

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND WEALTH IN
PROVERBS: A STUDY OF TWO “CONTRADICTIONARY”
SAYINGS (PROVERBS 14:23 AND 23:4–5)

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Readers of the book of Proverbs are confronted with what appears to be contradictory sayings.¹ When readers perceive proverbial sayings to be contradictory, the didactic function of the sayings, and by extension the book, is called into question. Scholars have varied reactions toward these contradictions,² either explaining them away and insisting they are not contradictions or affirming the presence of contradictions while offering explanations that point to their value. Claudia Camp, for instance, argues that the presence of contradictions is indicative of

1. By contradictory sayings, I refer to sayings that give opposing or conflicting meanings, lessons, or values. Such sayings appear to be inconsistent with each other. Proverbs 26:4–5, which juxtaposes two opposing views on how one should relate to a fool, serves as an example. There are also subtle contradictions, such as the advice on bribery in Prov 21:14 and 17:23.

2. The book of Proverbs is not the only proverbial material containing contradictions that has drawn the attention of scholars. Scholars in the field of paremiology and folklore studies have sought to address the issue. Yankah, “Do Proverbs Contradict?” 2–9, for instance, contends that proverbs do not contradict each other if placed in context. He explains that the problem of contradictory proverbs arises only because people fail to situate proverbs within a performance context. Mieder, *Proverbs*, 133–34, concurs with Yankah that there is no doubt that when one takes proverbs outside their performance context, they may contradict each other. However, in the performance context, contradictions serve as strategies by the users. He concludes that “Proverbs in normal discourse are not contradictory at all, and they usually make perfect sense to the speaker and listener.”

the dynamic social and moral world behind the sayings. These contradictions have a pedagogical value, especially in the construction of the moral self.³ Other scholars insist, rather, that the contradictions should be seen as complementary.⁴ Zoltán Schwáb contends that putting the contradictory sayings in clusters reveals their complementarity. Arguing from what he calls an associative strategy, he explains that what appears as a contradiction may be complementary, especially when interpreters are willing to be guided by dominating themes within clusters.⁵ Prior to Schwáb's argument, Peter Hatton made a case for rejecting the idea of contradictions in Proverbs.⁶ Unlike Schwáb, who uses clusters of sayings to argue for complementary reading, Hatton argues that complementary reading is possible for the entire book of Proverbs. He rejects early scholarship that presented Proverbs as atomistic collections and calls for a deeper appreciation of the carefully crafted and skillfully organized composition of the book. His position can be summed up in his words; "contradictions in the book are intrinsic to its purpose and not accidental."⁷

3. Camp, "Proverbs and the Moral Self," 25–42. See also Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 493, who attributes the problem of contradictions to the tension between pragmatism and idealism. For Collins, on the one hand, the sayings have a practical purpose in guiding young ones to making the best decisions for life. On the other hand, some of the sayings aim at very high standards, and in the process, they become tendentious and unrealistic. Also see, Yodder, "Forming 'Fearers of Yahweh,'" 167–84 and Dell, *The Book of Proverbs*, 54.

4. This proposal represents a relatively new stage in the studies of Proverbs where the book is no longer perceived to be a haphazard collection of sayings. Early modern studies on Proverbs downplayed the book's value due to the understanding that Proverbs contained sayings, which were for the most part randomly organized resulting in paradoxes and contradictions. Toy, *Book of Proverbs*, viii, for instance, describes the book as lacking logical arrangement, a characteristic of the book that creates difficulty in one's attempt to create some form of structure (apart from the divisions already in the book).

5. Schwáb, "The Sayings Clusters in Proverbs," 59–79.

6. Hatton, *Contradictions in the Book of Proverbs*.

7. Hatton, *Contradictions in the Book of Proverbs*, 11.

Inspired by Hatton's thesis, this paper argues that although there are apparent contradictions in Proverbs, especially within proverbial sayings on the relationship between wealth and work, close attention to the rhetoric of these sayings in light of sociological and theoretical insights about work reveals elements of complementarity.⁸ Using Prov 14:23 and 23:4–5 as a case study, I explore how perceived contradictions between sayings on work and wealth can be explained in a manner that avoids compromising the didactic value of the sayings.⁹ To achieve this goal, I first carry out an exegesis of the two texts to reveal their message. Next, I explore what may give rise to contradictions within the selected sayings. I then resolve the apparent contradictions by appealing to the nature of the sayings and the theory of work values.

