



## CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

### SERIES V

#### WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 6 Commentary Proverbs

Lesson 7 Questions Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes

### THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

#### INTRODUCTION

Proverbs was known by early Christian writers as “Wisdom” and is still called that in the Roman Missal (Mass prayers and readings). Its purpose is to teach wisdom (Proverbs 1:2ff). All sorts of wisdom is included—on human life, on divine activity, on moral and religious truths about God. Solomon is mentioned and quoted in Part II and Part V. The authors Lemuel and Agur, Part VI, Chapters 30 and 31, are unknown and may be foreign wise men. Lemuel’s words, at the end of Proverbs, are a fine portrait of “An Ideal Wife.”

The author of the first nine chapters is thought to be the editor of the whole collection. Most of the book is in short couplets: some of these have become part of our own “proverbs”—the advice we often quote or teach our children. Many of the Bible’s Proverbs are aimed at worldly affairs and wisdom, at the way to lead a “good life.” They counsel against laziness, drunkenness, relations with prostitutes (harlots), poor business sense, etc. Yet, even these daily realities are, in the Biblical proverbs, blended with a religious spirit, for the Hebrews believed that there is a divine order in all

human good; it is wise to live by this order. One of the Proverbs is mentioned three times:

“The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy one is understanding.” (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 15:33)

“Fear of God” in the Bible means living in reverence before God. Wisdom in the Biblical sense has nothing to do with intelligence, position in life, or right thinking or teaching. It is a decision made in freedom, while an intelligent “fool” decides through pride or passion. The “fool” has no sense of God or of His law; he is an irreligious man (see Psalm 14:1). In Proverbs 1:7, he despises wisdom and instruction.

A quite different insight into wisdom came into Hebrew wisdom from that of the Egyptian and other royal courts. Wisdom was personified; it was an agent of God. In Chapter 1, we see wisdom crying out in the streets—“she raises her voice” in the streets and open squares. She is “Dame Wisdom,” the opposite of “Dame Folly” (Proverbs 9:1-11, 13-18).

Two or three Jesuit Order musicians have made many scriptural verses into modern hymns that have become quite popular in Europe and America. Earlier, Father Lucien Deiss, a theologian of scripture and a musician, composed Biblical hymns. There are three books of hymns available in Catholic churches from each of these hymn books. The first five verses of Proverbs, Chapter 9, are in one of the Deiss hymns.

## I. THE VALUE OF WISDOM (Proverbs 1:1-9:18)

It is clear from Chapter 1 that parents are the source of wisdom in their children. “My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commands... then you will understand the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 2:5). Then you will have goodness, justice, and honesty, with practical prudence. Ask yourself, if as a young boy or girl, you had the attitude toward the Lord as in Chapter 3:1-12. Have you taught this attitude to your sons and daughters? If so, and they have not responded, what is your advantage before God? Have you taught the attitude toward fellow men and women in Proverbs 3:25-34? In this prologue, there are three sections on adultery, perhaps showing the same weakness in their society as in ours today...

The discourse on Wisdom in Chapter 8 reveals a theology of the second Person in God (Proverbs 8:30-31) which is very close to the Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). Christians see the Person of Jesus Christ as Wisdom incarnate.

We come upon, in Verse 22, a prediction, a description, fitting for the Second Person in God, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

“Before the mountains were settled into place,  
 Before the hills, I was brought forth;  
 While as yet the earth and the fields were not made  
 When he established the heavens I was there...”

Here Wisdom is personified, it is a Divine Person.

Proverbs 8:30-31 are a reading in the Mass Liturgy:

“Then I was beside him as his craftsman  
 and I was his delight day by day,  
 Playing before him all the while,  
 playing on the surface of the earth;  
 And I found delight in the sons of men;  
 He who finds me find life,  
 And wins favor from the Lord...”

Such remarkable words bring to mind not earth’s King Solomon as the writer, but the Holy Spirit, revealing the more than one Person in God. The final revelation of this came from the Apostle John who writes in his Gospel as one who knew Jesus’ never-before-heard words: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

The Prologue concludes with Dame Wisdom and Folly each inviting young men to a banquet (Proverbs 9:1-18) “Wisdom has built herself a house, she has set up her seven columns” (Proverbs 9:1). The number seven (a symbol of perfection) implies that the columns of seven uphold all perfection. Wisdom sends out her maidens to invite all: “Come eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!” This last verse has brought to the Church the thought of the Blessed Sacrament, the Eucharist. Folly just sits at the door of her house mentioning “stolen water and secretly gotten bread” (Proverbs 9:16-18).

