How To Unwrap A Biblical Proverb

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A biblical proverb is a profound gift of wisdom packed into a brief saying. The saying is often clever and memorable, and presents its reader or hearer with a choice between a wise and foolish course of action. The genius of proverbs in general, and of the biblical proverbs in particular, is their pithiness, that is, their profound insight conveyed with the utmost economy of language. The biblical proverbs are so terse as to often omit words that would have been obvious to the original hearers, but now must be inferred by the reader (and translator). Yet, in spite of their brevity, each proverb is pregnant with meaning!

The problem is that much of a proverb's meaning may be untranslatable without obscuring the original majesty of the saying's wording. Therefore translators must sometimes choose between conveying the beauty of the outward package, or ruining the wrapping in order to fully convey the wisdom hidden within. As a result, many of the biblical proverbs seem banal in our English versions, and as English readers we have no idea how profound each saying really is. In the interest of helping the student of the Hebrew Bible begin to see *both* the succinct beauty *and* the profound insight of the proverbs, I present this brief guide for thoroughly unwrapping the marvelous verbal package of a biblical proverb.

I must affirm that the careful reader *benefits greatly* from reading the biblical proverbs in translation. Nevertheless, I have personally found that the only way to get to the very marrow of these wisdom sayings is by analyzing them in their original language. What follows, therefore, are exegetical steps that require at least a rudimentary knowledge of biblical Hebrew.

Before proceeding, we should acknowledge our personal beliefs regarding the text of the canonical book of Proverbs. Here are my presuppositions:

- While composed and collected by human authors and editors, the proverbs are divinely inspired. That is, their composition was prompted by the working of the Holy Spirit, and they were included in the book of Proverbs because they are true expressions of the wisdom and the heart of God.

- Proverbs are not promises, but express probability. If you "train up a child in the way he should go," God does not promise that said child will never depart from that way, but assures us that such a child is far more likely to remain faithful than the one without right training.

- Proverbs are not commandments, but are rooted in the laws of God, particularly in those laws revealed to Moses.

- While the book of Proverbs assumes a relational foundation for righteousness (what we would call justification by faith), it also assumes that righteousness is recognized by works. The righteousness to which the proverbs refer is not forensic (imputed) righteousness, but *works-recognized righteousness*.

The reader is free to accept or reject these assumptions, but one's perspective on these four points will directly influence his or her interpretation of the proverbs.

Having considered the presuppositions we bring to the study of Proverbs, let us proceed to the exegetical steps. Because the biblical proverbs are written in Hebrew, the first step in unwrapping a proverb is to:

1. Tentatively Translate All The Words

As we translate the individual words of a proverb, we watch for theme words like *righteous, righteousness, wicked, wise, discerning, discernment, foolish,* because we will learn shades of meaning for these words as we observe their usage in the wisdom sayings.

We also take special note of any word whose meaning is not obvious to the English reader. For example, we find the verb כָּסָה , *cover*, in Pro 10.12; in *what sense* does love cover transgressions? Upon investigation, we find that *cover* in this and like instances means *to forgive*. This understanding will require us to make a decision regarding the final translation of the proverb: shall we translate כָּסָה using its primary meaning, *covers*, or with its extended meaning, *forgives.* Likewise, we take note of any idiomatic words or phrases, like לְעוֹלָם , in Pro 10.30 and 27.24. We will want to translate this phrase's meaning (*never/forever*) rather than translate it literally, *to an age*.

2. Identify The Parallelism

Most of the biblical proverbs consist of one sentence called a *stich*, made up of two parallel clauses called *cola* (singular, *colon*). These two-cola proverbs generally use **antithetical** parallelism expressing a contrast or antithesis. In our English versions, we can usually spot this kind of parallelism in a proverb by its use of the adversative conjunction *but*.

However, there are other kinds of parallelism in Hebrew poetry including:

- **Synonymous**: the two cola repeat the same idea in different words (in English translation the stich usually employs the conjunction *and*).
- **Amplification**: the second colon adds detail to the first.
- **Logical Sequence**: the second colon follows logically from the first.
- **Temporal Sequence**: the second colon expresses something occurring subsequently or previously to what is described in the first.

- **Petition And Argument**: the second colon expresses why the petition of the first colon should be granted.
- **Word Order**: the same words are used in the same or reverse order in the two cola.
- **Parts Of Speech**: verbs, nouns and adjectives are used in the same or reverse order in the two cola.

