

5. APPENDICES

PROVERBS 30:1 – 31:31

Introduction to 30:1 - 31:31

The final two chapters consist of a number of appendices.

¹The words of Agur, the son of Yakeh, of Massa; the utterance of the man. There is no God, there is no God and I am exhausted;

²for I am more beast than a man, and human discernment is not given to me. ³I have not learned wisdom, nor do I have knowledge of the Holy One.

⁴Who has ascended to heaven and come down again? Who has held the wind in his hands? Who has wrapped the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and his son's name, if indeed you know?

⁵Every word of God has stood the test. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. ⁶Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you, and you will be proved a liar.

⁷Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me as long as I live:

⁸Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; let me eat the bread that is my due, ⁹lest I be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is YHWH?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God.

All scholars agree that verse 1 is impossible to translate with any degree of confidence. McKane spends four pages on it (pages 644-647), and I am following his translation of verses 1-4.

'Massa' may be the name of a north Arabian tribe (see Genesis 25:14; 1Chronicles 1:30).

McKane writes (pages 646-647):

Agur's tone in vv. 2f. appears to be ironical. With a mock ruefulness he observes that others seem to know all about God and have him completely in their grasp, whereas he, poor fellow, is apparently sub-human, since for him God is shrouded in mystery. He has never been able to penetrate this domain of knowledge in which others seem to move with great familiarity and assurance. If this is what is indicated by vv. 2f., it is compatible with the weary or despairing searcher after God who has been created by the reconstruction of v. 1. Even the translation 'There is no God, there is no God, and I am at the end (of my resources)' is not ruled out, only it must be taken as a cry of despair and not as a militant dogmatic atheism. It is the cry of one who has searched to the furthest limits of his powers and has found nothing; for whom God, as he says in v. 4, is wrapped in a mystery which no human mind can penetrate.

On verse 2 compare Psalm 73:21-22.

Verses 5-6 present faith's response to verses 1-4. God will always remain a mystery, but God has revealed himself so that we can know God in ways that transcend human reason. Verse 6 warns against tampering with God's word.

Verses 7-9 consist in a prayer for honesty and integrity, as well as for enough to eat, while avoiding the temptation to think we can manage on our own, without God.

Verse 10 is a warning not to interfere between a servant and a master. Let the master sort things out for himself.

In light of the introduction given in verses 15, 18, 21, 24, 29 it is suggested that an introduction to verses 11-14 has been lost: something like 'There are three kinds of men whom YHWH hates and four that are abhorrent to him'. Verses 11-14 have the ring of prophetic denunciation about them.

On verse 13 see 16:18-19.

The leech that sucks blood (verse 15a) is an image for the greed that is such a scourge in society.

Following 'three' with 'four' (verses 15b, 18, 21, 29) is a way of saying that there is no intention of giving a complete list.

The behaviour named in verse 17 (compare verse 1) is so abhorrent as to require that the offender should suffer the ultimate disgrace of not receiving proper burial.

The key point made in verses 18-19 is the mystery of human sexuality. The first three examples help create an atmosphere of wonder.

Moral scruples have no place in the conscience of an adulteress (verse 20).

¹⁰Do not slander a servant to a master, or the servant will make things hard for you, and it will be your own fault.

¹¹There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers.

¹²There are those who are pure in their own eyes yet are not cleansed of their filthiness.

¹³There are those — how lofty are their eyes, how high their eyelids lift!

¹⁴There are those whose teeth are swords, whose jaws are knives to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among men.

¹⁵The leech has two daughters; "Give, give".

^{15b}There are three which are never satisfied; four which never say, "Enough": ¹⁶Sheol, the barren womb, the earth ever thirsty for water, and the fire that never says, "Enough."

¹⁷The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.

¹⁸Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: ¹⁹the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a woman.

²⁰This is how an adulteress acts: she eats, wipes her mouth, and says, "I have done no wrong."

²¹Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: ²²that a slave should rule; that a fool should be well fed; ²³that a shrew should get a husband; and that a maid should supplant her mistress.

