

# “Hear, My Daughter, the Instructions of Your Mother!”

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## ABSTRACT

*The prevalence of admonitions to the young man in the instructions in Prov 1–9 is well attested, but this article decries the dearth of admonitions to the young girl in the unit. Whereas it acknowledges the social historical context of the text and the postulations of a school setting origin for the instructions, without precluding a family setting, it points out that the application of the instructions also took (and takes) place in familial settings. The fact that the admonitions were aimed primarily at helping the young man to navigate life in the public arena and, in particular, in the city suggests that the instructions to the young female were overlooked/underplayed, possibly because she was less visible in the public sphere. The emphasis of the text on guiding the young man without giving much thought to the needs of the young female adult resonates with a view of gender which privileges the male child over the female in many African contexts. It is argued that the contemporary discourse on gender and family in the African setting can be enriched by the degenderised ethos embedded in selected Yorùbá and Sotho proverbs presented in this article, which fills the gender gap observed in the Hebrew Bible admonitions of Prov 1–9. The study, therefore, is a quest as well as a call for the construction of new texts and fresh interpretations that will admonish and take into account the visibility of the young woman in today’s public space and that will help invalidate some of the gender disparities observable in many African cultural and family settings.*

**KEYWORDS:** Proverbs 1–9, Sons, Daughters, Yorùbá Proverbs, Northern Sotho Proverbs

## A INTRODUCTION

This essay is written in celebration of the scholarship and person of Professor Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele), a worthy friend and mentor, whom I fondly call “Africa’s own *eshet hayil*”—an epithet I consider well fitting, given

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her pioneering and relentless work on African wisdom, Wisdom literature, the book of Proverbs, (Eco)Bosadi hermeneutics and African Biblical Hermeneutics in general. Professor Masenya’s passion for the text and for social, gender and environmental justice always shines through our engagements of almost two decades in both the academic and private settings. It shines through every encounter with her and her scholarship, revealing again and again a woman of deep-seated wisdom who has weathered many storms communally, professionally and privately, but who continues to hold her head high and hold on to her convictions about what is equitable and what is ethical.

Considering Masenya’s prolific and erudite engagements with African and Hebrew wisdom traditions as well as her unwavering commitment to a gender-conscious approach to the biblical text, it is only apt then to present this essay that juxtaposes, from an African Biblical Hermeneutical perspective, the instructions to sons in Prov 1–9 with Yorùbá proverbs on parental teachings and proverbs from Masenya’s Northern Sotho mother tongue.<sup>1</sup>

## **B PROVERBS 1–9 AND THE INSTRUCTIONS TO ‘THE SONS’**

Whybray has argued persuasively that the social and material background of Prov 1–9 is the city because the text contains various allusions to the busy life of an Israelite city and that the many descriptions of the houses, streets and squares, as well as the invitations to dinner parties, all point to an urban rather than a rural context.<sup>2</sup> He also notes that the text represents the interests of wealthy, self-satisfied, upper-class urban-dwellers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Among Masenya’s many notable engagements with African and Hebrew Proverbs/Wisdom are: “In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context,” *OTE* 4/2 (1991): 171–191; “Wisdom and Wisdom Converge: Selected Old Testament and Northern Sotho Proverbs,” in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Mary Getui, Knut Holter and Victor Zinkurature; Bible and Theology in Africa 2; New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 133–146; *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31: 10-31 in African South Africa* (Bible and Theology in Africa; New York: Peter Lang, 2004); “In the Ant’s School of Wisdom: A Holistic African-South African Reading of Proverbs 6: 6-11,” *OTE* 28/2 (2015): 421–432; “Tamed Identities? Glimpsing Her Identity in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and Selected African Proverbs,” *HTS* 74/1 (2018): 1–6.

<sup>2</sup> Roger N. Whybray, “City Life in Proverbs 1-9,” in *Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit... Studien zur Israelitischen und Altorientalischen Weisheit* (BZAW 241; ed. R.G. Lehmann, E. Otto and A. Wagner; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 245ff. Cf. Katharine J. Dell, “Wisdom and Folly in the City: Exploring Urban Contexts in the Book of Proverbs,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69/4 (2016): 389–401. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S00369306160003752016>.

