

The *Peti* and the Power of Speech in Proverbs 1–9

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ABSTRACT

*Speech is a prominent theme throughout ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. Accordingly, the proverbs in Proverbs 10–29 offer extensive instruction about the nature and power of speech. Speech also pervades Proverbs 1–9, a series of instructive lectures and interludes. However, speech is not primarily a topic of instruction; rather, it is a vehicle for instruction. Proverbs 1–9 puts speech on the lips of competing voices—the father, the gang, the seductress, Lady Wisdom, and Lady Folly—and admonishes, seduces, and encourages the son (the *peti*), who is presented with a choice: To whom will he listen? These chapters draw attention to what might be considered the most important trait of the *peti*: being a discerning listener. This article argues that, by prefacing the instruction of chapters 10–29 with chapters 1–9, the compiler of Proverbs sets discernment as the fundamental requirement for the instruction that follows. It surveys the topic of “speech” in ancient Egyptian wisdom literature; examines “speech” proverbs in Proverbs 10–29; and evaluates how “speech” in Proverbs 1–9 contributes to the portrayal of a teachable *peti* and one’s approach to the rest of the book.*

KEYWORDS: Proverbs, Speech, Wisdom, Instruction, Rhetoric

A INTRODUCTION

The declared purpose of the book of Proverbs is pedagogical (Prov 1:1–7), both for those who are simple and young (1:4) and those who are already skilled in wisdom (1:5). It has something to offer those who know little and those with vast experience. Despite this broad appeal, the primary target for the book’s instruction is the first of its stated audiences in the prologue—the *peti* (1:4).¹ Various translations as the one who is “simple” (NRSV, NJPS), “morally naïve” (NET), simply “naïve” (NASB), or “inexperienced” (CSB), the *peti* is the inexperienced and gullible lad to whom Wisdom and Folly call (1:22; 9:4–6, 16) and to whom the seductress comes out (7:7–10). His gullibility is explicit in Prov

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¹ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 43.

14:15,² but he is also considered teachable.³ His failure to learn is the topic of Prov 1:22.⁴ Outside the book of Proverbs, the *peti*’s inexperience alone does not make him culpable.⁵ However, the book of Proverbs “tends to interpret any intellectual flaw as tantamount to a moral one,”⁶ so the entire book is devoted to persuading the *peti* to choose wisdom.⁷

The book emphasizes and even pursues this goal by its use of the prominent wisdom theme of speech. Like their ancient Near Eastern counterparts, the proverbs in chapters 10–29 offer a great deal of instruction about the nature and power of speech.⁸ R. Murphy even suggests that “speech is perhaps the truest indication whether one is wise or foolish.”⁹

The notion of speech is also pervasive in Proverbs 1–9, which comprises a series of lectures and interludes. As G. Pemberton observes, “Outside of the

² “The simple one [*peti*] believes everything, but the prudent man considers his steps” (Prov 14:15).

³ “Strike a scoffer, and the simple one [*peti*] will learn prudence; correct an intelligent man, and he will gain knowledge” (Prov 19:25).

⁴ “How long, O simple ones [*petayim*], will you love being simple [*peti*]? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” (Prov 1:22, NRSV).

⁵ See, e.g., Ps 116:6, where God watches over the simple, and compare Pss 19:8; 119:30; Ezek 45:20; Hos 7:11 (Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 43).

⁶ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 43. Waltke similarly notes of the word *peti*, “Its *malo partem* sense in Proverbs must be carefully distinguished from its *bono partem* sense in Psalms.” Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 111.

⁷ Roland E. Murphy more specifically says the concern of chapters 1–9 “is to persuade the reader to the path of wisdom/justice.” *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 19.

In his study of metaphor in the Solomonic and Hezekian collections (Prov 10:1–22:16; 25:1–29:17), William Brown says chapters 1–9 “provide a meta-narrative for the book as a whole,” calling it “a meta-narrative of moral formation [that] begins with the figure of the son—the cipher for the reader—addressed by his father (1.8–19), and ... concludes with a male adult having married an economically productive woman, wisdom incarnated within the household (31.11, 23, 28).” Within the framework of chapters 1–9 and culminating in the banquet scene of chapter 9, food serves as a metaphor for the nourishing, life-giving nature of the sayings and instructions that follow. His analysis, therefore, focuses on the absorption of instruction through the mouth; mine will highlight the need to take it in through the ears. William P. Brown, “The Didactic Power of Metaphor in the Aphoristic Sayings of Proverbs,” *JSOT* 29.2 (2004): 137–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908920402900202>

⁸ William McKane estimates that 19 percent of the sentences in chapters 10–30 are concerned with the functions of language and the objectives of discourse. “Functions of Language and Objectives of Discourse according to Proverbs 10–30,” in *La Sagesse de l’Ancien Testament* (ed. M. Gilbert, Leuven: University Press, 1979), 167.

