

Ancient Israelite and African proverbs as advice, reproach, warning, encouragement and explanation

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With few exceptions, the majority of biblical scholars (Euroamericans and Africans) concentrate on comparing ancient Israelite proverbs with the so-called ancient Near Eastern proverbs. Despite the importance of proverbs in Sub-Saharan Africa it is doubly unfortunate that the majority of African biblical scholars did not think it wise to compare proverbs from ancient Israel with Sub-Saharan African proverbs. It is also a double tragedy that young people in Sub-Saharan Africa are ignorant of proverbs because they have refused to learn them because they think them archaic. Proverbs in both ancient Israel and in Africa are similar in function and classification. Thus, they serve as advice, reproach, warning, encouragement and further explanation of some facts. They have great value and importance, such as giving a sense of identity, community, culture, respect for authority and elders, sacredness of everything under the sun and a sense of hospitality and others.

Introduction

Bi oro ba sonu owe ni a fi nwa. [Proverbs are horse-footed to solve a problem, when the truth is elusive, it is proverbs that we use to discover it].

The above Yoruba proverb is evidence of the importance of Yoruba proverbs. Just as wisdom is important in Yoruba tradition, so also it is important in ancient Israel. Scholars have spent so much time discussing wisdom in ancient Israel and comparing it with wisdom in the so-called ancient Near East as a whole – the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Canaanite wisdom (Bartholomew & O'Dowd 2011:32–46; Clifford 1998:23–40; Currid 1997; Day, Gordon & Williamson 1997; Nardoni 2004; Von Rad 1970). Amongst the Mesopotamian wisdom material similarities with biblical wisdom are found in the *Instruction of Shuruppak* (considered to be the Oldest and most widely known Mesopotamian instruction) and the *Counsel of Wisdom*. Similarities with the Egyptian wisdom literature include *Instruction of Amenemope*, *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, and *the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. Amongst the Canaanite wisdom material similarities with the *Ahiqar*, (the most important non-biblical Canaanite wisdom text) are well known. Clifford claims that the reason for this comparison is to demonstrate that biblical wisdom literature is truly international. It is found in the great empires that surrounded the nation of ancient Israel as well as the geographically closer cities in the Levant. According to him, 'no category of biblical literature is more completely attested outside the Bible than the wisdom literature' (Clifford 1998:40).

What appears to be most unfortunate is that the above Western biblical scholars of Old Testament wisdom did not think it wise to compare Old Testament wisdom with the Sub-Saharan African wisdom, especially African proverbs.¹ The closest context to this is the comparison with the Northern part of Africa, namely Egyptian wisdom, which unfortunately is considered by most Western scholars as not part of Africa, but Ancient Near East or Europe.

Recently, however, a few African biblical scholars have begun to change the course of things as far as comparing biblical wisdom with Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Canaanite wisdom, by also comparing biblical wisdom, mostly proverbs, with the Sub-Saharan African proverbs. The following scholars have undertaken some interesting work on comparisons of biblical wisdom and proverbs with Sub-Saharan African proverbs, though not with Yoruba proverbs specifically.

Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele) wrote a masters dissertation, 'In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context' (Masenya

1. Whybray (1995), has undertaken a survey of various approaches to the study of the book of Proverbs but does not include any African authors. Waltke wrote two massive volumes on the book of Proverbs often referred to as 'definitive work' and 'a life time achievement' (2004a, 2004b). Longman III also wrote another voluminous book, *Proverbs* (2006). Kidner also penned what is called 'an excellent commentary' on Proverbs, *Proverbs* (2009). Raymond C. van Leeuwen wrote an article 'Proverbs', in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (1997). Unfortunately, none of these eminent scholars of Wisdom literature thought about a comparison of Sub-Saharan Proverbs and Israelite Proverbs.



1989); 'Challenging Poverty through Proverbs: an African Transformational Hermeneutics' (Masenya 2006:393–404); 'Wisdom and Wisdom Converge: Selected Old Testament and Northern Sotho Proverbs' (Masenya 2001:133–146). Lehon Peter Kimilike wrote 'Proverbial Folklore to Understand the Holistic Poverty Eradication Framework in the Book of Proverbs' (Kimilike 2006a:405–417); 'The Poor Are Not Us: An Exploration into the Transforming possibilities of Old Testament and African Proverbs on Poverty' (Kimilike 2006b:418–428). Willie van Heerden (2006:429–440) wrote 'It's on the Old Mat that One Weaves the New One: The Dialogue between African Proverbs and Biblical Texts'. Relating to this subject, K.J.N. Owan (2004:151–176) wrote 'African Proverbial Wisdom and Biblical Proverbial Wisdom: Bedfellows and More'.

Though the biblical wisdom literature may be difficult to understand and, thus, strange to us, the concern of the wisdom materials, especially the proverbs, is a modern concern and applies to everyone (Machado 2003:1–6). The main themes in the book of Proverbs are:

- poverty and wealth
- righteousness and the limitation of human minds
- God's sovereignty

Although this portion of the canonical Bible, which was classified as wisdom, was disputed before being accepted into the Christian canon, it does not reduce the importance and value of the book of Proverbs. This article is concerned with the book of Proverbs and the comparison with Yoruba Proverbs in order to find the similarities and the implications for Christianity in Africa. In other words, this article specifically compares the functions of wisdom in the book of Proverbs in both ancient Israel and Yoruba Proverbs using some selected proverbial sayings in the book of Proverbs and in Yoruba tradition. This article examines how proverbs in both cultures serve as advice, reproach, warning, encouragement and explanation of certain facts.

