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## Exeter Book: *Paternal Precepts* – An Edition, with Translation, and Comments

**E. G. Stanley** 

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# Abstract

This paper presents an edition and translation of the poem in the Exeter Book better called *Paternal Precepts*, not just *Precepts*, with some commentary. The poem is abstract, and father and son are no *dramatis personae*. Its instruction is that not only how one thinks and acts, but also how one speaks should be endowed with virtue. The brief introduction of *Paternal Precepts* directs us into the ten paternal precepts to teach a well-born son. The first precept instructs the son to be virtuous, and to honour his parents and teachers. The second and third precepts direct the son not to keep bad company, and teach that God rewards virtue and punishes complicity in evil. The fourth precept is about loyalty, both to one's friends and to one's high principles. The fifth precept is about what is to be avoided: drunkenness, evil thoughts, lies, boasting; and the dangers of loving women. It is important to be a safekeeper of one's words. The sixth precept is about understanding the concepts good and evil. The seventh precept reflects, in expressive contrasts, on futurity, and that the wise recognize sorrow in joys, whereas a fool fails to see that exultation may be enmeshed in sorrow. The eighth precept is about the theological concepts of God and saints. It ends with the glory of truth. The long ninth precept dwells on the Lord's commandments, and with terms not entirely clear: ancient writings, perhaps the Scriptures together with the writings of the Church Fathers; 'forward-looking writings', that is perhaps prophecies, and native traditions. The long tenth precept embraces sins of words and deeds, truth, wrath, and wisdom.

This poem in the Exeter Book should be called *Paternal Precepts*, not just *Precepts*, because the father is the speaker throughout.<sup>1</sup> From Poole (1998: 237–239) it clearly emerges that the poem has not been neglected in the study of Old English poetry. It also emerges that not everything written about it was praise, not even by those who in general praise 'wisdom poetry'.

In the opening sentence there are four significant nominal compounds and phrases: *frod fæder* 'wise father' (1a), alliterating with *freobearn* 'well-born son' (1b), *modsnottor* 'wise of mind' (2a), *wisfæst* 'of sure sagacity' (3a).<sup>2</sup> This is the introductory sentence unemended:

Ðus frod fæder freobearn lærde,  
modsnottor, maga cystum eald,  
wordum wisfæstum, þæt he wel þunge:

'The wise father, wise of mind, old in the virtues of kinsmen, instructed (his) well-born son with words of sure sagacity so that he may prosper well, (instructed him) as follows:'

The sentence is tortured in translation, and tortured in the original. The half-line *maga cystum eald* seems to mean that the father has grown old in the virtues admired by his kinsmen. The father's wisdom is mentioned in this opening sentence together with the son's nobility, if I have understood *freobeorn* correctly as 'well-born son'. The first word, *Ðus* 'thus', has been transferred in the translation to the end, its meaning here being 'as follows', and that is not how to start a sentence in Modern English.<sup>3</sup>

*Paternal Precepts* line 2 shows the editors at their most intrusive, for no gain in sense:

modsnottor, maga cystum eald

An adjective without a noun and only three syllables in the half-line 2 a seemed insufficient to [Thorpe](#) (1842: 300, footnote), who suggested that "guma seems wanting after mod-snottor". In 1850 [Ettmüller](#) (1850: 246) preferred to supply *mon*, not *guma*. He has been followed by many, recently by [Shippey](#) (1976: 48) and by [Muir](#) (1994: I, 228). This correction of the metre and smoothing of the syntax assumes a degree of metrical regularity and syntactic conformity with Modern English syntax. Modern scholarship expects such regularity and conformity in the verse of Anglo-Saxon poets as is not always found in the unemended texts. Dictionaries, even dictionaries of Old English, may distinguish neuter 'nouns' in nom. sg. in form identical to their adjective (of which the noun is the adjective used absolutely; see [Mitchell](#) 1985: §§ 132–135). There is no need to supply *mon*. The refusal to accept a half-line of three syllables as sufficient for 'strict' Old English verse is a matter of faith in the metrical regularity of the transmitted text.<sup>4</sup>

