The Truth Shall Make You Free

John F. Kennedy's Reliance on Proverbial Wisdom from the Bible

Wolfgang MIEDER
University of Vermont (USA)
Wolfgang.Mieder@uvm.edu || https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4002-5304

Received: 3/5/2023 || Accepted: 30/5/2023

Abstract: Having experienced a traditional Catholic upbringing, President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) was well versed both in the Old and New Testaments. His keen mind recalled Biblical passages to such a degree that he included them with impressive frequency in his oral and written messages. He was especially familiar with the proverbial wisdom of the Bible and quite eager to cite these wisdom sayings in his multifaceted messages on the national and international scene. The Bible proverbs provided considerable authority and didacticism to his rhetoric, and there is no doubt that this Biblical language also added a certain prophetic element to his arguments and explanations. Even though he was an intellectual with a Harvard University education, he relied on Bible and folk proverbs to communicate effectively with the American population as well as with people he dealt with on his travels abroad. As a most capable wordsmith, he was well aware of the metaphorical expressiveness of these proverbs that helped him to explain his hopeful vision of a more peaceful and humane future not just for the United States but for humankind throughout the world.
Keywords: Paremiology. Proverb. Politics. Bible. John F. Kennedy.

Título: «*La verdad os hará libres*: La confianza de John F. Kennedy en la sabiduría proverbial de la Biblia».
Resumen: El presidente John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), que había recibido una educación católica tradicional, conocía bien tanto el Antiguo como el Nuevo Testamento. Debido a su agilidad mental recordaba pasajes bíblicos hasta tal punto que los incluía con una frecuencia notable en sus mensajes orales y escritos. Estaba especialmente familiarizado con la sabiduría proverbial de la Biblia y era muy dado a citar en el ámbito nacional e internacional estos proverbios sapienciales en sus polifacéticos mensajes. Los proverbios bíblicos aportaban considerable autoridad y didactismo a su retórica, y no cabe duda de que este lenguaje bíblico también añadía cierto elemento profético a sus razonamientos y explicaciones. Aunque era una persona intelectual con estudios en la Universidad de Harvard, recurría a los proverbios bíblicos y refranes populares para comunicarse eficazmente con la población estadounidense, así como con las personas con las que se relacionaba en sus viajes fuera de su país. Al ser un orador exquisito, era muy consciente de la expresividad metafórica de estos proverbios, que le ayudaban a explicar su esperanzadora visión de un futuro más pacífico y humano, no solo para Estados Unidos, sino para toda la humanidad.
Palabras clave: Paremiología. Proverbio. Política. Biblia. John F. Kennedy.

Titre : « *The Truth Shall Set You Free* [La vérité vous rendra libres] : La confiance de John F. Kennedy dans la sagesse proverbiale de la Bible ».
Résumé : Le président John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), qui avait reçu une éducation catholique traditionnelle, connaissait bien l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament. Grâce à son agilité mentale, il se souvenait des passages bibliques à tel point qu'il les incluait avec une fréquence remarquable dans ses messages oraux et écrits. Il connaissait particulièrement bien la sagesse proverbiale de la Bible et aimait beaucoup citer ces proverbes de sagesse au niveau à l'échelle nationale et internationale dans ses

messages aux multiples facettes. Les proverbes bibliques ajoutaient une autorité et un didactisme considérables à sa rhétorique et il ne fait aucun doute que ce langage biblique ajoutait également un certain élément prophétique à son raisonnement et à ses explications. Bien qu'il ait été un intellectuel formé à Harvard, il s'est appuyé sur des proverbes bibliques et des dictons populaires pour communiquer efficacement avec le peuple américain, ainsi qu'avec ses interlocuteurs lors de ses voyages à l'étranger. Excellent orateur, il était parfaitement conscient de l'expressivité métaphorique de ces proverbes, qui l'aidaient à expliquer sa vision optimiste d'un avenir plus pacifique et plus humain, non seulement pour les États-Unis, mais aussi pour l'humanité tout entière.
Mots-clés : Parémiologie. Proverbe. Politique. Bible. John F. Kennedy.

When President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) began his memorable inaugural address on a cold January day of 1961 at Washington, D.C. with the pronouncement “Let the word go forth from this time and place” (I, 1; January 20, 1961), his audience might have felt that this uncommon formulation had a somewhat Biblical ring to it (Bartlett, 2012: 785; Shapiro, 2021: 446). Perhaps the new president had the following passage from the Old Testament in mind: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isiah, 55:1). This supposition might not be too far-fetched since his Catholic upbringing had instilled in him “a genuine interest in and working knowledge of the Bible” (Menendez, 1978: 67). As his writings and speeches reveal, he was without doubt “bibelfest”, as the German language refers to being well versed in the Bible, specifically in wisdom sayings of which many have long become proverbs in secular use (Mieder, 1990; Griffin, 1991; Mieder, 2004: 144-146; see also Mieder, Kingsbury and Harder, 1992):

