

1. INTRODUCTORY INSTRUCTION

PROVERBS 1:1 - 9:18

Introduction to chapters 1-9

The introductory instruction (chapters 1-9) presents the value and importance of the teaching and the pursuit of wisdom, the pitfalls it saves us from and the value it provides for life. Stressed throughout is the radical importance for the acquiring of wisdom of being in a right relationship with God. The different words used in this Preface (verses 1-7) will have different nuances depending on the context in which they appear. However, since they recur so frequently, we will offer here a general definition.

¹The wise sayings of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

1. ‘Wise saying’ [מִשְׁלָּה, māšāl, verse 1 and 6] is used broadly to cover brief one-liners (including proverbs) such as are found in the collections in Sections 2 and 4, and more general instructions such as are found in Sections 1 and 3.

For the significance of the attribution to Solomon see pages 6-7.

²to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words that give insight,

2. ‘To know’/‘knowledge’ [דָּעַתָּה, da‘at, verses 2, 4 and 7]. This is the infinitive of יָדַע [yāda‘] which can range from knowing about something to the kind of knowing that is the fruit of intimate communion.

³to accept instruction and to gain insight into righteousness, right judgment, and integrity;

3. ‘Wisdom’ [חֵכְמָה, ḥokmāh, verses 2 and 7]. This is the ability to make judgments that are appropriate to the situation and to act on them in ways that are good and life-giving and conducive to peace.

⁴to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young;

4. ‘Instruction’ [מוֹסָר, mūsār, verses 2, 3 and 7]. This is teaching that is systematic. It includes discipline and correction and whatever is deemed necessary for a student to learn.

⁵that the wise may listen and add to what they have gained, and understand how to steer their course,

5. ‘To understand’/‘understanding’ [בִּיָּן, bîn, verses 2, 5 and 6]. Basically this means to be perceptive, to gain insight, to grasp significance.

⁶to understand a proverb and metaphor, the words of the wise and their riddles.

6. ‘To gain insight into’ [שָׂכַל, śākal, verse 3]. A student who wants to learn and is willing to work will reap the benefits of schooling.

⁷The fear of YHWH the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

7. ‘Righteousness’ [שֶׁדֶק, šedeq, verse 3]. See the explanation on page 8. The goal of education is to equip us to be in a right relationship with God, with ourselves and with others according to the place we have in the community.

8. ‘Right judgment’ [מִשְׁפָּט, mišpat, verse 3]. Judgment that is in accordance with the truth, with the way things really are. This can be ascertained from revelation of God’s will. In Proverbs the focus is often on ascertaining the truth by careful and honest observation, and willingness to learn from the wise.

9. ‘Integrity’ [מִישָׁרִים, mēšārîm, verse 3, from the verb יָשַׁר]. Doing things the right way.

10. ‘The simple’ [פְּתָאִים, p^otā’îm, verse 4]. The nuance varies, but in general there are no negative connotations. It denotes a person who is not yet educated or skilled. The simple can be naive and, because they do not know, they can be easily deceived.

11. ‘Shrewdness’ [עֲרֻמָּה, ‘ormāh, verse 4]. The ability to discern, to know what is going on and to make one’s way successfully in the world. It can have negative connotations and suggest someone who is crafty, cunning.

12. ‘The young’ [נְעָר, na‘ar, verse 4]. A young person in need of schooling.

13. ‘Discretion’ [מְזִמָּה, m^ezimmāh, verse 4]. Making prudent decisions that will achieve the desired outcome.

14. ‘The wise’ [חָכָם, hākām, verses 5 and 6; see No. 3 on previous page].

15. ‘Listen’ [שָׁמַע, šāma‘, verse 5]. To listen, to hear, to heed, to obey. The point of verse 5 is that wisdom is not something we acquire once and for all. A person who is well educated, skilled and discerning will know that it is necessary to remain alert. Circumstances change. Responding appropriately requires vigilance and constant discerning.

16. ‘add to’ [יָסַף, yāsap, verse 5]. There is no end to the pursuit of knowledge.

17. ‘What one has gained’ [לֵקַח, leqah, verse 5]. In context the reference is to wisdom. One is never too old or too wise to learn more and grow in wisdom.

18. ‘To acquire’ [קָנָה, qānāh, verse 5].

19. ‘Steer their course’ [תַּחְבּוּלוֹת, taḥbulōt, verse 5].

20. ‘Metaphor’ [מְלִישָׂה, m^elîšâ, verse 6].

21. ‘Riddle’ [חִידָה, ḥîdāh]. A cryptic question intended to puzzle, and so get someone to think outside the square.

22. ‘Fool’ [אֲוִיל, ‘awîl, verse 7]. Unlike the ‘simple’ (see no. 10 above) who are not yet educated, the ‘fool’ is a person who resists education, who thinks he knows but takes no care to check, who won’t listen and won’t learn.

23. ‘Despise’ [בִּזָּה, bwz, verse 7]. To show contempt for, to ridicule, mock.

