

Jordan's Proverbs
as a Window
into Arab Popular
Culture

Jordan's Proverbs as a Window into Arab Popular Culture:

The Fox in the Blackberries

By

Mohammed Farghal

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This work is dedicated to my hometown Souf, where
I grew up with and admired these proverbs.

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FOREWORD

BY MOHAMMED FARGHAL

De Saussure (1916/1983) views languages as systems of *signs*, which establish their own meaning through relationships with each other. The overall meaning of a sign is primarily determined by its function within the language system, as well as by its relationship with other signs inside or outside the system. Having a unitary meaning, proverbs, just like lexemes, semiotically function as signs connecting the *signifier* to the *signified*, a relationship mediated by the *interpretant*, which enables us to make sense of the sign. One should note that while the signifier and the signified enjoy a considerable degree of constancy within a semiotic system, the interpretant may change over time. For example, the interpretant of the Arabic proverb “If water is present, making ablutions with earth is nullified”, which started as a religious rule, now enjoys a wide metaphorical application and is only infrequently employed in its original, doctrinal sense. Thus, for example, when “an expert” is around, it does not make sense to seek help from “a novice”.

The Arabic proverb that best unravels the philosophy of proverbial wisdom is “For every situation, there is a saying”, which roughly corresponds to the English proverb “Circumstances alter cases”. Therefore, it is wise to have two or more contradictory proverbs, simply because they are required by different situations. In this way, the Jordanian and English proverbs “Too many cooks spoil the dish” [Too many cooks spoil the broth] and “God’s hand is with the group” [Many hands make light work] are wisely invoked to cater for our communicative purposes in the course of day-to-day interaction.

In terms of language production and meaning-making in communication, proverbs, like idiomatic expressions, are a paradigm example of multi-word units. They are readily recognized as having unitary meaning whose production follows the *idiom principle* rather than the *open principle* (where meaning is made compositionally through the stringing of individual lexemes) (Sinclair 1991). However, proverbs function differently from idiomatic expressions. While proverbs mainly perform a social function involving the transmission of human wisdom and

experience from one generation to another, idiomatic expressions largely function as a culturally-informed linguistic resource for the expression of meaning. Compare, for example, the idiomatic expressions “to make mud wetter” and “to add insult to injury” with the proverbs “Blood does not become water” and “Blood is thicker than water”. Whereas the former, in both Arabic and English, express linguistic meaning emotively by lexicalizing it in terms of the relevant culture, the latter effectively transmit an element of human wisdom and experience.

In the introduction to his collection of English proverbs, Simpson (1982) talks about three types of proverbs: truthful proverbs expressing general truths, observational proverbs offering generalizations about everyday human experience, and traditional wisdom and folklore proverbs conveying maxims in various areas. In terms of interpretation, he states that proverbs can be understood either literally or metaphorically. However, Norrick (1985) rightly argues that proverbs have lost their literal meanings in favor of a wide metaphorical application, which involves a standard interpretation assigned by the proverb’s speech community (Ntshinga 1999). For example, while the metaphoricality of the English proverb “Forbidden fruit is the sweetest” is quite obvious in the metaphorical lexicalization of the proverb, the literal lexicalization of the Arabic proverb “What is forbidden is desired” still achieves a comparable metaphorical application. In this way, the literalness of some proverbs innately possesses a unitary metaphorical capability just like their clearly metaphoricized counterparts, that is, the interpretation of the apparently literal proverb cannot be based on the sum of the meanings of its individual words.