⁹ Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 259.

prologue, only two texts [Prov 3:13–20; 6:6–19] do not consist of a father-son lecture or a speech citation,” and even among these are references to “crooked speech” (6:12) and a “lying tongue” (6:17).¹⁰

However, in these early chapters, speech itself is not primarily a *topic* of instruction. Rather, it functions as a *vehicle* for the instruction. Proverbs 1–9 puts speech on the lips of competing voices—the father, the gang, the seductress, Lady Wisdom, and Lady Folly—and through these voices, the son (and the *peti*) is admonished, seduced, encouraged, and ultimately presented with a choice: To whom will he listen? Whose voice will he follow? The interplay of speeches and speakers in these opening chapters draws attention to what might be considered the most important trait of the “simple person,” the *peti*: he must be a discerning listener. If he is to become wise, he must evaluate the voices he hears and choose carefully. By prefacing the instruction of chapters 10–29 with chapters 1–9, the compiler of Proverbs sets astute listening as the fundamental requirement for all the instruction that follows.¹¹

In support of this thesis, this article begins with an overview of “speech” as a topic in ancient Egyptian wisdom literature.¹² It then examines the “speech” proverbs in Proverbs 10–29, noting an emphasis on the direct effect speech can have on others, for good or for ill. Finally, it evaluates what the usage of speech in Proverbs 1–9 contributes to the portrayal of a teachable *peti* and how this portrayal affects one’s approach to the rest of the book.

¹⁰ Pemberton’s identification of “texts” within Prov 1–9 follows the widely accepted view that there are ten lectures from the father to the son and five other “texts,” commonly called “interludes.” See further below. Glenn D. Pemberton, “The Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9,” *JSOT* 30.1 (2005): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089205057782>. Pemberton’s analysis of Prov 1–9 proposes a tripartite arrangement of the lectures based on the verbs of appeal used in each.

¹¹ The structure and compositional history of Proverbs have been much discussed. The details of these arguments are not relevant to the study here, insofar as scholars agree that chapters 1–9 are distinct from chapters 10–29 (and 30–31). The order and manner in which these sections developed do not affect the argument here, which considers part of the role chapters 1–9 play in the structure of the book as preserved in the Hebrew Bible. For further discussion of the compositional history of Proverbs, see Michael V. Fox’s “Essay 5. The Growth of Wisdom,” in Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 923–33; Waltke, *Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, 31–37; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 39–46.

¹² The theme is also evident in Mesopotamian sources (see further note 32), but this article limits itself to Egyptian sources because of the closer and ongoing contact between Egypt and Israel throughout Israel’s history. Additionally, I have excluded demotic texts because “the transmission of classical books to Hebrew becomes very unlikely” in this later period (Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 19).

B SPEECH IN EGYPTIAN WISDOM LITERATURE

The topic of speech is a well-traversed path in centuries of Egyptian wisdom literature. Three major works characterize the perspective of Egyptian wisdom about speech: Ptahhotep in the Old Kingdom, “The Eloquent Peasant” in the Middle Kingdom, and the instruction of Amenemope in the New Kingdom.¹³ In what follows, I offer examples from each of these major works and also from several lesser writings.

1 The Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period

1a Ptahhotep

Ptahhotep is the oldest of the major wisdom books, and in it, vizier Ptahhotep instructs his successor about how to prosper. The collection consists of thirty-seven maxims, a prologue, and an epilogue. Each maxim develops a theme and ranges from four to twelve sentences or clauses. In some instances, a theme carries through a consecutive series of maxims or recurs in other maxims of the collection. The importance of speech in Ptahhotep’s instructions is obvious, pervading at least half of the thirty-seven maxims.¹⁴ Two examples are below (maxims 3 and 24):

Maxim 3

If you meet a disputant in action
Who is your equal, on your level,
You will make your worth exceed his by silence,
While he is speaking evilly,
There will be much talk by the hearers,
Your name will be good in the mind of the magistrates.¹⁵

Maxim 24

If you are a man of worth
Who sits in his master’s council,
Concentrate on excellence,
Your silence is better than chatter.
Speak when you know you have a solution,
It is the skilled who should speak in council;
Speaking is harder than all other work,
He who understands it makes it serve.¹⁶

¹³ Dating for all Egyptian texts cited is that of Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California, 1973–1980).

¹⁴ Direct or indirect references to speech are included in maxims 1–4, 7–10, 12, 14–15, 17, 23–26, 28–29, and 33.

¹⁵ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1: *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California, 1973), 64.

¹⁶ Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 70.

