

THEOLOGY & CULTURE

Gaining Honour vs. Gaining Riches (Prov 11:12-16)

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Introduction

There is a choice between “to be” and “to have”. Avenues of publicity in contemporary culture strive to imprint on our thinking the notion that we need to have, to get, to gain something; at the same time they shy away from saying that we need to renounce something, to give something up, to suffer material loss for a higher motive, for a more noble purpose. The author of the present essay proposes a contextual analysis of a group of proverbs to be found in the biblical book by the same name in chapter 11, verses 12-16. These proverbs all end with a statement that declares that gaining honour and a good name present an antithesis to the unbridled drive to accumulate material things or riches (v. 16). Hence maintaining one’s honour and preserving a good name seem to be more worthy of the human being.

The Text

¹² He who despises his neighbour lacks sense¹,
but a man of understanding² remains silent.

¹ The expression חָסֵר־לֵב literally means “lacks heart,” a synonym of a foolish, a stupid person (cf. W.D. REYBURN – E.M. FRY, *A Handbook on Proverbs*, UBS.HS, New York 2000, 247).

² The word תְּבוּנָה “understanding” is used here in the plural, while in other places in the Proverbs it is used in the singular (10:23; 15:21; 17:27; 20:5).

¹³ He who walks as a slanderer³ reveals secrets,
but he who is trustworthy in spirit conceals the matter.

¹⁴ Without guidance⁴, the people fall,
but salvation [is] in the greatness of counsel⁵.

¹⁵ He who gives surety for a stranger will surely suffer⁶,

³ W. Bühlmann suggests that before the exile, the word רַכִּיל was used in the sense of “gossip” (Prov 11:13; 20:19; Jer 6:28; 9:3) and later in the sense of “slander” (Lev 19:16; Ezek 22:9; *Vom rechtem Reden und Schweigen: Studien zu Proverbien 10–31*, OBO 12, Göttingen 1976, 109); while for R.H. O’Connell the meaning of “gossip” is too weak in the OT context (“rākīl”, in W.A. VanGemenen, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, [CD-ROM], Grand Rapids 2001). Except for Ezek 22:9, there are five other instances when רַכִּיל is used in an idiomatic expression together with the verb הֵלֵךְ “walking” (Lev 19:16; Prov 11:13; 20:19; Jer 6:28; 9:3). The expression can be rendered as “he who walks as a slanderer” (cf. J.G. WILLIAMS, “The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs”, *Semeia* 17 [1980] 41). In a figurative sense, the verb הֵלֵךְ refers to a way of living (E.H. MERRILL, “hālak”, in W.A. VanGemenen, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, [CD-ROM], Grand Rapids 2001); and it could be translated as “he who has an attitude of slander”.

⁴ In the Bible, the word תְּהַלְלוֹת occurs only in the plural (Job 37:12; Prov 1:5; 11:14; 12:5; 20:18; 24:6). It has a sense of “guidance”, “advice” (cf. F. BROWN – S.R. DRIVER – C.A. BRIGGS, *The Brown-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Boston 1906, Peabody 2000, 287).

⁵ The noun יוֹעֵץ in the singular means “advice”, “counsel”, but many translations render it in the plural as “counselors” (e.g., KJV, NAB, NRSV, RSV) or “advisers” (NIV, NJB), while the Septuagint translates it by βουλή “counsel”. The proverb does not seem to be talking about the number of advisers, but rather about the quality of advice that even one counselor gives (e.g., L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL – J. VILCHEZ LINDEZ, *Proverbios*, Nueva Biblia Española, Madrid 1984, 278).

⁶ The expression רַע-יָרוּע is unusual. In the Masoretic vocalization רַע “evil, bad” is an adjective. Some have proposed to change its vocalization to רַע, that is, the infinitive absolute of the verb רָעַע “to be bad”. Then the syntactic construction would be composed of two verbal forms of the same verb (infinitive + niphal) reinforcing the expression to sound stronger; and the translation would be “will have to suffer for it” (cf. B. GEMSER, *Sprüche Salomos*, HAT 16, 2nd ed., Tübingen, 1963, 54; W. MCKANE, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL, London 1970, 429. A. Guillaume suggested that רַע could be derived from the root רִיעַ, “to be afraid” (“A Note on the Roots רִיעַ, ירַע, and רַעַע in Hebrew”, *JTS* 15 ns [1964] 294). P.A. Steveson translates the

but he who hates handshakes⁷ is secure.⁸

¹⁶ A gracious woman gains honour,
but the violent⁹ gain riches.¹⁰

expression by "will surely suffer" without noting any necessity of having to change the Masoretic Text (*A Commentary on Proverbs*, Greenville 2001, 150).

⁷ In the Bible, the word תִּקְעִים appears only here; and it could be considered as a participle of the verb תִּקַּע "to strike hands" (F. BROWN – S.R. DRIVER – C.A. BRIGGS, *The Brown-Briggs Hebrew*, 1075) or as a noun "striking hands" (L. KÖHLER – W. BAUMGARTNER, *A Bilingual Dictionary of the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament: English and German*, Leiden – Boston – Köln 1998, 1023). "Striking hands" is an idiomatic expression meaning the same as "shaking hands" in an agreement implying "pledge", "surety" (Cf. M. ROGLAND, "'Striking a Hand' (TQ' KP) in Biblical Hebrew", VT [1995] 109).

⁸ This proverb could be a conditional affirmation (cf. G.E. BRYCE, "Omen-Wisdom in Ancient Israel", *JBL* 92 [1975] 27-28; T. HILDEBRANDT, "Motivation and Antithetic Parallelism in Proverbs 10–15", *JETS* 35 [1992] 437).

⁹ The form of עָרִיצִים is that of a plural masculine adjective; and many translations add the word "men" forming an antithesis between "woman" and "men" (e.g., KJV, NAB, NIV, RSV). NJB translates it in a more general sense as "violent people". Some suggest that עָרִיצִים in this proverb could have a positive meaning of "vigorous, powerful men" (cf. G.R. DRIVER, "Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs", *Biblica* 32 [1951] 180; O. PLÖGER, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)*, BK 17, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984, 134; A. SCHERER, *Das weise Wort un seine Wirkung: Eine Untersuchung zur Komposition und Redaktion von Proverbia 10,1 – 22,16*, MWANT 83, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999, 73); however in all other instances in the OT this term is always used in a negative sense of "violent, ruthless".

¹⁰ The Septuagint has an additional two lines and the antithesis is between two women and the slothful and the diligent. Some suggest that the Septuagint translated a text that had been later lost (B. GEMSER, *Sprüche Salomos*, HAT 16, 2nd ed., Tübingen 1963, 54; J. HAUSMANN, *Studien zum Menschenbild der älteren Weisheit (Spr 10ff.)*, FAT 7, Tübingen 1995, 152), but the others think that translator added those lines (J. COOK, "Contrasting as a Translation Technique in the LXX of Proverbs", in C.A. Evans – S. Talmon, eds., *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality*, Fs. J.A. Sanders, Biblical Interpretation 28, Leiden 1997, 412-413; E. TOV, "Recensional Differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint of Proverbs", in H.W. Attridge – J.J. Collins – T.H. Tobin, eds., *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and*

Composition

The passage contains three parts: verses 12-13, verse 14 and verses 15-16.¹¹ The first part (vss. 12-13) is a thematic unit concerned with behaviour related to the use of speech:¹² one *despises his neighbour* (12a) and *reveals secrets* (13a), and the other *remains silent* (12b) and *conceals the matter* (13b). Both proverbs are in a parallel relation to each other, AB/A'B'.

– ¹² He who despises his NEIGHBOUR + but a man of understanding	lacks sense, remains silent.
– ¹³ He who walks as a slanderer + but he who is trustworthy in spirit	reveals <i>secrets</i> , conceals the matter.

– ¹⁴ Without <i>guidance</i> + but salvation	the PEOPLE fall, [is] in the greatness of <i>counsel</i> .
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– ¹⁵ He who gives surety for a STRANGER + but he who hates handshakes	will surely suffer is secure .
+ ¹⁶ A gracious woman – but the violent	gains honour, gain riches.

The closing verses (15-16) can be seen as a thematic unit that concerns itself with behaviour related to riches.¹³ Cast in a negative

Christian Origins, Fr. J. Strugnell, CTSRR 5, Lanham – New York – London 1990, 46-47).

¹¹ I have proposed this delineation in my dissertation (B. WITEK, *Dio e i suoi figli*, TG.T 117, Roma 2005, 54). Other proposed delineations: 12-14 (R.N. WHYBRAY, *Proverbs*, NCBC, Grand Rapids 194, 180); 14-16 (A. SCHERER, *Das weise Wort*, 83); 9-15 (O. PLÖGER, *Sprüche*, 137; A. MEINHOLD, *Die Sprüche*. I. *Sprüche Kapitel 1–15*, ZBK.AT 16, Zürich 1991, 189-190); 8-17 (R. SCORALICK, *Enzelspruch und Sammlung: Komposition im Buch der Sprichwörter Kapitel 10–15*, BZAW 232, Berlin – New York 1995, 186-189; H.F. FUHS, *Das Buch der Sprichwörter. Ein Kommentar*, FzB 95, Würzburg 2001, 195).

¹² For F. Delitzsch these two proverbs concern “the intercourse of private life” (“Proverbs”, in C.F. KEIL – F. DELITZSCH, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, VI. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Peabody 1966, 171).

¹³ For Delitzsch both proverbs are concerned with kindness, which, on the one hand, “brings injury,” and, on other hand, “brings honour” (“Proverbs”, 172).

light is the one who is expecting to gain and *gives surety for a stranger* but at the end is certain to suffer (15a). Presented in a negative vein, too, are *the violent* who *gain riches*, but they are only temporary goods (16b). Cast in a positive light is the one *who hates handshakes* (which might imply some dirty deals), and who, therefore, *is secure* (15b). Presented in a positive vein, too, is *a gracious woman* who *gains honour*. The text here seems to imply superior goods (16a) in contrast to material goods (16b). Both proverbs are in a chiasmic relation to each other: AB/B'A'.

The central proverb (14) seems to be an isolated saying; however, the word *people* belongs to the same semantic camp as *neighbour* (12a) and *stranger* (15a). *Salvation* (14b) refers to the expression *is secure* (15b). The word *secret* (13a) links to *guidance* (14a) and *counsel* (14b).¹⁴

Three proverbs in our passage are chiasmic (12, 14, 15)¹⁵ while the other two are parallel (13 and 16). We note also the presence of an *inclusion* formed by the expressions: *a man of understanding* (12b) and *a gracious woman* (16a).

The relationships among all the parts of the passage can be presented thematically as follows:¹⁶

A	Consequences of behaviour related to the use of speech	12-13
B	Fall and salvation of the people	14
A'	Consequences of behaviour related to riches	15-16

¹⁴ Such a relationship is possible because the noun טִיב means "secret" and "counsel" (cf. F. BROWN – S.R. DRIVER – C.A. BRIGGS, *The Brown-Briggs Hebrew*, 691).

¹⁵ The chiasmic composition is reflected in the translation of vv. 12 and 14, while the translation of v. 15 makes it parallel. In the Hebrew text of v. 15, the literal translation that reflects a chiasmic word order could be as follows:

A	<i>Will surely suffer</i>
B	for he gave surety for a stranger,
B'	but he who hates handshakes
A'	<i>is secure.</i>

¹⁶ Cf. B. WITEK, *Dio*, 56.

Biblical Context

Behaving as a Slanderer

The idiomatic expression of Prov 11:13a “walking as a slanderer” occurs in the Law of Moses in the following admonition: *You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour* (Lev 19:16). In this context, a false accusation by a slanderer leads to the death of his neighbour. Subsequently, the slanderer responsible for the death of his neighbour would then take the dead man’s property.

The same expression is found in the Prophetical Books. Ezekiel lists slander as one of the sins of Jerusalem: *In you are those who slander to shed blood* (22:9). Jeremiah warns about neighbours and relatives in what follows: *Let everyone beware of his neighbour, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a supplanter, and every neighbour goes about as a slanderer* (9:3; cf. 6:28). The first line of 11:13 is almost the same as the first line of 20:19¹⁷ where it is followed by an admonition: *He who walks as a slanderer revels secrets; therefore do not associate with a babblers*.

Surety

The verb עָרַב with the meaning of “giving surety for somebody” is found eleven times in the OT and among them six times in the Proverbs.¹⁸ Apart from Prov 11:15, two other proverbs in the First Solomonic Collection (10:1–22:16) are also against giving surety

¹⁷ In the Hebrew text the expressions are in a reverse order, but the lines can be translated into English in the same way:

11:13	מְגַלֵּה-סוֹד	הוֹלֵךְ רֵכִיל
20:19	הוֹלֵךְ רֵכִיל	גּוֹלֵה-סוֹד

¹⁸ Gen 43:9; 44:32; Isa 38:14; Ps 119:122; Job 17:3; Prov 6:1; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26; 27:13 (G. LISOWSKY, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament*, 3rd ed., Stuttgart 1993, 1110). There are five sentences where the verb עָרַב occurs together with the verb תָּקַע “to strike hands” (Job 17:3; Prov 6:1; 11:15; 17:18; 22:26) translated in 11:15 by “handshakes (cf. n. 7).

for others: *A man without sense shakes hands becoming surety for his neighbour* (17:18); *takes his garment when he gives surety for a stranger, and when for a foreign woman, holds him in pledge* (20:16; cf. 27:13). Other proverbs, too, give warnings about not giving pledges as surety for the debts of others; otherwise the one who would give his guarantees would later suffer (6:1-5; 22-26-27).

In Sirach, the author sees giving surety as something positive: *A good man will be surety for his neighbour* (29:14). However, on the practical level, he advises prudence for the one who is giving surety: *Do not give surety beyond your means, but if you give surety, be concerned as one who must pay* (8:13); *Assist your neighbour according to your ability, but be careful not to fall yourself* (29:20).

In Genesis the verb עָרַב is used in a positive sense. Judah becomes surety for his brother Benjamin (43:9; 44:32). The verb עָרַב three times is referred to God who helps those who cry to him (Isa 38:14; Ps 118:22; Job 17:3).¹⁹

Riches and Honour

In Prov 11:16 it is not clear if the noun עֲשָׂר, "riches," is used as a synonymous or antithetic term to כְּבוֹד, "honour, glory". In the OT both nouns appear together in sixteen verses.²⁰ Apart from Prov 11:16, in all other instances these two nouns are used as synonymous, parallel or complementary terms. Riches and honour are gifts that God gives to the kings of Israel: David (1Chr 29:12), Solomon (1Kgs 3:13; 2Chr 1:11-12), Jehoshaphat (2Chr 17:5), and Hezekiah (2Chr 32:37). Riches and honour also characterise the rulers of other nations, e.g., the Persian king Ahasuerus (Esth 1:4) and his minister Haman (5:11). In the Book of Proverbs, both riches and honour are presented as gifts that flow forth from

¹⁹ A. SCHERER, "Is the Selfish Man Wise? Considerations of Context in Proverbs 10.1–22.16 with Special Regard to Surety, Bribery and Friendship", *JOT* 76 (1997) 61–62.

²⁰ 1Kgs 3:13; 1Chr 28:12, 28; 2Chr 1:11, 12; 17:5; 18:1; 32:27; Esth 1:4; 5:11; Ps 49:17; Prov 3:16; 8:18; 11:16; 22:4; Qoh 6:2 (cf. B. WITEK, *Dio*, 57).

Wisdom (3:16; 8:18) and as rewards for those who fear the Lord (22:4). Finally, in Qoheleth they are gifts that God grants to a person who nevertheless does not receive from God the opportunity to enjoy them (6:2). All the above-mentioned instances would suggest that one should read “riches” in Prov 11:16 as a synonymous or complementary term for “honour”.

However, in the context of the First Solomonic Collection (10:1–22:16) there are two proverbs where עֲשָׂר “wealth” has negative connotations. The first one states: *He who trusts in his riches shall fall* (11:28a) in contrast to *the righteous who will flourish like leaves* (28b). Another proverb says: *A good name is better than riches* (20:1a) and in the second line there is a synonymous statement: *and a favour is better than silver or gold* (1b). Taking into consideration the literal context of the First Solomonic Collection, we can conclude that “riches” is used in a negative sense as an antithetical term to “honour”.

Interpretation

Riches: Reward of the Wicked

The word עֲשָׂר, “wicked,” does not appear in our text. Nevertheless it is one of the preferred words in the First Solomonic Collection (Prov 10:1–22:16).²¹ In the literal context there are other terms that express meanings that seem synonymous to wicked behaviour and actions. Among them there are words that either connote or denote foolishness, falsity or violence. Such words we find in our passage. The *one who despises his neighbour* is called a foolish person who *lacks sense* (12a). *A slanderer* (13a) is opposed to a person *who is trustworthy in spirit* (13b); therefore, he is not just a person who talks too much, but someone who behaves in a false manner by detracting others and revealing secrets that others have entrusted to him confidentially. One observes that

²¹ Out of 262 occurrences of this word in the OT, it appears 78 times in Proverbs and 54 times in the First Solomonic Collection (10:1–22:16, cf. B. WITEK, *Dio*, 349).

the person *who gives surety for a stranger*²² (15a) is someone who enters into dirty deals expecting to gain sordid profit. Finally, the closing proverb uses the term *the violent* (16b), a catch-all word that embraces all the other negative elements contained in our text. Wicked people may gain wealth (16b), but they seem to be blind to the fact that material things do not last forever (cf. 28a). Therefore, they can be compared to the people who act without paying attention to proper advice – at the end they will fall (14a). As another proverb in the same chapter states, they can be rich in this life but not in the life to come: *Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death* (4).

Honour: Reward of the Righteous

The “righteous one” (קִיָּץ)²³ is presented as *a man of understanding* (12b), or as *a gracious woman* (16a), as one who is *trustworthy in spirit* (13b), and as the one *who hates handshakes* (15b) – i.e., the one who does not engage in unethical, double-faced dealing. A righteous person deals with his neighbour with respect (12b) and loyalty (13b). He knows what to say and when to say it, and thus keeps silence out of respect for his neighbour (12b). He is a trustworthy friend to whom a person can reveal any secret without the fear that others will come to know it (13b). With the people he doesn’t know well, he deals with prudence (15b), because he knows the risks of giving guarantees for the debts of others (cf. 6:1-5; 22:26-27). Such behaviour does not imply egoism or selfishness, but it should rather be interpreted as cautious way of dealing with others resulting from the social and economic contexts of the time.²⁴ A righteous person looks first for the good of others, for the good of the community. Economically he seems

²² The adjective קִיָּץ “strange, foreign” does not indicate here a foreigner; rather it is somebody who is not a family member or does not belong to the circle of people who know each other (R.N. WHYBRAY, *Proverbs*, 181).

²³ This is another preferred term: out of 205 occurrences in the OT, it appears 88 times in the Book of Proverbs and 49 times in the First Solomonic Collection (10:1–22:16, cf. B. WITEK, *Dio*, 349).

²⁴ Cf. G. BERNINI, *Proverbi*, NVB 19, 3rd ed., Cinisello Balsamo 1993, 214; A. SCHERER, “Is the Selfish Man”, 64.

to be losing because is not entering into illicit deals (cf. 15b) nor is he using violence (16b). Such people understand well that it is better “to be” a good person than “to have” material goods, because a good name is more valuable than all the riches that a person may amass (22:1).