



**ROBERT  
F. HORTON**

**THE EXPOSITOR'S  
BIBLE: THE BOOK  
OF PROVERBS**



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# The Expositor's Bible: The Book of Proverbs

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# INTRODUCTION.

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In attempting to make the book of Proverbs a subject of Expository Lectures and practical sermons it has been necessary to treat the book as a uniform composition, following, chapter by chapter, the order which the compiler has adopted, and bringing the scattered sentences together under subjects which are suggested by certain more striking points in the successive chapters. By this method the great bulk of the matter contained in the book is brought under review, either in the way of exposition or in the way of quotation and allusion, though even in this method many smaller sayings slip through the expositor's meshes. But the grave defect of the method which is thus employed is that it completely obliterates those interesting marks, discernible on the very surface of the book, of the origin and the compilation of the separate parts. This defect the reader can best supply by turning to Professor Cheyne's scholarly work "Job and Solomon; or, The Wisdom of the Old Testament;" but for those who have not time or opportunity to refer to any book besides the one which is in their hands, a brief Introduction to the following Lectures may not be unwelcome.

The Jewish tradition ascribed the Proverbs, or Sayings of the Wise, to Solomon, just as it ascribed the Psalms, or inspired lyrics of the poets, to King David, and we may add, just as it ascribed all the gradual accretions and developments of the Law to Moses. But even a very uncritical reader will observe that the book of Proverbs as



we have it is not the work of a single hand; and a critical inquiry into the language and style of the several parts, and also into the social and political conditions which are implied by them, has led scholars to the conclusion that, at the most, a certain number of Solomon's wise sayings are included in the collection, but that he did not in any sense compose the book. In fact, the statement in 1 Kings iv. 32, "He *spake* three thousand proverbs," implies that his utterances were recorded by others, and not written down by himself, and the heading to chap. xxv. of our book suggests that, the "men of Hezekiah" collected the reputed sayings of Solomon from several sources, one of those sources being the collection contained in the previous chapters.[1]

The opening words, then, of the book—"The Proverbs of Solomon the son of David, King of Israel"—are not to be taken as an assertion that all which follows flowed from Solomon's pen, but rather as a general description and keynote of the subject of the treatise. It is as if the compiler wished to say, 'This is a compendium of those wise sayings current among us, the model and type of which may be found in the proverbs attributed to the wisest of men, King Solomon.' That this is the way in which we must understand the title becomes plain when we find contained in the book a passage described as "the sayings of the wise" (xxiv. 23-34), a chapter distinctly entitled "The Words of Agur," and another paragraph headed "The Words of King Lemuel."

Leaving aside the traditional view of the authorship, which the book itself shows to be misleading, the contents may be briefly delineated and characterized.

The main body of Proverbs is the collection which begins at chap. x., "The Proverbs of Solomon," and ends at xxii. 16. This collection has certain distinct features which mark it off from all that precedes and from all that follows. It is, strictly speaking, a collection of proverbs, that is of brief, pointed sayings,—sometimes containing a similitude, but more generally consisting of a single antithetical moral sentiment,—such as spring into existence and pass current in every society of men. All these proverbs are identical in form: each is expressed in a distich; the apparent exception in xix. 7 is to be explained by the obvious fact that the third clause is the mutilated fragment of another proverb, which in the LXX. appears complete: ὁ πολλὰ κακοποιῶν τελεσιουργεῖ κακίαν, ὃς δὲ ἐρεθίζει λόγους οὐ σωθήσεται. As the form is the same in all, so the general drift of their teaching is quite uniform; the morality inculcated is of no very lofty type; the motives for right conduct are mainly prudential; there is no sense of mystery or wonder, no tendency to speculation or doubt; "Be good, and you will prosper; be wicked, and you will suffer," is the sum of the whole. A few scattered precepts occur which seem to touch a higher level and to breathe a more spiritual air; and it is possible, as has been suggested, that these were added by the author of chaps. i.-ix., when he revised and published the compilation. Such a sentiment as xiv. 34 well accords with the utterance of Wisdom in viii. 15, 16. And the series of proverbs which are grouped on the principle of their all containing the name of Jahveh, xv. 33-xvi. 7 (cf. xvi. 20, 33) seems to be closely linked with the opening chapters of the book. Assuming the proverbs of this collection to spring from the same period,

