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## Interpreting Proverbs

### INTERPRETING PROVERBS

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How often have we heard someone preach a series of expositional sermons or conduct a Bible study from the book of Proverbs? “Not often,” many would answer. As I think about this, I have to regretfully admit that I can only remember a select few who have delivered an expositional series of lessons in Proverbs. In contrast to this deficiency in expositional studies of Proverbs, I remember numerous occasions where someone has used a portion of Proverbs for devotional or motivational purposes. For example, I have heard many a sincere believer claim a supposed prayer promise from the book of Proverbs or a verse that sounds as if success in some aspect of life, such as a business venture or a domestic activity, is guaranteed for one who trusts in the Lord. Yet, when the expected results did not come to fruition, the believer was left in a state of bewilderment about his lack of faith, or whatever sort of deficiency he is able to conjecture. On some different occasions, I have heard someone question a well-intentioned believer about his application and/or interpretation of a passage in Proverbs, and have received a response something like: “this is what the passage means to me!” Though we do not want to minimize an individual believer’s responsibility in applying Scripture to his life, we are convinced that legitimate application can only be accomplished after a believer directs his primary focus away from the application to a foundational level that focuses on what did this passage mean to its original author. This basic interpretative task is especially important when we come to Proverbs.

This interpretative task in Proverbs is germane for two reasons. First, Christians need to know how to live wisely in a humanistic and hedonistic society. Proverbs tells the individual believer how to live wisely in the everyday circumstances of life. This purpose is clearly articulated in [Proverbs 1:2–6](#) . This section states that the purpose of the book of Proverbs is to challenge its readers to obtain wisdom. The term translated as “wisdom” in Proverbs can be understood as biblical skill in living. This is to say wisdom enables one to live a successful and godly life. In 1:2–6 we can see that wisdom includes moral skill in holy living (vv. 2a, 3–5) and intellectual understanding (vv. 2b, 6). The theme of Proverbs is found in 1:7. This verse states that wisdom is an outgrowth of one’s relationship to fearing, “reverentially trusting,” God. Thus, Christians need wisdom found in Proverbs in facing the demands and temptations encountered in a secular society. Second, while Christians need the wisdom of Proverbs to regulate their lives, they must use Proverbs in a biblically informed manner to avoid misapplying the wisdom of Proverbs as necessarily direct guarantees from God. Because the applications drawn from the book of Proverbs have been so abused, we need that which is basic for all effective application of Proverbs: a development of hermeneutical guidelines to establish the meaning of Proverbs. Consequently, my objective in this workshop is to lay a foundation for effective application by developing six principles for interpreting Proverbs.

## I. The first principle is to recognize the characteristics of a proverb.

The proverb, or aphorism, is found throughout the Bible. It is often assumed that the use of proverbs is confined to the book of Proverbs. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament such as Ecclesiastes and Job are characterized by their use of proverbs. Proverbs are commonly found in poetic literature ([Ps 119:105](#) ). Jesus also uses proverbs ([Mark 12:17](#) ). The Epistle of James also contains many proverbs. The proverb is a common literary form used in the Bible.

A proverb is a concise, memorable saying, usually in poetic form, expressing a generally accepted observation about life as filtered through biblical revelation. From this definition, we can observe that a proverb is characterized as being concise and memorable, simple yet profound, specific yet general, usually expressed in poetic form, and observations about life as filtered through biblical revelation. To clarify our understanding of the nature of proverbs, we will examine these five characteristics in individual proverbs.

A. A proverb is concise and memorable. The verbal conciseness aids in making it memorable. The sage who creates a concise and memorable saying must be skillful in his use of words and syntax. By reducing his observation about life into a proverbial form, the sage was aiming to make his observations permanent. As such, a proverb is a high point drawn from the sage’s observations about life. With the proverb, the sage “captures the clearest and most affective moment and the point of greatest light” (Ryken, *Word of Delight*, p. 315).

B. A proverb is simple yet profound. “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts” ([Prov 21:2](#) ). The basic point of this proverb is that people think they have an accurate

self-evaluation for their actions, but the LORD has an evaluation of their heart that is truly accurate because of His divine perspective. Though this proverb is simple, it is quite profound. God knows exactly what is in the heart of every single person better than each individual knows himself, and God with His omniscient knowledge evaluates everyone according to His standard of holiness.

