

# PROLEGOMENA TO THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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From early days there existed in Israel men and women who gave themselves to the study and teaching of what was called "wisdom [*hokhmah*]." This pursuit was not peculiar to Israel, and was found throughout the Ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> In Israel, Solomon became its patron and it is reported that he composed 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs.<sup>2</sup> In the canon of Hebrew Scripture, Proverbs takes its place among the "wisdom books" along with Job, Ecclesiastes and about a dozen of the psalms. "In intellectual penetration, ethical awareness, and religious spirit, it is approached by these other literatures only here and there. Taken as a whole, it is unmatched in the surviving records of the wisdoms of any other ancient people."<sup>3</sup>

## WISDOM TEACHERS AND THEIR PUPILS

Wisdom teachers were firm in their belief that wisdom may be open to all but it does not come naturally; it can only be acquired through education.<sup>4</sup> They were able and readily available to share their knowledge with those who sought it, especially the younger generation. Their teaching material consisted of instruction that was handed down from prior generations, enriched by their own contributions. What they had to impart was the accumulated experiences of others as well as the vehicle whereby this funded wisdom was transmitted. Their favorite medium or method was the *mashal* [proverb, aphorism], a literary form of singular beauty and incisive power.

They believed in the effectiveness of the *mashal* because it called forth and challenged the attention of their listeners. It was thought provoking and could easily be committed to memory because of its linguistic features and poetic cadence. Its broad appeal can be explained by the absence of esoteric doctrine. It was able to speak to the ordinary man in a rather straightforward idiom that resonated with wholesome good sense and acceptable piety: *O men, I call to you. My cry is to all mankind. O simple ones, learn shrewdness; O dullards, instruct your minds* (Prov. 8:4-5).

The purpose of the teachers was practical. Their maxims and aphorisms were intended to lead to some form of action. Their teaching was tied to life.

Their aim was to carry their pupils along with them and thereby induce them to action. One might attribute their success to their genuinely affectionate interest in their pupils, reinforced by the compelling style of their diction and the manifest truth of what they had to say.

They were not argumentative. Their method was to assert, not to prove. The "scoffers" who did appear from time to time were met with sweeping denials and a mix of condemnations and threats. The Greek idea of "dialogue," in which the exponents of differing views confront each other as equals and have the right to a full examination of their respective claims in the court of reason, was evidently foreign to these savants.

It was expected of the pupil to be receptive and to thereby pass on the tradition intact. This accounts for the stress that was laid on the value of attentiveness that is an important aspect of memory: *My son, forget not my law; but let your heart keep my commandments . . . . Let not kindness and truth forsake you; bind them about your neck; write them upon the tablet of your heart* (3:1ff). The searching light of critical examination and comparison must never shine on the foundations upon which the structure of wisdom rested. Anything like independent reflection was frowned upon: *Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him* (26:12).

Such a method of education had obvious drawbacks. It made for rigidity and may have left its pupils unprepared to deal with unexpected and novel situations. If it did indeed tend to close the mind against foreign ideas and alien traditions, it succeeded in preserving and strengthening an ancient heritage that was noble and withstood the test of time. It also freed the ordinary man, to the extent that it did succeed, from the confusion and bewilderment of conflicting ideas. On the positive side it engendered group solidarity, religious enthusiasm and ethnic pride.

#### PROVERBS: PERSONAL APPEAL

The moment one begins to read the Book of Proverbs, one is struck by the fact that you are being addressed personally: *My son, hear the instruction of thy father* (1:8). How different from the prophets, whose words are directed to Israel, Judah, the city of Jerusalem, or the nations. In Proverbs the polity all but disappears and attention is riveted upon the ordinary citizen. Moreo-

ver, words directed to the ordinary citizen are applicable to men and women, Jew and Gentile, ancient and modern.

The reader is nowhere appealed to because he is chosen or has any part to play in the world because of it. The authors of Proverbs have no axe to grind, no institution to promote, nor advantage of their own to seek. They are wholly concerned with the good of their readers or their listeners. No one can fail to see that they want human relations to be made as beautiful and as noble as is humanly possible.

Their gaze is upon the individual, in order to teach and guide him so he can be a blessing to himself and to others. They do not command. Their aim is to win the hearts of their listeners to the path of wisdom by persuasion. They appeal to traditional, inherited beliefs, to plain common sense, to tried and tested models, and to the maxim that "nothing succeeds like success." This path, called "wisdom," is guaranteed to produce a high yield of rich dividends because, like all things, wisdom ultimately comes from God. And: *The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord* (1:7).

In human life, therefore, wisdom means conforming to the Divine constitution of the world. This is but another way of saying that one must strive to do the will of God. In the main, however, the teachers expressed their maxims and aphorisms in terms of natural law. They knew, based on human experience, that whatever runs counter to these laws is unsound and doomed to collapse.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, Proverbs contains maxims that are the product of mere prudence, but even they have often a distinctly moral tone. The fundamental assumption is that altruistic virtue is the cornerstone of wisdom and the only sound way of life.

#### ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

The Book of Proverbs sets a high standard for ethical behavior, as one might expect from a code that is of Divine origin. It calls for a society in which people work hard, respect each other and each other's rights, treat the less fortunate kindly, have concern for the poor, maintain an atmosphere of general friendliness, enjoy pleasures with moderation, love their families and homes, are sincere, modest, self-controlled, temperate, reliable, chaste, willing to listen and to learn, forgiving, considerate, discreet, kind to animals, sweet tempered, generous, yet withal prudent with an eye to self-interest.

In the ethical sayings, no attempt is made to discuss the nature of right and wrong, or to reconcile conflicting duties. All is simple, direct, dogmatic, and traditional. The vision of the teachers is focused on and informed by the inherited doctrine of retribution. This doctrine, which we are about to consider, was at the core of their interpretation of life.<sup>6</sup>

The exact reward of each man's conduct is sure to be meted out to him before he dies. Sin begets doom, whereas repentance delivers from death. This is assumed as a truism that need only be asserted over and over but never established by argument and debate: *Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: how much more the wicked and the sinner* (11:31). This is but a corollary to their deep conviction that God is just and the notion that His universe operates "*let din v'let dayan* [without Judge and justice]" was simply unthinkable.

#### DOCTRINE OF RETRIBUTION

The author of Proverbs developed the doctrine of retribution in great detail. One finds sayings repeated over and over, in which threats alternate with promises: *Treasures of wickedness profit nothing; but righteousness delivers from death. The memory of the righteous is blessed; but the name of the wicked shall rot* (10:2,4,7). These are pronouncements of faith in the Divinely ordained moral order. Behind these sayings, based on experience, is a vigorous faith, ready to reinforce the tradition if at any point it appears to falter.

Along with the doctrine of retribution goes the tacit assumption of free will. Each person has it within his or her power to insure happiness through wisdom, if it is put to use. There is equal opportunity, notwithstanding the handicaps of environment and education, differing temperaments, mental capacity and physical makeup. In the eyes of these teachers only a fool refuses to learn wisdom. Consequently, when he gets into trouble he receives little sympathy, because he has only himself to blame having been warned beforehand that such would be the case.

*Because you are indifferent to my rebuke . . . and refused me when I called, and paid no heed when I extended my hand, spurning my advice . . . I will laugh at your calamity, and mock when terror, trouble and distress come upon you . . . Because they hated knowledge, and did not choose fear of the Lord, their complacency will*

*destroy them. But he who listens to me will dwell in safety, untroubled by the terror of misfortune (1:23ff).*

#### PARENTAL INFLUENCE

The teachers realize the primary influence of parents in shaping the lives of their young. With this in view, they reinforce parental influence with every means at their disposal. There are frequent exhortations to young people to heed what they learn from father and mother. The home and the school thus cooperate toward the common goal. They counsel fathers to act with what they feel to be an appropriate measure of wise severity in dealing with their sons: *Do not withhold discipline from a child. If you beat him with a rod he will not die (23:13). Discipline your son while there is still hope; And do not set your heart on his destruction (19:18).*<sup>7</sup>

#### STRESS ON MOTIVATION

They are keenly aware that proper motivation is indispensable to propel a given course of action. By far the largest number of direct appeals are made to self-interest, in particular the desire for personal happiness: *If you are wise, you are wise for yourself. If you are a scoffer, you bear it alone (9:12).* Wisdom is pictured as laden with rewards for its devotee: *In her right hand is length of days, in her left, riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths, peaceful. She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whosoever holds her is happy (3:16-18).* The manifold rewards obtainable through wisdom include good health, wealth, a good name, a blessed memory, prosperous children, marital bliss, the respect and affection of ones peers and the favor of the Creator.

Self interest is offset by an appeal to develop a keen sense of altruistic virtue. It is in the latter that we find most of the loftiest utterances of the book. They include: Actions that gladden the hearts of parents, spouses and the heavy-hearted, promoting peace, being forgiving and exalting one's city and nation by dint of personal integrity.

Another motive for the pursuit of wisdom is the love thereof. That is wisdom for its own sake. She is at once an ideal to inflame passion and a possession to feed the mind with inner joy: *Happy is the man who finds wisdom . . . Her value in trade is better than silver, Her yield, greater than gold. She is*

*more precious than rubies. All of your goods cannot equal her (3:13-15).* And finally, there is the religious motive, an appeal to the love of God and the desire to please Him and be loved by Him.

The resolve to avoid those things that He abominates and to follow what He loves springs from a deeper motive than the desire to "play it safe." It is, rather, the desire to be at one with Him even when He chastens and rebukes: *Do not reject the discipline of the Lord, my son; do not abhor His rebuke. For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes, as a father the son he favors (3:11-12).*

#### WISDOM TEACHERS AND PROPHETS

The wisdom teachers follow the prophets of Israel faithfully in their uncompromising emphasis on ethical monotheism. First and foremost, God is conceived as demanding ethical conduct from men. Apart from righteousness, no act of worship pleases Him: *To do what is right and just is more desired by the Lord than sacrifice (21:3). He who turns a deaf ear to instruction [in the Law] his prayer is an abomination (28:9).* Both these verses resonate with the admonitions of an Amos or Hosea.

