

Proverbs: Instruction for a King (Proverbs 31:1–9)

Dr. August Konkell | Session 20

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Keywords

Proverbs 31, King Lemuel, Massa, mother's instruction, royal leadership, sobriety, justice, poor and needy

Abstract

In Session 20 of his teaching on Proverbs, Dr. August Konkell examines Proverbs 31:1–9, which preserves a rare maternal lesson addressed to King Lemuel of Massa on virtuous royal leadership. The lecture explores the historical and linguistic setting of Massa as a northern Arabian tribe with distinct Aramaic and Northwest Semitic linguistic features. King Lemuel's mother explicitly warns him against the perils of alcohol and promiscuity, which cloud judicial memory and lead to royal corruption. Ultimately, kings are commanded to maintain absolute sobriety and self-control so they can use their authority to defend the rights of the poor and disenfranchised.

Outline

I. Introduction to Proverbs 31:1–9 and the Royal Appendix

- A. Overview of Proverbs' unique appendix following the Hezekiah collection
- B. Unique nature of maternal wisdom in Proverbs
 - 1. Wisdom personified as a female figure throughout the book
 - 2. Parents (father and mother) as co-teachers in the Israelite wisdom tradition
 - 3. Specific identity of the female teacher: the mother of King Lemuel
- C. Ancient Near Eastern parallels in court literature
 - 1. Instructions for princes and royal courts in Egyptian literature (e.g., Instruction of Mari-ka-re, Amenemope)
 - 2. Transmission of royal instruction from parent to reigning monarch

II. Historical and Linguistic Context of King Lemuel of Massa

- A. Identification and geographical context of Massa
 - 1. Historical location as a northern tribe in the Arabian Peninsula
 - 2. Historical interaction between Israelites, Edomites, and northern Arabian peoples during Exodus and settlement
- B. Linguistic features of Northwest Semitic languages
 - 1. Dialectal relationships among Hebrew, Aramaic, Canaanite, and Moabite (e.g., Moabite Stele, Deir al-Lah inscription)
 - 2. Linguistic migration from Edom/Moab into Canaan demonstrated by Anson Rainey
- C. Specific Aramaic and Northwest Semitic evidence in the passage
 - 1. Use of the Aramaic word bar ("son") instead of standard Hebrew ben
 - 2. Comparison with modern Hebrew usages (e.g., bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah)

3. Expression "son of my womb, son of my vows" reflecting maternal devotion (cf. Hannah's vow)

III. The Mother's Exhortation and Maternal Warning (Proverbs 31:2)

- A. Interpretation of the opening exclamation "What, my son?" (ma bri)
 1. Function as an emphatic rhetorical pause and maternal objection ("You did what?")
 2. Reflects maternal discipline, protective boundary-setting, and emotional intensity
- B. Primary temptations facing young rulers in royal court luxury
 1. Sensual indulgence and promiscuity with women
 2. Excesses of wine and strong drink
 3. Systemic risks of royal decadence and moral debauchery

IV. Responsibilities of Royal Rulers as Judges and Lawmakers (Proverbs 31:3–7)

- A. The necessity of royal sobriety and vigilance
 1. Alcohol impairs executive memory and judicial recall of decrees
 2. Drunkenness leads to the perversion of legal rights for the vulnerable
 3. Illustrative example of King David, Bathsheba, and Nathan's parable
 - a. Abuse of royal power and schemes to cover up sin
 - b. Failure of judicial self-awareness until prophet Nathan's confrontation
- B. Proper place and function of wine in creation
 1. Recognized as one of God's good gifts (not intrinsic Nazirite asceticism)
 2. Medicinal and sedative use for those perishing or in deep emotional distress
 3. Comfort for weary workers vs. destructive drunkenness for reigning monarchs

V. The True Purpose of Sovereign Authority: Advocacy for the Disenfranchised (Proverbs 31:8–9)

- A. Use of royal speech and judicial authority
 1. Opening one's mouth on behalf of the mute and disenfranchised
 2. Administering impartial justice for the poor and needy
- B. Critique of self-serving political leadership
 1. Contrast between self-aggrandizing leaders seeking status/re-election and true servant rulers
 2. Moral mandate for leaders to prioritize the well-being of their people over personal self-interest