Verse 7 claims that if you want to know you must begin with ‘fear of YHWH’. See Introduction, pages 9-10. Without a sense of the sacred at the heart of nature and life, any attempt to know is only scraping the surface, for God is the Lord of creation and of history. It is God who makes things the way they are and who (in the view of the ancient Israelites) controls the movements of history.

Avoid bad company

⁸Hear, my child, your father's instruction, do not reject your mother's teaching; ⁹for they are a fair garland for your head, pendants for your neck.

¹⁰My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent. ¹¹If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us wantonly ambush the innocent. ¹²Like Sheol let us swallow them alive – whole, like those who go down to the Pit. ¹³We will get all kinds of costly things; we will fill our houses with loot. ¹⁴Throw in your lot with us; we will all share one purse."

¹⁵My child, do not walk in their way, keep your foot from their path; ¹⁶for their feet run to evil, and they hasten to shed blood.

¹⁷No difference if the net is baited while the bird is looking on; ¹⁸so they lie in wait – to kill themselves! They set an ambush—for their own lives!

¹⁹Such the ways of all who are greedy for gain; it takes the life of its owners.

The build up to the decalogue in the Book of Deuteronomy opens with the call: 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 5:1). Shortly after, when the authors summarise the decalogue with the command to 'love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength', once again they preface their words with 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4). The basic commandment is to 'hear', to 'listen', to 'heed' and to act accordingly.

The call here is the same. The language comes from the home, where a child first learns the art of living a productive life. This style of instruction is borrowed, in Egyptian and Israelite wisdom literature, by teachers in relation to their pupils. The first advice is a warning not to get caught up with 'sinners'. The primary meaning of the verb 'to sin' [נִטָּוַ, ḥāttā'] is 'to miss the mark'. A sinner is someone who is on the wrong track, and so will fail to reach the desired goal.

The situation described in verses 11-14 is where these sinners think they can get on by ambushing the innocent to rob them. The teachers are warning their pupils to avoid them. If the young are going to be wise they must choose their company carefully. For verse 12 see Isaiah 5:14; Habakkuk 2:5; Psalm 5:9.

Verse 17 presents the first 'proverb'. A bird can watch you baiting the trap, but it will still go for the seed. The sinners whose company the young person is being warned against are just as stupid as the bird. They see the trap that they themselves have lain, but they don't realise that they are the ones who are walking into their own trap. Their behaviour is hurting themselves. We can't expect to pretend away the consequences of the choices we make. People who behave in the way described in verses 11-14 end up losing themselves. Compare the psalm:

The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.

– Psalm 9:16

The message the parents-teachers are giving their child-pupil is obvious. Their hope is that the young person will listen and act accordingly.

The advice just offered to the young person is supported in this scene in which Wisdom herself (the Hebrew *ḥokmāh*, and its Greek equivalent *sophia*, are feminine gender) is heard 'in the streets, in the squares' inviting the young to seek wisdom while the opportunity is there. The personification of Wisdom is influenced by the goddess of wisdom in the surrounding cultures.

There is nothing wrong with being 'simple' (verse 22; see 1:4, page 13), but we can't choose to stay that way (we can't 'love being simple'). If we don't learn, if we don't mature, if we don't grow up, we remain a danger to ourselves and to others. We are too vulnerable and we won't ever be free.

Wisdom is appealing, too, to those who scoff [כָּסִילִם *kāsīlīm*, verse 22] at wisdom, and to fools who 'despise wisdom and knowledge' (see verse 7), who 'hate knowledge' (verse 22). The invitation to open their minds and hearts to wisdom is there for everyone.

The invitation is followed by a warning (verses 24-27). On verse 24 see Isaiah 50:2; 66:4. The choice to reject wisdom's invitation, and to stay simple or cynical or a fool can lead only to 'terror' [שׁוֹאֵה *šō'āh*], calamity, distress and anguish' (verse 27). The invitation is there now. If they don't accept it now, they may find that it is too late (verse 28).

In verse 29, once again the link between truth and religion is emphasised. On 'fear of YHWH' see verse 7, page 13. If they reject wisdom's invitation, they will suffer the consequences of their choice (verses 31-32; see 12:10; 13:2; 18:20-21).

The invitation concludes with a statement of the benefits of listening (verse 33; see verse 8).

²⁰Wisdom cries out in the street; raises her voice in the squares. ²¹At the corner of a bustling street she calls; speaks her words at the city gate:

²²"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? ²³Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.

²⁴Because I called and you refused; I stretched out my hand and no one heeded. ²⁵You ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof;

²⁶Now I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, ²⁷when terror strikes you like a storm, and your calamity arrives like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.

²⁸Then they will call to me, but I will not answer; they will seek me, but will not find me, ²⁹because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of YHWH; ³⁰they would have none of my counsel, and despised my every reproof.

³¹So they will eat the fruit of their way, have their fill of their own devices.

³²For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of scoffers destroys them; ³³but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

¹My child, if you accept my words and treasure within you my commands, ²giving your ear to wisdom, inclining your heart to understanding; ³if you cry out for understanding, and summon understanding; ⁴if you seek her like silver, and search for her like hidden treasure;

⁵then you will understand the fear of YHWH and acquire the knowledge of God.

