

# BEYOND NORMATIVITY AND DESCRIPTION: THE LITERARY SHAPE OF ETHICAL INSTRUCTION AND REFLECTION IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Konrad SCHMID

How does the Hebrew Bible shape its ethical instruction? The following contribution will approach this question from the literary forms of ethical instruction and reflection in the Hebrew Bible's wisdom literature, particularly in the book of Proverbs. I will present examples that seem especially sophisticated and unique to the biblical tradition. These cases formulate ethical instructions and reflect upon ethics in a more general manner. Many of these literary forms offer ethical education or instruction beyond simple normativity or mere description. Rather, to make their case, they call for intellectual engagement and even creativity on the part of the reader. Through the use of a variety of literary features, they seem to seek the insight and agreement of the audience in order that this audience might acquire a sustainable conception of ethical thinking and behavior.

## 1. "IMPROPER" COMMANDMENTS

One might call the first category "improper" commandments. A sample case appears in Prov 19:27:

חַדְלִיבְנִי לְשִׁמְעַ מוֹסֵר    Stop listening, my son, to instruction,  
לְשִׁגוֹת מֵאִמְרֵי־דַעַת:    in order to stray from the words of knowledge.

This text is ambiguous<sup>1</sup> and requires the audience's interpretative activities in at least two significant ways.

Firstly, the identity of "my son" remains ambiguous in this saying. According to Prov 10:1, the subsequent texts up to and including Proverbs 24 are identified as "proverbs of Solomon." In the Hebrew

<sup>1</sup> M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* (AncB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 661 sees "no sense" in this proverb and offers an emendation.

Bible's "Solomonic Discourse,"<sup>2</sup> the recurrent designation "my son" envisions the generation after Solomon. However, any (male?) audience of Prov 19:27, no matter the era, could arguably feel addressed by "my son." Nevertheless, it is helpful to retain and acknowledge the historicizing distance of the embeddedness of Prov 19:27 in its Solomonic discourse. The desire of the composer of the book of Proverbs to accord the proverb with King Solomon's authority probably motivated the formulation of this literary feature. In addition, however, this historicizing feature serves the purpose of necessary reflection and exegesis by the reader who must ask himself or herself: Is the correct action of Solomon's day still correct in my own time?

Secondly and more importantly, the ethical instruction of this proverb is difficult. It begins with the imperative: **קְדַל־בְּנִי לְשִׁמְעַע מוֹסֵר**, "Stop listening, my son, to instruction." This seems like a slap in the face to the wisdom tradition at large, if one compares a proverb like Prov 8:33:<sup>3</sup>

שְׁמָעוּ מוֹסֵר וְהָכֵמוּ    Hear instruction and be wise,  
וְאַל־תִּפְרְעוּ:            and do not neglect it.

However, Prov 19:27a cannot be read without Prov 19:27b: **לְשִׁנּוֹת מֵאִמְרֵי־דַעַת** "in order to stray from the words of knowledge." Proverbs 19:27 attempts to stress the futility of listening to instruction without then acting in accordance with the instruction. In such a case, and only in such a case, does Prov 19:27 recommend disregarding instruction.

But such a statement ("Stop listening to instruction") seemed unacceptable to a broad range of tradents and translators of the book. The Greek version of Prov 19:27, for example, reads:

υἱὸς ἀπολειπόμενος φυλάξαι παιδείαν πατρὸς μελετήσῃ κακὰς.	A son who stops keeping the instruction of the father will practice evil sayings.
--	---

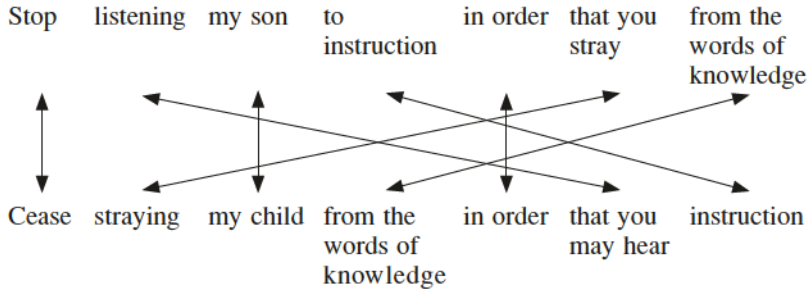
Modern readers have also deemed Prov 19:27 in need of correction through a mitigating translation. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)<sup>4</sup> offers the following rendering: "Cease straying, my child, from the words of knowledge, in order that you may hear instruction."

