



Sunday School Lesson
Prov. 15:15-17 et als
 by Lorin L. Cranford
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What is better than money?



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Just as the previous study in Prov. 3:13-18 focused on the value of wisdom, this study returns to the same biblical text with a second examination of wisdom in relationship to material possessions. Some differences between the two studies are readily apparent once the details emerge. The previous study stressed a comparison between Lady Wisdom as the personification of divine wisdom in contrast to the appeal of either the “foolish” woman or the “loose” woman in their appeal to material accumulation. The thought pattern in general moved off the structure “wisdom is...” This present study, however, takes wise words from the mouth of Lady Wisdom and compares two situations to one another.

Typically the contrast is between poverty and wealth. Poverty is the white knight, while wealth is the black hat guy. But the structure is deeper than mere not having and having wealth. The deeper, primary tension is between what accompanies poverty and what accompanies wealth. The ethical tension is primarily between these two “partners” of poverty and wealth. Thus the thought expression goes along these lines: It is better to be poor with ?? than to be wealthy with ??. The ethical tension is the key here. Usually, the polar opposites constitute the positive and negative sides., e.g., love and hatred.

This common form is the basis of picking up a string of sayings from several sources in Proverbs. Wealth and poverty are present in each, but more importantly the opposites found in their “partners” are the main point. Here the ancient sages of Israel saw how wisdom, the wisdom of God, made the difference between a blessed life and a cursed life. It wasn't so much the matter whether one was poor or wealthy. What did matter was the integrity with which one lived life day by day. Typically, the negative quality associated with wealth provides the contrastive point for what accompanies poverty.

In an ancient, very class conscious society the sages saw the extremes that generally accompanied the behavior of the wealthy, and realized the destructiveness of these traits that brought moral ruin and unhappiness where material possession was supposed to have provided the opposite. How little the situation has changed in almost three thousand years!

I. Context

Relevant aspects from the [Prov. 3:13-18 study](#) will be repeated here.

The literary nature of the content of Proverbs poses special challenges to the Bible student. The short pithy nature of most of the “sayings” in the book reflect timeless truths that came out of the ancient world and reflect that world's perception of reality and how life “was supposed to work.” The wisdom viewpoint of the Jewish people was deeply connected to similar approaches found in other Semitic cultures of that time, along with profound impact from Egyptian wisdom perspectives. Thus, in deep serious study of these biblical texts consideration of parallel concepts in extant texts from these materials is critical to correct understanding. Also helpful is the tracing of parallel texts from the OT wisdom material, found mostly in Proverbs and Psalms but including Job, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, through the large

body of intertestamental Jewish wisdom literature that surfaced during the four centuries between the writing of the Old and New Testaments, principal among these are Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. To see how concepts often changed on the same subject during that period is very informative.

Within the limits our or study space, attention will be given to these matters as they surface in the words of our text.

a. Historical

External History. As is so often the case with ancient literature, identifying the external history of an Old Testament document is particularly difficult. Such is the case with the book of Proverbs.

The starting point for an examination of the origin of these proverbs is [Prov. 1:1-7](#):

1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: 2 For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, 3 for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; 4 to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young— 5 let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, 6 to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. 7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Although the proverbs are attributed to Solomon, uncertainty exists over whether this was intended for the entire document, or for the first section (chaps. 1-9) of long poems. Careful examination of the contents of the entire document will argue overwhelmingly for a variety of sources including borrowing from the wisdom of the surrounding cultures, especially the Egyptian wisdom tradition. Given the long time connection of the Jews with the Egyptians beginning with the four hundred years in Egypt from Joseph onward, one should not be surprised of this influence. Additionally, the subheadings of the sections found in chapters 10-31 (see [Literary Setting](#) below) indicate sources beyond Solomon. Most OT scholars agree with the assessment of Harold C. Washington in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (3rd ed.; HB 904):

The book is typical of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible and also of the ancient Near East, especially Egypt. In face of this, most scholars agree that 22.17-23.11 is in some way depended upon the 'Instruction' of the Egyptian sage, Amen-em-ope (ca. 1100 BCE). Royal scribes are responsible for much of the material in Proverbs hence the sayings sometimes reflect an elite point of view. But the learned editors of the book also preserve the folk wisdom of ancient Israelite village and extended families.

In earlier personal studies of ancient Jewish wisdom literature in comparison to ancient Semitic and Egyptian materials while at the university of Bonn Ger-

many in the earlier 1980s I found enormous confirmation of these viewpoints. As we worked our way through this huge pile of extant literature in the Forlesung class of Prof. Otto Plöger, I discovered amazing parallels of the material in Proverbs to this larger wisdom tradition of the ancient Middle East. One would want to note that both similarities and distinctives exist in such a comparison. The Hebrew sages certainly had a distinct view which was shaped by their religious heritage.

More helpful is the assessment of the intended objective of this material. As [Prov. 1:8](#) suggests, this material was primarily targeting young Jewish men to help them learn to make good decisions and avoid bad decisions as they charted their way through life. The writing strategy was to present wisdom as a "vibrant feminine personification of divine Wisdom" (Washington, *NOAB*). She thus stood opposed to both foolish woman (chap. 9) and to the dangerous figure of a "strange woman" (chaps. 2, 5, 7).

