

Proverbs 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 30. The words of Agur, son of Jacob. The oracle. The man declares, I am weary, O God. I am weary, O God, and worn out. Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists?

Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name? And what is his son's name? Surely you know. Every word of God proves true.

He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar. Two things I ask of you. Deny them not to me before I die. Remove far from me falsehood and lying. Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you, and say, Who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God. Do not slander a servant to his master, lest he curse you, and you be held guilty. There are those who curse their fathers, and do not bless their mothers.

There are those who are clean in their own eyes, but are not washed of their filth. There are those, how lofty are their eyes, how high their eyelids lift. There are those whose teeth are swords, whose fangs are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mankind.

The leech has two daughters, give and give. Three things are never satisfied, four never say enough. Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says enough.

[1 : 5 0] The eye that mocks a father, and scorns to obey a mother, will be picked out by the ravens of the valley, and eaten by the vultures. Three things are too wonderful for me, four I do not understand.

The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin. This is the way of an adulteress. She eats and wipes her mouth, and says, I have done no wrong. Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up, a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is filled with food, an unloved woman when she gets her husband, and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress. Four things on earth are small, but they are exceedingly wise. The ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer. The rock badgers are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the cliffs.

The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank. The lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in king's palaces. Three things are stately in their tread, four are stately in their stride.

The lion, which is mightiest among beasts, and does not turn back before any. The strutting rooster, the he-goat, and a king whose army is with him. If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth. For pressing milk produces curds, pressing the nose produces blood, and pressing anger produces strife.

Proverbs chapter 30 is a new gathering of proverbs. It belongs to Agur, the son of Jehah, a figure about whom we know nothing else. The sayings of this chapter consist of a personal confession, followed by a number of numerical proverbs or epigrams. The style of the proverbs of this chapter differ markedly from those in the preceding sections of the book. It might be read as something of an appendix. The extent of the material of Agur in this chapter is debated. Some say that it only takes us up to verse 4. Others suggest verse 6 or 9, some up to verse 14, and others have argued that the entire chapter 30 belongs to Agur. The sayings of Agur, or at least the initial part, is described as an oracle, a divinely inspired message. We usually associate the oracle with the prophetic literature, but here at the end of a wisdom book in proverbs, it is applied to a number of wisdom sayings. We find a similar formula for an oracle in places like 2 Samuel chapter 23 verse 1.

[4 : 29] Now these are the last words of David. The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel.

One of the first questions facing the interpreter of this chapter is whether there is a change of speaker between verses 1 to 4 and 5 to 6. Depending on our treatment of this question, we will read this section rather differently. Bruce Waltke argues for the unity of this section, using the analogy of Job chapter 28 verses 12 to 28, where Job also moves from a confession of man's insufficiency to discover wisdom, to a series of rhetorical questions that point to God's unique possession of such wisdom, to a recognition that God can teach men such wisdom. Some scholars see at the beginning, in the statement, I am weary, O God, I am weary and worn out, personal names of the people to whom Agur is speaking, Ithiel and Uchal. These would presumably be the sons of Agur. However, if these are their names, we are not told that they are his sons here, which is one of the considerations that might lead us to lean in favour of reading these words as part of his confession, a reference to his weariness and being worn out. While some have seen in Agur's statement an impious statement of someone who does not have the fear of the Lord, this is unlikely. Far more likely he is expressing the limitations of human wisdom and the bounds placed upon the extent to which it can aspire to the knowledge of God. Agur speaks in a self-deprecating fashion. Michael Fox compares Agur's statement here to that found in Psalm 73 verse 22.

I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast toward you. Agur denies possession of such knowledge, and the knowledge in question is probably not the sort of wisdom that's been discussed in the rest of the book of Proverbs. Rather, it's the knowledge of the Holy One, a knowledge of God's secret and hidden ways. For Agur, God's thoughts greatly exceed our thoughts, and his ways are beyond our understanding. The rhetorical questions of verse 4 should remind us of Job chapter 28 verses 12 to 22.

But where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, it is not in me, and the sea says, it is not with me. It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal. The price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold. From where, then, does wisdom come, and where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and death say, we have heard a rumour of it with our ears. Agur's saying from these rhetorical questions moves into a confession of the word of God.