⁶For YHWH gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

⁷he stores up success for the upright – a shield to those who proceed with integrity, ⁸keeping watch over the paths of right judgment and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

⁹Then you will understand righteousness and right judgment and uprightness, every good path.

Though the language is that of a teacher instructing a pupil (see 1:8-19), chapter 2 is more a homily than an instruction. It is a poem of 22 lines (the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet). Verses 1-11 speak of the good things wisdom brings. We are taken to the heart of the quest for wisdom as a quest for God. This explains the call to ‘treasure within you my commands [תִּצְוֶה, *mišwōt*]. This echoes the call expressed in Deuteronomy:

You shall love YHWH your God, therefore, and keep his charge, his decrees, his edicts, and his commandments always.

– Deuteronomy 11:1

‘Making your ear attentive’ and ‘inclining your heart’ (verse 2) spell out the kind of listening that is needed (see 1:8, 33). To acquire ‘wisdom’ (see 1:2, 7), and ‘understanding’ (see 1:2, 5, 6), we have to want it more than anything.

If we do put our heart and mind into acquiring wisdom we will ‘understand the fear of YHWH’ (verse 5; see 1:7, 29), and we will come to ‘know’ (see 1:2, 4, 7) God. The goal of education and its prize is communion with God.

Wisdom is a gift from YHWH. If we really want knowledge and understanding we must seek enlightenment from YHWH. The Psalmist prays:

Open my eyes, so that I may behold
the wondrous things in your law.

– Psalm 119:18

In the Book of Job, Elihu declares:

It is the Breath of the Almighty that makes for
understanding.

– Job 32:8

YHWH pours out his wisdom to the ‘upright’ [יָשָׁר, *yāšar*, verse 7; see 1:3], that is, to those whose lives are ‘straight’ (not crooked). YHWH will continue to protect those who persevere in living in accordance with YHWH’s word. The Hebrew תָּם [tōm, verse 7] carries the nuances of completeness and integrity. His ‘faithful ones’ [חֲסִידִים, *ḥāsīdīm*, verse 8], are those who are faithful to God’s loving commitment to them [ḥesed]. On ‘righteousness’ see 1:3; on ‘right judgment’ see 1:3; on ‘uprightness’ see verse 7 above.

The section ends with the beautiful promise of verses 10-11. The fruit of persevering in the quest for truth is to experience wisdom in the heart, and knowledge that gives delight [נַעַם , nā'am] to the soul [נֶפֶשׁ, nepeš, verse 10]. nepeš picks up our most profound longings for fullness of life. On 'discretion' see 1:4.

Verses 12-19 speak of the danges from which wisdom preserves us. In verses 12-16 we have a picture of the person who lacks the qualities of the wise person just described in verses 9-11. He walks a crooked path, not a straight one, and has a bad influence on others, turning everything upside down.

The woman of 1:20-23 personified wisdom and attracted people to enter into and be faithful to the covenant that God is offering. The 'woman' of verses 16-19 personifies folly (see 9:14, 18), and is attracting people to be like those just described in verses 12-15. She is tempting people to be unfaithful to the 'sacred covenant' with God (compare Malachi 2:14).

If people follow her they will not experience the life promised the wise, the life that 'gives delights to the soul' (2:10). They are walking the crooked path that leads to death (verses 18-19).

Verses 20-22 offer a contrast between the fates of the wise and the foolish. As with 2:1, there is a link here with the Book of Deuteronomy:

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that YHWH, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.

– Deuteronomy 4:1

In verse 22 we are introduced to two other words that describe those who lack wisdom: they are 'wicked' [רָשָׁעִים rēšā'im – a word that is the contrary of 'just'], and 'faithless' [בֹּגְדִים bōg'dîm - they do not abide by covenant commitments].

The call is to choose wisdom: to be and do good, to be just, upright, faithful and innocent. That is the way to life for oneself and for others.

¹⁰When wisdom comes into your heart, and knowledge gives delight to your soul, ¹¹discretion will keep watch over you; and understanding will protect you.

¹²It will save you from the way of evil, from those who speak perversely, ¹³who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, ¹⁴who rejoice in doing evil, delight in the perverseness of evil, ¹⁵whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

¹⁶You will be saved from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, ¹⁷who has abandoned the partner of her youth and forgotten her sacred covenant; ¹⁸her way leads down to death, and her paths to the shades; ¹⁹those who go to her never come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.

²⁰Therefore walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just, ²¹for the upright will abide in the land, and those without blame will remain in it; ²²but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the faithless will be uprooted from it.

¹My child, do not forget my teaching, and let your heart keep my commands; ²for length of days and years of life and abundant peace they will give you.

³Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴So you will find favour and good repute in the sight of God and of people.

⁵Trust in YHWH with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will keep your paths straight.

⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear YHWH, and turn away from evil. ⁸It will be healing for your flesh and refreshment for your bones.

