

Dr. Kyle Dunham, Proverbs Structure and Theology

Session 1

NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Briefing Document, 3) Study Guide, 4) FAQs

1) Abstract:

Dr. Kyle Dunham's "Structure and Theology of Proverbs, Session 1" **examines the book of Proverbs, asserting it was an ancient curriculum for aspiring socio-political leaders in ancient Israel. He challenges the view that Proverbs lacks intentional design, arguing for a structured arrangement of seven wisdom collections.** Dunham proposes that **this structure facilitates memorization and guides the learner from elementary wisdom to complex social applications, emphasizing virtues like righteousness, justice, and integrity.** The **preamble and prologue, focusing on character formation within a domestic setting, introduce foundational concepts** before the text progresses to more nuanced, worldly scenarios, **preparing youth for the complexities of civic and religious leadership.**

2) Briefing Document: Briefing Document: Structure and Theology of Proverbs - Elementary Wisdom as Character Formation

Source: Excerpts from "Dunham_Proverbs_EN_Structure_Theology01.pdf" by Dr. Kyle Dunham.

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1. Overview and Core Argument

Dr. Kyle Dunham, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, presents a compelling argument that the book of Proverbs is not a haphazard collection of disconnected sayings but rather an "ancient curriculum" with "intentional design patterns" and a clear "editorial strategy." His

work, rooted in his journal article "Structure and Theology in Proverbs, Its Function as an Educational Program for Novice Leaders in Ancient Israel," challenges the long-held notion that Proverbs is merely "the orphan in the biblical household" lacking theological depth.

Dunham posits that Proverbs was specifically designed to train "inexperienced youth" for "socio-political leadership in ancient Israel." The book guides learners through a "continuum" of development, from "elemental ethical decisions to complex social applications," preparing them to embody "Torah as a wise royal official."

2. Challenging Prevailing Views on Proverbs' Structure

Dunham directly addresses and refutes the perspective of scholars like Michael Fox, who argue against any significant intentional design in Proverbs, particularly from chapter 10 onward. Fox claims that "Outside of scattered thematic clusters and Proverbs strings and an occasional poem, no significant patterns such as might constrain interpretation have been widely observed."

In contrast, Dunham aligns with the view that ancient oral cultures, including ancient Israel, frequently employed "intentional verbal patterning" such as "formulaic and repetitive, rhythmic, and verbal expressions" to aid "memorization and mastery of material." He cites David Carr's work on "written media" as part of a "cultural project of incising key cultural and religious traditions word for word on people's minds." Dunham argues that Proverbs served a similar mnemonic function, with its structure intentionally arranged to aid memorization and advance the learner toward key virtues.

3. Methodological Framework: Structural Canonical Approach

Dunham's approach is significantly influenced by Brevard Childs' canonical approach and Gerald Wilson's application of it to the Psalter.

- **Brevard Childs' Canonical Approach:** Focuses on "the biblical text in its received form" and "its function for the community of faith," rather than solely on redactional layers.

- **Gerald Wilson's Application to Psalms:** Wilson analyzed the "seams that connect the five books of the Psalter" (opening and closing Psalms) to understand the final editor's intention.
- **Julius Steinberg's Structural Canonical Approach:** Refines Childs' method by emphasizing the importance of "literary structure and design patterns of books" in understanding their function.

Dunham adopts this "structural canonical reading" for Proverbs, asserting that the "literary structure itself informs that book and how that informs its function within the community of faith." He seeks to uncover the "editorial strategy behind the book as a whole."

4. The Seven Wisdom Collections and Their Pedagogical Function

A central tenet of Dunham's argument is that Proverbs is structured into **seven wisdom collections**, echoing "Lady Wisdom in describing her house toward the end of the prologue talks about the seven pillars of wisdom." These collections facilitate the learner's progression:

1. Preamble and Prologue (Proverbs 1-9):

- **Introduction:** Sets the purpose and direction of the book.
- **Theme:** "Elementary Wisdom as Character Formation."
- **Focus:** Domestic setting, father-son relationship (with mother's and grandfather's voices implicitly present), addressed to the "peti" (inexperienced youth).
- **Key Virtues Introduced:** "righteousness, justice, and integrity." These are presented as "norms of Torah" and "symptomatic of the leaders of ancient Israel."
- **Lady Wisdom vs. Lady Folly:** Lady Wisdom is an "active patroness," contrasted with the "dangerous and seductive outside woman" (embodying Lady Folly). This serves as a primary moral lesson for the youth.
- **Structure:** 10 speeches and 5 interludes, conveying "imperative urgency." Speeches include "calls to attention," "calls to remember and obey," and "warnings against the outside woman." The progression from avoiding "bad

friends and easy money" to "forbidden sexual partners" indicates increasing maturity in the themes addressed.

