

In the school of wisdom: an interpretation of some Old Testament proverbs in a Northern Sotho context¹

M J Masenya (UniN)

ABSTRACT

Proverbs on child-parent relationships in the Old Testament and in Northern Sotho are compared, to determine the possibility of contextualising biblical proverbs in an African context for teaching purposes. Methods, presuppositions and a hypothesis are considered in a theoretical section to enable us to compare paroemiological issues in such different world-views. Specific proverbs from the Old Testament and the Northern Sotho culture are interpreted as metaphors in a practical exercise to prove the hypothesis that contextualisation is possible through the use of the hermeneutics of cultural relativity.

A INTRODUCTION: HYPOTHESIS, METHODS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

The main question of this paper is: is it possible to interpret the theme 'parent-child relationships in a family context' from the Book of Proverbs with success to Northern Sotho students? This is a hermeneutical problem, a problem of understanding between cultures (Kiewiet 1985:1-14). My *hypothesis* is: it is possible to contextualise Old Testament proverbs in a Northern Sotho society through the use of cultural hermeneutics, since proverbs in all languages are basically the same as far as their metaphorical and sapiential nature go and are therefore compatible.

The following *methods* were used in order to grapple with the problem of this research:

- 1 *Form criticism for Old Testament proverbs.* This method was used in the exegesis of the Old Testament proverbs to shed more light on their form/structure, their genres and their *Sitz im Leben* (if this could be identified).
- 2 *A literary approach to Northern Sotho proverbs.* Seitel's (1972) literary approach to proverb study has been useful in this regard. It stems from the representational nature of proverbs. Proverbs are

metaphorical statements that represent particular social settings. This representational character of proverbs necessitates that attention be given to Seitel's theory of proverbs as metaphors.

3 Comparative approach to cultures. This research is basically a comparative study since it compares Hebrew proverbs with their Northern Sotho counterparts on the basis of the following main criteria: (a) Proverbs and world-view; (b) Proverbs as language; and (c) Similarities and differences in subject matter.

This research is based on the following *presuppositions*:

Firstly, cultural relativity which proposes that statements from one culture - though strongly influenced by it - can be understood and accepted by members of a different culture (Deist 1983:x).

Secondly, common world-view and wisdom perspective. Both the Old Testament and Africa (i.e. the Northern Sotho culture) share a common wisdom perspective, an optimistic simplistic outlook on life. According to this world-view, there is an order that has been set by God for Israel and the gods (*badimo*) for Africa to which people should adhere. Failure to submit to its demands leads to punishment and adherence to it leads to reward.

Pertaining to this commonality between the Old Testament and Africa, Phillips (1942:13) argues:

In short, the Church in this continent, though only partly acquainted with this part of the Bible, feels a natural affinity with it, and is not likely to neglect it when the whole becomes more accessible. Misuse, misunderstanding or over-emphasis is likely to be more common than rejection or neglect; hence the Church in Africa has much to gain from a clearer insight into and firmer grasp of the Old Testament's true place and function in God's self-manifestation to the world.

B SELECTED TEXTS FROM PROVERBS ON FAMILY WISDOM: A BACKGROUND STUDY

Since we are dealing with the contextualisation of Old Testament (source culture) proverbs in a Northern Sotho (recipient culture) situation, an exposition of the Hebrew proverbs that relate to parent-child

relationships in a family context has served as our point of departure. However, before this could be done, a background study of selected texts was made. From this brief study, the following points have been noted:

1 Wisdom types and periods

The following three *wisdom types* can be distinguished in the history of Israel: (a) 'family' or 'tribal' wisdom, which is the oldest of them all; (b) 'court wisdom', the wisdom of Solomon's court, and (c) 'formal wisdom' which was taught at legal scribal schools by lay authorities who, with their skills, interpreted the law of Moses (Gottwald 1985:567-568).

In line with these three types of wisdom, three *periods* can be noted: (a) the era before the institution of the monarchy, (b) the monarchical period, and (c) the post-exilic period.

There are different ways in which Israelite wisdom was received. (a) The first phase witnessed an unreflective and 'non-problematic' view on wisdom. (b) The second phase, termed 'dogmatic', was characterised by rigidity. (c) The system proclaimed by the dogmatic phase met with criticism in the third phase. The books of Job and Qoheleth are manifestations of this sapiential 'protest' phase.

