, the context of 22:5 and 14:12 suggests that this meaning does not allow the child to have his own way (Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1964], 147). On the other hand, since Proverbs presents only two ways a child can go (the way of the righteous and wise or the way of the wicked and fool) there may be merit in retaining the traditional view (Ross, "Proverbs," 1061-62).

⁴⁶ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 25-26. However, Kidner argues that where the Hebrew תּוֹרָה occurs in the book unqualified (as in 28:9 and 29:18) it refers to divine law, but

The theological context of the "motto" (1:7; 9:10) must always be considered.

In longer units in chapters 1-9 or 30-31, certain literary clues should be noted as evidence of structural links or grouping. The use of repetition, catchwords, and inclusions are some of the most prominent devices.⁴⁷

GUIDELINE THREE: BEWARE OF THE ERRONEOUS ASSUMPTION THAT PROVERBS ARE UNCONDITIONAL PROMISES.

It is important for the expositor to become aware of the assumptions and nature of proverbial wisdom literature.⁴⁸

Assumptions of proverbial wisdom. Bullock correctly observes that the Book of Proverbs as wisdom literature assumes "a fundamental relationship between the natural and social/moral order."⁴⁹ Proverbs 3:19-20, which states that Yahweh created the universe through wisdom, and the many references to His acts of creation (8:22-31) demonstrate that creation is viewed as the basis for order in the universe. The implication is that God through wisdom placed "order" in the very fabric of the cosmos. These verses set the stage for the whole book, which is designed to exhibit the order that holds together all of life.⁵⁰ Within this context there is a "solidarity" between all parts of God's creation, over which He is Ruler, from the universe itself down to a colony of ants (6:6). What one observes in the natural cosmos has implications for understanding the social and moral order.⁵¹

Proverbs assumes that the physical and moral universe operates by cause and effect. Therefore good behavior is rewarded and bad deeds are punished (e.g., 10:30). In Hubbard's words, the various analogies and comparisons between animal life and human experience make sense (see chap. 30) because behind both

when qualified (as in 1:8; 3:1; and 13:14) it refers to home teaching (*The Proverbs*, 63). This conclusion should be evaluated in light of the specific data. Hubbard argues that a dogmatic position cannot be taken on 28:9 (*Proverbs*, 290-91).

⁴⁷ See Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 23-24, for examples. .

⁴⁸ Cf. some general assumptions of wisdom literature as part of what Bullock calls "biblical humanism" (Introduction to *Old Testament Poetic Books*, 54,63-65).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁰ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 25. Also see Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," 233. For a helpful summary of those who view wisdom as basically "a search for creation's order so as to master life" and for those who reject this, see Roy B. Zuck, "A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 211-13.

⁵¹ Bullock, *Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 162; Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 14.

stands the hand of the one Creator. It is that hand which underlies the cause-and-effect pattern of proverbs, where good conduct carries its own reward and bad behavior brings its own woe."⁵²

The nature of proverbial wisdom. Because proverbs are wise observations based on experience, they must not be understood as unconditional promises but as pragmatic principles (or procedures) to follow.⁵³ Neither are the proverbs "legal guarantees from God" but rather "poetic guidelines for good behavior."⁵⁴ Thus the proverbs tell what generally takes place without making an irreversible rule that fits all circumstances. This is a key to understanding problematic proverbs such as 22:6.⁵⁵ This verse should not be considered a promise but a general "principle of education and commitment."⁵⁶

Furthermore certain proverbs that make amoral observations (e.g., 14:20; 17:8) must not be seen as condoning or encouraging evil.⁵⁷ A distinction must be made between what is described and what is prescribed as proper.⁵⁸

The proverbs are limited by the characteristics of brevity and catchiness. On the surface some proverbs read almost like an algebraic equation or mechanical law (22:4).⁵⁹ However, Fee and Stuart aptly state that proverbs are "worded to be memorable" rather than "technically precise."⁶⁰ The very literary form necessitates that they overstate the case and oversimplify without including "fine print" or "footnotes" with "lists of exceptions."⁶¹ So one must be alert to the following limitations implied from an overall study of the context of the Book of Proverbs.⁶²

⁵² Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 25 (italics his).

