

## *Interpreting Proverbs: Preliminary Examples*

01.25.2018 D. Eric Williams

Cottonwood Community Church

D. Eric Williams Online

### *Introduction*

According to Robert McCabe “a proverb is a concise, memorable saying, usually in poetic form, expressing a generally accepted observation about life as filtered through the biblical revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Proverbs are “more complex than their surface simplicity might suggest. One of their paradoxes is that they are simultaneously simple and profound.”<sup>2</sup> The twenty-first century reader is not accustomed to this type of communication and must take care when encountering the book of Proverbs. For instance, it is important to recognize the variety of proverb one is reading in order to properly understand it. There are several types of proverbs; each has specific, identifiable characteristics and must be interpreted accordingly. Thus, in order to properly interpret a proverb we must first recognize its type. In the paragraphs ahead we will examine three forms; intensification in proverbs, contrast in proverbs and descriptive and prescriptive proverbs.

### *Part One: Intensification in Proverbs*

Intensification in A proverb is characterized by “the second line rephrasing the first line in a more forceful or intense manner.”<sup>3</sup> Intensification is closely related to specification where “each line adds more specific details to the first line.”<sup>4</sup> As seen in the following examples, intensification is sometimes a move from the theoretical to the functional or a generally equivalent yet stronger word for a key term.

*So that you incline your ear to wisdom,  
And apply your heart to understanding (2:2)*

To incline one’s ear to wisdom is to give it a hearing. To intensify this encouragement toward wisdom Solomon enjoins his disciple to “apply his heart to understanding.” Rather than simply listen, the seeker of wisdom must “stretch out”<sup>5</sup> his heart in an effort to embrace and internalize the wisdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert V. McCabe, “Interpreting Proverbs,” *Old Testament Studies*, April 06, 2008, accessed January 23, 2018, <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.org/my-papers/other-papers/wisdom-literature/interpreting-proverbs/>.

<sup>2</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to The Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 315.

<sup>3</sup> McCabe, “Interpreting Proverbs,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vol., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2.573.

*Yes, if you cry out for discernment,  
And lift up your voice for understanding (2:3)*

Intensification is exemplified in this verse in the advice to cry out or call for discernment - and then to increase one's volume as necessary.<sup>6</sup>

*If you seek her as silver,  
And search for her as for hidden treasures (2:4)*

Here the disciple is charged to seek for wisdom as silver "and search for her as for hidden treasures."<sup>7</sup> In the first line the student is encouraged to seek wisdom like something valuable but not necessarily hard to find. In the second line he is urged to seek after wisdom in the way one might search for a carefully hidden trove of treasure. In the first case, the reader might think of wisdom as valuable but easily attainable. However, the second line reveals that wisdom is both valuable and difficult to find or realize.

*Then you will understand the fear of the LORD,  
And find the knowledge of God (2:5)*

To fear Yahweh is to stand in awe of Him. It is to have a profound reverence for Him. Yet this is not the extent of the intimate relationship Yahweh desires with his people. We begin with reverent awe but a relationship of knowing and discerning God is more powerful and is the path to true wisdom. For wisdom is spiritual and Proverbs 2:5 "encompasses the two classic Old Testament terms for true religion - the polls of awe and intimacy."<sup>8</sup>

*For the LORD gives wisdom;  
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding (2:6)*

By now the reader understands Yahweh "gives wisdom" (Proverbs 2:6a). This truth is intensified when the Sage informs the reader of the intimate nature of wisdom. Wisdom is not merely a part of nature. It is not a product of man's effort. Instead, wisdom comes from the very mouth of God. It is God breathed and an expression of his character.

*He stores up sound wisdom for the upright:  
He is a shield to those who walk uprightly; (2:7)*

We are reminded Yahweh is the source of wisdom. It is He who is in charge of the hidden treasures of wisdom made available to the diligent searcher. Yet this skill in thinking and living is more than a philosophical pursuit. God also watches over wisdom seekers. The intensification in this verse is a move from the "abstract" to the practical. Wisdom is not just enlightenment of the mind but is also a means of protection from the ungodly and their abhorrent ways.

