

MISCELLANEOUS
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER FIVE

A NEW INTERPRETATION
OF PROV 25:21–22
AND ROM 12:17–21

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V

A NEW INTERPRETATION OF PROV 25:21–22 AND ROM 12:17–21

In the imprecatory lament of Psalm 140:10 is this wish, יְמִיטוּ עֲלֵיהֶם גַּחְלִים בְּאֵשׁ יִפְּלוּ בְּמַהְמָרוֹת בְּלִי-קוּמוֹ
“Let burning coals fall upon them! Let them be cast into pits, no more to rise!” It is obvious that the psalmist wanted the *burning coals* to be used as a weapon of death against his enemies. As Briggs (1907: 504–505) noted,

The author is thinking of divine retribution through a theophanic storm coming upon the enemies; possibly such as that upon Sodom, but more probably such as decided the battles of Beth-horon and the Kishon, Jos. 10^{11sq.} Ju. 5, cf. also Ps. 18^{17–16}.

By contrast, in Prov 25:21–22 a similar reference to *burning coals* to be used against an enemy had a redemptive purpose for the good of the enemy. These verses read

אִם-רָעִב שִׁנְאָךָ הָאֲכִלְהוּ לֶחֶם וְאִם-צָמָא הִשְׁקֵהוּ מַיִם:
כִּי גַחְלִים אִתָּה חֲתָה עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ וַיְהִיָּה יִשְׁלֵם-לָךְ:

ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου τρέφε αὐτόν ἐὰν διψᾷ πότιζε αὐτό
τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν
κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ ὁ δὲ κύριος ἀνταποδώσει σοι ἀγαθὰ

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat;
and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
for so doing you will heap coals of fire upon his head,
and the Lord will reward you [*with good*].

The proper interpretation of verse 25:22a has baffled scholars over the centuries, down to the present time. In the last century, for example, R. B. Y. Scott (1965: 156) recognized that heaping coals of fire upon someone’s head was a form of torture. Scott called attention to Exod 23:4–5, as a

more effective model for returning good for evil to overcome an enemy:

If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the ass of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall help him to lift it up.

Surprisingly, the apostle Paul quoted Prov 25:21–22 in Rom 12:17–21, which reads as follows (with the quotation in italics and the Greek text in brackets):

Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, *“if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head”* [τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ]. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

William Sandy and Arthur Headlam (1902: 365) raised the following questions and came to an Augustinian conclusion:

But with what purpose are we to “heap coals of fire on his head”? Is it (1) that we may be consoled for our kind act by knowing that he will be punished for his misdeeds? This is impossible, for it attributes a malicious motive, which is quite inconsistent with the context both here and in the O. T. In the latter the passage proceeds, “And the Lord shall reward thee,” implying that the deed is a good one; here we are immediately told that we are not to be “overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good,” which clearly implies that we are

to do what is for our enemies' benefit. (2) Coals of fire must, therefore, mean, as most commentators since Augustine have said, the burning pangs of shame, which a man will feel when good is returned for evil, and which may produce remorse and penitence and contrition.

More recently Joseph Fitzmyer (1993: 657–658) in his commentary on Romans also acknowledged, “The meaning of Prov 25:22a, however, is quite obscure” and demonstrated this point by providing an excellent summary of the varied interpretations of Prov 25:22 and Rom 12:20 in *the following six paragraphs*, which are cited here in full (with his references and abbreviations found at the end of this chapter):

(1) T. K. Cheyne [1883], Dahood (“Two Pauline Quotations”), and Ramarosan (“‘Charbons ardents’”) understand the prep. *‘al* to mean “from” instead of “upon,” as it can in Ugaritic. Moreover, the ptc. *ḥōteh* means “remove” (see HALAT, 349: “wegnehmen”); hence, “remove coals from his head.” This meaning might suit the Hebrew text of the MT, but the LXX and Paul’s text clearly read *sōreusēs epi*, “heap upon” (BAGD, 800; B–A, 1595; LSJ, 1750). Hence the Greek text of 25:22a cannot tolerate such a meaning. Various explanations have been proposed for the Greek form of the verse.

