

THE ANCHOR YALE BIBLE

PROVERBS 10–31



A New Translation
with Introduction and Commentary

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polemical. Quite likely it was appended to Proverbs because an editor believed that a cautionary comment was called for, after Proverbs' incessant glorification of wisdom, and he approved of Agur's exaltation of Torah.

Agur's meditation is close in word and spirit to Ps 73. Frustrated in his attempt to understand the prosperity of the wicked, the psalmist says, "I was ignorant and lacking knowledge. I was a beast with you" (v 22). ("Ignorant" is *ba'ar*, a word Agur uses of himself in Prov 30:2a.) Only in the sanctuary did the psalmist receive enlightenment (Ps 73:17), and then he can declare, "But I am continually with you. You grasp my right hand; you guide me by your counsel. And afterwards you will take me [in] honor" (vv 23–24). Like Agur, the psalmist combines confession of ignorance with a profession of faith and exultation in the insight that comes from God alone.

Agur entreats God to shape his life in such a way that he not be inclined toward sin. It is as if he does not trust his willpower alone to steel him against temptation. The other sages of Proverbs are well aware of temptation, but they believe that the character strength that comes from the discipline of the teachings is a safeguard against temptation. Agur would have us turn directly to God for such a safeguard.

The issue that Agur deals with indicates an origin at a time when some saw a certain tension between the claims of human wisdom and divine Torah. This situation would fit the time between Ezra and Ben Sira—the late fifth to the end of the third centuries B.C.E. The history of this tension is traced in Essay 7, "Revelation."

PART VIB: PROVERBS 30:10–33

EPIGRAMS AND APHORISMS

Part Vib is a miscellany of epigrams, similar to Interlude C (6:1–19), with three short aphorisms among them.

Aphorism a	30:10	Denouncing a Slave
Epigram i	30:11–14	The Wicked Generation
Aphorism b	30:15a	The Epitome of Greed
Epigram ii	30:15b–16	Four Greedy Things
Aphorism c	30:17	Contempt for Parents
Epigram iii	30:18–20	Four Wondrous Ways—and One More
Epigram iv	30:21–23	Four Things That Shake the Earth
Epigram v	30:24–28	Four Creatures Small but Wise
Epigram vi	30:29–31	Four Creatures with a Stately Gait
Epigram vii	30:32–33	Churning Up Quarrels

Most of the epigrams take the form of lists. Epigrams ii, iii, iv, and vi are graded numerical sayings, in the form of X // X + 1 ("Three things . . . and four . . .").

Epigrams i and vii are unnumbered lists whose items are grouped by theme and anaphora (each line beginning with the same word). Epigram v is a single-number list with four items.

The graded numerical saying is a prominent template in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature; see W. Roth 1965 and M. Haran 1972, esp. I, 253–57. See further the Comment on 6:16, with references. The single-number list is much rarer in the Bible but very common in later Hebrew literature.³⁷⁹ Early examples are Sir 25:1, 2 and 'Abot 5:1–15 (every verse but 9); see W. S. Towner's form-critical study (1973).

It is almost always the second number, $X + 1$, that corresponds to the subsequent listing. Often, however, the actual enumeration is vague or ambiguous, and it seems that the numbers are a way of saying “a couple” or “several.” The final item in the series is usually the climax and focal point. When a list is followed by a supernumerary item that oversteps the boundaries of the template (v 20), the additional item is the culmination and main point of the epigram *as it stands now*. In the nonnumerical epigram in Prov 30:11–14, v 14cd stands outside and beyond the syntactical structure of the preceding verses. It is likely that the supernumerary item was added by the editor to give the old epigram a new twist.

W. Roth (1965: 18–21) says that enumeration was an aid to reflection and facilitated the organization of thoughts and observations. He understands Epigrams iii, v, and vi as observations of nature whose purpose is to discover and formulate “an order inherent in the phenomena encountered” (p. 19). He does not believe that the numerical sayings in this chapter express “moral sentiment,” though at a later stage moral lessons could be derived from them (p. 21). He describes the lists as “general science” (p. 21).

