

PROVERBS 11:30: SOUL-WINNING OR WISE LIVING?

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פְּרִי צְדִיק עֵץ חַיִּים וְלֶקֶחַ נַפְשׁוֹת חַכָּם:

*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
And he who is wise wins souls.* (NASB95)

I. THE PROBLEM DELINEATED

This verse has presented an interpretational difficulty for centuries. Commentators still differ on how to interpret the verse, and one commentator concludes that up to the present there is no satisfactory explanation.¹

The central interpretational problem is the meaning of לֶקֶחַ נַפְשׁוֹת, which the KJV and many other translations render, “he who wins souls.”² Many Christian preachers have found this a useful translation to teach the merits of Christian evangelism.³ However, this understanding neither fits the context of Prov 11:30, of Proverbs as a whole or the old covenant in general, nor the usual understanding of the Hebrew idiom “to take life” and must therefore be rejected.⁴

The nature of the problem can be clarified and illustrated graphically by examining the deep structure following the approach advocated by Ted Hildebrandt.⁵ Though he limits his study to the antithetic proverbs in chapters 10–15, the principles he uses can be applied to other types of parallelism. He analyzes each line as a topic and comment and classifies each as “approach”

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¹ R. C. Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 5.120. Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 324, agrees, labeling it “an unresolved conundrum in Biblical studies.”

² BHS faithfully reproduces the pointing of Codex Leningradensis, נַפְשׁוֹת, but it should be read נַפְשׁוֹת, with the majority of manuscripts.

³ For example, Charles Spurgeon preached a number of such sermons on this text. In particular, see “Soul-Winning Explained” in his *The Soul Winner* (<http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/sw12.htm>). So also William Arnot, *Studies in Proverbs* (repr. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978) 235–36.

⁴ So stated explicitly by Sid S. Buzzell, “Proverbs,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck; Wheaton: Victor, 1983–85) 1.930, and by Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 98, and by Dave L. Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs* (Joplin, MS: College Press, 2002) 124; most commentators do not even entertain the notion.

⁵ Ted Hildebrandt, “Motivation and Antithetic Parallelism in Proverbs 10–15,” in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 253–72, repr. from *JETS* 35 (1992) 433–44.

(positive, +) or “avoidance” (negative, -). Proverbs uses any combination of these two: approach/approach, approach/avoidance, or avoidance/avoidance. Hildebrandt identifies eight patterns of antithetic proverbs. He specifies 11:30b as Act → Evaluation type. Though he does not specifically discuss the line as positive or negative, he apparently views it as negative, and hence an “avoidance” motivator, because only in this way can the sentence be antithetic. Also, of those proposed solutions listed in the table below that make a choice of whether 30b is positive and negative, at least half choose to make it negative, so that 30b is antithetic. Commentators are influenced by the fact that 90% of the proverbs in chapters 10–15 are antithetic.⁶ This disproportionate percentage of forms is attributed to the fact that the combination of approach plus avoidance found in antithetic proverbs has the highest degree of motivation.⁷ However, the Item → Item pattern as found in Prov 11:30a is not included in the list of eight types of antithetic proverbs. This is one indication, then, that 11:30 may not be antithetic. For Prov 11:30 according to the MT, we see:

Table 1. *Deep Structure Classification of Prov 11:30*

<i>Line</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Class</i>
a	Fruit of the righteous	Item (+)	Tree of life	Item (+)
b	לֶקַח נָפֶשׁוֹת	Act (-)	Wise	Evaluation (+)

What causes the problem is that the topic of 30b is an apparent negative act, while the comment is a positive evaluation. Proposed solutions involve either changing the negative act to a positive, or changing the positive evaluation to a negative, or leaving the translation ambiguous. The chart below summarizes ways suggested to make sense of the incongruity. Given first are those that simply give a formal translation and for the most part leave the interpretation to the reader. But there are a number of deviations from this.

So, it is abundantly clear that translators have felt the difficulties in the text. The solution this article suggests is not radical; most of the interpretations of parts of the verse have been offered before. The contribution we hope to make is the combination of ideas that makes sense of the MT in a way that is consistent with the imagery of the verse and also with the wisdom theme throughout Proverbs. Our procedure will be (1) to establish the veracity of the MT; (2) look closely at the meaning and syntax of the words in the MT; and (3) suggest a translation and meaning that fits the range of meaning of the Hebrew text as well as the context.

II. VERACITY OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

The internal evidence clearly supports the MT. First, often individual proverbs seem to be arranged by linking words. The word “righteous” links

⁶ Ibid. 259.
⁷ Ibid. 259–60.

Table 2. *Solutions to Problems in Prov 11:30*

30a		30b	
<i>Change from MT</i>	<i>Proponent</i>	<i>Change from MT</i>	<i>Proponent</i>
None – Formal/near formal equivalent of the MT	Vulgate ASV KJV NASB95 NIV NKJV RSV NRSV	None – Formal/near formal equivalent of the MT	Vulgate ASV KJV NASB95 NIV NKJV
“righteous” sg. to pl.	Targum	“takes” active to passive	LXX
“righteous” to “righteousness, righteous life”	LXX Message Scott ^a		
Add some verb of growing	LXX (φύω, “grows”) GNT NCV (“gives”) NET (“producing”) Message NLT (“-bearing”)	Various renderings of לָקַח, “take”	<i>Destroy</i> – Message <i>Win</i> – KJV ASV NET ^b NIV <i>Acquire/attract</i> – Reyburn & Fry, Cohen ^c <i>Capture</i> – ESV <i>Take away</i> – GNT ^d RSV NRSV
“fruit” to pl.	Syriac GNB ^e	נַפְשׁוֹת as construct	LXX
Explicit comparison of man and tree	GNB NLT	Various renderings of נַפְשׁוֹת	<i>Souls</i> – KJV ASV ESV NET NIV [= תַּיִם] <i>it</i> – GNT <i>Lives</i> – RSV NRSV
Identifying fruit and tree	Message NLT – “a fruit-bearing tree” Hippolytus	Accept reading תָּקַם instead of תָּכַם	παράνομον, <i>lawless</i> LXX (?) RSV (“lawlessness”) Scott (“crime”) ^f <i>Violence</i> – GNT NRSV <i>Violent life</i> – Message
Identifying tree and life	NCV “A good person gives life to others”		

a. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 87.

b. NET Bible.

c. Reyburn and Fry, *Handbook*, 260; A. Cohen, *Proverbs* (London: Soncino, 1946) 72.

d. Good News Translation.

e. The Gute Nachricht Bibel gives an interesting rendering: „Ein rechtschaffener Mensch ist wie ein Baum, dessen Früchte Leben schenken; und wer klug und weise ist, gewinnt Menschen für sich“; “A righteous person is like a tree, whose fruits give life; and whoever is clever and wise, acquires people for himself.”

f. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, 87, who renders 30b, “But crime takes away lives.”

verses 30 and 31; the word “wise” links verses 29 and 30, a point made by Murphy.⁸ Second, two of the key principles in textual criticism are that the more difficult reading and the reading that best explains the others are to be preferred. So, we turn to the external evidence.

