Proverbs in Middle East North Africa (MENA*) Cultural Context

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Abstract

All proverbs are inextricably related to the culture of their origin. The proverb has a form and function distinctive to that culture. Biblical proverbs thus reflect MENA (Middle East North African) culture and should be interpreted primarily in that context. For a reader from a different culture, this requires the use of appropriate “mental software.” This article proposes reading scenarios as the key components of this software. Four are reviewed: normative inconsistency, collectivistic personality, three-zone personality, and secrecy, deception, and lying.

Key words: MENA, culture, reading scenario, normative inconsistency, collectivistic personality, three-zone personality, and secrecy, deception, and lying.

My interest in Proverbs is rooted in my Polish ethnic heritage. A second generation American of Polish descent, I am fluent in the language and extensively informed about its history and culture through fourteen years of formal study. As a youngster, I looked forward to family visits with my godmother, Frances Senyk, and her family. Invariably after the dinner she prepared, the family continued to sit at the table and carry on discussion in Polish well into the evening. My father, who was born in Brooklyn, lived and was educated in Poland from 1920 to 1930.

He and my godmother would carry the discussion, reflecting on life and current topics of interest both in Poland and our Polish community in Brooklyn. I was impressed by the fact that the discussion was peppered with proverbs. A consideration of some life—challenges, hardships, setbacks, or the like, would ultimately prompt my father to introduce the idea of Divine Providence with an appropriate proverb:

_Widzi Pan Bóg z nieba,
czego komu trzeba_

“From heaven, God sees what each person needs.” My godmother would agree to a point. Eventually, she would add

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*Egyptian anthropologists recommend using the term “Middle Eastern North African” (MENA) rather than “circum-Mediterranean” or other such descriptors. The advantage of the acronym is that it recognizes diversity whereby culture is not a shared way of life but rather “a constellation of values, meanings, and practices unevenly distributed to its members” (Gregg: 6; Pilch 2013: 88).

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a complementary perspective with another Polish proverb:  

Ale nie równo każdemu Pan Bóg daje: 

jednemu kurę, a drugiemu jaje.

“But the Lord God does not give equal gifts to each person: to some he gives the chicken, while to others, he gives eggs.” She offered yet another perspective on Divine Providence. And this dialogue through proverbs would continue through the evening.

**Biblical Proverbs**

The anecdote about my father and godmother talking in Polish proverbs serves to illustrate some key characteristics of proverbs in general. As Scott observes, proverbs are “concise, picturesque, thought-provoking, sometimes witty and amusing” statements (Scott: 48/416). Mainly, they generalize about common experience, including common unfortunate experiences. Proverbs reflect human experience. The persuasive power of the proverb derives from the social authority of common consent rather than the personal authority of the one who enunciates the truism.

Of course, all human experience is culturally specific. As Miller points out, “proverbial sayings are inextricably related to culture” (Miller 2006: 170). Further, Sumner-Paulin explains that because proverbs reflect the cultural system and social organization of a community, they should be “transcoded” (that is, translated literally) so as to recreate the cognitive world of the original proverb (Sumner-Paulin: 554). Miller’s description of translating biblical proverbs in African cultures is illustrative (Miller 2005: 129–44). One example drawn from the Dinka people of Sudan should suffice: “A fence of people is not a fence of thorns.” For a Western reader, the sense is intelligible, but the interpretation is nearly impossible. A fence of thorns is common in Dinka society as a protection against thieves. A fence of people is a metaphor for neighbors. Still, what is the implicit cultural information that is embedded within the proverb? The focus is on the fence of people, one’s neighbors. The proverb praises the value of community over against individualism. The best rendition of the literal Dinka proverb “a fence of people is not a fence of thorns” into a suitable English proverb would be: “Mend fences. Build community.” This is concise, pithy, good form—all good qualities of a proverb.

Miller also demonstrates how the implicit Israelite cultural information in some biblical proverbs has to be made explicit in African cultures. Proverbs 25:26: “a trampled fountain or a polluted spring—a just person fallen before the wicked” (NABRE) is puzzling in those cultures where a “fountain” is practically unknown. Springs and ponds exist, but in the dry season if all that is available is muddy water, it will be drunk. The point of the biblical proverb, however, depends upon understanding a polluted source of drinking water. Thus, a Luo (Lwo) rendition of this proverb is: “A righteous person who accepts the words of an evil person, is the same as a pond where gourds are soaked.” Soaking gourds in a pond makes it easier to remove the husks but renders the water bitter and undrinkable. Thus, a just person who heeds the words of an evil person becomes totally corrupt.

