Areas for discussion

Thank you for taking the time to read my paper. I am happy to discuss whatever emerges out of it from your perspective. But here are some ideas for discussion points; they are mainly things that I myself am unsure about.

- I have spoken of "the prototypical proverb", largely drawing on paremiological research and cross-cultural parallels. Am I in danger of universalising a genre which is actually culturally-specific?
- Related to this, ought I pay more attention to the Hebrew word מָשָׁל, which may give us some insight into the "ethnic genre" of the Israelites (this is what Niditch argues)?
- Have I paid sufficient attention to the way that the biblical proverbs diverge from prototypical proverbs? I am aware that they also invoke genre conventions different from those of folk proverbs (e.g. those of Didactic Instructions). Do I need to comment more on this?
- Do the areas proposed for further research look fruitful, or are some of them problematic?

Is the "Book of Proverbs" a book of proverbs?

The מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה is known throughout English tradition as the Book of Proverbs. Despite this, however, there is a general scholarly reluctance to read its sayings in the way we might read genuine proverbs. Otto Eißfeldt made a seminal distinction more than a century ago: *Volkssprichwörter* "folk proverbs" may lurk somewhere in the book's prehistory, but in the book's current form, they have been replaced by *Kunstsprüche* "artistic sayings".[1] Though the arguments have been refined over the years, the general scholarly impression remains: the sayings should be read as artistic creations of elite scribes, embedded in a literary didactic work.[2] Some scholars do challenge this view, and see more connection between biblical sayings and genuine proverbs,[3] but this often fails to influence their interpretive practices.

In this article, I will address the relationship between the sayings in Book of Proverbs (10:1-22:16 and 25-29)[4] and the proverb genre. In §1, I will argue (with most scholars) that these biblical sayings are not proverbs in a straightforward sense. I will suggest, however, (diverging from most scholars) that they do invoke the proverb genre, and hence can be read in some sense "as proverbs". In §2, I will explore the implications of this for how we interpret them.

[1] Eißfeldt, 1913.
[2] E.g. McKane, 1970 pp.32-33: "The sentence literature in the book of Proverbs… is devoid of the imaginative constituents of the popular proverb." It bears "unmistakable evidence of literary composition according to established stylistic conventions. Such sentences have been hammered into shape, filed and polished, and whatever their difference in content… they have in common the character of self-conscious literary products."
[3] This is often in terms of the origin of the biblical sayings. See below n.22. A few scholars have applied insights from paremiology (proverb studies) to the book of Proverbs. See Hildebrandt, 2005; Millar, 2020; Nahkola, 2016; Sandoval, 2006; Schneider, 1992.
[4] The other sections in Proverbs (1-9, 22:1-24:34, and 30-31) are quite different in genre, so will not be considered.

1. Can we read the sayings "as proverbs"?

1(a) The sayings viewed individually

Invoking a genre

Let us begin, then, with the question of whether we can or should read these the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and 25-29 "as proverbs". This immediately raises the issue of genre, which deserves more sustained attention in biblical scholarship.[5] My genre analysis, presented below, suggests that the biblical sayings do not belong to the proverb genre as such. But they do play with and invoke this genre, inviting their readers to interpret and use them "as proverbs".

Biblical scholars have often worked with a simplistic view of genres, which understands them as in/out categories. A text either belongs to the genre or it does not, depending on a set of necessary and sufficient criteria. In the idealised system thus constructed, genres are mutually exclusive, defined in opposition to each other. They are "pure" and uncontaminated,[6] and Derrida's "law of genre" holds: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres".[7] What this means for our sayings is that they either are or are not proverbs.

However, this rigid categorisation breaks down in face of real texts, which cannot be categorised so absolutely. A genre is not like an exclusive club, admitting only those who tick a checklist of criteria.[8] It is more like a family, where characteristics are shared in varying degrees by various member-texts.[9] The relevant characteristics can vary from genre to genre (form, style, metre, topic, addressee, context, purpose etc.). When these characteristics accumulate or are particularly pronounced in a certain text, this text may be considered a prototype of the genre, and other texts' memberships are judged by comparison.[10] Overall, genres are flexible and dynamic, and have blurred boundaries.

What's more, genres can overlap. A text can be situated in several genres at once, and hence does not properly "belong to" any of them. Describing how his law of unmixable genres breaks down,

[5] While discussions of genre have been very prevalent in recent scholarship on wisdom literature, these almost focus on the genre "wisdom" itself, rather than on the smaller genres of which it is composed. See especially Kynes, 2019 and the essays in Sneed, 2015b.
[6] In his seminal form-critical work, Gunkel espoused a view of original genres (*Gattungen*) as "completely pure" (*völlig rein*), Gunkel, 1933, p.28 and elsewhere. See discussion in Buss, 1999, pp.246-255.
[7] Derrida, 1980, p.55, Derrida goes on to show how this law disintegrates.
[8] This "checklist" theory of categorisation has been criticised by e.g. Fillmore, 1975.
[9] The "family resemblance" view of categories was seminally introduced by Wittgenstein, 1958. It has been applied to genre in biblical studies by e.g. Dell, 2015, and criticised as an approach by Fishelov, 1993.
[10] The "prototype" view of categories began with the psycholinguistic work of Eleanor Rosch (e.g. Rosch, 1973). It has been applied to genre theory by e.g. Sinding, 2002. In biblical studies, see Wright, 2010.

