

# What Does the Bible Say About . . .?

October 23, 2006

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## Proverbs 30: Context and Format

### I. Introduction

#### A. Announcements

1. Open with prayer
2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions OK for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
5. Read passages (volunteers)

#### B. Does anyone have any questions/topics for us to consider for next time?

1. .
2. .

#### C. First of all, let me apologize for not using one of your questions this time. I have been sick and unable to put the effort into them that would be necessary to deal with them properly. So instead, I will be using some material I have presented before elsewhere. I hope you still find it of value.

1. I have spoken a number of times about the problems of misunderstanding the Bible by taking things out of context.
2. This study was a real eye-opener for me on exactly that error.
3. Today we will look briefly at the error and then the real meaning that will be revealed when we read the passage as an ancient Near-Easterner would, instead of a modern Westerner.
4. Let's take a journey *into* the Old Testament text of Proverbs 30.

### II. The Book of Proverbs is often looked at in very tiny bits and pieces, rather than as a whole. That makes it especially susceptible to misinterpretation by taking things out of context.

#### A. Today we will not try to deal with the book as a whole, either, but we will look at an entire chapter.

1. Proverbs 30 has a lot of wonderful imagery in it. That is what we should expect, I suppose, from an essentially **poetic** composition.
2. It was that beautiful imagery that first caught my attention, and I was especially drawn to verses 18 and 19.
3. In fact I heard a brief sermon on the radio about them that really attracted me and got me to thinking about what I *thought* they meant.
4. Will someone read them aloud? **Prov. 30:18-19**  
<sup>18</sup> There are three things that amaze me—no, four things I do not understand:  
<sup>19</sup> how an eagle glides through the sky,  
how a snake slithers on a rock,

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how a ship navigates the ocean,  
how a man loves a woman.

- B. From these two verses, what kinds of things come to your minds? What might this be about?
1. (Listen and list various answers. Ask what brought that to mind.)
    - a.
    - b.
  2. In the sermon I heard, and later read many times, David H. C. Read saw it as a call to turn our minds away from mere scientific explanations and to embrace the wonder around us. He said Proverbs 30 was asking us to not settle for answers to the questions of how or where or when, but to lose ourselves in the wonder of the question “why?”.
  3. I thought of it in a slightly different way. To me it was drawing our attention to the beauty in the created world of nature around us and to the beauty found in the human world, too.
  4. Both of these and the things we have talked about are worthwhile observations, and topics and insights, but they sell the proverb short and miss its real intent.
- C. Paying attention to context will help us. Verse 20 is clearly attached (by the words “equally amazing”) to 18-19, but it is jarringly different in its message and tone.
1. **Prov. 30:20:** <sup>20</sup> Equally amazing is how an adulterous woman can satisfy her sexual appetite, shrug her shoulders, and then say, “What’s wrong with that?”
  2. There is nothing here about wonder; nothing here about beauty.
  3. And look at **verse 17**, just before this selection. It is just as jarring:  
<sup>17</sup> The eye that mocks a father and despises a mother  
will be plucked out by ravens of the valley and eaten by vultures.
  4. Beauty?? Wonder???
  5. What does just this little bit of context tell us about our proposed interpretations so far?
    - a. (We are way off. And so is David Read.)
    - b. There’s something here we are just not getting yet.
  6. Clearly we are going to have to dig deeper.
- D. But what do we do to find the connection and the common themes or ideas among such very different kinds of verses?
1. The answer is a kind of way of understanding of the context.
  2. But it is even more clear that the “context” we need to understand is the structure and style of writing.

III. Proverbs 30 and many, many other small and large segments of Scripture are written in a style that is very different from what we are used to.

- A. We were all taught in school (hopefully) how to outline and to write based on Western, linear thinking.

