

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverb, Lecture 1, Introduction

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Welcome to this lecture series on the book of Proverbs. My name is Dr. Knut Heim. I am a Presbyterian, an ordained minister in the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom, but have recently moved here to beautiful, sunny Colorado in the United States. I work at Denver Seminary here in Denver, obviously, hence the name. I want to welcome you to this series on the book of Proverbs. Because for me, this is an exciting book.

It is one of those books in the Bible that is not very frequently read, and there are reasons for that, of course, which we will go into in the course of these lectures. But for me personally, I have held a fascination with the book for over 25 years. I did my PhD on the book of Proverbs in the 1990s at the University of Liverpool, again in the United Kingdom.

I have then worked as a pastor, and as an ordained minister in the Methodist Church for a number of years, and then have been teaching at two seminaries in the United Kingdom, first at the Queen's Foundation in Birmingham in the Midlands, and then at Trinity College Bristol in the southwest of England. But now let's get started with the book of Proverbs proper. So, let's begin with the first verse, the title of the book, the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

But are the 915 verses in the 31 chapters of the book really all from Solomon? Well, of course not. We know that because when we actually read through the book, we discover that the book is really a collection of collections of Proverbs, and quite a few of those collections were actually collected by named individuals or groups of scholars, of ancient scholars. Whose names and titles we have in the subtitles to the various collections in the book, I'm going to talk about some of these in a moment.

But I just want to also draw your attention as I continue now with some kind of short introductory remarks about the book, to a degree in my remarks now, I am drawing on the wiki of the Society for Old Testament Studies, which can be found online, and I encourage you to have a look at this. It's a fabulous, helpful resource on all sorts of biblical books that's online and freely available. The Society for Old Testament Studies makes these freely available to the general public, and as it happens, I happen to have written the wiki for the book of Proverbs in this publication.

So, to a degree, I will be drawing on what I've written for that in my comments now. So, the book of Proverbs invites us onto an intellectual and spiritual journey, and this is really an adventure of the mind and of the spirit. It is an intellectually challenging and rewarding journey that we are engaging in.

The book's invitation is expressed in terms of an intellectual feast, especially as we can see in the grand banquet hosted by Lady Wisdom in chapter 9, verses 1 to 12, and it promises. The book as a whole, and many of the lectures contained in it, promise a prosperous lifestyle characterized by happy relationships and high social status. For example, in chapter 31, in verses 10 to 31, that grand celebration of a wonderfully capable, wise, powerful, and successful woman at the end of the book.

Along the way, numerous practical lessons are learned, including detailed and provocative explorations of such interesting topics as sex, money, and politics. While the aim is always practical and interested in this worldly success, yet, on the other hand, every part of the book is characterized by a self-assured, unnatural religious realism, often expressed in quite humorous ways. Now, a few more comments about the authorship of the many parts of the book.

The book consists of seven different sub-collections. First, we have a collection of Solomonic lectures interspersed with various speeches in chapters 1 to 9. So, that's a section all on its own of a series of lectures and speeches. Then, secondly, we have a collection of Solomonic proverbs that are sometimes subdivided, or sometimes by scholars subdivided, into two separate parts, namely chapters 10 to 15 and chapters 16 to 22.

Then, we have, thirdly, a collection of sayings of the wise. These start in chapter 22, verse 17, and go through chapter 24, verse 22. The fourth sub-collection is a further collection of sayings of the wise in chapter 24, it's relatively short, just verses 23 to 34.

Then, the fifth sub-collection is a further collection of Solomonic proverbs, but as the title in chapter 25, verse 1, tells us, these have been collected by courtiers, by court officials, by administrators, at the royal court under the reign of Hezekiah, almost, well, roughly 300 years after the time of Solomon. This is chapters 25 to 29. Then, part six is a collection of sayings and reflections by an individual called Agur, son of Jakeh.

And we don't really know who that person is, the person is not mentioned in any of the other biblical books and is also not mentioned or known from any extra-biblical archaeological resources or finds or graffiti or anything like this. And then, in chapter 7, we have the so-called sayings of Lemuel, King Lemuel, really a brief lecture that he himself received from his mother, in chapter 31, verses 1 to 9, so these are explicitly marked as the lectures of the Queen Mother. And then, added to this in chapter 31, verses 10 to 31, is an extended poetic character portrayal of an idealized, very interesting woman that we will look at in greater detail later in this lecture series.

