

A Literary Analysis of the Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar

Introduction

Students of the Hebrew Bible who are determined to come to an understanding of not just the text, but of backgrounds of the Bible, learn very quick that their endeavor to discover leads them into the archaeology, literature and history of the entire Ancient Near East. The last two centuries have provided extensive opportunities, through the discovery of ancient texts in various mediums, to learn about the ways in which the small nation of Israel lived within the larger context of her neighbors in the Ancient Near East. These literary discoveries have shed tremendous light on the large corpus of sacred writings of the Hebrews. When studying anything literary, there inevitably comes the point where a classification is to be made concerning the text into particular genres. There are definite potentials of contact between Israel and the cultures of the Ancient Near East in the literary genres of narrative, wisdom, and prophecy. Elmer Smick comments on the breadth of this genre interaction,

Wisdom literature provided the most abundant communion of ideas between the cultures of the ancient Near East. This genre was the Near East version of philosophy. It appears in two forms, traditional and anti-traditional, and it appears precisely in these two forms in the OT. Texts like *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* (ANET 412-414), *The Instruction of Amenemope* (421-424), and the various Akkadian and Sumerian proverbs and counsels of wisdom (425-427, 593-596), along with *The Words of Ahiqar* (427-428)—all compare favorably with the Biblical book of Proverbs and some wisdom Psalms. Anti-traditional wisdom of Egypt like *A Dispute over Suicide* (405-407), the Sumerian *Lamentation to a*

Man's God (589-591), and the Babylonian documents *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom* (434-437), *A Dialogue about Human Misery* (438-440) and *A Pessimistic Dialogue between Master and Servant* (437-438) present the anti-traditional or anti-wisdom wisdom.¹

It is within this interaction of wisdom literature and more specifically, the similarity mentioned between the *The Words of Ahiqar* and the biblical Proverbs, that this paper arises. There have been numerous attempts at recognizing the parallels between *Ahiqar* and the proverbs in the Bible from a comparison of similar genre.² Additional efforts have been made to note the similarity in the narrative portion as well.³ I wasn't looking to just rehash what is already written but instead to attempt a more original (at least in my limited knowledge of the information available) investigation into the similarities in *Ahiqar* and the biblical book of Proverbs as it relates to an appeal to nature. I was first intrigued by this when reading the statements made in an article by Paul Dion. In this essay he wrote, "*The Proverbs of Ahiqar* is remarkable for its fable-like comparisons involving animals."⁴

The intent of this paper is twofold: 1) To recount the some of the preliminary issues of *Ahiqar* such as summary, background, date, setting, etc 2) To highlight the references to animals in *Ahiqar*; and bring to light any similar references that can be found in the biblical Proverbs that connect with the specific animals in *Ahiqar*. I hope to highlight that there might be a genre similarity or pattern as it relates to an appeal to

¹ *JETS* 32/1, p. 6

² See Weigl, Lindenberger, Ginsberg, Longman et. al. However, comments that most of these attempts have not been met with much success at the time of his writing (1983, 25)

³ See Niditch; note 46 in 1983, p. 34

⁴ Dion, p. 1289

nature in the West Semitic wisdom literature that existed during the time of the autographs of *Ahiqar* and that of the writing and compilation of the Hebrew Proverbs.

Preliminary Issues

The Proverbs of Ahiqar is the title that most are familiar with. Unfortunately, this title runs the risk of minimizing or neglecting the fact that the proverbs are not always isolated from the narrative surrounding the person of Ahiqar. Within the whole study of *Ahiqar* is the realization that there are two components, the actual proverbs and a narrative. There have been many discoveries relating to extant texts of *Ahiqar*, but most are not in good condition. Some don't even have any reference to the narrative portion of *Ahiqar*. However most of these findings have been late. That changed when a major discovery on the island of Elephantine in Egypt during the excavations of 1906-1908 by a German team unveiled to the scholarly community a large cache of Aramaic papyri. It was in this cache that an Aramaic version of the narrative and proverbs of *Ahiqar* was found. It had originally comprised more than fourteen columns, with well over two hundred lines of text. Yet some columns had been damaged and are lost whereas there were some that were recoverable and later published in 1911.⁵ Scholars have noted that this Aramaic version is paleographically and archaeologically dated to the fifth century even though the story is much older (early seventh century).⁶