In ancient Hebrew culture where a young boy wasn't considered of marriageable age (=an adult) until his 30th birthday, the later teen years and the twenties of his youth were fraught with mine fields morally. Sexual relations were technically forbidden by the Law until marriage, but youthful passions reached a feverous pitch during this period of his life. Temptations to force himself on young women would be substantial, but most young girls were married by their early teen years. The dangers of doing this were enormous both to him personally and to the reputation of his family. The OT Code prescribed execution in most situations of this nature. The other temptation was to purchase the services of a prostitute. The widespread practice of this serves as a background for the portrayal of the "strange woman" who posed enormous dangers for him as the admonitions within the book of Proverbs make clear. In ancient Israelite society this sexual activity sometimes found "legitimation" through the services of "sacred" prostitutes who were a part of the worship of various Canaanite gods and goddesses, most especially in the worship of Baal.

Internal History. The only internal history aspects in these verses relates to the issues of poverty and wealth. The ethical perspective accompa-

nying these axioms has limited history aspects. But these will be treated in the exegesis of the verses below.

b. Literary

Genre. Different levels of literary form exist in these verses. Generally speaking, they are a part of what is universally labeled [Wisdom literature](#). The Introduction to Proverbs, [1:1-7](#), helps define this distinct literary pattern. The article on “Wisdom” in the Harpers Bible Dictionary provides a helpful summary:

This literature has characteristic traits: (1) There is an absence of reference to the typical salvation beliefs, such as the patriarchal promises, the Exodus, the Sinai covenant, etc. (2) The object of the Hebrew sage is to transmit the lessons of experience, so that one may learn to cope with life. The teaching inculcates certain goals, such as self-control (especially in speech), honesty, diligence, etc. If one follows the counsels of the sage, wisdom will bring life; its opposite, folly—a practical, not merely intellectual folly—brings destruction. (3) A characteristic problem is retribution, the way in which the wise/foolish (i.e., virtuous/wrongdoers) are treated. Proverbs upholds the optimistic view shared by such books as Deuteronomy but disputed by Job and Ecclesiastes. (4) Certain literary forms are cultivated: the discrete, separate saying, which is usually a pithy expression in two parallel lines; the admonition, whether positive or negative, which is often accompanied by a motivation; wisdom poems (typical of Prov. 1-9); and reflections (characteristic of Ecclesiastes). Job is dominated by disputation speeches between the protagonist and the three friends (chaps. 3-31).

The major vehicle through which these ideas are expressed is ancient Hebrew poetry. This is the reason virtually all modern English translations of Proverbs will format their translation in modern English poetic form.

The distinctive poetic structure common to our verses is the antithetical comparative structure, [something is better than something else when](#). Antithetical parallelism dominates the collection found in 10:1-22:17.

Literary Setting. The understanding of how the book of Proverbs is structured both grows out of and impacts ones view of the [External History](#) of the document. This focuses especially on 1:1-7, which

serves as an Introduction and begins with a designation of Solomon as the sources of the proverbs. General agreement among OT scholars is that the basic structure of the document revolves around two foundational sections: chaps 1-9 and 10-31, with subsections in the second section. This is helpfully summarized in the *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (“Proverbs, Book of”):

Proverbs, the, an OT book bearing a traditional title, ‘Proverbs of Solomon,’ which disguises the fact that this work is made up of several collections of sayings and poems, as indicated by the presence of other subtitles.

OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

The Proverbs

The book is best outlined as a series of collections:

- I. Wisdom poems (1:1-9:18)
- II. Wisdom sayings (10:1-22:16)
- III. Admonitions (22:17-24:22)
- IV. ‘Sayings of the wise’ (24:23-34)
- V. ‘Proverbs of Solomon’: wisdom sayings (25:1-29:27)
- VI. ‘The words of Agur’ (30:1-33)
- VII. ‘The words of Lemuel’ (31:1-9)
- VIII. Poem on the ideal wife (31:10-31)

The verses we are considering come from chapters fifteen through nineteen, the “Wisdom sayings” section in chapters ten through twenty-two. The subtitle for these proverbs in 10:1 is “[The proverbs of Solomon](#).” In 22:17, this subheading changes to “[The words of the wise](#),” indicating a shift in tone and in sources for those that follow. Thus those that we are considering are traditionally associated with Solomon.

Few signals exist to suggest organizational structure of the many proverbs in 10:1 - 22:16. Sometimes catch-words, like “heart” seem to be the basis for grouping several proverbs together. “Heart” appears to the catch-word for those in 15:11-17. Here and there longer sections seem to have a better defined literary or grammatical structure. But for the most part, a certain randomness seems to prevail for those in 10:1-22:16.