The word *Ðus* opening *Paternal Precepts* directs the reader into the ten precepts to teach a well-born son. The first precept reads, lines 4–14:

“Do a þætte duge! Deag þin gewyrhtu  
God þe biþ symle goda gehwylces 5  
frea □ fultum; feond þam oþrum,  
wyrsan gewyrhta. Wene þec þy betran,  
efn eIne þis a þenden þu lifge!  
Fæder □ moder freo þu mid heortan,  
maga gehwylcne, gif him sy Meotud on lufan! 10  
Wes þu þinum ylðrum arfæst symle  
fægerwyrde, □ þe in ferðe læt

þine lareowas leofe in mode,

þa þec geornast to gode trymmen.”

‘Do always what is right! If your deeds are right (5) God will ever be Lord and support in every good deed, (but he will be) the enemy to the opposite, to the worse deeds. Make your practice the better, perform this valiantly always as long as you live. Love (your) father and mother wholeheartedly (10) (and) each of (your) kinsfolk, if the Lord is loved by them. Be always dutiful to your parents in courteous speech, and let (your) mind hold in high esteem your teachers, who most sedulously strengthen you in virtue.’

In the introduction to his edition, [Shippey](#) (1976: 4–6) analyses some of the reasons why this poem is difficult to translate. Antithesis and emphasis by variation or repetition are insistently used, and often in ways that cannot be easily replicated in Modern English. An example occurs in line 4: *duge* 4 a, *deag* 4 b. [Gollancz](#) (1895: 301) recognized the connection: ‘Do always what is worthy; if thy works be worthy, [...]’ The verb *deag* is translated in many different ways; ‘is effective’ is perhaps semantically more central than ‘is worthy’. Bosworth (in [Bosworth and Toller](#) 1882–1898: s.vv. *deag*, *dugan*) has a little entry for *deag* ‘is of use, is good, avails’, and a longer entry for *dugan* ‘To avail, to be of use, able, fit, strong, vigorous, good, virtuous, honest, bountiful, kind, liberal; *valēre, prōdesse, frūgi esse, bōnum esse, munīficum, vel libērālem se præbēre*’, to which Toller adds ‘to do, be good (1) *for a person*, (2) *for a purpose*’. It could be asserted that, if this verb means all this, line 4 a, *Do a þætte duge!* ‘Do always what is right!’ comprehends everything Wisdom need teach. Inexperience – and in my rendering of *duge* I have used an aspect of virtue, ‘right’, not in Bosworth-Toller.

*Paternal Precepts* immediately continues (line 4b) with a conditional clause, the syntax so understood by every editor and translator of the nineteenth century, from [Thorpe](#) (1842) to [Gollancz](#) (1895), including all the German editors.<sup>5</sup> Twentieth-century editors and translators – [Dobbie](#) (1936), [Shippey](#) (1976), and [Muir](#) (1994) – put a full stop or semicolon at the end of line 4 b; Shippey translates line 4 b ‘and what you have done will bring you profit’. Teaching moral virtue is often expressed by a contrast: be virtuous; if you are good God will strengthen your virtuous endeavour, but if wicked you will be punished. That contrast occurs several times in the poem. It begins, well expressed, by the double use of the all-embracing verb inculcating virtue, *duge* and *deag*. The contrast is vigorously expressed in lines 6b–7a: *feond þam oprum | wyrsan gewyrhta*, God will be ‘hostile to that other, to the worse of deeds’.<sup>6</sup> It is highly exceptional that the word *feond* is applied to God, as in Kock’s translation (1918: 28): ‘God ever is a Lord and help to thee | in all that’s good, but to the others | a foe in their inferior deeds.’ That *feond* is applied to God is a part of Kock’s translation that seems acceptable, but not to [Shippey](#) (1976: 49), who

translates: 'the devil will be an instigator<sup>7</sup> to others of what is worse.' That rendering is unconvincing, because rare Old English legal terminology is not used in Old English verse.

