

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

Every language has its own popular proverbs and sayings which enrich and enliven ordinary speech. 'The early bird catches the worm'; 'A stitch in time saves nine'; 'Too many cooks spoil the broth' – these are characteristic examples of English proverbs; most of us can think of many more. They represent the accumulated experience of a people and express it in a brief and memorable form. Among uneducated people especially they function as a rough and ready philosophy and a set of practical rules, and are handed down from one generation to another. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child', for example, has served through many generations as a rudimentary educational theory.

Ancient Israel was no exception. The Old Testament contains a number of popular proverbs and sayings not unlike our own, for example, 'Like mother, like daughter' (Ezek. 16: 44); 'One wrong begets another' (1 Sam. 24: 13); 'The lame must not think himself a match for the nimble' (1 Kings 20: 11).

At first sight Proverbs, especially certain sections like 10: 1–22: 16; 25–9, which consist mainly of large numbers of short sayings with no apparent arrangement or connection between them, might seem to be simply a collection of such popular sayings; but this is not so. For one thing, there are far too many of them. The essence of a popular saying is that it is common property, familiar to everyone. But there are far too many sayings in Proverbs for this to have been so. Most of us would find it difficult to remember more than a few dozen

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

English proverbs. No people could have had at their fingertips a vast collection like this.

Closer inspection confirms this judgement. These 'proverbs' differ in many ways from popular proverbs and sayings. The popular proverb is a short, pithy, memorable saying in prose. But the sayings in Proverbs are in poetry. They are also of a more literary character: they strive for effect rather than for memorability, using elaborate phraseology which goes far beyond the making of a simple point. Compare, for example, the simplicity of the popular sayings 'Like mother, like daughter' and 'One wrong begets another' with the following:

Like apples of gold set in silver filigree
 is a word spoken in season. (25: 11)

Like a golden earring or a necklace of Nubian gold
 is a wise man whose reproof finds attentive ears. (25: 12)

The wise man has his home full of fine and costly
 treasures;
 the stupid man is a mere spendthrift. (21: 20)

One can hardly imagine such sentences forming the common stock of sayings of the ordinary man.

It is also important to notice that many of the sayings in Proverbs are concerned with circumstances entirely outside the experience of the ordinary man. 16: 15, for example, would have meaning only for the small number of people who had regular access to the king:

In the light of the king's countenance is life,
 his favour is like a rain-cloud in the spring.

It is true that some of the sayings in Proverbs may have been composed on the basis of simpler, popular sayings. For example, in 24:5 the first half ('Wisdom prevails over strength') may have been a popular saying which has been given a more literary appearance by the addition of the second line ('knowledge over brute force'). But this is unlikely to be true of

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

more than a few. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that most of the sayings in Proverbs are literary creations whose authors had a high degree of education. And this is obviously true of the longer poems – especially in chapters 1–9 – which also form part of Proverbs.

THE WISDOM TRADITION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The culture of ancient Israel was not a unique phenomenon but belonged to a much wider cultural tradition shared by the neighbouring peoples, especially Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria. Israel was a latecomer to the community of nations, and so became heir to a culture which had already flourished for many centuries. It is therefore important to look at the literature of the ancient Near East for clues to the origin of the types of literature which we find in Proverbs. Fortunately a great deal of this literature has come to light during the last 150 years.

One of the types of Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature is that which modern scholars call 'wisdom literature'. Most of this is much older than any part of the Old Testament. In Egypt the most characteristic type of wisdom book was that which is known as the Instruction. The period during which such books were composed was a very long one: the earliest were written well before 2000 B.C. One of the latest of them, the *Instruction of Amen-em-opet*, probably to be dated at some time between 1000 and 600 B.C., served directly as a basis for one section of Proverbs (22: 17–24: 22). They usually take the form of advice and warnings given by a father to his son, a feature which is reflected in Proverbs with its frequent use of the phrase 'my son'. One of their most conspicuous features is the predominance of the imperative forms 'Do this', 'Do not do that'. For example, in one of the oldest of them, the *Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep*, the father says to his son, 'Do not become boastful because of your knowledge; do not

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The wisdom tradition in the ancient Near East

be over-confident because you are a wise man.' This feature is also frequently found in Proverbs.