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1. Modern western writing style is patterned after the classic Greek format for organizing information or arguments.
  2. Typically an essay would begin with an introduction, a statement of the main theme, and a listing of the supporting sub-points or sub-themes.
  3. This would be followed by a development of each supporting point or sub-theme in turn.
  4. Finally the essay would be completed with a summary, a restatement of the sub-themes, and a restatement of the main theme.
  5. The main point of the whole composition would be found, then, in the first paragraph and again in the last paragraph. Everything between would be the supporting information. (I. Introduction, II. A. 1.2. B. 1. 2., III. A. 1. 2. B. 1. 2., IV. A. 1. 2. B. 1. 2., V. Conclusion)
- B. In the Eastern culture, such as in ancient Israel and in all the surrounding lands, there developed a very different style of writing.
1. This style is sometimes called *chiasm*, (named for the Greek letter X [*chi*]) though that's not strictly correct.
    - a. Dr. Ken Bailey from whose teaching I learned much of what I know about this, calls it "inverted parallelism," and my own favorite term is the Latin word *escendo*, meaning "to climb."
    - b. Don't worry too much about the word, it's the concept that is important.
  2. But please indulge me as I use the word *escendo*, though you may run into the other terms in your studies somewhere else.
  3. Let me reassure you, that even though I have chosen my own descriptive term, I did not by any means invent or discover the concept.
  4. Dr. Bailey has written several books and produced many teaching tapes showing what he calls inverted parallelism in dozens of Jesus' parables<sup>1</sup>. Others have found it in small sections like Lev. 14:15 and larger ones like Revelation 12.<sup>2</sup> And I have also found it in Leviticus ch. 16-22, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians ch. 11-15, and the entire NT book of James.
  5. *Escendo*, this Eastern style of writing, stands in clear contrast to the Greek linear style. Instead of developing a series of points in sequence after the main theme, the sub-themes are developed both before and after the main point.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.shenango.org/kbpubs.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://bibleprophecy.net/bibleinterp.htm#9.%20The%20chiastic%20structure>

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- a. Look at the bottom of the handout with the brief outline of Proverbs 30 to see an example taken from Amos 5. <sup>3</sup>
  - b. The main theme is found not at the beginning and the end of the composition, but in the center of it. (Line D in the Amos 5 outline.)
  - c. The sub-themes that come after the main theme are directly connected to the ones that precede the main theme and they further develop the ideas in them.
6. Think of it like climbing over a mountain. (There's my word *escendo*, climbing).
- a. The sub-themes are found on the trail leading up to the mountain peak (the main theme), [A, B, C, leading to D} and the same sub-themes are found again in reverse order on the trail descending from the summit. [C', B', A': C-prime, B-prime, A-prime}
  - b. A and A' are connected. B and B' are connected. C and C' are connected. And all of them are connected to the center - D - the peak.
  - c. So in order to fully understand each sub-theme, we need to look at each in both its first and its second occurrences that come before and after the "peak" or main theme. **Is this clear?**
7. On the brief outline of Proverbs 30 at the top of the hand-out, the paired sub-themes are labeled as "A" and "A'" (A-prime), "B" and "B'" (B-prime), etc. The main theme of the Proverb is found at the "summit" in vv. 21-23, which I have labeled "D. Fools who become too rich. (Hubris/pride)"
- IV. Now let's look at the text. We are going to find that it comes in two sections. There is the prologue in vv. 1-9 and the main body in vv. 10-33. We will start with the prologue.
- A. The two sections make this a little more difficult, but not impossible. Don't despair.
1. In the short outline, we can easily see the structure of the first 9 verses.
    - a. It is a simpler form of parallelism.
    - b. The verses labeled 1. and 2. are reflected in the verses labeled 2.' and 1.' (This is more correctly called *chiasm* without a central or peak section.)
  2. This prologue section actually helps us a lot in trying to understand what comes later in the main body.
  3. Here it is less poetic and more direct.
- B. It begins with what's sort of the author's "by-line" in v. 1. Agur is tired and worn out, but we don't know why until we read what he's tired of in the following verses.
1. Notice what he says of himself in Prologue 1 (vv. 2-3). **Do you see where the idea of foolishness comes in?**
    - a. In fact v. 3 ends with the classic definition in Proverbs of what makes a person a fool.

