

Proverbs 1:1-7 **The Beginning of Wisdom**

Sunday, January 24, 2010

Text:

1:1-7 Preamble

- ¹ The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:
- ² To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
- ³ to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
- ⁴ to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
- ⁵ Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
- ⁶ to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
- ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

These verses form a kind of preamble, not only to the first collection (chaps. 1-9), but to the book as a whole. In these verses we have:

1. The author (v. 1)
2. The intended readership (v. 4)
3. The author's aims for his readers (vv. 2-4)
4. An admonition to hear (vv. 5-6)
5. The author's epistemology (v. 7)

Let's consider each of these a little more fully.

1. The Author

In verse one, we are given the name of the author, at least of this first collection of Proverbs (chaps. 1-9): “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (1:1).

As we saw last week, there are actually three *named* authors: Solomon, Agur, and Lemuel. There are, in addition, some unnamed sources who are referred to collectively as “the wise” (22:17; 24:23).

Solomon, of course, is the principal author of the book. The vast majority of it was written by him, the rest apparently collected by him. We have a reference to his literary output in **1 Kings 4:29-34**. “The people of the east” mentioned in this passage (v. 30) were renowned for their wisdom. You’ll remember that the “wise men” who brought gifts to the holy family were referred to as “wise men *from the east*” (Matt. 2:1). Egypt also was known for producing men of great wisdom. In fact, we have many examples of wisdom literature from ancient Egypt. But here we are told that Solomon’s wisdom excelled both the men of Egypt and the men of the east.

Not much is known about the individuals specified here by name: Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda. We do know that “Ethan the Ezrahite” composed the 89th Psalm. His name is mentioned in the title of the Psalm. And a man by the name of Heman—probably the same Heman mentioned here—is said to have composed Psalm 88.

This Heman, we learn in Chronicles, was a Levitical singer and a prophet (1 Chron. 25:1-6; 2 Chron. 5:12).

These men were renowned for their wisdom, but Solomon is said to have been even wiser.

Whence did Solomon receive this wisdom? How did he come by it? We are told in **1 Kings 3:1-15**. (Recall Job 28; cf. James 1:5)

2. *The Intended Readership*

Solomon is the author; but *to* whom (or *for* whom) is he writing? We are told in verse 4 that one of the purposes of this book is:

to give prudence to the *simple*,
knowledge and discretion to the *youth* (1:4)

Here we have two classes or categories mentioned: (1) the simple, and (2) the youth.

The Simple

The “simple” play a rather prominent role in the book. They are mentioned 14 times, and the related abstract noun “simplicity”, another 2 times.

Instead of translating the underlying Hebrew word as “simple”, the NASB translates it as *naïve*. Bruce Waltke, who is the go-to guy on the OT, has written a very fine two volume commentary on Proverbs, and he translates the word as *gullible*.

The word refers to people who are easily persuaded, and thus easily misled. As Solomon says in 14:15,

The simple believes everything,
but the prudent gives thought to his steps (14:15).

The simple go astray, not so much because they have a fixed purpose to pursue what is evil, but because they tend to be thoughtless. When Solomon says the “prudent gives thought to his steps”, he is making a contrast between the behavior of the prudent and the behavior of the simple. The simple *don't* give thought to their steps. They are thoughtless, and they lack discernment.

The Youth

This verse is an instance of synonymous parallelism.

to give **prudence** to the **simple**,
knowledge and discretion to the **youth**

Prudence, of course, is related to knowledge and discretion; and simplicity is related to youth.

The youth are not identified as full-fledged fools. They are not scoffers in open rebellion against God. They are merely inexperienced in life and the ways of the world. This is what makes them “simple”. If, however, they never come to the place where they are moved to seek wisdom, then they are in danger of *becoming* fools and scoffers in open rebellion against God.

This connection between simplicity and youth is very easy to see, isn't it? It is a young person's inexperience in life that makes him simple, naïve, gullible, easily led astray. In their simplicity, young people often do many things which they later come to regret. And they wonder how they could have been so foolish. This is why David says, “Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions” (Ps. 25:7).

Now young people, I want you to listen to me very carefully. This may be hard for you to hear, but I beg you not to overestimate your wisdom and your powers of discernment. You are not as wise as you think. I don't mean this as an insult. It's not intended to be demeaning. It's a simple fact. Young people tend to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think. This is why second year students in college are called sophomores—*wise fools*. That's what the word means. A sophomore is a wise fool. He's completed one year of college and he knows *so much more* than the incoming freshmen. He thinks he's so wise. But he's still a long way from completing his educational goals. He thinks he's wise, but he is still foolish. This tendency for the young to think themselves so smart is nearly

universal. That's why the name sophomore was coined, and why it seemed so fitting at the time it was coined, and why it has stuck.

You understand that age is not a *guarantee* of wisdom, just as youth is not necessarily an indication of folly. But it is generally true that those who are older are wiser than those who are young. And this has to do in large part with their greater experience in life. Now this doesn't mean you cannot become wise until you are older and experience life for yourself, first hand. In fact, one of the marks of wisdom is that you learn to experience life vicariously through those who have lived before you. You listen to your elders. You listen to your parents. You listen to the voice of tradition. You listen to the wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generation.

Moderns have a tendency to think that they must learn everything for themselves by their own personal experience. You can't truly learn anything without experiencing it for yourself. Consequently, they discount the past and the wisdom passed down from previous generations. They disregard tradition.

But this notion that is so prevalent today, that tradition is bad; that ideas inherited from our forefathers must be held suspect, if not summarily discarded; that we must reinvent everything new from scratch in each generation in order to be "real", in order to be "authentic"; this prejudice against learning from one's elders—this, I say, is foolishness! It leads to perpetual immaturity. We can never get

beyond the wisdom learned in one generation. How much better is it to learn from the accumulated wisdom of all previous generations!

These are some of the things that Solomon urges. Let the simple learn from those who are older and wiser. Let the young learn to value wisdom above all things. Folly will kill you, but wisdom will exalt you.

That the book is primarily written for the benefit of the young is apparent throughout (**1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1, 20; 7:1**; etc.).

3. The author's aims for his readers

Solomon makes his aims for his readers explicit:

To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the
youth (1:2-4)

Take note of all the words related to wisdom: wisdom, instruction (2), understanding, insight, wise dealing, righteousness, justice, equity, prudence, knowledge, discretion.

All these present various and subtle aspects of wisdom. None of it is abstract. The Bible is wonderfully free of philosophical abstractions.

4. An admonition to hear

Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance

It takes some measure of wisdom, some rudimentary form of understanding to realize that wisdom is a good to be pursued—that it is something worthwhile to expend some effort to obtain. He says, “Let the wise hear and increase in learning.” The first part of wisdom to value wisdom...

5. The Author’s Epistemology