

Origen's Commentary on Proverbs¹

1. *The Proverbs of Solomon the son of David.*² The Savior is also called the Son of David. Our peaceful Savior, born from the seed of David according to the flesh, *ruled in Israel.*³ Therefore it is also written to fulfill the plan for mankind: *"This is the King of the Jews."*⁴ They are Jews (that is Israel) whom the peaceful Savior rules, as if clear-seeing,⁵ if they are the true Israel. *Not all who are of the seed of Abraham are also his children,*⁶ since *they do not do the works of Abraham.*⁷

2. Concerning the phrase *"know wisdom and instruction."*⁸ Wisdom is the knowledge and comprehension of divine and human subjects. According to some *"Wisdom is the breath of the power of God, and the pure outflowing of the glory of the Almighty. Nothing dark can break into it, because it is the effulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the acts of God, the image of His love."*⁹ Whoever knows the works of wisdom knows these things, namely *"the effulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of God's energy, and the image of His love."* These are nothing other than knowing the Son of God's love, and the Wisdom who is Christ. For Christ is God's power and God's Wisdom.¹⁰ This is not from flesh and blood, but is revealed by the Heavenly Father.¹¹ Whoever has knowledge of the divine writings (namely the Law and the Prophets, the Evangelists and the Apostles) knows

¹ This translation was made by Travis Fernald as Appendix A of his paper "Origen's view of human wisdom in his *Commentary on Proverbs*", submitted to the faculty of Pittsburgh theological seminary as part of his MA (2015). He has kindly given permission for the translation portion of his paper to appear online. Roger Pearse created this PDF and wrote this note; the remainder is by Mr Fernald. The text used was that printed by J.-P. Migne in the *Patrologia Graeca* 13, cols.17-34.

² Prov 1:1a

³ Prov 1:1b

⁴ Luke 23:28

⁵ The exact meaning of this phrase is unclear.

⁶ Rom 9:7, also Gal 3:29

⁷ John 8:38

⁸ Prov 1:2

⁹ Wisdom 7:25-26 Origen cites this verse in *De Principiis*

¹⁰ 1 Cor 1:24

¹¹ Matt 16:17

Wisdom. He places his foundation upon the Rock, that is to say, upon the faith of Christ, so that he can withstand the rain, the wind and the spirits¹², manifestly all the trials which emerge from thence. Consider that Luke says that Jesus praised the unjust servant, who, despite his abuse, received praise for his quick action and because of his sharp mind. This seems to be made clear by this verse: *“The serpent was the wisest of all the wild animals,”*¹³ according to which it is also said *“Be as wise as serpents,”*¹⁴ of course not forgetting the evil cunning of the serpent.¹⁵

3. *“He will understand parables and obscure sayings, the words of the wise and enigmas.”*¹⁶ Let’s try to figure out how these things are different from each other. First let’s try to see what in the world a parable is! We have an excellent starting place for this in the Gospels. For they all use this word parable, including Matthew. Matthew writes: *“On that day, Jesus went out of his house and sat by the sea, and the whole crowd stood on the shore, and he said many things to them in parables: ‘Behold a sower went out to sow...’.”*¹⁷ Therefore a parable is a story about some event which did not literally happen, but could have happened and which figuratively shows matters through participation in the words of the parable. It did not really happen according to the words “A sower went out...” as we would say historical events do, but nevertheless it could have happened exactly as it is written. I think that Jesus went out of the house to speak to those who were outside, but only in parables, because it had not been given to them to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, precisely because they were outside; Matthew did not idly write that *“On that day, Jesus went out of his house and sat by the sea.”* This is because it was fitting for him to go out of the house to those who were outside and unable to enter the house.

¹² Luke 16:8

¹³ Gen 3:1

¹⁴ Matt 10:6

¹⁵ This seems to be saying that evil things like the unjust servant and the serpent are commendable for their wisdom, although it should be remembered that they used it for evil.