1b *Kagemni and Merikare*

The Old Kingdom instructions addressed to Kagemni by his father the vizier are fragmentary. The sage's name is unknown (though undoubtedly included in the lost beginning of the text), but the epilogue reports that "the vizier had his children summoned" and directed them to heed "all that is written in this book."¹⁷ In his instructions, the sage praises silence and controlled speech:

The respectful man prospers,
Praised is the modest one,
The tent is open to the silent,
The seat of the quiet is spacious.
Do not chatter!
Knives are sharp against the blunderer,
Without hurry except when he faults.¹⁸

The First Intermediate Period instructions addressed to Merikare by his father, the king, may well have been written by Merikare himself to honor his deceased father¹⁹ and serve as "a treatise on kingship."²⁰ In it, Merikare declares the power of speech:

(25) The hothead is an inciter of citizens,
He creates factions among the young;
If you find that citizens adhere to him,

Denounce him before the councillors,
Suppress [him], he is a rebel,
The talker is a troublemaker for the city.
Curb the multitude, suppress its heat . . .
If you are skilled in speech, you will win,
The tongue is [a king's] sword;
Speaking is stronger than all fighting,
The skillful is not overcome.²¹

2 The Middle Kingdom

In the Middle Kingdom tale of "The Eloquent Peasant," the speeches of a peasant seeking justice from the king so entertain the monarch that he orders his magistrate to goad the peasant on, just to keep him talking. In a series of nine petitions, the poor man pleads for help after being robbed. Lichtheim summarizes,

¹⁷ Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 60.

¹⁸ Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 59.

¹⁹ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 67.

²⁰ Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 99.

²¹ Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 99.

The tension between the studied silence of the magistrate and the increasingly despairing speeches of the peasant is the operative principle that moves the action forward. And the mixture of seriousness and irony, the intertwining of a plea for justice with a demonstration of the value of rhetoric, is the very essence of the work.²²

While the lengthy story does not explicitly advocate the value of speech, the story itself embodies the success fine speech brings and the admirable quality of skilled rhetoric. Lichtheim calls it "a parable on the utility of fine speech."²³

3 The New Kingdom

3a The Instruction of Amenemope

Best known for its influence on Proverbs 22:17–23:14, the Instruction of Amenemope consists of thirty chapters in which the scribe Amenemope instructs his son. The father's instructions follow two central themes: the depiction of the "ideal man" and the importance of honesty. In the portrait of the ideal man, speech—or rather the restraint of it—takes center stage, as the ideal man is the "silent man."²⁴ Excerpts from chapters 1, 4, and 9 are below:

Chapter 1
Give your ears, hear the sayings,
Give your heart to understand them;
It profits to put them in your heart,
Woe to him who neglects them!
Let them rest in the casket of your belly,
May they be bolted in your heart;
When there rises a whirlwind of words,
They'll be a mooring post for your tongue.²⁵

Chapter 4
(lines 7–12) The truly silent, who keeps apart,
He is like a tree grown in a meadow.
It greens, it doubles its yield,
It stands in front of its lord.
Its fruit is sweet, its shade delightful,
Its end comes in the garden.²⁶

Chapter 9
Do not befriend the heated man,
Nor approach him in conversation.

²² Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 169.

²³ Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 169.

²⁴ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2: *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 147.

²⁵ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 149.

²⁶ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 151.

Keep your tongue from answering your superior,
And take care not to insult him.
Let him not cast his speech to catch you,
Nor give free reign to your answer.
Converse with a man of your own measure,
And take care not to offend him. (lines 13–20)²⁷

3b *The Instruction of Any*

In the *Instruction of Any*, the author writes as a father to his son, but he presents himself as a middle-class scribe writing for average people. This is a marked difference from earlier exemplars of the genre aimed at the aristocratic population. The topics Any addresses and the values he espouses apply to the common man: marriage, piety, self-control, and compassion, to name a few. Also among his topics is the importance of speech. Any's instruction extols the soothing quality of sweet speech and alerts to the danger of foolish speech. Like others, he also praises silence and restraint:

A rude answer brings a beating,
Speak sweetly and you will be loved.²⁸

Do not talk back to an angry superior,
Let him have his way;
Speak sweetly when he speaks sourly,
It's the remedy that calms the heart.²⁹

Do not enter the house of anyone,
Until he admits you and greets you;
Do not snoop around in his house,
Let your eye observe in silence.
Do not speak of him to another outside,
Who was not with you;
A great deadly crime . . . ³⁰

A man may be ruined by his tongue,
Beware and you will do well.³¹

From these and other writings, Fox abstracts five "canons" of ancient Egyptian rhetoric: silence, timing, restraint, fluency, and truthfulness.³² These traits of fine speech are inseparable:

²⁷ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 153.

²⁸ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 140.

²⁹ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 143.

³⁰ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 136–37.

