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An Analysis of the Structure of
Proverbs 28 and 29

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The thematic arrangement of Proverbs 28 and 29 has been an area of scholarly dispute. Some propose that the thematic arrangement takes place around the royal court setting; others disagree.[1] It is the position of this writer that Proverbs 28 and 29 are addressed to kingly prospects within the court setting and that these chapters are skillfully arranged around themes pertinent to royalty. In developing this thesis, some general observations about the chapters and some specific observations about both the structure and theme of Proverbs 28 and 29 are stated. Following these observations, each section within the two chapters will be analyzed to help determine its thematic unity and thought development.

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[1] Bruce V. Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarchs," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (April 1985): 238; see also W. Lee Humphreys, "The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Book of Proverbs," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John G. Gamie and others (New York: Scholars Press, 1978), 186-187.

General Observations

To begin, several general observations should be made concerning these verses. The first concerns the poetic structure of this passage.

A significant poetic device used in Hebrew poetry is parallelism. The majority of the parallelism used in this passage is complementary. Of the parallelism that is complementary, thirty-two verses are antithetical while four are comparative. The use of antithetical parallelism is in distinct contrast to the "comparisons" and "single sentences" of chapters 26 and 27.[2] Other forms of parallelism used are as follows: the sequential/consequential, eleven verses; focusing (intensification), seven verses; synonymity (emphatic restatement), one verse.

A second interesting poetic feature of this passage is that virtually every verse is a couplet. The two exceptions appear to be triplets in 28:10 and 28:17. A third aspect of the poetic structure to draw attention is that twenty three out of the thirty six complementary verses are consequential within each stich.[3] This reveals that the author is emphasizing the consequences of godliness and wickedness. As will be shown later, there is a greater emphasis on the negative aspect. Fourthly, with the exception of the admonitions in 28:17 and 29:17, all of the verses are sayings.

Concerning the unit division, chapters 28 and 29 are widely considered to be a separate unit of thought. Although Malchow argues for including 27:23-27 as an introduction to this unit, those five verses could easily conclude the thought

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[2] Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1954), x.

[3] The term "stich" refers to each line or part within a Hebrew poetic couplet.

development in chapter 27.[4] The opening of chapter 30 clearly points to the commencement of a new collection.

Concerning content, the clear emphasis is the contrast between the righteous (צַדִּיק - Proverbs 28:1,12,28; 29:2,6,7, 16, 27) and the wicked (רָשָׁע - Proverbs 28:1,3,12,15,28; 29:2,7,10,12,16,27). Virtually every verse speaks of these two types of people either directly or by use of the synonyms.

Specific Observations

The Structure of Proverbs 28 and 29

The structure of Proverbs 28 and 29 seems rather clear. After personal research, this writer has arrived at a similar conclusion to that of Bruce Malchow.

The editor of chapters 28-29 has organized his material through the use of strategically placed proverbs employing the words *saddiq* ("righteous") and *rasa* ("wicked"). These chapters begin (28:1) and end (29:27) with couplets using these words. Then there are four proverbs within the collection that contain these terms and occur at intervals (28:12,28; 29:2,16). These four are integrally related to each other and form a symmetrical pattern. Thus, the first and third couplets have rather similar first lines (28:12a; 29:2a). Then the second line of the first proverb and the first line of the second match (28:12b; 28:28a). Next, both the second line of the second couplet and the second line of the fourth treat the destruction of the wicked (28:28b; 29:16b). Also, the second line of the second couplet and the first line of the third mention the rise of the righteous to a position of authority (28:28b; 29:2a). Finally, the second line of the

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[4]Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarchs," 243-245.

third couplet is comparable to the first line of the fourth (29:2b; 29:16a).[5]

Thus, these four strategically located verses form the division for the two chapters. To see these four interrelated couplets as merely coincidental repetition seems unlikely since no other verses within the chapters are as closely knit in structure (ב with the infinitive construct opens each verse) or content ("righteous" and "wicked"). The chapters could be divided as follows:

    28:1—introduction (contrast between lifestyles)
        28:2-11—first section
    28:12—transition
        28:13-27—second section
    28:28—transition
        29:1—a key to theme (middle of structure)
    29:2—transition
        29:3-15—third section
    29:16—transition
        29:17-26—fourth section
    27:27—conclusion (contrast between adversions)

    Some transitions are also tied into the immediate sections. Proverbs 28:12a is related to 28:11b and 28:12b to 28:13a. In addition, 28:28a is related generally to 28:27b and 28b to 29:1. 29:2a is related to 29:3a ("rejoice") and 29:2b to 29:3b ("grief" and "loss"). 29:16 is sandwiched between two verses on the family. Lastly 29:27 contrasts 29:26 ("injustice" and "justice").

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[5]Ibid., 239.

The Theme of Proverbs 28 and 29

What is the theme of Proverbs 28, 29? Generally these two chapters present a "manual for future monarchs."[6] The proof for an addressee who is a prospective ruler is four-fold. First, the direct instruction to rulers is seen in each section (28:2, 3, 15, 16; 29:2, 4, 12, 14, 26 - princes, oppressor, ruler, king, leader). Secondly, there are numerous verses referring to the results of ruling the nation as a whole (28:2, 12, 15, 28; 29:2, 16, 18) and deprived groups (28:3, 5, 21; 29:7, 14). Thirdly, the only two imperatives (28:17; 29:17) in these chapters appear to be addressed to a ruler. Although 29:17 is not very conclusive, 28:17 is. The only one who has judicial authority over people's response to a murder is a ruler. Fourthly, the recurring themes of impartial social justice and charity for the poor were common in the Ancient Near Eastern setting.[7] W. Lee Humphreys lists the following motifs "of wise courtiers in Egyptian literature" which occur in Proverbs 28 and 29: 1) humility 2) equity 3) strong family 4) control of tongue.[8]

Specifically, the theme seems to be that the prospective ruler is to submit to God's standard of righteousness. To prove this, the editor arranged these chapters to emphasize the importance of righteousness and submission. As previously mentioned, the motif of righteousness pervades these chapters. Special emphasis is expressed by showing the consequences of righteousness and wickedness. Submission, or, to be more specific, the consequences of refusing to submit, seems to be

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[6]See Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarch," 238; Bruce K. Waltke, Unpublished Class Notes (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1986), 7. Also see Patrick Skehan's analysis presented by James L. Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom (Atlanta: John Know Press, 1981), 76.

[7]Bruce V. Malchow, "Social Justice in the Wisdom Literature," Biblical Theology Bulletin, 12 (October 1982): 120-122.

[8]W. Lee Humphreys, "The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Book of Proverbs," 178.

emphasized in the central verse of the structural development (29:1). When a ruler is prepared to submit, God can instruct him concerning the standard. In these chapters the standard seems to be discernment (28:2-11), identifying types of people (28:13-27), wisdom (29:3-15), and appropriate speech to men and a realization of God's sovereignty (29:17-26).

Analysis of Proverbs 28 and 29

Proverbs 28:2-11

There is definite unity within the first section. The verb "discern"(בִּין) appears five times in this section (vv. 2, 5a, 5b, 7, 11) and not again until chapter 29. The noun "law" (תּוֹרָה) appears four times in this section (vv. 4a, 4b, 7, 9) and not again until chapter 29. Nouns designating poverty-stricken individuals (דַּל and רָשׁ) also appear frequently (vv. 3, 6, 8, 11).

Structural linkage and assonance show the "interconnection" between individual verses. Verses 7-10 all begin with participles. Malchow effectively discusses the assonance between "adjoining" verses.

Thus, *kēn* and *ʾēn* unite vv. 2-3. Three word combinations couple vv. 3-4: *geber-yitgārû, rōʾš-rāšāᶜ, māṭār-šōmĕrê*. In addition, the second word in vv. 3-7 has the same sound: *rōʾš, tôrâ, rāᶜ, rāš*, and *tôrâ*. Verses 5-6 are also related by *mĕbaqšê* and *mēᶜiqqēš*. *Bēn* and *bĕnešek* link vv. 7-8. Verses 8-10 all begin with the letter *mēm* and are connected by *tarbît-tôrâ-rāᶜ*. Furthermore, vv. 8-9 are joined by *hônô-ʾoznô*, and vv. 9-10 by *tĕpillātô-yippôl*. Finally, *yĕšārim* and *ᶜāšir* link vv. 10-11.[9]

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[9]Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarchs," 240-241.