¹⁶ Prov 1:6

¹⁷ Matthew 13:1-3

4. That Matthew has such a thing in mind regarding place is made clear by what follows in the text. He says that “*After Jesus dismissed the crowd he went into his house and revealed to his disciples the parable.*”¹⁸ Take note that Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables, and without parables he says nothing to them. This is what he did up until this point, because the crowd did not understand the parables. (Pay attention to these words “*After Jesus dismissed the crowd he went into his house*” because they are wisely written. They show that it was impossible for the crowd to go with Jesus, but only those who surpassed the crowd -- namely, his disciples – had the boldness to enter into the house of Jesus.) Look, not those outside, but rather those able to come inside approached the teacher and demanded to learn the inner meaning of the parables. Since they were able to follow Jesus as he entered his house, he answered their demand: “*Explain the parable to us*”¹⁹ and said the things he said.²⁰

5. Jesus not only went out of his house so that, by coming out, he could speak to those who were outside in parables, but he also sat by the sea speaking in riddles because the crowd and those outside of the billows of the sea and its bitter waters were not far off. Notice that a great crowd gathered around Jesus when he went out of the house and sat by the sea. Yet it was not the great crowd, but rather the few travelling the narrow and difficult way and finding the path that leads to life – namely the disciples – that came to Jesus, to enter into his house. Moreover, examining to the best of my ability what is appropriate to the Gospel narrative and Jesus’ purpose of embarking on a boat and speaking to the whole crowd along the shore in parables, I say that perhaps the Word did not walk or stand among the crowd but, happening to be on the water of the sea, He spoke leaping onto that which, as much as it was able, was able to walk on the water (I mean a boat!) Don’t be amazed if such better thoughts can be inferred, which the one outside and the crowd do not know. It should also not amaze

¹⁸ Matt 13:36

¹⁹ Matt 13:36

²⁰ That is Matt 13:18-23

you that there is some meaning that is hidden and has frequent subtlety which lies in the Gospel's composition. For this was the Word of God's regulating grace, that is work.²¹ But I am trying to more deeply understand the verses such as these: "*Coming to him the disciples said 'Why do you speak to them in parables'*"²² and "*After he dismissed the crowd Jesus went into his house, and his disciples approached him saying 'Explain the parable to us.'*" Whenever the crowd hears a parable they fail to notice that it is in need of interpretation. The disciples on the other hand, realizing that Jesus speaks to the crowds only in parables because they are outside, follow him when he leaves the crowd because they see that there is no other way to understand the parables other than going into Jesus' house. Therefore they enter the house, approach Jesus and say "Explain the parable to us!" because they desire to learn about it. So much, then, for parables.

6. Now on to the "obscure sayings." There are some passages in the Scriptures that are intentionally obscure so that it is impossible to apprehend the meaning of them without great scrutiny²³ paid to the phrasing, the meaning and the combination of words. I think that these are the obscure sayings spoken of here. I will set out an example of such a saying from the Psalms, specifically Psalm 31,²⁴ which says: "*Because I was silent, my bones grew old*"²⁵ and the rest. It is possible to understand the sense simply according to the words, as we will show, but if it is an obscure saying, it is not so. This passage from Isaiah is of the same sort: "*Woe to you, wings of the land of ships, beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, sending the messengers in the sea and paper letters on the water.*"²⁶ To properly clarify each of these

²¹ The entire section from "Moreover, examining to the best of my ability..." until here is exceedingly difficult to translate and the meaning is not entirely clear. In this last sentence I think perhaps there are some words missing or implied which could explain the accusative here, especially if Origen dictated this to a scribe. In the Latin both words are neuter, so it is impossible to tell if they are accusative.

²² Matt 13:10

²³ I have omitted the word "sugkexumenes" from the translation because I am not sure how it fits.

²⁴ Psalm 32 in the Hebrew, and modern English translations.

²⁵ Ps 32:3

²⁶ Isa 18:1-2

and to illuminate the obscurity through interpretation are not tasks for the present time, lest we get sidetracked with untimely distractions. It is enough for now to only make clear the meaning of the words of the Psalm. As long as I exclaim, praising God and doing theology all day, I do not get older at all, but rather am greatly refreshed. However, when I am idly silent from the topics of theology, then old age set into my bones and they seem stiff with age. And it follows this: “*Your hand became heavy against me night and day,*”²⁷ and because of this I was turned out of my former position of oversight into my present hardship, because your hand was heavy against me. Rightly did I suffer these things, this thorn fixed in me, because at the time I was conquered by anxiety, riches and earthly pleasures. It is clear that the prophet meant such things in this passage, as is clear from what follows: “*I acknowledge my sin, etc.*”²⁸

