

No. 43: The Dramatic Structure of Proverbs

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The book of Proverbs appears as a largely random collection of aphorisms drawn from experience saturated in law. Despite its random arrangement, however, the book does have an over-arching structure that reinforces its main themes.

One way to gather clues regarding the structure of a biblical book (or any book) is to look at the beginning and end. Genesis begins with a command to Adam to rule the earth, and ends with a new Adam, Joseph, ruling the largest empire of the world. Exodus begins with Israel in slavery and ends with God's presence descending on the tabernacle; as James Jordan has written, the theme of the book is "From Slavery to Sabbath." The cosmic scope of the books of Chronicles is reinforced by the fact that it begins with Adam (creation) and ends with the declaration of Cyrus that the temple would be rebuilt, an anticipation of the eschatological temple of the new creation. The book of Matthew begins with the Jewish genealogy of Jesus, depicts his escalating conflict with and rejection of the Jewish leadership and ends with Jesus commissioning His disciples to spread the gospel to the Gentile nations. Acts begins with Pentecost in Jerusalem and ends with Paul preaching unhindered in Rome.

Applying this procedure to the Proverbs yields some important insights. The first nine chapters are full of references to two women who compete for the prince's attention and affection. Lady Wisdom is introduced in chapter 1, in the street exhorting the simpletons to abandon their folly and warning them of the consequences if they refuse to hear (1:20-33). Chapter 2 introduces the second woman, the adulteress, Dame Folly (9:13); her ways are the ways of death (2:16-18). She is a loud and boisterous woman who preys on the simple (9:13).

Throughout the early chapters, the father alternately encourages his son to pursue Lady Wisdom (3:13ff.; 4:1-9; 8:1-36; 9:1-6) and warns him about the dangers of following Dame Folly (5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:6-27; 9:13-18). Wisdom brings life, riches, and honor. Folly bring poverty, shame, and ultimately death; her house is a highway to the grave. The Proverbs begin, then with the son confronted by a choice of two women who are bound up with two divergent destinies.

It should be recalled, too, that the Proverbs are written by a King to a Prince. The book largely consists of the Proverbs of Solomon and King Lemuel (chapter 31), and the king consistently

addresses his "son." The dramatic premise of the book of Proverbs is this: A Prince must determine whether Lady Wisdom or Dame Folly will be his princess. The dramatic question, then, is: Whom will he choose? (In teaching this to children, I have suggested that the book of Proverbs is structurally similar to Disney's version of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," in which a prince must choose between the mermaid, who cannot speak so long as she is a normal girl, and the sea witch, who has disguised herself as a desirable young woman.)

The answer to our dramatic question is given in the final chapter of the book, the well-known Proverbs 31. It is no accident that the Proverbs ends with a celebration of the excellent wife. In the drama of Proverbs, the excellent wife is Lady Wisdom from the earlier chapters. Her husband, the Prince, now sits in the gates of the city. The prince has successfully resisted the seductions of the adulteress, Folly. He has chosen well. Together, the Prince and his bride form the royal household.

This structure and these characters are generally analogous to the major structures and characters of the Bible. The first prince, Adam, chose to follow the word of his adulterous wife (2 Cor 11:1-3), and ended up, as the Proverbs say, in Sheol. The Last Adam listened intently to the Word of His Father, and died to win a spotless Bride. Now He praises His bride in the gates; she is an excellent wife.

This may seem a rather whimsical way to summarize the book of Proverbs, but it sheds light on particular proverbs. For example, recognizing the unity of the book of Proverbs will help us to understand the original force of the rescue verses of 24:11-12. These verses, of course, have been used to justify the activities of the anti-abortion group, Operation Rescue. They imply, according to the leaders of the movement, that Christians should physically hold back women who are going to abortuaries to kill their babies.

I do not wish to debate the merits of Operation Rescue here. This verse may indeed be applicable to anti-abortion tactics. Suffice it to say that, in the dramatic context of Proverbs, this verse has a different immediate force. The ones "being taken away to death" and "staggering to slaughter" are the fools and simpletons of the early chapters of the book. Throughout those chapters, the simpleton is depicted as one who blissfully follows the adulteress to the grave (2:18-19; 6:33; 7:22-27; 9:18). Proverbs 7:22 says that the fool follows the woman Folly as "an ox goes to the slaughter."

In context of the whole book, then, Proverbs 24:11-12 instruct us to rescue fools and simpletons from the folly and simplicity. The idea is close to that of James 5:20: "he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins." The rescue operation in view in Proverbs 24:11-12 is primarily the rescue of foolish sinners from the highway that leads to the grave.

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