These different phases of wisdom in Israel can be classified in the book of Proverbs as follows:

a *Proverbs 1-9* (which is normally dated in the post-exilic period from the fourth century BC) reflects the first two phases of the development of wisdom in Israel, namely, the non-problematic phase and the dogmatic phase (Loader 1986:128).

b *Proverbs 10-29* portrays the optimism of the old wisdom tradition. Like the previous collection (Pr 1-9), this collection agrees unconditionally with the old wisdom tradition that if, for instance, someone is righteous, that person will surely be successful in life and, should the opposite apply, the evildoers will suffer failure and calamity. These chapters also imply that should an individual be successful in life one would automatically assume that he or she must be righteous, while the individual who suffers failure in life must be a wicked person. This collection thus also reflects the situation of the non-problematic and dogmatic phases (Loader 1986:128).

From this it can be concluded that the wisdom of the book of

Proverbs is optimistic, which contrasts with the more pessimistic views on wisdom reflected in the book of Job, and even more clearly in Qoheleth (Loader 1986:128).

2 The life setting of the Old Testament wisdom literature with particular reference to the book of Proverbs

Practitioners of form criticism like Hermann Gunkel contend that there is a similarity between 'life setting' and form. However, in the case of wisdom literature, similarity between life setting and form is somehow less important – as is evident from the answers to the following questions: From what *Sitz im Leben* did the Old Testament wisdom saying arise? Was it a teaching situation? If so, this still has to be defined. Was the teaching conducted by parents, a clan elder, court instructor or religious teacher? The form does not need to differ from one person to another: 'my son', for instance, can be used as a title of address in all four instances. Another inference is that the sayings in Proverbs 10-29 (cf particularly Pr 22:17 – 24:22) are largely pre-exilic and supposedly derived from the Jerusalem court. Though these assumptions are reasonable, it is significant to note a shift in one very significant feature. The book of Proverbs, as it now stands, comes from the pens of post-exilic sages – even though there are chapters (cf Pr 22:17 – 24:22) with the Jerusalem court as their life setting; this shows that there has been a shift from one life setting to another. Furthermore, it should be noted that there was wisdom in Israel such as tribal or family wisdom even before the institution of the court. This wisdom type is also reflected in Proverbs 10-29. Thus, because of the variety of 'life settings' in the book of Proverbs, the book itself can be termed a 'life setting' (Murphy 1967:482; Fohrer 1968:320-321).

3 The significance of the concept 'family'

a *The Israelite family in the pre-exilic period*

From the time of the earliest documents, the Israelite family is patriarchal, properly described as **בית אב** (the house of one's father).

In Israelite marriage the husband was the **בעל** (master) of his wife. He had total authority over his children and even over his married sons and their wives if they resided with him (De Vaux 1968:20). In the home, the father had the responsibility of securing the safety of his chil-

dren and providing for them. Both parents had a shared responsibility in the education of their children. The latter were obliged to obey their parents. It was the parents' right to demand this obedience, since the parents shared in the universal fatherhood of God and as such shared in his power and authority.

The Israelite 'family' constituted those united by common blood and a common place of abode. The Hebrew word used was **בית** (Neh 7:4). The family had, apart from its blood members, servants, resident foreigners (**גרים**), people without political rights, widows and orphans, who all found their security in the head of the family. However, **בית** (house), like the word 'family', was very flexible and could include the whole nation, for example **בית ישראל** (the house of Israel), or even a larger section of the nation, for example **בית יהודה** (the house of Judah).

In the period before the monarchy in Israel, the **בית אב** (the father's house or extended family) was the basic socio-economic unit (Gottwald 1979:315). As a socio-economic unit, the family came to assume a very conspicuous role theologically because the life of Israel as a community rested on the family's stability (Camp 1985:245).

However, with the advent of the monarchical period, the situation changed. Rarely was there mention of a father surrounded by persons other than his unmarried children. During this time, the authority of the head of the family was limited. A shift in the locus of authority from the family to the king occurred.

During and after the exile, however, a different situation arose. During this period, the family was not only the basic unit of productivity, but the centre around which the political authority of the community revolved. The family continued to be a social and economic unit despite the destruction of the unity of Judah as a political entity.

b 'Family' in the Book of Proverbs in the post-exilic context

The book of Proverbs, perhaps more than any other, clearly presents a picture of the socio-economic significance of the family. It gives the picture of an ideal family atmosphere. Here the children are supposed to obey the instruction of their parents while the parents, in turn, have the responsibility of teaching their children the commandments regarding life (cf Pr 1:8,9; 4:3,4; 6:20).

