

How Far is Proverbs a Bumper-sticker Theology?

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It's sometimes said that Proverbs has a bumper-sticker theology,¹ which may be an insult or a compliment. It may suggest brief, pithy insights, or brief, pithy oversimplifications. Either way, bumper-sticker statements can be clever, confrontational, and humorous, though also serious. They are based on human insight or human experience, and they are thus contextual, culturally-rooted, and possibly puzzling to someone from another culture.

Clever, confrontational, humorous, and those other descriptions do also apply to Proverbs. How do its aphorisms compare with bumper stickers? In this paper, I focus on the great central section of the book, Proverbs 10:1–22:16, where aphorisms are most consistently concentrated. I first consider a number of characteristics common to some bumper stickers and some aphorisms in Proverbs. Second, I consider how the aphorisms differ rhetorically from the bumper stickers. And third, I note two key distinctive theological features of the aphorisms.²

How Bumper Stickers and Proverbs Compare

1. Bumper stickers and aphorisms in Proverbs can be clever.

Brevity is the.

Don't believe everything you think.³

In Proverbs:

Everyone Yahweh made for an answer to something,
and even the faithless person⁴ for a bad day. (16:4)

A crucible for silver, a furnace for gold,
and Yahweh tests inner beings. (17:3)

2. Bumper stickers and aphorisms can be funny:

This vehicle is protected by antitheft sticker.

¹ Cf. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Bumper-sticker Theology," *Christian Century* April 4, 2006, 43.

² In the quotations from Proverbs, I use my own translation: see John Goldingay, *Proverbs*, Commentaries for Christian Formation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), from which some of the textual comments also derive. Quotations from American bumper stickers come from personal observation or online advertisements.

³ Often credited to Robert Fulghum, but without reference. As is reflected in the linking of Proverbs with Solomon, there is a human inclination to link anonymous sayings with some known individual. Further, using this particular saying might be a means of gaslighting someone; indeed, many sayings that appear on bumper stickers (and many sayings in Proverbs) could be used to manipulative ends. My quoting bumper stickers doesn't mean I agree with them or identify with them.

⁴ On the translation "faithless" and "faithful" for *rasha'* and *tsaddiq* in the aphorisms, see the comment in the third section of this paper.

Let's eat grandma
 let's eat, grandma
 commas save lives.

In Proverbs:

A slacker said, "A lion outside,
 in the middle of the squares I'll be murdered!" (22:13)
 Why on earth is the price in the hand of a dimwit,
 to acquire wisdom, when they have no mind? (17:16)

3. They can be ironic:

Watch out for the idiot behind me.

America: made in China.

In Proverbs:

Someone faithful, they extricated themselves from distress,
 and someone faithless came instead of them. (11:8)
 A woman of grace, she will attain honor,
 and forceful people, they will attain wealth. (11:16)

4. They are commonly serious:

The best things in life are not things.

It's easier to build strong children
 than to repair broken men.⁵

In Proverbs:

The inner being knows its own bitterness,
 and in its happiness an outsider will not share. (14:10)
 Even in laughter the inner being will hurt,
 and happiness's end: sorrow. (14:13)

5. They can be vivid, painting colorful pictures to bring their point home:

If guns are outlawed,
 can we use swords?

I'm marching to a different accordion.

In Proverbs:

⁵ Traditionally attributed to Frederick Douglas, but see the comment above on attribution.

Like vinegar to the teeth and like smoke to the eyes,
 so the slacker to the people who send them. (10:26)
 Better living on the corner of a roof,
 than a disputatious woman and a shared house. (21:9)

6. They can be confrontational:

Don't assume I share your prejudices.

It won't kill you to learn Spanish.

In Proverbs:

Someone holding back their stick is hostile to their son,
 but one who loves him searches him out with discipline. (13:24)
 An outrage to Yahweh, everyone lofty in mind;
 hand to hand, they will not go free. (16:5)

7. They can be self-affirming or identity-affirming:

Cloth-diapering, breastfeeding, crispy-crunchy granola mom—
 any questions?