³¹ Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 140.

³² Michael V. Fox, "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric," *Rhetorica* 1 (1983), 9–22. Similar

Knowing the right moment for speech means waiting until then in silence; speaking fluently results from sincerity, the unity of tongue and heart. The need to restrain passionate words might seem to conflict with the requirement of honesty, but the teachers taught only that whatever you speak must be true, not that whatever is true must be spoken.³³

C SPEECH IN PROVERBS 10–29

The wisdom sayings of Proverbs 10–29 evidence the same values for speech that Fox identifies in Egyptian Wisdom: silence and restraint (10:19; 11:12; 12:16; 17:22, 28; 21:23; 25:27; 29:11),³⁴ good timing (10:32; 12:18; 15:23; 16:24; 20:15; 25:11, 15), fluency (10:32; 11:9; 15:2; 16:21; 18:4; 22:11), and truthfulness (12:17; 13:17; 14:5; 22:21; 24:26). These qualities in speech benefit the speaker: he prospers (10:19), is rescued (11:9; 12:6), is considered honorable (25:27), finds favor with the king (16:13; 22:11), takes pleasure in his words and their results (15:23; 18:20), and protects himself (21:23). Proverbs also makes explicit the effect that wise speech has on others. Wise speech is a balm (12:18; 15:4), brings healing (13:17; 16:24), saves lives (14:25;), diffuses wrath and conflict (15:1; 15:18; 29:8), disperses knowledge (13:14; 15:7), honors a father (23:15–16), refreshes (25:13), offers timely correction (27:6; 28:23), and provides good counsel (27:9).

Likewise, the fool³⁵ reaps the fruit of his own speech and brings about

themes are found in Akkadian and Sumerian texts: “Hold your tongue, watch what you say (line 26). . . . Speak nothing slanderous (line 29). . . . Do not backbite, speak fair words (line 127). . . . Do not speak lightly, guard your speech. . . . Set your mind on restraining your speech (lines 131, 134).” Benjamin R. Foster, “Counsels of Wisdom,” in *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1996), 412–14. Also, in Ahiqar: “Two things [which] are meet, and the third pleasing to Shamash: one who dr[inks] wine and gives it to drink, one who guards wisdom, and one who hears a word and does not tell. . . . [My s]on, ch[at]ter not overmuch so that thou speak out [every w]ord [that] comes to thy mind; for men’s (eyes) and ears are everywhere (trained) u[pon] thy mouth. Beware lest it be [thy] undoing. More than all watchfulness, watch thy mouth.” James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 428.

³³ Fox, “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric,” 18.

³⁴ For the different perspectives on silence in the rhetoric of the parental figures in Proverbs, see Catherine Petrany, “Fathers, Mothers, Sons, and Silence: Rhetorical Reconfigurations in Proverbs,” *BTB* 50 (2020): 154–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107920934700>. She argues that while the father advocates silence (as befitting ancient Near Eastern wisdom), the mother (the Queen Mother of Prov 31:1–9) calls her son Lemuel to speak, and especially on behalf of those unable to speak for themselves.

³⁵ Of the words for “fool” or “folly” in Proverbs (see Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 38–43), the

negative consequences for others through his words: he is cast down (10:8), encounters ruin (10:14; 18:7; 26:27), is shamed and disgraced (13:5; 18:13), earns a bad reputation (25:10), and sets his own trap (13:3; 29:5³⁶). The effects of his speech on others are hurtful at best and deadly at worst: it breaks the spirit (15:4), reveals secrets and slanders (11:13; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20), separates friends (16:28; 17:9), stirs up anger and contention (15:1, 18; 18:6; 26:21), testifies falsely (12:17; 14:5, 25), ruins a city (11:11; 29:8), and entices to destruction (12:6; 16:29; 26:24–26; 29:5).

Such notions of consequences—both to the speaker and others—are not absent in Egyptian wisdom (note *Merikare* above); however, the book of Proverbs deals with these consequences extensively and explicitly. Egyptian wisdom handles them indirectly by focusing on the individual's success and his ethical stance of truth and self-control (ethos is the "ultimate rhetorical virtue"³⁷). These values then determine the societal order:

Self-control was especially important to Egypt's strictly ordered hierarchical society, where the social order was considered divinely ordained and ideally static. In such order, the individual's chief duty was to bring himself into harmony with that order, certainly not to change it. The word for universal harmony is the same as that for truth and justice: *ma'at*. Thus beyond Egyptian rhetoric's goal of individual success lies a political purpose, the maintenance of social harmony. The virtues of restraint, stability and internal harmony that it cultivates in the individual will ideally be realized in the society as a whole.³⁸ Fox calls this maintenance of harmony in the social order the ultimate goal of Egyptian rhetoric.³⁹