It is clearly understood that comparing ancient biblical literatures with other literatures in other cultures is a difficult task, because without good discipline or good method, there will be parallels everywhere. In comparing ancient biblical literatures with African (oral) literature especially that of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, some important facts must be kept in mind. The purpose of this comparison is not to prove that one is superior to the other or to say that one is true and the other is not. Rather it is to help the reader understand both literature and the cultures. It is also important to know that it is more productive to compare genres and wholes than just individual items and odd details.² It will give the reader a general sense of location. Thus, to understand biblical literature in the light of African culture it is important to compare the biblical literature with ancient African oral literature (Clifford 1998:24–25).³

2.Genres refers to literature and culture together as a whole.

3.Clifford (1998:24–25), believes that this type of comparison will help the reader understand both cultures.

Definition of proverbs

Even though proverbs are phenomena that human beings are most familiar with, they still lack a universally acceptable definition (Olumuyiwa 2012:106–120). It has been shown that various attempts to define proverbs have resulted into a universally unacceptable, ambiguous definition so that one can identify every sentence of a proverb (Mieder 1989:13–27). The result of this is that it is easier to find fault in every definition any one gives, than propose what seems to be an infallible one (Fasiku 2006:50–63). R.C. Trench (2003:1–9) noted that most attempts at defining proverbs merely identify the ornaments of good proverbs, and not the essential marks of all good proverbs. The fact is that to actually define 'a phenomenon requires identifying necessary and essential qualities, which define a proverb' (Fasiku 2006:50).

Despite the lack of a universally acceptable definition proverbs are a universal phenomenon that can be recognised. What differs from one culture to another is the meaning given to each proverb in each culture. A proverb of a community or nation is indeed ethnography of the people that needs to be systematised because it gives a penetrating picture of the people's way of life. Their meanings are situational or context-dependent, to an essential degree (Kola 1987:57).

A proverb is an important aspect of human communication and has been a prominent linguistic feature in virtually all languages such as Yoruba, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, English, German, Dutch and all African languages because it pertains to human communication. The universal nature of proverbs is incontrovertible, and it is important to note that the meaning is culturally relative because the historical circumstances surrounding the origin of proverbs differ as a result of different cultural experiences that actually generated the proverbs (Fayemi 2009:1–18). The meaning and nature of proverbs have long agitated the minds of scholars in various intellectual disciplines such as Anthropology, Sociology, Linguistics, Philosophy, Psychology, Religion and others (Awolalu 1979; Idowu 1960; Parrinder 1951a, 1951b). Many attempts have also been made to arrive at a consensus of a definition of this word, but this has not been possible. What most scholars of proverbs would only agree upon in determining what sentence qualifies as a proverb is that a proverb can be identified on the basis of a good dose of common sense, experience, wisdom and truth, according to Wolfgang Mieder (1985:1–12).

Speake and Simpson (1990:2) think that a proverb is a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner. According to Fayemi, two things should be noted in this definition. Firstly, a proverb is a concise expression that contains more content meaning that can be expected from its pithy structure. Secondly, a proverb is a relic of ageless tradition (2009:2). Olatunji (1984:167) seems to corroborate this view when he says that a proverb is an inheritance from elders who might have experienced various things.

Various scholars agree with the pithy nature of proverbs. Mieder (1985:118) believes that '[a] proverb is a short generically known sentence that expresses common, traditional, didactic views in a metaphorical and freed from, which is easily remembered and repeated' (Mieder 1985:118). In other words, proverbs are metaphorically fixed in structure for repeated use and remembrance.

According to B.J. Whiting (1932), a proverb is

[a] short saying of philosophical nature, of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than of the classes, constantly applicable and appealing because it bears a semblance of the universal truth. (p. 27)

Oladele Balogun (2006) seems to hold the same opinion, when he says:

Proverbs are cultural relics preserved amid countless destructions by reason of brevity, laconic and in-depth meaning. Proverbs, which are pithy sayings, are popular devices usually used to state metaphorically, certain general truths about life. (pp. 86–97)

Taiwo Oladele (1976) also defines proverbs:

Proverbs deal with all aspects of life. They are used to emphasize the words of the wise and are the stock in trade of old people who use them to convey the precise moral lessons, warnings and advice, since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words. (p. 32)

The above quotation from Oladele means that a proverb is a linguistic metaphorical expression of truth which cuts across all strata of human life. It also means that a proverb is a linguistic instrument exclusively employed by the elders in the communication of thought and truth about any given state of experience (Fayemi 2009:3).

The judicious use of proverbs is usually regarded as a sign of wit (Oladele 1976:32). According to M.K. Dzobo (1992:89–100) a proverb is a 'metaphorical expression reflective of a people's cultural experiences and which establish certain truths and vital conclusions filtered from life's experience'. Michael D. Coogan (2009:374) defines proverbs as 'a short saying that pithily expresses insight into experience'. Andrew Arterbury, W.H. Bellinger and Derek Dodson (2014:115) define proverbs as 'a compact, memorable, applicable teaching about life'.