C. A proverb is specific yet general. This is illustrated in [Proverbs 26:27](#), “He who digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him.” “He who digs a pit” specifically refers to someone laying a trap for another and “he who rolls a stone” refers to placing a weight upon one’s opponent from which he cannot escape. The result in either case is that the trap backfires. The general point of this proverb is that one reaps what he sows.

D. A proverb is consistently cast into poetic form. Hebrew poetry is characterized by brevity in line length, parallelism, and figurative language. If we compare the line length of Proverbs 1 with a narrative such as Judges 1, it is readily apparent that the length of each line in Proverbs 1 is shorter than the length of each line in Judges 1. [Proverbs 4:1](#) is a familiar example of poetic parallelism. Solomon provides an exhortation, “Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father.” The second part of this verse parallels the first part with a specification of his purpose, “And give attention that you may gain understanding.” The parallelism clearly develops what the sage’s point is, viz., listen to a godly father in order to gain wisdom. [Proverbs 4:17](#) demonstrates the use of figures when Solomon picturesquely compares the unbridled lust of the wicked to their eating habits, “For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence.” Eating “the bread of wickedness” and drinking “the wine of violence” is a graphic way of illustrating that wicked people live for “wickedness” and “violence.”

As noted in the preceding paragraph, Hebrew poetry is characterized by parallelism. Parallelism is essentially a repetition of thought or grammar in a second line of poetry. The predominant form of parallelism is thought repetition. In the past, parallelism has been divided into three basic types: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic. With a number of recent studies, we have been able to more precisely categorize parallelism. Following the lead of Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, we can divide poetic parallelism into eight categories (pp. 230–38). The following list is not exhaustive but is descriptive of the types of parallelism that we are confronted with in poetry.

#### 1. Subordination

In this case one line is grammatically subordinated to the other line. [Proverbs 3:27](#)

“

“

“ Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due (command)  
when it is in your power to do it. (temporal clause)

## 2. Contrast

This has also been called antithetical parallelism. This occurs when the poet places a line in contrast to its corresponding line. [Proverbs 10:4](#) 

“

“

“ Poor is he who works with a negligent hand,  
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

## 3. Comparison

This has also been called emblematic parallelism. This is related to the subordination category of parallelism in that the comparative clause is subordinate to the other. A comparison is made between two lines in such a way that it forms a simile. [Proverbs 10:26](#) 

“

“

“ Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes  
so is the lazy one to those who send him.

## 4. Continuation

With this type of parallel, each successive line presents a progression in thought. [Isaiah 40:9](#) 

“

“

“ Get yourself up on a high mountain,  
O Zion, bearer of good news.  
Lift up your voice mightily,  
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news.  
Lift it up, do not fear;  
Say to the cities of Judah,  
“Here is your God!”

With this example, we should notice that messenger initially ascends the mountain to bring an address to a large area, then he would lift up his voice to shout, then he announces his good news, “Here is your God!”

## 5. Staircase

This is an extension of the preceding type of parallelism. With this type of parallelism, each line builds on the preceding line. A key thought would be repeated from the preceding line plus an additional item will be added to the new line. [Psalm 29:1](#) ,

“

“

“ Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty,  
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength,  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name;  
Worship the LORD in holy array.

## 6. Specification

With this type of parallelism, each line adds more specific details to the first line. Sometimes this specification may be spatial (see [Isa 45:12](#) ) , explanatory ([Isa 48:20b–21](#) ) , dramatic ([Ps 72:9](#) ) or purpose. [Proverbs 4:1](#)  provides an example of purposeful specification.

“

“

“ Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father,  
and give attention that you may gain understanding.

## 7. Intensification

This is closely related to the preceding category. The second line rephrases the first line in a more forceful or intense manner. It could also reflect a more pointed or extreme manner. This is analogous to an a fortiori argument, if this is so, how much more so the latter. This may be used with numbers for climactic effect as in [Proverbs 30:18–19](#) .

“

“

“ There are three things which are too wonderful for me,  
four which I do not understand:  
(1) the way of an eagle in the sky,  
(2) the way of a serpent on a rock,  
(3) the way of a ship in the middle of the sea,

(4) and the way of a man with a maid.

The pattern in this type of numerical intensification is commonly referred to as the X/X + 1 pattern. The emphasis in this type of parallelism is generally on the last enumerated item. In our example, this would be “the way of a man with a maid.”

