

**THE MODERN
READER'S BIBLE. THE
PROVERBS**

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The Modern Reader's Bible. The Proverbs by Richard G. Moulton

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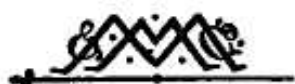
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PROVERBS**

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The Modern Reader's Bible

Wisdom Series

The Proverbs



Bible Proverbs. - Eng. - R. G. M. (1896)

THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE

**A SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED
IN MODERN LITERARY FORM**

THE PROVERBS

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTION

IN the wide range of books described by the collective title 'The Bible' a department that stands out separate from all the rest is Wisdom Literature. Side by side with prophets defending the theocracy and singers taking their inspiration from Temple service, with historians compiling annals of kings and scribes expounding the law, there was a class of Wise Men, who had habits of thought and forms of literature peculiar to themselves. Prophecy has much in common with the lyric psalms; prophecy again overlaps with history, and the line between historic and epic narrative is difficult to draw. But every reader feels how the proverbs of practical life differ from prophetic denunciations of sin, and how widely apart are the lyrics of worship and lyric celebrations of wisdom. Yet this is a distinctness in which there is no clashing: the wise have reached the same conclusions as the prophets and psalmists, only they have reached them by a different route. It is true that the name of Israel is found in only one of the books of wisdom, and only two give any recognition to

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the chosen people; there is not a hint in these books of Messianic hopes, and in only one place is there a reference to Temple service; there is little said even of a personal God. The wise have, not inappropriately, been called humanists; but it would be a great mistake to describe their works as secular. The whole is pervaded by a spirit of devoutness; and if there is little discussion of God it is plainly because the idea of God is so entirely taken for granted.

The principle underlying Wisdom literature and giving it its unity may be described by the single word Observation. The prophet rests his message on an immediate Divine revelation: the wise men only claim to have observed life. Modern Science is not more faithful to its root idea of examining details and grouping results than is the wisdom of the Bible to its principle of analytic observation. This same idea of observation gives us a key for determining the relation of the books of wisdom to one another. The earlier works, *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiasticus*, give us only Isolated Observations of life; these are reflected in brief proverbs, or in literary forms but little removed from proverbs, and each is entirely distinct and complete in itself. The further notion of the connectedness of all things is not ignored in these earlier books, but is looked upon as no subject for reflective analysis; the wise men approach the universe as a whole with feelings only of adoration, and the philosopher becomes a poet singing of

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this whole as 'Wisdom.' *Ecclesiastes* marks the point where, for the first time, reflective analysis has been turned upon the sum of things: the sudden responsibility becomes too great, and philosophy breaks down in despair. The word 'wisdom' now becomes confined for the most part to lesser achievements, or to the observing faculty; the universal is no longer a unity that can be adored, but a broken 'All things,' the attempt to understand which is 'vanity.' There is an advance from this position in the latest of the books of wisdom, the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*. Here philosophy recovers its tone of rapture; the recovery is made, not by returning to the restricted area of observation, but by still further enlarging it. The Preacher had considered only this life; his successor recognizes a life beyond the grave, and in immortality finds a solution of present mysteries. Whereas the Preacher had confined himself to the present, the new wisdom adds the past of history, and presents Wisdom as Providence. And a single passage — where however the topic is only raised, and not followed into detail — shows that this close of Wisdom literature extends its observation even from human life to external nature. Thus these four — *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiasticus*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Wisdom of Solomon* — make a distinct progression of thought. And somewhere in this line of thought — it is needless to discuss exactly where — comes the remaining work of Wisdom literature, the *Book of Job*. Here again it is the universe as a whole which is