

PROV 23:7—"TO THINK" OR "TO SERVE FOOD"? AN EXEGETICAL NOTE

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"For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov 23:7, KJV). When a familiar Hebrew proverb has, in turn, become as proverbial in the English language as this one has (thanks to the KJV), one is reluctant to tamper with it. Yet the key word, the verb **רָאָה** (*ʾar*, "to think"), has long been a *crux interpretum*. What I wish to do in this note is delineate how lexicons, translations, and commentaries have analyzed and interpreted this passage, and then suggest some possible semantic light from the cognate language Ugaritic.

Lexicons

The Brown, Driver, and Briggs lexicon assigns the meaning "calculate, reckon" to *ʾar* in Prov 23:7 translating it, "as he has calculated in his soul, so is he" but hastens to add that this meaning is dubious.² The reason for the uncertainty is that this nuance is unattested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The suggested meaning is from late, post-biblical Hebrew (*Piel* stem) and Jewish Aramaic (*Pael* stem)

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²BDB 1045.

usage "put a valuation on, estimate" and from the late Aramaic noun (from the same root) meaning "interest, market price."³ The Arabic cognate to the latter is a loanword from Aramaic. BDB also indicates that the ostensibly related noun **ראש** (*raʿa*) occurs in Gen 26:12 with the meaning "measure," supposedly developed from an original meaning of "reckoning." There "a hundredfold" renders the ultimate sense of "a hundred measures."

³M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim . . .* (reprint, Brooklyn: P. Shalom, 1967) 2:1612-13.

The treatment of KB,⁴ TWOT,⁵ and Holladay⁶ is similar, though Holladay suggests that the text is corrupt.

Translations

It is helpful to note the renderings of the major ancient translations of Prov 23:7. Obviously, they too struggled with the meaning:

LXX: "For as if one should swallow a hair, so he eats and drinks" (apparently reading **ראע** [**se #ar**, "hair"] instead of **sa #ar**; similarly the Syriac Peshitta, "bristle").

Latin Vulgate: "For like a soothsayer or diviner he conjectures that of which he is ignorant" (a very free paraphrase indeed).

The renderings of Prov 23:7a by a number of English versions are as follows:

- KJV: "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he."
- NKJV: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he."
- ASV: "For as he thinketh within himself, so is he."
- NASB: "For as he thinks within himself, so he is."
- RSV: "for he is like one who is inwardly reckoning."
- Berkeley: "for as one who inwardly figures the cost, so is he."
- Amplified: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he."
- JPS: "He is like one keeping accounts."
- GNB: "What he thinks is what he really is."
- JB: "It would be like a tempest in his throat."
- NAB: "For in his greed he is like a storm."
- NEB: "for they will stick in your throat like a hair."
- NIV: "for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost."

As is very apparent, lexicons and most of the English versions essentially agree on the meaning "calculate, reckon, think (about the cost), figure, keep accounts." The NIV, however, provides an alternative in a footnote: "for as he *puts on a feast*, so is he" (emphasis added). An idea from the "Wisdom of Amenemope" stimulated the renderings in the JB and NAB. The LXX inspired the NEB translation.

⁴KBL 1001.

⁵TWOT2:946.

⁶W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 380.

Commentaries

In their interpretations, most of the commentaries follow the traditional understandings reflected in the lexicons and English versions:

Zöckler: "this meaning [stated above] of the expression gives a general sense so appropriate that we ought clearly to abide by it," though he acknowledges that "no support can be found for it anywhere in the Old Testament."⁷

Delitzsch revocalizes the perfect to make it a participle רָעוּב (רָעוּב #er) and translates, "For as one who calculates with himself, so is he."⁸

Deane and Taylor-Taswell: "The meaning is that this niggardly host watches every morsel which his guest eats, and grudges what he appears to offer so liberally."⁹

Fausset: "He estimates his meats, and the cost of the entertainment, more than he does you; and is ill at ease if you eat much of his food."¹⁰

Toy, in effect, gives up on the verse: "The Heb. of the first couplet (which has apparently lost some word or words) hardly admits of a satisfactory translation."¹¹

Cohen (Soncino series): "A generous host gives unstintingly to his guest and does not calculate what it costs him; but a miserly host resembles a man who estimates the amount involved in a transaction. Although he extends a cordial invitation to his guest to eat and drink, his heart is not in his words because he is worrying over the outlay."¹²

⁷O. Zöckler, "Proverbs," in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures . . .*, ed. by J. P. Lange (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 200.

⁸F. Delitzsch, "Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon," in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 2:108-10.

⁹W. J. Deane and S. T. Taylor-Taswell, "Proverbs," in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. by H. D. M. Spence and J. S. Exell (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 9:441.

¹⁰A. R. Fausset, "Job-Isaiah," in R. Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and D. Brown, *A Commentary . . . on the Old and New Testaments* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 3:489.

¹¹C. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, ICC (reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970) 430.

¹²A. Cohen, "Proverbs," in *Soncino Books of the Bible*, ed. by A. Cohen (New York: Soncino, 1946) 153.