Exegesis of Proverbs 14:23 and 23:4–5

A series of headings divides Proverbs into seven collections.¹⁰ These two texts fall within the second and third sections. Proverbs 14:23 is part of the second collection (Prov 10:1—22:16)

8. In a similar discussion, Van Leeuwen, in "Wealth and Poverty," 34–35, wrestles with the issue of contradictions. He explains that contradictions "reveal basic conflicts within a worldview" (25) and as a result, function paradigmatically. Emanating from the reality of life, these contradictions call for deeper engagement with the texts with respect to the dynamics of the possibilities produced by the encounter between faith and life.

9. The selected texts fall under different collections within Proverbs. While this may seem a haphazard selection, it should rather be construed as a purposeful choice, one based on a conviction that many readers (especially ordinary readers) approach the book as a unit. Also, as Hatton argues, the book's structure is such that a saying in one collection may throw light on other sayings in the same or in a different collection. For him, the book is a unified text in which the sayings interact with each other irrespective of their location. See Hatton, *Contradictions in the Book of Proverbs*, 4.

10. Using the headings, seven main collections or divisions emerge. However, other variables such as the type of saying and the direction of the sayings can lead to further divisions of the book. See Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 9; also cf. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 4.

known as the Solomonic Sayings. As the largest collection in Proverbs, it sets itself apart from the preceding and proceeding collections mainly due to the form of its sayings. Short and pithy sayings which come in two-part lines or sentences characterize most of the proverbs. They are referred to as aphorisms or sentence literature.¹¹ Two main subdivisions have been identified: chs. 10–15 and 16:1–22:16. In the former, most of the sayings have parallel lines that contrast; while in the latter, the second line affirms, extends, or exemplifies what the first line says.

Proverbs 23:4–5 is part of the collection titled the Words of the Wise (Prov. 22:17–24:22). This collection has a relationship with an Egyptian text called the Instructions of Amenemope, which is dated *circa* 1100 BCE.¹² The literary uniqueness of this collection is borne out of the fact that the sayings are longer than the sentence literature in the preceding collection. The use of imperatives and extended admonitions followed by motive clauses, however, makes them stand close to the lectures of Prov 1–9, although they are less expressive than those of Prov 1–9. Thirty sayings make up this collection and among the themes discussed are the good and wicked, the conduct of the youth, and wealth.

Text: Proverbs 14:23

בְּכָל־עֵצָב יְהִיָּה מוֹתֵר וּדְבַר־שִׁפְתַיִם אֵדֶל־לְמַחְסוֹר

In all labor there is profit; but mere talk surely leads to poverty.

11. See Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 14.

12. Several scholars are of the view that there is a creative adaptation of the Egyptian text by the Hebrew text. See the following for exhaustive discussions on the relationship between the two works: Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope,” 29–68; Fox, “The Formation of Proverbs 22:17–23:11,” 22–37; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 753–67; and Clarke, “Wisdom Literature and the Question of Priority,” 50–56. The studies by K. A. Kitchen are particularly insightful as he uses linguistic and stylistic parallels to argue not only for the independence of the biblical unit, but also for the Solomonic authorship of the unit of Prov 1–24. See Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East,” 69–114, and “Basic Literary Forms and Formulations,” 235–92.

Proverbs 14:23 falls under the antithetical group of sayings (Prov 10–15). For Waltke, this saying is part of the unit formed in vv. 19–24, which contrasts “consequences of comportment using mostly ethical terms.”¹³ He further strikes a relationship between v. 23 and v. 24 on the conceptual level of their message. The wise and the fool of v. 24 are respectively connected to the wise and foolish acts of hard work and mere talk in v. 23.

As an antithetical couplet, Prov 14:23 focuses on two actions and their respective consequences. The first colon opens with the phrase “in all labor” (בְּכָל-עֲצָב) which paints a picture of hard and painful work. Following is the copula verb “to be” (יְהִי) which connects the preceding image of “labor” (עֲצָב) to “profit/gain” (מוֹתָר). The choice of the noun עֲצָב is deliberate. Conveying physical and emotional discomfort, עֲצָב stresses the pain one goes through when working. According to Swanson, the verb עֲצָב means “to hurt, grieve, or pain,” and the noun form of the same root refers to “pain, toil, or hurt.”¹⁴ Our first encounter of the word in the Hebrew Bible is in Gen 3:16–17 during the pronouncement of Adam’s and Eve’s punishment. In Eve’s situation, עֲצָב projects both physical and emotional pain resulting from pregnancy and birth, and by extension the stress that comes with family conflicts. In Adam’s case, the term refers to the difficulties of making a living.¹⁵ A similar meaning emerges from the use of עֲצָב in Ps 127:2, where the psalmist refers to the discomfort and agony associated with a long and arduous task.¹⁶

In the context of 14:23, the word conveys the discomfort associated with strenuous work. It is significant to note that the sage is emphatic in giving a positive evaluation of strenuous work through the qualification of עֲצָב with the determiner כָּל

13. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 597.

14. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, 6676, #3.

15. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 261–62.

16. It is important to note how the themes of “toil” and “weariness” are picked up in Ecclesiastes. The Preacher views labor as one of the troubles of life. However, in Ecclesiastes, several terms, including עֲצָב and תִּיגַע, are used to capture the enigma of life. More of this association is discussed in the conclusion.

(all). Waltke gives two possible usages of כָּל: definite or indefinite qualification of עָצָב. If the former, כָּל refers to the “entirety” or “whole” of work; if the latter, then it refers to all kinds of work.¹⁷ The point here is that despite the pain and discomfort that comes with strenuous work, there is an implied positive value placed on it. In the words of Fox, “Prov 14:23a is more sanguine about the value of hard work.”¹⁸ By using the verb יִהְיֶה to connect the subject and the complement, the sage emphasizes the relative truth of the claim that profit or gain and hard work go together.

Like the first, the second colon opens with the subject, “but mere talk” (וְדִבְרֵי־שִׁפְתַיִם), which serves as a contrast to עָצָב. The phrase וְדִבְרֵי־שִׁפְתַיִם can be translated literally as “but a thing/word of the lips.” Its usage is metonymical. It stands for unproductive talk or failure to accomplish what is said (cf. 2 Kgs 20:18; Isa 36:5). In this regard, the sage contrasts hard work with mere talk or empty words. The concern is with people who do not follow through on their words. Such a lifestyle has its consequence: it leads to low productivity and then to the state of want. Accordingly, the concluding phrase of the second colon, “surely leads to poverty” (אִי־לְמַחְסוֹר), cautions against the fate of such an action. By opening the concluding phrase, the particle “surely” (אִי), highlights the expected conclusion of “poverty” (מַחְסוֹר). Alliteration is used to associate the words מַחְסוֹר and מוֹתֵר, and connect them to their actions of mere talk and hard work respectively.

The thrust of the message in Prov 14:23 is that commitment to hard work leads to gain or some kind of benefit. On the contrary, verbosity and undirected conversation are a waste of time; they could cause a person to be poor. Antithesis is the main rhetorical strategy. Interestingly, the contrast is not between an action and inaction as observed in other sayings about work (cf. Prov 6:6–11; 10:4; 12:17; 20:13). Working hard and talking are both actions, but one leads to a gain while the other does not. The kind of action one engages in is therefore important.

17. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 601.

18. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 523.

Engaging in an activity that leads to no productivity is an unwise act. The use and placement of the only verb (יְהִיָּה) in a construction entirely dominated by nouns is worth noting. Used mainly to emphasize the state of being, יְהִיָּה “signifies the universal truth that profit exists, is present, or is in the process of becoming and lying in the future.”¹⁹ It can be attained only through hard work. The message, suffer to gain, is a conviction that is common to many primitive societies. Such belief systems partly stem from the crude manner they engaged with their environment to make a living. An ancient Israelite agricultural context, which was characterized by low rainfall, heavy soil erosion, and desert-like lands, indicates the difficulty individuals had to go through in farming practices.²⁰

Text: Proverbs 23:4–5

אַל־תִּיגַע לְהַעֲשִׂיר מִבִּינְתָךְ חֶדְל

Do not toil to be rich; from your own understanding cease.

הַתַּעִיף עֵינֶיךָ בּוֹ וְאֵינָנוּ

For when your eyes fly upon it, it is gone,

כִּי עָשָׂה יַעֲשֶׂה־לּוֹ כְּנֶפֶס כְּנֶשֶׁר יַעֲוֶף הַשָּׁמַיִם

for it suddenly makes to itself wings; like an eagle and it flies to the sky.

As part of the collection titled the Words of the Wise (Prov 22:17—24:22), Prov 23:4–5 is the seventh saying within the collection and its makeup consists of a couplet and a tricolon. Verse 4, the couplet, opens with the negation אַל fixed to the jussive תִּיגַע to form the imperative²¹ “do not toil.” The Hebrew word

19. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 601.

20. Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times*, 26–28.

21. My designation of this form as an imperative may be problematic as the designation itself suggests a particular grammatical form in Hebrew which is not equivalent to the “negative command” expressed by the negative adverb plus jussive. However, I am looking at the function of the form in this case.

עָיִן means to become weary by working.²² It indicates the extra effort one puts into accomplishing a task (cf. Josh 7:3). It also points to perseverance as depicted in Job 9:29. Closing the first part of the colon is the word לְהַעֲשִׂיר which means “to be rich.” By expressing concern about the extent to which one works, the sage puts into perspective the goals which may underpin one’s work. In this particular instance, the concern is that working hard (in a way that wears the body) to achieve the goal of creating wealth²³ may be unwise. The reason for this apprehension is developed in the tricolon of v. 5.

The second colon of v. 4 opens with the phrase “from your own understanding” (מִבִּינְיָתְךָ). Here, the sage alludes to the personal pain one encounters in a work that is continuous and toilsome. A wise person learns from his/her experiences. Thus, one’s engagement in עָיִן should lead one to the “insight” (בִּינָה) of its potential dangers. The pronominal suffix “your” (ךָ) stresses the essence of self-reflection. For the sage, self-reflection on the unguarded pursuit of wealth is the issue. The *qal* imperative “cease” (חָדַל) closes the second colon and negates a previously referred to action. Since the first verb, עָיִן, has already been negated, it is likely that חָדַל points to בִּינָה. Although Fox agrees, he provides a nuanced meaning of the second colon translating the line as “Leave off your starring!”²⁴ He tries to avoid the confusion that arises from translating בִּינָה as “understanding.” It is simply impossible for one to cease from using one’s own understanding; this is always true even when מִבִּינְיָתְךָ חָדַל is taken as “cease from” or “cease because of.”²⁵

22. Baker and Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 417.

23. The noun “wealth,” עֶשֶׂר, is not stated explicitly in the text. It is implied in the construction לְהַעֲשִׂיר which can be translated “to be rich.” See Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 723.

24. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 723.

25. Although Fox’s explanation is tenable, it is also true that those who render בִּינָה as “understanding” are constrained by the first colon which alludes to one’s experiences. The sage may be concerned about the experiences one has accumulated over the years in toiling for

Verse 5 provides the reason for the sage's misgivings about toiling to become rich. The first colon begins the description of wealth's ephemeral character. The image, "when your eyes fly on it" (הִתְעַיַף עֵינֶיךָ), depicts wealth's attractive prowess.²⁶ "It" refers to wealth as implied in לְהַעֲשִׂיר of v. 4. But immediately as one gazes on wealth, it goes away (וְאֵינָנוּ). How does this happen? Wealth develops "wings" (כַּנְּפִים): it does so quickly and unexpectedly. This view is conveyed by the expression כִּי עָשָׂה בְּיָעֲשֶׂה-לּוֹ, "for suddenly it makes to itself," which is a construction that expresses certainty or emphasis. Thus, wealth will surely grow wings; this includes an element of suddenness. The last colon gives the destination for the flying wealth. Simile is used to liken wealth with an "eagle" (נֶשֶׁר). Thus, like an eagle, wealth takes to "the sky" (הַשָּׁמַיִם) beyond the reach of humans. Accordingly, the point is that one needs to be careful in the quest for riches since wealth can be unpredictable.

Proverbs 23:4–5 cautions against straining oneself to be rich. Such an approach to wealth sends the message that attaining wealth is solely dependent on one's effort; God plays little to no role. However, Proverbs offers a nuanced theology on the role God plays in human welfare. For instance, Prov 10:22 says that wealth comes from God's blessings. Fox gives a two-step interpretation of this saying. First, Prov 10:22 is a reminder to all who have wealth that God is the source of their riches. Second,

wealth. By pointing to בִּינָה, בְּדָל does not mean a total ban on the use of one's intelligence as Fox seems to suggest.