"Honour thy father and thy mother" is how the Fifth Commandment begins (Exodus XX:12), and that underlies line 9.<sup>8</sup> It is of importance, therefore, in the formulation of *Paternal Precepts*, and the wise father seems to dwell on that, if lines 11–12a are understood as 'Be always dutiful to your parents in courteous speech'.<sup>9</sup> The relationship of father to son is that of old (e. g. 59b) to young (53b). Too much characterization, as of *dramatis personae*, should not be read into that contrast, though some characterization is attached to the abstraction. It is better to read the poem as in the first place Wisdom speaking to Inexperience, rather than the other abstraction Eld speaking to Youth. We should recognize the poet's expressive humanity, that for his first point, on the subject of fatherhood and sonhood, i. e. for the Fifth Commandment, it matters how the son speaks to his parents. The son's teachers, *þine lareowas* (13a), need not be his schoolteachers only; they could include his religious teachers, the priests, whose sermons and homilies he will hear throughout his life. In line 11 *þinum yl drum arfæst* must, in the context of the Fifth Commandment, mean 'dutiful to your parents' (as in Gollancz's translation). Though *yldra* (pl.) can perhaps mean 'seniors, elders', Shippey's translation 'respectful to your elders' is less good in this context.

The father's second precept deals with the friendship his son should keep; it must not be a wicked son keeping evil company. Lines 15–20:

Fæder eft his sunu frod gegrette 15  
opre siþe: "Heald elne þis!  
Ne freme firene, ne næfre freonde þinum  
mæge man ne geþafa, þy læs þec Meotud oncunne,  
þæt þu sy wommes gewita. He þe mid wite gieldeð,  
swylce þam oþrum mid eadwelan." 20

'(15) The wise father spoke to his son again, a second time: "Keep to this valiantly! Commit no evil, nor ever approve of evil in your friend (or) kinsman, lest the Lord accuse you that you are an accomplice in evil. He will requite you with punishment, (20) as he (will reward) others with prosperity and blessing.'"

It is not obvious how best to translate *elne* (16b), adverbial (dat. sg. of *ellen* 'courage, strength'). Perhaps 'in manly virtue', but though the poem is paternal guidance for a son,

its moral values are not exclusively male. I prefer 'valiantly' to *DOE* (s.v. *ellen* noun<sup>1</sup>, 1.a.) 'courageously, vigorously'.

The rendering of *mid eadwelan* (20b) is difficult for the simple reason that the two elements of *eadwela* are so similar in sense that, though they may reinforce each other – *ead* 'wealth, prosperity' and *wela* 'wealth, prosperity' –, nothing is gained by doubling the concept: the very common adjective *eadig*, however, most often means 'blessed; divinely blessed'; *mid eadwelan* therefore means 'with prosperity and blessing' in this religious poem.

The third precept, lines 21–26, is about not keeping bad company. A son who commits evil or approves of evil in his friend and kinsman (in the second precept, lines 17b–18a) is bad company for friend and kinsman, and bad company will pervert a good son:

Ðriddan syþe þoncsnottor guma  
breost-gehygdum his bearn lærde:  
“Ne gewuna wyrsa widan feore  
ængum eahta, ac þu þe anne genim  
to gesprecan symle spella □lara 25  
rædhycgende,<sup>10</sup> sy ymb rice swa hit mæge.”

‘The wisely-thinking man taught his son a third time with his inmost thoughts:<sup>11</sup> “In all your life do not associate with anyone with inferior precepts,<sup>12</sup> but take to yourself one (25) always communicating good advice in speaking and teaching, whatever his rank may be.”’

The phrase *ræd eahtian* ‘to consider advice’ is twice attested, but here *eahtian* would have a dative object, *ængum*, uniquely.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that *eahta* is gen. pl.; *ængum eahta* ‘with anyone of deliberations’, perhaps ‘precepts’ in this poem.<sup>14</sup> Line 26 b is puzzling. It may mean, if it is good advice it does not matter whether the standing of the advisor is high or low.