## 8. Chiasm

This involves a reversal of elements in each line. It has also been called inverted parallelism. [Psalm 2:10](#) 

a b

O kings, show discernment

b1 a1

Take warning, O judges of the earth

The two dominant forms of parallelism in the book of Proverbs are that of contrast and comparison. The most dominant of the two forms is parallelism of contrast. In Proverbs 10–15 approximately 90% of the proverbs are contrastive. This sets before the reader the responsibility to choose wisdom over folly. The comparative parallelism essentially says that at a common point “A is like B” (Parsons, pp. 155–56).

E. A biblical proverb is an observation about life as filtered through biblical revelation. A biblical proverb is different than a non-biblical proverb. The non-biblical proverb is a concise, memorable saying expressing a generally accepted observation about life, but it is not integrated with Scriptural truth. In contrast to wise men who wrote non-biblical proverbs, the biblical sage would additionally integrate his observations with special revelation. He would subsequently express his biblically interpreted observations in written proverbial form. By following the canons of proverbial literature, a biblically-informed sage would express his life observations in a proverbial format that is inherently oriented to be stated as generalized truth, allowing for possible exceptions (Stein, *Playing By the Rules*, pp. 85–86).

## II. The second principle is to place individual passages within the overall structure of Proverbs.

The overall structure of Proverbs reflects that it is a “collection of collections of wisdom material” (Hubbard, p. 153). There are seven sections in Proverbs that have their own unique introduction. These introductory headings are found at 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; and 31:1. These various headings reflect that there were initially seven different collections of proverbial material.

These were then collected into the book of Proverbs.

#### Collections in Proverbs

Introduction	Chapters
Proverbs of Solomon	1:1–9:18
Proverbs of Solomon	10:1–22:16
Words of the Wise	22:17–24:22
Words of the Wise	24:23–34
Proverbs of Solomon transcribed by Hezekiah's scribes	25:1–29:27
Words of Agur	30:1–33
Words of Lemuel	31:1–31

In light of this structural arrangement, it would appear that each individual passage or proverb must be interpreted in light of the section in which it is found. After this, we would then want to consider how the passage fits into the book of Proverbs as a whole.

### III. The third principle is to place proverbial literature into more precise literary forms.

I am using the term “form” as a descriptive category denoting the manner in which wisdom material is presented (Garrett, p. 28). There are two predominant literary forms, instruction and saying, and eight secondary forms. We will briefly examine each of these.

A. **Instruction** is the dominant form found in Proverbs 1–9 and 22:17–24:22. It is a longer form of the admonition (a command or prohibition), usually involving one or more paragraphs explaining a number of related admonitions. The instruction is directed to “my son” or “sons” (which may include the concept of “disciple”) and generally provides a reason for the instruction. It generally praises

wisdom and its attributes or provides a warning about the traps of folly and its disciples. The primary point of the instruction is to give advice on wisdom or a related subject or to provide a warning against folly or a related subject (Hubbard, p. 18).

B. **Admonition** is an abbreviated form of the longer instruction form, usually comprised of one to three verses. It expresses either a positive command or a prohibition followed by a motive clause. The motive clause provides a reason why the command should be followed. When we interpret the admonition, we should note the connection between the command and the motive clause. This connection is helpful in understanding the point of the admonition (Hildebrandt, p. 241). A command followed by a motive clause is found in [Proverbs 4:23](#), “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life.” The importance of this command is seen by the motive clause, viz., what is manifest in one’s life is an overflow from the contents of his heart.

C. A **wisdom speech** is a subcategory of the instruction. In this type, wisdom as well as folly, wisdom’s antithetical form, is personified as a woman publicly proclaiming a message. For example, the lady wisdom cries out to deliver its recipients in [Proverbs 1:20–33](#); [8:1–36](#); [9:1–6](#). The counterpart to the wisdom speech is folly. The lady folly calls aloud to mislead in [9:13–18](#) (Hubbard, p. 18).

D. **Saying** is the dominant form used in [Proverbs 10:1–22:16](#) and [25:1–29:27](#). A saying is essentially a sentence involving two parallel lines. While the mood of the instruction form is imperatival, the mood of the saying is indicative. As filtered through special revelation, the force of a saying is found in the wisdom or folly displayed in human experience (ibid.).

E. A **comparative saying** is a subcategory of the saying. It generally uses a simile or metaphor to intensify the main point of the saying. An example of this is [Proverbs 26:8](#), “Like one who binds a stone in a sling, so is he who gives honor to a fool.” In interpreting this type of saying, we must note the images being used, the main point of the proverb, and the connection between them. The image in the first clause is that of securely fastening a stone in the sling. The main point of the saying is in the last clause, “so is he who gives honor to a fool.” The point of this saying is that honoring a fool is as foolish as making it impossible for a stone to get out of the sling.