## II. THE FIRST COLLECTION OF SOLOMON’S PROVERBS (Proverbs 10-24)

**A. Proverbs 10-15.** Chapters 10-15 are observations in short statements that instruct us to choose goodness and good habits, and the second line contrasts them with the opposite in the proverb. For example, “When pride comes, disgrace comes; but with the humble is wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2). A change of style comes in the following chapters, where the second line is not contrasted

with the first but develops the thought of the first; for example, Proverbs 16:31 says, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained by virtuous living.” (Solomon was kind to say that; but not all grayheads are virtuous!) All the proverbs in this section presuppose that justice (virtue) and wisdom are synonymous, as are wickedness and folly. Once again we see that the duty of parents in the education of their children is emphasized.

Here, we see the Israelite presence in the Book of Proverbs, for the word used for “The Lord” in this section is the Hebrew word YAHWEH.

Human foibles are shown; natural goods give pleasure if in due proportion; real joy, however, is found in goodness: “The hope of the wicked comes to nothing” (Proverbs 10:28). “A gracious woman wins esteem; but she who hates virtue is covered with shame” (Proverbs 11:16). The wisdom of Proverbs counsels on “Telling on,”—Gossip:

“There are six things that the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers, sisters” (Proverbs 16:16-19).

Even “just listening” receives a warning: “He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore, do not associate with a gossip” (Proverbs 20:19). “An evildoer listens to wicked lips and a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue.”

This is one way to profit by and practice the wisdom in this inspired book: find a subject such as gossip and begin to skim for the Spirit’s counsel on that. A Concordance might help, but does not have listings on gossip!

**B. The Family (Proverbs 12-24).** “A worthy wife is the crown of her husband, but a disgraceful one is like rot in his bones” (Proverbs 12:4). Strong words. We notice that the worthy

husband is rather taken for granted. The worthy wife is taken up again in the last chapter of Proverbs, attributed to the wise man, Lemuel, who is not known in any other way than in this book.

Whether a husband or not, the description of a good man continues: “From the fruit of his words a man has his fill of good things, and the work of his hands comes back to reward him” (Proverbs 12:14). “Wealth quickly gotten dwindles away, but amassed little by little, it grows” (Proverbs 13:11). “Sometimes a way seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). Riches were thought to be a reward for goodness; the problem of rich wickedness waits for development in later scriptures. But here is wisdom that we can use personally, one which our twisted culture could use about life, love and marriage: “Better a dish of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it” (Proverbs 15:16-17). Love is described by a modern writer on successful marriages: “Love is not found in 50/50 measure; but in those who can give 90/10 when necessary.” “Better a dry crust with peace than a house full of feasting with strife” (Proverbs 17:1). Is there strife in a family? Ask yourselves, “Who? When? Why?” Perhaps another proverb helps here: “If one returns evil for good, from that house evil will not depart” (Proverbs 17:13).

And here is one that we all fit at times: “The fool takes no delight in understanding” (Proverbs 18:2). Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:12: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled but whoever humbles himself shall be exalted,” echo “Before his downfall a man’s heart is haughty, but humility goes before honors” (Proverbs 18:12). “It is good sense to overlook anger, and it is glory to overlook an offense” (Proverbs 19:11). And a wise maxim on children follows: “Even by his manners the child betrays whether his conduct is innocent and right” (Proverbs 20:10). Another wisdom is taught in this chapter: “Say not, I will repay evil!” (Proverbs 20:22). Jesus’ teaching on this is: “What I say to you is, ‘Offer no resistance to injury...’ People succumb to love and absence of returned hate and injury, more than to more hate” (Matthew 5:39, Romans 12:17, 19).

**C. The Poor.** “He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will himself also call and not be heard” (Proverbs 21:13). Does that explain why our prayers are not heard sometime? It is a matter of self-interest in the last analysis: for justice will be done finally to one who “shuts his ear to the cry of the poor.” What cry do we listen to instead of the cry of the poor? Is it sometimes, maybe often, to advertisers that we open our ears? Coming closely upon that wisdom is another: “The kindly person will be blessed, for he gives of his sustenance to the poor” (Proverbs 22:9). Notice “of his sustenance” (the necessities of life). We have all met such a one, who gives from their need, not from their abundance, which is the finest love (Luke 21:1-4).

