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Gnomic Wisdom

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Semeia

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Gnomic Wisdom

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John Dominic Crossan

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PROVERBIAL WISDOM AND THE YAHWIST VISION

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ABSTRACT

Proverbial wisdom has been contrasted with the Yahwist vision typified by prophecy and parables. While wisdom is usually seen as affirming order and meaning in experience, prophetic Yahwism tends to question and undermine established structures. The argument of this essay is that, while proverbial wisdom is predominantly constructive, and cannot be compared directly to either prophecy or parables, it is thoroughly comparable with the historical traditions which were basic to prophetic Yahwism. Both the historical credos and the maxims of wisdom could on occasion become rigid and dogmatic. Both, however, contained within themselves the seeds of a debunking tendency. In both cases these seeds can be found in a sense of the historical transience of human existence which exposes the limitations of all human knowledge.

0 Proverbial Wisdom and the Yahwist Vision

0.1 “The books of Wisdom in the Bible are somewhat compromised: they are not informed by a rigorous Yahwist vision but rather by an essentially foreign ethic of prudent calculation designed to lead to prosperity. If Solomon really wrote any of these books he was as repellent to perceptive Yahwists as Poor Richard to D. H. Lawrence.” (Schneidau: 206–7). This evaluation of Hebrew wisdom by literary critic Herbert Schneidau is shared by many biblical scholars. It is usually based on prior theological considerations: wisdom is suspect because of

its foreign origin (Preuss) or its failure to refer to the "mighty acts of God" toward Israel (Wright). While Schneidau stresses "the essentially foreign" character of wisdom, he is more directly concerned with the nature of the material itself. The "prudent calculation" of wisdom is perceived as incompatible with a "rigorous Yahwist vision." The Yahwist vision is understood by Schneidau in literary terms. The "enduring heritage of the Bible's literary forms" is typified by prophecy and parable (Schneidau: 254). These forms are characterized by a "demythologizing" or "debunking" thrust (12). While myth "charts paths of meaningfulness" (10) and is probably "the most efficient means man has of stabilizing his societies," (8) the bible "demands that we acknowledge how precarious is our grasp of any meaning at all" (255) and is characterized by "ambivalence towards culture of any kind, but particularly one's own" (4). By contrast, proverbial wisdom is notoriously dedicated to the idea that order pervades the world of appearances (von Rad, Gese) and to "the project of making a continuous whole out of one's existence" (Beardslee: 67). It would seem then that Schneidau has substantial reason to regard Solomonic wisdom as repellent to his vision of rigorous Yahwism.

0.2 Schneidau's view of the essential spirit of Yahwism is widely shared by biblical scholars. Strikingly similar views have been independently formulated by Clark (with particular reference to OT prophecy) and Crossan (with a focus on NT parables). Yet no one would claim that prophecy and parable are the only authentically biblical forms of speech. Biblical religion, like any other, can be understood as an exercise in "world-building" (Berger: 3) which involves the development of positive beliefs, traditions, and institutions. Schneidau does not deny that the bible has its myths, but claims that "whenever mythology developed in Hebrew history, it was inherently more unstable than the mythologies of the surrounding cultures, and those of other cultures generally, because it had, as it were, short half-lives, because the Yahwist vision was always latent within them, ready to erode the comfortable assumption that they shared in Yahweh's sacredness. Each form of mythologizing aroused its generation of critics—i.e. prophets— sooner or later. Even such institutions as the Law, which was manifestly an attempt to stabilize and sacralize the social ideology and thus substitute for myth, eventually became liable to demythologization." (Schneidau: 13-14).

In short, Schneidau's thesis is not that Yahwism dispensed with positive structures, but that its own basic myths and traditions contained within them an impetus to "anti-structure" (to borrow a term of Turner: 45). This impetus is located especially in the use of an "historicizing style" (215) which dominates much of the biblical material. While the biblical narratives are not necessarily "historical" in the

sense of reliable factual reports, and are perhaps more accurately classified as "story" than as "history" (Barr), they are not presented as timeless truths but are set in the constant flux of historical change. The basic biblical paradigm of the Exodus celebrated a dramatic change in the status of a people and a disruption of the power structure of the ancient world. The Exodus remained a symbol of the possibility of unexpected change, a reminder that God could again do "a new thing," making a path through the sea and rivers in the desert (Isa 43:16-20). In Voegelin's phrase, "history is the Exodus from civilizations" (cited by Schneidau: 185) and no institutions or systems are immune to its eroding power. The Exodus was no doubt often viewed positively in ancient Israel as a guarantee of divine favor and election. However, the Exodus tradition itself contained the seeds of the debunking critique of Israel's complacency, and so could be utilized critically by a prophet such as Amos.

0.3 The wisdom tradition in the OT is a self-contained body of literature which is independent of the traditions of Israel's history (Preuss; Collins, 1977a). Like the historical and legal traditions, it can be viewed as an exercise in world-building, the construction of an ordered view of reality. The house on seven pillars (Prov 9:1) eloquently symbolizes the stability of the sages' world. The pursuit of world order in the wisdom tradition culminates in the affirmation of a metaphysical wisdom which "in full might reaches from end to end and orders all things graciously" (Wis 8:1) and "holds all things together" (Wis 1:7; see Collins, 1977b:123-134). However the wisdom tradition also produced its literature of dissent (Crenshaw, 1977). Job and Qoheleth question traditional assumptions in a manner as radical as any prophet or parabler. Even Schneidau, interestingly, claims that the message of Qoheleth, that all human achievements are vanity and chasing after wind, is in fundamental accord with the Yahwist vision and "could come from any book of the Bible" (Schneidau: 5). The wisdom which is "repellant to perceptive Yahwists" must be found elsewhere, presumably in the more positive collection of Proverbs. Schneidau does not ask whether the positive proverbial tradition might contain the seeds of a debunking tendency, in the same way that the historical traditions of the bible are said to have the prophetic vision latent within them. Yet this possibility surely must be explored before wisdom can be compared or contrasted with other biblical traditions.

1.0 The Nature of Proverbs

1.1 There is widespread agreement that "the basic unit of gnomic apperception is the saying, either proverb or aphorism" (Crenshaw, 1974:231). Proverbs, as Jolles insisted, are not primarily didactic. Rather

they are retrospective and express a conclusion from experience (Jolles: 158; Crenshaw, 1974:231). Such simple statements are plentiful in the book of Proverbs:

“A rich man’s wealth is his strong city;
their poverty is the ruin of the poor.” (10:15)

“Where there are no oxen there is no grain
but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.” (14:4)

“A well fed person will disdain honey
but to one who is hungry even the bitter is sweet.” (27:7)

(For further examples see Hermisson, 1968:52-64.) These statements are purely declaratory and do not imply either approval or protest. They are not themselves hortatory, although they can clearly become the basis for exhortation.

1.2 To say that such sayings are “basic” is not to suggest that they are the oldest stratum of proverbs. While there have been several attempts to identify chronological layers by distinguishing the simpler forms from the more complex (Eissfeldt; Schmidt), such attempts have not been successful. Comparison with Egyptian wisdom literature has shown that even the longer instructions in Proverbs 1-9 are not necessarily late (Whybray; Kayatz). The “basic” character of the simple statement is logical rather than chronological. The didactic and hortatory sayings of Proverbs presuppose such declaratory observations. The advice of the sages is not deduced from divine law, but inferred from their observations. In some cases the motivation is explicit:

“Do not neglect your own friend or your father’s . . .
a near neighbour is better than a distant brother.” (27:10)

“Be careful to know your own sheep
and give attention to your flocks,
for possessions do not last forever
nor will a crown endure to endless generations.” (27:23-24)

Here the exhortations are clearly based on the assertions made in the second half of the sayings. Other observations clearly imply advice. If it is true that “he who sends a fool on an errand cuts off his own feet” (26:6), it is superfluous to add that one should not send a fool on an errand. If a man who meddles in another’s quarrel is like one who seizes a passing cur by the ears (26:17), meddling is evidently to be discouraged. In short, the basic declaratory character of the sayings pervades even the hortatory sentences. The ethics of Proverbs are inferred from observations such as are articulated in the sayings.

1.3 The prominence of declaratory sayings easily creates the impression that proverbial wisdom is positivistic. By positivism I understand the “assumption that we have an easily accessible standard of ‘external reality’ against which to measure any of our utterances”

(Schneidau: 248), that reality is univocal and unambiguous and yields single, simple, solid, and fixed meanings. This view of proverbs is reflected in von Rad's statements that, "In their own way and within their own sphere they simply wish to establish something positive, something unquestionably valid," and that, "Undoubtedly it often required lengthy observation of similar processes until gradually it became possible to recognize certain natural laws . . . this wisdom poetry never abandoned the strenuous attempt to derive some kind of order from the world and then to give it a fixed form" (von Rad: 31). These statements suggest that proverbial wisdom is positivistic in two respects: that it wishes to establish "something unquestionably valid" and to discern "natural laws" by which other positive facts can be discovered. We will argue that both these suggestions require modification.

2.0 Proverbs and Paradigms

2.1 We may begin by noting that proverbs combine concreteness and specificity on the one hand (von Rad's "something positive") with some degree of generalization (which von Rad relates to a search for natural laws). However it is characteristic of proverbs that the specificity and generality are fused in the single saying. To say that "a well fed person will disdain honey" is concrete but is not confined to an individual instance. It implies that well-fed people habitually disdain honey and so the proverb is relevant to recurring situations. However, it also suggests a pattern which can be illustrated without any reference to food or honey. Whoever has plenty of anything is hard to please. Again, the saying that there is no grain where there are no oxen may be apt in a situation remote from agriculture. Results are not achieved where resources are inadequate. The concrete proverb is evidently more striking than the abstract generalization, but its value depends on its range of applicability.

2.2 However, the specificity of the proverb has a further implication. It ensures that the proverb falls short of the natural laws to which von Rad refers. The proverb does not necessarily claim that in every case where there are no oxen the barn will be empty. The typical consequence, articulated in the proverb, may still admit of exceptions. This point is all the more apparent in view of the lack of any attempt to establish consistency between the different proverbs. The insights expressed in the different sayings are simply juxtaposed without regard for their mutual implications. In one celebrated case (26:4-5) two sayings which flatly contradict each other are placed side by side. As Robert Scholes remarked à propos of Jolles: "Brought together, 'Look before you leap' and 'He who hesitates is lost' can hardly function as guides to conduct" (Scholes: 45; compare Thompson: 69-70). Proverbs provide

insights of general validity, but they do not tell us when they may be appropriately applied. Their generality is limited. So William McKane rightly comments that proverbs have "a special kind of concreteness, in virtue of which their meaning is open to the future and can be divined again and again in relation to a situation which calls forth the proverb as apt comment," and he adds that "A 'proverb' can be generalized and the generalization does some justice to it, but it forecloses the meaning and destroys the hermeneutical openness which derives from its original concreteness" (McKane: 23). Jolles even goes so far as to say that proverbs resist all generalization and abstraction (Jolles: 167).

2.3 As limited generalizations, then, proverbs might be more appropriately described as paradigms than as laws. The applicability of the proverb, like paradigmatic myths or historical situations, rests on partial similarities, but does not require identical correspondence. Bruno Snell has noted that this reliance on partial or limited similarity is fundamentally at variance with all kinds of positivism: "Neither the primitive magic mentality nor the type of thought which follows scientific lines is able to appreciate the nature of the mythical or, for that matter, the historical paradigm. For whatever the differences between them, neither approach admits any comparisons which are not based on absolute identity . . . in the sciences, only that which really 'is' has any validity . . . But what we find in myth, in poetry and in history, namely the establishing of precedents for human actions and fortunes, to give them a broader and more universal significance, is rooted in a totally different category of speech" (Snell: 207). Since any given proverb may or may not be appropriate in a particular situation, their truth is conditional and relative, not absolute. They can not be taken as unambiguous statements of "that which really is."

3.0 The Use of Analogy

3.1 A further consideration which qualifies the positivism of the proverbial sayings is the frequency with which they resort to metaphor and analogy (von Rad: 115-124):

"Like cold water to a weary throat
is good news from a distant land." (25:25)

"Like a dog returning to his vomit
is a stupid man who repeats his folly." (26:11)

"Like a bird that strays far from its nest
is a man who strays from his place." (27:8)

Here again, similarity is not identity. The correspondences in question are no more than partial. The comparisons are not mandatory or necessary. As Max Black has argued: "The metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the principal subject by

implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject" (Black: 44–45). The analogy between the dog and the stupid man is not simply given in experience but is selected and designed to highlight a perspective on the fool which might not be otherwise evident. In Ian Ramsey's terms such comparisons are not "picture models," "reproducing identically those properties common to model and original which, for the particular purpose in mind, are importantly relevant" (Ramsey: 3). Rather, they are "disclosure" or "analogue" models, which do not posit identity but only suggest a structure or "web of relationship." Such analogies "are not made defining or descriptive in any categorical or doctrinal sense, but they are simply suggestive in an explorative effort to find a way in which the reality apprehended can be thought about or made marginally intelligible" (Meland: 130). Such comparisons have a tentative or exploratory character. They suggest new ways of looking at an object, which may disclose certain features of it, but do not exhaust it or constitute the only way of looking at it. The validity or usefulness of such a model can only be assessed by the degree to which it fits our experience or "chimes in with the phenomena" (Ramsey: 15). It does not provide a univocal, positivistic criterion for measuring reality.

3.2 The similarity between the fool and the dog is not an obvious one, and can only be perceived if we ignore several features in which the two differ. It is characteristic of proverbs that they bring together and compare things which initially seem very different. This tendency is especially evident in the so-called numerical sayings:

"Three things there are which are too wonderful for me,
four which I do not understand:
the way of a vulture in the sky,
the way of a serpent on the rock,
the way of a ship out at sea,
and the way of a man with a girl." (30:18–19)

The four things in question do not initially seem to have much in common. Von Rad observes: "The aim of this form of proverb is always the same, the collection of things which are similar where the assertion of similarity is the real surprise element" (von Rad: 35–36). Even when the matters in question are less disparate than Prov 30:18–19, the common element cannot be perceived without ingenuity. Prov 30:24–28 lists four creatures which are small, but exceedingly wise—ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards. Their "wisdom" however is quite diverse (and, in the case of badgers and lizards, dubious). While the list of four creatures might be conceived as part of a rudimentary attempt to master the world by *Listenwissenschaft*, we should note that the saying does not attempt to list creatures that are related in any obvious way—e.g. things that crawl or that hoard food. The criteria for the "wisdom" of these

creatures are too loose to serve any serious purpose of classification. Rather the saying is a playful exercise in ingenuity which tries to find something in common between lizards and locusts.

3.3 Many scholars have suggested that the numerical proverbs (and some others) were originally transmitted as riddles (Thompson: 75). We can easily imagine the form of such riddles: e.g. "what four things are small but exceedingly wise?" If the answer to such a question were obvious, the riddle would lose its interest. It is designed to test the "wisdom" of the respondent, whether that wisdom derives from ingenuity or from learned mastery of a store of proverbs. The less obvious the answer, the better the riddle, and the less obvious the analogy the more interesting the proverbial saying.

3.4 The delight in showing relationships between diverse entities is closely related to the phenomenon of allegory. The numerical saying in Prov 30:18-19 is followed directly by Prov 30:20:

"The way of an adulteress is this:
she eats, then she wipes her mouth
and says, 'I have done no harm.'"

The allegorical reference to "eating" might be taken as a mere euphemism. However, it also enhances the saying by suggesting an analogy between her attitudes to sex and to a casual meal. In so far as that analogy is surprising, it prompts reflection by the reader or hearer. Other allegories, where no euphemism is needed (e.g. the famous allegory of old age in Qoh 12), similarly prompt reflection by suggesting unusual analogies for the matter under discussion.

3.5 Von Rad has rightly observed that the veiled manner of allegorical speech "arouses reflection precisely through its veiled character" (von Rad: 44). This is also true of the numerical proverb, and even of the simple comparison of the fool to a dog returning to its own vomit. The force of the comparisons involved in any of these cases depends as much on its surprise quality as on the aptness of the comparison itself. In noting the similarity between numerical sayings, allegories, and riddles, von Rad further remarks that riddles are "playing at discovering the truth. One person hides or disguises the truth, the other brings it out of concealment into the light" (von Rad: 37). This remark may be misleading, if it is taken to suggest that "the truth" is definite, distinct, and univocal. In the example cited by von Rad: "What is heavier than lead? and what is its name except Fool?" (Sir 22:14), there is surely no suggestion that Fool is the only possible right answer. Similarly when the sage announces that three things are too wonderful for him and four he does not understand, we should not

conclude that these are the only things which evade his knowledge. While the numerical formula should not be read as an indefinite three or four, and the sage evidently has just four things in mind (Roth), the fact remains that the number is in no sense definitive. In short, any of the analogies in the proverbial sayings are arbitrary to a degree and could be replaced by others. Undoubtedly the sages believed that the analogies had a basis in "reality"—that the fool really was like a dog and so forth. However, this does not mean the analogies were fixed and univocal. Any two things could be validly compared by a sage of adequate wit and ingenuity.

3.6 The fact that surprising analogies and veiled speech are especially prominent and effective suggests that the "playing" at hiding and discovering truth may be more serious than von Rad realized. The Russian formalists emphasized *defamiliarization* as the essence of good literature (Schneidau: 267). The strange and surprising analogy provides a jolt which can shake off the "lethargy of custom" and permit a new perception and appreciation. The purpose of such surprises is not to suggest that the new analogy is definitive—that we should always think of a fool as a dog or that vultures, serpents, ships, and lovers really form a distinct class. Rather the goal is a "perceptual shift" which "involves not a replacing of one group of data with another, but rather a basic restructuring of the same material" (Clark: 100). The purpose is to defamiliarize our routine ways of looking at fools (or lovers) and enable us to see them anew in a fresh perspective. In this sense the surprising quality of the analogy is as important as the aptness of the comparison itself.

Schneidau celebrates such defamiliarization or alienation of meaning as a central aspect of biblical Yahwism. Crossan has stressed its role in the parables of Jesus (Crossan, 1976:40–51). Our consideration of the use of metaphor and analogy suggests that defamiliarization also plays a part in the proverbial sayings.

3.7 It is of course an irony of literature that the more popular and well-known a work becomes, the less it can hope to mediate a fresh perspective and the more commonplace its insights appear. Even the greatest poetry becomes banal if it is memorized and incessantly repeated. Proverbs are particularly vulnerable on this count since "the choice phrase, displaying that perfect aptness and originality of the good proverb, so lends itself to continuous repetition that it soon becomes trite" (Thompson: 14). Hence proverbs are often thought to represent a static, simplified view of reality as familiar and commonplace. However, triteness is not an intrinsic quality of proverbs but only a consequence of excessive repetition. As we have seen, proverbs frequently "defamiliarize" their insights by unusual analogies and veiled speech. Further,

the reliance on generalizations and analogies that are only partial gives proverbs an open-ended character and invites a critique of any attempt to use proverbial wisdom as an exhaustive or definitive formulation of reality.

4.0 The Limits of Wisdom

4.1 The limited and relative character of all human knowledge is in fact clearly acknowledged in the proverbs themselves. Von Rad, especially, has noted that mention of God frequently occurs in connection with human limitation. Prov 21:30–31 may serve as an example:

“There is no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel against Yahweh.
The horse is made ready for the day of battle
but the victory belongs to Yahweh.”

Or, in Prov 16:1:

“The plans of the mind belong to man,
but the answer of the tongue comes from Yahweh.”

(Compare also Prov 16:2,9; 19:14,21; 20:24). Von Rad rightly points out that these sayings do not “simply stand as exceptions on the perimeter” (99). They point to limits which can be encountered at any time in life and that are intrinsic to the human condition. The limitations are quite radical. The plans of the mind cannot guarantee the attainment of results, nor even an appropriate “answer of the tongue” which adequately expresses what is intended. No degree of mastery of the rules and maxims of wisdom can confer absolute certainty. Life retains a mysterious and incalculable element, and it is precisely in this incalculable area that Yahweh is encountered.

4.2 The sayings which give expression to the limitations of wisdom correspond to a surprising degree to the critique of wisdom in the OT prophets. If Jeremiah can insist that the wise man should not glory in his wisdom (Jer 9:23), the sages know that there is more hope for a fool than for one who thinks himself wise (Prov 26:12; compare 28:26; 3:7). If the god of the prophets “makes the wise men turn back and makes their knowledge foolish” (Isa 44:25), the sages also know that there is no wisdom or counsel against Yahweh (Prov 21:30). The emphasis on the unpredictability of Yahweh accords well with Schneidau’s understanding of the Yahwist vision, with which we began. Von Rad’s conclusion, that these “limit” proverbs “set the pupil in the midst of the constant oscillation between grasp of meaning and loss of meaning” (von Rad: 106), claims for proverbial wisdom a function strikingly similar to that claimed by Schneidau for prophetic Yahwism: to show “how precarious is our grasp of any meaning at all” (Schneidau: 255).

4.3 The limit proverbs we have cited all define humanity over against Yahweh. We might suspect, then, that the affinities between these sayings and prophetic Yahwism is a result of specific Yahwistic influence and does not arise from the intrinsic logic of proverbial wisdom. This viewpoint has been argued especially by Gese (45–50), who argues that the proverbs which refer to Yahweh are introduced by a redactor and depart radically from the closed chain of act and consequence which dominates Egyptian and older Israelite wisdom. Von Rad does not distinguish the “Yahweh” proverbs as a redactional stage but argues that they show that “the understanding of the world which these teachers had was . . . based quite specifically on faith in Yahweh the God of Israel” (104).

The suggestion that the acknowledgement of human limitation and divine unpredictability is due to the specific influence of Yahwism has been decisively refuted by H. D. Preuss. The same ideas occur frequently in Egyptian wisdom (Brunner; Preuss). Amen-em-opet 19:16 provides a typical example: “One thing are the words which men say, another is that which the god does” (Pritchard: 423; compare Prov 19:21; 16:9). A Babylonian proverb reflects that “The will of a god is difficult to find out” (Thompson: 121; Lambert: 266). More fundamentally, the same insight can be expressed in Egyptian, Babylonian and Israelite traditions in terms of human experience without reference to a god at all: “Man knows not what the morrow is like” (Amen-em-opet 19:13) or “Do not boast about the next day, for you do not know what a day may produce” (Prov 27:1) or “will the early corn thrive? How can we know? Will the late corn thrive? How can we know?” (Thompson: 121; Lambert: 250).

5.0 The Unpredictability of Experience

5.1 These sayings about the uncertainty of the future point to the real roots of the sages’ limitation. It is a commonplace that proverbs appeal to experience. They make no claim to supernatural revelation or to any other extrinsic source of authority. They may on occasion appeal to tradition (e.g. Job 8:8) but such a claim still rests on the experience of one’s predecessors. Hence we often find sayings presented as personal observations:

“I passed by the field of a lazy man
and by the vineyard of a man of little sense.
See weeds were growing up everywhere. . . ” (Prov 24:30–34)

“I was young and have grown old,
but I have never seen the righteous forsaken. . . ” (Ps 37:25; see further von Rad: 37)

Von Rad (38) may well be right that we have here a traditional stylistic form rather than biographical information, but the authority of the

sayings rests nonetheless on the appeal to experience. Inevitably, then, they can be disputed on the basis of a contradictory experience. So the rebellious Job stands as squarely in the wisdom tradition as his opponents when he challenges them to show him where he erred (6:24) and defends his own conviction that he is righteous despite his sufferings. While the sages attempt to find rules and orders for experience, any rule will admit of exceptions. We have seen already that proverbs stop short of claiming universal validity, and thereby differ from natural laws. However, the permanent possibility that an exception may be encountered limits seriously the validity of generalizations and requires a constant openness to new experience. The case of Job does not prove that sufferers are habitually righteous but it disrupts the general assumption that they must be sinful. Again, Qoh 9:13–16 does not suggest that wise men are always despised, but the sage claims to have found at least one case where wisdom did not prove better than strength. Again the human tendency to generalize is thwarted. We find a similar tendency in the parables of Jesus, which always speak of individual instances, and never of general rules. We are not asked to believe that no priest or levite would help a wounded man and that every Samaritan would. It is sufficient that one such case can be envisaged. Then we can no longer presume how either priests or Samaritans will perform. The occurrence of exceptional cases has the effect of defamiliarization, of breaking routine assumptions, and leads to the “perceptual shift” which enables us to grasp individual experiences afresh.

5.2 The permanent possibility of new, unpredicted experiences points to the fundamental historicity of human existence. By “historicity” here I mean the fact that we exist in time and that time is a process of change which cannot be frozen by generalizations. Since proverbs are not universally valid laws but admit of exceptions, their applicability depends on the identification of the right time. The realization that all rules and generalizations are relativized by time and that contradictory insights and values all have their time, is most forcefully expressed in the famous passage in Qoh 3:1–8 but is not a product of scepticism, since it is also central to the positive wisdom of Sirach that God “made the times and the feasts different” (33:8; see Crenshaw, 1975:53). The variability of the times and uncertainty of the future imposes an inescapable limit on any wisdom based on experience, irrespective of its contact with Yahwism.