<sup>3</sup> See Christl Maier, “Conflicting Attractions: Parental Wisdom and the ‘Strange Woman’ in Proverbs 1-9,” in *Wisdom and Psalms* (The Feminist Companion to the

Whereas different settings have been proffered for the unit of Prov 1–9 in general, there is no consensus among scholars. Due to the educational character of the instructions, most scholars identify either of two possible social contexts—the family and the school—without ruling out a court or administrative setting, as that would have taken educated scribes to write down the instructions, that is, if it is assumed that the instructions had an original oral context.<sup>4</sup> It is clear, however, that both the private (family) and the public converge in the setting of the book of Proverbs as a whole. The instructions of chs. 1–9 may have taken place in familial settings but they were aimed primarily at helping the young man to navigate life in the public arena and, in particular, in the city. The unit, which consists mostly of speeches, begins with the voice of a male—a father, admonishing his young son to embrace a moral life that is inspired by wisdom. The young man is warned to shun bad company, crooks, fools, wicked people and the “strange” woman.<sup>5</sup>

It is instructive to note that the father’s instructions to the youth begin in ten sections in chs. 1–9, specifically with the phrase “my son,” *b’ni* in the Hebrew

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Bible, Second Series 2; ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Katharine J. Dell, “Proverbs 1-9: Issues of Social and Theological Context,” *Interpretation* 63/3 (2009): 230–231. Clements argues that the primary institution for wisdom instruction in Israel was the household; see Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (The Didsbury Lectures; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 124ff. Baumann also takes into account the suggestions that the school might be the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the text but she cautions that the existence of such schools has not been proven; Gerlinde Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets: The Literary and Theological Functions of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” in *Wisdom and Psalms* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, Second Series 2; ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 47; cf. Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard’s Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1993), 13–14. Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets,” 47, further argues that although it is difficult to determine the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the text, an approach to the *Sitz-im-Buch*, that is, the literary setting, is more plausible. According to Ceresko, the family and clan as well as the scribal school (which he regards as a part of the royal court) served as the context for the development and transmission of popular wisdom; Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 16–18. Overall, there is no consensus on the *Sitz-im-Leben* of Prov 1–9; cf. Whybray, “City Life in Proverbs 1-9,” 71.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Roy Yoder, “Proverbs,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (Twentieth-Anniversary Edition; Revised and Updated; ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 234.

(1:8–9; 2:1–4; 3:1–2; 3:21–22; 4:1–2; 4:10; 4:20–21; 5:1–2; 6:20–21; 7:1–3),<sup>6</sup> as illustrated below.<sup>7</sup>

Verse	Admonition <sup>8</sup>
1:8	<b>My son</b> , hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother;
1:10	<b>My son</b> , if sinners entice you, Do not consent.
1:15	<b>My son</b> , do not walk in the way with them, Keep your foot from their path;
2:1	<b>My son</b> , if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you,
3:1	<b>My son</b> , do not forget my law, But let your heart keep my commands;
3:11	<b>My son</b> , do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor detest His correction;
3:21	<b>My son</b> , let them not depart from your eyes— Keep sound wisdom and discretion
4:10	Hear, <b>my son</b> , and receive my sayings, And the years of your life will be many.
4:20	<b>My son</b> , give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings.
5:1	<b>My son</b> , pay attention to my wisdom; Lend your ear to my understanding,
5:20	For why should you, <b>my son</b> , be enraptured by an immoral woman, And be embraced in the arms of a seductress?
6:1	<b>My son</b> , if you become surety for your friend, If you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger,
6:3	So do this, <b>my son</b> , and deliver yourself; For you have come into the hand of your friend: Go and humble yourself; Plead with your friend.
6:20	<b>My son</b> , keep your father’s command, And do not forsake the law of your mother.
7:1	<b>My son</b> , keep my words, And treasure my commands within you.
8:4	“To you, O men, I call, And my voice is to the <b>sons</b> of men.

The several instructions, listed above, admonish ‘the son’ to shun evil counsel and company (1:10, 15), value wisdom and God’s word/correction (1:8; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1; 8:4), avoid the wiles of the harlot and the adulteress (5:1–23; 6:20–28; 7:1–27) and avoid standing surety for strangers (6:1–5). The NIV translators, perhaps in an attempt to offer a gender-conscious reading of the text, translate this phrase as “my child,” but the Hebrew is clearly gendered. The addressee is a male child and the instructions are solely for him. However, the father shows that the admonitions are not from him alone. Twice, he reminds the young man to pay attention also to the instructions of his mother (1:8; 6:20),

<sup>6</sup> See Ernst Lucas, *Proverbs* (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2015), 4.

<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that instructions to “my son” are found elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, that is, outside the unit of Prov 1–9, e.g. 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11 and 31:2.