⁵³ Cf. Bullock, *Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 162.

⁵⁴ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 98-99, 203.

⁵⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 199.

⁵⁶ Bullock, *Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 162.

⁵⁷ Cf. Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, 171.

⁵⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 66.

⁵⁹ Alden observes that the verse seems to say, "Obedience plus humility equals riches, honor, and life" (Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 160).

⁶⁰ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 196, 201-3.

⁶¹ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 25.

⁶² Ironically the person who desires to use the Proverbs in the pursuit of wisdom must use wisdom in reading and employing the proverbial genre (Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 58).

Examples of specific limitations stated or implied in the Book of Proverbs.

1. Proverbs 26:4-5 demonstrates limitations to certain circumstances. These side-by-side, opposite proverbs should not be considered as inconsistent or contradictory but as defining specific situations noted in the biblical text.⁶³

Complementary proverbs imply that the application of a specific aphorism must be tempered by certain conditions. Proverbs 15:22 praises careful planning with the use of human counselors; however, this is balanced with the warning that while man proposes, God disposes" (19:21; 16:9; cf. 20:24; 21:30-31).⁶⁴ Zuck suggests that folly, which according to 22:15 is "bound up in the heart of the child," may introduce a situation that is an exception to the general principle of 22:6.⁶⁵

2. Proverbs may be limited to a certain tendency of things to cause a particular effect (see 15:1). A gentle answer may turn away wrath, but at times such an answer may have no positive effect on stubborn individuals.⁶⁶

3. Proverbs may be limited to what ought to be done not (necessary) what actually takes place (see 16:10).⁶⁷

The literary context of wisdom literature as a whole. This brings a more balanced understanding to the Proverbs. The traditional wisdom of Proverbs, which deals with the "built-in regularities which make nine-tenths of life manageable," is challenged by Job and Qoheleth.⁶⁸ The message of these two books illustrates that the proverbs are ultimately limited by the mystery of Yahweh's sovereignty. The natural order God established in the universe cannot tell everything about God. Hubbard rightly concludes that fear of the Lord⁶⁹ should restrict self-confidence in using the various proverbs to determine how God will act.

⁶³ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 64.

⁶⁴ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 26. Cf. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 25.

⁶⁵ Zuck, "A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," 234.

⁶⁶ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 64. Cf. Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, 199.

⁶⁷ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 65.

⁶⁸ "Proverbs seems to say, 'Here are the rules for life; try them and see they will work.' Job and Ecclesiastes say, 'We did, and they don't (David A. Hubbard, *The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith*," Tyndale Bulletin 11 [1966]: 6). These books operate in "creative conflict" with Proverbs. See Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 36, 116-24).

⁶⁹ The fear of God is a common denominator in wisdom literature (see esp. Prov. 1:1; 9:10; Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Eccles. 12:13; and numerous other instances).

We cannot use proverbs like subway tokens, guaranteed to open the turnstile every time. They are guidelines, not mechanical formulas. . . . We heed them as best we can, try to gain the wisdom that experience can teach, and then leave large amounts of room for God to surprise us with outcomes different from what our plans prescribe.⁷⁰

GUIDELINE FOUR: REALIZE THAT SOME PROVERBS ARE UNCONDITIONALLY TRUE (E.G., PROY. 16:2, 12, 33).

The recognition that the proverbs have limitations does not nullify the fact that some proverbs may always be true. Frequently these are connected to an attribute or action of God (11:1; 12:22; 15:3; 16:2, 33; 22:2). However, this does not mean that because the name of the Lord is used in the proverb there is a "blank check" to use in an unconditional fashion. For instance 15:25 and 16:7 must not be forced to apply to all situations. The experience of mankind will often alert the expositor to proverbs that have exceptions. However, ultimately the way to decide whether a proverb is always true or limited to certain circumstances is not by means of a subjective "vote" but by correlation with the rest of the biblical canon, beginning with the context of the Book of Proverbs and of wisdom literature as a whole and concluding with the New Testament evidence.⁷¹

GUIDELINE FIVE: INTERPRET THE BOOK OF PROVERBS IN LIGHT OF THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF EXTRABIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE.