The fourth precept is about various forms of loyalty, to one’s friends and to one’s high principles. Lines 27–31:

Feorþan siðe fæder eft lærde  
modleofne magan, þæt he gemunde þis:



“Ne aswic sundorwine, ac a sýmle geheald

ryhtum gerisnum! Ræfn elne þis, 30

þæt þu næfre fæcne weorð[e]<sup>15</sup> freonde þinum!”

‘The father again taught (his) heartily beloved son a fourth time that he should be mindful of this: “Do not desert (your) dearest friend, but always adhere to (30) what is right and proper! Perform this loyally, that you will never be false to your friend!”

The verb *aswican* is rare; this is the only occurrence in verse. The fourth precept is about not being false to one’s friend, in my translation explicit in line 31. A false friend is one who deserts his friend; *DOE* s.v. *aswīcan* also has ‘to betray’, which may mean ‘to prove false to’; ‘to desert’ is perhaps more strongly negative. I like Shippey’s ‘Do not let your chosen friend down’ (1976: 49). The very common verb *geswican* has ‘to deceive’, among its many senses. The Exeter Book *Maxims* 37 b (ASPR III, 158) has: *earm se him his frynd geswicað* ‘poor (is) he whom his friends deceive’. Here too Shippey (p. 67) translates ‘whose friends let him down’, but the preceding half-line has *eadig* ‘blessed’ to which *earm* ‘poor’ is in contrast. In that more sombre atmosphere ‘deceive’ is better because it feels weightier than ‘let down’.<sup>16</sup>

The dat. pl. phrase *ryhtum gerisnum* (30a) appears to be about ‘correct proprieties’ or ‘proper correctness’. Line 30 a teaches us how inferior is our understanding of Old English sensitivities well expressed in the verse of the fourth precept.

Howe (1985: 147) singled out the fourth precept in the poem, the numerative structure of which leads him to classify it as a “catalogue poem”: “Of the ten entries in the catalogue, this is the most compact, the most precept-like in its over-all form, and hence the most independent.” Howe believes that the general arrangement of the poem corresponds to the son’s progression from childhood to “the middle period of a man’s life”.<sup>17</sup> Much depends on how we translate *aswic sundorwine*; if ‘don’t let (your) best friend down’, it could be heard on an Anglo-Saxon playground; if ‘do not defraud (your) special friend’, it could be overheard in the world of Anglo-Saxon money men.

Line 31, with *fæcne*, is similarly difficult to interpret. *DOE* has for this adjective ‘deceitful, treacherous; fraudulent’, further ‘dishonest’, and it glosses words meaning ‘factious, rebellious’, and ‘trifling, not serious’ (glossing *frivolus*). Anglo-Saxon England was often politically dangerous. Of course, the date of composition of the poem is unascertainable; Krapp and Dobbie’s dating (ASPR III, xlili) is based on nothing: “Meter and language indicate an early date for this poem, say the eighth or early ninth century.”<sup>18</sup> *Paternal Precepts* deals with wisdoms generally valid; in the father’s use *fæcne* is not about treason to king and country, but about disloyalty to a friend. That could be as extreme as giving one’s friend a Judas kiss, leading to death; it could be a lighter act of

disloyalty, not standing by him when he is being attacked, either physically or verbally. It could be lighter still, it could still be about boyhood friendship: not taking one's friend seriously in some boyish endeavour; or even less serious than that, in some game. In the translations of line 30 *fæcne* bears a heavy burden, 'treacherous, deceitful, false'. Perhaps we should find some less severe adjective or adjectival phrase as we translate, such as 'not very comradely'.

The fifth precept involves no such adjectival scale of evaluation, though everything to be avoided can be variously slight or grave. Lines 32–42:

Fiftan siþe fæder eft ongon

breostgeþoncum his bearn læran:

“Druncen beorg þe □ dollic word,

man on mode □ in muþe lyge, 35

yrre □ æfeste, □ idese lufan;

forðon sceal æwiscmod oft sipian

se þe gewiteð in wifes lufan

fremdre meowlan: þær bið a firena wen,

laðlicre scome, long nið wið God, 40

geotende gielp. Wes þu a giedda wis,

wær wið willan, worda hyrde!”