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of a "Mosaic Discourse" see H. NAJMAN, *Seconding Sinai. The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (JSJ.77; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 14–19.

<sup>3</sup> See B. SCHIPPER, *Sprüche (Proverbia) 1–15* (BK XVII/1, Göttingen 2018), 536f.

<sup>4</sup> The New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh basically follows NRSV: "My son, cease to stray from words of knowledge and receive discipline."

What has happened here in comparison to the Hebrew text (“Stop listening, my son, to instruction, in order to stray from the words of knowledge.”)? The NRSV has simply rearranged the words of the Hebrew text, in order to avoid the general recommendation, “Stop listening, my son, to instruction”:



This of course goes beyond mere translation of the Hebrew text. But why has the Hebrew text been made so difficult?

It appears that Prov 19:27 stresses the detrimental, practical consequences of *not obeying* knowledge in such a way that it reaches the following conclusion: *In this case*, listening to instruction is useless, even deceitful, for oneself and for others.

Taken together, Prov 19:27 demonstrates an intriguing use of literary features in order to trigger the reader’s imagination into seeing the full context of the interplay between listening or not listening to instruction and acting or not acting accordingly.

## 2. CONTRADICTORY COMMANDMENTS

A complex instruction using *contradiction* as a literary feature appears in Prov 26:4–5. Proverbs 26:4 seems to be an independent entity:

אַל־תֵּעַן כְּסִיל כְּאַדְמֹתָו     Do not answer a fool according to his folly,  
 פְּנֵיתֶשׁוּהוּ־לִּו גַּם־אַתָּה:     lest you become just like him.

Taken on its own, this saying is clear and does not need any explanation. But whoever wrote this saying down and/or placed it in its current context did not shy away from juxtaposing another proverb that seems to state the contrary:

## Prov 26:4–5

אל־תַּעַן כְּסִיל כְּאַחַתּוֹ	Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
פְּתִישׁוּהֶלֶךְ גַּם־אַתָּה:	lest you become just like him.
עַנֵּה כְּסִיל כְּאַחַתּוֹ	Answer a fool according to his folly,
פְּתִיחֵהוּ חֲכָם בְּעֵינָיו:	lest he be wise in his own eyes.

How should one understand this difficult sequence of A and non-A? Michael V. Fox, writes: “By virtue of their placement, v. 5 responds to v. 4 and has the last word. In the end, there may be no choice but to give the fool a tongue-lashing.”<sup>5</sup> For him, Prov 26:4 is overridden by the following verse in 26:5, simply by virtue of its placement. The LXX also seems to prefer the position of 26:5 over 26:4 by inserting ἀλλὰ “but” before v. 5: μὴ ἀποκρίνου ἄφρονοι πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνου ἀφροσύνην ἵνα μὴ ὁμοιος γένη αὐτῷ ἀλλὰ ἀποκρίνου ἄφρονοι κατὰ τὴν ἀφροσύνην αὐτοῦ ἵνα μὴ φαίνεται σοφὸς παρ’ ἑαυτῷ.

Arndt Meinhold claims the opposite: “Eine wirkliche Gegensätzlichkeit entfällt, wenn beachtet wird, daß es in v. 4 um den Angesprochenen selbst, in v. 5 jedoch um den Selbstklugen geht.”<sup>6</sup> According to Meinhold, Prov 26:4 formulates a general rule and is preeminent over Prov 26:5.

How should one decide between these opinions? The two verses belong together on a literary level, and therefore their interpretation requires attending to their difficult yet meaningful sequence. The reason for their juxtaposition is that there is no clear answer to the problem of how to answer a fool according to his folly.

The question is whether there is a *tertium* (third way) besides answering or not answering a fool according to his folly. Is it possible to answer a fool in ways *other* than according or not according to his folly? What would be a third possibility to avoid a negative consequence when speaking to a fool? Seen in this perspective, the two verses of Prov 26:4–5 *implicitly* seem to suggest that a fool should not be perceived according to his folly *at all*. Or to put it another way, being a fool is *not an unchangeable quality* according to the ensemble of Prov 26:4–5. A fool can be healed from his folly when not treated according to his folly. But

<sup>5</sup> Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 792–794.

<sup>6</sup> Eng.: “There is no real contradiction, if one considers that v. 4 concerns the addressee, whereas v. 5 addresses the one who is wise in his own eyes.” See A. MEINHOLD, *Die Sprüche: Teil 2: Sprüche Kapitel 16–31* (ZBK; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), 438.