This is imperative for at least two reasons. First, Solomon was not the sole author of all the Proverbs but the inspired editor or collector of wise sayings from other cultures.⁷² Second, the Book

⁷⁰ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 25.

⁷¹ For instance the promises of long life, peace, riches, and honor to those who obey the commandments of parents or wisdom teachers in chapter 3 (see esp. vv. 1-2, 16) can be clarified by noting Jesus' life. Though He embodied wisdom and fulfilled all the requirements of Proverbs 3, He did not have a long life, riches, or much honor while on earth (in seeming contradiction to the text). This does not mean that these proverbs are inaccurate or uninspired; rather this illustrates that they are general precepts which describe the norm but are not without exception. Ephesians 6:1-4 includes a "promise" of blessing and long life on earth. Though the commandment to obey and honor parents must be considered as absolute (Exod. 20:12), the motivation or reward must not be interpreted as an unconditional promise. God in His sovereignty may make an exception as in the case of Jesus.

⁷² This is clear from the plain statement that Proverbs includes the words of King Lemuel (31:1), apparently a non-Israelite. Further support is derived from the possible translation of the word "oracle" in 30:1 and 31: 1 as "Massa," which may identify Agur and Lemuel as Ishmaelite converts from northern Arabia (cf. Gen. 25:14). See Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 33 (also n. 1) and Bullock, *Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 164, 176. Furthermore the several parallels between Proverbs and Egyptian literature (esp. 22:17-23:14 and the Egyptian

of Proverbs shares the literary forms of the proverbial and wisdom literature of the ancient Near East.⁷³ This common literary background may help the interpreter achieve one of the purposes of the Proverbs, namely, to understand the various types of wisdom literature including proverbs, instructions, riddles, and fables (1:2b, 6).⁷⁴

An awareness of the historical-cultural, and literary background of Proverbs minimizes the temptation to interpret Proverbs from the modern Occidental perspective. A common error is to forget that Proverbs is an ancient wisdom book. For example one would totally miss the meaning of Proverbs 26:17 if one envisioned a pet dog being taken by the ears. In the ancient world, dogs were wild scavengers similar to jackals.

Sometimes figures of speech complicate the problem of understanding the ancient text. The meaning of "you will heap burning coals on his head" (25:21-22; Rom. 12:20) is confusing to the modern reader. An awareness of Egyptian culture may provide the answer. One clue may be in the next verse (25:23), which has perplexed commentators because in Palestine the north wind does not bring rain.⁷⁵ However, since this statement is true for Egypt, it may suggest an Egyptian milieu for the proverbs in this section. One Egyptian text records that a penitent would go to the one he wronged carrying a clay dish on his head with burning coals. Thus the possible meaning of the proverb is that if one acts charitably he may bring his enemy to repentance.⁷⁶

"Instruction of Amenemope[t] demonstrates that the Book was not written in a vacuum. See Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 126-32, for some specific parallels, and Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," 234-35.

⁷³ Chapters 1-9 and 22: 17-24:22 share many of the same literary forms as the instruction genre of Egypt and Mesopotamia. For an extensive introduction to this extrabiblical literature including analysis of literary forms, see William McKane, *Proverbs*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 51-208. Concerning the commonality of literary forms between Proverbs and the Egyptian literature, See the brief but beneficial remarks of Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs .and Ancient Wisdom Literature," 223-26.

⁷⁴ Ross, "Proverbs," 884-85, 906. It may assist the student in understanding various abstract concepts which are conveyed through figures of speech. For instance the personification of wisdom found in chapters 1-9 is similar to the personification of *ma'at*, the Egyptian term for wisdom. For implications of the concept *ma'at* for understanding biblical "wisdom," See Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," 232-34.

⁷⁵ The KJV translation, "the north wind driveth away rain," is incorrect, perhaps being influenced by the translation of Jerome's Vulgate. Jerome's knowledge of the weather patterns of Palestine caused him to mistranslate the Hebrew word. See Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom*, 62-63. f

⁷⁶ See Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989) 302-5.