(2) Origen (In *ep. ad Romanos* 9.23 [PG 14.1225]), Pelagius, Ambrosiaster (In *ep. ad Romanos* 12.20 [CSEL 81.416–17]), Augustine (*Expositio quarundam propositionum ex ep. ad Romanos* 63.3–4 [CSEL 84.44]; *De doctrina christiana* 3.56 [CSEL 80.94]), Jerome (*Ep.* 120.1 [CSEL 55.475–76]), and many who follow them (e.g., Käsemann, *Commentary*, 349) have understood the coals as a symbol of burning pangs of shame. The enemy would be moved by kindness to shame, remorse, and humiliation, which would burn like coals of fire upon his head. But such a symbolic use of burning coals is otherwise unattested, except perhaps in the fifth-century *Tg. Prov* 25:21–22: “If your enemy is famished, give him bread

to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will bring coals of fire upon his head, and God will deliver him to you.”

(3) Morenz (“Feurige Kohlen”) calls attention to a third-century Demotic text describing an Egyptian ritual in which a penitent carries on his head a dish of burning charcoal as an expression of repentance for offenses committed. Hence kindness to an enemy would make him express his repentance in this way before God. See Klassen, “Coals of Fire,” for a nuanced use of Morenz’s explanation.

(4) Some Greek patristic writers (e.g., Chrysostom, *In ep. ad Romanos* hom. 22.3 [PG 60.612]; Theophylact, *Expositio ep. ad Romanos* 12.20 [PG 124.512]) understood the coals to be a symbol of a more noble type of revenge: if one feeds an enemy and he remains hostile, one makes him liable to more serious punishment from God, i.e., one heaps coals of divine punishment on his head. But again, such a symbolic use is not otherwise attested, unless this is the sense meant by 4 Ezra 16:54: *Non dicat peccator non se peccasse, quoniam carbones ignis comburet super caput eius qui dicit: Non peccavi coram Deo et gloria ipsius*, “Let not the sinner say that he has not sinned, for (God) will burn coals of fire upon the head of him who says, ‘I have not sinned before God and his glory.’” Cf. Ps 140:11 [MT].

(5) Stendahl (“Hate”) modifies interpretation (4) by comparing Paul’s general principle with statements in QL advocating the non-retaliation against evil done by enemies and the deferring of retribution to God’s day of vengeance, a covert way of expressing one’s “hatred” for one’s enemies (see 1QS 10:17–20; 9:21–22; 1:9–11). Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 32 and Proverbs 25 would, then, be a qualified way of adding to the measure of an enemy’s sins and guilt in God’s sight.

(6) Whatever be the real meaning of this mysterious verse, it is clear that Paul is recommending not Stoic passive resistance to hostility, but instead the OT treatment of an enemy

in order to overcome evil with positive charitable action, as the next verse suggests.

Fitzmyer's closing note on Rom 12:20 calls attention to 2 Kings 6:22, which exemplifies how charity and hospitality to an enemy led to peace. In context it reads,

6:20 As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men, that they may see." So the LORD opened their eyes, and they saw; and lo, they were in the midst of Samaria. 21 When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, "My father, shall I slay them? Shall I slay them?" 22 *He answered, "You shall not slay them. Would you slay those whom you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master."* 23 So he prepared for them a great feast; and when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the Syrians came no more on raids into the land of Israel.

Elisha's showing hospitality to the Syrian prisoners was an act of enlightenment for his fellow Israelites, as well as for the Syrians. Although not stated as such, in my opinion, Elisha actually *cast burning coals upon the heads* of these Syrian captives, i.e., the Syrians learned from their Israelite enemy a lesson which led to peace.

This interpretation that "to cast burning coals upon the head" was a metaphor for "teaching someone a good lesson" is based upon the different meanings of قَبَس (qabasa) in Arabic, which is the cognate of the Hebrew כֶּפֶס (kēpaš), which is a synonym of the נִחְלִים "glowing coals" in Prov 25:22.