26. The reading of הִתְעַיַף follows the *qere*, although it does not appear elsewhere as a *hiphil*, but the *ketib* is difficult to render in its context. The entire expression הִתְעַיַף עֵינֶיךָ בּוֹ וְאֵינָנוּ, "for when your eyes fly upon it, it is gone," suggests covetousness on the part of the worker. If this suggestion is valid, then one of the concerns of the sage is the unguarded quest for wealth. Such an attitude can only lead to weariness of the body and deceit of the heart. Covetousness is rebellion against God. In Ps 10:3, for instance, a covetous person cuts God away from his life mainly because the things sought after replaces God in the heart. When a worker is motivated solely through the desire to amass wealth, such a person may never have satisfaction (cf. Eccl 5:10) as greed eats satisfaction and contentment out of one's heart. The security of wealth may turn out to be false (Prov 23:5).

human effort expended towards creating wealth has a limit.²⁷ The thinking that this limitation can be dealt with through excessive work is not only deceptive but also unwise. Thus, the use of the negative command “cease from your own understanding” appeals to individuals of such persuasions to reflect on the experience of creating wealth.

A Superficial Case of Contradiction

A superficial reading of the two sayings may lead to conflicting values. First, where and how do the contradictions, if any, emerge? Proverbs 14:23 claims that in all labor there is profit or gain. However, idle talk leads to poverty or states of want. Two correlations can be discerned: (1) labor leads to gain/profit; and (2) idle talk leads to poverty. On the other hand, 23:4–5 cautions against extraneous hard work for the purpose of gaining wealth. Two inferences can likewise be discerned: (1) do not engage in hard work to gain wealth; and (2) wealth is ephemeral/unreliable.

The two sayings display an apparent contradiction on the relationship between work and wealth, although they also seem to agree that work somehow leads to a gain. Particularly explicit in 14:23 is this latter claim. Positive and negative illustrations are used to drive home the claim that hard work guarantees a gain or profit. Negative illustration is the main strategy in Prov 23:4–5 as it states inversely what Prov 14:23 only hints at. By their diction (עָצָב and תִּיגַע), the sayings agree that work could be stressful, strenuous, and demanding; but it is this kind of activity that could lead one to a gain.

Despite their tacit agreement on the output of hard work, the two sayings may be construed as presenting conflicting inferences. First, they seem to differ regarding the significance placed on the output of work. While 14:23 appears to place a positive value on מוֹתֵר (gain/profit), 23:4–5 places a caution on wealth when it characterizes it as ephemeral or untrustworthy. In 14:23, מוֹתֵר prevents one from becoming poor. Hard work is promoted as a guarantee for success, one that could liberate the worker

27. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 523.

from the shackles of poverty. Thus, מוֹתֵר is a positive stimulus used by the sage to persuade the audience to continuously choose hard work over fruitless idle talk. This positive value on work's output (מוֹתֵר) appears downplayed in 23:4–5. Wealth²⁸ assumes an ephemeral character. It is here today and absent tomorrow. It is unpredictable and therefore unreliable. Meanwhile, in 14:23, there is no hint of unpredictability on the part of מוֹתֵר, which may include wealth. Rather, there is the assurance that one stands to gain from one's work. Interestingly, the wealth alluded to in 23:4–5, which is unpredictable, can be attained through one's labor just like in 14:23.

Second, there may be conflicting values on the place of labor in one's life. To put it simply, is it incumbent for individuals to engage in hard work? Proverbs 14:23 does not shy away from promoting hard work as a positive value. Opting for the verb עֲצָב, the sage is conscious of the level of difficulty that such work entails, yet continues to give an overall positive evaluation of it. This overall positive evaluation of hard work is missing in Proverbs 23:4–5.²⁹ Pain and discomfort are to be avoided here, unlike 14:23 which embraces them as necessary for making a profit. The double negatives used in 23:4 are indicative of apprehension on the part of the sage towards work that wearies the body in order to attain wealth. This being the case, one wonders if there is any occasion where hard work (one that strains the body) can be justified in the eyes of the sage. Will he accept exhaustive labor directed at another goal besides creating wealth?³⁰

28. In Prov 23:4–5, wealth emerges as the output of work.

29. However, it needs to be pointed out that the saying does not prohibit hard work altogether. Rather the sage discourages the audience from engaging in a work that makes the body weary just to become rich. In other words, the prohibition is qualified.

30. This is difficult to determine from the text, but I argue for the negative. What the text appears to communicate is that wearying the body for any outcome is unwise. I explain later that implied in the sage's rhetoric is the wisdom of optimizing one's energy to work, which is different from working exhaustively to attain an elusive goal.