and to reflect the social conditions which then prevailed, we should say that it points to a time of comparative simplicity and purity, when the main industry was that of tilling the soil, when the sayings of wise people were valued by an unsophisticated community, when the family life was pure, the wife honoured (xii. 4; xviii. 22; xix. 14), and parental authority maintained, and when the king was still worthy of respect, the immediate and obedient instrument of the Divine government (xxi. 1). The whole collection seems to date from the earlier and happier times of the monarchy.

To this collection is added an appendix (xxii. 17-xxiv. 22), which opens with an exhortation addressed by the teacher to his pupil. The literary form of this appendix falls far behind the style of the main collection. The terse and compact distich occurs rarely; most of the sayings are more cumbersome and elaborate, and in one case there is a brief didactic poem carried through several verses (xxiii. 29-35). As the style of composition shows a decline, so the general conditions which form the background of the sayings are less happy. They seem to indicate a time of growing luxury; gluttony and drunkenness are the subjects of strong invective. It appears that the poor are oppressed by the rich (xxii. 22), and justice is not rightly administered, so that the innocent are carried away into confinement (xxiv. 11, 12). There is political unrest, too, and the young have to be cautioned against the revolutionary or anarchical spirit (xxiv. 21). We are evidently brought down to a later period in Israel's melancholy history.

Another brief appendix follows (xxiv. 23-34), in which the distich form almost entirely disappears; it is remarkable as

containing a little picture (30-34), which, like the much longer passage in vii. 6-27, is presented as the personal observation of the writer.

We now pass on to an entirely new collection, ch. xxv.-xxix., which was made, we are told, in the literary circle at the court of Hezekiah, two hundred and fifty years or thereabouts after the time of Solomon. In this collection there is no uniformity of structure such as distinguished the proverbs of the first collection. Some distichs occur, but as often as not the proverb is drawn out into three, four, and in one case (xxv. 6, 7) five clauses; xxvii. 23-27 forms a brief connected exhortation, which is a considerable departure from the simple structure of the *mashal*, or proverb. The social condition reflected in these chapters is not very attractive; it is clear that the people have had experience of a bad ruler (xxix. 2); we seem to have hints of the many troubled experiences through which the monarchy of Israel passed—the divided rule, the injustice, the incapacity, the oppression (xxviii. 2, 3, 12, 15, 16, 28). There is one proverb which particularly recalls the age of Hezekiah, when the doom of the exile was already being proclaimed by the prophets: "As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place" (xxvii. 8). And it is perhaps characteristic of that troubled time, when the spiritual life was to be deepened by the experience of material suffering and national disaster, that this collection contains a proverb which might be almost the key-note of the New Testament morality (xxv. 21, 22).

The book closes with three quite distinct passages, which can only be regarded as appendices. According to one

interpretation of the very difficult words which stand at the head of chaps. xxx. and xxxi., these paragraphs would come from a foreign source; it has been thought that the word translated "oracle" might be the name of the country mentioned in Gen. xxv. 14, Massa. But whether Jakeh and King Lemuel were natives of this shadowy land or not, it is certain that the whole tone and drift of these two sections are alien to the general spirit of the book. There is something enigmatical in their style and artificial in their form, which would suggest a very late period in Israel's literary history. And the closing passage, which describes the virtuous woman, is distinguished by being an alphabetical acrostic, the verses beginning with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, a kind of composition which points to the dawn of Rabbinical methods in literature. It is impossible to say when or how these curious and interesting additions were made to our book, but scholars have generally recognized them as the product of the exile, if not the post-exile, period.

