Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Proverbs, The Proverbs as a Literary Genre
Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Hildebrandt, Proverbs, The Proverbs as a Literary Genre, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Ted Hildebrandt explores the proverb as a literary genre, examining its definition, historical context, and usage. He discusses various classifications of proverbs, including adages, aphorisms, and maxims, analyzing their structure and function within different cultural and historical settings. Hildebrandt emphasizes the importance of understanding the genre to interpret proverbs correctly, highlighting their flexibility and adaptability across time and cultures. He also addresses the different levels of authority associated with proverbs, differentiating between universal mandates and conditional warnings. Finally, the lecture examines the use of literary devices such as parallelism and acrostics in biblical proverbs.

2. 25 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Hildebrandt, The Proverbs as a Literary Genre – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Psalms & Wisdom → Proverbs).

Hildebrandt_Prov_Genre.mp3

3. Briefing Document: Hildebrandt, Proverbs, The Proverbs as a Literary Genre

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided text, "Hildebrandt_EN_Proverbial_Genre.pdf":

Briefing Document: Understanding Proverbs as a Literary Genre

Introduction

This document summarizes a lecture by Dr. Ted Hildebrandt on the literary genre of the proverb, drawing primarily from biblical examples but extending to other cultures. The lecture emphasizes the importance of understanding genre in interpreting texts and how that understanding impacts our engagement with truth. Hildebrandt argues that the proverb is a complex literary form, difficult to define rigidly, and whose meaning is profoundly influenced by context, culture, usage, and its inherent structure.

Key Themes and Concepts

1. **The Importance of Genre:**

- **Genre and Truth:** Hildebrandt emphasizes that genre shapes how we understand truth. Different genres require different hermeneutics (interpretations). As Hildebrandt states, "A genre impacts how truth is engaged." He provides a variety of examples such as recipes, sci-fi novels, murder mysteries, biographies, encyclopedias and dictionaries to illustrate the point. Our expectations and interpretations are shaped by the type of literature we encounter.

- **Literal vs. Figurative:** A failure to understand genre can lead to misinterpretations. He uses examples like fables (Jotham's fable), parables (the 10 bridesmaids), apocalyptic literature (Revelation), and prophetic sign-events (Hosea marrying a prostitute) from the Bible to illustrate this point. Understanding that these are not meant to be taken in a literal fashion is crucial.

- **Proverbs as a Genre:** Hildebrandt then poses the question: "What is a proverb?" He points out the challenges of defining proverbs due to their inherent fluidity and overlap with other forms of short sayings.

1. **Defining the Proverb:**

- **Difficulty in Definition:** Hildebrandt notes that defining the proverb is incredibly difficult and that no definitive definition has been universally accepted. He emphasizes the need for flexibility in categorizing and defining these forms. He

says, "the proverb is pretty, it's hard to lock down. And so, you kind of need to loosen up your categories."

- **Key Elements**: Various forms of short sayings related to proverbs, like the following, are discussed and defined:

- **Adage:** "A traditional wise saying used generally accepted and transmitted in oral performance." Example: "Look before you leap."

- **Admonition:** "A warning against improper behavior, usually given in a negative imperative form." Example: "Don't forget my words."

- **Aphorism:** "A concise terse statement of insight." Example: "Barking dogs don't bite."

- **Apothem:** "A short witty saying, an observation, or a maxim."

- **Maxim:** "A kind of a general truth statement, a short general truth statement, giving you a kind of a fundamental principle in a short kind of thing." Example: "Haste makes waste."

- **Epigram:** "A brief poem making a single point often with a satirical twist."

- **Precept:** "A rule of behavior...often formulated as advice or an evaluation of a situation."

- **Paremiology:** The study of proverbs. Hildebrandt references Wolfgang Mieder, a leading scholar in the field. This highlights the international and cross-cultural nature of proverbs.