Some elements in the book's present composition make sense within a post-exilic context – for example, the final redactions of 1:6; 6:20;

23:22-25; and 31:10-11, which portray instruction by the mother and father in the setting of a home. This book, however, depicts the family rather than the cult as the source of social organisation and the arena of God's blessing (Camp 1985:252).

C WISDOM FROM AN ISRAELITE PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

A review of all the verses dealing with parent-child relationships in the book of Proverbs reveals the following picture of an ideal Israelite family:

1 The responsibility of the father and mother

In an ideal Israelite family, the two parents have a shared responsibility in the upbringing of their children, hence the recurrence of the pair אב and אִמָּה in most of the texts. Both parents were expected to educate their children according to the **יִרְאָה יְהוָה**, the fear of the Lord, so that they could be wise. Though both of them had a shared responsibility in training their children to be acceptable adults, it would appear that the role of the father in this regard was more marked than that of the mother. This is proved by the fact that there are a number of texts in which the father features in his relationship with his children. This conspicuous role of the father in child upbringing could be due to the fact that Israelite society (including the family) was hierarchical.

The following examples from the Book of Proverbs will suffice: 1:8-9; 6:20-22.

2 The responsibility of children

As parents taught their children wisdom in an attempt to train them to be responsible adults of the future, it was assumed that this attempt would meet with different responses from children. There would be wise children who would listen to the words of their parents. Such children made their parents pleased with them. On the other hand, there were children who would not listen to the words of wisdom handed down to them by their parents. These were referred to as fools. It was also recognised that rejection of the words of wisdom from their parents would vary, hence the use of different words for a fool (for example:

לֵץ, כְּטִיל etc). The parents of such children could not have joy.

Worthy of note is the fact that verses embarking on wise and foolish children predominate within the relevant collections of the book of Proverbs. It can therefore be concluded that the child, rather than the parent, is given a marked place in the verses dealing with family relationships in this book.

The following examples from the Book of Proverbs will suffice: 13:1, 19:26; 23:22.

3 Rewards: an optimistic sapiential philosophy

In an Israelite family it was assumed that if a parent was righteous, his/her children would be blessed – and vice versa. Such an assumption followed the same line of thought as the one that indicated that if a child was wise, his/her parents would be joyful and if he/she was foolish they would derive nothing but sorrow from him/her. These assumptions portray the optimistic world-view found in the book of Proverbs. It was not considered, for example, that parents could be righteous and their children not be blessed. Such a philosophy of life was based on the notion of certain rewards for certain actions; evil actions would be punished while good actions would be rewarded positively.

D WISDOM FROM A NORTHERN SOTHO VIEWPOINT: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN PERSPECTIVE

1 A typical Northern Sotho family

Among the Northern Sotho speaking people, like in any other group, the family is a social unit which is basic and fundamental. It can assume two forms: a simple legal variety in which the man has one wife, and a compound one in which the man is a polygamist (Mönnig 1967:208, Preston-Whyte 1974:179). Traditionally, the Northern Sotho husband has a final say in the family, whether simple or compound. Because all Southern African tribes are patrilineal (compare also the Israelite tribes) strong emphasis is laid on the authority of the male. Children are economically, emotionally and juridically dependent on their parents. This point highlights the role played by parents in the rearing of their children. However, a child's physical parents are not the only people responsible for moulding its behaviour; all people around it were looked upon as models for right behaviour – they could praise or punish the

child's conduct and it could learn from them by imitating them. This elucidates the corporate nature of African family relationships (Van der Vliet 1974:211,212; Junod & Jacques 1936:125).

Respect for seniors is therefore one of the basic rules enforced on Southern African children by parents. Pertaining to this, Van der Vliet (1974:218) argues: 'Political, religious, kinship and social relations are all organised around the principles of seniority and male dominance, demanding that each individual know his position in the hierarchy, and the appropriate respect due to every other member of the group'. For this reason children are taught to obey their parents unconditionally; failure to do so will lead to trouble (Hammond-Tooke 1974:360; Hoffman 1957:123).

In a traditional family, if sons married, they tended to bring their wives to their father's homestead, resulting in the formation of an extended family. It was rare to find a simple legal family or a compound one living as independent units. Nevertheless, the situation is changing today. This is particularly true of Christian societies in which the couple finds itself under pressure to leave the family at marriage or soon thereafter.