At other times, the lines may simply be in juxtaposition. “A whip is for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools” ([Prov 26:3](#)). The images in the first two clauses are the horse and donkey. The main point is in the last clause, “a rod for the back of fools.” The point of this saying is that the fool, being as difficult to control as the horse and the donkey, must be controlled by strong force.

F. **Better-than sayings** are a variation of comparative sayings. This saying is designed to set forth priorities and values. Some have concluded that this type of proverb is a form of relativism advocated by the sages of Israel. Against this, it is more precise to view this as eliminating one element and affirming another (Hildebrandt, p. 242). “Better is the poor who walks in his integrity,

than he who is crooked though he be rich" ([Prov 28:6](#)). To be rich and crooked is not a lifestyle to be valued, but there is value in being poor with integrity.

G. **Numerical sayings** are another subcategory of the saying. It is the dominant form used in Proverbs 30. The numerical saying will begin with a number line in the X/X + 1 pattern, where the second number is one digit larger than the previous number. The number line will also state the element that binds the list together. The number line is then followed by a list of items. The number of items in the list will correspond to the highest number in the number line. An example of this is [Proverbs 6:16–19](#),

“

“ There are six things which the LORD hates,  
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:  
Haughty eyes,  
a lying tongue,  
and hands that shed innocent blood,  
a heart that devises wicked plans,  
feet that run rapidly to evil,  
a false witness who utters lies,  
and one who spreads strife among brothers.

As stated in the number line, Solomon lists seven things that God hates. In interpreting the numerical sayings, the final element listed is usually the author's main point (Hildebrandt, pp. 241–42). In [Proverbs 6:16–19](#), the zenith of abominable items to God is “one who spreads strife among brothers.”

H. **Example story** recounts an illustration or personal experience and how from experience he has learned a truth worth leaving to others. This form has three basic parts: an opening where the sage notes his experience, a story illustrating his point, and the moral conclusion. [Proverbs 24:30–34](#) is an example of this (also see 7:6–23). The opening is in v. 30, the example story in vv. 31–32, and the moral conclusion in vv. 33–34 (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, p. 317).

I. **Beatitudes** are pronouncements of blessing on someone by an authority figure. When this is used in wisdom literature, it provides a motivation to convince someone that blessing comes by following the advised course of action (see 3:13–14; 8:32, 34; 16:20; 20:7; 28:14; 29:18). [Proverbs 20:7](#) reads like this: “A righteous man who walks in his integrity—How blessed are his sons after him.” Because a man has a life of integrity, his children will be the beneficiaries from his integrity.

J. An **acrostic poem** uses the Hebrew alphabet as a device for structuring. An acrostic poem is used in [Proverbs 31:10–31](#) to describe the virtuous women. The acrostic poem connotes completeness by emphasizing that this woman's qualities go from A through Z, from beginning to

end, she is a most excellent woman. The point is that her virtuous character has been thoroughly presented.

## IV. The fourth principle focuses on observing literary clues in the passage.

We will give a brief overview of the literary features that are found in paragraphs of proverbial material and in one-verse units.

A. When examining units containing more than one verse, there are many literary clues on which to focus. We will examine only three of these.

1. **Repetition** is a major device in biblical poetry for showing emphasis. In the Hebrew text of [Proverbs 30:11–14](#) , the Hebrew word translated as “kind” in NASB stands at the head of each verse.

11There is a **kind** of *man* who curses his father; and does not bless his mother. 12There is a **kind** who is pure in his own eyes; yet is not washed from his filthiness. 13There is a **kind**—oh how lofty are his eyes! And his eyelids are raised *in arrogance*. 14There is a **kind** of *man* whose teeth are *like* swords; and his jaw teeth *like* knives, to devour the afflicted from the earth, and the needy from among men (bold print reflects my emphasis).

This Hebrew term places an emphasis on those characterized by whatever is described in a given context. This term is best correlated with a group of society having similar characteristics. It is not just an occasional individual but a group within the society who are characterized in this context by showing disrespect for their parents, self-righteousness, arrogance, and oppression of the needy.