1. **The Nature and Function of Proverbs:**

- **Decontextualization and Recontextualization:** Hildebrandt addresses how proverbs change when they are removed from their original context and placed into collections, then are used again in different contexts. He explores how a single proverb is changed when it's taken out of its original context and placed into a collection and how meaning changes when a proverb is recontextualized.

- **The Virtual Nature of Proverbs:** Honik is quoted as saying that proverbs are "ready to function in a host of new situations." Hildebrandt uses the concept of the "virtual" to explain how proverbs in a collection exist in potential, ready to be applied to countless situations. He calls it "poly-situational adaptability." The potential of the proverb is "realized when it's reattached, recontextualized."

- **Memorable and Quotable:** Proverbs are designed to be easily remembered and repeated, often through sound devices like rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. Hildebrandt gives the example, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

- **Playfulness:** Hildebrandt acknowledges that proverbs can be playful and are not confined to serious applications. He provides his own example of humorously twisting, "haste makes waste" to "taste makes waist."

- **The Importance of Usage:** The context of the person using the proverb and who it is spoken to greatly impact the effect of the proverb. Hildebrandt stresses the importance of the character of the person using the proverb, stating, "a lame person's leg that hangs limp is a proverb in the mouth of a fool."

- **Multifaceted Application:** Hildebrandt uses the example, "a foolish son is a grief to his mother," and notes that it can mean different things in different situations. For example, it may mean comfort if used by a parent to parent, a warning if from sibling to sibling, and guidance from parent to child.

- **Topic and Comment Structure:** Many proverbs are structured with a topic and a comment, which is often binary (+/- or -/+ or -/-).

1. **The Cultural Dimension:**

- **Cultural Variability:** Hildebrandt uses the example of "a rolling stone gathers no moss" to demonstrate how the same proverb can have opposite meanings in different cultures (Scotland vs. England). He says, "culture impacts how you interpret a proverb." He emphasizes that we must not only engage in word studies but also in cultural studies.

- **Historical and Cultural Universality:** Hildebrandt points out the human urge to "classify, generalize, and codify experience" that gives rise to proverbs across different cultures. He gives many examples of how proverbs show up in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Chinese and African traditions.

1. **Proverbs and Authority:**

- **Not Absolutes:** Hildebrandt emphasizes that proverbs are *not* meant to be absolute, dogmatized, universal propositional truths. He says, "Proverbs are not meant to be dogmatized or absolutized into universal propositional truth." He makes the point that Proverbs are complex and have to be understood in context.

- **Levels of Authority:** Hildebrandt identifies five categories of authority within proverbs:

- **Universal Mandate:** Always true; to be done always. Example: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart."

- **Ideal Confirming Exhortation:** Encourages a path to success. Example: "The hand of the diligent will rule."

- **Simple Non-Moral Observation:** A statement of how things are. Example: "The heart knows its own bitterness."

- **Ideal Disconfirming Warning:** A warning against a harmful path. Example: "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets."

- **Absolute Prohibition:** Always wrong; to be avoided always. Example: "There are six things the Lord hates...a lying tongue."

- **The proverb as a means of emphasis:** He gives the example of Proverbs 1:17, "How useless to spread the net in full view of all the birds" to demonstrate this. The proverbial father uses this to emphasize that the son needs to learn from the wisdom that is being shared, and be able to see a "net" when it is being laid out for him.

1. **Proverbial Structure and Techniques:**

- **Repetition and Sound Patterns:** Hildebrandt discusses the use of repetition, assonance, consonance, alliteration, paronomasia, and rhyme to make proverbs more memorable.

- **Parallelism:** He discusses synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic parallelism in Hebrew poetry. He describes it in this way, "how the lines relate."

- **Verb Gapping:** A common feature where the verb in the second line is omitted, and to be supplied by the interpreter, creating a sense of cohesion.

- **Syntactic Parallelism:** Discusses the structure of subject, verb, and object and how those are often reversed. The structure may be SVO, SVO or SVO, OVS.

