

CLARIFYING  
BAFFLING  
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“SURELY THERE IS A GOD!”  
PROVERBS 30:1–5

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## XV

### “SURELY THERE IS A GOD!”

#### PROVERBS 30:1–5

#### INTRODUCTION

The difficulties encountered in the interpretation of Prov 30:1 can readily be illustrated by the presence or absence of proper names in the varied translations of the verse. The RSV and the NIV have five different names; the KJV, NKJV, and NAS have four distinct names; the Syriac text has three; but the Vulgate, NRSV, and the NLT have only two, whereas the Septuagint has none (although the Codex Venetus, like the Targum, takes Agur and Yakeh as names). The difficulties encountered here led McKane (1970:644) to say despairingly, “In such a verse, where there is hardly a glimmer of light, one feels powerless to make even the first move towards its elucidation.”

But illumination of the verse comes once it is recognized that 30:1–5 preserves a dialectal fragment for which the traditional lexicons of Jerusalem Hebrew will be inadequate, necessitating a greater use of Arabic lexicography to reconstruct the meaning. The poetic lines to be reviewed include:

דְּבַרֵי אַגּוּר בֶּן־יָקֵחַ הַמַּשָּׁא  
נֵאֵם הַגִּבֹּר לְאִיתִיָּאל לְאִיתִיָּאל וְאֶבֶל

The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, *even* the prophecy the man spake unto Ithiel, even unto Ithiel and Ucal

(KJV)

The words of Agur son of Jakeh<sup>1</sup> of Massa.

The man says to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal.

(RSV)

τοὺς ἔμοὺς λόγους υἱέ φοβήθητι  
καὶ δεχάμενος αὐτοὺς μετανόει τάδε<sup>2</sup>  
λέγει ὁ ἀνὴρ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν θεῷ καὶ παύομαι

“reverence my words, Son, and receiving them, repent,”  
says the man to them that trust in God; and I cease.

(Septuagint)

If the names are original, one must concur with Whybray (1994: 407) that the names here are not Hebrew names, at least not widely attested names. Each alleged name in the MT warrants some explanation, as well as a reason for the absence of any name in the Septuagint of Prov 30:1.

### AGUR

Franklyn (1983: 239) suggested, following the Vulgate and Midrash, that Agur is the participle of אָגַר “to gather,” disregarding Sauer’s criticism (which he cited) that the passive אָגַרְתָּ cannot have an active sense. Franklyn, moreover, disregarded the derivation of אָגַרְתָּ given in BDB (8) which cited Arabic, Assyrian, and Syriac cognates (like أَجْر [ʿajara] “to pay, to hire”) of which אָגַרְתָּ would be a passive participle meaning “a hireling.” The imperative φοβήθητι “fear” of the Septuagint obviously derived אָגַרְתָּ from אָגַר “to be afraid, to fear” or אָגַר, stem III, “to dread” (BDB 388, 158).<sup>3</sup>

But none of these derivations are correct, though BDB was on target since it noted the Arabic cognate أَجْر (ʿajara). But أَجْر (ʿajara) has other meanings than “to be a hireling.” It also means “a recompense, compensation, or reward for what has been done”; and, as Lane (1863: 24) noted, “it is well known that أَجْر (ʿajara) signifies a recompense, or reward from God

to a man for righteous conduct.”<sup>4</sup> With this definition in mind, the passive participle  $\text{קָנִי}$ , “one rewarded for righteousness,” is an appropriate name for a person of piety. Seemingly, then, Prov 30:1 opens with the phrase “the words of Agur” or “the words of one-rewarded-for-righteousness.”

### YAKEH

Toy (1916: 518), Franklyn (1983: 239), and others have recognized that the Arabic cognate of  $\text{קָנִי}$  is *واقى* (*waqî*) “to be cautious, guarding oneself from sin,” which is the equivalent of *تقى* (*taqî*) “godly, devout, pious” (Lane 1863: 310; 1893: 3059; Wehr 1979: 115, 1282).<sup>5</sup> Were the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint  $\text{קָנִי}$  (as in the forty-two manuscripts cited by KenNICOTT, mentioned in note 1), the  $\text{קָנִי}$  may have been misread as  $\text{קָנִי}$  “to fear”<sup>6</sup> and have been dismissed by the Greek translators as a gloss on the ambiguous  $\text{קָנִי}$ , which has four different meanings: (1) “to be afraid, to dread,” (2) “to sojourn,” (3) “to stir up strife,” and (4) “to be rewarded for righteousness,” discussed above.