> Kennedy seemed to prefer the Old Testament, especially the Psalms and Proverbs and the passage form the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, which treats of the changing seasons, the ebb and flow of human life. Courage, integrity, destiny, righteousness, and dependence on God are the items that he thought to illuminate in Biblical verse. Tenacity, endurance, and observing one’s commitment appear with frequency in the scriptural allusions pervading his speeches. (Menendez, 1978: 72-73)

This is indeed a befitting summary of Kennedy’s use of well-known Bible verses for his “rhetorical exigence” (Warnick, 1996: 185) with his “epideictic rhetoric” (Bostdorff and Ferris, 2014: 411) being informed by a solid dose of ethos. Considering that Kennedy fought against being considered a Catholic President, his steady reliance on the Bible might at first be surprising, especially also in light of the so-called separation of church and state in the United States. But Kennedy employs these short Biblical passages –or better verses or wisdom sayings– not so much as religious statements but more from the point of view of “linguistic pragmatics” (Wilson, 2015: 30), knowing only too well that the American public in general will react positively to this language in politics. Presidents Lincoln’s and Obama’s rhetoric is quite similar in that respect (Mieder, 2000: 3-10; Mieder, 2009: 20-22). And yet, even though Kennedy knew dozens of Bible verses by heart that he could weave into speeches and writings (Clarke, 2004: 61), very few passages have been cited in the secondary literature dealing with Kennedy’s relationship to religion (for three isolated examples see Bostdorff and Ferris, 2014: 420, 426, and 428).

Even though it might be somewhat surprising that Kennedy on numerous occasions relied on Bible proverbs that contain the words “God” or “Lord” in his campaign speeches in particular, it

must be remembered that, as Barack Obama has observed, "It is a truism that we Americans are a religious people" (Obama, 2006: 198). In certain sections of the country these particular references would certainly have touched a positive nerve. Even though as a Roman Catholic Kennedy would not himself have used the King James translation of Scripture in his religious practices, most of his biblical allusions do seem to be based on that archaic version, perhaps because he realized that the King James Version would sound familiar to the largely-Protestant American audience, and the most "folksy".

As some of the following contextualized passages will show, Kennedy always states his quotations from the Bible in a secular context informed by worldly matters. And he does not hide his Biblical messages by using such introductory formulas as "the Bible tells us", "the Scripture tells us", "the Biblical injunction", and "in the words of the Psalmist." And yet, Kennedy does not preach as such, as can be seen from the way he integrates the Bible proverb "Whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matthew, 19:6) that is part of today's wedding vows to celebrate the relationship of the United States with Canada and Mexico as our immediate neighbors:

> Geography has made us neighbors [Canada and the United States]. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies. Those whom nature hath joined together, let no man put asunder. (I, 383; May 17, 1961)

> Geography has made us neighbors [Mexico and the United States], tradition has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies – in a vast *Alianza para el Progreso*. Those whom nature has joined together, let no man put asunder. (II, 520; June 29, 1962)

The two passages are about a year apart with their almost identical wording being an indication how presidential statements can be recycled for different occasions. Of course, it should also be noticed that Kennedy very shrewdly exchanged "God" with" nature" in this secular application of the Bible verse.

Even though Kennedy retained the word "Lord" in the two proverbs "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it" (Psalms, 127:1) and "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchmen waketh but in vain (Psalms, 127:1) from the same verse, he places their wisdom into a worldly context in these two paragraphs:

> We need the faith with which our first settlers crossed the sea to carve out a state in the wilderness, a mission they said in the Pilgrim's Compact, the Mayflower Compact, undertaken for the glory of God. We need the faith with which our Founding Fathers proudly proclaimed the independence of this country to what seemed at that time an almost hopeless struggle, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence. We need the faith which has sustained and guided this Nation 175 long and short years. We are all builders of the future, and whether we build as public servants or private citizens, whether we build at the national or the local level, whether we build in foreign or domestic affairs, we know the truth of the ancient Psalm, "Except the Lord build the house, they labour [*sic*] in vain that build it." (III, 138-139; February 7, 1963)

> We in this country, in this generation, are – by destiny rather than choice – the watchmen on the walls of world freedom. We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our power and responsibility, that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint, and that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of "peace on earth, good will toward men." That must always be

> our goal, and the righteousness of our cause must always underlie our strength. For as was written long ago: "except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain." (III, 894; November 22, 1963)

The second passage would have been delivered by President Kennedy at the Trade Mart in Dallas, Texas, if he had not been assassinated. What is of special interest is that the New Testament message "Peace on earth, good will toward men" (Luke, 2:14) appears as well, signaling Kennedy's ever-present concern about peace during the time of the Cold War (Bostdorff and Ferris, 2014). A month earlier he employed the Bible phrase "Abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth" (Psalms, 72:7) as a hopeful expression of a lasting peace:

> A year ago it would have been easy to assume that all-out war was inevitable, that any agreement with the Soviets was impossible, and that an unlimited arms race was unavoidable. Today it is equally as easy for some to assume that the cold war is over, that all outstanding issues between the Soviets and ourselves can be quickly and satisfactorily settled, and that we shall now have, in the words of the Psalmist, an "abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth." (III, 796; October 19, 1963)

The injunction "Seek peace, and purse it" from the Book of Psalms (34:14) suits Kennedy perfectly in his mission to maintain peace throughout the world:

> Peace is our primary objective in the Middle East – and peace is partly our responsibility. "Seek peace, and pursue it" commands the psalmist. And that we must do. With open minds, open hearts, and the priceless asset of our American heritage, we shall seek peace in the Middle East, as elsewhere. And when history writes its verdict, let it be said that we pursued the peace with all the courage, all the strength, and all the resourcefulness at our command. (IV, 50; August 26, 1960)

There are also several statements in which Kennedy quotes "Seek peace, and pursue it" only as the truncated admonition "Pursue peace" together with an unusual employment of the proverbial expression "To beat swords into plowshares" (Isaiah, 2:4) from the Old Testament (Mieder, 2014b: 230-258). Normally this phrase is cited in its positive sense, but Kennedy appears not to be ready to give up the sword as a protective device but willing to change more aggressive weaponry into peaceful substitutes:

> In a world of danger and trial, peace is our deepest aspiration, and when peace comes we will gladly convert not our swords into plowshares, but our bombs into peaceful reactors, and our planes into space vessels. "Pursue peace," the Bible tells us, and we shall pursue it with every effort and every energy that we possess. (IV, 134-135; September 6, 1960)

Martin Luther King (1929-1968) also used this proverbial expression from the Bible, but he takes its metaphor into the realm of improving the social structure of the modern world:

> If we will join together we will be able to speed up the coming of the new world – a new world in which men will live together as brothers; a world in which men will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the [upper] classes; a world in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. Then we will be able to sing from the tradition of our nation: "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty of thee I sing, Land where my

> fathers died, Land of the Pilgrims' pride, From every mountain side, Let freedom ring." (Mieder 2010: 500)

While this is a somewhat utopian view of this dangerous world. it is of utmost importance to Kennedy to retain America's strength without any sign of weakness. This leads him to render a negative interpretation of the Bible proverb "A soft answer turneth away wrath" (Proverbs, 15:1) since the Soviet Union cannot be dealt with in gentle terms:

> We send arms to other peoples – just as we send them the ideals of democracy in which we believe – but we cannot send them the will to use those arms or to abide by those ideals. And while we believe not only in the force of arms but in the force of right and reason, we have learned that reason does not always appeal to unreasonable men – that it is not always true that "a soft answer turneth away wrath" – and that right does not always make might. In short, we must face problems which do not lend themselves to easy or quick or permanent solutions. And we must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent [n]or omniscient. (I, 725-726; November 16, 1961)

It should be noted that Kennedy also points out "that right does not always make right", negating the old English proverb "Right makes might" (Mieder, 2019: 263-286) in light of the fact that the humane cause of freedom pursued by the United States does not automatically translate into changing the mind of its Soviet adversary. In order to express that America is on the right side of the struggle with the Soviet Union, Kennedy calls on the Old Testament proverb "Righteousness exalteth a nation" (Proverbs, 14:34):

> And though the task ahead is not easy, it is exciting. For our cause is a sacred cause. Our fight is the fight of God-fearing men against godless communism. Our business is the unfinished business – not of Houston alone, not of Harris County alone, not of America alone. It is the unfinished business of the world. It is the business of making peace. For the making of peace is the noblest work of God-fearing men. It is the righteous way. And righteousness exalteth a nation. (IV, 1016; September 12, 1960)

As an aside it might be mentioned here that the great African American abolitionist and civil rights champion Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) had argued some eighty years earlier in 1877 with "Peace on earth and good will toward men" and "Righteousness exalteth a nation" for a country where the rights of all people would be guaranteed:

> Washington may not only become one of the most beautiful and attractive cities in the world, but one of the grandest agents in the work of spreading peace on earth and good will toward men. In its grandeur and significance, it may be a sign and a bond of the American Union, a pledge of the righteousness that exalts a nation, a place where the best men and the best women from all sections of our widely extended country shall delight to meet and bury their differences, renew their covenants of patriotism, and shake hands, not over a bloody chasm, but over a free, prosperous, happy and progressive *Republic*. (Mieder, 2001: 380-381)