SUGGESTED HOMILETICAL GUIDELINES FOR PROVERBS

GUIDELINE ONE: IN SEEKING TO APPLY A PROVERB, BE SURE TO VALIDATE THE APPLICATION THROUGH THE CONTEXT OF THE BIBLE.,

Note the context of Proverbs and wisdom literature. A common error is to take the proverbs out of context and misapply them in a literalistic way. For instance, Proverbs 10:22, which speaks of God's blessing of wealth, is sometimes preached as a sign that God wants all believers to prosper materially.⁷⁷ However, the immediate context is a contrast between the righteous who work diligently and the wicked who are negligent (10:3-5), both of whom the Lord will pay accordingly (10:16). The application must be tempered by the larger context of other verses which clearly imply that godly individuals may be poor⁷⁸ (see 15:16; 16:8; 19:1; 28:6).

Doing topical studies in Proverbs with the help of a good concordance provides an initial safeguard against using any single proverb as a "proof text."⁷⁹

An awareness of the overall context of Proverbs may clarify certain passages (e. g., 31:10-31). To read this passage in a literal fashion and preach it as the pattern for women today may leave many wives and mothers feeling inadequate. As Fee and Stuart observe, this passage could seem to "the literalistic reader to be a pattern of life impossible for any mortal woman to follow."⁸⁰ But is this the purpose of the acrostic poem? The numerous parallels between the feminine imagery of chapters 1-9 and 31:10-31 suggest that the ideal woman embodies the essence of wisdom that has been espoused in the book.⁸¹ Therefore it seems likely that hyperbole has been used to emphasize the joy a good wife and mother

⁷⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 192.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Kaiser argues cogently that the Bible "gives no aid to the view that poverty is in all its forms a result of the judgment of God and an evidence that the persons so afflicted are outside the will of God. Such a universal categorization is a caricature of the biblical position" (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Testament Promise of Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer," *Trinity Journal* 9 [Fall 1988]: 166). Though many have become poor through laziness (10:4-5; 12:24; 20: 13), ignoring discipline (13:18), or through gluttony and drunkenness (23:20-21), others are impoverished only because of the providential will of God (29:13); therefore the poor must not be mocked (17:5).

⁸⁰ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 201-2.

⁸¹ For a summary of the most significant parallels, see Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 188-89; also see Zuck, "A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," 237 -38.

brings to her family.⁸² These parallels plus the mention of the fear of the Lord in 31:30 serve as a literary inclusio to balance out the first main section (chaps. 1-9).⁸³ Through somewhat idealized language and the use of the alphabetic acrostic, the passage implies that the young man ought to marry someone like Lady Wisdom.⁸⁴ Since the description is couched in the language of ancient Israel's culture and may include hyperbole, one must exercise care in transferring this to today's society.

Note the context of the Bible. Though Proverbs does not mention the "salvation history" of Israel as in the Pentateuch and the Prophets, the expositor must not ignore the implicit covenantal context of the book. The foundational motto concerning the fear of Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, tied creation and covenant together.⁸⁵ The Proverbs were spoken in a culture in which the religious character of life permeated everything. Consequently Long argues, "To listen to a proverb without at the same time hearing its covenantal background is to pry a gem from its setting."⁸⁶ Therefore the "antecedent theology"⁸⁷ of the Pentateuch and other books may be important in interpreting some of the proverbs. For instance the proverbs condemning dishonesty in business may be a poetic reflection of the legislation of the Torah. Those referring to false weights and measures as being abominable to the Lord (11:1; 20:10, 23; cf. 16:11) imply the commands of Leviticus 19:35-36 and Deuteronomy 25:13-16.⁸⁸ Kaiser sug-

⁸² Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 202.

⁸³ See Henri Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom," *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977): 4-5.

⁸⁴ Herbert Wolf, "Proverbs," in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 945. This does not mean that the text has no application for today. By contrast Collins expresses doubt that this description can be used as a job description for the modern woman (Proverbs Ecclesiastes, 68-70), Zuck cites valid objections to the view that the ideal woman is merely the personification of wisdom ("A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," 237-38). For instance, in contrast to personified wisdom of chapters 1-9, the woman of chapter 31 is described as having a husband (v. 11) and as a mother (vv. 15,28). But the literary evidence implies that the poem describes not only a wise woman and mother. The portrait is idealized to remind the reader of Lady Wisdom.