This label is misleading. The epigrams offer little information or “scientific” insight and are not oriented to intellectual discovery. The ancient Near East was capable of sophisticated science and engineering. Though Israel was on the margins of the great cultures, it could not have been so backward that a list of four “ways,” associated merely by the fact of their wondrousness, would have served as science of any sort. Rather, poems such as we have in Part VIb—with the possible exception of Epigram ii—list types of human behavior that provide implicit moral guidance by analogy, as will be explained in the Comments. The numerical template served rhetorical, not scientific, purposes.

The list-epigrams, including the nonnumerical ones, assemble phenomena that at first seem to be quite disparate. The listing organizes the reader's *perceptions* of the phenomena. It frames them in a single category and counts the items to give the impression that they form a set with clear definition and with a header that defines the criteria for inclusion. Bracketing diverse phenomena in this way

³⁷⁹We should exclude prosaic counting of items in which the numbering is simply factual and has no particular rhetorical function, such as: “The sons of Jacob were twelve, etc.” (Gen 35:22–26). In a true numerical saying, the choice of numbers should govern the selection of items and not merely count the items in an existing group. Thus there could be any number of “things too wondrous for me” (Prov 30:18) or “things there are that are excellent of stride” (v 29), whereas there were only two sons of Eli (1 Sam 1:3b), no more or less. This criterion would exclude several of Roth's examples.

induces the reader to look for other shared features beyond the lowest common denominator. (Thus all commentators try to find stronger affinities among the “ways” in Epigram iii besides their being amazing and incomprehensible.) The framing also makes the qualities of each item permeate the reader’s perception of the others.

The reader can easily add further phenomena to the set by analogy. A human who is “small” in strength, status, or wealth can succeed by the wisdom of preparing for the future (Epigram v). If a slave becoming king disturbs the right order, as Epigram iv warns, so does a king falling into poverty, and so on. This is categorical thinking, which is well recognized in its pernicious form of group stereotyping but is in fact a necessary means of organizing the unruly mass of data that constantly flood our perceptions.

There are also isolated sayings whose placement seems to be due to word-association (*qll* “curse” in vv 10 and 11; *nešer* “eagle” in vv 17 and 19) and thematic affinity. The theme of greed laces together otherwise independent sayings in vv 11–14, v 15a, vv 15b–16, and perhaps v 17.

For an attempt to find an inclusive structure in 30:11–33, see Steinmann 2001. He believes that this unit is “a tightly organized and coherent unit” (p. 62) structured by the “intricate use of numbers” (p. 61)—indeed, extremely intricate, as he describes it. He divides the passage into seven subunits organized in a chiasm (A. vv 11–14; B. vv 15–16; C. vv 17–20; D. vv 21–23; C’. vv 24–28; B’. vv 29–31; A’. vv 32–33) and finds other patterns based on threes, fours, and sevens.

Aphorism a. Denouncing a Slave

**30:10 Do not denounce a slave to his master,
lest he curse you and you be held guilty.**

This couplet stands alone. It has no thematic connection with what precedes or follows, except for the word “curse” here and in v 11.

denounce [*talšen*]: Or “slander” (NRSV, and many others). The verb *hilšin* (in the H-stem here; in the D-related *poʿel* stem in Ps 101:5) means to say bad things about someone behind his back. Here it could mean lying about a slave or truthfully but maliciously divulging some misbehavior. The same verb (*tlšn*) is used to describe Anat’s denunciation of Aqhat to El (CAT 1.17.vi.51). The preceding narrative shows that she is complaining, not lying, about his refusal to give her a bow she wants. According to Ruyqam and Naḥmias, Prov 30:10 prohibits the betrayal of an escaped slave. This may indeed be the implication of “do not denounce” in the present verse.

The action indicated by *talšen*—whether slander, denunciation, or betrayal—is always wrong, regardless of who does it to whom. This admonition singles out the slave as victim because he is most defenseless. If you denounce him, his only recourse is to curse you for doing so. Apparently, however, this is deemed effective, for you will then be “held guilty” (*ʿšm*), that is, culpable before God, who will hear his cry and hold you responsible. Maltreatment of the orphan and widow, the poor, and others who cannot enforce their rights has the same consequence; see, for example, Exod 22:20–23, 26; Deut 15:9.

