

NAME

Hebrew: מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה ("Mishle Selomoh") - the Proverbs of Solomon - comes from the verb "mashal" (מָשַׁל) meaning "to rule" or "to govern" and the noun which signifies a similitude of comparison. In the oriental mind a proverb is a truth designed to govern life. It thus means a governing principle of life expressed by analogy (a principle that ground one's life).

The LXX title: Παροιμια Σαλωμωντος ("Paroimiai Salomontos") - the Proverbs of Solomon - uses the noun παροιμια ("paroimia") meaning "a wayside saying, a byword, maxim, proverb."

English: Proverb (pro "for" + verba "words") signifies a truth expressed in few words (i.e. a brief but wise saying - e.g. *"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"*). *"Proverbs are short sentences drawn from long experience"* (Cervantes). It contains a philosophy of life begotten and tested by long experience. A proverb is *"a short sentence conveying moral truth in a concise and pungent form"* (Whiting). The famous Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon said, a good proverb contained three elements: Shortness, sense, and salt (tang/flavorful).

Mitchell:

A proverb is a precept or sententious saying regulating or governing conduct and life, often taking the form of a resemblance or parable. In fact, many proverbs are condensed parables. This book is the most typical of the "wisdom literature" of the Old Testament. It is a library of moral and spiritual instruction for the young to insure a Godly, happy life here and reward in the life to come.

AUTHOR

- Solomon: Author or compiler of most of the book. This is the first book to specifically name the author at the beginning. Solomon was said to have written 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32) (note: We have less than 1,000 in this book). Solomon seems to have been the author or editor of the major sections (1:1; 20:1; 25:1) indeed all sections except 22:17-24:34. Solomon is credited with three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Proverbs deals with wisdom, Ecclesiastes deals with folly, and the Song of Solomon deals with love. Certainly Solomon was an authority on all three! Someone has well said that love is somewhere between wisdom and folly.
- Agur: Chapter 30
- The words of King Lemuel as taught by his mother (chapter 31). Possibly the words of Bathsheba to Solomon.
- Probably the whole was organized in its present form by the men of Hezekiah's day (Isaiah and Micah).
- It is possible that the unknown persons of Agur and King Lemuel may have been names or titles of Solomon himself.

DATE

Probably written or compiled between 1000 and 700 B.C. - the golden age of wisdom literature

THEME

Halley page 43: *"Wisdom of Solomon"*

Mitchell: *"Laws from heaven for life on Earth"*

This collection of wise sayings provides principles to govern one's daily conduct. They are mottos to mold lives. They are given to assert truth, attract attention, and attaché indelibly to the mind God's practical wisdom for righteous living. The emphasis in this book is practical duty even as Psalms emphasized devotion. The man of God needs both piety and practice.

"The wisdom of applying discipline to life and the folly of pandering passions." - Arnot

Their purpose is stated in 1:2-4 (WCBS Notes).

"To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth." (Proverbs 1:2-4)

The overall purpose of the book then is to emphasize the blessings and benefits which accrue to all of life by a disciplined mind and a spiritually-oriented way of life, and conversely, to warn of the dangers of following the dictates of the lower nature.

Key Word (Nelson's): Wisdom - Proverbs is one of the few biblical books that clearly spells out its purpose. The words "wisdom and instruction" in 1:2 complement each other because *wisdom* (hokhmah) means "skill" and *instruction* (musar) means "discipline." No skill is perfected without discipline, and when a person has skill he has freedom to create something beautiful. Proverbs deals with the most fundamental skill of all: practical righteousness before God in every area of life.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:5-7).

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths" Proverbs 3:5,6).

Key Chapter (Nelson's): 31 - The last chapter of Proverbs is unique in ancient literature, as it reveals a very high and noble view of women.

Wisdom Literature (WCBS Notes):

In the days of Solomon and following there arose a class of writers called "the wise men." Most preeminent, of course was Solomon. The idea of wisdom was practical knowledge; however, it was not knowledge alone, but the ability to use knowledge effectively.

"The wise men attempted to present a composite picture of the ideal man. It is not a sentimental, apologetic saint they portray, but a man of red blood and practical ability. He is a devoted husband, a true friend, a wise counselor, a charitable neighbor. He is industrious, honorable, and righteous. His insight into life is simple, yet profound. Above all he is sane, normal, and motivated by a sound faith in God and a desire to evidence his loyalty to God by living according to the divine precepts" (Purkiser).

The wise men were "buttonhole philosophers," apart from the priests and prophets, gathering wisdom tested by experience, ministering to individuals, and exerting influence where they might. But the philosopher of Israel was not concerned with metaphysics or with searching out ultimate reality; this he assumed. His concern was rather for ethics or the application of divine truth to human experience.