5.3 In short, the orientation of proverbial wisdom to historical, time-bound experience has a similar effect to that claimed by Schneidau for the “historicizing style” of the narrative sections of the OT. Both the proverbial sayings and the “historical credos” were undoubtedly

designed to construct a positive view of reality, but each contained the seeds of a debunking tendency which repeatedly undermined or modified the generalizations of the tradition.

6.0 Common Creaturehood

6.1 One further aspect of proverbial wisdom which was conducive to a debunking tendency was the conviction of the basic equality of all human beings: "Rich and poor have this in common, Yahweh made them both" (Prov 22:2; compare 29:13). This sentiment, with an attendant concern for the poor, is commonplace throughout the Near Eastern wisdom literature (Fensham). The insight is closely related to the uncertainty of the future—wealth is fleeting and whoever relies on it is riding for a fall (Prov 11:28). Qoheleth perceived that wealth gives no protection against the passing years and that the value of wealth depends on the power to enjoy it (Qoh 6:1–3). The parable of the rich man who hoped for security in the barns he had built makes a similar point (Luke 12:16–20). Not only do rich and poor share a common creaturehood, but they also share a common fate in death. The effect of these observations is a radical relativizing of the value placed on social status. Creaturehood and mortality are the shaky foundations on which all human structures are built.

6.2 The relative character of social distinctions is a constant theme in the narrative and prophetic books of the OT. However stratified their society may have become, the Israelites were haunted by the reminder that they had been "slaves in the land of Egypt." This reminder was a vital component in the corrosive Yahwist vision which Schneidau identifies as latent in every Israelite attempt to build institutions and structures.

6.3 Although the sages define creaturehood over against Yahweh as creator, their sense of a common humanity cannot be claimed as a peculiar product of Yahwism. Victor Turner's studies of African tribal rituals have shown that a similar conviction, that a common human bond underlies social distinctions, can be found in situations remote from Yahwistic influence. It is significant that Turner discovers his fleeting glimpses of a common human bond in symbols and rituals of "anti-structure" which show the limits of the various structures in which society is organized (Turner: 272–299). Similarly, in the wisdom tradition the common creaturehood of humanity emerges most clearly from the consideration of the limitation and transience of all things human.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 Our discussion began with the apparent contrast between proverbial wisdom, which is oriented to asserting order and meaningfulness in experience, and the Yahwistic vision typified by prophecy and parables, which tends to question and undermine the established structures. We have argued that while proverbial wisdom is predominantly constructive and cannot be compared directly to either prophecy or parables, it is thoroughly comparable with the historical traditions which were basic to Yahwism. Both the historical credos and the maxims of wisdom could on occasion become rigid and dogmatic. Both however contained within themselves the seeds of a debunking tendency. In both cases these seeds can be found in a sense of the historical transience of human existence which exposes the limitations of all human knowledge.

7.2 The affinities between proverbial wisdom and the Yahwistic vision are potentially important for biblical theology. First, they show that the familiar dichotomy between wisdom and biblical history cannot be maintained. While the proverbs show no interest in the historical credos of Israel, their understanding of human existence is acutely conscious of the flux of time. Other scholars have, of course, argued for affinities between wisdom and the historical books (McKenzie; Clark; Hermisson, 1971). Usually, however, the argument has been framed in terms of influence of an alleged wisdom movement on the historical writers. Our argument here does not presume such influence but only shows that similar thought patterns were at work in both historical and sapiential traditions.

7.3 Second, and consequent to this, the Yahwist vision was not so sharply discontinuous with its neighbouring cultures as often alleged (Wright; Schneidau). A comparable view of historicity and its implications can be found in the proverbial wisdom which was the common heritage of the ancient Near East.

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IMPOSSIBLE QUESTIONS, SAYINGS, AND TASKS

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ABSTRACT

Like the related literary forms of riddle, numerical proverb, and question/answer dialogue, impossible questions appeal to generally accepted truth and evoke a sense of mystery. Although interrogative in form, impossible questions function as a strong statement and are particularly effective in didactic settings. Two noteworthy examples of such questions are those in Prov 6:27-28 ("Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk upon hot coals without scorching his feet?"). Their function here is to demonstrate the sheer stupidity of adulterous action. Impossible questions, sayings, and tasks heighten the sense of human frailty, inasmuch as they call attention to limits imposed upon intellectual and physical ventures. For example, "Go, weigh for me the weight of fire, or measure for me a measure of wind, or call back for me a day that is past" (2 Esdr 4:5) paves the way toward scepticism in ancient Israel.

Affinities between riddles, numerical proverbs, question and answer dialogue, and impossible questions extend beyond surface similarities to the essential characteristics of each genre. In every instance, argument proceeds from consensus, that which is universally recognized to be true. In addition, certain features of each genre isolate cause for amazement, evoking a sense of awe in the presence of mystery. While tracing the contours of these literary forms, one has the feeling of traveling the road to scepticism. The ancient Israelite sages who

ventured forth on this rugged terrain were few; few in number, too, have been contemporary interpreters who have studied the aforementioned genres (Wünsche; Müller; Perdue; Roth; Tur Sinai), with the exception of proverbs (above all: Thompson; McKane). Elsewhere I have attempted to understand the form and function of riddles (1978), as well as the question and answer dialogue (1979). The focus of this essay will therefore fall upon impossible questions, sayings, and tasks. But first I wish to say a few more words about the kinship between riddles, numerical proverbs, question and answer dialogue, and impossible questions.

The riddle which Samson proposed to the thirty Philistines who attended his wedding in Timnah signals the essential characteristics of that genre in ancient Israel.

From the *eater* food goes forth,
and from the *powerful one* sweetness proceeds. (Judg 14:14)

Once we penetrate beneath external trappings such as fondness for initial *mem* and succinct poetic form, we discover the essence of riddles: ciphers that function simultaneously as clue and snare. In this brief riddle four Hebrew words function on two fundamentally different levels, which I shall call appearance and essence. "Eater," "food," "powerful one," and "sweetness" represent equivocation on Samson's part. Each cipher points beyond itself to a deeper meaning, which worthy persons comprehend.

On the one hand, cipher language deceives the hearer, leading to false interpretation of the riddle. The transparent meaning of Samson's *hidah* moves on the level of appearance. From a groom (the eater, the powerful one) goes semen (food, sweetness). The story of Joseph's heroic resistance of Potiphar's wife leaves no doubt that such ciphers enriched Israel's vocabulary. Here the narrator emphasizes the only thing Potiphar denied Joseph—the food which he ate (Gen 39:6)—and has the handsome first example of sexual harassment of a worker explain that Potiphar's wife was that food denied him (39:9). Similarly, Prov 30:20 reads: "This is the *modus operandi* of an adulteress—she eats, wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done nothing amiss.'" From this imagery, it is a small journey to Sirich's brief maxim: "To a fornicator all bread tastes sweet" (23:17), or to Dame Folly's pungent invitation: "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant" (Prov 9:17) RSV. To recapitulate, Samson coined his riddle in such fashion as to ensnare the Philistines in an erotic net. Failing this, he offered a trap on another surface level. One can readily explain the riddle as vomit which soldiers at the wedding grudgingly gave up.

On a deeper level Samson's ciphers alluded to a lion and honey retrieved from its carcass. That is, they offered a decisive clue that

conceals truth at the same time that it divulges important information. Thus it follows that riddles depend upon language's ambiguity. Like myths, which endeavor to communicate heavenly reality in earthly language, riddles must be interpreted (Müller: 472–77). In yet another way riddles resemble myths: once ciphers become familiar language, they lose their depth dimension—the power to trap or to inform concerning ultimate mystery.

In one sense, as André Jolles (131–33) recognized, riddles constitute a test. Their twofold intention can best be compared to examinations within the court room and schools. In the former, an examiner, the prosecuting attorney, endeavors to discover what the examined already knows. In the class room, the examiner knows the answers and tries to identify others who have access to this information. Especially useful in dealing with demonic powers, cipher imagery also avoids straight talk in the erotic realm. On occasion, riddles dispense with language altogether, and symbolic behavior offers simultaneous clue or trap. Naturally, riddles belong to diverse settings: weddings, the royal court, entrance rituals, and schools.

Excitement of discovery accompanies the opening of a riddle. Mystery yields its closely guarded secret to a worthy seeker, who demonstrates ability to avoid traps in the quest for essence. Returning to Samson's riddle, we note that it captures an essential characteristic of the sexual experience: the groom feeds his bride. An ancient Sumerian sage put it this way: "Has she become pregnant without intercourse? Has she become fat without eating?" (Lambert: 247). One wonders whether the well-known Sumerian riddle of the school did not also function as *double entendre*: "One whose eyes are not open enters it, one whose eyes have been opened comes out from it." In any case, the sexual connotation of the imagery of entering and open eyes is indisputable.

In this instance, as in Samson's riddle, disclosed mystery threatens to become commonplace knowledge and forces alternative solutions to be thrust forward. Thus many riddles yield more than one depth meaning, increasing their power to mislead as well as their capacity to communicate. Those riddles for which no additional solutions presented themselves eventually lost their power to deceive. This is why, I think, so few genuine riddles occur in the Hebrew Scriptures: most of them disintegrated into harmless metaphors. The interpreter is thus faced with the task of reconstructing ancient riddles. A single example suffices. In my view, Qoheleth cites a riddle in his ironic comments about the supposed advantages of life over death: "A living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4). Both *dog* and *lion* are ciphers signifying members of the lowest and highest social strata respectively. Would not this riddle serve as defense of a widow's remarriage, this time to one who could hardly compare with her former husband? Who

knows what surprises await those who patiently search the Scriptures! For the moment, however, I wish to venture forth in still another direction—charting the affinities between riddles and related forms, especially numerical proverbs, question and answer dialogues, and impossible questions.

Proverbs encapsulate the universally true (Thompson: 23). Herein lies their secret sway over human minds: they compel assent at the deeper level of meaning. When numerical proverbs juxtapose several phenomena and introduce excitement of discovery, they penetrate to the level of intrinsic relationship. If ciphers appear, similarities with riddles mount, as Herder saw with exceptional clarity. For example, the comparison of an eagle, a serpent, a ship, and a man with a woman in Prov 30:18–19 employs the cipher “way” and suggests a harmonious universe behind such diverse activity that leaves no trace of its movement. Still, a decisive difference between this proverb and riddles stands out: it lacks an intention to deceive. Unless I am mistaken, all numerical proverbs in the Bible depart from riddles at precisely this point.

Question and answer dialogue, or contest literature, shares a common atmosphere with riddles—strife. In addition, the former uses deceptive understatement to overcome opposition. Nevertheless, such contests sacrifice excitement of discovery by giving the answer at the outset. The exquisite question and answer dialogue in 1 Esdr 3–4 reverses the procedure from what takes place in riddles. The answers (wine, king, women, and truth) provoke great expectations as king and nobles await explanations for these particular responses to the question: “what is strongest?” In this instance emphasis shifts to rhetoric, and entertainment seems to be the desired end (Goodman).

Impossible questions resemble riddles in their fascination for the inconceivable, which evokes disbelief. Confronted by both, the person addressed expresses surprise or astonishment. Riddles and impossible questions strain one’s credulity; they frequently give birth to scepticism. Who would ever think that food goes forth from the eater? Or that a wild ass’s colt would be born a man? (Job 11:12). When impossible questions use ciphers, affinities with riddles become impressive indeed. It follows that a closer examination of this genre in the Hebrew Scriptures is long overdue. Before attempting such, I wish to call attention to the moods characterizing the forms I have thus far discussed. In my judgment, riddles emphasize malice, numerical proverbs focus upon eros, question and answer dialogue captures humor, often grim, and impossible questions concentrate on wonder.

In form, if not in substance, the Philistines’ answer to Samson’s riddle resembles impossible questions: “What is sweeter than honey; what is stronger than a lion?” (Judg 14:18). One answer, of course, is love, under whose powerful wings Samson had come to rest. This juxtaposition of riddles and impossible questions (and tasks) occurs

also in Arabic legends which expound upon the story of Solomon and Sheba as recorded in the Targum to Esther. I shall mention two of these riddles and one impossible task. The latter asks what thirst-quenching water comes neither from heaven nor from earth. Solomon answers: "Nothing is easier: let a horse gallop and gather the sweat." The two riddles contain implicit questions. The first reads: "It doesn't fall from heaven or spring up from the earth; it runs sweet and bitter from a glass." The answer, of course, is tears, and the cipher "glass" refers to eyes. The other riddle asks about Jonah: "The dead lived, the grave moves, and the dead prays—what is that?" (Schechter). Here "grave" functions as a cipher, and the "dead" constitutes an existential paradox.

We shall begin an investigation of biblical impossible questions at Prov 6:27–28.

Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?
Or can one walk upon hot coals without scorching his feet?

Occurring within a larger didactic unit (6:20–35), these questions demand a negative answer and function as the equivalent of a strong statement: no one can carry live coals in his garments without setting them on fire, and nobody can walk on glowing coals without burning his feet. Alongside these impossible questions stands another query which requires a positive response: "Do we not despise a thief who steals to satisfy his hunger?" (30). Each type of question appeals to consensus; only one devoid of sense would dare dispute what everyone knows to be true.

The didactic unit consists of a brief familial instruction (20–23), to which has been joined a warning against the arch villain, the adulteress (24–35). The warning consists of an initial statement of the problem (24–26), an argument from consensus (27–28), specific application (29), supporting argument (30–31), and conclusion (32–35). The unit juxtaposes two kinds of fire burning within the human heart: parental teaching, which shines radiantly like a lamp, and consuming passion for another man's wife. A reference to discipline's guidance appropriately links the two fires, inasmuch as sages must practice self-mastery to kindle the one and to extinguish the other. Language of intimacy punctuates the discussion, thereby guarding against taking the threat posed by the adulteress lightly. So do euphemisms. The description of an adulterer as "one who goes into his neighbor's wife" and "one who touches her" suggests that "coals of fire" and "feet" carry an erotic undertone, just as "thief" and "hunger" point beyond a literal sense to theft of sexual favors. Perhaps, too, the allusion to bread as the bargain price a harlot offers as compared to an adulteress was chosen precisely because of its rich double meaning.

Perhaps this *penchant* for *double entendre* explains the strange use of *no'ep 'iššah* (32), surely a redundant phrase since everywhere else

no'ep alone suffices to connote an adulterous act. Inasmuch as a man cannot commit adultery with another man, the specification of woman here hardly seems necessary. Lacking the collective insights of interpreters, who seem not to have noticed the problem, I offer a tentative solution: the author added *'iššah* in his concluding observation because of its similarity with *'eš*, thus returning to the motif of fire that pervades the entire unit.

The artistry of this textual unit invites closer examination. Verses 20–23 constitute parental teaching, although the imagery is at home in legal and psalmic contexts as well.

My son, guard your father's directive
and do not let fall your mother's teaching.
Secure them upon your heart always,
tie them around your neck.
When you walk, she [Dame Wisdom] will lead you,
when you lie down, she will watch over you,
and upon your awaking, she will talk with you.
For the directive is a lamp, the teaching, a light,
reproof and correction, the way to life.

The familial setting for this sub-unit is virtually assured. Besides using *bēni* (my son), the author refers to father and mother as the sources of instruction. To be sure, reference to “my son” eventually functions as guild language to designate a student, but it does not seem to have that sense here. In fact, even the imagery accords well with a family setting: going about daily tasks, sleeping, rising.

The synonymous parallelism in verse 20 is strained by the peculiar juxtaposition of positive and negative verbs, as well as by the direct address which occurs only once. In truth, the parallelism takes place at the level of genus: parents, teaching. The father and mother are no more synonymous than are the specific gifts they hand on to their children: *mitzwah* (commandment, directive) and *torah* (teaching, instruction). The plural suffix in verse 21 distinguishes the paternal directive from the mother's teaching. The verbs emphasize the priceless quality of such parental legacy, which is to be treasured above all else. According to Prov 22:15, folly can be bound up in the heart of a lad, and chastisement can drive it out. In 6:21, the adverb *tamid* addresses the possibility that hearts may vacillate: the son must secure the teachings *always*.

The syntax of the three verbs in verse 22 is striking. The first two are infinitive constructs, while the third is a verb followed by the personal pronoun *hi'* (she). Presumably, the feminine subject of these verses is Dame Wisdom. The following verse alters the expected sequence noticeably: “for a lamp is the commandment, the teaching, a light.” The final colon returns to the original pattern of introducing the metaphor before referring to the actual object of concern: “the way of

life (is) correction (and) discipline.” The assonance in Hebrew (*torah/’ôr*), difficult in English translation, is reproduced in Latin (*lex/lux*).

The next sub-unit introduces a problem which will be addressed by the legacy bequeathed from parents to children. The initial statement of the danger facing the son occurs in verses 24–26.

To keep you from the evil wife,
 from the enticing speech of a foreign woman.
 Do not desire her beauty in your heart,
 nor be captured by her eyelids.
 For on account of a woman, a harlot, right to a loaf of bread,
 but a man’s wife hunts precious life.

Transition from the previous verses is achieved by means of the verb *šmr*, here used of preserving one from danger. Precisely how such teaching accomplishes this goal is not specified. Although the Septuagintal reading of *rea*ˆ (stranger) instead of *ra*ˆ (evil) necessitates no consonantal change, the Massoretic Text makes perfectly good sense. As in verse 20, an active verb gives way to a passive one in verse 25. Lustful stirrings within the heart make one susceptible to coquettish glances. With remarkable power the attractiveness of adultery is acknowledged, particularly in predominantly physical imagery (smooth tongue, lust in the heart, beauty, eyelids). A sharp contrast between an ordinary harlot and a married woman follows: whereas a harlot can be had for a piece of bread—a particularly apt price because of the erotic meaning of bread familiar to ancient sages—a man’s wife hunts for something far more expensive. In verse 26 the strange syntax provides a subtle hint of the rake’s singleminded race toward sensual gratification (Kidner: 74).

At this point two impossible questions appear (27–28) and make a cogent argument from universally acknowledged fact. No one carries live coals in his clothes with impunity, and nobody walks barefoot on red hot embers without burning his feet. Of course the fire recalls insatiable lust, and the euphemistic use of feet in many contexts suggests that the imagery could hardly be improved.

Verse 29 applies the impossible questions to the danger under discussion.

So is anyone who goes into his neighbor’s wife;
 none who touches her will escape punishment.

Wildeboer (21) has perceived the original sense of the verb in the first half of this verse: it referred to a man’s entering the part of a tent where women plied their trade. Restraint characterizes this unit from first to last, despite the volatile subject. Euphemisms literally impregnate the vocabulary of this entire text.

Apparently, the author felt the need to buttress his argument in every way possible. Accordingly, a supporting observation underlines the cost of philandering (30–31).

Do we not despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his appetite when hungry?
Caught, he will pay sevenfold;
yea, he will forfeit the entirety of his household goods.

The Massoretic Text does not have the interrogative *h*, although some ancient manuscripts do. Perhaps the *h* was lost because of the preceding *bah* (Frankenberg: 49). Otherwise, the verse seems to condone theft under certain circumstances, an altogether unlikely view, in my judgment. In any case, the referent seems to shift in verse 31, where the unfortunate person must be the adulterer, for we have already been informed that the starving thief lacks anything with which to pay.

The conclusion (32–35) focuses upon the severe penalty for invading the privacy of marriage.

The adulterer lacks sense,
whoever does it injures himself.
A beating and disgrace he will discover,
and (the husband's) anger will not be dispelled.
For a man's fury is jealous;
he will not display mercy on the day of reckoning.
He will accept no compensation,
nor will he be moved even if you increase the pay-off.

Just as the thief lacked food, the adulterer was devoid of sense. No stronger word could be spoken within a sapiential setting. Qoheleth proceeds to articulate what this text implies. "The *fool* lacks sense" (10:3). In short, the adulterer is a fool.

We note the self-interest underlying this refutation of adultery. Such behavior is not dismissed because it offends divine laws, or even because it violates the sanctity of another individual or family. Joseph may have spurned forbidden pleasure for theological reasons, particularly when accompanied by anthropological-social ones. But this author goes one step further and appeals to self-interest. Under guise of love, another man's wife stalks life itself; touch her, and pay dearly. In Job 31:9–10 and Ahikar 2:6 still another reason is given for avoiding such contact: your own wife will have to surrender to the same ignominy.

Before taking leave of this remarkable didactic unit within which two impossible questions are embedded, I wish to call attention to a brief passage in "The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant." Here we find three impossible questions, their practical application, and argument that a thief who is starving can be excused for his action. The impossible questions concern impartial justice: "Does the hand-scales err? Does the stand-balance incline to the side? Is even Thoth indulgent? Then thou

(also) mayest work mischief. When thou makest thyself the second [footnote: in the sense of 'companion'] of these three, then thou (also) mayest be indulgent" (Pritchard: 409).

Like the eloquent peasant, Bildad found it impossible to imagine that God could pervert justice. In support of his defense of Shaddai, Job's friend quoted an impossible question that may come from Egyptian wisdom. In any case, the words for papyrus and rushes apparently derive from Egyptian (Tur-Sinai: 149; Pope: 66; Fohrer: 184).

Can papyrus grow without marsh?

Rushes flourish without water? Job 8:11 (AB)

Just as lack of moisture destroys plants which thrive in a watery medium, so absence of virtue leads to an early death. Bildad's certainty in this matter prompts extreme cruelty—the assertion that Job's children had earned their punishment. Conceding that all knowledge is partial, Bildad urged Job to profit from accumulated tradition. The impossible question constitutes such capsular knowledge which was transmitted from one generation to another.

Although tempted to label Bildad's initial question, "Does God pervert justice? Does Shaddai distort the right?" an impossible question comparable to that about Thoth, and consequently to view it as an assertion, the refutation of the charge that God rejects the upright (8:20) makes this identification improbable. Obviously, Bildad's remarks about divine justice are subject to challenge. In short, consensus is lacking on this issue, even if present with regard to the question about papyrus and rushes used in its support.

The structure of Job 8 is terribly elusive, but does not seem to support the interpretation of 8:13 ("Such is the fate of all who forget God; the hope of the impious will perish") as a summary appraisal form (Childs: 133). In my view the entire speech is a tightly woven unit. The introduction alludes to false speech (8:2), offers a theological motto (8:3), and draws a natural conclusion therefrom (8:4). The main body of the speech urges continued loyalty and attempts to demonstrate the truth of the theological affirmation couched in question form. To do so, it distinguishes between external appearance and reality: apparent prosperity will vanish in a moment (8:5–19). The conclusion reaffirms the theological motto (8:20), and acknowledges reversal of the false speech (8:21) and victims of divine punishment (8:22). Because God does not pervert justice, laughter will replace Job's idle banter and his enemies, not his children, will perish.

Still other impossible questions occur in connection with weighing in balances (Job 6:5–6; cf. 6:2).

Does the ass bray over his grass?
 The bull bellow over his fodder?
 Can flat food be eaten unsalted?
 Is there flavor in slimy cream cheese? (AB)

Whereas the previously discussed impossible questions were integral to their contexts, these hardly advance the argument. Presumably, Job justifies his complaints in terms of an absence of a functioning reward system.

The student of Amos will recognize affinities with that prophet's argument from consensus.

Do horses run upon rocks?
 Does one plow the sea with oxen? (6:12) RSV

An important difference occurs both here and in Jeremiah,

Can a maiden forget her ornaments,
 Or a bride her attire? (2:32) RSV

In each instance the impossible has occurred: the people have turned justice into poison, and those who have pledged their loyalty to the Lord have forgotten him "days without number." The other example in Amos (3:3-8) also departs from the customary form of the impossible question. Here, ordinary actions exercise such power over humans that they cannot resist certain consequences. When lions roar, or battle trumpets sound, it is impossible to vanquish fear. How different these cause and effect questions are from the true impossible question in Jeremiah:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? (13:23) RSV

If such transformation were possible, which it isn't, Jeremiah contended, then Judah, accustomed to doing evil, could also do good.

In Sirach the impossible question resembles the numerical proverb.

The sand of the sea, the drop of rain
 and the days of eternity—who can count them?
 The height of heaven, the breadth of the earth,
 the abyss, and wisdom—who can search them out? (1:2-3) RSV

Here two questions apply to seven items, and come after them. One could easily rephrase the passage as follows: three things cannot be counted, yea, four cannot be found out. Regardless of the form, this text brings us remarkably close to impossible tasks, which folklorists link with impossible questions.

