AGUR’S WISDOM AND THE COHERENCE OF PROVERBS 30
AGUR’S WISDOM AND THE COHERENCE OF PROVERBS 30

Alexander T. Kirk
For Meghan.
We did it, babe.

לאתני
הכי אני ואתי עמנת
Ps 139:18
Contents

Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................ix
Abbreviations and Sigla ..........................................................................................................xiii

1. Introducing Agur Ben-Yakeh: The Coherence of Proverbs 30 and the Voice of Agur ..............................................................................................................3
   1.1. An Incoherent Text or an Eccentric Sage? .........................................................3
   1.2. Voice, Coherence, and the Anthological Nature of Proverbs .........................8
   1.3. The Argument and Structure of This Study .......................................................25

2. Agur and His Interpreters: Wisdom Literature, Form Criticism, and the Hermeneutical Potential of Proverbs 30 ........................................................................29
   2.1. How Has Agur Been Read? .................................................................................29
   2.2. How Might We Read Agur? .................................................................................47

3. Reframing Agur’s Words: Reading Proverbs 30:1 as the Superscript of a Collection ..............................................................................................................................61
   3.1. Burdened with Many Problems ...........................................................................61
   3.2. Invoking Agur .......................................................................................................62
   3.3. What Might משָׁפֶן Mean? ..................................................................................69
   3.4. Toward a Reading of Proverbs 30:1b ...................................................................95
   3.5. Proverbs 30:1 as the Superscript of a Collection ...............................................107

   4.1. Will the Real Agur Please Stand Up? ..................................................................109
   4.2. Reading Proverbs 30:2–10 .................................................................................110
   4.3. Finding Agur’s Voice ..........................................................................................143

5. Agur’s Beastly Ethics: The Numerical Saying, Animal Imagery, Humor, and Coherence in Proverbs 30:11–33 .................................................................147
   5.1. Coherence, Form, and Content in Proverbs 30:11–33 ......................................147
5.2. The Numerical Saying, Animal Imagery, and Humor: Hermeneutical Perspectives 148
5.3. Reading Proverbs 30:11–33 165
5.4. Satirizing Pride and Greed: Tone, Ethics, and Coherence in Proverbs 30:11–33 198

6. Agur in His Own Words: Coherence, Genre, and Philology in Proverbs 30 ..............................................................201
   6.1. Aspects of Coherence in Proverbs 30 201
   6.2. Agur’s Words and the Question of Genre 204
   6.3. Reading Agur’s Words as Wisdom Literature within Proverbs 208
   6.4. Philology, Reading, and Hermeneutics 215

Appendix: Translation and Philological Notes ........................................221
   Translation of Proverbs 30 221
   Philological Notes 223

Bibliography .................................................................251
Ancient Sources Index .....................................................281
Modern Authors Index ......................................................299
Acknowledgments

If you start counting from when I first began working on Prov 30, this volume has been over ten years in the making. My long journey was filled with circles and doubling back, yet I have received better than I deserved, and I have gathered many debts of gratitude on my way.

Bruce Waltke first suggested to me, in my final semester of seminary, that the unity of Prov 30 would make a good topic for research. But more than that, with quiet passion Dr. Waltke introduced me to the beauty and awe of the Old Testament through his lectures, commentaries, and conversation. He is the reason I set out to try to be a scholar of the Hebrew Bible in the first place.

I was immensely privileged to study with both Walter Moberly and Stuart Weeks. Walter’s postgraduate module, “Bible and Hermeneutics,” not to mention his famous informal seminar, taught me to read with charity, precision, and faith. His invested reading of my own writing slowly and steadily improved it and consistently encouraged me. Stuart, on the other hand, did me the honor of never quite being satisfied with my work. In many long sessions at various pubs around Durham, Stuart apprenticed me in philology and set a high bar for the work I was attempting. Later, as I drafted chapters, Stuart sent me back to rewrite them again and again. He kept insisting that I didn’t quite have my whole argument worked out yet. He was, of course, right. If Walter and Stuart had not guided and challenged me, I cannot imagine how impoverished this work would be. I am now proud to call myself both a philologist and a theologian.

Many other friends, colleagues, and mentors aided me on my journey. I would not have managed the transition from seminary to PhD studies without Mark Futato, Scott Swain, Scott Jones, and Scott Redd. Special credit is also due to Robert Holmstedt, who introduced me to the philological tools that made this study possible. I am further thankful to Rob for challenging me to publish my first papers, for bracing me with his hard-won perspective on academia, and for readily providing bits of syntactic
guidance over the years. Bernd Schipper welcomed me to two consecutive years of his phenomenal Berlin-Oxford Summer School and has continued to support my research. Chris Ansberry kindly invited me to present an early paper and has championed my work ever since. Andrew Judd generously shared his own unpublished research and gave me reassuring notes on my treatment of genre. Will Kynes and Katherine Southwood have been valuable mentors, particularly generous with much-needed advice and encouragement about wisdom literature, biblical humor, and the various foibles and vagaries of trying to make one’s way in academia. Suzanna Millar and David Janzen posed helpful questions, spotted many typos, pushed me toward sharper definitions in key places, and offered advice toward publication.

Without the support of Training Leaders International and our many generous and faithful partners—I cannot possibly list all the names—my research simply would not have been financially possible. It has been an honor—you have my deepest thanks. At Training Leaders International, Daren Carlson, Jim Jordan, Paul Smith, Jonathan Worthington, and Joost Nixon were particularly supportive, understanding, and encouraging. When we transitioned to Durham, Richard Rohlfing Jr. welcomed us and helped us find a home to live in, which—as much as anything else—made this research and writing possible through both the COVID-19 pandemic and the birth of two little girls. I am lucky to have friends like Robb Coleman, Joseph Justiss, and Hannah Bash, who all read bits of my work and made helpful comments. Michael Morgan’s generosity and encouragement know no bounds. Pierre-Yves Koenig helped with French translations. Demetrios Alibertis infiltrated some of the world’s best libraries to send me critical editions of the Peshitta when I could not access them. Jesse Schumann helped advance my Hebrew skills and became a great friend in the process. Jesse Peterson was my faithful companion as we both studied at a distance from Durham, offering me the gift of endless debate and critical moral support. Jacques Boulet and Rony Kozman—great friends since Toronto—have not stopped encouraging me and walking with me from afar. John Screnock has been like an older brother. From viewing apartments in Toronto, to providing excellent, detailed feedback on the most technical parts of this volume, to helping navigate academia and creating opportunities for me, John has been unflaggingly supportive. Brandon and Brittany Hurlbert, Dan and Megan York, and Luke and Bekah Irwin—fellow pilgrims in Durham—supported and encouraged us with their friendship in ways that I cannot summarize or repay.
My wonderful in-laws, Jeff and Rebecca Kiel, have always opened their home and their hearts to me. They never questioned or stopped supporting our work through their generosity and prayers, even when the life-choices Meghan and I made probably left them scratching their heads. My mom and dad, Larry and Connie Kirk, gave me my earliest and, in many ways, best education. Through dad’s faithful preaching and mom’s unflinching conviction that all truth is God’s truth, they set me on this path. I am forever indebted to their example, their prayers, and their sacrificial love.

My little girls, Rue, Willa, and Janie—all three of whom were born during the course of my PhD—have been God’s gift of perspective. I will cherish our Saturday daddy-daughter-days as long as I live. My wife, Meghan, has supported our quest for me to become a biblical scholar no matter what. More importantly, she has helped me keep that quest in perspective when it threatened to consume me. She is my best friend, and this book is for her.

Finally, though some may sneer, I would be remiss in my own conscience if I did not acknowledge the Lord my God. Ultimately, his incongruous grace enabled this work, from the natural gifts and inclinations he placed in me, to the parents he placed me with, to the woman he placed beside me, the scholars he placed me under, and the resources he placed at my disposal. What do I have that I did not receive?

Durham, 14 July 2023
Abbreviations and Sigla

Sigla

√ Semitic root
{} translation of reconstructed Hebrew text that deviates from MT
§ section number

Greek Letters for Hexaplaric Sources

α’ Aquila
θ’ Theodotion

Abbreviations

1cs first-person common singular
2ms second-person masculine singular
3fs third-person feminine singular
3mp third-person masculine plural
3ms third-person masculine singular
AB Anchor (Yale) Bible
Avod. Zar. Avodah Zarah
Avot R. Nat. Avot of Rabbi Nathan
AIL Ancient Israel and Its Literature
A.J. Josephus, Antiquitates judaicae
AJSL American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures
ANEM Ancient Near Eastern Monographs
AnOr Analecta Orientalia
AOAT Alter Orient und Altes Testament
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AOTC</td>
<td>Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArBib</td>
<td>Aramaic Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATD</td>
<td>Das Alte Testament Deutsch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AuOr</td>
<td>Aula Orientalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>Babylonian Talmud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBRSup</td>
<td>Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ber.</td>
<td>Berakot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHBib</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Hispana biblica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHQ</td>
<td>Biblia Hebraica Quinta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bib</td>
<td><em>Biblica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BibInt</td>
<td><em>Biblical Interpretation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BibInt</td>
<td><em>Biblical Interpretation Series</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BibOr</td>
<td><em>Biblica et Orientalia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJRL</td>
<td><em>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJS</td>
<td>Brown Judaic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BKAT</td>
<td><em>Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLS</td>
<td><em>Bible and Literature Series</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSOAS</td>
<td><em>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td><em>The Bible Translator</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td><em>Biblical Theology Bulletin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BWANT</td>
<td>Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZ</td>
<td><em>Biblische Zeitschrift</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZAW</td>
<td>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBET</td>
<td>Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td><em>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQMS</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Cairo Genizah copy of the Damascus Document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ConBOT</td>
<td>Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ConC</td>
<td>Concordia Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CrStHB</td>
<td>Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CurBR</td>
<td><em>Currents in Biblical Research</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCLS</td>
<td>Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJD</td>
<td>Discoveries in the Judean Desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMOA</td>
<td>Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSD</td>
<td><em>Dead Sea Discoveries</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET</td>
<td>English translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOTL</td>
<td>Forms of the Old Testament Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRLANT</td>
<td>Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fs</td>
<td>feminine singular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

G  The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible commonly known as the Septuagint
GA  The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible according to Codex Alexandrinus
GöMisz  Göttinger Miscellen
HAT  Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBAI  Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel
HBCE  The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Edition
HBM  Hebrew Bible Monographs
HCS  Hellenistic Culture and Society
HdO  Handbuch der Orientalistik
HS  Hebrew Studies
HTR  Harvard Theological Review
HUCA  Hebrew Union College Annual
IBC  Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC  International Critical Commentary
Int  Interpretation
ITQ  Irish Theological Quarterly
JANES  Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies
JAOS  Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL  Journal of Biblical Literature
JBW  Jahrbücher der biblischen Wissenschaft
JCS  Journal of Cuneiform Studies
JETS  Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JHS  Journal of Hebrew Scriptures
JNSL  Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JPSV</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JQR</td>
<td><em>Jewish Quarterly Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSem</td>
<td><em>Journal of Semitics</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSJSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Semitic Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSSSup</td>
<td>Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Theological Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ketub</td>
<td>Ketubbot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klio</td>
<td><em>Klio: Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Lectio Divina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let. Aris.</td>
<td>Letter of Aristeas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHBOTS</td>
<td>Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSAWS</td>
<td>Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menah.</td>
<td>Menahot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midr.</td>
<td>Midrash (+ biblical book)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mtl.</td>
<td>Masoretic text as witnessed to by Leningrad Codex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mg.</td>
<td>meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAC</td>
<td>New American Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>New Century Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJPS</td>
<td><em>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures; The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMES</td>
<td>Near and Middle Eastern Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS</td>
<td>new series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTG</td>
<td>Neue Theologische Grundrisse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBO</td>
<td>Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLA</td>
<td>Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or</td>
<td><em>Orientalia</em> NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSHT</td>
<td>Oxford Studies in Historical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTM</td>
<td>Oxford Theological Monographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTS</td>
<td>Old Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OtSt</td>
<td><em>Oudtestamentische Studiën</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTWSA</td>
<td><em>Oud Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.Amh.</td>
<td>Papyrus Amherst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.Ins.</td>
<td>Papyrus Insinger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEQ</td>
<td><em>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pesah.</td>
<td>Pesahim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHSC</td>
<td>Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and Its Contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSB</td>
<td><em>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTMS</td>
<td>Princeton Theological Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qidd.</td>
<td>Qiddušin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rab.</td>
<td>Rabbah (+ biblical book), i.e., midrashic works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RB</td>
<td><em>Revue biblique</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhet.</td>
<td>Aristotle, <em>Rhetoric</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSO</td>
<td><em>Rivista degli studi orientali</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>The Syriac version of the Hebrew Bible, or the Peshitta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabb.</td>
<td>Shabbat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanh.</td>
<td>Sanhedrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCS</td>
<td>Septuagint and Cognate Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sef</td>
<td>Sefarad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJT</td>
<td>Scottish Journal of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPIB</td>
<td>Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSStLL</td>
<td>Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STDJ</td>
<td>Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StPohl</td>
<td>Studia Pohl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SubBi</td>
<td>Subsidia Biblica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SymS</td>
<td>Symposium Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>The Targum, or the Aramaic version of the Hebrew Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanh.</td>
<td>Tanhumah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Textus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tg. Neof.</td>
<td>Targum Neofiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tg. Onq.</td>
<td>Targum Onqelos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THB</td>
<td>Textual History of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTC</td>
<td>Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUGAL</td>
<td>Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>The Vulgate, or Jerome's Latin version of the Hebrew Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td>Vetus Testamentum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VTSup</td>
<td>Vetus Testamentum Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeBC</td>
<td>Westminster Bible Companion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WLAW</td>
<td>Wisdom Literature from the Ancient World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOO</td>
<td>Wiener Offene Orientalistik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WZKM</td>
<td>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YJS</td>
<td>Yale Judaica Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZAW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Agur ... may aptly be termed the Hebrew Voltaire.
—E. J. Dillon, *The Skeptics of the Old Testament*

“Ah! you are a happy fellow,” said Mr. Farebrother, turning on his heel and beginning to fill his pipe. “You don’t know what it is to want spiritual tobacco—bad emendations of old texts, ... or a learned treatise on the entomology of the Pentateuch, including all the insects not mentioned, but probably met with by the Israel-ites in their passage through the desert; with a monograph on the Ant, as treated by Solomon, showing the harmony of the Book of Proverbs with the results of modern research. You don’t mind my fumigating you?”

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*