As Franklyn (1983: 239) noted,  $\text{קָנִי}$  may not be a patronym but a designation of quality, meaning “an obedient man,” or as I would prefer, “a pious person.” As a result, the first four words of Prov 30:1 can be rendered, “The words of a pious person rewarded for righteousness.” If  $\text{קָנִי}$  and  $\text{קָנִי}$  were names, the meaning of the names would have been transparent to the initial audience, even though their meanings subsequently became lost to tradition.

## THE MASSAITE

Many commentators, like Scott (1965: 175) and McKane (1970: 644) added to the MT אִשְׁמַעֵל “the oracle” a gentilic ׀ and treat אִשְׁמַעֵל as a place name for an Ishmaelite group in North Arabia, producing אִשְׁמַעֵל . . . אַגּוּר, “Agur . . . the Massaite.” The argument is that the original אִשְׁמַעֵל lost the gentilic ׀ suffix because the next word was אִשְׁמַעֵל “utterance,” and אִשְׁמַעֵל “the oracle” was taken to be its synonym, resulting in a pseudo-correction changing the original ethnicon אִשְׁמַעֵל “the Massaite” into the common noun אִשְׁמַעֵל “the utterance.”<sup>7</sup>

Probably, however, אִשְׁמַעֵל originally was not a place name nor a word for “utterance.” The desiderated meaning can be found in the Arabic cognates (1) نَشَأَ (*našaʿa*, form 4) “he created, produced, originated; he framed or constructed a proverb or phrase; he composed or recited well an ode or the like,” and (2) مَنْشَى (*munšī*) “author, originator” (Lane 1893: 2791; Wehr 1979: 1131).<sup>8</sup> Here אִשְׁמַעֵל (*scriptio defectiva* for אִשְׁמַעֵל) would be a *Hiphʿil* participle, corresponding to the parallel Arabic causative, and אִשְׁמַעֵל אִשְׁמַעֵל would mean “the one authoring (the) saying.” The אִשְׁמַעֵל would be a double-duty noun, doubling as a construct noun with the following אִשְׁמַעֵל.

## NO LONGER “THE MAN”

McKane (1970:644) rightly noted that “the phrase *n<sup>e</sup> ūm haggeber* [‘the utterance of the man’] is very odd if *haggeber* is Agur.” But the oddity disappears if אַגּוּר is interpreted as meaning something other than “man.” BDB (149) cited Akkadian, Arabic, Aramaic, Syriac, and Ethiopic cognates for

גבר meaning, among other things, “to compel, to force, to be overbearing, to be strong, to prevail.” But contextually important definitions found in Lane (1865: 373) were not cited in BDB (149) or KBS (175), namely, جبر (*jabara*): “he restored to a sound, right, or good estate; to bring back to normal; and to treat anyone in a kind and conciliatory manner.”<sup>9</sup> Adding this piece to the puzzle of 30:1 permits this translation: “the words of Agur [= the one-rewarded-for-righteousness], the son of Jakeh [= the pious one], the one authoring the declaration [הַמְשִׁיאַת הַנְּשִׂאָה], the declaration of the one-restored-to-sound-estate” (reading the גבר of הַמְשִׁיאַת הַנְּשִׂאָה as a *Qal* passive participle).

Since three nouns/names of the seven words preceding the declaration in 30:1b deal with (1) [God’s] rewarding righteousness, (2) a God-fearing person, and (3) restoration to wholeness, the writer sets the stage for a theologically significant declaration in 30:1b, one which will match the affirmation in 30:5, “every word of God proves true” (RSV). Such an affirmation appears once the MT preposition לְ “to” in 30:1b is read as the emphatic particle לְ “surely”<sup>10</sup> rather than being read as the negative לְ (= לֹא).

### ITHIEL AND UCAL

The MT לְאִיתִי אֵל לְאִיתִי אֵל has produced a wide variety of interpretations which are summarized by McKane (1970: 644–645) and Franklyn (1983: 241–243). The most interesting interpretations of לְאִיתִי אֵל are (1) “I am weary, O God,” based upon the root לָאָה; (2) “O that God were with me,”

based upon the preposition **ל** and the vocative **ל**; (3) “there is no God,” based upon the Aramaic **ל** (the particle of existence) and the negative **ל** (= **ל**), as in Dan 3:29; and (4) “I am not God,” based upon the emendation **ל**. A fifth reading begs for recognition, namely, “Surely God exists!”—based upon the Aramaic **ל**, “exists” and the emphatic **ל** “surely, verily.”

