

Proverbs

1. Overview – Proverbs is an anthology of writings and short sayings about true wisdom. The book addresses wise living in a fallen world.
2. Author and date – Proverbs is a compilation of writings by a number of different authors from various time periods. Some sections explicitly indicate authorship. Solomon (1:1), Agur (30:1), and King Lemuel (31:1) are mentioned by name. Prov. 1:1-7 introduces the book as being primarily associated with Solomon. However, the introduction does not claim Solomonic authorship for itself. Solomon’s unsurpassed wisdom is an important theme in the historical account of his life (1 Kings 3:1-15; 4:29-31), including the writing of many proverbs and wise sayings (4:32). Therefore, it is natural to conclude that the book was initiated by Solomon, and much of the unattributed wisdom may have flowed from his thought and effort.

The “men of Hezekiah” (25:1) appear to have had an editorial role in the book. Thus, we know from Solomon’s contribution that the book was begun at least by the 10th century B.C. and from the contribution of Hezekiah’s men that it was not finalized before Hezekiah’s reign around 700 B.C. Some of the wisdom may have been collected by Solomon from an earlier period, and it may be possible that either the men of Hezekiah or some later editor arranged all the material and wrote the introduction (1:1-7). Because of the anonymous sections and the absence of historical information outside Proverbs about Agur and Lemuel, we cannot be more precise than this about the dating of the book.

3. Structure of the book (Dillard & Longman):
 - a. Preamble (1:1-7)
 - b. Extended discourses on wisdom (1:8-9:18)
 - c. Solomon’s proverbs (10:1-22:16; 25:1-29:27)
 - d. Sayings of the wise (22:17-24:34)
 - e. Sayings of Agur (30)
 - f. Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-9)
 - g. Poem to the virtuous woman (31:10-31)
4. Principles of interpretation
 - a. *Recognize the theistic framework.* Some people tend to read Proverbs as merely a collection of short, pithy sayings that provide practical, common-sense observations about how to get along in life. However, even though some of these Proverbs may have been derived from reflection and observation, we must ultimately attribute their source to God. “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure...so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.” Furthermore, the very beginning of wisdom and knowledge is the fear of the LORD (1:7, 9:10). True wisdom is hopeless unless one is rightly related to God; that is, ethics presupposes relationship.
 - b. *Recognize what is at stake.* Proverbs presents us with more than practical tips about how to get along in life. It presents us with a choice between life and death. Folly in ch. 9 has a house on the “highest point in the city” (9:14), which was the case for all the ancient Near East gods that so often drew Israel from the worship of Yahweh. Thus, we are presented with a choice between wisdom and folly, Yahweh and Baal, life and death. Proverbs is more than good advice! It is about the choice between two kinds of life.
 - c. *Don’t absolutize the Proverbs.* The individual proverbs were not intended to be read in isolation from the larger context of the book or the teaching of the Bible as a whole. Proverbs are not promises. They do not guarantee the described outcome in every instance but speak of general truths that are vindicated in the end. A soft answer does not always turn away wrath (15:1), but this is the general way of things.
 - d. *Recognize the parallel structure.* Many of the proverbs are short couplets. They are intended to examine the same truth from two different perspectives. “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish man despises his mother” (15:20). This does not mean that mothers alone are the target of a foolish son’s bad attitude. Rather, wisdom and folly affect both parents.
 - e. *See Jesus as the embodiment of God’s wisdom.* John 1:1 and Col. 1:15 appear to refer back to Proverbs 8 concerning wisdom’s role in and prior to creation. Jesus is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30).

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.