

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 12

Prosperity Genocide

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This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 12, Prosperity Variants and Poetry on Genocide.

Welcome to lecture 12 on the biblical book of Proverbs.

In this lecture, I want to focus on two particular topics. One is an ironical engagement in two variant repetitions of Proverbs to do with prosperity. The other topic in this lecture is poetry on genocide.

So I begin, first of all, with two verses, Proverbs 10.15 and Proverbs 18.11. These are very similar statements, but as we shall see, in their subtle differences, they make both related and different kinds of pragmatic suggestions to its readers and hearers. Proverbs 10:15 reads, The wealth of the rich man is his fortified city. The ruin of the poor is their poverty.

Proverbs 18:11 reads, The wealth of the rich is his fortified city, and like a secure wall in his fantasy. Proverbs 10.15 consists of what traditionally used to be called antithetic parallelism, while Proverbs 18.11 is an example of a traditionally synonymous parallelism. The two half verses in verse 10.15 are arranged in chiasmic order, so the word sequence has been reversed to facilitate the visualization.

Each term has a corresponding opposite, the only difference being that the suffix has shifted to a different part of speech. The three sets of corresponding terms are all opposites, wealth as opposed to their poverty, rich singular as opposed to poor plural, his strong city as opposed to the ruin of. The corresponding elements are fairly straightforward opposites, and the antithetical statements in the two half verses seem conventional and perhaps even trite, what one might expect in a reward-driven economic environment.

However, we will see that in Proverbs 18:11, both the parallel elements and the contents are unusual. In Proverbs 18:11, the final phrase in his fantasy at the end of Proverbs 18:11 creates a surprise by delaying the recognition that the apparently conventional statements in 18:11, which sound so similar to Proverbs 10:15, are actually highly ironic. The opposites are wealth and then implicitly through ellipses also wealth, then the next opposition is, or correspondence rather, the rich and the rich man's fantasy, and then his fortified city and like a secure wall.

The parallelism in this verse is remarkably different from its variant counterpart. The topic, the wealth of the rich, of the nominal sentence in Proverbs 18.11a is still

presupposed, and the second half verse provides a second predicate, secure wall, but in a significantly expanded form. The metaphorical equation of the rich man's wealth is his fortified city has now been transformed into a simile.

It is like a secure wall, an expansion by a sheer number of consonants alone. The real power of this proverb, however, derives from the positioning of the term at the end of the second half line, at the very end of this proverb. While the reader or listener expects the simple rephrasing of the encouraging truth stated in the first part of the line, his or her anticipation seems to be confirmed by the opening words of the second half line.

But this illusion is shattered by the devastating punch word that surprisingly turns the meaning of the first half verse on its head and stands in stark contrast to the earlier variant in Proverbs 10:15. The effectiveness of the proverb relies on the reversal of expectations about the universal advantage of wealth as apparently expressed in Proverbs 10:15. It appears then that Proverbs 10:15 was probably the earlier variant of the two and that Proverbs 18:11 is a deliberately reshaped version to make a highly original point as far as the proverb's message is concerned. I now turn, however, to the contexts both of Proverbs 10:15 and of Proverbs 18:11. Adal Berlin noted that the contextual suitability of the two variants is also to the kind of imagery employed in each. She considered three pairs of poetic lines that consist of identical or nearly identical first-half lines.

The second half lines of which are, she says, semantically equivalent but differently phrased. That is, quote, two completely different parallelisms which have one line in common, end quote. She refers here to a number of parallels between Psalm 39:13, Psalm 102 verse 2, Psalm 55 verse 2, and Psalm 86 verse 6, and then finally here our example Proverbs 10:15 parallel with Proverbs 18:11. This led her to conclude, quote, that the semantic parallels in each of these verses are not only equally acceptable, neither being more parallel than the other, but that the choice of parallel in each case fits the larger context in which the verse is situated, end quote.

With regard to our variant set, she noted, quote, Proverbs 10 contains many other contrasts between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish and so the contrast between the rich and the poor is quite at home. Proverbs 18, on the other hand, is structured much differently. It is not built on quick contrasts but on more prolonged images and verse 11 fits into one of these, end quote.

The contextual fit of both variants, however, goes even further than Berlin has recognized. Proverbs 10:15 is part of a proverbial cluster extending from Proverbs 10:12 to 18. Its relationship to verse 16 is particularly close, so much so that every element in Proverbs 10:15a has a corresponding expression in Proverbs 10:16a and every element in Proverbs 10:15b has a parallel in Proverbs 10:16b. When the two

verses are considered together, wealth in Proverbs 10:15a is considered positive not in its own right but as a well-earned reward for righteous living.

The converse is expressed in the second half verses. The interplay between the pairs shows that the ruin of the poor in Proverbs 10:15b is not attributed to poverty as such. Rather, Proverbs 10:16b reveals that wicked people's achievements leads to sin and the poverty mentioned in 10:15b is seen as the wages of sin.