- **"Fear of Yahweh":** Emphasized as "the beginning of knowledge" and the "controlling principle governing the acquisition of wisdom."
- **Literary Framing:** Catchwords and themes in the prologue deliberately echo the preamble, reinforcing the intentional "wisdom training regimen."

1. **Solomon 1 (Proverbs 10-22):**

- **Transition:** Moves from the home to the outside world, encountering "black-and-white character types of the righteous and the wise versus the foolish and the wicked."
- **Introduction:** To wisdom and folly (Ch. 10).
- **Conclusion:** On wealth and morality (Ch. 22).

1. **Sayings of the Wise 1:**

- **Transition:** Has its own introduction with "exhortation, motivation, and purpose."
- **Conclusion:** Focuses on "wisdom, righteousness, and justice," reinforcing the book's core virtues.

1. **Sayings of the Wise 2:**

- **Focus:** "Justice."
- **Conclusion:** Example story of "the sluggard," promoting diligence.

1. **Solomon 2 (Proverbs 25-29):**

- **Transition:** Moves to "complex royal applications," focusing on the "royal court setting."
- **Introduction:** In 25.1, noting "these are the Proverbs of Solomon that the men of Hezekiah copied," indicating editorial work by Hezekiah's scribes.
- **Conclusion:** Emphasizes "discipline, trust in Yahweh, and righteousness."

1. **Agur (Proverbs 30):**

- **Introduction:** On "humility and integrity in a proper wisdom epistemology," recognizing "mysteries and enigmas" beyond human grasp.
- **Conclusion:** On "arrogance versus humility in the wisdom pursuit," admonishing the seeker to "remember his place in the cosmos" and "stay humble before the Lord."

1. Lemuel (Proverbs 31):

- **Role:** The son who is now king, being instructed by his mother. This "brings the book full circle" as the mother's voice echoes the implicit mother in the prologue.
- **Conclusion:** Ends with "the exalted piety of the woman who fears Yahweh," specifically "the virtuous wife," who "embodies Lady Wisdom and her character from the prologue."

5. Progression from Simplicity to Complexity

Dunham emphasizes a clear pedagogical trajectory within the book:

- **From Simplicity to Complexity:** The preamble "informs us that the wisdom of the book moves from simplicity to complexity." This means moving from a "binary" or "black-and-white world" of character types to a "more sophisticated study of wisdom that requires more intellectual discipline and rigor," allowing for "more shades of nuance."
- **From Home to Royal Court:** The education begins in "the setting of the home and in the immediate family" and concludes with "intellectual conundrums that are the purview of the maturing wise, most likely in the royal court."
- **Growing Maturity:** The book equips the "inexperienced youth to be prepared for the complexities of civic and religious leadership."

6. The Centrality of Righteousness, Justice, and Integrity

Repeatedly highlighted throughout the analysis, the virtues of "righteousness, justice, and integrity" are presented as the "focal point of the book." They are explicitly named in the preamble (1:3) as what the wisdom seeker gains, reiterated in the Sayings of the Wise 1, and again in Solomon 2. These virtues are directly

linked to the "norms of Torah" and were stipulated as essential qualities for ancient Israelite leaders, particularly the king, as seen in Deuteronomy.

7. Elementary Wisdom and Character Formation in the Prologue

The prologue (Proverbs 1:8-9:18) serves as the foundation for the entire curriculum, focusing on "elementary wisdom that's focused on character formation." Key features indicating its foundational role include:

- **Domestic Context:** The "father-son relationship" and the "implicit carries the voice of the mother" reflect customary wisdom instruction originating in the home, mirroring Deuteronomy's training regimen.
- **Target Audience:** The "peti" (inexperienced youth) is the principal addressee, who "must take responsibility for himself by navigating a risk-filled world."
- **Lady Wisdom's Role:** She is a "teacher, and sage" who "amplifies the father's counsel" and is contrasted with Lady Folly (embodied by the "seductive outside woman").
- **Progression of Themes:** The 10 speeches and 5 interludes are "intentionally arranged" to progressively prepare the youth. The initial focus is on avoiding "bad friends and easy money," culminating in warnings against "illicit sex with outside women," signifying a movement towards "greater maturity and more difficult themes."