I live in my own little world, but's okay,
 everyone knows me here.

In Proverbs:

Acquiring wisdom, how good, rather than gold,
 and acquiring discernment: preferable, rather than silver. (16:16)
 Someone acquiring a mind befriends themselves;
 someone keeping guard of discernment: to find something good. (19:8)

8. They can be touching or melancholic, yet perhaps at the same time encouraging or
 consoling as they look reality in the face:

I majored in liberal arts—
 would you like fries with that?

I used to be cool.

This bumper sticker sat on the back of the kind of vehicle driven by parents or middle-aged
 people.

In Proverbs, many statements about teachers and parents come in this category, given that
 their authors or compilers are teachers and parents:

An idiot, they will dismiss their father's discipline,
 but someone keeping guard of correction, they will become smart. (15:5)
 A wise son, he will make a father happy,
 but a dimwit of a human being despises their mother. (15:20)

9. They can be puzzling:

Silence is golden
 but duct tape is silver.

2+2 = 5.

Kathleen Scott Goldingay, my (American) wife suggests that anyone who watches crime or spy movies would realize that the first implies, "If you don't keep quiet, I'll tape over your mouth," and suggests that the second implies, "You're so stupid."⁶

In Proverbs:

In the absence of cattle, a clean trough,
 but [there is] abundant yield with a bull's strength. (14:4)
 A gold ring in a pig's nose,
 a woman beautiful but turning away from perceptiveness. (11:22)

While aphorisms in Proverbs thus can be puzzling, bumper stickers are more often easy to understand. To put it another way, aphorisms in Proverbs may more likely be designed to make people think and reflect on, to take time in processing. The likely implication of 14:4 is that you can have a clean trough if you have no cattle, but if you want a good crop of grain, you need an animal to pull the plow, and you will just have to put up with the mess. In 11:22, the beautiful woman might be someone who is faithless rather than faithful. Or it might be that her husband is a forceful but faithless man, but she lacks the perceptiveness to handle him. Or perhaps her tragedy is not her lacking perceptiveness but her failing to use it, so that she becomes a bimbo. Or perhaps the aphorism offers marriage advice: looks are useless without perceptiveness. And is the pig her, or her husband?

10. Bumper stickers can be bicola, two-part lines, and aphorisms in Proverbs regularly are:

Don't worry what people think—
 they don't do it very often.

I'm against abortion—
 I used to be a fetus.

In modern Israel, political bumper-stickers can work that way:⁷

⁶ I am grateful to Kathleen for other comments in this paper, and for yet others to Dave Bland, who was respondent when I gave the paper.

⁷ The Israeli bumper stickers come from Hagar Salamon, "Ha'am in the Turbulent Discursive Sphere of Israeli Bumper Stickers," *Hebrew Studies* 46 (2005): 197–234.

Uprooting settlements:
war between brothers.

In Proverbs:

Faithless storehouses will be no use,
but faithfulness, it will rescue from death (10:2)
The light of faithful people, it will be happy,
but the lamp of faithless people, it will go out. (13:9)

These examples are typical of Proverbs, where it is common for the second half-line to contrast with the first, though the equivocal nature of the conjunction *we* means it does not signal contrast like English “but.” Yet a bicolon’s form itself facilitates the expression of contrasts, and of irony, and also of a key aspect of Proverbs’ thinking, that it thinks in binaries, in sharp distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, insight and stupidity. This may be one reason why it’s tagged “bumper-sticker theology,” as bumper stickers may well presuppose binaries, though they do not regularly express them. While politics works in binaries, they are out of fashion in the thinking of modernity. An article in *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2024 (18), quotes a psychotherapist: “people respond to anxiety by dividing the world into good and bad, a tendency know as ‘splitting.’” Thus our scholarly culture is more attracted to Job and Ecclesiastes than to Proverbs. Commentaries on Proverbs apologize for its bold assertions, and note how Job and Ecclesiastes qualify the kind of statements that Proverbs makes. And modern or postmodern Christians are inclined to appreciate Job more than Proverbs.

