



THE DANGEROUS STUPIDITY OF THE UNAMBIGUOUS THE POLARITY OF THE PROVERBIAL LITERATURE AS A SCHOOL OF WISDOM

Ursula Rapp

1. Introduction

A spectre is haunting Europe ...—today it is not Communism. Today a different spectre is going around in Europe—and not only here: the spectre of stupidity. I mean by this stupidity that against which Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned so forcefully, and today we may write this warning in very large letters: “Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than is evil.”¹ It is the dangerous stupidity of the people who are blind and self-righteous.

Zygmunt Baumann spoke of a spectre that is going around in the democratic countries, and he called it the spectre of the strong man, of the strong woman.² We know which demagogic monsters in present-day politics he means, and they belong to the essence of this stupidity.

The US-American Protestant theologian Katharina von Kellenbach asks herself why so many people in the USA are defenselessly devoted and subject to the lies and the bullshit of Donald Trump, although it is known that he is lying, that he turns truth around and invents things that are false. She attests to the US-American people a stupidity that is an “abandoning of healthy common sense”, and she returns to Bonhoeffer: “It (stupidity) is a particular form of the influence of historical circumstances on the human being, a psychological concomitant element of certain external situations. If one looks more closely, one sees that every greater external development of power, whether it be political or religious, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. Indeed, it seems as if this is really a sociologico-psychological law. The power of one group needs the stupidity of the others.”³ This stupidity does not mean an intellectual stupidity, a lack of education according to an elitist definition of self. It means a stupidity of the heart, a “human defect”.

When stupidity is politically and therefore humanly dangerous, wisdom is vital. This is why this week’s theme, the Book of Proverbs, seems to me to be more important with every month that passes, precisely also as a theme of interfaith conversation, and even more so on the background of the Christian history of guilt towards the Jewish people.

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, “Von der Dummheit”, in: id.: *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Eberhard Bethge (ed.), Munich / Hamburg ⁵1968, 14-16, 14.

² Cf. Baumann, Zygmunt, “Die Angst vor den anderen. Ein Essay über Migration und Panikmache”, Berlin 2016, 49-68.

³ *Ibid.*, 15, and <http://www.feinschwarz.net/daher-ist-dem-dummen-gegenueber-mehr-vorsicht-geboten-als-gegenueber-dem-boesen-dietrich-bonhoeffer/>, downloaded on May 23, 2017.

But it's not so easy to deal with the Book of Proverbs, for its wisdom does not seem to be really comprehensible. I first want to outline the problems in the book and then trace a few paths in order to walk with these problems constructively. I am presuming that these difficulties have a meaning and that we are supposed to walk with them. They are not our foes but rather signposts for us.

2. Outlining the problem

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings of Israelite wisdom, mainly in the style of:

"Make no friends with those given to anger,
and do not associate with hotheads ..." (Prov 22:24)

"Do not take the wicked as a model,
nor desire to spend time with them ..." (Prov 24:1)

or even:

"A golden ring in the snout of a wild boar:
a beautiful woman without understanding." (Prov 22:11)

This list could be continued indiscriminately, as it has also been given. Today, Christians have problems with these saying:

1. The sayings sound flat and like generalizations. On the one hand, some believe that this *genre* is foreign to us. Today, such sayings no longer mean anything to us, they conserve pure banalities. One characteristic of this genre of "proverbial literature" is generalization and that they lump everything together, and precisely this is hurtful in many ways, for the sayings paint in black and white: They divide human beings into good and bad, wise people and fools, righteous and wanton people. This contradicts all experience of reality, for no person belongs to the one *or* the other, every person has dark and difficult as well as wonderful sides. Could it be that these proverbs are unjust towards human reality? Do we have to say today that they are unjust sayings, whereas Israelite wisdom claims to be divine righteousness?

