

"DRINK WATER FROM YOUR OWN CISTERN": A LITERARY STUDY OF PROVERBS 5:15-23

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IN PROVERBS 1-9 THE FATHER-TEACHER repeatedly addresses the subject of sexual behavior as he instructs his son-pupil about how to live skillfully (see 2:16-19; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 1-27). This article focuses on Proverbs 5:15-23, a passage in which the father seeks to convince his son that genuine sexual satisfaction comes only within the context of marriage. The father's pedagogical technique, which balances realism and rhetoric, is instructive for modern teachers who seek to give young men moral guidance in this area.

PROVERBS 5:15-23 IN ITS IMMEDIATE LITERARY CONTEXT

Verses 15-23 are the climax to a speech that begins in verse 1. The entire chapter displays the pattern of the instruction genre, which combines exhortation with persuasive motivating arguments.¹ Its structure may be outlined as follows:

Cycle One (vv. 1-6)

General exhortation to pay attention (v. 1)

Motivating argument (vv. 2-6)

Cycle Two (vv. 7-14)

Expanded general exhortation to pay attention² and specific

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¹ William McKane, *Proverbs*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 3, 311. As Michael V. Fox explains, "In order to make a lasting impression, the father must not only command; he must persuade" ("*Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 [1997]: 622 [*italics his*]).

² In verse 7 the father addresses his "sons" and uses plural verb forms. In verse 8

exhortation concerning improper behavior (vv. 7-8)
 Motivating argument (vv. 9-14)

Cycle Three (vv. 15-23)

Specific exhortation concerning proper behavior (v. 15)

Motivating argument (vv. 16-17)³

Blessing and anticipated consequence of its realization
 (vv. 18-19a)⁴

Specific exhortation reiterating proper behavior (v. 19b)⁵

Motivating argument (vv. 20-23)

In the first cycle the father urges his son to listen to his instruction (v. 1), for it will provide the discretion (v. 2) necessary to avoid the fatally attractive promiscuous woman (vv. 3-6).

The second cycle reiterates the need to listen (V. 7), but it adds a more specific command to avoid the promiscuous woman (v. 8). It then describes the negative consequences that typically overtake those who fail to heed this warning (vv. 9-14).

In the third cycle the father offers the antidote to promiscuity as he urges his son to intoxicate himself with the sexual satisfaction that marriage has to offer (v. 15).⁶ Through the effective use of metaphor and hyperbole he depicts the son's wife as a bountiful and inexhaustible source of sexual pleasure (vv. 16-17) on whom he even pronounces a blessing (vv. 18-19a). He then reiterates the exhortation (v. 19b), which he buttresses with a rhetorical question (v. 20) and some concluding observations about God's moral administration of the world (vv. 21-23).

he returns to the singular.

³ Many understand verse 17 as an exhortation, but the following discussion suggests that the verse should be understood as part of the motivating argument.

⁴ This assumes that verse 18b, introduced by *waw* plus an imperative, is subordinate to the preceding clause (which contains a jussive) and expresses a consequence of the blessing (see v. 18a) being realized.

⁵ This assumes that the prefixed verb forms in verse 19 express instruction ("let her breasts/love intoxicate. ..be captivated"). Another option is to take the prefixed (verb form וַיִּשְׂבֹּג) as an extension of the blessing ("may her breasts/love intoxicate"). In this case the final clause, like verse 18b, can be understood as a consequence of the blessing being realized ("you will be captivated").

⁶ Daniel J. Estes observes that this unit "recommends the enjoyment of sexual (delights within the boundaries of marriage as an antidote against the allurements of the adulteress" (*Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 114).

COMMENTARY

VERSE 15

In the first poetic line the father urges his son to quench his sexual thirst by "drinking" from his own "cistern." Though the father, for rhetorical reasons, waits until verse 18 to identify the reality behind the image, the cistern represents the son's wife, while the "water" symbolizes the sexual satisfaction she is capable of supplying.

