

Proverbs 23:7—“To Think” or “To Serve Food”?

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“For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7, KJV). When a familiar Hebrew proverb has, in turn, become as proverbial in the English language as this one has (thanks to the KJV), one is reluctant to tamper with it. Yet the key word (the Hebrew verb *šāʿar*, “to think”) has long been a *crux interpretum*. What I wish to do in this short article is to delineate how the passage has been analyzed and interpreted in the lexicons, translations, and commentaries, and then to suggest some possible semantic light from Ugaritic.

Lexicons

*BDB*¹ assigns the meaning “calculate, reckon” to *šāʿar* in our verse, translating it “as he has calculated in his soul, so is he,” but hastening to add that such a meaning is dubious. The reason for the uncertainty is that this nuance is not attested anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. The meaning is suggested by late, post-Biblical Hebrew (*Piel* stem) and Jewish Aramaic (*Pael* stem) usage, “put a valuation on, estimate,” and by the late Aramaic noun (from the same root) meaning “interest, market price”² (the Arabic cognate to the latter is a loanword from Aramaic). *BDB* also indicates that the ostensibly related noun *šāʿar* occurs in Gen. 26:12 with the meaning “measure,” supposedly developed from an original meaning of “reckoning.” There the ultimate sense of “a hundred measures” is given as “a hundredfold.” The treatment in *KB*³, *TWOT*⁴, and Holladay⁵ is similar, though Holladay suggests that the text is corrupt.

Translations

Here the readings of the major ancient versions should first be noted. It is obvious that they were struggling with the meaning.

LXX: “For as if one should swallow a hair, so he eats and drinks” (apparently reading *šēʿār*, “hair,” instead of *šāʿar*; similarly the Syriac Peshiṭta, “bristle”).

1 *BDB*, 1045.

2 M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim* . . . (reprint: Brooklyn, 1967), 2:1612–13.

3 *KB*, 1001.

4 *TWOT*, 2:946.

5 W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1971), 380.

Latin Vulgate: "For like a soothsayer or diviner he appraises (conjectures?) that of which he is ignorant" (a very free paraphrase indeed).

The renderings of Prov. 23:7a by the principal English versions follow next:

<i>KJV</i> :	For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.
<i>NKJV</i> :	For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.
<i>ASV</i> :	For as he thinketh within himself, so is he.
<i>NASB</i> :	For as he thinks within himself, so he is.
<i>RSV</i> :	for he is like one who is inwardly reckoning.
Berkeley:	for as one who inwardly figures the cost, so is he.
Amplified:	For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.
<i>JPS</i> :	He is like one keeping accounts.
<i>GNB</i> :	What he thinks is what he really is.
<i>JB</i> :	It would be like a tempest in his throat.
<i>NAB</i> :	For in his greed he is like a storm.
<i>NEB</i> :	for they will stick in your throat like a hair.
<i>NIV</i> :	for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost.

As can readily be seen, the lexicons and most of the English versions essentially agree on the meaning "calculate, reckon, think (about the cost), figure, keep accounts." The *NIV*, however, provides in a footnote the alternative translation "for as he *puts on a feast*, so he is" (italics mine). The *JB* and *NAB* renderings were stimulated by an idea from the Egyptian "Wisdom of Amenemope." The *NEB* translation was inspired by the LXX.

Commentaries

In their interpretations, most of the commentaries follow the traditional understandings reflected in the lexicons and English versions.

Zöckler: "this meaning [stated above] of the expression gives a general sense so appropriate that we ought clearly to abide by it," though he acknowledges that "no support can be found for it anywhere in the Old Testament."⁶

Delitzsch revocalizes the perfect to the participle *šō'ēr* and translates "For as one who calculates with himself, so is he."⁷

Deane and Taylor-Taswell: "The meaning is that this niggardly host watches every morsel which his guest eats, and grudges what he appears to offer so liberally."⁸

Fausset: "He *estimates* his meats, and the cost of the entertainment, more than he does you; and is ill at ease if you eat much of his food."⁹

6 O. Zöckler, "Proverbs," in J. P. Lange, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* . . . (Grand Rapids, n.d.), 200.

7 F. Delitzsch, "Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon," in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, n.d.), 2:108-10.

8 W. J. Deane and S. T. Taylor-Taswell, "Proverbs," in H. D. M. Spence and J. S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1983 reprint), 9:441.

9 A. R. Fausset, "Job-Isaiah," in R. Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and D. Brown, *A Commentary . . . on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, 1967 reprint), 3:489.

Toy, in effect, gives up on the verse: “The Heb. of the first couplet (which has apparently lost some word or words) hardly admits of a satisfactory translation.”¹⁰

Cohen (Soncino series): “A generous host gives unstintingly to his guest and does not calculate what it costs him; but a miserly host resembles a man who estimates the amount involved in a transaction. Although he extends a cordial invitation to his guest to eat and drink, his heart is not in his words because he is worrying over the outlay.”¹¹

Whybray basically follows the LXX.¹²

The best and most complete treatment of this problematic clause is by McKane. After giving some assent to the common view, represented by most of the commentaries above, he proceeds to point out its weaknesses. He then notes that Dahood relates *šr* to Ugaritic *šr*, which is used of serving food. Finally, he concludes by favoring the LXX reading, translating it “Eating and drinking (with him) is as if one should swallow a hair.”¹³

Other commentaries could be cited, but the ones referred to are representative.