The most common parallelism in the biblical proverbs is **antithetical**, but we should note that any given stich may utilize more than one kind of parallelism, each contributing either to the meaning or the emphases of the verse.

The next step in unwrapping a Hebrew proverb is to:

3.   Identify The Emphasized Words

In order to find the emphasized words in a Hebrew proverb we look for two things: **Fronting** and **Chiasm**. Hebrew is a VSO (verb-subject-object) language, meaning that the main verb in a sentence typically precedes the subject and object. Therefore, when the object or subject is **fronted**, i.e., placed before the verb, something other than the verb is emphasized. Consider the first colon of Proverbs 10.12 which says,

Hatred will incite strife ….

It uses an SVO (subject-verb-object) word order as we normally do in English, but being a Hebrew proverb, this word order puts an emphasis on the subject *hatred*.

This emphasis becomes all the more evident when we look at the entire proverb and see that it has a **chiastic** structure. A **chiasm** is a poetic structure that repeats parallel ideas in reverse order, generally creating an emphasis at the central "hinge" repetition. In its entirety, Proverbs 10.12 reads,

Hatred will incite strife,
But-over
All-offenses will cover **love**.

The word order is,

> **Subject** -> Verb -> Object,
> Conjunction-preposition,
> Adjective[1]-Object -> Verb -> **Subject**

This chiastic structure serves to highlight the two subjects, *hatred* and *love* at opposite ends of the proverbial saying, but also emphasizes its hinge words in the middle, *strife* and *offenses*.

We'll explore the significance of these emphases further when we get to the steps of **Matching Parallel Components**, and **Identifying Asymmetries**. Before those steps, though, we must:

4. Check For Ellipses And Supply The Missing Words

An ellipsis in a proverb is the written omission of a word which is, nevertheless, (usually) implied by the context.[2] Omitted words in a proverb could be the subject or object in one colon, the verb in one colon, or the verbs of both cola. Biblical Hebrew is famous for its **verbless clauses**, so let me give a brief explanation of that phenomenon.

A clause is the next grammatical unit below the sentence, and consists of a subject and a predicate, the latter containing a verb — *or implied verb* — and stating something about the subject. "When a tree falls in the forest…" is not a sentence, but it is a clause with a subject (a tree), a verb (falls), and prepositional phrase (in the forest) stating something about the subject.

Hebrew makes wonderful use of clauses that contain only an implied verb. We can call them **verbless clauses**, but since they do rely on an "invisible" verb, it is more correct to call them **nominal clauses** because they are formed by modifying one nominal word (i.e., a noun or word that behaves like a noun) with another nominal word or adjective. Thus, the second clause of Proverbs 10.1, reads literally, "But foolish son grief of his mother." In this

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[1] The word כָּל is actually a noun in construct, *the whole of*, but is probably best translated as the adjective, *all*.

[2] Omitted words in modern writing are often indicated by the punctuation mark (three dots) *called* an ellipsis.

verbless clause, the second nominal word *grief* modifies the first nominal word *son*. We often translate the Hebrew verbless clause the way we would form a nominal clause in English, namely, by using a linking verb (copula). That linking verb is usually a form of the verb *to be*. So our English versions will render Proverbs 10.1b, "But a foolish son *is* the grief of his mother."

Sometimes, when supplying an unstated verb, we may take our cue from the first colon. In Proverbs 10.1a, a wise son **makes glad**[3] his father. Therefore, in Proverbs 10.1b, we can supply a similar verb like *brings* or *causes*: "But a foolish son *brings* grief to his mother." To translate Proverbs 10.1b in this way makes it quite understandable. However, we must consider whether the simple verb *to be* is still the better choice for the second colon. To translate, "But a foolish son **is** a grief to his mother," as most English versions do, emphasizes the stative consequence of the son's folly: he doesn't just *bring* grief to his mother, he *is* a constant grief to her.

The unstated verb is more strongly implied in Proverbs 10.32,

The lips of a righteous man understand what is pleasing *to God*,
But the mouth of wicked men *knows only* perversities.

In this instance the default verb *to be* would not make sense in the second colon ("But the mouth of wicked men *is* perversities"). Instead, it's reasonable to suppose that the unstated verb in the second colon is synonymous with the verb stated in the first colon, and should be a verb of *understanding* or *knowing*.