In verse 15b the father transforms the image of a cistern (בֹּר), a manmade receptacle for catching runoff water, to that of a well (בְּאֵר), which contains fresh water supplied by underground streams.⁷ The son's wife, he says, is like a well filled with fresh water, not a mere cistern containing runoff water!⁸

VERSES 16-17

In verses 16-17 the father supports his exhortation with a motivating argument. Once more he transformed his metaphor, changing the image of a well (see v. 15b) into that of a natural fountain (מְקוֹרֶיךָ, "your fountain," in v. 18a) from which streams flow.⁹ The son's wife, rather than being a mere cistern or well, is more like a bubbling fountain that produces streams of sexual satisfaction. Springs/streams are viewed as the handiwork of God (Ps. 104:10), in contrast to manmade cisterns and wells. Through the transformation of the metaphor the father pictures the son's wife as a gift from God and paves the way for the blessing he mentioned in verse 18a.

⁷ The term נִזְלֵי יַם refers elsewhere to streams that bubbled out of a rock in the wilderness (Ps. 78:16), the streams of Egypt (78:44), streams produced by rainfall (Isa. 44:3), and the waves of the Red Sea (Exod. 15:8). The word נִזְלֵי יַם seems to be roughly synonymous with the phrase מַיִם חַיִּים, "living (i.e., running/fresh) water." The latter refers to streams (Zech. 14:8) or to the fresh water produced by a well (Gen. 26:19) or a spring, in contrast with a cistern (Jer. 2:13; 17:13). In Song of Solomon 4:15 "living water" is associated with a well, while נִזְלֵי יַם refers to mountain streams. Both refer metaphorically to the sexual pleasures the young lady has to offer her husband. In Proverbs 5:15 נִזְלֵי יַם appears to refer, like מַיִם חַיִּים, in Genesis 26:19 and Song of Solomon 4:15, to the fresh water supplied by a well.

⁸ On cisterns in ancient Israel see James B. Davis, "Hill Country Village Subsistence Strategy in the Period of the Judges" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984), 48-56; and David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 95-96. On wells in ancient Israel see Davis, "Hill Country Village Subsistence Strategy," 57-58; and Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan*, 97-98.

⁹ On springs in ancient Israel, see Davis, "Hill Country Village Subsistence Strategy," 41-45; and Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan*, 96-97.

To emphasize her capacity to satisfy, he pictures these "springs"¹⁰ and "streams of water" flowing through the streets and public squares.¹¹ The wife is more than capable of quenching the young man's thirst, making it unnecessary to seek water from any other source.

The references to streets and city squares are at first puzzling. After all, the street (שׁוּכַר) and city square (בֵּית הַחַיִּים) were public places (Prov. 1:20; 22:13) where promiscuous women lurked (7:12).¹² However, the description may be purely hyperbolic, or the imperfect יִפְּצוּ, "they are dispersed," may be taken in a modal manner, indicating capability.¹³ In either case the statement is ironic.¹⁴ The wife is capable of attracting and satisfying many men, just like a prostitute or adulteress. But despite her tremendous capabilities, her streams of sexual satisfaction belong solely to the son (v. 17a).¹⁵ They are off-limits to other men (אֲנָשִׁים, v. 17b).¹⁶

¹⁰ Normally מַעְיָן, spring, an מְקוֹר, "fountain, are roughly synonymous see Davis, "Hill Country Village Subsistence Strategy," 44-45). In verse 16 the plural form "springs" probably refers to the abundant water that gushes from the fountain (giving the impression of many springs in one) and disperses into many streams (as if coming from multiple springs).

¹¹ Similar imagery is employed in Song of Solomon 4:12-15. The young man's lover, with whom he has not yet consummated his love, is first likened to an enclosed spring and a sealed fountain (v. 12). But then, anticipating sexual consummation, he compares her to a garden fountain, a well containing fresh water, and mountain streams (v. 15).

¹² See Paul A. Kruger, "Promiscuity or Marriage Fidelity? A Note on Prov. 5: 15-18," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 13 (1987): 67.

¹³ For other examples of this use of the imperfect, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 507, where it is labeled the "non-perfective of capability." See especially Deuteronomy 1:12 (in comparison with Deut. 1:9) and 2 Samuel 22:39 (in companson wIth Ps. 18:39).