Proverbs 14:23 and 23:4–5 as Complementary Sayings

A superficial reading of the two sayings may present conflicting values to readers. However, as Yankah³¹ and Meider³² argue, is it possible that the seeming contradictions are only prominent because the sayings appear in a collection? Could the contradictions disappear if the sayings were used in a performance context? Better still, can the contradictions be resolved if close attention is paid to the nature and goal of the sayings? This section appeals to the sociological theory of work values to demonstrate how the two sayings can be read as complementary. However, before that is done, let us explore how the nature of the sayings help to resolve the presence of contradictions.

A conspicuous contrast between the two sayings is the mode in which the message is communicated. While 14:23 is a declarative statement, 23:4–5 is couched in a dyadic structure of imperatives³³ and a declarative. In 14:23, the sage is stating an axiom: if work or labor is the exertion of force towards an end, then there is a guarantee of an output. Such conclusions have become self-evidently true within Israelite society. Undoubtedly, the sage has witnessed the strenuous effort Israelites put into their farming practices and the resulting output of their efforts. The narrator of Gen 3 presents the relationship between work and gain in a similar manner. In Gen 3:17, the Lord God pronounced a curse on the ground as a way of punishing man. This etiological story communicates the truth about difficulty in work (which was mainly agricultural). By employing a declarative statement, the sage of 14:23 only echoes the generally accepted truth that work leads to an output, which more often than not is a gain of some sort. A combination of an imperative and a declarative statement is used in 23:4–5. This indicates the presence of personal opinions interlaced with axioms or generally accepted truths. By using the declarative, 14:23 is generalized in its message. The double commands of 23:4 give specific injunctions. In this case, moving into the realm of the sage's personal belief on the

31. Yankah, "Do Proverbs Contradict?" 2–9.

32. Mieder, *Proverbs*, 133–34.

33. Refer to note 21.

relationship between wealth and work. Through the commands, a personal connection is made with the sage. Shifting to a declarative statement in v. 5, the sage gives the basis for his earlier conviction in v. 4. However, this time there is a shift from specifics to generalization.

Thus, a case of complementarity can be seen in the functions of the sayings. The combination of declarative statements and imperatives functions to supply readers with information and at the same time caution them against a particular line of action. Both sayings provide the information that hard work leads to some outcome related to wealth. Through its imperatives, 23:4–5, however, goes further to caution against inordinate pursuit of wealth. Because of its transient and perishable character, wealth may not be a trusted motivation for work. The use of the negative commands places a serious tone on the counsel being given: apply wisdom when it comes to working hard for the purpose of creating wealth.³⁴

Now, how can the theory of work values help readers appreciate the complementary value the two sayings offer? Values play a central role in human behavior. They shape norms and practices, define heroes, and establish symbols at the core of culture. Values influence not only attitudes and perceptions, but also choices.³⁵ As individuals get socialized from a young age, they internalize various values over their lifetime, including work values. According to Robert Roe and Peter Ester, “the importance of the role of work in many cultures makes work values into core

34. The theme of wealth creation is key in this reading. In other places in Proverbs (cf. 10:4; 16; 22; 14:24), the sages do not shy away from placing a positive value on wealth. The problem envisaged here may be the excessive desire for striving for wealth. Perhaps, the sage is drawing our attention to the one who pursues wealth. Although wealth’s characterization as ephemeral puts a blip on its value, it is the pursuer who ultimately decides his/her actions relative to wealth. When wealth is pursued inordinately, it may create feelings of weariness and exhaustion. If this reading is taken, then the problem shifts to the one who pursues riches and the processes used to gain riches, and not the object of the pursuit.

35. Bardi and Schwartz, “Values and Behavior,” 1208–10.

values that take a cardinal position in the overall pattern of values.”³⁶ Definitions of work values focus on the goals individuals see as important and that they attempt to attain within their work context. Thus, work values are the desirable goals one pursues through labor.³⁷

Scholars have identified three main types of work values: extrinsic, intrinsic, and social work values.³⁸ Extrinsic work values deal with the tangible outcomes from work such as pay, food, and job security. Intrinsic values deal with goals derived from the process of working such as job satisfaction. Intrinsic values differ from extrinsic work values; while the former is gained through the process of working, the latter is a result gained from the experience of the activity. Lastly, social work values deal with the relational benefits one gains within the work context such as friendship. Now, what work values do the two sayings offer as a basis for their respective messages?