What is interesting is the way in which *Ahiqar* has been translated and integrated into various languages and literary documents since its introduction. There have been versions found in Syriac (including a modern Syriac version), Armenian, Arabic, Old Turkish, Georgian, Slavonic, Romanian, Russian, and Serbian. Fragments have been

⁵ Lindenberger 1983, p. 8

⁶ Dion, p. 1289; *ibid.* p. 19

found in Ethiopic and even Greek. All of these versions are no older than the 12th or 13th centuries A.D., but references in the book of Tobit suggest a much older tradition.⁷

For the sake of this paper the focus will be on the oldest extant manuscript found in the Elephantine Aramaic version translated by Lindenberger. In further understanding this particular text scholars have debated whether the narrative and the proverbs were integrated together. Cowley argues that they were together on literary merit.⁸ Yet a more conclusive argument against their integration is formed on philological grounds.

Lindenberger attempts to show that based on differences in dialects it is clear that they were once separate.⁹ Additionally, a study of the linguistic aspects show that the proverbs would have been older than the narrative. Lindenberger comments,

“A careful analysis of the language of the proverbs- its phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and idiomatic usage- has brought forth a good deal of additional evidence to support the conclusions of Kutscher and Greenfield. The dialect of the sayings is virtually free of Akkadian loan words (in sharp contrast to the narrative), and there are no Persian words in it at all. Typologically, it is more archaic than the standard Imperial Aramaic of the narrative, with pronounced similarities both to Old Aramaic and the Canaanite languages.”¹⁰

This provides a valuable linguistic connection to the broader studies of the Arameans.

The rise of the Arameans and their influence through political, language, and other mediums can bring some understanding to the widespread dissemination of this work in

⁷ , 1983, p. 4-5; Also see 1985, p. 479

⁸ Cowley, p. 210

⁹ Lindenberger 1983, p. 19 and all of Appendix A.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 19, Appendix A; Lipiński argues (for different reasons) an early date on linguistic reasons as well that make comparisons between the Aramaic word (ksyky) only appearing in ancient Aramaic and thus equating to an earlier date for the proverbs of Ahiqar, p. 494

ancient history (as well as down to modern history). It is one of the few significant literary windows into the thoughts and viewpoints of the Arameans.

As to the location of its composition, there seems to be disagreement as well. Lipiński argues that since there is the inclusion of Sun-god Šamaš of the Akkadian therefore it most likely composed in upper Mesopotamia. He mentions that these features parallel the characteristics of Šamaš in Akkadian literary and ritual texts.¹¹ Lindenberger takes a different approach to the evidence and says that,

“The place of origin is also uncertain, but it was most likely not Mesopotamia... There is nothing in the proverbs which would suggest they originated in Assyria. The lack of Akkadian influence in the language- striking when compared even with the Old Aramaic inscriptions from Syria- must be taken seriously... Two lines of evidence point independently to north Syria... the dialect... it’s similarities in vocabulary an idiom to Canaanite , suggest a region where Canaanite and Aramaic were in contact. The second is the pantheon.”¹²

There is mention of the gods: Šamaš, El, and Baal Šamayn. These references to the pantheon are all in reference to the proverbs. The narrative portion has numerous examples of Akkadian loan words which would imply two observations: the narrative was separate from the proverbs and also may have originated in an area closer to Mesopotamia.

Before moving on to the analysis of the proverbs it is important to give at least a summary account of the narrative that gives background to the sayings. The narrative tells the story of man named Ahiqar who is an advisor and cabinet minister of

¹¹ Lipiński, p. 625

¹² 1983, p. 20

Sennacherib, king of Assyria (704-681 B.C.) and Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.). Ahiqar, as a youth, had been warned by astrologers that he would have no children. In seeking to overcome this doomed prophecy that comes to realization as he becomes an adult, he marries sixty wives. He appeals to his gods and they instruct him to adopt his nephew Nadin and raise him as his own son. He is to take on an instructing role in the life of his son and train him up to be a worthy successor to Ahiqar's position in the kingdom. When Nadin gets older, he rejects the wise sayings of his uncle and then seeks to plot against him in order to have him convicted of treason. He forges documents and eventually Ahiqar is declared a betrayer and sentenced to death. As the sentence is being carried out, Ahiqar recognizes the executioner as one whom he had saved years prior by hiding him away. Ahiqar asks the executioner for a similar favor which he grants. As Ahiqar stays hidden away, the king of Egypt sends a request and offers of tribute to the king of Assyria for three years if he could provide a wise man to Egypt who will help build a castle unto the sky. After a time of distress for the king, the executioner reveals to the king that Ahiqar (who was known as the only person wise enough to accomplish such a feat) is still alive. The king rejoices and sends Ahiqar to Egypt where he accomplishes the task and returns after three years to Assyria with the promised tribute. On his return Ahiqar asks the king to allow him to discipline the ungrateful Nadin. The king agrees and Ahiqar has him imprisoned and tortured all the while attempting to teach him even more of the proverbs that he previously rejected. Eventually Nadin dies and thus ends the narrative portion of Ahiqar.

