

Open Proverbs:  
Exploring Genre and Openness in Proverbs 10:1-22:16

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### Abstract

This thesis has three main aims. First, I will propose and explain a genre ascription for the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 – the ‘didactic proverb’. Second, I will analyse ‘openness’ as a textual feature, and show its contribution to the functions of this genre. Third, I will demonstrate how reading this way may influence our understanding of some key issues in Proverbs’ scholarship.

Part 1 tackles the first and second aims. In ch. 1, I suggest that the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 have something of a hybrid genre, displaying features akin to both ‘didactic’ texts and ‘proverbs’. This can be seen from their: generically related texts, probable social settings, media, self-presentation, and literary forms. As ‘didactic’ texts, the sayings shape the worldview, character and intellect of their students. As ‘proverbs’, they apply to specific situations with specific purposes. In ch. 2, I explain three manifestations of literary ‘openness’: polysemy can give a text multiple meanings; parallelism makes the relationship between lines unclear; imagery opens up worlds for exploration. Ch. 3 begins to show how this ‘openness’ enhances the sayings’ ‘didactic’ and ‘proverbial’ functions. Here I move beyond openness in interpretation to openness in application, and draw on the field of ‘paremiology’ (the technical study of the ‘proverb’ as a genre), which has been somewhat neglected in Proverbs’ scholarship.

In Part 2, I turn to the text, drawing out the openness of key verses, and showing how they function ‘didactically’ and ‘as proverbs’. This proves to have implications for certain classic debates in Proverbs’ scholarship (my third aim). Ch. 4 considers ‘character’ terms (e.g. wise/foolish, righteous/wicked). I use cognitive linguistic theories to examine the terms as open categories with ‘prototype structure’. Viewed this way, the terms are not (as some have argued) abstract and cut off from the world, but profoundly useful for life. Ch. 5 considers the apparent ‘act-consequence connection’ in Proverbs. The connection is predictable but not inviolable, may come about through a number of agencies, and has strong motivational potential. Ch. 6 looks at proverbs about the king. These do not necessitate an actual court context, for the ‘king’ figure may encapsulate wider principles, and function as a teaching tool. Even when he appears to be glorified, his role may be subverted, requiring students to exercise their minds. In ch. 7, I consider the way wisdom is acquired in the ‘didactic proverb’ genre, and suggest a principle for gaining it: students must ‘trust and scrutinise’. They are thereby empowered in their quest for wisdom, whilst also becoming aware of their limitations. Throughout Part 2, I find ‘openness’ to be an important facilitator for didactic and proverbial goals.

Prov 10:1-22:16 presents its readers with a panoply of fascinating texts. By exploring them as ‘open’, ‘didactic’, and ‘proverbial’, this thesis offers a fruitful reading strategy; new insights into functions and meanings; and some fresh perspectives on old debates.



For my parents,  
my wisest guides.

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee (Faculty of Divinity; 80,000 words).



## Acknowledgements

The book of Proverbs is sometimes read as a story of a youth growing up. His teachers guide him from the household to the world, and from folly to wisdom. My PhD has felt a bit like that too. I first submitted this dissertation on my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, a week after sleeping in my childhood home for the final time. I hope that it displays more wisdom than folly. If it does, then I, like the youth, am indebted to the many teachers who have guided me.

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Any folly which occurs in the pages that follow is entirely my responsibility. But if any wisdom is found there, it is because I have walked with the wise (Prov 13:20).

June 2018

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List of Abbreviations**Journals and Book Series**

ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
BAOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BBRSup	Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
HvTSt	<i>Hervormde Teologiese Studies</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JAF	<i>Journal of American Folklore</i>
JANER	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
JANESCU	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JQRSup	Jewish Quarterly Review Supplement
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
RB	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplement
WMANT	<i>Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

**Textual Witnesses and Other Ancient Texts**

AEL	M. Lichtheim, <i>Ancient Egyptian Literature: A book of readings</i> . Vols 1-3. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
ANET	J. B. Pritchard, <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950.
BHS	K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977.
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
KTU	M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartin, <i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit: einschließlich der keilalphabetischen Texte außerhalb Ugarits</i> . Alter Orient und Altes Testament 24. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercher; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1976.
LXX	Septuagint, according to A. Rahlfs, <i>Septuaginta: Id Est Vetus Testamentum Graece Iuxta LXX Interpretes</i> . Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2005.
MT	Masoretic Text, according to BHS.
Pesh.	Peshitta, according to A. A. di Lella, <i>Proverbs, Wisdom, Qohelet, Song of Songs</i> . The Old Testament in Syriac: According to the Peshitta Version Part II, 5. Brill: Leiden, 1979.
Targ.	Targum, according to P. de Lagarde, <i>Hagiographa Chaldaice</i> . Leipzig: [s.n.], 1873.
Vulg.	Vulgate, according to B. Fischer, and R. Weber. <i>Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem</i> . Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969.

**English Bible Translations**

*All biblical translations given in this thesis are my own unless otherwise stated.*

ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i> . Copyright © 2001; Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.
HCSB	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible</i> . Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009; Holman Bible Publishers.
JPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. The New JPS translation to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i> . Copyright © 1985; the Jewish Publication Society.
KJV	<i>Authorized King James Version</i> . 1611. Printed by Cambridge University Press, 1987.
NABRE	<i>New American Bible (Revised Edition)</i> . Copyright © 1970, 1986, 1991, 2010; Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC.
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i> . Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995; The Lockman Foundation.
NIV	<i>New International Version</i> . Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011; Biblica, Inc. ®.
NKJV	<i>New King James Version</i> . Copyright © 1982; Thomas Nelson.
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i> . Copyright © 1989; the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
REB	<i>Revised English Bible</i> . Copyright © 1989; Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press.

RSV      *Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971; the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

### Other Abbreviations Used

ANE      Ancient Near East  
 BDB      F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.  
 BH      Biblical Hebrew  
 CPA      Christian Palestinian Aramaic  
 GKC      W. Gesenius, E. Kautzsch, and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar; as edited and enlarged by the late E. Kautzsch*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1910.  
 HALOT      L. Köhler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000.  
 HB      Hebrew Bible  
 IBHS      B. K. Waltke, and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.  
 JBA      Jewish Biblical Aramaic  
 JPA      Jewish Palestinian Aramaic  
 JM      P. Joüon, and T. Muraoka. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2003.  
 K      *Ketibh*  
 Q      *Qere*  
 WHS      R. J. Williams, *William's Hebrew Syntax*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Revised and expanded by J. C. Beckman. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.



## Introduction

*“Epigrams and sentences... do not circumscribe their range of possibilities of comprehension; they offer no defence even against bold interpretations.”*

G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p.32

This pronouncement, from von Rad’s *Wisdom in Israel*, has replayed in my mind like an earworm, or a proverb of old, since the first time I read it. It sparked an ever-increasing fascination with the multiple possible interpretations and uses of the sayings in the book of Proverbs. I came to see them, not as banal, formulaic clichés, as some interpreters have it, but as rich and complex epigrams. When pondered, they open out and draw their readers in, as explorers through their possibilities. Von Rad implies that ‘boldness’ in interpretation is a foe, and the lack of ‘defence’ is troubling. But boldness may in fact be a companion for well-founded and fruitful explorations.

Of course, at some point boldness can become too bold; a proverb cannot simply mean whatever you want it to mean. Von Rad goes on to speak of “limitations” to interpretation. He stressed that we must understand each proverb in light of the “ideological and religious factors” which shaped the composition.<sup>1</sup> Important as these undoubtedly are, my focus will be slightly different. I will suggest that interpretation should be guided by the genre of these sayings (which I will propose is the ‘didactic proverb’), and by a close consideration of their literary features.

My aim in this thesis is threefold: (1) to suggest that the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 should be seen as ‘didactic proverbs’ and to explain what I mean by this; (2) to analyse a textual feature I call ‘openness’ and demonstrate how it is helpful for the sayings’ ‘didactic’ and ‘proverbial’ functions; (3) to show how reading Proverbs in this way may influence some key issues in scholarship. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the growing corner of Proverbs’ studies sensitive to the intricacies and ambiguities of the text.<sup>2</sup> Before I begin, however, the notions of ‘didactic proverb’ and ‘openness’ require some explanation.

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<sup>1</sup> G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972) p.32.

<sup>2</sup> Recently, for example, P. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The deep waters of counsel* (SOTS Monograph Series; Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008); K. M. Heim, *Poetic Imagination in Proverbs: Variant repetitions and the nature of proverbs* (BBRSup 4; Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013); A. W. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs: Wisdom literature and the shaping of the moral self* (New York: CUP, 2016).

*'Didactic proverbs'*

I am using the phrase 'didactic proverbs' as a genre descriptor. In ch.1, I will justify why this is appropriate for Prov 10:1-22:16. Here, I will introduce the methodological debates on genre, and their place in Proverbs' scholarship.

Genre studies first entered biblical scholarship within the framework of 'form criticism'. Founding practitioner H. Gunkel was concerned to reconstruct the short oral *Gattungen* ('genres') that he believed lay behind the Bible's (considerably more developed) literary texts.<sup>3</sup> These were primarily distinguishable by their *Form* – the essential structural commonalities between units, above and beyond their specific manifestations.<sup>4</sup> The *Gattung* and *Form* of each unit were controlled by rigid conventions, stemming from that unit's particular *Sitz im Leben*, 'setting in life'.<sup>5</sup> Gunkel's first followers enthusiastically reconstructed these *Sitze* – the legal, cultic, or social institutions apparently discernible from the hypothesised oral precursors to the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of early oral forms, as distinct from their later literary manifestations, found traction in Proverbs' scholarship. O. Eißfeldt influentially suggested a development from single-lined *Volksprüchwörter* 'folk proverbs' to the two-lined *Kunstsprüche* 'artistic sayings' we find in the book of Proverbs.<sup>7</sup> W. Oesterley incorporated these ideas into a schema of development for the whole book, moving from oral one-line sayings, to literary distiches, to more elaborate instructions (such as those in chs.1-9).<sup>8</sup> A similar development was also found from an original, observational *Aussagewort* 'saying' to an instructive *Mahnwort* 'admonition'.<sup>9</sup> In each case the movement was in the text's increasingly instructional nature; from 'proverb' to 'didactic'.

Gunkel offered a number of important insights to biblical studies: form and genre are closely related; genres are frequently embedded in social realities; genres bring particular functions and conventions. However, modern 'form criticism' has moved a long way since his time (so far in fact that many scholars have become uneasy of this label<sup>10</sup>). The possibility of reconstructing

<sup>3</sup> E.g. H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: [s.n.], 1901); H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen: [s.n.], 1926). For an overview of Gunkel's views in historical and intellectual context, see M. J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in its Context* (JSOTSup 274; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) pp.209-262.

<sup>4</sup> Gunkel seems to have used *Form* in a quasi-Aristotelian sense for the 'essence' of textual units. Buss (1999) pp.246-247.

<sup>5</sup> See Buss (1999) pp.237, 251.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. A. Alt, "The Origins of Israelite Law," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966) pp.1-100; S. Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (1-2; Translated by D. R. Ap-Thomas. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> O. Eißfeldt, *Der Maschal im Alten Testament* (BZAW 24; Gießen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1913).

<sup>8</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs* (London: Methuen, 1929).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. J. Hempel, *Die Althebräische Literatur in ihr hellenistisch-jüdisches Nachleben* (Wildpark-Potsdam: Athenaion, 1930) p.175.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. E. Blum, "Formgeschichte – A Misleading Category? Some critical remarks," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (eds. M. A. Sweeney and E. Ben Zvi; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2003) pp.32-



oral antecedents has been questioned, both in Proverbs and across the HB. Even if the biblical proverbs did derive from one-lined precursors (which is itself questionable<sup>11</sup>), these are impossible to recover.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in light of modern genre theory, it is unconvincing to propose a distinct and unified *Gattung* rigidly corresponding to a pure<sup>13</sup> *Form* and *Sitz im Leben*.

Within biblical studies, focus has shifted from hypothetical oral *Gattungen* to literary genres, and there has been increasing engagement with literary theory.<sup>14</sup> In the 1970s and 80s, the SBL Genres Project catalysed interest and insights in the field.<sup>15</sup> Particularly in recent years, genre studies have become prevalent for the wisdom literature. M. Sneed's 2015 SBL volume on wisdom, for example, devotes its whole first Part to 'Genre Theory and the Wisdom Tradition'.<sup>16</sup> Most of the discussions there, and in scholarship more broadly, focus on whether 'wisdom' itself constitutes a genre, and if so, how to characterise and delimit it.<sup>17</sup> There is an increasing recognition that genres are not discrete in-out categories, but are often flexible, indistinct, and changing.

My focus will not be on the 'macro-genre' of wisdom, but on one of the many 'micro-genres' of which it consists. Diverse genres can co-exist within a single work. Job, for example, has been seen as a dialogue of competing generic claims,<sup>18</sup> or as a 'parody', intentionally mimicking different genres.<sup>19</sup> In Proverbs, a major distinction can be drawn between 'instructions' (chs.1-9) and 'sentences' (chs.10-29),<sup>20</sup> but scholars have also found e.g. 'wisdom sermons' in chs.1-9;<sup>21</sup> a 'dialogue with a skeptic' in 31:1-14;<sup>22</sup> 'numerical sayings' in 30:15-33;<sup>23</sup> a 'hymn' in 31:10-31.<sup>24</sup>

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45; S. Weeks, "The Limits of Form Criticism in the Study of Literature, with Reflections of Psalm 34," in *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in honour of John Barton* (eds. K. J. Dell and P. M. Joyce; Oxford: OUP, 2013) pp.15-25.

<sup>11</sup> Such views were largely based on a developmental model of texts, where longer must mean later. This was challenged on the basis of Egyptian parallels, where one-lined sayings occur late in the tradition. E.g. B. Gemser, "The Instructions of 'Onchesheshonqy and Biblical Wisdom Literature,'" in *Congress Volume Oxford 1959* (ed. G. W. Anderson et al.; VTSup 7; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960) pp.127-128.

<sup>12</sup> Though some scholars try; e.g. M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31* (The Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) p.485.

<sup>13</sup> On the idea of a 'pure' (*rein*) *Form* in Gunkel's thinking, see Buss (1999) pp.237, 251-253.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the trends of scholarship, see C. A. Newsom, "Spying out the Land: A Report from Genology," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays offered to honor Michael V. Fox on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday* (eds. R. L. Troxel et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005) pp.437-450.

<sup>15</sup> Published in editions of *Semeia* from 1978 to 1986.

<sup>16</sup> M. R. Sneed, *Was there a Wisdom Tradition? New prospects in Israelite wisdom studies* (Ancient Israel and its Literature 23; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015) pp.11-177.

<sup>17</sup> In Sneed (2015), see contributions by Dell, Fox, Kynes, and Sneed.

<sup>18</sup> C. A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A contest of moral imaginations* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> K. J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (BZAW 197; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> E.g. W. McKane, *Proverbs: A new approach* (Old Testament Library London: SCM Press, 1970) p.2.

<sup>21</sup> B. K. Zabán, *The Pillar Function of the Speeches of Wisdom: Proverbs 1:20-33, 8:1-36 and 9:1-6 in the structural framework of Proverbs 1-9* (BZAW 429; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) pp.205-229.

<sup>22</sup> R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible New York: Doubleday & Co., 1965) p.22; J. L. Crenshaw, "Clanging Symbols," in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in honor of Walter Harrelson* (eds. D. A. Knight and P. J. Paris; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) pp.51-64. Crenshaw recognises various genres even within the dialogue.

<sup>23</sup> W. M. W. Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament: A form-critical study* (VTSup 13; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).

<sup>24</sup> A. Wolters, "Proverbs xxxi 10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A form-critical analysis," *VT* 38.4 (1988) pp.446-457.

Such classification is by no means absolute, for genres may be more heuristic tools than ontological realities.<sup>25</sup> No text is a ‘pure’ manifestation of a genre, and our constructed categories can have a good deal of overlap. C. Newsom’s comment should be taken seriously: “texts do not ‘belong’ to genres so much as participate in them, invoke them, gesture to them, play in and out of them, and in so doing continually change them”.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the genre I suggest for the sayings in 10:1-22:16 is a flexible hybrid. They are ‘didactic proverbs’, simultaneously participating in both ‘didactic’ and ‘proverbial’ genres. Justification for this claim will be given in ch.1. Discerning these genres will offer us conventions for interpretation, as well as clues about the expected situations and functions of the sayings.

Scholarship on the ‘didactic’ aims and strategies of Proverbs is a burgeoning field, which this study will help to cultivate. Work on the sayings as ‘proverbs’ (in a technical sense) has on the other hand been surprisingly minimal. I hope to plug this gap by drawing insights from paremiology (the technical study of the proverb genre), a rich field yet to be fully ploughed by biblical scholars.

### ‘Openness’

By ‘openness’ I mean (in short): a text’s ability to offer multiple possibilities of interpretation and use. Scholars sporadically use the term with reference to Proverbs, and some have drawn more extensively on the notion.<sup>27</sup> I have chosen the term because it is broader, less technical, and more affirmative than comparative ideas, like ‘ambiguity’, ‘vagueness’, or ‘indeterminacy’.<sup>28</sup> While these are literary phenomena, pertaining to interpretation alone, ‘openness’ pertains also to *use*. An ‘open’ text may be used and applied in many ways. This seems to be a generic hallmark of proverbs,

<sup>25</sup> M. Sneed, “‘Grasping After the Wind’: The elusive attempt to define and delimit wisdom,” in *Was there a Wisdom Tradition? New prospects in Israelite wisdom studies* (ed. M. Sneed; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 23; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015) pp.39-68; S. Weeks, “Wisdom, Form, and Genre,” in *Was there a Wisdom Tradition? New prospects in Israelite wisdom studies* (ed. M. Sneed; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 23; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015) p.164.

<sup>26</sup> Newsom (2003) p.12.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. J. Hausmann, *Studien zum Menschenbild der älteren Weisheit (Spr 10ff.)* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 7; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995) pp.348-351.

<sup>28</sup> These terms are often given technical definitions in linguistic scholarship (though these definitions often vary between scholars). E.g. B. S. Gillon, “Ambiguity, Indeterminacy, Deixis, and Vagueness,” in *Semantics: A reader* (eds. S. Davis and B. S. Gillon; Oxford: OUP, 2004) pp.157-187; C. Kennedy, “Ambiguity and Vagueness: An overview,” in *Semantics: An international handbook of natural language meaning, vol. 1* (eds. C. Maienborn, K. von Heusinger and P. Portner; Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011) pp.507-533; G. Zhang, “Fuzziness—Vagueness—Generality—Ambiguity,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 29 (1998) pp.13-31.

which are “inherently capacious”,<sup>29</sup> offering general principles to be fleshed out by the circumstances of the hearers’ own lives. An ‘open’ text also provides vistas for mental examination. The readers may climb in and explore, further ‘opening up’ the proverb for themselves. Limits will always be encountered somewhere, however. Meaning may be expansive, but it is not inexhaustible.

This raises the vexed question of where such ‘meaning’ lies. The basic alternatives, often noted by literary critics, are: the author, the text itself, or the reader.<sup>30</sup> Most interpreters nowadays acknowledge an interaction between all three (though they may stress one above the others). Each of these loci gives a certain warrant for finding openness, but also imposes limits.

One approach is to locate meaning in *the author’s intention*: the text means whatever he or she meant by it.<sup>31</sup> This of course runs into problems in any text, for we cannot reconstruct the author’s thought processes, and it is all the more problematic in a text like Proverbs, whose authorship is unknown and probably multi-layered. Furthermore, the proverb genre suggests, not the distinct authorship of specific individuals, but the distilled communal wisdom of ages past. Even if coined by an individual, by casting it in the form of a proverb, she or he renounces ownership of it.<sup>32</sup> A proverb is by definition a truth in the public domain. By choosing this genre, part of the ‘author’s intention’ seems to be, paradoxically, to legitimise interpretations other than those first intended. This warrants a reading which anticipates openness. It does not, however, do away with the author entirely. Though proverbs are public truths, they are created within and presuppose certain experiential boundaries, ideological frameworks, and social hierarchies. Interpretation should not contravene the base assumptions of the author’s world.

A second possible locus for meaning is *the text itself*. This approach came to the fore particularly in the New Criticism of the 1940s-70s. Meaning here is language-based and cannot be derived extra-linguistically (e.g. from the author’s intention).<sup>33</sup> The text of a proverb, I suggest, is distinctively open in comparison to that of other genres. Proverbs are terse and elliptical, condensed into the minimum of words, and lacking in the grammatical markers which could clarify meaning (such as object markers and relative particles). No elucidation is offered at any of their ambiguity points. Within the collections, their lack of clear literary context means that no

<sup>29</sup> E. Davis, “Surprised by Wisdom: Preaching Proverbs,” *Interpretation* 63.3 (2009) p.266; cf. C. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982) p.76; S. Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) p.86.

<sup>30</sup> For a more extended discussion, see D. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 431; New York: T&T Clark, 2006) pp.5-22.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>32</sup> It may be ‘the wit of one’, but it is also ‘the wisdom of many’ (so John Russell’s famous dictum).

<sup>33</sup> The ‘authorial intention’ paradigm was famously challenged by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 (1946) pp.468-488.

subsequent discourse can answer any questions that have been raised.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, proverbs are replete with poetic devices, such as polysemy, parallelism, and imagery, which often create openness (see ch.2). However, the text also offers important constraints. Any interpretation must be rooted in the genuine possibilities of the language, requiring careful linguistic analysis.

The third locus for meaning is *the reader*. In this school of thought, a text has no objective meaning independent of the interpretation process. Reading a text does not uncover its pre-existing meaning, but constructs a meaning actively. ‘Reader-response’ criticism made its ascendancy in literary theory in the 1960 and 70s, and in biblical studies shortly thereafter.<sup>35</sup> Versions of it continue to be prevalent. Most radically, it denies the text and author any real role in meaning. More moderately (and with wider acceptance), meaning emerges from the interaction between text and reader. We should distinguish here between the ‘ideal’ readers apparently presupposed by the text, and the ‘actual’ readers who engage with it; as well as between ‘original’ and ‘contemporary’ readers (and all the many readers in between). My main focus here will be on ‘actual, original readers’. They are of course difficult to reconstruct, given our ignorance about the composition and transmission of the book. But their possible reading strategies may be recoverable in part, through analysis of the text’s genre with its attendant conventions and social contexts. This can offer some constraints in interpretation. What was the original readers’ framework of expectations, and what meanings were possible within this framework? What social conventions and hermeneutical principles may have guided them?

The rise of reader-oriented approaches has gone together with increasing recognition of openness and ambiguity in biblical texts. Finding multiple meanings in the Bible is nothing new (think of the allegorising tendency of early Christian interpreters, and the rabbinic tradition of **דבר אחר** ‘another interpretation’), but its scholarly study has been influenced by the reader response school. The influential literary critic W. Iser focused on ‘indeterminacy’ as the most important ingredient in the interaction between text and reader.<sup>36</sup> The reader gets into the gaps in the text, as it were, and fleshes them out for himself. Iser’s approach has been followed explicitly or implicitly by many in biblical studies.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See ch.1 §6 for a discussion of literary context.

<sup>35</sup> See overview in B. N. Melton and H. A. Thomas, “Reader-Response Criticism and Recent Readers,” in *The Biblical World* (ed. K. J. Dell; London: Taylor & Francis/Routeledge, Forthcoming).

<sup>36</sup> W. Iser, “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response in Prose Fiction,” in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected papers from the English Institute* (ed. J. Hillis Miller; New York: Columbia University Press, 1971) pp.1-45.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological literature and the drama of reading* (The Indiana Literary Biblical Series; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) pp.185-190; Ingram (2006). For a discussion of the (mis)appropriation of Iser in biblical scholarship, see Z. Schwab, “Mind the Gap: The impact of Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response criticism on biblical studies – A critical assessment,” *Literature and Theology* 17.2 (2003) pp.170-181 .

Many biblical texts have been examined for their ambiguities (e.g. extensively Samuel<sup>38</sup> and Qohelet<sup>39</sup>). In Proverbs' scholarship, though interpreters often note ambiguity, there has been no thorough or systematic study. I hope that, by exploring the gaps in the proverb texts, I may help to fill this gap in the scholarship.

### *The corpus to be examined*

I will not consider the whole of the book of Proverbs in this thesis, but a distinct unit: the 'proverbs of Solomon' (משלי שלמה) in Prov 10:1-22:16. This may be split into two sub-collections (10:1-15:33 and 16:1-22:16), though the distinction is not essential for my purposes.<sup>40</sup> In the present form of the book, these are followed by two more sayings collections: the 'sayings of the wise' in 22:17-24:34,<sup>41</sup> and the 'Hezekian collection' in chs.25-29 (sometimes subdivided into 25-27 and 28-29). These collections within Prov 10-29 are widely held to be distinct sub-units. Though their relative chronology is disputed,<sup>42</sup> they may all stem from the monarchic period.<sup>43</sup> Due to the

<sup>38</sup> E.g. explorations of ambiguities in 2 Sam 11 alone have been undertaken by K. Bodner, "Layers of Ambiguity in 2 Samuel 11,1," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 80.1 (2004) pp.102-111; G. G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some observations on ambiguity in biblical narrative," *JSOT* 73 (1997) pp.43-54; Sternberg (1985) pp.190-219; G. A. Yee, "'Fraught with Background': Literary ambiguity in II Samuel 11," *Interpretation* 42.3 (1988) pp.240-253.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. R. W. Byargeon, "The Significance of Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes 2,24-26," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998) pp.367-372; Ingram (2006); T. Krüger, "Meaningful Ambiguities in the Book of Qoheleth," in *The Language of Qohelet in Its Context: Essays in honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the occasion of his seventieth birthday* (eds. A. Berlejung and P. van Hecke; Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 164; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2007) pp.63-74; L. Wilson, "Artful Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes 1,1-11," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998) pp.357-366.

<sup>40</sup> No new title is given for 16:1-22:16, suggesting that in the final composition, the two halves are considered as a single collection. But the sub-collections can be distinguished by form and content: the former is characterised by antithetical parallelisms pitting the wise and righteous against the foolish and wicked; the latter has greater diversity.

<sup>41</sup> This section has striking and often-noted similarities to the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*. First A. Erman, "Eine Ägyptische Quelle der 'Sprüche Salomos'," in *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sitzung der philosophisch-historischen Klasse* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1924) pp.86-93.

<sup>42</sup> U. Skladny suggested the chronological order 10-15; 28-29; 16:1-22:16; 25-27 (leaving out 22:17-24:34 as Egyptian-influenced). Conversely, Schmid argued that 25-27 is the oldest section, while 10-15 is a late 'Anthropologisierung' of wisdom (see p.72 below). Whybray concluded that relative chronology is impossible to determine. H. H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit: eine Untersuchung zur Altorientalischen und Israelitischen Weisheitsliteratur* (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1966) pp.144-168; U. Skladny, *Die ältesten Spruchsammlungen in Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) pp.76-79; R. N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> This is suggested by their frequent references to the king (see ch.6). Other evidence sometimes offered for a monarchic dating includes: (a) the ascriptions to Solomon and Hezekiah (Carr; Dell; Waltke); (b) the time needed for a development from chs.10-29 to chs.1-9 and from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes and Job (Dell); (c) the presence of 'early' linguistic features, showing the influence of e.g. Canaanite (Albright); Ugaritic (Waltke, drawing on Dahood); Israelian Hebrew (Rendsburg); Aramaic (Fox); (d) apparent roots in an early oral tradition (many scholars). W. F. Albright, "Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (eds. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas; VTSup 3; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955) pp.1-15; D. M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 2011) pp.410-413; M. Dahood, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 113; Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1963); K. J. Dell, "How Much Wisdom Literature Has Its Roots in the Pre-Exilic Period?" in *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. J. Day; JSOTSup

sayings' openness and multi-applicability, they were retained post-exile, when a compiler seems to have added an introduction (chs.1-9) and appendix (chs.30-31).<sup>44</sup> Composition and dating will form no major part of my discussion. By their very nature, the proverbs are open to use in many different places and times.

It is important to take account of the final form of the whole composition, but we should also study each section in its own right. My attention is on 10:1-22:16 firstly for pragmatic reasons: it provides a corpus of manageable size for this thesis. It may be possible to extrapolate some conclusions to other sections of Proverbs, but that is a separate project. Secondly, I am interested in the 'didactic proverb' genre, which seems to be best exemplified by these texts (and also perhaps by 25-29<sup>45</sup>). Thirdly, these chapters are often characterised as the most banal and boring in the book.<sup>46</sup> I hope to counter this assumption by showing some of the interest and complexity I have found there.

I will work from the MT of these chapters. The textual and Versional situation of Proverbs is complex.<sup>47</sup> The Qumran evidence is minimal and fragmentary, preserving vestiges of chs.1-2

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406; London: T&T Clark, 2004) pp.251-271; Fox (2009) pp.504-506; G. A. Rendsburg, "Literary and Linguistic Matters in the Book of Proverbs," in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. J. Jarick; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 618; Oxford: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016) pp.111-147; B. K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (NICOT Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004) pp.31-36.

<sup>44</sup> Scholars have argued that these sections are post-exilic because: (a) they serve as a prologue and epilogue to the sayings, so must have been composed later (Fox); (b) they show a more developed theology than the sayings (many scholars); (c) they display late linguistic features (Yoder); (d) they may reflect the social and ideological debates post-exile, particularly the dispute about marriage with foreigners in the Persian period (Maier; Camp). C. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985) pp.239-243; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A new translation with introduction and commentary* (Anchor Bible 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000) pp.48-49; C. M. Maier, *Die 'Fremde Frau' in Proverbien 1-9: Eine exegetische und sozialgeschichtliche Studie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); C. R. Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A socioeconomic reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001) pp.15-38.

- A minority have argued, however, that 1-9 may be pre-exilic, largely based on its borrowing from Egyptian materials. Carr (2011) pp.408-410; Dell (2004); C. Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9: Eine form- und motiungeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966); Waltke (2004) pp.31-36.

- There are numerous instances of intertextuality between Prov 1-9 and other texts (esp. Jeremiah, Deuteronomy and Isaiah), but these can be used to support either Proverbs' priority (Carr; Dell) or posteriority (Robert; Camp; Fox; Schipper). Carr (2011) pp.413-428; Dell (2004); Camp (1985) pp.223-239; Fox (2000) pp.48-49; A. Robert, "Les Attaches Littéraires Bibliques de Prov. I-IX," *RB* 43 (1934) pp.42-68, 172; A. Robert, "Les Attaches Littéraires Bibliques de Prov. I-IX (suite)," *RB* 44 (1935) pp.344-65, 502; B. U. Schipper, *Hermeneutik der Tora: Studien zur Traditionsgeschichte von Prov 2 und zur Komposition von Prov 1-9* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> These chapters are formally similar to 10:1-22:16, particularly chs.28-29, which return to the antithetical style of chs.10-15.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. S. Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (Approaches to Biblical Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2010) p.32: "the first collection is characterised by advice so general that it is almost worthless"; H. McKeating, *Studying the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1979) p.159: "we are bound to wonder why the collector bothered to set them down".

<sup>47</sup> For a good overview, see R. J. Clifford, "Observations on the Text and Versions of Proverbs," in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the occasion of his eightieth birthday* (ed. M. L. Barré; Washington: Catholic Bible Association of America, 1997) pp.47-61. The best scholarly editions currently available are probably: For DSS: P. W. Skehan and E. Ulrich, "Proverbs," in *Qumran Cave 4: 11. Psalms to Chronicles* (eds. E. Ulrich, F. Cross and J. A. Fitzmyer et al; DJD 16; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) pp.181-186.

(4Q102) and 13-15 (4Q103). Its text is very close to MT.<sup>48</sup> LXX diverges quite considerably, with differences both in individual verses, and in the overall arrangement of the chapters. Many of the variations may be creative reworkings of proto-MT,<sup>49</sup> for example introducing doublets,<sup>50</sup> heightening antithetical parallelisms,<sup>51</sup> and making the text more theologically pious.<sup>52</sup> Some differences, however, may stem from a different Hebrew *Vorlage*.<sup>53</sup> The other witnesses are of limited value as text-critical resources, as they seem to have known MT and LXX. The Peshitta apparently negotiated between them in a rather complex way.<sup>54</sup> Unique amongst the Targumim, Targum Proverbs seemingly knew Peshitta and followed it in most cases,<sup>55</sup> refraining from Midrashic exegesis. Vulgate appears to have translated mainly from the Hebrew, but shows knowledge of LXX and Peshitta.

My selection of MT as a base text is not because I necessarily consider it earliest in every reading (though in many instances it seems to be). Textual variants apparently arose during even the Hebrew transmission of book, which sometimes preserves two variant proverbs.<sup>56</sup> M. Fox suggests that a similar process may explain some of the divergences in the Greek text: proto-MT

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For LXX: The Göttingen edition has yet to be released; see instead A. Rahlfs, *Septuaginta: Id Est Vetus Testamentum Graece Iuxta LXX Interpretes* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2005).

For Peshitta: A. A. di Lella, *Proverbs, Wisdom, Qohelet, Song of Songs* (The Old Testament in Syriac: According to the Peshitta Version Part II, 5; Brill: Leiden, 1979).

For Targum: No critical edition exists. It is probably still best to use P. de Lagarde, *Hagiographa Chaldaica* (Leipzig: [s.n.], 1873).

For Vulgate: B. Fischer and R. Weber, *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969).

<sup>48</sup> J. de Waard, "4QProv and Textual Criticism," *Textus* 19 (1998) pp.87-96.

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of translation practices in LXX proverbs, see M. V. Fox, "A Profile of the Septuagint Proverbs," in *Wisdom for Life: Essays in honour of Maurice Gilbert* (ed. N. Calduch-Benages; BZAW 445; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014) pp.3-17.

<sup>50</sup> Sometimes these are thought to stem from the work of a Jewish 'Revisor' (P. de Lagarde, "Anmerkungen zur Griechischen Übersetzung der Proverbien," in *Mittheilungen*, vol. 1 [Göttingen: Dieterich, 1884] pp.19-26), or to represent the incorporation of a Hexaplaric text (C. T. Fritsch, "The Treatment of the Hexaplaric Signs in the Syro-Hexaplar of Proverbs," *JBL* 72.3 [1953] pp.169-181). L. Cuppi, "Long Doublets in the Septuagint of the Book of Proverbs With a History of Research on the Greek Translations" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2011) reviews these theories, and argues that the doublets are instead the work of the translator.

<sup>51</sup> G. Tauberschmidt, *Secondary Parallelism: A study of the translation technique in LXX Proverbs* (Atlanta: SBL, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> J. A. Cook, *The Septuagint of Proverbs: Jewish and/or Hellenistic proverbs; concerning the Hellenistic colouring of LXX Proverbs* (VTSup 69; Leiden: Brill, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> M. V. Fox, "LXX-Proverbs as a Text-Critical Resource," *Textus* 22 (2005) pp.95-128; E. Tov, "Recensional Differences Between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint of Proverbs," in *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, intertestamental Judaism, and Christian origins presented to John Strugnell on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday* (eds. H. W. Attridge, J. J. Collins and T. H. Tobin; College Theology Society Resources in Religion 5; Maryland: The College Theological Society University Press of America, 1990) pp.43-56.

<sup>54</sup> M. V. Fox, "How the Peshitta of Proverbs Uses the Septuagint," *JNLS* 39.2 (2013) pp.37-56.

<sup>55</sup> First influentially T. Nöldeke, "Das Targum zu den Sprüchen von der Peschita abhängig," in *Archiv für Wissenschaftliches Erforschung des Alten Testaments* 2 (ed. A. Merx; 1871) pp.246-249. The debate is summarised in J. F. Healey, "The Targum of Proverbs," in *The Targum of Job, The Targum of Proverbs, The Targum of Qohelet* (eds. C. Mangan, J. F. Healey and P. S. Knobel; The Aramaic Bible 15; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991) pp.7-10. Targum's dependence on Peshitta has been questioned by e.g. D. C. Snell, "The Relation between the Targum and the Peshitta of Proverbs," *ZAW* 110 (1998) pp.72-74.

<sup>56</sup> Comprehensively surveyed by D. C. Snell, *Twice-Told Proverbs and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993), see also below ch.1 §3.

preserved one variant, proto-LXX preserved the other.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, LXX and MT may be different recensions/editions of the book.<sup>58</sup> I work from MT as a legitimate and important variant collection. I will however acknowledge the occasional need for emendation where MT seems corrupted through copyist errors etc. I will refer to the Versions mainly where they seem to be working from proto-MT, as evidence of how early translators negotiated the text's openness and selected from its multiple meanings in translation.

### *Brief overview of the thesis*

Part 1 of this thesis deals with theoretical and methodological issues, justifying the reading strategy that I will employ. Chapter 1 explains my reasoning behind the genre designation 'didactic proverb'. This is based on generically related texts, probable social settings, media, self-presentation, and form. Chapter 2 catalogues and explains some literary and linguistic phenomena that give rise to 'openness': polysemy, parallelism, and imagery. Chapter 3 suggests some ways that openness may enhance the potential of the sayings when used as 'didactic proverbs'.

Part 2 turns to exploring the sayings themselves, and considers the implications of this way of reading for some wider debates in Proverbs' scholarship. Chapter 4 discusses the use of character terms, viewing them through the lens of 'prototype theory', and arguing that they are open terms, useful for the book's didactic goal of character development. In chapters 5-7, I examine various key proverbs in depth, exploring their openness and highlighting their contribution to some important scholarly issues. Chapter 5 considers the theory of the 'act-consequence connection'; chapter 6 the role of the king; and chapter 7 the way that wisdom is acquired. These chapters will also demonstrate how 'openness' helps the sayings to function 'as proverbs' (especially in evaluating situations and directing behaviour) and 'didactically' (developing their readers' worldviews, training their intellects, and forming their characters).

This thesis sets out to explore some of the many "possibilities of comprehension" alluded to by von Rad, and to show that multiple meanings are not only possible but even probable, and functionally important for didactic proverbs. I hope that these interpretations will prove thought-provoking and illuminating; "bold", but not indefensibly so.

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<sup>57</sup> Fox (2005).

<sup>58</sup> Fox (2005); Tov (1990).



## Part 1 – The Openness of the Didactic Proverb



## Chapter 1 – The ‘Didactic Proverb’

To understand and use a text properly, we must consider its genre(s). A genre functions as a culturally conditioned mediating framework, prompting the reader how to approach the text.<sup>59</sup> It signals what expectations to have for its content, and what interpretive strategies are appropriate (e.g. a fairytale is interpreted very differently from a scientific treatise). Genre determines what sorts of situations the text may be used in (e.g. spoken to a child at bedtime), and what functions it may take (to impart a moral lesson, to send them to sleep).<sup>60</sup> A single text may invoke several generic categories at once, for genres are flexible and allow for hybrids.<sup>61</sup> Thus, I suggest that the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 invoke both ‘didactic’ and ‘proverbial’ genres. Neither of these terms is new to Proverbs scholarship, but I use each in quite a specific sense, which should be explained.

Particularly since the time of H.-J. Hermisson,<sup>62</sup> ‘didactic’ interpretations have been popular for Proverbs. ‘Didactic’ texts are generically oriented to teach, particularly to teach moral lessons. The reader adopts the subject position of a student, receptive to the text’s wisdom. Within this, didactic texts seem to have three main functions: first, they instil a broad and general *worldview* in their student; second, they foster his *character development*; third, they train his *intellect*. This last function may be in tension with some modern usage of the term ‘didactic’, which sometimes brings pejorative connotations of a top-down imposition of knowledge, requiring no participation from the student. I contend, however, that Proverbs’ moral education includes training in how to think. The book employs a range of complex pedagogical techniques to this end.<sup>63</sup> Reading may even become ‘autodidactic’: the student ponders the text independently, and is formed thereby.

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<sup>59</sup> Scholars have used various metaphors to express this. A. Freedman, “Anyone For Tennis?” in *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (eds. A. Freedman and P. Medway; Bristol: Taylor and Francis, 1994) pp.37-56 likens a genre to a tennis match, where utterances are meaningful because they abide by the ‘rules of the game’. D. Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre: The role of analogies in genre theory* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1993) draws an analogy between a genre and a social institution, for they both “provide a network of norms through which our experience is made culturally meaningful” p.2. For A. Fowler, “Genre,” in *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, vol. 2 (ed. E. Barnouw et al.; Oxford: OUP, 1989) pp.215-217, a genre is a ‘shared code’ between text and interpreter, and for F. Jameson, “Magical Narratives: On the dialectical use of genre criticism,” in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982) pp.103-150, it is a ‘social contract’ – an agreement to interpret a certain way.

<sup>60</sup> The ‘functional’ approach was especially emphasised by C. R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984) pp.151-167, who characterised genres as ‘forms of social action’.

<sup>61</sup> D. Chandler, “An Introduction to Genre Theory,” (1997) p.2. Online access at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242253420\\_An\\_Introduction\\_to\\_Genre\\_Theory](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242253420_An_Introduction_to_Genre_Theory) [accessed October 2017].

<sup>62</sup> H.-J. Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (WMANT 28; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968).

<sup>63</sup> See e.g. W. P. Brown, “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 10:1-31:9,” in *Character and Scripture: Moral formation, community, and biblical interpretation* (ed. W. P. Brown; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002c) pp.150-182; E. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) pp.18-24; Stewart (2016); C. R. Yoder, “Forming ‘Fearers of Yahweh’: Repetition and contradiction as pedagogy in Proverbs,” in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays offered in honor of Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (eds. R. L. Troxel, K. G. Friebel and D. R. Magary; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005) pp.167-183.

I also maintain that these texts operate as ‘proverbs’, a term which (to state the obvious) is familiar in Proverbs’ scholarship. Few scholars, however, have allowed it its technical sense, nor drawn insights from ‘paremiology’ (the study of the proverb genre).<sup>64</sup> I suggest that these verses do in fact invoke the generic conventions of true ‘proverbs’. In particular, proverbs speak to *specific situations with specific purposes*. While didactic texts form general worldview and moral character, proverbs give particular evaluation and direction. While the former prompt a ponderous reading process to train the intellect, the latter exploit their immediacy, cutting into situations and provoking action. Prov 10:1-22:16 plays into both of these genres, drawing on both sets of conventions. And both can work together. A saying can be spoken specifically and later contemplated; or analysed and then applied.

In what follows, I will explain why I think this double interpretation strategy is warranted. There are no hard and fast criteria for distinguishing a genre. A writer might signal it and a reader might recognise it through a great variety of different features. I will focus on: the related genres Prov 10:1-22:16 evokes (§1); its social settings (§2); its media (§3); its self-presentation (§4); and its forms (§5-6).

### §1. Generic relations: Didactic Instructions and folk proverbs

No reader encounters a text in a vacuum. Her accumulated experience of other texts will have built up in her a set of expectations about genre. Any new text will be viewed through these lenses. Equally, no genre is isolated, but the reader understands it in relation to others, as a sort of genre ‘family’.<sup>65</sup> In the family’s diachronic aspect, genres may have descendants. The family spreads through time and space as one gives birth to another. The new-born genres are united by a common ancestry, and may, synchronically, exhibit ‘family resemblances’.<sup>66</sup> Two genres may share

<sup>64</sup> Exceptions include T. Hildebrandt, “The Proverb: An interdisciplinary approach to a biblical genre,” (2005). Online access at [https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/otesources/20-proverbs/text/articles/hildebrandt-proverb-genre-2005.htm](https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/20-proverbs/text/articles/hildebrandt-proverb-genre-2005.htm) [accessed October 2017]; A. Nahkola, “Orality and the Sage: A word (proverb) to the wise suffices,” in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. J. Jarick; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 618; Oxford: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016) pp.56-82; T. J. Sandoval, *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) pp.10-13; T. Schneider, *The Sharpening of Wisdom: Old Testament proverbs in translation* (Old Testament Essays Sup 1; Pretoria: OTSSA, 1992) pp.83-103. Paremiology is also occasionally drawn on in studies of the term מִשְׁלָּה (see §5), and of proverb context (§6).

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion and critique of this ‘family analogy’ see Fishelov (1993) pp.53-84.

<sup>66</sup> The notion of ‘family resemblances’ originally comes from L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1958). See further below, p.75. It has been applied to genre in wisdom literature by K. J. Dell, “Deciding the Boundaries of ‘Wisdom’: Applying the concept of family resemblance,” in *Was there a Wisdom Tradition? New prospects in Israelite wisdom studies* (ed. M. Sneed; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 23; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015) pp.145-160.

e.g. stylistic and substantive characteristics; interpretive expectations and principles; or situations and functions of use. Occasionally, genres which seem foreign to each other may intermarry, and give birth to children of mixed complexion.

Thus, I suggest that the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 are closely related to two of their contemporary genres: the ‘folk proverb’ and the ‘Didactic Instruction’. Here, I will briefly present the evidence that these genres were accessible to the writers/compiler of Proverbs. My interest is not in the possible diachronic development from one genre to another, but on the generic conventions that might be signalled by the likeness.

### *Folk proverbs*

First, the ‘didactic proverb’ is generically related to the ‘*folk proverb*’. Paremiologists discern several central features to this genre, many of which are also exhibited by the sayings in Proverbs (discussed more fully in the following sections).<sup>67</sup> Folk proverbs are short, self-contained and sentential; poetic and pithy (§5). They are spoken (§3), usually amongst the everyday people (§2), and lay claim to a traditional authority. Proverbs give a ‘relative’ truth, in need of contextual specification (§6). As such, they are applicable to many situations, and can have many functions (ch.3). Particularly, they function to evaluate situations, and to direct behaviour. Nonetheless, there remains a certain indefinability about the genre, a notorious “incommunicable quality”.<sup>68</sup> We should allow the genre to be flexible; these features are not necessary and sufficient.

‘Folk proverbs’ in some manifestation recur almost universally across space and time. In Mesopotamia, proverbs were gathered into collections from as early as c.2600BCE,<sup>69</sup> and are quoted in narratives, hymns, and letters.<sup>70</sup> These seem to reflect an oral tradition of the people.<sup>71</sup> In Hebrew texts too, apparent proverbs are cited in narrative and prophecy,<sup>72</sup> distinguishable by generic criteria like those given above, and sometimes marked by ‘thus it is said’ (עַל־כֵּן יֵאמַר) or similar. Even if these particular ‘folk sayings’ are not genuine (but rather creations of the biblical

<sup>67</sup> For an overview of recent discussion, see N. R. Norrick, “Subject Area, Terminology, Proverb Definitions, Proverb Features,” in *Introduction to Paremiology: A comprehensive guide to proverb studies* (eds. H. Hrisztova-Gotthardt and M. Aleksa Varga; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) pp.7-27.

<sup>68</sup> A. Taylor, *The Proverb*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931) p.3.

<sup>69</sup> Many published in E. I. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of everyday life in ancient Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1959).

<sup>70</sup> J. Taylor, “The Sumerian Proverb Collections,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 99 (2005) pp.21-24.

<sup>71</sup> B. Alster, “Proverbs From Ancient Mesopotamia: Their history and social implications,” *Proverbiūm* 10 (1993) p.9; Gordon (1959). However, Veldhuis thinks this is a romanticised interpretation; N. Veldhuis, “Sumerian Proverbs in their Curricular Context,” *JAOs* 120.3 (2000) pp.383-399.

<sup>72</sup> e.g. Judg 8:2,21; 1 Sam 10:12≈19:24; 16:7, 24:13; 1 Kgs 20:11; Ezek 12:22, 18:2≈Jer 31:29.

writers),<sup>73</sup> they are evidence that sayings were deemed usual and unremarkable in Israelite discourse. Carole Fontaine was seminal in analysing their function and import, and several scholars have fruitfully followed her trajectory.<sup>74</sup>

There is a long-recognised similarity between such folk proverbs and the sayings in the book of Proverbs. As noted in the Introduction (p.2), a diachronic progression is often postulated, from the single-lined folk saying to the two-lined wisdom saying<sup>75</sup> – though we cannot trace such development securely. More fruitfully perhaps, Fontaine drew on the similarities of content, structure, function, and worldview to argue for the same ‘wisdom at work’ in both folk tradition and ‘wisdom’ books like Proverbs.<sup>76</sup> And indeed, some cross-influence seems likely. Significant for my purposes here: the features held in common between biblical and folk proverbs mean that the interpreter applies to both certain conventions and strategies of interpretation and use. This is explained further in the sections which follow.

### *Didactic Instructions*

Second, there are family resemblances between biblical proverbs and ancient Near Eastern ‘*Didactic Instructions*’<sup>77</sup> from Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria.<sup>78</sup> We probably cannot speak of an ‘international wisdom tradition’ as such,<sup>79</sup> but Israel certainly interacted with foreign ideas. By the HB’s account,

<sup>73</sup> Influentially, H.-J. Hermisson remained sceptical of the presence of any genuine *Volkssprichwörter* in the Hebrew Bible. Hermisson (1968).

<sup>74</sup> Fontaine (1982); see further e.g. C. Camp, “The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A role model for women in early Israel?” *CBQ* 43 (1981) pp.14-29; G. Hasan-Roken, “And God Created the Proverb... inter-generic and inter-textual aspects of biblical paremiology – or the longest way to the shortest text,” in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*. (ed. S. Niditch. Amherst College: SBL, 1990) pp.107-120; W. van Heerden, “The Rhetoric of Using Proverbs in Conflict Situations: The cases of a biblical text and an African proverb,” *Old Testament Essays* 16.3 (2003) pp.731-744; M. D. Lieber, “Analogic Ambiguity: A paradox of proverb usage,” *JAF* 97.386 (1984) pp.423-441; Niditch (1993).

<sup>75</sup> Seminally Eißfeldt (1913); critiqued by Hermisson (1968).

<sup>76</sup> Fontaine (1982), pp.168-170.

<sup>77</sup> The terminology used to describe these texts is disputed. They are sometimes classed as ‘Wisdom Literature’, but this is superimposition of a category from biblical scholarship onto the ANE material; see M. Lichtheim, *Moral Values in Ancient Egypt* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 155; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997) pp.1-8.

<sup>78</sup> The most important texts from Egypt include (chronologically): the *Instruction of Hardjedef*; *Instruction of Ptahhotep*; *Instruction to Merikare*; *Instruction of Amenemhet*; *Instruction of Ani*; *Instruction of Amenemope*; *Instruction of Ankhsheshong*; *Instruction of Papyrus Insinger*. Published in AEL 1,2,3.

- From Mesopotamia come the *Instruction of Šuruppak* (known in Sumerian and Akkadian versions); *Counsels of Wisdom, Advice to a Prince, Counsels of a Pessimist*. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

- From Syria is the much-copied Aramaic work, the *Instruction to Abiqar*. J. M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Abiqar* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1983) (sayings only).

- For good bibliography of other publications and editions until 1994, see the appendix of S. Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford Theological Monographs Oxford: OUP, 1994). An overview of recent scholarship is given by M. V. Fox, “Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature (Didactic),” *Religion Compass* 5.1 (2011) pp.1-11.

<sup>79</sup> This notion has been challenged in particular by M. Sneed, “Is the ‘Wisdom Tradition’ a Tradition?,” *CBQ* 73 (2011) pp.50-71.

Solomon's wisdom "surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all of the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kgs 5:10 [Eng 4:30]), and Prov 31:1-9 is attributed to Lemuel, King of Massa (a North Arabian people group). Furthermore, the biblical text has literary connections with ANE materials. Most striking are the similarities between Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and the *Instruction of Amenemope*,<sup>80</sup> and scholars have also noted verbal parallels with e.g. the Aramaic *Instruction to Ahiqar*.<sup>81</sup> There are formal parallels too, discussed below (§6). We should be cautious of assuming that Israel had ready access to and understanding of a broad corpus of foreign texts, but the plausibility of an international connection is further undergirded by Ugaritic materials. In the libraries of Ugarit, Sumerian and Akkadian didactic texts have been found, showing their influence just north of Israel at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium.<sup>82</sup> It is likely that the authors of Proverbs drew upon this genre with its conventions, and adapted it towards their own goals.

In particular, these texts seem to have been intended for ethical formation. Egypt's didactic literature (like Israel's) stresses the importance of developing moral character, and makes use of character types and anti-types to emulate and avoid (see ch.4 below). The texts educate their readers in virtues, principal amongst which were (according to Egyptologist M. Lichtheim) "honesty and truthfulness; justice, kindness, and generosity; temperance and patience; thoughtfulness, diligence, and competence; loyalty and reliability".<sup>83</sup> This is very similar to what we find in Proverbs.

As well as moral formation, such didactic texts encourage reflection on their own words. The desired reading strategy is one of thoughtful interpretation. In Egyptian literature, the reader is called on to ꜥꜥ 'penetrate' or 'open' the instructions.<sup>84</sup> Ani claims he will make his reader "a wise man who can penetrate words", and later advises "penetrate the writings, put them in your heart".<sup>85</sup> This reflects an advanced stage of learning: the student must go deeply into the sayings and consider their intricacies. The tightly-worded epigram is likened to a 'knot' (ꜥꜥ) which must be

<sup>80</sup> First recognised by Erman (1924). See discussion of more recent debates in J. A. Emerton, "The Teaching of Amenemope and Proverbs XXII 17-XXIV 22: Further reflections on a long-standing problem," *VIT* 51.4 (2001) pp.431-465.

<sup>81</sup> J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and its Appropriation in the Book of Proverbs," in *Wisdom in Israel: Essays in honour of J. A. Emerton* (eds. J. Day, R. P. Gordon and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: CUP, 1998) pp.55-70.

<sup>82</sup> L. G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An introduction to wisdom in the age of empires* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008) pp.36-39.

<sup>83</sup> M. Lichtheim, "Didactic Literature," in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and forms* (ed. A. Lopriendo; Probleme der Ägyptologie; Leiden: Brill, 1996) p.261.

<sup>84</sup> M. V. Fox, "Wisdom and the Self-Presentation of Wisdom Literature," in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in honour of David J. A. Clines* (eds. J. C. Exum and H. G. M. Williamson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) pp.166-167.

<sup>85</sup> 15.4 and 20.4-5; according to the numbering of J. F. Quack, *Die Lehren des Ani: Ein neuägyptischer Weisheitstext in seinem kulturellen Umfeld* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 141; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995). Translation by Fox (2003) p.167.

‘untied’ (*wh*) through the interpretive process. According to Amenemope, it is not enough simply to listen to the sayings; you must “put them in your heart, and become a man who unties their knots, one who unties as a teacher” (27.13-15; cf. 3.10).<sup>86</sup> This hermeneutical principle of careful consideration for the sake of intellectual training is essential for Proverbs too.

## §2. Social settings: Court and family

Since the 1960s, literary theorists have shown a sustained awareness that genres are inextricably tied to their situations of use.<sup>87</sup> Genres necessarily interact with the social, cultural, and physical features of their environment. They both are shaped by, and go towards shaping, that environment. They are put to use in certain settings to answer to the needs and desires of particular communities. Little has been conclusively decided about Proverbs’ original setting(s), but two options seem most likely: the school/court, or the family/folk.

### *A setting in a school/court?*

A school would provide an obvious context for a didactic book.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, this seems to have been the setting for many of the generically related ANE texts. Proverb collections seem to have provided an early stage in the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum,<sup>89</sup> and Egyptian Instructions may have been used in schools (‘houses of life’) to train the aristocracy.<sup>90</sup> The presence of comparable institutions in Israel may be hinted at through epigraphic finds (primarily abecedaries, reflecting

<sup>86</sup> N. Shupak, *Where Can Wisdom Be Found? The sage’s language in the Bible and in ancient Egyptian literature* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 130; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) p.64.

<sup>87</sup> See esp. E. Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A study in method* (New York: MacMillan, 1965) and L. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968) pp.1-14. In biblical studies, Gunkel (see pp.2-3 above) considered social setting in terms of *Sitz im Leben* (‘setting in life’). For Gunkel, this referred to a typical social situation which gave rise to an oral *Gattung*, and not to the historical situation of a particular literary text. I prefer the broader terminology ‘social setting’, which designates both typical genre settings and specific text settings.

<sup>88</sup> First influentially argued for Proverbs by Hermisson (1968). Cf. also B. Lang, “Schule und Unterricht im alten Israel,” in *La Sagesse de l’Ancien Testament* (ed. M. Gilbert; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniesium LI; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979) pp.186-201; A. Lemaire, *Écoles et la Formation de la Bible dans l’Ancient Israël* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 39; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981); Perdue (2008); Shupak (1993).

<sup>89</sup> Veldhuis (2000). Many tablets were found accumulated in what appear to be school buildings. J. Black, et al., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) pp.xli-xlii.

<sup>90</sup> Perdue (2008) p.76. This may pertain, however, to the texts’ reuse in later periods, more than to their original provenance. S. Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1-9* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) pp.16-25.



early education),<sup>91</sup> and some possible allusions in the HB.<sup>92</sup> However, such evidence is scant, and the presence of formal schools in Israel remains uncertain.<sup>93</sup>

However, an elite educational function may be possible even without this. Within the Israelite court, these texts may have been used to train would-be scribes, sages and royal officials.<sup>94</sup> Many Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Syrian texts present themselves as wisdom passed from a king/royal official to his successor, and similarly, the collections in Proverbs are ascribed (probably eponymously) to kings Solomon (1:1; 10:1) and Hezekiah (25:1; and Arabian king Lemuel, 31:1). A number of sayings specifically refer to the king, or seem to presume acquaintance with him (see ch.6). This evidence suggest that the proverbs probably passed through the court at some point. At the very least, they came into the hands of the educated literati (for they were written down, see §3), and were connected with the court by these writers. Within this setting, the book might serve as a broad enculturation programme, to establish the ideological foundations of this social group.<sup>95</sup> This elite may have been more available, equipped, and inclined to study than the everyday folk. Indeed, “the wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity for leisure... How can one become wise who handles the plow?” (Sir 38:24-25).

### *A setting amongst the 'folk'?*

But “the who handles the plow” may also lay claim to proverbs.<sup>96</sup> Indeed ‘folk proverbs’ operate universally within non-elite, family settings. The sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 show similarity to the

<sup>91</sup> D. M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of scripture and literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2005) pp.122-4; Lemaire (1981) pp.7-33.

<sup>92</sup> Carr (2005) pp.124-6; J. L. Crenshaw, “Education in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 104.4 (1985) pp.603-604; A. Klostermann, “Schulwesen im alten Israel,” in *Theologische Studien: Theodor Zahn zum 10. Oktober 1908 dargebracht* (eds. G. N. Bonwetsch and T. Zahn; Leipzig: Deichert, 1908) pp.193-232.

<sup>93</sup> See discussion in Weeks (1994) pp.132-153.

<sup>94</sup> C. B. Ansberry, *Be Wise, My Son, and Make My Heart Glad: An exploration of the courtly nature of the book of Proverbs* (BZAW 422; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); M. V. Fox, “The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs,” in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A tribute to Menahem Haran* (eds. M. V. Fox et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996) pp.227-239; Perdue (2008); von Rad (1972). For criticism of the court hypothesis, see Weeks (1994) pp.41-56.

<sup>95</sup> Ansberry (2011).

<sup>96</sup> Suggesting a folk origin for (at least some of) the sentence literature: A. Barucq, “Proverbes (Livre des),” in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* 8 (eds. L. Pirot, A. Robert, H. Cazelles and A. Feuillet; Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1972) cols.1415-1419; K. J. Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006); F. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993); L. Naré, *Proverbes Salomoniens et Proverbes Mossi. Étude comparative à partir d'une nouvelle analyse de Pr 25-29* (Frankfurt and Berne: Peter Lang, 1986); J. Paterson, *The Book that is Alive: Studies in Old Testament life and thought as set forth by the Hebrew sages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954); H. C. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs* (SBL Dissertation Series 142; Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994); C. Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The oldest proverbs of Israel and other peoples* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (JSOTSup 99; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

proverb stocks of other peoples,<sup>97</sup> with some tropes strikingly recurring across space and time.<sup>98</sup> Many sayings reflect an agrarian society, with the language of husbandry and harvests frequent, and the importance of diligent work stressed. There is sometimes ambivalence about the ruling elite (see ch.6 below), and a deep concern for the poor.<sup>99</sup> The book has a strong community ethos, commending behaviour conducive to harmonious communal life (avoiding quarrels, soothing social tensions etc.), not specific skills needed for royal administration.

At the very least, the sayings were retained into post-monarchic Israel, so must have been able to function away from the court. But in earlier periods too, ‘wisdom’ seems to have been at home outside the royal precincts, perhaps epitomised in figures like the local ‘wise woman’ (2 Sam 14:2; 20:16).<sup>100</sup> The most prevalent social circle in Proverbs is familial, with frequent references to the parents and son. Both ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are mentioned, suggesting that the latter is not (as some argue<sup>101</sup>) simply a cipher for ‘teacher’. Within such a context, the sayings may have been used akin to folk proverbs, spoken into problem situations arising in the family’s life.

### *More than a single setting*

In all likelihood, the didactic proverbs had links with both these settings – court and folk.<sup>102</sup> The sentences reflect an array of social locations. It is misguided to search for one setting alone, for it is in the nature of a proverb to be passed through many hands. A rough distinction might be made between origin, collection, and use (though not in a simple linear progression). Many proverbs may have originated amongst the folk, before a complex collection process. At this stage, some may have been altered or created by the literati. Smaller collections might have circulated independently in oral or written form before being brought together. There is little reason to think that the proverbs then fell out of popular usage.

<sup>97</sup> Several scholars have compared biblical proverbs with those of other nations. E.g. Barucq (1972; col.1415-1419; African); Golka (1993; African); L. P. Kimlike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: An African transformational hermeneutic of proverbs on poverty* (Bible & Theology in Africa 7; New York: Peter Lang, 2008; African); Naré (1986; Mossi); Westermann (1995; African, Sumatran, Sumerian, Egyptian).

<sup>98</sup> For example, the view of speech held by biblical and folk proverbs seems very similar (see ch.7 §2.2). Even a theme seemingly so distinctive as the contrast of wise and foolish is attested in proverb collections universally; F. Černak, “Reason and Thought: Pillars of intellectual behaviour in proverbs,” in *10th Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs* (eds. R. Soares and O. Lauhakangas; ACTAS ICP16; Tavira: AIP-IAP, Forthcoming); Golka (1993) pp.49-50.

<sup>99</sup> There is a debate about the socio-economic perspective reflected. Westermann (1995) thinks the perspective is that of the ‘simple folk’; Whybray (1990), those in a middle class who were neither rich nor poor; Fox (1996), the higher echelons of society.

<sup>100</sup> Camp (1981).

<sup>101</sup> E.g. Lang (1979) pp.192-195.

<sup>102</sup> Though emphasising one setting in particular, most scholars cited above in n.88 (court origin) and n.90 (folk origin) acknowledge the possibility of the other setting.

Such a double context suggests a twin interpretive strategy: didactic use in the court, and proverbial use in the family. But these should not be distinguished too rigidly. Scribes and courtiers are ‘real people’ too, with families of their own, and proverbs learnt in the court may have entered their ‘folk’ interactions. Equally, the family may have been a primary locus for social, moral, and religious training in Israel (e.g. Deut 4:9–10; 6:20–25), providing an environment eminently suitable for ‘didactic’ use.<sup>103</sup> The two settings are related to, but not necessary for, these two different usages.

### §3. Media: Written and oral

#### *Written*

In the form we have it, Prov 10:1–22:16 is, clearly, a written text. Comparable proverb collections in Mesopotamia in fact seem to have taught writing skills to aspiring scribes.<sup>104</sup> However, alphabetic Hebrew is much simpler than Mesopotamian cuneiform, so this is unlikely to be the primary reason that Israel’s proverbs were penned. The extent of literacy and the prevalence of ‘scribal culture’ in ancient Israel are disputed, with some arguing for literacy as a commonplace.<sup>105</sup> But a more moderate reconstruction is probably safer: only by the late monarchic period had literacy spread, perhaps beyond scribes, but probably not beyond an elite minority.<sup>106</sup>

Writing Proverbs down has semi-formalised it, into what could be used as an enculturation programme to develop a distinctive worldview in its students (whether or not in a ‘school’). Writing can become a symbolic activity, establishing the identity and values of a particular group.<sup>107</sup> It makes the text less malleable, circumscribes its limits, and presents its instructions as a definitive totality: “Beware of anything beyond these” (Qoh 12:12). It makes claims about the text’s authority; only that of utmost importance is honoured with this expensive, specialist medium.

