

Proverbs and Egyptian Wisdom Literature

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The Instruction of Amenemope is strikingly similar to Proverbs 22-24. Proverbs 22.20 even seems to refer to the thirty chapters of Amenemope. Many of the first lines of the proverbs in these chapters apparently were taken from the first lines of the chapters of Amenemope, which would have been the theme statements of those chapters.

In many places where the Book of Proverbs yields wisdom similar to that of other ancient near east cultures, one might argue it was coincidental or reflective of universal principles that many similar cultures might work out. But the high concentration of similarities between Amenemope and Proverbs 22-24, along with the correlation between the first lines of the proverbs and the first lines of the chapters of Amenemope, argue for literary dependence.

In the ancient near east, it was more common to condense [as from Amenemope to Proverbs] than to go the other way. Also, copies of Amenemope predate Solomon by over 100 years. It seems likely that Solomon was given a copy during his reign, when he had close cultural ties to Egypt and had Egyptian scribes in his court. The conclusion seems to be that the Holy Spirit superintended bringing some of the world's wisdom into Scripture, with corrections for theological truths, such as leaving out references to pagan gods and inserting references to Yahweh. This is supported by the Proverbs stating that chapter thirty is from Agur and chapter thirty-one from King Lemuel's mother, both apparently non-Israelite.

Amenemope and other ancient near east wisdom literature exhibit similar structural forms. The basic structural form can be seen in the Egyptian Instruction of Ptahhotep, of which copies date back to the nineteenth century BC. This structure was for the first line to give the authorship of the book, then a prologue stating the purpose of the collection, then again a statement of authorship at the end of the prologue, followed by the maxims of wisdom, and last an epilogue. The book of Proverbs can be seen to fit this pattern: first line declaration of authorship [1.1]; prologue [1.2-9.18]; restatement of authorship [10.1]; maxims of wisdom [10.2-30.33]; epilogue [31.1-31]. This similar structure clearly makes possible an early date for Proverbs. Even at the time of Solomon, this was a 1000 year old literary tradition.

Because we know from other sources that in the ancient near east culture the statements of authorship represented real people who likely were the real authors, this similarity in structure between Proverbs and ancient near east wisdom books also argues for the veracity of the statements of Solomonic authorship in Proverbs 1.1; 10.1, suggesting Solomon was responsible for compiling the material in Proverbs 1.1-22.16. Proverbs 25.1-29.27 are declared in the text to be proverbs of Solomon which were gathered by men under King Hezekiah. Thus the bulk of the material is declared to have Solomon as the author. Another factor encouraging belief in Solomonic authorship is that when some proverbs are not from Solomon the text freely admits this. Proverbs 22.17-24.22 are called "the words of the wise" [NET] and correlate well with Amenemope. Proverbs 24.23-34 are said to be "also...from the wise" [NET]. Proverbs 30.1-33 are from Agur, and Proverbs 31.1-31 are from King Lemuel's mother.