Go, weigh for me the weight of fire,
 or measure for me a measure of wind,
 or call back for me the day that is past. (2 Esdr 4:5) RSV

The angel thus poses no small tasks for Ezra, who had complained of inability to believe in divine justice. Recognizing the impossibility of accomplishing any of these assignments, Ezra objects that none born of woman could achieve such things. Undaunted, the angel reverts to impossible questions:

How many dwellings are in the heart of the sea,
or how many streams are at the source of the deep,
or which are the exits of hell,
or which are the entrances of paradise? (4:7) RSV

In defense, the angel chides Ezra with stark reality—he had earlier asked about things through which Ezra had passed and without which he could not exist (fire, wind, time). The angel's final display of impossible tasks returns to the realm of ordinary experience:

Count up for me those who have not yet come,
and gather for me the scattered raindrops,
and make the withered flowers bloom again for me;
open for me the closed chambers,
and bring forth for me the winds shut up in them,
or show me the picture of a voice. . . . (5:36–37) RSV

These impossible questions and tasks within 2 Esdras stand at the apex of an intellectual movement—the birth of scepticism. Numerous passages in Job, Proverbs, and Qoheleth reveal the agony of this birth.

Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind in his fists?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is his son's name:
Surely you know! (Prov 30:4) RSV

This text constitutes a dialogue between a sceptic and a believer; for that reason, it is difficult to determine whether these questions express a faith affirmation or utter scepticism couched in irony.

Regardless of our resolution of this difficult problem we must admit that impossible questions fanned the flames of pessimism and heightened the theodicy question for ancient Israelites accustomed to solving most questions. Certainly, Job 28:12 (“But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?”) was not so easily resolved as the equation of wisdom and fear of the Lord in 28:28 implies. The divine questions addressed to Job from the whirlwind only intensified the feeling of impotency that Agur and others like him confessed to constitute a living nightmare.

We are not surprised, therefore, when Qoheleth expresses himself in a similar manner.

Consider the work of God;
 who can make straight what he has made crooked? (7:13)
 That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep,
 who can find it out? (7:24) RSV

We are thus reminded of a passage in "A Pessimistic Dialogue between Master and Servant" (Pritchard: 438):

Who is tall enough to ascend to heaven?
 Who is broad enough to embrace the earth?

We may also compare an Akkadian proverb (Pritchard: 425):

Will ripe grain grow?
 How do we know?
 Will dried grain grow?
 How do we know?

The author of Deut 30:11-14 sought to counteract the force of such scepticism in Israel at an earlier date.

For this commandment . . . is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. RSV

At times we cannot tell whether we are dealing with an impossible question or saying. For example, Job 11:12 may actually be a question: "Can a stupid man get understanding, or can a wild ass's colt be born a man?" On the other hand, it may be a saying similar to Ovid's, "Then will the stag fly!" Actually, we can cite impossible sayings from a Semitic source. In Ahikar, we find the following comment (Charles: 2.737,739):

My son, if the waters should stand up without earth,
 and the sparrow fly without wings,
 and the raven become white as snow,
 and the bitter become sweet as honey,
 then may the fool become wise. (Syr A 2:62)

The Armenian version differs somewhat:

Son, if the rivers pause in their courses,
 or the sun in its career,
 or if the gall become sweet as honey,
 or the raven turn white as the dove,
 even so will the senseless man abandon his want of sense
 and the fool become sensible. (2:83)

In Ahikar we find impossible tasks as well: Building a castle between earth and heaven, making cables from the sand of the river, sewing up

a broken millstone. But in these instances Ahikar's ingenuity succeeds in satisfying the person who commissioned the tasks, even if by clever ploys (Charles 2.762-766).

In these examples the impossible sayings occur within a narrative setting (cf. Qoh 1:15). In short, questions have given way to statement or observation that calls attention to the impossible character of certain things. So far we have not mentioned a related form, the paradoxical proverb that Bend Alster has discovered in Sumerian literature (207-8). We list a few examples.

Do not heap up a mountain in the mountains.

Do not cut off the neck of that which has had its neck cut off.

From 3600 oxen there is no dung.

The dog has climbed up on the roof.

A scribe without a hand, a singer without a throat.

Make the distant side the nearer side.

But here we move into the broader area of paradox, where juxtaposition of incompatible words, like "exalted fool" or "dying, we live" occurs, an expression that also appears in "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-Hotep" as "dying while alive every day" (Pritchard: 414). Discussion of the existential paradox takes us beyond the topic announced for this essay.

Before closing, however, I wish to make one observation about the mood characterizing these examples of the impossible question. I have suggested that "wonder" best describes the feeling evoked by this literary form. Now this concentrated focus upon the impossible task early produced a reaction that struck at the very heart of wisdom. Sceptics seized this literary form to attack the possibility of knowing anything significant (Qoh 3:11), and others used the impossible question to squelch open dissent. In the end, emphasis upon God's superior knowledge brought scant comfort to sensitive persons caught up in the paradox of divine grace and wrath. The authors of Deut 30:11-14 and 2 Esdras stand so far apart that none can bring them together. Between wonder as worship and wonder as human incapacity, a deep abyss stretches. "Who can make the distant side near?" This bringing together of two separate realms, essence and appearance, was the distinctive role of riddles. I find it difficult to stifle the suspicion that in doing so, riddles gave birth to an unwanted child—scepticism. During the pangs of childbirth, impossible questions performed midwife service.

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0. Introduction

To the ethical by way of the esthetic,
as Juan de Mareina said. . . . (Machado: 16)

One common assumption about biblical proverbs, especially those in the book of Proverbs, is that they are dry, stale, and hackneyed. Many readers have certainly had an initial experience of Proverbs as a rather boring collection of sayings. The translations tend to concentrate on rendering the *content* of the proverbs, and the commentaries deal more with *concepts* and philological information than with their aesthetic dimension.

The fault lies with all of us—teachers, scholars, translators—who have nourished such judgments with poor translations, literary insensitivity, and stereotyped assumptions that are read into the proverbs. The energizing perspective of this essay is that the proverbs will disclose their riches and stir our imagination when they are read with an informed, sympathetic sensitivity; they are trite and stereotypical only when read tritely and stereotypically.

“Stirring our imagination” would not matter, of course, *if we knew for sure* what the proverbs meant. We are now in a situation in which such certainty of meaning is problematic. Traditional forms of criticism stemming from historiography seem to worry the text as though there is some definite content there to find. I believe that the content is there to find only through the *form*, and that one must attend carefully to this form in a new era for Biblical studies when a shift is occurring from historical to literary criticism (see Miles; Robertson: ch. 1). I agree with Miles that literature can never be an effective substitute for religion; it can however, be a *way in* to religion. Thus, “to the extent that a fierce and compelling religion is *in* the Bible and not alone in those institutions which assign the Bible a religious meaning, to that extent an aesthetic reappropriation of biblical sensibilities will be a religious experience” (Miles: 6).

In the hope that a new aesthetic appreciation of Biblical proverbs will contribute to religion and theology by way of literature, I present the following study as a set of reflections on the various facets of the formal dimension of the proverbs:

- (1) Their character as a variety of aphoristic speech.
- (2) Their formal construction, which comprises juxtaposition of images (2.1), patterning of sounds (2.2), and literary expansions (2.3).
- (3) The use of a semiotic model to clarify the source of ambiguity in proverbs as metaphorical speech.

The basic thesis of the article is thus that there are fine artistic forms and methods in the sentence literature of the book of Proverbs. The implication of the thesis is that, if these artistic forms and methods

are recognized, a renewed literary and perhaps religious appreciation of proverbs may be possible.

Most of the translations of proverbs will be offered in two modes: "literal" and "poetic." The literal translation is an attempt to give the reader a sense of the brevity and syntax of the original Hebrew and to show how much is "filled out" in most translations. The poetic translation, though perhaps wanting in true poesy, seeks to give the reader some sense of the poetic form, tone, and play of images in the original.

1. Aphoristic Speech and the Character of Biblical Proverbs

[The aphorism] wants to be heard and enjoyed *en passant*, it seeks to flash into conversation and disappear before it stands in the center of attention. . . . It doesn't allow itself to be taken alive. And dead it is no longer the same as it was in its liveliness. (Asemissen: 176)

The immediate problem is to name the subject. This is not easy. The word we commonly use is "proverb." As a noun denoting the short forms in the biblical book and in various biblical passages, it is supported by long usage in the Western languages. The Hebrew word is *māšāl*, which has been translated in various contexts as proverb, parable, allegory, riddle, taunt-song, etc. The core idea of *māšāl* may be that of "likeness" and "comparison." McKane argues for "model" (22-33), which is often fitting. However, "model" requires the basic ideas of comparison and likeness, and it would be off the mark to understand certain instances of *māšāl* as model. Do singers sing models? (Num 21:27). Is one nation ridiculed by another as a model? (Deut 28:37). Is an enigmatic song a model? (Ps 49:5). One strains to catch a likeness, a hidden comparison therein—but it is not a model. Insofar as consideration of the etymology or root idea of *māšāl* is pertinent to its meaning and function in specific instances, I would see it as likeness/comparison.

The history of short forms of speech in Western cultures does not disclose compelling reasons to prefer one term over another (Schalk: 75-89). Proverb, aphorism, sentence, gnome, maxim, *pensée*: all have their attractions and connotations. Perhaps the most appealing word is aphorism. From the Greek *aphorismos*, its root idea of delimiting (Latin *definitio*) experience through language would place our reflection and study on a broad base. Yet the base is too broad: the word lacks specificity and has been used in numerous ways (Asemissen: 160).

In this essay the noun employed most often will be "proverb." It is part of our religious and literary heritage, and, as applied to biblical short forms, it signifies sayings that are usually viewed as the articulation of experience accepted by people generally (Grenzmann: 195), both

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during and since the biblical period. There is no other word that obviously commends itself. However, since aphorism has had a long literary usage and bears an etymology that interests me, I shall frequently employ the adjective "aphoristic," as in "aphoristic speech." The use of adjectives derived from aphorism helps to counteract some of the stereotypes imposed on the Hebrew *māšāl*.

1.1 Biblical proverbs can be expected to exhibit many of the features of aphoristic speech as noted by modern literary historians and critics. A first characteristic is that aphoristic speech is assertive, apparently self-explanatory; it says something as though it is *a priori*, though it is not (Asemissen: 163; Grenzmann: "It does not develop, it asserts." — 196). An example is the dictum of Heidegger (21):

Nie ist das Gesprochene und in keiner Sprache das Gesagte.

Whatever the form of speaking, the spoken is never what is said.

1.2 A second characteristic is that of insight, insight as process. The aphoristic saying is a delimitation that invites its hearer to move beyond limits, to go beyond fixed boundaries. It starts a journey of thought. As Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach says (cited in Grenzmann: 197):

Ein Gedanke kann nicht erwachen, ohne andere zu wecken.

One thought cannot awake without waking others.

There is a sense in which the aphoristic thought "arrives" or occurs to the subject as though at the end of a journey, yet it starts another series of reflections. This is articulated by Heidegger (11):

Wir kommen nie zu Gedanken. Sie kommen zu uns.

We never come to thoughts. They come to us.

1.3 A third feature is paradox. Reversing expectations, provoking surprise, exaggeration: these are manifestations of the very *raison d'être* of aphoristic speech. Why? As Grenzmann indicates, aphoristic thinking and speech is engendered by *revaluation* (*Umwertung*); it both feeds upon and encourages a different way of looking at things (Grenzmann: 194). Such revaluation was Pascal's project as he sought to understand his religious experience *vis-à-vis* the life of a scientist:

Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.

The heart has reasons reason has not heard.

1.4 A fourth feature is brevity and conciseness. This may vary somewhat, but it doubtless bestows on aphoristic speech much of its force and appeal. There is, on the one hand, a great deal of tension in the saying that is just at the point of being unleashed. On the other hand, there is a certain sharpness which comes with brevity and

conciseness and which enables the speaker and hearer to “cut through” some tangles of experience. The importance of brevity and conciseness is indicated by the terms employed in the various languages: *aphorismos*, *definitio*, *Sentenz*, *pensée*, etc. The point is a maximum of meaning in a minimum of words. Hippocrates sets a good example: *vita brevis—ars longa*. How ironically interesting to be told by the briefest of art forms that art is long (enduring? immortal?) and life is brief!

1.5 A fifth feature of aphoristic speech is the attempt to bring sound and sense as closely together as possible. Certain ideas, images, situations and persons are shown to belong together or to be antithetical by the combination of sound, image, and referent. Pascal’s famous line, quoted previously, tells the hearer effectively that “COeuR” and “CONnaîtRe” are inseparable, whereas “la raison ne connaît point.” The “heart hears.” Von Ebner-Eschenbach says two things with her onomatopoeia in the aphorism cited: (a) The denoted, viz., a thought not only “awakes” but “wakes up” other thoughts. (b) The connoted, viz., thinking and waking go together.

1.6 All of the features—assertiveness, insight as process, paradox, brevity, play on word and sound—have two more basic characteristics in common. One pertains to the subject who speaks or composes, the other to the formal structure of aphoristic speech. Aphoristic speech stems from the dynamic of a searching subject. Grenzmann calls this “being full of subjective energy” (195). Aphoristic speech forms and expresses the desire to be original, to set aside certain limits and prejudices, to prepare the way for spontaneous recognitions. The situation of the aphorist, claims Grenzmann, is usually that of intellectually uncertain times (207). Of course, the topic here is biblical proverbs, so we must ask whether these features of aphoristic speech are applicable to biblical proverbs. My response is that the various facets of the presentation in parts 2 and 3 of this paper point to the conclusion that most of the sentence and expanded sentence forms in Proverbs 10–31 were highly original and experientially oriented. Such matters must be judged from case to case, but I disagree with McKane’s sweeping contention that the sentence literature of the book of Proverbs “is devoid of the imaginative constituents of the popular proverb” (32).

1.7 Basic to the structure of aphoristic speech is comparison, whether overt or concealed. This basic structure is a factor in all gnomic utterances. The structure of comparison sometimes suggests itself in the *tertium comparationis*, which exemplifies the riddle that is often lurking in aphoristic speech. For example: “The kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field” (Matt 13:44). What do the kingdom of God and treasure have in common? That they are hidden? So it seems. That

they are precious? Yes again, but here one touches upon the hidden comparison: they are valuable to the extent that they are valued above all things by a *valuer*. The *tertium* is the valuer, the investor. The second part of the saying is thus an interpretive expansion that spells out the *tertium comparationis* as understood by the speaker or Evangelist: "The man who found it buried it again; and for sheer joy went and sold everything he had and bought that field." This interpretive expansion changes the saying from a *māšāl* which is a simile into a *māšāl* which is the basic plot of a story.

1.8 If proverbs may be viewed as instances of aphoristic speech, how is "aphorism" related to "proverb"? It would appear that if the aphorism or gnomic utterance is hallowed by long usage, certain of its features are accentuated and the character of the short form is changed. "Subjective energy" may become the force of tradition, especially if the short form is put to didactic use in a traditional society. Paradoxes can lose their surprise and become non-paradoxical, especially if a tradition transmits a "right" interpretation of the paradox. The qualities of assertiveness and insight can come to be understood or felt as that which is given "in the beginning." Proverbs usually have the air of the archaic; they may originate in sayings that are deliberately archaizing (Greimas: 311, 313). One can imagine, for example, the aphoristic appeal of a saying like this:

Hope drawn out drains the heart,
but a desire fulfilled is paradise. (Prov 13:12; see §2.10)

But within the literature of the Bible as canon, and thus drawn into the network of the Israelite story of origins, the form becomes a brief communication of the mythical (this would be the ironic point of the quotation of that first line in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*). Its authority is that of a reality placed outside of time. Greimas (313) has said that, "The archaic character of proverbs constitutes, therefore, a *placement outside of time* of their meanings. This is a method comparable to the 'once upon a time' of the fairy tales and legends that is intended to situate the truths revealed by the narrative in the time of 'the gods and heroes.'"

This archaic character of the proverb is thus no more and no less positive than that of myth and fairy tale. The question is whether the aphoristic quality of the proverb can be appreciated anew.

2. The Construction of Biblical Proverbs

2.1 Juxtaposition of Images

2.10 Artistic method and understanding of existence can be distinguished; they cannot be separated. In working with the short

“sentence” proverbs, translating them, attempting to render them as I find them in the Hebrew text, I have begun to understand something of the strategy of juxtaposition. Its basic form is simple: whether it is a matter of synonyms or antithetical parallelism, two sentences are juxtaposed. These sentences contain words and images which play off against each other. They do not “define” each other, but they suggest a web of meanings.

Furthermore, within each sentence there is a juxtaposition of images which are projected stroboscopically: they are seen quickly side by side, then they are shut off. For example:

<i>bāz-lērē' ēhû</i>	<i>ḥāsar-lēb</i>
<i>wě' iṣṣ tēbûnôt</i>	<i>yaḥārīṣ (11:12)</i>
despiser of his neighbor and man of discernings	lacking of mind keeps still
Who reviles another lacks sense, but who understands keeps silent.	
<i>hōlēk rākīl</i>	<i>mēgallēh-ssōd</i>
<i>wēneēmān-rūaḥ</i>	<i>mēkassēh dābār (11:13)</i>
goer as gossip and faithful of spirit	revealer of counsel concealer of word
The gadding gossip gives away confidence, but the faithful confidant keeps counsel.	
<i>yōdē' a ṣaddīq</i>	<i>nēpēš bēhēmtō</i>
<i>wēraḥāmē rēšā' im</i>	<i>akzāri (12:10)</i>
knower is the righteous and compassion of wicked	of life of his beast cruel
The good person perceives his beast's fatigue, but the bad man's mercies are mean.	
<i>tōḥēlēt mēmūššākā</i>	<i>maḥālā-lēb</i>
<i>wēēṣ ḥayyīm</i>	<i>ta' āwā bā' ā (13:12)</i>
hope drawn out and tree of life	sickens mind desire come
Hope drawn out drains the heart, but a desire fulfilled is paradise.	
<i>pōrē' a mūsār</i>	<i>mō' ēs napsō</i>
<i>wēšōmē' a tōkaḥat</i>	<i>qōnēh llēb (15:32)</i>
rejecter of discipline and hearer of reproof	despiser of his soul acquirer of mind
Who rejects discipline despises his life, but who accepts criticism acquires a mind.	
<i>kēbōd 'ēlōhīm</i>	<i>hastēr dābār</i>
<i>ūkbōd mēlākīm</i>	<i>ḥāqōr dābār (25:2)</i>
glory of God glory of kings	to conceal word to search word
Godly glory conceals meaning; kingly glory unseals meaning.	
<i>šāmaim lārūm</i>	<i>wā' arēṣ lā' omēq</i>

<i>wělēb mēlākîm</i>	<i>'ên ḥēqēr (25:3)</i>
heaven for height	and earth for depth
and mind of kings	no searching
As the sky is high and the earth is deep,	
so the mind of kings is sought in vain.	

2.11 These aphoristic assertions are made as though something is evident, but it is not. “A priori sentences say something obvious in the broadest sense. . . . Aphorisms say something not obvious. But they say it in such a way that it seemingly goes without saying” (Asemissen: 163).

It seems obvious that a hope that is prolonged without actualization is depressing, i.e., it makes the heart/mind (*leb*) sick. But is it obvious? Doesn't hope keep one going? Is not the anticipation of fulfillment a support of the *leb* that is more significant than any realization?

2.12 The connection of the juxtaposed sentences is by means of the simple *waw*, “and,” the basic conjunction in Hebrew. We supply the “but” for English minds in cases of antithetical parallelism. There are proverbs, of course, which have no conjunction of the sentences. For example:

<i>něžēm zāhāb</i>	<i>bě'āp ḥāzîr</i>
<i>'iššāh yāpā</i>	<i>wēsārat tā'am (11:22)</i>
gold ring	in nose of wild pig
pretty woman	and lacking taste
A pig with a pearl necklace is like	
a woman pretty but reckless.	

The character of conjunctions and their omission is important in understanding aesthetic form and strategy in biblical proverbs. Comprehending this importance is not only a matter of translating but of becoming aware of what the translator supplies with respect to words and suppositions. A statement by Friedrich Hauck in the *Theological Dictionary of the NT* (Friedrich-Bromilly: 5.748) is indicative of the problem: “Formally many of [the proverbs] use the comparative ‘as’ (25:11–13; 26:18f.; 27:15). In others a ‘but’ is used, esp. 10:3–14:23.” The “but” is always the *waw*. And two of the cited instances of the comparative “as” have no comparative particle at all in the Hebrew text (25:11, 12).

2.13 In many of the examples we encounter play: word play, image play. This playful element is an important feature of wisdom reflection and expression. Images rebound off each other. We find that the discerning person is basically different from one who reviles his neighbor, though we are not told that they are categorical opposites. We hear

that one who lacks “mind” or “sense” (*lēb*) is not like one who keeps still. In an instance of synonymous parallelism we observe that *nēpēš* (soul, life, appetite, etc.) is in the semantic range of *lēb*, mind, yet the two are not synonymous. (The beast, too, has a *nēpēš*.) A “tree of life” has something to do with being wise and is a metaphor of “desire (*ta’āwāh*) fulfilled.” The latter is probably a learned allusion to the story wherein the fruit of the tree was for Eve “a desire (*ta’āwāh*) to the eyes” (Gen 3:6). And this is another facet of play: clever allusions. We really do not know how many allusions there may be to images and stories both extant and extinct.

In allowing oneself to enter into this kind of “proverb-play,” one can begin to feel as though a discovery is being made. As Asemissen says concerning the aphorism: “It mediates insight as process, but it does not allow itself to call attention to this” (163).

2.14 There are occasionally sayings that are enigmatic in their compactness. A whole mythology may be compressed within 25:2–3. One senses that if one were to “crack these nuts” it would be like splitting an atom. An entire world ready to explode from a proverb.

2.15 Position and opposition of images result in frequent paradox of thought (cf. Grenzmann: 194; Asemissen: 165–66). At the conceptual level certain assertions appear to be contradictions; in fact, they are unexpected (paradoxical). Does one who “spares the rod” love his child? Or does the “disciplinarian” hate his child? “No,” one might say, “not necessarily.” Someone else may say “probably not” or even “of course not.” The qualifications are possible when the insight is expressed as a question, or in any fashion which allows for discussion. In aphoristic form, however, the insight takes on the style of a paradox which commands assent:

<i>hōsēk šibṭō</i>	<i>sônē’ bēnō</i>
<i>wē’ōhābō šihārō</i>	<i>mūsār (13:24)</i>
sparer of rod	hater of his son
and who loves him	applies to him discipline
Save your strap and spoil your son;	
if you love him let him learn discipline.	

2.16 Not infrequently there is humor, especially of the ironic sort. The “mercy” of the wicked is “mean!” And:

ṭāman ‘āṣēl yādō baṣṣallāḥat
gam-’ēl-pîhû lô’ yēšibēnnâ (19:24)
 the sluggard hides his hand in the dish
 even to his mouth he returns it not
 The lazy one leaves his hand in the dish,
 he won’t even lift it to his mouth!

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 r & - & -nd \\
 A & & B \\
 & \times & \\
 t & - & -r \\
 B' & & A'
 \end{array}$$

Augmentation involves expansion by stretching sounds or placing them further apart. Diminution involves bringing the sounds closer together than they were.

Augmentation:

She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.

Here *sl-* and *sl-* (sleep and slid) are made into a longer note (soul).

Diminution:

But silently, by slow degrees.

Here the time between *s* and *l* is collapsed in "slow."

Before giving examples of these patterns in biblical proverbs, I think it important to point out that the principles involved are basically aesthetic. Ideas are not lacking in the sentences to be considered, but they are incorporated into the context of spoken and heard language. The order of pleasing sounds is more important than analytic thought. Thought, in turn, is given power by being profoundly rooted in concrete and vivid expressions of language. For aphoristic speech is an expression of the human capacity to correlate sounds and perceptions and it evokes this capacity. This is why it is able to "generalize concretely," to be extremely concrete or very general, sometimes simultaneously (see Neumann: 6ff.).

It is a simple matter to find the repetition of sounds in cognate variations. For instance:

<i>'ōgēr baqqayış</i>	<i>bēn maškîl</i>
<i>nirdām baqqāşîr</i>	<i>bēn mēbîs</i> (10:5)
gatherer in summer	son who proves prudent
sleeper in harvest	son who shames
A sensible son makes hay while the sun shines;	
a shameful son sleeps in the hay through harvest.	

There is an alliterative play on *qayış* and *qāşîr*, and a repetition of palatal sounds in the first sentence: *g*, *q*, *k*. Also noteworthy is the frequency of the labial *b*.

Another interesting example is 15:23.

<i>símhâ lâ'îş bēma'āneh-pîw</i>	
<i>wēdābār bēittô mah-ţôb</i>	
joy to one	in response of his mouth
and word in its season	how good

A person gets pleasure from an apt reply,
and how salutary is a word in season!

This proverb is punctuated by nicely spaced labials: *b*, *p* in the first sentence, *b*, *b*, *b* in the second. One could add an *m* in both lines if the Hebrew *mem* be counted as a labial sound (but see Blau: 4–5).

Acrostic patterns are fairly frequent. A simple example is the antithetical pair in 11:12: *ḥsr/ ḥrš* (lacking/to keep still). Acrostic plays on *kēsîl*, “fool,” occur often. “In the ears of the senseless (*kēsîl*) do not speak, for he will refuse the sense (*s’ēkēl*) of your words” (23:9). In the same proverb there is an acrostic combination contained in *bē’oznê* (“in ears of”) and *yābûz* (“he will refuse”).

