

# 1

## How to be wise—lesson one

*Please read Proverbs 1:1–7*

**D**o you want to be wise? Do you want to be skilful, shrewd and practically able? Do you want to be intelligent, witty, informed, knowledgeable? Do you want success? The purpose of this book is to show you how.

‘Sounds like a dodgy newspaper advertisement to me,’ you say. Maybe you are instinctively cautious. Caution is good. Remember how the serpent spoke to Eve in the garden. Despite his grand claims, that episode led, not to wisdom, but to woe. Like Eve, we all want to be wise but, if we have any experience at all, we have learned to be cautious about amazing offers that promise the earth. ‘Once bitten, twice shy,’ says an English proverb. Proverbs itself encourages due caution: ‘A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps’ (14:15); ‘The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it’ (27:12).

There are plenty of gullible people out there—immature, inexperienced and naïve souls who can easily be taken advantage of. There are plenty of frauds, scams and swindles too, waiting to catch the next unwary customer. A few years ago companies were offering to fly people across the Atlantic for free. The catch? You agree to pay for your stay in an expensive hotel while over there! Every weekend

the glossy magazine supplements with the newspapers are full of advertisements for books and CDs at knock-down prices. But do read the small print explaining what it is you are committing yourself to before you sign up!

It is right to be cautious, but in this book I want us to focus on a book that is 'God-breathed'. It is the very Word of God. Proverbs is a book that, like the sixty-five others that make up Holy Scripture, is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16). An Old Testament book, it is quoted several times in the New Testament (see Romans 2:6, quoting Proverbs 24:12; Romans 12:20, quoting Proverbs 25:21-22; Hebrews 12:5-6, quoting Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:13, quoting Proverbs 4:26; James 4:6, quoting Proverbs 3:34; 1 Peter 4:18, quoting Proverbs 11:31; 1 Peter 5:5, quoting Proverbs 3:34; 2 Peter 2:22, quoting Proverbs 26:11).

It is usually grouped with the 'Wisdom Literature'. This also includes several psalms and especially Job and Ecclesiastes. The latter two books, as a modern writer puts it, deal with questions of 'Why?' and 'How?' They are somewhat 'speculative'. Proverbs, on the other hand, deals with the more basic questions that ask, 'What ...?' It is intensely practical. Here is, in Derek Kidner's words, 'truth in street clothes'. It deals with everyday subjects such as laziness, pride, handling money and telling lies. Here we meet familiar folk such as the bargain-hunter (20:14), the neighbour you see too much of (25:17), the practical joker (26:19) and the 'morning person' who forgets that others take a while to surface (27:14).

Wisdom Literature is striking. Although it refers to 'the LORD', the covenant God of Israel, it is nevertheless willing to put the matter of Mosaic laws and ceremonies largely to one side and communicate in a way more readily understood by those without that background. It endeavours to show, not so much the sinfulness of sin, but the folly of it and deals much in what we may term 'sanctified common sense'. This makes it of perennial interest to people of all cultures. It is an ideal way into Scripture for those unwilling to approach from other angles. The nineteenth-century commentator Charles Bridges put it this way: of all Old Testament books it 'is the one which we may think of as most distinctively educational'. This is its tone. A teacher speaks to his student, an old man to a young man and, chiefly, a father to his son.

Having said this, we should recognize that the book is fully in line with what is found in the law of Moses. As with the prophets, what is laid down in Deuteronomy is always in the background and ‘the LORD’ is referred to directly some ninety times. In Deuteronomy 4:5–6 Moses says, ‘See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”’ Sadly, near the end of the book the Lord has to say:

They are a nation without sense,  
there is no discernment in them.  
If only they were wise and would understand this  
and discern what their end will be!

(Deuteronomy 32:28–29).

The wisdom of Proverbs is there to remedy that potentially fatal tendency in the professing people of God.

### **‘The proverbs’**

A ‘proverb’ was originally a comparison or simile, such as, ‘Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion’ (Proverbs 11:22). It could be any length and was, in some ways, more like a parable than a proverb as we think of it today. The word came to refer to any wise saying, maxim or observation—anything from a mere wisecrack to true wisdom from on high. Proverbs are words ‘aptly spoken ... like apples of gold in settings of silver’ (25:11). They act individually as ‘goads’, together as ‘firmly embedded nails’ and in Proverbs, as in Ecclesiastes, are ultimately ‘given by one Shepherd’ (Ecclesiastes 12:11). The book is full of terse, memorable proverbs. Hence its official and popular name.

Where did the proverbs come from? Firstly and chiefly, they are ‘the proverbs of Solomon’ (1:1). The book of Ecclesiastes also has a strong connection with that name. Ecclesiastes 12:9 speaks of ‘the Teacher’ imparting ‘knowledge to the people’. It says, ‘He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.’ Perhaps that explains what happened here. Some proverbs are the result of Solomon’s own

pondering; others he searched out from various sources. He and, later, others then set these in order to form the book we have today.

