Abstract

The distinction between wisdom admonitions and wisdom sayings, as emphasised by Westermann, is examined. This is a seminal aspect of his study, which has long been overlooked but has recently become prominent and influential. In this light his views on the so-called imperative and indicative sayings and their life-setting are critically discussed. It is concluded that indicative wisdom sayings as much as admonitions imply an educational situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

"... [we]", says P J Nel in one of the most important studies on Proverbs yet to have come out of South Africa, “are inclined to differ with Westermann who exaggerates the difference between wisdom saying and admonition” (Nel 1982:75). What he is driving at is that there is a “coherence in content of the admonition and the wisdom saying”. This should not, I think, be interpreted as a statement that the admonition as genre and the wisdom saying as genre mean the same thing, but probably that room should be left for another coherence, “the coherence of admonition and motivation” and that the two coherences cohere. This would seem to boil down to the claim that, despite the formal difference between wisdom sayings and admonitions, there is some common ground between them which is not accounted for in Westermann’s exaggeration of the difference between the two. If I understand Nel correctly, I agree. So, I propose to take a look at Westermann’s treatment of the two genres in his study (Westermann 1971) on wisdom in the sapiential saying, which study has long been overlooked, but is now being brought to prominence (cf. Westermann’s own comment to this effect, 1991:28).

1 For the sake of not unduly complicating the matter, I leave aside Nel’s statement, to the effect that this “coherence in content” does not “abolish” the “intentional differences” between the two genres.

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2. THE IMPERATIVE, THE INDICATIVE AND LIFE-SETTING

In his study, Westermann develops the thesis that wisdom sayings found in collections are no longer "real" wisdom sayings. They have been divorced from their original life-setting or *Sitz im Leben* (Westermann 1971:73-74), and are developments from the stage of the simple saying ("einfaches Sprichwort") to the level of sophisticated proverb ("Kunstspruch"). Since, therefore, these proverbs represent the later development ("Nachgeschichte") of an earlier stage in Israel's sapiential history, they need to be related to a suitable backdrop "in dem das Sprichwort seine eigentliche und für die Gesellschaft zentrale Bedeutung hatte" (Westermann 1971:75). Such an earlier stage is not found in the Old Testament, but it can still be observed in the wisdom sayings of "primitive" peoples. Therefore these sayings from all over the world (in his own case only from a section of Africa) should be examined to provide the missing foundation. The cornerstone built into this thesis is that sayings in the imperative (Westermann does not include the vetitive) have a totally different life-setting to that of the sayings in the indicative.

2.1 Imperative and direct speech

Westermann (1971:75) takes his cue from an old book by Jakob Spieth, who collected 128 sayings of the Ho, an Ewe tribe. He attaches significance to the fact that only one of these has an imperative form, but immediately adds:

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2 I shall respectively be referring to the genre of the admonition ("Manspruch") for the former, and to the genre of the (wisdom) saying ("Aussagespruch") for the latter. For this purpose the constructions of נָל plus imperfect for the prohibitive and לָנ plus jussive for the vetitive will be included in the admonition category.

3 The work, *Die Ewe-Stämme*, dates from 1906 and is not accessible to me.
Es gibt hier auch Worte, die den Imperativ-Sprüchen des Alten Testaments entsprechen; aber sie kommen nur in direkter Anrede vor, und zwar bei der Ermahnung eines Kindes oder Heranwachsenden, z.B. bei Spieth S 634:

Sieh doch deine Altersgenossen an,  
wie sie fleißig und gehorsam sind,  
wie sie niemandes Eigentum nehmen,  
sondern arbeiten, daß sie für sich selbst etwas erwerben!
Wir bitten dich deswegen:  
Sei doch auch du nicht träge, sondern arbeite fleißig!  
Dann wird dir alles gelingen,  
damit du deinen Altersgenossen gleich werdest,  
alles tuest und so den Leuten gefällt!

He continues to claim that the imperative and indicative sayings have, "jedenfalls in diesem Beispiel", different life-settings (Westermann 1971:76). This is quite difficult to see, but, in the light of the far-reaching claims that follow, it merits closer attention.