"I walk in the way of righteousness, along the path of justice." (Prov 8:20)

2. The problem of black-and-white typology becomes especially evident when it is used as regards *women*, for this typology gave cause to a rhetoric and to a moral praxis that is hostile to women. In it, women are either good wives who sacrifice themselves, whose behaviour excels in a (lunatic) mania for work (Prov 31:10-31), in obedience, servility and reticence as much as in wise learning, as is shown in the repeated mention of the mother's Torah / teaching / admonition.⁴ Or on the contrary, these women are called seducers, prostitutes and / or adulteresses who are considered to be "foreign" women, since they do not belong to their own husband, but to another (4:16-22; 7 and more); or the book also speaks of "good" and "bad / evil" daughters. Here, we have to do with stereotypes that definitely demand critical reading. Nor do we find any indication that these appreciations are relativized, for example in the sense that the text says that what seems to be evil for one person is perhaps agreeable clarity for another. No, these seem to be claims that speak of the essence, so that say: Thus the essence of a human person.

3. In addition, in part the sayings are really only individual ones, and a person does not have the feeling that a theme is thoroughly dealt with or looked at in depth. Much seems like an arbitrary collection without any system. However, by means of a very exact reading, some systematic order can be recognized: There are connections of key words, frames, leading words, and occasionally thematic paragraphs. But these minimal examples of order do not run through the entire book, and they certainly don't do so as a system. But at least one can note that there are helps which should facilitate the learning by heart of these proverbs.

⁴ Cf. Prov 1:8; 31:1.26

3. Criticism of the text and of its reading

Where and how can criticism begin so that it does not remain superficial and doesn't only spring from our subjective needs? For when we note that the texts and their wisdom do not fit with our experience, this is important and cannot be avoided for an honest and deepening reading of the texts. But this observation also bears the danger that the criteria for the relevance of the texts end with our needs and our mental state. Formulating our own perception always also demands some humility towards the possible and deeper truth of the texts that has not yet been disclosed.

I do not understand this humility as servility to the meaning of a text that someone has claimed. That is a dangerous approach which corresponds with a fundamentalist attitude. Humility is the attitude which believes that one searching, interpreting community alone, one exegetical paradigm alone cannot reveal the whole truth, but always only part of it.

Thus criticism of the text does not take the path of simply rejecting the text, but that of waiting for a greater content of truth or meaning by means of a conversation with the text, with other interpretations, and with one's own context and approach.

3.1 Proverbs and proverbial cultures

The opinion exists, especially also in religious education, that proverbs are not "in". Today they no longer mean anything. This can also be seen in the fact that young people today hardly know any proverbs. And this means that adults are already no longer using them.

However, there can be doubts regarding this assumption when we consider the fact that the culture and industry of cards with proverbs is booming as rarely before.

For example: Every morning is the beginning of a new time,
of new happiness. (© Monika Minder)

These sayings are written either in the style of nice thoughts that are beneficent at the moment, or they come from Far Eastern wisdom or are sold as such. They reveal truths that in the proverbs seem to us to be far away, but this shows that we today in the Western, enlightened societies, are not closed to the culture of proverbs. So we have to assume that proverbs depend on culture and are not universally valid. What does this mean for the polar and essentialist description of good and bad people?

2. Cultural stereotypes

In exegesis, such typologies as for example "wise and foolish" in the proverbs, are understood as "cultural stereotypes". Of themselves, stereotypes do not form concrete individual cases. Stereotypes are not interested in these, they want to generalize, to form schemata to which reality is always only in relationship. They do not show reality, they are exaggerations, escalations, as well as simplifications.

But why does a society, a people, a community need something like this? The formation of stereotypes has the aim of offering the addressees clear images, ideals and anti-ideals, and thus to give orientation. The stereotypes aim at establishing an order in a world that is full of disorder and chaos. They are consciously simplified descriptions of characteristics and people. They show ideal schemata of life that has succeeded or failed, or of relationships that do good or are difficult for individual people and for groups.

So cultural stereotypes have an educational intent and call for imitation or serve as a deterrent. However, we should consider two things when interpreting these cultural stereotypes:

1. Since we are dealing with “cultural” stereotypes, they depend on the cultures and societies in which they are formed. They are agreements, conventions that serve an ideal order as well as the people who are supposed to identify with this order. This is why they are not of a general nature that goes beyond the culture. Since the biblical texts were written in a culture and society that is foreign to us, we may not transfer their statements of that time uncritically to our present time. The question is of course what we may take on and under what hermeneutical conditions. We are again faced with the problem of simply making an arbitrary agreeable choice, that sands down the foreignness of the texts. But the foreignness can also be precisely the essential element, for without foreignness, there is no revelation. This is why I invite you to remain some more with our alienation through the polarization of the types.