¹⁴ Commenting on the father's pedagogical approach in chapters 1-9, Fox observes that he "revels in ironies" ("Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," 623).

¹⁵ The imperfect יִפְּצוּ at the beginning of verse 17 is taken as indicative, describing a continuing situation.

¹⁶ The masculine form clearly refers to other men, not women. The masculine plural form is used elsewhere of male lovers (Jer. 2:25; 3:13; Ezek. 16:32), but never of women. If prostitutes or adulteresses were intended, the feminine form אֲנָשִׁים would have been used. See Proverbs 2:16; 5:3, 20; 7:5; 22:14. L. A. Snijders points out that the "precise definition" of the term it, "outsider," derives from "the immediate context in which its user is thinking and speaking" ("אֲנָשִׁים," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 4:57). In this context אֲנָשִׁים refers simply to men other than the son, all of whom are outside the bounds of his marriage and to whom the son's wife is therefore off limits. (See Deuteronomy 25:5, where it refers to any man outside a deceased man's family. See also Psalm 109:11.)

The father's rhetorical strategy in these verses is clear-cut. He paints the word picture of a cistern filled with water. He transforms that image to a well filled with fresh water and then turns the well into a fountain, a gift from God that produces streams of thirst-quenching water. After pointing out that the son's wife has what it takes to satisfy many men, he emphasizes that she belongs solely to the son. By transforming the image of the wife from a passive receptacle to an active source of abundant satisfaction, and by then emphasizing that she is reserved for the son alone, the father makes her look exceedingly desirable. With such a special source of sexual satisfaction reserved just for him, why would he want to seek sexual pleasure anywhere else?

This interpretation of these verses differs from the way others have interpreted them. Some see the springs/streams of water as symbolizing the young man's sexual potency (perhaps his semen), rather than the sexual satisfaction provided by his wife.¹⁷ According to this view the son must reserve his sexual potency for his wife and not spread it throughout the community. Proponents of this view must translate verse 16 as a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer ("Should your springs be dispersed...?") and must take the morphologically ambiguous prefixed verb form at the beginning of verse 17 (יְהִי) as a jussive ("Let them be yours alone!").¹⁸ McKane and Clifford defend this view by arguing that the springs/streams of verse 16 are plural, while the cistern and well of verse 15 are singular.

However, this interpretation is inconsistent with verse 15, where water represents the sexual satisfaction produced by the 'wife, symbolized by the cistern/well. McKane's and Clifford's argument is specious, for the springs/streams correspond to the water (מַיִם)/fresh water (נְוֵלִים) of verse 15 (Hebrew forms that are dual and plural, respectively), not the well/cistern, which are the source of the water/fresh water. In other words the cistern (v. 15), well (v. 15), and fountain (v. 18) correspond, as do the water contained in the cistern (v. 15), the fresh water available in the well (v. 15), and the streams produced by the fountain (v. 16). Since the springs are produced by the son's fountain, they can be spoken of as belonging to him (indicated by the suffix on "springs" in v. 16).

¹⁷ See, for example, McKane, *Proverbs*, 318-19; and Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 68,71.

¹⁸ This line of interpretation may be reflected in Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, which negate the verb in verse 16a (J1Ij) and translate it as if it were an extension of the exhortation in verse 15.

Furthermore no interrogative markers are in verse 16,19 and this view has difficulty explaining how the son's sexual potency should be kept to himself (V. 17a; note לִבְדָּךָ -one would think it would be shared with the wife) and not shared with other men (אֲרֵי in v. 17b is masculine). For this view to work, sexual potency must refer by metonymy to the children it produces and verse 17b must then allude to providing children for other men in the community by means of their promiscuous wives.²⁰

Garrett says the springs and streams refer to the "husband's sexual affections" (just as the cistern symbolizes "the affections of his wife"). The young man is not to share these affections with other women, but is to reserve them for his wife. In this way the husband and wife "fill and refresh each other."²¹ However, this view, like the preceding one, fails to take the imagery of water in a consistent way, requires taking verse 16 as a rhetorical question, and has difficulty explaining verse 17. One would think the son should share his sexual affections with his wife, not keep them to himself.

