

## A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs

### Introduction

Francis Bacon: “the genius, the wit and the spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs”. The Book of Proverbs is part of the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, also known as Writings [Ketubim]. These are products of Israel’s sages to provoke thinking, often with a sense of humor. Jeremiah 18:18 speaks of ‘wise man’s counsel’, as taught by prophets, priests, how to conduct life in accordance with Torah [Law of Moses]. Major Wisdom Books are: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Song of Songs. Proverbs give spiritual and social counseling, so as to face life’s unpredictable events and problems of daily life. Proverbs contain philosophical and theological reflections to address the ways of the human mind and teach practical skills for each vocation in life. Wisdom’s role is to understand the mind of God, to provide counsel on the good that alone can satisfy human mind. God saw creation as good; Proverbs ponder how to experience this goodness in life. God is the source of all wisdom! King Solomon was called the model of wisdom or wise man [*hakam* in Hebrew] who possessed wisdom [*hokmah* in Hebrew].

**Authorship and date of the Book:** Authorship of the book of proverbs is traditionally attributed to king Solomon [1King 4: 29-34], who was known as the wise king. About 3000 proverbs are in Solomon’s name. Secretaries or scribes in the king’s court recorded wise sayings of the king and other scholars of the law. Scholars of the court attributed their individual proverbial works to the king. Bible scholars also see cross-cultural influence in the wisdom sayings of proverbs, especially Egyptian *Amen-em-ope proverbs*. Books’ title derives from chapter 1:1<sup>st</sup>, ‘the proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel’ [*mishle selomoh* in Hebrew]. Proverbs contain parables, poems, instructions, warnings. Most of the proverbs are of pre-exilic origin [538 BC] and development of thought in post-exilic Judaism is also seen in proverbs.

**Proverbs: Religious and moral directives:** Wisdom is God’s gift to those who pursue a disciplined life. God knows human thoughts and actions; this is not as a threat but God as guide/light. ‘Fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom’ or seeking the Lord [Proverbs 1:7]. God is source of all blessings [Proverbs 3:9-10]. ‘Humans may work out their way, but it is the Lord who directs the steps’ [Jeremiah 10:23]. The way of good life is to have right relationship with Creator and creation. Proverbs speak of the way things ought to be. Proverbs highlight effects of virtue and vice in life. Virtue consists in: diligence, prudence, integrity, forthrightness, calm, patience, generosity, modesty, peaceableness, self-discipline, kindness to the weak and unfortunate. Wisdom sayings in Proverbs inspires all to excel in human activities, in rational and physical skills.

According to Bible scholar R. B. Y. Scott, there are seven general patterns of Proverbs:

- Identity, association. Example: ‘without labor of oxen, the manager is bare’ [Proverbs 14:4]
- Non-identity, contrast. Example: ‘a soft tongue can break a bone’ [Proverbs 25:15]
- Similarity, analogy [like so and so]. Example: ‘singing happy songs to a heavy heart is like disrobing a man on a cold day’ [Proverbs 25:20]

- Contrary to right order, the absurd. Example: 'as a door turns on its pivot, so a lazy man turns on his bed' [Proverbs 26:14]
- Classification of persons, actions, situations. Example: 'the simpleton believes everything he hears but the prudent looks where he is going'[Proverbs 14:15]
- Value, priority, degree. Example: 'better to be poor than a liar' [Proverbs 19:22]
- Consequences of human behavior. Example: 'He who digs a pit for another will fall into it himself' [Proverbs 26:27]

In proverbs, elders of Israel pass on their life experiences to young generation for peace, prosperity and success; proverbs warn youth about responsibilities and temptations, and appeal to use 'common sense'. While some sayings could be products of the time, others transcend time and have perennial value.

Father Jose