Unusual Verbal Forms in the Book of Proverbs and Semantic Disambiguation

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It is a special pleasure for me to contribute something to a celebratory volume in honour of Albert van der Heide. We first met when I came to Leiden in May 2004 in order to give a trial lecture after having applied for the Chair of Hebrew and Aramaic. The Jubilar acted as a member of the selection committee at that time; in this function, he briefly introduced me to the audience, chaired the session and, during the subsequent interview, asked a number of very pertinent questions about my ideas for the future, provided I were appointed. Der Mai war mir gewogen, and Albert thus established right at the beginning a personal contact with our Department, which soon afterwards turned out to be a most stimulating environment. Fortunately, it still profits a great deal from his kind manners no less than from his learning.

Perhaps the following observations will remind him of our initial chat about the spelling of his surname; this chat, to be sure, broke the ice before my talk and immediately made me feel comfortable. Later on, I discovered that there was more to the issue in question, since a certain interest also in peculiar cases of Tiberian Hebrew orthography, together with a sympathetic understanding of their reasons, at times emerges from his publications.¹ The present rara Hebraica take a similar course by discussing some philological details in the Book of Proverbs, whose richness in linguistic subtlety might actually fall under the ‘enigmata’ announced in the prologue itself (Prov 1:6).

1. ‘Imperfect’ with unassimilated first radical /n/ (Prov 2:11 and 5:2)

Contrary to morphological expectations, the /n/ in a few ‘imperfect’ forms of verbs I ae n (or γ ν, according to the traditional terminology)

¹. So, for example, in his article ‘Rara Hebraica V: Een pluizig systeem met gemengde vormen’, Alef Beet 15/1 (2005) 50–54 (on Ps 7:6).
The Book of Proverbs provides two such variant forms of the verb נצר ‘to protect’:

Circumspection will watch over you, Good sense will protect you.

(Prov 2:11)

to keep circumspection, and your lips shall protect knowledge.

(Prov 5:2)

In total, the Masoretic Text contains 13 Qal ‘imperfect’ forms from verbs [ae] n where the etymological /n/ does not disappear in writing. They all occur in poetry and all have a thematic ‘imperfect’ vowel /o/ < */u/. Among these, the verb נצר ‘to protect’ with eight instances is the most common one, while the other five roots only exhibit one attestation each. Such a distribution on its own does not allow far-reaching conclusions, as it only reflects the general frequency of these verbs.

This phenomenon has hitherto resisted genuine explanation. Traditional grammar usually describes it as an analogy with the regular verb conditioned by a particular intonation pattern, since most, though not all, of the examples occur in pause. Such a connection seems all the more likely, because a pausal environment tends to pre-