By comparison, W. McKane, in his study of language function and

two most commonly used in proverbs related to speech are *בְּסִיל* ("stupid man") and *אֲוִיל* ("fool"), although more common are expressions including forms of *רָשָׁע* (e.g., 12:5–6; 15:28; 19:28) and *רָגַן* (16:28; 18:8; 26:20, 22). On account of his speech, the *אֲוִיל* faces ruin (10:8, 10, 14); he is quarrelsome (20:3) and rejects discipline and counsel (12:15; 15:5). Proverbs has much more to say about the speech of the *בְּסִיל* (10:18; 12:23; 13:16; 14:7; 15:2, 7; 18:2, 6, 7; 19:1; 26:7, 9; 29:11): he spouts folly and spreads slander; he is short-tempered and stirs up strife; he delights in revealing what is in his mind and, understandably then, does not spread knowledge. Like the *אֲוִיל*, he despises wise words (23:9) and faces ruin (18:7).

³⁶ *גִּבֹּר מַחֲלִיק עַל-רֵעֵהוּ רֶשֶׁת פּוֹרֵשׁ עַל-פְּעָמָיו* ("A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet"). Whether the flatterer is spreading a net for his own feet or for the feet of his neighbor is syntactically ambiguous.

³⁷ Fox, "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric," 18.

³⁸ Fox, "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric," 18.

³⁹ Fox, "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric," 22.

discourse objectives in Proverbs 10–30, asserts that the authors of Proverbs

begin with the premise that the most important functions of words are social, that speaking is an important, perhaps the most important sphere of human activity, and that it serves the ends of communication, clarification and conciliation in interpersonal contexts.⁴⁰

Given the accretional nature of wisdom and the literature it produced, McKane's notion of "authors" and their premises is overstated, but he nonetheless isolates an important aspect of speech in Proverbs: an individual's speech has direct effects on society's well-being. In Egyptian wisdom, an individual's speech determines his place in the order; societal harmony is maintained if everyone does his part. Proverbs nuances the power of speech differently by drawing attention to the consequences of words on others.

The wise harnesses the power of constructive speech through restrained and controlled, gentle speech. It is the speech of the fool that wreaks destruction, albeit often unintentionally (see n. 36 above). He is the loose canon whose tongue is always going off and whose mind is rarely, if ever, engaged. The destruction he brings on others (and himself) is like that of the clumsy oversized dog that knocks over everything in its path. But chapters 10–29 also present the speech of a man with evil intentions: he plans evil and tries to entrap others (12:6; 16:30; 24:2; 26:24–26; 29:5); he entices the unsuspecting to destruction (16:29); and he testifies falsely (12:17; 14:5, 25; 25:18).

Such potentially destructive speech, along with the voices of wisdom, dominates the rhetoric of Proverbs 1–9. The speeches of the characters in the lectures and the interludes of chapters 1–9 are less instructive *about* speech (as in chapters 10–29, where explicit instruction about good speech is given) than they are illustrative of its power, which serves as a vehicle for one of the most fundamental messages of the chapters: Wisdom begins with astute listening. This message provides an essential requirement for reading the instructions that follow (chapters 10–29).

D SPEECH IN PROVERBS 1–9

The framework of the first nine chapters of Proverbs consists of ten father-to-son lectures that, on the surface, do not appear to follow a logical progression or indicate an organizational principle. Fox calls the lectures "variations on a theme: how to withstand seduction,"⁴¹ while Pemberton argues for three distinct subgroups based on verbs of appeal.⁴² Interspersed among the lectures are five

⁴⁰ McKane, "Function of Language," 166.

⁴¹ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 324.

⁴² Pemberton's subgroups are (1) calls to attention; (2) calls to remember; (3) warnings of the alien woman. "The Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9," 68.

interludes, four of which are “Wisdom Interludes”, in which wisdom is personified in the character of Lady Wisdom.⁴³

There is general agreement that chapters 1–9 are distinct from the rest of the book and that they consist of ten major units of thought, though some scholars differ in the details of the limits and speakers of each unit.⁴⁴

- Lecture 1: Prov 1:8–19 (Avoid gangs)
- Lecture 2: Prov 2:1–22 (The path to wisdom)
- Lecture 3: Prov 3:1–12 (The wisdom of piety)
- Lecture 4: Prov 3:21–35 (The wisdom of honesty)
- Lecture 5: Prov 4:1–9 (Love wisdom; hate evil)
- Lecture 6: Prov 4:10–19 (The right path)
- Lecture 7: Prov 4:20–27 (The straight path)
- Lecture 8: Prov 5:1–23 (Another man’s wife and one’s own)
- Lecture 9: Prov 6:20–35 (Adultery kills)
- Lecture 10: Prov 7:1–27 (Beware the seductress)