Derrida speaks of "a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of".[11] A text may participate in or invoke multiple genres by employing and playing with their recognisable characteristics (a film may simultaneously invoke the gore of horror and the slap-stick exaggeration of comedy, resulting in a comedy-horror hybrid). I will suggest that the sayings in Proverbs do not "belong to" the proverb genre, but they do invoke it.

The proverb genre in ancient Israel

This, of course, assumes that such a thing as "the proverb genre" existed for the composers and audience of the Book of Proverbs. It is well-established in paremiology (proverb studies) that proverbs in some form have recurred across the globe and throughout history (though we should avoid universal claims).[12] In Mesopotamia, for example, sayings were gathered into collections from as early as c. 2600BCE,[13] and were quoted in narratives, hymns, and letters.[14] Something about the proverb genre taps into human cognitive capacities and societal instincts, giving it transcultural utility.[15] The precise nature of the sayings may vary from culture to culture,[16] but there are also remarkable transcultural similarities, which cluster together in prototypically proverbial texts.[17] In origin, they are apparently authorless creations, the public stock of ordinary people. In content, they give traditional moral advice about everyday issues, often employing concrete imagery. In form, that are short, self-contained and sentential; poetic and pithy. In medium they are spoken conversationally, and in function they cut into specific situations, often serving to evaluate the circumstances or to direct the hearer.

Sayings with characteristics like these are known in the narrative and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible,[18] testifying that they were part of the common rhetorical stock of the Israelite/Judahite people. When they occur in the text, they are sometimes unmarked, sometimes introduced by "thus it is said" (עַל־כֵּן יֵאָמֵר or similar; e.g. Gen 10:9; 2 Sam 5:8, 20:18), and sometimes designated as מָשָׁלִים (1

[11] Derrida, 1980, p.59. This view of genre has been explored and endorsed in biblical studies by e.g. Newsom, 2005, p.439; Zahn, 2012, p.277.
[12] See the discussion in Hakamies, 2016; cf. Lauhakangas, 2007, pp.214-219, who argues that proverbs are a universal genre.
[13] Published in e.g. Gordon, 1959. There is debate about whether these sayings reflect an oral tradition of the people (Alster, 1993, p.9), or are inventions of the scribal school (Veldhuis, 2000).
[14] Taylor, 2005, pp.21-24.
[15] See Honeck, 2013 on the cognitive foundations of the proverb genre.
[16] See Norrick's distinction between "supercultural" and "ethnographic" definitions; Norrick, 1985, pp. 58-59.
[17] The seminal work on the proverb by Archer Taylor concluded that proverbs elude definition, exuding some "incommunicable quality"; Taylor, 1931, p.3. Since then, there have been extensive discussions about proverb definition. See Norrick, 2015.
[18] E.g. Gen 10:9; Judg 8:2, 21; 1 Sam 10:12≈19:24; 16:7, 24:14[13]; 2 Sam 20:18; 1 Kgs 20:11; Ezek 12:22, 16:44 18:2≈Jer 31:29.

Sam 10:12, 24:14; Ezek 12:22–23, 18:2–3). This term (מָשָׁל) has a broad semantic range, and can refer to various discourse types.[19] I use the English term "proverb" to isolate the "short saying" area of this semantic range. Detailed work elsewhere has used paremiological insights to analyse the characteristics and function of these sayings.[20]

The sayings in Proverbs invoke the proverb genre

My contention is that the sayings in the book of Proverbs tap into this genre, in a way recognisable to the original audience. This does not mean that they "belong to" the genre, nor that they display all its prototypical characteristics. I will suggest that, though the *origin, self-designation, content, form/style* and *medium* of the sayings may diverge in places from prototypical proverbs, they nonetheless resemble the prototypes, and thus invoke the genre.

The biblical sayings may stem from a different *origin* and social location to prototypical proverbs. In caricature: the former are found amongst the elite; the latter amongst the ordinary people. However, both sides of this should be nuanced. The biblical sayings are, in the form we have them, necessarily products of the literati (for they are written down),[21] but some of them may nonetheless have circulated amongst ordinary people.[22] What's more, in contrast to other ancient Near Eastern Instructions, which explicitly set their prologues in a courtly context,[23] Proverbs' own prologue speaks of uncourtly everyday life.[24] Conversely, though prototypical proverbs express the wisdom of the ordinary people, they might be used by the higher echelons too.[25] Hence we find them on the lips of the elite prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 12:22, 16:44, 18:2) and the King of Israel (1 Kgs 20:11). In terms of proverb use, "elite" and "folk" should not be dichotomised.[26] If the elite did compose the biblical