They likewise follow the prophets in stressing the social side of ethics: *Rob not the poor because he is poor; neither oppress the afflicted in the gate: For the Lord will take up their cause . . . (22:22-23).* Cheating, lying, slandering, bearing false witness, shedding innocent blood, are all things that are detestable in the eyes of the Author of the Moral Law, and fall under the Divine displeasure. And in spite of all their counsels of general prudence, the wise men keep bringing home to their pupils the solemn and unassailable truth that the beginning of wisdom is to commit one's life to God: *Entrust your affairs to the Lord, and your plans will succeed (16:3).*

As Cornill remarks,<sup>8</sup> the Book of Proverbs: "Taking its stand on the pure and lofty plane of the religious and moral ideas attained by those two potent forces, [the Book of the Covenant and Deuteronomy], mints the good metal of Prophecy and Law into current coin." The "current coin" is incomparable when it comes to the treatment of an enemy, excusing the faults of others, and forgiving those who inflict injury. But it falls short when the nation with its sense of corporate responsibility and civic duty drops below the horizon. The individual would be hard pressed to see himself as part of a polity

wherein his personal relation to God and/or his own religious obligations finds a broader significance and deeper meaning.

In reading the Book of Proverbs one gets the feeling that God is somehow less vivid. And when He is mentioned His presence does not electrify and palpitate as it does in the prophetic books. Above all, God has ceased to be the Cosmic Intervener, whose "Hand is stretched out upon all the nations." Nor does God anymore call upon men, as He called the prophets, to go forth on His mission at once terrible, sublime and lonely. The "word of the Lord" with its clarion call to rise up in revolt against injustice is muted. It is as if the days of theophany and epiphany are things of the past. For His word He has substituted "wisdom."<sup>9</sup>

The Book of Proverbs is characterized by a cooling down of religious passion and pathos. Unlike the prophets who are constantly getting worked up, the wise men remain calm, never once "loosing their cool." Life for them is on the whole a placid affair, a gently flowing stream not a roaring torrent plunging down from the heights. One wonders what place there would be for an Isaiah or a Jeremiah in this negotiable world where the good people settle down, make money, marry, have children, enjoy their friends, dispense philanthropy, live peacefully and depart in mellow old age!<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps that is why the Book of Proverbs, with all its nobility, somehow falls short of a great message, and was for a time not considered worthy of being included in the canon of Holy Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Life is, after all, too big, too passionate and unpredictable to be confined within the parameters of the ordered, everyday scheme drawn up by wise men including Solomon. Their maxims and aphorisms may well prove to be a satisfactory guide in the normal course of human affairs. But occasions are bound to arise when a person would find himself helpless, precisely at a time when he needed most to be helped.

Two final notes:

1) It is not possible to say with certainty whether the final editing of the Book of Proverbs took place in the later Persian period or in the early Greek Period. It is noteworthy, however, that its standpoint (though not necessarily its chronological date) is midway between that of the Book of Job, where the ultimate wisdom is a Divine secret (Job 9:5-9) and that of Sirach (24:1-12), where it is said to be revealed in the Law of Moses.<sup>12</sup>

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2) The Hebrew word for "wisdom" is *hokhmah*, a feminine noun. In Proverbs, "wisdom" is personified as a female as in 4:5-9; 7:4 and in 9:1-6. This is to be understood as if she were an hypostasis of the Divine; that is, an attribute or activity of the Creator which becomes endowed with a personal identity, similar to *bina* in the Kabbalistic lexicon.

In truth, one may ask: What comfort would Job have found in the Book of Proverbs?

NOTES

1. There were the Edomite (Jer. 49:7), Egyptian (Ex. 7:11, 22), and Phoenician sages. Also, Sumerian and Assyrian (Tobit 1:21-22;14:10) teachers of wisdom. In Esther, the wise men of the Persian court are consulted by King Ahasuerus (Est. 1:13). Clearly, the wisdom movement in ancient Israel was part of a much wider genre current in neighboring cultures.
2. I Kings 4:29- 34.
3. R.B.Y. Scott, *The Anchor Bible, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965) p. LII.
4. *Da'at Mikra, Sefer Mishle* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983) pp. 83ff.
5. Ezekiel 13:11ff.
6. Y. Kaufman, *Toldot Ha'emunah HaYisraelit*, Vol. 2, (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1945) p. 595.
7. *Da'at Mikra, Sefer Mishle*.
8. C. Cornill, *Introduction to the Canonical Books of the Old Testament*, trans. G.H. Box (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1907) p. 444.
9. Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899).
10. James Fleming, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950) pp. 506-516.
11. B. Shabbat 30b; Avot de Rabbi Nathan A 1:4.
12. Scott, *ibid.*, p. XXXVIII.