⁸⁵ As Hubbard rightly notes, Israel's wise men did not have a different religion from the psalmists and the prophets (Proverbs, 29).

⁸⁶ See Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 58-59.

⁸⁷ This is Kaiser's term to describe the "informing theology" of chronologically previous scriptural teachings available to the recipients of a particular book of the Bible (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 161).

⁸⁸ Alden, *Proverbs*, 91.

gests that the seemingly materialistic motivations of Proverbs may find clarification in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.⁸⁹ As Hubbard wrote,

This covenant setting is what keeps the proverbs from shriveling into legalism. Their ground rules for life are not a prescription for salvation. ...The proverbs are not bite-size tablets of the law but neither are they sparkling tokens of grace. . . . They are designed to enable us to live out the full meaning of the life that springs fresh daily from the hand of the Creator and Savior.⁹⁰

Thus the expositor must consider the impact of the coming of Christ and the New Covenant in seeking to understand and apply proverbial wisdom. The New Testament portrays Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24, 30). Therefore the invitations of Lady Wisdom (Prov. 8:32-36) should be proclaimed in tandem with that of Christ (cf. Matt. 11:27-30).⁹¹ Furthermore one must carefully note any quotations, allusions, or New Testament parallels to the Proverbs.⁹² Also the practical wisdom of the Book of James and other portions of the New Testament, written under wisdom influence, must be explored.⁹³

GUIDELINE TWO: UTILIZE THE CHARACTERISTICS AND NATURE OF PROVERBIAL WISDOM AS A FOUNDATION FOR GRAPHIC COMMUNICATION OF TIMELESS PRINCIPLES.

Certain essential characteristics of the proverbs, namely, brevity, intelligibility, and "flavor,"⁹⁴ make them ripe for

⁸⁹ Kaiser argues that those promises of material blessings for the covenant keepers involved Israel's corporate calling ("The Old Testament Promise of Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer," 156-57). Therefore corporate blessing, not individual blessing, may be the ultimate intent of these passages. However, in this thesis should be tested with the specific evidence. Proverbs 3:7-10 seems to offer material blessing to the individual (Hebrew singular pronouns are used).

⁹⁰ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 30.

⁹¹ Cf. Kidner, *The Proverbs*, 16, and Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, 175-76.

⁹² For a convenient listing of New Testament quotations (or paraphrases) of Proverbs with a comparative analysis in English of the possible source of the quotation (whether Septuagint or Masoretic Text), see Robert G. Bratcher, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*, 3d rev. ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1987), 85-86 and various other pages. Readers who know Hebrew and Greek may consult Gleason L. Archer and Gregory Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 00-93.

⁹³ According to Osborne, other key passages which have imbibed wisdom influence are aspects of the Sermon on the Mount (especially the antitheses of Matt. 5:21-48 and the emphasis on ethical conduct), the practical exhortations of Romans 12 and portions of the Book of Hebrews (3:12-19; 4:11-13; 6:1-12), social codes (Eph. 5:22-9; 1 Pet. 2:11-3:7), and "vice or virtue lists" (Gal. 5:19-23; Col. 3:5-17) (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 198).

⁹⁴ R. C. Trench, cited in LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 538.

proclamation. Josh Billings stated that "genuine proverbs are like good kambrick needles—short, sharp, and shiny."⁹⁵ They are thought-provoking to the interpreter. On one hand they prick the mind through their "teasing refusal to explain themselves." On the other hand they prick one into thought by the sharpness of brevity and by vivid pictures and analogies.⁹⁶ Recapturing this flavor of being simple and clear yet profound⁹⁷ helps produce a good sermon. These characteristics make proverbs memorable, an excellent "handle" on which to attach a timeless principle. Proverbs are stimulating, not boring. Although not entertaining in the strictest sense, they are sometimes humorous (e.g., 11:22; 26:13-14; 27:14). Through this type of "honest humor," instruction is more likely to be received and retained than through a sermon tone.⁹⁸

Another important characteristic of proverbs is that they are universal and timeless, not restricted to ancient Israel. Because they have been germinated in the soil of time and experience,⁹⁹ the expositor can transplant them into modern society.

