



Proverbs Glossary

This glossary provides a simple (and at times simplistic) explanation of key terms as used in Proverbs, designed to assist in reading Proverbs as the original audience would have heard the words of the original authors.

A brief reminder that context is the most determinative factor in the “meaning” of a word, because words have usage more than meaning.

A Word About Words

While words can be given lexical (dictionary) definitions or meaning, in reality **words do not have meaning, they have usage.**

Or stated positively, **the meaning of words comes from usage.**

Therefore, the meaning of words is conventional (formed by common agreement) and contextual, not intrinsic.

A Word in Use...

- has only one meaning unless something in the text indicates a more fluid use.
- has its meaning determined by its context.
 - is influenced by other words in the context
 - is influenced by the grammar—how it is being used

Concepts

Co-referential terms

Basic definition—Co-referential terms are words which help provide contextual meaning to key words.

A word, that in context, based on usage, is influenced by other specific words, thereby providing a richer, fuller meaning.

Key example in Proverbs—“Wisdom” (see below)

Syntagma or collocation

Basic definition—Collocation or syntagma are phrases that must be understood as a phrase, not just as individual words.

A phrase may mean more than the sum of the individual words. A phrase may take on a specific role, and therefore, a particular meaning in a context.

- a series of linguistic elements forming a distinctive, syntactic unit
- meaning that the terms work together, and therefore, must be defined together

Key example in Proverbs—“The fear of the Lord”

Lord

“LORD” in all caps in most English translations.

Yahweh (יהוה' YHWH) 6,828 occurrences in Old Testament
YHWH = “I Am”

Exodus 3:14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” (ESV)

God is, and reveals Himself actively, especially to Israel as—Powerfully present to fulfill His Word.

—Covenant Keeper—Creator of Israel (Exodus 3:16; 6:2-4)

Not just a “name”—but identity, characteristic
Personal (“God of...” Exodus 3:16) **Present Faithful**

Key passages Exodus 3:13-22; **6:2-9**

Contextual emphasis—Covenant name, related to the Law (Exodus 3)

“To be” meant more than simply to exist to the Hebrews, it meant “to be active, to express oneself as an active being, the God who acts.” “I am that I am” means that “God will reveal Himself in His actions through history.”

Fear of the Lord

The fear of the Lord is a syntagma or collocation (a series of linguistic elements forming a distinctive syntactic unit). Meaning that, as a phrase, the terms work together, and therefore, must be defined together.

When it comes to “the fear of the Lord,” just defining “fear” and/or “Lord” is not enough to understand the collocated phrase, “the fear of the Lord.” Studying the two terms in isolation will not provide an explanation or definition of “the fear of the Lord” that will do justice to how the phrase is used in context—particularly in Proverbs, where it is the hermeneutical key to the book.

Key uses in Proverbs

Proverbs 1:7 The **fear of the LORD** is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (ESV)

Proverbs 9:10 The **fear of the LORD** is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (ESV)

Proverbs 15:33 The **fear of the LORD** is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor. (ESV)

Proverbs 2:1–5

① The **fear of the Lord** leads to wisdom and insight

Proverbs 3:7; 8:13; 16:6

② The **fear of the Lord** causes, provides, or motivates one to avoid evil, pride, and arrogance

Proverbs 14:26;15:33

③**The fear of the Lord** provides confidence

④**The fear of the Lord** is wise instruction, and in some way, leads to humility, which people will honor

Fear of the Lord—as used in Proverbs specifically

While the fear of the Lord, in books like Deuteronomy, focuses on obedience to the revealed Word of God, in Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is both the goal and motivation.

In Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is the starting point for gaining wisdom, and at the same time, the means of using wisdom well.

The reason why individuals are to gain wisdom, insight, and knowledge, is because they enable the fear of the Lord.

The means of using wisdom well is the fear of the Lord.

It is both a cautious fear that slows one's approach, and a wonder that draws one close.

- A submission which worships (reverence)
- It includes moral conduct toward holiness—obedience
- It includes an emotional response—fear, love
- It motivates and results in trust—loyalty

It is both rational—an understanding of who God is

And nonrational—a feeling that leads to a response

Shrinking back in fear in light of who He is

Tempered by the urge to draw near to Him in light of who He is

Not fear that paralyzes

Nor polite respect

It causes one to run from sin and toward God.

Hatred of evil and love for good

General explanation: Fear of God

The fear of the Lord is a realization that God is in control, and we are not.

