
PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, AND SONG OF SOLOMON

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Study Guide

Prepared by David A. LeFevre

INTRODUCTION

In Jewish tradition, all three of the books in this lesson are attributed to Solomon, the son of David and third king of Israel. The Song of Solomon, they say, was written in his youth, with Proverbs authored in midlife, and Ecclesiastes when he was old. They have very differences approaches, styles,

and messages. They are similar, however, to other ancient Near Eastern books, especially from Egypt. A major difference is that they attribute wisdom and blessings to God, which is not always the case in non-Israelite wisdom literature.

PROVERBS

Proverbs is a collection of sayings that are provided to teach the proper way to conduct one's life. It is especially focused on the acquisition of wisdom—*ḥākēmāh*. The book's Hebrew title is *māšāl*, meaning a comparison or to lay side-by-side. It is related to the Greek word from which we get the term parable. Though it is attributed to Solomon in the first verse—and some of the content may well have originated with Solomon—other authors are listed in the book (24:23; 30:1-14; 31:1-9), and the final form of the book is from a later period, after the return to Israel under Ezra and Nehemiah.

Unlike Psalms, Proverbs is only quoted nine times in the New Testament and never in the gospels. There are only two verses changed in JST Proverbs which are discussed below.

Scholars divide Proverbs into six units based on titles in the text at the first verse of each section, as follows:

1. Proverbs of Solomon (1:1 – 9:18)
2. More proverbs of Solomon (10:1 – 22:16)
3. Words of sages (22:17 – 24:22)
4. More words of sages (24:23-34)
5. Proverbs of Solomon, copied by Hezekiah (25:1 – 29:27)
6. Appendices, including the words of Agur and Lemuel (30:1 – 31:31)

The first and last sections contain relatively long poems that should be read as units, whereas the middle four sections contain short sayings, typically of two lines or sometimes a few more, and can thus be read more randomly or in small pieces. Only a selection of these are highlighted in the commentary below.

PROVERBS OF SOLOMON (1:1 – 9:18)

1:7 **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.** Knowledge or wisdom is the purpose of life, in the eyes of Proverbs. That journey begins with a fear and respect for God.

1:20 **she uttereth her voice in the streets.** Wisdom is personified as a woman that stands in the streets and markets and cries out to everyone to listen to her.

2:2 **incline thine ear unto wisdom.** The father in these chapters counsels his son to see wisdom and knowledge. If he seeks it like he would a great treasure of silver, then he will gain wisdom from the Lord.

2:16 **deliver thee from the strange woman.** Wisdom as a woman is contrasted with a worldly “strange” woman who represents evil and foolishness. The father counsels the son to choose the right woman with which to associate.

3:5 **lean not unto thine own understanding.** Trusting in the Lord is the counsel, not depending on the wisdom of man. If we do that, God will direct our paths.

3:11 **despise not the chastening of the Lord.** The father of Proverbs counsels his son to accept the Lord’s chastening hand, as he would correction from his father. This is different from Job who struggles under the Lord’s chastening, continuing to defend his own righteousness and innocence, seeking death instead of enduring the challenges placed upon him.

3:13 **Happy is the man that findeth wisdom.** Using the formula Jesus would later use in the Sermon on the Mount, this verse could be translated, “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding” (NIV).

4:7 **with all thy getting get understanding.** Get wisdom, the son is told, but while doing so, be sure to get understanding or “discernment” (JPS Tanakh).

4:18 **as the shining light.** The contrast between the just and the wicked is in the amount of light they encounter on their path; “shining light” is what is before the righteous, while the wicked encounter “darkness,” causing them to “stumble” (4:19).

5:15 **Drink waters out of thine own cistern.** The metaphor is to stay close to home and partake of your own trusted source of water. Lest we miss the application, it is made clear in verse 18: “rejoice with the wife of thy youth.”

6:6 **Go to the ant.** In a parable-like example drawing on nature, the father instructed the son to look at a small ant, busy working seemingly without instruction but always be productive. Then he asks, “How long will thou sleep, O sluggard?” (6:9).

6:16 **six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven.** A known way to emphasize a point, the first number quoted is incomplete, followed by the perfect number, seven, indicating the correctness of the point made.

7:2 **the apple of thine eye.** Found in other places in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:10; Psalm 17:8; Lamentations 2:18; Zechariah 2:8), this phrase is better translated ‘pupils of your eyes,’ meaning to have a sharp focus on the commandments of God.

7:3 **the table of thine heart.** Both Jeremiah (17:1) and Paul (2 Corinthians 3:3) used this metaphor that refers to the tablets from Mount Sinai on which God wrote his law with his finger. Making our hearts (in the ancient world, how they thought) a place for the Lord to write his Law puts the Law in the forefront of our daily thinking and actions.