Some say that the springs/streams of verse 16 are the children produced by the sexual activity enjoined in verse 15.²² This view is preferable to the ones just mentioned, for it allows one to take the verb forms in verses 16-17 in a straightforward, indicative manner. In this case verse 17 might be pointing out that these children, though overrunning the public places, belong only to the man who fathered them. In this way the teacher emphasizes the public influence that derives from fathering many children with one's wife.

¹⁹ The rhetorical question in verse 20 is introduced by the interrogative word לָמָּה "why?" Other rhetorical questions in Proverbs 1-9 are similarly marked (1:22; 6:9, 27-28; 8:1). Of course interrogative sentences do not have to be marked (see Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 2d ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1910], 473, para. 150a, which cites Proverbs 5:16 as an example!); but when there are no formal interrogative indicators, one should assume an interrogative sentence only if the context demands it. The context makes no such demands in this case. Though he takes verse 16 as a rhetorical question, R. N. Whybray admits that "the most obvious rendering would be as a positive statement" (Proverbs, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 90). See also Philip J. Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), 49. Nel takes verse 16 as a rhetorical question, but acknowledges that one expects the motivation to begin "with a metaphoric wisdom saying."

²⁰ See, for example, Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 198~), 52.

²¹ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 93.

²² See, for example, L. A. Snijders, "The Meaning of zar in the Old Testament," *Old Testament Studies* 10 (1954): 93; and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 180.

However, this view, like those mentioned above, fails to take the water imagery of verses 15-17 in a consistent manner. Furthermore Clifford points out that "nowhere in the Bible do springs and streams of water symbolize descendants."²³

Kruger, emphasizing the distinction between private and common property, understands the springs/streams, which are accessible to the public, as symbolizing lewd women, who stand in contrast to the son's wife, symbolized by the privately owned cistern and well. Verse 16 describes the behavior of such lewd women who lurk on the street corners "in search of paramours."²⁴

However, this interpretation crumbles when one notices that a second person masculine singular pronominal suffix is attached to "springs" in verse 16, suggesting that the springs, whatever they symbolize, belong to the son. Like the cistern, well, and fountain, they are his private property.²⁵ Furthermore this view requires understanding the water referred to in verse 17 as being the privately owned water of verse 15, rather than the springs/streams of verse 16.²⁶ But the most natural subject of the plural verb יְהִי (פְּלִגְי־מַיִם) is the immediately preceding "streams of water" (פְּלִגְי־מַיִם).

Others correctly see the streams as representing the wife's sexual capacity, but then they interpret verses 16-17 as alluding to promiscuity. In this view the logic of verses 15-17 is as follows: The young man should find sexual satisfaction from his wife. Otherwise she will become dissatisfied and vindictive and share her sexual favors with other men throughout the community.²⁷ The references to the street and public square might seem to support this view, for they suggest activity outside the privacy of the home. However, Clifford rightly labels this view as "unlikely, for it proposes as an everyday motive the relatively unlikely possibility (in that culture) of the wife's adultery."²⁸ Furthermore, as already noted, if the language is taken in an ironic manner, the references to the

²³ Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary*, 68.

²⁴ Kruger, "Promiscuity or Marriage Fidelity?" 66-67.

²⁵ Kruger emphasizes the significance of the pronominal suffix in verses 15 and 17-18, but he omits any reference to its appearance in verse 16 (*ibid.*, 66, n. 29).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁷ See, for example, Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs*, 50; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 58; and Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 32.

²⁸ Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary*, 68.

street/public square contribute powerfully to the father's rhetorical strategy.

VERSES 18-19a

In these verses the father concludes his motivating argument with a prayer of blessing for the son's wife (v. 18a). Likening her to a fountain (the source of the springs and streams pictured in vv. 16-17), he prays that she will "be blessed" (יְהִי ... בְּרִוּיָּהּ). Though some see this as referring to the ability to bear children, both the preceding and following contexts suggest that the capacity to provide sexual pleasure is in view.²⁹

The pronouncement of a blessing is a highly effective rhetorical device, for a blessing was not mere well-wishing, but a powerful and effective appeal to the sovereign God to endue the object blessed with special capacity and power.³⁰ The blessing caps off the father's argument, for it invited God into the situation. If God responds positively to the father's prayer (and why wouldn't He?), the blessing gives the son additional motivation to confine his sexual activity to the marriage bed. It makes little sense to seek sexual pleasure with another woman when one's wife possesses a special divine endowment to satisfy one's sexual needs.