7. After these it remains to be seen what the “words of the wise” are, as well as enigmas. There are words of a certain kind of wisdom which, when heard by a wise man make him even wiser than he was. Now then, is it only the wisdom of God and his truth dealt with here, or not only that, but also those whom God grasps with his cunning? For these kinds of wisdoms are also called by that name. Could the one spoken of understand the words of those who are holy and wise, but not be able to understand also the words of those who are wise in other things? Could his mind be worse than the mind which understands the wisdom of this world? Could he not be able to follow along with the things they say? Perhaps, just as the work of the eyes is not only to see the things that are beautiful,²⁹ but also the things that are not, (and what the craft in them wants),³⁰ it is the work of the mind to examine the successful ideas, as well as those that not, both so that the person himself is not conquered by the persuasiveness in these false sayings, and so that he can rescue others who

²⁷ Ps 32:4

²⁸ Ps 32:5

²⁹ Lit. “well organized”

³⁰ This phrase is difficult to understand

have been conquered, if he knows the words of those who are wise in other things; whether they are sophistry and where they err. How will sophistry be undone and the false reasoning be cross-examined? For God threatens through his own Wisdom that He will set aside the wisdom of the wise which is worthy of destruction due to its falseness, as well as the guileful intelligence of those who are intelligent, but not according to God's intelligence. Thus through the use of His own wise men God lays hold of the craftiness of this age.

8. If the disciples of Christ do not understand the words of the wise of this world, how will they take the field to destroy the strongholds, destroying every reasoning and high place lifted against the knowledge of God? How would someone be able to perfectly keep the command of Peter (that is: *Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope in us*"³¹) if he is not perfectly prepared? He must be prepared to give a defense of his hope to every Greek and every Barbarian, every wise man and every ignorant man by his understanding of the words of the wise, refuting and disproving some things, while proving and bolstering others. Don't be amazed if someone truly wise according to God is not now found. Most of the remarkable spiritual gifts have ceased, so they are only found rarely, or never at all.

9. It remains to define what exactly an "enigma" is. I think that an enigma is a passage about things happening which did not really happen, and in fact cannot happen, meant to secretly signify something ineffable. An example of this occurs in Judges: "*The trees journeyed to anoint a king over themselves.*"³² The three fruit-bearing trees – the fig tree, the vine and the olive tree—did not want to rule over the trees which were not worthy of their rule. Instead a thorny bramble ruled, and the fire came out of to consume the cedars of Lebanon. The wise should see that the trees refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the

³¹ 1 Pet 3:15

³² Judges 9:8

bramble to the Enemy. There is another example of an enigma in Kings: “*The thorn bush in Lebanon sent to the cedar of Lebanon saying ‘Give your daughter to my son as a wife’*”³³ and the rest. You can also find enigmas in the prophets, such as this one in Ezekiel: “*A great eagle with giant wings, great in extension, full of feathers*”³⁴ and the rest. For the time being we have only been able to briefly sketch these things.

10. These then are the parable and the dark word, the sayings of the wise and the enigmas. A parable is a story about something happening which did not literally happen, but which could happen and figuratively clarifies enigmas, such as the example: A man went out to sow his field etc. For this did not literally happen, but rather leads to loftier things. How is the saying “*I will open my mouth in parables*”³⁵ to be harmonized to this fact? For whatever brings forward has happened.³⁶ “*He made wonders before their ancestors*”³⁷ and he literally “*cleaved the sea asunder and led them through it.*”³⁸ For all these things have happened, even if they are also symbols received in the manner of the evangelical parables. Now someone else may say “This passage “*I will open my mouth in parables*” does not refer to the events of Exodus, but rather to the Gospel parables,” even though Christ says in the prophet “*Pay attention, my people, to my law*”³⁹ and the rest.⁴⁰

³³ 2 Kings 14:9

³⁴ Ezek 17:3

³⁵ Psalm 78:2

³⁶ The exact meaning of this short sentence is unclear. It seems to me to mean that whatever has an edifying value in its historical sense must have happened. It could also mean that whatever leads to a higher spiritual sense has also literally happened. I am not sure.

