“The words of Agur the son of Jakeh of Massa,” if wise words, present a number of severe problems for the translator and interpreter. The penultimate verse of his collection of aphorisms (30:32) constitutes one such and it runs as follows:

The sentence appears to consist of a conditional clause, with a second protasis in apposition to the first, and a single apodosis. The whole is extremely laconic and its three parts ambiguous, each for somewhat different reasons. These will first be reviewed.

I. The Root נבל

The verb נבל (II) is rare in the Qal, though it is well attested in the Piel where it has a declarative sense, e.g., ‘to treat with contumely’ (BDB, cf. Gesenius, 16 and 18);2 ‘als nichtig erklären,’ ‘für nichtig halten’ (HALOT, נבל II). The difference in emphasis between these renderings depends to some extent on the view taken as to the meaning of the cognate noun נבל which is also common and plays a special part in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible. Here, under the influence of the ancient Versions,3

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1 Wilhelm Frankenburg (Die Sprüche [HKAT 2/3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1898], 165) e.g., regards the words as ‘unverständlich’ and, apart from the last phrase, leaves the verse untranslated.


3 See Gillis Gerleman, “Der Nicht-Mensch. Erwägungen zur hebräischen Wurzel NBL,” VT 24 (1974): 147–58 (145); the LXX generally uses the following terms: ἄφρων ‘foolish,’ μωρός ‘stupid’ and, less frequently, ἀπαιδευτός ‘ignorant,’ ἀσυνετός ‘stupid’; cf. the Peshitta with the equivalent terms מטיח and יPHPExcel, the Vulgate with stultus and insipiens and the Targum with ר 아니 construct of, ‘wicked,’ ‘vile’ are also attested, on which see below.
the traditional rendering of the term is ‘fool,’ ‘Tor,’ ‘törich’ specifically in an intellectual and ethical sense. An important article by G. Gerleman, however, has demonstrated that these traditional renderings are not adequate because they do not fit a number of instances where the noun נבל occurs. Examples include 2 Sam 3:33, where David’s protest following the assassination of Abner is founded upon his view that Abner should not have died the death of a נבל, i.e., a criminal “bound hand and foot.” Abner, then, did not die as a ‘fool.’ Another is Isa 32:5–8, where the virtues of the נדיב ‘the generous’ are contrasted with the vices of the נבל. Here the antithesis is not between the generous, noble נדיב and the understood as a foolish man; rather it is between the generous, warm, liberal נדיב and the nihilistic, amoral, mean, and heartless נבל. To Gerleman such an estimate of the true sense of the noun נבל suggests an etymological explanation offered by reference to the bi-radical root בלא ‘negation,’ prefixed by an augmental nun. It is difficult to suggest a single English word which captures the ‘taste’ of נבל with its notions of self-centred cynicism and heartless selfishness and so, for the moment and for convenience, the simple expression ‘mean’ will suffice. If the נבל is mean and heartless, then he is very much more discreditable than the fool, and the traditional translations which use these terms must be discounted. In that early they became established, rests, perhaps, on the tendency for the Wisdom tradition to put words denoting various aspects of wicked and undesirable behaviour into the straight-jacket of that tradition, whereby the abiding and ultimate antithesis is between the wise and the foolish. If the qal perfect form נבלת is unlikely to mean “If thou hast done foolishly...” (so, e.g., RV, RSV), it would seem rather to denote “If thou hast behaved meanly...” or, if stative, “If you are mean...”; cf. the NEB’s “If you are churlish...”.

The second word באתרנשא, a hithpa’el infinitive of the very familiar root נשא ‘to lift up, carry, etc.,’ prefixed by the preposition ב, follows closely the finite verb. The meaning of the expression is ‘rising,’ ‘(self-) exaltation.’ In Num 23:24 it describes the aggressive stance taken by a lion which will

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4 Cf. the similar (and earlier) suggestion of Theodor Nöldeke, Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1910), 94–95; for further comments see below.

5 See my assessment of the word ליץ (“Light on ליץ,” in On Stone and Scroll: G. I. Davies Festschrift [ed. Brian Mastin and James K. Aitken; BZAW; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011], 479–492), for another example of a word which has suffered this fate.