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<sup>6</sup>"The expression means to shout loudly, to make a sound that carries further (e.g., Jer 2:15). J. H. Greenstone says, "If it [understanding] does not come at your first call, raise your voice to a higher pitch; put forth greater efforts." *New English Translation Bible* (Spokane, WA: Biblical Studies Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Scripture quotations are taken from *The New King James Version* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction & Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 61.

*He guards the paths of justice,  
And preserves the way of His saints. (2:8)*

The intensification of this passage is subtle. God guards the paths of justice; He makes sure wisdom remains wisdom. He defines what is just and true. Moreover He guards the walk of his saints, not only by maintaining a right definition of wisdom, justice and truth but by giving personal attention to His people. Once again we see intensification in a movement from the conceptual to the concrete.

*Then you will understand righteousness and justice,  
Equity and every good path (2:9)*

As the disciple pursues wisdom under the direction and protection of Yahweh, he comes to intellectually grasp what is right and just. Indeed the seeker will learn how to practically live (put wisdom into action) all of life on an even keel and come to recognize the well-worn track of the whole godly way of life.

*When wisdom enters your heart,  
And knowledge is pleasant to your soul (2:10)*

The first step in gaining wisdom is to take it into the "heart," the will or intellect. However, as the disciple meditates on wisdom, it takes hold of his whole life. The active life of the wisdom seeker is flooded with knowledge.

*To deliver you from the way of evil,  
From the man who speaks perverse things (2:12)*

This final selection informs us that wisdom will keep the disciple from evil (again the conceptual), even from the machinations of the man of perversity (actual).

## **Part 2: Contrast In Proverbs**

A proverb written in the form of a contrast "places a line in contrast to its corresponding line"<sup>9</sup> to show the difference between two philosophies of life and their outcome.

*A wise son makes a glad father,  
But a foolish son is the grief of his mother (10:1)*

This proverb reminds the disciple that his lifestyle affects more than just himself. A son who embraces skillful living brings joy to his father (and mother). Meanwhile the son who denies God (Psalms 14:1) rejects wisdom and grieves his parents with his ungodliness.

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<sup>9</sup> McCabe, "Interpreting Proverbs," 2.

*Treasures of wickedness profit nothing,  
But righteousness delivers from death (10:2)*

The first line says man centered intellectual attainments are of no value. Likewise material wealth acquired apart from God has no salvific effect. On the other hand, right-thinking (wisdom) and the behavior that accompanies dedication to God are of present and eternal value.

*Yahweh will not allow the righteous soul to famish,  
But He casts away the desire of the wicked (10:3)*

Yahweh cares for and provides for the righteous and thwarts the cravings of those who reject Him.

*He who has a slack hand becomes poor,  
But the hand of the diligent makes rich (10:4)*

The student of wisdom is reminded many times throughout the book of Proverbs that laziness results in poverty. On the other hand, the person with a strong work ethic, who sticks to the task at hand, will reap a significant financial reward.

*He who gathers in summer is a wise son;  
He who sleeps in harvest is a son who causes shame (10:5)*

This verse contrasts the son who understands the need to work hard during harvest with the one who does not. The first son displays common sense wisdom. Meanwhile, the shameful son ignores the need for appropriate work at the appropriate time, preferring to be dead to the world in deep sleep<sup>10</sup> rather than act responsibly. Thus he dishonors his parents.

*Blessings are on the head of the righteous,  
But violence covers the mouth of the wicked (10:6)*

Here we find that, as a general rule, the righteous man can expect to be praised by his fellows and enriched by God. However, the wicked man spews violence and therefore forgoes blessing and praise, being marked for condemnation.<sup>11</sup>

*The memory of the righteous is blessed,  
But the name of the wicked will rot (10:7)*

Those who lived righteous lives are remembered with fondness but people who live lives of wickedness are despised even after death.

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<sup>10</sup> James Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World*, (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt Publishers Inc., 1988), 299.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Bridges, *Proverbs*, (1846: Carlisle PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 95.

*The wise in heart will receive commands,  
But a prating fool will fall (10:8)*

One of the characteristics of a wise man is a willingness to receive instruction and correction from others. On the other hand "a prating fool" is so busy spouting folly that he disregards the insight of others and suffers for it.

*He who walks with integrity walks securely,  
But he who perverts his ways will become known (10:9)*

This proverb contrasts integrity and perversity.<sup>12</sup> The wise man that lives blamelessly (with integrity) can live a worry free life. On the other hand, the one who maliciously perverts the right path is known and targeted (by his fellow man and by God).