Deuteronomy, with a heightened humanitarianism, commands, “You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master” (23:16). Without denying that a slave is his master’s possession, Deuteronomy recognizes the slave’s natural and legitimate right to try to escape from slavery. Deuteronomy seems to realize that slavery is not a just institution, at least for fellow Israelites, even if it is a social fact. Prov 30:10 shows a similar sympathy: A slave’s master may own him and have the legal right to punish him, but others should not be complicit in the master’s enforcement of his power.

An Egyptian ostrakon with sapiential content cites the following as a proverb: “Do not slander a man to his master or . . .³⁸⁰ by your words, when his master is alive.”³⁸¹ (The “master” can be an owner or a supervisor.)

Epigram i. The Wicked Generation

- 30:11 A generation that curses its father,
and does not bless its mother.
- 12 A generation that is pure in its own eyes
and is not cleansed of its filth.
- 13 A generation of arrogant eyes,
and whose eyelids are haughty.
- 14 A generation whose teeth are swords,
and its molars knives—
to devour the poor from off the earth,
and the indigent from among men.

Epigram i is a nonnumerical list whose cohesiveness comes from anaphora (“a generation”). On the assumption that the epigrams must all be numerical, G. Sauer adds an introduction to Prov 30:11–14: “Six things there are that the Lord hates, // seven his soul does loathe”; cf. Prov 6:16 (1963: 103). But there is no reason to insist that this epigram must be a numerical proverb, especially since the four generations are really a single group.

Epigram i is a series of complex noun phrases with no expressed predicate. The one-member sentence implies a predication of existence; in other words, “*There is a generation that . . .*” Nothing is said *about* this generation, for the description itself is enough to condemn it.

The epigram describes one generation, not four. It is corrupted by contempt of parents (v 11), self-righteousness (v 12), arrogance (v 13), and rapaciousness (v 14). By grouping these defects, the epigram teaches that one who despises his parents is also self-righteous and malevolent toward others, and so on. No one should, for example, fancy himself a benefactor to society while holding his own parents in contempt. Character is indivisible, and when someone sullies himself by one sin, he joins the society of the wicked and is contaminated by all their vices.

³⁸⁰ A gap in the text.

³⁸¹ ODeM 1209 x+3–4. The non-royal male determinative with the second “master” indicates that the royal determinative in the first occurrence is an error, and that the saying applies to everyone.

By speaking of a “generation” rather than persons, the epigram also recognizes the “collective character” of sin (Van Leeuwen). Prov 6:12–15 lists the characteristics of the good-for-nothing (the man of Belial). Prov 16:27–30 is an epigram about three kinds of scoundrels, who are really one and the same. Much of the book of Proverbs is dedicated to describing evildoers and fools. What is unusual about the present epigram is that it profiles an entire generation. An entire generation (or, by another interpretation, a group within it) becomes infested by evil. We are not told the mechanism of infection. Perhaps it is that the wicked find support among corrupt members of the society, and they in turn make corruption profitable. When that happens, the contamination spreads to families and infects individual attitudes. Oppression of the poor becomes rife, and people’s self-righteousness blinds them to the evil of their deeds.

generation [*dor*]: There is a biblical notion that certain generations, such as the generation of the Flood (Gen 6:5, 9), the generation of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), and the generation of the wandering in the desert (Deut 32:20), were distinguished by a certain failing. There can also be a righteous generation, one that seeks God (Ps 24:6; sim. 112:2, though the meaning of *dor* there is disputed; see below). A “generation” can be everyone alive at a certain time, or a certain age cohort within a particular time-span. English “generation” is used similarly, as when we speak of the generation of the sixties or “Generation X” and assume that they have certain collective attributes. This notion need not mean that everyone in a generation is wicked or righteous, but that the period as a whole is thus characterized. Since generations are not discrete, *dor* is often equivalent to “period.” The “generation” described in this epigram is like the ones in which the wicked “arise” or “increase” (Prov 28:12b, 28a; 29:16). By another interpretation, *dor* means “group.”