Support for this fifth interpretation comes from the confidence of the speaker hidden in the last word of this verse, **ל**. This word has also been variously interpreted. The Septuagint’s **καὶ παύομαι** “and I cease,” derived it from **ל** “to be complete, to end,” whereas the Vulgate’s *confortatus* read **ל** “to contain, to sustain.” Scott (1965: 175) took **ל** to be from **ל** “to be able, to have power,” and provided the expansive translation “and I can [not know anything].” Franklin (1983: 243) related **ל** to **ל** “to eat” and translated “I am consumed.”

But there is a better option than the above four which are derived from standard lexicons with their incomplete listings of cognates. The Arabic **كَلَا** (*kalāʿa*) (Lane 1885: 2623; Wehr 1979: 978) “to guard, to keep safe, to protect” (including the expression, **كَلَاءَةُ اللَّهِ** [*kilāʿat ʿallahi*] “the safe keeping of God”) is the most likely cognate of the MT **ל**, a *Hophʿal* imperfect of **ל** meaning “I will be kept safe.”<sup>11</sup> The affirmation, “Surely there is a God! Surely there is a God!” led logically to the conclusion, “I will be safeguarded!”

Consequently, the first ten words of 30:1 can be translated “the words of a pious person rewarded for righteousness, the declaration of one restored to wholeness: ‘Surely God exists!’

Surely God exists! I will be kept healthy!”—rather than being *transliterated* as a series of names or unknown words.

### NO LONGER “THE BRUTE”

The MT **מֵאִישׁ בְּעַר אֲנֹכִי מֵאִישׁ** of 30:2 has generally been understood as “for I am more a beast/brute than a man.” But **בְּעַר** and **אִישׁ** may have other meanings than “beast/brute” and “man,” respectively. MT **בְּעַר** can be the *Qal* passive participle **בְּעָר**, of **בַּעַר** stem II, “to burn, to consume, to be consumed (with anger or emotion).” Likewise, the MT **מֵאִישׁ** can be repointed to **מֵאֲזַשׁ** “from despair.” In this case, **אֲזַשׁ** would be the cognate of Arabic **أيس** (*ʿayisa*) “he despaired” and **إياس** (*ʿiyās*) “desperation” (Lane, 1863: 137; Wehr, 1979: 47). The by-form of **أيس** (*ʿayisa*) is **يأس** (*yaʿisa*) “to give up all hope,” which in form. (4) means “to deprive someone of hope” (Lane, 1893: 2973–2974; Wehr, 1979: 1294). The Arabic **يأس** (*yaʿisa*) would be the cognate of **יָאָשׁ** “to despair, to give up hope” (BDB: 384; Jastrow, 1903: 560).<sup>12</sup>

Agur’s despair brought him to the point where he could not think straight, as he confessed, **וְלֹא־בִינַת אָדָם לִי**, “I did not have (normal) human discernment.” The past tense used in translating this verbless clause reflects the tense of the verbal clause which follows: **וְלֹא־לִמְדַתִּי הִכְמָה** “I had not learned wisdom.” The shift to the imperfect in 30:3b marks the transition from depression to elation—Agur had become **הַגִּבּוֹר**, “the one restored to normalcy.” With renewed piety the affirmation was made: **וְדַעַת קִדְשִׁים אֲדַע** “and (now) I make known the knowledge of the Holy One.”<sup>13</sup>



## NO INTERROGATIVES

The  $\text{מִי}$  opening 30:4b functions as a relative pronoun like the Arabic personal/relative pronoun *من* (*man*) (Wehr 1979: 1084), not as an interrogative pronoun. The pronoun refers to  $\text{קֹדֶשׁ יְהוָה}$ , the “Holy One” *who* performed all the acts spelled out in 30:4. Although  $\text{עָלָה שָׁמַיִם}$  can mean “he *ascended* (into) heaven,” it can just as well mean “he was *exalted* (in) heaven” or “he had ascendancy (in) heaven.” This interpretation draws support from  $\text{עֲלִיּוֹן}$ , the name of God which speaks of his *ascendancy in* heaven, not an *ascent into* heaven.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, although the MT  $\text{שָׁמַיִם וַיֵּרַד}$  can mean “he ascended (to) heaven and came down,” Scott (1965: 175), who followed tradition in making this verse speak rhetorically about a person ascending into heaven, correctly noted that  $\text{וַיֵּרַד}$  (=  $\text{וַיֵּרַד}$ ) was from  $\text{רָדָה}$  “to have dominion,” not  $\text{יָרַד}$  “to descend.” The point being made in 3:4a is that the Holy One ( $\text{קֹדֶשׁ יְהוָה}$ ) reigns ( $\text{רָדָה}$ ) ascendent ( $\text{עָלָה}$ ) in heaven.

