

Ancient Near Eastern Proverbs: Part I



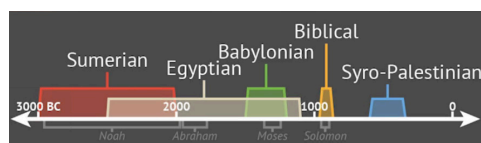
Hélène Dallaire, PhD

*Experience: Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at
Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado*

When we think of the proverbs in the book of Proverbs . . . very interesting when we compare them or read them alongside other collections of ancient Near Eastern proverbs, because what we find is that people have always been the same. And so proverbs, words of wisdom, teachings, wise sayings are important in every culture to every generation . . . I was even looking at some Chinese proverbs this morning and looking at how . . . the similarity with ancient Near Eastern proverbs and biblical proverbs. And so what I'd like to talk about in the next few minutes is the similarities between the world of the ancients—even before Abraham and during the time of the patriarchs and during the first millennium, and the Israelites—and what was taught to the Israelites, is it the same as what was taught elsewhere? Or did they have their own unique set of instructions or wise sayings? Well, a lot of wonderful similarities.

Ancient Near Eastern Collections

- Biblical Proverbs - 1000 BC
- Sumerian Proverbs - 3000-2000 BC
- Babylonian Proverbs - 1500-1200 BC
- Egyptian Proverbs - 2500-1100 BC
- Syro-Palestinian Proverbs - 600 BC
Proverbs of Ahiqar



So four of the main collections of proverbs that we have are, (1) the Sumerian proverbs, and those are dated to the third millennium BC. So they are much older than the biblical texts that we have because the earliest of the biblical texts that we have would be from around 1000 BC, especially the proverbs of Solomon. So proverbs were in existence, whole collections of proverbs were in existence, long before the biblical proverbs came along. Then you have (2) Babylonian collections that are dated from 1500 to 1200 BCE, which really would cover partially the end of the patriarchal period and then also go into the time when Moses was called to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. And it depends how you date the exodus and date the entering to Canaan. But during the biblical times, the second millennium period, you have whole collections of proverbs that were written in Akkadian language that is connected to Hebrew, is linked to the Hebrew language in that it belongs to the same family of Semitic languages. However, it uses a very different script and very different tools to write the language. Then there are (3) Egyptian proverbs, collections that date from the third millennium all the way down to almost the

Ancient Near Eastern Collections

Sumerian proverb

My son, I will counsel you,
may my counsel be accepted,
Ziusudra, a word will I say to
you, may it be heeded. Do
not neglect my counsel, the
word that I have spoken, do
not change, the counsel of a
father is precious; may your
neck bow before it.

Common Themes

• Co-signing a loan

Proverbs 6:1–3 TLV

Proverbs 22:26–27 TLV

Proverbs 11:15 TLV

Sumerian proverb

time of David. And so this also covers the patriarchal period and the time of Moses. Then we have (4) Syro-Palestinian proverbs and especially the collection of Ahiqar. And this collection was written in Aramaic. So let's look at some of them.

First of all, we'll look at a Sumerian proverb that speaks to Ziusudra, who is a corresponding character to Noah because he was existing during a flood and wanting to survive, and etc. But what is common here is that he is addressed as, "My son, I will counsel you. May my counsel be accepted, Ziusudra. A word will I say to you, may it be heeded." Sounds almost the same as what I read in the previous video about "My son, listen, pay attention, incline your ear to my sayings." And then continue this Sumerian proverb: "Do not neglect my counsel. The word that I have spoken, do not change. The counsel of a father is precious. May your neck bow before it." So, very similar to what we read in the book of Proverbs. However, it is a Sumerian proverb that existed at least 1500 years, if not more, before the biblical Proverbs were written by King Solomon.

We have an interesting Sumerian proverb about cosigning a loan. In the book of Proverbs in the Bible, in Proverbs 11:15, we read, "Whoever puts up security for a stranger will have trouble" (TLV). In other words, if you cosign a loan, and there are other Scriptures that I listed there also, Proverbs 6:1–3, Proverbs 22:26–27, which is interesting because it's repeated in various sections of the book of Proverbs, in other words, in different collections. The first collection in the collection of "My son, pay attention to what I'm saying." And then in Proverbs 11, it's used in a different style, written in a different style. And Proverbs 22 also, same message, don't cosign. And we find the same thing in the Sumerian proverb. We read, "Do not make a guarantee for someone. The person will have a hold on you." So the same type of thing is, you are binding yourself to someone else if you cosign a loan. So, very interesting information here.