Literary Analysis of the Proverbs of Ahiqar

As was mentioned earlier, this paper will be focusing solely on the Elephantine text as translated by Lindenberger.¹³ He has arranged his translation into “sayings” which is the equivalent of “proverbs” according to his terminology. I will seek to highlight in *bold italics* the saying and number followed by Lindenberger’s translation of the particular phrase referencing any animals in *italics*. If applicable, I will reference any similarities with the biblical book of Proverbs. I understand that the sayings are in Aramaic, but I will endeavor to find Hebrew cognates in the book of Proverbs instead of cross-referencing in English. If there is nothing found in Proverbs, then there will be no listing after the *Ahiqar* saying. I will list the references to other biblical wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon) simply to note the possible parallels within the overall genre.

Saying 1- What is stronger (louder?) than a braying ass?...¹⁴

There is some potential ambiguity as to whether טמור should be translated as “donkey” or “wine.” However based on adjective run being used to describe an animal noise the connection is made. Unfortunately there is no answer given in the proverbs and so the point of the proverb is not revealed.

Proverbs 26:3 A whip for the horse, A bridle for the donkey, And a rod for the fool's back.

Here the writer is relaying that there are certain inherent uses for different items. These items seem to exist for no other purpose. The point is that just as a bridle is made for the

¹³ 1983, Pp. 43-220

¹⁴ Ibid., Pp. 43-45

controlling of the donkey, so also is a rod for the controlling or reigning in of a fool. The Hebrew טמר also appears in Job 24:3.

Saying 7- *The scorpion [finds] bread and will not eat it, but(if he finds) something foul, he is more pleased than if he were (sumptuously) fed.*¹⁵

The animal reference here is to the scorpion. The saying seems to be too badly broken to be interpreted with much confidence according to Lindenberger. The interpretation ranges from “one man’s meat is another man’s poison” to the scorpion itself being inedible. I seem to think that is a reference to the finicky or picky nature of the scorpion’s eating habits. That it only eats according to its nature. Scorpions are known to only eat live food such as crickets, roaches, and even mice.

Saying 9- *The lion catches the scent of the stag in (its) hidden den, and he...and sheds its blood and eats its flesh. Just so is the meeting of men.*¹⁶

The interpretation of seems clearly to show the way in which man cannot resist killing and overpowering those who are weaker. It also seems evident that man will not miss an opportunity to do this. The stag unknowingly hides in the den of the lion and suffers for it. hyra does not appear in Proverbs, but does appear in Job 4:10, Ecc 9:4, and Pss 7:3, 10:9, 17:12, 22:14; 42:2 and Sol 2:9, 17; 8:14. The Hebrew ארי does appear in Proverbs 22:13, 26:13, and 28:15.

Proverbs 22:13 *The lazy man says, "There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!"*

Proverbs 26:13 *The lazy man says, "There is a lion in the road! A fierce lion is in the streets!"*

¹⁵ Ibid., Pp. 57-58

¹⁶ Ibid., Pp. 60-61

Here the lazy man is making any excuse he can to avoid work.

Proverbs 28:15 Like a roaring lion and a charging bear Is a wicked ruler over poor people.

As a bear would be oppressive and dangerous so also is a wicked ruler.

*Saying 10- the lion... The ass abandons his load and will not carry it. He will be shamed by his fellow and will carry a burden which is not his own; he will be laden with a camel's load.*¹⁷

Here are more references to two animals we have already mentioned, the lion and ass.

However, this saying introduces the camel. The interpretation seems straight forward in that if a person doesn't seek to carry or bear their own load or responsibility, they will end up with a greater load or responsibility. The Hebrew גמל does not appear in Proverbs, but does appear in Job 1:3, 1:17, 42:12.