Whybray basically follows the LXX.¹³

The best and most complete treatment of this problematic clause is by McKane. After giving some assent to the common view, represented by most of the commentaries above, he proceeds to point out its weaknesses. He then notes that Dahood relates $\mathfrak{r};\mathfrak{v}$ ($\mathfrak{s}\#\mathfrak{r}$) to Ugaritic $t\#r$, which refers to serving food. Finally, he concludes by favoring the LXX reading, and then by translating it, "Eating and drinking (with him) is as if one should swallow a hair."¹⁴

It is possible to cite other commentaries, but the ones already noted are representative.

Lexical Light from Ugaritic

Perhaps the first observation should be that this perplexing verb and clause appear as part of the eighth saying in a section of Proverbs consisting of a total of thirty sayings (22:17-24:22; see particularly 22:20, where the correct translation is almost certainly, "Have I not written for you thirty [sayings] . . . ?"). Thus 22:17-24:22 is structurally identical with the Egyptian "Wisdom of Amenemope," which also contains thirty sections. Some of the wording is similar too, though the eighth saying in Proverbs has no close parallel. Since it is always important to interpret Scripture in the light of its context, the text of the entire eighth saying contributes light:

- 6 Do not eat the food of a stingy man,¹⁵
do not crave his delicacies;
- 7 for he is the kind of man
who is always thinking about the cost.
"Eat and drink," he says to you,
but his heart is not with you.
- 8 You will vomit up the little you have eaten
and will have wasted your compliments.¹⁶

¹³R. N. Whybray, "The Book of Proverbs," in *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*, ed. by P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer (Cambridge: University Press, 1972) 135.

¹⁴W. McKane, *Proverbs*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 383-85.

¹⁵Lit., "an evil eye." As in 28:22, reference is to a stingy, miserly man. It is the opposite of "a good eye" (22:9), referring to a generous man, who will be blessed (enriched) because he shares his food with the poor.

¹⁶The translation is from the NIV.

I would change the above NIV rendering in v. 7a to the footnote alternative: "for as he puts on a feast, so he is." Even here, however, I would make a slight addition in order to bring out more clearly what I regard as the force of **ovfab** (*benap̄s̄θ*): "for as he puts on a feast within himself, so he is."

John Gray appears to be the first to make the connection between Ugaritic *t#r* and Hebrew *sa #ar* in Prov 23:7.¹⁷ Commenting on *Anat* 1:4-5, he writes, "*yt#r* is found in the same sense in GORDON *UH* 77, 35 and in Hebrew as *r;v*, e.g. Proverbs xxiii, 7."¹⁸ Again he notes, "The root *t#r* is used in the sense of 'arranging' seats and tables etc. in GORDON *UH #nt*, II, 20. It occurs possibly in Hebrew in the sense of 'arranging', 'disposing', e.g. Proverbs xxiii, 7."¹⁹ His most extensive remarks come still later. This is the lengthy quotation:

In Proverbs xxiii, 7 . . . the difficulty of the text was felt by Greek translators who rendered *r;v* by τριχα, 'a hair', obviously reading **rae** [sic]. The meaning would then be 'he is as a hair in the throat'. In the *Wisdom of Amenemope* . . . the same type of man is compared to a storm within one. This suggests that the reading of the Hebrew text may have originally been **ras** corrupted to **rae** during the dictation of the text and subsequently read as **raa**. The Massoretic reading, however, might be supported by the usage of *t#r* in the Ras Shamra texts. In GORDON *UH* 77, 35 in the payment of the dowry of *Nkl* 'her brothers arrange (*yt#r*) the weights of the balances'.²⁰

After citing two more occurrences of *t#r* in a context of putting on a feast or banquet, Gray concludes: "On lexical grounds then there is no reason why the Massoretic reading of Proverbs xxiii, 7 should not stand. . . . The reading of the Egyptian text, however, suggests that after all emendation is necessary in this case."²¹ In the light of all the evidence, I fail to see why "emendation is necessary in this case."

Dahood concurs with Gray's proposal (referring to the first edition of Gray's work): "J. Gray has correctly identified the roots *sa #r*

¹⁷That the phonemes *t* and *s* can legitimately be correlated is demonstrated by such etymological cognates as Hebrew **rov** and Ugaritic *tr*.

¹⁸J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967) 38 n. 7.

¹⁹Ibid., 250 n. 1.

²⁰Ibid., 266.

²¹Ibid.

with Ugar. *t#r* 'to serve, arrange,' collocated with *lhm* in *#nt*: I: 4-5, *yt#r wyslhmnh*, 'He serves and feeds him.'²² Dahood mentions this again later in another work: "*t#r* 'to arrange, to serve (food)'. On Prov. 23:7, J Gray."²³

In his Glossary, Gordon (*UT*) defines *t#r* as follows: "*t#r* 'to arrange' (77:35; *#nt*: 20, 37). 'to serve (food)' (*#nt*: I: 4)."²⁴

The following are the texts where *t#r* occurs (the translations are original; the texts are from Gordon, *UT*). In the first passage someone is putting on a feast for Baal:

Anat 1 (V AB, A): 4-5:
qm yt#r He rises, he serves food
*wyslhmnh*²⁵ and he gives him to eat.