2. The use of **synonyms** will also show an emphasis in a passage. This is demonstrated in 6:20–35. After an exhortation to follow his commandments in vv. 20–23, Solomon provides his “son” with a proverbially packaged treatment of “You shall not commit adultery.” He uses a number of synonyms to describe a potential partner in adultery. She is called an “evil woman,” an “adulteress” (v. 24), a “harlot,” an “adulteress” (v. 26), and his “neighbor’s wife” (v. 27). She is also characterized in v. 25 as having “beauty” and knowing how to use her eyes (“eyelids” is a poetic device to refer to “eyes”). In v. 26 she is further characterized as one who reduces a man “to a loaf of bread” and as one who “hunts for the precious life.” The build up of synonyms shows that the adulteress is an evil and cunning foe of God’s moral will.

Through the use of synonyms for wisdom and folly, as well as examples of each, the overall unifying theme of Proverbs 1–9 is an extended conflict between wisdom and folly. The addressees of these chapters are encouraged to choose wisdom over folly (for a fuller development, see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, pp. 317–19).

3. Certain **literary features** show the emphasis of a passage. The numerical saying places an emphasis on the enumerated item that corresponds to the highest digit in the number line. In 30:18–19 the sage indicates that there are four items which are too wonderful for him to understand. The emphasis of the text is on the fourth enumerated item, “the way of a man with a maid” (see earlier discussion of poetic parallelism with the first principle of interpretation).

B. When we examine units of one verse, we must look at other literary clues to see the emphasis in the verse. The dominant feature of the sayings in 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27 is this one-verse format. We will examine three types of emphases in these chapters (while we recognize that Alter is writing from a different theological perspective, his presentation of this subject is thorough, see pp. 163–84).

1. One-line sayings built on the model of contrastive parallelism may show a certain emphasis through the use of a “punch-word” (ibid., p. 168). An example of this is seen in [Proverbs 11:1](#) .

“

“ A-false balance is-an-abomination to-the-LORD,  
But-a-just weight is-His-delight.

In Hebrew this proverb takes seven words, four in the first line and three in the second. I have hyphenated the terms to reflect which expressions were one word in the Hebrew text. The antithesis of “a-false balance” is “but-a-just weight.” The two Hebrew terms, “an-abominations to-the-LORD,” are compressed into a significant one-word counterpart with “His-delight.” Both of these latter expressions are strong theological descriptions of that which is an abhorrence and a pleasure in God’s sight. The counterpart of “an-abomination to-the-LORD” is the theological punch-word “His-pleasure” (ibid.). This compressed punch-word is a theologically satisfying emphasis of this one-verse unit. In contrast to that which is abominable in His sight, this verse affirms that God’s pleasure is found not only in worship but even in the marketplace.

2. Other one-line sayings built on the parallelism of specification or intensification may reflect a “consequentiality.” This type of proverb shows that certain types of activity generally lead to certain types of consequences. This is to say, it reflects that God has created and governs the world and man in such a way that certain consequences are generally the result of specific actions. “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it” ([Prov 22:6](#) ). God has designed life in such a way that when parents seriously instruct their children according to a godly pattern, the consequence is that they generally share the same godly patterns as their parents. In a modified manner, we see another example in 21:31, “The horse is prepared for battle, but victory belongs to the LORD.” The first part of the verse focuses on preparing the horse for battle. The last half moves to the conclusion of the battle. The last half is unexpected in that we have a new figure introduced into a proverbial equation, “the LORD” (ibid., pp. 172–73). This is to say, we do not have a strict cause-and-effect relationship between the first half of the verse and the

second. However, from the sage's vantage point, God is the ultimate cause for everything in life.

3. One-line sayings may also reflect a type of riddle format. The riddle format not only includes a riddle, but it may also include a perplexing statement or an image. The pattern of this format will have a riddle, perplexing statement, or image introduced in the first half of a verse with the second half explaining it. A perplexing and shocking image is used in [Proverbs 11:22](#) , "As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion." The image in the first half of the verse would have been repulsive and ludicrous to a Jew. How foolish it is to think that a gold ring could beautify a pig. The second half makes the point. An undiscerning and ungodly beautiful woman is comparable to the same attempt to beautify a repulsive pig. Another example is 17:12, "Let a man meet a bear robbed of her cubs, rather than a fool in his folly." A fool in his folly is a greater danger than meeting a bear that has been robbed of her cubs (*ibid.*, pp. 176–78). As Alden has said, "Consider meeting a fool with a knife, or gun, or even behind the wheel of a car; a mother bear could be less dangerous" (p. 134).