²⁴Four things on earth are small, yet they are exceedingly wise: ²⁵the ants are not strong, yet they stock up their food in the summer; ²⁶the badgers are without power, yet they make their homes in the rocks; ²⁷the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank; ²⁸lizards can be grasped in the hand, yet are found in kings' palaces.

²⁹Three things are stately in their stride; four are stately in their gait: ³⁰the lion, which is mightiest among wild animals and does not turn back before any; ³¹the strutting rooster, the he-goat, and a king striding before his people.

³²If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, with your hand on your mouth (you had better watch your step). ³³For pressure on milk produces curds, pressure on the nose produces blood, and pressure on anger produces strife.

One can imagine the slave, the fool, the shrew and the maid gloating at their success and being quite insufferable.

In verses 24-28 the creatures listed help make the point that apparent unimportance is not an issue. If these small animals through their 'wise' industry can go places and make a success of things, we can't excuse ourselves because of our insignificance.

Verses 29-31 are a reflection on kingship drawn from observation of nature.

Neither pushing people out of the way in order to advance oneself, nor scheming in an underhand way to get the better of others, is acceptable. People who behave in this way had better watch their step (this seems to be implied). Extreme provocation runs the risk of arousing anger and finding oneself involved in strife (verses 32-33).

Lemuel is unknown to us. On 'Massa' see 30:1. This may be a piece of Edomite wisdom (see 1Kings 5:10; Jeremiah 49:7; Eliphaz, one of Job's 'comforters' is from Edom). Like Sections 2 and 4, this has the form of an instruction, not a proverb.

A mother's role in education is a common theme in Proverbs (see 1:8; 6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 29:15; 31:26).

His mother's first piece of advice is to keep his sexual energy in check, lest he undermine his personal authority and government.

Then she warns him against 'strong drink' (verses 4-7). She is not against wine on principle. It has its place, but he must be on his guard against over-indulgence. He has responsibilities and needs to keep a level head.

Thirdly, it is the king's responsibility to safeguard the rights of the poor (verses 8-9).

¹The instruction received by Lemuel, king of Massa, from his mother:

²Listen, my son, son of my womb, son of my vows!

³Do not expend your strength on women, your manhood on those who destroy kings.

⁴It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to have strong drink; ⁵lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deny justice to the poor.

⁶Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; ⁷let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

⁸Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. ⁹Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

A good wife

The theme of a good wife is found throughout Proverbs (see 5:15; 12:4; 18:22). This is an acrostic poem as the Hebrew letters at the beginning of each verse indicate. It is this that determines the organisation of the passage, rather than any internal logic. Wisdom has been portrayed in feminine terms. It is fitting that the final editors would round off the Book of Proverbs with a portrait of an ideal woman.

- ¹⁰ [א] **A wife of valour who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.**
- ¹¹ [ב] **The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.**
- ¹² [ג] **She brings him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.**
- ¹³ [ד] **She acquires wool and flax, and works with willing hands.**
- ¹⁴ [ה] **She is like a merchant ship, she brings her food from afar.**
- ¹⁵ [ו] **She rises while it is still night and issues orders for her household, tasks for her servant girls.**
- ¹⁶ [ז] **She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.**
- ¹⁷ [ח] **She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.**
- ¹⁸ [ט] **She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.**
- ¹⁹ [י] **She puts her hand to the distaff, and takes hold of the spindle.**
- ²⁰ [יא] **She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out to the needy.**
- ²¹ [יב] **She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for they are all clothed in crimson.**
- ²² [יג] **She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.**
- ²³ [יד] **Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.**
- ²⁴ [טו] **She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.**
- ²⁵ [טז] **Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the days ahead.**
- ²⁶ [יז] **She opens her mouth with wisdom, and sound teaching is on her tongue.**
- ²⁷ [יח] **She misses nothing of what goes on in her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.**
- ²⁸ [יט] **Her children rise up and bless her; her husband sings her praises:**
- ²⁹ [כ] **“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”**
- ³⁰ [כא] **Charm is deceitful, and beauty vanishes, but a woman who fears YHWH is to be praised.**
- ³¹ [כב] **Give her credit for her achievements, and let her be praised in the city gates for her accomplishments.**