

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 17, Proverbs 30:1-9, Introduction to Agur Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Heim, Proverbs, Session 17, Proverbs 30:1-9 Introduction to Agur, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Knut Heim **analyzes** Proverbs 30:1-9, focusing on the **enigmatic figure** of Agur. The lecture **examines** the **complexities** of the text's opening verses, including **translation discrepancies** and the **identity of Agur**. Heim **proposes** that Agur, possibly a non-Israelite convert, offers a **prayerful reflection** on his life and relationship with God, marked by **intellectual humility** and a reliance on faith over self-reliance. The lecture **interprets** Agur's interaction with God as a **dialogue** featuring rhetorical questions and ultimately **concludes** that Agur's crisis was spiritual, urging reliance on God instead of self.

**2. 10 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Heim, Session 17 – Double click icon to play in Windows
media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and
click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Psalms &
Wisdom → Proverbs).**



**Heim_Prov_Session
17.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Heim, Proverbs, Session 17, Proverbs 30:1-9 Introduction to Agur

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided lecture on Proverbs 30:1-9 by Dr. Knut Heim.

Briefing Document: Proverbs 30:1-9 - The Enigmatic Words of Agur

Introduction:

This lecture focuses on the opening verses of Proverbs chapter 30, specifically verses 1-9, which are attributed to a figure named Agur. Dr. Heim highlights that this section is considered one of the most enigmatic and understudied portions of the Book of Proverbs, largely due to the complex nature of the Hebrew text and the questions surrounding the identity and background of Agur himself. The lecture analyzes the text, offering an interpretation that sees it as a dialogue between Agur and God, exploring themes of humility, divine revelation, and reliance on God rather than on self.

Main Themes and Key Ideas:

1. The Enigma of Agur:

- **Unusual Author:** The chapter introduces Agur, son of Jakel, who is a new author within Proverbs. This is unusual, as most of the book is attributed to Solomon.
 - **Identity Uncertain:** Agur's name, and his father's name, are atypical for Israelites and have parallels in Mesopotamian cultures. This has led to speculation that Agur might have been a foreigner who converted to the Israelite faith.
 - **Language as a Clue:** Dr. Heim suggests that the unusual grammar and vocabulary could point to Hebrew being Agur's second language, further supporting the idea that he may have been a convert.
 - **Inspired Utterance:** The opening verses describe Agur's words as an "oracle" (NRSV) or "inspired utterance" (NIV), similar to a prophet's message. However, unlike many prophetic oracles, this does not primarily present itself as the direct words of God.
1. *Quote: "The reason why this chapter is so enigmatic is because, first of all, in the opening verse, we are confronted with a new character who has authored...the entirety of this chapter..." Quote: "...some people suggest that Agur actually was a foreigner. Ethnically speaking, a non-Israelite. However, as we will see in a moment, his theology is thoroughly Israelite."*

2. Textual Difficulties & Translation Differences:

- **Variations in Translation:** The lecture emphasizes significant differences between the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New International Version (NIV) translations of verse 1. The NRSV interprets the text as a lament ("I am weary, O God..."), whereas the NIV sees it as an address ("This man's utterance to Ethiel").
 - **Hebrew Complexity:** These variations stem from the difficulty in understanding the original Hebrew, which contains rare words and unusual grammatical constructions.
 - **"Etiel" Debate:** The translation of "Etiel" is a major point of contention: the NRSV interprets it as two separate nouns ("my weariness, God"), while the NIV sees it as a proper name.
 - **Multivalence:** The lecture highlights the "multivalency" of the Hebrew, leading to multiple possible interpretations which translators must navigate. This is further demonstrated in verse 3 with the phrase "knowledge of the holy ones," which can also be read as "knowledge of holy things," or "knowledge of the holy one." Dr. Heim argues that the ambiguity might be intentional, enriching the meaning.
1. *Quote: "If we believe that scripture is inspired by God...how come two of the very best modern English translations that we have are so different?" Quote: "The words in Hebrew are highly unusual, they're very rare, and also the grammatical and syntactical construction..." Quote: "Here it is the case... the lack of knowledge of the holy can be interpreted in three different ways... I have no knowledge of holy things... It's deliberate ambiguity to create a surplus of meaning..."*