## V. The fifth principle requires the various passages in Proverbs to be interpreted in light of the book's own terms.

To understand Proverbs, we must understand its explicit theological framework. We can see its theological framework by examining its purpose and theme and its characteristic motifs.

A. The individual proverbs or passages should be viewed in light of the book's purpose and theme. Unlike many books in the Bible, Proverbs explicitly announces its purpose and theme in the opening part of the book, 1:2–7.

1. The purpose of Proverbs is expressed in 1:2–6. There is a twofold emphasis in this statement of purpose.

a. One emphasis in Proverbs is to develop moral wisdom, vv. 2a, 3–4. Solomon's purpose in proverbs includes helping one "to know wisdom and instruction." The word translated as "wisdom" is a term that focuses on developing "skill." In Proverbs this term emphasizes biblically-informed skill in living. In light of vv. 3–4, this skill relates to living a life that is morally pleasing to God. The term translated as "instruction" emphasizes "discipline" or "training." Its emphasis in this context is on a training to develop one's moral nature.

b. A second emphasis in Proverbs is to develop mental wisdom, vv. 2b, 6. The last clause in v. 2, "to discern the sayings of understanding," emphasizes one learning how to compare ideas and make evaluations about subjects. This emphasis is clearly seen in v. 6, emphasizing an understanding of proverbs, parables, and riddles. This type of discernment emphasizes one's mental acumen.

2. The theme of Proverbs is found in 1:7, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools

despise wisdom and instruction.” This reverential fear is the Old Testament counterpart of the New Testament concept of saving faith. The fear of the LORD expresses itself in reverential submission to God and whatever He commands. This type of fear is the “beginning of knowledge.” The Old Testament concept of “beginning” can refer to that which is “first” or to that which is “primary and controlling.” In Proverbs, the concept of “beginning” does not primarily mean that the fear of the Lord is the “starting point” of knowledge. Rather, the fear of the Lord is a “primary and controlling element” in developing wisdom. This same theme is restated in 9:10, toward the conclusion of the first section of material in Proverbs. As such, it sets the parameters for this unit.

B. The book of Proverbs has three emphases that inform us of its theological framework.

1. In conformity with other wisdom literature, Proverbs has a practical orientation (Osborne, *Hermeneutical*, p. 192). The wisdom of Proverbs is especially addressed to the youths of Israel. As such, they needed to be encouraged about subjects such as acceptable speech and etiquette ([Prov 29:20](#) ) , domestic relationships (10:1), self-control (25:28), material possessions (10:22, 11:4), and the certainty of divine retribution (11:21; 16:4; 20:22; 26:26–27). The practical nature of wisdom literature is reflected by Kidner’s arrangement of the content of Proverbs around these eight subjects: God and man, wisdom, fools, sluggards, friends, words, the family, and life and death (*Proverbs*, pp. 31-56; for other topical arrangements, see also Ross [pp. 897–903], Voorwinde, and Woodcock).

2. Proverbs, like other wisdom literature, emphasizes that one must have a complete dependence on God. Since God is a Sovereign who with His absolute control of everything (16:1, 4, 9) permits the godly, wise person to experience suffering and difficulty as a part of His discipline (3:11–12). This teaching in Proverbial theology should force the believer to recognize with a humble and believing spirit his limitations and God’s complete control of life (21:1). This is demonstrated from three theological observations.

a. Proverbs sets forth that wisdom is predicated on the Mosaic Covenant. This is demonstrated by the fact that the instruction in places such as [Proverbs 3:1-12](#)  and [4:4-5](#)  are predicated upon a father’s teachings being consistent with the Torah (cf. [Prov 3:3](#)  with [Deut 6:6-8](#) ). We should also notice how genuine obedience results in blessing (cf. [Deut 6:24](#)  with [Prov 3:9-10](#) ) and disobedience disgrace and judgment ([Prov 10:16](#) , [21](#) ; [19:3](#) , [9](#) ). Since God is the One bringing the results according to His time schedule (cf. [Prov 3:1-10](#)  with vv. 11-12), one must live his life in an environment of faithful obedience to the covenant.