<sup>8</sup> The New King James translation is employed in these citations.

which shows that these are actually parental instructions, that is, both parents are in agreement as to the training of the young man. Ernst Lucas notes that:

[There may also be] the implication that the teaching given in Prov 1–9 is *parental* teaching, not just that of the father, although he seems to be the teacher. The Egyptian instructions are addressed to a named person, usually a son. The fact that in Proverbs the son is not named generalises the teaching.<sup>9</sup>

It can be argued then that if this is meant to be instructions from both parents administered by the father, the likelihood that the setting is the home rather than a school or royal court is strong. Horne affirms that the implication of the instructions being addressed to an individual through the appellation "my son" is "that the context of the instruction is familial rather than academic."<sup>10</sup>

Besides the father's acknowledgement that the instructions do not emanate from him alone but in agreement with the mother of the young man, textual evidence outside the unit of Prov 1–9 confirms that women co-instructed children in ancient Israel. For example, the mother of King Lemuel warns her son against unrestrained sexual indulgence and drunkenness in Prov 31:1–9. Apparently, this queen mother, like others enculturated by the androcentric context of her time, also subscribes to the idea of a stereotypical imagery of women as seductive and dangerous. This wisdom of a *gebbirah* is said to be the "only instruction attributed to a king's mother known from the ancient Near East."<sup>11</sup>

Some feminist interpreters have found it disturbing that the instructions of chs. 1–9 address only the young male. As Yoder has observed, "the fact that the book was crafted principally to educate and enculturate young men presents certain challenges to women readers."<sup>12</sup> However, the nature of those challenges is generally unexplained by these commentators besides the fact that female readers are side-lined by the gendered appellation, "my son."

Whereas some scholars have noted that Proverbs gives unusual prominence to the mother's teachings (cf. 6:20; 31:1, 26), compared with instructions from Egypt and Mesopotamia, these teachings, as recorded in the

<sup>9</sup> Lucas, *Proverbs*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Milton P. Horne, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 53. Note that Waltke proffers a court setting for the origin of Proverbs 1–9 and a home or family setting for its dissemination; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 61–62.

<sup>11</sup> Yoder, *Proverbs*, 240.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 232. Lucas, *Proverbs*, 54, adds that, "The patriarchal setting and the gender-specific focus of the teaching in Proverbs, especially chs. 1–9, raises serious questions which can be a stumbling block for those for whom Proverbs is a part of Scripture."

book of Proverbs, appears lopsided. Like that of the father, it is directed at the son. Thus, we have a male voice at the opening of the book (chs. 1–9) and a female voice at the end (chs. 31:1–9),<sup>13</sup> but both focus on admonishing the son. It is interesting that only two mentions of daughters (both in the epilogue) are found in Proverbs as a whole—the first being an opaque reference to the horse-leach having two daughters (30:15) and the other a commendation of the *eshet hayil* as excelling other virtuous daughters (31:29). This contrasts with almost fifty occurrences of ‘son’ in the same book. Thus, regarding the unit of Prov 1–9 and the book of Proverbs as a whole, what we have found most disturbing is that, of the numerous utterances of what sounds almost like an endearment for “my son” to “hear,” to “listen,” to “be attentive,” to “keep my words,” there is not a single “hear/ listen/ be attentive, my daughter.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Yoder, *Proverbs*, 240–241.

<sup>14</sup> Grateful acknowledgement of the comments by the anonymous peer reviewer of this article who pointed out that, “Worthy of note are the teachings that mention ‘women,’ ‘wife,’ and ‘widow’ in the Book of Proverbs” and that “Since women, wives and widow are the ‘daughters’ it may be argued that the Book of Proverbs also include teachings on daughters.” While I have illustrated the examples offered by the reviewer in the table below, it is crucial for me to add that not only are all these examples outside the unit of Prov 1–9, their genre is also different, as the focus of this study is the admonitions that specifically address/instruct sons and not just on any verse that includes the category ‘female.’ Besides, wives and widows would not typically be included in instructions to (unmarried) youth. I do note the point that ‘son’ could be included in the title of the essay but given the whole context of the discourse, which is that young girls need to be affirmed (boys already are), adding ‘son’ to the title may distract from this argument.

Verse	Saying
11:16	A kindhearted woman gains honor, but ruthless men gain only wealth.
12:4	A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.
14:1	The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.
15:25	The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but he sets the widow’s boundary stones in place.
19:14	Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord.
27:15	A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rainstorm.
30:31	Charm and grace are deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
31:10	A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

For a detailed reference to the female category in the book of Proverbs, see Funlola O. Olojède, “A Gender-Sensitive Methodology in African Biblical Interpretation: Insights from the Book of Proverbs,” in *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Trends and Themes from Our Pots and Our Calabashes* (ed. Madipoane Masenya

The question is, were the Israelite daughters so compliant and their activities so curtailed that they did not need these instructions? Of course, that question would insinuate that only sons tended to be wayward and to succumb easily to peer-pressure. However, that argument may be untenable given the behaviour of the independent and sassy *isha zara/nokriya* and of Dame Folly in chs. 5 and 7, both of whom are considered a real threat to the young man seeking the path of wisdom and life.

It is helpful to note here that the concept of the *be't ab* (the father's house) is central to the discourse of family life in ancient Israel. The *be't ab* was the basic unit of social categorisation and its importance as a channel and bedrock of patriarchal practices and norms among the ancient people is well recognised.<sup>15</sup> As in other societies in the ancient world, the home or family served as a place of nurturing and training for the child who was socialised into the culture and traditions of its people. However, whereas the term occurs widely throughout the corpus of the Old Testament, reference to the mother's house is very scant (Gen 24:28; Ruth 1:8; SoS 3:4; 8:2), which could suggest that the norm was the *be't ab* while the *be't em* would be regarded as an exception. The centrality of the *be't ab* therefore points to some extent the dominance of the male in social gender relationships.

It is little wonder therefore that the father's voice as well as the mother's voice in both the prologue and epilogue of the book of Proverbs focus solely on admonishing the son. Do the findings from the book then represent a literary construction or an actual depiction of what took place in the *be't ab*? Were instructions addressed solely to the males in the family or did daughters also have the opportunity to benefit from parental instructions? In the Song of Songs, for example, the Shulamite issued a charge to the daughters of Jerusalem (SoS 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). Even though it was an instruction to daughters, no doubt, the Shulamite was not issuing a parental instruction or an admonition to do right or refrain from wrong. It was simply a charge to help find her lover.

However, the warnings to the male youth to stay away from evil company, corrupt practices and folly are persistent and strong in the unit of Prov 1–9 and the parents' concern for the son to 'get it right' is deep. As already observed, there is no corresponding concern about the fate of the young girl and this may denote, in a sense, that parents privileged the boy child over the girl child and that even mothers were complicit in this act. Could it have been a lack of such instructions to the female child that caused Dinah (Gen 38) and Tamar (2 Sam 13) to act in such gullible ways as to become the victims of rape? Did they

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(Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Kenneth Ngwa; Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 43–45.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 1–47.

become victims because no one warned them against the wiles of the ‘strange man’? Was the young girl left to navigate life on her own, especially in the urban setting, without any explicit guidance from parents or guardians? Or else, why do these admonitions completely overlook the need of the young female for parental counsel and if these were not overlooked in reality why did the biblical authors/editors consider it unimportant to preserve such admonitions?

Could insight from selected African proverbs of the Yorùbá and the Northern Sotho, therefore, help to confirm or disprove the findings from Prov 1–9 and 30:1–9?

### **C SOME YORÙBÁ AND NORTHERN SOTHO PROVERBS ON CHILDREN’S UPBRINGING**

Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele) and Ọlọjẹde have affirmed that the worldview embedded in some of the proverbs in the Hebrew Bible also underlie many African proverbs, including Yorùbá and Northern Sotho proverbs.<sup>16</sup> This view undergirds the parallels observable in the selected proverbs examined below. It is important to point out, however, that unlike those of the Hebrew Bible, the Yorùbá and Northern Sotho proverbs that are presented here are not instructions or admonitions per se, as they do not tell the child what to do or not to do. Rather, they are more descriptive in character and are employed here to highlight only the diverse ways that children’s upbringing is entrenched in proverbs in African cultures.

Socio-anthropological findings on social relationships have shown that, unlike in some Western and North American cultures, for instance, gender or race is not a unit of social organising principle among the Yorùbá, but age is.<sup>17</sup> On a linguistic note, therefore, it is important to remark on the non-gendered implication of the Yorùbá proverbs that relate to the child or children’s upbringing. The term for child or children, not only in Yorùbá (*omọ*) but also in

<sup>16</sup> Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Funlola O. Ọlọjẹde, “Sex and Power(lessness) in Selected Northern Sotho and Yorùbá Proverbs: An Intertextual Reading of Proverbs 5-7,” in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually* (ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kyne; London: T & T Clark, 2018), 217. See also Ọlọjẹde, “A Gender-Sensitive Methodology,” 42.

