

From Proverb to Prophecy: Textual Production and Theology in Proverbs 30:1–6

Tracy J. McKenzie with Jonathan Shelton

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Proverbs 30:1–6 draws upon tradition and texts in the Hebrew Bible in order to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the Davidic son of God. This article analyzes texts in the Hebrew Bible that have a relationship with Prov 30:1–6 and discusses how various texts build upon and develop the promise that YHWH would give David a son who would reign forever. It concludes by considering the way in which Prov 30:1–6 theologially comments upon the promise to David.

Key Words: 2 Samuel 7, 2 Samuel 23, David, innerbiblical allusion, Numbers 24, Proverbs, Son of God, textual production

The promise to King David that YHWH would give him a son who would reign forever is one of the two or three most important declarations in the Hebrew Bible. Its importance for Christianity is no less significant given the claims of the lineage, person, and nature of Jesus of Nazareth. Proverbs 30:1–6 draws upon tradition and texts in the Hebrew Bible in order to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the Davidic son of God. This essay demonstrates the relevance of the Davidic promise from an initial appearance in 2 Sam 7 to its incorporation into Prov 30:1–6. It discusses how various texts build upon and develop the promise and analyzes texts in the Hebrew Bible that have a relationship Prov 30:1–6. This essay also compares the language of these texts in order to establish any associations between them and considers the texts' dependence upon traditions at various times in Israel's existence up to and including Second Temple Judaism.¹ It concludes by considering the way in which Prov

¹ We presume that Prov 30 was produced in a historical context that included a messianic discussion of texts in Second Temple literature prior to the turn of the millennium and prior to subsequent Christian or Jewish development, in particular regarding a descendent of David. See John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Johannes Zimmermann, *Messianische Texte aus Qumran: Königliche, priesterliche*

30:1–6 theologially comments upon the promise to David.

Proverbs 30:1–6 presents the reader with more than one enigma. A brief survey of introductory statements by scholars demonstrates the difficulties in the text. One scholar says, “In a book filled with difficult patches, the Words of Agur (Prov 30:1–9) remain among the most difficult and contentious. Basic questions of genre, function, and the pericope's extent have not found a consensus.”² Another comments, “Indeed, every word in the superscription has been disputed by the versions or by scholarship.”³ A third opines, “Recent scholarly treatment of this passage has led to readings as different in their grasp of a single text as one could probably find anywhere in biblical interpretation.”⁴ The passage contains dubious lexical forms, perplexing idioms and grammatical constructions, and theological conundrums since it stems from a book otherwise containing wisdom features.⁵ These issues form the impulse for our analysis.

und prophetische Messiasvorstellungen in den Schriftfunden von Qumran (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); J. A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1979); James H. Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Gerbern S. Oegema, eds., *Qumran–Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); Antti Laato, *A Star Is Rising: The Historical Development of the Old Testament Royal Ideology and the Rise of the Jewish Messianic Expectations*, International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism 5 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Seyoon Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll, *Israel's Messiah In the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

² Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “The Background to Proverbs 30:4a,” in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Michael L. Barré, CBQMS (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), 102.

³ Paul Franklyn, “The Saying of Agur in Proverbs 30: Piety or Skepticism?” *ZAW* 95 (1983): 239.

⁴ Rick D. Moore, “A Home for the Alien: World Wisdom and Covenantal Confession in Proverbs 30, 1–9,” *ZAW* 106 (1994): 96.

⁵ Consider Arthur Keefer's article against a Christian interpretation, “The Use of the Book of Proverbs in Systematic Theology,” *BTB* 46 (2016): 38–39. See also Franklyn, “The Saying of Agur,” 238–52.

Proverbs 30:1–6 and Its Treatment within Old Testament Studies

Old Testament Studies is in a period of flux. At the risk of oversimplification, the study of the Old Testament has shifted from a pursuit of the *ipsissima verba* of the prophets, from putative independent sources and autographs, to a pursuit of how texts were composed or developed from previously existing texts or traditions.⁶ Situated within Old Testament studies in general, the study of Proverbs has shifted with the discipline. Older methodologies sought solutions to the enigmas in Prov 30 from comparative Semitic literature,⁷ from its supposed relationship to an original author of the chapter,⁸ or more recently, from its relationship to wisdom literature within the Ancient Near East.⁹ Some contemporary studies seek to understand the interrelationship of texts or textual rewriting within a passage.¹⁰

Convergence in Developments in Old Testament Studies and Studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls

Publications on the Dead Sea Scrolls developed slowly after the initial

⁶ The turn is evident with Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985). The same year that Fishbane published his work, George J. Brooke published *Exegesis at Qumran: 4Q Florilegium in Its Jewish Context*, JSOTSup 29 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985). Brooke's analysis showed that Hellenism influenced Jewish interpretation of the intertestamental period and that later rabbinic interpretation emerged partially from that influence. Moreover, his analysis demonstrated that rabbinic interpretation was consistent with scripture's own use and development of other authoritative texts (*Exegesis at Qumran*, 36–44). For a critique of tradition criticism, see Rolf Knierem, "Criticism of Literary Features, Form, Tradition, and Redaction," in *Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, vol. 2 of *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium*, ed. Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, et al. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 1–41, in particular, 22–28.

⁷ F. Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, K&D 6, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 260–314.

⁸ Franklyn, "The Sayings of Agur," 238–52.

⁹ Leeuwen, "The Background to Proverbs 30:4aα," 102–21.

¹⁰ It was published too recently to consider in this analysis, but see Ryan O'Dowd's article, "Poetic Allusions in Agur's Oracle in Proverbs 30.1–9," in *Inner Biblical Allusion in the Poetry of Wisdom and Psalms*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Kevin Chau, Beth LaNeel Tanner (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 103–19.

discoveries in 1947.¹¹ Increasingly, scholarly research on these manuscripts began to shed light on a phase when these authoritative texts were used, how these texts were passed down, and how these texts were produced and incorporated into what is now the Hebrew Bible.

This period in which texts continued to develop was largely unknown for the Old Testament, or in the case of the versions such as the Septuagint, ignored or explained away as secondary. Subsequently, scholars have increasingly recognized that studies on the Old Testament converged with scholarship on the production of texts in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The discovery of how authors/scribes produced texts at Qumran coincided with how others produced the legal codes of the Pentateuch; prophecies in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve; or books like Samuel-Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah.

Those responsible for the handing down, the composition, and the production of manuscripts and scrolls at Qumran did not utilize one single method for textual production. But enough data and overlap exist that a new consensus is developing to explain the production of biblical books in similar manner. The question concerns how authors reused earlier texts in their production of biblical books. It is more than a question of quotation, allusion, or intertextuality. It is a question of how authors produced texts and how the incorporation of various texts within the final shape constrain interpretation. Textual reuse and commentary upon that textual reuse may privilege a particular interpretation over another.¹² A similar type of query considers why authors juxtapose one text to another. A synchronic analysis would treat the arrangement of two texts in an equivalent relationship to one another. An analysis that considers relative chronology would interpret the later juxtaposed text as interpreting or constraining the interpretation of the earlier text. What was the inherited text—the default portion—that we can examine synchronically and how has the author incorporated other material? Rachele Gilmour, in her fascinating volume on the importance of juxtaposition as a hermeneutical tool, argues that "the placement of pericopes and stories was itself an act of interpretation of the meaning of the events, and therefore it is an appropriate method for reading of the text also."¹³ Incorporating pieces of texts or juxtaposing one text to another forces the reader to read the texts in close

¹¹ Weston W. Fields, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

¹² See Mark McEntire, *The Internal Conversation of the Old Testament*, SHBC 32 (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 1–2, 21–22. See also John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 97–103, 206–15.

¹³ Rachele Gilmour, *Juxtaposition and the Elisha Cycle*, LHBOTS 594 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 18; Brooke, *Exegesis at Qumran*, passim.

association with one another. Moreover, the reader senses a different production technique than she would if she was listening to a speaker or conceived that a text stemmed from a single moment of writing.