*Saying 11- The ass mounts the jenny out of lust for her, but the birds...*¹⁸

There isn't much that can be made because the saying doesn't finish. However the word Aramaic anta for jenny does not appear in the Bible nor any Hebrew cognate. Lindenberger comments that there might be a juxtaposition between lust of the ass and the procreation of birds. The Hebrew עוף does not appear in Proverbs, but it does appear in Job 12:7, 28:21, 35:11; Pss 50:11; 78:27; 79:2; 104:12; Ecc 10:20.

¹⁷ Ibid., Pp. 62-63

¹⁸ Ibid., Pp. 64

Saying 15- *Above all else, guard your mouth; and as for what you have h[ear]d, be discreet! For a word is a bird, and he who releases it is a fool.*¹⁹

The interpretation of this is straightforward. As soon as words come out of the mouth, they are unable to be retrieved just as a bird being released is normally not possible to retrieve. Lindenberger notes that later *Ahiqar* tradition, this particular saying is so altered that it is barely recognizable.²⁰ As mentioned under the previous saying there is no reference in Proverbs, but there is one in Ecclesiastes that is too proverbial (and similar) to pass up without quoting it. The flighty and ubiquitous movements of the bird provide ample opportunity for a moral lesson. This is a good example of how Ancient Near East thought shows some consistency through the geographical and linguistic regions.

Ecclesiastes 10:20 *Do not curse the king, even in your thought; Do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom; For a bird of the air may carry your voice, And a bird in flight may tell the matter.*

Saying 23- *The k[ing]'s tongue is gentle, but it breaks a dragon's ribs. (It is) like death, which is invisible.*²¹

The interpretation seems straight forward, but powerful. The king's words are spoken of as being kind and gentle, but have the power to break dragon's ribs carry with it the power of life and death. There are similarities to the Proverbs here in thought.

Lindenberger mentions 25:5b where it spoken of that soft tongue breaks bone.²² Another thought example speaks of life and death being in the power of the tongue (Pr 18:21).

The Hebrew **לִשְׁוֹן** does not appear in Proverbs, but does appear in Job 7:12 and Pss 74:13;

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 75

²⁰ Ibid.; also note 162 on p. 235-6

²¹ Ibid., p.91

²² ibid.

91:13; 148:7. The thought in this saying uses the imagery of breaking the dragon's ribs as an ultimate sign of strength. God uses this same imagery in challenging Job to observe the strength of the Behemoth in Job 40:18 (NKJ).

Saying 28- *The lion approached to greet the ass: "Peace be unto you!" The ass replied to the lion,*²³

I must say that I am quite disappointed that this saying is not finished. This also is the first time that there are animals doing any speaking in fable like fashion. Both the lion and ass have been covered in previous sayings.

Saying 34- *There is no lion in the sea, therefore the sea-snake is called labbu.*²⁴

This turns out to be a very important *saying* because of the probable influence of Akkadian. Lindenberger mentions that it most likely is a play on words in involving a pun that the most average reader would not understand. However, if the readers were those educated and involved in the king's court, they certainly would have understood the intended pun. With the Akkadian word *labbu* being translated as "lion", it would read "There is no lion (לֵאָוִן) in the sea, therefore the sea-snake is nicknamed lion (labbu)." He mentions that this is the only place that features something of Mesopotamian origin. Thus it could possibly be a later addition when the narrative and the proverbs were joined.²⁵ The Aramaic word for sea-snake or a Hebrew cognate does not appear in the Hebrew Bible.

Saying 35- *(Once upon a time) a leopard came upon a she-goat who was cold. The leopard said to the goat, "Wont' you let me cover you with my pelt?" The goat replied to the leopard, "Why should I do that, my lord? Don't take my*

²³ Ibid., p. 96

²⁴ Ibid., p. 105

²⁵ Ibid.

*own hide away from me! For (as they say) '[A leopard] does not greet a gazelle except to suck its blood.'"*²⁶

This saying is a gold mine for the fable imagery using animals. The moral of the story seems clear that sometimes well-sounding offers are cloaks for something more sinister. There are some new animals introduced in this saying. The goat has already been covered, but we now have the leopard mentioned. Even though it doesn't appear in any Proverb, it does appear in Sol 4:8. Gazelle 'צב' on the other hand appears in Sol 2:9, 17; 4:5; 7:3; 8:14 as well as Proverbs.