There appears to be structured thought development concerning the discernment of prospective rulers in the first section (28:2-11). The apparent inclusio in this section, in which בִּין is written in vv. 2 and 11, give credence to the "discernment" theme. In addition, the recurrence of the verb בִּין in this section and the omission of the verb in the subsequent section (29:13-27) indicate the verb's importance to the first section. "The verb refers to knowledge which is superior to mere gathering of data." It "is a power of judgment and perceptive insight and is demonstrated in the use of knowledge."[10]

The author seems to present his theme in 2 stanzas of five verses each (vv. 2-6; 7-11). Each verse within each stanza parallels a verse in the other stanza based on word correspondence. For instance, בִּין links vv. 2 and 7, זַל joins vv. 3 and 8, תּוֹרָה concatenates vv. 4 and 9, רַע interconnects vv. 5 and 10, and expressions for the poor (רָשׁ and דַל) link vv. 6 and 11. The purpose for two interrelated stanzas may be emphasis. The following model further clarifies the structural hypothesis.

Verse 2	Verse 7
Importance of Discernment	Importance of Discernment
(setting - ruling)	(setting-family)

Verse 3	Verse 8
Negative example of	Negative example of
Discernment	Discernment (inequitable
(inequitable to the poor)	in taxes to the poor)

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[10]Louis Goldberg, "בִּין," Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament Vol. 1 edited by R. Laird Harris, et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 103.

Verse 4	Verse 9
Basis of discernment - one's relation to the law (influences horizontal relationships)	Basis of discernment - one's relation to the law (influences vertical relationship)

Verse 5	Verse 10
Basis of discernment - one's character in relation to God (negative/positive consequences)	Basis of discernment - one's character in relation to others (negative/positive consequences)

Verse 6	Verse 11
Pervasiveness of discernment includes poor (emphasis - character behind act)	Pervasiveness of discernment includes poor (emphasis - act due to character)

Although this model and the thought development it espouses may be inaccurate in some specifics, the apparent parallels should not be explained as coincidences.

Proverbs 28:13-27

The second section (28:13-27) is another separate entity. On the one hand, it is separated from the first and third section by the two literary division verses (28:12, 28), but on the other hand there is unity within the second section. This unit may be described as an inclusio since intra-personal relationships are expressed by one's relationship to God and sin in vv. 13, 14, and vv. 25-27. The inclusio is also emphasized by the repetition of synonyms for "cover" in v. 13a (מְכַסֶּה) and v. 27b (וּמַעְלִים). The section depicts all types of men under the categories of righteous and wicked. The consequences of a man's activities are present in every verse except vv. 15 and 21.

There is cohesion between the adjoining verses in the second section. First, there is cohesion in content.[11] Verses 13, 14, and 25-27 refer to one's intra-personal relationship to God. For instance, בֶּטַח (vv. 25, 26) refers to one's relationship to Jehovah. Verses 15-18 refer to hierarchal relationships (rulers, vv. 15, 16; subjects, vv. 17, 18). Verses 19-22 refer to extra-personal relationships (a coined term referring to one's relationship to things). The focus is on the distinction between greed and contentment. Lastly, verses 23-24 refer to interpersonal relationships. A ruler must identify various types of individuals within these categories and believe that consequences follow actions.