First, the concession that also in this collection there are imperative pronouncements, undermines the categorical distinction that Westermann wishes to make between imperative and indicative proverbs. Second, the attempt to minimise this weakening of the argument, by appealing to the supposed occurrence of the imperatives exclusively in direct speech, is unsuccessful. It is not clear how the imperative can be used in any other way than in direct speech, which in itself cancels any meaning that could have been attached to the statement. Moreover, the very example that Westermann puts forward contains two imperatives, one following upon an introductory formula and one not so presented. If Westermann means by "direkte Anrede" an imperative preceded by an introductory formula (such as "So we ask you...", cf. line 5 of his quote), the reference does not mean much, since the first line of his quote contains an imperative ("Observe your peer group") without any
such formula. Even if this were not the case, it would still remain unclear what difference the presentation of imperatives in introduced direct speech would make to the argument.

2.2 Sitz im Leben: equal and unequal situations

The pièce de résistance of Westermann’s proposition is that the admonition and the wisdom saying hail from different life-settings. He plainly declares (Westermann 1971:76):


The moot point is not whether admonitions are to be located in education, but whether it is true that the indicative wisdom sayings are not to be understood as part of this aspect of ancient Israelite (and so-called “primitive”) society. There seem to be several loose ends in Westermann’s handling of the matter.

He obviously regards a rigid distinction between the two genres as support for his fundamental thesis that the collections of proverbs should be studied against the backdrop of “primitive” sayings to compensate for the irretrievable loss of the original setting of the Biblical proverbs. I do not see why this is necessary. Westermann could have developed his argument ‘without saddling

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4 I do not find much convincing in the attempts of Westermann’s pupil, FW Golka, to show our understanding of the biblical proverbs is enhanced by such comparisons with African wisdom sayings. (Cf. Golka 1986, 1989, 1993.) My paper, “Wisdom by
this horse. The only incentive I can see for arguing along these lines is the
desire to safeguard the simple sayings from being incorporated into the
category of *instruction* ("Lehre"). The latter is "education" and, if one can
keep the former from being understood as education as well, they will also be
kept from the danger of being regarded as part of a sophisticated didactic
system and from association with schools⁵, while it would not be such a loss
to have to cede only the admonitions to the category of "Lehre"⁶.

Next, Westermann’s exposition is less than lucid when he comes to explain the
intention of indicative sayings in relation to admonitions. Denying that all
indicative sayings have the function of merely establishing facts ("die Funktion
blosser Feststellung"), he continues (Westermann 1971:76):

\[E\]ine ganze Reihe dieser Sprüche hat einen
ausgesprochen auffordernden oder auch mahnenden
Charakter, aber es ist wesentlich, daß diese Aufforderung
oder Mahnung aus dem Indikativ zu entnehmen, zu folgen
ist. ... Der Aussagespruch sagt, wie es ist.

It makes very little sense to concede the admonitory character of indicative
statements and, in the same breath, to reiterate their simple descriptive

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⁵ (the) people for (the) people", to be published shortly, discusses
the matter in detail.

⁶ For Westermann’s opposition to this association and his
championing of the “folk school” (which associates the origin of

Zimmerli [1933] 1976:180 and Von Rad 1970:48 point out the
relative scarcity of direct admonitions in relation to the total
number of verses in the Book of Proverbs. Compare this,
however, with the hefty list of 103 admonitions, arranged
according to form, provided by Nel (1982:65-67), even though he
qualifies the form as "anal" [sic].
character. These two statements are not reconciled by calling it seminal that the admonition is to be inferred from the indicative. This is exactly what anyone wishing to demonstrate the affinity of imperative and indicative sayings would claim. If anything, the inconsistency in Westermann’s argument reveals uneasiness about the relationship between admonitions and indicative wisdom sayings. His examples from the Ewe collection illustrate this:

The dwarf antelope does not put on the elephant’s foot.

and:

The strife of the sheep is no concern of the goats.