[19] Taunt songs (Isa 14:4, Mic 2:4), allegories (Ezek 17:2, 21:5[20:49]), poems (Pss 49:5[4], 78:2) and discourses (Num 23:7, Job 27:1). There have been some attempts to describe a "ethnic genre" which would account for all these diverse uses, but none are ultimately persuasive. It is better to see the term as a polyseme, denoting different things in different contexts, just as e.g. the English word "script" may denote the written version of a play, a piece of computer coding, a student's exam answer, or someone's handwriting. See Crenshaw, 1974, pp.229-239; Eißfeldt, 1913; Fox, 2009, pp. 54-55; Herbert, 1954; Jeremias, 1963; Johnson, 1955; Landes, 1978; McKane, 1970, pp.22-33; Niditch, 1993; Polk, 1983; Suter, 1981.
[20] Camp, 1981; Fontaine, 1982, 1985, 2002, 2004; Hasan-Roken, 1990; van Heerden, 2003; Lieber, 1984; Niditch, 1993.
[21] Several scholars propose an elite courtly origin for the sayings: Ansberry, 2011; Fox, 1996; Perdue, 2008; von Rad, 1972. For criticisms of this hypothesis, see Weeks, 1994, pp.41-56.
[22] Suggesting a folk origin for (at least some of) the sentence literature: Barucq, 1972; Dell, 2006; Golka, 1993; Naré, 1986; Paterson, 1954; Washington, 1994; Westermann, 1995; Whybray, 1990.
[23] See discussion in Ansberry, 2011, pp.13-19 (Egyptian instructions) and pp.26-29 (Mesopotamian instructions).
[24] Apart from the single titular mention of King Solomon, 1:1.
[25] Compare the contemporary example of Akan folk proverbs which are adopted by the chief's circle. Yankah, 2012, discussed by Fox, 2009 p.485.
[26] Many scholars acknowledge that both these locations are suited for Proverbs. E.g. Dell, 2006, p.53.

sayings, they chose a genre which transcends social boundaries. Their generic choice implies an ideological move, imbuing their instructions with traditional authority and universal validity.

When discerning genre, we should be attentive a text's *self-designation*, which guides the reader in what to expect, and consequently in what she will find. The biblical sayings call themselves מָשָׁלִים (1:1, 10:1, 25:1), priming the reader to recognise their resemblance to traditional sayings. The semantic background of this term is probably מָשַׁל "to be like" (BDB I).[27] Indeed, "likeness" is important for both prototypical proverbs and biblical sayings. Many contain explicit comparisons,[28] and those which do not are intended as standards for comparison with situations in life.[29]

In terms of their *content*, the sayings are strikingly similar to the proverb stocks of other peoples,[30] their tropes recurring across space and time. They impart traditional moral advice, drawing from several spheres of everyday life – the neighbourhood and family (cf. Ezek 16:44; 18:2=Jer 31:29); the law court and agriculture (cf. Jdgs 8:2). They show ambivalence about the elites, and concern for the poor.[31] As conversational wisdom, prototypical proverbs are socially-oriented, and often function to ease community tensions.[32] Similarly, the biblical sayings commend behaviour conducive to harmonious communal life: avoid quarrels (16:28; 17:1,14; 20:3; 26:17), placate the angry (15:1, 18; 21:14), restrain your speech (10:19; 11:12,13; 13:3; 17:27; 21:23).[33]

They also bear the *formal* and *stylistic* markers of proverbs. Proverbs are short and pithy, crying out for a context to elucidate them. But when used in a context, they set themselves apart as self-contained, summarial remarks. They employ heightened poetic language, with soundplay, wordplay (cf. 1 Sam 24:14[13]) and figures of speech (cf. Ezek 18:2 = Jer 31:29), adding to their memorability and persuasiveness. They are indirect and observational, subtly persuading their hearers without abrupt imperatives.

It should be noted though that many biblical sayings differ from prototypical proverbs here. Instead of being single-lined, they have stylised two-lined parallelism.[34] And instead of employing

[27] Some have suggested instead "to rule" (BDB II), hence "sovereign word" or "word of power" (e.g. recently Perdue, 2000, 27). However, this view has largely been discredited, mainly based on cognate languages. See discussion in McKane, 1970, pp.24-26.
[28] E.g. Gen 10:9; Judges 8:2, 21; 1 Kgs 20:11; Ezek 16:44; many examples in Proverbs, esp. chs. 25-26; also e.g. 10:26; 11:22; 12:4,18; 16:15,24; 18:8,11.
[29] See McKane's explanation of the מָשָׁל genre. McKane, 1970, pp.26-33.
[30] Barucq, 1972; Golka, 1993; Kimilike, 2008; Naré, 1986; Westermann, 1995.
[31] Westermann, 1995; Whybray, 1990.
[32] Lauhakangas, 2007, p.208; Fontaine, 1982, pp.154-158.
[33] Restraint in speech is a common trope in wisdom texts across the ancient Near East (see Lyu, 2012, pp.102-107), and in proverb texts cross-culturally (see Norrick, 1997).
[34] It has been common to argue that an original single-lined folk saying was supplemented by a second line when it was incorporated into the written collection. Influentially Eißfeldt, 1913, p.47.

concrete imagery, they use general language.[35] But this cannot disqualify them entirely from proverbiality. Indeed, cross-culturally and in ancient Israel, some proverbs do exhibit parallelism (e.g. 1 Sam 16:7) and generality (e.g. 1 Sam 24:14[13]). And neither feature prevents them from functioning as proverbs, useful for specific situations. A proverb with parallelism shows the situation from dual perspectives, and may have increased motivational capacity;[36] a general proverb allows room for many applications. If proof is needed that such sayings could function as proverbs, then we need look no further than the numerous biblically-inspired societies, who have used them just so.[37]

Finally, though the book of Proverbs comes to us in a written *medium*, it does not lose contact with oral tradition – a hallmark of prototypical proverbs. It is easy to forget, in our contemporary writing-infused culture, that Israel was essentially an oral society, even within its literate subsections. The two media were intertwined, with the oral taking priority.[38] Orality might explain the existence of variant proverbs (multiple versions of ostensibly the same saying, found scattered throughout the collections). While these could be explained otherwise, it is possible that they arose through the Chinese-whisper effect of the oral repetition.[39] Proverbs is aware of its own orality, and is insistent in its imperative: "Listen!" (1:8; 4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:32, 33; 19:20; 22:17; 23:19, 22). The sayings thus become available as spoken, conversational tools.