The purpose of this step in the process of unwrapping a proverb is to clarify meaning, not to dictate the proverb's final translation into English. When translating, we may feel it best to retain the ellipses, rather than to supply a conjectured verb. This step, however, is *over translating for ourselves* in order to get the clearest possible understanding of the proverb.

Once we have identified all the ellipses, we supply the missing words in our tentative over-translation of the proverb. We indicate (with italics or brackets) that the words we supply are not in the original text. This allows us

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[3] The piel form of the verb *rejoice* (שָׂמַח) has the same force as the hiphil.

to keep both the proverb's written and implied words before us, as we work toward making our final interpretation and application of the saying.

We also must supply the implied articles, definite and indefinite, in our rendering of the proverb, and we will probably retain most of these in our final translation. English has both a definite article *the*, and the indefinite articles *a* and *an*. Hebrew only has the definite article *the* (·הַ) , the absence of which often, but not always, implies *indefiniteness*. Where the definite article appears in the Hebrew, we must tentatively insert a *the* in our English translation. However, in the absence of a definite article, i.e., when we find anarthrous nouns, we must let context tell us whether the noun is definite or indefinite, and supply the definite or indefinite article in our English translation accordingly. Remember that inherent meaning or syntactical context can make a Hebrew noun definite, regardless of whether it is preceded by the definite article.[4]

Next, we must:

5. Fully Translate The Number And Gender Of Each Participle And Non-Qualifying Adjective

In English, the adjective *wicked* has neither number nor gender. Number and gender are unnecessary for an English adjective because an adjective qualifies a substantive (a noun or word that functions like a noun), and the substantive supplies its own number and (sometimes) gender. In Hebrew, however, adjectives do express number and gender, often making it unnecessary in a text to repeat the implied substantive that the adjective qualifies.

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[4] E.g., proper nouns are inherently definite, though in their case we generally don't use the definite article in translation.

This is initially confusing to the English student of Hebrew who reads an adjective in the biblical text and can't find an immediately preceding or following substantive for the adjective to qualify. We can usually solve the problem if we "over translate" the Hebrew adjective to overtly express its number and gender. For example, in the proverbs we will often come upon the masculine singular form of the adjective *wicked* with no substantive in the text for it to qualify. We read the adjective and wonder, "wicked *what*?" We figure that out by fully translating the number and gender of *wicked*, in this case writing out, "wicked man," with our word *man* expressing the masculine singular aspect of the adjective. This is an "over translation," in that once we fully translate the masculine singular adjective *wicked* as "wicked man" in a given proverb, we may realize that a *boy,* or *young man* is actually in view, and need to correct our translation accordingly, or, considering the gnomic (timeless wisdom) character of the saying, we may choose the gender-neutral *wicked one* or *wicked person* in our final translation.

Since participles are verbal adjectives, we must do for Hebrew participles what we do for stand-alone adjectives: write out a full translation of the implied substantives. In English, the participle *winking* has neither gender nor number, but the Hebrew participle *winking* (קֹרֵץ) in Proverbs 10.10 is masculine singular. Therefore, we tentatively "over translate" it as *a winking man*.

Once we have fully translated the proverb, and even "over translated" its adjectives and participles, we must:

6. Match The Corresponding Components

Above, we have translated Proverbs 10.12 this way:

> Hatred will incite strife,
But-over

all-offenses will cover love.

We can easily match the corresponding components of the two cola; let's mark them using colors:

Hatred will incite strife,
But-over
all-offenses will cover love.

We see that the subjects *hatred* and *love* correspond, as do the verbs *incite* and *cover*, and finally the objects *strife* and *offenses*. This proverb has very straightforward parallel components. However, let's try to match the corresponding components in Proverbs 10.18:

A man concealing enmity *has* lips of falsehood,
And
a man causing to go forth a rumor, he *is* a stupid fellow.

We can immediately spot the corresponding participial subjects, *man concealing* and *man causing to go forth*. We can also see the objects of these participles, *enmity* and *rumor*. Let's color mark these:

A man concealing enmity *has* lips of falsehood,
And
a man causing to go forth a rumor, he *is* a stupid fellow.