So, as we continue in our introduction to the Book of Proverbs, what we see really is then that we have many different parts, seven big parts, all together, by different

named or even unknown authors. And some of the material is actually anonymous, we know they're wise people, but there are no names, no specific functions of these individuals attached. The opening verse of the book, at first, seems to assign the entire book to the well-known King Solomon, son of David, who was famous for composing and collecting large numbers of proverbs, songs, and scientific treatises, as we read in the biblical book of 1 Kings, in chapter 4, verses 32 to 33 in particular.

And this is, no doubt, one of the reasons why the book as a whole, although many of its parts are not from Solomon, has been kind of collected under this title of the Proverbs of Solomon. Nonetheless, as we have seen already, subtitles in later parts of the book explicitly assign several sections to other named or unnamed authors and compilers. We see this, for example, in chapter 22, verse 17, in chapter 24, verse 23, in chapter 30, verse 1, and in chapter 31, verse 1. And of course, we've also mentioned chapter 25, verse 1, which does assign the proverbs collected in those chapters to Solomon, but tells us that they were compiled by other people several hundred years later.

So, I now want to quote from a major recent commentary on the book of Proverbs by Bruce Waltke in the NYCOT series, and just read this out to you to give you a sense of how one particularly, or relatively conservative scholar in recent times, has summarized the material. He says this, I quote, An anonymous final editor appended collections 5 to 7, this is chapters 25 to 31, to Solomon's collections 1 to 4, this is chapters 1 to 24. Judging by biblical analogs, he allowed the original heading attributing the work to Solomon in 1.1 to stand as the title of his final composition, because Solomon is the principal author of the sayings, that is chapters 1 to 29, and the most distinguished author of this anthology.

This final editor, the real author of the book, Bruce Waltke writes, not of its sayings, probably lived as late as the Persian period, so this is after the exile in Babylon, around 540 to perhaps even as late as 332 BCE. So that's the end of my quote from Bruce Waltke, but here is a kind of a way of conceptualizing the assignment of authorship to Solomon in a fairly consistent way that helps us to understand that much of the book and how it is now arranged in its final form was actually done much, much later than Solomon, King Solomon, lived. So, then the named authors of the two final collections in the book, namely Agur, son of Jaqe, and King Lemuel, are otherwise unattested, and we really know nothing else about them than that King Lemuel is likely to be of non-Israelite origin.

And this is something we will come back to later in the lectures on the book, this non-Israelite authorship of some of the materials that we find in Proverbs. An absolutely fascinating part and characteristic of this truly international book that is nonetheless part of the holy scriptures of the people of Israel, who are very different religiously from some of the, or all of the surrounding nations in the ancient Near East of that era. The socio-religious background of ancient Israel's wisdom literature

then is international, and this has important repercussions for its reception and for its modern relevance as we shall see.

So, we have already talked about the fact that Solomon is certainly not the author of all of the book, but is he even the author of those parts of the book that clearly are assigned to this? And there are in fact modern doubts about this Solomonic authorship even of those parts, and I just want to focus on that a little bit to help us understand some of the background here. So based on external considerations, the majority of recent scholars, certainly since the 20th century and even slightly earlier, question whether Solomon really was the author of the sections of the book that are even assigned to him directly. A significant number of the proverbs under consideration, namely, appear to be so-called folk proverbs, quite literally proverbs that originated with normal folk, normal people, not the court, not the king.

So, the very definition of these folk proverbs is that they were anonymous proverbs that had gained wide acceptance in the culture by the time they were incorporated into the collections of the Book of Proverbs. Thus, it is quite likely that Solomonic proverbs may actually have been compiled rather than authored by Solomon, even if we accept the fact that he actually put them in the book as we now have it. Many, perhaps the majority of the sayings, may have been then assigned to him precisely on the basis of his reputation as a wise king.

