

The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature

Bruce K. Waltke

The comparison made in 1 Kings 4:29-34 between Solomon's wisdom and that of the ancient Near Eastern sages strongly implies that his proverbs were a part of an international, pan-oriental, wisdom literature. During the past century archaeologists have been uncovering texts from Solomon's pagan peers, and scholars have been using them to further the understanding of the Book of Proverbs. The purposes of this article are to examine the ways in which this ancient literature has advanced the understanding of "the proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel" (Prov. 1: 1, NIV), and to demonstrate how these texts help answer introductory questions (date; authorship; literary forms, structure, and arrangement; textual transmission; and history of the wisdom tradition) and how these texts help interpret the content of the book (the meaning of wisdom, its theological relevance, and the resolution of some exegetical problems).

DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

Before the discovery and decipherment of these extrabiblical texts, scholars who applied to the Old Testament a historico-critical method (which presupposed the evolutionary development of religion) concluded that the biblical witnesses to Solomon's contribution to wisdom could not be taken at face value.¹ Instead, they argued,

¹ These biblical witnesses are 1 Kings 4:29-34; Proverbs 10:1; 25:1; and Matthew 12:42. Proverbs 1: 1 is best taken as a title for the work and not a designation of the authorship of the whole book because the internal evidence of the book itself clearly shows that the book achieved its final form after the time of Hezekiah (25: 1) and that others besides Solomon contributed to this anthology of wisdom material (cf. 30: 1; 31: 1). There is no evidence, however, that the book in its present form should be dated later than the time of the monarchy.

the postexilic Jewish community under Grecian influences must be credited for these literary achievements. Even as late as 1922, Hoelscher still placed the so-called older proverbial literature in the Persian period.² But the many pagan sapiential texts, found around the broad horizon of the Fertile Crescent, and confidently dated to the time of Solomon and centuries before him, have called their presupposition into question and have refuted their skepticism toward the biblical witness.

Giovanni Pettinato, in his preliminary report on the thousands of tablets unearthed in the royal archives at Tell-Mardikh (Ebla), alerted biblical scholars that some of those tablets contain collections of proverbs.³ The precise dating of the royal palace at Ebla poses some difficulties, for the artifactual evidence points to a date between 2400 and 2250 B.C. while the paleography of the literary texts points to a period around 2450 B.C.⁴

Gordon has published two collections of Sumerian proverbs out of the fifteen collections he pieced together from the hundreds of clay tablets dug up from the scribal quarters at Nippur, Susa, and Ur.⁵ These two collections containing about 200 and 165 proverbs respectively have a strikingly similar form to the Solomonic collections of 375 and 124 proverbs in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27 respectively. Gordon dates both of these Sumerian collections to the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1700 B.C.).

Lambert has published bilingual proverbial texts containing both Sumerian proverbs and their Akkadian translations.⁶ Six of these fragments, dating from the Middle Assyrian times and later, overlap or can be placed in relation to each other, and thus provide a considerable part of one group of proverbs known as the *Assyrian Collection*. He also published an Akkadian translation from Middle Assyrian times of a Sumerian original entitled *The Instructions of*

² Gustav Hoelscher, *Geschichte der israelitischen und jüdischen Religion* (Giessen: A. Topelmann, 1922), p. 148.

³ Giovanni Pettinato, "The Royal Archives of Tell Mardikh-Ebla," *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (May 1976): 45.

⁴ Paolo Matthiae, "Ebla in the Late Early Syrian Period," *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (September 1976): 94-113.

⁵ Edmund I. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverb: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp. 24, 152. Gordon also noted that "it is quite reasonable to assume a considerably older date for the origin of at least a great number of the proverbs included in them."

⁶ W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 92, 97, 222.

Shuruppak as well as the famous Akkadian work, *The Counsels of Wisdom*, which he dates to the Cassite period (1500-1200 B.C.).

Aramaic proverbs are given in a collection known as the *Words of Ahiqar*. Ahiqar was a sage in the court of the Assyrian kings Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) and Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.).⁷

Instructional literature from Egypt has close affinities to the admonitions found in Proverbs 1:2-9:18 and 22:17-24:34 and are dated from the Old Kingdom right on down to the Late Dynastic Period and Hellenistic Rule. The following is a list of those texts belonging to the Egyptian instruction literature.⁸

The Old Kingdom (2686-2160 B.C.)

The Instruction for Ka-gem-ni

The Instruction of Prince Hor-dedef

The Instruction of Ptah-hotep

The First Intermediate Period (2160-2040 B.C.)

