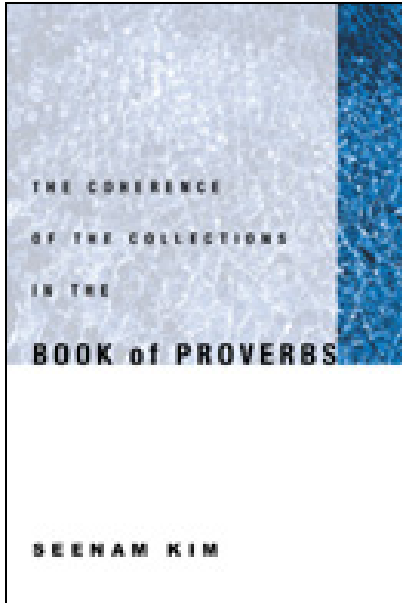


RBL 05/2008



Kim, Seenam

The Coherence of the Collections in the Book of Proverbs

Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2007. Pp. xvi + 292. Paper.
\$34.00. ISBN 1556355181.

Jutta Krispenz
Philipps-Universität Marburg
Marburg, Germany

The study by Seenam Kim, Professor of Old Testament and Vice President of Academic Affairs at the International Theological Seminary in El Monte, applies a complex method on an often-underestimated part of the Old Testament. Kim starts from two widely accepted statements on the book of Proverbs: that it is divided into collections that differ from one another in style and content; and that it mirrors a worldview that is shaped by an international, more or less secular, tradition in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East called the wisdom tradition. While explicitly adopting the first statement and thus accepting the existence of different collections in the book of Proverbs, Kim does not agree with most scholars when it comes to characterizing Proverbs as secular and international. As to the international relation of Proverbs to other ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts, he points to similarities between biblical proverbs and Chinese proverbs, which surely are not due to a common tradition; John Ruffle already made a similar point thirty years ago (“The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBull* 28 [1977]: 29–68). Kim points out that the persons who appear in Proverbs can be perceived as Israelites. He also opposes the view that wisdom is a “secular” phenomenon: “With regard to the secular aspect of wisdom, it is the position of this study that the sage did not intend to present wisdom as secular in Proverbs” (xiv). That is why Kim prefers a religious interpretation of the text whenever this seems possible

and why he presumes that all the persons mentioned anywhere in the book are Israelites and that the text is of Israelite origin, written in Hebrew.

Kim's aim is "to understand the characteristics of each collection and the relationship between collections"(xvi). In the book he examines the vocabulary of the collections in the book of Proverbs. As collections, he accepts only the seven collections that are marked by "internal titles" (ix): (1) Prov 1-9; (2) 10-22:16; (3) 22:17-24:22; (4) 24:23-34; (5) 25-29; (6) 30:1-33; and (7) 31:1-31. As to the vocabulary, Kim considers all the verbs, adjectives, and nouns in the text, as long as they are exclusive to one collection or a group of collections. By investigating this part of the vocabulary, Kim singles out the "exclusive vocabulary" of each collection and all possible groups of collections. He thinks that the exclusive vocabulary of a collection will characterize the respective collection and that the exclusive vocabulary of a group of collections is able to indicate the relationship of these collections, as long as the use of the words is coherent throughout the texts under consideration. Based on this presupposition, Kim investigates the exclusive vocabulary of each collection and of all the possible groups of collections. In addition, he describes the use of the exclusive terms, sometimes even the use of an exclusive terminology in the respective part(s) of the book of Proverbs. His results, which he summarizes at the end of his study, are not altogether astonishing: collections 2 and 5 appear to be closely related to each other; collections 1, 2, and 3 share a considerable amount of exclusive words and expressions; and collections 6 and 7 seem closely related. In this last chapter of his book, Kim looks not only at words but also at phrases or, based on the study of Daniel C. Snell (*Twice-Told Proverbs and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993]), complete verses that appear in different collections. The book provides readers with the complete information about exclusive words in Proverbs, each of the collections, and any possible grouping of collections in a tripartite appendix as well as an index of Hebrew words, so that other scholars can use the material he has collected.