An example of juxtaposition takes place at the end of the book of Jeremiah. Why—after Jeremiah’s words end in Jer 51:64—does the author reuse for his final chapter (Jer 52) a text that we also know from 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30? What was the content of the composition before this final chapter was added? What lacunae existed that the author felt compelled to juxtapose a text that we know otherwise from 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30? Moreover, the reuse of texts occurs not only in chapter-size texts. Reuse also exists in smaller textual units, including clauses and even phrases. One example is the common clause in the book of Ezekiel, “And you will know that I am YHWH.” The clause contains a different grammatical person on occasion as a way to fit it to a particular context, at one point even unexpectedly indicating that the Gentiles will know Yahweh is Lord (Ezek 36:23; 38:23). In such cases, one should ask why the author has incorporated it, and how it should affect our understanding of the surrounding material. We will attempt to demonstrate such reuse in Prov 30:1–6 by examining the incorporation of various clauses and material. The author’s reuse of clauses will articulate his own view of the transcendence of the Davidic son of God.

Proverbs 30:1–6

Scholars commonly divide the unit between vv. 9 and 10 because of the grammatical first person that begins after the superscription (30:1a) and stops after v. 9. However, for the purposes of this article, we will not analyze beyond v. 6 because the relationships of the first six verses to other biblical texts will demonstrate the connection of Proverbs 30 to elements of the Davidic promise.

Proverbs 30:1

The initial verse of the chapter already presents difficulties. It does so with the name “Agur.” The stich reads, “The words of Agur, son of Yaqeh, the oracle.” The name is not otherwise known inside the Bible, nor is his father’s name.¹⁴ Moreover, the etymology of Agur’s name has to do with “to sojourn” (*gūr*) so the conjecture that it could indicate a non-Israelite is well known, a factor that will materialize when we observe its

¹⁴ Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur,” 238–52; For *Yāqeh*, see Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 260–61.

relationship to the non-Israelite prophet, Balaam, in Num 24.¹⁵ The construct noun, “the words of,” is an important factor in determining the relationship between Prov 30:1 and Prov 31:1, where one reads similarly, “The words of King Lemuel, an oracle.” Here, “Lemuel” is another unknown name. The initial verse in each chapter then labels these “words,” as an “oracle” (*maśśā*), a genre marker for prophecy.¹⁶ It is noticeable that the final two chapters in this book of proverbs are “oracles.”

In Prov 30:1, “the oracle” follows the identity of Agur’s father. The two occasions of this word at the end of the book are the only two occurrences of the lexeme in the entirety of Proverbs. But does it really indicate that the chapter is somehow a prophetic oracle? And why have an “oracle” at the end of a book of “proverbs” (משלים)? Indications of genre link prophecy to proverb in the following ways. First, the construction in Prov 30:1, 31:1, “The words of,” which appears in the prophetic books of Jeremiah and Amos as introductions to their prophecies, ring of a prophetic utterance (2 Sam. 23:1–2). Second, and most tellingly, the phrase “the utterance of the man” appears in apposition to “the oracle” in Prov 30:1a. This phrase, whose only other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible appear in the commonly understood messianic poem of Num 24 (vv. 3 and 15) and in 2 Sam 23:1, strongly indicates an association to the notion of prophecy.¹⁷ Interestingly, in Num 22–24, Balaam is a “diviner” (22:7; 23:23; 24:1) who Balak hires to curse Israel. Balaam eventually makes his way to the encampment of Israel, where he gives an “utterance of the one

¹⁵ For an analysis of the Balaam text found at Deir ‘Alla and its relationship to biblical texts, see Meindert Dijkstra, “Is Balaam also Among the Prophets?” *JBL* 114 (1995): 43–64.

¹⁶ Some propose the locale Massa from Gen 25:14, but Prov 30:1 provides merely an article and noun and not the preposition “from.” Contra Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 518, who emends the text, saying, “The emendation is supported, however, by the fact that ‘oracle’ would likely not be followed immediately in the next line by ‘utterance’ (*ne’um*).” He does not explain why he thinks that “the utterance of the man” would not reinforce the notion that “oracle” indicates some sort of prophetic revelation. Furthermore, the noun lacks a typical gentilic form that would denote that Agur is a “Massite.” The relative clause following the same noun in 31:1 makes this gloss unlikely. Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur,” 240.

¹⁷ Contra Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 12–14, 313–14. Mowinckel demonstrates that it is a commonly understood messianic poem, although he disagrees and thinks it only refers to David. Either way, this connection strengthens our case in Prov 30.

hearing the words of God” (24:4). Indeed, he “sees a vision of the Almighty” and his “eyes are uncovered.” Although Balaam is not an Israelite prophet, he has a revelation from God. Numbers 24:2 even says that “the Spirit of God came on him,” again indicating that Balaam will speak the words of God. Precisely in this context, Balaam “lifts his proverb” in Num 24:3. English versions translate this phrase with terms such as “parable,” “message,” or “discourse,” but the same Hebrew word (לְשׁוֹן) underlies our gloss “proverb.” Balaam is a diviner who speaks in proverbs (Num 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23). The writer of Prov 30 has recognized that a book of proverbs is the appropriate place to comment further upon the star from Jacob, about which Balaam, the speaker of proverbs, prophesied in Num 24:17.

The writer of Prov 30 (and likely 31) has something more that he wants the book to say. He juxtaposes his own prophetic word next to the notion of wisdom otherwise found within the previous chapters. He utters his oracle not so much by “lifting a proverb” like Balaam does in the pericope in Num 22–24 but by lifting a text and commenting upon tradition. In this case, he will incorporate a text and comment upon the tradition of the Davidic “seed” who is likewise a “son of God” (2 Sam 7:14).¹⁸

In addition to the obvious importance of Num 24 in the history of interpretation as it relates to messianism, there is the significance of the phrase “the utterance of the man” in relationship to 2 Sam 23:1. This verse, articulating the final words of David after a structurally significant poem, says, “These are the last words of David, the utterance of David, son of Jesse, and the utterance of the man raised up, concerning the anointed one of the God of Jacob, and the sweet one of the songs of Israel.”¹⁹ Space does not permit us to consider this poem in detail. However, besides the significant repetition of “the utterance of the man,” the verse mentions the “messiah [anointed] of the God of Jacob” and indicates that David “was raised up.” Michael Rydelnik points out how the

¹⁸ We presume here and throughout the article that well-known criteria demonstrate textual association or dependence. See Tracy J. McKenzie, *Idolatry in the Pentateuch: An Intertextual Strategy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 53–59; Jeffrey M. Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 241–65. Space does not allow a full discussion of these issues, but because the writer of Prov 30:1–6 combines Davidic tradition/texts and the Balaam prophecy of Num 24, it is probable that he depends upon those texts and traditions. See our full discussion for the data.

¹⁹ Author’s translation; Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* NACSBT 9 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 39–41.

LXX witnesses a text, or at the least, an interpretive gloss, that David is speaking about the messiah of YHWH and not himself.²⁰ Moreover, in 2 Sam 23:5, David indicates that God has “placed an eternal covenant” with him. The covenant refers to the promise in 2 Samuel in which YHWH promises David regarding his son, a son to whom Yahweh says, “I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me” (2 Sam 7:14). Just like the association with Num 24, the writer of Prov 30 can utilize the notion of the “messiah” who was “raised” (מָרָא) as a means to theologize regarding the names of God and his son. The divine sonship of the Davidic king takes on significance in the history of interpretation of Ancient Israel’s scriptures, a point to which we will return in this analysis.

