

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 19

Lemuel's Mother, Proverbs 31:1-9

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This is Dr. Knut Heim and his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 19, Teaching of King Lemuel's Mother, Proverbs chapter 31, verses 1 through 9.

Welcome to lecture 19 on the biblical book of Proverbs. We are now in the final chapter of the book which comes in two parts that I believe are related, as I will explain in the next and final lecture.

But in this lecture, we are going to look at verses 1 to 9, the teachings of King Lemuel's mother that Lemuel then shares with his readers and us through the centuries. A few words of introduction. In verse 1, the lecture that the Queen Mother is giving to her son, which is from verses 2 to 9, is introduced with, 'I'll read from verse 1, the sayings of King Lemuel, an inspired utterance his mother taught him, and in the NRSV, an oracle that his mother taught him.

And again, what we see is we have the same word, *massa*, here. And here now, the words of the Queen Mother, the words of a woman, are declared to be an inspired utterance along the lines of the inspired utterance of Agur that we looked at in chapter 30 of the previous lecture. So, this is, I think, significant, this information we are given here, on a range of different things.

Number one, there is no known King Lemuel in all the complex sequences of the kings of Israel, both of the Northern Kingdom and of Judah, who are very, very carefully documented throughout the historical books of the Bible. So much so that even kings who have only reigned for a few days are being recorded meticulously. And we are often even given evaluations of how well they did as kings.

Usually, they didn't do very well. So, it is very surprising to find King Lemuel here, which probably almost certainly means that this king is a foreign king, a non-Israelite king, with presumably—we don't know that, it could, of course, be the case—presumably a non-Israelite mother. Although it could possibly be that this mother was originally an Israelite who had been married off to be the queen of King Lemuel's father.

Possible, but there's no way of knowing. But that might explain, number one, her ethical, moral, and wisdom stance that she shares with her son, which seems to be very much in line with the overall teaching of the Book of Proverbs. And it would also explain how this teaching of a foreign king would have found its way into this final collection of the collections in the Biblical Book of Proverbs.

By the way, this just brings me back to an earlier lecture we talked about, the instruction of Amenemope being taken over in chapters 22 to 24. And I didn't quite explain how that came about. I explained that I think that's quite a natural and good thing that happened.

But very likely the reason why this happened is another kind of part of international diplomacy, because the people who were perhaps courtiers or diplomats, ambassadors between Israel and Egypt, may have encountered this piece of writing. Or an Egyptian ambassador might have brought this piece of writing, perhaps as a present, to the court in Israel. So, these are the kinds of explanations that would make it plausible why international writings, philosophical writings, were being exchanged and adapted and adopted in the collection of Biblical books as well.

So, I think that is fascinating and exciting that we have international wisdom being incorporated as an inspired utterance as part of the Holy Scriptures of Israel. The other really interesting and fascinating thing here is that we have recorded, among other ones, a longer speech, a longish speech, by a woman as an inspired utterance in the Bible. I mentioned this in one of the earlier lectures when we looked at Proverbs 11.22, that although the book clearly is directed mainly at a male audience, written by male authors, nonetheless women play such a prominent role at all sorts of levels.

Not only as desirable wives and lovers but also as dangerous distractors. Not only as foolish women, but as women who can truly enhance the lives of others around them, that's husbands and children in particular, and the wider family. Here now we have the example of a leading female figure of international standing making an appearance in the Biblical book.

So that, apart from anything else, is just showing that women are important, certainly in this Biblical book. Much more can be said, but unfortunately, we do not have time to go into this in detail. But for now, I just want to say, that women are important in spiritual matters, in theological matters, in the Bible.

And they teach and instruct, if you like, they preach on the pages of the Bible. And here is one example. So, what is she saying? I'm going to take us through this again as I did in the previous chapter, verse by verse through this.

Luckily, it's not as long so we can do that here. Listen, my son, she says, listen, son of my womb, listen, my son, the answer to my prayers. That's a bit over the top, right? Why is she talking to her son like this? We don't know how old he was, but it sounds to me like she's treating him like a little boy, like a little naughty schoolboy.

By the time she needs to tell him, listen three times, emphasizing my son, my son, my son, son of my womb, he's clearly done something wrong. She's telling him off. And she's appealing to his good sense and his esteem for her as his mother to really listen this time.

And again, when we just read this and we think, oh, this is the Bible, whatever, and we don't pay attention to the detail in the way the poetry works, we might just have missed the chiding tone and the friction here between two family members. This is the king, but the king is being told off by his mother. So why is she telling him off? Well, maybe we can find out why.