The 'father-to-son' form no doubt goes back to a time when education in Egypt was provided by parents; but the Instructions with which we are familiar were mainly used in the school. Egypt had a highly developed system of both elementary and higher education.

It is not difficult to understand how Israel came to borrow this foreign literary tradition. When Israel first became a national state and began to develop settled national institutions, in the time of David and Solomon, it drew upon the experience of other more well-established states such as Egypt. The Egyptian civil servants who helped these Israelite kings to set up their national organizations – including an educational system – were themselves trained in the Egyptian schools, and they brought with them, and handed on, the literary wisdom tradition which had been the basis of their own education. In this way the small group of men who had been selected to occupy the position of state official or scribe in Israel came to found a literary wisdom of their own, closely modelled at first on the Egyptian tradition which they had received. The wisdom tradition in Israel was therefore from the first not a popular tradition but one which was primarily the possession of this privileged, educated class. As we shall see, there were other influences as well, and the Israelite writers did not forget their own distinctive national characteristics; nevertheless Israelite wisdom literature, of which Proverbs is the most characteristic example, took its origin from foreign inspiration.

We cannot be certain that any part of the book goes back to Solomon as is claimed in the headings in 1: 1; 10: 1; 25: 1. But the statement in 1 Kings 4: 32 that Solomon 'uttered three thousand proverbs' is unlikely to be without any historical foundation at all. Prov. 25: 1, with its reference to the work of the 'men of Hezekiah king of Judah' on older proverbial material, shows that the Judaeen court was still a centre of wisdom activity 300 years after Solomon, and it is reasonable

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
R. N. Whybray
Excerpt
[More information](#)

The wisdom tradition in the ancient Near East

to suppose that much of Proverbs as we have it now is the product of a continuous development of literary wisdom throughout the period of the monarchy, that is from the tenth to the sixth century B.C.

Egypt was not the only source of influence on Israel's wisdom tradition. The old tribal wisdom of the Israelites can hardly have failed to make its mark upon it, though unfortunately we know very little about this, and are therefore unable to measure the extent of its influence. Another source of influence difficult to assess is that of the Canaanite cities which had existed in Palestine long before the arrival of Israel, and whose higher culture had a marked effect on their new masters when they were conquered or otherwise taken over by David and Solomon when those kings extended Israelite control over the whole country. This Canaanite culture was a mixed one, influenced both by Egypt and the Mesopotamian cultures but also possessing characteristics of its own. Unfortunately the very small quantity of Canaanite wisdom literature which has survived makes it difficult to assess the extent of its influence. Besides these sources, Israel was aware of yet other wisdom traditions: the statement in 1 Kings 4: 30-1 that 'Solomon's wisdom surpassed that of all the men of the east and of all Egypt. For he was wiser than any man, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Kalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol', and the headings of Prov. 30: 1; 31: 1 (on which see the notes in the commentary) show that there was a wisdom tradition among the tribes east of Palestine, in the northern Arabian desert, with which Israel was in contact.