Lexical Light from Ugaritic

Perhaps it should first be noted that our perplexing verb and clause appear as part of the eighth saying in a section of Proverbs containing thirty sayings altogether (22:17–24:22; see particularly 22:20, where the correct translation is almost certainly “Have I not written for you thirty [sayings] . . . ?”). Thus 22:17–24:22 is structurally identical with the “Wisdom of Amenemope,” which also contains thirty sections. There are certain verbal similarities as well, though there is no close parallel to the eighth saying. Since it is always important to interpret all Scripture in the light of its context, we now provide the *NIV* rendering of the entire eighth saying (23:6–8):

- 6 Do not eat the food of a stingy man,¹⁴
do not crave his delicacies;
- 7 for he is the kind of man
who is always thinking about the cost.
“Eat and drink,” he says to you,
but his heart is not with you.
- 8 You will vomit up the little you have eaten
and will have wasted your compliments.

The only part of this translation I would change is v. 7a, where I prefer the footnote alternative: “for as he puts on a feast, so he is.” Even here, however, I would make a slight addition in order to bring out more clearly what I regard as the force of *benapšô*: “for as he puts on a feast within himself, so he is.”

10 C. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1970 reprint), 430.

11 A. Cohen, “Proverbs,” in A. Cohen, ed., *Soncino Books of the Bible* (New York, 1946), 153.

12 R. N. Whybray, “The Book of Proverbs,” in P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer, eds., *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge, 1972), 135.

13 W. McKane, *Proverbs*, OTL (Philadelphia, 1975), 383–85.

14 Lit. “an evil eye.” As in 28:22, reference is to a stingy, miserly man. It is the opposite of “a good eye” (22:9), referring to a generous man, who will be blessed (enriched) because he shares his food with the poor.

John Gray appears to be the first to make the connection between Ugaritic ḫr and Hebrew šār ¹⁵ in Prov. 23:7. Commenting on *Anat* 1:4–5, he writes: “ yḫr is found in the same sense in Gordon *UH* 77, 35 and in Hebrew as שער , e.g., Proverbs xxiii, 7.”¹⁶ Again he notes: “The root ḫr is used in the sense of ‘arranging’ seats and tables etc. in Gordon *UH* *ḫnt*, II, 20. It occurs possibly in Hebrew in the sense of ‘arranging’, ‘disposing’, e.g., Proverbs xxiii, 7.”¹⁷ His most extensive remarks come still later. I quote at length:

In Proverbs xxiii, 7 . . . the difficulty of the text was felt by the Greek translators who rendered שער by τρίχα , ‘a hair’, obviously reading שער [*sic*]. The meaning would then be ‘he is as a hair in the throat’. In the Wisdom of Amenemope . . . the same type of man is compared to a storm within one. This suggests that the reading of the Hebrew text may have originally been שער corrupted to שער during dictation of the text and subsequently read as שער . The Massoretic reading, however, might be supported by the usage of ḫr in the Ras Shamra texts. In Gordon *UH* 77, 35 in the payment of the dowry of *Nkl* ‘her brothers arrange (yḫr) the weights of the balances’.¹⁸

After citing two more occurrences of ḫr in a context of putting on a feast, or banquet, Gray concludes: “On lexical grounds then there is no reason why the Massoretic reading of Proverbs xxiii, 7 should not stand. . . . The reading of the Egyptian text, however, suggests that after all emendation is necessary in this case.”¹⁹ In the light of all the evidence, I fail to see why “emendation is necessary in this case.”

Dahood concurs with Gray’s proposal (referring to the first edition of Gray’s work): “J. Gray has correctly identified the root ḫr with Ugar. ḫr ‘to serve, arrange’, collocated with ḫm in *ḫnt*: I:4–5, yḫr wyḫmnh , ‘He serves and feeds him’.”²⁰ Dahood mentions this again later in another work: “ ḫr ‘to arrange, to serve (food)’. On Prov. 23:7, J. Gray.”²¹ In his Glossary, Gordon (*UT*) defines ḫr as follows: “ ḫr ‘to arrange’ (77:35; *ḫnt*: II: 20, 37). ‘to serve (food)’ (*ḫnt*: I:4).”²²

Next we present the Ugaritic texts where ḫr occurs (the translations are mine; the texts may be found in Gordon, *UT*). In the first passage someone is putting on a feast for Baal.

Anat 1 (V AB, A): 4–5:

qm yḫr	He rises, he serves food,
wyḫmnh ²³	and he gives him to eat.

