

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 14

Proverbs 22-24 and Amenemope

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This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 14, Proverbs chapters 22 through 24, and Amenemope.

Welcome to lesson 14 on the biblical book of Proverbs.

In the previous lecture, we have been looking at the international dimension of so-called wisdom literature as a whole and then problematized the very term wisdom literature as such, both in its application to ancient and eastern texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt, but also even for the biblical literature itself. And I myself have not come to a new way of referring to these books yet, but I'm inclining towards perhaps a less defined way of speaking and more saying this is a specific kind of poetic literature that is really interested in intellectual, cognitive integration of theology into human life, something like that. In this particular lecture now, I want to focus more specifically on a very prominent, very exciting parallel that I've already mentioned in the previous lecture between the Egyptian text, the teachings of Amenemope, and one of the collections in the biblical book of Proverbs, namely collection number three, which is chapters 22 to 17 to halfway through chapter 24.

And in order to explain what is at issue, I will do is to get us into, help us gain a sense of what's at stake, is I'm going to read an opening section from Bruce Waltke's commentary, which I will then comment on and reflect and to a degree also critique in the next few minutes. So here we go. The structural evidence, Waltke writes, of the Egyptian instruction of Amenemope from around 1186 to 1069 BC, confirms the internal evidence, which he has discussed elsewhere, that the 30 sayings of the wise, in Proverbs that is, is a distinct anthology of wisdom sayings.

Most scholars believe that the 30 Sayings of the Wise shows a creative use of Amenemope. The structural model for this collection, do I not write for you 30 sayings, derived from the last chapter of Amenemope, section 27, line 6, quote, look to these 30 chapters, end quote. In Egypt, and we should probably assume the same about this collection, the holy number 30 symbolizes a complete and perfect teaching, but its material dependence on Amenemope extends only for the first 11 sayings.

This is, Waltke says, 22:16 to 23:11. That's a typing error, it should of course be 22:17 to 23:11. The next saying introduced by the educational saying at 23:12 that separates it and the next unit of the 30 Sayings is more common to the Aramaic writing from Mesopotamia, Akkadian.

The saying against the dead surety finds a thematic analogy in the Aramaic and Akkadian wisdom traditions, but not in the Egyptian. The lampooning saying against drunkenness in 2329 to 35 descends from the Egyptian tradition, but not specifically from Amenemope. So much about Waltke's brief introduction to the wider discussion that he has on the similarities of the material in Collection 3 that we are now going to focus on with the book of Amenemope.

Now the remainder of this lecture I am going to do two things. One, I am going to look at the introductory verses in the text of Proverbs and the way that Bruce Waltke and many others have translated one particular word in this opening section, and I am going to critique and evaluate this translation. And then secondly, I am going to turn to one particularly prominent similarity between the book of Proverbs on the one hand and Amenemope on the other, and we are going to compare line for line what the similarities and the differences are and then draw some further conclusions from that for the international dimension of this fascinating book of Proverbs.

So here we go. I am going to now read the opening verses from the new revised standard version of Collection 3, so that is chapters 22, verses 17 to 20. The words of the wise, incline your ear and hear my words and apply your mind to my teaching, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips, so that your trust may be in the Lord.

I have made them known to you today, yes, to you. And then verse 20, have I not written for you 30 sayings of admonitions and knowledge to show you what is right and true, so that you may give a true answer to those who sent you. And then the actual teaching begins with an opening admonition in verse 22.

It says, do not rob the poor because they are poor, and so on. Now what is fascinating here is the translation in verse 20 where the new revised standard version mentions 30 sayings. And as we have already heard from Waltke, he believes that these are 30 sayings, even though only the first 11 verses of the whole collection, which is quite a bit longer moving into chapter 24, comprises 30 sayings, just as the teaching of Amenemope has 30 short mini-chapters, which are clearly mentioned at the end of the instruction of Amenemope.

However, if we actually look at the Hebrew original of the book of Proverbs, and I'm just, no, aha, here we are. So, this is my fascicle of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. There's now a new version, the Biblia Hebraica Quinta, B-H-Q, but the details, of course, textual details, are the same.

And when we look at chapter 22, verse 20, we find that verse 20 has an unusual punctuation of the vowel points. And that is because the Hebrew scribes have recorded for us both a ketiv and a qere version of how this particular word was translated 30 by Waltke, and also the Nehemiah standard version, and an increasing

number of other biblical translations, gives us. The particular word in verse 20 is, in the ketiv, that is what is written, should probably be pronounced shilshom.

I'm just going to read this specifically from how Bruce Waltke describes it. So in the written form of the consonants, this word, translated 30, should either be, should be pronounced shilshom, and then means former, i.e., I have written to you ancient sayings, or ancient things. Or, with the qere reading, this is a suggestion for an alternative way of interpreting the actual consonant letters that are written there.

