

(S) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today we introduce the book of PROVERBS - PART 1. We will learn about the Proverbs as a part of biblical poetry, its origin, its purpose and its division.

POINT 1. THE BOOK OF PROVERBS IS A PART OF BIBLICAL POETRY

Biblical poetry is found in the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, but also in parts of the Prophets and even in the sayings of Jesus Christ.

First. Ancient wisdom literature.

Wisdom literature was extensively cultivated among all the near Eastern peoples. Archaeologists have found outstanding examples of collections of wisdom in the ancient Egyptian-, Akkadian-, Aramean-, Ugaritic- and Arabian languages. These collections are dated between 2250 and 669 B.C. These facts compel us to conclude that the Hebrews not only memorised their poetry and passed it on orally, but must have committed their poetry to the written form at the time they were produced.

“Wisdom literature” is all kinds of practical principles and precepts for how to live. It is based on clever observations of human nature and human behaviour. It records all kinds of rules how to succeed in social, commercial and political life. The wisdom literature of the Hebrews was of a practical rather than a theoretical-philosophical nature. *The wise man* was a person who feared God and had knowledge of God (Prov 9:10). He knew how to do things with knowledge, ability and skill (Ex 31:3). He was also a person who could come up with the right answer in critical situations (Gen 41:39). Wisdom in Israel was applied to the art of getting along successfully with all kinds of people: Wisdom was the art of knowing how to relate to the rich and the poor, to kings and servants, to your neighbour and to people of the opposite sex. Among the Hebrew people, much of the ancient wisdom found among their own people and among other Eastern people have become a vehicle of God’s inspiration. Through the wisdom literature in the Bible, God revealed what he regards as wisdom and what he regards as foolishness.

Second. The book of Proverbs is wisdom literature.

The proverbs are didactic poetry, that is, poetry with the purpose to instruct God’s people in wisdom. The wise people in Israel with their minds illumined by the Holy Spirit sought to understand God and his ways, as well as to understand life by studying the consistencies in human experience. The understanding of life in the book of Proverbs was that “practising wisdom or righteousness brings prosperity and life”, while “practising foolishness or wickedness brings suffering and death”. The only practical way the believers during the Old Testament period could understand the blessings of wisdom and the pitfalls of foolishness, was by pointing to the prosperity of wise people and the disasters of foolish people. The book of Proverbs is a guidebook for successful living: it contrasts the results of living a life of wisdom with the results of living a life of folly.

POINT 2. THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

First. The name of the book.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the book is named after its beginning words, “The proverbs of Solomon”. The word “proverb” (H: *mashal*) means *representation of something* and probably means representations of events in ordinary daily life. In Ezekiel 12:22 and 18:2 it means *a proverb*. In Ezekiel 17:2 and 24:3 it means *a parable or a riddle*. In Isaiah 14:4 it means *a taunt or song of mockery* and in Ezekiel 14:8 it means *a byword or word of ridicule*. The proverbs contain hints or allusions, comparisons and contrasts, proverbs and parables, and sayings with a deep meaning.

Second. The writer of the book.

The book of Proverbs did not have one writer. Proverbs 10:1 to 22:16 as well as 25:1 to 29:27 were all proverbs of king Solomon. Proverbs 22:17 to 24:22 as well as 24:23-34 were all sayings of *the wise*. Proverbs 30:1-33 were proverbs of Agur. Proverbs 31:1-9 were proverbs of king Lemuel, which his mother had taught him. And Proverbs 31:10-31 is an acrostic hymn in which each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Because the majority of the book was written by king Solomon, Proverbs 1:1 says that the book contained the proverbs of king Solomon.

Third. How the book of Proverbs was written and compiled.

One. Writing of proverbs.

1 Kings 4:32-34 says that king Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs and composed 1005 songs! He described plant life, ... and taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Also other people wrote proverbs, for example, the proverbs of *the*

wise men, of Agur and of Lemuel. Agur and Lemuel were probably non-Israelites, who believed in the Lord (30:6, Dt 4:2). Their *oracles* were a *burden*, which the Holy Spirit had laid upon them to speak to the people, just like the prophets did.

Two. Smaller collections of proverbs.

Ecclesiastes 12:11 speaks of “the collected sayings of the wise” and shows that collections of wisdom existed at a very early time. On the whole, the collection of proverbs in the book of Proverbs do not show any logic classification or order. But making an association between two thoughts must have guided the writers or compilers in ordering the proverbs in their collections. For example, Proverbs 6:1-19 does not seem to fit between Proverbs chapter 5 and 6:20 onwards. While Proverbs chapter 5 and 6:20 to 7:27 deal with practical warnings against adultery, Proverbs 6:1-19 deals with putting up security, with laziness, with a deceiver and with seven things that God hates. These things do not seem to fit in chapter 5 to 7. But on closer examination, there is an association of thought between these passages: Proverbs chapter 5 speaks of practical situations that deal with the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.” Proverbs 5:10 warns against adultery that could incur a heavy financial loss. This thought reminded the writer or compiler of other evil things that could also incur heavy financial losses. For example, putting up security and being lazy. These speak of practical situations that deal with the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal.” The thought of issues related to the seventh and eighth commandment reminded the writer or compiler of issues related to the ninth commandment, “You shall not give false testimony” and the sixth commandment, “You shall not kill.” “A man going around with a corrupt mouth” and “hands which shed innocent blood” are transgressions of the ninth and sixth commandments. Thus, a thought in one section of Proverbs could be the bridge to related thoughts in the next section of Proverbs.

Three. Larger collections of smaller collections of proverbs.

When smaller collections of proverbs are compiled into larger collections, one might expect repetitions of certain proverbs. Even within one larger collection, there are repetitions. Compare Proverbs 2:16 with 7:5, 3:15 with 8:11, 10:1 with 15:20, 14:12 with 16:25; 14:20 with 19:4. Thus, even our present identifiable larger collections were collections of even smaller collections. Finally, the book of Proverbs emerged as one collection of all the other larger collections of proverbs.

Fourth. When the book of Proverbs was written and compiled.

King Solomon reigned as king from 971-931 B.C. Thus, his proverbs were written before 931 B.C. When the other proverbs of Agur, Lemuel and the other wise men were written, we do not know. However, the spiritual and moral evils described in the book of Proverbs were the same evils, which the prophets during the period of the kings of Israel and Judah preached against. There is no evidence against the theory that Proverbs was written before the time of king Hezekiah. According to Proverbs 25:1, “these proverbs of Solomon” were copied by the men of king Hezekiah.

King Hezekiah reigned as king of the southern kingdom of Judah from 726-685 B.C. (of which the first 13 years under a guardian and the last 11 years together with his son). Three factors may have contributed to the collection of the proverbs:

One. The prophet Isaiah, who prophesied from about 740-680 B.C., must have had a great spiritual impact on king Hezekiah and his people.

Two. The extraordinary defeat of the mighty army of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, in about 701 B.C. by an angel of God, must have deeply moved the spiritual life of many in Israel.

Three. The northern kingdom of Israel was invaded and deported to Assyria in 721 B.C. Therefore, it is quiet understandable that the godly king Hezekiah ordered that as much as possible of the wisdom of Israel as a whole at that time be collected in order to preserve it for posterity.

We therefore conclude that all the proverbs were written before the time of Hezekiah, and were collected in smaller collections of proverbs. The book of Proverbs was finally compiled from the various smaller collections of proverbs in the days of king Hezekiah, thus before 685 B.C.

Fifth. The place of the book of Proverbs in the Canon - the list of inspired books of the Bible.

One. The Hebrew Canon was arranged in three parts.

The Law, which consists of the 5 books of Moses.

The Prophets, which consists of the Early and the Latter Prophets. The Early Prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, and the Latter Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 Minor Prophets.

The Writings, which contain the rest of the Old Testament books.

The book of Proverbs belongs to this last part, called *the Writings*. According to a reliable source (Ben Asher), the order of the books in this third part of the Hebrew Bible were originally: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles. That order probably

reflected the order in which these books were considered to belong to the Canon, that is, the list of inspired books of the Bible.

Two. The present canon is arranged in five parts.

Although it consists of the same books as the Hebrew Canon, it is ordered in a different way and is based on the division and order in the Greek and Latin translations of the Hebrew Old Testament Bible. Our present Old Testament Canon consists of five parts:

The 5 books of the Law, which consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The 12 historical books, which consist of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, two books of Samuel, two books of Kings, two books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

The 5 poetical books, which consist of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

The 5 major prophets, which consists of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations and Daniel.

The 12 minor prophets, which consist of the 12 last books of the Old Testament.

POINT 3. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

First. Wisdom is highly exalted but nevertheless attainable.

On the one hand, *wisdom* is so highly exalted that it stands on the side of God himself (8). On the other hand, *wisdom* is attainable here on earth, because she calls aloud to people in the streets (1:20-33) and invites people to come and sit at her feast (9:1-6).

Second. Every person must choose between wisdom and foolishness.

The book of Proverbs deals with the two ways between which people must choose: The one way leads to death, while the other way leads to life. Proverbs 8:35-36 says, "Whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death." (1:32-33).

Third. Wisdom is associated with godliness and righteousness.

The unrighteous people are fools and their way certainly leads to death. The righteous people are wise and their way certainly leads to life (15:24). And because real wisdom is given from above by the Lord (2:6; Js 1:17; 3:17), and because real wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord (1:7; 9:10), *the righteous* are not just those who do righteous things, but are those who stand in the right relationship to the Lord and the Lord's revealed truths. Because real life begins with the fear of the Lord (14:26), *the righteous* are a synonym for *believers in the Lord*. Those who fear the God of the Bible are contrasted with those who are godless. The holy God of the Bible is contrasted with perverse people (3:32; 8:13; 11:20). The people who fear the God of the Bible are contrasted with the people who despise God (14:2). The righteous are contrasted with the wicked (10:24,30; 11:5-6; 12:3). And the wise are contrasted with the fools (12:16,23; 13:20; 22:3). Those who love are contrasted with those who hate (10:12; 13:24). Those who are diligent are contrasted with those who are lazy (6:6; 10:4). Proverbs 10:24 says, "What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted." And Proverbs 10:30 says that the wicked will never remain in the land, but the righteous will never be uprooted! In short, the purpose of the book of Proverbs is to attract people to a life of godliness and righteousness, and to frighten them away from a life of godlessness and wickedness.

POINT 4. THE DIVISION OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The theme of the book of Prophets is Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One in understanding.**"

The book of Proverbs may be divided into 8 parts:

The first part: Proverbs 1:1 to 9: 18. The long introduction to the collections of proverbs.

Chapter 1 describes the purpose and theme of Proverbs and calls people to avoid the way of wicked people, and instead to respond to the call of wisdom.

Chapter 2 describes the benefits of wisdom.

Chapter 3 recommends to submit to wisdom.

Chapter 4 admonishes in a fatherly way to acquire wisdom.

Chapter 5 warns against adultery.

Chapter 6 warns against putting up security for others, laziness, deceivers and the seven things that God hates.

Chapter 6 and 7 give more warnings against adultery.

Chapter 8 describes the exalted nature of wisdom.

Chapter 9 contrasts the invitation of wisdom with the invitation of foolishness.

The second part: Proverbs 10:1 to 22:16. The proverbs of king Solomon.

Although the proverbs cannot be adequately classified, the following is a help to remember in which chapters proverbs are written:

Chapter 10 deals with diligent work, righteous wages and self-control in speaking.
Chapter 11 deals with honesty, humility, faithfulness, trustworthiness and generous giving.
Chapter 12 deals with correction, women of good character, unpretentious realism, care of animals and self-control in speaking.
Chapter 13 deals with unpretentious realism, accepting advice, honesty with regard to money, making friends with the wise and discipline of children.
Chapter 14 deals with evaluation and planning - with considering one's personal ways and the outcome of every way and with planning what is good.
Chapter 15 deals with wisdom in speaking - with thinking before answering and speaking gently.
Chapter 16 deals with planning and the sovereignty of God.
Chapter 17 deals with friendship and no corruption in justice.
Chapter 18 deals with friendship and listening before exercising justice.
Chapter 19 deals with relationships with one's marriage partner, children, offenders, advisors and the poor.
Chapter 20 deals with honesty in business, faithfulness and discipline of children.
Chapter 21 deals with the right and wrong way of giving money.
Chapter 22 deals with money and children.

The third part: Proverbs 22:17 to 24:22. The proverbs of the wise.

Chapter 22 deals with friendship and justice.
Chapter 23 deals with personal restraint and the responsibility of children.
Chapter 24 deals with avoiding wicked people, rescuing weak people and diligence in work.

The fourth part: Proverbs 24:23-34. More proverbs of the wise.

The fifth part: Proverbs 25:1 to 29:27. More proverbs of king Solomon.

Chapter 25 deals with patience and doing good.
Chapter 26 deals with wisdom in speaking.
Chapter 27 deals with friendship and care.
Chapter 28 deals with law and order.
Chapter 29 deals with discipline, self-control and not fearing man.

The sixth part: Proverbs 30:1-33. The proverbs of Agur.

It deals with interpersonal relationships.

The seventh part: Proverbs 31:1-9. The proverbs of king Lemuel.

It deals with the responsibility of rulers.

The eighth part: Proverbs 31:10-31. An acrostic hymn.

It sings about the wife of noble character.

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read Proverbs 16-31. Next week we will introduce the book of Proverbs - part 2.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".