Now we're reminded that both cola of this proverb are nominal clauses; they each lack a main verb. For our translation, we must choose a verb to put in place of the one that is unstated but implied, and our default option — particularly in a verse using *nominal* participles which often have stative force — is a form of the verb *to be*. This is the verb that most English versions have chosen for the second colon of this proverb: "he who spreads slander **is** a fool" (NASB). Using the verb *to be* is a little more awkward in the first colon, but the JPS version found a way to do it: "He that hideth hatred **is of** lying lips." For a smoother translation, we can follow most English versions, and

use the word *has* in the first colon.[5] Now we can mark the corresponding verbs:

> **A man concealing enmity has** lips of falsehood,
>
> And
>
> **a man causing to go forth a rumor**, he ***is*** a stupid fellow.

We have some leftover phrases, though, and they don't correspond to one another in the expected way. This is a wonderful phenomenon in the proverbs that we can call an *asymmetry*; when an asymmetry occurs, we must take a closer look at the components that don't seem to correspond with one another. So our next step in unwrapping the proverb is to:

7. Identify And Amplify Asymmetries

We have translated Proverbs 10.18 this way:

> **A man concealing enmity has** lips of falsehood,
>
> And
>
> **a man causing to go forth a rumor**, he ***is*** a stupid fellow.

We've spotted an asymmetry between the construct phrase of the first colon ("lips of falsehood") and the pronominal phrase of the second ("he … a stupid fellow"). If the synonymous parallelism of this proverb had been stringent, we would expect the second colon to conclude with a construct phrase like "heart of deceit." Then the proverb would read like this:

> **A man concealing enmity has lips of falsehood**,
>
> And
>
> **a man causing to go forth a rumor**, ***has*** **a heart of deceit**.

This would give us neat parallelism, but it would not provide the insight(s) that the asymmetry was meant to elicit. When "a stupid fellow" is made the parallel to "lips of falsehood," what does that tell us? The author of the proverb wanted us to stop and think about it, and then realize things like:

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[5] The KJV supplies a preposition in the first colon instead: "He that hideth hatred *with* lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander, *is* a fool."

- How does one recognize a stupid fellow? One way is by noticing that he spreads rumors; another is by his lying lips! A liar is stupid, and a stupid fellow is apt to lie.
- If you observe someone with lying lips, is their problem only a speech problem? No, it's a character problem: the whole person is stupid.
- When you observe someone using words to veil their enmity toward another, what does that tell you about the speaker? It tells you that they are foolish to think they can hide hatred in their heart; it will likely come out in gossip and slander.

The asymmetries are intended to provoke thought, and to help us see further parallels. In other words, the asymmetry in the proverb encourages us to imagine a lengthier paraphrase like,

A man concealing enmity *is* apt to lie in his foolishness,
And
a man spreading a rumor, *is* **stupid in his deceit**.

This paraphrase amplifies the asymmetries and provides the missing parallel for "lips of falsehood," i.e., "his deceit," and for "stupid fellow," i.e., "his foolishness." As a paraphrase, **this rendering is interpretive**, so we would not submit it as an accurate translation. However, if we were writing a commentary on this verse, or preaching a sermon on it, this exercise of amplifying the asymmetries will have deepened our understanding of the proverb. We now understand more clearly that a man is foolish to try to veil his animosity toward another, because his lips will betray him: he won't be able to resist slandering the object of his enmity.

Our next step is to:

8. Check The Thematic, Legal And Historical Context

We now need to know if the proverb we're unwrapping is part of a larger thematic context. If it is one of multiple proverbs contrasting wise and foolish

speech, for example, then each proverb within the thematic unit will illuminate the others. Consider, Proverbs 10.19 (NASB) which tells us,

> When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
> But he who restrains his lips is wise.

When we study the surrounding context of Proverbs, chapter 10, we are reminded of what kinds of transgressions are likely to occur when a person talks too much, namely: not listening to commands (Proverbs 10.8); failing to gain knowledge, wisdom and understanding (10.13-14); ignoring reproof (10.17); lying and slander (10.18); perverted speech (10.31-32). These reminders give weight to the wisdom of Proverbs 10.19: he who restrains his lips is wise!

Having considered the immediate thematic context in the book of Proverbs, we must also check the law of Moses, so as not to miss any of the many legal allusions in the proverbs. With regard to Proverbs 10.18 (which we looked at closely in the previous section), we see that it is indeed informed by, and enlarges upon, the law of Moses (Leviticus 19.11,16) which states, "You shall not … deal falsely, nor lie to one another. … You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD." In other words, should a young pupil ask, "Who says that a man who spreads slander is a fool?" the teacher may reply, "Is it not foolish to violate the commandment of the Lord? Is it not foolish to jeopardize the life of your neighbor?"