- **Figures of Speech:** Hildebrandt explores the use of metonymy (e.g., "the crown" for "king"), similes ("pierce like a sword"), metaphors ("The name of the Lord is a strong tower"), hyperbole, and synecdoche.

- **Personification:** The personification of wisdom, especially in Proverbs 1-9 (Madam Wisdom).

- **Themes and Vocabulary:** Common themes like wisdom, foolishness, the way, and key vocabulary like "fool," "discern," "knowledge" and others help to identify the wisdom context.

1. **Proverbial Themes and Deep Structure:**

- **Character-Consequence:** Hildebrandt emphasizes that *character-consequence* is a bigger underlying structure than act-consequence in Proverbs. He states that there are 70 instances of "character-act" and 16 instances of "character-evaluation" in Proverbs 10-15. He compares that to "act-consequence" where there are only 63 instances.

- **Act-Consequence:** He shows that "whoever heeds instruction, act, is on the path to life, consequence," as an example.

1. **Context of Proverb Creation and Use:**

- **Schools:** He points out that the "father" figure in Proverbs is often the teacher as well, suggesting a potential school environment in which the proverbs were created.

- **Family and Clan:** Proverbs arise from family or clan settings and the frequent use of "father," "mother," and "son" in the text.

- **Court and Scribe:** The role of courtiers, scribes, and kings, especially King Solomon, in the creation and preservation of proverbs.

- **Sages:** The "Proverbs of the Sages" are mentioned.

- **The Father-Son Lectures:** In Proverbs 1-9, Hildebrandt analyzes ten father-son lectures, each with an "call to hear," exhortation, a motivation, and a lesson proper, and concluding with a proverb.

- **Admonitions:** Admonitions can either be positive mandates or negative prohibitions and use an imperative form.

- **Numerical Sayings:** Numerical sayings using the "three things...and for four" pattern (Proverbs 30 and Amos).

- **Better-Than Sayings:** Proverbs with a "better than" structure and the twist that "there are no good Proverbs. There's better than Proverbs."

- **Comparative Sayings:** Proverbs using "like" or "as" to make analogical comparisons.

- **Abomination Sayings:** Proverbs that state an abomination to the Lord or that the Lord detests something.

- **Beatitudes:** Proverbs that say, "Blessed is the one who always fears the Lord."

- **Yahweh Sayings:** Sayings that invoke the name of Yahweh and the emphasis on "fear of the Lord."

- **Contrary Proverbs:** Proverbs that are paradoxical or seem to contradict each other, reflecting the complexities of life (e.g. "absent makes the heart grow fonder" vs. "out of sight out of mind").

- **Proverb Pairs:** Two Proverbs that are paired together in some way and intended to interact with each other. In Proverbs 10-29, 21% are paired.

- **Acrostics:** Proverbs in acrostic form, such as Proverbs 31, where each line begins with the next letter of the alphabet (similar to Psalm 119). This gives completeness, perfection and exhaustiveness to the text.

- **Clusters or Strings:** Proverbs that appear in groupings where there is an inclusio (the beginning and end of the group have similar phrases).

Conclusion

Dr. Hildebrandt concludes his lecture by emphasizing that Proverbs deny helplessness and encourage wise choices. He stresses the ongoing power and influence of proverbs through time and across cultures. He notes that "the wit of one and the wisdom of many" is an accurate descriptor of Proverbs. Ultimately, Hildebrandt points back to the core wisdom principle, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning or first principle of wisdom."

Key Takeaways

- Genre is crucial for interpreting truth.

- Proverbs are a complex literary genre, difficult to define rigidly, marked by adaptability, cultural context and sound patterning.

- Meaning is shaped by context, usage, and structure.

- Proverbs are not meant to be absolute, universal truths, but have layers of authority.

- Character-consequence is the underlying structure of the book of Proverbs.

- Proverbs are dynamic and function on many levels.

