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Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice, by Robert L. Alden. Baker, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983, no price given. Reviewed by John M. Zinkand, Professor of Greek and Theology.

This 222 page book is written with a verse seldom found in commentaries, especially those in O.T. books. After a short introduction to Proverbs, Alden, Professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary, proceeds to a verse-by-verse handling of the text. The author has not chosen to include a translation of the verse being commented on. This necessitates using a Bible along with the book—something which could be considered a drawback. However, this frees the commentary from the constraints of a particular translation and helps to keep the commentary down to a manageable size.

Alden does a fine job of transferring the nuances of Hebrew into English. In Proverbs 9:18:

Lady Folly's house is not a home but a mausoleum. If you enter it you will not leave it alive. Choosing the way of folly is a one-way street away from good things wisdom might have given you. Why become a ghost (the literal meaning of the Hebrew) when you can have life?

The author could have dealt more fully with the problem of the similarity between Proverbs and collections of proverbs found in other, especially ancient Near-Eastern, culture. Yet for the lay person—the audience Alden is writing for—he indicates that the solution is to be found

Somewhere between these two extremes: (1) all of the proverbs are unique to Israel, or (2) everything was copied from somewhere else. Wisdom cannot be copyrighted, so it is quite certain that different cultures can produce similar proverbs even though there is no contact between them. The living out of life

teaches lessons which are transculturally true whether about thrift, industry, honesty or patience.

Introduction, p. 11

Alden uses a delightful, whimsical style and doesn't hesitate to use contractions. This helps the book come alive. Commenting on Proverbs 21:17, he states that this text

is a warning against people with "champagne taste on a beer budget." Luxuries are for the already rich, not for those who just act like they are. Wealth, like poverty, has a way of compounding itself. "The rich get richer while the poor get poorer" is a modern equivalent to this proverb; even if poor people try to emulate the rich they'll only succeed in getting poorer.

Alden reminds the reader that Proverbs is not meant just for one particular stratum of society; all who are needy are urged to partake of its rich fare (p. 78). Putting it differently, Proverbs is for anyone wise enough to listen (p. 11).

Some *Pro Rege* readers might fault his statement that "Proverbs addresses, by and large, 'non-spiritual' dimensions of life" (p. 9). Or his statement, a few lines later, that "in some respects [Proverbs], along with Ecclesiastes, is the most 'secular' book of the canon because it is a guide to social and economic questions rather than theological ones."

These matters aside, Alden's book will help most of us appropriate the timeless advice encapsulated in biblical Proverbs.