11. Bumper stickers and aphorisms in Proverbs can speak in the present, declaring things that are regularly true. They can also juxtapose phrases without including a verb, with similar implications. They can speak in the future tense to declare what they predict or promise (though the future may be logical rather than chronological). They can speak in the past tense, declaring what has happened and may be expected to recur. They can be imperative, and they can ask questions.

In connection with tenses, admittedly, drawing parallels is complicated by the fact that the Hebrew verbal system does not correspond to the English one. Thus a *yiqtol* verb may refer to the way things will be or to the way they regularly are—though that can also be true of an English future. In the examples that follow, I include some traditional British aphorisms, which work in a similar way to bumper stickers.

First, then, bumper stickers, British aphorisms, and aphorisms in Proverbs that use present tense verbs:

Well-behaved women rarely make history.

Another Israeli bumper sticker:

Tearing out settlements rips apart the people [the *‘am*].

A traditional British aphorism:

Many hands make light work.

In Proverbs:

Someone going about as a blabbermouth reveals a confidence,
 but someone trustworthy in spirit covers over a thing. (11:13)
 All the brothers of someone badly-off are hostile to them;
 how much more do their acquaintances stay distant from them (19:7)

In the first, both verbs are participles. In the second, both are stative.

12. Or they can function without a verb:

A British aphorism:

Out of sight, out of mind.

Another Israeli bumper sticker:

Jerusalem, the heart of Israel.

In Proverbs:

Someone gathering in summer, a judicious son,
 but someone snoozing in harvest, a shameful son. (10:5)
 Choice silver, the tongue of someone faithful;
 the inner being of the faithless, worth little. (10:20)

Such verbless sentences resemble sayings that use present tense verbs in drawing attention to things that do happen and to the way things are, but they communicate in a particularly tight way. Verbless sayings are frequent in Proverbs as they are not in English, because verbless clauses are a regular feature of Biblical Hebrew. But their compactness makes them more like bumper stickers.⁸

13. They can speak in future tense:

When the power of love overcomes the love of power
 the world will have peace.⁹

Another Israeli bumper sticker:

The people is strong,
 together we will stand firmly for the Land of Israel.

Another British aphorism:

⁸ I owe this point to my friend Berel Dov Lerner.

⁹ Traditionally attributed to Jimi Hendrix, but see the comment above on attribution..

If you play with fire,
you will get burned.

In Proverbs:

Yahweh's blessing, it will make someone well-off,
and not add toil with it. (10:22)

The mouth of a someone faithful, it will produce the fruit of wisdom,
but a crooked tongue, it will get cut off. (10:31)¹⁰

Such aphorisms point to things that will happen unless they don't. They make promises or issue warnings that work much of the time.

14. They can speak in the past tense:

A British aphorism:

Curiosity killed the cat.

An American bumper sticker:

I was an honor student—
I don't know what happened.

In Proverbs:

Arrogance has come and humiliation has come
but with modest people, wisdom. (11:2)

Someone faithful, they extricated themselves from distress,
and someone faithless came instead of them. (11:8)

Such aphorisms tell a mini-story and invite listeners to imagine the event they refer to.

15. They can be imperative:

American bumper stickers:

Abolish daylight savings time.

Ask me about my lobotomy.

A British aphorism:

Strike while the iron's hot.

¹⁰ LXX translates the first verb as present and the second as future, and EVV mostly follow, but Vg has two futures.

In Proverbs:

Discipline your son because there is hope,
and towards putting him to death, don't take yourself there. (19:18)
Don't love sleep, so that you don't get dispossessed or impoverished;
open your eyes, and be full of food. (20:13)

While Proverbs is more inclined to describe and state than to urge, and to let the urging be implied by the statement and description, it can be imperative. Dispossessed or impoverished" is a double translation of *tiwwaresh*, which can be derived from *yarash* or *rish*. It is thus an example of paronomasia: see #22 below.