II. Message

Once more, no profitable way of outlining the proverbs that we’re considering exists. Instead, we will simply consider them in sequence of their occurrence in the scripture text.

a. When poverty is better

Proverbs 15:15-17

LXX

15:15-17

¹⁵πάντα τὸν χρόνον οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τῶν κακῶν προσδέχονται κακά οἱ δὲ ἀγαθοὶ ἡσυχάζουσιν διὰ παντός

¹⁶κρείσσων μικρὰ μερὶς μετὰ φόβου κυρίου ἢ θησαυροὶ μεγάλοι μετὰ ἀφοβίας ¹⁷κρείσσων ξενισμὸς λαχάνων πρὸς φιλίαν καὶ χάριν ἢ παράθεσις μόσχων μετὰ ἔχθρας

Notes:

Verse 15 begins with the negative {"bad"; "hard," "trouble"} then moves to the positive {"continual feast"}. The key difference is the "cheerful heart." This suggests not two separate groups of people, but a transformation of inner disposition, perhaps through refocusing away from the hardships of everyday life to the lasting values that transcend the daily struggles. This is the position of R.E. Murphy (*Word Biblical Commentary*) on this verse:

At first sight the two lines seem to describe separate groups: the afflicted will have evil days all their lives, but others, not troubled by adversity, who are literally "good of heart," have a continual feast. These can hardly be two totally separate and unrelated observations. But is v 15a to be understood in an absolute manner, as though there could be no change in the plight of the afflicted? Perhaps in their affliction there can be no escape from suffering. Or perhaps the generalization of v 15b modifies the desperate situation found in v 15a, in the sense that the afflicted can and must cultivate a happy heart. Their lot is hard, but their interior attitude can help them attain some joy in life. Plöger and McKane are of this opinion. Whybray regards the verse as an "apparently contradictory proverb."

Thus the key to how we face life is the condition of our heart. When we can find happiness in life, our life can be transformed into a "continual feast." Ultimately, that happiness should stem from our relationship with our God.

The second and third stanzas bring this religious emphasis to the forefront, especially the second one. Here the poverty/wealth comparison is set forth. Again Murphy (WBC) has helpful insight:

NASB

15:15-17

15 All the days of the afflicted are bad, but a cheerful heart *has* a continual feast.

16 Better is a little with the fear of the LORD Than great treasure and turmoil with it. 17 Better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox *served* with hatred.

NRSV

15:15-17

15 All the days of the poor are hard, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.

16 Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. 17 Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

NLT

15:15-17

5 For the poor, every day brings trouble; for the happy heart, life is a continual feast.

16 It is better to have little with fear for the LORD than to have great treasure with turmoil. 17 A bowl of soup with someone you love is better than steak with someone you hate.

These two "better" sayings illustrate the kind of judgment that true wisdom exercises. They both modify conventional wisdom by pointing up paradox. See the *Comment* on 16:8. Both proverbs are similar to sayings in the Instruction of Amenemope, 9:5–8 (*AEL*, 2:152): "Better is poverty in the hand of the God, / Than wealth in the storehouse; / Better is bread with a happy heart / Than wealth with vexation." **16** Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but it is no guarantee of prosperity and riches, even if these are the benefits promised to the wise. Wealth is preferable to poverty, but not at any price; it does not guarantee happiness. In themselves riches can create problems, as Qoheleth pointed out, Eccl 5:9–19. The "little" may not necessarily mean abject poverty—perhaps modest means; however, the force of the comparison should not be lost. The emphasis is placed on what is true value, despite life's problems. Prov 16:8 provides a close parallel. For further comment, see the *Explanation*. **17** The criterion for judgment is not specified, but it is clear that the imponderable and immaterial weighs more than the material. The spirit in which a meal is shared is far more important than the kind of food that is eaten; cf. 17:1. Alonso Schokel describes the "good" (טוֹב) that unites vv 15–17: a contented heart, fear of the Lord, and harmony with companions; thus, peace with self, God, and neighbor.

To be poor and fear the Lord is better than being wealthy and having a life full of turmoil, largely due to the wealth. The third stanza moves to the inner personal stressing the table fellowship of love is far superior than what is served on that table. Lesser quality food enjoyed in brotherly love is much better than exquisite food served in an atmosphere of hatred.

In a status conscious world like this ancient one, the tendency was to focus on the visible material aspects and neglect the inward lasting values of love

for God and for others. Solomon, who had lots of experience here, reminds us of what really counts.

Proverbs 16:8, 19

LXX	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>16:8 omitted in LXX</p>	<p>16:8 Better is a little with righteousness, than great income with injustice.</p>	<p>16:8 Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.</p>	<p>16:8 It is better to be poor and godly than rich and dishonest.</p>
<p>16:19 κρείσσων πραΰθυμος μετὰ ταπεινώσεως ἢ ὅς διαιρεῖται σκῦλα μετὰ ἕβριστῶν</p>	<p>16:19 It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.</p>	<p>16:19 It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.</p>	<p>16:19 It is better to live humbly with the poor than to share plunder with the proud.</p>

Notes:

Although the Greek Old Testament doesn't contain this proverb, the Hebrew text does and thus the three English translations provide a translation of the Hebrew text.