It should be pronounced shalishim, and then probably be translated as noble sayings. So, in the Hebrew original, the people who actually read this and copied it, noticed that there is a certain ambiguity of what this word means. There is a sequence of letters, shin, a lamed, and another shin, shilshom, shalishim, shaloshim, or whatever, and how would we pronounce it? And there are two suggested ways of doing this, and they have slightly different meanings.

We then get to the Septuagint translation of this same verse, and the Greek translation. The people who produced this Greek translation also noticed, and were not quite sure, that there is something unusual about this word. And they did neither read it as shilshom, nor as shalishim, but probably as shalosh, meaning three.

And so, the Greek translation has the word threis, which just means three. So, the Greek text says something like, have I not written to you three things, probably referring to three parts of this collection. That, it appears to be, is what the Greek translators did with this.

So, what we have, in fact, is an unusual word, which even the ancient first original readers of the text were not sure exactly what this meant. It is a certain kind of saying, or group of sayings, or whatever, that we are being introduced to here. But we are not sure exactly what that particular word means.

Interestingly, in the Egyptian text, has at least 11 verses or so, that are similar to, I mean, to the book of Proverbs, which consists of 30 sayings. Three, 30. And so what has now happened indeed, and Bruce Waltke is not the first one to suggest this, but he also included, for example, Michael Fox has the same, and many other biblical commentators, and now increasingly also biblical translations, are now saying, well, surely this word should be kind of re- slightly amended, slightly changed, and then it should be reading something like sheloshim, which means 30, in parallel with its partial source text from Amenemope.

And what we have, fascinatingly, in the New Revised Standard Version is that this translation, 30 sayings, is mentioned here, but there is not even a footnote or marginal note in the New Revised Standard Version to say that this translation is based on a comparison with an Egyptian text, and is a kind of a creative emendation,

rather than a reflection of what the Hebrew actually said, whatever it was saying, which we are not sure what it is. The other interesting thing, particularly with regard to Bruce Waltke's commentary, is that he actually divides the material in Collection 3, and not just the first 11 verses until 23:11 and so on, into several smaller sections of two, three, sometimes four verses, which he then calls saying one, saying two, saying three, and counting, of course, all the way up to saying 30. Now, I have to say I'm not convinced.

There is too much guesswork involved. How do we divide these up? There can be at least four or five different ways of dividing up the various verses into groupings. It seems to me that Waltke, in his strong conviction that really we have 30 sayings here, felt compelled to do this, but I don't think it is easily done, and certainly not as convincing as he makes it out to be in his commentary.

Now, the reason why I've spent some time on this is just to help us see in this lecture how influential the international dimension of the Book of Proverbs can even be on the way in which our Bibles are translated. Now, to be honest, there is not much gained or much lost, whether we say these are ancient sayings or noble sayings or 30 sayings. They are really good sayings, whichever way you translate it.

There's nothing theologically at stake. There's no danger. There's no conspiracy or anything like this, but I hope you can catch a glimpse of the fascination that comes with trying to engage with these texts in their wider intellectual milieu.

I now want to turn to another example of this, here mainly based on my own work in the book on poetic imagination in Proverbs, and I hope I can find a section. Yep. What I want to focus on in particular is one of the sayings or verses that is repeated in Proverbs from the Book of Amenemope, and in particular, this is chapter 22, verse 28, and I'm going to read that.

It's something I mentioned already several times in an earlier lecture when we looked at prosperity teaching in the Book of Proverbs. In verse 28 reads, do not remove the ancient landmark that your ancestors set up. Now, the reason why I include this proverb in my discussion of variant repetitions in the Book of Proverbs is that, in fact, again, as I mentioned a few lectures ago, there is actually another version, not far away at all, in the same collection three of this very same proverb.

Let me read that one to you. This one now is in chapter 23, verse 10. So, near the end of that section of verses Waltke has helped us to see what is largely in common with Amenemope.

So, 23, verse 10 reads, do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans. And then verse 11, for the Redeemer, this is God, is strong. Let me just repeat those verses again.

Do not remove the ancient landmark that your ancestors set up, 22, 28, and do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, 23, 10. So, we have an unusual repetition of one and the same thing in very close proximity, just 12 verses apart in the Book of Proverbs. And then we also have the fact, as I will show in a moment, that something very similar is being said, and I will quote that in a few minutes, in the Book of Amenemope.

So, we have kind of a double-type repetition, variant repetition going on here. I'm now going to read a section from my book on these two verses, particularly focusing on the context. Proverbs 22, 28, and 23, 10 belong to the same collection, collection three, namely 22, 17 to 24, 22.