In addition to his search for peace not only between the Soviet Union and the United States but throughout the world, Kennedy also saw himself and the American society as the champion of peace and freedom at home as well as abroad. To express this commitment, he relied repeatedly on the Biblical question "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle?" (1 Corinthians, 14:8). The following four passages show how freely Kennedy makes us

of this leitmotif, usually but not always referring to the Bible and also changing its structure at will:

> The Bible tells us, "Who prepares to battle when the trumpet sounds an uncertain sound?" In the last 3 years, the influence, power, and prestige of America has declined relative to that of our adversaries. I want to see it built up again. (IV, 794; October 28, 1960)

> Prestige is important, but if these people [allies from abroad] upon whom we depend for our security, our support, and ultimately the peace, ever begin to get the idea that we are tired, uncertain, not sure where we are going, without purpose, how can we lead a free alliance? As the Bible says, Who prepares for battle when the trumpet gives an uncertain sound? (IV, 804; October 29, 1960)

> How can we lead an alliance? Who prepares for battle, as the Bible tells us, when the trumpet blows an uncertain sound? We are as strong abroad as we are at home. We are as strong in the fight against communism as we are in Pennsylvania [where Kennedy is speaking]. The hope for freedom in Eastern Europe rests with our strength, our determination, our unwavering determinations [*sic*] to carry this fight for freedom in this country and around the world until ultimately freedom prevails. (IV, 791; October 28, 1960)

> Our hope for freedom, our hope for peace, depends upon our leading a free world coalition, a coalition that is put together voluntarily. How long will they [other countries] listen to the sound of our trumpet if they believe it blows a faltering note, if they believe that we represent the way of the past; that the Communists represent the way of the future? To lead the free world, to defend freedom, to roll back the Communist advance requires a powerful, committed, dedicated and moving America, and that is what we are going to get. (IV, 786; October 28, 1960)

In the fight for freedom, it is paramount that truth prevails in national and international affairs, with Kennedy being quick to cite the well-known Bible proverb "The truth shall make you free" (John, 8:32) as the underpinning of fair and honest social interaction:

> If we are to make the sacrifices and summon the courage that are necessary to meet the challenge of the 1960's, we need to know the truth, the bad news as well as the good. We must hold steadfastly to the Biblical injunction: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth will make ye free." (IV, 1198; October 26, 1960)

Some seventy years earlier, it was once again Frederick Douglass who in 1888 had employed this proverb to argue for an American society based on truthfulness regarding its socio-political problems of racism, poverty, and more:

> There are times when neither hope nor fear should be allowed to control our speech. Cry aloud and spare not, is the word of wisdom as well as of Scripture. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," applies to the body not less than the soul. To this world not less than the world to come. Outside the truth there is no solid foundation for any of us, and I assume you have invited me to speak, and you have come to hear me speak, expect me to speak the truth as I understand the truth. (Mieder, 2001: 485)

Martin Luther King, who followed Douglass as the most influential civil rights champion of the time of John F. Kennedy, also cited this proverb as he confronted the nation with its continuous racial ills:

> It is time for us to tell each other the truth about who and what have brought the Negro to the condition of deprivation against which we struggle today. In human relations the truth is hard to come by, because most groups are deceived about themselves. Rationalization and the incessant search for scapegoats are the psychological cataracts that blind our individual and collective sins. But the day has passed for bland euphemisms. He who lives with untruth lives in spiritual slavery. Freedom is still the bonus we receive for knowing the truth. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." (Mieder, 2010: 511)

This "truth"-proverb certainly became a favorite piece of wisdom in the many addresses that Kennedy gave on university campuses, where he enjoyed "the 'teacher role' that epideictic rhetors assume" (Bostdorff and Ferris, 2014: 414):

> Ninety years from now I have no doubt that Vanderbilt University will still be fulfilling this mission. It will still uphold learning, encourage public service, and teach respect for the law. It will neither turn its back on proven wisdom [n]or turn its face from newborn challenge. It will still pass on to the youth of our land the full meaning of their rights and their responsibilities. And it will still be teaching the truth – the truth that makes us free and will keep us free. (III, 409; May 18, 1963)

At another university he referred to the command "Let there be light" (Genesis, 1:3) to conclude his address encouraging the students to carry forward the torch of education that will be instrumental in improving the society:

> The nation was then [in 1861 at the time of the founding of the University of Washington] torn by war. This territory had only the simplest elements of civilization. And this city [Seattle] had barely begun to function. But a university was one of their earliest thoughts – and they summed it up in the motto that they adopted: "Let there be light." What more can be said today, regarding all the dark and tangled problems we face than: Let there be light. And to accomplish that illumination, the University of Washington shall still hold high the torch. (I, 728; November 16, 1961)

Kennedy was thoroughly convinced that school and university education together with the ethics contained in the Bible are necessary for an improved world order with educated students going out to spread knowledge and the idea of freedom by way of the Peace Corps to underdeveloped countries (Sorensen, 1965: 357-365).