2. Agur's Self-Deprecating Prayer and Humility:

- **Honest Confession:** Agur expresses a profound sense of personal inadequacy and intellectual humility in verses 2-3, stating he is "too stupid to be human" and lacks knowledge of the "holy ones."
- **Exaggerated Humility:** Dr. Heim interprets this as an intentional rhetorical device to highlight his dependence on God, rather than a literal expression of self-loathing. He suggests that Agur is, in a way, employing Socratic-like humility ("I know that I don't know anything").
- **Prayer as Context:** These statements are understood to be within a context of prayer, an appeal to God for help.

1. *Quote: "Surprisingly strong statements are being made, which on their own terms seem rather stark and extreme and perhaps even unhealthy... It is kind of, if you like, an exaggerated humility that he expresses here in order to motivate God to graciously help him to transcend his present ignorance."*

2. **God's Rhetorical Questions:**

- **Sequence of Questions:** Verses 4 introduces a rapid-fire sequence of questions that seem to be prompted by Agur's statements of ignorance.
 - **Questions Imply Answer:** The answers to the questions are implicit and point to God as the creator, sustainer, and ultimate power of the universe.
 - **God as Speaker:** Dr. Heim argues these questions are not from Agur, but are a response from God to Agur's prayer. The purpose is to demonstrate to Agur that he does not have the power to deal with his challenges, but God does.
 - **Parallels with Job:** This section is compared to God's questioning of Job in the Book of Job (Chapters 38-42), where God uses similar rhetorical questions to establish His sovereignty and Job's limitations.
 - **"Surely You Know":** The line that immediately follows the sequence of questions is taken to be ironic sarcasm, similar to God's words to Job.
1. *Quote: "And because this is a prayer... it is just possible that the speaker here is not Agur, but God answering, answering ironically, Agur..." Quote: "...these quick-fire questions that are coming here are God's responses to Agur telling him... you need to rely on me and on me alone and not on whatever knowledge or lack of knowledge you have."*

2. **Agur's Response: Faith and Submission:**

- **Acknowledging Truth:** In verse 5, Agur responds to the questions by acknowledging that "Every word of God proves true." This indicates that he understands the implications of God's questions and accepts God's supremacy.
- **Taking Refuge in God:** Agur states that God "is a shield to those who take refuge in him," indicating that he's now going to act on the implied message in the questions. He is going to rely on God.
- **The Danger of Adding to God's Word:** Agur follows this with a warning against adding to God's words, emphasizing the importance of revelation as received and not reinterpreted by people.

- **Complementary Wisdom:** The passage provides an additional dimension to the traditional wisdom teachings in Proverbs. It introduces a “more mature reflection on the value of wisdom being augmented with divine revelation from God.” It suggests a connection between wisdom and reliance on God's word.
 - **Connection to Torah:** The lecture suggests that the book of Proverbs (including this section) may be referencing the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), not just as a metaphor for the father’s teaching, but as an additional source of revelation.
1. *Quote: "Agur, rather than being freaked out and panicking and running away from God because God has confronted him with all these questions, is directly responding...with faithful wisdom." Quote: "And so, what we may have here is a later phase in the development of the book of Proverbs where a very powerful but enigmatic reflection... has been added and included... in order to provide an even more mature reflection on the value of wisdom being augmented with divine revelation from God through God's word or words."*
 2. **Agur's Specific Prayer for Moderation:**
 - **Requesting Two Things:** Agur’s prayer in verses 7-9 focuses on two main requests: to be delivered from falsehood and lying, and for neither poverty nor riches, but a sufficiency in all things.
 - **Avoiding Falsehood:** His request to be delivered from falsehood and lying could be interpreted as him asking for deliverance from both the falsehood of others, or the temptation to lie and be deceitful himself.
 - **Reason for Balance:** The request for neither poverty nor riches is given a rationale. He fears that wealth would lead to self-reliance and a denial of God, while poverty would tempt him to dishonesty and profaning God's name. Both these extremes he understands to be a form of self-reliance, therefore "falsehood".
 - **Underlying Crisis:** It is suggested that Agur is not speaking about old age, but a situation in which he fears his own self-reliance and the pride that could be developed from his wisdom and knowledge.