Literal translation therefore does not mean “word for word.” Rather, the translator must uncover the implicit cultural information that is embedded within the proverb. Problems in translations occur when there is a mismatch between the culture expressed in biblical proverbs and the culture of the target language, English in our case. For example, speaking about marriage and a good wife, Proverbs 18:22 is predominantly translated: “To find a wife is to find happiness, a favor granted by the LORD” (NABRE). A contemporary reader in a Western cultural setting would imagine that some ancient version of “match.com” or “eharmony.com” existed to help the aspiring spouse “to find for himself” an ideal match. One might think the search is an exclusively personal endeavor. Indeed, Waltke asserts that the word “finds” (see 1:28; 2:5; 3:4, 13) entails a person’s attainment of a goal that he has pursued diligently (Waltke: 95). However, marriages in the MENA antiquity (and the present) were arranged by the parents. Ideally, the partner was a patrilateral (or lacking that, a matrilateral) parallel cousin. The marriage was the fusion of the honor of two families for the benefit of each family (Malina 2001: 134–60). Thus the Hebrew word ordinarily translated “find” should more appropriately be translated “get, acquire,” as Hebrew dictionaries indicate. In other words, lucky the fellow whose parents arranged a good and welcome match for him.

The translation challenges reviewed here derive from MENA social systems, with the various social structures, cultural values, and understandings of what it meant to be a person who existed at that time and place. The idea is to discover what the proverbs were expressing within their social setting by examining the typical MENA social behaviors witnessed to in these aphorisms. What implicit cultural information is embedded in these proverbs? What sorts of outcomes in this
society are expected? To answer these questions, we turn to
the social sciences, notably cultural and Mediterranean
anthropology for insight.

Culture

The Proverb specialist, Raymond Van Leeuwen (:28)
observed:

Many twentieth century collections of proverbs made by mis
sionaries, folklorists, and anthropologists were of little value
since they have no account of the role or function of the sayings
in their live cultural context; indeed they were often taken from a
culture which itself was largely misunderstood.

Scholars generally agree that it is impossible “to recover the
original setting of a proverb, its point of origin” (Murphy: xxix).
Of course, this is true. In general, the vast majority of bib-
lical proverbs seem to have arisen among the populace in small
villages. In general, they reflect rural life within an extended
family, or folk, or village setting. Some reflect the royal court.
However, it is also true that the MENA cultural setting of bib-
lical proverbs has been ignored or misunderstood and wrongly
interpreted. With the aid of the social sciences, it is indeed pos-
sible to hypothesize the live cultural context of proverbs.

Concepts drawn from the world of information technology,
i.e., computers, help to understand the significance of culture
(Hofstede et al.: 5–7). Human nature is what all human be-
ings have in common. From this perspective, all human being
are 100% alike (Malina 2001: 8). Human nature can be con-
sidered “the operating system” that determines our physical
and psychological functioning. It equips us with the ability to
experience fear, anger, love, joy, etc. How one expresses these
emotions is modified by culture.

Culture is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking,
feeling, and acting learned throughout a person’s lifetime. It
is possible to call these patterns mental programs, or software
of the mind, or mental software (Balkin). From this perspec-
tive, all human beings are 50% the same, and 50% different.
The source of these mental programs is the environment within
which one grew up. The first ten to twelve years of life are
crucial for learning one’s culture, or developing one’s mental
software. Culture is always a collective phenomenon. Culture
is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the
members of one group or category of people from others.

The specific mental software necessary for cross-cultural un-
derstanding lies in the category of communication software. An
example of communication software is ArabBible 5.5 (www.
arabible.com). It contains the entire New Testament plus Gen-
esis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ruth, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah,
Daniel, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah,
Haggai, and Malachi in Classical Arabic. Components of this
program include complete grammatical explanations of every
word and its contextual meaning; structure of the literal Ara-
bic, Concordance, Root Analyzer, Verb Conjuguator, adjustable
Audio Recitation for verse and chapter, Word Frequency (for
learning vocabulary). It does not provide cultural information,
the major component of mental software for understanding a
proverb’s cultural setting in life.

Finally, Personality is a unique set of mental programs that
needn’t be shared with any other human being. From this per-
spective, all human beings are 100% different. Personality is
partly inherited and partly learned. Learned means modified
by culture (the collective programming) and unique personal
experience.

Cultural differences manifest themselves in several ways:
symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. Symbols are words, ges-
tures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning that
is recognized as such only by those who share the culture.
Examples are words in a language, hair styles, flags, and
status symbols. This is the most superficial layer of culture
(mental software).

Heroes are persons alive or dead, real or imaginary, who
possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and
thus serve as models for behavior. Rituals are collective ac-
tivities technically superfluous to reach desired ends but that,
within a culture, are considered socially essential. These in-
clude distinctive ways of greeting or respecting others, social
and religious ceremonies. These three elements are practices.
They are externally visible but their cultural meaning is invis-
ible and determined by the interpretation of insiders. Outsid-
ers need help in order to understand.

