

The mind of a sage appreciates proverbs. Sirach 3: 28

Proverbs were the principal method by which the youth of biblical times were taught how to live ethically and successfully. Written educational materials were hard to come by in the days before the printing press and so pupils were required to memorize brief and often rhymed maxims recited by their instructors – and thereby build up a handy store of wisdom by which they might navigate their way through the challenges of life. The biblical *Book of Sirach* as well as the *Book of Proverbs* offer many such pithy sayings. Scholars tell us many go back to the days of King Solomon (970-930 BC). Here's a sample:

- The simpleton believes everything but the shrewd man measures his steps.*
- Pleasing words are a honeycomb, sweet to the taste and healthful to the body.*
- Like a festered tooth is dependence on a faithless man in time of trouble.*
- Like a glazed finish on earthenware are smooth lips with a wicked heart.*
- Like a man who seizes a dog by the ears is he who meddles in another's quarrels.*

Notice how this proverbial method of teaching wastes no time in abstract speculation. Rather, it offers the student practical insights drawn from generations of human experience. It deals with the “how” of living rather than theological questions like whether God exists – simply because it takes God for granted, convinced that “Only a fool will say there is no God”.

Of course anyone who has heard of *Poor Richard's Almanac* and Benjamin Franklin knows that proverbial wisdom influenced even the generations that founded our American republic – offering us ever valid (and usually Calvinist) advice such as:

- Diligence is the mother of good luck.*
- Industry pays debts while despair increases them.*
- Have you something to do tomorrow? Do it today.*
- Keep thy shop and thy shop will keep thee.*
- Words may show a man's wit but actions his meaning.*
- He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.*
- The Poor have little, Beggars none; The Rich too much, Enough not one.*

Given the fact that only males were formally educated in biblical times, you will occasionally find proverbs that take a swat at the feminine, for example: *It is better to dwell in a corner of the rooftop than in a roomy house with a quarrelsome woman.* But modern women have their retaliatory champion in Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) whose stiletto thrusts still evoke a laugh and an “ouch” regarding modern romance and maleness.

For example: *By the time you swear you're his, / Shivering and sighing, / And he vows his passion is / Infinite, undying - / Lady, make a note of this: / One of you is lying. And: Oh, seek, my love, your newer way; / I'll not be left in sorrow. / So long as I have yesterday, / Go take your damned tomorrow!*