

**Excerpts from**  
***Lectures on the Book of Proverbs***

by

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Proverbs 30:1-4 -- *"The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, even his prophecy. This man declared to Ithiel--to Ithiel and Ucal: Surely I am more brutish than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom nor have knowledge of the holy. Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if you know?"*

We have now finished what are properly the proverbs of Solomon, consisting, after the introductory part of the book, of the proverbs selected by himself and those subsequently copied out from his larger collection by the men of God in the days of Hezekiah. What remains in the 30th and 31st chapters may be regarded as a kind of *appendix* to the book, and in all probability was added by the same persons, no doubt under divine guidance.

The first verse may be considered as the *title* prefixed by them to this small portion of inspired truth, which they were thus directed to preserve from oblivion and to insert in the canon of holy writ. It is a small portion, consisting of no more than this one chapter. And yet it is not smaller than the words of Obadiah in the Old Testament or the Epistle of Jude in the New. The occasional sayings and the inspired prophecies of others besides Agur are recorded in the histories of the Bible, although not assigned a distinct and distinctly titled place in the Canon any more than Agur's. The apostle Jude in his epistle, short as it is, has redeemed from being lost and forgotten one of the earliest prophecies delivered in the history of our world--the prophecy of Enoch, the seventh from Adam. Had the chapter before us been separated from the book of Proverbs, and placed alone with the Title in the first verse prefixed to it, it would have borne resemblance in length to one of the small books referred to, "The Vision of Obadiah."

Agur must have been well known as a "*man of God*," even though it may be doubted whether he belonged to the number of those who were called the "sons of the prophets," those who were trained in the seminaries called the "schools of the prophets." The doubt has been founded on what he says of himself in the third verse: "*I neither learned wisdom nor have knowledge of the holy*." This has been interpreted as amounting to much the same thing as the words of Amos, "I am not a prophet, neither a prophet's son." How far this may be correct and conclusive I will not pretend to say. We know nothing of Agur from Scripture history and but little of him here.

His "*words*" are called a "*prophecy*." It is, in the Hebrew, the term which in some passages is translated "*burden*." It occurs again in chapter 31 verse 1. Both there and here it means a *weighty and divinely dictated discourse or writing*. This portion, then, of the sayings of Agur has thus been preserved, and with the sanction of other inspired men assigned a place in the sacred Canon.

Some of the ancient fathers had a fancy that by Agur was meant Solomon himself. But this could have no foundation except for the *place* in which the words are inserted, which is but slender evidence. They probably got placed here in consequence of the resemblance they bore to the contents in general of the book of Proverbs.

*"This man declared to Ithiel--to Ithiel and Ucal."* Some translations have it *touching* or *concerning* Ithiel and Ucal. But it is much more likely that Ithiel and Ucal were two of Agur's pupils.

Some have regarded the import of the names *Ithiel* and *Ucal*, of which the one signifies *God with me* and the other *the Mighty* or *the Mighty one*, not as names but as expressing the nature of the prophecy or of its subject. But this seems a mere fancy both in itself and in any attempt to make out the appropriateness of the terms as descriptive of the lessons contained in the chapter. Almost all Hebrew names were significant; and we take the common opinion to be the true one (as we do in many other cases), that Ithiel and Ucal were two of Agur's disciples to whom he addressed his instruction, very probably in answer to inquiries from them. Only make the supposition (surely not an improbable one in itself) that they had asked him some questions on topics of a mysterious nature--topics surpassing the apprehension of the human intellect and on which God had not been pleased to make any revelation, such as the "deep things of God," the "secret things which belong to Yahweh"--and this would impart a peculiarly striking propriety and emphasis to his words, especially those with which he begins.

*"Surely I am more brutish than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom nor have knowledge of the holy."* Observe that this language is not the language of another about Agur but his own words about himself. If we were to regard Agur as a man destitute of ordinary understanding (and little, if at all, above the level of the beast) simply because he speaks of himself in these words, then we would have to regard the Apostle Paul as just barely having the character of a child of God because he refers to himself as "less than the least of all the saints." In both cases we have the language of strong feeling, the feeling of deep personal abasement and conscious deficiency. And such language is never measured and precise; it is always very strong and hyperbolic.

Imagine Agur bringing the powers of his mind to some subject of mysterious depth or sublime and incomprehensible vastness. He knows his incompetence to fathom or grasp it, and he sinks under the weight of the difficulty and the consciousness of his ignorance and weakness. He therefore breaks out with words of hyperbole as he tries to express the burden he feels. And this is in perfect harmony with nature. Let us consider Asaph, who after recovering from temptation and being made sensible of its extreme foolishness, exclaimed, "I was *as a beast* before thee." In like manner Agur felt the subjects under his consideration utterly above and beyond him, as if he had no understanding at all. Indeed, it is neither impossible nor improbable that in his humility of mind he might have felt his ignorance and incompetence to be owing in part to a spiritual deficiency in godly aspiration. He may have been sensible then, as we all are now, of how greatly obscured the view of divine things can be, and how rising affections and earnest longings after the knowledge of God and heavenly and eternal realities can be kept down by the influence of the flesh and the world.

It is not unlikely that Ithiel and Ucal had shown a propensity to pry into the secrets of God, to discover what God had not been pleased to make; and to urge their desire with a vehemence and importunity that, however natural, went beyond what was fitting. Their teacher sets them an example--an example of the humility of mind which belongs to creatures of limited faculties, and who are dependent upon God for the knowledge of what was beyond their own penetration. He expresses himself strongly in order to impress their minds the more deeply. And the more they had been accustomed, with admiration and confidence, to look up to him as their superior, the more would they be surprised and struck by the force of his expressions of self abasement in regard to the subjects of their questions. Agur had become duly sensible how little it was that he possessed of wisdom and knowledge, especially in what regarded the highest of all the fields of human investigation--the being, attributes, counsels, and ways of the Most High and Most Holy.

In the third verse, "*the Holy*" is in the original a plural word--*the Holies*, or *the Holy Ones*. It is the same as in 9:10. A comparison of the two passages shows clearly that it is a designation of Deity, and the plural nouns used in regard to Yahweh are justly regarded as having a reference in them to the *personal distinction in the unity of the Godhead*. And what if the nature of Deity in this and other respects was one of the very subjects of the inquisitive speculation of these disciples of Agur?

It was as if he had said: "You ascribe wisdom and knowledge to your instructor. You look up to him for information--the solution to your difficulties, the unraveling of your perplexities, the clearing of your darkness. But you expect a great deal more from him than he is able to communicate. I have thought of your questions. I have exhausted the powers of my mind upon them. And however far I may fall in your eyes, still I must avow my ignorance and incompetence of matters so deep that the consideration of them has overwhelmed me!"

There are subjects which God has not explained and of which, perhaps, no explanation could be given that would be intelligible to the mental capacities of man, subjects regarding "the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity," who "dwells in the light which no man can approach," whom "no man has seen or can see," and "whose ways are high above out of our sight." So Agur, in order to check their presumption and impress the reasonableness of being satisfied in ignorance on some subjects manifestly beyond man's unassisted powers and beyond the boundary which divine revelation has prescribed for itself, adds, "*Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if you know?*"

Of these striking words the general spirit appears to me to be the same with that of Job 11:7-9, 12, the subject of which is the incomprehensibility of GOD. We cannot scale the height, we cannot fathom the depth, we cannot reach the length, and we cannot embrace the width of this vast illimitable subject. Such is the lesson of these words now before us. "*Who has ascended up into heaven?*" That is, who has ascended to see the glories of the INVISIBLE, to learn the secrets of the world unknown, to read the books of providence, grace, and judgment? And who has "*descended*," that is, to bring down and reveal the discoveries he has made?

No man has mounted to the third heavens and explored their hidden wonders. No man has received a commission to carry back the revelation of what he has seen and heard to the sons of men, the children of the earth. If there is such a man, "*What is his name, and what is his son's*

*name, if you know?"* Who and where is he? What is his name? Is he on earth? And if he has gone the way of all living, then who and where are they who have the privilege and honor of being related to him? What is his son's name? Point out the descendants of the man whom God has thus supremely distinguished.