The same text (*Anat* 2 [V AB, B]: 20-22) describes the warrior goddess Anat as making banquet preparations:

tt#r ksát lmhr She sets up chairs for the soldiers,
*t#r*²⁶ *tlhant*²⁷ *lsbim* sets tables for the warriors,

²²M. Dahood, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1963) 47.

²³M. Dahood, *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology* (also, Rome, 1965) 75.

²⁴C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (UT; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1965) 505, entry #2719.

²⁵*UT* 253; interestingly the latter two verbs appear in the eighth saying in Proverbs and, as in Ugaritic, they are in a context of offering a meal (*lhm* in v. 6 and *#r* in v. 7).

²⁶The form *t#r* is apparently the G inf. (*ta#aru*) and is consistent with Held's view that the Ugaritic (and Hebrew!) poets usually varied their verbal forms in parallel cola. They would often use the same verb but with a different stem or tense. For the sequence *tt#r* . . . *t#r*; then, see M. Held, "The *YQTL-QTL (QTL-YQTL)* Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and in Ugaritic," in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, ed. by M. Ben-Horin, B. D. Weinryb, and S. Zeitlin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963) 281-90; cf. also his article, "The Action-Result (Factitive-Passive) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and Ugaritic," *JBL* 84 (1965):272-82.

²⁷As I have indicated elsewhere ("The Value of Ugaritic for Old Testament Studies," *BSac* 133 [April 1976]:125), the Hebrew for "table" (, אִלּוּ [*sulhan*]) was said to be related to an Arabic verb, *salaha*, with the resultant meaning, "skin or leather mat spread on the ground" (BDB, 1020). Now Ugaritic provides the true etymology with its cognate noun, *tlhn*, "table." Since two of the phonemes differ from the

*hdmm lḡzrm*²⁸ footstools for the heroes.²⁹

As the lines following in that context make clear, Anat here resorts to deception, which is typical of her trickery and treachery. She is really "setting them up."

The reference in 77 (NK): 35³⁰ has already been dealt with in the quotation from Gray above. The one in *Anat 2* (V AB, B): 37 is uncertain.

Conclusion

First, it seems that Ugaritic *t#r* can mean "to arrange, set (up), offer, serve (food), put on a feast or banquet."

Second, Hebrew *ṣa #ar* in Prov 23:7 should probably have a new etymology, by relating it to Ugaritic *t#r*, and should mean "to serve food, put on a feast." The verb in both languages appears in the context of offering or hosting a meal.

Third, it is interesting that the ultimate sense of the passage in Proverbs is basically the same with either translation. If the meaning of Hebrew *ṣa #ar* is "to serve food," the point is still that it is *how* a host serves food *within himself* that reveals his character and motivation. Outwardly he may be serving a lavish feast, but inwardly he may be grudging every bite his guests take.

Thus the eighth saying is about a stingy, miserly host who, for whatever reason, desires to give the appearance of being a generous person when, in reality, he is a hypocrite. He is insincere "his heart is not with you" (v. 7). When his stinginess begins to become obvious from his attitude, mannerisms, facial expressions, speech, actions, etc.,

alleged Arabic cognate, Ugaritic proves such an etymology to be incorrect, and it must now be abandoned. The word simply means "table," with nothing said about its nature, structure, or material.

²⁸UT, 253. Based on Ugaritic, Held has argued (class notes) for I *ṛz*; (*#zr*, "to help, save, rescue") and II *ṛz*; (*#zr*, "to be strong") in Biblical Hebrew. I *#zr* = *#ṣr* (UT *#ḏr*) in Ugaritic, while II *#zr* = *ṣr* in Ugaritic. A few passages where II *#zr* may exist in the Hebrew Bible are 1 Chr 5:20; 12:1; 2 Chr 20:23; 26:15; Pss 28:7; 89:20 ("I have bestowed *strength*," NIV); Isa 41:10; Ezek 30:8; 32:21.

²⁹H. L. Ginsberg's translation (ANET 136) of these lines reads, "She *pictures* the chairs as heroes,/ *Pretending* a table is warriors,/ And that the footstools are troops." I can only assume that Ginsberg's rendering is based on the alleged connection between Biblical Hebrew *ṣa #ar* and the post-Biblical and Jewish Aramaic usage discussed above.

³⁰UT183.

it turns the stomachs of his guests, and in disgust they realize that they have wasted their compliments (v. 8).

The Bible commends generosity and unselfish sharing, and condemns avarice, hoarding, and miserliness. Even society in general frowns on the Silas Marners and Scrooges of this world, and praises good Samaritans. So "do not eat the food of a stingy man, . . . for *as he serves food within himself*, so he is. 'Eat and drink,' he says to you, but his heart is not with you." Let the wise show their wisdom by heeding this sage counsel.