Since there is no Hebrew ms variant for the text, we examine the ancient versions that reflect difficulty in understanding the MT and have inspired some modern scholars to emend the MT reading קִיָּי . For example, Murphy cites Meinhold’s interpretation of 30b that the wise person wins others over to wisdom, but says that this interpretation of “take life” cannot stand up to Hebrew idiom and therefore adopts the suggested reading חַיָּי , “violence.”⁹ Rejecting pure conjecture, one needs to examine the ancient versions, to see if they bear witness to a Hebrew *Vorlage* different from the MT. Below is a literal translation of LXX, Vulgate, Syriac, and Targum followed by observations.

LXX: “From the fruit of righteousness grows a tree of life; but the souls of law-breakers are taken away untimely.”

For the MT substantival adjective, קִיָּי , “righteous one,” the LXX has $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\upsilon\eta$, “righteousness,” which is equivalent to Hebrew קִיָּי .¹⁰ Note that LXX takes נַפְשׁוֹת as a plural construct, after which the Greek has the adjective $\pi\alpha\rho\nu\omicron\mu\omega\nu$, “unlawful,” “wicked.” BHS suggests this represents the reading of a Hebrew *Vorlage* חַיָּי , “violence,” “wrong,” instead of קִיָּי , “wise,” which is used of physical violence as well as general harsh treatment and verbal abuse. However, the text should not be emended here on the basis of the LXX, because the translation practices of the LXX often make it difficult to draw a firm conclusion that they had a Hebrew *Vorlage* with a reading different from the MT. It is more likely that the LXX reading in Prov 11:30b is a deliberate rereading by the translator due to the difficulty of “take a life” as “to kill.”¹¹

⁸ Roland E. Murphy, “‘Catchwords’ in Proverbs 10:1–22:13” in *Learning from the Sages* 242. The Hebrew Old Testament Text Project follows the MT, according to William David Reymond and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Proverbs* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000) 260.

⁹ R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 2002) 80, 84.

¹⁰ The recensions, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian all render the MT very literally: $\kappa\alpha\rho\pi\omicron\iota \delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\upsilon \xi\upsilon\lambda\omicron\nu \zeta\omega\eta\varsigma$ (F. Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1875] 2.333). Field lists nothing for verse 30b.

¹¹ D. C. Snell, “‘Taking Souls’ in Proverbs xi 30,” *VT* 33 (1983) 363, argues that since the LXX rendering $\pi\alpha\rho\nu\omicron\mu\omega\varsigma$, “unlawful,” does not precisely mean חַיָּי , “violence,” the likelihood is that the translator was trying to make sense of a difficult text with חַיָּי rather than translate קִיָּי . C. H. Toy, *Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899) 238–39, prefers the reading with קִיָּי following the Greek, but adopts a different meaning, viz. “wealth gained by violence” by metonymy of cause. For a brief overview of the state of LXX text of Proverbs, see R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs* xxvi–xxvii. Richard Clifford, *Proverbs* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 28–29, rightly points out that the Greek translators had a different Hebrew edition of the book of Proverbs. That being said, it is still difficult to establish for any given passage that the translators had a *Vorlage* with a different reading, since the translators, as Clifford (p. 29) points out, often dealt with difficult passages by several methods, including metathesis or alteration of Hebrew consonants. So also William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 33–47. For a discussion of how to determine translational variations versus *Vorlage* variations, see Emanuel Tov, “Recensional Differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint of Proverbs,”

In addition, the translators understood לָקַח נַפְשׁוֹת to refer to dying rather than killing (taking לָקַח as a passive). This is indicated by the presence of the adjective ἄωρος, “untimely,” “unripe.” The fact that it is in the nominative plural, agreeing with “souls,” makes the grammar a bit awkward.¹² It is interesting to note that in Prov 10:6, where MT has הַקֶּץ, “violence,” the LXX renders with πένθος ἄωρον, “untimely grief.”

Vulgate: “The fruit of the just man is a tree of life and he who takes souls is wise.”¹³

This is the near formal equivalent of the Hebrew; note simply that the Hebrew participle, לֹקֵחַ, is rendered in Latin as a relative clause functioning as a noun. The significance of the agreement of the Vulgate with the MT is that, though the translation is based on the Hebrew, it was heavily influenced by the LXX.¹⁴ Therefore the Vulgate supports the MT.

Syriac: “The fruits of the righteous man (are) a tree of life [plural]; and (are) scattering the lives of the iniquitous ones.”¹⁵

Notice that except for “tree,” the nouns and participle are plural. In verse 30b, the Hebrew לָקַח נַפְשׁוֹת is interpreted as verbal and נַפְשׁוֹת is taken as the construct with the following word. In place of the Hebrew הַקֶּץ, Syriac translates with the plural ܐܘܠܐ, ‘awole’, “the iniquitous ones,” similar to the LXX.

Targum: “The fruits of righteous men are a tree of life; and he who takes souls is wisdom” or a variation on verse 30b, “and the one who takes (or “the taking of”) souls is pleasant.”¹⁶

in *Of Scribes and Scrolls, Fs. J. Strugnell* (ed. H. W. Attridge; Lanham, MD: University Press, 1990) 43–56. See also Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (rev. ed., 1914; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989) 315–41, esp. 325–30; Ralph W. Klein, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 63–64; Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 64–68; Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 153; Paul D. Wegner, *Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006) 167.

¹² J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, “ἄωρος,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint: Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003). For verse 30b, the New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) has, “but the souls of transgressors are cut off untimely” (cited from *Proverbs*, Johann Cook, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/prov.pdf>).

¹³ The Clementine edition (*Biblia Sacra Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam* [ed. electronica; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2005]) and the modern edition (Bonifatius Fischer and Robert Weber, *Biblia Sacra: Juxta Vulgatam Versionem* [ed. quartam emendatam; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997, c1969]) are identical for this verse.

¹⁴ Würthwein, *Text* 92–93; Wegner, *Textual Criticism* 167.

¹⁵ The translation is based on the *Syriac Bible* published by the United Bible Society, since the critical edition, *Proverbs; Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs*, Part II, fasc. 5 of *The Old Testament according to the Peshitta Version* (Leiden: University of Leiden, 1979) was not available to me.

¹⁶ The text is taken from the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (CAL Text), *Targum Proverbs* (Logos Electronic Edition; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2005); see also the CAL website (“Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon,” <http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/index.html>, and search Prov 11:30 in the CAL databases). The main text is based on L. Diez Merino, *Targum de Proverbios* (Madrid, 1984); the variants are from P. Lagarde, *Hagiographia Chaldaica* (Leipzig, 1872).

The main version follows the MT; notice that the plural form צדיקי, “righteous” differs from the singular in the MT. For ומקבלא, “and he who receives,” of verse 30b, the variant has ומקבלנא. The more common translation for Hebrew לקח is with the Aramaic דבר or נסב.¹⁷ Of eight cases in which the MT has נפש as the direct object of לקח, the Targums translate לקח with נסב, “take,” four times (*Tg. J.* 1 Kgs 19:4; Jonah 4:3; *Tg. Ps* 31:14; *Tg. Prov* 1:19) and דבר, “lead,” “take away” once (*Tg. J.* Ezek 33:6); the remaining three times the translation is idiomatic, למקטלי, “to kill me” (*Tg. J.* 1 Sam 24:12; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14 [Sperber: למקטלה]). The fact that *Tg. Prov* 11:30 translates Hebrew לקח with the unusual Aramaic קבל may suggest that the translators understood the text other than to mean “to kill.” Interestingly, whereas the Merino’s edition of *Tg. Proverbs* renders the MT literally, the Lagarde edition translates חכם with ריעיתא, “pleasant.”¹⁸ Clearly this indicates the translators tried to solve the problem by making the topic of verse 30b positive.

The best text, then, is that preserved in the MT. The versions offer no solid evidence of a different *Vorlage*. The LXX and Syriac attempt to solve the problem of a negative topic with a positive comment by changing the MT “wise” to a negative and merely demonstrate attempts to understand the difficult passage. The Latin and targumic texts clearly support the MT. Therefore, we must seek to understand the MT text of Prov 11:30 as it stands in such a way that 11:30b is consistent both with verse 30a and with the theme of wisdom throughout Proverbs. We will examine the text in detail.

III. FIRST LINE:

“THE FRUIT OF THE RIGHTEOUS IS A TREE OF LIFE”

Proverbs 11:30a contains two pairs of words in a verbless clause. The first pair is פרי צדיק, “(the) fruit of (the) righteous one.” Word meaning is not the problem here.¹⁹ What is significant is the function of the genitive case of צדיק. If the “movement” of the nouns in the verse is toward the Gen. צדיק, then he would be the beneficiary; if the movement is away from him, then another would be the beneficiary. Further, we also argue that, in cases in

¹⁷ By comparison, of the 148 times לקח occurs in Genesis, Targum Onkelos in the CAL Text translates with קבל only eight times, compared to נסב, 82 times, and דבר, 40 times, comprising 82.4% of the occurrences. Other translations are from the roots ברי, “create,” twice (Gen 3:19, 23); קרב, “bring near, offer,” three times (Gen 15:9, 10; 48:9); שבי, “take captive, take as booty,” twice (Gen 14:11, 12); and once each מית, in the Aphel “to put to death” (Gen 5:24); בוי, “take spoil” (Gen 43:28; Sperber’s text has דבר here); and קני, “acquire” (Gen 43:18). On the other hand, in the MT of Proverbs, לקח occurs 19 times and is translated in Targum Proverbs seven times with קבל (ten times with נסב). In six of these seven, the direct object is some form of instruction. Thus Prov 11:30 is unique of these seven.

¹⁸ The lexical form of this adjective is ריעי, and is a word found in Palestinian Jewish literary Aramaic and late Jewish literary Aramaic; see the entry in Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, *Targum Lexicon* (Logos Electronic Edition; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2004).

¹⁹ The change of the personal adjective to the abstract noun (see Table 2 above), though minor, is not desirable, because it depersonalizes the phrase. The adjective defines a person characterized by that quality.

which the fruit has an apposite modifier, the type of genitive affects the relationship between the subject nominative and the predicate nominative, viz. whether the predicate nominative is equative or descriptive. Both genitives have to do with agricultural production, but we will show that the “direction” of production in the first is opposite of the second and that the tree and the life are distinct.

פֶּרִי occurs in the construct 103 times. Due to the meaning of the word, the function of following genitives is somewhat limited. Excluding our target text, we classify the other 102 uses as follows.

Table 3. *Analysis of Genitive Functions after Fruit*

<i>Gen. Function</i>	<i>Times</i>
Gen. of Possessor	2
Attributive Gen.	3
Attributed Gen.	1
Gen. of Producer (including immediate and remote, human and non-human)	83
Gen. of Cause (in which Gen. noun is noun of action)	6
Gen. of Apposition ^a	3
Total	102

a. Five of these passages are a bit difficult to identify as apposition apart from cause. For Jer 6.19, in the phrase “the fruit of their thoughts” the genitive might be viewed as causal, but in context, in which the sinful actions involve thoughts (not paying attention and refusing), it seems best to say the genitive is apposite. In Hos 10:13, the genitive is a noun of action, “lie,” but the phrase “fruit of lie(s)” is parallel to iniquity and injustice; so the “fruit” does not seem to be the result of the lying, but the lying itself (similarly Jer 17:10; 32:19, in which the parallel is “way,” and Amos 6:12, “fruit of righteousness,” with the parallel being simply “judgment”).

We can limit further the examples to those, like our passage, in which the genitive is directly personal, of which there are only seven instances. For our text, three possible functions are relevant: producer, attributive, and possessor.

First, it is simple enough to agree with most commentators that the genitive is producer. In the vast majority of these 103 cases, the word “fruit” refers to offspring, whether plant, animal or human, and whether the use of such offspring is literal or figurative. Usually the genitive is immediate producer (e.g. “belly”) or more remote producer (e.g. “ground”). Interestingly, of all 103 cases, only seven have a personal genitive. Even of the 13 cases in which “fruit” refers to humans, the genitive noun is a person only twice: women (Lam 2:20) and enemies (Ps 21:11 [Eng. 10]; cf. v. 9 [Eng. 8]).²⁰ Besides our text, four of these seven cases should be classified as genitive of Producer. The first two are the ones just mentioned in Lamentations and

²⁰ In the other 11 cases the Gen. is בֶּטֶן, “belly, womb.”

Psalms 21. The other two cases involve personification (mountains in Ezek 36:8 and wisdom in Prov 8:19), but in both cases the “persons” are further anti-personified as trees or other plants based on the use of similar imagery in the context (cf. Ps 1:3) and therefore each serves as genitive of Producer.

Second, the genitive might be taken as attributive. Hippolytus of Rome (fl. 230), reading the LXX allegorically, identifies both the fruit and the tree as Christ. He seems to take both genitives “righteousness” and “life” to be attributive, when he comments, “He alone, as man, fulfilled all righteousness,” and when he describes Christ as a tree bringing forth fruit “with his own underived life.”²¹ However, the three instances of attributive genitive involve a genitive that is either an adjective (Jer 11:16) or impersonal nouns used adjectivally (Song 4:13, 16). Further, though the terms “fruit” and “tree” provide a unified image, the two terms are not in the same word pair and the types of genitive relationship are significant.²²

Finally, I found two cases with a personal genitive that are examples of genitive of possessor. In Ezek 25:4 (pronoun referring to the Ammonites), the fruit is something that will be taken away. In Hos 14:9 [MT; Eng. 14:8] it is something that the Lord will provide to Israel. It is this last example that is the key to this meaning, for the producer would be the Lord rather than Israel, the genitive after “fruit.” In this use, the “movement” is toward the genitive noun; Israel is the recipient and beneficiary of the fruit by being the possessor.

It is possible, then, that צִדִּיק in Prov 11:30a is a genitive of possessor. If so, then the fruit, the tree of life, is something that he enjoys.²³ The relationship of the nominatives in the verbless clause would be equative; that is, the fruit is the tree itself. In that case we might paraphrase, “The fruit belonging to the righteous one [which he received presumably from the Lord] is a tree of life”; that is, the fruit is the tree.” The implication is that fruit tree gives the righteous one “life” (as a reward for his righteousness?). In other words, that person receives the tree of life, similar to Adam and Eve in the garden. This would follow the use of “tree of life” in Prov 3:18 and would be especially true of those who believe Prov 11:30 to be antithetic, in which the two lines contrast one person in line A with an unrelated other in line B. However, unlike 3:18, our verse has no preposition making explicit the direction of blessing is to the one who possesses the tree, and neither does 11:30 imply any outside giver.

It is best to conclude that the genitive is possessor, because that is the most common use and fits the agricultural context best. This implies, then, that the direction of the movement is away from the producer and the beneficiaries primarily in view are others. In this case, the predicate nominative

²¹ Hippolytus, *Fragments on Proverbs*, quoted from ANF 5.173.

²² Helmer Ringgren, “חַיָּה,” *TDOT* 4.335, agrees with the conclusion presented here that Prov 11:30a is talking about a happy, successful life, but he treats the entire expression חַיָּה צִדִּיק as being a “symbol of happiness” rather than just the word חַיָּה.

²³ So Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs* (repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 6.180, argues against the LXX rendering for the same reason.

is descriptive: the fruit is like a tree that gives life to others. We might paraphrase, “The lifestyle of a righteous person produces fruit, which in turn is a tree that produces life in others.” The spotlight is on a person with a righteous lifestyle and the benefits that he brings to others. This understanding has implications for how we are to understand 30b and especially the participle “take.”

We turn now to the second word pair, עץ חיים, “tree of life.” There are two issues here, the kind of life and again the function of the genitive. First, the range of meaning for חיים includes quality of life, as can be easily seen in Prov 4:4, 13, 22–23, and many other places. However, here we are dealing with a fixed phrase that occurs seven times in the OT. This requires that we look more closely at the meaning of the figure and the kind of life implied.

Three times the article is present (עץ החיים), all in the context of the garden of Eden (Gen 2:9; 3:22, 24). The phrase occurs four times without the article, all in the book of Proverbs: 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4. To this we may add four times in the NT, all in Revelation (2:7; 22:2, 14, 19), all of which are allusions to the Genesis use. The “life” in all of these cases seems to be eternal life in the presence of God. It is likely that the phrase in Proverbs is also an allusion to the Garden of Eden.²⁴

Waltke says the tree of life is a metaphor for “a source of healing and of abundant, eternal life to all who eat of it.”²⁵ The difference between Genesis and Proverbs is that the latter is speaking of current earthly life rather than eternal life in some earthly paradise (Genesis) or some eschatological eternal life in a heavenly paradise (Revelation).

What kind of “life” do these four proverbs mean? In 3:18, Wisdom is described as a tree of life. In verses 16–17, wisdom possesses long life (ארך ימים, “length of days”), wealth, and honor, and the way of wisdom is pleasantness and peace. The tree of life imagery in verse 18 seems to summarize the blessed earthly life in חיים; Wisdom corresponds to the tree and “the good life” is the product or fruit of the tree. In 13:12, the tree is desire fulfilled. The life that the tree produces is the opposite of the heart made sick. Therefore, חיים here means an encouraged, hopeful outlook.²⁶ In 15:4, the מרפא לשון, “gentle (of) tongue,” is a tree of life. Once again the opposite of this life is a broken spirit, discouragement. This kind of tongue, however, gives life, viz. encouragement.²⁷ As we turn to 11:30, the parallel line

²⁴ So Buzzell, “Proverbs” 1.912; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1–15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 513. On the other hand, Ringgren, “חיה,” TDOT 4.335, 340, denies that there is any connection with the Genesis story, since “life” in ancient Near Eastern literature is often tied to objects, the possession of which ensures life. John Goldingay, “Proverbs,” *New Bible Commentary* (ed. D. A. Carson; 4th ed.; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), *loc. cit.*, seems to take a middle position; though not denying any connection, he simply denies the theological overtones of Genesis 2–3. Given the limited contexts of the occurrence of this phrase in the OT, it seems best that some general allusion to “life-giving” is present.

²⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs* 513.

²⁶ So Buzzell, “Proverbs” 1.933.

²⁷ מרפא is a difficult word to treat and three solutions have been offered: (1) treat it as from רפא, “to heal,” and derive some meaning from that, even though the syntax is difficult at some

is more opaque and therefore does not give clear insight into the meaning of the type of the life that is the fruit of righteousness. Nevertheless, it is safe to conclude that in 11:30 also “life” has a long, successful, happy, and prosperous quality of living rather than the opposite of death.²⁸

Second, what is the genitive function of ׀ִיָּם? Virtually everyone agrees that the life is produced by the tree. But it is well to note that the bound form of ׀ִיָּ, “tree,” has a variety of different genitive relations. ׀ִיָּ occurs in the singular construct 56 times and in the plural construct 82 times.²⁹ An analysis of the genitive uses is as follows:

Table 4. *Analysis of Genitive Functions after Tree(s)*

<i>Gen. Function</i>	׀ִיָּ	׀ִיָּֿ	<i>Times</i>
Gen. of Possessor (including personal and impersonal, as well as location)	15	28	43
Attributive Gen. (including kind of tree ^a)	14	46	60
Attributed ^b Gen. (only of idols)	1	1	2
Partitive Gen.	5	1	6
Gen. of Purpose	—	2	2
Gen. of Apposition	3	—	3
Gen. of Product	18 ^c	4	22
Totals	56	82	138

a. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) §9.5.3g classify this as genitive of species.

b. Waltke and O'Connor §9.5.3c seem to classify this as an epexegetical genitive. We are adopting terminology from Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 89, since it helpfully demonstrates the difference with its semantic opposite, the attributive genitive.

c. Including the four times in Proverbs.