### **'... of Solomon'**

A strong argument for paying attention to what we find in the book is the person of its chief author, 'Solomon son of David, king of Israel'. In fact, here are a number of arguments.

#### **1. *These are the words of a king***

Solomon ruled about 961–922 BC, succeeding his father David as king of all Israel. Few kings write books, but surely someone who has ruled over a nation has insights to share.

#### **2. *These are the words of a king of Israel, God's chosen nation***

Jeremiah 18:18 and other verses reveal that Israel had a place not only for 'the teaching of the law by the priest' and 'the word from the prophets', but also 'counsel from the wise'. God sent his ancient people, not only prophets and teachers, but also wise men. Even before Solomon, a wisdom tradition already existed in Israel. David's court had a place for wise counsellors such as his uncle, Jonathan, 'a counsellor, a man of insight and a scribe', and Ahithophel and Hushai (1 Chronicles 27:32,33), who seem to have acted in an official capacity. We also read of the wise woman of Tekoa and of another from Abel, a town with a long reputation for wisdom (2 Samuel 14:2; 20:16). 1 Kings 4:31 refers to other wise men of Solomon's day: 'Ethan the Ezrahite ... Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol'.

Established cultures generate their own wisdom, often in the form, firstly of single proverbs, and then, later, of collections. Because they are brief and memorable, proverbs are an excellent means of retaining compact and portable nuggets of accumulated wisdom. To carry £100 sterling in silver coins is to bear a considerable weight, but five £20 notes are so light that even a child can carry them easily. A small expensive diamond in a pocket may be worth more than a truckload of steel. That illustrates the advantage that proverbs give.

Israel's neighbours also esteemed wisdom and there are examples of it in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Phoenician and other literatures. 'Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt' (1 Kings 4:30). It seems that on occasion Scripture makes use of such wisdom from other

cultures in modified form. God's people, inevitably, received superior wisdom. Their wisdom came, ultimately, from heaven itself.

***3. These are the words of a great king of Israel***

Solomon was the greatest king Israel ever had. He was one of the greatest kings who ever lived. The description of the splendour of his reign in 1 Kings 10 is full of superlatives. He was 'greater in riches ... than all the other kings of the earth'.

***4. These are the words of the son of great King David, a man after God's own heart***

David's son and heir, wrote the early nineteenth-century commentator George Lawson, 'enjoyed all the advantages to be expected from the instructions and the example, the prayers and the blessings, of so good a father'. Solomon was both a prophet and the son of a prophet.

***5. These are the words of the wisest man who ever lived***

We know from 1 Kings how, on becoming king, Solomon was conscious of his unworthiness and so asked God for wisdom. God always 'gives generously to all without finding fault' (James 1:5) and Solomon became the wisest man ever. His wisdom was typified in his famous judgement, early in his reign, between two prostitutes who came to him seeking justice (1 Kings 3:16–28). Both women had given birth to babies and were living together under the same roof. One night, one of them had rolled onto her baby, suffocating it, and it had died. She had then gone to the other bed, put the dead baby next to the other woman and taken her baby. This had led to a dispute over who truly was mother to the surviving baby.

'The living one is my son; the dead one is yours,' says the one.

'No!' replies the other. 'The dead one is yours; the living one is mine.'

'My son is alive and your son is dead.'

'No! Your son is dead and mine is alive.'

And so it went on, until Solomon hit on the surprising expedient of calling for a sword to cut the surviving child in two! That soon revealed the true mother as she pleaded that he spare the life of her dear little one even if it meant her losing custody of the baby. 'When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because

they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice' (1 Kings 3:28).

1 Kings 4:29–34 speaks of Solomon's wisdom and fame and of his 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. Clearly, only a selection has been preserved in the book before us. Maybe the other songs and proverbs dealt with 'plant life ... animals and birds, reptiles and fish', and so were not preserved. Bridges and others suggest this and underline the purpose of Scripture, which is 'not to teach philosophy but religion; not to make men of science, but men of sound godliness'. On the other hand, several proverbs grow out of an observation of nature. There are references to flora ('a green leaf', 11:28; 'thorns' and 'weeds', 24:31; 'a thornbush', 26:9; 'a fig tree', 27:18; 'grain', 27:22; 'hay' and 'grass', 27:25; 'crops', 28:3); to fauna ('a gazelle', 'a bird' and 'the ant', 6:5,6; 'a bear', 17:12; 'a lion', 19:12; 'an eagle', 23:5; 'a snake' and 'a viper', 23:32; 'a fluttering sparrow' and 'a darting swallow', 26:2; 'the horse' and 'the donkey', 26:3; 'a dog', 26: 11; 'a bird that strays from its nest', 27:8; 'flocks' and 'herds', 27:23; 'lambs' and 'goats', 27:26; 'the leech', 30:15; 'ants', 'conies', 'locusts' and 'a lizard', 30:26–28; 'a strutting cock', 30:31); and to meteorology ('a storm' and 'a whirlwind', 1:27; 'the clouds' that 'drop the dew', 3:20; 8:28; snow, 25:13; 'a north wind' that 'brings rain', 25:23).