As Murphy (above quote) noted, this proverb is very similar to the one in 15:16 with its overt religious tone. But the overarching tone of 16:1-19 has shifted to the theme of God and king with these catch words peppering these verses. These provide some contextual setting to help better understand both these proverbs.

The moral of the first proverb: *Poverty with righteousness is better than wealth with injustice.* This comes against the backdrop of vv. 1-9:

1 The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

2 All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.

3 Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.

4 The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

5 All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; be assured, they will not go unpunished.

6 By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one avoids evil.

7 When the ways of people please the Lord, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.

8 Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.

9 The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.

The importance of fearing God in reverent obedience is stressed. Thus living with few material

means while possessing outward obedience reflecting this fear of the Lord is far better than being wealthy and ignoring God's demands for just treatment of others.

The moral of the second proverb: *humility in poverty is far better than arrogant gaining of wealth.* Here the backdrop is that of warfare and the humiliating defeat of enemies leading to the taking of the spoils of warfare. The poverty / wealth theme is once more foundational, but now the ethical contrast is between humility and arrogant pride.

The preceding proverb in v. 18 is closely linked to this one in v. 19: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." It serves to set up the one in v. 19. The theme of humility / pride is rather common in Proverbs, cf., 11:2a; 15:33b; 29:23.

The backdrop of 16:10-19 sets the tone for the climatic proverb in v. 19:

10 Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king; his mouth does not sin in judgment.

11 Honest balances and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work.

12 It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness.

13 Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves those who speak what is right.

14 A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and whoever is wise will appease it. 15 In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.

16 How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

17 The highway of the upright avoids evil; those who guard their way preserve their lives.

18 Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty

spirit before a fall.

19 It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

In v. 19, the image of boasting arrogant soldiers

in battle field victory is set over against the peasant living in humility. The peasant is the ultimate victor in shaping his life in humility.

Proverbs 17:1

LXX
17:1
κρείσσων ψωμὸς μεθ’
ἡδουῆς ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ οἶκος
πλήρης πολλῶν ἀγαθῶν
καὶ ἀδίκων θυμάτων μετὰ
μάχης

NASB
17:1
Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it, than a house full of feasting with strife.

NRSV
17:1
Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.

NLT
17:1
A dry crust eaten in peace is better than a great feast with strife.

Notes:

In this proverb the theme of 15:17 is somewhat picked up again with the feasting motif. But the thrust is distinct. Murphy (WBC) summarizes:

There has been some discussion about the cultic nuance in “sacrifices of strife” (translated as “feasting with quarrels”). Plöger simply dismisses this aspect. He is correct, but Alonso Schokel is more subtle; he recognizes here an ironic contrast to the “peace sacrifices,” commonly mentioned in the liturgy. There is a stark contrast between the practically useless dry bread and the rich meal, making the preference all the more striking. As it is, v 1 displays the depth of this type of “better” saying. See also Amenemope,

“Better is bread with a happy heart / Than wealth with vexation” (9:7–8; Lichtheim, *AEL*, 2:152).

Here quietness is contrasted with strife, while in 15:17 love is contrasted with hatred. The humility of a poor man living his life with quietness is the virtue. His situation physically is bleak, since a “dry morsel” was an almost worthless piece of bread. So the extremes of physical situation are highlighted.

The wisdom writings of the Old Testament place a value on [quietness](#) and frequently equate it with being wise: “A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back” ([Prov. 29:11](#)). Such is the value of a life lived in quietness over against strife.

Proverbs 19:1, 22

LXX
19:1
omitted in LXX

NASB
19:1
Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity, than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.

NRSV
19:1
Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool.

NLT
19:1
It is better to be poor and honest than to be a fool and dishonest.

19:22
καρπὸς ἀνδρὶ
ἐλεημοσύνη κρείσσων δὲ
πτωχὸς δίκαιος ἢ
πλούσιος ψεύστης

19:22
What is desirable in a man is his kindness, and *it is* better to be a poor man than a liar.

19:22
What is desirable in a person is loyalty, and it is better to be poor than a liar.

19:22
Loyalty makes a person attractive. And it is better to be poor than dishonest.

Notes:

In 19:1, the poverty / wealth foundation sets up the contrast between “integrity” and “foolish liar.” Prov. 28:6 is closely related to this proverb: “Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one’s ways even though rich.” Murphy (WBC) helps summarize:

It is better here to recognize a simple comparison.

V 1a refers to someone, poor but virtuous, who refuses

to better his material situation by wrong means, such as lies. He is better off than the person in v 1b who has lied his way into success and probably riches; he may think he is well off, but he is a fool!

The second proverb in v. 22 has two parts, with only the second one being the “better than” saying. The first saying in 22a establishes a frame of meaning for the second saying in 22b. Loyalty is seen as a

virtue, although the Hebrew text has unclarity in it as Murphy (WBC) discusses:

It is difficult to determine the relationship between the two lines. “Disgrace” is also rendered by many as “kindness,” the normal meaning of Hebrew **חסד**. If so, then the meaning seems to be that a person’s desire, or what is desired in a person, is loyalty/goodness, and the parallel line would indicate that the poor, who fulfill such an ideal, are therefore better than the wicked who are productive, but deceitful in their display of goodness. Thus, loyalty is better than deceit. However, as translated above, “desire” is taken as evil, as in the sense of greed, and the proverb is a saying in favor of the poor. For them there is no disgrace, but there is for those whose wealth is built on deceit. Yet it is to be admitted that there is little connection between the two lines, and in any interpretation there are certain assumptions that go beyond the text.