One important fact that must be noted in disagreement with some of the above definitions is that proverbs offer more than moral lessons, warnings, advice and truth. Proverbs offer such truth which extends to epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, legal, scientific and anthropological facts. Proverbs are not mere relics. Again, although many proverbs are short sentences, Yoruba proverbs are sometimes exceptional.

For example, '*Owo omode ko to pepe, t'agbalagba o wo keregbe. Ise ti ewe be agba ki oma se ko mo; gbogbo wa ni an'ise a jon be rara'* [Just as a child's hand does not readily reach the top of the mantelpiece, so also the elders' fist does not enter the gourd's neck].

Another example is '*Anikan dajo, o o seun; anikan dajo o o seeyan. Nigbati o o gbo t'enu enikeji, emi l'o da'jo se?* [Listen to the two parties before adjudicating in a dispute] (Delano 1973:85).

Of all the above definitions, I prefer Delano's, Sotunde's and Adedimeji's definition. Adedimeji (2009:43) defines proverbs as 'wise sayings that address the hearts of the discourse in any given context truthfully and objectively'. Delano also defines it as 'self-evident truths' that are communicated in a brief and condensed form (Delano 1973:77). Sotunde (2009:30) regards it 'as a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson which often requires an explanation beyond the literal meaning of the words used'. They are simple and to the point.

Despite the loss of consensus amongst scholars concerning the definition of proverbs, Ademola Kazeem Fayemi's (2009) suggestion of essential features of Proverbs is also acceptable to me:

1. Proverbs have their origin in oral tradition. They existed before written culture.
2. Proverbs are passed down from generation to generation and sometimes their specific meanings do change.
3. Proverbs are metaphorical, and it is through proper understanding that their metaphorical nature is unravelled.
4. Proverbs are neither clichés, nor sententious maxims, but are relics of cultural experiences.
5. Proverbs are not *a priori* determined. Rather, they are based on human observations and experiences with the things of nature such as human beings, animals, nature itself and the spirit world.
6. Proverbs are universal and particular in nature. Similar situations and similar objects have unquestionably made men think, act and express themselves alike.
7. Proverbs establish truths of life, which could be universal or relative.
8. There is no occurrence in human affairs to which some proverbs may not be applied.
9. Proverbs are hetero-situational by nature (pp. 6–7).

Sources of Yoruba and Israelite proverbs

It is very difficult indeed to categorically identify the sources of Yoruba proverbs. As a result of this it is said categorically that the sources of Yoruba proverbs are unknown (Olumuyiwa 2012:106–120). Proverbs are the product of human observations of what happens in the environment, and that is why Yoruba 'proverbs could be deductive, speculative, affirmative, empirical, mythical and superstitious' (Olumuyiwa 2012:106–120). It has also been suggested that the sources of Yoruba Proverbs are Yoruba religion, poetry, songs and history (*itan*). For example *Ifa* divination is a complex system of divination which involves recital of Yoruba poetry containing stories and proverbs bearing on the divination. These histories, religions, stories and proverbs were passed down from generation to



generation in oral forms. Other sources of Yoruba proverbs are elders in towns and villages. Amongst the Yorubas, elders are the wisest in the community and they are the custodians of proverbs. This is why Lawal, Ajayi and Raji emphasise that 'Among the Yoruba, proverbs taste sweetest in the mouths of very old people' (1997:637). This does not mean that young people do not use proverbs in their speche. However, they have to seek permission from elders who are present saying, 'I bow to you elders'; and the elders will answer 'May you live long to use more proverbs' (Lawal *et al.* 1997:637). Another suggested origin of Yoruba proverbs is the occasion of settling disputes and quarrels (Zartman 2011:120–121). This is why until today amongst the Yorubas, it is the person who is very knowledgeable in words and proverbs who can settle quarrels adequately (Lawal *et al.* 1997:637). It is very clear that Yoruba proverbs have socio-cultural origins according to the historical, religious experiences of the Yoruba people. Proverbs are formed with the worship of *Ifa* and *Orishas* (gods) in songs, beating drums with proverbial sayings, as they settle disputes, as they make merry or drink palm wine (native drink from palm trees), as they tell family or local histories and other social cultural events.

It is difficult to know the actual sources or the social location of the book of Proverbs because there is little data about the Palestinian society that wrote and read the book of Proverbs. Several sources of the book of Proverbs have been suggested:

1. The ancient Near Eastern wisdom materials, especially Egypt and Mesopotamia.
2. Instructions and Proverbs originated in the tribal society, villages and families.
3. It was also alleged that they originated in the schools for the upper class or in the royal court.
4. Though they might have been collected by scribes, the materials in the book of Proverbs arose as oral sayings of simple folk, farmers, artisans, slaves and housewives (Clifford 1998:48).

It may be true that the royal court was the dominant institution writing in ancient Israel. According to Clifford (1998:49), it is unlikely that the scribes and the family in Israel are the origin of the materials in the book of Proverbs. According to Clifford (1998:49), 'A scribal origin of some sort cannot be denied'. As it is in the African (Yoruba) situation this writer believes that the Proverbs were formerly oral sayings of elders and wise people in ancient Israel. The origin cannot be from the scribes or royal court, or wisdom school or wisdom movement in Israel (Arterbury *et al.* 2014:113), although they might later have found their ways to the royal court when scribes committed them to written form.