In the middle of Chapter 22 is a new heading. What can this mean? The editors who gathered all these proverbs gathered collections of them. And right here starts a new collection, in the midst of a chapter! Other editors must have done this...

**D. Sayings of the Wise (Proverbs 22:17-24:22).** The pattern here changes from two line proverbs and their plan of either contrasts within two statements or development of the thought in the first statement. In this new collection, the sayings are in sets of four to eight lines each. The words, “My son,” begin to recur again. And here, the writer admits that “I make known to you the words of Amen-en-Ope” and mentions the “Thirty” which his readers must have known. This person was an Egyptian scribe with a fine reputation, who had written proverbs for the instruction of his children. The scriptural inspired author constructs similar proverbs to Amen-en-Ope’s instead of translating the Egyptian’s work.

This shows us the situation among the countries; there was a sharing of literature and of wisdom books. But only the Hebrew collections have passed down to all the world in the collection that we call the Bible. Again, we are amazed at the effect on our world and its history, by this small group of people whom God chose and continued

to contact and teach in spite of their unworthiness, until He actually became one of them to save the whole world of us!

The next section that begins with “My son...” (Proverbs 23:15) continues with counsels to the young boy or man about father and mother and their hopes and training in his regard; these are touching lines, revealing a family united in love. Then comes a vivid picture of a home or group where drunkenness is common as a way out of some ill: “Who scream? Who shriek? Who have strife? Who have anxiety? Who have wounds for nothing? Who have black eyes? Those who linger over wine... Look not on wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the glass. It goes down smoothly; but in the end it “bites like a serpent”... “Your eyes see strange sights; your heart utters disordered thoughts...” (Proverbs 23:29-33).

Advice to his son comes from the father: “If you eat honey, my son, because it is good, if virgin honey is sweet to your taste; so is wisdom to your soul. If you find it, you will have a future, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 24:13-14). And we have our own saying which we see came down from this Biblical book: “The just man falls seven times and rises again; but the wicked stumble to ruin” (Proverbs 24:16). The brevity of many of these bits of wisdom is enhanced by such apt choice of words: “stumble to ruin.” How well said!

The thirty instructions in this collection came from a common source, and some of them are repeated in order to reach the desired number. In those days justice was administered and important affairs discussed at the city gate (See Psalms 69:13). “Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and when he stumbles, let not your heart exult, lest the Lord see it, is displeased with you, and withdraws his wrath from your enemy” (Proverbs 24:17). “Love your enemy,” says Jesus, “and do good to those who hate you” (Matthew 5:44-45).

### III. OTHER SAYINGS OF THE WISE

This collection begins in the middle of the chapter also, and its short length is addressed to all. For the young man, he says: “Complete your outdoor tasks, and arrange your work in the field. Afterward, you can establish your house” (Proverbs 24:27). Which means: Be sure of your livelihood before undertaking to establish a family. Wise advice!

#### **IV. SECOND COLLECTION OF THE PROVERBS OF SOLOMON (Proverbs 25-28)**

The good and wise king of Juda, Hezekiah, had his royal scribes assemble this collection. An interesting fact about it is that its proverbs number closely the numerical value in Hezekiah’s name. No man can equal the knowledge of God, but kings’ glory is in what they know and understand. If good is carried out, a king shall endure, shall continue (Proverbs 25:5). “If your enemy is hungry, give him to eat, if he be thirsty, give him to drink” (Proverbs 25:21-22, Romans 12:20-21). “The north wind brings rain, and a backbiting tongue an angry countenance” (Proverbs 25:23). Chapter 26 describes the flaws and faults of fools and “sluggards,” some with a bit of humor: “The door turns on its hinges, the sluggard on his bed!” (Proverbs 26:14). “He who conceals his sins prospers not, but he who confesses and forsakes them obtains mercy” (Proverbs 28:13). Again the poor interests the writer: “The just man has a care for the rights of the poor; the wicked person has no such concern” (Proverbs 29:7). And finally this section says: “The rod of correction gives wisdom, but a child left to its whims disgraces his mother” (Proverbs 29:15) and “Correct your son and he will bring you comfort and give delight to your soul” (Proverbs 29:17).