Conclusion

Dr. Dunham's analysis fundamentally reframes the understanding of Proverbs, presenting it not as a disjointed compilation but as a meticulously structured "educational program." This program, guided by mnemonic devices and a clear pedagogical progression, aims to cultivate foundational virtues of righteousness, justice, and integrity in young individuals, preparing them for the complex demands of socio-political leadership in ancient Israel and ultimately grounding them in the "fear of Yahweh" and the "norms of the Torah."

3) Study Guide: Structure and Theology of Proverbs: Session 1 Study Guide

I. Comprehensive Review Questions

This section provides a series of short-answer questions designed to test your understanding of the key concepts and arguments presented in the source material. Aim for 2-3 sentences per answer.

1. What is the main argument Dr. Dunham makes about the book of Proverbs, and what does he propose was its primary function in ancient Israel?
2. How does Dr. Dunham's view on the intentional design of Proverbs contrast with Michael Fox's perspective?
3. Explain the concept of "mnemonic serviceability" in relation to ancient oral cultures and the book of Proverbs.
4. According to Dr. Dunham, what three virtues are central to the educational program outlined in Proverbs, and where are they introduced?
5. Briefly describe Brevard Childs' "canonical approach" and how it influenced Dr. Dunham's methodology.
6. How did Gerald Wilson apply the canonical approach to the Psalter, and what specific element did he focus on?
7. List the seven wisdom collections Dr. Dunham identifies in the book of Proverbs.
8. What is the "preamble" of Proverbs, and what two elements frame it?
9. In what ways does the preamble suggest a progression of wisdom from simplicity to complexity?
10. Describe the primary setting and focus of the "prologue" (Proverbs 1:8-9:18), and identify the key relationships and characters present.

II. Essay Format Questions

These questions require more extensive answers, drawing upon multiple concepts and arguments from the source material. Do not supply answers.

1. Analyze how the "structural canonical approach," as refined by Julius Steinberg, is applied to the book of Proverbs by Dr. Dunham. Discuss how this approach helps to understand the book's function and intentional design.
2. Discuss the progression of wisdom development for the "inexperienced youth" throughout the book of Proverbs, as described by Dr. Dunham. How do the "literary seams" and the content of the seven wisdom collections facilitate this progression?
3. Examine the role of Lady Wisdom and the "outside woman" in the prologue of Proverbs. How do these literary characters contribute to the character formation of the young addressee, and what values do they embody or oppose?
4. Elaborate on the significance of "righteousness, justice, and integrity" as programmatic virtues in the book of Proverbs. How are these virtues emphasized in both the preamble and the prologue, and what is their connection to the norms of Torah and the training of future leaders?
5. Compare and contrast the "elementary wisdom" found in the prologue (Proverbs 1:8-9:18) with the "complex social applications" that follow in later sections. How does the instruction in the prologue prepare the youth for the challenges encountered in the broader world of ancient Israelite society?

III. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Aphorism:** A concise, pithy statement expressing a general truth or principle; a maxim.
- **Canonical Approach:** A method of biblical interpretation, pioneered by Brevard Childs, that focuses on the final, received form of a biblical book as a whole within the community of faith, rather than its historical development or underlying sources.
- **Chiasm:** A rhetorical or literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order, often to emphasize a central point.

- **Elementary Wisdom:** The foundational, character-forming instruction found particularly in the prologue of Proverbs, focusing on basic ethical decisions and the contrast between wisdom and folly.
- **Fear of Yahweh:** A central theme in Proverbs, representing both the starting point and the controlling principle for acquiring true knowledge and wisdom, emphasizing reverence and obedience to God.
- **Lady Folly:** A literary personification of foolishness and destructive choices in Proverbs, often contrasted with Lady Wisdom. She is embodied by the "seductive outside woman."
- **Lady Wisdom:** A literary personification of wisdom in Proverbs, presented as an active patroness and teacher who offers guidance and life-giving counsel. She is embodied by the "virtuous wife."
- **Liminal Entry:** The transitional stage or threshold between two states, in this context referring to the inexperienced youth on the verge of independent adulthood.
- **Literary Seams:** The transitions, openings, and conclusions of distinct sections or collections within a biblical book, which, according to the structural canonical approach, often reveal intentional design and editorial strategy.
- **Mnemonic Serviceability:** The quality of a text (especially in oral cultures) that aids memorization and mastery through formulaic, repetitive, or rhythmic language.
- **Peti:** A Hebrew term referring to the "inexperienced youth" or "naive" person, who is the primary addressee of the book of Proverbs, standing at a crossroads between wisdom and folly.
- **Preamble:** Proverbs 1:1-7, identified as the introduction to the book that outlines its purpose, provides a programmatic theme, and hints at the trajectory of wisdom from simplicity to complexity.
- **Prologue:** Proverbs 1:8-9:18, the initial section of the book that focuses on elementary wisdom, character formation within a household context, and the foundational contrast between Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.

