

SOLOMON BORROWED THEIR PROVERBS!

Hebrew Proverbs and the Arabic Proverbial Genre

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1-Introduction

In the study of Hebrew proverbs, concentration has been made upon the relation of the Hebrew wisdom tradition to the international scene, especially Mesopotamia and Egypt. With regards to the formation of Hebrew proverbs, study has focused on the common two-line proverbs which use parallelism for their poetic structure. Yet sprinkled throughout Hebrew wisdom literature are numerous examples of one line proverbs, sometimes exhibiting a poetic structure comprised of a rhyme and meter otherwise foreign to Hebrew poetry. Scholars in biblical studies have differed in whether these exceptions to the norm are accidental in their structure or intentional.¹ In this article we will argue that these one line proverbs are authentic examples of a genre of proverbial material which can be found developed and more common in the Arabic tradition. We will further

¹ For some of the various views on the structures of proverbs in the Hebrew Wisdom tradition and the considerable work which has been done to relate Hebrew wisdom to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions, see the following books: R.B.Y Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972).

argue that evidence from the Hebrew Bible supports our contention that the pattern of rhyme and meter and even whole proverbs themselves have been borrowed from the Arabs into the Hebrew tradition.

2-Proverbial Poetic Structure

Arabic proverbs are firmly set in a genre we could call that of the "Folk" proverb. Folk proverbs are concerned with imparting wisdom and advice on the most basic aspects of human behavior. They almost always display a scheme of rhyme and rhythm. For the Arabic material we detect three basic forms the rhyme and meter can take. The purpose of these structures is simple enough. By compacting wisdom into concise rhythmic and rhyming units, the information is easily memorized. Owing to how successful this arrangement is for preserving wisdom, these same structures can be found in many languages.

The first type of proverbial poetic structure is a single short line of two to four words including a rhyming syllable as an inclusio at the front and end. The following is an Arabic example with a visual following to emphasize the rhyming structure:

it-takraar biyi'allim il-Himaar "Repetition teaches even a donkey"

/- - aar - - - - - - - aar/

Another example of an Arabic proverb meaning the same thing is

il-'i'aada ifaada "Repetition is beneficial (to learning)"

/- - aada -aada/

Interestingly, these two proverbs give a sufficient lesson in the instructive qualities of proverbs through a double entendre of teaching repetition and using it to reinforce that lesson.

An example of this first type of proverbial poetic structure in another language is the Norwegian proverb:

Selvgjort er velgjort "Self-done is well-done"

The second type of proverbial poetic structure is a single poetic line with a rhyming syllable or sound appearing twice in the line:

man sakata salima

/- sa - a sa - a/

The one who is quiet is safe

'amal min il-Habbah qubbah "He has made a seed into a dome"

/- - - - V-bbah V-bbah/

ma'rifat nafsi-ka il-ma'rifa il-kubra wa-l-'usra

/- - - - - - - - - u ra - u ra/

"Knowledge of self is the best knowledge, and the hardest."

An example of this second type in English is "A stitch in time

saves nine."

The third type of proverbial poetic structure is two roughly equal lines rhyming at the ends of the lines. There can also be complex rhyming in the interior of these lines. Some Arabic proverbs of the third type are

kalimat ya rayt mabit'ammir bayt "The words 'If only' do not build a house."

/a i a - ayt// a i a ayt/

taghadda tamadda ta'ashsha tamashsha "After breakfast, rest, after supper, walk"

il-insan yidabbir wa-llah yiqaddir "People make plans, God makes fate."

An English example of this third type is "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise."

3-An Arabic Source?

Due to close parallels between portions of the book of Proverbs and the Egyptian wisdom instruction of Amenemope, Hebrew Bible scholars have focused most efforts into elucidating Hebrew wisdom literature by recourse to Egyptian parallels. While we do not dispute the borrowing of Egyptian material into Israel, we assert that another major source of wisdom material is largely being ignored. The Hebrew Bible itself admits of connections to Egyptian wisdom texts,

but at the same time refers to the tradition of wisdom in "Eastern parts" in a description of the Wisdom of King Solomon:

And the Wisdom of Solomon was greater than the Wisdom of the sons of the East (bney-qedem) and all the Wisdom of Egypt (1 Kings 5:10).