⁹Honour YHWH with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; ¹⁰then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

¹¹My child, do not reject YHWH's discipline or spurn his reproof, ¹²for YHWH reproves the one he loves, as a father the child in whom he delights.

The style of verses 1-12 is that of an instruction. The Hebrew word translated here (and in 1:8) as 'teaching' is תּוֹרָה [tōrâ]. 'Commands' (as in 2:1) refers to the directives given by the teacher. Both words are used in the tradition in relation to divine revelation and enlightenment. For the first time we hear the word 'peace' [שְׁלוֹמִים, šālōm, verse 2], the goal of wisdom, the fullness of life that comes from divine communion.

Verse 3 introduces two key words that are traditionally characteristic of God: 'loyalty and faithfulness' [חֶסֶד וְאֱמֻנָה, ḥesed we 'emet]. They speak of God's covenant love and God's fidelity to the covenant. God offers his love unconditionally, but we can receive it only to the extent that we open our hearts to welcome the gift.

Verse 5 introduces another key word: 'trust' [בְּטַח, bāṭaḥ]. A lot has been said about 'understanding'. To be wise we must seek the truth. Essential as the seeking of understanding is we should not rely on it. Since wisdom is a gift from God, our reliance must be founded on God, not on our efforts. To walk a straight path we need divine guidance.

There follows the caution not to think of ourselves as wise (see Isaiah 5:21). True wisdom is found in communion with God and is the fruit of the sense of wonder and awe that sees God at the heart of creation and the events of life. We remain fragile [שָׂרֵף, šā'ar, 'flesh', verse 8]. It is this communion with God that brings us healing [רִפְאוֹת, rāpā'], and refreshes whatever strength we have [our 'bones': עֲצָמֵינוּ, 'eṣem].

Verse 9 takes us to the inner motivation behind the cult. Whatever we have by way of possessions, the glory is to go to YHWH not to ourselves. The harvest is not our doing. We must, of course, be wise, and do all we can to see that there is a harvest, but we must know that it is a gift from God. If we acknowledge this we open ourselves to receive God's gift in abundance. The teacher suggests that suffering and adversity should not be seen as God's withdrawal of love (verse 12). On the contrary it is God's way of purifying us, so that we will be open to receive more love.

The style of verses 13-20 is not instructional. It is a hymn in praise of wisdom. Verse 13 introduces a beatitude. 'Happy' does not quite get the meaning of the Hebrew אֲשֶׁר־יָרַח, [’ašrê]. Sometimes it is translated 'blessed', but this, too, puts the focus in the wrong place. 'Blessed' focuses on what God is doing when God blesses us. 'ašrê puts the focus on what we are doing that opens us to receive God's blessing (compare the 'beatitudes' in Matthew 5). To 'find wisdom' and to obtain understanding' (verse 13) demands a lot of us, as has been stressed throughout. But it is supremely worth the effort. True prosperity includes the gift of 'long life', 'riches' and 'honour' (verse 16), but these bear no comparison with the prosperity that comes with wisdom and understanding (verses 14-15).

In verse 17, for the second time, we hear of 'delight' (see 2:10), and 'peace' (see 3:2).

Verse 18 recalls the garden of paradise, the garden of delight (Eden). God created this paradise for mankind, and in the middle of the garden he placed 'the tree of life' (Genesis 2:9). Because of sin, God banished mankind from the garden so that we could not get to the tree. We are told here that the way to reach the tree and live to the full is to lay hold of wisdom, for it is wisdom that opens us up to God's blessing.

Verses 19-20 go further. The divine gift of wisdom is seen in the ordering and maintenance of creation (see Isaiah 40:12-17, 28-31), as are the gifts of understanding and knowledge. The implication is that to pursue them is to be in harmony with the divine order. The delight and the peace that come with these gifts are our participation in the harmony of God's creation, the creation that God sees as 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). We share in God's delight in everything that he made.

¹³Happy are those who find wisdom, those who acquire understanding.

¹⁴Her profit is greater than silver, and her revenue better than gold. ¹⁵More precious than jewels, nothing you desire can compare with her.

¹⁶Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand riches and honour.

¹⁷Her ways are ways of delight, and all her paths are peace.

¹⁸She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

¹⁹YHWH by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens;

²⁰by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.

21My child, do not let them slip from your sight: keep your focus on the successful outcome of your actions and on discretion,²²and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck.

23Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble. ²⁴When you lie down, you have nothing to be afraid of; you will lie down, and your sleep will be sweet.

25Do not fear a sudden terror, or the ruin that strikes the wicked; ²⁶for YHWH will be your confidence he will keep your foot from being caught.

27Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. ²⁸Do not say to your neighbour, “Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it” – when you have it with you.

29Do not plan harm against your neighbour who lives trustingly beside you.

30Do not quarrel with anyone without cause, when no harm has been done to you.

31Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways; ³²for the perverse are an abomination to YHWH, but the upright are in his confidence.

33YHWH’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the abode of the righteous.

34The scorner.s he scorns; the lowly he favours.

35The wise inherit honour, but scoffers who exalt themselves, disgrace.