Thus goodness and trustworthiness in poverty is better than riches gained with deceit and dishonesty.

Summary: what we have seen in these proverbs, mostly the “better than” type where poverty and wealth are pitted against one another, is that proper ethical character and behavior is worth far more than wealth. This doesn’t mean that wealth is itself evil, but when wealth is accompanied by wrong, destructive character and behavior, wealth cannot compensate for these destructive things.

The sage here in Proverbs, traditionally Solomon himself for this section, takes a long look. Life cannot be measured by the accumulation of things. Certainly this is so when the accumulation of things is connected to wrongful, destructive attitudes, character and behavior. To make the accumulation of wealth the central goal in life, with the willingness to resort to whatever means possible to acquire it, is to turn oneself into a fool. The far better alternative would be to live out one’s entire life in stark poverty while possessing the positive character traits of love, honesty, loyalty along with positive behavior.

Excursus on poverty and wealth in Proverbs:

Murphy (WBC) has a helpful summation of the issue of poverty and wealth in Proverbs. This broader picture is important to have in mind with these individual proverbs that we have studied in relation to this theme.

The purpose of this excursus is not to arrive at a harmonious view concerning riches/poverty in the book of Proverbs, but to put together the disparate opinions on the subject. One may hazard a guess that the abundant references to riches and poverty are due especially to the sapiential thesis that wisdom and prosperity go together. If that is so, how is one to understand the plight of the poor? It is suggestive that there are several words used in Proverbs to designate a poor person, where there is only one, **עשיר**, designating the rich. Can one simply say that the poor deserve their condition due to laziness, or because of their folly or wrongdoing? And how does all this shape up with “the rights of the poor” (Exod 23:6, 11) in the Law? As far as the book of Proverbs is concerned, there is no one answer to the problem of riches and poverty; several attitudes are portrayed and left in tension with each other. That is no surprise, due to the inherent limitations of a proverb, and also to the varied social settings that these sayings necessarily reflect. On the one hand, riches are a proper goal for the wise, and the poor may deserve their poverty, e.g., because of laziness. On the other, the questions arise: How did the rich acquire their possessions? (hastily? through bribery?), and how did the poor come to be afflicted? (through an inexplicable disaster? through oppression?). No ethical rules are laid out to cover all the situations, and there is no consistency in the observations, since different circumstances call for different observations. H. Delkurt (*Ethische Einsichten*, 84) counts more than fifty sayings that deal with the theme of rich and poor in Prov 10–29.

Poverty is taken for granted; the poor are a fact of life, and this is as great a problem for the ancients as for the moderns. It is significant that in Israelite wisdom literature they become a special object of care due to their relationship to the Lord. Such is the motive invoked in 14:31; 17:5; 22:2: both rich and poor were created by God, so that mockery of the poor is a blasphemy. It is misguided to take Proverbs to task for not decrying social abuses, such as one finds the prophets doing. That is not in the wisdom style; there is enough about bribery and other aspects of the rich/poor situation to lead to conversion those who will listen. An argument from silence is not an argument. There is a particularly striking expression in 19:17: “Showing kindness to the poor: making a loan to the Lord, and a reward will be given for it.” G. von Rad (*Wisdom*, 94) remarks that among the instructions (the traditions of the past, present experiences) there are also “experiences which men have had directly of Yahweh, that he proves to be the defendant of those who are without legal rights, that he quite personally ‘complements’ a good deed with his blessing.” The Lord will fight for the cause of the poor; in Prov 22:23 God is described as the **גִּוֹאֵל**, or champion, of the fatherless; cf. 23:11. In 14:21 one who despises a neighbor is called a sinner (**חַוֵּטָא**),

while a blessing comes to the one who is kind to the poor. Perhaps it is even more striking that curses are the lot of those who close their eyes to the poor (28:27).

The “better” saying provides a typically sapiential form for weighing the advantages of poverty and riches. The *Excursus on Retribution* points out how these sayings reversed the usual value of riches and poverty and thus pointed away from any deed-consequence theory. The classical expression is 16:8: Better is a little with justice than great income with injustice. This recognizes that life is not fair, that the just can be poor and the rich be unjust, contrary to a common idea held by perhaps the majority of the people. Was there a way out of this dilemma? There is the frequent hope that the future will change the situation. There is no future for the evil person, 11:28; 24:20, and “justice delivers from death,” 10:2b; 11:4b. But mainly there is simply the dogged insistence that virtue will prevail, 28:6, 18. In such circumstances, the “better than” sayings are all the more remarkable; there are values that surpass riches (22:1; see the commentary on 22:1–9).