³⁷ Ps. 78: 12

³⁸ Ibid 13

³⁹ Ibid 1

⁴⁰ It is possible that this “and the rest” is not what Origen wrote, but rather a scribe who was ending his copying. It seems that this section may end mid-sentence. It certainly ends in the middle of Origen’s argument.

11. “A crown of graces.”⁴¹ A ring of the virtues, because each is bound to the others. “A gold necklace around your throat.”⁴² Here the gold necklace symbolizes the halo and circular splendor of the divine words and the throat symbolizes the mind.

12. “Let us lift his memory from the earth.”⁴³ This could easily have been said by those who also said “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him so that the inheritance becomes ours.”⁴⁴

13. “Throw your lot in with us.”⁴⁵ Renouncing this citizenship, be with us, keep the Sabbath with us, make unleavened bread with us, and all the other observances of the law.

14. “For they are the partakers of slaughter.”⁴⁶ God is the giver of good, and we are culpable for the bad, even that which is hurtful. You might say these things about the Jews who partook of the blood both of the prophets and of Christ Himself.

15. “These are the ways of all the ones completing lawlessness.”⁴⁷ I do not think that “to complete” simply means to do something, but rather to fulfill the measure of their fathers, and to lie under all the blood from Abel to Zacharias.

16. “Wisdom sings in the passageways.”⁴⁸ Being silenced by a wise man, she does not sing, but happening to be in a passage, she sings.⁴⁹

17. “For it will be whenever you call me... .”⁵⁰ Just like the Lord, we call on Wisdom, who is Christ. So the one calling on Christ (if you think about who He really is) also calls on

⁴¹ Prov 1:9

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Prov 1:12

⁴⁴ Matt 21:38

⁴⁵ Prov 1:14

⁴⁶ Prov 1:18

⁴⁷ Prov 1:19

⁴⁸ Prov 1:20

⁴⁹ The Greek for this section is unclear.

⁵⁰ Prov 1:28

Wisdom, Understanding, Holiness, Righteousness, and every Virtue. We should call not with lips, but deeds. So let's not become that sort of person, lest when we call he not listen.⁵¹

18. *"If, receiving the word of my command, you hide it with you."*⁵² One hides, not doing this in vainglory, but zealous to escape notice.

19. *"Then you will know the fear of the Lord."*⁵³ Look at from how many things we know the fear of the Lord. For the fear itself is obscure, but it is clear from more simple examples. You can see that there are some who fear the Lord when they should not, and do not fear when they should!

20. *"Give your voice to understanding."*⁵⁴ Everyone gives his voice to something, whether to anger (if that happens to be that of which one is speaking), or to suffering, or to fornication. The blessed one offers his whole voice to the Lord so that whatever he says might be Wisdom. Just as another would seek silver you should seek wisdom, as if you were greedy for it!

21. *"Do not let evil council take hold of you."*⁵⁵ Those outside the church proclaim one thing about the beginning and another about the end. They reject idolatry from the beginning but hypothesize a Demiurge. Still changing, they deny the Old Testament, opposing the new element. But it is held among the teachers of the church that the things that happen at the end are in harmony with the events of the beginning⁵⁶.

⁵¹ This is a reference to the second half of Prov 1:28, and "such people" apparently refers to those who do not try to know Wisdom until calamity strikes.

⁵² Prov 2:1

⁵³ Prov 2:5

⁵⁴ Prov 2:3

⁵⁵ Prov 2:16

⁵⁶ This passage is clearly addressed against some heresy prevalent in Origen's day, but what it means is difficult to ascertain. It most likely is using technical terms that would have been familiar to the heresy, which makes it difficult to understand now.