7:5 **the strange woman.** The metaphor was alluded to in chapter 2 but is fully developed in chapters 7 and 8, contrasting the “strange woman” of darkness with the voice of wisdom that presents herself at the “high places” (8:2) and “crieth at the gates” (8:3).

8:17 **those that seek me early shall find me.** “Early” is better translated ‘diligently’ or ‘earnestly.’ It is the consistent relationship with God that leads to truly finding him, not just seeking him out when we have trials.

9:10 **the beginning of wisdom.** The father’s advice came full circle, referring back to the beginning of his statements in 1:7.

MORE PROVERBS OF SOLOMON (10:1 – 22:16)

10:1 **The proverbs of Solomon.** Still claiming origin with Solomon, this section is not a long lecture but rather a large collection of short sayings in poetic (typically parallel) form. Many of the statements contrast wisdom and foolishness or righteousness and wickedness.

10:21 **The lips of the righteous feed many.** The righteous who gain wisdom use it to teach others, thereby blessings many lives of those around them.

11:22 **a jewel of gold in a swine's snout.** Nose jewels were prized by women of that day, but to put one in a pig's nose would be a waste and a defilement. So also is a "fair woman which is without discretion" or judgment.

12:15 **The way of the fool is right in his own eyes.** A fool justifies his own actions, but the wise person listens carefully to the counsel of others.

13:3 **He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life.** In nearly all cases, saying nothing is better than speaking rashly. Controlling the tongue is a great sign of wisdom.

13:24 **He that spareth the rod hateth his son.** A parent that truly cares will take the time to correct and guide children as soon as they see a problem. Only indifferent, uncaring parents let kids do whatever they want.

15:1 **A soft answer turneth away wrath.** It has been said, "I have learned that the head does not hear anything until the heart has listened, and that what the heart knows today the head will understand tomorrow" (Student Manual 2:16).

15:13 **A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance.** If you feel joy on the inside, it is impossible for that joy not to come out on the outside.

15:32 **He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul.** To listen humbly when others have constructive things to say about us is to get understanding.

16:8 **little with righteousness.** This verse summarizes well what should be our attitude toward wealth.

16:18 **Pride goeth before destruction.** This verse is the origin of the phrase, 'pride goeth before the fall,' which is a combination of the first and last parts.

16:29 **the way that is not good.** The JST changes this verse by deleting the italicized "that is" and changing "the" to "a," making it, "leadeth him into a way not good." The only good 'way' is Jesus (Matthew 5:14; Joh 14:16); all other paths are "strange roads" (1 Nephi 8:32) which lead to misery and destruction (1 Nephi 11:36).

16:32 **ruleth his spirit.** President David O. McKay said, "I commend to you, young man and young woman, the virtue of self-mastery, if you would fulfill the true measure of your life in subduing, in order to realize the ideal, the spiritual development of your soul" (Student Manual 2:17).

17:9 **covereth a transgression.** Better translated, "One who forgives an affront fosters friendship" (NRSV).

18:22 **Whoso findeth a wife.** The JST changes this verses as follows: Whoso findeth ~~a wife findeth~~ a good ~~thing~~ **wife, and hath** obtaineth favour of the LORD.

Not just any wife, but finding a *good* wife shows the favor of the Lord. Of course, the responsibility is on both spouses to become 'good', as Elder David A. Bednar reminded us. He suggested we ponder this question as we think about the doctrine of marriage: "In my own life, am I striving to become a better husband or a wife, or preparing to be a husband or a wife?" (*Ensign*, June 2006, 82). Then he explained:

By divine design, men and women are intended to progress together toward perfection and a fullness of glory. Because of their distinctive temperaments and capacities, males and females each bring to a marriage relationship unique perspectives and experiences. The man and the woman contribute differently but equally to a

oneness and a unity that can be achieved in no other way. The man completes and perfects the woman and the woman completes and perfects the man as they learn from and mutually strengthen and bless each other (*ibid.*).

20:9 ***I have made my heart clean.*** No one can cleanse themselves from sin; it is only through the Atonement of Christ that that miracle can occur.

21:3 ***more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.*** Harkens back to 1 Samuel 15:22 when Samuel told something similar to Saul.

21:13 ***stoppeth his ears.*** A person who ignores the cries of the poor around them will experience having his own cry for help go unheeded.

22:1 ***A good name.*** The integrity of your name is better than great wealth.

22:6 ***Train up a child.*** This verse has given hope to many parents who have watched their children go astray.

WORDS OF SAGES (22:17 – 24:22)

22:17 ***hear the words of the wise.*** A new section begins here with the words of the sages or the wise.

23:7 ***as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.*** Thoughts of righteousness or evil precede our actions. As we think, we eventually are.

23:16 ***my reins shall rejoice.*** “Reins” is kidneys, the place of desire or emotion. Several translations say, “my inmost being” (e.g. NIV, NASB).