Since proverbial sayings are intentionally timeless in their message, we will only rarely discern a possible historical context or basis for a specific proverb. Still, it is likely that most of the proverbs were composed in response to a real-life observation. If we assume, as I do, that Solomon was the compiler of the biblical proverbs, and the author of many of them, we can pick out some historical situations that at least illustrate a proverb, if they did not provide its inspiration. My favorite example is Proverbs 29.18:

> Without a prophetic vision, a people is unrestrained,
> But *a people* keeping *the* Law — happiness *is theirs*.[6]

This proverb reminds us that there are times when the written Scriptures are not enough. It goes well for a people when they heed the Torah, but what about when they have the Bible but don't even read it? This is the current state of our own nation, the United States of America. We probably have more printed Bibles in our national possession than any other country in the world, not to mention our online access to digital versions. Nevertheless, we — as a nation — are not reading, studying or obeying the Word of God. It is precisely in this situation that *a prophetic voice* is needed to call people back to God and His moral laws. It is the natural bent of every nation to stray from the Scriptures, and therefore every generation needs the prophetic ministry to call it back to what is written.

This proverb has in view the corporate body of a people group, i.e., a nation. Nevertheless, it has direct individual application, as encouraged by the translations of the second colon in the LXX and in our Eng versions: "But happy is he who keeps the law." Recognizing this, we see that when Solomon authored this proverb (or added it to his collection) he could have had the life of his own father, David, in mind. David knew the Torah, and he himself had authored inspired Scripture. Yet, there was a time in David's life when he closed his heart to what was written, and did not regain his blessedness until he was broken by the prophetic ministry of Nathan (2 Samuel 12).

We must next:

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[6] Lit.: *happiness his*. The translator must note that the masculine singular participle *keeping*, and the third person masculine suffix of *happiness*, both in the second colon, coordinate with the masculine singular noun, *people*, of the first colon. In other words, the second colon refers to a people, or nation, rather than to an individual. This is obscured in our English versions that translate the suffix of *happiness* as a predicate nominative ("happy is **he**") rather than as a possessive ("his happiness"). It is also obscured in the LXX which translates with the neuter ἔθνος in the first colon, and then retains the masculine singular participle in the second colon.

9. Identify The Fundamental Choice Presented By The Surface Text

Having observed all that we can from the wording, structure and context of a proverb, we can now consider the first choice that it puts before us. Consider Proverbs 10.32, which I have translated as saying,

> The lips of a righteous man understand what is pleasing to God,
> But the mouth of wicked men knows only perversities.

We look for the antithetical terms to reveal the fundamental choice presented by the proverb, and the familiar proverbial terms *righteous* and *wicked* pop out at us. That's it. The fundamental question the proverb asks is, "Do you choose to be a righteous person or a wicked person?" The reader or hearer says to themselves, "I choose to be a righteous person, of course!" However, if we were to end our meditation of the proverb with that response, and hurry on to the next verse, we would eventually conclude — as so many have — that the biblical proverbs are indeed banal.

So, we must go further and:

10. Infer The More Subtle Choice(s) Embedded In The Proverb, Along With Its Wisdom Principle(s)

Thankfully, Proverbs 10.32 encapsulates a more subtle exhortation than simply, "Choose to be a righteous person!" When we look again, we see the other antithetical terms (*what is pleasing* and *perversities*), and realize that the proverb gives us an important *trait* of a righteous man: **a righteous person understands what pleases God, and that understanding is manifest in his or her speech**. In effect, the proverb asks, "Do you really want to be a righteous person? If so, then it requires more than just 'keeping your nose clean.' Being a righteous person means that you discover what pleases God, and then let that knowledge dictate the content and manner of

your speech." In this way, Proverbs 10.32 presses a more subtle choice upon us: "Will you pursue the knowledge of what pleases God, or be content to be like the coarse talkers in the alleyway who remain ignorant of God and His ways?" For me, at least, this proverb is no longer banal, but convicting.[7]

We can now state some wisdom principles drawn from this proverb:

1. Righteousness and wickedness is recognized by one's speech; the wicked who abstain from overtly criminal behavior will still be recognized by their lack of Godward conversation.
2. Righteousness involves understanding what is pleasing to God; no one can claim to be righteous who has no interest in knowing God's heart.