This is neither more nor less than a challenge to find and name one man, either now alive or from any preceding age, who has had an intuitive and perfect acquaintance with the mysteries of God's being and the secrets of His mind. It warns against presumption and implies a strong admonition to humility--to be satisfied with the amount of divine revelation given.

The language also clearly conveys the sentiment that no one but a being who himself possesses the perfections, exercises the powers, and performs the works of God can be capable of comprehending God. This seems the intended import of the questions, "*Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth?"* Point out the man who has done or can do these things, and I will show you the man who is competent to answer your questions, the man who can penetrate the depths of God and give you full satisfaction. The plain import is, *He who has done and continues to do these things is God himself, and by God himself alone can God be comprehended.*

These words have been understood by some commentators as containing a prophetic intimation of Jesus, who came down from heaven to be our instructor and Savior and then ascended into heaven to be our advocate; who as one with the Father created and upholds all things; who was known in some measure to the ancient church as Yahweh, *I AM*, and the only-begotten Son of God; and from whom alone the knowledge of God can be obtained. The name of the great Creator, as manifested through his Son, appears thus to be inquired after.

While the believer should rightly be interested in finding the Lord Jesus in every passage of the Bible that can justly be interpreted of Him, yet most assuredly the true way to honor God is to endeavor to discover in all cases the precise meaning of every portion of it, to find the design of the Holy Spirit and *the intended lesson* to be conveyed. In every case this should be our *sole* and earnest aim. Now I cannot regard the view of this passage which has just been mentioned as at all the true one for the following reasons.

1. The form of the question here implies the idea of *difficulty* or *impossibility* to give either the name of him who "has gathered the wind in his fists, bound the waters in a garment, and established all the ends of the earth," or to give "the name of his son." Now when we consider the question as relating to the actual Creator and Governor of the physical universe and the elements and powers of nature, there could exist *no difficulty* in naming the one who did the things specified. There could be no difficulty in giving the name of the almighty Maker and Superintendent of all things.

2. You will observe that the question, "What is his name, or what is his son's name," applies to the same person of whom it is also asked, "Who has ascended up into heaven, or descended?" Now if this is supposed to refer to Jesus, the future Immanuel, then what are we to make of the additional question, "*What is his son's name?"* And the question, "Who has ascended up into heaven, or descended," cannot apply to the Father; nor is it at all assumed that it does.

3. According to the terms of the exposition given above, a prophetic reference to Jesus is made. He came down from heaven to be our instructor and Savior and then ascended to heaven to be our advocate. If this be the true interpretation, then should not the questions in the passage be inverted in their order? "Who has *descended* from heaven, and *ascended*?" But in the order in which they do stand, they are not susceptible of any other sense than that which we have placed upon them, namely, "Where is the man, where are there any traces of his existence, where is his son that we may find his genealogy?" It is as if Agur said, "You ask *me* your questions. But have *I* gathered the wind in my fists? Have *I* bound up the waters in a garment? Have *I* established the ends of the earth? Before you can obtain satisfactory answers to your questions, you must find the man who has done all this."

While I say these things in regard to the immediate and proper sense of the passage, I am far from denying that what is said in it is in the fullest amount of its meaning true respecting Jesus of Nazareth, "God manifest in the flesh." But does that mean there are no questions still to be asked? Is everything that was before mysterious respecting God and his ways now plain and comprehensible? No. There are many questions that may be asked of which the revelation of God gives no answer. And of the revelation which has been given, there are many explanations we desire but which God has not seen fitting to give.

We are in need of lessons of humility, self-diffidence, and gratitude for what has been made known, as well as lessons of patient and submissive acquiescence in that measure of knowledge that God has seen fit to withhold and keep among the "secret things" which belong to Himself. It is our duty to receive with meekness what God has taught us and not to attempt making additions. It is good to have our minds fully disciplined to this. This is the lesson pressed by Agur on each of his disciples, and through them upon us.