The mere lexeme “utterance” (מִנְחָה) is used frequently in the prophetic literature and also in Num 24. It is used in construct with various titles for God in all other occurrences besides the three passages where it is found in the unique phrase “the utterance of the man” (Num 24:3–4, 15–16; 2 Sam 23:1; Prov 30:1).²¹ Its appearance here, in particular in construct with “of the man,” denotes that the upcoming words are on par with prophetic revelation; these words are revelation from God. Similar to Prov 30, chapter 31 contains “the words of Lemuel, a king, an oracle.” Not only do the chapters begin with the same phrase (“the words of”), but these words also stem from names otherwise unknown in the Hebrew Bible. Interestingly, both chapters fall outside the Solomonic associations that are prevalent in the first twenty-nine chapters. What connotation does the placement of these two chapters at the end of the book of Proverbs convey? The two chapters not only segue into the following book in the Hebrew Bible—Ruth—but they shift the focus of the book from truisms by a son of David to the lineage of David through the self-contained acrostic poem about a “woman of valor” (31:10). Ruth, a non-Israelite and the only other “woman of valor” (Ruth 3:11) in the Hebrew Bible outside of Proverbs, is praised by her husband (Ruth 2:11; 3:11; 4:1), as is the woman in Prov 31.²² The verbal linkages between the two books and their juxtaposition divulge that the oracles in Prov 30–31 are associated with Ruth who happens to be the ancestor of David. Connotations associated with a Davidic dynasty thus transpire in both books.

From the observations of these initial stiches, one is already able to

²⁰ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 39–41.

²¹ See Eva Strömberg Krantz, “‘A Man Not Supported by God’: On Some Crucial Words in Proverbs XXX 1,” *VT* 46 (1996): 549.

²² See Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC 14 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 248, who identifies v. 23 regarding public respect for her husband as the center of a chiasm spanning the acrostic. This prominent verse also finds parallels in Ruth (4:1–2, 4).

discern the method of the author's composition of this text and what may presumably continue as we analyze the remainder of the passage. Acknowledging the manner in which these texts have been produced from the composition of smaller texts or traditions justifies our inquiry as to the effect of the juxtaposition and incorporation of particular texts. In Prov 30:1, the incorporation of "oracle" and the placement of "the utterance of the man" compels two effects. First, a reader should carefully consider that what follows Prov 30:1 is revelation in the prophetic tradition. This assessment will aid in a subsequent contrast between "wisdom" and revelation. Second, the incorporation of "the utterance of the man" from Num 24:3, 15 and 2 Sam 23:1 indicates that the writer is bringing together these two texts in an effort to comment on their content, e.g., "a star from Jacob" and the covenant with David that his son would be the son of God.

Proverbs 30:1a–b continues obliquely, "For Ithiel, for Ithiel and Ucal."²³ A common approach to these words in modern versions is to understand them as proper names. Indeed, such seems to be the only option unless one emends the Hebrew text. To that end, one reads in the ESV, "I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out." In either case, scholars note that with minor emendations, the Hebrew lemmata translate to indicate that the speaker is at the end of his life.²⁴ Balaam also speaks of his "death" and "last (day)" (אחרית) in Num 23:10, after which he will "go to his people" and "place" in Num 24:14, 25 before he is killed in Num 31:8. Likewise in 2 Sam 23:1, David utters "his last words" (אחרונים) before "the utterance of the man."²⁵ Furthermore, each oracle is introduced by a name of the one uttering it, followed by an indication of the "son of," then in the case of Num 24:3 and 2 Sam 23:1, the "utterance of" the named character, and concluding with a passive description of the character (2 Sam 23:1, "raised"; Num 24:3, "opened"; and Prov 30:1, "consumed"²⁶). This observation makes more plausible the proposal that Agur is "worn out." Furthermore, it strengthens the argument that the writer of Prov 30 uses Num 24 and 2 Sam 23 to convey his message.

²³ See Krantz, "A Man Not Supported By God," 548–53; and Longman who concludes, "I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and exhausted" (*Proverbs*, 519).

²⁴ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 853–54. Emending vowel pointing and spacing generates the reading.

²⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 853.

²⁶ For the passive construction of "consumed," see Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 853–54.

Proverbs 30:2

Proverbs 30:2a begins with the predication, "Indeed, I am stupider than (any) man" (שׁוֹטֵט). The clause indicates that the speaker lacks knowledge when compared with other men. If one is *ba'ar*, he is stupid. In the context, the speaker has in mind that he lacks the knowledge that comes with the craft of wisdom, otherwise so prevalent in the book and wider context of wisdom literature. Another association to Num 24 emerges in the pun on *ba'ar*. Balaam is introduced as a son of "Beor," using the same triradical root.

Proverbs 30:2b continues: "I do not (even) have human understanding" (מִדָּעָה). The word "understanding" is a positive trait to pursue in wisdom literature. The fact that the writer does not have it indicates again the contrast he is making with what for him is revelatory knowledge. Moreover, the reader has now read two different nouns against which the author is defining his comprehension. Both nouns indicate a similar group, "man." These are similar but distinct from a third term for humanity in v. 1: "The utterance of the man" (גִּבּוֹר). On the one hand, Agur presents "the utterance of the man," but, on the other hand, he is ignorant and lacking understanding. Already one discerns that this oracle will reveal knowledge that is different in kind from what man might generally know.

Proverbs 30:3

Proverbs 30:3a is the third clause in a series of four and unequivocally states that the speaker has missed necessary learning or development of understanding in comparison with others. Indeed, this clause suggests that he lacks wisdom training: "And I have not learned wisdom." In comparison with the positive acquisition of wisdom in the book, the clause surprises. The root occurs thirty-nine times in the book (חִכְמָה). The terms "wisdom," "knowledge," "understanding," and "learning" often appear parallel to one another, and the following clause is no exception. Translated rather woodenly, Prov 30:3b states, "But knowledge of the holy one(s), I know." Here, he integrates a piece of text from Prov 9:10, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of YHWH and 'knowledge of the holy one(s)' is understanding."²⁷ His assertion that he has knowledge of the

²⁷ While both occurrences of "holy ones" are commonly translated as a singular in the English versions, "Holy One," they are grammatically plural in Hebrew (קִדְשֵׁימ). These occasions are the only two references to God in the Old Testament where he is called the "Holy One(s)" in this unambiguous plural form, whereas he is frequently referred to as a singular, "the Holy One," in Isaiah and

holy one(s) indicates a contrast to his acquisition of wisdom. The comparison exposes a satirical element transpiring in Prov 30:3 between wisdom of the world and revelatory knowledge. The plural adjective “holy ones” is often understood here as a singular substantive. Joshua 24:19 articulates this understanding in its description of God, i.e. the plural “*Elohim*, He is holy” (קדשים). However, here in Prov 30:1–6, nomenclature denoting *Elohim* has not appeared and when it does occur in Prov 30:5, it is singular (אלוה). In contrast, v. 4 articulates a pair: “his name and the name of his son.” The occurrence of the duo at the end of verse 4 suggests a plurality in the holy ones here in verse 3. We will return to this question below.

Besides integrating “knowledge of the holy ones” from Prov 9:10, does the author negate knowledge or affirm that he has it? Most modern versions gloss the clause as a negation. But the Hebrew text does not contain an explicit negation in Prov 30:3b.²⁸ Instead, translations assume an ellipsis from the previous clauses, which do include the negative (e.g., “I have not learned wisdom”). Apparently, most English versions presume that because Agur has used two negations in a row, he then articulates a third one. Or do the translations have to do with the fact that he would

elsewhere. Hosea 11:12 (HEB 12:1) contains a third occurrence of the plural form (see the discussion of Josh 24:19 in text above), but the rarity of the plural form as a title for God and the unique interpretive difficulties of Hosea 11 have caused some commentators to see it as a reference to the Canaanite pantheon. See Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, NAC 19A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 230–31; Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 601–3. These data have led some to conclude that the reference to “holy ones” in Prov 30:3 does not refer to God, but Prov 9:10 utilizes the same clause and does so in parallel structure with “YHWH.” However, see C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1948), 194. The most common response has been simply to read the plural “Holy Ones” here in Proverbs as another instance of the so-called plural of majesty. However, these titles are typically found in the plural when used as a title for God, whereas “holy one” is, besides these exceptions, found in the singular.