Dôr can also mean “assembly” or a group of some other sort, and recent translations often give it this sense (JPSV: “breed”; NRSV, blandly: “There are those who”; Clifford: “a sort”). NRSV’s “There are those who” reduces the collective character of the evil to individual failings. The word means “assembly” or the like a few times in Ugaritic (e.g., CAT 1.15.iii.19) and Phoenician (Karatepe iii 19), with reference to the assembly of the gods. F. Neuberger 1950 assigns this meaning to *dôr* in Pss 14:5; 24:6; 49:20; 73:15; 84:11; 112:2; and Jer 2:31; see also P. Ackroyd 1968. Some of the suggested passages are ambiguous, but this usage is clear in Ps 14:5, in which the *dôr šaddiq* is contrasted with (contemporary) evildoers. Translations like JPSV’s and NRSV’s are seemingly more logical, but the logic is not necessarily that of the Bible, which recognizes that a generation or age as a whole can be corrupt. Whether *dôr* means “generation” or “group,” the epigram describes the depravity of a collectivity, not just individuals.

30:11. curses: He who curses his parents incurs the death penalty according to Exod 21:17 and brings a curse on himself according to Deut 27:16; sim. Prov 20:20b. Similar warnings are Prov 23:22 and 30:17. “Curse” (*qll*) means to insult and demean; see Brichto 1963: chap. IV.

does not bless: This is a litotes meaning “curses”; see the Comment on 16:29.

30:12. pure in its own eyes: As Prov 20:9 says, no one can rightly claim to be pure. According to 16:2, to imagine oneself innocent is a universal delusion; see the Comment.

30:13. *A generation of arrogant eyes:* Lit., “A generation—how high its eyes!” “Generation” is a *casus pendens*. The following clause, surprisingly, is an exclamation: “how high . . . !”

and whose eyelids are haughty: Lit., “whose eyelids are raised.” Lacking a true synonym for “eyes,” the poet uses a word with approximately the same meaning. The intention is not that their eyes are wide open, but that they look upwards. This connotes arrogance, as in Prov 21:4 and Pss 18:28; 101:5; and 131:1. The notion that raised eyes are a symptom of haughtiness presumes a social practice of keeping one’s eyes directed slightly downward as a sign of modesty, rather than walking with them raised and gazing directly at other people. Prov 6:12–13 lists various types of gesticulations and facial expressions that are thought to mark the scoundrel.

30:14. *whose teeth are swords . . . :* The people of this generation are as cruel and rapacious as wild beasts.

to devour the poor . . . : Standing outside the “generation” series, this couplet (v 14cd) is the climax of the listing. The apex of the generation’s evils lies in pillaging and destroying the poor.

Aphorism b. The Epitome of Greed

30:15a The leech has two daughters: “Give!” “Give!”

This monostich differs sharply from the didactic couplets and epigrams typical of proverbs and has the character of a folk saying. It would work nicely, say, as a jibe about a woman and her daughters or about any greedy person. It serves here as a pivot verse between two epigrams. By its placement, Prov 30:15a tells us that the rapacious generation that devours the poor (v 14) is no better than a contemptible leech. It further connects this greed to the four insatiable forces in vv 15b–16.

Leeches, belonging to the genus *hirudinea*, have a sucker at each end. Since the word *‘āluqah* is feminine, this leech is considered the mother. She has two daughters—twins, judging from their identical names and demands. The sentence can simultaneously be read in two ways: They are both named “Give,” and they both say “Give!” The image of the leech and her daughters can be used of anyone who leeches off others, and it is a way of ridiculing and chastising a greedy person.

The leech’s daughters are as greedy as she is—and that is her fitting punishment. Her daughters nag *her* by whining, as it were, “Gimme!” “Gimme!” Like mother, like daughter. The lesson is: Be careful what you are, because your children will be just like you!

This saying can be extended to other rapacious entities. The Talmud (*b. ‘Abodah Zarah* 17a) says: “What is meant by ‘Give, give’? Mar Uqba said: It is the voice of the two daughters who cry from Gehenna calling to this world: ‘Give, give!’ And who are they? Heresy and the government.” These “daughters” of human society call from the underworld because they are as deadly and voracious as Death itself.

leech [*‘āluqah*]: According to Schneider (1961: 260–61), this is the horse-leech,

found in the Mediterranean region. It is especially repulsive because it fixes itself inside the nostrils of animals as they drink in rivers and ponds.

daughters: These are the leech's two suckers. Schneider (*ibid.*) notes that the branches of a tree are called "daughters" in Gen 49:22 (though this is not certain). He regards the present saying as a riddle whose answer is that the leech's two daughters are its heads (p. 262). The leech, he says (expressing what is in fact an allegorical interpretation), represents the powerful oppressors of the poor, mentioned in Prov 30:14.