The five “interludes” are as follows:

- Interlude A: Prov 1:20–33 (Wisdom’s warning)
- Interlude B: Prov 3:13–20 (In praise of wisdom)
- *Interlude C: Prov 6:1–19*⁴⁵
- Interlude D: Prov 8:1–36 (Wisdom’s self-praise)
- Interlude E: Prov 9:1–18 (Two banquets)

While chapters 1–9 provide some direct instruction about speech similar to that of chapters 10–29 (3:21–25; 4:24; 5:2; 6:12), this instruction comprises only a small, even inconsequential, component of the larger role of speech in this section of Proverbs. In his lectures, the father creates two personae that are

⁴³ Interlude C (6:1–19) is neither a lecture of the father nor of similar nature to the other interludes. Murphy calls it “interruptive” (*Proverbs*, 37), and Fox judges it to be “rather extraneous” and part of the latest stage of the book’s redaction (*Proverbs 1–9*, 47 and 227). At any rate, it does not contribute to the development of speech as a topic or vehicle (aside from 6:12, אָדָם בְּלִיעֵל אִישׁ אֶזְנֵן הוֹלֵךְ עִקְשׁוֹת פֶּה [“A worthless man, a wicked man, goes about with a crooked mouth”] and 6:17, which refers to לִשׁוֹן שָׁקֶר [“a lying tongue”], it says nothing of speech), and thus is excluded from the ensuing discussion.

⁴⁴ Lindsay Wilson, *Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 11. Whybray was the first to identify ten lectures, what he called “instructions” (R. Norman Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* [Chatham: SCM Press, 1965]). The structure followed here is that of Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*. For slightly different arrangements and emphases, see Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, 10–11, and Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 63–64.

⁴⁵ See note 43.

antithetical to his persona: the gang (collective persona) and the seductress. The words of his persona, the wise man, are based on experience and verifiable facts.⁴⁶ He does not distort or twist his words to persuade. However, he shapes the words of the gang and the adulteress woman in the language of seduction, which erases the difference between values.⁴⁷ For his own persuasive purposes, the father has distilled his son’s greatest temptations into the invitations of the gang and the seductress, and he has made speech the foremost vehicle of these temptations.⁴⁸ The fight for the heart of the son takes place on the battlefield of words. By means of the four interludes, the compilers of Proverbs 1–9 bring the voice of Lady Wisdom (and Lady Folly, 9:16–17) into the fray of competing voices.

In his second lecture, the father specifies that his instructions have a twofold purpose: to deliver (הציל) from the one who *speaks* perversity and from the strange woman whose *words* are smooth (2:12, 16). Through his scenarios of the gang’s (perverse) speech and the seductress’s (smooth) speech, the father brings to life the destructive nature of speech and tries to help his son see what he might miss in a real temptation.

1 Perverse Speech—The Gang

As Fox notes, the opening verse of the scenario with the gang (1:10) looks like an exposition of 16:29: אִישׁ חָמָס יַפְתֶּהוּ רָעוּהוּ וְהוֹלִיכוֹ בְּדֶרֶךְ לֹא-טוֹב, “A violent man entices his neighbor and leads him in a way that is not good.”⁴⁹ The gang invites the *peti* to join them in violence against an innocent man. They urge him to throw in his lot with them, and they will all get rich. Two items of particular interest characterize this speech. First, the father reveals the true attitude behind the gang’s action by “implant(ing) a moral evaluation of the act in the evildoers’ own words, thereby making them at once expose their perverted values and

⁴⁶ “Le sage a pour lui l’expérience: ses conclusions se sont maintes fois vérifiées” (Jean-Noël Aletti, “Séduction et Parole en Proverbes I–IX,” *VT* 27 [1977]: 135–36). Aletti’s analysis of seductive speech in Prov 1–9 also focuses on the divine source of wisdom in contrast with the “simplement humaine” speech of the adulterous woman; he considers this key to the inclusion of Prov 8 in the collection of chapters 1–9. His study focuses on the structure of chapters 1–9 in conjunction with the nature of seduction; while my study draws heavily on his conclusions about seductive speech, I also consider how the use of speech as a vehicle in chapters 1–9 rhetorically shapes one’s reading of chapters 10–29.

⁴⁷ “. . . les discours des méchants et de la femme adultère sont ceux de la séduction, ceux où la différence entre les valeurs est gommée . . .” (Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 130).

⁴⁸ “Le savoir-faire est celui de la parole, la séduction s’opère par le dire” (Aletti, “Séduction et Parole, 129). Aletti is specifically referring to the speech of the seductress in this statement, but the application extends to the gang in his argument.