<sup>17</sup> See Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of a Western Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 2, 10–14; *eadem*, “Making History, Creating Gender: Some Methodological and Interpretive Questions in the Writing of Oyo Oral Traditions,” *History in Africa* 25 (1998): 263–305. Examples of such terms include “*ẹgbọn* and *ábùrò*, i.e., the elder and the younger relative, words which show the relative age only, without indicating the gender and are equally applicable to uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins however far removed, as well as to brothers and sisters.” Cf. Jeremy Eades, *The Yorùbá Today* (Changing Cultures Series; London: CUP, 1980), 51; Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 5.

Sotho (*ngwana*), is gender neutral. Therefore, the proverbs do not generally indicate whether a male or female is implied. As a matter of fact, they do mostly refer to both sexes.

However, a number of the proverbs suggest that issuing parental instruction or child discipline is mostly the domain of the mother, as exemplified by the following:<sup>18</sup>

*Abiyamọ şowọ kòtò lu omọ-ọ rẹ* “A mother cups her palm to strike her child.” (Discretion is the better part of discipline.)

*Àgbàkà l’abiyamọ ñgbàjá mọ omọ-ọ rẹ.* “It is completely and securely that a mother (bearing her child on her back) supports the child with a strip of cloth.” (One must be thorough in discharging one's responsibility.)

*Bí omọ bá jágbọn-ọn kíkẹ, iyá-a rẹ a jágbọn-ọn rírẹ é.* “If a child learns the trick of crying, the mother learns the trick of consoling him or her.” (One must be ready to adapt to cope with any situation.)<sup>19</sup>

**Cf. Sotho:** *Go lemala ga namane ke go dula le mmayo.* If a calf is spoiled, it shows that it sleeps with its mother. (A spoiled child presupposes lack of proper education from the parents [i.e. the mother]. It is assumed that he/she adopted the bad manners from his/her parents.)<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, fewer of the proverbs also indicate that fathers share the responsibility of instructing the children with their mothers (cf. Prov 1:8; 6:20):

*Omọdẹ ní wọn ñjẹ igún, bàbá ẹ- ẹn iwọn kì ijẹ ẹ; óní ẹnìkan jẹ ẹ rí lójú òun; bàbá ẹ-ẹ ní ta ni? Ó ní ẹnì nàà ò sí.* A child says that people do eat vultures, and its father says people do not; the child says someone did eat a vulture in its presence; its father asks, who? The child says the person is dead. (The youth who attempts to challenge the wisdom of the elders will find himself tripped by his own mouth.)

*Ìyá ni wúrà, baba ni jíjí.* Mother is gold, the father is a mirror. (The mother is a treasure [to the child] and the father is a role model.)

<sup>18</sup> The Yorùbá proverbs cited in this essay are primarily from Oyekan Owomoyela, *The Good Person: Excerpts from the Yoruba Proverb Treasury*. Online: <http://yoruba.unl.edu/yoruba.php-text=1f&view=0&uni=1&l=16.htm>. In the analysis, the Yorùbá proverbs are presented first and are followed by the Northern Sotho parallels.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Bí omọ bá jágbọn-ọn kíkú, iyá ẹ a jágbọn-ọn sísin.* If a child learns the trick of dying, his mother should learn the trick of burying him or her. (One should learn to meet wiles with wiles.)

<sup>20</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 132; Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho*, 26.

**Cf. Sotho:** *Ngwana wa monna o gata hlogo ya noga.* The child of a man treads upon the head of a serpent. (A child should be brought up in a strict way.)<sup>21</sup>

Several of the proverbs are also gender neutral, referring only to the parent without specifying the gender of the referent:

*Omōdé yì í, máa wò mí lójú, ẹni (tí) a bá lọ sóde là ñwò lójú.* Child, keep your eyes on me; one keeps one's eyes on the person who takes one visiting (i.e. the child must watch out for non-verbal communication from the parent when on a social outing or in the presence of others. Always pay attention to what your guide and instructor does and tells you to do.)

*A bímọ kò gbọn, a ní kó má sàákú; kí ní ñpa ọmọ bí àìgbọn?* A child lacks wisdom, and some say that what is important is that the child does not die; what kills more surely than lack of wisdom? (A foolish child is not much better than a dead child.)

*A kì í yin ọmōdé lójú ara ẹ; ifàsehìn ní ñkángun ẹ.* One does not praise a child in his presence; only backsliding results. (Children should not be praised too highly; they should always be made aware that they can be even better.)

