

Intro:

In this lesson, we are going to be using notes from an article by Duane Garrett who wrote a good commentary on the book of Proverbs.

“The theological problems in Proverbs can be divided into five major questions.”¹

Note: Garrett calls these the theological problems of Proverbs. It is not that Proverbs has problems, but that theologians have problems. It is really the problems of theologians that he is addressing.

QUESTION ONE: *Is the search for a divine order a basic element of the old wisdom of Proverbs?*²

I. The search for the divine order

Is the search for a divine order a basic element of the old wisdom of Proverbs? – Yes, but the divine order is **revealed**, not **observed**.

QUESTION TWO: *Does Israelite wisdom include a concept of divine retribution, or is it simply an act-consequence philosophy?*³

II. Judgement vs. Consequences

Does Israelite wisdom include a concept of divine retribution, or is it simply an act-consequence philosophy? – Yes, but not from a **humanistic viewpoint**, rather from a **theo-centric viewpoint** (the fear of the Lord).

QUESTION THREE: *How do Proverbs and the other biblical wisdom literature relate to the rest of the Old Testament and its theological outlook?*

III. Theological Outlook

A. Stumbling ground for OT theologians: no **unifying center**

“Old Testament theologians have stumbled at the point of integrating wisdom literature into the rest of the Old Testament. ... No single ‘center’ proposed for the Old Testament has shown

¹ Duane A Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1993), 52.

² Garrett, 53.

³ Garrett, 54.

itself to be able to incorporate all the texts, genres, and motifs of the Old Testament."⁴

1. Striking similarity between Proverbs and ancient wisdom literature
2. Absence of any reference to Israel's election and covenants
3. Leads liberal scholars to claim Proverbs 'outside' the norm of OT to the point of some calling it an attempt to shape Israel into its pagan environment

Waltke calls these objections "superficial observations"⁵

B. Literary distinctions between covenant texts and wisdom texts

1. Covenant texts

a. Primary concern: **covenant** between God and Israel

- 1) Pentateuch
- 2) History
- 3) Prophets

b. Primary purpose: bring people into **fellowship** with God

- 1) Fall, Flood, Nations, Abraham, Moses, Israel as a nation
- 2) Law and Ceremony
- 3) Preaching

2. Wisdom texts

a. Purpose: how to **live** in this **world** (Pr 1.3)

Pr 1.3 To receive instruction in wise behavior,
Righteousness, justice and equity;

⁴ Garrett, 55.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136, no. 544 (October 1979): 302.

- b. Relationship to God: **submission** (Pr 1.7) – but for *understanding* and *wisdom*, not for *life* and relating to ‘the God of your fathers’

Pr 1.7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

C. The relation of wisdom to covenant

1. Inadequate proposals

- a. Wisdom is **inferior** to covenant theology
- b. Wisdom is **subordinate** to the **Law** as part of salvation history
- c. Wisdom is **subordinated** to the **covenant** as Israel’s response

Each makes one part of the Bible an afterthought to the ‘main part’

2. Two pillars approach: Covenant and Wisdom “**twin guides** to life”⁶

There is overlap – wisdom teaching is found in other parts of the Bible, some wisdom texts relate to salvation topics

- a. Covenant theology involves God **approaching mankind** with covenant love and divine authority
- b. Wisdom involves the disciple **approaching God** in daily life.

Wisdom counsels the disciple to “begin the quest for discernment by submitting to God”⁷

3. The common ground

- a. The same essential **beliefs** and **presuppositions**
- b. Theological framework of Prov 1-9 **foundational**
 - 1) Fear of God
 - 2) Rejection of temptations to easy gratification
 - 3) Confession that the world is God’s creation

Wisdom literature agrees with the theology of covenant literature but has a distinct purpose expressed in a different genre.

⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 56.

⁷ Garrett, 56.

QUESTION FOUR: *Does Proverbs teach or endorse a theology that asserts that the rich are righteous and favored by God but the poor are evil, lazy, and only getting what they deserve?*

IV. Theology of the rich

A. Proverbs under attack: liberals use this theme to make Proverbs seem less 'holy' than other Scripture

1. Liberals turn Proverbs wisdom into an argument in favour of maintaining class distinctions
2. Allege that Proverbs justifies the rich, puts down the poor

B. Proverbs rightly understood

1. Wisdom literature is a work of **instruction**
2. Wisdom literature uses pithy **observations** to teach general **principles**
3. Understanding comes by taking into consideration the **whole teaching** of wisdom literature on any topic

Pr 3.9-10 Honor the LORD from your wealth
And from the first of all your produce;
10 So your barns will be filled with plenty
And your vats ll overflow with new wine.