Overall, then, the sayings in Prov 10:1-22:16 and 25-29 do not "belong to" the proverb genre. Their origin, self-designation, content, form/style, and medium diverge in places from those of prototypical proverbs. However, there is enough resemblance that the sayings continually invoke this genre, and invite their readers to interpret them "as proverbs".

[35] This is the main reason why some scholars, like McKane, refuse to see them as genuine proverbs. McKane, 1970 pp.22-33.
[36] Hildebrandt, 1992.
[37] See Hagopian, 2008; Mieder, 2015, pp.35-36; Snapp, 1933.
[38] Niditch, 1996 describes an oral-written continuum, and Carr, 2005 envisages a complex nexus for transmission, involving memorisation, orality, and writing.
[39] E.g. Carr argues that these are "memory variants" based on oral tradition. Carr, 2011, pp.25-34. Other possibilities include scribal error, different literary sources, and editorial activity. See discussions in Heim, 2013 and Snell, 1993.

1(b) The sayings viewed as a collection

Literarily embedded genres

So far, I have considered the biblical sayings as individual units, but now I must turn to the collection as a whole. Indeed, some argue that, whatever the genre of the individual sayings, this is changed inexorably when they are embedded in the book.

Genre is here understood in a quasi-Bakhtinian sense as coming in two forms; Bakhtin calls them primary and secondary.[40] For Bakhtin, primary genres are simple, concise and usually oral; secondary genres are complex, organised, and usually literary. Many primary genres can be embedded into a secondary genre (think of the songs and prayers embedded in Hebrew narrative). And, for Bakhtin, primary genres "are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones", for they lose contact with everyday life.[41] Hence a proverb is changed by its entry into a didactic collection. It is no longer a spoken unit of direct communication, but has been abstracted and anthologised.

In paremiological research, this interpretive move was paralleled by Wolfgang Mieder. For Mieder, stripping a proverb of its situational context was as good as killing it. Thus he famously sounded the knell: "the proverb in a collection is dead!"[42] In biblical studies, scholars like Claudia Camp took note of this obituary, eulogising that the sayings in Proverbs had been entombed by their literary, collected form. Dead and inert, they no longer functioned as they once might have, potent within lived situations.[43] Rather, according to Camp, they had hardened into "encalcifed dogma", dead "inscribed morality".[44] More recent scholars have nuanced this claim. The proverb in a collection may not be "dead", they say, but it has become something else, something distinctly unproverbial.[45] *Sitz im Leben* has been replaced by *Sitz im Buch,*[46] and it is now a didactic saying enmeshed in a literary work. As such, it no longer invokes the proverb genre.

These proposals should be taken seriously, but cannot be assumed a priori. Embedding one genre into another does not *always* denature it (instructions remain instructions, whether they are found on individual sheets or in a lengthy manual). We must therefore examine the particular texts

[40] Bakhtin, 1986.
[41] Bakhtin, 1986, p.62.
[42] Mieder, 1974, p.892.
[43] For Camp, this meant that they no longer functioned as cultural models, evaluating or affecting reality. Camp, 1985, pp.167-175.
[44] Camp, 1985, p.173.
[45] Several scholars cite Mieder in this way. E.g. Ansberry, 2011, p.72; Brown, 2002, p.182; Brown 2004, p.138; Clifford, 2009, pp.243-244; Heim, 2001, p.42; Murphy, 1998, p.67.
[46] Ansberry, 2011, p.72.

involved. For the biblical sayings, two levels of literary contextualisation are sometimes thought to change their nature: immediate and distant.

Immediate literary context

When viewed in their immediate literary context, the sayings might be taken, not individually, but as parts of an interconnected whole. They can then be read in relation to each other, the meaning of each fleshed out by its neighbours. Indeed, Knut Heim suggests that "[t]his reading-together allows for inferences and cross-references which lead to a cross-fertilization and inter-animation of meaning".[47] They lose the self-contained quality of prototypical proverbs, and begin to seep into each other. They meld into their literary context, and are therefore not available for extraction and use as proverbs.

Two main arguments are generally offered to support this view. First is an assumption: speakers and writers tend to create connected discourses; hearers and readers tend to expect them.[48] Heim argues that if a proverb occurs in a conversation, hearers expect it to be related to the conversational context, and similarly if it occurs in a collection, readers expect it to be related to the literary context.[49] In both instances, he says, we naturally use the whole to interpret each of the parts. But searching for an interrelation of parts is an interpretive convention, and interpretive conventions vary depending on genre. (I would not, for example, search for significance in the interrelationship of numbers in my phone book). And indeed, spoken conversations and written collections are very different genres. We expect coherence and inter-part relation in the former,[50] but not necessarily in the latter – if it is there it must be found empirically.