1 Kings is alluding to a strong wisdom tradition in the "eastern region" with which people apparently had some familiarity. Another important figure in Hebrew wisdom is Job, who is called the "greatest of the sons of the East (bney-qedem; Job 1:3). The exact identification of the location of this "Qedem" or "East" has been debated. In Isaiah 11:14 the same term explicitly refers to the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites, who dwell to the South and East of Canaan respectively. A more southern referent is suggested by the travels of Sinuhe, a traveler from Egypt in ca. 2000 BC, who reports that he entered Qedem after traveling across the Sinai. The application of the term to Job further supports a more southern provenance because the location of Job is generally placed in either Edom or further south. The report that Job's household was attacked by Sabaeans could place him in Arabia proper. One of the characters in the Book of Job is one Eliphaz the Temanite, whose homeland is solidly within Arabia.

Most intriguing is an instance in which actual proverbial material from the undefined "Eastern region" and Arabia is quoted and acknowledged as coming from those areas. Our first example is unfortunately marred by some textual difficulties. A reasoned examination of the issues involved in it, however, clearly supports our understanding of the passage. In 1 Samuel 24:14, David quotes

against Saul a proverb using the following words:

As it says in the proverb of the Qadmonite (mshal ha-qadmoni), "From the Wicked comes forth wickedness (meresha'im yetse' resha')."

Translators have sometimes rendered this passage as "the old proverb" because the adjective "qadmoni" can mean "old" in Hebrew, as it also can in Arabic. A close examination of the use of this term will show that this interpretation is impossible. The vowelling of the passage in the Masoretic text is reading the word proverb (mshal) as being in a construct chain with the word following, meaning that the proverb is possessed by what follows, not modified by it. Further, a manuscript of this passage discovered at Qumran, 4Q Sam^a, has the reading "proverb of the Qadmonites (mshl-hqdmnyym)." It is easy to see how the original reading found at Qumran could have become corrupted into the reading preserved in the Masoretic text. The "m" following "qadmonim" in the phrase "meresha'im" could have caused a copyist to accidentally leave out the "m" of "qadmonim." The second "y", which makes the Qumran reading unmistakably a gentilic adjective, could have been left out at the same time, or by a later copyist. Another interpretation of the passage reads "qadmonim" here as a substantive adjective, meaning "ancient ones." First of all, this interpretation ignores the fact that the Qumran reading can only be a reference to eastern peoples, because of the extra "y" in the ending. But even so, a study of this adjective and the noun "Qedem" discovers that this understanding of qadmonim is weak at best. When these

terms modify time, they overwhelmingly stand solely with units of time (eg., days of old, etc.), not independently, as in "ancient ones. The only possible example, Job 18:20, uses the term in opposition to "aHaronim," which can, like qadmonim, mean "after" in either a spatial or a temporal sense. But it too is overwhelmingly spatial, so Job 18:20 is best taken as a reference to people on the east and the west, not to people of the past and future.

Beyond this example, the Hebrew Bible also provides, finally, clear and indisputable evidence of direct borrowing of wisdom material, not even from the undefined "eastern region" but from a kingdom in the Arabian peninsula. In Proverbs 30 and 31, we read the wisdom collections of two kings, Agur and Lemuel respectively, who are called "Kings of Massa". Genesis 25:14 lists Massa' as a part of the descendants of Ishmael, Father of the Arabs. Inscriptional evidence from Arabia places Massa' near Tayma, 250 miles southeast of Aqaba.

The Hebrew tradition, then, acknowledges entrance into its Folk proverb tradition of material from the Arabs. In fact, between David's "Eastern proverb" and the material in Proverbs 30 and 31, the only wisdom material in the Hebrew Bible which is explicitly acknowledged as borrowed from a neighboring people comes from the Arabs. There are no proverbs or wisdom collection in the Hebrew Bible which are outright called "Egyptian or Mesopotamian." Given this fact, we must believe that the Arab tradition influenced Hebrew wisdom as much, if not more, than these other traditions. The neglect in comparing Hebrew wisdom to Arabic sources can ultimately not be defended. We seek to make a start in what promises to be a fruitful

source of illumination for Hebrew proverbs.