In the same text (*Anat* 2 [V AB, B]: 20–22) the warrior goddess Anat is described as making banquet preparations:

15 The phonemes ḫ and š correspond when Heb. š derives from original *ḫ .

16 J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1965), 38, n. 7.

17 *Ibid.*, 250, n. 1.

18 *Ibid.*, 266.

19 *Ibid.*

20 M. Dahood, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Rome, 1963), 47.

21 M. Dahood, *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology* (Rome, 1965), 75.

22 C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome, 1965), 505, entry #2719.

23 *UT*, 253; interestingly, the latter two verbs appear in the eighth saying in Proverbs and, as in Ugaritic, they are in a context of offering a meal (ḫm in v. 6 and ḫr in v. 7).

<i>ṭṣr ksāt lṃhr</i>	She sets up chairs for the soldiers,
<i>ṭṣr²⁴ ṭḥnt²⁵ lšbim</i>	sets tables for the warriors,
<i>hdm lḡzrm²⁶</i>	footstools for the heroes. ²⁷

As the following lines make clear, Anat here resorts to deception, which is typical of her trickery and treachery. She is really "setting them up."

The reference in 77 (NK): 35²⁸ has already been dealt with by Gray above. The one in *Anat* 2 (V AB, B): 37 is uncertain.

Conclusion

First, it would seem that Ugaritic *ṭṣr* can mean "to arrange, set (up), offer, serve (food), put on a feast or banquet."

Second, Hebrew *šāʿar* in Prov. 23:7 should probably be given a new etymology, by relating it to Ugaritic *ṭṣr*, and be assigned the meaning "to serve food, put on a feast." The verb in both languages appears in the context of offering or hosting a meal.

Third, interestingly the ultimate sense of the passage in Proverbs is basically the same with either translation. If the meaning of Hebrew *šāʿar* is "to serve food," the point is still that it is *how* a host serves food *within himself* that reveals his character and motivation. Outwardly he may be serving a lavish feast, but inwardly he may be grudging every bite his guests take.

Thus the eighth saying is about a stingy, miserly host who, for whatever reason, desires to give the appearance of being a generous person when, in reality, he is a hypocrite. He is insincere—"his heart is not with you" (v. 7). When his stinginess begins to become obvious from his attitude, mannerisms, facial expressions, speech, actions, etc., it turns the stomachs of his guests, and in disgust they realize that they have wasted their compliments (v. 8).

24 The form *ṭṣr* is apparently the G inf. (*ṭaʿāru*) and is consistent with Held's view that the Ugaritic (and Hebrew!) poets usually varied their verbal forms in parallel cola. They would often use the same verb but with a different stem or tense. For the sequence *ṭṣr* . . . *ṭṣr*, then, see M. Held, "The YQTL-QTL (QTL-YQTL) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and in Ugaritic," in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, eds., M. Ben-Horin, B. D. Weinryb, and S. Zeitlin (Leiden, 1962), 281-90; cf. also his article, "The Action-Result (Factitive-Passive) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and Ugaritic," *JBL* 84 (1965), 272-82. I take great pleasure in contributing an article to this memorial volume. Professor Held was a master of the Semitic languages and literatures.

25 As I have indicated elsewhere ("The Value of Ugaritic for Old Testament Studies," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 [April 1976], 125), the Hebrew for "table" (*šulḥān*) was said to be related to an Arabic verb, *salaḥa*, with the resultant meaning, "skin or leather mat spread on ground" (*BDB*, 1020). Now Ugaritic provides the true etymology with its cognate noun, *ṭḥn*, "table." Since two of the phonemes differ from the alleged Arabic cognate, Ugaritic proves such an etymology to be incorrect, and it must now be abandoned. The word simply means "table," with nothing said about its nature, structure, or material.

26 *UT*, 253. Based on Ugaritic, Held has argued (class notes) for *ṣr* I ("to help, save, rescue") and *ṣr* II ("to be strong") in Biblical Hebrew. *ṣr* I = *ṣr* (*UT ṣdr*) in Ugaritic, while *ṣr* II = *ḡr* in Ugaritic. A few passages where *ṣr* II may exist in the Hebrew Bible are 1 Chron. 5:20; 12:1; 2 Chron. 20:23; 26:15; Ps. 28:7; 89:20 ("I have bestowed strength," *NIV*); Isa. 41:10; Ezek. 30:8; 32:21.

27 H. L. Ginsberg's translation (*ANET*, 136) of these lines reads: "She pictures the chairs as heroes, / Pretending a table is warriors, / And that the footstools are troops." I can only assume that Ginsberg's rendering is based on the alleged connection between Biblical Hebrew *šāʿar* and the post-Biblical and Jewish Aramaic usage discussed above.

28 *UT*, 183.

The Bible commends generosity and unselfish sharing, and condemns avarice, hoarding, and miserliness. Society in general frowns on the Silas Marners and Scrooges of this world, and praises its Good Samaritans. So “do not eat the food of a stingy man, . . . for as he serves food within himself, so he is. ‘Eat and drink’, he says to you, but his heart is not with you.” Let the wise show their wisdom by heeding this sage counsel.