MORE WORDS OF SAGES (24:23-34)

24:23 ***belong to the wise.*** A small section based on the words of the sages or wise.

24:29 ***Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me.*** Jesus turned this phrase on its head a bit,

saying that what we want others to do to us, we should do to them (Matthew 7:12).

PROVERBS OF SOLOMON, COPIED BY HEZEKIAH (25:1 – 29:27)

25:1 ***proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied.*** The next five chapters are said to be more proverbs of Solomon copied by scribes in the court of Hezekiah, Solomon’s descendent more than 200 years later.

25:11 ***apples of gold in pictures of silver.*** “Pictures” is better translated ‘settings,’ meaning the golden apples are put in a necklace or other decorative display.

26:17 ***taketh a dog by the ears.*** See the footnote for a good insight.

26:20 ***no talebearer, the strife ceaseth.*** Using an obvious metaphor, to quit spreading rumors or

gossip is like removing the wood from a fire; it quickly goes out.

27:15 ***A continual dropping.*** A contentious woman is compared to the constant dripping of rain.

28:1 ***The wicked flee.*** The unrighteous are fearful and run at the first sign of trouble, even when it does not exist. The righteous, on the other hand, are bold as a lion.

29:2 ***When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice.*** Very true; comments pertaining to current elections are personal opinions only.

APPENDICES, INCLUDING THE WORDS OF AGUR AND LEMUEL (30:1 – 31:31)

31:10 **Who can find a virtuous woman?** The conclusion of Proverbs lauds the praises of a virtuous woman. Considering how strongly the metaphor of a woman being wisdom was at the

beginning, this appears to bring the concept full circle. The praise of this productive, wise, loving woman is well-deserved.

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is the English version of the Greek name. The Hebrew name has the name meaning: *qohêlêt*, meaning a teacher or one who assembles others (written koheleth in modern translations and translated “Preacher” in the KJV). Ecclesiastes can have a negative tone, focused on the futility of life and inevitability of death. Even some of the common phrases quoted today with intention of comfort or wisdom, taken in context, have a definite existential tone.

Jewish rabbis and scribes debated including Koheleth in the canon because of its negative overall tone. In many ways, it echoes points made in Job about the seeming inequality in life, the success of the wicked, and the futility of going on when things appear to be stacked against you.

Ecclesiastes is the only book of the Bible that is not mentioned in the JST manuscripts. Perhaps the tone of the book caused Joseph Smith simply to skip it.

1:2 **Vanity of vanities.** The Hebrew word means ‘vapor’ and implies the utter futility of life, as expressed by the author of the book—it’s all like a vapor of smoke that will blow away at the first wind.

1:9 **there is no new thing under the sun.** A commonly repeated phrase in Koheleth, representing the author’s view of the endless cycle of life, the things that never change.

2:17 **Therefore I hated life.** After a recitation of all his efforts to improve and enjoy his life, he concluded that the same ultimate fate happens to both the wise and the fool—death. So he decided to hate life. All of it would one day just be left to other people anyway (see 2:15-19).

2:24 **nothing better for a man.** In a very existential perspective, the Preacher concludes that the

ultimate purpose of life is to “eat and drink” and enjoy the fruits of his labors. He reasons that that small pleasure was “from the hand of God.” This theme is repeated several times.

3:1 **To every thing there is a season.** This well-known passage is often used to show how at different times in our lives, different activities are appropriate. But Koheleth is giving it as an example of the endless cycle of life, things that just keep happening over and over in their time. In the end, he wonders, “What value, then, can the man of affairs get from what he earns?” (JPS).

4:9 **Two are better than one.** Promotes teamwork, we might think. But again, the author’s conclusion is a bit pessimistic: you’d better be with another when you fall because if you are alone, you won’t be able to get back up (4:10).

7:20 **not a just man...and sinneth not.** Recognizing that even the best people have faults, Ecclesiastes agrees with Paul, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

9:11 **the race is not to the swift.** Another scripture often cited to elicit patience or endurance over time, but Koheleth’s conclusion is that “time and chance happeneth to them all.” Success in life is chance and luck, he says.

11:1 **Cast thy bread upon the waters.** A famous phrase, this has been interpreted as a metaphor that you should help others not because it is the right thing to do but because one day they may also turn and help you.

12:13 **Fear God, and keep his commandments.** The last few verses have a very different tone and were likely added by a later scribe to put some kind of a happy ending on the book.

SONG OF SOLOMON

The Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs in Hebrew) is an erotic dialogue in poetic form between a man and a woman, mostly from the woman's perspective. Jewish sages determined it belonged in the scripture because it was a metaphor for God's love for Israel. The JST manuscripts have only comment about this

book: "The Songs of Solomon are not Inspired writings." Thus the book is not included in the JST and is rarely taught in classes in the Church. It is attributed to Solomon though without any real historical or contextual justification.

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