Following the jussive יְהִי at the beginning of verse 18, the imperative with the prefixed waw at the beginning of verse 18b may be taken as an indirect volitive indicating purpose or consequence.³¹ When God blesses the son's "fountain," he will derive genuine sexual satisfaction from her.³²

The father identifies the reality behind the water-source (cis-

²⁹ See Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 93, and C. H. Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1899), 114.

³⁰ Though many believe that blessings are rooted in a magical view of the power of the spoken word, this seems doubtful. Blessings (as well as curses) were a way of invoking divine intervention. Ultimately they depended on the divine will for fulfillment. See Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 171-76. For a summary of the history of interpretation on the subject see Timothy G. Crawford, *Blessing and Curse in Syro-Palestinian Inscriptions of the Iron Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 16--26.

³¹ See Genesis 20:7 and the other examples cited in Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, 325, para. 110 i. Mitchell points out the cause-effect relationship here and cites an Aramaic parallel. He writes, "The wife who is blessed by God becomes a source of joy for her husband" (*The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament*, 124).

³² The construction מִן מְשֻׁבֵּחַ, "get pleasure from," appears only here and in Ecclesiastes 2:10, where Qoheleth observed that he derived pleasure from all his hard work.

tern, well, fountain) as the "wife of your youth,"³³ whom he then describes as being "an affectionate doe" and "an attractive female goat" (v. 19a). These appositional phrases mix reality with metaphor, for the genitives אֶהְבֵּי (and וְנִי more naturally describe the wife than a doe or female goat. The word אֶהְבֵּי occurs only here and in Hosea 8:9, where it refers metaphorically to illicit "lovers." In Proverbs 5:19 the term likely has a romantic sense ("affectionate" is an appropriate translation). The word נִי is used of a "charming" (or perhaps "kind") woman in 11:16 and of a physically "charming" woman in 31:30, where it stands parallel to יָפִי, "beauty." In the context of 5:19 the term surely has this physical or sensual nuance ("attractive" is an appropriate translation). By comparing the son's wife to a doe and a female goat, the father again reveals his awareness of his son's elemental sexual urges. By implication the metaphor likens the son to a buck or a male goat, two animals well-known for their powerful sexual drive during the mating season.³⁴

VERSES 19b-23

In verse 19b the father reiterates his earlier exhortation. Building on the drinking metaphor of verse 15, he urges his son to be intoxicated with and captivated by his wife's love at all times.³⁵ The Hebrew text reads חֲדָרָי, "her breasts," at the beginning of the poetic line,³⁶ but the form should probably be revocalized as חֲדָרַי, "her love," which forms a tighter synonymous parallel with אֶהְבֵּיהָ, "her love," in the following line.³⁷ The word חֲדָרַי, "love," refers to romantic, sensual love in the Song of Solomon (1:2, 4; 4:10) and is used with the verb חָרַךְ, "drink one's fill, be intoxicated," in Proverbs 7:18, where the adulteress says to her lover, "Come, let's drink our fill of

³³ The phrase means "the wife whom you married when you were young." Usage elsewhere suggests that a man was sometimes tempted to divorce his first wife (Isa. 54:6; Mal. 2:14-15). Similar expressions include "bridegroom of her youth" i.e., the man to whom she was betrothed/married when she was young, Joel 1:8), sons of youth" (i.e., sons born to a man when he was still young, Ps. 127:4), and "companion of youth" (i.e., the husband a woman marries in her youth, Prov. 2:17; or a friend whom one has known from youth, Jer. 3:4).

³⁴ In the Song of Solomon the young lady compared her lover to a stag who bounded over the hills to her home and waited longingly to enter (2:8-9, 17; 8: 14).