Both are obviously statements, but imply what should be respected and done. In the natural order of things the dwarf antelope does not walk with huge elephant feet. The opposite would be unnatural, therefore undesirable, and should therefore be avoided. In other words, the small, lowly or less powerful should know their station and not aspire to things that are too big for them. The strife among sheep, for instance the competition among rams in the mating season, has no impact on the quite different species of goats. The implied

7 The same is done by Gerstenberger (1965:119-120), although he is more sensitive than Westermann to the flimsy distinction between the direct admonitions and the wisdom sayings with admonitory implication (Gerstenberger calls it a “feiner Unterschied”). Gerstenberger is certainly right that the difference is not eradicated by the fact that such indicative sayings require the hearer to infer the implied admonition, but neither is the similarity in thrust eradicated by the difference in grammatical form. Compare this with Bauer-Kayatz 1969:13-12, according to whom both the admonitions and the indicative sayings belong to the “clan wisdom”. Von Rad’s idea (1970:48) that the wisdom sayings contain an element that points beyond themselves (“etwas über sich Hinausweisendes”), which makes possible all kinds of associations, can be taken to support the affinity of the two forms despite their grammatical difference.
admonition is to keep out of conflicts that do not concern one. Both examples have equivalents in Biblical wisdom.

The Biblical admonition not to be assuming in the king's presence or to take a place among the great (Pr 25:6) and the indicative statement that a skilful man may stand before kings (Pr 22:29) have the same function. The admonition advises humility in high society and implies that only certain people have the right to certain styles of conduct in that society. The indicative states that only certain people have a certain status, and implies that skill should be striven for. Another example: the statement that it is foolish to meddle in others' quarrels (Pr 26:17) can be compared to the Ewe saying on sheep and goats. It has the didactic implication that one should not concern oneself with conflicts among others.

The vague dividing line between the admonitions and the indicative sayings was underscored by Zimmerli as early as 1933 (Zimmerli [1933]1976:181). Not only are several transformations of admonitions into "ordinary sayings" and vice versa possible (cf. his illustrations by means of Pr 16:3, 19:20 on the one hand, and 10:2a, 23:4,5 on the other), but also the "two forms are often found joined together in Proverbs into a verbal unity" (e.g. 23:20-21, 26-27, 24:15-16, 19-20).

Hermisson (1968:160-162) also pays attention to forms on the border of the indicative saying and the admonition. He is taken to task by Nel (1982:74-75) for furthering the cause of those who would advocate a genetic development from wisdom saying to admonition, but this is not what Hermisson in fact has done. He has only demonstrated the grey area between the two forms as witnessed to by what he calls "Übergangsformen". These are wisdom sayings in which the imperative is used, but which cannot be understood as direct admonitions to do as one has been told. For example, Proverbs 22:10a:

Drive out the insolent and strife goes away.
In the syntax of the Hebrew imperative it is well known that either two imperatives (GK 110f) or an imperative and a jussive (GK 110g) may be related in this way, so that "the first imperative contains, as a rule, a condition, while the second [imperative or jussive] declares the consequence which the fulfilment of the condition will involve" (Kautzsch & Cowley [1910] 1966:325). This is what can be seen here (cf. also Is 8:10; 55:2). It is not an injunction that one should act in a certain way towards insolent people, but a statement showing what happens in the presence or absence of such people.

Proverbs 20:16 (and its parallel in 27:13) may also be compared:

Take away his garment, for he has pledged for a stranger, and hold him as a pledge for strangers.

This is a strong form of condemning the practice of surety, not an admonition as to what the wise person should do to those who have pledged. The focus is on demonstrating the folly of an unhealthy financial practice, not on the duty of punishing others.

Westermann (1971:76) concedes that a saying in the indicative can imply an admonition, but the examples provided show that an admonition in the imperative can also, conversely, imply a statement. Therefore the formal side of his argument for the strict distinction and indeed separation of the two forms is very weak.

The logical aspect of his argument is just as unconvincing. Westermann, as we have seen, declares that the admonitory saying has its life-setting in "education" ("Erziehung"). This is a broad category and does not yet address
the controversy of the "school school" versus the "folk school". However, when he has to define the life-setting of the indicative wisdom saying, he is even less clear (1971:76):

Das eigentliche Sprichwort dagegen [sc as opposed to the admonition which is placed in "education"] ist Aussagespruch.

This is not a statement, as required by the context of the argument, on the supposedly differing *Sitz im Leben* of the simple proverb, but one on its literary form. So he still does not say where the saying is to be located, but the implication is "not in education".