In terms of productivity, proverbs, which usually have an extremely fixed form, may be used as input for the creation of proverbial expressions (Norrick 1985) or what Farghal and Al-Hamly (2005) call “remodeling”, whose legitimacy derives from their parent proverbs. For example, the English remodelings “A smile a day keeps misery away” (twitter) and “A laugh a day keeps the doctor away” (*Daily Strength*/Cyndi Sarnoff-Ross, Oct. 21, 2011) derive their communicative power from the parent proverb “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” by shocking the receiver’s expectations about how something is said for a communicative purpose (Grice 1975). Hence, such remodelings achieve their acceptability intertextually by referring, albeit differently, to the theme of an existing proverb. Likewise, the Arabic remodeled newspaper commentary titles “All the roads in Iran lead to ... Qum” (*Al-Watan*/Kuwait, 2005) and “If

you are not decent ...” (Al-Watan, 2005) derive their communicative power from the Arabic proverbs “All roads lead to Rome” and “If you are not decent enough, do what you please”, respectively. Without the reader's being aware of the parent expressions, these newspaper commentary titles would make little sense, if any at all.

Within the sphere of social life, proverbs are considered the mirror through which different cultures can be viewed and judged; they represent the cumulative wisdom of a nation (Simpson 1982; Norrick 1985; Mieder, 1992, 1985; Honeck 1997; Mollanar 2001). Proverbs have both a literary value that contributes to the aesthetics of discourse as well as a practical value which touches directly on people's day-to-day undertakings and which helps them conduct their affairs more smoothly and effectively (Honeck 1997; Moosavi 2000; Mieder 2004).

The lexicalization of proverbs across languages seems to have both an intercultural and an intracultural parameter. On the one hand, the similar lexicalization of proverbs like “Like birds run into each other” and “Birds of a feather flock together” in Arabic and English, among many other languages, points to an intercultural aspect of proverbs whereby the same proverb may be traced to a common origin. For example, the historical fact that Rome (the capital of the ancient Roman Empire) was once considered the centre of the globe, where all roads led, accounts for the presence of the proverb in most European languages, and even in some languages as remote from each other as English and Arabic. However, this originally literal expression has become an established proverb enjoying a broad metaphorical interpretation in many languages.

On the other hand, the fact that languages also possess culture-bound features and images gives special significance to the intracultural parameter, when thematizing and lexicalizing proverbs. Apart from proverbs that have gained some universal status, proverbs may inherently acquire some culture-bound features, e.g. “Two thirds of a boy are his maternal uncle's” and “Every Jack must have a Jill”, reflect two different cultures. Alternatively, they may differently lexicalize universal themes, e.g. “One group's miseries are another group's benefits” and “One man's meat is another man's poison” transmit the same motif but by employing different metaphorical images.

Thematically, the corpus has been classified into eight major categories representing areas that Jordanian proverbs invest and cover: animals and

birds, religion, food and drink, weather, kinship and marriage, generosity and money, death and madness, and finally a miscellaneous category. One should note these categories sometimes overlap by employing lexemes from two areas. An attempt is made, however, to base the categorization on the key lexical item in the proverb. For example, the proverb “Catch a camel and levy its tariff” is listed as an animal proverb because of the mention of ‘camel’, which is a key animal in Jordanian, and Arab culture in general, rather than a money proverb based on ‘tariff’, because the metaphorical role played by the lexeme ‘camel’ surpasses that played by the lexeme ‘tariff’.

By the same token, the proverb “God breaks a camel’s leg to feed a fox” is classified as a religious rather than animal proverb because the key lexeme here is ‘God’ rather than the lexemes ‘camel’ and ‘fox’. The decision to present the proverbs thematically rather than alphabetically aims to help the reader follow the material more easily and coherently. In addition, where there is a story behind a proverb, we narrate it within the entry in order to deepen the understanding of the proverb and track it down to its claimed origin. An appendix containing a list of all the Jordanian proverbs as they occur in the book, with page reference, is added.

Sometimes, the same or related motif is expressed in more than one proverb. In such cases, for the sake of economy, the other proverb(s) that duplicate the head proverb in the entry is/are given within the same entry in bold type. For example, the literal proverb “He who interferes in what does not concern him receives what displeases him” advises us to stay away from trouble by not interfering in affairs that do not concern us. Similarly, the metaphorical proverbs “Stay away from evil and sing to it”, “Close the door which wind comes through and rest unalarmed” and “Don’t sleep between graves and have disturbing dreams” all dwell on the same theme. Hence, they are given within the same entry.