<sup>103</sup> Ansberry (2011) pp.40–45; Carr (2005) pp.129–130; Crenshaw (1985) p.614.

<sup>104</sup> Veldhuis (2000).

<sup>105</sup> E.g. W. G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know And When Did They Know It? What archaeology can tell us about the reality of ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2001) pp.202–204; R. Hess, “Questions of Reading and Writing in Ancient Israel,” *BBR* 19.1 (2009) pp.1–9; A. Millard, “Writing, Writing Materials and Literacy in the Ancient Near East,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical books* (eds. B. T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson; Illinois: IVP, 2005) pp.1003–1011.

<sup>106</sup> Carr (2005); C. A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010); S. L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009); W. M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The textualization of ancient Israel* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

<sup>107</sup> S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite literature* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p.79.

Furthermore, a written text is removed from situational contexts, ready to be unrolled no matter when or where. Its general advice transcends particularities. It becomes a ready stimulus for intellectual training, a physical object to be pored over and analysed. This may be a personal, reflective activity, with no need for a third party beyond text and reader. Its unchanging form allows repeated autodidactic study, to explore its intricacies.

### *Oral*

However, Proverbs is not just a written text; it is oral too. It is easy to forget, in our contemporary writing-infused culture, that Israel was essentially an oral society, even within its literate subsections. The two media cannot be dichotomised, nor placed in a simple diachronic progression. Even when texts were set down in writing, their essential orality did not cease. S. Niditch has expressed this in terms of an ‘oral-literary continuum’ in Israel,<sup>108</sup> and D. Carr proposes that both media were parts of a much larger matrix for textual transmission, whose aim was to inscribe the texts on the recipients’ hearts (Prov 3:3; 7:3).<sup>109</sup> Memorisation, oral performance, and written records were all aspects of this much grander enculturation.

This accords with the self-presentation of didactic texts across the ANE. They often depict a spoken discourse between father and son, which is subsequently recorded for posterity in written form.<sup>110</sup> Similarly Prov 22:17-21 describes its own instruction in both oral and written terms: “Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise... Have I not written for you thirty sayings of counsel and knowledge?” We might imagine court recitations of entire collections, functioning as an important didactic tool for enculturation.<sup>111</sup>

However, the oral nature of the texts means that a use ‘as proverbs’ also becomes possible. They can no longer be the secret property of the literati. Even if recited at court, they may have been heard and repeated by more than just courtiers. J. Black suggests that the oral nature of Sumerian proverb collections made them “accessible to the vast illiterate majority too”.<sup>112</sup> Orality can fragment textual unity, permitting piece-by-piece transmission. Such a process may be attested by the presence of variant proverbs: dispersed throughout the collections are multiple versions of

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<sup>108</sup> Niditch (1996).

<sup>109</sup> Carr (2005).

<sup>110</sup> See Fox (2003) pp.160-165.

<sup>111</sup> Carr (2005).

<sup>112</sup> Black (2006), p.ii.

what are ostensibly the same saying. While they could be explained otherwise,<sup>113</sup> it is possible that these arose through the gradual Chinese-whisper effect of the oral repetition of units.<sup>114</sup>

Individual units might be spoken into specific contexts. Proverbs’ fictive interaction situation – ‘father instructs son’ – frequently recurs throughout life. The memorised text becomes a mental proverb inventory, each unit ready to be deployed at an opportune moment. Removed from its literary encasing, the proverb is no longer an artefact for individual study, but a tool that can be used within interaction. And an oral unit can cut into a situation with an immediacy inaccessible to its written counterpart. Its aural features (such as sound patterning<sup>115</sup>) not only help its memorisation, but bring it particular potency when spoken. The hearer assumes there is some specific reason for this speech, some pressing importance for her own circumstance. It becomes a matter of urgency to follow its direction. Thus the book is insistent in its imperative: “Listen!” (1:8; 4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:32,33; 19:20; 22:17; 23:19,22). The Hebrew here – שִׁמְעוּ – implies not just passive hearing, but active obedience. Thus, the media of the book give it dual function, both didactic and proverbial, or as Fox has put it, both “study and understand” and “hear and do”.<sup>116</sup>

#### §4. Self-presentation: מִשַׁל and חִידָה

We have seen, then, that the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 may be used akin to ‘Didactic Instructions’, read in the royal court; or akin to ‘folk proverbs’, spoken in the family. But does this tally with what the book says about itself? Does the book indicate how it wants its sayings to be used; the expectations and conventions it wants its interpreter to bring to bear?

Clues may be present in its statement of purpose (1:2-7). Positioned as a prologue, this offers itself as a hermeneutical guide for what follows.<sup>117</sup> Its addressees are specified in verse 4 as ‘the simple’ פְּתָאִים and ‘the youth’ נָעַר (the same characters to whom the speakers of chs.1-9 subsequently appeal<sup>118</sup>). With such recipients, the sayings must allow for straightforward interpretations, akin to folk proverbs. They offer basic advice on how to behave more wisely. Their surface meaning is evident, and they can be applied straightforwardly to the hearer’s life.

<sup>113</sup> Other possibilities include scribal error, different literary sources, and editorial activity. See Heim (2013) pp.5-9; Snell (1993).

<sup>114</sup> Carr in particular argues that these are ‘memory variants’. Carr (2011) pp.25-34.

<sup>115</sup> Esp. T. P. McCreesh, *Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic sound patterns in Proverbs 10-29* (JSOTSup 128; Sheffield: A&C Black, 1991).

<sup>116</sup> Fox (2003).

<sup>117</sup> Fox (2003); T. J. Sandoval, “Revisiting the Prologue of Proverbs,” *JBL* 126.3 (2007) pp.455-473.

<sup>118</sup> The פְּתָי is appealed to in 1:22; 8:5; 9:4,16, paralleled with the נָעַר in 7:7.

However, the prologue abruptly shifts the book’s addressee in v.5, with a jussive exclamation: “let the wise (חֲכָמִים) hear... let the discerning (נְבוֹן) get guidance”. The book’s advice must go beyond the basics. The task of the wise is delineated in v.6 – לְהִבִּין מִשָּׁל וּמִלִּצָּה דְבָרֵי – חֲכָמִים וְחִידָתָם: “to understand the proverb and the saying, the words of the wise and their riddles”. The implication: these are not always easy to understand. Four literary terms are listed here, apparently describing the contents of the book. The meaning of מִלִּצָּה is too poorly understood to offer much insight.<sup>119</sup> The ‘words of the wise’ (דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים) characterises the imagined speakers of the book. The other two terms, מִשָּׁל ‘proverb’ and חִידָה ‘riddle’, can be used as genre descriptors, so may offer us conventions for interpretation.

The proverb and the riddle are recognised cross-culturally as folk forms. Evidence for the former in Israel has been given above (§1). Evidence for the latter occurs particularly in Samson’s obscure puzzle of Judg 14.<sup>120</sup> The forms are closely related, and the sayings in Proverbs have been explained as stemming from both.<sup>121</sup> All are short, pithy, oral expressions, often employing figurative language.<sup>122</sup> However, proverb and riddle also have important differences. A proverb has a self-evident meaning, even to the simple-minded; a riddle requires wise interpretation. The former intends to clarify; the latter to obscure.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>119</sup> מִלִּצָּה occurs twice in the HB: here and in Hab 2:6 (also Sir 47:17), each time associated with מִשָּׁל. Its etymology is disputed. It may be from לִצָּח, ‘to scorn, mock’, hence ‘mocking saying’ (BDB; Oesterley [1929]). As a hiphil participle, the root designates an ‘interpreter’, so some have suggested ‘a saying in need of interpretation’ (B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos* [Handbuch zum Alten Testament 1.16; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1963]), which would be supported by the parallelism with חִידָה, ‘riddle’. Alternatively, the root may be מִלִּץ ‘to be smooth, slippery’ – either a slippery, allusive saying (H. N. Richardson, “Some Notes on לִצָּח and Its Derivatives,” *V/T* 5.2 [1955] pp.163-179), or a smooth, sweet saying (J. Parkhurst, *Hebrew Lexicon and Grammar* [Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1821]). LXX translates it as σκατεινὸν λόγον, a ‘dark saying’.

<sup>120</sup> C. Camp and C. R. Fontaine, “The Words of the Wise and Their Riddles,” in *Text and Tradition: The Bible and folklore* (ed. S. Niditch; SBL, 1990) pp.127-152 use insights from folklore studies to interpret this riddle.

<sup>121</sup> The origin of the sayings in folk proverbs was first influentially advocated by Eißfeldt (1913), see above p.2. Some propose an origin in folk riddles, reconstituted so that question and answer are pushed together into a single saying. This has been particularly suggested for the numerical sayings in Prov 30:15-33, e.g. H. Torcszyner, “The Riddle in the Bible,” *HUCA* 1 (1924) pp.125-149. Some have suggested this for other sayings too. E.g. J. L. Crenshaw, “Wisdom,” in *Old Testament Form Criticism* (ed. J. H. Hayes; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974) pp.225-264; H. Torcszyner, *משלי שלמה* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1947); M. Zer Kavod, “חידות בספר משלי,” *בית מקרא* 64 (1975) pp.7-11.

<sup>122</sup> On the structural similarities between the proverb and riddle, see A. Dundes, “On the Structure of the Proverb,” *Proverbium* 25 (1975) pp.961-973, cf. R. D. Abrahams, “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore,” *JAF* 81.320 (1968) pp.143-158; T. Green and W. Pepicello, “The Proverb and Riddle as Folk Enthymemes,” *Proverbium* 3 (1986) pp.33-46.

<sup>123</sup> Abrahams (1968) p.150; McKane (1970) p.23.

**מִשְׁלַּ** – *Speech for the simple*

Elsewhere in the HB, the term **מִשְׁלַּ** designates apparent folk proverbs (e.g. 1 Sam 10:12, 24:14; Ezek 12:22-23, 18:2-3). Two sayings in Proverbs speak self-referentially of **מִשְׁלִים**, perhaps also implying this meaning. “A proverb (**מִשְׁלַּ**) in the mouth of fools” is “like a lame man’s legs” (26:7) and “like a thorn” (26:9). The fool uses the saying in a particular situation, expecting it to have an effect like a folk proverb. But it proves ineffective (26:7) or downright harmful (26:9). Most scholars believe that **מִשְׁלַּ** is etymologically derived from ‘to be like’ (**משל**, BDB I).<sup>124</sup> This etymology is readily explained if the term designates folk proverbs, which often function as ‘similitudes’. They clarify for the simple the likeness between two situations or phenomena. In Proverbs, many sayings contain comparisons (esp. in Prov 25-26), and/or can be used as standards of comparison for situations in life.<sup>125</sup>

Proverbs designates its contents as **מִשְׁלִים** in three titular verses (1:1; 10:1; 25:1). By giving itself this title, the book signals that the reader should bring to bear the expectations and principles of the ‘proverb’ genre. Each saying can be pronounced as a comment on a particular situation, evaluating it and directing the hearer’s subsequent behaviour. Each provides straightforward clarification and guidance.

**מִשְׁלַּ** – *Perhaps not so simple?*

However, the situation may not be quite so simple. The term **מִשְׁלַּ** can be used for a variety of forms: taunt songs (Isa 14:4; Mic 2:4); allegories (Ezek 17:2; 21:5[20:49]); poems (Pss 49:5[4]; 78:2); discourses (Num 23:7; Job 27:1); even a person or nation who has become a byword (Ps 44:15[14]; Deut 28:37). Some scholars have tried to account for all these diverse uses within a single umbrella category, perhaps based around the idea of ‘likeness’.<sup>126</sup> Ezekiel’s allegories for example are

<sup>124</sup> Some have suggested instead ‘to rule’ (BDB II), hence ‘sovereign word’ or ‘word of power’ (e.g. recently L. G. Perdue, *Proverbs* [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Lewisville: John Knox Press, 2000] p.27). This view has largely been discredited, mainly based on cognate languages. See discussion in McKane (1970) pp.24-26.

<sup>125</sup> Thus McKane (1970) pp.22-33 understands **מִשְׁלַּ** as ‘exemplar’, ‘paradigm’, ‘model’.

<sup>126</sup> A. S. Herbert, “The ‘Parable’ (*māšāl*) in the Old Testament,” *SJT* 7.2 (1954) p.181; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New Testament Library London: SCM, 1963) p.20; G. M. Landes, “Jonah: A *māšāl*?” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and literary essays in honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J. G. Gammie; New York: Scholars Press, 1978) p.139; Niditch (1993) pp.67-91. Cf. also Crenshaw (1974) pp.229-239; Eißfeldt (1913); Fox (2009) pp.54-55; A. R. Johnson, “**משל**,” in *Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Presented to Professor Harold Henry Rowley* (eds. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas; Leiden: Brill, 1955) pp.162-169; McKane (1970) pp.22-33; T. Polk, “Paradigms, Parables, and *Mēšālīm*: On reading the *māšāl*

founded on comparisons, and bywords are exemplars. However, this will not work for all cases, and it is probably better not to look for a unifying genre, but to recognise the flexibility of the term.

With the designation ‘מִשְׁלִים’, therefore, the introductory verses prime us for strategies of interpretation appropriate for folk proverbs, but they do not hem us in to such strategies. In form and substance, the sayings are not quite folk proverbs (see §5, below). Indeed, nothing much resembling folk proverbs appears until 9 chapters later, in 10:1ff. The mismatch may prompt consideration of other ways the term can be used. מִשְׁלִים sometimes describes texts that are obscure and ambiguous, requiring much greater reflection.<sup>127</sup> Such strategies may also be appropriate here.

This is possibly the implication in Qoh 12:9 – וְאַיִן וְחָקַר תִּקַּן מִשְׁלִים הֶרְבֵּה “he heard and investigated, composed many proverbs”.<sup>128</sup> מִשְׁלִים may be the object of all three verbs. He “investigated... proverbs” (חָקַר ... מִשְׁלִים), i.e. penetrated beneath their surface and explored their nuances.<sup>129</sup> Even if not, Qohelet’s intellectual searching is closely linked with his proverb use. Equally, the “words of the wise” (דְּבַרֵּי חֲכָמִים; Qoh 12:11, cf. Prov 1:6) are “like goads” (כְּדֹרְבָנוֹת) – perhaps prompters to deeper reflection.<sup>130</sup>

Later tradition describes the job of the wise interpreter. Sirach 39:2b-3 depicts him as engaging with the παραβολή ‘parable/proverb’ and the παροιμία ‘proverb’, both of which elsewhere translate מִשְׁלִים.<sup>131</sup> These are described as having turnings/subtleties (στροφή), secrets (ἀπόκρυφος), and enigmas (αἰνιγμα). The interpreter must engage wisdom to explore the language and discover what lies beneath its surface. In this sense they are akin to ‘riddles’, חִידוֹת, which Sirach can also translate as παραβολή (47:17) or παροιμία (8:8), and which occur in Prov 1:6 as counterparts to the מִשְׁלִים.

in scripture,” *CBQ* 45 (1983) pp.563-584; D. W. Suter, “Mašāl in the Similitudes of Enoch,” *JBL* 100.2 (1981) pp.193-212.

<sup>127</sup> Especially the allegories in Ezekiel. Niditch (1993); M. W. Hamilton, “Riddles and Parables, Traditions and Texts: Ezekielian perspectives on Israelite wisdom tradition,” in *Was there a Wisdom Tradition? New prospects in Israelite wisdom studies* (ed. M. Sneed; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 23; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015) pp.241-264.

<sup>128</sup> On the translation of אֵין and תִּקַּן, see discussion in C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A new translation with introduction and commentary* (The Anchor Bible New York: Doubleday, 1994) pp.384-385.

<sup>129</sup> Fox (2003) p.169; N. Shupak, “Learning Methods in Ancient Israel,” *VT* 53.3 (2003) p.422.

<sup>130</sup> The precise significance of this simile is disputed. Related to this view is the idea that they prompt readers to right action C. G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009). Alternatively, they prick and hurt; M. V. Fox, *A Time To Tear Down and a Time To Build Up: A rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999); T. Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>131</sup> The Hebrew text of these verses is lost. ‘παραβολή’ is LXX’s usual translation for מִשְׁלִים. ‘παροιμία’ translates מִשְׁלִים in Sir 6:35; 47:17 and Prov 1:1.



*חֵידָה – For wise interpretation*

Nothing much like Samson's obscure puzzle occurs in Proverbs (despite the recurring tropes of lions and honey!<sup>132</sup>). But to search for strict examples of the folk riddle is, I think, to miss the point of the prologue's pronouncement. Rather, it invokes this genre to offer principles for interpretation and expectations about content. Told that an item is a riddle, we expect it to be obscure and enigmatic. So in Num 12:8, God spoke to his prophets 'in riddles' (בְּחִידוֹת); not in pithy folk puzzles, but in words difficult to understand. By contrast, he spoke to Moses clearly, face to face (פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה).

Riddles require wise interpretation – thus the queen of Sheba used them 'to test' (לְנִסָּה) Solomon's famed wisdom (1 Kgs 10:1). They force their interpreters to think of their subject matter in new ways, compelling re-categorisations, and links between phenomena unconnected before.<sup>133</sup> They emphasise the enigmatic and paradoxical, the disorder in reality.<sup>134</sup> This makes the reader contemplate and reflect. They serve as a jolt out of the ordinary, an upsetting of conventional categories, a disorientation. Through the interpretive process, order is restored, and resolution found,<sup>135</sup> making riddles eminently suited for the didactic wisdom enterprise. This process has a psychological impact on the reader, and may bring about his formation and growth.<sup>136</sup> This is what we should expect when the text tells us it contains חֵידוֹת. The saying should be read reflectively, with an eye to what is beneath the surface.

The self-presentation of Prov 1:6, therefore, permits two different strategies for the interpretation and use for the sayings. They can be understood as מְשָׁלִים, folk proverbs, applied straightforwardly to life, to direct the simple in their actions. Or they can be interpreted as though חֵידוֹת, riddles, catching the wise up in their obscurities, provoking fresh reflection on reality and training the mind.

<sup>132</sup> Lions occur in Prov 19:12; 20:2; 22:13; 26:13; 28:1; 28:15; 30:30; honey in 5:3; 24:13; 25:16,27; 27:7.

<sup>133</sup> D. Handelman, "Traps of Trans-Formation: Theoretical convergences between riddle and ritual," in *Untying the Knot: On riddles and other enigmatic modes* (eds. G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman; Oxford: OUP, 1996) p.44.

<sup>134</sup> H.-P. Müller, "Der Begriff 'Rätsel' im Alten Testament," *VT* 20.4 (1970) p.488.

<sup>135</sup> G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman, "Introduction," in *Untying the Knot: On riddles and other enigmatic modes* (eds. G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman; Oxford: OUP, 1996) p.4; L. G. Perdue, "The Riddles of Psalm 49," *JBL* 93/4 (1974) p.535.

<sup>136</sup> Hasan-Rokem and Shulman (1996) p.5.

## §5. Form (1): Aphorism and proverb

Central to most scholarly accounts of genre is ‘form’: the structural and stylistic features shared by the texts. Form often directly impacts how a text can be interpreted and used. The distinctive form of the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 allows them to be used both ‘as proverbs’ and ‘didactically’ (akin to aphorisms).

### *The form of a proverb*

The sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 have formal, structural and stylistic features, similar to those of folk proverbs,<sup>137</sup> which make them suitable for application to life situations. Formally, a proverb is a self-contained unit, often short and ‘pithy’. It lacks a straightforward literary context to elucidate it, and its meaning can be filled out instead by social context (see ch.3 §2.1 below). In its self-containedness, it sets itself aside from the discourse and announces itself as a summarial remark.

Structurally, a proverb can be represented as [Topic – Comment].<sup>138</sup> It is a simple, succinct description of a situation; spoken as an incisive comment on a topic relevant to the circumstances. Unlike folk proverbs, biblical proverbs often employ parallelism: [Topic – Comment] // [Topic – Comment]. They thus observe the situation from two similar or opposite perspectives. Frequently, the slots are filled with characters, acts, or consequences: [act – character], [act – consequence] or [character – consequence], which we will see makes them particularly useful for evaluating situations, and directing behaviour (ch.3 §2.2).

Stylistically, a proverb often uses heightened poetic language, with figures of speech, wordplay or soundplay. This increases its memorability – it is added to the mental inventory, ready to be redeployed in an appropriate situation. The heightened form draws attention to it as a comment, and gives it persuasiveness and power. Proverbs are indirect and observational, subtly persuading their hearers without abrupt imperatives.

<sup>137</sup> Though the form, structure, and style of ‘folk proverbs’ have themselves provoked much paremiological dispute. N. R. Norrick, “Subject Area, Terminology, Proverb Definitions, Proverb Features,” in *Introduction to Paremiology: A comprehensive guide to proverb studies* (eds. H. Hrisztova-Gotthardt and M. Aleksa Varga; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) pp.7-27.

<sup>138</sup> Dundes (1975); cf. R. C. van Leeuwen, *Context and Meaning in Proverbs 25-27* (SBL Dissertation Series 96; Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988) pp.47-51.

*The form of an aphorism*

If one formal comparison is offered by folk proverbs, another is offered by literary aphorisms.<sup>139</sup> Great thinkers throughout the centuries – from Bacon to Nietzsche – have found short sayings effective for conveying philosophical insights and provoking reflection.<sup>140</sup> Some of the very same formal features that make sentences suitable for immediate application can turn them into goads to extensive aphoristic musings. Furthermore, the biblical sayings go beyond their folk counterparts in their literary style, enhancing their contemplative capacity. Three characteristics are particularly significant for aphoristic function: compressed expression, poetic flavour, stark language.

These qualities make aphorisms highly affective. The aphorism *feels* true and important.<sup>141</sup> The intensity of poetic language gives it an incontrovertible air. It is a concise, unified thought, beautifully packaged and deposited before the reader. Its allure compels her to take it up and unpack it, to feel the weight of its unqualified assertion. The heavy, emphatic language, the polarities, the all-encompassing categories, make this a statement of the utmost significance. As one scholar put it, aphorists “are stirred by the hope of economising glimpses of eternity into single-worded statements”.<sup>142</sup> There is much to explore here – the world in a phrase.<sup>143</sup>

The compressed form gives the aphorism the impression of being a moment of insight, a flash of comprehension of some universal truth. It appears, all of it, all at once. Its stark and unapologetic immediacy causes a momentary psychological disruption, demanding explanation. Rather than reflection leading to a conclusion, the conclusion comes first with an aphorism.<sup>144</sup> Discerning how it is true (for it *must* be true) is the task of future contemplation. The aphorism is often figurative or elliptical. Its precise implications are not always clear, and the reader must employ interpretive dexterity. Modern aphorisms are often veiled in paradox and are intentionally deconstructive and problematising. While the prevailing mode of biblical proverbs is constructive,

<sup>139</sup> See esp. J. G. Williams, “The Power of Form: A study of biblical proverbs,” *Semeia* 17 (1980) pp.35-58, and J. G. Williams, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic thinking and biblical literature* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1981).

<sup>140</sup> E.g. F. Bacon, *The New Organon* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: CUP, 2000); F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Modern Library Publishers, 1917).

<sup>141</sup> J. M. Thompson, *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel* (Paris: Mouton, 1974) pp.23-25.

<sup>142</sup> H. E. Pagliaro, “Paradox in the Aphorisms of La Rochefoucauld and Some Representative English Followers,” *PMLA* 79.1 (1964), p.42.

<sup>143</sup> Thus the title of Geary’s book on aphorisms, J. Geary, *The World in a Phrase: A brief history of the aphorism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

<sup>144</sup> So Barthes: “l’intellect perçoit d’abord des substances pleines, non le flux progressif de la pensée”. R. Barthes, “La Rochefoucauld: Réflexions ou sentences et maximes,” in *Le Degré Zero de l’Écriture: Suivi de nouveaux essais critiques* (Points Littérature 35; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) pp.71-72.

moments of paradox occasionally disrupt its attempts at order.<sup>145</sup> They have endless nuances upon which the wise can reflect.

## §6. Form (2): Collection and saying

The proverbs have not come to us one isolated saying at a time, but as a written collection, bearing signs of literary craftsmanship. This may change how we read them: while it is still legitimate to take each proverb on its own terms, as a literary whole they take on a particular didactic flavour.

### *The didactic collection*

If the proverbs are read together as a collection, then the connections between the parts become important: between the introduction and the sentence literature; between sentences in different parts of the collection; between a sentence and its immediate literary context.

First, the sayings can be read in light of the introduction (chs.1-9), which may offer a hermeneutical lens for the book,<sup>146</sup> suggesting its purpose for general education and moral formation. Such prologues are very common in ANE didactic literature. They conventionally begin by giving the title, nature, and eponymous author of the text, followed by either a narrative account of when and how the instructions were spoken,<sup>147</sup> or exhortations to listen and take heed.<sup>148</sup> Proverbs falls into the latter tradition.<sup>149</sup> Such introductions present a didactic setting: a royal father passes on instruction to his son. The reader is called upon to adopt the receptive, submissive posture expected from the latter, and implicitly to retain it throughout the book. Furthermore, in Prov 1-9, the key theme ‘wisdom’ is introduced, and made to seem a great object of desire. This will serve as important motivation to embody the sentences’ later advice.

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<sup>145</sup> Williams (1981) considers Proverbs and Ben Sira to be ‘aphoristic wisdom of order’, where paradox is recognised but not prevalent. By contrast, Qohelet and the sayings of Jesus are ‘aphoristic wisdom of counter-order’, where paradox abounds.

<sup>146</sup> E.g. Ansberry (2011) pp.74-75; Camp (1985); Fox (2003).

<sup>147</sup> E.g. *Ankhseshong, Abiqar*.

<sup>148</sup> E.g. *Šuruppak, Amenemhet, Amenemope*.

<sup>149</sup> K. Kitchen, “The Basic Literary Forms and Formulations of Ancient Instructional Writings in Egypt and Western Asia,” in *Studien zu Altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (eds. E. Hornung and O. Keel; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979) pp.235-282 sees a development in the tradition from short hortatory introductions to longer narrative ones. He suggests that Proverbs’ long hortatory introduction indicates that it is chronologically a transitional work (p.247).

Second, we may consider connections between sayings in different parts of the collection. Folk proverbs are met one piece at a time; a written collection is encountered as a whole, and as such can inculcate a worldview into a student. Each proverb presents a single instance of a category or pattern. Though they are not arranged systematically, the reader may combine them into a fairly coherent system to make sense of the world. By dedicated study, he becomes aware of recurrent themes and important messages. His ethical vision is shaped and his character is formed. The combined weight of the sayings becomes for him an ideological foundation upon which to stand when observing and tackling the world.

However, when the sayings are combined, they do not neatly assemble into a watertight system. Proverbs often offset each other with slightly different messages, or alternative stances on the same issue, even blatant contradictions (e.g. 26:4-5).<sup>150</sup> P. Hatton has called Proverbs 'heteroglossal':<sup>151</sup> different voices are allowed to speak without clear adjudication. The student of the collection must learn how to resolve the tension; or, if not, how to bear it. Apparently contradictory sayings train the mind to confront apparently contradictory situations in life.

Some 'contradictory' proverbs may be deliberately arranged to problematise the confident assurances of wisdom, and to make the reader think (again see 26:4-5).<sup>152</sup> This leads to the third type of connection between parts: between a saying and its immediate literary context. There is evidence of some literary ordering in Proverbs' use of alliteration, catchwords, and thematic links. By S. Weeks' analysis, 58% of the proverbs in 10:1-22:16 are connected to their neighbour in some way.<sup>153</sup>

K. Heim in particular finds interpretive significance in this, and has developed a theory of proverb 'clusters'.<sup>154</sup> Like eating a cluster of grapes, our experience of each individual item is enhanced by taking in the whole. As he explains, "[t]his reading-together allows for inferences and cross-references which lead to a cross-fertilization and inter-animation of meaning".<sup>155</sup> The proverbs are 'co-referential', referring to the same individual, whose character is fleshed out as the connections between the proverbs are explored.<sup>156</sup> The reader builds up a single multi-faceted picture of the wise and righteous man, to whom he can assimilate himself for his own ethical

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<sup>150</sup> A number of scholars have examined apparent contradictions in Proverbs. E.g. Hatton (2008); R. C. van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and contradiction in Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992) pp.25-36; Yoder (2005).

<sup>151</sup> Hatton (2008) employs the term as part of his Bakhtinian hermeneutic.

<sup>152</sup> Hatton (2008) conceptualises the arrangement of proverbs as a 'stream' of wisdom, where certain sayings are dropped in provocatively to disrupt the flow and cause ripples.

<sup>153</sup> Weeks (1994) p.24.

<sup>154</sup> K. M. Heim, *Like Grapes of Gold Set in Silver: An interpretation of proverbial clusters in Proverbs 10:1-22:16* (BZAW 273; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001) pp.67-108.

<sup>155</sup> Heim (2001) p.107.

<sup>156</sup> See further ch.4 §3.2 below.

formation. The connections also invite him to exercise his mind, to contemplate possible links with imagination and discernment.<sup>157</sup>

### *The individual saying*

However, just because we *can* read proverbs with their literary surroundings does not mean we *have to*. There are also benefits to sampling each proverb individually, and chewing it over.<sup>158</sup> Ingesting the proverb in this slow, ponderous process can effect the reader’s intellectual and moral development. Some scholars, however, find this reading ‘proverb-by-proverb’ untenable. They object that a saying’s brevity requires it to be elucidated in a context. The logic runs that the *social context* of a folk proverb (which allows it to be taken and applied individually) is here replaced with the *literary context* of a collection. I suggest, however, that social context is still possible, and literary context is not necessary.

*The possibility of a social context?* It is central to the proverb genre that the text be applied to a social context, used and reused to comment on situations arising in life. Social context elucidates the proverb’s otherwise underspecified sense. Such paremiological insights were first drawn into studies of the biblical book by C. Camp. In her words, proverbs, “by definition, *require* a performance context to be fully meaningful”.<sup>159</sup> When gathered in a literary collection, proverbs are stripped of any such performance setting. Camp suggested that this eventually led to their loss of function and encalcification as dogma.<sup>160</sup> It further required that they be recontextualised into the literary brackets of Proverbs’ introduction (chs.1-9) and conclusion (ch.31).<sup>161</sup>

However, the mere fact of collection cannot kill a proverb.<sup>162</sup> Hezekiah’s men are not murderers, and paremiographers not necrophiles. Collections have existed throughout the centuries, menageries of proverbs alive amongst the people.<sup>163</sup> But might this particular type of

<sup>157</sup> Z. Schwab, “The Sayings Clusters in Proverbs: Towards an associative reading strategy,” *JOT* 38.1 (2013b) pp.59-79.

<sup>158</sup> W. P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, creation, and crisis in the Bible’s wisdom literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014) p.58; Davis (2000) pp.11-12; Perdue (2000) p.33.

<sup>159</sup> Camp (1985) p.166.

<sup>160</sup> Camp (1985) pp.151-178.

<sup>161</sup> Camp (1985) pp.179-208.

<sup>162</sup> See W. Mieder’s often appropriated dictum “the proverb in a collection is dead” (W. Mieder, “The Essence of Literary Proverb Studies,” *Proverbium* 23 [1974] p.892). cf. e.g. D. Bland, “A Rhetorical Perspective on the Sentence Sayings of the Book of Proverbs” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1994) p.6; Hatton (2008) p.47; Fontaine (1982) p.54; Hildebrandt (2005) p.6.

<sup>163</sup> E.g. on ancient Sumerian proverb collections, see B. Alster, “Literary Aspects of Sumerian and Akkadian Proverbs,” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (eds. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Cuneiform Monographs 6; Groningen: STYX, 1996) pp.1-21; on medieval collections, see B. Taylor, “Medieval Proverb Collections: The west European tradition,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 55 (1992) pp.19-25; on

collection, with its purpose and addressees, prohibit social use? In this vein, Heim argues that readers of the book are probably seeking general guidance in faith and practice, and are therefore unlikely to apply the proverbs to particular contexts.<sup>164</sup> But I would question how else faith and practice are manifested than through specific situations? Surely the reader may apply the guidance to his life.

*The necessity of a literary context?* Heim further suggests that readers will instinctively and necessarily contextualise the proverbs in their literary setting. He notes that when a folk proverb is spoken in a social context, the hearer expects it to be contextually relevant. Correspondingly, when biblical proverbs are read, the reader expects them to be contextually related,<sup>165</sup> and so searches for the connections between them. But this is a false equation. A spoken conversation is very different from a literary collection, and brings very different conventions and expectations, which may not include the expectation of contextual relevance.

Indeed, such contextual links are often far from obvious, and those that do emerge may not be intentional: proverbs in *any* arrangement will generate some apparent links, purely by chance.<sup>166</sup> And even if intentional, perhaps they are not significant:<sup>167</sup> the scribe may simply have ordered proverbs according to some simple associative principle,<sup>168</sup> or in a manner to help the flow of reading.<sup>169</sup>

The reader's immediate impression is of random arrangement. Had the collector wanted to make a contextualised reading imperative, he could have offered much clearer groupings. Reading straight through them may be disorienting. As Don Quixote rebukes Sancho (the incessant proverb-speaker): "to pile up and string together proverbs at random makes conversation dull and vulgar".<sup>170</sup> Sancho's lists of unconnected sayings make his argument hard to

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contemporary collections, see K. Tamás, "Paremiography: Proverb collections," in *Introduction to Paremiology: A comprehensive guide to proverb studies* (eds. H. Hrisztova-Gotthardt and M. Aleksa Varga; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) pp.229-242.

<sup>164</sup> Heim (2001) pp.72-4.

<sup>165</sup> Heim (2001) p.74.

<sup>166</sup> Fox (2009) pp.479-480 experimented with Weeks' method (see p.31 above) on groups of sayings randomly jumbled. He found that 36-60% of them had links with their neighbours.

<sup>167</sup> Arguing for significant arrangement in the sayings, e.g.: G. Boström, *Paronomasi i den äldre hebreiska maschallitteraturen med särskild hänsyn till proverbia* (Lunds Universitets årsskrift 1.23.8; Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1928); Hatton (2008); T. Hildebrandt, "Proverbial Strings: Cohesion in Proverbs 10," *Grace Theological Journal* 11.2 (1990) pp.171-185; R. Scoralick, *Einzelnspruch und Sammlung: Komposition im Buch der Sprichwörter Kapitel 10-15* (BZAW 232; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995); P. Skehan, "A Single Editor for the Whole Book of Proverbs," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (ed. J. Crenshaw; New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1976) pp.329-340; Waltke (2004); R. N. Whybray, "Yahweh-Sayings and Their Context in Proverbs 10:1-22:16," in *La Sagesse de l'Ancien Testament* (ed. M. Gilbert; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniesium; 1979) pp.153-165.

- Suggesting the arrangement is relatively insignificant: Fox (2009); McKane (1970); Scott (1965); Weeks (1994); Weeks (2010); Westermann (1995).

<sup>168</sup> Fox (2009) p.480.

<sup>169</sup> Weeks (1994) p.33.

<sup>170</sup> M. de Cervantes, *The History of Don Quixote de la Mancha* (Great Books of the Western World 29; Translated by J. Ormsby. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952) p.334.

follow, and the relevance of each individual proverb is lost. Similarly perhaps with a ‘contextualised’ reading of the biblical collections. But Don Quixote nuances his criticism: “Mind, Sancho, I do not say that a proverb aptly brought in is objectionable”. We may take the biblical proverbs as a selection of different tools, each of which may be “aptly brought in” at an appropriate time. Each can be used purposefully to comment on a specific situation.

Proverbs 10:1-22:16 then presents itself as a didactic collection, and may be interpreted as such – a manual for the reader’s ideological, moral, and intellectual formation. However, the collection’s apparent disorder offers us a second strategy: each proverb in its own right, as a tool for application to the world.

### Conclusion

We have seen that the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 invoke two sets of generic conventions, and hence are open to a double strategy of interpretation and use. On the one hand, they are ‘didactic’ – general advice intended to inculcate a worldview, train the intellect, and bring about moral formation. They are akin to Didactic Instructions, and may have had a setting amongst the educated elite. They present themselves as **חִידוֹת** (riddles), and are formally similar to aphorisms. In their written form, they comprise a pedagogically-oriented collection.

On the other hand, they are ‘proverbs’ – incisive maxims to be applied to a specific situation with a particular purpose. They are generically related to folk proverbs, and may have been spoken in a family setting. They present themselves as **מִשְׁלִים**, and are formally akin to such proverbs, particularly suited to purposeful application. The apparent disorder in the collection allows us to take each in its own terms.

While these strategies of interpretation and use are distinct, the very same unit of text stimulates both: one and the same ‘didactic proverb’. Indeed, the strategies can work together, didactic reflection leading to situational application and vice versa. I suggest that both these strategies can be employed, and indeed probably were employed by the original recipients of this book. In Part 2, I will explore the sayings, using this double strategy. In particular, I will examine how the *openness* of the sayings contributes to both their didactic and their proverb uses. This aspect of openness requires further examination, and I will turn to it in the next chapter.



## Chapter 2 – Literary Openness

I suggest that the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 are particularly *open* to different interpretations and applications. As noted in the introduction, there has been much recent scholarship on openness and ambiguity in the HB, and some attention paid to its place in Proverbs.<sup>171</sup> According to A. Stewart, “many of the sayings in the book delight in ambiguity and multivalency”,<sup>172</sup> and K. Heim goes as far as to call ambiguity a “hermeneutical key to the entire book”,<sup>173</sup> with further studies “urgently needed”.<sup>174</sup> This study will help to fulfil this need.

The openness of biblical proverbs is, paradoxically, often due to their constriction in form. With few exceptions,<sup>175</sup> the proverb is only a single verse, usually just seven or eight words long. Often omitting clarifying elements such as object markers and relative pronouns, the parts of the proverb press tightly together without making obvious their inter-relationships.<sup>176</sup> The compression cries out for elaboration and elucidation but without offering any itself. Terse text and intrigued reader interact, generating a superabundance of open meaning potential. Furthermore, the generic conventions of both didactic and proverbial texts prompt the reader to look for openness. Didactic texts are to be pondered and explored, their surface penetrated and their depths plumbed. Proverbial texts expect to be applied in many different ways to many different situations.

In this chapter, I will examine three phenomena which give rise to openness in proverbs: polysemy, parallelism, and imagery. Not every proverb employs these devices, not every one is an open enigma of poetic genius, but such phenomena are notably frequent. The discussion here is mainly theoretical. It catalogues the phenomena explored in later chapters, and provides foundations for analysing them.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> E.g. Bland (1994) pp.1-2; J. A. Loader, “The Problem of Money in the Hand of a Fool,” *HvTSt* 68.1 (2012) pp.1-9; R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1998b); J. G. Williams, “Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. R. Alter & F. Kermode; London: Collins, 1987) pp.263-282.

<sup>172</sup> Stewart (2016), p.50.

<sup>173</sup> Heim (2013), p.639.

<sup>174</sup> Heim (2013), p.640.

<sup>175</sup> An exception in our section may be 21:25-26.

<sup>176</sup> R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) p.207; P. J. Nel, “Juxtaposition and Logic in the Wisdom Sayings,” *JNSL* 24 (1998) pp.115-127; Williams (1981).

<sup>177</sup> My linguistic methodology falls within cognitive linguistics. This will be evident in my view of polysemy (§1, seeing meaning as flexible, without rigid boundaries) and imagery (§3, employing the idea of ‘encyclopaedic knowledge’ and cognitive theories of metaphor). In ch.4 it will also undergird my discussion of character types (drawing on prototype theory). For a useful set of introductory essays on cognitive linguistics, see D. Geeraerts and H. Cuyckens, *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

## §1. Openness through polysemy

‘Polysemy’ here refers to the possible multiple meanings of a proverb caused by semantics or grammar. I will consider semantic ambiguity (§1.1), grammatical ambiguity (§1.2), and the difference between ‘theoretical’ and ‘empirical’ ambiguities (§1.3). I will illustrate with examples from proverbs not discussed elsewhere in the dissertation. In the footnotes, I will indicate where the phenomenon occurs in proverbs explored later (listed in the order they will occur). These are tabulated in the appendix.

### §1.1 Semantic ambiguity

#### *§1.1(a) Conceptual distance between meanings*

A word can have multiple possible meanings. For some words, the meanings are close together conceptually, such as the meanings of ‘to paint’ (e.g. painting a picture or painting lines on the road). For other words, they are conceptually distant, like the meanings of ‘bank’ (a financial institution or the side of a river).<sup>178</sup> Traditionally, this has been explained in terms of ‘polysemy’ and ‘homonymy’. Polysemy describes one semantic unit that can have different nuances of meaning; homonymy describes different semantic units that happen to take one form. This is a diachronic distinction: polysemes share a common root (all meanings of ‘paint’ from Old French ‘peint’), whereas homonyms are etymologically distinct (the financial institution from Old Italian ‘banca’, the river edge from proto-Germanic ‘bankan’).<sup>179</sup> This historical distinction does not always apply on a synchronic level, however. Words with the same etymology do not always remain conceptually connected, neither do words with different etymologies always remain distinct.<sup>180</sup>

Recognising the problems of this historical approach, some scholars prefer to speak of a synchronic distinction between ‘ambiguity’, where a lexeme has multiple discrete meanings, and ‘vagueness’, where it has is one meaning open to differences in interpretation. So ‘bank’ is ambiguous, and ‘paint’ is vague.<sup>181</sup> A number of linguistic tests have been proposed to help

<sup>178</sup> These examples come from an influential article by D. Tuggy, “Ambiguity, Polysemy, and Vagueness,” *Cognitive Linguistics* 4.3 (1993) pp.273-290.

<sup>179</sup> T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: OUP, 1996).

<sup>180</sup> For examples, see B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, “Polysemy, Prototypes, and Radial Categories,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (eds. D. Geeraerts and H. Cuyckens; Oxford: OUP, 2010) p.142.

<sup>181</sup> So Tuggy (1993).

recognise the distinction, but these often yield contradictory results.<sup>182</sup> Meaning is a flexible phenomenon, and there is no absolute division between ambiguity and vagueness. We can, however, loosely speak of a spectrum between conceptually distant and conceptually close meanings. In this dissertation, I will use the terms ‘polysemy’ and ‘ambiguity’ in a broad sense, to cover this whole spectrum.

### *Conceptually distant meanings*<sup>183</sup>

Sometimes in Proverbs, a word has two conceptually distant meanings, and it is unclear which is intended.

15:7 שִׁפְתֵי חֲכָמִים יִזְרוּ דָעַת וְלֵב כְּסִילִים לֹא־כֵן:

*The lips of the wise scatter knowledge; but the heart of fools – not כֵן.*

כֵן may be a denominative adjective from כּוֹן (‘to be firm’), meaning ‘steadfast, honest’ (so JPS, NIV). Alternatively, it may be an adverb (so ESV, NASB), such as occurs frequently in the expression לֹא־כֵן ‘not so!’ (e.g. Gen 48:18; Exod 10:11; Num 12:7). The possible interpretations are not only conceptually distant, but from different parts of speech. Either is possible in the context of the proverb.

### *Conceptually close meanings*

Often, there is not such an overt double meaning, but a word may have several conceptually close interpretations.

14:8a חֲכֻמַּת עָרוֹם הִבִּין דְּרָכּוֹ

*The wisdom of the shrewd הִבִּין his way*

The hiphil of הִבִּין can have the two related senses: ‘to discern’ (emphasising the process of thought, BDB 2), and ‘to understand’ (emphasising the outcome of thought, BDB 1). Either may be discerned and understood here. Sometimes meanings may be less distinct still, with interpretation varying on whether certain connotations are found.<sup>184</sup>

<sup>182</sup> Geeraerts, for example, proposed logical, linguistic, and definitional tests. D. Geeraerts, “Vagueness’s Puzzles, Polysemy’s Vagaries,” *Cognitive Linguistics* 4.3 (1993) pp.223-272; D. Geeraerts, *Theories of Lexical Semantics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) pp.197-199; summarised in Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2010) pp.141-144. Cf. W. Croft and A. Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: CUP, 2004); Zhang (1998).

<sup>183</sup> In the proverbs explored below, some of the double meanings are conceptually quite distant (Prov 20:11 [הִתְנַבֵּר]; 16:17, 13:2, 20:2 [נִפְשׁ]), some conceptually closer (19:28 [אֵן]; 20:8,26 [מִזְרָה]; 20:2 [חֶטָּא]; 16:14 [מְלָאכִים]; 10:22 [עֲצָב]), and some closer still (16:17 [שָׁמַר, נִצֵּר]; 16:10 [מִשְׁפָּט]).

<sup>184</sup> See below 10:14 (יִצְפֹּנָה); 11:16 (עָרוֹץ, חָן); 16:10 (קֶסֶם); 20:11 (מַעֲלִים).

*'Vague' and 'general' terms*<sup>185</sup>

A term might be 'vague' with regard to certain features.<sup>186</sup> 'To paint' is vague concerning what the 'paint' is, and how and where it is applied. Thus its interpretation differs for Picasso, a makeup artist, and a road marking machine. A term with few specifying features is 'general', allowing it many nuances.

וְהוֹלִיכוֹ בְּדֶרֶךְ לֹא-טוֹב: 16:29b

*and he makes him walk in a way not good.*

Not specified is *how* the way is 'not good': ethically? in its material quality? Some general terms have a 'prototypical' interpretation, a phenomenon I will discuss further in ch.4.

*Soundplay*<sup>187</sup>

Though not polysemy proper, soundplay is an important related phenomenon. Two words, whose meanings may be conceptually distant, sound very similar. The proverb contains only one of them, but may evoke both.

בְּפִי-אֵוִיל חֶטֶר גָּאוֹן 14:3a

*In the mouth of the fool is a rod of pride*

גָּאוֹן means 'pride', but it sounds similar to גֹּהַז 'back' (Job 20:25). Accordingly, the hearer might discern 'a rod for his own back' in these words (cf. Prov 10:13, 26:3).<sup>188</sup>

*§1.1(b) Type of relation between meanings*

We might consider not only the conceptual distance between meanings, but the type of relationship between them. What sort of semantic extension has occurred? Two of the most common are metonymy and metaphor.

*Metonymy*<sup>189</sup>

In metonymy, the word no longer designates its usual referent, but something associated with it. Thus Brits may bemoan the decisions not of 'the government', but of 'Westminster', Americans

<sup>185</sup> Vagueness occurs in 11:24 (מִפְּזִיר); Generality occurs in 10:16 (חֶטְאֵת); 16:17; 14:22; 12:21 (רַע), 21:1 (כָּל).

<sup>186</sup> Also sometimes referred to as 'indeterminacy', 'lack of specification', or 'contextual modulation'.

<sup>187</sup> See below 13:5 (יִבְאִישׁ); 11:6 (בְּרִשְׁעָתוֹ); 20:11 (מַעֲלָלָיו).

<sup>188</sup> Some have suggested emending to גֹּהַז 'his back' (BHS; RSV; McKane [1970]). Others find an allusion to the back problematic because the word for 'rod' here is the rare חֶטֶר (cf. Isa 11:1) rather than the שֶׁבֶט used elsewhere; Waltke (2004).

<sup>189</sup> See below 11:24 (יִשְׂרָאֵל); 20:8 (רַע); 21:1 (כָּל); 16:1 (מַעֲנֵה).

of ‘Washington’, and Amos of ‘Damascus’, ‘Gaza’, and ‘Tyre’ (Amos 1:3,6,9). In Proverbs, metonymy often occurs with terms for body parts – especially לֵב ‘heart’ for sense; and שִׁפָּה ‘lips’, פֶּה ‘mouth’ or לָשׁוֹן ‘tongue’ for speech. A metonymy creates ambiguity when it is unclear whether the concrete term or its extension is intended. For example, בֵּית means ‘house’, but can be metonymically extended to the ‘household’, including family, servants, cattle etc. Sometimes either interpretation is possible.

14:11a בֵּית רָשָׁעִים יִשָּׁמַד

*The house of the wicked will be destroyed*

Will the physical building only, or all associated parties, succumb to this fate?

*Metaphor*<sup>190</sup>

Meaning can also be extended through metaphor. For example, in English and Hebrew, ‘fruit’ פֶּרִי does not necessarily refer to the ‘fruit of the tree’ (פֶּרִי הָעֵץ, Gen 3:2), but may stand figuratively for an outcome, the ‘fruit of deeds’ (פֶּרִי מַעַלְלֵיהֶם, Isa 3:10, cf. Prov 12:4; 13:2; 18:20). Such metaphorical understandings, conventional in a speech community, have been *lexicalised*: stored as a separate entry in the mental lexicon, easily retrieved on each occasion of use. Usually it is clear whether the literal or metaphorical sense is intended, but sometimes there is ambiguity.

12:7b וּבֵית צְדִיקִים יִעֲמֹד

*the house of the righteous will stand.*

Both בֵּית ‘house’ and יִעֲמֹד ‘will stand’ may be taken literally. But if בֵּית is a metonym for the whole household, יִעֲמֹד might take the lexicalised metaphorical extension ‘to be established, to endure’ (BDB 3).

Not all metaphors are conventional, however. *Novel* metaphors make unexpected connections, and are discussed in depth in §3. Here I note that sometimes it is unclear whether the metaphorical and literal sense is intended.

10:31b וּלְשׁוֹן תְּהַפְּכוֹת תִּכְרֹת

*the tongue of the perverse will be cut off.*

Is this a genuine threat of glossectomy? Or a metaphor for a punishment which will silence the wrongdoer?

<sup>190</sup> Both metaphorical and literal interpretations are possible in 10:16 (תְּבוּאָה, פֶּעֱלָה); 20:17 (לֶחֶם); 16:14 (מְלָאכִים); 21:31 (מְלָחָמָה, סוֹס), as well as for the figure of the king (see ch.6).

## §1.2 Grammatical and syntactic ambiguity

Sometimes, instead of ambiguity arising at the lexical level, it comes through syntax or grammar.

### *Ambiguous modifier*<sup>191</sup>

A ‘modifier’ is an element in a sentence (typically an adjective or adverb) which modifies the meaning of another element. Sometimes it is ambiguous what it modifies.

13:10a רַק־בְּזִדּוֹן יִתֵּן מַצָּה

רק by insolence comes strife

רַק (‘only’) might qualify the immediately subsequent element (בְּזִדּוֹן): ‘only by insolence’ comes strife, not by any other factors. Or it might qualify the entire clause: ‘only this: by insolence comes strife’. Implicitly, it then may apply to the most salient element, ‘strife’, hence the common translation ‘by insolence comes only strife’ (e.g. ESV, JPS, NASB).<sup>192</sup>

### *Subject-object ambiguities*<sup>193</sup>

In Classical Hebrew Prose, the subject and object of a verb are usually distinguished by word order (typically VSO) and the object marker אֶת. However, the proverbs rarely conform.<sup>194</sup> Word order is variable, and אֶת is almost always elided. Sometimes it is difficult to tell subject from object.

17:11a אֶדְ-מָרִי יִבְקֹשׁ-רָע

What is the subject of יִבְקֹשׁ (‘seek’): מָרִי or רָע? Facilitating the ambiguity is the possible metonymy in both terms (see above). מָרִי can mean ‘rebellion’ or stand metonymically for ‘the rebellious man’. רָע can mean ‘evil’ or ‘evil man’. So either ‘the rebellious man seeks evil’ (מָרִי as subject; JPS, NASB) or ‘the evil man seeks rebellion’ (רָע as subject; ESV, NIV, RSV). Note also the ambiguous modifier אֶדְ ‘only’. Does it qualify מָרִי alone, or the whole clause?

<sup>191</sup> See below 20:8 (בְּעֵינָיו); 20:11 (גַּם).

<sup>192</sup> Because of the word order, רַק can probably not apply directly to מַצָּה.

<sup>193</sup> See below 16:17 (סוֹר); 13:2 (יֹאכֵל); 16:10 (יִמְעַל); 10:22 (יוֹסֵף).

<sup>194</sup> R. Holmstedt in fact argues for a basic SV word order in Proverbs. R. D. Holmstedt, “Word Order in the Book of Proverbs,” in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays offered to honor Michael V. Fox on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday* (eds. R. L. Troxel et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005) pp.135-154.

*Juxtaposition of terms*<sup>195</sup>

Very often in Proverbs, two nouns or noun phrases are simply placed side by side, without an intervening verb. In this ‘blunt juxtaposition’,<sup>196</sup> it may be unclear what relationship holds between them.

10:28a תוֹחֶלֶת צְדִיקִים שְׂמֵחָה

*The hope of the righteous – joy*

Unclear here is the precise relation between the ‘hope’ and the ‘joy’. Do the righteous hope for joy? Is the process of hoping a joyful one? Or will their hope (whatever its content and manner) end in joy?<sup>197</sup>

*Construct state*<sup>198</sup>

The Hebrew construct state can express a number of different relationships between nouns, a range overlapping with (but not identical to) the English ‘of’ construction.

11:18 רָשָׁע עֹשֶׂה פְּעֻלַּת-שָׁקֶר וְזֶרַע צְדָקָה שָׂכָר אֱמֶת:

*A wicked man earns the ‘wages of lies’; and he who sows righteousness, a ‘reward of truth’.*

It is possible here that the wicked man’s wages are earned through lying practices, and the righteous man’s through truthful ones (genitive of means<sup>199</sup>). Alternatively (or additionally), the wages of the wicked will prove to be deceptive, and those of the righteous will be reliable (attributive genitive<sup>200</sup>).

*Ambiguous prepositions and conjunctions*<sup>201</sup>

Prepositions and conjunctions have little lexical definition, but have an important grammatical function in a sentence. Hebrew has a limited selection of such words to convey a wide range of functions, and sometimes ambiguity can arise.

13:11a הוֹן מִהֶבֶל יִמָּעַט

*Wealth מִן vapour/vanity will decrease*

מִן ‘from’ can be used comparatively: ‘wealth will decrease to *less than* vapour’. It could also denote the source of the wealth: ‘wealth *derived from* vanity will decrease’, i.e. from vain and deceptive

<sup>195</sup> See below 14:22; 10:17; 13:2; 20:2; 18:4.

<sup>196</sup> This terminology comes from Fox (2009) p.561.

<sup>197</sup> Similar ambiguities are found in the variant verses 11:23 and 12:5. Do the righteous desire good, or does their desire end in good (11:23)? Are their thoughts about justice, or do they end in justice (12:5)?

<sup>198</sup> See below Prov 20:17 (לֶחֶם שָׁקֶר); 20:2 (חוּטֵא נִפְשׁוֹ); 20:27 (גֵּר יִהוּה).

<sup>199</sup> WHS P.45b.

<sup>200</sup> WHS P.41.

<sup>201</sup> See below Prov 11:5; 20:8; 16:10 (בִּ); 11:24 (מִן); 20:11 (אִם); 21:30 (לִנְגִיד).

economic practices. Here **הָבַל** takes on its metaphorical extension, from ‘vapour’ to ‘vanity’.<sup>202</sup> The resulting double interpretation, connecting deceptive practices and fleeting wealth, is close to that in 11:18 (above; see also 20:17, explored in ch.5).

### *Ambiguous function of the binyan*<sup>203</sup>

The binyan in which a verb occurs can change its meaning. Each of the binyanim has certain common functions, but there is no absolute uniformity, and sometimes ambiguity arises.

13:7 יֵשׁ מִתְעַשֵּׂר וְאֵין כֹּל מִתְרוֹשֵׁשׁ וְהוֹן רָב:

*There is one who מִתְעַשֵּׂר, but with nothing; one who מִתְרוֹשֵׁשׁ, but with abundant wealth.*

In the qal, **עָשָׂר** means ‘to be rich’, and it is unclear here how the hithpael is altering the sense.<sup>204</sup> It could be reflexive-factitive<sup>205</sup> ‘makes himself rich’. The comment ‘with nothing’ might then express a future scenario (he will have nothing in the end) or relativise wealth’s value (he has nothing of true worth). Or the hithpael could be reflexive-estimative<sup>206</sup> ‘thinks himself rich’ or ‘pretends to be rich’, tying in with the book’s theme of deception (see ch.7 §2.1). The same possibilities arise for the hithpolel of **רוּשׁ** ‘to be poor’ in the *b* colon – he ‘makes himself’, ‘thinks himself’ or ‘pretends to be’ poor.

### §1.3 Theoretical and empirical ambiguity

Most sentences include some potentially ambiguous elements, but interpreters often fail to perceive them. (I doubt, for example, that you have just thought of a legal judgement against the shady characters of hydrogen and helium! The polysemies of ‘sentence’, ‘ambiguous’, and ‘elements’ were not realised.) The difference is between ‘theoretical’ and ‘empirical’ ambiguity,<sup>207</sup> between what is hypothetically possible in the language and what is actually understood. Individual language users may vary in how much ambiguity they find, but within linguistic communities there

<sup>202</sup> The Greek translation of this verse adds a further complexity. It has ὑπαρξίς ἐπισπουδαζομένη μετὰ ἀνομίας ἐλάσσων γίνεται “property gathered hastily with illegality dwindles”. “with illegality” (μετὰ ἀνομίας) translates **מִתְרוֹשֵׁשׁ** in the second sense given here (‘from vanity’). “hastily” (ἐπισπουδαζομένη) seems to offer a double translation, but with a metathesis in the Hebrew, to **מְהֵרָה** (pual ptc from **הָרַחֵק** ‘to hasten’).

<sup>203</sup> See below 13:5 (**וַיִּתְעַשֵּׂר וַיִּתְרוֹשֵׁשׁ**); 10:17 (**מִתְעַשֵּׂר**).

<sup>204</sup> As the hithpael of this verb is so rare, it is admittedly possible that the uncertainty stems from our lack of knowledge, rather than from genuine openness in the Hebrew text.

<sup>205</sup> WHS P.154.

<sup>206</sup> WHS P.155.

<sup>207</sup> E.g. E. A. Schegloff, “One Some Questions and Ambiguities in Conversation,” in *Structures in Social Action: Studies in conversation analysis* (ed. J. Maxwell Atkinson; Cambridge: CUP, 1984) pp.28-52.



are certain social and psychological constraints on interpretation. The most important are frequency and context.

### Frequency

Not all possible meanings of an ambiguous word or construction occur with equal frequency in a language. All other factors being equal, the more common interpretation will be perceived first, and the other possibilities may not occur to the interpreter.<sup>208</sup>

13:16a כָּל-עָרוֹם יַעֲשֶׂה בְדַעַת

*Every shrewd man יַעֲשֶׂה in knowledge*

עָשָׂה may have two meanings: ‘to do, act’ (extremely common) and ‘to take cover’ (extremely rare).<sup>209</sup> B. Waltke suggests the latter for this verse, translating “Every shrewd person takes cover through knowledge”. He cites as evidence a connection with Prov 12:23a אָדָם עָרוֹם כֹּסֶה דַּעַת (“A shrewd man covers knowledge”). However, given its ubiquity, the meaning ‘to act’ probably springs to the reader’s mind immediately, foreclosing ‘to cover’ before it arises. The connection with Prov 12:23 is suggestive (though ‘takes cover in knowledge’ [13:16a] and ‘covers knowledge’ [12:23a] are not quite the same), and may possibly occur to the thoughtful student. For most, however, the ambiguity is not realised in interpretation.

Analogous to this semantic phenomenon, grammatical and syntactic constructions may have default construals, assumed by the reader unless strong suggestion otherwise. In this verse, I (with most interpreters) have taken כָּל as qualifying עָרוֹם (‘every shrewd man’). K. Heim, however, reanalyses the syntax and interprets it as the object of יַעֲשֶׂה: “a shrewd man does *everything* with knowledge”.<sup>210</sup> But the Masoretic punctuation connects כָּל and עָרוֹם with a maqqeph, in a construct relationship, which would be highly unexpected if object and subject respectively. Furthermore, the frequency of the collocation כָּל + noun’ meaning ‘every...’ has primed the reader to expect this meaning. The OSV alternative would probably not be empirically recognised.

<sup>208</sup> This has been confirmed by psycholinguistic research. Eye-tracking experiments show that interpreters read smoothly over a theoretically ambiguous word if it has one particularly common interpretation, instantly selecting this meaning. If its meanings are equally common in the language, readers linger over it, unsure. M. Traxler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics: Understanding language science* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) p.117.

<sup>209</sup> The meaning ‘to take cover’ is not certain (recognised by HALOT but not BDB). Evidence comes from the Arabic cognate *ḡaṣiya*. It has also been proposed for Gen 6:14 and Ezek 17:17 (G. R. Driver, “Problems and Solutions,” *VT* 4.3 [1954] p.243), and for the nominal form מַעֲשֶׂה in Ps 104:13 (J. Reider, “Etymological Studies in Biblical Hebrew,” *Vetus Testamentum* 4.3 [1954] p.284).

<sup>210</sup> Heim (2013) p.320. cf. Pesh and Vulg.

*Context*

The second factor constricting potential ambiguity is context. This operates at different levels. One particular interpretation may be favoured by the immediate linguistic construction, the verse as a whole, or the wider proverb collection. Still more broadly, interpretation might be constrained by the reader's worldview, presuppositions, knowledge of literary genre, social context, physical environment etc.

16:16a קְנֵה-חֵכְמָה מֵה־טוֹב מִחֲרוֹץ

*Acquiring wisdom, how much better than חֲרוֹץ*

Some potential meanings of חֲרוֹץ, like 'strict decision' (Joel 4:14[3:14]), and 'moat' (Dan 9:25), are eliminated immediately by their infrequency in BH, and their strangeness within this literary context. The colon may allow two meanings: wisdom is better than 'diligence' (cf. Prov 10:4 for this meaning), or better than 'gold' (8:14). However, the reader who knows worldview of the proverb collection may be suspicious of the former, for diligence is nowhere else denigrated. This suspicion proves well-founded in light of the second colon: וְקִנּוּת בִּינָה נִבְחָר מִכֶּסֶף: 'and acquiring understanding is more choice than silver'. The interpretation 'gold' is justified by comparative Semitic evidence,<sup>211</sup> and supported here by its parallel with 'silver'. The theoretical ambiguity is clarified in context.

Though we must still exercise caution, theoretical ambiguities may be perceived more frequently in didactic proverbs than in texts of other genres. Their self-contained form means that the constraints of wider literary context are less binding here. They intend to train their readers' intellects, and do so by encouraging reflection on their own words. As readers mull them over, meanings initially unperceived may rise to the fore. Though they may ultimately reject such meanings, the process of contemplation proves formative.

As shown by this catalogue of techniques, a range of different phenomena can contribute to a proverb's polysemy. In later chapters, we will witness these phenomena at work, contributing to the richness and openness of individual sayings in their didactic and proverbial functions.

<sup>211</sup> Cf. Phoenician חֲרוֹץ; Assyrian *hurāṣu*.

## §2. Openness through parallelism

### §2.1 Introduction

The second way in which a proverb's meaning may be opened is through *parallelism*; that is, through the elusive relationships between the two lines. 'Parallelism' was defined by R. Lowth in the seminal work *de Sacra Poesie Hebraeorum* (1753) as "[t]he correspondence of one verse, or line, with another".<sup>212</sup> He went on to make a now famous tripartite distinction: synonymous parallelism, "when the sentiment is repeated in different, but equivalent terms"; antithetical parallelism, "when a thing is illustrated by its contrary being opposed to it"; and synthetic parallelism "in which the sentences answer to each other... merely by the form of construction".<sup>213</sup> This analysis proved foundational for the subsequent centuries of scholarship, and Lowthian parallelism came to be seen as near-definitional for Hebrew poetry.