#### **V. THE WORDS OF LEMUEL (Proverbs 31:1-31)**

At the end of Proverbs, Lemuel, king of an Ishmaelite tribe (descendants of Abraham but not

Sarah’s son) records instructions his mother gave him when he became king, being a first-born. She cautioned him against drinking, “lest in drinking they forget what the law decrees and violate the rights of all who are in need.” She describes a “worthy wife” as one whose value is far beyond pearls, who husband “entrusts his heart to her,” in whom he has “an unfailling prize.” Devoted to her household, she provides all needs, makes cloth and sells it, buys a field and plants a vineyard. All in her house are warmly clothed and “fear not the snow.” She “reaches out her hands to the poor” and, in a specially loving way “extends her arms to the needy” (Proverbs 31:20). Her worthiness and character reflect upon her husband, for the writer seems to see his good as resulting from her many fine qualities and their result: “Her husband is prominent at the city gates as he sits with the elders of the land. Her children rise up and praise her; her husband extols her; Many are the women of proven worth, but you have excelled them all.” Among even very worthy women, she excels them. And yet, all of her fine qualities originate in her belief in the Lord; her “charm can be deceptive; her beauty fleeting.”

What really counts in a woman is that she who “fears the Lord—she is to be praised.” Though as we read of her life style, her worth, we might feel daunted by such an amazing list of achievements and good qualities, which will “praise her at the city gates,” we shall find, especially among our Scripture Study, women of whom we (and their children and husbands) can also say, “Her value is far beyond pearls.” And all of us can choose one or more of her worthy deeds and her character, and develop it more strongly in our own, and then we, too, “can laugh at the days to come” (Proverbs 31:25).

This “ideal wife” Scripture remains in my memory for when I, at thirteen years of age, attended my grandmother’s funeral, though I did not know her, the priest read this passage to us as a description of her. From then on, I have loved my grandmother, now with God.

**QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 7**  
**Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes**

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. What impressed you most?
  
  
- b. What in the Notes pertains to our life today?

Day 2 Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

- a. What is Qoheleth's main point in these verses?
  
  
- b. Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18. What is Qoheleth's conclusion on trying to know all things under the sun?
  
  
- c. Read Ecclesiastes 2:8-12. What do these verses teach us?
  
  
- d. Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-6; 7:1-8; 12:1, 7-8. Quote two verses that impressed you.

Day 3 Read Song of Songs 1:1-17, the footnotes (if you have any), and the Introduction, if you have the New American Bible, or if your Bible has an Introduction.

- a. What are three interpretations of the Bride?
  
  
- b. What can "Draw me; we will follow you eagerly!" (from verse 4) mean for us?
  
  
- c. Read Song of Songs 2:1-4. What popular religious song (for children or adults!) is made from 2:4b? If you know it, be prepared to sing the line in 2:4b.
  
  
- d. Those of you who have read HIND'S FEET ON HIGH PLACES, explain Song of Songs 2:8-9a. Others of you, read Song of Songs 2:10-13 and give a meaning for these lines.
  
  
- e. In the Allegory, what can Song of Songs 2:14a mean in the sense of Jesus seeking us or our seeking Him?

## Day 4

- a. What can Song of Songs 2:15 mean in the sense of our spiritual life? What can “little foxes” be and what can they do for our growth in God’s life in us?
- b. Read Song of Songs 3:1-5 and 2:8. Interpret this as the search of a Christian who greatly wishes to find union with God. What then, could “at night” symbolize? What could “watchmen” mean?
- c. Read Song of Songs 3:6-11. How does 3:11 recall 1:4c? What do these two expressions from the Bride, with “King” and “King Solomon” mean?
- d. Read Song of Songs 4:1-16a. Who is speaking? If she is a garden what can “enclosed,” and “seal” mean? Who can verses 7-8 mean?
- e. Who is meant in Verse 4:7 among the human race? (See Ephesians 5:27.)
- f. What can Song of Songs 4:13-14 mean in regard to Jesus’ words in John 15:8? How can 4:16 express a desire of Christ for His Church?

Day 5     Read Song of Songs 5:1-16, Numbers 30:3, Psalms 50:14.

- a. This experience in Song of Songs 5:2-8 can come to all of us seeking to find God and His love and care. Explain a meaning that you see in these lines.
- b. Read Song of Songs 6:1-12, Job 8:9. In reality what does this refer to in our spiritual life?

Day 6     Read Song of Songs 8:6-7. These are the most famous lines in the Song of Songs poetry.

- a. Apply it to the love God has for his Bride, the Church, or for a soul He created.
- b. What can Song of Songs 8:8-10 mean in regard to the bride as a “wall” or a “door”? Explain according to Ephesians 5:1-5 and 25-32.