

LXX PROVERBS 3:28 AND ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WISDOM

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Prov 3:28 as it stands in the LXX, which includes a third stich absent from MT, shows a pattern of thought paralleled in ancient Egyptian wisdom. LXX Prov 3:28c is probably original.

Prov 3:27–28 in the MT reads:

(27) Do not withhold a benefit [*tôb*] from one who is eager for it,¹
when it is within your capacity to do (it).

(28) Do not say to your fellow, “Go away and come again, and tomorrow
I’ll give (it to you)”—and all the while you have it.

LXX (all witnesses) has an additional stich at the end of v. 28:

(28c) οὐ γὰρ οἶδας τί τέξεται ἡ ἐπιούσα

For you do not know what the morrow will bring forth (lit., “give birth to”).

This sentence can confidently be retroverted to *ki lo³ tēda^c mah tēlēd yôm*. But the question remains whether this stich is a translator’s addition or if it stood in the LXX’s *Vorlage*, and, if it did, whether it was original or a scribal addition in Hebrew.

The few commentaries that mention v. 28c are in agreement that it is an addition. Toy (1899, p. 78) calls this stich “a not very appropriate gloss, taken from 27:1.” Mezzacasa, in his comprehensive study of LXX Proverbs, says only that the stich is taken from 27:1 with a change of

1. Hebrew *ba^cālāyw*: Clearly the usual sense of this word, “its owner,” is inappropriate, since the would-be recipient is not presently the possessor. LXX’s “the poor” is too restricted. Delitzsch (pp. 99f.) explains *ba^cālāyw* as meaning one worthy of a benefit, comparing Arabic *ahl*, but the worthiness of the beneficiary is not relevant here. The above translation follows (without certainty) Gordis (1983, pp. 90–92), who suggests that the biblical Hebrew noun *be^cālīm* underwent the same semantic process as Yiddish *baylon*, “eager”, “avid”, which he derives from Hebrew *ba^cal*. He suggests that *be^cālīm* developed a “voluntive nuance,” coming to mean “would be owner,” “one avid, eager for.” All such translations can be justified only by the needs of context.

γινώσκεις (1913, p. 121). Scott (1965, p. 48) says that the LXX inserts a line from 27:1 as a reason for the command. LXX Prov 27:1, however, differs from 3:28c, the former reading γινώσκεις instead of οἶδας. LXX Prov 27:1 is not the source of 3:28c. If v. 28c were transferred from 27:1, it must have been an independent translation of that verse or an addition by a Hebrew scribe which was translated differently in the two places. In either case we are faced with the question of why, if the stich is indeed “not very appropriate,” the scribe chose to add it to 3:28, or, if it *is* appropriate, why it should be considered secondary. I think that this sentence, seen in the context of ancient Near Eastern wisdom, is so appropriate that it is best judged part of the maxim in an earlier form.

An examination of similar advice in other wisdom texts shows that the reasoning in vv. 27–28, *including* 28c, is paralleled in Wisdom Literature from the most ancient times. Prov 3:27–28c counsels generosity, motivating the advice by reference to human ignorance of the future. Just how reference to our ignorance of the future can serve as a reason to be generous is seen more clearly in a parallel from the Wisdom of Ptahhotep, § 22 (ll. 339–349), dating from ca. 2200–2000 (late Sixth Dynasty or early Middle Kingdom)²:

- (339) Satisfy your acquaintance with what has accrued to you,
 (340) as is possible for one whom god favors.
 (341) As for him who neglects to satisfy his acquaintances,
 (342) it will be said: “This is a selfish soul [Ka]!”
 (343) One does not know what will happen, such that he might understand
 the morrow.
 [(345) There is no one who knows (the outcome of) his plans, so that he
 might plan the morrow.³]
 (344) A (true) soul is an honest soul, in which one can find repose (?).
 (346) If misfortunes⁴ occur,

2. The translation is my own, based on the text in P. Prisse in Žába, 1956, q.v. for philological notes.

3. Or: “. . . who knows his fortune” (*šhrw*). Line 345, which appears in two later MSS (L₁, L₂) is a variant of l. 343, which appears only in the oldest MS, P. Prisse. In L₁ (where “knows” is omitted) and L₂, the variant appears after l. 344.