The study is surely the result of a long period of meticulous and unselfish work on this challenging book, yet some questions must be asked, especially concerning the basic design of the study. Kim ventures a statistical study of a specific part of the vocabulary in the collections of the book of Proverbs. Although exegetes quite often deal with arguments, which are statistic by nature (especially when attributing a text to an "author"), statistics only play an inconsiderable role in exegetical discussions. That may be the reason for the fact that, in biblical exegesis, some basic rules concerning statistics are not always observed. This is also true for Kim's study:

Although certain factors, such as the size of a collection, frequency of a word in the OT, and the significance of a word in the wisdom context, must be taken into consideration in an attempt to establish literary relationship between collections,

the significance of table 1.1 is that the numbers of the exclusive words can serve as indicators for the possibility of close relationship between given collections. For example, the higher numbers of the exclusive words in several groups of the collections (I-II [87], I-V [38], I-II-III-V [35], and I-II-III [26]) imply higher possibility of literary links between the collections. (1–2)

Although he remarks on the different length of the collections and seems to be aware of the implications this will have, he nonetheless sticks to using raw data and assumes that the probability of a literary relationship will rise with a higher number of exclusive words. A reader wanting to use Kim's material for his or her own study could overcome the problem with the use of raw data by dividing the figures given by Kim by the number of words in the respective collection(s) or by the number of verses in these collection(s). But the problem with Kim's own study will not altogether be solved by doing this. Actually, the diversity of the vocabulary, which leads to some collections showing different "exclusive words," depends on the linguistic skills of the author, the genre (which is not even mentioned by Kim) and the text length, but the vocabulary will not grow in a linear fashion with a growing text. Usually, in a narrative text, the number of new words will increase strongly in the beginning of the text. As the text goes on, there will be more and more words that have been used previously in the text, and the increase in "new" words will slow down. The diversity in vocabulary is usually measured by the type-token relation.

What Kim has counted are actually the types, but only of the nouns, adjectives, and verbs used exclusively in one collection or in a group of collections. His figures can account for the *difference* of one or more collection(s) against the rest of Proverbs. That means that, if collection 1 shows 168 words, used only in collection 1 in the book of Proverbs, these 168 words mark the difference in the vocabulary between collection 1 and the rest of Proverbs. It is by no means certain that these 168 words are representative of the collection's content. On the contrary, this will not be the case very often, as the exclusive words often are rare words, which will not have too much impact on the overall theme—if there is any such theme in a collection. The study of Udo Skladny (*Die ältesten Spruchsammlungen in Israel* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962]) tried to find topical coherence in collections 2 and 5 by investigating the semantics of the vocabulary. Like some other books dealing with coherence in Proverbs, Skladny's work is not mentioned in the bibliography.

The manner in which Kim uses rare words leads him to conclusions that are statistically invalid: "The frequency of *ba'ar* 'brutish' and *nābāl* 'foolish' is low in the Old Testament. The two terms occur exclusively in the two collections [2 and 6] in connection with other wisdom terms. This phenomenon suggests a coherent aspect of the collections" (219).

While *ba'ar* occurs once in each of the collections, *nābāl* is used twice in collection 2 and once in collection 6; collection 2 consists of 3,525 words, 6 of 378. Three words out of 3,525 and two words out of 378 are simply not enough to establish a coherence between the two collections. The conclusion that can be reached from the rare occurrence of words is in fact that these words are rare. Statistics will help one to find structures in large groups, but it should never be used on rare events, nor should it be used on small samples. Collection 4, containing of 119 words, is not an ideal sample, especially when compared with collection 2, but deciding whether Prov 30:2–4 (22 words) or 31:1–9 (69 words) have been translated from Aramaic or rather formulated to give that impression (xv) is beyond the possibilities of a statistical argument. For the last point, concerning the origin of 30:2–4 and 31:1–9, however, Kim relies on the work of E. Y. Kutscher, which again shows that the use of statistics is generally a weak point in Old Testament studies.

On the other hand, it should be clear that the kind of investigation Kim aims at with his study is impossible without using statistics. So, basically his book is a step in the right direction, and his material can be deployed on other studies by relating the figures to the text length. This may, one hopes, inspire other scholars to carry on in that direction. Moreover, those parts dealing with single words or semantic groups within the exclusive words are valuable presentations of the respective words throughout the book of Proverbs. They can be used similarly to articles in a theological dictionary, focused on this part of the Old Testament. This is also supported by an index of Hebrew words at the end of the book. In this way the study will be an inspiring and useful tool for those working on the book of Proverbs.