*Omọ-ọ mi ò yó' la mọ; 'omọ- mí yó, sùgbọn kò rí sáára fẹ,' a ò mọ ìyẹn.* ‘My child did not have enough to eat,’ we understand; ‘My child had enough to eat but had no snuff to snort,’ that we do not understand. (People should care for their children, not spoil them with over-indulgence.)

**Cf. Sotho:** *A di je di šie marapo.* Let them eat, but leave the bones. (A parent should not be too harsh while disciplining a child.)<sup>22</sup>

*Ngwana o ganetšwa selepe, thipa o lesa ka noši.* A child is refused an axe, but a knife he will leave on his own. Experience is the best teacher.<sup>23</sup> (A child should be defended against harmful actions and if the latter are less harmful, he could be left to be disposed to them so that he can be disciplined by them.)<sup>24</sup>

*Polawa ke mong ga e na lebelo.* Killing by the owner does not have speed. There is no appeal beyond the highest authority.<sup>25</sup> (The child can never evade discipline from the parents.)<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> D. Ziervogel and P.C. Mokgokong, *Comprehensive Northern Sotho Dictionary* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1975), 890.

<sup>22</sup> J.R.D. Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika a Sesotho sa Leboa* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1971), 113.

<sup>23</sup> Ziervogel and Mokgokong, *Comprehensive Northern Sotho Dictionary*, 890.

<sup>24</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 209.

<sup>25</sup> Ziervogel and Mokgokong, *Comprehensive Northern Sotho Dictionary*, 890.

<sup>26</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 222.

Overall, it is the responsibility of parents to discipline their children, but some of the African proverbs indicate that parenting in traditional society is a communal responsibility in which elders take the lead. Thus, the popular adage, "It takes a village to raise a child," rings true here. The following illustrate this ethos:

*Àgbà kì í wà l'ojà k'óri ọmọ titun wọ.* An elder is not present at a market and permits a child's head to rest askew. (Elders must not permit untoward behaviour in their presence).

*Ojú męrin nii bi ọmọ, igba ojú ní wò ó.* A child has only two parents but multiple persons train that child.

*À-bí-í-kọ; à-kọ-ì-gbà; ọde ló ti ñkọgbọn wá'lé.* A-child-that-was-never-taught-how-to-behave; a-child-that-was-taught-but- that-refused-to-heed-instruction; it is from outside the home that he will learn wisdom. (Look well to your child's upbringing.)

*Àgbà tí kò tó ọmọdé-é rán ní'sẹ níí ñsọ pé kó bu omi wá ká jọ mú.* It is an elder who lacks the authority to send a child on an errand who tells the child to go fetch water so they could drink it together. (If one was sure of one's authority one would not need to sweeten one's orders with incentives.)

**Cf. Sotho:** *Rutang bana ditaola le se ye natšo badimong.* Teach your children (to use) the divining bones, you must not go with it (the bones) to the ancestors. (Parents – whether biological or other elders in the society — are supposed to provide their children with proper education [the norms and values] of the society so that even after their death the children will be able to survive.)<sup>27</sup>

Again, though traditionally Africans were affectionate with their children, they did not lose sight of the fact that children were supposed to be disciplined when necessary. They were convinced like the sages of Proverbs that if the rod was spared, the child would definitely be spoiled (Prov 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15). Therefore, indulgence was frowned upon and the discipline imposed on the child was supposed to be proportionate to his or her wrongdoing. A child would always remain a child and, as such, s/he would sometimes wrong the parents (un)intentionally. The parent should therefore be considerate and not be too harsh on the child.<sup>28</sup> In other words, corporal punishment could be imposed on the child, but the parent must exercise restraint in doing so:

*Abiyamọ şowọ kòtò lu ọmọ-ọ rẹ.* A mother cups her palm to strike her child. Discretion is the better part of discipline.)

<sup>27</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 225; cf. J. G. Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho Spreekwoorde* (Johannesburg: APB, 100), sa.

<sup>28</sup> J. McLaren, "The Wit and Wisdom of the Bantu as Illustrated in Their Proverbial Sayings," *SAJS* 14 (1917): 334; Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 171.

*Tí a bá fi ọwọ ọtún bá ọmọ wí, a máa fi t'òsì fá mọra.* If we chasten a child with the right hand, we hug him/her closer the left hand. (After disciplining a child, remember to make them feel loved again.)