In terms of translation, proverbs may readily travel between cultures thematically (the present volume is a good example). Yet, it is really a matter of good luck for a proverb to lend itself to a prosodic/proverbial formulation in the target language. Examples from this book may include “He who does not have need not have”, “Better be a bachelor for life than a widower for one month”, “Summer cold is sharper than a sword”, “Like knight like horse”, and “Troubled is the husband of two”. However, examples which are doomed in terms of prosody or proverbiality are many. By way of illustration, the periphrastic English translation “Turn the

jar on its mouth; the girl takes after her mother” corresponds to the rhyming and alliterative *'iglib iljarra 'a thumha / btiTli' ilbint lamha* [Turn the jar on its mouth/ takes the girl after her mother], thus largely losing its prosodic features. Similarly, the periphrastic “Heaven without people is not the place to stay” corresponds to the rhyming and alliterative *iljannah biduun naas / maab tindaas* [Heaven without people / not trodden].

To conclude, this volume of Jordanian proverbs in English translation is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it merely represents a window into Arab popular culture through a Jordanian lens. The bulk of the corpus is derived from an interactive post requesting Jordanian popular proverbs which I had placed on Facebook, on 31 August 2018. The post generated a far-reaching interest from respondents with various educational backgrounds, which grants the corpus psychological plausibility in terms of Jordanian culture. Some of the proverbs included in this book, the reader should note, are also familiar in the Fertile Crescent and the Arab Gulf (and may even go farther than that, in the Arab World). By way of illustration, the popular proverbs “Like knight like horse” and “He who does not know the falcon will grill it” are as familiar in Syria and Kuwait, for instance, as they are in Jordan. However, many proverbs specifically bear token to Jordanian culture as an Arab subculture. For example, proverbs like “Like Um Qays’s falcon”, “Many a watermelon has the camel broken”, and “He who fears the hyena runs into it” speak for Jordanian culture rather than other Arab cultures. In translating the proverbs in this volume, I have taken utmost care to transfer Jordanian culture alongside the thematic material. My discussion and contextualization of proverbs aims to supplement the boldface translation and drive the proverb’s motif home, mostly in dialogic discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

BY BRUCE MERRY

A book of Arabic proverbs is introduced by the phrase “To understand a people, acquaint yourself with their proverbs”. Many of the proverbs in the following Jordanian anthology have the power to teach us to by-pass people’s perennial mistakes. Such is the case with the best-known proverbs in English. Repeating “A miss is as good as a mile” would avoid the familiar scene on the green, at many professional golf championships. The player makes his putt. He misses the hole by an inch, or by choosing a curved line. He then sinks to his knees, or lowers his head, or gnashes his teeth, or throws up his golf club (sometimes he chucks it into a near-by lake). The golfer generally acts as if a pathological accident has occurred. He should reflect on the proverb. His miss was the same as a mile.

“A fool and his money are easily parted” is a proverb that should stop the victims of scams and pyramid schemes from complaining on TV that a formidable misfortune has occurred. The Kuwait newspapers carry stories, every week, about citizens who give their money to someone else to invest for them. They complain when he disappears and “switches off his mobile”. The loser does not admit that he was a fool.

“Don’t bite the hand that feeds you” is a proverb with a modern ring to it. Some peacekeepers in Africa would still be alive if their beneficiaries observed its force.

Many luminaries in show business act younger than their age (Elton John, Madonna, Cher, Bono). They should ponder the proverb: “Mutton dressed as lamb”. Thousands of artists and writers aspire to make something original. They should recall the proverb “There is nothing new under the sun”.

Proverbs work as a teaching tool for adults as well as kids: “Pride goes before a fall”, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick”. Proverbs use a paradox to make an opinion more forceful: “Wishes can’t fill a sack”, “Mud thrown is ground lost”, or “Those who spare the rod hate their

children”. Hate? Yes, because wisdom lies in reversing the concept of love, in this context.