In Jastrow's lexicon (1903: 611) the Hebrew/Aramaic כֶּפֶשׁ has these varied definitions:

- כָּבַשׁ “to press, to squeeze, to subdue, to conquer”
- כָּבַשׁ “to grade, to make a path”
- כָּבַשׁ “to put on the head” (which is a variant of חָבַשׁ)
- כָּבַשׁ “hot ashes, coals”
- כַּבְּשָׁן “kiln, furnace.”

The last two words are cognates of the Arabic قبس (*qabasun*) “fire, a live coal” (Lane 1885: 2480–81). The variant כ/ק with the *kēbaš* and the *qabas* is like the variants כָּבַשׁ/קָבַשׁ “to crush,” and קָבַשׁ/כָּבַשׁ “to be weak”; and the Hebrew ש (š) for the Arabic س (s) is a standard variation.

The Arabic قبس ناراً (*qabasa nâran*) means “he took fire” and قبس النار (*qabasa 'alnâran*) means “he lighted the fire”; but قبس علماً (*qabasa 'ilman*) means “he acquired knowledge, he sought knowledge.” In the causative form أقبسه ناراً (*'aqbasahu nâr^{am}*) means “he gave him fire”; and أقبسه علماً (*'aqbasahu 'ilman*) means “he taught him knowledge.” The plural noun القوابس (*'alqawâbisu*) means “those who teach what is good”; and قابس (*qâbasu*) also has a dual meaning:

- “taking fire, a taker of fire,”
- “seeking fire, a seeker of fire”
- “acquiring knowledge, an acquirer of knowledge,”
- “seeking knowledge, a seeker of knowledge.”¹

If the *firey coals* have to do with *heat*, then crowning someone with *coals* would be an act of torture. However, if the *firey coals* have to do with *light*, then crowning someone with *glowing coals* would be an act of illumination with the recipient’s becoming enlightened. An English analogy is the

verb “to electrify,” which when done to a person for punishment means “to electrocute,” but when done for entertainment means “to enliven, to thrill with a shock of excitement.”

Exegetes have rightly interpreted the גְּתָלִים בַּאֵשׁ ($\alpha\upsilon\theta\rho\alpha\kappa\epsilon\varsigma \acute{\epsilon}\nu \pi\upsilon\rho\iota$) “coals of fire” in Psalm 140:10 as referring to *intense heat*. But they failed to recognize that the גְּתָלִים “glowing coals” in Prov 25:22 (and its quotation in Rom 12:20 as $\alpha\upsilon\theta\rho\alpha\kappa\alpha\varsigma \pi\upsilon\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$) refers to the *light* that emanates from the coals, which *enlightens*, rather than to the *heat* emitted from the coals that *burns*. Thanks to the lexical data on the Arabic قَبَس (*qabasa*) it is possible to recover the semantic range of its Hebrew cognate כַּפָּשׁ “hot ashes, coals” and to recognize the Semitic metaphor in which the plural גְּתָלִים “coals” and the collective כַּפָּשׁ “coals” refer to “learning, teaching, and being enlightened,” i.e., when cognitively “the lights go on” thanks to “brilliant ideas and insights.”

Adapting this metaphor into English, this interpretation of Prov 25:21–22 and Rom 12:17–21, as presented here, is my *casting out glowing coals*, i.e (a) *shedding of light* on a long standing crux, (b) *firing up* students to study Aramaic, Arabic, and Hebrew to better interpret some Greek New Testament texts, and (c) my having more *heated* discussions with colleagues about baffling biblical passages.

NOTE

1. Wehr (1979: 865) cited Modern Arabic قَبَسَ (*qabasa*) “to acquire, to loan, to borrow” and قَابُوسَ (*qâbûs*) “nightmare,” as well as the classical definitions “to take fire, to acquire knowledge.”

FITZMYER’S ABBREVIATIONS

BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
HALAT	W. Baumgartner et al (eds.) <i>Hebräisches und aräisches Lexicon zum Alten Testament</i> , 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill 1967–)
PG	Patrologia graeca (ed. J Migne)
QL	Qumran Literature
1QS	<i>Serek hayyahad</i> (Rule of the Community, Manual of Discipline)