THE WHEEL IN PROVERBS XX 26 AND
ODE OF SOLOMON XXIII 11-16

In VT39 (1989), pp. 503-7, Daniel C. Snell proposes to elucidate the meaning of the use of ṣēpān (‘wheel’) in Prov. xx 26, (‘A wise king winnows the wicked and causes a wheel to return upon them’), by recourse to a number of Hittite texts in which the image of the wheel is connected with the king’s judgement, and perhaps even intended to be understood as an instrument of torture. Over against this interpretation, Snell holds as ‘less probable’ the attempt by L. Alonso Schökel and J. Vilchez to find an agricultural sense to the image (Proverbios [Madrid, 1984], pp. 392-3). However, a study of Ode of Solomon xxiii1 both indicates that it may have closer links to Prov. xx 26 than the Hittite texts cited by Snell2 and suports the interpretation of the image in an agricultural sense.

The primary focus of Ode xxiii is a letter (= the thought/will of the Lord) sent from the height. A major section of the Ode (vv. 11-16) comprises a description of the action of a wheel which receives the letter and thereafter causes some destruction. A literal translation of the relevant verses follows:

11 But a wheel received it
   and it (the letter) came upon it
12 And a sign was with it
   of the kingdom and of rule.
13 And everything which was disturbing to the wheel
   it mowed down
   and cut to pieces.
14 And it gathered in a multitude who were opponents

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and it covered rivers with earth and passed over.  
It uprooted many thickets  
and made a wide way.

Within the description of the actions of the wheel, two are specifically connected with agricultural imagery: mowing or reaping (ḥṣd), and uprooting (ḥqr). Moreover, the verb ḥml ("to gather") may have connotations of gathering the harvest. Given the parallelism between 13b and 13c, it seems that the verb ṣpq ("to cut to pieces/to hew") should also be understood in an agricultural sense. That the overall context of the activity is agricultural is supported by the references to rivers and thickets/dense forests (ḥb).  

Certainly, in the Ode there is no suggestion that the wheel is a winnowing instrument but rather one for reaping or threshing. Snell rejects a parallel between Isa. xxviii 27 and Prov. xx 26 on these grounds. However, such a rejection of the Isaianic passage seems a little premature. Surely it must be allowed that the parallelism in Prov. xx 26 might as easily combine the complementary actions of threshing and winnowing as two actions concerned solely with winnowing.

Of further interest in the Ode is the association of the wheel with the concepts of kingdom (mlkwṭ? ) and rule/government (mḥbnwṭ?). Thus, there are two points of connection between Prov. xx 26 and the Ode: the agricultural setting and activity of the wheel, and the concept of king/kingdom/government. The recognition of these links supports the Ode as a closer parallel to Prov. xx 26 than the Hittite texts which Snell cites. In this case it appears, contra Snell, that the suggestion by Alonso Schökel and Vilchez of an agricultural sense to the image of the wheel is the more probable interpretation.

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2 Although the Odes (dated probably in the second half of the 2nd century...