11. Draw Out The Theological Insight

A final step that we can take in our examination of Proverbs 10.32 is to draw out its theological insight. What does this proverb tell us about God and His ways? This proverb assures us that it is possible to understand what is pleasing to God. That means that God — unlike pagan idols — is willing and able to make His will known to man. Furthermore, His will is something that can be verbalized. In fact, He has verbalized, in human language, His will for man. He has done this in the Law, which can be summarized by the two greatest commandments, to love God and to love one's neighbor. Living and conversing righteously will deepen our understanding of God's loving ways. Living and speaking wickedly will deepen our ignorance of what God intends for our lives.

As a final step to help us apply the proverb, we can:

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[7]   Church kid that I was, until I was almost 18 my religion consisted of trying not to do perverse things. What brought me to deep repentance and new birth was the conviction that I had utterly failed at keeping the greatest commandment: I did not love God. When I look back at my pre-conversion days, I see that I spent no time nor energy *at all* trying to understand what pleases God, and even now complacency in my devotion to God Himself is a familiar temptation.

12. Suggest A Setting In Ancient Israel For The Teaching Of The Proverb

What might have prompted Solomon, or another author, to first formulate the saying of Proverbs 10.32? I can imagine a scenario like the following:

A wise father on his rooftop observes his young son learning the profane speech of the street urchins in the alleyway below. This prompts a bedtime conversation between father and son.

"Son, I overhead you talking with the boys in the alley today. Did that kind of talk please you?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think it would please your mother? Or, how about our rabbi?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Would it please God?"

"No."

"I think you're right. Remember son, 'The lips of a righteous man understand what is pleasing to God, But the mouth of wicked men knows only perversities.' Son, I know that you want to grow up to be a righteous man, so what kind of talk do you want to learn?"

The value of this final step is in the fact that if we can imagine an original setting for the utterance of the proverb, it not only solidifies our understanding of the saying, but also helps us visualize a teachable moment in which we might apply it in the life of our own family, or perhaps a situation in which we will do well to quote it to ourselves.

13. The Special Case Of The Numerical Proverbs

Proverbs 6.16-19 introduces us to the numerical style of proverbial sayings, and a collection of five numerical proverbs appears in Proverbs chapter 30. Let's consider Proverbs 30.15-16:

> To *the* leech *are* two daughters named Give! *and* Give!
>
> Three they *are* not satisfied; four have not said, "Enough!"
>
> Sheol,
>
> Barrenness of *the* womb,
>
> Land not having had enough water,
>
> And fire *that* has not said, "Enough."

We see in this numerical proverb the standard form of these sayings:

1. A catchy introduction giving the number of items to follow. The numerical sayings in the book of Proverbs are all what are known as "graded numerical sayings," in that the introduction gives a number, and then increases it by one or more to arrive at the actual number of items appearing in the following list.[8]

2. A title supplied *or implied* by the content of the introduction or list (e.g., Four Things That Are Never Satisfied).

3. The list of items.

How do these numerical proverbs work? I found help in understanding them from an unlikely source. Jim Croce's debut single on ABC Records, released in June of 1972, a tune entitled "You Don't Mess Around With Jim," has a refrain in the style of these numerical sayings. In this popular song, all the list items but one refer to fictional scenarios, but the cultural familiarity of Croce's advice makes it instantly understandable for American listeners of the 1970's:

> Uptown got it's hustlers, The bowery got it's bums
>
> 42nd Street got Big Jim Walker, He's a pool-shootin' son of a gun
>
> Yeah, he big and dumb as a man can come,
>
> But he stronger than a country hoss,
>
> And when the bad folks all get together at night,
>
> You know they all call big Jim "Boss," …
>
> And they say

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8   W. M. W. Roth, *Numerical Sayings In The Old Testament*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 6.

> You don't tug on Superman's cape
>
> You don't spit into the wind
>
> You don't pull the mask off the old Lone Ranger
>
> And you don't mess around with Jim

If this were a biblical proverb, we'd say the first verse is a long, if evocative, introduction, and the title of the numerical saying is obviously, *Four Things You Don't Do*. Now, while all four of the warnings in the list express good advice (at least within their fictional settings), the context of the song makes it clear that the fourth and final tip is the main one; the emphasized point is: "you don't mess around with Jim." So, what we have is four wise admonitions, with one of the four emphasized, and an overall wisdom message, namely: There are things in life that you must not do.