While not denying parallelism's prevalence and importance in Hebrew verse, more recent scholarship has disputed its designation as the *sine qua non*.<sup>214</sup> Lowth's approach has been challenged from a number of perspectives. The overriding theme of these criticisms is his failure to account for the openness of the phenomenon, and the diversity of ways it can occur.

First, Lowth's categories prove problematic, as they are a somewhat artificial dissection. As we will see below, 'synonymous' and 'antithetical' are problematic terms. The 'synthetic' category is an amorphous catchall for many diverse relationships that can exist between lines. More finely delineated classifications have been offered,<sup>215</sup> but while these can be heuristically useful, even they cannot do justice to the rich diversity. Second, parallelism occurs at different levels of language. Though he did recognise a grammatical element to parallelism,<sup>216</sup> Lowth and his followers focused almost exclusively on semantics. From the late 1970s, a group of scholars

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<sup>212</sup> R. Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum: Praelectiones academic Oxonii habitae a Roberto Lowth; subjicitur Metricae Harianae brevis confutatio: et oratio Crenviana*. (Oxonii: e typographico Clarendoniano, 1753). Translated as *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Translated by G. Gregory. Andover: Codman Press, 1829) p.156, n.9. Lowth was not the first scholar to examine this phenomenon, but was certainly the most influential. For discussions of developments before and after Lowth, see J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) pp.96-286; R. Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An introduction to biblical rhetoric* (JSOTSup 256; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp.44-166.

<sup>213</sup> Lowth (1829) pp.157,161,162.

<sup>214</sup> E.g. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: OUP, 2015), p.56.

<sup>215</sup> Esp. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A guide to its techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) pp.114-159; W. G. E. Watson, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) pp.104-261.

<sup>216</sup> "When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it... equivalent, or contrasted with it in sense, *or similar to it in the form of grammatical construction*, these I call parallel lines". R. Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation: With a preliminary dissertation, and notes* ([s.l.]: W. Hillard, 1834) p.9, italics mine.

challenged this approach, studying parallelism from a linguistic perspective,<sup>217</sup> some even seeing parallelism in purely grammatical terms. Thus E. Greenstein: parallelism is simply “the repetition of a syntactic pattern”.<sup>218</sup> Third, Lowth focused on parallelism between the two cola of a verse. But it can also occur inner-verse and inter-verse, and must find its place amongst other devices (such as chiasmus and refrain) that structure larger portions of texts.<sup>219</sup>

Overall, there has been an increasing recognition of openness and reader involvement in parallelism.<sup>220</sup> The verse’s meaning is not exhausted in the first line; a parallelism “delays meaning in order to offer a heuristic quest for meaning”.<sup>221</sup> The second line may offer some help in the quest, but may also increase its challenges, for the relationship between lines may not be entirely clear.<sup>222</sup> The reader must decipher it for himself.

I will focus on two particular ways that the reader meets such diversity and openness in Proverbs’ parallelisms. If a prototypical Lowthian parallelism contains two lines, balanced by their similarity or opposition, the proverbs may diverge in the following ways: (a) it may be unclear whether *synonymy* or *antithesis* is intended; (b) there may be a perceived *imbalance* between the lines, which the reader tries to fill out.

<sup>217</sup> E.g. T. Collins, *Line-Forms in Hebrew Poetry: A grammatical approach to the stylistic study of the Hebrew prophets* (Studia Pohl; Series Maior 7; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), S. A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 20; Missoula: Montana Scholars Press, 1979), and M. O’Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980) each independently presented a method for analysing the grammatical structure of a verse and its parallelism. The methods are compared by D. Pardee, *Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetic Parallelism: A trial cut* (‘nt 1 and Proverbs 2) (VTSup 39; Leiden: Brill, 1988) pp.23-46. Most influentially, A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985; rev. and enl. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) systematically studied parallelism occurring across different ‘aspects’ of the language – morphological/syntactic, lexical-semantic, and phonological.

<sup>218</sup> E. L. Greenstein, “How Does Parallelism Mean?” in *A Sense of Text: The art of language in the study of biblical literature* (ed. S. Geller; JQRSup; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982), p.44.

<sup>219</sup> So e.g. J. P. Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An introductory guide* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Meynet (1998). Heim distinguishes between semilinear, intralinear, interlinear and translinear parallelism in Proverbs; Heim (2013) pp.29-32.

<sup>220</sup> D. J. A. Clines, “The Parallelism of Greater Precision,” in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (ed. E. R. Follis; JSOTSup 40; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987) pp.94-95; G. Payne, “Parallelism in Biblical Hebrew Verse,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 8.1 (1994) pp.126-140; A. Wagner, “Der Parallelismus membrorum zwischen poetischer Form und Denkfigur,” in *Parallelismus Membrorum* (ed. A. Wagner; Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 224; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) pp.1-28.

<sup>221</sup> Payne (1994) p.136.

<sup>222</sup> See Berlin (2008) pp.96-99 on the tension between ‘disambiguation and ambiguity’ in parallelism.

## §2.2 Synonymous or antithetical?<sup>223</sup>

First then, it may be unclear whether the proverb is characterised by (to use Lowth's terms) synonymy or antithesis. These may at first seem to be easily distinguishable, even opposite phenomena. But in language and thought, there is no true synonymy nor true antithesis (not even between these very terms). From one perspective two things may be alike; from another they are necessarily unlike. Even opposites must be similar in some ways, or they would not be commensurable. Sameness and difference in meaning are fluid, and cannot be confined by rigid categories.

The complex interplay of sameness and difference has proved central in many scholars' accounts of parallelism. For A. Berlin, parallelism intertwines "equivalences and contrasts" not just in word meaning but in morphology and syntax.<sup>224</sup> For J. Kugel, the lines display "integration and differentiation", saying 'the same thing' and 'something more'.<sup>225</sup> For K. Heim, "[t]he creative combination of repetition with variation is the very essence of Hebrew poetry",<sup>226</sup> manifesting itself most fully in parallelism. Opposing two similar ideas highlights their differences; apposing different ideas emphasises their similarities.

The two cola of the proverbs' parallelisms are sometimes paired without a conjunction (parataxis), or (more often) with the basic conjunction *waw*. Depending on context, this might be translated 'and', 'or', 'namely', 'moreover', 'but' etc.<sup>227</sup> The relationship between the lines is thus left to the discernment of the reader.

Sometimes it is unclear whether the similarities between the cola are paramount (rendering the parallelism loosely 'synonymous'; 'and'); or the differences ('antithetical', 'but'). Consider, for example, Prov 17:17:

<sup>223</sup> This ambiguity occurs in Prov 11:16; 19:12; 18:4; 16:1,9; 21:31, commented on in later chapters. See table in the appendix.

<sup>224</sup> Berlin (2008). Drawing on Russian formalist R. Jakobson, Berlin argues that parallelism "projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination". That is, instead of surveying equivalent/similar terms and 'selecting' one only, parallel lines 'combine' two. This then shows them to be different (p.140).

<sup>225</sup> Kugel (1981). Kugel expresses this in three main ways. First (pp.1, 53-54), a verse is read as \_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_, where / corresponds to a small pause, and // to a larger one. The reader integrates the half-lines (separated from surrounding discourse by the large pause), and distinguishes them (through the small pause). Second (p.16), paradoxically, the differentiation of the lines integrates them, for "it asserts A + B to be a *single statement*". Third (p.8), B at once looks back at A and beyond it. It is both equivalent and contrasting.

<sup>226</sup> Heim (2013), p.636, italics original. Heim's discussion of parallelism occurs within a larger argument about 'variant repetitions' in Proverbs – verses which occur in several places in the book, with some similarities and some differences.

<sup>227</sup> Berlin (2008), p.91; K. Seybold, "Anmerkung zum Parallelismus membrorum in der hebräische Poesie," in *Parallelismus Membrorum* (ed. A. Wagner; Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 224; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) p.110.

בְּכָל־עֵת אָהֵב הָרֵעַ וְאָח לְצָרָה יוֹלֵד:

*The friend loves at all times;*

*and/ but a brother is born for adversity.*

The two main sets of parallels here are ‘friend’//‘brother’ and ‘at all times’//‘for adversity’. In some senses, the terms in each set are similar, and the proverb can be read synonymously. Friend and brother are alike in the support they show at various seasons. However, there are also differences that might render the proverb antithetical. Perhaps the friend is the better figure (cf. 18:24). He can be relied on ‘at all times’, but the brother only at specific ones. Or maybe the preference is for the brother. He, and not the friend, should be turned to in ‘adversity’. Indeed, Proverbs displays a general scepticism about the reliability of so-called ‘friends’ (e.g. 19:4,6,7). Antithesis might then emerge in the verbs. The friend’s apparent ‘love’ is an ironic comment or a fleeting virtue, opposed to the prenatal vocation of support that the brother was ‘born for’. The complex interaction of contrast and equivalence means that this proverb, along with others explored in later chapters, is open to readings as synonymous or antithetical.

### §2.3 Unbalanced parallelisms<sup>228</sup>

A second type of openness can arise from parallelism if there is a perceived imbalance between the lines, an apparent gap that the reader tries to fill out.<sup>229</sup> This perception of imbalance rests upon an expectation of balance. In Proverbs (especially chs.10-15), such is the proliferation of balanced antithetical parallelisms that this becomes the expected form. Whilst elsewhere in the HB there is often a dynamic movement between the cola, here stasis often prevails.<sup>230</sup> This has led to some scholars devaluing parallelism in Proverbs. It is according to Alonso Schökel “trivial and academic”, “easily forgotten”;<sup>231</sup> according to Krašovec “neither stimulating nor rewarding”.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>228</sup> In the proverbs explored later, this occurs in 13:5; 10:8,14,16; 12:21; 13:2.

<sup>229</sup> See M. V. Fox, “The Rhetoric of Disjointed Proverbs,” *JSOT* 29.2 (2004) pp.165-177; Heim (2013) pp.638-639; W. E. Mouser, “Filling in the Blank: Asymmetrical antithetical parallelism,” in *Learning from the Sages: Selected studies of the book of Proverbs* (ed. R. B. Zuck; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995) pp.137-150.

<sup>230</sup> Thus Alter (2011) p.206: “the general dynamic complexity of semantic parallelism in biblical verse has given way to a didactic and mnemonic neatness of smoothly matched statements clicking dutifully into place”.

<sup>231</sup> L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Subsidia biblica 11; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1988) p.88.

<sup>232</sup> J. Krašovec, *Antithetical Structure in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (VTSup 35; Leiden: Brill, 1984) p.17.

However, balanced proverbs have a value of their own,<sup>233</sup> and they place in sharp relief the unbalanced examples.

In an ‘unbalanced’ or ‘imprecise’ parallelism, the reader perceives that the two lines are in some sense parallel; e.g. through a semantic antithesis in one pair of terms, or a matching of syntax between the cola. Other features however, are not parallel. Contemplating the relationship of the terms, the reader has different interpretive options. She may (a) emphasise what is new in the second line, and read the proverb as a progression; or (b) level the difference, and read it as an equilibrium. If the latter, further options of interpretation open up.

Let us take as an example one of Alonso Schökel’s “trivial and academic” proverbs, 15:6:

בֵּית צַדִּיק חֵסֶן רַב וּבִתְבוּאָת רָשָׁע נִעְכָּרָת

*In the house of the righteous<sup>234</sup> is abundant wealth;*

*but the produce of the wicked is troubled.*

(a) A progression may be seen in this proverb,<sup>235</sup> from the quantity of the wealth in the first colon, to its quality in the second. The climax is the declaration that the wicked’s produce is *troubled*. Its quantity is only of secondary significance. Whether it is substantial or not, the reader can rest assured that the wealth will do the wicked man no good.

(b) Alternatively, the proverb may be an equilibrium. The righteous-wicked word pair signals balance in the proverb; what applies to one of them cannot apply to the other. If the righteous has abundant wealth, the wicked cannot; if the wicked has troubled produce, the righteous cannot. The interpretation strategy is to take the ‘unbalanced’ term from each colon and to reverse it into the opposite colon. The full thought thus emerges as something like: ‘In the house of the righteous is abundant [*untroubled*] wealth; but the produce of the wicked is [*minimal and*] troubled.’ If they are reading hastily, interpreters may not consciously supply these reversals, but savouring the proverb, they are likely to.

However, the precise reversals are unclear, and open up the proverb to further interpretations. Reversing a term may involve simply negating it, or affirming its opposite. For example, take the phrase יָפִיחַ כְּזָבִים ‘breathes out lies’.<sup>236</sup> It occurs in 14:5, where its antithesis is given as a simple negation לֹא יִכְזֹב ‘does not lie’, but in 14:25, it is reversed by עֵד אֱמֶת ‘true witness’.

<sup>233</sup> This is mainly in their didactic utility as simple and emphatic forms (Alter [2011] p.206); and their proverbial potential for motivation (T. Hildebrandt, “Motivation and Antithetical Parallelism in Proverbs 10-15,” *JETS* 35 [1992] pp.433-444).

<sup>234</sup> Reading as בבית and ותבואת (so Pesh, Targ, BHS). See discussion in M. V. Fox, *Proverbs: An eclectic edition with introduction and textual commentary* (The Hebrew Bible Critical Edition; Atlanta, Georgia: SBL, 2015) pp.231-232.

<sup>235</sup> A ‘developmental’ understanding of parallelism has been prevalent in much scholarship. Esp. Alter (2011) pp.1-28.

<sup>236</sup> Or ‘witness of lies’; D. Pardee, “yph ‘Witness’ in Hebrew and Ugaritic,” *V/T* 28.2 (1978) pp.204-213.

Not only does he not lie; he is positively truthful. Equally, in 15:6, נַעֲכָרָה ('troubled') might be reversed by negation ('untroubled') or by affirmation of the opposite. But the 'opposite' is open to further interpretation, depending on the nature of the 'trouble'; there is no absolute antithesis in language. Is the wealth of the righteous peaceful? dependable? flourishing? רַב ('abundant') may be reversed as 'not abundant'; or 'minimal', 'absent', 'deficient'.

Another point of ambiguity may arise if a phrase is being reversed (rather than a single term), for it may be unclear which term to reverse. In 28:12, וּבָקוּם רְשָׁעִים 'when the wicked rise' is reversed by בָּעֲלָץ צַדִּיקִים 'when the righteous exalt', i.e. the character term is reversed, and a synonym is given for the verb. In 28:28, however, the same phrase is paralleled with בָּאֲבָדָם 'when they perish'. The character term stays the same (just represented by a pronoun) and the direction of the verb is switched. Perhaps in 15:16, חֶסֶן רַב should be levelled, not by reversing רַב as above, but as an ironic 'abundant poverty' (cf. 28:19).

Overall, parallelism is a flexible and diverse phenomenon, which may give rise to openness in a number of ways. Here, I have highlighted two particular phenomena, important for our later investigations. It may be unclear whether the two lines of a verse are intended to be 'synonymous' or 'antithetical'; there may be a perceived 'imbalance' between the lines, which invites imaginative filling out.

### §3. Openness through imagery

Having shown how openness emerges in Prov 10:1-22:16 through polysemy and parallelism, I turn its final main source, imagery. Much scholarly work on imagery in Proverbs focusses on chs.1-9, with their vibrant personifications of Ladies Wisdom and Folly.<sup>237</sup> In the sentence literature, imagery is not ubiquitous, but it does occur, and that with increasing frequency from ch.16 onward.<sup>238</sup> W. McKane drew attention to concrete imagery as conferring a "hermeneutical openness" on true 'proverbs' (מִשְׁלִים).<sup>239</sup> Of Mesopotamian examples, he noted an "openness to interpretation... and the quality of opaqueness, or even enigma, which may characterise the

<sup>237</sup> E.g. Camp (1985); N. C. Habel, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," *Interpretation* 26.2 (1972) pp.131-157; Weeks (2007).

<sup>238</sup> Notable studies include W. P. Brown, "The Didactic Power of Metaphor in the Aphoristic Sayings of Proverbs," *JSOT* 29.2 (2004) pp.133-154 on food metaphors; T. L. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs* (VTSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2008) on animal imagery; Sandoval (2006) on imagery of wealth and poverty.

<sup>239</sup> McKane (1970) p.23.



imagery”.<sup>240</sup> McKane excluded the bulk of the sayings in Proverbs (which he did not see as genuine *מְשָׁלִים*) from any such open or enigmatic potential. But this is unwarranted. Indeed, their imagery is sometimes rich, and I suggest that it contributes to their openness in three main ways. First (§3.1), the image may invite the reader into an imaginary world to explore. Second (§3.2), it may interact and ‘blend’ with its metaphorical referent in an open-ended manner. Third (§3.3), it may apply to the reader’s life in various ways.

### §3.1 Imagining

Imagery can open up a world to be imagined and explored by the reader. The importance of the imagination in interpretation has been increasingly stressed in recent Proverbs’ scholarship.<sup>241</sup> The proverb does not pen in every detail of its images; these are left for the reader’s mind. What are the precise dimensions of the ‘strong city’ (*קִרְיַת עֹז*) in 10:15/18:11? How do you imagine it? How thick are its walls? How dark its stone? Are there soldiers manning the lookouts or merchants calling in the streets?

In imagining this city, I have brought to bear a whole set of related concepts – building materials and practices, inhabitants, warfare – a broad ‘encyclopaedic knowledge’.<sup>242</sup> When a word is read or heard, particularly when that word conjures up an image, our minds are not constrained to the dictionary definition. Each word may evoke related concepts, personal experiences, cultural perceptions, emotional responses, ingrained storylines, evaluations, patterns of reasoning etc. Each opens up a world to explore.

The world imagined varies from individual to individual, and from culture to culture. As much as possible, we should try to reconstruct the world accessible to the ancient Israelite. This is problematic, separated as we are by time and space, but an interdisciplinary approach can be fruitful. We may examine relevant biblical passages; comparative ancient Near Eastern literature; iconography and archaeology; sociological and anthropological research; scientific fields like

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<sup>240</sup> McKane (1970) p.183.

<sup>241</sup> E.g. Heim (2013); Perdue (2000); L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A theological history* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Stewart (2016). In addition, some have applied a Ricoeurian hermeneutic to Proverbs. Ricoeur suggested that poetic texts project a symbolic world ‘in front of the text’, which the reader is called to imagine and inhabit. E.g. Bland (1994); Sandoval (2006); A. Viljoen, “An Exploration of the Symbolic World of Proverbs 10:1-15:33 With Specific Reference to ‘the Fear of the Lord’” (PhD, University of Pretoria, 2013); less explicitly C. G. Bartholomew and R. P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A theological introduction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011).

<sup>242</sup> E.g. Croft and Cruse (2004) p.30.

geography, zoology, and meteorology.<sup>243</sup>

Poetic texts often evoke imaginary worlds, and flesh them out over the course of the text. In Proverbs' sentence literature, however, the image is confined to a single line, and any work of elaboration must be done in the reader's mind. The form is terse and elliptical, and the contextual information is sparse which could potentially direct interpretation. The proverbs are a small window into a world, but one that can be climbed through for extensive exploration.

### §3.2 Blending

The images in Proverbs tend not to be images only, but metaphors. This ushers in another level of openness.<sup>244</sup> In a metaphor, the image (or imagined world) serves as a 'source domain', which depicts something else, a 'target domain'.<sup>245</sup> When Prov 12:4 says 'An excellent wife is the crown of her husband', the source domain is the 'crown' (עֲטָרָה) with its associated world of rarity, esteem, and value. The target domain is 'the excellent wife' (אִשָּׁת חַיִל).

In Proverbs, metaphors are often expressed bluntly 'X (is) Y'. The copula is usually lacking, so two images are simply juxtaposed: 'An excellent wife – the crown of her husband'. J. G. Williams describes the impact of this form: the images "are projected stroboscopically" (imagine viewing them under a strobe light) "they are seen quickly side by side, then they are shut off".<sup>246</sup> The reader becomes puzzled by the juxtaposition and is drawn in to examine their relationship. Alternatively, the metaphor may be embedded into the syntax of the sentence. When the son's 'lamp is put out' (יִדְעָךָ נֶרֶו) in 20:20, the reader must infer that it refers to his death and destruction.

In the twentieth century, metaphor theory underwent great developments.<sup>247</sup> According to the early 'substitution' theory, a metaphor is simply the substitution of one word (a literal term) with another (a figurative one), based on resemblance between them. It is an ornament, perhaps with emotional impact, but with no new cognitive content. It may be 'translated' back into literal language without loss of meaning. However, this view is problematic, and was influentially

<sup>243</sup> Several biblical scholars fruitfully adopt this approach. E.g. W. P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A theology of metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002b); Forti (2008); A. R. Gray, *Psalms 18 in Words and Pictures: A reading through metaphor* (Biblical Interpretation Series 127; Leiden: Brill, 2014); E. J. Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When language and text meet culture, cognition, and context* (Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

<sup>244</sup> Bartholomew and O'Dowd (2011) p.65; Williams (1980).

<sup>245</sup> The terms 'source domain' and 'target domain' were popularised by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>246</sup> Williams (1980) p.41.

<sup>247</sup> For an overview, see Gray (2014) pp.17-33.

challenged by I. A. Richards (1936).<sup>248</sup> Rather than a *substitution*, he spoke of a metaphor as an *interaction*, between a ‘tenor’ (the referent, or target domain) and a ‘vehicle’ (the image, source domain). The interaction creates meaning that would not be attainable otherwise.

Richards’ theory was built upon by M. Black (1962).<sup>249</sup> He pointed out that the interaction is not between two words alone, but between two ‘systems of associated commonplaces’: the shared knowledge and assumptions held by a speech community about the words (or ‘encyclopaedic knowledge’). In a metaphor, the system of commonplaces evoked by the source is ‘projected onto’ the target, serving as a filter for how we view it.

However, it is probably not a case of direct ‘projection’, but more a ‘blend’ of ideas. G. Fauconnier and M. Turner have proposed that the interaction between source and target takes place in a ‘blend space’ in the mind.<sup>250</sup> They suggest three stages here, each giving scope for openness: composition, completion, and elaboration. In ‘composition’, the interpreter transfers information from the source and target domains into the blend space. She then ‘completes’ the structure by bringing in broader encyclopaedic knowledge and conceptual architecture. It is open to her which particular information and encyclopaedic knowledge to select. Finally, she ‘elaborates’, running a mental simulation, imagining the new emergent structure. The story that she develops is open-ended: “We can ‘run the blend’ indefinitely”.<sup>251</sup> Fauconnier and Turner provide a convincing theoretical description of the inherent openness of metaphors. While not drawing extensively on the technicalities, I will employ the basic procedures of imaginative blending in my explorations in Part 2.

### §3.3 Applying

The interpretation process does not stop there, however. We are not dealing simply with metaphors, but with proverbs, which demand application (see ch.3 §2.1). The imagery in folk proverbs relates figuratively to some situation in the hearer’s own life. Drawing a parallel of genre between folk and biblical proverbs, T. Sandoval has suggested that this is true of the latter too,

<sup>248</sup> I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (The Mary Flexner Lectures on the Humanities 3; Oxford: OUP, 1936).

<sup>249</sup> M. Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in language and philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1962).

<sup>250</sup> Fauconnier and Turner describe four ‘mental spaces’ – small packets of conceptual structure dependent on larger domains of encyclopaedic knowledge. Source and target are two ‘input spaces’; what is common between them constitutes the ‘generic space’; and they are imaginatively combined in the ‘blend space’. G. Fauconnier and M. Turner, “Conceptual Integration Networks,” *Cognitive Science* 22.2 (1998) pp.133-187. For more recent developments see G. Fauconnier, and G. Lakoff, “On Metaphor and Blending,” *Cognitive Semiotics* 5.1-2 (2009) pp.393-399 and the bibliography compiled by Turner at <http://markturner.org/blending.html> (accessed October 2017).

<sup>251</sup> Fauconnier and Turner (1998) p.144.

“because proverbs by their ‘nature’... are concerned to say something metaphorically”.<sup>252</sup> For some biblical proverbs, a figurative interpretation looks appealing: “he who gathers in the summer” (10:5a) may be metaphorically applied to someone who has never ‘gathered’ in his life, but who is diligent in his work.

However, most biblical proverbs cannot be taken as figures. A distinction should be made between biblical sayings which *contain* metaphors (e.g. ‘an excellent wife is the crown of her husband’ [12:4]) and folk proverbs which *are* metaphors (e.g. ‘birds of a feather flock together’).<sup>253</sup> Put differently, a biblical proverb usually specifies its target (e.g. ‘an excellent wife’), but a folk proverb does not. This raises a problem for folk proverbs: how can we interpret a metaphor without a target domain?

Earlier paremiologists suggested that a general principle is abstracted from the proverb, and applied to different situations in the world: the proverb’s ‘abstraction idea’,<sup>254</sup> ‘philosophical meaning’,<sup>255</sup> or ‘general/maxim level’.<sup>256</sup> Developments in metaphor theory, however, have nuanced these views. Just as a metaphor cannot be ‘translated’ into literal terms, a proverb cannot be translated as a literal maxim. The process is much more complex and imaginative. Over the last decade, recent metaphor theories, particularly Blend Theory, have been applied to proverbs.<sup>257</sup> The situational context serves as the target domain, and is blended imaginatively with information from the proverb itself. Similarly with biblical proverbs. In effect, they have two target domains: a ‘textual target’, stated in the proverb, and a ‘situational target’ – the contextual application to the interpreter’s life.

The two targets overlap but are distinct. For example, in Prov 19:13, ‘a wife’s quarrelling is a dripping of rain’ (וְדֹלֶף טֶרֶד מְדִינַי אִשָּׁה). Two related questions arise: ‘how is a wife’s quarrelling a dripping of rain?’ (textual target) and ‘how is *my wife’s* quarrelling a dripping of rain?’ (situational target). Interpretation will depend on the reader’s encyclopaedic knowledge of wives and quarrelling, and on his own specific circumstances. Accordingly, features may be reorganised,

<sup>252</sup> Sandoval (2006) p.11.

<sup>253</sup> So Loader’s criticism of Sandoval; J. A. Loader, “Metaphorical and Literal Readings of Aphorisms in the Book of Proverbs,” *HvTSt* 62.4 (2006) p.1196.

<sup>254</sup> H. Jason, “Proverbs in Society: The problem of meaning and function,” *Proverbium* 17 (1971) p.620.

<sup>255</sup> J. Penfield and M. Duru, “Proverbs: Metaphors that teach,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 61.3 (1988) p.121.

<sup>256</sup> N. Barley, “A Structural Approach to the Proverb and the Maxim with Special Reference to the Anglo-Saxon Corpus,” *Proverbium* 20 (1972) pp.738-741.

<sup>257</sup> E.g. E. Aasland, “Two Heads are Better Than One: Using conceptual mapping to analyze proverb meaning,” *Proverbium* 26 (2009) pp.1-18; D. Andersson, “Understanding Figurative Proverbs: A model based on conceptual blending,” *Folklore* 124:1 (2013) pp.28-44; G. Buljan and T. Gradićak-Erdeljić, “Where Cognitive Linguistics Meets Paremiology: A cognitive-contrastive view of selected English and Croatian proverbs,” *Explorations in English Language and Linguistics* 1.1 (2013) pp.63-83; J. D. Johansen, “When the Cat’s Away, the Mice Will Play: On proverbs, metaphors, and the pragmatics of blending,” in *Semiotic Rotations: Modes of meanings in cultural worlds* (eds. S. K. Gertz, J. Valsiner and J.-P. Breaux; IAP, 2007) pp.61-76; K. Sullivan and E. Sweetser, “Is ‘Generic is Specific’ a Metaphor,” in *Meaning, Form & Body* (eds. F. Parrill, V. Tobin and M. Turner; Stanford, California: CSLI Publications, 2010) pp.309-328.

backgrounded, foregrounded, eliminated etc. For example, aural qualities may come to the fore if applied to a woman with a particularly distinctive voice: are your wife's tones dull and monotonous, or piercing and insistent? Both are plausible connotations of dripping rain. Application to a situational context directs and partially closes the interpretation of a proverb, but it may also open the proverb to nuances not noticed before.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed three features which make biblical proverbs particularly open to different interpretations. They may display polysemy (§1), i.e. semantic or grammatical ambiguities. Their parallelism (§2) may offer interpretive questions without clear answers. Or, they may contain imagery (§3), opening up a world for the reader to explore and apply. We will see in the next chapter how such openness helps the sayings in their 'didactic' and 'proverbial' functions.

## Chapter 3 – The Openness of the Didactic Proverb

In ch.1, I suggested that the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 should be considered as ‘didactic proverbs’. Accordingly, they are open to interpretation and use ‘didactically’, for general formation and training; or ‘proverbially’, to influence specific situations. In ch.2, I explored how proverbs may show literary openness through polysemy, parallelism, and imagery. In this chapter, I will tie these together, and discuss how a proverb’s openness makes it particularly useful for both didactic and proverb functions. This will take us beyond openness in interpretation to openness in application.

### §1. Openness in a ‘didactic’ use

Openness greatly enhances the didactic function of biblical proverbs, contributing to their three key educational aims: developing a worldview, forming character, and training the intellect. In particular, openness educates by simultaneously entailing the sayings’ broadness and their complexity. Let me explain.

First, the cumulative effect of the sayings is to build up a *worldview* in the student, or, more precisely, a broad framework of categories and patterns through which to view the world. Particularly important are character categories (ch.4) and act-consequence patterns (ch.5). The categories offered are wide and general, able to encompass a broad sweep of reality. They function as large, open boxes into which the student may fit the manifold situations of life. These boxes alone are offered as the proper rationalisation system for the messiness of the world.

However, the proverbs’ openness also prevents this basic framework from becoming absolute law. Openness entails complexity as well as breadth. The proverbs, like the world they represent, are ambiguous and elusive. The worldview they build must be flexible and adaptive, not rigid and dogmatic. The proverbs can be fitted together in various ways, and never reach a completed system. Their openness to different meanings allows the framework to be nuanced and shifted by the changing situations of life.

Second, the openness of the proverbs facilitates the *character development* of the student (see ch.4). The generalised character types offer simple ideals, perhaps for the sake of the one beginning in wisdom: she must become ‘righteous’ (צַדִּיק) and ‘wise’ (חָכָם). The proverbs tend to describe overall character, in broad terms, showing concern for total disposition. The student may fill out these open characterisations with specific actions. She can fit herself into the category, and develop proper morality in the particulars of her own behaviour.

Insofar as their openness also entails ambiguities, some proverb suggest that human character is not simple. This will become evident in chs.4-7. ‘Righteous’ and ‘wicked’ are not all-or-nothing, and there are vagaries under the surface of every proverb, and every human person. Acknowledging this, Proverbs attempts to shape its reader. Openness encourages her to step inside the proverb, to be influenced and formed by it. Particularly, Proverbs wants to reorientate her desires towards wisdom (16:6), encouraging her to seek it not as an obligation but as a joy. It wills for her to delight in its own wise words. Indeed, the nature of its words encourages this. Their openness is often playful, alluring, and evocative. Some proverbs become intellectual games, riddles to resolve. Others invite her to explore rich and open imagery. She is tempted in, seduced into study.<sup>258</sup>

In doing so, she participates in Proverbs’ third main didactic aim – *intellectual training*. Pondering the complexities emerging through the proverbs’ openness, she cultivates particular modes of thought.<sup>259</sup> Proverbs do not simply teach about the faculties of wisdom, but they also train those faculties. To decipher polysemy, parallelism, or imagery, the reader must engage reason, logic, and critical discernment. She must consider what is important, and what peripheral for interpretation. She must make and assess connections between phenomena, and scrutinise what she sees. These skills are vital not only for textual interpretations, but for making sense of life. Proverbs’ open imagery encourages the imagination, a faculty fundamental to moral reasoning.<sup>260</sup> To imagine means to crystallise new insights and to welcome recategorisations. This is essential for a world where, despite the essential stability of tradition and life, newness may arise. Proverbs’ openness, then, is didactically oriented, training the reader how to engage fruitfully with the changing world.

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<sup>258</sup> On the pedagogical power of poetry in general in Proverbs, see Stewart (2016), pp.43-55; Davis (2000) pp.18-24.

<sup>259</sup> D. Bland, “The Formation of Character in the Book of Proverbs,” *Restoration Quarterly* 40.4 (1998) pp.232-233; Fox (2004) pp.175-176; M. Hind, “Teaching for Responsibility: Confirmation and the Book of Proverbs,” *Religious Education* 93.2 (1998) pp.207-224; Stewart (2016).

<sup>260</sup> M. Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of cognitive science for ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Stewart (2016), pp.170-202.

## §2. Openness in a ‘proverb’ use

Equally, openness is significant for the sayings’ ‘proverb’ function. When a proverb is spoken, it comments on a particular situation, for a particular purpose. A proverb’s ‘meaning’ cannot be restricted to its textual meaning but must encompass its whole ‘performance meaning’. As defined by paremiologist B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, this consists of: “participants’ evaluation of the situation + the participants’ understanding of the proverb’s base meaning + interactional strategy of the proverb user” ( $\approx$  situation + text + purpose).<sup>261</sup> The openness of the proverb allows it to be used in many different situations, for many different purposes.

### §2.1 Openness to different situations

#### *How a proverb is ‘mapped’*

Scholars have argued that a proverb is only fully meaningful when applied to a situational context. Such situational context is lacking in a proverb collection, and many suggest that it has been functionally replaced by literary context (see ch.1 §6). However, there is no reason why a student should not apply a collected proverb directly to a situation in his life; indeed, if he is serious in following the book’s moral counsel, he must! – for this is how general principles become concrete realities. When he does so, the proverb text interacts with and ‘maps onto’ the situational context.

As we have seen, a proverb is often structured as [Topic – Comment] (ch.1 §5). The hearer maps each of these components onto some feature of the situational context (here designated as X and Y; fig. 1).<sup>262</sup>

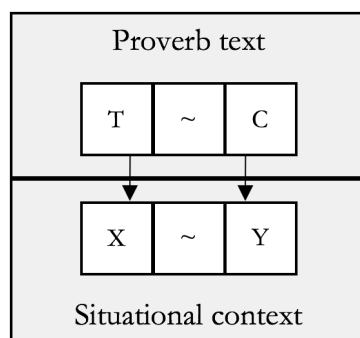


Fig. 1

<sup>261</sup> B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Towards a Theory of Proverb Meaning,” *Proverbium* 22 (1973) pp.821-827; reprinted in W. Mieder and A. Dundes, *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland, 1981) pp.111-121; this quotation p.119. Followed in biblical studies by e.g. Fontaine (1982) pp.48-50; Camp (1985) pp.165-167.

<sup>262</sup> Figure adapted from P. Seitel, “Proverbs: A social use of metaphor,” *Genre* 2 (1969) pp.143-161; also followed by Fontaine (1982) pp.58-63. The application of metaphorical proverbs is more complex than this (see ch.2 §3.3)



Biblical proverbs tend to have two lines; they also make a second Comment on a second Topic [ $T \sim C // T_2 \sim C_2$ ]. If a proverb employs simple synonymous or antithetical parallelism, then both halves may be mapped onto a single context (fig. 2).

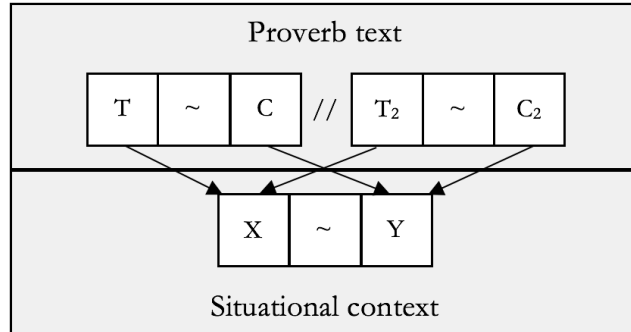


Fig.2

The proverb provides two different, mutually affirmative views of the same situation. The repetition drums in the message and its relevance. In an antithetical proverb, the same principle is stated positively and negatively, bringing balance and order to what may have been an ambiguous, anxiety-inducing situation.

However, when the parallelism is imprecise or absent, it may be difficult to map both sides onto the same situation (Fig. 3):<sup>263</sup>

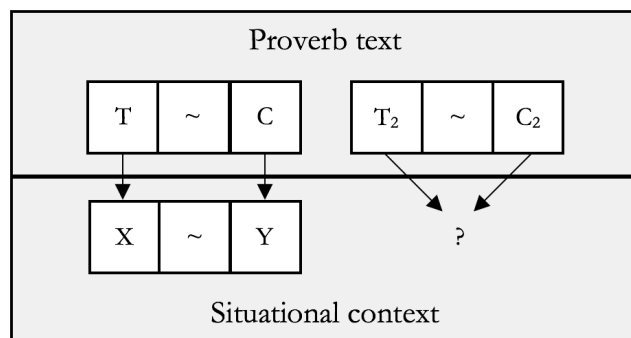


Fig.3

A proverb like this may be more open to application, because it can be used in situations relating to either half. It begins at a certain point (the situation of the hearer), but then develops in a direction of its own choosing. It moves beyond specific application, to more general reflection. The hearer must consider and discern why the proverb has taken this course, learning to see his immediate situation in relation to the wider phenomena of the world.

<sup>263</sup> Examples of this in practice are given in ch.5 §2.2 below.

*Openness arising*<sup>264</sup>

Such a ‘mapping’ of a proverb onto a situational context gives rise to openness. First, this may be because the proverb has multiple ‘base meanings’.<sup>265</sup> The base meaning is the basic interpretation of the text, without regard to situational context. As we have seen, proverbs may be open to several such meanings because of their polysemy, parallelism, and imagery.

It has been empirically demonstrated that users apply different base meanings to different situations. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett highlights for example the multiple possible base meanings of “a friend in need is a friend in deed”, depending on “(1) syntactic ambiguity (is your friend in need or are you in need); (2) lexical ambiguity (indeed or in deed)”.<sup>266</sup> Different users employ the proverb in different ways accordingly. In a now well-rehearsed example, “a rolling stone gathers no moss” yields two quite different interpretations, depending on the user’s understanding of the imagery.<sup>267</sup> By one interpretation (prevalent in Scotland), ‘moss’ is undesirable, and ‘rolling’ protects against it: stagnation is prevented by keeping on the move. But by another interpretation (prevalent in England), ‘moss’ is a sign of peace and stability, and ‘rolling’ would destroy it: prosperity will not accumulate for the restless.

Second, a single base meaning may have multiple realisations. Even when two proverb users agree what the proverb ‘means’, they may apply it different ways. Here openness emerges not simply from the text but from the interaction between text and context. It has various manifestations:

*Metaphor.*<sup>268</sup> As discussed in ch.2 §3.3, the world evoked by a metaphor may be blended with the situational context in an imaginative, open-ended way.

*Generality.*<sup>269</sup> The base meaning of a proverb is often a broad principle, employing general terms, which can be specified in many ways. For example, Prov 10:1b states “A wise son makes a father glad”. ‘Wise’, like so many character terms in Proverbs, is a wide category applicable to many different people (see ch.4). Being ‘glad’ may manifest itself in a thousand concrete instances.

<sup>264</sup> See appendix for a table giving where these different types of openness are discussed in later chapters.

<sup>265</sup> The term comes from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981). For examples of how different base meanings might be used in application, see ch.5 §3.3, 4.2.

<sup>266</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981) p.114.

<sup>267</sup> Originally G. B. Milner, “Quadripartite Structures,” *Proverbium* 14 (1969) pp.379-383, followed by A. Krikmann, *Some Additional Aspects of Semantic Indefiniteness of Proverbs: Remarks on proverb semantics 2* (Tallinn: Acad. of Sciences of the Estonian SSR, 1974) p.7; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981) pp.112-113; D. Bland (1994) pp.128-129; P. Grzybek, “Semiotic and Semantic Aspects of the Proverb,” in *Introduction to Paremiology: A comprehensive guide to proverb studies* (eds. H. Hrisztova-Gotthardt and M. Aleksa Varga; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) p.89.

<sup>268</sup> Examples given in ch.5 §3.3.

<sup>269</sup> Ch.4; ch.5 §3.3.

*Positive or negative relation to context.*<sup>270</sup> It is possible to apply proverbs positively or negatively; as depicting the situation of the hearer, or the opposite scenario. Prov 10:1b could be spoken to a son who is wise (perhaps to commend him), or to one who is not wise (to admonish him). Antithetical proverbs provide both the positive and negative manifestations. Prov 10:1 continues “but a foolish son is sorrow to a mother”. One half is mapped by identity, and the other half by contrast. Which half is positively mapped may change the rhetorical direction of the proverb. Spoken to a wise man (i.e. if the first half is positively applied), the second half might be an afterthought. Spoken to a fool, it becomes the climax.

*Opinion about the situation.*<sup>271</sup> While most proverbs offer clear evaluative categories, some do not, and different individuals may assess them differently. One might think it despicable that “the poor man is hated even by his neighbour, but the rich man has many friends” (Prov 14:20, cf. 19:4,6,7), and speak the proverb in disapproval. Alternatively, he may simply be observing society. Positively, he might be sanctioning a quite proper manifestation of the social order, or offering savvy advice about whom to befriend. The proverb has no clear opinion of its own, but may be used to condemn, comment, or commend.<sup>272</sup>

*Temporal orientation.*<sup>273</sup> Proverbs occur in various tenses – we find *yiqtol*, *qatal*, participial and verbless clauses.<sup>274</sup> However, tense does not dictate temporal orientation. In proverb use, a *qatal* (usually a past tense) might apply to a future situation, and a *yiqtol* (usually a future) to the past. All seem to express a generic, ‘gnomic’ sense, a proverbial present,<sup>275</sup> which can then be applied diagnostically or prognostically. Though Prov 10:1b has a *yiqtol* form (יָשָׂם), it may refer to a son who *has made*, *is making*, or *will make* his father glad.

*Correlation of persons.*<sup>276</sup> Finally, the ‘correlation of persons’<sup>277</sup> is not evident in a proverb’s base meaning. In most speech genres, speakers refer to themselves in the first person and to their conversation partners in the second person. Proverbs, however, are almost all in the third person, giving them an openness to apply to *any* person. Particularly important is whether the characters in the proverb correlate with the people using the proverb. Does the speaker refer to himself (1<sup>st</sup> person correlation), the hearer (2<sup>nd</sup> person), or somebody else (3<sup>rd</sup> person)?

<sup>270</sup> Ch.5 §2.2.

<sup>271</sup> Ch.6 §3.1.

<sup>272</sup> Cf. also proverbs about bribery, e.g. 17:8; 21:14.

<sup>273</sup> Ch.5 §2.2; ch.6 §2.1.

<sup>274</sup> According to Cook, in the first line of the proverbs in 10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27, we find: 180 *yiqtol*, 202 verbless, 48 participial, 38 *qatal* and 31 modal clauses. J. A. Cook, “Genericity, Tense, and Verbal Patterns in the Sentence Literature of Proverbs,” in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays offered to honor Michael V. Fox on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday* (eds. R. L. Troxel, K. G. Friebe and D. R. Magary; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005a) p.124.

<sup>275</sup> Cook (2005a). But cf. M. Roglund, *Alleged Non-Past Uses of Qatal in Classical Hebrew* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica; Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2003), who argues that even here, *qatals* retain something of their past orientation.

<sup>276</sup> Ch.6 §2.1, 3.1.

<sup>277</sup> Expression taken from Seitel (1969).

Proverbs which speak of two characters are particularly open. In application, the hearer may correlate with either, and the proverb is sometimes understood quite differently in each case. Prov 13:1, for example, reads בֶּן־חָכָם מִוְסֵר אָב וְלֹץ לֹא־שָׁמַע גְּעֵרָה “A wise son – a father’s instruction; a scoffer has not heard rebuke”. There are two main ambiguities in the base meaning here: What is the relationship between the two nominal phrases juxtaposed in the first colon? Does שָׁמַע in the second colon refer to passive hearing or active listening? The interpretation may depend on the recipient of the proverb – father or son.

If the son is the recipient, both cola address his behaviour. The second colon warns against improper behaviour, with שָׁמַע as active listening. “The scoffer” characteristically “does not listen to/heed rebuke”, but the son must. The juxtaposition in the first colon may be resolved either by gapping שָׁמַע back from the second colon,<sup>278</sup> or by supplying an implied verb: “A wise son listens to/follows his father’s instruction”. So must the hearer. If the proverb instead addresses the father, the sense is quite different, for now the father’s behaviour is central. The first colon is almost a copula: a wise son ‘is’ a father’s instruction, in that he is the product of it.<sup>279</sup> The father must instruct the son well, for wise character will follow, which will gladden the father’s heart (Prov 10:1; 15:20; 23:15,24; 27:11). The son’s active listening is not the focus of שָׁמַע, but the fact that “rebuke” has been sounded at all. A scoffer has never heard such from his father, but a more attentive disciplinarian could have rectified his character. Let this be a warning.

Overall then, the usefulness of a proverb is increased by its openness, for this allows it to be applied many different situations. A proverb may have different base meanings, and a single base meaning may be mapped in multiple ways.

<sup>278</sup> Although C. Miller, “A Linguistic Approach to Ellipsis in Biblical Poetry,” *BBR* 13.2 (2003) pp.251-270 has argued that such backwards gapping is linguistically improbable.

<sup>279</sup> E.g. F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon* (Clark’s Foreign Theological Library, Fourth Series 45; Edinburgh: [s.n.], 1884).

## §2.2 Openness to different functions

### Introduction

Proverbs are not only multi-situational, but multi-functional. A proverb is mapped onto a situation for a reason; it is, according to C. Fontaine “*always* purposeful”.<sup>280</sup> Accordingly, the ‘performance meaning’ depends not just on base meaning and situation, but also on purpose (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s “interactional strategy of the proverb user”<sup>281</sup>). This too can generate openness, for a single proverb may be put to many different ends. Paremiologist A. Krikmann notes that proverbs can, for example, endorse ideas, forecast, express doubts, reproach, accuse, justify, excuse, mock, comfort, jeer, repent, warn, advise, interdict – to name but a few!<sup>282</sup>

This relates to a wider point about language. When I speak, I do not simply exercise my vocal chords. I also do something *in* my speaking – I congratulate, command, complain or conclude.<sup>283</sup> A speech is also an act. Such ‘speech acts’ might be classified according to the speaker’s purpose.<sup>284</sup> By this measure, J. R. Searle distinguished between *assertives* (intending to assert belief); *directives* (directing the hearer); *commissives* (committing to action); *expressives* (expressing feelings); and *declarations* (declaring that something is the case, and thereby making it so<sup>285</sup>).<sup>286</sup>

As I will go on to show, proverbs function particularly well as assertives and directives.<sup>287</sup> Their purpose may be to assert some truth about the world, or to direct their hearer to proper behaviour. Searle distinguished assertion and direction further by the “psychological state” of their speaker, and the “direction of fit between words and the world”.<sup>288</sup> Assertion implies *belief* that

<sup>280</sup> Fontaine (1982) p.64, italics original.

<sup>281</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981) p.119.

<sup>282</sup> Krikmann (1974) p.3; cf. also O. Lauhakangas, “Proverbs in Social Interaction: Questions aroused by the multi-functionality of proverbial speech,” *Proverbium* 24 (2007) pp.204-228; A. Widbäck, “Summary: Proverbs in play. Usage of proverbs in drama dialogue,” in *Ordspråk i bruk. Användning av ordspråk i dramadialog* (Skrifter Utgivna av Institutionen för Nordiska Språk vid Uppsala Universitet 95; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2015); and concerning biblical proverbs, Hildebrandt (2005) p.7.

<sup>283</sup> J. L. Austin, the seminal scholar for ‘speech act theory’, distinguished these as ‘locutionary’ and ‘illocutionary’ acts respectively. He also distinguished ‘perlocutionary’ acts: what is done *by* speaking. J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>284</sup> Searle called this ‘illocutionary point’. J. R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979) pp.2-3.

<sup>285</sup> E.g. “I hereby declare this garden party open”; “I dub thee Sir Walter”.

<sup>286</sup> Searle (1979) pp.12-20.

<sup>287</sup> This basic distinction is often made by paremiologists and biblical scholars. Camp (1985) pp.167-171; Fontaine (1982); pp.163-164; R. M. Harnish, “Communicating with Proverbs,” in *Cognition, Comprehension and Communication. A decade of North American proverb studies (1990-2000)* (ed. W. Mieder; Baltmannsweiler: Schneider-Verlag Hohengehren, 2003) pp.167-8; Krikmann (1974) p.6; Lauhakangas (2007) pp.219-220.

<sup>288</sup> Searle (1979) pp.3-5.

something is the case; I try to make my *words* fit the *world*.<sup>289</sup> Direction implies *desire* that it be the case; I try to make the *world* fit my *words*.<sup>290</sup>

Used as *assertive* speech acts, biblical proverbs do not give neutral ‘facts’, but charged evaluations.<sup>291</sup> They formulate the strongly held beliefs of the sages, giving words to the way the world truly is. They create a value system through their particular categories and patterns. Categories and patterns can disambiguate and ‘name’ situations, making them more manageable.<sup>292</sup> However disordered circumstances may seem, they fall into known types, and can be mastered. The new phenomenon is related to an existing system, the myriad experiences of life sorted into a comprehensible network. The process is iterative. A category or pattern is learnt and applied to a situation. The situation then nuances how the category is understood, ready for its reapplication. This emerging complex of categories and patterns contributes to the didactic development of a worldview.

Used directly, these same categories and patterns become incentives for action. Do you want to fall into this category, or bring about this unfolding pattern? I direct you to behave accordingly! The speaker expresses his strong desire that you order your world according to his words. Habituating yourself in such behaviour will develop your character over time (the sayings’ long-term didactic goal).

### *Evaluative and directive functions*

#### *[act – character] proverbs:*

The main categories offered in Prov 10:1-22:16 are character categories – wise and foolish, righteous and wicked (see ch.4). These often occur within the structure [act – character]: a particular act is classified as indicating a character type. These proverbs are especially effective in an evaluative function. After a hard day in the field, I return home and my neighbour David commends me: אִגֵּר בַּקֵּיץ בֶּן מְשָׁכִיל “He who gathers in summer is a prudent son” (Prov 10:5a). Because of my behaviour, David evaluates me as ‘prudent’. This is not a neutral observation, but draws in a pre-existing and highly-charged ethical system, structured around apparently absolute moral types.

<sup>289</sup> Searle (1979) pp.12-13.

<sup>290</sup> Searle (1979) pp.13-14.

<sup>291</sup> I will therefore speak about using proverbs ‘evaluatively’, rather than ‘assertively’.

<sup>292</sup> On disambiguation, see Lieber (1984). On ‘naming’ the situation, see Abrahams (1968) p.150; Lauhakangas (2007) p.220; D. Bland (1994) pp.91-94.

The charged language also makes these proverbs useful in a directive function. David may quote the same proverb the following morning, to encourage me into the field again – I'll be prudent if I go. In Proverbs, development of wisdom and character is a great end to be desired: "How much better to get wisdom than gold!" (Prov 16:16a). Personal formation is offered as its own reward; being 'prudent' should motivate in and of itself. This may not appeal to all students, however. Indeed, "a fool takes no pleasure in understanding" (Prov 18:2a), and the promise of prudence is unlikely to stir him. Perhaps recognising this, proverbs also offer more material motivations.<sup>293</sup>

*[act – consequence] proverbs:*

This is where the [act – consequence] structure comes in (see further ch.5). It gives a clear example of a pattern: a particular act leads to a particular outcome. ראש עֲשֶׂה כַּחֲרָמָה וְיָד חֲרוּצִים תַּעֲשִׂיר: "A lazy hand brings poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich!" (Prov 10:4), David continues when I look unconvinced by his motivation of 'prudence'. Used directive, these proverbs are forceful. The book does not shy away from offering material incentives – in this case, riches. Antithetical [act – consequence] proverbs have a doubled capacity, both alluring and alarming with polarised prospects of reward and punishment.<sup>294</sup> Accordingly, I hurry out into the field.

The consequences offered are often extreme. This makes them motivationally powerful, but problematic if deployed to evaluative situations, for this might turn into reasoning from event to cause. If you are poor, you must be lazy; if suffering, you must be wicked. This is the kind of retributive logic (mis)appropriated by Job's 'friends', and some scholars are keen to deny its validity in Proverbs.<sup>295</sup> As a genre, proverbs function through unqualified assertions, without offering counter-examples. Necessarily, they will only be true to certain situations and not to others. Only if a proverb is immediately plausible within the circumstances will its evaluative strategy succeed. Six months later, the crops have failed, and David evaluates the situation: "A lazy hand causes poverty". If I have ignored his previous advice and been idle, this proverb may find traction. It is an accurate classification of a pattern I have instigated. If, however, I have continued in my diligence, I may cast off the proverb as a misevaluation.

*[character – consequence] proverbs:*

<sup>293</sup> See Stewart (2016) pp.102-129 on the complexity of motivation and the 'moral self' in Proverbs.

<sup>294</sup> So Hildebrandt (1992).

<sup>295</sup> E.g. T. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (VTSup 90; Leiden: Brill, 2002) pp.39-40; "If the righteous accumulates wealth, is it equally true that the wealthy person is righteous? The answer to this question in Proverbs is no" (p.39).

The categories and patterns in proverbs, then, open them up to both evaluative and directive functions. The double-functionality is most evident in proverbs of a [character – consequence] structure. The character term gives a clear evaluative category, and the consequence offers powerful motivation. The following year, after an unexpected resurgence of my barley, David exclaims בְּרָכוֹת לְרֹאשׁ צַדִּיק “Blessings are on the head of the righteous!” (Prov 10:6a). He has evaluated me as righteous, and directed me through the promise of future blessings. Like folk proverbs, then, the didactic proverbs of the Bible are open to many different functions, of which two are paramount: evaluation and direction.



Conclusion to Part 1

This thesis explores the ‘openness’ of the ‘didactic proverb’. Part 1 has discussed what I mean by each of these terms, and has begun to fit them together. I argued (ch.1) that the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 are ‘didactic proverbs’. They invite a double strategy of interpretation and use: didactic and proverbial. This was argued on the basis of their generic relations (Didactic Instructions and folk proverbs); social settings (court and family); media (written and oral); self-presentation (חידות and משלים); sentential form (aphorism-like and proverb-like); and final form (whole collection and individual saying).

In ch.2, I distinguished three main types of literary openness occurring in the proverbs. Polysemy allows double meanings at the level of semantics and grammar. In parallelism, the synonymy or antithesis of the lines is sometimes unclear, and there may be an imbalance for the reader to fill out. Through imagery, the proverbs open up a world to explore, and to be blended imaginatively with the target domains in the proverb text and in the reader’s own life.

Ch.3 began to discuss how the openness of the sayings contributes to their didactic and proverb functions. Didactically, it helps to develop a broad and flexible worldview, forms the reader’s character and desires, and trains his intellect. In a proverb use, it allows application to many different situations for many different purposes. The contribution of openness, however, can only truly be seen when it is explored for oneself. To that end, Part 2 turns to the text of the proverbs.



## Part 2 – Exploring the Openness of Didactic Proverbs



In Part 2, I will explore the text of Prov 10:1-22:16 itself, interpreting the sayings as both didactic and proverbial, and giving particular attention to the way that openness contributes to these uses. I will focus on four important areas of Proverbs' scholarship, to see how reading this way might nuance our understanding. Ch.4 considers the role of character; ch.5, the 'act-consequence connection'; ch.6, the king; and ch.7, the acquisition of wisdom. Ch.4 looks at key terminology, and chs.5-7 examine individual proverb texts.

## Chapter 4 – The Openness of Character Categories in Didactic Proverbs

תן לחכם ויחכם עוד הודע לצדיק ויִסָּף לֵקַח:

*Give to the wise man and he will be wiser still; teach the righteous man, and he will increase in learning.*

(Prov 9:9)

### §1. Introduction

In almost every verse of Prov 10:1-22:16, a distinctive character or pair of characters greets us. Some of these characters occur only once – the violent עָרִיצִים (11:16); the humble צָנוּעִים (11:2); the mighty עֲצוּמִים (18:18) – but often the proverbs repeat the same key character types. Particularly in chs.10-15, they are presented in stark contrasts, giving the impression of a 'binary anthropology':<sup>296</sup> the wise against the foolish; the righteous against the wicked. This may partly stem from the generic conventions of didactic literature, with character types attested in Egyptian didactic texts too.<sup>297</sup> Proverbs, however, makes them central to its rhetoric in a way far beyond its Near Eastern parallels.

<sup>296</sup> S. M. Lyu, *Righteousness in the Book of Proverbs* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2.55; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) pp.34-37.

<sup>297</sup> Most prominent are the 'silent man' (*grw*) and the 'heated man' (*šmm*), who occur particularly often in Amenemope. The late demotic text Papyrus Insinger uses character types more extensively, including the wise man (*rḥ*) and the fool (*lḥ*, *swg*, *hn*); the man of god (*rmt nḥr*) and the wicked (*š3be*). O. Keel, "Eine Diskussion um die Bedeutung polarer Begriffspaare in den Lebenslehren," in *Studien zu Altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (eds. E. Hornung and O. Keel; Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 28; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979) pp.225-234; M. Lichtheim, "Observations on Papyrus Insinger," in *Studien zu Altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 28; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979) pp.283-306; Lichtheim (1996) pp.256-261; Lyu (2012) pp.97-114; Shupak (1993) esp. pp.259-261; N. Shupak, "Positive and Negative Human Types in the Egyptian Wisdom Literature," in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies in honour of Bustenay Oded* (eds. G. Galil, M. Geller and A. Millard; VTSup 130; Leiden: Brill, 2009) pp.245-260.

I will argue that these character categories are *open* in a number of ways, and that this openness contributes to how the sayings function as *didactic proverbs*. This is a significant claim, for many scholars see them as closed, abstract categories, without function in the real world.

### §1.1 Closed, abstract categories cut off from the world?

The apparently black-and-white depiction of character types – wise-foolish, righteous-wicked – has suggested to some scholars a loss of contact with reality. H. H. Schmid, for example, influentially argued that such binary presentation marked a hardening point in the developing wisdom tradition.<sup>298</sup> Older wisdom (fleetingly attested in Prov 25-27<sup>299</sup>) had been concerned with navigating the contingencies of life, and had accepted ambiguities of character. But by the time Proverbs was fully compiled, the world had been artificially systematised into two camps: the righteous/wise on one side; the wicked/foolish on the other. This amounted to a dogmatisation. Denying ambiguity, the new order was “statisch fixiert und fest gelegt” by its closed, abstract categorisations.<sup>300</sup> A ‘crisis of wisdom’ eventually ensued, epitomised in the cries of Job and Qohelet, for this dogma was not played out in real life.

Other scholars have proposed similar developmental schemas, but with an additional distinction: the wise-foolish proverbs as earlier than the righteous-wicked proverbs.<sup>301</sup> For C. Westermann, the former represent an early stage in the tradition, before the alleged dogmatisation, and they genuinely reflect life in a folk community.<sup>302</sup> But the latter are late artificial constructions.<sup>303</sup> They are schematically formulated into quadripartite structures, highlighting the stark opposition between the characters and between their respective fates. Far from the changing situations of life, “[a]nything concrete is altogether missing... the statements are purely general and theoretical”.<sup>304</sup> Similarly, for W. McKane, the humanistic wise-foolish rhetoric of ‘old wisdom’ was dogmatised by the pious moralism of the righteous-wicked sayings. These are later theological reinterpretations and display “a kind of Yahwistic piety which is condemned to emptiness because

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<sup>298</sup> Schmid (1966) pp.156-164.

<sup>299</sup> Schmid held this to be the oldest section in the book. Its sayings are the most ‘worldly’, and it does not show the developed theologisation and systematisation of other sections. Schmid (1966) pp.145-146, 165-166.

<sup>300</sup> And, as we will see in the next chapter, by its apparently rigid act-consequence connection. Schmid (1966) p.159.

<sup>301</sup> In addition to Westermann and McKane, see R. B. Y. Scott, “Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked,” in *Studies in Religion of Ancient Israel* (ed. G. W. Anderson et al.; VTSup 23; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972) pp.146-165.

<sup>302</sup> Westermann (1995) pp.50-57.

<sup>303</sup> Westermann (1995) pp.75-84.

<sup>304</sup> Westermann (1995) p.76.

it has disengaged itself from the realities of life”.<sup>305</sup> However, while the two sets of characters are indeed portrayed quite differently, I will suggest that neither is in fact disengaged from reality.

## §1.2 Character ethics in Proverbs

A more fruitful approach to the character terms might be to see them as contributions to a character-based didactic framework. The terms are not alien from lived experience, but are at the very heart of how the proverbs shape lives and behaviour. ‘Character ethics’ is a burgeoning area in moral philosophy and biblical studies.<sup>306</sup> W. Brown in particular has brought it to attention, calling it the “*raison d’être*” of the biblical wisdom literature.<sup>307</sup> And indeed, the book of Proverbs is increasingly being seen as rich ground for exploration.<sup>308</sup>

While character ethics encompasses a range of different philosophical, literary, and theological approaches,<sup>309</sup> it is most strongly associated with Greek philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle.<sup>310</sup> In its classical expression it is not directly transferable to Israel, but it can be a helpful heuristic framework. Character ethics is distinct from other ethical theories in its focus on character-building, rather than on duties and rules (deontology) or on outcomes (consequentialism). Decisions are thought to flow from stable moral dispositions; all ‘doing’ comes out of a prior ‘being’. Moral character is not manifested only in ethical dilemmas, but in every decision of daily life.<sup>311</sup> The human person is holistic, with moral disposition inextricable from

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<sup>305</sup> McKane (1970) p.16.

<sup>306</sup> Sometimes this is also called ‘virtue ethics’. In biblical studies, see, for example B. C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, ethics, and Christian life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991) esp. pp.31-33; W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A fresh approach to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996); Brown (2014); W. Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A paradigmatic approach* (Louisville Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)); J. E. Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?: The problem of the moral self in the book of Ezekiel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000); C. S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Old Testament Studies Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) pp.273-282; Stewart (2016). See also collections of essays in W. P. Brown, *Character and Scripture: Moral formation, community, and biblical interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002a) and M. D. Carroll R. and J. E. Lapsley, *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral dimensions of scripture* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). J. Barton is sceptical of finding character ethics in the HB. J. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and explorations* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) pp.65-74; J. Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: OUP, 2014) pp.157-184.

<sup>307</sup> Brown (1996) p.21.

<sup>308</sup> E.g. Brown (1996) pp.22-49; D. Bland, *Proverbs and the Formation of Character* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015); Lyu (2012) esp. pp.60-75; Stewart (2016).

<sup>309</sup> See Stewart (2016) pp.11-28.

<sup>310</sup> R. J. Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights from the ancient Greeks* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

<sup>311</sup> D. C. Russell, “Virtue Ethics in Modern Moral Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (ed. D. C. Russell; Cambridge: CUP, 2013) p.2.

emotions, desires, intellect, habits etc.<sup>312</sup> And disposition must be formed over time, until virtues become habitual.

Much of this is relevant to Proverbs. Despite the apparent simplicity of the character terms, the moral self that Proverbs imagines is far from simplistic.<sup>313</sup> Ideal characters are held up as paradigms for emulation,<sup>314</sup> to be embodied through the messy contingencies of life, in the hope that readers might become ‘wise’ and ‘righteous’ themselves.

### §1.3 Prototypes

Through its character terms, Proverbs aims to teach and form its students. To understand how, we should consider the way the categories are conceptualised. The terms are ‘general’, able to be specified in various ways (see ch.2 §1.1), and I further suggest that they have ‘prototype structure’. ‘Prototype theory’ is commonly used in cognitive linguistics to describe how we conceptualise categories.<sup>315</sup> It views them, not as bounded and closed, but as fundamentally *open* in a number of ways. Most important for our purposes are the following characteristics:<sup>316</sup>

- (a) Categories cannot be defined by *necessary and sufficient conditions* for membership.
- (b) Instead, they are conceptualised in terms of their *central members*.
- (c) Radiating outwards from the centre are many other members, which have ‘*graded centrality*’.
- (d) Towards the edges of the category, it may be unclear if an item is a member or not.

