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THE SITUATIONAL CONTEXT OF STATEMENTS CONCERNING POVERTY AND WEALTH IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Abstract

The aim of the article is an explanation of the shift in meaning from the neutral 'rich' in Pr 22:2 to a pejorative 'oppressor' in Pr 29:13, two almost identical proverbs. In a first section dealing with the most probable setting of Proverbs in the wisdom school, the issue is debated whether all material in Proverbs is of a uniform kind. Following McKane and Scott, the author maintains that there are indications that older sayings material is annotated or even corrected by the addition of later sayings which display a different viewpoint or perspective. An important element in this process of reinterpretation is the re-evaluation of poverty and wealth. In a second section dealing with socio-economic developments in Israel, the author points to distinctively negative experiences with Canaanite commercial practices, for example the taking of interest, which caused widespread impoverishment of the Israelite peasant population. This led the wise to distinguish between wealth gained by unrighteous means, that is trade and commerce, and wealth gained by

honest and hard toil in agriculture. This distinction can explain the 'agricultural ideal' (Boström) which is found even in post-exilic wisdom texts.

In an earlier essay (Wittenberg 1986:40-85) the terminology of 'poor' in the Book of Proverbs was investigated according to paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations It was found that the four major terms for poor, **rāš, dal ʾebyōn** and **ʿānī** do not all belong to the same lexical field, but to the two fields of social relations and justice. Contrasting evaluation of poverty and wealth in the sayings material can, to some degree, be attributed to this fact.

In this essay we want to supplement the earlier synchronic investigation by trying to link statements in Proverbs concerning poverty with the context of situation 1), that is by a more diachronic approach.

At the outset, this attempt would seem to be rather futile. Proverbs have a timeless quality about them which make them notoriously difficult to date. Nevertheless, no human utterance is without its context. That applies also to proverbial and aphoristic literature. The peculiar nature and the artistic forms of Old Testament proverbs point to a situation, a setting which produced them and which forms the context from which they can be understood. Old Testament scholars have therefore rightly tried to establish the most probable setting, linking the origin of Proverbs with Israel's history.

There is also another reason which calls forth a diachronic investigation supplementing the synchronic one. In the lexical field of 'poor', designating social status, we noted a remarkable shift in the two almost identical sayings: Proverbs 22:2 and 29:13.

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1) On the importance of context for the whole process of understanding cf Deist 1980:33-54.

> The rich and the poor meet together
> the Lord is the maker of them all.
> (22:2)
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> The poor and the oppressor meet
> together
> the Lord gives eyes to the light of both. (29:13)

The variation in the second line is insignificant, but there is a major shift in meaning in the first line from the neutral or even positive 'rich' **ʿāšīr** to the pejorative 'oppressor' **ʾīš tᵉkākīm.** Here a remarkable re-evaluation of wealth has taken place. What is the reason for this shift in meaning? We will not be able to answer this question without considering the influence of the socio-economic developments in ancient Israel on the evaluation of poverty and wealth.

This determines the scope of the present essay. In a first section we shall enquire after the most probable setting of Israel's proverbial literature, and in a second section we shall deal with Israel's social history and its influence on statements about poverty and wealth.

1. Setting - The Wisdom School and the problem of Class Ethic.

Gerstenberger (1965:117ff) and Wolff (1973) have tried to show that a large body of the material found in the Book of Proverbs has its setting in ancient Israelite clan instruction 2). This theory has,

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2) According to Gerstenberger the main body of the exhortatory material in Proverbs is the short precept, the 'Mahnspruch'. Whereas the saying originates in the wisdom school, the 'Mahnspruch' has its setting in ancient Israelite clan instruction (1965:117ff). This would account for the form of direct address, because in the Israelite clans

however, been contested by most scholars. We may conclude with Fohrer (1973:161) that 'it is out of place to speak of ancient clan wisdom as a special form of wisdom'. The sayings and admonitions in Proverbs are not the product of popular or clan wisdom. Very few, if any, popular proverbs have found the way into the sayings collections (Hermisson 1968:49). The terminology of the admonitions 'father-son', which Gerstenberger had claimed to be a sign of clan instruction, in reality reflects the terminology of the wisdom school (Cf De Boer 1955:62-71).

