

## Intro:

I am merging teaching threads from two separate occasions when I taught Proverbs. There are bits of overlap and unique bits along the way. I am trying to avoid repetition, but I can't always avoid it. Today's study may repeat some things I've taught before.

The last bit of "introductory" material I want to talk about is the *form* of Proverbs, what kind of literature is it, and how does that affect interpretation and application?

Our study today may sound like an English lesson... sorry about that!

Proverbs is poetry, but poetry of a particular kind, Hebrew poetry.

## I. On Hebrew poetry

Robert Alter: "the best words in the best order"<sup>1</sup>

Dan Phillips: "Hebrew poetry is the development of ideas in a creative, evocative way."<sup>2</sup>

Bruce Waltke: "Hebrew poetry, like all poetry ... tends to be more terse, more concise, than prose, and the relationships and transitions between lines tend to be unexpressed. ... In Proverbs terseness becomes even more acute; it is the hallmark of its lines. The sage teaches truth through aphorisms (a terse formation of a truth) that are also epigrams (a terse, sage, witty, and often paradoxical saying). They concentrate or distill truth and so by their nature cannot express the whole truth about a topic."<sup>3</sup>

## II. Characteristics of Hebrew poetry

A. Unlike English poetry [chief characteristic: 'rhyme and meter']

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, x, quoted by Dan Phillips, *God's Wisdom in Proverbs* (Kress Christian Publications, 2011), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Phillips, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce K Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 14.

## B. Chief characteristic of Heb. poetry: **Parallelism of thought**

“In parallelism, one line is then developed in (at least) a second line that completes the thought in some way.”<sup>4</sup>

## C. Imagery

### 1. Picturesque language (Pr 1.8-9, 2.3-4, 15.4)

Purpose of imagery: **arrest attention**

Pr 1.8-9 Hear, my son, your father's instruction And do not forsake your mother's teaching;<sup>9</sup> Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head And ornaments about your neck.

Pr 2.3-4 For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding;<sup>4</sup> If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures;

Pr 15.4 A soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit.

### 2. Wide variety of images (figures of speech)

- a. Simile: “a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by *like* or *as*”

Pr 26.18-19 Like a madman who throws Firebrands, arrows and death,<sup>19</sup> So is the man who deceives his neighbor, And says, “Was I not joking?”

- b. Metaphor: “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another”<sup>5</sup>

Pr 11.22 As a ring of gold in a swine's snout *So is* a beautiful woman who lacks discretion.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, *God's Wisdom in Proverbs*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

c. Allegory: “an extended metaphor”<sup>6</sup>

Pr 27.23-27 Know well the condition of your flocks, *And* pay attention to your herds;<sup>24</sup> **For riches are not forever, Nor does a crown endure to all generations.**<sup>25</sup> *When* the grass disappears, the new growth is seen, *And* the herbs of the mountains are gathered in,<sup>26</sup> The lambs *will be* for your clothing, *And* the goats *will bring* the price of a field,<sup>27</sup> *And there will be* goats' milk enough for your food, For the food of your household, *And* sustenance for your maidens.

1) Sustaining dynastic succession compared to

2) Paying attention to good stewardship of one's herds

d. Personification: “attributing human qualities to what is not human”<sup>7</sup>

Pr 9.1 Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars;

## e. Overstatement and understatement

Pr 30.1-2 The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle. The man declares to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal:<sup>2</sup> **Surely I am more stupid than any man,** *And* I do not have the understanding of a man.

Pr 24.23 These also are sayings of the wise. **To show partiality in judgment is not good.**

## f. And others, including irony, anthropomorphism, synecdoche (part for the whole – “gray head” for old person) and metonymy (associated item – “crown” for “king”)

<sup>6</sup> Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 40.

“In reading Proverbs, you’ll find word-pictures to your imagination’s delight. You’ll cringe from crucibles, flee from whirlwinds, wince at thorns, dodge arrows, shiver in snow, and sweat in heat. You’ll plunge your hands in gold and silver and jewels. You’ll drink (or run) from fountains and springs; pluck fruit off trees; and luxuriate in exotic fragrances and spices. You’ll behold both feasts and famine, rooftops and deserts. You’ll ponder ants and lions and coney and roosters and snakes and eagles and vultures.”<sup>8</sup>

### III. Types of parallelism in Proverbs<sup>9</sup>

#### A. **Synonymous** Proverbs

1. Def.: Line B re-words the thought of Line A
2. Examples (Pr 11.25, 16.16, 18)

Pr 11.25 The generous man will be prosperous, And he who waters will himself be watered.

Pr 16.16 How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!  
And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver.

3. The ‘echo’ [Line B] is often more specific than Line A

#### B. **Contrast** (or **Antithesis**)

1. “A, but B”
2. Examples: (Pr 10.1, 4; 27.7)

Pr 10.1 A wise son makes a father glad, But a foolish son is a grief to his mother.

Pr 10.4 Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich.

Pr 27.7 A sated man loathes honey, But to a famished man any bitter thing is sweet.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, *God’s Wisdom in Proverbs*, 18–19.

<sup>9</sup> Listed in Phillips, 27–33 for Phillips sources, see his footnote 46 on p. 27.

3. "The effect of this kind of proverb is to make a point startlingly clear by holding up opposites."<sup>10</sup>
4. Presents "the same truth but from opposite directions."<sup>11</sup>

Proverbs "is intent on presenting its readers with a fundamental choice in life, the choice between wisdom and folly. These antithetical proverbs are fleshing out the difference between the two. Wisdom is constructive, demands fear of the Lord, avoids proud talk, and does not lie. Folly, on the other hand, is destructive, despises the Lord, brags, and lies. Antithetical parallelism supports the worldview and message of Proverbs as a whole."<sup>12</sup>

### C. Comparison

1. Line A is like Line B
2. Examples: (Pr 10.26; 25.25; 26.18-19)

Pr 10.26 Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, So is the lazy one to those who send him.

Pr 26.18-19 Like a madman who throws Firebrands, arrows and death,<sup>19</sup> So is the man who deceives his neighbor, And says, "Was I not joking?"

3. In comparison proverbs, there is always point of contact in the comparison – a certain way line B is like line A

### D. Satirical

1. Use humorous satire to arrest attention – especially to warn against foolish or immoral behaviour
2. Satire in Line A (Pr 12.27; 13.4; 14.15)

Pr 12.27 A lazy man does not roast his prey, But the precious possession of a man *is* diligence.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Tremper Longman, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Longman, 42.

### 3. Satire in both lines (Pr 19.24; 17.16)

Pr 19.24 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, *But* will not even bring it back to his mouth.

## E. Evaluation

1. Line A is better than Line B
2. Examples: (Pr 15.16; 17.12; 18.24; 21.3)

Pr 15.16 Better is a little with the fear of the LORD Than great treasure and turmoil with it.

3. Two points contrasted, the better stands out clearly

## F. Consequence

1. Line B happens when you do Line A
2. Two kinds
  - a. Warnings (Pr 16.5, also 19.27. 20.4; 22.6)

Pr 16.5 Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.

- b. Commendations (Pr 22.29)

Pr 22.29 Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before obscure men.

## G. Synthetic

1. Line B builds on or extends Line A: “Line A — and what’s more, Line B”
2. Examples: (Pr 14.7; 15.3; 16.29; 17.8; 26.4-5)

Pr 14.7 Leave the presence of a fool, Or you will not discern words of knowledge.

Pr 15.3 The eyes of the LORD are in every place, Watching the evil and the good.

## H. Proverbial Discourse

1. Protracted didactic [teaching] poems
2. Chiefly found in Pr 1-9