As the structures of Arabic proverbs can be seen in many languages, we may conclude that any similarity in the Hebrew material to these structures is a parallel creation of the memory device, not borrowing. However, the admitted debt the Hebrew tradition acknowledges to the Arabs implies that the similarity is more than coincidence. A comparison of Hebrew proverbs from this genre will show that this borrowing has been in the form of both structure and content. Examples can be found in Hebrew literature for each of the three types of proverbial poetic structure.

Type I

Ezekiel 16:44 "See, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you,

ki'immah bittah "Like mother, so is the daughter."

/- i ah i ah/

tov shem mishshemen tov

/o e - ee o/

"A good name is better than fine oil" Eccl 7:1

Type II

Tov shakhen qarov me-aH raHoq

/ - - - a o - - a o/

"Better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far off" Prov. 27:10b

Tovah tokhaHat megulah me'ahavah meSutaret

/ - - - - - u a - - - - - u a -/

"Better is open rebuke than hidden love." Prov. 27:5

ki keqol hassirim taHat hassir, ken seHoq hakksil

/k- - - - i i - - ha i k- - - ha i/

"For like the sound of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool" Eccl 7:6

Type III

sefat 'emet tekxon la'ad ve-'ad 'argi'ah leshon shaqer

/ - a - - e o a -// - a - - - e o a -/

"Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue only a moment" Prov. 12:19

kasheleg baqqayits ve-kammaTar baqqatsir

/ka - - baqqa - i - ka - - - baqqa - i/

"Like snow in summer and like rain in Harvest time " (ie., when hell freezes over) Prov 26:1a

kekhelev shav 'al qe'o, ksil shoneh bi'ivvalto

/- - - - - o - - - - - o/

"Like a dog returns to its vomit, a fool repeats his folly" Prov 26:11

notser torah ben mevin ve-ro'eh zolelim yakhlim aviv

/o e o - - - vi // - o e o - - - - - vi/

"A Keeper of the Law is a wise child, but a companion of

gluttons shames his parents" Prov. 28:7

ne'emanim pits'e 'ohev ve-na'tarot neshiqot sone'

/n- - - - o e/ - n- - - - - o e/

"Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy." Prov. 27:6

The following collection will demonstrate the similarity in content which can be found between the Hebrew and Arabic tradition. In each case, the Hebrew proverb will be followed by the Arabic.

po'el 'otsarot bi-leshon shaqer

hevel niddaf mevaqshe mavet

"The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a seeking for death." Prov. 21:6

il-maal il-Haraam la yidoom

"Sinful money does not last"

lev-'adam yiHashev darco

va-YHWH yakhin tsa'ado

The mind of man plans a path, but the LORD prepares the step.

il-insan yidabbir

wa-llah yiqaddir

"People make plans, God makes fate."

yihallele-kha zar ve-lo' fi-kha

nakhri ve-'al sefatekha

"Let the neighbor praise you, not your own mouth, a stranger,
and not your own lips." Prov. 27:1

liyamdaHa-ka il-gharib, la fam-ka

"Let the stranger praise you, not your own mouth."

shomer piv u-leshono

shomer mitstsarot nafsho

The one who minds his mouth and tongue will save his life
from distress.

man sakata salima

The one who is quiet is safe.

4-Conclusion

We have demonstrated affinities of structure, style, and content between Hebrew and Arabic proverbs. These affinities suggest that at least some of the Hebrew proverbs properly belong to a parenetic genre shared by Arabic language and literature. The clear evidence that the Hebrew people borrowed considerable amounts of wisdom material from the Arabs leads us to conclude that the similarity in style and structure was a part of this borrowing. The evidence of these affinities invites scholars of Hebrew language to search for more close affinities between these two languages, their bodies of literature, and the cultures of the people that developed them, both ancient and modern.