English people say “A word to the wise”, in order to make their advice seem more courteous. What they really mean is “A word *from* the wise”, as in “The words of the wise: incline your head and hear my words” (*Proverbs*, 22, 17). In Oman it is said: “If the speaker is mad, the hearer should be wise”. From Syria comes: “One single word only is sufficient for the wise”.

Consider the force of the antithesis and alliteration in “Neither a lender nor a borrower be”. This proverb contains ten thousand years of wisdom. Most people, at some stage in their life, invite trouble by messing with the deadly nouns in that saying. Mapletoft (1707) declares: “Proverbs bear age, and he who would do well may view himself in them as in a Looking-glass”.

Every human being in the world has seen ants. Not all of us welcome the figure of speech in a formidable adage: “Go to the ant, you lazybones, consider its ways”.

In these days of refugees crossing desert or sea, it is prudent to observe the force of the proverb “If you effect a rescue, you will only have to do it again”. Books of etiquette advise us not to eat greedily at an important banquet. One proverb puts this wisdom in an easily consumed capsule: “Put a knife to your throat if you have a big appetite”. Another says: “His name is renowned, but his stomach is hungry”.

Many proverbs from the kingdom of Jordan refer to items or animals that are familiar in that particular ethnic landscape: donkey, olive, fig, kebab, oak nuts. A country like England, with its preposterous affection for the dog, recycles countless proverbs about this animal: “A dog is man’s best friend”, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”, “Every dog has its day”, “Give a dog a bad name”, “A dog’s life”, “Be the top dog”, “Throw something to the dogs”, “A dog in a manger”, “Dog that chases its own tail”, “A dog that returns to its own vomit”.

The Arab world also has an extensive proverb literature round dogs: “A dog that barks does not bite”, “The dog’s tail remains crooked even it is put in fifty moulds”, “The dog does not bark in his own house”, “The clouds are not hurt by the baying of dogs”.

Proverbs make full use of the negative. They adopt the exemplary formula "This is A, not B". Thus we meet "All work and no play makes Jack a dull lad", "Jack Sprat could eat no fat; his wife could eat no lean", "A watched pot never boils", "One swallow doesn't make summer", "A man cannot serve two masters". These latter proverbs are gnomic. They broadcast their wisdom, rather than turning up as a remark in dialogue, which is what happens throughout the Jordanian collection that follows.

What is attractive about this Jordanian anthology is that all the items show people in the street, at a market, nattering with their neighbours or, in the proverbial phrase, *just passing the time of day*.

Vivid description, or hypotyposis, is a key figure of rhetoric. The proverb also uses this device: "Casting pearls before swine", "Scared of his own shadow", "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread". Indeed, we may say that fools get a bad deal from proverbs: "Like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of a fool".

Basically, a proverb is a short, pithy opinion about the world. It is sanctified by tradition or collective usage. Aristotle declared that proverbs are the truest relic of old philosophy. Erasmus published collections of *Adagia* (Sayings) from 1500. He defined proverbs as "cut like precious stones in a language that the common people shares with the highly literate". An entire book of the Bible, namely *The Proverbs*, comprises the didactic and talismanic sayings of King Solomon.

In most cultures, the proverb is in common plebeian use. It is known by the working class, as much as by the intellectual élite. The proverb uses rhetorical forms which are also associated with slogans (war cries), advertising, and newspaper headlines. It is often metaphorical or alliterative in form. Many proverbs are based on a strong antithesis, as in "Set a Knave on horseback and you shall see him shoulder a Knight" (England, year 1586). The Old Testament proverbs draw on the ancient farming wisdom of Palestine: (1) "Drink water from your own cistern", (2) "Do not eat the bread of the stingy", (3) "Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit".

The proverb frequently consists of two lines of rhyming verse, as in "Red sky at night / Shepherd's delight" (Wales, 1952), or "Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, / Der bleibt ein Narr sein Lebelang" (Germany, 1775: The man who doesn't love wine, woman and song, remains a fool his

whole life long). Note also: “No bees, no honey. / No work, no money”, or “Early to bed and early to rise / Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise”, or “Scherza coi fanti / E lascia stare i santi” (Italy, sung towards the opening of G. Puccini’s opera *Tosca*: Crack jokes with foot soldiers; / Leave the saints alone).