Proverbs 26:4–5 does not intend to offer this solution explicitly. It instead prompts the audience to reach this conclusion on their own – not just by reading what is written before them, but by thinking about what is written before them.

At this point, a word on a specific literary feature of the so-called *parallelismus membrorum* is in order, since it seems doubly present in Prov 26:4–5. One finds it at the level of each saying and also at the level of their juxtaposition. Robert Lowth (1710–1787) usually receives credit as the one who discovered *parallelismus membrorum* in his “Praelectiones de sacra poesi Hebraeorum (1753).”<sup>7</sup> This is neither completely mistaken nor completely correct. On one hand, the term “*parallelismus membrorum*” does not yet occur in the “Praelectiones” and, on the other, there were theorists before Lowth who already described this phenomenon in other literatures. These minor quibbles aside, Lowth’s contribution to Hebrew poetry constitutes a milestone in the description and analysis of parallelism. This was taken further by Johann Gottfried Herder. Firstly, Herder’s approach to parallelism seems influenced by the romanticism of his era.

“Für den Verstand allein dichtet die Poesie nicht, sondern zuerst und zunächst für die Empfindung. Und ob diese den Parallelismus nicht liebet? Sobald sich das Herz ergießt, strömt Welle auf Welle, das ist Parallelismus. Es hat nie ausgedet, hat immer etwas neues zu sagen.”<sup>8</sup>

“Poetry does not compose its poems for reason alone, but first and foremost for emotion. And does emotion not love parallelism? As soon as the heart overflows, one wave gushes after another – that is parallelism. It never finishes, always having something new to say.”

It is not unfair to detect a certain dree of orientalism in this statement as well: The biblical poets were not able to state what they had to say clearly. Rather, they ramble on, circumscribing their point in a complicated way.

Nevertheless, the immediate context of this statement offers a quite revolutionary insight concerning the nature of parallelisms.

<sup>7</sup> R. SMEND, “Der Entdecker des Parallelismus: Robert Lowth (1710-1787),” in: B. HUWYLER u.a. (eds.), *Prophetie und Psalmen* (FS K. Seybold, AOAT 280, Münster: Ugarit, 2001), 185-199; J. KUGEL, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1998), 247–268.

<sup>8</sup> J. G. HERDER, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie. Eine Anleitung für die Liebhaber derselben, und der ältesten Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes. Erster und Zweiter Theil* (Dessau: Buchhandlung der Gelehrten, 1782–83), 21.



“Nur freilich hat der Ebräische Parallelismus vor unseren Nordischen Sprachen das voraus, daß er mit seinen wenigen Worten die Region schön ordnet, und zuletzt prächtig in der Luft verhallen lasset; für uns also ist er beinahe unübersetzbar. Wir brauchen oft zehn Worte, wo jene drei brauchen.”<sup>9</sup>

“Compared to our Nordic languages, Hebrew parallelism has the advantage of being able to order the region nicely using its few words, and finally to have it [the region] fade out beautifully in the air; for us, it is nearly untranslatable. We often need ten words where they need three.”

This pertains to the opposite of what the previous statement suggested: Parallelisms do not serve the purpose of redundancy, but of precision. In my view, this articulates the specific nature in the arrangement of Prov 26:4–5. The meaning of these verses coalesces in a precise way into a third dimension above the text that cannot be pinned down to a specific statement within the text itself. To use a term coined by Benno Landsberger, one can call this evocation of a third dimension “stereometric reading.”<sup>10</sup> Meanings are not made explicit in the text. They instead emerge through the process of the audience’s reception. This characteristic of many proverbs proves highly important for their ethical implications. It shows that certain nuances of meaning appropriate to a text can only be presented by remaining silent about them. At the same time, however, the audience is pushed to perform particular synthesizing conclusions themselves during the process of reading without unequivocally identifying the textual meaning.

### 3. POSING A QUESTION

Ethical instruction through questioning rarely appears in wisdom literature, but there are some significant examples. One of them is Prov 22:27:

<sup>9</sup> J.G. Herder, *Vom Geist*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. B. LANDSBERGER, “Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt,” in B. LANDSBERGER and W. VON SODEN (ed.) *Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt: Leistung und Grenze babylonischer Wissenschaft* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1965), 1–18, (here 17); repr. from *Islamica* 2 (1926): 355–72, (here 371). The notion of stereometry was adopted by G. VON RAD, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1970), 42–53; trans. as *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974). See A. WAGNER, “Der Parallelismus membrorum zwischen poetischer Form und Denkfigur,” in *Parallelismus membrorum*, ed. idem (OBO 224; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 1–26 (here 11–13); B. JANOWSKI, *Konfliktgespräche mit Gott: Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen*, (4th ed. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2012), 13–21.