²⁸ See Fox who did not include the negation in his original translation. Though he later changed his position due to doubt that Agur would claim such knowledge, he attests the lack of the negative particle and thus the grammatical positive assertion (Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 854–55). Moore likewise acknowledges this reading, proposing that the switch from the Hebrew perfect to imperfect verb forms further signal disjunction. He suggests that Agur would say, “I shall have knowledge of the Holy One, but not through the pursuit of wisdom,” a translation that aligns well with our stance (Moore, “A Home for the Alien,” 99).

then be asserting something about divinity, regardless of whether his assertion refers to a plural or singular “holy one(s)”? Is it because he asks questions in 30:4 rather than asserting information about the divine beings? Although an ellipsis is possible given the terseness of poetry, the writer appears to be contrasting wisdom with a word from God. The contrast is explicit in that in Prov 30:2–3a, the writer has not acquired knowledge relating to “mankind.” That information includes “a man” (איש), “human” (אדם), and “wisdom” (חכמה) that he himself has not “learned.” However, in 30:3b, he asserts knowledge of God due to the oracular knowledge from 30:1 and will in subsequent verses assert something about the divines. The writer’s juxtaposition suggests that he does have knowledge of the holy one(s). The incorporation of content related to Num 24 helps resolve any ambiguity. Balaam, in his own prophetic utterance, had claimed to be one who “knows the knowledge of the Most High” (Num 24:16), so now Agur, with very similar language (double repetition of ידע “to know” + title for God), should be understood as positively asserting the same in Prov 30:3b. Moreover, in the final clause in v. 4, the writer utilizes the same root “to know” that he used twice in 30:3b “knowledge of the holy ones, I know.” He asserts in 30:4bγ, “Indeed, you know.” His questions in v. 4 are themselves a sort of answer. Additionally, there is the juxtaposition of the second oracle in Prov 31. Its placement after Prov 30 is an answer through the poem about the woman of valor. The juxtaposition of Ruth after Proverbs constrains a reading that interprets the son of Ruth, i.e., David as the son of God in Prov 30:4bβ.

Proverbs 30:4

Proverbs 30:4 commences with four interrogative clauses that begin with “who” (מי), then continues with two more interrogative clauses that begin with “what” (מה), and finally concludes with an assertion. The first question is perhaps most enigmatic: “Who has ascended into heaven and then descended?” Two observations lead one to expect a single answer from the two verbs. First, the two verbs are governed by one interrogative, in contrast with its repetition in the following three interrogative clauses. Second, the *wayyiqtol* verbal form “descended” transpires in sequence to the *qatal* form “ascended.” This twofold construction anticipates one response. In light of v. 3, the obvious answer would be the “holy one(s).” It would seem that no mere human could accomplish such a circuit.

Scholars have combed the literature of the ANE for references to divine ones ascending or descending into heaven.²⁹ Examples from comparative literature demonstrate that traditions of one ascending to heaven would not be unique when dealing with the divine and semi-divine, but few statements found in materials from the ANE contain both ascent and descent; nor do these ANE texts contain other linguistic connections common between them and Prov 30. As such, it is very difficult to demonstrate that Prov 30:4a alludes to any particular texts or expects the reader to know such texts.

While the obvious answer of Prov 30:4 appears to indicate a supernatural being, it is peculiar that this being must first “ascend” before “descending.” The natural sequence for a divine being would be to descend first and then ascend back to a heavenly position. This observation has been common among commentators, which has led to the conclusion that the clause could indicate a man.³⁰ In an effort to understand Prov 30:4 in relationship to ANE texts, Van Leeuwen proposes that the clause indicates a man because the trope in ancient literature can also operate negatively.³¹ Some beings attempt to ascend to heaven, which improperly imbalances the cosmos, and later fall in defeat. Although some broad themes overlap, the context of Prov 30 does not appear to lend itself to such readings. It is possible that the oracle uses an ANE trope, tradition, or genre element in Prov 30:4a α to introduce the idea of an inter-transcendent trip by a man. Proverbs 30:4a α would then suggest that a divine first appears on earth. Although at first glance this notion seems implausible, we will eventually have reason to suspect a connection to the traditions and texts surrounding the “son of David” who according to 2 Sam 7 would also be the “son” of God.

But if comparative ANE literature does not yield conclusive results, what about other parallels in the Hebrew Bible? Given the author’s incorporation of other materials from the HB, are there scriptures that relate to the themes in Prov 30:4? At least four passages exist that relate to a man having access to above and below places: (1) Gen 28:11–19, which speaks of the messengers of God (מלאכי אלהים) who ascend and descend on a ladder, which is stationed on the ground but extends into heaven; (2) Dan 7:13, which speaks of one who “came to the Ancient of Days with

²⁹ See Van Leeuwen, “The Background to Proverbs 30:4a α ,” 102–21; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 118–19.

³⁰ See Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 273–75.

³¹ Van Leeuwen, “The Background to Proverbs 30:4a α ,” 102–21.

the clouds of the heaven”; (3) Exod 19, in which Moses repeatedly mediates between YHWH and the people by ascending the mountain to talk with God and descending to talk to the people; and (4) 2 Sam 23:1.³²

Genesis 28 concerns YHWH’s appearance to Jacob at Bethel. Jacob thinks that the place where the messengers were ascending and descending was the heavenly gate (v. 17). It was here that YHWH stood on the ladder in Jacob’s dream and reaffirmed his promise to Abraham (Gen 28:11–19). In spite of the similar language and the reaffirmation of the patriarchal promise in Genesis, an association with Prov 30 is not immediately transparent. Scholars have attempted to locate the sayings of Agur with the tradition about Jacob. Patrick Skehan in *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom* explains, “Agur means ‘I am a sojourner,’ and takes its origin from Gen 47:9, wherein Jacob tells Pharaoh, ‘The number of the years of my sojournings is 130 years’—my sojournings, *meḡûrāh*.”³³ For Skehan, this means that the name, Agur, in conjunction with “utterance of the man” (נִקְרָא) indicates that he is a mere mortal and is associated with Jacob. What makes the connection for Skehan, however, is not so much the text in Genesis but a reference from the pseudepigraphal work, the *Wisdom of Solomon*. In Wis 10:10, the personified wisdom is said to help Jacob flee from his brother’s anger and guide him. Moreover, Wisdom showed him the kingdom of God and gave him “knowledge of the holy ones,” a quotation of Prov 30:3b. The obvious allusion to Jacob escaping his brother and having knowledge of the holy ones—presumably ascending and descending on a ladder according to Gen 28:12–13—follows “I know knowledge of the holy ones” in Prov 30:3b by “ascending to heaven and descending” in v. 4a. Thus, the similar terminology between *Wisdom of Solomon* and Prov 30 makes the connection for Skehan, not a linguistic relationship between Gen 28 and Prov 30.³⁴

In the history of messianic interpretation, Dan 7 bears special importance. Its importance lies at the center of the subject matter in Prov 30:4. Proverbs 30 is stating knowledge of one(s) who is(are) transcendent from creation. Who has ascended to “heaven,” “gathered wind,” “stirred up waters,” “established the ends of the earth,” and how do these actions relate to the “son of God”? Like Proverbs, the book of Daniel is in the

³² See Ps 139:8 (Amos 9:2–4), in which the psalmist speaks of God’s presence whether he “arises to heaven” or “makes his bed in Sheol.” Although the lexemes in this context are different from Prov 30:4, the concepts are similar enough to note the conceptual overlap. The content concerns God’s immediate presence to humanity.

³³ Patrick W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, CBQMS (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971), 42–43.

³⁴ Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, 42–43.

third section of the Hebrew canon (TaNaK), known as the Writings. The book of Daniel combines apocalyptic materials with Hebrew narrative. The Hebrew characters are situated within an exilic setting, but the book contains heavenly visions that explain events concerning the “son of man” and the saints of God that will transpire in the last days. This purpose in apocalyptic dress informs an understanding of Prov 30:1–4.

Daniel 7 contains lexemes and themes that relate to Prov 30:1–6. In the vision that Daniel had in the night in Dan 7:2–3, the four “winds” (Prov 30:4aγ) from “heaven” (30:4aα) were “stirring up” (30:4aδ) the sea (water, 30:4aδ). Four beasts arise from (30:4aα) the sea who later represent kings from the earth (30:4aε). In the midst of that scene, the Ancient of Days appears and, among a plural number of thrones that were placed, sits on one of the thrones (Dan. 7:9). He is obviously the supreme being because of his description, because the multitudes serve him, because the court convenes before him, and because the books were opened before this Ancient of Days. After the dreadful beast was destroyed and the others neutralized, one like the “son of man” comes with the “clouds of heaven,” arrives at the Ancient of Days, and is presented before him (Dan. 7:13). To this one then was given dominion, glory, a kingdom, and peoples, nations, and languages to serve him forever so that his kingdom is not destroyed (Dan. 7:14).