‘The father did teach his son then a fifth time with his inmost thoughts: “Guard yourself from drunkenness and foolish words, (35) from evil in your thinking and from lies in your mouth, from wrath and envy, and from woman’s love; for he must often go away disgraced in spirit, who proceeds to the love of a female, to a woman outside one’s own circle: there will always be the probability of violation of what is right, (40) disgusting ignominy, long-lasting contrariety against God, an outpouring of boastfulness. Be ever wise in all you say, prudent in facing pleasures and lusts, (be) a safekeeper of words.”’

There are so many shades of dyslogistic and eulogistic detail in these lines that translation is difficult, as is most clearly seen when the translator comes to the last half-line (42b): *worda hyrde*. It is a highly refined locution, suggesting that words are like sheep; without herding they lack the sense of knowing when or where to go. They need a

shepherd, but a precept, 'be a shepherd of your words' (or 'herdsman of your words'), is too rustic in twenty-first century English for such a bookish poem (and herding sheep is too specific for a noun that is metaphorical in its herding). My 'safekeeper of words' is not good in style and spirit, but I can think of nothing that is not flawed; Gollancz's 'guardian of thy words' (1895: 303) is not as metaphorical as this poem, Shippey's 'guard your words' (1976: 49) is not metaphorical and its syntax is not close enough.

The wrongs of this fifth precept, drunkenness, wrath and envy, libidinous involvements, boastfulness: all these involve evil speech, and often action hostile to God. The son is in danger from any of these wrongs. Wisdom is essential in words and behaviour. The paternal command, a model of poetic conciseness, is a mighty warning: *Wes þu [...] worda hyrde!*

The sixth precept is for every age at any time. Lines 43–51:

Siextan siþe swæs eft ongon

þurh bliðne geþoht his bearn læran:

“Ongiet georne hwæt sy god opþe yfel, 45

□toscead simle scearpe mode

in sefan þinum, □þe a þæt selle geceos!

A þe bið gedæled, gif þe deah hyge;

wunað wisdom in □þus wast geara

□git yfles, heald þe elne wið, 50

feorma þu symle in þinum ferðe god!”

‘A sixth time the dear one resumed the instruction with kind thought: (45)

“Distinguish clearly what is good or evil, and always separate them with acute discernment in your understanding, and at all times choose the better for yourself! It (the better) will always be apportioned to you if your intention is virtuous, as long as wisdom rests in it, and thus you know clearly (50) the cognizance of evil, keep yourself from it valiantly, ever cherish good in your mind!”

This sixth precept is about good and evil. It emphasizes the need to understand evil, because that understanding is prerequisite for doing good with wisdom. It is a very ratiocinative analysis of good and evil, based on *hyge* ‘mind, intention’.

The seventh precept is a quiet but emotionally charged reflection on the son’s

*forðgesceaft* (56a) ‘future’. Lines 52–58:

Seofepan siþe hi sunu lærde

fæder, frod guma, sægde fela geo[n]gum:<sup>19</sup>

“Seldan snottor guma sorgleas blissað,

swylce dol seldon drymeð sorgful. 55

Ymb his forðgesceaft, nefne he fæhþe wite,

wærwyrde sceal wisfæst hæle

breostum hycgan, nales breahtrne hlud.”

‘A seventh time the father taught his son, the wise man said much to the young one: “A wise man rarely rejoices sorrowless, (55) even as a fool rarely exults sorrowful. A truly wise man must reflect on his future in his inmost thoughts, unless he experiences contrariety, careful in speaking, not at all clamorously noisy.”’

The sentence structure of what the father says is uncertain. The contrast is expressed by *sorgleas* and *sorgful*: when a wise man feels joy it is seldom wholly sorrowless, and the sorrowful fool does not recognize that grief may include rare moments of joyfulness. This is dependent on the verbal contrasts, *snottor guma* and *dol*, with *sorgleas blissað* and *drymeð sorgful*: the adjectives *sorgleas* and *sorgful* qualify the wise man and the fool. The twice-used adverb *seldan* expresses that the wise man can conceive of what happens rarely, the fool cannot.