אם־אין־לך־לְשַׁלֵּם    If you have nothing with which to pay,  
 לָמָּה יִקַּח מִשְׁכָּבְךָ מִתַּחְתֶּיךָ:    why should your bed be taken from under you?

Proverbs 22:27 might simply have stated that a creditor not take a debtor's bed in pawn if he cannot pay his debt. The verse instead does something different in two ways. Firstly, it addresses the debtor rather than the creditor. It thus demonstrates to the reader – whether a creditor or a debtor – that a debtor is a legally protected person with certain rights.

Secondly, the latter half of Prov 22:27 uses an argument that one might call “natural ethics.” By posing the legal problem – “Should someone lose his bed on account of his debts?” – as a rhetorical question, Prov 22:27 suggests the self-evident moral inadequacy of such an act. Rather than arguing normatively, it seeks the reader's agreement by posing a question.

It is striking how Exod 22:25–26, within the legal corpus of the so-called Covenant Code, uses the same literary feature of asking a question to corroborate a case similar to Prov 22:27:

אם־חָבַל תַּחְבֹּל שְׁלֵמַת רֵעֶךָ    If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn,  
 עֲדֹרְבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ תִּשְׁיבֵנוּ לוֹ:    you shall restore it before the sun goes down;  
 כִּי הוּא כְסוּתוֹ לְבָדָה    for it may be your neighbor's only clothing  
 הוּא שְׁמֹלְתוֹ לְעָרוֹ    to use as cover;  
 בְּמָה יִשְׁכֹּב    in what else shall that person sleep?  
 וְהָיָה כִּי־צָעַק אֵלַי וְשָׁמַעְתִּי    And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen,  
 כִּי־חַנּוּן אָנִי:    for I am compassionate.

Another example appears in Prov 20:24:

מִיְהוָה מִצְעָדֵי־גִבּוֹר    From YHWH (directed by YHWH) are the steps of a man,  
 וְאָדָם    and as for a human being,  
 מַה־יָבִין דְרָכּוֹ:    how can he understand his way?

This text does not concern a specific kind of moral behavior, but pertains instead to the fundamentals of ethics: Can human beings understand their nature in the slightest? The metaphors of “steps” and “way” thereby seem to envision a larger entity than just human *acts*. They pertain to human life writ large, including things that unwillingly happen to people.

Aided by a rhetorical question in v. 24b, the literary shape of Prov 20:24 suggests that humans cannot understand their “way.” But

conspicuously, as the introduction to v. 24b, v. 24a formulates the exception to this negative assessment: the insight that God himself directs the steps of humans, which is obviously a remarkable piece of understanding. Such an assessment would be impossible according to v. 24b because v. 24a is not God's own assessment, but a judgement about God's involvement with humans.

Accordingly, Prov 20:24 boldly introduces at the outset a point of view of God's overarching rule over human steps, though the text is remarkably open in this respect (literally "from YHWH...", in an instrumental sense of "by").<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in the form of a question, v. 24b inquires about the human capacity to gain insight into this plan. The particle *מִה* lacks specificity: It directs the audience's attention not to decide whether humans can know their way at all, but rather to decide which part they might be able to understand as their "way."

How are we to interpret the fact that v. 24b takes the form of a question? Proverbs 20:24 does not seem to state categorically that there is no way for humans to understand their life. The question itself ("how can he understand his way?") naturally has a rhetorical flavor and does not leave much leeway for doubting an answer in the negative. But as v. 24a makes clear, one can nevertheless maintain some fundamental aspects such as God's guidance. However, if read backwards from the second half (v. 24b) to the first (v. 24a), this proverb might even allow for some doubt regarding God's overall guidance. Proverbs 20:24 as a whole would thus present an ethic of a balanced interpretation of human life that is aware of intellectual boundaries.

#### 4. ENVISIONING SOCIETAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

Numerous proverbs seem to encourage specific actions or attitudes by envisioning respective consequences. One example among many is Prov 11:25:<sup>12</sup>

**נֶפֶשׁ בְּרַכָּה תִדְשֵׁן** A generous (blessing) soul will be enriched, and one  
**וְיִמְרֹה גַם הוּא יוֹרֵא** who gives water will get water.