Second, then, are the empirical links which connect proverbs together, e.g. alliteration, catchwords, and thematic similarities.[51] Perhaps these show that the biblical sayings are meant to be enlivened by their literary context. The constraints of this article do not allow details here, but suffice it to say that the alleged connections are often far from obvious, and may not be intentional: proverbs in *any* arrangement will generate some links, purely by chance.[52] And even if intentional, perhaps they

[47] Heim, 2001, p.107.
[48] Heim, 2001, pp.72-75; van Leeuwen, 1988, p.31.
[49] Heim, 2001, p.74.
[50] See Grice's influential conversational principles, which include this "maxim of relation" Grice, 1975, p.46.
[51] According to Stuart Weeks' analysis, 58% of the proverbs in 10:1-22:16 link with their neighbours in these ways. Weeks, 1994, p.24.
[52] Fox, 2009, pp.479-480 experimented with Weeks' method on groups of sayings randomly jumbled. He found that 36–60% of them had links with their neighbours.

are not significant:[53] the scribe may simply have ordered proverbs by some associative principle,[54] or to help the flow of reading.[55]

Indeed, the reader's immediate impression is of random arrangement. If she tries to read straight through the proverbs like a continuous discourse, she becomes disoriented. She could say with Don Quixote, "to pile up and string together proverbs at random makes conversation dull and vulgar".[56] Perhaps, then, this is not how they are meant to be read. So (again with Don Quixote) she might nuance her criticism: "Mind… I do not say that a proverb aptly brought in is objectionable". She might find in the collection, not a connected literary discourse, but a selection of proverb-like sayings, each standing in all its proverbial particularity. Each can then serve as an individual tool, to be extracted from its literary encasing, and "aptly brought in" to a situation like a proverb.

Distant literary context

I suggest, then, that the immediate literary context of the sayings does not stop them from invoking the proverb genre. But might their distant literary context do so? In particular, Proverbs 1-9 is often said to provide a hermeneutical framework for the sayings collections that follow.[57] It sets the reader up with expectations about what will follow and about how to read it. In particular, it establishes a certain *performance context* and *function* for the book. Some scholars suggest that these prevent the reader from seeing the subsequent sayings as proverbs. I contend, however, that they may actually facilitate it.

First, Prov 1-9 indicates a particular *performance context*. Like many ancient Near Eastern didactic texts, it depicts a father instructing his son through long, wise discourses.[58] Some argue that the sayings in chs.10ff are imagined as belonging to the same sustained recitation.[59] If so, they are not functioning as proverbs. However, this idea is questionable. At 10:1, discourse is disrupted by a new title – "the proverbs of Solomon" (10:1).[60] Before had been connected instructions, infused with direct

[53] Arguing for significance in the arrangement of the sayings: Boström, 1928; Hatton, 2008; Heim, 2001; Hildebrandt, 1990; Scoralick, 1995; Skehan, 1976; Waltke, 2005; Whybray, 1979.
Suggesting the arrangement is relatively insignificant: Fox, 2009; McKane, 1970; Scott, 1965; Weeks, 1994; Weeks, 2010; Westermann, 1995.
[54] Fox, 2009, p.480.
[55] Weeks, 1994, p.33.
[56] de Cervantes, 1952, p.334.
[57] E.g. Ansberry, 2011, pp.74-75; Bartholomew & O'Dowd, 2011, p.97; Camp, 1985, p.186-191; Brown, 2002, p.153; Sandoval, 2006, p.116; Clifford, 2009, pp.243-246; Yoder, 2005.
[58] Some suggest that this was the historical actuality behind textual transmission. E.g. Carr, 2005.
[59] Fox, 2003.
[60] While ANE parallels usually indicate at this point that the performance context continues, it is notable that the biblical text does not. Vayntrub, 2016, p.110.

imperatives to "my son"; now we have atomistic, third-person sayings.[61] These differences suggest a break between the sections, and a new performance context.

But if there is not the specific continuity of an ongoing speech, there may be a more general continuity – a continuity, what's more, which may facilitate reading the sayings as proverbs. Chs. 1-9 have established a father-son context. This immediately continues into the sayings (10:1, 5), evoking the familial environment known as a prime locus of proverb performance.[62] Through their didactic, authoritative lectures, chs. 1-9 have inculcated into their hearer a posture of humble receptivity – precisely the posture required to properly heed proverbial advice. And they have highlighted the preeminent value of wisdom, which will then serve as a key motivation to action in the proverbs which follow.

Second, the contextualisation of the sayings after chs. 1-9 is sometimes said to change their *function*. Chs. 1-9 may orientate the book towards offering general moral principles and inculcating timeless virtues. Whether or not the book was used in formal "schools",[63] it enculturates students holistically into a sagacious way of life. This may appear to diverge from the prototypical function of proverbs (namely, to give situation-specific advice). Indeed, Heim argues that readers of Proverbs are probably seeking general guidance in faith and practice, so they are unlikely to use the sayings as proverbs in specific situations.[64] However, I would ask how else faith and practice are manifested, other than through specific situations? The general function does not override the specific, but the two work together. Indeed, paremiologists have long observed that proverbs are used for ethical guidance of the young, promulgating the status quo, and giving traditional moral advice.[65]

Overall, then, the performance context and function established by chs. 1-9 do not prevent the reader from seeing the sayings in chs. 10ff as proverbs. If anything, they may facilitate this genre recognition. Tied with the perception of random arrangement and proverbial characteristics of the sayings, this creates conditions highly conducive to reading the sayings "as proverbs".