The style of verses 21-35 is that of an instruction. We have already been advised to check on the outcome of our actions (see 2:7), and the importance of discretion has been emphasised (see 1:4; 2:11). Only a reflective life can satisfy our deepest longings (on *nepeš* compare 2:10).

On verse 23 compare the Psalmist:

YHWH will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

– Psalm 91:11-12

The promises expressed in this passage reinforce verses 16-17. They are an expression of the traditional ‘wisdom’ that sees a necessary connection between God’s blessing and righteousness, God’s punishment and wickedness [רָשָׁע, *rāšā‘*, verses 25, 33; see 2:22] – a position radically questioned by Ecclesiastes and Job.

It is typical of this first section of Proverbs to underline the religious dimension of living a life founded on wisdom: ‘YHWH will be your confidence’(verse 26; see Psalm 4:9).

Verses 27-30 offer sound advice as to how we should behave towards others if we are to live productively in society.

Verse 31 speaks of violence [חַמָּס, *ḥāmās*], the sin that is most destructive of community. It is the sin highlighted in the primeval story of the flood (see Genesis 6:11,13). The ‘upright’(verse 32) are those who act with integrity (see 1:3; 2:7, 13, 21; 3:6).

Verse 34 introduces us to another group: those who ‘scorn’[לִיז, *lîz*]. They are worse than the foolish, for they mock at wisdom, much like the ‘scoffers’(verse 35; see 1:22, 32).

Verses 1-5 is authoritative teaching couched in terms of a parent instructing a child. Verse 1 picks up terms we are familiar with. It begins with the call to ‘listen’(see 1:5, 8, 33). ‘Knowing’(see 1:2 and 7 other times in chapters 1-3) and ‘understanding’(see 1:2; 2:3; 3:5) are acquired from being attentive to ‘instruction’(see 1:2 and 4 other times in chapters 1-3).

The parent is sharing wisdom gained from life-experience, and is appealing to the child’s ‘heart’(verse 4; see 2:2, 10; 3:1, 3, 5). Wisdom goes deeper than knowing about life. It is an ‘understanding’ of the heart. It is not added on from the outside. It finds its home in the depths of one’s being, and so gives life (verse 4).

The key advice is to ‘get wisdom; get understanding’(verse 5; repeated verse 7). We are to seek wisdom as we seek the love of our life whom we choose as a life-companion. Hence the call to ‘love her’(verse 6), to ‘embrace her’(verse 8).

Verses 6-9 praise and commend wisdom.

¹Listen, children, to a father’s instruction; be attentive, that you may know what it means to understand;

²for I give you good precepts: do not forsake my teaching.

³When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother’s favourite, ⁴he taught me, and said to me, “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commands, and live.

⁵Get wisdom; get understanding! do not forget, do not turn away from the words of my mouth. ⁶If you do not forsake her, she will guard you; love her, and she will keep you safe.

⁷The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get understanding.

⁸Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will see you honoured. ⁹She will get for your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

¹⁰Hear, my child, and take in my words, and the years of your life will be many.

¹¹I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. ¹²When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and when you run, you will not stumble. ¹³Keep a firm hold on instruction; do not let her go; keep her, she is your life.

¹⁴Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evildoers.

¹⁵Avoid it; do not go near it; turn away from it and keep going. ¹⁶They cannot sleep without doing wrong; they are robbed of sleep if they have not made someone stumble.

¹⁷For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

¹⁸But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

¹⁹The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what they stumble over.

²⁰My child, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.

²¹Do not let them slip from your eyes; keep them within your heart.

²²For they are life to those who find them, and healing to their flesh.

²³More than all else you guard, watch your heart, for from it flow the springs of life.

²⁴Put away from you all crooked speech, and put deceit far from your lips.

²⁵Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.

²⁶Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure.

²⁷Do not swerve to the right or to the left; keep your foot away from evil.

There are two paths one can take in life (compare Deuteronomy 30:15). One is the path chosen by the ‘wicked’(verse 14; see 2:22; 3:25, 33), the ‘evildoers’(verse 14; see 2:14). It is a path of deep darkness (verse 19).

Verse 11 echoes Psalm 32:

I will instruct you. I will show you the road to follow. I will give you counsel and keep watch over you.

– Psalm 32:8

The teacher is encouraging the young person to avoid the path trodden by the wicked (verse 15; see already 1:10-19; 2:12-15), and to choose the path of the ‘upright’(verse 11; see 1:3), the path of the ‘righteous’(verse 15; see 1:3). It is a path of light that sheds light from early morn and continues to shine more and more brightly ‘until full day’(verse 18).

Verses 20-23 advise vigilance. It is not enough to listen, we must keep focused on what is right, and keep what we have learned within our heart (verse 21).

The teacher’s words mean ‘life to those who find them’(verse 22). Verse 22 introduces a new word: ‘flesh’[בָּשָׂר, bāśār]. We are weak. If we heed instruction we will also be healed of any corruption we have picked up along the way (verse 22 and 24). Verse 23 advises that we guard our heart with great care ‘for from it flow the springs of life’.