2. Stereotypes describe an unambiguous and simplified order, and they serve the orientation, they establish the parameters of order in a world of disorder. As human beings living in a complex and unclear world, in which the fundamental conditions of life change suddenly and on a massive scale, in which people of the most varied cultures and values live together, we know that simplifications do not explain anything. Even more, they can be very dangerous, as we know from some politicians’ populist speeches. In the religious context, simplifications can lead to fundamentalist pseudo-truths which unambiguously situate good and evil and attach these to concrete people and societies.

We are living in a time in which things are not sure and in a societal, economic and political complexity for which we have no unambiguous solutions, because we do not yet know what will ultimately be helpful for a good and peaceful life together. We cannot avoid learning to live with ambiguity.

What is the difference between the simple patterns of the proverbs and the simplifying lack of ambiguity and the pseudo-truths that were just rejected?

It seems to me that one difference lies in the forming of patterns in order to reflect and on the one hand to situate oneself and on the other to situate the attributing of good and evil. The polarizations are supposed to help one to reflect on one’s own behaviour in this, to situate oneself. They are a kind of ethical cartography for one’s own behaviour. However, they become hostile to human beings when they are misused as criteria for excluding others and when they become the only measure for foreign behaviour.

A further difference in times of insecurity is that between patience and impatience. The proverbs can be used to establish an order, which however does not correspond with the unsolved questions and ambiguities, because they are not discussed to the end, because all the sides involved have not been heard and taken into consideration. And even when this is the case, more time is often needed. Using religious power in order to establish an order that has not matured, that is simply claimed, includes something of violence, and religion may not be misused for this—even though this has happened often enough and continues to happen. This has often happened in many forms as regards women who have not lived their lives in conformity with the societal norms and who were denigrated and excluded, and it is happening again today in the name of the Christian Europe or in other names.

Thus cultural stereotypes bear a dangerous potential for praxis. Therefore once again a reminder of our resistance in reading.

3.3 Take resistance seriously—forming one’s way of life, responsibility

The polarizations that have been described of wise and foolish people, of good and bad women arouse our contradiction because we know that the world is not like that and because we are honestly trying not to put people into categories, not to judge in a way that resembles a poster, in gen-

eralizations and unfairly; ultimately we want to give every human being a chance to come to the fullness of his and her life, no matter how difficult a person might be. Often enough this is difficult for us, but precisely here the proverbs in their absolute way of stating things do not seem helpful.

Polarizations show two poles, neither of which corresponds with reality. Reality occurs rather in the grey areas between the black and white of the contrasts. The proverbs draw from Israel's offer of wisdom, and they want to give access to this wisdom and to make it useful for a successful forming of one's way of life. They aim at educating to wisdom and want to invite their readers to reflect, not just to take over truths that have been previously spelled out. This means that we situate our reflection on ourselves and our finding of self between these poles, and that we use these stereotypes in order to direct our attitudes and the orientation of our life according to them: a wise direction or a foolish direction. For this, the Book of Proverbs gives us guidance:

4. Against the lack of ambiguity of wise and stupid (Prov 26)

Chapter 26 is a collection of individual proverbs belonging to the so-called collection of Hiskiyah's men⁵ at the turn of the 8th to the 7th centuries, during a time of social crisis in Israel. Social justice and the righteousness of the heart are themes of these proverbs.

Prov 26:1-12 is a discourse on the essence of the stupid person (כָּסִיל) and on how one should speak with him or her (vs. 4-5). Aside from v. 2, the word is in every verse; in reading, one becomes oneself entirely stupid because of so much כָּסִיל.⁶ However, the paragraph does not simply describe the stupid person, but rather reflects above all on how one should behave towards him and her:

– The text begins with a contradiction: In v. 3 (cf. v. 8) it says that honour, weightiness, significance are not part of the stupid person. Nevertheless, intense attention is paid to the stupid person for 11 verses. But one is not supposed to respect, pay attention to him or her.

– Vs. 4-5 are a glaring contradiction, one should not speak wisely with the stupid, but not stupidly either, so how should one speak with him or her? Not at all?