It is in this sense that it is said to be ruinous. Thus, Proverbs 10:16 shapes the interpretation of a statement that appears to anchor motivation for economic success in the drive for self-preservation and clarifies afterward that true safety lies not in wealth as such but in the rewards for righteous living which, according to these two Proverbs together, include lasting and true prosperity. Proverbs 10:15 and 10:16 then form a proverbial pair.

The second proverb provides a sting to the first proverb's tale and together they combine into a sophisticated view of economic ethics that, in a surprising way, turns the apparently simple thought of Proverbs 10:15 on its head. Proverbs 18:11 conspicuously does the same within one poetic line which is surely no coincidence. By means of particular variations and contextual arrangements, a similar reversal of expectations is prompted in both variants.

Proverbs 18:11 also belongs to a proverbial cluster, Proverbs 18:10-15, and it also forms a proverbial pair with an adjacent saying. The content of verses 10 and 11 is similar. In both sayings, two entities that promise security, the name of the Lord in one and wealth in the other, are mentioned and identified metaphorically as a strong tower and a strong city and high wall respectively.

The second half verses qualify the initial statements. The name of the Lord is confirmed as a truly safe stronghold. Wealth, by contrast, is a dubious source of security.

Without the Lord, it is only a figment of a rich person's imagination. The following verse, verse 12, reinforces the point. Undue trust in one's own resources, that is the wealth of verse 11, at the expense of trust in Yahweh in the Lord, by implication from verse 10, is characterized as pride which ultimately leads to ruin.

When we look again in a more detailed way at the parallels in Proverbs 18.11, we notice that one single expression stands out from the otherwise neat sets of corresponding elements. The phrase we've mentioned earlier, in his fantasy. A number of conclusions may be drawn.

First, the name of the Lord in whom the righteous of Proverbs 10 seek refuge is the true wealth to which all should aspire. Secondly, the terms righteous and rich are not

opposites as such. The contrast arises from the wealthy person's self-reliance at the expense of trust in the Lord.

Third, the sequence of architectural structures in the proverbial pair displays a centrifugal spatial dynamic from the city's citadel, the strong tower, the most secure place of refuge in ancient cities, to the fortified city as a whole, to the wall as the external defense system that would be taken first in the case of a successful assault. Fourth, the expression in his imagination or in his fantasy has no parallel element in the proverbial pair of verses 10 to 11, although it is this element that constitutes the punch word that clinches the meaning of the whole unit. I have already pointed out briefly that verse 12, which warns of the destructive consequences of pride and promotes humility, reinforces the points made in Proverbs 18.10 to 11.

The expression that denotes pride in 18.12a, before destruction a man's heart is high, introduces an intriguing wordplay between the verbs to be safe, literally to be high, and the word to be proud, literally also to be high. The rich man's self-sufficiency is exposed as pride, undue trust in one's own resources, at the expense of trust in the Lord. Proverbs 18.12a exposes this sort of self-reliance as delusional, the very point being made by the punch word in his fantasy at the end of Proverbs 18.11. Thus, the most conspicuous variation in the variant 18 to 11, the word in his fantasy, turns out to be a crucial linking device that intricately relates the variant with adjacent sayings, thus forging them into a proverbial triplet, ranging from Proverbs 10 through 12.

It is worth comparing the above analysis that I've just given here with Murphy's reflections on the meaning of the two variants and how they interact with one another. In Murphy's view, there is no hidden message in Proverbs 10.15. There is no intention of communicating here a moral lesson. This is simply a reflection upon reality.

That is the way things are. However, in comparing 10.15 with 18.11, which he interpreted against the background of its companion verse 18.10, he concluded, quote, as is the case with so many other proverbs, one must learn to balance them against each other. Here he noted a connection.

His extended discussion of the significance of Proverbs 18.11 in the light of Proverbs 10.15 is worth quoting in full. Just bear with me for this slightly long quotation. The first line of the proverb deliberately picks up Proverbs 10.15, which expresses an obvious fact.

Riches are a protection. Even 11b can be taken in a somewhat neutral sense and seen as being in synonymous parallelism to line a. So, the rich person thinks. This need not be an unreasonable viewpoint.

It echoes Proverbs 10.15. However, the saying has more bite if, so he imagines, indicates only an apparent but ultimately false high point of safety. This it does. It is intentioned with the high tower or the name of the Lord mentioned in verse 10.

Hence, the situation has to be carefully weighed. In what or in whom do the rich really trust? This verse sounds a warning with regard to Proverbs 10:15. Strictly, no judgment is passed on the rich. Hence, this proverb does not change the meaning of Proverbs 10.15, which is true as far as it goes.

But a timely caution is sounded. The rich of verse 11 must also keep verse 10 in mind for the Lord provides strength that cannot fail. Now, these are insightful and highly relevant reflections.

In the light of the analysis of parallelism context that I have just given, however, we can again see an editorial hand at work that skillfully changes the meaning of verses through subtle variations between the repetitions that go hand in hand with contextual arrangements. The results are both subtle and rewarding. And in contrast to Murphy, I would say that Proverbs 10.15 in its context with verse 16 is far more subversive than even Murphy has realized.

I now turn relatively briefly, although this is an incredibly important subject area, to three verses that I believe are poetry on genocide. Proverbs 24:12 belongs to a small section ranging from Proverbs 10 to 12 and needs to be interpreted in this light. Here is the passage in its entirety.

