

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 16,

Proverbs 28-29

6-min. Video Overview

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You know how sometimes you read something and you just think you know what it means? Well, today we're going to be linguistic detectives. We're going to take this ancient proverb that seems super obvious, crack it wide open, and find a hidden secret inside that, honestly, it changes everything. So let's get into it.

All right, here's the proverb at the heart of our investigation. Proverbs 28, verse 28. I mean, read that.

On the surface, it seems pretty cut and dry, doesn't it? Wicked people rise up; everyone else ducks for cover. Then when the wicked are gone, the good guys can finally flourish. Seems like simple cause and effect.

But what if that's not the whole story? What if our full, obvious understanding of this verse is being pulled in a certain direction by this, well, this invisible force? I'm talking about an ancient rule of poetry that has basically been telling people how to read this for centuries. Okay, so here's how we're going to crack this case. We'll start with that obvious reading.

Then we'll expose this tyrannical poetic rule. We're going to zoom in on one tiny word with a huge double meaning, challenge the evidence for it, and then boom, we'll uncover a much smarter, more subtle piece of wisdom. Let's get to it.

All right, first things first. Let's talk about what we think we're reading. When you hear this proverb, what's the first image that pops into your head? For most people, it's this classic good versus evil showdown, right? Like a political seesaw.

And yeah, that's pretty much the standard take. A famous commentator, Roland Murphy, summed it up perfectly. He said, when the wicked fall, the good guys come into the open and take up positions of some power.

It's a satisfying story, isn't it? The righteous don't just come back; they take charge. But, and this is a big but, this whole interpretation rests on one single, massive assumption. And that assumption leads us right to the main culprit in this whole mystery: something called parallelism.

Think of it like a hidden rule, a kind of literary tyrant that has been twisting the way people read this verse, forcing them to see a meaning that might not even be there. So what is this rule? It's called antithetical parallelism, which is just a fancy way of saying that in ancient Hebrew poetry, the second line of a verse is supposed to be the exact opposite of the first. It's all about balance.

So if the first line says the wicked arise, you're hardwired to expect the second line to say something like the righteous fall. It sets up this really strong expectation in your mind. Okay, but here's where it gets really interesting.

This proverb doesn't actually follow the rule. Think about it. The opposite of the wicked arise isn't really they perish.

And the opposite of people hide isn't the righteous increase. It should be something like people come out. So because the proverb doesn't fit this perfect pattern, for centuries, interpreters have basically had to fudge the numbers.

They've been changing the meaning of the words to make the verse fit the rule. And that fudging all comes down to one single critical clue, a Hebrew verb, *rabah*. This one little word, translated as increase is the key.

The whole mystery hinges on it. So here's the million-dollar question. Does *rabah* mean what it almost always means: to increase in number, you know, just to grow in quantity? Or could it also mean to become powerful? Because depending on how you answer that, the entire meaning of the proverb just flips on its head.

See the trap they fell into? To make that parallelism rule work, the righteous increase has to be the perfect opposite of people hide. So scholars just decided, well, *rabah* must mean become powerful then, because that's a better opposite. The rule wasn't explaining the verse.

The rule was changing the definition of a word. But is there any actual evidence for that? All right, time to get our hands dirty. A scholar named Dr. Knut Haim really dug into this, and we're going to follow his breadcrumbs.

Let's put the evidence for this supposed meaning right under the microscope. So get this. The entire case for this alternative meaning, the one that has shaped centuries of interpretation, rests on just six verses.

That's it. Six verses in the entire Old Testament. Let's see if this foundation is made of rock or sand.

And wow, the case just evaporates almost immediately. Dr. Haim points out that of those six verses, three of them are totally unconvincing. One's about floodwater getting deeper, not more powerful.

Another is about knowledge growing. In both cases, the word just means increase. So poof, half the evidence is gone.

We're left with just three verses. And guess what? They're all from the book of Proverbs. And this is the smoking gun, folks.

The argument for the last three verses is a total logical loop. It goes like this. We need *rabah* to mean powerful in this verse, to make the poetry work.

Therefore, this verse is proof that rabah can mean powerful. Do you see it? It's completely circular. The whole thing is built on the assumption that the rule has to be perfect, not on any real evidence.

So what happens if we just step outside of that circle? If we let go of the idea that the poetry has to be perfectly symmetrical? Well, that's when a much cooler, much more profound meaning starts to come into focus. What if we just let the word mean what it says? What if rabah just means to increase in number? Simple as that. No mental gymnastics, no reinterpreting.

Let's just read what's actually there. And just look at the difference. The old view is all about a power struggle, right? Bad guys fall; good guys seize control.

But this new, more careful reading, it's not about politics. It's about public health, almost. When dangerous people are gone, it creates a society where the number of good people can actually grow.

It's not about a few elites taking over. It's about the whole community becoming healthier and more virtuous. Okay, so you might be thinking, why does this tiny detail from an ancient proverb matter? Well, because this isn't just about one verse.

This whole detective story is a perfect example of how our hidden assumptions can totally change what we see when we read anything. So what's the bottom line here? We saw how this one rule, this idea of strict parallelism, was like a pair of glasses that distorted everything. It literally forced a different meaning onto a word.

And by taking those glasses off, we found a much richer message. It wasn't about a simple power swap. It was about creating the conditions for a good society to grow.

And that's a huge lesson, right? Sometimes the most obvious rules are the ones we need to question the most. Which really just leaves us with one last question to chew on. We just watched a so-called obvious truth completely crumble because it was built on a shaky circular argument.

It really makes you think: what obvious ideas in your life might be worth a second look?