³⁵ The prefixed verb 1~j~ is taken as a jussive expressing the father's instruction. The verb חָרַךְ in the following line is understood as an Imperfect of Instruction.

³⁶ The word חֲדָרַי, "breast," occurs only here and in Ezekiel 23:3, 8, 21.

³⁷ The correspondence between חֲדָרַי לְעַתָּה, "at all times," and חֲדָרַי לְעַתָּה "continually," suggests the lines are to be understood as synonymous.

love until morning."³⁸

The father begins his motivating argument with a rhetorical question that challenges the son to consider the absurdity of marital infidelity. It would make no sense whatever for the son to seek sexual satisfaction with a woman other than his wife (v. 20).³⁹ Why? The father has already given adequate justification for marital fidelity, but he concludes his argument with some observations about God's moral administration of the world.⁴⁰ Having sex with another woman is foolish because it can never be done in secret. God Himself is always watching and evaluating "all" that a person does (v. 21).⁴¹ Because God prohibits adultery and punishes those who rebel against His moral standards, adultery is self-destructive (v. 22). Like a snare the sinner's deeds "capture" (לָכַד) him; like restricting ropes they "seize" him.⁴² His lack of discipline (מוֹסֵר) and

³⁸ However, in defense of the Masoretic text, one should note that the traditional reading, if retained, exhibits a chiasmic structure in verses 19b-20: breasts—חֶשֶׁת--גֵּוֹ--חֶשֶׁת--breasts. (The noun חֶשֶׁת, "chest," v. 20, is a synecdoche for breasts.) See. Gale Yee, "The Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (1989): 60; and Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 94.

³⁹ The term זָרָה is used of a woman only in Proverbs, where it refers to an adulteress. See 2:16 (cf. v. 17); 5:3 (cf. v. 10); 7:5 (cf. v. 19); 22:14. The parallel term נְכַרְיָה often refers to a "foreign" land (Exod. 2:22; 18:3) or to "foreign" women/wives (Ruth 2:10; 1 Kings 11:1,8; Ezra 10:2, 10-11, 14, 17-18,44; Neh. 13:26-27). In Genesis 31:15, where Laban's daughters complain about how their father has treated them, the term may simply mean "women outside the family sphere" rather than "foreigners" (see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 648-49). The term can also mean "atypical, abnormal" (in Isa. 28:21, it is used of God's work of judgment against His own people, and in Jer. 2:21, it refers to a "wild" vine). In Proverbs it appears in parallelism with זָרָה (5:20), זָרָה אִשָּׁה (2:16; 7:5), אִשָּׁת רָע "immoral woman" (6:24), and זֹנֵה, "prostitute" (23:27). The term also appears in 27:13. In Proverbs the various contexts provide no solid support for the notion that the woman described is foreign in the ethnic sense. The word seems to refer to women outside the married man's family sphere (i.e., women other than his wife) with whom he might be tempted to have sexual relations. Of course it is possible that the term was originally a technical designation for ethnically foreign women, but, if so, it apparently had developed an additional general idiomatic shade of meaning by the time it was rused in Proverbs.

⁴⁰ For other examples of a rhetorical question introduced by לָמָּה, "why?" followed : [by an explanatory כִּי, "for," see Genesis 47:15; Numbers 21:5; 27:4; Deuteronomy 5:25; 1 Samuel 26:15; Psalm 44:24-25; Jeremiah 29:27-28; and Ezekiel 18:31-32.

⁴¹ The verb פָּלַס when used with "path" can mean "make level"-see Psalm 78:50 (with נִתְיָב) and Isaiah 26:7 (with מַעֲגַל)-but it can also carry the meaning "consider carefully: examine" (see Prov. 4:26;5:6). The next two verses, which speak of divine judgment, favor the latter nuance here. See Lennart Bostrom, *The God of the sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 99.