4. *Spw n hswt*. On *hswt* see Volten (1955, pp. 362f.), who translates “Widerwärtigkeit, Missgeschick.” Lichtheim (1973, p. 69) translates, “If praiseworthy deeds are done . . .” but “praiseworthy deeds” does not accord with the verb *hpr*, “occur”, or with its variant *iw*, “come to pass.” I would not follow Volten in understanding *hswt* in l. 340 as “misfortune” (Volten translates, “(auch) wenn ein widerwärtiges Schicksal seitens des Gottes (dir) begegnet ist”). First of all, the form is different; second, Volten’s translation implies that one should give benefits *after* a disaster, whereas the rest of the context clearly envisages a disaster as a possible *future* event.

(347) it is (one's) acquaintances who say: "Welcome!"

(348) One does not receive relief from one's town⁵;

(349) one receives (it) [from] one's acquaintances when there is trouble.

This maxim teaches that it is prudent to give of your wealth to your fellows, because you do not know what the future will bring. In the time of disaster, you will receive help only from people you have treated kindly. In other words, do unto others that they may do unto you.

There are additional, but less complete, parallels to Prov 3:27–28 (in the fuller version). A variant of Ptahhotep I. 343 is quoted in a Middle Kingdom dialogue (Gunn, 1926, p. 283, no. 9). In the Middle Egyptian "Eloquent Peasant," this proverb is quoted: "Do not plan for the morrow before it comes, for no one knows what trouble will come in it" (P. Berlin 3024, I, 183). A similar statement appears in a different context in the Late Egyptian Wisdom of Amenemopet, § 18 (19, 13): "The man knows not what the morrow will be like." The point of the saying in its context in Amenemopet is that man must accept God's unknowable plans without fear.

The Wisdom of Ani (18th dynasty) has advice to the same effect⁶:

Do not eat food while another stands by and you fail to stretch out your hand for him to the food. What is there that endures forever? It is man who does not last. One may be rich, while another is poor. Does food remain? Can it not pass away?⁷ As for the one rich last year, he is a vagabond this year. Do not be greedy to fill your belly, since (you) do not know your end at all. Should your—come (to pass), another may give you a benefit.⁸ (8, 3–7).

In spite of some difficulties, the overall sense of the passage is clear: Do not be indifferent to a poor person today, because you might end up poor yourself and be in need of aid.

Ignorance of the future can be mentioned either as a reason to plan for the morrow by investing in good will (thus Ptahhotep and Ani), or as a reason to resign oneself to God's will rather than to trust in one's own powers (thus Amenemopet; similarly Prov 27:1).

5. In other words, you cannot assume that one's neighbors will take care of you in time of trouble, so you must prepare the ground for receiving help. L₂ creates a clearer (though rather banal) concept by substituting "enemies" for "town."

6. This translation generally follows Volten (1937, pp. 117–126).

7. Thus Volten (1937, pp. 119f.) emending. Lichtheim (1976, p. 142): "But food remains for him [who shares it]."

8. The first part of the sentence is obscure. Volten (1937, p. 118), awkwardly: "Es wird (auch) deine Stellung [wnw] kommen, wo ein anderer dir Überbleibsel gibt." Lichtheim (*ibid.*), freely: "Should you come to be in want, another may do good to you."

A maxim with an intent similar to the passage quoted from Ptaḥḥotep apparently occurs in one of the latest of Egyptian wisdom texts, the Wisdom of Onchsheshonqy (19, 10), from Ptolemaic or perhaps Persian times. The translation of the line in question is, however, in dispute. Lichtheim (1980, p. 174) translates:

Do a good deed and throw it in the water;
when it dries you will find it.

If this translation is correct,⁹ Onchsheshonqy is advising that one do a good deed and forget about it; then some time in the future it will be there to benefit you.

The proverb in Onchsheshonqy brings us to a striking biblical parallel, Eccl 11:1–2:

- (1) Cast your bread upon the waters,
for in the course of time you will find it.
- (2) Give a portion to seven or even eight,
for you do not know what misfortune will occur on earth.¹⁰

Eccl 11:1, judging from the parallel in Onchsheshonqy 19, 10 (according to one translation), says that a good deed done and forgotten will be rewarded sometime in the future. V. 2, which has its parallel in Ptaḥḥotep § 22, advises generosity, giving from one's wealth to several people, because (we might paraphrase) you do not know what the morrow will bring. In Proverbs, Qohelet, and Ptaḥḥotep, as in Prov 3:27–28c, generosity is advised as a matter of prudence, as a hedge against disaster.