The Instruction for King Meri-ka-Re

The Middle Kingdom (2040-1558 B.C.)

The Instruction of King Amen-em-het

The Instruction of Sehetep-ib-Re

The New Kingdom (1558-1085 B.C.)

The Instruction of Ani

*The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope*⁹

The Late Dynastic Period and Hellenistic Rule

The Instruction of 'Onchsheshonqy (fifth or fourth century B.C.)

The Instruction of the Papyrus Insinger (304-30 B.C.)

In short, wisdom literature existed around the Fertile Crescent not only before Solomon but even before the Hebrews appeared in history!

LITERARY FORMS

Like the wisdom sayings in the Book of Proverbs, these texts of varying provenience are composed in poetic form, that is, they are cast in parallelisms. Herder praised this form as "thought rhyme"

⁷ James M. Lindenberger, "The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar," (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 1974)

⁸ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 28-61.

⁹ The date of the Instruction of *Amen-em-Ope* is hotly disputed and deserves a separate study. The issue is of some importance because this text most closely resembles the Book of Proverbs. A date for this text shortly before the time of Solomon has received new support through the discovery by Cerny of a broken (yet unpublished) ostrakon in the Cairo Museum. See Ronald J. Williams, "The Alleged Semitic Original of the Wisdom of Amen-emope," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 47 (1961): 100-106.

and von Rad aptly likened it to expressing truth stereophonically. For example, the familiar antithetical parallelism of Solomon's proverbs finds its counterpart in this Sumerian proverb: "Of what you have found you do not speak; [only] of what you have lost do you speak."¹⁰ In his "rhetorical analysis" of Sumerian proverbs, Gordon calls attention to antithetical, synonymous, climactic, and more complicated types of parallelism.

Most instructive here is the *Instruction of Amen-em-Ope*, preserved in a British Museum papyrus and on tablets in Turin and Paris. On these documents the parallelism is written stichically, that is, in lines that show the metrical scheme. Furthermore, the lines are grouped into chapters.

The Egyptians had the specific term *sboyet* ("instruction" or "teaching") for their literary genre¹¹ that closely approximates the precepts and maxims collected in Proverbs 1:2-9:18 and 22:17-24: 34. On the other hand, the pithy Solomonic sentences designated "proverbs" in 10: 1 and 25:1 resemble in the strictest sense the apothegms, adages, and bywords of the Sumerian collections.

But in contrast to the Solomonic collections, the Sumerian collections and the *Assyrian Collections* contain coarse and vulgar proverbs. Here are some edited samples: "[A low] fellow/[An A]morite speaks [to] his wife, 'You be the man,' [I] will be the woman.'"¹² "A mother of eight [grown] young men who is [still capable of] bearing [more children] lies down [for copulation] passively [?]"¹³ "A thing which has not occurred.. since time immemorial: a young girl broke wind in her husband's bosom."¹⁴ Such proverbs bear more kinship to the Arabic, Turkish, and other modern Near Eastern proverbs than to the known proverbs from the rest of the ancient Near East.

¹⁰ Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, p. 47.

¹¹ William Kelly Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Egypt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 6.

¹² Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 230. Lambert comments: "The section apparently refers to transvestite practices, which are first known in the ancient near East from their condemnation in Deuteronomy xxii.5. Later references to these rites in Syria and Asia Minor are more abundant (see S. R. Driver, Deuteronomy, p. 250), though there seems to be no clear evidence for them at any period in Mesopotamia. Thus the alternative 'Amorite' could be supported on the assumption that these people were notorious for this perversion, as were the men of Sodom, Corinth, and Bulgaria, and the women of Lesbos, for other things" (ibid.).

¹³ Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, p. 273.

¹⁴ Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 260.

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND ARRANGEMENT

The literary structure of the Egyptian *sboyet* genre includes three elements: (a) a title - "the beginning of the instruction of X which he composed for his son Y"; (b) a prose or poetic introduction - the setting forth of the details of why the instruction is given; and (c) the contents - the linking together of admonitions and sayings in mutually independent sections of very diverse nature.

Aside from the omission of the first section, this is precisely the structure exhibited in the "Thirty Sayings of the Wise" (Prov. 22: 17-24:22). The motive behind the collection is given in 22: 17-21 which is followed by the diverse collection of admonitions in 22:22-24:22.

Compare, for example, the first two chapters of the *Instruction of Amen-em-Ope* with Proverbs 22: 17-23.