The experiential richness of proverbs means that the environment where they really come to life is the everyday situation where they apply. . . . The best way to teach or study biblical proverbs is to supply a context for each one from someone's actual experiences or from observations of what is going on in society and the world.¹⁰⁰

Also the expositor should consider the literary and rhetorical effect of proverbs as a factor in making valid and relevant applications. Long suggests that the rhetorical effect of a proverb is to propel the reader in two directions--both backward and forward. The proverb makes a reference backward by summoning the reader to imagine the kind of experiences that caused its development. It also sends the readers on a memory search for suitable examples. It pushes the reader forward by implying yet future incidents in which it will apply. It provokes the imagination to

⁹⁵ Cited in John H. Scammon, *The Book of Proverbs: Good Advice for Good Living* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1979), 16.

⁹⁶ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 19.

⁹⁷ See Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 315.

⁹⁸ Bullock, *Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 149-51. Also see Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 31.

⁹⁹ Bullock, *Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 19, 147.

¹⁰⁰ Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 316-17. One reason for the applicability of proverbs is the practical orientation inherent in the design to instruct the young person in his proper place in society. See Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 192.

ponder "other situations in which the wisdom of the proverb may apply and thereby provides an ethical guide for wise response."¹⁰¹ A sermon from Proverbs should seek to "do the same work and create the same effect as the proverb out of which it grows."¹⁰² Designed as a manual for successful living, Proverbs provides both negative and positive guidelines. The instruction genre (or admonition form) provides a good foundation for application with its dual emphasis: a prohibition or a negative example to avoid, and/or a positive command or example to be emulated.¹⁰³ Proverbs demonstrates that there are only two paths to follow--the way of the righteous (or wise) and the way of the wicked (or fools). This anticipates the New Testament teaching that there is no middle ground.¹⁰⁴

Though Proverbs is fertile ground for modern application, some cautions are urged. First, one must remember that the proverbs do not necessarily fit all situations and are not promises. A particular proverb can properly apply only when it corresponds with those situations "that are similar in key ways to the ones that called it forth."¹⁰⁵ Second, one must recognize that some proverbs are problematic because of cultural considerations. One must determine whether they are still applicable (as worded) or whether modern equivalents should be substituted in the transfer to today's society. The problem of Proverbs 23:13-14 has already been cited. The context of verse 14 in conjunction with the similar proverb in 13:24 helps clarify the intent of the text. Proverbs 23:14 and 13:24 clearly give love as the motivation for discipline. The latter verse shows that diligent (and perhaps "careful," as in the NIV¹⁰⁶) discipline is in view rather than an angry and unrestrained beating.¹⁰⁷

Several proverbs express their wisdom according to practices and institutions that are foreign to modern audiences. Unless the

¹⁰¹ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 56-57, 59.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 59. In discussing Proverbs 15:17, Long illustrates the concept of calling forth memories that illustrate a proverb (*ibid.*, 62-65).

¹⁰³ Cf. Lasor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 547, 552, and Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom*, 137-38.

¹⁰⁴ See especially John's writings; cr. LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 552, and Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 80.

¹⁰⁵ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 57.

¹⁰⁶ The Hebrew word רָחַץ is probably best translated "treat early with discipline" (see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1007, and Ross, "Proverbs," 982).

