



## Teaching Wisdom: Proverbs and the Classroom

By Anne Stewart

What is *wisdom*? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines wisdom as “the capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct.” It is a character attribute and a way of looking at the world.

Wisdom comes in many different forms. It can be traded orally, especially through anecdotes or advice. It can be written down, sometimes in the form of short, pithy proverbs, like “early to bed, early to rise, makes you healthy, wealthy, and wise.” It’s also found in longer stories or speeches or even in songs or poems, such as Robert Frost’s famous poem “The Road Not Taken,” which states that taking the less-traveled road makes all the difference. Even television, print, and internet advertisements function as “wisdom” to a certain extent; they promote a particular way of looking at the world and imply that their way is the best, the one that judges “rightly.”

Each of these sources of wisdom uses different techniques to make its appeal persuasive. A recent ad for a minivan, for example, featured the backseat of the car loaded with champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries. It appealed to the desire for luxurious things, not a list of the car’s safety features or seating capacity, as a way to communicate that it was the car most worthy of purchase. Its “wisdom” was that the consumer deserves to indulge herself. Such wisdom is everywhere in modern culture, if we have the eyes to see it.

The Hebrew Bible also contains wisdom, most notably in the book of Proverbs, which is a collection of poems and proverbial sayings. Like the wisdom we encounter every day, the wisdom in Proverbs also has various forms and uses persuasive techniques to make its appeal.

The book of Proverbs is concerned with *teaching* wisdom, not just recording or cataloging it. The opening lines of the book explain that its purpose is “to learn wisdom and discipline, to discern words of insight...to give savvy to the naïve, knowledge and astuteness to the young” (Proverbs 1:2, 4). Unlike other books in the Hebrew Bible, Proverbs does not present a list of laws that must be obeyed, nor does it appeal to divine revelation. Compare, for example, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5), which offer a list of laws that the Israelites should keep. The Commandments appeal to God’s authority—the people should obey them because they are the words that Moses received from God. Proverbs bases its appeal on different strategies.

A primary teaching strategy in Proverbs is *rebuke*. Proverbs speaks of physical discipline as a means of correction: “a whip for a horse, a bridle for a donkey, and a rod for the back of fools” (Proverbs 26:3). Here, the rod is a tool of training, not of punishment, used to guide the foolish student towards the way of wisdom. But more often, the book refers to verbal rebuke. Indeed, words have even more power than the rod, especially upon receptive ears. Proverbs 17:10 observes: “a rebuke strikes deeper into a discerning person than one hundred blows on a fool.” In fact, one can profit from rebuke not only by receiving it oneself, but by witnessing the rebuke of others. So Proverbs 21:11a, “when a scoffer is punished, the naïve one becomes wise.” According to Proverbs, the need for rebuke is basic to all humanity. The unformed mind is a foolish one, and it requires discipline to become properly ordered and trained after the way of

wisdom. Acquiring wisdom is a continual, and never-ending, process—even the wise person requires correction (Proverbs 9:8; 19:20).

Another dominant teaching strategy in Proverbs is *motivation*. Proverbs recognizes that students are motivated by self-interest, and it offers a wide range of motivations in its appeal, promising certain benefits and material rewards for following the parent's instruction. "My child," says the parent, "do not forget my teaching, let your mind keep my commands, for they will bestow on you length of days, years of life, and well being" (3:1–2). Proverbs 10:4 offers that, "a negligent hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent enriches," suggesting that wealth comes to the industrious. It is important to note that these motivations are *promises*; they are not insurance policies. Desirable outcomes are not guaranteed, but simply presented either as a reasonable expectation or as a way to depict positively a particular situation, act, or character.

Closely related to language of motivation is language of *desire*, and Proverbs is in many ways a book about discerning between right and wrong desires. One of the main claims of Proverbs is that the things we desire shape our character. It appeals to human desires for wealth, long life, fine food, and love as a way of teaching the student to discern between helpful and harmful desires. For example, in Proverbs 1:10–19, the parent warns his child about a group of people who may entice him with the promise of wealth to join their deceitful practices. The goal for this group is great wealth, and any means necessary justify that end. But as the father tells the story, he too says something about wealth. Wealth acquired by deceit is not desirable at all—it leads to death. Yet elsewhere in the book, wealth can be indicative of human flourishing, and the parent encourages the student to acquire things of value, both material wealth and intangible treasure, like knowledge or wise speech. According to Proverbs, the desire for wealth—and many other things—is not all bad, in and of itself. Desires, rightly ordered, can lead to wisdom. At the same time, desire can also lead one astray. Even as the book validates certain cultural desires, it also frames them in the larger perspective of the pursuit of wisdom. The wise person is not one who disavows all desires, but rather one who seeks wisdom as the highest desire and who seeks other desires in relation to the goal of wisdom.

Proverbs has a complex pedagogy that accounts for the complexity of the human person. It assumes that human character is continually being shaped—not just by official teachers, but by friends, acquaintances, the threat of punishment and the allure of motivations and desires. Accordingly, even as the parent of Proverbs teaches about wealth, for example, he recognizes that the student may meet other "teachers" in the guise of would-be friends who promise easy money. The goal of the book is to help the student discern the way of wisdom amidst the bewildering array of choices and desires that daily life presents. In this respect, even though not all of its teaching strategies will be followed in modern classrooms, the book of Proverbs still has much wisdom to share with modern teachers and students.

### **Further Reading**

Richard Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Rev. ed.; Westminster John Knox, 1998).

Christine Roy Yoder, "Shaping Desire: A Parent's Attempt, Proverbs 1–9," *Journal for Preachers* 33.4 (2010): 54–61.

**Anne Stewart** is a Ph.D. candidate in Hebrew Bible at Emory University.

---

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>