[61] Within 10:1-22:16 and 25-29, "my son" only occurs in 19:27; 27:11. Imperatives occur in 23 verses.
[62] Mieder, 1997, p.414.
[63] Influentially argued by Hermisson, 1968. Cf. also Lang, 1979, pp.186-201; Lemaire, 1981; Perdue, 2008; Shupak, 1993.
[64] Heim, 2001, pp.72-74.
[65] E.g. Bascom, 1954; Penfield & Duru, 1988.

2. What are the implications of reading the sayings "as proverbs"?

The communicative capacity of genre

So far, I have argued that the biblical sayings invoke the proverb genre, when considered both individually and as a collection. Now the question must be asked: So what? What difference does this make to our interpretation? I suggest it makes a good deal of difference. The purpose of genre analysis is not classification for classification's sake. Rather, genres have communicative capacity.

A genre functions as a culturally conditioned mediating framework, prompting the reader how to approach the text. Members of a society are repeatedly exposed to certain genres, and come to absorb conventions for their interpretation, and expectations about their content. Each new instantiation of the genre recalls and renews this "social contract", reinforcing the agreement to interpret in a particular way.[66] What's more, a genre often emerges within a typified situation of use.[67] Within that situation, it provides a socially-recognised means for participants to enact particular identities and roles. It offers rhetorical and linguistic resources to perform sanctioned social actions.[68]

For the proverb genre, these situational and functional aspects are particularly important. Paremiologists stress that the essence of the proverb genre does not reside in the text of the proverb alone. Indeed, this is only one part of a much larger "proverb event".[69] The proverb *text* cannot be fully understood outside of a *specific situation*, where it is performed with a *specific function*. The meaning of a proverb involves the dynamic interrelation of these three parts.[70]

I suggest that by invoking the proverb genre, the biblical sayings simultaneously invoke the attendant conventions for interpretation and use. They invite application to specific situations in specific functions in the manner of proverbs. Paremiological insights in this area have been fruitfully

[66] The metaphor of a genre as a "social contract" comes from Jameson, 1982, pp.103-150. Various other metaphors express the same ideas. Freadman, 1994 likens a genre to a tennis match, where utterances are meaningful because they abide by the "rules of the game". Fishelov, 1993 draws an analogy between a genre and a social institution, for they both "provide a network of norms through which our experience is made culturally meaningful", p.2. For Fowler, 1989, a genre is a "shared code" between text and interpreter, and for Jauss, 1982, a genre provides a "horizon of expectation" about how to interpret.

[67] Influentially suggested by Bitzer, 1968 and Black, 1965. Gunkel had anticipated this observation, with his view of *Gattungen* linked to *Sitze im Leben*. However, the rigid one-to-one connection he proposed is untenable.

[68] For the view of genre as social action, see Miller, 1984.

[69] The move was initiated by a special edition of *The Journal of American Folklore*, the introduction to which promised "a full-scale and highly self-conscious reorientation from the traditional focus upon folklore as 'item' – the things of folklore – to a conceptualization of folklore as 'event'". Bauman, 1971, p.v.

[70] Paremiologist Kirshenblatt-Gimblett influentially expressed this as "Proverb (performance) meaning = participants' evaluation of situation [situation] + participants' understanding of proverb's base meaning [text] + interactional strategy of proverb user [function]" (square brackets added). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1973. This equation has been widely cited in paremiological and biblical scholarship since.

applied to the proverbs of Hebrew narrative by Carole Fontaine and others.[71] I suggest they could be applied to the sayings in the book of Proverbs too. In what follows, I will sketch out some preliminary results in this area, which could serve as avenues for further exploration.

Proverb situation

Proverbs are prototypically spoken into social situations. They are particularly often performed in certain types of circumstance – such as education[72] or conflict[73] – but this does not expend the range of possibilities. In their collected form, the biblical sayings have been extracted from any such context. This decontextualization serves, not to kill them (*qua*-Mieder), but to open them up to multiple recontextualisations elsewhere.[74]

When a proverb is spoken into a social context, it maps onto some salient aspect of the context, isolating and highlighting it. This mapping involves, not a one-to-one correspondence, but a dynamic interrelation.[75] Text and context each remould our interpretation of the other. The proverb is not static, but is enlivened to display flexible dynamism. We cannot, of course, predict every possible instance of application, but we can scope out the range of meaning potential, and analyse the directions of interpretation which the saying may or may not permit. Meaning potential is guided both by certain *variables of application*, and by the *text itself*.

First, then, certain *variables* guide the direction of the proverb application. As these shift, the saying's implications and rhetorical force will shift too. For example, a proverb can have a positive or negative relationship to its context, stating what is or is not the case. Thus I can say "a wise son [heeds] his father's discipline"[76] (בֵּן חָכָם מוֹסַר אָב; Prov 13:1a) to a wise son to commend him, or to a fool to shame him. In the latter case, the second half of the proverb – "but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (וְלֵץ לֹא שָׁמַע גְּעָרָה) – may have a biting direct relevance. Equally I can speak the proverb at various temporal points – before, during, or after the son has heeded (or ignored) the discipline.[77] The rhetorical force will change in each instance.

