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**ANCIENT JEWISH
PROVERBS**

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COMPILED AND CLASSIFIED BY
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Ancient Jewish Proverbs by Abraham Cohen.

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That many of the proverbs originated in the villages and not in the large towns is evident from the numerous references to nature and agricultural work. Cf. nos. 2, 21, 54, 85, 90, 111, 113, 130, 216, 239, 276. Such sayings would on the whole belong to an early period, since it was only in the first centuries of the current era that it could be said: "As for ourselves, we neither inhabit a maritime country, nor do we delight in merchandise ...; but the cities we dwell in are remote from the sea, and having a fruitful country for our habitation, we take pains in cultivating that only."⁷ The proverbs connected with Trades will accordingly be comparatively late.

Historical incidents have given rise to proverbs, nos. 25, 44, 230 ff., 246, 269 f., 326; and in most cases we have not been supplied with the key to the details. A Biblical source is to be claimed for nos. 252, 257, 270, 280. There is one folk-saying, based on the Bible, that seems to have been in common use as early as the beginning of the second century AD. (in the time of R. Akiba, see *Jalkut to Prov.* § 958), and is worthy of quotation. "In the West (*i.e.* Palestine), when a man took to himself a wife people used to ask him "*Mätzā* or *Mōtzē*"?" (*Jeb.* 63^b). The key to the question is the following two Scriptural verses; "Whoso hath found (*mätzā*) a wife hath found good" (*Prov.* xviii. 22), and "I find (*mōtzē*) woman more bitter than death" (*Eccles.* vii. 26). The question, then, means, "Do you find married life "good" or "more bitter than death"?" This is a good example of how the Bible became the source of popular sayings.

The proverbs reveal to us various habits and customs of the Jewish people at that period of their history. We see what pride they took in their personal appearance (no. 202), and how they strove to make their homes as beautiful as possible (nos. 203 f.). They were abstemious (no. 184), but not freed from superstition (no. 348).

Workmen were respected and idlers despised (nos. 156 ff.). Only in few instances do we find a class of workmen contemned—*e.g.* in the case of weavers (nos. 23 f., 53, etc.).⁸ Such a proverb as no. 148 teaches us that it was a common practice to put by the family savings in jars.

A reference to this custom is perhaps to be found in 2 Cor. iv. 7. Nos. 73 and 99 could only have arisen in a country where snakes, and nos. 11, 15, 72, 76 where dogs were numerous. No. 150 throws light on the kind of food eaten by the poor.

Generally speaking, the close study of the proverbs of the ancient Jews must yield much information about the country in which they lived, their occupations, their habits, their thoughts and environment, with the result that we can form a truer picture of what they were like. Readers of Franz Delitzsch's *Jewish Artisan Life in the Time of Christ* will remember the fine use to which he puts Jewish proverbs in his attempted reconstruction of life in Jerusalem.

The unbiassed student, who approaches the consideration of these proverbs without preconceived ideas about Palestinian and Babylonian Jewry in the first five centuries of this era, will probably arrive at the conclusion that much that has been written upon that subject is based more on prejudice than fact.

The quotations collected in the following pages may offer a surer guide to a fair conception of the character of the Jewish people, and if this be so, lovers of the truth will

⁷ Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, I. 12.

⁸ Trade guilds seem to have had their own proverbs, since we read of millers' proverbs (see no. 350), and fullers' (*Suc.* 28^a; *BB.* 134^a).

