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# Proverbs

by Kurtis Peters

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The book of Proverbs is, first and foremost, a book of *wisdom*. That doesn't necessarily mean that everything in it is good advice for all people and times. It is part of an ancient literary genre that includes reflections on how the world operates, what life is like, etc. This means that one should be very careful about how to use Proverbs as scripture. Ought we to live out all these teachings? Are they instructions? No! It is a collection of wisdom, and it takes wisdom to know how/when it is appropriate to apply them. A classic example comes from Proverbs 26:4-5:

“Do not answer fools according to their folly,  
or you will be a fool yourself.

Answer fools according to their folly,  
or they will be wise in their own eyes.”

What's a person to do? This is an example of two things. First, proverbs are situational and one proverb may be applicable in one situation and the other proverb at a different time. In other words, some fools at some times are better to be answered according to folly, whereas some fools at other times should not be answered according to their folly. Second, putting these two sayings together may indicate the futility of dealing with fools! Disclaimer: “fools” does not mean people with low intelligence, but people who disregard good ways of thinking/behaving/etc.

We should also recognize that Proverbs is proverbial and was meant to be understood that way; a modern proverb such as “the early bird catches the worm” is good advice about being early or punctual for things (a wise teaching for

Grandview perhaps?). Of course, it does not mean that it is good to be early for every situation in life. This is how we should view much of the book of Proverbs.

The make-up of the book isn't all lists of proverbs, however. The first nine chapters form an address cast as father to son about the competing ways of wisdom and of folly, both portrayed as women. In chapter 8, Wisdom herself is identified as the beginning of Creation, language that is sometimes applied to Christ in the New Testament. From chapter 10 onward, we have collections of sayings, sometimes associated with known biblical characters (e.g., Solomon, Hezekiah) and some from unknown characters who may not have been Israelite (e.g., King Lemuel). Some portions are clearly borrowed from non-Israelite texts (especially parts of chapters 22-24). The final chapter contains a story of a “capable woman” and has been read by feminist scholars both as extremely patriarchal and misogynist and as empowering of women. (I'll let you wrestle with that.) As a whole, the book is attributed to King Solomon, but this clearly cannot apply to the whole book, if such an attribution was meant literally at all. Hezekiah, for example, lived centuries after Solomon. But the point of attributing it to Solomon was to give the collection a seal of authenticity in the same way that Psalms was attributed to David. Solomon is the traditional patron of wisdom, while David was the patron of the arts. As David and Solomon presided over Israel's “golden age,” it was natural to find in them the sources for these things.

So, when you read Proverbs, try to hear its wisdom. Try to understand it as proverbial. And make sure you find your favourite quotes, because there are some great ones. ✨