

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Proverbs, Proverbs 26:4-5 – To Answer or Not to Answer a Fool Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Hildebrandt, Proverbs, Proverbs 26:4-5 – To Answer or Not to Answer a Fool, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Ted Hildebrandt examines proverb pairs in Proverbs 10-29, arguing against the common view that they are haphazardly arranged. He proposes that the editors intentionally paired proverbs to create a deeper meaning not evident in individual verses. The lecture focuses on the seemingly contradictory Proverbs 26:4-5 ("Answer not a fool...Answer a fool..."), using this example to illustrate his point about the importance of considering editorial intent and contextual relationships within the book. Hildebrandt explores various interpretative approaches to these paradoxical proverbs, drawing on scholarship in biblical studies and paremiography (the study of proverbs). He also uses examples from other cultures and languages to show that contradictory proverbs are a common literary device.

2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Hildebrandt, Proverbs, Proverbs 26:4-5 – To Answer or Not to Answer a Fool – 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_P
rov26_4_5.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Hildebrandt, Proverbs, Proverbs 26:4-5 – To Answer or Not to Answer a Fool

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided source, "Hildebrandt_EN_Proverb_Pairs01_Prov_26_4_5.pdf":

Briefing Document: Understanding Proverbs Through Pairs and Contradictions

Introduction:

This document summarizes the key concepts presented by Dr. Ted Hildebrandt in his lecture on proverb pairs, focusing on the apparent contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5 ("Answer not a fool according to his folly... Answer a fool according to his folly..."). The lecture explores the nature of proverbs as a literary genre, their cultural context, and how to interpret seemingly contradictory sayings.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Context is King:

- Hildebrandt emphasizes that understanding the meaning of a word or text depends heavily on its context. He uses the example of the word "trunk" having different meanings (tree trunk, car trunk, etc.).
- This applies to literary genres as well. Understanding that a text is a historical narrative, a prophetic utterance, or a proverb shapes how we interpret it.
- **Quote:** "What does the word trunk mean? Well, context determines meaning."
- **Quote:** "Genres, literary genres, or types of literature also affect how you interpret things."

1. The Nature of Proverbs:

- Proverbs are an international phenomenon, found in almost every language.
- The form of a proverb is connected to its meaning. The literary form shapes how things are communicated.
- Proverbs are not promises, but they do carry a certain authority.
- **Quote:** "Form and meaning are connected... The literary form is going to shape what types of things are communicated and how they're communicated."

- **Quote:** "A proverb is not a promise. It's a particular... It does have a particular aspect of authority though."

1. **Proverb Pairs and Literary Structure:**

- Hildebrandt argues against the view that Proverbs are a random collection of sayings. He emphasizes the concept of "proverb pairs" - two proverbs placed adjacently, linked by phonetics, semantics, catchwords, syntax, rhetorical devices, situation, or theme, forming a higher unit of meaning.
- He notes that around 21% of proverbs in chapters 10-29 are paired in this way.
- There are also examples of triads (three proverbs together), split pairs, pairs with one detached, and clusters of proverbs.
- The arrangement of proverbs is not random but intentional by the editors.
- He notes various structural elements in proverbs: acrostics, chiasms, inclusios (bookends), hinges, and phonology.

1. **Proverbs 26:1-12 as the "Book of Fools":**

- Hildebrandt notes that many scholars see chapter 26:1-12 as focused on the topic of "the fool."
- He highlights a chiasmic structure within these verses, with the central message: "Honor is not fitting for a fool."
- The chapter explores how to deal with a fool and what is appropriate for a fool.
- Repetitions in this section (e.g., giving honor to a fool, a proverb in the mouth of a fool) emphasize its coherence.

1. **The Contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5:**

- The core of the lecture focuses on the contradictory nature of Proverbs 26:4-5:
- Verse 4: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him."
- Verse 5: "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."
- Hildebrandt argues that these verses are intentionally placed together, forming a proverb pair, not a random juxtaposition. They are not a triad with verse 3.
- This apparent contradiction forces the reader to engage with the complexities of wisdom.

- The verses are linked by key phrases ("answer a fool," "according to his folly," "lest"), and the concept of consequence.

1. **Contradictory Proverbs: A Universal Phenomenon:**

- Hildebrandt demonstrates that contradictory proverbs are not unique to the Bible but are found in many cultures and languages (e.g., Sumerian proverbs, Yoruba proverbs).
- He explores "twisted proverbs" in English to show how existing proverbs can be altered or contradicted.
- **Quote:** "This phenomena of two proverbs kind of clashing with one another is found all over the world in all different periods."
- The concept of contradictory proverbs is a feature of the genre itself.

