Proverbs: Responses to Questions

*How is Proverbs split into chapters? Is it random?*

\*\*It looks pretty random. The English chapters are quite different from the Hebrew ones.

*Isn’t Proverbs simplistic? Life doesn’t work the way it says.*

\*\*That’s right – that’s why we have Job and Ecclesiastes as well. Proverbs deals with generalities that work 80 percent of the time. We mustn’t treat them as working 100 percent of the time; we mustn’t lose their importance because we are aware of the 20 percent.

*Why is anger a prominent theme?*

\*\*Because people are inclined to anger? Insofar as the teaching is for people in government, it’s a special danger.

*Can there be a synthesis of Proverbs, with other books such as the Psalms (protest Psalms, praise Psalms) and Ecclesiastes? Proverbs appears to be a book that I would be glad to identify with, a book in which the world works the way that it should.  However, the protest psalms say that the world is not this way and take God to task.  Ecclesiastes agrees and declares that life is empty. Are the protests and Ecclesiastes always trying to attain to the life that is found in Proverbs, a world in which Proverbs is king?  And Ecclesiastes thinks both are meaningless, but if you are going to live by one, better to live by a paradigm of Proverbs.*

\*\*I like that image of wanting to return to a world in which Proverbs is king. “Synthesis” then isn’t quite the word. The scriptures suggest that we have to live in between Proverbs and the praise psalms on one hand and Ecclesiastes and the protest psalms on the other, always given hope by Proverbs and the praise psalms but forced to be real by the protest psalms and Ecclesiastes.

*How does Proverbs, which seems very law-based, connect with the NT?*

\*\*I’m not sure what law-based means here. Does it mean that things work out for people who do the right thing? But Jesus promises that, too (Mt 6:33), and Paul promises that generous people prosper (2 Cor 8—9).

*Many of the Proverbs seem almost impossible to attain in our human existence (of course, I am always humbled by Proverbs 31, for example!) What is supposed to be our response to these teachings?*

\*\*Is it any worse than the rest of the Bible: e.g., “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Jesus)? Maybe it’s to inspire us?

*It looks as if this Proverbs 22—24 is modeled on the Egyptian text, though usually parallels with other peoples’ wisdom texts will more reflect being part of a common way of looking at things. Isn’t it worrying that wisdom outside scripture is similar to wisdom inside scripture? Or If the Holy Spirit allowed Israel to draw from foreign sources, shouldn’t we be open to secular self-help books and motivational seminars which often carry the same principle as the Bible?*

\*\*This dependence fits the assumption running through scripture that God has not left the rest of the world ignorant of the basic truths about God and us. Proverbs is distinctive for the more systematic way it interrelates pragmatic wisdom, ethics, and God. What the world doesn’t have is not those basic truths that everyone can know, but the gospel story that tells about how God acted to put things right – that’s the thing you can get only in the Bible. And the things we learn from the world need to be set in those two contexts – the gospel story, and faith and ethics.

*How does Proverbs (and Job and Ecclesiastes) look at/relate to other religions? It seems that a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu might not have any big issues with accepting these writings as part of their core of religious writings if these pieces had developed within their own context.*

\*\*They don’t really talk about other religions and relate to them in that sense, but their willingness to utilize their resources suggests an openness to recognizing that there is truth in them, and one would indeed expect a Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu to recognize truth in them, as we can recognize truths in the teaching of those other religions. They are not wholly wrong. It doesn’t mean all religions are the same or are equally true, because there are distinctive features of Egyptian, Babylonian, Israelite, Hindu, Buddhist, and Moslem religions that make them irreconcilable. The overlap opens up the possibility of a conversation in which we can say, “Yes, we agree about x and y, but let me tell you something really important that it’s vital to add to those things” (what God did in Israel in the story that comes to a climax in Jesus).

*Why should I place authority on these texts? Why should I not place authority on other ancient literature that displays equal wisdom?*

\*\*The general reason is the same as for any other parts of scripture. It’s a combination of the fact that they are illuminating, that the people of God passed them on to me, and that Jesus accepted them and thus commended them to me. Other ancient literature (and other works) can also be illuminating, but don’t have those other two things in their favor. The implication is that on one hand I have more expectations of the scriptural writings, and on the other, that I feel free to reject things in other works, but I don’t do that with the scriptural writings.

*How likely is it that either the Israelites or Egyptians were influenced by the other when they wrote their literature? Are there any other documents with similar themes found amongst the other nations, too?*

\*\*Israel and Egypt are especially close and the OT gives lots of reference to movement between the two, and it also explicitly refers to the wisdom of other peoples. For Babylonian proverbs, see w.

*How would the Proverbs be used in the Jewish liturgy or consciousness? How do they relate to the laws of God, for instance? Are they as authoritative, or do they serve more as a kind of folk-morality for the people? Is the concept of morality or authority even an appropriate lens through which to view Proverbs?*

\*\*They would be more used in a teaching context in family or college. Their content is often very similar to the Torah, so what you have is different ways of commending the same lifestyle—do this because God says so, do it because of God’s acts in your life, do it because you know it makes sense.

*What are the primary differences between ancient near eastern instruction/proverbs/sayings and those found in the Bible?*

\*\*The difference lies more in the context (of a relationship with Yahweh and a stress on ethics) than in the content. The biblical argument is not confined to one about how to get good fortune, though it includes that argument.

*How many of the proverbs were just for the contemporary culture?*

\*\*None, I guess, to judge from 2 Tim 3:14-17. But of course all are expressed in a cultural context so they may need adapting, e.g., to an urban culture.

*How would beating save your children from Sheol?*

\*\*The assumption is that wise/immoral behavior such as theft and adultery risks an early death (e.g., 1:32; 9:18).

*Were the proverb composers inspired by God? Or did they write from what they saw in life?*

\*\*They say the latter, but this wouldn’t exclude God’s providence being at work. Compare Luke 1:1-4—he worked from what he read and saw.

*What is the equivalent to wisdom literature today?*

\*\*The books of leadership and counseling.

*If wisdom begins with awe for Yahweh, how can you buy it (23:23)?*

I guess that’s an image one shouldn’t press—it means give everything for it. Compare Jesus saying you sell everything to get the pearl of the gospel.