

# An introduction to the book of Proverbs

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[ 0 : 00 ] Technology is going to work for us. Well, we've already had one bit of reference to *Pride and Prejudice* today, and Phil's mentioned! Mr. Darcy, this morning. But what I've put up there, I guess, is probably the most famous! opening line in English literature. It's a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. And with that opening sentence, of course, we know that, I've forgotten her name, Lizzie Bennett will get her man, and we're not too far into the book before we realise which man it is she's going to get.

But the whole point, well, one way of looking at the book, perhaps, is how she transcends her own *Pride and Prejudice* and that of her friends and her sisters and other people.

She transcends, if you like, the cynicism to which the super-intelligent are sometimes prone.

And she progresses and achieves, in the end, perhaps what one might call true nobility. So she becomes a true mistress of *Pembury*, the mistress of a great house, not just by marrying a very rich man, which she did, of course, the owner of the house, Darcy.

But she progresses above her sisters, the pretty one and the tomboy and the scatty one, and their other rivals. And she becomes, as we might say, we'll use the language of proverbs, the wife of noble character, the one who becomes the fit person to be the mistress of a great house.

[ 1 : 55 ] And that is a quotation I've put up there, Proverbs 31, verse 10, a wife of noble character who can find she is worth far more than rubies.

Well, the book of proverbs has somewhat of the same thought, except that it focuses on the viewpoint of the young man, in this case, instead of the young lady.

And we meet him, newly adult, on his way into town. The bit that we read just is the introduction to this. And he's going to meet two women in town.

And to whose attractions will he succumb? Will he land up in the end with the wife of noble character? Or will he fall into the clutches of the adulteress?

And as he leaves the house, his parents give him one last exhortation, Proverbs 1, verses 8 to 10. Listen, my son, to your father's instruction. Do not forsake your mother's teaching.

[ 2 : 59 ] They will be a garland of grace to grace your head, and a chain to adorn your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them.

So off he goes, newly adult, into the town to make his way. So, who are the characters in this drama?

And it's not a work of fiction in quite the same way as *Pride and Prejudice* is. It's part allegory, part good advice, part exhortation.

But the idea is much the same. So who are the main characters? Well, our hero is only referred to, really, as my son all the way through. So, in the last chapter, it talks about Lemuel, but Lemuel, in fact, was probably a real person.

And although he is addressed as my son, in that case, probably it's just that passage that really refers to Lemuel. So, really, he's just given the name, my son. He's the son, the child of his loving parents.

[ 4 : 07 ] And, well, we've already met his parents, his father's instruction, his mother's teaching. Fortunately, he seems to have a rather better mother than Lizzie Bennet did.

They both seem to be wise parents. And then we meet three women. We meet Wisdom.

And we meet another woman who's called Folly, but is most often, in fact, referred to as the adulteress, although we're told her name is Folly.

And then, right at the end of the book, we meet another lady, one we've already referred to, who is referred to as the wife of noble character. Not quite the same as Wisdom, although, as we shall see, connected to Wisdom, but does seem to be a different person.

So, there are three women. Particularly Wisdom and the adulteress, we meet in the first nine chapters, but they pop up from time to time throughout the whole book. And there are some minor characters as well.

[ 5 : 21 ] Prudence. Prudence shares a house with wisdom. We see that in Proverbs 8, verse 12. I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence. I possess knowledge and discretion.

Actually, prudence is only personified in that one verse, but there are lots of verses that talk about prudence as a virtue. So, we can think of prudence as a character. Perhaps she's Wisdom's sister. It doesn't actually tell us that, but she could be. And then we meet a few baddies, as well as folly. We meet the sluggard. Sluggard means a lazy person, and he's a benefit cheat. He's the person who thinks the world owes him a living, but he's too lazy to get up and earn it.

I don't know. Maybe he's folly's brother. Certainly, he shares a lot of characteristics with folly. He always wants the benefits of life, but he's not prepared to have the responsibilities.

[ 6 : 25 ] So, we'll come across the sluggard from time to time. Then we meet, on the other hand, there is the true friend. Many people know this proverb, I think, but he is an important character.

Proverbs 18, 24. A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Some people have said that friend is Christ himself, and I don't think it would be wrong to take it that way, but I'm not sure that's the only meaning.