A Northern Sotho family today, unlike in the past, normally constitutes a father, one wife (by Christian influence) and their children. This is basically the case amongst the elite members of the community. This situation reminds us of the Israelites, as discussed previously. In Israel too, in the period before the monarchy, it was possible to have extended families. However, with the introduction of the monarchy, the conditions were reversed: the families basically comprised a father, mother and their unmarried children.

2 Relevant aspects of the Northern Sotho world-view

Traditionally, the Northern Sotho-speaking people have a conception of a Creator God who is no longer interested in human affairs. There are various ways of explaining God's withdrawal; for example, he became tired of the demanding first couple. This situation is in complete contrast to that of the Israelites. They believed in a Creator who was also active in history. The Northern Sotho-speaking people believed in the existence of an unseen order (set by the gods) which was supposed to mould human lives. If people could submit to this order by leading lives that were in harmony with the societal norms and values, they would be prosperous. If however, they failed to submit to this order they could be

punished.

Such a view of the world and the Creator God exhibits the same *wisdom trends* that we notice in the Old Testament. Perhaps we can also describe it as a dogmatic or non-problematic view of life, as we did with the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Northern Sotho wisdom restores the balance in society, according to the order that is expected by the ancestral spirits.

3 Wisdom in Northern Sotho proverbs

As with the Israelite proverbs, which form part and parcel of Israel's wisdom literature, the Northern Sotho proverbs are a wisdom genre of African folklore. They are the sum total of the everyday life experience of the community (Krappe 1965:148). In this regard, McLaren (1917:332) contends: 'There is little doubt that the shortest route to a knowledge of the Bantu psychology and the Bantu ethics is through the study of their proverbs on the one hand, and the folklore and fables on the other'.

Some of the Northern Sotho proverbs *originated* from mythology. This makes sense if we bear in mind that the Northern Sotho people, like most Africans, set great store in the belief that ancestral spirits (*badimo*) are actively involved in their lives. Some proverbs have originated from folk-tales; however, whether proverbs originated from tales or vice versa cannot be proved with certainty. Other proverbs originated from history. Most of the proverbs, however, came as a result of careful observation by community members of human and animal behaviour, and the observation of things in general in the environment (Nyembezi 1954; Bezuidenhout 1981:21-66).

It is difficult or almost impossible to trace the formation of individual Northern Sotho proverbs. The question of how and by whom the earliest proverbs were formed is purely guesswork. In this regard, Taylor (1985:3) argues: 'The origins of the proverb have been little studied. We can only rarely see a proverb actually in the making, and any beliefs we have regarding origins must justify themselves as evident or at least plausible'.

Northern Sotho proverbs originated from individuals or even a group of people and were later adopted by the community. Proof of individual origination ('monogenesis') lies in the metaphoric use, the form and the unique frame of each aphorism (Krappe 1965:144).

Associated with the question of the origin of individual Northern So-

the proverbs is the problem of their usage. According to Seitel, to do justice to proverb study the researcher must combine both text and context – which means content and usage.

Northern Sotho proverbs can be used in a variety of ways since they portray different situations. Some of the *functions* that proverbs serve are as follows: Some proverbs have a *didactic function*, which is geared at educating, inspiring, warning and advising. Some are used in *oratory*; this usage was particularly conspicuous in law cases and disputes. Proverbs can also assume an *advisory function*. They can, furthermore, serve a *practical function* – that is, proverbs can be used to point out the practicability of certain things in life.

The many functions that Northern Sotho proverbs serve shed light on the importance of proverbs among the Northern Sotho people. As these proverbs are used, they communicate a particular world-view by interpreting and analysing people's experience and recognising particular circumstances (Finnegan 1970:414; Nyembezi 1954:xii).

4 The proverb and the metaphor

One of the *characteristics of proverbs* is that they are situation-bound. Because of this, they have a *representational function* which necessitates taking into account the metaphor in general terms. This is the case because a proverb is a metaphorical representation or description of the situation that it speaks about.