Values constitute the core of culture. They are broad ten-
dencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others. Values
are feelings with a “+” or “–” sign. For example, at a high
level of abstraction values include evil versus good; dirty ver-
sus clean; unnatural versus natural, etc. (Pilch & Malina). As
already noted, through the first ten or twelve years we learn
symbols (language), heroes (parents), rituals (toilet training),
and values. Crenshaw appropriately notes that “proverbs con-

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stitute the best single source for discovering the cherished values of ancient Israel” (Crenshaw: 63).

Reading Scenarios

Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, and John Pilch have co-authored a series of Social Science Commentaries on the New Testament (Synoptics, John, Revelation, Authentic Letters of Paul, Deutero-Paulines, and Acts of the Apostles; Catholic Epistles pending; Fortress Press). A distinctive feature of these Commentaries is the inclusion of “Reading Scenarios” (Malina 1991: 14–17). These are drawn from anthropological studies of the MENA social system. This is the social system that characterizes MENA culture and has been encoded in the language of the Bible in ways that are not always obvious to modern readers. In other words, these reading scenarios present elements of the MENA mental software.

A modern reader of the Bible from Western culture or any other than MENA culture will find in these scenarios clues for filling in the unwritten elements embedded in the respective document just as a Mediterranean reader might have done. In order to develop a considerate posture toward the people who formulated the common folk wisdom in these proverbs, it will be important for the modern reader to temporarily substitute MENA mental software (elements of MENA culture) for his or her cultural mental software, which is alien to the Bible.

Most of the twenty-one reading scenarios presented for Proverbs in my forthcoming book, The Cultural Life Setting of the Proverbs, were selected and revised from the scenarios in the Social Science Commentary series on the New Testament. The list includes: Adultery, Age, Agonism, Collectivistic Society, Discipline, Economy, Evil Eye, Honor and Shame, Hospitality, Humility, Inclusive Language, In-group and Out-group, Kinship, Limited Good, Lying, Meals, Normative inconsistency, Patronage, Politics, Rich and Poor, and Three-Zone Personality. Applying some of these scenarios to specific Proverbs will illustrate the contribution they make to understanding the implicit cultural information embedded in a Proverb.

Normative Inconsistency

When ambivalence and inconsistency provide positive outcomes, anthropologists call this “normative inconsistency.” Nearly all societies have some form of normative inconsistencies, but the way in which a given society handles them differs. In the United States, for example, individualism is a core value and secret of America’s greatness. However, no one should live for self alone. The person who “gives back” is a cultural hero. Children are considered a blessing, but no one should have more than s/he can afford to support and educate. (For a more complete list see Lynd: 60–62; Williams 1970: 421–22). In the Bible, Jesus cautions: “Whoever says to his brother, ‘Raqa,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna” (Matt 5:22). Yet he himself calls the scribes and Pharisees: “Blind fools!” (Matt 23:17) in a chapter filled with insults. Or again Jesus recommends “turning the other [left] cheek” in reference to bearing insults (Matt 5:39). The right cheek requires either the backhand, or left hand used only for toilet functions, in either case a serious insult. Yet throughout the Gospel whenever approached by hostile, testing questioners, his first reaction is an insulting counter-question (Matt. 15:1–9; for other examples see Malina 1986: 45–47; Pilch 2014).

Inconsistency of norms and the experience of dissonance are normal in a social situation in which traditional values cannot be realized or actualized in daily living. This produces conflict both within the individual and between groups. One result is the spontaneous and prolific spawning of coalitions of various sorts: cliques, gangs, action sets, and factions. These individuals and coalitions then distinguish rigidly between in-groups and out-groups, often alternating allegiance between the two. The individual is thus forced to deal with this sociological ambivalence and has two options:

- ignore the dissonance, seek total consistency, and adopt inflexible behavior without options which is extremism. This option leads ultimately to disaster, destruction of self (suicide), or the demise of the group or coalition; or
- accept the conflict and engage in a networking process in the social environment of one’s birth.

Once one learns the network, it can be “reconstructed” as necessary in order to produce a positive outcome, that is, a more or less satisfying life. Thus the person becomes a social, self-interested entrepreneur who learns how to manipulate norms and relationships for personal social and psychological benefit, while of course being manipulated in turn by that network. This option provides the person with contrary norms without losing role or status, without losing honor. Such a person simultaneously honors different commitments according to the circumstances. Thus Paul exemplifies such
The implicit MENA cultural information embedded in Proverbs 18:22 (“To find a wife is to find happiness, a favor granted by the Lord”—see the explanation above: patrilateral/matrilateral parallel cousins) is the notion of collectivistic personalities who make a sharp distinction between in-groups and out-groups. Collectivism describes “societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede et al.: 92).

The chief in-group of course is the extended family. In contrast, contemporary American culture is individualistic, that is, a society “in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him-or herself and his or her immediate family” (ibid.). Thus Americans consider an individual’s psychological makeup to be the key to understanding who a person might be. Each individual is viewed as bounded and unique, a more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness and judgment that is set over against other such individuals and interacts with them. This sort of individualism has been and is extremely rare in the world’s cultures and is almost certainly absent from the Bible.