A pattern of alliteration, though not a full acrostic, is to be observed in 26:11: *kēlēb* (dog)/*kēsîl*. In the same vein, with palatal sounds, is 27:14:

<i>bēqôl</i>	<i>gādôl</i>	(“with loud voice”)
	<i>qēlālâh</i>	(“curse”)

He who “blesses” his neighbor early in the morning brings a curse on himself! “Loud voice” and “curse” are thus associated by means of assonance and alliteration.

Chiasmus is not rare. To dip into Qohelet, the popular saying in Qoh 7:1a provides a good instance:

<i>ṭôb sēm miššēmēn ṭôb</i>
A B C B' A'
better a name than fine ointment

Prefer fame to fine perfume.

Its literary continuation (7:1b) is nicely arranged:

<i>wēyôm hammāwēt miyyôm hīwwālēdô</i>
A B B A B B A A
and the day of death than the day of one’s birth

And the day of death to the day of delivery.

A nice chiasmus of initial sounds occurs in Prov. 22:14:

<i>šûḥâh ‘āmuqqâh pî zārôt</i>	$\begin{array}{c} \check{s} \quad z \\ \quad \times \\ z \quad \check{s} \end{array}$
<i>zē’ûm yhw̄h yippol šām</i>	

This proverb leaves no doubt that those hiring and those seduced by sirens are abhorred by Yahweh!

It is more difficult, I find, to locate good examples of augmentation and diminution such as Burke illustrates in Coleridge. An instance of diminution is 16:26, where the ‘ and *l* of ‘*āmēl/omlâ* are brought together in ‘*ālāyw*. More examples may be found upon further investigation. Augmentation and diminution depend on clusters of

consonants in a language. Biblical Hebrew, following as it does a pattern of consonant-vowel in words, may not have many such combinations in comparison to English. However, there are frequently consonant clusters in the transition from one word to the next (e.g., *bērē'sît bārā'*). Such links between words may be worth investigating. An instance which does not show augmentation or diminution, but which is interesting, is 18:4:

mayim 'āmuqqîm dibrēy pî-'îš
naḥal nōbēa' mēqôr ḥokmâ
 deep waters words of a man's mouth
 rushing torrent source of wisdom
 The words of the mouth are deep waters;
 a surging stream is the source of wisdom.

The translation is disputed; some translators think "source of wisdom" belongs with "deep waters" and "words of one's mouth" goes with "rushing torrent" (so NEB). But if one rearranged the sentences notice how the play on '-m-q would be lost:

'āmuqqîm
nōbēā' mēqôr

Did the investors of proverbs self-consciously employ principles of musicality? Perhaps at times. Probably, however, they usually followed their "ear." Poets usually do the latter, although they may tend toward either pole of the ear-principles spectrum. As Burke suggests concerning modern poets, many poets are very much aware of *method*, but it would not be wise to attribute *methodology* unless we had the poet's own statement (301-2). Or at least there should be firm evidence of a self-conscious use of principles and procedures. But if one has no evidence of definite methodology per se, yet it is clear that sounds are patterned in definite and often complex ways, this becomes another interesting source of reflection in the human mind: are there similar patterns and structures to be discerned at every stage from sound to story, from combinations of phonemes to combinations of mythemes?

At any rate, one cannot assume a disjunction of sound and sense in proverbs. Aphoristic speech and thinking strive to bring onomatopoeia, concept, and referent as closely together as possible. Thus in the tongue that is like a woman who offers fruit to her friends, the labial sounds (§2.2) reinforce the images of "tongue" and "eating fruit."

MāWēt WēḥayyîM Bēyad-lāšôn
Wē'ōhāBēhā yō'kal Piryâ

2.3 The Literary Expansion of Proverbs

2.31 Ancient Israelite Folk Sayings

If we can isolate folk proverbs in the Bible and relate these to the literary proverbs of the book of Proverbs, it may shed light on some literary questions, with important implications for phenomenology of religion and theology.

R. B. Y. Scott has done as much as anyone, at least in scholarly writings published in English, to investigate folk sayings in biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature (1961; 1971:63–70). Some of the characteristics he points out are terseness, compactness, and occasional alliteration and assonance (1971: 63–64).

mērēšā 'îm yēšē' rēša' (I Sam 24:14)

From those evil evil comes.

'al-yithallēl ḥōgēr kimēpatēah (I Kgs 20:11)

let not the girder boast as the ungirder

Boast not before the battle's won.

A folk saying is one that is not only anonymous, but appears always to have been, is easy to remember and repeat, and seems “just right” in contemplating a given situation. Its vocabulary is from a common stock of words, though the proverb may put the words to uncommon use.

Scott has also sought to isolate originally non-literary proverbs within the sentences of Proverbs and Qohelet. For example:

bā'-zādôn wayyābō' qālôn (Prov 11:2a)

comes insolence and comes disgrace

Haughtiness comes and honor leaves.

wērō'eh kēsîlîm yērôa' (13:20b)

companion of fools will be hurt

Fellow of fools fares ill. (Scott's tr.)

šômēr mišwâh šômēr napšô (19:16a)

keeper of command keeper of his soul

Who keeps the law keeps his life.

On the basis of the known colloquial sayings (see citations in Scott), I would make the following tentative observations.

(1) Literary and folk proverbs both presuppose the principle of retributive justice (e.g., I Sam 24:14; Prov 22:8a). In one instance a well known proverb expresses inherited retribution which is superseded by the prophetic word:

The fathers have eaten sour grapes

and the sons' teeth grate together. (Jer 31:29 = Ezek 18:2)

(2) In the folk sayings we occasionally find a nice alliteration (I Sam 24:14), a clever assonance (2 Sam 20:18), and sometimes both.

yādô bakkōl wēyad kōl bô (Gen 16:12)

His hand held against all, all hands held against him.

(3) Both literary and folk expressions share fondness for word play (e.g., Prov 13:20b; Qoh 7:1a).

(4) A very brief, compact image or flash of insight is expressed in both types.

2.32 Folk Proverbs Expanded Literarily

Colloquial sayings do not usually have the kind of complexity that results from deliberate composition. If I may offer an example from our English heritage: "Look before your leap." To fashion this into a literary proverb one could add a stich in this manner:

Look before you leap,
and listen to the learned.

Or:

Birds of a feather flock together,
and fools fare ill with the wise.

Of course, it is not always easy to discern whether or not one has a folk saying which has been expanded with the addition of a literary line, or whether it is a really clever folk saying or perhaps a literary creation which the composer has sought to make "folkish." To return briefly to an aphorism cited in the first part of this essay, let us examine Pascal's famous line as though we knew nothing about its origin and literary character. The first part of the sentence sounds as though it could be a folk saying: "le coeur a ses raisons." This, or some similar saying, may have been known in French for a long period of time. But the continuation, "que la raison ne connaît point," would probably not have been part of a popular proverb for two reasons. First, the word "la raison" as the subject of a verb would not belong to the layperson's repertoire. As an abstraction *la raison* appears in French popular speech as it does in English. For example: "ramener quelqu'un à la raison"; "mettre à la raison"; "listen to reason." But this is different from personified reason speaking, knowing, etc. Second, the author has composed a clever alliteration of *coeur/que/connaît*. This is probably too clever for an originally popular saying, forming as it does a near chiasm (actually A/B/A /B /A if one counts the relative *que*). Such cleverness is not unknown in folk wisdom, although it usually takes simpler forms (e.g., the chiasmus of Qoh 7:1a involves only *tôb šēm* plus *mi-* and *-en*). But the two reasons (sic!) taken together would weigh against its origins as a folk gnome.

Some of the sentences in Proverbs have the earmarks of popular sayings in both lines. Their subject, vocabulary, and play on sound show them to be cleverly constructed, but not literary compositions. For example:

hôaḥ 'ālâ bëyad-šikkôr
ûmāšāl bëpî kēsîlîm (26:9)

On the other hand, 19:16b provides a good case of poor literary expansion.

19:16a: *šomēr mišwâ šomēr napšô*
Who keeps the law keeps his life.

19:16b: *bôzēh dērākāyw yāmūt*
who despises his ways shall die

There is practically no alliteration nor assonance. There is a bit of music in the labial-sibilant construction of naPŠô/BôZēh, but that is all. The referent of “his” in the second sentence is uncertain. It could be human subject or God, but probably the latter. Sometimes ambiguity increases the appeal of a proverb, but here it comes across as wooden.

Here are three examples of the skillful, sometimes profound way in which folk sayings are often expanded in Proverbs:

ba'-zādôn wayyābō' qālôn
wě'ēt-šēnū'im ḥokmâ (11:2)

comes insolence and comes disgrace
and with the humble is wisdom

Haughtiness comes and honor leaves,
but wisdom is with the humble.

'ōbēd 'admātô yišba'-lāḥēm
ūmēraddēp rēqîm ḥāsar-lēb (12:11)

worker of the soil sated of bread
and pursuer of empty things lacking of mind

Who works his soil has his fill of food;
who goes gadding is full of folly.

nēpěš 'āmēl 'omlâ llô
kî-'ākap 'ālāyw pîhû (16:26)

appetite of the laborer labors for him
for urges upon him his mouth

The hunger of the laborer labors for him,
for his mouth lures him on.

Concerning 11:2, *šēnū'im* as the antithesis of *zādôn* plays nicely off the sound of the latter, sharing a sibilant (*š/z*) and the *n*. The image of the “humble” is a clever play on “disgrace” or “shame” (*qālôn*). Someone who is *qālôn* is little, light, lacking in esteem; he is the opposite of the honored, who is “weighty” (*kābōd*). But the weighty person, it turns out, is one who does not push his weight around, who does not boast and advertise himself (see McKane’s note: 428). There is a world of ironic play in the interstices of this proverb!

The literary stich added to 12:11a skillfully juxtaposes an image of satisfied hunger to that of an undernourished mind. The worker of his soil will be full (*yišba'*): how different is the one who chases things that lack substance (*rēqîm*). Correspondingly, this pursuer of folly is empty in the head (*ḥāsar-lēb*)! His poor hungry mind will not be satisfied.

We can observe here also the retribitional character of the world. The worker of his soil 'ōbēd'admāto—an allusion to Adam who was created to till the ground?) is intelligent and his stomach is satisfied. The soil responds to him. And the pursuer of vain things gets what he is after, too: nothing!

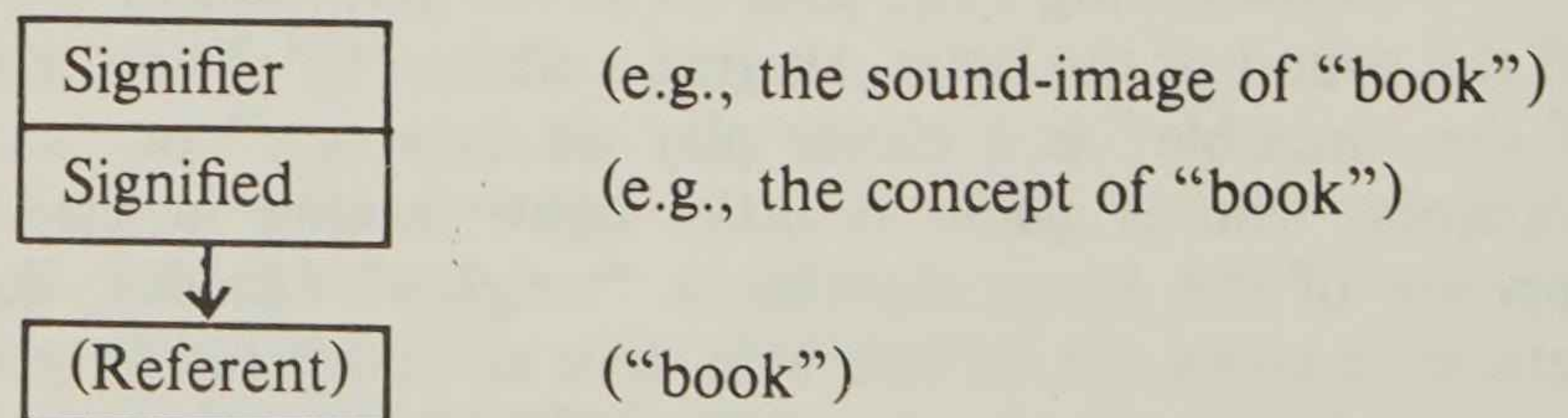
The expansion involved in 16:26 is an example of another sort. There is no word play in the second stich, although 'alāyw in response to 'āmēl 'omlâ is a nice touch. What is significant is the fruitfulness of this proverb. It has any number of intellectual seeds. As McKane says, "It has allusiveness and openness to interpretation . . ." (491). Does it refer to the human need for incentives, the struggle of the toiler, the great capacity of the human *něpěš* (appetite/soul/desire/life)? Or is the mouth a metaphor of "appetite" and "speech" combined and interrelated? The LXX expanded the two stichs and turned them into a contrast of the silent industrious person and the person who busies himself with misrepresentations (deceitful mouth).

3. A Semiotic Interpretation of Biblical Proverbs

3.1 A Semiotic Model

The aphoristic saying and the proverb are often enigmatic and open to many interpretations. Why is this? Obviously they share certain features of metaphorical speech, which has a built-in ambiguity by virtue of being metaphorical. But can we get a more precise sighting of the ambiguity of the metaphor? I think that Susan Wittig has contributed to clarification of this problem by sketching an interesting semiotic model for comprehension of the multiple meanings of the parabolic sign. "Parabolic sign" means practically the same thing as "proverbial sign" or "aphoristic sign," so her theory can be appropriated for this study and for any analysis of metaphor.

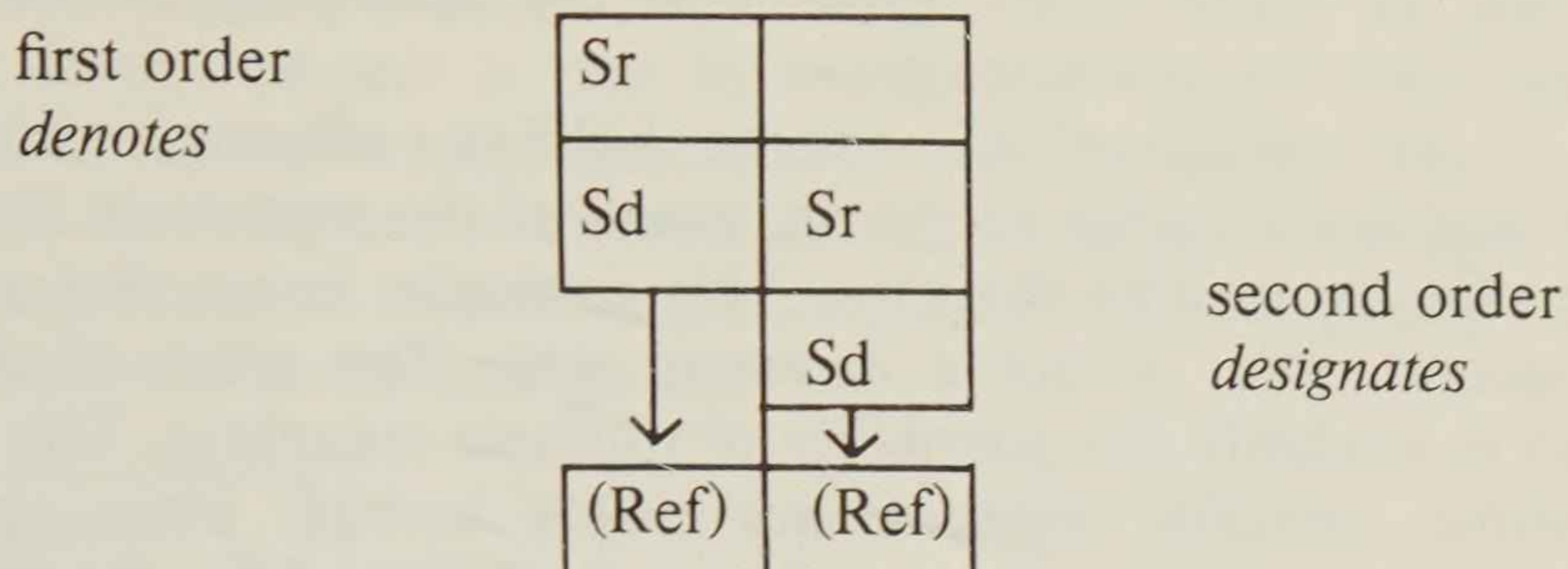
Wittig's model begins with the basic semiotic relationship:



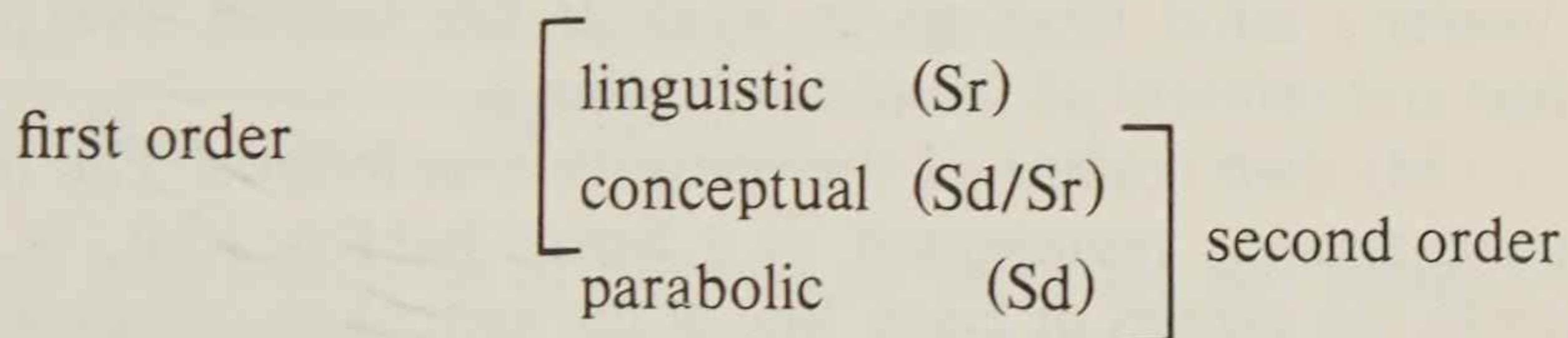
I have here modified her model a little by putting "referent" within parentheses. This is in order to indicate that the referent is not simply out there, a *Ding an sich* that exists apart from the sound and concept that make it what it is for the perceiver.

Wittig points out that the parabolic structure has two orders of signification: a stated signified (*denotatum*) and an unstated signified (*designatum*). The latter is provided by the hearer or perceiver in the context of the constraints imposed by the *denotatum* within a given culture. The result is a doubled structure with two referents, one of the

first order and the other of the second order. A diagram of the model (Wittig: 85):



The levels of the parabolic construct may be viewed in the following manner (Wittig: 85–86). (I have modified Wittig’s diagram only by placing the second Sd directly under the second Sr.)



This model will now be used to interpret two proverbs and to show their polyvalence.

3.2 Multiple Meanings in Prov 18:21 and 26:27

3.21 The translations of Prov 18:21 are an interesting case for illustrating the various meanings and connotations of translations, which in turn are efforts to wrestle meaning out of complex signs that have a double structure.

- LXX: Death and life are in the hand of the tongue; and those who rule her (*kratountes autês*) will eat her fruits.
- JPS: Death and life are in the power of the tongue; And they that indulge in it shall eat the fruit thereof.
- NEB: The tongue has power of life and death; make friends with it and enjoy its fruits.
- RSV: Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

Three of these translations are within the same range of meaning, although their connotations are different. The LXX tells us to control the tongue, NEB tells us to befriend it (in other words, “grasp the opportunity”) and RSV recommends loving it. JPS differs in presenting an implied warning against indulging in the tongue’s power.

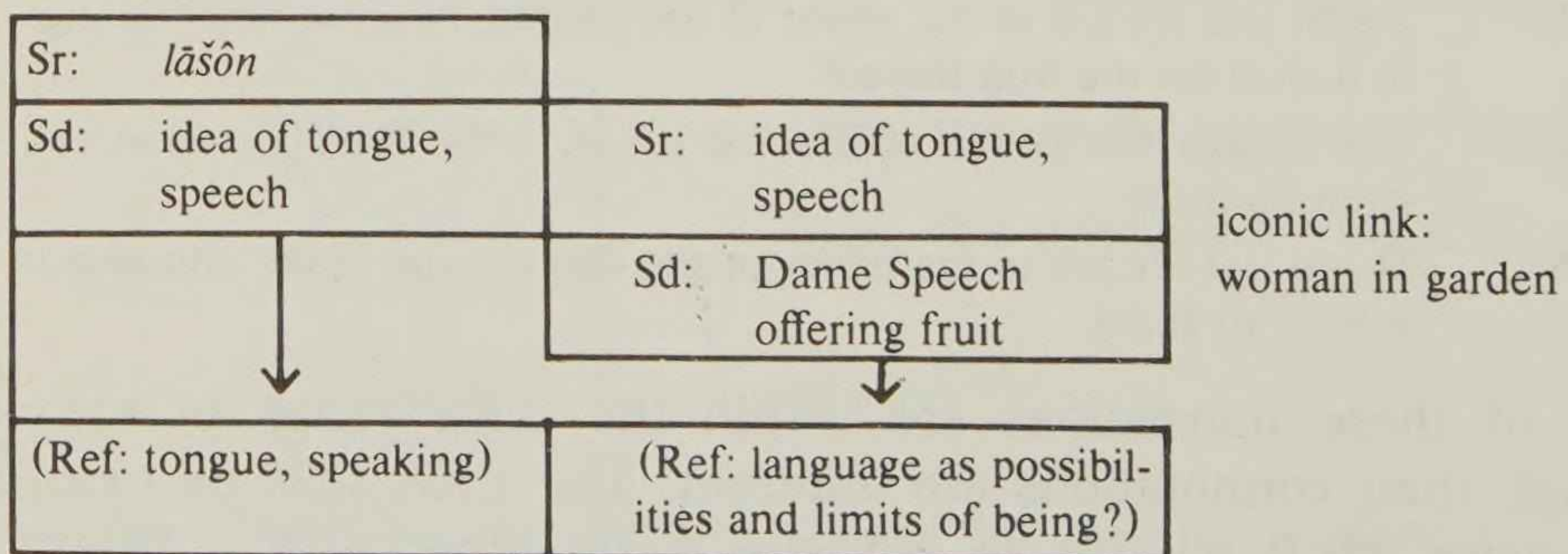
The focal word is *lāšôn*, tongue. The idea denoted is “tongue, speaking, speech.” *lāšôn* is here and usually a feminine noun. Death and life are *bēyad lāšôn*, “in the hand of *lāšôn*,” and “her lovers/friends will eat her fruit.” The image of *’ōhēb*, “lover, friend,” is reminiscent

of adherents of *ḥokmâ*, Dame Wisdom (see Prov 8:17, 21; cf. 8:36). Fruit comes from a tree, *‘ēṣ*, but tree is masculine; so also are death and life, so there is no doubt that the possessive pronouns in the second line refer to the tongue.

The image of the tongue holding—offering?—fruit which is death and life suggests to me an image of the woman in the garden of Eden offering fruit to the man. This particular image that gives rise to the second order is not a *necessary* step. The point of the semiotic model is to clarify the possibility of multiple meanings. The system has “dynamic, unstable *indeterminacy* which invites, even compels, the perceiver to complete the signification” (Wittig: 87). The four translations quoted above indicate the many connotations that the same saying may have for different interpreters. The dominant image that is sought by the hearer functions like the *tertium comparationis* in simile proverbs. The hearer’s mind must go to work at the second level to infer the signified and referent of the second order.