⁴⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 85.

condemn their acts by their own mouths.”⁵⁰ A real gang would not describe their behaviour as gratuitous ambushing of innocent blood, but by putting these words in their mouths, the father exposes the truth and, in so doing, “destroy[s] the ethos of the opponent [and] makes exclusive use of the pathos of fear.”⁵¹ Secondly, as Aletti notes, the gang promises a shortcut to the prosperity of the wise path by mimicking the words of the wise:⁵² The gang promises houses filled with spoil (נִמְלֵא בְּתִינוּ שָׁלָל, 1:13), much like the father speaks of barns filled with plenty (וַיִּמְלֵאוּ אֶסְמִיךְ שִׁבְעָה, 3:10). The destructive power of speech lies in its promise of easy gain.

2 Smooth Speech—The Seductress

In his portrayal of an encounter with the seductress, the father uses her speech to make vivid the dangers lurking behind the smoothness and sweetness of her words. Four different times in the lectures, the father characterizes the seductress’s speech as “smooth” (and “smoother than oil,” חֶלֶק; 2:16; 5:3b; 6:24 [חֶלְקָה]; 7:5, 21) and dripping honey (5:3a), but only once does he give the *peti* a taste of it by putting words in her mouth (chapter 7). When she enters the scene, little attention is given to her appearance (just זֹנָה, “garment of a prostitute,” 7:10); the seduction takes place through her words. First, she tells the *peti* that she has food at home, and then with a threefold increase in intensity, she appeals to the human desire to be special, to be sought: וַיֵּצֵאתִי לִקְרֹאתְךָ לְשֹׁחַר פָּנֶיךָ וְאֶמְצָאָךְ, “I came out to meet you, to look for you, and I have found you!” (7:15). Having captured his attention, she creates “an air of sumptuous indulgence”⁵³ by describing the extravagance spread on her bed—fine linens and spices. After boldly inviting him to have sex, she provides just the safety net he needs to plunge ahead: Her husband is far away, and they will not be caught. Aletti notes the subversive nature of these words and says that the seduction does not rest on the object of pleasure (note that the gang’s seduction rests on the object of “pleasure,” or gain), but on the evaluation of the consequences, namely, there will not be any.⁵⁴ In this scenario, the destructive power of speech lies in its promise of no adverse consequences.

When the seductress’s speech ends, the father resumes his speech and tells the rest of the story: her words are successful. Their sweetness and their

⁵⁰ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 86.

⁵¹ Pemberton, “The Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9,” 71.

⁵² “Ce qu’il propose est tout simplement la tentation dont le maître veut détourner l’élève: croire qu’on peut trouver bonheur et prospérité autrement que par l’apprentissage de la sagesse” (Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 137).

⁵³ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 247.

⁵⁴ “La séduction ne porte donc pas sur l’objet de plaisir mais sur l’évaluation des conséquences” (Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 135).

smoothness persuade the *peti* (cf. to the power of *positive* persuasion through sweet words in 16:21–24). She entices (H, נָטָה) him with her teaching (לִקְחָהּ). Using language common to the lectures, the father reinforces the subtlety and perversion of her words: נָטָה is used six other times by the father as he urges his son to listen or to keep from the wrong path (2:2; 4:5, 20, 27; 5:1, 13); לִקְחָהּ appears three other times in the father’s lectures, referring to the instruction the *peti* should be following (1:3, 5; 4:2). In other lectures, the father has spelled out the disaster awaiting the one who falls to the strange woman (Sheol, 2:18–19; ruin, 5:4–5, 8–14, 22–23; vengeance of the husband, 6:26–35), and again here, the father pointedly reveals the consequences veiled by the seductress’s words: her house leads to destruction and Sheol; the *peti* pays for his pleasure with his life (7:22–27).

Aletti highlights the use of familiar symbols and “appropriate” words throughout the seductress’s speech (as in the gang’s speech, noted above); it is the context and manner in which the words are used that create the seduction—and thus, the danger. The offering of the woman’s vows becomes a matter of alluring the *peti* rather than “turning the glance of God by smoke”;⁵⁵ her invitation to indulge in love would be entirely fitting if spoken to her husband, but he is far away. “La femme adultère parle *comme* une véritable épouse,” but the topsy-turvy context makes her words subversive and destructive to the very fiber of community well being.⁵⁶ Aletti argues that the words of both the seductress and the gang represent perversions of language in that they employ the same expressions as “true speech,” but do so with intent to mislead.⁵⁷

Insofar as the *peti* is concerned, the problem lies not in the words themselves as he has no control over them. The issue is whether he will evaluate the competing voices he hears and choose wisely. The *peti* is not made captive by charm or violence, but by words. And whether he matures into a wise man or is reduced to an idiot is determined by whether he takes the time to distinguish the truth and falsity in competing discourses.⁵⁸

3 The Speech of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly

Lady Wisdom represents yet another voice for the *peti* to hear. Three of the four interludes include speeches by Lady Wisdom (A, D, E), and to a great extent,

⁵⁵ Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 135.

