

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 5

Highlights from Proverbs 1-9

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This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number five, Highlights from Proverbs 1-9.

Welcome to lecture five on the biblical book of Proverbs.

In lecture five, we are going to explore a little bit further some of the impacts of the modern study of the method of interpretation of poetry, and how that impacts our understanding of the book of Proverbs, and we will then use just one case study, namely from Proverbs chapter three, to apply some of the learning that we have done in the first part of lecture five on the method for the interpretation of poetry. The first half of the 21st century, as we are recording these lectures, is an exciting time for the study of the Bible's poetry. Scholars of language and literature have gained exciting new insights into poetry, and that is what I want to share with you now.

Modern linguistics and I'll mention some of the branches and make some general comments about these various branches of modern methodology that contribute to an imaginative, skillful interpretation of poetry. So, the first one of these is modern linguistics helps us to understand how words acquire different meanings in different contexts, and how word combinations produce meaning that far outstrips the sum of the meanings of the individual parts. It helps us to see ambiguity as an asset rather than a setback, something I've mentioned in earlier lectures.

Modern scholars of Hebrew poetry have helped us to overcome simplistic ideas of poetic parallelism and rediscover the beauty of Hebrew poetry, something we have focused on also in one of the earlier lectures. Modern critical theory inspires us to ask fresh questions of familiar texts, invites us to rediscover their modern relevance, and empowers us to become proactive participants in poetry's production of transformative meaning. Modern study of metaphors, and I will be saying a lot more about metaphors in one or two lectures to come, modern study of metaphors helps us to understand how the metaphors we use to speak of complex problems shape our thinking and our lives.

Modern hermeneutics helps us to read biblical poetry with humility and expectation. That famous quote that I keep repeating, and I hope you will remember this to the end of your life, what has been written with imagination must be read with imagination, as famous Spanish Catholic scholar Luis Alonso Schökel used to say. In many ways, then, the study of Hebrew poetry has just begun.

We have arrived in a new territory of the mind that awaits our discovery, a land wide open to the interpretive imagination, inviting us to embark on an exciting adventure of the mind that can change our lives, our political, cultural, and ethical values, and make us more positive contributors to society. And thus, consequently, change our world for the common good. Now, such imaginative and responsible Christian reading requires skill and imagination, and the church and the synagogue need to be challenged and empowered to acquire these interpretive virtues.

For example, poetic metaphors in the Bible are immensely powerful, and they can be used as forces for good or abused to promote or justify evil. On the one hand, they can be beneficial change agents applied responsibly and skillfully for the common good. On the other hand, superficial and less than competent interpretations can turn them into dangerous traps misleading well-meaning Christians and Jews and confirming narrow-minded and dangerous presuppositions current in the general cultural milieu.

In an important study of the ethical relevance of the law of the Old Testament for Christians, notable Old Testament scholar Gordon Wenham explains that laws tend to be a pragmatic compromise between the legislator's ideals and what can be enforced in praxis. Laws do not show what is socially desirable, let alone ideal. They enforce rather minimum standards and set a floor for acceptable behavior, not an ethical ceiling.

I quote, that they do not disclose the ideals of lawgivers but only the limits of their tolerance. End quote. By contrast, I would argue, that the poetry of the Bible, including the poetry of the Book of Proverbs, can bring us further.

In its beautiful words and phrases and its powerful thoughts and emotions and ethical challenges, we actually do come face to face with the dreams and hopes of the people of God. And catch a glimpse of God's ideals for fulfilled, purposeful lives that actively contribute to the common good rather than simply avoid doing the wrong thing. I now want to move to one particular case study from the Book of Proverbs.

This is in Chapter 3, verses 9 to 10. And this is poetry about prosperity, an area and theme in the Book of Proverbs that is very prominent and to which I will come back later in one of the later lectures in our series. But here now, this brief instruction in Proverbs 3, 9 to 10, which is often associated with prosperity teaching in many Christian traditions.

It reads like this, Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce. Then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine. I'll just repeat that to let it sink in.

Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce. Then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine. These two verses have, of course, been a mainstay of prosperity gospel-type preaching for many years, decades even.

A superficial reading does indeed suggest two related ideas, one general, the other specific. First, these verses appear to suggest that godliness automatically leads to wealth. Second, they appear to suggest that the giving of generous offerings of money to church work or Christian ministry organizations automatically leads to prosperity, especially financial rewards.

In practice, this often leads to calls for people to give the so-called tithe, a tenth of their financial income. Such preaching is regularly accompanied by promises that faithful and generous, even sacrificial, giving would make relatively poor people prosperous. However, this is in fact not what these verses are saying, as I will try to show in a moment.

Rather, I want to argue, and I hope you will see this in a minute, that these verses are not addressed to relatively poor people. They are addressed quite specifically, quite directly, and expressly so, to rich people. For verse 10 clarifies that their barns, plural, and their vats, again plural, will be filled beyond capacity.

So, only relatively well-off people have a barn or a vat of their own. Those with several barns and vats are positively wealthy. What does this mean? Rather than providing a prosperity gospel for the poor, these verses constitute a genuine gospel for the rich.