The nature of the book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs like the Psalms is an anthology of anthologies (Clifford 1998:42; Coogan 2009:375). According to Clifford (1998:42), it is an anthology of collections and appendixes collected and composed from the earliest time of

the monarchy (1000 BCE) to the end of the sixth century BCE. The book of Proverbs contains several types of genres with the most common being aphorism and instruction. This is the most 'widely attested genre of wisdom Literature' (Coogan 2009:374). In fact, the book of Proverbs is distinct amongst the collection of books called wisdom literature because the book as a whole contains proverbs (Kaminsky, Lohr & Reasoner 2014:186).

The literary structure and purpose is an interesting and impressive one when compared with the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. In fact, the binding together into one book with so many different genres (that is, instructions, sayings, riddles and poems) on so large a scale, is extraordinarily impressive. The book opens with an elaborate title and statement of the author, the purpose and the benefit to the readers. The title is מְשָׁלִי which is translated 'proverbs'. The book also names the person to whose authorship it is attributed, Solomon, despite the fact that all the biblical wisdom literature, except Job, does not name the author. The purpose of the book is presented through the accumulation of synonyms of wisdom instead of differentiating them: learning (1:2–3), understanding wisdom literature (1:2, 6), teaching (1:4), wisdom and instruction and the fear of the Lord. This book is thoroughly religious. The gods are the creators of the order in the world, about which the literature is concerned. Despite the string of loosely connected proverbs, there is a theme and progression. The basic division is, firstly, chapter 1–9 and, secondly, chapter 10–29.

Proverbs operates with many assumptions and concepts. Firstly, it assumes the existence of a world created by God with 'certain order or with inherent dynamism' (Clifford 1998:50). Secondly, it assumes a threefold dimension of things, sapiential, the ethical and the religious.

Apart from the assumptions above shared with the entire ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, Clifford (1998:51) points out that there are four operative concepts in the book that can be singled out:⁴

1. 'Its psychology of the human person as a knower and a doer'
2. 'Its use of types, usually antithetically paired, to describe behaviour and its consequences'
3. 'Its personification of wisdom as a woman'
4. 'Its dominant metaphor of finding a wife, founding a household'.

The book of Proverbs is not without some controversies and debates amongst scholars. In a closer examination of the book of Proverbs, one finds that the different sections of the book come from different periods. Argument also exists as to the context in which proverbial literature, in chapters 10–29, was produced and transmitted. The reason is that very little is known about ancient Israelite educational practices, although Proverbs 10:1 and 25:1 give the idea that

4. See also Perdue (1989) and Murphy (1998) for more of these assumptions and the general nature of Proverbs.

the collecting and copying of proverbial literature was under the royal auspices. However, this does not tell us that the persons who coined these sayings are known. Most of the sayings in the book of Proverbs are in the same category of the wider ancient Near Eastern context where Israel lived. This is why Israelite proverbs are similar to the proverbs in the ancient Near East in some respects.⁵

Another important scholarly argument about Proverbs concerns how to describe the figure of Lady Wisdom in the introduction, especially in chapter 8. The question asks, is Lady Wisdom simply a personification or literary trope? Or is Wisdom here more concrete and substantial? Some scholars see Wisdom as functioning as an attribute or extension of God (Kaminsky *et al.* 2014:187). In chapter 8, there is an argument that Wisdom is a goddess (Kaminsky *et al.* 2014:167). I believe that Wisdom is personified in chapter 8. Wisdom first appeared in Proverbs 1:20 as a person crying out on the street and in the gate. Lady wisdom preaches repentance from folly and a return to Wisdom. Lady Wisdom cries out that Wisdom is available and that people need to submit to instruction. In 8:17 Wisdom says, 'I love those who love me', and that those who listen will prosper. From the above, it seems as if this cannot be anything but a personification of Wisdom.

The Yoruba people of Nigeria

As this article is on the comparison of ancient Israelite and Yoruba proverbs and the identity of the ancient Israelites, it is also important to discuss the identity of the Yorubas who are less known. This will enable readers to have a bird's eye view of the people called the Yorubas of Nigeria. In fact, the status of the Yorubas of Nigeria and Africa influenced the author's choice to compare Yoruba with Israelite Proverbs.

There is no agreement amongst scholars concerning the origin of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Several suggestions have been put forward. Egyptian (Lucas 1970:381–382), Atlantic (Frobenius 1968:345), Hebrew (Williams 1930) and independent (Olubunmi 2011:20) origin have been suggested.⁶

The Yorubas are the inhabitants of Lagos, Oyo, Ondo, Kwara and parts of the Kogi states in Nigeria. They also live in parts of the Republic of Benin, and Togo. Amongst the Yoruba people, names are important. For example, to know someone's name is to gain insight into that person's being or character. That is the reason why the naming of a child is very important and celebrated because of the strong belief that the meaning of the name of a child may determine his character and his destiny.