Similarly, the  $\text{מָה}$  which opens the poetic line 30:5c is not the interrogative “what”, nor even the relative “which,” but the exclamatory “how!” (BDB 553b; Wehr 1979: 1042, מ). The exclamation parallels Psa 8:2,  $\text{מָה־אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ}$  “how majestic is thy name.” The  $\text{שְׁמוֹ}$  could be cognate with Arabic *سمو* (*sumû*) “exaltedness, eminence, highness” (Lane 1872: 1435; Wehr 1979: 504). If so, the  $\text{מָה־שְׁמוֹ}$  would have the same meaning as  $\text{מָה־אֲדִיר}$ . The *Vorlage* could have been  $\text{מָה־שְׁמוֹ שְׁמוֹ}$  “How exalted his name!” which, in an unpointed text, appeared to be a dittography and was mistakenly changed into the simple interrogative, “what is his name?”

On the analogy of the  $\text{ע"ו}$  stem  $\text{רָוַם}$  “to be high” having the derivative noun  $\text{רֶם/רוֹם}$  “height,” the  $\text{ע"י}$  stem  $\text{בֵּין}$  “to

discern” could have had the derivative noun בִּינָה/בִּינָה “discernment.” In this case, MT וַיִּמְדֵּה־שָׁם־בִּנְוֹ could simply be re-vocalized as וַיִּמְדֵּה־שָׁם־בִּינָה (*scriptio plene*) “how sublime his intelligence!”

Contrary to the suggestion in BHS, the בִּי הִדְרֵעַ in 30:4, which is not reflected in the Codex Vaticanus or Sinaiticus, should not be deleted, but read as the initial words of 30:5, “*Certainly you know every saying of God has stood the test!*”

### SUMMARY

The uncertainty surrounding Prov 30:1–5 has been minimized in this study by appealing to Arabic cognates for meanings lost in the Judean dialect of Hebrew. Many scholars who were quite confident that Agur ben Yakeh was from the Arabian tribe of Massa made but limited use of Arabic cognates to clarify problematic words. While some scholars have recognized that קָדָה was a cognate of وقى (*waqī*) “to be pious, to be obedient,” the case has been made for relating (1) אָגוּר to أجر [*ajara*] “a reward from God to a man for righteous conduct”; (2) מְנַשֵּׂי to منشى (*munšī*) “author, originator”; (3) גִּבְרָה to جبر (*jabara*) “to restore to a sound or good estate”; (4) אֶכְלָה to كلال (*kala'a*) “to keep safe”; (5) אִישׁ to ايس (*ayisa*) “to despair”; (6) מַיְ to من (*man*) “who” [as a relative pronoun]; (7) שָׁמוֹ to سمو (*sumū*) “exaltedness”; and (8) the initial ל of לֵאשֶׁר־אֵל to ل (*la*) “surely.”

There are sixteen other words in Prov 30:1–5 which have Arabic cognates, but these are already listed in BDB and KBS and need no additional elucidation. Adding the definitions

proposed above to the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew should not be problematic, especially since Agur’s poetry is in dialect or an idiolect.

If is unfortunate that Agur (meaning “honored for righteousness”) is viewed by some as a skeptic because of the skepticism of some scholars about an emphatic ל in Hebrew. Failure to recognize the emphatic ל in the phrase לֵאלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהִים (‘‘Surely there is a God!’’) has produced a great deal of erudite exegetical gymnastics about a God-fearing, but stupid, Ishmaelite whose words of doubt made it into the canonical wisdom of Israel in a brief obtuse debate where he was a named foil for an unnamed and unidentified Judean apologist.