1. **Interpreting Contradictory Proverbs:**

- The purpose of these contradictions is "a subtle and profound didactic strategy to awaken critical faculties in the readers." They are not imperfections.
- Hildebrandt discusses different ways people try to resolve such conflicts:
- **Separate Frames of Reference:** Different situations call for different actions.
- **Averaging:** Combining two opposite proverbs to get a middle ground.
- **Modifying:** Redefining terms to reconcile apparent contradictions.
- **Vicious Cycles:** Creating an emphasized function that creates a loop.
- Hildebrandt rejects the approach of the Septuagint, which seeks to "smooth out" contradictions.
- **Quote:** "They [contradictions] are kind of like eddies... So which way is the water flowing? ... what Hatton is pointing out here is that critical faculties, take account of the major flow of the water. Yes, but they also see the eddies that ripple up back the other way."

1. **Interpretations of Proverbs 26:4-5**

- Hildebrandt examines interpretations by rabbis, who separated spheres of reference, either to Torah versus mundane affairs, or vice versa.
- He notes that these are all arbitrary and not derived from the text.

- He examines other takes, that emphasize either the fourth or fifth verse.
- Hildebrandt's preferred view emphasizes the pronouns. He suggests the first verse focuses on potential harm to *yourself* and the second on the potential harm to the *fool*. The first verse focuses on the speaker's potential damage, while the second verse focuses on the need to challenge the fool's false wisdom.
- Other interpretations considered include: that a response is necessary if a fool continues to pester you and a sense of partial truth to each proverb.
- He notes that the Septuagint re-interprets the word "according to" to be "as his folly deserves." Other attempts at modifying words are examined.
- He concludes that such proverb dueling is part of the genre.

1. **Wisdom as Discernment:**

- Hildebrandt concludes that the key to interpreting proverbs, especially paired ones, is wisdom and discernment, which is the hermeneutic.
- There is not a single formula to use.
- The point of the paired proverbs is to provoke reflection, imagination, and insight.
- **Quote:** "Wisdom does not always mean doing the same thing, even superficially, in superficially similar circumstances...The juxtaposition of these admonitions drives one to reflect on the limits of human wisdom."

Conclusion:

Dr. Hildebrandt's lecture argues for a careful, nuanced approach to interpreting Proverbs, particularly when confronted with apparent contradictions. He emphasizes that the genre of proverbs is characterized by such tensions and that these are designed to provoke critical reflection and a deeper understanding of wisdom. Proverbs are not designed to be taken as simple, universal truths, but rather as situation-specific guidance that requires discernment. The placement of Proverbs 26:4-5 as a pair is deliberate, forcing the reader to grapple with the complexities of responding to foolishness.

This briefing document captures the main points of Dr. Hildebrandt's lecture. It is recommended that one consult the original source for a full understanding of his argument and supporting evidence.

4. Study Guide: Hildebrandt, Proverbs, Proverbs 26:4-5 – To Answer or Not to Answer a Fool

Proverbs Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. How does context influence the meaning of a word, and what example does the lecture use to demonstrate this concept?
2. According to the lecture, how does the genre of a text affect its interpretation, and can you provide two examples from the Bible that support this claim?
3. What is the significance of the "Elohistic Psalter" within the Book of Psalms, and how does it relate to the use of different names for God?
4. How do proverbs function differently than historical narratives in the Bible, and what unique characteristics does the lecture highlight about the structure of Proverbs?
5. What is the relationship between proverbs and stories, according to the lecture, and can you provide an example of a story turning into a proverb from the source material?
6. Why is it difficult to define a proverb, and what is the lecturer's approach to understanding proverbs despite this difficulty?
7. Why is it important to understand that a proverb is not a promise, and what is the nature of the authority of a proverb according to the lecture?
8. What is a proverb pair, and what elements can connect two proverbs to form a pair?
9. How does the structure of Proverbs 26:1-12 demonstrate a deliberate organization of its content, according to the lecture?
10. According to the lecture, what is the core question at the heart of Proverbs 26:1-12, and how does it relate to the topic of fools?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Context drastically alters the meaning of a word. The lecture uses "trunk" as an example, which can refer to a tree trunk, car trunk, elephant trunk, or various other things, depending on the context.
2. The genre of a text shapes our expectations for interpretation. Historical narratives, like stories about Abraham, require a different approach than prophetic utterances or the laments in the Psalms.
3. The "Elohistic Psalter" (Psalms 42-83) uses the name Elohim for God, while surrounding sections use Yahweh, revealing that different editorial sections with distinct theologies are at play.
4. Proverbs are concise, sentential statements, often without clear narrative connections, unlike historical narratives that focus on plots and characters; proverbs are not structured as a cohesive story.
5. A proverb can be a condensed story or an encapsulation of a broader situation. The lecture cites the story of Saul among the prophets, which became a proverb, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"
6. Defining a proverb is challenging due to its diverse nature and cultural variations. The lecturer aims to emphasize that proverbs are distinct from other genres.
7. Proverbs don't function as universal promises but offer situational wisdom with authority specific to a context. The authority of a proverb comes from its cultural acceptance and perceived truth.
8. A proverb pair consists of two adjacent proverbs linked through elements such as phonetics, semantics, catchwords, syntax, rhetorical devices, situation, or theme.
9. Proverbs 26:1-12 employs chiasms and repetitions to emphasize the theme of fools and their inappropriate use of honor and wisdom. The passage is deliberately structured around the topic of the fool.
10. The core question in Proverbs 26:1-12 is: what is fitting for a fool? This question is explored through examples of how not to honor or utilize a fool.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Develop a detailed essay on each of the following topics.

