

A Proverb Poem by Levni

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As Rosalind Fergusson points out in her preface to the *Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs* (1982, v), proverbs exist in virtually all the languages of the world. In Turkish, throughout the Ottoman period, they were frequently gathered together in poems, which it was hoped would act as guides to conduct, compendiums of wisdom and experience. The following example, loosely translated from a shortened version of the eighteenth century original, "Atasözleri destanı" (A proverb poem), by Levni, might be considered typical. For the original text of the poem see Vasfi Mahir Kocatürk, *Saz şiiri antolojisi* (1963, 221–224). Collections of Turkish proverbs can be consulted in Ömer Asım Aksoy, *Atasözleri sözlüğü* (1971), and in Aydın Su, *Açıklamalı atasözleri* (1971). An account of the use of proverbs in Turkish folk literature can be found in Dehri Dilçin, *Edebiyatımızda atasözleri* (1945). A list of the original Turkish proverbs used in the poem (with the appropriate English stanza number and an English translation) is given below.

Very little is known about Levni, who lived in the first half of the eighteenth century. It is said that he was a cultivated man, who wrote both popular and classical verse, and painted miniatures (KOCATÜRK 1963, 219). In "Atasözleri destanı" he generally uses one proverb in each of the twenty nine more or less autonomous stanzas of the poem, though he occasionally uses two, and on one occasion three. When using a longer proverb he sometimes divides it between two lines of the stanza, as for example in the following:

Eskiden âdettir: Dağdan gelenler
Bağda olanları kovar demişler.

It is an old custom: those who come from the mountains
Beat those who are in the gardens, they say.

With the exception of the first stanza, which is rhymed abab, all of the remaining stanzas are rhymed cccb, dddb, eeeb, etc. The last line of each stanza ends with *demişler* ("they say"). As was the custom, in the concluding stanza of the poem Levni refers to himself by name:

Levni! Nasayihi pirlerin böyle,
Durab-u emsali nazm ile söyle.
Meydan-ı hünerde ağırılık
Ağır bassa yeyni ağır demişler.

Levni! The advice of the wise is this,
Say the proverbs in verse.
Conduct yourself in this world with seriousness:
The heavy press down the light come up, they say.

A PROVERB POEM BY LEVNI

- 1 Hold then to these wise sayings,
And let your heart be pure.
Sharp wine erodes the vessel,
But goodness will endure.
- 2 Water runs down in channels,
The wise man tells the fool.
Faith and observance are one:
Observe this basic rule.
- 3 Do not seek merely profit:
Greed turns all work to dross.
Effort not soundly grounded
Will simply end in loss.
- 4 Don't let the world deceive you,
It's made of tears, they say.
Don't put off till tomorrow
What you can do today.

- 5 Much effort comes to nothing.
As the old saying goes,
The mountain and the plains folk
Will often come to blows.
- 6 Break bread with men of honor.
As men so often say,
Except with men of honor
There'll be a price to pay.
- 7 They smile that seek to flatter:
Take this advice to heart!
The truth speaks plain and honest,
Tis lying that needs art.
- 8 The good man in the market
Will make an honest deal;
The bad man in the market
Will seek to lie and steal.
- 9 The man that handles money
Will always want a share:
Money makes sticky fingers,
They say. That's how things are.
- 10 Don't always raise your prices,
Be satisfied with less:
He who sells cheap sells quickly,
Avoiding much distress.
- 11 Such greed is best avoided,
It really doesn't pay.
Remember how the camel
Lost his fine ears, they say.
- 12 Don't trick or cheat your fellow,
Speak honestly and true:
Do nothing ill to others,
Lest they do ill to you.
- 13 One stone won't make a mountain,
One brick won't make a wall.

Take heed of the wise teacher:
Come, listen to his call!

14 Don't set up traps for others,
Don't act the bird of prey.
Two acrobats cannot dance
On one tightrope, they say.

15 Take note of the wise sayings
Levni assembled here.
Then in the great scales of life
Bring your full weight to bear.

TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF THE PROVERBS

- Stanza 1: Har sırke küpünü çatlar.
Strong vinegar harms the vessel.
- Stanza 2: Su alçağa akar.
The water flows to the lowlands.
- Stanza 4: Bugünkü işini yarına bırakma.
Don't leave today's work until tomorrow.
- Stanza 5: Dağdaki gelir bağdakini kovar.
The mountain people drive away the garden people.
- Stanza 7: Doğru söz insana batar.
Straight words hurt people.
- Stanza 8: Helâlzade pazar yapar,
Haramzade pazar bozar
The trickster spoils a bargain,
The good man promotes a bargain.
- Stanza 9: Bal tutan parmağın yalar.
He who handles honey licks his fingers.
- Stanza 10: Ucuz satan tez satar.
He who sells cheaply, sells quickly.
- Stanza 11: Deve boynuz ararken kulaktan olmuş.
The camel going to seek horns lost it's ears.

- Stanza 12: Çalma elin kapısını, çalarlar kapını.
Don't cause trouble, or you will have trouble.
- Stanza 13: Yalnız taz duvar olmaz.
One stone alone does not make a wall.
- Stanza 14: a) Yırtıcı kuşun ömrü az olur.
A bird of prey's life is short.
b) İki cambaz bir ipte oynamaz.
Two acrobats cannot perform on one rope.
c) Kazma elin kuyusunu, kazarla kuyunu.
Don't dig a trap for others, they'll dig one for you.
- Stanza 15: Ağır basmayınca hafif kalkmaz.
As long as the heavy scale pan does not press down, the
light one will not rise.

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