- **Proverbs Strings:** Loosely connected clusters of proverbs, particularly noted in chapters 10 onwards, where Michael Fox argued there was no conscious arrangement.
- **Righteousness, Justice, and Integrity:** Three core virtues emphasized in the preamble and prologue of Proverbs, stipulated by the Torah for leaders in ancient Israel and central to the book's educational program for character formation.
- **Scribal Culture:** The literary and educational environment in ancient Israel that involved the training of scribes and officials, often through the memorization and mastery of core texts.
- **Seven Wisdom Collections:** Dr. Dunham's proposed intentional grouping of the book of Proverbs into distinct sections, designed to advance the reader from inexperience to greater maturity.
- **Sheol:** In ancient Israelite belief, the underworld or realm of the dead, often associated with negative consequences and destruction.
- **Solomon 1 (Proverbs 10-22):** The first major collection of Solomonic proverbs, characterized by aphorisms that begin to introduce the youth to different character types in the world outside the home.
- **Structural Canonical Approach:** A refinement of the canonical approach, particularly advocated by Julius Steinberg, which emphasizes the importance of analyzing the literary structure and design patterns of a biblical book to understand its function within the community of faith.
- **Torah:** The Law of Moses, or more broadly, divine instruction and teaching in ancient Israel, whose theological norms are seen as being "concretized" or materialized in the wisdom of Proverbs.
- **Virtuous Wife (Proverbs 31):** The exemplary female figure at the conclusion of Proverbs, who embodies the character and ethos of Lady Wisdom from the prologue.
- **Wisdom Literature:** A genre of biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts (including Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) that typically explore themes of morality, ethics, the meaning of life, and practical advice for living.

Quiz Answer Key

1. Dr. Dunham argues that Proverbs was an ancient curriculum designed to help inexperienced youth mature and progress towards socio-political leadership in ancient Israel. He proposes its primary function was as an educational program for character formation.
2. Michael Fox argued that Proverbs, especially from chapter 10 onward, lacked intentional design or conscious arrangement, seeing it as a collection of loosely connected proverbs. In contrast, Dr. Dunham asserts that the book has a deliberate structure, intentionally arranged to aid memorization and advance the learner.
3. Mnemonic serviceability refers to how texts, especially in primary oral cultures like ancient Israel, were formed with features like formulaic, repetitive, or rhythmic language to aid memorization and mastery. In Proverbs, this means the intentional verbal patterning helped aspiring leaders and scribes internalize core cultural and religious traditions.
4. The three central virtues are righteousness, justice, and integrity. They are introduced as the focal point in verse three of the preamble (Proverbs 1:1-7) and are continually emphasized throughout the book's educational program.
5. Brevard Childs' canonical approach requires interpreters to focus on the biblical text in its final, received form and discern its function for the community of faith, rather than layers behind it. Dr. Dunham adopts this by studying Proverbs as a cohesive whole, seeking its intended purpose as canon.
6. Gerald Wilson applied Childs' idea to the Psalter by arguing that the shape of the book could be understood by closely examining the "seams" connecting its five books, specifically the opening and closing Psalms of each. He believed this revealed the final editor's intention and literary strategy.
7. The seven wisdom collections are: Preamble/Prologue (1-9), Solomon 1 (10-22), Sayings of the Wise 1, Sayings of the Wise 2, Solomon 2 (25-29), Agur (30), and Lemuel (31).

8. The preamble is Proverbs 1:1-7. It is framed by a title ("The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel") in verse 1 and a programmatic theme ("The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and correction") in verse 7.
9. The preamble hints at longitudinal growth by using a chain of wisdom words, moving from basic terms like "wisdom and correction" to more sophisticated ones like "cunning, knowledge, and scheming," and finally to "proverb and interpretive epigram" and "sayings of the wise and their riddles." This suggests a progression from simple, binary wisdom to more nuanced and complex understanding.
10. The prologue (Proverbs 1:8-9:18) is primarily set in the home and focuses on elementary wisdom and character formation. Key relationships include the father-son dynamic and the implicit voice of the mother, while central characters are the "peti" (inexperienced youth), Lady Wisdom, and the "outside woman" (embodiment of Lady Folly).

