Proverbs, Greek

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Greek proverbs (*paroimiai*) were concise, pithy, and "popular" expressions of wisdom, which belonged to the genre of wisdom literature. The word *paroimia* is a cognate of *oimos*, "road, path, way" and *oime*, "way or course of song," and it appears to be related to the paroemiac meter (*paroimiakon metron*: - — - — — - — - — — - — - - — —), although the meter's origin is under debate: it is not certain whether it derives from the hexameter, from the *hemiepes* of elegiac distich, or from the anapaestic catalectic dimeter. According to Hesychius' gloss on "Hipparcheian Hermes" (I 783 s.v.), it was HIPPARCHOS, SON OF PEISISTRATOS, who introduced to Athens HERMS inscribed with elegiac distichs (*elegeia*), so that by reading them passers-by would become better human beings: see the introductory remarks by the paroemiographers Diogenianus, second century CE, and Apostolius, fifteenth century, in the edited collection (*CPG* 1: 177–80 and 2: 237–8).

The distinction between different forms of wisdom literature is not clear-cut in the ancient sources. ARISTOTLE appears to be the first who systematically studied proverbs – he found them embedded in practically all the texts – and his definition is preserved by SYNESIUS in his *Encomium calvitii* (*Praise of baldness*) 22 (= fr. 13 Rose, from Aristotle's lost work "On proverbs" or "On philosophy"): "Proverbs are a form of wisdom (*sophia*); for, as Aristotle says, they are remnants of ancient philosophy which was lost in major human disasters, and they are preserved because of their conciseness (*suntomia*) and dexterity (*dexiotes*)." The attention paid to proverbs by Aristotle, by his successors THEOPHRASTUS and Clearchos, and by the Stoic CHRYSIPPOS OF SOLOI caused the proliferation of proverb studies in rhetorical handbooks and of collections of proverbs from the Hellenistic period onwards.

Antiquity (hence orality and anonymity), brevity, and wit are the Aristotelian criteria for distinguishing the ancient Greek proverb, although these may apply to the other forms of wisdom literature as well. The Hellenistic interest in proverbs stems both from the proverb's philosophical side and from its stylistic– rhetorical aspect. Its generalizing and therefore authoritative ideas, expressed with the utmost economy and widely circulated in the form of the *ainos* (animal-fable) or of the *ainigma* (riddle), belong to collective wisdom and to the experience accumulated by society at large, because they present solutions which in the past have proven successful, and therefore their validity is universally acknowledged. The proverbs' form and composition reveal that they are a species of *tropoi* or *figurae* and that they are related to metaphor and allegory (*metaphora*, *allegoria*), since, when employed in works of a less formal character, they embellish the narrative style by creating charm (*charis*), sweetness (*glukutes*), and pleasure (*hedone*).

In terms of function within a narrative, however, a proverb is almost always marked out in the text by expressions such as "as the proverb goes," as if it were a quotation; or, if no textual indication is present (as is the case in poetic texts), presumably by the performer's change of voice, or even by some appropriate gesture. Moreover, the use of proverbs aims at persuading the listener/reader(s) to act in a certain way, through authoritative speech that is didactic but polysemous and therefore inherently ambiguous (e.g., "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing", "one hand washes the other"; "sleep does not come to a hungry (man)"; "to fight a dog in a well"; "an owl to Athens"; "shake acorns from another oak-tree"; "an axe of Tenedos"). The ambiguity of certain proverbs triggered the development of a myth or story designed to explain the proverb's origin, meaning, function, and purpose, as all were conditioned by, and depended on, the context – discourse, narrative, social.

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SEE ALSO: Wisdom literature, ancient Near East; Wisdom literature, Jewish.

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