This is said by *all* conservative Italians when anyone blasphemes, or mocks religion. It is no use reminding those who quote this couplet that it would be easier to say “Don’t mix the sacred and profane”. They always revert to the sung form, which pre-dates Puccini. This reminds us of the venerable age of proverbs. Nobody seems to *invent* them; they have been there for ages, as in “It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good”. They constitute a literature without a known author. They are “The wit of one and the wisdom of many” (John Russell, 19th cent.).

Aesop’s *Fables* (c. 535 B.C.) contain hundreds of proverbial sayings drawn from the observation of animals. It is impossible to determine whether Aesop (an emancipated slave) hit upon these moral explanations of life by himself. It is likely that he adopted them from within the deep mists and fog of popular culture. Examples: (1) “Let sleeping dogs lie”, (2) “Revenge is a two-edged sword” (the burning tail of a fox, lit by a farmer, sets fire to his whole field of corn), (3) “Don’t let a man bridle your head” (if you are a horse). Recently (October, 2018), an American politician declared that appointing a Russian chief of Interpol would be “Putting a fox in a henhouse”.

Farghal, in the following study, emphasizes the ubiquity of metaphor, in proverbs from Jordan. Metaphor, often misinterpreted as an artifice, is the oldest and most natural of all language mannerisms. Here are three newspaper headlines which refer to football. They could not function without the metaphor: (1) “City *hits* head of table”, (2) “Real Madrid *snaps* losing streak”, (3) “Manager *slams* unfair referee”. A Kuwait newspaper headline about ten-pin bowling reads: “Haribon Slazers Wreck Asian Air Safari with no Harsh Effect” (*Arab Times*, June 23, 2018, p. 31). This 10-word sentence is, in reality, *all* metaphor.

Advertising is awash with metaphor: (1) “Kentucky Fried Chicken is *finger-lickin’* good”, (2) “Prices *start from* KD 2,999”, (3) “This is *totally Dodge*”. In Jordanian proverbs, as Farghal observes, metaphor is allied with contrast (the classical figure of speech represented by antithesis) and sheer ease of memory (euphony).

Jordanians, as this book shows, enjoy repeating their sayings. Their listeners love *ready-made knowledge*. Their proverbs are wisecracks, adages, or allegory (i.e. saying the *other*). They combine their metaphors with assonance, word association, and euphony.

In short, they display an armoury of classical tropes. An English theologian Trench (1877) writes: "Those are called 'Proverbs' in St. John, which, if not strictly parables, yet claim much closer affinity than to the proverb, being in fact allegories". Thus, proverbs make us see things in terms of contrast, rather than similarity: (1) "Once the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box" (Italian), (2) "When wert thou changed into a queen, O pawn?" (Egypt), (3) "The wise person has long ears and a short tongue" (German) (4) "Marrying is easy; it's housework that's hard", (5) "The calmest husbands make the stormiest wives".

Pieter Brueghel's famous painting "Netherlandic Proverbs" (1559) is cited by W. Mieder. Over forty studies of this painting have shown how it depicts more than a hundred Dutch or European adages. One detail in the bottom left corner of this picture, for example, shows fifteen examples, which include "To bell the cat", "Be as patient as a lamb", and "To bang one's head against the wall".

Many such proverbs exult in their brevity. Classical Latin was proud of brevity as a trope in its own right: "Ex parvis magna" (From small beginnings come great results), "Consuetudo facit usum" (Habit creates usage), "Natura non facit saltus" (Nature does not make jumps), "De minimis non curat lex" (The law does not care about tiny issues). Latin has perhaps the shortest proverb of all, "Ludere, non laedere" (Joke but don't wound). Here, the assonance (*l...ere; l...ere*) and brevity say something about the actual way in which proverbs are constructed, i.e. as cushioned jokes: "Children suck the mother when they are young and the father when they are old", or "The parents drink, the children toast".