The title “son of man” implies that he had to go up in order to come with the clouds of heaven and be presented to the Ancient of Days. Moreover, there is a correlation in the passage between the beasts that arise from the sea, representing kings that arise from the earth whose dominion is taken away, and the son of man who presumably must arise and whose dominion is everlasting. In such apocalyptic dress, Dan 7 addresses notions similar to Prov 30:4 that in the midst of “winds from heaven” and the “stirred up sea” one like a son of man came with the “clouds of the heaven.”³⁵ Extra-biblical literature exhibits reception of Dan 7 or similar traditions. This literature conflates Dan 7 with a “son of God.” Although space does not permit an analysis of such texts and traditions here, discussion of a “son of man” who was transcendent and “son of God” does exist in a post-exilic and Second Temple period.³⁶

³⁵ André Lacocque, “Allusions to Creation in Daniel 7,” in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint (Boston: Brill, 2002), 114–31; Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 119.

³⁶ E.g., 4Q426, called, “The Son of God” text, 4Q491 frg. 11 Col.i; See Johannes Zimmermann, “Observations on 4Q426—The ‘Son of God,’” in *Qumran Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H.

Jewish and Christian scholars have noted the relationship of Exod 19 to Prov 30:4a, “who has ascended to heaven and descended.”³⁷ In Exod 19, Moses is portrayed as going up and down the mountain as a mediator between the people and Yahweh. In v. 3, Moses first “ascends” the mountain to hear from YHWH. Moses was to prepare the people for YHWH’s “descent” in v. 11. When the horn’s blast blew long, the people were to “ascend” the mountain (v. 13). Moses “descended” the mountain and prepared the people in v. 14. However, as the horn blew loud (v. 16) the people were afraid and stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain (v. 17). Yahweh then “descended” the mountain in the form of fire (v. 18). As the mountain trembled from the divine presence, Moses spoke, and God answered. Yahweh “descends” upon the mountain and called Moses (v. 20) to the head of the mountain and Moses “ascends.” He commanded Moses to “descend” to witness against the people (v. 21). Moses responded that the people were unable to “ascend” the mountain (v. 23) before Yahweh commanded Moses again to “descend and ascend” (v. 24), this time with Aaron because the priests and the people could not “ascend” the mountain. The chapter ends with Moses “descending” to the people (v. 25) with the words of the Ten Commandments in his mouth.

It is not only post-apostolic readers of the Bible that have noticed the peculiar up and down of Moses, Yahweh, and the people. In the second century BC, a playwright, Ezekiel the Tragedian, wrote a piece that expanded upon Moses’s role as a deliverer of God’s people from Exodus.³⁸ The play develops material in poetic meter, known from Greek tragedies,

Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Gerbern S. Oegema (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 175–90; F. García Martínez, “Messianische Erwartungen in den Qumranschriften,” *JBTb* 8 (1993): 171–208; É. Puech, “Fragment d’une Apocalypse en Araméen (4Q246 = pseudo-Dan^d) et le ‘Royaume de Dieu,’” *RB* 99 (1992): 98–131; Karl A. Kuhn, “The ‘One Like a Son of Man’ Becomes the ‘Son of God,’” *CBQ* 69 (2007): 22–42; Laato, *A Star Is Rising*, 250–51; Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, eds., *Texts Concerned with Religious Law*, vol. 1 of *DSJR* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 255–57.

³⁷ *Midrash Mishlei*, a midrash on Proverbs from 750–850 CE, asks the question along with Prov 30:4a “Who has ascended and descended” and then answers, “This is Moses.” See *Midrash Mishlei*, at https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_MishleiPang=bi, quoted in Van Leeuwen, “The Background to Proverbs 30:4aα,” 120–21. Cf. Deut 30:12.

³⁸ R. G. Robertson, “Ezekiel the Tragedian,” *OTP*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2011), 803–7.

and builds upon the Exodus narratives in several places.³⁹ The tragedy constructs from the drama of Moses's narratives a dream that incorporates elements from Dan 7 and possibly other messianic texts such as Num 24:17.⁴⁰ The poem is another indication of the discussion ensuing in the second century BC of a human figure who would receive a throne and have access to a transcendence over creation.

A final text related to Prov 30:4α is 2 Sam 23:1. This verse commences with the same formula as in Prov 30:1 and Num 24:3, 15, and introduces the one uttering the words as being “raised up on high” (רָם עַל) (עָלָה). Besides containing a lemma denoting “raised up” (רָם), the Hebrew text contains consonants that are associated with עָלָה, “to go up,” the same lemma occurring in Prov 30:4α (“Who has ascended . . .?”). In 2 Sam 23:1, there is a question of whether the phrase refers to David as “raised up on high” or whether it is a preposition relating to the one who David is describing, that is, “concerning messiah of the God of Jacob.”⁴¹ Regardless, this collocation (“raised up on high”) is another connection between the prophetic “utterance of the man” in 2 Sam 23:1 and the one who “ascended and descended” in Prov 30:4α.

The next clause in Prov 30:4αβ (“Who has gathered the wind in his fists?”) is the second in the string of four interrogatives that commence with מָה. Commentators have noticed the similarities with Job 34:14 as well as shared content and lemmata with Ps 104:29 (“You gather their spirit; they expire”). In Job 34, Elihu is questioning Job’s accusation of God’s justice. Elihu begins his inquiry with the same interrogative (“Who?”) and implies that God rightly gives man his breath and gathers his spirit (רוּחַ). Both Job 34:14 and Ps 104:29 acknowledge that it is YHWH who places רוּחַ in man, and when he “gathers” (אָסַף) it, man perishes. Elihu maintains that it is God who set up the world. He is not unjust in his actions. The theme in Prov 30:4αβ is distinct from these verses, however, in that the word “wind” (רוּחַ) is not connoting man’s life but the cosmic “wind” as parallel to the following clause with “water.” Unlike in Elihu’s inquiry, God’s justice is not in view. Rather his creative power and transcendent control of the winds and water is maintained. However, there is something more to the clauses. Agur is making a riddle concerning “knowledge of the holy ones” (v. 3).⁴² The questions are intended to reveal something about these holy ones.

³⁹ Robertson, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 803.

⁴⁰ See Robertson, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 811, for a possible allusion to Num 24:17 (e.g., the terms “stars” and “scepter”).

⁴¹ Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 39–41.

⁴² Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 25–26.

Proverbs 30:4αγ asks, “Who has wrapped up (צָרַר) waters in a garment?” The clause bears resemblance to Job 26:8a, “The one wrapping waters in his clouds” (צָרַר), in which Job states God’s control over the universe to Bildad. In this case, Prov 30:4αγ has a similar purpose but no other linguistic connection arises with Job 26:8. However, now that we have considered Prov 30:4αα and its relationship to transcendence, another observation materializes. The first clause in 30:4αα contains the lexeme “heavens.” The final interrogative clause in 30:4αδ contains “earth.” In between are two other clauses, the first of which includes “spirit” (רוּחַ, also translated “wind”) and the second of which includes “waters.” These four lexemes also appear in Gen 1:1–2. Their appearance here in comparison makes up an ABB’A’ pattern. Is it possible that the writer here also alludes to God’s creation as he sets the riddle before the reader? The creation merism suggests that Agur is invoking the pattern of Gen 1:1–2. If so, the person in view possesses the transcendent and creative power of the divine.

