

PROVERBS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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The proverb was a popular genre in the ancient Near East. We find proverb collections and instructional literature that contains proverbs written in Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, and Aramaic. Proverbs are among the earliest literature known, dating to the first half of the third millennium BC, and they persisted to the latest periods of ancient Near Eastern literature.

Ancient Near Eastern proverbs provide a background to the study of the book of Proverbs, and indeed there is strong evidence that the biblical writers were aware of other ancient Near Eastern texts and sometimes even drew inspiration from them as they wrote their proverbs in Hebrew.

Egyptian proverbs are the best known and most important for the study of Hebrew proverbs. These proverbs are found within instructions of a father to a son, one of the most popular Egyptian genres. The earliest examples (Hardjedef, Kagemni, Ptahhotep, and Merikare) come from the third millennium BC. The most famous example, though, is the Instruction of Amenemope from the end of the second millennium BC, which was first presented to the public in 1923. Immediately, scholars noted similarities between its structure and its content and the book of Proverbs, in particular the section subtitled “words of the wise” (22:17–24:22). Significance has been attached to how the Egyptian text has thirty chapters while the biblical text has thirty sayings (22:20). While Amenemope is the best-known example, many of the other Egyptian texts express similar teaching as the biblical book. Even so, the theological foundation of Proverbs radically separates that book from all ancient Near Eastern texts (“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”; Prov. 1:7).

In Mesopotamia, the earliest Sumerian literature includes extensive collections of proverbs. Today more than twenty-five collections of proverbs are known from this early period. Some of the topics are similar to those treated in Proverbs, including family relationships, women, the liar, the court, and the good/righteous person. Sumerian also has an instructional text where the flood hero Ziusudra receives advice from his father, Shuruppak (*Instructions of Shuruppak*). The Babylonians and Assyrians did not produce original proverbs in their own language, though they continued the use of the Sumerian collections.

Finally, Ahiqar is an Aramaic text, set in the seventh century BC, that also provides background to the book of Proverbs. Ahiqar was an adviser to Assyrian kings. His nephew framed him so that he was to be executed, but he escaped and was eventually restored to his position. After beating his nephew, he then instructs him by means of proverbs. Some of these proverbs seem closely related to the teaching of Proverbs, perhaps most notably, “Spare not your son from the rod; otherwise, can you save him [from wickedness]?” (Saying 3, compare Prov. 13:24; 23:13–14).