The Yorubas are a strong homogenous group and 'many Yorubas are better educated than the other two major tribes (Ibos and Hausas) in Nigeria' (Ayandele 2004:121). Their

levels of education and high migration rate have caused many of them to be well-placed in significant formal and sometimes informal positions all over the world. With regard to their social and cultural values, the Yorubas have undertaken more academic work than any other specific African tribe. They are described as 'the most outstanding people of "Black Africa" with respect to their myths' (Lange 2004:39).

The Yorubas are amongst the richest in Africa considering the preservation of the oral history of their past (Lange 2004:39). Yoruba unique sculptures like the Ife Bronze head and their genetic uniqueness in producing the highest dizygotic twinning rate in the whole world (4.4% of all maternities) are but a few amongst many reasons that are bringing the Yoruba race into global recognition (Leroy *et al.* 2010).

Furthermore, Yoruba history is the most researched and the most documented history compared to any other tribe in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yoruba ruling elites have established institutions and worked out ways through which their history is preserved (Akintoye 2004:3). These gestures, initiated by many Yoruba elites, have helped to keep good records about the writing of their contemporary history. Their proverbs are more documented than any other race in Africa. In fact, historians and archaeologists worldwide are unanimous that the Yoruba are the most urban black people of all time (Olubunmi 2011:5).

Proverbs as advice in Israelite and Yoruba traditions

It seems to me that the function of proverbs in the Old Testament and in Africa (Yoruba tradition) is to advise, encourage, reproach, and elucidate important facts, the main purpose of which is to understand life and make it easy for living. These are also intended for the purpose of having good relationships with other people and God. This will be made clearer in my discussion of proverbs in the book of Proverbs and in the Yoruba traditions.

Proverbs as advice in the book of Proverbs

Although the passages below from the book of Proverbs mention children, the application is to all people in Israel. They are advice to all people firstly to desist from doing evil. They should refuse to follow evil people because the consequences may not be palatable. This is certainly the advice to keep away from sin. The above includes the keeping of the law and the commandment of Yahweh. According to the Deuteronomic law, if the law of Yahweh is faithfully kept, there will be good order, peace and tranquillity. The society will also prosper. This is what the proverbs below are saying.⁷

5. In the introduction this article has listed these similarities which made some people to think that Israel borrowed their proverbs from these countries around them.

6. As the purpose of this article is not to discuss the origin of the Yorubas, one cannot dwell so much on the origin but settle more on the identity of the Yorubas.

7. Collins's disagreement (2004:502) does not seem to make sense to me because it is difficult to separate the law or Torah from wisdom. The question is not simply a similarity but sometimes can be used interchangeably, that Torah is wisdom and wisdom is Torah as far as the Old Testament is concerned. The fact is that Israelitic law is not completely different from the laws of ancient Near Eastern law. No one can deny the resemblance that Israelitic law is Yahwized.



My son, hear the instruction of thy father,
and forsake not the law of thy mother:
For they shall be an ornament of grace unto
Thy head and chains about thy neck (Pr 1:9)⁸

My son, if sinners entice thee consent thou not. If they say,
Come with us, let us lay wait for blood,
Let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: (Pr 1:10–11).

My son, walk not thou in the way with them;
Refrain thy foot from their path: (Pr 1:15).

My son, forget not my law;
but let thine heart keep my commandments (Pr 3:1).

Below also is the advice in the book of Proverbs for those who are quick to anger because anger is of great consequence. It destroys. Such a person is foolish. Envy is outrageous and destroys also. It is, therefore, good to be slow to anger and deal with envy very wisely:

Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous;
but who is able to stand before envy (Pr 27:14).

A wrathful man stirreth up strife:
but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife (Pr 15:18).

He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding:
but he that is hasty of spirit exalted folly (Pr 14:29).

He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly: and a man of wicked devices is hated (Pr 14:17).

Below is advice to the wicked ones that the way of the wicked shall not prosper and that there is no rest for the wicked. It means that what awaits the wicked is darkness and they shall suddenly stumble:

For they sleep not, except they have done mischief;
and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fail.
(Pr 4:16)

The way of the wicked is as darkness,
they know not at what they stumble. (Pr 4:19)

Below also is the advice for the hardworking person because the future is bright for such a person. It is also advice for the lazy person to learn to be hard working:

The hand of the diligent shall bear rule but the slothful shall not bear rule (Pr 12:24).

In all labour there is profit: but the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury (Pr 14:23).

Proverbs as advice in Yoruba tradition

Advice against hasty decisions:

Aringbere ni yio mu oye dele, asaretete ko ba oye je. [He who walks slowly (to act intelligently) will bring a title home; he who runs (to act recklessly) misses the chance of enjoying the title].

This is advice that making a hasty decision will not accomplish anything. One should think clearly before a decision is made, even if it takes time.

Fi ija fun olorun ja fi owo leran. [Leave all the fight for God and watch].

This is recognition that God exists who fights for people and, therefore, one should not attempt to take revenge.

Ogbon ologbon ki je ki a pe agba ni were. [Other people's wisdom does not allow us to call an elder a fool].

This is advice that we should take advice from elderly people. We should respect elderly people's advice because of their experiences.

Orisa ti ngbe ole ko si, nitori apa eni ni gbe 'ni. [There are no gods who support an unaccomplished man in his laziness; a man's greatest support is his own arm].

This is advice that one should not depend on other people's help but work hard on one's own. Man should work hard to attain his objectives.