'God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man ... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations' (1 Kings 4:29–31).

Hiram, King of Tyre, observed that the Lord had 'given King David a wise son, endowed with intelligence and discernment' (2 Chronicles 2:12). In 1 Kings 10, we have an unembellished account of the Queen of Sheba's visit and her amazement at his wisdom and splendour. 1 Kings 4:34 tells us that 'Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.'

### **6. *These are the words of God himself***

They come through men, of course, but form part of Scripture. God had his hand on Solomon as he sorted, sifted and recorded these proverbs, gathered from diverse sources, so that we have here inspired,

God-breathed words of life that are able to ‘make wise to salvation’. As one writer puts it, the Spirit used ‘Solomon like a magpie to snatch up sparkling treasures of wisdom’ wherever he found them.

Not all the proverbs are Solomon’s, any more than all the psalms are David’s. He is, however, the principal author. Other authors (Lemuel and Agur) and compilers (Hezekiah) are mentioned and the final section is anonymous. There are also collected ‘sayings of the wise’. We cannot be sure when the whole book was assembled. It seems likely that it reached its present form in the time of another wise king, King Hezekiah, but it may have been later still.

### **The introduction**

The book of Proverbs is not simply an anthology of proverbs. First, in chapters 1–9, we have an important introduction. Here is instruction on how to make proper use of the proverbs found in the sections that follow. After the opening verses, we can divide the text into a series of some ten fatherly talks, followed by an appeal from wisdom itself and a conclusion in chapter 9. John H. Sket and others have worked to show how carefully structured these chapters are, ‘utilizing certain common features of the Israelite literary traditions’, especially symmetry and inclusion. Some of the detail is difficult but this observation is undoubtedly true and we shall seek to note such features where appropriate.

It is sometimes tempting to skip introductions in books or similar materials. Wading through every word of a manual for a computer or some other piece of equipment before using it can seem tedious, even pointless. However, experience teaches us that making efforts to master introductory materials early on can often save time in the long run.

If the axe is dull  
and its edge unsharpened,  
more strength is needed (Ecclesiastes 10:10).

Time spent in preparation is not time wasted. One of the later proverbs warns: ‘Like a lame man’s legs that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of a fool’ (26:7). Worse still, it can be like ‘a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand’ (26:9). We need to master wise ways before we start giving wise advice.

Over the years, I have attempted to learn different languages. I remember in school receiving textbooks for French, German and Latin. Each time my attention was drawn first to the ends of these books, where the vocabulary lists were. Learning vocabulary always seemed to me the most interesting, easy and worthwhile component. However, I have learned that proficiency in vocabulary without a proper understanding of the grammar found at the front of the textbook makes communication in any language rather difficult. A lack of early application here may mean never speaking the new language with any great facility. Proverbs 1–9, we may say, gives us the ‘grammar’, the proper context, in order for us to make use of the extensive vocabulary provided in the rest of the book. It is, therefore, well worth our attention. Proverbs is here to provide a course of education in how to live a life of wisdom. Time spent mastering its initial lessons, before moving on to the wisdom of the proverbs proper, is not time wasted. Remember, *all Scripture* ‘is useful’. It is *all* there to make us ‘wise to salvation’.

### **Five purposes**

Right at the beginning, Solomon lists five purposes for the book. Before you can look for a thing, you must have some idea of what it is you are looking for. These descriptions overlap, but together they give a good idea of the book’s purpose. They give an insight into the many colours that make up the rainbow of wisdom. As David Hubbard puts it, this paragraph is ‘chock full of meaty morsels ... that ... whet the appetite of even the most casual reader’.

#### **1. For attaining wisdom and discipline (1:2)**

The chief use of the book is in order to know or gain wisdom, or *skill*. In Job 28, Job reflects on how hard wisdom is to obtain. Silver and gold are difficult enough to mine from the ground, but wisdom is rarer and even more difficult to extract:

But where can wisdom be found?  
 Where does understanding dwell? ...  
     it cannot be found in the land of the living ...  
 It cannot be bought with the finest gold,  
     nor can its price be weighed in silver ...  
 Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it,  
     nor can it be had for jewels of gold.