The Uniqueness of Biblical Proverbs (Mitchell):

The Orient and Ancient East are the home of proverbs. Evidently Solomon gathered together many from other sources. He was the editor of all, and the author of some. Scholars noted that there is a change of pronoun in the book from the second person to the third person. Their conclusions are that the proverbs with the second person were taught Solomon by his teachers, and the proverbs with the third person were by Solomon.

There is a difference between the book of Proverbs and proverbs in other writings (The Greeks were great at making proverbs, especially the Gnostic poets).

1. Proverbs bear no unscientific statement or inaccurate observation. e.g. *“Out of the heart proceed the issues of life”* (Proverbs 4:23); about 2,700 years later Harvey found that the blood circulates. In contrast, in the apocryphal book, the Epistle of Barnabas, mention is made of the mythical phoenix, a bird that consumes itself by fire and rises in resurrection. A fable such as this does not appear in the book of Proverbs., nor anywhere in the Bible.
2. The Proverbs are on a high moral plain. The immoral sayings which often occur in other writings are not present. Justyn Martyr said that Socrates was a Christian before Christ. Although he portrays a high conception of morals, according to his admirers, Socrates also gives instructions to harlots on how to conduct themselves. The best that can be said of him is that he was amoral.
3. The Proverbs do not contradict, while man’s proverbs are often in opposition to each other. e.g. *“Look before you leap”* verses *“He who hesitates is lost.”* *“A man gets no more than he pays for”* verses *“The best things in life are free.”* *“Leave it well enough alone”* verses *“Progress never stands still.”* *“A rolling stone gathers no moss”* verses *“A setting hen does not get fat.”*

Examples of Armenian proverbs (these may be found in other Middle Eastern literature):

Օձն ամէն տեղ ծուռ կը քալէ, իր բունը շիտակ:
The serpent goes every where crooked, but enters straight into its hole.

Պղտոր ջուրին մէջ ձուկ բռնելը դիւին է:
It is easy to catch fish in troubled water.

Պզտիկ մարդիկ մեծ երազներ կը տեսնեն:
Little minds have great dreams.

Literary forms employed in Proverbs (WCBS Notes):

- Unit proverbs in couplet form
- Clusters proverbs on a common theme (the fool: 26:3-12)
- Epigrams the unit proverb enlarged (the transitoriness of riches: 23:4,5)
- Dramatic monologue as in wisdom personified (1:20-23)
- Sonnets 14 stitches (one octet, one sextet), expressing successive stages of a progressing thought (keeping the law: 3:1-10)

Important subjects (Mitchell):

1. Wisdom
2. Righteousness
3. Fear of God
4. Morality
5. Diligence
6. Self-control
7. Tithes
8. Choice of companions
9. Training children
10. Honesty

Outline:

- I. Wisdom Introduced 1-9
 1. The basic essentials for personality growth 1
 2. The power of wisdom in personality growth 2,3
 3. The practical benefits of wisdom for growth 4-7
 4. The schools of "Wisdom" and "Folly" compared 8,9
- II. Wisdom Diversely Applied 10-24
 1. Contrasts between the pious and the wicked 10-15
 2. Constructive principles for growth 16-22
 3. Additional "Words to the Wise" 22-24
- III. Wisdom collected by Hezekiah's Researchers 25-29
 1. How to handle the truth 25
 2. How to recognize a fool 26
 3. How to grow in wisdom 27
 4. Some practical benefits of the righteous 28
 5. Some practical dangers of the foolish 29
- IV. Wisdom Supplemented and Illustrated (wisdom given to Solomon) 30,31
 1. The words of Agur to his sons 30
 2. The words of King Lemuel - from his mother 31:1-9
 3. The virtuous women described 31:10-31

RECIPIENTS

God's people: The Hebrews and us / anyone with ears to hear, eyes to see, and a heart open to God.

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7)

- Fear which is afraid of God’s wrath is selfish
- Fear of the Lord (having a proper orientation towards God) is the beginning of true wisdom
- Fear which is respect and in response to God’s love results in obedience from the heart (John 14:15)
- Fear is the starting point for all kinds of knowledge
- Knowledge of the Word diverts us from scientific detours
- True wisdom begins with a knowledge of the Lord
- Wisdom of Proverbs is not dealing with earthly prosperity but Heavenly prosperity. Proverbs teaches us how to grow a healthy personality for eternity.

Mitchell:

Just as Psalms were directed toward our devotional life, so Proverbs are geared toward our practical life. Psalms is calculated to make our hearts warm toward God, while Proverbs makes our faces shine before men in prudent, discreet, honest, and useful living. In the Psalms, love to God is exhibited; in the Proverbs, love to our neighbor is of prime consideration.

J. Sidlow Baxter: *“Here are counsels from above for conduct here below. Here are words of the wise on ways of the world. Here is homely wit for the daily walk, but it is human wit shot through with divine wisdom; and he who is well versed in it will be soundly guided and safely guarded.”*

RESOURCES

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Halley, Henry H. *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

Nelson’s Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I’ve relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoizian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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