Variant repetition within one and the same collection, we have, and I have observed elsewhere in my book. But nonetheless, here the conclusion is inevitable that variant repetition in Proverbs is a conscious, ubiquitous, editorial strategy and does not happen by accident. Everybody would have noticed within just 12 verses that they're saying the same thing again, or something similar.

The collection consists of only 70 verses altogether, and there are only 10 verses between the two variants. Furthermore, there are other repetitions in this same collection in which the two variants are close together, namely Proverbs 23, 3 and Proverbs 23, 6, just three verses apart. The editor who shaped this collection knew that he was repeating material within close range.

Clearly, the dominant contextual references for the two verses are their respective variant counterparts, creating a frame around the enclosed material. Proverbs 23, 10 is connected to Proverbs 23, 11 via a causal particle, for or because, that introduces the motivation for the prohibition, namely God will look after the people you're trying to harm. There are several statements in the Egyptian instruction of Amenemope that are similar to the two verses in Proverbs under consideration here.

The section in Amenemope that has the material related to our variant set is in that chapter 6. It begins in line 11 of plate 7 and runs through plate 9, line 8, and contains 36 lines in all. I will now cite those lines that are closest to the Proverbs material. This is now a translation from the Egyptian text.

Do not move the markers on the borders of fields, nor shift the position of the measuring cord. Do not be greedy for a cubit of land, nor encroach on the boundaries of a widow. The trodden furrow is worn down by time, and here the text is a little bit interrupted, we're not entirely sure how to translate this, he who disguises it in the fields, he will be caught.

And then again, beware of destroying the borders of fields, lest a terror carry you away. One pleases God with the might of the Lord when one discerns, probably meaning respects, the borders of fields. Do not erase another's furrow, it profits you to keep it sound.

So here's an expanded elaboration and encouragement to the readers to respect the property and the land borders of their neighbors or competitors. The strongest points of context are in lines 12 and 15 on plate 7, with parallels regarding the verb do not move, as well as the mention of boundary markers. The mention of family members, namely orphans and a widow in Amenemope, and widows and orphans in the biblical texts.

Widows and orphans are often mentioned together in biblical and extra-biblical texts of the Frequent One. The detail of land markers being ancient reflected both in 22:28 and in 23:10 of Proverbs, may be reflected in the furrows of Amenemope being worn down by time. Finally, a theological motivation for refraining from grabbing land from the vulnerable in society is also present in both texts.

In 23:11, the text says, for their redeemer, namely the Lord, is strong, and Amenemope says, one pleases God with the might of the Lord when one respects the borders of fields. So, the relevant sections are not identical, but the similarities are so striking that coincidence surely must be ruled out. So not only is their material repeated, but as we have seen in chapter 6 of Amenemope, there are in fact at least three, possibly four, repeated statements to not encroach on fields.

Let me just read those four again. Do not move the markers on the borders of fields, nor encroach on the boundaries of a widow. Beware of destroying the borders of fields when one discerns the borders of fields.

So, there are four repetitions of encouragement not to infringe neighbors' property rights. In parallel with the repetition of this also in the same section that is repeating materials in Proverbs. So, what am I saying? What I'm saying is that not only is Proverbs repeating Amenemope, but Proverbs is repeating Amenemope, repeating the material.

So, there are repeatings here, repeatings here, and these repeatings are repeatings of repeatings here. You get the idea. Surely this cannot be a coincidence.

So, I want to now close with some further considerations based on this evidence. Clearly the two works, Amenemope and Proverbs, are related. But equally evident is the fact that Proverbs does not simply copy Amenemope.

Proverbs uses its Egyptian source material in Amenemope creatively to craft a new variance, just as it has done from source materials within the Book of Proverbs itself.

Therefore, the parallels between Amenemope and Proverbs should not be overdrawn. While the emendation of the word Shiltshom, formerly in the Ketiv reading and Shalishim, noble things, in the qere reading to Sholoshim, 30, is supported by most, although Norman Whybray in his commentary is an exception, it is harder for scholars to agree on identifying the delimitation of the actual 30 units.

Mention should also be made of the fact that the instruction of Amenemope itself contains two sets of variants of verbatim repetition. Murphy thought that there is no explanation for the repetition of Proverbs 22-28 in Proverbs 23-10. But my observations with regard to the similarity with Amenemope suggest, indeed, I think, an explanation that makes sense.

Namely, the editor followed his Egyptian vorloge or source text and also included several statements creatively adapted from Amenemope on the important topic of respect for other people's property. And the editor of the Book of Proverbs did this because the author of the instructions of Amenemope did it. But both of them, of course, did it because they felt that to help people to see the importance of respecting other people's property was absolutely essential and important for the well-being of their societies.

That brings us now to the close of this lecture.

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