A *metaphor* can be defined in general terms as a figure of speech in language, which is used to employ one reference to a group of items in a given relationship so as to establish an analogous relationship with another group which also holds in a given relationship (cf Seitel 1972:18). As *analogy*, metaphor is a relationship that can be portrayed as follows: A:B::C:D (A is to B as C is to D). A metaphor has two basic components: a tenor, which is the principal subject, and a vehicle, or a subject commenting on the principal subject. In the analogical relationship A:B::C:D, A:B is the vehicle and C:D is the tenor and the relationship itself is a complete metaphor (Seitel 1972:20,21). The relationship can be illustrated as follows in the following proverb:

Kgaka // ya hwa // mac // a bola
A C B D

A (Kgaka/ a crowned guinea bird/parent) is to B (mac/eggs/children)

as C (ya hwa/if it dies/if the parent dies) is to D (a bola/they get spoiled/children suffer). In this relationship A:B is the vehicle and C:D is the tenor.

Another term which shows some relation to a metaphor is *metonymy*. An understanding of both is necessary for the better analysis of proverb study (Seitel 1972:27). A metaphoric relationship only occurs when items being compared are mutually exclusive – in other words, if they are not compatible and they also come from different domains. Metonymy, on the other hand, has to do with a relationship of entities by virtue of the fact that they share the same domain (Seitel 1972:29,32; Grobler 1978:7,8).

The question of the *function of the metaphor* is also important. Critics agree that one of the main functions of a metaphor is to enable the reader to identify relationships among entities which are not always recognisable. Metaphor, as artistic speech, serves to draw attention to itself (the signifier), but it also functions to draw attention by analogy to some features of the subject it refers to (i.e. the tenor or the signified). As regards the relevant Northern Sotho proverbs, it is noteworthy that most of them are fully or partially metaphorical.

5 Northern Sotho wisdom regarding parent-child relationships

a *Parent-child relationships*

In a traditional Northern Sotho family, parents, together with society, played a very important role compared to that of children. Parents were supposed to care for their children and to train them to be good family members and good neighbours because, if they failed in this respect, children would be ill-behaved and society would lay the blame on the parents. Parents were also expected to discipline their children. Discipline was to be executed in love and with the consideration that the wrongs committed by children were not done purposely. Although a traditional Northern Sotho child was supposed to conform without question to the dictates of his elders, there were a few exceptions to this pattern. There were children who despised the constant advice of their parents, those who cursed their parents and those who led wild lives, et cetera. According to the Northern Sotho world-view, children receded into the background most of the time; however, their significance was recognised.

Most of the themes of the Northern Sotho proverbs treated in this

research reveal non-problematic and dogmatic views on the traditional reality of the Northern Sotho people: a disobedient child was to be rewarded with evil while an obedient one would be rewarded with good. If a child was ill-behaved, it was safely concluded that he/she copied that behaviour from his/her parents. Exceptions to this were given little or no place. In the family, the parent (particularly the father), rather than the child, was conspicuous.

b The style and structure of Northern Sotho proverbs

With regard to their structure, Northern Sotho proverbs, as with those of Hebrew or any other language, have a pithy, terse form. Most comprise two related lines: one may carry the idea of the other further by using the same idea in different words, or even by contrast. This use of two or more such related lines is called parallelism. This is supported by the Northern Sotho and Old Testament preference for balance: one line in most cases balances its counterpart.

In conclusion, it should be indicated that not all Northern Sotho proverbs treated in this research apply only to the theme of the parent-child relationship in a family context. Some can be used in non-familial contexts. This fact testifies to the truth that one proverb can be used in a variety of social situations.

c Northern Sotho family relationships in changing context

Another important fact worth noting is that the Northern Sotho proverbs included in this research give us an idea about typical/traditional Northern Sotho family relationships. It should, however, be remembered that Africa has experienced radical changes in the second half of the nineteenth century, which has also influenced the family setup (Mbiti 1969:216). For this reason the present Northern Sotho family is not exactly the same as the one portrayed in the proverbs treated in this research.

In a traditional Northern Sotho family, the object of training was to make an individual a better member of the family and also of society. Children had to obey their elders unquestioningly. In contrast, the situation of the modern Northern Sotho family is pathetic. Children are ill-mannered, stubborn, show little or no respect for parents, let alone other elderly people. They think only about their own pleasures (Scha-

pera 1939:265,266). This is in complete contrast to the situation of a traditional Northern Sotho family, in which a child submitted without choice to the authority of all other people who could also freely discipline it. There is a shift to individualism, which affects both parents and children. On the one hand, parents in the family deem it their sole responsibility to train their children to be good adults. On the other hand, children, through their education among other things, are exposed to a Western lifestyle. As a result, they develop a feeling of individual responsibility which makes them self-sufficient (Schapera 1939:267,268; Mbiti 1969:225).