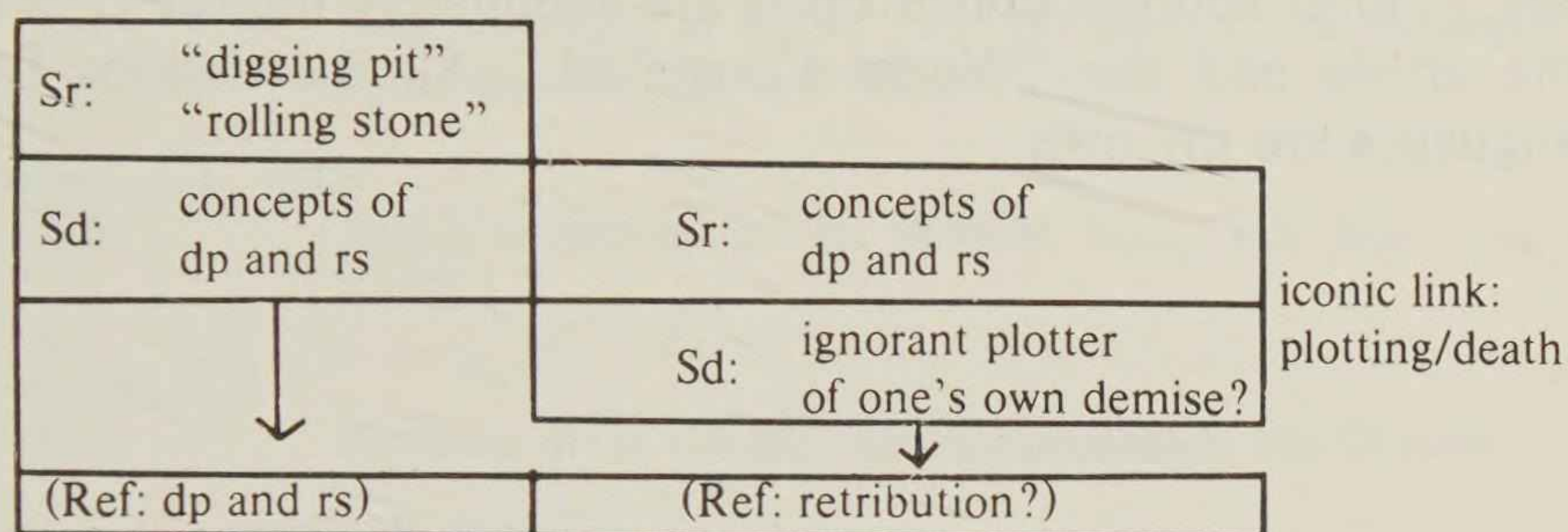
My own reading of the proverb is as follows. The image of the tongue-as-speech, represented as a figure holding fruit, is that of the woman in the garden of Eden. She is the unspoken comparison, the one who transmits knowledge of good and evil. The signified of the second order is thus Dame Speech whose lovers eat her fruit. Is the fruit “good,” i.e., is the fruit *ḥayyîm*, life? The proverb is very ambiguous in this regard. The image of eating the fruit in paradise intimates the ingestion of the knowledge of both good and evil, which apparently includes sexual differentiation and death. There is also another tree, the tree of life. Be this as it may, the proverb itself gives no sure clue as to whether one eats “life” *instead* of “death,” or “life” *and* “death.” The connotation may be that Dame Speech offers fatal fruit, but that some fates are better than others.

A diagram of the interpretation offered here:



3.22 To turn to 26:27, “digging a pit” obviously has a conventional signified. But “digging a pit,” in the sense of digging a pit for someone else to fall in, is one figure of plotting against others (Ps 7:16; Jer 18:20, 22). The image is complicated by another connotation: the “pit” (*šahat*) is also the place of the dead as the grave or Sheol (Job 17:4; 33:22, 24, etc.). The second sentence multiplies the possibilities of meaning geo-

metrically, for “roller of a stone” could reinforce the image of plotting or of death (ignominious death: Josh 7:26; 10:27; 2 Sam 18:17). It implies, as does digging a pit, a demanding project which requires all one’s effort. If this project is one in which one “falls,” the web of imagery would then seem to suggest that in plotting against others one is unknowingly working out one’s own death. We thus find images with a suggestive openness to numerous interpretations. The meaning that I find is illustrated in the semiotic model:



These interpretations of the two proverbs are not presented as the “correct” ones. The very point of the semiotic model is that multiple meanings are possible for the doubled parabolic structure. My reading is informed by the constraints of my cultural setting, conscious and unconscious concepts, and knowledge of biblical literature. Whether or not the interpretations are true to the *intention* of the aphorists is difficult if not impossible to say, although probably the constraint of my specialized knowledge gives some sort of *entrée* into their patterns of thinking.

The possibility of multiple meanings may be viewed as unfortunate or as a way of weaseling out of the interpreter’s responsibility. I view it as a challenge to the interpreter to allow the proverb to provoke and challenge his mind.

Bibliographical Note

I have frequently consulted the commentary by McKane. McKane’s research and reflections are very helpful, although the philological pull of his work prevents him from attaining a fuller literary appreciation of proverbs. G. von Rad’s *Wisdom in Israel* has been a source of insight. Many of Gordis’s writings have affected my perspective on wisdom literature (1939–40, 1965, 1968). An anthology of important essays, with a helpful introduction and a valuable bibliography, is Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. Essays by Asemissen, Grenzmann, and Schalk have enhanced my theoretical understanding. These essays and others are in a book edited by G. Neumann, whose introduction to the collection is useful. Professor

Donald Morton of the English Department at Syracuse University has made available to me his rough draft translations of the essays by Asemissen, Grenzmann, and Schalk, and he has read two earlier drafts of this paper. Professor Matitiahu Tsevat of Hebrew Union College read an earlier version of 2.2, "Patterning of Sounds in Proverbs," and made important critical comments. Dominic Crossan, the editor of this issue, has contributed much to the final form of the paper. I thank them for their assistance, and I accept full responsibility for all errors and deficiencies.—Other sources drawn upon are adequately indicated in the text of the article and the "Works Consulted." All translations from foreign languages are my own.

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ON THE GNOMIC-DISCURSIVE WISDOM OF JESUS BEN SIRACH

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ABSTRACT

In autobiographical notes and poems celebrating wisdom and the sage, Sirach informs his readers how he understands his vocation as a tradition-conscious Israelite sage and what demands this makes on his active oral and literary response to his people's sacred lore in his time and place. The analysis of structures and forms evident in Sirach's original book (1:1-23:27/51:1-30), its three successive additional sections (24:1-32:13; 32:14-38:23; 38:24-50:24/29), and in selected units within these sections shows how and to what extent Sirach carried out his program and how he makes his topical maxim collections and thesis based discourses his specific contribution to biblical wisdom.

0.1 "Do not slight the discourse of the sages, but busy yourself with their maxims," was the advice which Jesus ben Sirach gave to his hearers (8:8a; unless noted otherwise, Scripture quotations and references are according to the RSV). His book is witness that he himself lived by this counsel. He regarded highly "the discourse of the aged" and so gained from them "understanding" and learned "how to give an answer in time of need" (8:9). Learning is here not merely a matter of committing to memory what one has heard. It is as much acquiring the ability to discern the need of the moment and to respond to it constructively. The sage of Sirach's stature is committed both to the tradition to which he has become heir and to the situation in which he

finds himself. He affirms both. Within him past and present meet each other. He welcomes the encounter as a creative tension and sees it as the matrix of his thought and word.

0.2 How did Sirach become the sage that has left his imprint on later generations? How did he understand the program which he set for himself? How did he carry it out? What are the characteristic features of his compositions?

0.3 This paper is devoted first to an analysis of texts which illustrate Sirach's own understanding of his vocation, and secondly to a literary-theological examination of sections and units of his book which show to what extent and how the sage carried out his program and so made his specific contribution to biblical wisdom.

1.1 After Sirach had composed his first book of wisdom (1:1–23:27 and 51:1–30), he found himself compelled three times to add a section to his original book (24:1–32:13; 32:14–38:23; 38:24–50:29). As he had done in the case of each of the four sections which make up the original book (1:1–4:10; 4:11–6:17; 6:18–14:19; 14:20–23:27/51:1–30), where he had prefaced each additional section with a programmatic prologue (1:1–2:18; 4:11–19; 6:18–37; 14:20–15:10; following Segal, paragraph 21), so he did also now: 24:1–29 precedes the first additional section as prologue, 32:14–33:15 is the prologue to the second addition, and 38:24–39:11 introduces the third (against Segal: paragraph 21, who argues for four sections also in 24:1–50:29). In the original book, which was conceived as a whole and so is literarily of one cast, the topical maxim collections and discourses directly followed each of the four prologues. In the additional sections, however, which were added successively, an autobiographical note intervenes between prologue and body of the section. In it Sirach justified each addition, claiming in each case that unexpectedly and by God's grace his wisdom had increased and so compelled him to publish the new insights.

1.21 Thus after the hymn celebrating 'Wisdom' (24:1–29) he reviews in an autobiographical note (24:30–34) what has happened to him in his continuing quest for wisdom. He compares his labors to the flow of water which a farmer directs from a river and through a channel to his plot:

I went forth like a canal from a river
and like a water channel into a garden.
I said, "I will water my orchard
and drench my garden plot, . . . (24:30–31)

What then happened, Jesus ben Sirach registers with surprise:

and lo, my canal became a river,
and my river became a sea." (24:32; cf. 21:13).

What began as a humble irrigation project ended as an astounding inundation!

1.22 The student of wisdom who had "toiled in her service a little while" (6:19), put his "neck into her collar" (6:24) and "pursued her like a hunter" (14:22), found his erstwhile "yoke" changed to "a golden ornament" (6:30) and himself "given the water of wisdom to drink" (15:3), for "her thought is more abundant than the sea" (24:29).

1.23 Sirach's successful quest for wisdom eventually led him to the conviction that his wisdom had become so abundant that it overflowed. He could not contain it anymore and so had to pass it on—in the form of an addition to his earlier wisdom book:

I will again make instruction shine forth like the dawn,
and I will make it shine afar;
I will again pour out teaching like prophecy, . . . (24:32–33a)

The word "again" refers to his original wisdom book; it shows that our sage thought highly of his new insight and considered it sufficiently different to warrant an additional section. He stresses that so his work profits not only himself, but "all who seek instruction" (24:34); he "leaves it to all future generations" in written form (24:33b; cf. 39:32; 44:5).

1.3 Does Sirach say more about his acquisition of wisdom? Instructive is the autobiographical note which he put after the prologue (32:13–33:15) to the second edition (32:13–38:23). Conscious of studying the traditions of a succession of illustrious sages, he describes himself as one who "has studied the subject 'wisdom' with diligence" (Hartom: 122):

I was last on watch;
I was like one who gleanes after the grape-gatherers. (33:16)

Contrary to what gleaners may expect, he picked enough in his study of earlier wisdom books "to fill, like a grape-picker, his wine press"—and that, of course, through the grace of God (33:17). Thus Sirach considers the results of his labors equal to, though not replacing, the work of earlier sages; he sees himself as the last link in a chain of wisdom students who, when they "hear a wise saying, . . . will praise it *and add to it*" (21:15).

1.41 The most detailed description of the way in which a sage comes to name and fame is found in the prologue to the third and last addition

(38:24–39:11). The sage must be free to pursue his vocation full time. In this he differs from the farmer and the craftsman, each “skilful in his own work” but not “sought out for the council of the people,” nor able to “expound discipline or judgment,” nor “found using proverbs” (38:24–34). The sage, on the other hand, has dedicated himself to the meditation, the “thinking through” of “the law of the Most High” (39:1), that is, the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture (Smend: 353; Segal: 258; Hartom: 144).

1.42 Here the Greek text (a Hebrew version is not extant) describes the sage’s study of the law with two coordinated participles (“dedicating oneself” – “thinking through”), and then details this study in six coordinated clauses, each ending in a future indicative verb form. Thus the study of the law is carried out *through* the activities described in the finite clauses.

1.43 The first two finite clauses refer to what later became the third and the second part of the Hebrew canon: The Writings and The Prophets:

he will seek out the wisdom of all the ancient,
and will be concerned with prophecies. (39:1)

The first line refers to the wise men on whose writings he freely draws: the authors of Proverbs, Job, some Psalms, and Ecclesiastes. Cf. 41:3 for a parallel, non-specific and context-determined use of “ancient” (against Segal: 258, who suggests that Sirach refers to what later became apocryphal books named after Adam, Enoch, and Noah).

1.44 “Wisdom” is listed before “prophecies” probably because the sage sees in wisdom a manifestation and explication of the law which is more comprehensive and primary than anything else, including prophecy (24:9; 43:33–44:16; Prov 8:21–32 and von Rad: 144–176). To this corresponds the character of the verb employed: it is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew verb “to exegete,” “to seek (out the meaning of a text)”: *drš* (so the suggested retranslations into Hebrew: Smend: 353; Segal: 252; Kāhānā’: 609; Hartom: 143).

1.45 Not only the wisdom traditions but also the prophecies are the sage’s field of study—a claim borne out by numerous Sirach passages, even though one looks in vain for texts which assign as comprehensive an interpretation role to the prophets in relation to the law as is the case with wisdom’s role. Generally, commentators point out that the passage refers to the threefold division of the Hebrew canon in the making (Smend: 353; Hartom: 142).

1.46 The following two couplets indicate that the law, as it manifests itself in wisdom and prophecies, does not exhaust the sage's field of study. Segal (259) argues that "in these verses [39:1-3] Sirach refers to biblical and other ancient extra-biblical books which the teachers in his time used to study." He and several commentators further suggest that 39:2-3 refer to the *oral* tradition which the student was to study seriously (Smend: 353; Segal: 258; Hartom: 144). In keeping with this argument I propose that *Sirach here summarizes his hermeneutic-pedagogic theory: from understanding to explanation, from assimilation to exposition, from learning to teaching, from apprenticeship to mastery:*

The sage will carefully listen to and preserve
the presentations of outstanding men,
and become thoroughly acquainted
with strings of proverbs,
then he will search out what lies hidden
in wise sayings,
and keep discussing baffling aspects
of proverbs. (39:2-3; my rendering)

1.461 The teacher's presentations were oral (6:35; 17:10; 25:9). Examples are Sirach's own compositions, such as his "Praise of the Fathers" (44-50), or his "Celebration of the Works of the Lord" (42:15-43:33). Such compositions became widely known, were memorized and recited (44:15); thus they are a forerunner of Haggadah. "Strings of proverbs" (so Kāhānā's rendering into Hebrew: 509) are topical collections of maxims which the teachers collected, ordered, augmented, and transmitted. Several such titled collections have found a place in Sirach. Following Segal (paragraph 21) I list 18:30-19:30, headlined "Discipline of Desire," 20:27-31, named "Wise Sayings," and 31:12-32:13, with the title "Etiquette at Banquet and Symposium." The aspiring sage became thoroughly acquainted with such collections, that is, he first memorized them and so made them literally his own. They are a forerunner of Halakah.

1.462 The first couplet (39:2) describes in synthetic parallelism the first, the learning stage. The second couplet (39:3) deals with the second, the research stage. While the subject areas of study remain the same, its approach and character change:

Those who understand sayings become skilled themselves,
and pour forth apt proverbs. (18:29)

The wise man of course remains a learner, but growing ability brings success and recognition as "man of name." The apprentice-sage graduates to master-sage. And so he becomes the newest link in the succession of notable teachers; the chain of tradition is preserved and extended to a new day (8:8-9).

1.463 What exactly is meant by the activities described in 39:3? To judge by the range of subjects discussed in Sirach, it comprises both ethics and theology, the forerunners of both Halakah and Haggadah. Bringing to light what lies hidden in wise sayings (39:3a) refers primarily to the clarification and amplification of inherited maxims through the *addition* of other, parallel maxims, either culled from tradition or newly formulated, in keeping with the maxim that “a man of understanding” will do precisely that when he hears a wise saying (21:15). Hence we encounter many reformulations of the thrust of one maxim in the wise sayings of the same topical collections, cf. 10:30–31 and the discussion of “Honoring Father and Mother” in 3:1–16 (below §5.4). The discussion of baffling aspects of certain issues (39:3b) refers primarily to the *discourses* in which the sage highlights various aspects of a debated issue, argues polemically by quoting the opponents’ thesis, and may or may not reach a definite conclusion or counterthesis, cf. the discourse on “Free Will” in 15:11–20 or on “The Goodness of All the Works of the Lord” in 39:13–35 (below §2.2). The Greek verb form rendered “will keep discussing” refers broadly to professional activity, be it of the farmer (38:25) or of the scholar (50:28). Generally, the characteristic verb forms of the reflective-discursive activity are causative or reflexive forms of the root *byn* which occur 26 times in the extant Hebrew texts and are 13 times translated by a Greek verb compounded with the root *noe-* (Barthélemy-Rickenbacher: 53–54). And, contrary to the view of the early rabbis, the sage of Sirach’s time was not to have a secular profession, contrast *’Abot* 2:2 with Sir 39:1 and cf. Segal (253).

1.464 On the other hand, the sage-to-be also knew the limits beyond which his quest was not to go. He is not to seek “what is too difficult” for him, nor to “investigate what is beyond [his] power” (so Rüger: 31: “older text”). On the contrary, he is to “reflect upon what has been assigned” to him (3:21–22). In other words, he is not to be impatient to advance quickly in the course of study but to concern himself only with the lesson of the day, as the warning against “hasty judgment” (3:24a) and the emphasis of the first section (3:1–4:10) on proper humility suggest (against Smend [31] and Segal [17] who take the warning to be directed against Greek philosophy).

1.465 The long quest for wisdom is not an easy one; in all prologues of the original book (1:1–23:27) Sirach has a lot to say about the trials to which the aspiring sage’s life is subject. In reality they are tests (2:1–5). At first, wisdom responds to the student’s search by “walking with him on tortuous paths,” by “tormenting him by her discipline” and “testing him with her ordinances” (4:17). “She seems very harsh to the uninstructed” (6:20), yet the student is urged to put his “feet into her fetters,” and his “neck into her collar”; eventually, though, “her

yoke” turns into “a golden ornament” (6:24, 30), and he “will dwell in the midst of her glory” (14:27). Similar is the thrust of the stylized, autobiographical acrostic (see Segal’s reconstruction: 363–64) which as appendix concludes the (original) book (51:13–30).

1.47 The listing of the sage’s qualifications is not yet ended. Aside from the experience which travel and its opportunities in “testing the good and evil among men” supply (39:4; cf. 34:11), the sage turns to God “in prayer and make(s) supplication for his sins” (39:5). Then, if it is God’s will, “he will be filled with the spirit of understanding” (39:6) and become a sage whose “memory will not disappear” (39:9; cf. 15:6; 50:27–29). And thus he confidently introduces the last, third addition to his book with the autobiographical note:

I have yet more to say, which I have thought upon,
and I am filled, like the moon at the full (39:12),

and concludes his discourse on “The Goodness of All the Works of the Lord” (39:13–35) with a restatement of his thesis (39:33; cf. 39:16) and words ringing with self-assurance:

Therefore from the beginning I have been convinced,
and have thought this out and left it in writing: . . . (39:32)

The emphasis on transmitting the results of his labors *in writing* seeks to align Sirach’s book with *the books*, that is, the ancient writings which were in his time about to become Holy Writ. And that not under the name of an ancient, hallowed figure (Ecclesiastes!) but under his own (50:27).

1.5 Sirach’s answer to our query as to how a sage becomes a sage has now been explored. We reviewed or alluded to passages which illustrate the attitude to be adopted, the difficulties to be faced, the curriculum to be followed, the options to be chosen, the advances to be made, the results to be hoped for, and the success to be gained through the grace of God.

2.0 How does the book which Sirach has left measure up to his theory? To what extent does it illustrate his method? In what manner has he carried out his program? How do his topical collections of maxims and his discourses on debated issues make a place for themselves among the biblical wisdom traditions?

2.1 We begin our review with Sirach’s last addition to his book (38:24–50:24/29). In its prologue (38:24–39:11) we encounter the sage’s most self-conscious and developed explanation of his method (39:1–3) and in its body (39:12–50:24/29) his most sustained compositions: The

discourses on "The Goodness of All the Works of the Lord" (39:13–35), on "The Fear of Death" (40:1–17), on "True and False Shame" (41:14–42:8) and the litany celebrating God's works in nature (42:15–43:33a), composed as introduction (43:33b; 44:1–15) to "The Praise of the Fathers" (44:16–50:24). These compositions reveal the confidence of the mature scholar and teacher.

2.31 A case in point is the discourse on "The Goodness of All the Works of the Lord" (39:13–35; extant in Hebrew). It is introduced and concluded by the call to his students to respond to the teacher's thesis with a thanksgiving (39:13–15, 35). Then the thesis itself is stated:

All things are the work of the Lord,
for they are very good,
and whatever is needed,
he in its proper time supplies. (39:16; my rendering)

The thesis is repeated as conclusion (39:33–34); it emphasizes the word "all" and argues against the opponent's thesis that the phenomena of storm, fire, hail, famine, pestilence, wild beasts, scorpions, vipers, and sword (39:28–30) are evil.

2.22 The argumentation (39:17–31) is involved and draws on a variety of motifs (cf. Smend's summary [359] and the discussions of von Rad [251–4], Crenshaw [52–3] and Hengel [261–3]).

2.23 The first argument (39:17b–20) is drawn from Israel's credal tradition and refers to the Exodus (Segal: 260; Hartom: 145; against Smend: 359). Every Israelite knows that it was God's command to the waters of the Red Sea that allowed the Israelites to pass unharmed yet overwhelmed their pursuers. Here the element "water" is at exactly the right time by God's command made to fulfil the need of that moment, and that in a double fashion: good for Israel but bad for its enemies.

2.24 This argument anticipates the gnomic saying /1/ which appears in the center of the discourse:

He [God] has apportioned from the beginning good to the good,
by the same token to the wicked both good and evil. (39:25; my rendering)

Of course, the sage and his hearers knew that the element "water" was also "good" for the Egyptians because it made life possible in the Nile valley through the regular inundations of the soil (39:22!).

2.25 The passage 39:18–20 emphasizes and universalizes the Exodus argument by noting that God's saving intervention is irresistible (39:18), can occur in every place (39:19) and time (39:20), and knows no limit of smallness or magnitude (39:20).

2.26 This leads to the denial of the (quoted) question of the opponents:

Thus one must not say, "This here, why does it exist?"

because everything is created for its purpose.

Nor must one say, "This thing is evil—what good is it?"

because in its proper time everything

fulfils its purpose. (39:21; my rendering)

The opposing position is refuted by the gnomic saying (39:25) but before Sirach cites (or newly coins) it, he offers a second argument in support of his thesis, again drawn from Israel's sacred tradition but phrased in general terms. Just as God's blessing of the patriarchs became a reality in Israel's blessed life (39:22), so by the same divine action the nations (the Canaanites, cf. 16:8–9) were driven out before Israel, and the once well-watered region of Sodom turned into a salt-waste (39:23; Smend: 363; Segal: 264; Hartom: 146). The use of this argument in support of Sirach's thesis is summarized in 39:24: God's ways are "straight" for Israel yet "impassable" for non-Israelites.

2.27 This is followed by the gnomic saying 39:25 which abstractly sets forth Sirach's argument against an agnostic or pessimistic view of life, which was probably current in the Jerusalem of his time among the followers and transmitters of Ecclesiastes (Hengel: 262). Sirach's polemic is as obvious as the assurance with which he seeks to establish a rationally defensible interpretation of the existence of evil; in other words, he wrestles with theodicy (Hengel: 262; Crenshaw: 52–53, and cf. 'Abot 4:3).

2.28 Sirach rounds out his argumentation through three demonstrations from the realm of nature: (1) The ten basic necessities for human life are water, fire, iron, salt, bread, milk, honey, wine, oil, and clothing. They offer only good to the good but also become the substances through which the evil are hurt (39:26–27; sustained search in Israel's sacred traditions or the realm of nature would adduce proof either way for each item). (2) The argument that storms are sent by God to overcome evildoers (39:28) is a midrash on Job 9:5 (possibly earthquakes are meant, Smend: 365). (3) The listing of the eight phenomena of fire, hail, famine, plague, wild beasts, scorpions, vipers, and the sword (39:29–30) serves the same end: these forces willingly and exactly as bidden serve the purpose God has appointed for them (39:31). Sirach here probably refers to the "evils" quoted by his opponents, and clinches his counterargument by citing and rejecting them as evidence.

2.29 This completes his argumentation; he is now ready to stake his

reputation on his thesis and the supporting arguments, to attest that it is the considered outcome of his thinking, and to leave it "in writing" (39:32).

2.3 This discourse is representative of the others in the last section (38:24–50:24/29). It marks the achievement and the level of sophistication of the self-assured, mature sage. He confronts a debated issue and its proponents, argues systematically against it with easily grasped arguments drawn from Israel's tradition and from the realm of nature, formulates or gets from tradition a maxim as center for his argumentation, and concludes with a sense of achievement.

2.4 The discourses in the last section are marked by a comprehensive approach which covers all aspects of the issue. Hengel (262) notes that we here encounter the beginnings of a still simple theological systematization (later found again but in a more pronounced fashion in the Dead Sea Scrolls), coupled with a preference for abstract theological terms such as "need," the key term in 39:13–35. This is evident in the discourse on the two kinds of shame (41:14–42:8), especially when compared to Sirach's earlier discussion of the subject (4:20–28), in the inclusion of the sphere of the human being's *inner* fears and feelings in the discourses on death (40:1–17; 41:1–13), and in the comprehensive scope of the praise of God's works in the forces of nature and the wisdom-endowed heroes of Israel's history (42:15–50:24), not to mention the positive-negative balancing and somewhat old age oriented sequence of topics in 38:24–50:24 generally: the goodness of God's works—the fear of death—the true joys of life—the relativity of death—true and false shame—God's works in all of nature and all of Israel's history.