So, by the time she says, the other thing she says no three times. No, son of my womb, no, son of my womb, no, son of my vows. So, what's the yes that he's been doing that she is saying no to? Well, the next verse says, do not, here's the fourth no, do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.

Fitting nicely, by the way, with the way of a man with a girl in the previous chapter, lack of humility. Here's a king, of course, kings through the ages are essentially famous for this kind of thing.

Sexual indulgence. And this queen mother says, the problem here is number one, there's several of them, not just one. And secondly, she says, these several ones, these kinds of women are the ones, the kind that destroy kings.

Now, of course, we cannot possibly know who these women were. It appears to me, however, most likely candidates for the job are probably prostitutes. Quite a few of them, lots of them.

And the Queen Mother is worried that her son paying too much attention to his bed chamber is neglecting his duties as a ruler of the nation. And that is why these women are potentially destroyers of kings. Because it distracts them from doing their job properly.

I would say this is not so much a generic biblical statement saying that prostitutes are bad. But what this statement is saying is that men, or women for that matter, who kind of get themselves distracted from their responsibilities by unfettered sexual engagements are in danger of being destroyed. So, the emphasis is not on the wickedness of the women.

It is on the foolishness of the men. And I think that's important because we have a woman talking about other women here. And not in a kind way.

But the point here is not to make other women look bad. The main point is not that. The main point is to warn her son of silly behavior.

Foolish and dangerous behavior in this case. She continues and says, it is verse 4, It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine or for rulers to desire strong drinks. Or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed and will be perverted and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

So here is another yes to the no's of the Queen Mother. She says it is not for kings to drink. And the issue of course is drinking alcohol and drinking lots of it.

So here is another distraction. Not only sexual distraction but also distraction through intoxicating drink. In this case alcohol.

And she is saying the danger with regard to the drinking of alcohol and probably also the danger indirectly with regard to being distracted with other pursuits than the business of ruling is that the most vulnerable in society are getting neglected by the person who is responsible for them. She emphasizes this here. Or they will drink and forget what has been decreed.

Presumably, this is a divine decree. The commandments of God. And will pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

So, the rights of all the afflicted. This is about social justice for those who are vulnerable in society. We are driven back to the widows, the orphans, the foreigners, the poor.

Those people who cannot help themselves and need someone else who is strong enough to stand in the breach for them and help them and intervene for them. The righteous that we have discussed a few lectures ago when we looked at the end of chapter 25. Who is supposed to be a pure fountain and a clear spring.

In verses 6 to 7, the Queen Mother goes on and this is again part of the kind of over-the-top chiding tone. In this case now sarcasm. She continues to tell off her son and encourage him not to indulge in excessive drinking.

And she says, give strong drink to one who is perishing and wine to those in bitter distress. Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. Now she is literally speaking, she is telling her son, to give alcohol to the destitute and the poor, and those who cannot help themselves.

The ones she just told him he needed to take care of. But is this really what is meant here? No. This is by the way one of those reasons why I always emphasize imaginative reading.

A literal straightforward reading without further interpretation would read this as an encouragement of the Queen Mother to say to her son, look the way you help the poor is stop drinking yourself and get them drunk. Well, that's one way of handling the crisis. But that's certainly not what she means here.

What is going on here, this is extreme sarcasm. You, my son, have no excuse. You are the king.

These poor people don't know what to do with themselves because they are so vulnerable. One could possibly understand why they would drink if they had enough money to do it. Because they just want to forget their misery.

But you have no such excuse. That's what she is saying. And she then continues moving on now to the positive.

So instead of all the no-no's she is now saying this is the yes, yes, yes that you should be doing. Verses 8 and 9. Speak out for those who cannot speak for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the poor and needy.

So the king is to play an active role in ensuring, maintaining, and establishing social justice in society by being the one who supports those who are poorest and most vulnerable in society. What an astonishing thing in the ancient world to hear this. The responsibility of those in power is to not just avoid wrongdoing but to actively get involved in advocacy for the poor, for the needy, for the destitute, for the vulnerable, and for those who cannot help themselves.

I think this is powerful stuff. I think this is something that relates back to what I said a few lectures ago about Proverbs 25. The righteous who give way before the wicked are like a muddied spring and a polluted fountain.

They have lost their life-giving, life-enhancing, life-sustaining impact as righteous people. They are righteous no more. And I think this is true, as we see here from the Book of Proverbs, for all members of society who have the means to help others.

And it is especially true according to Proverbs 31, King Lemar's Queen Mother, with regard to those in authority and power in society. This brings us to the end of Lecture 19. This is Dr. Knute Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs.

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