Most have agreed that these rhetorical questions build on the same traditions reflected in Job 38.⁴³ No fewer than thirteen times, God asks Job “who” was there at creation’s dawn. This litany of questions begins as God’s speech commences in Job 38:2. God inquires who is speaking without “knowledge” (v. 2), the same word used in Prov 30:3b. The next clause (v. 3) taunts Job to get ready like a “man,” the same word in the phrase “utterance of a man” (Prov 30:1). Job 38:3b challenges that God will ask the questions and then perhaps Job can make him “know” (יָדַע), the same verb used in Job 38:4b, Prov 30:3b, and Prov 30:4b. Job 38:4 begins with God asking Job a question (“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”), similar to the Prov 30:4αδ (“Who established all the ends of the earth?”). The following clause, Job 38:4b, demands, “Declare if you know understanding!,” the same noun used in Prov 30:2b (בִּינָה). Scholars have long recognized that the clause, “surely you know” (כִּי תֹדַע), in Prov 30:4b repeats verbatim Job 38:5.⁴⁴ The clause expresses incredulity when it asks regarding the foundations of the earth, “Who placed its measurements” and then berates, “Surely you know!” This assertion is likewise found in Prov 30:4בγ after it asks about the name of the holy one. That this phrase “surely you know” only occurs in Prov 30:4בβ and Job 38:5 is enough evidence for many to see a relationship between the two passages. The writer incorporates language similar to Job

⁴³ R. B. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 165–69. See also Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur,” 246–47.

⁴⁴ Keil and Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 273–74; Toy, *Proverbs*, 521–22.

38:5 in the same manner that he does “utterance of the man” in Prov 30:1 in order to comment upon a transcendent holy one involved in laying out the foundations of the earth.

Proverbs 30:4b teases, “What is his name, and what is the name of his son?” As for the first question, “What is his name,” few question that the obvious answer is YHWH.⁴⁵ The question appears to evoke a similar response as the assertions in Amos 4–5. There the writer asserts God’s control over creation while resolutely declaring that his name is YHWH. Amos 4:13 asserts, “Listen, the one forming mountains, creating the wind, declaring to man what his thoughts are, the one making dawn, darkness and treading upon the high places of the earth, YHWH God of hosts is His name”; or Amos 5:8, “The one making Pleiades and Orion, the one turning deep darkness into morning, turning darkening night into day, and the one calling to the waters of the sea and pouring them out upon the surface of the earth, YHWH is His name.”⁴⁶ These texts assert that the name of the creator, the transcendent One, is YHWH.

Isaiah 40:12–14 similarly inquires (מִי), “Who measured the waters in his hand, weighed the heavens by the span, gave the dust of the earth a measurement, and weighed the mountains with a balance and the hills with a pair of scales? Who directed the spirit of YHWH, or as his counselor made him know? With whom did he consult, brought him understanding, and taught him in a path of justice, taught him knowledge, and made him know a way of understanding?” These “who” questions concern the one responsible for creation and have the obvious answer that it was YHWH who had done such a thing. It would seem that the writer in Prov 30 queries in this same way.

The only problem with such explicit answers to the interrogatives in Prov 30:4 is the riddle-like formulation of the entire passage, in particular Prov 30:4a α . If the answer was as straightforward as “YHWH is the one who creates,” would there have been the need to state that he did not learn wisdom, had no understanding, and was stupid? If YHWH was the simple answer, would he state, “But I do have knowledge of the Holy One(s)” (v. 3)? Indeed, the passage is formulated as an oracle affirming that every word of God proves true (v. 5). If YHWH is the clear answer, how would that response be incogitable since books such as Job, Amos, Isaiah, Psalms, and other Proverbs express such things. Such assertions that deities were involved with creation or transcendent over it was ubiquitous in the ancient worlds. This riddle asserts more than merely YHWH created. The final interrogative will provide an answer.

⁴⁵ Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur,” 274; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 857–58; Van Leeuwen, “The Background to Prov 30:4a α ,” passim.

⁴⁶ Cf. Amos 5:27.

To answer such questions, we must consider the final interrogative in Prov 30:4b (“What is the name of his son?”). The third masculine singular suffix on the singular noun, “son,” divulges that the author asserts that it was indeed YHWH who was a responsible agent for creation. But who else the question refers to has caused consternation. In the history of interpretation, proposals have gone one of three ways. First, scholars have suggested that this question retreats to the teacher-pupil relationship, based on the lexemes father/son (Prov 1:8).⁴⁷ This interpretation is unlike the other uses of the father/son relationship in Proverbs. These occurrences that refer to training and teaching through familial relationships in Proverbs always involve other elements such as commands to do or not do something (e.g., “Listen to . . . !”), inclusion of the mother along with the father, or references to a fool in contrast to a wise or righteous son.⁴⁸ Thus, this interrogative (“What is the name of his son?”) would be unique if it referred to the proverbial teacher-pupil relationship.

A second interpretation follows from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It translates the “his son” with a plural “his sons.” This interpretive gloss accords with the notion that the community of Israelites were the sons of God; YHWH expresses as much to Moses in Exod 4:22. Moreover, Ps 82:6 flatly states, “You are gods; and sons of the Most High are all of you.” Thus, the Greek version may have interpreted the theologically-difficult, singular noun “son” as a plural in accordance with other Scripture, likely referring to Israel as sons of the creator, God.⁴⁹ For this interpretive gloss, the translator was not after two names, the name of the creator and the name of the creator’s son, but was really only inquiring about the identity of the greater being. The second question (“What is the name of his sons?”) would be, in this case, just another effort to name

⁴⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 474, who goes on to propose that this interpretation implies YHWH’s relationship to Israel, thus “son” indicating Israel in Prov 30:4b β in a typological way, referring ultimately to the true Israelite son, in Waltke’s opinion, Jesus. For teacher-pupil, see also James Crenshaw, “Clanging Symbols,” in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Peter J. Paris (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 57.

⁴⁸ See Prov 1:8; 3:12; 4:1, 3; 6:20; 10:1; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:6, 21, 25; 19:13, 26; 20:20; 22:28; 23:22, 24; 27:10; 28:7, 24; 29:3; 30:11, 17. Proverbs with only the lexeme “son” are mostly found in Prov 1–9 and also contain commands to listen or a jussive not to do something. This form returns in Prov 23–29 in which the only occurrence of this form without a command accompanying the lexeme “son” is Prov 23:15.

⁴⁹ Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 276.

YHWH because of his relationship to the nation, Israel. Besides the singular reference to “son” and without any reference to “Israel” in the context, this interpretation ignores the riddle of the name of the second party. In other words, it ignores a significant development in the passage/book that becomes transparent with the “utterance of the man” in Prov 30:1, associated with the son of David through the relationship with 2 Sam 23:1 and the attention on David in the following book, Ruth.

Another proposal for “his son” accords with Job 38, a passage that we have already proposed has associations with Prov 30. Job 38:5–7 inquires about God’s audience when he laid the foundations for creation. After rebuking Job for his lack of understanding, vv. 5–7 say, “Who placed its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched over it a line? What were its bases sunk upon or who laid its cornerstone? When the stars of the morning sang together and all the sons of God shouted?” Some scholars have understood this passage in Job as referring to the starry host or to those angelic beings who were present when God created the heavens and earth.⁵⁰ Thus, because of the relationship between the two passages, these interpreters assume a similar connection with the “name of his son(s)” in Prov 30:4. The problem remains, however, that the Hebrew is singular (“son”) and not plural as it is in Job 38:7. Any observations from the point of view of text criticism would indicate that the singular “son” is the *lectio difficilior* and should be retained.

One can say more about the use of Job 38:5aβ, “Surely you know” in this context. It is interesting that the author here playfully asserts that the reader should know what “the name of his son” is. He does so not only with the borrowed clause—which could further condition, “If you know”—but also with the quote of Job 38:5 referring to YHWH’s statement to Job that he certainly knows that he, YHWH, was the one responsible for the universe. Regardless of whether it is a pure assertion or a conditional, the author himself professes some knowledge in Prov 30:4 if by no other means than his very questions.

God and His Son

In this section, we will deal with the topic of a human being, who is called or likened unto a “son of God” in order to show that this topic is not unique to Prov 30:1–6. We will do so by analyzing texts of the Hebrew Bible that assert that Israel’s God has a son. Second Samuel 7:13–14 is an articulation of the so-called Davidic promise. YHWH promises that he would establish the throne of David’s son forever (וּכְנַנְתִּי אֶת־כִּסֵּא מִמְּלַכְתּוֹ (ועד־עולם). Moreover, he says in 2 Sam 7:14, “As for me, I will be a father

⁵⁰ See Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur,” 247–48.

to him, and as for him, he will be a son to me.” This promise in the Hebrew Bible indicates that David’s royal house would continue forever, and that YHWH had established his divine kingship. But the passage goes further than granting David’s house a divine right to rule Israel. The promise indicates that the seed of David would be a son to YHWH, and YHWH would be a father to him. The concept that a human king could relate to divinity is well-known from literature in Egypt from the third millennium BC.