b. The book of Proverbs has a tendency to personify wisdom as an attribute and extension of God. This is “seen in one sense as a ‘craftsman’ standing alongside of and aiding the God of creation ([Prov 8:29-30](#) ) , as a female teacher inviting students to learn from her at the gates of the city ([Prov 1:20-21](#) ; [8:1-36](#) ) and as a hostess inviting people to her banquet (9:1-12). Wisdom is contrasted with the adulteress (2:16-19; 7:6-27) and with a foolish hostess (9:13-18)” (Osborne, *Hermeneutical*, p. 193). Since this type of wisdom comes from God, we must look to Him for this.

c. Proverbs has a strong emphasis on fearing God. Though the fear of God is not found exclusively in Proverbs, or even wisdom literature ([Deut 6:24](#) ) , it does receive an emphasis in Proverbs (1:7; 3:7; 8:13; 16:6; 31:30). The Hebrew term for fear may be used in contexts that are of a legal nature, religious, or moral (Smith, p. 6). The focus of wisdom is in the moral realm. The fear of God denotes a relationship with God resulting in a morally pleasing lifestyle. In [Proverbs 2:4-5](#) ) fearing God is correlated with knowing God. A result of this is that one hates evil in 8:13. Other practical results include qualities such as confidence (14:24), humility (3:7), and contentment (15:16). We might define the fear of God as an unconditional, reverential submission to the Sovereign LORD (ibid.).

3. As wisdom literature, Proverbs has an emphasis on creation theology. This is seen in Proverbs 8 where God in His wisdom created the world ([Prov 3:19-20](#) ) ; see also [Job 38:4-7](#) ) ; [Ps 104:24](#) ) . The many references to God's creative activities in Proverbs 8 set a dominant theme in the book, viz., God's orderly design is the substance that holds life together. In Proverbs 30, the many comparisons between animals and man suggest that God control both. Proverbs' creation theology also suggests that there is a connection between divine remuneration and retribution. Furthermore, God's creative work as used in wisdom material is foundational for enjoying life. Man's food, drink, work, youth, wife, and other privileges in this life are part of God's creative design for man in this life ([Prov 5:18](#) ) ; [10:1](#) ) , [28](#) ) ; [12:4](#) ) , [20](#) ) ; [29:2-3](#) ) ; in other wisdom literature, see [Eccl 2:24-25](#) ) ; [3:12-13](#) ) , [22](#) ) ; [5:18-19](#) ) ; [8:15](#) ) ; [9:7-10](#) ) ; [11:8-9](#) ) ; [12:1](#) ) ; [Cant 1:4](#) ) ; [3:11](#) ) . "The righteous, though part of the finite, creaturely world, can experience joy as part of God's design in creation" (Zuck, p. 219).

## VI. The sixth principle requires problematic passages in Proverbs to be balanced by the rest of Scripture.

This hermeneutical axiom is what the Reformers referred to as the *analogia fidei*, "the analogia of faith." This is also referred to as *analogia scriptura*, "the analogy of Scripture." This hermeneutical principle maintains that Scripture interprets Scripture. What this means is that the entirety of Scripture is the context and the guide in interpreting specific passages in Scripture.

How is a passage such as [Proverbs 17:8](#) ) ("A bribe is a charm in the sight of its owner; wherever he turns, he prospers") to be harmonized with 17:23 ("A wicked man receives a bribe from the bosom to pervert the ways of justice"), or [Exodus 23:8](#) ) and [Deuteronomy 16:18](#) ) -19? On a broader level, how do we respond to critics who maintain that the book of Proverbs is less authoritative than the special revelation contained in the Prophets? To establish their point that Proverbs is inferior in authority, critics point to supposed contradictions within Proverbs. For example, [Proverbs 26:4](#) ) says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him." This is supposedly contradicted in the following verse, "Answer a fool as his folly deserves, lest he be wise in his own eyes." Do we answer the fool or avoid answering the fool? According to the critical scholar, if either of these proverbs is inspired and, therefore, presents absolute truth, only one of them can be absolute. How can this be special revelation from God if it is contradictory? How is the Bible-believing Christian to explain these problematic verses, as well as

similar problem passages in Proverbs? Are we to say that the book of Proverbs is less inspired and, therefore, less authoritative than other parts of the Bible?