His commitment to peace and freedom is ever-present in Kennedy's communications, but there is also the significant aspect of helpfulness to those not as fortunate as the affluent and prosperous United States. In many ways he saw himself as the care giver, exemplified by the creation of the Peace Corps, to those less fortunate in this country and beyond. What better rhetorical way than to cite the phrase "My cup runneth over" (Psalms, 23:5) to advance this social agenda:

> We live in the land of abundance, the land of such great abundance of food and fiber, in fact, that our cup runneth over. At the same time we live in a world where over 60 percent of the population lives under the shadow of hunger and malnutrition. This is the great paradox of the 1950's. (VII, 48; October 31, 1960)

As one would expect, there is also the very popular Bible proverb "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts of the Apostles, 20:35) to underscore the need to care for others and to lend a helping hand whenever possible:

> I was struck by the fact that in the far-off continents Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, as well as Christians, pause from their labors on the 25th day of December to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace. There could be no more striking proof that Christmas is truly the universal holiday of all men. It is the day when all of us dedicate our thoughts to others; when all are reminded that mercy and compassion are the enduring virtues; when all show, by small deeds and large and by acts, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. (II, 888; December 17, 1962)

It is a bit strange to connect other religions with the celebration of Christmas, but his laudable "ecumenism revealed [itself] in his private charity. He donated his entire salary to Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and other non-sectarian charities, stipulating that his gifts be given without publicity" (Menendez, 1978: 68-69).

There is another New Testament proverb, "Of those to whom much is given, much is required" (Luke, 12:48), that served Kennedy well in his philanthropic mission that went far beyond the borders of the United States:

> For of those to whom much is given, much is required. And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state, our success or failure, in whatever office we hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions [dealing with] courage, judgment, integrity, and dedication. (VI, 5; January 9, 1961)

> Equality of opportunity does not mean equality of responsibility. All Americans must be responsible citizens, but some must be more responsible than others, by virtue of their public or their private position, their role in the family or community, their prospects for the future, or their legacy from the past. Increased responsibility goes with increased ability, for "of those to whom much is given, much is required." (III, 407; May 18, 1963)

This is a positive call to arms for Americans to become role models of charity and service to all those less fortunate. He certainly saw government and the people working hand-in-glove in this venture, as he explained by his use of the proverb "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew, 6:24):

> We emphasize this basic principle: The essence of any government that belongs to the people must lie in the Biblical injunction, "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other." All America seeks a government in which no man holds to his own interest and despises the public interest, and where all men serve only the public and love that master well. (VIII, 53-54; October 17, 1960)

One hundred years earlier in 1861, Frederick Douglass employed the same proverb to argue that the country could not survive with slavery standing in the way of freedom. But being a remarkable "proverbialist", he added a number of additional proverbs that amplified his vigorous message into a proverbial barrage:

> The cause [for the societal misery] is deeper down than sections, slaveholders or abolitionists. These are but the hands of the clock. The moving machinery is behind the face. The machinery moves not because of the hands, but the hands because of the machinery. To make the hands go right you must make the machinery go right. The trouble is fundamental. Two cannot walk together except they be agreed. No man can serve two masters. A house divided against itself cannot stand. It is something to ride two horses going the same way, but impossible when going opposite ways. *The folly is just here*: We have attempted to maintain a union in defiance of the moral chemistry of the universe. To join together what God has put asunder – We have thought to keep one end of the chain on the limbs of the bondman without having the other on our own necks. (Mieder, 2001: 350)

Of course, the government cannot bring about miracles, but as the Bible says, "There is a time for every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes, 3:1-8). In due time, Kennedy argued, the country will advance in providing ever better service to its citizens:

> I realize that we shall not reach these [economic] goals overnight, nor shall we achieve them without inconvenience, some disagreement, and some adjustments on every side – among labor, business, and the Government. But the Bible tells us that "there is a time for every purpose under the heaven … a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together." Ladies and gentlemen, I believe it is time for us all to gather stones together to build this country as it must be built in the coming years. (II, 352; April 30, 1962)

Especially in the heat of his presidential campaign, Kennedy also made use of Bible proverbs to attack or undermine Richard Nixon's candidacy. He employed them as cautionary statements with the Bible reference adding rhetorical authority to his arguments, as for example with the often-heard New Testament proverb "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians, 6:7):

> The Bible tells us that "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Mr. Nixon has sown the seeds of negation. Time after time, he has said "No" to the American people. And on November 8, the American people will say "No" to Mr. Nixon. The Democratic Party has sown the seeds of accomplishments and progress; and on November 8, we shall reap a great harvest of victory. (IV, 744; October 24, 1960)

And yet, in the additional appearance of this well-known proverb, Kennedy quotes it as promise to his fellow Democrats that were they to choose to vote for him, they would definitely reap positive results:

> Give me your help. Give me your hand and your heart in the week [last week of the campaign] ahead – and remember what the Bible tells us: That "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." If in this coming week, and in all the weeks and years that follow, we can sow the seeds of dedication and effort, we shall surely reap a great victory for our country. (IV, 837; October 31, 1960)

Not surprisingly, it is once again Frederick Douglass who in 1863 made repeated use of this cautionary proverb as he argued vehemently against slavery, warning that the punishment for this ill will certainly come:

> If slavery is the cause of our present troubles, as every enlightened man must see that it is, what can the same cause, if retained, produce in the future, but trouble? Will the thorn tree bye-and-bye bear grapes, and the bitter fountain send forth sweet water? Shall we never learn that whatsoever we, as a nation, shall sow, that we shall certainly reap. (Mieder, 2001: 444)

Twenty years later, the great feminist Elisabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and close friend of Frederick Douglass, applied this Bible proverb to the issue of equal rights for women:

> How long will it take us to recognize the fact that all human beings have the same love of liberty & justice, & whatever is good for white men is equally good for black men & women. I see by the American papers that a grand dinner was given to Frederick Douglass in Washington, thus is a former slave honored in the Capitol of the nation. Well the next generation of women will reap the blessings we [together with her friend Susan B. Anthony] are now sowing, so let us work on in faith & hope to the end. (Mieder, 2014a: 271)

In any case, interpreting this Bible proverb from a moralistic point of view, Martin Luther King in 1954 echoes Douglass's thoughts as he calls for an adherence to an ethical value system:

> This universe hinges on moral foundations. There is something in this universe that justifies [Thomas] Carlyle in saying, "No lie can live forever." There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." […] There is something in this universe that justifies the Biblical writer in saying, "You shall reap what you sow." God's universe has moral foundations and if we are to go forward we must go back and pick up this precious value. (Mieder, 2010: 475)

Related to the appearance of the proverb "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" as an explanation of Nixon's negativism is Kennedy's repeated citation of the proverb "By their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew, 7:16). Notice how ingeniously Kennedy puts it in such a context that he tells American farmers indirectly that they can recognize the Republicans by their questionable policies. The following two passages show Kennedy's clever political manipulation of this Biblical wisdom to suit his at times aggressive attacks on the Republicans:

> I think the farmers of the United States can make a clear and precise judgment as to which party, day in, day out, month after month, year after year, has been more concerned with the income of the farmers of this country, and I have no doubt that when all the speeches are separated, when all the promises of this campaign are analyzed, I think that we should look at the record. The Bible says, "By their fruits you shall know them." (IV, 317; September 22, 1960)

> How then, in this election year of 1960, is the American farmer to choose between Mr. Nixon and myself? – between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party? For an answer we must return to the ancient Biblical injunction: "By their fruits shall ye know them." And by their fruits the American farmer has learned the true meaning of Republican election speeches and pledges. (IV, 1045; September 22, 1960)

But Kennedy also remembered the related Bible proverb "The tree is judged (known) by its fruit" (Luke, 6:44) and incorporated it in such a way into his rhetoric that it becomes a template for judging Richard Nixon's political record. And as if this is not enough, he adds

Shakespeare's proverb "What is past is prologue" from *The Tempest* to it for good measure to warn that the possible election of Nixon would be catastrophic for sure:

> But the Bible tells us to judge a tree by its fruits. For "what is past is prologue" – and any American who is concerned about Mr. Nixon's attitude in the future would do well to inform himself of Mr. Nixon's attitude in the past. (IV, 742; October 24, 1960)

This is serious satirical rhetoric during the presidential campaign. Kennedy was known to excel in ironic or humorous comments during his campaign speeches, especially when he departed from his prepared text and introduced spontaneous comments. He certainly did so with the Bible proverb turned secular wisdom "Rain falls alike on the just and unjust" (Matthew, 5:45) during a couple of rainy campaign events:

> I regret the rain, but it remains [*sic*] as the Bible tells us on the just and unjust alike, on Republicans as well as Democrats. (IV, 320; September 22, 1960)

> Two weeks from today you are going to make it [the elective choice]. One hundred years ago in the campaign of 1860, Abraham Lincoln wrote to a friend – fortunately, as the Bible tells us, it rains on the just and unjust. There are some Republicans here and it is raining on them, too. (IV, 757; October 25, 1960)

President Kennedy, despite his Harvard education and his intellectual as well as linguistic prowess (Wicker, 1962; Golden, 1966; Windt, 1993; Clarke, 2004; Mieder, 2005: 171-173), had great respect for farmers and his commitment to their hard work was by no means just political lip-service. He knew well that the population of the world depends on food production. To this vital matter for the survival of humankind Kennedy added the spread and protection of human rights. In his major address before the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 20, 1963, at New York, he included the proverb "Man does not live by bread alone" (Deuteronomy, 8:3; Matthew, 4:4) that appears in both the Old and New Testaments. While acknowledging the need of food, the proverb also states that there is more to life than mere nourishment. And this gives him the opportunity to talk about human rights that are of greatest importance for a safe and free life:

