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 sense\(^1\),
but a man of understanding\(^2\) remains silent.


\(^2\) 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 slanderer reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit conceals the matter.
14 Without guidance, the people fall, but salvation is in the greatness of counsel.
15 He who gives surety for a stranger will surely suffer,

3 W. Bühlmann suggests that before the exile, the word רָכִיל 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 Proverben 10–31, OBO 12, Göttingen 1976, 109); while for R.H. O’Connell the meaning of “gossip” is too weak in the OT context (“rākil”, in W.A. VanGemeren, 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 רָכִיל is used in an idiomatic expression together with the verb הָלַח “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 הָלַח refers to a way of living (E.H. Merrill, “hālak”, in W.A. VanGemeren, 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”.


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־יֵרוֹﬠ is unusual. In the Masoretic vocalization “evil, bad” is an adjective. Some have proposed to change its vocalization to רַע, that is, the infinitive absolute of the verb לָרֵע “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 רָעַ, רֵעַ, “to be afraid” (“A Note on the Roots יָרָע, רָע, רֵע in Hebrew”, JTS 15 ns [1964] 294). P.A. Steveson translates the
but he who hates handshakes is secure.\(^7\)


\(^9\) 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. PLOGER, 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”.

Composition

The passage contains three parts: verses 12-13, verse 14 and verses 15-16.\textsuperscript{11} The first part (vss. 12-13) is a thematic unit concerned with behaviour related to the use of speech:\textsuperscript{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’.

\begin{tabular}{ll}
– 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 secrets, \\
& conceals the matter. \\
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
– 14 & Without guidance \\
+ & but salvation \\
& the PEOPLE fall, \\
& [is] in the greatness of counsel. \\
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
– 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. \\
\end{tabular}

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


\textsuperscript{12} For F. Delitzsch these two proverbs concern “the intercourse of private life” (“Proverbs”, in C.F. \textsc{Keil} – F. \textsc{Delitzsch}, \textit{Commentary on the Old Testament}, VI. \textit{Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs}, Peabody 1966, 171).

\textsuperscript{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 chiastic 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).\textsuperscript{14}

Three proverbs in our passage are chiastic (12, 14, 15)\textsuperscript{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:\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{align*}
A & \quad \text{Consequences of behaviour related to the use of speech} & 12-13 \\
B & \quad \text{Fall and salvation of the people} & 14 \\
A' & \quad \text{Consequences of behaviour related to riches} & 15-16
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{14} Such a relationship is possible because the noun סָוד means “secret” and “counsel” (cf. F. BROWN – S.R. DRIVER – C.A. BRIGGS, The Brown-Briggs Hebrew, 691).

\textsuperscript{15} The chiastic 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 chiastic word order could be as follows:

\begin{align*}
A & \quad \text{Will surely suffer} \\
B & \quad \text{for he gave surety for a stranger,} \\
B' & \quad \text{but he who hates handshakes} \\
A' & \quad \text{is secure.}
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{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 Prophetic 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 babbler.*

Surety

The verb יָרֵב 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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>לְולָךְ רְכִּילָה</td>
<td>Hanleh Rêcîl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָוֹלֵ֣ל רְכִּילָה</td>
<td>Holâl Rêcîl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 יָרֵב is used in a positive sense. Judah becomes surety for his brother Benjamin (43:9; 44:32). The verb יָרֵב 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 עֹשֶׁר, “riches,” is used as a synonymous or antithetic term to כָּבוֹד, “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

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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 אֶשֶּׁר “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 רָשָׁע, “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). 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

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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” (נָכָר)\(^{23}\) 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 זָר “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).

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).