*He who winks with the eye causes trouble,  
But a prating fool will fall (10:10)*

"The contrast here . . . seems to be between a man who brings trouble on his fellow creatures, and one who brings trouble upon himself."<sup>13</sup> In the first case we have the ungodly man who corresponds with his fellow miscreants aiming at the "derision or injury" of others.<sup>14</sup> In the second example we are once again introduced to the foolish man who loves the sound of his own voice and ignores the advice of others to his own destruction.

### ***Part Three: Descriptive and Prescriptive Proverbs***

A descriptive proverb "describes the situation of life without noting how it applies or what its exceptions are."<sup>15</sup> This type of proverb simply tells it like it is.

"A prescriptive proverb does more than just tell about the way life is. It seeks to characterize an attitude or an action in order to influence behavior."<sup>16</sup>

These two aspects often appear together. Sometimes the descriptive portion comes first and sometimes the prescriptive leads the lesson. The following selections from chapter twenty-three illustrate the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of the Proverbs.

*When you sit down to eat with a ruler, Consider carefully what is before you; And put a knife to your throat If you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, For they are deceptive food. Do not overwork to be rich; Because of your own understanding, cease! (23:1-3)*

This first verse in the chapter provides a very brief descriptive line followed by five prescriptive lines. We begin with the "neutral" idea of sitting down to eat with a ruler. This is

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<sup>12</sup> David Hubbard, *Mastering The Old Testament: Proverbs*, (Waco: Word Books, 1989), 143.

<sup>13</sup> Bridges, *Proverbs*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Delitzsch and Carl Friedrich Keil, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 156-157.

<sup>15</sup> McCabe, "Interpreting Proverbs," 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

merely something a person might do. But then the reader is instructed to carefully consider what is before him and to curb his appetite.<sup>17</sup> To act without restraint in the presence of a king or other ruler in ancient Near Eastern culture would be a major blunder, possibly ending with loss of life. Moreover the food served is deceptive in that the ruler most likely has an ulterior motive. In other words, the wise man will understand that the invitation was for the ruler's advantage not his own.

*Do not overwork to be rich; Because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your  
Eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings;  
They fly away like an eagle toward heaven (23:4-5)*

This paragraph begins with the prescriptive portion of the saying, admonishing the disciple to put employment in its proper place. In other words, "be wise enough not to wear yourself out trying to get rich" (Proverbs 23:4 *Good News Bible*). And then the descriptive verse: "Your money can be gone in a flash, as if it had grown wings and flown away like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:5 *Good News Bible*).

*Do not speak in the hearing of a fool,  
For he will despise the wisdom of your words (23:9)*

This verse begins with the prescriptive aspect, telling the reader to refrain from offering good advice to a fool. Why? Because according to the way things work, fools despise wisdom.

*Do not remove the ancient landmark, Nor enter the fields of the fatherless; For  
their Redeemer is mighty; He will plead their cause against you (23:10-11)*

This selection graces the reader with a description of Yahweh; Redeemer, defender of the orphan, mighty and one who will plead the cause of the needy against their oppressors. In light of this, the reader is proscribed from any attempt to confiscate the land and property of "the fatherless."

*Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die.  
You shall beat him with a rod, And deliver his soul from hell (23:13-14)*

In these verses we find the descriptive portions of the selection sandwiched between prescriptive aspects. To begin with, the reader is assured (descriptive) that spanking a child with a rod will not cause him to die (23:13b). Therefore one should not withhold correction from a child (23:13a). Yes you shall beat him with a rod (23:14a, prescriptive) and deliver his soul from hell.

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<sup>17</sup> "Put a knife to your throat" is an idiom meaning "curb your appetite" or "control yourself." Keil and Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 336.

## *Conclusion*

The Proverbs are the rich wisdom of God. Yet, unless we approach the Proverbs appropriately we will miss out on much of what they have to offer.

We have discovered that intensification in the Proverbs heightens our awareness of a principal through forceful repetition. Contrast in the Proverbs compares wisdom and folly so we might recognize both more readily. Descriptive and prescriptive Proverbs inform us of how life is and then provide commands pertinent to the situation described. These are just three types of Proverbs we must be familiar with in order to properly interpret the book.

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