The proverb is close to allegory, because it is the *other*, an alternative way, to express the highway of real life. Macaulay writes: "His ancestors, though originally English, were among those early colonists who were proverbially said to have become more Irish than Irishmen". An analogous proverb says "A cruel king out-Herods Herod". Italians mock outsiders with: "Inglese italianizzato / il diavolo incarnato" (An Italianized Brit is a devilish twit).

Nearly all the Jordanian proverbs in Farghal's study retain an alluring aspect of wit and vivacity. They bear repeating. Indeed they *must* be repeated, in order to preserve an ethnic treasure trove. L. Permyakov once proposed a model for proverbs, paring down corpora (collections of examples) to four structuralist ingredients: "If there is an A, there is a B; if A has the quality *x*, it has the quality *y*. If B depends on A and if A has the quality *x*, B will have the quality *x*. If A has a positive quality and B doesn't have it, then A is better than B".

A Spanish proverb says: "Two pieces of advice you should never give to a man: when to go to war or take a wife". Here A will remain better off than B, unless B adopts the quality *x*, of A, i.e. his sage counsel. This model can be apprehended throughout Farghal's corpus. Many of the Jordanian proverbs refer to the area of business (merchandise, capital, loans, investment, borrowing) and of etiquette (family, obedience, eating).

Etiquette, indeed, is an area populated by proverbs, maxims and pithy sayings: (1) "A joke should alight like a butterfly, not sting like a wasp", (2) "Pay the worker before the sweat is dry on his brow.", (3) "Three things you should never mention: your noble blood, your wealth, or the honour of your wife".

Feminists can certainly groan at the element of misogyny in this tradition: W. Mieder has a long list under the heading **woman**: Most of these are unflattering: "A woman and a cherry are painted for their own harm", "A woman's hair is long, her tongue is longer", "A woman is known by her walking and drinking", and "Never run after a woman or a streetcar: there'll be another along in a few minutes". More provocative, perhaps, are the American counter-proverbs. They end up damning women with faint praise: "One hair of a woman draws more than a team of horses" or "As great a pity to see a woman weep as to see a goose go barefoot" (from Ontario). Farghal discusses certain proverbs which appear to restrict the space of women. But he shows that Jordanian women dictate the lives of their men, by a sort of remote control.

Obviously, some commentators see proverbs as trite. Gatty (1858) writes: "A genuine proverb-monger – he who chills off your enthusiasm by a tame truism". The English novelist Jane Austen considered proverbs "gross and illiberal". James Rogers admits that many phrases collected as clichés may seem like proverbs. Joanna Wilson, editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* commences the introduction to her revision of this famed

collection with a warning. "Wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them" (itself a proverb).

Proverbs, being vigorous types of popular wisdom, are free of catchphrases. The buzzword (see Rees, 1994, p. 15) is a phrase that catches on, like "Be prepared", or "Who dares, wins", or "Better dead than red".

An early French linguist C. Oudin (1640) classifies well-known proverbs into categories: familiar, vulgar, low or trivial. Marc Soriano observes how they arise as a slogan in times of political crisis: "Métro, boulot, dodo" (Paris, Nanterre, 1968: Commute, work, sleep) or "God speaks a foreign language" (Ovamboland), or "Property is theft" (P-J. Proudhon, 1840).

Slogans use wit, or a pun, to promote a product, a cause or an idea, e.g. "Save water: bath with a friend", or "I like Ike". Rees comments (1984: 167) that a slogan uses less than seven words. Examples of successful slogans are "Put a tiger in your tank", "Good to the last drop", "Black is beautiful", "Careless talk costs lives". Here we are back in the catchment area of proverbs, like "The early bird catches the worm", or "Do as you would be done by", or "Once bitten, twice shy". The latter has a distant parallel from Oman in "He who has been once bitten by a snake is afraid of even a rope".

Proverbs contain a kind of built-in modifier, i.e. the clause "Our elders say..." or "Our forefathers used to say". Farghal puts this ingredient under the microscope, in several of his examples. It constellates Jordanian men's dialogue. One of the interlocutors often adds "as they say", or "as the proverb says".