Chapter 1

He says:

Give your ears, hear the sayings,

It profits to put them in your heart,

Woe to him who neglects them!

Let them rest in the casket of your belly,

May they be bolted in your heart;

When there rises a whirlwind of words,

They'll be a mooring post for your tongue.

If you make your life with these in your heart,

You will find it a success;

You will find my words a storehouse for life,

Your being will prosper upon earth.

Chapter 2

Beware of robbing a wretch,

Of attacking a cripple....¹⁵

If those who divided the Bible into its chapters had been aware of these literary forms and structures found in the pagan sapiential texts, they no doubt would have made a chapter break between Proverbs 22: 16 and 22: 17.

The literary structure of the Egyptian "teaching" genre also enables one to detect better the structure undergirding the Book of Proverbs. After the prose introduction in 1: 1 and before the collection of sayings in 10:1-31:31, the editor included a collection of admonitions and eoniums to wisdom, setting forth in detail the value of the instruction (1:2-9:18).

¹⁵ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 2 (1976): 149-50.

The biblical student may find small comfort in learning that the sages throughout the ancient Near East essentially arranged their material in the same baffling manner found in the Book of Proverbs. Is there any logic to the arrangement? Perhaps some help is found in the Sumerian collections which fall, with few exceptions, into groupings which have in common either the initial signs of each individual proverb or the subject matter of the proverbs in the group. The "key sign" may also occur in the second place or even further on in the proverb.¹⁶ Moreover, the "key signs" also alternate occasionally. Gemser also notes rudiments of similar groupings in the *Instructions of 'Onchsheshonqy*.¹⁷ Possibly the proverbial sentences and the admonitions in the Book of Proverbs are connected in this so-called anthological style whereby sayings are strung together by certain catchwords as in the more obvious key *king* in 16:12-15 and *Yahweh* in 16:1-7, which follows an alternating pattern in 16:7-11 (note *king* in 16:10).

It is also surprising to find lofty precepts mixed with more "trivial" apothegms. Of course, this is a misconception based on the modern-day viewpoint of life. From the sages' perspective each proverb is an expression of "wisdom," which is, as will be seen, the fixed order of reality. Viewed from this perspective no sentence is trivial, as Frankfort notes.

But when a predestined order is recognized in so many quasi-permanent features of society...all rules of conduct become practical rules. There can be no contrast between savoir-faire-worldly wisdom - and ethical behavior. Conceptions which we distinguish as contrasts thus turn out to be identical for the Egyptian; statements of his, which have for us a pragmatic ring, appear to be transfused with religious reverence.¹⁸

Elsewhere Frankfort expanded on the traditional character of the wisdom literature.

Such an inconsequential arrangement characterizes many books of ancient "wisdom"; the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are cases in point. The absence of a systematic arrangement is due to the traditional character of the contents. There is no need of a closely knit argument; striking images, incisive wording are all that is required to give a fresh appeal to the truth of familiar viewpoints.¹⁹

16 Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, pp. 24, 156.

17 B. Gemser, "The Instructions of 'Onchsheshonqy and Biblical Wisdom Literature," *Supplement to Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 7 (1960), p. 113.

18 Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 65.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT

First Kings 4: 29-31 suggests that the sages and their writings were held in high esteem in Solomon's world. The texts confirm this impression. One hieratic papyrus put the value of wisdom literature this way: "Books of instructions became their [the learned scribes'] pyramids. ...Is there another one like Ptah-hotep and Kaires?"²⁰ A wall of a New Kingdom tomb at Sakkara has representations of mummiform statues of important officials. Among the viziers are Imhotep and Kaires. Their inclusion is certainly partly to be explained on the basis of their reputations as sages.

Not surprisingly, then, their works seem to have enjoyed a canonical status. "Take no word away, add nothing thereto, and put not one thing in place of another," cautions Ptah-hotep with reference to his own work. His mentality corresponds to the godly Agur's admonition: "Every word of God is flawless; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words or He will rebuke you and prove you a liar" (Prov. 30:5-6). Meri-ka-Re was told, "Copy thy fathers, them that have gone before thee.... Behold, their words endure in writing. Open [the book] and read, and copy the knowledge, so that the craftsman too may become a wise man [?]."

The conservative scribes by and large followed these admonitions. The Turin tablet contains the portion of the *Instruction of Amen-em-Ope* which corresponds to 24:1-25:9 in the complete British Museum papyrus. The tablet attests the same line arrangement and the extract copied on the tablet begins precisely at the beginning of a page in the complete papyrus.