The category has *fuzzy borders*.

Here I will explain these features from a linguistic perspective, and in the next section I will show their relevance to didactic proverbs.

<sup>312</sup> Stewart (2016) pp.161-162; Lyu (2012) p.70.

<sup>313</sup> Stewart (2016) pp.6-8 and *passim*.

<sup>314</sup> So Ansberry (2011) e.g. p.77; Lyu (2012) pp.62-64. A ‘paradigmatic’ approach is most fully explored by Frydrych (2002) esp. pp.18-23.

<sup>315</sup> For a classic work on categorisation employing prototype theory, see G. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What categories reveal about the mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For more recent discussions, see Croft (2004) pp.77-92; Geeraerts (2009) pp.183-203; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2010).

<sup>316</sup> These features are recognised in most contemporary versions of prototype theory, though they may not all be valid for every category in a language (e.g. Geeraerts [2009] p.190).



*(a) Necessary and sufficient conditions for membership?*

According to a ‘classical’ theory of categorisation,<sup>317</sup> category membership is determined by necessary and sufficient criteria. A word or category can be broken down into its semantic components;<sup>318</sup> a *colt* for example is [equine] [male] [young].<sup>319</sup> Any creature fulfilling these criteria is a member of the category, but one falling short (e.g. a female horse) is excluded.

For many words, however, this ‘checklist’<sup>320</sup> theory breaks down. Wittgenstein famously pointed out the impossibility of finding necessary and sufficient conditions for the category ‘game’. “Don’t say: ‘There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” he berated his readers, “but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all”.<sup>321</sup> He concluded that there was not. Rather, certain features are shared between certain ‘games’, but not between others. This is somewhat analogous to a family, where some characteristics – build, temperament, facial features – may be shared by Grandad Bill and Uncle Charles, but not by Great Aunt Eloise. ‘Family resemblances’ characterise both human ancestry and semantic categories.<sup>322</sup> No single member must exhibit every feature, nor must a single feature be shared by every member. The category’s makeup is much more fluid and open.

*(b) Central members*

Following on from this, it was recognised that some items are cognitively ‘central’ to their categories. This approach was pioneered by E. Rosch, through her experimental work in cognitive psychology.<sup>323</sup> She began with the study of colour terms, noticing that colour categories “develop around perceptually salient ‘natural prototypes’”.<sup>324</sup> These prototypes are the best examples we can imagine of given colours – we might think of blood red instead of maroon; grass green instead of turquoise. In other categories too, we find better and worse examples, more and less prototypical members.<sup>325</sup> These insights developed into a ‘prototype theory’ of category structure.

<sup>317</sup> Such as was propounded by Aristotle in his treatise *Categoriae*. For Neoclassical Theories, see E. Margolis and S. Laurence, *Concepts: Core readings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999) pp.303-352.

<sup>318</sup> The approach developed within structural semantics, and is known as ‘componential analysis’. See discussion in Geeraerts (2009) pp.70-80 for an overview.

<sup>319</sup> Croft and Cruse (2004) p.76.

<sup>320</sup> So Fillmore’s caricature; C. J. Fillmore, “An Alternative to Checklist Theories of Meaning,” in *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (California: University of California, 1975) pp.123-131.

<sup>321</sup> Wittgenstein (1958) p.31.

<sup>322</sup> Wittgenstein (1958) p.32. The ‘family resemblance’ approach is used more widely than just in semantics. See e.g. ch.1 §1.

<sup>323</sup> E.g. E. Rosch, “Natural Categories,” *Cognitive Psychology* 4 (1973) pp.328-250; E. Rosch, “Cognitive Reference Points,” *Cognitive Psychology* 7 (1975a) pp.532-547; E. Rosch, “Cognitive Representations of Semantic Categories,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 104.3 (1975b) pp.192-233. For an overview of Rosch’s work, see Lakoff (1987) pp.39-55.

<sup>324</sup> Rosch (1973) p.328. Rosch was building on the earlier studies of colour: B. Berlin and P. Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their universality and evolution* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1969).

<sup>325</sup> E.g. Rosch (1975b) examined the categories of furniture, vehicles, fruit, weapons, vegetables, and clothing.

According to this theory, categories gather around central, ‘prototypical’ cases. Often, the central cases are representative of the category.<sup>326</sup> They share features in common with other items inside the category, and are distinctive from items outside. Sometimes, however, central cases are stereotypes. These develop socially, and (though unrealistic) become cognitively pertinent to members of that community.<sup>327</sup> Sometimes, prototypes are ideals, presenting society’s view of what *should be* the case. G. Lakoff suggests that ideal members are “of great importance in culturally significant categories”, shaping the way that judgements and plans are made.<sup>328</sup> It is in this sense that I suggest prototypes are at work in the proverbs: they present idealised examples of righteous and wise men.

(c) ‘Graded centrality’

The recognition of central cases has implications for category structure, which must be open to degrees. Members do not have equal status, but ‘graded centrality’; some are better examples than others.<sup>329</sup> The precise grades might vary from speaker to speaker, but there is consistency of overall conceptualisation within speech communities. Which is a better example of a ‘fruit’,<sup>330</sup> an apple or a date? Western speakers generally pick the apple.<sup>331</sup> From the centre, radiating outwards, are all the other fruits – the bananas, oranges, and melons. At the periphery fall the obscure cases – the tomatoes, avocados, and dates. Accordingly, categories are not all or nothing. Items do not have to be central to be considered members. Individuals do not have to be ideal cases to be counted as ‘righteous’ or ‘wise’.

(d) ‘Fuzzy borders’

Finally, graded centrality raises the question of how far you have to move from the centre before you are outside the category’s bounds. Is an olive, for example, still a ‘fruit’?<sup>332</sup> The borderline seems somewhat ‘fuzzy’. The scholarly discussion of ‘fuzziness’ began in mathematics with L. Zadeh’s ‘fuzzy set’ theory.<sup>333</sup> In classical set theory, an item’s ‘membership function’ takes a numerical value of 0 (not a member of the set) or 1 (a member). Zadeh suggested that membership

<sup>326</sup> E. Rosch, “Principles of Categorization,” in *Cognition and Categorization* (eds. E. Rosch and B. B. Lloyd; Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978) p.30.

<sup>327</sup> E.g. Lakoff (1987) pp.79-80 discusses the ‘housewife’ stereotype as central to the ‘mother’ category.

<sup>328</sup> Lakoff (1987) p.87.

<sup>329</sup> This has been thoroughly demonstrated through experimental work. Croft and Cruse (2004) pp.78-79; Rosch (1978) pp.38-40.

<sup>330</sup> The ‘fruit’ category was important in Rosch’s seminal work. E.g. Rosch (1975b).

<sup>331</sup> Demonstrating the cultural specificity of this, Jordanian speakers tend to pick the date. Croft and Cruse (2004) p.78.

<sup>332</sup> This example is discussed by Geeraerts (2009) pp.189-190.

<sup>333</sup> L. A. Zadeh, “Fuzzy Sets,” *Information and Control* 8 (1965) pp.338-353.

functions between 0 and 1 can exist. That is, some items are ‘not quite a member’ of the set, and ‘not quite not-a-member’ either. The set has ‘fuzzy borders’.

Zadeh’s theory was quickly applied to semantics, incorporated into prototype theory,<sup>334</sup> and verified by empirical research:<sup>335</sup> a category in language too may have ‘fuzzy borders’, open boundaries. Without necessary and sufficient conditions for membership, there is no clear dividing line between items inside and outside. For some items, for some of the potential ‘righteous’ or ‘wise’, the question of category membership may remain unresolved.

## §2. The wise and the foolish

The character categories in Proverbs can be usefully viewed through the lens of prototype theory. Let me begin with ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’. Proverbs employs these categories in a distinctive way. Some scholars suggest that in Proverbs the ‘wise man’ (חָכָם) is a technical designation for a professional ‘sage’ (comparable to the professional ‘priest’ and ‘prophet’; cf. Jer 18:18).<sup>336</sup> But the strong focus on disposition and the contrast with the fool suggest something more here: wisdom as a quality of character. Elsewhere in the HB, being ‘wise’ can be a down-to-earth skill – perhaps technical expertise (e.g. Exod 28:3), or even shrewd cunning (2 Sam 13:3) – but Proverbs elevates and aggrandises the notion into its own idealised portrait.<sup>337</sup>

I suggest that the categories ‘wise man’ and ‘fool’ have open prototype structures, exhibiting the four features delineated above. What’s more, each feature has implications for the functions of didactic proverbs. To pre-empt my conclusions, I will suggest:

<i>Feature of prototype structure</i>	<i>Implications for didactic proverb use</i>
Conceptualised around central cases	Motivational potential of ideals
Lack of necessary and sufficient conditions	Creation of a broad evaluative framework
Graded centrality	Character development
Fuzzy borders	Making wise the foolish

<sup>334</sup> See J. D. McCawley, *Everything that Linguistics Have Always Wanted to Know about Logic but Were Ashamed to Ask* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) pp.360-394 for the application of ‘fuzzy logic’ to natural language.

<sup>335</sup> E.g. C. B. Mervis and E. Rosch, “Categorization of Natural Objects,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 32 (1981) pp.100-102.

<sup>336</sup> E.g. W. McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (Studies in Biblical Theology 44; London: SCM Press, 1965).

<sup>337</sup> See M. V. Fox, “What the Book of Proverbs is About,” in *Congress Volume: The fifteenth congress of the international study of the Old Testament: Cambridge 1995* (ed. J. A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1997a) for a survey of how ‘wisdom’ is presented differently in Proverbs from elsewhere in the HB (and ANE literature). The question ‘what is wisdom?’ has provoked much scholarly debate which cannot be engaged here. Discussion is restricted to the category ‘wise man’ in Prov 10:1-22:16.

## §2.1 Central cases, and ideals

According to prototype theory, categories are conceptualised in terms of their central members. I suggest that each proverb presents one such central case, offering an ideal example of a character. Their cumulative effect is to sketch the category's centre, a portrait of the prototypical wise man or fool. The former is most commonly labelled the חכם, and the latter the אָוִיל/בְּסִיל, though various largely synonymous terms are used.<sup>338</sup>

These characters are depicted with certain qualities, mainly related to their attitude towards wisdom, their use of speech, and their morality. The wise seek and attain the wisdom inaccessible to fools (14:6; 15:12; 17:24; 18:15). They treasure up or disseminate this wisdom, while fools spread folly (10:13,14; 12:23; 13:16; 14:7,33; 15:2,7). They find wisdom a delight, but “folly is joy to the senseless” (15:21; cf. 10:23; 18:2). The wise recognise their limitations (11:2); they listen to the advice which fools spurn (10:8; 12:15; 13:1,10; 15:5,12), and such discipline increases their knowledge (15:31; 17:10; 19:25; 21:11). In speech, the wise benefit themselves and others, while fools bring harm (10:10,18; 12:18; 13:14; 14:3; 18:6,7). Aware of its power, the wise man knows to restrain his speech (11:12; 17:27; 18:13 [but cf. 17:28!]). In the moral sphere, the wise man pays careful attention to his way (14:8,15; 15:21). By contrast, the fool acts wickedly (10:23; 13:19), and is imprudent, hot-tempered, and quarrelsome (12:16; 14:16,17,29; 19:3; 20:3).

By these characterisations, the proverbs offer students something to emulate in their own lives. Some of these behaviours are quite attainable by the novice: listening to advice takes nothing more than a humble disposition. Others are for the more advanced and aspirational: disseminating true wisdom is the prerogative of the few.

I suggest that ideal characters are here used for their motivational potential. Elsewhere, wisdom's desirability is made explicit. In chs.1-9, wisdom is personified as a woman to adore and revere. She is “more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (3:15, cf. 2:4; 8:10-11,18-19; 16:16; 20:15; 25:12).<sup>339</sup> Here, the strategy is more subtle. The prototypical wise man is described again and again. This repetitive insistence drums the readers' desires into sapiential shape; wisdom comes to provide motivation in and of itself. Accordingly, these proverbs can function well directly (see ch.3 §2.2). Why should I listen to advice? Because then you will be *wise*.

<sup>338</sup> See Fox (2000) pp.28-43. Prominent terms for ‘wise man’ are ‘the discerning/understanding’ נָבוֹן/מְבִין/אִישׁ תְּבוּנָה, ‘the shrewd’ עָרוּם, and ‘the prudent’ מְשֻׁכֵּל. Other terms akin to ‘fool’ are ‘the simple’ פְּתִי, ‘the senseless’ חֲסֵר-לֵב, ‘the boar’ בָּעַר, and ‘the idiot’ נָבֵל. See further §2.3 below.

<sup>339</sup> On this common trope of ‘wisdom as precious commodity’, see Sandoval (2006) pp.117-141.

## §2.2 Scarcity of definitional features, and evaluation

According to prototype theory, categories cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient features. Similarly, in the proverbs, certain characteristics are made central, but no full definition is offered. This is part of the reason why the terms are sometimes seen as abstract and empty. However, perhaps readers are being encouraged to fill out the categories for themselves. As J. Hausmann put it, “[d]urch die fehlende Konkretisierung ergibt sich eine große Offenheit der inhaltlichen Füllung”.<sup>340</sup> Readers are given a snapshot of the category’s centre, and are goaded to sketch in the larger picture. They might employ various strategies to this end:

*Using the prototypes themselves.* The prototypical examples provide the seedbed for the full category in all its verdancy. Based on logic and experience, the readers can extrapolate from central cases: the wise man takes advice (10:8; 12:15; 15:5), so he may also be humble, submissive, and self-aware. Readers can draw resemblances:<sup>341</sup> in the proverbs, one who scorns the guilt offering is a fool (14:9); in life, one who shuns pilgrimage is probably a fool too. Readers can specify the meaning of general language, pinpointing a specific ‘evil’ from which the wise turn (14:16), and making concrete the advice to ‘give thought to a word’ (16:20). And they can imaginatively elaborate scenarios: when the wise tongue ‘heals’ (12:18), what joys of vitality may lie in store?

*Using the wider literature.* Furthermore, when Proverbs is used didactically, each saying may be taken, not individually, but as part of the larger literary work (see ch.1 §6). Accordingly, chapters 1-9 set the broad contours for understanding the ‘wise man’ and the ‘fool’.<sup>342</sup> From wisdom’s self-praise in ch.8, for example, we learn that wisdom is noble, right, true, straight, and precious (vv.6-11), entailing fear of the Lord, (v.13), demanding righteousness and justice (vv.15-16,20). A dominant binary is established in these chapters – two ways, two women, two houses.<sup>343</sup> Much of chs.10-29 is structured through antithetical parallelisms, which reaffirm this division. All the positive characteristics implicitly cohabit with wisdom; all are embodied in the same individual, and can flesh out what it truly means to be ‘wise’.

*Using real world experience.* The categories ‘wise man’ and ‘fool’ can be contextualised not just by the literature, but by the real world. They can be moulded through proverb use. Whenever a proverb about a wise man is spoken successfully, that situation goes to nuance the hearer’s understanding of wisdom. In application, the sayings are connected to real people and experiences.

<sup>340</sup> Hausmann (1995) p.95. The openness of character terms forms an important part of Hausmann’s discussion.

<sup>341</sup> Judging by resemblance to a prototype is a type of ‘reference point reasoning’. The reference point serves as a helpful point of comparison, and a cognitive anchor for the classification system. Rosch (1975*a*); E. Tribushinina, *Cognitive Reference Points: Semantics beyond the prototypes in adjectives of space and colour* (Utrecht: LOT, 2008).

<sup>342</sup> Ansberry (2011) pp.75-76; Brown (1996) p.45.

<sup>343</sup> Habel (1972) in particular has drawn attention to this duality.

These individuals could draw on their personal experiences to flesh out the categories: what, in my life, has proved wise or foolish? Whom do I know to be a wise man or a fool? Such an individual could become a real life central case,<sup>344</sup> his behaviour observed and emulated (though the inevitable flaws in human character make this complex in practice; see ch.6). Furthermore, value systems are often socially construed.<sup>345</sup> Social consensus may have determined what ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’ meant for readers, removing the need for further explanation. The proverbs could then speak the norms of their culture, with an authoritative, traditional voice.

The process of fleshing out the categories – through prototypes, literature, or experience – offers intellectual training. Necessary and sufficient characteristics are not handed to the students, and the openness itself becomes a pedagogical strategy. Interpretation is the students’ freedom and responsibility.<sup>346</sup> They must discern, imagine, and observe what is truly ‘wise’, and through the process become wise themselves.

The categories, having been fleshed out by the situations of life, are then easily reapplied to such situations. Circumstances may seem ambiguous, but the categories provide guidance on what to look for, and a system for overall appraisal. They serve as a broad evaluative framework to make sense of the world and its inhabitants.<sup>347</sup> When a proverb is spoken, it fits a particular instance into the framework. The highly-charged valuations define what is good or bad; what is to be desired or reviled, and the proverb accordingly offers praise or condemnation. The straightforward framework requires little decipherment, and can gain immediate traction with the hearer. Its familiarity suggests the stability of ancient wisdom.

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<sup>344</sup> Such individuals can become paragons. Commenting on paragons as cognitively central to categories, Lakoff suggests that “[a] great many of our actions have to do with paragons. We try to emulate them... as models to base our actions on”; Lakoff (1987) p.88.

<sup>345</sup> See J. Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral education in an age without good or evil* (NY: Basic Books, 2000) pp.15-27; Rodd (2001) pp.49-51. An example of a socially construed ethical norm might be the father’s revulsion at Lady Folly’s sexual ethic (Prov 7). In a modern libertarian society, her acts might be seen positively, as empowering women and celebrating the fact of sexuality. Bartholomew and O’Dowd (2011) p.279.

<sup>346</sup> H. Delkurt, *Ethische Einsichten in der Alttestamentlichen Spruchweisheit* (Biblich-Theol Studien 21; Neukirschen-Vluyn: Neukirschen Verlag, 1993) p.145; Hausmann (1995) pp.349-351.

<sup>347</sup> Hausmann (1995) p.102.

### §2.3 Graded centrality, and character development

The third distinctive feature of prototype theory is ‘graded centrality’: some members are better examples of a category than others. Within the category of ‘the wise’, different individuals (or the same individual at different times) may display different degrees of wisdom. This makes character development possible. The student can position himself in the category, and then move ‘inwards’ through the graded centrality, conforming his behaviour more and more to the prototypical wise man.

Such personal development is essential to character ethics. Moral dispositions are not innate or instantly acquired, but must be diligently formed throughout life, so that virtues become ingrained.<sup>348</sup> J. Barton has argued that character development is alien to the HB. ‘Conversion’ may be possible (wholesale shifts from one category to another), but “everyone is either good or bad, wise or foolish, and there is little idea of moral progress”.<sup>349</sup> According to Barton, character is “fixed and unchanging”.<sup>350</sup> However, this view rids Proverbs of its overall didactic function (to form wise men and women),<sup>351</sup> and it does not take account of graded centrality.

In Proverbs, the wise man can “become wiser still” (יִחְכַּם-עוֹד; Prov 9:9): he is already a member of the category, and can still progress closer to its centre. However, the progression is asymptotic. No-one is ever completely wise, and the centre remains just out of reach.<sup>352</sup> This keeps even the wisest of men ever striving, their faces ever set to wisdom (17:24a; cf. 15:14a; 18:15). They are not perfect, but err and are rebuked (17:10). When this happens, they characteristically welcome advice (10:8; 12:15; 13:1; 15:5), and learn from it (9:9; 19:25; 21:11).

All the terms used in Proverbs to describe the wise man seem to imply a similar level of wisdom. In distinction, gradation may be seen in the terms used to describe the fool. According to M. Fox’s analysis, the hardened fools are the ‘knave’ אָוִיל and the ‘scornful’ לֵץ; then the intermediary ‘oaf’ פֶּסִיל. More peripheral are the mindless ones – the ‘ignoramus’ בֶּעֶר and the ‘senseless’ חֲסֵר-לֵב – and least culpable of all, the ‘naïf’ פֶּתִי.<sup>353</sup> The open, graded structure of the categories allows the student to progress through the stages – towards wisdom to their good, or towards folly to their harm.

<sup>348</sup> M. V. Fox, “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2,” *JBL* 113.2 (1994) pp.233-243.

<sup>349</sup> Barton (2014) p.159; cf. Barton (2003) p.67.

<sup>350</sup> Barton (2014) p.160.

<sup>351</sup> Barton does acknowledge this, but in my view does not give it sufficient weight. Barton (2014) p.162.

<sup>352</sup> See ch.7 §3 for a fuller discussion of the limits of man’s wisdom.

<sup>353</sup> Fox (2000) pp.28-43. T. Donald, “The Semantic Field of ‘Folly’ in Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes,” *V/T* 13.3 (1963) pp.285-292 gives a slightly different gradation: (least culpable) פֶּתִי, בֶּעֶר, אָוִיל, פֶּסִיל, לֵץ, נָבֵל (most culpable). Donald takes his evidence from Proverbs alone, while Fox uses the whole biblical corpus. Shupak (1993) p.198 proposes a similar scale for Egyptian ‘folly’ language.

## §2.4 Fuzzy borders, and making wise the foolish

The final significant feature in prototype theory is the possibility of ‘fuzzy borders’: sometimes it is unclear whether an individual belongs in the category or not. In the real world, not everyone is a prototypical case. Ambiguity is to be expected at the borderlines.

Such ambiguity raises the question of whether it is possible to ‘cross the border’: can a fool become wise?<sup>354</sup> Hardened characters, like the **לץ** and **אִיל** seem so far sucked into the centre of folly’s vortex that escape is impossible. Only in vain does the scoffer (**לץ**) seek wisdom (14:6). Neither he nor the ‘knave’ (**אִיל**) will improve by instruction (13:1; 15:5; 15:12), or even by corporeal discipline (27:22). Trying to educate them will ultimately harm the teacher (9:7-8). However, for those on the edges, the vortex’s power wanes, and they may yet evade it. Thus, Lady Wisdom calls out to fools as well as to the wise (1:22; 8:5; 9:4), and Prov 1:2-6 programmatically declares its intention “to give prudence to the simpleton” (**פְּתִי**; v.4). This simpleton is the prime target for Ladies Wisdom and Folly, for he is naïve and still formable.<sup>355</sup> Both women implore him to turn aside to their own abode (9:4,16). The implied addressee is in a state of liminality,<sup>356</sup> on the threshold between youth and adulthood, folly and wisdom. The hope is offered that he might step over the border. This can provide great encouragement for naïve youths seeking improvement, and for their anxious instructors. Conversely, fuzzy borders warn the wise against complacency, for remaining so is not guaranteed. All must continually press after wisdom.

## Conclusion

Viewing the prototype structure of the categories ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’, then, can cast light on their usefulness in didactic proverbs. According to prototype theory, categories are conceptualised by *central cases*; these motivate students and provide ideals to aim for. Categories cannot be defined by *necessary and sufficient criteria*, which allows students to flesh them out for themselves, and to construct a broad evaluative framework for making sense of life. They have *graded centrality*, making character development possible, and *fuzzy borders*, meaning fools may become wise. The character

<sup>354</sup> M. V. Fox, “Who Can Learn? A dispute in ancient pedagogy,” in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the occasion of his eightieth birthday* (ed. M. L. Barré; CBQMS 29; Washington D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1997b) pp.62-77 discusses this as a prevalent dispute in ancient pedagogy, in both Egypt and Israel. Cf. Lichtheim (1997) pp.13-18, 46.

<sup>355</sup> Stewart (2016) pp.41-42.

<sup>356</sup> Brown (2002c); L. G. Perdue, “Liminality as a Social Setting for Wisdom Instructions,” *ZAW* 93 (1981) pp.114-126.



categories are not closed and abstract, nor cut off from the world, but are open, and profoundly useful for life.

### §3. The righteous and the wicked

But what of the categories ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’? These are presented somewhat differently from their ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’ counterparts. Some scholars have found them to be “condemned to emptiness” by this distinctive presentation (see §1.1 above).<sup>357</sup> Indeed, the presentation may seem at first to cast doubt on their prototype structure and their usefulness. This is because:

1. The *central cases* are described in terms of unrealistic consequences that come to the characters, making them seem implausible.
2. Such presentation by consequences offer *no* characteristics, let alone *necessary and sufficient* ones to flesh out the categories.
3. There is little suggestion of *gradation* or *fuzzy borders* which would allow one to improve in righteousness.

I suggest, however, that despite the difference in presentation, the categories of ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’ still have a prototype structure, and are just as useful as their wise/foolish counterparts. The divergence stems from the different pedagogical techniques employed.

#### §3.1 Problem 1: Central cases, and unrealistic consequences

In general, while Proverbs presents the ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’ in terms of what they do, the ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’ are depicted through the consequences that come to them.<sup>358</sup> These are often extreme and exaggerated, rarely seeming to accord with reality, and the proverbs may thus appear to be cut off from the world. The righteous receive life (e.g. 10:16,25; 11:19), deliverance (10:2; 11:4,6,8,9,21) and blessing (10:6; 11:18,28). All they desire will be granted (10:24; 11:23; 13:25), and they will have fullness of joy (10:28; 13:9; 21:15). The wicked, however, face death (10:25,27; 11:19), danger

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<sup>357</sup> McKane (1970) p.16.

<sup>358</sup> This apparent character-consequence connection is considered in detail in ch.5.

(10:2,24; 11:5,6,8) and hardship (10:3,30; 11:18). This scenario – as attested Job, Qohelet, and our own experiences – is not always reflected in life.

However, prototype theory can make some sense of this. As we have seen, the proverbs do not claim to give a full delineation of categories, nor even a representative sample of members, but rather, they give ideals. They present what should be the case, not what necessarily is. In prototype theory, not only may the prototypes themselves be ideals (see §2.1), but categories may presuppose *idealised cognitive models* (ICMs).<sup>359</sup> An ICM is a simplified, idealised world. Within this imagined world, the prototype is accurate, but within the real world, it may not be.

For example, consider the category ‘bachelor’.<sup>360</sup> The definition ‘a bachelor is an unmarried man’ (Merriam Webster) has immediate plausibility to the English speaker. Our central prototype of the category is defined in this way. But what about ‘unmarried men’ who engage in long-term relationships, civil partnerships, religious celibacy, or ‘Tarzan’ lifestyles – are they ‘bachelors’?<sup>361</sup> Only peripherally so. The prototypical definition of the category (‘a bachelor is an unmarried man’) seems to imagine a world where such situations do not exist, a simplified model reality without the complexities of real life. Applying the category to the real world, then, there are many ‘unmarried men’ who do not fit, and who are only peripherally ‘bachelors’.

Idealised worlds like this are presupposed in many categories – not only linguistic categories (like ‘bachelor’), but categories of moral principles (like the ‘righteousness-prosperity’ axiom).<sup>362</sup> The central, prototypical principle is ‘the righteous prosper’. But this presupposes an idealised world with an absolute moral order and intrinsic reward nexus. This does not correspond fully with the ‘real world’, and therefore lived experience may cohere to a greater or lesser degree with the prototype.

Proverbs is probably not trying to reflect reality through this idealised world. Indeed, the book is not naïve to peripheral cases, and does occasionally present them.<sup>363</sup> But it focuses on central ideals for their pedagogic and motivational potential. The proverbs intend to incentivise their students – to immediate action (in a ‘proverb’ use), or to reflection and character development (used ‘didactically’). We saw above (§2.1) how Proverbs uses wisdom itself as a motivation – becoming ‘wise’ is an end in itself. The book recognises, however, that not all students are stirred

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<sup>359</sup> Lakoff (1987) pp.68-76.

<sup>360</sup> This term has provoked much discussion within linguistics. For a classic explanation of the term from a structural linguistic perspective, see J. J. Katz and J. A. Fodor, “The Structure of a Semantic Theory,” *Language* 39.2 (1963) pp.185-190. Further analysed from a cognitive linguistic perspective by C. J. Fillmore, “Towards a Descriptive Framework for Spatial Deixis,” in *Speech, Place, and Action* (eds. R. J. Jarvella and W. Klein; London: John Wiley, 1982) p.34, and employing ICMs, Lakoff (1987) pp.69-71.

<sup>361</sup> Lakoff (1987) pp.70-71.

<sup>362</sup> Johnson (1994) pp.78-107. Applied to Proverbs by Stewart (2016) pp.173-181.

<sup>363</sup> See Stewart (2016) pp.179-180.

by such noble goals. It allows for the reality of worldly self-interest, and also offers material rewards. A. Stewart has suggested four major motivational paradigms in Proverbs, giving strong incentives for action. Righteousness leads to: wealth, honour, protection, and fundamentally, life.<sup>364</sup> These idealised consequences may seem to abstract the proverbs from the world. But paradoxically, they also root them in the world, for they ensure that the student will actualise their advice.

### §3.2 Problem 2: Apparent absence of definitional features

The presentation by consequences raises a further problem: the proverbs offer few characteristics by which to flesh out the categories (let alone necessary and sufficient ones). How can they then function to evaluate people's behaviour?

It should first be noted that some proverbs *do* present the behaviour of the righteous and wicked.<sup>365</sup> The righteous man's speech is beneficial, while the wicked man's is harmful (10:6,11,20,21,32; 11:9,11; 12:5,6,26; 13:5; 15:28). The righteous man knows his beast (12:10), walks with integrity (20:7), and is generous (21:26). The wicked man covets evildoers (12:12), accepts bribes (17:23), and shows no mercy (21:10).

Furthermore, irrespective of their use in Proverbs, these terms have a meaning in the Hebrew language and literature.<sup>366</sup> the reader already knows something of what they entail. In the HB, the צדק root is often employed in a legal context. צדקה 'righteousness' often occurs together with משפט 'justice', to depict a judicial rule of absolute equity, administered by God or the king.<sup>367</sup> The adjective צדיק 'righteous' can mean 'innocent,' 'vindicated' regarding a specific legal offence.<sup>368</sup> It may also refer, however, to more holistic moral character. Ps 112 paints a portrait of the righteous man (צדק occurring in vv.3,4,6,9). Not only does he conduct his affairs with justice (v.5), but he has a proper relationship with Yahweh, trusting and fearing him, and delighting in his commandments (vv.1,7; cf. Ps 18:21-25[20-24]). What's more, he is gracious and merciful (v.4; cf.

<sup>364</sup> Stewart (2016) pp.107-114.

<sup>365</sup> See Lyu (2012) pp.45-59 for a discussion of distinctive characteristics of the 'righteous' in Proverbs.

<sup>366</sup> There have been extensive debates about the 'theory of righteousness' in the HB (see Lyu [2012] pp.15-32). The most pervasive ideas are that righteousness entails conformity to a (legal, ethical, religious) norm, or correctness in relationship (with God or other people). Within Proverbs' scholarship H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung: Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffes* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 40; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968) influentially argued that 'righteousness' is 'world order'.

<sup>367</sup> E.g. 2 Sam 8:15≈1 Chr 18:14; 1 Kgs 10:9≈2 Chr 9:8; Isa 5:16, 9:6[5], 28:17, 33:5; Jer 9:23[22], 22:3,15, 23:5; Pss 33:5, 72:1, 99:4, 103:6. See discussion in ch.6 on the judicial role of the king.

<sup>368</sup> E.g. Exod 23:7-8; Deut 25:1; 1 Kgs 8:32; Isa 5:23.

Ps 116:5), and abundant in generosity (vv.5,9; cf. Ps 37:21,26). צַדִּיק co-occurs frequently with other moral character terms, like תָּם (blameless, e.g. Gen 6:9); יָשָׁר (upright, e.g. Ps 33:1); טוֹב (good, e.g. 1 Kgs 2:32). Though understandings from other books are not automatically transferable to Proverbs, these connotations may come to mind when the term is employed.

In addition, some of the strategies that I suggested above for fleshing out ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’ are equally as applicable here. *Real world experience*: Like ‘wisdom’, ‘righteousness’ may be defined socially. As C. Rodd put it, “righteousness in the first place is conformity to the prevailing norms of society”.<sup>369</sup> The student is already embedded in this society, and knows its norms. She knows who is esteemed as ‘righteous’, and can observe and emulate them accordingly.

*Wider literary context*: As used in Proverbs, ‘righteousness’ seems to encompass the whole of moral character.<sup>370</sup> Any and every positive characteristic described in the book is embodied in the righteous man. We have already seen something similar in the ‘wise man’, and indeed these two characters are particularly closely related.<sup>371</sup> While the terms do not have the same precise meaning, they might be seen as ‘co-referential’,<sup>372</sup> referring to the same individual. He that is righteous is necessarily also ‘wise’, with all that this entails. This inextricability of morality and intellect is central in character ethics,<sup>373</sup> and is particularly evident in Prov 1-9. According to the preamble (1:2-7), the instructions will increase both the students’ wisdom, and their “righteousness, justice, and equity” (1:3, cf. 2:9-10). Accordingly, Lady Wisdom presents herself as the epitome of righteousness (8:6-9; 15-18; 20-21).

In the sentence literature, an explicit connection is made only rarely (e.g. 10:21,31; 11:9,30; 14:9; 19:1; 22:12). But the dominant binary rhetoric puts righteousness and wisdom together on one side, and wickedness and folly on the other. If the student knows what the ‘wise man’ looks like (see §2.2), she can use this portrait to flesh out the ‘righteous’. Through these strategies, the

<sup>369</sup> Rodd (2001) p.49.

<sup>370</sup> Lyu describes it as a ‘meta-virtue’: “the all-encompassing quality of human or divine character *in toto* above and beyond specific behaviours” Lyu (2012) p.134.

<sup>371</sup> Some suggest that the terms should be equated in the Proverbs. Barton (2014) p.158 suggests “a complete correspondence” between them; Skladny (1962) p.11 calls them ‘synonyms’ in chs.10-15; according to Fox (2009) p.931, by the time the prologue was written, wisdom was “almost identical with righteousness”. The close connection of also occurs in the Demotic text Papyrus Insinger. Lichtheim (1979); Shupak (1993) pp.258-261.

<sup>372</sup> Heim (2001) pp.77-103. See also above, ch.1 §1.6. Heim’s terminology has been followed by several scholars, e.g. Ansberry (2011) e.g. pp.77,84; Fox (2009) p.928; Lyu (2012) p.135.

<sup>373</sup> See R. Kamtekar, “Ancient Virtue Ethics: An overview with an emphasis on practical wisdom,” in *Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (ed. D. C. Russell; Cambridge: CUP, 2013) pp.29-48 for the relationship between virtue and wisdom in ancient virtue ethics. Fox (2009) pp.934-945 discusses their relationship in Proverbs from a Socratic perspective. Ansberry applies an Aristotelian model. C. B. Ansberry, “What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Athens? The moral vision of the book of Proverbs and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*” *Hebrew Studies* 51 (2010) pp.157-173.

student can construct a broad and meaningful evaluative framework from these apparently ill-defined terms.

### §3.3 Problem 3: Apparent lack of graded centrality or fuzzy borders

The third problem is the apparent lack of gradation or fuzzy borders in these categories. In contrast to the proverbs about the ‘wise’, no sayings suggest that one can become righteous, or even improve in righteousness. It seems all-or-nothing. However, graded centrality may in fact be assumed. Cognitive research suggests that this is how most categories are conceptualised, even if they at first seem absolute.<sup>374</sup> And indeed, in the HB (and in lived experience) someone may be ‘more righteous than’ (צַדִּיק מֵ) another (Gen 38:26; 1 Sam 24:18[17]; 1 Kgs 2:32; Jer 3:11; Hab 1:13). The whole purpose of the book is that students might acquire (לִקְחֹ) righteousness (1:3),<sup>375</sup> and it encourages them to pursue it (רָדִף; 15:9). I suggest that this didactic intention overrides the impression of absolutism.

But if it is possible to increase in righteousness, why do the proverbs avoid mentioning it? First, it may be a pedagogical simplification, so that the novice is not confused with grey areas and marginal cases.<sup>376</sup> She can put people into two crude boxes as a starting point for categorising the world. Over time she may realise the ambiguities and gradations in human character. Second, the rhetoric of these proverbs deals in absolutes and ideals. Idealised consequences are offered to those who are wholly righteous, not to any borderline cases. Motivationally, this is powerful. You should not strive after half-measures, nor be satisfied if you are ‘quite righteous’. You must press right in to the centre of the category.

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<sup>374</sup> For example, ‘dead’ and ‘alive’ at first seem to be all-or-nothing, non-graded terms. But I may easily describe someone as ‘more alive’ than another, extending the conceptualisation to include vitality, joy and health. It is clear what constitutes an ‘odd number’, but research shows that even this category has a graded structure. Croft and Cruse (2004) pp.79,88.

<sup>375</sup> This reference to “righteousness, justice, and equity” is structurally and rhetorically central to the book’s preamble, perhaps giving its highest purpose. Brown (1996) pp.23-30.

<sup>376</sup> So Ansberry (2011); Frydrych (2002).

## Conclusion

The categories ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’ (like ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’) are open, and didactically useful. Three objections might be made to this, but none is unanswerable. First, does the presentation by consequences cut the proverbs off from the real world? I suggest that the proverbs present conscious idealisations, and expect marginality to arise. They do so to offer motivation. Second, do the consequences mean that the categories lack a definition? No; rather, several strategies are available to flesh them out and use them as an evaluative framework. Third, is righteousness all-or-nothing? The absolutist depiction is probably a rhetorical technique, paradoxically intended to help the student increase in righteousness.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the openness of the important character terms ‘wise’, ‘foolish’, ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’. Some scholars see these as closed, abstract categories, disconnected from the world. I have argued just the opposite: they are open, and profoundly relevant and useful for real world application.

I have suggested that these categories be considered in terms of ‘prototype theory’. This is helpful because: it gives a persuasive description of how categories are conceptualised; it fits in well with Proverbs’ presentation through ideal cases; it illuminates certain aspects of proverb function. ‘Prototype structure’ is ‘open’ in a number of ways. It is built around *central cases*, rather than *necessary and sufficient conditions*, allowing flexibility and openness in category content. It has *graded centrality*, open to degrees of membership, and may even have open *fuzzy borders*.

Each of these features has implications for didactic proverb use. In Part 1, I suggested that the proverbs have three main didactic goals: character development; intellectual training; instilling a worldview. *Character development* is forefronted by Proverbs’ use of character terms. It is made possible by graded centrality, and the ideal central cases show the student what to aim for. Fuzzy borders mean that even the simpleton has hope. The openness of the categories provides *intellectual training* as the reader strives to flesh them out and relate them to his own experiences. The end result is a *worldview*, or rather an evaluative framework for the world. The scarcity of definitional features means that it is broad and encompassing, offering the proper way to view reality.

This breadth also means that the sayings can be applied to many different situations ‘as proverbs’. The two main functions here are evaluation and direction (see ch.3 §2.2). The classification system makes the proverbs very useful *evaluatively*. Its simplicity means that it immediately finds traction, and the strong ethical charge gives its appraisal power. This is also significant *directively*. The central cases are idealised – becoming wise is an end in itself, and can provide incentive for action. Motivation is even more forceful through the idealised consequences in the righteous/wicked proverbs. And it is this connection between consequences, characters and acts that will be my focus in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5 – Openness and the Act-Consequence Connection

צַדִּיק מִצָּרָה נִחְלָץ וַיָּבֵא רָשָׁע תְּחִתּוֹ:

*The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked comes into it instead.*

(Prov 11:8)

### §1. The *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*

It is not possible to read Proverbs without being struck by its repeated insistence on a connection between acts and consequences. Everywhere we turn, the righteous flourish, the wicked suffer harm. Proverbs is less explicit, however, about what brings about these consequences. Earlier scholarship had formed a general agreement on the issue: ‘retribution’ was responsible; Yahweh intervened judicially to punish sin and reward righteousness.<sup>377</sup> But the consensus was rocked in 1955, when K. Koch famously argued against the pervading *Vergeltungsdogma* (‘retribution dogma’), replacing it with an intrinsic *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*, ‘act-consequence connection’.<sup>378</sup>

Koch argued that the judicial-theological category of ‘retribution’ (*Vergeltung*) is anachronistic. In the HB, we find no temporal distinction between deed and consequence, no “previously established norm” for reward/punishment, no “levels of severity” for different cases – nothing very judicial at all.<sup>379</sup> Rather, he suggested, consequences (*Ergehen*) grow organically from acts (*Tun*), like plants from seeds.<sup>380</sup> They are internally and necessarily bound together as a synthetic whole – a *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*. For Koch, such holistic thinking characterised the Hebrew mindset. He followed Scandinavian scholars like J. Pedersen and K. Fahlgren, who had argued for a particular ‘primitive’ mode of conception:<sup>381</sup> a ‘synthetic view of life’ (*Synthetische*

<sup>377</sup> E.g. W. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Teil 1, Gott und Volk* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1933-1935). Translated as *Theology of the Old Testament, vol. 1* (Translated by J. A. Baker. London: SCM Press, 1961) pp.263-269; J. Fichtner, *Die Altorientalische Weisheit in Ihrer Israelitisch-Jüdischen Ausprägung: Eine Studie zur Nationalisierung der Weisheit in Israel* (Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelman, 1933) pp.105-117.

<sup>378</sup> K. Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament,” *ZTK* 52 (1955) pp.1-42; reprinted as K. Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament,” in *Um Das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (Wege der Forschung; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972) pp.130-180. An abridged version published in English as K. Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. J. Crenshaw; London: SPCK, 1983) pp.57-87.

<sup>379</sup> Koch (1983) p.59.

<sup>380</sup> Koch (1972) p.166; omitted from abridged English version.

<sup>381</sup> Pedersen, J., *Israel: Its life and culture. Vol I-II* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1926); K. Hj. Fahlgren, *Sedaqa, nabestehende und entgegengesetzte Begriffe im Alten Testament* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1932). Sections published as “Die Gegensätze von sedaqa im Alten Testament,” in *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (ed. K. Koch; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972) pp.87-129. Such ideas about ‘primitive’ thought are nowadays seriously questioned.



*Lebensauffassung*).<sup>382</sup> Israelites looked at the world as a totality, devoid of our modern compartmentalising divisions which might separate deeds from their effects. For them, such separation was almost nonsensical.<sup>383</sup>

According to these scholars, the structure of the Hebrew language itself gives evidence of this totalising mentality. Not only does Hebrew have no word for ‘punishment’,<sup>384</sup> but, as demonstrated by Fahlgren, a number of Hebrew roots can describe both an ‘act’ (in our terms) and its ‘consequence’.<sup>385</sup> So אָן can mean ‘wrong deed’ (*Missetat*) and also ‘guilt/punishment’ (*Schuld/Strafe*).<sup>386</sup> רַע can mean ‘moral evil’ (*Bosheit*) and ‘misfortune’ (*Unglücke*).<sup>387</sup> The same word describes both, therefore “Ursache und Wirkung sind... für den Israelite ein und dasselbe”.<sup>388</sup>

Accordingly, Koch proposed that the ancient Israelite inhabited a *schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre* – a sphere of activity bringing about his fate. Every deed was *schicksalwirkende* ‘fate-effecting’, and no foreign agent was needed (or indeed able) to intervene between the two. Yahweh was no interventionist judge, but more like a ‘midwife’,<sup>389</sup> helping to deliver what had been conceived and gestated in the impersonal womb of the *Tatsphäre*. Particularly significant for Koch were verbs like שָׁלַם, which he translated as ‘make complete’ (*vollständig machen*),<sup>390</sup> and הָשִׁיב ‘steer back’ (*zurücklenken*).<sup>391</sup> In neither case does Yahweh impose external consequences, but “does something which is intricately woven into the action itself”.<sup>392</sup>

Koch’s views acquired particular force in confluence with another emerging stream in German scholarship – *Weltordnung* ‘world order’. H. Gese noted that in Egypt, the act-consequence connection was enforced by the deity *Ma’at* (who embodied order, justice and truth). He suggested something similar for Israel.<sup>393</sup> H. H. Schmid expanded on this: a powerful World Order was

<sup>382</sup> Fahlgren (1972) pp.126-129.

<sup>383</sup> Thus Koch describes Fahlgren’s view: “in a certain time in Israel’s history it could not distinguish between transgression and punishment, between righteousness and reward” Koch (1983) p.75. Barton caricatures the view: “the question ‘Will I suffer if I sin?’ becomes... a nonsense-question: if we asked an ancient Israelite he would presumably give us a blank stare”. J. Barton, “Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament,” *JTS* 30.1 (1979) p.12.

<sup>384</sup> Koch (1983) p.77.

<sup>385</sup> Fahlgren (1972) examines the roots רַעַע, נָבַל, עוֹל, אָן, פֶּשַׁע, חַטָּא, רָשָׁע. Koch explicitly draws on Fahlgren (Koch [1983] pp.75-78). Such arguments are repeated and developed by R. Knierim, *Die Hauptbegriffe für Sünde im Alten Testament* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965), pp.73-77; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962) pp.265-266, 384-385; G. M. Tucker, “Sin and ‘Judgment’ in the Prophets,” in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in honor of Rolf Knierim* (eds. H. T. C. Sun and K. L. Eades; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997) pp.373-388.

<sup>386</sup> Fahlgren (1972) p.112.

<sup>387</sup> Fahlgren (1972) p.122.

<sup>388</sup> Fahlgren (1972) p.90.

<sup>389</sup> Koch (1983) p.61.

<sup>390</sup> Koch (1972) p.134; Koch (1983) p.60.

<sup>391</sup> Koch (1972) pp.139-140; Koch (1983) pp.63-64.

<sup>392</sup> Koch (1983) p.64.

<sup>393</sup> H. Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1958). Gese, however, also argued for a *Sondergut*, distinctive to Israel: Yahweh as a free agent not bound by the order.

operative across the ANE, encapsulated in Egyptian *Ma'at*, Babylonian *Me*, and Canaanite/Israelite *צדק*.<sup>394</sup> Both cosmic and moral, it pervaded every sphere of life: law, wisdom, nature, kingship, war, and cult. In the life of the individual, it actualised itself through the *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang*.<sup>395</sup>

Together, the *Weltordnung* and *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang* proved a formidable torrent, flowing through and changing the landscape of Wisdom studies in the second half of the 20th century. ‘Order’ was established as the framework for wisdom thought,<sup>396</sup> and the act-consequence connection was considered fundamental.<sup>397</sup> Both at the time and subsequently, however, much critical work also questioned and refined these views. Key challenges concern: (1) the linguistic foundations of act-consequence connection; (2) its inviolability; (3) the agent(s) behind it; (4) whether it offers an explanation or a motivation.

### §1.1 Linguistic foundations of the *Schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre*

Koch’s *Tatsphäre* was built in part on linguistic foundations. However, many have found these to be unsound, threatening the integrity of the edifice. From *שָׁלֵם* and *הָשִׁיב*, Koch had inferred a previous movement (internal to the act itself) which Yahweh needed only to ‘complete’ or ‘steer back’. But this argument is based on the verbs’ etymology (*שָׁלֵם* ‘to be complete’; *שׁוּב* ‘to return’), and falls foul of the well-known ‘root fallacy’:<sup>398</sup> word meanings reside in current (not historical) usage, and must be examined in context. And in context, the terms may imply active intervention.<sup>399</sup>

Another load-bearing datum for Koch was the lack of a Hebrew word for ‘punishment’. But this is not conceptually relevant.<sup>400</sup> Indeed, as K. Wong reminds us, “[t]hey have no word for

<sup>394</sup> Schmid (1968). See also Schmid (1966).

<sup>395</sup> See esp. Schmid (1968) pp.175-177.

<sup>396</sup> Murphy called it an ‘assured result’ of scholarship. R. E. Murphy, “Wisdom – Theses and Hypotheses,” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and literary essays in honor of Samuel Terrien* (eds. J. G. Gammie, W. Brueggemann, W. L. Humphreys and J. Ward; New York: Scholars Press, 1978) pp.35-42. It is still a prevalent presupposition today.

<sup>397</sup> E.g. von Rad (1962), e.g. 265, 384-5; von Rad (1972), esp. pp.124-137 (though this later work allows more flexibility and ambiguity in the connection). For a recent positive (though nuanced) appraisal of Koch and Schmid, see Barton (2014).

<sup>398</sup> See J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961) pp.107-160.

<sup>399</sup> J. Scharbert, “ŠLM im Alten Testament,” in *Um Das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (ed. K. Koch; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972) pp.300-324; P. Zerafa, “Retribution in the Old Testament,” *Angelicum* 50 (1973) pp.477-479; J. Lam, *Patterns of Sin in the Hebrew Bible: Metaphor, culture, and the making of a religious concept* (Oxford: OUP, 2015) pp.114-127.

<sup>400</sup> Zerafa (1973) p.478.

‘schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre’ either’.<sup>401</sup> The shape of a language cannot be directly equated with the shape of thought,<sup>402</sup> and this foundation of non-existence is no foundation. The same false equation of linguistic structure and thought structure is evident in Koch’s other arguments too. It is not, for example, conceptually determinative that some languages have one word where others have two. English has just ‘to know’, while French has ‘connaître’ and ‘savoir’, German ‘kennen’ and ‘wissen’. Is it therefore impossible for English speakers to distinguish between ‘knowing’ a person and ‘knowing’ facts? If I know my linguistic community, I know this isn’t so. Similarly, Hebrew has only **יָדָע** where English has ‘iniquity’ and ‘punishment’, but this does not mean that the aspects were necessarily one and the same. The linguistic phenomenon does not necessitate a metaphysical connection.

That said, however, the data Koch described are real enough, and deserve consideration. But instead of language structure and lexical stocks, we should examine words used in context. And indeed, in context the polysemies are striking. In the proverbs, it is sometimes unclear whether the polysemous term refers to an act or to a consequence (see §3 below). By this double meaning, the proverbs may poetically propose (and do not necessarily presuppose) a connection between the two. Using the same word to describe both may suggest justice, for one is appropriate for the other in degree and kind.<sup>403</sup> An **יָדָע** for an **יָדָע**; an **יָדָע** for an **יָדָע**.<sup>404</sup>

### §1.2 An inviolable world order?

The world-order models of Schmid and Koch seemed to admit few exceptions. Acts and consequences were thought to always correspond. Apparent violations could only be temporary, and people were “hardly ever conscious” of problems.<sup>405</sup> The world order, epitomised in the book of Proverbs, was dogmatic,<sup>406</sup> and across the ANE, *Ma’at*, *Me*, and **צדק** were conceived of as mechanistic. Eventually, however, the inviolable came to be seen as unviable. In Schmid’s words,

<sup>401</sup> K. L. Wong, *The Idea of Retribution in the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 87; Leiden: Brill, 2001) p.23.

<sup>402</sup> Barr (1961) pp.33-45.

<sup>403</sup> Barton (1979); P. D. Miller Jr., *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A stylistic and theological analysis* (SBL Monograph Series 27; Chicago: Scholars Press, 1982); Wong (2001) pp.196-245.

<sup>404</sup> Miller (1982) pp.105-108 suggests the ‘talion principle’ as the foundation of the act-consequence wordplay.

<sup>405</sup> Koch (1983) p.78.

<sup>406</sup> Schmid argues that the polarised character types discussed above (ch.4 §1.1) were formulated according to this same mentality, at the same developmental stage.

a ‘Krise der Weisheit’ broke out across the region. Khonshoptep,<sup>407</sup> Šubšiš,<sup>408</sup> Qohelets and Jobs<sup>409</sup> raised their voices against the unrealistic dogma. Act and consequence do not in fact always align.

However, there are hints of unease even *within* Proverbs, not just in later texts. Some sayings seem to violate a strict act-consequence connection.<sup>410</sup> We hear of the righteous in need of deliverance (Prov 10:2; 11:4,6,8,9 etc.) and the wicked gaining wealth (albeit troubled; 10:2; 11:18; 15:6). A whole community might suffer unjustly (11:11; 28:15; 29:2), and we are encouraged to have pity on the poor, as though their penury is undeserved (14:21,31; 19:17; 22:9). The wide array of sayings reflects a diversity of experience, where ambiguity and anomaly arise. In the book as a whole, the psychological weight of these sayings may be out of proportion with their small number.<sup>411</sup>

Furthermore, the proverbs do not focus on specific actions, but on total disposition and overall character (see ch.4 §1.2). As U. Skladny suggested, the connection is more a ‘*Haltung-Schicksal Zusammenhang*’ (posture-fate connection) than *Tun-Ergehen*.<sup>412</sup> This makes it much less direct and less tangible. If we are to speak of a ‘world order’, it is more as a recognition of life’s regularities than as a mechanistic principle of causality.<sup>413</sup> The proverbs attest to a world that is generally predictable, but is not inviolable.

<sup>407</sup> Khonshoptep is the son of the scribe in the Egyptian New Kingdom text, the *Instruction of Ani*. He laments the impossibility of adhering to his father’s immutable doctrine. Schmid (1966) pp.74-78.

<sup>408</sup> Šubši-mašrâ-Šakkan is the narrator of *Ludlul bel nemeqi*, a Babylonian poem which questions why the righteous suffer. Schmid discusses this, along with the ‘Sumerian Job’ and ‘Babylonian Theodicy’ as epitomising the Babylonian crisis of wisdom. Schmid (1966) pp.131-141.

<sup>409</sup> Schmid (1966) discusses the crisis in Israel on pp.173-196.

<sup>410</sup> See e.g. S. L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and consequence in Second Temple instructions* (JSJSup 125; Leiden: Brill, 2008) pp.53-4, 85; Delkurt (1993) pp.153-156; J. Gladson, “Retributive Paradoxes in Proverbs 10-29” (PhD diss., University of Vanderbilt, 1978); Hatton (2008) pp.83-116; Hausmann (1995) pp.234-237.

<sup>411</sup> Hatton (2008) p.83; C. Camp, “Proverbs and the Problems of the Moral Self,” *JSOT* 40.1 (2015) pp.25-42 suggests that, though this is a ‘minority report’, it can still cause great anxieties.

<sup>412</sup> Skladny (1962) pp.71-75. Others speak of a ‘character-consequence connection’, e.g. L. Boström, *The God of the Sages: The portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs* (Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 29; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990) p.91; Delkurt (1993) p.144; Hildebrandt (1992) p.438. By Hildebrandt’s count, in Prov 10-15 there are 152 [character – consequence] proverbs, and only 62 [act – consequence].

<sup>413</sup> ‘World order’ has proved a slippery term, with scholars employing it in either of these ways. Fox distinguishes them as ‘predictable’ and ‘mechanistic’ orders respectively. He also adds a ‘constructed’ order, actively constituted by people’s acts. M. V. Fox, “World Order and Ma’at: A crooked parallel,” *JANESCU* 23 (1995) pp.40-41. Cf. Adams (2008) pp.84-85; Boström (1990) pp.91, 137-138; Delkurt (1993) pp.157-159.

### §1.3 The agent(s) behind the connection

Probably the most widespread criticism of Koch concerns the agency behind his *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*. For Koch, the operative force was an impersonal nexus, with Yahweh relegated to the position of ‘midwife’. But many proverbs do speak of an active deity, who blesses (10:22; 16:20; 18:22), directs behaviour (16:1,9; 20:24), tests hearts (15:11; 17:3; 21:2), creates (16:4; 20:12; 22:2), and (despite Koch’s protestations) administers rewards and punishments (12:2; 15:25; 16:5,7; 17:5; 19:14,17; 21:12; 22:12,14,22-23; 24:12). Koch does not address such verses adequately.<sup>414</sup>

Some scholars explain Yahweh’s presence chronologically: at first Israel understood an impersonal *Zusammenhang*, later a Yahwistic conception took over.<sup>415</sup> Similarly in Egypt, some think that mechanistic *Ma’at* was replaced by the free, arbitrary will of the deity.<sup>416</sup> However, there is little to signal that theological elements are late, either in Israel or in Egypt. The ‘theological’ proverbs are in formal and thematic continuity with those around them,<sup>417</sup> and positing an original ‘secular’ understanding is a great anachronism. It is more likely that the two modes of causality co-existed from the beginning, and were not held to contradict.<sup>418</sup> Yahweh was the omnipresent reality behind the connection, and intimately involved in its operation.

In some proverbs, humankind is allowed some retributive agency of their own – they too can bless and curse (11:26). *Society* may be operative in the *Zusammenhang*.<sup>419</sup> The scholarly recognition of this has been prompted partly by fresh thinking on *Ma’at*. J. Assmann has described *Ma’at*, not as an impersonal cosmic force, but in social terms of “konnektiven Gerechtigkeit” and “Solidarität”.<sup>420</sup> It is communally enacted by “Aufeinander-Hören”, “Füreinander-Handeln” and

<sup>414</sup> Hatton draws attention to the proverbs in chs.10-13 simply ignored by Koch. Hatton (2008) pp.83-116.

<sup>415</sup> Fahlgren (1972) pp.126-129; M. V. Fox, “Aspects of the Religion of the Book of Proverbs,” *HUCA* 39 (1968) pp.55-69; H. G. Reventlow, “Sein Blut Komme Über Sein Haupt,” *VT* 10.3 (1960) pp.311-327. Also Knierim (1965), although for Knierim, Yahweh did not replace the *Zusammenhang*, but rather took over management of it. The classic expression of the ‘Yahweh redaction theory’ is McKane (1970), although he contrasts Yahweh’s activity with self-confident human wisdom rather than with an impersonal world order.

<sup>416</sup> Influentially H. Brunner, “Der Freie Wille Gottes in der Ägyptischen Weisheit,” in *Les Sagesses du Proche-Orient Ancien: Colloque de Strasbourg 17-19 Mai 1962* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) pp.103-120.

<sup>417</sup> Gese (1958) p.37.

<sup>418</sup> So e.g. Adams (2008) pp.77-83; Barton (2014); Dell (2006) pp.105-117; E. Huwiler, “Control of Reality in Israelite Wisdom” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1988) pp.12-31; Tucker (1997).

- On Egypt, see Adams (2008) pp.15-52; Fox (1995) pp.42-44; M. Lichtheim, *Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies and Related Studies* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 120; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992). Lichtheim concludes that “over the span of two millennia, the basic understanding of Maat doing and its rewards had not changed” (p.97).

<sup>419</sup> Adams (2008) pp.87-88; G. Freuling, *Wer eine Grube gräbt...: der Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang und sein Wandel in der alttestamentlichen Weisheitsliteratur* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 102; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2004) pp.57-61; B. Janowski, “Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück: Offene Fragen im Umkreis des ‘Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs,’” *ZTK* 91 (1994) pp.247-271; C.-A. Keller, “Zum sogenannten Vergeltungsglauben im Proverbienbuch,” in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (eds. H. Donner, R. Hanhart and R. Smend; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) pp.223-238.

<sup>420</sup> J. Assmann, *Ma’at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (München: C. H. Beck, 1990), *passim*.

“Aneinander-Denken”.<sup>421</sup> Applying these principles to Israel, B. Janowski argues for “Vergeltung als sozial Interaktion”.<sup>422</sup> Consequences do not come ‘naturally’ from acts, but through socially enforced reciprocity: whatever the doer did comes back to him through another.<sup>423</sup> Some proverbs make this explicit (e.g. 11:26; 14:17; 17:13; 20:22; 24:29). Others use general language and passive formulations, which Janowski suggests should be filled out socially.<sup>424</sup> Perhaps, however, this inexplicit nature intentionally leaves the proverbs open to different agents,<sup>425</sup> making them applicable to many situations.

#### §1.4 Explanation or motivation?

Proverbs is no scientific treatise. It does not set out to describe systems of causality. Occasionally, the act-consequence sayings may be used (accurately or not) to evaluate situations (see ch.3 §2.2), but their main aim seems to be to direct the behaviour and shape the character of their impressionable pupils. To this end the *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang* may be employed; for motivation, and not for explanation.<sup>426</sup> Indeed, the extreme consequences are obviously problematic if intended as accurate descriptions of reality (see ch.4 §3.1), but they have significant force as motivational devices. The apparently inevitable connection intends to orientate the student before he acts. The proverbs express not what he *has been* until now, but what he *should be* from now on,<sup>427</sup> holding up prototypical ideals for his emulation. These idealised characters are central to the proverbs. Any other active parties are ignored through impersonal and passive formulations. The student’s responsibility is stressed over any third-party agency; his devastating or joyful experience is before the readers’ gaze – strong motivation for morality.

In what follows, I will examine three sets of proverbs which comment on the act-consequence connection. Each set deploys its own technique to generate openness: the first uses mainly parallelism, the second imagery, and the third polysemy (see ch.2). Each has implications for the act-consequence connection, and for the four debates considered above. Each will also demonstrate the ‘didactic’ and ‘proverbial’ power of the sayings.

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<sup>421</sup> Assmann (1990), *passim* e.g. pp.66,89,178.

<sup>422</sup> Janowski (1994).

<sup>423</sup> Janowski (1994) p.266.

<sup>424</sup> Janowski (1994) pp.264-265, citing e.g. 11:25,27,31; 13:13,21; 21:13; 22:9; 24:24.

<sup>425</sup> Boström (1990).

<sup>426</sup> E.g. Adams (2008) pp.88-93; Freuling (2004) p.103; Wong (2001) p.24.

<sup>427</sup> Freuling (2004) p.104; Hausmann (1995) p.352; Janowski (1994) p.271; Wong (2001) p.24.

## §2. Parallelism and the predictable world order

I suggested above (§1.2) that the world order in Proverbs is not inviolable, but is predictable. The proverbs examined here imply precisely that, using a particular technique of parallelism to do so. Structurally, many proverbs are formulated as [Topic – Comment] // [Topic – Comment], with *character*, *act*, and *consequence* terms filling these slots (see ch.1 §1.5). Often, the two halves of the proverb have the same arrangement, but sometimes they are ‘unbalanced’ (see ch.2 §2.3).<sup>428</sup> We find, for example:

<i>a</i> colon:	CHARACTER	ACT	[                      ]
<i>b</i> colon:	CHARACTER	[                      ]	CONSEQUENCE

In these proverbs, the ‘character’ is the only repeated term, the mediating figure between act and consequence, determining both. The logic of the proverb may not be immediately clear, and the reader must work to restore it, deducing the connections between the parts. She may well ‘level’ the terms by supplying an *act* to the second colon, and a *consequence* to the first. The proverb becomes a kind of riddle to solve, or in M. Fox’s terms, a ‘folk enthymeme’, a reasoning structure with ‘suppressed’ premises or conclusions.<sup>429</sup> Fox points out that by supplying additional terms, the reader constructs the proofs by which she is persuaded. She will be loath to contradict her own reasoning, and the argument thus seems incontrovertible.

### §2.1 Didactic explorations

13:5     דְּבַר־שָׁקֶר יִשְׁנָא צָדִיק וְרָשָׁע יִבְאִישׁ וַיַּחְפִּיר:

*A lying word the righteous hates; but the wicked becomes a stench and a disgrace.*

The antithetical parallelism here is clearly recognised through the prototypical word pair ‘righteous-wicked’, but each colon steers in a different direction. The proverb begins with the acts of the righteous, or rather (in keeping with Proverbs’ concern for total disposition) their attitudes:

<sup>428</sup> This imprecision is particularly common in chs.10-15; e.g. 10:6,8,13,14,16,21,31; 11:2,5,9; 12:6,12,20,21,27; 13:2,5; 14:3,9,25.

