

Word Study on “simple”, “fool”, and “mocker” in Proverbs

There are several Hebrew words in Proverbs that are translated in the sense of simple or fool:

“Inherent in the idea of wisdom was that it could be taught, whether as a technical craft, as rules for the good life, or as a profound understanding of the meaning of human existence.

“Israel’s teachers were well aware that people vary in native intelligence, and that their pupils might be open to instruction or might resist it. Some were ignorant and unskilled simply because they had not been taught. Others were unteachable because they could not learn, and still others because they would not.

“These differences are reflected in the usages of the several Hebrew words for fool, antithesis of the wise man. The *pethi* is the naïve, untutored youth whose intelligence has not been awakened. He is simple, but not, as some translations put it, “a simpleton.” The *k^esil* is stupid. The *‘^ewil* or *sakal* is obstinate in his folly. The *ba‘ar* is crude, the *nabal* brutal and depraved, the *holel* irrational to the point of madness. The *les* is the foolish talker, opinionated and insolent.”¹

Comment:

1. *k^esil* is the primary word used for fool in Proverbs. I do not agree with the above definition of “stupid” if that means mentally deficient but prefer dull and obstinate in his chosen outlook.
2. *pethi* is the primary word used for simple; mentally he is naïve, morally he is willful and irresponsible. The *pethi* is best described in Ch 7.
3. *holel* is not found in Proverbs; it is found 5 times in Ecclesiastes, most notably in 2:12: (Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also *madness* and folly); three times it is coupled with folly (*siqlut*).
4. *sakal* is also not found in Proverbs, but is found 4 times in Ecclesiastes (but *‘^ewil* is not found in Ecclesiastes) and 2 times in Jeremiah. The verb form is found 8 times, mostly in Samuel and Chronicles. *‘^ewil* means stubborn or obstinate.
5. *ba‘ar* and *nabal* are used only as adjectives (“foolish [man]”). Nabal means one whose mind is closed to God and to reason (cf Abigail’s first husband, 1 Sam 25:17).
6. NIV always translates *les* in Proverbs as mocker. NAS and NKJ usually use scoffer, but will use mocker when necessary (20:1 “wine is a mocker”).

Reference:	<i>pethi</i>	<i>k^esil</i>	<i>‘^ewil</i>	<i>ba‘ar</i>	<i>nabal</i>	<i>les</i>
1:4	x					
1:22	6	6				6
1:32	6	6				
3:26		2				
3:34						x
3:35		x				
5:23			x			
7:7	x					
8:5	6	6				
9:4,6	x					
9:7-8,12						x
9:13		x				
9:16	x					
10:1		x				
10:18		x				
10:23		x				
12:1				x		
12:23		3	3			
13:1						x
13:16		3	3			
13:19-20		x				
14:1			x			

¹ R.B.Y. Scott, “*The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament*”, Macmillan Publishing, 1971; p48.

Reference:	<i>pethi</i>	<i>k^esil</i>	<i>'evil</i>	<i>ba'ar</i>	<i>nabal</i>	<i>les</i>
14:6						x
14:7-8			x			
14:9						x
14:15	x					
14:16		x				
14:17-18	7		7			
14:24		x				
14:33		x				
15:2		3	3			
15:7		x				
15:12						x
15:14		3	3			
15:20		x				
15:21			x			
16:22			x			
17:7					x	
17:10		x				
17:12		3	3			
17:16		x				
17:21		5			5	
17:24-25		x				
18:2		x				
18:6-7		x				
18:13			x			
19:1		x				
19:3			x			
19:10		x				
19:13		x				
19:25	8					8
19:28						x
19:29		9				9
20:1						x
21:11	8					8
21:20		x				
21:24						x
22:3	x					
22:10						x
22:15			x			
23:9		x				
24:9			10			10
26:3-12		x & 3	3			
26:11			x			
27:12	x					
27:22			x			
28:26		x				
29:11		x				
29:20		x				
30:2				1		
30:22					x	

Notes (NIV):

1. NIV: I am the most ignorant of men; NAS: I am more stupid than any man
2. NIV: for the LORD will be your confidence (k^esil) and will keep your foot from being snared.
 Note that this word can be translated stupidity or confidence/trust (as here, although stupidity could also be used here in a sarcastic sense). The identical word is used in:
 Ps 49:14: NIV: This is the fate of those who *trust* in themselves
 NAS: This is the way of those who are foolish,
 Ps 78:7 Then they would put their *trust* in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands
 Eccl 7:25 NIV: So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.
 Note: NIV is not very literal and does not illustrate the point; need to look at NAS:
 I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the *foolishness* of madness.

3. 12:23: A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools (k^esil) blurts out folly (ʻ^evil).
 13:16: Every prudent man acts out of knowledge, but a fool (k^esil) exposes his folly (ʻ^evil).
 15:2: The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool (k^esil) gushes folly (ʻ^evil).
 15:14: The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a *fool* (k^esil) feeds on folly (ʻ^evil).
 17:12: Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a *fool* (k^esil) in his folly (ʻ^evil).
 26:4-5: Do not answer a *fool* (k^esil) according to his folly (ʻ^eevil), or you will be like him yourself.
 ⁽⁵⁾Answer a *fool* (k^esil) according to his *folly* (ʻ^evil), or he will be wise in his own eyes.
4. 14:7-8: Stay away from a *foolish man* (k^esil), for you will not find knowledge on his lips. ⁽⁸⁾The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the *folly* (ʻ^eevil) of *fools* (k^esil) is deception.
5. 17:21: To have a *fool* (k^esil) for a son brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a *fool* (nabal).
6. 1:22: How long will you *simple ones* (pethi) love your *simple* (pethi) ways? How long will *mockers* (les) delight in *mockery* (les) and *fools* (k^esil) hate knowledge?
 1:32: For the waywardness of the *simple* (pethi) will kill them, and the complacency of *fools* (k^esil) will destroy them.
 8:5: You who are *simple* (pethi), gain prudence; you who are *foolish* (k^esil), gain understanding.
7. 14:17-18: A quick-tempered man does *foolish things* (k^esil), and a crafty man is hated. ⁽¹⁸⁾The *simple* (pethi) inherit *folly* (ʻ^eevil), but the prudent are crowned with knowledge
8. 19:25: Flog a *mocker* (les), and the *simple* (pethi) will learn prudence; rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge.
 21:11: When a *mocker* (les) is punished, the *simple* (pethi) gain wisdom; when a wise man is instructed, he gets knowledge.
9. 19:29: Penalties are prepared for *mockers* (les), and beatings for the backs of *fools* (k^esil).
10. 24:9: The schemes of his *folly* (ʻ^eevil) are sin, and men detest a *mocker* (les).