Secondly, there is cohesion in assonance. Malchow demonstrates this when he writes,

> Verses 13-18 are all united by the series *mĕkasseh*, *maqśeh*, *môśēl*, *maᶜăśaqqôt*, *ᶜāśuq*, and *neᶜquaś*. Verses 14-15 have *ᵓaśrê* and *ᵓărî* . . . . The assonance between vv. 18-19 occur in *yiwwāśēaᶜ* - yisbaᶜ and *dĕrākayim* - *rēqîm*. The tie between vv. 19-20 is *admātô* - *ᵓĕmûnôt*. The first words in the second lines of vv. 20-22 are *wĕᵓās*, *wĕᶜal*, and *wĕlō*. *Lahôn*, *lāśôn*, and *lĕᵓîś* link vv. 22-24. Verses 24-25 are related by *ḥābēr* - *rĕḥab*. Verses 25-26 are united because both contain the word *bōṭēaḥ*.[12]

The thematic development of the second section is based on content rather than assonance. The following model delineates the thought development.

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[11]Malchow treats each section according to <u>content</u>, <u>word-links</u>, and <u>assonance</u>; see "A Manual for Future Monarchs," 238-243.

[12]Ibid., 241.

Vv. 13, 14 - Intra-personal relationships
  Acts in light of sin (13)
  Attitudes in light of God (14)
Vv. 15-18 - Hierarchal relationships
  Rulers (15-16)
    specific: Negative ruler (comparison) (v. 15)
    general: Compare bad and good ruler (v. 16)
  Subjects (17-18)
    specific: Negative subject (consequence) (v. 17)
    general: Compare bad to good subjects (v. 17)
Vv. 19-22 - Extra-personal relationships
  Compare content and covetous (19, 20)
      Content v. dreamer (19)
      Content v. dishonest (20)
  Negative man - covetous (consequence) (21, 22)
Vv. 23-24 - Interpersonal relationships (verbal speech)
  Compare reprover and flatterer (23)
  Negative speaker (consequence) (24)
Vv. 25-27 - Intrapersonal relationships
  Compare 'truster' in God and in men (25, 26)
  Specific application (27)

The author constructs a structure in which a comparison between good and evil, and a focus on the negative man appear under each heading (vv. 15-16; 17, 18; 19-22; 23, 24) with the exception of the first and last heading (vv. 13, 14; 25-27). In conclusion, a prospective ruler needs to identify various types of individuals (good or evil) within the various relationships.

Proverbs 29:3-15

The third section of chapters 28 and 29 (29:3-15) is a unified entity developing a common theme (wisdom). The unity is seen in the assonance and "word-links" between the adjoining verses. Once again Malchow demonstrates this when he states that,

Within the group, vv. 3 and 4 share the word ⁻îš̌. There is
assonance between ⁻āreṣ in v. 4 and rešet in v. 5. Pôrēš-
pešaᶜ and rēᶜēhû-rāᶜ unit vv. 5-6. Both vv. 6 and 7
contain ṣaddîq. The first words in vv. 8-10 are ⁻anšê, ⁻îš̌,
and ⁻anšê. In addition vv. 8-9 have ḥăkāmîn-ḥākām.
Assonance is present in yěšabběḥennû-maqšîb in vv. 11-12,
and both verses share kol. Rěšāᶜîm-rāš link vv. 12-13.
Verses 13-14 are connected because they contain different
words for the poor. And there is assonance between vv. 14-
15 in ⁻ĕmet-⁻immô.[13]

The common theme in the third section is wisdom. The
term "wisdom" or "a wise man" occurs five times in this section.
These words are sporadic elsewhere in chapters 28 and 29.
Verses 3 and 15 form an inclusio for this section centering
around wisdom in the family setting. If a prospective ruler· is
going to be righteous, he must be wise.

