

## Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 20

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This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 20, Instruction for a King. Proverbs 31:1-9.

Welcome to a chat on Proverbs in which we are looking at some of the unique sections of what we call its appendix.

After the last collection of the men of Hezekiah, we have the words of and we have some numerical sayings, and then we have the instructions for a king. What is interesting about these instructions for a king is the fact that they actually come from a woman. Now, we have said before that in the book of Proverbs, the mother is the teacher along with the father.

So, it's not a radically new idea that a woman should be the wise teacher. And of course, wisdom herself is referred to as a woman. But this is the one place in Proverbs where we know the identity of the woman.

She is the mother of King Lemuel. And here's where we have the example of where the child has listened to the parent. In this case, the son has listened to the mother, and she is the one who has taught him.

Now he is passing on the knowledge that he has learned as a king, the way in which he needs to be a king, instruction that he received from his mother. This little poem, though it's very short, these few sayings here, have their ancient parallels. So, if we go to the Egyptian writings, such as Mari-ka-re or Amenemope, we're dealing with these princes, these people of the court, the ones who were given instruction as to how they should live.

Now, these are the words of King Lemuel, who is the king of Massa. We can identify Massa historically. It is a northern tribe in the Arabian Peninsula.

The Arabian Peninsula doesn't tend to figure largely in biblical history. We know, of course, of the queen of Sheba, who comes from somewhere in Arabia. But as a matter of fact, if we go back to the Exodus, we do find that there was considerable interaction between the Israelites and the Edomites and other peoples of northern Arabia, all during that whole time when Israel was in migration and when Israel was establishing its place and its position in the land.

So, it is not strange or foreign that there should be an interaction with a king from someone who is in the more northern part of the Arabian Peninsula. We actually do

know something about its language. There are numerous languages in what we call Northwest Semitic.

Hebrew is among those, but Aramaic is among those. The dialects of Canaanite are among those. The Moabite language is among those, and we know it from the Moabite Stele, for example.

And then there is an engraving we have called the Deir al-Lah engraving, which is something of a blend of Aramaic and what we know as Hebrew. And this language is in that whole category. Now, there are some fairly sharp distinctions, actually, between the Semitic languages of Canaan and the more Aramaic languages.

Some of the features that we see in Hebrew actually show distinctly that the Hebrews, in their language and linguistics, migrated from the area of Edom and Moab across into Canaan because their language betrays those features that come from that field of the dialect. And this has been shown very clearly by one of the most expert analysts of ancient inscriptions who passed away not too long ago. His name is Anson Rainey.

But he made this point in numerous articles. Some of the features that we have in biblical Hebrew can be explained and understood when we know better the relationship between these languages. So, what we have here is a little piece in Proverbs that has affinity.

And one of the ways that we know it is the way that the mother addresses her son. ma bri, ma bri btnei, ma bar n'dvai, ma bar n'dvai. What? My son, bar.

Now, in ordinary Hebrew, the word for son is ben. In modern Hebrew, the word for son is b'ar. And that is because modern Hebrew has been introduced, has been influenced somewhat more by Aramaic.

So, this would be the way that modern Hebrews say it. So, you talk about a bar mitzvah. You become a son of the commandment.

Now, we're familiar with a bar mitzvah is a big party. And that's the way that a lot of Jews understand it. And if you're a girl, you have a bat mitzvah.

And I have a niece who had a bat mitzvah because her mother is very, very Jewish. And so, that happens at about age 13 or 14. And what that is supposed to mean is that you learn something about this Torah.

And you're saying this Torah is going to be what governs the value of my life. My brother, who has no association with Hebrew at all, who is married to this Jewish lady, memorized perfectly a fairly significant passage in Hebrew from Deuteronomy

with all the correct pronunciations. And I said to him, well, Stan, you've made such a good start.

Why don't you let me help you carry on? And you'll come to read the Hebrew Bible. And he said, absolutely not. I know every syllable of Hebrew that I ever want to know.

And it's only because I have to. All of that is a little bit of an aside to say that this passage reflects this interchange that there is between the North Semitic languages, Aramaic, and Hebrew. So here in the Hebrew Bible, we have a bat mitzvah, bat mitzvah, a bat mitzvah, the son of my womb, the son of my vows.

So, this teaching is really quite logically placed. The actual words that we have then in this passage are those of a woman. There, what the king was taught.

We then come to the address to the son, which is a little bit mysterious. I've already read it to you, and it begins with the word or the word what, what my son, what son of my womb, what son of my vows. It's been kind of mysterious as to the significance of this.

It sort of, of course, forms this pause, which has an impact on the teaching which is going to follow. You can kind of hear the mother teaching her son, you know, what is this that you need to know? You are my son. You are the one who fulfills my vows.

So perhaps a little like Hannah, this mother had made a vow to dedicate this child to God. It doesn't say that, but in some sense, there, the mother had made a commitment in relation to this son. And so, there's a what, what, what.

There have been many suggestions as to what this might mean, but I think there is a way in which this is what mothers often have to say to their children. No, no, no. Why is it that as children, it's our, it's our habit to deliberately test our mothers, to inadvertently test our mothers, to one way or another, always be doing those things that our mothers can't approve of, and they have to say no.

I remember hearing it quite a few times myself. I remember that I often didn't like it. Now, what actually mean no? I think that it can.

I think that it can be in the English language. We sometimes say you did what? In other words, what? That's a negative. This can't be so.