Far more is known, however, about the influence of Mesopotamian wisdom on Israel. Much of the wisdom literature of the Sumerians and of the Babylonians and Assyrians who followed them in the Euphrates valley has been preserved, although our sources are less abundant than in the case of Egypt. One of the most important characteristics of this wisdom literature is that, unlike that of Egypt where the

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The wisdom tradition in the ancient Near East

Instruction form ('Do this'; 'Do not do that') predominates, much of it takes the form of collections of short proverbs and sayings in which the teaching is expressed partly or wholly in statements which simply describe the facts of life. It is this type rather than the Instruction which predominates also in the greater part of Proverbs. In this respect the *Words of Ahikar*, a book which is probably of Assyrian origin, is particularly important. Much of its contents is very similar to passages in Proverbs: for example, its teaching on parental discipline is very close indeed: 'The son who is educated and disciplined and whose feet are fettered will do well. Do not hesitate to take the rod to your son if you cannot restrain him from wickedness. If I strike you, my son, you will not die, and if I leave you to your own devices you will not live' (lines 80-2). Compare especially Prov. 23: 13-14:

Do not withhold discipline from a boy;
 take the stick to him, and save him from death.
 If you take the stick to him yourself,
 you will preserve him from the jaws of death.

Similar teaching is also found in Prov. 13: 24; 19: 18; 29: 17.

Ahikar is of particular interest to the student of Proverbs for several reasons. It was almost certainly written in Assyria during the period of the Israelite monarchy, and so is probably contemporary with some parts of Proverbs. It is known to have been composed in scribal circles similar to those of Egypt, and so confirms the view that such circles were the centres of the composition of proverb collections; and finally there is positive proof that it was actually known to, and read by, Israelites: a copy, in Aramaic translation, was found among documents from a Jewish colony in Egypt of the fifth century B.C.

As in the case of Egyptian wisdom literature it is not difficult to understand how this Mesopotamian literature came to exercise its influence on Israel. We know that it was known and read in Canaan even before the arrival of the Israelites,

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The wisdom tradition in the ancient Near East

since clay tablets inscribed with proverbs and instructions in Accadian, the language of the Babylonians, have been found in Canaanite cities. This wisdom tradition may therefore have found its way to Israel through the medium of the Canaanites. And in later centuries contacts between Israel and Mesopotamia continued, both in times of peace and in periods when kings of Israel and Judah were the vassals of Assyria and Babylon. At no time was Israel entirely isolated from either Egypt or Mesopotamia.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND ITS MODELS:
 RESEMBLANCES AND DIFFERENCES

Each area of the ancient Near East developed its own style of wisdom literature, in which local religious and cultural characteristics modified the common pattern. It is therefore important for the student of Proverbs to understand what the book has in common with its models and to what extent it diverges from them.

1. *Scope.* Although at least some sections of Proverbs must have been composed, like their foreign counterparts, mainly for use as textbooks in schools whose purpose was to educate a small scribal class, the tone of the book as a whole is less purely professional than that of the majority of the Egyptian Instructions, and much of its teaching is of more general interest. This may be due to a progressive enlargement of the educated class in Israel during the course of its history. During the later stages of its composition the book tended to lose its purely scholastic character and came to be read by a wider circle of readers for both instruction and entertainment.

2. *Religious teaching.* The Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom books are concerned above all to recommend to the student a course of behaviour which will set him on the road to a long, happy and successful career. This was to be achieved, however, not by a selfish careerism but by recognizing that the world is governed by an all-pervading divine Order, and

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
R. N. Whybray
Excerpt
[More information](#)

The Book of Proverbs and its models

that what is required of a man is simply that he should conform to this Order in every department of life. The man who did so would be happy and prosperous; the man who set himself against the Order would end in disaster. Each man would get what he deserved. This teaching is well summarized in *Ptah-hotep*: 'Truth (that is, the Order) is good and of permanent value, and has remained unchanged since the day when it was created. Whoever breaks its rules is punished. It lies before the uninstructed like a straight path. Wrong-doing has never yet brought its undertakings safe home to port. Evil may indeed acquire wealth, but the strength of truth lies in its permanence, and the righteous man says, "It is an inheritance from my father."' "

Basically the teaching of Proverbs follows the same lines. The concept is wide enough to include the practical, moral and religious aspects of life, and in Proverbs, as in its foreign models, these are not sharply distinguished one from the other. The ideals represented by the figures of the wise man and the righteous man are not opposed to one another but are twin aspects of one and the same ideal. Both lead to divine approval and so to happiness.