Ibinu ko se nkan, suru ni baba iwa. [Anger does not accomplish anything; patience is the chief virtue].

Advice for a man who is easily annoyed should easily curb his temper, because he may get into trouble if he is not patient in circumstances that demand patience.

Bi owe bi owe ni a nlu ilu ogidigbo, ologbon ni njo o, omoran ni sin mo o. [The *ogidigbo* talking drum is sounded in proverbs, only the wise can dance it, and only the experienced can understand it].

This is advice that one should watch events carefully before making decisions because all the facts may not be apparent.

Proverbs as reproach in Israelite and Yoruba traditions

Proverbs as reproach in the book of Proverbs

'Righteousness exalted a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people' (Pr 14:34).⁹

'Righteousness is not only moralistic and ethical, it is also doing what is the right thing' in any given circumstance. It includes both relationship to one's self and others, including social responsibility and personal ethics (Lyu 2012:5–8; Sandoval 2006:1–4). A righteous nation then is a nation which orders its affairs with wisdom by taking care of the needs of its people (Tate 1971:49). Therefore, a nation which refuses to do this is a reproach and disgrace to God and his people, because their energies have been misdirected and their purpose is not achieved.

'When the wicked cometh, then cometh also contempt, and with ignominy reproach' (Pr 18:3). This proverb is speaking

8.All Bible quotations are from the King James Version.

9.Although the quotations are not in a foreign language, they are deliberately in italics to distinguish them from the commentary and for uniformity with Yoruba proverbs.

about the results of wickedness and dishonour. The reproach is a lack of honour, social status and respect amongst people. The wicked person himself is an insult to himself and to the entire nation.

'He that wasted his father, and chaseth away his mother, is a son that causeth shame, and bringeth reproach' (Pr 19:26). Certainly, a son whose aged parent depended on him and who is able to maltreat his aged parent without legal punishment is the focus in verse 26. Such a son causes shame and reproach upon himself and others. He also demonstrates unacceptable behaviour in his rejection of responsibility for parents, even outright eviction of the parent. This is also a contemporary problem in the world:

If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? And he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? And shall not he render to every man according to his works? (Pr 24:12)

This speaks specifically of a person who has failed in his duty to his fellow brothers in distress because he says he knew nothing about his brother's predicament. However, God who knows the heart of men, knows that such an excuse does not hold water (Fritsch 1955:919).

'Lest he that heareth it put thee to shame, and thine infamy turn not away' (Pr 25: 10). One should not come to hasty conclusions about what one sees or hears because one may be wrong and look foolish in the eyes of the people who hear one's words. It may also result to the stigma of disloyalty or the inability to keep confidential information. A person who talks too much is, therefore, a reproach.

'The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother' (Pr 29:15). Lack of discipline of a child brings shame and reproach to parents and society. Mere words are, therefore, not enough for a child's discipline. Frank Larosa (2011:1) maintained that the purpose of proverbs is not only to teach wisdom, but to give instruction in discipline and good conduct and doing what is right, just and fair.

Proverbs as reproach in Yoruba tradition

A ngba oromo die l'owo iku, o ni a o je ki on lo atan lo je. [We are saving a chick from death, and it complains that it is not allowed to go to the rubbish heap to pick up rubbish. (Public rubbish heaps are usually in the bush near the village; and may often be found there)].

This is a rebuke to someone who grumbles because he is not allowed to do certain things which those who prevent him know to be dangerous for the person.

Afaso-gbejo ntan ara re je. [He who tries to catch rain-water with a sieve is deceiving himself].

This is the mocking reproof to a person who is trying to do something which is obviously beyond his power or is aspiring to a position to which he can never attain.

Aja ki iroro ko so ojule meji. [A dog cannot be so fierce as to keep watch over two gates at once].

This is a rebuke against people who want to interfere in the affairs of others which do not concern them. It is a polite way of saying mind your business.

Bi omode ni aso to baba re ko le ni akisa to o. [If a child has as many clothes as his father, he cannot have as many rags as him. A young man should not look down on his elders but should have regard for their greater experience and wisdom].

Eniti o gbin ogurun ebu ti o pe ni'gba ntan ara re je: igba ti o ba je ogurun otito tan, a tun je ogurun iro. [He who plants 100 yam seeds and calls them two hundred is deceiving himself; when he has eaten the 100 real ones he has planted, he will then eat the 100 lies. It is of no advantage to consider ourselves better than we are or to give a false impression of ourselves].

Proverbs as an encouragement or admonition in Israelite and Yoruba traditions

Proverbs as encouragement or admonition in the book of Proverbs

'For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding' (Pr 2:6). Chapter 2:5-8 contains an encouragement or admonition to a person who is searching for wisdom and understanding that such person will not be disappointed. The truth is that the quest for wisdom and understanding will end with the fear of Yahweh who is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is the gift of Yahweh and he is the source of knowledge and understanding:

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart: and lean not unto thine understanding (Pr 3:5).

Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him (Pr 30:5).

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy is understanding. (Pr 9:10)

The theme of trust in Yahweh is contained in 3:5; 9:10 and 30:5. Trust must be put in Yahweh and not one's own insight. Then Yahweh will make the way straight by removing obstacles and prevent deviation into dangerous places. Trust in Yahweh is a necessary qualification or prerequisite for obtaining true wisdom.