Quote: "The first thing Agur asks for is, to remove from me falsehood and lying... the temptation would be to be so desperate that he would justify breaking the law, committing an immoral deed, and stealing. And thereby, he says, profane the name of my God." >Quote: "And I think, therefore, now I conclude kind of this opening section by

saying that the crisis that he was facing was a religious crisis based on the potential of pride, perhaps the very kind of pride that could have arisen out of a self-oriented reading of the early chapters of the Book of Proverbs."

Conclusion:

Dr. Heim's lecture provides a detailed analysis of the complex and often ambiguous opening verses of Proverbs 30. He presents an interpretation that sees the passage as a powerful dialogue between Agur and God, which emphasizes the importance of humility, reliance on God, and the limits of human wisdom. The lecture highlights the inherent difficulty in translating and interpreting biblical texts, while also exploring how these ambiguities may enrich the text's meaning. Ultimately, this section of Proverbs acts as a corrective to an over-emphasis on self-reliance, instead pushing the reader to rely on divine wisdom and revelation.

4. Study Guide: Heim, Proverbs, Session 17, Proverbs 30:1-9

Introduction to Agur

Proverbs 30:1-9 Study Guide: Agur's Oracle

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences based on the provided source material.

1. Why is Proverbs Chapter 30 considered enigmatic?
2. What are the major differences between the NRSV and NIV translations of Proverbs 30:1?
3. What are the possible interpretations of "Etiel" in Proverbs 30:1?
4. What is the significance of the term "oracle" (masah) in the context of Agur's words?
5. What does Agur say about himself in verses 2-3?
6. How does Heim interpret Agur's self-deprecating statements about his own intelligence and religious knowledge?
7. What are the possible interpretations of the phrase "knowledge of the holy ones/holy one/holy things" in verse 3?
8. Who does Heim propose is asking the rapid-fire questions in verse 4 and why?
9. What is the significance of Agur's statement, "Every word of God proves true," in verse 5, according to Heim's interpretation?
10. What are the two main requests Agur makes of God in verses 7-9, and why are they related?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Proverbs Chapter 30 is considered enigmatic because it introduces a new author, Agur, and its verses are divided into seemingly incoherent sections, with the first nine verses forming a cohesive unit, but the remaining verses are a collection of diverse statements. The opening verses also contain difficult and unusual language and syntax, which creates multiple interpretations.

2. The NRSV translates the first verse as "the words of Agur...an oracle. Thus says the man, I am weary, O God, I am weary, O God, how can I prevail?" The NIV translates it as "the sayings of Agur...an inspired utterance. This man's utterance to Ithiel." This is a significant difference in interpretation of the Hebrew text.
3. "Etiel" is interpreted either as a personal name, a person otherwise unknown in scripture, or as a compound noun combining "weariness" and "God," reflecting the speaker's weariness toward God. The NRSV favors the latter interpretation, while the NIV favors the former.
4. The term "oracle" (masah) usually refers to sermons or poetic reflections of prophets where the word of God is conveyed in direct speech. In Agur's case, the term suggests an inspired utterance similar to a prophet's, though not necessarily direct divine speech, but a theological reflection relating to God.
5. In verses 2-3, Agur expresses his sense of weariness and lack of wisdom, stating, "Surely I am too stupid to be human. I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One." He presents himself as religiously and intellectually deficient.
6. Heim interprets Agur's self-deprecating statements as a form of exaggerated humility. He posits that Agur is aware of his limitations and uses this as a rhetorical strategy to motivate God to grant him new insights, similar to Socrates' claim that he knows nothing.
7. The phrase "knowledge of the holy ones/holy one/holy things" can be interpreted as a lack of knowledge of holy things, of holy supernatural beings like angels, or of the Holy One, the God of Israel. Heim suggests that the best translation is the broadest, encompassing all three meanings: a lack of knowledge of holy matters generally.
8. Heim proposes that God is asking the questions in verse 4, responding to Agur's admission of ignorance. He explains that the rapid-fire rhetorical questions are designed to show Agur that God is in charge and that Agur should rely on God, not his own limited understanding or knowledge.
9. According to Heim, Agur's statement, "Every word of God proves true," is a response to God's rhetorical questions in verse 4. It signifies Agur's understanding that he should rely on God and his word to overcome the crisis he is facing, rather than trying to rely on himself.