Verses 1-2 continue the focus on wisdom, understanding, instruction and knowledge (all present in 1:2; see page 12).

This particular warning is against getting involved with a 'loose woman' – an obvious danger to a young man who is looking for excitement, but lacks wisdom (verses 3-6; compare 2:16-19; 6:24-35; 7:5-27).

Verses 8-11 warn the young person of the consequences. Getting entangled with such a woman will result in a waste of energy, squandering of money, and shame in the community. If the woman is married, he will have an injured husband to contend with.

Verses 11-14 describe the regret that a person who fails to heed this advice will experience when he comes to the end of a wasted life. 'Flesh' (see 4:22) and 'body' [בָּשָׂר, še'ēr] are two ways of speaking of our fragile, human condition.

¹My child, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, ²that you may hold on to instruction, and your lips may guard knowledge.

³The lips of a loose woman drip honey; her speech smoother than oil; ⁴but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.

⁵Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol.

⁶She does not keep straight to the path of life; her ways wander, but you do not know it.

⁷And now, my child, listen to me, and do not turn aside from the words of my mouth.

⁸Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house;

⁹or you will give your honour to others, and your years to the merciless,

¹⁰and strangers will take their fill of your wealth, and your labours will go to the house of an alien;

¹¹and at the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, ¹²and you say, "Oh, how

I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof! ¹³I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors.

¹⁴Now I am at the point of utter ruin in the public assembly."

Marriage fidelity

¹⁵Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. ¹⁶Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? ¹⁷Let them be for yourself alone, and not for sharing with strangers.

¹⁸Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, ¹⁹a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love.

²⁰Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman and embrace the bosom of an outsider?

²¹The ways of humans are under the eyes of YHWH, and he examines all their paths. ²²The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the cords of their sin. ²³They die because they have failed to follow instruction, and because of their great folly they are lost.

Following on from verses 1-14, this is a call to have sexual union only with one's own wife (compare Sirach 26:19-21), and to enjoy the pleasures of marriage fidelity.

Like the Song of Songs, the stress is on the attractiveness of sexual marriage union. This is motive enough to avoid infidelity. Why would a person deprive himself of this joy, by allowing himself to be seduced 'by another woman' (verse 20)?

YHWH, too, is invoked. We cannot hide from YHWH's scrutiny. Marriage infidelity is a snare that brings death. The instruction is clear. If we neglect to follow it we will lose our way and ourselves.

Verses 1-19 look like a later insert, interrupting the flow from chapter 5 to verse 20 of chapter 6. The style of verses 1-5 is that of an instruction. They warn of the dangers of providing financial backing to cover the debt of someone who is not part of the community. It's too risky. The teacher advises someone who has already made the mistake of going guarantor in this situation to do all he can to untangle himself from the situation (compare 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26-27; 27:13).

Verses 6-11 speaks against laziness, using the ant and the bee as examples of industriousness.

Verses 12-15 warn of the danger to social harmony from people who go around spreading mischief.

Verses 16-19 list vices that undermine community. The harm caused society by 'a lying tongue' is recurring theme in Proverbs (see especially 26:23-28). Compare the words of the Psalmist:

YHWH, give us your saving help, for there is no longer anyone who respects the covenant; sincerity has disappeared from the human race. People utter lies to each other; they speak with flattering lips and a false heart.

– Psalm 12:1-2.

We are told that such vices are hated by YHWH. One number followed by another (here 6 followed by 7, verse 16) is a way of saying that the list is not intended to be complete (compare 30:15-33; also Amos 1:3 - 2:8).

¹My child, if you have given your pledge to your neighbour, if you have bound yourself to another, ²you have been snared by the utterance of your lips, caught by the words of your mouth. ³So do this, my child, and free yourself, for you have come into your neighbour's power: go, hurry, and plead with your neighbour. ⁴Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber; ⁵save yourself like a gazelle from the hunter, like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

⁶Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. ⁷Without having any chief or officer or ruler, ⁸it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest. ⁹How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep? ¹⁰"A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest", ¹¹and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.

¹²A scoundrel and a villain goes around with crooked speech, ¹³winking the eyes, shuffling the feet, pointing the fingers, ¹⁴with perverted mind devising evil, continually sowing discord; ¹⁵on such a one calamity will descend suddenly; in a moment, damage beyond repair.

¹⁶There are six things that YHWH hates, seven that are an abomination to him: ¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸a heart that devises wicked plans, feet quick to run to evil, ¹⁹a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.

Warning against adultery

²⁰My child, keep your father's commandment, and do not forsake your mother's teaching. ²¹Bind them to your heart always; tie them around your neck. ²²When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you.

²³For the command is a lamp and the teaching a light; the reproofs of discipline are the way to life, ²⁴to preserve you from the wife of another, from the smooth tongue of a stranger. ²⁵Do not lust after her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her fluttering eyes; ²⁶for a prostitute's fee costs only a loaf of bread, but the wife of another puts one's very life at risk.