22. *“May your heart keep my words.”*⁵⁷ After the imperatives and prohibitions of the Law of God, the words of God’s Wisdom report the true knowledge of things. For example: *“Out of Zion the Law proceeds, and the Word of the Lord out of Jerusalem.”*⁵⁸ The one keeping the laws will also take up wisdom. For he says *“Each of you plant your own righteousness and you will reap in the time of life.”*⁵⁹ Then after the action it follows: *“Light yourselves with the light of knowledge.”*⁶⁰

23. *“Provide good things before the Lord and men.”*⁶¹ If you do the things you do in wisdom, you will be a son of God, as it says: *“You made all things in wisdom.”*⁶²

24. *“Honor the Lord with your just works.”*⁶³ Holy Scripture often uses the word “honor” to mean giving. It says: *“Honor the widows who truly are widows”*⁶⁴ compared with *“Give a share, lest you humble the widow, not speaking mercy.”*⁶⁵ Even the Savior says *“It is written in the Law ‘Honor your father and your mother’”*⁶⁶ and the rest. It says “from your just works” lest the giving come from thievery or greedy gains. Let no one shrink from giving! He will have no defense before widow⁶⁷ in the Holy Gospel, who threw in her entire life, and was justified, not before those who gave out of thievery, but before those who gave out of their abundance. Every work of prudence and the other virtues is an act of giving to God. For it is right to give first-fruits from every production to the Church and the poor. The

⁵⁷ Prov 3:1

⁵⁸ Isa 2:5

⁵⁹ Hosea 10:12

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Prov 3:4

⁶² Psalm 104:24

⁶³ Prov 3:9

⁶⁴ 1 Tim 5:3

⁶⁵ This passage is interesting. Origen introduces it with a neuter article as he normally does for Scripture, but as far as I have been able to find, this is not in Scripture or any other writing. It is possible that it could be a summary statement of the laws regarding widows in Deut., but this seems unlikely. He is citing these two passages to show that “to honor” and “to give” can be synonyms at times. His argument is based on the exact wording of these citations, so it is unlikely that he would use a loose summary for this. Therefore it is most likely a significant textual variant which has made it difficult or impossible to find. It is also possible that it is from an unidentified text which Origen held as worthy of being compared with Scripture. This is certainly worthy of more in-depth research.

⁶⁶ Matthew 19:9

⁶⁷ Luke 21:2

one raising from sleep should give his first-fruit to God, namely prayer. It is also right to give the first-fruit of words, namely psalms. Then it will be said to you “*Blessed are your barns and your storehouses.*”⁶⁸ This refers to the things of the soul.

25. “*God established the earth in Wisdom.*”⁶⁹ The faithful soul is earth, bearing fruit a hundredfold. The soul becomes wise out of its abundance (that is, wisdom) which establishes itself upon the Wisdom of God. For it seats the importation of teaching upon it, making a building from wisdom and always completing the improving heaven, the most pure creation, the home to both angels and intelligences. Having perception of what is and perceiving the minute details of things, it begins to distinguish and dissect them.⁷⁰

26. “*Make your way far from her.*”⁷¹ It says “way” to indicate the mind travelling to virtue. Or it also orders us to separate virtue from vice.

27. “*The woman ensnares the valuable souls of men.*”⁷² The soul ensnared by the woman is by nature precious. For it is not by nature of this earth. But since the mind and soul of strong men are precious, she equally sets out to ensnare these.

28. “*I was that in which he took delight.*”⁷³ The word “was” does not refer to time when it is applied to God. It is temporal when it refers to something in time, such as the phrase “I was in the market.” But if she “*was harmonizing*”⁷⁴ herself with God, who is without beginning, then she is also eternal.

⁶⁸ Deut 28:5

⁶⁹ Prov 3:19

⁷⁰ This section is difficult to understand in the Greek.

⁷¹ Prov 5:8

⁷² Prov. 6:26

⁷³ Prov 8:30

⁷⁴ Ibid

29. *“She makes rich.”*⁷⁵ If everyone blessed by the Lord is rich, and all staying in the Law of the Lord are blessed by the Lord, and further, if the prophets stay in the Law of the Lord, then they clearly are rich. *“The fool does evil with laughter.”*⁷⁶ Doing evil he is pleased and rejoices, but Wisdom nurtures prudence in men, which is practical virtue.

30. *“He who has not dealings with his own house will inherit the wind”*⁷⁷ God is our house, in which we move and are. The one not staying in the commandments of God will be co-inheritor with the evil powers.

31. *“Out of the fruit of righteousness grows the tree of life.”*⁷⁸ The fruit of righteousness is the end of virtue. One has as many trees of life as he has fruits of righteousness. This is the tree of life which is planted in the middle of Paradise, which Adam was forbidden to touch after his sin. This is because he threw away seeds of righteousness, from which the tree of life grows.