3.0 We turn to the second addition to Sirach's original book (32:14–38:23). In its prologue (32:14–33:15) those who fear the Lord are praised as the ones who know how to judge what they encounter and who, "in situations where it is not easy to distinguish between good and bad," are able to offer "constructive thoughts" (Hartom: 118; cf. Segal: 207–8). Thus the "man of judgment will not overlook an idea" and "do nothing without deliberation," nor will he "be overconfident on a smooth path" (32:18a, 19a, 21a). Later in this section our sage returns to this theme with the programmatic statement:

Reason is the beginning of every work,
and counsel precedes every undertaking. (37:16)

Formulated as gnomic saying, its two stichs are synonymous and stress that every action must be based on careful consideration (cf. 27:7).

3.11 The ability to differentiate and to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad in ambiguous situations is the mark of the wise. What are the criteria upon which one may rely?

As principles for the guidance of the mind
four criteria (literally: staffs) appear.

Good and evil, and life and death.

Then it is the tongue that makes known the choice.

(37:17–18, my rendering, following Segal: 239)

Formulated as numerical saying for the sake of clear categorization and easy remembering (Roth: 18–20, 88–93), the text sets forth the principle of polarity as the decisive criterion: Does the contemplated action result in good and affirm life or does it accomplish the opposite? It is the recognition of this polarity in all of life which governs the selection and discussion of most topics in this section of Sirach. It is laid out, overture-like, at the end of its prologue:

Good is the opposite of evil,
and life the opposite of death;
so the sinner is the opposite of the godly.
Look upon all the works of the Most High;
they likewise are in pairs,
one opposite the other. (33:14–15)

The dualism argued here is not a philosophical-metaphysical one but a basic and necessary category for one's ethical orientation; it is a "hodoxetic dualism" (Maier: 115), that is, a reasonable, easily understood and remembered practical principle /2/.

3.12 This hortative-ethical dualism is the keynote in most units of the section 33:19–38:23. Differentiation, discrimination, and recognition of the real character of options or in relationships are the issue: There are family ties and family ties (33:19–23), servants and servants (33:24–31), dreams and dreams (34:1–8), sacrifices and sacrifices (34:18–35:20), the people (of Israel) and the peoples (of the world) (36:1–17), words and words (36:18–20), beauty and beauty (36:21–26), friends and friends (37:1–6), counsel and counsel (37:7–15), teachers and teachers (37:19–21), wise men and wise men (37:22–26), desire and desire (37:27–31), healing (from God) and healing (by the physician) (38:1–15), and mourning and mourning (38:16–20).

3.2 How does Sirach lead his hearers and readers to the ability to differentiate between the choices with which they may find themselves confronted? He does so by showing how one (1) brings to surface the real choice hidden in the question and (2) then applies the criterion "good or bad?" or "life or death?"

3.21 Take the matter of turning to a counselor (37:7-15). Everyone asked to give advice will of course speak highly of the counsel he gives (37:7a) but, Sirach continues, some counselors advise others in such a way that their own, not their client's interests are served (37:7b). Hence one must discriminate between the counselors and avoid those who may in the matter under consideration be biased in their own favor but who, rather than disqualifying themselves, give self-serving advice and then even unflinchingly watch their counselee fail (37:8-9).

3.22 It may be that the only way to tell whether an adviser is to be trusted is the observation how he non-verbally responds to the request or the determination whether he is jealous of the person seeking counsel (37:10).

3.23 At this point Sirach fittingly lists (or quotes a list of) nine groups of people who are by definition suspect in counseling about specific matters, such as a coward in relation to war, a buyer about selling, or a man hired for a year in relation to the completion of a task (37:11).

3.24 Rather, one should know well the person one asks for advice. He should have the same outlook on life as the counselee, be "a keeper of the commandments," whose reliable character is proven through his solidarity with a failing advisee (37:12).

3.25 Even these precautions are not sufficient, hence

establish the counsel of your own heart,
for no one is more faithful to you than it is. (37:13)

A person's natural caution and vigilance on his or her own behalf may inform that person better "than seven watchmen sitting high on a watchtower" (37:14). In addition, one must ask for God's guidance "that he may direct your way in truth" (37:15).

3.26 Sirach's heuristic principle of polarity is operative here on three levels: (1) Differentiating between selfless and self-serving counselors, (2) giving weight both to the advice of the reliable counselor as well as to what the counselee himself or herself thinks best, and (3) being aware of the frailty of even the best human counsel in relation to direction of human affairs. Our sage either had learned from his teacher the list of (ten) nine suspect groups of advisers or formulated it himself (37:[10-]11); in either case his discourse sets the question into a broader context, surfaces the deeper issue with his heuristic polarity principle, makes also the person of the counselee an active part of the counseling process, and finally reminds his hearers that "a man's mind

plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Prov 16:9). In all, the sage has succeeded in "bringing to light what lies hidden in wise sayings" and in "adding to them" (39:3a; 21:15b).

4.11 The well known wisdom hymn 24:1–22/23–29 introduces as prologue the first additional section (24:1–32:13) to Sirach's original book (1:1–23:27). In its first part wisdom traces autobiographically her story in God's creation and with God's people Israel. While created "from eternity, in the beginning," and having "gotten a possession in every people and nation," she came to settle "in Israel," "in Jerusalem," and there "took root" (24:9, 7, 8, 11, 12). There she grew like a tree; the shade, blossom, fruit, or spice of not fewer than 15 valuable trees and shrubs are compared to her (24:13–17) and the abundance of her gifts to Israel are likened to the waters of five well known rivers in spate (24:25–27)—a veritable Garden of Eden (cf. Gen 1:12, 29; 2:9, 10–14, 16–17)!

4.12 Her seekers are invited into this paradise and promised sweet and never-failing sustenance. It will fill them and keep them from shame and sin (24:19–22)—precisely what had not been granted to those who inhabited the first Garden of Eden! Sirach himself channels wisdom's life-giving waters to all who seek instruction, now and in the future (24:25–26). "Wisdom" and "understanding," thus made available, will turn the Israelites who receive it into a well ordered and sustained society. Thus the Hebrew version of the Greek city is projected.

4.13 In keeping with this emphasis Sirach begins the body of the section (25:1–32:13) with two numerical sayings which positively and negatively outline the Hebrew *polis*:

Three things delight me
and are beautiful before the Lord and humans:
Concord among brothers,
friendship among neighbors,
and harmony among husband and wife.
But three groups of people I hate,
and I am burdened by their existence:
low-bred who are arrogant,
well-to-do who are deceivers,
and adulterous old men without sense. (25:1–2; my rendering)

Here Sirach formulates, overture-like, the principles which govern the selection of and the exposition within the units in this section. Basic orders of society are here recognized and codified through the pattern of the numerical saying, in keeping with the use of that pattern in Proverbs (Roth: 34–43). In the first, positively phrased, numerical

saying three concentric spheres of social structure are covered: Israel ("brothers"), town ("neighbors"), family ("husband/wife"). The people as a whole are one and united through their agreement, presumably in religious, political, and cultural matters, townspeople evidence neighborly concern and support for each other, and each family lives in internal harmony. The negative counterfoil speaks of people who are not mindful of their station in life and its responsibilities.

4.14 The unit 25:1–26:28 unfolds in various ways the theme of harmony in private and public, beginning with the emphasis on the leadership role of the elders (25:3–6), then listing ten community-building human relationships, again in the form of a numerical saying (25:7–11), and of nine community-threatening relationships (25:13–15 and, as numerical saying, 26:28), and giving an extensive discussion and contrasting of the good and evil wife (25:16–26–26:1–4/26:5–9 [10–12]–26:13–18; cf. 26:19–27). This is followed by a brief unit on the merchant's proneness to sin (26:29–27:4).

4.15 Then four larger units deal successively with various aspects of interhuman relationships which either build or destroy human community: discriminating behavior in human justice, talk, secrets, "eye-winking," and scheming (27:4–29), avoiding bearing grudges, quarrels, and slander (27:30–28:26), cautions in lending, standing surety, and going abroad (29:1–28), and directions for the education of sons, the attitude to one's own person and to wealth, and the behavior at banquets and symposia (30:1–32:13).

4.2 The units of this section (some 27 according to my analysis) are in comparison to those in the second and third additional sections shorter and more numerous. They are mostly topical collections of maxims, sometimes arranged in a discursive sequence, sometimes merely set side by side and so outlining the aspects of the topic. At times the line between thoughtful juxtaposition of (inherited or newly formulated) maxims and their elaborations into an orderly progressing discourse is hard to draw.

4.21 Examples of juxtapositions are the series of comparisons (27:4–6) which illustrate the maxim:

Do not praise a man before you hear him reason,
for this is the test of men. (27:7)

Or the sequence of maxims which in different ways set forth the observation that

He who digs a pit will fall into it. . . . (27:26a)

As Prov 26:27 and Ps 7:15–16 show, this was an ancient, favorite, and readily appreciated topic of wise men.

4.22 The unit on going abroad is different (29:21–28). Sirach begins with a (already proverbial?) listing of the “four essentials for life”: water and bread, clothing and housing. He then emphasizes that it is better to be content with this minimum than to go abroad and live sumptuously. In vivid language he paints from experience the life of the traveler who as guest is welcome only at the convenience of the host. He concludes that such treatment is “hard to bear for a man who has feeling.” But why would a man of feeling such as Sirach go abroad in the first place? Either when sent on an honorable mission and/or in search of wider and deeper knowledge (39:9–12, 4b; 51:13). At any rate, he was appreciative of the travel opportunities and so aware of the ambiguity: life in relative poverty at home *versus* life in relative affluence elsewhere in the Hellenistic world.

4.31 A fully developed “Etiquette for Banquets and Symposia” (31:12–32:13; cf. 13:9) fittingly concludes the section on the Hebrew *polis*. Taking the brief and somewhat cryptic references to this topic in Prov 23:1–3 as starting point, Sirach first discusses the banquet at the house of a superior to which a junior official or scribe-to-be has been invited (31:12–24), then he discourses on the Hellenistic feast where a master of ceremonies is chosen from those attending, wine drunk, and musical entertainment enjoyed (31:25–32:13). Thus the unit is aptly titled: Discipline of Bread and Wine; it was probably as such a standard unit in Sirach’s curriculum.

4.32 In the discussion of the dinner party he proceeds in an orderly, logical fashion. He recommends avoiding greedy attitude and behavior, as would be evident in being the first to reach for the food, in crowding another person (least of all the host) in the common dish, in leaving some foods uneaten, and in chewing loudly. The polite guest is the first to stop eating (31:12b–18). He then warns against overeating but also comments on what is to be done when the guest, probably due to the urgings of the host, is overstuffed (31:19–22). He concludes this subunit with the observation that one’s table manners as a guest surely become known in town (31:23–24), and one is then treated accordingly also in other life situations.

4.33 Then he moves to the second part of the unit and discusses symposia where wine is served and citizens take turns presiding (32:1). It understandably begins with a warning against drunkenness (cf. Isa 5:22; Prov 31:6–7) with due allowance made for the consumption of wine in moderation (cf. Ps 104:15), and against reproaching one’s fellow

at that inopportune time (31:25–31). As president one is to be mindful of the welfare of all participants (32:1–2), as an old person in attendance ready to speak to the point, without interrupting the music (32:3–6), and as a young person one is to speak only when urged to do so, and then “concisely, saying much in few words; . . . as one who knows and yet holds his tongue” (32:7–9). Generally, modesty and gratefulness to God are indicated, as is leaving the feast in good time and controlling one’s emotions until one has reached one’s home (32:10–13).

4.4 The range of topics and the comprehensive approach in this and the other units of the section are remarkable. Maxims are used as centers or conclusions of small topical collections, suggesting the range and the thrusts of each maxim and providing fixed points of familiarity or ready assent. Together they constitute as first addition to Sirach’s original book his coverage of the section’s lead theme: concord, friendship, and harmony in matters public and private are to constitute Israel’s society.

5.1 A review of Sirach’s original book (1:1–23:27/51:1–30) will conclude the essay. The sage divided it into four sections (1:1–4:10; 4:11–6:17; 6:18–14:19; 14:20–23:27), each prefaced by a programmatic prologue in which the search, the merits, the achievements of wisdom are the subject (1:1–2:18; 4:11–19; 6:18–37; 14:20–15:10). This book is literarily of one cast and patterned after the biblical book of Proverbs with its four sections (1–9; 10–24; 15–29; 30–31); its prologue (1–9) suggested to Sirach the pattern: prologue-wisdom collection /3/.

5.11 Students of Sirach have not been able to identify an ordering principle in relation to the sequence of the four sections nor to the governing themes and ordering principles within each section. Without arguing my thesis in detail I propose that Sirach intended an alphabetic-climactic arrangement: The body of the Section א begins with a unit on אב (“father,” 3:1–16/3:1–4:10), the body of the Section ב with a unit on בשת (“shame,” 4:20–28/4:20–6:17), in the body of Section ג Sirach introduces early and puts into central place the notion of גאווה (“arrogance,” 7:17 and 10:5–18/7:1–14:19), while in Section ד he reaches the climax of his book with his presentation of דעת (“knowledge,” e.g. 16:25b [Hebrew]/15:11–23:27) through its theological discourses on “Free Will” (15:11–16:14) and “Individual Providence” (16:15–18:14) /4/.

5.12 The first two sections are each made up of four units. These are relatively short and represent elementary instruction. The second two sections have each eight units; they are wide-ranging in topics and represent advanced instruction. The third section (6:18–14:19) is more

hortative-ethical and society-oriented in character while the fourth section (14:20–23:27) is more explorative-theological in outlook and oriented more toward the individual.

5.13 Sirach drew on the teaching materials he used in oral instruction, some of which were already written down (Segal: pars. 18–19). The alphabetic-climactic arrangement of the original book probably reflects the graded curriculum of his school (51:23; 25–26, 28; 25:9b). This would also explain the great number of one line prohibitions and commandments without much supportive argumentation which make up most of the collections in the first two sections (3:1–4:10; 4:20–6:17) as well as the longer, extensively argued and supported units which are found in the third and fourth sections (7:1–14:19; 15:11–23:27).

5.21 In the fourth section (14:20–23:27) the prologue (14:20–15:10) is followed by discourses on debated theological issues of Sirach's time: "Free Will" (15:11–16:14) and "Individual Providence" (16:15–18:14). The method of argumentation is similar to that observed in the discourse on "All the Works of the Lord Are Good" (39:13–35) in the last added section in that arguments are drawn from the realm of nature, human experience, and history in that the opponents are quoted (15:11, 12; 16:17–22) and the concluding summary statement phrased with emphasis (16:11b–4; 18:13–14).

5.22 The following units (18:15–27; 18:28–19:17; 19:18–20:31; 21:1–22:18; 22:19–23:15; 23:16–27) are composed with a thesis or issue in mind. They are introduced or concluded with a summary statement, in four of these the summary word "all" occurs (18:27; 18:28; 22:18; 23:15); on the whole these units are juxtapositions of parallel maxims, some traditional, others newly formulated, and composed around the theme; they stress in different ways the importance of "knowledge."

5.31 The body of Section 3 (7:1–14:19) begins with a "Bürger-spiegel," that is, a comprehensive list of exhortations covering many aspects of a citizen's life (7:1–3, 8–14, 18–36), expanded by two warnings against seeking high office (7:4–7, 15–17), and concluded with a summary statement which contains the word "all (these)."

5.32 The following units (8:1–19; 9:1–9; 9:10–18; 10:1–11:9; 11:10–28; 11:29–13:23; 13:24–14:19) are likewise theme centered, and end with concluding summary statements. The center of this section is Sirach's discourse on "Government, Arrogance, and True Honor," both on the corporate and the individual plane (10:1–11:9). Appropriately, this section ends with a unit devoted to a citizen's last act affecting society, his death (14:11–19).

5.41 The bodies of the first two sections of the original book are made up of four units each (3:1-16; 3:17-25; 3:26-29; 3:30-4:10 and 4:20-28; 4:29-5:13; 5:14-6:4; 6:5-17). In some cases the individual maxims or maxim collections are supported by a motive clause which offers a reason for the maxim(s) 3:10, 16, 20, 24; 4:21, 24; 5:3, 6, 7, 8, 14; 6:4, 8, 17; not evident in the RSV in all cases).

5.42 Several units are composed on the basis of what appear to be known or readily intelligible maxims, for instance, the "Honoring Father/Mother" unit (3:1-16):

For the Lord has honored the father above the sons,
and has confirmed the authority of the mother
over the sons. (3:2)

To this restatement of Exod 20:12a the sage adds what at first appears to be a parallel maxim but which on closer scrutiny proves to add to it:

Whoever honors his father *atones for sins*,
and whoever glorifies his mother
is like one who lays up treasure. (3:3-4)

This is a new thought. Here the observance of the Mosaic law is considered to earn merit and to build up a treasure (cf. Matt 6:20). The following line (3:5) similarly extends the original maxim, while the one that is then given returns to a biblically attested result of honoring one's parents: long life (3:6a; cf. Exod 20:12b par). Here the juxtapositions of maxims serve to frame within biblically attested interpretations (3:2/6a) the new exegesis (3:3-5). The rest of the unit exhibits a similar moving back and forth between traditional and contemporary understanding of the biblical topic.

5.43 This exegetical procedure is aptly described by Sirach himself, who emphasizes that the sage both transmits what he inherits, as well as adds to it (8:8-9; 21:15; cf. 39:1-3), and by the evangelist Matthew who compares the "scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven" to "a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (13:52). It is noteworthy that Sirach rephrases statements which are directly derived from the Scripture so as to present both the old and the new, both the tradition and his interpretations and expansions literarily as of one cast. This phenomenon can also be observed in other units of the first two sections. It is the merit of Segal's commentary that it provides extensive references to the biblical sources on which Sirach draws and categorizes the various ways in which our sage does this (especially pars. 26, 31) /5/.

6.0 In conclusion, Sirach may be characterized as a sage who affirmed the rich heritage in which he stood and related it to the debates of his day. He recasts and develops the traditions, mirroring his contemporaries' understandings of the written and oral sacred lore as much as setting forth his own ordering, unfolding, and systematizing of the heritage. Whether or not his philosophy is judged in some respects "limited" and "superficial" in comparison to Job and Ecclesiastes /6/, he has, through his patient, probing, and reflection-inviting topical maxim collections and discourses, helped to set the stage and become seminal for the thought of Jews and Christians.

NOTES

/1/ Without attempting an exhaustive definition I here define a gnomic saying as a short (one or two line) maxim, through which a basic or striking, typical experience of life has been verbalized (von Rad: 113-37). Such sayings are transmitted as well as newly formulated by each generation of sages. The highly concentrated quality of the gnomic saying on the levels of word and thought leads to its retention in tradition and its use in the reflection, the interpretation, and the polemic of the sages.

/2/ Hengel (263-64), Marböck (1971:152-54) and Crenshaw (53) discuss this polarity. Hengel goes so far as to argue that Sirach reads out of God's free, independent activity in nature and history *a basic, structural law of polarity for creation* (264). Sirach's notion must no doubt be seen in a wider context (Eccles 7:14!); it is quoted and discussed in later Jewish and Christian writings (references in Segal: 212; Hengel: 264, footnote 248). On the whole issue cf. Maier's perceptive discussion (84-113).

/3/ Following Segal (paragraphs 18-21), who in turn follows and refines the results of Smend (par. 2).

/4/ "Knowledge" was to become an important notion in later Jewish literature (Dead Sea Scrolls), and Sirach's first sample of its application in the "Free Will" discourse (15:11-16:14) prepares the way for Josephus' programmatic discussion of the Jewish schools of his time on the basis of their attitude to this very issue (Hengel: 256).

/5/ Segal also discusses in survey (par. 47-57) and in detail (commentary) the many references and echoes of Sirach in Jewish and Christian literature.

/6/ So Segal, par. 43; cf. Haspecker: 13-35 for a review of recent German and English language interpretations of Sirach.

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PAROIMIAI IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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ABSTRACT

The gospel of John labels much of its own content as *paroimiai*, a term which seems to embrace a variety of literary forms and devices in that gospel, one of which is the proverb. In this preliminary study, thirty-four proverbial sayings have been isolated. Their functions range from creating literary discord to providing a basis for some fundamental johannine themes. Several proverbs are analyzed in their literary contexts, and some possible implications for understanding the gospel are suggested.

1.0 An acknowledged feature of the gospel of John is the variety of literary and conceptual puzzles on which it seems to flourish. John presents an array of metaphor, allegory, riddle, double entendre, contradiction, and caesura that resists, if it does not prevent, an easy theological systematization. One approach to solving these puzzles has been simply to dismantle them, either by rearrangement, or division into sources, or reassignment to multiple authors or redactors. Even with such theories, the intentional literary enigmas remain. Hence, Wayne Meeks has described a second approach which recognizes that most of the *aporiae* in the gospel were apparently acceptable to the evangelist; thus, they should be considered a positive factor in understanding his literary and theological effort, as well as, perhaps, his historical situation.

So long as we approach the Johannine literature as a chapter in the history of *ideas*, it will defy our understanding. Its metaphors are irrational, disorganized and incomplete. But if we pose our questions in the form, What functions did this particular system of metaphors have for the group that developed it? then even its self-contradictions and its disjunctures may be seen to be *means of communication*. (Meeks: 68)

2.0 Is the gospel comprehensible or not? This tension is implicitly presented to the reader by the very kinds of material used: metaphor, allegory, irony, riddle, and the like invite misunderstanding, as well as a higher understanding. However, the gospel also explicitly admits to this tension in 16:25 where Jesus says: "I have said these things to you *en paroimiais*. The hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you *en paroimiais* but *parrēsiā*"; in 16:29 the same contrast is given in reverse: "His disciples said, 'See, now you are speaking *en parrēsiā* and you are not speaking *paroimian oudemian*.'" (This same contrast is also found in 7:4–10, 26 to describe the *behavior* of Jesus.) These verses have generally been understood to be a reference not merely to the immediately preceding verses, but to all of the words of Jesus in the gospel (Brown: 734; Bultmann: 586–87). Actually, 16:25–29 does not stand as a dividing line after which Jesus no longer speaks *paroimiai* or after which he is understood. In fact, the point of the passage seems to be to underscore the continued misunderstanding of the disciples (Lindars, 1972:513).

2.1 The term *paroimia* is unique to John among the gospels, and it occurs only once outside of 16:25–29, where in 10:6 it refers back to two shepherd parables in 10:1–5. Obviously, more than this one specified example is involved. Moreover, John's use of the term embraces a range of literary forms, devices, and concepts, including riddle, proverb, parable, metaphor, allegory, irony, paradox, enigma, aporia, and so on. Could an analysis of the literary functions of these items add to an appreciation of the origin, genre, purpose, and setting of the gospel? Toward that end it is the purpose of this article to focus on the proverbial-parabolic material in the gospel (on the johannine riddles, see the fascinating work of Leroy).

3.0 Prior to investigating the johannine proverbs, some methodological remarks on proverb identification and function are in order. The literature on the proverb is sizeable and not easily summarized, but a thorough presentation of the discussion and its insights is unnecessary here.

3.1 Ultimately, the ability to recognize a proverb, or any genre, is intuitive and based on learned, shared assumptions (Blehr). A statement is seen as proverbial, not so much because it is traditional, but

because it fits certain expectations, or more likely because there are contextual clues that signal the presence of proverbs (Abrahams, 1967: 181; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). Among folklorists (see Abrahams, 1972) a general understanding of the proverb is that it is a short, impersonal, traditional, out-of-context statement in which a particular incident or experience is described and from which one is encouraged to abstract metaphorically a meaning. That meaning is then to be extended to more general applications in a variety of situations. It is this, plus the fact that the proverb's subject matter is usually different from the literary or social context in which it is used, that gives the proverb an out-of-context character—it is also this character which enables the proverb to be transferred from one setting to another. The concrete illustrations in a proverb give it the character of being a capsule story from real life.

3.2 The proverb provides a model or meaning to be applied to the hearer's own situation. The proverb seems to embody the knowledge and wisdom of the past, and this is what gives it a persuasive character. By providing a solution in traditional terms, the proverb carries with it the unarguable weight of past experience. It is a self-contained statement with a moral weight of its own; it presents a point of view and a recommended strategy to be followed.

3.3 The proverb is a sanctioned vehicle for expressing one's thoughts and intentions, without fear of public censure and with little risk of being misunderstood. But, the meaning of a proverb is clear only when seen in its social or literary context—the reason for its use, its effect. Of course, the social, oral function of proverbs may differ greatly from their literary, written functions, but in both contexts it is necessary not only to recognize the proverb but also to be aware of the other components of the situations in which proverbs are used:

What are the rules governing who can use proverbs, or particular proverbs, and to whom? upon what occasions? in what places? with what other person present or absent? Do restrictions or prescriptions as to the use of proverbs or a proverb have to do with particular topics? With a specific relationship between speaker and addressee? What exactly are the contributing contextual factors which make the use of proverbs or a particular proverb, possible or not possible, appropriate or inappropriate? (Arewa and Dundes: 71)

Such questions as these could be applied to the johannine proverbs as they function in the text or equally perhaps to their pre-gospel social use within the johannine group or community. The combination of these may provide insights into johannine christianity. For example, the fact that the coining of new proverbs takes place especially within subcultures (Abrahams, 1970:426) might support a particular sociological view of the johannine group. As value charged statements (Blehr), what indices of the shared assumptions and values of the group are provided?

3.4 Answering such questions would require an exhaustive study of the gospel and its proverbs. However, in what follows, they can offer a fresh vantage point from which to view the gospel.

4.0 In this preliminary study, it was necessary to establish a tentative list of johannine proverbs. The appendix of this paper offers a list of thirty-four items which seem to *function proverbially* within the literary text, whether or not they could be established as having a long tradition or a wide distribution. Even if particular items would be disputed or others added, there does seem to be a body of sayings that are used proverbially in the gospel.

4.1 At first glance, this collection of proverbs appears to be extremely diverse and incoherent, but on closer inspection, relationships can be found. Characteristic of johannine dualism, most of these proverbs fall into either/or contrasts:

slave/master	13:16; 15:15b; 15:20
father/son	5:19-20a
light/darkness	3:20; 3:30; 9:4; 11:9-10; 12:35c
slave/son	8:35
sower/reaper	4:37
faithless/believe	20:27 (see 20:29)
shepherd/stranger- robber-hireling	10:1-3a; 10:3b-5; 10:11b-13
life/death	12:25a; 15:13
secrecy/openness	7:4
better/worse	1:46; 4:44; 2:10
sorrow/joy	16:21

Many of the proverbs also group on the basis of subject matter:

light	3:20; 3:30; 9:4; 11:9-10; 12:35c
slave	8:34; 8:35; 13:16; 15:15b; 15:20
nature	3:8; 4:35; 4:37; 12:24; 15:1-2(6)
belief	3:27; 13:17; 20:27; 20:29
shepherd	10:1-3a; 10:3b-5; 10:11b-13

4.2 A number of these proverbs reflect recognized johannine themes, and this raises the question of whether these sayings have been coined in the course of composing the gospel or whether they had an existence, independently or as part of a collection, prior to being incorporated into the gospel. The latter case would mean that some of the proverbs are responsible for generating particular gospel themes.

4.21 Several of the proverbs do play crucial roles in developing themes. For example, the father/son imagery in the gospel does not really begin until after 5:19-20a (cf. 3:35). The light imagery is not developed until after the light proverb, 3:20 (except for the prologue). The

shepherd/sheep theme is structured around the shepherd *paroimiai* and is confined to 10:1–30, except for 21:15–18. Further investigation may reveal that other proverbs function in this way (e.g., is 1:46 perhaps the controlling proverb of the whole gospel?). Other proverbs link up with some of the Jesus typologies in the gospel: the Light (3:20, etc.); the Son (5:19–20a); Good Shepherd (10:11); the Door (10:7); True Vine (15:1–2).

4.3 One should also note that although usually it is Jesus who speaks these proverbs, in seven cases it is other characters who do: steward (2:10); John the Baptist (3:27, 3:29, 3:30); the brothers (7:4); Nathanael (1:46); the evangelist/narrator (4:44). Therefore, *paroimiai* are a characteristic of the *gospel* and not only of the words of Jesus; this is another point at which proverb investigation pushes us behind the gospel to the evangelist and his group for the more adequate locus of these *paroimiai*.

4.4 Finally, does this study point to a *collection* of johannine or pre-johannine proverbs, now dispersed throughout the gospel but once independent? There is great methodological difficulty in moving backwards from a literary text to a sayings source. Careful form-critical work might be useful, however, as would attention to other unifying factors and similarities among the proverbs (see 4.1 above). Further progress on this point could yield additional sociological information as well as insights into the generic development of John. There are ample examples of proverb collections in antiquity that would justify further pursuit with John.

5.0 More important than the existence of a proverb collection is the question of how these proverbs are used in the gospel. In this section a brief examination of four examples will be given.

5.1 *John 2:10*. How does this proverb operate within this pericope? Lindars (1970) has argued that the story is the result of the fusion of a miracle story (2:1–8) and a parable (2:9b–10). The fusion was accomplished in 2:9 through the link-word “wine.” A review of the story suggests that the proverb seems to be out of context with the rest of the story and thus appears to have been inserted.

5.11 The story as it stands is disparate. For example, although the mother of Jesus is introduced at the beginning of the story, she disappears, while the steward is introduced (v.9) as a significant character at the end.

5.12 The crux of the pericope comes in attempting to understand the point of the story in its present form. Is it that Jesus was obedient to his mother? Or, is it that Jesus' hour has come even though he says it has not? Is it that water has become wine (no action implied)? Or that Jesus has changed water into wine (no action or words of Jesus narrated)? If the point is to display the miraculous power of Jesus, then the story ends without any response at all to Jesus. Is the point that Jesus' wine is better than their good wine, or that a new eschatological age has come even though Jesus' hour has not?

5.13 And how should the saying be understood? Is it a criticism of the bridegroom for not following the appropriate procedure of serving the good wine first? Or is it a neutral comment which simply points out what the norm is even though it has not been followed? Or is it a compliment to the groom who has taken it upon himself (as the steward sees it) to serve the best wine to his (intoxicated) guests?

5.14 Why does Jesus embarrass the groom by upsetting the norm? Why would he produce better wine for guests who, being intoxicated, would not be able to appreciate it? Is it, as some have commented (e.g. Douglas: 367), a cruel joke on the steward who, being responsible for the proper serving of the wine, has been tricked?

5.15 The introduction of the proverb deflects the course of the story (water being changed into wine is not the same as good wine replacing poorer), creating some tension. The proverb, in the process, converts the miracle story into a "sign" which is apparently appreciated only by the disciples (2:11). To the extent that the story is disjointed, it seems to be the result of the insertion of the proverb which shifts the direction of the story.

5.2 *John 4:35; 4:37.* These two verses are the clearest examples of proverbs in the gospels, each being introduced by a stock formula (see appendix). Although Jesus speaks these proverbs, it is clearly established that he is citing known proverbs.

5.21 John 4:31 picks up the theme from 4:8 in which the disciples had gone to buy food. 4:31-34 introduce the riddle of special food—Jesus' food being to do the work of the one who sent him. 4:35-38 could be viewed as an attempt to expand Jesus' answer in the riddle. The proverb in 4:35 is cited *in order to be contradicted*. The saying is not true—the implication being that Jesus' work involves some sort of metaphorical harvesting now and not according to the normal pattern. 4:36 redirects the thought and appears almost an attempt at a pseudo-

proverb designed to introduce the words “sower” and “reaper” which are needed to link up the next proverb in 4:37.

5.22 The second proverb, 4:37, is accepted as true. Both vv.36 and 38 may be attempts to expand its meaning. 4:36 leaves unclear who the “sower” is; the “reapers” might be the disciples or the johannine community. The fate of the sower is not mentioned, only that he and the reaper rejoice (the reaper receives wages). 4:38 destroys the possible unity by making Jesus the one who sends the disciples to reap (instead of being the sower as we would expect) and by introducing “others” who are apparently to be equated with sowers.

5.23 Thus, once again there appears to be a disjuncture in the pericope. The juxtaposition of the riddle and the first proverb (4:35) forces the reader to guess at a connection. But with 4:36 it becomes apparent that it is actually 4:37, the second proverb, that is controlling the development of the pericope, rather than perhaps an overriding idea (the link between 4:35 and 4:36 remains unclear). While the riddle in 4:31–34 has been woven more smoothly into the story of the Samaritan woman, it is not at all clear that the expansion of the riddle by means of the proverbs was as successful. Again, it may be the case that proverbs have been worked into the narrative but have disrupted somewhat the flow of the story. It may be that the riddle was inserted as well; this unit, 4:31–38, seems ungermane to the larger story of Jesus in Samaria.

5.3 *John 7:4.* John 7 begins with an act of physical secrecy (the evangelist tells us that Jesus would not go about in Judea because the Jews sought to kill him). Nevertheless, the disciples urge Jesus to go to Judea and they quote him a proverb about not doing works in secret (*en kryptō*) but rather openly (*en parrēsiā*). Although Jesus rebuffs the proverb, in 7:10 he goes up to Judea anyway (*ou phanerōs all' en kryptō*), and soon (7:14–24) is speaking *parrēsiā* (7:26). John narrates that officers are being sent to arrest Jesus, and with that Jesus speaks a riddle: “I shall be with you a little longer . . . you will seek me and you will not find me . . .” (7:33–34), a riddle about (apparently) physical secrecy.

5.31 Thus, 7:1–36 is a carefully unified section based on the proverb (7:4) and the riddle (7:33–34) and framed by references to Jesus' hiding in 7:1 and 7:33–34 (36). The proverb's vocabulary has been used to expand the story (7:10, 13, 26). An interesting aspect of this story is that while Jesus makes an attempt to disregard the proverb (7:4b–10), in the end he follows the advice of the proverb (despite using a counter-proverb in 7:18a) and goes to the feast.

5.32 This whole section is parallel in many ways to John 16, where in v.25 Jesus speaks *en paroimiais* but will someday speak *parrēsiā*. Yet, in 18:19–20 Jesus states that he has spoken *parrēsiā* to the world and has spoken nothing *en kryptō*. The same tension is found in 7:1–36 where for all the emphasis on secrecy, in the end Jesus speaks openly. John 11:8–17 may be the mirror opposite of 7:4–10; there the disciples discourage Jesus from going near Jerusalem and Jesus quotes a proverb at them (11:9–10) indicating that he intends to work openly! (Yet, Jesus withdraws in 11:53–54.)

5.33 In this section, the proverb functions more coherently in the narrative. Jesus reacts against the proverb only in the end to validate it.

5.4 *John 10:1–3a, 3b–5, 11b–13.* John 10 topically begins a new section, introduced with the *amēn, amēn* formula, used frequently with the *paroimiai* (see Appendix, item 11).

5.41 This section (10:1–30) exhibits one of the smoothest and least contradictory uses of proverbs. Robinson has shown that 10:1–5 contains two “parables” that have been fused together. In 10:1–3a the concern is with two figures, the shepherd and the robber, and how each enters the sheepfold; 10:3b–5 is concerned with how the sheep react to the shepherd and to a stranger. With the same subject and setting, these stories fused easily. It is important to note that this section is the only one specifically designated by John as a *paroimia*.

5.42 10:7–10 is an expansion of 10:1–5, using the word door, although this is not an expected development since the door has no great significance in 10:1–5.

5.43 10:11b–13 is the third parable, and it links smoothly to what has preceded. Here the contrast is between the shepherd and the hireling and how each cares for the sheep in adversity.

5.44 10:14–18, 26–30 are a midrashic expansion, building on the themes and content of the three parables. The following relationships may be noted:

v.14	– 11b, 4–5, 3a	v.26	– 5, 16
15b	– 11b	27	– 3–5
16	– 4, 3	28	– 12
17–18	– 11b–13	29	– 27, 17–18, 12

Thus, this section seems to be much more unified and almost self-contained: only in 21:15–17 is the shepherd/sheep theme mentioned again. However, the theme of laying down one’s life does extend beyond this

section through the use of two other johannine proverbs (12:25a; 15:13). This kind of localized expansion of proverbs is typical of John's style (cf. 7:4; 15:1-2).

5.5 The use of the remaining proverbs varies considerably and a full analysis of each should be done. Generally, one might find that a number of these proverbs have very loose connections with their contexts and appear to be inserted without clear reason (4:44; 8:35; 9:4; 11:9-10; 13:17; 15: 15b; 21:18). For example, 21:18 is so out of context that an explanation had to be inserted (21:19) to explain it. John 4:44 is contradictory no matter how it is interpreted, contradicting either 4:1 or 4:45. Other proverbs seem to have been worked a little more into their contexts or to have had their contexts shaped around them (1:46; 3:8; 3:20; 3: 27; 3:30; 5:19-20a; 7:18a; 8:34; 12:35c; 13:10; 13: 16; 15:1-2; 15:13; 16:21). For example, 1:46 is linked to its context by 1:45c—both disrupt the story; 3:8 has been inserted through the link word, *pneuma* (also 3: 8d), creating a double entendre, but not seriously disrupting the story line. Finally, there are a number of proverbs that do function well in context (12:24; 12:25a; 15: 20; 20:27; 20:29). Further work on these proverbs remains to be done.

6.0 The gospel of John contains a block of proverbial material which has been worked into the narrative with varying degrees of success. This proverbial material has been incorporated into the gospel even when contextually abrasive. Why? Are we to attribute this to multiple redactors, the collision of sources, displacements, or poor authorship? Was it felt that this material was necessary to the thematic development of the gospel? In some cases it seems to have the opposite effect. Could it be that there was some compulsion to include this material in the gospel; was it a given with which the author had to come to terms in the best possible way? What kind of a genre allows for such needs and still accommodates disjunctures, contradictions, and disparate elements as found in John?

6.1 In answering these questions, the following observations are proposed:

(a) Lack of success in finding a carefully worked out order or structure in the gospel might be taken as a *positive* factor in searching for an understanding of the gospel.

(b) The gospel might be dealt with as it stands, as an integral literary unit, however roughly composed. Various theories of sources, displacements, multiple editings and rewritings have made it difficult to consider the gospel on its own terms. Could it not be that the diversity, contradictions, *aporiae*, and variations of thought and language are sign posts into an understanding of the *generic development* of John and to

the intentions underlying its composition? As Smalley (291) remarks, "In the end, it is not the diversity of John that is surprising, but its unity."

(c) Is it possible that motives other than a concern for content are at work in the production of the gospel? Do not the various perplexities of the gospel give evidence for this?

(d) Take seriously the existence of sources or independent elements that have come together in the gospel: signs source, proverbs, John 21, prologue, passion story, synoptic traditions, and so on. However, must we presume the existence of a once more coherent, more literary gospel that has undergone a process of deterioration or disintegration in order to explain the disparate nature of the gospel?

(e) Overriding themes may be a more predominant unifying factor than structure, plot, or logical consistency.

(f) Could the gospel have arisen generically out of anthological motives? As a collection of disparate material, a collection of collections, is it possible to see the gospel as an anthology in transition? For example, Meeks (69) has observed that the gospel has been "organized partly by design and partly by pre-redactional collocation of the different ways of talking in the life of the community." To what extent does the motive of preservation of material override the desire to present a totally unified coherent work? Is it possible to view John as a collection in which an attempt has been made to coalesce the material and to extend various themes (while recognizing that an anthology would resist such efforts)? Do we not find John using traditional material and yet attempting to move beyond it? To what does this point in the text and context of John? Whatever the answer, the proverbs in the gospel will be one factor in the final resolution.

Appendix

7.0 What follows is a tentative, working list of proverbs (*paroimiai*) in the gospel of John. Each item includes: (1) references to some secondary sources which also identify the verse as proverbial or parabolic, (2) possible allusions or parallels, (3) commentary. No attempt has been made to be comprehensive or exhaustive in any of these three categories. A complete listing of biblical and non-biblical allusions and parallels would be necessary in order to establish each saying's extra-johannine traditional and proverbial status as well as its socio-cultural and literary distribution. Toward this end, consult such works as Allenbach.

- (1) Can anything good come (be) from Nazareth? (1:46)
(Barrett: 154; Brown: 83)
(No parallels located)

Brown suggests that the saying may have been "a local proverb reflecting jealousy between Nathanael's town of Cana and nearby Nazareth." It seems inappropriate to the story and may have been inserted by the insertion of 1.45c, which is inappropriate to the rest of v.45 (Dodd, 1963:310-11; Bultmann: 103).

- (2) Every man serves the good wine first, and when they have drunk (become intoxicated), the poor wine. (2:10)
(Dodd, 1963:227; Lindars, 1970:320-24)
(Luke 5:39)
This verse is discussed in the article (§5.1).
- (3) The wind blows where it wills, and you hear its sound, but you do not know whence it comes or where it goes. (3:8)
(Dodd, 1963:364-66; Hunter: 79; Lindars, 1972:154; Schnackenburg: 374)
(Eccl 11:5; Sir 16:21; Ign. *Phld.* 7:1; cf. John 8:14)
This verse has been added via the linking word *pneuma* (3:5,6,8d). The whole section, 3:3-15, seems to be a collection of incomprehensible sayings; within this, vv. 3 and 7 frame one part ("born from above") and vv. 8-15 form a looser unit of enigmatic sayings, initiated by the proverb, attesting to mysterious or inaccessible aspects of reality.
- (4) For everyone doing evil things hates the light (and does not come to the light) lest his works be exposed. (3:20)
(No secondary support)
(Job 24:13-17; Eph 5:11-13; cf. John 11:9-10; 12:35c)
John 3:20 functions proverbially and parallels two other johannine proverbs: 11:9-10 and 12:35c (see also 9:4). There is some development of these in 8:12 and 9:5. Nicodemus comes to Jesus *nyktos*. John 3:21 is a theologized extension of the proverb.
- (5) No man can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. (3:27)
(Bultmann: 172, "maxim"; Dodd, 1963:281, "aphorism")
(1 Cor 4:7; cf. Prov 1:28; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; John 6:65, 19:11; *Gos. Thom.* 38)
This proverb points back to 3:2, as does 3:20; at the same time, it is the first of three proverbs contained in a new unit, 3:22 ff.
- (6) The one who had the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. (3:29)

(Barrett: 185; Bultmann: 173; Dodd, 1963:282–85, 385–86; Hunter, 78; Lindars, 1970:324ff; 1972:167; Schnackenburg: 416)

(cf. Isa 62:5; Jer 7:34, 16:9; 25:10; Mark 2:19–20; Matt 9:15; Luke 5:34–35)

See Lindars (1970) for full discussion.

- (7) He must increase, but I must decrease. (3:30)
 (Dodd, 1963:283, 285, “aphorism”; Lindars, 1970:326; 1972:168)
 (1 Sam 2:7; 2 Sam 3:1; 1 Cor 15:42–47; Luke 1:51–53; cf. John 3:6, 13; 8:23)
 The verbs *auxanein* and *elattousthai* can be understood as referring to the increase and decrease of light, perhaps as brightening and fading (see Bultmann: 174–75). If so, then this proverb fits into the light theme of this chapter and the gospel and can be grouped with the four other light proverbs: 3:20; 9:4; 11:9–10; 12:35c.
- (8) There are yet four months and the harvest comes. (4:35)
 (Barrett: 202; Brown: 174, 182; Bultmann: 196; Hunter: 79–80; Lindars, 1972:195; Schnackenburg: 448–49)
 (cf. Rev 14:15)
 The introductory formula, “do you not say,” indicates that this is a popular saying, a proverb.
- (9) One sows and another reaps. (4:37)
 (Barrett: 203; Brown: 182–83; Bultmann: 198 and notes; Lindars, 1972:196; Schnackenburg: 450)
 (Job 31:8; Mic 6:15; 1 Cor 3:6–8; 9:11; Gal 6:7–8; Matt 12:30; 13:37–43; Matt 6:26/Luke 12:24; Matt 25:24/Luke 19:21; Barrett cites a number of parallels and possible Greek sources)
 The introductory formula, *ho logos*, indicates this to be a proverb.
- (10) A prophet has no honor in his own country. (4:44)
 (Barrett: 206; Lindars, 1972:200; Schnackenburg: 462–63; and others)
 (Mark 6:4; Matt 13:57; Luke 4:24; *Gos. Thom.* 31; POxy I,5; cf. John 1:11; 7:52)
 This is a well attested proverb, not only among the biblical traditions. In John, the saying is awkward in its context (Brown: 187; Dodd, 1963:239–40) and contradicts either 4:45 or 4:1. Notice that it is the narrator (the evangelist) who is citing this proverb.

- (11) The son does nothing on his own but only what he sees the father doing. For, whatever he would do, those things the son does likewise. For the father loves the son and shows him all the things he is doing. (5:19–20a)
 (Brown: 214, 218; Dodd, 1963:386,n.2; 1968:30–40; Hunter: 80; Lindars, 1970:318; 1971:50; 1972:221)
 (cf. John 3:35; 5:30; 8:28; 10:17; 14:10,12; 15:9; 17:23–24)
 Lindars, 1970:318: “It is easy to see how the entire exposition of the work of Jesus as the Son of Man, with which the ensuing discourse is concerned, is based on the parable” (so also Dodd). Father/son imagery is sparse in the gospel prior to this point: 2:16?, 3:35, 5:17. The introductory formula, *amēn, amēn legō hymin*, may indicate sayings of a traditional or proverbial nature, if not simply to place emphasis on certain sayings. In fact, a number of johannine proverbs are introduced with this formula (5:19; 8:34; 10:1; 10:7; 12:24; 13:16; 16:20; 21:18), as are a number of quasi-proverbial sayings (3:3; 3:5; 5:24; 5:25; 6:47; 6:53; 8:51; 13:38; 14:12; 16:23; 16:23; cf. also 1:51; 3:11; 6:26; 6:32; 8:58; 13:20).
- (12) For no one does anything in secret if he seeks to be in the open. (7:4)
 (No secondary support)
 (Mark 4:22/Luke 8:17; Matt 10:26/Luke 12:2; *Gos. Thom.* 5, 6; POxy 654.4)
 This is another example of a proverb spoken by someone other than Jesus in the gospel (cf. 1:46; 2:10; 3:27,29,30; 4:44), in this case Jesus’ brothers. It appears that this saying may be the base upon which this whole section is expanded (cf. 7:10,13,26).
- (13) The one who speaks on his own seeks his own glory. (7:18a)
 (Bultmann: 275, maxim)
 (Cf. John 8:50; 5:30–31; 5:19–20a)
 Brown: 312, suggests that this is the answer to the challenge hurled at Jesus by his brothers in 7:3–5; in that case, we might have one proverbial statement used to counter another.
- (14) The one who commits sin is a slave. (8:34)
 (Dodd, 1963:380, maxim)
 (Rom 6:15–23; 2 Pet 2:19; cf. Gal 4:7)
 This is the first of two attached slave proverbs (see also 8:35; 13:16; 15:15b; 15:20). Note the introductory *amēn* formula.
- (15) The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. (8:35)

(Brown: 355–56; Bultmann: 440; Dodd, 1963:379–82; Hunter: 81; Lindars, 1970:318; 1971:44; 1972:324–25)

(Gen 21:10; Gal 4:30; cf. Exod 21:2; Deut 15:12)

A slave proverb attached to another (8:34). Lindars (1970: 318) points out that, as in 5:19–20a, the discourse which encloses these sayings is based on them and an expansion of them.

- (16) It is necessary for us to work while it is day; night comes, when no one is able to work. (9:4)

(Brown: 372; Dodd, 1963:186; Lindars, 1971:31–32; 1972:342–43)

(No parallels located)

The proverb does not fit its context at all; it has no relation to what follows and, in Dodd's own words, "the transition to vs. 5 is violent." The day/night contrast occurs only here and in 11:9–10, also proverbial; but see 3:20 in conjunction with 3:2, and 12:35c. The phrase, *tou pempantos me*, is an insertion and should be ignored on textual grounds as well.

- (17) The one who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that one is a thief and a robber; but the one who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. (10:1–3a)

(Barrett: 305–6; Brown: 391; Bultmann: 363, 371–72 n.3, 375 and n.4; Dodd, 1963:383,385; Hunter: 81–82; Lindars, 1971: 51; 1972:353–55; Robinson, 67–75)

(Cf. Mark 13:33–37; Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39)

This is the first of two shepherd parables that have been fused together.

- (18) The sheep hear his (shepherd's) voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. (10: 3b–5)

(See above; also Lindars, 1972:356–57)

(See above; also Ezek 34)

See 10:1–3 above. This section is the only place specifically referred to in John as a *paroimia* (10:6). John 10 should be viewed as a collection of three parables followed by an expansion and interpretation of them (Lindars, 1972:354).

- (19) The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The one who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them—because he is a hireling and does not care for the sheep. (10:11b–13)
 (Brown: 395; Bultmann: 363, 370 n.4)
 (Cf. 1 Sam 17:34–35; Isa 31:4; 40:11; Ezek 34:15f., 22; Amos 3:12; Acts 20:29)
 The third of the shepherd parables in John 10. Note the relationship between 10:11, 17, and 15:13.
- (20) Are there not twelve hours of the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not with him. (11:9–10)
 (Bultmann: 398–99; Dodd, 1963:373–79; Hunter: 82–83; Lindars: 1972:389)
 (Matt 6:22–23; cf. John 9:4, 12:35c)
 This saying does not seem to function well in its context.
- (21) Unless a grain of wheat, falling on the earth, dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (12:24)
 (Brown: 467, 471; Bultmann: 424; Dodd, 1963:366–68; Hunter: 83–84; Lindars, 1972:428)
 (1 Cor 15:36f.; John 15:1–2; *1 Clem* 24.4–5; P. Egerton 2v (IV,60–75); *Apoc. Pet.* (Ethiopic) 4; *Gos. Thom.* 57; cf. Matt 5:13; 1 Cor 15:42ff.)
 Note the introductory *amēn* formula. Attached to this saying is a second proverb, 12:25a; the context of these sayings is awkward.
- (22) The one who loves his life loses it. (12:25a)
 (Beardslee: 67; Dodd, 1955:78–81; Lindars, 1972:429)
 (Mark 8:35; Matt 10:39, 16:25; Luke 9:24, 14:26; *Gos. Thom.* 58; cf. John 10:11; 15:13)
 Apparently this was a widespread and popular saying in the tradition. See 15:13 below.
- (23) The one who walks in darkness does not know where he goes. (12:35c)
 (Bultmann: 356–57, maxim; Hunter: 83; Lindars, 1972:435)
 (1 John 2:11; Eph 5:8; cf. John 9:4; 11:9–10; 8:12)
- (24) The one who has bathed does not need to wash, but is clean all over. (13:10)
 (Brown: 567–68; Bultmann: 469–70, n.2)
 (No parallels located)

Brown has argued that "except for the feet" is a scribal addition to the saying; following Brown, we drop it.