The rest of the precept is, I think, one complex sentence, with line 56 b, *nefne he fæhþe wite*, a difficult intrusion. [Collancz](#) (1895: 303) has ‘unless he experience adversity’, which uses *adversity* in a sense of ‘opposition’.<sup>20</sup> My ‘contrariety’ is nearer to the ‘enmity’ of *fæhþe witan*, but no ‘feud’ is mentioned, and, if interpreted literally, ‘feud, enmity’ would divert from the paternal teaching. Shippey’s ‘unless he knows he has an enemy’ (1976: 51) and *DOE*’s ‘unless he perceives enmity’ (s.v. *fæhþ*, sense 1. ‘feud, state of feuding, enmity, hostility; hostile act’) would be diversions from the teaching of the poem. The last two lines of this long sentence revert to the father’s repeated theme: wisdom manifests itself in speech, as well as in thinking.

In the eighth precept, *weoruda Scyppend* (62b) ‘the Creator of hosts’ and *haligra gemynd* (63b) ‘the memorial of saints’ are religious concepts. Lines 59–64:

Eahtopan siþe eald fæder ongon

his mago monian mildum wordum: 60

“Leorna lare lærgedefe!

Wene þec in wisdom! Weoruda Scyppend

hafa þe to hyhte,<sup>21</sup> haligra gemynd,

□ a soð to syge þonne þu secge hwæt!”

‘An eighth time the old father did instruct his son with gracious words: (60) “Learn the kind of instruction that shows you (to be) fit for instruction!<sup>22</sup> Familiarize yourself with wisdom! Take the Lord of hosts, (and) the memorial of saints, as your hope and comfort, and always (take) truth as your glory,<sup>23</sup> whenever you say anything!”

The precept begins with the son’s wisdom as an essential for his understanding of the father’s teaching. Wisdom includes understanding what God and his saints stand for. As often in this poem speech is important; truthful speaking is the final triumph of thought in this precept.

The ninth precept is long. The Lord’s commandments comes into it twice, at lines 71 a and 73 b. Lines 65–75:

Nigeþan siþe nægde se gomola 65

eald uðwita, sægde eaforan worn:

“Nis nu fela folca þætte fyrngewritu

healdan wille, ac him hyge broснаð,

ellen colað, idlað þeodscype.

Ne habbað wiht for þæt, þeah hi wom don 70

ofer Meotudes bibod. Monig sceal ongielðan

sawelsusles, ac læt þinne sefan healdan

fyrn forðgewritu □ Frean domas,

þa þe her on mægðe gehwære men forlæt aþ

swiþor asigan þonne him sy sylfum ryht.” 75

‘(65) A ninth time the aged one spoke, the old wise man said much to his son:

“There are no longer many people that wish to uphold writings of long ago, but their mental disposition has decayed, their valour has cooled, native traditions have been voided. (70) Their thought is not at all about that, though they commit wrong against the Lord’s commandment. Many must atone (for it) with torment of the soul, but let your mind uphold the ancient forward-looking writings and the Lord’s commandments, which here people let fall into neglect (75) more seriously than may be right for their own good.”

The ninth precept is about ‘cultural heritage’, as that notion has been designated ever since the second half of the twentieth century. There is no agreement about what the *fyrngewritu* (67b) and *forðgewritu* (73a) are. The former are ‘ancient writings’; therefore perhaps the Scriptures, or the Scriptures together with the writings of the Church Fathers; *forðgewritu* may refer to prophetic writings both scriptural and patristic, ‘forward-looking writings’ in my rendering. Maintaining inherited traditions is expressed variously by the verbs *healdan* and *habban* (68a, 70 a, 72b), and the compound *peodscype* means ‘native traditions’ (69b). This precept can be interpreted negatively as a typical old man’s view, that everything has declined, that there is decay everywhere. Perhaps it could be interpreted positively as an instruction to resist decline, *ac læt pinne sefan healdan | fyrn forðgewritu □ Frean domas* ‘but let your mind uphold the ancient forward-looking writings and the Lord’s commandments’ (72b–73); and if the son obeys that, there may be hope, but the father does not express that hope.