Another factor that breaks the corporeal morality previously enjoyed by traditional Northern Sotho society is the influence of migrant labour. This removes the father, who is the ultimate figure of authority in the family, from it. This removal has far-reaching consequences for child-rearing, as children are left to the care of the mother, whose weaker authority is not as highly esteemed by children.

One other contributory factor to the decline in the morals of a modern Northern Sotho child is that parents no longer fulfil the role they used to play in teaching their children the norms and values of society. They also set a bad example to their children in words, deeds and attitudes.

As a result of these changes in modern society, Northern Sotho children are different from traditional ones. It is, however, interesting to note that recently there has been a feeling of national identity among the African people (including the Northern Sotho). There is a tendency to revert to the traditional culture (Duminy 1968:49). However, regarding the matter of respect for seniors, modern youth does not seem to admire their traditional counterparts.

Having cast some light on the wisdom perspectives of these two groups of people, the Hebrews and the Northern Sothos, we can now attempt to answer the main question of this research: Is it possible to contextualise Hebrew proverbs with success to Northern Sotho-speaking students? The section that follows will make an attempt at finding the answer.

E WISDOM INTO WISDOM: AN EXERCISE IN CONTEXTUALISATION

1 Contextualisation: A theoretical issue

The object of this research is a hermeneutical problem. It necessitates a

review of the content of the previous two sections, which deal with Hebrew and Northern Sotho wisdom (as portrayed in their proverbs) respectively. By placing the contents of the proverbs of these two cultures side by side according to different themes/categories, an attempt will be made to investigate similarities and differences between them, and in this way open the possibility of contextualising them.

Israelite and Northern Sotho proverbs dealing with the parent-child theme show both similarities and dissimilarities. The similarities appear to be more than the differences. On the basis of certain common criteria an attempt will be made to compare them.

Contextualisation, as we noted previously, is a hermeneutical problem. In the case of the Old Testament, hermeneutics can be defined as a science that attempts to translate the statements (proverbs) of the culture that produced the Old Testament to the members of the recipient, Northern Sotho, culture. We are therefore dealing here with a problem of cross-cultural communication. What is significant in cross-cultural communication is the cultural world-view(s) of the people concerned (Burden & Bosman 1982:74). World-view refers to the central systematisation of conceptions of reality that members of a culture adhere to, which are the source of their value system (Kraft 1979:53). It serves to shape the culture of the people.

The question that can now be posed is whether the statements of one culture can be accessible and acceptable in a different culture. This paper is based on cultural relativity, which argues – contrary to cultural relativism – that statements from one culture can be accepted by members of another.

2 Contextualisation: Hebrew and Northern Sotho proverbs compared

Having got an idea about contextualisation and its related problems, we shall now select a few proverbs from each of the Hebrew and Northern Sotho collections, and compare them for possible contextualisation. The comparison will be based on two of the three basic criteria, namely world-view, language and subject matter.

a World-view and the order in creation: an optimistic outlook

Hebrew proverb

Northern Sotho proverb

Proverbs 10:1

כֵּן חֵכֶם יִשְׂמַח־אָב
: וְכֵן כִּסִּיל תּוֹגַח אִמּוֹ :

*More wo o babago o tšwa
lešiteng (Rakoma 1983:194).*

A wise son will make a
glad father
But a foolish son is sorrow
to his mother

*A sour 'muti' comes from
a (sour) tree(?) (obscure)*

If a child is ill-behaved,
it means that he/she
learned that behaviour
from his/her parents for
they are the ones who
are supposed to train
him/her in the right
way (Rakoma 1983:194).

Proverbs 23:24

גּוֹל יִגּוֹל אָבִי צְדִיק
: יוֹלֵךְ חֵכֶם וַיִּשְׂמַח־כּוֹ :

The father of the righteous
will greatly rejoice;
he who begets a wise son
will be glad in him (RSV).

The three proverbs indicated above reflect the optimistic world-view shared by both the Hebrews and the Northern Sotho people. This common world-view is simple and uncritical. It does not accommodate change easily. According to this simplistic outlook on reality, what a child or parent does, automatically affects the other. The result is clear: a foolish child on the one hand will necessarily make his/her parents sorrowful and a wise one will be their delight; on the other hand, the good or bad behaviour of a child comes from the wise or foolish ap-

proach of the parents. In both cultures, slight allowance is made for the possibility of a child being evil while his/her parents are good, or a wise son who makes his parents sorrowful.