<sup>429</sup> Fox (2004), drawing on paremiologists Green and Pepicello (1986).

they hate lies. This is contrasted with the consequences coming to the wicked: stinking disgrace. The proverb could be formally represented:

CHARACTER	ACT	CONSEQUENCE
The righteous	hates a lying word	
But the wicked		becomes a stench and a disgrace

Character is central, determining acts in *a*, and consequences in *b*. Perceiving the imbalance, the reader may ‘fill the gaps’, restoring logic and relevance by levelling the terms:

The righteous	hates a lying word	[and doesn't become a stench or disgrace]
But the wicked	[doesn't hate a lying word]	and becomes a stench and disgrace

By supplying the reversals, the reader practices a type of reasoning essential for a wise life: deducing the connections between character, act, and consequence. In this world order, the *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang* is logical, and basically predictable.

However, the levelling process also brings a certain openness: the order is not absolutely established. ‘Hates a lying word’ is a phrase, not a single term, and either element may be reversed. Does the wicked man *love* a lying word, or hate a *truthful* word, or indeed both? יִבְאִישׁ, ‘becomes a stench’, is a metaphor evocatively expressing contemptibility.<sup>430</sup> In the reversal, the reader might imagine a pleasing fragrance rising from the righteous (cf. Cant 3:6). The term may also contain a wordplay. It is phonologically similar to יָבִישׁ ‘he brings shame’.<sup>431</sup> This root, בּוֹשׁ, often occurs as a word-pair with חָפַר, ‘shame and disgrace’,<sup>432</sup> so the hearer is likely to recognise the double meaning here. Both ‘shame’ and ‘stench’ are probably intended for the wicked (and so too perhaps honour and fragrance for the righteous).

Notably, these consequences are enacted by society. In community-oriented Israel, disgrace is a terrible punishment, and a powerful incentive against wickedness. The proverb propagates a set of social norms. By reversing the terms, the reader deduces that the righteous deserve honour. Through the interpretation process, then, he ascribes honour to the worthy, and

<sup>430</sup> Gen 34:30; Exod 5:21; 1 Sam 13:4, 27:12; 2 Sam 10:6, 16:21; 1 Chr 19:6.

<sup>431</sup> The Versions reflect this meaning. Pesh. (=Targ.) נִבְּשָׁה; LXX paraphrases ‘has shame’ as οὐχ ἔξει παρρησίαν ‘does not have boldness’. Possibly here בּוֹשׁ is a by-form of בּוֹשֵׁל (cf. Q/K of Isa 30:5); see P. R. Ackroyd, “A Note on the Hebrew Roots בּוֹשׁ and בּוֹשֵׁל,” *JTS* 43 (1942) pp.160-161.

<sup>432</sup> Isa 1:29, 24:23, 54:4; Jer 15:9, 50:12; Mic 3:7; Ps 71:24; Prov 19:26; Job 6:20.



is thus made to practice the very principle the proverb preaches. He must continue to do this throughout life.

In the above interpretation, the hiphil verbs are understood as ingressive: ‘becomes a stench’ (cf. 1 Sam 27:12), ‘becomes a disgrace’ (Isa 54:4). However, the binyan presents ambiguity, and the sense may also be causal: ‘causes a stench’ (Exod 5:21), ‘causes disgrace’ (Prov 19:26), i.e. to others. The negative consequences come not to the wicked man alone, but to those around him. Ambiguity enters the act-consequence connection here, for who is to say whether these others deserve disgrace?

10:8 חֲכָם־לֵב יִקַּח מִצְוֹת וְאִוִּיל שְׁפָתַיִם יִלְבֹּט:

*The wise of heart receives commandments; but the foolish of lips is ruined.*<sup>433</sup>

10:14 חֲכָמִים יִצְפְּנוּ־דַעַת וּפִי־אִוִּיל מִחֲתָה קְרִיבָה:

*The wise treasure up knowledge; but the mouth of a fool – destruction is close by.*

These two proverbs, separated by only 6 verses, give very similar messages:<sup>434</sup> the wise take in wisdom; foolish mouths bring destruction. The first cola may be self-referential: the reader must love and treasure up the proverbs’ own wisdom, contemplating their many nuances which will educate her. A parallelism is recognised through the antitheses of wise and foolish – these stable, recurrent prototypes determining conduct and destiny. However, the parallelism is not exact. The first cola give acts, the second consequences. The reader may *emphasise* the consequence terms, reading the proverbs as developmental. Ruin and destruction are climactic motivations. She may alternatively practice her logical skills and *level* the terms:

	CHARACTER	ACT	CONSEQUENCE
10:8	The wise of heart	receives commandments	<i>[and is not ruined]</i>
	But the foolish of lips	<i>[does not receive commandments and]</i>	is ruined
10:14	The wise	treasure up knowledge	<i>[and destruction is not close by]</i>
	But the mouth of a fool	<i>[does not treasure up knowledge and]</i>	destruction is close by

<sup>433</sup> The precise meaning of  $\sqrt{\text{לבט}}$  is disputed. Its only other occurrences are Prov 10:10 (an exact repeat of this colon) and Hos 4:14. The Arabic cognate means ‘to throw down to the ground’. See Fox (2009) p.516.

<sup>434</sup> Surrounding proverbs also speak of the value of good speech: 10:11,13,17-21. 10:10b repeats 10:8b, suggesting to some that one of these cola has been displaced. Fox (2009); Murphy (1998b); C. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899).

On the one hand, the gap-filling suggests the predictability of the world order: connections between acts and consequences can be inferred. But on the other, it allows openness, for the implied reversals are not certain. In 10:8, the terms could be simply negated, or positively opposed. Does the fool ‘not receive’ or actively spurn commandments? Will the wise ‘not be ruined’ or positively flourish?<sup>435</sup> In 10:14, we find two-word phrases. Is destruction *far* from the wise; or is *restoration*, or *life* close by? The wise ‘treasure up knowledge’, valuing it highly. Do fools treasure up *folly* in the same way, or *devalue* knowledge, counting it as worthless? צִפֹּן suggests only sparing expenditure. While the wise are judicious in speech, perhaps the fool spews forth whatever ‘wisdom’ he thinks he has (leaving דַּעַת unreversed), and his extensive folly (reversing דַּעַת) (cf. 13:16b).

Supplying the reversals ties together act, character, and consequence in the reader’s mind. The details of the connection, however, are not explicit. The verb ‘is ruined’ יִלְבֹּט in 10:8 is passive, and the agent of ‘destruction’ מִחֲתָה in 10:14 is unspecified. The emphasis remains on the fool, and his responsibility, rather than any divine, societal, or intrinsic agency (none of which are excluded). The proverbs may further suggest a complex model of causality. In the short-term, the wise might receive precisely the commandments which can forestall a particular type of ‘ruin’, imminent in their circumstances (10:8); they may treasure the knowledge to avoid this specific ‘destruction’ (10:14). In the long-term, through habitual ‘receiving’ and ‘treasuring’, they develop a total disposition conducive to their flourishing. Furthermore, in 10:8, a third party is suggested – the speaker of the ‘commandments’ – with powerful influence over her student’s fate. This hints at social agency. In 10:14, it is possible that the ‘destruction’ does not harm the fool alone, but all those around him, deserving or not.<sup>436</sup> This problematises any facile notion of an absolute act-consequence relationship.

10:16 פְּעֻלַּת צַדִּיק לְחַיִּים תְּבוֹאָה רָשָׁע לְחַטָּאת:

*The wage of the righteous – to life; the produce of the wicked – to sin.*

The form in our final example is terse, and its sense catches the reader off-guard. At first, it seems to present a precise antithetical parallelism. The cola are matched by the syntax, the verbal ellipsis,

<sup>435</sup> Heim creatively reverses יִלְבֹּט as יִמְלֵט, presumably for the pleasing soundplay. Semantically, the reversal (the wise ‘are delivered’) is not exact but not invalid Heim (2013) p.225.

<sup>436</sup> So Delitzsch (1884); McKane (1970); Toy (1899); Waltke (2004); C. R. Yoder, *Proverbs* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

the prototypical word-pair צַדִּיק/רֶשַׁע, even the vowel patterns of פְּעֻלָּת/תְּבוּאָת. But after the ל in the second colon, we meet – not the anticipated antithesis to ‘life’ (i.e. ‘death’, מָוֶת) – but ‘sin’ הַטָּאָה. This riddle-like rupture brings a psychological disorientation appealing for resolution. The most obvious solution is to level the terms:

CHARACTER	ACT	CONSEQUENCE
The wage of the righteous	[ – to virtue and]	to life
The produce of the wicked	– to sin	[and to death]

The ‘wage’ and ‘produce’ might have literal economic reference.<sup>437</sup> As elsewhere, the very suggestion that the wicked *have* ‘produce’ problematises a dogmatic understanding of the *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*. The righteous use their income in life-enhancing, virtuous ways, while the wicked squander theirs on sin, ultimately leading to death. Or, the proverb could speak figuratively of all that comes from<sup>438</sup> and to the characters. ‘Life’ and ‘sin’ are fundamental, basic ideas, general terms which could be fleshed out in various ways by the student’s imagination, experience, and reason. The *b* colon may suggest that the wicked man gets ever more engrossed in sin, progressing through grades of wickedness (see ch.4 §3.3) until it consume his whole lifestyle and encapsulates his character. A *Haltung-Schicksal Zusammenhang* may be more appropriate here than *Tun-Ergehen*.

Through the parallelism, the reader connects this sinful behaviour with death, a deduction set up to motivate righteous living. Some commentators suggest that consequences are already implicit in the term הַטָּאָה.<sup>439</sup> Indeed, Waltke translates it as “sin and death”,<sup>440</sup> and הַטָּאָה was one of the terms adduced by Koch *et al.* to support the ‘synthetic view of life’, for it apparently refers to both sin (*Sünde*) and disaster (*Unheil*).<sup>441</sup> However, the meaning ‘*Unheil*’ is very rare if present.<sup>442</sup> I suggest that ‘death’ is not in the normal semantics of the word, nor should it feature in the translation, but this proverb closely binds the concepts together. Death clings around sin. Though far from being explicit, the proverb may suggest some form of intrinsic causality.

<sup>437</sup> So Murphy (1998*b*); Toy (1899); Yoder (2009).

<sup>438</sup> פְּעֻלָּה might also be translated as ‘work, deeds’ (cf. Ps 17:4; 2 Chr 15:7), i.e. as referring to the acts of the righteous. The parallelism with ‘produce’ favours the translation as ‘wage’, however, depicting consequences.

<sup>439</sup> R. J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) suggests that it means not ‘sin’, but ‘lack’ (a consequence instead of an act), citing Prov 21:4 and Job 14:16. However, both of these instances are dubious. D. Winton Thomas, “The meaning of הַטָּאָה in Proverbs X. 16,” *JTS* 15 (1964*b*) pp.295-296 connects it with the Ethiopic, and suggests the meaning ‘penury’.

<sup>440</sup> Waltke (2004) p.464.

<sup>441</sup> Koch (1972) p.161, (1983) p.75; Knierim (1965) pp.19-112; Fahlgren (1972) pp.93-105.

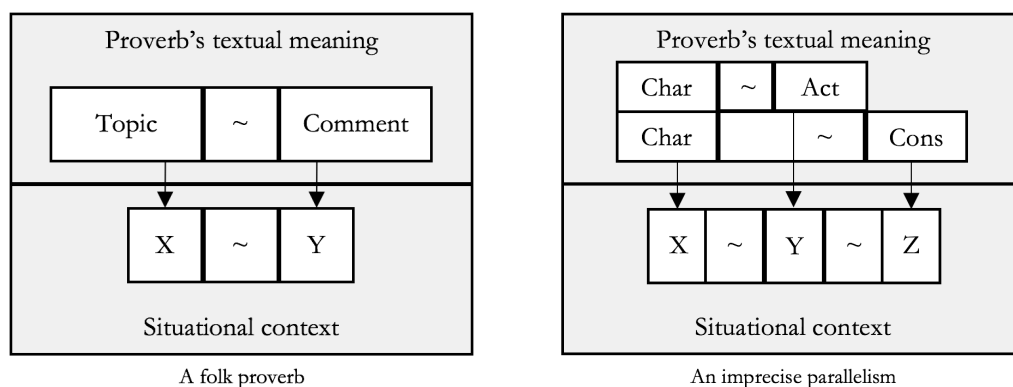
<sup>442</sup> Koch cites this proverb and Num 12:11. BDB only gives Zech 14:19. More commonly, the noun טָאָה may take this meaning.

Of course, the reader might not supply the mental reversals. The absence of ‘death’ is conspicuous, and perhaps significant. In the balance of justice, retribution is expected, but does not occur. The wicked are not in fact greeted with death. The disruption to the precise parallelism through the term תִּטָּח suggests that the world order does not always click along mechanically. The student must be prepared to face ambiguity in proverbs and in the world.

## §2.2 Used as proverbs

So far, we have explored these proverbs ‘didactically’: for the principles they teach their reader, and the ways they form character and intellect. But they could also be spoken ‘as proverbs’: applied to a specific situation with a specific purpose. In ch.3, I suggested a number of ways that a single proverb may be open to different *situations* and functions.<sup>443</sup> Here, I will concentrate on our example verses, and show how manipulating the variables may result in many different uses.

Most ‘folk proverbs’ are single-lined, but the examples here employ a distinctive parallel arrangement. They do not give one topic and one comment, but two paralleled topics and two very different comments. This makes their mapping onto context more complex. Adapting the diagram from ch.3, we could represent it thus:



Two ‘character’ terms are given, one relating positively to the context (describing what is or will be the case), and one relating negatively (giving the opposite of what is or will be). The sense of bifurcation is strong: either righteous or wicked; wise or foolish. This is particularly useful evaluatively. We have seen how, through their prototypical character types, proverbs establish a broad framework for making sense of the world (ch.4). Whenever such a proverb is spoken, the

<sup>443</sup> In the subsequent discussions, will italicise *situations* and underline functions for clarity.

referent is fitted into the appropriate category. She is commended or condemned, and the categories are fleshed out accordingly, ready for reapplication in another proverb use. The constant presence of the opposing character hints at the possibility of changing sides, of crossing the ‘fuzzy borders’ between categories. The fate of the wicked motivates the righteous hearer if she fears it may be her own. The actions of the wise interest the fool if she yet hopes to join them.

As well as characters, these proverbs offer an ‘act’. This is the most straightforward term to map onto context, as it gives a concrete datum, easily observable in the world. They also give a ‘consequence’. It is possible that this consequence has occurred in the context, and the proverb is spoken to explain it. More likely though, the consequence is a motivational device, facilitating the proverbs’ directive function with the threat of punishment or hope of reward. Containing both character and consequence terms, these proverbs gain dual evaluative-directive potency.

As examples, let us take Prov 13:5 and 10:8. I will focus on the possibilities of *a positive or negative relation to context* and *a past or future orientation*. That is, does the proverb describe the current situation or an opposite situation? Is it spoken before or after the event described? As a rule of thumb, before the event it may function directively; afterwards it may offer evaluation.

13:5 דְּבַר־שָׁקֶר יִשְׂנָא צַדִּיק וְרָשָׁע יִבְאִישׁ וַיַּחְפִּיר:

*A lying word the righteous hates; but the wicked becomes a stench and a disgrace.*

I could speak this proverb with an entirely *future orientation*. Neither of the events described has yet happened: no-one has spoken a word; no-one been dishonoured. The whole proverb becomes directive, providing motivations in both cola. ‘Hate lies!’ I direct my interlocutor, ‘then you will be righteous, and won’t be put to shame’. The first motivation appeals to noble goals: character development as its own reward. The second is more straightforwardly self-serving, for no-one wants disgrace.

Or, I might speak the same words with a *past orientation*. My interlocutor has both shown himself to love lying words, and been put to shame. I offer the proverb as an evaluation. ‘You love lies? You cannot be righteous’ I begin, evaluating and condemning his character based on his attitudes, ‘and that is why you have been disgraced’. The situation is an example of a recurring [act – consequence] pattern. My hearer might learn to distinguish this pattern through the ambiguities of life, and evaluate future shame accordingly.

The imprecise parallelism here means that the two cola describe different events, which need not have the same temporal reference. The proverb could be spoken ‘between the cola’, as it

were, with both *past and future orientations*. A friend has displayed that she hates lies. Accordingly, I evaluate her as righteous. She fleshes out the character type in her evaluative system, and can reapply it when appropriate. I add that, should she continue in righteousness, she won't be shamed or disgraced. She is thus disinclined from wicked behaviour, and directed to further truthfulness.

In this proverb use, the first colon has a *positive relationship to context*: it describes my interlocutor. The second colon has a negative relationship, depicting the opposite of her destiny. But it is also possible to reverse the arrangement. Another conversation partner revels in deceit. Speaking evaluatively, I condemn his character by applying the first colon negatively: he cannot be righteous. As a foreboding comment on his ensuing fate, or as a directive plea to change his ways, I add that men such as he will suffer disgrace.

10:8 חֶכֶם-לֵב יִקַּח מִצְוֹת וְאִוִּיל שְׁפָתַיִם יִלְבָּט:

*The wise of heart receives commandments; but the foolish of lips is ruined.*

The same possibilities of interpretation also apply to other proverbs of this type. 10:8 could be spoken directively, depicting possible *future* events. 'Receive commandments! Then you will be wise, and won't be ruined!' Or, it may function evaluatively, of a situation in the *past*. 'I am pleased that you received my commandments. I commend you as wise. This wisdom is why you have flourished'. Or, reversing the *positive/negative relationship*: 'You have not heeded my commands! You foolish student! Have you not suffered ruin as a result?'

Or, again, the proverb can be spoken such that the first colon lies in the *past*, and the second in the *future*. 'You have received my commands, so I evaluate you as wise. I direct you to more of the same, for it will dispel potential ruin.' The parallelism in these verses, then, makes them particularly useful 'as proverbs', able to address a number of different situations, and offer both evaluation and direction.

## Conclusion

The openness of the parallelism in these proverbs may have implications for how we understand the *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*. These verses do not indicate the agent behind the connection; there are various hints, but the different possibilities – divine, social, intrinsic – remain open. The stress is on responsibility rather than agency, both cola presenting prototypical, polar character types, determining behaviour and destiny. Each colon contains a ‘gap’, a missing act or consequence. By strongly implying how to fill these gaps, the proverbs suggest predictable act-character-consequence connections in the world. However, this parallelism also brings ambiguity to the order. The reversals are only implied, and their precise content is unclear; any connections must allow for flexibility.

When used ‘as proverbs’, these verses have dual evaluative-directive potential, due to their combination of character and consequence terms. They are able to speak with a positive or negative relationship to context, and before or after the events described. Within a ‘didactic’ use too, openness is a powerful tool, forcing serious engagement with the text, and training certain modes of thought. The readers must flesh out the open character types through imagination and experience. They can use logical reasoning to infer the connections between acts, characters, and consequences. This is an essential skill for negotiating an ethical path through life. Even if connections are not obvious in events, they may be deduced through careful observation and thought.

### §3. Imagery of the *Schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre*

In the second group of proverbs to be considered, openness is generated primarily through imagery. Imagery in the proverbs can be rich and evocative, opening up imaginary worlds to their readers (see ch.2 §3). I will examine two such metaphorical worlds, each of which is imagined as a *schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre* (a ‘sphere of activity effecting fate’). Within the logic of these metaphorical worlds, act and consequence intrinsically correspond. Deducing the connection in the metaphor trains the readers to deduce it in life, and motivates them to act accordingly. The first imaginary world draws on imagery of ‘the path’, the second ‘dining on destruction’.

#### §3.1 The path<sup>444</sup>

##### *§3.1(a) Introduction*

“*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...*” begins Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; “In the middle of life’s road...” This metaphor of ‘*del cammin di vita*’ is recognizable to us all, a ubiquitous trope across cultures, centuries, and religions. We need only think of ‘Taoism’ (from the Chinese word for ‘path’); the early Christian movement of ‘the Way’ (ἡ ὁδός); and the ‘Eightfold Path’ of Buddhism. The imagery was employed throughout the ANE,<sup>445</sup> and in later Zoroastrian and Greek texts.<sup>446</sup> Israel was no exception.

Linguists have described ‘life is a path’ as a basic conceptual metaphor,<sup>447</sup> conventional to many speech communities. Conceptual metaphors are not mere embellishments, but tools for structuring thought. They make complex ideas more manageable. Something difficult to

<sup>444</sup> See S. R. Millar, “The Path Metaphor and the Construction of a Schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre in Proverbs 10:1-22:16,” *VT* (Forthcominga) for a fuller exploration of this metaphor.

<sup>445</sup> M. P. Zehnder, *Wegmetaphorik im Alten Testament: Eine semantische Untersuchung der alttestamentlichen und altorientalischen Weg-Lexeme mit besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer metaphorischen Verwendung* (BZAW 268; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999) pp.117-292 surveys the metaphor in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic and Egyptian literature. G. Vittmann, *Altägyptische Wegmetaphorik* (Beiträge zur Ägyptologie 15; Wein: Afro-Pub, 1999) examines it in Egypt. Interestingly, it does not seem to have been prevalent in Egyptian *didactic* literature; Weeks (2007) p.149.

<sup>446</sup> G.-H. Baudry, *La Voie de la Vie: Étude sur la catéchèse des Pères de l’Église* (Théologie Historique 110; Paris: Beauchesne, 1999).

<sup>447</sup> For a classic work on ‘Conceptual Metaphor Theory’ discussing ‘life is a path’, see G. Lakoff and M. Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A field guide to poetic metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). The theory is applied to the ‘path’ metaphor in HB by A. Basson, “The Path Image Schema as Underlying Structure for the Metaphor ‘Moral Life is a Journey’ in Psalm 25,” *OTE* 24.1 (2011) pp.19-29; O. Jäkel, “How Can Mortal Man Understand the Road He Travels? Prospects and problems of the cognitive approach to religious metaphor,” in *The Bible Through Metaphor and Translation: A cognitive semantics perspective* (ed. K. Feytaerts; Discourse and Religion vol 15; Bern: Peter Lang, 2003) pp.55-86.



understand, like life, is imagined as simpler, like a path. Reasoning about paths can then be employed to learn about life. Properties, relations, and patterns of inference are transferred and blended across the domains. The path can be explored extensively in the imagination before being applied to interpreter's own circumstances. It brings to mind not a single image, but a whole 'image schema'. Not only is life a path, but 'conduct in life is movement on a path'; 'dangers in life are hazards on a path'; 'advice about life is guidance along a path'.<sup>448</sup>

The path (usually *דֶּרֶךְ*) is employed throughout the HB, particularly in Deuteronomy,<sup>449</sup> Psalms, and the prophets.<sup>450</sup> In Proverbs, it has some distinctive features. In particular, it is removed from its nomistic and salvation-historical frameworks. It is not linked with the Torah, with 'straying' implying idolatry,<sup>451</sup> nor is it a reminder of the God-led Exodus.<sup>452</sup> Furthermore, in 10:1-22:16 (in contrast to chs.1-9<sup>453</sup>), God seems all but entirely absent along the path. Once we hear of the 'way of the Lord' (*דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה*, 10:29), and twice he controls a man's 'steps' (*צִעְדוֹ*, 16:9; *מִצְעַדֵּי־גִבֹּר*, 20:24), but elsewhere he is silent. As in many act-consequence proverbs, divine agency is elusive.

The image may bring various associations. We should not look for absolute consistency between proverbs, but allow the path new undulations each time it is evoked.<sup>454</sup> Its metaphorical world allows for openness and imagination. Sometimes, the path depicts overall lifestyle, the total moral course of life. Along the straight path, every step heads straight; from the upright man, every deed is upright. In this book of character-based ethics, total disposition determines individual actions. Furthermore, the metaphor may imply moral progress, for where is the path heading? Character development is a journey, not an achieved destination.

<sup>448</sup> For fuller elaboration of the schema, see Jäkel (2003).

<sup>449</sup> 706x in HB, 75x in Proverbs. Synonyms found in Proverbs are *מַסְלָה*, *סֶלֶלָה*, *נְתִיבָה*, *אֶרֶח*, and *מַעְגָּל*. The schema may also be evoked by related terms: e.g. words for motion (e.g. *רוץ* run, *סור* turn aside, *תָּעָה* go astray, *שוב* return, and *רָדַף* pursue); hazards (e.g. *אָרֶב* ambush, *רֶשֶׁת* net and *שַׁחַת* pit); and guidance (e.g. *נָחָה* guide; *הִתְעָה*, *שָׁגָה* lead astray).

<sup>450</sup> The most comprehensive study is Zehnder (1999). See also Basson (2011); Baudry (1999); Brown (2002b) pp.31-54; A. Gros, *Je suis la route* (Thèmes Bibliques; Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1961); Jäkel (2003); Lam (2015) pp.156-178; O. Lund, *Way Metaphors and Way Topics in Isaiah 40-55* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2.28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); F. Nötscher, *Gotteswege und Menschenwege in der Bibel und in Qumran* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 15; Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1958); B. Whiteford, "The Leading Scriptural Metaphor. The way," *The Expositor* 4.10 (1894) pp.450-457. On roads in ancient Israel, see D. A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (The Asor Library of Biblical and Near Eastern Archaeology; Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>451</sup> On this in Psalms, see Brown (2002b) pp.31-54. Weeks suggests, however, that the post-exilic readers of Proverbs 1-9 may have found covenantal connotations. Weeks (2007) pp.148-154.

<sup>452</sup> Gros (1961); Lund (2007).

<sup>453</sup> The path in Prov 1-9 is more explicitly theological (e.g. 2:7-8; 3:7,26; 5:21). See Habel (1972); Weeks (2007) esp. pp.73-79, 148-154.

<sup>454</sup> Lam (2015) pp.163-165.

Many scholars have commented on the image of ‘two paths’ in Proverbs, separate and unbridgeable.<sup>455</sup> Revelling in absolutes, Proverbs presents the prototypical righteous walking one course, the wicked another. However, this simplistic polarity is sometimes ambiguated, with the imagery more of ‘many paths’ than two.<sup>456</sup> And sometimes the wicked and the righteous walk the same path, the former laying snares for the latter (e.g. Prov 1:10-19; 12:6; 22:5).

In general, when the paths are separate, the righteous course is both morally upright and pleasant, the wicked way both corrupt and hazardous.<sup>457</sup> Thus, the image combines both act and consequence. In so doing, it creates a metaphorical *schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre*. Many correspondences between deed and outcome are evident in this metaphorical world (explored below). The proverbs suggest that these can be transferred to the target domain of the real world, and are true there too. The vagaries of life are clarified by this didactic, simplifying metaphor. It offers a clever rhetorical strategy, encouraging the reader of the truth and obviousness of the connection, and motivating him to a proper ethical course.

### §3.1(b) Didactic explorations

מַסְלֵת יֵשָׁרִים סוּר מִרָע שֹׁמֵר נַפְשׁוֹ נֹצֵר דֶּרֶכוֹ: 16:17

*The highway of the upright is a turning-aside from evil/disaster; he who watches over his path preserves his life.*

The first colon of this proverb transports us to a highway traversed by upright men. Its course depicts their conduct, turning aside from evil (סוּר מִרָע).<sup>458</sup> The infinitive construct allows ambiguity in the subject here. Perhaps the whole highway ‘turns’. The entire course of life is in focus, one’s total disposition. Or it may be the individual traveller, in the specific steps he takes. Even upright men might feel temptations to wickedness, and must actively ‘turn’ at these moments, training their desires in morality.

In so doing, they also end their trajectory to tragedy, for סוּר מִרָע may take a double meaning.<sup>459</sup> רָע is polysemous: both ‘moral evil’ and ‘disaster’. Accordingly, misconduct and

<sup>455</sup> E.g. Baudry (1999); D. P. Bricker, “The Doctrine of the ‘Two Ways’ in Proverbs,” *JETS* 38.4 (1995) pp.501-517; Habel (1972).

<sup>456</sup> Fox (2000) pp.129-131.

<sup>457</sup> Brown (2002b) pp.36-39; Freuling (2004) pp.37-39; K. Koch, “דֶּרֶךְ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament vol.3* (eds. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978) pp.271-273; Koch (1983) pp.135, 164; Nötscher (1958) pp.60-64; Zehnder (1999) *passim*.

<sup>458</sup> Cf. Isa 59:15; Pss 34:15[14], 37:27.

<sup>459</sup> The double meaning is recognised by Delitzsch (1884); Fox (2009); Heim (2013); Waltke (2004).

misfortune are both averted; ‘turning’ becomes a fate-effecting deed. The reader learns to link act and consequence in this metaphorical world, and in his own life. Elsewhere in Proverbs, travellers turn (סור) from Sheol (15:24), and from the ‘snares of death’ (13:14; 14:27). Here, the nature of the hardship is open to the imagination. An undisclosed calamity lurks ominously, motivating wayfarers to change their course.

It may be significant that this is not a generic דֶּרֶךְ ‘path’, but a מַסְלָה ‘highway’,<sup>460</sup> probably a carefully constructed road (Isa 40:3; 49:11; 62:10). N. Tidwell suggests that a מַסְלָה is broad and easily passable, with a gentle gradient. It is well-kept and possibly surfaced, so the traveller stumbles over no rocks nor slips in any mud. Direct and purposeful, well-delimited, so he cannot wander off-course.<sup>461</sup> It is precisely the type of road which ‘avoids harm’ – סור מִרָע. Captured by the appealing prospect of safe passage, the reader is motivated to uprightness.

The second colon pleases the ear with its tight internal parallelism, שָׁמַר נַפְשׁוֹ (‘preserves his life’) closely mirrored by נָצַר דֶּרְכּוֹ (‘watches over his path’).<sup>462</sup> As I have translated them, the former refers to a consequence and the latter to an act. Through phonological and morphological correspondence (both phrases consisting of a qal ms ptc and segholate noun with 3ms suffix), the deed and effect are linked together, fitting for each other. The arrangement could be subject-predicate or predicate-subject, suggesting the mutual entailment of act and consequence. Furthermore, each phrase may intertwine the halves within itself. Elsewhere in Proverbs, שָׁמַר נַפְשׁוֹ refers to preserving one’s own life (13:3; 19:16; 22:5), giving individuals responsibility over their own destiny. The phrase, however, is polysemous, and elsewhere can mean ‘watch yourself’, take care of your ethical behaviour (Deut 4:9 cf. Deut 4:15; Josh 23:11), thus implying an act as well as a consequence.<sup>463</sup>

Similarly, נָצַר דֶּרְכּוֹ may have a double significance. ‘Watching over your way’ may suggest moral conduct. Elsewhere in Proverbs נָצַר refers to ‘keeping’ moral precepts, or ‘paying attention’ to behaviour.<sup>464</sup> Here, you must carefully attend to your moral course, without blithe assumptions of correctness, prepared to turn from any temptation to evil. In so doing, you will ‘protect your

<sup>460</sup> There is some dispute about the referent of this term. Dorsey (1991) pp.228-233 believes it is a major public route: a major regional road, national highway, or international thoroughfare. This remains the standard explanation. N. L. Tidwell, “No Highway! The outline of a semantic description of *mesillā*,” *VT* 45 (1995) pp.251-269 disputes this for the biblical period, suggesting that it is an approach road to a city, turning off the regional roads and ascending to the city gate. These differences in opinion do not greatly change the interpretation of this proverb.

<sup>461</sup> Tidwell (1995) pp.266, 269.

<sup>462</sup> Cf. Prov 13:3a שָׁמַר נַפְשׁוֹ נָצַר פִּי שָׁמַר נַפְשׁוֹ.

<sup>463</sup> Noting the similarity with the phrase שָׁמַר פִּי (Prov 21:23), some scholars suggest this phrase can refer to ‘watching what you say’ (e.g. Heim [2013] on 13:3; Clifford [1999] on 22:5). While נַפֶּשׁ can mean ‘throat’, it is nowhere an organ of speech, so this seems unlikely to me.

<sup>464</sup> Prov 3:1,21; 4:13,23; 5:2; 6:20; 13:3; 28:7; cf. נָצַר + דֶּרֶךְ in an ethical sense in Ps 119:33.

way’, keeping it safe (cf. 2:8,11; 4:6; 13:6; 20:28). “Guard the ramparts, watch the road!” (נִצֹּר (מְצוּרָה צִפֵּה-דֶּרֶךְ) this proverb might say with Nah 2:2[1], for you are responsible for your own safety. Attending to the path becomes a *schicksalwirkende Tat*, impacting both course and condition, conduct and consequence. Ruminating on the interwoven acts and consequences, the reader learns to connect them in his own life.

This interpretation has taken the participles to refer to the traveller. However, if both phrases depict consequences, this may not be necessary. Perhaps, “the one who guards the traveller’s path (i.e. God) preserves his life”. Yahweh has set the highway to avoid harm (cf. 10:29). He will watch over the upright man’s life (cf. 24:12),<sup>465</sup> and protect his way (2:8).<sup>466</sup> Yahweh may stand in the shadows of this constructed world. Through the interpretation process, the reader is trained to peer into the corners of life, and there he might find the divine.

14:22 הֲלוֹא־יִתְּעוּ חֲרָשֵׁי רָע וְחֶסֶד וְאֶמֶת חֲרָשֵׁי טוֹב:

*Do they not go astray, those who devise evil? But kindness and loyalty – those who devise good.*

This proverb contrasts two polar character types: the “devisers of evil” (חֲרָשֵׁי רָע), and the “devisers of good” (חֲרָשֵׁי טוֹב). The terms imply internal dispositions and thought-worlds before any specific actions, and the general designators “evil” and “good” allow an abundance of content. The former characters “go astray” (יִתְּעוּ). This may refer to moral deviation, like the Israelites whom Manasseh “led astray to do evil” (לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הָרָע) 2 Kgs 21:9≈2 Chr 33:9). The image presupposes an ethical norm, a set path. Usually in the HB, this is the divinely given law, but in the non-covenantal discourse of Proverbs, it may suggest wise instructions, societal values, or an inbuilt moral plumb-line. *תעה* can also suggest ‘to stagger about’, as though inebriated (Isa 28:7; Job 12:25); these apparent ‘artisans’ (חֲרָשִׁים) of evil have the true intellectual clarity of drunks. Through its rhetorical question, the colon directly addresses its reader, forces her to think, and compels her assent. She is goaded to view the world through the categories of the sages.

Furthermore, within the proverb’s metaphorical framework, ‘straying’ implies harmful consequences.<sup>467</sup> It is a fate-effecting deed. As she imagines straying from the path, the reader wanders aimlessly, without direction or purpose, like a desolate nomad (Gen 21:14) or a forlorn

<sup>465</sup> Cf. Pss 25:20; 86:2; 97:10; 121:7.

<sup>466</sup> Sometimes personified virtues take this role: Prov 2:11; 4:6; 13:6; 20:28.

<sup>467</sup> Toy (1899) paraphrases “go astray” as “go to destruction” (p.95). So Delitzsch (1884) “Weg zum Verderben” (p.237).

beast (Exod 23:4; Isa 53:6; Ps 119:176). The scorching heat of trackless wastes (Ps 107:4; Job 12:24) is the inevitable fate of deviants – strong motivation against moral error.

In the second colon, “kindness and loyalty” (חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת) are linked with the “devisers of good”, but the nature of the link is not clear. The reader must infer the connection between the juxtaposed phrases, forging associations between previously unconnected phenomena. It may be predicate – subject: such men are benevolence itself!<sup>468</sup> The hyperbolic identification has rhetorical force, and fleshes out ‘goodness’ with social solidarity. The reader must embody beneficence in her own community, so that it characterises her whole being.

Alternatively, “kindness and loyalty” may suggest not acts but consequences. The reader may deduce a double meaning and transfer it to her own life. Perhaps “kindness and loyalty *meet* the devisers of good”.<sup>469</sup> In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian meets many on the road – Piety, Charity, Watchful, Mr. Feeble-Mind. Similarly, our travellers here are greeted by Kindness and Loyalty. Just as Righteousness ‘protects’ (13:6) and Evil ‘pursues’ (13:21), these personifications treat the wayfarer according to their natures. They are trustworthy guides, preventing the travellers from straying, watching over them as diligently as they watch over the king (20:28). Elsewhere they are God’s heralds on the road (Ps 89:15[14]). A divine sender is not mentioned here, but may be hidden in the vagaries of proverbs and life.

10:17 אֶרֶץ חַיִּים שׁוֹמֵר מוֹסֵר וְעוֹזֵב תּוֹכַחַת מִתְּעָה:

*A path to life – one who heeds discipline; but one who rejects reproof leads astray.*

This proverb draws the reader in with a grand offer of “a path to life” (אֶרֶץ חַיִּים). Life, as the epitome of all that is good, is an enticing allure. The path is connected with a character, but the blunt juxtaposition of the nominal phrases means that the relationship between the two is not entirely clear. The reader must discern such links for himself. Perhaps this man walks this path. He is not described as an absolute moral type (like ‘righteous’) but as “one who heeds discipline” (שׁוֹמֵר מוֹסֵר). Accordingly, the moral walk is a communal enterprise, requiring wise guides and discipliners, for no traveller has perfect command of the route. And it is a journey ‘to life’, not an achieved destination.<sup>470</sup> Development of character and conduct are possible, and by heeding advice

<sup>468</sup> Cf. NIV marg., ESV marg.: “show love and faithfulness”. REB: “are loyal and faithful”.

<sup>469</sup> Many translations and commentators. ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NIV, RSV; Clifford (1999); Delitzsch (1884); Murphy (1998b); Toy (1899); Waltke (2004).

<sup>470</sup> Though cf. Prov 2:19; 5:6; 15:24.

(even this proverb’s own advice), the reader may approach this salutary goal. Conversely, “the one who rejects reproof leads astray”. The hiphil *מִתְּעָה* here may be internal: he ‘leads *himself* astray’.<sup>471</sup> And as in 14:22, *תָּעָה* may take the double sense of straying ethically and into disaster. Forsaking instruction, the student forges his own ethically dubious paths, and blindly takes himself into desolation.

But another interpretation is also possible: the proverb does not focus on the ‘heeder’ and ‘rejecter’ alone, but on their actions towards others. The first colon may be equational: the disciple *is himself* a path to life, for others. This counter-intuitive metaphor flexes our interpretive muscles. Others have instructed him; now he himself shows the way. Equally, the untrained man in the second colon leads *others* astray (causative hiphil).<sup>472</sup> The overall interpretation is complex, a mental challenge to train the reader. It involves three characters in each colon: implicitly, (A) ‘disciplines’/‘reproves’ (B); (B) ‘heeds’/‘rejects’ this, and then instructs (C); (C) is consequently led, either ‘to life’ or ‘astray’. The proverb thus describes the acts of (B), and the consequences, not for himself, but for (C). A note of trepidation may enter here, for (C), the one ‘led astray’, may be no moral reprobate, but simply a naïve follower, now lost in arid wastelands. Undeserving of his fate, he hints at problems in an over-dogmatic *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang*.

However, character (B) is not let off freely. In this communal world, guides walk with their travellers, experiencing the same safe paths or trackless deserts. Where he leads others, he leads himself. The reader takes this connection, evident in the metaphorical world, and applies it to his own world. In Prov 10, your attitude to speech and instruction affects your own destiny (10:8b=10b), the destiny of others (10:11a,13,<sup>473</sup>21a), and sometimes both (10:6b=11b,14b).<sup>474</sup> The layers of double meaning imply both here.<sup>475</sup>

<sup>471</sup> Internal hiphils are not uncommon for verbs of motion. E.g. *הִקְרִיב* ‘to (cause oneself to) come close’ (e.g. Exod 14:10); *הִרְחִיק* ‘to (cause oneself to) go far away’ (e.g. Gen 44:4). Though the passage is difficult, an internal hiphil of *הִתְּעָה* ‘to (cause oneself to) go astray’ may also occur in Jer 42:20. See IBHS 27.2g.

<sup>472</sup> The object is elided, as in Isa 3:12; Hos 4:12.

<sup>473</sup> This assumes 10:13b to provide a second subject for *תִּמְצָא* in 13a: “on the lips of the discerning is found... a rod for the back of the senseless”. The wise punish fools through their words.

<sup>474</sup> In 14b, the fool’s mouth brings ruin to himself and others (see pp.99-100 above). 10:6b=11b reads *וּפִי רְשָׁעִים יִכָּסֶה* וּפִי חָסֵד. There is a subject-object ambiguity here, and the colon could mean “the mouth of the wicked covers violence”, or “violence covers the mouth of the wicked”. The first arrangement might suggest that the wicked do violence, and seek to hide it through the words (act), e.g. Fox (2009). This would provide an antithetical parallelism to 11a, which speaks of words’ effect on others. In the second arrangement, perhaps violence comes upon the wicked man (consequence), just as blessings are upon the righteous in 6a, e.g. Clifford (1999).

<sup>475</sup> Double meaning is recognised by Clifford (1999); Murphy (1998*b*); Waltke (2004).

11:5 צִדְקַת תְּמִים תִּישֹׁר דְּרָכּוֹ וּבְרָשָׁעָתוֹ יִפֹּל רָשָׁע:

*The righteousness of blameless men straightens/levels his way; but in his wickedness the wicked man falls.*

If those in 14:22a and 10:17b are going astray, those in 11:5a are doing their utmost to avoid this. They intentionally ‘straighten’ (תִּישֹׁר) their way against tempting deviations (cf. Prov 4:25; 9:15; 15:21), walking the ethical line set by God, society, or inbuilt morality. This action stems from their ‘righteousness’ (צִדְקָה), character determining conduct. In תִּישֹׁר, they also ‘level’ their way: removing obstacles, smoothing the surface (e.g. Isa 40:3-4; 45:2).<sup>476</sup> Undoubtedly a laborious process, this metaphor suggests the careful, wearisome work required for ethical development. The result, however, is worth the effort. The straight/level path is smooth and easily traversable, giving no cause for stumbling (Jer 31:9). It is direct, destination in sight (Ps 107:7), promising a safe passage (Ezra 8:21). In this metaphorical world, straightening/levelling one’s path is a *schicksalwirkende Tat*, leading to a prosperous journey. The reader deduces this connection, blends it with the situations of her own world, and is motivated to righteousness.

The wicked man, however, walks a very different path, which the reader infers (through the imprecise parallelism) cannot be smooth or straight. Indeed, along its course, he ‘falls’. The fall however cannot be blamed on extraneous circumstances, but only on his own character: it is “because of his wickedness” (בְּרָשָׁעָתוֹ, parsing the ב causally<sup>477</sup>). Or (the ב interpreted locatively), he falls ‘into’ his wickedness. Perhaps ‘wickedness’ encloses his character, ingraining him in patterns of sin from which he cannot escape. Furthermore, it suggests his consequential downfall. Far from straight level paths, pits and snares may hide round a corner or beneath the uneven surface (cf. Prov 13:14; 14:27; 22:5; 26:27; 28:10).<sup>478</sup> In the reader’s imagining, ‘his wickedness’ (רָשָׁעָתוֹ) might become ‘his net’ (רֶשֶׁתוֹ), to entangle and entrap. Perceiving the soundplay, the reader connects act and consequence. And this is ‘his’ wickedness/net – completely in line with his character, entirely his responsibility. Elsewhere, a psalmist pleads “let the wicked fall into their own nets (וְיִפְּלוּ בַּמִּכְמָרֵי רָשָׁעִים)” (Ps 141:10); here, he has his wish. The wicked man

<sup>476</sup> L. Alonso Schökel, “יִשֹּׁר,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol.6 (eds. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) pp.463-472; Dorsey (1991) p.3.

<sup>477</sup> WHS P.247.

<sup>478</sup> The ‘hazard’ metaphor is continued into the following proverb, which seems paired thematically, lexically, and syntactically with this one. 11:6b reads: וּבְהִנֹּת בְּגִדִּים יִלְכְּדוּ: “In the desire/disaster of the treacherous, they are captured”. The meaning of הִנֹּת is disputed. It may be a by-form of אָוָה ‘desire’ (cf. Prov 10:3; Mic 7:3; Ps 52:9[7]), or an unusual singular form of הָוָה ‘disaster’ (cf. Job 6:2; 30:13). It is possible that a wordplay is intended, connecting act with consequence. Either way, the ‘hazard’ metaphor entraps wrongdoers here too.

characteristically lays traps for others, but becomes his own prey (cf. Prov 26:27, 28:10).<sup>479</sup> Just recompense provides a heavy disincentive from wickedness.

### *Conclusion*

Weaving through their metaphorical worlds, the proverbs' open paths can be explored extensively. In these worlds, act and consequence often correspond. Disciples offer "a path to life" to others, and walk one themselves (10:17). Do-gooders act in and experience "kindness and loyalty" (14:22). Some deeds prove fate-effecting, with a single phrase encompassing both act and consequence. "Watching over" and "straightening" your way ensure good conduct and consequences simultaneously. "Straying" and setting traps are ethical misdemeanours and harbingers of destruction. Within the logic of this metaphorical world, such connections are obvious. The readers discern the patterns, and can blend them imaginatively with the situations of their own lives.

This may provide strong incentive to good behaviour. Why stray morally if it means wandering in the wilderness? Why lay a net if you will get tangled in it yourself? Your choice of path, your total disposition, determines each fate-effecting deed, making character development paramount. Life is a journey, and with careful and constant attention, progress is possible.

No interventionist agents are named. If I find myself forlornly wandering the wilderness, I have my own ethical wanderings to blame. No external agent is needed for "straying" to entail "straying". Sometimes, though, a divine map-maker may be implicit. And sometimes social agency is stressed: we are each other's guides. Through this, a hint of unease enters the act-consequence connection, for it is possible to lead undeserving victims astray (14:22; 10:17), or set a net for their feet (11:5).

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<sup>479</sup> Cf. also Pss 9:16-17[15-16]; 57:7[6].



### §3.2 Dining on destruction

#### §3.2(a) Introduction

Our second metaphorical schema welcomes the reader into the banquet hall. From Lady Wisdom's feast (9:1-6) to the 'delicious morsels' of the whisperer (18:8, 26:22), food metaphors abound in Proverbs,<sup>480</sup> whetting the reader's tastebuds, or setting him retching in disgust. The metaphor is accessible to all, and provides training for the sensory imagination. In the proverbs examined here, individuals eat, ingest, are filled with, evil itself. It may empower their activity, energising their wicked deeds, but it may also prove a poison.

In the HB, wicked qualities sometimes become a foodstuff, greedily consumed by wrongdoers, and characterising their subsequent action.<sup>481</sup> Men drink injustice (עוֹלָה) and scoffing (לַעֲג) like water (Job 15:16; 34:7). They salivate over the sweet savour of sin, hiding trouble (עֲמָל), iniquity (אָוֶן), and evil (רָעָה) under their tongues (Ps 10:7; Job 20:12). They feast on the "bread of wickedness" (לֶחֶם רָשָׁע) and "wine of violence" (יַיִן הַמָּסִים, Prov 4:17). Fools feed on folly (אֹלֶת, Prov 15:14).<sup>482</sup> Such food energises them and creates their character, for in this metaphorical world, 'you are what you eat'.<sup>483</sup> But as much as food empowers, it can also poison.<sup>484</sup> The Lord pours the foaming cup of his wrath,<sup>485</sup> and fills the belly with his fury (חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ, Job 20:23). Lamenting psalmists drink deep of anguished tears (Pss 42:3; 80:6[5]; 102:9). Men are filled with sorrow (יָגוֹן, Ezek 23:33) and sated with shame (קִלְיוֹן, Hab 2:16), and drink the violence they suffer (חֲמָס, Prov 26:6).

Thus, eating may be a *schicksalwirkende Tat* – at once empowering activity and effecting consequences. In the proverbs examined here, an individual consumes evil. Act and consequence are infused together in a single draught: an elixir that energises evil activity, but simultaneously poisons its drinker. Adding this to the mix of her own life, the reader is powerfully disincentivised from evil.

<sup>480</sup> See Brown (2004).

<sup>481</sup> Stewart (2016) p.139.

<sup>482</sup> Cf. also imagery of being 'filled with' (מָלֵא) negative behaviour, e.g. 'violence' חֲמָס in Ezek 28:16, Mic 6:12; 'indignation' זַעַם in Jer 15:17; 'wrath' חֲמָה in Jer 6:11.

<sup>483</sup> G. S. Goering, "Honey and Wormwood: Taste and the embodiment of wisdom in the book of Proverbs.," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 5.1 (2016) pp.32-34.

<sup>484</sup> On the 'bad taste' metaphor for distress, see P. D. King, *Surrounded by Bitterness: Image schemas and metaphor for conceptualizing distress in classical Hebrew* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012) pp.322-354.

<sup>485</sup> Isa 51:17,22; Jer 25:15; Ezek 23:33; Zech 12:2; Hab 2:16; Pss 11:6, 75:9[8]; Job 21:20.

## §3.2(b) Didactic explorations

19:28 עד בליעל יליץ משפט ופי רשעים יבלע-און:

*A worthless witness scoffs at justice; and the mouth of the wicked scoffs down iniquity/trouble.*

This proverb begins in the law court, with a man of such perverted values that he mocks justice. The second colon explains his behaviour: the worthless man (בליעל) ‘scoffs’ because he is full of the iniquity he has ‘scoffed down’ (יבלע).<sup>486</sup> Repetition of ב-ל-ע and double pataḥ patterns forge a phonic and conceptual unity here.<sup>487</sup> Iniquity (און) comes into the man; scoffing comes out. Iniquity is almost an independent force, poisoning his actions, ingraining him in sin.<sup>488</sup> We act out of what we have internalised to our characters, and here character has become extreme: prototypically ‘wicked’.

In Proverbs’ urgency to shape the holistic moral self with its desires, this metaphor suggests the wicked man’s appetite for wrongdoing. He ‘devours’ it, greedily gobbling it up, for evil tastes sweet to the wicked (Job 20:12; cf. Prov 9:17, 18:8=26:22). The reader deduces that this is an abominable desire, and shapes his own desires in opposition. The language suggests the man’s thoughtlessness: he acts impulsively from his unrestrained appetite, without consideration of consequences.

But consequences will come. The promised feast turns to poison, and the meaning of און turns from ‘iniquity’ to ‘trouble’. With caricatured idiocy, the wicked man gobbles up his own punishment, and the reader is goaded to judge his sensibleness. No external agency is indicated; the disaster is entirely self-inflicted. The content of this disaster, gut-wrenching and inescapable, is left to the reader’s imagination, repulsing him from wickedness. The reader deduces the inevitable connection between act and consequence in this proverb.<sup>489</sup> Using the same word, און,

<sup>486</sup> The translation (with ‘scoffs’ framing the centre of the verse) intends to capture the aesthetic effect of the wordplay.

<sup>487</sup> This striking assonance is probably why piel was chosen here rather than qal. In qal, בלע means ‘to swallow down’, but in piel, it usually means ‘to destroy’. An ‘eating’ sense here is accepted by most commentators, and is suggested by (a) the reference to the ‘mouth’ (פי); (b) the antithesis with the *a* colon (giving out – taking in); (c) the semantic difficulty of usual piel sense (‘destroys iniquity?’); (d) the possible meaning ‘devour’ for piel בלע in Prov 21:21; (e) the proverb’s resultant fit within the metaphorical schema delineated here.

<sup>488</sup> This ‘act’ interpretation is accepted by e.g. Barucq (1972); Clifford (1999); Delitzsch (1884); Fox (2009); V. A. Hurovitz, *עם מבוא ופרוש משלי: מקרא לישראל* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2012).

- Some reject it because iniquitous acts should be given out, not taken in, and propose emending to יביע ‘he utters’. BHS; Toy (1899); Gemser (1963); H. Ringgren and W. Zimmerli, *Sprüche/Prediger* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962). However, this disrupts the soundplay and is unnecessary.

- Others suggest a connection with the Arabic root *balāḡa* ‘to be eloquent’. HALOT; McKane (1970). But this is a speculative stretch for a common Hebrew verb.

<sup>489</sup> Double meaning recognised by Waltke (2004); hinted at by L. Alonso Schökel, *Proverbios* (Nueva Biblia española Sapienciales 1; Madrid: Cristiandad, 1984); Murphy (1998b).

to depict both suggests they are appropriate to one another in degree and kind. Devouring iniquity is fate-effecting, and the ensuing disaster is of bowel-trembling intensity.

12:21 לֹא-יֵאָנֶה לַצַּדִּיק כָּל-אֵין וּרְשָׁעִים מְלֵאוּ רָע:

*No harm befalls the righteous; but the wicked are full of evil/disaster.*

רָע fills the wicked. While the opposite prototype, the righteous man, avoids even external harm (21a), the wicked are saturated with disaster, total and all-consuming.<sup>490</sup> Elsewhere, the Lord ‘fills’ the hungry with ‘good’ (מְלֵא טוֹב, Ps 107:9, cf. 104:28), but here, the stative verb (מְלֵא, qal) means there is no hint of external agency. Our fixed and sickened gaze is on the wicked man’s self-inflicted and irremediable state, capturing the imagination, and powerfully motivating against wickedness.

However, רָע is polysemous and may refer not just to disastrous consequences, but to the man’s evil *acts*.<sup>491</sup> Some scholars reject this interpretation, arguing that because consequences are depicted in the *a* colon, parallel consequences are needed in *b*.<sup>492</sup> However, as we have seen (§2), Proverbs revels in such imprecision, for the gap-filling potential it provides. Perhaps “the wicked are filled with evil acts [*and harm befalls them*]” (supplying a reversal from *a*). The reader thus works out the connection between act and consequence. Furthermore, the very preceding verse has the same imbalance. In 12:20, the good receive joy (a ‘consequence’; 20b), but the evil have deceit in their hearts (an ‘act’; 20a). The heart in 12:20 houses deceit, presumably determining character and activity (cf. 12:23). The whole being in 12:21 is pervaded with evil; how much more will this infiltrate their deeds. Just as Jeremiah cannot hold in the wrath that fills him (מְלֵא, Jer 6:11), our wicked man brims with an evil that will inevitably overflow into action. The proverb is stark in its absolute statement: wicked men are full of evil, and that alone.

The proverb, then, is open to implications of both act and consequence, and presents them together under the figure מְלֵאוּ רָע.<sup>493</sup> In this metaphorical world, allowing evil to fill you becomes a *schicksalwirkende Tat*. The wicked man may think he has mastery over it, but he gets ingrained in patterns of ill, whose potency rebounds and infects his being with disaster. The metaphor is

<sup>490</sup> So McKane (1970); Murphy (1998b); Waltke (2004).

<sup>491</sup> Yoder (2009).

<sup>492</sup> Waltke (2004).

<sup>493</sup> Double meaning is recognised by Clifford (1999); Fox (2009).

didactic, making accessible this somewhat complex view of morality. It further suggests that the connection is inevitable and obvious: of course you will suffer if you fill yourself with such poison.

13:2 מִפִּי פִי־אִישׁ יֹאכֵל טוֹב וְנֶפֶשׁ בְּגֵדִים חָמָס:

*From the fruit of a man's mouth, one/he will eat good; but the throat of the treacherous (will eat) violence.  
but the desire of the treacherous is for violence.*

Three threads of double-meaning intertwine in 13:2a. First, it offers us “the fruit of a man’s mouth” (cf. 12:14; 18:21). On the one hand, this metaphor may depict speech, the fruit which the mouth produces (an ‘act’). The fruit here proves ‘good’ (טוֹב), so the reader deduces that the speaker (simply designated a ‘man’ [אִישׁ]) is ‘good’ too.<sup>494</sup> The lack of the expected character ascription leaves us wondering, and encourages us to apply an important principle: character is known through speech and action. But on the other hand, the metaphor also suggests ‘consequences’ – the fruit the mouth enjoys. Here, the identity of the eater is unclear, providing the second thread of double meaning. יֹאכֵל has no explicit subject: a second individual or the speaker himself may ‘eat’ (translating ‘one’ and ‘he’ respectively). That is to say, the speaker gives good fruit to others (‘act’) and enjoys it himself (‘consequence’). Third, the good consumed may both empower the eater’s actions, and characterise the benefits he receives.

Conversely “the throat of the treacherous eats violence”. This interprets נֶפֶשׁ in its physiological sense ‘throat’, and assumes יֹאכֵל to be gapped into the second colon.<sup>495</sup> Earlier in Proverbs, the wicked “drink the wine of violence” (4:17). Here the treacherous ‘eat’ it, taking it in as the directing and energising fuel for their acts. The verb here (אָכַל) is less forceful than ‘devour’ (בָּלַע) in 19:28. Violence has become commonplace, as natural as eating and drinking. Mealtime routine structures the day, and violence the lives of the wicked. Developing the habits, and hence the character, of the ‘good’ must fuel the reader instead.

Alternatively, ‘eating violence’ may depict a consequence (cf. Prov 26:6). Its poison burns the insides and cannot be escaped, as surely as you cannot escape from yourself. The treacherous men in this proverb, then, are immensely foolish. They mean violence as their elixir, but it inevitably turns toxic. It is fate-effecting to dine on such destruction, and no external agent can be blamed. The metaphor teaches the reader to conceptualise good and violence in this new and

<sup>494</sup> The lack of explicit character qualification may have been problematic for the Greek translator, who designates the individual as an ἀγαθός ‘good man’.

<sup>495</sup> So e.g. KJV, Fox (2009). Some object to this interpretation because the נֶפֶשׁ is nowhere else said to ‘eat’. E.g. Toy (1899). But elsewhere it is hungry, thirsty, satisfied, and filled, so this seems a natural extension.

didactically useful way. Through the imaginative leap, she learns that act and consequence are baked together in a single dish.

Prov 13:2-4 focalises the נָפֶשׁ, with even an acrostic in the central proverb (the first letters of the words in 13:3 are ...נפשנפש). The term occurs in each of these verses and its various meanings are played with, prohibiting a simple, unified translation – NABRE gives ‘throat’, ‘self’, ‘appetite’; ESV ‘desire’, ‘life’, ‘soul’. The ‘throat’ as the locus of the appetite can provide a semantic extension to ‘desire’. This may be the case in 13:2, requiring the syntax of *b* to be reparsed as an equational clause: “the desire of the treacherous is (for) violence”.<sup>496</sup> This creates an unbalanced parallelism in the proverb, from which the reader infers that that the man in *a* does *not* desire violence, and the treacherous will *not* eat good.<sup>497</sup> Improper desire may be faintly hinted in 13:3,<sup>498</sup> and it is outright condemned in 13:4 – “the נָפֶשׁ of the sluggard craves and gets nothing”. The triad of proverbs aims to shape the reader’s desires as well as her actions. Woe betide her if she fosters violent longings; she must look only to good fruit (13:2a).

The two parsings of *b* may work together, one providing the logical precursor to the other. “The desire of the treacherous is for violence”. So, imprudently, they make it their meal, and “the throat of the treacherous eats violence”. They will suffer accordingly. Working out, imagining, and elaborating such a narrative trains the reader to internalise Proverbs’ logic for her own life.

<sup>496</sup> So Delitzsch (1884); Toy (1899); Waltke (2004). נָפֶשׁ rarely refers to righteous desires, but designates those of evil men in e.g. Exod 15:9; Ezek 16:27; Ps 27:13[12].

<sup>497</sup> The lack of precise parallelism has proved difficult for some interpreters (see discussion in J. A. Emerton, “The Meaning of Proverbs XIII.2,” *JTS* 35 [1984] pp.91-95), and some suspect textual corruption (e.g. Toy [1899]).

<sup>498</sup> The one who “opens wide his lips” (פֶּשֶׁק שְׁפָתָיו) is probably a rash talker, but in the context of vv.2 and 4 could hint at the greedy man too.

עֲרֵב לְאִישׁ לֶחֶם שֶׁקֶר וְאַחֵר יִמְלֵא-פִיהוּ חֶצֶץ: 20:17

*Sweet to a man is the bread of lies; but afterwards his mouth will be filled with gravel.*

The foodstuff here is more concrete than in previous examples: the ‘bread of lies’ (לֶחֶם שֶׁקֶר). Perhaps this is physical food, earned through deceitful enterprise (genitive of means),<sup>499</sup> a practice elsewhere condemned in Proverbs (11:18; 13:11<sup>500</sup>). Or perhaps the bread is figurative, the ‘lies’ describing not its source, but its constitution (attributive genitive). The man delights in falsehoods and indulges in them as his meal. Deceit thereby enters his very being. It becomes his daily bread, habituated into his character. As in Prov 13:2, he is simply a ‘man’ (אִישׁ) without ethical qualification; the reader must evaluate his morality for himself.

The sweetness (עֲרֵב) of this bread is an acute psychological insight: the sensual pleasures and immediate gratification of wrongdoing can be seductive. The wicked refuse to spit out the evil they suck (Job 20:12-13), while Lady Folly’s lips drip honey (Prov 5:3). The reader is teased with a promise which may tempt every ‘man’ (אִישׁ). However, sweetness turns to venom (Job 20:14) and honey to wormwood (Prov 5:4). Here, in what is possibly a subtle soundplay,<sup>501</sup> desire (חֶפֶץ) dissipates as bread turns to gravel (חֶצֶץ). This has the last word, and the sensory experience is reoriented. A jolt of the jaw as it grinds on gravel (cf. Lam 3:16), disgust replaces the pleasantries, and the senses are stirred against deceit. The psychological jolt occasioned by the unexpected trains the reader for encountering unforeseen events in life, even if as absurd and vile as a faceful of stones.

This leads to a second interpretation of שֶׁקֶר – not as lies the man engages in, but as a quality of the bread itself, for it deceives its eater.<sup>502</sup> Elsewhere, rulers offer deceptive food (לֶחֶם כְּזָבִים, Prov 23:3) which provides no sustenance. Here, no third party is involved; interest is solely on the eater and his responsibility. As B. Waltke remarks, “[i]n poetic justice, the deceptive fare the liar and cheat dished out to others now turns around and deceives him”.<sup>503</sup> A true correspondence of act and consequence: a lie for a lie. While the previous proverbs stressed the sheer obviousness of the connection, a nuance is added here. For those not trained in wisdom, wicked acts are deceptive. They may look beneficial, but they will harm you in the end (cf. Prov

<sup>499</sup> WHS P.45b; Delitzsch (1884); McKane (1970).

<sup>500</sup> See pp.41-42 on polysemies in these verses.

<sup>501</sup> So Stewart (2016) p.149.

<sup>502</sup> Fox (2009); R. C. van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (eds. L. Ryken and T. Longmann III; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993) pp.256-267.

<sup>503</sup> Waltke (2004) p.146.

14:12=16:25). The proverbs thus counsel scrutiny: “observe carefully what is before you” (Prov 23:1).

### Conclusion

These four proverbs offer a rich metaphorical world, open to exploration. The controlling image is ‘dining on destruction’: the individual consumes something evil, and his acts and their consequences are characterised accordingly. The readers are encouraged to explore this world – with its implications, patterns of reasoning, and nuances – and to blend it into the situations of their own worlds. Openness occurs through the generality of the key terms – שָׂקָר, חָמָס, רָע, אֲוֹן – which may refer to acts or to consequences. Designated by the same word, the latter is befitting to the former. In this metaphorical world, consumption is *schicksalwirkend*, fate-effecting. If you internalise evil, it will inevitably harm you. Applied to the reader’s own world, such patterns of reasoning provide strong moral motivation.

Unlike elsewhere in the HB, where harmful food is given by another,<sup>504</sup> no external agents are named here. Rather, the eater himself is responsible. His character is paramount, controlling both what he does and what he experiences. As food enters the digestive system and energises the body, wickedness enters the wrongdoer and empowers his activity. It takes hold of him, ingraining him in patterns of wrong. Hence the importance of character development, habitually nourishing yourself through proper practice. The proverbs show the appetites of the wicked, and even make them look ‘sweet’ (20:17). But they teach condemnation of such cravings, shaping the reader’s own desires.

Thus the proverbs offer their own categories and patterns as a lens for viewing the world. Their metaphorical framework simplifies a complex view of morality and the readers are powerfully disincentivised through their promise of poison. Consider your food before you eat, lest it turn toxic. Consider your deed before you do it, lest it prove a *schicksalwirkende Tat*.

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<sup>504</sup> See King (2012) e.g. p.348.