In the ancient MENA world such a view of the individual did not exist. There every person was understood to be embedded in others and had his or her identity only in relation to these others who formed this fundamental group. For most people this was the extended family, and it meant that individuals neither acted nor thought of themselves as persons independent of the family group. What one member of the family was, every member of the family was, psychologically as well as every other way. MENA individuals are what anthropologists call group-oriented persons or “collectivistic” persons. They are “dyadic” or “other-oriented” people who depend on others to provide them with a sense of who they are.

Consider the chart (top of next page) comparing individualist, weak-group persons (U.S.) and dyadic, collectivist or strong-group persons (MENA cultures).

If the level of analysis is a comparison of entire societies then individualism and collectivism are opposite poles of one dimension. Ancient MENA societies—like 90 percent of the societies in the ethnographic data base of the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University—are collectivistic. If the level of analysis is individual members of a society, then individualism and collectivism are two separate dimensions. Persons enculturated in collectivistic societies remain individuals (Hofstede et al.: 102).

But there is a difference between the self in collectivistic societies and the self in individualistic societies (see Hofstede et al.: 89–134). Anthropologists commonly distinguish three distinctive selves: the privately defined self, the publicly defined self, and the collectively or in-group defined self.

- The private self is what I myself say about my own traits, states, behaviors. Who is it I think I really am in my heart of hearts?
The public self consists of what the general group says about me. Who does that range of people with whom I regularly come in contact think I am? What do neighbors, merchants, teachers, and the like say about me? Do I live up to their expectations when I interact with them? And what do I think of all that these people think of me?

The collective or ingroup self is what the ingroup says about me. Who do my parents say I am? What are their expectations for me? Did anyone give me a nickname? What does it say about me? What are the expectations of my grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and brothers and sisters in regard to who I am, how I should behave, what I will be? And what do I think of what these people think of me? What do my friends want me to do, over against what my parents want me to do?

To understand the self in terms of social psychology we need to know the way the defined self emerges in the contrasting collectivist and individualistic cultural types. In collectivist cultures there is a general conformity between private self and ingroup self. Such people take in-group self assessments far more seriously than people in individualist cultures. Moreover, individuals are socialized not to express what they personally think, but to say what their conversation partner or audience needs or wants to hear from the ingroup. Saying the right thing to maintain harmony is thus far more important than telling what seems to be the truth to the private self (pakikisama in the Philippines = smooth interpersonal relations). In fact “truth” might be defined here as conformity to the expectations of others, especially those considered of high esteem in the wider group. Otherwise, truth is often defined as conformity to the expectations of one’s ingroup.
between what the in-group thinks about some person, event or thing, and what the private self believes and knows. Collectivist persons are not expected to have personal opinions, much less to voice their own opinions. They are required to hold only those opinions that derive from the social consensus of ingroup members.

In individualist cultures the public and private selves converge to form a single, “objectively” defined private self. Inconsistency between the public and private self is understood to be hypocrisy. One must think and say the same thing. Honesty, frankness and sincerity are more abstract and less interpersonal for individualists. Everyone is expected to have an opinion on everything, and others are supposed to act as though everyone’s opinion counted for something.

It is shameful to tell the truth if it dishonors one’s in-group members or causes them discomfort. In non-challenging situations, out-group persons are almost always told what makes for harmony and what is to be expected. Making a friend feel good by what one has to say is a way of honoring the other, and that is far more important than “telling the truth.”

A recent anthropological-historical study (Finches at al.: 1279–1285) concluded that in contrast to individualism, collectivism serves as an antipathogen defense function. Thus the many advantages of individualism pale in comparison with its increased vulnerability to infectious diseases. Collectivism definitely proved to be a stronger defense against infectious disease, and thus emerged and existed in populations that historically have been characterized by a greater prevalence of pathogens.

Proverbs 15:22 enunciates the importance of group opinion: “Plans fail where there is no counsel, but they succeed when advisers are many” (see also Prov 11:14). As noted, personal opinion has no value. Only fools offer personal opinion. “Fools take no delight in understanding, but only in displaying what they think” (Prov 18:2). Deception, lying, and secrecy are three legitimate strategies in MENA cultures in the service of honor (see below). Safeguarding honor—either personal or that of others—is paramount. What then does the Sage mean by saying: “Like a crazed archer scattering firebrands and deadly arrows, such are those who deceive their neighbor and then say “I was only joking” (Prov 26:18–19), or “I was only having fun.” The real concern here is deception just for the fun of it. Such behavior disrespects the cultural approval of resorting to deception to avoid shaming a neighbor. It ruins interpersonal harmony and is drastically destructive of society. On the other hand, sensitivity to others, most likely members of the out-group, should not become paralyzing fear, or a willingness to ignore God’s directives and accept the bad advice of others leading to sin, to shaming God. “Fear of others becomes a snare, but the one who trusts in the LORD is safe” (Prov 29:25).