The section breaks down into three divisions (excluding vv.
3 and 15 which form the inclusio for this section). The first
division (vv. 4-7) describes kingly wisdom. Verses 4 and 7 form
an inclusio for this section since royal justice occurs in each
verse. There seems to be a connection between bribery (v. 4)
and flattery (v. 5). The "young man" (v. 5) may refer to a
prospective king (28:3, 21; 30:1). Verses 6 and 7 are bonded by
צַדִּיק. The second division (vv. 8-11) portrays wisdom that is
under control. Lack of control is portrayed by braggers (v. 8),
fools (v. 9), murderers (v. 10), and angry men (v. 11). Various
terms or concepts are repeated ("men-of" - vv. 8, 9; "fool" - vv.
9, 11; "anger" - vv. 8, 11). The third division (vv. 12-14)
develops the concept of kingly wisdom. Verses 12 and 14 form
an inclusio for this division by discussing the king's public
ministry. Verses 12 and 14 refer to the ruler while verses 13

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[13]Ibid., 242.

and 14 refer to the poor. The structural similarity of the first
and last verses within each division is as follows:

vv. 4, 7   Saying: positive/negative; complementary antithetical
vv. 8, 11   Saying: negative/positive; complementary antithetical
vv. 12, 14 Saying: negative/consequence/negative; consequential
            Saying: positive/consequence/positive; consequential

The third section is clarified by the following model.

v. 3	- Wisdom in the family setting
vv. 4-7	- Kingly wisdom
vv. 8-11	- Wisdom under control
vv. 12-14	- Kingly wisdom
v. 15	- Wisdom in the family setting

Proverbs 29:17-26

The last section (29:17-26) of the collection focuses on
verbal speech (17-24) and Jehovah's prominence over men (25,
26). If the prospective ruler is to be righteous and promote
righteousness, he must submissively adhere to this instruction.
Malchow elaborates upon the internal unity by focusing on the
author's assonance and word-links.

> *Pāša^c-napšekå* bind vv. 16-17. Verses 17-19 are related by
> *binkā-bĕ ᵓên-wĕ ᵓên.* In vv. 19-21, there is the series
> *^cābed-bidbārāyw-^cabdô. Bidbārāyw* in v. 20 also connects
> with *bidbārîm* in v. 19. The last words in vv. 19-21
> constitute another series between these verses: *ma^căneh-
> mimmennû-mānôn. Mānôn* in v. 21 also provides a link with
> *mādôn* in v. 22. Verses 22-23 are united by two different
> words for man and the pair *ûba^cal-ûšĕpal. Tašpîlennû
> ûšĕpal* in v. 23 corresponds to *šônē ᵓnapšô* in v. 24. There
> is assonance between *yaggîd* in v. 24 and *yĕšuggāb* in v. 25,

and both verses begin with the letter *ḥet*. *Môqēš* in v. 25
relates to *mĕbaqšîm* and *môšēl* in v. 26. . . .[14]

Verbal speech is delineated in vv. 17-24. Terms such as
"discipline" (vv. 17, 19), "there is no" (vv. 18, 19), "slave" (vv.
19, 21), and "words" (vv. 19, 20) are used in this section.
Verses 17, 18 emphasize the importance of proper speech from
a father to a son (v. 17) and from God to a people (v. 18). Both
are necessary for success and righteousness. Verses 19-23
describe wrong speech. Wrong speech includes advising or
pampering a slave (vv. 19, 21), being hasty with words (v. 20),
releasing anger due to a proud heart (vv. 22, 23), and refusing
to speak when one should (v. 24).
          Verses 25 and 26 describe Jehovah's prominence over men.
What could capstone this collection better than focusing on
Jehovah who is behind all human affairs? The key word linking
these 2 verses together is "Jehovah." The author petitions the
courtier to trust God rather than fear men (v. 25), and to realize
that justice comes from God not from manipulating judges (v.
26). A working model of this section is as follows:

     vv. 17-24   Verbal speech
          vv. 17-18   Necessary speech
          vv. 19-24   Improper speech
     vv. 25-26   Jehovah's prominence

Verse 27 concludes the collection by reiterating the dichotomy
between the righteous and wicked.
          By way of conclusion, this writer has sought to analyze
chapters 28 and 29 of Proverbs. Although some of the specific
development within each section is subject to debate, there are
some clear literary styles and structures used in this collection
which seem to be more than mere coincidence. It would appear

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[14]Ibid., 243.

that the author is petitioning prospective rulers to submit to God's standard of righteousness, to see the opposition between righteousness and wickedness, and to understand the consequences of right or wrong living for himself and his people.