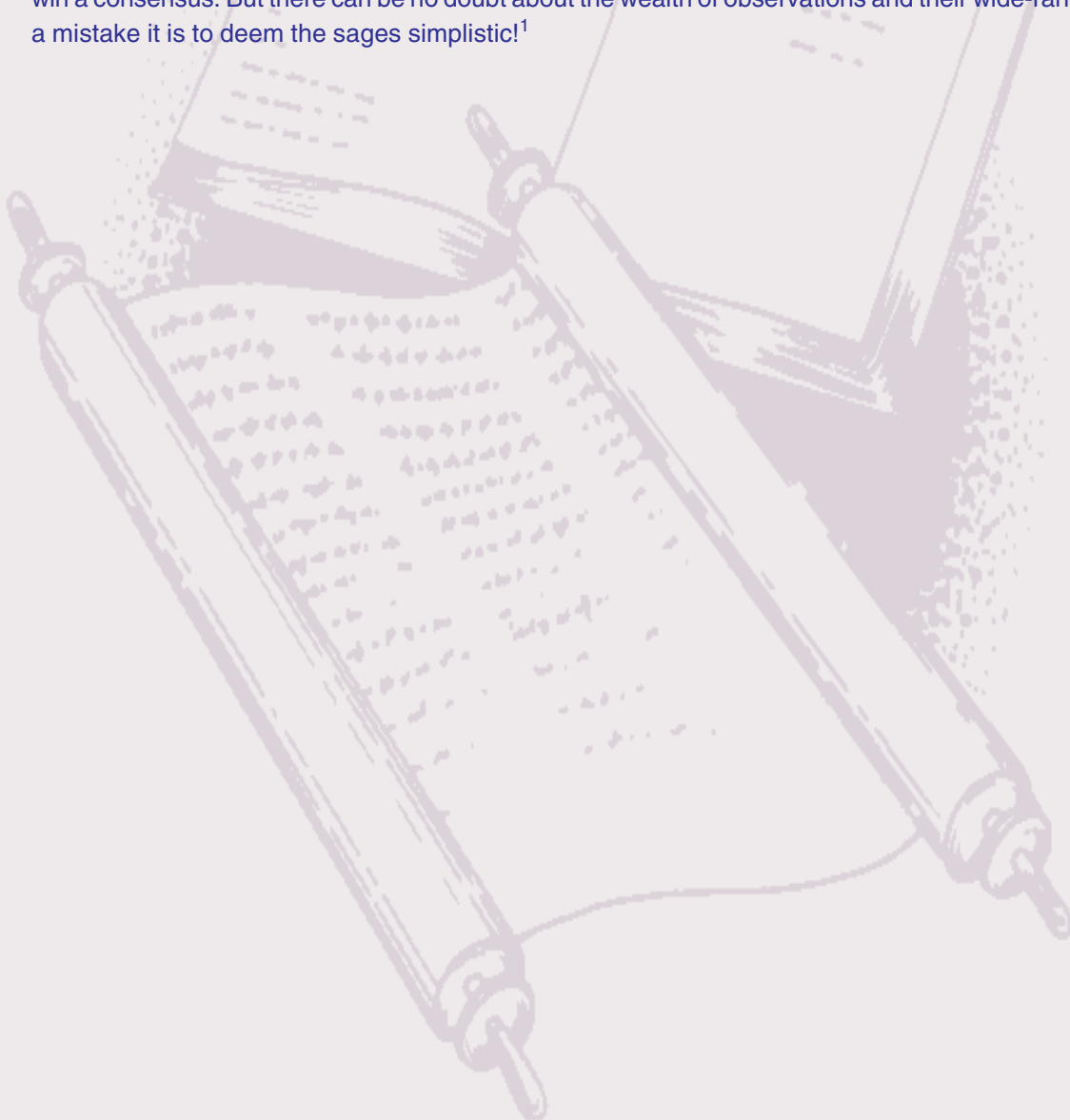
There is a hard-nosed realism about the advantages of wealth. It is probable that the sayings originated among the family circle, and not among an elite class. The vantage point of the proverbs, while they display a commendable caution, is that riches are indeed a good, a blessing from God, Prov 3:1–10; Ps 37. This is apparent in the realistic observations that in this world riches make a great difference. As it reads in 18:23, the poor man implores, but the rich get away with rough and harsh words. The rich rule over the poor, 22:7; they wield influence among the community. They acquire many “friends,” in contrast to the poor (14:20; 19:4), who often enough will be looked down upon, 19:7. The poor have nothing to lose and nothing that others can profit from. Therefore, one must look hard at reality. Riches are a “strong city,” a refuge for the rich man, whereas poverty spells ruin, 10:15. There is no moralizing about this fact of life. But that is not the last word. The “strong city” occurs in 18:11a, and here it receives an ironic twist in the parallel line: it is like a high wall, as the rich person imagines, or thinks. The point is made all the stronger by the previous verse, 18:10, where it is said that the “name of YHWH” (שם יהוה), the only time this phrase occurs in the book) is a strong tower for the just person. Thus a neat counterthrust is provided; the true refuge is the Lord. One cannot read 10:15 or 18:11a without considering the telling points that are made in 18:10 and 18:11b. In addition, 18:12 carries the warning that pride goes before a fall! It should not be inferred from these examples that there is after all a contextual approach to the interpretation of proverbs. Properly speaking, there is no context (outside of a common topic); there are only clashing viewpoints. If one considers that very many of these sayings were handed down by oral tradition, no true context is possible. And the collections are not dominated by interpretative concerns among the many sayings. Proverbs can be at war with each other. But they are at war precisely because they retain their own independence and meaning. Otherwise there would be no “war.”