The tenth and last precept is also long, embracing not only sins of words and deeds, *wommas worda □ dæda* (79), but a wise person must also be wise in his thinking, *gleaw in gehygdum* (88a). Lines 76–94:

Teoþan siþe tornsorgna ful

eald eft ongon eaforan læran:

“Snyttra bruceþ þe fore sawle lufan

warnað him wommas worda □ dæda

on sefan symle, □ soþ fremeð. 80

Bið him geofona gehwylc Gode geyced,

meahtum spedig, þonne he man<sup>24</sup> flyhð.

Yrre ne læt þe æfre gewealdan

heah in hreþre, heoroworda grund

wylme bismitan; ac him warnað þæt 85

on geheortum hyge hæle sceal wisfæst

□ gemetlice, modes snottor,

gleaw on gehygdum, georn wisdomes:

swa he wið ælda mæg eades hleotan.

Ne beo þu no to tælende, ne to tweospræce, 90

ne þe on mode læt men to fracope,

ac beo leofwende, leoht on gehygdum:

ber breostcofan, swa þu, min bearn, gemyne

frode fæder lare, □ þec a wið firenum geheald!"

'A tenth time the old one, full of bitter cares, did again instruct his son: "He employs wise thoughts, who for the love of (his) soul at all times guards himself in his mind against sins of words and deeds, (80) and tells the truth. Every one of his graces will be increased by God, as long as he (such a wise and truthful person), prosperous in his abilities, shuns vice. Never let wrath govern you, high in (your) heart; (never let) that foundation of wounding words (i. e. wrath) (85) corrupt you with (its) onset; but a wise man must guard himself against that in his heartened mind, and (he must be) self-restrained, wise in spirit, discerning in (his) thinking, eager for wisdom: In that way he can gain happiness throughout the stages of (his) ageing. (90) Be not too censorious nor too ambagious, do not allow people (that are) too wicked (be) in your mind, but be loving and lovable, life-brightening in (your) thoughts: Dispose your feelings in such a way that you, my son, remember (your) father's wise instruction, and at all times keep yourself from vices!"

The construction, negative + 'too' + adjective, as in *Ne beo þu no to tælende, ne to tweospræce* (90), has been much discussed in *The Wanderer*, lines 65b–69b:<sup>25</sup>

Wita sceal geþyldig:

ne sceal no to hatheort, ne to hrædwyrde,

ne to wac wiga, ne to wanhydig,

ne to forht ne to fægen, ne to feohgifre,

ne næfre gielpes to georn ær he geare cunne.

'A wise man must be patient: He must not at all be too hot-tempered, nor too hasty of speech, nor too timid a warrior, nor too foolhardy, nor too afraid, nor too joyful,<sup>26</sup> nor too greedy for valuable plunder, nor ever too eager to boast before he has the knowledge.'

My concern here is only the construction, 'too' + negative, in a context many words of which have been variously interpreted. It might be thought that because this set of 'too' phrases is introduced by an appeal to being *gepyldig* 'patient' (a form of moderation), the 'not too' construction is in response to that. Similarly these constructions in *Paternal Precepts* (90–91) are led in, at line 87 a, by *gemetlice* 'and moderate, self-restrained'; the 'not too' construction is in response to the mildness called for. But among uses quoted by Mitchell (1968: 192, repr. 1988: 113) is *Andreas* 98 b, where God addresses the woeful, imprisoned Matthew: *Ne beo ðu on sefan to forht* 'Be not too afraid in mind'. What is involved in this construction is a form of understatement or meiosis (cf. Mitchell 1968: 191; repr. 1988: 112), namely, litotes, expressing a truth by denying its opposite, the denial expressed by *ne* + 'too', where 'too' reduces the force of the opposite. There is wisdom in such expressions; the opposite is based on the recognition of a state that holds in general, but is not fully applicable in the particular case. Matthew, imprisoned in the land of the *anthropophagi*, has every reason to fear, and might therefore be expected to be afraid. God tells him to rise above a reasonable fearfulness, as accords with the wisdom of hope. In *Paternal Precepts*, lines 90–91, censoriousness, ambagiousness, and a mind too open to wicked people are against the dictates of wisdom: let us *not* have *too much* of such attitudes.