Pr 14.24 The crown of the wise is their riches,
But the folly of fools is foolishness.

Pr 26.13-15 The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road!
A lion is in the open square!"
4 As the door turns on its hinges,
So *does* the sluggard on his bed.
15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again.

Pr 10.4-5 Poor is he who works with a negligent hand,
But the hand of the diligent makes rich.
5 He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely,
But he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully.

- Pr 11.4 Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,
But righteousness delivers from death.
- Pr 11.18 The wicked earns deceptive wages,
But he who sows righteousness *gets* a true reward.
- Pr 11.24 There is one who scatters, and *yet* increases all the
more,
And there is one who withholds what is justly due,
and yet it results only in want.
- Pr 16.8 Better is a little with righteousness
Than great income with injustice.
- Pr 21.6 The acquisition of treasures by a lying tongue
Is a fleeting vapor, the pursuit of death.
- Pr 23.4-5 Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,
Cease from your consideration of it.
⁵ When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.
For wealth certainly makes itself wings
Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens.

“It is not that the wisdom writers did not know that life was complex and full of exceptions, but dwelling on those cases would have distracted attention from their didactic purposes. It is general truth that those who fear God and live with diligence and integrity will have lives that are prosperous and peaceful but that those who are lazy and untrustworthy ultimately destroy themselves. And general truths are the stock in trade of Proverbs.”⁸

QUESTION FIVE: *What is the message of Proverbs concerning education and learning?*

V. Education and Learning

“In the final analysis, Proverbs is a book of education”⁹

A. “Proverbs does not subordinate the education of the **individual** to the

⁸ Garrett, 57.

⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 57.

needs of the **state**.”¹⁰

1. Greek education = dedicated to the *polis*, the city-state
2. Heb.: Patriotism not evil, but not central
3. Heb.: Everything is subordinated to God (Pr 14.34)

Pr 14.34 Righteousness exalts a nation,
But sin is a disgrace to *any* people.

B. “Israelite wisdom does not promote any particular **occupation** or **trade**.”¹¹

1. Egyptian wisdom included a *Satire on Trades* which endorses the scribal trade as superior
2. Proverbs has no hierarchy of trades: no legitimate occupation considered degrading

a. Agriculture (10.5)

Pr 10.5 He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely,
But he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully.’

b. Government (11.14)

Pr 11.14 Where there is no guidance the people fall,
But in abundance of counselors there is victory.

c. Business (31-18-24)

Pr 31.18 She senses that her gain is good;
Her lamp does not go out at night.
¹⁹ She stretches out her hands to the distaff,
And her hands grasp the spindle. ...

3. Proverbs only condemns laziness (24.30-34)

Pr 24.30 I passed by the field of the sluggard
And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,

¹⁰ Garrett, 57.

¹¹ Garrett, 59.

C. "Education is primarily the task of the **parents**."¹²

1. Family first and best school (Dt 6.4-9)

Dt 6.4-9 ¶ "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!⁵ "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.⁶ "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart.⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.⁸ "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.⁹ "You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

2. Son exhorted to heed parents (Pr 23.22-25)

Pr 23.22 Listen to your father who begot you,
And do not despise your mother when she is old.
²³ Buy truth, and do not sell it,
Get wisdom and instruction and understanding.
²⁴ The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice,
And he who sires a wise son will be glad in him.
²⁵ Let your father and your mother be glad,
And let her rejoice who gave birth to you.

3. Parents commanded to invest time in their children (Pr 29.15, 17)

Pr 29.15 The rod and reproof give wisdom,
But a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother.
Pr 29.17 Correct your son, and he will give you comfort;
He will also delight your soul.

D. "Biblical wisdom stresses the **limitations** of human knowledge."¹³

1. The wise must remember their limitations (30.2-4)

¹² Garrett, 59.

¹³ Garrett, 59.

Pr 30.1 The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle.
The man declares to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal:
2 Surely I am more stupid than any man,
And I do not have the understanding of a man.
3 Neither have I learned wisdom,
Nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One.
4 Who has ascended into heaven and descended?
Who has gathered the wind in His fists?
Who has wrapped the waters in His garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is His name or His son's name?
Surely you know!

2. The wise must submit their learning to the Word of God (30.5)

Pr 30.5 Every word of God is tested;
He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him.

Conclusion:

The key thing that we must take away from this part of the study is the last point: the wise must submit their learning to the Word of God. God's word really is without error. It is always right. If we are troubled by a passage, we must conclude that the trouble is with us – either in our understanding or in our heart.