Now, when I think about this cosigning, we hear, it's commonly said, "Let's make a deal," and "We're wheeling and dealing." These are terms we use today. And there was a lot of bartering going on in the ancient Near East. This is one way in which they paid for products or paid for services . . . was a lot of bartering. But, when you come to a point where you take the responsibility of someone else's loan, everybody recognizes that you may be putting yourself or your livelihood in jeopardy. And so, although we always look for a good deal, we have to be very careful how we do that.

Common Themes

• The adulteress

Proverbs 5:1, 3–10 ^{TLV}

Egyptian proverb

• The adulteress

Proverbs 5:1, 3–10 ^{TLV}My son, pay attention to
my wisdom . . .For a seducing woman's lips drip
honey
and her mouth is smoother than
oil.But in the end she is bitter as
wormwood,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death,

An Egyptian proverb that speaks of the adulteress, the dangers of falling into the hands of an adulteress or a temptress, who is trying to draw a man away from the right path, from walking in the fear of the Lord. And we read so many of these warnings against the woman who would want to get you off base. And in Proverbs 5, 6, 7, and these are all proverbs where we have the father speaking to his son, My son, be careful. Don't be seduced by a woman who is trying to tempt you. "For a seducing woman's lips drip honey and her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a double-edged sword, her feet go down to death, her steps lead straight to *Sheol*. She does not keep straight to the path of life, her paths are crooked—but she does not know it. So now, my sons, listen to me and do not turn aside from the words of my mouth. Keep your path far from her and do not go near the door of her house—lest you give your strength to others and your years to one who is cruel; lest strangers feast on your strength, your labors go to a foreigner's house" (Proverbs 5:3–10 TLV).

So the father, again, you see the father caring for the son, knowing that if he goes and plays these sexual games outside of what is pleasing to God, then he can live . . . some very terrible consequences. And we know that this is so much part of our world today. Sexual temptation is something that we see with pornography, and we see with all kinds of tools, with literature that is used for tempting men and women away from faithfulness in a marriage, that covenant marriage situation, where a one man, one woman, and really living for God in the paradigm that God has established.

So we read an Egyptian proverb that says, "Beware the woman who is a stranger, one not known in her town. Do not stare at her when she goes by. Do not know her carnally, a deep water whose course is unknown, such as a woman away from her husband. 'I'm pretty,' she tells you daily. When she has no witnesses, she's ready to ensnare you." And it's so interesting because as I read this, I was thinking of the story in the book of Genesis, in Genesis chapter 40 [see chapter 39], with Potiphar's wife, who in Egypt tries to entice Joseph to sleep with her. And the language in Hebrew is so interesting the way she tries to entice him, not just by using a command, "Come sleep with me." But in Hebrew, there is a form of command that is associated with manipulation. What she says to him is, "Oh, *shikhvah imi*. Oh, come and sleep with me." So she's obviously a woman who is deviating from the path. So we don't know what was going on in Potiphar's house,

Common Themes

• The adulteress

Proverbs 5:1, 3–10 ^{TLV}

Egyptian proverb

Beware of a woman who is a
stranger, one not known in her town.
Do not stare at her when she goes
by. Do not know her carnally. A deep
water whose course is unknown,
such is a woman away from her
husband. "I am pretty" she tells you
daily. When she has no witnesses,
she is ready to ensnare you.

but obviously temptation was there for Joseph. And Joseph was a man who feared God. Even when he was in prison, he feared God. When he was a slave, he feared God. And he continued to fear God even when he was at the right hand of Pharaoh, serving God in the position in which God had placed him.

And so he was tempted, as many are tempted. So the book of Proverbs is very clear, don't get burned by falling into sexual sin because the consequences are severe. The pain is great. And so it is very difficult to recover in many cases after having succumbed to this kind of temptation. So we find that it's not just today. It's not just in biblical times. But obviously has always been something that has created problems in marriages and in society and in individuals' lives.