

Year of the Bible Series
Ignorance of the Scriptures is Ignorance of Christ (St. Jerome)
Series V: The Book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is part of the section of poetical books in the Old Testament referred to as the *Ketuvim* (Writings). The *Ketuvim* refers to the third part of the Hebrew Scripture or *Tanakh*. The first two parts being the *Torah* (The Law or Pentateuch) and the *Nevi'im* (Prophets). The Hebrew word for Proverb is *mashal* which means comparison, parallel. It is a figure of speech in which the author uses comparison in order to present a pithy, poignant observation or instruction. Thus, the book of Proverbs is not made up of just catchy sayings but longer poetic units such as instructions, dramatic personifications of both wisdom and folly, words of the wise. That is why the book of Proverbs is listed among the wisdom literature of the Old Testament alongside Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon. It is the most intensely practical book in the Old Testament because it teaches skillful living in the multiple aspects of everyday life with specific precepts on wisdom and folly, the righteous and the wicked, the tongue, pride and humility, justice and vengeance, the family, laziness and work, poverty and health, friends and neighbors, love and lust, anger and strife, masters and servants, life and death.

While other writings in the Old Testament articulate profound theological truths, Proverbs concerns itself completely with instructing people in the path of wisdom. The Hebrew word for wisdom which occurs thirty-nine times in the book of Proverbs is *chokmah*. This is a word that signifies a very important aspect of the Old Testament religious world view. Religious experience was not just a ritual or faith experience but was also viewed as the mastery of the art of living in accordance with God's expectations. Thus, it was a wisdom directed towards God. Therefore, the big idea behind this book is found in Proverbs 1:7: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. This book therefore is aimed at helping the readers attain practical righteousness in all things and not just mere human wisdom. In other words, holiness in the marketplace.

The authorship of the book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon. The very first words of the book are: *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel*. However, he is not the only author who contributes to this book. In several sections of this book we see headings such as: The words of Agur son of Jakeh (31:1); the words of king Lemuel, the words of the wise (1:6; 22:17). What these different authors reveal about this book is that it is composed of several collections written at different times.

What then is the message and themes of this Book?

Just like the other wisdom literature of Israel, Proverbs raises questions of values and moral behavior, the meaning of human life and righteous conduct. In other words, this book offers a key to life. The samples of behavior which it holds up to view are all assessed by one criterion which is summed up in the question, 'is this wisdom or folly?' This makes us realize that wisdom leaves its signature on anything well-made or well judged. Furthermore, it is a book of judgment. It holds up the mirror to us to make us understand how much we have deviated from God's plan. Thus, it reminds us not to only be listeners of the word but doers of the word.

The themes in this book provide another lens through which we can glean the message of this book. The first theme is concerned with the relationship between God and man. The overarching idea in this book is that only the godly are wise. And this is made evident in the way they view sin, 'Who can say, I have kept my heart pure, I am clean without sin? (20:1). God is the beginning; he is the end and goal. Hence, only in the fear of the Lord is there knowledge (2:5).'

This is to demonstrate that it is not simply a Jewish equivalent of Greek philosophy without any basis in a God who entered a covenant with them. Rather, Israel's wisdom is from God, God who is wisdom par excellence. The other themes involve wisdom which is manifested in the instructions or training for a disciplined life; the need for understanding and insight to be able to distinguish between right and wrong; then there is the call for practical wisdom or savoir-faire which couples righteousness with judgment and equity.

In reading these proverbs one should avoid the danger of turning these wise sayings into literal promises. They are basically general statements on how things normally turn out in God's world. For example, it is generally true that those who keep God's words shall enjoy length of days and long life (3:2). But this should never be interpreted as an iron clad guarantee but rather as a call for the necessity to keep God's law no matter how long one lives.

By way of summary, Proverbs 1:1-7, presents us with a precise purpose of this book: To attain wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, for doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and education to the young; for letting the wise listen and add to their wisdom and letting the discerning get guidance; for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings of the wise; and finally, the key theological underpinning of this book, for cultivating the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of knowledge.

Why should a Christian read the book of Proverbs?

First and foremost, it is in the Bible. It is part of divine revelation. Furthermore, in addition to giving us wisdom about daily life, the early church read this book primarily as a book about Wisdom himself, Jesus Christ. This was especially true of Proverbs 8:22-31. In these verses, lady wisdom described herself as one whom the Lord possessed at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old, who ages ago was set up, at the first before the beginning of the world. She was brought forth when there were no depths and before the mountains had been shaped. The church sees in these verses a figurative description of God the son, who is identified as wisdom. Paul refers to him as, 'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:24). Jesus Christ is thus the embodiment of wisdom. He is the wise son par excellence (one third of the book of Proverbs contains a father's addresses and appeals to his son); he is the wise teacher, the wise host par excellence. He is the wise creator (8: 22-28), he is the wise bridegroom (Proverbs 31).

In conclusion, this book offers us wisdom for daily living but reminds us that this wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord. Without Him we are on the path of folly. And the personification of this wisdom for us Christians is Jesus Christ. **(Fr. Denis Tameh)**