Those with significant wealth, they already own several barns and vats just to contain their regular income, are encouraged to put God first in their lives by being generous to others. The motivation for such reorientation and generosity is then given in promises. Barns will be filled to overflowing, wine containers filled to bursting.

And these promises imply two related but distinct positive outcomes. The first outcome is that any giving to the work of God will not diminish the giver's wealth, but increase it. The barns and vats will not be empty or half full, they will be completely full.

Giving will not diminish the giver. The second outcome is that such giving, by contrast, enriches the giver to the level of surplus without excess. The barns and vats will not be, sorry, so let me just repeat, it enriches the giver to the level of surplus without excess.

Not more barns and more vats to be filled with ever more corn and wine are promised, but an overflow just beyond the present level of prosperity. I should

perhaps just add at this point, this does of course not mean that enterprising business people should not aim to expand their businesses. But the point is the expansion of the business is not an end in itself, but a means to an end to achieve the ability and the opportunity to become even more generous in the future.

It's not about hoarding ever more conspicuous wealth, but it is about enabling the giver to become ever more generous. An imaginative interpretation then will continue and ask the question, ingeniously prompted by this mysterious abundance. What is the generous giver to do with this excess of fortune beyond his or her actual needs? The obvious answer, ingeniously built into the poetic design of this astonishing piece of advice is this.

Give it away! Honor the Lord with it! Continue the virtuous cycle of abundant generosity begetting generous abundance. Not for one's own enrichment, but for a prosperity of the heart that glorifies God through enriching others. As we will see in subsequent lectures, the poetry of the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bible has the power to move, to heal, to challenge, and to transform.

In this poetry we have also seen needs, reading such poetry needs skill, imagination, and wisdom. These interpretive virtues do not come easily. They need hard work, commitment, and perseverance.

But the fruits of such investment in interpretive skills will be abundant and rewarding. They can bring true and lasting change for ourselves and for the common good. Perhaps I want to just add one more thing here.

I am giving this lecture trying to make sure that all of our listeners are aware that this is relevant both for Christians and for Jews in the modern world. But I also, of course, being an ordained pastor in the Methodist Church and teaching at a Christian seminary, I also speak as a Christian theologian and a Christian academic. And I now want to put much of what I am sharing in these lectures about the Book of Proverbs into a larger hermeneutical context with regards to what role the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish Hebrew Bible, and the Christian Old Testament play for modern Christians today.

And to a degree, of course, also for modern Jewish believers today. And I want to put these statements under the heading somewhat provocative and deliberately provocative, but also kind of tongue-in-cheek, kind of light-hearted, humorous statement. For me, the Old Testament is the New Testament.

Let me say that again. The Old Testament is the New Testament. What do I mean by that? Well, the New Testament was written over a period of around 100 years by those who knew the incarnate Jesus personally or who at least knew people who had known Jesus through first-hand experience.

All of them wrote from the perspective of Jesus' imminent return, as hinted at in the Gospels, for example, in Matthew 16, verse 28, or Luke 9, verse 27. From this perspective, all that mattered was the life to come, eternity in heaven. As Paul puts it in Colossians 3, verse 2, set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

In the light of the resurrection, the challenges and opportunities of this earthly life seemed peripheral. Paul again, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. Romans 8, verse 17.

Most of the New Testament, then, was written to prepare its readers for heaven. Guidance on how to live faithfully here and now was peripheral, for we have no lasting city, but we're looking for the city that is to come. Hebrews 13, verse 14.

Now, by contrast, the Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus and the disciples was written over a time span of around 1,000 years. It was written by and for a community of believers who, for most of their existence, constituted a beleaguered minority surrounded by powerful opponents. It describes the highs and lows of a people's spiritual and physical defects and victories.

It paints a vivid picture of the struggles and triumphs of innumerable individuals, great heroes, and heroines of the faith through many generations. It presents the songs of joy over divine blessings and the laments of anguish over divine judgment. It offers us glimpses into the deepest feelings and fears, the greatest joys and insights, and the unsurpassed wisdom of great thinkers like the authors of the Book of Proverbs.

In short, the Old Testament describes the life of faith of the people of God throughout history. And here lies its relevance for modern Christian faith and praxis. The Christian Church has been in existence for almost 2,000 years.

Through much of its history, it has been a beleaguered minority like ancient Israel. While this has not been true for Europe roughly from 300 AD to 1900 AD and for North America from the 18th century to the present day, it has certainly been true for most of the world for most of Christianity's history. It is true for Western Europe today and it is still true for many parts of Africa and Asia.

The Church has gone through wonderful triumphs and tragic failures like ancient Israel. The Church has brought great advances to humanity like ancient Israel. The Church has committed great sins like ancient Israel.

It shares with modern Judaism one of the greatest treasures of humanity, the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, the New Testament. For the Church, as for ancient

Israel and modern Judaism, the Old Testament and especially its poetry is an inspiration for a life lived well, for survival in the midst of injustice and suffering, for humility in the midst of human self-aggrandizement, and for a life in service for the common good. This is Dr. Knute Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs.

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