This briefing document should serve as a comprehensive overview of the key ideas and insights presented in Dr. Hildebrandt's lecture on proverbs.

4. Study Guide: Hildebrandt, Proverbs, The Proverbs as a Literary Genre

A Deep Dive into Proverbs: A Study Guide

Short Answer Quiz

1. How does understanding genre affect how we interpret a text, and what is this process called? Understanding genre shapes our expectations and influences how we make connections and interpret the text. This process is called hermeneutics.

2. Why is it important to recognize the literary genre of biblical texts, such as fables or parables? If you don't recognize a fable or parable, you might take the story literally, missing the point the author intended to communicate, such as the fable of the talking trees in Judges or the parable of the ten bridesmaids.

3. What are some of the challenges in defining a proverb, and what should one do when faced with these challenges? Proverbs are difficult to define precisely due to their fluid nature and overlap with other forms. When defining proverbs, one should loosen categories and accept ambiguity.

4. How does the meaning of a single proverb change when it is decontextualized and placed in a collection? When taken out of context, the proverb loses its original setting, its specific historical or situational meaning, and it now has the potential for broader application and interpretation.

5. Explain the concept of the "virtual" nature of a proverb within a collection and how it becomes realized. In a collection, the proverb has a virtual, dormant potential, like unpopped popcorn. It becomes realized when recontextualized, applied to a new situation, and reattached to a particular conversation or context.

6. What role do sound and structure (such as repetition, rhyme, and parallelism) play in the function of a proverb? These literary devices enhance a proverb's memorability and quotability. They make it easily passed on and readily applied to new situations.

7. How does the character of the person who uses a proverb affect its impact, and why is this significant? The character of the person using the proverb influences how it is received and understood. A fool using a wise proverb might distort its meaning and cause damage, highlighting that wisdom is not simply having memorized words.

8. How do cultural contexts impact the interpretation of proverbs, as seen with the example of the proverb about the rolling stone? Cultural contexts greatly affect proverb interpretation. For example, the proverb of a rolling stone gathering no moss has opposing meanings in Scottish and English cultures.

9. What are the five levels of proverbial authority outlined in the source, and give an example of one? The five levels are: universal mandate, ideal-confirming exhortation, simple non-moral observation, ideal-disconfirming warning, and absolute prohibition. An example of a universal mandate is "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," (Prov. 3:5).

10. Describe the difference between synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic parallelism in Hebrew poetry? Synonymous parallelism has two lines going in the same direction; antithetic parallelism has lines going in opposing directions; and synthetic parallelism is where lines do not parallel, but complete a single thought.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the role of context in understanding the meaning of proverbs, using specific examples from the provided source material. Consider how decontextualization, recontextualization, and cultural setting shape interpretation.

2. Discuss the relationship between character and the effective use of proverbs, according to the lecture, explaining why a proverb, even if true, is not inherently wise if used by a fool.

3. Explore the concept of "authority" as it relates to proverbs. How does the source material suggest that not all proverbs carry the same weight of authority, and what are some of the different levels or types of authority it describes?

4. Evaluate how various literary devices (e.g., sound patterning, parallelism, figures of speech) contribute to the effectiveness of proverbs as a form of communication.

5. How does Hildebrandt suggest that the book of Proverbs denies helplessness and encourages human development, and how does this relate to the themes of individual choice, community, and the pursuit of wisdom as it is found in the text?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Adage:** A traditional, wise saying that is generally accepted and transmitted orally.

- **Admonition:** A warning against improper behavior, often given as a negative imperative, though can be a positive mandate.

- **Aphorism:** A concise, terse statement of insight.

- **Apothem:** A short, witty saying, observation, or maxim.

- **Beatitude (Macarism):** A blessing; a statement of happiness or blessedness often beginning with "Blessed is."

- **Chiasm:** A literary device where parallel lines are structured in an ABBA pattern, creating an X-like shape.