Perjury (bearing false witness) is a repeated theme in Proverbs (Prov 6:19; 12:17; 14:5; 19:5, 9; 24:28). This repetition suggests that despite God’s commandment forbidding it (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20), bearing false witness occurred frequently. It is an abomination to the LORD who hates “the false witness who utters lies and sows discord among kindred” (Prov 6:19). The injured party in these verses is a fellow-ethnic, a fellow Israelite, a member of one’s in-group. That is what irritates God. By these lies, such a person is like a lethal weapon: “a club, sword, or sharp arrow” (Prov 25:18) destroying the honor of another. In Deuteronomy, God commands that the disputing parties be investigated by the priests and judges. If the falsity is proven, then the law of Talmion should be applied: “you shall do to the false witness just as that false witness planned to do to the other. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst” (Deut 19:19).

Three-Zone Personality

In the mid-20th century, a Belgian Benedectine biblical scholar proposed a Semitic view of the human person which he identified in the Bible and elsewhere in ancient literature (de Géradon 1954, 1958, 1974). In contrast to the Greco-Roman world’s view of the human person in terms of body and soul, de Géradon observed that people in the biblical world focused concretely on the body. Exegetes certainly agree with this. Preuss observes: “Old Testament Anthropology is familiar neither with the dichotomy of body and soul nor a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit. . . . [it] has rather a holistic view of humanity” (Preuss: 110, 114). McKenzie explains further:

[Human nature] is seen as an existing totality, and the words that refer to anything except parts of the anatomy designate the totality of conscious life in some way. Indeed, even when particular parts of the anatomy such as the loins, the bowels, the eye, the hand, or the heart are made the subject and the seat of vital acts, the total person is identified with the organ, in which the sum of psychic energy comes to focus [NJBC 77: 66].

Thus Murphy is correct in emphasizing: “It is important in
Since ancient Israel—like other MENA societies—was not at all introspective (see 1 Sam 16:7), philosophical and psychological interpretations are inappropriately ethnocentric and anachronistic (Pilch 1997). Rather, human behavior in the Bible is evaluated on the basis of externally perceptible activity and in terms of the social functions of such activity (de Géradon 1974: 13). The human being is perceived as a socially embedded and interacting whole, a living being reacting to persons and things on the outside of the individual. The main framework of perimeters or boundaries of this interaction between the individual and the world outside the individual is described metaphorically, for the most part, using parts of the human organic whole as metaphors. Thus, most obviously, human beings are endowed with a heart for thinking, along with eyes that fill the heart with data; a mouth for speaking, along with ears that collect the speech of others; and hands and feet for acting. More abstractly, human beings consist of three mutually interpenetrating yet distinguishable zones of interaction with persons and things in the human environment symbolically interpreted: the zone of emotion-fused thought, the zone of self-expressive speech, and the zone of purposeful action.

In other words, the way human beings are perceived as fitting into their rightful place in their environments, physical and social, and acting in a way that is typically human, is by means of their inmost reactions (eyes-heart) as expressed in language (mouth-ears) and/or outwardly realized in activity (hands-feet). These three zones comprise the non-introspective makeup of human beings and are used to describe human behavior throughout the ancient Near East, including the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. As noted above, this three-zone model was discovered and fully explicated by Bernard de Géradon (1974). For a review of his insight, see Follon, and for its extensive application to the New Testament see Malina (2001: 68–75; 2012: 56–59).

Recall that MENA descriptive approaches tend to be highly synthetic rather than analytic—more like floodlights than spotlights. A floodlight covers a whole area at one time, and movement of the light might intensify exposure in a given part of the area; yet the whole area always remains in view. Similarly, specific words covering one of the three zones would stand for the whole zone, while always keeping the total functioning human being in view, that is, the other two zones as well (de Géradon 1974: 18). Here is a representative list of such words and the zones they refer to.

**Zone of emotion-fused thought:** eyes, heart, eyelid, pupil, and the activities of these organs: to see, know, understand, think, remember, choose, feel, consider, look at. The following representative nouns and adjectives pertain to this zone as well: thought, intelligence, mind, wisdom, folly, intention, plan, will, affection, love, hate, sight, regard, blindness, a look; intelligent, loving, wise, foolish, hateful, joyous, sad, and the like.

In western culture, this zone would cover the areas referred to as intellect, will, judgment, conscience, personality thrust, core personality, affection, and so forth.

**Zone of self-expressive speech:** mouth, ears, tongue, lips, throat, teeth, jaws, and the activities of these organs: to speak, hear, say, call, cry, question, sing, recount, tell, instruct, praise, listen to, blame, curse, swear, disobey, turn a deaf ear to. The following nouns and adjectives pertain to this zone as well: speech, voice, call, cry, clamor, song, sound, hearing; eloquent, dumb, talkative, silent, attentive, distracted, and the like.