> The worldwide program of farm productivity and food distribution, similar to our country's "Food for Peace" program, could now give every child the food he needs. But man does not live by bread alone – and the members of this organization [United Nations] are committed by the Charter to promote and respect human rights. Those rights are not respected when a Buddhist priest is driven from his pagoda, when a synagogue is shut down, when a Protestant church cannot open a mission, when a Cardinal is forced into hiding, or when a crowded church service is bombed. The United States of America is opposed to discrimination and persecution on grounds of race and religion anywhere in the world, including our own Nation. We are working to right the wrongs of our own country. (III, 696-697; September 20, 1963)

To a certain degree Kennedy echoes what Frederick Douglass in 1861 and Martin Luther King about hundred years later in 1963, shortly before the president's assassination, have expressed by way of the proverb "Man does not live by bread alone":

> All that great wealth, physical bravery, and military skill can do to save the country, will doubtless be done. If we fail, we shall fail by moral causes, not by outward strength, but by internal weakness. Physical power is important – bread is indispensable – but nations, no more than individuals, can live by bread alone. The thing which we wish here and now to urge upon public attention, and which is the central idea of all our lectures though the country, is, that no amount of physical courage or strength can possibly supply the place of *wisdom and justice*. (Douglass in Mieder, 2001: 139)

> In any realistic doctrine of man we must be forever concerned about his physical and material well-being. When Jesus said man cannot live by bread alone, he did not imply that men can live without bread. As Christians we must think not only about "mansions in the sky," but also about the slums and ghettos that cripple the human soul, not merely about the streets in heaven "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8), but also about the millions of people in this world who go to bed hungry at night. Any religion that professes concern regarding the soul of men and fails to be concerned by social conditions that corrupt and economic conditions that cripple the soul, is a do-nothing religion, in need of new blood. Such a religion fails to realize that man is an animal having physical and material needs. (King in Mieder, 2010: 409-410)

Later in the same speech, turning to international politics, Kennedy enlists a second Bible proverb – "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke, 9:62) – to encourage the members of the United Nations to continue the progress that has been made in the Congo in particular:

> It is, for example, most important not to jeopardize the extraordinary United Nations gains in the Congo. The nation which sought this organization's help only 3 years ago has now asked the United Nations' presence to remain a little longer. I believe this Assembly should do what is necessary to preserve the gains already made and to protect the new nation in its struggle for progress. Let us complete what we have started. For "No man who puts his hand to the plow and looks back," as the Scripture tells us, "No man who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." (III, 697; September 20, 1963)

What becomes clear here is that the youthful and energetic John F. Kennedy, while being a pragmatic realist, was also a sociopolitical visionary and idealist. Who could possibly be surprised to find the two proverbs "Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Joel, 2:28) and "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs, 19:18) combined into a prophetic announcement at Houston, Texas, just one day before his assassination at Dallas:

> In 1990 the age of space will be entering its second phase, and our hopes in it to preserve the peace, to make sure that in this great sea, as on earth, the United States is second to none. And that is why I salute [Representative] Albert Thomas and those Texans whom you sent to Washington in his time and since then, who recognize the needs and the trends today in the sixties so that when some meet here in 1990 they will look back on what we did and say that we made the right and wise decisions. "Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions," the Bible tells us, and "where there is no vision, the people perish." (III, 886; November 21, 1963)

It does seem strange, however, that the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew, 7:12) as the most basic principle of social behavior that appears in all the major religions of the world cannot be found in his many communications (Griffin, 1991).

Other presidents, certainly Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, relied repeatedly on its humane message (Mieder, 2014b: 172-197). Long before becoming president, Lincoln, as he witnessed the human suffering of slavery in 1848, asked in desperation: "Then I ask, is the precept "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" obsolete? – of no force? – of no application?" (Mieder, 2000: 80). And Barack Obama, in his significant campaign speech "A more Perfect Union" on March 18, 2008, at Philadelphia, envisioned a more inclusive world order based on humane principles:

> In the end then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us [Genesis 4:9]. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well. (Mieder, 2009: 201)

But while Kennedy does not cite the proverb, there is one passage in which he at least refers to the "Golden Rule", assuming most people would know it:

> Brotherhood, tolerance, enlightened relations between members of different ethnic groups – these are, after all, simply an extension of the concept upon which all free organized society is based. Some call this concept comity. Some find it in the Golden Rule, others in Rousseau's "social contract." Our Declaration of Independence calls it "the consent of the governed." The ancient Romans called it "*civitatis filia*," or civic friendship. (V, 112-113; February 24, 1957)