²⁷Can fire be carried in the bosom without burning one's clothes? ²⁸Or can one walk on hot coals without scorching the feet?

²⁹So is he who sleeps with his neighbour's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.

³⁰Thieves are not despised who steal only to satisfy their appetite when they are hungry. ³¹Yet if they are caught, they will pay sevenfold; they will forfeit all the goods of their house.

²²But he who commits adultery has no sense; he who does it destroys himself. ³³He gets a beating and dishonour, and his disgrace will not be wiped away. ³⁴Jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he shows no restraint when he takes revenge.

³⁵He will accept no restitution, nor be swayed by a bribe no matter how great.

After a reminder of the value of heeding the teaching of one's parents (verses 20-22; compare Deuteronomy 11:19; 6:7), verses 23-35 return to the theme of chapter 5 renewing the exhortation to avoid adultery. Adultery harms us at the deepest levels of our being (verses 26 and 32).

Similar language is used of the Torah:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

– Psalm 109:105

Verses 27-28 offer two proverbs. The moral is expressed in verse 29. To commit adultery is to play with fire. You will get burned!

If a thief is caught he has to pay up. An adulterer is a thief, taking for himself another man's wife.

Some of the consequences of adultery are spelled out in verses 32-35. An adulterer 'destroys himself' (verse 22). He loses honour; he suffers disgrace; and he suffers the fury of a jealous husband who won't let up.

The introductory verses (verses 1-5) call on the support of ‘commands’ [מִצְוֹת, mišvôt] and ‘teachings’ [תּוֹרָה, tōrâ] : the instructions given by the teacher and the directives as to behaviour. As noted already in 6:23, both words echo traditional religious tradition. The goal is for the pupil to ‘live’ (verse 2). Intimacy with wisdom gives life and so is a protection against seeking intimacy in a way that leads only to death.

Verses 6-23 picture a foolish young man who seeks and falls prey to the seduction of a woman who is married to a merchant, and who takes the opportunity of her husband’s absence to seek sexual encounters with others.

It is hard to interpret verse 14. Is she trying to reassure him that she is a good religious person?

She knows what she is about, and is successful in achieving her aims. She snares the naive young man. At the same time he wants what she offers him and makes no effort to avoid her advances, ‘not knowing that it will cost him his life’ (verse 33).

¹My child, keep my words and store up my commands with you; ²keep my commands and live, keep my teachings as the apple of your eye; ³bind them on your fingers, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,” and call insight ‘friend’, ⁵that they may keep you from the loose woman, from the stranger with her smooth words.

⁶At the window of my house I looked out through my lattice; ⁷I saw among the simple ones, among the youths, a young man without sense, ⁸crossing the street near her corner, taking the road to her house ⁹in the twilight, in the evening, at the onset of night and darkness.

¹⁰Then a woman comes toward him, decked out like a prostitute, wily of heart. ¹¹She is loud and wayward; her feet cannot stay at home. ¹²Now in the street, now in the squares, and at every corner she lurks.

¹³She seizes him and kisses him, and with impudent face she says to him: ¹⁴“I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows; ¹⁵so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you! ¹⁶I have decked my couch with coverings, coloured spreads of Egyptian linen; ¹⁷I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. ¹⁸Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love. ¹⁹My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. ²⁰He took a bag of money with him; he will not come home until the full moon.”

²¹With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she pressures him. ²²Right away he follows her, goes like an ox to the slaughter, or bounds like a stag toward the trap ²³until an arrow pierces its entrails. He is like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life.

Folly leads to death

²⁴And now, my children, listen to me, and be attentive to the words of my mouth.

²⁵Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths. ²⁶Many are those she has brought down, numerous, her victims.

²⁷Her house, the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death.

In the context of chapter 7, the ‘her’ of verse 25 is the seductress. The meaning, however, is more extensive. Just as wisdom is portrayed as a woman who attracts a young man along the path to freedom, divine communion, and peace, so this seductress stands for anything foolish, anything that lacks wisdom, that fails to heed instruction.

The choice is between life and death. To embrace wisdom is to commit oneself to the path that leads to life. To embrace folly is to find oneself on a path that leads to destruction.

The meeting of the careless and foolish young man and the seductress happens in private and 'at the time of night and darkness' (7:9). By contrast, Wisdom stands in the open and her call is in the midst of daily life, and is offered to anyone who is willing to heed (compare 1:20).

The appeal is for the naive to become more discerning (more 'shrewd', see 1:4), and for those who lack wisdom to work at acquiring understanding that is more than additional information, but that informs the heart (verse 5).

The claim of wisdom is to speak the 'truth' (אמת, 'emet, verse 7; see 3:3). Wisdom's words are in accordance with the way things really are. They are 'righteous' (verse 8; see 1:3): wise as to what is right, in accordance with the order determined by God.

¹Does not Wisdom call, and Understanding raise her voice?

²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;

³beside the gates at the entrance to the city, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

⁴"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. ⁵O simple ones, understand what it is to be shrewd; you who are foolish acquire understanding of the heart.