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of the nomadic special order, the father is everywhere the person in authority who has to instruct his sons.

Gerstenberger based his investigations mainly on collections III (Pr 22:17 - 24:22) where the 'Mahnspruch' is especially numerous, but, as we have seen already (cf Wittenberg 1986:78), this whole collection III is heavily dependent on the Egyptian instruction of Amenemope. Gerstenberger tries to meet this obvious objection, by maintaining that also in Egypt the basic unit of the instruction was the single precept going back ultimately to popular ethos. He even speaks of an international tribal ethos found all over the ancient Near East (1965:140). But this is a claim which cannot be substantiated; there is no evidence for a distinctive clan wisdom in ancient Egypt.

Hans Walter Wolff, in his study on the background of the prophet Amos, holds that Amos was nurtured in Israelite tribal wisdom. Wolff emphasizes again and again the basic difference between clan wisdom and court wisdom of Egyptian provenance. Characteristic for clan wisdom is oral tradition and the simpler forms as compared with the elevated style of the Egyptian wisdom schools (1973:14). The purpose was to instruct members of clans, not princes or officials (1973:23). Wolff has, however, not succeeded in proving that the wisdom genres such as admonition, didactic questions, woe- and the corresponding blessing-cries, and numerical sequences, which he finds in Amos, are forms that are peculiar to Israelite clan wisdom.

McKane (1965:38) emphasizes the strictly limited nature of education in the ancient Near East: 'Schools were not the agency of universal education, but were the preserve of the children of the elite'. Hermisson (1968:100), in dealing with the school as the setting of aphoristic wisdom literature, lists three different groups which would have been able to read and write in ancient Israel: in the first place officials who needed this ability for the manifold administrative posts in the state, secondly priests and temple personnel, and thirdly sons of the affluent upper class who could afford an education. Hermisson claims that there was originally quite a sharp distinction between the wisdom and the temple schools. The temple school was the bearer of cultic and legal traditions, whereas the wisdom traditions were handed on in wisdom schools whose purpose was mainly to provide training for the officials of the state and the upper class in general.

Because wisdom literature has its setting in the wisdom school, the wisdom books reflect the mentality of the upper classes, just as in Egypt the wisdom books proffer the class ethic of a feudal aristocracy (Cf Baumgartner 1961:210). This has been argued by Gordis (1943/44:82), who contends that the wisdom teachers were basically conservatives who clung to the status quo: 'Their conservatism extended to every sphere of life and permeated their religious ideas as well as their social, economic and political attitudes.' This is shown by the constant emphasis on the morality of the young man, which would be especially appropriate for sons of the wealthy classes. The influence of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the secular character of wisdom, the fact that most of the wisdom writings were linked with kings, all these observations point to an upper class setting. The morality is that of a possessing class warning against the perils of laziness and emphasizing diligence, reliability and loyalty to the king. Finally,

'the social virtues that are inculcated are approached from the standpoint of the powerful groups towards the weaker.'(1943/44:94)

This applies especially to the practice of charity.

In a more recent article B W Kovacs (1974:171-190) has re-emphasized the upper-class orientation of Proverbs. He claims that there is clear evidence of class-ethic in aphoristic wisdom. Before proceeding with his arguments, he first of all clarifies the various meanings of the term.

> 'Class-ethic can mean three rather different things. At minimum, class-ethic is the ethos of a specific social group - a system of values and a corresponding perspective on the world founded in that group and common to it. Their view may be open to the world or closed, addressed universally or to a select few ... Second, Standesethik refers to a restricted ethic or in-group morality. Different standards of conduct are applied to outsiders as opposed to members of one's own social group ... A third definition of class-ethic construes it as a professional code.'(1974:176)

Many scholars would agree that Proverbs displays a class-ethic in the first sense of the term, but they deny that we find any class ideal in the narrower sense (Von Rad 1972:82; Hermisson 1968:134; Gemser 1963:7; Kaiser 1975:373f). Kovacs (1974:178), however, claims that Proverbs also contains class-ethic in the sense of an in-group morality in sayings which he characterizes by the term 'noblesse oblige'.