Though we do meet the true friend, the companion who is not just a companion for the good times, but the friend who sticks when things start to go wrong.

We meet, at one point, we meet Folly's betrayed and rather angry and jealous husband. Well, I'm not surprised you'd be angry and jealous if you were married to Folly. Proverbs 6, verses 34 and 35 says, For jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes his revenge.

He will not accept any compensation. He will refuse the bribe, however great it is. So that's Folly's husband when he finds out what's been going on. And of course there are various other interesting companions and neighbours.

[ 7 : 50 ] Towards the end of the book, there's a rather interesting character, only we meet in one verse actually, but she's called the leech, and she has two daughters who are always crying out for more.

It's in the second to last chapters. There's a whole host of interesting characters. Now, how's the book organised? Well, it's a double chiasm. Do I really want to know that, you ask?

Well, yeah, actually you do. A chiasm is the name that people give to this common Hebrew structure where we go in and out.

So, first you sort of describe your points, whatever they are, and you go through them, and then after that you reprise them more or less in the reverse order.

That's what a chiasm is. Usually you don't just repeat what you've said, you take a slightly different slant on it, but the basic idea is that, that you go through your points and then you reprise them again in the reverse order.

[ 9 : 05 ] It's perhaps a different version of the old preacher's motto of first you tell them what you're going to say and then you say it and then you tell them what you've said. Perhaps the same idea.

It's very common in Hebrew literature. In fact, it's very common in religious literature. I'm told it also appears even in the Book of Mormon and in the Koran.

And also, it's obviously regarded as a good, at least that's what I say I'm told. That's what I should say, as Wikipedia says that. It may or may not be true.

But it is, it's useful to know that because otherwise it can seem very unstructured, the book. So, as we saw, there's the prologue, which is the introduction explaining what the book's about.

And we read that and we read this first exhortation to godly living. After that, we meet these two women, Wisdom and the Adulteress. And that's a big section, nine, some nine chapters.

[ 10 : 09 ] And then we meet another big section, in fact, the longest section of the whole book, the Proverbs of Solomon. And then we meet these two inner sections, what are called Sayings of the Wise.

and they're actually rather interesting. Did I write it? Where did I write it down? Did I write it down? I lost it.

Sorry. Well, never mind. I'll probably come across the name in a minute. Actually, they're quite interesting because they're actually written, they're actually based on an Egyptian document, which

is something like the teachings of Anamahopi or something, but I can't find why I wrote his name down.

This was discovered in 1922, this document, when people started translating Egyptian documents and caused a bit of a stir at the time when people realized that these central chapters of the book of Proverbs appear to have been based on that Egyptian teaching.

But, of course, given a very Hebraic slant in the version that we have here. Agur and Lemuel may well not have been Jews.

[ 11 : 33 ] I did look up what Lemuel means. Obviously, the L bit on the end refers to God. Again, I forgot to write it down. I'm sorry. But they may well not have been Jews. So this is not all necessary Jewish literature originally.

The sayings of Agur, in fact, are quite similar in style to the book of Job, which is regarded as one of the oldest books. So much of this may be based on older books than Solomon, older wisdom even than Solomon.

We do know that it was edited at quite a late stage. How do we know that? Well, one reason is that these more Proverbs of Solomon, which start from chapter 25, actually are introduced by saying they were collected by the men of King Hezekiah.

Now, Hezekiah, of course, was a king who lived several hundred years after Solomon. And so we know that this book is not just, you know, just straight from the pen of Solomon.

It was edited at a much later stage. Also, another interesting fact, actually, is that this further sayings of the wise, this section here, as you can say, is actually very short.

[ 12 : 49 ] In fact, it's only about 10, 11 verses. In the scepter, again, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, these two bits, the sayings of Ager and the oracle of Lemuel's mother, actually appear in the further sayings of the wise.

So, obviously, somebody thought it might be a good idea to beef up that section by putting these other sayings of the wise in there. But then, in the final edited version that we have, they're put at the end here.

I would suggest the reason they're put at the end here is because of this structure. So that we have the sayings of Ager, which is a meditation on godly living and therefore kind of balances out this exhortation to godly living.

And also, we have the two women at the beginning and we have the two women at the end. So, it suggests very much that this structure is intentional and that we are supposed to connect the dots, as it were, to connect the sayings of Ager with the exhortation to godly living and connect these two women, Lemuel's mother and the wife of noble character, with wisdom and the adulteress.