The nature of the poem is abstract: it is not an Anglo-Saxon father (how old might he have been?) speaking to his son (how old?); it is ageless wisdom formulating precepts to guide the unwise or inexperienced, also ageless but younger than Wisdom. The Old English wording is often obscure, as is quite often the sentence structure. Realistic language, a nursery *register*, is of course not called for when translating it; the poem is not about a real father teaching a real young son: these two figures are not *dramatis personae*. In translation language there may be redoubled obscurity: the Old English obscurity expressed in its wording (and sometimes by its sentence structure), capable of a great range of interpretations. The wording and syntax of the translation place new obscurities on top of the obscurities of the Old English. Clarity is a conspicuous ideal, but Wisdom at times operates opaquely. Wisdom, when understood by a reader, may be thought by him "platitudinous advice".<sup>27</sup>

Several details of the tenth precept repeat what the father has said earlier. *Bið him geofona gehwylc Gode geyced* (81) is a new idea, and *geofu* (DOE s.v. *gyfu*) is so polysemous that the sense of the line is uncertain. My rendering, 'Every one of his graces will be increased by God', depends on line 82 b, *ponne he man flyhð*, in which *ponne* appears heightened from temporal 'when' to conditional 'as long as', because God's bounty will not be



exercised unless 'he shuns vice'. 'Grace' is one of the senses of *gyfu*, and it has a sense more spiritual than 'accomplishment'. Perhaps 'endowment, talent' may be possible, but would God increase a person's endowments because he shuns vice?

The phrase *wið ælda* (89a) is difficult. I believe [Gollancz](#) (1895: 303) is right in his translation 'throughout the ages', but only if that means, throughout the ages the wise man lives, hence my clumsy rendering, 'throughout the stages of (his) ageing'. It is doubtful if *wið* + gen. pl. can mean 'throughout'; perhaps it means 'as the wise man comes up against the stages of his ageing' – a questionable construction of *wið*.<sup>28</sup>

None of the short poems in the Exeter Book is easy. Explaining obscurity is a difficult endeavour; defining 'wise; wisdom' inevitably rests on synonyms, 'exercising sound judgement; the exercise of sound judgement; the capacity of exercising sound judgement'. There is some circularity in such definitions.

Hrothgar does well, as he lists the excellencies of Beowulf, lines 1844–1845a ([Fulk, Bjork and Niles](#) 2008: 62): *Pu eart mægenes strang | on mode frod || wis wordcwida* 'You are strong of might, and wise of intellect, wise in verbal expression'. Hrothgar has analysed Beowulf's pre-eminence well; but his words make no pretence of being a definition, since *frod* and *wis* are synonyms, and such circularity is not allowed in definitions.

There is, in *Paternal Precepts*, a phrase, synonymous with *on mode frod*, namely, *gleaw in gehygdum* 'discerning in thinking' (88a). Thinking and speaking is what the poem is largely about. The poet rises high with thought and speech: *hafa [...] a soð to syge* 'always (take) truth as (your) glory' (63a–64a). These words also mean 'Let truth be your triumph!'

Usually it is unprofitable to drag into the light of day all the mistaken and forgotten emendations of early editors, as do Dobbie (ASPR III, 293–294) and [Muir](#) (1994: II, 502–503) in their notes on line 64 a. They quote, among others, [Klipstein](#) (1849: II, 392), whose untenable emendation of this half-line (his 129) is immediately followed by a note on the final half-line (his 189), an assessment of the poet and this poem (an assessment which Dobbie and Muir do not quote): "The close of sentiments, which if published in Ancient Greece, would have dignified the author with the name of philosopher." That, however, is overpraising a good Old English poet and his wise and intellectual religious poem.

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