[71] See above, n.20.

[72] Lauhakangas, 2007; Penfield & Duru, 1988.

[73] Fontaine, 1982, pp.154-155; van Heerden, 2003; Lauhakangas, 2007.

[74] Bland, 1994, p.128; Fox, 2009, p.484; Hildebrandt, 2005, pp.6-7.

[75] There is a long-standing debate between paremiologists about whether the Great Chain Metaphor Theory or the Extended Conceptual Base Theory best explains proverb application (see helpful discussion in Bradbury, 2002, pp.265-275). There are also increasing contributions from scholars using Blend Theory; e.g. Aasland, 2009; Andersson, 2013; Buljan & Gradečak-Erdeljić, 2013; Johansen, 2007.

[76] I have supplied the verb in translation. See discussion below.

[77] This proverb is unusual in using the *qatal* form of the verb. According to Cook, in the proverbs in 10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27, we find: 180 *yiqtol*, 202 verbless, 48 participial, 38 *qatal* and 31 modal clauses. Whatever their grammatical tense, they seem to maintain a general "gnomic" sense, a proverbial present. Cook, 2005.

What's more, a proverb can address several different parties. The prologue of Proverbs presents didactic instruction from a father to a son, and this type of interchange makes good sense for Prov 13:1. But this is not the only possible context for the sayings. Hebrew narrative suggests that proverbs could be spoken, not only to the lowly, but to those with a high status.[78] The book of Proverbs stresses that even wise men have much to learn,[79] and Prov 13:1 might thus be spoken *to* a father. If so, it commends him to discipline his son, who may consequently become wise. It would be worthwhile to give systematic examination to how these variables might alter proverb meaning and rhetoric.

Second, and more fundamentally, the meaning potential of the *text itself* should be analysed. Openness to multiple meanings is widely noted as a hallmark of the proverb genre.[80] Israelite proverbs were probably no exception. Consider, for example, the proverb "Is Saul also amongst the prophets?", which occurs twice in biblical narrative (1 Sam 10:11, 19:24), and which seems to have a subtly different meaning in each case.[81]

True to genre, the sayings in Proverbs are often ambiguous and open-ended. Their terseness and omission of grammatical markers (e.g. אֲשֶׁר and אֵת) leave them underspecified, and may permit multiple relationships between parts. For example, in Prov 13:1a, two noun phrases are juxtaposed: בֵּן חָכָם מוּסַר אָב "a wise son – a father's discipline".[82] A verb must be supplied, but it is unclear which verb (I suggested "heeds" above, but we might choose another[83]). Many proverbs contain grammatical or semantic ambiguities. The subsequent proverb, 13:2, for example, reads מִפְּרִי פִי אִישׁ יֹאכַל טוֹב וְנֶפֶשׁ בֹּגְדִים חָמָס. In 2a, ambiguities emerge in the subject of the verb: "from the fruit of a man's mouth, he/one will eat good". 2b is more ambiguous still: "but the throat of the treacherous [will eat] violence" (interpreting נֶפֶשׁ physiologically, and assuming the verb gapped from 2a) or "but the desire of the treacherous is violence" (נֶפֶשׁ as desire, and the clause as copula) or "but the treacherous person – violence" (נֶפֶשׁ as the acting person,[84] and חָמָס exclaiming the results of his actions).

Many proverbs contain open-ended or flexible metaphors – what would it mean to "eat good" or "eat violence" (13:2) anyway? Many contain general language – the wise (חָכָם) of 13:1; the treacherous (בֹּגְדִים) of 13:2 – which could be fleshed out in many ways. This breadth of meaning potential is not accidental or unfortunate, but essential to the sayings' use as proverbs. As they are applied, ambiguities are clarified by context and generalities are specified by concrete realities. As

[78] Proverbs are spoken to e.g. Gideon (Jdgs 8:21), Saul (1 Sam 24:14), and Ben-Hadad, King of Syria (1 Kgs 20:11).
[79] Prov 1:5; cf. also 10:8; 12:15; 15:5, 14; 17:10, 24; 18:15; 19:25; 21:11.
[80] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1973; Krikmann, 1974.
[81] Lieber, 1984.
[82] This device of "blunt juxtaposition" is very common in Proverbs. See Fox, 2009, p.561.
[83] For example, we could supply "hears" via a back-gapping of יִשְׁמַע from the second colon; or "is the product of" as an extension of the copula understanding: the wise son *is* a father's discipline (Delitzsch, 1884).
[84] נֶפֶשׁ is frequently used to represent the acting person in Priestly legislation (Lev 2:1; 4:2, 27 etc.). Cf. also Prov 11:25.

students of the proverbs, we should be sensitive to this, explore the openness, and not pre-emptively foreclose possibilities.

The situation-specificity inherent in the proverb genre also has implications for the worldview conveyed, about which I can comment only briefly here. A genre provides lenses which colour and distort the reality it mediates, and which thereby control the perspective of its readers.[85] For example, the wisdom conveyed by the proverb genre necessarily maintains contact with everyday life. Wisdom emerges not from the proverb text alone, but from its interaction with situational context. In epistemological terms, not just tradition, but experience, is paramount.[86] Though the biblical sayings are expressed in broad, general terms, they do not drift off into abstraction.[87] Rather, their generality ensures applicability to many concrete situations.