We would contend that every verse when originally written in our canonical book of Proverbs was as fully inspired as the Prophets or any other portion of Scripture (see [2 Tim 3:16](#)). If the entirety of Proverbs is inspired, then it is inerrant. Consequently, Proverbs in its entirety is descriptive truth. This guarantees the accurate preservation of the entirety of Proverbs. However, not all of Proverbs is prescriptive truth. This is also true with the rest of Scripture. All Scripture is descriptive truth, but not all Scripture is prescriptive truth. For example, Satan's desire to get Job to curse God in [Job 2:4-5](#) and his lie in Genesis 3 are both examples of descriptive truth. Descriptive truth demands that whatever Scripture originally recorded was preserved with historical accuracy. Satan really did what Scripture says he did in Job 2 and Genesis 3. However, prescriptive truth pertains to those truths by which the people of God are to regulate their lives. Satan's lies and deceitful tactics are not to be followed by God's people.

How then do we determine if a proverb is prescriptive truth? Comparing Scripture with Scripture most easily does this. More specifically, by comparing a proverb with other biblical revelation, we can determine if we should view a proverb simply as *descriptive* truth or, more normatively, as *prescriptive* truth.

A. A **descriptive** proverb describes a situation of life without noting how it applies or what its exceptions are (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, pp. 313-14). It is not seeking to influence behavior, rather it seeks to present life the way it actually occurs. It is the reader's responsibility to discern what is prescriptive and to accept the rest as descriptive truth. An example of a descriptive proverb is [17:8](#), "A bribe is a charm in the sight of its owner; wherever he turns, he prospers." Another example is found in [Proverbs 14:20](#), "The poor is hated even by his neighbor, but those who love the rich are many." A further example is [Proverbs 31:6-7](#), "Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter. Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his trouble no more." Though some have taken this to be a medicinal use of alcohol, this seems, at least in part, to miss the point of using it to forget one's poverty. However, the real point is that this is describing the way life is. This neither condemns nor condones the use of alcohol (for prescriptive proverbial material against the use of alcohol, see [Proverbs 23:29-35](#)). [Proverbs 31:6-7](#) is a descriptive proverb.

B. A **prescriptive** proverb does more than simply tell about the way life is. It seeks to characterize an attitude or an action in order to influence behavior (ibid.). There are three types of prescriptive proverbs.

1. A prescriptive proverb that allows for exceptions is a **generalization**. There are two categories of generalizations.

a. Some proverbs allow for limitations in various circumstances. The example we looked at earlier

in [Proverbs 26:4–5](#) is certainly an example of this. Wise planning with proper advice is praised in 15:22. However, this is balanced by [Proverbs 19:21](#), “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the LORD, it will stand” (Parsons, p. 160). The foolishness “bound in the heart of a child” in 22:15 may provide a hindrance to the generalization in 22:6 (Zuck, p. 234).

b. Other proverbs are generalizations because they are bound to the dispensation of law. For example, [Proverbs 10:22](#) says, “It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich, and he adds no sorrow to it.” The blessings of wealth were promised to the obedient Israelite in [Deuteronomy 28:8–14](#). This type of promise is not made to believers in the New Testament. At times, a generalization may even be limited in the dispensation of law. An example of this is [Proverbs 10:30](#), “The righteous will never be shaken, but the wicked will not dwell in the land.” When this text says the righteous will not “be shaken,” the sage is referring to righteous Israelites not being uprooted from the land of Israel. However, there were exceptions to this, viz., Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. While we recognize this type of exception, our point is that the “land” emphasis in this proverb reflects that it was written under the dispensation of law and its direct application pertains to those living under the law.

2. A prescriptive proverb that has no exceptions is a **moral absolute**. This will often be true in proverbs dealing with an action or characteristic of God. [Proverbs 11:1](#) says, “A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight.” Another example is 14:31, “He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.” The instructional material in Proverbs 5 against adultery by maintaining a proper marital relationship is a moral absolute. It upholds the moral absolute, “You shall not commit adultery” ([Exod 20:14](#)).

3. A prescriptive proverb may contain both a **moral absolute** and a **generalization**. [Proverbs 3:1–2](#) is an exhortation to honor one’s father with a promise of long life and peace. The command to honor one’s parents is a moral absolute; however, the promise about life is only a generalization for Jesus Christ was the embodiment of honor to His earthly parents, yet He was crucified in His early thirties. “God in His sovereignty may make an exception as in the case of Jesus” (Parsons, p. 161, n. 72).

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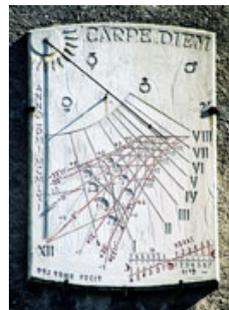
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