32. *“He will be a friend to himself.”*⁷⁹ Origen does not entirely remember this verse. It is found in some manuscripts, but not the Septuagint or the others.

33. *“The anger of a king is a messenger of death.”*⁸⁰ The wise man placates him, if he is holy and passionless. Or anger is to be taken allegorically.

34. *“In the places of the wicked, men are caught”*⁸¹ Their places are also the gatherings of heretics.

35. *“Three things are impossible for me to understand.”*⁸² It not possible for the one introducing that which can be seen to have a mind capable of knowledge, nor is it possible for

⁷⁵ Prov 10:22

⁷⁶ Prov 10:23

⁷⁷ Prov 11:29

⁷⁸ Prov 11:30

⁷⁹ Prov 12:26

⁸⁰ Prov 16:14

⁸¹ Prov 25

a man to see and know the things beyond man, such as the service of crabs, although the angels know it. It is not possible for anyone to know that which neither exists nor is capable of coming about, such as that three equals four. He seems to speak about things which do not exist. Of course the tracks of an eagle cannot be known, since an eagle, as it flies through the air, does not leave tracks like those which are left by those walking on the soil or sand.⁸³ It is the same with the snake. On soft soil it is possible to know its ways, but not on rock.⁸⁴ “*And the paths of a ship in the sea.*”⁸⁵ Perhaps the ship spoken of in this verse is Jesus and his disciples, but at some times just the disciples alone. Not in the sea, since “*immediately the boat came to the land where it was going*”⁸⁶ by divine power. The boat did not carry Jesus on the sea, but through this, it was tossed by adverse spirits. Since the things of this life are vanities, always fluctuating, none of which led men into eternal life, it is not possible for their ways to be known. So for example, no work of esteemed kings of nations or rulers which is foreign to piety remains after their death. Their glory is extinguished. They do not know, he says, “*the ways of a man in his youth*”⁸⁷ burning with desire on account of his restless ways. There is also the way of the adulteress, similarly on account of her shamelessness.⁸⁸ Perhaps this is the Gentile Church, which he says should do nothing base after the cleaning of baptism. The righteous is not in youth since, “*being completed in a short time, he fulfilled long times.*”⁸⁹ Such is the way of every adulteress: She estranges herself from her spouse, her soul leaves her husband, and she chases after her lovers.⁹⁰

⁸² Prov 30:18

⁸³ Prov 30:19

⁸⁴ Prov. 30:19

⁸⁵ Prov 30:19

⁸⁶ John 6:21

⁸⁷ Prov 30:19

⁸⁸ Prov 30:20

⁸⁹ Wisd 4:13

⁹⁰ This entire paragraph is difficult to understand, both grammatically and in terms of content. Many sentences have no main verb at all, which would suggest that this text might be corrupted.

36. *“They march orderly at one command.”*⁹¹ Even the locust is praised as orderly since it obeys the command of the Word of God. Some such is the Church (because it is looked down up by men), being compared to a locust as living on the earth. Because it gathers with Jesus and does not scatter’ but rather puts on the full armor of God, in order to withstand the wiles of the Devil, it could be said to march orderly at one command. It is kingless under Pharaoh, but has a king under God, and the works of Egypt are surrendered to it. Perhaps because we have no king before the kingdom of Christ, the locust is kingless. For they do not have a leader like the honey bees do, but rather each leads. These are the wills lightened of earthly things, pursuing the ordered life. Even the locusts though, when they want to fly but cannot for a short time,⁹² eventually rise from the ground. If they partake in the action, they will be lead into one body of activity.

37. *“The he-goat leads the goat herd.”*⁹³ The goat (which is mentioned third, only according to the Septuagint) leads the herd, increasing and multiplying it, showing the way in the pastures in the heights. No herd of animals walks on the heights like them! Such is the one who leads those in the herd of Christ up to the heights. Otherwise the goat is a type of Christ, who was offered for sin. The whole host of the godly follows Him in the heights.

⁹¹ Prov 30:27

⁹² Young locusts are unable to fly, but rather hop around until their wings develop.

⁹³ Prov 30:31