16. They can ask a question:

American bumper stickers:

What if I just slammed on my brakes?

Are you following Jesus this close?

Who would Jesus hate?

A British aphorism:

Why keep a dog and bark yourself?

In Proverbs:

Why on earth is the price in the hand of a dimwit,
to acquire wisdom, when they have no mind? (17:16)
An individual's spirit, it will contain their illness,
but a crushed spirit, who will carry it? (18:14)

While questions challenge someone to think, aphorisms such as these are rhetorical questions that assume there is no answer or that the answer is obvious.

The overlaps between bumper stickers, traditional British aphorisms, and aphorisms in Proverbs show how pithy, amusing, provocative sayings appeal as much in (for instance) modern Western culture as they do in the ancient Middle East. The point becomes even clearer if one sets t-shirt slogans alongside the bumper stickers and the aphorisms:

Just do it
Give peace a chance
Make my day
Black lives matter
Born to run

Limited edition

In a contrast with the point about attribution made above, one can trace the origin of most of these slogans, but they have gained a life of their own.

How Bumper Stickers and Proverbs Differ in Their Rhetoric

Compared with bumper stickers, the aphorisms in Proverbs are poetic in their approach to articulating truth, though they are not high-flown, artistic poetry like the Song of Songs or Job. Many are subtle and repay close attention, whereas bumper stickers aim for an immediate response, unless they are the puzzling kind that may hope the reader will keep thinking about them after they have turned off the freeway.

17. Aphorisms in Proverbs often have an abb'a' or similar format.

A fountain of life, the mouth of someone faithful,
but the mouth of the faithless, violence will cover it. (10:11)

The two mouths come scandalously together at the center of the verse.

The assets of someone well-off [are] their strong town;
the terror of the poor, their being badly-off. (10:15)

This format further aids the expression of binaries (or vice versa).

18. They use word order to bring their point home. It is usually assumed that Hebrew's default word order is verb, subject, object. In Proverbs 1, for instance, a number of verses work that way in both cola (see 1:15, 23 [three cola], 24, 28, 30), though there is also some variety there. But Proverbs 10, the first chapter in the middle section of the book, has no aphorism where both halves of the line have verb-subject-object word order.¹¹ After the reference to Solomon, the chapter thus begins:

A wise son, he will make a father happy,
but a dimwit son: a pain to his mother. (10:1)

The line begins by fronting the verb's subject, and makes the reader momentarily pause while waiting to discover what the verb will be. And the second half-line differs from the first in being a verbless clause, and on the assumption that the default word order for a verbless clause is predicate-subject, this clause also has the reverse of the expected order, so that it again puts the emphasis on the son. But none of the subtleties of the line emerge in English translations.

19. They use ellipsis, omitting some words that have to be supplied from the context.

¹¹ This may offer some support to the possibility that verb-subject-object is not the default order at all. But in prose, at least, it is the dominant order, and the distinctive word order of the aphorisms in a chapter such as Prov 10 conveys something of their significance.

To a false word a faithful person will be hostile,
but a faithless person, they will stink and disgrace. (13:5)

The line begins with the observation that faithful people do more than ignore a false statement. They are actually hostile to it. The verb (*sane'*) is the one traditionally translated "hate," so this provides one answer to the bumper-sticker question, "What would Jesus hate?" In the context, the colon suggests hostility to the idea of actually uttering a lie. The observation recalls the fierce hostility of Psalm 139:21–22: "I am hostile to them with a completeness of hostility." The comment about the faithless then goes in a new direction, perhaps hinting at more than one. But both half-lines involve some ellipsis; each is filled out from the other.¹² The faithful repudiate falsehood (and therefore have honor); the faithless (tolerate or practice falsehood and therefore) are stinking and disgraceful.¹³ The saying issues complementary challenges to the would-be faithful ("are you hostile enough?") and to the possibly faithless ("do you really want to stink?"). The word order in the saying also conveys something of its emphasis. More literally,

To a false word he will be hostile, a faithful person,
but a faithless person, they will stink and disgrace.