This is exactly how the numerical proverbs of the Bible work; we only need to know that all the wisdom items listed in the biblical numerical proverbs are from the real world, *and* from a cultural setting much different from 20th-century America. In fact, it helps to understand the numerical saying of Proverbs 30.15-16, *Four Things That Are Never Satisfied*, if we mentally transport ourselves to the 10th-century-BC, agrarian society of Israel.

The first item of wisdom, that Sheol (i.e., death or the grave) is never satisfied, is easy to understand. I can never say to myself, "Billions of people have died through the ages, so I imagine Death is satisfied by now and will never come looking for me."

To understand the second item, that the barren womb is never satisfied, we must know how supremely important childbearing was to a wife of ancient Israel. Many barren women in our own culture agonize over their inability to have children, but the laws of inheritance, and perhaps the messianic hope, in ancient Israel made the grief of barrenness even more acute.[9] When we understand the problem, we can grasp the point of wisdom: An Israelite husband should not say to himself, "My wife grieves because she cannot bear children, but she'll get over it."

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[9]   Rachel's agony was exacerbated by the fertility of Jacob's other wives (Gen 30.1).

Our contemporaries with farming background will have no difficulty understanding the third item: land is never satisfied with water. In times of insufficient rain, a farmer cannot say to himself, "My land has gotten plenty of rain in the past; I shouldn't have to irrigate my crops now."

Both farmer and city dweller understand the fourth item: fire is never satisfied. If a corner of the barley field, or of the house, catches fire, the onlookers must not say to themselves, "Fire has consumed so much before now, it must be nearly satisfied; surely it will go out by itself any moment now."

In other words, this numerical proverb has the overall message: Don't be complacent in the face of urgent need. Like the other proverbs, this one presents us with a choice: Will you be wise and respond to urgent need, or be foolishly complacent and suffer loss? The correct choice is obvious: I choose to be wise and not suffer for my complacency! To grasp the full teaching of this proverb, however, we must take the additional step of discerning the emphasized item.

Two things will help us find the emphasized item of a numerical saying. First, we must check to see which items have to do with people or relationships (biblical wisdom is first and foremost relational). Second, we must look again at the last point and the first. Hebraic literature favors placing the emphasized point last, but will sometimes list it first. Checking our four items in Proverbs 30.15-16, we see that the second item is indeed personal, having to do with barrenness in a marriage. Then, as we look again at the first and last items, we see that the first is also personal, pertaining to every person's problem, Death, whereas the last item about fire is about a somewhat less personal concern. So, is the main item about the barren womb, or about Sheol. It's prominence at the top of the list tells us that the author's main point is that Death is never satisfied. In other words, while one must never be complacent about a wife's emotional agony, nor about drought, nor about fire, the fact is that childlessness, failed crops and burned down barns *can be survived*, but Death cannot. The most important wisdom message of this numerical proverb is that the wise person will never be complacent about Death. He will neither lightly risk his life, *nor wait to find right relationship*

with his Creator. Now, we must remember that *every* item in a numerical proverb presents a true gem of wisdom, so we must not fail to meditate on each item. This proverb reminds us, for example, that wise husband will enter into the grief of his barren wife, and as priest in his home intercede for her until God answers. Nevertheless, the wise reader of this proverb will embrace the most important item, and seek right relationship with God without delay.[10]

Conclusion

I love the graded numerical saying of Proverbs 30.15-26, with its warning against complacency. In our prosperous culture, complacency is a constant enemy to the soul. It also plagues our relationship to Scripture. It's easy for us to ignore the Bible in favor of more sensual pastimes, but never in history have we needed God's word in our lives more desperately. It's not enough, though, to read the Bible as a duty and as a task to check off on our daily reading list. We must not be complacent about *our understanding of Scripture* nor about *what we have yet to hear from God through His word.* There is vastly more to receive from God's heart as expressed through the inspired Scriptures than any of us have yet unwrapped. My hope is that this brief guide to unwrapping a proverb will deliver us from complacency about these ancient gifts of wisdom collected in the book of Proverbs, and renew our fascination with these profound little messages from God.

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[10] My friend Rick Dupea has pointed out that in this numerical proverb there is a spiritual warning in the lesser three points: If one does not prepare for death by repentance and faith, his spiritual life becomes barren, dry and his works are turned to ashes.