- **Exegesis:** A critical interpretation of a text, focusing on understanding its meaning within its original context.

- **Epigram:** A brief poem that makes a single point, often with a satirical twist.

- **Hermeneutics:** The theory and methodology of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts.

- **Hyperbole:** An overstatement used for emphasis, not meant to be taken literally.

- **Inclusio:** A literary technique where a word or phrase appears at the beginning and end of a text section to create a frame.

- **Mashal:** A Hebrew term for a proverb, but also used for other literary forms, including bywords, taunts, aphorisms, or allegories.

- **Maxim:** A short, general truth statement that provides a fundamental principle.

- **Metaphor:** A comparison between two dissimilar realms without using "like" or "as."

- **Metonymy:** A figure of speech where a word or phrase is substituted for another that is closely associated with it.

- **Paremiology:** The study of proverbs.

- **Paronomasia:** A rhetorical device that uses words that sound alike but have different meanings.

- **Personification:** A figure of speech where an inanimate object or idea is given human characteristics.

- **Precept:** A rule of behavior often formulated as advice.

- **Polysemous:** Having multiple meanings.

- **Simile:** A comparison between two dissimilar realms using "like" or "as."

- **Sitz im Leben:** German phrase meaning "setting in life." It is used to describe the real-life setting or context in which a text originated.

- **Synecdoche:** A figure of speech where a part is used to represent the whole, or vice versa.

- **Synonymous Parallelism:** A type of parallelism in Hebrew poetry where two lines express similar ideas or thoughts.

- **Antithetic Parallelism:** A type of parallelism in Hebrew poetry where two lines express contrasting ideas or thoughts.

- **Synthetic Parallelism:** A type of parallelism in Hebrew poetry where two lines are neither synonymous nor antithetical, but complete a single thought.

- **Verb Gapping:** A literary device in poetry where a verb is left out of a line with the assumption that the reader will supply it from the first line.

5. FAQs on Hildebrandt, Proverbs, The Proverbs as a Literary Genre, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions About Proverbs as a Literary Genre

- **What is the significance of genre when interpreting literature, and how does it apply to understanding proverbs?**

- Genre is crucial because it shapes how we approach and interpret truth. Different genres, like recipes, sci-fi novels, biographies, or encyclopedias, each have unique conventions and expectations. Understanding the genre is a key component to proper hermeneutics (interpretation). For example, recognizing a biblical text as a fable (like Jotham's fable) or a parable (like the ten bridesmaids) allows for a figurative, rather than a literal, interpretation, focusing on the intended lesson rather than historical fact. When applied to proverbs, recognizing their nature as a genre allows us to understand how they operate as generalized truths that are meant to be recontextualized and applied to various situations, not always as direct promises or universal rules.

- **How do proverbs function differently when they are removed from their original context and placed within a collection?**

- When a proverb is taken out of its original setting—a specific situation or story—and placed into a collection, it becomes decontextualized. In this decontextualized or "virtual" state, the proverb is no longer tied to its original speaker or circumstances. Instead, it becomes a generalized statement ready to be recontextualized and applied to many new scenarios. This detachment makes proverbs adaptable to many different situations but also requires the reader to supply the meaning within their own context. This recontextualization is critical to how proverbs function.

- **What are some of the various literary forms or "micro-genres" found within the broader genre of proverbs?**

- Within the genre of proverbs, there are various sub-forms such as:

- **Adages:** Traditional wise sayings generally accepted and transmitted orally (e.g., "Look before you leap").

- **Aphorisms:** Concise, terse statements of insight (e.g., "Barking dogs don't bite.").

- **Admonitions:** Warnings against improper behavior, often in negative imperative form (e.g., "Don't forget my words")

- **Maxims:** Short general truth statements or fundamental principles (e.g., "Haste makes waste.").

- **Epigrams:** Brief poems making a single point, often with a satirical twist.

- **Precepts:** Rules of behavior often formulated as advice.