10. Agur requests two things: to remove falsehood and lying, and to give him neither poverty nor riches. Heim proposes that these are related because Agur fears that if he has too much he will deny God, and that if he has too little, he will steal and dishonor God's name, both of which are forms of falsehood.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the significance of Agur's unique voice and perspective in the book of Proverbs, focusing on how his self-deprecating language challenges traditional wisdom themes.
2. Compare and contrast the rhetorical functions of the questions in Proverbs 30:4 and the questions posed to Job by God, exploring the significance of divine questioning in these texts.
3. Discuss the various interpretations of the identity of Agur and the impact that these interpretations have on how one understands the message of Proverbs 30:1-9.
4. Evaluate the role of humility in Agur's reflections and in the broader book of Proverbs, considering whether the text presents conflicting perspectives on the value of knowledge and self-reliance.
5. Examine how the themes in Proverbs 30:1-9 integrate with or challenge the traditional wisdom literature found elsewhere in the book of Proverbs.

Glossary of Key Terms

Agur: The author of Proverbs 30:1-9, a figure who is enigmatic and whose identity is debated.

Oracle (masah): A prophetic utterance, often used in reference to sermons or poetic reflections of the prophets of Israel. In the context of Agur, it is understood as an inspired utterance, although not necessarily direct divine speech.

Etiel: A term in Proverbs 30:1 whose meaning is uncertain, potentially a personal name or a compound term meaning "my weariness, O God."

NRSV (New Revised Standard Version): A modern English translation of the Bible that interprets "Etiel" as an expression of weariness toward God.

NIV (New International Version): A modern English translation of the Bible that interprets "Etiel" as a personal name.

Inspired Utterance: A communication that is believed to be divinely inspired; similar to an oracle.

Rhetorical Question: A question asked for effect rather than to elicit an answer. In Proverbs 30:4, these questions are posed to highlight God's power and wisdom, and the limited human understanding of these things.

Exegetical Crux: An unsolvable problem in the interpretation of a text.

Multivalency: Having multiple possible meanings or interpretations. The poetic language of the text allows for multiple meanings to be intended by the author.

The Holy One/Holy Ones/Holy Things: Refers to the divine. Can refer to the God of Israel, or celestial beings, or religious matters.

Self-reliance: The act of depending on one's own capabilities, judgments, or resources rather than seeking external or divine help.

Divine Revelation: A message or disclosure from God to humanity through communication of divine knowledge or truth.

5. FAQs on Heim, Proverbs, Session 17, Proverbs 30:1-9

Introduction to Agur, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Proverbs 30:1-9 and Agur