In western culture, this zone would cover the area referred to as self-revelation through speech, communication with others, the human person as listener who dialogues with others in a form of mutual self-unveiling, and so on.

**Zone of purposeful action:** hands, feet, arms, fingers, legs, and the activities of these organs: to do, act, accomplish, execute, intervene, touch, come, go, march, walk, stand, sit, along with specific activities such as to steal, kidnap, commit adultery, build, and the like. The following representative nouns and adjectives pertain to this zone as well: action, gesture, work, activity, behavior, step, walking, way, course, and any specific activity; active, capable, quick, slow, and so forth.

In western culture, this zone would cover the area of outward human behavior, all external activity, human actions upon the world of persons and things.

It is very unlikely that the persons using this derived etic model were explicitly aware of it. Rather, it seems more likely that the model served as an implicit pattern, an unarticulated set of significant areas working much like the grammar of a native speaker who knows no explicit, articulated grammar. Yet whenever speakers (or writers in a given document) describe human activity, they inevitably have recourse to the three zones, at times emphasizing only two of them or even one of them, with the others always in view in the background.
(de Géradon 1974: 18). These are the emic or indigenous data from which de Géradon devised his derived etic model (which he prefers to call “schema” or “diagram”).

The idea is that all human activities, states, and behaviors can be and are in fact chunked in terms of these three zones. Now when all three zones are explicitly mentioned, then the speaker or writer is alluding to a total and complete human experience. For example, the law of limited retribution in Exodus 21:24, restated in Deuteronomy 19:21, and cited in part in Matthew 5:38 (the so-called law of Hammurabi) basically refers to limiting retribution within the whole range of human interactions covered by each zone: “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” This “law” looks to righting restrictions put upon individual social entitlements. If this legal formula derives from and expresses the three zones that make up a human being, it would obviously not be meant literally and concretely (except by persons who do not understand the culture or by persons in the culture who are at the concrete stage of cognitive development, i.e., children and adults who are mentally challenged by nature or by choice or experience).

A few more examples: “There are six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet that are quick to run to evil, the false witness who utters lies, and the one who sows discord among kindred” (Prov 6:16–19). In this seven-patterned proverb (patterned much like the seven days of creation in Genesis 1), we have two complete descriptions of the totally wicked person in terms of three zones, followed by the worst type of person in that culture, one who breaks up bonds of loyalty in a family of blood. Or again, note how the prophet Elisha symbols his total living self as he lies upon the child he seeks to resuscitate: “Then he lay upon the child on the bed, pacing his mouth upon the child’s mouth, his eyes upon the eyes, and his hands upon the hands. As Elisha stretched himself over the child, the boy’s flesh became warm” (2 Kgs 4:34). Or consider the description of the linen-clothed man in Daniel in what is obviously meant to be a total description: “His body was like chrysolite, his face shone like lightning, his eyes like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and the sound of his voice was like the roar of a multitude” (Dan 10:6). The author of Revelation, perhaps taking his cue from Daniel, describes his celestial vision of the Son of man as follows: “The hair of his head was as white as white wool or as snow, and his eyes were like a fiery flame. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. A sharp, two edged sword came out of his mouth, and his face shone like the sun shining at its brightest” (Rev 1:14–16). Again, we have a description of function in terms of three zones, a portrayal of how this being relates to those he comes into contact with—a functional picture (de Géradon 1974: 33). It is the function of the organs rather than the organs which is the focus of the ancient authors.

In addition to the dyads—heart-eyes, mouth-ears, hands-feet—it is possible to add yet another organ that seems peculiar to the Semites: the kidneys, often associated with the heart (Ps 7:10; 26:2; Jer 2:20; 20:12). Though the heart and kidneys together form the seat of intimate human impulses, the heart seems to orient them primarily in the direction of language, while the kidneys point primarily toward external action. The primitive anatomical views of the ancient Israelites joined the kidneys with the hips and the articulation of its members, whence their immediate link with the movements of the legs, and accordingly with the arms. On the other hand, the heart, by its position, finds itself closer to the mouth, the breath of the word. “I, the LORD, explore the mind and test the heart [LXX adds: I examine the kidneys], giving all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds” (Jer 17:10). The Sage observes: “For Wisdom is a kindly spirit, yet she does not acquit blaspemous lips; because God is the witness of the inmost self (Greek =kidneys), a sure observer of the heart and the listener to the tongue” (Wis 1:6).

Ancient MENA cultures reveal a polyphasic system i.e., a mixture consisting of various substances and solutions which are only partly miscible with one another. Such a system is characterized by or exhibits several successive peaks of activity. In animate beings, the life source permeates the whole being, yet is rooted in specific organs such as the blood, the fat around the kidneys, the heart and the like. Animate human beings relate to beings in their environment in zones marked off by eyes-heart, mouth-ears, and hands-feet. These polyphasic features mark off all animate behavior: of God and gods, spirits, human beings, and, of course, animals (de Géradon 1958; 1974: 33–42).