N. Rees (2006) shows how certain words become *clichés*. J. Lannon (2004) castigates all old phrases as trite: "If it sounds like a 'catchy phrase' you've heard before, don't use it".

Proverbs, on the contrary, convey an air of austere gravity, like an old tree in a sanctuary: (1) "For dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return" (*Genesis*, 3:19), (2) "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety" (Shakespeare), (3) "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" (Shakespeare), (4) "Oignez vilain, il vous poindra; poignez vilain, il vous oindra" (medieval French: Caress the villain, and he'll stab you; stab the villain and he'll caress you).

Proverbs carry a sharper punch than buzzwords. You think back to check you have caught the full meaning: (1) “Blue eyes say ‘Love me or I die’; black eyes say ‘Love me or I kill you’”, (2) “No tener por donde caerse muerto” (Spanish: Have a rag big enough to live and die on), (3) “Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes, / So are the lazy to their employers”. They develop diachronically into more complex forms. Thus “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” may have evolved from a more primitive “An eye for a tooth”.

“Don’t blow your own trumpet” declares a fine English proverb. The Latin phrase is concise like a gem: “Nemo sit iudex in causa sua” (Let nobody be the judge of his own case). Oxymoron can generate a proverb, as in Latin “Festina lente” (Hasten slowly). Sometimes a joke is produced by deforming a proverb. The chauvinist magazine *Playboy* (1977) has: “When wine, women, and song become too much for you, give up singing”. Who will not laugh at the Jordanian saying “Two watermelons cannot be carried in one hand”? Farghal says, wittily, that this is “based on a valid observation”.

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CHAPTER ONE

ANIMAL AND BIRD PROVERBS

He who wants to be a camel owner must enlarge his gate: This proverb offers advice to people who want to become public personalities by metaphorically comparing them to a person who wants to become a camel owner, which necessitates enlarging their gate in order to allow camels to enter the house. The same applies to those who want to be public figures, which necessitates their willingness to receive and host supporters in their homes. For example, someone running for member of parliament may complain to his friend that he has to spend a lot of money and time on receiving and hosting his supporters. His friend may respond, “**He who wants to be a camel owner must enlarge his gate!**” to indicate that this is the surcharge he has to pay for undertaking such an enterprise.

Catch a camel and levy its tariff: This metaphorical proverb historically refers to the Arabs’ use of camels to smuggle goods. Levy, therefore, can be imposed only when a camel is caught smuggling. Jordanians now use this proverb (often flippantly) to indicate that a wrong act may receive a penalty only if the person is caught red-handed. For example, Ahmed may complain that Ali always wins when they play cards because he cheats, to which Sami (another player) may respond, “I have the same feeling, but, as the proverb says, **Catch a camel and levy its tariff**”, to indicate that this is of no use unless they catch him cheating.

Like a camel’s ploughing: The camel in Jordanian culture is well known for its clumsiness in ploughing – the furrow made in going one direction the camel will usually flatten when coming back in the opposite direction, due to its flat, large feet. The proverb metaphorically compares a camel’s ploughing with a person doing a task. No sooner he finishes a part of it than he is back to square one. For example, Professor Merry may ask “Professor Farghal, can you believe that our colleague Professor Awad has been working on a paper for more than a year now?” which may induce Professor Farghal to respond, “He will never finish it! His work is **like a camel’s ploughing** – what he does today, he’ll spoil tomorrow”.



LIKE A CAMEL'S PLOUGHING

Eat like a camel and finish before other men: This traditional proverb prescribes an eating habit when invited to banquets, by advising a person to eat like a camel (that is, to consume a sufficient amount of food fast) and finish before other invitees, in order to give the impression that you are self-sufficient and not greedy. In this way, as the proverb puts it, you will hit two birds with one stone. For example, someone may tell his friend that he does not like people who take a long time to eat when

invited to a meal, which may induce his friend to say “I’m with you here. As the proverb says, **eat like a camel and finish before other men**”.