> 'Throughout we find concern continually expressed for the declasse of society: the widow, the poor, the oppressed, the powerless ... When used by kings, statements of social concern for the poor and oppressed expressed their devotion to duty and affirmed their discharge of social responsibiblity. The king has behaved properly in office, undertaking those tasks required of a dutiful king. Similarly, the social concern of the wise can plausibly be founded in the need to assert and uphold social responsibility. Thus the specific situation they mention are less important

> for themselves than for what they express about the wise: they are responsible and dutiful citizens who act to uphold the social order.'

Kovacs recognizes the difficulty of finding class-ethic in the restricted sense of a professional code in Proverbs. While there are many references to the scribal profession in the Egyptian instructions, we search in vain for similar references in the Israelite sayings collections (1974:183). Still, Kovacs contends that there are similarities in the patterns of life espoused by the Egyptian and Hebrew wise. The Hebrew aphorisms teach an ethic of restraint. The observance of proprieties, court and king sayings, instruction and discipline, and a system of authority suggest a professional ethic of administrators and officials. Kovacs (1974:186f) concludes by stating that Proverbs displays class-ethic in all three meanings of the term,

> 'though wisdom tends to be open to experience, concerned for the declasse and interested in the instruction of children and youth in general. The mashal collections come from a distinct social group and retain marks of that origin.'

The scholars whose views we have treated so far, all regard the material in the Book of Proverbs as presenting a single world view and arising from a common setting. Contradictions which occur among the meshalim are either ignored or, as in the case of Kovacs (1974:186), explained with reference to propriety.

> 'Behaviour appropriate to a wise man is improper in the fool. What is fitting at one time may bring a curse at another.'

The question is, however, whether this is an adequate explanation of the contradictions, and whether all material is in fact of a unitary system of wisdom. There are scholars who have denied this. McKane distinguishes three different types of wisdom which he classifies as A, B and C material. In his book **Prophets and Wise Men** (1965:53) he defines Class A or old wisdom as 'primarily a disciplined

empiricism engaged with the problems of government and administration'. He points to the Egyptian instruction genre, whose aim it is to define the fundamental intellectual attitudes necessary for the aspiring statesman and administrator. Similarly in Israel, from the time of Solomon onwards, the education was geared to the education of officials needed in the administrative machinery of the state. The 'scribes' **sōp^{e}rīm** or ' counsellors' **yo^{ca}ṣīm** were thought to be 'wise' **h^{a}kāmīm**. It was the self-confident wisdom of the royal counsellors which was attacked by Isaiah and Jeremiah (1965:40f).

McKane's restriction of the training in the wisdom school to the instruction of officials for the administration of the state is one-sided. The links which H W Wolff has demonstrated between Amos and wisdom, suggest that wisdom had from the beginning a broader base in Israel than in Egypt. Court wisdom in Egypt was directed toward officialdom, but Hermisson (1968:101) has pointed out that the much more modest dimensions of the Jerusalem court, even before the break-up of the empire, as compared with that of the pharaoh, made for a much closer connection with the life of the people in general. Thus, whereas the Egyptian instructions are concerned with the profession of royal officials, Israelite aphoristic wisdom praises agriculture (Gemser 1963:7). McKane has modified his position in the commentary on Proverbs. He now does not restrict old wisdom simply to the training of officials, but he still believes that it is mundane, empirical, and 'concerned with the training of the individual for a successful and harmonious life' (1970:11).

In the wisdom of Class B 'the centre of concern is the community rather than the individual', while the sayings in Class C

> 'are identified by the presence of God-language or by other items of vocabulary expressive of a moralism which derives from Yahwistic piety' (1970:11).