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<sup>3</sup> *Poet and Peasant*, Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, p. 48, Eerdmans Publ. Co. 1976, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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- b. **Proverbs 1:1-7** sets the tone for the whole book and gives us our larger context.
          - c. **What is wisdom? What is foolishness?**
        2. Look at the parallel verses at the end of the Prologue. Prologue 1' (vv. 7-9).
          - a. What are the marks of a fool that Agur asks to avoid?
          - b. **What is the clue that tells us Agur wants to be wise?** (Asks God. Not rely on self. These are important themes we will see again.)
        3. Now look at the middle sections Prologue 2 and Prologue 2' from the outline.
          - a. **Where does wisdom come from? And what is "wisdom?"** (God is the source and knowing who God is constitutes wisdom.)
          - b. **What should be our attitude about all this?** (Trust God. )
          - c. Wisdom is the word in Proverbs for what the New Testament calls faith.
          - d. And foolishness is rejection of faith in God.
        4. The prologue has given us the topic for what is to follow.
          - a. It will help us understand the symbolism in the rest of the chapter.
          - b. As we look at the main body with all its poetic illustrations, we should not be looking for reflections on beauty, social commentary, or mystery and wonder.
          - c. **What does the prologue tell us we should expect to find instead?** (Wisdom/foolishness; faith and faithlessness).
- V. Words to the Wise and Warnings to the Fools (main body)
  - A. Let's look at the outline for the main body and compare A and A' (10-14 and 32-33).
    1. Remember what we said before about parallel points being connected to each other.
    2. Don't expect them to say exactly the same thing, but to each be comments on the same sub-topic.
    3. Notice both are written as negative statements: i.e., don't do this/that.
      - a. **To whom are they addressed?**
      - b. **What are the warnings?**
      - c. **If anyone does the things warned against here, what does that mean about their faith?**
    4. Jesus could easily have had this in mind when he spoke to people who should have shown faith, but didn't.
      - a. **Matthew 7:15-20**
      - b. **Luke 11:39-40**
    5. I think this is what James was getting at too in **James 2:14-17** (faith without works)
    6. Faith that is real shows in how we live our lives. That's what Prov. 30 says and Jesus said, too.
  - B. Let's move on to B and B' (vv. 15-16 and vv. 29-31)
    1. In B, we run into our first poetic illustrations.

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2. There's a little progression here: "There are 3 things--no, 4!"
    - a. It doesn't mean Agur was having trouble counting! This is a very common poetic technique.
    - b. It's the last number that is really meant. The other number is just to get our attention and emphasize the final one.
  3. Now that we know the topic of this Proverb, **what do these 4 things illustrate? How?** (Endlessly empty no matter how often fed/filled - greed)
  4. **In B', how is the idea of not being satisfied (i.e., greed) illustrated by these 4?**
    - a. There's also a new element added here besides greed. **What is it?**
    - b. Hint: lion "won't turn aside", "strutting" rooster. (Pride. Utter self-confidence.)
    - c. Do you remember when King David got in trouble for conducting a census? **1 Chronicles 21:1-3, 7-8**. A census was conducted so he could see how big his army was and how powerful a king he was. It's the pride of "a king as he leads his army."
    - d. That is the idea of pride here in vv. 29-31, but it is hard to see at first and for good reason. We are looking at one of the *sub*-points.
    - e. We can only really know what it is about when we find the central, main point. We are still climbing the mountain trail and haven't reached the peak yet..
- C. In C and C' we are nearly at the summit. But we are also in the middle of what could be the most confusing poetic illustrations.
1. In fact, without knowing the overall theme, we could easily make the mistake I made in thinking C (vv. 17-20) was about beauty and David Read made in thinking it was about wonder.
  2. But we do have some more information to work with now, don't we?
  3. **What did the prologue tell us we would be reading about?**  
(Wisdom/Foolishness)
  4. **And what are the examples of wisdom and foolishness we have seen so far?**  
(Greed, pride, trust in self as opposed to trust in God)
  5. Consider the "eye that mocks a father/mother" in v. 17.
    - a. **Does that suggest any of the topics we have seen so far?**
    - b. **Who does that person rely on for wisdom about behavior?** (Self)
  6. **What about the adulterous woman in v. 20? Who sets her standards?** (Self)
  7. **Is this wisdom or foolishness?**
- D. Those verses clarify for us what the meaning of the illustrations in between are. Remember the principle that in *escendo* or inverted parallelism the meaning is in the middle. It applies here.
- E. We are given some more help in understanding this, too, by comparing this to the parallel passage C' (vv. 24-28).