The fear of the Lord is a realization of who God is—that He is in control, and we are not—that leads to reverential submission and loyalty, characterized by worship and obedience.

A trusting submission that consumes one's whole being and leads to wise thinking and concrete acting to honor the Lord and for the benefit of others.

Simple definition

The fear of the Lord is a willing surrender to the Lord's control, understanding who God is (the Sovereign) and the benefits of surrender and the consequences of seeking our own way.

Fear of the Lord is a clear understanding of the holy transcendence of God with a sobering understanding of the consequences of not keeping His righteous standards.

The fear of God is what we feel when we recognize and acknowledge that God is sovereign—all powerful, holy, just, majestic, infinite...

A recognition that God is God and I am not—therefore I must submit/surrender to His control and commands. Fleeing sin and pursuing His righteousness in full obedience lest I turn toward sin and defame the Lord.

Reverence out of the reality of who He is—the all-powerful, creator, ruler, holy just judge, who is supreme and unique, distinct, and separate from all else, to whom all worship is due and who will do what is right for His own glory.

Fear of the Lord—submission (worship), includes moral conduct (holiness) and is evident by emotional reality (fear, love, trust)

- a realization of who God is—that He is in control, and we are not

- that leads to reverential submission and loyalty, characterized by worship and obedience

—**A trusting submission (loyal, acknowledged surrender) that consumes one's whole being and leads to wise thinking and concrete acting to honor the Lord and for the benefit of others.**

It is the goal and motivation in Proverbs—to gain wisdom

- It leads to wisdom and insight—it is wise instruction

- It provides confidence—leads to trust, yielding to God's will

- It motivates one to avoid evil, pride, and arrogance—leads to humility

Wisdom leads to the fear of the Lord—that is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom

Proverbs teach wisdom, which must be processed, not just memorized.

Observation

Key uses in Proverbs

Wisdom and the fear of the LORD

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (ESV)

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What is wisdom?

Lexical definition

The Hebrew words for “wisdom”—*hokma*, and “wise”—*hakam*, are simply words which mean “skill” or “expertise” and which, without modification, are neutral terms which can be positive or negative.

Therefore, in Proverbs, our understanding and definition start with the term “skill” but must see the modifiers which inform what kind of skill is described and desired.

Co-referential terms

Knowledge

There is no skill, “wisdom,” without knowledge

But “knowledge” in Proverbs is more than the accumulation of information or facts.

Hebrew does not separate the object known from knowledge experienced—therefore, it is better to think of “knowledge” as experiential knowledge, not just cognitive knowledge (know about).

Righteous

The wise are righteous, and the righteous are wise

In Proverbs, righteousness is more than just generic “doing right.” It is associated with doing right by, or for, others in keeping with God’s standard.

It is a social term.

Taking these first two co-referential terms with wisdom—knowledge and righteousness—establishes the core context for our understanding of “wisdom” in Proverbs.

Wisdom includes knowledge (experiential knowledge) and righteousness (right relating to God and others).

Discipline or Correction

This concept, which can be verbal or physical, implies the seriousness of the pursuit of wisdom.

Success

Not all would add this as a co-referential term—but this word gives an outcome to “wisdom.”

Developing a definition for “wisdom” in Proverbs

Working definition

Skill in godly living — with God and others

An (learned) ability to cope with life in a God-honoring way.

- Wisdom is a moral quality enabling moral evaluation and action.
 - Discernment
- Wisdom is a social term—a relational term
 - Skill in living well and rightly with others
- The application of knowledge and experience toward living for God and others.
 - Informed righteous behavior
 - Ethics
- Applying God’s truth to everyday living. Spiritual know-how.
 - Walking...
 - Concrete

Wisdom is skill in godly living so as to approach life in a God-honoring way.

Wisdom is

Understanding and living in agreement with the way God designed for humanity to live.

A way that is part of His creative world and revealed in His Word.

The world is built in a way that if you live wisely as God intended, there are general results; if you do not live wisely, there are general consequences and problems.

Implication: Wisdom—knowledge, righteousness, the fear of the Lord

Since wisdom is based on knowledge (particularly knowledge of the Lord, and in connection to the character of the Lord), and since wisdom is evidence of righteousness or helps to produce righteousness, true wisdom requires revelation from God.

Wisdom, in the context of Proverbs, is a worldview issue—it impacts all of life, how one is to view the world.

Righteousness

In the New Testament, many usages of “righteousness” are related to a position declared by God (justified). And there are uses like this in the Old Testament.