In total there are nine admonitions from parents to the son: 1:18-19; 2:1-22; 3:1-12, 21-35; 4:1-9, 10-27; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27.

Proverbs as encouragement or admonition in Yoruba tradition

Owe lesin oro, Bi oro ba so nu, owe la a fii wa a. [Proverbs are horse-footed to solve a problem, when the truth is elusive, it is proverbs that we use to discover it. It means that great

respect is given to anyone who can use proverbs frequently and appropriately].

Aja ti o pa ikun l'oni le pa oya lola, nitorina ki a ma pa aja. [The dog which kills a squirrel today may kill a grass cutter tomorrow, so we must not be angry and kill the dog. It means that he who has succeeded in a small way today should be encouraged; possibly he will achieve greater things in the future].

Pipe ni yio pe akololo yio pe baba. [However long it will be, the stammerer will call *baba* (father). No matter how long something takes, with patience there will be success].

Ki iburuburu ko ma ku eni kan mo 'ni; eni ti yio ku li a o mo. [Things are never so bad that there remains nobody at our side; but we do not know who will remain. No matter how bad there is always someone supporting us, though we may not know who that person is. This is a comment to encourage someone having so many problems and difficulties that someone will turn up at some time to help].

Proverbs as warning in Israelite and Yoruba tradition

Proverbs as warning in the book of Proverbs

My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding: ... For the lips of a strange woman drop as a honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil. But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. (Pr 5:1, 3–4)

This is warning against adultery which leads to bitterness. This is also a warning against being persuaded by a loose or strange woman who is extremely seductive with her sweet speech. The end result of yielding to her seductive appeal is bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a two-edged sword. The sweetness of her lips turns to a bitter taste. The person who is persuaded by her needs not expect any mercy. Following her way leads to death.

My son keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee. Keep my commandment and live: and my law as the apple of thine eye (Pr 7:1–2). Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths (Pr 7:25).

This is the warning against disobedience to parental advice. Such advice is authoritative and mandatory. This is also an admonition for children to listen and obey the teaching of the father and walk in the way of wisdom (3:1–4):

These six things doth the LORD hate; yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood. A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief. A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. (Waltke 2004a: 240–242; Pr 6:16–19)

'Do not be wise in your own eyes' (Pr 3:5). This verse reminds us how easy it is to think we are wise when we are acting like fools and how quickly we think that we know what a proverb means. The verse is essentially saying that it is better for the wise to be humble and know that they always need more wisdom (Bartholomew & O'Dowd 2011:95).

Proverbs as warning in Yoruba tradition

Agada ko mo ori alagbede. [The sword does not recognise the head of the smith (who made it)].

This is a warning to a person who is trying to get on the wrong side of another person or law because the law or the wrong side will catch up with the person.

Agboju le ogun fi ara re fun osi ta. [He who pins his hope on an inheritance gives himself up to be afflicted with poverty. This is a warning against relying on inheritance or help from other people].

Agba ti o gbin ebu ika ori omo re ni yio hule. [When an elder plants the seed of cruelty, it will sprout on the head of his children. This is a warning that what a person sows will be reaped by his children or other relatives].

Alaso ala ki lo si iso elepo. [One who is clad with white linen does not go to the stall of a palm oil seller. This is a warning that if one has a good name it is unwise to walk with bad company because it will tarnish one's name].

Bi omode fe sise agba, ojo a bi ko ni je. [If a young child wants to behave like an elderly man, the date of his birth will not allow it. A warning that however clever a young man may be, he cannot do things as an elder would do them because he lacks experience].

Proverbs as explanation in Israelite and Yoruba traditions

Proverbs as explanation in the book of Proverbs

Where no oxen are, the crib is clean: 'But much increase is by the strength of the ox' (14:4). This is to give a powerful explanation of the value of oxen for a farmer's production of crops.

'The poor is hated even of his own neighbour: but the rich hath many friends' (14:20). A closer examination of this verse 20, with 18, 19, 22, and 24 will indicate that it gives examples of what happens to persons of different character and status. In verse 20 the poor man is disliked by his own neighbour but a rich man has many friends. This verse is explaining the reality of life in a society even though that is not how it ought to be.

'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, only in expressing his opinion' (Pr 18:2). A foolish person is only interested in pouring out his own opinion instead of trying to grasp real

understanding of what other people say. 'The hard work of thinking through the issues is of little interest for such a man' (Tate 1971:58).

Proverbs as explanation in Yoruba tradition

A ki ije okele l'ori okele, a ki ifi ina s'ori orule sun. [No one eats after he has had enough; no one would leave fire on the roof to go to bed. This is an explanation that when there is a tense situation, it is better to deal with it at once rather than pretend it does not exist].

A ki ni eni ni idi osan ki a mu igan. [One does not eat sour fruit when one's servant is nearby to collect good fruit. It means that if one has an agent to watch over one's interests in any matter, it is his business to see that one does not suffer].

A ni ki a je ekuru tan ninu awo a tun ngbon owo re s'awo. [We are told to finish up the *ekuru* on the plate and we are now, again, shaking the (crumbs on the) hand on to the plate. This is an explanation when elders want to settle a misunderstanding between two people and then one of the parties, or some third person, brings in new complaints to complicate the issue still further].