Following from this, proverbial wisdom does not try to construct a wholly consistent system for understanding life. It approaches situation after situation, unperturbed when the muddled mass of human experience generates apparently contradictory principles.[88] Should we or should we not answer a fool according to his folly? Proverbs 26:4-5 merrily advises both. Proverbial wisdom thus accepts its limitations.[89] It distils helpful generalisations, categories and patterns, but never claims to grasp the whole.

Proverb function

Essential to the proverb genre is not only the situation to which it is applied, but also the function for which it is applied. Indeed, proverbs do not simply state facts, but are active – flattering, advising, congratulating, warning, and so on. In linguistic terms, they assert themselves as speech acts. There is a growing body of paremiological research investigating proverbs as speech acts,[90] but this remains largely untapped by biblical scholars. Not all speech acts are equally suitable for proverbs, for genres lean towards certain typified actions.[91] We can highlight two speech acts as prototypical of proverbs: assertion and direction.[92] Proverbs assert the truth about the situation, or they direct their

[85] Medvedev, 1978.
[86] Scholars arguing for an empirical epistemology in Proverbs include Crenshaw, 1985, pp.51-52; Frydrych, 2002, p.53-57. This has been challenged by Fox, 2007.
[87] On wisdom's negotiation between the general and specific, see Bartholomew & O'Dowd, 2011, pp.27-28.
[88] On contradictions in Proverbs, see Hatton, 2008; Nahkola, 2016.
[89] See especially von Rad, 1972, pp.97-110.
[90] Dairo, 2010; Jesenšek, 2015; Kayange, 2018; Klégr, 2013; Lawal, Ajayi, & Raji, 1997; Norrick, 1982.
[91] Miller, 1984.
[92] E.g. Harnish, 2003, pp.167-168; Krikmann, 1974, p.6; Lauhakangas, 2007, pp.219-220.

hearer to change the situation. If Hebrew narrative is anything to go by, Israelite proverbs were no exception here.[93]

As assertive speech acts, proverbs do not give neutral "facts", but charged evaluations. They create a value-laden system of categories and patterns for understanding the world. Circumstances may seem disordered, but they can be sorted into known types. Each situation can be managed by disambiguating and "naming" it – as wisdom or folly, righteousness or wickedness.[94] As more and more situations are confronted, an iterative process takes place. Each speech act invokes the evaluative system to claim a new situation, changing how we understand that situation. Reciprocally, each situation enters the evaluative system, changing how we understand that system. As assertive speech acts then, proverbs negotiate worldview in conversation with situations of the world.

In their directive function, proverbs offer these same categories and patterns as incentives for action. Character categories are value laden, and intend to offer intrinsic motivation for moral development. Becoming wise is the student's highest end. If extrinsic motivation is needed, many sayings describe the tick-tock pattern of the righteous prospering and the wicked falling.[95] This, of course, is not always borne out in reality, leading some to accuse Proverbs of a naïve, unrealistic idealism.[96] But proverb function should be taken seriously here: they offer whips and carrots to spur the student into action.[97]

Like proverbs cross-culturally, the biblical sayings achieve their speech-act potency through sophisticated rhetorical techniques.[98] Well-crafted speech is highly valued in Proverbs and ancient Near Eastern wisdom more generally,[99] and the biblical sayings practice what they preach. They create the appearance of objectivity and timeless veracity, demanding immediate acquiescence to their truth. They do not provoke discussion, but clinch the case.[100] They are depersonalised and indirect, to protect the speaker and avoid affronting the hearer.[101] These functional and rhetorical aspects of the biblical sayings deserve more attention in scholarship.

[93] Fontaine commented on the interconnection between these two functions in Hebrew narrative. Fontaine, 1982, p.164.
[94] On disambiguation, see Lieber, 1984. On "naming" the situation, see Abrahams, 1968, p.150; Bland, 1994, pp.91-94; Lauhakangas, 2007, p.220.
[95] The literature on this "act-consequence connection" is extensive. It was influentially introduced by Koch, 1955. For more recent studies, see Adams, 2008, Freuling, 2004.
[96] See discussion of the "simplicity thesis" in Stewart, 2016, pp.71-78.
[97] Hildebrandt, 2005.
[98] Bland, 1994.
[99] In Proverbs e.g. 12:25; 15:23; 16:24; 25:11.
[100] Jacobson, 1990, p.79.
[101] Fontaine, 1982, p.157.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the Book of Proverbs *is not* a book of proverbs, if understood in a simplistic sense. However, the sayings in the book do powerfully invoke the proverb genre, and hence can be read *as* a book of proverbs. Though they diverge from prototypical proverbs in their origin, self-designation, content, form/style, and medium, they nonetheless resemble them. Neither the immediate nor the distant literary context changes this impression. By this resemblance, they bring to bear the strategies for use and interpretation which are conventional for proverbs. Paremiologists have recently made exciting advances in proverb interpretation, particularly regarding how proverbs interact with multiple situations in multiple functions. Above, I have outlined some of the implications of this for Proverbs scholarship, but have only taken some low-hanging fruits. I would exhort my fellow biblical scholars to gather up the rich insights from this field, and not to sleep through the harvest (Prov 10:5)!

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