The colophon to the *Counsel of Wisdom* reads, "Written according to the prototype and collated." Lambert commented on a bilingual tablet from Ashurbanipal's library, of which no duplicate or early copy has yet been found.

Either this tablet, or an antecedent copy on which it is based, was copied from a damaged original, and the scribe very faithfully reproduced this. When he wrote on one line what was split between two in his original, the dividing point on the original was marked with the pair of wedges used in commentaries to separate words quoted from the comments on them....Where the original was badly damaged, the scribe copied out exactly what he saw, and left blank spaces marked "broken" where nothing remained.²¹

²⁰ From *Papyrus Chester Beatty IV*, following the translation of A. H. Gardiner.

²¹ Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 239.

But the evidence also shows that some changes were made. The comparison between the late bilingual tablets with their old Babylonian unilingual Sumerian material is proving to be a most helpful lesson in literary history. Gordon turned up thirty-four individual proverbs common to both the earlier unilingual material and the later bilingual texts. Lambert observed instances where no change occurred. "What is more significant is that whole groups of proverbs in the same sequence are carried over from the unilinguals to the late bilinguals."²² But he also noted that one tablet of the late period has a proverb not in the earlier collection. This shows that while collections were transmitted conservatively, yet choice proverbs could be added to the collection. In the same way, the editor of the Book of Proverbs felt free to bring together material from diverse sources. Lambert also found another tablet which added a variant from one in the earlier period. The circulation of variant forms of the same proverb is also well known in the Hebrew collection (cf. Prov. 11:4 with 24:6).

HISTORY OF WISDOM TRADITION

Many attempts have been made to trace in one way or another an evolutionary development in the history of the wisdom tradition. Richter,²³ for example, advanced the notion that the motive clauses in the admonitions were late, post exilic additions to the imperative statements.²⁴ But more recently Kayatz carefully documented the remarkable parallelism between the syntactic forms of these admonitions in both the Egyptian and Hebrew instructions.²⁵ Albright had earlier shown their close affinities with Ugaritic and Phoenician texts and on this basis had argued for their antiquity.²⁶

Hermisson²⁷ and Murphy²⁸ have proved wrong the thesis of

²² Ibid., p. 223.

²³ W. Richter, *Recht und Ethos. Versuch einer Ortung des weisheitlichen Mahnspruches* (Munich: Kosel-Verlag GmbH & Co., 1966).

²⁴ Compare the imperative statements in the odd-numbered verses and the motive clause in the even-numbered verses in 3:1-12.

²⁵ Christa Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966).

²⁶ W. F. Albright, "Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom," *Supplement to Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 3 (1955), p. 4.

²⁷ H. J. Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968).

²⁸ Roland E. Murphy, "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969): 477.

Schmid²⁹ that popular sayings (*Volkspriiche*) developed into artistic sayings or aphorisms (*Kunstspriiche*).

Many today still attempt to date profane and secular wisdom with the early period and the more religious and ethical wisdom with a later period. According to this view Israelite Yahwism, with its strong religious stamp, was laid over an older pragmatic wisdom inherited from Egypt. But Frankfort and others have refuted this thesis recently propounded by McKane³⁰ and Whybray.³¹

It would seem that we have here material (from texts from the third millennium extending to the late dynastic times) for a history of ideas, and modern scholars have sometimes used these texts to describe a development of social and ethical thought in Egypt. I do not think that such an interpretation is tenable if we study the evidence without prejudice - that is, without an evolutionary bias. The differences between the earlier and the later texts seem largely to have been caused by accidents of preservation, while their resemblance consists, on the contrary, in a significant uniformity of tenor.³²

Erman concurs: "It ['Onchsheshonqy] is far removed from the pious quietism of the *Instruction of Amenemope* and in fact seems closer to some of the Old Kingdom practical instructions, those of Ptahhotep and Kegemni...."³³

Whedbee addressed himself directly to McKane's view.

McKane does not deal with the basic concept of an order in the world, which seems to have formed a crucially important presupposition in the wise man's approach to reality. The wise man took this order - created and guaranteed by God - as the starting point in his attempt to master life. ...To say that the wise man was completely an independent, empirical operator, as McKane does, is to misread the data of the ancient wisdom and view it through the lens of a modern construct. The wise man always reckoned with God....³⁴

²⁹ H. H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit* (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1966).

³⁰ William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

³¹ R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (Naperville, Ill: A. R. Allenson, 1965).

³² Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 59. Fr. R. W. von Bissing finds constant spiritual and moral stance throughout the history of the sapiential genre (*Altaegyptische Lebensweisheit* [Zurich: Artemis-Verlag, 1955]).

³³ Simpson, *The Literature of Egypt*, p. xxi.

³⁴ J. William Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 118-19.

Murphy holds the same opinion. "No distinction of 'profane' or 'sacred' is applicable here; God was considered the guardian of the social order...."³⁵

Hubbard concludes that no evolution in the history of the wisdom tradition can be discerned. "Simple evolutionary approaches ought to be *passee* in studies of wisdom as they are in those of prophecy or cultus."³⁶

THE SETTING

For whom were the proverbial sentences and admonishing sayings originally composed? How should one interpret the frequently recurring expression, "my son"? For lack of space the theories given in answer to these questions cannot be discussed here. But it is this author's conviction that the wisdom material had its original setting in the home of the courtier.

At least that seems to have been the case for the Egyptian teachings. As noted earlier, the titles of these works uniformly follow the form: "The instruction of X ...for his son Y." As Frankfort observed, "The authors of the 'teachings' do not present themselves as priests and prophets. They appear as aged officials at the end of active and successful careers, desirous to let their children profit by their experience."³⁷ Here, for example, are the introductions to Ptah-hotep and Ka-gem-ni, respectively:

The Instruction of the Mayor and Vizier Ptah-hotep ...: "O Sovereign, my lord: Oldness has come; old age has descended... Let a command be issued to this servant to make a staff of old age (that is, the son as the support of his father), that my son may be made to stand in my place. Then may I speak to him the words of them that listen and the ideas of the ancestors...."³⁸

The vizier had his children called after he had completed (his treatise) on the ways of mankind and on their character as encountered by him. And he said unto them: "All that is in this book hear it...."³⁹

³⁵ R. E. Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems in Old Testament Research," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1967): 103.

³⁶ David A. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," *The Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966): 18.

³⁷ Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 60.

³⁸ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 12.

³⁹ Simpson, *The Literature of Egypt*, pp. 178-79.

Amen-em-Ope, a high official in the administration of royal estates, wrote expressly for his own son, Hor-em-maa-kheru, a young priestly scribe. Erman points out that the content of these texts supports this alleged setting: "What King Amenemhet committed to his son far exceeds the bounds of school philosophy, and there is nothing whatever to do with schools in the great man warning his children to be loyal to the king."⁴⁰

The expression "my son" also appears to have its face value in the Akkadian *Counsel of Wisdom*. Lambert makes the following comment on the use of the term in this text:

The advice given in the section "My son" can have had relevance for very few people.... This suggests that we are to construe the text as being in the form of admonitions of some worthy to his son who will succeed him as vizier to the ruler.⁴¹

Ahiqar, the vizier to the Assyrian king Sennacherib, wrote his words for his nephew Nadin.⁴² He too uses the recurrent parental address, "my son."

Thus across many cultures through centuries of history these admonitions are those of a high court official addressing his son.

The admonitions and proverbs in the biblical text also appear to have originated in courtiers' homes. In addition to Solomon's proverbs, other literary achievements collected in the Book of Proverbs are attributed to King Lemuel's mother (31:1) and to the copying of Solomon's proverbs by the men of Hezekiah (25:1).

Moreover, the subject matter of Proverbs best suits this setting. Some of them are most appropriate for kings and for those associated with him, e.g., proverbs pertaining to the nation (11:14) or the king (16:10; 20:2); dining with royalty (23:1-3); behaving in a way worthy of a king (31:4); etc. Here too it should be noted that court wisdom in Egypt also focused on the king's responsibilities as guarantor of justice.⁴³ In addition, the Book of Proverbs, like the Egyptian literature, includes a mingling of urban and agricultural concerns, particularly those of the wealthy plantation owner.⁴⁴ Such

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴¹ Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 96.

⁴² The story is set during the reign of Esarhaddon.

⁴³ H. Brunner, "Gerechtigkeit als Fundament des Throns," *Vetus Testamentum* 8 (1958): 426-28; cf. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (1968).

⁴⁴ R. Gordis, "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 18 (1943-4): 77-118.

a breadth of interest and perspective on life admirably suits the position of courtiers.