It is equally plausible that many of the proverbs identified as Solomonic by the courtiers of Hezekiah in the late 8th century BCE were assigned to Solomon not because he was believed to be their actual author, but because they were believed to belong to the number of 3,000 proverbs spoken by Solomon according to the traditions reflected in 1 Kings 4.32 or 1 Kings 5.12 in Hebrew, or because they were believed to stem from Solomon's time. I think now it is also just worth spending a little bit of time at least on the dates for the different parts of the book. Remember as the quotation from Bruce Walters' commentary showed us a little bit earlier, just a few minutes ago, the earliest parts of the book might be as early as Solomon's time in the 900s in the 10th century BCE, but the latest parts of the book might be as late as the 300s.

So, we are actually talking of a time span of up to 600 years in some people's estimation. I'm not quite that widespread in my own dating of the materials, but nonetheless. So generally the second collection, namely Proverbs 10.1-22.16, is by most people considered to be the oldest part of the book.

And many conceive that at least in principle these 375 verses could stem not only from the time of Solomon but perhaps have been collected, coined, or popularized by him. On the other hand, many modern scholars doubt whether any part of the book could be as old as that. Then the third and fourth collections, namely Proverbs

22.17-24.22, and then also the other short section, Proverbs 22.17-24.23-34, are assigned to an unknown group of wise people.

These have generally been regarded as a particular type of intellectual based at the royal court in Jerusalem, as for example the famous Ahitophel, the political advisor to David and Absalom, that we read about in 2 Kings 15-16. There is, however, and this is very, very interesting, an astonishing amount of overlap and similarity between large parts of 22.17-24.22 and a popular contemporary Egyptian wisdom text, namely the so-called Instruction of Amenemope. By the way, just as a bit of a tongue-breaker, Amenemope, that's how I think in the English-speaking world most scholars pronounce the name of this famous sage from Egypt.

But, for example, in Germany, where I grew up, I think we pronounced it in those days as Amenemope. So, there you go, pick your pick, however, you want to pronounce it, that's how you're going to pronounce it. So anyway, this is a fascinating incidence here, that we have several dozens of verses in these chapters, 22-24 in Proverbs, that appear literally, or almost literally exactly the same words in translation, of course, in an Egyptian text from roughly the same time period, but most people arguing, and I think convincingly arguing, that the text from Amenemope is slightly earlier, even than the time of Solomon.

So much so, then, there is then so much overlap between the two texts that a direct knowledge of, and a creative dependence of Proverbs on the Egyptian counterparts is now almost universally and quite rightly acknowledged in modern scholarship. It is impossible to precisely date this and the following smaller collection of wise sayings in 23-34, other than to say that it could stem from any period in Israelite history. Their earlier position, however, in the sequence of sub-collections, suggests that they were added to the book before the reign of Hezekiah in the late 700s, because chapter 25, just following on in the sequence of collections, of course, is from that period onwards.

Then let's talk about the fifth collection, Proverbs 25-29. This gives a relatively precise date for its period of compilation, at least, namely during the reign of King Hezekiah, approximately from about 728 to 698 BCE. However, again, the material contained in this compilation is declared to be from the Solomonic period in the 900s, whose reign date is approximately 970 to 931 BCE.

It is likely, then, that at least some material from later than Solomon's time would have been also included in this accidentally. Then finally, the last two collections in the book are almost certainly from a later period than Hezekiah's reign. Again, as their position at the end of the book suggests, they may be as late as near the end of the Persian period, just before 332 BCE, but it could also be as early as the pre-exilic period, namely after the reign, shortly after the reign of Hezekiah.

The period of the exile, by the way, extends from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonian army and the deportation of large parts of the population in 597 to 586 BCE, until the return of most of the population around 535 BCE. We now come, I don't know whether you've noticed, I've studiously avoided talking about this until now, but we now come actually to the first sub-collection in the book, namely chapters 1-8 to 9-18. And I've left this for last because the dating of this material is the most controversial.

Its position in the book and the title in 1-1, as well as external evidence, namely 1 Kings 4, suggests that it originated from Solomon himself. Yet, very clearly the majority of recent scholars have dated the entire section firmly in the post-exilic period. In the early days, especially up until the kind of mid-1980s, so the last century now, the arguments for late dating were mainly of a form-critical or form-historical nature.