Now, the two collections which have been described, with their several appendices, were at some favourable point in religious history, possibly in those happy days of Josiah when the Deuteronomic Law was newly promulgated to the joyful nation, brought together, and, as we should say now, edited, with an original introduction by an author who, unknown to us by name, is among the greatest and noblest of Biblical writers. The first nine chapters of the book, which form the introduction to the whole, strike a far higher note, appeal to nobler conceptions, and are couched in a much loftier style than the book itself. The writer bases his moral

teaching on Divine authority rather than on the utilitarian basis which prevails in most of the proverbs. Writing in a time when the temptations to a lawless and sensual life were strong, appealing to the wealthier and more cultured youth of the nation, he proceeds in sweet and earnest discourse to woo his readers from the paths of vice into the Temple of Wisdom and Virtue. His method of contrasting the "two ways," and exhorting men to shun the one and choose the other, constantly reminds us of the similar appeals in the Book of Deuteronomy; but the touch is more graphic and more vivid; the gifts of the poet are employed in depicting the seven-pillared House of Wisdom and the deadly ways of Folly; and in the wonderful passage which introduces Wisdom appealing to the sons of men, on the ground of the part which she plays in the Creation and by the throne of God, we recognize the voice of a prophet—a prophet, too, who holds one of the highest places in the line of those who foretold the coming of our Lord.

Impossible as it has been in the Lectures to bring out the history and structure of the book, it will greatly help the reader to bear in mind what has just been said; he will thus be prepared for the striking contrast between the glowing beauty of the introduction and the somewhat frigid precepts which occur so frequently among the Proverbs themselves; he will be able to appreciate more fully the point which is from time to time brought into relief, that much of the teaching contained in the book is crude and imperfect, of value for us only when it has been brought to the standard of our Lord's spirit, corrected by His love and wisdom, or infused with His Divine life. And especially as the reader

approaches those strange chapters "The Sayings of Agur" and "The Sayings of King Lemuel" he will be glad to remind himself of the somewhat loose relation in which they stand to the main body of the work.

In few parts of the Scripture is there more need than in this of the ever-present Spirit to interpret and apply the written word, to discriminate and assort, to arrange and to combine, the varied utterances of the ages. Nowhere is it more necessary to distinguish between the inspired speech, which comes to the mind of prophet or poet as a direct oracle of God, and the speech which is the product of human wisdom, human observation, and human common sense, and is only in that secondary sense inspired. In the book of Proverbs there is much which is recorded for us by the wisdom of God, not because it is the expression of God's wisdom, but distinctly because it is the expression of man's wisdom; and among the lessons of the book is the sense of limitation and incompleteness which human wisdom leaves upon the mind.

But under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the reader may not only learn from the Proverbs much practical counsel for the common duties of life; he may have, from time to time, rare and wonderful glimpses into the heights and depths of God.

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## I.

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# **THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM.**

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"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."—PROV. i. 7.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom:

And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."—PROV. ix. 10.

(*Cf.* Eccles. i. 14, "To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and it was created with the faithful in the womb;" also Ps. cxi. 10.)

The book of Proverbs belongs to a group of works in the Hebrew literature the subject of which is Wisdom. It is probably the earliest of them all, and may be regarded as the stem, of which they are the branches. Without attempting to determine the relative ages of these compositions, the ordinary reader can see the points of contact between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and a little careful study reveals that the book of Job, though fuller and richer in every respect, belongs to the same order. Outside the canon of Holy Scripture we possess two works which avowedly owe their suggestion and inspiration to our book, viz. "The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach," commonly called Ecclesiasticus, a genuinely Hebrew product, and "The Wisdom of Solomon," commonly called the Book of Wisdom, of much later origin, and exhibiting that fusion of Hebrew religious conceptions with Greek speculation which prevailed in the Jewish schools of Alexandria.



Now, the question at once occurs, What are we to understand by the Wisdom which gives a subject and a title to this extensive field of literature? and in what relation does it stand to the Law and the Prophets, which form the great bulk of the Old Testament Scriptures?