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1. This time the parallel passages are related by being in direct *contrast* to each other.
  2. **What is the difference you can see between the eagle, snake, ship, and man on one hand and the ants, rock badgers, locusts, and lizards on the other?**
  3. Hint: look at the last letter of the names of creatures in C'.
- F. Everything named in C is singular. They are alone. In C' they are all groups.
1. The ones who are alone are pictures of individual self-reliance —just like the “eye” in v. 17 and the woman in v. 20.
  2. They turn to no one else for anything. They are pictures of complete self-reliance. They are the “captains of their ships”, “the masters of their destiny.”
  3. They *think* they are in charge. They *think* they are wise. But in the context of the Proverb, they become depictions of the **fool** who looks only to self, not to God.
- G. The ones in C' clearly do not rely on themselves. (vv. 24-28)
1. They need the help of others and they know it.
  2. They look beyond themselves for protection and become for the poet a picture of humility. Humility is not just feeling bad about ourselves, it is realizing that we cannot do it alone.
  3. The world thinks very little of these creatures. They are all little; they are weak. Look at them: lizards and ants. Insignificant.
  4. But they don't rely on themselves, and in that they conquer. They aren't the fools. In their humility they prove themselves wise.
- H. Can you hear Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? Blessed are the poor in spirit, for **they** shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:3)
1. Read **Philippians 2:5-11**
  2. Jesus is the Wisdom we find in Proverbs, just as John called him the Word that was made flesh (John 1:14). He is the wisdom of humbling ourselves to complete dependence upon God.
- I. And now we come to the “peak” of our climb through Proverbs 30. It is a warning.
1. Read **Prov. 30:21-23**.
  2. Keeping in mind what we have learned so far, **what is so terrible about the role reversals described here?** (Arrogance and pride are unleashed, unrestrained. We would expect vengeance and exalting of self over the supplanted one.)
  3. Now this proverb isn't written just to talk about an upset in the social order.
  4. **Who is the one that is really being supplanted in the minds of the proud?**
    - a. Remember the prologue.
    - b. God is wise and I am foolish.
  5. **If we put the whole picture of Proverbs 30 together now, how can we sum up its message?** (e.g., wisdom is humble dependence upon God; foolishness is prideful, self-centered greed and dependence on self.)
  6. Are there any other questions or comments before I say a few concluding words?
- J. Pride is often thought of as a positive, a virtue in our modern culture.

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1. And it is, if it is thought of as the opposite of self-loathing, or that any one of us is somehow worthless or less than any other person in the eyes of God.
2. But the Bible speaks of pride as sin in another sense.
3. The sin of pride is thinking of ourselves as better than someone else.
4. And most especially as we have seen in Prov. 30, pride is the terrible sin of thinking that somehow we don't need God.
5. We are not eagles gliding through the sky, lording it over all that we see.
6. We are ants and lizards, weak in ourselves, but creatures for whom Christ gave his life to redeem. If we humble ourselves before him—no longer saying “I can do it myself”—but finding our strength and hope and protection and wisdom in Jesus, then we have the wisdom of faith.
7. I'd like us to conclude with a reading that sums it all up well from **1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:26-31**.

## VI. Summary

- A. Our goal today was to learn how learning to recognize structure and style in the Bible can help us to understand it better, and to learn from Proverbs 30 what God teaches us about pride and humility, wisdom and foolishness.
  1. Have we done that satisfactorily?
  2. Are there still questions on this topic we need to discuss more?
- B. What questions for next time?
  - 1.
  - 2.
- C. Next meeting: Monday, November 27, 2006. 7:00 p.m.
- D. Closing prayer
- E. **Archives of class notes can be found online at: [www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa](http://www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa)**

## VII. Sidebar/Excursis

- A. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said anyone who calls another “fool” is liable to the fires of hell. (Matthew 5:22)
  1. Doesn't that contradict Proverbs which spends a lot of time describing people as fools?
  2. No. We must be careful to not let a word in common confuse us. Context interprets the meaning.
  3. Look at the context in Mt. 5 carefully. Jesus is speaking about anger that is at the root of murder. He is talking about an attitude of the heart that hates and wants to destroy another. Even the mildest epithet like “fool” can indicate a heart that hates its neighbor instead of loving him/her.
  4. In Proverbs the word is the same, but the context is different. Here it is not about putting someone else down, but raising God up. It's not about anger and hate versus love, it's about faith and humility versus Godless self-reliance and arrogant pride.