

Twenty-five years ago a book was published titled Emotional Intelligence by a man named Daniel Goleman. The book and the concepts in it became fairly popular, especially in the business community and others interested in discovering paths to leadership success. Goleman's book never mentions the Bible or the book of Proverbs. But he does offer a clear distinction between IQ and emotional intelligence (EI). I mention all this because it turns out that the definition the book offers for EI is remarkably similar to the kind of wisdom portrayed in Proverbs. Those who have high IQ scores are known to be avid problem solvers (mathematical and otherwise), they have superior abilities to reason and use logic, and often possess a considerable knowledge base in many disciplines. EI, on the other hand, has more to do with characteristics like, "self-control, zeal and persistence and the ability to motivate oneself." Moreover, people with EI frequently have skills in persevering through frustrations, controlling impulses, and succeeding at delayed gratification, to regulate their own moods and keeping "distress from swamping the ability to think; and to empathize and to hope." One author commenting on this connection between Proverbs and EI says that, "biblical wisdom is much closer to the idea of EI than it is to IQ." He goes on to say that, "wisdom is a skill, a 'knowing how'; it is not a raw intellect, merely a 'knowing that'. Goleman's remarkable conclusion is that EI, not IQ, correlates with success in life—success being the ability to get and hold a good job, enjoy life and sustain healthy relationships." He concludes, "Why read Proverbs, then? To gain wisdom, which is an ability to navigate life. We will see that it means much, much more than how to make and keep friends or say the right word at the right time. But that it does mean those things should contribute to our interest in this book."

Lydia Brownback says that "Proverbs advances the overarching theme of the Bible, which is God's calling, preserving, and shaping a people for himself. Proverbs advances this theme uniquely through the offer of God-centered wisdom...wisdom is personified as a noble lady whom one should pursue. The personification anticipates the words of the apostle Paul: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:22-24).

This captures the heart of why we should study this book, or any book of the Bible for that matter. Christ crucified is the wisdom of God. That's a profound concept. I don't think any of us can fully understand that or know fully how to translate that into our daily lives. But as we diligently make our way through the book over the next few months, we can be confident the Holy Spirit will further enlighten us about why this matters to the Christian and how to

manifest this reality in our thinking, our choices, our priorities, our attitudes, and behaviors towards others.

With that said, I do want to provide us with just a bit of background about this book. Understanding literary style, historical context, and authorship is always a good idea to help us approach any biblical writing. And Proverbs is no exception. I've been looking forward to studying this for a while now as it represents such a very different kind of writing compared to narratives and the portions of the Gospel like the Sermon on the Mount. How kind of God to give us such a wonderful mix of genres that offer the story of salvation. As you probably know, Proverbs fits into a category of writing in Scripture called "wisdom literature", this designation is not so much for its form as it is for its subject matter. Wisdom literature is produced by wise individuals and the form it comes to us in is of course, the proverb. A proverb is a concise, memorable statement of truth. Some of the proverbs are phrased as straightforward declarative 'sayings,' while others are phrased as imperative exhortations.

Additionally, the book of Proverbs is poetry, with the result that we need to apply what we know about interpreting such elements of poetry as image, metaphor, and simile. The verse form of this poetry is called parallelism, and most of the book consists of two-line units that require the second line to complete the thought of the first, by way of repetition, contrast, or comparison. Other techniques include analogy (such as, "the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life," 11:30), the brief portrait (such as the portrait of the drunkard in ch. 23), and numerical listings (such as the list of four mysterious things in ch. 30).

Proverbs are concise, memorable sayings. They strip away extraneous material and focus on a single aspect of experience. They state principles that extend to a whole category of similar experiences; for example, the proverb 'Righteousness exalts a nation' (14:34) states a principle that accurately applies to nation at all points in history. A good proverb not only states an insight but actually compels insight. Many proverbs are both particular and universal: for example, the proverb, 'In the place where the tree falls, there it will lie' (this actually is found in the book of Ecclesiastes) paints a concrete picture, but that picture is a symbol or metaphor of the universal principle of finality that attends many events in life. Proverbs are observations regarding the repeatable situations of life, **but an observation should not necessarily be construed as a promise**. Thus the proverb, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" is an observation about what *usually happens*, not a promise that it will always happen. The most powerful context for a proverb is the everyday situation in life where it applies.

Finally, the deeper meanings of a proverb, including a proverb that is observational in format, will emerge if we apply the following grid to it:

What virtue does this proverb urge?

What vice does it denounce?

What value does it affirm?

In addition to understanding all of this information about the literary format of the book, it's also helpful to explore the cultural and historical context, as well as the authorship. One scholar explains it this way, "Many people think that the authorship of Proverbs is established in the first verse: 'These are the proverbs of Solomon, David's son, king of Israel.' As we read on, though, the issue becomes much more complex. Other sections are marked by captions that seem to attribute authorship to others. For instance, 22:17 and 24:23 mention a group called simply 'the wise'; 30:1 and 31:1 mention two unknown kings name Agur and Lemuel respective; 10:1 and 25:1 mention Solomon again, but the latter also ascribes some type of role to the 'advisers of King Hezekiah of Judah.' Thus the question of authorship seems much more complex after a complete reading of the book.

Indeed, there is quite a variety of opinion about the compositional history of the book. Conservative scholars argue that Solomon authored the parts directly attributed to him and also collected and presented the work of the other wisdom figures periodically named in the book. More liberal scholars argue that nothing in the book can be directly associated with Solomon and that his association with the book is the result of his legendary wisdom. The majority of present-day scholars limit Solomon's contribution to 10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27, sections that constitute a major—and perhaps the earliest—portion of the book. Thus it is certainly appropriate for the first verse to identify Solomon as the main contributor and the initiator of the anthology. After all, his connection with biblical wisdom is a major theme of the historical narrative in the book of Kings. He prays for and receives wisdom from God (I Kings 3:1-15), then demonstrates that wisdom in a practical case (I Kings 3:16-28). His wisdom exceeds that of anyone else in the world, impressing even the Queen of Sheba, who travels a long distance to see for herself what she has heard about him. His wisdom led to a considerable compilation of proverbs; I Kings 4:32 declares that three thousand are authored by him.

Very little is known about the other authors named in the book. The names Agur and Lemuel occur only here and with limited additional information. The 'wise' are anonymous, though their designation may tell us that they were professional scholars perhaps serving the court.

The only other group named in the book are the advisors to King Hezekiah. While early Jewish tradition may have ascribed authorship of the book to them, Proverbs 25:1 clearly gives them a role similar to a scribe or an editor.

As with any anthology, Proverbs is composed of material written over a period of time. We do not know how long, because there are anonymous sections of the book as well as named authors about whom we know nothing. We are on firm ground only with Solomon (10th century B.C.) and the men of Hezekiah (700 B.C.). Since the work of the latter is limited to one small portion of the book, it is reasonable to conclude that there was an even later editorial stage that arranged the entire book and provided the short introduction. We don't know the exact date of this final editing

What we do know is that what we read in our bibles when we come to this book is what was included in the canon of Scripture. It is inerrant and infallible in its original language, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and authoritative in our lives today. We are blessed to have it in our own language, to have the ability to read it, and for copies of it to be readily available to all of us in this room. This is all such a privilege that we enjoy—while so many around the world today have none of these gifts. May our study of it this spring lead us to love God's Word even more, and to come away from this study with fresh insights and lessons learned about living wisely for God's glory.

Sources:

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