The word "faithful" thus comes at the end of the first colon, so that "faithful" and "faithless" confront each other at the center of the verse.

20. They can declare things that are obvious or self-evident or tautologous, saying the same thing twice.

Every smart person, they will act with knowledge,
but a dimwit, they will spread out stupidity. (13:16)
A true witness, they do not lie,
but one who testifies lies: a false witness. (14:5)

Such statements urge listeners to face facts and draw inferences.

21. Some aphorisms in Proverbs are ambiguous:

A person's longing is their commitment *or* their reproach,
and someone badly-off is good, rather than an individual who is a liar. (19:22)

"Commitment" is the common noun *hesed*, traditionally translated by an expression such as "steadfast love," but it has a homonym meaning "reproach," which makes sense here.

By their deeds even a young person will make themselves known *or* will dissemble,
whether their action will be pure and whether it will be straight. (20:11)

¹² Cf. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, The Anchor Yale Bible 18b (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 562.

¹³ The translation takes the *hiphils* as declarative; if it is causative, then they "make a stink and cause disgrace."

There are two verbs *nakar*, with two different possible meanings in the hitpael. An aphorism that expresses itself in ambiguities can push thinking.

22. Some utilize paronomasia, making use of the similarity between similar words with different meanings:

A fist hiding lethargy makes someone badly-off,
but the hand of determined people, it will make someone well-off. (10:4)

“Hiding lethargy” is a double translation of a single word (*remiyyah*) that commonly means deception but has a homonym meaning lethargy. Further, this is another aphorism with an *abb’a’* order: the phrases about the fist and about the hand come together at its center and the words for badly-off and well-off come at the beginning and end of the line, drawing attention to the contrast:

Badly-off it makes someone, a fist hiding lethargy,
but the hand of determined people, it will make someone well-off

The judiciousness of one who possesses it: a fountain of life,
but stupidity: the discipline of stupid people. (16:22)

Proverbs stresses *musar*, “discipline,” from the verb *yasar*. Here, the use of the word would be paradoxical. But *musar* could alternatively derive from *’asar*, “bind” or “imprison.” A *moserah* is a fetter, and in 7:22, in the description of a naïve young man walking into a trap like an ox walking blithely to the slaughter, it makes sense to take *musar* to denote a snare or a shackle. So in 16:22 the listeners might hear “shackle” as the meaning of *musar*, at least as an overtone:

The judiciousness of one who possesses it: a fountain of life,
but stupidity: the shackle of stupid people.

Like ambiguity, paronomasia pushes thinking by encouraging listeners to make connections.

23. Proverbs uses metaphors:

Women’s wisdom, it has built its house,
but stupidity, with its own hands, will demolish it. (14:1)

Wisdom’s house is a metaphorical physical structure, the home of a mentor where students go to learn from someone who embodies wisdom.¹⁴ But the physical house stands for a household, which is also something that can be built, a household that a woman who embodies wisdom built up, a community of which she was mentor. To be more literal, the verse pictures mentors, like the teachers behind Proverbs, gathering men and women who need teaching. The mentors seem to be successful until other teachers come along and

¹⁴ The opening phrase looks as if it means “wise ones of women” and thus “wisest [plural] of women” (cf. LXX), but the verb is singular. I take *hakmot* as an unusual spelling of the word for “wisdom.”

undermine their work. Or the audience might think of someone like the wise woman in Proverbs 31 building her household and teaching its members (31:26), and of a stupid woman demolishing it. The line has a past statement followed by a future one, which dramatically puts the listeners into a setting where the building is past but they need to think about its imperiling, about what may happen.

