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The Proverbs



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Introduction

The book of proverbs originated with Solomon son of David, king of Israel (Proverbs 1:1). The word 'proverb' in Hebrew is *mashal* from a root meaning to rule, have dominion, or reign, and so have superiority in mental action.

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This double meaning was true of Solomon who was not only a king who ruled, but he was wiser than all the men of the east and all the sages of Egypt (1Kings 4:30). In addition, his *mashal* in the sense of his superiority in mental action is reflected in the voluminous literature that he wrote. He composed 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32).

The book of proverbs is structured like a sandwich (envelope, bracket, inclusio), the outer layers of which are the *fear of the Lord*:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools have despised wisdom & instruction (Proverbs 1:7)

Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting. A woman who fears the Lord makes herself praiseworthy. Give her credit for what she has accomplished, and let her works praise her in the city gates (Proverbs 31:30-31).

Proverbs 1:7 is propositional, while 31:30 is practical. The first text asserts a fact; the second provides evidential proof of it. The expression 'fear of the Lord' occurs 13 times in Proverbs; 'fears the Lord' just three times (ESV).

The fear of the Lord

There is no single word for "fear" in Hebrew, and the various terms can have multiple meanings, so context is definitive. However, the most frequent word used is 'yirah', which sometimes expresses being afraid, while in other contexts, "yirah" denotes awe, or adoration. An example of both meanings is provided from the life of David when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me; all day long foes oppress me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many fight against me. O Most High, when I am afraid (yirah), I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid (yirah); what can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:1-4).

The first *yirah* is that psychological fear that comes from the oppression that David experienced from his enemies. In contrast, the second *yirah* in the sense of awe comes from God's word in which David trusts and it eliminates his psychological fear. That is, the basis for David's confidence is God's word of assuring promise of protection ([Skip Moen, 2017](#)).

Yirah is connected with a Hebrew word that means "flowing", a "flowing of the gut," and is related to words meaning rain or stream as a flowing of water, which can be applied to "fear" or "reverence" ([Benner](#)). As such, *yirah* is the source of wisdom and knowledge, even life. We've all been scared or been in the presence of something so amazing that you could feel it in your gut?

The common interpretation of Proverbs 1:7 above, is that to get wisdom one has to be in great awe of Yahweh, that is, it is a human initiative. However, when a noun (*fear*) precedes another noun (*Lord*) in Hebrew, it is connected to the second noun to form one concept. So here, the fear (*yirah*) belongs to the Lord, and the initiative is His. Note God's initiative in Jeremiah's text next in the form of His seven "***I wills***".

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear (yirah) me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear (yirah) of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul (Jeremiah 32:38-41).

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The fear of the Lord continued

That is, *yirah* as awe proceeds from the Lord to His people as in "flowing of the gut" above, and the resultant wisdom depends entirely on the Lord's gift. It is not humanly generated. Also, *yirah* does not occur in relations between equals, only in hierarchical relationships. So, to "fear" Yahweh involves acknowledging one's lower standing before Him and often taking concrete action based upon that acknowledgment ([Lasater](#)). Now let us look at the other words in 1:7, their meanings taken from the Net Bible notes.

Beginning

"Beginning" describes the first step in acquiring moral knowledge (Net Bible notes).

Knowledge

"Knowledge" refers to experiential knowledge, not just cognitive knowledge, including the intellectual assimilation and practical application. It is also used in v. 4 with the nuance "discernment."

Wisdom

"Wisdom" is "moral skill." It is used in reference to the skill of seamen (Psalm 107:27), abilities of weavers (Exodus 35:26), capabilities of administrators (1 Kings 3:28), or skill of craftsmen (Exodus 31:6). In the realm of moral living, it refers to skill in living—one lives life with moral skill so that something of lasting value is produced from one's life. Deuteronomy 4:6 refers to the statutes and laws given by God as Israel's wisdom.

Instruction

Throughout the Book of Proverbs the term includes moral training and instruction. Parental discipline (1:2, 7; 15:33; 23:23) may also be chastisement from God.

Fools

"Fools" are people characterised by moral folly, lacking understanding (10:21), do not store up knowledge (10:14), fail to attain wisdom (24:7), and refuse correction (15:5; 27:22). They are arrogant (26:5), talk loosely (14:3) and are contentious (20:3). They might have mental intelligence but they are morally foolish. In sum, they are stubborn and "thick-brained." Placing "wisdom and moral instruction" first makes this the focus. The reader is not asked to think primarily about the nature of fools but about the choice regarding wisdom.

In addition tools, Solomon calls them simpletons and mockers (1:22). Simpletons are naive, open-minded and easily influenced. He is easily enticed and misled (Proverbs 1:32; 7:7; 9:6; 22:3; 27:12); believes everything, including bad counsel (14:15); lacks moral prudence (8:5; 19:25); needs discernment (21:11). However, he is capable of learning (9:4, 16), but is easily persuaded and gullible, open to any influence, good or bad. This is the "wide-eyed youth" who is headed for trouble unless he listens to the counsel of wisdom.