- **Better-Than Proverbs:** Comparisons of what is preferable in various circumstances.

- **Numerical Sayings:** Sayings structured around a set of numbers, often "X and X+1"

- **Comparative Sayings:** Sayings using "like" or "as" to draw comparisons between different areas of life.

- **Abomination Sayings:** Statements declaring something is detestable to the Lord

- **Beatitudes or Macarisms:** Statements of blessings or happiness often beginning with the word blessed

- **Yahweh sayings:** Proverbs that explicitly mention the name of God

- **How does culture influence the interpretation and understanding of proverbs, and why is exegesis alone insufficient?**

- Culture profoundly impacts the interpretation of proverbs. A proverb's meaning can shift dramatically depending on the cultural values and context in which it is understood. For example, "a rolling stone gathers no moss" has opposite meanings in Scottish (where moss is bad) and English (where moss is good) cultures. Therefore, exegesis (word studies) alone is not enough. One must also consider the cultural context to properly interpret a proverb's meaning. This recognition highlights the importance of cultural awareness when reading proverbs that originate from other cultures than one's own.

- **What is the "polysemantic" nature of proverbs, and how does it affect their use and meaning?**

Proverbs are inherently polysemantic, meaning they possess multiple layers of meaning and can function differently depending on the context and who is using them. The meaning of a proverb is not fixed; rather, it is fluid and can vary. This depends on the speaker, the listener, and the circumstances of the situation. For example, the proverb "a foolish son is a grief to his mother" can provide comfort when spoken between parents, serve as a warning when spoken between siblings, or act as guidance when spoken from parent to child. This polysemantic characteristic allows proverbs to be used for many purposes, such as consolation, encouragement, rebuke, warning, or humor.

- **How do proverbs utilize literary devices like parallelism and figures of speech to enhance their impact and memorability?**

- Proverbs frequently employ literary devices to increase their memorability and impact.

- **Parallelism**, including synonymous (two lines expressing similar ideas), antithetic (two lines expressing contrasting ideas), and synthetic (two lines building or developing on an idea) parallelism are very common and often work with verb gapping.

- **Sound devices** such as alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

- **Figures of speech** include:

- **Metaphor** direct comparisons without using "like" or "as."

- **Simile** comparisons using "like" or "as."

- **Metonymy** substitution of one word for another that it is closely related to (e.g. crown for the king).

- **Synecdoche** a type of metonymy where part represents the whole, or vice-versa.

- **Personification** Giving human qualities to non-human entities.

- **Hyperbole** Exaggeration for emphasis.

These techniques make proverbs memorable, quotable, and effective in conveying wisdom. They also add richness and depth, prompting listeners to reflect more deeply on the truths presented.

- **What are the major themes and underlying structures often found in proverbs, and what do these suggest about their purpose?**

- Proverbs frequently explore themes related to wisdom, folly, the consequences of actions, and the importance of character. There is an emphasis on character-consequence. This idea highlights that one's character often leads to specific outcomes in life, and the book of Proverbs seems more concerned about character than just the isolated results of actions. Some other key themes include relationships, hard work, wealth, poverty, and the fear of the Lord. These underlying structures and themes indicate that the purpose of proverbs is not just to provide simple guidelines for life but to shape one's character, promoting a life of integrity, wisdom, and understanding.

- **What is the purpose of proverbs and how should they be viewed in light of their limitations?**

- Proverbs are not intended to be dogmatized or absolutized into universal propositional truths. They should not be treated as promises or guarantees. Instead, they are adaptable wisdom for handling the complexities of life. Proverbs are meant to encourage human development through responsible choices. They guide people away from egocentrism toward a communal perspective guided by wisdom. The authority of proverbs is also not uniform. Some serve as universal mandates (always to do these) while others are merely observations, while still others are warnings or absolute prohibitions. The flexibility and broad applications of proverbs highlight the idea that they are meant to be applied thoughtfully and creatively within the constraints of complex real life situations.