⁵⁶ Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 134–35, 139.

⁵⁷ Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 140.

⁵⁸ “Le séduction vient de la parole humaine, non des choses elles-mêmes. Nous ne sommes donc pas rendus irrémédiablement captifs du charme ou de la violence. . . . L’idiot est justement celui qui ne sait ni ne veut prendre du temps pour discerner, dans le discours d’autrui, le vrai du faux” (Aletti, “Séduction et Parole,” 140).

their vocabulary of Wisdom's activity and their venues echo one another:

- A: חֲכָמוֹת בַּחוּץ תִּרְנָה בְּרַחֲבוֹת תִּתֵּן קוֹלָהּ (1:20)
Wisdom in the street cries out; in the squares she raises her voice.
- D: הֲלֹא־חֲכָמָה תִּקְרָא וְתִבּוֹנָה תִּתֵּן קוֹלָהּ (8:1)
Does not Wisdom call out, and [does not] Understanding raise her voice?
- A: בְּרֹאשׁ הַמַּיּוֹת תִּקְרָא בִּפְתָּחֵי שְׁעָרִים בָּעִים אֲמַרְיָהּ תֹּאמֶר (1:21)
At the head of busy streets she calls;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks her words.
- D: בְּרֹאשׁ־מְרוֹמִים עַל־דֶּרֶךְ בֵּית נְתִיבוֹת נִצָּבָהּ (8:2)
At the top of the heights along the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand.
- E: שְׁלָחָהּ נִעְרֹתֶיהָ תִּקְרָא עַל־גִּפֵּי מְרֹמֵי קֶרֶת, מִי־פָתִי יִסֵּר הִנֵּה חֲסֵר־לֵב וְאֶמְרָהּ לוֹ (9:3–4)
She sent out her servant girls; she calls at the highest places of the town; "Whoever is simple, turn in here! Whoever lacks sense, I say to him..."

Interlude A introduces the character of Lady Wisdom. She speaks and makes herself available to whomever will come, warning of dire consequences should they ignore her voice. On the heels of the gang's enticement, this interlude's description of those who reject Wisdom could be readily understood as the gang and, by inference, of the way the *peti* should go. In Interlude D, Wisdom praises her words and the effect they will have on those who embrace them. Unlike the seductress and the gang, she speaks candidly, uprightly, and truthfully; her words can be trusted, and the benefits of following them exceed silver and fine gold.

Interlude E sets Lady Folly beside Lady Wisdom as both issue invitations to their banquet tables. The description of Lady Folly is reminiscent of the seductress in chapter 7 (חֲמִיָּה, "(she is) loud;" she sits near her house instead of wandering from it), but unlike the seductress, her words are hardly smooth and dripping with honey. Instead, she is herself פְּתִיּוֹת ("ignorant"), like those she summons using the same words as Lady Wisdom: מִי־פָתִי יִסֵּר הִנֵּה וְחֲסֵר־לֵב (9:16; cf. 9:4). Knowing which Lady to listen to has to be determined by evaluating the rest of their speeches. Lady Wisdom invites the *peti* to eat her bread and drink her wine, and she calls him to gain wisdom and its rewards. Lady Folly can only extol the sweetness of stolen bread and water. Lady Folly is no seductress, but simply an obvious and cheap imitation of Lady Wisdom.

E CONCLUSION

Proverbs 10–29 deal with the idea of speech much as Egyptian wisdom does, but these chapters give greater attention to the direct effects speech can have on others. The treatment of speech in chapters 1–9 differs in that the focus is not instruction *about* speech; rather these chapters put speech on the lips of competing voices to use it as the vehicle for portraying one of the fundamental traits of a *peti*-in-training: he must be a discerning listener. The destructive speech of the gang hinges on the idea that prosperity can be gained apart from wisdom, and the speech of the seductress on the idea that adverse consequences can be avoided. In contrast, the words of the father call for a pursuit of wisdom. The father's words are said to be life and healing, and listening to them protects one from the seduction of perverse and/or smooth speech. The words of Lady Wisdom are true and trustworthy, upright and beneficent. The *peti* who avoids destruction and reaps the benefits of wisdom will do so because he can carefully sort out the competing voices, evaluate them, and choose the right path.

By prefacing the instructions of Proverbs 10–29 with this rhetorical message of Proverbs 1–9, the compilers of the book subtly establish a requirement for reading the instructions in the rest of the book. Wisdom will only come by listening, discerning, and choosing thoughtfully.

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