⁶Hear, for I speak noble things, and from my lips comes what is right;

⁷my mouth utters truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. ⁸All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.

⁹They are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge.

¹⁰Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; ¹¹for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

¹²I, Wisdom, dwell with prudence, I know understanding and discretion.

¹³The fear of YHWH, hatred of evil.

Pride and arrogance, the way of evil, perverted speech I hate.

¹⁴I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength.

¹⁵By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; ¹⁶by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly.

¹⁷I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.

¹⁸Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity.

¹⁹My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my produce than choice silver.

²⁰I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, ²¹endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries.

Wisdom takes a person beyond naivety to the ability to make decisions that follow on correct discernment of the options that present themselves amid the complexity of life.

This must include and be informed by an awareness of the sacred, that is, of the presence and action of YHWH in the world – an awareness that is traditionally called ‘fear of YHWH’ (see 1:7, 29; 2:5). It is this humble awareness that is the key to choosing what is good, and hating (not choosing) what is evil.

On verse 14 see Job 12:13 where these qualities are attributed to God, and Isaiah 11:2 where they are attributed to the king.

Wisdom is especially important for those who govern society (verses 15-16; compare Proverbs 16:12; 20:26, 28; 25:5; 29:14). The Psalmist prays:

Give the king *your* judgments, O God,
and *your* justice to the king’s son,
that he may judge *your* people with
justice, *your* poor with right judgment.

– Psalm 72:1-2

Verse 17 is both beautiful and encouraging. Wisdom is a quality of the heart, of our inner being. A special intimacy is promised which, ultimately, is an intimacy with God. Wisdom is offered to everyone. We are reassured that if we diligently seek wisdom we will not be disappointed.

From verses 18-21 it is clear that material things matter, but it has already been made clear that matter is not divorced from spirit. What is promised is a wholeness that is the fruit of integrity.

Wisdom is portrayed here as claiming that when God began his work of bringing order out of chaos, it was wisdom that God brought forth first (verses 22-26).

The overall point is that creation reveals God's presence and wisdom. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

The world is charged
with the grandeur of God.

As the Book of Genesis says:

God saw everything that he had made,
and indeed it was very good.

– Genesis 1:31

Compare Psalm 136:4-9

Verse 30 includes a repetition of the words 'I am', thereby echoing the words of YHWH at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14).

God delighted in the order that resulted from God's own wisdom, especially 'in the human race' (verse 31).

Wisdom delights God and delights the human race.

Three times in three verses (32, 33, 34) we are being exhorted to listen (see 1:5). If we do so we will be 'happy' (verses 32, 34; see 3:13). That is to say, we will receive God's blessing.

Verse 35 makes the point that it through communion in love with wisdom that we enjoy divine intimacy. To fail to grow in wisdom is to injure oneself. There is only one goal of folly, and that is death.

'Pass me by' in verse 36 translates the Hebrew **חָטָא** [hātṭāh], 'to miss the mark', 'to sin'.

²²YHWH created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. ²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. ²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no fountains, springs of water. ²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, ²⁶when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first clumps of earth.

²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, ²⁸when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, ²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰there I am beside him, like an artisan; and I am daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, ³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

³²And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. ³³Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.

³⁴Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my door. ³⁵For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from YHWH; ³⁶those who pass me by injure themselves; all who hate me love death."

Choose your banquet

^{9:1}Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars. ²She has slaughtered her animals, mixed her wine, set her table. ³She has sent out her servant girls to call from the highest places in the town, ⁴“You that are simple, turn in here!”

To those without sense she says, ⁵“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. ⁶Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

⁷Whoever corrects a scoffer gets abuse; whoever rebukes the wicked gets hurt. ⁸A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you. ⁹Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous and they will gain in learning.

¹⁰The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom; knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

¹¹For through me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. ¹²If you are wise, your wisdom is yours; if you scoff, you bear it on your own.

¹³Woman Folly is loud; she is ignorant and knows nothing. ¹⁴She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the high places of the town, ¹⁵calling to those who pass by, who are going on their way, ¹⁶“You who are simple, turn in here!” And to those without sense she says, ¹⁷“Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” ¹⁸But they do not know that the dead are there, her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

In verses 1-6 Wisdom is portrayed as inviting the as yet uninstructed to a banquet, at which she promises to offer all the food and drink they need to be nurtured as they grow in maturity.

There are echoes here of Psalm 23:

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my foes. You anoint my head with perfume. My cup overflows.

– Psalm 23:5

Verses 7-12 present a series of maxims, the main point of which is not to waste time trying to teach those who are stubbornly unreceptive, but to concentrate on those who are disciplined in their search for wisdom.

Verse 10 underlines the fundamental dimension of wisdom which is religious. On the ‘fear of YHWH see the Introduction pages 9-10.

In verses 13-18 Folly, also portrayed as a woman, is inviting the inexperienced to enter her house, not the house of wisdom. She represents the pitfalls that the inexperienced can encounter. What she offers is superficially attractive (‘sweet’), and you don’t have to work hard to acquire it (it is ‘stolen’). However, it leads in one direction, and that is death.