Broadly speaking, the Wisdom of the Hebrews covers the whole domain of what we should call Science and Philosophy. It is the consistent effort of the human mind to know, to understand, and to explain all that exists. It is, to use the modern phrase, the search for truth. The "wise men" were not, like Moses and the Prophets, inspired legislators and heralds of God's immediate messages to mankind; but rather, like the wise men among the earlier Greeks, Thales, Solon, Anaximenes, or like the Sophists among the later Greeks, Socrates and his successors, they brought all their faculties to bear in observing the facts of the world and of life, and in seeking to interpret them, and then in the public streets or in appointed schools endeavoured to communicate their knowledge to the young. Nothing was too high for their inquiry: "*That which is* is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out?"[2] yet they tried to discover and to explain *that which is*. Nothing was too lowly for their attention; wisdom "reaches from one end to another mightily, and sweetly orders all things." [3] Their purpose finds expression in the words of Ecclesiastes, "I turned about, and my heart was set to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom and the reason of things." [4]

But by Wisdom is meant not merely the search, but also the discovery; not merely a desire to know, but also a certain body of conceptions ascertained and sufficiently

formulated. To the Hebrew mind it would have seemed meaningless to assert that Agnosticism was wisdom. It was saved from this paradoxical conclusion by its firmly rooted faith in God. Mystery might hang over the details, but one thing was plain: the whole universe was an intelligent plan of God; the mind might be baffled in understanding His ways, but that all existence is of His choosing and His ordering was taken as the axiom with which all thought must start. Thus there is a unity in the Hebrew Wisdom; the unity is found in the thought of the Creator; all the facts of the physical world, all the problems of human life, are referred to His mind; objective Wisdom is God's Being, which includes in its circle everything; and subjective wisdom, wisdom in the human mind, consists in becoming acquainted with His Being and all that is contained in it, and meanwhile in constantly admitting that He *is*, and yielding to Him the rightful place in our thought.

But while Wisdom embraces in her wide survey all things in heaven and in earth, there is one part of the vast field which makes a special demand upon human interest. The proper study of mankind is man. Very naturally the earliest subject to occupy human thought was human life, human conduct, human society. Or, to say the same thing in the language of this book, while Wisdom was occupied with the whole creation, she specially rejoiced in the habitable earth, and her delight was with the sons of men.

Theoretically embracing all subjects of human knowledge and reflection, the Wisdom of the Hebrew literature practically touches but little on what we should now call Science, and even where attention was turned to the facts

and laws of the material world, it was mainly in order to borrow similitudes or illustrations for moral and religious purposes. King Solomon "spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes." [5] But the Proverbs which have actually come down to us under his name refer almost exclusively to principles of conduct or observation of life, and seldom remind us of the earth, the sea, and the sky, except as the dwelling-place of men, the house covered with paintings for his delight or filled with imagery for his instruction.

But there is a further distinction to be drawn, and in attempting to make it plain we may determine the place of the Proverbs in the general scheme of the inspired writings. Human life is a sufficiently large theme; it includes not only social and political questions, but the searchings and speculations of philosophy, the truths and revelations of religion. From one point of view, therefore, wisdom may be said to embrace the Law and the Prophets, and in a beautiful passage of Ecclesiasticus [6] the whole covenant of Jehovah with Israel is treated as an emanation of wisdom from the mouth of the Most High. Wisdom was the inspiration of those who shaped the law and built the Holy House, of those who ministered in the courts of the Temple, and of those who were moved by the Holy One to chide the faults of the people, to call them to repentance, to denounce the doom of their sin, and proclaim the glad promise of deliverance. Again, from this large point of view Wisdom could be regarded as the Divine Philosophy, the

system of thought and the body of beliefs which would furnish the explanation of life, and would root all the decisions of ethics in eternal principles of truth. And this function of Wisdom is presented with singular beauty and power in the eighth chapter of our book, where, as we shall see, the mouth of Wisdom shows that her concern with men is derived from her relation with the Creator and from her comprehension of His great architectural design in the construction of the world.

Now, the wisdom which finds expression in the bulk of the Proverbs must be clearly distinguished from wisdom in this exalted sense. It is not the wisdom of the Law and the Prophets; it moves in a much lower plane. It is not the wisdom of chap. viii., a philosophy which harmonizes human life with the laws of nature by constantly connecting both with God.

