

## **QUESTION**

WITH RESPECT TO A CULTURE OR SUB-CULTURE KNOWN TO YOU AND WHICH HAS A HERITAGE OF PROVERBS, ARGUE A CASE FOR USING THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AS A BRIDGE FROM THE BIBLE INTO THAT OTHER CULTURE OR SUB-CULTURE.

## **ANSWER**

### INTRODUCTION

Attempting to argue a case for using the book of Proverbs as a bridge from the Bible into whatever culture or sub-culture, requires one to be very well-versed in the book of Proverbs and of course be well familiar with the particular culture in question. In this situation, I would argue my case with reference to my very culture (the Yoruba culture). First, I would try to give the break-down of the book of Proverbs, enumerate the importance of Proverbs in the Yoruba culture with specific examples and then draw out the parallels between the two Proverbs to substantiate my case.

### THE BOOK OF PROVERBS IN PERSPECTIVE

The book of Proverbs is filled with expressions of wisdom and experience. It is one of the books comprising the third part, the Writings, of the Hebrew canon. Commentators and scholars have long regarded it as a prime example of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Tradition has ascribed the entire work to the

Hebrew king Solomon, whose wisdom reputedly “surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt” (I Kings 4:30).

This tradition is now recognised, however, as an example of an ancient custom of paying tribute to famous figures and of lending new works the prestige attached to great names. Proverbs is a collection of short moral sayings composed or compiled by a number of unknown persons. The most commonly accepted view is that these persons were professional sages who offered moral and religious instruction to young, upper-class Jewish men. Although some of the material contained in Proverbs may date from Solomonic, and perhaps even pre-Solomonic times, the whole collection most likely was given its present form sometime during the 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The book of Proverbs is a teaching compendium for postexilic Judaism. It consists in part of short sayings expressing in pithy form insights into human affairs, especially of a social and religious nature. In other words, it revolved around the professional sages, or wise men, and scribes in the service of the court, and consisted

primarily in maxims about the practical, intelligent way to conduct one's life and in speculations about the very worth and meaning of human life.

Most scholars recognise five separate collections in the book. The first collection (1:1-9:18), labelled "Proverbs of Solomon," is really instruction genre, a series of essays on the nature of wisdom, the meaning of life, and the path to success. It presents the ideal of a fully integrated human being, one who is liberally educated and morally stable. Perhaps written for a generation that had become estranged from its cultural and religious roots, it sets out to inculcate human and religious values.

To do so it presents wisdom under two guises: parental instruction (aimed at the reason) and a personalised Wisdom who appeals directly in her own name (aimed at emotions). The key to a fruitful integration of the secular and the religious is "fear of the Lord," a sense of the divine that permeates every aspect of life and impregnates the secular. These nine chapters, more theological than the rest, present a highly sophisticated worldview with a high regard for human capacity to achieve fulfilment.

The second collection (10:1-22:16), also attributed to Solomon, is simpler in style than the first and is probably pre-exilic. It is a gathering of heterogeneous, semi-independent proverbs, maxims, and precepts – really a literature of the schools dealing mainly with moral life and virtue. It suggests how best to live in the world. More secular than chapters 1-9, it inculcates control of the tongue, social awareness, and respect for the mystery of existence. In the efforts to master life one must recognise that there are limits not just of volition but to human knowledge, which is finite (16:1, 9; 19:14, 21; 21:30). Justice seems to be inspired by a concern for equity rather than religion.

The third collection (22:17-24:22), entitled “the words of the wise,” is a compilation of thirty instructions. After a brief introduction (22:17-21) comes a series of warnings, counsels and appeals to the reader’s moral sense. Integration of the secular and religious, which was evident in chapters 1-9, appears again. Good graces, culture and social bearing are not alien to holiness. “Fear of the Lord” is part of education (23:12-18).

The fourth collection (24:23-24), much shorter than although similar to, the third, bears the title “these also are sayings of the wise”; it represents an addition to the previous collection and may be by the same editor. Certainly the tone remains consistent. Social awareness is its topic. It presents the practical aspects of justice in a legal maxim (24:23b-29) and appends a portrait of one who neglects his social duties (24:30-34).

The fifth collection (25:1-29:7), represents what might be called an editorial program, sophisticated and quite unified. Again there is a concern to integrate secular and religious wisdom. It deals with the structure of society – government administration (25:1-7a), social responsibility (27:11-14), and human conduct (28:1-22). To a greater extent than usual God is invoked as arbiter of morality, and the traditional concept of retribution loses its overly dogmatic tone: the human act itself has its own repercussions.

Four appendices (30:1-31:31) close the book. Although containing older elements, these appear to be a later redactional effort, perhaps intended as a general conclusion. The first (30:1-9) is an essay on scepticism; the second (30:10-33) deals with the mysterious

dimensions of life, the inexplicable and therefore the fascinating; the third (31:1-9) is a “manual for rulers” personalised by being put in the form of a queen mother’s teaching – moral rather than administrative; and the final appendix (31:10-31) is a carefully drawn portrait of the ideal woman.

Generally speaking, the book of Proverbs is an ambitious undertaking, offering the reader “wisdom” and opening up to the willing student a world of learning. It shows how to cope with life by organising the range of human experience so as to evolve practical rules of comportment and to develop balanced judgement, as the editorial introduction makes clear (1:2-7). On this basis of personal and inherited experience and by means of different kinds of literature – sentence, instruction, maxim, proverb – it shows “what really works” and how to achieve success in the business of living a full life. Thus, it is didactic literature in the truest sense of the term.

It also urges the individual to think realistically about life. It does so by making them to personally face up to the problems that besiege humanity: ignorance and poverty (9:7-12; 22:7-8), right and wrong (16:10-15). The need to adapt oneself to life in society (22:1-4), and finally although somewhat indirectly, the need to accommodate to a mysterious divinity (16:1-19).