- (25) A slave is not greater than his master, nor is the messenger greater than the one who sent him. (13:16)
 (Brown: 553; Bultmann: 477; Dodd, 1955:75-78)
 (Mark 10:44-45; Matt 10:24-25; 20:27-28; Luke 6:40; 22:26-27; cf. Gen 39:8-9)
 The first half of this proverb is repeated in 15:20; this saying contains the only use of *apostolos* in the gospel and may indicate its non-johannine character. Note also the introductory *amēn* formula.
- (26) If you know these things, happy are you if you do them. (13:17)
 (Bultmann: 476; Dodd: 1963:353)
 (Luke 11:28; Matt 24:46; Jas 1:25)
 This is one of two makarisms found in the gospel (see 20:29). This saying is attached to 13:16 and as such functions under the introductory formula of that verse.
- (27) (There is a vinedresser.) Every branch that bears no fruit, he takes it (v.6: and it withers; they gather them and throw them into the fire and they are burned) and each bearing fruit he cleans so that it may bear more fruit. (15:1-2, 6)
 (Barrett: 396; Brown: 660; Hunter: 86-87; Lindars, 1972:488-89)
 (Isa 5:1-7; Ezek 19:10-14; Matt 13:30, 37ff.; Luke 13:6-9; Matt 3:12/Luke 3:17; Matt 3:10/Luke 3:9; Matt 7:16-20/Luke 6:43-44; *Gos. Thom.* 40)
 Recognizing the dangers of rearrangement, we offer a speculative revision of this parable. Verse 2 (except for *en emoi* is the core of the parable (with original introduction perhaps being something like *ho geōrgos estin*). In that verse, the consequence of bearing fruit is that the branch is pruned so that it will grow more; the only consequence of not bearing fruit is that the branch is taken away. But, given v.6c the contrast would be intensified ("they" perhaps referring to vinedressers?). In any case, 15:1 begins a new section in the gospel and it is clear that 15:3-17 is an expansion based on the parable. Cf. John 12:24.
- (28) Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. (15:13)
 (Bultmann: 542-43, n.7, maxim; Lindars, 1972:491)
 (Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 33: "A friend is a second self"; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, X,120; 1 John 3.16; cf. John 10:11; 12:25a)

- (29) The slave does not know what his master does. (15:15b)
 (Bultmann: 544, n.2)
 (No parallels located)
 This is one of five slave proverbs in the gospel: 8:34,35; 13:16; 15:20.
- (30) A slave is not greater than his master. (15:20)
 See above on 13:16. Note, however, that the second half of that proverb is not repeated here, even though prefaced with, "Remember the word (*tou logou*) I said to you." This may suggest that 13:16b is not to be considered part of the original proverb.
- (31) The woman, when she is giving birth, has sorrow because her hour has come; but when the child is born, she no longer remembers the distress because of the joy that a man has been born into the world. (16:21)
 (Brown: 731, 732; Bultmann: 580, n.1; Dodd, 1963:369-73; Hunter: 84-85; Lindars, 1972:509)
 (Cf. Isa 13:8; 26:17)
 Note the introductory *amēn* formula in v.20. This proverb is worked nicely into its context.
- (32) Be not faithless, but believing. (20:27)
 (Dodd, 1963: 354-55)
 (Cf. Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46)
 Surprisingly, this saying contains the only uses of *pistos* and *apistos* in the gospel (Brown: 1026).
- (33) Happy are those who do not see and believe. (20:29)
 (Brown: 1048-51; Bultmann: 476, n.4; Dodd, 1963:354-55)
 (Luke 10:23/Matt 13:16-17; 1 Pet 1:8; cf. John 9:37-39)
 The second of two makarisms in the gospel. Brown (1051) cites an echo of this verse in the Apocryphal *Letter of James*)
- (34) When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hand and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. (21:18)
 (Barrett: 487; Bultmann: 713; Lindars, 1972:636)
 (No parallels located)
 Brown (1118) states that the sayings in 18-23 are very old and notes the ambiguity of v.18. He concludes that the saying was so well known and traditional that it could not be reworded. We note that the saying is totally out of context, so much so that it must be explained in v.19 in order to justify its being there. Note also the introductory *amēn* formula, characteristic of many of the johannine proverbs.

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PLUTARCH'S USE OF PROVERBIAL FORMS OF SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

Plutarch's maxims and proverbs are in the first place rhetorical and decorative, enlivening the presentation of essay or narrative. At a more fundamental level, a large number of them bring to expression an ironic awareness of the precariousness of existence, an awareness which serves to offset the rational-moral ordering of Plutarch's thought. This subordinated irony is contrasted to the more radical irony of much early Christian language.

1.1 For one who comes at the study of the proverb from the side of the Jewish wisdom literature and the proverbs and maxims in early Christian literature, Plutarch provides some striking contrasts. His surviving works constitute one of the ancient world's greatest sources of "quotable quotes," taken from quite varied sources—Homer, Hesiod, the tragic and comic dramatists (most frequently of these, Euripides), and various philosophers, especially Plato (on Plutarch's quotations, see Helmbold and O'Neil) /1/. Among these quotations are a great many short, pithy maxims and also some popular proverbs; some of the proverbs and proverbial phrases are expressly identified as such. If we look at the meaning and function of these maxims and proverbs, we find that most of them fall into a very different class from what we find in the Jewish and early Christian sayings. These latter proverbs affirm a

moral order; very many of Plutarch's, on the other hand, are ironical or sceptical about the outcomes of life.

1.2 This fact is the more noteworthy because the moral stance affirmed by the Jewish-Christian wisdom tradition is parallel in many respects to the position of Plutarch. But while he often does affirm his moral stance in a maxim, he characteristically uses other rhetorical forms for this purpose, while his typical use of popular proverbs and also of many maxims turns against the reliability of the moral order and questions or mocks it.

2.1 In pre-philosophical language the proverb supplements myth by gathering observations about how life works. (Plutarch himself associates "mythos" in a sense close to our "myth" with "paroimia" or proverb as archaic, poetic forms of speech, but does not stop to set out their functions [*On the Oracles at Delphi* 406C].) Proverbs do not attempt to formulate an overarching view; that is the function of myth. What they attempt is to gather together a multitude of specific observations into clusters of insights that will be usable in future situations. On the one hand, the need for a shock of recognition to gain insight is reflected in the very frequent occurrence of violence, deceit, sexual irregularities, etc., either in the content of a proverb or in the setting in which it is remembered. On the other hand, the final result is to offer a group of stable, recurring processes which the user hopes will be a guide in the making of a whole out of life. Most probably all proverb traditions include both sayings that are "optimistic" about the possibility of making a whole out of one's life, and others that are "pessimistic," sceptical, or ironical about this project, proverbs that speak of the precariousness of life and of the awkward surprises that overtake one who is trying to unify it.

2.2 The history of thought which had preceded Plutarch had seen the emergence of logic and speculative thought, and this development had transferred the effort of what I have called the optimistic strand of proverbial wisdom into a new dimension of coherence and rigor. Of course Plutarch was the inheritor of this shift. He still resorts to myth, but he believes that the basic outlines of his vision are established by philosophy. At the same time, he stood in a tradition of self-conscious literary style which differentiated between the high style appropriate to a serious grappling with human destiny, and a low style appropriate for a comic treatment of the human situation. For such a writer, what place is left for the condensed, aphoristic wisdom of the popular proverb?

2.3 The result of the trend toward logic and philosophy might be that the moral and unifying aspects of popular wisdom could be taken

over altogether by carefully-reasoned philosophic thought. Of course Plutarch moved in this direction—treating poetry, for instance, which like the proverb is metaphorical, “packed” language, as preparatory to philosophy, following a line which was already traditional (*How to Study Poetry*). But, again following an established tradition, Plutarch understood his writings as art, as symbolic communication as well as strictly propositional. Were he to have explained why the proverb was still useful, he would have resorted, no doubt, to an interpretation already worked out by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (esp. 2.21.11–13) where proverb and maxim are considered under the heading of persuasive speech (Freese: 284–85). In the above mentioned passage, for instance, Aristotle urges the insertion of popular maxims into argument, even if they do not fit in strict logic, because they will be easily believed.

2.4 Hence we find that in the writings of Plutarch, maxims and proverb-like sayings abound, but most of these are quotations from literary sources rather than popular proverbs. Maxims of the ancient wise men and cultic maxims are borderline cases, and the works of Hesiod whom Plutarch often quotes are full of popular wisdom. In addition, Plutarch's maxims are drawn from authors such as those mentioned above (§1.1). A few examples, drawn from the essay *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*:

Love is blind about the one loved (48A; from Plato, *Laws*, 731E, which has “the lover is blind. . .”)

Know yourself (49B; Delphic maxim)

When destiny (ὁ δαίμων) gives good fortune, what need for friends? (68E; Euripides, *Orestes*, 667)

A doctor of others, but full of ulcers yourself! (71F; Euripides, Frag. 1086 Nauck; cf. Luke 4:23)

Not *everything* about old age is bad. (73C; Euripides, *Phoenician Women*, 528)

2.5 There are thousands of such excerpts of the maxim type in Plutarch, as well, of course, as other sorts of quotation. Most of the functions of the anonymous folk proverb have been taken over by these more sophisticated forms. Indeed, this shift represents a phenomenon familiar to the student of the proverb in any situation where a transition takes place from anonymous folk literature to self-conscious literary authorship. Maxims associated with an author's name are as familiar in modern English or German collections of sayings as they are in Plutarch.

2.6 As our few examples show, maxims from literary sources can express both the optimistic proverbial stance which affirms the possibility of the unity of a life-experience, and the sceptical or ironic stance which doubts this unity. It is particularly the moral and life-unifying type

of proverb, the type so familiar in the biblical book of Proverbs, that is replaced by the maxim from a literary source; but the comic poets and Euripides, as well as other sources, offer an ample supply of ironic maxims. Some of these, in turn, had been taken over by their authors from popular speech. Thus the popular proverb, though it may frequently express the consistency of life, is remembered mainly for its phrasing of the sceptical or ironic view, or at least for its statement of the precarious and fateful character of human existence.

2.7 Of course, many of Plutarch's quotations are offered anonymously, and in a good number of cases it is only on the basis of the modern editor's identification or of one's own judgment that one recognizes a given statement as a proverb. But this abundance of quotations requires a source or sources, and quoting from previously-made collections of sayings and stories was in fact standard procedure at the time. Plutarch twice refers to such collections that he had himself assembled. In *On Tranquillity of Mind* he opens the essay with the comment that because of the pressure of time he put his remarks together by drawing on observations on this subject that he had collected in his notebooks (*ὑπομνήματα*, 464F). In *On the Control of Anger* he remarks that he collects data not only about philosophers but also about kings and despots, who have special reason, in this case, to control their anger (4570). In Plutarch's time, collections of sayings and apophthegms had been made for centuries; papyrus fragments of the *Sayings of Menander* and of the *Sayings of Chares* are available from the second century B.C.E. (Jaekel: xxiv-xxv). Plutarch doubtless used collections already made by others (the *Sayings of Kings and Commanders* is regarded by Ziegler [864] as such a work), and made collections of his own (Ziegler: 866-67 assigns the *Sayings of Spartans* to this category). But he has an interesting stricture on mere collecting: "some go about collecting apophthegms and anecdotes (*χρείας καὶ ἱστορίας*); as Anacharsis said about money that he never saw the Greeks use it for anything but counting it up, just so they count up and reckon their account of sayings, but do not put aside anything else for their own profit" (*Progress in Virtue*, 78F). Not surprisingly, more than one actual collection of proverbs is attributed to Plutarch, but these are regarded now as considerably later collections: (1) *Proverbs which the Alexandrians Used* (Leutsch and Schneidewin: 1.321-42); (2) *Proverbs of the Alexandrians* (Leutsch and Schneidewin: Supplement, No. IIIa; Otto Crusius, "Commentarius," No. IIIb). Even though Otto Crusius vigorously defended the second of these two as genuine, his view has not been followed. Like ancient proverb collections generally, these pseudo-Plutarch collections are not simple anthologies, but are scholarly commentaries on proverbs, often giving explanations of the concrete occasion from which the saying arose. Plutarch, as we shall see, often enters into such explanations when he quotes a proverb.

3.1 Although Plutarch uses so many maxims drawn from known authors that he must have had collections on hand from which to draw, probably both of his own making and those of others, actual popular proverbial wisdom is so scattered and incidental in his writing that it is quite possible that he was not drawing on any written collection, but simply resorting to his general knowledge. At the same time, he probably knew of such collections; at any rate he speaks of "those who quote proverbs" (οἱ παροιμαζόμενοι, 239A, 298F).

3.2 The shift away from the popular proverb to the maxim quoted from literature or attached to the name of a great man calls for attention in two respects, both of which cast light on the relatively modest place of traditional proverbial sayings in the work of Plutarch. For one thing, the move from the anonymous proverb to the maxim identified with a known person is part of the move away from the traditional popular style of anonymity. It is characteristic of Plutarch that his sayings are usually attributed to great men (or women!) whose reputations add to the authority or character of the sayings. It does not matter that this attribution is made flexibly, so that a given saying or apophthegm may be given to different speakers (e.g., "War is not supplied by fixed assessment," to Hegesippus ["Creobylus"] in *Life of Demosthenes* 17; to Archidamus in *Life of Crassus* 2). The custom of giving character and authority to a maxim by attributing it to an author or even to a concrete occasion in the speaker's life is foreign to the older genre of proverb collections, in which the saying simply carries its own authority. Plutarch's time (here the NT would also supply examples) was one in which the person of the speaker was felt to be important as a guarantee of the authority of the saying (Georgi). Plutarch, the biographer, amply demonstrates this interest. In addition he not infrequently shows the scholar's interest in tracing a proverb back to its originating occasion (*Life of Pelopidas* 10.4) or even giving a history of its interpretation (*Life of Aratus* 1).

3.3 Even more characteristic of Plutarch than the tendency to offer "somebody's" maxim rather than a proverb, is the way in which he so often presents maxims as the climax of a brief story, in other words offering a *chreia* or apophthegm rather than a simple saying (on the apophthegm in Plutarch, see Spencer). In fact, the presentation of a person through a series of apophthegms or little stories of which a saying is the climax is a principal part of Plutarch's biographical method. Also large parts of many of the essays are strings of apophthegms (cf. *On Talkativeness*). In other words, not just the association of a saying with an author, but even more, the embedding of a saying in an apophthegm indicates that for Plutarch the solitary saying is too fragmentary a carrier of meaning to be satisfactory.

3.4 From Plutarch's point of view, the popular proverb belonged to a less sophisticated level of literary achievement, and the "serious" questions of ethics and religion were presented in a subtler, more differentiated style, whether in philosophical discourse or in concrete narrative form. It is not accidental that the figures who speak the wise sayings are eminent figures, or famous authors; this is in accord with the canons of style which held that serious matters were properly demonstrated in the lives and words of the great. This left the common man and proverbial wisdom to express the lighter side of things, and also to give voice to comments about elements of reality that did not quite fit the seriously affirmed pattern. Although this formulation is a bit extreme, it does correctly present the trend.

4.1 In spite of these tendencies toward the elimination of proverbs, they do appear, as well as brief proverbial phrases. Plutarch, so far as I have been able to discover, does not comment specifically on the function of proverbs. But we may compare what Aristotle said of proverbs, that they are fragments of early thinking that have managed to escape destruction because of their brevity and cleverness (Frag. 2 [1474b5]) with a remark that Plutarch makes about the maxims of the wise men inscribed at Delphi, and we will see that the two run parallel. Plutarch remarks about "know yourself" and "avoid extremes" that their very conciseness (*βραχυλογία*, a quality admired also by Plutarch elsewhere; cf. *On Talkativeness*; and Beardslee: 1978) encompasses "in small space a thought which is dense and hammered as if of iron" (*On the Oracles at Delphi* 408E). Plutarch also valued the antiquity of proverbial wisdom, as can be seen from his remark about the saying that there must be a mingling of good and evil, that this is an ancient opinion which comes from writers on religion and philosophers, but which cannot be traced to a source. At the same time he quotes Heraclitus and Euripides, indicating that the insight itself is far older than his authorities (*Isis and Osiris* 369B).

4.2 We now turn to some of the actual proverbs found in Plutarch's writings. As to form, most of his proverbs are simple statements. The question and the command, both familiar proverbial forms, are virtually absent, perhaps because these forms are readily associated with the moral demand, which is not the prevalent function of the proverb in Plutarch.

4.3 But there is one form, more complex than the simple statement, which is found in Plutarch, namely, the "Wellerism," or proverb which is not a full apophthegm, but which is given context by a phrase like "as the man said when. . . ." An example is the man who missed his dog when he threw a stone at it, but struck his stepmother instead, and said, Not so bad! (*On Tranquillity of Mind* 467C; cf. *Dinner of the*

Seven Wise Men 147C). This proverbial “not bad!” is very instructive. It is one of the humorous, ironic proverbs about the unexpected and uncontrollable outcomes of life; in this case, an event that turns out “well,” even though the conscious intention of the act was quite different. Plutarch knew perfectly well what the force of the story was, but in his application he moralizes it, showing how one can say, “Not so bad!” when various hardships overtake us, which we can nevertheless turn to our philosophic or moral development.

4.4 Another instance of the way in which Plutarch chooses proverbs of harsh ironic realism is the following, one of the few which fall in the form of a question: “Who would praise their father, except no-good sons?” (*κακοδαίμονες*, *Life of Aratus* 1). This is harsh enough, Plutarch tells us, that Chrysippus wanted to change “no good” to “well favored” (*εὐδαίμονες*). But Dionysiodorus of Troezen restored the original form of the saying and made clear that it has to do with the craving for fame—only a son who has nothing else to boast about will call attention to the achievements of his father. Once again, Plutarch softens the saying, using it in the dedication of his *Life of Aratus* to Polycrates, who, he courteously says, has both his own achievements and a distinguished ancestry of which to be proud. Incidentally, we note here a small essay of “proverb scholarship” such as we find in the later proverb collections (Diogenianus, *Cent.* 8.46, offers a similar interpretation and several parallel proverbs; Leutsch and Schneidewin: 1.314).

4.5 Another ironic proverbial saying is, “Serious business is for tomorrow” (*Life of Pelopidas* 10.4). Here again we notice the antiquarian interest in the occasion when the saying was supposed to have arisen and the notation that the saying persists “until now” among the Greeks “in the form of a proverb.” The explanation makes it a saying of Archias while he was busy with a girlfriend and a letter was brought giving much needed details of a plot. He put the letter under his pillow with the remark, “Serious business is for tomorrow,” with the result that the city was lost.

4.6 “The one who can make a good guess is the best prophet” is not Plutarch’s theology of the oracle! (*On the Oracles at Delphi* 399A). But he can let one of the speakers quote it approvingly, with the rationalistic explanation that prophets have to weigh probabilities. The saying, which Plutarch calls a proverb, is taken from a line of Euripides, showing how maxims of known authors reclaimed a space in proverbial wisdom then as they do today. (Plutarch cites the whole line at *Obsolescence of Oracles* 432C, where he disapproves of the thought.)

4.7 Other proverbs, less sceptical but nonetheless ironic in tone, are “What is in the heart of a sober person is on the tongue of one who

is drunk" (*On Talkativeness* 503F), which is said with a sharper thrust as "the Greeks say that drinking and truth go together" (*Life of Artaxerxes* 15.3), since his boast at a drinking party led to the death of Mithridates.

4.8 There are other places where Plutarch explains the source of a saying, as in *Life of Camillus* 28, where the Latin saying, "Woe to the vanquished," is said to have become a proverb after an occasion in the struggle with the Gauls, and in the parallel story, *Greek Questions* 301C, explaining the saying "This is the authority." But most proverbs are cited without any such comment, simply as illustrative. Also he uses a good number of current proverbial phrases, like "to mix fire with water" for an impossibility (*On the Principle of Cold* 950F).

4.9 Though some of these reinforce a moral point, the prevailing function of Plutarch's proverbs is to upset the regularity of expectation, to remind the reader that things do not cohere as easily as the affirmed model of the larger structure within which they are found would suggest. These are proverbs of shrewd observation. "A shoe does not take away the gout, nor an expensive ring a whitlow, nor a fillet a headache" (*On Tranquillity of Mind* 465A). "They asked for pails, but they refused them tubs" (*On Talkativeness* 512E). "I can't carry the goat; put the ox on me" (*On Borrowing* 830A). "A dead man does not bite" (*Life of Pompey* 77). "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one big one" (*The Cleverness of Animals* 971F).

5.1 In Plutarch's writing the popular proverbial saying may function in the same way as does the extended essay within which it appears, to reinforce the kind of socially responsible human behavior which Plutarch advocated. But in general he supports his ethical convictions in other, more sophisticated ways. Proverbs function as decorative and rhetorically persuasive elements, often, as in modern literature, introducing an element of local color as in the Doric dialect of "Bring your own hand when you call on fortune" (*Customs of the Spartans* 239A; a notebook rather than a finished essay).

5.2 But Plutarch brings in most of his proverbs to express something refractory to his major perspective. His proverbs repeatedly point to the irrationality of experience, to the unpleasant or occasionally pleasant surprises of life; and their metaphors are often drawn from scenes of violence and risk. Thus his proverbs express the element of irony; they create an aspect of distance from the larger pattern of meaning expressed in the work in which they appear. Plutarch in his applications often moralizes this kind of proverbial wisdom, domesticating it into the moral point he is making, as in the example of "not bad" when the stone hits the stepmother. The moralization of popular

wisdom was, indeed, part of the philosopher's task as Plutarch understood it, as can be seen from the moralization of a traditional series of riddle questions which Plutarch attributes to Thales (*Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* 153A–D). In spite of this, Plutarch was greatly interested in and attracted by the ironic strand of popular proverbial wisdom. Even though he often moralizes it, he refuses to paper it over, as in the case where he rejects the improved version of a proverb proposed by Chrysippus. Though he does not, so far as I know, reflect on this point, it is clear that the pessimistic-ironic proverbs, probably because they do stand as a challenge to his own world view, interest him much more than do the traditionally orderly and moral ones. They remind the reader of the complexity and the precariousness of the project of making a whole out of one's life. They provide a contrasting background for the rational-moral view which Plutarch himself affirms.

5.3 In view of the fact that proverbial sayings also challenge the project of making a whole out of one's life in the synoptic gospels (Beardslee: 1970), and in view of the fact that irony is now increasingly used as a central category for interpreting NT language (Thompson; Booth), a word in closing is appropriate about the importance of distinguishing different kinds of irony. Some recent interpretation of the NT has used the concept of irony to illuminate the central NT symbol, the cross; it is ironic because it speaks through opp^l/sites (power through weakness). There is a linkage of irony to the proverbial sayings which communicate a similar confrontation to the establishment of a direction in one's life. But this is a different irony from Plutarch's. For in Plutarch the irony is a modification and complication of an affirmed overall view, while in the gospels the irony is embodied in the overall view itself.

5.4 The central issue, which can only be noted here, is that of "distance." Plutarch's ironic proverbs clearly illustrate this element of irony (Muecke: 35–40). The ironic proverbs help to create an element of distance from the main thread of the discourse; they set a distance between the reader and the text. But the acknowledgement of the precariousness of life is itself kept at a distance in Plutarch's rhetoric, so that it can be absorbed and subordinated to the overall perspective, which is confident of moral order. The rhetoric of the gospels functions quite differently. There the indirection, if that is an adequate way to put it, of irony does not open the way to the traditional ironic distance. Rather it is aimed to challenge the distance which the hearer tends to set up between his or her own existence and the vision communicated by the message. The refusal of distance in the "irony" of the gospels is symbolized by the inadequacy of the image of divine distance to convey the meaning of the relation between the reader and the divine (cf. the citations on irony and the "play" of the divine in Muecke). I hope to work out the implications of this contrast elsewhere.

NOTES

/1/ Most of the proverbs which Plutarch cited, along with a host of his other quotations, found their way into the collections of proverbs and sayings which were so popular from his own time right down to the Renaissance. Strömberg lists seventeen proverbs in Plutarch's writings which were not taken up into the ancient collections (68-71). The basic ancient proverb collections are in Leutsch and Schneidewin. For the history of the collection of proverbs and sayings, see Elter, Rupprecht, and Spoerri. Plutarch remains a source of quotations down to the present time; Stevenson's *Home Book of Quotations* has 95 entries taken from Plutarch.

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