The word of God is the ultimate source of truth and security. For the man who feels keenly his lack of wisdom, he must look to the Lord. It is from the Lord that he will find his protection, and from whom he will learn understanding. Job chapter 28 verses 23 to 28. God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder. Then he saw it, and declared it. He established it, and searched it out. And he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Verses 7 to 9 contain a prayer which is very unusual in the wisdom literature. Within it, Agur prays for deliverance from falsehood and lying. Within his prayer, he is concerned that he maintain his integrity. He does not want to be a person given to deceit, and in his prayer he is seeking the Lord's help in this matter. Likewise, he wants neither poverty nor riches. He desires moderation in his possessions, because he knows that if he has a lot, he will be faced with the temptation of practical atheism, and if he has too little, he will be tempted to become a thief.

[8 : 42] More than anything else, he wants to ensure that he lives a life that is honouring to God, a life that is pious and characterised by integrity. If he is going to live such a life, he will need the Lord's protection from temptation, and his empowering strength.

Within the book of Proverbs, slander is seen to be universally wrong. Verse 10 speaks of slandering a servant to his master, a situation where the object of one's slander is defenceless and vulnerable, and the act of slander could be severely damaging. In such a situation, the slave can appeal to the Lord. A slave who cursed the slanderer in such a situation would be invoking the Lord's judgment upon the person. Those who mistreat the poor should beware of such consequences. This chapter contains several numerical proverbs or epigrams, many of them of the form X and X plus one. The number of items is generally X plus one, with the final element being the one that is particularly emphasised. The list generally involve classing together several diverse and disparate phenomena, inviting the reader to reflect upon the comparisons or associations between them.

Verses 11 to 14 are held together by the repeated, there are those, or in other translations, a generation that. A single group is being described here, and the reader is being invited to reflect upon the logic of the association of their characteristics, dishonouring parents, self-righteousness, haughtiness, and cruelty. Fox argues that one of the effects of this is to highlight the collective character of sin. These verses describe the way that an entire people can become distinctively corrupted by evil. The sins that are mentioned in this list are sins that are also mentioned elsewhere in the book of Proverbs. For instance, cursing father and mother, Proverbs chapter 20 verse 20. If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.

Self-righteousness is spoken against in chapter 20 verse 9. Who can say, I have made my heart pure, I am clean from my sin? Along with these there are frequent warnings against the haughty and the proud, and then against those who devour the poor.

The leech of verse 15 has two daughters with identical names and demands. This might be a reference to the suckers on both ends of the horse leech. It's connected with the evil generation that precedes it, and with the four insatiable things that follow. You are supposed to recognise such a figure and avoid them. From the second half of verse 15 into verse 16, we have the first proverb of the form x things and x plus one things. Here it is three things that are never satisfied, four that never say enough. The point of the proverb is for us to ponder upon the connections between the different items, to think about analogies between them, and ways in which the analogies and connections open up windows into a deeper reality. In this particular proverb we have two frustrated sources of life which are insatiable, bracketed by corresponding sources of death and destruction which are also insatiable.

[11 : 45] Sheol or the grave is the place of death that can never be filled up. The barren womb is the source of life that has been frustrated. There is a natural correspondence between these two things.

The grave itself is like a barren womb that will be opened up in the event of Christ's resurrection. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the earth giving birth to its dead. Just as the womb and the tomb are opposing yet related forces, so water and fire stand in opposition. Here the land never satisfied with water is also like the barren womb that produces no fruit. The destroying fire for its part is like Sheol. This proverb invites us to think about the parallels between things that devour and things that cannot bring forth. It also encourages us to reflect upon the insatiability of the force of death within the creation. Verse 17 seems to stand out a bit in its context. Perhaps a connection between this and the surrounding proverbs could be inferred from Proverbs chapter 27 verse 20.

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and never satisfied are the eyes of man. From a proverb about that which is never satisfied, Sheol being one example, we now move to a proverb concerning the eye of the wicked son. Such an eye will be picked out by the ravens and the vultures. Creation itself abhors such dishonouring of parents.

The numerical proverb that follows concerns four wonderful things. In particular, the wonderful things are the ways of the four items that are described, belonging to various realms.

The eagle in the sky, the serpent on the rock, the ship on the seas, and the man with the virgin. Once again, these items do not appear to have been chosen at random. The eagle and the serpent are a pairing of natural creatures, one in the sky, one on the earth.

[13 : 28] The ship and the man with the virgin are both human things, one on the seas and one on the land. If you spend any time looking at an eagle soaring in the heavens, or a serpent gliding on a large rock, you may well marvel at the effortless, yet remarkable way that they move.

The eagle's realm is the sky, the serpent is on the rock, the ship is on the high seas, and there we can marvel at the way that a human vessel can move with the waves and with the winds, forces of immense strength, yet follow a course of human direction.