The wisdom of the Proverbs differs from the wisdom of the Prophets in this, that it is derived not directly, but mediately from God. No special mind is directed to shape these sayings; they grow up in the common mind of the people, and they derive their inspiration from those general qualities which made the whole nation in the midst of which they had their birth an inspired nation, and gave to all the literature of the nation a peculiar and inimitable tone. The wisdom of the Proverbs differs, too, from the wisdom of these introductory chapters in much the same way; it is a difference which might be expressed by a familiar use of words; it is a distinction between Philosophy and Proverbial Philosophy, a distinction, let us say, between Divine Philosophy and Proverbial Philosophy.

The Proverbs are often shrewd, often edifying, sometimes almost evangelical in their sharp ethical insight; but we shall constantly be reminded that they do not come with the overbearing authority of the prophetic "Thus saith the Lord." And still more shall we be reminded how far they lag behind the standard of life and the principles of conduct which are presented to us in Christ Jesus.

What has just been said seems to be a necessary preliminary to the study of the Proverbs, and it is only by bearing it in mind that we shall be able to appreciate the difference in tone between the nine introductory chapters and the main body of the book; nor should we venture, perhaps, apart from the consideration which has been urged to exercise our critical sense in the study of particular sayings, and to insist at all points on bringing the teaching of the wise men of old to the standard and test of Him who is Himself made unto us Wisdom.

But now to turn to our text. We must think of wisdom in the largest possible sense, as including not only ethics, but philosophy, and not only philosophy, but religion; yes, and as embracing in her vast survey the whole field of natural science, when it is said that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*; we must think of knowledge in its fullest and most liberal extent when we read that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*.

In this pregnant truth we may distinguish three ideas: *first*, fear, or, as we should probably say, reverence, is the pre-requisite of all scientific, philosophical, or religious truth; *second*, no real knowledge or wisdom can be attained which does not start with the recognition of God; and then, *thirdly*,

the expression is not only "the fear of God," which might refer only to the Being that is presupposed in any intelligent explanation of phenomena, but the "fear of the Lord," *i.e.* of Jahveh, the self-existent One, who has revealed Himself in a special way to men as "I AM WHAT I AM;" and it is therefore hinted that no satisfactory philosophy of human life and history can be constructed which does not build upon the fact of revelation.

We may proceed to dwell upon these three thoughts in order.

1. Most religious people are willing to admit that "the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death."[\[7\]](#) But what is not always observed is that the same attitude is necessary in the intellectual sphere. And yet the truth may be illustrated in a quarter which to some of us may be surprising. It is a notable fact that Modern Science had its origin in two deeply religious minds. Bacon and Descartes were both stirred to their investigation of physical facts by their belief in the Divine Being who was behind them. To mention only our great English thinker, Bacon's *Novum Organum* is the most reverent of works, and no one ever realized more keenly than he that, as Coleridge used to say, "there is no chance of truth at the goal where there is not a childlike humility at the starting-point."

It is sometimes said that this note of reverence is wanting in the great scientific investigators of our day. So far as this is true, it is probable that their conclusions will be vitiated, and we are often impressed by the feeling that the unmannerly self-assertion and overweening self-confidence of many scientific writers augur ill for the truth of their

assertions. But, on the other hand, it must be remembered that the greatest men of science in our own, as in all other ages, are distinguished by a singular simplicity, and by a reverence which communicates itself to their readers. What could be more reverent than Darwin's way of studying the coral-insect or the earth-worm? He bestowed on these humble creatures of the ocean and of the earth the most patient and loving observation. And his success in understanding and explaining them was in proportion to the respect which he showed to them. The coral-diver has no reverence for the insect; he is bent only on gain, and he consequently can tell us nothing of the coral reef and its growth. The gardener has no reverence for the worm; he cuts it ruthlessly with his spade, and flings it carelessly aside; accordingly he is not able to tell us of its lowly ministries and of the part it plays in the fertilization of the soil. It was Darwin's reverence which proved to be the beginning of knowledge in these departments of investigation; and if it was only the reverence of the naturalist, the truth is illustrated all the better, for his knowledge of the unseen and the eternal dwindled away, just as his perception of beauty in literature and art declined, in proportion as he suffered his spirit of reverence towards these things to die.