### §3.3 Used as proverbs

In addition to its didactic benefits, the openness of these ‘path’ and ‘dining’ sayings helps them to function ‘as proverbs’. They become multi-situational and multi-functional. In part, this is due to their *generality* and *metaphor*, and their *multiple base meanings*. I will use 16:17 and 19:28 as examples here, though the principles apply more widely.

16:17 מַסְלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל סוּר מִרַע שֹׁמֵר נַפְשׁוֹ נֹצֵר דֶּרֶכוֹ:

*The highway of the upright is a turning-aside from evil/disaster; he who watches over his path preserves his life.*

19:28 עֵד בְּלִיעַל יִלִּין מִשֹּׁפֵט וּפִי רָשָׁעִים יִבְלַע־אֶוֶן:

*A worthless witness scoffs at justice; and the mouth of the wicked scoffs down iniquity/trouble.*

In the ‘imprecise parallelisms’ of the previous section, the proverbs each contained a concrete ‘act’, easily mapped onto the context. Someone ‘hates a lying word’ (13:5); another ‘receives commandments’ (10:8). No such straightforward description occurs in the proverbs here. Rather, they are expressed through *metaphor*: someone ‘walks a path’; another ‘consumes a meal’. Applying a metaphor to a situational context is a complex, imaginative process (see ch.2, §3.3). Saying ‘my pathway turns’ (16:17), I might blend my encyclopaedic knowledge of this image with many different situations. If I discover minor ills that need careful negotiation, my imagined path might undulate gently. If I foresee a major disaster, it makes a hairpin. The ‘highway’ might run through my economic enterprises (I perhaps recall its careful construction); social relationships (imagining fellow travellers); religious affairs (picturing a pilgrimage procession).

The presence of the ‘worthless witness’ means that 19:28 is most obviously applied in the judicial sphere. But the witness may also be a figurative of unjust individuals more broadly. Then the connotations of ‘scoffing down’ might change too. In economics, it may imply money-grabbing; in society, selfishness; in religion, thoughtless irreverence.

Furthermore, the *generality* in these proverbs makes them multi-applicable. What is the ‘evil’ from which my pathway turns? What the ‘iniquity’ in which the wicked indulge? Scamming a customer (e.g. 11:1)? Quarrelling with a spouse (21:9)? Scorning an offering (14:9)? These general terms also increase the proverbs’ *evaluative* potential. If I say ‘the highway of the upright turns from evil’ (16:17), I have evaluated not only my interlocutor as ‘upright’, but the action avoided as ‘evil’. If ‘wicked men gobble up iniquity’ (19:28), my referent is ‘wicked’, and furthermore, his acts



are ‘iniquitous’. By speaking the proverb, I have claimed the situation for my evaluative system, applying and nuancing the categories inherited from the sages. I call on my hearer to do the same.

The proverbs are not, however, so vague that they cannot find traction in the circumstances. Most do contain some indication of a concrete action, some ‘hook’ to attach onto the context.<sup>505</sup> 19:28a entails that the wicked man has made a mockery of justice. In 16:17a, not only has my hearer not done evil, but he has actively turned from it, implying some previous temptation to a wicked course.

Finally, as shown throughout this chapter, the ‘path’ and ‘dining’ proverbs are open to *different base meanings*. Particularly, they might describe the *act* done, or the *consequences* received. ‘Turning from פֶּתַח’ means not only avoiding ethical ‘evil’, but consequential ‘disaster’. ‘Gobbling up נֶאֱסַף’ is not only acting in ‘iniquity’, but suffering the resultant ‘trouble’. Applied to a context, one or other of these nuances may come to the fore. Accordingly, the proverbs may not only evaluate, but motivate and direct. ‘Be upright!’ I imply, ‘so that your path turns from disaster’ (16:17). ‘Don’t be wicked! Or you’ll be gobbling up trouble’ (19:28). Powerful incentive lies in these dramatic consequences, expressed inexplicitly to entice the mind. Hearers are left to imagine, and thereby to disincentivise themselves. The double meaning, if perceived, allows the proverbs simultaneously to evaluate and direct.

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<sup>505</sup> These proverbs could be spoken when someone has for example: devised good/evil (14:22); shown kindness/loyalty (14:22); received/not received discipline (10:17); ‘straightened’ their way (11:5); ‘fallen’ (11:5); scoffed (19:28); engaged in/desired violence (13:2); indulged in bread/benefits/lies (20:17). Only 12:21 seems to have no concrete hook.

#### §4. Problematising polysemies

We have considered proverbs opened by parallelism and imagery. The final examples in this chapter mainly use polysemy. Through their openness, they may undermine a dogmatic understanding of the act-consequence connection. The proverbs in §2 above stressed the predictability of the world order, but gave hints of ambiguity. Here the ambiguity is more prevalent. I suggest that these proverbs each have a double interpretation. One interpretation affirms the world order and its act-consequence nexus; the other subverts it. Not only may contradictions emerge *between* proverbs therefore,<sup>506</sup> but even *within* them, between different interpretations of the polysemy. Readers may be torn between the meanings, or apply each to a different situation.

##### §4.1 Didactic explorations

11:24 יֵשׁ מְפִיזֵר וְנוֹסֵף עוֹד וְחוֹשֵׁד מִיֶּשָׁר אֶדְ-לִמְחִסּוֹר:

*There is one who scatters, and he is increased more; and one who holds back from uprightness – only to scarcity.*

Prov 11:24 provokes the reader with its bald assertion of paradox:<sup>507</sup> giving out gives back; holding back back-fires. Aphorism-like, its enigma draws the reader in to train his mind. Furthermore, there is an additional complexity: the evaluation of the characters' morality, and hence whether they deserve their destiny, is open to interpretation. By one reading, the proverb affirms the act-consequence connection, but problematising polysemies may undermine it.

Rather than describe a prototypical character type, the first colon introduces the מְפִיזֵר – the 'scatterer'. The verb suggests wide and haphazard dispersal. This may depict charitable giving. Like the righteous one who "has scattered (פִּיזֵר), has given to the poor" (Ps 112:9), the man here may be a model of magnanimity, liberally bestowing his own bounty on all (cf. Prov 14:21,31; 19:17; 21:26; 22:9). For the student, he becomes a paradigm for emulation. But the verb itself is vague, reticent about its object and motive.<sup>508</sup> The mere activity of 'scattering' does not reveal the character beneath (in contrast with the obvious manifestations of character in acts elsewhere). Economically, it may suggest broad investment of personal finances, for who knows "which will

<sup>506</sup> E.g. Hatton (2008).

<sup>507</sup> Proverbs beginning with שׁ often present paradoxes (e.g. 13:7,23; 14:12=16:25 cf. Qoh 2:21; 7:15; 8:14; Sir 4:21; 6:9,10; 10:31; 11:11,12).

<sup>508</sup> Elsewhere, the objects are diverse: sheep (Jer 50:17); bones (Pss 53:6[5]; 141:7); enemies (Ps 89:11[10]); frost (Ps 147:16); nations (Joel 4:2[3:2]; Esth 3:8).

prosper, this or that” (Qoh 11:1-6). The proverb then offers morally neutral business acumen.<sup>509</sup> Or, the ‘scatterer’ may be a reckless spender.<sup>510</sup> Elsewhere, Proverbs commends financial prudence (e.g. 11:15; 17:18; 20:16), and warns that the “lover of wine and oil will not be rich” (21:17). Here, the character may have no such quibbles, but indulges his fancies with unrestrained relish.

In contrast is set the *חושד מִיֶּשֶׁר*, ‘the one who holds back from uprightness’. If the scatterer is generous, he is the opposite: an anti-social, tight-fisted miser. *יֶשֶׁר* is here taken metonymically, ‘what is right’ (cf. Job 33:23). The *מִן* may be ablative – ‘holds back (from doing) what is right’<sup>511</sup> – or comparative – ‘holds back (more than) what is right’. Either way, he is an antitype to avoid. Niggardliness in Proverbs may bespeak deeper ills, for “the righteous gives and does not hold back” (*לֹא יִחְשֹׁד*; Prov 21:26). But ‘holding back’ is not always negative. In fact, perhaps the man holds back, i.e. saves money, ‘because of his uprightness’ (*מִיֶּשֶׁר*, parsing the *מִן* causally, and taking *יֶשֶׁר* in its usual sense as a character quality).<sup>512</sup> The proverb then speaks of prudence, financial decisions rooted in an upright character.

Overall, then, the proverb may contrast the generous with the miserly, or the reckless with cautious. And they all get the opposite of what their behaviour would suggest. The scatterer is increased again (*נוסף עוד*), and the refrainer comes to poverty (*אֵד לְמַחְסוֹר*, cf. 14:23; 21:5; 22:16). No agent is specified behind these fates; indeed, the first colon gives a passive, and the second a blunt juxtaposition. The connection remains unexplained, impelling the reader to wonder.

If the generous and miserly are in view, then the proverb upholds the act-consequence connection. Unambiguously in 28:27, and implicitly here too, “whoever gives to the poor will have no scarcity” (*אֵין מַחְסוֹר*; cf. also 22:16). Acts will be recompensed in kind; by the Lord, by society, by some intrinsic causality, the options are open. The proverb motivates the reader to embody beneficence and shun parsimony. This interpretation is supported by literary context. The proverb compilers have followed this verse with two similar sayings, each emphatically affirming the *Zusammenhang*: “<sup>25</sup>A soul which blesses will be enriched; and one who waters, he too will be watered. <sup>26</sup>The one who holds back grain, the people curse; but blessing is on the head of the one who sells it”.

However, each proverb must also be allowed to speak in its own right. As the reader ponders 11:24, he may contemplate the possibility of the reckless man’s riches and the prudent

<sup>509</sup> Murphy (1998b); possibility raised by McKane (1970); Yoder (2009).

<sup>510</sup> Fox (2009).

<sup>511</sup> Cf. e.g. 1 Sam 25:39 – *חָשַׁד מְרֵעָה* ‘he held back from (doing) evil’; also Ps 19:14[13].

<sup>512</sup> Fox (2009). On causal *min*, see WHS P.319. Cf. 2 Sam 3:11; Ish-bosheth could not answer ‘because of his fear’ (*מִיֶּרֶאָתוֹ*).

man's penury, contradicting act-consequence logic. Such cynical paradoxes are known from late Egyptian texts. So Pap. Ins. 7.15-16: "It is not the wise man who saves who finds a surplus. Nor is it the one who spends who becomes poor".<sup>513</sup> In Prov 11:24, the possible double meaning may serve to train the reader's mind. He must acknowledge ambiguities in proverbs and the world, judging the interpretations through wisdom and experience.

11:16 אֲשֶׁת־חַן תִּתְמַד כְּבוֹד וְעֲרִיצִים יִתְמְכוּ־עֶשֶׂר:

*The gracious woman takes hold of honour; ruthless men take hold of riches.*

The beginning of 11:16 seems to present clear *Tun-Ergeben* logic. Like the widely-praised woman of valour (אֲשֶׁת־חַיִל; Prov 31:28,31), the woman of grace (אֲשֶׁת־חַן) attains society's greatest reward: honour. The *b* colon provides parallel syntax and verbal repetition, suggesting its message will be complementary. But instead, the *Zusammenhang* seems violated, for it is violent men (עֲרִיצִים) who attain wealth. The psychological jolt forces deep reflection. (How) can the saying be true? How can the unexpected be managed, in proverbs and life?

Assured in the conviction that *good people get good things*, the reader might search for a positive meaning in the second colon. Some suggest emendation – from עֲרִיצִים to חֲרוּצִים 'diligent men'.<sup>514</sup> The Versions possibly offer some support for this, but it is more likely that they were smoothing over difficult Hebrew than working from a different *Vorlage*.<sup>515</sup> Others propose that עֲרִיץ has a positive connotation here. Thus "strong men" (Murphy) are rewarded with riches.<sup>516</sup> The proverb would commend graciousness to women, and energetic vitality to men, as gender-appropriate routes to success.<sup>517</sup> G. R. Driver draws attention to an Arabic cognate *'ariṣim*, referring to vigorous activity without value judgement.<sup>518</sup> However, arguments from cognates are notoriously difficult,<sup>519</sup>

<sup>513</sup> See whole of 7.13-19, *AEL* 3:191; also Ankhsheshonq 26.7, *AEL* 3:179. Fox (2009) p.542.

<sup>514</sup> BHS; Alonso Schökel (1984); Fox (2009); Gemser (1963); Oesterley (1929); Ringgren (1962).

<sup>515</sup> LXX has ἀνδρείοι (manly, vigorous), which translates חֲרוּץ in Prov 10:4; 13:4, and Pesh (+ Targ) has 'מץ' (strong), which translates חֲרוּץ in Prov 12:24; 13:4. The change in MT may have been provoked by mishearing ח for ע. However, LXX and Pesh both have an extra couplet inserted in between the cola, and seem to be creative reworkings. See Hatton (2008) pp.108-109 on the Greek translation.

<sup>516</sup> Murphy (1998b) cf. Barucq (1972) "les hommes énergetiques". Early vernacular translations seem to have preferred this option: KJV (1611) 'strong men'; Coverdale (1535) 'the mightie'; *Giovanni Diodati Bibbia* (1649) 'i possenti'; *Reina Valera Antigua* (1602) 'los fuertes'.

<sup>517</sup> McKane (1970).

<sup>518</sup> G. R. Driver, "Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs," *Biblica* 32.2 (1951) p.180.

<sup>519</sup> See J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1968).

and this meaning is unsupported in Hebrew.<sup>520</sup> Indeed, elsewhere עָרִיץ is clearly negative, associated with the wicked (רָשָׁעִים; Isa 13:11; Ps 37:35; Job 15:20, 27:13), the evil (רָעִים; Jer 15:21) and the arrogant (זָדִים; Isa 13:11; Ps 86:14). Elsewhere, Proverbs condemns the violent,<sup>521</sup> here, the reader is goaded to evaluate them for himself: does their connection with wealth give them worth?

Responding in the negative, but still affirming an act-consequence connection, the reader might devalue wealth. *Bad people do not get truly good things.* Gracious women have real riches, i.e. honour. But ruthless men have only material goods.<sup>522</sup> The cola are now antithetical, pitting relative values against each other. While honour is universally positive in Proverbs, wealth is more ambiguous. Indeed, “favour (חֵן) is better than silver or gold” (Prov 22:1b). Many such ‘better than’ sayings affirm that wealth is only of relative worth.<sup>523</sup> Thus interpreted, the proverb is didactically powerful, encouraging the reader to deduce the value system and make it her own, assimilating her desires and lifestyle accordingly.

She may remember, and is reminded just two verses later, that “the wicked earns deceptive wages” (Prov 11:18a, cf. 10:2; 11:4; 21:6). The apparent breach of the act-consequence connection may be restored in time.<sup>524</sup> The עָרִיץ may “heap up silver like dust” (Job 27:16), but will not enjoy it (27:17); may “spread himself like a green tree” (Ps 37:35), but will ultimately disappear (37:36). However, none of this is explicit in the proverb. Indeed, commentary is conspicuously absent. Furthermore, כְּבוֹד ‘honour’ and עֶשֶׂר ‘riches’ are nowhere else opposed in Proverbs, but are equivalent goods,<sup>525</sup> offered together by Lady Wisdom herself (Prov 3:16; 8:18).

Perhaps, then, the proverb simply and cynically asserts that *bad people get good things*.<sup>526</sup> The ruthless men rip *Tun* and *Ergeben* apart. And as for the woman, with graceful allure she seduces the consequence away from its rightfully wedded act, to her own bed. Indeed, the אִשְׁת־חֵן may not be as noble as the אִשְׁת־חַיִל she mimics. Sirach warns against her: “Hide your eye from a gracious woman (אִשְׁת־חֵן) ... she has burned up her lovers in fire” (Sir 9:8; cf. Nah 3:4). Grace is indeed deceitful (Prov 31:30), an ambiguous quality which can be used for good or ill within the

<sup>520</sup> Driver supports the Hebrew usage with reference to Ps 37:35, but here it is clearly a bad characteristic, connected with the רָשָׁע ‘wicked’.

<sup>521</sup> See K. Engelken, “Erziehungsziel Gewaltlosigkeit? Überlegungen zum Thema ‘physische Gewalt’ im Buch Proverbien,” *Biblische Notizen* 45 (1988) pp.12-18.

<sup>522</sup> HCSB, NIV, REB supply ‘only’ into the second colon. Cf. Delitzsch (1884); Toy (1899); Waltke (2004).

<sup>523</sup> Prov 3:14; 8:11,19; 15:16-17; 16:8,16,19; 17:1; 19:1,22; 22:1; 28:6. On the value system, see esp. T. A. Perry, *Wisdom Literature and the Structure of Proverbs* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Sandoval (2006).

<sup>524</sup> Clifford (1999); Waltke (2004).

<sup>525</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 3:13; Prov 3:16; 8:18; 22:4; Qoh 6:2; Esth 1:4; 5:11; 1 Chr 29:12,28; 2 Chr 1:11,12; 17:5; 18:1; 32:27.

<sup>526</sup> Clifford (1999); Hatton (2008) pp.103-109.

complexity of human character. Here the woman is ascribed honour (כְּבוֹד) for her grace. When society is the agent of the *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*, there is no guarantee of its justice.<sup>527</sup> Glory can be conferred on the undeserving, like binding a stone in a sling (Prov 26:8).

The proverb, then, creates subtle polysemies with huge repercussions: the act-consequence connection is upheld or torn down. As significant as the final interpretation may be the exploratory process taken to get there. The connotations and ambiguities encourage deep reflection on the reality of the world, its justice, and its host of characters from whom to learn.

#### §4.2 Used as proverbs

As well as being stimuli for didactic reflection, these verses could be applied ‘as proverbs’ to specific situations with specific functions. The most striking differences in use will of course stem from which *base meaning* is intended, context and manner of speech probably making this clear. The subversive interpretations open the proverbs to various different functions, beyond simple direction and evaluation.

יֵשׁ מְפַזֵּר וְנוֹסֵף עוֹד וְחוֹשֵׁף מִיֶּשֶׁר אֶדְ-לִמְחָסוֹר: (11:24) I say to a potential almsgiver in my community. “There is one who gives freely, and he is increased more; and one who holds back more than what is right, only to scarcity”. The relevance of the proverb for the situation is immediately grasped. It functions just as any [act – consequence] proverb might: directing and motivating correct behaviour through the hope of reward. My hearer should increase his charity, for it will be duly recompensed. He is warned against miserliness, lest poverty ensue.

But I may also speak the proverb quite differently, with reference to a financial squanderer. “There is one who spends recklessly, and he is increased more; and one who holds back because of his uprightness, only to scarcity!” By saying this, I do not mean to direct my hearer to recklessness. Rather, my utterance might be an outraged cry at the injustice around me! A cynical comment on the way the world is. A humble recognition of reality’s disorder, in hope of some small mastery over it?

The same sorts of multiple usage are evident in Prov 11:16. The different base meanings allow it to be spoken about a seductress or a truly gracious woman; a violent man or (possibly) an energetic zealot. “A gracious woman attains honour!” I say, directing my hearer to graciousness through the promise of social standing. Or, to a woman already honoured, these words may

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<sup>527</sup> Janowski (1994) p.271.

evaluate her congenial character. If she is poor, the proverb may provide comfort, for though others attain fleeting material wealth (*b* colon), a far greater reward is hers. Or, by the same Hebrew, I might rage against, complain of, or resign myself to apparent injustices. “The seductress gets honour. The violent get rich.”

### Conclusion

The polysemy in these proverbs opens each of them up to two quite different interpretations, one affirming the *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang*, the other undermining it. Accordingly perhaps, the world order is sometimes upheld, sometimes violated, and the proverbs may be spoken into either situation. Furthermore, character is much more complex than simply ‘righteous’ or ‘wicked’. ‘Scatterers’ are sometimes generous men, sometimes reckless spenders; the ‘gracious woman’ may be noble or seductive. The proverbs do not make explicit the agent(s) behind the consequences. If Yahweh is active, perhaps he may be trusted to enforce just retribution, but the same guarantee cannot be made for social agency. Readers are not forced into a particular interpretation, but are encouraged to explore and consider, weighing and evaluating possibilities. Contradictory interpretations and contradictory experiences are encountered throughout life: interpreting these proverbs becomes training for living.

### Conclusion

This chapter has focused on proverbs which comment on the ‘act-consequence connection’. They are open to extensive exploration, mainly due to their parallelism, imagery, and polysemy. At the start of the chapter, I highlighted four key scholarly discussions. Our explorations have had implications for each:

(1) *The schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre and its linguistic foundations.* I have suggested that the act-consequence polysemy of terms like רע (evil/disaster) does not itself imply an ontological connection between the two. However, the proverbs exploit such polysemies to their own ends. Some proverbs construct metaphorical worlds in which there *is* an obvious connection between *Tun* and *Ergeben*. If you swallow evil (רע) into your character, of course it will poison you (§3.2). If you stray (תעה) from the path, of course your journey will be punishing (§3.1). The reader takes these connections from the source world and applies them to the target world, where they may not have been obvious before. The *schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre* is not so much a presupposition as a metaphorical construction for didactic ends.

(2) *An inviolable world order?* For Koch and Schmid, the act-consequence connection in Proverbs was basically inviolable. My discussion has suggested that while the world’s order may be predictable, it admits of exceptions. The parallelisms in §2 offer a straightforward way for readers to infer acts and consequences. But they do not absolutely determine the process. Furthermore, the polysemous proverbs in §4 admit subversive interpretations, violating the *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang*. These problematic elements are on the fringes in Proverbs, but their persistent presence suggests that the sages had no naïve, dogmatic worldview.

(3) *The agent(s) behind the connection.* In general, the proverbs examined here (like many in the book) do not specify an agent. Occasionally they hint at one – intrinsic causality, Yahweh, or society – but little is explicit. The openness suggests that any of these could be active. The focus is on the character in the proverb: his responsibility is more important than any technical agency.

(4) *Explanation or motivation?* The focus on responsibility ties in with Proverbs’ didactic purposes: the sayings motivate *character development* in the responsible individual, rather than explaining mechanisms of causality. The proverbs are concerned with total disposition – the overall path a person walks – more than with individual acts; more *Haltung* than *Tun*. And disposition includes emotions and desires, evocatively captured through e.g. dining imagery. The proverbs recognise the complexity of human character, and that life is a journey of development.

Furthermore, the process of exploring the openness proves to be *intellectual training* for the reader. The parallelisms encourage their readers to use logic, and deduce the connections between



act and consequence, in proverbs as they must in life. The imagery prompts imaginative explorations, fresh modes of thought, and the blending of inference patterns across domains. The polysemies teach their readers to hold apparent contradictions in tension and to confront ambiguities. Apparently incompatible ideas may in fact each be appropriate when applied thoughtfully to different situations.

This is particularly apparent when the verses are used ‘as proverbs’. Each time a proverb is spoken, it interprets a new situation and is given a fresh function. The proverbs are open to positive or negative application to context, and to past or future orientations. Their general and metaphorical terms make them applicable to many different circumstances. They are especially suited to evaluate (through their character terms), and to direct (through their act-consequence motivations). When the straightforward connections are problematised, many other possible functions open up.

Such problematic elements will come to the fore more in the next chapter. We will hone in on one particular character – the king – with his acts, and the consequences that come through him. We will see that these proverbs offer no straightforward evaluation or direction, no clear-cut character types to emulate or righteous acts to copy. It is uncertain how to bring about the consequences they offer.

## Chapter 6 – The Openness of Didactic Proverbs about the King

מְשִׁלִּי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

*The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel*

(Prov 1:1)

### §1. Introduction

From the Solomonic heading, to the cluster of monarchical maxims in ch.16, to the maternal address to King Lemuel in ch.31, the king has an important role in Proverbs. This chapter will explore the kingly proverbs in 10:1-22:16, examining their openness and its implications. I will begin by discussing some issues in current scholarship: the depiction (§1.1), social context (§1.2), and pedagogical function (§1.3) of the kingship sayings. I will then explore some specific proverbs: those about the king's judgement (§2), and about his favour and wrath (§3).

#### §1.1 The depiction of the king in the royal proverbs

The king is one of the few cameo parts allotted to a social figure in Proverbs,<sup>528</sup> sketched in many sayings. Here I will focus on two key questions: *How favourable is the proverbs' depiction of the king?* *What is the relationship between Yahweh and the king?*

A cursory glance at the kingship sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 (esp. 16:1-22:16<sup>529</sup>) reveals a powerful figure. He is a sovereign authority, allotting life and death (16:14,15; 20:2). He is the supreme and righteous judge (16:10; 20:8; 20:26), delighting in rectitude (14:35; 16:13; 22:11) and despising wickedness (16:12; 20:26), his throne established on righteousness and love (16:12; 20:28).<sup>530</sup>

Furthermore, he seems to have a close relationship with Yahweh (though it is rarely made explicit). Editorially, a cluster of kingship sayings in 16:10-15 is linked to a section on Yahweh

<sup>528</sup> Other roughly comparable roles include the father, wife, and neighbour.

<sup>529</sup> The king is only mentioned twice in chs.10-15: 14:28 and 14:35. Cf. also 11:14. On the significance of these verses in their literary context, see Ansberry (2011) pp.80-84.

<sup>530</sup> H. Brunner, "Gerechtigkeit als Fundament des Thrones," *VT* 8.4 (1958) pp.426-428 argues for an Egyptian background for this image. In Egypt, the pedestal of the throne may have borne the symbol of *Ma'at* 'justice'. Apparently Solomon's throne was constructed similarly.

immediately preceding it (16:1-9).<sup>531</sup> Verbal repetitions connect the passages (כֶּפֶר, תוֹעֵבָה, רָשָׁע, כּוֹז), and there are ‘interlocking’ verses. V.8 comes one before the end of vv.1-9 and, alone in this cluster, does not mention יְהוָה. It links forward by introducing ‘justice’ מִשְׁפָּט (cf. vv.10-11) and ‘righteousness’ צְדָקָה (vv.12-13). V.11 comes one after the beginning of vv.10-15, and is the only verse not to speak of the king. It links back with its reference to יְהוָה.

The effect is to set the kingship proverbs within a theological context. Yahweh’s dominant and sovereign role (vv.1-9) is passed to the king (vv.10-15). He is God’s human representative, with divine prerogative to instigate his rule on earth. The king’s qualities here are Yahweh’s elsewhere: his concern for justice (16:10);<sup>532</sup> his righteousness and uprightness (vv.12-13);<sup>533</sup> his power over life and death (vv.14-15).<sup>534</sup> As U. Skladny put it “[i]n allen diesen Aussagen könnte man ‘König’ durch ‘Jahwe’ ersetzen”.<sup>535</sup>

In Egypt, the king was the divine son of *Re*, and as such, became the earthly guardian of *Ma’at*.<sup>536</sup> When scholars transferred *Ma’at* to Israel in the form of ‘World Order’ (see ch.5 §1), she brought this guardian with her. Thus in Israel too the king became the “Garant des Schicksal-Haltung-Zusammenhangs”,<sup>537</sup> and Schmid’s five spheres of *Weltordnung* (law, wisdom, fertility, war, cult) apparently coalesced under his just administration.<sup>538</sup> However, we have seen that *Zusammenhang* and *Ordnung* are problematic notions when applied to Israel, and furthermore, the king is nowhere shown to control them as Yahweh does. Indeed, he is not divine, but fundamentally subordinate to the Lord, only gaining authority through Yahweh’s gracious bestowal, ever subject to his will (21:1). Prov 16:1-9 (which juxtaposes the kingship sayings in vv.10-15) emphatically declares God’s control over human destiny (esp. vv.1,3,9; see ch.7 §3). This presumably includes the king’s own destiny. The relationship thus involves both authorisation and subordination.<sup>539</sup>

<sup>531</sup> Ansberry (2011) pp.104-107; H. S. Kim, “YHWH Sayings and King Sayings in Proverbs: 10:1-22:16,” *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 75.1 (2011) pp.83-104; Whybray (1979). The kingship cluster is internally bound by the term מֶלֶךְ (in all but v.11). Vv.12-13 cohere in syntax, the plural מְלָכִים, and the root צדק. Vv.14-15 employ the antonyms of life and death, and a wordplay on מֶלֶךְ – מְלָאךְ – מְלָקֶשׁ. Interconnected Yahweh and kingship sayings also occur in 20:22-21:3.

<sup>532</sup> E.g. 16:11; 21:3; 28:5; 29:26.

<sup>533</sup> ‘Righteousness’ in 3:33; 10:3; 15:9,29; 17:15; 18:10; 21:3; uprightness in 3:32; 15:8.

<sup>534</sup> E.g. 14:27; 19:23; 22:4.

<sup>535</sup> Skladny (1962) p.28.

<sup>536</sup> Assmann (1990) pp.200-212.

<sup>537</sup> Skladny (1962) p.38.

<sup>538</sup> Schmid (1968) p.23, 83-89.

<sup>539</sup> K. J. Dell, “The King in the Wisdom Literature,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. J. Day; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013) pp.163-186 argues for divine authorisation: the king is “part of the manifestation of God to humanity, standing at the crossroads of the human and the divine” (p.185).

- W. L. Humphreys, “The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Book of Proverbs,” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and literary essays in honor of Samul Terrien* (eds. J. G. Gammie, W. A. Brueggemann, W. L. Humphreys and J. M. Ward;

The collections of sayings after 22:16 comment on the king in distinctive ways. In 22:17-24:34, occasional sayings seemingly presuppose a courtly addressee, who can “stand before kings” (22:29), or “eat with a ruler” (23:1). Yahweh and the king are paired in one proverb: both are to be feared (24:21). At the start of ch.25, a kingship cluster occurs. God conceals, and the king searches (חַקֵּר v.2). His own heart, however, is unsearchable (אֵין חִקָּר v.3). You should remove the wicked from before the king (לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ) like dross from silver (vv.4-5). You should remove yourself from before the king (לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ), lest he debase you (vv.6-7).

Chapters 28-29 are the most striking, containing several distinctly unflattering portraits, removing any notion of a divine monarch. They speak of a “wicked ruler”, with the wildness of a rampaging beast (28:15); and a noble oppressing subordinates (28:16). They describe the abuse of power, court machinations, and economic injustice (29:4,12,26). Not every proverb writer was an ardent royalist. P. Hatton suggests that the book is “no tame supporter of the *status quo*”,<sup>540</sup> undermining the monarch even as it seems to glorify him. Noting the political sensitivity of the theme, he suggests that the proverbs are stated subtly, “in such a way that any subversive intention could be denied”.<sup>541</sup> I will suggest that even in 10:1-22:16, where the king seems at his most glorified, there are hints of unease beneath the surface.

## §1.2 The context and addressees of the royal proverbs

A second area of debate concerns context and addressees. The wider discussions surrounding the book’s social setting have already been considered (ch.1 §2). Here, I will limit my focus to kingship sayings: *must they relate to an actual court setting?*

Of all the proverbs, they are the strongest contenders for this setting. Perhaps the sections where kingship sayings are prominent came from the court, even if the whole book did not. In this vein, B. Malchow describes chs.28-29 as a “manual for future monarchs”,<sup>542</sup> and G. Bryce distinguishes Prov 25:2-27 as an independent wisdom book, to train aspiring courtiers in “the proper kind of behaviour for success and promotion”.<sup>543</sup> Most extensive and influential was U.

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Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978) pp.177-190 stresses subordination: the proverb writers wanted to avoid any implications that the king might be divine.

<sup>540</sup> Hatton (2008) p.135.

<sup>541</sup> Hatton (2008) p.118.

<sup>542</sup> B. V. Malchow, “A Manual for Future Monarchs,” *CBQ* 47.2 (1985) pp.238-245.

<sup>543</sup> G. E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian contribution to the wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg: Buckness University Press, 1979) p.147. Similarly, Humphreys (1978) argues that 16:1-22:16 and 25:2-27 may have been for the education of ‘wise courtiers’.

Skladny, whose delineation and characterisation of four collections within chs.10-29 were largely derived from their kingship sayings.<sup>544</sup>

However, such dissection attempts seem speculative, and scholars have questioned whether royal content really necessitates a royal context.<sup>545</sup> Indeed, the proverbs were retained, and therefore presumably still considered relevant, even into post-monarchic times. F. Golka has proposed African parallels as empirical evidence that royal sayings can be coined in the *Volksmund*.<sup>546</sup> As in Africa, he says, so in Israel. However, Golka's method should be viewed with caution. Direct comparison is difficult between societies so divergent,<sup>547</sup> and between proverbs with such formal and stylistic distinctions.<sup>548</sup> Many of his specific parallels are strained.<sup>549</sup> He does show, however, that kingly figures can be common in the proverbs of ordinary people.

Golka finds further support for his thesis in the 'commoner's perspective' he can apparently distinguish.<sup>550</sup> There is an uneasy tendency noticeable in scholarship here, that whatever the proverbs say about the king, scholars can fit it to their thesis. The critical voice of chs.28-29 might be the enraged cry of the common people,<sup>551</sup> or an educational tool for the king himself.<sup>552</sup> The apparent glorification of 16:1-22:16 might come from the king's sycophantic inner circle,<sup>553</sup> or from the naïve minds of the common folk.<sup>554</sup>

Scholars cannot agree on the context, addressee, or perspective of the sayings, and this, I suggest, is because they are open to a number of contexts, addressees, and perspectives. They could be spoken in the royal court – to the monarch or his courtiers – but they need not be. While the historical king did have a certain 'special status' not applicable to others, he might also function figuratively, to encapsulate wider principles.<sup>555</sup> The proverb genre is particularly open to metaphorical applications. It delights in hyperbole and exaggerations, hence its use of this most majestic figure. He is an easily interpreted symbol for authority, and the 'king-courtier' dynamic may serve as the epitome and paradigm for many relationships within a stratified society.

<sup>544</sup> Skladny (1962) pp.7-67.

<sup>545</sup> E.g. Dell (2013); Weeks (1994) pp.41-56; Westermann (1995) pp.31-35; R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A survey of modern study* (History of Biblical Interpretation Series 1; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995) pp.45-59.

<sup>546</sup> Golka (1993) pp.16-35.

<sup>547</sup> In particular, many of Golka's examples come from societies where there is no 'king' as such.

<sup>548</sup> Golka's African examples are 'folk proverbs' without the literary characteristics of Prov 10:1-22:16 (e.g. parallelism).

<sup>549</sup> For example, he compares Prov 16:13 "Righteous lips are the delight of a king / and he loves him who speaks what is right" with the African proverb "You cannot dig up the hole of the ant-eater / but you may peep into it", on the grounds that both may implicitly advise not causing offence to a superior. Golka (1993) p.29.

<sup>550</sup> Golka (1993) p.34.

<sup>551</sup> Golka (1993) pp.32-34; Westermann (1995) pp.33-34; Whybray (1990) pp.53-54.

<sup>552</sup> Skladny (1962) pp.57-58; Malchow (1985).

<sup>553</sup> Skladny (1962) pp.25-46.

<sup>554</sup> Whybray (1990) pp.48-52.

<sup>555</sup> Dell (2013).

### §1.3 The pedagogical function of the royal proverbs

The possibility of a figurative reading allows us consider these proverbs as widely applicable pedagogical tools, in which the reader might critically observe the characters, or imaginatively align himself with them. So *how does the figure of the king function pedagogically?*

If the king is interpreted positively, he may serve as a paradigm for emulation, similar to the ‘righteous’ and ‘wise’ (see ch.4). In the reader’s own positions of authority, he should aspire to this ideal, and assimilate his behaviour. Aligning himself instead with the courtier in the proverb, the reader may learn of the appropriate response to authority. In this positive depiction, the proverbs may also become standards for comparison, by which the reader can assess his own rulers. Here, however, the idealisation in the text may provoke criticism of society. For the real king may fall short of the ideal.<sup>556</sup>

Furthermore, some proverbs do not in fact present an ideal, but show the king behaving reprehensibly (esp. chs.28-29). The locus of normative morality shifts: the proverbs no longer provide standards for judging the world; the world must provide standards for judging the proverbs. Across the book as a whole, the king is not a type like the ‘righteous’ or ‘wise’ with utterly consistent ethical behaviour, but an example of the complexity of human character, containing both good and bad. In his hyperbolic depiction, both are taken to extremes. The reader is called upon to observe him, in proverbs and life, analysing his ethics.

W. Brown too has argued for a model of merging and diverging student-king identities, but for him there is a pedagogical progression in the book.<sup>557</sup> The first chapters (1-9) speak to the reader as a naïve son; the final chapter addresses him as the king (31:1-9). He is called upon to grow from one identity to the other. The intervening chapters show a politicisation and widening social sphere to enable the shift. Alongside the child’s development towards kingship comes, counterintuitively, increasing criticism of kingship. The erstwhile “earthly embodiment of divine *mysterium tremendum*”<sup>558</sup> is later displayed in distinctly unflattering terms (chs.28-29). According to Brown, this too is pedagogical. “As the king becomes an object of critique, so the reader must cultivate self-criticism”.<sup>559</sup> The closing pronouncement (31:1-9) sees the king under the sway of his mother, subject to unswerving rebuke. Though the reader has progressed from child to king, he is ever more a student.

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<sup>556</sup> Hausmann (1995) p.136.

<sup>557</sup> Brown (2002c), followed by e.g. Ansberry (2011), Yoder (2005).

<sup>558</sup> Brown (2002c), p.180.

<sup>559</sup> Brown (2002c), p.181.

Brown's account is compelling, though I would challenge the alleged simplicity of the earlier collections. I will argue that the depictions of the king in 10:1-22:16 are complex and ambiguous. The reader must ponder and test them, and in so doing, train his mind. Does the king really provide a standard for evaluation, or must I evaluate him by external standards? Does he offer a paradigm or an antitype? Bold and even subversive readings are permitted, calling for courage in interpreting life and proverbs.

In the discussions which follow, we will see the contribution of the proverbs' 'openness' to these debates. Openness allows them to give positive and negative depictions of the king. It makes them applicable to different contexts and addressees when spoken 'as proverbs'. And it turns them into complex 'didactic' tools, useful for forming a worldview, developing character, and training the intellect.

## §2. The king's judgement

Against this background, let us turn to the proverbs themselves. We will first confront the king's judgement (here), and then his favour and wrath (§3). We will focus on the proverbs' implications for the scholarly questions considered above, and how their openness contributes to their 'proverb' and 'didactic' uses.

Israelite royal ideology makes the king the supreme judicial authority.<sup>560</sup> As the HB portrays it, the pre-monarchic era was a time of lawlessness because "there was no king in Israel" (Judg 17:6; 21:25); the 'Judges' were apparently inadequate. The elders therefore demanded a new model of leadership: "a king to judge us" (1 Sam 8:4-6). With the establishment of a monarchy came a centralised judiciary<sup>561</sup> and a supreme adjudicator (the king), to whom legal cases could apparently be brought directly (2 Sam 12:1-6, 14:1-20; 1 Kgs 3:16-28; 2 Kgs 6:26-31, 8:1-6). In this role, David "administered justice and equity to all his people" (2 Sam 8:15), and Solomon executed "justice and righteousness" (1 Kgs 10:9). If he failed in these duties, the king found his position threatened (2 Sam 15:1-6; Jer 22:15-17).

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<sup>560</sup> H. J. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* (Translated by J. Moiser. London: SPCK, 1980), K. W. Whitlam, *The Just King: Monarchical judicial authority in ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 12; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1979), R. R. Wilson, "Israel's Judicial System in the Preexilic Period," *JQR* 74.2 (1983) pp.229-248.

<sup>561</sup> D. C. Flatto, "The King and I: The separation of powers in early Hebraic political theory," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 20.1 (2008) pp.74-75.

The historical accuracy of this picture is questionable,<sup>562</sup> but its ideological roots are deep. Indeed, across the ANE, the king was the divinely-endowed administrator of justice.<sup>563</sup> Mesopotamian monarch Hammurabi describes himself as the *šar mešarim*, the ‘just king’, and boasts that he is appointed “to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and evil”.<sup>564</sup> Equally, in Israel, justice is the foundation of the king’s throne (Prov 16:12, 20:28, 25:5; Pss 89:15[14], 97:2), and becomes a key component of messianic expectations (e.g. Isa 16:5, 32:1; Jer 23:5-6). The proverbs considered here may reflect this judicial ideal.

## §2.1 Used as proverbs

In ch.5 I began with ‘didactic explorations’ of the verses, and then proceeded to their use ‘as proverbs’. Here I take the reverse arrangement, for in life there is no linear progression between uses, and either order might occur. There are three verses to consider:

16:10 קֶסֶם עַל-שִׁפְתֵי-מֶלֶךְ בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא יִמְעַל-פִּיו:

*An oracle is on the lips of a king; in judgement his mouth does not break faith.  
with justice*

20:8 מֶלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא-דִין מְזַרְהָ בְּעֵינָיו כָּל-רָע:

*The king sits on the throne of judgement; scattering/ winnowing all evil with his eyes.*

20:26 מְזַרְהָ רָשָׁעִים מֶלֶךְ חָכֵם וַיֵּשֶׁב עֲלֵיהֶם אוֹפֶן:

*A wise king scatters/ winnows the wicked; and brings the wheel back over them.*

Each of these proverbs suggests the judgement of the king, perhaps presuming him to preside over a legal case, maybe even spoken before the judicial throne itself (20:8, cf. 1 Kgs 7:7; Isa 16:5; Ps 112:5).<sup>565</sup> Or they might be applied more broadly to any situation requiring justice, the

<sup>562</sup> Boecker (1980) pp.40-49; Whitlam (1979).

<sup>563</sup> Whitlam (1979) pp.17-29.

<sup>564</sup> ANET, p.164.

<sup>565</sup> Some scholars have argued for a common origin for proverbs and law. E.g. J. P. Audet, “Origines Comparées de la Double Tradition de la Loi et de la Sagesse dans le Proche-Orient Ancien,” in *25th International Congress of Orientalists* (Moscow: 1960) pp.352-357; J. Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and the Law in the Old Testament. The ordering of life in Israel and early Judaism* (Oxford: OUP, 1983); E. Gerstenberger, *Wesen und Herkunft des ‘apodiktischen Rechts’* (WMANT 20; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965). Some envisage the use of proverbs at court, to give the verdict or summarise a case. E.g. B. Gemser, “The Importance of the Motive Clause in Old Testament Law,” in *Congress Volume Copenhagen 1953* (VTSup 1; Leiden: Brill, 1953) pp.64-66; H. Nyika, “The Traditional Israelite Legal Settings: Social contexts in



‘king’ as a cipher for an authority figure. 16:10 affirms that the judgement is perfect; 20:8 that it ousts evil; 20:26 that it retributes the wicked.

The proverbs imply an interaction between judge-king and defendant. The *correlations of person* between these textual characters and the people using the proverb may be various. I might speak the proverbs to either party (construed literally or metaphorically), or to another, like the plaintiff. Furthermore, I could speak with different *temporal orientations*: before the crime; between the crime and the verdict; or after the verdict. In each of these permutations, the proverb’s function will change.

#### *Spoken to the defendant*

These proverbs might be spoken to the potential criminal. They may in fact forestall the criminality, uttered *before the crime* has been committed. In this case, they can function directively, offering behaviour and motivation. ‘Don’t be evil’ counsels 20:8; ‘don’t be wicked’ advises 20:26; in fact, ‘don’t do anything worthy of condemnation!’ (16:10) – lest the ‘king’ find out and punish you. The proverbs employ generality, leaving the contents of the crime open to many possible manifestations. Equally, the punishment is inexplicit (16:10) or metaphorical (20:8,26), to be filled out by the hearer’s imagination, blended with the situation of his own life. He thus constructs his own disincentive.

The proverbs may also address the defendant *between the crime and the verdict*. 16:10 pronounces that the judgement will be just, providing encouragement for the innocent, striking fear into the guilty. By the other two proverbs, I might predict the outcome: guilty. The trial occurs, and the condemnation is pronounced. *After the verdict*, I proclaim the proverbs evaluatively. Adding my insult to the injury of ensuing punishment, I supplement the king’s judgement with my own. The proverbs serve as a final summary, a ‘case closed’. ‘You are evil (20:8)’, I imply, ‘wicked (20:26), and worthy of condemnation (16:10)’. These are not only legal, but moral indictments, ascribing particularly heinous character types.

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proverbs,” in *Wisdom, Science, and the Scriptures: Essays in honor of Ernest Lucas* (eds. S. Finamore and J. Weaker; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015) pp.34-55.

*Spoken to the plaintiff*

Alternatively, I may speak to the plaintiff, the one wronged by the evil/wicked men. *Before the verdict*, the proverbs may provide encouragement and consolation. Do not fear; justice will be done. The ruler will distinguish wickedness infallibly, and deal with it appropriately. *After the verdict*, they may celebrate with the plaintiff, pronouncing the triumphant ruling. Justice has reigned; the plaintiff has been vindicated.

*Spoken to the judge-king*

Finally, the proverbs could be spoken to the king himself, or to anyone presiding over justice. *Before the verdict*, they may function directively, presenting an ideal to emulate. Stated as indicative observations and not as imperatives, they avoid the potential affront of presuming to command the king. The monarch does not (i.e. must not) speak unjustly (16:10). He has (i.e. should have) hatred for wickedness and evil, dealing with them accordingly (20:8,26). *After the verdict*, the proverbs might evaluate and glorify him. The king has infallibly removed all evil (20:8) and wickedness (20:26)! O wise one (20:26), with oracular power and perception (16:10)! Glory be to the king!

§2.2 Didactic explorations

‘As proverbs’, then, these sentences are open to application in many different situations and functions. Their openness also contributes to their didactic usefulness, shaping a worldview, facilitating character development, and training the intellect.

20:8 מֶלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא־דִין מְזַרְהָ בְּעֵינָיו כָּל־רָע:

*The king sits on the throne of judgement; scattering/ winnowing all evil with his eyes.*

20:26 מְזַרְהָ רָשָׁעִים מֶלֶךְ חָכֵם וַיִּשָּׁב עֲלֵיהֶם אֹפֶן:

*A wise king scatters/ winnows the wicked; and brings the wheel back over them.*

Grand, stately, and unmoving, the king sits upon the judicial throne (20:8a). Elsewhere Yahweh’s seat (e.g. Ps 9:4,7-8), this is now the locus of his own righteous justice (cf. Prov 16:12; 25:5), from which (in an unexpected shift of imagery), he winnows/scatters (מְזַרְהָ). This imagery is polyvalent,

open to connotations of *punishment* or *discernment*. To begin with *punishment*, זרה (piel) often means ‘to scatter’. Just as Yahweh scatters nations for their unrighteousness,<sup>566</sup> implying their devastation and destruction, so the king executes quasi-divine justice on his subjects. In 20:8, he needs no secondary agents or instruments; his ‘eyes’ alone will do it. For any king or leader reading this proverb, strict retributive justice becomes a behavioural ideal. For any subordinate, it motivates strongly not to be ‘evil’ (20:8) or ‘wicked’ (20:26).

זרה can also denote ‘to winnow’:<sup>567</sup> grain and chaff are tossed into the air and the latter is ‘scattered’ to the wind.<sup>568</sup> Agriculture is an unexpected complement to kingship, but it lures in the everyday reader, training his imagination through mental exploration of a familiar world. As a trope for judgement (usually divine,<sup>569</sup> here monarchic), winnowing imagines the wicked as chaff.<sup>570</sup> Despite any appearances, they are worthless and insubstantial, blown away to destruction. Wickedness is, accordingly, futile.

The subsequent imagery in 20:26 has perplexed interpreters: the king “brings the wheel back” (וַיִּשָּׁב...אֹפֶן) over the wicked. Some suggest that this is a ‘torture wheel’,<sup>571</sup> others the ‘wheel of fortune’,<sup>572</sup> but these explanations have little to support them. Some resort to textual emendation.<sup>573</sup> Most plausibly, the image continues the agricultural metaphor and refers to a threshing wheel.<sup>574</sup> During the ingathering process, threshing occurred before winnowing. The

<sup>566</sup> Most commonly Israel and Judah, but also other nations (Jer 49:32,36; 51:2; Ezek 29:12; 30:23,26).

<sup>567</sup> This meaning is more common in the qal (Isa 30:24, 41:16; Jer 15:7; Ruth 3:2), but piel occurs in Ps 139:3 (figurative).

<sup>568</sup> For a description of winnowing in ancient Israel, see O. Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Ind., 1987) pp.65-70.

<sup>569</sup> E.g. Isa 41:16; Jer 15:7.

<sup>570</sup> Cf. Isa 17:13, 29:5; Hos 13:3; Pss 1:4; 35:5; Job 21:18.

<sup>571</sup> A few scholars speculate that this was a punitive instrument in Israel (So Toy [1899], Gemser [1963], BDB). D. C. Snell, “The Wheel in Proverbs XX 26,” *VT* 39.4 (1989) p.507 n.12 likens it to torture instruments in ancient Greece and 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Snell adduces Hittite parallels, apparently showing a ‘wheel’ in judicial contexts. However, the meaning, significance, and even presence of the Hittite *hurki* ‘wheel’ are disputed in these texts.

<sup>572</sup> Driver (1951) p.184 (followed by REB), based on a Sophocles fragment reading “Fortune revolves on the frequent wheel of a god”. There is no supporting evidence from Hebrew usage.

<sup>573</sup> A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel: Textkritisches, sprachliches und sachliches* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1908), BHS. Changing אֹפֶן ‘wheel’ to אֲוֶנָם ‘their iniquity’ would give the retributive sense “he returns their iniquity to them” (cf. Ps 94:23). But there is no textual or Versional support, and the imagery can be interpreted as it stands.

<sup>574</sup> Followed by many commentators, and a number of translations which give ‘threshing wheel’ (HCSB, NASB, NIV, NKJV). See D. Winton Thomas, “Proverbs XX 26,” *JJS* 15 (1964a) pp.155-156; M. Franzmann, “The Wheel in Proverbs XX 26 and Ode of Solomon XXIII 11-16,” *VT* 41.1 (1991) pp.121-123.

- Possibly, the imagery is resonant because legal trials sometimes took place at the threshing floor. In the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat, king Dan’ilu twice judges at the threshing floor (KTU 1.17.5.6-8 and 1.19.1.19-25). In 1 Kgs 22:10 (≈2 Chr 18:9) the threshing floor is at the city gate, a usual location for legal judgements (e.g. Deut 21:19, 22:15; Ruth 4:1-11; 2 Sam 15:1-6), and the ensuing dialogue takes the form of a legal trial. Tobolowsky argues that threshing floors functioned as “sites of divine communication and of momentous decision-making” (p.97). A. Tobolowsky, “Where Doom is Spoken: Threshing floors as places of decision and communication in Biblical literature,” *JANER* 16 (2016) pp.95-120. For the threshing floor at the city gate, see M. Anbar, “‘L’Aire à l’Entrée de la Porte de Samarie’ (1 R. XXII 10),” *VT* 50.1 (2000) pp.121-123; S. Smith, “The Threshing Floor at the City Gate,” *Palestinian Exploration Journal* 78.1 (1946) pp.5-14.

order is reversed here, disorienting readers and spurring their imaginations. Minds set in reverse, they may search for previous stages, the acts that could have led to such outcomes. In ancient Israel, the precious grain was probably threshed from its husks and stalks with sticks/flails, animals, sledges, and carts.<sup>575</sup> The threshing sledge may have been fitted with iron or stone teeth,<sup>576</sup> and the cart with sets of heavy wheels, like this one.<sup>577</sup> This was a violent procedure, unsuitable for delicate crops (Isa 28:27), and it occurs as a common figure for divine retribution.<sup>578</sup> Imaginatively blending the image with her own envisaged punishment from a quasi-divine monarch, the reader might react viscerally. The weight of the device crushes her bones, and she is powerfully disincentivised from wrongdoing.

As well as punishment, these proverbs may suggest *discernment*. Both threshing and winnowing entail separation. The labourer separates the grain from the husks and stalks, then from the chaff, just as the king separates the righteous from the wicked. On the one hand, moral types, like agricultural products, have crucial and obvious differences. On the other, they are muddled together in life's threshing floor, and separating them requires skill. Indeed, the literary context may suggest that moral confusion is rife (see discussion of 20:11; pp.166-169). For his winnowing fork, the king uses his 'eyes' (20:8b), a tool created by the Lord (20:12), and bestowed on all. The reader can imaginatively align herself with this infallible scrutineer, learning to decipher good and evil herself. And not only must she search for 'evil men' (taking רָע metonymically, as above), but all 'evil' (taking רָע in an abstract sense): evil actions and situations, even evil within her own character.

Gazing a little deeper, however, she might see something disconcerting 'in his eyes'. מְצִינֵי might modify, not מְצִינֵי (he "winnows with his eyes"), but כָּל-רָע: "all that is evil in his eyes".<sup>579</sup> And this king, unlike his counterpart in 20:26, is not said to be 'wise'. Indeed, only the *fool's* way (or the way of the kingless vagabond<sup>580</sup>) is right "in his own eyes" (12:15; 16:2; 21:2). The

<sup>575</sup> Flails appear in Isa 28:27; animals in Deut 25:4; Hos 10:11; Mic 4:13. The instruments are explained by Borowski (1987) pp.62-65; L. Cheetham, "Thresh and Winnowing – An ethnographic study," *Antiquity* 56.217 (1982) pp.127-130; J. L. Waters, *Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel: Their ritual and symbolic significance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) pp.2-4.

<sup>576</sup> Borowski (1987) p.65. Hence Amos's "threshing sledges of iron" (חֲרָצוֹת הַבְּרֹזֶל, 1:3) and Isaiah's sledge "equipped with teeth" (בָּעֵל פִּיפִּיּוֹת, 41:15).

<sup>577</sup> Cf. the אֹפֶן עֲגֻלָּה "cart wheel" in Isa 28:27. Borowski (1987) p.65; Cheetham (1982) pp.127-8.

<sup>578</sup> Isa 21:10, 41:15-16; Jer 51:33; Amos 1:3; Mic 4:12-13; Hab 3:12.

<sup>579</sup> The inverted word order, modifier before noun, would be unusual, but may be an emphatic fronting. Even if 'ungrammatical', it may have been recognisable to the reader because of the expression's expected meaning in Proverbs.

- The first interpretation takes the phrase adverbially, and the כֹּכַב instrumentally. The second takes the phrase adjectivally in its common idiomatic sense.

<sup>580</sup> Judg 17:6; 21:25; "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes".

phrase is frequent in Proverbs, each time suggesting an alarming distortion of the value system.<sup>581</sup> Ethical norms are personally construed; the king chooses good and evil for himself.

This gives the proverb a possible subversive undertone: the king judges unjustly, with none to hold him accountable, problematising his apparent idealisation and paradigmatic status. If spoken in a suitable context, with appropriate intonation, these connotations could ring out. The reader must not be naïve, but should judge even the king's judgement. She herself should discern 'evil' (according to Proverbs' own standards), and flesh out the category, developing her character accordingly. There are complexities to examine – complexities in characters and language – and non-dominant interpretations to hear – of situations, people and proverbs.

קֶסֶם עַל־שִׁפְתֵי־מֶלֶךְ בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא יִמְעַל־פִּיו: 16:10

*An oracle is on the lips of a king; in judgement his mouth does not break faith.  
with justice*

Most obviously, this proverb may express the supreme, infallible judgement of the king. He is a paradigm of piety and justice, a standard for all authority figures. In legal practice, he does not 'break faith' (יִמְעַל). This verb suggests breach of relationship, and almost always refers to religious devotion,<sup>582</sup> perhaps suggesting God beneath the surface here. Continuing the piety of the immediately preceding 'Yahweh cluster' (16:1-9), the king does not break faith (implicitly) with the Lord. This interpretation takes מִשְׁפָּט as 'judgement' (as in Prov 16:33; 24:23) and בָּ as 'in, with regard to',<sup>583</sup> combining to give a circumstantial phrase approximating 'whenever the king judges'. Alternatively, מִשְׁפָּט could be 'justice' (its more common sense in Proverbs<sup>584</sup>), with בָּ taking its usual role with מַעַל, introducing the injured party. The king does not "break faith with justice".<sup>585</sup> Unlike the worthless witness who "scoffs at justice" (יָלִין מִשְׁפָּט; 19:28, see pp.116-117), the king adheres to it with an almost religious devotion, and so too must the reader. Emphatically fronted at the start of the colon, justice has become a personified virtue to revere.<sup>586</sup>

The first colon is more problematic for the royalist. קֶסֶם refers to an 'oracle', 'divination',

<sup>581</sup> Prov 3:7; 12:15; 16:2; 21:2; 26:5,12,16; 28:11; 30:12.

<sup>582</sup> Apart from Num 5:12,27.

<sup>583</sup> This is not common in the collocation בָּ מַעַל, but does occur, see the phrase 'break faith with regard to the devoted things' (Josh 7:1, 22:20; 1 Chr 2:7).

<sup>584</sup> Including two verses in the immediate literary context here (vv.8 and 11; cf. Prov 1:3; 2:8,9; 8:20; 12:5; 13:23; 17:23; 18:5; 19:28; 21:3,7,15; 28:5; 29:4,26).

<sup>585</sup> So BDB 'act treacherously against justice'; NIV 'betray justice'.

<sup>586</sup> Cf. the personification of 'wisdom' (throughout chs.1-9); 'discretion' and 'understanding' (2:11); 'righteousness' (13:6); 'kindness and loyalty' (14:22, see pp.110-111; 20:28); and conversely 'wickedness'/'sin' (13:6); 'evil' (13:21).

and is almost always condemned in the HB. Here alone does BDB give it “in good sense”. Possibly it refers uniquely here to a legitimate legal-religious practice for decision making.<sup>587</sup> Most scholars interpret it as figurative for divinely-given accuracy. Like the wise woman who esteemed David’s judgements “as the wisdom of the angel of God” (2 Sam 14:17,20), so wise proverb readers must regard their king’s words as supernaturally bestowed.

It may also be possible, however, that **קָסָם** retains its negative connotations. The first colon is then a cynical comment on the king. Divination – that abominable practice co-occurring with child sacrifice (Deut 18:10; 2 Kgs 17:17) and rebellion (1 Sam 15:23); that method that delivers only lies (Jer 14:14; Ezek 13:6; cf. Ezek 21:28[23],34[29]; 22:28) – that’s the king’s judgement for you. When an Israelite king does use **קָסָם** (1 Sam 28:8), it is certainly not legitimate. The reader’s mind is trained by assessing this possibility.

He might reject the possibility when faced with the apparently unswerving positivity of the second colon. Or, he might uncover hidden condemnation there too. The second colon may simply be ironic: the king’s grandiose proclamation on his own infallible judgement; his inerrancy ‘in his own eyes’.<sup>588</sup> Perceptions and values have been distorted. The speaker’s tone of voice could easily convey this sense. Alternatively, we could follow M. Fox’s interpretation: “in judgement no one can defy what he says”.<sup>589</sup> You cannot resist the king’s word, even if illegitimate, such is its power. The subject of **יִמְעַל** is now an impersonal ‘one’. Its object is **פִּי**, which is no longer a physical ‘mouth’, but a metonymy for speech, “what he says”. It would be unique for **מַעַל** to take a direct object like this, but it may be possible. On the surface, then, this proverb proclaims the infallible judgement of the king, but it may contain hints of subversion. The reader must think carefully before glorifying the monarch, or using him as a paradigm and standard.

<sup>587</sup> McKane (1970) suggests that it refers to the Urim and Thummim, which the king (legitimately) consults in 1 Sam 14:41. However, there is no evidence that **קָסָם** could designate this. E. Davies suggests that **קָסָם** in Ezek 21:26-28(21-23) refers to the shaking of arrows, and accordingly in Prov 16:10, it designates decision by lot. However, the reference in Ezekiel is not certain, and there is no other evidence for this specialist sense of **קָסָם**. Furthermore, in Ezekiel it is hardly a legitimate practice, paralleled with consulting teraphim and observing the liver. E. W. Davies, “The Meaning of Qesem in Prv 16,10,” *Biblica* 61.4 (1980) pp.554-556, followed by Heim (2013).

<sup>588</sup> So rabbi Alshich. Cited in E. Ginsburg, *Mishlei: A new translation with a commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic sources* (2 vols. ArtScroll Tanach Series; New York: Mesorah Publications, 1998).

<sup>589</sup> Fox (2009).

### Conclusion

The didactic explorations of these three proverbs have revealed their alluring openness, generated mainly through their polysemy and imagery. Their openness is increased when spoken ‘as proverbs’, in the royal court or amongst commoners; during a legal trial or a non-judicial case. They may be spoken to the defendant, plaintiff, or king (or the one imaginatively aligned with these characters), and at various stages in the trial process. In each case, their function might be different.

When used didactically, these proverbs facilitate the readers’ *character development*. In 20:8 and 20:26, the reader is presented with the anti-types ‘evil’ and ‘wicked’, whose behaviour they must avoid. The king himself may be a paradigm of justice for emulation. But the readers must think carefully before assimilating their behaviour: there are undertones and complexities to be acknowledged. In the king, as in the world, good and evil can be distinguished, but only through a careful winnowing.

The readers’ main impression regarding *worldview* may be the idealisation of the king. He is closely aligned with Yahweh, scattering, winnowing, and threshing wrongdoers as he sits enthroned (20:8,26). His judgement is as infallible as a God-given ‘oracle’ (16:10). However, there are subtle subversive elements: perhaps the king only punishes what is evil ‘in his own eyes’ (20:8); perhaps his judgement is as void as false religion (16:10).

These impressions are not paramount, but may arise when the readers ponder and *exercise their minds*. Skills vital for success in life are practiced here. The readers must use reason and discernment, engage the imagination, and work out the implications of events. They must learn to question what they see, judging for themselves. They must not simply follow dominant voices, however authoritative they may seem.

### §3. The king's favour and wrath

#### §3.1 Used as proverbs

For the monarchist, the most worrying depiction of the king occurs in those proverbs describing his favour and wrath. His favour presents few problems. It suggests a social harmony and generosity to which all can aspire. His wrath, however, is more troubling, for wrath is unequivocally condemned elsewhere in Proverbs (e.g. 14:29; 15:18; 22:24; 29:22). When ascribed to the king, however, no moral commentary is given. Perhaps in certain persons and circumstances, anger is justified. Indeed, the Lord himself may be angry (22:14, and commonly in the HB), and he sometimes uses the king as a conduit for his wrath (1 Sam 28:18). Pro-monarchic ANE material sometimes revels in the king's magnificent rage.<sup>590</sup> Here, the monarch may have special status. Or, possibly, the principles might be extrapolated. In state and household alike, effective leadership is authoritative leadership, which sometimes requires severity (e.g. 13:24). Much will depend on the circumstances in which the proverbs are used.

We will focus on five verses:

16:14 חֲמַת־מֶלֶךְ מְלַאכֵי־מוֹת וְאִישׁ חָכָם יִכַּפְּרָנָהּ:

*The anger of the king – messengers of death; a wise man will appease it.*

20:2 נָהָם כִּכְפִּיר אֵימַת מֶלֶךְ מִתְעַבְּרוֹ חוּטֵא נַפְשׁוֹ:

*Growling like a lion – dread fear of the king; the one who enrages him forfeits his life.  
sins against himself.*

19:12 נָהָם כִּכְפִּיר זֶעַף מֶלֶךְ וְכֹטֵל עַל־עֵשֶׂב רְצוֹנוֹ:

*Growling like a lion – the anger of the king; but like dew on the grass is his favour.*

16:15 בְּאוֹר־פְּנֵי־מֶלֶךְ חַיִּים וּרְצוֹנוֹ כְּעָב מִלְּקוֹשׁ:

*In the light of the king's face is life; and his favour is like a cloud of spring rain.*

21:1 פְּלִגֵּי־מַיִם לִב־מֶלֶךְ בְּיַד־יְהוָה עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַחְפֹּץ יִטּוֹ:

*Channels of water – the king's heart in Yahweh's hand; he turns it to all that he desires.<sup>591</sup>*

<sup>590</sup> Strawn discusses this particularly in relation to lion imagery. B. A. Strawn, *What is Stronger Than A Lion? Leonine imagery and metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005) pp.174-181.