There is a further question: How was wealth obtained? Emphasis is placed upon human diligence, and also upon the reward of a virtuous life. The sages do not really examine the means, but they say enough to question the morality. If riches are acquired in haste, they seem to be suspect. They will not be appreciated, and thus they may be squandered, 13:11. Riches have a way of acquiring wings and flying off like birds, 23:4–5. Or at least there is the suspicion that some evil-doing was involved: “but one in haste for riches does not go unpunished,” 28:20b. And there is the verdict that “Treasures obtained by wickedness do not profit,” 10:2a. Bribery was a fact of life. On the one hand, it was only too often successful. Prov 21:14 describes the effectiveness of a secret gift or bribe. But on the other hand, was every gift necessarily a bribe? There seems to be a fascination about the power of a gift in 17:8, and perhaps 18:6 refers to the benefits of well-placed gifts that were not, strictly speaking, outright bribes. In view of modern practice, we are inclined to suspect that kind of “lobbying,” and perhaps the ancients did also. Prayers are not cultivated by the collectors of Proverbs, but there is a remarkable prayer pertinent to the theme of wealth/poverty among the sayings of Agur (or of someone else? See the *Comment*). The individual asks for two things before death arrives—to be kept from falsehood and lying, and then: “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with my ration of food, lest, being full, I become a renegade, and say: The Lord—who? Or lest, being poor, I steal, and blaspheme the name of my God,” 10:8–9. This pious ideal is unique among the wisdom sayings. There is no effort here to evaluate riches or poverty, but the dangers attendant upon either extreme were known, and to be avoided. The caution typical of the Israelite sage comes to expression.

It is to be expected that the phenomenon of wealth/poverty would capture the attention of observers in many cultures before and after the heyday of Israelite wisdom. The study of H. C. Washington (*Wealth and Poverty*, 135–45, 185–204) recognizes the influence of international wisdom on the book of Proverbs, but he is properly cautious and proceeds soberly between the extreme positions that have been taken on this issue. For a discussion of the relationship between the Instruction of Amenemope and Prov 22:17–24:11 (23:13) see the commentary at 22:17 and also the *Excursus on the Book of Proverbs and Amenemope*. If the issues of wealth and poverty were not extensively treated throughout the book of Proverbs, Washington’s arguments for the influence of the Egyptian work upon Israelite views might be more convincing. To take an example, Prov 22:28 (= 23:10) prohibits tampering with the landmark, the boundaries of a field that belong to a widow. This concern is also found in Amenemope

(7:11–15; 8:9–12; *AEL*, 151–52). But it is hard to imagine that this concern about landmarks, which Washington notes is present in Hos 5:10; Deut 24:17 and Job 24:2, is to be considered as dependent upon the Egyptian work. It was very much a concern in Israel. Its appearance in this section of Proverbs, which indubitably betrays a dependence on Amenemope, is not unusual, for the idea itself was far from foreign to Israelite life. One may phrase the question from another angle: How much in Egyptian (and other) wisdom works did the Israelite writer(s) find in harmony with what they already knew, conclusions they had already arrived at from their national experience?

On the whole, the ambivalent attitude which Proverbs displays concerning riches is surprising. In Israelite society, as we have seen, wealth is a blessing. But Proverbs is very much concerned that riches be handled with caution, and that their inner effects on the possessor be considered. Nowhere else in the Bible do we find this investigation into the character of the one who is “blessed” with riches. The sages penetrated below the obvious level of pleasure or power. One cannot derive from the proverbs any neat laws about the ethics governing riches/poverty. R. Whybray (*Wealth and Poverty*, 60–61) lists nine conclusions that he draws from chaps. 10–22 and 25–29, and such a number indicates the qualifications necessary to present any general description of the position of the sages. Similarly, H. Delkurt (*Ethische Einsichten*, 129–40) is forced to go into details and so avoid the danger of generalizations. Many scholars have drawn conclusions about the social classes involved, both those who composed the proverbs, and those for whom the proverbs, in written form, were intended. For example, the socio-historical conditions that have been reconstructed point to the Persian period as the date of the final form of the book. Such conclusions have to be supported by other considerations; in themselves they are too hypothetical to win a consensus. But there can be no doubt about the wealth of observations and their wide-ranging scope. What a mistake it is to deem the sages simplistic!¹



15:15-17

¹⁵πάντα τὸν χρόνον οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τῶν κακῶν προσδέχονται κακὰ οἱ δὲ ἀγαθοὶ ἠσυχάζουσιν διὰ παιτῶς

