



To Answer or Not Answer? Reading Text, Culture, and Soul with Wisdom

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Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.
Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes. (Prov 26:4–5)

To answer or not answer a fool: that is the question. At first glance, the advice given in the book of Proverbs appears to be no help at all when dealing with a fool. In the space of two verses we are instructed not to answer a fool, immediately followed by the advice to answer a fool. While perhaps the most blatant, and frequently cited, example of contradictory proverbs, close readers can cite other examples of proverbs that seem to impart advice but that, if not outright contradictory, are at least in tension (see Prov 17:23 and 18:16 for negative and positive attitudes toward a bribe), raising the question whether Proverbs can be any help at all when it comes to making decisions as we navigate life.

Before proceeding, though, we should point out that the apparently contradictory advice given by certain sayings is not unique to biblical proverbs. We

The wisdom in the book of Proverbs seems sometimes to contradict itself, with opposite pieces of advice sometimes even in back-to-back couplets. But the wisdom in Proverbs is more complicated than simple moral aphorisms that can be easily applied at all times. Rather, this wisdom relies on a sophisticated reading of nuance and context, and of the people involved.

observe the same phenomenon in other proverb traditions, including in English. Consider the following proverb pairs:

Too many cooks spoil the broth.
 Many hands make light work.
 The early bird catches the worm.
 He who hesitates is lost.
 You are never too old to learn.
 You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

The list goes on and on. What is it about proverbs that allows such tension to exist? And how, assuming such proverbs are useful, are people supposed to implement them in their lives?

The first question raises the issue of genre. Different genres trigger different reading strategies and also help us understand what claims a piece of writing is making. Before looking at the genre of a proverb, let's illustrate by using a different biblical example where there has been a historical debate over genre participation.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
 for your love is better than wine. (Song 1:2)

This opening verse of the Song of Songs can represent the debate that extends to the whole book. Many today understand the Song to be a love poem or a collection of love poems, thus encouraging a particular expectation on the part of readers that guides their interpretation. As such, readers take the opening line of the Song as an expression of a woman's desire for physical intimacy with a man. Others, not only in the past but in the present, understand the Song to be an allegory, not at all concerned with intimacy between human beings but rather between God—or in a Christian allegorical interpretation, Jesus—and people. Accordingly, Song of Songs 1:2 expresses a desire for a different type of intimacy, a desire for intimacy with God.

My purpose here is not to resolve this disagreement over the Song,¹ or even to get into the weeds of how such a question gets decided,² but only to illustrate that one's decision about genre participation has consequences for how texts are interpreted and applied to our lives. The reason this question is unimportant to our present reflection is because there is no real doubt about the genre of Proverbs 26:4–5 (they are proverbs, short observations, admonitions, prohibitions). And further, there is no real question about the type of claims proverbs in general make. It is simply that many people, particularly when confronted with contradictory biblical proverbs, do a double take and wonder how they can both be true.

¹ See Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

² For a helpful discussion of contemporary genre theory and biblical studies, see Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 105–147; and E. Ben Zvi and Marvin Sweeney, *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

At least that has been my experience in the forty years I have been teaching and writing on the book of Proverbs.³ When I tell students that proverbs are not always true, the first reaction is often puzzlement, followed by the question “Then what good are they?”

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Of course, stating my point in that way helps me get my students’ attention before I then restate the premise more positively: “Proverbs are always true when spoken in the right situation.” In other words, timing is everything when it comes to the proper use of a proverb.

Let me first illustrate with two English proverbs, the first pair cited above. My example comes from real life, a family Thanksgiving that took place over five decades ago. On that afternoon, my family and my cousin’s family went to our grandparents’ house to enjoy a large turkey dinner. On entering the kitchen, my mother and aunt offered to help my grandmother prepare the meal. She responded, “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” My mother and aunt got the message: my grandmother wanted full control of the preparation of the meal. After dinner, though, with dirty dishes piled high, she called out to my cousin and me, “Many hands make light work!”

Her timing was indisputably persuasive, so we dutifully trotted off to the kitchen not bothering to make an argument based on the principle that “too many cooks spoil the broth.” We knew that proverb did not apply to washing dirty dishes.

And that is the point when it comes to biblical proverbs as well. A proverb is true when spoken into the right situation. Proverbs itself makes it clear that timing is pivotal to proper application. Consider the following proverbs as examples:

A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—
and how good is a timely word! (Prov 15:23)

Like apples of gold in settings of silver
is a ruling rightly given. (Prov 25:12)

If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning,
it will be taken as a curse. (Prov 27:14)

That timing is everything in the proper application of proverbial wisdom is also recognized by another, albeit frustrated, wise man, Qohelet (the Preacher/

³ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

Teacher). He famously, and elegantly, affirmed that “there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (Eccl 3:1, see also vv. 2–8). His frustration arises because “no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (Eccl 3:11).

Contrary to Qohelet, the sages behind Proverbs are more optimistic that a proper use of the wisdom found in its collected sayings is possible. But how? Let’s turn our attention back to Proverbs 26:4–5, and as we do, we will begin to address the second question we posed above: How do we implement a proverb in our life?

Since proverbs are only true when applied at the right time, the proper use of a proverb thus depends on a person knowing when a proverb is appropriate for a specific situation. Indeed, there are proverbs that remind us that just knowing a proverb is not enough. Unless one knows how to take a proverb and speak it in the right situation, knowing the proverb itself is useless:

Like the useless legs of one who is lame
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool. (Prov 26:7)

A wrong application of a proverb can even be harmful:

Like a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool. (Prov 26:9)

The picture the sage evokes in this second proverb is a drunk with blood running down his own arm and perhaps hurting others with the thorns as well. Again, these proverbs tell us that it is far from enough to simply know a proverb; we need to know the situation to which it applies.

But how do we do that? How do we come to decide that a particular proverb is right for a real-life situation? The answer is that we not only need to know how to read a *proverb*; we also must understand how to read people and the situation.

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When it comes to Proverbs 26:4 and 5, we should realize that not all fools are alike and not all situations in which we encounter a fool are similar. To illustrate, let me engage in an imaginary situation (inspired by real-life experiences) that describes the process of discerning whether 26:4 or 26:5 applies to a situation.

Just after the 2020 presidential election had been decided in favor of Biden, Cheryl logged onto Facebook and saw some of her friends writing about a rigged election and evidence of massive election fraud. She asked (“answering a fool”) what evidence they had for such allegations, and they responded that the evidence

would be revealed in court. A few weeks later, after dozens of court cases in which no evidence was presented, her friends were still alleging massive election fraud and suggesting that if it were not for the rigged election, their candidate would have won. At that point Cheryl began to wonder whether engaging the argument was worth the effort since their unfounded views seemed entrenched and immune to persuasion. But then she remembered that she was on an open forum, and if no one addressed their claim, then others who were “listening in” might be persuaded that these individuals were correct about election fraud. Therefore, Cheryl continued to challenge their views as lacking any evidence, to which they responded that there would be a big reveal on January 6 when the US Senate convened to certify the Electoral College vote. When that did not happen, some abandoned the charge of election fraud, but many persisted. At that time, Cheryl decided to move from the advice of Proverbs 26:5 (“answer a fool”) to that of 26:4 (“don’t answer a fool”).

The point of this thought experiment is not to justify the choices Cheryl made, but rather to illustrate the type of thought process that one should go through to make a determination whether a particular proverb applies to a situation. But then too we might ask, How does someone develop wisdom in reading situations to know which proverb might apply? The book of Proverbs itself indicates that we grow in wisdom by being observant, self-reflective people who learn through their experience, and particularly from their mistakes.

The sages who produced the book of Proverbs encourage the reader to reflect on their observations and experiences: Watching ants, for instance, warns against laziness (6:6–8). Observing the disastrous consequences of a person sleeping with a woman other than his wife (7:6–23) warns a person to avoid that harmful behavior.

The sages highlight one type of experience that is particularly instructive in learning to navigate life—making mistakes. When one experiences the problems that arise from making a wrong decision, one can learn from that mistake. Of course, learning is only possible if a person is open to correction, and only the humble, not the proud, can learn from their mistakes. Thus, the sages appeal to their listeners to pay attention to those who point out their errors and encourage the humility that will allow them to recognize their failures. They often do this by pointing out the folly of not paying attention:

Whoever heeds discipline shows the way to life,
but whoever ignores correction leads others astray. (Prov 10:17)

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but whoever hates correction is stupid. (Prov 12:1)

And as for the promotion of humility and warnings against pride:

[God] mocks proud mockers
but shows favor to the humble and oppressed. (Prov 3:34)

Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the Lord,
and humility comes before honor. (Prov 15:33)

Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov 16:18)

By default, in biblical tradition older people are wiser than the young since they have had more experiences, and have made more mistakes, than the young. But this is a general principle and not always, or perhaps even frequently, true since one must be observant and self-reflective, and must learn from one's experiences and mistakes. Just observe the behavior and thinking of Job's three friends.

Perhaps another imaginary scenario, again derived from a real-life situation, related to Proverbs 26:4 and 5 will help illustrate: John was a member of the faculty of a seminary in the 1980s when a former graduate who was a thought leader and a well-known author advocated for an interpretation of the Bible that was supportive of Christian nationalism. His view that the Old Testament law, including its penalties, was a blueprint for modern society and specifically for the law of the United States was, surprisingly, gaining an audience and even influencing leaders of the so-called Moral Majority who had a national and public voice. The connection between this graduate's views and the Moral Majority was pointed out in a documentary aired on national TV and the former student's connection to the seminary was highlighted.

At the next faculty meeting, the proposal was put forward to write a book critiquing the student and his movement's views. John readily agreed, thinking that in this situation, "answer a fool" was the right move. The book was published a year later, and a year after that, one of advocates of Christian nationalism published two books attacking the book John had helped write. The response was largely mocking, not engaging with the substantial arguments of the critique. The author also proclaimed himself the "tar baby" of theologians. He promised to write three books against any further book that the faculty might write and thus would mire the faculty in a meaningless debate.

Thus, when the editor of the first book proposed to write a response to the response, John stood up. He simply read, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him" (Prov 26:4). The faculty concurred; the right proverb had been applied to the situation. No more argument was necessary.

As mentioned, we learn how to apply proverbs to specific situations from observing and reflecting on life. We learn from being open to correction after we make mistakes. But since we find these proverbs in the Bible, we appropriately ask, "Where is God in all of this?" Many think that proverbs give us just so much practical advice and that the book of Proverbs is a kind of secular or humanistic corner of an otherwise theocentric collection of books.

But such a perspective on proverbial wisdom is short-sighted. While the sage in the book of Proverbs tells his disciples that wisdom is something for which we strive (Prov 4:4-9), we also hear from Woman Wisdom that wisdom is a gift of God (Prov 2:6).

While individual proverbs, including 26:4-5, do not speak explicitly about God, the first part of the book of Proverbs (chapters 1-9) makes it clear that

wisdom is a theological category. To be wise is to be godly. After all, the book opens by telling the reader, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7). There is no true wisdom unless one has the proper relationship with God, characterized by fear—not the type of fear that makes one run away, but the type of fear that acknowledges that God is the Creator and you are the creature. This type of fear inculcates humility that makes one open to hearing from God and God’s agents (the sages) to grow in true wisdom rather than being “wise in your own eyes” (see 26:5).

A second way in which Proverbs teaches that true wisdom comes in a relationship with God is through the figure of Woman Wisdom. To be wise, one needs to be in an intimate relationship with Woman Wisdom, who represents Yahweh’s wisdom if not Yahweh’s own self (Prov 1:20–33; 8:1–36; and especially the invitation to dine with her in 9:1–6).

Accordingly, we strive to be wise by learning through life experiences and making an effort to know the proverbs, but our success at living wisely is nonetheless the gift of God. Indeed, as Proverbs 20:12 lets us know, even our power to observe life is a gift from God: “Ears that hear and eyes that see—the Lord has made them both.”⁴

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Having considered the importance of reading a situation and people in the proper use of a proverb, we finally come back to the proverb itself. Many people have a static and rather simplistic view of the proverb as some kind of rustic, hit-someone-over-the-head mode of paternalistic/maternalistic instruction. William Willimon expresses the opinion of many when he characterizes the advice you get in the book of Proverbs as along the lines of “It doesn’t hurt to be nice.” He goes on to say, “Proverbs is something like being trapped on a long road trip with your mother.”⁵

While many have recognized that proverbs are much more sophisticated than many people believe, no one has done a better job expressing this in recent days than Suzanna Millar. In her excellent study, *Genre and Openness in Proverbs*

⁴ For more on the subject of divine and human sources of wisdom, see chapter 7 in Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

⁵ William Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 255–256.

10:1–22:16,⁶ she points out that proverbs are amenable to more than one understanding that can be applied in different ways to a variety of life-situations. Those who utilize proverbs correctly—shall we say wisely—are those who can discern an appropriate meaning of the proverb and apply it to a relevant situation.

Proverbs can serve a variety of functions in different life contexts. Proverbs 26:4–5 might be cited in the process of evaluation: “Should I engage this person or not?” One might cite it to another to advise a friend: “You should (or should not) respond to this person.” In another situation, you might cite one or another of these two proverbs by way of criticism: “It was a mistake to answer (or not answer) that person.” Or under question for engaging a foolish person, one might justify oneself with “Answer a fool according to his folly.”

Millar points out that a proverb’s openness may also involve an intentional ambiguity in the meaning of the proverb itself. Such ambiguity is generated by the polysemy of the words, the relationship between the parallel lines, or the natural ambiguity of images that are frequent in the sayings of Proverbs.

An example of openness from Proverbs 26:4–5 might have to do with the term “answer.” What does it mean to answer or not answer a fool in a specific situation? In some contexts, I can imagine not engaging the foolish person directly, but perhaps still appealing to that person’s audience or even pointing out that the person’s viewpoint is so off base that it is not worthy of engagement. At other times, it means to simply ignore the person. In another situation, not answering a person might go even further since their viewpoint is hateful and egregious, and answering might lead to efforts to remove their argument from public exposure. Of course, the modern debate around so-called cancel culture is less whether there are some cases in which people should be ignored (not answered) than who should be. That is a matter of wisdom, and wisdom does not always lead to agreement.

If anything, I hope this reflection on Proverbs 26:4–5 reminds us that the sayings of Proverbs are not mindless and simplistic statements, but rather helpful insights into life that require careful thought about the proverbs themselves, as well as about people and life situations. Wisdom is not a credential like getting a PhD. Once the latter is conferred, the recipient is “Dr.” till the day of death, even if, God forbid, they have a stroke or slip into senility. To be wise is not the same. First of all, one can lose wisdom, as the well-known story of Solomon in the book of Kings informs us. But secondly, one can grow in wisdom as well. Through our reflection on Proverbs 26:4–5, I hope to have shown that we grow in wisdom through contemplating proverbs (text), reflecting on life experiences (culture), and knowing how to read people (soul). Wisdom is a lifelong pursuit, and the purpose of Proverbs is to help us grow. ⊕

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⁶ Suzanna R. Millar, *Genre and Openness in Proverbs 10:1–22:16* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020).