CHAPTER FOUR

SPEECH AND SILENCE

According to Skladny more than twenty per cent of Prov. 10.1-22.16 and 25-29 are concerned with the theme of speech and related matters.¹ The importance of this theme is suggested not only by its many occurrences, but also by its relevance to essential issues such as the individual’s character and the community’s life. Speech is the most important expression of wisdom or of folly:

Die Sprache (langue) in allen ihren Vollzügen (parole) erweist sich von besonderer Bedeutung und Wert für den Weisen. Sie wird zu einer Schlüsselfunktion für die Weisheit; Weisheit erlangt sich via Sprache und wird durch diese vermittelt. Hier ist der Bereich, wo insonderheit der intellektuelle wie der zwischenmenschliche Aspekt der Weisheit zum Tragen kommen. Sprache hat Auswirkungen auf den Sprechenden wie den Hörenden. Sie bewirkt Leben oder Tod, Wohltat oder Zerstörung und ermöglicht Beeinflussung anderer.²

We now propose to compare and contrast the theme of speech in Proverbs with that in Arabic proverbial wisdom. In the first section we deal with the organs of speech and hearing (the tongue, the mouth, and the ear) and their relation to speech. The second section explores various forms and aspects of speech. The third section deals with the theme of silence. Finally, we discuss the use of religious language in sayings on speech.

¹ Skladny, *Spruchsammlungen*, p. 70.
4.1 The Organs of Speech and Hearing

4.1.1 The Tongue

The Tongue as a Valuable Organ

The tongue is viewed in Proverbs as the organ which expresses thoughts. A good tongue is regarded highly in Proverbs. The tongue is described as בְּשַׁר (10.20) and as מִרְרָה (12.18) and (18.21; cf. 15.4). Such descriptions suggest that speech does not consist of mere words spoken 'in the air', but has a powerful effect in life. Words are indeed actions. The value of the tongue is seen in the fruits of good speech which bring satisfaction to both individual and community (12.14; 13.2; 18.20).

In Arabic proverbs the tongue is a valued organ. It is the main organ that distinguishes man from other things and creatures: "Were it not for the tongue, man would be nothing more than a silent picture or a contemptible animal (ما الإنسان لولا اللسان إلا صورة متملة أو بهيمة مهيمة). This concept that the faculty of speech distinguishes man from other creatures has a biblical counterpart.

The high regard for the tongue is seen in its being associated with the heart, the source of life. The value of a person is not to be judged

3 Shupak, Wisdom, p. 280.
4 McKane, Proverbs, p. 233: "Speech with healing properties is a tree of life, but with perversion it is spiritual ruin." Hausmann, Menschenbild, p. 193 n. 52, correctly argues against Bühmann (W. Bühmann, Vom rechten Reden und Schweigen: Studien zu Proverbiyen 10-31 (OBO 12; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), p. 279; cf. Whybray, Commentary, p. 226) that מִרְרָה describes the speech itself as being "eine wohlruende Sprache" rather than what results from speech. The latter thought is referred to in Prov. 12.18.
5 McKane, Proverbs, pp. 448-9, 459-60; Bühmann, Reden, pp. 308-14.
6 For verses of didactic poetry on the tongue see, for example, Ibn Munqidh, Manners, pp. 274-8; A., Qabbiš, A Dictionary of Wisdom Sayings and Proverbs in Arabic Poetry (Damascus: Dâr al-'Urûba, 1979), pp. 292-5, 446-9.
7 al-Maydāni, 2:344. For the theme, cf. the verse: "A man's tongue is his half and his heart is his other half/so nothing remains except the form of blood and flesh (لساناً كانا نصف ونصف فزاده فلم يبقى إلا صورة الندم والدم)" which is said either by al-Buhturi (d. 284/897) (Abû 'Ubayd, p. 55 n. 6) or by the pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr b. Abî Sulmâ (Qabbiš, Poetry, p. 294).