**Cf. Sotho:** *Se tšhoge patla lapeng wa re o ntšha diatla.*<sup>29</sup> Do not be afraid of a stick in the family and (then) say that you are holding off hands. (A parent should not be scared to exercise discipline on a child lest the child becomes spoiled.)<sup>30</sup>

*Go itia tšie gobedi wa e itia ka maatla o a e pšhiatlagana, wa e nenola ya fofa.* To hit a locust is twofold; if you hit it severely you destroy it, if you hit it lightly it flies away. (It is difficult to warn a child or rebuke him for his evil ways. If he is punished corporally, he might become worse and if the punishment is done by word of mouth, he might become more spoiled.)<sup>31</sup>

*Fihla thupa o senye ngwana.* If a child is not rebuked or punished when he has done something wrong, he would be spoiled and behave like an animal.<sup>32</sup>

*Go bofa ke go laya, go kakatlela ke go kgaola.* Binding (by a parent) is to give advice, but holding fast is to (will) break (a child). If a child has done something wrong, he should be disciplined in love and concern; should the punishment be excessive, the child may become a rascal.)<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, other forms of non-verbal, non-physical training are encouraged:

*Àwítele ní nje ọmọ gb'ẹnà; ọmọ kì í gb'ẹnà lásán.* Previous-instruction enables a child to understand coded speech; a child does not naturally understand codes. (A clever child reflects the instruction he/she has received.)

*Ọmọdé yì í, máa wò mí lójú, ẹni (tí) a bá lọ s'óde là ñwò l'ójú.* Child, keep your eyes on me; one keeps one's eyes on the person who takes one visiting (i.e. the child must watch out for non-verbal communication from the parent when on a social outing or in the presence of others. Always pay attention to what your guide and instructor does and tells you to do.)

**Cf. Sotho:** *Mogolo o pelopedi.* An elderly person has two hearts. (A parent should not be too strict while disciplining a child, but should always bear

<sup>29</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 138. Although some of the pronouns used in the Sotho translations of these proverbs are not gender balanced, they are cited as they appear in both Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho* and Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 130; Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 136; Ziervogel and Mokgokong, *Comprehensive Northern Sotho Dictionary*, 102.

in mind that the wrongs a child does are not done purposely but due to childishness.)<sup>34</sup>

Both Yorùbá and Northern Sotho proverbs also acknowledge that children will make mistakes and will always need parental guidance. Thus, parents are enjoined to show understanding in disciplining them.

*Omódé ò lè mọ ẹkọ [ori] jẹ kò mà ráa l'ówó.* A child cannot be so good at eating corn meal/pudding and not soil their hands with it. (A youth may be clever but will inevitably make some mistakes.)

*Bí omódé bá fẹ se ise àgbà, ojọ ori-i rẹ ò ní jẹ.* If a child attempts to act like an elder, the age will stop him. (A youth does not have what it takes to be an elder.)

*Bi omódé bá pa eku á da jẹ, tí o bá pa àrọgìdìgbà, á gbe bá àwọn óbì rẹ nílẹ.* If a child kills a bush rat, he/she can eat it all by him/herself, if the child kills a shark (monster fish), he/she will bring it home to the parents. (Problems that cannot be solved by children are brought to their parents.)

**Cf. Sotho:** *Didirwabana ke didirwabaloyi.* That which is done by children is that which is done by sorcerers. (Parents should be sympathetic to their children's awkward deeds for they remain children.)<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, some of the proverbs show that there are consequences for a child that lacks or refuses home training:

*Ài-gbọn-léwe ni à-d'àgbà di-wèrè.* Lack-of-wisdom-in-youth is imbecility in adulthood. (The man turns out just as the child was; the grown person acquires his/her traits in childhood.)

*Orí ọkẹrẹ popo l'áwo; bí a wí f'omọ ẹni a gbọràn.* The squirrel's head sits in a plate like a lump; if one counsels one's child, it should listen; i.e. for not heeding its mother's instruction the squirrel's head ends up on the hunter's plate. (Refusal to listen to counsel leads to disaster.)

*Alágẹmọ-ọ ti bí'mọ ọ rẹ ná; àimọ-ọjó kù sọwọ ọ rẹ.* The chameleon has given birth to its young; inability to dance is the responsibility of the child. (A parent has done his/her part by having a child; the child's fortunes are the child's responsibility.)

*Òwú tí iyá bá gbọn ni omọ yoó hun.* The cotton that the mother picked is what the daughter would weave (i.e. a daughter will follow her mother's [wrong] footsteps = like mother like daughter).

<sup>34</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 182.