24. They use similes, which also appeal and reveal and bring home:

A slacker's road, like a thorn hedge,
but the path of upright people, elevated. (15:19)

The saying invites people in the village to look at the farms around. There is the orchard, which needs hedges to keep animals out (Isa 5:5), and there is the road that leads to the terrace where olive trees and vines grow, or that goes along this terrace. But the slacker has let the hedge get out of hand and one can hardly get to the terrace or get along it. In contrast, there is the path of the upright people, which matches who they are. It is a properly raised track, easy to walk along and providing access to the fruit. Maybe the task of clearing is divided among the men in the family. One can imagine the fiery confrontation initiated by one of the brothers about who is and who is not doing their section of the work properly, and the long-tempered exhortations to calm down on the part of another brother, and the important role that both have in the family. The saying could thus have a literal meaning, but roads and paths are usually similes or metaphors in Proverbs, and townies might need to take the saying that way.

A king's wrath: envoys of death,
but an individual who is wise, he will make recompense for it.
In the light of a king's face: life,
and his acceptance: like a late-rain cloud. (16:14–15)

A king may be unwise enough to explode at a servant who tells him something he doesn't wish to hear. His wrath then comes to the servant as a pair of envoys announcing the death penalty. Or the servant may just be an unlucky victim of an irrational outburst, or a deserving victim who has made a serious mistake. Whatever the situation, the servant is wise not to panic but to see how to make recompense. If a king's wrath threatens death, however, then at least the light of a king's face is life. The king looking out brightly means a positive attitude and positive action. To put it in a simile, then, his *acceptance* resembles a cloud heralding the spring rains that can bring cereal crops to full maturity and take crops such as grapes and olives to fruition, and are therefore vital for life itself over the next year.

How Bumper Stickers and Proverbs Differ in Their Perspective

The first three aphorisms in the great middle compilation of aphorisms in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 neatly give expression to three key aspects of its convictions. The compilation begins with a saying we have already noted:

A wise son, he will make a father happy,
but a dimwit son: a pain to his mother. (10:1)

It's a realistic expression of human wisdom and reflection on human experience, that can come across as poignant and a little sad, or alternatively as forceful and challenging, and it would fit the sometimes poignant, sometimes forceful side to bumper-sticker thinking. So the first aphorism in this great middle compilation in Proverbs presupposes the assumption implicitly shared by the bumper stickers that life teaches us things.

The second aphorism gives expression to a different sort of conviction.

Faithless storehouses will be no use,
but faithfulness, it will rescue from death. (10:2)

People who produce or display bumper stickers no doubt believe in faithfulness rather than faithlessness, but it is not a theme in them, whereas it is key to the aphorisms in Proverbs. The aphorisms encourage people to manifest *tsedaqah* rather than *resha'*, to be *tsaddiq* rather than *rasha'*. These words are traditionally translated "righteousness" and "righteous" over against "wickedness" and "wicked," but I accept the view going back to Hermann Cremer that *tsedaqah* denotes doing the right thing by people in your community to whom you have a commitment,¹⁵ while *resha'* denotes the opposite. Therefore the English words "faithful" and "faithfulness" over against "faithless" and "faithlessness" get closer to the meaning of the Hebrew words. I cheat by using two English words that are etymologically or linguistically opposites ("faithful" and "faithless"), but the use of the Hebrew words in Proverbs and elsewhere does indicate that the Hebrew words are substantially opposites, even though they do not make the point by their form in the manner of "faithful" and "faithless" or "righteous" and "unrighteous."

Either on the basis of the traditional translation or on the assumption that the words mean something more like "faithful" and "faithfulness," *tsedaqah* is a key and distinctive theme in the aphorisms. Soon after that first references, Proverbs 10 goes on:

Yahweh will not let a faithful person be hungry,
but the craving of the faithless he will repel. (10:3)
Blessings on the head of someone faithful,
but the mouth of the faithless, it will cover violence. (10:6)
The commemoration of someone faithful will become a blessing,
but the name of the faithless, it will rot. (10:7)

Thirty-eight of the ninety-one aphorisms in Proverbs 10–12 refer to faithfulness (usually the adjective *tsaddiq*, but sometimes *tsedaqah* or *tsedeq*), and thirty refer to faithlessness (usually the adjective *rasha'*, but sometimes *rish'ah* or *resha'*).