And the argument basically went something like this. The other materials in the book are short, pithy, one-line or two-line sayings or very small groups of sayings. Whereas the material in chapters 1-9 are longer speeches of often a whole chapter, and also lectures of chapter length.

So, this longer material, so the argument went, would have naturally come later in the development of the genre, of the form of this kind of public teaching. Now, interestingly, this sort of argument has by and large been kind of abandoned, certainly since the 1990s into the present period. But nonetheless, the late dating of the material is still very much there.

It's just not based on those same arguments anymore. And I personally have not looked into this recently. But I don't think that any other really strong arguments for a late dating have been proposed, other than there is a little bit of a presumption that those scholars who date this material earlier, and therefore would tend to assign it actually to the very hand of King Solomon himself, are considered to be a little bit conservative, and perhaps taking the Bible and its statements too literally.

Whereas more, how can I put it, perhaps less faith-based scholars who want to be particularly, or just kind of consistently critical of the material that they study, are much more open to challenging the historical data that we're giving in many of the biblical books. So that's kind of my personal take on the present state of the conversation. But I would draw your attention, for example, to the work of one of my colleagues at the University of Cambridge, Professor Catherine Dell, who has argued in a number of publications that there are no compelling reasons why chapters one to nine in Proverbs must be post-exilic, and she's presented a range of good arguments that suggest that it could very well be pre-exilic, including from the time of Solomon himself.

I think we will leave it there. I don't think this is a matter that is of absolute importance or not, but I think it's just worth being aware of the relative dates of the different parts of the book. So, in the final part of my kind of general introduction to the book of Proverbs, I now want to talk about the contents and the interpretation of those contexts in the book.

The interpretation of those contents in the book. The book as a whole and its various parts bring together advice and warnings to young people. Significant issues of interpretation include the following.

Are the ethics of Proverbs purely prudential? That is to say, does the teaching of the book simply aim to tell people what to do to have a happy and successful life, or does it also teach a more other-directed morality? Secondly, why does the book appear to be uninterested in the great themes of the theology of the Old Testament? The exodus, the election of the patriarchs, the history of the kings, the revelations in the various biblical books, older biblical books, the work of the prophets, and so on. Do its authors, the wise, belong to a different kind of social circle from those who have written the Torah, the five books of Moses or the Pentateuch as it's sometimes called, and the prophets? Many sayings in the book warn that laziness may lead to poverty. For example, in chapter 6 verses 8 to 11, does this imply that the poor are poor because they are lazy? Does the book, as some scholars assert, despise the poor? This idea does not seem to harmonize, however, with other sayings that observe that the poor are subject to injustice from the rich, for example, in chapter 18 verse 23, or verses that advise the reader to be generous to the poor, for example, in chapter 14 verse 21 and verse 31, or in chapter 19 verse 70.

As I conclude this general introduction, I think one particular thing that I want you to take from this general overview of the book is that, intriguingly, very interestingly, the book was written for young people. It was written for people who are ambitious, who are intelligent, and who want to make something of themselves. The book sometimes calls them, in the Hebrew language, *peti*, which is variously translated, some people translate it as a naive person.

I don't think that's meant at all. The *peti* in Hebrew, as addressed in the book of Proverbs, is not a naive person, but someone, a young person with intellectual curiosity and huge potential. Some may be as yet immature with regard to personal experience and may not have the full extent of intellectual schooling that was available at the time, but the book of Proverbs wants to present exactly that for its readers, for the young intelligentsia of its day.

This book wants to inspire young people to make something of themselves, and to develop the right kind of values that will help them to succeed in a morally, socially, and religiously rich kind of life. It wants to help them to be positive contributors to the common good. And that is, perhaps as you continue to engage in

this lecture series on the book of Proverbs, a good kind of personal stance for yourself to adopt.

One of religious, spiritual openness to what God wants to teach its readers through the book of Proverbs, an openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help you develop and form the kinds of values and habits in life that will help you to do well in all senses of that particular world. Adopt an intellectually humble stance, an openness to rethink things that you have until now taken for granted. Be open to engage on an intellectual journey, an adventure of the mind that may just not only change your own life but through changing you, change the world around you.

What a wonderful prospect as we engage in the study of this book.

This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number one, the introduction.