In Proverbs, righteousness is more than just generic “doing right.” It is associated with doing right by, or for, others in keeping with God’s standard.

In Proverbs, the wise are righteous and the righteous are wise. The terms are intertwined. Righteousness is not merely about behavior, but a way of being.

The righteous are righteous not just because of how they act, but their heart motivation.

It is a moral social virtue—doing right by, or for, others in keeping with God’s standard.

Knowledge

Not just “information” or “facts”—but experiential.

Hebrew does not separate the object known from knowledge experienced—therefore, it is better to think of “knowledge” as experiential knowledge, not just cognitive knowledge (know about).

In a number of passages in Proverbs, “to know” or “knowledge” can be translated “to learn” and in many, the “knowing” is relational.

Example:

Proverbs 1:2 To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, (ESV)

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (ESV)

From our cultural context, we are tempted to hear “information” or “facts accumulated” when we read the words “know” or “knowledge.” But the original audience would have heard—learn, internalize, or recognize, with an ethical expectation of implementation of wisdom.

Instruction, Discipline, Correction

Shaping the character of an individual

This concept, which can be verbal or physical, implies the seriousness of the pursuit of wisdom.

mûsār Instruction, discipline

leqāḥ Instruction, learning

tôrâ Instruction, teaching

Heart

Heart is a key term in Proverbs, occurring 46x. And it is a term which has different connotations in Hebrew than it does in modern English. Therefore, we must be careful not to supply our understanding.

An overly simplistic explanation

How we use “mind” is one key way that Hebrews used “heart.”

Not primarily the center of emotion, but the central control system.

It is what drives a person—their thought process which includes affections and emotions.

Example

Deuteronomy 6:5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (ESV)

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what good and acceptable and perfect. (ESV)

Can include

One’s inner self (including feelings and affection), whole person, disposition (inclination, motivating direction), determination (courage to act), will and decision-making (intention), reasoning (thoughts, considerations, attention), conscience

Thoughts, feelings, decision-making

Sheol

Occurs 9x in Proverbs—term for the abode of the dead

—describes the destiny of all humanity (23:14; 27:20; 30:16), including the fools or wicked (5:5; 7:27; 9:18), and a temporary place for the wise or righteous (1:12); see Psalm 49:9, 15.

Proverbs 1:12 like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; (ESV)

With the preposition, points to a grave below ground, the earth.

—“the grave,” the place of the departed.

Metaphor being completely overwhelmed.

שְׁאוֹל (šē’ôl), Sheol, netherworld

Collocated term with Abaddon, the pit, death

Fool

fools {66x}

(*kěšîl* 49x 1:22; also *ěwîl* 19x 1:7)

—beyond being gullible, they are fixed in their own opinion—which is in contrast to moral teaching—they are morally deficient, leading to irrational evil behavior.

The two words are related and could serve as synonyms.

Simple or gullible

Usually, a youth who is still malleable, who needs to make a choice—either toward wisdom and the fear of the Lord, or toward folly and death.

They are not described as wicked, but the simple/gullible are in moral and religious danger.

Proverbs 1:22 “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? (ESV)

Three kinds of people who reject wisdom 1:22

Simple: Naïve or gullible (the Hebrew word means “open”). The simple person is open to deceit and is easily misled.

simple ones (14x)—gullible

1:4 moral category, unlearned in wisdom, morally naïve, no common sense—here passionate to remain gullible

Mocker: Scoffer, not just foolish but proud, open contempt toward wisdom and instruction.

scoffers (14x)—mocker (further hardening)—antithesis of the wise, prideful, antagonist

Fool

kesil Dull and obstinate, stubbornly clinging to foolishness

weil Moral indecency

nabal completely closed to reason

Mocker or scoffer and the proud

In Proverbs, there is a spectrum of “fools,” with the “mocker” being the antithesis of the wise and the hardened expression of the fool.

But the worst of the fools is not just the mocker, but the proud and haughty—the root cause of the problem of the mocker—who maliciously seeks to influence others. Therefore, they are the “worst” fool. The proud scoffer is disruptive to the community.

Wicked

This “character” or characteristic could be included as a progression from simple, to fool, to mocker, to wicked.

But it is significant enough to make it its own section.

Proverbs 4:14–19 Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. 15 Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. 16 For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. 17 For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. 18 But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. 19 The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble. (ESV)

The wicked are the antithesis of the righteous.

Related terms

Evil, treacherous, iniquity