⁴² On this meaning of the verb תָּמַק here, see Michael Heltzer, "The Root tmk in

failure to use foresight (רַב אֲנִלְתָּו, "the abundance of his folly") are fatal (יָמוּת) for they lead him astray (יִשְׁכַּח) from the path of wisdom and life (v. 23).⁴³

This reminder of God's moral administration of the universe gives additional rhetorical punch to the blessing offered in verse 18. If God is so opposed to marital infidelity that He makes it self-destructive, then it stands to reason that He is very pleased when individuals fulfill their God-given sexual urges through marriage. This makes Him predisposed to bless the wife of the obedient man so that the latter might be rewarded appropriately for his obedience.

TRANSLATION AND PARAPHRASE

The following translation and paraphrase reflect the interpretation proposed in this article:

5:15 "Drink water from your own cistern,
fresh water from your own well!"

Just as one quenches his thirst by drinking water from his own cistern or well, you should find sexual pleasure and satisfaction with your own wife.

5:16 "The springs available to you flood the streets,
and run like streams through the public squares."

Your wife's capacity to satisfy you is more than adequate. She is more like an overflowing natural spring than a mere cistern or well.

5: 17 "But they belong to you alone!
Other men cannot share them!"

The good news is that this bountiful source of sexual pleasure is all yours! No one else has a right to enjoy her.

5:18 "May your fountain be blessed!
Then you will enjoy the wife of your youth,

Ammonite, Phoenician and Hebrew," Zeitschrift für Althebraistik 8 (1995): 141.

⁴³ The verb יִשְׁכַּח is a key word in this section. The son should be "captivated" by his wife's love (v. 19), not by the breasts of another woman (v. 20). Failure to heed this warning will cause him to "stray" morally (v. 23) and bring him to ruin.

5:19a (who is like) an affectionate doe and an attractive female goat!"

My prayer is that your wife will be a sexually potent source of pleasure who, with her affection and charm, will make mating enjoyable.

5:19b "Let her love continually intoxicate you!
Always be captivated by her love!"

Allow your wife to satisfy your sexual thirst and bring you physical pleasure.

5:20 "My son, why should you be captivated by another woman?
Why fondle the breasts of a woman who is not your wife?"

It makes no sense to seek sexual satisfaction with a woman other than your wife,

5:21 "For Yahweh sees clearly a man's activities;
He evaluates everything a man does."

because you can't hide anything, including sinful activities, from Yahweh.

5:22 "A sinful man's evil deeds entrap him;
he is tangled up in the ropes of his own sin."

The world is "rigged" in such a way that sin is self-destructive.

5:23 "He dies because of his lack of discipline;
he is led astray by his great folly."

The foolish sinner's lack of self-discipline and of foresight is suicidal.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The father exhorts his son to satisfy his sexual desires in the proper way-within the context of marriage. The father's approach is realistic. By comparing sexual satisfaction to quenching one's thirst and by likening the son to a vigorous young buck or a male goat, the father acknowledges the power of the male sexual drive.

The earthy, sensual imagery realistically communicates the father's insight into the son's psyche and gives credibility to his teaching. The father is no platonic idealist; he recognizes his son's sexual urges.

At the same time the father marshals rhetorical fire power to support his exhortation to marital fidelity. In verses 15-16 he heightens the metaphor of the water source (from cistern to well to spring) in an effort to get the son to think correctly about his wife's potential to satisfy. In verse 17 he draws attention to the son's unique privilege. He then asks God to bless the son's wife so that the son might experience genuine sexual pleasure (vv. 18-19a). In verses 21-23 theological reflection climaxes the father's argument. Marital fidelity is the only wise course to follow, for God sees everything a man does and has ordered the world in such a way that sexual promiscuity destroys the sinner.

Teachers of God's Word can learn some important pedagogical (as well as moral) principles from the father's instruction. First, they should recognize the strong sexual urges young men feel and never downplay or try to suppress their reality. Second, they should help them develop a proper perspective on God's ordained way of satisfying these desires. Through marriage God makes available to them a rich source of sexual pleasure, one who is reserved just for them and whom God is predisposed to endue with special sexual potency. Third, teachers should also remind them that God will hold them accountable for their behavior, even in this area of their lives. Sexual promiscuity is self-destructive, as modern medicine, psychology, and sociology clearly demonstrate.

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