Proverbs 14:23 uses extrinsic work values to promote hard work. This is discerned from the words “profit” (מוֹתֵר) and “poverty” (מִחְסוֹר). The word מוֹתֵר is a derivative of יָתַר (“a portion or a remaining part”). By associating hard work with מוֹתֵר, the sage entices the audience with material possessions. As Waltke points out, the sense of excess is fundamental in the root יָתַר. Inversely, מִחְסוֹר devalues an individual.³⁹ Derived from the root חָסַר, מִחְסוֹר connotes meanings of lack and poverty.⁴⁰ The one who engages in unproductive conversations ends up poor, lacking even the basic necessities in life.

The word מוֹתֵר, however, also carries the meanings of “advantage” and “pre-eminence.”⁴¹ Through hard work, one could

36. Roe and Ester, “Values and Work,” 5.

37. Elizur, “Facets of Work Values,” 379–89.

38. Elizur, “Facets of Work Values,” 379–89; Kaasa, “Work Values in European Countries,” 852–62; Ros et al., “Basic Individual Values,” 49–71.

39. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 601.

40. Baker and Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 597.

41. Baker and Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 589.

attain several advantages, including gaining respect in the eyes of others. Being able to produce abundance through work is a sign of a responsible person with a preeminent character. Such a person, especially in a communal society like ancient Israel, is well-positioned to maximize life. From these meanings, מוֹתָר seems to project more than extrinsic motivation. In its abstract usage, מוֹתָר in the context of 14:23 projects nuanced motivations that could be intrinsic or social. For instance, the nuanced meaning of “advantage” is applicable in many contexts. Whereas the advantage here could certainly be the benefits one derives from producing in excess (extrinsic values). There is also the possibility that the meaning here is intangible, such as the advantage of experience one derives through working (intrinsic value) or the influence one could have over the others in the work context (social value).

Like 14:23, 23:4–5 may project more than one work value. Two verbs control the message of 23:4–5: תִּיגַע, “to be weary,” and לְהַעֲשִׂיר, “to be rich.” It is the latter, however, that the sage is concerned with. After the appearance of לְהַעֲשִׂיר in the first colon of v. 4, the remainder of the text develops this motif. The message is that wealth or riches can be ephemeral. The admonition against תִּיגַע is only in relation to the pursuit of the explicit goal of creating wealth. Wealth emerges as an extrinsic value in 23:4–5, although there is some level of reservation about it.⁴² What is the sage’s problem with the pursuit of wealth? Wealth can be deceptive. It can create frustration and disillusionment, one should be careful to not be fixated on wealth. If wealth is created through one’s work, it is a good thing. However, one should not allow oneself to be controlled by the search for wealth in a way that causes exhaustion to the body.

It follows that the sage’s reservation in 23:4–5 is about excessive desire and overly striving for wealth. In this case, the

42. Wealth is valuable in Proverbs. As Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 113, indicates, Israelite sages with their Near Eastern counterparts shared the common view that wealth is a sign of blessing “though some qualify this assessment in various ways.”

problem is not so much about wealth as it is the pursuer. Although it is wealth that receives negative evaluation, it is the pursuer who is advised to apply wisdom with respect to the pursuit of wealth. One does not become rich arbitrarily. As implied by the sage, the character of the one who becomes rich, as well as the manner in which wealth is attained are important.

While 14:23 exhorts and inspires audiences to believe in life's principle that hard work leads to gain, 23:4–5 adds the message that there is a need for caution when one's goal for working is to amass wealth; wealth can lead to exhaustion of body and can create frustration. Work should in no way compromise the life of the worker, no matter the goal for working. Intrinsic work values are implied in the wisdom offered here. Although hard work is good (as in 14:23) it should be carried out in a manner that optimizes life (23:4–5). Thus, even wealth (one of the most attractive goals for work) should not diminish the truth that work is for humans and not the reverse. The prohibition against hard work in 23:4, therefore, is in relation to the inordinate pursuit of wealth, a dangerous disposition to life. It can be argued that the two sayings complement each other in guiding their audiences into appreciating the complex relationship between work and its outcomes, especially wealth.