Epigram ii. Four Greedy Things

30:15b Three things there are that are insatiable,
 four that do not say, "Enough!":
 16 Sheol, and barrenness,
 the earth, which is not sated with water,
 and fire, which does not say, "Enough!"

These are the four great consumers. Sheol consumes people, earth consumes water, fire consumes combustibles, but what does barrenness consume? Not children, for they have escaped its demands by being born, and barrenness cannot be said to desire children the way that the earth "desires" water. Rather, barrenness, personified like the other devourers, craves *non-existence*. Even more hostile than Sheol, barrenness desires to preclude life before it begins.

A practical purpose is not evident in Epigram ii. It does not derive a lesson from these phenomena or use them as analogies to human behavior. Nor do the images rebuke greediness, for, unlike the leech, the items in this listing are not insignificant and disgusting and their desires are not demeaned by association with them. It would, however, be misleading to call the epigram "natural science," for it does not infer new knowledge by examination of natural phenomena or provide information about them beyond the obvious.

It would be more accurate to call this epigram a *meditation*. Taken as illustrations of universal qualities, the listing conveys an unexpected perception of the world. The world, even nature itself, is full of unappeasable desires. All around us and within us are voices nagging (in the words of v 15a) "Give! Give!" This voraciousness is not inherently wicked; it is just the way things are. Indeed, powerful desires are a dynamic force, without which the world would stagnate.

30:15b. *there are* [*hennah*]: See the Comment on Prov 6:16.

Enough! [*hon*]: Lit., "wealth!" The implication of this exclamation is, "This is wealth! I have plenty." The four great "consumers" never feel wealthy. Their "income" is boundless, but they always feel poor.

30:16. *Sheol*: Death's appetite is infinite. Death is an active power and not just a receptacle of the dead. This is vividly concretized in Mesopotamian mythology. In the Neo-Assyrian "Nergal and Ereshkigal," Ereshkigal, queen of the Underworld, is a grim nymphomaniac, desperately copulating with her consort Nergal without any satisfaction or hope of fertility and birth (see BTM 410–28).

barrenness: Barrenness (lit., “the closure of the womb”) is treated not as an absence but, like Sheol, as an active force that desires and makes demands.

Some explain “barrenness of womb” as a trope for the barren woman (Clifford), who insatiably craves sexual intercourse (Rashi: *tašmiš*) because of her desperate yearning for children. Ehrlich is able to inform us that childless women have a greater sexual drive than mothers, “who during pregnancy and nursing scarcely experience it at all.” With equal expertise, Delitzsch explains that the barren woman, not fearing pregnancy, “invites to her many men, and always burns anew with lust.” There is no reason to think that the sexual urge is stronger in childless women than in mothers or, more important, that the author thought it was. But it does seem likely that, like Rashi, the author thought that a barren woman demands more intercourse out of desperation for children. The fact that barrenness itself, rather than “love” or “desire,” is the insatiable power supports this explanation. Rachel’s insistence that Jacob sleep with her (Gen 30:1, 16) comes to mind. This seems to be the case also in “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” for Ereshkigal has never known joy and never will.

earth . . . : No matter how much water is poured on the earth, the ground absorbs it and can always take more. Or: the earth always needs more rain (Murphy).

Aphorism c. Contempt for Parents

30:17 An eye that mocks the father

and disdains obedience^a to the mother—
the ravens of the creek will gouge it out,
and the young of the eagle will devour it.

^a *lʿyiqqʿhat*- (MT, most MSS *liqqāhat*).

Showing contempt for one’s parents will be punished harshly. The gouging out of the eye matches the crime, for the eye is the organ of greed. That the punishment comes from wild animals suggests that nature itself feels revulsion for such a violation of decency.

eagle: Or “vulture.” Hebrew *nešer* includes both eagles and vultures. It is translated “eagle” here to resonate with the same word in v 19, but here the scavenger rather than the predator is in mind.