Of the 22 instances of genitive of Product, excluding the phrase under discussion, thirteen are literal and seen in trees bearing fruit (׀ִיָּ [Gen 1:11; Ps 148:9; Eccl 2:5]), food (׀ִיָּֿ, [Lev 19:23; Deut 20:20; Ezek 47:12; Neh 9:25]), and oil (׀ִיָּֿ, specifically olive oil [with singular tree, Isa 41:19; Neh 8:15;

places (BDB “׀ִיָּֿ” and “׀ִיָּֿ,” *TWOT* 2:857); (2) treat it as from ׀ִיָּֿ, “to lose, sink, relax” (Jenni and Westerman, “׀ִיָּֿ,” *TLOT* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997] 3:1258, and “׀ִיָּֿ,” *NIDOTTE* 3:1167); or (3) treat it as from another ׀ִיָּֿ with the noun meaning “calmness” (“׀ִיָּֿ: ׀ִיָּֿ,” *HALOT* 2.637 and J. Swanson, “׀ִיָּֿ,” *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew [Old Testament]* [electronic ed.; Logos Research Systems: Oak Harbor, 1997] hereafter abbreviated *DBLSD*). Buzzell, “Proverbs” 1.937, suggests “emotional health.”

²⁸ Robert Alden, “Advice to Young Men: Proverbs 3,” in *Learning from the Sages* 210; Toy, *Proverbs* 239, takes ׀ִיָּֿ to mean “long life and happiness.”

²⁹ According to the *BHS*, Stuttgart Electronic Study Bible (5th corr. ed.; Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003), with morpho-syntactic database prepared by Eep Talstra, hereafter referred to as *SESB*.

and with plural trees, 1 Kgs 6:23, 31, 32, 33)). The remaining nine uses are metaphorical, but only in two phrases within a single context: עץ (ה)חיים, “(the) tree of (that bears) life,” and עץ הִרְעָה טוֹב וְרָע “the tree of (that bears) the knowing of good and evil.”

In the context of the tree, חיים is best seen as a genitive of Product, the directional opposite of genitive of Producer. The cause/effect relationship then becomes interesting. A righteous person produces fruit, presumably, righteous acts or the results thereof. The fruit in turn is (like) a tree that produces life. Semantically, the fruit is equated with the tree as the result of the lifestyle of the righteous man and the effecter of a life of quality.³⁰

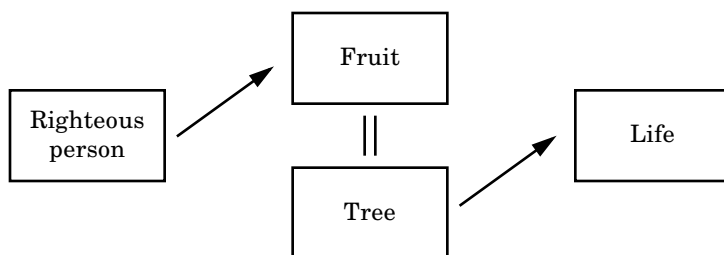


Figure 1. Cause and effect series in Prov 11:30a.

Thus far we have seen that “life” in Prov 11:30a means a positive quality of earthly life. This blessed life is ultimately the result of righteous living. The intermediated elements of tree/fruit present a separation between the righteous man and the happiness. In other words, the “tree of life” image, in addition to the Gen. functions, hint that the righteous man is not the only one to benefit in that happy, successful life.³¹

IV. SECOND LINE:

“AND HE WHO TAKES נִפְשׁוֹת IS WISE”

There are two questions that need to be answered here: what exactly is being taken and then who is the agent of the “taking.” First, what is “taken”; that is, what is the meaning of נִפְשׁוֹת? To answer this question, one needs to deal with the range of meaning of the individual terms נִפֶּשׁ and לִקַּח, and then the use of the idiom made when these two are combined.

The range of meaning of נִפֶּשׁ is broad. Definitions in various lexicons and theological dictionaries vary quite a bit, though some categories are well established and commonly recognized. *DBLSD* lists four basic ideas (plus numerous set phrases), to which we, following many other studies,

³⁰ So apparently Waltke, *Proverbs* 513.

³¹ Roy B. Zuck, “A Theology of Proverbs,” in *Learning from the Sages* 100, argues that the tree imagery indicates benefit to others.

add “appetite.” These five concepts may be further grouped as tangible and intangible. Of the 753 occurrences of the noun in the MT, this survey focuses on those in the absolute state, since this will limit the survey to structures more nearly parallel to our text. The plural absolute occurs only 17 times.³² The singular absolute occurs 170 times.³³ A survey of the range of meanings of the absolute state will show, however, that there are passages in which נֶפֶשׁ has a sense of “well-being” or “blessed life” parallel to what we saw for חַיִּיה in Prov 11:30a.

1. *Tangible uses of נֶפֶשׁ.*³⁴

a. “*Creature*,” *any living thing*. Here especially נֶפֶשׁ חַיִּיה, “a living *nepeš*,” can refer to animals (Lev 11:46, where it is modified by an adjectival participle), people (e.g. Gen 1:20, 21), or both (Ezek 47:9).

b. “*Person*,” “*self*,” *a living human being*. The singular נֶפֶשׁ may refer to a generic person. There are 23 occurrences of the singular absolute, both with and without the article, all in the Pentateuch (16 times in Leviticus, e.g. Lev 2:1, and five times in Numbers, e.g. 15:30), except for Isa 49:7 and Jer 43:6. This use is also illustrated in the phrase הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַזֹּאת, “that *nepeš*,” in the Pentateuch (Gen 17:14; Exod 12:19; 31:14; plus 15 times in Leviticus and Numbers). It should be noted that the grammatically singular נֶפֶשׁ can also be used to refer to plural individuals, though the only examples I found are in Genesis (e.g. 12:5; 14:21 and seven times in chap. 46).

2. *Intangible uses of נֶפֶשׁ.*

a. “*Life*,” “*quality of being alive*,” *the animate part of a person* (Deut 19:21, twice) or *an animal* (Lev 24:18, twice) *existing until death*. This appears to be the meaning in the phrase נֶפֶשׁ תַּחַת נֶפֶשׁ, “life for life,” in these latter two passages. Included here also are several passages in which נֶפֶשׁ occurs adverbially in the absolute state meaning “mortally, to death” (Deut 19:6; 22:26; Jer 40:14, 15). This is the sense also for expressions of killing. So, לָקַח נֶפֶשׁ, “take a *nepeš*” (e.g. Ps 31:14b [English 13b]; לָקַח with the plural absolute occurs only in Prov 11:30).³⁵ נִכְהַל נֶפֶשׁ, “smite a *nepeš*” (e.g. Gen 37:21;

³² The 753 occurrences is according to Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); *HALOT*, “נֶפֶשׁ” 2.711, gives the number at 754. The frequency of the plural absolute is based on SESB.

³³ According to SESB and the Westminster 4.0 Morphology (Libronix), there are 178. However, the following are clearly in the construct: Num 35:31; 1 Kgs 19:2; Isa 32:6; Jer 20:13; Ps 94:21; Prov 10:3; 16:26; 21:10.

³⁴ We omit discussion of the probable original meaning of “throat, gullet.” See the lexicons and studies on this matter.

³⁵ Toy, *Proverbs* 238, says the expression always means “to destroy lives.” However, he makes no distinction between the singular and plural uses of נֶפֶשׁ.

Num 35:11, 15, 30a) and לְצַדֵּר נֶפֶשׁוֹ, “to hunt נֶפֶשׁוֹ” (Ezek 13:18; but see discussion below).

b. *“Heart,” “inner self,” including mind, will, and emotions.* This use is common and is found primarily in the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, though it also occurs in Psalms and Proverbs; e.g. Isa 10:18, in which “from *nepeš* to flesh” is a merism for the total man involving the inner and outer man.

c. *Closely related to “inner self” is “appetite” or “desire.”* It is found in this sense without modification, though in the construct state, in Prov 16:26. It is found several times in various modified constructions. For example, עֲזִי נֶפֶשׁ, “mighty of *nepeš*,” occurs in Isa 56:11, which is parallel to not being satisfied; ESV translates “a mighty appetite.”

The relation of these other uses may be illustrated graphically:

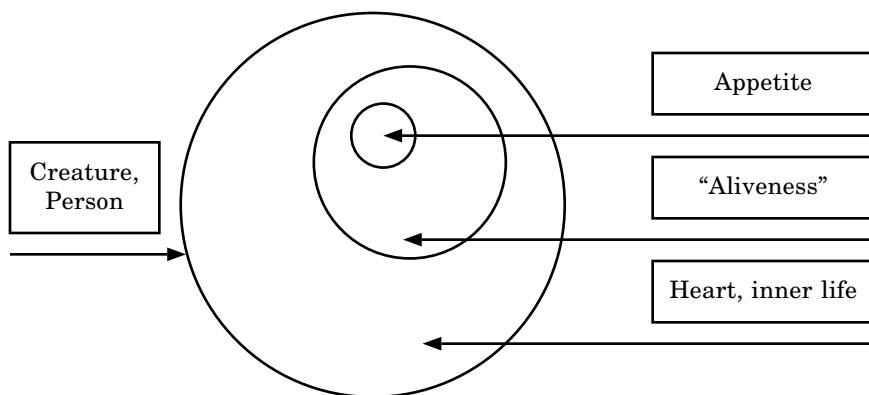


Figure 2. Meaning range for נֶפֶשׁ.

The “creature, person” categories, represented by the bold circle, are tangible. The regions represented by the various regions within the circle are intangible. Yet another meaning that overlaps the two broad categories listed above may be seen.

3. נֶפֶשׁ as the “blessed” life. The singular absolute seems to mean the “blessed, pleasant, successful life” in a number of passages. In Deut 24:6, taking in pledge (חִבְלוֹ) a man’s means of livelihood is prohibited, since it is viewed as taking his נֶפֶשׁ. It is also used in this sense with the verbal root שׁוּב in Ruth 4:15 of Boaz’s ability to care for Naomi in her old age. In Lam 1:11 it is used of the search for food by the refugees after the destruction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar. This would be more at subsistence living, rather than “the good life,” but still a similar idea in that the life in view is better than the alternative, viz. starvation. So also in Ezek 22:25

the false prophets “consume life” (נָפֶשׁ אָלְכוּ), which is parallel to “they have taken treasure and precious things” (ESV, following 2 mss cited in the BHS note: חֶסֶן וְיָקָר לָקְחוּ).³⁶

The form of נָפֶשׁ in Prov 11:30 is plural, which occurs 51 times in the OT. In the majority of these cases, the plural is numeric, as understood by the versions that read “souls” (probably in the sense of “person”). However, the grammatical plural is also used in Hebrew to express abstract ideas. The issue is whether the plural of נָפֶשׁ is used to refer to an abstract concept. It would appear so in Jer 2:34, דָּם נַפְשֹׁת אֲבִיּוֹנִים, “the blood of the souls [‘life-blood’ in many versions] of the poor,” in which *nāpšôt* refers to the crime of Judah. Commentators are divided as to whether the crime is actual murder (e.g. Jer 26:15) or hyperbole to speak of the oppression of the poor. More likely it is speaking of the latter (cf. other expressions for killing used as figures for oppression: Isa 33:15; Ezek 22:27; Mic 3:2–3; Nah 3:1).

To match the syntax in our passage, we limit our study to the absolute forms of נַפְשֹׁת. Of the 51 occurrences of the plural, 17 are absolute, including our passage (Exod 12:4; Lev 18:29; 27:2; Num 19:18; Ezek 13:18³, 19², 20³; 17:17; 18:4; 22:27; Prov 14:25).³⁷ At first glance, the plural absolute seems always to refer to a plurality of people in the 16 occurrences beyond our target text.³⁸ However, eight of these occur in Ezek 13:18–20, a notoriously difficult passage. Close examination allows for a definition of נַפְשֹׁת other than “persons.” The section is a speech by the Lord indicting false prophetesses for “hunting down נַפְשֹׁת.” Some say that since לְצַדּוֹר, “to hunt,” in Ezek 13:18 is parallel to לְהָמִית, “to put to death,” the expression “to hunt נַפְשֹׁת” should be taken to mean “murder.”³⁹ If so, נַפְשֹׁת would mean either the tangible whole person or intangible aliveness.

However, צַד, “to hunt,” can be used figuratively (as in Prov 6:26) and most commentators so understand these eight occurrences in Ezek 13:18–20. If the sense is figurative, נַפְשֹׁת means either tangible “people as a whole” or to intangible “inner thoughts and motives.”⁴⁰ So, Moshe Greenberg argues that צַד does not mean “to kill,” but more toward the notion of “entrap,” and the entire expression is “a figure for the enticement of gullibles.”⁴¹ If entrapment is the action, then נַפְשֹׁת means either the “inner thoughts” of these victims and the complete expression, “to hunt נַפְשֹׁת” refers to some

³⁶ These two lines are the first two of a tricolon, in which the third line is “they make many widows in her midst.” This third line need not be understood to mean “violent, physical murder,” though it may include that. But even if it does, this would not necessarily demand that the other two lines mean the same, especially the second line. Similar language occurs in Ezek 22:27 in the context of destroying lives to get dishonest gain and it is best to take Ezek 22:25 to be speaking of lives ruined in any number of ways, rather than only physical murder.

³⁷ Again based on the SESB database.

³⁸ So G. A. Cooke, *Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936) 146, “The plur. Of *néphesh* does not mean *souls*, but *persons*.”

³⁹ So apparently Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 297.

⁴⁰ For the former view, see Cooke, *Ezekiel* 146 and Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1994) 204; for the latter, see Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 170, Peter C. Craigie, *Ezekiel* (DSB; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 93.

⁴¹ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 240.

deception, or it refers once again to “whole persons” and the complete expression refers to domination and control over them, presumably for financial gain.⁴² Therefore, physical death is not the best meaning; the entire expression refers to the condition of the *נפש*, whether tangible or intangible.

The correctness of the notion that the plural of *נפש* means the condition or status of the person seems to be confirmed in Ezek 13:19, “You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live, by your lying to my people, who listen to lies” (ESV). “Putting to death souls” and “keeping alive souls” form a merism and therefore need not be interpreted concretely. Since the means of accomplishing these acts is lying to a people who are gullible, it is best to conclude that literal putting to death and keeping alive are not in view, but rather welfare, or quality of life (spiritual, financial, emotional, etc.).

Therefore, the sphere of meaning of noun *נפש*, in both singular and plural forms, includes welfare, or the blessed life.⁴³ The likelihood of this meaning is strengthened by the fact that the terms *חיים* and *נפש* are parallel and neatly ties together both lines of Prov 11:30. It remains to determine if this meaning fits the construction *לקח נפש*.

There are several meanings for *לקח* that are made on the basis that *נפש* means “people.” We enumerate four interpretations that have been applied to Prov 11:30, then offer a much simpler solution.

a. “Kill.” Verbal forms of *לקח* occur with the singular noun *נפש* as a direct object in five passages (1 Kgs 19:4; Ps 31:14; Prov 1:19; Ezek 33:6; Jonah 4:3) plus three times in which is attached the third singular feminine suffix, the antecedent of which is *נפש* (1 Sam 24:12; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14). In seven of these occurrences, it means “take away life, kill.” Proverbs 1:19 is inconclusive. The meaning may be that the greedy will physically die as a result of their action, or the expression may be a hyperbole for appropriate punishment. Clearly “kill” is not the meaning in the context of “wise,” but this idiom used with an uncommon meaning would get the readers attention.

b. “Understand.” Snell suggests that we ought to follow the lead of Moses Qimchi, who understands *לקח* to mean “he who understands” as happens with the noun; Snell then takes the entire expression to mean understanding man’s nature or needs.⁴⁴

⁴² So John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969) 124, and Daniel I. Bock, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 441–45.

⁴³ Bruce K. Waltke, *שנ, TWOT* 2.589, denies this meaning, but this conclusion is supported by H. Seebass, *שנ, TDOT* 9.501, citing glosses for the Akkadian term given in CAD (“vigor, vitality, good health”), as well as the use in Hebrew, *TDOT* 9.509, where he says the term “inherently expresses joy in life, vitality,” though neither the word with *לקח* nor our passage is treated, even in the discussion of threats to life, *TDOT* 9.513–4.

⁴⁴ Snell, “Taking Souls,” 363–64. He thus takes *נפש* to mean “inner person(s)” (he uses the term *soul*) and also, by adopting the meaning “desire,” to refer to needs. Cohen, *Proverbs* 72, apparently sees a double sense from *לקח* when to the notion of attraction he adds, “and imparts to them sound advice,” apparently influenced by Qimchi.

c. “*Attract.*” Buzzell suggests this without citing evidence. He understands נִפְשׁוֹת to mean “people.”⁴⁵ The idea is that the righteous lifestyle of a person attracts other people to himself.⁴⁶ The subject in verse 30a is the same as the subject in verse 30b; in other words, the righteous person is the wise person. Used positively, לָקַח can mean something similar to our English “captivate.” The difficulty here is that verse 30a, as we analyzed above, focuses on the benefit that the righteous gives to others, while this interpretation focuses on what the righteous gains, or else the two lines are less closely related.

d. “*Save.*” This is actually the opposite idea of the idiomatic meaning “kill.” Bland suggests that this means to promote life.⁴⁷ Clifford has a variation of this when he says לָקַח means “to have power over,” i.e. the wise person promotes life.⁴⁸

Waltke seems to combine several ideas when he writes, “The life-giving fruit of the righteous is so *attractive* that it turns people aside to *eat* from it, and so [the righteous and wise man] ‘*takes away* lives’ from death.”⁴⁹ His use of “attractive” and the *eating* of the fruit of righteous do well to bring out the benefit that others besides the “righteous one” receive. However, there is no verbal link to these terms. So, either he is inferring them from the imagery of the text, or he gets them from לָקַח. However, Waltke explicitly defines לָקַח as “to take away” or remove people *from* death. This he calls “an intentional irony.”⁵⁰ Presumably he means that since the phrase “take life” normally means “to kill,” but “wise” precludes such a meaning, the concept of death is still in the mind of the reader and Waltke places that concept outside the idiom as something avoided. He concludes by saying that “the righteous both produce eternal life and by their attractiveness save others from [death].”⁵¹

If, on the other hand, נִפְשׁוֹת means “blessed life” and is the “fruit” of the tree, then לָקַח can also be understood in agricultural imagery. Included in the range of meaning for לָקַח is that of picking fruit (Lev 23:40; Num 13:20;

⁴⁵ Buzzell, “Proverbs” 1.930.

⁴⁶ So Cohen, *Proverbs* 72.

⁴⁷ Bland, *Proverbs* 124. Bland very appropriately cites Prov 29:10 as a similar problem with the verb בָּקַשׁ, *bāqāš*, “to seek.” The text reads: אֲנָשִׁי זִמִּים יִשְׁאַדּוּהֶם רִישָׁרִים יִבְקְשׁוּ נַפְשׁוֹ: “Bloodthirsty men hate a blameless man, but the upright ones seek his life.” The third masculine singular suffix in נַפְשׁוֹ must refer to the only other singular substantive in the verse, הֵם. Clearly יִבְקְשׁוּ נַפְשׁוֹ cannot mean that the upright seek to kill the blameless man. So one must either follow the emendation suggested by BHS substituting וְשָׂעִים, “the wicked,” for “the upright,” or else take the verbal idiom to mean something positive. I find 33 cases in which the verb בָּקַשׁ is followed by the direct object נַפְשׁ, and in all of them the meaning is “try to kill.” There is one case, Esth 7:7, in which בָּקַשׁ is followed by the prepositional phrase עַל-נַפְשׁוֹ, but this simply means that Heman was begging for his life, not that he was seeking his life to save it, which would require נַפְשׁוֹ as the direct object. If our solution for Prov 11:30 be accepted, then it may be applied here as well, viz. the upright seek his welfare.

⁴⁸ Clifford, *Proverbs* 127.

⁴⁹ Waltke, *Proverbs* 513; emphasis is mine.

⁵⁰ A point noted by Koptak, *Proverbs* 325, citing W. I. Irwin, “The Metaphor in Proverbs 11:30,” *Bib* 6 (1984) 97–100.