Although, clearly, they're not the same two women. But, the fact that, you know, we have these two women at the beginning and two women at the end. A couple of other interesting things.

[ 14 : 27 ] First of all, the wife of noble character, which is the epilogue to the book, right at the end of chapter 31, is an acrostic.

That means that each verse starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. I don't quite know why, but somebody thought perhaps this made it easy to remember or to think of.

And so, the epilogue is an acrostic. Oh yes, so there's the teachings of Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, I knew I'd written it down somewhere.

That's those essential sayings are based on the Hebrew book, the teachings of Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, So, overall, the book, oh yes, and the other point I was going to make is that this first section, Wisdom and the Adulteress, is a much stricter chiasm, this structure is quite loose, you know, it doesn't balance too well, some sections are quite long, others are quite short, but the Wisdom and the Adulteress, this first section, is an inner chiasm which is much stronger, much more strict, and we'll actually look at this next time, which won't be next week, because I'm on holiday next week, so it'll be in two weeks' time, and we're going to look at that section, and you'll see this in-out structure is very strongly there in that first section.

So that's the structure of the book, but what seems odd when we read it is that at a more micro level, it doesn't seem to be very structured at all, we've got all these connections, all these sayings of the wise, proverbs of Solomon, and yet, the arrangement all seems a bit random, I mean, with our sort of Western mind, we think there ought to be a section on wisdom in the home, perhaps, and a section on wisdom in business ethics, and maybe a section on sexual ethics and something like that, but it just, at the micro level, it just ain't arranged like that.

[16:49] We've got groups of proverbs that seem to hang together, and you think maybe he's developing a subject, and then you find there's a complete change of direction. It's quite, you know, it's quite mind-boggling sometimes, how there's a sudden change, and that doesn't perhaps make it so easy to come to grips with, but I'll say a little bit more about this in a minute, because I think there might be a reason for that.

Having said that, I am going to try and structure it a bit, and so I am going to have a talk on wisdom in the home, and wisdom in politics, and wisdom in the, so I'm going to approach it with my Western mind, but the, but it's not structured that way in the book.

So, what are we to make of this book? And I've titled this section, this is going to be the final section, but it's perhaps the longest one, I've titled it The Riddles of the Wise.

Now that phrase occurs at the end of the first section, the sayings and riddles of the wise, and I looked up what this Hebrew word means, and riddles is a good translation, it means a dark saying, something that's not immediately obvious, a mystery perhaps, something you have to dig into a bit, and so that gives a hint, doesn't it?

We're not supposed to take these things necessarily at their face value. Sometimes we have to think about them a bit and say, what is this guy really saying? What's this really about?

[18:36] So is it a book only for young men? Well, clearly not, because the wife of noble character is obviously a woman, so there's plenty in it for women as well, and in fact, he doesn't take the, the book doesn't take the allegory that strictly and occasionally it goes out of character and out of sequence a bit, so in, actually in chapter 5, halfway through this first section on wisdom and the adulteress, he says, we read this, may your fountain be blessed and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth, so he's obviously thinking ahead to the time when the young man has grown up, and he's no longer a young man, he's got his wife and had his wife for a long time, and what does he say?

May your fountain be blessed and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth, a loving doe, a graceful deer, may her breasts satisfy you always and may you ever be captivated by her love, so it's not advice just for young men, it's advice for those who have been around a bit, are you going to take a trophy wife, trade her in for a new model, no, he says, you take delight in the wife of your youth, so this is wisdom for everyone, it may be given the character of my son, but we're told to think about it and we're told that it's the wise, those who are already wise who seek instruction and discipline, folly, the foolish, and remember in the Old Testament when it talks about a fool, there's always a moral component to that, it doesn't just mean somebody who's not very intelligent, it means somebody who rejects the law and the way of God, the foolish we say in the end is never going to learn anything, the wise, if we start with the law of God then we will be in one sense wise but we will be always seeking further knowledge and instruction, and the other thing you might think is this just an Old Testament book, is it Old Testament stuff, surely it's all a bit basic, you know, does it really have much to do with us in the Gospel age, is it just stuff that was alright in the late Bronze Age but not much to do with even a modern Roman society, let alone a 21st century society, is it just old fashioned stuff, well let me suggest to you that it very much isn't because the New Testament refers to