Although 2 Sam 7 does assert a father/son relationship between the Davidic seed and YHWH, it does not describe the nature of this relationship or how it would come about in a particular context. Indeed, the doctrine of divine kingship in the ANE is quite complex and scholars are reticent to draw general conclusions from such a wide array of literature. And yet, its application in Ancient Egypt and other cultures demonstrates that a general notion would not have been unique in Ancient Israel.⁵¹ Regardless of whether the author ascribes deity to David’s seed in 2 Sam 7, a discussion of a divine, Davidic son continues in the Hebrew Bible and beyond.

The book of Isaiah is also significant in this discussion. Isaiah 7 presents the famous virgin birth prophecy as Ahaz, the Davidic king, faces tumultuous enemies surrounding his kingdom. In Isa 7:2, 13, “the house of David” receives a sign that a virgin⁵² would conceive and give birth to a son, even though the land would be destroyed (Isa 7:18–23). Isaiah 8 continues indicating that Israel would be subdued, and the battle would “sweep into Judah” (Isa 8:8). Both “houses of Israel” would stumble over YHWH and the inhabitants of Jerusalem would be trapped (Isa 8:14). It would be a time of destruction and upheaval. But in the midst of that destruction, Isa 9:5 indicates that a child would be born, “a son is given to us.” Moreover, Isa 9:6 indicates that the son would sit “upon the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it . . . forever” (עַל־כִּסֵּא דָוִד (ועד־עולם). It is not our purpose here to demonstrate a chronology between 2 Sam 7 and Isa 9, but the lemmata are the

⁵¹ For a recent monograph on the state of the issue, see Nicole Maria Brisch, *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2008). See also Allison Thomason, “The Materiality of Assyrian Sacred Kingship,” *RC* 10 (2016): 133–48.

⁵² We translate “virgin” here not primarily because of the denotation of the underlying term in Hebrew (עַלְמָה, “young maiden”) nor only in view of the LXX/NT gloss, “virgin,” but because of the word play of עַלְמָה with the place from which the sign will come, מַעְלָה, that is, “from above.” This relationship was first pointed out in a conversation with a colleague, Seth Postell, April 2006.

same indicating, if nothing else, a relationship in content or tradition. Furthermore, in the midst of four descriptions of the child in Isa 9:5, the son is given a title of “God almighty” (אל גבור). Although much discussion has ensued from this title, one explanation is to understand the description as elevating the status of this son to deity within a developing exegetical tradition. The title is used again in Isa 10:20–21 to express that the remnant will return and depend upon YHWH, the holy one of Israel, “the mighty God” (אל גבור). Here, the title is used in association with the personal name of the God of Israel and the Isaianic appellation for Israel’s God, “the Holy One of Israel.” The “remnant will return ... to God almighty,” which relates to Isa 10:20 in which the remnant would lean on “YHWH, the holy one of Israel.” Isaiah 9:6 develops the Davidic promise that not only would YHWH establish the throne of David’s son and that he would be a father to this son, but that the Davidic son would be called God (אל). It appears that Isa 9:5–6 takes up the promise of YHWH to David that he would raise up his “seed” and establish his kingdom’s throne forever” and develops that promise.

Psalm 89 is another passage that develops the status of the Davidic son. This passage expressly considers the Davidic promise.⁵³ Psalm 89:20–21 says, “Then you spoke in a vision to your godly one(s) and you said, ‘I gave help for the mighty, I exalted a chosen one from the people. I found David, my servant. I anointed him with my holy oil.’” The psalm continues by describing YHWH’s presence and strength with him, assuring him defeat over enemies. It would be in YHWH’s name that “his horn will be exalted” (vv. 25). But Ps 89:26 further elevates the notion of the Davidic king. YHWH says that he will “place his hand on the sea and on the rivers, his right hand.” Consequently, the Davidic king takes on a cosmological role, one that was absent in 2 Sam 7 and latent, at best, in Isa 9.

Immediately after the psalm articulates the chosen servant’s transcendence in v. 26, Ps 89:27 echoes 2 Sam 7 as the Davidic king says, “He will call to me, ‘You are my father,’ my God, and the rock of my salvation.” The psalmist continues by quoting YHWH, “Indeed, I, I will make him the firstborn, the most high of the kings of the earth.... I will place his seed forever and his throne like the days of heaven.” Again, echoes of 2 Sam 7 and Isa 9 reverberate in the psalmist’s understanding of this Davidic king, who now becomes YHWH’s firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Moreover, his days will now be like the “days of heaven” and in v. 37, “His seed will be forever and his throne like the sun before me.”

⁵³ Beth Laneel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 769–82; Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73–89)*, JSOT 307 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 218–19.

It is not merely that “the throne of his kingdom will be forever” but that he himself “will be forever.” The concept of the Davidic king, which initially was likened unto a father/son relationship, developed in the Hebrew Bible. Not only did he have a special relationship to YHWH, but he was called God, described as transcendent over creation, and his days are infinite.

Another important biblical text to consider is Ps 2. Verse 2 recounts that the kings of earth and rulers set themselves against YHWH and against his “messiah.” Meanwhile, he sits in the heavens. The scene is similar to Dan 7, which we will consider next, in that the Ancient of Days takes his seat among the thrones and throngs who attempt to rebel against him. In Ps 2:6, YHWH responds to them in anger that he has, “[S]et my king upon Zion, my holy mountain.” Then in language that suggests a quotation of 2 Sam 7:14 in view of his reference to a “decree,” the psalmist states, “Let me recount in a decree, YHWH said to me, ‘You are my son and I, today, I have begotten you’” (Ps 2:7). The development upon the familial themes in 2 Sam 7 and Isa 7–9 seem clear.⁵⁴ Not only is he called a son, but he is “birthed.” And he is birthed not by David but by YHWH.⁵⁵ He continues that when asked, he would give him “the nations, the ends of the earth as a possession” (Ps 2:8). The king-son will have access to the nations as an inheritance; he will possess “the ends of the earth,” the same collocation that is found in Prov 30:4ae. Even here it appears that the psalmist expands the transcendence of the divinely born, Davidic son because of his inheritance of the earth itself and his “breaking and shattering them” in Ps 2:9.⁵⁶

Psalm 2:10–12 continues by warning kings and judges to “Serve YHWH in fear and . . . kiss the son” (Ps 2:11a–12aα). The “son” can be no other than the Davidic son given the Zion language in the psalm, the allusion to the Davidic promise, and proximity to the psalms of David that make up Book 1 of the Psalter. It appears that the psalmist is commanding the reader to venerate the son after he commands, “Serve YHWH in fear.” Additionally, the “son” in Ps 2:12 occurs in Aramaic, the language of Dan 7 and the “son of man.” Thus, it is possible that the

⁵⁴ Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Atlanta: SBL, 1985), 209; Robert Luther Cole, *Psalm 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 111–14.

⁵⁵ Cf. Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Vol. 1 (1–41)* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 207.

⁵⁶ The travailing language and transcendence theme seems the strongest connection between Psalm 2, Proverbs 8, and 30.

psalm conflates the Davidic promise with the “son of man” from Dan 7.⁵⁷ Psalm 2 ends as Ps 1 began, “Blessed are all those who take refuge in him.” Likewise, Prov 30:5 shares the collocation “those who take refuge in him” as it quotes 2 Sam 22:31/Ps 18:31 (“The word of YHWH is pure; it is a shield to all those taking refuge in him”). Psalm 2 not only develops the concept of the son of God, but also demonstrates an association with Prov 30:1–5.