אֶל־תַּעַן כָּסִיל כְּאִוְלָתוֹ פְּוֹת־תְּשׁוּהָ־לּוֹ גַּם־אֶתָּה:
עֲגֵה כָּסִיל כְּאִוְלָתוֹ פְּוִי־הִנֵּה תִּכְּם בְּעֵינָיו:

These two verses, together with the last v. 12, are the only ones in which the reader is directly addressed. All three verses again lack unambiguity. Can there be no absolute criteria for judging the stupid or the wise? Must this ultimately always be left to one's own judgment? Does it depend on the situation? Or can one maybe never be sure? The proverbs make us reflect. This becomes just as clear here, and also in many other ambiguous statements, as well as in the glaring polarizations that one cannot simply apply one to one.

– With v. 9 it also becomes clear that knowledge of the proverbs alone is not yet wisdom; it depends on how one works with them, on one's praxis. So it is not enough to know wisdom and to speak of wisdom, rather it is a question of *how* one speaks and lives. Perhaps we should be aware of the fact that the proverbs are not literature with instructions for praxis, they aren't boring advisers, but rather instructions for reflection, for honest, differentiated reflection. They aim at educating our sensitivity for what is ambiguous, and they want to encourage us over and over again, not to let our perception and its dealing with what we experience grow blunt in what is unambiguous.⁷

⁵ 1 – 9; 10 – 22:16; 22:17 – 24:22; 24:23-34; 25 – 29; 30; 31.

⁶ The many k's and s's dominate in the entire paragraph.

⁷ Cf. 1:4: The young are to practice reflection—only the old do not practice it. These proverbs give guidance in practicing; youth ends when one no longer practices. Either because one no longer has to practice, because one is now able to be wise, or because one becomes tired and no longer practices.

– In this, the theme of language is very central—as so often in the Wisdom literature and in the Book of Proverbs. The stupid person cannot deal with wise sayings, whereas it is precisely not clear what it means “to be able to deal with wise sayings”. Stupid people are also unreliable (v. 10), so not only their speaking is wrong, but also their acting.

– In all the ambiguity and the question about what is proper, the last verse, v. 12, is the summit:

רְאִיתָ אִישׁ חָכָם בְּעֵינָיו תִּקְנֶה לְכַסִּיל מִמֶּנּוּ:

Just don't consider yourself to be wise, for the person who considers him- and herself to be wise can be helped less than the stupid person. So there is no such thing as something like a soft pillow in thinking that one is wise oneself. Here, believing that the stupid people are the others, is shown to be a great error. We are again with the ambiguity of wisdom and stupidity / unwisdom and with the necessity to constantly test. With this I come to my last point, the criteria of testing.

5. Prov 1:1-7 and the God above us

Prov 1:1-7, the beginning of the Book of Proverbs, is an introduction and a kind of declaration of the intent of the proverbs: They want to teach wisdom and a wise life, and they understand the proverbs as an exercise in knowledge and wisdom (v. 4). Thus the polarity and the ambiguity are presentations for practicing perception, reflection and doing.

The closing sentence of this introduction is the sentence with which other writings on wisdom (Sir) begin:

יִרְאַת ה' רֵאשִׁית דַּעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסֵר אֲוִילִים בָּזוּ:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

We are again with stupidity and the meaning of wisdom. In the introduction, we remembered Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Zygmunt Baumann. If we agree with them, the stupidity that is dangerous is the one that needs the strong man or the strong woman and that even believes this stupidity! People believe the lies of those who are “strong”, although they know that these are lies. Does this stupidity need a strong man / a strong woman because it does not fear any God?

The beginning of knowledge is the fear of God. Perhaps this is why precisely the introduction to Proverbs is the very important frame: The beginning of all wisdom is the acknowledgment that there is a God, a Creator, whose children we all are, all of us equally, all of us owing ourselves to a greater happening, nobody is what he / she is of themselves, all of us are imperfect, all are in the care of mercy, in an order that is God's order and not that of human beings. It is an order that contains contradictions, that is not unambiguous.

To be wise means to practice and to learn perception, to look with care, to live and to learn over and over again to live with ambiguity, and to learn that wisdom is only revealed with patience and in the course of life, but that it cannot be determined universally. This is why the contradictions of the polarity are important, so that we again and again and ever anew are shown the stupidity of what is unambiguous. But the beginning against stupidity is the fear of God.

Gefördert durch:



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff