On the Interpretation of Proverbs 12:27

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Abstract: This article suggests that the difficulties in Prov 12:27 stem from a confusion of the gutturals ח and ע, and interpretation of יקר as an adjective rather than a verbal form of the rootكار. Making these minimal emendations produces a balanced and coherent text: חָרוּץ יִקֶּר / יִקָּר וְהֹון־אָדָם צֵידֹו רְמִיּה לֹא־יַעֲרֹךְ (The slacker will not set up his food, All a person has befalls the diligent).

Keywords: Prov 12:27, ח/ע confusion, gutturals

Introduction

Proverbs 12:27, which reads

A negligent man never has game to roast; לֹא יִהְמָה רְמִיּה צֵידֹו
A diligent man has precious weight. וְהוֹון־אָדָם יִקר

poses considerable difficulties to commentators. The preceding NJPS translation reflects Toy’s opinion that:

The two clauses are unrelated to each other; there appears to be a displacement—each clause has lost its parallel. The first may read: the slothful man (lit. slothfulness, = the man of slothfulness) does not hunt (or, rouse, or, roast) his game—metaphor taken from hunting-life; the meaning of the verb is doubtful, but the general sense appears to be that the slothful man is too lazy to provide food for himself, and must consequently suffer.¹

Many commentators note that the first line of 12:27 is obscure, and the second line seems to be garbled.² Some commentators feel that the verse is too corrupt for translation (Kamphausen). Others come up with strange renditions of the verse. For instance, Noyes translates: The slothful man takes not that which he hunts; but a diligent man has precious substance.³ Recently Longman observed that “This verse is widely recognized as enigmatic. We find it hard to place the second colon in smooth grammatical form, so we keep it abrupt.” He renders 12:27 Slack people do not roast their prey; determined people, precious riches.⁴ This meaningless text amply illustrates the frustration with the MT of 12:27.

³ George R. Noyes, A New Translation of the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Canticles (Boston: Monroe, 1846), 27.
The major difficulties in 12:27a are the hapax legomenon חֲרֹך, the confusing order of words in the parallel colon, and the absence of thematic connectivity between the cola. For instance, Toy observes that: “The second clause should express the idea that the diligent man does make provision for himself, but this meaning cannot be got from the present text.” Obviously, a solution is required that assigns to the hapax legomenon חֲרֹך a reasonable meaning and establishes a sound meaning for 12:27b which clearly conveys the thematic coherence of the verse.

Analysis

The versions in general support the MT, though some change the order of the words. For instance, the Septuagint renders: A deceitful man shall catch no game; but a pure man is a precious possession (Ὁὐκ ἐπιτεύξεται δόλιος θήρας, κτήμα δὲ τίμμον ἀνήρ καθαρός). It assumes that 12:27a is a metaphor derived from hunting-life, takes חֲרֹך = he shall catch (ἐπιτεύξεται), θήρας = game (θήρας), seems to be reading πειρατής (κτήμα δὲ τίμμον), and takes כְּרֹךְ = pure (καθαρός). The Septuagint’s rendition results in two cola that are completely unrelated. It leaves us wondering why a deceitful man shall catch no game when so much of hunting relies on deceit.

It seems that Targum Ketubim understands 12:27 as a comparison between the fortunes of the deceitful and honest man, translating: A deceitful man does not chance upon game, and the fortune (wealth) of [an honest] man is precious gold (יקירא דבהא אנש דבורה ומזליה נכילא). Tg. Ket. takes חֲרֹך = he chances upon (נוכתרתבל see Jastrow 1019a), seems to be reading כְּרֹך (הראה באה), and takes כְּרֹךְ = gold (דהבא). The coherence of Tg. Ket. translation is better than that of the Septuagint. However, it does not have a clear counterpart to נוכתרתבל in the second colon. How can the Targum assert that a deceitful man does not chance upon game when any reader knows it to be unrealistic?

The Septuagint and Peshitta translations result in two colons that are thematically uncon

All the versions render חֲרֹך = he will find, or catch. However, it is not clear whether there was a tradition for this meaning of the word, or the Septuagint guessed a meaning that in its view fit the text and the other versions adopted it. However, the only two words in the Tanach that could have the verbal stem חֲרֹך in them are תָּחַרְךּ (was singed”) in Dan 3:27 and the noun חֲרֹכים in Song 2:9 (“window”). Neither of these cases even remotely suggests the sense of catching or obtaining. This is also the case whether the word is similar to the Arabic حرق.

5 Longman, Proverbs, 269.
7 H.W.F. Gesenius, Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 305a. Regarding the translation of Prov 12:27 by the versions, Gesenius observes that “all these translations appear only to have given the sense freely. The signification of taking is indeed doubtful, unless the idea be connected with חֲרֹכים. C.B. Michaelis interprets, will catch in a net, making it thus, denom. from חֲרֹכים, net-work, lattice.”
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("singe, burn") or חֶרֶךְ ("move, be agitated"). Apparently, the versions struggled with the order of words in 12:27b. Their rearrangements of the text do not result in better inner-verse coherence. As will be seen from the following overview, the difficulties faced by the versions presage the exegetical challenges of Prov 12:27 to this day.

Rashi (1040-1105) connects 12:27a to 12:26b, paraphrasing the two colons “the behavior of the wicked will make him err, and he will not succeed in his fraudulent hunt.” Rashi notes that the underlying hunting metaphor led to the MT use of חֶרֶךְ, since successful trapping of a bird implies singeing of its feathers. He rearranges 12:27b, reading אֲלֹהֵי עַדִּי and the possession of the honest man is precious,” apparently taking עַדִּי = "honest man.” Attachment of 12:27a to 12:26b removes the need for harmonization of the MT cola in 12:26. However, this attachment destroys the meter of both vv. 12:26 and 27. Moreover, the stand-alone 12:27a is hanging.

Ibn Ezra (1089-c.1164) explains that the deceitful should not roast or cook his game since he would be robbed of it, but the possessions of a precious person, diligent and honest, would not be robbed. Ibn Ezra reads an entirely unrealistic scenario into the verse. Ralbag begins in a similar vein, saying that “the deceitful should not eat his hunt or trade it, because someone will take it from him.” He explains the following colon: “A man’s most precious possession is being an honest person (עַדִּי).”

Most Jewish classical exegetes (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Qimhi, Ralbag et al.) take עַדִּי to mean roast, or singe, as in Aramaic (Dan 3:27), and so do the early Jewish lexicographers (Menahem, Abulwaldid, Parchon, and Juda ben Kureish). The exegetes seem to be compelled to expand and complete 12:27a with a statement about the deceitful not being able to enjoy his game and the reason for it. This expansion is not in the MT, nor is it realistically credible.

While early exegesis saw the contrast in 12:27 anchored on deceit and honesty, modern exegesis sees it resting on laziness and diligence. For instance, Stuart says: “The most probable meaning seems to be, indulgence will prevent the slothful from catching the game, and so he will have none to roast. But perhaps, the sentiment is still more pointed, viz.; he is too lazy to cook his game when caught. The text will bear either explanation.” It seems strange to suggest that someone is not too lazy to hunt but is too lazy to cook his catch.

Stuart translates 12:27: The indolent man shall not roast his game; but a precious treasure of any man is a diligent person. He perceives 12:27b as referring a diligent laborer who hunts for his employer, and so is a treasure to him. Why isn’t 12:27b self centered? Toy rightly says that such a notion is “an allowable rendering of the Hebrew, but an inappropriate idea; the intention of the clause is to praise the diligent man for his value not to others but to himself.” Perowne repeats Stuart’s translation of 12:27a and corrects 12:27b rendering: The slothful man roasts not that which he took in hunting; but the substance of a diligent man is precious. The two cola, however, remain disconnected.

Delitzsch thinks that Shultens is right in associating עַדִּי with the Arabic حرك ("move, be agitated, set in motion"). In his view “The Latin agitare, used of the frightening up and driving forth of wild beasts, corresponds with the idea here. Thus עַדִּי together with חֶרֶךְ gains the meaning of hunting, and generally of catching the prey.” Delitzsch adopts Qimchi’s interpretation of 12:27b. He says that Qimchi’s explanation “a valuable possession to man is industry" has

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8 Qimchi understands צידו as referring to wild fowls, and explains that יחרך refers to the singeing of the tips of the wings of the fowl, so that they could not fly away.
9 Moses Stuart, Commentary of the Book of Proverbs (New York: Dodd, 1852), 262.
10 Toy, Proverbs, 259.
the twofold advantage that it is according to the existing sequence of the words and presents a more intelligible thought.” Delitzsch renders: *The slothful pursues not his prey; but a precious possession of a man is diligence.* The meaning “pursue” for יָרָה has support of the versions. However, as was shown above, the versions guessed the meaning of יָרָה from the context.

Bertheau and Nowack essentially accept Delitzsch’s position. They say:

Man wird daher richtiger mit arab. حَرَّح zusammenstellen *quod est movere, ciere, excitare κυνείν* generatim; … In hebben Umbrbeit u. A. auf Grund der LXX die Umstellung versucht:

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Delitzsch, *Commentary*, 268. Delitzsch argues that יָרָה is here incarnate slothfulness, and thus without ellipse equivalent to יָרָה יָרָה, and that יָרָה does not mean ἀποτόμως, decreed (Löwenstein), nor gold (Targum, Jerome), nor that which is excellent (Syriac), is manifest from this contrast as well as from x. 4. xii. 24. … a precious possession of man is it that, or when, he is industrious, יָרָה יָרָה briefly for יָרָה יָרָה.

Ernst Bertheau and Wilhelm Nowack, *Die Sprüche Salomo’s* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1883), 82.


Toy, *Proverbs*, 258–259. Toy suggests reading יָרָה יָרָה. In his view “The insertion of יָרָה between the two words is possible, but here hard (1:13, 24:4).”


reads: whm לולח [y]הרכוי וַֽיְשַׁח מ ("et du vinaigre et du sel / qu'il le mette au feu et chauffe"). Caquot and Bordreuil note, "Le verb הַרְכִּי est nouveau en ougaritique, de même le causatif de הַמְּמִי qui le suit." In Dahood’s opinion, "the juxtaposition with יְשַׁח מ, 'that he heat up', leaves little doubt as to the meaning of Ugaritic הַרְכִּי," and establishes the meaning of Hebrew ילך, "to singe, roast." Also, the appearance of the phrase הון ימ "wealth of the sea," in a Phoenician inscription (Byblos 13) suggests, in his view, understanding of בְּמֵאַדָּם in the second-colon phrase בְּמֵאַדָּם as referring to "wealth of the steppe," namely, the wild animals living in the desert."

He translates 12:27: "the languid man will roast no game for himself, but the diligent will come on the wealth of the steppe." This hyperbole means that the lazy person does not complete a project.

Eitan notes that in Amos 5:8b, בְּמֵאַדָּם should be understood to mean "to gather, bring or hold together," as in Arabic کَلَّرَا, "to collect (water)." Such a meaning would provide inner-verse contrast for Amos 5:8b. Eitan claims that: "Such identification will best solve the crux in Prov. 12.27b which is to be vocalized הון ימ ‘The second line is difficult due to the order of the words in the MT: literally, perhaps, it says: 'The second line is difficult due to the order of the words in the MT: literally, perhaps, it..." Murphy understands the verse as comparing the lazy and the diligent. The lazy do not get their prey, but what happens to the diligent? The second line does not really explain. Murphy says: "The second line is difficult due to the order of the words in the MT: literally, perhaps, it

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20 Jean Starcky, "Une inscription phénicienne de Byblos," MUSJ 45 (1969, appeared 1970), 259-273. The statement on the inscription is: whm ימ לְגַד lמ מַיּוֹמ "[... 'and the wealth of the sea the sailors indeed (emphatic lamedh) bound up for themselves.' Dahood argues: "Though the precise meaning of הון ימ cannot be pinned down (fish? sea booty?) its existence suffices to suggest that biblical הון – ’אדָם might signify 'wealth of the steppe,' namely, the wild animals living in the desert. Among the several texts where scholars admit that ’אדָם is the masculine counterpart of feminine 'דָּמָּה, 'earth,' for our present purpose the most relevant passages are Gen 16,12 and Job 11,12, pere’ ’אדָם 'wild ass of the steppe.' In Proverbs the most widely accepted example is 30,14, where the parallelism with me’ereq renders the sense of me’ָדָּם quite obvious." However, Dahood misreads Job 11:12, which speaks about a man being born a בְּמֵאַדָּם, Gen 16:12 is more naturally understood as "wild man" or "wild as of a man," and in Prov 30:14 the parallelism of me’ereq and me’ָדָּם could at most imply that me’ָדָּם= me’דָּמָּה, but not "steppe.”


23 Israel Eitan, “Biblical Studies II: Stray Notes to Minor Prophets,” HUCA 14 (1939), 6. Eitan observes that in Arabic نَفْس is "to gather (fruit)" and Hebrew נֵסָל means "harvest-time, autumn."

24 Mordechai Zer-Kavod, יָדָּם וַֽיְשַׁח מ (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1983), 75.

25 Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (Brooklyn: Traditional Press, 1903), 27b.
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**6** is: ‘the precious possessions of a man, diligent.’

**26** He translates: *Slackness will not have a roast to cook, but the wealth of a diligent person is precious. However, the abstract slackness cannot possess a roast, or cook. Moreover, slackness cannot be the contrast of a diligent person. Finally, Murphy’s translation transposes “diligent” with “precious.”

Clifford views the verse as abstractly presenting a contrast between sloth and diligence, and concretely the contrast “between a bird, which is the food of the poor, and vast wealth.”

**27** He interprets: *A lazy man hasn’t even a bird to roast, but the diligent possesses great wealth.* However, the Hebrew צידוע does not necessarily mean “a bird.” While, the sacrifice of the poor could be a dove, that does not mean that birds were the food of the poor. Also, there is considerable difference between “singeing,” or “charring,” which Aramaic חֶרֶךְ might mean in Dan 3:27, and “roasting.”

Longman explains that the slack “are pilloried by saying that they do not even cook the prey that they catch. On the other hand, the second colon associates determination with riches. ... The obvious intention of this proverb is to encourage determination and diligence and discourage laziness.”

**29** The challenge of 12:27b leaves him with the strange translation: *Slack people do not roast their prey; determined people, precious riches.* It has been already noted that this rendition of 12:27b makes no sense. Moreover, slackers could be very determined people.

Fox translates 12:27: *The slacker will not roast his game, but the wealth of the honorable man is pure gold.* He says: “Though generally considered obscure, the first line makes good sense. “Roast his game” is a natural metaphor for enjoying one’s spoils.” The meaning “roast” for צידע relies on Dan 3:27b, which reads on whose bodies the fire had no effect, the hair of whose heads had not been singed (התחרך), whose shirts looked no different, to whom not even the odor of fire clung. Obviously, צידע in Dan 3:27b cannot mean “roast,” and there is considerable difference between “singed” and “roasted.” If the game was a beast, its skin was taken off with its hair on and singeing was necessary. If the game was a bird, the feathers were plucked and the feather undergrowth was removed with hot water or sometimes singed. This occasional procedure could not serve as “a natural metaphor for enjoying one’s spoils.”

Fox’s explanation that the slacker would not enjoy his spoils is puzzling. One would have expected that the slacker would not have any spoils. Moreover, if the slacker gets his spoils, why shouldn’t he enjoy them? Fox explains: “Although the deceitful slacker may cheat and ‘hunt’ others, he will not be allowed to enjoy his gains.” This elaboration introduces another characteristic (“deceitful”), and a tension between being “slack” and unsuccessful, and being “deceitful” and successful, but unable to consummate. Which of these two characterizations is the dominant one in the first colon as a stand-alone, and in the entire verse? It seems as though Fox wanted to catch two birds but caught none.

Fox thinks that “The second line is loosely related to the first. The point seems to be to contrast the illusory character of the slacker’s gains with the high value of the man of honor’s achievements.” This is, *prima facie*, an invalid contrasting comparison. A slacker is not necessarily the opposite of the man of honor. The word צידע could mean “slacker” or “deceitful,”

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26 Roland Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Thomas Nelson, 1998), 44.
28 Clifford, *Commentary*, 128.
32 Sometimes the skin of the bird was removed with the feathers (Lev 1:16).
33 Fox, *Proverbs*, 269. Fox suggests that צידע as an Aramaism (or rabbinic usage), can mean “honorable” (Esth 1:20, 6:6, 7:11). In his view, this nuance gives a better antithesis to “deceitful man.”
but “slacker” does not also mean “deceitful.” Finally one wonders why the author of Proverbs would want to stress that the wealth of a man of honor is “pure gold.” What is the added value in this specification? Does reality support such a contention?

It is obvious from this partial overview of the exegesis for 12:27 that commentators are still at loss concerning what the proverb is conveying. The consensus seems to be that the abstract "slothfulness" takes on a concrete meaning because of its parallelism with a concrete substantive (נרָוֹ), and that the verse contrasts laziness and diligence. Unfortunately, all the attempts to anchor this general notion in the specifics of the text are unsatisfactory. Clearly, a new approach is required. In the following a text-critical approach is offered.

Proposed Solution

Since none of the meanings that were suggested for הָרָהָ gives a satisfactory sense, it is reasonable to assume that the word was miscopied. Tov notes that textual variations in the Bible occurred because of the phonetic similarity of the guttural letters ח/ח/ג/א. It is possible that the ח/ע confusion resulted in the reading חָרָה instead of יַעֲרָה "will set up, arrange" (Isa 21:5, 65:11, Ez 23:41, Prov 9:2, Ps 78:19, 23:5). This confusion is attested in 1 Sam 17:7 where we have חָרָה (ketib) and נִעֲרָה (qere); in Ex 28:26 חָרָה (MT) and נִעְרָה (Samaritan); in the Septuagint reads in Job 24:12 חָרָה instead of נִעֲרָה; the Septuagint reads in Job 29:7 נִעְרָה instead of חָרָה; there is an opinion that the Easterners (מדנחאי) had in 2 Chr 34:13 נִעְרָה (ketib) and חָרָה (qere); perhaps in Prov 26:17 one should read נִעְרָה instead of חָרָה; perhaps in Job 20:2b one should read נִעְרָה instead of חָרָה; etc.

The term נִעְרָה does not necessarily have a hunting connotation. It could also mean more generally “his food supply, his food” (Ps 78:24, Josh 9:11, Jud 7:8, 20:10). Since the hunting metaphor does not extend to the parallel colon it makes sense to adopt this meaning for נִעְרָה in 12:27a. These understandings result in the following cogent meaning for 12:27a: “The slacker will not set up his food.” The implied message of this statement is that the slacker has no food to put on the table.

In 12:27, it seems that the imperfect of the root חָרָה was incorrectly vocalized נִעְרָה (adjective) instead of the verbal form נִעְרָה or נִעְרָה "will chance upon, will occur, will befall," the Qal imperfect of the root חָרָה “encounter, meet, befall” (Ruth 2:3, Num 23:4, 16). The phrase נִעְרָה occurs only here. It probably should be considered equivalent to מָכַס "the wealth of his house" (Ps 112:3, Prov 6:31, Song 8:7). Thus, the construct חָרָה would mean “all a person has.” The word III חָרָה occurs only in Proverbs (4 times). According to Qimchi it describes a person who does a proper (or efficient) job. Mandelkern notes that some derive the meaning of חָרָה from the Aramaic חָרָה "hip, loin," understanding it as “industrious, girded (ready),” and that this meaning of חָרָה applies to 12:27b. The term “diligent” captures these

56 See Mandelkern (Concordantiae, 815c) and Crawford (Proverbs, 481). The Peshitta reading מָכַס is equivalent to מָכַס of the Masoretic text.
57 The verb חָרָה is often collocated with נִעְרָה “table.”
58 Dahood, “Hapax,” 62. Dahood also understands חָרָה as a verb. He says: “With the repointing of MT יַעֲרָה to defectively written יִקֶּר (for יִקֶּר), one recovers the verb missing from the second colon, the imperfect of garah ‘to meet, encounter.’ Similarly, Eitan (“Biblical Studies,” 6) considers (8) חָרִים a verb.
59 Mandelkern, Concordantiae, 428d.
meanings of III חָרוּץ. These understandings of the verse components result in the following cogent meaning for 12:27a: “All a person has befalls the diligent.” The implied message of this statement is that one has to be diligent to have any possessions.

The minimal emendations that are suggested here reveal a clear parallelism between the two cola of 12:27, as well as a thematic connectedness. It is obvious that יַעֲרֺך לא קֶר, יִקֶּר, יַעֲרֶך, ההוֹרֶך, הרֶך, and צידו. This parallelism also vividly illustrates the disparity between the “slacker” and the “diligent,” displaying the contrasting parts of a single idea—the advantage of being diligent. This idea, a staple of wisdom literature, is reiterated in 6:6, 9, 10:4-5, 12:24, 13:4, 15:19, 19:15, 20:4, 13, 21:5, 25-26, 24:28-34, 26:13-15, 31:27, Qoh 10:18, Sir 22:1-2, etc.

Conclusion

Commentators seem to have missed the possibility that the gutturals are often confused in the Tanach, and that the unpointed יַעֲרֶך could have been by mistake pointed יָקָר (adjective), when the verbal form יִקֶּר/יִקָּר was intended. By making these emendations two balanced comma are obtained, which make eminently good sense without any rearrangement of the order of words in the MT. The emended text reads:

The slacker will not set up his food, All a person has befalls the diligent.