Many a watermelon has the camel broken! This exclamatory proverb is used to emphasize that the act the speaker is referring to is only one of a multitude, so it makes no difference to him. Thus, the referent’s large number of previous deeds is compared to the large number of watermelons that a camel (which is well known for clumsiness) breaks when it is used for ploughing. For example, Ali has lent Abu Mohammed money several times but he never paid him back. Ahmed may urge Ali to go to Abu Mohammed and make him pay the money back, to which Ali may respond, “It really does not matter to me. **Many a watermelon has the camel broken!**” to indicate that he has lent money to many people like Abu Mohammed and that he does not care.

Like knight like horse: According to this proverb, it is the knight (the agent) rather than the horse (the tool) that makes a real difference in performing an act. It may be used literally but it usually applies metaphorically in both a positive and negative sense. In the positive sense, someone may tell another how impressive Ahmed’s performance was among other businesspeople, despite the fact that he started with humble capital, to which the latter may respond, “Great performance! **Like knight like horse**, my brother”. In the negative sense, someone may tell another that he lost his tennis game the day before because his racket had not been good enough, to which the latter may respond, “Don’t blame your racket, my friend! **Like knight like horse**, as they say”.

One stroke on the hoof, another on the nail: This proverb metaphorically refers to the act of shoeing a horse to express the moral of ‘moderation’. According to this proverb, therefore, one should be moderate when undertaking various kinds of daily activity. In the bringing up of children, for instance, parents should not be too strict with their children in order for things not to fire back. For example, Abu Mohammed may tell his friend that he has forbidden his teenage boy to go out after school because of his poor achievement. This may induce Abu Mohammed’s friend to say “This is wrong! You don’t correct a mistake by a mistake. As they say, **one stroke on the hoof, another on the nail**, my dear friend”. The moderation moral is expressed in several other Jordanian proverbs, including “**Either you shoot him or you break his brain (neck)!**”, “**Too much tightening loosens**”, and “**If the person you love is honey, don’t lick him all**”. The English proverbs “All things in

moderation and moderation in all things” and “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” dwell on similar ideas.

A person’s tongue is his horse: This proverb metaphorically advises a person to control his tongue the way another person controls his horse. If a person manages his tongue properly by talking when it is appropriate and restraining it when it is not, he can save face and maintain integrity. If his tongue betrays him, by contrast, he will lose both face and integrity. For example, Ahmed may tell his friend that he shouted at his son’s school principal last week and will be officially questioned about it. His friend may respond, “You shouldn’t have done that! As they say, “**A person’s tongue is his horse**”. In Classical Arabic, we have the proverb “**If speech is silver, then silence is golden**”, which parallels the English proverb “Speech is silver, silence is golden”.

With the horses you go, o blond: This proverb metaphorically describes a person who is led by others without him questioning what they are up to out of naivety. In the proverb, ‘the blond’ is a horse named after its color and is ready to join in whatever the other horses are doing. Jordanians usually utter this proverb in contexts where the person referred to readily imitates other people’s behaviour without giving it serious thought. For example, Ahmed may tell his friend that Ali has joined the sit-down strike against the manager, despite the fact that he is one of his fans. Ahmed’s friend may respond, “I’m not surprised! He’s a yes man. ‘**With the horses you go, o blond**’ is the best description of him”. Another Jordanian proverb that delivers the same message is “**By them he stands; against them he also stands**”.

Two stallions should not share the same manger: Based on the nature of animal behaviour, this proverb tells us that two people should not share the same position/power the way two stallions should not share the same manger. When such a thing happens, the outcome will be rivalry and chaos that may lead to spoiling or destroying the state of affairs in question. For example, a teacher is critical of how his school is run because both the principal and his assistant are power-hungry. He may tell his colleague, “There’s nothing going well at our school. **Two stallions should not share the same manger**. Either the principal or his assistant, but not both!”

Tie the donkey where its owner pleases: Across many situations, this proverb offers metaphorical advice to do what the employer or the person