"Have despised" means to treat things of value with contempt, as if they were worthless. The perfect verb places the life that fools have lived in contrast with the beginning of moral knowledge. Here is the way of wisdom; fools have gone a different way. Now by implication—what is your choice?

The table on the next page lists the references to the 'fear of the Lord', and 'fears the Lord', excluding 1:7 and 31:30.



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Verse	Fear of the Lord texts
What it is	
8:13	The <i>fear of the Lord</i> is hatred of evil.
9:10	The <i>fear of the Lord</i> is the beginning of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
14:27	The <i>fear of the Lord</i> is a fountain of life, and so turn away from the snares of death.
15:33	The <i>fear of the Lord</i> is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honour.
What it does	
10:27	The <i>fear of the Lord</i> prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.
14:2	Whoever walks in uprightness <i>fears the Lord</i> , but he who is devious in his ways despises Him.
14:26	In the <i>fear of the Lord</i> one has strong confidence.
15:16	Better is a little with the <i>fear of the Lord</i> than great treasure and trouble with it.
16:6	By <i>fear of the Lord</i> one turns away from evil.
19:23	The <i>fear of the Lord</i> leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm.
22:4	The reward for humility and <i>fear of the Lord</i> is riches and honour and life.
28:14	Blessed is the one who <i>fears the Lord</i> , but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.
How to get it	
1:29	They hated knowledge and did not choose the <i>fear of the Lord</i> .
2:1-5	My son, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, then you will understand the <i>fear of the Lord</i> and find the knowledge of God.
23:17	Let not your heart envy sinners, but always continue in the <i>fear of the Lord</i> .

I have classified the texts into ‘what’ the fear of the Lord is, what it does, and how people may get it.

What it is

I mentioned early on that ‘yirah’ sometimes expresses being afraid, that is psychological fear, while in other contexts, “yirah” denotes awe, or adoration. Further I noted that the sense of awe comes from God in Whom we must trust, which then eliminates psychological fear. In the first four texts in the table, fear (‘yirah’) is to be understood in the latter sense.

What it does

These eight texts describe what the fear of the Lord does. It works both for the upright and the wicked. For the former, the outcome is always good such as prolonged life, strong confidence, satisfaction, protected from harm, riches and honour and life, and blessing. On the other hand, the wicked get shorter life spans, trouble, harm, and calamity.

How to get it

The last three texts point to the need for a right heart and a submissive will. Hating knowledge and envying sinners are symptoms of a your problem. Not choosing the fear of the Lord, nor accepting Solomon’s wisdom, and treasuring his commandments indicates a rebellious will and understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God are impossible.

The woman of valour

This brings us to the final text.

Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting. A woman who fears the Lord makes herself praiseworthy. Give her credit for what she has accomplished, and let her works praise her in the city gates (Proverbs 31:30-31).

These texts end a body of text beginning at verse 10 and describing a “a woman of valour” (see Ruth 3:11), which means a woman of moral valour or virtue. Here the woman possesses all the virtues, honor, and strength to do the things that the poem indicates. This, and the word meanings below are taken from Net Bible notes.

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Charm

The word appears to have a broad meaning that includes whatever may have the effect of eliciting a favourable response from someone else, something that they find pleasant, or agreeable.

Deceitful

The word means a lie, a breach of faith and is a strong declaration against relying on the emotional impulse of attraction. Messages to “follow your heart” amount to little or no more than ‘follow whatever gives you a charmed feeling while ignoring moral constraints and potential consequences’.

Fleeting beauty

The verse shows that “charm” and “beauty” do not endure as do those qualities that the fear of the Lord produces. Charm is deceitful: One may be disappointed in the character of the one with beauty. Beauty is vain (fleeting as a vapour): Physical appearance will not last. The writer is not saying these are worthless; he is saying there is something infinitely more valuable.

Praiseworthy

The verb means “makes herself praiseworthy” and emphasises her character. That is, she has a sound basis for being proud of her accomplishments achieved under the umbrella of the fear of the Lord.

City gate

In Biblical times, the gates of cities were occupied by prominent city men, like judges who made decisions, and where people transacted their business dealings, legal transactions, and had social meetings. Gates were open during the day to allow access, especially to merchants and farmers bringing their goods into the cities to sell. At night the gates were closed, making the city a fortress for the protection of the people against enemies. One is reminded of the acclaim given to Ruth by Boaz: “for all the gate of the town knows that you are a noble woman” (Ruth 3:11).

Conclusion

The book of proverbs is structured like a sandwich, the outer layers being the *fear of the Lord*:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools have despised wisdom & instruction (Proverbs 1:7)

Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting. A woman who fears the Lord makes herself praiseworthy. Give her credit for what she has accomplished, and let her works praise her in the city gates (Proverbs 31:30-31).

Proverbs 1:7 is propositional, while 31:30 is practical. The first text asserts a fact; the second provides evidential proof of it in the 21 verses of chapter 31:10-31.

The fear of the Lord (“yirah”) denotes awe, or adoration and comes from God to a receptive heart and submissive will. Its benefits are wisdom, Knowledge of the Holy One, a prolonged, upright life full of confidence, satisfaction and honour.

References

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