The raven and vulture are scavengers. We are to picture them as eating the eyeballs of the dead and unburied sinner (Murphy). A proper burial was necessary for a comfortable existence in the underworld, and sons, especially the firstborn, were duty-bound to care for their parents’ existence in Sheol.³⁸² To despise one’s

³⁸² Our knowledge of mortuary practices in ancient Israel is derived largely from what is *prohibited* by the Law (particularly the Deuteronomic) and condemned by prophecy. These practices included offerings to the dead (Deut 26:14; Ps 106:28) and necromancy (Deut 18:11). On the “cult of the dead” in ancient Israel, see Lewis 1989: esp. 177–81. We cannot know just what assumptions and attitudes the authors of Proverbs held in these matters, but proper burial was universally considered important.

source means to destroy one's future. This is the message of Prov 20:20: "He who curses his father or his mother—his lamp will be extinguished in deep darkness." See the Comment there and on 23:22.

According to Prov 27:20, the eye, as the organ of desire, is insatiable. In Prov 23:20–21, the son is admonished to avoid gluttony. Then follows the exhortation, "Listen to your father, who begot you, and be not contemptuous when your mother grows old" (23:22). This associative cluster—greedy eye, greedy son, offense to parents—could explain the placement of 30:17 after Epigram ii. The editor would have understood this proverb as another example of insatiability, but one that is provided with a proper threat. Epigram ii is bracketed between the aphorisms about selfish daughters and a nasty son, all of whom treat their parents contemptuously. This context underscores the grim selfishness of the forces listed in the epigram.

obedience: This is written as an anomalous *liqqāhat* in the major MT manuscripts. We should vocalize *l^eyiqq^ehat*—as in Ehrfurtensis p.m.; cf. Baer 1880: 52 (where, however, its originality is doubtful). This agrees with Gen 49:10, *yiqq^ehat*. Lit., "the obedience of." This is clearly the sense of the word in the latter verse, the only other occurrence. On the basis of an Arabic cognate, Winton Thomas (1941) emends to *lhqt* and derives it from an otherwise unknown *l^ehîqāh* or *l^ehāqāh*, from an otherwise unattested Heb *l-h-q* "white (of hair)." Though emendation to *zqnt* "old age" (Toy, BHS) makes sense, LXX's *gēras* "old age" is uncertain evidence because it was probably influenced by Prov 23:22b.

Epigram iii. Four Wondrous Ways—and One More

**30:18 Three things there are too wondrous for me,
four I cannot comprehend:**
19 the way of the eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship in the heart of the sea,
and the way of a man with a maid.
20 Such is the way of an adulterous woman.
She eats and wipes her mouth,
and says: "I have done no wrong."

This epigram should be interpreted first without v 20, which is a later addition written in a different spirit from the original list-proverb. (The person who added it may, however, be considered the author of 30:18–20 in its present form.) The wondrousness of the first three phenomena constitutes a premise from which the fourth is deduced by analogy (cf. Sa'adia). The fourth item, "the way of a man with a maid," is the epigram's culmination, and v 20 stands beyond that. Cohesiveness is enhanced by the fourfold repetition of *derek* "way."

The four wondrous things are clearly itemized, but it is left to the reader to discover what makes them amazing. The numerical part of the epigram (vv 18–19) may be an enigma of the sort mentioned in the Prologue (1:6). The quality shared by the first three ways, let alone the fourth and fifth, is disputed. Explanations include the following:

(1) *Mysteriousness of destinations*. An observer cannot determine where the

eagle, snake, and ship are heading, but they do have their destinations. Likewise it is a marvel that the course of the relationship of man and woman makes them one (Murphy). However, it is not particularly difficult to see where a snake is heading, or even a boat, unless at a distance. Also, the fact that they have destinations is not wondrous. Moreover, the “way” of a man’s behavior with a maid does not necessarily “make them one.”

(2) *Mystery of birth*. It is a wonder that sexual intercourse produces a new life (Ehrlich). But the other images describe a quality of the movement itself, not its outcome. And the mystery of birth lies not in the relations between the sexes but in the formation of the fetus in the womb (Ps 139:14–16 and esp. Qoh 11:5).

(3) *Mystery of sexual attraction*. It is remarkable that a man and a woman are mutually attracted. Clifford, strangely, believes that this attraction was “especially notable in ancient Near Eastern society, where boys and girls were raised separately.” Or, the first three “ways” are suggestive of the “mystery of sexuality” (McKane). But sexual attraction is so conspicuous (even outside the ancient Near East!) as to seem natural and self-evident, not mysterious. In any case, the first three ways are not examples of attraction and are poor analogies to mutual attraction.

(4) *Sublimity*. The first three ways are elegant and graceful movements; compare the interest in excellent gaits in Epigram vi (30:29–31). Likewise, love is beautiful, a joy to behold. Toy understands the “ways” to be things that excite the admiration. (And indeed, a snake can be remarkably quick.) Van Leeuwen says that the poem “sings implicit praise to God for the glories of creation, especially for sexual love.”

This is the way I have often read the passage—as a lyrical and romantic evocation of the wonder of love. But perhaps this common denominator is too subjective, residing in the individual reader’s feelings about the phenomena. Is a snake’s slithering really sublime? In any case, the image shows no trace of hymnic exultation in God’s creation.

(5) *Lack of a trace*. The very earliest interpreters and the great majority of later ones, medieval and modern, follow this interpretation. The four “ways” or movements do not leave a trace and one does not know where they went (Rashi, Riquam). The earliest interpreter of 30:18–19, namely, the editor who added v 20 (see below), understood vv 18–19 to allude to tracelessness. The adulteress wipes away the evidence (though not the moral stain) of her sexual transgression. Another early interpreter was the author of the Wisdom of Solomon. Elaborating on vv 18–20, he describes human transience by the images of a shadow, a quick messenger, a ship, a flying bird, and an arrow (Wis 5:9–12).

If tracelessness is the point of the analogies, the “way of a man with a maid” must mean that a man can have sex with an unmarried girl and leave no one the wiser (assuming that she does not become pregnant). This observation cannot be a celebration of sexuality, for tracelessness is irrelevant to conjugal sex. Anyway, marital intercourse would be expressed as *derek ’iš b’išto*, “the way of a man with his wife.”

What, then, would be the purpose of observing that sex does not leave tracks?

Saʿadia believes that it is to condemn fornication. However, the other “ways” do not have bad effects and an admonitory tone is absent. If the point is that having sex does not leave evidence of the deed, the author of the numerical epigram—without v 20—is actually chuckling in a conniving tone at the man who seduces a girl and gets off the hook. In this case, the passage was originally a ribald ditty. Though the first three images seem rather lofty for that purpose, the incongruity of the beautiful and the bawdy could be meant as humorous. The original poem was not wisdom until the author-editor appropriated it for a moralistic purpose by adding v 20. As for what he did with it, see below on v 20.

30:19d. *way of a man*: This is usually understood as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Saʿadia, Riyqam, and most); see interpretation 5 (above). It is not an allusion to courtship and love, which do leave a “trace”—marriage.

maid [ʿalmah]: An ʿalmah is a young woman, married or not. However, the epigram speaks of an unmarried one. The terms *geber* (“man”) and ʿalmah (“maid”) are not equivalent in status. A *geber* is a mature, robust man, whereas ʿalmah is closer to “girl.” The scope of ʿalmah includes young women but also younger girls, such as Moses’s unmarried sister (Exod 2:8). In Cant 6:8, the “countless” ʿalamot are on a rank lower than the royal concubines and queens. (Concubinage was a contracted, legal status.) The ʿalamot in Cant 6:8 are the young servant girls living in the palace. Though an ʿalmah could be of a higher status than theirs, the term has a tone of condescension when used of women beyond adolescence. The translation, “the way of a man with a maid” is suggestive of this asymmetry.

with a maid [*b^ealmah*]: The preposition *b^e*- is ambiguous. It is usually the equivalent of English “in” or “into” in a spatial sense, or “by,” “with” in an instrumental sense. In v 19ac, the preposition means “in.” If it means “in” or “into” in v 19d (hence, “the way of a man in [or “into”!] a maid”), then “in a maid” is a transparent allusion to sexual intercourse, one that is ribald, if not lewd, in its physiological specificity. Then, in addition to tracelessness, the shared quality of the “ways” would be smoothness and slipperiness. Somewhat more delicately, this preposition can indicate accompaniment and be translated “with,” as in Gen 32:11; Num 20:20; Josh 22:8; and Judg 11:34. This use of *b^e*- usually occurs with verbs of movement. It would imply that the man is doing something accompanied by the girl. In either case, the phrasing does not describe the activity from the standpoint of mutuality, which would call for the preposition ʿim “with.”

Despite the possible ambiguity, it is very likely that the man’s deed in Prov 30:19d is sex with a girl, a maidservant perhaps, rather than courtship. This act would not be adultery (which means violating another man’s marriage), but it would be licentious and “wondrous” only facetiously, perhaps in the sense of “surprising.” (*Nipla’ot* refers to amazingly *bad* deeds in Dan 8:24 and 11:36.) Non-adulterous licentiousness behavior is little discussed in Wisdom Literature. Ben Sira says, “Give not yourself to a woman to have her trample on your dignity” (9:2; see Skehan and Di Lella, p. 218). Ben Sira warns against adultery but also against intercourse with prostitutes, virgins, and singers (9:1–9), who are examples of unmarried women with whom a man might have sex. The rabbis forbade this as *z^enut* “fornication.” Rabban Gamaliel warned that amassing slave-girls increases

zimmah “lewdness”; see the Comment on Prov 29:3. Such licentiousness is not considered nearly as heinous as adultery. Comparable behavior by or with a married woman would be adultery.

30:20. *the way of an adulterous woman:* This verse stands outside the series of four ways and departs from its pattern of syntax (Haran 1972: 261–62). The verse is certainly an addition to the original epigram and is thus the first interpretation of v 19.

The author of v 20 must understand the fourth “way” to be fornication because he *compares* to it the “way” of the adulteress. Unlike the “way” in v 19, the “way” in v 20 is not the specific act of intercourse but the entirety of the adulteress’s behavior: having sex, then denying her deed. Her behavior is made all the worse by her smugness and impudence. Like the earlier ways, this one leaves no visible traces. She enjoys the sex, thinking that she can wipe away her sin as if brushing crumbs off her face. The author does not tell us that she cannot escape the consequences, but lets the piggishness of the behavior speak for itself.

eats: Eating and drinking are allusions to sexual pleasures in Cant 5:1 and Prov 5:19. Further, as Clifford notes, “mouth” is sometimes a euphemism for vagina in rabbinic usage (*b. Sanh.* 100a; *b. Menah.* 98a; *b. Ketub.* 65.13–23). One cannot be certain about hidden meanings in matters of sexual allusion, but given the unmistakable meaning of “eats” in v 20, the phrase “wipes her mouth” at least allows one to suspect that something vulgar is intended. This would be a deliberately crude jibe aimed at the adulteress. The tone recalls Ezekiel’s rhetorical obscenity in Ezek 16:25; 23:8, 20, and Ben Sira’s use of “quiver” as a deliberately crude term for vagina (Sir 26:12).

As a metaphor, the adulteress’s wiping crumbs off her face exposes the way she trivializes her offense and blithely denies wrongdoing. This calls to mind the hypocrisy of the man who robs his parents and says, “No wrong was done” (Prov 28:24).

Epigram iv. Four Things That Shake the Earth

- 30:21** Under three things the earth quakes,
 under four it cannot stand:
22 under a slave, when he becomes king,
 and a scoundrel, when he has his fill of bread;
23 under a hateful woman, when she gains mastery,^a
 and a maidservant, when she disinherits her mistress.

^a *tib‘āl* (MT *tibbā‘ēl*).

Four things, the author believes, violate the right order so severely that the earth itself shudders in revulsion or dismay. The violation might be very localized—as in the cases of the scoundrel, the hateful woman, and the maidservant—but the offense is actually to the world order as a whole, and the earth itself reacts. Perhaps we are to understand this reaction as simply “emotional,” a vivid way of saying that the offense is shocking, but perhaps we are to think in terms of an earthshaking