

The Hebrew Corner

The book of Proverbs uses literary devices to instruct the reader in moral and wise living. God, in his great love for us, wants us to make the most of our short span of life on the earth, and the book of Proverbs is arguably the clearest road map to a productive and fulfilled life that we see in the entire Tanach.

Proverbs in Hebrew is mashal (משל, mah-SHAHL), which can also be translated as parable. In this book, frequent use is made of a device known as antithetical parallelism. This means that a possible choice of action resulting in a good, productive outcome is presented, directly followed by an opposing choice resulting in a bad, destructive outcome, or vice versa. Let's look at 2 examples of this, first in Proverbs 10:12:

“Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.”

The key pair of words providing the contrast here are the words hatred, or in Hebrew sinah (שנאה, sih-NAH), and love, in Hebrew ahavah (אהבה, ah-hah-VAH). The contrast is between the bad influence of hate, which brings discord to the surface, in view of all, and the good result of love, which provides a covering for the stain of sin in our lives and the lives of others.

Next let's consider Proverbs 17:22:

“A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.”

The contrast here is between the merry heart, or in Hebrew, lev sameach (לב שמח, layv sah-MAY-ahch), and the broken spirit, in

Hebrew ruach n'kayah (רוח נכאה, ROO-ahch nuh-chay-AH). Here broken spirit can also be translated as stricken spirit. The idea of dry bones may connote diminished strength. Thus this proverb gives the impression that joy or merriment may have a medicinal effect. This has actually been promoted to a form of therapy. Here is a definition of laughter therapy as presented at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America website:

“Laughter therapy, also called humor therapy, is the use of humor to promote overall health and wellness. It aims to use the natural physiological process of laughter to help relieve physical or emotional stresses or discomfort.”

How often do we rediscover the wisdom found in the word of God!

Other proverbs are not so easy to quickly ascertain the meaning of. Frequently in God's word, however, the most difficult to understand, or even contradictory passages yield great benefit when we consider them fully. Here's an example (Proverbs 14:4):

“Where no oxen are, the crib is clean: but much increase is by the strength of the ox.”

If we look at the Hebrew, we see that two words are translated as ox and oxen are actually two different words. The word translated as oxen is alaphim (אַלְפִים, ah-lah-FEEM), which occurs only in the plural, and can be alternately translated as cattle. The Hebrew word translated above as ox is the word shor (שׁוֹר, SHOHR), which can also be translated as head of cattle, or bull. In attempting to determine the meaning of a verse like this, we can often enlist the help of other verses or passages of the Tanach. Consider the following verse (Deuteronomy 28:4):

“Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep.”

The key word above is kine, the old English word for cattle, which is in Hebrew is a form of the same word alaphim used in our verse in Proverbs. So we again have the association of this word for cattle with increase. So one possible understanding of this verse is this: one strong hardy bull can lead to great increase in the numbers of cattle, in ancient times an indicator of wealth. Yet conversely, if you and nourish the bull, you will have a clean feeding trough (crib) but no cattle and thus no wealth. A more general extension of this would be that no investment (putting feed in the feeding trough) means no risk, but also no profit (the increase in cattle). If we as Christians don't put the time and commitment into advancing the kingdom of God, then we will not see the corresponding fruit that we as believers are expected to produce.

Here is another proverb with some meaning that is not evident at first reading (Proverbs 16:33):

“The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”

The word translated as lap is the word cheq (חֵיק, CHAYK), which can also mean bosom, and sometimes refers to a fold of garment at the breast. This is a key to understanding this verse, since the word translated as lot is goral (גּוֹרָל, goh-RAHL), which is also used in Proverbs 18:18 to refer to settling disputes by lot. Thus this may be referring to stones placed into the breast-fold of a garment for the purpose of casting lots. Further, what is strongly suggested here is

an association with the Urim (אורים, oo-REEM) and the Thummim (תמים, toom-MEEM) described in Exodus 28:30:

“And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and Thummin and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually.”

Urim and Thummin can roughly be translated into English as Lights and Integrity. This indicates that perhaps these were stones placed into the breastplate, precious gems shining with different colors. The patterns of colors produced upon casting the lot may have been a code to render a judgment, ordained by God. Referring back to the verse we are considering, Proverbs 16:33, the word that is translated as disposing is a form of the Hebrew word mishpat (משפט, mish-PAHT), which may be translated as judgment, the same word used in the Exodus 28:30 passage. Piecing all of the above insights together, we can obtain a more revealing translation of this proverb:

“With the lot in the breast-fold a cast is thrown, but all of its judgment is of the LORD.”

The immediate implication is that the outcome of the casting of the lot, perhaps with the Urim and Thummin, is controlled by God. A broader understanding is that life is not controlled by chance, but it is ordered by the Lord. By staying close to God, through prayer and by reading and obeying his word, we can expect that our steps will be ordered also, and that we need not turn our lives over to fate. May your steps be ordered by the Lord, and may you have a fruitful and blessed month!