The gates of Knowledge and Wisdom are closed, and they are opened only to the knock of Reverence. Without reverence, it is true, men may gain what is called worldly knowledge and worldly wisdom; but these are far removed from truth, and experience often shows us how profoundly ignorant and how incurably blind pushing and successful

people are, whose knowledge is all turned to delusion, and whose wisdom shifts round into folly, precisely because the great pre-requisite was wanting. The seeker after real knowledge will have little about him which suggests worldly success. He is modest, self-forgetful, possibly shy; he is absorbed in a disinterested pursuit, for he has seen afar the high, white star of Truth; at it he gazes, to it he aspires. Things which only affect him personally make but little impression on him; things which affect the truth move, agitate, excite him. A bright spirit is on ahead, beckoning to him. The colour mounts to his cheek, the nerves thrill, and his soul is filled with rapture, when the form seems to grow clearer and a step is gained in the pursuit. When a discovery is made he almost forgets that he is the discoverer; he will even allow the credit of it to pass over to another, for he would rather rejoice in the truth itself than allow his joy to be tinged with a personal consideration.

Yes, this modest, self-forgetful, reverent mien is the first condition of winning Truth, who must be approached on bended knee, and recognized with a humble and a prostrate heart. There is no gainsaying the fact that this fear, this reverence, is the beginning of wisdom.

2. We pass now to an assertion bolder than the last, that *there can be no true knowledge or wisdom which does not start from the recognition of God*. This is one of those contentions, not uncommon in the Sacred Writings, which appear at first sight to be arbitrary dogmas, but prove on closer inquiry to be the authoritative statements of reasoned truth. We are face to face, in our day, with an avowedly atheistic philosophy. According to the Scriptures,



an atheistic philosophy is not a philosophy at all, but only a folly: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." We have thinkers among us who deem it their great mission to get rid of the very idea of God, as one which stands in the way of spiritual, social, and political progress. According to the Scriptures, to remove the idea of God is to destroy the key of knowledge and to make any consistent scheme of thought impossible. Here certainly is a clear and sharp issue.

Now, if this universe of which we form a part is a thought of the Divine mind, a work of the Divine hand, a scene of Divine operations, in which God is realizing, by slow degrees, a vast spiritual purpose, it is self-evident that no attempt to understand the universe can be successful which leaves this, its fundamental idea, out of account; as well might one attempt to understand a picture while refusing to recognize that the artist had any purpose to express in painting it, or indeed that there was any artist at all. So much every one will admit.

But if the universe is not the work of a Divine mind, or the effect of a Divine will; if it is merely the working of a blind, irrational Force, which realizes no end, because it has no end to realize; if we, the feeble outcome of a long, unthinking evolution, are the first creatures that ever *thought*, and the only creatures who now *think*, in all the universe of Being; it follows that of a universe so irrational there can be no true knowledge for rational beings, and of a scheme of things so unwise there can be no philosophy or wisdom. No person who reflects can fail to recognize this, and this is the truth which is asserted in the text. It is not

necessary to maintain that without admitting God we cannot have knowledge of a certain number of empirical facts; but that does not constitute a philosophy or a wisdom. It is necessary to maintain that without admitting God we cannot have any explanation of our knowledge, or any verification of it; without admitting God our knowledge can never come to any roundness or completeness such as might justify our calling it by the name of Wisdom.

Or to put the matter in a slightly different way: a thinking mind can only conceive the universe as the product of thought; if the universe is not the product of thought it can never be intelligible to a thinking mind, and can therefore never be in a true sense the object of knowledge; to deny that the universe is the product of thought is to deny the possibility of wisdom.

We find, then, that it is not a dogma, but a truth of reason, that knowledge must start with the recognition of God.

3. But now we come to an assertion which is the boldest of all, and for the present we shall have to be content to leave behind many who have readily followed us so far. That we are bound to recognize "the Lord," that is the God of Revelation, and bow down in reverence before Him, as the first condition of true wisdom, is just the truth which multitudes of men who claim to be Theists are now strenuously denying. Must we be content to leave the assertion merely as a dogma enunciated on the authority of Scripture?

Surely they, at any rate, who have made the beginning of wisdom in the fear of the Lord should be able to show that

the possession which they have gained is actually wisdom, and does not rest upon an irrational dogma, incapable of proof.