Finally, Dan 7 takes on special importance in non-biblical literature.⁵⁸ Whether in Ezekiel the Tragedian or literature from Qumran, the image of the son of man coming with the clouds of heaven became an important text for messianic hopes. We have already considered Dan 7 above but for the purpose here, it is instructive to consider how the chapter relates to the Davidic promise from 2 Sam 7. As we noted above, an important clause in the Father/Son promise to David in 2 Sam 7:14a is found in 2 Sam 7:12b and 13b. These clauses indicate an enduring kingdom for the seed of David saying in v. 12b, “I will establish his kingdom,” and reiterating in v. 13b, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” Second Samuel 7:16 concludes YHWH’s speech by affirming to David, “Your house and your kingdom will be confirmed forever before you and your throne will be established forever.” Daniel 7 contains language that likewise asserts the everlasting rule of the son of man. Daniel 7:14 says of the son of man, “To him was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, and all peoples, nations, and tongues will serve him. His dominion will be a dominion forever, which will not pass away and his kingdom will not be destroyed.” The language regarding the enduring nature of the Davidic

⁵⁷ For the possibility that a manuscript from Qumran, 1Q28a, alludes to Ps 2 and the “begotten” Messiah, see Craig A. Evans, “Are the ‘Son’ Texts at Qumran ‘Messianic’? Reflections on 4Q369 and Related Scrolls,” in *Qumran–Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Gerbern S. Oegema (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 138.

⁵⁸ For analyses on the relationships of these texts and full bibliography, see Johannes Zimmerman, *Messianische Texte aus Qumran*, WUNT 104 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 128n255; Zimmerman, “Observations on 4Q426–The ‘Son of God,’” 177; for an analysis of the Aramaic Apocalypse, see Seyoon Kim, “*The ‘Son of Man’ as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 20–22, 79–80, 84. More recently, see Kuhn, “The ‘One Like a Son of Man’ Becomes the ‘Son of God,’” 22–42, 27 in particular. See Kim for a full bibliography on the discussion, including J. A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1979), 84–113, who does not think the manuscript is messianic.

kingdom is true also of the kingdom of the son of man.

Textual Production and Theological Construal

The author of Prov 30:1–6 has used a number of texts and traditions to provide an amalgamation in the passage.⁵⁹ The author has incorporated an expression of prophetic pronouncement; an excerpted phrase from Num 24:3, 15 and 2 Sam 23:1; multiple clauses from Ps 18:31/2 Sam 22:31; and a clause from Deut 4:2.⁶⁰ Moreover, he has drawn from traditions of important figures in the Hebrew Bible and the ANE and traditions of cosmology within those same spheres. This phenomenon fits entirely into the situation of current studies in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and writings from the Second Temple period. In an article dealing with wisdom literature and the literary milieu of the Second Temple period, Menahem Kister concludes that authors/scribes picked up and incorporated terminology and traditions of classical wisdom into literature of the period for purposes beyond that of classical wisdom, including for purposes of eschatology.⁶¹ He writes, “The Second Temple period was, above all, the period of interpretation, and its major project was amalgamating, through interpretation, concepts from diverse biblical strata in a Hellenistic environment. It is true, for instance, that ‘wisdom functions for post-exilic writers as a hermeneutical construction to interpret the Torah,’ but it is equally true that the Torah functioned as hermeneutical construct to interpret wisdom, and probably to a larger extent.”⁶² Why has the author of Prov 30 incorporated this material?

First, Prov 30:1–6 draws upon these items and incorporates them into

⁵⁹ Menahem Kister, “Wisdom Literature and Its Relation to Other Genres: From Ben Sira to Mysteries,” in *Sapiential Perspectives: Wisdom Literature in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 20–22 May 2001*, ed. John J. Collins et al., STDJ 51 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 13–47, quoted in Bernd U. Schipper, “Wisdom and Torah—Insights and Perspectives,” in *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of “Torah” in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Bernd U. Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter, SJSJ 163 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 307–19, quote from 317.

⁶⁰ Schipper, “When Wisdom Is Not Enough! The Discourse on Wisdom and Torah and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs,” in *Wisdom and Torah*, 55–79, in particular, 80–71.

⁶¹ Kister, “Wisdom Literature and Its Relation to Other Genres,” 19.

⁶² Kister, “Wisdom Literature and Its Relation to Other Genres,” 19. The internal quote is from G. T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament*, BZAW 151 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980), 118.

the book of Proverbs in view of its relationship to a purported speaker of proverbs, Balaam. Knowing that Balaam spoke in proverbs about the last days (Num 23:7, 18; 24:3, 14, 15, 20, 21, and 23), the writer juxtaposes texts and traditions in Prov 30:1–9 in order to provide a Torah-guided interpretation within the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs already had an association with a “seed” of David, namely Solomon. Through his use of “utterance of the man,” the author draws upon the “seed” of David language (2 Sam 22:51–23:1) and conflates it with the Balaam oracle. Moreover, through this “proverb,” Prov 30:4b draws upon “son of God” texts or tradition while v. 4a itself comments that the son is transcendent (30:4a β – δ) and a Moses-type mediator (30:4 α).

Second, the writer has incorporated these items as a means of balancing wisdom literature with the prophetic word from God, namely, an oracle. He does so by incorporating four statements regarding prophecy. He includes: (1) “oracle,” (2) “utterance of the man,” (3) Ps 18:31/2 Sam 22:31, which emphasizes the purity and refuge of the “word of God,” and (4) Deut 4:2, which warns against adding to the “word.” Moreover, he diminishes the importance of wisdom by stating that he does not have “wisdom” or “understanding,” but rather is “stupid.” The focus on a “word” becomes obvious. In Num 24:16, Balaam “hears the words of God” (אמרה) while the writer of Prov 30:5a and 6a says, “Every word of God is true... Do not add to his words . . .” (אמרה, דבר). Only God can reveal his word. His incorporation of Ps 18:31/2 Sam 22:31 and Deut 4:2, “Do not add to the word . . .” reveals that he does not see his amalgamation of texts as adding to God’s word but rather clarifying its meaning. Thus, Prov 30:4 takes on the effect of commentary, or even theology.

Third, although it is difficult to draw absolute conclusions, it is hard to imagine his incorporation of “utterance of the man” (Num 24:3, 15) if he was not aware of the wisdom terminology in Num 24:16. There Balaam acknowledges that he has heard the “words of God” (cf. Ps 18:31/2 Sam 22:31) and “knows knowledge of the Most High.” In Prov 30:3b, Agur “knows knowledge of the holy one(s).” Moreover, given the issues surrounding apocalypticism and mysteries in Second Temple literature, the phrase in Num 24:16b β (“Falling and eyes opened”) likely spurred on his use of “utterance.”⁶³ Through the use of these amalgamations, the writer combines the content of the “utterance” and “vision” from Num 24:17, the “star from Jacob,” a well-known, messianic title from the period, and the promise to David from 2 Sam 7:13–16.

The incorporated phrase “utterance of the man” serves double-duty

as it also draws upon 2 Sam 22:51–23:5. The poetry of 2 Sam 22:51 reiterates the promise to David before it leads to the “utterance,” saying, “He will make great the salvation of his king, he will do a *hesed* to his anointed, to David and to his seed forever.” It comes as no surprise that the author of Prov 30:1–4 then combines the promise to David and the “proverb” of Balaam as he awaits a “star from Jacob,” “a scepter from Israel,” who would “smash the heads” of the enemy and “act with valor” (Num 24:17–18).

Conclusion

Proverbs 30:4 α – β , with maddening ambiguity and polysemy, invites a connection to a Moses-type man, who interceded for his people and was a lawgiver. Additionally, the clause leads one to imagine a “son of man,” who, because of his humanity, must ascend from the earth to the heavens before descending again. Proverbs 30:4 γ – ϵ draws from cosmological language to establish that this human “son of God” is transcendent; he is not created but stands over creation and in fact “established all the ends of the earth” with his father. Agur asks: Who is this transcendent being who gathers wind, wraps water, and establishes the ends of the earth? Who could do that besides God and his son? Surely you know!

⁶³ See Alexander Rofé, “Revealed Wisdom: From the Bible to Qumran,” 1–11; Kister, “Wisdom Literature and Its Relation to Other Genres,” 19.