The main reason for both cultures holding such an outlook on life is their shared concept of an order that was supposed to be satisfied by people in their daily lives. Both the Hebrews and the Northern Sothos had the conviction that if this concept was not satisfied, an imbalance would be caused and have to be balanced accordingly.

b Similarities and differences in subject matter: the responsibility of parents for education

Hebrew proverb

Northern Sotho proverb

Proverbs 1:8-9

שמע בני מוסר אבִיךָ
ואל־חטשׁ חורח אִמֶךָ
כי לויח חן הם לראשׁך
וענקים לגרגרחיך:

*Rutang bana ditaola le se ye
natšo badimong (Erasmus
[sa]:100; Rakoma 1983:225)*

Hear, my son, the chastening
of your father,
and do not disregard the
teaching of your mother:
For they are a garland to
your head, and necklaces for
your neck.

*Teach your children (to
use) divining bones and
you must not go with
them (the bones) to the
ancestors.*

Parents are supposed to
provide their children
with proper education
(societal norms and
values). Then even
after their death,
their children will
be able to survive
(Rakoma 1983:225).

The above proverbs have a common teaching: Israelite and Northern Sotho parents (both fathers and mothers) had the task of educating their offspring according to their societal traditions, to make them bet-

ter adults. The presentation of this theme in each culture is however different. The Israelite proverb is Yahweh-orientated while the Northern Sotho proverb is devoid of God. The reason for the latter is probably because, for the Northern Sotho, as we noted previously, God is deemed to have withdrawn from human affairs.

Another difference between the presentation of the theme of parents' responsibility to educate their children is that the Hebrew proverbs give prominence to the children while the Northern Sotho ones lay emphasis on the parent.

Noteworthy is the fact that though these proverbs have different styles of presenting their tenors, they have a common lesson: Parents should educate their children in order for them to be good adults in future.

To conclude this section on the criteria on which contextualisation is based, we should indicate that, though we noted a few differences between the proverbs of these two cultures on parent-child relationships in a family context, they are however minor. The proverbs of both cultures have a basic common view on parent-child relationships in a family context: parents should care for their children and the latter should respect their parents.

However, it should be indicated that the information gleaned from the relevant Northern Sotho proverbs applies to the *traditional* Northern Sotho people. We have noted changes in the Northern Sotho society of today. Therefore, we will also have to consider the possibility of contextualisation in a changing or changed Northern Sotho society.

In an attempt to contextualise these Hebrew proverbs for the modern Northern Sotho child in the classroom situation, teachers should encourage Northern Sotho students to promote their identity, to identify with their culture. This will not be too difficult an exercise for, as we noted previously, African people have recently tended to identify themselves as a nation, particularly as Black South Africans. As a teacher, I will encourage my students to develop a love for the wisdom of their own people; they should be conversant with Northern Sotho folklore (proverbs, riddles, tales, etc). As they acquaint themselves with these, they will come to appreciate the teaching contained in them and also to apply it. If they can be motivated to this stage of appreciation and application of the teaching of their proverbs, they will then appreciate and understand the teaching of the Hebrew proverbs that show similarities with their own proverbs.

In contextualising these Hebrew proverbs in the Northern Sotho

teaching/learning situation, the teacher will have to employ appropriate teaching methods, didactic principles, and teaching/learning aids in order to make his teaching successful.

F AN APPRAISAL AND CONCLUSIONS

This research has been an attempt to translate the wisdom of the Old Testament proverbs from Hebrew into the Northern Sotho culture. Since this study deals with two different cultures, a number of problems had to be dealt with. Problems encountered were distance in time, language, culture, and hermeneutical approaches.

The hypothesis of this research was originally stated as follows: *It is possible to contextualise Old Testament proverbs in a Northern Sotho society through the use of cultural hermeneutics, since proverbs in all languages are basically the same as far as their metaphorical and sapiental nature go and are therefore compatible.*

The following criteria have been used to prove the validity of this hypothesis: common world-view, proverbs as language, and common subject matter. A review of these criteria reveals that there is much in common between the Hebrew and Northern Sotho proverbs. Therefore it has been possible to prove the hypothesis partially correct. The reasons that the hypothesis has not proved to be completely correct are the following:

Firstly, Hebrew and Northern Sotho are two different cultures and it will therefore not be possible to have a one-to-one basis of contextualisation; secondly, there is the realisation that modern Northern Sotho society is changed or changing.