I read from verses 10 to 12. You remained inactive during the time of distress, your strength being limited. If you fail to rescue those who are being dragged off to death, those staggering to the slaughter, if you say, look, we did not know this.

Is it not true? The one who weighs the hearts, he understands. And the one who guards your life, he knows. And he repays a man according to his deed.

Now, the demonstrative pronoun this in verse 12a, in look, we didn't know this, refers to the crisis described in verse 11, people being dragged off to death, staggering to the slaughter. An unspecified number of people are violently dragged off to be slaughtered and mistreated all along to the point that they are swaying with exhaustion and injury because of the sustained maltreatment they have been enduring over time. This, I believe, is a description of a sustained campaign of persecution, torture, and murder.

The question mark in verse 12, refracting the unusual expression, is it not, introduces a well-known truism, the authority to which the speaker appeals. A paraphrase in more expensive prose may capture the pragmatic force of the passage. So, you did

not get involved in the crisis because you knew that you were not strong enough to make a difference.

If you make that an excuse, or if you pretend you did not know the full extent of the crisis, then remember the well-known proverb, the one who weighs the heart, he understands. The one who guards your life, he knows. And beware, God repays all people for what they do.

Just as God looks after you, so he will look after those whom you disown. He will indeed render to every one according to their deeds, to the victims according to their innocence, and to you according to the guilt you have incurred by allowing such injustice. Now, I admit that the way I've interpreted this passage is one way of interpreting it.

This is perhaps something that I've under-emphasized in previous lectures. I have consistently presented imaginative interpretations, some of them more daring than others, some of them perhaps more convincing than others. In the process, I may have given the impression that I believe my interpretations to be either the best or the only right interpretations.

If I have done so, I want to apologize to you right here, right now, because I think that would be a misunderstanding of what I mean by imaginative interpretation. Poetry, as such, is in many different ways under-determined in its brevity, in its daring figures of speech, metaphors, and so on, so that it will always evoke and make possible several interesting, good interpretations. I personally happen to believe that many of the interpretations that I have presented are in fact the best.

I certainly, however, don't want to say, and I don't think, that they are the only ones possible and that they are the only true or correct interpretations. And the same thing is true here. And it may well be that my background as a German theologian, whose grandparents were both involved during World War II, has shaped my reading of this passage.

But to me, the parallels are striking. I remember on a number of occasions preaching in German churches on the famous passage in Romans 13, where Paul, in his letter to the Romans, encourages the Christians to be subservient to the political authorities. And I remember well, both from writings of the time and also from discussions and conversations that I've had with many people of the generation of my grandparents, that in Hitler's Germany, during the genocide against Jews in Europe, there were many, many Christians, German Christians, who would say, they make both of these excuses that we read about here in Proverbs 24, 10 to 11.

They would either say, what could I alone have done? It would not have made a difference, and by implication, I would have endangered myself. And the other

excuse that I have very often heard is that people said, look, we did not know. I probably never really meant, I don't think they really meant, we didn't know anything.

But I think what they meant is, we didn't know that it was this bad. And partially, I believe people. But if six million people are being killed under your nose, how is it possible that you didn't know anything? I think in those days, the reason why people didn't know is because they didn't want to know.

Because it was convenient not to know. Because to intervene in that situation, in those days, was indeed dangerous. And the few people who did, risked their lives.

And many of them, most of them, very well known to the present day, are famous for having lost their lives in order to save those being dragged off to death, swaying as they stagger to the slaughter. And so I think what this particular sequence of proverbs is telling us through the ages, from 3,000 years ago, is that we cannot remain bystanders in crises of genocide. We must take sides.

According to Proverbs 24, verse 12, God himself demands it. And if we do not, there is a God here to whom we have to answer. To take those responses, however, takes courage, involves high risk, it is dangerous.

And as we do so, we may well lose sleep, comfort, company, and perhaps even our health or our lives. As we consider these matters in the light of these proverbs, which I believe are not banal at all, I think we need to reconsider the importance of Christian martyrdom, which is a very different kind of martyrdom that is sometimes being talked about in other religions, where people blow themselves up and others and call that martyrdom. Christian martyrdom is not about destroying other people, or destroying yourself in order to destroy other people.

Christian martyrdom is a witness to the love of God by loving those who need it most, by standing up for the vulnerable, the persecuted, those who are being dragged off to their deaths, who are being tortured, who are being exploited, and so on. And so I want to make an appeal here specifically to Jewish and Christian believers today. And I will do it in a perhaps slightly evocative, provocative, and almost overdrawn statement, which I will explain in a minute.

But I want to say this to you. If you ever find yourself in a situation like this, where you can make a difference and the possibility of martyrdom presents itself, take it. It may be your only chance.

And what I mean by that is Christian martyrdom isn't about dying for dying's sake. Christian martyrdom is about something profoundly positive, which is about

testifying to the love of God in God's Son, Jesus Christ, for all humans everywhere. And then to live out that love in faithful obedience, even when it is costly. Thank you.

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