The fourth element in the list stands out from the other three, however. Those three former elements evoke something of the wonder of creation itself of the natural world, and of human activity within it, and now the fourth element concerns something more marvellous still, the way of a man with a young woman, presumably one who has not yet had sexual experience.

There is something properly mysterious about the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, especially in the initial consummation of a union, and this wonderful character invites us to think of it in terms of the wonders of the cosmos more generally.

There is something occurring in such sexual union that exceeds our understanding, something delightful and beautiful, something that should invite our awe and our wonder. There is, however, a fifth way that is added to this proverb, which is the way of the adulteress, which seen against the backdrop of the way of a man with a virgin, is perceived in its true ugliness.

[14 : 53] In euphemistic language, Eger describes the adulteress, who eats and wipes her mouth, engaging in sexual relations, and then cleaning up, as if nothing had happened at all, as if she hadn't profaned something wonderful by her perverse actions.

Verses 21 to 23 contain a numerical proverb that speaks about disruptions to the social order. The earth trembles beneath these things. They represent a sort of social earthquake.

The first is the slave or the lower official who becomes a king, presumably in an act of revolution. The next is the fool or social outcast who is filled with food. Then there is the unloved or hateful woman who gets a husband, gaining much social influence to perform her mischief.

And then there is the maidservant who displaces her mistress, presumably by getting the master to commit adultery with her and cast out his wife. Each of these characters have larger social ramifications that disrupt much around them.

The person who desires the good order of a society should feel a sense of horror at each one of these examples. From great social threats, we move to examples of animals that we can learn from.

- [15 : 59] The animals described here are weak or small, but have compensating forms of wisdom. Proverbs 6 verse 6 directed the sluggard to pay attention to the ant and learn from his behaviour.

Here the ants are characterised by their diligent providence. They lay up food in the summer, so that they will be prepared when the difficult days come. They do this despite not being strong.

The wisdom of providence can compensate for physical weakness. The rock badgers are also not mighty, and yet they compensate for this by making their homes in secure locations. The locusts don't have a king, and yet they still exhibit great unity, wisely marching in ranks.

The lizard is the final example. The lizard is weak and can be taken up in human hands, but nonetheless it is found in king's palaces. No compensating wisdom of the lizard is mentioned here.

Rather, the point is that if the lizard, with its weakness and its vulnerability, can be found in king's palaces, the wise man who compensates for his forms of weakness should be able to be found there too.

- [16 : 59] Once again, the proverb has a poetic structure to it that invites closer reflection. You can see in verses 25 and 26 they are held together by the reference to a people, and in verses 27 to 28 with the reference to a king.

The final numerical proverb concerns things that are regal in the way that they move. The first three examples in this list are animals, and the final one is the king surrounded by his army. The stately animals each exhibit certain traits.

The lion is mighty, and by his strength provides a deterrent for any who would want to attack. The lion is not afraid of any creature, and he exhibits his regal character in his fearlessness.

Many societies have recognized the regal character of the lion, speaking of him as the king of the jungle, or the king of the beasts. Lions have been taken as symbols of rulers, not least in Israel, with the lion of the tribe of Judah.

The strutting rooster is another example of a regal animal. The rooster struts with command. He is aggressive towards any threat. He keeps others in line. He both provides and courageously protects.

- [18 : 04] The he-goat is another example of a regal figure. He is a sure-footed and inquisitive figure who establishes dominance within his group, like the lion with the pride, or the rooster with the brood of chickens.

The he-goat is a creature committed to the group around him. In all of these animals, we see something of the virtues that should characterize the king's relationship with his army. The king needs to project an effective image of might, so that people don't attack.

The king needs to be fierce against all aggressors, and to establish dominance, all in service of his people. The prominence of the figure and the context of the king in these proverbs suggest that it might be directed particularly to people in the context of rule and authority in a society.

The chapter ends with a warning, seemingly directed to those who exalt themselves as rulers, in a way that is proud, or who have devised evil. Such foolish rulers are advised to stop immediately, and they are warned against the consequences of oppression.

Pressing milk produces curds, pressing the nose produces blood, and pressing anger, constantly inciting a people by oppressive policies, will produce strife and violence.

[19 : 12] If you want to rule over a peaceful people, you must be acutely aware of the dangers of pressing anger. A question to consider.

We noted the characterization of the generation in verses 11-14. What might be some of the ways in which the vices of the generation described in those verses produce or encourage each other?