

Artikel

Words for Folly

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Fools of many sorts are condemned in the Bible, above all in Wisdom Literature, and to this end a number of terms are used to designate them and their folly. This article describes the semantic field of the nouns for fools and folly in the Hebrew Bible and Ben Sira.¹ The distinctions among these terms have not been well studied,² and an examination of the semantic ranges and interrelations of these words can enhance our understanding of the subtleties of the Biblical texts which speak of these undesirable types.

The present study assumes that the person-types (*ʿēwil* etc.) possess the qualities designated by the cognate abstract nouns (*ʿiwwelet* etc.) and the two classes of nouns can be used as evidence for each other. Cognate verbs are sometimes used for supplementary evidence about the nouns, with an awareness that there might be a certain disjunction between the verbal implications in the various stems and the qualities implied by the nouns. Some of these words have been better understood than others, but all are included in order to describe the complete semantic field of folly-words used in Wisdom Literature.

At the start we should note that the semantic field of folly is not subdivided into discrete areas. There is much overlap and blurring of boundaries because the various types of fools were not kept distinct. Proverbs, Qohelet, and Ben Sira, the texts most concerned with describing folly, censure all follies globally rather than drawing distinctions or creating a typology. Nevertheless, these words are not exact synonyms, but refer to different – though overlapping and comparable – types of people.

We cannot determine the lexical meaning of these terms by paraphrasing and cataloguing all that is predicated of the types they designate, as if the words carried all their contexts with them. Nor are the behaviors imputed to fools enough to distinguish the different types. Many foolish actions, after all, can be assigned to

¹ I examined part of the semantic field of wisdom in “Words for Wisdom”, *ZAH* 6 (1993), 149-69.

² One of the few studies of these terms is Trevor Donald, “The Semantic Field of ‘Folly’ in Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes”, *VT* 13 (1963), 285-29. Donald surveys and summarizes what Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Qohelet say *about* each type (which they treat somewhat differently) rather than ascertaining the lexical meaning of the words and the way their semantic field is organized.

More helpful is the sketch in W. O. E. Oesterley’s *The Book of Proverbs*, London 1927, lxxxiv-lxxxvii. He too is concerned with what Proverbs says about each type rather than the meaning of the words, but he has some useful lexical insights too.

various sorts of fools in English as well as in Hebrew. A brilliant scientist, for example, who mistreated people and made a mess of his life, might be called a “jerk” or “fool”, or an ^ʾēwīl, but not a “dullard”, “simpleton”, or ba^ʿar, and probably not a k^ʿsil.³

Rather than summarizing what is said about each type of fool (this is the “theological dictionary” approach), we must try to ascertain what *assumptions* the contexts make about the meanings and implications of the words they use. In part we can do this by considering the sort of context in which the various types of fools are commonly mentioned and constructing a picture that provides an implicit definition of each word. Actions and traits predicated of a certain type of fool (for example, that the leš is impervious to correction) cannot simply be added to the definition (“a leš is an arrogant person who is impervious to correction”), but they can support a proposed definition by showing what sorts of behaviors are associated with a particular type of fool.

The essence of folly is lack of good judgment, which means distortion in moral and practical values. One who fails in this persistently fits Kant’s definition of a fool as “one who sacrifices things of value to ends that have no value” (Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht, in: W. Weischedel [ed.], Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden VI, Darmstadt 1964, 395-690; English translation: M.J. Gregor, The Hague 1974, I 49).

The different types of folly differ in their etiologies and, consequently, symptoms. Folly may arise from distortions of moral values (in the case of the ^ʾēwīl), smug mental sloth (the k^ʿsil), arrogance and disdain (the leš), flightiness (the ḥāsar leb); ignorance (the ba^ʿar), or callow, gullible naiveté (the petī).

All these terms have equivalents in Egyptian Wisdom, though most do not correspond exactly. For a full comparative study see Nili Shupak, *Where Can Wisdom Be Found?* (OBO 1993). Shupak has a valuable discussion of the Hebrew words for wisdom and folly (232-56). I differ in attempting to distinguish the lexical content of the words from their contextual meaning, the things said *about* the types of persons and powers called by these names, whereas she considers mainly the latter.

The terms studied here are

1. ^ʾiwwēlet, ^ʾēwīl
2. lasōn, lēs
3. k^ʿsilūt (*kesel*), k^ʿsīl
4. siklūt, sākāl
5. ḥāsar leb
6. ba^ʿar, bo^ʿēr
7. p^ʿtayyūt (var., p^ʿtāyîm), petī

³ The distinctions among the English synonyms used to gloss the Hebrew words in this semantic field are themselves problematic. Webster’s *Dictionary of Synonyms*, Springfield, Mass., 1984, is useful in drawing distinctions and in observing the possible nuances which the Hebrew terms may imply.

This order corresponds to a continuum going from ingrained moral defect and irremediability to relative innocence and improvability.

1. ^ʿ*iwwelet*, “perverse folly”; ^ʿ*ēwil* “fool, knave”⁴

Moshe Alsheikh observes that ^ʿ*ēwilim* are not idiots or madmen, for these would not bother either to esteem or to despise discipline. Rather, “one is called an ^ʿ*ēwil* who vacates (*y^eḥasser*) his mind from choosing good and rejecting evil”.⁵ This is correct. ^ʿ*iwwelet* is moral corruption from the standpoint of its impact on judgment and reason. It is a willful refusal to make the right moral choices. Though he may be shrewd and knowledgeable in some ways, the ^ʿ*ēwil* is rendered stupid in important regards by his warped values and distorted vision. His failing is moral rather than intellectual, though the moral taint produces stupid behavior. The ^ʿ*ēwil* possesses this flaw as a constitutional character trait.

^ʿ*ēwil* and ^ʿ*iwwelet* appear as congeners (synonymous and antonymous) not only of words for intellectual strengths and flaws, but also of words for ethical qualities, positive and negative, namely *yīššer leket* “walk straight” (Prov 15:21); ^ʿ*āšamot* “guilty deeds” (Ps 69:6); *ṭame^ʿ* “[morally] impure (Isa 35:8); and ^ʿ*eyn musar* “lacking moral discipline” (Prov 5:23; see also Ps 107:17). This is not the case with the other folly words except for *les*.

^ʿ*iwwelet* is essentially a moral pathology. In fact, a rendering such as “knavishness” is often appropriate. The promise that ^ʿ*ēwilim* will not wander in the holy way (Isa 35:8) has in view their moral failings. Sir 8:15 ascribes ^ʿ*iwwelet* to the cruel man. The psalmist confesses his ^ʿ*iwwelet* parallel to his sin and iniquity (Ps 69:6; cf. Ps 38:6). The actions of the adulterer are labelled ^ʿ*iwwelet* and ^ʿ*eyn musar* “lack of moral discipline” (Prov 5:23).

However clever he may be, the ^ʿ*ēwil* is obtuse to the broader perspective and to some obvious truths with their ethical and religious implications. The princes of Zoan are called both *ḥākamim* and ^ʿ*ēwilim* (Isa 19:11),⁶ because they are blind to God’s plans (12-15). Likewise, Jeremiah calls Israel an ^ʿ*ēwil*, condemning them as “stupid sons” (*banim s^ekalim*) who do not know God their father. Nevertheless, they have *hokmah* of one sort, for they are *ḥākamim* ... *l^hara^c* “experts in doing evil” (Jer 4:22; cf. 5:4, using the verb *no^ʿalu*).

A characteristic often ascribed to the ^ʿ*ēwil* is anger. Others, of course, may become angry, but with an ^ʿ*ēwil*, irritability and agitation are constitutional; see Job 5:2; Prov 12:16; 14:17; 20:3; 27:3; 29:9. These verses do not say that the ^ʿ*ēwil* is angry and contentious so much as *presume* that he is. In contrast, anger is ascribed to the *k^esil* only in Qoh 7:9.

⁴ ^ʿ*ēwil* 26x (19x Proverbs; 2x Job) + 4x Sira; ^ʿ*iwwelet* 25x (23x Proverbs; 2x Psalms) + 5x Sira. The adj. ^ʿ*ēwili* occurs in Zech 11:15.

⁵ Moshe ben Ḥayyim Alsheikh, רב פנינין (16th c.; Vilna, n.d.), comment on Prov 1:7b.

⁶ Against the notion that *ḥākamim* in Isaiah designates a professional class see R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the OT* (BZAW 135), Berlin, 1974: 18-21 and chap. II, *passim*. A *ḥakam* is an expert but not necessarily wise.

As a character trait, ²*iwwelet* is persistent and irremediable in the ²*ewil* (Prov 27:22), but it may be episodic in others. Prov 22:15 asserts that “²*iwwelet* is attached to a lad’s heart, but a ‘disciplinary beating’ can remove it from him”. This is not ingrained moral perversion, but an immature waywardness and recalcitrance. The psalmist confesses to ²*iwwelet* (Ps 69:6), but this is humble hyperbole. A true ²*ewil* would not be praying for cleansing. A *k^esil* is not necessarily an ²*ewil*, but he does have a proclivity to speak ²*iwwelet* (Prov 12:23; 15:2, 14), to possess it (14:8; 17:12, etc.), and to repeat it (Prov 26:11).

2. *Lāṣôn* “scorn”, “cynicism”; *Lēṣ* “scornful man”, “cynic”⁷

Opinions are divided as to whether *leṣ* means “arrogant”⁸ or “scornful”.⁹ In fact, these are two sides of one coin, for, as Kāspi says, “The *leṣ* is the haughty man; he is wise in his own eyes and therefore mocks whomever rebukes him” (comment on Prov 1:4¹⁰). Still, the contexts where *leṣ* is used (rather than, for example, *ge²eh* or *yahir*) are less concerned with manifestations of pride and conceit than with insolent and disdainful treatment of others. The *leṣ* may well be inclined to mock other people and ideas, but that seems to be a secondary implication, a natural manifestation of this personality-type.¹¹ *Lāṣôn*, then, is arrogance manifest as contempt for other people and ideas.

Prov 21:24 defines the *leṣ*’s character: “The arrogant insolent man (*zed yahir*) – ‘*leṣ*’ is his name; he acts in the rage of insolence (*ēbrat zadon*)”. The essence of *lāṣôn* is *hybris*, a quality which naturally issues in attitudes of contempt and derision. The

⁷ *Lāṣôn* 3x (all Proverbs); *leṣ* 16x (14x Proverbs) + 8x Sira.

⁸ F. Buhl, in “Die Bedeutung des Stammes *lūṣ* oder *līṣ*” (*BZAW* 29 = Wellhausen Festschrift, Giessen, 1914, pp. 81-86), assigned to the root the notion of arrogance rather than verbal mockery. Similarly C. Barth, *TDOT* VII, 547-50, says that *leṣ* is “a typical manifestation of what it means to be ‘unwise’ in one’s plans, words, and actions – presumptuous, arrogant, and conceited” (p. 550). He believes that in postexilic wisdom *leṣ* took on more theological overtones. But the existence of these features depends on which texts one dates to the postexilic period and may represent a certain intensification of theological interests in postexilic Wisdom. The definition of the word, however, has not changed.

⁹ “Scoffer” or “mockers,” meaning one who derides and repudiates others’ beliefs and doctrines, is the traditional understanding of *leṣ* and is represented in most translations. Some scholars consider this scoffing to be a repudiation of orthodox beliefs. A. Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, 1913, VI.126) identifies the *leṣ* as “the bitter enemy of religion,” and C. H. Toy (*Proverbs* [ICC, 1899]) identifies the word with “all persons who acted with bold disregard of moral and religious law” (p. 408). Franz Delitzsch glosses *leṣim* as “free thinkers” (*Proverbs*, Leipzig, 1873; English translation James Martin, 1983, at 1:22). But the people called *leṣim* in the Bible are not expressing intellectual repudiation of certain principles.

H.N. Richardson (“Some Notes on לִיץ and its Derivatives,” *VT* 5 [1955], 163-179) identifies the basic meaning as “talk big” or “babble,” but this is a secondary quality of the *leṣ* rather than the primary meaning of the word.

¹⁰ Yosef ibn Kāspi, פְּרָשׁוֹת חֻצוֹת כִּסְיָא (14th c.); ed. Isaac Last, Pressburg, 1903.

¹¹ LXX uses a variety of terms to translate *leṣ* and cognates. These are drawn from the semantic field of arrogance (ὕβριστής, ὕβρις, καθυβρίζειν) and wickedness (κακός, λοιμός, ἀπίδευτος, ἄφρων, παρανομεῖν). It does not use words for mocking (such as cognates of μωκτικίζειν, ἄτιμάζειν, etc.).

connection with *zed* “the insolent man”, also appears in Ps 119:51a: *zedim hēlišuni ʿad m^eʿod*, “Insolent men severely scorned me [or treated me arrogantly]”. Compare Sir 38:18, where *zd wls* is treated as a singular. The antithesis between *leşim* and the humble in Prov 3:34 highlights the earmark arrogance of the former. Isaiah 29:19-21 opposes to the “humble” and “poor” the three types who afflict them: “the brutal man” (*ʿaris*), the *leş*, and “those who diligently pursue iniquity” (*šoqdey ʾawen*). In Isa 28:14, *ʾanšey lašon*, “men of insolence”, is explicated by parallelism with *moš^eley ha^cam hazzeh*, “rulers of this people”. These are the men who boast that they have made a covenant with death and are protected by deceit (28:15). Their words do not express mockery so much as cynicism and insolence. In their insolence they imagine themselves immune from punishment.

The *leş*’s moral corruption is shown by his association with terms for wickedness, such as *ʿaris* “the brutal man” and *šoqdey ʾawen*, “those who diligently pursue iniquity” in Isa 29:20. *Lešim* is paralleled by *r^eša^cim* “wicked” and *hatta ʾim* “sinners”, in Ps 1:1, and by *raša^c* in Prov 9:7.

Proverbs points out the *leş*’s resistance to chastisement (9:7-8; 13:1; 15:12; cf. Isa 29:20 f.; Sir 15:8). His arrogance prevents him from attaining learning, even if he should seek it (Prov 14:6; cf. Sir 15:8; 38:18), for the willingness to learn from another requires a certain suppression of egotism. The *leş* must be punished, but mainly as a warning to others (Prov 19:25, 29; 21:11).

3. *K^esilūt / kesel* “stupidity”, “doltishness”; *k^esil* “dolt”, “dullard”¹²

K^esilūt is smug mental sloth with respect to its impact on judgment and reason. It is the stupidity that comes from moral obtuseness and complacency, not merely lack of intelligence.

K^esil “stupid man”, and *kesel* “stupidity” are cognate to *kesel* (var. *kislah*) meaning “hope”, “confidence”. *Kesel/kislah* can refer to hopes of all kinds, whether pious and praiseworthy (Ps 78:7; Prov 3:26; Job 4:6) or foolhardy and shortsighted (Job 8:14; 31:24; Ps 85:9). It is an easy semantic move from confidence to overconfidence, and from there to smug obtuseness.

Various verses assume the connection between (over)confidence and stupidity. Prov 1:32b says that “the complacency (*šalwah*) of *k^esilim* will destroy them”. Prov 14:16 says that the *k^esil* gets involved in quarrels, in contrast to the wise man, who “fears” and turns aside from the trouble. The *k^esil* “trusts in his own heart” (Prov 28:26). He clasps his hands in indolent self-satisfaction, though, paradoxically, he destroys himself by the consequent vexation (Qoh 4:5).

Obtuseness closes a person to knowledge and renders him ignorant. Several times *k^esil* – never *ʾēwil* – appears in synonymous parallelism or collocation with *ba^car*, “ignoramus” (Ps 49:11; 92:7; 94:8). The verbs *kasal* and *ba^car* are used in describing wooden idols in Jer 10:8. These are, we might say, “blockheads”, the epitome of stupid, dense things.

¹² *k^esilūt* 1x (Prov 9:13); *k^esil* 70x (including 49x Proverbs, 18x Qohelet) + 5x Sira. *kesel* means “stupidity” in Qoh 7:25 and perhaps in Ps 49:14. Elsewhere it means “confidence”.

The *k^esil*'s cloddishness erupts into all he does. He blunders into others' quarrels (Prov 14:16).¹³ He quickly consumes the goods that happen to be in his house (21:20). The *ʿēwil*, on the other hand, does not lack wit or narrow prudence.

The *k^esil* lacks clarity of vision. Qohelet usually refers to fools as *k^esilim* because he is concerned with intellectual dullness and obliviousness to reality more than with unwise and immoral deeds. Qohelet uses *k^esil* to refer to the dullard without implying wickedness. The old king who is a *k^esil* and who is no longer able to take precautions (4:13) suffers from senile witlessness, not moral debasement. The *k^esil* goes about in darkness, that is, ignorance (Qoh 2:14). He cannot even find his way to the city (Qoh 10:15). His heart is on his left side, meaning it is inept, unhelpful (Qoh 10:2). *K^esilim* are deaf even to the shouts of their commander (Qoh 9:17). Those who delay in paying vows are called *k^esilim* not because the act is sinful but because it is self-destructive (Qoh 5:5), hence shortsighted and stupid. The *k^esil*'s faulty vision may take the form of looking in the wrong places. He "looks to the ends of the earth" (Prov 17:24b), though knowledge is right before one's face, if he but open his eyes (v. 24a).

Self-satisfaction is conducive to silly self-indulgence, so when a fool is shown as mirthful, he is usually called a *k^esil*. Prov 19:10 speaks of the *k^esil* experiencing pleasure (*ta^eānug*). He is inclined to mindless amusements rather than to facing reality – a trait that Qohelet seems to envy (Qoh 7:4-6). Only Qoh 7:9 asserts that *k^esilim* suffer from anger; that is Qohelet's way of saying that anger is self-destructive and witless. The *k^esil* may blunder into an argument (Prov 18:6-7), but he is not in a constant froth.

There is little hope of educating the *k^esil* (Prov 17:10), but it is not beyond the range of possibility; Prov 8:5b calls upon *k^esilim* to "get a mind", *habinu leb*; cf. Ps 94:8. (There seems to be no thought of changing the *ʿēwil*). Yet if a *k^esil* seeks learning – imagining it can be bought – he will fail for lack of a mind (*leb*) (Prov 17:16).

K^esil is associated with *peti* in Prov 1:22, 32; and 8:5, whereas *peti* and *ʿēwil* are kept distinct. (*Poteh* is parallel to *ʿēwil* in Sir 34:7 and Job 5:2.) The manifestations of *p^etayyut* and *k^esilut* are much the same, but in the *p^eti* they are caused by inexperience, in the *k^esil* by smugness.

The *k^esil*'s incompetence in speech, a frequent theme in Proverbs and Qohelet, exposes his cloddish stupidity. He lacks the verbal skills to use a proverb effectively (26:7, 9); he ruins messages (26:6); he is inanely voluble (Prov 29:11; Qoh 5:2); see also Prov 15:14; 18:7; Qoh 10:12. In contrast, verbal incompetence is not ascribed to the *ʿēwil*. The *ʿēwil* has verbal flaws, such as boastful pride (Prov 14:3), and he utters guilt (14:9, if correct), and his advice may be stupid (Isa 19:11), but he is not necessarily voluble (see Prov 17:28; 24:7) or clumsy in speech.

¹³ Reading *mi^eabbēr*, as indicated by the LXX.

4. *Siklūt* / *śiklūt* / *sekel*¹⁴ “stupidity”; *sākāl* “stupid person”¹⁵

Siklūt is obtuseness and ignorance, with no necessary connotation of moral turpitude. It is a near-synonym of *kesel*, except that the former does not clearly connote overconfidence. The nouns from *s-k-l* are overwhelmingly Qohelet’s usages. (The verbs *hiskil* and *niskal* “act stupidly” and *sikkel* “make stupid”, “frustrate”, occur several times elsewhere in a sense that accords with the meaning of the nouns.) *Siklūt* is a characteristic of the *k^esil*, as shown by Qoh 2:13-14, where the trait described is ignorance, “walking in darkness”. Likewise Qoh 2:19 uses *sakal* in a statement which elsewhere (2:16) mentions the *k^esil*. In 10:1-3, as well as in 10:12-14, Qohelet uses *sakal* and *k^esil* interchangeably and attributes *siklūt* to the *k^esil* (10:13).

Ben Sira calls to *s^ekalim* to turn to him for education (51:23). Here the term has no worse connotation than “uneducated”. (The addressees are in any case reading his book!) The word was probably chosen for the sake of the original acrostic.¹⁶

5. *Ḥāsar-leb* “mindlessness”, *ḥāsar leb* “mindless, empty headed person”¹⁷

The expression *ḥāsar leb* is unique to Proverbs and Sira. *ʿeyn leb* “lacking a mind” (Jer 5:21 and Hos 7:11) is a synonym, and *libbo ḥaser* “his mind is lacking” in Qoh 10:3 conveys the same idea. In this phrase, *leb* always refers to faculties we would consider specifically cognitive, namely the ability (or willingness) to make a prudent, sensible decision. Hence *leb* is better translated “mind” in this phrase – or even “head”, since it is the precise equivalent of English “empty headed”.

Prov 6:32 equates “lack of a mind” with self-destructive behavior: “He who commits adultery with a woman is *ḥāsar leb*: he brings about his own destruction”. The imprudence of the *ḥāsar leb* may involve an immoral and vile act, as in this verse, but it may also express itself in lesser types of indiscretion and mindlessness, such as pursuing vain things (Prov 12:11), guaranteeing a loan (Prov 17:18), and being lazy (Prov 24:30). Since the term *ḥāsar leb* does not necessarily imply deeper corruption, it is nearly identical with *peti* (Prov 7:7; 9:4,16). In Sir 34:7, *ḥāsar leb* is equated with the *poteh*; similarly the dove is *poteh* and *ʿeyn leb*, Hos 7:11. *ḥāsar leb* parallels *ʿēwil* in Sir 6:20, but the words may refer to different types: the *ʿēwil* considers discipline “bent” or “perverse” (*ʿāqubbah*; cf. Jer 17:9), while the *ḥāsar leb* cannot “bear it” or “contain it” (*lo^ʾ y^ekalk^elennah*).

¹⁴ *Sekel* in Qoh 10:6 is an abstract-for-concrete epithet meaning “fool”.

¹⁵ *Siklūt* 7x (all Qohelet; once with *śin*); *sekel* 1x (Qohelet); *sakal* 5x (3x Qohelet) + 1x Sira.

¹⁶ Reconstructed by M. H. Segal, ספר בן סירה השלם, Jerusalem, 1958, 363 f.

¹⁷ 13x Proverbs, 1x Sira. The abstract *ḥāsār leb* (*ḥāsar* = construct of *ḥeser*) occurs in Prov 10:21. In Sir 16:23 (MS A), *ḥsdy lb* should be emended to *ḥsry lb*.

6. *ba^car, bo^cer* “ignoramus”¹⁸

The *ba^car* is an ignoramus. Animal-like brutishness is his main attribute. The word’s etymological associations with *b^eir* “beast”¹⁹ are several times highlighted by collocation; for example: “But I am a *ba^car*, lacking knowledge. I am a beast (*b^ehemot*) with you. (Ps 73:22). “The man who is a *ba^car* does not know (this)” (Ps 92:7); cf. Prov 30:2a; Jer 10:14.

The term *ba^car* does not in itself connote pernicious defects. Agur says, “I am more a *ba^car* than a man, and have not human intelligence (*binat^u adam*) in me” (Prov 30:2). Agur is not confessing sin or failure, but declaring, proudly, his untutored faith, which he calls *da^cat q^edošim* “knowledge of holiness”.²⁰ Similarly, a psalmist professes that he is a brutish ignoramus but is nevertheless always with God (Ps 73:22-23).

But ignorance is one step away from deficiency of judgment in moral and practical matters. The ignorance of the idol makers in Jer 10:14 is blameworthy, and Judah’s leaders, who have become brutish (*nib^caru*) and oblivious of their responsibilities, are reprehensible (Jer 10:21). Ignorance also engenders self-satisfaction, which makes one reject the uncomfortable insights of chastisement (Prov 12:1).

7. *P^etayyut / peti* (pl. *p^eta^uyim*) “callowness”, “gullibility”; *peti* “callow, gullible, person”²¹

P^etayyut is naiveté and gullibility from the standpoint of their effect on judgment and reason. The root-meaning “be gullible” is kept alive in the word’s uses; see, e.g., Prov 14:15.

A *peti* is not inherently culpable. Indeed, outside of Proverbs the word never implies this. God himself watches over the *p^eta^uim* (Ps 116:6) and gives them wisdom (Pss 19:8 and 119:130). In Ezek 45:20 too, the *peti* is just a simpleton, and in Hos 7:11 an innocent dove is called *potah*.

Yet Proverbs, being inclined to interpret any intellectual failing as tantamount to a moral defect, has some harsh things to say about the *peti*. With their absolute faith in the powers of education, the sages of Proverbs consider *p^etayyut* a matter of choice. The *peti* is thought to *love* his condition (1:22) and to be prone to backsliding (1:32) and even to the deep corruption of *iwwelet* (14:18; “inherit” folly means that they will get this at a later stage). But the *peti*’s malleability also opens him to learning and improvement (8:5; 9:4, 6; 19:25; 21:11). Indeed, the *peti* is the primary audience of Proverbs’ instructions (1:4). But as long as he remains stuck in his naiveté and

¹⁸ 5x (2x Prov); *bo^carim* (participle) 2x (Ps 94:8; Ezek 21:36; in the latter it implies “barbarians”).

¹⁹ Both *BDB* and *HALAT* assign *b^eir* and *ba^car* to different roots, the latter supposedly from a root meaning “uncultivated”. Connecting the two words is at least a folk etymology, but it may be the actual etymology as well.

²⁰ *Q^edošim* is best explained as an abstract-for-concrete epithet equivalent to the Holy One, God. Compare *da^cat^u elohim* in Prov 2:5 with *da^cat q^edošim* in 9:10.

²¹ *P^etayyut* 1x (Prov); *peti* abstract [Prov 1:22] (pl. *p^eta^uyim* [Prov 9:6]) 2x (Prov); *peti* “callow person” 17x (13x Prov). The participle *poteh* (3x [1x Prov] + 4x Sira) is a synonym of *peti*.

callowness, the *peti* belongs to the class of fools and can be set parallel to the *lešim* and *k^esilim* (1:22; 8:5; Sir 42:8, using *poteh*) and even the *ʿēwil* (Sir 34:7, with *poteh*).

In conclusion, none of the folly-words denotes a simple want of native intelligence, as this faculty is commonly understood today. Although the congenital simpleton probably would be called a *peti* in Biblical Hebrew (Ps 116:6; cf. Hos 7:11, *poteh* of a dove), that is not the usual meaning. Typically, the *peti* is assumed to have the potential to learn and is therefore considered responsible for his condition if he clings to it. Likewise, although *ba^ʿar* means ignoramus without necessary assignment of moral culpability (see Prov 30:2), insofar as his ignorance results in distorted judgment, the *ba^ʿar* is deemed a fool, and, in Wisdom Literature, at least, is regarded with contempt. The *sakal* is much the same. The other words denote willful and blameworthy defects of character.

Abstract:

An examination of the semantic field of folly leads to the following definitions of the words for folly (with corresponding qualities assigned to the fools of each type): (1) *ʿiwwelet* is moral corruption from the standpoint of its effect on judgment and reason. (2) *Lason* is arrogance manifest as contempt for other people and their ideas. (3) *K^esilut* is smug intellectual sloth as it impacts on judgment and reason. (4) *Siklut* is obtuseness and ignorance, with no necessary implication of moral turpitude. (5) *Ba^ʿar* means ignoramus, one characterized by animal-like brutishness. (6) *P^etayyūt* is naiveté and gullibility from the standpoint of their effect on judgment and reason.

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ENVIRONMENTS OF THE FOLLY WORDS¹ (including Ben Sira)

word	in synonymous parallelism with	in antithetical parallelism with	in antithetical quasi-parallelism with ²	in synonymous quasi-parallelism with	in synonymus collocation with
² ʿwīl	ḥakmēy-yō ⁵ ʿšēy-; tāmē ⁶ ; bānīm s ⁶ kalīm; m ⁶ šuggā; pōteh (2x); ʿōkēr bēytō; y ⁶ šārīm; šōmēr- iōkahat; ḥāsar lēb; rā ⁶ im	ḥākām-lēb; ḥākām (3x); nābôn	dā ⁵ at; šiptēy-šedeq; kōseh-qālôn; šēkel		
² iwwelet	² ʾāšāmôt; ² ʿēyn mūsar	hokmāh (2x); dā ⁵ at (4x); ʿōšer(?) ³	ḥakmōt ⁴ ; dā ⁵ at; t ⁴ būnāh; y ⁴ yaššer-leket; m ⁴ qōr hayyīm	qī	
lasōn ⁵	petī ⁶	[ḥākām ¹]		mōš ⁸ līm	
lēš	ʿārīš; šōq ⁶ dēy ² ʾawen; ḥāṭā ⁶ im; petī; rāšā ⁶ (2x); k ⁶ sīl p ⁶ tayyūt; siklūt	ʿānaw; ḥākām (3x); nābôn (2x);	hōmeh ⁹		
k ⁶ sīlūt, kesel					
k ⁶ sīl	bā ⁶ ar / bō ⁶ ʿer (2x) petī (3x); nābāl; ² iš kāzāb	ḥākām (20x); ² iš t ⁶ būnāh; ʿārūm (3x); nābôn (2x); mēbīn (2x)		analogies ¹⁰	pōteh

word	in synonymous parallelism with	in antithetical parallelism with	in antithetical quasi-parallelism with	in synonymous quasi-parallelism with	in synonymous collocation with
<i>siklūt, sekel</i>			^c <i>āsūrīm</i> ¹¹ , ² <i>ōr</i> ;	<i>rešā</i> ^c	<i>hōlēlōt</i> (3x) ¹²
<i>sākāl</i>				<i>lō</i> ² <i>n bōnīm</i> ; <i>w ēyn lēb</i>	
<i>bā ar; bō ēr</i>	<i>kē sīl</i> (3x); <i>lō bīnā(h) lī</i> ¹³	<i>hākām</i> ; ² <i>ōhēb</i> <i>mūsār</i>		<i>hārāšēy mašhīt</i> ; <i>kē sīl</i> ;	
<i>hāsar lēb</i>	<i>pefī</i> (3x); <i>pōteh</i> ¹⁴	<i>nābōn</i> ; ² <i>īš t būnōt</i>	^c <i>āsēl</i> ; ^c <i>ōbēd</i> ² <i>admāiō</i> ; <i>sīptēy šaddīq</i> ¹⁵	<i>mašhīt napšō</i> ; [<i>sākāl; pōteh</i>] ¹⁶	
<i>pē uyyūt</i> , <i>pefī</i> (abst.)	<i>kē sīlūt</i> , <i>lāšōn</i>	<i>derek bīnāh</i>	<i>yīsn</i> ² <i>ū dā at</i>		
<i>pefī</i>	<i>kē sīl</i> (3x); <i>lēš</i> ; <i>nā ar</i> ; <i>hāsar lēb</i> (2x) ¹⁷	^c <i>ārūm</i> (4x); <i>nābōn</i> ; <i>hākām</i>			<i>bānīm</i>
<i>pōteh</i>	² <i>ēwīl</i> ; <i>hāsar lēb</i> ¹⁸			<i>gōleh sōd</i> ¹⁹	² <i>ēyn lēb</i>

Notes to Table

1. This table is intended to give an idea of the type of words that are associated with folly-words by synonymy or antonymy, not to account for all uses. Many cases do not fit into these categories and are set aside. Common congenerers which appear in both singular and plural are normalized under the singular. Insignificant variations, such as *ben ḥakam* and *ḥakam*, or *ʾadam ʿarum* and *ʿarum*, are combined and listed under the latter. Counts include Ben Sira, based on the concordance in *The Book of Ben Sira* [Heb.], Academy of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem, 1973.
2. Quasi-parallelism refers to pairs of words that provide similar semantic content to a parallel line but fill a different syntactic slot, or to syntactically parallel words that are too distant semantically to be considered synonyms but that supplement each other; e.g. “lazy man” // “mindless man” (Prov 24:30) = “mindless lazy man.”
3. Prov 14:24; text uncertain.
4. Prov 14:1. *Ḥakmot našim* means “the wise women,” in spite of the sg. verb. Others regard it as an abstract pl., “wisdom of women.”
5. In two of three occurrences, *laṣon* occurs in the phrase *ʾanšey laṣon*, “men of impudence,” and is equivalent to *lesim*.
6. Abstract, “naiveté.”
7. *ʾanšey laṣon* // *ḥākamim*.
8. *ʾanšey laṣon* // *mošʿley ha ʿam hazeh*, Isa 28:14. Compare Hos 7:5, where *lošʿsim* is apparently parallel to *šarim*, “princes.”
9. “Boisterous”, said of beer; Prov 20:1.
10. Some proverbs compare the *kʿsil* to other limited or undesirable beings: horse and ass (Prov 26:3); dog (26:11); lame man (26:7); burning thorns (Qoh 7:6); a quarrelsome woman (Prov 19:13).
11. In Qoh 10:6, *sekel* (abstr. for concrete; = *sakal*) is in quasi-antithesis to “rich men.”
12. *Holelot*, apparently an abstract plural, is used in Qoh 1:17 and 2:12. The synonymous *holelut* is used in 10:13 (where the parallelism is *siklut* // *holelut raʿah*). In Qoh 7:25, the latter form is predicated of *siklut*. Both forms mean “inanity” or the like.
13. See Prov 30:2.
14. Sir 16:23: *ḥsry lb* [thus read, for *ḥsdy leb*] // *gbwr* [= *gbr*] *pwth*.
15. Antithetic to the abstract *ḥāsar leb*; Prov 10:21.
16. These terms are collocated with *ʾeyn leb* in Jer 5:21 and Hos 7:11, respectively.
17. Cf. Prov 7:7.
18. See n. 14.
19. Prov 20:19, *goleh sod* // *poteh sʿpatayw*