⁵¹ Waltke, *Proverbs* 513.

Deut 1:25; 26:2). Of particular significance is the context of Eden. In Gen 3:6, Eve “took (לקח) from the fruit of the tree of knowing good and evil.” And in Gen 3:22 the Lord expels the man from the garden lest “he also pick (לקח) [sc. fruit] from the tree of life so that he eat and live forever.” This sense for לקח suits the imagery of the whole of Prov 11:30. Similarly, Alden suggests the meaning “receive,” and paraphrases the entire verse, “righteousness gives life and the wise receive it,” though he does not clarify the antecedent to “it”; righteousness or life.⁵² In other words, the agent of the taking is a one who plucks or harvests fruit, the fruit in this case being נְפִשׁוֹת, a blessed quality of life. Who does the “taking”? Most view the agent of verse 30b to be the same as that of verse 30a. We suggest instead that it is better to see two different agents in each line, because (1) as we mentioned above, the direction of the genitives and the tree imagery imply multiple beneficiaries; and (2) in verse 30a the righteous is producing the life and in verse 30b someone is plucking it; it only makes sense that another person is in view.

V. SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

In sum, the central interpretational problem lies in verse 30b, in which at first glance the topic, “לקח נְפִשׁוֹת,” seems to be negative while the comment, “wise,” is positive. To solve the problem, we have argued as follows.

- (1) The MT should stand as original based on the principles of textual criticism and on due consideration of the versions.
- (2) The phrase “tree of life” in verse 30a is most likely a reference to Genesis, but in wisdom literature it refers to a blessed earthly life; this clarifies the meaning of יָמֵי, “life,” both referring to a blessed (good quality of) life.
- (3) The genitive functions of verse 30a point in a direction from the righteous person to the benefit of others, viz. to that blessed life. In turn, verse 30a anticipates the description of the beneficiaries in verse 30b.
- (4) The meaning range of נְפִשׁוֹת includes the blessed life, and that meaning is supported in this passage by the plural absolute form used for an abstract and by the parallelism with יָמֵי in 30a.
- (5) The idiom “to take נְפִשׁוֹת” with the plural form is slightly different from the idiom “to kill” with the more common singular שָׁחַט, and the negative meaning “to kill” ought not to be forced onto the passage. Instead, the agricultural use of לקח for plucking fruit, especially in view of this use in Genesis, makes sense and is a simple solution. This solves the central interpretational problem of verse 30b, yielding a positive topic and a positive comment that makes sense.

Finally, (6) the identification of the agent (“taker”) of verse 30b as distinct from verse 30a (“righteous one”) fits with the directionality of the genitives in verse 30a and confirms the notion that verse 30a anticipates mention of the beneficiaries. Consequently, verse 30b describes

⁵² Alden, *Proverbs* 98.

as wise those who benefit from the righteous one of verse 30a by choosing that style of life.

As a result, the following interpretation emerges. In Prov 11:30a, the person who lives righteously is going to bear fruit. That fruit is a tree of life. The kind of life in view is an abundantly blessed life. From an earthly perspective, it is as pleasant as life in the Garden of Eden. As a tree is a blessing to many, many benefit from a righteous life in addition to the righteous person. Just as verse 30a anticipates the benefit that a righteous person provides for others, verse 30b implies that the person who follows the example of the righteous by choosing that same righteous and blessed life is wise. A translation reflecting this analysis would be, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who plucks that good life is wise."

At first glance Prov 11:30b may sound weak to modern, Western, Christian ears, because the motivation for the reader appears to be self-interest or personal gain. However, in Proverbs, extrinsic motivators are in fact used and are not weak. Hildebrandt's study of the psychology of motivation in Proverbs is very helpful. In particular, two motivating factors he discusses are important here.⁵³ The first factor is "attribution theory motivation." This is the idea that humans are motivated to seek, or attribute, causes for successes and failures. The proverbs relate tasks to character, but word them in such a way that the student is empowered by having to make a choice about action and then being able to evaluate that action within the framework of what things are wise. The student then rewards himself on his ability to make wise choices.⁵⁴ Proverbs 11:30b motivates in the same way: plucking this "life" is a wise choice.

The second factor is extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivators may result in the desired action, but only as long as the motivation is valued and applied. When the stimulus stops, so does the behavior. Intrinsic motivators result in more long-lasting change. Further, studies have shown that "the impact of others-oriented motivation leads to more emphatic and altruistic behavior." Hildebrandt notes that Proverbs moves beyond motivational drives based on basic needs to cognitive needs, with the ultimate motive being "life" (Prov 8:32–6).⁵⁵ He explains,

Self-preservation, the desire for well-being and the avoidance of harm underlie much proverbial motivation. Rather than demeaning such motivational forces by labeling them as adolescent or crassly egocentric, such "worldly" motivations need to be embraced as having been utilized in Proverbs, the law (Deut. 28; Lev. 26), and even the NT (. . . 1 Tim. 5:23; Titus 2:5; cf. Matt. 6:33; Acts 16:3).

Hildebrandt also points out that, though Proverbs uses the power of extrinsic motivation, such as wealth and happiness, the book as a whole speaks

⁵³ The third one involves emotional factors as a motivator. Since this does not seem to play a part, other than perhaps in the startling unusual use of the phrase לֹקֵחַ נֶפֶשׁוֹת, we will not treat it here.

⁵⁴ Hildebrandt, "Motivation" 262–63.

⁵⁵ Hildebrandt follows R. N. Gordon, "Motivation in Proverbs," *Biblical Theology* 25 (1975) 55–56.

of the greater worth of wisdom than such concerns. Proverbs highlights the internal benefits of character development as its own reward, setting up wisdom as its own motivating goal.⁵⁶ This others-oriented approach is the point of Prov 11:30a. To choose to behave in a way that gives life to others is a strong motivator.

The proposed understanding of this proverb, then, does not weaken its force, but strengthens it. In the first half, the man of God should seek to be righteous, because by doing so, he will act in such a way that others as well as himself benefit from that good life. He and they will live longer, healthier, and happier. Here is a combination of extrinsic reward and altruistic motivation. In the second half, anyone who notices the fruit of the righteous man is in view. This observer can also partake of that same fruit of a successful life. In fact, he is wise, if he does. Here is a combination of extrinsic reward and attribution motivation. By putting the two halves of Prov 11:30 together, the reader can see that to pluck that kind of fruit requires that he pursue the same righteous lifestyle and the same motivation.

The traditional understanding of the proverb is based on faulty understanding and therefore ought to be rejected. This means, of course, that the preacher may lose a sermon promoting evangelism. It is hoped that the interpretation suggested here, truer to the original intent, will yield for the preacher plenty of fruit for his congregation.

⁵⁶ Hildebrandt, "Motivation" 263.