***Proverbs 6:5** Deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hunter's hand And like a bird from the hand of the fowler.*

Here the writer speaks about being delivered from quickly from trouble if his son was to follow his admonitions. He then goes on to use the ants as an example of how to be financially wise and to resist laziness. If he does these things, he will be delivered like the gazelle from the hand of the hunter or like the bird from the clutches of man who hunts birds.

***Saying 36-** (Once upon a time) a bear came to the lambs and said, "...I will be content." The lambs replied to him, "Take whichever of us you will, we...For it is not in men's power to lift their feet or set them down apart fro[m the gods..."]*

***(Variant Ending)** "For it not in your power to lift your foot or set it down."*²⁷

The interpretation of this speaks of the powerlessness of men to thwart the will of the gods. I find this very deterministic in its theology. Power rests solely in the gods and so

²⁶ Ibid., p.108-109

²⁷ Ibid., Pp. 110-112

if confronted with danger, then take what has been dealt to you. Again, two new animals are introduced here to our list. The first is lamb and only appears in Psalm 119:76.

However, the bear appears twice in Proverbs.

Proverbs 17:12 *Let a man meet a bear robbed of her cubs, Rather than a fool in his folly.*

Pretty straightforward that man is better off to meet a dangerous bear than a fool in his foolishness.

Saying 106- *[A man said] one [da]y to the wild ass, [“Let me ride] on you, and I will provide for you.” [The wild ass replied, “Keep] your care and fodder; I want nothing to do with your riding.’”²⁸*

The issue seems clearly that of freedom versus provision. We all have been in an unfortunate situation where we have promises of security, but in return we have to give up freedom in order to receive it. I think of the contemporary issue of wire-tapping for the sake of being protected from terrorists. The Hebrew cognate ערוֹד does not appear in Proverbs, but does appear once in Job 39:5.

This is the end of the sayings that relate specifically to animals in the Aramaic version of *Ahiqar*. However, there are two additional references that deal with nature that should be briefly mentioned. *Saying 80* makes reference to being hid under the shelter of the cedar tree, which ends up being a reference to the king. This saying seems to be one of those that are directed specifically at the rebellious and traitorous son Nadin. It

²⁸ Ibid., p. 203

mentions leaving him under the care of the king, but having turned and abandoned his friends.²⁹

Saying 73- *The [bram]ble sent a message to the pomegranate as follows: “Dear pomegranate, what good are all [your] thorns [to him who tou]ches your [fru]it?” The pomegranate replied to the bramble, “You are nothing but thorns to him who [tou]ches you.”*³⁰

This fable-like saying shows a contempt on the part of thorn bush against the pomegranate. Does the thorn bush seem to show some sort of jealousy because he himself has no fruit? In the act of disparaging the pomegranate, the pomegranate reminds the thorn bush that he has nothing at all that anyone would desire.

One last comment on animals in the *Ahiqar* is warranted. This focus has been on the Aramaic version of *Ahiqar*, but in understanding the role of animals, there is an fascinating story of a wolf in the Syriac version. Aaron Demsky writes,

“In a very perceptive proverb found at the end of the Syriac version of *Ahiqar* (Conybeare 1913:127), the author juxtaposed the school lesson in learning the alphabet with its potential for popular literacy. An unlikely but intuitively intelligent student — the wolf — is brought into the formal educational system including the teacher/master (*rab*), the school house (*bet sfr’a*) and elementary curriculum *’alf bet*. The result of this meeting is that the wolf quickly recognizes the potential of the alphabet as a means of achieving his own goals, in this case in having a good meal of kid. While the teacher is still on the opening lesson of the

²⁹ Ibid. p. 179

³⁰ Ibid., p. 167

first two letters, the wolf anticipates the next lesson by providing a word, which includes the following two letters and one that indicates his personal aim in life.³¹

Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to recount of some of the preliminary issues of Elephantine Aramaic version of *The Proverbs of Ahiqar* as well as bring to light a thorough list of the references of animals used to bring forth salient wisdom. I also attempted to show comparisons between these specific animals found in this wisdom literature with that of the Bible. I have found the fable like stories of *Ahiqar* even more fascinating than expected when I was first intrigued by Dion's article. May we continue to learn through nature God's practical or natural wisdom.

³¹Demsky, 1:107 in Hallo, William W.; Younger, K. Lawson: *The Context of Scripture*.

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