But these kings and high officials in Israel are writing for their sons. There is no reason not to take the reference to "my son" in any other way than in its normal significance. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the father is held responsible for his child's social, moral, and religious training (Gen. 18:19; Exod. 12:24; Deut. 4:9-11). Furthermore, it is certain that skills and trades were passed down from father to son without recourse to schools. But above all, the references to the mother in 1:8; 4:3; 6:20; 31:1, 26 clinch the argument. Whybray argued cogently:

Here the father and mother are placed on exactly the same footing as teachers of their children.... The phraseology of these sentences corresponds almost exactly to that of their Egyptian counterparts...; and this throws into greater relief the one feature which is entirely unique in them: the mention of the mother. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this feature is an example of the adaptation of the Egyptian tradition to the peculiar situation in which the Israelite instructions were composed: a domestic situation in which the father and mother together shared the responsibility for the education of the child.⁴⁵

But while these sayings originated in the courtiers' homes, they seem to have been disseminated in Mesopotamia and Egypt through the schools for most of these texts have been unearthed in scribal schools. The *Satire on the Trade Winds* reads, "The beginning of the instruction which a man of the ship's cabin, whose name was Duauf's son Khety, made for his son, [whose] name was Pepy, as he was journeying upstream [to] the Residence City, to put him into the Writing School among the children of officials...." Indeed, many of the extant copies of these texts are obviously schoolboy efforts to reproduce what their instructors were teaching them. In Israel the sayings of its courtiers were democratized for the improvement of all Israel through such a work as the Book of Proverbs.

THE MEANING OF WISDOM

Crenshaw justly complained that "the many attempts to define wisdom have not been altogether successful."⁴⁶ He is well aware however, that efforts to understand this term so central to the teach-

⁴⁵ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ James L. Crenshaw, *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1976), p. 3.

The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature / 233

ing of the Book of Proverbs have been greatly advanced through an understanding of its Egyptian equivalent *Ma'at*. The Egyptian term, like Hebrew חָכְמָה ("wisdom"), lies at the heart of its wisdom teaching. A section in the *Instruction of Ptah-hotep* presents *Ma'at* in these terms:

Ma'at is good and its worth is lasting. It has not been disturbed since the day of its creator, whereas he who transgresses its ordinances is punished. It lies as a path in front even of him who knows nothing. Wrongdoing [?] has never yet brought its venture to port. It is true that evil may gain wealth but the strength of truth is that it lasts; a man can say: "It was the property of my father."⁴⁷

From this statement Frankfort made the following conclusion:

The Egyptians recognized a divine order, established at the time of creation; this order is manifest in nature in the normalcy of phenomena; it is manifest in society as justice; and it is manifest in an individual's life as truth. *Ma'at is this order, the essence of existence, whether we recognize it or not.*⁴⁸

This notion of a fixed, eternal righteous order does compare favorably with the biblical meaning of "wisdom." The figures of speech used in the first section of the Book of Proverbs (1:2-9:18) suggest that it is Yahweh's eternal and righteous order granting life to those who walk in it. In 1:20-33 wisdom is likened to a street preacher (Lady Wisdom) who laughs at the calamity of the fools who ignored her or disdainfully rejected her, that is, it is an inviolable righteous order. In 3:18 it is referred to as a tree of life in the midst of time. According to 3:19-20 it was God's instrument for creating the cosmos. The point of this statement seems to be that wisdom is the principle that accounts for order and life found in creation. In 4:10-27 in a series of poems it is designated "the way," that is, it is an ordered realm without imperfections. In 8:1-11 an evangel proclaims that righteousness, justice, and truth are the way to lasting well-being. In 8:22 wisdom is likened to a craftsman at Yahweh's side delighting above all in man at the time of creation. The point of this comparison seems to be that it is an eternal order existing for man's good. Finally in 9:1-18 Dame Wisdom contends with Dame Folly in their rival invitations for the soul of the simpleton. In a word, wisdom is a potent righteous force opposed by a potent unrighteous force.

⁴⁷ Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

The Egyptian concept of *Ma'at* has helped gain from these metaphors the meaning that wisdom is God's fixed order for life, an order opposed by chaos and death. But man must choose by faith to trust the Lord who stands behind this created order.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The Egyptian sages seem to have discerned values in *Ma'at* similar to those affirmed in Israel for "wisdom." Since the pioneering efforts of Budge⁴⁹ and Gressmann,⁵⁰ it has been clear that the *Instruction of Amen-em-Ope* most closely approximates the teachings of the Book of Proverbs, especially the "Thirty Sayings of the Wise" in Proverbs 22:17-24:22.