This is just not true. And, and so I can almost hear in this passage, the mother saying to her son, you did what? What, my son? What is this all about? In any case, the general sense of it is pretty clear that it intensifies what the mother is trying to say,

and what she has to say is negative. What is the big temptation to all young people, all young men in particular? Wine, women, and song.

And if you're in high places, and they're in the court and so forth, where the harem is much more available, and where the wine is constant, and when there's all sort of provision and luxury, of course, it is much, much more difficult not to be decadent, and not to get caught up in a life of debauchery. Of course, there are altogether too many examples, both in the Bible and otherwise, where this kind of debauchery came about. But kings need to avoid drunkenness, and they need to avoid promiscuity.

They aren't privileged. And the curses of drunkenness, which we have talked about pretty cleanly, and the curses of promiscuity, which we have talked about quite openly, will come upon anyone who practices them, whether you're a king or not. Kings are judges.

Kings make laws. Now, you see this illustrated in the Bible in various ways. Let's take David as an example.

Most of us know the story of the sin of David that he committed with Bathsheba, in having sexual relations with the wife of one of his most noble soldiers, while his soldier was away at war. And then, to make all of this more justifiable, at least in the way that the king wanted it to be covered up, the soldier was stationed in such a way that he would die, which left David with the freedom to marry his wife. And this is one of those good examples in Proverbs, where, you know, you lay these schemes, and laying these schemes is going to come home to bite you.

Well, in David's case, it happened in a rather surprising way, because the prophet came to him one day, and he said, I've got a case for you. There's this rich guy, and he's got all sorts of sheep and flocks, and he receives a guest. Now, in ancient times, hospitality was crucial.

That shows up many times in the Old Testament itself. But not to show hospitality was simply a violent offense against all good order. So, the rich man is obligated to be hospitable to his guest and to do that, you have to kill one of your lambs and make a meal.

But the rich man just couldn't figure out, you know, which of his lambs he wanted to spare. And so, he started to look around his neighbor, and he had a very poor neighbor who had one little lamb. And he loved it like a child, and he was raising this little lamb.

And the rich guy took that little lamb, stole it because he was powerful, and he killed it, and served it to his guest. Now, King David, you're the judge. What should be done? And King David, of course, is outraged.

And he says, well, this guy should die. Now, that's not what the law said. The law didn't say he should die.

This is not a murderous penalty. But the king asks, of course, that justice is going to be meted out properly. And the king says, he's going to pay fourfold, not just the damages plus the loss of the lamb.

No, he's going to pay more than that. This is just outrageous. I'm the king, I make the judge.

And then, of course, Nathan says, well, you know, really, I'm talking about you. And that's when the penny drops, as we sometimes say in our English expression. That's when David suddenly gets the message of what he has done in taking the wife of a loyal soldier when he is the king with all of his privileges.

Kings make laws, they judge, and they need to remember. David wasn't remembering very well. But this is a little more specific than that.

You know, if a judge makes a decision, he'd better remember the decision he made and not go back on it. Now, if in fact you're given a little bit too much wine, that might become a problem because sometimes wine is a bit of a hindrance to the exercise of memory. And the king might not remember the decision which he had made in a previous time.

So, the mother is warning her son, to listen, for kings, vigilance is required at all times. You're going to have to stay sober. That's the only way.

Now, is wine bad? Well, no. It's one of God's good gifts. It's the fruit of the vine.

I am not a beer lover. Strange thing. I've got a German background, but I'm also Baptist, and so Baptists didn't drink.

So, I never learned to drink beer, and I was always kind of repulsed by beer. And so, Germans cannot understand that I don't want to drink beer. But boy, you can't keep me from a good glass of wine when there's a beefsteak on the table or something like that.

Wine is indeed God's gift. And the mother says here, yes, sometimes wine is a sedative. Now, wine is a sedative, it's not the wine that makes you drunk.

Sometimes wine helps you get a little bit of comfort. Now, you don't get comfort by trying to completely lose your mind. No, you get comfort by remembering that there are small good gifts in life.

Wine can soothe the worker. Drunkenness is always very, very bad. But proper use of wine, no, that's not such a bad thing.

So, the mother moves on then to kings. How should kings use their mouths? Well, not to get drunk. No, but to speak, to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

How should kings use their mouths? To exercise judgment on behalf of the poor, to defend them, and to provide for just decisions, because the poor and the needy are the special objects of the care of the king. So, the mother here is giving very, very sage advice to the one who is going to become responsible and become the ruler. Vigilant at all times, discipline, and self-control.

This doesn't mean that there's a kind of asceticism. It's not like being a Nazirite in Old Testament terms. That's not what it's about.

But rather, it is about knowing the proper role and function of a king, which is to make sure that he stays away from excesses and that he keeps his focus on his responsibility to people. I think the saddest thing about leadership, and especially political leadership, even political leadership as we see it all around us, is that leaders are self-serving. Leaders are there for the prominence that it brings them and the esteem and prestige that they think it brings them.

And leaders don't actually care about the people that they're supposed to lead. Even as a citizen of democracy, I have to say that there are many, many times with many of our leaders, I lose absolute confidence that they could care at all about me, what happens to me, and how their decisions affect me. That's just not a concern to them.

They're either concerned about how they get re-elected or how they get some kind of status or something else. This is a good reminder, a good reminder to all of us in leadership, and whatever leadership we have, you have a responsibility to the well-being of the people that you lead. And you'd better not use that as an excess in terms of just serving your own self-interest.

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