McKane's distinction between Class A and B does not seem convincing 3), but he has made a strong case for demarcating sentences characterized by the presence or the absence of religious language. As evidence for this claim McKane quotes many instances where the vocabulary of old wisdom is re-interpreted in terms of Yahwistic piety, the most telling example being the different attitudes to bribery in some of the sayings 4). Scott, in an article examining the word-pairs 'wise-foolish' and 'righteous-wicked', has corroborated McKane's findings, adding interesting observations of his own. He notes that there are 'secular' sayings which do not affirm or suggest religious beliefs. Many of these display the characteristic antithesis 'wise-foolish' (1972:154ff). The 'righteous-wicked' antithesis, however, belongs to a group of sayings which specifically relates the teachings of wisdom to those of religion (1972:160ff). Scott (1972:162), concurring with McKane, claims that those sayings which affirm Yahweh's activity, present an annotation or editing of already existing sayings. They

> 'seem designed either to correct views expressed in other proverbs, or to put them in a new light by adding a religious dimension.'

Among other examples Scott quotes Proverbs 18:11:

> A rich man's wealth is his strong city,
> and like a high wall protecting him.

Immediately preceding it, (Pr 18:10), we find another saying re-interpreting it in terms of Yahwistic piety:

> The name of Yahweh is a strong tower;
> the righteous man runs into it and is safe.

Our own findings agree with McKane's and Scott's conclusions. In the initial investigation into the lexical context of the terminology for poor, we noticed a shift in the understanding of poverty and

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3) Cf the critique of Scott 1972:152.

4) Compare Pr 17:8; 18:6; and 21:14 with 15:27 and 17:23.

wealth coinciding with a shift from the act-consequence to the attitude-fate relationship (1986:70ff). We noted significant signs of redaction in the appropriation of the Egyptian instruction of Amenemope (1986:78-81). The evidence obtained from the material itself can furthermore be supplemented by other considerations. In Jer 8:8-9 the prophet attacks those who claim that they are wise because the law of the Lord is with them, which shows that by now the **h^{a}kāmīm** were on the way of becoming legal scholars (McKane 1965:105). M Weinfeld (1961:241-247) has argued that the humanist outlook underlying the laws in Deuteronomy represents a fusion of law and wisdom, rather than of law and prophecy. Within the process of education we also find a converging of the two basic types of school, the temple school and the wisdom school. In post-exilic times the temple school becomes the sole bearer of the pre-exilic wisdom tradition (Hermisson 1968:131), and the 'wise' are no longer royal counsellors, but are learned writers in close connection with the temple singers and produce learned psalmography in the form of wisdom hymns (Mowinckel 1955:205ff). This converging of two traditions has, however, a pre-history dating to pre-exilic times (Hermisson 1968:131). In this process the concept of 'wisdom' is transformed. It no longer refers to practical skills, but wisdom, righteousness and piety now constitute an indissoluble unity (Fohrer 1973:163). One important element in this whole process is the re-evaluation of poverty and wealth. This leads us back to the question which we posed earlier on: what were the decisive factors bringing about this change? Apart from the impact of Yahwistic faith, are there perhaps influences coming from the socio-economic sphere which may have contributed to the fact that poverty came to be viewed in a more positive way and wealth treated no longer as an unqualified good?

2.The influence of socio-economic developments on the evaluation of poverty and wealth.

We have already referred to the shift in meaning in the two sayings Pr 22:2 and 29:13. In Pr 29:13 wealth is no longer any good, but is seen in the light of oppression. The **'îš t^{e}kāmīm**, the oppressor,

> 'seems to be a general term, involving all sorts of hard procedures, financial and other ... but there may be special reference to money' (Toy 1916:511).

This is shown by the Septuagint rendering of the saying:

> 'When creditor and debtor have a meeting with each other, the Lord has both under surveillance' (McKane 1970:640).

The shift in emphasis from wealth as a desirable asset and blessing of God, to wealth as a means of oppression, can best be understood in the context of the numerous sayings and admonitions directed against the practice of giving pledges and surety.