It is important to Westermann that the implied social status of those involved in the speaking and hearing of the two genres should be considered. In fact, this is the most important, if not the only, argument for their functional difference. The admonition implies, he thinks, unequal social positions, while the wisdom saying implies equality in the status of the speaker and the addressed. An admonition implies a position of authority for the speaker; therefore it points to a teacher-pupil relationship; therefore the life-setting is "education". An indicative saying implies two parties "auf gleicher Ebene stehend" (Westermann 1971:77); therefore it does not point to a life-setting in education; where it should point, if not here, is unclear.

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Compare this with Nel 1982:79-82, who thinks the life-setting of the admonition to be the same as that of the wisdom saying, notably "the Israelite city", which he regards as comprehensive enough to accommodate a whole series of ethoi, including the family ethos and the school ethos. Although Nel is thoroughly part of the "school school" (cf. his indebtedness to Gese - Nel 1982:v), his social placing of the admonition genre is so broad as to keep the folk-school controversy unresolved. This does not contribute to his endeavour to evaluate the "two main solutions" of the problem, viz those of Gerstenberger (1965:121) and Richter 1966:117), who respectively opt for the family and the school as the life-setting of the admonitions.
However, much - indeed most - education is formulated in the indicative. If wisdom sayings imply anything, it is that they contain worthwhile knowledge, which necessarily entails that the speaker has knowledge that the hearer does not have. This is the nearest one could get to a teacher-pupil relationship, whether the former is a father, an experienced clan elder, or a teacher in a formal schooling institution, and whether the hearer is a child, an adolescent, an adult member of the speaker's clan, or even a superior.

Moreover, if the instructions of, for instance, Proverbs 1-9 may employ indicative statements as well as admonitions in the imperative, why can this not be the case in the shorter sayings from chapter 10 onwards? McKane (1970:7) forcefully makes this point with reference to Proverbs 7:6-23 (cf. 24:30-34), where we find:

greater imaginative and descriptive scope than the didactic employment of imperatives and motive clauses in order to inculcate authoritative instruction. There is rather a reliance on descriptive power in order to win acquiescence for the point which is being made.

Westermann (1971:77) himself refers to Proverbs 1-9 in this connection and concedes that we here find the father or teacher teaching a son or pupil. He then adds that his examples of Ewe wisdom have shown that one cannot take both indicative and imperative proverbs as instruction9. Non sequitur.

3. CONCLUSION

Westermann's taking a position so fraught with difficulties is probably related to his basic orientation towards "form" rather than "content". The article we have been considering seems to anticipate the thoughts on this issue clearly.

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9 This is said as criticism of Gese (1958:5-6), who does regard the two forms as together being constitutive of the instruction genre.
expressed in Westermann’s later works on wisdom (1990; 1991). In these the
preoccupation with strongly distinguishing between the study of wisdom from
the vantage point of “Redeformen” and sapiential study concentrating on
“gedankliche Inhalte” is quite clear. It becomes a yardstick for categorising
contemporary “schools”. For him the “Redeformen” school coincides with the
“folk” school as opposed to the “gedankliche Inhalte” school, which coincides
with the “school/court” school. His own allegiance to the former leads to his
strict separation between the wisdom poems (“Schulweisheit” or
“Lehrweisheit”) and the aphorisms (“Volksweisheit” or “Spruchweisheit”).
The former is pure education in a formal situation, and the latter not. When it
comes to aphoristic wisdom, the form-content dichotomy, specifically the
separation of form and content at the expense of the content, in turn causes an
exaggerated distinction between imperative and indicative proverbs - two
forms that are equally part of aphoristic wisdom. Finally, different
life-settings for different forms have to be sought, which leads to the
discrepancies and obscurities that I have pointed out. I would submit that this
conclusion warns us against the dichotomy of form and content.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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These include the following: the instructions of the poems differ
fundamentally from the aphorisms, but the aphoristic admonitions
are also instructions; the poems have a life-setting in education,
but the fundamentally different admonitions should also be
located in the educational setting; no attention is given to the use
of the indicative in an educational setting; admission of the
admonitory character of indicative sayings while arguing for their
descriptive character, conclusions are drawn without attention
being paid to syntactical possibilities.


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