

Analysis of Proverbs

General

Proverbs “have universal appeal, dealing as they do with topics of concern and relevance to people everywhere and in all eras of history” (Zuck, p. 209). Proverbs are considered wisdom literature, which is “a literary genre common in ancient Near East in which instructions for successful living are given...” (Ibid, p. 208). The initial collection plays a significant role in the book, for it illuminates the value of wisdom and identifies the prerequisite for acquiring the wisdom presented within the remainder of the book. Proverbs aid a person in developing skill in living daily life wisely.

Authorship

As is true of all Scripture, the book of Proverbs was authored by human authors and the divine author (2 Tim 3: 16). The book of Proverbs is an anthology of seven collections attributed to Solomon and other wise individuals (see Outline) who had wise insight into life and who demonstrated keen observation skills. Solomon wrote the majority of the proverbs. Scripture states: ²⁹ God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. ³⁰ Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East.... ³² He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five (1 Kings 4:29-30, 32 NIV). Other proverbs were attributed to Agur (30:1), and King Lemuel (31:1). Some proverbs were authored by Solomon but transcribed by the men of Hezekiah (25:1). The titles within the book indicate that several authors produced the material over an extended period of time, and they imply that an anonymous sage edited the whole collection.

Date

It is a recognized fact that Proverbs was written over a long period of time (Dillard and Longman, p. 237). If Solomon was the first writer of Proverbs (971– 931 BC) and if the work of Hezekiah's men (700 BC) on Proverbs is maintained, then a time span of approximately three centuries exist just between these two known composers of the book. Outside these dates it is impossible to date the final composition of the book with any certainty.

Key Issues

Key issues Proverbs are: 1) to recognize the genre of proverbs, 2) to recognize that proverbs are not promises but observations concerning life, 3) to recognize the fact that Proverbs have been collected over a period of time and arranged in their present form, 4) to appreciate God's wisdom in providing pithy sayings to help man live skillful life.

Subject/Purpose Statement

The book of Proverbs succinctly and memorably outlines two paths of conduct that each person must choose as he/she encounters various situations in life. The person who travels the path of the foolish suffers. The person who sets his feet to follow the path of the wise, will experience blessing. Describing the consequences of choosing one of these paths in any given life situation was meant to encourage the reader to choose the path of the wise. This was the only way to enjoy the blessings of a wise life and avoid the tragedy of walking the way of the fool. The one who feared God was challenged to choose the wise path.

Audience

In light of the preamble (1: 1– 7), the original audience consisted of two groups of people: (1) youths (1: 4) and (2) the wise (1: 5). The youths are characterized as simple, uncommitted, and gullible individuals on the brink of adulthood. Wisdom personified, challenges them to repent and choose wisdom, for they are headed for eternal death. The second group addressed are those characterized as wise, i.e., individuals who cherish and choose wisdom but recognize that the search for wisdom is a lifelong process. In this respect, they are teachable, and the book seeks to develop their wisdom by sharpening the mind, softening the heart, and shaping the character of these wise and righteous people. (The NIV Zondervan Study Bible)

Outline of Proverbs

Since Proverbs is a collection of memorable sayings or an anthology, it is difficult if not impossible to outline the book. Dillard and Longman offer the briefest outline that this analysis will build upon (p. 238).

- I. The purpose of Proverbs explained and illustrated (1:1-19).
 - A. The purpose for Proverbs (1:1-6)
 - B. The beginning of wisdom defined (1:7).
 - C. Wisdom illustrated by a wise son who refuses to gain by violence (1:8-19).
- II. A wise man admonishes the learner to follow wisdom or suffer the consequences (1:20-9:18).
- III. The Proverbs of Solomon to his son to chose wisdom by following these proverbs (10:1-24:34).
- IV. The Proverbs of Solomon transcribed by the men of Hezekiah (25:1-29:27).
- V. The Proverbs of Agur to Ithiel and Ucal (30:1-33).
- VI. The Proverbs of Lemuel: which his mother taught him (31:1-31).

Theological Application

Zuck states the practical side of Proverbs so well. “Heeding the wisdom of the book of Proverbs... brings harmony to one’s life” (p. 232). If one desires harmony in everyday life, he or she needs to set their moral compass along the map of Proverbs.