1. Discuss the importance of genre when interpreting biblical texts, using examples from different genres within the Old Testament. Analyze how the expected characteristics of each genre influence our understanding of their meaning and authority.
2. Analyze the concept of "proverb pairs" as introduced in the lecture. How do these pairs function to create deeper meaning beyond the individual proverbs? In your argument, incorporate and discuss specific examples of proverb pairs given in the lecture.
3. Explain the challenges inherent in interpreting seemingly contradictory proverbs, such as Proverbs 26:4-5. What different strategies does the lecturer identify for resolving these contradictions, and what are the strengths and limitations of each strategy?
4. Examine the role of cultural context in understanding proverbs. How do the cultural origins and uses of proverbs from different cultures inform our interpretation of biblical proverbs? In your answer, include discussion of specific examples of proverbs from different cultures as discussed in the lecture.
5. Analyze the literary techniques and devices used in the Book of Proverbs as identified in the lecture, such as chiasm, inclusio, and repetition. How do these literary features contribute to the meaning and impact of the proverbs?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Acrostic:** A literary device where the first letter of each line (or paragraph) spells out a word or phrase.
- **Antilegomena:** A term referring to books of the Bible that were disputed in their acceptance into the canon.
- **Assonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds in words that are close together.
- **Atomistic:** A term used to describe proverbs as individual units, seemingly disconnected from each other.
- **Catchwords:** Specific words or phrases that serve to link two adjacent proverbs together.
- **Chiastic Structure:** A literary device using a pattern where elements are arranged in a mirrored or inverted way, like A-B-C-B-A.
- **Cognitive Linguistics:** A field of study that examines how language interacts with thought, particularly focusing on metaphors and metonymy.
- **Elohistic Psalter:** A section within the Book of Psalms (Psalms 42-83) characterized by the dominant use of the name "Elohim" for God.
- **Form and Meaning:** The principle that the literary form of a text influences its meaning and how that meaning is conveyed.
- **Genre:** A category of literary composition characterized by particular style, form, or content.
- **Hermeneutics:** The theory and practice of interpretation, especially of the Bible.
- **Hyperbole:** An intentional exaggeration for emphasis.
- **Inclusio:** A literary device where the beginning and the end of a passage are linked, creating a "bookend" effect.
- **Intertextuality:** The relationship between one text and other texts.
- **Janus:** A literary device or verse that connects two different sections, pointing back to what precedes it and forward to what follows.
- **Juxtaposition:** The placement of two or more things side by side, often to compare or contrast.

- **Metaphor:** A figure of speech that describes something by likening it to something else.
- **Metonymy:** A figure of speech in which one thing is represented by something associated with it.
- **Numerical Proverbs:** Proverbs that make use of numbers or numerical patterns as a feature of their structure or message.
- **Parody:** A humorous imitation of a literary style or subject matter.
- **Paremiology:** The study of proverbs.
- **Phonology:** The study of the sounds of language.
- **Proverb Pair:** Two proverbial sentences that are linked together, whether by phonetics, semantics, catchwords, syntax, or rhetorical devices.
- **Septuagint:** The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).
- **Simile:** A figure of speech that explicitly compares two unlike things, often using "like" or "as."
- **Synecdoche:** A figure of speech where a part represents the whole or vice-versa.
- **Triad:** A group of three proverbs that share a related theme or structure within the Book of Proverbs.

5. FAQs on Hildebrandt, Proverbs, Proverbs 26:4-5 – To Answer or Not to Answer a Fool, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Proverbs and Proverb Pairs

- What is the significance of genre in interpreting biblical texts, and how does it apply to understanding Proverbs?** Genre plays a crucial role in interpretation because it shapes what we expect from a text. For example, historical narratives, prophetic utterances, psalms, and proverbs each have their unique characteristics and functions. Proverbs, as a genre, are distinct from historical narratives that tell stories with plots, prophetic utterances that often convey messages of repentance, or psalms that include laments or praise. Recognizing the genre helps us understand the intended meaning and purpose of the text. The proverb genre is characterized by short, pithy sayings that often offer general truths or observations, not promises. They function differently, shaping their meaning and truth and have to be interpreted through their own unique lens.
- What are proverb pairs, and why are they significant in the book of Proverbs?** Proverb pairs are two proverbial sentences that are placed adjacent to one another, bonded together by elements such as phonetics, semantics, catchwords, syntax, rhetorical devices, situation, or theme, forming a higher, architectonic unit. They are significant because the juxtaposition suggests a relationship between the proverbs, inviting the reader to consider the combined meaning or tension that the pair creates. They are not just random pairings; the editors placed them together intentionally, suggesting a higher meaning to be derived from their connection. About 21% of the proverbs in Proverbs 10-29 are paired. Understanding the connection helps illuminate a richer understanding of the individual proverbs.
- Why is there such a debate on how to define a proverb?** Defining a proverb is challenging because it's like trying to "nail down jello." Scholars from various disciplines (structural, sociological, rhetorical) have tried, but no single definition can fully encompass the variety and complexity of proverbs. Proverbs are found in almost every culture worldwide, each with unique forms and contexts. The effort to define proverbs is not always fruitful, though they are a unique literary form that should be understood as distinct.

- **What are some literary devices, structures, and forms used in the Book of Proverbs?** The book of Proverbs utilizes a wide range of literary devices. These include similes and metaphors, which are ways of comparing concepts. Proverbs also employs various structures like numerical proverbs (e.g., "three things are never satisfied...four that never say enough"), acrostics (where verses follow alphabetical order, as in Proverbs 31), chiasmic structures (A-B-B-A), and inclusios (where the beginning and end of a section connect). The structure of Proverbs is less narrative-driven and more sentence-oriented. In addition to these poetic and structural elements, Proverbs often utilizes figures of speech, like hyperbole (overstatements) and parody (humorous imitation), and repetition for emphasis.
- **How can understanding proverb pairs illuminate potentially conflicting or contradictory proverbs?** Proverb pairs intentionally juxtapose seemingly contradictory ideas, creating tension and inviting critical reflection. This is not a mistake or an imperfection; it's a deliberate didactic strategy designed to awaken the reader's critical thinking and understanding. Examples include contrasting sayings like "look before you leap" and "he who hesitates is lost" that prompt the reader to consider the nuances of both ideas. This approach challenges the reader not to take a simple or literal understanding of each individual proverb in isolation, but instead, to see them in relationship.
- **What is the specific interpretive challenge posed by Proverbs 26:4-5 ("Answer not a fool according to his folly..." and "Answer a fool according to his folly...")?** Proverbs 26:4 and 5 present a significant interpretive challenge because they appear to contradict each other directly: one verse commands not to answer a fool while the other commands to answer a fool. This paradox is not unique to Proverbs; similar contradictory proverbs exist worldwide. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly opposite directives forces the reader to examine the nature of wisdom, the appropriateness of response, and the context of interaction with a fool. It asks the question: what is the proper way to engage a fool?

- **What are some methods used to resolve the apparent contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5?** Several methods are used to resolve the tension in Proverbs 26:4 and 5. They include: (1) *Separating frames of reference*, where one proverb applies to one situation, and the other to a different situation. For example, some rabbis suggest that one applies to Torah and the other to ordinary affairs; (2) *Averaging*, where the two proverbs are seen as parts of a larger truth, and the reader finds a middle point between the two, or a process of unfolding truth; (3) *Modifying terms*, where words like "friend" or "answer" are reinterpreted; (4) *Vicious cycles*, when conflict between proverbs underscores emphasis. Others focus on the pronouns: "you" in verse 4 (protecting self) and "he" in verse 5 (correcting the fool's ego), and some suggest that verses 4 and 5 are connected to the level of persistence of a fool in his folly. The Septuagint's use of prepositions (prose and kata) smooth the apparent contradiction by suggesting one should not respond in kind, but one must provide a fitting response. All these interpretations highlight the need for contextual understanding and a careful consideration of the text.
- **What does the author mean when he says "Proverbs is not a promise", and what is the nature of its authority?** The speaker emphasizes that Proverbs are not promises that guarantee specific outcomes, they do not carry a universal, blanket authority. Instead, they are general observations or pieces of wisdom that are context-dependent and should be applied with discernment. A proverb's authority is not absolute or universal, like a divine promise, but it is authoritative within its specific context and type of wisdom that is being applied. It depends on the particular situation and the reader's own wisdom in evaluating it. They are specific to a context that can be widely applied with discernment.