<sup>35</sup> Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho*, 18; Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 1–3

**Cf. Sotho:** *Leabela la lehodu ke bohodu.* The inheritance of a thief is robbery. (If a parent leads an evil way of life, he/she should realise that the child is going to be worse for the trend of the family is an evil way of life.)<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, there are also consequences for parents who overindulge or refrain from training or disciplining their children:

*Ko omō rē yóó fún o ní ìsimi.* Train your child, he/she will give you peace.

*Omō tí a ò kọ ní yóò gbé ilé tí a kọ tà.* A child that one did not train (build up) will end up selling the house that one built. (There is a play on the word 'kọ' which is used for both training or teaching and building a house. The inference is that an untrained child would end up squandering his or her parents' resources.)

**Cf. Sotho:** *Ngwana a utswa a obela papagwe.* If a child steals, his/her father would be held responsible. (Parents suffer the consequences of their children's actions.)<sup>37</sup>

*Letlapakgerere ke letseka modimo wa lesekamela.* A crab is a side-walker (and) the god of side-walking. (Evil actions of a child presuppose bad education [from parents].)

*Kgomo ka mogobe e wetšwa ke namane.* A cow is led into a pan (of water) by the calf. (If a child is ill behaved it creates a problem for its parents since they will try to protect it from the situation, for instance, when it has committed a crime and they find themselves entrapped in that undesirable situation.)<sup>38</sup>

*Ga go sekišwe Khutšwane, Rakhudu a Le gona.* It cannot happen that Khutwane is cross-examined while Rakhudu is present. (If a child commits a crime, the parent is the one to be held accountable, even to be disciplined.)

## D INFERENCES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, the Yorùbá and Northern Sotho proverbs above illustrate that:

- Disciplining a child is mostly the domain of the mother but fathers also share the responsibility of instructing the child.
- Parenting in traditional society is a communal responsibility in which elders take the lead and the proverbs pointing to the instructors and those being instructed are mostly gender neutral.
- Both corporate and other forms of verbal and non-verbal punishment are considered acceptable, but parents are enjoined to discipline children in love.

<sup>36</sup> Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 154; Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho*, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Ziervogel and Mokgokong, *Comprehensive Northern Sotho Dictionary*, 889.

<sup>38</sup> Erasmus, *Uitgesoekte Noord-Sotho*, 36; Rakoma, *Marema-ka-dika*, 148.

- Whereas there are consequences for a child that lacks or rejects home training, there are also consequences for parents that refrained from training their children properly.

Unlike the admonitions in Prov 1–9 and 30:1–9, the proverbs outlined above are all part of cultural and communal collections which do not address a particular individual but are rather largely descriptive of the ethos of the people when it comes to parents’ nurturing and mentoring their children. Due to the non-gendered character of most of the proverbs, it is clear that both male and female children receive parental instructions and that similar yardsticks are used to admonish them, unlike in the Hebrew text.

Of course, the Proverbs text is often appropriated in contemporary ecclesiastical and family settings to admonish the female child, even though it is not originally addressed to her. Notwithstanding, the gender implication for the female child who may feel undermined by the biblical text (and rightly so) cannot be discounted. Daughters should be taught and affirmed as much as sons and their issues ought to be foregrounded also. Whereas the son is warned to steer clear of the strange woman and of fools, there is not a single warning to the daughter to stay away from the path of dangerous or adulterous men (cf. Prov 1:10; 5:20). Do the instructions to sons in Prov 1–9 therefore suffice in a world where daughters are susceptible to the dangers posed by online predators and smooth operators, gender-based violence, abduction, sugar-daddy syndrome and sex trafficking?

In a situation where there are gaps in the biblical text as in the instructions in the book of Proverbs, then, in the African context, the African proverbs can be used in a complementary way to supply what is lacking in the text, which is that the girl child needs admonition as much as or even more than the boy child especially in contexts where she is more vulnerable and susceptible to violence and exploitation. Thus, employing African proverbs to problematise traditional gender roles could help in empowering girls in the public space and boys in the home setting.

In the appropriation of the Proverbs text in contemporary (African) settings, the admonition, “hear,” “listen” or “take heed,” “my son,” will need to be complemented or balanced by more inclusive, gender-neutral wisdom sayings about parent-child relationships in family/school settings. In light of the patriarchal contexts which produced the instructions in the biblical text and the African proverbs—contexts that have always placed both mother and daughter on the margins of society and limited their access to education and training—and in line with the Northern Sotho proverb, *Ngwana wa mosetsana molao o o tšea basading*, there is an imperative to advance, re-envision and highlight proverbs/admonitions that will declare, “Hear, my daughter, your mother’s torah”!

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