We have already recognized at the outset that the Wisdom of this book is not merely an intellectual account of the reason of things, but also more specifically an explanation of the moral and spiritual life. It may be granted that so far as the Intellect alone claims satisfaction it is enough to posit the bare idea of God as the condition of all rational existence. But when men come to recognize themselves as Spiritual Beings, with conceptions of right and wrong, with strong affections, with soaring aspirations, with ideas which lay hold of Eternity, they find themselves quite incapable of being satisfied with the bare idea of God; the soul within them pants and thirsts for a *living* God. An intellectual love of God might satisfy purely intellectual creatures; but to meet the needs of man as he is, God must be a God that manifests His own personality, and does not leave Himself without a witness to His rational creature. A wisdom, then, that is to truly appraise and rightly guide the life of man must start with the recognition of a God whose peculiar designation is the Self-existent One, and who makes Himself known to man by that name; that is, it must start with the "fear of *the Lord*."[\[8\]](#)

How cogent this necessity is appears directly the alternative is stated. If Reason assures us of a God that made us, a First Cause of our existence and of our being what we are; if Reason also compels us to refer to Him our moral nature, our desire of holiness, and our capacity of love, what could be a greater tax on faith, and even a

greater strain on the reason, than to declare that, notwithstanding, God has not revealed Himself as the Lord of our life and the God of our salvation, as the authority of righteousness or the object of our love? When the question is stated in this way it appears that apart from a veritable and trustworthy revelation there can be no wisdom which is capable of really dealing with human life, as the life of spiritual and moral creatures; for a God who does not reveal Himself would be devoid of the highest qualities of the human spirit, and the belief in a God who is inferior to man, a Creator who is less than the creature, could furnish no foundation for an intelligible system of thought.

Our text now stands before us, not as the unsupported deliverance of dogma, but as a condensed utterance of the human reason. We see that starting from the conception of Wisdom as the sum of that which is, and the sufficient explanation of all things, as including therefore not only the laws of nature, but also the laws of human life, both spiritual and moral, we can make no step towards the acquisition of wisdom without a sincere and absolute reverence, a recognition of God as the Author of the universe which we seek to understand, and as the Personal Being, the Self-existent One, who reveals Himself under that significant name "I AM," and declares His will to our waiting hearts. "To whom hath the root of Wisdom been revealed? or who hath known her wise counsels? There is one wise, and greatly to be feared, the Lord sitting upon His throne."[\[9\]](#)

In this way is struck the key-note of the Jewish "Wisdom." It is profoundly true; it is stimulating and helpful. But it may not be out of place to remind ourselves even thus early that

the idea on which we have been dwelling comes short of the higher truth which has been given us in Christ. It hardly entered into the mind of a Hebrew thinker to conceive that "fear of the Lord" might pass into full, whole-hearted, and perfect love. And yet it may be shown that this was the change effected when Christ was of God "made unto us Wisdom;" it is not that the "fear," or reverence, becomes less, but it is that the fear is swallowed up in the larger and more gracious sentiment. For us who have received Christ as our Wisdom, it has become almost a truism that we must love in order to know. We recognize that the causes of things remain hidden from us until our hearts have been kindled into an ardent love towards the First Cause, God Himself: we find that even our processes of reasoning are faulty until they are touched with the Divine tenderness, and rendered sympathetic by the infusion of a loftier passion. And it is quite in accordance with this fuller truth that both science and philosophy have made genuine progress only in Christian lands and under Christian influences. Where the touch of Christ's hand has been most decisively felt, in Germany, in England, in America, and where consequently Wisdom has attained a nobler, a richer, a more tender significance, there, under fostering powers, which are not the less real because they are not always acknowledged, the great discoveries have been made, the great systems of thought have been framed, and the great counsels of conduct have gradually assumed substance and authority. And from a wide observation of facts we are able to say, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge;" yes, but the Wisdom of God has led us on from

fear to love, and in the Love of the Lord is found the fulfilment of that which trembled into birth through fear.

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## **II.**

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# **WISDOM AS THE GUIDE OF CONDUCT.**

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