Nevertheless the unique character of the religion of Israel, though this is hardly ever referred to specifically in Proverbs, left its mark. In the polytheistic systems of Egypt and Mesopotamia there was a multiplicity of gods, none of whom was by himself in supreme control of the universe, and the Order to which men were expected to conform was distinct from and superior to the gods – an impersonal force. But the Israelite's conviction that everything in heaven and earth was under the control of his God, Yahweh (this personal name of God, too sacred to be spoken, is represented in the Old Testament by the phrase 'the LORD'), enabled him, in the end, to see more clearly than his neighbours the true relationship between wisdom and religious faith. This insight is not apparent in every part of Proverbs, but in its final form, which represents the full maturity of Israelite thought on this subject, the book

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The Book of Proverbs and its models

teaches that wisdom is first and foremost the possession of God himself. This insight is most completely expressed in 2: 3–8:

If you summon discernment to your aid
 and invoke understanding,
 if you seek her out like silver
 and dig for her like buried treasure,
 then you will understand the fear of the LORD
 and attain to the knowledge of God;
 for the LORD bestows wisdom
 and teaches knowledge and understanding.
 Out of his store he endows the upright with ability
 as a shield for those who live blameless lives;
 for he guards the course of justice
 and keeps watch over the way of his loyal servants.

In other passages (1: 20–33; 8; 9: 1–6) the same thought is expressed in vivid symbolism: wisdom is there represented as a personal being related to God, who offers divine instruction to men. This teaching, which provides a counterbalance to the tendency of some strands of Israelite thought to regard wisdom as essentially human arrogance leading to rebellion against God, eventually came to make an important contribution not only to Jewish faith but to Christian teaching as well.

This reconciliation between the originally foreign wisdom tradition and the religion of Israel was not achieved all at once or without a struggle. Wisdom, with its connections with the small ruling class and its tendency to recommend a utilitarian approach to life and in particular to the conduct of national policy, came under fire from some of the prophets, who believed that the only motivation for human conduct ought to be the will of God expressed in the laws which he had given to his people and in the Word which he continued to speak through his prophets. But the decisions of national policy were made on the basis of what the prophets considered to be purely human considerations, such as are expressed in Prov. 11: 14:

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09679-9 - The Book of Proverbs
 R. N. Whybray
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The Book of Proverbs and its models

For want of skilful strategy an army is lost;
 victory is the fruit of long planning.

For the prophets, victory was secured not by skilful strategy but by hearing and obeying the Word of God. And so we find the prophet Isaiah condemning human wisdom:

Then the LORD said:

Because this people approach me with their mouths
 and honour me with their lips
 while their hearts are far from me,
 and their religion is but a precept of men, learnt by rote,
 therefore I will yet again shock this people,
 adding shock to shock:
 the wisdom of their wise men shall vanish
 and the discernment of the discerning shall be lost.

(Isa. 29: 13–14)

It was probably from this time onwards that attempts were first made to reconcile the wisdom tradition with the will of God. Isaiah himself showed the way: he was the first, as far as we know, to use the word 'wise' of God when he affirmed that God's control of history was inspired by wisdom (Isa. 31: 2). But the later years of the monarchy were not, on the whole, years when the prophets found a ready ear in court circles. In the seventh century B.C. Jeremiah continued to attack the policies of the kings of his time, and it was almost certainly not until the period after the destruction of the state of Judah in 587 B.C., when men were able to reflect on the experiences of the past with some degree of theological perspective, that the final reconciliation between the 'fear of Yahweh' and wisdom was achieved.

Proverbs therefore reflects a series of stages in the development of Israel's own brand of wisdom teaching: it contains Instructions hardly distinguishable from those of Egypt, many sayings in which, in spite of an Israelite dress, the successful life remains the goal with little reference to specifically moral