

## **Proverbs: How Human Wisdom Becomes Divine**

*Listen to your mom and dad...*

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When you turn to the book of Proverbs and read the opening line, “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (1:1), you expect to start reading proverbs—short, clever sayings that pack a punch and offer you some kind of wisdom on the good life. But that’s not what you get. Instead, you get ten long, cohesive speeches from a father to a son interwoven with four poems from “Lady Wisdom” to humanity. It’s not until chapter 10, when the heading is repeated, that you begin reading the proverbs themselves.

This structure feels a little odd. Why does the collection of “the proverbs of Solomon” begin with an elaborate introduction (nine chapters!) that is fundamentally different from the rest of the book? What’s going on here?

### **Religious Authority in Wisdom Literature**

To understand Proverbs 1-9 and how it sets you up for reading the rest of the book, we need to first consider the basis of religious authority in wisdom literature. It’s intriguingly different from other parts of the Bible. Proverbs exist in almost all human cultures, and they are typically passed down to us from previous generations. By definition, proverbs come from wise, thoughtful people who have condensed their observations on life into short, clever sayings that ring true to our own life experience. Many people have paid attention to how life works and the patterns of cause and effect that flow from our daily decisions. In this sense, proverbs come from previous generations who are passing on their wisdom. Simply put, proverbs have a generational authority of human wisdom based on human observations. And a whole book of the Bible is made up of this kind of wisdom.

This feels different from the Torah or the books of the prophets. The law, given by Moses on Mount Sinai, is God’s revealed will for Israel. This is where you get the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” commandments that come directly from God. It’s a divine, covenantal authority. The prophets also speak with this kind of authority. But rather than giving commandments written by God’s hand, they communicate the words, thoughts, and purposes of God in a “thus says the Lord” manner, a common phrase in prophetic literature. The point is, it’s clear that both the law and the prophets derive their religious authority from God.

In comparison, the basis of authority in the wisdom literature is markedly different. Instead of God addressing Israel, you get a dad talking to his son: “*Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.*” (Proverbs 8:1)

Basically, listen to your mom and dad. Before, God was saying “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” on Mount Sinai, and “thus says the Lord” through Jeremiah or Isaiah. Now all of the sudden, we have “listen to your parents” through a series of speeches between a father and son. It seems so... human! And it is! That’s the nature of authority in the Proverbs. It’s human wisdom--observations about life from people who are older and wiser shared with the younger generation.

So if that’s the basis for its religious authority, does that mean it’s only human wisdom?

### **Human Wisdom Elevated to a Divine Status**

The book of Proverbs isn’t merely human wisdom. It’s divine wisdom. Or, to be more precise, through human wisdom God’s own wisdom is revealed. This is where that lengthy nine-chapter introduction comes into play. The claim of Proverbs 1-9 is that the wisdom you will read in Proverbs 10-31 isn’t

merely human wisdom, it's divine. The purpose of these introductory chapters is to help you see that God's words to his people have come through the human words of the elders.

Consider the interweaving of the ten father-son speeches and the four "Lady Wisdom" poems in Proverbs 1-9. First, let's think about the ten speeches from father to son. You can find these in Proverbs 1:8-19, 2:1-22. The ten speeches from father to son all follow the same pattern:

1. exhortation
2. lesson
3. conclusion

The dad exhorts his son to listen to him, to write his commands on his heart, and to do everything in his power not to forsake them. Then the dad offers a lesson about virtue or wisdom or integrity that he wants his son to know.

Finally, there's always a concluding line about how wisdom will keep you safe and give you abundant life. There are ten of these speeches explicitly from the father (sometimes representing both mom and dad), which offer human wisdom.

But interwoven into the ten speeches of human wisdom from father to son are four poems from "Lady Wisdom," who symbolizes the perfect and transcendent universal wisdom (see Prov 1:20-33, 3:13-20). Wisdom, personified as a lady, calls out to all humanity on behalf of God himself, beckoning them to live by and listen to her.

In Proverbs 8, she claims that she is like an eternal principle of the universe because she was the principle by which God wove the moral universe into existence. God used wisdom to architect the physical and moral fabric of creation. Therefore, anytime humans access this wisdom and live by it, they are living by a divine principle or a divine word. Thus, the "Lady Wisdom" poems elevate the human wisdom of the elders to a status of heavenly wisdom, offering you a filter through which to read the rest of the book. It's as if the four "Lady Wisdom" poems are commenting on the father-son speeches saying, "Dear reader, do you realize that when you listen to the wisdom of your elders, you are hearing a transcendent, divine wisdom about how to live in God's good world?"

### **The Fusion of Two Voices**

When you appreciate the interweaving of these two voices (the human voice of the father and the transcendent voice of "Lady Wisdom"), you are primed and ready to read the wisdom of the elders in chapters 10-29 as Scripture. In his book *Proverbs 1-9*, Michael Fox rightly states: "We carry this image of Lady Wisdom with us as we enter the proverb collections that hold the wisdom of Solomon and other ancient sages. The image informs us that the sundry, often homely, proverbs of the father-teacher, of Israel's anonymous sages, and even of Solomon himself, speak with a single voice, and this is Wisdom's own." (p. 359).

So Proverbs 1-9 really serves as a prelude to the proverb literature, preparing you to hear the wisdom of the elders as the divine Word. It's important to appreciate this as you read the book, so you know that human wisdom isn't pitted against divine wisdom. Rather, the human word or human wisdom is the vehicle for the divine Word. The two voices we hear in Proverbs 1-9 have been fused together to help us understand that in the observations and sayings of Israel's human elders, we will hear echoes of the divine, transcendental wisdom.