<sup>11</sup> The translations by NRSV and NJPS ("All our steps are ordered by the LORD; how then can we understand our own ways?" [NRSV]; "A man's steps are decided by the Lord; What does a man know about his own way?" [NJPS]) basically follow the LXX: *παρὰ κυρίου εὐθύνεται τὰ διαβήματα ἀνδρὶ θνητῶς δὲ πῶς ἂν νοήσαι τὰς ὁδοὺς αὐτοῦ.*

<sup>12</sup> See SCHIPPER, *Sprüche (Proverbia) 1–15*, 692f.



This saying is structured in terms of the so-called act-consequence connection (“Tun-Ergehens-Zusammenhang”), where a given deed entails a corresponding consequence. For our purposes, it is crucial to emphasize that these proverbs are not formulated as imperatives (“Be generous!”), but rather seem to motivate specific acts by pointing to their consequences.

However, it is important to note that the connection between act and consequence is not simply a supernatural automatism, as many interpreters from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century concluded from their presupposition of a biblical doctrine of retribution in these texts.<sup>13</sup> Consideration of this statement’s parallel structure shows that the connection between act and consequence is not only or primarily safeguarded by divine action. Proverbs 11:25 does not even mention God. While one might interpret the first colon “be enriched” as a divine passive, one could also think of social interactions that ensure this course of events. In any case, the use of the same root *hi. / ho.* “give to drink” / “be given drink” in the second colon suggests the conception of a reciprocal action within the community, which at the same time interprets the first colon.

Proverbs 11:25 seems deliberately to formulate its ethical position in an indirect way by claiming a beneficent link between act and consequence for those who show generosity. In this way it underscores the communal aspect of generosity, thereby avoiding the misinterpretation that generosity is an individual quality that elevates a donor above his dependents.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

When we investigate the ethics of the book of Proverbs, it goes without saying that the scribes behind these texts are not acquainted with what we mean by the category of “ethics.” The book of Proverbs offers reflections on how to lead a good life, but it does not develop an overarching theory of moral behavior or a theory of a good life.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cf. B. JANOWSKI, “Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück: Offene Fragen im Umkreis des ‘Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs,’” in B. JANOWSKI, *Die rettende Gerechtigkeit: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments 2* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1999), 167–191.

<sup>14</sup> See also H. SPIECKERMANN “Lebenskunst als Wegkunde” in: H. SPIECKERMANN, *Lebenskunst und Gotteslob in Israel: Anregungen aus Psalter und Weisheit für die Theologie*, (FAT 91; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 55–79.

Nevertheless, the diverse use of literary forms in Proverbs exhibits a remarkable degree of deliberation in how the sayings are formulated. To sum up, the following points seem noteworthy.

Firstly, more often than not, the book of Proverbs avoids prescribing specific acts. Rather, it formulates moral insights in a way that strives to elicit the agreement of the reader. Our examples included literary devices like “improper” commandments, contradictions, and questions.

Secondly, the book of Proverbs seems strategically to transcend the perspective of the individual and to conceptualize its sayings within the broader realm of human societies. This naturally accords with the “sociomorphic”<sup>15</sup> worldview of ancient Israel and Judah. However, this emphasis on the societal embeddedness of individuals is also warranted in a non-historical perspective because it determines a majority of issues pertaining to the problem of a good life. We saw examples of this in the use of the act-consequence nexus in ethical argumentation, as well as in the literary activation of the perspective of those in need or distress.

Thirdly, one can discern an interest in many proverbs to develop, on the one hand, a balance between different viewpoints and, on the other hand, a certain stereometry in the argument. Both aims are realized predominantly by the use of *parallelismus membrorum*, which does not simply serve the use of repetition, but rather of balancing an argument and creating meaning in a third dimension above the text.

All three elements point to the conclusion that ethics in the book of Proverbs is not limited to Kant’s question, “What should I do?” Rather, Proverb’s question is integrally enlarged by perspectives such as: “Who am I?”; “Am I an autonomous subject?”; “What determines my acts?”; “What are the consequences of acts?”; and “What are the possible downsides of my acts?” Such questions certainly benefit the analysis of ethical problems at large. They not only transcend the difference between normativity and description, but also between “deontology” and “utilitarianism.”

<sup>15</sup> This term was coined by E. TOPITSCH, *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik. Eine Studie zur Weltanschauungskritik* (Wien: Springer, 1958), 19.