<sup>591</sup> As this proverb does not explicitly mention favour or wrath, it may not be obvious why it is included here. But its connection with favour will become apparent below.



Two images are used to depict the king's wrath: "messengers of death" (16:14), and "growling like a lion" (19:12; 20:2). Three envision his favour: "dew on the grass" (19:12), "a cloud of spring rain" (16:15), "streams of water" (21:1). Like all proverbs, these verses are open to multiple situations and functions. I will focus on the *correlation of persons* – is it addressed to the 'king' (the superior) or to his subject (the subordinate)? – and the *opinion about the situation* – is the favour/wrath a good thing?

#### *Addressing the subordinate*

Though they do not all mention him explicitly, these proverbs imply the presence of a subordinate, who experiences the king's wrath or favour. After this experience, the proverbs might evaluate it. The sudden sorrow or success is not of the subordinate's own making. Prosperity has its primary basis, not in good fortune or hard work, but in the benefactor. Or, before the experience, the proverbs might be spoken directively. Graphic imagery provides strong motivation: the king's wrath destroys like a lion (avoid it!); his favour vivifies like water (seek it!).

However, how to do so is less clear. 16:14 encourages wisdom through [character-consequence] logic: 'the wise man' will not fall foul of the king's rage. But the other proverbs offer no behavioural types. The speaker may assume that the hearer already knows what would rouse the king, or may call on her to work it out. Perhaps she has learnt from elsewhere that the king bestows his favour on the wise (14:35), righteous (16:13), and pure (22:11), and she may be prompted to act accordingly. But the proverbs themselves here make no such claims. They might in fact be spoken to one whose king rejoices in evil (cf. Hos 7:3); what direction do they then offer?

#### *Addressing the superior*

These proverbs express no independent opinion of the king, allowing the speaker to superimpose his own. He might speak *affirmatively*. The king's favour is as generous and life-giving as abundant waters. His wrath is powerful, magnificent, and terrible. Thus understood, the speaker might evaluate and exalt the ruler. Or he might direct the ruler to proper leadership behaviour, presenting it as though it were already the case to avoid offending this powerful interlocutor.

But the speaker might also pronounce the proverbs *negatively*. Deathly messengers and roaring lions are no friendly playmates. Even in the king's favour, the speaker might bring out disturbing nuances (see the didactic explorations below). He thus condemns the king's character; a brave (and foolhardy?) move if in his presence. Or he might lament the injustice of society, speaking safely out of earshot (though cf. Qoh 10:20...).

### §3.2 Didactic explorations

#### §3.2(a) The king's favour

16:15 באור־פְּנֵי־מֶלֶךְ חַיִּים וְרָצוֹנוֹ כְּעָב מִלְקוֹשׁ:

*In the light of the king's face is life; and his favour is like a cloud of spring rain.*

This proverb employs two images, both open to exploration, to portray the life-giving favour of the king. The first is 'light' (אור), emanating from the face, possibly a metaphor for a physical smile.<sup>592</sup> This trope occurs across the ANE, especially of the deity's face shining with favour.<sup>593</sup> Biblical psalmists frequently implore the Lord to show the "light of his face", akin to bestowing peace, prosperity, and victory.<sup>594</sup> The *Ketef Hinnom* inscriptions further attest to the trope's central influence in Israel.<sup>595</sup> Thus, the king here is intimately related to God.<sup>596</sup> This favour-filled light brings its corollary,<sup>597</sup> 'life' (חַיִּים), in stark contrast with the 'death' of the previous verse (see discussion of 16:14 below). 'Life' designates not so much physical existence as life-in-its-fullness: secure, prosperous, abounding in joy.<sup>598</sup> The reader may be allured by this promise, imagining what it could mean blended with his own circumstances, and thus may be motivated to pleasing behaviour.

Juxtaposed with this brightness, the darkening "cloud of spring rain" (עָב מִלְקוֹשׁ) creates a powerful sensory experience (cf. Ezek 1:28). The reader's explorations are informed here by encyclopaedic knowledge. There are two major seasons in Canaan: hot dry summers (קִיץ) and cool wet winters (חֹרֶף). The wet season is opened by autumn rains (יֹרֶה) in October, and concluded with spring rains (מִלְקוֹשׁ) in April-May. Vital for agricultural life, these spring rains bring the year's final precious moisture, preparing the ground for the summer crops, and ripening those that have germinated over the winter.

<sup>592</sup> Toy (1899); cf. Clifford (1999); Delitzsch (1884); Fox (2009). In Job 29:24, אור פְּנֵי 'the light of my face' is parallel to אֶשְׁחֵק 'I will laugh'. Vulgate gives '*hilaritate*', 'cheerfulness' instead of 'light'.

<sup>593</sup> Occurs in Babylonian, El Amarna and Ugaritic texts; See B. K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16-31* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005) p.21.

<sup>594</sup> 'Light of the face' occurs in Pss 4:7[6]; 44:4[3]; 89:16[15]; 'make the face shine' in Pss 31:17[16]; 67:1; 80:4,8,20[3,7,19]; 119:135.

<sup>595</sup> Ketef Hinnom I.16-18: "[יֵאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵי]"; II.8-10 "[אֵלֶּיךָ]"; closely resembling Num 6:24-26. See G. Barkay, M. J. Lundberg, A. G. Vaughn and B. Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A new edition and evaluation," *BASOR* 334 (2004) pp.41-71.

<sup>596</sup> Perhaps like Moses, whose face shone after his divine communication (Exod 34:29-30).

<sup>597</sup> Prov 13:9, 20:20; Job 3:16, 33:28, 30; Pss 56:14[13], 58:9[8]; Qoh 6:4.

<sup>598</sup> Stewart (2016) pp.112-114.

In the HB, meteorological activity is a divine prerogative, and rain is a gift of God, emblematic of his generosity and care,<sup>599</sup> while withholding it is his curse.<sup>600</sup> Furthermore, the Lord himself “will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains (מִלְקוֹשׁ) that water the earth” (Hos 6:3). Once more, conventional Yahweh imagery connects divine and human monarchs (cf. 2 Sam 23:4; Ps 72:6). The king is celestially abundant in generosity, an ideal of magnanimity to which all may aspire. The proper response to such favour is given by Job: “They waited for me as for the rain, and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain... the light of my face they did not cast down” (Job 29:23-24). The courtier must eagerly seek the king’s favour, open-mouthed at the blessings he could bestow. As the proverb does not elucidate, he must work out for himself how best to elicit it.

While the overall impression of this proverb is glowing, however, dark clouds may linger. Yes, rain usually brings life, but not always (Prov 28:3). A deluge might cause destruction.<sup>601</sup> Spring rains suggest the ominous necessity of a long, hard summer to come. They are unpredictable, and irregular<sup>602</sup> – is the king’s favour the same? A stormy, erratic character can provide no straightforward paradigm of morality. Like the forces of heaven, he is impossible to control; who knows how to secure his capricious favour? Pondering this proverb, the reader evaluates situations and explores possibilities. He casts rains, monarchs, and his own circumstances into an imaginative, life-shaping blend.

21:1 פִּלְגֵי־מַיִם לִב־מֶלֶךְ בְּיַד־יְהוָה עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יִחְפֹּץ יִטְנוּ:

*Channels of water – the king’s heart in Yahweh’s hand; he turns it to all that he desires.*

The rains of 16:15 here become “channels of water” (פִּלְגֵי מַיִם), which are presented as an image for “the king’s heart” (לִב מֶלֶךְ). The equation is not obvious, and the reader looks for an explanation in the second colon. But, riddle-like, its relevance is at first unclear: “he turns it to all that he desires”. The subject of the verbs here (though ambiguous) is likely to be the Lord, as suggested by the mention of his ‘hand’ (an instrument of turning). The object ‘turned’ has double reference: the water and the heart. In the HB, the heart can be turned towards other gods (1 Kgs

<sup>599</sup> P. Reymond, *L'Eau, Sa Vie, et Sa Signification Dans l'Ancien Testament* (VTSup VI; Leiden: Brill, 1958) pp.41-53. The Lord gives מִלְקוֹשׁ in Deut 11:14; Jer 5:24; Joel 2:23; Zech 10:1. Cf. also Lev 26:4; 1 Kgs 17:14; Ezek 34:26; Ps 68:10[9].

<sup>600</sup> God withholds מִלְקוֹשׁ in Jer 3:3; cf. Deut 11:17; 1 Kgs 8:35(≈2 Chr 6:26); Isa 5:6; Zech 14:17; 2 Chr 7:13.

<sup>601</sup> E.g. Gen 6-9; Ezek 13:11-13.

<sup>602</sup> Cf. Amos 4:7; R. B. Y. Scott, “Meteorological Phenomena and Terminology in the Old Testament,” *ZAW* 64 (1952) p.19.

11:2-4) or Yahweh (Josh 24:23); towards wickedness (Ps 141:4) or wisdom (Prov 2:2). It suggests full-blooded devotion. Concerned with internal disposition, Yahweh inclines the king's desire according to his own, to 'all' he sees fit. כָּל is expansive and under-determined; the reader could fill it out in many ways.

The "channels of water" seem incongruous with the bodily imagery of hand and heart. Proverbs employs its favourite technique of juxtaposing the unlike,<sup>603</sup> the psychological disorientation challenging conventional categories and associations. Human character is an elusive, flowing stream. Grasping it may seem impossible (cf. Prov 27:16), but it is as nothing to the Lord (cf. Isa 40:12). He has full control of this פְּלֶגֶא, an artificially constructed canal<sup>604</sup> under his management. In Egypt and Mesopotamia, farming seems to have depended on such artificial irrigation, but it was probably not common in Palestine.<sup>605</sup> It may, however, have occurred in urban environments (Ps 46:5[4]), or the luxuriant gardens of the upper echelons.<sup>606</sup> In his kingly role-play, Qohelet declares "I made myself gardens and parks... pools from which to water the forest of growing trees" (Qoh 2:5-6; cf. Ps 1:3; Cant 4:12-15; Neh 3:15). In order 'to water', artificial pools need artificial waterways.

Accordingly, the reader might be transported to a beautiful and abundant landscape, the king's garden with its sights, smells, and sounds. כָּל might be translated not as 'everything', but 'everyone'. The king's favoured ones abound with all manner of luxuries. The king is liberal and generous, super-abundant with gracious gifts, a paradigm and standard of generosity. Furthermore, a פְּלֶגֶא is dependable: "Whereas a river (*nābār*) might run wild, and a wadi (*nāḥāl*) [*sic.*] run dry, the artificial stream of water provides a steady, directed, full supply of refreshing, living-giving water".<sup>607</sup>

This is a rare proverb explicitly connecting the king and Yahweh,<sup>608</sup> and it stands at the

<sup>603</sup> E.g. a crown with rottenness in 12:4; a fountain with snares in 13:14≈14:27; a lion with dew in 19:12 (see below).

<sup>604</sup> This seems to be the primary reference of this term. BDB; Reymond (1958) p.129, cf. Fox (2009) p.679. Compare the commonly attested Assyrian *palgu*, meaning 'canal, irrigation ditch' (M. T. Roth, *The Assyrian Dictionary: Volume 12* [Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2005]).

<sup>605</sup> Climate and terrain probably rendered it unnecessary. This may have distinguished Canaan from Egypt (Deut 11:10-11), for in Israel, water management seems to have occurred mainly through a terrace system, rather than through the Mesopotamian/Egyptian model of canals from major rivers (the Euphrates and Nile). O. Borowski, "Irrigation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East vol.3* (ed. E. M. Meyers; Oxford: OUP, 1997) pp.181-184; H. J. Bruins, "Runoff Terraces in the Negev Highlands During the Iron Age: Nomads settling down or farmers living in the desert?" in *On the Fringe of Society: Archaeological and ethnoarchaeological perspectives on pastoral and agricultural societies* (eds. B. A. Saidel and E. J. van der Steen; BAR International Series; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007) pp.37-43; Reymond (1958) pp.126-131.

<sup>606</sup> Borowski (1997) p.183; K. J. Kavusa, "The Life-Giving and Life-Threatening Potential of Water and Water-Related Phenomena in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature: An eco-theological exploration" (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2015) pp.182-191; Reymond (1958) p.128.

<sup>607</sup> Waltke (2005) p.168.

<sup>608</sup> The only other examples are 24:21 and 25:2.

heart of a king-God cluster (20:22-21:3).<sup>609</sup> But the significance of the connection is not readily apparent. It exalts the king as the ultimate earthly fulfiller of Yahweh's will. But it also limits him: as free and unsearchable as he may think his heart (Prov 25:3), it is simply a tool for the deity. And (how) can the principles be applied beyond the courtly circle? *Only the king* enjoys this special relationship; not the mere commoner? Or *even the king* is under Yahweh's control; how much more the common folk?

נָהָם כִּכְפִּיר זַעַף מֶלֶךְ וְכֹטֵל עַל-עֵשָׂב רִצּוֹנוֹ: 19:12

*Growling like a lion – the anger of the king; but like dew on the grass is his favour.*

Our final favour proverb contains two images for the king – lion and dew. Here we will concentrate on the latter, completing our triad of water metaphors. The king's favour is "like dew on the grass", shimmering in the dawn air of the reader's imagination. The HB explains the mysterious morning presence of dew as a dropping from heaven (Deut 33:28; Prov 3:20), and implies it that has fertilising effects. Indeed, it parallels 'rain' in life-giving potential (Deut 32:2; 2 Sam 1:21; 1 Kgs 17:1), and can bring healing (Sir 43:22) or even resurrection (Isa 26:19).<sup>610</sup> Blended with the target domain of the king's favour, the latter becomes similarly salubrious. The king, and every benefactor, is encouraged to abundant generosity. The courtier, and every beneficiary, is inspired to please him.

Like the spring rain, dew comes from Yahweh as a sign of his favour.<sup>611</sup> Withholding it is a curse.<sup>612</sup> Yahweh himself is even likened to dew, causing Israel to "blossom like the lily" and "take root like (the trees of) Lebanon" (Hos 14:6[5]). The earthly king now adopts this role for his people. Dew is no deluge, but is quiet and gentle (Deut 32:2; Isa 18:4). Likewise, the king's favour may not be monumental, but subtle. Dew is widespread and far-reaching – so too royal benevolence? It can still accumulate over the rainless summer, and provide some moisture for the hardened earth.<sup>613</sup> There is hope for the reader suffering drought in her life.

The imaginative elaboration process, however, may lead to some darker undertones, particularly if the reader's own 'king' is not so beneficent. Is dew really conducive to flourishing, or is it simply a necessity? Is it even that? Dew comes silently and unpredictably; it will not "wait

<sup>609</sup> Yahweh appears in 20:22,23,24,27; 21:1,2,3; the king in 20:26,28; 21:1.

<sup>610</sup> Dew and resurrection are increasingly associated in later Jewish and Christian tradition. See e.g. B. Kern-Ulmer, "Consistency and Change in Rabbinic Literature as Reflected in the Terms Rain and Dew," *JSJ* 26.1 (1995) pp.71-74.

<sup>611</sup> Gen 27:28; Deut 33:28; Zech 8:12.

<sup>612</sup> Gen 27:39; 2 Sam 1:21; 1 Kgs 17:1; Hag 1:10.

<sup>613</sup> So Fox (2009) p.654.

for the children of man” (Mic 5:6[7]; cf. 2 Sam 17:12), and its levels can vary greatly.<sup>614</sup> The king’s subject cannot affect where his favour falls, making futile any attempts to garner it through good behaviour. Dew is ephemeral and fleeting, “going early away” (משכים הלך, Hos 6:4, 13:3). The king’s favour may dissipate as quickly as it formed. Like the natural world, the king’s character (and all human character) contains good and bad. Though here he may sit atop the natural and social orders, his position atop the moral order is not so secure. He is a problematic paradigm. The reader is trained to explore such connotations, subversive and courageous. She must not be afraid of possibilities, but give full examination to the ambiguous phenomena of life.

### Conclusion

The water imagery in these proverbs – spring rains, streams, and dew – opens them up to imaginative exploration, multiplying their didactic potential. Addressed to the courtier-beneficiary, they motivate him to develop a *character* that the king would find pleasing. Addressed to the king-benefactor, they advocate generosity. But there are ambiguities. The king’s character is complex, and may not prove a perfect paradigm. The readers align their *worldviews* accordingly. The king may be magnanimous, the quasi-divine bestower of the waters of life. But rain can be sporadic (16:15), and dew fleeting (19:12). Neither is predictable nor controllable. So too the king’s favour? These connotations are deep below the stream’s surface and perhaps as fleeting as the dew itself, but they should not be dismissed immediately. Discerning them serves as *mental training*, giving rein to the readers’ imagination and reason. The proverbs invite readers to evaluate interpretations, even if quiet or subversive.

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<sup>614</sup> See M. Gilead and N. Rosenan, “Ten Years of Dew Observation in Israel,” *IEJ* 4.2 (1958) pp.120-123.

§3.2(b) *The king's wrath*

נָהָם כַּכְפִּיר זֶעַף מֶלֶךְ וּכְטֹל עַל-עֵשָׁב רְצוֹנוֹ: 19:12

*Growling like a lion – the anger of the king; but like dew on the grass is his favour.*

In multi-sensory juxtaposition, Prov 19:12 combines the delicate moisture of dew on the feet with a fearsome growling in the ears. The lion was probably familiar in ancient Israel/Judah,<sup>615</sup> if not through personal experience, through popular conception. Lions could apparently roam near human habitation (e.g. Judg 14; 1 Sam 17:34-37), offering the sluggard an excuse to stay indoors (Prov 22:13; 26:13). Across the ANE, lions are “the mightiest among beasts” (Prov 30:30), commonly associated with kings for their power and majesty. The king here is not comfortable and affectionate, but fear-inspiring. Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Hittite royal inscriptions employ the motif,<sup>616</sup> and leonine iconography occurs on royal ships, chariots, and thrones.<sup>617</sup> Kings boast of their power over lions, and even describe themselves in such terms: “I am king, I am lord, I am powerful... I am a virile lion... I am raging” (Adadnari II).<sup>618</sup>

The HB, however, is much more reticent about the king-lion connection,<sup>619</sup> and Israelite monarchs are almost never described as such. Rather, the language is reserved for God himself. He is likened to a lion more than to any other creature,<sup>620</sup> the one who “roars from Zion”.<sup>621</sup> In this guise, he destroys wicked peoples, suggesting his great and untameable power, put to a righteous end. Strikingly, here the king assumes this role,<sup>622</sup> as an unstoppable, divinely-authorised instrument of justice, to be exalted and feared. The proverb perhaps inspires leaders to cultivate such a persona.

However, such connotations may not be found by every reader, particularly if her own king shows no godlike justice. Indeed, later in Proverbs, “a roaring lion (אַרִי־נָהָם) or a charging bear, is a wicked ruler over a poor people” (28:15). Perhaps the king has usurped Yahweh’s role

<sup>615</sup> Strawn (2005) p.28.

<sup>616</sup> Strawn (2005) pp.174-181.

<sup>617</sup> Strawn (2005) pp.182-184.

<sup>618</sup> Strawn (2005) p.179.

<sup>619</sup> The only examples are: Saul and Jonathan were “stronger than lions” (2 Sam 1:23); Solomon’s throne was flanked by lions (1 Kgs 10:19-20); two foreign kings are depicted as lions (Ezek 32:2-3; Jer 50:17). Strawn suggests this is a “glaring omission when seen in the light of the ancient Near Eastern data” Strawn (2005) p.236.

<sup>620</sup> Strawn (2005) p.58.

<sup>621</sup> Joel 4:16[3:16]; cf. Isa 31:4; Jer 25:30,38, 49:19≈50:44; Hos 5:14, 13:7-8; Amos 3:8.

<sup>622</sup> Strawn (2005) argues that the lack of leonine imagery of the king in the HB is precisely because the writers did not want to make these human-divine connections (pp.236-248).

unauthorised. Lions are a common biblical metaphor for destructive enemies.<sup>623</sup> In ancient Near Eastern iconography, they are terrifying beasts,<sup>624</sup> and sometimes depict demons.<sup>625</sup> Such may provoke terror in the reader. The proverb invites her into the start of a story: the growl before the attack. She can elaborate the grim continuation for herself. “The lion has roared; who will not fear?” (Amos 3:8a).

The lion-king of 19:12 may be violent and merciless. His methods are brutal and indiscriminate, his rage unrestrained. He roars against the ‘good sense’ of the previous verse, which makes one ‘slow to anger’ (19:11a). The proverb can condemn as ferociously as it glorifies. Employed to different ends, leonine traits may be desirable or abhorrent, for as B. Strawn put it, “the lion is a *polyvalent symbol*”.<sup>626</sup> The reader must adjudicate between interpretations, and deploy them discriminately.

Furthermore, this image must be held together with the other in the proverb – “dew on the grass” – for both apply to the same king. This provides an intellectual puzzle, a challenge to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable realities.<sup>627</sup> Incongruous characteristics are simultaneously embodied by the same individual. Despite the all-or-nothing impression of some proverbs, character is endlessly complex. Placed side by side, the images play off each other. As the reader ponders them, categories and images shift and are reinterpreted. Taking the parallelism as synonymous, ‘and’, their similarities come to the fore. In both images, the king has supreme uncontrollable power over the human and natural world. Taken as antithetical, ‘but’, differences are highlighted. The most pertinent is the polarisation of destroying and giving life, but others too may emerge. The lion ravages individual victims, whereas dew covers everything. Lions are rare, but dew common. Does the king bestow his wrath on the unfortunate few, but his favour on the masses? The lion creates a strong response of terror, but the dew is understated. Is the king’s wrath to be feared more than his favour desired? The proverb opens up questions, and lets the reader explore to train her mind.

<sup>623</sup> כָּפִיר in Jer 2:15, 51:38; Pss 35:17, 58:7[6]; cf. also Isa 5:29; Jer 4:7, 50:17; Joel 1:6; Amos 3:12; Zech 11:3; Pss 7:3[2], 10:9, 17:12, 22:14[13].

<sup>624</sup> Strawn (2005) pp.134-151.

<sup>625</sup> O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern iconography and the book of Psalms* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978) p.86.

<sup>626</sup> Strawn (2005) p.26, italics original; cf. I. Cornelius, “The Lion in the Art of the Ancient Near East: A study of selected motifs,” *JNSL* 15 (1989) p.65.

<sup>627</sup> Some think they are too different to be compatible, and have sought emendation by deleting נָהָם and changing כָּפִיר to כָּפָר ‘like the hoarfrost’. This would provide a tighter parallelism with טֵל ‘dew’, with which hoarfrost is paired in Exod 16:14. Gemser (1963); Ehrlich (1908); I. L. Seeligman, “Voraussetzungen der Midraschexegeese,” in *Congress Volume Copenhagen 1953* (ed. G. W. Anderson et al.; VTSup 1; Leiden: Brill, 1953) pp.150-181. However, this emendation has no textual support and is unnecessary. Proverbs allows interesting juxtapositions of images, and the combination of a lion and dew is known in Mic 5:6-7[7-8].



20:2 נָהָם כִּכְפִּיר אֵימַת מֶלֶךְ מִתְעַבֵּר חוּטֵא נִפְשׁוֹ:

*Growling like a lion – dread fear of the king; the one who enrages him forfeits his life.  
sins against himself.*

This proverb uses the same motif as 19:12 – a growling lion – with all its ambiguities of characterisation. However, the Hebrew is particularly difficult, and each of the other phrases – *מִתְעַבֵּר*, *אֵימַת מֶלֶךְ*, and *חוּטֵא נִפְשׁוֹ* – is disputed in scholarship. *אֵימַת מֶלֶךְ* describes the “dread fear of the king”, depicting the terrified courtier. But how can this be a source of ‘growling’? – growling would more logically come from the angry king himself (as in 19:12).<sup>628</sup> The two parts of the colon press together; their relationship is oblique, left for the reader to decipher. Possibly, the relationship is cause and effect: (I hear a) growling like a lion; (I feel) dread fear of the king.

The next problematic element is *מִתְעַבֵּר*. *עבר* occurs in the hithpael five times outside Proverbs, in the reflexive meaning ‘to enrage oneself’.<sup>629</sup> But this does not explain the 3ms suffix here (\*‘he enrages himself him?’),<sup>630</sup> and the sense seems to require that the king is angered, not ‘oneself’. Most plausibly, the hithpael may be understood as an indirect reflexive: ‘to enrage *against* oneself’, with the suffix as a direct object (‘him’ = the king).<sup>631</sup> The advice not to provoke the king would accord with the next verse’s commendation of “keeping away from strife” (*שָׁבַת מִרִיב*, 20:3a).

Also difficult is the subsequent phrase *חוּטֵא נִפְשׁוֹ* (cf. Hab 2:10). Both terms are polysemous, and their grammatical relationship is unclear. Possibly there is a double meaning.<sup>632</sup>

<sup>628</sup> Some find this too problematic, and suggest emending to *חַמַּת* ‘anger’ accordingly. A. Barucq, *Le Livre des Proverbes* (Sources Bibliques Paris: [s.n.], 1964); Clifford (1999).

<sup>629</sup> Deut 3:26; Pss 78:21,59,62; 89:39[38]. The other occurrences in Proverbs (14:16 and 26:17) are also difficult.

<sup>630</sup> Hatton retains the reflexive sense ‘enrages himself’, and suggests that the suffix simply emphasises ‘himself’, but this seems elsewhere unattested in BH. Hatton (2008) p.134.

<sup>631</sup> Many commentators (implicitly or explicitly), e.g. Barucq (1964); Delitzsch (1884); Fox (2009); Gemser (1963); Yoder (2009).

- See IBHS P.26.2d; GKC P.54f. Indirect reflexives may take direct object, e.g. Exod 32:3 *וַיִּתְּפְרוּ ... אֶת־נִזְמֵי הַזָּהָב* “they tore off (*from themselves*)... the gold rings”; Mic 6:16 *וַיִּשְׁתַּמְר חֻקֹּת עֹמְרִי* “he kept *for himself* the statutes of Omri” (cf. also Exod 33:6; Josh 9:12; 1 Sam 18:4; Isa 52:2.). Though the text is difficult, Mic 6:16 may form a particularly apt parallel. *הַשְׁתַּמֵּר* is elsewhere a regular reflexive ‘to keep oneself’ (Ps 18:24≈2 Sam 22:24), but this does not exclude an indirect reflexive in Micah. Similarly, *הִתְעַבֵּר* usually means ‘to enrage oneself’, but ‘to enrage against oneself’ may be possible here. Fox (2009) suggests this sense for Sir 16:8 too (*הַמִּתְעַבְרִים*).

- Other interpretations have also been suggested. Heim (2013) p.456 takes it as from *עבר* I ‘to transgress against’, though the hithpael of this root would be an unexplained *bapax*.

- G. R. Driver, “Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs,” *JTS* 41 (1940) p.174 relates *מִתְעַבֵּר* to the ithpael of Syr ‘*br* and Arab *ḡabara*, translating accordingly as “he that is negligent”, but there is no other evidence for this meaning in Hebrew.

- Some scholars have related the sense to *ערב* ‘to mix up’ (though unattested in verbal form in BH): “he who meddles with him” (discussed by McKane [1970], Fox [2009]). They suggest either textual corruption through metathesis of *ר* and *ב*, or a semantic conflation of these roots. Some mss of LXX may support this reading, as they add *καὶ ἐπιμιγνύμενος* “and he mixes” to the *b* colon.

<sup>632</sup> Waltke (2005); Yoder (2009); Heim (2013).

חָטָא may be close to its etymological sense ‘to miss’,<sup>633</sup> extended here to ‘to forfeit’, and נָפֶשׁ may mean ‘life’: he who angers him ‘forfeits his life’<sup>634</sup> (cf. the common converse: ‘preserves his life’ .consequence logic provides strong motivation to discern pleasing behaviour-). The act<sup>635</sup> שָׁמַר נָפֶשׁוֹ

Alternatively, חָטָא may take in its usual sense ‘to sin’, with נָפֶשׁוֹ as a reflexive pronoun. חָטָא usually takes a separate preposition ‘against’ (ב/ל), but might admit a direct object too (cf. Prov 8:36). Thus here, he “sins against himself”.<sup>636</sup> This sophisticated interiority and self-alienation – separating the ‘I’ who sins from the ‘I’ who is offended – may seem foreign to Proverbs. But there are parallels: elsewhere one ‘despises’ (מוֹאֵס; 15:32), ‘hates’ (שׂוֹנֵא; 29:24) and ‘does violence to’ (חָמַס; 8:36) himself (נָפֶשׁוֹ). There is complexity in character far beyond the wicked (who sins), and the righteous (who feels offence). Furthermore, it is the courtier here who ‘sins’, and not the king,<sup>637</sup> whose behaviour (even if filled with leonine wrath) remains uncondemned. This ambiguates a simplistic ethical system: ‘sin’ seems to be mapped in relation to the social hierarchy (cf. Qoh 10:4). Perhaps ‘sinless’ behaviour would amount to political savvy or sycophancy.

The reader can explore these complexities of characterisation of courtier and king, to discern whether either is worthy of emulation. If the double meaning of חָטָא נָפֶשׁוֹ is discerned, then the phrase reflects both an act (sinning) and a consequence (forfeiting your life). The reader is taught to connect the two halves in language and in life (cf. ch.5).

חַמַּת-מֶלֶךְ מְלָאכֵי-מוֹת וְאִישׁ חָכָם יִכְפֹּרָנָה: 16:14

*The anger of the king – messengers of death; a wise man will appease it.*

Our final proverb connects the king’s wrath with מְלָאכֵי-מוֹת “messengers of death”. The genitive may be attributive (‘messengers consisting of death’) or resultative (‘messengers leading to death’). Similarly, the juxtaposition of phrases may indicate a metaphorical equation (the anger *is* the messengers) or an outcome (the anger *results in* the messengers). Furthermore, the identity of the messengers has been subject to much scholarly dispute. מְלָאךְ is polysemous, and allows both literal and metaphorical interpretations.

<sup>633</sup> BDB gives this meaning for this verse; Hab 2:10; Prov 8:36, 19:2; Job 5:24.

<sup>634</sup> Gemser (1963), Ringgren (1962), McKane (1970). The possibility of this semantic extension of חָטָא, however, is unclear.

<sup>635</sup> Prov 13:3; 16:17; 19:16; 21:23.

<sup>636</sup> So LXX, Vulg, Barucq (1964). Alternatively perhaps, an apposition of instrument: ‘he sins [with/in] his soul’ (cf. Mic 6:7).

<sup>637</sup> See Hatton (2008) p.134 for an alternative interpretation.

Some suggest that the proverb draws on Ugaritic mythology, with מָוֹת alluding to a god, and the genitive giving origin: “messengers from *Mot*”.<sup>638</sup> But this is an unnecessary speculation, and there are more plausible options. Firstly, מְלָאָכִי could refer to literal human messengers (cf. 13:17), presumably ready at the king’s disposal. Solomon sends Benaiah to kill his opponents (1 Kgs 2), and Saul has Doeg slaughter the priests of Nob (1 Sam 22); the king’s henchmen here too inflict ‘death’ (cf. also Jer 26:22-23; 2 Kgs 6:32-33). This culturally plausible scenario provides concrete motivation against inciting wrath. Secondly, מְלָאָכִי could be taken as divine messengers, ‘angels’. Elsewhere, the Lord sends an angel (מַלְאָךְ) to inflict his deathly punishment;<sup>639</sup> perhaps the earthly king too has access to such heavenly sources. His grandeur and power heighten to quasi-divine status, increasing the subject’s fear of him: who can stop such supernatural wrath? Thirdly, מְלָאָכִי could be an open metaphor for any number of punishments. The reader may imagine their specific form in particular circumstances, and elaborate on the emergent story. מָוֹת in Proverbs is not just physical death, but is a cipher for any calamity. Undisclosed disaster arrives at the offender’s door, ready to deliver his poisonous package.

However interpreted, the first colon suggests the king’s absolute power. The subsequent verse makes him lord over ‘life’ (16:15a, see above); here his dominion is ‘death’. The proverb pair gives the same polar depiction as we saw condensed into 19:12. The proverb does not disclose its own evaluation, merely stating the fact, and allowing the reader to make up her own mind as she confronts the realities of character and society. She might stand in awe, finding a paradigm for her own domestic dominion. Or she may be outraged, standing above the king in the moral hierarchy, and condemning his murderous wrath (cf. 16:32).

In self-protection, she might align herself with the “wise man”, who “will appease it”.<sup>640</sup> This second colon can function in two quite different ways. First, it may extol the value of wisdom. The prototypical wise man overflows with qualities guaranteed to quash the flames (cf. 29:8). Filling out the characterisation, the reader might consider gracious speech, which can “turn away wrath” (15:1) and persuade a ruler (25:15). Indeed, the previous verse affirms that the king loves righteous lips (16:13). The colon then has a [character – consequence] structure, and can function

<sup>638</sup> H. L. Ginsberg, “Baal’s Two Messengers,” *BAASOR* 95 (1944) pp.25-30 argued that in Ugarit, Baal sent his messengers in pairs. When Baal’s attendants *Gpn* and *Ugr* are referred to, the form is probably dual. Dahood (1963) p.36 relates this to the present verse of Proverbs, translating “Death’s two messengers”. Waltke (2005) suggests that here the metaphor “is an allusion to an Ugaritic myth... because the form is probably dual” (p.21). But the logic must run the other way. Nothing suggests a dual form (morphologically identical to a plural in the construct state) apart from the possible Ugaritic allusion. And very little suggests the allusion. Indeed, apart from in one contested passage (*Baal* I ii.16-17; cited in Ginsberg p.29 n.20), the two Ugaritic messengers belong not to ‘Death’ (Mot), but to Baal.

<sup>639</sup> 2 Sam 24≈1 Chr 21; 2 Kgs 19:35≈Isa 37:36≈2 Chr 32:21; Ps 35:5.

<sup>640</sup> Etymologically related to ‘covering’, כָּפַר (piel) usually means ‘to atone for (sin)’ (e.g. 16:6), but this sense does not fit here. Rather, it seems to mean ‘to cover over, pacify’ (BDB 1), as in Gen 32:21[20].

evaluatively or directive. To pacify the king, I *direct* you to become wise. Once pacified, I commend you for it, and *evaluate* you as wise.

Alternatively, the pacifying may be a deliberate *act* (rather than a consequence).<sup>641</sup> It would be wise, advises this savvy political note, to assuage the king's anger when it arises. Attempting to bear it only heralds death. The astute reader, holding the king's anger contemptibly, and aware of the possibility of persuasion, can discern how to achieve this. 'Wisdom' here, like 'sin' in 20:2, is defined in terms of society, and of personal/political ends, challenging the neat moral classifications offered elsewhere.

### Conclusion

These final three proverbs graphically depict the king's wrath through imagery open for exploration. The readers can evaluate the *character* of both king and courtier. Is the king's wrath a paradigm for the leader? Is a courtier's morality best judged by his political acumen? Simple character classifications are found wanting in the complexity of real life, and the machinations of the court. The *worldview* espoused is somewhat ambiguous. The king may be a majestic, quasi-divine lion, deserving the highest respect. Or his anger may be an abominable character flaw. Confronted with these conflicts, readers are forced to *exercise their minds*. They must adjudicate between interpretations without fearing subversive or challenging ideas.

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<sup>641</sup> So e.g. Toy (1899).

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored a selection of proverbs about the king, to show their openness and its contribution to their double use as ‘didactic proverbs’. Three scholarly questions were raised at the start of the chapter: what is the depiction of the king (how favourable; how closely associated with Yahweh)? Do the proverbs need a courtly setting? How do they function pedagogically? Regarding *setting*, I have suggested that a literal court is not necessary (though it is possible). ‘As proverbs’, the verses could be spoken to many different people, in many different situations, for many different reasons. The king and courtier might be idealised figures, *pedagogically* designed as standards for evaluation or paradigms for emulation. However, there are subversive elements; this is no straightforwardly favourable *depiction*.

If the courtier is a paradigm in these proverbs, the reader is called upon to develop a *character* pleasing to the king. Motivation is strong in light of the king’s righteous judgement, magnificent favour, and terrible wrath. If the king is truly just, then righteousness is the aim. However, this may not be so, and morality might be reoriented by political savvy and personal ends. If the reader instead aligns himself with the king, he is encouraged to embody justice, beneficent favour, and (perhaps) righteous anger. But the king’s character is not unthinkingly glorified. Like all human character, it is complex, and even in the positive portrayals, there are disturbing ambiguities. The picture is darkest when displaying his wrath.

Imagery elsewhere used of the Lord is passed to the monarch in these proverbs, perhaps suggesting that he is the divine viceroy, instigating God’s rule on earth. Or perhaps the king has usurped the role illegitimately; Yahweh is nowhere to be found when the lion-king roars unjustly. When the relationship is explicit, the monarch seems to be subordinate, with no true authority of his own (21:1).

These ambiguities strongly encourage the reader’s *intellectual engagement*. Her assumed identity shifts – courtier, king, critic – necessitating dynamic interpretation. The moral norm is sometimes dislocated from the proverbs themselves, provoking her to seek it elsewhere. She must use imagination, logic, and experience to evaluate king and proverb, to weigh possible interpretations. Such explorations require courage and sensitivity, giving ear to non-dominant views. Even if the resultant interpretations are ultimately rejected, the process of interpreting is formative.

These elements of character development, worldview, and intellectual training give the proverbs strong didactic potential. They help their addressee to acquire wisdom about the world. She listens to the general principles about the king and weighs them in light of specific situations. She engages her mind to scrutinise both proverb and king, and embodies their wisdom into her own character. The next chapter will focus more intentionally on the process by which such wisdom is gained.

## Chapter 7 – Acquiring Wisdom Through the Openness of Didactic Proverbs

רֵאשִׁית חֲכָמָה קִנָּה וּבְכָל-קִנְיָנָה קִנָּה בִּינָה:

*The beginning of wisdom: get wisdom; and whatever you get, get insight.*

(Prov 4:7)

### §1. Wisdom mediated by the didactic proverb genre

Proverbs calls upon its students to “get wisdom”. This is not just a commendation of propositional knowledge, but a call to exist in the world in a new way, a way shaped by Proverbs itself. This chapter will consider what that process entails.

Scholars have distinguished several tensions in the way Proverbs expresses its wisdom. Is wisdom more concerned with the ‘textual’ or ‘extra-textual’ world? The general or specific? The moral or intellectual? The ‘religious’ or ‘secular’? Scholars may situate themselves on one side or the other, or attempt to mediate between them. I suggest that each of these tensions can be explained and clarified by considering the double didactic-proverb genre. What’s more, the text’s openness allows wisdom to be carried through the tensions. The first three tensions will be considered here (§1) and the fourth later (§3), to begin to answer the pressing question of an anonymous sage: “Where can wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12).

#### §1.1 Wisdom is found in the textual and extra-textual worlds

The Book of Proverb creates a ‘textual world’, which relates in some sense to the outside ‘extra-textual world’ of the reader. But in which world is true wisdom to be found? Many have suggested that Proverbs’ epistemology is essentially empirical – it advocates seeking wisdom in the extra-textual world.<sup>642</sup> Several passages give apparent descriptions of empiricism in practice (e.g. 6:6-11; 7:6-27; 24:30-34), and it is characteristic of the proverb genre to give straightforward observations of life.

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<sup>642</sup> In 2007, Fox could call this a “scholarly consensus”. M. V. Fox, “The Epistemology of the Book of Proverbs,” *JBL* 126.4 (2007) p.670. E.g. J. L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the deadening silence* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1998a) pp.51-52; Frydrych (2002) pp.53-57.

However, the epistemology cannot be *simply* empiricism. The act-consequence proverbs, for example – so often violated by the realities of life – are unlikely to have been empirically derived. G. von Rad has suggested that empiricism was essential to the book’s formation, but in its current form it stands two steps removed. Proverbs are by genre the product of an empirical quest, “a rudimentary expression of man’s search for knowledge”,<sup>643</sup> a means of discovering the world.<sup>644</sup> However, by formulating the worldly tangle of events into language, the interpreter moves herself one step beyond them, asserting an order. Situations are observed, and captured in language, in tight proverbial bindings. Thereby, “[t]he things which are elusive, that seem to be so mobile that they cannot be grasped, are seized, stopped, established”.<sup>645</sup> Through the textual world, the extra-textual world is controlled. In a second step, von Rad suggests that the proverbs’ form and goal were altered when incorporated into the biblical book: they were now oriented to the “cultivation of men” only.<sup>646</sup> The essential empiricism of the ‘proverb’ was transformed when they became ‘didactic’.

Some have in fact challenged whether there is anything left of empiricism in the book. M. V. Fox argues instead that Proverbs operates with a ‘coherence theory’ of truth.<sup>647</sup> It sets out a system of compatible beliefs, and no empirical insight can be accepted unless it is coherent with this system. Several scholars further argue that this constructed textual world “eclipses the tangible objective world”.<sup>648</sup> It fills the reader’s vision with a value system not to be questioned or changed, more valid and true than anything outside of itself.

I will argue that there is an important relationship between these worlds, but it is not one of ‘eclipsing’. The outside world retains some independent status. Along with listening to the book’s instruction, personal observation *is* validated: “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord made them both” (Prov 20:12). The proverb genre cannot function unless embedded in real life. A proverb has only a partial meaning until applied to a situation (see pp.32-34), and its legitimacy depends upon finding genuine traction there. Spoken aptly, it emerges as the crystallisation of an insight discovered in the world. The book does offer its own textual world, but this is open and not immutable. It is more a generalised framework, responsive to specific situations as they emerge.

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<sup>643</sup> Von Rad (1972) p.30.

<sup>644</sup> Von Rad (1962) pp.418-441; von Rad (1972) pp.30-32; cf. W. Zimmerli, “The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology,” *SJT* 17.2 (1964) pp.146-158.

<sup>645</sup> Zimmerli (1964), pp.149-150, elaborating on von Rad’s view.

<sup>646</sup> Von Rad (1962) pp.432.

<sup>647</sup> Fox (2007).

<sup>648</sup> The language is taken from Ricoeur. E.g. Sandoval (2006) p.6; Viljoen (2013) p.35.

§1.2 Wisdom is general and specific

The textual world of Proverbs 10:1-22:16 is structured around regularities. Each proverb offers a succinct principle, a “breakthrough to the generally and universally valid”.<sup>649</sup> Each recognises a recurring type, a common category or pattern. Character categories (ch.4) and act-consequence patterns (ch.5) are paramount. Brought together into a didactic collection, these provide sound instruction for the whole of life. The principles are not neutral, but value-laden and morally charged, shaping a new vision for reality. But the outside world is not eclipsed by this vision, rather seen through it. It offers a framework of general principles by which to understand and evaluate the specificities of life. This is not, however, absolute law. It is no closed inviolable system, but by virtue of its construction through *proverbs*, remains essentially open.

The self-contained form and haphazard arrangement of the sayings means that no total system is reached. This mentality has been described as ‘gnomic’, rather than systematic or philosophical.<sup>650</sup> As characterised by literary critic A. Jolles,<sup>651</sup> the individuality of each saying is paramount: “in the bonds, separation predominates; in the relatedness, juxtaposition remains; in the order, the isolation of members exists”.<sup>652</sup> Jolles influenced e.g. H.-J. Hermisson, who argued that the world of Proverbs progresses “in an abundance of single phenomena”,<sup>653</sup> and von Rad, for whom every individual phenomenon “stand[s] in its own particular character absolutely”.<sup>654</sup> Each proverb provides only a shard of experience; a glistening fragment, belonging to a mosaic whose overall construction is unknown.

This unsystematising nature is particularly apparent in ‘contradictory’ proverbs<sup>655</sup> (which challenge any notion of a fully-fledged ‘coherence theory’). These occur in many cultures: “absence makes the heart grow fonder”, but also “out of sight, out of mind”. In Proverbs, “answer not a fool according to his folly”, but also “answer a fool according to his folly” (26:4-5; cf. also 17:27-8). In life, every rule admits of exceptions; experience is too unwieldy and variegated for rigid dogma. As didactic literature, wisdom can be generalised into time-tested principles, but as proverbs it requires constant verification in the local and particular.

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<sup>649</sup> Von Rad (1962) p.420, cf. von Rad (1972) p.32.

<sup>650</sup> E.g. Crenshaw (1985) pp.116-117; von Rad (1962) pp.420-422; von Rad (1972) p.30; Williams (1981).

<sup>651</sup> Jolles distinguished seven ‘Simple Forms’ in folk language, each tied to a particular form of thought. A. Jolles, *Einfache Formen: Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1930; repr. 1968); Eng trans. A. Jolles, *Simple Forms* (Translated by Peter J. Schwartz. New York: Verso, 2017).

<sup>652</sup> “[I]n den Bindungen überwiegt die Trennung, in den Bezogenheiten bleibt das Nebeneinander, in den Ordnungen die Sonderung der Glieder bestehen”, Jolles (1968) p.156, translation mine.

<sup>653</sup> Hermisson (1968) p.140, “in einer Fülle von Einzelphänomenen”.

<sup>654</sup> von Rad (1962) p.421; cf. von Rad (1972) p.113.

<sup>655</sup> E.g. Gladson (1978); Hatton (2008); Yoder (2005).



This further suggests that no single principle can apply to every situation. The external world has a reality unconstrained by the textual framework. Because of their generality, the proverbs are open to many circumstances, but there will always be those which do not ‘fit’. Several recent scholars have stressed this concern for ‘fittingness’, O’Dowd even calling it the “lost epistemology of aphoristic... thinking”.<sup>656</sup> This requires further nuance, however. It is not that the principle is a rigid crate into which only certain situations will fit. Rather, the principle itself admits some flexibility, and may be moulded according to its contents. It is more like a bag than a box. Because of their openness – their ambiguity and ‘fuzzy edges’ – we can nuance our understanding of the proverbial principles according to our experience of life.

### §1.3 Wisdom is moral and intellectual

For didactic proverbs then, wisdom is found in textual and extra-textual worlds, in the general and specific. It is also moral and intellectual. In ch. 4, we saw the close correlation between ‘the wise’ and ‘the righteous’, and the didactic concern for the development of moral character. In Proverbs’ embodied epistemology, acquiring wisdom is not like receiving an object, but like taking a medicine, effective over both mind and morals. It changes their decrepit state to health and vitality. Exploring the openness of proverbs and world is productive of this character development. Exploration enlivens the moral senses, and shapes the desires. True embodied wisdom must be manifested in practice. Wisdom is not a hypothetical construct of the textual world, but a reality, actualised by deeds in the extra-textual world. Just as general principles are manifested in specific situations, character is borne out in action. This action-orientation is essential to the proverb genre.

But the wisdom of didactic proverbs does retain an intellectual aspect. As didactic texts, they instil a worldview, offering general principles for life. As proverbs, they evaluate specific situations according to these principles. Furthermore, they intend to train the mind. Contrary to some scholarly views, the wisdom of this genre is not naïve, nor uncritical. The sayings encourage intellectual engagement as an avenue to wisdom. Akin to riddles and aphorisms, they are not always forthright in their meaning. Their polysemy, imagery and parallelism must all be deciphered, requiring logic and imagination. Such skills for interpreting the text can then be deployed to interpret the world. Confronting ‘contradictory’ proverbs trains the mind in how to approach

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<sup>656</sup> R. O’Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 225; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) p.136; cf. Bartholomew and O’Dowd (2011) pp.91-95; van Leeuwen (1988) pp.99-106.

‘contradictory’ realities. There must be a thoughtful negotiation between principle and situation, textual world and real world, not an uncritical superimposition. The principle must be both fleshed out, and left flexible, open to reappraisal by an active mind.

Both the textual world and the real world are complex and sometimes deceptive. Sometimes neat causal structures, like the act-consequence connection, are violated (see ch.5). Sometimes social and moral categories, embodied in figures like the king, break down (see ch.6). We will see below that even general teachings, specific situations, character and intellect can deceive us, and must be engaged with thoughtfully, scrutinised as well as trusted.

## §2. A principle for acquiring wisdom: trust and scrutinise

In order to “get wisdom” (Prov 4:5,7), I suggest that a stance can be adopted: trust and scrutinise. Proverbs’ general didactic principles are safe and ordered, worthy of trust.<sup>657</sup> However, specific situations may display contradiction and ambiguity. An individual’s actions are usually a guide to her overall character, but sometimes she may deceive. This necessitates scrutiny alongside trust, when interpreting both proverbs and outside world. This is made possible by the openness of each.

In each section that follows (§2.1, 2.2, 3), I will first outline the grounds for trust and scrutiny. I will then scrutinise a proverb which makes a comment on these issues, but whose position is ambiguous. By one interpretation, these proverbs advocate trust; by another they advise scrutiny. In their status as sagacious wisdom, they are to be trusted; by encapsulating the debate within themselves, they goad their readers to scrutinise.

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<sup>657</sup> See esp. von Rad (1972) pp.190-195.

## §2.1 Trusting and scrutinising other people

### §2.1(a) *Introduction*

Wisdom is moral – embodied in general character and actualised in specific actions. It can be acquired by observing human behaviour, and evaluating it according to the sages’ overall framework. Proverbs affirms the trustworthy simplicity of this process. Yet it also recognises the art of deception; human character and behaviour should be scrutinised.

In Proverbs, other people are central to wisdom acquisition, unsurprising given the community-centred ethos of the book. The implicit addressee is inextricably enmeshed in “a small, tightly-knit community, in which each individual’s behaviour has a great impact on the life of everyone else”.<sup>658</sup> He is advised on interpersonal relationships,<sup>659</sup> and lured by the great reward of social esteem.<sup>660</sup> In this interdependent society, he learns from his fellows. “Walk with the wise” galvanises Prov 13:20, “and become wise”.<sup>661</sup> In general, the behaviour of others can be trusted to reveal the character behind it. Wisdom is embodied and lived, and character manifests itself in action. The righteous man is clearly distinguishable from the wicked, and observing his behaviour brings a greater understanding of righteousness.

However, some proverbs problematise this principle. Deceit (תַּרְמָה) characterises wrongdoers’ schemes (12:5) and hearts (12:20), even the balances they use in the marketplace (11:1; 20:23; cf. 16:11; 20:10). We cannot trust appearances. A fool stands tight-lipped in Prov 17:28, fooling others into thinking he is wise. One pretends to be rich in 13:7 (perhaps to attain social esteem); another pretends to be poor (perhaps to avoid almsgiving).<sup>662</sup> We are onlookers in a court-case in 18:17. When we read the first colon, we believe in the litigant’s innocence - צַדִּיק הָרֵאשׁוֹן - בְּרִיבוֹ, “righteous is the first man in his case!” – but our false impression is corrected in the second colon, when יְבֹאֲרְעֵהוּ וַחֲקֹרֵהוּ, “his neighbour comes and examines him...”. Like that neighbour, we must examine and scrutinise others before placing our trust in them, for acts and appearances are no fail-safe measures for true character, nor for true wisdom.

<sup>658</sup> Frydrych (2002) p.148.

<sup>659</sup> E.g. 10:12; 15:18; 16:28; 17:9,14; 18:19,24; 19:13; 20:3; 21:9; 22:10.

<sup>660</sup> E.g. 12:4; 13:18; 15:33; 18:12; 19:26; 21:21; 22:4.

<sup>661</sup> *Ketibh*. *Qere* changes the imperatives to a participle and imperfect respectively.

<sup>662</sup> Though the hithpael/hithpoel forms may be ambiguous (see p.42 above).

§2.1(b) *A proverb under didactic scrutiny*

20:11 גַּם בְּמַעַלְלָיו יתְנַפֵּר נַעַר אִם-יֹדֵד וְאִם-יִשָּׁר פְּעָלָיו:

*Indeed,*<sup>663</sup> *in his deeds a young man reveals/disguises himself; whether his conduct is pure and upright.*

Let us turn now to a proverb which, I suggest, embodies the tension between trust and scrutiny within itself. Prov 20:11 comments on the possibility of acquiring knowledge through observing the behaviour of others (*a* colon) and interpreting it according to the sages' ethical framework (*b* colon). The key point of openness is the polysemy of יתְנַפֵּר. Either the young man “reveals himself”: you can trust that his behaviour manifests his character. Or, he “disguises himself”: you cannot trust his behaviour at all.

*“Reveals himself”*

First, then, יתְנַפֵּר may mean “reveals himself”. נִכְרַךְ occurs frequently in the hiphil meaning ‘to regard, recognise’. The corresponding reflexive hithpaël would be ‘make oneself recognised, known’.<sup>664</sup> Although this would be a *hapax* in BH, it is plausible, corresponding to its meaning in several branches of Aramaic.<sup>665</sup> The Versions attest to this understanding, and it has been accepted by the majority of translations and commentators.<sup>666</sup> It ties in with the book’s basic message: a person “reveals himself” through what he does. His character is made evident in each of his

<sup>663</sup> I have taken גַּם to qualify the whole of the subsequent clause as a rhetorical heightener ‘indeed’ (GKC P.153). It may, however, be left untranslated, following Muraoka’s argument that sometimes גַּם is simply additive, and need not be ascribed emphatic force. T. Muraoka, *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill, 1985) pp.143–146. Alternatively, it might belong with the adjacent element, “even in his deeds” (NASB; Barucq [1964]; McKane [1970]; Fox [2009]). However, it is unclear why the ‘deeds’ should be highlighted like this. Many commentators and translators give “even a child” or similar. גַּם does not elsewhere qualify an element not immediately subsequent to it, so this interpretation must assume גַּם to apply to the whole sentence, and then implicitly to its most pertinent element, נַעַר. (ESV, HCSB, NKJV, NIV, NRSV; Clifford [1999]; Delitzsch [1884]; Heim [2013]; Toy [1899]; Waltke [2005]).

<sup>664</sup> Waltke (2005) objects that hithpaël should be related to piel, not hiphil (p.120, n.26). However, two examples of the piel ‘to recognise’ do occur (Job 21:29, 34:19). Cf. also the semantically close יָדַע ‘to know’. Hiphil is very common, and piel only occurs once (Job 38:12). Hithpaël is attested twice (‘make oneself known’; Gen 45:1; Num 12:6).

<sup>665</sup> Ithpe’el meaning ‘to be recognised’ occurs in JPA, JBA, and CPA. M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 1990); M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 2002); M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014); M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature* (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005). Correspondences with Aramaic have been noted throughout Prov 10:1–22:16; Fox (2009) pp.504–505.

<sup>666</sup> Pesh/Targ have *myd’* ‘makes himself known’, and Vulg has *suis intellegitur* ‘is known’. LXX is widely divergent here, so of little help, but Symm. has ἐπιγνωρισθήσεται (‘come to be recognised’) and Venet. γνωσθήσεται (‘come to be known’), suggesting this meaning (cited in Delitzsch [1884]). Almost all modern translations give this meaning (except JPS). So BDB, HALOT, and many critical commentators (e.g. Delitzsch [1884]; Fox [2009]; McKane [1970]; Murphy [1998]; Toy [1899]).

“deeds” (מַעֲלָלִי). To move from observing the latter to understanding the former, the deeds must be interpreted through the sages’ ethical framework: can they be classed as “pure” (טָהוֹר), and “upright” (יָשָׁר)?<sup>667</sup> The general terms are fleshed out by specific instances, and the evaluative system developed accordingly.

“Conduct” (פִּעֻלָּה) stands as the conceptual midpoint between individual “deeds” and overall “self”. Accordingly, the second colon may elaborate on either. The revelation is: by his deeds (i.e. by whether his conduct is pure in each instant); of his self (i.e. of whether his conduct is pure overall). Self, conduct, and deeds are intimately related; wisdom is embodied and enacted. Here, אִם has been interpreted as introducing an indirect question, “whether”. But it may also precede a direct question: “Is his conduct pure? Is it upright?” (cf. Job 6:12 for this syntax).<sup>668</sup> The hearer is urged to observe and evaluate for himself. If the question is genuine, the answer may not be obvious; character is not always absolutely clear, and borderline cases can exist.

*Trusted as a proverb:\**

A young man has just shown unexpected kindness. I wish to educate an onlooker, so say to her “Indeed, in his deeds a young man reveals himself. Is his conduct pure? Is it upright?” I call upon her to evaluate the man, fleshing out her ethical framework according to his deeds, and thus acquiring wisdom.

*\*In previous chapters, I have included a separate section on ‘proverb use’. Here I intersperse it amongst the didactic explorations, to reflect the dynamic relationship between didactic and proverbial uses.*

And the נַעַר, the “young man” is just the type to stand on the border. Like the פֶּתִי “simple”, he is malleable, susceptible to both wise and foolish influence (Prov 1:4; 7:7). He must be disciplined (22:15; 23:13; 29:15), for the path he chooses in his youth may become his throughout life (22:6<sup>669</sup>). The ethical categories that sum up character have already begun to ingrain themselves. And if already in the youth, how much more in the adult!

“Even in his childish deeds a youngster reveals himself” I say to a father, “whether his conduct is pure and upright”. By stressing his youth, and the importance of this formative period for ethical development, I implicitly encourage the father to exercise discipline, ensuring his son is on the right course.

Possibly, מַעֲלָלִי here refers not just to “deeds” but to ‘childish deeds, play’, related to the noun עוֹלֵל ‘child’.<sup>670</sup> This would be a *hapax*, and is, as Delitzsch put it “[m]öglich, aber aus der Luft gegriffen”.<sup>671</sup> More plausibly, there may be a soundplay here. Hearing עָלַל combined

<sup>667</sup> This pair of terms occurs also in 21:8, cf. 16:2/21:2. Some think that an antithesis is preferable, so emend יָשָׁר ‘upright’ to רָשָׁע ‘wicked’ (Toy [1899]) or טָהוֹר ‘pure’ to זָר ‘strange’ (Ehrlich [1908]).

<sup>668</sup> So Heim (2013); Waltke (2005).

<sup>669</sup> On the difficulties of this verse, see T. Hildebrandt, “Proverbs 22:6a: Train up a child?” *Grace Theological Journal* 9.1 (1988) pp.3-19.

<sup>670</sup> So H. Ewald, *Die Poëtischen Bücher des Alten Bundes: Vierter Theil* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1837) ‘*Spiel*’. Also Me’am Loez, cited in Fox (2009). Hurovitz (2012) p.412 paraphrases as מַעֲשֵׂי יְלֻדוֹת ‘deeds of childhood’.

<sup>671</sup> Delitzsch (1884) p.322.

with נָעַר may bring to mind connotations of childishness without changing the basic meaning “deeds”.<sup>672</sup> Moral character is manifested in the most unremarkable, even frivolous, of activities.

Thus, the youth reveals himself through what he does. His individual actions are transparent to inquiry and can be trusted. The onlooker may observe them, relate them to the taught categories for ethical character, and acquire wisdom accordingly.

### *Disguises himself*

However, another interpretation is also possible: יִתְנַכֵּר means not “reveals himself”, but “disguises himself” – almost its polar opposite.<sup>673</sup> This meaning is attested elsewhere in BH.<sup>674</sup> One passage even plays on the antithetical senses of the root (as I suggest this proverb does): Joseph “recognised” his brothers (וַיִּכְרֶם, hiphil) and “disguised himself” before them (וַיִּתְנַכֵּר; Gen 42:7). נָכַר can be related to ‘foreignness’, such as is embodied in the “strange woman”, נְכַרְיָה, of Prov 1-9.<sup>675</sup>

Acquiring wisdom, then, is not so easy as slotting behaviour into neatly prescribed categories. People may dissemble and hide their true character; they must be scrutinised. Despite appearances, perhaps their methods are reckless and ill-founded; perhaps their motives disingenuous.

The intermediary position of ‘conduct’ between ‘self’ and ‘deeds’ again allows different interpretations of the second colon. The youth disguises whether his conduct (i.e. his character) is *really* pure and upright. Or, he disguises himself even though<sup>676</sup> his conduct (i.e. his acts) seems pure and upright.<sup>677</sup> In either case, יָדָה and יָשָׁר designate what seems to be, not what is (cf. 16:2; 21:2). The reader must see through these words, much as he must see through the youth’s disguises.

Outwardly, my student seems to be doing everything right, but I sense deception. “Indeed, in his deeds, the child dissembles,” I say to him gravely, “even if his conduct seems pure and upright”. I thus warn him that wickedness will not go unnoticed, and perhaps imply that consequences will follow.

<sup>672</sup> Fox (2009).

<sup>673</sup> Such ‘antagonymy’ (one word with two opposite meanings) is attested in many languages (e.g. English ‘cleave’). In Arabic, it is known as *‘addād* (see Barr (1968) pp.173-177). Cf. שָׁתַם/סָתַם, both ‘to shut up’ (its usual sense) and ‘to open’ (Num 24:3,15); also רָפַח ‘to be weak’ and רָפָא ‘to heal’ (conflation of the roots occurs orthographically in Jer 8:15 and possibly semantically in Prov 14:30; 15:4).

- This interpretation is rare in English Bible translations (but see JPS, ESV marg.), but more common among rabbinical commentators (see Ginsburg [1998]), and recent interpreters (Clifford [1999]; Heim [2013]; Hurovitz [2012]; Waltke [2005]; Yoder [2009]).

<sup>674</sup> Gen 42:7; 1 Kgs 14:5-6; Sir 4:17.

<sup>675</sup> Prov 2:16, 5:20, 6:24, 7:5, 20:16 (Q); 23:27, 27:13.

<sup>676</sup> Concessive use of אֲשֶׁם, as in Num 22:18; Isa 1:18; Amos 9:2-4; JM P.171d.

<sup>677</sup> Clifford (1999); JPS.

Indeed, his acts may be understood as ‘wicked deeds’ if a possible nuance of מַעֲלָיו is allowed to the fore. Etymologically, it may be from עָלַל ‘to act wantonly’ (BDB), or מַעַל ‘to act unfaithfully’ (HALOT), and elsewhere it primarily designates evil acts.<sup>678</sup> Despite appearances, the child is wicked. His character and action must be scrutinised accordingly.

These apparently contradictory interpretations cannot both be true in the same circumstances. Each situation must be approached individually, to see which applies. Knowledge is acquired in fragments, and never reaches a total system. Paradigmatically cast in proverbial form, truth is situation-specific. Confronted by the enigma of opposed interpretations, the reader is forced into deep reflection. Possibly, we can trust the young man’s deeds, for he “reveals himself” through them. Or, he dissembles and cannot be trusted. The debate is condensed into a single sentence here; the two ends of the spring are forced on top of each other, and the reader is trapped in the tension between. The immediate literary context of the proverb offers no resolution either, apparently affirming both poles. In v.8 the king can distinguish the wicked (see pp.140-143 above), and in v.12 God gives tools for discernment. So in v.11 the child is revealed? But v.9 concerns the pretence of purity, and v.10 economic deceit. So in v.11 the child dissembles? The reading process begins to mirror the message, as the reader is unsure which interpretation to trust. He must scrutinise the proverb’s openness as he seeks wisdom from it. Does it reveal itself to us, as the child might? Or is it at play, disguising its true nature?

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<sup>678</sup> There are 36 instances; the exceptions are when it refers to God’s “deeds” (Mic 2:7; Pss 77:12, 78:7). Heim (2013); Hurovitz (2012); Waltke (2005).

## §2.2 Trusting and scrutinising words

### §2.2(a) Introduction

In Proverbs, words are a fundamental means of mediating wisdom.<sup>679</sup> Teachings are expressed verbally: spoken as proverbs and written in didactic collections. Words structure the ethical framework through categorial character terms (e.g. **רָשָׁע**, **צַדִּיק**, **אֱוִיל**, **חָכָם**). When carefully applied at the proper time (15:23; 25:11), they pin down situations in language, making them comprehensible, revealing their wisdom.