Proverbs as a surprising amount and it often do it in an interesting way as well and so what I'd like to do actually is get your flicking fingers ready I won't ask different people to read them out because I want to make comments as I go through but you might find it helpful actually to look at some of these references at least in Proverbs and we don't have to look at the New Testament references as well but we could do but I think that would take too long so flick through and we'll look at Proverbs and I'll just remind you where these ideas come up in the New Testament so apart from the last one which you'll see why I've left to the end when I get there I put these just in the order in which they occur in Proverbs so turn first of all to Proverbs 3 verse 11 we read my son do not despise the

Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke because the Lord disciplines those he loves as a father the son he delights in sounds familiar it should do because it's quoted verbatim in Hebrews chapter 12 5 to 11 when the believers were going through some suffering and the writer to Hebrews advises them that this is the Lord's discipline and it's not a sign that the Lord has rejected them but rather that he's disciplining the son whom he loves Proverbs 3 verse 34 so same chapter now verse 34 where we read he mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble that's quoted twice in the

New Testament it's quoted in James 4 verse 6 and it's quoted in 1 Peter 5 chapter 5 verse 5 in fact I think when Peter wrote his first letter he must have had the scroll of Proverbs open on his desk because he quotes an awful lot go on to chapter 10 chapter 10 verse 12 we read this hatred stirs up dissension but love covers over all wrongs so this is about the forgiving healing power of love isn't it hatred stirs up dissension but love covers over all wrongs it's quoted explicitly in 1 Peter 4 8 and other New

[ 24 : 31 ] Testament passages certainly seem to have this in mind for instance James 5 20 where James talks about love carrying a multitude of sins and of course most famously perhaps of all in 1 Corinthians 13 where the whole chapter is about the healing and binding together of the power of love so that's certainly not an Old Testament idea Proverbs 11 next chapter if the righteous receive their due on earth how much more the ungodly and the sinner 1 Peter again in this time case 1 Peter 4 verse 18 where interestingly he he actually quotes the scepter version which talks about judgment receiving the righteous well it talks about judgment starting with the righteous with the house of God so he brings out the idea that even it doesn't mean so much righteous receive their reward but even the righteous receive judgment on earth for the things that they do wrong and so how much more the ungodly and the sinner so

Peter gives it his own slant emphasizes that in 1 Peter 4 18 incidentally if you think that's a misunderstanding Dick Lucas in his comment Dick Lucas no I don't mean Dick Lucas do I Kidner Derek Kidner that's right in his commentary discusses the meaning and he I think he goes for the scepter version of it that it probably does mean something like that Proverbs 13 verse 9 the light of the righteous shines brightly but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out well I don't think this is directly quoted in the New Testament but surely Jesus must have had it in mind when he said in Matthew 5 14 to 16 where he said you are the light of the world the light of the righteous shines brightly the wisdom of God is shown through the people of

God the righteous people of God in the church so it's not always quoted directly but the ideas are often found there in the New Testament move on to chapter 25 verses 6 and 7 do not exalt yourself in the king's presence and do not claim a place among great men it is better for him to say to you come up here than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman sound awfully familiar again should do because in Luke chapter 14 Jesus expands this verse a bit he says when someone invites you to a wedding feast do not take the place of honour for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited if so the host who invited both of you will come and say to you give this man your seat then humiliated you will have to take the least important place but when you're invited take the lowest place so that when your host comes he will say to you friend move up to a better place then you will be honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests so it's not a direct quote but clearly Jesus' teaching there is directly based on that proverb or chapter 27 when we read verse 1 do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring forth now there's all sorts of ideas in the New Testament that pick that idea up but let me for instance turn your attention to James chapter 4 verses 13 to 16 where James says now listen you who say today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city spend a year there carry on business and make money why do I not even know what will happen tomorrow what is your life you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes instead you ought to say if it's the

Lord's will we will live and do this or that as it is you boast and brag all such boasting is evil clearly James had that proverb in mind when he wrote his letter this one's quite interesting as well proverbs 29 verse 3 sorry about this cough proverbs 29 verse 3 it says a man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth surely this is the jumping off point for Jesus parable of the prodigal son the son who demands his share of the inheritance and goes away but Jesus doesn't just leave it at that of course he brings with it the message of reconciliation point in