¹⁰⁷ Cf. similarly Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 199.

expositor understands this and is able to translate them properly, the meaning will seem irrelevant or become completely lost.¹⁰⁸ Two examples are Proverbs 25:24 (repeated in 21:9) and 27:15. In the former case, one must realize that flat-roofed houses of Bible times enabled people to sleep there especially in hot weather.¹⁰⁹ A paraphrase for "corner of the roof" might be attic¹¹⁰ or patio or porch. The other verse (27:15) illustrates the need to comprehend cultural aspects to understand the figures of speech in Proverbs. The meaning is enhanced when one realizes that the dripping of rain did not lull a person to sleep. Rather the dripping referred to the common but obnoxious sound caused by a leaky roof or by bad drainage. Thus a modern equivalent to the irritating noise might be "a leaky faucet."¹¹¹ Collins believes that some of these sayings are a "trifle chauvinistic."¹¹² Whether one agrees with this assessment, the expositor should be aware that the Proverbs were written in a culture in which women were not prominent.¹¹³ In transferring these sayings to modern culture, the teachings of the New Testament should be carefully studied and applied with discernment in light of the concerns of women today.¹¹⁴

Thus to understand the cultural background is not all that is needed to make the right transfer to today. For instance it does not guarantee the correct understanding of the figures of speech. The interpretation of 26:8 is complicated since the cultural reference ("tying [or binding] a stone in a sling") is combined with a figure of speech comparing it to the giving of honor to a fool. Osborne rightly suggests that since the sling was used as a weapon, the substitution of the word "gun" would be a modern equivalent.¹¹⁵ However, he probably misses the point of the comparison by isolat-

¹⁰⁸ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 202.

¹⁰⁹ Alden, *Proverbs*, 155.

¹¹⁰ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 427-28, and Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 201.

¹¹¹ Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom*, 59-60, 63.

¹¹² He asserts that they must not be taken as assigning blame to the woman any more than the man (Collins, *Proverbs Ecclesiastes*, 50).

¹¹³ Hubbard concludes that the masculine orientation of Proverbs is consistent with the initial purpose to provide leaders for a society in which women did not have the opportunities present-day society gives (*Proverbs*, 27-28).

¹¹⁴ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 28. Cf. Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?: A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 8-11. The present author does not necessarily agree with the conclusions of either of these writers in this matter.

¹¹⁵ He paraphrases, honoring a fool is like putting a bullet in a gun; it will soon go off and disappear" (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 201). But as noted above, this is probably not the point of the comparison (in view of the context of 26:1).

ing it from the context of Proverbs. As McKane argues, the context of 26:1 is an important key in understanding the point of the figure, namely, the incongruity of giving honor to a fool. Therefore to bind a stone in a sling is "nonsense and an absurdity" since it was designed to be hurled as a projectile.¹¹⁶

GUIDELINE THREE: EXPLORE THE CREATIVE USE OF PROVERBIAL CHARACTERS .

Imagination and sense of humor may be used in imitation of the proverbial characters. Proverbs 26:14 was not intended as a serious portrait of the sluggard but as a caricature.¹¹⁷ Kidner states that lessons are better learned from these characters "by a flash of wit than by a roll of sermonic thunder."¹¹⁸ The tragic comedy of the sluggard and other fools¹¹⁹ is a seedbed for one's own imagination to illustrate in today's society.¹²⁰

Proverbs 4 could be used by the expositor to warn young people of the dangers of not deciding for the Lord and to motivate them to commitment. Life is a series of forks in the road where decisions must be made.¹²¹ Youth must pay attention to the road (4:21, 25-27) in order not to miss the correct turns. Ultimately there are only two routes to take: "Wisdom Lane" (vv. 10-13), which could be illustrated as a small ordinary-looking lane going up a big hill, and Folly Freeway (vv. 14-17), an eight-lane expressway leading downward with apparently no obstacles or red lights.¹²² Verse 19 shows that the ultimate destiny of the fool who fails to heed the warning signs is darkness, symbolizing destruction.¹²³

¹¹⁶ McKane, *Proverbs*, 598.

¹¹⁷ R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 13.

¹¹⁸ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 31.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Kidner, *The Proverbs*, 39-43.

¹²⁰ For instance the present writer has compared the "simpleton" to the caricature of the "mugwump," the proverbial "fence-straddler" in American political history who was portrayed with his "mug" leaning over one side of the fence and with his "wump" (backside) on the other. The tragedy is that while the "simpleton" thinks he is "walking the fence" of a noncommittal lifestyle he is gradually becoming more and more the fool as he follows the stronger pull of folly. See the New Testament verdict for those who fail to make a decision on the highway of life (John 3:18).