De Géradon’s tripartite schema is particularly clear in Proverbs and popular sayings (de Géradon 1974: 105). It is present when the theme of the Proverb presents an opportunity. This anthropological schema exercises such a power over human nature (the operating system), that it successfully insinu-
ates itself into language. From this perspective, the schema is the software. Specifically it is an element of MENA cultural software. Despite the freedom involved with creativity, a Sage (or any person) is conditioned by this schema even more than he or she is aware (de Géradon 1974: 113–14).

Though Proverbs 6:16–19 reflects the complete tripartite schema, most often the proverb uses two rather than all three terms. For example, “Out of sight, out of mind.” In the Bible, “A cheerful glance brings joy to the heart; good news invigorates the bones” (Prov 15:30). Each stich refers to a different part of the schema, a different symbolic body zone: glance = heart-eyes, the zone of emotion-fused thinking. The ancients believed in an extramission function of the eyes. A person could see because light emanated from the body through the eyes and illuminated the view. Projecting this “cheerful glance” upon another person brings joy to the heart of that person because of what is perceived through the eyes. The second stich refers to the zone of mouth-ears, the zone of self-expressive speech. The speaker’s communication of good news literally in Hebrew “puts fat on the bones.” This phrase means that good news enhances the total well-being of a person. “Puts fat on the bones” (well-being) contrasts with “rot in the bones” (Prov 12:4; 14:30), the opposite of well-being. NABRE retained the Hebrew idiom, while NRSV interpreted it as “refreshes the body.” According to de Géradon, the tripartite schema with its symbolic interpretation includes more than just the body.

The very next aphorism focuses on two symbolic body zones: “The ear that listens to salutary reproof is at home among the wise” (Prov 15:21). Ear obviously refers to the mouth-ears zone, but the significance is that this person exhibits his collectivistic orientation since he heeds “salutary reproof.” The Hebrew literally says “admonition of life,” that is, opinions contrary to the listener’s which lead to or confer life. Those offering such opinions do so by means of their mouth-ears symbolic body zone. Heeding this advice, the listener “is at home among the wise.”

Secrecy, Deception and Lying

Since honor is the core cultural value in the Mediterranean world, and since one’s public claim to honor, value, worth, and reputation requires public acknowledgment, secrecy is one of a trio of strategies employed in preserving honor: secrecy, deception, and lying. Actually, these are also cultural values. The more people know about a person, the fewer claims to honor can that person make. Hence the first step in maintaining one’s reputation is secrecy, a formal, conscious, deliberate, and calculated concealment of information, activities, or relationship which outsiders can gain only by espionage (Pilch 1994: 151–57). In other words, it is a selective sharing of information including refusal to share it, or leaking information as it is useful. One never gives “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” to anyone. Given the nosey nature of this culture in which people always suspect they are not being told the truth, no one is satisfied with what is “leaked” or shared. They try to probe deeper to find the real truth.

This then leads the secretive person to deception. In his prayer, Job asks: “Will it be well when he [God] shall search you out? Can you deceive him as you do a mere human being?” (Job 13:9). Jeremiah reports God’s lament:

They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the LORD. Beware of your neighbors, and put no trust in any of your kin; for all your kin are supplanters, and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer. They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongues to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent” [Jer. 9:3–5].

It was a commonly used strategy.

Parables are a form of deception. “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables” (Mark 4:10). Notice that central to this process is a careful distinction between insiders and outsiders. Insiders are privy to the truth, but outsiders deserve nothing but secrecy, deception, and outright lies. As already noted, the constantly shifting distinction between insiders and outsiders is characteristic of the collectivistic personality.

The third strategy for protecting honor is lying, that is, restricting the public dissemination of information over a period of time (Pilch 1992: 126–35). Lying is not unique to MENA cultures. It was nearly universally practiced by all cultures from Socrates (4th century BCE) to Chrysostom (5–6th century CE; Ehrman: 135). Plato identifies Socrates as the creator of the “noble lie,” that is, “a contrivance for one of those falsehoods that come into being in case of need, of which we were just now talking, some noble one…” (Plato, Republic, 414b–c). In other words the intent of the lie is to
Pilch, “Proverbs in MENA Cultural Context”

maintain social harmony. Some anthropologists don’t distinguish between deception and lying; they consider lying a form of deception. Whatever one decides, it is important not to impose upon lie in Mediterranean culture the moral evaluation that it has in Western culture.

In the biblical tradition, lying is an “abomination to the Lord” (Prov 6:16–19; 12:22). Bearing false witness is prohibited by God’s commandment (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:10). Fifth century Father of the Church, St. Augustine says all lying is forbidden to everyone, everywhere, in all circumstances. But other Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, allowed for “medicinal lies,” that is, those that would not harm another person but rather lead to good (Ehrman: 51). The abundant (mostly condemnatory) references to lying in Proverbs suggest that people also tended to ignore the commandment, as in his time Augustine was similarly ignored by many (Griffiths).

du Boulay has distinguished eight kinds of deception or lies used by contemporary MENA people as a legitimate strategy in the service of maintaining or even gaining honor. These can also be found in the Bible, though not all in Proverbs. Each case reflects the public dimension of honor.