The fact that the original hypothesis of this research has been proved partially correct, has necessitated its reformulation. *Despite the common characteristics of proverbs in all languages, their contextualisation depends upon their degree of compatibility. It is therefore possible to translate Hebrew proverbs on parent-child relationships in a family context with partial success in a traditional or typical, as well as in a contemporary, Northern Sotho society. The cultural differences will always limit understanding, but also open up new ways for understanding.*

This research will possibly be helpful in teaching, preaching and translation situations. Most previous studies on proverbs have concentrated on either the text or context of Old Testament and Northern Sotho proverbs. This research has been an attempt to combine both the text and context of these proverbs. According to Seitel (1972:9) such an

approach does justice to proverb study. It will be worthwhile for future researchers in proverb studies to take this combined approach into account.

Another important aspect of paroemiology that this research has highlighted is the study of proverbs as metaphors. The latter, as an aspect of proverb study, has been neglected in the past. Future studies will probably also benefit by giving attention to this approach.

ENDNOTE

- 1 This is part of the research completed by the writer in 1989 for a MA degree in Biblical Studies at Unisa under this title.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bezuidenhout, J S 1981. *Die Noord-Sotho spreekwoord en gesegde: 'n Stilistiese analise*. MA-verhandeling, University of Potchefstroom, Potchefstroom.
- Burden, J J & Bosman, H L 1982. *Only guide for OTB302-3*. Pretoria: Unisa.
- Camp, C V 1985. *Wisdom and the feminine in the book of Proverbs*. England: Almond.
- Deist, F E 1983. *Only Guide for HBS401-V, HOT401-B, HNT401-5*. Pretoria: Unisa.
- Deist, F E & Vorster, W S (eds) 1986. *Words from afar*. Cape Town: Tafelberg. (LOT 1.)
- De Vaux, R 1968. *Ancient Israel: Its life and institutions*. London: Darton Longman & Todd.
- Duminy, P A 1968. *African pupils and teaching them*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Erasmus, J G [sa]. *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho Spreekwoorde*. Johannesburg: APB.
- Finnegan, R 1970. *Oral literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fohrer, G 1968. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. London: Abingdon.
- Gottwald, N K 1979. *The tribes of Yahweh*. London: SCM.
- Gottwald, N K 1985. *The Hebrew Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

- Grobler, G M M 1978. Interpretasie van die spreekwoord in Noord Sotho. MA-verhandeling, Universiteit van Pretoria.
- Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed) 1974. *The Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hoffman, C 1957. Customs of the Basotho in Northern Transvaal. *AUL* 41, 73-86.
- Junod, H P & Jacques A A 1936. *The wisdom of the Tonga-Shangaan people*. Pretoria: Central Mission.
- Kiewiet, J J 1985. Hermeneutics in historical perspective. *SWJT* 16, 1-14.
- Kraft, C H 1979. *Christianity in culture: a study in dynamic biblical theologizing in cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Maryknoll.
- Krappe, A H 1965. *The science of folklore*. London: Methuen.
- Loader, J A 1986. Texts with a wisdom perspective in Deist, F E & Vorster, W S (eds) 1986. *Words from afar*. Cape Town: Tafelberg. (LOT 1.)
- Mbiti, J S 1969. *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- McLaren, J 1917. The Wit and Wisdom of the Bantu as illustrated in their proverbial sayings. *SAJS* 14, 330-334.
- Mönnig, H O 1967. *The Pedi*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Murphy, R E 1967. Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature. *CBQ* 31, 475-483.
- Nyembezi, C L 1954. *Zulu proverbs*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University.
- Phillips, G E 1942. *The Old Testament in the World Church*. London: Lutherworth.
- Preston-Whyte, E 1974. Kingship and marriage, in Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed), *Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa*, 177-210. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rakoma, J R D 1983. *Marema-ka-dika tša Sesotho sa Leboa*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Schapera, I 1939. *Married life in an African tribe*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Seitel, P 1972. *Proverbs and the structure of metaphor among the Haya of Tanzania*. Michigan: Ann Arbor.
- Taylor, A 1985. *The Proverb and an index to "The Proverb"*. Bern: Lang.

Van der Vliet, V 1974. Growing up in traditional society, in Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed). *Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa*, 211-245. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

M J Masenya, Department of Biblical Studies, University of the North, Private Bag X1102, Sovenga, 0727. Republic of South Africa.