¹⁶κρείσσων μικρὰ μερὶς μετὰ φόβου κυρίου ἢ θησαυροὶ μεγάλοι μετὰ ἀφοβίας ¹⁷κρείσσων ξενισμὸς λαχάνων πρὸς φιλίαν καὶ χάριν ἢ παράθεσις μόσχων μετὰ ἔχθρας

16:8

omitted in LXX

16:19

κρείσσων πραῦθυμος μετὰ ταπεινώσεως ἢ ὅς διαιρεῖται σκύλα μετὰ ἴβριστῶν

17:1

κρείσσων ψωμὸς μεθ' ἡδονῆς ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ οἶκος πλήρης πολλῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἀδίκων θυμάτων μετὰ μάχης

19:1

omitted in LXX

19:22

καρπὸς ἀνδρὶ ἐλεημοσύνη κρείσσων δὲ πτωχὸς δίκαιος ἢ πλούσιος ψεύστης

Eccl. 4:13

ἀγαθὸς παῖς πένης καὶ σοφὸς ὑπὲρ βασιλέα πρεσβύτερον καὶ ἄφρονα ὅς οὐκ ἔγνω τοῦ προσέχειν ἔτι

15:15-17

15 All the days of the afflicted are bad, but a cheerful heart *has* a continual feast.

16 Better is a little with the fear of the LORD Than great treasure and turmoil with it. 17 Better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox *served* with hatred.

16:8

Better is a little with righteousness, than great income with injustice.

16:19

It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.

17:1

Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it, than a house full of feasting with strife.

19:1

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity, than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.

19:22

What is desirable in a man is his kindness, and *it is* better to be a poor man than a liar.

Eccl. 4:13

A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction.

15:15-17

15 All the days of the poor are hard, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.

16 Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. 17 Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

16:8

Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.

16:19

It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

17:1

Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.

19:1

Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool.

19:22

What is desirable in a person is loyalty, and it is better to be poor than a liar.

Eccl. 4:13

Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice.

15:15-17

5 For the poor, every day brings trouble; for the happy heart, life is a continual feast.

16 It is better to have little with fear for the LORD than to have great treasure with turmoil. 17 A bowl of soup with someone you love is better than steak with someone you hate.

16:8

It is better to be poor and godly than rich and dishonest.

16:19

It is better to live humbly with the poor than to share plunder with the proud.

17:1

A dry crust eaten in peace is better than a great feast with strife.

19:1

It is better to be poor and honest than to be a fool and dishonest.

19:22

Loyalty makes a person attractive. And it is better to be poor than dishonest.

Eccl. 4:13

It is better to be a poor but wise youth than to be an old and foolish king who refuses all advice.

15:15-17

15 כָּל־יַמֵּי עֵינֵי רָעִים וְטוֹב־לֵב מִשְׁתֵּה תַמְיֹד¹⁶ טוֹב־מַעַט
 בִּירְאַת יְהוָה מֵאוֹצֵר רָב וּמְהוּמָה בּוֹ
 17 טוֹב אֶרְחַת יֶרֶק וְאַהֲבַה־שָׁם מִשׁוֹר אֲבוֹס וּשְׂנֵאֵה־בוֹ

16:8

8 טוֹב־מַעַט בְּצַדִּיקָה מֵרַב תְּבוּאוֹת בְּלֹא מִשְׁפָּט

16:19

19 טוֹב שְׁפַל־רוּחַ אֶת־(עֲנִיִּים) [עֲנִיִּים] מִחֶלֶק שְׁלַל אֶת־גֹּאֲוִים

17:1

1 טוֹב פֶּת חֲרָבָה וּשְׁלוֹה־בָה מִבַּיִת מְלֵא זִבְחֵי־רִיב

19:1

1 טוֹב־רֶשׁ הוֹלֵךְ בְּתַמּוֹ מֵעֲקֹשׁ שְׁפָתָיו וְהוּא כְּסִיל

19:22

22 תְּאוֹת אֲרָם חֲסֵדוֹ וְטוֹב־רֶשׁ מֵאִישׁ כְּזָבֹב

Eccl. 4:13

13 טוֹב יֶלֶד מִסֶּכֶן וְחֶכֶם מִמֶּלֶךְ זָקֵן וְכְסִיל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִדַּע
 לְהִזְהָר עוֹד

LXX Benton Translation

15:15-17

¹⁵ The eyes of the wicked are always looking for evil things; but the good are always quiet. ¹⁶ Better is a small portion with the fear of the Lord, than great treasures without the fear of the Lord. ¹⁷ Better is an entertainment of herbs with friendliness and kindness, than a feast of calves, with enmity.

16:8

omitted in LXX

16:19

Better is a meek-spirited man with lowliness*, than one who divides spoils with the proud.

*Or, affliction

17:1

Better is a morsel with pleasure in peace, than a house full of many good things and unjust sacrifices, with strife.

19:1

omitted in LXX

19:22

Mercy is a fruit to a man: and a poor man is better than a rich liar.

Eccl. 4:13

Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king, who knows not how to take heed any longer.