Abata takete bi enipe ko ba odo tan. [The marsh stands aloof as if it were not related to the river.]

This is a comment about someone who ought to be interested in a matter but prefers to ignore it, or refuses to take his share of the responsibility.

Afomo ko ni egbo, gbogbo igi ni iba tan. [The parasite has no roots, all trees are its relations. This is a comment about someone who joins himself with another person because of the wealth and the position of that person].

Agba ki wa loja ki ori omo titun wo. [An elder cannot be present in the market and let the head of a young baby twist to one side].

This is a comment that it is the responsibility of elders in all situations to make sure that misunderstandings which may lead to unpleasantness are explained and removed.

The importance of proverbs in ancient Israel and Yoruba traditions

Despite the fact that the location of the continent of Africa is separate from the position of Israel, both share the same worldview with 'an optimistic simplistic outlook of life' (Masenya 2001:134–146). Van Leeuwen (1990:122) believes that proverbs exhibit 'a carved one in that a cultural and personal exhortation is grounded in the reality of the created world with its inbuilt normativity.' In both cultures proverbs are used to deal with situations of everyday life. As is in ancient Israel, in Africa it continues to wield a great influence in the life of ordinary and important people, particularly amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It becomes the vehicle

by which members of the community deal with various situations in life (Masenya 2006:393–404). In Africa life is an indivisible whole with no compartmentalisation of a belief in the order of life which has been set by God and the ancestors which everyone must follow, or else something unpalatable may be the consequence (Masenya 2006:397). Both worlds were created and controlled by a deity, God. A discussion of Old Testament and Yoruba proverbs support this similarity in culture and tradition. When compared, the functions of proverbs from both places cannot be overestimated. From both places they function as:

- advice
- reproach
- warning
- comment and further elucidation of facts and encouragement for a good life
- the importance of proverbs for African Christianity.

Proverbs are deeply rooted in culture and everyone who lives in an African village knows about proverbs and is a living carrier of proverbs. These proverbs are interwoven with local languages and in a way they constitute sub-language of their own (Mokitimi & Mbiti 1997). In Irunda village where I grew up, elders hardly speak without including a proverb or citing a proverbial phrase. To the people of Irunda village, the language of proverbs is a way of seeing the world, a way of speaking with other people, a way of feeling the atmosphere in a society where they live. One is not surprised that many preachers in Nigeria spice their sermons with proverbs which arouse great emotion and make people feel at home.

Proverbs employ symbols and, in fact, they are in themselves symbols of communication with short sentences, sometimes carved on wood, stone or other materials, sung, danced, and acted. Yoruba proverbs as well as the proverbs in ancient Israel are catalysts of knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals. They provoke further reflection and call for deeper thinking. Proverbs call attention to dangers especially in human relationships. Others appeal to emotion rather than just reflection, that is, to feel, laugh, cry, be happy, angry or sad, love or hate, appreciate, admire, be jealous, accepted or rejected, fear and despair. Proverbs are well represented in all these areas of life.

The book of Proverbs in its prologue (1:2–6) mentions and appreciates the many benefits of wisdom-proverbs:

1. Proverbs will enable one to gain wisdom and understanding (Pr 1:2).
2. They will enable one to gain a disciplined and just life (1:3).
3. They will enable the immature to become mature (1:4).
4. They will help the wise to become wiser (1:5).
5. They will teach one how to interpret the sayings of the wise (1:6).

Machado (2003:1–6) explains that proverbs are popular because of their benefits to humanity, especially the

universality of their application for every occasion, for different types of personalities, including priests, prophets, pastors and sages.

Conclusion

This article has discussed and confirmed that both proverbs in ancient Israel and Yoruba traditions are mainly for advice, encouragement, discipline or reproach, warning and explanations. Despite the problems in comparing two different cultures (location, different people and traditions, amongst others), the author of this article has attempted to compare proverbs in ancient Israel and Yoruba traditions. This is because the problems do not cloud their similarities. These similarities will enable African biblical scholars to use the Old Testament to understand African culture and African culture to understand the Old Testament.

Proverbs in both cultures are a mark of a rich heritage. Amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria, proverbs are markers of culture because they tell us, 'in brief and intense terms about so much the history and psychology of the peoples and communities from which they emanate' (Soneye 2009:80–86). Proverbs have inseparable links to culture and language. It is also evident that they are markers of people's identity because they are 'the shortest forms of traditional expression that call attention to themselves as formal artistic entities' (Abrahams 1972:117–127; cf. Soneye 2003).

Further implications are that by using proverbs, Christianity is at home amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria, as proverbs in both cultures appeal to our emotions, and make us think more deeply and help our understanding of ourselves through advice, encouragement, reproach, warning, and explanation or elucidation. This is certainly evident in the comparison of both proverbs in the book of Proverbs and Yoruba Proverbs. Other important benefits of proverbs include a 'sense of the community', a sense of good human relations, a sense of sacredness of life, a sense of hospitality, a sense of sacredness of everything and religion, and a sense of respect for authority and elders who are in possession of wisdom by the virtue of their experiences. All of these benefits cannot be discussed in this article, and will require a separate article for proper academic treatment.

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