Perhaps his intellectual mind and his inclination towards high rhetoric carried him away just a little here. But there is no reason to speculate at the end of this discussion of Kennedy's effective use of Bible proverbs. They served him well to express his optimistic vision for a free and peaceful world, perfectly expressed by the Bible proverb "Love your neighbor" (Matthew, 5:43) that parallels the Golden Rule:

> World peace, like community peace, does not require that each man love his neighbor – it requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance, submitting their disputes to a just and peaceful settlement. And history teaches us that enmities between nations, as between individuals, do not last forever. However fixed our likes and dislikes may seem, the tide of time and events will often bring surprising changes in the relations between nations and neighbors. (III, 461; June 10, 1963)

REFERENCES

John F. Kennedy's addresses, essays, messages, news conferences, and speeches:

I. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*. January 20 to December 31, 1961. Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1962. 908 pp. (columns).

II. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*. January 1 to December 31, 1962. Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1963. 1019 pp, (columns).

III. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*. January 1 to November 22, 1963. Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1966. 1007 pp. (columns).

IV. Magnuson, Warren G. (ed.). *The Speeches, Remarks, Press Conferences, and Statements of Senator John F. Kennedy, August 1 Through November 7, 1960*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961. 1440 pp. (1290 pp. texts and the rest a giant index)

V. Kennedy, John F. *The Strategy of Peace*. Ed. by Allan Nevins. New York: Harper Brothers, 1960. 233 pp.

VI. Garner, John W. (ed.). *To Turn the Tide. A Selection from President Kennedy's Public Statements from His Election Through the 1961 Adjournment of Congress, Setting Forth the Goals of His First Legislative Year*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962. 236 pp.

VII. Meyersohn, Maxwell (ed.). *Memorable Quotations of John F. Kennedy*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. 314 pp.

VIII. Sorenson, Theodore C. (ed.). *"Let the Word Go Forth". The Speeches, Statements and Writings of John F. Kennedy*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1988. 433 pp.

Secondary Sources:

Bartlett, J. (2012). *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. 18th ed. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Bostdorff, D. M., and Ferris, S. H. (2014). John F. Kennedy at American University: The Rhetoric of the Possible, Epideictic Progression, and the Commencement of Peace. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 100, 407-441.

Clarke, T. (2004). *Ask not. The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech that changed America*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

Golden, J. L. (1966). John F. Kennedy and the "Ghosts". *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 52, 348-357.

Griffin, A. K. 1991. *Religious Proverbs: Over 1600 Adages from 18 Faiths Worldwide*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

Menendez, A. J. (1978). *John F. Kennedy: Catholic and Humanist*. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books.

Mieder, W. (1990). *Not by Bread Alone. Proverbs of the Bible*. Shelburne, Vermont: The New England Press.

Mieder, W. (2000). *The Proverbial Abraham Lincoln. An Index to Proverbs in the Works of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Peter Lang.

Mieder, W. (2001). *"No Struggle, No Progress". Fredrick Douglass and His Proverbial Rhetoric for Civil Rights*. New York: Peter Lang.

Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs. A Handbook*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press; rpt. New York: Peter Lang, 2012.

Mieder, W. (2005). *Proverbs Are the Best Policy. Folk Wisdom and American Politics*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

Mieder, W. (2009). *"Yes We Can". Barack Obama's Proverbial Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang.

Mieder, W. (2010). *"Making a Way Out of No Way". Martin Luther King's Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang.

Mieder, W. (2014a). *"All Men and Women Are Created Equal". Elizabeth Cady Stanton's and Susan B. Anthony's Proverbial Rhetoric Promoting Women's Rights.* New York: Peter Lang.

Mieder, W. (2014b). *Behold the Proverbs of a People. Proverbial Wisdom in Culture, Literature, and Politics*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.

Mieder, W. (2019). *"Right Makes Might". Proverbs and the American Worldview*. Bloomington, Indiana; Indiana University Press.

Mieder, W.; Kingsbury, S. A., and Harder, K. B. (1992). *A Dictionary of American Proverbs*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Obama, B. (2006). *The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Shapiro, F. R. (2021). *The New Yale Book of Quotations*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Sorensen, T. C. (1965). *Kennedy*. New York: Harper & Row.

Warnick, B. (1996). Argument Schemes and the Construction of Social Reality: John F. Kennedy's Address to the Houston Ministerial Association. *Communication Quarterly*, 44, 183-196.

Wicker, T. (1962). Kennedy as a Public Speakah [*sic*]. *The New York Times Magazine*, February 28, 14 and 70-71.

Wilson, J. (2015). *Talking with the President. The Pragmatics of Presidential Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Windt, T. O. (1993). President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, 1961. *The Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents*. Ed. Halford Ryan. Westport, Connecticut: Prager, 181-193.