Proverbs 14:23 and 23:4–5, and their respective work values, point to the important role work plays in the socio-economic life of ancient Israelites. The prominence of extrinsic work values in the two texts shows ancient Israel's commitment to ensuring the sustenance of the society. In several sayings, work is promoted as the primary source of food, as well as income for basic needs (cf. 12:11; 19:15; 20:4; 27:23–26). Again, extrinsic work values reveal some aspect of ancient Israel's understanding of wealth creation. That is, hard work is encouraged as a socially acceptable way to create wealth (10:4; 12:11, 27; 13:4; 28:19), although in some cases (as in 23:4–5) the sages call for prudence when wealth becomes the main goal for work. The implied presence of intrinsic work values and social work values in the two sayings indicate the indispensable place of work in human life and the importance of social relations in the work context respectively. The centrality of work in the life of humans, for Israelite sages,

is not only because through work individuals and societies achieve sustenance, but also that work is an integral part of what it means to be human. This idea is prominent in the characterization of the sluggard, who, because of the absence of work in his life, is depicted as a disillusioned figure (cf. 19:4; 22:13). Also, through work, individuals and society stand to benefit from the social bond that the work context provides. For instance, in 10:5, work presents the “son” (בן) an opportunity to honor his family.

Conclusion

Proverbial sayings within these collections present many challenges. The absence of a performance context strips them of their dynamic social environs and in effect constrains their semantic range. As part of the wisdom tradition, however, Proverbs retains its associations with other wisdom books. Considered as the foundation of Israelite wisdom, conservative and optimistic, Proverbs is often contrasted with Job and Ecclesiastes where optimism dissipates and is replaced with doubts and skepticism. But as some scholars note, the suspicion against conservative wisdom has traces in Proverbs.⁴³ In the particular case of Prov 14:23 and 23:4–5, there appears to be a notable similarity in viewpoint and language with Ecclesiastes concerning ideas about labor and its place in human life. How can the Preacher’s ideas help deal with the difficulties in comprehending the apparent contradictions of Prov 14:23 and 23:4–5?

In Prov 14:23, the sage exhorts the audience to have faith in hard work because it pays to work and to work hard. There is a gain to be accrued by the one who works hard. This idea coheres with the Preacher’s message in Eccl 10:18 when he counsels against a slothful life. The optimism in these claims encourages the audience to make the choice for diligence instead of slothfulness. When this wisdom from 14:23 encounters that of 23:4–5, where on the surface reading the audience is advised to desist from hard work that wearies the body in order to create wealth,

43. See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 229–50 and Dell, *The Book of Proverbs*, 83.

one may question the veracity of the claim in 14:23 or the utility of the counsel in 23:4–5. However, the two sayings offer valuable counsel on existential questions such as why we work, what outcomes we expect from our work, and the place of work in our total wellbeing.

Proverbs 14:23 lays the foundation for the inherent connection between humanity and work. The two are inseparable as long as humans continue to live. The phrase “in all labor” shows that the sage is not leaving out any form of work. In other words, one should not be concerned with the kind of work one engages in: so long as it is a legitimate work, one will not lose out. There is a benefit to work, be it extrinsic, intrinsic, or social, work is beneficial to individuals and society. The sage of the saying also directs readers to be conscious of why they engage in work. Working, which involves the exertion of energy, should not be done in vain. This message is important especially when many people consider their work worthless when they fail to gain material benefits from it. As explained above, the “advantage or gain” (מוֹתֵר) of work can be realized in different forms.

This generic message of 14:23 is given a twist in 23:4–5, where this time the sage moves away from justifying the need for humans to work to illustrating the place of work in advancing the wellbeing of humans. By isolating the specific extrinsic value of wealth, the sage first affirms that hard work is one means through which wealth can be created. Indeed, in Eccl 10:19 the Preacher claims that money answers for everything (a claim which can be read cynically); however, the message may be that money does help in life. Wealth enhances human life in varied ways. But this is where the danger lies. Thus, through the rhetoric of 23:4–5, the sage places human life above wealth. Similarly, the Preacher notices that excessive wealth from one’s toil can be problematic; not only does wealth dwindle, but also leads to sleepless nights. For the sage, the pursuit of wealth through hard work cannot rule one’s life. If one allows the quest for wealth to overtake the good sense of optimizing how one works, then such a person is a fool. He misses out on the wisdom behind work and its value in human life.

As the Preacher implies in his message, labor is part of human fate. On the one hand, it helps one acquire pleasures for enjoyment, but on the other hand, it is a painful and frustrating experience (2:22–23) in which one is not guaranteed the enjoyment of one's profits as they may go to a fool (2:18), or another person (2:21). The message about labor, and its corollary, wealth, is not straight forward; it is a mystery the Preacher tries to fathom. Similarly, Prov 14:23 and 23:4–5 capture the intriguing relationship between human fate and human desire as it pertains to work and its role in human life. The wisdom here, perhaps, is that humans need to continuously rethink the place of work in our lives, and more importantly, the value placed on the benefits derived from work.

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