These references to faithfulness already make clear the ethical side to faithfulness and thus to the aphorisms in Proverbs. When Proverbs 10:2 sets faithfulness over against faithless storehouses, it issues a challenge the head of a household. Are your barns full, so that you so that your family will have enough to eat all through the coming year until next year's harvest? If so, is it because you have operated in an honest way, working hard in your fields, paying your laborers promptly, leaving some grain for the needy, and avoiding ill-treating the oxen who pull your plow? Another aphorism observes:

¹⁵ See Hermann Cremer, *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhange ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1899); cf. Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, Volume One of *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 370–371.

Someone faithful acknowledges their animal's appetite,
but the compassion of the faithless is hard. (12:10)

Have you given your animals the proper fodder? That's faithfulness. It is the opposite of the so-called compassion that is no compassion at all, that either fails to feed them properly or overworks them.

The aphorisms especially associate faithfulness with speech. In Proverbs 10 alone:

A fountain of life, the mouth of someone faithful,
but the mouth of the faithless, violence will cover it. (10:11)

Choice silver, the tongue of someone faithful;
the inner being of the faithless, worth little. (10:20)

The lips of someone faithful, they will pasture many,
but idiots, through being in want in their inner being they will die. (10:21)

The mouth of a someone faithful, it will produce the fruit of wisdom,
but a crooked tongue, it will get cut off. (10:31)

The lips of someone faithful, they will acknowledge what has acceptance,
but the mouth of the faithless, crooked things. (10:32)

Truthfulness or honesty in speech is a crucial expression of *tsedaqah*, of faithfulness in human relationships. To put it positively, faithfulness in speech pastures people, sees that they get looked after. Faithful speech is thus life-giving. To put to negatively, faithless speech can conceal violence or issue in violence—for the faithless person as well as their victim, eventually.

A third aspect of Proverbs' convictions in 10:1–22:16 surfaces in its third aphorism, which we have already had reason to note. It talks about Yahweh's involvement in people's lives.

Yahweh will not let a faithful person be hungry,
but the craving of the faithless he will repel. (10:3)

A key aim of Proverbs in seeking to shape people's thinking about life is to encourage them to recognize and live by the fact of Yahweh's involvement in their lives. Near the beginning of 10:1–22:16 it thus makes that bold affirmations about how life works. Near the end, it makes another:

Awe for Yahweh leads to life,
and one will be full, rest for the night, not meet with anything bad. (19:23)

Three basic features of a good life are having enough to eat, being able to get a good night's sleep, and enjoying security. The aphorism declares that awe for Yahweh is key to these.

Proverbs refers fourteen times to awe for Yahweh, and it suggests that such awe (*yir'āh*) is a key aspect of a relationship with Yahweh. Again, I avoid the traditional translation of this noun, "fear," which is misleading. While there are passages in the Scriptures such as indicate that sometimes we should be afraid of God, there aren't any in Proverbs. The *yir'āh* of which it

speaks denotes a meek submission that is more an expression of confidence than fear. One could see awe for Yahweh as the First Testament term for spirituality.¹⁶

Affirmations such as 10:3 and 19:23 can worry Christians because they don't always work out in experience, though they are really no more troublesome than statements by Jesus in this respect: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things [food, drink, clothing] shall be added unto you" (Matt 6:33, KJV). There, as elsewhere in the New Testament, *dikaiosune* is equivalent to *tsedaqah* and surely carries the connotations that Cremer suggested. Near the beginning and near the end of Proverbs 10:1–22:16, these audacious and confident assertions of God's own faithfulness are ones that Israelites are invited to continue trusting even when they do not work out.

While some of Proverbs' affirmations about how life works explicitly involve Yahweh, others do not.