4) FAQs:

1. What is the main argument or thesis presented regarding the book of Proverbs?

The main argument is that the book of Proverbs functions as an ancient curriculum designed to educate inexperienced youth, primarily young men, to mature and develop the necessary character and skills for socio-political leadership in ancient Israel. It is argued that the book's literary structure, particularly its seven wisdom collections, intentionally advances this educational program, moving the learner from elementary ethical decisions to complex social applications and embodying virtues like righteousness, justice, and integrity.

2. How does this interpretation of Proverbs challenge traditional scholarly views?

This interpretation challenges the traditional view that Proverbs lacks intentional design or theological depth, often described as the "orphan in the biblical

household" due to its practical orientation rather than theological formulation. Scholars like Michael Fox have argued against significant patterns or designs. However, this interpretation posits that Proverbs has a highly intentional literary structure and a clear educational and theological purpose, with its arrangement aiding memorization and character formation.

3. What scholarly approaches influenced this understanding of Proverbs?

The understanding of Proverbs is influenced by several scholarly approaches. Brevard Childs' canonical approach, which emphasizes studying the biblical text in its final, received form and discerning its function for the community of faith, is foundational. Gerald Wilson's application of this approach to the Psalter, by analyzing the "seams" between its books, further inspired the focus on the transitions and connections within Proverbs. Additionally, Julius Steinberg's "structural canonical approach," which examines how literary structure informs a book's function, is crucial to understanding the intentional arrangement of Proverbs.

4. How is the book of Proverbs structured to support its educational program?

The book of Proverbs is structured into a preamble, a prologue, and seven distinct wisdom collections. The preamble (Proverbs 1:1-7) outlines the book's purpose and introduces key virtues like righteousness, justice, and integrity, which serve as the baseline for the learner. The prologue (Proverbs 1:8-9:18) focuses on elementary wisdom and character formation, beginning in the home context with parental instruction and contrasting Lady Wisdom with Lady Folly. The subsequent seven wisdom collections incrementally guide the learner from simple, binary ethical choices to more complex social and royal applications, with "mnemonic signposts" embedded in the "seams" between sections to aid mastery and memorization.

5. What are the key virtues emphasized in the book of Proverbs, and why are they significant?

The key virtues emphasized throughout Proverbs are righteousness, justice, and integrity. These virtues are introduced in the preamble and are consistently reinforced in the prologue and subsequent collections. They are significant because they are presented as essential tenants for the tutelage of future

leaders in ancient Israel, reflecting the theological norms of the Torah, particularly as stipulated for kings in Deuteronomy. Cultivating these virtues was crucial for leaders to embody God's character and avoid the pitfalls associated with power.

6. What is the role of the "fear of Yahweh" in the book of Proverbs?

The "fear of Yahweh" is presented as the foundational and controlling principle for acquiring wisdom in Proverbs, explicitly stated as "the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). It is both the starting point and the guiding force for the entire wisdom enterprise. This theological grounding ensures that the pursuit of wisdom is not merely intellectual but deeply rooted in reverence for God, providing the ethical and moral framework for all subsequent learning and application of wisdom.

7. How does the book of Proverbs progress from elementary to more complex wisdom?

Proverbs begins with "elementary wisdom" focused on character formation within the domestic setting, addressing the "peti" (inexperienced youth) and emphasizing basic binary choices between wisdom and folly. As the learner progresses, the book introduces more sophisticated wisdom terminology (e.g., cunning, scheming) and moves to more complex social and royal contexts. This progression involves understanding nuanced situations, navigating the complexities of civic and religious leadership, and confronting more difficult temptations, such as those personified by the "outside woman," which appear later in the prologue as the youth matures.

8. What is the significance of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in the prologue of Proverbs?

Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly are crucial literary characters in the prologue, personifying the two paths available to the inexperienced youth. Lady Wisdom is presented as an active, attractive, and protective patroness of wisdom, echoing and amplifying the father's counsel. She offers wholesome guidance and leads to life. Lady Folly, embodied by the "seductive outside woman," represents a grave temptation to illicit and fatal pleasures that ultimately lead to destruction. This stark contrast serves as a fundamental lesson in character formation, urging

the youth to discern and choose the path of wisdom and avoid destructive influences.