Simpson called attention to the following parallels, among many others, between the Hebrew and Egyptian works.⁵¹

1. "Better a little with the fear of the Lord
than great wealth with turmoil.
Better a meal of vegetables where there is love
than a fattened calf with hatred"
(Prov. 15:16-17, NIV).

"Better is poverty at the hand of God
than riches in the storehouse.
Better is bread with happy heart
than riches with vexation" (Amen. 9:5-8).

2. "In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps"
(Prov. 16:9, NIV).

"The words which men say are one thing.
The thing which God does is another"
(Amen. 19:16).

3. "Do not say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong!'
Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you"
(Prov. 20:22, NIV).

"Say not, 'Find me a redeemer,
for a man who hateth me hath injured me'

⁴⁹ E.A.W. Budge, *The Teaching of Amen-em-apt, Son of Kanekht* (London: M. Hopkinson & Co., 1924).

⁵⁰ Hugo Gressmann, *Israels Spruchweisheit im Zusammenhang der Weltliteratur* (Berlin: Karl Curtius, 1925).

⁵¹ D. C. Simpson, "The Hebrew Book of Proverbs and the Teaching of Amenophis," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 12 (1926): 232-39.

The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature / 235

Sit down at the hand of God;
your tranquility will overthrow them"
(Amen. 22:3-4, 7-8).

4. "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man,
do not associate with one easily angered,
or you may learn his ways
and get yourself ensnared" (Prov. 22:24-25, NIV).

"Do not associate to thyself a passionate man,
nor approach him for conversation.
Leap not to cleave to that [fellow],
lest a terror carry thee away"
(Amen. 11:13-15; 13:8-9).

5. "Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
have the wisdom to show restraint.
Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle"
(Prov. 23:4-5, NIV).

"Labor not to seek increase

.....
[perchance] they have made themselves wings like geese,
they have flown to heaven" (Amen. 9:14-10:4).

These individual sayings not only agree in form and sometimes even in wording, but when viewed collectively they share the same ethical and social ideals. Lichtheim summarizes the ideal man, "the silent man," in this Egyptian text in this way:

[He] is content with a humble position and a minimal amount of material possessions. His chief characteristic is modesty. He is self-controlled, quiet, and kind toward people, and he is humble before God. This ideal man is indeed not a perfect man, for perfection is now viewed as belonging only to God.⁵²

Here again space does not permit discussion of a much-debated issue related to these sapiential texts, namely, how this striking relationship between the Bible and these pagan texts is to be accounted for. Suffice it to say here that Oesterley seems to have the best of the arguments in his contention that both go back to a common stock of international, pan-oriental, proverbial literature.⁵³

⁵² Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 146.

⁵³ W. O. E. Oesterley, "The 'Teaching of Amen-em-Qpe' and the Old Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 45 (1927): 9-24.

But the question still remains, In what way is the theology of Proverbs unique? Indeed, anyone familiar with studies comparing other literary forms of the Bible with their counterparts in the ancient Near East will immediately grasp the point that the question needs to be expanded: In what way is the Old Testament unique? The theological significance of the Book of Proverbs does not depend on the originality of its individual sentences or sayings any more than the theological significance of the so-called Book of the Covenant rests in the originality of its individual commandments. These can be paralleled at point after point in the Babylonian, Assyrian, and Hittite laws, and they clearly reflect a common body of ancient Near Eastern legal tradition. The same is true of Israel's hymns; they are stamped by a hymnology common to the ancient Near East. The theological significance of the Old Testament rests rather on the connection of all this literature with Yahweh, the God of Israel. The theological significance of the Book of Proverbs rests in its clear affirmation that Yahweh brought "wisdom" into existence, revealed it to man, and as Guarantor upholds this moral order.

Hubbard pointed in this direction when he wrote, "Pagan wisdom though it, too, may be religious has no anchor in the covenant-God. ..." ⁵⁴ The pagan sages do not even know the name of the God who created and sustains the fixed moral and ethical order that their consciences bore witness to. Frankfort rightly observed this lack in the Egyptian texts: "But is it not remarkable that none of the gods are mentioned by name in any of the 'teachings'? When the Egyptians appeal to 'God,' ...they impart to the divine interest in man's behavior a distinctly impersonal character." ⁵⁵

Keimer put it this way: "All in all, one has the impression that there is for Amenemope but one God; it remains open to the individual, however, to represent this highest being as he will." ⁵⁶ Paul's famous sermon to the Athenians, in which he related their

⁵⁴ D. A. Hubbard, "Wisdom," in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 1,333.