- **Who is Agur, and why is his section of Proverbs considered enigmatic?**
- Agur, the son of Jakeh, is identified as the author of Proverbs 30:1-9, an unusual and enigmatic section of the book of Proverbs. His identity is uncertain; some scholars speculate he might have been a foreigner who converted to the Israelite faith. The opening verses, particularly, are difficult to translate and interpret, with variations even in modern English versions. This has made this section often overlooked in biblical studies. Further, Agur's language and self-deprecating tone also contribute to the enigmatic nature of the passage, especially within the broader context of the book of Proverbs which is mainly about gaining wisdom and knowledge.
- **Why are there significant differences in translations of the opening verses (Proverbs 30:1-2)?**
- The differences in translations of Proverbs 30:1-2 stem from the ambiguity and unusual nature of the original Hebrew text. The grammar and syntax, especially of the first line, are highly unusual and rare. For example, the name "Ethiel" in one translation is interpreted as "I am weary, O God" in another due to the root words. The uncertainty about how to interpret these rare words and phrases leads to varying translations and interpretations by scholars.
- **What is the significance of the term "oracle" (or "inspired utterance") in relation to Agur's words?**
- The term "oracle" or "inspired utterance" (depending on translation) characterizes Agur's words as a form of prophetic-like communication. While typically, "oracles" in prophetic literature often directly represent God's speech, Agur's words are not divine speech but rather a theological reflection of his life journey, similar to David's final words in 2 Samuel 23. This indicates that the text was regarded as divinely inspired but not necessarily dictated by God. It's also possible that the term is tied to a place name "Masah" which could indicate that Agur may have been from that region.

- **Why does Agur express such intense self-deprecation in verses 2-3 ("I am too stupid to be human")?**
- Agur's statements of self-deprecation should not be taken literally as expressions of self-hatred or depression. Rather, they are likely a form of exaggerated humility within the context of a prayer to God. By highlighting his intellectual and religious limitations, Agur seeks to motivate God's gracious help and guidance. This expression of humility is similar to the Socratic saying, "I know that I know nothing." This is also designed to highlight his dependency on God, and his reliance on God, and not in himself and his own knowledge and capabilities.
- **Who is asking the series of questions in verse 4, and what is the rhetorical purpose?**
- The questions in verse 4, such as "Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" are not asked by Agur, but rather are most likely spoken by God. These rhetorical questions, similar to those directed to Job, serve to remind Agur of God's power and sovereignty. The questions imply the answer God, emphasizing God's control over creation and the limitations of human understanding. This barrage of questions serves to redirect Agur's focus from his own limitations to reliance on God.
- **What is Agur's response to God's questions in verses 5-6 and what is the significance of the response?**
- Agur's response to God's questions is one of acceptance and faith. He states, "Every word of God proves true; He is a shield to those who take refuge in him" (v5). This response reveals that he understands the point of God's questions and is now choosing to rely on God instead of his own wisdom. His statement "Do not add to his words" shows his conviction that one should not seek further wisdom through other means, because relying on God's words is all that is needed. This underscores the complementary nature of wisdom literature with divine revelation, emphasizing that true wisdom leads to dependence on God and his revealed word.

- **What two primary requests does Agur make in his concluding prayer (verses 7-9) and why?**
- Agur's two primary requests are: (1) to remove falsehood and lying from him, and (2) to give him neither poverty nor riches. The first request could be either about others being false to him, or about Agur being false to others. The second request is for sufficiency, or the right amount of material goods. He seeks to avoid the temptations of pride (from having too much) and of desperation (from having too little), which could lead him to deny or profane God, respectively. He emphasizes the need for balance and dependency on God, recognizing that extremes can lead to self-reliance and thus moral and spiritual failure. This is directly related to the lesson from the dialogue that one should not be reliant on oneself, but instead rely on God.
- **How does Agur's reflection in Proverbs 30:1-9 contribute to the overall message of the Book of Proverbs?**
- Agur's reflection adds a layer of maturity to the book of Proverbs, complementing its wisdom teachings by emphasizing the importance of divine revelation and reliance on God. While the rest of Proverbs primarily focuses on acquiring wisdom and knowledge, Agur's section highlights the need for intellectual humility and faith. He demonstrates that true wisdom comes from acknowledging one's limitations and seeking refuge in God's word, preventing self-reliance. This integration of wisdom literature with the broader themes of scripture helps to bridge gaps in the wisdom tradition and to show how a holistic understanding of scripture is essential.