- There is a lie to conceal the failure of an individual or group to live up to the highest levels of requirements of the social code. A failure against honor can be concealed through lying so as to keep the appearance of maintaining honor.
- Sometimes one fails without intending to do so. The failure would not escape notice in this society; so it must be covered with a lie. However, the lie might backfire. “By the lies of their lips the wicked are ensnared, but the just escape from a tight spot” (Prov 12:13). “The lying tongue is its owner’s own enemy, and the flattering mouth works ruin” (Prov 26:28).
- Sometimes to preserve one’s honor, one must besmirch another. It is fair to attack the honor of another by telling a lie of false imputation. “A club, sword, or sharp arrow—the one who bears false witness against a neighbor” (Prov 25:18). “By a word the impious ruin their neighbors, but through their knowledge the just are rescued” (Prov 11:9).
- Other lies serve to avoid quarrels or trouble. The Middle East is not basically violent. It has a collection of strategies for defusing arguments because they can lead to violence that might erupt in bloodshed. Blood feuds last forever. Hence the mediator is key to squelching arguments. An even earlier step is to lie to avoid a quarrel or escape trouble, both of which can besmirch honor.
- Since honor is also measured by material possessions, one seeks to acquire them. However, such gain in the peasant world of limited good is shameful. Still, a (material) gain achieved by cheating on a deal, or pretending to be cunning and shrewd, contributes to a person’s achieved honor. Hence some lies are told for material gain. “Trying to get rich by lying is chasing a bubble over deadly snares” (Prov 21:6). “What is desired of a person is fidelity, rather be poor than a liar” (i.e., refuse the bribe rather than commit perjury in a lawsuit; Prov 19:22).
- At other times, lies are told for sheer concealment, because the other has no right to know. The expert in deception and lying in MENA culture is admired as a hero.
- Thus some lies are told for pure mischief, just for the fun of it. “Like a crazed archer scattering firebrands and deadly arrows, such are those who deceive their neighbor, and then say ‘I was only joking’” (Prov 26:18–29; see above). Or the lie is intended to confuse authorities. “If rulers listen to lying words, their servants all become wicked” (Prov 29:12; see Ps. 101).
- Finally, it is also and especially acceptable to lie on behalf of a friend, a guest, and certainly kin. Thus some deceptions serve a defensive purpose, while others are strategies of attack.

Is there a distinction between lying and bearing false witness (Exod 20:16//Deut 5:20)? Separate mention of each in Proverbs 6:17, 19 might suggest that. The term “false witness” most certainly refers to legal proceedings. It is a special instance of a lie: “Whoever speaks honestly testifies truly, but the deceitful make lying witnesses” (Prov 12:17; see also 14:5). However, the Sage gives hope: “The false witness will not go unpunished, and whoever utters lies will not escape” (Prov 19:5). Apart from legal proceedings, lying is just slander or one of the eight categories identified by du Boulay.

Useful as they may be in MENA culture, lies nevertheless make life very difficult and frustrating. Hence the consoling wisdom: “The perverse in heart come to no good, and the double-tongued fall into trouble” (Prov 17:20). The unknown person, Agur, prays to God: “Two things I ask of you, do not deny them to me before I die. Put falsehood and lying far from me, and give me neither poverty nor riches” (Prov 30:7–8).
Conclusion

Our colleague, Jerome Neyrey, often concluded his presentations with this question: “Now that we know this, what do we know?” We ask the same question about the significance of MENA cultural insights for interpreting Proverbs. Here is what we have learned.

• Proverbs are inextricably embedded in their culture of origin. Biblical proverbs are rooted in MENA culture.
• A respectful reading and understanding of biblical proverbs requires more than a superficial knowledge of MENA culture.
• Culture is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting learned throughout a person’s lifetime. It is possible to call these patterns mental programs, or software of the mind, or mental software.
• This mental software (=culture) belongs to the category of application software. It directs the operating system (the human person) to perform specific tasks or functions.
• The specific application software appropriate for interpreting biblical proverbs is communication software.
• The major components of MENA communication software are cultural (Reading) scenarios.
• In this presentation, I have offered four MENA cultural scenarios appropriate for reading, understanding, and interpreting sayings in the biblical book of Proverbs: Normative Inconsistency; Collectivistic Personality; Three-Zone Personality; and Secrecy, Deception, and Lying—with proverbs manifesting the MENA cultural values. This is the mental software that a reader from a culture other than MENA should develop to be a considerate and respectful interpreter of proverbs in the Bible.

Works Cited


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