Applying the benefits of the word studies above, an entirely different scenario emerges. A pious person honored for righteousness authors a short poem in which he affirms ‘‘Surely there is a God!’’ He confesses to having had a bout of depression which affected his reason. But when reason failed, faith prevailed. As good as his name, this pious person was restored to mental health. As a consequence, he tells of his intention to declare his knowledge of the ‘‘Holy One’’ who reigns supreme in heaven and over creation. Piety spoke again in his affirmation: ‘‘Certainly you know every saying of God has stood the test!’’ Having asserted initially in the poem ‘‘I will be safeguarded,’’ this pious soul concluded his five verses with a third affirmation, ‘‘the Holy One is a shield to those who take refuge in him!’’ Far from being a skeptic or an agnostic, Agur lived up to his name and has been well rewarded for his righteousness—his poem became a part of the canon even though written in a non-Judean dialect.

## NOTES

1. In forty-two manuscripts cited by Kennicott (1780 II: 475) קק" appears as נק", as though the root were נק" / ק"ק "to vomit, to disgorge" (BDB 883). This accounts, in part, for the Vulgate's reading, *verba Congregantis filii Vomantis visio quam locutus est vir cum quo est Deus et qui Deo secum morante confortatus ait*, and the Douay, "The words of Gatherer the son of Vomiter. The vision which the man spoke, with whom God is, and who being strengthened by God, abiding with him, said." Traditional interpretation explained that the "Gatherer" was the one who assembled people for instruction and the "Vomiter" was the one who pours out words of instruction (see Toy 1916: 518).
2. The Septuagint μετανοεί "repent" indicates the Hebrew ננ was read as נן in the Greek *Vorlage*. Hebrew נן is translated in thirteen other places in the Septuagint by μετανοεῖν.
3. Note Num 22:3, מוֹנֵה מוֹנֵה (= καὶ ἐφοβήθη Μωαβ) and Jer 46:17, נִגְוֵה נִגְוֵה (= σὺ φοβῆ). A typographical error flawed Franklyn's comment, "φοβήθητι is derived from the jussive נגו [sic] (dread, fear)" (1983: 239).
4. In the *Qur'an* (*Sura* 29:26) أَجْرٌ (*ajara*) has the meaning of "praise" or "fame."
5. KBS II: 430 cites Arabic *waqiha* [sic] "to be obedient," with the name קק" given the meaning "careful."
6. See Delitzsch (1920: 119 §131) for a list of texts having a confusion of ק and ר.
7. The Septuagint καὶ δεχάμενος αὐτοῦς reflects a reading of נשנ, as in Deu 33:3, מִדְּבַר־תִּי נָשָׂא (= καὶ ἐδέξατο ἀπὸ τῶν λόγων αὐτοῦ "and he received from his words") and Gen 50:17, וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָשָׂא לְפָשַׁע (= καὶ νῦν δεχατι τὴν ἀδικίαν, "now please pardon the transgression").

8. In Arabic the ن (*n*) remains unassimilated.

9. See also Wehr 1979: 132.

10. The literature on the emphatic ל and ל continues to grow. In addition to references cited by Richardson (1966: 89), note Mc Daniel (1968) 206–208; Bloomerde (1969) 31; Dahood (1975) 341–342); Whitley (1975) 202–204; and Huehnergard (1983) 569–593, especially 591.

11. One would expect a final ס on כל along with the initial ס for the 1cs imperfect. But as discussed in note 1, the interchange of ס and ה (like יקה and יקס) is well attested. On the elision of the ס, note Delitzsch (1920: 21–22, §14<sup>a-c</sup>) and GKC 68<sup>h,k</sup>. The following elisions are noteworthy: והאזרני and ותורני in the parallel texts of Ps 18:40 and 2 Sam 22:40; ויסר and ויאסר in Ex 14:25; האסורים and הסורים in Ecc 4:14; יהל for יאהל in Isa 13:20; חטאתיכם and תבו for חטאת וירת in Lev 25:36; חטתיכם and תבו for חטאתיכם and האבו in Lev 26:18 and 26:21 in 11QpaleoLev.

12. See the study on Numbers 12:3 above in Chapter VII.

13. Reading קדשים as an honorific plural (see GKC 124<sup>e</sup>). The MT קדש can be repointed (*scriptio plene*) as the *Hiph<sup>il</sup>* imperfect אודיע. The addition of “now” is suggested by the ועת “and now” in Psa 74:6 (rather than the usual ועתה). The *Vorlage* could have been ועת דעת קדשים אדע, with a loss of the first עת.

14. Note Deut 28:43, where יעלה עליך מעלה מעלה “he shall excel above you higher and higher” speaks of *status* not of *motion*. Note also Arabic العلی (*al<sup>l</sup>ali*) “the Most High,” used as a name of God (Lane 1874: 2147).