[ 30 : 38 ] Jesus parable is it doesn't get left like that he does go off and be a companion of prostitutes and squander his wealth but he finds that he can come back but still this is this that's where it starts that man who doesn't bring joy to his father but instead goes off and squanders his father's wealth now back to 25 I've left this one to the end deliberately back to chapter 25 now what about doing good to your enemies loving your enemies now surely that's a New Testament idea isn't it isn't it isn't that where it comes from sure I mean the Old Testament is all about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and stuff like that doesn't that idea only occur in the New Testament well no it occurs in Proverbs Proverbs chapter 25 verse 21 says this if your enemy is hungry give him

food to eat if he's thirsty give him water to drink in doing this you will heap burning coals on his head and the

Lord will reward you so it comes from Proverbs that's quoted of course by Paul in Romans 12 verse 20 and it's surely also the basis for Jesus is teaching again you have heard that it was said love your neighbor and hate your enemy but I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so the gospel is very much a gospel book a new testament book and when we find when we look at wisdom and the adulteress next time we'll find this is very much a gospel call a call to turn to wisdom and away from the adulteress away from sin proverbs are not prophecies they're not thus saith the lord in the sense of saying this is what's going to happen this is what the lord is doing they tell us things that are generally true in this fallen world sometimes things perhaps that ought to be true that might be only fully true in the kingdom of god so it's generally true that if you work hard you should do well in your business and profit from the results of your labour if you're a sluggard if you're lazy or if you try and gain by dishonest gain then you're likely to come a cropper one way or another but of course that's only partly true in this world we know there are lots of exceptions to both those rules and indeed proverbs acknowledges that if we read it we see that that's the case but what it's really telling us is about how we ought to live

I mean it's saying that almost the point is that we should live diligently even if we don't become wealthy and prosperous but because that is the way of life and again when we look at wisdom and the adulteress we'll say that's the choice that we're presented with the choice between life and death so even if sometimes when we read the proverb and says well yeah but that doesn't always happen does it well maybe not no but that's nevertheless the path of wisdom and perhaps another I've already mentioned that they're not neatly sectioned into topics the arrangement is quite random now why is this well they are the riddles of the wise we are supposed to think about them perhaps we're supposed to make our own connections you see if we just had this thing put laid out neatly and here's the section on business ethics this is what you do then perhaps we'd just learn it parrot fashion but we wouldn't make it our own perhaps we're supposed to think it through perhaps if I dare say it this is perhaps almost a zen approach to enlightenment the idea is that you think over these things you think what they really mean now you ask yourself is this really true is this really how it works what am

I really supposed to learn for this and you're supposed to make it your own and we've seen the way that sometimes the New Testament writers simply quote the proverb exactly but on many occasions they develop it or take a different slant on it or say well this is what the word is really saying and make it their own and I would suggest to you that that's what we're supposed to do so I'm going to put some connections together over the coming weeks but they are in a sense going to be my connections not yours well I hope they might be useful to you as well but really you should be making your own connections you should be thinking about it I would invite you to read as much of the book as you can certainly say two weeks before we're looking at wisdom at the adulteress if you could read through the first nine chapters before then it would be very useful because obviously I won't have time to read them all if you could read through it and think about it and that's what I'm aiming to help you to do over the next few weeks help you to do and help me to do that we can learn how to make our own connections from these and learn true wisdom because after all wisdom is really about as

Paul takes in Romans 12 isn't it having our minds transformed by the gospel by the word of God so that we actually know how to react in a particular situation we don't have to think it through at the time when the crunch comes we know we're trained like a soldier is trained to react in the right way when a certain event happens because you don't have time to think it through then so your mind is transformed by the word of God so as we so you know how to react and that's what wisdom perhaps is about and so try and read through others more of it and make your own connections and then finally let's take the advice that comes at the end of the prologue the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and discipline see there are other sources of wisdom as I said the part of Proverbs is actually based on Egyptian wisdom there are other books of wisdom and you could go to the library and you could find any number of books of good advice and all sorts of things some of them are maybe worth reading

[ 37 : 55 ] I think Phil quoted from was it men are from Mars women are from Venus a few years ago maybe that's a book worth reading they are books of wisdom in a sense but what do we find if we don't have a real foundation and that's what Jesus says isn't it but build your house on my words