## THE PROMINENCE OF PROVERBS IN YORUBA CULTURE

Proverbs come from many sources most of them anonymous and all of them difficult to trace. Their first appearance in literary form is often an adaptation of an oral saying. On this note, one can deduce from facts and reasoning that, the biblical Proverbs has got a close affinity to many cultures. This likeness suggests that Israel's wisdom movement, whatever its origins, must have been influenced by the wisdom literature of other ancient Middle Eastern cultures and have parallels in most other cultures and subcultures. In fact, comparisons of proverbs found in various parts of the world show that the same kernel of wisdom may be gleaned under different cultural conditions and languages.

For example, the introduction (chapter 1-9) described above, consists of a series of poems or discourses in which a father exhorts his son to acquire wisdom and in which wisdom personified intervenes. These chapters have a more speculative quality than the remainder of the book. They do not treat wisdom simply as a human quality and achievement or as a cultural legacy imparted by teachers and parents; they present it as a universal and abiding reality, transcending the human scene.

The Yoruba culture is the culture of one of the two largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, being concentrated in the south-western part of that country. Many smaller, scattered groups live in Benin and northern Togo. They are numbered more than 24 million in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. They speak a language of the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family.

Although some Yoruba are now Christians or Muslims, belief in their traditional religion continues. The traditional religion has an elaborate hierarchy of deities, which includes a supreme creator and some 400 lesser gods and spirits, most of whom are associated with their own cults and priests. The Yoruba language has an extensive literature of poetry, short stories, myths, and proverbs.

The Yoruba Proverbs consisted chiefly of moral sayings and counsels just as we have it in the book of Proverbs. It appealed to experience and offered prudential guidelines for a successful and happy life. As it now stands, it represents a many-faceted ideal of religious humanism, in which many disparate kinds of teaching contribute to one purpose – the formation of a whole person by leading the society on paths of uprightness, intelligence, and conviction to human fulfilment.



Further more, the Yoruba people have valued their proverbs and collected them for posterity. They use their proverbs for ethical instruction (“No matter how long it takes, truth will always triumph over lies”), and to expound philosophical ideas (“It is a sheer waste of time to attempting to have a hunch stand upright”). Among this people, “Proverbs are the Palm-oil, with which words are eaten,” in other words, Proverbs are part of every spoken dialect and are related to such other forms of folk literature as riddles and fables that have originated in oral tradition.

The *griots*, the celebrated epic bards, customarily ‘warm up’ before their recitations and during breaks in their lengthy performances by singing proverbs in rapid sequence. This practice serves the function of gaining the attention and respect of the audience, who think of proverb sayers as wise men knowing how the society works, hence the listeners will be ready to credit the historical tradition that follows.

In the same manner, the art of conversation and argument depends, in fact, on the use of Proverbs. By that, the speaker shows his learning. Use of proverbs also enables the speaker to attack an

opponent obliquely, without mentioning his name or the subject of the dispute (“The purring of a cat is prelude to theft”). It is also noted that the Yoruba Proverbs expresses the people’s inherited wisdom and code of behaviour (“If a child washes his hands, he will eat with kings”). It also expresses imagination and sense of humour (“If the earthworm does not dance in front of the cock, he will still be eaten, but at least the cock cannot say that he was provoked”).

## PARALLELISM IN BOTH THE YORUBA AND THE BIBLICAL PROVERBS

The biblical proverb “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” for example, has an equivalent in the Yoruba Proverbs. For example, “A goat’s hide buys a goat’s hide, and a gourd, a gourd.” Both form part of codes of behaviour and exemplify the proverb’s use for the transmission of tribal wisdom and rules of conduct. In fact, many biblical Proverbs have parallels among the Yoruba Proverbs. For example, there is this Yoruba Proverb that says, “If you visit the house of toads, stoop”, the equivalent precept as found in the book of Proverbs is “When in Rome do as the Romans do.” Among many others we also have, “ Empty barrels make the most noise” while its

equivalent precept as found in the book of Proverbs is “Pride goes before a fall”.

Some biblical Proverbs may sometimes appear contradictory. “Look before you leap” is challenged by “He who hesitates is lost, “ but each saying contains its truth to be applied to a given situation. Likewise, some of the Yorubas proverbs sometimes embody superstitions. For example, one medical advice says, “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, and wise”. Looking at the following chapters of the book of Proverbs (1:8; 4:3; 6:20), after the opening paragraph the first thing that may strike us is an unmistakable flavour of old-fashioned virtue and strong family life. In itself, the repeated expression, ‘my son’, need amount to no more than a teacher’s fatherly way of speaking to a pupil. Not only in the biblical Proverbs can we find this, the Yoruba culture also assumed that, truth is to be learnt first at home, instilled there with firmness and affection as lessons for the mind and training for the character.

Furthermore, in a different vein, using metaphor more sparingly, the biblical Proverbs speaks in chapter 5:7-14 of the dignity that a man surrenders by loose living; of perhaps the bondage of blackmail; of

his scattered and haphazard brood which should have been a close-knit family; of venereal disease; of vain regrets; of will-nigh irretrievable disgrace. And if the risks of any philanderer are high, those of the adulterer may be literally deadly. ‘An adulteress stalks a man’s very life’ (6:26), for there is no length to which jealousy and wounded pride may not drive a man (6:32-35). Likewise in the Yoruba Proverbs, there are several sayings by which similar reasoning are being advanced. For example, “A lame man beating the drums of war runs the risk of being consumed by the war” and “A dog in the Lion’s Den is on a fatal adventure”. Based on these accounts therefore, I hope to have argued convincingly that the book of Proverbs is better able to serve as a bridge from the Bible into the Yoruba culture.