There are different ways of explaining LXX-Egyptian parallels such as noted above. According to McGilchey (1939, pp. 17–19), LXX Proverbs shows signs of Egyptian coloring that are to be attributed to the Alexandrian locale of the translators. But, as Gerleman has shown (1956, pp. 8f.), the passages McGilchey used as evidence (which do not include 3:28) have either been misunderstood or are at most only vaguely similar to the Egyptian texts that supposedly influenced the translators. A more fundamental objection is that the traditional, native Egyptian culture impinged little on the culture of the Hellenized residents of Alexandria. There is no reason to suppose any familiarity on the part of Alexandrian

9. Stricker (1958, pp. 56–79) translates similarly. Glanville (1955, p. 45), translates: "Do a good deed (only) to throw it into mid-river, and it is extinguished when you find it." I am not able to judge the accuracy of translations from Demotic, but Lichtheim's and Stricker's translation produces a more meaningful proverb than does Glanville's, because the metaphor of "extinguishing" a good deed is obscure, and, furthermore, one would not wish to find an "extinguished" deed.

10. *Mah yiheyeh rā^cāh = mah rā^cāh tiheyeh*; for the construction compare Esth 6:3.

Jews with ancient Egyptian wisdom. In any case, it is very unlikely that a Jewish translator of Proverbs would add a single stich to a verse in order to increase its Egyptian coloration.

Another possibility is that the translator, or a Hebrew scribe in a non-Massoretic tradition, created v. 28c in order to provide motivation for the preceding advice. The type of reasoning shown in LXX Prov 3:27–28 is, after all, present in Wisdom Literature as late as Onchsheshonqy and Qohelet. Yet the idea of v. 28c is utilitarian, far closer in character to the ancient wisdom than to the LXX, which tends to give a stronger ethical-religious cast to the earlier wisdom.¹¹ This tendency is even evidenced in the passage at hand, where the LXX renders *ba^cālāyw* as “the poor,” thus transforming advice to give benefits to others in general into advice to give charity to the poor. The LXX further omits “to your fellow” (*lerē^cākā*). This omission, too, has the effect of restricting the range of the advice to charity toward the poor, but this omission may be accidental. This transformation means that the LXX translator would not have had to add v. 28c as a motive clause, for vv. 27–28ab stands on its own as an ethical counsel urging charity toward the poor. Thus the addition of v. 28c is unlikely to have been the translator’s work.

There are certainly pluses in LXX Proverbs that represent a Hebrew original. We may note Swete’s opinion that the following are among those that belong to the original collections: 7:1a; 8:21a; 9:12a–c, 18a–c; 12:11a, 13a; 17:6a; 18:22a; 22:8a; 24:22a–e; 27:2a, 21a (Swete, 1914, p. 255). The radical differences between MT and LXX in Proverbs after 24:23 indicate that LXX Proverbs received its shape before the crystallization of Proverbs as a book. To be sure, the general tendency is for texts to receive accretions in the course of transmission and copying, rather than to lose material, but later texts can show omissions that are not accidental. For example, the three later copies of Ptaḥḥotep (L₁, L₂, and C in Žába, 1956) show several omissions of verses, and many of these omissions are almost certainly deliberate.¹²

11. See, for example, LXX Prov 11:25, which eliminates the tit-for-tat reasoning of 25b, and 21:14, which eliminates the remark on the utility of bribery. See further Gerleman (1950, pp. 19ff).

12. E.g., lines 137, 173–174, 189–193, 250–256, 275, 283. Some of the omissions may be erroneous—though a known scribal error, such as homoioteleuton, cannot usually be identified. Others, however, are certainly deliberate, as in the case of ll. 189–193, which a later scribe replaced by a version of his own. It is possible, but to my mind very unlikely, that the passages lacking in later copies were moved to places in the instruction that are now in lacunae in the later MSS. (Burkard, 1977, pp. 72ff., makes “Auslassung von Versen ohne erkennbaren mechanischen oder redaktionellen Grund” into a subcategory

I have argued that the Septuagintal form of 3:28 is earlier than the Massoretic, and that the forerunner of the MT omitted a stich, perhaps accidentally, perhaps because it was a seemingly unnecessary utilitarian motivation. But, whether v. 28c is the work of the original author (if we can speak of an "original author" of proverbial wisdom) or of a later scribe, the sentence shows a train of thought with roots in the most ancient Near Eastern wisdom.

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of "Gedächtnisfehler," but it is highly unlikely that Ptaḥhotep was transcribed from memory later than P. Prisse—if ever—especially since some orthographic peculiarities are transmitted to later MSS.) The principle that a fuller text is expansionistic and thus younger is a reasonable rule-of-thumb, but it is certainly not valid in all cases; see, for example, Talmon (1973), which discusses a verse where the LXX seems to show a reductionist tendency.

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