> He who gives surety for a stranger will smart for it,
> but he who hates suretyship is secure. (Pr 11:15)
>
> A man without sense gives a pledge,
> and becomes surety in the presence of his neighbour. (17:18)
>
> My son, if you have become a surety for your neighbour,
> have given a pledge for a stranger,
> if you are snarled in the utterance of your lips,
> caught in the words of your mouth;
> then do this, my son, and save yourself,
> for you have come into your neighbour's power;
> go, hasten, and importune your neighbour.
> Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber,
> save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,
> like a bird from the hand of the fowler. (6:1-5)
>
> Be not one of those who give pledges,
> who become surety for debts.
> If you have nothing with which to pay,

why should your bed be taken from under you?
(22:26f)

All those sayings presuppose a developed money economy. Interest on loans in the ancient Near East was exhorbitant, the average rate charged in Babylonia and Assyria being a quarter or a fifth for money loans, and a third for loans in kind (Mendelsohn 1949:23). We do not know what the practice was in Israel, but from the injunctions against taking interest from a fellow Hebrew, we may infer that Israel was no exception to the rule (Mendelsohn 1949:26). The giving of surety was therefore an extremely risky business. Toy (1916:119) observes that commercial lending has to be distinguished from helping the poor and unfortunate. The giving of pledges and surety belong to commercial activities and have to be viewed in the context of interest, usury, and profiteering in general (Boström 1935:55).

We have seen that in the course of re-evaluating wealth, the wise distinguish between wealth gained by righteous and wealth gained by unrighteous means (1986:70). The warning against surety and pledges shows what wealth gained by unrighteous means denotes in concrete terms. The ambiguity of wealth has, therefore, a real basis in socio-economic conditions, characteristic especially of the latter part of the monarchy. This has been argued by G Boström (1935:59ff), who has given the most coherent and plausible explanation of the contrasting evaluation of wealth in Proverbs. Boström shows that most of the sayings and admonitions in Proverbs display an 'agricultural ideal'. Agriculture is the real profession which has been ordained by God, while trade and

commerce is sin 5). Once this basic contrast is understood, much of the ambiguity in the statements about wealth becomes clear. There are two types of wealth: the one whereby a farmer steadily increases his possessions through diligence and hard work, the other whereby one wants to become rich quickly through speculation and dubious mercantile and financial transactions. According to Proverbs 28:19, these are 'worthless pursuits' (Cf Ploeger 1971:411; McKane 1970:631).

> He who tills his land will have plenty of bread,
> but he who follows worthless pursuits will have
> plenty of poverty.

A variant of the same proverb states it even more bluntly:

> He who follows worthless pursuits has no sense.
> (12:11)

The 'agricultural ideal' is most clearly enunciated in Pr 27:23-27:

> Know well the condition of your
> flocks,

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5) This is also true for post-exilic wisdom. Boström gives two telling quotations from Sirach:

> Do not hate toilsome labour, or farm work,
> which were created by the Most High. (7:15)

> A merchant can hardly keep from wrongdoing,
> and a tradesman will not be declared innocent of
> sin.
> Many have committed sin for a trifle,
> and whoever seeks to get rich will avert his eyes.
> As a stake is driven firmly into a fissure between
> stones,
> so sin is wedged in between selling and buying.
> If a man is not steadfast and zealous in the fear of
> the Lord,
> his house will be quickly overthrown. (26:29 -
> 27:3)

and give attention to your herds;
for riches do not last forever;
and does a crown endure to all
generations?
When the grass is gone,
and the new growth appears,
and the herbage of the mountains is gathered,
the lambs will provide you with
clothing
and the goats with a price of the field,
there will be enough goat's milk for your food,
for the food of your household
and the maintenance of your maidens.

Wealth which is sound, stable, self-perpetuating and will not perish, is the one obtained through diligent work with flocks and herds and in agriculture. Money quickly made through commerce and trade and other financial transactions, is dissipated with equal rapidity (McKane 1970:618; Gemser 1963:97). Skladny (1962:46) 6) has shown that many sayings in the collection Pr 25-27 reveal close links with nature and agriculture. Gemser (1963:57) has claimed the same for chapters 10-22:16. Sayings about the diligent and sluggard demonstrate that in the old wisdom wealth is understood in terms of blessing of fields and flocks. Social conditions reflected in these sayings do not display affluence, but a comparatively modest standard of living. To be able to have a good meal is really the desire and the reward of diligence:

A lazy man is consumed by desire and remains hungry,
but the diligent men eat their fill. (13:4) 7)

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6) Skladny calls this collection a 'Bauernspiegel'. We disagree, however, with his assigning of this collection to a later date than 11-15, in which sayings about the righteous and the wicked are especially numerous.

7) Translation by McKane.

Love not sleep, lest you come to
poverty:
open your eyes, and you will have
plenty of bread. (20:13)

This modest standard of living, still typical of the early part of the monarchy 8), stands in marked contrast to the affluence characteristic of the upper class in the eighth and seventh centuries (Cf Wittenberg 1978:141-142).

Boström draws attention to the remarkable fact that the social conditions prevalent in the early period became the 'agricultural ideal' of the wisdom teachers right down to post-exilic times. He emphasizes that it was the ideal of the learned stratum, the scribes, and he asks the question why they should have kept this tradition. The clue can be found in certain texts which portray the farmer no more as well-to-do or rich, but rather as poor. They seem to presuppose the social disruptions of the latter part of the monarchy (1935:68f), and give us the impression that the wisdom teachers were also involved in the struggle against the oppression of the poor, as were the prophets and the Deuteronomist (Gemser 1963:5).

The fallow ground of the poor yields much fruit,
but is swept away through injustice. (13:23)

The fields of the poor would still yield enough to sustain them if it were not for social injustices, such as oppressive exactions, which rob them of the fruit of their labour (McKane 1970:462; Gemser 1963:64). Boström translates 13:23:

'Der Neubruch der Armen gibt viel Speise,
aber solches gibt es, das zu Unrecht angehaeuft
wird'.

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8) Excavations at Tirsah, the modern Tell-el-Farah near Nablus, bear witness to the equality of standards of living in the tenth century. Cf De Vaux 1968:72f.

He understands this in terms of money transactions involving interest and usury (1935:65). The wicked tends to become identified with the merchant and the moneylender. They have the means, through their financial power, to oppress the impoverished farmer. The wise hope that, on account of the just order of creation, these devices will not succeed and this type of wealth will not last.

> He who augments his wealth by interest and increase
> gathers it for him who is kind to the poor. (29:8)
>
> He who oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth,
> or gives to the rich, will only come to want. (22:16)

Just as the wicked is identified with the merchant, the moneylender and usurer, the righteous is identified with the peasant 9). This can be seen in the re-interpretation of the saying Pr 13:4, where the contrast is still the 'diligent' and the 'lazy', in terms of the later contrast of the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' in Pr 13:25.

> A lazy man is consumed by desire and remains hungry
> but diligent men eat their fill. (13:4)

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9) A similar identification of the 'righteous' with the peasant is found in Am 2:6 and 5:12. One could ask the question whether the prophecy of Amos contributed towards the transformation of the language of old wisdom to the religious language of later times in which the contrast righteous-wicked is characteristic. The social conditions are certainly the same. Cf also Pr 12:10:

> A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast,
> but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.

> The righteous man eats his fill
> but the hunger of the wicked man is unsatisfied.
> (13:25) 10)

Because he is poor, the peasant has to battle for his existence, but God will support him on account of his righteousness.

> Jahweh will not let the righteous man go hungry
> but he will obstruct the desire of the wicked.
> (10:3)

> The fear of Jahweh makes for life
> and one passes the night replete, unvisited by evil. 11)

The contrast between the agriculturalist and the merchant is not always clearly expressed, but can be inferred from the contrast between the honest man who is diligent and by the sweat of his brow increases his possessions, and the one who 'hastens to be rich'. Boström offers the plausible explanation that this refers to the money speculator (1935:72ff).

> Wealth hastily gotten will dwindle,
> but he who gathers little by little will increase it.
> (13:11)

> A faithful man will abound in blessings
> but he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished. (28:20)

> The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance,
> but everyone who is hasty comes only to want.
> 21:5)

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10) Translations by McKane.

11) Translations by McKane.

A miserly man hastens after wealth,
and does not know what want will come upon him. (28:22)

An inheritance gotten hastily in the beginning
will in the end not be blessed. (20:21)

Pr 20:21 shows that the **naḥ^{a}lāh**, the land which an Israelite peasant had inherited from his fathers, was passing into the hands of a wealthy moneylender.

Pr 19:2 is also significant, especially if we consider it in conjunction with 19:1. Here the re-evaluation of poverty and wealth comes out very clearly. The poor man, who, as we now may assume, is a poor upright peasant, is better than the one who makes haste (to get rich) by using devious means in order to attain his goal. The 'Better-Saying', as a literary genre taken over from Egypt (Cf Wittenberg 1986:72-74), assumes a new and deeper significance in the social struggle.

Better a poor man whose conduct is blameless,
than a man twisted of speech who is a fool. (19:1)

It is not good for a man to be without knowledge,
and he who makes haste with his feet misses his way. (19:2)

All these sayings present the picture of the merchant and moneylender who is the direct opposite to the diligent agriculturalist working with his flocks and in his fields. Of course they represent a stereotyped picture and could be interpreted as a reaction of an old rural economy to the dynamics of a growing urban-based money economy. Still, in the background there are also very real experiences with the negative effects of an early capitalist system.

Max Weber has pointed out that the oppression of the country-side by the wealthy upper-class in the cities was made possible through readily available money which the rich could lend out at exhorbitant

interest rates, but which they obtained in the first place through commerce (1921:26).It was a common experience that merchants were dishonest in their dealings. Condemnation of false weights and measures are therefore frequently found in Proverbs, just as in the prophetic writings 12). It must have been a general practice in times of scarcity, especially after a bad harvest, for grain merchants to keep back their grain supplies to push up prices (Bruppacher 1924:9; Oesterley 1929:89). In Amos 8:4-6 the prophet castigates them for their business practices which made the peasants more and more dependent on them, leading to an accumulation of debts with all their attendant horrors (Cf esp Lang 1982:47-63). All these negative experiences form the background to the saying Pr 11:26.

> The people curse him, who holds back grain,
> but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it.

In addition to these factors, which account for much of the aversion which wisdom teachers felt for trade and commerce, the dominant position of the Canaanites in the whole area of trade was also a source of grievance. This is reflected in the vocabulary: a 'Canaanite' $k^{e}na^{ca}n\bar{i}$ means 'merchant' in Pr 31:24; Jb 40:30; Ze 14:21 (De Vaux 1968:78). The foreign merchants introduced Canaanite business practices, especially interest on loans, and could be seen as being primarily responsible for the exploitation of the poor. Taking all these considerations into account, the sentiments expressed in other sayings about the rich become comprehensible. We hear of 'treasures gained by wickedness' (10:2), of the 'greedy man who stirs up strife' (28:25), of a man who, instead of giving to the poor 'hides his eyes' (28:27) and 'withholds what he should give' (11:24, Boström 1935:91). Finally, the rich is portrayed as the one who 'trusts in his riches' (11:28), and this by now has become a negative character trait. In view of this development the change in the Masoretic text in Pr 18:11, to which we have already referred (1986:52, footnote 46), becomes understandable. The neutral proverb

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12) Cf Pr 11:1; 16:11; 20:10,23.

A rich man's wealth is his strong city
and like a high wall protecting him.

now reads:

A rich man's wealth is his strong city
and like a high wall - in his imagination. 13)

This reinterpretation of the old saying in a distinctly negative tone of disapproval, could have taken place during this time.

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13) The reading of the MT **b^{e}maskītō** is followed by Gemser (1963:74) and McKane (1970:516). The sense would be that wealth does not really give protection. That wealth is a fortress is the purely subjective opinion of the rich. It does not reflect reality, but only the way how he views his own position. Toy (1916:360), Scott (1965:112), and Oesterley (1929:148) and his BHS follow the reading of the LXX ἐπισκι
which is most probably a rendering of **bim^{e}sukkātō**, that is that which gives security and protection. Toy seems to be right when he claims that **b^{e}maskītō** is probably due to the 'correction of an editor who took offence at the role ascribed to wealth' (1916:360). Originally, the couplet simply states a fact, and can thus be classed as a true proverb (Cf Wittenberg 1986:52).

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