⁵⁵ Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 76. While most scholars think *Amen-em-ope* has an "urgott" in view, both Frankfort and Hellmut Brunner suppose that Egyptian *netjer* ("god") designates an individual's personal god, *his* god ("Der Freie Wille Gottes in der aegyptischen Weisheit," *Sagesses*, pp. 103-20). Joseph Vergote believes that a distinction can be made between the mention of "specified gods" and the anonymous "unique" god ("La notion de Dieu dans les Livres de sagesse egyptiens," *Sagesses*, pp. 159-90).

⁵⁶ Ludwig Keimer, "The Wisdom of Amen-em-ope and the Proverbs of Solomon," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 43 (1926-27): 11.

unknown god with the Creator and the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, springs immediately to mind (Acts 17: 22-31).

Since the Egyptians did not know the name of this "urgott," with whom they had no personal relationship, they do not attribute their understanding of the fixed order to him. Of course, this is strikingly different from the claim made in Proverbs 2:6: "For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (NIV).

Finally, it should be noted that the Egyptian fathers did not call on their sons to trust an impersonal, unnamed God. By contrast the godly Hebrew courtiers realized that ultimately the son must trust in Yahweh who founded, revealed, and upheld this fixed moral order. Its promises were only as sure as He is trustworthy.⁵⁷ It is instructive to note that in the introduction to the "Thirty Sayings of the Wise," which bears such a strong resemblance to chapter one in the *Instruction of Amen-em-Ope*, the Israelite sage uniquely adds that his purpose is that his readers' "trust may be in the LORD" (Prov. 22:19, NIV). In that unique addition the essential theological relevance and distinctiveness of the biblical book stands out. That demand for faith informs the whole book (cf. Prov. 3:5-6 and the recurrent expression, "Fear the LORD" [1:7], which is the motto of the book).

SOME EXEGETICAL PROBLEMS

On the basis of the similarity between the sayings collected in Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and the *Instruction of Amen-em-Ope* and the fact that both works contain thirty sayings - a point stated explicitly in Amen-em-Ope 27:7 - most modern versions emend the obscure *Kethibh* readings **שְׁלֹשִׁים** "day before yesterday" = "heretofore" (?), and the Qere reading, **שְׁלֹשִׁים** "officer" = "excellent" (?), to **שְׁלֹשִׁים** "thirty."

In Proverbs 24:12 Yahweh is represented as one "who weighs the heart." This figure goes back to the Egyptian god Thoth, who is often represented as standing at the judgment of the dead beside the scales with the human heart.

The Septuagint and some ancient versions have rendered the ambiguous **אָשֶׁר** of Proverbs 23: 1 by "note well *what* is before you,"

⁵⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 193.

while other versions have "note well *who* is before you." The parallel in *Amen-em-Ope*, "Look at the cup that is before you," suggests that the Septuagint and those versions agreeing with it have the better translation.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of the ancient Near Eastern sapiential literature to biblical studies is apparent. It helps to establish the plausibility of a position contending for the preexilic date of the content of the Book of Proverbs and for the historical credibility of those texts which attribute their authorship to Solomon. A "proverb" can now be defined more accurately and confusion with other literary forms in the book can be avoided. There is firm reason to think that the text of the Book of Proverbs was transmitted conservatively, and that the attempt to arrange its sources chronologically by distinguishing so-called earlier, profane texts from later, sacred texts is wrong-headed. The structure of the literary forms within the book and of the book itself, along with its anthological arrangement, no longer appears so disconnected as it once did. As the sayings and poems within the book are read, one now envisions a godly, noble couple instructing their children. No longer can wisdom be defined simplistically as "the practical application of knowledge." Instead wisdom must be thought of as a broad, theological concept denoting a fixed, righteous order to which the wise man submits his life. Also commentaries should appeal to ancient sources to clarify obscure texts where that is possible.

These sources also provide data for the systematic theologian. The shape and form of the Word of God was popular in its own time and even some of its material is similar to that found in the pagan world. The way in which these inspired sages integrated contemporary literature with their faith provides a model for the saint today. Moreover, one is forcibly reminded that while the Word of God is unchanging, his understanding of it is progressing.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu

The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature / 225. Literary structure and arrangement. The literary structure of the Egyptian sboyet genre includes.Â Instructions of 'Onchsheshonqy.17 Possibly the proverbial sentences. and the admonitions in the Book of Proverbs are connected in this. so-called anthological style whereby sayings are strung together by. certain catchwords as in the more obvious key king in 16:12-15 and.