

Proverbs – information sheet

What is it? Why is it called 'Proverbs'?

The Old Testament book of Proverbs is an example of 'wisdom literature'. It is made up almost entirely of short ethical, moral or religious sayings, often only twenty or thirty words long, which are known as proverbs. As such, it can at first, seem to be an odd book to include in the Bible as most of the sayings seem to be about common sense more than anything spiritual.

However, while it is concerned with the art of living, the book of Proverbs says that wisdom is the ability to make choices in life that are good and pleasing to God.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

The proverbs offer a collection of practical wisdom for everyday life, covering things such as to act justly, to be kind, to be truthful and honest, to work hard, to behave well towards others. Many ancient cultures valued wisdom and wanted to work out how to make the best choices in life. What makes the proverbs of the Bible different is their emphasis on the importance of making the choices that God would want people to make – that good choices are also godly choices.

What is in it?

Proverbs is not really designed to be read from the beginning to the end in one go. The sayings are grouped according to which wise person they originated with.

- Chapters 1-9 A long, poetic introduction on how to live a life shaped by wisdom
- Chapters 10-21 Proverbs of King Solomon
- Chapters 22-24 A collection of anonymous wise sayings
- Chapters 25-29 More proverbs of Solomon
- Chapters 30-31 Proverbs of Agur and proverbs of King Lemuel.



Who wrote it?

The Book of Proverbs attributes most of the sayings in it to Solomon, the Old Testament king who ruled between about 961 and 922BC and who was famed for his wisdom. His story can be found in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Other sayings come from Agur and King Lemuel, and some are anonymous. We don't know when these sayings were gathered together into the book of Proverbs, or who compiled them. It is possible that the book grew over time, perhaps starting with Solomon's sayings and adding wisdom from many different sources over time but we can't be sure.

What do Proverbs mean for us today?

The wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs is practical and involves making good choices. Cultures change, but people remain the same, meet similar situations and face similar challenges; we need wise advice today just as much as the people in Solomon's day. While many of the sayings in proverbs can appear to be absolute promises, they are more about how we can live our lives in good and practical ways that are pleasing to God rather than promises that certain situations will turn out in particular ways. The reader needs to work out how proverbs might apply to real-life situations, so the proverbs help us to think harder about how to live life in God's way.

Liturgical use.

Catholics use this book in the liturgy because it gives sound teaching and catechesis on how to live a faithful and responsible life as a member of the community of faith in society. The sublime passage on the relationship of Wisdom to God (Proverbs 8:22-31) provides the first reading for the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity (Year C) in the spring just after Pentecost. We also hear readings from the Book of Proverbs on weekdays in the Autumn: Week 25, Year II - which tell us that the wilful wrong-doer is abhorrent to the Lord (Proverbs 3:27-34) in one reading; and beg the Lord to keep falsehood and lies far away, as well as asking to be granted only his share of the bread to eat (Proverbs 30:5-9) in another.

Many of the sayings in Proverbs are addressed to young people:

My child, be attentive
to my wisdom;

incline your ear to my
understanding,

so that you may hold
on to prudence,

and your lips may
guard knowledge.

(Proverbs 5:1-2)

All Bible quotations from the New Revised
Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA).