

The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs (continued)*

F.F. Bruce

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'The Scriptures principally teach', says the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 'what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.' This is as true of the Book of Proverbs as of any other part of the Bible. We have already considered the teaching of this book with regard to God; now we turn to look at its portrayal of the whole duty of man.

This last expression, 'the whole duty of man', is actually a quotation from another of the Old Testament Wisdom books, Ecclesiastes, but the sentence in which it appears—'Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man' (Eccl. 12:13)—may be said to sum up the ethical teaching of all the Wisdom literature. The fear of Jehovah is not only the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7; 15:33); it is the essence of true worship. The sage, as we have seen, agrees with the prophet and the psalmist that the mere offering of material sacrifices without a right attitude of heart and a right manner of life is worse than useless.

What then has the Book of Proverbs to teach about the right attitude of heart and right manner of life?

'Let not mercy and truth forsake thee' (Prov. 3:3) is an admonition which brings together two attributes which found their perfect manifestation in our Lord: 'grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Again:

Mercy and truth preserve the king;
And his throne is upholden by mercy (Prov. 20:28)—

had Shakespeare these words in his mind when he wrote concerning the quality of mercy?

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown...
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings.

So mercy, not vengeance, should be shown to one's enemy:

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'If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat;
And if he be thirsty, give him water to drink:
For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head,
And the Lord shall reward thee' (Prov. 25:21 f.).

It is noteworthy that, when Paul quotes these words in Rom. 12:20, he omits the fourth line of the quatrain.

* The previous article appeared in the July issue of last year, page 116. It will be well to read that portion again before reading this.—*Ed.*

But mercy is not enjoined at the expense of justice: 'it is a joy to the righteous man to do judgment' (21:15); the just man's memory is blessed (10:7); his tongue is as choice silver (10:20); his mouth is as a fountain of life and brings forth wisdom (10:11, 31); his path—

'is as the shining light
That shineth more and more unto the perfect day' (4:18).

'Love coverall all transgressions' (10:12) is a sentiment that is echoed in the New Testament (1 Cor. 13:7; 5:20; 1 Pet. 4:8); a similar thought appears in Prov. 17:9, 'He that covereth a transgression seeketh love.'

Paul urges his readers not to be slothful in business (Rom. 12:11); and the Book of Proverbs anticipates him a number of warnings against sloth and exhortations to diligence. The sluggard is advised to learn a lesson in industry from the ant (6:6 ff.), and a similar passage later in the book draws a moral from the sorry picture presented by the sluggard's field and vineyard (24:30 ff.). But contrariwise:

Seest thou a man diligent in his business?
He shall stand before kings;
He shall not stand before mean men (22:29).

And a number of other passages might be cited, emphasizing the blessings of diligence and industry.

Self-control, moderation, and humility are urged, as against all forms of intemperance, excess and pride. Here are a few samples:

He that is slow to anger is of great understanding:
But he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly (14:29).

Before destruction the heart of man is haughty,
And before honour goeth humility (18:12).

Better is a dry morsel and quietness therewith,
Than an house full of feasting and strife (17:1).

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The last example reminds us that the sage has no great opinion of the value of wealth.

Weary not thyself to be rich...
For riches certainly make themselves wings,
Like an eagle that flieth toward heaven (23:4 f.)

Contentment may be enjoyed with but a small portion of this world's goods:

Better is little with fear of the Lord,
Than great treasure and trouble therewith.
Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,
Than a stalled ox and hatred therewith (15:16 f.).

Over against the various virtues which are thus inculcated, frequent warnings are given against a number of vices—revenge, falsehood, oppression, hatred, idleness, drunkenness, unchastity, bad temper, covetousness and envy. It is interesting, indeed, to compare the practical teaching of Proverbs rather minutely with the ethical parts of the New Testament, and to note how far in this respect the New Testament dots the i's and crosses the t's of the Wisdom literature.

The part played by women in the Book of Proverbs is also worthy of note. High praise is given to the 'virtuous woman' (or 'woman of worth'), not only in the alphabetic acrostic which rehearses her accomplishments in 31:10-31, but in a number of sayings scattered throughout the book. It is evident that monogamy is contemplated throughout as the regular married relationship (cf. 5:18 f.), whatever deviations might be permitted by the law for the hardness of men's hearts.

Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing,
And obtaineth favour of the Lord (18:22)—

provided, of course, that she be a good wife. There is another kind of wife, whose shortcomings are denounced in forthright language:

A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband:
But she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his
bones (12:4).

By contrast with the woman of worth, the sage utters stern warnings against the foolish woman, the brawling and ill-tempered

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woman, and above all the 'strange woman' whose 'house is the way to Sheol' (7:27).

In all these moral precepts it is presumed that men and women are free agents, responsible for the way in which they exercise the power of choice. Yet there is no suggestion that it is possible to lead a moral life without having any regard to religious considerations. Disregard of God leads to moral ruin (cf. 22:14), but 'by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil' (16:6). Divine grace and guidance keep a man in the right way:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart,
And lean not upon thine own understanding:
In all thy ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct thy paths (3:5 f.).

These words may be said to put in a nutshell the prime lesson of Proverbs.

Little is said about divine judgment, but it is made plain that men are answerable to God for the conduct of their lives, and that the last word rests with Him.

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes:
But the Lord weigheth the hearts (21:2; cf. 17:3).

But ample room is left for repentance and forgiveness: 'by mercy and truth iniquity is purged' (16:6).

He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper:
But whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall
obtain mercy (28:13).

Since God is a righteous God, the universe which He controls is a moral universe, marked by retribution for evil and reward for virtue, but the retribution and reward alike generally to be found in this life. 'Length of days, ... rich, and honour' are held out by Wisdom as a prize for following her paths. This indicates for the Book of Proverbs a date when righteousness was on the throne, and rulers were not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. A day was to come later in history when persistence in keeping the commandments of God meant an early and a violent death, and when that day came, it was found insufficient to restrict retribution and reward to this life only. A worthier understanding of the life to come, and a more balanced sense of its relation to the present life, were attained as a result.

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