Discipline your son because there is hope,
and towards putting him to death, don't take yourself there. (19:18)

Many such insights find expression in the traditional wisdom of other cultures, as they do in bumper stickers. In Proverbs, such sayings may take for granted truths about Yahweh expressed elsewhere within the Tanak, but whether or not individual aphorisms assume that basis, the collection with its many references to Yahweh does imply it, and sets in this context the kind of aphorism that leaves it unsaid. Implicitly, then, Proverbs says, the reality and involvement of Yahweh is key to maintaining the kind of hopes that are expressed in an aphorism such as 19:18.

After 10:3, Yahweh features in only three more of the aphorisms in Proverbs 10:

Yahweh's blessing, it will make someone well-off,
and not add toil with it. (10:22)
Awe for Yahweh, it will prolong days,
but the years of the faithless, they will shorten. (10:27)
Yahweh's road, a strength for someone of integrity,
but terror for people who do harm. (10:29)

Yahweh features more prominently in Proverbs 16, which begins with a vividly formulated aphorism that again urges bold confidence, and follows it with another forthright affirmation about Yahweh's sovereignty, which holds even in connection with mysterious events in the world.

³Roll your actions to Yahweh,
and your intentions will stand firm.
⁴Everyone Yahweh made for an answer to something,
and even the faithless person for a bad day. (16:3–4)

It adds a statement of confidence concerning Yahweh's exercise of that sovereignty concerning people who are lofty in mind instead of living by awe in him, and concerning the commitment, truthfulness, faithfulness, judiciousness, and trust that are expressions of awe for Yahweh:

⁵An outrage to Yahweh, everyone lofty in mind;
hand to hand, they will not go free.

¹⁶ Cf. Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method and Cases* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 285–97.

- ⁶By commitment and truthfulness, waywardness will be recompensed,
and by awe for Yahweh, a turning away from what is bad.
- ⁷When an individual's roads [meet] with Yahweh's accepting,
even their enemies they/he will make peace with them.
- ⁸A little with faithfulness, good,
rather than an abundance of yield without the exercise of authority.
- ⁹The mind of a human person, it will plan their road,
but Yahweh, he will make their step firm.
- ²⁰Someone judicious in a matter will find what is good,
and the good fortune of someone who trusts in Yahweh! (16:5–9, 20)

Accidentally or on purpose, then, the opening of the middle third of Proverbs announces three key aspects of its convictions in its first three aphorisms: human insight, faithfulness, and awe for Yahweh. It shares its first conviction with the bumper-sticker phenomenon, but the second and third are more distinctive. Proverbs is concerned for faithfulness in relationships with other people, and for a life lived in a relationship with Yahweh, and it implies the conviction that this is not merely compatible with natural human insight but key to its working properly.

While William McKane, among others, suggested that the more bumper sticker-like sayings are older than the ones that urge faithfulness and awe for Yahweh,¹⁷ the idea that Israelite thinking was once secular and then gained a sacred layer looks like an imposition from within a modern framework that separates the sacred and the secular. And something like faithfulness and awe for Yahweh would surely be integral to anything that would count as Israelite faith, or the faith of Israel's ancestors. Certainly as we have Proverbs, the work as a whole seeks to shape people's thinking about life, to build up faithfulness, and to nurture commitment to Yahweh, and to encourage people to assume that these three concerns belong together rather than being in some sort of tension. On that basis, it aims to embolden and console teachers and parents about the possibility that their students and offspring can make choices about the kind of person they are.

And actually, Proverbs as a whole begins by announcing that it holds together these three convictions. It even begins with Solomon, like Proverbs 10:

Verses of Solomon ben David, king of Israel:

For getting to know wisdom and discipline,
for gaining discernment into sayings that are discerning,
For receiving discipline that is judicious—
faithfulness in the exercise of authority, and uprightness....
Awe for Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge,
whereas idiots despise wisdom and discipline. (1:1–3, 7)

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¹⁷ See *Proverbs: A New Approach*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1970).

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