¹²¹ Alden observes, "The precepts of Proverbs are like signposts" at the critical crossroads of life where the believer might miss the right road (Proverbs, 48).

¹²² Compare Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:13-14.

¹²³ In light of the New Testament this ultimate destination could be compared to a great canyon (the pits of hell). The wise person will listen to the advice of godly parents and wise teachers concerning the proper route to choose (4:1-2, 10). He must reject the counsel of the wicked man or woman (context of 2:10-20) in order to avoid the treacherous road leading to destruction.

Whybray wisely remarks that the use of creative imagination to visualize the circumstances behind Proverbs 26:14 and other sayings will "reveal a vivid picture of a real human society in all its variety." Much like the great novels of Charles Dickens, "a host of characters pass through its pages: the farmer, the courtier, the drop-out, the dishonest trader, the adulterous woman, the husband absent on business, the street gang, the schoolboy and the teacher, the rather simple young man, the prostitute, the thief, the gossip, the royal messenger, and many more."¹²⁴

These various characters are good object lessons for young people concerning the foolishness that leads to death, the tragic comedy of the sluggard, the ridiculous naivete of the simple, and the irreverence and doom of the scoffer. The strong warnings against adultery in Proverbs 5-7 and 9 are very relevant for today's society.¹²⁵

Also drama may be used to communicate the message of the proverbial characters.¹²⁶ The possibilities are almost unlimited for depicting the vivid characters in the Proverbs through drama. The characters in Proverbs may also be correlated with other biblical personalities (whether named or unnamed) who illustrate wisdom themes. For example, Joseph is a classic example of a wise man who feared God.¹²⁷ The wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14) illustrates shrewdness in dealing with others.

CONCLUSION

Five guidelines for interpreting the Book of Proverbs have been suggested, and three suggestions were made to assist the expositor in proclaiming proverbial wisdom. It is the prayer of the present writer that readers have been challenged to utilize Proverbs more in their teaching or preaching ministry.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, 13.

¹²⁵ For instance the expositor must alert young and old alike to the bitter results of adultery (5: 1-14) and the beauty of intimacy in marriage (5:15-23),

¹²⁶ For instance when the writer's friend A, Dale Travis was preaching on the sluggard, his son came into the church dressed like a "hobo" or "bum." A "conversation" ensued in which the message was illustrated and reinforced.

¹²⁷ See Kidner, *The Proverbs*, 15-16.

¹²⁸ Not only is there a need for more preaching from the wisdom books, but the writer agrees with Osborne's recommendation that the wisdom material be used more often "as secondary texts to anchor the application of other Scriptural texts" (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 192-93).

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204

www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu

So, the book of Proverbs is concerned to give us practical guidelines for daily experience. It is a neglected treasure of the Old Testament, with untold riches lying in wait in its pages to guide our lives. It holds real, concrete advice that comes from the mind of God Himself. If we want wisdom, this is the fountain from which to drink. He who is foolish will neglect this fountain. He who is hungry for God's wisdom will drink deeply from it. We need to listen to the wisdom of God so that we can cut through the many distractions and confusions of modern life. But, as with the entirety of the W Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the book of Proverbs, Greg W. Parsons. The Book of Proverbs includes many practical and down-to-earth sayings. Yet few sermons are preached from this book. For many preachers the Book of Proverbs apparently seems like "nothing more than a deserted stretch of highway between the Book of Proverbs in particular.⁸ Recently Hubbard has laid an excellent foundation for understanding the Book of Proverbs.⁹ Other authors offer some insights for preaching from Proverbs, but seldom in detail.¹⁰ Collins gives a brief "preaching guide" to Proverbs from a neoorthodox perspective.¹¹ However, he offers no specific guidelines. Therefore this article offers guidelines for both understand

Whether you believe in the Bible or not, the book of Proverbs has a wealth of wisdom for anyone who is listening, so I encourage you to read this article and hopefully gather a few nuggets from this. If you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. Proverbs 2:4-5. You can't expect to be walking through life and eventually get a pile of wisdom dumped on your head. You also can't expect to continually search for it and never find it.