Just like the wisdom they convey, words in Proverbs are social and moral, and not just intellectual. They are one of the greatest revealers of character.<sup>680</sup> They are also potent: “life and death are in the power of the tongue” (18:21a). Wise words are as valuable as “choice silver” (10:20), and a “precious jewel” (20:15). They are like a fountain of life (10:11), healing (12:18) and feeding (10:21) many. Through their wisdom, the student becomes wise herself (13:10; 15:31,32; 19:20). Paradigmatically, she accepts a wise proverb’s evaluation, and follows its direction, letting her worldview and character be shaped accordingly. The proverbs are self-referential here. They themselves are trustworthy words, brimming with wisdom

Not all language, however, should be accepted so readily. Indeed, only the simple man “believes every word” (14:15). Aware of the destruction bad speech can wreak,<sup>681</sup> proverbs of all cultures advise restraint.<sup>682</sup> The fool babbles and blunders, causing havoc for himself and others (10:19; 12:23; 13:3; 18:2; 20:19). Men are known for their untrustworthy verbiage: the liar (**אִישׁ בִּזְבּוֹב**), whisperer (**נִרְנָן**), gossip (**הוֹלֵךְ רָכִיל**), and scoffer (**לֵץ**)<sup>683</sup> Lying lips are heard throughout daily life. In the marketplace a buyer lies about an item’s worth (20:14), and the sluggard fabricates tales to avoid work (22:13). They are particularly dangerous in the courtroom (e.g. 12:17; 14:5,25), where

<sup>679</sup> On the importance of words/speech in Proverbs, see W. Bühlmann, *Vom rechten Reden und Schweigen: Studien zu Proverbien 10-31* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 12; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1976); W. McKane, “Functions of Language and Objectives of Discourse According to Proverbs 10-31,” in *La Sagesse de l’Ancien Testament* (ed. M. Gilbert; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979) pp.166-185.

<sup>680</sup> Wise/fool and righteous/wicked are often distinguished by their use of speech. See above pp.78,85.

<sup>681</sup> It can be like a bloody ambush (12:6), sword thrusts (12:18), or scorching fire (16:27); destructive (11:9) and violent (10:6,11).

<sup>682</sup> Prov 10:14,19; 11:12,13; 12:23; 13:3; 15:2; 17:9,27; 18:2; 20:19; 21:23. In English, “children should be seen and not heard”; “think before you speak”; “silence is golden”. The silent man/hothead was a key contrast in Egyptian didactic literature (see Lyu [2012] pp.102-107). From cross-cultural proverb analysis, paremiologist N. Norrick has derived a ‘folk linguistics’. Its first major theme is “take care with language”, explained by the principles “language is powerful” and “language reveals thoughts, feelings”, and provoking the advice “use words carefully; avoid careless speech” and “use gentle words; avoid aggressive speech”. This is strikingly similar to what we find in Proverbs. N. R. Norrick, “Speech is Silver: On the proverbial view of language,” *Proverbium* 14 (1997) pp.277-287.

<sup>683</sup> Richardson (1955) has argued that this term refers to the babblers.



the “false witness” (עֵד שֶׁקָרִים) is encountered, who “breathes out lies” (יִפִּיחַ כְּזָבִים), perverting justice. Such falsehoods are an “abomination to the Lord” (12:22). They are more than factual inaccuracies, but are morally perverse and socially destructive. ‘A lie’ in Proverbs is “nicht eine theoretische Lüge... sondern den Treuebruch, die Unzuverlässigkeit, die fehlende Vertrauenswürdigkeit”.<sup>684</sup> In short: “*Lüge ist gemeinschaftswidrig*”.<sup>685</sup>

However, it is not always clear how to distinguish between true and false words. It is all too easy to consume the “delicious morsels” coming from the whisperer’s lips (18:8; 26:22). Proverbs 1-9 is structured around speeches by key characters: the father and Lady Wisdom on the one hand; sinners and the strange woman on the other. All make verbal appeals for the student’s allegiance, and he may well find the language of the wicked characters persuasive.<sup>686</sup> The lips of Lady Folly “drip honey” (5:3), and she is filled with “smooth words” (2:16; 7:5,21). The reader must learn to ignore such allures, to distinguish true from deceptive speech, when both are persuasive. For this, he must carefully scrutinise words.

### §2.2(b) A proverb under scrutiny

18:4 מִים עֲמֻקִּים דְּבַרִּי פִי־אִישׁ נַחֵל נֹבֵעַ מְקוֹר חָכְמָה:

*Deep waters, the words of a man’s mouth; a flowing brook, a fountain of wisdom.*

Both sides of the debate are encapsulated in Prov 18:4. The proverb may affirm the life-giving power of words: they impart wisdom and should be trusted. Or, it may warn of their destructiveness: they must be scrutinised. No ‘character’ term is given – the speaker is simply a “man” (אִישׁ) – allowing either interpretation. The openness is generated by a series of images, whose nuances and interrelationship are unclear: deep waters, a flowing brook, a fountain of wisdom. These invite the reader into their depths, and train her imagination.

*Deep waters.* Commentators are divided about whether the “deep waters” (מִים עֲמֻקִּים) are a positive or negative trope.<sup>687</sup> In human experience and biblical tradition, the image opens up an

<sup>684</sup> M. A. Klopfenstein, *Die Lüge nach dem Alten Testament: Ihr Begriffe, ihre Bedeutung und ihre Beurteilung* (Zürich: Gotthelf Verlag, 1964) p.26.

<sup>685</sup> Klopfenstein (1964) p.353, italics original.

<sup>686</sup> It may be the rhetorical strategy of these chapters to make the words of the wicked genuinely appealing to the reader. So Stewart: Lady Folly’s poem “allows the student to enter deeply into precisely the nefarious desire that the father warns against” Stewart (2016) p.160. Cf. J. N. Aletti, “Séduction et Parole en Proverbes I-IX,” *VT* 27.2 (1977) pp.129-144; Weeks (2007) pp.79-82.

<sup>687</sup> Suggesting it is primarily negative: Brown (2004); Delitzsch (1884); Waltke (2005). Proposing it is positive: Fox (2009); Hatton (2008); McKane (1970); Reymond (1958); Toy (1899).

ocean of connotations, to be blended imaginatively with the target domain of a man's words. First, deep waters (and men's words) can bring *life or death* (cf. 18:21). The raging ocean caused great fear for the Israelites, and is sometimes imagined through the primordial creation myth of the battle with the sea monster.<sup>688</sup> The trope swells up in the Psalms of lament: "I have come into deep waters (בְּמַעַמְקֵי-מָיִם), and the flood sweeps over me!" (69:3[2]; cf. Pss 69:15[14], 130:1). Overwhelming tides bring terror and destruction. So too may a man's words, through their false accusations, malicious threats, or twisted advice. But deep waters can also bring life. Deep beneath the earth flow fresh, unpolluted streams.<sup>689</sup> Like sagacious words, they hold out the hope of restoration to the thirsty wanderer. But these underground waters of wisdom, released in a well, are *difficult to access*. They require a man of skill and understanding laboriously to draw them up (20:5). Words must be plumbed, carefully considered, scrutinised.

*Trusted as a proverb:*

A well-known wise woman pronounces an enigma of utter profundity. "The words of a person's mouth are deep waters", I sigh in admiration, evaluating the words' sagacity, and preparing myself for extensive contemplation. I hold them to be as life-giving as "a flowing brook, a fountain of wisdom".

Third, deep words and waters are *expansive and profound*. Deep wisdom belongs to the King (Prov 25:3) and God: "How great are your works, O Lord! Your thoughts are very deep (מְאֹד עֲמֻקּוֹ)!" (Ps 92:6[5]). Long-enduring and all-encompassing, such words (like the sages' own) provide much to ponder and explore. However, wisdom too profound becomes unfathomable (e.g. Job 11:7-9; Qoh 7:24), impressing upon the student the limits of her own

mind. Those "deep of lip" (עֲמֻקֵּי שִׁפָּה, Isa 33:19; Ezek 3:5-6) speak a foreign, incomprehensible tongue. What's more, expansive waters may (fourth) *hide many things*. Gems of wisdom may nestle in crevices beneath the surface. But in the darkness, wicked and unwelcome secrets may also lurk (Isa 29:15; Ps 64:7[6]). The hearer must scrutinise the words she is offered, for they may conceal as much as they show.

*A flowing brook.* Surging alongside the "deep waters" is a "flowing brook" – נַחַל זָבֵיג. A נַחַל is a wadi: a dry valley in the rainless summer, but a plentiful stream in winter, such as flows through the "good land" of idealised Canaan.<sup>690</sup> It can provide an abundant habitat, where fish live,<sup>691</sup> plant-life thrives,<sup>692</sup> and the needy may freely drink.<sup>693</sup> Similarly, wise speech brings refreshment and vitality.

The ambiguity is recognised by Bühlmann (1976); Murphy (1998b); Yoder (2009).

<sup>688</sup> Remnants of this view are found in e.g. Ps 89:10-11[9-10]; Job 26:12.

<sup>689</sup> Fox (2009); Toy (1899).

<sup>690</sup> Deut 8:7; cf. Gen 26:19; Isa 35:6; Jer 31:9.

<sup>691</sup> Lev 11:9,10; Ezek 47:9.

<sup>692</sup> Lev 23:40; 1 Kgs 18:5; Ezek 47:7,12; Job 40:22; Cant 6:11.

<sup>693</sup> 1 Kgs 17:4,6; Ps 110:7.

However, a נַחַל could also be dangerous. In heavy rains, the channel might fill and overflow, its currents gathering momentum unstoppably. Such torrents are depicted as overwhelming woeful psalmists (Pss 124:4; 18:5[4]≈2 Sam 22:5) and wicked nations (Isa 30:28; Jer 47:2). Words too can wreak destruction when wicked men ‘pour out’ (נִבְעַעַ) evil speech (Prov 15:28; cf. Prov 15:2; Pss 59:8[7], 94:4). True wisdom is cast in a few precious words, not in a relentless stream.

A friend has been deceived by wicked words, and has suffered extensively. Sympathising with her, I acknowledge that “the words of a man’s mouth are like the depths, like raging torrents”. Consoling, I add (with reference to my own advice) that they may be “a fountain of wisdom” too.

*A fountain of wisdom.* The only unambiguously positive image is the מְקוֹר חֵכְמָה “fountain of wisdom”. A מְקוֹר is a fountain or spring, accessing the purest deep waters. It is reliable and life-sustaining when surface moisture dries up. Used figuratively, the ‘fountain’ image suggests strength, fertility, and joy (e.g. Jer 51:36; Hos 13:15; Ps 68:27[26]; Prov 5:18). It may even become a מְקוֹר חַיִּים, “fountain of life”,<sup>694</sup> an image used in Proverbs to depict “the mouth of the righteous” (10:11), and “the instruction of the wise” (13:14; cf. 14:27, 16:22). If searching for wisdom, the student must drink deep of the sages’ trustworthy well of words.

*Overall.* The syntax of the proverb overall is not entirely clear. Images are pressed together into a complex interplay of similarity and difference. “The words of a man’s mouth” may be the target domain for all three images. “The words of a man’s mouth are: deep waters, a flowing brook, a fountain of wisdom”.<sup>695</sup> If each image is taken positively, they complement each other. If the מַיִם

I speak this proverb to a student, before he has uttered any words. I intentionally leave the ambiguities open. “The words of a man’s mouth may be...” I invite him to consider how his own speech will flow; as what sort of “deep waters, flowing streams”? I exhort him to make it as “a fountain of wisdom”.

(“waters”) or נַחַל (“brook”) is negative, contrasts emerge. Alternatively, the cola may be parallel, with the “fountain of wisdom” providing a second target domain. “The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a flowing brook”.<sup>696</sup> In this case, the נַחַל is presumably positive. If the מַיִם are positive too, then the cola are synonymous. If they are negative, the cola are antithetical.

This proverb may affirm the value of words, or warn of their dangers. The reader must hold together the simultaneous truth of apparently contradictory realities. Words can be a deep source of knowledge and life, and trusting them is a primary way of acquiring wisdom. But in their

<sup>694</sup> LXX has “fountain of life” (πηγή ζωῆς) in this verse too, prompting Toy (1899) to emend.

<sup>695</sup> So Clifford (1999); Delitzsch (1884); Fox (2009); McKane (1970); Toy (1899).

<sup>696</sup> So Heim (2013); Waltke (2005).

dark expanse, much wickedness can also hide. The literary context here stresses the problematic side of words, and so may favour this latter interpretation (cf. Prov 18:2,6,7,8).

This proverb's images are alluring and concise with no elaborations to curtail their openness. The reader immerses herself in the world they evoke, and blends them imaginatively with the situations in her own life. The apparent contradictions suggest the situation-specificity of truth. Some words, such as the sages' didactic dictums, bring life; others bring death. Accordingly, the reader must scrutinise all the words she meets, which (like open waters) might be concealing or difficult to fathom. The proverb becomes practice in the very lesson espoused. It offers itself as an example of "the words of a man's mouth", "deep waters" for exploration. By offering two interpretations, it demonstrates that words are not always what they seem. Scrutiny of this proverb does not prohibit ultimate trust. With due recognition of the ambiguity of life and words, it may become part of the trustworthy ethical framework mediating wisdom.

§3. Trusting and scrutinising ourselves; the limits of acquiring wisdom§3.1 Introduction

Wisdom contains an intellectual component, and thus requires its seekers to trust their own minds. Proverbs' basic position is to affirm students in their capacity for wisdom. It has an optimistic and 'high' anthropology,<sup>697</sup> and as didactic literature confidently trains its readers "to know wisdom and instruction; to understand words of insight" (1:2). Character formation is a real possibility; the student can progress towards the central ideal of the 'wise man' (see ch.4). As he does so, a centripetal effect may take hold, like a whirlpool sucking him further in. The wiser he is, the wiser he gets. He seeks wisdom more (15:14; 18:15), and wisdom becomes easier to find (14:6). He may confidently trust his capacities to acquire and use it.

*The limited human*

Despite this, however, true wisdom recognises its limitations. It is folly indeed to be "wise in your own eyes" (Prov 3:7; 12:15; 26:5,12; 28:11). Everyone can benefit from didactic instruction and well-spoken proverbs, even the sagest of the sages (10:8; 12:15; 13:1; 15:31; 17:10). Such limitations may already be implicit in the genre, for proverbs make no totalising claims.<sup>698</sup> Each is limited to giving a single comment, tied to some particular situation (§1.2). Similarly, the human mind, for all its attempts at transcendence, is bounded by the here and now. General principles may be loosely hung together, but no completed system is reached. Life and proverbs are scattered with contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities. Confronted with these, the student becomes aware of her limitations. The book orients her through life, but moments of disorientation save her from proudly assuming complete mastery.<sup>699</sup>

What's more, human beings, who can so readily deceive others through word and deed, are not immune to their own falsehood. They may deceive even themselves. "Those who plan evil" have "deceit (מִרְמָה) in the heart" (12:20a), intending to swindle other people for their own benefit. But it is others who end up with "joy", not they (12:20b). Their internalised deception has

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<sup>697</sup> Frydrych (2002) pp.127-134.

<sup>698</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the aphorism experienced a resurgence in postmodern thought, disillusioned with absolute, totalising claims to knowledge. W. A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship New Testament Series; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) p.30; Williams (1981) p.14.

<sup>699</sup> So Yoder (2005).

festered into self-deception, and their hoped-for gains prove illusory.<sup>700</sup> The fool thinks he is forging a fruitful path, but this too proves a deception (מְרָמָה; 14:8; cf. 12:15, 14:12=16:25<sup>701</sup>). In fact, any man (אִישׁ) may be deluded about his own way and its ethics (16:2; 21:2), and a persistent recognition of moral incapacity weighs upon Proverbs' optimism, for none can claim to have an entirely pure heart (20:9a). Intellect will suffer or prosper along with morality, for wisdom is born out of character. Accordingly, the human self in all its aspects must be thoroughly scrutinised if it is to be trusted. Only then can true wisdom be acquired.

### *The limiting Lord*

These limitations are rooted in the human being herself, but she is further limited by the inscrutable work of Yahweh.<sup>702</sup> We saw in ch.5 how ruptures appear in the world order, which might otherwise have offered safe mechanisms for securing one's own fate.<sup>703</sup> Behind these ruptures stands the creator and overseer of the order: the inscrutable God. A fissure emerges between two modes of causality: the act-consequence connection, clear and useful for mastering life; Yahweh's activity, incalculable and unmanipulable. Anthropocentric and theocentric are unreconciled by the sages.<sup>704</sup> The emerging cognitive gap marks the borderline of the student's understanding, beyond which lies only divine mystery, fundamentally inaccessible.<sup>705</sup>

This has implications for the individual: "many are the plans in the heart of a man, but it is the counsel of the Lord that will stand" רַבּוֹת מִחֲשָׁבוֹת בְּלִב־אִישׁ וְעֶצֶת יְהוָה הִיא תִקּוּם (Prov 19:21). The variegated and unreliable concoctions of the human mind are contrasted with the single divine purpose,<sup>706</sup> which intervenes before their execution.<sup>707</sup> While the individual has some control over his mental world, the material world remains the exclusive and unpredictable domain of God. And

<sup>700</sup> McKane (1970); Murphy (1998b); and Waltke (2005) recognise self-deception in this proverb.

<sup>701</sup> "There is a straight path before a man, but its end is the ways of death" (14:12=16:25). Reading the first colon, the reader is tricked into believing the beneficial prospects of this path. The second colon forces him to rectify this, and to acknowledge his mistaken impression. Individuals are in perpetual danger of misreading – misreading both proverbs and situations in the world. S. R. Millar, "When a Straight Road Becomes a Garden Path: The 'false lead' as a pedagogical strategy in the book of Proverbs," *JSOT* (Forthcomingb).

<sup>702</sup> McKane (1970) argues that Yahwistic proverbs are a theological reaction against the self-confidence of sages, in keeping with the prophetic critique of wisdom. They "represent an attempt to demonstrate that the empire of the mind which the *hakamim* have pegged out for themselves is illusory" (McKane [1965] p.50). However, there is little reason to think that Yahwistic elements are late in Proverbs (see above p.95).

<sup>703</sup> Note that this conception of a world order masterable by individuals is somewhat different from the *Weltordnung* of Schmid, which was hardened and cut off from people's lives (see above p.72). For Schmid, a rupture occurred between Proverbs and the 'real world'. For the scholars discussed here, ruptures occur *within* Proverbs, between the sayings reflecting non-Yahwistic and Yahwistic causalities.

<sup>704</sup> Von Rad (1972) p.98.

<sup>705</sup> Geese (1958) pp.38-42.

<sup>706</sup> Cf. the similar plural/singular contrasts in 16:1; 20:24.

<sup>707</sup> Skladny (1962) p.75.

true wisdom is no mental construction, but a lived reality, with manifestations in the real world. True wisdom, then, is here denied from humanity. Compared with the many proverbs stressing human capability, this may suggest something radical: a “Determinismus... die das Weisheitsdenken in seinen Grundlagen erschüttert”.<sup>708</sup>

With similarly convulsing force, Prov 20:24 declares “from the Lord are a man’s steps; as for a person, how can he understand his way?”: **מִיָּהוָה מַצְעָדֵי גִבּוֹר וְאָדָם מֵהֵיבִין דְּרָכּוֹ**. God and humans are emphatically paralleled in frontal positions, stressing the unbreachable gap between them (cf. Prov 16:1,9, 21:31 below). A man might trust his self-direction, but as he walks, Yahweh is already at work (unnoticed by the earth-bound mind). Not only are the ways of the world barred from comprehension (cf. Prov 30:18-19), but even one’s own way (**דְּרָכּוֹ**). The ambiguous suffix here suggests that the way may not be ‘his’ – the man’s – any longer, but ‘his’ – the Lord’s. And if so, the student cannot even *consider* and analyse his way (**בִּינָן**, BDB 3), let alone *understand* it (**בִּינָן**, BDB 2). He is denied even self-scrutiny, let alone self-trust.

#### *Reactions to limitations; trusting the inscrutable God*

The recognition of human limitations might encourage students to seek God in the openness of proverbs and life, mediating the tension between wisdom’s ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ manifestations. The proverbial form means that the worldview never becomes a closed system (see §1.2). We only see snapshots of Yahweh’s activity, without access to any overall divine construction plan. The collection places strikingly different proverbs side by side, levelling insights about Yahweh and sluggards (10:26-27; 19:23-24; 22:12-14). So too in life, Yahweh emerges amongst the humdrum. Sublime and ridiculous succeed each other, and wisdom can be found in both. The openness emerging between the disparate proverbs may be filled however the interpreter chooses. Yahweh may or may not be found in the gaps. Equally, the concision and openness of individual proverbs and situations mean that sometimes Yahweh’s presence is not obvious. Both Yahwistic and non-Yahwistic interpretations are possible. Other times, he is clearly present, but the nature of his activity is unclear. He cannot be bound by human language or human wisdom.

This openness, emerging through the proverb form, can be harnessed for didactic ends. The sayings can train their student to search for the divine in the mundane. As the student’s character develops, she become more and more the kind of person who would seek God. Emerging like proverbs, Yahweh’s actions might be scattered seemingly at random through life.

<sup>708</sup> Gese (1958) p.46. Gese described this as a *Sondergut* of Israel compared with the rest of the ANE.

But in the didactic collection, they are clustered in 15:33-16:9. They are central – structurally and interpretively. In the book as a whole, the sayings are prefaced with a much more ‘theological’ introduction (chs.1-9), grounding our subsequent understanding.

Acknowledging Yahweh’s ultimate supremacy and his own incapacity, it would be possible for a student to resign himself to despair. Thus, Jeremiah’s comment that “a man’s way is not his own” (Jer 10:23; *לֹא לְאִישׁ דִּרְכוֹ*) forms part of a lament on the hopeless incapacity of Judah in face of the divinely-ordained Babylonian threat; “woe to me!” (10:19; *אֵי לִי*). But the same recognition might also elicit hope. One psalmist rejoices that “a man’s steps are established by the Lord” (Ps 37:23; *מִיְהוָה מְצַעְדֵי-גִבֹּר כּוֹנְנֻ*), for this ensures him a safe path. Yahweh – and not the human mind – is his ultimate object of trust (Ps 37:3,5; cf. Prov 3:5, 14:26, 28:25, 29:25). And this can provide comfort, relief, even a sense of liberation,<sup>709</sup> for Yahweh is not capricious or malicious, but fundamentally trustworthy. When deeds are committed to the Lord, divine and human activity can work hand in hand, and plans will be established (16:3).

Within this framework of trust, human wisdom is not redundant, but finds its truest expression. Indeed, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7). Variations of this programmatic statement structure the book: the capstone of the preamble (1:7), indeed of the whole prologue (9:10), and the centre-point of the Solomonic collection (15:33). In “the fear of the Lord” (*יִרְאַת יְהוָה*), the recognition of human limitedness has been given contrite religious orientation, entailing willing and obedient submission to divine superiority. It is the “beginning” (*רֵאשִׁית*) of knowledge: its ‘best part’, ‘first manifestation’ and ‘prerequisite’.<sup>710</sup> In this last sense, it becomes an epistemological principle; wisdom is ethical-religious to its foundations. True wisdom then is not acquired *despite* human limitations, but *through* acceptance of them; through trust in the inscrutable God.

### §3.2 Proverbs under didactic scrutiny

The tension between divine and human agency is not resolved in Proverbs. In some verses, the two work in partnership (16:3). In others, there is apparent conflict (19:21; 20:14). In between are a number of proverbs open to interpretation. These will be our focus here.

<sup>709</sup> So von Rad (1972) pp.101,106.

<sup>710</sup> See Z. Schwab, “Is Fear of the Lord the Source of Wisdom or Vice Versa?,” *VT* 63 (2013a) pp.652-662.



16:1 לְאָדָם מֵעֲרֵי-לֵב וּמִיְהוָה מַעֲנֶה לְשׁוֹן:

*To a man, the arrangements of the heart; from the Lord, the answer of the tongue.*<sup>711</sup>

Paralleled in first position, the tension between “a man” and “the Lord” here is palpable. A man’s thought-world is his own, bubbling with arrangements and machinations. But bubbles burst. Even the best-laid plans<sup>712</sup> he struggles to make real; without divine assistance, they cannot be actualised. They cannot even be enunciated, for the “answer of the tongue” (מַעֲנֶה לְשׁוֹן) is directed by Yahweh. The ‘answer’ is a powerful tool in Proverbs (15:1,23,28), and here it might stand as a metonymy for the broad sweep of human activity;<sup>713</sup> all is “from the Lord”.

This proverb begins a cluster of Yahweh sayings which is concluded similarly in 16:9: לֵב אָדָם יַחֲשֵׁב דֶּרֶכוֹ וַיְהוָה יָכִין צֵעָדוֹ: “The heart of a man plans his way; the Lord establishes his step”. No journey is left to human direction, but to the divine navigator. The war-march too has Yahweh at its head: סוֹס מוֹכָן לְיוֹם מִלְחָמָה וְלַיהוָה הַתְּשׁוּעָה: “The horse is made ready for the day of battle; to the Lord belongs the victory” (Prov 21:31). Even the most fearsome of human equipment cannot secure success.<sup>714</sup>

An openness arises in these proverbs. The cola may be synonymous (‘and’) or antithetical (‘but’).<sup>715</sup> If synonymous, the *a* cola are prerequisites of the *b* cola. Individuals have responsibility to arrange their thoughts, to lay plans, to prepare equipment. ‘And’ then the Lord will fulfil the human initiative, with an answer, a stride, a victory. The divine response validates human wisdom as trustworthy. If antithetical, God and humans are in conflict. Meticulous plans may be laid ‘but’ the Lord takes the last word and decisive step. Victory is his alone to grant. Human wisdom is inefficacious (and therefore akin to untruth). People cannot trust themselves, but only fling themselves into despair, or into trust of the Lord.

<sup>711</sup> There are a number of ANE parallels to this proverb: Amenemope 19.16-17, *AEL* 2:157: “The words men say are one thing, the deeds of a god are another”. Amenemope 20:5-6, *AEL* 2:158: “If a man’s tongue is the boat’s rudder, the Lord of All is yet its pilot”. Anchsheshonq 26:14, *AEL* 3:179 “The plans of the god are one thing, the thoughts of [men] are another”. Ahiqar 115 (saying 32): “If [a young man] is beloved of the gods, they will put in his mouth something good to say” (וְהוּן רַחִים אֱלֹהִים הוּא יִשְׁמֹן טֹב בַּחֲנֹכָה לְמֵאמָר); Lindenberg (1983) p.101.

<sup>712</sup> מֵעֲרֵי here is a *bapax*. However, עֲרַךְ ‘to arrange’ suggests “‘thought-through plans’ or ‘arguments,’ not ‘brainstorming’ or ‘half-baked ideas’” Waltke (2005) p.100.

<sup>713</sup> So Clifford (1999). McKane (1970) suggests that the “answer of the tongue” refers to what Yahweh says: “we are to think of Yahweh’s creative word, which is the final answer and determines the shape of the future.” (p.496; sim. Murphy [1998]). However, nowhere else is Yahweh said to have a “tongue”, while the human tongue is a common trope in Proverbs. Accordingly, it is probably the man’s answer here.

<sup>714</sup> In the ANE, horses were a sign of power and strength, and a military innovation that gave a great advantage. Many texts caution again putting one’s trust in warhorses (e.g. Deut 17:16; Isa 31:1; Mic 5:10; Zech 9:10; Pss 20:8[7], 33:17)

<sup>715</sup> This ambiguity is noted by e.g. H. D. Preuß, *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur* (Kohlhammer Urban-Taschenbücher Band 383; Stuttgart: Verlag Kohlhammer, 1987); Waltke (2005); Yoder (2009).

<p>Meticulously, and in the fear of the Lord, my neighbour is preparing for a new economic endeavour. “The heart of a man plans his way, so the Lord will establish his step”, I say to him (16:9). I evaluate his care as commendable, and direct him to further fastidiousness through the hope of success.</p>	<p>My son has been wrongly accused, and the matter is to be taken to court. He is aware of his own weakness, and the strength of his accusers as they compile their lies about him. In encouragement, I comment “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord”. Apparent human strength is to no avail.</p>
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21:30 אֵין חִכְמָה וְאֵין תְּבוּנָה וְאֵין עֲצָה לִנְגֹד יְהוָה:

*There is no wisdom, and no understanding, and no counsel before/against the Lord.*

Heralding the warhorse of 21:31, 21:30 can be read as a fervent denunciation of claims to wisdom, which dissolve to non-existence “before” (לִנְגֹד) the Lord. As von Rad put it, the “vital art of mastering life is aware that it must halt at these frontiers – indeed, it even contrives to liquidate itself there”.<sup>716</sup> Breaking the usual pattern of parallelism, heavy repetition of the monosyllable אֵין (“there is not”) drums its point. But the message might be more temperate. לִנְגֹד could be taken in an adversative sense “against”:<sup>717</sup> wisdom is specious only when it opposes the Lord. When it trusts in him, it too can be trusted.

10:22 בְּרַכַּת יְהוָה הִיא תַעֲשִׂיר וְלֹא-יֹסֵף עִצָּב עִמָּה:

*The blessing of the Lord, that is what makes rich; and he adds no pain with it.  
and toil will not add to it.*

This proverb affirms the Lord’s prerogative to bestow riches (*a* colon). Concerning human efforts, it either remains neutral, or explicitly denigrates them (*b* colon). By the first interpretation, the Lord is the only active party in *b* (and the grammatical subject of יֹסֵף). In his great beneficence, “he adds no pain” (עִצָּב; cf. Gen 3:16; Prov 15:1) with his blessing.<sup>718</sup> Treasures acquired by the wicked may prove fleeting and deathly (Prov 21:6; cf. 10:2, 13:11, 15:16), but Yahweh’s favoured ones will prosper pain-free. Human work is not mentioned; perhaps diligence was a basis for the blessing (cf. 10:4, 12:24, 13:4, 14:23, 21:5).

<sup>716</sup> Von Rad (1962) p.440.

<sup>717</sup> As in Dan 10:13; Neh 3:37[4:5]. So McKane (1970) “to withstand Yahweh”; Clifford (1999) “that prevails against Yahweh”.

<sup>718</sup> So Boström (1990); McKane (1970); Toy (1899).

Alternatively, human “toil” (עָצָב; Prov 5:10, 14:23; Ps 127:2) makes a vain effort to exert its influence (cf. Prov 23:4).<sup>719</sup> Grammatically the subject of יוֹסֵף, it tries to “add” to what the Lord has given. But no (לֹא) – humans cannot effect or even affect their own blessing. A person’s wisdom and work, by this interpretation, should not be trusted.

The concise form of these proverbs presents a fragmentary view of reality. No elaborations are offered to explain them or combine them into a system. Their ambiguities at once train the mind and expose its limits. Should people trust themselves? Do they have a vital role in beginning what Yahweh completes, or is their work irrelevant, overridden by the divine? The answer may be ‘it depends’. Plans in line with Yahweh’s are encouraged, and will be fulfilled. Those which diverge must be overruled (cf. Ps 127:1). We are offered a situation-specific model of truth: different interpretations suit different people at different times.

20:27 יְרֵי יְהוָה נְשָׁמַת אָדָם חִפְשׁ כָּל־חֲדָרֵי־בֶטֶן:

*The lamp of the Lord – the breath of man; searching all the chambers of the belly.*

Prov 20:27 addresses, through its corporeal-domestic imagery, scrutiny of the human self. What is unclear is *who* is scrutinising: the Lord (יהוה) or man (אָדָם)? The Lord’s lamp and man’s breath are juxtaposed without explanation; the reader must discern the connection between disparate phenomena. Probably, the source domain is “the lamp”, and the target is “the breath”.<sup>720</sup> But both are rich images to be explored individually, before an imaginative blending.

The metaphor continues in the second colon by searching (חִפְשׁ) through a corporeal house (cf. 1 Kgs 20:6). The expression “chambers of the belly” (חֲדָרֵי־בֶטֶן) is found only in Proverbs, and apparently depicts a locus of moral behaviour.<sup>721</sup> As is common in character ethics, the focus is on internal disposition more than external actions. Elsewhere (Ps 64:7[6]), the inward parts (קִרְבִּי) and heart (לֵב) are searched, and injustice (עוֹלָת) is revealed, but here discovery is undisclosed. Good or ill may lurk in the shadowy recesses of human character, which evades straightforward classification into ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’. But the portable, illuminating lamp

<sup>719</sup> Clifford (1999); Fox (2009); Murphy (1998b); Preuß (1987); Scott (1965).

<sup>720</sup> Murphy (1998b) proposes the opposite.

<sup>721</sup> Cf. 20:30; 18:18=26:22, cf. use of בֶּטֶן in 22:18. The phrase is apparently borrowed from Egyptian, where ‘the casket of the belly’ is “a person’s innermost soul”; N. Shupak, “The Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17-24:22 from the Perspective of Contemporary Research,” in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients* (eds. R. L. Troxel, K. G. Friebe and D. R. Magary; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005) p.210; cf. Shupak (1993) pp.291-297.

(נִרְ, <sup>722</sup> cf. Zeph 1:12) exposes all, casting its scrutinising glare into the darkest corners.

Reorienting the imagery, the instrument of the search is also designated as “the breath of man” (נְשָׁמַת אָדָם).<sup>723</sup> Usually, נְשָׁמָה refers to physical breath. This verse alone assigns it a ‘spiritual’ task: searching moral character.<sup>724</sup> The unusual usage is best explained, not by imposing new semantic content on the word, but by considering its role in the metaphor. The ephemeral breath can be pervasive. It fills the belly, permeating each cavity and crevice. So scrutiny reaches each corner of character. While a person lives, there is always breath in her (cf. 1 Kgs 17:7). Accordingly, she is always examined. At each inhalation, she should remember the searchlight. Furthermore, the נְשָׁמָה is the particular possession of both humanity and God. It is a person’s life-breath; a basic and fundamental necessity of her existence. But it is always a gift of God. Human breath was from the beginning divinely breathed (Gen 2:7), and it never ceases to originate with the Creator (Isa 42:5, 57:16; Job 27:3, 32:8, 33:4). As Wolff put it, “[b]reath as the characteristic of life shows that man is indissolubly connected with Yahweh”.<sup>725</sup>

This raises the questions of the relationship between man and God, and the identity of the searcher. Perhaps man examines his own character. His breath is a lamp: divinely-bestowed, and therefore effective and reliable. His introspective capacities are trustworthy, and the proverb provides “a confident assertion that he need not be a victim of self-deceit”.<sup>726</sup> Its implication becomes an exhortation elsewhere: “Let us search (נִחְפְּשֶׁה)

A conscientious and anxious friend is concerned to ensure that her course is ethical. I encourage her in the efficacy of her self-examination: “a person’s breath is a lamp bestowed by the Lord, searching all the chambers of the belly”.

<sup>722</sup> Some scholars (S. E. Loewenstamm, “Remarks on Proverbs XVII 12 and XX 27,” *VT* 37.2 [1987] pp.221-224; M. Seidel, *Higre Lashon [Linguistic Studies]* [Jerusalem: [s.n.], 1932] p.30; Torczyner [1947] pp.27-28) take נִרְ as a participle from נִרַר ‘to break up [ground], to till’ (though נִרְ would be expected morphologically). Yahweh ‘plows’ a man’s spirit, to see what lies under its surface. Loewenstamm also argues that חֲפֹשׁ means ‘digs’, to create a parallel.

- Another suggestion (BHS; Ehrlich [1908]; H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* [London: SCM Press, 1974] p.60) is to emend נִרְ to נִצֵּר “the Lord guards” the man’s breath before searching him; cf. Prov 24:12, where “he who guards your soul” (נִצֵּר נַפְשְׁךָ) parallels “he who weighs hearts” (תִּכּוֹן לְבוֹת). However, neither of these interpretations has textual support, nor gives a significantly improved reading. They destroy the congenial connection between “lamp” and “searches”.

<sup>723</sup> A few commentators suggest that נְשָׁמָה here refers to a man’s words, for they reveal his character. K. Koch, “Der Güter Gefährlichstes, die Sprache, dem Menschen gegeben... Überlegungen zu Gen 2,7,” *BN* 48 (1989) p.56 suggests the Targumic understanding of נְשָׁמָה as ‘*Sprache*’. Waltke (2005) compares Prov 1:23, where he argues that רוּחַ (which can mean ‘breath’) receives a similar metonymic extension to mean ‘words’ (cf. also Ps 150:6; Job 26:4; 32:18). Cf. also the common phrase ‘breathes out lies’ (יָפִיחַ כְּזָבִים; Prov 6:19; 14:5; 14:25; 19:5,9). However, in all these examples, context *requires* some vocalic resonances to stretch the usual understanding of the breath, which is not the case here. Further, here the נְשָׁמָה ‘searches’ character, and does not ‘reveal’ it (as Waltke suggests).

<sup>724</sup> Toy (1899) describes it here as man’s “moral and intellectual being” (p.396; cf. Delitzsch [1884]; Murphy [1998]). Scholars highlight that the נְשָׁמָה is sometimes a distinguishing feature between humans and animals, and therefore may refer to man’s higher faculties. So T. C. Mitchell, “The Old Testament Usage of *nešāmâ*,” *VT* 11.2 (1961) p.186.

<sup>725</sup> Wolff (1974) p.60. Cf. H. Lamberty-Zielinski, “נְשָׁמָה,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol 10 (eds. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Fabry; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2000) p.67.

<sup>726</sup> McKane (1970) p.547; cf. Delitzsch (1884); Hausmann (1995); Murphy (1998b); Toy (1899).

and examine our ways!” (Lam 3:40). After such thorough self-scrutiny, the inner chambers can be cleaned, and character trusted accordingly.

Alternatively, perhaps the Lord examines man, fully in control of the נְשָׁמָה he created. It is a lamp not *from* the Lord, but *used by* the Lord. As a moral scrutineer, he elsewhere weighs (21:2) and tests (17:3) hearts, which lie fully open to him (15:11). Men try “to hide iniquity in the bosom” (לְטַמּוֹן בְּחִבֵּי עוֹנֵי; Job 31:33); in deep and dark places, challenging “who can see us?” (מִי רֹאֵנוּ; Isa 29:15). This proverb’s answer: the Lord can. His divine searchlight exposes all (cf. Ps 90:8).

I warn the wicked man that his evil will be exposed, however deep he thinks he has buried it. “A man’s life-breath is a lamp used by the Lord, searching all the chambers of the belly”. I darkly hint the punishment to follow, directing him to change his course.

And after searching, he will respond appropriately.

Both נֵר and נְשָׁמָה are powerful symbols of life,<sup>727</sup> and in the imaginative blend, such connotations might be foregrounded. A positive verdict allows the man to ‘breathe easy’, for “the light of the righteous will rejoice” (Prov 13:9a). But a guilty sentence may entail the breath leaving the body, for “the lamp of the wicked will be put

out” (Prov 13:9b=24:20b). Such imagined implications train the reader to discern the consequence of character.

But something more alarming still may lurk in the recesses: perhaps the light exposes sins, not hidden *by* the man, but even *from* the man. A man’s own character may be unknown to him, for he does not wield the examination light. Indeed, “who can discern his errors?” (Ps 19:13[12]); “who can say ‘I have made my heart pure, I am clean from my sin?’” (Prov 20:9). Attempts at self-scrutiny may ultimately be in vain.

Exploring this proverb trains the skills of imagination and discernment so important for navigating life. It may exhort self-scrutiny or deny its possibility, even as it coaxes scrutiny of its own words. Vacillating between interpretations, the reader recognises the limits of his wisdom. He must exercise self-trust and self-scrutiny, yet both may evade him.

<sup>727</sup> נְשָׁמָה is the vitalising breath. נֵר is often used figuratively of prosperity and life (e.g. Prov 13:9; 20:20; 24:20).

### Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to acquire wisdom about acquiring wisdom. The ‘didactic proverb’ genre can explain and elucidate three dualities which scholars have discerned in Proverbs’ view of wisdom (§1): wisdom is found in the textual and extra-textual worlds, in general principles and specific instances, in moral and intellectual forms. To these §3 has added a fourth: in the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’. The openness of the proverbs allows wisdom to be mediated across these tensions. Exploring the openness of the textual world trains characters and intellects for the openness in the extra-textual world. Interpreters can flesh out and adapt general principles for specific situations, and learn to seek God through ambiguities.

To acquire this wisdom, students should ‘trust and scrutinise’: a hermeneutical principle for interpreting text and world. A text’s ‘meaning’ emerges from three interacting forces (see pp.5-6): the speaker/author, the text itself, the reader/hearer. Each of these – other people (§2.1), words (§2.2), oneself (§3) – are basically trustworthy, but can deceive and should be scrutinised. Scrutiny is possible because of the textual openness.

The openness of proverbs might allow some *speakers* to deploy them harmfully. Lady Folly can use Lady Wisdom’s own words deceptively (Prov 9:4,16), and fools can cause pain by misappropriating proverbs (26:9, cf. 26:7). Speakers may hide their true selves (20:11), and must be scrutinised. The *words* themselves must be scrutinised too, sometimes providing deep and open waters to explore (18:4). Their polysemy, imagery, and complex parallelism goad us to infer, imagine, reason and reflect. The *hearer* can trust her own powers of interpretation, but only after they too have been scrutinised. The words’ openness can generate ambiguities and contradictions that force her to acknowledge her limitations. She must scrutinise her own mind – and yet, this scrutiny too might evade her (20:27). Only Yahweh’s lamp can fully illuminate it.

Yahweh’s role is elusive: he emerges at once as the enabler and limiter of human wisdom. Recognising these divinely-set limitations, the reader may respond as she chooses. But Proverbs’ didactic intention is to shape characters who would interpret Yahwisticly and trust in God. And this object of trust is utterly *inscrutable*. A stance of trusting subordination to the divine orientates students to the world, proverbs, and self, and allows them to achieve their fundamental aim: “Get wisdom” (4:5).

## Conclusion

### *Summary*

Inspired by von Rad's suggestion that proverbs "do not circumscribe their range of possibilities of comprehension",<sup>728</sup> I set out in this dissertation to explore the 'openness' of the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16. I found this to be intimately tied to the question of genre, which I came to see as the 'didactic proverb'. Accordingly, I set myself three main aims: first, to justify this genre ascription; second, to show how 'openness' contributes to 'didactic' and 'proverb' functions; third, to see how this interpretation strategy might influence some issues in Proverbs' scholarship.

Chapter 1 was directed towards the first aim. I argued that the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 are best classed as *didactic proverbs*. This was based on their 'generic relations' (Didactic Instructions and folk proverbs); social settings (court and family); media (written and oral); self-presentation (מְשָׁלִים and חִידוֹת); and form (aphorism and proverb; collection and individual saying).

The next goal was approached by the rest of Part 1. I suggested (chapter 2) that *openness* occurs pervasively throughout Prov 10:1-22:16. On a literary level, it is generated in three main ways. Some proverbs are characterised by polysemy (grammatical and semantic ambiguities). Their parallelism may be open to interpretation as antithetical or synonymous; or contain an imbalance to be filled out. Their imagery opens up a world for exploration, which can be imaginatively applied to the situations in the proverb and in the reader's own life.

Chapter 3 began to show how openness contributes to the functions of didactic proverbs. In a didactic use, openness helps the student develop a broad yet flexible worldview. It also provides stimulation for intellectual training and character development. In a 'proverb' use, openness allows the sayings to be applied in many different situations and functions (particularly to evaluate or direct).

In Part 2, I demonstrated the importance of openness for didactic proverbs by exploring a sample of texts. This also contributed to my third aim: in each case this interpretive strategy cast new light on an important issue in scholarship. Chapter 4 considered the character categories so pervasive in Proverbs (e.g. wise and foolish; righteous and wicked). I suggested that these categories are open, and their structure is best understood through 'prototype theory'. They are conceptualised around central cases, which provide ideal, prototypical characters for emulation. Without necessary and sufficient conditions for membership, categories can be fleshed out in

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<sup>728</sup> Von Rad (1972) p.32. See above, p.1.

various ways. They have ‘graded centrality’, permitting different degrees of morality, and making character development possible; and ‘fuzzy borders’, allowing the foolish one to become wise.

In chapter 5, I considered the apparent ‘act-consequence connection’ in Proverbs. Some of its imagery constructs metaphorical worlds where act and consequence are intrinsically related. For example, ‘the straight path’ is at once morally correct and beneficial; ‘eating evil’ energises wicked activity and poisons the eater. Such connections can be applied to the real world too, where the link between act and consequence is often predictable. However, the connection is not inviolable, and some proverbs use polysemy to problematise the principle. The agent behind the connection is often left open; perhaps it is Yahweh, society, or an intrinsic causality. This keeps the attention firmly on the actor and his responsibility. The proverbs are not primarily intended to explain causality, but to motivate good behaviour and character development. If they are not an absolute reflection of real life, this may not be a detriment, but a motivational heightener.

In chapter 6, I considered the depiction of the king. The kingship proverbs may have been used in the actual royal court, but they are not restricted to these environs. Indeed, king and courtier provide examples of general principles. When their positive qualities are forefronted (e.g. the king’s beneficent favour and righteous judgement), they can function pedagogically as paradigms for emulation or standards for evaluation. However, there are also darker undertones; the proverbs provide no naïve or sycophantic idealisation. The king offers an example of human character in its irreducible complexity.

The final chapter (chapter 7) suggested that the didactic proverb genre can explain and elucidate various dualities in Proverbs’ view of wisdom: wisdom is found in the textual and extra-textual worlds; the general and specific; the moral and intellectual; the ‘religious’ and ‘secular’. To acquire this wisdom, a principle can be applied to the proverbs and the world: trust and scrutinise. It is the openness of each which permits this. The world is generally trustworthy; people’s behaviour and words provide reliable wisdom. However, they may also deceive, and should be scrutinised. Our own minds have great capacities, but cannot be relied on fully, for human character and intellect are limited by the inscrutable work of Yahweh. Only by trusting him is wisdom validated, and can we trust ourselves.

As well as addressing these scholarly debates (my third aim), Part 2 sought to fulfil my first and second aims through practice, i.e. to interpret the sayings as ‘didactic proverbs’, and to explore the contribution of ‘openness’. Here, I will draw together my findings about ‘proverb’ and ‘didactic’ functions.



*Use ‘as proverbs’*

I have shown how the sayings might be used ‘as proverbs’, that is, in specific situations with specific purposes. Such insights have hitherto been largely absent from Proverbs’ scholarship. If a saying has *multiple ‘base meanings’*, i.e. is polysemous, each meaning may be spoken into a different circumstance. If it employs *generality or metaphor*, how this is specified may vary: the images of paths and dining (ch.5); lions and rains (ch.6); waters and lamps (ch.7) might be applied to many different concrete referents. Furthermore, the speaker might give various *opinions about the situation* through the same proverb. Does she, for example, intend to glorify or to condemn the king (ch.6)?

The proverbs could have a *positive or negative relation to context*, describing the current situation or its opposite. I can say “a righteous man hates lies” (13:5a; ch.5) positively of the truthful man, affirming him; or negatively of the liar, in condemnation. Further, different *correlations of person* are possible between the characters in the proverb and the people using the proverb. A proverb about a child might address the child himself, his parent, an onlooker, or someone else (20:11; ch.7). A proverb about the king’s legal judgement could be directed to the defendant, plaintiff or king (ch.6). Equally, it could be spoken in different *temporal orientations*; in this case, before the crime, between crime and verdict, or after the verdict.

In each different situation, a proverb might take a different function. In the last three chapters, we have seen them used, for example, to comfort, encourage, celebrate; lament, rage, complain; glorify, extol; condemn, rebuke. The most important functions are evaluation and direction. A proverb offers the correct way to evaluate a situation. ‘Character’ terms in particular provide broad categories for making sense of the world (ch.4), and develop an ethical framework. A proverb also directs its hearer. It often uses ‘consequence’ terms for their strong motivational force, prompting the hearer to immediate action. Proverbs which combine ‘character’ and ‘consequence’ are particularly suited for a dual evaluative-directive function (ch.5). From a long-term perspective, evaluation can provide stimulus for a worldview, and direction for character development, moving the sayings from a ‘proverb’ to a ‘didactic’ use.

*'Didactic' use: Intellectual training*

As well as instilling worldview and developing character, the didactic sayings aim to train their reader's mind. A primary way they do this is by encouraging him to explore their openness. He thereby learns modes of thought essential to life. Some proverbs are riddle-like, goading deep reflection and scrutiny. They may bring moments of psychological disorientation, and as the reader seeks reorientation, he himself is formed.

For proverb interpretation, skills of logic are required. The reader must work out implications and connotations. He must offer analysis and synthesis, striving for internal consistency and relevance. He must reason and deduce, calculate and surmise. In particular, he learns to infer the connection between act and consequences (ch.5). Such a skillset will benefit him throughout life.

The proverbs also train the (no less essential) skills of imagination. Particularly through metaphor, the reader is taught to see things anew, and to forge connections between what had seemed incommensurable. Phenomena are reconceptualised, recategorised, reimagined. Worlds are opened up, full of paths (ch.5), streams (ch.6), and deep waters (ch.7) ready for exploration. The reader may take his own mental lamp through the chambers of these worlds; exploring, narrating, imagining possibilities. His prize discoveries may then be brought home into the 'real world'.

More than one interpretation may arise, and the reader learns to adjudicate between competing opinions, in proverbs as he must in life. Some implications may lie deep beneath the surface. The reader must attend to these non-dominant voices and interpret courageously, evaluating for himself, weighing up the possibilities. In the proverbs about the king for example (ch.6), there are some subtle subversions amongst the glorifications, for those who would give ear. But words can be deceitful (ch.7). Not all voices are valid, though all voices must be heard.

Sometimes, the voices might be irreconcilable, but the reader holds them as simultaneously true. He is forced into an interpretive tension that he feels compelled to loosen. We saw this first in the problematising polysemies of ch.5, and even more in subsequent chapters. Just like the world, proverbs contain complexity, paradox and enigma. Perhaps situation-specificity provides a solution: each interpretation for a different place and time. But sometimes, the reader must simply accept the irresolvability, hold his preliminary interpretation lightly, and acknowledge his limitations (ch.7).

*'Didactic' use: Character development*

Proverbs is a didactic book of character-based ethics. It makes human characters central, presented in ideal, prototypical types (e.g. righteous and wicked; wise and foolish [ch.4]). These can be fleshed out into a moral framework, and provide paradigms for emulation. The types suggest stable dispositions, which determine both acts and consequences (ch.5). The overall course of moral conduct is paramount – the whole life 'path'. Within holistic human character, the qualities which direct behaviour are internalised. Those found appealing are consumed like a meal, energising action, and fulfilling the appetite. Proverbs knows the importance of appetite and desire for character, and attempts to shape its readers' cravings through its appeals.

Character is usually revealed through action (ch.7). Students can observe people's behaviour and fit it into their ethical framework. Some people may be close to Proverbs' ideals, and can be emulated. The king, for example, might be a paradigm of justice, generosity, and piety (ch.6). However, fitting prototypes to the real world can prove problematic. People are not wholly 'righteous' or 'wicked'. The king himself contains both light and shade. The value of some characteristics – like a king's anger, or a woman's grace (ch.5, 11:16) – may depend on how they are used. Furthermore, people can hide their true character (ch.7, 20:11), even from themselves (20:27). Self-scrutiny is essential, for dark shadows may lurk in our own hearts.

This inevitable non-perfection makes character development essential. Character-consequence rhetoric offers strong motivation to this end (ch.5). Overall, Proverbs is optimistic in this endeavour. Folly can be overcome, and wise character achieved. Life is a path, a journey towards proper character. But the destination is never quite reached; for all their striving, no-one is ever entirely righteous or wise (ch.7).

Indeed, some proverbs suggest that your own character is not fully under your control. Just as 'consequences' can be affected by society, external forces, and Yahweh (ch.5), so too can character. Character can be formed by wise guides (ch.5, §3.1), or disintegrated by wrongdoers. Sometimes, wickedness can take hold like a poison (ch.5, §3.2), ingraining you in patterns of sin. Yahweh has ultimate control of a person's steps (ch.7, §3), how then can she understand or control her way?

*The role of Yahweh*

Yahweh has had a subtle but recurrent presence in the sayings we have examined. In Prov 10:1-22:16, he only appears explicitly in a selection of verses around a few themes. He is sometimes conspicuously absent from places we might expect him, such as the act-consequence connection (ch.5). However, this may not be a denial of his activity. Rather, it keeps the focus squarely on the human, to stress personal responsibility. What's more, there are hints of Yahweh's activity under the surface; he may infuse the sayings and world without need for dramatic intervention. Along the path, perhaps he is "the one who preserves your life" (16:17); perhaps he sends his divine messengers to meet you (14:22).

As in these instances, language which ordinarily speaks of God is sometimes employed in the proverbs without explicit reference to him. In ch.6 we saw imagery which conventionally depicts the deity being transferred to the monarch. How to interpret this is not obvious. At one extreme, perhaps the king has usurped Yahweh's authority. It is not the Lord whose face will shine (16:15), nor whose roar will resound (19:12; 20:2). All power over life and death belongs instead to the king (16:14-15). At the other extreme, perhaps Yahweh has complete authority, and the king none at all. It is God who ultimately winnows the wicked (20:8,26); he who provides rain and dew (16:15; 19:12). The monarch is but a puppet in his hand (21:1). The proverbs could be spoken from either side of the debate. But we should probably avoid both extremes: Yahweh's activity is not all-or-nothing, but subtle, complex, and mysterious.

This came out more fully in the similar debates of ch.7. What are the extent and limits of human wisdom and agency? Does Yahweh allow the individual her own authority, and empower her, helping to complete what she begins? Or does he take away all autonomy, overpower her, and enforce his own desires instead? Again, no simple resolution can be found. And perhaps such a solution would not be desirable. Proverbs does not want us to comprehend his activity, for this would be an attempt to usurp his control. Yahweh is utterly inscrutable, and thus he must remain. The elusive manner in which the proverbs refer to him perhaps reflects his elusive activity in the world. In proverbs, as in life, tantalising glimpses are caught, shimmering reflections of the divine presence. But grasping them is like grasping oil in the hand. And yet, Proverbs teaches us to look. The book's pedagogy goads us to search beneath the surface, to scrutinise proverbs and the world. And sometimes Yahweh may be found there. As she searches, the reader might find her character and intellect formed, in humility and trust of the Lord. "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings to search a thing out" (Prov 25:2).

*Directions for further research*

This dissertation has opened up a number of avenues for further research. First, more work is needed on the ‘didactic proverb’ genre. ‘Didactic’ features of the book have been quite widely studied, but ‘proverbial’ features much less so. I have here ventured into this gap, and found rich fields of research in paremiology and folklore studies which might yet yield much fruit. Careful and critical discernment is needed for what to pick for Proverbs (not straightforwardly a ‘folk’ text). Relatedly, scholars have focussed mainly on the sayings’ interpretation; more attention could be given to their function. C. Fontaine’s characterisation of folk proverbs is applicable to didactic proverbs too: this is wisdom ‘at work’ amongst its recipients.<sup>729</sup>

Second, many more proverbs in 10:1-22:16 could be studied to draw out their openness, and their didactic and proverbial potentials. I have only considered a selection of proverbs and of issues in scholarship from this standpoint; there are many others. For example, what might reading this way reveal about: community in Proverbs; wealth and poverty; or conceptions of the ‘self’? The role of Yahweh has been only briefly touched on here, and deserves further consideration. Several interesting fields of imagery are also open to exploration, such as wealth, cities, and healing.

Third, the discussions here could be related to other texts comparable to Prov 10:1-22:16. Chs.25-29 for example may have a very similar genre. Chs.28-29 are formally akin to chs.10-15, abounding in antithetical parallelisms helpful for evaluation and character development. Chs.25-27 are characterised by comparisons, filled with rich and diverse imagery for exploration. These chapters could be explored with a reading strategy like the one I have proposed for 10:1-22:16. It would also be helpful to examine the differences between the ‘didactic proverb’ and the other genres in the book; and then to consider their interaction within the final literary text. C. Newsom has offered something similar in her Bakhtinian reading of Job, which analyses the dialogue of genres.<sup>730</sup> Furthermore, can any of the conclusions reached here be applied to other texts, such as the ‘proverb’ lists in Qohelet (7:1-13, 10:1-20); the sayings in Hebrew narrative; the sayings of Jesus; or any of the comparable texts from the ANE?

Finally, openness could be studied from the perspective of transmission, reception and translation. By its very nature, a proverb is a text transmitted through time and communities. Its openness might be interpreted differently in each new setting. We saw, for example, how the same concise idea is received differently in Prov 20:24, Ps 37:23, and Jer 10:23 (cf. also its reuse at

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<sup>729</sup> Fontaine (1982) pp.139-170.

<sup>730</sup> Newsom (2003). Hatton (2008) offers a ‘Bakhtinian’ reading of Proverbs, but more in terms of a dialogue of different voices than a dialogue of genres.

Qumran<sup>731</sup>). Sometimes reinterpretation might result in a new variant form of the proverb, perhaps explaining some of the differences in the Versions.<sup>732</sup> Here, transmission blurs into reception. How have interpreters dealt with the openness over the centuries? Can tendencies of interpretation be discerned in e.g. the Versions; rabbinical interpretations; early critical scholarship; modern Bible translations?

This last issue, translation, is an ongoing practice for which ‘openness’ has real implications. It may be desirable to convey openness in translation, given its importance for didactic proverb function. But this proves problematic: translation necessarily entails interpretation, closing down on a particular meaning expressible in the target language. Strategies for maintaining the openness would be helpful. Such strategies might include greater literalness in translation<sup>733</sup> and the use of footnotes and/or parallel texts. Translations also brings new openness, as the target language will contain its own ambiguities, and images will have new resonances in new interpretive contexts. Should the translator try to minimise this new openness? Or perhaps this malleability, this skill of acquiring fresh meaning over time, is the inherent joy of the genre, not its nemesis.

G. von Rad comments on this feature of transmission. I began with his statement that proverbs “offer no defence against even bold interpretations”.<sup>734</sup> A little later in his discussion, he notes that as it was transmitted, “the sense of a sentence was never completely fixed; any attempt to understand it was always a flexible one”.<sup>735</sup> This dissertation has shown the inherent ‘flexibility’ or openness of the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16, stemming from and contributing to their genre as ‘didactic proverbs’. I hope that future studies will follow this trajectory, offering interpretations that (while careful and critical) are ‘flexible’ and ‘bold’.

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<sup>731</sup> R. C van Leeuwen, “Scribal Wisdom and a Biblical Proverb at Qumran,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 4.3 (1997) pp.255-264.

<sup>732</sup> Fox (2005).

<sup>733</sup> To preserve, for example, ambiguities arising from the juxtaposition of parts. R. E. Murphy, “A Brief Note On Translating Proverbs,” *CBQ* 60 (1998a) pp.621-625; Schneider (1992) pp.144-147.

<sup>734</sup> Von Rad (1972) p.32.

<sup>735</sup> Von Rad (1972) p.33.



## Appendix – Tables showing different types of ‘openness’

**Table 1** – Semantic ambiguities occurring in the proverbs discussed in this thesis.

For a discussion of the different types of semantic openness, see ch.2 §1.1.

The proverbs are listed in the order they occur in the thesis; for explanations of each instance, see the discussion of the proverb in question.

	Prov	pp.	Polysemy: conceptually		Connotations	Vague/general	Soundplay	Metonymy?	Metaphor?
			distant	close					
Ch.5	13:5	97-99					יְבֹאֵשׁ		
	10:8	99-100							
	10:14	99-100			יִצְפֹּנוּ				
	10:16	100-102				חֲטָאת			תְּבוֹאָת, פְּעֻלָּת
	16:17	108-110	נֶפֶשׁ	נֶצֶר, שֹׁמֵר		רָע			
	14:22	110-111				טוֹב, רָע			
	10:17	111-113							
	11:5	113-114					בְּרִשְׁעָתוֹ		
	19:28	116-117		אֵין					
	12:21	117-118				רָע			
	13:2	118-119		נֶפֶשׁ					
	20:17	120-121							לֶחֶם
	11:24	124-126				מִפְזֹר		יֵשֶׁר	
	11:16	126-128			עֲרִיצִים, חֹן				
Ch.6	20:8	140-143		מִזְרָה				רָע	
	20:26	140-143		מִזְרָה	קֶסֶם				
	16:10	143-144		מִשְׁפָּט					
	16:15	148-151							
	21:1	151-152				כָּל		כָּל	
	19:12	153-154							
	20:2	155-156		חֹטָא	נֶפֶשׁ				
	16:14	156-158		מִלֵּאכִי					מִלֵּאכִי
Ch.7	20:11	166-169	יְתִנְכֹּר		מַעֲלִלִיו		מַעֲלִלִיו		
	18:4	171-174							
	16:1	178-179						מַעֲגָה	
	16:9	178-179							
	21:31	178-179							מִלְחָמָה, סוֹס
	21:30	179							
	10:22	180		עֵצֶב					
	20:27	181-183							



**Table 2** – Grammatical ambiguities, ambiguous parallelisms, and open imagery discussed in this thesis.

For discussions of the phenomena, see ch.2 §1.2, §2 and §3 respectively.

For explanations of each instance, see the discussion of the proverb in question.

			Grammatical ambiguities					Parallelism		Imagery	
			Ambiguous modifier	Subj-obj ambiguity	Juxtaposition of nominals	Construct state	Preposition/conjunction	Binyan	Antithetical/synonymous		Unbalanced
Prov pp.											
Ch.5	13:5	97-99						יִבֹּאֵיִשׁ יִחְפִּיר		x	Stinking
	10:8	99-100								x	
	10:14	99-100								x	
	10:16	100-102								x	
	16:17	108-110		סור							Path
	14:22	110-111			b colon						Path
	10:17	111-113			a colon			מִתְעָה			Path
	11:5	113-114					ב				Path
	19:28	116-117									Dining
	12:21	117-118								x	Dining
	13:2	118-119		יֹאכֵל	b colon					x	Dining
	20:17	120-121				לֶחֶם שֶׁקֶר					Dining
	11:24	124-126					מִן				Scattering
11:16	126-128							x			
Ch.6	20:8	140-143	בְּעֵינָיו				ב				Throne, winnowing
	20:26	140-143									Winnowing, threshing
	16:10	143-144		יִמְעַל			ב				Oracle
	16:15	148-151									Cloud, rain
	21:1	151-152									Stream, hand, heart
	19:12	153-154							x		Lion, dew
	20:2	155-156			a colon	חֹזֵא נִפְשׁוֹ					Lion
	16:14	156-158									Messengers
Ch.7	20:11	166-169	גַּם				אִם				
	18:4	171-174			both cola				x		Waters
	16:1	178-179							x		
	16:9	178-179							x		
	21:31	178-179							x		Horse, war
	21:30	179					לִנְגִּד				
	10:22	180		יֹסֵף							
	20:27	181-183				נֵר יְהוָה					Lamp, breath, belly

**Table 3** – *Openness occurring when proverbs are applied to different situations.*

The columns give the source of the openness (see ch.3 §2.1). An x indicates that there is a discussion of this type of openness in the analysis of the verses in question (though other types of openness may occur in these verses too).

The proverbs discussed in ch.7 are not included here because that chapter gives snapshots of different uses, rather than a separate explanatory section.

Correlation of persons	Temporal orientation	Evaluation of message	+ve/-ve relationship to	Generality	Metaphor	Multiple base meanings	One half mapped		
Ch.5									
	x		x				x	§2.2 pp.102-104	13:5
								10:8	
								10:14	
								10:16	
				x	x	x		§3.3 pp.122-123	16:17
									14:22
									10:17
									11:5
									19:28
									12:21
									13:2
									20:17
						x		§4.2 pp.128-129	11:24
									11:16
Ch.6									
	x							§2.1 pp.138-140	20:8
									20:26
									16:10
		x						§3.1 pp.146-147	16:15
									21:1
									19:12
									20:2
									16:14

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